AMOROUS AESTHETICS: THE CONCEPT OF LOVE IN BRITISH ROMANTIC POETRY AND POETICS

Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that love is the central concept through which to think about and understand British poetry of the Romantic period. Scholars have typically treated love in terms of romantic relationships or adoptions of Platonic eros, but love has not been understood to be as significant as other major Romantic concepts such as nature, imagination, and ideology. This study establishes love as central to Romanticism. The Introduction outlines the various philosophical, scientific, and poetic conceptions of love available in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as well as defines the conception of love at work in Romantic poetry. The rest of the dissertation demonstrates through formalist-historicist readings how this conception of love works in various primary texts of William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, Felicia Hemans, and Matthew Arnold. The critical discourses with which this dissertation engages include Romantic New Historicisms and New Formalisms, Ecocriticism, Frankfurt School Critical Theory, affect theory, and work on form, aesthetics, ethics, and poetics.
Dedication

Dedicated to Ashley, my love and life
Acknowledgements

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Vita

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Table of Contents

Abstract .............................................................................................................................................ii
Dedication ..........................................................................................................................................iii
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................iv
Vita .....................................................................................................................................................v
INTRODUCTION: AMOROUS AESTHETICS ..............................................................................1
  1. Historicizing Romantic Love and Sexuality .............................................................................5
  2. Poetry, Theory, Utopia .............................................................................................................13
  3. The Chapters .............................................................................................................................28

PART ONE: WORDSWORTHIAN LOVE

Introduction ...........................................................................................................................................32

Chapter One: “A sympathetic twilight”: Love and the Sentimental Turn in the Early Poems.........................................................................................................................42
  1. An Evening Walk (1788-9, 1793) .........................................................................................42
  2. Salisbury Plain (1793-4) .......................................................................................................55

Chapter Two: “The sentiment of being”: The Ruined Cottage and the Development of Wordsworthian Love .................................................................................................................64
  1. Love in The Ruined Cottage (1797-9) .................................................................................69
  2. The Pedlar (1798-1804) ..........................................................................................................82
Chapter Three: “Something far more deeply interfused”: Love in and after

*Lyrical Ballads* ........................................................................................................88

1. “Tintern Abbey” (1798) .......................................................................................90

2. “Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind”: Love in

*The Prelude* (1805). ........................................................................................105

PART TWO: SHELLEYAN LOVE

Introduction ....................................................................................................................117

Chapter Four: “Strange Symphony”: Love and Desire in *Queen Mab*

and “Alastor” ............................................................................................................129

1. *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem* (1813) ....................................................132

2. “Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude” (1816) ....................................................152

Chapter Five: “Love’s rare Universe” in the Later Works: *Prometheus Unbound*

and *Epipsychidion* ..................................................................................................173

1. Shelley and England in 1819 ............................................................................178

2. *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts* (1820) .................198

3. *Epipsychidion* (1821) ....................................................................................218

CONCLUSION: HEMANS AND THE VICTORIANS .................................................229

1. The Other Bright Star: Felicia Hemans .............................................................231

2. Romantic Love and the Victorians .....................................................................258

References ..................................................................................................................277
He who aspires to love rightly...would turn towards the wide ocean of intellectual beauty.
– Plato, *The Symposium*, translated by Percy Shelley

We have all of us one human heart.
– William Wordsworth, “The Old Cumberland Beggar”

Love is a desire of the whole being to be united to some thing, or some being, felt necessary to its completeness. – Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notebooks*

Love is...the sole law which should govern the moral world.
– Percy Shelley, Preface to *Laon and Cyntba*

Love makes all things equal.
– Percy Shelley, *Epipsychidion*
INTRODUCTION: AMOROUS AESTHETICS

When I tell my friends, family, and colleagues that my dissertation is about “Love in Romanticism,” they often smirk, display a concerned or confused look, and even occasionally chuckle. When I ask the more honest people why, they respond that “love” is such a vague word that it can mean almost anything. Even though some of us have been lucky enough to experience the feeling, even though we know and feel its importance, its meaning is highly multivalent, often ambiguous, and historically-dependent. While Deconstructionists might say this is true of all words, even the average person on the street knows that love is particularly tricky.

So, why would I write a dissertation about a term I can’t define concretely in the first place?

My response is always the same: that it is those very qualities of love as a concept—its ability to oscillate between and fuse together multiple meanings—that make it is such an important term for the Romantics. *Amorous Aesthetics* argues that love is the central concept through which to think about and understand poetry and poetics of the Romantic period. At its core, love refers to affectionate relationships between people, but Romantic poets often move from affection to a cosmic scope: love of humanity, love of nature, love of the universe. Love then takes on abstract, philosophical, and immaterial qualities. Yet poets still refer to and think of their feelings of transcendence and their thoughts of unity and interconnectedness as “love.” Love is distinct from the concepts of soul, intuition, and
imagination precisely because the poets retain its social and relational aspects. Romantic poets ground love of nature and of the universe in sociality and in the political, social, and moral qualities ideally inherent to human relationships. This tension between an individual feeling and a universalizing aesthetics runs through much of Romantic poetry. Whether it is William Wordsworth’s claim in *The Prelude* for the preeminence of “intellectual love,” Percy Shelley’s revelation in *A Defence of Poetry* that love is the “great secret of morals” (517), or Felicia Hemans’s consistent emphasis on the affections, love as both a feeling and a concept proves to be a defining feature of Romantic poetry and of Romanticism itself. As such, I argue that love is more important than imagination, nature, and ideology in the Romantic ethos.

The five quotations that serve as epigraphs for this study demonstrate the depth, breadth, and complexity of love in Romantic poetry. Shelley (translating Plato) links love to the pursuit of the beautiful, the just, and the good. Wordsworth understands love as a social force that binds humans together through affection, compassion, and sympathy. Coleridge, fusing *eros* and *agape*, defines love as a desire for unity and wholeness. Shelley identifies love as the moral and political basis for equality, democracy, and “a brighter morn” (*Queen Mab* V 251). Each of these poets finds in the concept of love a source of and inspiration for their poetry, politics, and aesthetics; in effect, love as a way of reimagining human relationships and reshaping the world in which we live.

Scholars typically treat Romantic love in terms of sex and sexuality, poets’ romantic relationships, and poets’ adoptions of Platonic *eros*. There are relatively few critical studies on the concept of love in British Romantic poetry and poetics as compared to studies on nature, imagination, and ideology, but love is omnipresent in Romanticism. Foregrounding the
conception of love in the work of Wordsworth and Shelley in particular can shed new light not only on their poetry and prose but also on the idea of Romanticism itself. Wordsworth and Shelley are unique in thinking about love as an ontology and as an epistemology. Both poets develop a theory of love that fuses subjectivity, perception, and imagination, a love that enables them to explore and to understand reality, truth, and existence itself. In this study, I also give some attention to Coleridge, Hemans, and Matthew Arnold, but Wordsworth and Shelley are the most central figures.

While it is true that romantic love and the various philosophical manifestations of eros, philia, and agape play a role in Romantic poets’ conception of love, the poets also work with a more complex notion of love.¹ One major problem with the Romantic theory of love is the difficulty of discussing it in a clear and concrete manner. Shelley suggests in his essay “On Love” that love itself is in many ways beyond language: “What is Love?—Ask him who lives what is life; ask him who adores what is God” (503). The Greeks had sixteen different words to reflect various kinds, distinctions, and levels of love, but in English the word “love” takes precedence (De Rougemont 5). The Oxford English Dictionary has an extensive record for the word “love,” including but not limited to “inclination, hope, desire, affection, kindness, friendship, pleasure, goodwill, allure, greed, sense, feeling, fondness, amicable or peaceable settlement, treaty, covenant, charity, devotion, addiction, lust, instinct.” The Romantics most often write of “love,” “affection,” and “sympathy,” all of which shape the Romantic theory of love. Despite—or perhaps because of—its linguistic and etymological

¹ These Greek terms generally serve as the foundation for Western discussion of love: (1) eros – erotic or sensual love, typically in reference to intense, passionate desire, but also in Plato the desire for transcendental beauty; (2) philia – familial love or friendship, as well as love of self; (3) agape – spiritual love, especially in the Christian sense of God’s love of humanity, humanity’s love of God, and brotherly love.
slipperiness, love is a dominant theme in the major works of most Romantic poets, a driving force behind their aesthetic, political, and ethical aspirations.

Perhaps critics have been reluctant to engage Romantic love because it carries with it notions of transcendence, divinity, sentimentalism, and idealism that seem suspicious and ideological to the materialists and historicists that have shaped and determined the terrain of Romantic scholarship these past three decades. But love is material, too. Romantic poets conceive of love as a feeling and a thought, as a physical and metaphysical experience. They often present love in their poems as a corporeal, psychological, intellectual, and otherworldly “thing”; as a political and philosophical aesthetic; and as a way to engage more directly with the real, material realities of the world rather than as a way to escape and evade them. At a time when Enlightenment empiricism, metaphysics, and rationalism claimed to uncover the knowledge of the world, poets such as Wordsworth and Shelley turned instead to love and poetry as better means to understand the nature of knowledge and truth in both the material and immaterial realms that comprise the reality of the world.

2 For seminal New Historicism studies, see the references for Marjorie Levinson, Alan Liu, Jerome McGann, and Clifford Siskin. For important deconstructive and formalist studies, see the references for Paul De Man, Anne Mellor, Tilottama Rajan, Gayatri Spivak, William A. Ulmer, Earl Wasserman, Thomas Weiskel, Deborah Elise White, and Susan Wolfson. For a detailed account of the relationship between deconstructions, formalisms, and historicisms as they bear on Romantic literature and criticism, see Jonathan Arac, Critical Genealogies: Historical Situations for Postmodern Literary Studies (New York: Columbia UP, 1987).

3 Bill Brown most notably established “thing theory” in his book, A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2003), but here I use the word “thing” in the sense developed more recently by Adam Potkay William S. Davis in their studies of Romantic poetry and theory. Both scholars locate in “things” a blurring of distinctions between the human and the nonhuman, between the material and the immaterial, and I draw from such “thing theory” in my analysis of “Wordsworthian love” in chapters one through three.
1. Historicizing Romantic Love and Sexuality

Sex is the most material and physical manifestation of love, and sex is certainly linked to love in Romantic poetry. Indeed, as historians and literary scholars have observed, the Romantic period witnessed the burgeoning of our modern ideas about sex, sexuality, gender, marriage, and love. In his influential study, *Love in the Western World*, Denis De Rougemont argues that the Western “invention of passionate love in the twelfth century and the secular elaboration of conjugal love” attains a kind of height during the Romantic period when writers and thinkers fused “the notions of eros, agape, sexuality, [and] passion” into a unified theory of human love (5). De Rougemont refers to such fusion as “confusion,” but British Romantic poets, of which De Rougemont has nothing to say, knowingly fuse these notions in order to construct and reflect their emergent theory of love. Like De Rougemont, historian Irving Singer also asserts a secularization thesis: “Romantic love reverses the slogan ‘God is love’ and says that love is God” (*Explorations* 86). Similar to M. H. Abrams in his well-known accounts of Romanticism, Singer suggests that in the nineteenth century, Romanticism was a kind of super-religion that infused and transfigured all of the traditional dogmas in the West, [and] sexual love was treated like a natural deity much as nature itself had been deified in the previous century. More precisely, sexual love was seen as a sacred manifestation of nature parallel to the descent of Christ showing forth the infinite goodness of God the Father. (*Pursuit* 45-6)

Through a “democratization of Greek thinking about love” that “encouraged the belief that everybody [i.e., not just men and the upper classes] can possibly attain a love worth having” (*Singer, Explorations* 79), the Romantics reimagined human relationships, not only shaping
how people thought about love and sex but also constructing a new affective psychology in which reality is created in part through feelings. Romantic poets formed nothing less than a new epistemology of love.

In recent years scholars have begun to historicize Romantic sexuality in ways that open up new avenues for understanding Romantic poetry, poetics, and aesthetics. It is surprising, really, that so little work has been done on Romantic-era sex, sexuality, and love given their predominance in the literature and discourses of the period (political, philosophical, and scientific). After all, this was a time when surgeon and anatomist John Hunter performed the first successful human artificial insemination, which, as Richard Sha outlines in *Perverse Romanticism*, contributed to the moral and scientific tension between sexual pleasure and reproductive purpose (8, 34-5). In 1789, Erasmus Darwin introduced “the Sexual System” of Linnaean botany to England through *The Loves of the Plants*, in effect making “sexuality the most important feature of organic life” (Sha 24). In the wake of the French Revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft invented (or identified) the concept of gender, initiating modern feminism and both challenging and transgressing gender ideology through her status as an author and through her relationships with Gilbert Imlay and William Godwin. This was a time when the institution of marriage itself was challenged on several fronts; when individuals gained the power to choose their own sexual partners and

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preferences; when sexuality was beginning to become linked to one’s identity; when
condoms and other forms of birth control entered the marketplace; and when figures such
as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, Lord Byron, the Shelles, Thomas Hogg, and
others attempted to practice and establish free-love communities. Sex, that is, plays an
important role in the development of Romanticism, and the radical politics, poetics, and
aesthetics championed by Romantic poets was bound to their new, “radical” notions of sex
and love.

In his recent study of these issues, Sha breaks down the perceived opposition
between aesthetics and sexuality by showing how Romantic “writers linked eroticism with a
mutuality that had the form of purposiveness instead of with reproductive function. The
Romantics thus often insisted upon an eroticized aesthetics precisely to engage readers
otherwise put off by an overly rational aesthetics, one that tried to give it an explicit
purpose” (1). In a Kantian vein, Sha argues that as subjective aesthetic judgments gain
 universality by means of pleasure without function, so the “perverse…suspension or
disregard of reproductive purpose allowed sexuality to rise above brute instinct and become
idealized in terms of love, monogamy, equality, and mutuality” (7). Such a new
understanding of sexuality likened sex to liberation, freedom, and democracy. Yet, as Sha
emphasizes, sexuality was not a purely philosophical concept. The Romantics also

        turn to science to construct a notion of sexual pleasure that is separable from
        reproduction and marriage and, in so doing, construct desire and pleasure so
        that they can enable personal autonomy, meaningful consent based on shared
        erotic pleasure, the choice of whether or not to reproduce, and conscious
        opposition to both organized religion and the enemies of democracy.

        (Sha 17)
Science provides Romantic writers with a materialist basis for their more abstract and theoretical ideas about sexuality. Sex is intensely political for Romantic writers, and “love,” ever tied to sex, “could serve as a convenient euphemism for sex in the period” (Elfenbein).

But Romantic love is not all about sex. In reading the poetry and letters of Byron or Shelley, it may appear this way at first, but, as Andrew Elfenbein points out, “At a moment when the public sphere was packed with big, loudly named, embarrassingly trumpeted acts of sexual love on the part of the Prince Regent and others,” much Romantic “poetry seems interested in continuing an entirely different sense of what love might look like” (“Romantic Loves”)—and not only in the poetry of Wordsworth. Romantic love grows from the philosophical debates and discourses on love, sympathy, and emotion from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As scientists debated the purposes, functions, and pleasures of sex, philosophers and social thinkers debated the various theories of love that formed and informed human relationships. In *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, a veritable medical-philosophical collection of all thinking on human emotions and passions from the Classical period to the seventeenth century, Robert Burton states that love and hatred “are the first and most common passions, from which all the rest arise, and are attendant” (426). But love is ultimately more powerful: “love built cities, invented arts, sciences, and all good things, incites us to virtue and humanity, combines and quickens; keeps peace on earth, quietness by

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6 For an overview of different philosophical approaches to love in the eighteenth century, see Gabor Boros, Herman De Dijn, and Martin Moors, eds., *The Concept of Love in 17th and 18th Century Philosophy* (Leuven: Leuven UP, 2007).
sea, mirth in the winds and elements, expels all fear, anger, and rusticity; a round circle still from good to good; for love is the beginner and end of all our actions” (Burton 430).

Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, Baruch Spinoza, David Hume, David Hartley, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Edmund Burke, and Immanuel Kant set the stage for the development of Romantic love. Many of them, following the Platonic tradition, saw an insurmountable chasm between love and reason and instead advocated sympathy, what Adam Smith calls the imaginative “fellow-feeling” central to successful social relationships and morality. Rousseau argues that all humans are born with two innate feelings, love of self and sympathy, and the Jacobin impulse to move from self-interest to affection emerges from this dichotomy. The Romantics embrace the eighteenth-century triumph of sympathy over self-love, but, of course, they resist in many ways the Enlightenment notion that reason trumps feeling. Romantic poets unite the transcendence of Platonic love with the sociality of sympathy and reason. Indeed, “sociality” and “sympathy” were virtually interchangeable terms in the period, to which Hartley attests in Observations on Man: “Sociality [is the affection] by which we rejoice at the Happiness of others…the Pleasure which we take in the mere Company and Conversation of others” (472). Platonic love, on the other hand, “is complete Desire, luminous Aspiration, the primitive religious soaring carried to its loftiest pitch, to the extreme exigency of purity which is also the extreme exigency of Unity” (De Rougemont 61). Courtly love, as it developed in the medieval and Renaissance periods, had idealized sexual love so as to eroticize the Platonic pursuit of ideal beauty and unity. But how

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7 The Anatomy of Melancholy was immensely popular in the seventeenth century and went through eight editions beginning in 1621, but it was out of print from 1676-1800. The study attests to the Western fascination and obsession with the study of love through science, philosophy, and art.
could one reconcile such idealized love with human compassion, affection, and sociality? That is, how could actual human relationships live up to such divine expectations?

These were central questions and problems for conceptualizing love in the eighteenth century and in the Romantic period. As Singer outlines, a philosophical split developed “between the conditions needed for people to live together well, in an orderly marriage for instance, and the conditions demanded by courtly love, or in general idealized sexual love of any sort. There was a great skepticism…about the ability to harmonize married love with sexual love” (Explorations 85). For Hume, sexual love does combine desire for beauty, bodily appetite, and sociality. In his Treatise on Human Nature, Hume argues that “the amorous passion” of sexual love unifies in and of itself Platonic desire and social sympathy (394-5). For Kant, the “solution” is not sex but marriage. Kant argues that human love is predominantly social in nature: it is “the love that wishes well, is amicably disposed, promotes the happiness of others and rejoices in it” (Lectures on Ethics 155-6). Sexual love, on the other hand, is a bodily “appetite” (Kant 163), even when idealized. According to Kant, the concept of marriage as the union of two individuals is the only way for sex to become fully “human” and thus “moral.”

The Romantics were influenced by Kant’s idea of unity in marriage, but love without marriage was certainly a component of their thinking. Wollstonecraft and Godwin argue that women are enslaved by marital love as they become property of men, an aspect of their New Philosophy that inspired Coleridge, Southey, Shelley, and others to practice free love as part of their radical politics. Of course, Wollstonecraft and Godwin eventually married, as

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8 In Light from Heaven: Love in British Romantic Literature (DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 1971), Frederick L. Beaty identifies five different kinds of love in Romantic literature: comic, marital, nonmarital, visionary, and universal. In my approach, conversely, I treat Romantic love as an aesthetic amalgamation of these (and other) kinds.
did Shelley (twice), Coleridge, and Southey. Coleridge would go on to idealize marital love in his poetry (as does Wordsworth). All of the Romantics poets, however, advocated a universalizing and transcendent love that remains grounded in sympathy, sociality, and sexuality.

Romantic love has as much to do with poetry and aesthetics as it does with sympathy and sex. I do not want to suggest, like Frederick Beaty, that Romantic love is primarily “a literary phenomenon” (ix), but I am primarily concerned with how Romantic poets articulate, express, and develop a theory of love through their poetry. Such a critical poetics characterizes Romanticism in many ways: a poetry (like Romantic love) that fuses philosophy, science, politics, aesthetics, and human experience. As Friedrich Schlegel writes, “all art should become science and all science art; poetry and philosophy should be made one” (Critical Fragments 14). This understanding of Romantic poetry enters British culture in the 1790s via Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge (the so-called first generation of Romantic

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9 Coleridge’s theory (and ultimate failure) of Pantisocracy especially speaks to these issues. In 1794, Coleridge and Southey planned a free-love utopian community in America in which all property and possessions would be shared by a small group of individuals. In their correspondence relating to the planning of the Pantisocratic community, Coleridge tells Southey that “The leading Idea of Pantisocracy is to make men necessarily virtuous by removing all Motives to Evil—all possible Temptations (114); that “Love makes all things pure and heavenly like itself” (145); and that “Love is an active and humble principle” (150). J. Robert Barth uses such statements to argue that Coleridge understands love as a “power” or “principle of action” (vii). But Romantic love is not simply an instrument for or source of sympathetic social and natural (inter)action—it is a way of understanding reality itself. Coleridge’s statements reflect the social and political import of love as well as his rather lofty and ideal hopes. Pantisocracy was in many ways a practical or material manifestation of abstract thoughts and theories. But the utopian plan ultimately failed. While planning the community, Coleridge and Southey took romantic interest in sisters Sara and Edith Fricker, respectively, and Coleridge married Sara in 1795 as plans for their American community were falling apart. Coleridge and Southey lacked the sufficient finances to make the move; they learned of the less-than-desirable conditions of the area which they had in mind; and Coleridge became quite dissatisfied with Southey’s requests to bring slaves to their equal, utopian community. Although the Pantisocratic community never materialized, Coleridge does present in his poetry an alternative utopia in his home at Clevedon, an intimate community of him and his wife based on love and equality. Coleridge idealizes marital love in “The Aeolian Harp” and “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement.” Like Pantisocracy, however, his ideal marriage with Sara was short-lived: in 1799 he fell in love with Sara Hutchinson, the sister of Wordsworth’s eventual wife, to whom he addresses his well-known poem, “Dejection: An Ode.” Coleridge, that is, consistently turned to poetry to work through his personal, philosophical, religious, and aesthetic engagements with love.
poets). Coleridge, who acts as an intellectual catalogue and filter for Wordsworth, unites through his writing and thinking German Romantic philosophy with the English tradition of empiricism, metaphysics, and science of mind. Coleridge became quite familiar with Kantian philosophy as well as the work of the Jena Romantics during a trip to Germany in 1798-9, which he recalls in Book IX of *Biographia Literaria*. Indeed, in the *Athenaeum Fragments*—which comprise a large body of work representing the Jena Romantics in 1798-1800—Schlegel presents a theory of Romantic poetry that informs my approach to British Romanticism. Fragment 116 reads:

> Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry. Its aim isn’t merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature; and make poetry lively and sociable, and life and society poetical; poeticize wit and fill and saturate the forms of art with every kind of good, solid matter for instruction, and animate them with the pulsations of humor. It embraces everything that is purely poetic, from the greatest systems of art, containing within themselves still further systems, to the sigh, the kiss that the poetizing child breathes forth in artless song. It can so lose itself in what it describes that one might believe it exists only the characterize poetical individuals of all sorts; and yet there still is no form so fit for expressing the entire spirit of an author: so that many artists who started out to write only a novel ended up by providing us with a portrait of themselves. It alone can become, like the epic, a mirror of the whole circumambient world, an image of the age. And it can also – more than any other form – hover at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer, free of all real and ideal self-interest, on the wings of poetic reflection, and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors. It is capable of the highest and most variegated refinement, not only from within outwards, but also from without inwards; capable in that it organizes – for everything that seeks a wholeness in its effects – the parts along similar lines, so that it opens up a perspective upon an infinitely increasing classicism. Romantic poetry is in the arts what wit is in philosophy, and what society and sociability, friendship and love are in life. Other kinds of poetry are finished and are now capable of being fully analyzed. The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterize its
ideal. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free; and it recognizes as its first commandment that the will of the poet can tolerate no law above itself. The romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a kind, that is, as it were, poetry itself: for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic. (Schlegel 31-2)

Coleridge, responding to charges of plagiarism, claims in Biographia Literaria that he had formulated many of these same ideas before visiting Germany in 1798, but what is more important here than whether the British or Jena Romantics first “created” or “defined” the project of Romantic poetry are the ideas that such poetry is “universal” and “infinite” and that it corresponds to love: “poetry is in the arts what wit is in philosophy, and what society and sociability, friendship and love are in life.” Romantic poetry fuses the various elements of philosophy, rhetoric, prose, criticism, inspiration, art, and nature in an ever-becoming web of “wholeness.” Love, being a universal feeling and a forever-becoming set of historic- and culture-specific ideas, connects individuals in life and creates society, sociability, and friendship. Coleridge’s vision of love as a desire for connection, interrelatedness, fusion, and unity reflects Schlegel’s vision of Romantic poetry.10

1. Poetry, Theory, Utopia

Amorous Aesthetics locates the connections and tensions among poetry, politics, philosophy, sexuality, and aesthetics through a study of Romantic love. The framework of this study draws not only from Romantic-era texts and discourses but also from modern historicist and formalist methodologies related to Frankfurt School Critical Theory. In the following chapters, I situate the Romantics’ critical poetics and conception of love in a

Marxist-Marxian critical trajectory running from William Godwin to Fredric Jameson. I discuss this trajectory in specific detail in my analyses of the poetry and poetics of Wordsworth and Shelley, but I will briefly outline my theoretical orientation here to stake out some of the major and recurring points.

This study engages inevitably with two critical movements currently at the forefront of Romantic studies: New Historicism and New Formalism. New Historicism has been the dominant methodology in Romantic criticism since the 1980s, although deconstructive and formalist criticisms have also played a significant role in the development of such historicist criticism. In reaction, two recurrent themes in Romantic criticism over the past decade or so have been (1) the “return” to or “insistence” of the aesthetic and (2) a move away from strictly polemical arguments and direct associations with particular schools to what I would call a desire for dialectical criticism. The formalist-historicist continuum in criticism has been a hot topic of scholarly conversation in recent years with regard to the emergent New Formalism, a movement outlined by Marjorie Levinson in her PMLA review essay. New Formalist studies “aim to recover for teaching and scholarship in English some version of their traditional address to aesthetic form” (Levinson 559) in a number of ways. Similar to dialectical criticism, New Formalism spans a broad spectrum of methodological approaches.

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12 In *Marxism and Form*, Jameson describes this criticism: “the essential movement of all dialectical criticism… is to reconcile the inner and the outer, the intrinsic and the extrinsic, the existential and the historical, to allow us to feel our way within a single determinate form or moment of history at the same time what we stand outside of it, in judgment on it as well, transcending that sterile and static opposition between formalism and a sociological or historical use of literature between which we have so often been asked to choose. … It is clearly the most urgent task of a genuinely dialectical criticism to regain, on the occasion of a given work of art, this ultimate reality to which it corresponds” (330-1, 354). See also the February 2000 volume of *Romanticism on the Net*, “After Romantic Ideology.”

centered on form. The myriad New Formalisms demonstrate the possibilities of Romantic scholarship to unite a renewed emphasis on aesthetics and form with those materialist and historicist methodologies that are now vital to literary criticism. My analysis of Romantic love provides an opportunity to intervene in this debate as I examine not only the historical sense, development, and understanding of the conception of love during the Romantic period but also the aesthetic and formal qualities of the poetry itself—qualities that are just as important as the content, or concept, of love.

Levinson identifies two major strands of New Formalism: “activist formalism,” which makes a continuum with New Historicism, tracing the idea of form through Hegel, Marx, Freud, Adorno, Althusser, and Jameson; and “normative formalism,” or a “backlash new formalism,” which asserts a sharp demarcation between history and art and traces the idea of form through Kant (559). In many New Formalist studies of British Romanticism, there is significant overlap between these two schools. Robert Kaufman, whom Levinson identifies as the exemplar of New Formalism, was one of the first critics to formally articulate a critical lineage between the Frankfurt School and British Romanticism in his 1996 essay, “Legislators of the Post-Everything World: Shelley’s Defense of Adorno.” Levinson discusses Kaufman’s more recent work on the relationship between Romanticism and Modernism, but his seminal essay proves quite influential in New Formalist studies of British Romantic poetry. In that essay, Kaufman emphasizes Shelley’s role in the Romanticism-Frankfurt School connection. Shelley’s treatise, A Defence of Poetry, has been

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commonly disparaged by materialist and historicist scholars in its insistence on an idealized and prophetic vision of poetry, but Kaufman presents “the case for seeing in Shelley and Adorno the lineaments and trajectory of a critical aesthetics that is already a working-through, and ultimately a rejection of, what is today called ‘the critique of the ideology of the aesthetic’” (706). Kaufman, in essence, redeems Shelley’s philosophy and theory of poetry by arguing that the *Defence* contributes to a type of pre-Marxian criticism later taken up by Adorno as it develops through Hegel, Marx, and German metaphysics. Kaufman utilizes “Adorno to defend Shelley against cultural materialist, new historicist, and post-structural critique” (707) in a move that situates Shelley as a more complex and nuanced critical thinker than scholars had previously imagined him to be. Kaufman’s work contributes considerably to the ongoing reassessment of Romantic poets’ aesthetic, poetic, and political ideas.

Many other Romantic scholars have taken Kaufman’s lead of pairing Romantic poets and the Frankfurt School in order to demonstrate some kind of critical trajectory or shared lineage, as well as to challenge the New Historicist notion of the Romantic Ideology.\(^\text{15}\) Jerome McGann coined this term in 1983 with his highly influential book, *The Romantic Ideology*, and since then it has served as a kind of rallying cry for New Historicians. “Romantic Ideology” became almost synonymous with New Historicist critique in the 1980s and 1990s, but different critics mean different things by “ideology.” Terry Eagleton identifies no less than sixteen different definitions of the term “ideology,” many of which are wholly incompatible with each other. Eagleton makes this point not to disregard or throw out the

term but rather to demonstrate that when talking about “ideology,” one must carefully understand what conceptual, historical, and methodological factors and traditions inform the use of the term in a given piece of writing. The mainstream Marxist tradition that informs “ideology” in contemporary literary and cultural criticism “has been much preoccupied with ideas of true and false cognition, with ideology as illusion, distortion and mystification” (Eagleton 2). This tradition obviously draws from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s *The German Ideology*, a work in which Marx “flips Hegel on his head” by arguing that “Morality, religion, metaphysics,…and their corresponding forms of consciousness” are ideological illusions (Marx and Engels). Instead of seeing history and the “progress” of human civilization as a series of battles of ideas, Marx offers a materialist conception of history: “Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” (Marx and Engels). In the Marxist tradition, “ideology” is idealism, illusion, and false consciousness, but one can overcome such illusion by turning to a materialist conception of history, or “ideology critique.”

The German Ideology has a close relationship to the Romantic Ideology, but the latter is more complex and nuanced than its German counterpart. The Romantic Ideology specifies the particular ways of thinking associated with British Romantic poets and twentieth-century Romantic scholars. So, what exactly is the Romantic Ideology for McGann? He begins with two central theses: first, that “the scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and its works are dominated by a Romantic Ideology, by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representations,” and second, that Romantic “poems are social and historical products and that the critical study of such products must be grounded in a socio-historical analytic” (3). The first thesis refers to twentieth-century critics
such as Abrams who read the Romantics “on their own terms.” The second thesis refers more specifically to McGann’s New Historicist methodology: since poems are produced by their socio-historical circumstances, scholars must employ an historicist methodology in order to resist falling prey to the Romantic idea that literature can transcend its immediate historical context. Similar to the German Ideology, the Romantic Ideology “is marked by ‘false consciousness’ and ‘error’ because ideas are time and place specific” (McGann 7). The central Romantic illusions include the Wordworthian idea of spontaneous and sincere poetic composition; the conception of a unified self; a unity of being; the valorization of nature and the imagination; the idea that poetry can transcend history and politics; and, in many cases, the Romantic conception of love. The Romantic Ideology thus refers to the shared body of ideas and beliefs held by the major Romantic authors, what William Hazlitt (and Shelley before him) called “the spirit of the age.” The suggestion here is that the Romantics were not aware of ideology, that their idealism, optimism, and utopianism serve as a negative and unnecessary set of illusions.

Romantic poets were intensely aware of ideology. Amorous Aesthetics thus joins a growing number of studies that challenge and develop New Historicism and the concept of the Romantic Ideology. In addition to aesthetic and formalist interventions, this study also engages with environmental and Ecocritical theories as they relate to Romantic poets’ love of the natural world. Nature is central to Romantic love, especially Wordworthian love. After all, Wordsworth writes in The Prelude that “Love of Nature” leads “to Love of Mankind.” Ecocriticism and Green Romanticism emerged in the early 1990s as a response to New Historicism, and Jonathan Bate’s Romantic Ecology is the seminal work. In that study, Bate shows how the Romantics’ idea of nature is not an escape from politics and the
material world but rather an embrace and celebration of it. More recently, William S. Davis has identified the idea of “one vast living organism,” a physical and metaphysical unity of the world that Romantic poets often reference and attempt to figure forth in their works. Davis traces “the Romantic thing” through Schelling, German metaphysics, and what he calls “Kantianism romanticized” in order to address the divisions of Subject and Object and of poetry and philosophy that haunt Romantic poetry. The Romantic thing animates everything, including inorganic matter. The ‘thing’ is alive. People are all part of one vast living organism. It makes no difference whether one starts with the Subject and works toward the Object…or with the Object and works towards the Subject…the outcome should be the same: subjects and objects are not hopelessly cut off from each other, nor does one dwell in a solipsistic stew of misapprehensions and fantasies. The nature of nature allows from the concurrence of subjective and objective being. (Davis 4)

Timothy Morton develops a similar view of Ecocriticism and Romanticism in his recent work, and I will return to these ideas in my analyses of Wordsworth and Shelley.

Wordsworthian love in particular performs the same collapse of subject/object dichotomies, and Wordsworth’s poetry fuses philosophy, science, and aesthetic through that conception of love.

Along with this trajectory of environmental thinking, Amorous Aesthetics traces a critical trajectory in Romantic poetry from Godwin to Jameson. Godwin’s greatest work, An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, had a significant impact on the British intellectual and political scene in the 1790s, and it certainly influenced Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley. Inspired by the French Revolution and the pamphlet debates of the 1790s, Godwin’s treatise embodies the New Philosophy that asserts government corrupts society and that the gradual

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spread of knowledge and subsequent emergence of morality and truth will one day render politics unnecessary. 18 Even after the Reign of Terror and its aftermath, Wordsworth and Shelley seized the Godwinism of the 1790s in their poetry and theory as an alternative to what they perceived as failed political systems. Indeed, Godwinism and its philosophical anarchism were appealing. In his well-known book on Godwin’s influence on the Romantics, Michael Scrivener explains this philosophical anarchism: “philosophical anarchism establishes a political ideal, a utopia, toward which society is moving in stages; it rejects a millenarian logic whereby utopia could be achieved immediately; it accepts politics as a process of gradual reforms and compromise, as well as ethical idealism” (xii). 19 Such a vision of utopia remains unrealized, although the Romantics often project in their poetry realization or reconciliation at some uncertain point in the future.

The ideas of utopia and perfectibility are central to Political Justice as well as to the poetry of Wordsworth and Shelley. Godwin begins his manifesto with two founding principles: first, that “The extent of our progress in the cultivation of knowledge, is unlimited,” and second, that “human inventions, and the modes of social existence, are susceptible of perpetual improvement” (15). The “improvement of reason” and “the cultivation of knowledge” are, in Godwin’s utilitarian thinking, the means to human perfectibility and a utopian future. But this perfectibility remains forever deferred. Godwin does not believe perfection is actually attainable. He argues instead for perfectibility, a

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18 See John P. Clark, The Philosophical Anarchism of William Godwin (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977). In it, Clark argues that Godwin is “the first and one of the most capable theorists of philosophical anarchism” (5). Clark’s study marked a revival of interest in Godwin during the 1970s, and his book still serves as an important study of Godwin’s political and philosophical theories.

constant striving for perfection: “the cultivation of knowledge is unlimited” and humans’ existence is “susceptible of perpetual improvement.”

Importantly, love plays a significant role in Godwinian politics and utopianism. In his discussion of sincerity and its intimate connections to “innocence, energy, intellectual improvement, and philanthropy” (151), Godwin presents “equality” as “the only sure foundation of love” (153). He later discusses “love” as one of the “most admirable instruments in the execution of the purpose of virtue” (323). Moreover, Godwin argues that love is a universal sentiment and power: “The human mind is so constituted, as to render our actions in almost every case much more the creatures of sentiment and affection, than of the understanding. We all of us have, twisted with our very natures, the principles of parental and filial affection, of love, attachment and friendship” (323). He identifies affection, love, attachment, and friendship as inherent in human nature, as a collective framework for interpreting, understanding, and acting in the world. Love thus becomes a central element of perfectibility, an essential concept for envisioning utopia and of utopia itself. Godwin also discusses the dangers of love in excess, an unthinking experience of and indulgence in love (323). An epistemology of love requires contemplation, awareness, and celebration: “A truly virtuous character is the combined result of regulated affections” (324).

Godwin’s seemingly idealist principles—and the Romantics’ inheritance of them—have thus been characterized as “excessively Utopian and naively optimistic” (Carter vii) in contrast to a more materialist Marxist utopianism. If, however, we situate such Romantic conceptions of utopia in relation to love and to the critical utopias of the Frankfurt School, the materialist elements of utopia become more clearly defined. The poems I analyze in this study reveal a critical working-through of conceptions of utopia that can help elucidate not
only the poems themselves but also the utopian theories of Godwin, Marx, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin.

In *Political Justice*, Godwin critiques Britain’s existing form of government and demonstrates, through logical argumentation and rather lengthy examples, how that system works to serve the interests of the upper classes at the expense of everyone else. As many subsequent twentieth- and twenty-first century scholars have pointed out, Godwin’s theory of politics and culture anticipates the “ideology critique” usually attached to Marxist schools of thought. Godwin’s critique “of accumulated property” and of the emergent capitalist division of classes is proto-Marxist (281), and even more striking are the similarities between Godwin’s central theory of human perfectibility and Marx’s belief in a kind of utopian communist future, what Marxist critics call his “anti-utopian utopianism.” In *Marx, Marxism, and Utopia* Darren Webb describes the classic Marxist conception of utopia: “the theoretical origins of Marx’s ‘anti-utopian utopianism’ lie precisely in the conflicting solutions he proposed to the problems that he set himself. The problems were those of generating radical hope and of capturing the spirit of revolution whilst simultaneously avoiding the need for utopianism and all the paternalistic, elitist and messianic baggage that came with it” (2). Marx did call for a kind of utopia in the anticipated working-class revolution, but the concept of utopia itself was dangerous in its inherent rejection of a wholly materialist understanding of history and culture. Webb suggests that Marx himself was unsure of how to properly articulate “anti-utopian utopianism,” and this is one important project taken up by the Frankfurt School theorists.

Major Frankfurt concepts that reveal a residual Romanticism are (1) negative dialectics, (2) the autonomous work of art, and (3) utopia. Negative dialectics in many ways
underpins the other two concepts. Adorno especially champions the idea of negative dialectics, which rejects the traditional Platonic and Hegelian notions of synthesis, reconciliation, and progress. As he writes in *Negative Dialectics*, “As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation; the thought figure of a ‘negation of negation’ later became the succinct term. This book seeks to free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy” (xix). Developing the notion of the dialectical relationship between myth and enlightenment first presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the negative dialectic refuses the illusion of synthesis and embraces the suffering caused by the inability to achieve reconciliation; in effect, the dialectic is suspended indefinitely. As Brian O’Conner argues, the negative dialectic is “the theoretical foundation of the sort of reflexivity—the critical stance—required by critical theory” (ix); it is, in fact, central to critical theory, as “critical theory is supposed to be a consciousness-raising critique of society in which empirically specific aspects of society are examined” (ix). It is just this notion of dialectics (in effect a revision of Hegelian and Marxist dialectics) that I see at work in various ways in the poetry and theory of Wordsworth and Shelley. The dialectical process of reconciliation and synthesis is never quite complete in Romantic poetry and theory, even in representations of utopia. Romantic poets often present a suspended or negative dialectic similar to Schlegel’s definition of Romantic poetry as one that is always “in the state of becoming,” one that “should forever be becoming and never be perfected.”

The negative dialectic plays a significant role in the Adornian concept of the autonomous work of art, and Adorno fully explores this idea in *Aesthetic Theory*. According to Adorno, “Artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous
entity. … By virtue of its rejection of the empirical world…art sanctions the primacy of reality” (1). A work of art, Adorno suggests, can simultaneously sustain and transcend the material, empirical world in the very act of negating that world. Adorno here conceives of reality and totality in dialectical terms. In *Reason and Revolution*, fellow Frankfurt theorist Herbert Marcuse defines “reality” in dialectical fashion as

> the constantly renewed result of the process of existence. … Thought ‘corresponds’ to reality only as it transforms reality by comprehending its contradictory structure. Here the principle of dialectic drives thought beyond the limits of philosophy. For to comprehend reality means to comprehend what things really are, and this in turn means rejecting their mere factuality. (viii, ix)

Artworks can thus aesthetically represent the passage from thought to reality—they can recover, in a sense, the totality of being—by embodying the dialectical method. György Lukács can help to explain further the dialectical model of totality espoused by the Frankfurt School:

> The materialist-dialectical conception of totality means first of all the concrete unity of interacting contradictions…; secondly, the systematic relativity of all totality both upwards and downwards…and thirdly, the historical relativity of all totality, namely that the totality-character of all totality is changing, disintegrating, confined to a determinate, concrete historical period. (12)

Just as Marcuse discusses reality as process, Lukács discusses totality as process. Reality is the constantly changing result of the concrete totality of all levels, perceptions, and experiences of society at a given historical moment. A dialectical-formalist criticism attempts to mediate both the understanding of the artwork itself (Hegelian model) and its historical and material
existence (Marxist model) through form and aesthetics in order to return the work of art to the reality to which it corresponds (i.e., concrete totality).  

Only “great” works of art can both sustain and transcend the ideology of their time, as Adorno further argues in *Aesthetic Theory*. He writes, “Great artworks are unable to lie. … only failed works are untrue. … The spell with which art through its unity encompasses the *membra disjecta* of reality is borrowed from reality and transforms art into the negative appearance of utopia” (130). Great artworks embrace the negative dialectic and thus transcend naïve notions of synthesis and reconciliation. These special works of art function as “the negative appearance of utopia,” a present and immaterial impossibility embedded within the empirical appearances of material reality—and thus possible at some point in the future. The purpose of art is to instruct and delight, and Adorno here stresses the former: art’s function as social intervention and critique. Yet in addition to such intervention and critique, a great artwork also becomes “the negative appearance of utopia” to be excavated by future critics. In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson develops Adorno’s view of art as a negation of and representation of social totality by identifying “critical negativity” as the function of utopian texts (211); in other words, utopian texts are “maps and plans to be read negatively” and dialectically (Jameson 12). Viewed in this way, the alternative utopian worlds constructed in major Romantic texts are not illusions but rather aesthetic engagements with form, politics, and ethics that reveal plans for future (and thus unrealized) possibilities.  

Adorno’s theory of utopia rests on his concept of *Versoehnung*, which Jameson describes as

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20 Of importance to this discussion is Louis Althusser’s idea of “relative autonomy.” Althusser argued for the “relative autonomy” of each of the four sets that comprise social totality: economic, political, ideological, and theoretical. The superstructure (which includes works of art) has a “relative autonomy” from the base so that art’s autonomy resists economic, political, or even ideological reduction. See “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” “*Lenin and Philosophy,*” and *Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review, 1971).
the “reconciliation between the subject and objectivity, between existence and the world, the individual consciousness and the external network of things and institutions…. The naïve projection of such a logical possibility into the realm of historical chronology can only result in metaphysical nostalgia…or in Utopianism” (Marxism 38). Such is the unrealized but potentially realizable nature of the critical utopia.

Romantic love is a kind of precursor to Adorno’s Versöhnung in that it does not refer directly to an individual moment of transcendence or reconciliation of subject/object, self/other, but rather addresses these divisions through its insistence on the unity of reality, of concrete totality. Love conceived only in terms of eros or agape relies on a false sense of reconciliation and relates more closely to the tradition of joy. The negative dialectic redresses this illusion of reconciliation, which Adorno identifies as the danger of utopian enlightenment. Utopia in this sense is not an idyllic state but a problematic idea that deceives the individual. As Jameson points out, this conception of utopia is a development of classic Marxist thinking in which “Utopian thought represented a diversion of revolutionary energy into idle wish-fulfillments and imaginary satisfactions” (Marxism 110-1). For Adorno, utopia is not so much a diversion as a driving force in the “new kind of barbarism” (Dialectic of Enlightenment xi) that dominated Fascism in the 1930s and 1940s.

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21 Scholarship tends to privilege Romantic joy above Romantic love in studies and theories of the passions, but in this study I argue for the supremacy of the latter. Joy is a momentary experience, often presented as transcendence in Romantic poetry, while love develops as a sustained way of thinking, an experience and an epistemology. The theory of passions advocated by Thomas Aquinas and Baruch Spinoza differs markedly from the tradition espoused by eighteenth-century thinkers such as Kant, Burton, Godwin, and Hartley. Aquinas and Spinoza privilege joy in their theory of the passions while the eighteenth-century thinkers I have listed privilege love. In The Story of Joy, Adam Potkay masterfully charts the development of joy in Romanticism through the Aquinas-Spinoza tradition, and in one sense, I am tracing the development of love in Romanticism through the Kant-Hartley-Godwin tradition.
Benjamin likewise sees utopia as a destructive vision of paradise, but he is even more concerned than Adorno with the utopian function of art which he calls “aura.” For Benjamin “the object of aura stand perhaps as the setting of a kind of Utopia, a Utopian present, not shorn of the past but having absorbed it, a kind of plentitude of existence in the world of things, if only for the briefest instant” (Jameson, *Marxism* 77). Aura, or the authenticity of great artworks, seeks a utopian wholeness akin to Adorno’s *Versöhnung* and Wordsworthian love, and, as Jameson suggests, Benjamin believes this wholeness can be achieved through the work of art. Utopia does blow a storm from paradise, holding the individual in a perpetual catastrophic moment, but art has the ability to transcend the catastrophe in order to represent, if only for a moment, the possibility of redemption.

A study of Romantic love and poetry is important in 2011 for this very reason. Postmodern culture has been kind neither to love nor to poetry. Decades of High Theory have reduced affect and emotion to the point of nothingness. The “death of the subject” coincides with the death of love and the emergence of “a blank, mechanistic world” (Terada 3). Jameson identifies a distinctive characteristic of the postmodern condition as “the waning of affect” (*Postmodernism* 10). Slavoj Žižek speaks of love as “a cosmic imbalance,” “an extremely violent” and exclusionary act (Žižek!). For Žižek, “love is evil” (Žižek!). Reality television makes a mockery of love and of human relationships. Poetry, likewise, has suffered a decline in social and cultural significance since the nineteenth century. Poetry, it must be admitted, does not matter to most people in the twenty-first century. It is often perceived as archaic, unnecessary, or useless. In contrast, Romantic poets saw poetry as

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essential to human life. Poets were celebrities, politicians, radicals, and influential public figures, and they believed poetry could transform the world. For them, poetry was crucial to the new democratic world that emerged after the American and French Revolutions, the world in which we arguably still live. Even after the immediate failures of the French Revolution, the Romantics continued to reimagine a post-revolutionary subjectivity through poetry. For the Romantics, poetry is intimately tied to love, and love is the means to move toward “a brighter morn.”

Romantic poetry still matters. Amorous Aesthetics strives to reestablish it as meaningful to the postmodern condition by rethinking the Romantic concept of love. Romantic poetry has much to teach us about love and its social, political, and ecological nature. Romantic love reaffirms issues of community, sociality, and interconnectedness in ways that can shed new light on the dynamics and ecologies of human relationships.

2. The Chapters

I divide my analysis of Romantic love into two sections: “Part One: Wordsworthian Love” and “Part Two: Shelleyan Love.” In Part One, I consider six works through which Wordsworth develops his theory of love. I begin in Chapter One with two of Wordsworth’s earliest poems, An Evening Walk and Salisbury Plain, which demonstrate the poet’s commitment to sociality and sympathy as essential elements of love and politics. These poems provide the groundwork for the ecological and philosophical elements of Wordsworth’s thinking that develop more fully in the late 1790s and early 1800s.

In Chapter Two, I focus on The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar to consider how Wordsworth presents love as the key concept in his poetry and poetics. I argue that
Wordsworth moves beyond the sentimentalism that characterizes his earlier poetry to arrive at a complex theory of love with which he continually works from 1797-1805. During this period, he consistently turns to love at crucial moments in his poetry and prose, yet it does not get the scholarly attention of nature, imagination, history, and ideology. Wordsworth’s theory reaches its most sophisticated levels in *Lyrical Ballads* and the thirteen-book *Prelude*, to which I turn in Chapter Three. My close reading of “Tintern Abbey” demonstrates the essentially “negative” character of Wordsworthian love, and I show how Wordsworth anticipates certain aspects of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, which I explore in greater detail in Part Two.

While Part One focuses exclusively on Wordsworth, I turn my attention in Part Two to Shelley. I argue that Shelley adopts, adapts, and fuses aspects of Wordsworthian love with Classical, philosophical, and scientific accounts of love. I consider the development of Shelleyan love through five major works, as well as several shorter poems, fragments, and treatises. In the Introduction to Part Two I offer a reading of Shelley’s essay “On Love” that demonstrates its significance to the poet’s critical theory. While many scholars see this fragment as tangential to Shelley’s body of work, I argue that it is central to understanding his theory of love. In Chapter Four, I examine love and desire in *Queen Mab* and “Alastor,” two earlier poems that establish the Godwinian and Wordsworthian engagements that shape Shelley’s treatments of love, politics, aesthetics, and utopia throughout his career.

In Chapter Five, I investigate the negative dialectic that emerges in Shelley’s life, thinking, and poetry while he was self-exiled in Italy from 1819-1821. I analyze “The Mask of Anarchy,” *Prometheus Unbound*, and *Epipsychidion*, three poems that create a dialectical movement in Shelley’s thought between hope and despair, idealism and skepticism, love and
hate. I argue that the anomalous “Mask of Anarchy” presents an embrace of violent revolution that Shelley corrects with the utopian Prometheus Unbound, a drama that enacts the possibilities of ideal love. Epipsychidion, on the other hand, embraces the suffering caused by Shelley’s inability to achieve that utopian ideal, forcing him to imagine death as the only avenue for reconciliation. But there is no reconciliation in these poems. Shelley sustains a negative dialectic that (in)forms his thinking and his poetry, and that dialectic preserves the hope for a redeemed world for which Shelleyan love ultimately strives.

I conclude my study with a consideration of the legacy of Romantic love in the poetry of Felicia Hemans and Matthew Arnold. Hemans serves in many ways as a bridge from the Romantic period to the Victorian period, and her continual emphasis on the “affections” throughout her career reveals an under-studied continuity with other major Romantic poets and with the Romantic theory of love. Similarly, Arnold’s poetry of the 1850s reveals an ongoing Victorian engagement with Romantic love at once desirous and dubious. In the end, Amorous Aesthetics explores how and why Romantic poets construct a theory of love in their poetry and poetics, a love that is just as (if not more) central to Romanticism as are nature, imagination, and ideology.
PART ONE

WORDSWORTHIAN LOVE
Introduction

In his Preface to the third edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth refers to poetry as “an acknowledgment of the beauty of the universe, an acknowledgment the more sincere because it is not formal, but indirect; it is a task light and easy to him who looks at the world in the spirit of love” (401). Such a statement fraught with ambiguity typifies Wordsworth’s treatment of love. But he is quite sure of himself here, quite confident in these seemingly enigmatic claims. His “acknowledgement of the beauty of the universe” is “sincere” because it is “indirect”—it is filtered through love. This filtering effect acts as an epistemology, as a way of knowing and understanding the world. Through the “spirit of love,” Wordsworth can create a poetry that in turn produces pleasure, beauty, and love for the reader. He presents “personal and individual” knowledge and pleasure that by “habitual and direct sympathy connect…us with our fellow-beings” (402). The poet “is the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying every where with him relationship and love” (402). Love, that is, almost always coincides with pleasure, unity, and harmony, both in the world and in poetry.

Materialist, historicist, and formalist critics alike have established nature, imagination, ideology, and history as the central concepts for Wordsworth studies,¹ but love is as much a

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part of Wordsworth’s poetry and poetics as are these more critically-discussed concepts.2

Wordsworth uses the word “love” far more often in his poetry and prose than “nature” or “imagination.” The word “love” appears 820 times in Wordsworth’s collected works as compared to 556 instances of the word “nature” and only 42 instances of the word “imagination.”3 In The Prelude Wordsworth writes that his two central themes are “Imagination” and “intellectual love” (XIII 186), and he subtitiles the eighth book, “Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind.” This subtitle is a kind of poetic manifesto, a thesis of Wordsworth’s autobiography: the argument that his first experiences of intersubjectivity were with the natural world, and from those, developed a “love of mankind.” That phrase, in the early nineteenth-century, carries revolutionary connotations reminiscent of both the American and the French declarations of the “rights of man.” It is a political statement that confirms the “natural” rights associated with democracy, liberty, and equality.

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2 In her Introduction to a volume of Romantic Circles Praxis Series on “Romantic Passions,” Elizabeth Fay poses a relevant question: “what of love in the Romantic period?” Fay points out that “Critical attention to the emotions, either as love…, as passion…, or as sex…, has never had much force in Romantic studies,” and, while scholars have engaged more with emotions over the past decade, love is still a largely under-read and under-studied concept in Romantic poetry, especially in Wordsworth’s poetry. For two important studies on Romanticism and love, see Beaty and Ulmer. Many recent studies of “love” in the Romantic period focus on gender and sexuality (e.g., see Mellor, Fulford, Wolfson, Nagle, and Sha) or take a more biographical approach. Jean H. Hagstrum suggests that Wordsworth was “a sexual poet,” “a highly obsessed and more frequently a highly successful poet of physically based love” (73). Hagstrum emphasizes the poet’s relationships with Annette Vallon, his sister Dorothy, and the Hutchinson sisters (he married Mary Hutchinson in 1802) to trace a continually suppressed sexuality in his poetry (see especially chapter three). In Providence and Love, John Beer analyzes Wordsworth’s poetry with regard to his love and affection for his sister Dorothy and his wife Mary. In this essay, I am not primarily concerned with Wordsworth’s romantic attachments and relationships but rather with his theory of love.

theory of love reaffirms issues of community, sociality, and interconnectedness in both the natural world and human relationships.

But I do not think it is entirely accurate that Wordsworth’s earliest passion for nature “grows” through poetic sensibility into a passion for human rights and a poetics of intellectual love. Although Wordsworth insists on a move from love of nature to love of humanity in much of his best-known poetry written during and after 1798, earthly love, or the love between individual people, appears as the starting point in his earlier poetry. Wordsworth retrospectively constructs a mythic and ideal conception of love in works such as “Tintern Abbey” and The Prelude, but that idealizing and universalizing love remains grounded in actual human relationships. Human affection is the basis of many of Wordsworth’s earlier poems, including An Evening Walk, Salisbury Plain, and The Ruined Cottage. Love involves affection and sympathy for other people, which can lead to the affection Wordsworth expresses for the universe in the passage from the Preface cited above. The spirit of love allows Wordsworth to connect with other people as well as to “see into the life of things” (“Tintern Abbey” 50), to know and feel and live and move. But the aesthetic and ecological movement that love seems to generate in his poetry and prose—from particular, somatic experience to cosmic, transcendent experience, or from the interpersonal to the political—never fully realizes itself. The synthesis breaks down into a more restless shifting between different moments of love—in effect, a nascent negative dialectics. Wordsworth’s passion for nature intensifies and elevates love to higher ethical, aesthetic, and philosophical levels, but it does not displace the fundamental human element of love.
Recent scholarship on aesthetics, affect theory, and Romantic science has reinvigorated discussions regarding the role of feeling and emotion in Wordsworth’s poetry after decades of materialist and historicist critique. Resulting in part from the emergence of New Formalism and the renewed emphasis on aesthetics, my approach to Wordsworth’s poetry draws from such scholarship through an analysis of the poet’s theory of love.

Historicist criticism that privileges history and culture above form and aesthetics as the best sites through which to understand literature often regards Romantic conceptions of love as ideological: love seems to carry with it notions of transcendence, idealism, and truth that reinforce the so-called Romantic Ideology. Romantic love, linked to imagination and aesthetics in many historicist and poststructuralist studies, becomes an evasive and ethereal “illusion” (Tang 208-9). Scholars such as James Chandler and Tom Furniss situate love and affection within Burkean aesthetic ideology and eighteenth-century politics. In Radical Sensibility, Chris Jones sees Wordsworthian love as an engagement with and development of the tradition of sensibility as it was politicized in the 1790s. Critical work on Wordsworth and the politics of sympathy tends to support historicist and ideological readings, although

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4 Since the 1980s, scholarship on Wordsworth has been dominated by new historicist critique in myriad forms. Critics such as Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson, Alan Liu, Clifford Siskin, and Kenneth Johnston published important and influential readings of Wordsworth and his poetry, but in recent years scholars have begun to develop and challenge such historicist critique through a renewed emphasis on form, aesthetics, and feeling. For example, in the 1990s, Jonathan Bate established an Ecocritical approach to Wordsworth’s poetry that continues to gain relevance and significance to contemporary theory and practice; Forest Pyle and Deborah Elise White have developed a theoretical-formalist approach to the Wordsworthian (and thus Romantic) Imagination through Deconstruction and Frankfurt School Critical Theory; and a range of newer studies are reinvestigating the role of affect and feeling in Wordsworth’s poetry and theory (e.g., see Pinch, Fosso, Fry, Wilson, Bruhn, and Allen).

5 For work on Romanticism and aesthetics, see Levine, De Man, Armstrong, Redfield, Loesberg, and Pyle.
Wordsworth’s sympathy for the suffering and for the dead has received more positive attention.  

More recently, Simon Jarvis and Stuart Allen have countered such ideological attacks by showing how Wordsworth thinks critically and philosophically through his poetry. In their respective studies, *Wordsworth’s Philosophic Song* and *Wordsworth and the Passions of Critical Poetics*, both critics, but Jarvis especially, position Wordsworth’s verse in some relation to Theodor Adorno’s critical thought to demonstrate the ways that the poet critically and dialectically engages with philosophy, social theory, and utopian negativity. Wordsworth’s “verse is itself a kind of cognition,” a kind of philosophic thinking which happens in and through verse (Jarvis 4, 214). Jarvis points out that many historicist critiques present a limited view of Wordsworth (5-6), as do readings of Wordsworth as the poet of the imagination or the egotistical sublime. Wordsworth does not construct a system in his poetry that reflects and perpetuates the Romantic Ideology but rather a critical poetry that engages with and explores the contradictions, resistances, and difficulties inherent to human experience (Jarvis 4-5, 214-5). This study develops such a view of Wordsworth by looking closely at his theory of love and its relation to what Adorno calls negative dialectics.

The basis of Adorno’s negative dialectics is a refusal of the synthesis inherent in Platonic and Hegelian dialectics. The negative dialectic embraces the suffering caused by the

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6 For historicist approaches, see Chandler, McGann, Liu, Furniss, Harrison, Mitchell, and Lamb. For studies on sympathy and mourning, see Averill, Bewell, Schor, and Fosso. Of particular relevance to my approach is Kurt Fosso’s *Buried Communities*. Fosso analyzes Wordsworth’s “sociology of community” (16), which brings together the poet’s spiritual, pantheistic, political, and aesthetic modes of thought. While my focus on love differs from Fosso’s almost exclusive emphasis on the communities generated by grief and mourning, I develop his view of Wordsworth as primarily a social and relational poet whose poetry explores at the literary and aesthetic levels (as well as the historical and political levels) spiritual communities and connections grounded in actual human experience.

7 See also Kim, Kaufman, Fosso, Wilson, and Allen.
human incapacity for reconciliation; in effect, the dialectic is suspended indefinitely (Adorno *Negative Dialectics* xix). Such a stance is central to modern critical theory as well as to Adorno’s philosophical aesthetics. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno states that

> Artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous entity. … By virtue of its rejection of the empirical world—a rejection that inheres in art’s concept and thus is no mere escape, but a law immanent to it—art sanctions the primacy of reality.  

(1)

A work of art, he suggests, can simultaneously sustain and transcend the material, empirical world in the very act of negating that world. But only “great” works of art can do this, as Adorno further contends: “Great artworks are unable to lie. … [O]nly failed works are untrue. … The spell with which art through its unity encompasses the *membra disjecta* of reality is borrowed from reality and transforms art into the negative appearance of utopia” (*Aesthetic Theory* 130). Great artworks embrace the negative dialectic and transcend naïve notions of synthesis and reconciliation. These special works of art create “the negative appearance of utopia,” a present and immaterial impossibility embedded within the empirical appearances of material reality—and thus a reality possible at some point in the future.

What I will call Wordsworthian love is both an idea and a feeling, both a metaphysical-philosophical concept and a physical experience. Wordsworthian love is an all-pervading spirit that links all things in the universe; it is a universal and spiritual presence anchored in subjective and material experiences. Wordsworth articulates this conception of love in an early, short poem from *Lyrical Ballads*, “Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House.” The poem is addressed to his sister, Dorothy, and it acts as an ode to her and to the season of spring, that time when “There is a blessing in the air, / Which seems a sense of
joy” (5-6). Wordsworth asks Dorothy to join him in an exploration of nature, and, like most poems of the volume, the central theme is love:

Love, now an universal birth,
From heart to heart is stealing,
From earth to man, from man to earth,
—It is the hour of feeling. (21-4)

The poet equates the (re)birth of the natural world in the spring-time to the “universal birth” of love. Wordsworth depicts an interrelated ecosphere in which the hearts and feelings of humans are as intimately connected to each other as are the earth and humankind. Love is both universal and specific to individual hearts. He then invokes a rhetoric of totality akin to what I will discuss in “Tintern Abbey”:

And from the blessed power that rolls
About, below, above:
We'll frame the measure of our souls,
They shall be tuned to love. (33-6)

The concept of what Wordsworth here calls “the blessed power” recurs in his poetry as a theory of love. He variously describes it as “the eternal spirit,” the “Spirit of the universe,” “the sentiment of Being,” the “one life,” “the Spirit of Nature,” and “something far more deeply interfused.” In “Lines,” Wordsworth writes that he and his sister will “tune” their souls “to love,” a framing of their worldview so as to truly see reality. Unity and harmony are central to Wordworthian love, a love that shapes his and Dorothy’s way of thinking about the world as well as the aesthetic form of the poem itself. Even in poems where Wordworth

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8 William Wordsworth, “Was it for this” (104), The Prelude (I 428; II 420, 430; VII 736), and “Tintern Abbey” (97). In an earlier tradition of criticism, scholars perceived Wordsworth as a Pantheist in his engagements with the “one life,” but recent work in Ecocriticism has recast such pantheistic elements in terms of environmental and ecological philosophy and theory. This essay draws from such studies to emphasize the ethical, ecological, and sociological work of Wordworthian love. See Bate, McKusick, Fosso, Morton, and Wilson.
does not specifically use the word “love,” his emphasis on pleasure, unity, harmony, and affection signals his developing theory of love.

The dominant elements of Wordsworthian love are (1) affection, (2) the move from isolation to sociality, and (3) unity and harmony. The purpose of poetry, as Wordsworth argues in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, is not only “to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement” (394), in other words, to produce pleasure and excitement along with the dissemination of knowledge and truth, but also to spread “relationship and love” by means of understanding the world through “the spirit of love,” through “the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he [i.e., the Poet] knows, and feels, and lives, and moves” (401). The all-pervading spirit of love allows Wordsworth to connect with other people as well as “to see into the life of things,” to know and feel and live and move.

Wordsworthian love represents a new composition of eternal or universal feelings, a new conception of love for an increasingly industrial and modern world. Along with nature and the imagination, love is a driving force in Wordsworth’s poetry; it can connect not only the human mind to nature but also individuals to each other and to communities.

Wordsworth writes in an 1802 letter to John Wilson that “A great Poet ought…to a certain degree to rectify men’s feelings, to give them new compositions of feeling, to render their feelings more sane pure and permanent, in short, more consonant to nature, that is, to eternal nature, and the great moving spirit of things” (355). He aims to present compositions or combinations of feeling that are both “new” and “eternal.” Such a project would seem a paradox—how can a feeling be both new and eternal?—until we foreground Wordsworth’s conception of love. As Irving Singer explains, “the feeling of love is universal among human
beings, whereas ideas of love are extremely particular to a culture or historic period” (75). Wordsworth’s idea of love captures not only relationships between individuals and nature but also between the poet and his audience. The four editions of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798, 1800, 1802, 1805) present his attempts to deal and to intervene directly with life—that is, to counteract the desensitization of modern society with its newspapers, industrial cities, “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies” (Preface 395); to valorize the lower classes as worthy subjects of poetry, in effect, to argue for a new, “radical” politics; to teach us how to feel, as Arnold writes in his “Memorial Verses”; and, ultimately, to teach his readers how to love and how to understand love. Wordsworth’s particular orientation within the broader Romantic response to the Enlightenment and to the crises of the era rests on an epistemology of love.

In the following three chapters, I analyze Wordworthian love from its initial appearances in *An Evening Walk* and *Salisbury Plain* to its fuller development in *The Ruined Cottage*, *Lyrical Ballads*, and the thirteen-book *Prelude*. What begins in 1788 as a means to re-envision the relationships between individuals and between humans and the natural world becomes by 1798 Wordsworth’s central poetic and philosophic concept, an idea of love that weaves itself through nearly every aspect of his poetry and poetics. Although there are instances where Wordworthian turns to sentimentalism, self-love, or the so-called “egotistical sublime,” my analyses demonstrate how love works in the poetry; how it presents a challenge to scholarship that portrays Wordworth as escapist, evasive, and deluded by the
Romantic Ideology; and how it reveals a fuller understanding of Wordsworth’s work and the Romantic project.⁹

⁹ “Romantic Ideology” refers directly to McGann’s seminal New Historicism study of the same name, but I also use it here to reference indirectly the wide range of materialist and historicist scholarship that utilizes ideology critique to interpret Wordsworth’s works. I use the term “sentimentalism” in this study to refer to an indulgence in emotion for pleasure in literature and art. This usage of the term is distinct from philosophical sentimentalism, which treats ethics and morality as grounded in feeling and emotion. Wordsworth’s theory of love aims to unite personal feeling and social morality in such a way that parallels the debates surrounding sensibility and sentimentalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling, Michael Bell suggests the union of “[i]ndividual feeling and social principle” was the original intent of the term “sentiment,” which became politically polarized between “Reason” and “Sensibility” during the Romantic era (116). Bell concludes that for Wordsworth “the culture of moral feeling…provided no compelling or universalizable model for the social whole” (117). I argue, however, that love provides such a model for Wordsworth, at least until 1805. When the poet turns to sentimentalism in his poetry, he partially abandons his critical theory of love. See also Jones and McGann.
CHAPTER ONE

“A sympathetic twilight”: Love and the Sentimental Turn in the Early Poems

1. An Evening Walk (1788-9, 1793)

An Evening Walk is a kind of love song to Wordsworth’s then-absent sister, Dorothy. It is “an epistle in verse,” as the subtitle indicates, but it is much more than that. Wordsworth expresses in the poem his affection for Dorothy, his “dearest friend” (1), and his desire to reunite with her. Yet the poem is far from a traditional love song. The address to Dorothy frames the poem. Its central parts focus on Wordsworth’s exploration of memory, imagination, nature, and the human mind, and the poem revolves around two sentimental scenes: “the idyll of the swans” (Hartman 96) and the tale of a female beggar. Wordsworth moves from his personal affection for Dorothy to more philosophical meditations on his mind and the natural world—for his love of nature. But the “vulgar,” earthly aspects of love continually disrupt his “heavenly,” universal aspirations through the insistence of the sentimental.

Love does not play a central role in critical studies of the poem. Like many of Wordsworth’s poems, history and imagination have received more critical attention than feeling and love. In Wordsworth: A Sense of History, Alan Liu positions the poem in the picturesque tradition and argues that Wordsworth constructs “the theory of denial” through a privileging of the imagination and the self as transcendent of history. Liu suggests that this
theory reveals itself as a constant arresting of narrative movement and temporality in the name of aesthetic or natural unity. In a more recent essay on the poem, John Axcelson develops Liu’s reading and points out the poem’s likeness to historicist criticism itself—that is, the tendency of both the picturesque poem and historicist criticism to endorse “the discrete moment of vision at the expense of narrative development” (652). What Axcelson addresses is the apparent disjunction between Romantic unity and totality—a unity also present in the picturesque tradition—and historicist critique of such an idea of unity.

Axcelson concludes that An Evening Walk is “the first moment in a process of refiguring eighteenth-century modes of thought and representation,” a poem in which Wordsworth intends “neither to imitate nor reject them but to shift them toward a more human understanding of mind and nature” (669). The representation of unity in An Evening Walk works neither as an ideological illusion nor an instance of social evasion but rather an attempt to reform the eighteenth-century picturesque tradition of unity to arrive at a more human understanding of the world. Wordsworth reveals how his conception of nature enriches human experience, and in my reading, the central element of the human experience is love.¹

Both Liu and Axcelson privilege history and politics over form, and the result is a displacement of love. The stops and starts in the poem’s narrative and temporality indicate Wordsworth’s conception of love, one that oscillates between his affection for Dorothy, his affection for humanity, and his affection for the natural world. Wordsworth desires an ideal

¹ I here follow Adorno’s claim from Aesthetic Theory that art’s autonomy is bound to the human-ness of society: “As society be[comes] ever less a human one, this autonomy [i]s shattered” (1). Although “Art is the antithesis of society” (8), it stands in negative relation to society and sustains reality and human-ness through form and aesthetics.
and universal unity of existence, but personal and earthly affections frustrate that desire. This process reveals the negative character of Wordsworthian love.

While many critics might claim that Wordsworthian imagination is the “theory of denial,” imagination in the poems and texts themselves aligns more often with the category of the aesthetic. Deborah Elise White presents such an argument in *Romantic Returns*, an important revisionist study that embodies the impulse “to reinvestigate and reinvigorate ways in which the category of the aesthetic—for which the crucial Romantic term is imagination—enables a critical and reflexive articulation of the historical passage between knowledge and action, epistemology and ethics, fine art and politics. The focus on Romantic ideology tends to lose sight of just this (admittedly Romantic) insight” (3). The Romantic poets, that is, utilize the category of the aesthetic for critical and dialectical thinking. For Wordsworth, the imagination is that faculty of mind that can reveal and construct links between self and society, spirit and matter, humanity and nature, ideas and politics and history. In *An Evening Walk*, and in most of Wordsworth’s poems, the aesthetic of love connects in complex ways the concepts of love, nature, time, affection, self, mind, imagination, and history. Although much of the poem does develop picturesque vision within temporal experience, the most significant passages fuse physical and metaphysical vision, senses of the body and mind, history and transcendence. Wordsworth presents through his poetry a theory of love that forms the basis of human experience.

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2 The Romantics themselves did not conceive of aesthetics as separate from history or politics or culture. Like White, I understand Romantic aesthetics as philosophical and theoretical as well as “social and political in content” (3). The category of the aesthetic, as it develops from Kant through Hegel, Marx, and the Frankfurt School, concerns and unites sensory perception, philosophical investigation, and social relations. Love, then, becomes a central concept for Wordsworth in understanding and articulating aesthetic theory.
The descriptive elements of the poem move visually and temporally from noon to night, while the psychological and formal elements move from isolation to sociality and unity. The poem begins with Wordsworth alone, musing on his “thoughtless” experience of the natural world (1-190), which tends to stand as pure description in the picturesque mode:

How pleasant, as the yellowing sun declines,
And with long rays and shades the landscape shines;
To mark the birches’ stems all golden light,
That lit the dark slant woods with silvery white!
The willows weeping trees, that twinkling hoar,
Glanced oft upturned along the breezy shore,
Low bending o’er the coloured water, fold
Their moveless boughs and leaves like threads of gold;
The skiffs with naked masts at anchor lai’d,
Before the boat-house peeping thro’ the shade;
Th’ unwearied glance of woodman’s echoed stroke;
And curling from the trees the cottage smoke. (97-108)

Wordsworth hints at a unity of perception in this passage—in his use of enjambment, in the fluid use of assonance and consonance, and in the construction of the passage as one continuous phrase—but he does not move fully from description to introspection. Despite its poetic execution, this passage reflects the feeling of “thoughtless mirth.”

At the advent of evening, however, Wordsworth begins to supply deeper, more meditative thought to such descriptions. The first instance of this formal movement occurs in the contrast between the superstitious, unreal forms that appear at sunset and the actual and material manifestation of love among the swans (179-218). Wordsworth begins to move out of his isolation during the idyll of the swans. The male swan (or “cob”) swells his lifted chest, and backward flings
His bridling neck between his tow’ring wings;

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3 The only exception is line 100, which ends with an exclamation point, but this use of punctuation has more to do with the expression of sincerity than with the finality of a clause. For a discussion of the use and meaning of punctuation marks in the 1790s, see Hodson.
Stately, and burning in his pride, divides
And glorying looks around, the silent tides;
On as he floats, the silvered waters glow,
Proud of the varying arch and moveless form of snow.
While tender Cares and mild domestic Loves,
With furtive watch pursue her as she moves[.]  (201-8)

This traditionally masculine description of the cob attains its importance only in relation to its connection with the female swan (or “pen”). Wordsworth deemed this “mild” and “domestic” love of the swans significant enough to mark the transition from day to night and from thoughtlessness to thoughtfulness.

The sentimentality of this idyll is an odd intrusion on Wordsworth’s descriptive observations of and musings on the natural world. He descends, in a sense, from his idealization of nature to earthly affection for living creatures. Swan love—and love of the swans—leads him to a more social understanding of the world around him:

The female with a meeker charm succeeds,
And her brown little ones around her leads,
Nibbling the water lilies as they pass,
Or playing wanton with the floating grass:
She in a mother’s care, her beauty’s pride
Forgets, unwearyed watching every side,
She calls them near, and with affection sweet
Alternately relieves their weary feet;
Alternately they mount her back, and rest
Close by her mantling wings’ embraces prest.  (209-18)

Wordsworth’s observations of the pen and her cygnets act as a turning point in the poem. These observations specify pictorial detail and focus on materiality—there is very little abstraction. Wordsworth emphasizes the “brown little ones,” the water lilies, the floating grass, and the interactions of the swans. He describes in this passage a “mild domestic love” or “affection.” He conflates the two terms in this poem, but he draws a distinction in later poems such as “Tintern Abbey.” In *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant distinguishes
“affects,” which “are related merely to feeling,” being “tumultuous and unpremeditated,” from passions such as love, which are “sustained and considered” (154). Affections are spontaneous while love involves deep thought and active desire. But even in this early poem, Wordsworth presents a subjective and material manifestation of affection to anchor his more abstract and philosophical thoughts on love. In the following three stanzas he begins to idealize the swans’ existence, but he continues his sentimental tone: he hopes that “Long may [the swans] roam these hermit waves that sleep” (219) and that others may bless the “Fair swan! by all a mother’s joys caressed” (241). Wordsworth wavers between lyric and narrative, ideal and material, abstracted and earthly affections.

Despite a turn to the abstract, the swan scene leads to the second and more significant turn to the sentimental: the tale of a female beggar. The tale more directly speaks to eighteenth-century sentimentalism and its “exciting stimulation of fictional suffering” (Averill 21). Wordsworth returns through the sentimental to earthly love; it is seemingly inescapable. The tale is a narrative intrusion on the lyric poem, but it also refers back to Wordsworth’s address to Dorothy. Unable to connect directly to Dorothy, An Evening Walk shifts between an idealized love based in unity and an earthly love based in sympathy and sentimentalism. Likewise, Wordsworth attempts to invoke in the reader sympathy, and from sympathy, a universal love, but the tale turns to sentimentalism and remains grounded in earthly affection.  

4 It may seem that Wordsworth anthropomorphizes the swans in this section of the poem, but I think it is more accurate to see Wordsworth as moving toward an eco-centric perspective where love connects both human and non-human life forms. For work on Wordsworth’s ethical and ecological thinking, see Bate, Morton, and Potkay.

5 G. Gabrielle Starr sees the turn to the female beggar and her narrative as “a generic interruption, a turn toward the novel” (191). In her reading of the poem, Wordsworth absorbs the eighteenth-century sentimental novel in his lyric poem so that poetry itself can create “a broadened ethical, affective, and political community”
The tale of the beggar speaks to the social, moral, and political elements of love. The beggar’s husband died in the Battle for Bunker Hill, which left her and her children destitute. There is seemingly no solution to their situation, no one to help them survive:

I see her now, denied to lay her head,  
On cold blue nights, in hut or straw-built shed;  
Turn to a silent smile their sleepy cry,  
By pointing to a shooting star on high: (257-60)

Wordsworth paints a rather pathetic picture of the beggar and her children, almost begging someone to help them. He transforms the woman into a symbol of political and social failure; in effect, a symbol of the lack of unity and love amongst the various social classes. He even envisions the beggar’s desire to reunite with her husband, but, unlike his desire for Dorothy, the beggar’s desire is hopeless (267-8).

The sentimental nature of the tale intensifies as Wordsworth turns sympathy into spectacle:

—When low-hung clouds each star of summer hide,  
And fireless are the valleys far and wide,  
Where the brook brawls along the painful road,  
Dark with bat haunted ashes stretching broad,  
The distant clock forgot, and chilling dew,  
Pleased thro’ the dusk their breaking smiles to view,  
Oft has she taught them on her lap to play  
Delighted, with the glow-worm’s harmless ray  
Tossed light from hand to hand; while on the ground  
Small circles of green radiance gleam around. (269-78)

Like the swans, the family becomes a part of the picturesque landscape. Wordsworth establishes the backdrop of the picture, with its clouds, valleys, brooks, and roads darkening at dusk, through which the smiles of the playing children appear in the foreground. They are

(193). Wordsworth, then, as Jarvis and Allen similarly suggest, articulates a new kind of thinking and reading through his poetry, a Critical Theory that encompasses multiple disciplines, genres, and traditions. In my reading, love is at the center of Wordsworth’s Critical Theory.
spectacle to be viewed by readers, and their brief moments of happiness reinforce their pitiful and hopeless condition:

Oh! when the bitter showers her path assail,
And roars between the hills the torrent gale,
—No more her breath can thaw their fingers cold,
Their frozen arms her neck no more can fold;
Scarce heard, their chattering lips her shoulder chill,
And her cold back their colder bosoms thrill.] (279-84)

Sympathy and sentimentalism work together here. Wordsworth imagines a connection between his self and the beggar, his self and the reader, and the reader and the representation of the beggar in the poem, through an emphasis on and perhaps indulgence in emotion as a means for social and political action. Adela Pinch suggests that such “conventional images of women’s suffering provide the poet with a medium through which the transmission of feeling and the transmission of poetic language produce and reproduce each other” (75). Wordsworth, that is, does not humanize, purify, or transcend sentimentalism but rather incorporates sentimentality into his broader philosophy of language and feeling. This passage presents the fear, sadness, and hopelessness of the beggar as her children cling to her in frozen terror, and eventually perish (285-90). As her children die, the beggar cries, “Now ruthless Tempest launch thy deadliest dart! / Fall fires—but let us perish heart to heart” (291-2). As they were connected by love in life, so she wishes them to be connected in death: “heart to heart.”

After the deaths of the children, the speaker of the poem instructs the beggar to grieve as a way to conclude the narrative interjection: “Press the sad kiss, fond mother! vainly fears / Thy flooded cheek to wet them with its tears” (295-6). This marks the moment

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6 Such indulgence is typical in the eighteenth-century sentimental novel. See Starr (especially chapter six).
where Wordsworth moves from the sentimental back to unified, universal aesthetics. The fragmentary nature of the tale and its relation to the poem as a whole disrupt the aesthetic of unity and cohesion which the poem strives to represent. The fragmented tale also frustrates its direct purpose of moving its reader to social and political action through sympathy. Wordsworth seemingly intends to fuse sympathy and affection for the beggar with universal love, but the process ultimately fails, producing a jolting effect as he moves from material to ideal love.

Wordsworthian love reveals itself in this shift following the tale of the female beggar, which corresponds to twilight and night in the temporal element of the poem. Wordsworth abruptly leaves the frozen family and describes the natural scenery with more intense vision than before, fusing sight and sound, nature and humanity:

Sweet are the sounds that mingle from afar,  
Heard by calm lakes, as peeps the folding star,  
Where the duck dabbles 'mid the rustling sedge,  
Or the swan stirs the reeds, his neck and bill  
Wetting, that drip upon the water still;  
And heron, as resounds the trodden shore,  
Shoots upward, darting his long neck before.  
While, by the scene composed, the breast subsides,  
Nought wakens or disturbs its tranquil tides;  
Nought but the char that for the may-fly leaps,  
And breaks the mirror of the circling deeps;  
Or clock, that blind against the wanderer born  
Drops at his feet, and stills his droning horn.  
—The whistling swain that plods his ringing way  
Where the slow wagon winds along the bay;  
The sigh of swallow flocks that twittering sweep,  
The solemn curfew swinging long and deep;  
The talking boat that moves with pensive sound,  
Or drops his anchor down with plunge profound;  
Of boys that bathe remote the faint uproar,  
And restless piper wearying out the shore;  
These all to swell the village murmurs blend,  
That softened from the water-head descend.
While in sweet cadence rising small and still
The far-off minstrels of the haunted hill,
As the last bleating of the fold expires,
Tune in the mountain dells their water lyres.  (301-28)

Critics have read the “eerie” placement of this transitionary passage as marking an escape from the narrative intrusion; as a displacement of Wordsworth’s social and political fears; and as a common sentimental trope (i.e., the move from suffering to calm). But what the passage suggests within the poem is a desire for continuity from the beggar’s narrative to universalizing aesthetics, what Kurt Fosso reads as an element of Wordsworth’s sociology: “to look, in a time of separation, alienation, and loss, to discover bonds to unite a disunited world” (55). The same connection that unites Wordsworth’s subjectivity with that of the female beggar unites him with the natural world. The transition from narrative to loco-description marks an anxious attempt to represent aesthetically universal love after the sentimental tale. Wordsworth clearly privileges universal, cosmic love, but it remains wed to earthly affection and sentimentality.

The passage begins as a mingling of sounds, heard by nature as well as by Wordsworth, and quickly moves to a mingling of sights as well (the lake, the star, the swan). Following the dash, the speaker supplies human sights and sounds to those of nature: the swain, the wagon, the boat, the boys, the piper, the village, all fuse into one vision, one experience of the world. Inanimate things, such as the boat, suddenly have a life of their own, a connection with everything else in the passage and in the world. The “minstrels” refer simultaneously to the music of humans, the bleating of the sheep, and the lyres of mountain streams. Wordsworth especially emphasizes music as a means to represent the

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7 See Averill, Liu, Pinch, and Starr.
unity of life in this passage. Disparate sights and sounds, thoughts and feelings, create a kind of harmony that the speaker expresses through the idea of music: the “whistling swan,” the toll of the curfew bell, the “restless piper,” the “water lyres.” This musical unity fuses again with twilight, which the speaker describes: “Now with religious awe the farewell light / Blends with the solemn colouring of the night” (329-30). The unity that surrounds the speaker takes on a mystical or “religious” aspect, and, as the moon rises, a magical quality:

—’Tis restless magic all; at once the bright 
Breaks on the shade, the shade upon the light, 
Fair Spirits are abroad; in sportive chase 
Brushing with lucid wands the water’s face, 
While music stealing round the glimmering deeps 
Charms the tall circle of th’ enchanted steeps. (345-50)

Wordsworth uses “magic” to emphasize the unknowable aspects of reality, aspects not fully explained by science or Enlightenment thought but available intuitively. Love is beyond materiality, beyond the physical senses, and it is something that Wordsworth can access through poetry. The shadowy interplay of light and dark seems so otherworldly, as if “Fair Spirits are abroad,” as if the fusion of sound were a kind of magical music.

The stanza ends with its most important passage:

— No purple prospects now the mind employ 
Glowing in golden sunset tints of joy, 
But o’er the soothed accordant heart we feel 
A sympathetic twilight slowly steal, 
And ever, as we fondly muse, we find 
The soft gloom deep’ning on the tranquil mind. 
Stay! pensive, sadly-pleasing visions, stay! 
Ah no! as fades the vale, they fade away. 
Yet still the tender, vacant gloom remains, 
Still the cold check its shuddering tear retains. (379-88)

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8 For a discussion on the relationship between music and transcendence, see Potkay, The Story of Joy, 154-5, 193.
In the first phrase of this passage, Wordsworth identifies a physical and metaphysical link between nature, the mind, and the heart. As night falls, his heart becomes soothed and harmonically fused with the natural world; he feels a “sympathetic twilight” both in his body and mind. The emphasis on unity, harmony, and interconnectedness signifies Wordsworthian love. There is something that links feeling and thought, body and mind, humanity and nature, and, while Wordsworth does not specifically use the word “love,” I argue that it is a kind of love that works as both epistemology—the way he understands and constructs his knowledge of the world—and poetics, the form and structure of the poem itself (i.e., the poet’s aim to unify form and content). Wordsworth attempts to portray the experience of this love through the rhetoric of the sublime; he seems to transcend the earthly and the human, if but for a moment. In the second part of this passage, the sublime, transcendent moment fades away, but Wordsworth writes, “Yet still the tender, vacant gloom remains, / Still the cold cheek its shuddering tear retains.” The tear alludes to the tale of the female beggar—the vulgar sentimental once again emerges. Wordsworth anchors his metaphysical, otherworldly experience of love with a material (and more accessible) manifestation of affection. Wordsworthian love links these metaphysical and physical experiences; it is the bridge between the individual act of transcendent imagination and the social community.

In the final section of *An Evening Walk*, Wordsworth returns to the epistle form as he envisions Dorothy preparing their future, ideal home through a poetic vision that creates an imagined yet potential (and later actual) community from the isolation that persists in the early parts of the poem. He writes,
—Ev’n now she decks for me a distant scene,
(For dark and broad the gulph of time between)
Gilding that cottage with her fondest ray,
(Sole bourn, sole wish, sole object of my way;
How fair its lawn and silvery woods appear!
How sweet its streamlet murmurs in mine ear!
Where we, my friend, to golden days shall rise[.] (413-9)

Reuniting with Dorothy is Wordsworth’s sole desire. The intention of the poem is to articulate and explore a kind of love that links the poet to his sister, to humanity, and to nature. Wordsworth’s many attempts to explain love with religion or magic or spirits or music demonstrate how the cosmic, ideal conception of love remains rooted in earthly affection and personal relationships.

It is ultimately the ideal, universalizing love that Wordsworth prefers in the poem. Consider the final stanza of the poem:

The song of mountain streams unheard by day,
Now hardly heard, beguiles my homeward way.
All air is, as the sleeping water, still,
List’ning th’ aereal music of the hill,
Broke only by the slow clock tolling deep,
Or shout that wakes the ferry-man from sleep,
Soon followed by his hollow-parting oar,
And echoed hoof approaching the far shore;
Sound of closed gate, across the water born,
Hurrying the feeding hare thro’ rustling corn;
The tremulous sob of the complaining owl;
And at long intervals the mill-dog’s howl;
The distant forge’s swinging thump profound;
Or yell in the deep woods of lonely hound. (433-46)

Wordsworth describes a unified, harmonic ecosystem, reflected by the continuous phrase of lines 435-46. Every element and aspect of the description is intimately connected to every other element and aspect. The harmony of sounds, likened to “aerial music,” is especially apparent in this passage. In a sense, _An Evening Walk_ prefigures Deep Ecology, a kind of
ecological thought developed more fully in *The Ruined Cottage*, “Tintern Abbey,” and *The Prelude*.9 Wordsworthian love connects the poet not only to his absent sister and the female beggar but also to the natural world, to the swans and the air and the water and the owl and the hound. Timothy Morton calls this acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of all dimensions of life “the ecological thought,” and this way of thinking is central to Wordsworth’s theory of love. All things are connected for Wordsworth, both in subjective sensory perception and in the transcendent experience this final passage suggests. Although subtle in this early poem, Wordsworthian love already affects the poet’s epistemology so that he arrives as a new ethics founded on equality and interdependence.

2. *Salisbury Plain* (1793-4)

Many aspects of *An Evening Walk* parallel those in *Salisbury Plain*. Written after France had officially declared war against England in February 1793, *Salisbury Plain* is more political than *Evening Walk* and certainly possesses a more ominous and disparaging tone. Critical readings of *Salisbury Plain* tend to focus on Wordsworth’s politics or on the many revisions and developments of the poem throughout Wordsworth’s career. Of special interest to Wordsworth’s politics in the poem is the influence of William Godwin, who

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9 It is difficult to provide a single definition of “deep ecology” but in general what I mean by this term is a shift in human thinking from “anthropocentrism to eco-centrism” (to use Timothy Morton’s phrasing, which is supported by the Foundation for Deep Ecology: http://www.deepecology.org/). Deep ecology is “deep” because it requires a fundamental shift in human consciousness—it requires the transformative power of the imagination—unlike environmentalism, defined more broadly, as a movement which holds that science and human knowledge can address ecological crises. There are of course many nuances, sub-movements, and groups within these two large categories, but these general characteristics are appropriate for thinking about Wordsworth, who was writing before the word “ecology” was in usage.
published his massively influential treatise *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* in 1793.\(^\text{10}\) Such historicist readings have been valuable in reconstructing the work as “a poem of protest” (J. Wordsworth, *Music of Humanity* 57) and in recovering its radical political elements, but the political aspects of love have not been as closely studied.\(^\text{11}\) Politics and history do figure forth more centrally in *Salisbury Plain* than in *An Evening Walk*, but what I wish to emphasize in this reading is what the poems share: Wordsworth’s attempts to overcome the failures of politics and history through feeling and love. But this seemingly “inward” turn is not an evasive move. On the contrary, the poem illustrates the social and political aspects of love.

As in *An Evening Walk*, love acts as a central force in *Salisbury Plain*, a means to overcome fear and superstition and to lead the two unnamed wanderers from isolation to sociality through affection and sympathy.

An eerie aura of unreality permeates *Salisbury Plain*, a surreal quality that acts to defamiliarize every person, object, and aspect in and of the poem, including love. Such unreality was undoubtedly inspired by Wordsworth’s trip to the Salisbury Plain, which is home to Stonehenge, Avebury, and several other ancient sites. Hartman famously reads the Plain itself as “a purgatory, a strait between states of being” (123). Moreover, Wordsworth uses Spenserian stanzas to structure the poem, which provides an archaic sense that both reflects the ancient mysteries of the Plain and reinforces Wordsworth’s comparison of the

\(^{10}\) Liu provides excellent commentary of Wordsworth’s adoption and adaptation of Godwin’s idea of necessity. See *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, especially pages 184-5.

savageness of primitive humanity to the savageness of his contemporary world. The
greatness of the poem is owing in large part to this interplay of formal and thematic levels.
Hartman argues that Wordsworth’s use of Spenserian stanzas

reminds us...of the poet’s freedom to interpose the image of another kind of
world, and of Spenser’s peculiar power to make this world a truly
autonomous realm, mediating between the historical and the apocalyptic, yet
somehow independent of either. Poetry itself is such a special realm of self-
encounter, enabling the passage from one state of consciousness to another,
and with the least damage. (125)

The decision to use Spenserian stanzas, Hartman suggests, reflects Wordsworth’s belief in
the autonomy of poetry and its ability to mediate and facilitate interchanges between states
of consciousness and levels of reality. Such a reading is quite similar to Adorno’s theory of
autonomous art. While New Historicists would cite Adorno to demonstrate Wordsworth’s
outright “rejection of the empirical world” in favor of utopian or idealistic illusions, Adorno
also sees art as remaining intimately tied to “the primacy of reality” despite its apparent
rejection of it.

Fosso usefully connects Wordsworth’s choice of Spenserian stanzas with the
Romance revival and Gothicism that in many ways defines Romanticism itself.12 Similar to
the sonnet and ballad revivals during the Romantic period, the Romance revival acts to
provide material and worldly forms for immaterial and otherworldly concepts and issues.
Wordsworth’s incorporation of Romance and Gothic elements in the poem provides a
lyrical, otherworldly quality to love and, at the same time, anchors that otherworldly quality
in material actuality and narrative form.

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12 See Buried Communities, especially chapter three.
Salisbury Plain begins with (and sustains) a proto-Darwinian view of life at odds with the picturesque tradition that informs An Evening Walk. The first stanza establishes the tone for the first third of the poem:

Hard is the life when naked and unhoused
And wasted by the long day’s fruitless pains,
The hungry savage, ’mid deep forests, roused
By storms, lies down at night on unknown plains
And lifts his head in fear, while famished trains
Of boars along the crashing forests prowl,
And heard in darkness, as the rushing rains
Put out his watch-fire, bears contending growl
And round his fenceless bed gaunt wolves in armies howl. (1-9)

This vision of the savage conflates diachronic time with synchronic moment, fusing “ancient man” with the contemporary world. Exposed to the elements and the “armies” of nature, the savage survives, albeit the contemporary comparison aims for social and political critique. Wordsworth almost immediately contrasts this vision with

reflection on the state
Of those who on the couch of Affluence rest
By laughing Fortune’s sparkling cup elate,
While we of comfort reft, by pain depressed,
No other pillow know than Penury’s iron breast. (23-7)

The affluent, or upper-class, members of society provide a stark contrast to the savage, now likened to the lower classes. Wordsworth explains one way to unite these two classes:

Refinement’s genial influence calls
The soft affections from their wintry sleep
And the sweet tear of Love and Friendship falls
The willing heart in tender joy to steep[.] (28-31)

Here Wordsworth distinguishes the “affections” from “Love and Friendship”; the former give way to the latter but only after indulgence in “Refinement.” Wordsworth asserts a kind of political love, but he still strives to unite it with universality and transcendence. The
remainder of the poem, then, becomes a type of poetic experiment intended to wake the affections of the privileged classes, to stir the unpremeditated feelings that have been diminished by affluence and complacency.

Following the frame of the initial five stanzas, Salisbury Plain becomes in most respects a narrative poem that tells the tale of a male wanderer who meets a female vagrant in one of the ruinous buildings that stand on the plain. The female vagrant then tells her own pathetic and sentimental tale embedded within the broader narrative of the interactions between the two wanderers. Her familiar tale is as much a social and political critique as it is an attempt to stir sympathy and affection in the reader: when a youth, her father’s land was seized, causing him to live with her, her husband, and their three children until his death; for want of food and for love of his family, her husband joins the army; within one year, all of her family perish; she wakes on a British ship, as if “transported to another world” (371), and wanders for three years until she meets another wanderer on the Salisbury Plain.

Pain and suffering dissipate in sociality. The wanderer at first fears the ruins on the Plain, their existence tied mysteriously “To hell’s most cursed sprites” (84), to “magic power” (85), and to “endless tortures” (89). But upon hearing a “human voice,” his terrors vanish (137). The female vagrant, too, is almost paralyzed by superstitious fears regarding stories of “Gigantic beings ranged in dread array” (175) and human sacrifice of which she learns from an old man on the plain, the only other human figure in the poem. The old man appears less as an actual person in the poem than as a symbol of superstition, a lack of reason and of love. He contrasts with the male wanderer, who

to her low words of chearing sound
Addressed. With joy she heard such greeting kind
And much they conversed of that desert ground,
Which seemed to those of other worlds consigned
Whose voices still they heard as paused the hollow wind. (158-62)

Such social interaction moves the woman from fear to “sober sympathy and tranquil mind” (202), and their conversation leads to her tale of suffering. In contrast to the tale itself, a sense of tranquility pervades the frame before and after she gives voice to her story. The shift from intense emotion to calm serenity marks Wordsworth’s engagements with sentimentalism. The female vagrant’s tale is a focal point of the poem, so much so that Wordsworth would later revise it as “The Female Vagrant” in *Lyrical Ballads*. This narrative within a narrative acts to awaken the affections and sympathies of its readers, particularly those who hold privileged social positions. In a sense, the reader becomes the auditor (the male wanderer), and as such, the tale works as a poetical and rhetorical tool. The interaction between the tale—which presents the potential suffering affixed to love and its corresponding concepts of unity, community, and sociality, as well as the engagement with sentimentalism and romantic and filial love—and the frame reveals Wordsworthian love.

Morning breaks on the plain during the telling of the vagrant’s tale in a harmonic unity that parallels the connection established between the two wanderers. Stanza 39 acts as an interlude and signals the tension inherent to Wordsworthian love:

> They looked and saw a lengthening road and wain
> Descending a bare slope not far remote.
> The downs all glistered dropt with freshening rain;
> The carman whistled loud with cheerful note;
> The cock scarce heard at distance sounds his throat;
> But town or farm or hamlet none they viewed,
> Only were told there stood a lonely cot
> Full two miles distant. Then, while they pursued
> Their journey, her sad tale the mourner thus renewed. (343-51)
Such picturesque description hearkens back to the mode of *An Evening Walk*, although the emphasis of the passage is the connection between the two characters and the increase of sociality at dawn. They have created a community. When the vagrant ceases her tale, a city appears in the distance and the wanderer forgets his “terrors of the night” (402). Another picturesque scene unfolds in stanza 46 before the narrator intervenes and closes the narrative of the poem:

Adieu ye friendless hope-forsaken pair!
Yet friendless ere ye take your several road,
Enter that lowly cot and ye shall share
Comforts by prouder mansions unbestowed.
For you yon milkmaid bears her brimming load,
For you the board is piled with homely bread,
And think that life is like this desert broad,
Where all the happiest find is but a shed
And a green spot 'mid wastes interminably spread. (415-23)

This stanza unites the final frame of the poem with its opening frame and casts an allegorical shadow on the preceding 46 stanzas through the simile, “life is like this desert broad.” The “remedy” for the wasteland of life is community and connection, an embrace of the natural world and its aura of unity. As Wordsworth explains fully in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, the rustic peasants referenced in this passage are more in tune with such notions of natural and ecological community than the upper classes whose affections Wordsworth attempts to awaken in the poem. Wordsworth, then, goes beyond sentimentalism in his multiple returns to a universalizing aesthetics during the vagrant’s tale of suffering. The political nature of the poem emphasizes sentimentalism more than *An Evening Walk*, but Wordsworth clearly insists on a link between earthly and heavenly love.

There is, however, no final synthesis in *Salisbury Plain*. The poem shifts between moments of earthly and heavenly love, but Wordsworth does not establish fully the
transcendence and reconciliation inherent to the idealism of the latter. Wordsworth politicizes the Christian notion of agape so as not to disengage from the material realities of England. His conception of love avoids a complete turn away from history and politics through the development of a negative dialectics. The import and aesthetic of Wordsworthian love remains embedded in the socio-political nature of the material world.

The narrator of the frame adopts a rather didactic and even chastising tone in the final stanzas that clearly asserts the poem’s political protest as well as its emphasis on the sympathetic and political qualities of love. The narrator directly addresses the privileged classes:

For proof, if man thou lovest, turn thy eye
On realms which least the cup of Misery taste.
For want how many men and children die?
How many at Oppression’s portal placed
Receive the scanty dole she cannot waste,
And bless, as she has taught, her hand benign?
How many by inhuman toil debased,
Abject, obscure, and brute to earth incline
Unrespited, forlorn of every spark divine? (433-41)

In contrast to the sentimental turn in An Evening Walk, the narrator asks for more than emotional responses from its reader; he asks for action. The vagrant’s tale is now cast as a spectacle of suffering intended to awaken readers’ social consciousnesses. A few stanzas later this political love intensifies:

Say, rulers of the nations, from the sword
Can ought but murder, pain, and tears proceed?
Oh! what can war but endless war still breed?
Or whence but from the labours of the sage
Can poor benighted mortals gain the meed
Of happiness and virtue, how assuage
But by his gentle words their self-consuming rage? (507-13)
Wordsworth’s choice to end the poem with such explicit politics tends to overshadow the other aspects of the poem. Fosso argues that the poem ultimately “functions to startle its reading audience into momentary awareness in order to effect its agenda about the disparate accommodation of England’s rich and poor” (86), yet it does so by subsuming the intimate affection and love between its two main characters. Fosso presents a similar social reading of the poem in his emphasis on the shared bonds of mourning, but love also plays an important role in the social and political protests of the poem. Although the political turn in the poem’s concluding stanzas frustrates the development of Wordsworthian love, the narrator urges “Heroes of Truth” to pursue the “march” of “Reason” in order to “uptear / Th’Oppressor’s dungeon” and to overcome “Superstition’s reign” (541-9). In the thirteen-book Prelude, Wordsworth would describe “reason in her most exalted mood” (170) as “imagination,” and imagination as inextricably bound to “intellectual love.” Such an understanding of love develops more fully in the Lyrical Ballads and The Prelude, but Salisbury Plain, similar to An Evening Walk, presents initial moments of the exploration and articulation of Wordsworthian love.
CHAPTER TWO

“The sentiment of being”: The Ruined Cottage and the Development of Wordsworthian Love

By the end of 1795, Wordsworth had reunited with Dorothy, met Godwin, and begun his partnership with Coleridge. Over the next four years, he produced new versions of An Evening Walk and Salisbury Plain, composed The Ruined Cottage, and in 1798 published with Coleridge Lyrical Ballads, amongst other writings. Indeed, 1798 was Wordsworth’s annus mirabilis, a year in which he composed and published many of his greatest and best-known poems. Critics have lauded The Ruined Cottage as Wordsworth’s first great achievement in verse, and it certainly deserves such praise. Written in blank verse, The Ruined Cottage is both technically and philosophically more complex than Wordsworth’s earlier poems, and its treatment of humanity and nature places it squarely within the Wordsworthian tradition of great poems such as “Tintern Abbey” and The Prelude. The poem retains and refines the radical politics of Salisbury Plain, but unlike this earlier poem and An Evening Walk, The Ruined Cottage effectively incorporates a sentimental tale of suffering as the centerpiece of Wordsworth’s poetic project. Margaret’s tale and the poem itself reveal the persistent influence of Godwin’s New Philosophy, Coleridge’s pantheistic philosophy, and Spinoza’s theory of God/Nature.

1 In this chapter I use the MS. D version of The Ruined Cottage, dated around 1799, which includes the revisions of MS. B through 1798. This early version of poem, composed between April 1797 and March 1798, is far superior to the later version that appears as Book One of The Excursion. For a detailed account of the poem’s composition and publication history, see Jonathan Wordsworth, The Music of Humanity: A Critical Study of Wordsworth’s Ruined Cottage (London: Nelson, 1969).
The abundant criticism on the poem emphasizes its political and pantheistic
elements while neglecting its concurrent sociological and relational work. In particular,
scholars tend to see the poem’s engagements with the concept of unity only in terms of the
pantheistic One Life. As William Ulmer argues, *The Ruined Cottage* represents Wordsworth’s
“reception and abandonment of pantheist theory,” particularly the idea of the One Life “as a
consoling pantheist conclusion” (―Wordsworth‖ 305). Hence, “The poem suggests that
Wordsworth’s growing reservations about the One Life rested on the idea of Necessity as an
especially powerful expression of pantheistic holism. But it also suggests that his assent to
the One Life was always less confident and complete than critics contend” (Ulmer,
―Wordsworth‖ 305). To think of the poem as a critical working-through of Pantheism and
the One Life can lead to productive engagements with the poem, but I would like to reorient
Ulmer’s reading to present such a working-through as a means to arrive at a more developed
sense of Wordsworthian love. The insistence on natural and aesthetic unity in the poem does
draw from the pantheistic philosophies of Spinoza, Coleridge, and others, but Wordsworth
synthesizes these philosophies with earthly mediations and relationships—that is, Margaret’s
tale and the frame of the poem itself. In the poem, Wordsworth demonstrates his capacity to
gather honey from every flower of philosophical, scientific, and literary tradition available to
him. Indeed, *The Ruined Cottage* serves in many ways as a bridge from early poems such as *An
Evening Walk, Salisbury Plain* to later poems including “Tintern Abbey” and *The Prelude*. In *The
Ruined Cottage*, Wordsworth clarifies, intensifies, and develops the interrelated conceptions of

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2 I have in mind here studies of Wordsworth that reveal the poet’s sociology in myriad ways. See Fosso; Regina
unity, aesthetics, community, and love from his earlier work en route to his most fully
developed epistemology of love.

*The Ruined Cottage* presents the most developed aesthetic of Wordsworthian love up
to 1798. In Jonathan Wordsworth’s seminal study of the poem, *The Music of Humanity*, he
identifies the centrality of love to the poem, “the Wordsworthian harmony of love,
identification, loss of self, outside the context of pantheism” (257). Unlike Coleridge, who
“had merely reasserted a Christian commonplace” in his “religion of love,” or notion of the
One Life, Wordsworth moves beyond pantheism to proclaim a “pure” kind of love
“accessible to all” (J. Wordsworth, *Music* 216). Jonathan Wordsworth suggests that “The
music of humanity…is love, the striving towards identification, loss of self. Harmony is the
enjoyment of this love in its fullest potential, in relationship either with one’s surroundings,
or with another human-being” (257). Such an affirmative notion of love enables the
individual to “transcend the limitations of ordinary experience” and “to achieve something
greater than himself” (J. Wordsworth, *Music* 258).

Thomas Weiskel identifies such transcendence as the defining characteristic of the
Romantic sublime, “that moment when the relation between the signifier and signified
breaks down and is replaced by an indeterminate relation” (ix). Weiskel takes a
Deconstructive approach in order to argue that Wordsworth attempts to transcend the
human in representations of sublime moments in his poetry, but, like the New Historicists
that would follow him, such a reading asserts an “elision” of reality (Weiskel 29), an evasive
or escapist tendency that does not account for Wordsworth’s humanness, for the poet’s emphasis on relationships—in short, for Wordsworthian love.3

Wordsworth, however, does not transcend reality but rather embraces it as a dialectical process unified by love. Transcendent and abstracted philosophical moments in The Ruined Cottage are bound to personal, intimate relationships between people in the material world. The poet’s engagement with the pantheistic One Life does not represent a transcendence or evasion of material reality but rather one facet of his emergent critical theory, one level of the totality which the poem strives to embody and articulate. Fosso makes the case for seeing Wordsworth as a deeply social and relational poet, one who creates a “spiritual community” through “the fundamental source of social cohesion…: human beings’ shared mourning of the dead” (6-8). As is the case with the tales of death and suffering in An Evening Walk and Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth constructs in The Ruined Cottage a community of mourners as an alternative to political, legal, religious, and pantheistic solutions to Margaret’s problems (Fosso 125). Fosso does not treat love directly, but I would argue that it is love that binds together the spiritual and social community achieved through mourning in the poem. Mourning relies on love and is in fact subordinate to love in the poem.

In my reading of The Ruined Cottage I wish to develop and intensify the powerful yet brief comments on love by Jonathan Wordsworth, Fosso, and others in order to reveal the complexities of Wordsworthian love.4 Wordsworthian love in The Ruined Cottage prefigures

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4 Hartman also discusses love briefly in Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1787-1814, 223.
the Deep Ecology loss of self I mention in my concluding points in the reading of *An Evening Walk* and will discuss further in my reading of “Tintern Abbey.” The Deep Ecology loss of self is “an identification so deep that one’s own self is no longer adequately delimited by the personal ego or the organism. One experiences oneself to be a genuine part of all life” (Pite 361). Wordsworth experiences the collapse of the subject/object, self/other divides through an *acknowledgment* of the unity of reality, but this does not necessarily equate to an actual or illusory reconciliation of subject/object, self/other. Wordsworth represents his experience as a critical utopia, an unrealized possibility, a hope for the future. This kind of experience has been variously understood as a psychological or ethical shift (Hartman, Bate, Fosso, Potkay), a philosophical exercise (Ulmer), an historical instance of ideological thinking (Weiskel, McGann, Liu, Levinson), and an aesthetic or formal expression (Curran, Wolfson). Such a “rhetoric of oneness,” as Adam Potkay points out, results in ethical problems tied to the ideas of total assimilation and self-negation, and Wordsworth clearly engages with these ethical issues in the poem (*Joy* 31-4). The best reading of the poem is a dialectical one that incorporates all levels of understanding, and in my reading, what dialectically holds the levels together is Wordsworthian love.

In the following section, I establish my critical intervention of *The Ruined Cottage* by showing that love is the dominant focus of the poem. My reading relies on the critical genealogy outlined in the Introduction, as well as Wordsworth’s engagements with Pantheism and the various theories of the passions. In the second section of this chapter, I analyze *The Pedlar*, which acts as both a development and revision of *The Ruined Cottage* and provides a basis for my reading of *The Prelude* in Chapter Three.
1. Love in *The Ruined Cottage* (1797-9)

*The Ruined Cottage* contains two parts. In the first part, the narrator stumbles upon his acquaintance, the wanderer, sitting by a ruinous cottage once home to a family: Margaret, her husband Robert, and their children, all of whom have passed away. The wanderer first presents his theory of life relating to the relationship between nature and humanity. He then tells the first half of Margaret’s tale of social injustice: “Two blighting seasons” (134) left their fields with only “half a harvest” (135) during the “plague of war” (136); Robert was seized with a fever and subsequently drained the family’s store; and then Robert began to wander idly and perhaps lose his grip on reality. The narrator becomes deeply moved by the narrative and begins the second part of the poem by begging the wanderer to continue the tale. The wanderer then describes his four visits to the cottage: during his first visit he learns that Robert has deserted his family to join the army; the second visit reveals Margaret’s physical and psychological deterioration; in his third visit Margaret tells him her baby is dying; and in his fourth and final visit, the baby is dead and Margaret is but a shell of the person she was when he first met her five years earlier. The philosophical wanderer then ends the poem with his famous monologue in which he discusses the “secret spirit of humanity” and outlines the “correct” way to read and understand the world.

Similar to *An Evening Walk*, *The Ruined Cottage* moves temporally from noon to sunset, and Wordsworth’s poetic tone reflects the haunting dialectics of harmony and suffering, happiness and loneliness, unity and decay, love and pain. The poem begins with a one-line sentence—“‘Twas summer and the sun was mounted high” (1)—before presenting a typical Wordsworthian sentence that spans seventeen poetic lines:
Along the south the uplands feebly glared
Through a pale stream, and all the northern downs
In clearer air ascending shewed far off
Their surfaces with shadows dappled o’er
Of deep embattled clouds: far as the sight
Could reach those many shadows lay in spots
Determined and unmoved, with steady beams
Of clear and pleasant sunshine interposed;
Pleasant to him who on the soft cool moss
Extends his careless limbs beside the root
Of some huge oak whose aged branches make
A twilight of their own, a dewy shade
Where the wren warbles while the dreaming man,
Half-conscious of that soothing melody,
With side-long eye looks out upon the scene,
By those impending branches made more soft,
More soft and distant. (2-18)

The first half of this passage depicts the beauty and unity of the natural world as perceived by the narrator while at the same time suggesting uncertainty or anxiety regarding such beauty and unity. The uplands “feebly glare” at the narrator while “deep embattled clouds” throw shadows over the northern downs, rather stubborn shadows which “lay in spots / Determined and unmoved.” In the second half of the passage, the narrator grounds this aesthetic unity in a human who seems to receive pleasure from the “sight” only insofar as he remains “careless” and “Half-conscious” not only of the wren’s song but also of the sight itself at which he looks only “With side-long eye.” The word “sight,” it should be noted, connotes both the process of sensory perception and an intellectual or spiritual perception; Wordsworth emphasizes the former in the opening passage, but as the poem progresses he emphasizes the latter, ultimately fusing sensory and spiritual perceptions.

The opening Wordsworthian sentence contrasts with the narrator’s stated experience: “Other lot was mine.” We learn that the narrator has “toiled / With languid feet” (19-20) through the countryside, lacking the energy to disperse
The insect host which gathered round my face
And joined their murmurs to the tedious noise
Of seeds of bursting gorse that crackled round. (24-6)

Again, the aesthetic of the unity of senses here remains tied to a “battle” rhetoric (“The insect host”) that originates in the opening passage. The notion these opening lines imply is one of searching, and what the narrator-poet finds is the philosophic wanderer in front of a ruined cottage. After directing the narrator to a well in order to quench his thirst, the wanderer gives his first of two important monologues:

The old Man said, ‘I see around me here
Things which you cannot see: we die, my Friend,
Nor we alone, but that which each man loved
And prized in his peculiar nook of earth
Dies with him or is changed, and very soon
Even of the good is no memorial left. (67-72)

The wanderer establishes a didactic element in the poem: the narrator, and presumably the reader of the poem, cannot “see” the “things” the wanderer discusses. These “things” are the linkages between human life and the objects or ideas which the individual loved, linkages which can “die” or “change” by the process of time but nevertheless leave behind a trace. The wanderer in effect reveals a theory of mortality. There exists a profound connection between humans and inanimate objects and things accessible only to those who read and understand the world as does the wanderer—that is, through the “spirit of love.” The poem thus can be read as a “denial” of history, as Liu argues, an attempt to evade the process of time through imagination and poetry. Or, as Hartman argues, the poem can be seen to represent Wordsworth’s confrontation with the crisis of his attempts “to humanize the spirit of man” and thus put his “imagination into question” (74).
Conversely, I read the poem as an attempt to represent aesthetically love, which is at once historically variable and universally present. The Wordsworthian wanderer seizes upon the aura of humanity, what Fredric Jameson calls, paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, “a Utopian present, not shorn of the past but having absorbed it, a kind of plentitude of existence in the world of things, if only for the briefest instant” (Marxism 77). That which was once loved or prized, the wanderer suggests, retains an aura of life and significance accessible to those who can truly see it. Poetry, as the wanderer continues, is one such way to capture the aura of existence:

The Poets in their elegies and songs
Lamenting the departed call the groves,
They call upon the hills and streams to mourn,
And senseless rocks, nor idly; for they speak
In these their invocations with a voice
Obedient to the strong creative power
Of human passion. (73-9)

*The Ruined Cottage* is itself a pastoral elegy of sorts, the kind of poem the wanderer here discusses. As in Milton’s *Lycidas* (which acts as a forerunner of *The Ruined Cottage*), poets call upon inanimate or “senseless” things to mourn what has been lost and to enter into a brotherhood with humanity. As the wanderer points out, this is not an idle or evasive move but a direct embrace of “the strong creative power / Of human passion,” an embrace of humanity and the love that unites animate beings with inanimate objects and things. The wanderer continues with a more detailed example of such love:

Sympathies there are
More tranquil, yet perhaps of kindred birth,
That steal upon the meditative mind
And grow with thought. Beside yon spring I stood
And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel
One sadness, they and I. For them a bond
Of brotherhood is broken: time has been
When every day the touch of human hand
Disturbed their stillness, and they ministered
To human comfort. When I stooped to drink,
A spider’s web hung to the water’s edge,
And on the wet and slimy foot-stone lay
The useless fragment of a wooden bowl;
It moved my very heart. (79-92)

Beyond human passion, which already requires meditation, is a deeper and “More tranquil”
sympathy, what critics have seen as a recognition of the pantheistic One Life. Wordsworth,
however, moves beyond pantheistic thought in this poem—the “One sadness” the wanderer
shares with the waters of the spring indicates recognition of both the absence of humanity
and the presence of ruins and residues (or aura) of Wordsworthian love. The “bond of
brotherhood” is broken only for the waters—the wanderer still sees the “sight” of love that
materially links nature to humanity.

Moreover, the wanderer grounds his universalizing love of nature and his recognition
of that love in his personal love of Margaret:

The day has been
When I could never pass this road but she
Who lived within these walls, when I appeared,
A daughter’s welcome gave me, and I loved her
As my own child. O Sir! the good die first,
And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust
Burn to the socket.

She is dead,
The worm is on her cheek, and this poor hut,
Stripped of its outward garb of household flowers,
Of rose and sweet-briar, offers to the wind
A cold bare wall whose earthy top is tricked
With weeds and the rank spear-grass. She is dead,
And nettles rot and adders sun themselves
Where we have sate together while she nursed
Her infant at her breast. (92-8, 103-11)
The wanderer then seamlessly launches into the first part of Margaret’s tale, but what I find more interesting than the tale is the wanderer’s framing of it—a framing we can safely assume reflects Wordsworth’s philosophy in 1797-9.\[^5\] In addition to providing the narrator and the reader of the poem with the “correct” interpretive framework, the wanderer must reconcile the love and bonds of brotherhood that he sees in the world with the social and political realities of the time—that is, he must confront Godwin’s doctrine of necessity in his working through of pantheistic and other philosophical approaches to the natural world and humanity’s place within it.\[^6\] One viable option is an epistemology of love that retains the detailed interrelations of thought and action prescribed in Godwin’s doctrine of necessity.

After the first half of Margaret’s tale (120-85), the Wordsworthian wanderer pauses and offers the first of his seemingly pantheist consolations:

He said, “’Tis now the hour of deepest noon. 
At this still season of repose and peace, 
This hour when all things which are not at rest
Are cheerful, while this multitude of flies
Fills all the air with happy melody,
Why should a tear be in an old man’s eye?
Why should we thus with an untoward mind
And in the weakness of humanity
From natural wisdom turn our hearts away,
To natural comfort shut our eyes and ears,
And feeding on disquiet thus disturb
The calm of Nature with our restless thoughts?” (187-98)

\[^5\] David Herman analyzes the poem in the context of contemporary narrative theory in order to argue that the poem’s narrative embedding “is at once the record of and a primary instrument for situated, socially distributed cognition” (358). See “Genette meets Vygotsky: Narrative Embedding and Distributed Intelligence,” *Language and Literature* 15.4 (November 2006): 357-380.

The wanderer chastises himself for being so moved by the tale in light of the “natural wisdom” and “natural comfort” supplied by nature. Here we can see the beginnings of Wordsworth’s theory of pedagogical nature, which he develops more fully in *The Pedlar* and *The Prelude*, as well as his working-through of pantheistic philosophy and his nascent Deep Ecology. In addition to Coleridge, Spinoza’s pantheistic theory plays an important role in Wordsworth’s philosophy of nature and humanity. Marjorie Levinson has recently demonstrated Wordsworth’s debts to Spinoza, a seventeenth-century thinker whose *Ethics* helped to spread Pantheism throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, influencing Romantics such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hegel, and Schelling. The pantheistic belief that God and Nature are one, however, differs from the Deep Ecological beliefs in the interdependence of human and non-human life and the value of all things in a given ecosystem. The two questions posed by the wanderer in this passage each phrase in different ways the problem of humanity divorced from the natural world, the problem of self-reflection and “restless thoughts” within “The calm of Nature.”

Part one ends with these two questions posed by the wanderer: (1) why does Margaret’s tale bring him to tears within the “happy melody” of the natural world? and (2) why do humans turn away from “natural wisdom” and “natural comfort” and thus “disturb / The calm of Nature with our restless thoughts”? This seems to be where Wordsworth’s engagements with pantheistic theory have led him so far. Wordsworth explores possible answers in the second part of the poem.

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In this second part, the wanderer almost immediately adopts an “easy cheerfulness” and “a look so mild” (201) that Margaret’s tale passes from the narrator’s “mind like a forgotten sound” (204). The two friends discuss “trivial things” (205) until the narrator begins to think “of that poor woman as of one / Whom I had known and loved” (207-8). What has happened to the tearful, almost melancholy wanderer who ends part one with a question? How can the wanderer so easily become cheerful after narrating the destruction of a woman’s family whom he considered as a daughter? These are the questions implied by the narrator’s confusion and anxiety and his reason for begging the wanderer to “resume his story” (220). Rather than an abrupt turn to sentimentalism, as is the case in An Evening Walk and Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth absorbs the sentimentalism of Margaret’s tale into his theory of love; the sentimental marks the trace of earthly love linked to the wanderer’s philosophical and moral discourse.

The wanderer himself responds to the questions that conclude the first part of the poem in his frame of the second half of Margaret’s tale. The wanderer distinguishes those individuals who “hold vain dalliance with the misery / Even of the dead” (223-4) from those who

have known that there is often found
In mournful thoughts, and always might be found,
A power to virtue friendly. (227-9)

The wanderer recognizes an ordinary, imaginative sympathy that can result in “momentary pleasure” (225) and an extraordinary, feeling sympathy at once natural and ethical. This extraordinary sympathy emerges from a loss of self achieved through self-reflection and meditation, much like the Deep Ecology loss of self.
And indeed, the wanderer emphasizes such love or sympathy in the second half of Margaret’s tale. When he visits Margaret after the disappearance of Robert, she “clings” to him (256), and he helps to move her from isolation to sociality:

long we had not talked
Ere we built up a pile of better thoughts,
And with a brighter eye she looked around
As if she had been shedding tears of joy.  (278-81)

The wanderer builds a kind of community betwixt himself, Margaret, and her child, a social move indicative of the interdependence central to Pantheism, Necessity, and Deep Ecology. When he returns a season later, however, Margaret has lost that sense of community and sociality and has taken to wandering the countryside in a negative and destructive manner. Separated from all forms of sociality—even leaving her child behind in the cottage for days at a time—Margaret herself fades from the world, leaving behind only traces of her spirit. As the wanderer tells the narrator,

It would have grieved
Your very heart to see her. Sir, I feel
The story linger in my heart. I fear
*Tis long and tedious, but my spirit clings
To that poor woman: so familiarly
Do I perceive her manner, and her look
And presence, and so deeply do I feel
Her goodness, that not seldom in my walks
A momentary trance comes over me;
And to myself I seem to muse on one
By sorrow laid asleep or bourne away,
A human being destined to awake
To human life, or something very near
To human life, when he shall come again
For whom she suffered.  (361-75)

Margaret’s story “lingers” in the wanderer’s heart; his spirit “clings” to her even in death. He perceives not only Margaret’s “manner” and “look”—memories of her behavior and
physical appearance—but also her “presence.” The word “presence” can refer either to a person or thing that is actually and physically present or “a divine, spiritual, or incorporeal being or influence felt or perceived to be present” (OED). The latter certainly is the case in this passage, although it retains the material anchor inherent to the word itself. Some kind of immaterial residue of Margaret’s existence remains tied to the cottage and to the wanderer’s connection to that place. The wanderer deeply feels her goodness. He sees the world through an epistemology and ecology of love. And often in his walks he experiences a “momentary trance” when feeling the residual traces of love—he thinks of Margaret as not of this world, but rather as a human who would “awake to human life” when Robert returns. Love, in Margaret’s case, is both her legacy and her destruction. As is the case with many of the lyrical ballads, the intimate connections forged by love can be as painful as they are pleasing.

The final sections of the poem, however, call into question Wordsworth’s consolatory efforts in the wake of such a painful story of loss and love. On the wanderer’s final visit to Margaret, her cottage is dilapidated, her child has died, and she is left alone:

Yet still
She loved this wretched spot, nor would for worlds
Have parted hence; and still that length of road
And this rude bench one torturing hope endeared,
Fast rooted at her heart, and here, my friend,
In sickness she remained, and here she died,
Last human tenant of these ruined walls.’ (486-92)

Despite the loss of her entire family, the cottage and its place remained “Fast rooted at her heart.” The presence of love remained for Margaret, and it remains for the wanderer and the narrator: “The old Man ceased: he saw that I was moved” (493). The tale is a success. The narrator’s heart is moved just as the wanderer has been moved throughout the poem.
Moreover, the narrator experiences the same cheerful comfort expressed by the wanderer at the beginning of the second part:

I stood, and leaning o’er the garden-gate
Reviewed that Woman’s sufferings, and it seemed
To comfort me while with a brother’s love
I blessed her in the impotence of grief.
At length [          ] the [          ]
Fondly, and traced with milder interest
That secret spirit of humanity
Which, ’mid the calm oblivious tendencies
Of nature, ’mid her plants, her weeds, and flowers,
And silent overgrowings, still survived. (497-506)

The narrator feels so close to Margaret that he expresses filial love. But why do Margaret’s sufferings strangely comfort him? He clearly does not experience the “vain” sympathy outlined earlier by the wanderer but rather the extraordinary kind of sympathy, that genuine and productive sense of love (227-9). What the narrator sees here at the end of the poem is the “secret spirit of humanity,” the “things” that he could not see at the poem’s beginning. This “secret spirit,” as I have suggested, represents Wordsworthian love, a love that unites not only individuals to each other and to places but also to nature and to the universe. This love is not nature itself—it survives amidst nature. This love is also not God, nor any other divine or spiritual or mythological being, although at times Wordsworth draws from Biblical, mythological, and philosophical traditions in his descriptions and aesthetics. Wordsworth’s “reception and abandonment of pantheist theory” can perhaps more properly be described as a reception and revision of pantheist theory, Christian theology, the doctrine of necessity, Spinozan philosophy, and eighteenth-century modes of thought and science of the mind.
Still, scholars make a case for seeing the wanderer’s final monologue as some type of affirmation and/or abandonment of Pantheism. After seeing the narrator’s reaction to the tale, the wanderer tells him,

Be wise and chearful, and no longer read  
The forms of things with an unworthy eye.  
She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here.  
I well remember that those very plumes,  
Those weeds, and the high spear-grass on that wall,  
By mist and silent rain-drops silvered o’er,  
As once I passed did to my heart convey  
So still an image of tranquillity,  
So calm and still, and looked so beautiful  
Amid the uneasy thoughts which filled my mind,  
That what we feel of sorrow and despair  
From ruin and from change, and all the grief  
The passing shews of being leave behind,  
Appeared an idle dream that could not live  
Where meditation was. I turned away  
And walked along my road in happiness.’ (510-25)

The wanderer first congratulates the narrator, in a sense, for learning to understand the world through the spirit of love. The serenity of death corresponds to the calm, still “image of tranquillity” that leads the wanderer from grief to happiness. The Wordsworthian aesthetic moment is tied directly to “things,” to the “weeds” and to the “rain-drops” on the “spear-grass.” These nonhuman things produce an aesthetic “image” that links perception and cognition. The beauty of such tranquility clarifies the fundamental reality of being, opposed to the “passing shews of being,” or the transient thoughts, feelings, and experiences of material reality. The passage appears less as a pantheistic consolation of the One Life than as a celebration of Wordsworthian love. Even in the alternate conclusion to the poem, which later became part of *The Excursion*, Wordsworth emphasizes the power of love:

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8 This verse fragment appears in the MS B version of *The Ruined Cottage*. 
Not useless do I deem
These quiet sympathies with things that hold
An inarticulate language, for the man
Once taught to love such objects as excite
No morbid passions, no disquietude,
No vengeance and no hatred, needs must feel
The joy of that pure principle of love
So deeply that, unsatisfied with aught
Less pure and exquisite, he cannot choose
But seek for objects of a kindred love
In fellow-natures, and a kindred joy.

... 

Thus disciplined
All things shall live in us, and we shall live
In all things that surround us. (1-11, 78-80)

As is the case with the wanderer’s final monologue in the MS. D version of *The Ruined Cottage*, he explains here that an embrace of the “pure principle of love” can result in a renewed way of life. The universalizing aesthetic of this passage remains wed to the material “things” and personal connections “that surround us” on a daily basis. Accordingly, the poem’s final stanza represents the aesthetic of love through the unity and harmony of the natural world akin to the final stanza of *An Evening Walk*:

He ceased. By this the sun declining shot
A slant and mellow radiance which began
To fall upon us where beneath the trees
We sate on that low bench, and now we felt,
Admonished thus, the sweet hour coming on.
A linnet warbled from those lofty elms,
A thrush sang loud, and other melodies,
At distance heard, peopled the milder air.
The old man rose and hoisted up his load.
Together casting then a farewell look
Upon those silent walls, we left the shade
And ere the stars were visible attained
A rustic inn, our evening resting-place. (526-38)

Unlike *An Evening Walk* in which Wordsworth does not seem to directly acknowledge the aesthetic of love, here the acknowledgement seems quite apparent. Both the wanderer and
the narrator have moved from isolation to sociality, from the ruined cottage to the rustic inn. They appreciate the beauty of unity and harmony: the sun declining, the linnet warbling, the thrush singing, “other melodies,” and ultimately the relationship between the wanderer and the narrator and their communities at both the cottage and the inn. Love develops as a dialectic between cosmic unity and earthly relationships.

2. *The Pedlar* (1798-1804)

*The Ruined Cottage* ends at the advent of evening, but the poem signals the direction that Wordsworth’s poetry would take from 1797-1805. The narrator, like Wordsworth, has learned to perceive, interpret, and understand the world and its realities in a new and enduring fashion. This new epistemology is a central element in the poems of the *Lyrical Ballads* and the thirteen-book *Prelude* as well as other poems composed shortly after or during the composition of *The Ruined Cottage*. Of special interest here is *The Pedlar*, a poem in which Wordsworth presents in detail the biography of the wanderer from *The Ruined Cottage* and more fully acknowledges the centrality of love to both *The Ruined Cottage* and his own poetics. Wordsworth began writing *The Pedlar* along with *The Ruined Cottage* in the spring of 1798, and over the course of the next six years he revised, combined, and developed both poems in various ways. Like many fragments written from 1797-1805, several passages from the unpublished *Pedlar* became part of *The Prelude*, and they reveal the development of Wordsworthian love after Wordsworth’s initial working-through of its various components in *The Ruined Cottage*.

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9 For the composition history of both poems, see Jonathan Wordsworth.
The Pedlar shares many affinities with The Prelude with regard to its autobiographical nature and its fusion of philosophy, poetry, and science. In The Pedlar, an unnamed narrator charts the psychological development of the Pedlar beginning from his childhood, and, given that Wordsworth used many of the poem’s central passages as part of his autobiographical Prelude, it is safe to assume that this development closely relates to Wordsworth himself.

After outlining how “the foundations of [the Pedlar’s] mind were laid” (26) amidst nature in his early childhood, the narrator discusses the ultimate goal of the Pedlar’s philosophical life:

Within his heart
Love was not yet, nor the pure joy of love,
By sound diffused, or by the breathing air,
Or by the silent looks of happy things,
Or flowing from the universal face
Of earth and sky. But he had felt the power
Of nature, and already was prepared
By his intense conceptions to receive
Deeply the lesson of love, which he
Whom Nature, by whatever means, has taught
To feel intensely, cannot but receive. (81-91)

The ultimate goal is to receive “the lesson of love.” In the first sentence of this passage, the narrator explains how the Pedlar was “not yet” ready to accept and understand fully a love that can be experienced through “sound,” “the breathing air,” “the silent looks of happy things,” and “the universal face / Of earth and sky.” This love exists everywhere. In the second sentence, the narrator qualifies the first conditional sentence with a “but”—the Pedlar has “felt” this love, and he is “prepared” for love—although he does not at this particular moment in his young life understand it. It is nature that offers “the lesson of love” that conflates love of nature with love of humanity.

The Pedlar does, however, experience an ecology of love as a boy of eight years old. While tending his father’s sheep, the Pedlar views a sunrise from the top of a mountain:
He looked,
The ocean and the earth beneath him lay
In gladness and deep joy. The clouds were touched,
And in their silent faces did he read
Unutterable love. Sound need none,
Nor any voice of joy: his spirit drank
The spectacle. Sensation, soul and form
All melted into him. They swallowed up
His animal being. In them did he live,
And by them did he live. They were his life. (97-106)

This sight reveals the joy of the ocean and earth, the “silent faces” of the feeling clouds, and “Unutterable love.” In this sublime moment of real or imagined transcendence, language loses its force, as it were, leaving the Pedlar and the narrator unable to express fully the experience of Wordsworthian love. The sensory sight then becomes a spiritual sight: “his spirit drank / The spectacle.” In another Deep Ecology loss of self, the Pedlar’s “animal being” becomes one with the natural world and with love. Yet, reminiscent of the well-known passages from “Tintern Abbey” recounting Wordsworth’s thoughtless experience of nature as a youth, the Pedlar does not contemplate his experience but only enjoys it:

In such access of mind, in such high hour
Of visitation from the living God,
He did not feel the God, he felt his works.
Thought was not: in enjoyment it expired.
Such hour by prayer or praise was unprofaned;
He neither prayed, nor offered thanks or praise;
His mind was a thanksgiving to the power
That made him. It was blessedness and love. (107-114)

Although Christianity may play a role in this passage, “the living God” does not seem to correspond to the Christian God but rather, as critics have argued, to a more pantheistic understanding of nature as god. Wordsworth uses a definite article in both references to “God” and relegates the Pedlar’s feelings to love and to the natural world. The Pedlar neither thinks, thanks, prays, nor praises anything during his experience; his animal
enjoyment of the moment is “all in all.” It is his mind that serves as “thanksgiving to the power / That made him. It was blessedness and love.” The final sentence of this passage is ambiguous. The pronoun “It” could refer to “His mind,” “a thanksgiving,” “the power,” or the entirety of the experience represented in this passage. Given its uncertain linguistic and formal placement in the passage, “It” would seem to refer simultaneously to all of these things in an attempt to represent the aesthetic of Wordsworthian love. Love is omnipresent; it exists everywhere and in everything. As the Pedlar learns while a shepherd, “All things” in the natural world “Breathed immortality, revolving life, / And greatness still revolving, infinite” (124-25). As he grows older, that is, the Pedlar learns to perceive nature “with a superstitious eye of love” (139).

When the Pedlar is twenty years old, he fully receives and understands the lesson of love. He begins to read (especially Milton) in addition to working, and, like Wordsworth himself, he begins to supply thought and meditation to his physical or animal pleasures. The narrator describes the Pedlar’s newfound knowledge in perhaps the poem’s greatest passage, which would later appear in the second book of *The Prelude*:

From Nature and her overflowing soul
He had received so much that all his thoughts
Were steeped in feeling. He was only then
Contented when with bliss ineffable
He felt the sentiment of being spread
O’er all that moves, and all that seemeth still,
O’er all which, lost beyond the reach of thought
And human knowledge, to the human eye
Invisible, yet liveth to the heart;
O’er all that leaps, and runs, and shouts, and sings,
Or beats the gladsome air; o’er all that glides
Beneath the wave, yea, in the wave itself,
And mighty depth of waters. Wonder not
If such his transports were; for in all things
He saw one life, and felt that it was joy. (204-18)
The “sentiment of being” refers to what I intend by the phrase “Wordsworthian love,” which spreads, connects, and unifies all of existence and reality. The Pedlar sees “one life,” a direct reference to the pantheistic views held by Coleridge. But rather than read this reference as an affirmation of Pantheism, I read it as a subsuming of pantheist theory into Wordsworth’s more complex theory of love. As Coleridge attempts in his early writings to harmonize the Bible with other mythologies, so Wordsworth seems to harmonize Pantheism with other philosophical, poetical, and scientific theories of his time.10

Following this central passage, the narrator tells us that the Pedlar “quit his native hills” (226) in order to wander the world. This is presumably the time when the Pedlar meets and develops his relationship with Margaret as represented in *The Ruined Cottage*. The narrator also reveals that he had long loved the Pedlar (312), and he recounts their shared journeys first mentioned in *The Ruined Cottage*. As is the case with the narrator in the latter, the narrator of *The Pedlar* also understands the power of love by the poem’s end. The narrator describes the world as perceived and understood by the Pedlar:

To every natural form, rock, fruit, and flower,
Even the loose stones that cover the highway,
He gave a moral life; he saw them feel,
Or linked them to some feeling. In all shapes
He found a secret and mysterious soul,
A fragrance and a Spirit of strange meaning. (332-7)

10 The equation of this “one life” with the feeling of “joy” would seem to support Potkay’s insistence on the supremacy of joy above love in Wordsworth’s poetry, but such an argument depends on Potkay’s use of the Judeo-Christian tradition of the theory of passions running through Aquinas and Spinoza. This history of joy certainly plays a large role in Wordsworth’s poetry and theory, but Wordsworth’s engagements an alternative theories of the passions espoused by Burton, Hartley, and Godwin (all tied to the theories of Socrates and Plato) demonstrate the supremacy of love above joy. This philosophical distinction has at its base one major point of contention: is joy the ultimate end or goal of all passions and experiences or is love? Potkay makes the case that the answer is “joy” in the Judeo-Christian tradition. I make the case that the answer is “love” in the Wordsworthian tradition.
An epistemology of love leads necessarily to an ethics of love—inanimate objects and things also possess “a moral life.” The Pedlar either perceives these things as experiencing some kind of feeling or links “them to some feeling”; he finds a soul, fragrance, and “Spirit of strange meaning” in all that exists. In part a shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism—a defining characteristic of Deep Ecology—and in part a Wordsworthian poeticizing of pantheist theory, this passage figures forth the worldview of one who sees the world through the spirit of love. The Pedlar here shares similarities with the title character of “Old Man Travelling,” who loses his self in the natural world and “is by nature led / To peace so perfect” (Wordsworth 12-3), as well as with the speaker of “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” who concludes “That we all of us have one human heart” (Wordsworth 146). As the narrator states in the final two lines of The Pedlar, love is an “unrelenting agency / Did bind his feelings even as in a chain” (355-6). The new vision of love draws from the “unrelenting agency” of Godwinian Necessity and from the “chain” of thoughts and feelings central to Hartleyan Associationism. Wordsworth expresses through The Pedlar and The Ruined Cottage his belief that all things in the world are inextricably bound by love.

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CHAPTER THREE

“Something far more deeply interfused”: Wordsworthian Love in and after Lyrical Ballads

Wordsworth’s *annus mirabilis* concludes emphatically with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in late 1798. William and Dorothy Wordsworth had moved to Coleridge’s neighborhood of Nether Stowey in 1797, and it was at this time that the two poets began to plan the collection and write the poems that would eventually become the *Lyrical Ballads*. The collection thus overlaps with the composition of *The Ruined Cottage* and *The Pedlar*, and the best and most important poems from *Lyrical Ballads* cultivate the central ideas, themes, and arguments from these two works: namely, the articulation and development of Wordsworthian love.

Two editions of *Lyrical Ballads* were published in 1798: the Bristol edition (August) and the more widely-circulated and now standard London edition (October). The major differences between the two are the substitution of Coleridge’s “Lewti” for “The Nightingale” and the addition of the Advertisement in the London edition. In the Advertisement, Wordsworth famously writes that “the following poems are to be considered as experiments” that “were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure” (21). And indeed, many of the poems in the collection are experimental in nature. As is the case with Wordsworth’s previous verse, he attempts in many of the poems to achieve a synthesis of thought and feeling, to unite emotion and philosophy through his
conception of love. Wordsworth also writes in the Advertisement that the poems should contain “a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents” (21); that is, the poems should deal directly with life. As Wordsworth would write in the 1802 Preface, he aims in his poetry to spread “relationship and love” and to represent the world as perceived through “the spirit of love.” Poetry in this sense functions as a social necessity, “a necessary part of our existence” that can directly connect “us with our fellow-beings” (Wordsworth, “Preface” 402). Such is Wordsworth’s ideal.

Financial pressures, however, played an important role in the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*. The collection served as a major source of funding for a trip to Germany that Wordsworth and Coleridge had been planning since at least March 1798.1 The subsequent editions of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800, 1802, and 1805 can thus be seen as attempts to edit, revise, and expand a collection of poems that Wordsworth felt was not quite complete in 1798. The major changes to these three editions are the addition of the Preface in 1800 and its significant development in 1802; the addition of many poems by Wordsworth and the gradual marginalization of those poems by Coleridge; the division of the collection into two volumes beginning with the 1800 edition; and the arrangement of the poems within these two volumes. While the publication history of *Lyrical Ballads* has received much critical attention, critics have under-read the importance of love in many of the collection’s central poems. Wordsworth’s emphasis on love remains constant throughout the four editions of *Lyrical Ballads*, and “Tintern Abbey” retains its powerful position as the final poem of the first volume.

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1 Wordsworth outlines a two-year trip to Germany in a letter to James Losh dated 11 March 1798. Wordsworth in fact dreaded publication but needed money for the trip, as he reveals in two other letters: to James Webb Tobin dated 6 March 1798 and to Joseph Cottle dated Summer 1799.
In the following section, I present a detailed reading of “Tintern Abbey,” arguably the greatest and most important poem of *Lyrical Ballads*. In it, Wordsworth turns to a conception of love in the wake of political failure. Love becomes a way of knowing and understanding the world, a love that is at once embedded within a more elitist philosophical and intellectual tradition and universally accessible to everyone. The categories of the aesthetic, the imagination, and material reality converge dialectically in a multivalent Wordsworthian love. In the second section of this chapter, I conclude my exploration of Wordsworthian love with an analysis of the thirteen-book *Prelude*, a work that caps the most significant period of Wordsworth’s poetic career (1797-1805) with regard to his theory of love.

1. “Tintern Abbey” (1798)

   Like *An Evening Walk*, “Tintern Abbey” is a poem addressed to Dorothy that develops formally through dialectical stops and starts in its narrative. Love is Wordsworth’s central theme and inspiration in “Tintern Abbey” and the articulation of that love is the poem’s central work. Given the extensive body of scholarship on “Tintern Abbey”—with all of its theoretical, historical, and methodological baggage—I often forget that the poem

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2 “Tintern Abbey” has been a critical battleground for Romanticists since Marjorie Levinson’s groundbreaking reading of the poem in *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems*. In that reading, Levinson, amongst other things, points out the political import inherent in the date referenced in the poem’s full title: “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye, during a Tour, July 13, 1798.” July 13—the eve of the ninth anniversary of the storming of the Bastille and the French Revolution in which Wordsworth had placed so much hope, as the poet remembers in the ninth and tenth books of the thirteen-book *The Prelude*. Levinson argues that the title hints at the kind of political and social undertones that Wordsworth continually suppresses and evades throughout the poem in his insistence on an idealized vision of nature. Since that reading, scholars typically engage the poem either by opposing Levinson’s New Historicism reading (for example, via Ecocriticism or New Formalism or affect theory) or by developing and/or departing from Levinson in similar historicist fashion.
functions in many ways as an ode that expresses deep love for the Wye Valley and for Dorothy. In the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth adds a note to the poem: “I have not ventured to call this Poem an Ode; but it was written with a hope that in the transitions, and in the impassioned music of the versification would be found the principal requisites of that species of composition” (692). In *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, Stuart Curran succinctly describes “Tintern Abbey” as “the paradoxical record of the mind’s desire for relief from contraries…within a genre that emphasizes them and that, in this particular case, reveals a structure that is incessantly, uncompromisingly dialectical” (77). Indeed, the poem’s rhythm and musicality, its sudden stops and starts, its oscillation between past and present, politics and poetry, unity and fragmentation, reveal the dialectical form and structure of the poem—and they also reveal the dialectical nature of Wordsworthian love.

“Tintern Abbey” embodies Wordsworthian love, and the movement of the poem reflects the formula that would later appear in *The Prelude*: “Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind.” Wordsworth develops his youthful, physical experiences of nature into a metaphysical understanding of the world and, in the poem’s final stanza, conflates the love of nature with love for his sister. In contrast to the younger Wordsworth who last visited the Wye Valley in 1793, the Wordsworth of 1798 has moved from his “thoughtless youth” to understand and acknowledge the all-pervading presence of love that “rolls through all things” (91, 103). He sees the world through the spirit of love; like the narrator of *The Ruined Cottage*, he sees things as they really are, even if only within the context of a critical utopia.

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3 A full discussion of the poem’s critical history would require an essay in and of itself, but for several of the most influential studies of the poem, see Hartman; Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*; Weiskel; McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*; Levinson, *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems* and “A Motion and a Spirit: Romancing Spinoza”; Johnston; and Potkay.
In the first section of the poem, Wordsworth presents sensory observations of the natural landscape in the tradition of loco-descriptive poetry, but, as in *An Evening Walk*, Wordsworth moves from these initial descriptions to a more profound working-through of thought and reality. In the second section, he explains how the “forms of beauty” (24) from nature have given him

sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration[.] (28-31)

The “sensations” Wordsworth experiences are “felt” in two ways: (1) physically “in the blood” and (2) psychologically and emotionally “along the heart.” Wordsworth adds the clause, “and felt along the heart,” to distinguish this second kind of feeling from the purely bodily sensation of blood flowing through his body. Moreover, the “heart” acts as a symbol of both body (the physical heart) and spirit (the emotional or psychological heart), and it signifies the passage of thought and feeling “into [his] purer mind,” the point at which the material and intellectual experiences of the world meet. This “purer mind” marks the approach of the sublime, a moment in which he can seemingly transcend the factuality of existence to approach ideal truth. This moment occurs “in lonely rooms, and mid the din /
Of towns and cities” (26-7)—the spiritual community Wordsworth reveals connects his self to the natural world. Yet he immediately follows this passage with a dash and a reference to human relationships, to the “little, nameless, unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love” (35-6) performed by “a good man” (34). The aesthetic appreciation of nature leads to ethical actions and to a more profound understanding of humanity.
Love is that concept that can unite these ethical and aesthetic dimensions, as Wordsworth articulates in the section’s end. He achieves a “more sublime” state:

that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things. (38-50)

The progression of the second verse paragraph culminates in this final passage, from the memory of perceiving forms of beauty, to the representation of those forms as thought, to the expression of love, and finally to “that blessed mood.” In Platonic fashion, Wordsworth unites material forms with forms of ideal beauty and truth. The pleasure of harmony and joy that he experiences relates to the idea of love outlined in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*—that is, his ability to perceive and understand the beauty and unity of the universe through the spirit of love. Moreover, the word “mood” can refer to both a state of mind and an emotion, and in this case it seems to refer to both. In this mood, the “affections gently lead us” until “We see into the life of things.” Here is the move from affection to transcendence that characterizes Wordsworthian love. The word “affections” refers to earthly feelings and “sensations” that can link materiality to the more abstract conception of love as universal harmony and interconnectedness. Such an otherworldly experience “almost” suspends “the motion of our human blood”—those sensations felt only in the blood or body—as the poet
achieves a transcendent state. The powers of harmony and joy are dependent on and subordinate to this theory of love.

Wordsworthian love is also ecological in nature. Wordsworth identifies a dependent relationship between the human mind and the natural world, and this relationship exemplifies something very like what Morton calls “the ecological thought” and what Deep Ecologists call an ecological loss of self. For Wordsworth, the human body can become a “living soul” through the contemplation of nature; the imagination, in effect, has the power to activate this shift in human consciousness. This reasoning deconstructs the humanity/nature binary present in the poem as nature is no longer separate from humanity but rather an integral part of “the life of things.” This unified “life of things” is thus not strictly a noumenal reality but rather an understanding of the way the world exists as a whole.

But this experience, this moment of supposed transcendence, is fleeting. The next verse paragraph descends as the poet wonders “If this / Be but a vain belief” (50-1). The poem turns in upon itself as it represents the dialectical process of reality. Wordsworth writes,

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when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart,
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee
O sylvan Wye! (53-8)
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The passage marks the dialectical shift from past to present, from unity in and reconciliation with nature to the fragmentation and loneliness of human society and industry. The passage also acts as an interlude, a transition between the two most significant and philosophical stanzas in the poem. It anchors Wordsworth’s more abstract thoughts. Such is the rhythm of
the ode. As soon as the poet achieves a seemingly transcendent or otherworldly state, as soon as he gains insight into the essence of truth and reality, he dialectically moves back to a material, worldly existence. But what he retains is the spirit of love, and the poem represents the dialectical passage from one state to the other, from past to present, unity to fragmentation, poetry to history. The lack of complete synthesis and fusion aligns the poem with a proto-Adornian negative dialectics that shapes the movement of the poem.

Wordsworth’s theory of love and of poetry relate to Adorno’s claim that art remains intimately tied to “the primacy of reality” despite its apparent rejection of the real. “Tintern Abbey” is the kind of great artwork that embraces the negative dialectic. The poem continually defers synthesis and reconciliation in favor of dialectical process and accumulation. The seemingly idealistic and utopian ideas constructed in “Tintern Abbey” need not be read as illusions that demonstrate Wordsworth’s naïveté or his complicity with false consciousness. They function as part of the dialectical process of an unrealized critical utopia and of Wordsworthian love.

In the fourth section of the poem, the poet must revive the picture of his mind, again, as he recounts the development of his relations to nature from the coarse and physical pleasures of his “boyish days” in 1793 to the present moment of composition in 1798. Wordsworth writes that he is “changed, no doubt, from what I was, when first / I came among these hills” (67-8), but “I cannot paint / what then I was” (76-7). Instead, he offers a series of similes to portray his younger self. In his first visit he was “like a roe” (68) experiencing nature without thought. But he was also “more like a man / Flying from something that he dreads, than one / Who sought the thing he loved” (71-3). At that time, nature haunted him “like a passion” (78). Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson, Adam
Potkay, and James O'Rourke have read in these lines Wordsworth's repression of both the failures of the French Revolution and his perceived abandonment of Annette Vallon and their daughter, Caroline. In these readings, love plays a tangential and repressive role. Wordsworth evades such thoughts and feelings, he pushes away the sexual “aching joys” and “dizzy raptures” (85, 86) of his youth and creates instead a false sense of union and reconciliation with an idealized vision of nature. I do not disagree that such undertones play a role in this part of the poem, but I do not think they are the best way to read the poem as a whole. In a sense, Vallon can be seen as another version of the female figures that haunt Wordsworth’s poetry, but she certainly is not the focal point of the poem. “Tintern Abbey” is more about the critical articulation of love and its aesthetic development than about the Wordsworth’s romantic relationship with Vallon. Moreover, in the conclusion to the poem, his love for Dorothy takes precedence. There is no more reason to think that he is evading Annette than reason to think he is articulating his theory of how all of the “thoughtless” past becomes a different present.

What is more important in this stanza is Wordsworth’s theory of love. In his youth, nature was to him

An appetite: a feeling and a love,
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, or any interest
Unborrowed from the eye. (81-4)

In this passage, nature is an “appetite,” a “feeling,” and a “love.” He distinguishes this “thoughtless” sensual love from the love that governs the poem because “That time is past” (84). His poetic project has become to recover that love through thought, a project that necessarily produces a different conception of love. Thought is requisite to an ethical love,
and he describes this love in the well-known passage directly following his brief recounting of youth:

I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity  
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. (89-103)

In the first part of this passage, Wordsworth’s intellectual love of nature leads to a love of humankind, represented by the “still, sad music” that can “chasten and subdue” the moments of “thoughtless youth.” This “still, sad music of humanity” relates to the “secret spirit of humanity” that the narrator of The Ruined Cottage perceives at the end of that poem. The Wordsworth of 1798 in “Tintern Abbey” has learned, like the narrator of The Ruined Cottage, to see the “things” that he could not in 1793. An epistemology of love makes possible an understanding of the interrelatedness of all “things” in the world.4

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4 Adela Pinch discusses “epistemologies of emotion” as well as a Romantic “epistemology of love.” While she does not explicitly analyze Wordsworth in this regard, I take an epistemology of love to be central to Wordsworth’s poetry and poetics. Moreover, contemporary scientists have recently discussed an “epistemology of love” with regard to contemplative practices and the relationship between knowledge and love, and in many ways these ideas can be traced back to the Romantics. As physicist Arthur Zajonc suggests, “knowing itself remains partial and deformed if we do not develop and practice an epistemology of love instead of an epistemology of separation,” and, importantly, “every way of knowing becomes a way of living, every epistemology becomes an ethic” (1744). At a time when Enlightenment science and empiricism claimed to uncover the knowledge of the world, Wordsworth turned instead to love and poetry as better means to understand the nature of knowledge and truth in both the material and immaterial realms that comprise the reality of the world. See also Vandenberghe.
Wordsworth then describes his new conception of love in a rather contrasting fashion: love is a “presence,” a “sense sublime,” a “something,” a “motion,” and a “spirit.” Of these five descriptors, the first and last (“presence” and “spirit”) suggest a nonmaterial existence; this love is not a thing—but it is simultaneously “something.” It is also a “motion” that “rolls through all things,” which implies a material existence similar to the “rolling” waters invoked in the poem’s opening lines and the “motion” of blood pulsing through the body in the second verse paragraph. Love is a “sense sublime” of that “something”—it fuses sensory experiences of the world (“sense”) with the internal world of the mind (“sublime”). Love “rolls through all things”—it is earthly and heavenly, it is a thing and not a thing.

As Potkay demonstrates in his *PMLA* article, Wordsworth employs the Latin-based Old English usage of the word “things” in this poem, a word that can refer (simultaneously) to “creature, object, property, cause, motive, reason, lawsuit, event, affair, act, deed, enterprise, condition, circumstance, contest, discussion, meeting, council, assembly, court of justice, point, respect, sake” (393-4); in short, both human and nonhuman life, both ideas and objects. As discussed in the Introduction, the word “love” also has an extensive record in the *OED*. “Love” can refer (simultaneously) to “inclination, hope, desire, affection, kindness, friendship, pleasure, goodwill, allure, greed, sense, feeling, fondness, amicable or peaceable settlement, treaty, covenant, charity, devotion, addiction, lust, instinct” (italics are mine to highlight words in the poem previously discussed). The totality of “all things” Wordsworth strives to figure forth in this passage indicates his larger poetic project of love, a love in which the boundaries of subject and object disappear, a love in which the self can potentially assimilate into the unity of the world.
Wordsworth also explores the totality of all things in a fragment of meditative verse he composed in 1798 and later incorporated into Book IX of *The Excursion*. In it, he articulates his theory of love in a language and aesthetic quite similar to the second and fourth sections of “Tintern Abbey”:

> There is an active principle alive in all things;  
> In all things, in all nature, in the flowers  
> And in the trees, in every pebbly stone  
> That paves the brooks, the stationary rocks,  
> The moving waters and the invisible air.  
> All beings have their properties which spread  
> Beyond themselves, a power by which they make  
> Some other being conscious of their life,  
> Spirit that knows no insulated spot,  
> No chasm, no solitude, from link to link  
> It circulates the soul of all the worlds. (1-11)

Wordsworth conceives of an “active principle” that transcends the self/other divide through his passion for the natural world. This principle exists in “all things,” both animate and inanimate, and the “properties” of “All beings” participate in its vast web. The second grammatical sentence of this passage particularly illuminates Wordworthian love. Each individual being spreads and connects with “Some other being” through the eternal links that comprise material reality. As “Spirit,” Wordworthian love dialectically weaves material and immaterial aspects of reality. Wordworth’s articulation of love here echoes the concluding lines of *The Pedlar* in which all things are “linked” to feeling and morality through “a secret and mysterious soul, / A fragrance and a Spirit of strange meaning” (336-7). And importantly, as is the case in *The Ruined Cottage, The Pedlar*, and “Tintern Abbey,” this fragment embraces the negative dialectic central to the critical utopia. Wordworth writes that “we live by hope” (19) and that hope is “the very blood / By which we move, we see by the sweet light / And breathe the sweet air of futurity” (20-2). Wordworth delays the
reconciliation with reality possible through love. Reconciliation is a hope for the future, an unrealized utopia.

Following Wordsworth’s insight into “something far more deeply interfused,” he reasserts his love for nature as well as the aesthetic and ethical import of that love. He conceives of reality as an aesthetic-dialectical process of sensory perception and cognitive development: he is a lover “of all the mighty world / Of eye and ear, both what they half create, / And what perceive” (106-8). He perceives reality through the spirit of love. Wordsworth is

well pleased to recognize

In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being. (108-12)

As is the case in many of Wordsworth’s poems, the material world acts to anchor his more abstract and philosophical mode. The poet indentifies the basis of material reality as both “nature” and “the language of the sense.” What exactly is this sense? Within “Tintern Abbey,” it would seem to refer to the “sense sublime” of the previous grammatical sentence, an insight of that disturbing presence that “rolls through all things.” That is, it is both a physical and metaphysical “sense.” Moreover, the language of this “sense” refers to Wordsworth’s larger poetic project of synthesizing thought and feeling through the concept of love. Nature and the language of the sense “guide” Wordsworth toward an ethical existence by serving as the “soul” of his “moral being.”

In the final section of “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth conflates his love of nature with love for Dorothy. Love best accounts for the poem’s conclusion which has perplexed readers and critics since its initial publication. Some critics read the turn to Dorothy as a
power move, a silencing of the female voice by the male authority. Others read it as an instance of Wordsworth’s “egotism,” his insistence that Dorothy remember that he was with her above all else. Still others read it as an attempt at consolation on having been unable to recapture his initial experiences in the Wye Valley. In his formal analysis of the poem, Curran would seem to fall into the last group, but he also poses a possibility relevant to my interpretation of the poem. Curran writes, “Whether the shift to Dorothy confesses his inadequacy or intuitively recognizes that the love essential to a harmonious society is a fundamentally dialectical emotion is for rival interpreters to argue from the same insufficient evidence” (77). Curran is willing to grant the poem’s form dialectical structure but not the love that is its central theme. But when we conceive of Wordworthian love within the context of critical utopias and the negative dialectic, and when we trace the development of that love through Wordsworth’s poetry, there is sufficient evidence in the poem to support the dialectical nature of love.

Wordworthian love is not simply an emotion. It is also a concept that encompasses the emotions, feelings, thoughts, and ideas attached to love in Wordsworth’s milieu, including the ideas of unity and interconnectedness that serve to connect the poet to his sister. Heidi Thomson suggests that Dorothy’s part in the poem “is not to serve as the speaker’s nursery training wheels en route to individual selfhood. On the contrary, the poem affirms the continuous necessity for a web of interlocution between Wordsworth and his sister to substantiate the myth of memory” (533). Thomson sees the poem not as a joyful celebration of self and transcendence but rather as a despondent one more in keeping with the other poems in Lyrical Ballads. Wordsworth responds to his feelings of sadness and loss by emphasizing the importance “of a shared experience with a beloved person” and “the
indispensable need for a familiar community” (Thomson 535). Although Thomson grounds her reading in the concepts of memory and selfhood, I would like to develop her reading by showing how these concepts function as a central part of Wordsworth’s theory of love.

In the conclusion to “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth moves from isolation to sociality and from nature to humanity. Wordsworth suddenly addresses Dorothy, who has been with him all along (115-6). In contrast to “the language of the sense,” Wordsworth sees in his sister “The language of my former heart” (118). Dorothy reminds Wordsworth of his former existence, but this is not her purpose in the poem. Wordsworth emphasizes his love for Dorothy (as he does in An Evening Walk): he describes her as “my dearest Friend, / My dear, dear Friend,” “My dear, dear Sister!” (116-7, 122). It is not so much that Dorothy represents the younger Wordsworth as that Wordsworth expresses a newfound connection between himself and his sister. As he moves from earthly affection to cosmic love earlier in the poem, so he moves from cosmic love to an intimate human relationship at the end. Wordsworth writes that nature leads us “From joy to joy” and reveals “that all which we behold / Is full of blessings” (126, 134-5). Nature leads Wordsworth from joy of the natural world to an understanding of love that “rolls through all things” to joy of his relationship with Dorothy and ultimately to greater love and affection for Dorothy. As Potkay argues, “Joy is the experience or apprehension of union or fulfillment,” and Wordsworth’s joy here “is ecological, egalitarian, and ultimately utopian” (Joy 10, 122). But joy is not the ultimate end; it is only a temporary state. Love links the various joys Wordsworth pursues, and love remains after the experience of joy. It is desire, and not love, that joy displaces. And it is the spirit of love that allows Wordsworth to see “that all which we behold / Is full of blessings.”
Although “Tintern Abbey” does not register as a traditional lyrical ballad written by “a man speaking to men,” it shares with most poems in the collection an emphasis on love, affection, and loss, especially in its final section. Wordsworth had poems such as “The Female Vagrant,” which is the tale of suffering extracted from Salisbury Plain, “Simon Lee,” “Anecdote for Fathers,” “We Are Seven,” “The Last of the Flock,” and “The Idiot Boy” in mind as he defends his poetry in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, and these were the poems that Wordsworth’s contemporary critics and reviewers disparaged, (although we now know the poet engages with more complex ideas in these poems than was initially appreciated). One of the more traditional lyrical ballads, Wordsworth’s “Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House,” is a miniature form of “Tintern Abbey” written in rhymed, ballad-like quatrains, and it can help to understand the move that Wordsworth makes in the conclusion of the latter. As discussed in the introduction to Part One of this study, Wordsworth’s connection to Dorothy is central to this poem and to his theory of love. “Lines” is also an address to Dorothy, and the “blessed power” in the poem recalls the “something” that “rolls through all things” from “Tintern Abbey,” the “active principle” from the “things fragment,” and the “thousand blended notes” of nature in “Lines Written in Early Spring.” Like “Tintern Abbey,” “Lines” is not predominantly about selfhood and transcendence but rather about love, community, and human relationships.

Wordsworth concludes “Tintern Abbey” as a paean to Dorothy in a more intensified address than in “Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House.” The importance of connection and community with Dorothy is certainly more apparent in “Tintern Abbey.” Wordsworth reminds her never to forget when they are apart
That on the banks of this delightful stream
We stood together; and that I, so long
A worshipper of Nature, hither came,
Unwearied in that service: rather say
With warmer love, oh! with far deeper zeal
Of holier love. (151-6)

Wordsworth would “rather” have Dorothy remember the love that connects them to each other and to the natural world than nature itself—love is “warmer” and “holier.” Because of this love, as Wordsworth writes in the poem’s final line, the Wye Valley and its landscapes are “More dear, both for themselves, and for thy sake” (160). As Thomson argues, the address to Dorothy elevates community, connection, and kinship above self and transcendence, and I believe this speaks directly to Wordsworthian love. Like Thomson, I would argue that the poem “refuses to give a conclusive answer about individual selfhood” (545). Its conclusive point is love. The final section of the poem is neither an aberration nor a problem; it is a love song to Dorothy that represents how love works for Wordsworth as a dialectical way of knowing and understanding the world.

Although Wordsworth strives for synthesis throughout “Tintern Abbey,” it is ultimately governed by a nascent negative dialectic that continually defers and rejects moments of transcendence and resolution. He has indeed gained knowledge and insight into his mind and the universe, but what remains is his relationship to Dorothy, his earthly love coded in universalizing aesthetics. In contrast to Keats’s claim for Wordsworth’s egotistical sublime, Wordsworth articulates a theory of love akin to Negative Capability, “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (Keats 370). There are perhaps some irritable reachings in “Tintern Abbey,” but
they ultimately “evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth” (Keats 370), in this case, with love.


Wordsworth’s longest poem, *The Prelude*, is not addressed to Dorothy but to Coleridge, who had prompted Wordsworth to write an epic work since at least 1798. In fact, *The Prelude* had been conceived as only one part of Wordsworth’s grand and unrealized scheme for *The Recluse*, and as such, *The Prelude*, or “The Poem to Coleridge,” was known only to the poet’s friends and family until its posthumous publication in 1850. Wordsworth worked through sections and versions of *The Prelude* beginning in October of 1798, resulting in the two-part Prelude of 1799, the five-book Prelude of 1804, the thirteen-book Prelude of 1805, and the fourteen-book Prelude of 1850. As an autobiographical epic, Wordsworth revised *The Prelude* throughout his life, but I want to focus specifically on the 1805 version as a conclusion to and culmination of his theory of love as it develops during the period stretching from 1788-1805.

Self-love and egotism would seem inescapable in a poem eventually subtitled “The Growth of a Poet’s Mind.” Although known by Wordsworth and his circle only as “The Poem to Coleridge,” there are more moments of self-love in *The Prelude* than in any of Wordsworth’s poems. The first book begins with the poet’s retrospective musings on the composition of the poem itself, where Wordsworth writes that he poured out his

> soul in measured strains,
Even in the very words which I have here
Recorded: to the open fields I told
A prophecy: poetic numbers came
Spontaneously, and clothed in priestly robe
My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem,
For holy services: great hopes were mine;
My own voice cheered me, and, far more, the mind’s
Internal echo of the imperfect sound. (57-65)

The seeming egotistical claims for prophecy, spontaneous composition, and divine recognition, as well as the joy he receives from his own voice, speak to the poem’s autobiographical purpose of tracing the growth of Wordsworth’s poetic mind: it is a poem about the poet and his imagination. Scholars typically treat the poem based on such an understanding, often focusing on the well-known “spots of time,” those moments “Which with distinct pre-eminence retain / A renovating Virtue” (XI 259-60) for the mind:

> those passages of life in which
> We have had the deepest feeling that the mind
> Is lord and master, and that outward sense
> Is but the obedient servant of her will. (XI 270-3)

For Wordsworth, these moments comprise some of the most central parts of *The Prelude*: the boat-stealing episode, the Boy of Winander, the Drowned Man scene, the girl with a pitcher on her head, and the final Snowdon experience. Hartman thus reads the poem as centered on self-consciousness and the revelation of the imagination and its limits; Abrams reads it as developing through narrative stages of mental development, crisis, and the power of the mind to recover (*Natural Supernaturalism* 74-80); Liu reads it as “Wordsworth’s culminating ideology of self—his greatest denial of history” (388).

I do not wish to oppose wholly such powerful readings of *The Prelude*, but I do want to suggest that the poem looks much different if we foreground love rather than the spots of time. To do so is not to exclude the imagination, which is undoubtedly a principal theme of the poem, but rather to include the importance of Wordsworthian love. For example, Wordsworth writes near the end of the final book that
Imagination having been our theme,
So also hath that intellectual love,
For they are each in each, and cannot stand
Dividually.  (XIII 185-8)

Wordsworth clearly states that “intellectual love” is just as important as the imagination.

Imagination and intellectual love work almost as synonyms, but as Book XIII develops, it seems that love is more important than the imagination—not only intellectual love but Wordsworth’s entire theory of love.

Wordsworth asserts the supremacy of love after the Snowdon scene, which works as the conclusion to Book XIII and to *The Prelude* itself. The poet attains the peak of Snowdon suddenly, “like a flash” (40), and the sublime and majestic vision impresses his mind with thoughts of nature, the soul, and the imagination (XIII 1-65). He first meditates upon the scene, which appears to him

> The perfect image of a mighty Mind,
> Of one that feeds upon infinity,
> That is exalted by an underpresence,
> The sense of God, or whatso’er is dim
> Or vast in its own being[].  (XIII 66-70)

Wordsworth’s epiphany is that the same “Power” that controls and embodies nature has its “genuine Counterpart / And Brother” in the imagination (XIII 84, 88-9). The imagination, or “reason in her most exalted mood” (XIII 170), is that creative faculty of mind that allows Wordsworth to shape existence (XIII 94-6), to “build up greatest things / From least suggestions” (XIII 98-9), and “To hold communion with the invisible world” (XIII 105). But it is love that ultimately governs the imagination and human existence:

> From love, for here
> Do we begin and end, all grandeur comes,
> All truth and beauty, from pervading love,
> That gone, we are as dust.  (XIII 149-52)
The imagination may allow humans to shape and mold their existence, but the materials and ideas of existence itself derive from love. Love is the beginning and ending not only of *The Prelude* but also of all grandeur, truth, and beauty. For Wordsworth, it is the source of life, imagination, and poetry. The imagination is specific to the human mind, but love is pervasive and universal. He perceives the world through the spirit of love and thus gains access to “truth and beauty” in their myriad forms:

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Behold the fields
In balmy spring-time, full of rising flowers
And happy creatures; see that Pair, the Lamb
And the Lamb’s Mother, and their tender ways
Shall touch thee to the heart; in some green bower
Rest, and be not alone, but have thou there
The One who is thy choice of all the world,
There linger, lulled and lost, and rapt away,
Be happy to thy fill[.] (152-60)
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The spirit of love allows Wordsworth to perceive and connect to the beauty of the natural world and its flowers and creatures. Similar to the swans from *An Evening Walk*, he expresses affection for lambs in this passage. Such affection leads directly to human affection, a move from the isolation of his meditations to the sociality of lingering with “The One” of his choice—this is certainly earthly love.

The final movements in *The Prelude* clearly characterize what I call Wordsworthian love. Wordsworth uses the image of earthly lovers to ground his move to cosmic, universalizing love in the next lines of the poem. He would seem to privilege this more heavenly or intellectual love, but it is consistently coded in earthly affection and human relationships. After the move to a higher conception of love, Wordsworth offers a little love song for Dorothy and a final address to Coleridge. Following his advice to embrace another, Wordsworth writes,
thou call’st this love
And so it is, but there is higher love
Than this, a love that comes into the heart
With awe and a diffusive sentiment;
Thy love is human merely; this proceeds
More from the brooding Soul, and is divine.  (XIII 160-65)

He uses the term “love” to refer both to “human” or earthly love and the “higher” or “divine” love that is cosmic and universal in scope. This higher love recalls “the sentiment of being” passage from *The Pedlar*, which Wordsworth incorporated into Book II of *The Prelude*:

I felt the sentiment of Being spread  
O’er all that moves, and all that seemeth still,  
O’er all, that, lost beyond the reach of thought  
And human knowledge, to the human eye  
Invisible, yet liveth to the heart,  
O’er all that leaps, and runs, and shouts, and signs,  
Or beats the gladsome air, o’er all that glides  
Beneath the wave, yea, in the wave itself  
And mighty depth of waters.  (II 420-28)

Now it is not the Pedlar but Wordsworth who feels this sentiment. In this passage, he expresses his theory of love as initially experienced when he was a child, and it achieves its philosophical weight later in his life (i.e., in Book XIII).

Yet Wordsworth’s insistence on the supremacy of intellectual love produces tension. Claims for the divine aspects of love remain wed to its earthly roots. The materiality of love, that is, leaves traces in intellectual love; materiality is inescapable. Following his disquisition on intellectual love and the imagination, Wordsworth addresses Dorothy and praises her “sweet influence” on turning him from nature and from abstract thoughts to humanity and personal relationships. He writes that he “too exclusively esteemed that love” (XIII 234) of nature and of the intellect, and that Dorothy allowed him to embrace earthly affection and the “common things” of nature and humanity. His affection for Dorothy grounds his
philosophical and intellectual love; like the imagination, it cannot stand dividually. His
dress to Dorothy also recalls the moral and political elements of love as they appear in
Salisbury Plain, The Ruined Cottage, and many poems from Lyrical Ballads. As he suggests in the
title to Book VIII of The Prelude, love of nature leads to love of humanity.

After the brief address to Dorothy, Wordsworth concludes the poem as a direct
address to Coleridge. He praises Coleridge for providing him with the ideas for the poem
and the conception of “the mighty unity / In all which we behold, and feel, and are” (XIII
254-5). Significantly, he stresses Coleridge’s capacity for love above all:

O most loving Soul!
Placed on this earth to love and understand
And from thy presence shed the light of love[.] (XIII 248-50)

Again, the universalizing aesthetics of unity Wordsworth purports rests in his personal
affection for Coleridge and in earthly love. Although The Prelude concludes on a particularly
prophetic and abstract insistence on the “divine” fabric and substance of the mind (XIII
452), that very conclusion is called into question by the dialectical nature of the poem, which
oscillates between such universalizing claims and emphases on the materiality of human love.

The uncertain conclusion to The Prelude parallels the poem’s beginnings.

Wordsworth’s desire to privilege the immaterial qualities of the human mind appear in the
poem “Was it for this,” originally composed in 1798 and then folded into the 1799 Prelude
and into Book I of the thirteen-book Prelude. Duncan Wu reads the poem as the basis of The
Prelude, and it certainly establishes many themes of that longer work. In this short poem,
Wordsworth discusses the pedagogical function of nature as well as his insights into love,
imagination, and the human mind. He writes of the “beings of the hills” (47)—revised in The
Prelude as “Spirit of the universe” (I 428)—that
from my first day
Of childhood, did ye love to interweave
The passions that build up our human soul
Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,
But with high objects, with eternal things,
With life and nature, purifying thus
The elements of feeling and of thought,
And sanctifying by such discipline
Both pain and fear, until we recognize
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart. (47-58)

Wordsworth privileges “high objects” and “eternal things” in this passage, in opposition to the “vulgar works of man.” These vulgar works would seem to refer to human-made objects, which are inferior to natural objects and natural beauty, but there is also a sense of vulgar love here. Wordsworth wants to completely purify feeling and thought from all vulgarisms, and in The Prelude that purifying leads to intellectual love. But the material “beatings of the heart” remain.

Wordsworth continues his high argument by explicitly discussing love. He elevates the status of feeling to a philosophical register by claiming that “the eternal spirit” (104) of the universe appears “as the soul / Of our first sympathies” (108-9). This “Soul of things” (114) provides a love for Wordsworth that renews

Those hallowed and pure motions of the sense
Which seem in their simplicity to own
An intellectual charm – that calm delight
Which (if I err not) surely must belong
To those first-born affinities which fit
Our new existence to existing things,
And in our dawn of being constitute
The bond of union betwixt life and joy. (116-23)

As in The Prelude, Wordsworth strives for the “intellectual charm” of the senses and of love. There is a noticeable lack of human affection and materiality in “Was it for this,” but as Wordsworth develops his poetic project and theory of love through the composition of The
Prelude, intellectual love and its universalizing impulses become increasingly tied to earthly affection and relationships.

Love begins to play a more active role in the 1799 Prelude. In a passage later incorporated in Book II of the thirteen-book Prelude, Wordsworth discusses the importance of human connection for the development of an infant babe (retrospectively Wordsworth himself) through the love between mother and child. Before intellectual love, before love of nature or love of the universe, the babe claims “manifest kindred with an earthly soul” (II 272). Through such a “discipline of love” (281), the babe’s

organisms and recipient faculties
Are quickened, are more vigorous; his mind spreads,
Tenacious of the forms which it receives.
In one beloved presence – nay and more,
In that most apprehensive habitude
And those sensations which have been derived
From this beloved presence – there exists
A virtue which irradiates and exalts
All objects through all intercourse of sense.  (II 282-90)

It is earthly love which leads to heavenly, intellectual love. The personal love Wordsworth feels for another can lead to love of nature and then to love of humanity: “Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind.” Although this passage appears in The Prelude itself, it is the exalted, philosophical, and intellectual love that seems to take precedence in the poem and in scholarship of the work. But the earthly traces of intellectual love are always there—they are, in fact, the basis of Wordsworth’s theory of love.

Wordsworth does not deny the importance of earthly love. Indeed, throughout The Prelude he emphasizes love’s moral and political qualities. In Book IV, for instance, he remembers how he begins to perceive and appreciate the rustics of the countryside in a new way. He sees them with “something of another eye” (200), reading the people “in a sense /
Of love and knowledge” (204-5). Wordsworth begins to see the world through the spirit of love in the way he articulates in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, and he begins to fuse earthly with heavenly love:

Nor less do I remember to have felt
Distinctly manifested at this time
A dawning, even as of another sense,
A human-heartedness about my love
For objects hitherto the gladsome air
Of my own private being, and no more;
Which I had loved, even as a blessed Spirit
Or Angel, if he were to dwell on earth,
Might love, in individual happiness.
But now there opened of me other thoughts
Of change, congratulation, and regret,
A new-born feeling. It spread far and wide;
The trees, the mountains shared it, and the brooks,
The stars of Heaven[.] (222-35)

Wordsworth moves from isolation of his “own private being” to the sociality of a more socially-encompassing love. This “human-heartedness” manifests itself as “another sense,” reminiscent of the “sense sublime” from “Tintern Abbey.” This new sense opens Wordsworth to a fuller understanding of love, one that accounts for “change, congratulation, and regret” not only of other humans but also of everything in existence: trees, mountains, brooks, stars. He moves from isolation to sociality to a cosmic and universalizing aesthetics.

The conclusion to Book IV ends with a personal story of human connection. Wordsworth chances upon a weary and desolate soldier during one of his solitary walks. At the poet’s promptings, the soldier tells him “in simple words, a Soldier’s tale” (IV 445). Wordsworth is moved not only by the tale itself, of which he provides little detail, but even more so by the soldier’s “solemn and sublime” demeanor (IV 473):
There was a strange half-absence, and a tone
Of weakness and indifference, as of one
Remembering the importance of his theme
But feeling it no longer. (IV 475-8)

The soldier’s absent and indifferent attitude contrasts with Wordsworth’s intensely self-conscious state of mind and mode of writing, but the poet’s curiosity and interest in his fellow human speaks to a fundamental bond of brotherhood. The episode works in part as a critique of war and its effects on soldiers but also as a celebration of earthly affection. As Wordsworth leads the soldier to a cottage where a laborer will undoubtedly provide food and lodging, they establish a community to which the soldier responds “with a reviving interest, / Till then unfelt” (IV 499-500). The soldier feels again affection and human connection through the poet and laborer. Wordsworth ends the book on this scene in a way that emphasizes the importance of earthly affection and materiality to his theory of love.

Wordsworth recalls many similar episodes throughout *The Prelude* that serve to ground and complicate his more cosmic and universalizing impulses. Although he would seem to privilege the divine and transcendent imagination, such notions of divinity and moments of transcendence remain wed to earthly, human experiences and relationships. Wordsworth’s desire for a fully purified intellect and a wholly unified theory of the world becomes more solidified after 1805, and, as subsequent poets and scholars point out, he turns increasingly conservative in his poetry and thinking. Fosso suggests the concurrent intensification on “the restorative powers of nature” and imagination and the diminution of the social model in Wordsworth’s work after 1805 speaks to the poet’s growing faith in “the stability of Christian tradition and institutions, that [offers] the promise of hope, permanence, and quiescence” (193). Wordsworth abandons the hope of negative dialectics in
favor of the certainty of Christianity. Fosso relates this growing faith to the death of
Wordsworth’s brother John in 1805 and the deaths of two of his children, Catherine and
Thomas, in 1812. After 1805, Wordsworthian love is replaced by Christian love, and
Wordsworth no longer develops in his poetry the theory of love apparent in his earlier work.

Wordsworth’s contemporaries were aware of Wordsworth’s political and
philosophical backsliding. Percy Shelley was perhaps most outraged and influenced by what
he saw as Wordsworth’s abandonment of truth and liberty. Shelley expresses his praise for
the earlier and critique of the later Wordsworth in his sonnet, “To Wordsworth” (1816).
Shelley celebrates Wordsworth as a “Poet of Nature” (1) who “stood / Above the blind and
battling multitude” (9-10), weaving “Songs consecrate to truth and liberty” (11-2). But
Shelley sees the great poet as “Deserting these” and leaving him “to grieve” (13). It was up
to Shelley, then, to continue the fight for truth and liberty, and, as I show in the next part of
this dissertation, to develop Wordsworth’s theory of love.
PART TWO

SHELLEYAN LOVE
Introduction

In *The Keepsake* for 1829, Percy Shelley’s essay “On Love” appears along with two poems on the same topic: Frederic Mansel Reynolds’s “The Test of Love” and Mary Lamb’s “What Is Love?”¹ The latter makes an especially interesting pairing with Shelley’s philosophical essay as its title seems to allude directly to the opening question of his essay: “What is Love?—Ask him who lives what is life; ask him who adores what is God” (503). In her poem, Lamb answers this question with a rather conventional definition of love:

> Love is the passion which endureth,  
> Which neither time nor absence cureth;  
> Which nought of earthly change can sever:  
> Love is the light which shines for ever. (1-4)

Lamb follows the tradition of love as an enduring and eternal passion linked to the light of heaven. Love is stable and unchanging, and in this sense her poem acts as an affirmation for the conservative readers of *The Keepsake*. Reynolds’ “Test of Love” is a similar yet more overtly didactic poem in which he asks “ladies” to test themselves and their lovers to determine whether or not they are experiencing “true” love. Reynolds somewhat facetiously claims that true love occurs when one is consistently “unhappy,” when one is always thinking of and fretting about his or her lover.

The poems of Reynolds and Lamb are not surprising in their publication in *The Keepsake*, but the publication of Shelley’s essay is. Published from 1827 to 1856, *The Keepsake*¹

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¹ Most publications in *The Keepsake* deal with love or passion in some sense, but these three works stand out in the 1829 volume.
was one of the most successful literary annuals, a fashionable anthology of poetry and prose aimed at a middle-class female readership (Hoagwood and Ledbetter 3). In their edition of the 1829 volume, Terence Hoagwood and Kathryn Ledbetter state that The Keepsake in particular was “tailored to romantic fantasies of middle-class women in a prolific attempt to capitalize on the growing female audiences in Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century” (4-5). Annuals “were the foremost venue for the publication of poetry in England” with regard to “sales and public attention,” and most poets could not ignore their importance (Hoagwood and Ledbetter 3). The 1829 volume of The Keepsake is “distinctive for its impressive collection of literary celebrities” (Ledbetter and Hoagwood 6)—including Thomas Moore, Walter Scott, Robert Southey, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and both Percy and Mary Shelley. Reynolds, the editor of the 1829 volume, even makes a point to acknowledge Shelley’s essay in the Preface by thanking “the Author of Frankenstein” for her generous “gift” (iv). The previously unpublished essay, then, is a centerpiece of the volume, one of the few works singled out for particular attention.\(^2\)

Shelley’s essay does not “fit” the conservative aims of The Keepsake and its readership as do the poems of Reynolds and Lamb. As Hoagwood and Ledbetter explain in their online edition of the 1829 volume, “Politics, current events, outwardly radical social opinions, and crude language were unacceptable in The Keepsake. Editors made their volume appear sanitized for drawing-room display and family reading by carefully choosing poetry, prose, and illustrations that would satisfy conservative readers.” At the same time, they suggest there are “themes that threaten to disturb the carefully woven fabric of domesticity.”

\(^2\) Mary Shelley, like many authors, wrote for the annual to make money. Her decision to publish her husband’s work was influenced much more by profit than an attempt to shape his legacy.
Hoagwood and Ledbetter do not focus on Shelley’s essay, but its treatment of love certainly contrasts with a conservative notion of domesticity. Shelley was well-known as an atheist, a radical social and political thinker, and a poet who had espoused “free love,” associated with Lord Byron, and eloped with Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin while still married to his estranged wife, Harriet. His philosophical-political poem, *Queen Mab*, was used against him in the Chancery Court when he was deprived custody of his children by Harriet in 1817. He had argued for Irish independence, opposed the British government on several fronts, self-exiled himself from England in 1818, and drowned tragically while sailing from Livorno to Lerici on July 8, 1822. To include his previously unpublished essay in *The Keepsake* would seem a risky (but perhaps market-savvy) move, but the essay’s theme, love, would have appealed to a broad audience then as now.

Unlike Wordsworthian love, Shelleyan love has received significant scholarly attention, but it is almost always within one (or more) of three ideas: (1) Platonic *eros*, (2) Greek and Shelleyan sexuality, and (3) metaphor. Sexuality and *eros* are the most common approaches to Shelleyan love, although William Ulmer and Jerrold Hogle have explored usefully the metaphorical elements of love in Shelley’s works with differing degrees of emphasis on his idealism and skepticism. ³ “On Love” does play an important role in Shelley

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³ The trajectory of Shelley studies since the nineteenth century reveals the importance of love to the poet’s work. The Victorians tended to over-emphasize Shelleyan sexuality, sensuality, and “moral depravity,” even admonishing Alfred Tennyson for following in the footsteps of the so-called “Sensation School” of poets. Later in the nineteenth century, Shelley became revered in the canon, but Matthew Arnold’s characterization of him as “a beautiful archangel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain” (“Shelley” 380) persisted during the first half of the twentieth century. Moreover, early twentieth century criticism largely ignored aspects of Shelleyan feminism and the poet’s engagements with the actual world. In the 1970s Shelley studies had a kind of boom: Earl Wasserman established the poet as a complex deconstructive thinker; the social and political aspects of Shelley’s poetry began to receive more serious attention; and sexuality and feminism became scholarly interests. In the 80s and 90s critics were often split between “skeptical” and “idealist” versions of Shelley, positions often dependent on historicist or formalist treatments of his work. And in the last decade or
studies, but many critics tend to privilege Shelley’s translation of *The Symposium* and its corresponding essay, “Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love,” in studies of Shelleyan love. One result of this tendency is an over-emphasis on *eros* and sexuality in Shelley’s works. Along with Hogle, Ulmer, and other scholars, I believe “On Love” is more central to Shelley’s poetry and poetics than the “Discourse,” which was intended as an introduction to Shelley’s translation of *The Symposium.*

My approach to Shelleyan love develops and challenges existing scholarship by adding a fourth approach: negative dialectics. Robert Kaufman and others have traced Shelley’s similarities to Frankfurt School Critical Theory, and I build on their work to show how Shelley’s conception of love plays a central role in his proto-Adornian aesthetics. Shelley’s grounding of cosmic and universal love in personal affection and human relationships creates a negative dialectic that not only sheds new light on his fundamental dialectic of idealism and skepticism but also bears directly on his treatments of utopia, revolution, reform, politics, ethics, and aesthetics. Wordsworth provides Shelley with the foundation for his negative dialectics as well as his conception of love, but, as “On Love”


As fragments, both “On Love” and the “Discourse” were largely neglected in scholarship until the 1970s, when they became more available to and widely discussed by critics.
demonstrates, Shelleyan love is more aesthetically and philosophically complex than Wordsworthian love.

In many ways, “On Love” characterizes the dialectical and multivalent nature of the concept that dominates most of Shelley’s writings. Shelley composed the essay in the summer of 1818, most likely after he had translated Plato’s *Symposium* and before he began “Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks” (I discuss both texts in Chapter Five). The essay is thus a culmination of his treatment of love in previous works—*Queen Mab* and other poems from *The Esdaile Notebook*, the *Alastor* volume of 1816, many of his shorter lyrics—and foreshadows the works to follow, such as “The Mask of Anarchy” (1819), *Prometheus Unbound* (1818-20), *Adonais* (1821), *Epipsychidion* (1821), and *A Defence of Poetry* (1821). That Shelley would have had Plato’s *Symposium* fresh in his mind, with its various definitions and disquisitions on love, is especially important, as the movement of his essay demonstrates.

Despite the ostensibly rhetorical question that opens “On Love,” Shelley defines (or attempts to define) the concept of love in several ways (much as the discussion ensues in the *Symposium*). For Shelley, love is:

1. “[T]hat powerful attraction towards all that we conceive or fear or hope beyond ourselves when we find within our own thoughts the chasm or an insufficient void and seek to awaken in all things that are a community with what we experience within ourselves” (503).

2. “[T]he bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with every thing which exists” (504).

3. A desire for “the ideal prototype of every thing excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man…a soul within our soul that describes a circle around its proper Paradise which pain and sorrow or evil dare not overleap” (504).
(4) “[A] secret correspondence” between nature and “our heart” (504).

In the space of two paragraphs, Shelley moves through four distinct but interrelated conceptions of love. He first discusses love as an imaginative, sympathetic, sensual, and perhaps selfish attraction to another person. Love is an impulse to move from the isolated self to another person and to a community, an impulse that ideally collapses the self/other, subject/object divides. Shelley further writes that this impulse is a desire to “be understood” by others, an impulse that, “if we feel, we would that another’s nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and melt into our own, that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart’s best blood” (503-4). This typical Shelleyan language is conditional, even skeptical: “if we feel, we would.” Shelley questions the move from self to other, the sexual and intellectual kindling and melting of bodies and subjectivities, even as he asserts it as a defining element of love. He then adds to this assertion the claim that love is “the bond” that “connects…every thing which exists.” Such a cosmic, universal, and metaphysical bond coded in materiality recalls Wordsworthian love, but Shelley again tempers this idea with a more skeptical statement: “We are born into the world and there is something within us which from the instant that we live and move thirsts after its likeness” (504). Similar to the critical debates surrounding the conclusion to “Tintern Abbey,” in which scholars argue whether Wordsworth displaces Dorothy as an image of his younger self or is the other to which Wordsworth can connect, Shelley seems unsure of whether love moves us beyond ourselves or only results in loving the image of the self in another.

I do not, however, want to suggest that such skepticism is the predominant mode of Shelley’s writing. In *Shelleyan Eros*, Ulmer argues that Shelley’s poetics is “predominantly
idealism,” that Shelley “was morally and artistically committed to the idea of truth” (ix). In contrast to decades of poststructuralist and deconstructive accounts of Shelley that present disruptions and deferrals as the solution to his works—as the intentional and necessary conclusion of a poststructuralist and deconstructive way of thinking—Ulmer sees them as the problem, both for Shelley and for scholars. Instead, Ulmer locates the basis of Shelley’s concept of love in “an idealization of metaphor as the vehicle for emotional closure and union” (7). Shelleyan metaphor, as Ulmer understands it, subsumes difference into identity, and this elision allows for the idealistic move from self to other that characterizes Shelleyan love.

In another important study of Shelleyan love, Shelley’s Mirrors of Love, Teddi Bonca focuses on the metaphor of the mirror in Shelley’s essay. Shelley writes that the ideal prototype acts as “a mirror” within the soul “whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness” (504). Unlike Ulmer, however, Bonca does not see Shelley’s linguistic and metaphorical maneuverings as the dominant mode of his theory of love. Rather, Bonca reads the mirror-metaphor as representative of the dialectic of “Self and Love” at the center of all of Shelley’s works. The mirror-metaphor works against scholarship that portrays Shelley as ultimately narcissistic in his vision of love—a reading implied by Ulmer—through “its emphasis on sympathy, connection, [and] relation” (Bonca ix). For Shelley, the self is the “cornerstone of oppressive regimes, religious intolerance, and familial/marital tyranny,” and so the loss of self in the other—or the collapse of the self/other dichotomy—becomes the

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goal (and anxiety) in many of Shelley’s works (Bonca 3-4). This kind of sociality is central to Shelleyan love.

Bonca, however, employs a biographical approach to Shelley’s poetry that becomes at times cumbersome. Bonca calls her approach “microbiography” (4)—that is, a constant shifting of focus between fragmentary moments in Shelley’s life and texts viewed as workings-through of Shelley’s memories and anxieties of those moments. Bonca, who frequently draws from Freud, focuses on the poet’s childhood and adolescent experiences with his family, especially the women in his life: his mother, his sisters, his cousin Harriet Grove, and his two eventual wives and their sisters. Such biographical readings are fascinating as well as useful in reconstructing the human element of Shelley’s poetry, but they verge on reducing Shelley’s work to autobiography. In the following chapters I will focus more on the formal and theoretical aspects of the poetry—the ways in which Shelley uses poetry to represent and construct cognition and theory—while keeping in the background the actual events of his life. In this sense, I temper Bonca’s microbiography with Ulmer’s formalist deconstruction.

As Shelley continues “On Love,” his conception of love turns more explicitly toward a revised notion of Platonic eros, specifically a desire for ideal beauty. Ulmer, in fact, reads the essay as a direct response to Plato (5). But unlike Plato, Shelley writes of an “ideal prototype” that exists not in an external world of Forms but rather “within our intellectual nature” (504). Love is a desire for that “soul within our soul” that is devoid of “pain and sorrow or evil.” As is the case in “Alastor,” which I discuss in Chapter Four, “this is the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends” (Shelley, “On Love” 504). Like Wordsworthian love, Shelleyan love works as an unrealized critical utopia. In A Defence of
Poetry, Shelley would clarify his revision of Platonic eros by situating love at the center of poetry, philosophy, politics, and morality: “The great secret of morals is Love; or a going of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own” (517). For Shelley, the Platonic world of Forms does not exist “out there,” somewhere, but rather within our minds, within the collective human condition. Love is a binding force created by and reliant on human thought and interaction, but that does not make it any less real or ideal. Shelley believed that humans were ultimately social beings and that love is central to our social nature (“Discourse” 106-7). What emerges in “On Love” (and in Shelley’s other works) is a dialectic of idealism and skepticism; each time Shelley asserts an “ideal” or Platonic notion of love, he immediately tempers it with uncertainty and doubt. Abstract and philosophical ideas are continually grounded in material, human relationships. Love, in itself, resists single definition or stasis; it is forever moving and forever becoming, as is the process of life and reality. But this is not a skeptical vision of love. In his poetry and prose Shelley consistently presents love as a binding force in the universe, the means by which we can achieve harmony and community both universal and individual.

As such, I disagree with one of Ulmer’s central claims: that Shelleyan love “begins by embracing earthly mediations” and then moves irrevocably to idealism (10). Like Wordsworthian love, the move from the earthly to the divine certainly characterizes Shelleyan love, but Shelley does not ultimately reject earthly mediations. Shelley’s idealistic and apocalyptic poetics and aesthetics are always grounded in earthly mediations and human relationships. My reading of Shelley shares some affinities with that of Stuart Sperry, who sees Shelley as an idealist writing the poetry of life. Yet, like Bonca, Sperry privileges a
biographical and psychoanalytic approach to the poetry, though he does utilize more formalist methodologies akin to Ulmer. Ulmer, conversely, tends to promote an idealized version of Shelley that is all mind and spirit and imagination. This is probably the abstract, philosophical picture of himself that Shelley strove to represent in his writings, but this picture misses the social and human aspects of his poetry.

While Ulmer partially neglects the social and communal aspects in “On Love,” he does provide a useful framework for thinking about Shelley’s theory of the “ideal prototype” of self. Ulmer writes:

Shelley’s association of love and language ends by implicating philosophy in rhetoric and by demanding that a poem’s moral or political analysis of love be gauged against the performance of its language as a mode of love. “On Love” locates desire in the self’s thirst for an antitypical complement, a beautiful other pursued for its promise of wholeness. By adding this erotic model to its confession of metaphorical inefficiency, “On Love” grounds Shelley’s poetics in contradiction. Shelley’s career was largely an exploration of the artistic possibilities of this contradiction. (4)

Ulmer’s assessment here is useful for two reasons. First, he establishes Shelley’s revision of reconciliation within the context of “the problem of language,” which most critics would agree is a central preoccupation in all of Shelley’s writings. The problem of love, that is, is also the problem of language, as Shelley articulates in a note to the essay: “These words are inefficient and metaphorical—Most words so—No help—” (504). Second, Ulmer suggests that Shelley’s desire for the idealized other—the metaphorical antitype that is at once a mirror of the self and a projection of what the self is not—is a contradiction that Shelley strives to explore and not embrace. Shelleyan love, then, is a possible idealism.

The fourth and final notion of love of which Shelley writes in his essay fuses Platonic and Wordsworthian conceptions of love with Shelley’s dialectical understanding of reality.
Love is ultimately the essence of human nature: it is a “secret correspondence” between humankind and the natural world, an “inconceivable relation to something within the soul” (504). In particularly Wordsworthian language, Shelley finds this correspondence in “the motion of the very leaves of spring” and “in the blue air” (504). Moreover, this move to “love of nature” derives from Shelley’s love and affection for people, whether reciprocal or not: “in solitude, or in that deserted state when we are surrounded by human beings and yet they sympathise not with us, we love the flowers, the grass and the waters and the sky” (504). Shelley revises Wordsworth’s dictum, “Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind,” or, perhaps more properly, he reads Wordsworth’s theory of love correctly. Shelley concludes his essay by stating, “So soon as this want or power is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere husk of what once he was.—” (504).

Love is both a desire and a power, a material manifestation and a spiritual presence. And without it, Shelley suggests, there is no poetry or life, at least no poetry or life worth writing or living.

What holds the four conceptions of love together in the essay and in Shelley’s poetry is the idea of unity—the unity of life, in fact, which Shelley describes as “an astonishing thing” and as “the great miracle” (505) in another posthumously-published essay, “On Life.” Shelley’s complex notion of love involves adoptions and revisions of Wordsworthian, Platonic, and philosophical-scientific notions of the concept. Love unites all aspects of life, as Shelley writes in the “Discourse”: love is “the universal thirst for a communion not

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6 Shelley composed the essay in 1819, and it went through a series of publications in 1832, 1833, and 1840.
7 For example, in “On Love,” Shelley draws from the pseudo-scientific idea of vibrations as well as Coleridgean-German metaphysics in his discussion of love as Platonic desire: “a frame whose nerves, like the chords of two exquisite lyres strung together to the accompaniment of one delightful voice, vibrate with the vibrations of our own” (504).
merely of the senses, but of our whole nature, intellectual, imaginative and sensitive” (106-7).

Moreover, Shelley asserts a strong ethical and political character to love in other works that are implicit to “On Love,” such as *Queen Mab*, and, more directly, the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*: “until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness” (209). This same idea appears in different versions and forms in nearly all of Shelley’s works.

In the following two chapters, I trace the development of Shelley’s treatment of love over his career, from *Queen Mab* and “Alastor” through his central prose writings on love, *Prometheus Unbound*, and *Epipsychidion.* There are times when Shelleyan love conflates with Platonic *eros* or with pure sexuality and desire, but what emerges in his poetry and prose is a consistent conception of love as the basis of both human nature and the dialectical process of reality—that is, the dialectic between the material and the spiritual. Like Wordsworthian love, Shelleyan love moves continually between earthly affection and cosmic love, between personal relationships and universalizing aesthetics. Love is absolutely central to Shelley’s poetic, philosophical, and political thought, and he continually returns to a dialectical notion of love that forms the foundation of reality and promises the possibility of change, reconciliation, and redemption.
CHAPTER FOUR

“Strange symphony”: Love and Desire in Queen Mab and “Alastor”

Two of Shelley’s earlier poems reflect two of his strongest influences: the Godwinian Queen Mab and the Wordsworthian “Alastor.” Godwinian and Wordsworthian notions of love, poetry, and politics are central to the initial development of Shelley’s poetics and politics. Shelley was more directly influenced by Godwin than by Wordsworth, and Shelley is more centrally embedded in the trajectory of critical theory outlined in the Introduction. Yet Shelley sees himself as carrying on the political-poetic program that he believed Wordsworth had abandoned early in the nineteenth century. Shelley’s theory of love, then, emerges from Wordsworthian love and Godwinian political theory, and he articulates his theory in Queen Mab and “Alastor.”

As I discuss in the Introduction, Godwin’s Political Justice is central to Shelley’s poetics, politics, and theory of love, and critics often characterize the Godwinian and Shelleyan principles of utopia and perfectibility as “excessively Utopian and naively optimistic” (Carter vii) in contrast to a more materialist Marxist utopianism. Shelley’s Godwinian-Romantic conception of utopia, however, finds a useful parallel in the critical utopias espoused by Marx and the Frankfurt School theorists. This parallel can illuminate the poet’s more materialist impulses that are present in the poems I analyze in this chapter.

Many twentieth- and twenty-first century scholars point out that Godwin’s theory of politics and culture in Political Justice anticipates the “ideology critique” usually attached to
Marxist schools of thought. Godwin’s critique “of accumulated property” and of the emergent capitalist division of classes is proto-Marxist (Godwin 281), and even more striking are the similarities between Godwin’s central theory of human perfectibility and Marx’s belief in a kind of utopian communist future, what Marxist critics call his “anti-utopian utopianism”:

the theoretical origins of Marx’s “anti-utopian utopianism” lie precisely in the conflicting solutions he proposed to the problems that he set himself. The problems were those of generating radical hope and of capturing the spirit of revolution whilst simultaneously avoiding the need for utopianism and all the paternalistic, elitist and messianic baggage that came with it. (Webb 2)

Marx did call for a kind of utopia in the anticipated working-class revolution, but the concept of utopia itself was dangerous in its inherent rejection of a wholly materialist understanding of history and culture. Webb suggests that Marx himself was unsure of how to properly articulate “anti-utopian utopianism,” and this is one important project taken up by the Frankfurt School theorists.

I demonstrate in the Introduction how the Frankfurt theories of negative dialectics, autonomous art, and utopia possess a residual Romanticism initiated in the poetry of Wordsworth and Shelley, and how negative dialectics in particular plays a central role in Romantic and Frankfurt theories of art and utopia. Great artworks, according to Adorno, retain a kind of autonomy in their embodiment of the dialectical method, and they function as “the negative appearance of utopia”—that is, a present and immaterial impossibility embedded within the empirical appearances of material reality. Adorno’s theory of utopia rests on the concept of Versoehnung, that elusive “reconciliation between the subject and objectivity, between existence and the world, the individual consciousness and the external network of things and institutions” (Jameson, Marxism 38).
Shelleyan love is a precursor to Adorno’s *Versoehnung* in that it does not refer directly to an individual moment of transcendence or reconciliation of subject/object, self/other, but rather addresses these divisions through its insistence on the unity of reality, of concrete totality. Love conceived only in terms of *eros* or *agape* relies on a false sense of reconciliation, but the negative dialectic redresses this illusion of reconciliation. Utopia in this sense is not an idyllic state but a problematic idea that can deceive the individual. As Jameson points out, this conception of utopia is a development of classic Marxist thinking in which “Utopian thought represented a diversion of revolutionary energy into idle wish-fulfillments and imaginary satisfactions” (*Marxism* 112). For Adorno, utopia is not so much a diversion as a driving force in the “new kind of barbarism” (Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* xi) that dominated Fascism in the 1930s and 1940s.

Benjamin likewise sees utopia as a destructive vision of paradise, but he is even more concerned than Adorno with the utopian function of art which he calls “aura.” For Benjamin “the objects of aura stand perhaps as the setting of a kind of Utopia, a Utopian present, not shorn of the past but having absorbed it, a kind of plentitude of existence in the world of things, if only for the briefest instant” (Jameson, *Marxism* 77). Aura, or the authenticity of great artworks, seeks a utopian wholeness akin to Adorno’s *Versoehnung*, and, as Jameson suggests, Benjamin believes this wholeness can be achieved through the work of art. Utopia does blow a storm from paradise, holding the individual in a perpetual catastrophic moment, but art has the ability to transcend the catastrophe in order to represent, if only for a moment, the possibility of redemption. Shelley articulates such an interconnected theory of art, utopia, and love in *Queen Mab* and “Alastor,” and taken
together the poems reveal the centrality of his dialectical conception of love to his poetry, poetics, and politics.

1. *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem* (1813)

*Queen Mab* was Shelley’s first major accomplishment in verse, but it never reached an audience beyond Shelley’s circle until it was pirated in the 1820s. The poem then became the Chartist Bible, a phenomenon that underscores its radical social and political nature.¹ But the working-class audience that *Queen Mab* eventually found was not what Shelley had intended. The poem’s complex form—a fusion of the allegorical and prophetic form of the dream-vision, the “philosophical” form of the content, language, and extensive footnotes, and the popular form of the fairy tale—indicates its intended or “virtual” intellectual audience, which Shelley identifies as aristocratic youths.² In a letter to his publisher, Thomas Hookham, Shelley requests that his poem be published as “A small neat Quarto, on fine paper & so as to catch the aristocrats: They will not read it, but their sons & daughters may” (*Letters* I 361). Moreover, as Shelley indicated in a letter to Thomas Hogg, the verse form of the poem shifts between the “blank heroic verse” of Mab’s didactic instruction and the “blank lyrical measure” of the descriptive sections, a formal move in emulation of John Milton and

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² In *Shelley and His Audiences*, Behrendt identifies the “virtual” audience as Shelley’s imagined and intended ideal readers (4-5). Although the virtual audience does not immediately exist for Shelley, Behrendt argues that Shelley projects his works into the future at a time when the virtual audience will become the actual audience. Each of Shelley’s texts, then, has multiple audiences, what Behrendt calls “multistability” (2). For a detailed study of Shelley’s reception by the Reviews, see Wheatley.
classical Greek dramatists (Letters I 352). David Duff thus considers the poem a “revolutionary romance,” a work that revives the revolutionary culture of the 1790s through its form, political iconography, and content (111-2). Indeed, Duff suggests that Queen Mab is “the most radical and outspoken of all” Shelley’s poems (4). Shelley expected no immediate success, and, as he believed it was too radical to be published along with his name, he only distributed approximately 70 of the 250 published copies (with his name removed) to sympathetic friends. But he did believe that the poem could influence a future generation of politicians via its Godwinian virtues. Shelley would later regret composing the poem, particularly when it was used against him in the Chancery Court in 1817, but it remains an important work in understanding the emergence and development of many Shelleyan ideas, including love.3

Love is one of many concepts that drive Queen Mab, but I believe it is the most important concept. In addition to Godwinism (and its corresponding Doctrine of Necessity), utopianism, religion, science, classicism, and other more critically-discussed aspects of the poem, love figures over and over again as the central force of the universe in Queen Mab. Shelley presents love not only as the foundation of the world and of the universe but also as the most effective means to achieve the kinds of social, political, and moral change that comprise his own Godwinism and its utopian future. The poem must be situated in relation to Godwin’s influence on the poet in order to understand fully Shelley’s conception of love.

Shelley’s relationship with Godwin was complex, to say the least. Over the course of his career, Shelley was Godwin’s admirer, correspondent, pupil, disciple, financier, son-in-

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3 Indeed, the poem has long been considered an inferior work that doesn’t represent the “real” or “mature” Shelley, but in the past few decades scholars have made the case for its importance to Shelley’s body of work. See the August 1997 volume of Romantic Circles Praxis Series on “Early Shelley.”
In his first of many letters to Godwin in 1812, Shelley called Godwin “a luminary too dazzling for the darkness which surrounds him,” and he wrote that “The name of Godwin has been used to excite in me feelings of reverence and admiration…, and from the earliest period of my knowledge of his principles I have ardently desired to share on the footing of intimacy that intellect which I have delighted to contemplate in its emanations” (Letters I 220). When their correspondence began, however, Godwin and his works had been out of public favor and critical esteem for over a decade. Godwin’s greatest work, Political Justice, had made a significant impact on the intellectual and political scene in the 1790s, but as the decade wore on Godwin and his New Philosophy seemed outdated, idealist, and potentially dangerous to England. Many prominent figures still deemed Political Justice to be a significant contribution to politics and philosophy, but Godwin came to believe it was Shelley who “should become the chief instrument of conveying the ideas of Political Justice to the next generation” (St. Clair 329).

Shelley emerged in 1812 as the new, second-generation Godwin—in effect, he was Godwin’s philosophical and political protégé. But it soon became apparent to Shelley that Godwin seemed increasingly to have succumbed to Wordsworthian backsliding. In The Godwins and the Shelleys, William St. Clair suggests that Shelley was more firmly Godwinian than Godwin himself, who seemed relatively conservative in 1812 as compared to the Godwin of the 1790s (319). Shelley was arguably the most radical thinker of his time, and his

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5 The New Philosophy refers to Godwin’s philosophical anarchism, the belief that government corrupts society and that the gradual spread of knowledge and subsequent emergence of morality and truth will one day render politics unnecessary. This type of thinking was inspired by the French Revolution, but after The Terror and the rise of Napoleon, the English government and its more conservative members saw this kind of Jacobin politics as a threat to the stability and prosperity of England.
self-proclaimed “passion for reforming the world” (*Prometheus Unbound* 208) directed most of his political and philosophical work. Faced with Godwin’s more conservative politics, Shelley began to revise Godwinian ideas in order to construct a New Godwinism, by which I mean a set of philosophical and political ideas influenced by *Political Justice* and Godwin’s other writings. Michael Scrivener calls this Godwinism Shelley’s philosophical anarchism, “an extensively revised Godwinian perspective” (318) that acted as a precursor to nineteenth-century anarchism and, to a lesser extent, democratic socialism (xii). In his well-known study, *Radical Shelley*, Scrivener explains Shelley’s philosophical anarchism:

“philosophical anarchism establishes a political ideal, a utopia, toward which society is moving in stages; it rejects a millenarian logic whereby utopia could be achieved immediately; it accepts politics as a process of gradual reforms and compromise, as well as ethical idealism” (xii). Shelley’s critical, unrealized utopia is neither a flight of fancy nor a representation of naïve idealism but rather a “political ideal,” a social possibility that lies “beyond the confines of the established order” (xii). Scrivener sees Shelley’s Godwinism as both an ongoing revision of Godwin’s own visionary radicalism and a continuous negotiation between ideas of moderate, gradualist reform and those of radical, revolutionary reform.

Godwin’s *Political Justice* most influenced Shelley’s social and political beliefs during the composition of *Queen Mab* in 1812 and 1813. William Keach sees the poem as an early and powerful example of the poet’s interventionist verse: “Shelley first began thinking about *Queen Mab* during the winter of 1811-1812; the project grew out of his interventionist response to the conditions he saw around him” in his travels through England and his interactions with the lower classes (“Young Shelley”). All of Shelley’s interventionist verse is,
in some way, a development of Godwinian ideas. Because the debates and conversations between Godwin and Shelley during 1812 worked to solidify many of the major ideas and themes in *Queen Mab*, the poem can be best read as Shelley’s poetic articulation—his “working through”—of the Godwinian perspective at this time. This is not to say that the poem is simply a poetic version of *Political Justice*, but it is necessary to understand the relationship between these two works in order to understand the deeply social and political nature of Shelleyan love.

In *Political Justice*, Godwin almost always discusses love in a social and political context. He is not so much interested in “passion between the sexes” (Godwin 52) as he is in showing the necessity of love to his ideas of utopia and perfectibility. In his discussion of sincerity and its intimate connections to “innocence, energy, intellectual improvement, and philanthropy” (151), Godwin claims that “equality…is the only sure foundation of love” (153) and that love is one of the “most admirable instruments in the execution of the purpose of virtue” (323). Moreover, Godwin suggests that love is a powerful universal sentiment: “The human mind is so constituted, as to render our actions in almost every case much more the creatures of sentiment and affection, than of the understanding. We all of us have, twisted with our very natures, the principles of parental and filial affection, of love, attachment and friendship” (323). Godwin identifies affection, love, attachment, and friendship as inherent to human nature, as a collective framework (or filter) for interpreting, understanding, and acting in the world. Love thus becomes a central element of envisioning utopia and of utopia itself, a means by which to develop human perfectibility. Godwin also discusses the dangers of love in excess: “love of distinction,” “love of fame/power,” “love of one’s country” (323). Love can have disastrous political consequences, and as such,
Godwin concludes that “A truly virtuous character is the combined result of regulated affections” (324).

Regulated, controlled affections directly relate to Godwinian gradualism. According to Godwin, effective social and political change occurs gradually through education, reform, and rational discussion. Shelley certainly adopts Godwin’s rejection of violence and revolution, although he does revise his Godwinism throughout his career, as I will discuss later in this chapter and in Chapter Five. Godwin argues that violence and revolution are signs that “the people are unenlightened and unprepared for a state of freedom” (131). The properly educated masses need not do anything but resist the existing form of government and wait for their oppressors to “see how futile and short-lived will be the attempt to hold them in subjection” (131). If revolution is unavoidable, Godwin asserts that the duty “of the true politician, is to postpone revolution, if he cannot entirely prevent it” (139), even if that revolution were to result in positive social and political change. This continuum of reform and revolution and its relation to human love and affection forms the basis of Queen Mab.

Shelley’s Queen Mab can be read as a poem of political postponement, as a Godwinian instruction manual for aspiring intellectual politicians. Yet even in this earlier poem, we can see how Shelley tempers his more idealist Godwinian impulses—including a desire and hope for perfectibility through synthesis and progress—with a skepticism more commonly associated with his later work. Shelley’s idealist and materialist negotiations in the poem produce an unresolved dialectic central to his theory of love.

6 My reading of the poem shares some affinities with Andrew Franta’s emphasis on the ways in which Shelley defers his desired audience to some point in the future, but Franta does not account fully for the significance of Shelley’s Godwinism. See “Shelley and the Poetics of Political Indirection,” Poetics Today 22.4 (Winter 2001): 765-793.
Shelley prefaces his otherworldly fairy tale with two pieces that establish love as a central theme of the poem: a Latin epigraph on cosmic-erotic love from Lucretius’s *De rerum natura* (*Of the Nature of Things*) and a love poem to his first wife, Harriet. The contrast between Lucretius’s philosophical approach to love and Shelley’s earthly mediation parallels the nature of Wordsworthian love. Shelley selects lines from Lucretius’s poem that emphasize the materiality and sensations inherent to erotic love while at the same time framing those sensations in “Pierian realms,” or the mythological source of knowledge and art. As Lucretius writes, “First, I teach of great matters, and [secondly] I free men’s minds from the crippling bonds of superstition” (Reiman 16). Shelley sees himself as performing these tasks through his Godwinian poem. The Fairy Queen Mab, for the most part a mouthpiece for Shelley’s own views, both instructs the reader in a Godwinian understanding of human history and reveals the possibility of a utopian future free from all forms of tyranny. Superstition—which, in Shelley’s view, amounts to religion and social hierarchies—prevents humankind from achieving this utopian future.

Shelley also moves between earthly and universal love in his address to Harriet. At the time of writing, however, Shelley was no longer madly in love with Harriet, with whom he had eloped in 1811 after being expelled from Oxford for his pamphlet on atheism. He attempted a free love experiment with Harriet and Hogg shortly after their marriage, but Harriet objected, the first of many signs of their unhappy marriage. Shelley nevertheless pursues an ideal love in his poem to Harriet. After praising his wife, Shelley writes that he “gazed fondly” on her eyes “And loved mankind the more” (7-8). Their isolated love for each other leads to a social and political love for humanity. Shelley’s relationship with Harriet
provides him with “the inspiration” for the poem (10), and, as some critics have argued, the poem’s main character, Ianthe, is modeled after Harriet (Reiman 17).

Early in the poem’s first Canto, Shelley introduces dialectics of soul and body as well as idealism and materialism when the Fairy Queen Mab initiates the dream-vision that comprises the bulk of the poem’s nine cantos. The poem follows the structure of most dream-visions: it is framed by Ianthe, the main female character, falling asleep in Canto I and waking up in Canto IX as her lover, Henry, gazes on her. Thus, as Sperry suggests, the frame subtly stresses the importance of human affection to the philosophical and intellectual content of Ianthe’s dream-vision—the human element is necessary (3-5). In the dream-vision, Mab takes Ianthe’s soul away from the material world and into the Spirit of Nature where Mab (and other spirits) show the various forms of violence throughout human history: religion, government, war, degraded love, capitalism, eating meat. To initiate the dream-vision, Mab must transcend the material world. When the fairy appears, all is “heavenly strains” (I 92), and she commands Ianthe to “burst the chains, / The icy chains of custom” (I 126-7), to “Awake! arise!” (I 129). These “icy chains of custom”—evocative of Blake’s “mind-forg’d manacles”—anticipate Shelley’s subsequent critique of all social sources of power, and what arises from these broken chains is Ianthe’s soul. Similar to the Wordsworthian sublime, Ianthe’s soul transcends her earthly body, which allows her to access the true reality beyond materiality (I 198). The dream-vision is thus embedded in a space between the materialist and idealist worlds which Shelley continuously attempts to articulate and to interconnect in all of his poetry. Shelley, in effect, postpones the vision’s interventionist purpose.

Ianthe is also the name of Shelley’s first daughter.
As a predominantly instructive poem, Ianthe’s dream-vision articulates the kind of political education necessary for important social and political changes to occur. Yet Shelley makes clear that the masses are not ready for such changes—only Ianthe is sufficiently prepared. Only those who possess a “gifted ear” (I 113) can hear Mab’s speech, and Mab chooses Ianthe because she was “Judged alone worthy of the envied boon, / That waits the good and the sincere” (I 123-4). Lisbeth Chapin suggests that Shelley’s choices of a female protagonist in Ianthe and a female symbol of universal power in Mab are of particular importance to his critique of patriarchal systems, especially of Christian patriarchy (133). Ianthe’s male counterpart, Henry, appears only at the end of the poem, and he does nothing but “gaze” while Ianthe participates in a potentially world-changing experience. Moreover, Mab is given

The wonders of the human world to keep:
The secrets of the immeasurable past,
In the unfailing consciences of men,
Those stern, unflattering chroniclers, I find:
The future, from the causes which arise
In each event, I gather[,] (I 168-73)

Mab suggests that not only the past but also the future is embedded in the present, “In the unfailing consciences of men.” As the poem develops, Mab gradually reveals a possible utopian future in which social, political, and human perfectibility have been achieved through the spirit of love, as opposed to the violent and revolutionary failures of the past.

Yet Mab does not reveal such knowledge immediately. Instead, she takes Ianthe far away from earth, into outer space, and finally to the Spirit of Nature, an “unearthly dwelling” (II 49). It is only once Ianthe has been far removed from earth (and its ideas, histories, politics, and people) that Mab “will teach [her] / The secrets of the future” (II 66-7). The
entire dream-vision—and the poem itself—is a form of postponement. Only Ianthe is prepared for Mab’s knowledge, and Mab can only impart her knowledge to Ianthe once they have removed themselves from material reality. True to the poem’s Godwinian foundation, Mab’s instructions to Ianthe are presented slowly and gradually, and the social and political changes Mab prophesizes will likewise be slow and gradual.

Ianthe’s other- and outer-worldly experience directly relates to Shelley’s Godwinian vision of utopia. Mab removes Ianthe from material reality in order to provide her with a “just perspective” (II 250)—that is, the perspective from which she can see the whole: the whole of history, the whole of time, the whole of the world, and ultimately, the whole of reality as a dialectical process. Ianthe uses her “intellectual eye” (II 98) to view the universe in which everything is connected “In the great chain of nature” (II 108):

Above, below, around,
The circling systems formed
A wilderness of harmony;
Each with undeviating aim,
In eloquent silence, through the depths of space
Pursued its wondrous way. (II 76-82)

Harmony, not chaos, is the fundamental state of the universe, even if it is a wild harmony—similar to the poem’s form, its wild but structured lines and stanzalic patterns. Timothy Morton sees Shelley’s notion of the universe here in terms of what he calls “fractal poetics,” which identifies and creates order within chaos, limits within indeterminacy. As Morton writes, Shelley’s “sublime, dizzying, spiralling poetics” achieves a “wilderness of harmony” of its own “as he tries to fit the asymmetrical ideologies of capitalism and ecology together” (“Queen Mab”). For Morton, Shelley’s utopian future is an “Ecotopia” that requires the kind of stability represented by the wild harmony of the universe. Moreover, such poetics
“demonstrates something about dialectics: how simplicity, reflected into itself, becomes complexity” (Morton, “Queen Mab”). Morton would seem to see in Shelley’s poetry a rejection of traditional dialectics and its notions of synthesis and reconciliation, or what I call a nascent negative dialectics. Although Shelley’s negative dialectics is not as fully formed in Queen Mab as it is in his later poetry, it certainly plays a role in his early aesthetics and poetics.

Shelley presents a vision of interconnected systems and worlds that exist simultaneously and peacefully. This cosmic harmony contrasts with humanity:

all things speak
Peace, harmony, and love. The universe,
In nature’s silent eloquence, declares
That all fulfil the works of love and joy,—
All but the outcast man. (III 195-200)

Humanity, however, can recover cosmic harmony through love. As in Wordsworth’s poetry, unity, harmony, and interconnectedness often function as synonyms for and signs of love in Shelley’s work. For Shelley, love is the foundation of life and universal harmony. People are as intimately connected to each other, to the natural world, and to the universe as are the “circling systems” that Ianthe perceives from outer space. Shelley writes,

There’s not one atom of yon earth
But once was living man;
Nor the minutest drop of rain,
That hangeth in its thinnest cloud,
But flowed in human veins. (II 211-15)

Shelley invokes a kind of Wordsworthian ecological rhetoric, what Morton calls “the ecological thought.” The smallest particles and atoms are a part of humankind, and they are also worlds in and of themselves (II 230). Even “the minutest atom comprehends / A world of loves and hatreds” (IV 145-6). All things
Shelley transitions from cosmic harmony in the universe to human affection in the material world. He articulates something very much like Wordsworthian love to develop his Godwinian politics. Mab, after all, instructs Ianthe here in the means to a utopian future. And a major point the fairy makes, one that Shelley adamantly believes throughout his life, is that the collective human consciousness shapes and produces actual human existence. If we perceive the universe through a spirit of love, Shelley suggests, utopia would be possible.

This utopian future, however, remains conditional throughout the poem. It is a possibility embedded in the world and in the minds of people. Like Wordsworth, Shelley emphasizes the necessary connection between love and the imagination. Shelley alters Godwin’s utilitarian “reason” by fusing it with the intuitive imagination associated with Wordsworthian Romanticism. Reason, that is, has to include Ianthe’s vision. The human mind is both the source of and solution to the tyranny that Shelley believes continually impedes harmony and reconciliation (III 80-1, VI 31-2). In Canto III Mab describes this possible utopian future when love and Godwinian reason shall conquer tyranny and evil:

And when Reason’s voice,
Loud as the voice of nature, shall have waked
The nations; and mankind perceive that vice
Is discord, war, and misery; that virtue
Is peace, and happiness and harmony;
When man’s maturer nature shall disdain
The playthings of its childhood;—kingly glare
Will lose its power to dazzle; its authority
Will silently pass by; the gorgeous throne
Shall stand unnoticed in the regal hall,
Fast falling to decay; whilst falsehood’s trade
Shall be as hateful and unprofitable
As that of truth is now.

... Aye! to-day
Stern is the tyrant’s mandate, red the gaze
That flashes desolation, strong the arm
That scatters multitudes. To-morrow comes! (III 126-38, 143-6)

Reason conquers the forms of violence—that is, everything Godwin and Shelley see wrong with society: war, misery, the divine right of kings, luxury, tyranny, hate. This future utopia, however, remains undetermined because Shelley describes it only indirectly through a list of negatives. Reason simultaneously allows humankind to “perceive” vice and peace and to adopt a utilitarian approach to power, wealth, and authority (III 133-5). Although vices currently govern society and politics, Shelley asserts, there is certainty and necessity in the future and in the conviction that an “age of endless peace” “Will swiftly, surely come” (III 235, 237). This conviction derives from human perfectibility and from Shelley’s belief that humanity already knows all it needs to know to make radical changes for the better (i.e., the seed is already planted). As he would later write in A Defence of Poetry,

We have more moral, political and historical wisdom, than we know how to reduce into practise; we have more scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it multiplies. The poetry in these systems of thought, is concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes. …We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest. (530)

At the heart of morality is love, that “generous impulse to act” on the ideas and knowledge of the imagination. Poetry, for Shelley, is absolutely central to developing the social and moral sympathies and to revealing the poetry of life: “The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thought of ever new
delight” (517). But Shelley sees the world as accumulating “facts” and “calculating processes” rather than clarifying the spirit of love. Such an aesthetic of accumulation rejects the Godwinian notion of progress in favor of proto-Frankfurt understanding of reality as a dialectical process. In opposition to violent power, which “like a desolating pestilence, / Pollutes whate’er it touches” and “Makes slaves of men, and, of the human frame, / A mechanized automaton” (III 176-7, 179-80), reason may free humankind from such existence, from “the icy chains of custom.” What makes Shelley’s views particularly distinct from Godwin is his emphasis on love as well as reason as a means to political change and social harmony.

Shelley continues such Godwinian proto-Marxist critique in Canto V, where he describes commerce as a major form and source of tyranny, suffering, and violence, particularly the commerce of love. For Shelley, to end commerce is one major step toward perfection. He critiques the “poison-breathing shade” (V 44) of commerce that destroys all it touches, including “boundless love” (V 42), and he rejects capitalism in a clear allusion to Adam Smith, stating, “The harmony and happiness of man / Yields to the wealth of nations” (V 79-80). In a capitalist society, “All things are sold” (V 177), including heaven, light, and love (V 189). In a footnote to the text, Shelley explains that “Love withers under constraint: its very essence is liberty: it is compatible neither with obedience, jealousy, nor fear: it is there most pure, perfect, and unlimited, where its votaries live in confidence,

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8 Benjamin articulates this aesthetic of accumulation most poignantly in his description of the Angel of History: “His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress” (“Theses” 257-8).
equality, and unreserve.” Yet as he continues, Shelley critiques the institution of marriage, not only on grounds of its basis in religion (specifically Christianity) but its tyrannical and restraining nature. He discusses a kind of “free love” theory (which he practiced unsuccessfully with Harriet and Hogg, and later in his life with other women while married to Mary) that presents earthly affection and love as transient in contrast to the immoveable essence of cosmic love he theorizes in the poem itself. Free love is more in tune with the harmony of the universe: “Love is free: to promise for ever to love the same woman is not less absurd than to promise to believe the same creed: such a vow, in both cases, excludes us from all inquiry.” Ideal love and “the fit and natural arrangement of sexual connection” result from free and unrestrained love—but not promiscuity, as Shelley stresses. The poet certainly draws from Godwin’s views on marriage, but, like his mentor, Shelley does marry twice.

The commodification of love, both in marriage and prostitution, is especially repugnant to Shelley, who envisions an alternative moral economy:

This commerce of sincerest virtue needs
No meditative signs of selfishness,
No jealous intercourse of wretched gain,
No balancings of prudence, cold and long;
In just and equal measure all is weighed,
One scale contains the sum of human weal,
And one, the good man’s heart. (V 231-37)

Shelley draws upon Godwin’s utilitarianism in order to present ideal commerce not as the selfish trade of goods, services, and individuals, but rather as a just, rational distribution of
the necessities of life to those who are most in need.\textsuperscript{9} Importantly, Shelley describes this ideal, utopian vision of commerce via a list of negatives. He again postpones the utopian vision through a language that inverts the current conditions of his society. Shelley invokes Godwin’s idea of Necessity and human perfectibility in this vision of moral economy, but he also incorporates the Romantic conception of the imagination—and its modern parallel of the category of the aesthetic—as having the power to transform social and material reality.\textsuperscript{10}

But he is sure that it will eventually happen:

\begin{quote}
A brighter morn awaits the human day,
When every transfer of earth’s natural gifts
Shall be a commerce of good words and works. (V 251-3)
\end{quote}

Much like the idea fully articulated in \textit{Prometheus Unbound}, Shelley suggests that a revolution of mind must precede a material revolution that would result in a utopian economy.\textsuperscript{11}

Shelley envisions in \textit{Queen Mab} a regenerated world governed by peace, harmony, and love. After showing Ianthe the horrors and tyrannies of the past and present, Mab reveals the possible (and apparently inevitable) future:

\begin{quote}
Hope was seen beaming through the mists of fear:
Earth was no longer hell;
Love, freedom, health, had given
Their ripeness to the manhood of its prime,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{9} Or, in Godwin’s case, to those who are most valuable to society as a whole. Although Godwin’s famous Fenelon example from \textit{Political Justice} has raised challenges to his utilitarianism, Shelley does not appear to adopt such a position.

\textsuperscript{10} In a note to the text, Shelley explains, “He who asserts the doctrine of Necessity, means that, contemplating the events which compose the moral and material universe, he beholds only an immense and uninterrupted chain of causes and effects, no one of which could occupy any other place than it does occupy … We are taught, by the doctrine of Necessity, that there is neither good nor evil in the universe, otherwise than as the events to which we apply these epithets have relation to our own peculiar mode of being.” For a discussion of the relationship between the Romantic Imagination and the category of the aesthetic, see White.

\textsuperscript{11} As Duff points out, Shelley presents “a scientific justification for his vision of a regenerated world” (109) here and throughout the poem. Shelley’s utopia is not a fantastical illusion—as is typically the case in a romance—but a real possibility based on Shelley’s knowledge of science and materiality.
And all pulses beat
Symphonious to the planetary spheres. (VIII 13-18)

The power of love, likened to freedom, health, and harmony, transforms the earth. Through love, humankind enters the universal “wilderness of harmony,” and, like Wordsworthian love, Shelley’s conception of love unifies all of existence. A “pure stream of feeling” (VIII 27) flows from the music of the spheres, “and the flame / Of consentaneous love inspires all life” (VIII 107-8). Shelley does not identify a particular kind of “consentaneous love” but uses the adjective to argue for the universal, harmonious nature of love itself. Such reconciliation with cosmic unity occurs through the collapse of the self/other dichotomy that typifies Shelleyan love. But this is not complete synthesis or reconciliation—it is more of a complex, infinite spectrum that is never quite complete. The spectrum derives in part from Godwinian gradualism and in part from Shelley’s own critical poetics. As Morton reminds us, “there is no exact fit between Shelley’s ideal future and the pockmarked world in which it is imagined” (“Queen Mab”). The ideal future is an unrealized utopia that nevertheless remains a future possibility embedded in the present. Only when an individual can truly understand another—only when one can go outside of the self and identify with the ideal in thoughts and in another person, and thus create a community—only then is love ideally actualized, and only then can love transform material reality.

For Shelley, it is important to identify with all living things, and he expresses this view through his theory of vegetarianism. Vegetarianism is central to Shelley’s conception of universal love and its corresponding equality. He explains at length in a footnote that the production and consumption of meat is a source of “Tyranny, superstition, commerce, and inequality,” as well as disease, “mental and bodily derangement,” and “the mass of human
Love, which requires true equality, is only possible in its ideal form when man “stands / an equal amidst equals” (VIII 226-7) in the natural world. The oppression of people and animals inhibits the utopian ideal as well as social and political progress. Shelley explores and expands his argument for vegetarianism in the footnotes, which he published separately as A Vindication of Natural Diet and On the Vegetable System of Diet. In her essay on these footnotes, Chapin argues that “Shelley’s essays on vegetarianism are a kind of coherence of body, mind, thought, nutrition, and social code that are incorporated toward a utopian ideal” (123). Like Shelleyan love, the poet’s vegetarianism draws from his critical poetics and politics. Adopting an ecological stance in the vein of Wordsworthian love—a precursor to Deep Ecology—Shelley imagines a future where man no longer “slays the lamb that looks him in the face, / And horribly devours his mangled flesh” (VIII 212-3). In this utopian future, the unity and harmony inherent to the cosmic love outlined earlier in the poem would result in a similar “consentaneous love” on earth.

Yet, like all of Shelley’s utopian works, Queen Mab is conditional. He portrays an interdependent relationship—an unresolved dialectic—between the real and ideal throughout the poem. The vision of the future that Mab reveals to Ianthe is one possibility that requires a complex restructuring of both society as a whole and the workings of individual human minds. Accordingly, this complex restructuring relies upon gradual, Godwinian changes in politics and society: “slow and gradual dawned the morn of love” (IX

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12 Shelley supports his argument for vegetarianism with readings of Paradise Lost, the Prometheus myth, John Newton’s Return to Nature, or Defence of the Vegetable Regimen (1811), Dr. William Lambe’s Reports on Cancer (1809), and the conclusions arrived at by comparative anatomists of his day that humans resemble “frugivorous animals in everything, and carnivorous in nothing.” For a study of the scientific bases for Shelley’s vegetarianism, see Chapin (esp. 132-3).

Yet Shelley seems ultimately skeptical about this gradualism. In his study of the poem’s aesthetic of utopia, James Silver observes similarly that Shelley’s attempts “to resolve a number of conflicts by way of dialectical synthesis…fall short of [the] goal and result in anticlimax” (105). He goes on to argue, however, that “Queen Mab does not succeed in its final attempts of fusion. A surplus of doubt and uneasiness renders dubious Queen Mab’s many thrusts toward reconciliation” (Silver 114-5). I would reorient Silver’s argument to say that this “surplus” of uneasiness and doubt demonstrates instead Shelley’s refusal to submit wholly to a method of dialectical synthesis.

Shelley does not fail in his final attempts of fusion in the poem—he rejects the immediate possibility of fusion and reserves this utopian reconciliation for a more distant future. Shelley postpones Mab’s revolutionary thought, for, as Godwin makes clear in Political Justice, extreme revolutionary changes inevitably lead to violence and the cessation of rational enquiry. In the final stanzas of the poem, Mab advises Ianthe “to pursue / The gradual paths of an aspiring change” (IX 147-8). Ianthe

Is destined an eternal war to wage
With tyranny and falsehood, and uproot
The germs of misery from the human heart. (IX 190-2)

No social or political changes are immediate, and Mab implies that the desired utopian future ever recedes into the distance. The fact that Shelley locates this future in ideal space does not mean that he deceives himself with illusions and false consciousness. The poem ends, after all, with Ianthe awakening to Henry, who is “Watching her sleep with looks of speechless love” (IX 238). The vision was not “real,” it was only a dream, only one of many possibilities.
Idealist possibilities predicated on materialist visions are powerful. Although he regretted writing the poem, Shelley states in the Preface to *The Cenci* that *Queen Mab* is a dream “of what ought to be, or may be” (140). Even six years later, Shelley believed that the utopian future of *Queen Mab* might still occur. The postponement of utopia and its correspondent suspension of the dialectic work as a nascent theory of negative dialectics, derived in part from Godwinism and in part from Wordsworth’s critical poetics. Shelleyan love depends on a theory of negative dialectics and its inherent optimism. As discussed in the Introduction, Horkheimer and Adorno present the return to mythology during the Romantic period as a reaction to the Enlightenment. They imply that the Romantics failed to set up their relationship to myth and enlightenment as a negative dialectic. This is a misreading or perhaps a disregard for the English Romantic poets. Although he champions negative dialectics, Adorno also states that “The task to be accomplished is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past. … The accompanying critique of enlightenment is intended to prepare the way for a positive notion of enlightenment which will release it from entanglement in blind domination” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* xv-xvi). To redeem the *hopes* of the past is a crucial point. Adorno does not seek to redeem the past itself—this would be an illusion—but rather the hopes and ideals for which humanity must strive. The optimism of Adorno’s negative dialectics envisions a future in which negative dialectics is no longer necessary, and this optimism is at the heart of Shelley’s Romanticism.\footnote{My reading of Adorno’s optimism may seem to counter most scholarship on the Frankfurt School, but critics have made similar cases. See Yvonne Sherratt, *Adorno’s Positive Dialectic* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002); Brian O’Conner, *Adorno’s Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of Critical Rationality* (Cambridge: The MIT P, 2004); and Robert Kaufman’s essays.}
Queen Mab, however, represents only the initial emergence of Shelleyan love. Although the divide between a “young” and “mature” Shelley is an artificial construct, and to some extent inconsistent with the development of Shelley’s poetry, Queen Mab is one of the first of many poems throughout Shelley’s career in which he develops his theory of love. Shelley certainly becomes more aware of the power of ideology after 1813, and his awareness has consequences for his politics and poetics. As Stuart Curran claims, Queen Mab acts as “an ideology to overthrow ideologies”; the poem “fails exactly at the point of explaining why so monstrous a structure exists in the first place; for without that understanding of the foundation there can be no hope of toppling the edifice reared upon it” (“Shelley” 601). Queen Mab exposes the forms of violence and tyranny without clearly explaining how those forms were established or how to rid them from society. Although Shelley identifies love as the central concept and force of cosmic and social harmony, he does not more fully address the issue of ideology until later in his career. He does, however, continue to develop his theory of love in the years immediately following the composition of Queen Mab.

2. “Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude” (1816)

Shelley composed “Alastor” apparently on the brink of death during the latter half of 1815 after he had eloped with Mary Godwin. The two began their affair during the summer of 1814, while Shelley was still married (unhappily) to Harriet, and they had been roving the Continent in self-exile for nearly one year before settling down in Bishopsgate sometime in August 1815. Percy and Mary Shelley experienced many traumatic events during the first half of 1815: the birth and death of their first child; a failed free love experiment between Mary and Hogg; a continually strained and (emotionally and financially) draining relationship with
Harriet and her two children by Shelley; a continually strained and (emotionally and financially) draining relationship with Godwin; and the first of many bouts of Shelley’s “chronic abdominal illness” (Holmes 286), coupled with consumption and possibly kidney stones (Beiri 348). Shelley eventually recovered from his illness, but the stress of his many fractured relationships weighed heavily on him. The quasi-autobiographical “Alastor” reflects the issues at the forefront of Shelley’s mind during this time: love, death, and poetry.\footnote{For autobiographical approaches, see Bieri, Holmes, Bonca, and Sperry.}

In February 1816, Shelley published the \textit{Alastor} volume, which was neither popular nor well-received by reviewers. Subsequent critics, however, have lauded the volume as Shelley’s first poetic triumph. “Alastor” in particular has been singled out routinely as the first of Shelley’s “great poems” (i.e., those poems composed between 1816 and his death in 1822). As discussed in the previous section, \textit{Queen Mab} is just as important as “Alastor” in understanding the development of Shelley’s work and his theory of love, but the latter does more explicitly engage with love than its predecessor. Indeed, the 1816 volume begins with “Alastor” and concludes with “The Daemon of the World,” which is in essence a condensed version of \textit{Queen Mab}. Shelley, that is, places the two poems in a kind of dialogue regarding poetry and love. Ulmer claims that “Alastor” “appears so archetypally Shelleyan a text because here Shelley first formulates and explores his poetics of love” (25).

Scholars do not overlook the importance of love in “Alastor.” In his influential and still useful reading of the poem in \textit{Shelley: A Critical Reading}, Earl Wasserman argues that Shelley negotiates in the poem the desires for ideal, universal love and personal, individual love (26). Shelley, that is, locates love in both the social community and the transcendent
self. Unlike Ulmer, Wasserman sees skepticism as the ultimate basis of Shelley’s poetry, and so the contradictions that arise in the poem with regard to “worldly perfections” and “an ideal postmoral eternity” are the point: instead of “the optimistic utopianism of Queen Mab,” Shelley presents “the theme of man’s transience and nature’s inconstancy” in Alastor (Wasserman 5). Accordingly, the theory of love that Shelley develops in the latter seizes “on irreconcilable polarities” and a “purposeful ambiguity” that shape the poem and its ideas (Wasserman 15, 38). In his more recent essay on the poem, Kyle Grimes suggests similarly that the Alastor volume moves away from the problems of Queen Mab (i.e., the problems of language, ideology, and utopia) as none of its poems offer a single or stationary “truth” but rather work in dialectical fashion. While Grimes focuses on a distinction between Shelley’s “public” and “private” poems, as well as their overlap, his analysis of the volume speaks to my reading of Shelleyan love. The negative character of love that emerges in “Alastor” shifts between ideal, visionary truth and imagination, on the one hand, and material, human relationships on the other, reflected in Shelley’s dialectic of idealism and skepticism.

Poststructuralist and deconstructive polarity and ambiguity need not be read as skeptical rejections of truth and idealism. As in Queen Mab, Shelley rejects the immediate possibility of reconciliation in “Alastor” through a negative dialectics that defers and postpones reconciliation to the future. The reconciliation inherent in his conception of love reveals a concurrent idealism that sustains optimism, utopianism, and the hope for “a brighter morn.” Wasserman’s impressive poststructuralist reading of the poem emphasizes the Platonic elements of Shelleyan love (i.e., desire) at the expense of its more critical and Wordsworthian aspects. Shelley’s poetry is always a critical working-through of thought and
reality, and his theory of love in “Alastor” prefigures many of the ideas he articulates in “On Love.”

In “Alastor,” the Narrator tells the story of a Visionary Poet who pursues unsuccessfully the ideal prototype that would fulfill both his physical and intellectual desires and as such complete his self. After spending his life on this solitary quest, he dies, and the Narrator laments his death in the poem’s concluding frame. Grimes reads the poem as a “negative myth of the Poet’s futile narcissism” which “is set against the positive myth of Ianthe’s model social engagement as presented in the Daemon narrative” (75). Yet Shelley certainly sees positive aspects in the Visionary Poet’s narcissistic quest. The choice to follow a visionary ideal is fatal but noble, narcissistic but necessary. Through the characters of the Narrator and the Poet, Shelley presents two fundamental aspects of his poetics (and of Romantic poetry more broadly), and each character “fails” in different ways. The problem, which Shelley alludes to in the poem’s Preface, is that neither character can compromise his ideal. Shelley himself, however, searches not so much for a compromise as a shifting poetics and ultimately a negative dialectics. The Poet’s crisis does indeed remain unresolved in the poem, but Shelley’s overarching unresolved dialectics promises the hope of reconciliation and utopia. The dialectics of “Alastor” depends on its relationship to Queen Mab and the other poems of the 1816 volume; that is, the ideal depends on the actual (and vice versa).

Before turning to the Preface and the poem, I must first outline some of the most powerful challenges to my interpretation of the text. Wasserman, who establishes the divide

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16 Grimes analyzes Alastor in relation to the other 11 poems of the 1816 volume, reading the structure of the poem as reflective of the overall structure of the volume. Similar to Neil Fraistat, Grimes sees the poems in the volume as moving from more introspective in nature to more social in nature, exemplified by the first and last poems of the collection, Alastor and The Daemon of the World (a version of Queen Mab).
between the Wordsworthian Narrator and the Shelleyan Poet, sees Shelley as transforming
Wordsworth’s impulse to bind “the imagination to earth and the human” by aspiring “to a
vision that is absent because it can have no existence on earth” (20). Ideal love for Shelley “is
a visionary mirror-image of one’s inmost soul” (Wasserman 22), a material impossibility that
has no link to earthly and human affection. Wordsworth got it wrong, in other words, and
Shelley revises his precursor’s understanding of love by removing the earthly aspects.
Ultimately, Shelley does not provide a stable theory of love but rather what Wasserman calls
a “purposeful ambiguity” that demonstrates a poetics of skepticism inextricably bound to his
idealism.

While Wasserman’s reading hinges on an understanding of Wordsworthian love as a
misguided impulse to link the transcendence of imagination to the sociality of human
relationships, Ulmer’s reading of the poem depends on a view of Wordsworthian love as
ultimately assertive of such transcendence. Ulmer also reads in “Alastor” a “critique of
Wordsworthian emotion” (46), but in contrast to Wasserman, Ulmer suggests “the poem
censures Wordsworth for preferring visionary isolation to human emotional ties” (48). For
Ulmer, “Alastor combines Shelley’s distrust of transcendence with a mediation on human
love” (46), but the poem ultimately turns away “from the bounds of physical existence in the
natural realm” (40) to a world of language and metaphor. Ulmer interprets the Poet’s death
at the end of the poem as a negative transcendence, as “the last refuge of a linguistic idealism
that insists on meaning as the closure of tenor and vehicle, soul and body” (43).

Both Wasserman and Ulmer misread Wordsworthian love and subsequently arrive at
different yet similarly incomplete readings of Shelleyan love. For both critics, Wordsworth’s
conception of love is primarily transcendent and visionary, even if he does attempt to tie
imagination to humanity. As I discuss in chapters one through three, Wordsworth often prefers this mythic conception of love, but it always remains grounded in earthly affection, human relationships, and sociality. Shelley adopts the character of Wordsworthian love and raises it to more self-consciously complex philosophical and linguistic levels. Shelley does aspire at times to an ideal vision without earthly existence, just as he temporarily rejects such Wordsworthian transcendence at moments in “Alastor” and in other poems. But earthly love and visionary idealism remain inextricably bound in his theory of love.

Shelley articulates the negative character of his conception of love in the Preface to “Alastor.” He presents the poem “as allegorical of one of the most interesting situations of the human mind” (72) and the story of the Poet as moral and didactic in purpose. There is no critical consensus on the didactic moral of the tale, but there is strong evidence to support my claim that it refers to the social nature of love. The Poet, Shelley writes, was profoundly affected and shaped by the “magnificence and beauty of the external world,” such that he desires objects “infinite and unmeasured” (72-3). Desire here is likened to the unrealized utopia that Shelley refers to in “On Love”: “the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends.” As a result, the “Alastor” Poet constructs an “ideal prototype” and seeks it in the external world:

His mind is at length suddenly awakened and thirsts for intercourse with an intelligence similar to itself. He images to himself the Being whom he loves. Conversant with speculations of the sublimest and most perfect natures, the vision in which he embodies his own imaginations unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture. The intellectual faculties, the imagination, the functions of sense, have their respective requisitions on the sympathy of corresponding powers in other human beings. The Poet is represented as uniting these requisitions, and attaching them to a single image. He seeks in vain for a prototype of his conception. Blasted by his disappointment, he descends to an untimely grave. (73)
The Poet’s desire for the ideal prototype unites thought, imagination, and sensory experience, but the prototype remains unrealized in the material world. Shelley suggests the problem is the “Poet’s self-centered seclusion” (73). In a critique of what scholars call the Romantic Ideology, Shelley shows a movement in this passage from Romantic idealism to solipsism to narcissism, perhaps similar to Keats’s critique of Wordsworth’s egotistical sublime.

Yet Shelley also writes that the Poet’s desire is the result “of an irresistible passion” that “strikes the luminaries of the world” (73). There is something noble, even paradoxically self-sacrificing, in the Poet’s seemingly narcissistic quest. Grimes addresses this contradiction in his account of the Preface and the ensuing tale of the Poet. He suggests that Shelley presents an example of an individual caught between an inadequate, limited and limiting reality and a seductive, luxurious, but finally escapist and futile imagined world—between a life oriented toward outward engagement and a life oriented toward a transcendental, visionary imagination. What emerges from these dramatic situations is an allegory about the condition of poetry in an age of literary disengagement, in an age when literature for various ideological and economic reasons is retreating to a realm of private, psychological fantasy.

Grimes suggests that Shelley critiques the Romantic Ideology while pretty much all other Romantic poets fall prey to it. Like Wasserman and Ulmer, Grimes misreads Wordsworthian love, or perhaps focuses on the “conservative” Wordsworth which Shelley critiques. But Wordsworth was also a social and relational poet, despite his universalizing and “escapist” aesthetics (although Shelley was admittedly more aware of ideology than Wordsworth). Shelley articulates and works through in “Alastor” his theory of love, which relates to and unites in a sense the other points of which Grimes and other scholars write.
Shelley’s critique of Wordworthian love certainly emphasizes the “conservative” Wordsworth and not the earlier, “radical” Wordsworth. Shelley seizes on the social and relational qualities of Wordworth’s theory of love as it is articulated in his poetry of the 1790s and early 1800s. Sociality and human relationships are central to Shelleyan love. Shelley writes of those who “languish” in the world because they love “nothing on this earth” and “keep aloof from sympathies with their kind” (73):

They are morally dead. They are neither friends, nor lovers, nor fathers, nor citizens of the world, nor benefactors of their country. Among those who attempt to exist without human sympathy, the pure and tender-hearted perish through the intensity and passion of their search after its communities, when the vacancy of their spirit suddenly makes itself felt. … Those who love not their fellow-beings, live unfruitful lives, and prepare for their old age a miserable grave. (73)

Shelleyan love shifts between earthly and ideal (or intellectual) love. Reconciliation is not fulfilled, but the utopian prospect remains a possibility. The desire for such reconciliation drives the “Alastor” Poet as it drives Shelley himself, but Shelley makes clear that one should not abandon actual human relationships for idealism—this is the didactic moral of the poem. The Visionary Poet is, after all, likened to the “Spirit of Solitude.” The ideal prototype of which he writes in “Alastor” and in “On Love” is inextricably bound in a negative relationship to actual social communities, to “fellow-beings.”

“Alastor” begins with a Wordworthian invocation of Nature, signaled not only by the form (blank verse) and content (nature) but also by the many allusions and references to

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17 Shelley concludes the Preface with a quote from Wordworth’s Excursion (which first appears in The Ruined Cottage), a poem with which he expressed great displeasure. The quote reads, “The good die first, / And those whose hearts are dry as summer dust, / Burn to the socket!” (Shelley 73). It is unclear whether Shelley suggests that idealists die first and non-idealists live unfruitful lives—that is, which way should we live life? Based on my reading of the poem, I would argue that Shelley rejects this binary thinking—one should pursue idealisms but remain grounded in human sympathies and relationships.
Wordsworth’s poetry. The Narrator has been imbued with “natural piety” so that he feels the “love” of nature “and its gorgeous ministers” (3, 4, 6), and he loves nature back in a mutual cycle. Indeed, the Narrator loves only nature, or what he calls “our great Mother” (2, 18). He is linked to the natural world and its birds, insects, and beasts, his “beloved breathren” (16), but not, it seems, to his fellow human beings. Given the sentiment of the Preface, Shelley appears to critique such Wordsworthian love of nature, but, as I have argued, this is only one element of Wordsworthian love. Shelley’s view of Wordsworth is thus somewhat limited, but in his adoption and revision of Wordsworthian love, Shelley illuminates and intensifies (perhaps inadvertently) what is already present in Wordsworth.

In the first of many poetic allusions to Shelley’s youth, the Narrator recounts in the second section of the frame how he seeks for ghosts and spirits to reveal the secrets of the natural world. The Narrator desires “to still these obstinate questionings” (26), but he can only access the essence of Nature through transient dreams and thoughts (27-41). The Narrator presents himself as isolated. It is only at the end of the section, which closes the initial frame, that the Narrator mentions any thought of humanity:

I wait thy breath, Great Parent, that my strain
May modulate with murmurs of the air,
And motions of the forests and the sea,
And voice of living beings, and woven hymns
Of night and day, and the deep heart of man. (45-9)

The language of this passage recalls the “something far more deeply interfused” of “Tintern Abbey,” but Shelley emphasizes the heart rather than the mind of man. The story that follows the frame aims to penetrate both the mysteries of the natural world and the sympathies and affections of humans. Shelley articulates a poetics of love embedded in both
the Wordsworthian transcendence of the self and the connections of human relationships. Love, like poetry, reveals the interconnectedness of all things in the world.

After the initial frame (1-49), the poem develops through four distinct sections: the Poet’s early life and travels (50-150); the Poet’s life-changing dream to which Shelley alludes in the Preface (151-91); the Poet’s quest for the ideal prototype of his dream, and his eventual death (192-671); and the final frame where the Narrator laments the death of the Poet (672-720). Scholars have traced connections between these sections and Shelley’s romantic and familial relationships, but what I privilege in my reading is a formalist approach that emphasizes Shelley’s inter-textual and philosophical theory of love.

The Narrator describes the Poet as an amalgamation of various Romantic poetic figures—Wordsworthian, Shelleyan, and Byronic. He is The Romantic Poet. He is an ideal son of nature who has the capacity to know truth and to access “Nature’s most secret steps” (81). Like the Wordsworthian Narrator, the Poet lives an isolated life of solitude, conversing only with “the vast earth and ambient air” (69). Like Shelley himself, the Poet’s vegetarianism is central to his love of nature: animals do not fear him and in fact eat from his hand (100-6). And similar to Byron’s Childe Harold, the Poet travels throughout the world in search of knowledge and truth, visiting ruins and sites of great civilization until he sees “The thrilling secrets of the birth of time” (128). By presenting the Poet as an archetypal Romantic Poet, Shelley continues his critique of the Romantic Ideology.

In one of the most important scenes in the poem, “an Arab maiden” (129) tends to the Poet as he rests during his journey. This is first instance of the Poet’s interaction (or lack thereof) with another person. The maiden provides him with her own “daily portion” of food, her own matting for a bed, and sacrifices her time “to tend to his steps” (132). But the
Poet is so caught up in “high thoughts” (107) and the quest for truth that he neglects her sacrifices and affection; he neglects human interaction. He does not reject the maiden, as she does not explicitly reveal her love for him, but he certainly does not notice her earthly love. Wordsworth writes of these same “high thoughts” in *The Prelude*, in which he reveals that his relationship with Dorothy helps him to ground such intellectual love in sociality and human connection. Shelley’s Poet, however, does not move back to earthly love, and the point of this episode is to show that a wholly idealized love is incomplete—Shelley’s theory of love demands earthly mediation.

The major turning point in “Alastor” occurs after the Poet leaves the Arab maiden. He experiences an intense vision in his sleep, “a dream of hopes” (150) in which he encounters a second maiden. This maiden, however, is his ideal prototype, a mirror of his own soul, and he directly interacts with her. The Poet likens her voice to “the voice of his own soul” (153), and, like him, she is a poet bent on “Knowledge and truth and virtue” “And lofty hopes of divine liberty” (158, 159). Her musical voice and glowing body produce a “Strange symphony” (167) that so enraptures the Poet he fuses with the vision in a sexual union of self and other—or perhaps only self. The maiden is a projected prototype of the Poet’s own thoughts and desires. It is not clear whether their union is an actual possibility or a frustrated desire. As the dream turns increasingly sexual and sensual, the maid spreads her “bare” and “glowing” arms; her “dark locks” float in the air; “Her beamy bending eyes, her parted lips / Outstretched, and pale, and quivering eagerly” (179-80); and the Poet’s “strong heart sunk and sickened with excess / Of love” (181-2). The maiden

    Folded his frame in her dissolving arms.
    Now blackness veiled his dizzy eyes, and night
    Involved and swallowed up the vision; sleep,
Shelley’s aesthetic moment does not rely on objects or things, as in Wordsworth, but remains abstract, philosophical, and paradoxically sexual. The union of actual self and ideal prototype depicted in this passage ends with the Poet’s “vacant brain.” Shelley uses the word “vacant” perhaps to signify that the dream is over and the Poet now experiences a more profound sleep—but it also implies that the Poet’s mind is empty, thoughtless, even vacuous. Shelley stresses that the idealized union of the vision is only a dream, albeit a powerful one.

The contrast between the two maidens and the Poet’s interactions with them characterize the social and transcendent aspects of Shelleyan love. Grimes suggests that Shelley presents the Poet with a choice between his ideal prototype and “an ordinary physical and social existence” (66), and, given the Poet’s background and description by the Narrator, “such a move, for a visionary Poet whose imagination is energized by his pursuit of an Ideal of knowledge and beauty, would amount to little more than the choice of death itself” (66). Yet the idea that the Poet must choose is exactly what Shelley rejects in his dialectical theory of love. Shelleyan love acts as a bridge between the isolated imagination and the social community; love requires both the ideal and the ordinary. In the poem, however, there is a choice. The Poet chooses ideal love and subsequently suffers. Although his focus is not on love, Grimes implicitly suggests such a reading when he concludes that “neither lover is adequate as a quest object, and the Poet is left with only a gnawing awareness of the depth and desperation of his desire” (66). Indeed, when the Poet awakes
the following morning, he must face the consequences of his isolated pursuit of the ideal. The “hues of heaven” have fled and the earth appears to him dull and dreary.

The Poet fails to ground ideal love in materiality and human affection. Shelley, speaking through the Narrator, reiterates the didactic moral of the Preface:

The spirit of sweet human love has sent
A vision to the sleep of him who spurned
Her choicest gifts. He eagerly pursues
Beyond the realms of dream that fleeting shade;
He overleaps the bounds. (203-7)

The Poet conflates desire of the ideal with love. But as Shelley makes clear in this poem, as well as in “On Love,” love cannot be reduced to desire. Love connects all things in the universe and remains grounded in social community and human affection. The so-called “spirit” of human love produced the Poet’s ideal vision, and this passage suggests the vision was intimately tied to the Arab maiden whose love the Poet fails to recognize. Instead of seeking human love, the Poet “pursues / Beyond the realms of dream that fleeting shade” of ideal love.

As the Poet continues his quest, he consistently references sleep and death as the means to achieve ideal love. Yet he continually neglects instances of human connection and compassion, and he shuns social communities. The Poet keeps “mute conference / With his still soul” (223-4) as he travels the world, while cottagers minister “with human charity / His human wants” (255-6); while a mountaineer and an infant fear to impede his solitary wanderings (257-66); and while “youthful maidens” respond to his woe (266-71). In a scene reminiscent of the idylls of the swans from An Evening Walk, the Poet even seems to acknowledge his social failures when observing a swan take flight:
His eyes pursued its flight.—“Thou hast a home,
Beautiful bird; thou voyagèst to thine home,
Where thy sweet mate will twine her downy neck
With thine, and welcome thy return with eyes
Bright in the lustre of their own fond joy.
And what am I that I should linger here,
With voice far sweeter than thy dying notes,
Spirit more vast than thine, frame more attuned
To beauty, wasting these surpassing powers
In the deaf air, to the blind earth, and heaven
That echoes not my thoughts?” (280-90)

The poet envies the swan—he envies its home and its mate, its connection to another of its own kind. He reveals his desire for interaction with another person, which he has replaced with desire for his ideal prototype. But Shelley also critiques (again) the Poet’s narcissism here. The Poet believes his own voice “sweeter” and his own sensibility more attuned than that of the swan, and he rejects any kind of Wordsworthian connection between the human mind (or spirit) and the natural world. Sperry thus suggests that “what raises the Poet in dignity and power above the bird and its song is precisely his isolation from the kind of natural community the swan enjoys. The distinguishing quality of the Poet’s humanity, his very voice and timbre, are rooted in his solitude, in his unappeasable desire and despair” (34). This is true, but the Poet has forsaken the “secret correspondence” that connects him to the natural world. Solitude and despair may raise the Poet in dignity above the bird but not above human community. As Shelley suggests in the Preface, the Poet fails not only because he cuts himself off from the rest of humankind but also because he moves from idealism to solipsism to narcissism.

The narcissistic elements of self-love and desire for the ideal play a role in Shelley’s theory of love, but he makes clear in “Alastor” that one must always temper such idealizing love with actual human relationships. If not, isolation and death are the ultimate outcomes.
Throughout the poem, the Poet encounters many bowers that recall the Greek myth of Narcissus, and he even reenacts the myth at one point while gazing into a fountain (469-74). During this inward-turning moment, the Poet perceives “Two starry eyes” that “beckon him” to continue his quest (490, 492) into another small, secluded bower where he eventually dies. These starry eyes return on his deathbed in the form of the two points of the setting moon (654-5)—they act as a natural and material manifestation of the eyes of the Poet’s ideal prototype. Rather than read this moment as affirmation of the Poet’s own belief that only in death can he unite with the ideal, I see it as an affirmation of the interconnectedness at the center of Shelley’s theory of love. Social community, human affection, and mysterious yet intimate ties to the natural world surround the Poet throughout “Alastor,” but he attempts “to exist without human sympathy.” The Poet perishes in search of ideal community.

Shelley complicates the Narrator’s Wordsworthian nature in the poem’s concluding frame. As the Poet dies, the Narrator suggests that “the Poet’s blood” always “beat in mystic harmony / With nature’s ebb and flow” (651-2). The Narrator returns, in a sense, to his initial description of the Poet (and himself). The Poet, however, rejects his connection to nature throughout most of his journey, even in his death. The Narrator also expresses a wish to bring the Poet back to life, either through alchemy or some other kind of magic. He passionately laments the Poet’s death, repeating three times that the Poet has “fled” (686, 688, 695), and in an explicitly anti-Wordsworthian sentiment, the Narrator claims that the philosophic mind is not abundant recompense for the loss of the Poet:

   Art and eloquence,  
   And all the shews o’ the world are frail and vain  
   To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade.
It is a woe too “deep for tears,” when all
Is reft at once, when some surpassing Spirit,
Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves
Those who remain behind, not sobs or groans,
The passionate tumult of a clinging hope;
But pale despair and cold tranquillity,
Nature’s vast frame, the web of human things,
Birth and the grave, that are not as they were. (710-20)

The Narrator, perhaps in allusion to Milton’s *Lycidas*, claims that poetry cannot properly
mourn death. In direct allusion to Wordsworth, he states that poetry leaves us with “pale
despair and cold tranquillity,” and not those recollections and moments of tranquility that
could have a possible rejuvenating effect on the mind, such as in *The Ruined Cottage*, “Tintern
Abbey,” and *The Prelude*. The Narrator rejects certainty, stability, order, and harmony and
instead embraces skepticism. The “vast frame” of nature and “the web of human things”
have irrevocably changed with the death of the Poet, and the Narrator bemoans such change
as evidence of a chaotic and uncertain universe. As Shelley articulates in “Mutability,” the
fourth poem of the *Alastor* volume, “Nought may endure but Mutability” (16).

The Narrator, however, does not represent fully Shelley’s views, nor does the Poet.
Shelley uses these characters to explore aspects of his thinking and of his poetics and theory
of love, but, as he articulates in “On Love,” love itself is a complex idea that develops
negatively through actual and ideal elements and moments. This is different from *Queen Mab*,
where Mab is for the most part representative of Shelley’s own views. “Alastor” more clearly
develops Shelley’s dialectical poetics and theory of love—the poem is more complex, more
shifty, and less conclusive regarding reconciliation. The social, political, and philosophical
postponement of *Queen Mab* intensifies through the language and imagery of “Alastor.”
“Alastor” reflects the negative dynamics of Shelleyan love: his theory emerges through the
interactions of the Narrator, the Poet, and Shelley’s own elusive authorial voice. The Narrator provides a Wordsworthian love of nature, an intellectual love at once isolating and ideally social in nature. The Poet, on the other hand, presents love as a passionate and intense desire for union with an ideal prototype. The Poet’s semi-erotic love is also isolating and, in its adoption of Platonic eros, intellectual and philosophical in scope. What the Poet lacks, and indeed what the Narrator lacks, is the sociality inherent in human relationships of which Shelley writes in the poem’s Preface. Both poetic characters fail to establish or find value in the social community.

Shelley, however, does find value in the kinds of love the Narrator and Poet present. Shelley forges a poetic community: formally between the Narrator and the Poet, and virtually between himself and the readers of his poem. Ulmer states that “Poets and readers are lovers in Shelley,” and that the reader is a mirror-lover of Shelley’s mind and rhetoric; Shelley creates, in a sense, an “ideal” readership (19-21). As a didactic work, “Alastor” instructs its readers to value human communities and relationships, much in the same way that Mab instructs Ianthe in the politics and social force of love in Queen Mab. In “Alastor,” earthly love and visionary love require human relationships to have social and political force—but neither actually does. Shelley’s own theory of love moves between and beyond the Narrator’s and Poet’s conceptions, even as Shelley skeptically questions love itself in the poem’s final lines. If at times Shelley sees mutability and the “inconstant glance” “of some unseen Power” as governing the world, as he writes in “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” (6, 1), he also places hope and faith in the idea that we can “love all human kind” (“Hymn” 84) in order to achieve “a brighter morn.” Love remains the key to such an unrealized utopia, and Shelley continues to develop his theory of love throughout his career. Like Wordsworth, Shelley
asserts an intellectual and aesthetic character to his own theory of love. But unlike his predecessor’s “intellectual love,” the negative character of Shelleyan love is more clearly and distinctly defined.

While the Poet of “Alastor” is unsuccessful in his quest for love, “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” does present the poet-speaker in a successful relationship between ideal and material love. This poem, written during the summer of 1816 and published in the *Examiner* for January 19, 1817, shares many of the ideas and autobiographical references of “Alastor,” and it can help to elucidate the failure of the “Alastor” Poet.

The speaker of “Hymn,” like the Visionary Poet and like Shelley himself, searches for the secret of life, for what he calls “intellectual beauty.” Given the speaker’s account of his youth and the consistency of his philosophy and poetics with that of Shelley’s other writings, scholars for the most part equate the speaker with Shelley’s own voice. Shelley even seems to anticipate his translation of Plato’s *Symposium*. In that dialogue, Socrates, paraphrasing Diotima, claims that “He who aspires to love rightly…would turn towards the wide ocean of intellectual beauty” (Plato 101). The speaker describes the “unseen Power” of the world indirectly through lists of similes and negatives (4-12, 32-6, 44-5). The simile, as Forest Pyle argues, is the most appropriate representation for the Power, which is nonmaterial and beyond language itself. The Power is the “Spirit of BEAUTY” (13) that shines upon and makes divine “human thought or form” (15). Similar to Shelley’s conception of love, this spirit links the ideal with the material and the divine with the human.

Yet the spirit has abandoned the human world. Its presence is “inconstant” and mysterious, and the speaker asks, “where art thou gone?” (15). As Pyle points out, the spirit has “been exiled from us, an exile which, whether self-imposed or enforced by worldly
powers, leaves our state, our worldly actuality, a place of desolation” (“Frail Spells”). Pyle reads in this “poetics of exile” Shelley’s “political critique of the nation-state and the nationalisms that institute and preserve it,” including the “frail spells” of “poetry, theology, and philosophy” (“Frail Spells”). Shelley writes that sages, poets, priests, and others attempt to explain the Power through “God and ghosts and Heaven” (27), but what governs the human world is “Doubt, chance, and mutability” (31). Truth, stability, and harmony exist only in the spirit of intellectual beauty, and the speaker pursues this relationship dialectically through the poem.

Intellectual beauty is not love, but it forms a part of the spirit of love—it is the beauty of what Wordsworth calls “intellectual love.” Accordingly, the beauty of love leads the speaker to embrace successfully the dialectic of ideal and material love inherent in Shelley’s theory. Pyle similarly sees “a politics of love” at work in the poem, but it is much more dominant than his reading suggests. As a child, the speaker “sought for ghosts” (49) and “called on poisonous names” (53) of religion in his pursuit of truth, but it is ultimately the natural world that reveals the spirit of beauty:

When musing deeply on the lot
Of life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing
All vital things that wake to bring
News of buds and blossoming,—
Sudden, thy shadow fell on me:
I shrieked, and clasped my hands in extacy! (55-60)

Like Wordsworth in his moments of epiphany, the speaker achieves his goal while in deep thought alone in nature. Ideal truth, that is, the secret of the existence, the essence of beauty

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18 Pyle’s deconstructive historicism is at odds with the New Historicist Romantic Ideology (a la Levinson and McGann), and he has more in common with the argument of James Chandler’s England in 1819, which he cites in his essay. Like Chandler, Pyle argues that Shelley develops a complex and sophisticated historicist mode of thought.
and of life, emerges from the “vital” workings of the natural world. Although the speaker can only access the “shadow” of the ideal, nature itself acts as a material manifestation of spirit in this passage. Moreover, the speaker “dedicate[s]” his poetic “powers” to the spirit and its ability to “free / This world from its dark slavery” (69-70). Although “words cannot express” (72) the full force and power of intellectual beauty, the speaker, as Shelley suggests in “On Love,” must write of it anyway.

In the seventh and final stanza of “Hymn,” the speaker links intellectual beauty with love through his interactions with the natural world and humankind. The stanza is Shelley’s version of Wordsworth’s dictum, “Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind.” Shelley writes:

The day becomes more solemn and serene
When noon is past—there is a harmony
In autumn, and a lustre in its sky,
Which through the summer is not heard or seen,
As if it could not be, as if it had not been!
Thus let thy power, which like the truth
Of nature on my passive youth
Descended, to my onward life supply
Its calm—to one who worships thee,
And every form containing thee,
Whom, Spirit fair, thy spells did bind
To fear himself, and love all human kind. (73-84)

Shelley images the harmony of autumn, evoking both the approaching end to the natural cycle of life (and thus human mortality) and the unity and interconnectedness of all things in the world. The power of intellectual beauty, he suggests, works like this harmony: as the speaker matures and develops through the stages of his life, ideal truth supplies him with “calm” amidst the mutability of the world. The spirit of beauty “binds” the speaker’s will to revere and love not only himself but “all human kind.” Social community emerges from this
love. Pyle writes that in the final lines the poem “turns its praise to an exiled spirit whose genuinely binding spells are those solely of universal love. If a hymn is not merely a song of praise or adoration but also a form of spell, then one of the intended effects of this hymn to intellectual beauty is to extend its sacred powers to its singers and readers: it is intended to place those who utter it under the spell of love” (“Frail Spells”). The poem asserts love and connection between poet and reader, individual and society, society and nature. Instead of pursuing ideal truth to his ruin, as is the case with the “Alastor” Poet, the speaker of “Hymn” successfully embraces the ideal and material aspects of love.

The universalizing love for nature and for humankind with which Shelley concludes “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” remains grounded in the materiality of both the natural world and the implied human relationships that allow the speaker to articulate and experience Shelleyan love. But Shelleyan aesthetics is not as tied to object and things as Wordsworthian aesthetics, and this is a major distinction between the poets’ conceptions of love. “Hymn” wonderfully embodies Shelley’s dialectics of the ideal and the material and of idealism and skepticism, both of which intensify later in his career. In the next chapter I will look closely at how his dialectical theories shape his poetics, politics, and theory of love in his later works.
CHAPTER FIVE

“Love’s rare Universe” in the Later Works: Prometheus Unbound and Epipsychidion

During the summer of 1818, Shelley translated Plato’s Symposium, wrote “On Love,” and began “Discourse on the Manners of the Antient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love.” He also began work on Prometheus Unbound, which would take him nearly two years to complete, and concurrently from 1819-1821 composed several other poems focused on his conception of love, including “Love’s Philosophy,” “The Sensitive Plant,” and Epipsychidion. Moreover, Shelley developed his political and proto-poststructuralist thinking at this time through The Mask of Anarchy, A Philosophical Review of Reform, “On Life,” The Cenci, Prometheus Unbound, and A Defence of Poetry, to name just a few. It was a prolific period of writing for the poet—similar to Wordsworth’s annus mirabilis of 1798—and during this time Shelley’s theory of love becomes more explicitly central to his poetics, politics, and personal life. The two major poems I analyze in this chapter, Prometheus Unbound and Epipsychidion, demonstrate Shelley’s commitment to love as a spirit, presence, and power that can potentially (and ideally) unite people and thus lead to socio-political regeneration and utopia. In “The Sensitive Plant,” Shelley writes that “the Spirit of love [is] felt every where” (I 6), and it is just this notion with which Shelley engages in many of his later works.

Like Wordsworth, Shelley consistently grounds his conception of love both in the natural world and in human relationships. Shelley especially uses the idea and imagery of mingling, mixing, and melting bodies and beings through love, as I show in Chapter Four.
Such imagery intensifies in works such as *Prometheus Unbound* and *Epipsychidion*. One of Shelley’s shorter poems, “Love’s Philosophy,” exemplifies what Teddi Bonca calls the “complete interfusion” of “physical, emotional, … spiritual” and “erotic union” (9) involved in Shelleyan love:

The Fountains mingle with the river  
And the rivers with the ocean,  
The winds of heaven mix for ever  
With a sweet emotion;  
Nothing in the world is single,  
All things by a law divine  
In one another’s being mingle.  
Why not I with thine?—

See the mountains kiss high heaven  
And the waves clasp one another;  
No sister-flower would be forgiven  
If it disdain’d its brother;  
And the sunlight clasps the earth  
And the moonbeams kiss the sea:  
What are all these kissings worth  
If thou kiss not me?

Shelley presents his own version of Wordsworth’s “sentiment of being.” In the first stanza, the speaker identifies the interconnectedness of the natural world as a kind of ecological emotion, a universal love. Nothing, he suggests, exists independently; everything mingles and mixes with the “being” of everything else “by a law divine,” in this case, by love. As the final question of the stanza reveals, the speaker invokes this interconnectedness as a ploy to “mingle” with the poem’s silent auditor, presumably a prospective lover. The second stanza continues the natural imagery established in the first stanza, and, in the final line, the speaker asks the auditor to kiss him. Although a bit clichéd, Shelley’s point regarding love is clear: “Nothing in the world is single.”
Composed around the same time as “Love’s Philosophy,” Shelley’s fragmentary essay “On Life” develops in a more philosophical register the negation of individuality and self present in the poem. Shelley presents in the essay his spiritual post-structuralism:

the existence of distinct individual minds similar to that which is employed in now questioning its own nature, is likewise found to be a delusion. The words I, you, they are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblages of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind. Let it not be supposed that this doctrine conducts to the monstrous presumption, that I, the person who now write and think, am that one mind. I am but a portion of it. The words I, and you and they are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them. It is difficult to find terms adequately to express so subtle a conception as that to which the intellectual philosophy has conducted us. We are on that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of—how little we know. (508)

Shelley presents psychological mingling and intellectual sexuality. What he calls “the one mind” plays an important role in Prometheus Unbound, and in this passage it acts as a way of thinking about the unity of life, the apprehension of which is obscured by the “mist of familiarity” (506). That Shelley indicates the arbitrary nature of words in relation to the construction of selfhood is but one instance of his anticipation of what we now call post-structuralism.¹ For Bonca, such thinking intensifies the dialectic of Self and Love that drives much of Shelley’s work—Self as the assertion of individuality and Love as the loss, sacrifice, and interfusion of individuality (in)to the unity of the universe.

Shelley draws from classical Greek conceptions of love in his dialectics of Self and Love as well as ideal and material love. In “Discourse on the Manners of the Antient

Greeks,” he emphasizes the distrust of sexual love, marriage, and prostitution outlined in

*Queen Mab.* Shelley writes that “sexual connection” is

a very small part of that profound and complicated sentiment, which we call

Love, which is rather the universal thirst for a communion not merely of the

senses, but of our whole nature, intellectual, imaginative and sensitive; and

which, when individualized, becomes an imperious necessity, only to be

satisfied by the complete or partial, actual or supposed, fulfilment of its

claims.  (106-7)

Love, Shelley suggests, involves the kind of “complete interfusion” presented in “Love’s

Philosophy” as well as the intellectual and imaginative cognitive processes discussed in “On

Love” and “On Life.” But individualized love, likened to “sexual connection” alone, can be

base and harmful.

In effect, Shelley adopts and modifies the ideas discussed by the speakers in Plato’s

*Symposium*, the translation of which Shelley entitled *The Banquet*. Plato’s dialogue takes place

at a dinner party where six guests take turns giving speeches in praise of the god Eros, which

Shelley translates as “Love.” As is the case in most Socratic dialogues, each speech

successively builds to Socrates’s final and seemingly ultimate position. There are six

significant points made in the dialogue that reflect on Shelleyan love:

(1) Phadrus’s “universal” belief that Love along with Chaos and Earth

comprise the eternal “foundation for all things” (39).

(2) Pausanias’s idea of two distinct kinds of love: Uranian Love, which is

heavenly and intellectual in nature—in effect, a desire for transcendental

beauty—and Pandemian Love, essentially sexual love or lust (43-51).

(3) Eryximachus’s scientific observation that love can be in ecological as well

as philosophical systems: love exists not “only in the souls of men, but in the

bodies also of those of all other living which are produced upon earth, and,

in a word, in all things which are” (52-3); and the idea that music is “the

knowledge of that which relates to love in harmony and system. In the very

system of harmony and rhythm, it is easy to distinguish love” (55).
(4) Aristophanes’s fable of a previous age when humans were round with eight limbs until Jupiter cut them in half, leaving them desirous of reconciliation with their other half: “From that period, mutual love has naturally existed between human beings; that reconciler and bond of union of their original nature, which seeks to make two, one, and to heal the divided nature of man. Every one of us is thus the half of what may be properly termed a man, and like a pselta cut in two, is the imperfect portion of an entire whole, perpetually necessitated to seek the half belonging to him” (63). Love, then, is an “obscure desire” for and pursuit of the unattainable other, “something which there are no words to describe” (64).

(5) Agathon’s description of love as wholly non-violent and as the source of sympathy and community (72-4).

(6) Socrates’s final declaration that love is desire for what is lacking, and as such it is “something intermediate” (84) between “what is divine and what is mortal” (85), between knowledge and ignorance, the immaterial and the material, the mind and the body. Love “fills up that intermediate space...so as to bind together, by his own power, the whole universe of things” (85). Love thus inspires a perpetual quest for the ideal. Love “is eternal, unproduced, indestructible” (101).

The idea of love as “something intermediate” is quite illuminating. Throughout The Banquet, the guests move from an understanding of love as (1) a universal and eternal foundation of the world to (2) a division of ideal or transcendent love from sexual or erotic love to (3) an essence of all life to (4) a desire for completeness or unity to (5) a spirit that moves people from isolation to sociality to (6) a spirit and a desire, an intermediate thing. As I discuss in the introduction to Part Two, Shelley certainly had these ideas in mind when he composed “On Love,” and he continues to develop them through individual poems. In his poetry and poetics, Shelley fuses these classical ideas into a dialectical theory of love that shapes all aspects of his critical thought.

In the following sections, I demonstrate Shelley’s developing theory of love as it works in “The Mask of Anarchy,” Prometheus Unbound and Epipsychidion. There is no love in The Mask of Anarchy. The poem creates a negative dialectic with Prometheus Unbound in
Shelley’s life and thinking. *Mask* is a challenge to Shelleyan love, a test for which Shelley corrects in his longer epic. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley focuses on the ethical, political, and intellectual possibilities of a world (and universe) governed by love. Shelley imagines in this psychological closet drama a potential utopian world in more complex ways than in *Queen Mab*, which is a kind of precursor to this longer poem. In *Epipsychidion*, on the other hand, Shelley draws universalizing aesthetics from his individualized and at times eroticized love for Teresa Viviani. The poems thus explore and incorporate elements of both Uranian and Pandemian Love. Ultimately, Shelleyan love reveals itself as an intermediate “something” akin to the ideas of Socrates and Wordsworth, but Shelley sees love as more powerful and more necessary to humankind than his predecessors.

1. Shelley and England in 1819

Shelley composed *Prometheus Unbound* while self-exiled in Italy from 1818-1820 in the wake of Britain’s increasingly oppressive and tyrannical government following the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the Peterloo Massacre, and other disturbing events. But Shelley’s personal life as much as his politics drove him from England: the suicide of Harriet; his scandalous relationship with Mary; his failed Chancery Court case; his strained relationship with Godwin; and his mounting debt and constant hounding by creditors. Shelley’s exiled position in Italy affords him a different perspective on events in England than that of his countrymen, and, subsequently, he has the opportunity to be more polemical and interventionist. Like Ianthe’s distance from earth in *Queen Mab*, Shelley’s distance from his homeland offers him a more “just perspective” from which he can see clearly the elusive whole. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley envisions the possibility of a universe rejuvenated and
regenerated by the spirit of love. Love, as the poem proffers, is the solution to tyranny in all its forms—a love deeply involved in philosophical, linguistic, psychological, and political complexes.

Shelley composed two other overtly political works during the composition of *Prometheus Unbound* that deserve attention: “The Mask of Anarchy” and *A Philosophical Review of Reform*. Both works were too radical to be published during Shelley’s lifetime, and Shelley used sections of *A Philosophical Review of Reform* in “On Life” and *A Defence of Poetry*. Each work develops in different ways Shelley’s Godwinism, and each approaches the debate surrounding revolution and reform in early nineteenth-century England. These poetic-political engagements bear directly on the development of *Prometheus Unbound*. So, before turning to Shelley’s lyrical drama, I will outline his views on socio-political revolution and reform in “The Mask of Anarchy” and *A Philosophical Review of Reform*.

“*The Mask of Anarchy*” is a direct address to the reformers and protestors who were attacked by mounted yeomanry and Hussars during a legal gathering at St. Peter’s Field in Manchester, England on August 16, 1819. There are many conflicting accounts of the so-called Peterloo Massacre, but critics agree that mounted yeomanry and Hussars, who had warrants for the arrest of Henry Hunt (the headliner) and his associates, were ordered to break up the rally involving more than 60,000 British reformers and protestors. In the process of capturing Hunt and breaking up the assembly, the soldiers killed 11 and wounded hundreds more.² The central refrain of Shelley’s poem speaks to its activist agenda:

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Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number—
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you—
Ye are many—they are few. (368-72)

There has been much debate over Shelley’s intentions in the “The Mask of Anarchy”: does he call for violence and revolution in the name of radical reform? or does he rather call for a collective effort of passive, nonviolent resistance in a way that anticipates the kind of civil disobedience later advocated by Henry David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi?3 Most critics have either adopted the latter position or chosen to read the poem as ultimately “ambivalent” or “ambiguous,” that is, as wavering between these two positions in a skeptical Shelleyan dance. Yet even in these readings, critics tend to suggest that nonviolence wins out in the end.4 They argue, in effect, that the poem turns in upon itself in a recursive repetition of passive resistance; Shelley directs the protestors to “Rise like lions” not to perform violence but to perform nonviolent resistance again and again and again.5 Although the protestors were “slashed, stabbed, maimed, and hewed” by the yeomanry and Hussars who

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5 See Redfield; Franta; and Thomas Frosch, “Passive Resistance in Shelley: A Psychological View,” *The Journal of English and German Philology* 98.3 (July 1999): 373-395.
were ordered to break up their peaceful assembly, Shelley seems to maintain, similar to his mentor Godwin before him, that pacifism is the best means for political change.

The poem itself, however, resists this ambivalent reading. The final lines of “Mask” suggest a barely contained violence, an almost-explicit incitement to revolution. The stanza may begin with a simile—“Rise like lions after slumber”—but the oppressed people are nonetheless compared to ravenous beasts whose “unvanquishable number” poses an imminent threat to the ruling powers. Shelley stated that he composed the poem while still “boiling” with indignation, and he intended to publish “Mask” in an unrealized “volume of popular songs wholly political, & destined to awaken & direct the imagination of the reformers” (Letters II 117, 191). As he wrote in a well-known letter to Charles Ollier upon first hearing of the Peterloo Massacre, “Something must be done…What yet I know not” (Letters II 118). His call in the poem for the reformers to “rise” coupled with the final line—“Ye are many—they are few”—can thus be read not as a repeated call to passivity but rather as a rejection of the reformers’ nonviolent tactics based on Shelley’s recognition of the failure of the Godwinian principles from which his nonviolent beliefs had derived.

In order to account for the unprecedented violence of “Mask,” the poem must be situated in relation both to Shelley’s association with Godwin and to Shelley’s other works, including the poem’s earlier incarnation, *Queen Mab*, and its more elitist successor, *Prometheus Unbound*. In essence, *Queen Mab* and “The Mask of Anarchy: Written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester” are the same Godwinian poem written for two distinct audiences at

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*This statement is a self-quotation of the words that Beatrice Cenci utters after she has been raped by her father in Shelley’s drama *The Cenci*, which he was completing at the time of the Massacre. For Beatrice, what must be done is patricide, and, even though critics agree that Shelley ultimately portrays Beatrice’s violence in a negative light, Shelley implies a very real kind of violence in relation to the Peterloo Massacre.*
two distinct phases in Shelley’s poetic career (1813 and 1819, respectively). Shelley translates Godwinism into his poetry, yet he modifies this Godwinism according to his intended or “virtual” audience. While Godwin’s philosophy seems wholly intact in *Mab*, an “esoteric” drama intended for an elite intellectual audience, Shelley makes significant changes in “Mask,” an “exoteric” poem intended for a less educated audience. The poetic form of each poem reflects these changes: *Mab* is a complex “philosophical poem” with alternating meters and forms and extensive footnotes, while “Mask” is a straightforward allegory (or masque) written in tetrameter couplets and triplets. This shift in form and the interrelated shift in each poem’s intended audience not only represent Shelley’s frustrations with the (in)effectiveness of Godwinian ideas but also work to displace Shelley’s own violent reactions to the Peterloo Massacre. The aesthetic form of “Mask” embodies the violence its Godwinian foundation seeks to resist. The poem, in effect, forces Shelley to a kind of violence he rejects elsewhere in his writings.

Indeed, Shelley is quite consistent in his rejection of violence and revolution in his works, including *A Philosophical Review of Reform* and *Prometheus Unbound*, both of which were written (or, in the case of the latter, completed) after “Mask.” “Mask” is an anomaly, both in Shelley’s body of work and in his theory of love. The poet shuns all forms of violence and tyranny in *Queen Mab*; he develops Godwinian resistance to revolution in *A Philosophical Review of Reform*; and he champions passive resistance in *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelleyan love

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7 See Behrendt, *Shelley and His Audience*, and Wheatley.
8 Shelley himself uses these terms to distinguish his works aimed at a select, intellectual audience (esoteric) and those aimed at a more general, common readership (exoteric).
9 The formal elements of the poem are complex, as I will discuss later in the essay. These forms are also common in radical poetry from Peter Pindar and Mary Robinson through William Hone and Thomas Wooler. Shelley skillfully adapts the courtly masque for a broader, working-class readership.
resists and rejects violence, and this is the central theme of *Prometheus Unbound*: socio-political change will occur through love, not through hate, revenge, or violent revolution. But “Mask” presents an alternative to Shelley’s politics of love, an alternative path to utopia. This major distinction between “Mask,” on the one hand, and *Mab* and *Prometheus Unbound* on the other, not only shows the effects of Shelley’s shifting audiences but also his revision of Godwinian gradualism.

Critical investigations of Shelley’s treatment of violence and literature tend to coincide with one or more of the fundamental Shelleyan dialectics—idealism and skepticism, reform and revolution, aesthetics and politics—and one or more of his most politically-engaged works from the late 1810s. “The Mask of Anarchy” provides a particularly rich site for exploring these subjects since (1) its central themes are violence and revolution and (2) the consistent scholarly return to the poem indicates a general dissatisfaction with the way we understand it. Before turning to the poem, I will first deal with some of the most important studies of the poem by three leading Shelley scholars: William Keach, Susan Wolfson, and Marc Redfield.

Keach has written extensively on Shelley and revolution, and he has made the case convincingly for seeing Shelley’s engagements with politics and aesthetics as a dialectic between Paul Foot’s radical, revolutionary Shelley and Michael Scrivener’s utopian Shelley. Shelley, according to Keach, negotiates in his poetry a “leftist” stance where violence and revolution are effective means for social change with a more Godwinian stance where society will gradually progress toward perfection through reform and education. Both stances are linked inextricably with Shelley’s fraught relation to Godwinian philosophy implicit in the “doubts, difficulties and contradictions” in “Mask” (77). As disciple, protégé,
and son-in-law of Godwin, Shelley certainly adopts the rejection of violence and revolution articulated in Godwin’s *Political Justice*, but he revises his Godwinism throughout his career. As I discuss in Chapter Four, Godwin believes that violence and revolution are signs of an “unenlightened and unprepared” populace; if properly educated, the masses need only resist tyranny and wait for their oppressors to see the futility of their oppression. If revolution appears unavoidable, Godwin argues that “the true politician” must “postpone revolution, if he cannot entirely prevent it,” even if positive social and political change seems imminent.

Shelley does advocate such Godwinian postponement in *Queen Mab*, and he sustains this view in *A Philosophical Review of Reform*. In many ways, Shelley’s unfinished political treatise is an updated version of *Political Justice*: it begins with a political history of western civilization and political philosophy in the vein of Godwinian-Marxist critique; it looks forward to socio-political changes around the world; and it offers Shelley’s program for probable reform, based on equality and democratic representation. As in *Queen Mab*, Shelley is sure that gradual reform and progress will occur in England: “Let us believe not only that it is necessary because it is just and ought to be, but necessary because it is inevitable and must be” (*Philosophical 1*). Shelley ultimately rejects revolution as a means to reform, although there appears an underlying and implicit suggestion that revolution may be the last and perhaps only option given the strength and power of tyranny in England: “It is better that they [the people] should be instructed in the whole truth; that they should see the clear grounds of their rights; and be impressed with the just persuasion that patience and reason and endurance are the means of a calm yet irresistible progress” (67). Calm, gradual progress through education and passive resistance is “better,” but Shelley imagines in “Mask” the possibility of attaining change through an inevitable revolution.
Keach seems to suggest that Shelley’s response to Godwinism rests in the “indeterminacy” of his poetry, but this indeterminacy does not fully account for Shelley’s treatment of violence in “Mask.” Keach’s reading of the poem centers on the poem’s “uncertain” ending. He argues that the seemingly agent-less “voice” that speaks the final two thirds of the poem—including the refrain quoted at the beginning of this section—is purposefully indeterminate so that it arises not from an individual “but from the collective consciousness of the oppressed” (85). Shelley believed class conflict was inevitable, and, like Godwin, he wanted to “minimise the possibility of mob violence and rioting” (85). But Shelley does not merely postpone violence and conflict in “Mask” as he does in Queen Mab. The voice in “Mask” is the voice of “Mask,” of the poem itself, and through it Shelley advocates violence.

Wolfson hints at such a notion in Formal Charges. Noting that there are no closing quotation marks at the end of the poem in an earlier draft of “Mask,” she argues that Shelley privileges the “fantasized oratory” of the voice and that he ultimately falls prey to a kind of ideological blindness when the poem’s imaginative reality “usurps the initial dream frame” (195–204). Wolfson emphasizes a struggle between an aesthetic ideology in which poetry can produce political action and a political ideology in which poetry is politically superfluous. That is, she identifies Shelley’s central struggle as whether poetry can actually “insert its own forms into the process of social reform” or if it remains only “a symbolic politics” (196). Wolfson arrives at her conclusion through an impressive formalist reading of the poem, but

she is not directly interested in how the poem revises Shelley’s specific views on violence and revolution. She sees only a “call for a mass demonstration of passive resistance” (201), but I will develop her claim for the voice’s usurpation of Shelley’s authorial voice in order to challenge that very conclusion.

“Mask” is not dominated by self-absorption or poetic dreaminess but rather by what Redfield calls “aesthetic ideology’s political unconscious” (151). Redfield argues that “Mask” is a conditional poem oriented toward futurity, and as such its political force resides in its “radical uncertainty” and ambiguity, its critique of “the inevitability with which we project meanings onto inscriptions, give voice to written signs” (150, 159). Whereas Wolfson sees such ambiguity as collapsing into the dream of the poem itself, Redfield sees it as embodying its central paradox: that is, it both masks and unmasks anarchy and political violence. Redfield establishes an aesthetic-political understanding of the poem that demonstrates Shelley’s self-conscious critique of and complicity with violence and ideology. This complicity, however, amounts to advocacy in two important ways: (1) Shelley’s direct address to a working-class audience and (2) his development of a proto-Frankfurt School Critical Theory.

Kaufman has pointedly traced Shelley’s Frankfurt connections in a series of essays that demonstrate a critical trajectory that leads from Shelley to Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory.11 While Kaufman tends to privilege German writers, the major element I wish to emphasize in this trajectory is Shelley’s shifting Godwinism. Shelley’s dialectic of skepticism and Godwinian optimism prefigures aspects of Adorno’s aesthetic theory as well as the concept

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of negative dialectics. Godwinism is the key intellectual touchstone in the Shelley-Frankfurt trajectory, and Shelley’s critical poetics exemplify this connection. Kaufman implies a nascent negative dialectics at work in Shelley’s _Defence of Poetry_, and its development from _Queen Mab_ to “The Mask of Anarchy” to _Prometheus Unbound_ can make clear not only the uncertainty and indeterminacy that so many scholars find in the latter but also the centrality of Shelley’s Godwinism to his critical poetics.

The conditional, projected futures in _Queen Mab_, “The Mask of Anarchy,” and _Prometheus Unbound_ rest on the present moment of each poem: Shelley’s youthful and more optimistic engagements with Godwinian utopianism in _Queen Mab_, a poem written for an aristocratic audience while Shelley was still a resident of England; his more skeptical and frustrated response to the Peterloo Massacre in “Mask,” a poem written for the oppressed working classes while Shelley was an expatriate living in Italy; and the cosmic, mythological, and utopian drama, _Prometheus Unbound_, which develops over nearly two years at the height of Shelley’s thinking about love and politics. What begins in _Mab_ as a suspended dialectic that postpones its action to a future time becomes in “Mask” a negative dialectic—and in constructing this negative dialectic, Shelley crafts a poem that rejects its futurity and advocates instead immediate and violent revolution.

Self-exiled in Italy, Shelley learned of the Peterloo Massacre in a letter from Thomas Love Peacock nearly one month after the event had occurred. Shelley’s reaction and response were immediate: he was enraged and he wrote a poem. He surely understood that “Mask” was deliberately incendiary and that his publisher, Leigh Hunt, would refuse to

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publish it for fear of prosecution. Like *Mab* and many of Shelley’s other works, the poem thus fails to reach its intended audience, but its virtual readership nonetheless shapes Shelley’s rejection of Godwinian passive resistance in favor of the immediacy of revolution and violence.

The ninety-one stanzas that comprise “Mask” present the dream-vision of Shelley himself, akin to Ianthe’s dream-vision in *Queen Mab*. Unlike Mab, however, Shelley frames the dream-vision of “Mask” as conditional from the opening stanza:

As I lay asleep in Italy
There came a voice from over the Sea,
And with great power it forth led me
To walk in the visions of Poesy. (1-4)

The poem, then, is both a dream of “things as they are” and “things as they may be.” For Wolfson, the poem “never really unmask[s] this dreamy origin” and thus remains ultimately “self-addressed” (*Formal* 196). Shelley fails, that is, to fuse his “visions of Poesy” with material reality—the masses do not read the poem and it has no immediate effect on British policy. But Shelley does revise his political thinking through the poem. The intention of the poem is “to awaken & direct the imaginations of the reformers,” that is, to inspire the masses into revolutionary thought and action. His exiled position in Italy affords him a different perspective on the events in England than that of his countrymen, and, subsequently, he has the opportunity to be more polemical and interventionist.

“Mask” portrays Shelley’s attempt to articulate and represent reality as a dialectical process (as opposed to an impasse). The poem is a powerful figuring forth of Shelley’s political and critical aesthetic, a site through which he presents and negotiates actual and potential conditions and outcomes. Importantly, the materialist conditions of England are required for
the potential idealist vision to emerge. Similar to Ianthe’s other-worldly experience in *Queen Mab*, Shelley’s physical distance from England affords him a more comprehensive perspective of the Massacre, of English society and politics, and of the utopian possibilities available through critique. Shelley remains ambivalent toward the Godwinian perspective in *Mab*, but in “Mask” he outright rejects it: nonviolence and violence, pacifism and revolution, create a negative dialectic that leads Shelley to embrace the suffering inherent to the lack of immediate reconciliation and subsequently to advocate the immediacy of revolution. Such advocacy challenges Shelleyan love, and Shelley corrects his turn to violence in *Prometheus Unbound*.

“Mask” progresses through three principal sections: (1) the satiric antimasque procession of the first 22 stanzas (excluding the first stanza), (2) the transitional “mania maid” scene of stanzas 23-36, and (3) the direct address to the “Men of England” that comprises the bulk of the poem (stanzas 37-91). The second and third sections are of most importance to my present argument. The poem also plays out the three possibilities for English society that Shelley had proposed two years earlier in his *Address to the People on the Death of the Princess Charlotte*: despotism, revolution, or reform (111). “Mask” dramatizes these possibilities by first presenting despotism before developing a dialectic of revolution and reform.

The antimasque procession establishes the immediate political context of the poem as a critique of England’s ruling powers. Shelley portrays a murderous parade of figures representing well-known government officials, all of whom worship Anarchy as their “King,
and God, and Lord” (71). They feast on human hearts, brainwash little children, corrupt the Church, trample the multitudes, become intoxicated, and bankrupt the nation (12-76).

The cacophonous textures of Shelley’s language coupled with the ballad-like tetrameter couplets add to the portrayal of this drunken procession which seems to almost teeter off the page at every line break. The aesthetic and overtly political references represent action and critique—Shelley inserts his poem directly into the discourse of reform and revolution. “Mask” is not only a form of action but a call to action.

It is not until the appearance of the maniac maid in stanza 22 that the poem introduces the dialectic of non-violent protest and violent revolution. At the outset, the maid, called “Hope,” symbolizes Godwin’s notion of human perfectibility. She performs passive protest against the murderous procession by lying

   down in the street,
Right before the horses’ feet,
   Expecting, with a patient eye,
Murder, Fraud and Anarchy. (98-101)

Her morbid expectation critiques the Peterloo Massacre, but it also critiques Godwinism: the Massacre was an actual instance in which the Godwinian ideal of passive resistance failed miserably. Although both Godwin and Shelley understood that one nonviolent demonstration would not result in social and political change, Shelley was in this instance particularly disappointed and enraged with Godwinian gradualism. Unsure of how to reconcile this failure with his own Godwinism, Shelley turns instead to poetry, a move to which he was equally skeptical.

13 Officials include the Foreign Secretary, the Lord Chancellor, the Home Secretary, and the Prince Regent.
The critical utopia emerges when Hope does not die. Anarchy prepares to slay Hope when a militant “Shape” appears as “A mist, a light, an image” (103). As is the case with the Phantom of “England in 1819,” which “may / Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day” (13-4), the Shape is a conditional possibility. It is an ineffable presence always just out of human reach:

With step as soft as wind it past
O’er the heads of men—so fast
That they knew the presence there,
And looked,—but all was empty air. (118-21)

Its very elusiveness demonstrates the extent to which Shelley was skeptical of poetry’s ability to intervene in material reality. The Shape represents “the visions of Poesy” inserted and embedded in material reality. But this is a utopian dream. The immaterial world of poetry does emerge from the material world, but the Shape’s indeterminacy reflects Shelley’s frustration with unrealized reconciliation. Passive resistance is not enough; action is necessary. Moreover, as Wolfson stresses, Shelley never awakes from the dream that is the poem itself. In this transitionary section, the poem begins to take over and displace Shelley as the authoritative voice of the opening stanza.

This displacement marks Shelley’s rejection of Godwinian passive resistance. Anarchy is slaughtered in an act that overshadows Hope’s initial non-violent method of protest:

And the prostrate multitude
Looked—and ankle-deep in blood,
Hope that maiden most serene
Was walking with a quiet mien:

And Anarchy, the ghastly birth,
Lay dead upon the earth— (126-31)
Instead of seeing “empty air,” the multitude now sees Hope, “ankle-deep in blood,” and the
slain figure of Anarchy. Although Shelley presents indirectly this death, there are only four
possibilities that can explain what happens: (1) Hope kills Anarchy, (2) the “mist-light-
image” kills Anarchy, (3) the multitudes kill Anarchy, or (4) Anarchy kills itself. Even if it is
Hope’s act of non-violent resistance that results in the death of Anarchy (an allegorical
figure, of course), violent revolution remains the result. Each of these four options imagines
and advocates immediate violence and revolution as the means for effective social and
political change.

What happens next is the pivotal moment of the poem. A new voice overtakes the
authorial voice of Shelley that begins the poem. It arises from the critical utopia and
addresses the masses. Shelley does not directly indicate what this voice is or to whom it
belongs. He writes that “words of joy and fear arose / As if their own indignant Earth”
(138-9) cried out, “As if her heart had cried aloud” (146). But only “as if” the voice belonged
to the earth. In the more immediate context of “Mask,” the voice belongs to the poem itself.

Stanza 37 marks the point where the poem usurps Shelley’s voice and forces the poet
to embrace the violence of revolution that he was reluctant to recommend explicitly. The
“visions of Poesy” displace the authorial “I” that begins the poem. The new voice directly
addresses the “Men of England”:

Rise like Lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number
Shake your chains to Earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you—
Ye are many—they are few. (151-5)

In response to his virtual working-class audience, Shelley here invokes violence and
revolution. His anger and frustration with Godwinism bursts through the poem’s form. The
“icy chains of custom” from Mab have transformed into purely “mind-forg’d manacles,” but these abstract, dew-like chains are still contingent on material reality. Shelley rejects pacifism and attempts to inspire the masses to rise up—an attempt to incite revolution that is admittedly anti-Godwinian. Echoing the claim from Mab that the earth “Contains at once the evil and the cure,” here it is as if the Earth offers the cure of revolution to the multitude. These violent sections of “Mask” represent Shelley’s skepticism toward his earlier idealism and its reliance on Godwinism. Shelley, however, maintains a projected idealism through the poem’s critical utopia, which creates a negative dialectic that emphasizes suffering, anger, and violence, all of which run throughout the poem.

As Anarchy’s bloody corpse lies on the earth and as the masses are incited to revolution, the voice of the poem presents an apt, proto-Marxist description of working-class existence. The multitudes are slaves and living corpses whom unfeeling ruling powers keep in check through “strong control” (160-87). Following the previous stanzas in which he calls for violent revolution, Shelley includes these final descriptions of “things as they are” before turning to his descriptions of beautiful Shelleyan ideals: Freedom, Justice, Wisdom, Peace, Love, Spirit, Patience, and Gentleness (230-61). The power and problem of ideology is language, and Shelley predicates this list of ideals on the fact that the word “freedom” has been extricated from the language of the masses (209-12). Language will set the masses free. If only the slaves could speak of freedom, the “tyrants would flee” and social change would occur. Shelley’s list of abstract ideals, then, is a kind of instruction in the power of language for the less-educated audience Shelley has in mind.

Yet the idea that the “tyrants would flee” appears suspicious at best. The voice of the poem echoes Godwin’s claim from Political Justice that the masses, if prepared for change,
need only patiently wait for their oppressors to realize their faults and cease their tyranny. But this is only if the slaves could answer—another conditional possibility reliant upon education and a specific reaction by the ruling classes. The oppressors did not flee at the Peterloo Massacre, or afterwards—indeed, they reinforced their ministerial and civic status—and so this entire section of the poem critiques Godwinism. Such a sequence of events did not happen in material reality, although it could be possible.¹⁴

Godwinian passive resistance, however, does not completely disappear in the poem. In the midst of the descriptions of the working classes, the voice recommends nonviolent resistance:

Then it is to feel revenge
Fiercely thirsting to exchange
Blood for blood—and wrong for wrong—
Do not thus when ye are strong. (193-6)

This Godwinian stanza is short-lived and almost lost within the more forceful violent images that dominate the poem. Moreover, the final line of this stanza suggests that revenge and violence are acceptable when the populace is weak; when strong, they can apparently rely on “justice” or “rights.” Even though the working classes were strong in number, they were certainly weak in politics and, as both Godwin and Shelley suggest, education. Pacifism and nonviolence inherently work as part of the negative dialectic, but, as reconciliation is either impossible or postponed indefinitely, the poem revises Godwinian idealism in favor of the rhetoric of violence and revolution.

Shelley does not return to Godwinian ideals until after the readers’ passions are aroused and after the people in the poem are shielded by the “visions of Poesy.” The

¹⁴ Take, for example, the Egyptian Revolution of 2011.
intellectual audience of *Queen Mab* can apparently accept the theory of gradual Godwinian change because they have secured the basic necessities of life, but the multitudes need something more radical and immediate to stir them from slumber. The voice of the poem tells the people to oppose tyrannical oppression by creating a “vast assembly” (295) to harness the power of language. If the tyrants respond with violence, the people should remain “calm and resolute” and use their own weapons of war: “folded arms and [apparently stoic] looks” (319-22). Calm, passive resistance is more effective than violence and war in the context of Godwinian gradualism, but education, poetry, and active resistance are its prerequisites. The voice continues:

> And if then the tyrants dare
> Let them ride among you there,
> Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew,—
> What they like, that let them do.

> With folded arms and steady eyes,
> And little fear, and less surprise
> Look upon them as they slay
> Till their rage has died away. (340-47)

In a calculated turn, the voice instructs readers in the Godwinian path to revolution: calm, steady, passive resistance to tyranny in all its forms. Yet the irony of this passage lies in its conflation of “things as they are” and “things as they may be.” The protestors did employ this type of passive resistance at the Peterloo Massacre, and many individuals were slashed, stabbed, maimed, and hewed. At the time Shelley composed the poem, however, the tyrants’ rage had not died away, nor did they “return with shame / To the place from which they came” (348-9). Rather than wait patiently for change to occur at some point in the future—rather than postpone revolution—Shelley’s ironic juxtaposition rejects Godwinian gradualism.
Such Godwinian sentiments only work within the unrealized future Shelley constructs in the poem. The immediate force and form of the poem recommends violence, which Shelley reasserts in the poem’s final stanzas. The language of violence, likened to “oppression’s thundered doom” (365), leads to action, and the poem ends by repeating its central hypnotic refrain:

Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number—
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you—
Ye are many—they are few. (368-72)

As a direct address to the enraged multitudes, the stanza serves as an anthem of action despite the earlier petitions for passive resistance. The dialectical nature of the poem avoids reconciliation and ends on this incitement to revolution in a move that ultimately overshadows the Godwinian pacifism that appears elsewhere in less enthusiastic and less central ways.

Shelley’s different articulations of the Godwinian argument in Queen Mab and “The Mask of Anarchy” reveal a shift in his attitude toward violence and revolution grounded in uncertainty regarding Godwinian ideals. In the shift from Mab to “Mask,” Shelley revises his idealism and optimism by adapting his Godwinian views for a working-class audience. At the same time, he constructs in the poem a complex negative dialectic that reflects his political and philosophical negotiations. “Mask” stands out among Shelley’s works as one instance where he favors the immediacy of revolution and where he abandons the ideal of love.

In Prometheus Unbound, which I discuss in the following section, Shelley corrects the violence of “Mask” by returning to and developing his theory of love within the political context of reform and revolution. Addressed to an elitist, intellectual audience, Prometheus...
Unbound advocates nonviolence and ideal love as the means to achieve utopia, but Shelley continues to ground such idealisms in the material conditions of England and in the active power of resistance and revolution. The consistency of Shelley’s rejection of violence and tyranny that appears in Prometheus Unbound suggests the poet’s commitment to gradual reform, and my reading of the poem highlights the unique stance Shelley takes in “The Mask of Anarchy.” Utopia, as Shelley always stresses, remains a conditional possibility: the current socio-political structures of England “Are graves from which a glorious Phantom may / Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day” (“England in 1819” 13-4). Like the Spirit in “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” and the Shape in “The Mask of Anarchy,” the Phantom of utopia may arrive in the material world—or it may not. Shelley remains optimistic that progress toward perfection is necessary and inevitable, but that optimism is couched within his Romantic negative dialectics.

Instead of seeing Shelley as an “ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain” (Arnold, “Shelley” 380), we should see him in the context of Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history.” Like Benjamin’s angel, Shelley understood social progress as a storm blowing from paradise that irresistibly propelled him into a future he could not fully comprehend (Benjamin 253-64). Shelley could project utopia into futurity, he could hope for and imagine social and political change, but he tempered his hopes and projections with a skeptical understanding of the contradictions of social reality. Such is the critical aesthetic he develops in his work, and, as is the case in “Mask,” that aesthetic is not always enough—sometimes, immediate action is necessary. But in Angelus Novus, the Paul Klee painting that inspired Benjamin, one can perceive the angel’s eyes subtly looking over his back and into the future, a gesture that reveals the angel’s hope in light of so much devastation. Shelley,
likewise, beats his wings in both the world of “things as they are” and the world of “things as they may be,” and in his poetry he beautifully articulates the ever-receding and seemingly unutterable space where these two worlds meet.

2. Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts (1820)

The central themes of the ten poems in the Prometheus Unbound volume are love, politics, and the natural world.\(^\text{15}\) Prometheus Unbound is undoubtedly the most complex of the poems, and it deals with these themes in the most sophisticated and interrelated ways. The drama embodies what Samuel Gladden calls Shelley’s “project of liberty-through-love” (250)—that is, the poet’s belief that the spirit of love would lead to socio-political reform and Godwinian perfectibility. Accordingly, Shelley uses a mythical-cosmic drama to stage the potentiality of such a world-changing revolution. Shelley draws not only from the Promethean myths but also from a whole range of classical mythologies, biblical stories, scientific ideas, and political allegories.\(^\text{16}\)

Prometheus Unbound is a rewriting of Aeschylus’s lost drama, which was a rewriting of Hesiod’s myth. In Hesiod’s original stories from which Aeschylus’s Prometheus Bound derives, Prometheus steals fire from Zeus and gives it to humans as a symbol of wisdom and knowledge. In retaliation, Zeus chains Prometheus to the Caucasus Mountains where an eagle eats his liver every day in eternal punishment. Aeschylus’s drama, Prometheus Bound, focuses on the heroic suffering of Prometheus, who helped Zeus overthrow the Titans and

\(^{15}\) After Prometheus Unbound, the contents of the volume are as follows: “The Sensitive Plant,” “A Vision of the Sea,” “Ode to Heaven,” “An Exhortation,” “Ode to the West Wind,” “An Ode,” “The Cloud,” “To a Skylark,” and “Ode to Liberty.”

\(^{16}\) An analysis and outline of these various allusions, references, and parallels outstrips the limits of this chapter, and they have been well-documented in scholarship. See Wasserman.
who holds a prophecy of Zeus’s eventual fall from power. In Shelley’s version of the myth, outlined in Act II of *Prometheus Unbound*, Prometheus gives Jupiter (Shelley uses the Roman name for the god) wisdom on condition that humankind be free, but instead Jupiter rules the human world as a tyrant. Prometheus then gives humans fire, and, more importantly, love, language, and thought, all of which are weapons with which to combat tyranny (II.iv 63-82). Shelley, like Aeschylus, foregrounds Prometheus’s heroic suffering, but unlike his classical predecessor, he emphasizes love and language as the most powerful political tools.

In Aeschylus’s lost sequel to the extant *Prometheus Bound*, the hero apparently reunites with Jupiter, but Shelley instead portrays Prometheus as a Christ-like hero of human love and passive resistance whose transformation of mind causes universal and cosmic regeneration. Shelley writes in the Preface that he was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind. The moral interest of the fable which is so powerfully sustained by the sufferings and endurance of Prometheus, would be annihilated if we could conceive of him as unsaying his high language, and quailing before his successful and perfidious adversary. (206)

Shelley resists reconciliation. He describes a compromise with tyranny as a “catastrophe” because it would not only destroy the heroic morality of Prometheus but would also present utopia as immediately attainable through submission to the ruling powers. Such submission would be just as bad as, and perhaps worse than, a violent revolution by the masses. Change must occur through gradual, intellectual means and through an embrace of the spirit of love. Prometheus’s “high language”—in its Aeschylean prophecy and in its creative power—represents the hope and promise of love.
In addition to love, Shelley expresses through *Prometheus Unbound* a theory of ideology and language. He writes in the Preface that poets “are in one sense the creators and in another the creations of their age” (208). Yet as a self-conscious creator of his age, Shelley has the ability to acknowledge and thus momentarily transcend ideology through art. Echoing the last line of *A Defence of Poetry* (which first appears in *A Philosophical Review of Reform*), Shelley states that Romantic poets are “the companions and forerunners of some unimagined change in our social condition or the opinions which cement it” (208). It is precisely the alternative poetic world that portends this unimagined change. Similar to Adorno’s optimistic vision of the future in which enlightenment thinking will become positive, Shelley claims “that until the mind can love, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness” (209). This “harvest of happiness”—the promise of happiness, the promise of redemption—relies on the spirit of love, and it represents the hopes of the past which must be redeemed to make way for a more positive future.

At the moment of writing, however, Shelley did not believe the masses were prepared to reap the harvest. Accordingly, he imagines an elitist readership for *Prometheus Unbound*—not necessarily future politicians, as is the case with *Queen Mab*, but “the more select classes of poetical readers” who possess “highly refined imagination[s]” (209). Like Shelley himself, these readers are aware that love and the imagination are the keys to “reforming the world” (208). Poetry, as he writes in his *Defence*, produces “the moral

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17 For work on Shelley and language, see Gladden, Keach, Hogle, Ulmer, White, Pyle, and Wasserman.
improvement of man” (517) by awakening, nourishing, and enlarging the imagination, which
in turn shapes and determines reason. Shelley further states that

The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an
identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, actions,
or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely
and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of
many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own. The
great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to
the effect by acting upon the cause. (Defence 517)

This fusion of Platonic eros and Romantic sympathy, this interplay of poetry, love, and the
imagination, produces a morality and ethics founded on equality, interconnectedness, and
justice, all of which express the critical theory of love Shelley develops in Prometheus Unbound.

As many critics have pointed out, the first act of Prometheus Unbound is the central act
of the entire work. Everything that happens in Acts II, III, and IV is a direct result of
Prometheus’s moral and psychological transformation in Act I, his shift from an embrace of
hate to an embrace of love. The remainder of the drama—the emergence of ideal love in Act
II; the regeneration of the human world in Act III; and the regeneration of the universe
through reconciliation of heaven and earth in Act IV—depicts conditional possibilities
dependent on Prometheus’s initial change. The ideal utopia that bursts into the world in the
later acts results from the hero’s initial embrace of love.

Although my reading develops those of Earl Wasserman and William Ulmer, I must
point out two key differences in our understandings of the drama. First, I disagree with
Wasserman’s claim that the poem “is apocalyptic, not utopian” (306). Shelley’s utopia is, in a
sense, apocalyptic in his quasi-prophetic belief in the necessity of change, but the poet
ultimately presents utopia as a negative projection dependent on emotional and
psychological realizations on behalf of the whole of humankind. Utopia, then, is the natural
state of the unity of existence, which can only be accessed through love. Second, this love must be dialectical in nature—the spirit of love fuses and embraces both the intellectual and material elements of life. Ulmer presents an Oedipal reading of *Prometheus Unbound*:

Prometheus overthrows or “kills” his father when he helps Jupiter defeat the Titans, but he knows that Jupiter’s son, Demogorgon, will eventually overthrow or “kill” his father, Jupiter. Ulmer sees this Oedipal under-story as informing the drama’s movement from tragic myth in Act I to sexual joy and erotic renewal in Act IV (Ulmer 84–5). Teddi Bonca also follows this reading, emphasizing that fire (in Freudian terms) symbolizes phallic activity. In Bonca’s reading, the move from the tragic to the erotic parallels Prometheus’s movements from the masculine to the feminine, from a position within a patriarchy to a position within a matriarchy comprised of Asia, Panthea, and Ione (181). Prometheus thus reflects Shelley’s own circle of women which Bonca argues dominates his life and writings. While these Oedipal interpretations can illuminate the erotic aspects of Shelleyan love, they tend to over-emphasize sexuality and eroticism in Shelleyan love and politics.

Marjean Purinton offers a different reading of the drama in *Romantic Ideology Unmasked*. Although Purinton maintains a New Historicist notion that ideology explains all human activity, she admits that Shelley’s drama “depicts a transformation of bifurcated thinking, and therefore of sociopolitical organization, into an alternative structuration” (96). I see this alternative structuration as part of Shelley’s negative dialectics, which leads to an acknowledgment and thus transcendence of the Romantic Ideology. Purinton further claims that the drama “offers a presentation of liberation from an enslaving ideology. Unveiling the human-created and tyrannous fictions masked as truths and operating in surface-level activities, Shelley projects amelioration, at the level of cultural thinking, as the radical
reformation to which humanity aspires” (124). This “cultural thinking” is what I think Kaufman has in mind when he draws the critical-aesthetic thread from Shelley through the Frankfurt School, and it is akin to my own view of Romantic negative dialectics. In my reading of the poem, love avoids a blind idealism that reinforces the Romantic Ideology through Shelley’s critical aesthetics and negative dialectics.

Shelley makes clear that the road to redemption is found through love. Prometheus’s ongoing enslavement depends in part on his unwillingness “to share the shame” of Jupiter’s “ill tyranny” (18-9). The Titan, “eyeless in hate” (I 9), has been nailed to the Caucasus for “Three thousand years” (I 12) with “No change, no pause, no hope!” (I 24). Although Shelley’s drama apparently takes place in his contemporary historical period, there has been no progress because Prometheus continually reenacts Jupiter’s tyranny through his own hate and desire for revenge. Tyranny has ruled the human world for thousands of years, argues Shelley, and it will continue its reign until humankind embraces the spirit of love.

Prometheus, then, represents humanity in some sense. The best way to understand the Titan in Shelley’s drama is as a representation of the one mind, or the collective (un)consciousness of humanity itself. Thus, I agree with Wasserman’s seminal reading of Prometheus as “Existence itself” which “is the One Mind” (257). But whereas Wasserman reads the entire drama as Shelley’s quest for a place to “stand without compromising his skepticism” (56)—for Wasserman claims “the final act is not really part of the Promethean drama” (360)—I view Shelley’s skepticism as engaged in a dialectic with the idealism inherent in his theory of love and thus in the drama itself. Prometheus is at once the ideal representation of the one mind and the tyrannical power that (re)produces that ideal. Prometheus cannot be an individual, for, as Shelley argues in the poem’s Preface, the social
and cosmic reform and regeneration he sets in motion must result from a widespread revolution in human thought. This revolution of the mind will develop gradually, despite the fact that Shelley portrays a seemingly immediate revolution in the poem itself.

Prometheus’s transformation occurs early in the first act of the drama. Up to this point (i.e., for the past 3,000 years), Prometheus’s hateful curse of Jupiter continually affects the entire universe. The curse corresponds to Jupiter polluting the earth; to the spread of disease and plagues; and to the prevalence of ignorance and hate (that is, the current state of the world in Shelley’s eyes). But Prometheus changes his outlook and declares pity for his oppressor:

Disdain? Ah no! I pity thee.—What Ruin
Will hunt thee down undefended through the wide Heaven!
How will thy soul, cloven to its depth with terror,
Gape like a Hell within! I speak in grief
Not exultation, for I hate no more
As then, ere misery made me wise.—The Curse
Once breathed on thee I would recall. (I 53-9)

Prometheus enacts Shelley’s Godwinian belief that the oppressed need only “wait out” tyranny in order for the oppressors to realize their futile and immoral stance. Although Prometheus still speaks of Jupiter’s destruction, he ceases to hate and reneges his powerful curse. Yet it is not entirely clear why Prometheus suddenly changes his way of thinking. Did Prometheus need 3,000 years to grow weary of hate and revenge? Is his change the result of a gradual cognitive process? Does Prometheus realize that he can modify existence itself through his mind? Does he embrace love as the most significant power in the universe? The answers are ultimately unknowable—and intentionally so. Stuart Sperry similarly questions why Shelley does not detail Prometheus’s transformation so as to demonstrate change for his readership. Sperry suggests two related possibilities for Shelley’s decision: (1) the fact that
Prometheus is the one mind and thus cannot enact properly the choice of a single individual; and (2) Shelley’s reluctance to show specifically how change would occur (77). The regeneration and utopia that emerge in the poem are, after all, conditional possibilities. What is clear in the poem is this: the change was gradual (although it seems sudden); it rests on love and passive resistance; and it reflects Prometheus’s knowledge that tyranny must eventually come to an end. Like Shelley himself, Prometheus places his hope in the necessity of reform and change.

Prometheus does not unite or attempt reconciliation with Jupiter, and he views the tyrant with pity rather than exultation. Furthermore, Prometheus loses all memory of his hate-filled curse and must call upon the phantasm of Jupiter to repeat it. Language is powerful, as Shelley makes clear in “The Mask of Anarchy” and elsewhere, and the act of repeating the curse would recall hate and tyranny in the human world. Throughout the drama, Shelley grants a creative power to language that constructs the reality of the world:

Language is a perpetual Orphic song,
Which rules with Daedal harmony a throng
Of thoughts and forms, which else senseless and shapeless were. (IV 415-7)

Love and the imagination play a critical role in the development of those ideal “thoughts and forms” to which language can give shape. In calling upon the phantasm of Jupiter to repeat the curse, Prometheus acknowledges not only the power of language but also his prior complicity with the system of tyranny that enslaved him in the first place. Consider the curse:

Fiend, I defy thee! with a calm, fixed mind,
All that thou canst inflict I bid thee do;
Foul Tyrant both of Gods and Humankind,
One only being shalt thou not subdue.
Rain then thy plagues upon me here,
And let alternate frost and fire
Eat into me, and be thine ire
Lightning and cutting hail and legioned forms
Of furies, driving by upon the wounding storms.

Aye, do thy worst. Thou are Omnipotent.

... On me and mine I imprecate
The utmost torture of thy hate
And thus devote to sleepless agony
This undeclining head while thou must reign on high. (I 262-72, 278-81)

Prometheus appears as the tyrant he curses in this passage. He demands Jupiter to do his worst and to punish not only himself but also humankind, “those [he] love[s]” (I 277). After hearing the curse, Prometheus in disbelief declares, “It doth repent me…/ I wish no living thing to suffer pain” (I 303, 305).

Prometheus embraces the spirit of love, which connects him through affection and sympathy to all living things in the world. His rejection of the curse, already acknowledged by his initial change of mind, produces the Promethean ideals produced by tyranny produced by the ideals and so on. This is Romantic negative dialectics. There is no synthesis or reconciliation. There is an embrace of the suffering caused by the realization of the impossibility of reconciliation. Contrary to critics who claim that “utopia means reconciliation and synthesis for Shelley” (Silver 107), I would argue that the hope of utopia in Prometheus Unbound can only be redeemed by means of negative dialectics. The reconciliation that occurs in the later acts is a negative projection of utopia. Freedom and tyranny, love and hate, ideal and actual, idealism and skepticism—Shelley suggests it is not through an affirmative synthesis of these oppositions that progress toward perfection can be achieved, but rather that the hope of this future can be redeemed by critiquing the social and cultural systems of thought that offer synthesis and progress as salvation. Shelley offers
religion (Christianity) and politics (aftermath of the French Revolution) as two examples of such systems (I 546-77), but this critique most clearly reveals itself in Acts II and III via the characters of Demogorgon and Jupiter.

Jupiter immediately attempts to stifle Prometheus’s resistance by sending Furies that reflect the destructive elements of Prometheus’s own mind (that is, of the one mind): “pain and fear / And disappointment and mistrust and hate / And clinging crime” (I 452-4). But Prometheus sacrifices any sense of individualism by turning his love and pity towards all of humankind (I 429), and in doing so he rejects the tyranny of his own mind. One of the Furies tempts Prometheus to despair by explaining a major problem in the human world:

In each human heart terror survives
The ravin it has gorged: the loftiest fear
All that they would disdain to think were true:
Hypocrisy and custom make their minds
The fanes of many a worship, now outworn.
They dare not devise good for man’s estate
And yet they know not that they do not dare.
The good want power, but to weep barren tears.
The powerful goodness want: worse need for them.
The wise want love, and those who love want wisdom;
And all best things are thus confused to ill.
Many are strong and rich,—and would be just,—
But live among their suffering fellow men
As if none felt—they know not what they do. (I 618-31)

The Fury describes the blinding force of ideology and its correspondent lack of understanding, feeling, love, and compassion. Not only do politics and religion (“Hypocrisy and custom”) reinforce tyrannical ideology but also the very structure of social thinking itself—no one seems to feel or love, and no one realizes the mistake. Shelley believes this description is entirely true, but what must be done is not despair but critique, and through critique, change.
Prometheus accomplishes this change by means of love and pity for humankind. He drives away the Furies and ushers in a chorus of “fair spirits / Whose homes are the dim caves of human thought” (I 558-9). These emergent spirits are the positive counterparts to the Furies. They represent the awakening of love in the one mind, and they portend a possible future when “Truth, liberty and love” (I 651) will defeat Jupiter and all forms of tyranny. Indeed, Prometheus’s prophecy corresponds to his “high language.” His speech concurs with action and change in the material human world. As the spirits of hope sing,

And one sound—above, around,
One sound beneath, around, above,
Was moving; ’twas the soul of love;
”Twas the hope, the prophecy,
Which begins and ends in thee. (I 703-7)

Although here it is unclear whether the “soul of love” is actually spreading throughout the universe or if the spirits are projecting the future, it becomes clear in the later acts that language and action mutually occur. As Prometheus speaks, the utopian world actualizes itself. There exists, as it were, two competing worlds—the current, unredeemed world and the potential, redeemed world. Through the ongoing and multivalent processes of love and language (i.e., poetry), the redeemed world can possibly be achieved. As the spirits reveal, the “shadow” of Ruin follows Love in the unredeemed world of humankind (I 780), but in the redeemed, utopian world, there is only Love, which is Prometheus’s only hope (I 808).

The appearance and movement of “the soul of love” in the previous passage recalls Wordsworthian love in a number of ways. Not only does Shelley’s description of love link utopia and materiality, but his language—and this passage in particular—reflects his predecessor’s treatment of love. Consider Wordsworth’s vision of love from “Lines Written at a Small Distance from my House” which I cite in Part One:
Love, now an universal birth,
From heart to heart is stealing,
From earth to man, from man to earth,
—It is the hour of feeling.

...And from the blessed power that rolls
About, below, above:
We'll frame the measure of our souls,
They shall be tuned to love. (21-4, 33-6)

Wordsworth more directly connects the universal birth of love to the natural world than
does Shelley, but it is clear that both poets see the spirit of love as a “blessed” and all-
pervading presence that coincides with personal and social regeneration.

The (re)emergence of Love is the focal point of the second act of *Prometheus Unbound*.

In Shelley’s theory, love dialectically links the material, human world with beautiful idealisms,
and he represents this linking through the characters that correlate to the one mind of
humanity and love itself: Prometheus and his exiled lover, Asia. Asia possesses a
“transforming presence” (I 832) when “mingled” with Prometheus, and this transformation
begins in accordance with the psychological events of Act I. Asia mediates, and ultimately
brings together, the world of dreams and the world of material realities.

Act II dramatizes the revolution Shelley so ardently awaited. The act enacts his idea
of “liberty-through-love.” As Wasserman outlines in his study of the poem, this
psychological and political revolution is “both motivated and succeeded by love” and that
succession is “immediate. … [T]he Hour of Love must succeed the Hour of Revolution in
the realm of mind” (325). The succession of events in Acts I and II, that is, occurs in the
same moment: Prometheus withdraws his curse; Asia/Love awakens Demogorgon;
Demogorgon withdraws Jupiter/tyranny; and Asia/Love reunites with Prometheus.
The revolutionary events develop more slowly in the drama itself, of course, but time
and history are suspended, as it were, in the realm of the one mind. Ulmer sees this dramatic
suspension as an elision: Shelley evades time and history through metaphorical idealism (96-
7). Similar to the New Historicist critiques of Wordsworth I discuss in chapters one through
three, Ulmer finds fault in the suspensions and reversals of time that occur throughout
Prometheus Unbound. But again, Shelley avoids such ideological blindness through the negative
projection of utopia in Acts II, III, and IV.

The second act begins with dreams that lead to realities. First, Asia’s sister Panthea
describes two prophetic dreams involving Prometheus, one that she can remember and one
that she cannot. In the remembered dream, Prometheus

was shadowed o’er
By love; which, from his soft and flowing limbs
And passion-parted lips, and keen faint eyes
Steamed forth like vaporous fire; an atmosphere
Which wrapt me in its all-dissolving power
As the warm ether of the morning sun
Wraps ere it drinks some cloud of wandering dew.
I saw not—heard not—moved not—only felt
His presence flow and mingle through my blood
Till it became his life and his grew mine
And I was thus absorbed—until it past
And like the vapours when the sun sinks down,
Gathering again in drops upon the pines
And tremulous as they, in the deep night
My being was condensed, and as the rays
Of thought were slowly gathered, I could hear
His voice, whose accents lingered ere they died
Like footsteps of far melody. (II.i 72-89)

This sexualized dream shares many similarities with that of the Poet in “Alastor.” But in
Panthea’s dream, the interfusion of self and ideal love does not lead to a destructive quest
but rather a regenerated world. The difference is the sociality and community inherent in
Prometheus Unbound. The “all-dissolving power” of love flows from the collective human community of the one mind. Panthea details a sacrifice of individuality through the “presence” of the spirit of love that the “Alastor” Poet does not embrace. Moreover, the “melody” of Prometheus’s language corresponds to the harmonic music of love that creates a backdrop in Acts II, III, and IV. The focus of Panthea’s dream is on the unity forged by ideal love, the condensing of being into the whole, the interconnectedness of the entire universe, and not, as in “Alastor,” the individual and narcissistic quest.

Asia travels into “the Deep” before she fully transforms into ideal love. The Deep, as discussed in the first act, is a place where exist “Dreams and the light imaginings of men / And all that faith creates, or love desires” (I 200-1); it is the second, potential world of shadows between life and death, the material and the immaterial, the actual and the potential. It is thus a fitting realm for Love to emerge. It is also the realm of Demogorgon, the son of Jupiter, who eventually overthrows his tyrannical father. In classical mythology, Demogorgon is the father of Sky, Earth, Underworld, and Fates, and his name translates from the Greek into “people-monster,” which scholars have read as the symbol of a politically-activated populace (Reiman 215). Love thus motivates and activates social consciousness and political change.

Asia seeks from Demogorgon the name of the creator and controller of the universe, to which Demogorgon answers again and again, “God.” Asia, like the reader of the poem,

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18 For recent work on the relationship between Shelley’s poetry and music, see Jessica K. Quillin, “An assiduous frequenter of the Italian opera: Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound and the opera buffa,” Romantic Circles Praxis Series (May 2005) and Shelley and the Musico-Poetics of Romanticism (forthcoming). In the former, Quillin argues “that the organization of discourse and the specific dramatic arrangement of Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound have strong affinities with the Italian operas of his day, particularly the works of Mozart and Rossini.” Quillin focuses much of her attention on the shifting between blank verse and rhymed, rhythmical passages (which is also present in Queen Mab, as I discuss in chapter four) and the increasing musical qualities of Shelley’s verse in Acts III and IV.
does not know whether “God” refers to Jupiter, another god, Demogorgon, the one mind, or something else. She does not find any possibility satisfactory, and her questioning culminates in a challenge to Jupiter’s tyranny:

but who rains down
Evil, the immedicable plague, which while
Man looks on his creation like a God
And sees that it is glorious, drives him on,
The wreck of his own will, the scorn of Earth,
The outcast, the abandoned, the alone?  (II.iv 100-5)

The implied answer is the combined power of language and human thoughts—that is, the one mind. It is certainly “Not Jove” (II.iv 106). But in the end, as Demogorgon reveals, the answer is unknowable:

—If the Abysm
Could vomit forth its secrets:—but a voice
Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless;
For what would it avail to bid thee gaze
On the revolving world? what to bid speak
Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change?—To these
All things are subject but eternal Love.  (II.iv 114-20)

The lack of an appropriate language—or the problem of language itself—prohibits access to the secrets of the Abysm: “the deep truth is imageless.” Perhaps no statement better reflects Shelley’s critical aesthetics than this. The truths of the potential world are imageless and inaccessible, but love remains accessible.

At the end of Act II, Asia undergoes a miraculous change as love moves from the potential to the actual world and radiates beauty throughout the entire universe. Panthea describes this (re)birth of love in terms of Asia’s original mythological birth:

love, like the atmosphere
Of the sun’s fire filling the living world,
Burst from thee, and illumined Earth and Heaven
And the deep ocean and the sunless caves,
And all that dwells within them[,] (II.v 26-30)

Panthea likens the spirit of love to the atmosphere itself, all-inclusive and “ever-spreading” (II.v 84). Ideal love unites not only people but “all that dwells” in the world. Asia also emphasizes the equalizing and ecological nature of love:

all love is sweet,
Given or returned; common as light is love
And its familiar voice wearies not ever.
Like the wide Heaven, the all-sustaining air,
It makes the reptile equal to the God… (II.v 39-43)

The naturalness and commonness of love is familiar in Shelley’s writing. Similar to the role of vegetarianism in Queen Mab, ideal love in Prometheus Unbound remains grounded in Shelley’s politics of equality and reform. Humans, reptiles, animals, kings, gods—all are connected through love.

Such ecological, aesthetic, and political interconnectedness reflects in the bower of nature and art to which Prometheus and Asia eventually retire. In a parallel to the interplay among poetry, love, and the imagination that Shelley articulates in his Defence, Prometheus and Asia produce “Painting, Sculpture and rapt Poesy / And arts” from “The echoes of the human world, which tell / Of the low voice of love” (III.iii 55-6, 44-5). Prometheus and Asia remain immune from the mutability of the human world; their works of art represent the ideals of human thought by which the evils of the world will be erased. And their art speaks to love, not only between humans but between humans and the natural world:

all plants,
And creeping forms, and insects rainbow-winged
And birds and beasts and fish and human shapes
Which drew disease and pain from my wan bosom,
Draining the poison of despair—shall take
And interchange sweet nutriment. (III.iii 91-6)
This passage, spoken by the Earth, reiterates the centrality of Shelley’s ecological thought to his theory of love. As is the case in Queen Mab, the universal spirit of love and humans’ correspondent revolution of mind will defeat not only tyranny but also many forms of bodily disease. Such is the “diviner day” (II.v 103) that Asia envisions:

Realms where the air we breathe is Love  
Which in the winds and on the waves doth move,  
Harmonizing this Earth with what we feel above.  (II.v 95-7)

These utopian realms remain a projection in three senses of the word: as a blueprint or plan for the future; as an idea or thought; and as a forecasting of what Shelley sees as the potential (and inevitable) progress of the world.

Despite the projection of utopia and synthesis, Shelley maintains negative dialectics through the final two acts of the drama. As in Queen Mab, Shelley presents the potential utopian world in Prometheus Unbound through negatives. The union of Prometheus and Asia in Act III corresponds to Demogorgon’s overthrow of Jupiter, or the end of tyranny, and unlike in “The Mask of Anarchy” the revolution here is wholly nonviolent. Indeed, Shelley presents the revolution of love and mind in such a way that one almost misses it. All things in the human world “put their evil nature off” (III.iv 77), but the only possible description of such a world is in contrast to the existing material conditions of England in 1819:

And behold! thrones were kingless, and men walked  
One with the other even as spirits do,  
None fawned, none trampled; hate, disdain or fear,  
Self-love or self-contempt on human brows  
No more inscribed, as o’er the gate of hell,  
“All hope abandon, ye who enter here”;  
None frowned, none trembled, none with eager fear  
Gazed on another’s eye of cold command  
Until the subject of a tyrant’s will… (III.iv 131-9)
The redeemed world is a negative image of the unredeemed world. There is no hierarchical social structure, no corruption, no fear, no hate, no selfishness, no tyranny. But Shelley cannot articulate exactly what there is: “the deep truth is imageless,” as is a potential utopia.

What Shelley provides is a blueprint for change and reform, a negative image of utopia:

The painted veil, by those who were, called life,
Which mimicked, as with colours idly spread,
All men believed and hoped, is torn aside—
The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed—but man:
Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree,—the King
Over himself; just, gentle, wise—but man:
Passionless? no—yet free from guilt or pain
Which were, for his will made, or suffered them,
Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,
From chance and death and mutability,
The clogs of that which else might oversoar
The loftiest star of unascended Heaven
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane. (III.iv 193-204)

Shelley intensifies his political critique in this passage by emphasizing equality and education as the surest foundations of love and utopia. Yet the existence of this projected utopian future remains uncertain: the human world will never be exempt “From chance and death and mutability.” The material world remains in a dialectical relationship with the ideals for which Shelley strives, including ideal love.

Ulmer presents a very different reading of the preceding passages. For Ulmer, Shelley uses an idealized and metaphorical notion of love to mask the violence of Demogorgon’s overthrow of Jupiter. He argues that the poem “can only advocate the toppling of kings through monarchical diction and elitist conventions” (99); Shelley’s lists of negatives reconfirm “the status quo by inscribing Shelley’s apocalypse with the icons it would smash” (100). In attempting to represent a world without tyranny, that is, Shelley’s
very language becomes tyrannous: “Shelleyan metaphor redistributes power but never
transcends it” (Ulmer 101); “metaphor operates as a mode of power in the service of
power’s eradication” (Ulmer 102). Ulmer returns, in a sense, to Curran’s critique of *Queen
Mab*. Curran argues that in *Queen Mab* Shelley critiques tyranny without explaining how
forms of tyranny become established in the first place. For Curran, the explanation is
ideology, which Shelley realizes later in his career. But Ulmer insists that despite Shelley’s
theory of ideology, the poet recreates tyranny through the power of metaphorical language.
Shelley cannot overcome the problem of language through his idealism.

In contrast to Ulmer, I argue that Shelley approaches dialectically the idealism of
utopia with uncertainty and mutability. But I do not wish to simply recycle critical accounts
of Shelley’s dialectic of idealism and skepticism. It is the predominantly negative character of
Shelley’s dialectics that allows him to embrace simultaneously the optimism of utopia and
the suffering resultant from the lack of reconciliation.

The final act of *Prometheus Unbound* enacts Shelley’s negative dialectics. Most scholars
see Act IV as the most idealized and eroticized act of the entire drama; indeed, it is primarily
composed of songs performed by spirits of the human mind, the Earth, and the Moon
regarding the interpenetration of love throughout the universe. The act portrays a cosmic
celebration where love and humankind create “a chain of linked thought” (394) and where
love harmoniously governs the very acts, motions, and fixed laws of the universe (522).

Yet the drama ends with Demogorgon’s half-warning, half-instructive speech that
reinforces negative dialectics:

This is the Day which down the void Abysm
At the Earth-born’s spell yawns for Heaven’s Despotism,
And Conquest is dragged captive through the Deep;
Love from its awful throne of patient power  
In the wise heart, from the last giddy hour  
Of dread endurance, from the slippery, steep,  
And narrow verge of crag-like Agony, springs  
And folds over the world its healing wings. (IV 554-61)

First, Demogorgon affirms the utopia: it is “the diviner day” when conquest and tyranny itself is conquered by love. But love remains on the verge of utopia—this future projection is not final in any way. In order to maintain utopia, humankind must uphold “Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom and Endurance” (IV 562). The one mind must continually embrace the spirit of love in order to maintain “An empire o’er the disentangled Doom” (IV 569). As Ulmer points out, Shelley’s language here does seem to redistribute tyrannical power to love and the one mind, but this is because his negative projection of utopia is embedded in the current material realities of England. Shelley’s idealizing metaphors thus resist absolute certainty and remain potentials—“the deep truth is imageless,” and utopia ultimately lies “Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.” Moreover, Demogorgon instructs humankind in the Promethean method to reassume the empire of love if tyranny once again takes hold of the world:

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;  
To forgive wrongs darker than Death or Night;  
To defy Power which seems Omnipotent;  
To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates  
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;  
Neither to change nor falter nor repent:  
This, like thy glory, Titan! is to be  
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;  
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire and Victory. (IV 557-78)

This final passage embodies Shelley’s politics of love and his theory of negative dialectics. In order to achieve socio-political reform and change, people must wait patiently and defy tyranny through passive resistance and an embrace of the active spirit of love. Humans must
defy and love, a contradiction, as Sperry points out, that Shelley redresses through consensus (126). The unity of humankind, that is, justifies a politics of love. In addition to love, people must hope for the necessity of a utopian future, and that hope, that ideal thought, will act as a projection. But Shelley stresses that the hope must be forged through the negative projection of utopia. The only way to move toward this utopia is through a collective unity of mind, symbolized by Prometheus. At the same time, Shelley was concerned about the ideal possibility of love leading to “Life, Joy, Empire and Victory” in the material world. In the next section, I show how Epipsychidion revisits and challenges this idealizing notion of love by looking at how the poet develops his dialectic and aesthetic of love.

3. Epipsychidion (1821)

Epipsychidion is partly an ode to Teresa Viviani, partly a discourse on Shelley’s theory of love, and partly “an idealized history” of the poet’s “life and feelings” (Shelley, Letters II 434). Indeed, Shelley was so anxious about the poem’s autobiographical nature that he wished to publish it anonymously or not at all. Shelley grounds his notion of ideal love in material sexuality, human affection, and his personal relationships. He questions his own idealizing and universalizing aesthetics in Epipsychidion more than in any of his poems, but he does not renounce his idealism, as Ulmer argues (153); rather, he more fully embraces the suffering inherent in negative dialectics.

The dialectical interplay of spirit and body and of ideal and material love reflects on the title and subtitle of the poem: “Epipsychidion” translates from the Greek into “On the Subject of the Soul,” and the subtitle, Verses Addressed to the Noble and Unfortunate Lady, Emilia V-------, Now Imprisoned in the Covent of --------, indicates its direct address to Viviani herself.
(Shelley refers to her as “Emily” and “Emilia” in the poem). Shelley’s “ideal” relationship with Viviani was the inspiration for *Epipsychidion*, but he also articulates through the poem the critical and aesthetic dimensions of his theory of love. His personal affection for Viviani leads to a more philosophical and universalizing aesthetics. Viviani was the daughter of the governor of Pisa, and Shelley met her in November 1820 while she was confined in a convent awaiting her arranged marriage. Shelley developed a philosophical and romantic interest in Viviani, and, along with Mary and Claire Claremont, he visited her several times until her marriage on September 8, 1821.

To Shelley, Viviani was the “perfect” vision of youth (*Epipsychidion* 42), a “Sweet Spirit” (1) and “Seraph of Heaven” (21) that seemed to transcend the human in beautiful sublimity. She acts as the poet’s muse, inspiring him not only to praise her but to explore and articulate the concept of love itself. There are three major sections of the poem: (1) an invocation and description of Shelley’s relationship with Emily; (2) the idealized history of Shelley’s life; and (3) a proposal to elope with Emily to a utopian paradise. Yet Shelley’s pursuit of Viviani as the ideal prototype was short-lived. In June of 1822, Shelley wrote in a letter to John Gisborne that Viviani “was a cloud instead of a Juno…. I think one is always in love with something or other; the error, and I confess it is not easy for spirits cased in flesh and blood to avoid it, consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is perhaps eternal” (*Letters* II 434). Shelley here describes the failure of the “Alastor” Poet to which he himself has succumbed. *Epipsychidion*, then, is a more mature version of “Alastor,” but it still generates hope through its developed version of negative dialectics.

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19 Scholars suggest that Shelley used the name Emilia in the poem in allusion to the heroine of Boccaccio’s *Teseida* (Reiman 390).
The poet-speaker of Epipsychidion describes ideal love as a union of souls. He transcends his self through love, through a mingling with the being of another person, in this case, Emily. He directly states, “Emily, / I love thee” (42-3), and he imagines a single soul made whole by their love: “I am not thine: I am a part of thee” (52). Emily’s very presence moves the poet to a trance-like state that suspends his senses (85, 90, 110):

The glory of her being, issuing thence,
Stains the dead, blank, cold air with a warm shade
Of unentangled intermixture, made
By Love, of light and motion: one intense
Diffusion, one serene Omnipresence,
Whose flowing outlines mingle in their flowing,
Around her cheeks and utmost fingers glowing
With the unintermitted blood, which there
Quivers, (as in a fleece of snow-like air
The crimson pulse of living morning quiver,)
Continuously prolonged, and ending never,
Till they are lost, and in that Beauty furled
Which penetrates and clasps and fills the world;
Scarce visible from extreme loveliness. (91-104)

Emily appears as does Asia in Prometheus Unbound: as an embodiment of ideal love. Love creates the “unentangled intermixture of light and motion” that diffuses and “penetrates and clasps and fills the world.” Beauty, that is, expresses the intense unity of love, the interconnectedness of all things in the world, both immaterial and material. The poet emphasizes Emily’s sexuality—her “flowing outlines,” “cheeks,” “fingers,” and “unintermitted blood”—as well as the transcendent qualities of her “being.” Moreover, Shelley’s use of enjambment hides the interlocking rhymes of the couplet verse he employs throughout the poem (excluding the final envoy). The formal unity within apparent disparity, that is, reflects Shelleyan love.
The descriptions of Emily and/as ideal love parallel the “something” from “Tintern Abbey.” In both cases, Shelley and Wordsworth search for an appropriate expression of the seemingly inexpressible essence of love, and they both attempt that expression through a dialectic of thought and feeling, transcendence and materiality. As the speaker of *Epipsychidion* continues, he more explicitly transforms Emily into the epitome of such dialectics:

See where she stands! a mortal shape induced
With love and life and light and deity,
And motion which may change but cannot die;
An image of some bright Eternity;
A shadow of some golden dream; a Splendour
Leaving the third sphere pilotless; a tender
Reflection of the eternal Moon of Love
Under whose motions life’s dull billows move;
A Metaphor of Spring and Youth and Morning;
A Vision like incarnate April, warning,
With smiles and tears, Frost the Anatomy
Into his summer grave. (112-123)

Like Wordsworth’s “something,” Shelley cycles through several different descriptions of Emily. She is “a mortal shape,” but one “indued” with divine and immortal qualities; she is “An image of some bright Eternity”; she is “A shadow of some golden dream”; she is “a Splendour” of the third sphere of love; she is “a tender / Reflection of the eternal Moon of Love”; she is “A Metaphor of Spring and Youth and Morning”; and she is “A Vision like incarnate April.”

These seven metaphorical descriptions reveal the negative character of Shelleyan love. Each one is vague yet powerfully evocative of an ideal beyond language. Wasserman sees these “rhapsodically chaotic” descriptions as unable to reconcile mortality and immortality or the divine and the human (426). But this is Shelley’s point, not his failure.
Emily exemplifies how Shelley grounds ideal love in materiality. Emily is indeed a mortal being, but she possesses the transforming power of love which grants the idea of her a kind of immortality. As in Prometheus Unbound, the hope of ideal love points toward utopia, but exactly what that utopia is remains undetermined in Epipsychidion. Emily is the “image of some bright Eternity,” the “shadow of some golden dream.” Although an angel or “Splendour” of love, she is only a “Metaphor” of the coming spring, only a “Vision” of the season that will dispel the “Frost” of the world.

The metaphorical ambiguity that pervades the preceding passage speaks to what Ulmer calls Shelley’s “dialectical form of metaphor” (Eros 11). By subsuming difference in unity and skepticism in idealism, Shelley idealizes metaphor (like love) “as the vehicle for emotional closure and union” and “celebrates multivalence and becoming as the hallmarks of emotional fulfillment” (Ulmer, Eros 7, 15). The speaker’s many descriptions of Emily transfer “value through a differential circuity that fragments the origin and the one among receding vistas” and enact “a linguistic version of Godwinian perfectibility” (Ulmer, Eros 137, 141). As I discuss in Chapter Four, love and language are inextricably bound in Ulmer’s assessment of Shelleyan love, and, while this is certainly true in Epipsychidion, I argue that Shelley still maintains the earthly mediations that Ulmer and other scholars see the poet as abandoning in his idealist poetics.

In the poem as a whole and in the passages cited above in particular, Shelley continually negotiates ideal and material love through a dialectical method. Similar to the movement of “Tintern Abbey,” Shelley shifts from transcendence to a more materialist stance after the description of Emily:
Ah, woe is me!
What have I dared? where am I lifted? how
Shall I descend, and perish not? I know
That Love makes all things equal: I have heard
By mine own heart this joyous truth averred:
The spirit of the worm beneath the sod
In love and worship, blends itself with God. (123-9)

The very question of descent to materiality moves the poet back to the earth. Moreover,
Shelley links ideal and material love: as is the case in *Prometheus Unbound*, love reveals the
equality and interconnection of all things in the world. When he returns in the next stanza to
idealizing aesthetics, he does not reject the earthly mediations represented by this passage
but rather binds them dialectically to that aesthetics.

Shelley presents the most explicit discourse on ideal love following his materialist
negotiations. Developing his views on marriage first articulated in the notes to *Queen Mab*,
the poet rejects monogamy on the grounds of its exclusivity (149-59) and advocates instead
what he calls “True Love” (160):

> Love is like understanding, that grows bright,
> Gazing on many truths; 'tis like thy light,
> Imagination! which from earth and sky,
> And from the depths of human phantasy,
> As from a thousand prisms and mirrors, fills
> The Universe with glorious beams, and kills
> Error, the worm, with many a sun-like arrow
> Of its reverberated lightning. (162-9)

Like Wordsworthian love, the “intellectual” aspect of Shelleyan love is closely related to the
imagination. Love reveals the truths of the universe created by the one mind—and love also
half-creates those truths it perceives. Love corresponds to the transformative power of
understanding and imagination, but love is more important to Shelley: love is *like*
understanding, it is *like* the light of imagination. The similes suggest their own inadequacy in
expressing the significance of love in the world. Shelley believes that love is the foundation for understanding and imagination as well as their potential to achieve equality and reform. But it is only through embracing the full extent of social community that ideal love can be achieved:

\[
\text{Narrow} \\
\text{The heart that loves, the brain that contemplates,} \\
\text{The life that wears, the spirit that creates} \\
\text{One object, and one form, and builds thereby} \\
\text{A sepulchre for its eternity. (169-173)}
\]

The poet presents a slightly different take on free love than in Queen Mab, but the sentiment is consistent: monogamy is a form of tyranny, and tyranny opposes freedom and love.

Shelley uses his personal relationship with Viviani—for better or for worse—to articulate a universal theory of love. True or ideal love, he writes, “in this differs from gold and clay, / That to divide is not to take away” (160-1). Unlike material things, love multiplies through its diffusive and ever-spreading nature. But love also differs in this from “suffering and dross,” which, if divided, will “Diminish till it is consumed away” (178-9). Love, on the other hand, is a mingled fusion of mind and body, of “pleasure and love and thought” (180), that holds “the promise of a later birth / … of this Elysian earth” (188-9). In his discourse on ideal love, Shelley maintains its relationship with material love. It is only through this dialectical understanding of love that the promise of utopia can emerge.

Shelley precedes utopia in the poem with an idealized history of his life. Similar to the Poet of “Alastor” and the speaker of “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” Shelley, now more clearly identified with the speaker of Epipsychidion, describes his youth as a search for “a Being” that emerges
from the breezes whether low or loud,
And from the rain of every passing cloud,
And from the singing of the summer-birds,
And from all sounds, all silence. In the words
Of antique verse and high romance,—in form,
Sound, colour—in whatever checks that Storm
Which with the shattered present chokes the past;
And in that best philosophy, whose taste
Makes this cold common hell, our life, a doom
As glorious as a fiery martyrdom;
Her Spirit was the harmony of truth.— (206-16)

This Being unifies the natural world with works of art with sensory perceptions with high,
intellectual thoughts with common, everyday experiences. It is the spirit of love, signified by
“the harmony of truth.” As Shelley writes in “On Love,” it is “the bond and the sanction
which connects not only man with man, but with every thing which exists”—and in
Epipsychidion it drives the youthful Shelley to desire intensely the ideal prototype, “this soul
out of my soul” (238). In a string of autobiographical allusions, Shelley vainly seeks for the
prototype in his first sexual experience (256-66); in Harriet (271); in Mary (281-300); and in
Claire (368). Finally, he claims to find the ideal in Emily (343-4).

Shelley’s discovery of the ideal prototype in Emily—the material actualization of
ideal love—is a utopian projection. Reconciliation and attainment of the ideal remains the
hope that drives Epipsychidion. The poet imagines escaping with Emily to “a far Eden of the
purple East” (417), to “an isle under Ionian skies, / Beautiful as a wreck of Paradise” (422-3).
The paradise not only draws from classical imagery but also anticipates a Benjaminian
view of paradise “as a wreck.” Shelley continues to develop his theory of love and utopia in
the context of negative dialectics and metaphorical ambiguity. He describes this utopia with
Emily as a kind of suspended, natural bower filled with books and music, reminiscent of that
of Prometheus and Asia:
And every motion, odour, beam, and tone,
With that deep music is in unison:
Which is a soul within the soul—they seem
Like echoes of an antenatal dream.—
It is an isle 'twixt Heaven, Air, Earth, and Sea,
Cradled, and hung in clear tranquillity[.] (453-8)

Everything speaks to the spirit of love, which links the heavens and the earth, the immaterial and the material. And Shelley (again) presents the utopia through a list of negatives: there is no “Famine or Blight, / Pestilence, War and Earthquake” (461-2). There is only the unity of life and love (551-2).

Gladden suggests that Shelley’s vision of love and its utopian paradise reflects “Shelley’s entrapment within language” (187). Like Ulmer, Gladden sees the matrix of love, language, and desire as shaping Epipsychedion, and his Lacanian reading can help to elucidate the conclusion of the poem. Gladden argues that Emily, as an idealized object,

emerges as one of many of Shelley’s attempts to embody what Lacan designates as the objet a, that ultimate object of desire that lies beyond all modes of signification, entirely outside of articulation. … Shelley’s description of Emily as well as his displacement of the beloved to an island, a space (ambiguously) defined by fluid borders, demonstrate that the poet may be struggling to discover the pre-Oedipal other in a realm that corresponds to the Lacanian Imaginary, an alternative sphere that exists just beyond the perimeter of the Symbolic Order, just beyond tyranny’s vanishing points at the edges of the known world. … Shelley temporarily escapes the Symbolic Order in terms of the French feminist model of jouissance[, that is,] a moment of psychic transcendence during which a subject overleaps the bounds of the Symbolic Order to obtain a glimpse of the lost realm of the Imaginary. (184-5, 187)

Gladden’s reading reflects Shelley’s own admission of his inability to attain the eternal, ideal of love, and it relates in many ways to my reading of the poem’s negative dialectics. There are moments when one can transcend the fragments of material reality in order to glimpse unity/the ideal/truth/the Lacanian Imaginary, but language ultimately fails to capture this
experience. Shelley nevertheless attempts to capture “the deep truth” in his poetry, oftentimes by projecting utopia, and he avoids ideological blindness through his self-conscious negative dialectics.

The utopian paradise in *Epipsychidion* is a product of Shelley’s mind. He projects an exclusive, personal utopia amidst his broader theory of love. This tension between his individualized relationship with Emily and his universalizing aesthetics reveals the problem of Shelleyan love: it can never actually be achieved. But this is also its triumph. Shelleyan love is always becoming; it embodies a negative dialectics that generates hope and rejects synthesis and reconciliation. The negative character of the dialectic between ideal and material love can (and Shelley believes will) lead to human perfection through reform, education, and community, and thus to a future where negative dialectics is no longer necessary. But in 1821, as now, this has not occurred. For Shelley, unredeemed language fails:

> The winged words on which my soul would pierce  
> Into the height of love’s rare Universe,  
> Are chains of lead around its flight of fire.—  
> I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire! (588-91)

And as Shelley suggests in the envoy that concludes the poem, the “reward” of love “is in the world divine / Which, if not here, it builds beyond the grave” (597-8). As Wasserman concludes in his reading of the poem, “The whole burden of all his poems, with all their striving after the ideal, Shelley realizes as he looks back over his career, has really been that love needs a perfect world, which, if it is impossible here—and the ultimate transfiguration of the island paradise into a postmortal states makes that likely—it ‘creates for itself in the
infinite”” (461). If utopia remains inaccessible in the human world, it develops beyond the painted veil of life, whatever and wherever that may be.
CONCLUSION: HEMANS AND THE VICTORIANS

Felicia Hemans was one of the most popular and prolific poets of the Romantic and Victorian periods. She was the highest paid writer for *Blackwood’s Magazine*, her work was admired by Shelley, Wordsworth, Scott, and Byron (despite the latter’s infamous nickname for her, “Mrs. He-Woman”); and her poems were memorized and recited by school children. She was, in all senses of the term, a literary celebrity. Moreover, scholars often situate Hemans’s work as a bridge from the Romantic to the Victorian period. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk state that “she is the last Romantic and the first Victorian” (4). Not only does Hemans’s career span nearly three decades from 1808 to 1835 but the seeming emphasis on domesticity, sentimentalism, and conventional British values in her poetry aligns her more with our modern (and perhaps stereotypical) notion of Victorian literature than with the radical politics and poetics of Romanticism. In the following section, however, I argue that Hemans’s conception of love has much in common with those of Wordsworth and Shelley, and her poetry continues to engage with the radical Romantic tradition into the 1830s.¹

Hemans admittedly provides a more direct link to the Victorian period than do many other canonical Romantic poets. Wordsworth, of course, continued to publish poetry until his death in 1850, and his perceived conservatism also demonstrates the waning of Romantic

ideals. But Hemans’s engagements with the conventions of domesticity, femininity, and nationalism speak more to the issues that would come to dominate much of the literature of the Victorian period. Norma Clarke writes in *Ambitious Heights* that “Mrs. Hemans” is the “undisputed representative poet of Victorian imperial and domestic ideology” (45), but such a characterization of Hemans is limiting and at times unsupported by her poetry. In this conclusion, I develop the work of scholars such as Susan Wolfson and Stephen Behrendt who see Hemans (and other women poets of the period) as blurring and challenging gender, genre, and generational distinctions that scholars often use in studies of Romanticism. I also show how Hemans’s continuity with Wordsworthian and Shelleyan notions of love parallels the poetry of Matthew Arnold. Both Hemans and Arnold attest to the continuing influence of Romantic conceptions of love at a time when those very conceptions were seen as the products of an idealized and irrecoverable epistemology. Both poets continue to think about Romantic love in serious and sophisticated ways. The Romantics’ dialectical notion of love provides Victorian poets such as Arnold with a poetics both desirable and dubious. As such, love is a defining characteristic and legacy of Romanticism.

In the first section of this conclusion, I analyze Hemans’s poetry with attention to her development of and challenge to both Wordsworthian and Shelleyan love over her career. I begin with one of her first volumes of poetry, *The Domestic Affections and Other Poems* (1812), and conclude with one of her last, *Songs of the Affections, with Other Poems* (1830).\(^2\)

Through readings of “The Domestic Affections” and “A Spirit’s Return”—the two central

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\(^2\) Scholars typically divide Hemans’s career into three periods: early (1808-23), middle (1823-1830), and late (1830-1835). As Sweet and Melnyk suggest, Hemans’s work develops through these periods from “public and largely occasional poetry” to “more intimate and haunting lyric poems” to “experiments towards a new, scriptural polity” (4-5). My selection of the 1812 and 1830 volumes addresses each period, as the 1830 volume links Hemans’s middle and late periods.
poems of each collection, respectively—I argue that Hemans moves from an embrace and celebration of earthly, domestic, and familial love in the former to a more uncertain and certainly more Romantic acknowledgement of a spiritual, otherworldly, and idealizing conception of love in the latter. In the second section I consider briefly the legacy of Romantic love in the early poetry of Arnold. Arnold’s Victorian engagements with Wordsworth, Shelley, and Hemans attempt to recover the idealism of Romanticism while concurrently anticipating the skepticism and alienation characteristic of Modernism.

1. The Other Bright Star: Felicia Hemans

Critical discussions of Hemans over the past two decades tend to focus on three issues: (1) gender, (2) Hemans’s contacts with other major Romantic poets, and (3) the justification for her inclusion in the canon. As is the case with many British women writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Hemans was neglected in scholarship, anthologies, and classrooms until her recovery during the 1980s and 1990s. Wolfson succinctly characterizes the arc of Hemans’s critical reputation: “from polite discouragement, to emerging appreciation, to celebrity, to condescension, to obscurity, to critical and scholarly recovery, to renewed classroom interest” (Felicia Hemans xiv). Despite Hemans’s popular and critical success for much of the nineteenth century, scholars pushed the “poetess” to the periphery of Romanticism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, citing the “feminine qualities” of her writing and her perceived mediocrity as compared to the “Big Six.” But due in large part to the work of scholars such as Wolfson,
Behrendt, Sweet, and Paula Feldman, Hemans has been recovered fully and is being reasserted in scholarship and in classrooms as an important Romantic poet.³

The title of the current section alludes both to Hemans’s ongoing critical reassessments and to the issues of gender that dominate scholarship on her poetry. One may expect a study on Romantic love to move from Shelley to Keats, but Hemans’s career eclipses that of Keats in duration and in contemporary popularity, and as such she can provide a broader and more comprehensive account of Romantic conceptions of love. At the same time, I wish to suggest that Hemans is just as important a poet as Keats in our evolving construction and understanding of Romanticism and the literary landscape of the early nineteenth century.

Hemans’s contemporary reviewers, readers, and friends tended to construct her as the ideal female poet, and Hemans often performed the role. Although a few women had succeeded in the literary marketplace for decades, early nineteenth-century British culture was “increasingly anxious to insist on [women’s] subordination and inferiority” (Clarke 19). To become a professional female writer was to challenge social conventions—gender ideology dictated that a woman should be wife and mother first, and if she must write, it should be done in a “feminine” manner. Hemans valued her literary career more than her marriage, but she projected an idealized vision of femininity in her poetry and in her public persona. She began publishing poetry as a precocious teenager in 1808; she married Captain

Alfred Hemans in 1812 and had five sons with him; in an apparently consensual separation, her husband went to Rome in 1818, and they never saw each other again; and by the 1820s she was a literary celebrity. Hemans had, as it were, “failed” as a wife in her private life, but she played the role of the “ideal” woman in public. As Wolfson suggests, Hemans’s “poetry was a primer in the sphere of the domestic affections, religious piety, and patriotic passion, and of the female (more particularly, maternal) responsibility for binding these sensibilities together” (“Revolving” 214). Hemans idealized “the ‘essentially feminine’ as essentially ‘domestic’ and ‘self-sacrificing’” (Wolfson “Revolving” 214-5). Like Francis Jeffrey’s famous review of the poet in 1829, the public saw in “the poetry of Mrs Hemans a fine exemplification of Female Poetry” (34). Twentieth-century scholarship often sustains such a demarcation between “masculine” and “feminine” poetry,4 but, as Wolfson points out,

What is missed between the extremes is a middle ground of equivocation, of poignant protest, and of shadowy critique— in many ways the haunt and main region of Hemans’s song. Encased in a culturally orthodox language of the domestic affections, the emotional and affective center of her poems frequently exposes women’s devastating struggles against the structures, both domestic and national, in which these struggles are set. (“Revolving” 221-2)

Hemans was market-savvy enough to portray herself as an ideal “poetess,” but her poetry often reveals the tensions between her public and private lives. And in that tension emerges her theory of love, couched in “a culturally orthodox language of the domestic affections.”

Hemans’s theory of love also develops from her relationships with other major Romantic poets, both textual and personal. Her correspondence with Shelley and Byron and her friendships with Scott, Wordsworth, and the Jewsbury sisters have garnered critical

4 See Mellor and Ross.
attention, and I do not wish to recount the details of these relationships. I evoke them here to stress the community of writers of which Hemans was a part, a community that reveals continuity between first- and second-generation Romantic poets as well as between male and female poets. Gender distinctions do matter, but, as Behrendt puts the matter,

the broader landscape of Romantic poetry inscribed by the presence and activity of men and women alike does not break down quite so neatly along gender lines, nor does it entirely support any critical insistence on an inevitable and essentialist separation and segregation of female poets from male (or male from female, to put it somewhat differently). To insist on such an uncompromising split is to at once misrepresent and oversimplify a complicated historical, social, political, economic, intellectual, and literary setting. (“Gap” 30)

In this section I remain cognizant of gender issues that impact Hemans and Romantic scholarship, but I approach Hemans’s poetry as part of the same literary setting inhabited by Wordsworth and Shelley that I have established in chapters one through five. My approach to Hemans draws from the above-mentioned critical approaches through an analysis of her conception of love. What strikes me consistently in reading Hemans’s poetry is not only her craft and style—and her obvious continuity with the

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6 Wolfson asserts a similar stance in Borderlines, where she destabilizes a “masculine” center of Romanticism in favor of a more complex negotiation between genders in literature of the period. For three recent studies on communities of Romantic writers, see Beth Lau, ed., Fellow Romantics: Male and Female British Writers, 1790-1835 (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009); Stephen Behrendt, British Women Poets and the Romantic Writing Community (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2009); and Susan Wolfson, Romantic Interactions: Social Being and the Turf of Literary Action (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2010).
Romantic poetic tradition—but also her emphasis on the “affections.” The word appears in
the titles to her first and next-to-last collections of poetry, and it comes up over and over
again in many of her best poems. What exactly does Hemans mean by “affections”? Is it a
synonym for “love”? Are the “domestic affections” she writes of in 1812 different from her
“songs of the affections” written nearly twenty years later? These questions drive my
investigation in the following pages, and my tentative answers are “yes”: the affections are
directly related to love (often synonymous with love), and there is a distinct shift in
Hemans’s attitude toward love, affection, and domesticity between these two collections.

“The Domestic Affections” is the final poem in the volume of the same name, and it
stands as the crowning achievement (much like “Tintern Abbey” in Lyrical Ballads). The
volume itself is full of short odes, songs, sonnets, and hymns, but the much longer title
poem is the most complex and sophisticated of the poems. Written in conversational, easy-
flowing couplets, the poem begins as a celebration of affection and of ideals of the “sacred
home” (65). But the work turns increasingly political and uncertain as Hemans introduces a
series of sentimental and fragmentary narratives that contrast with the serenity of the initial
stanzas: first, a narrative of a soldier returning home from war; second, a tale of a
shipwrecked wanderer cut off from all familial and social ties; third, a description of an
emigrant displaced by the Napoleonic Wars; and fourth, a scene of a daughter dying in her
mother’s arms. The tension between domestic serenity and perpetual war drives the poem—
what Wolfson calls Hemans’s “dark intuition” (Felicia Hemans 4)—and it is clear that the
speaker’s gendered position affords her a special preparedness to negotiate this precarious
terrain. The poem concludes with notions of Christian consolation and a return to the celebration of affection and love with which the poem begins. “The Domestic Affections” thus develops formally and thematically through a dialectical conception of love.

The poem begins with descriptions of the domestic affections. The poet writes of the affections as sacred, divine, and seemingly religious in nature: they are “tranquil” and “sacred joys” (1, 15), “Those pure delights, ordain’d on life to throw / Gleams of the bliss ethereal natures know” (5-6). The speaker initiates a somewhat Shelleyan dialogue between materiality and immateriality that runs throughout the poem: she suggests that there are “ethereal natures” whose “bliss” we only glimpse through “affection.” Through a series of questions, the speaker locates the affections’ “home” not on “Ambition’s regal throne,” nor “with luxury,” nor even in “Heav’n,” but “in the purest mind” “On earth so sweet” (7, 9, 11, 16, 18). The affections exist within the human mind in the material world—and more specifically, in the domestic home (naturally):

Nurs’d on the lap of solitude and shade,
The violet smiles, embosom’d in the glade;
There sheds her spirit on the lonely gale,
Gem of seclusion! treasure of the vale!
Thus, far retir’d from life’s tumultuous road,
Domestic bliss has fix’d her calm abode[]. (19-24)

The speaker conceives of “Domestic bliss,” or the product of the domestic affections, as “fix’d” and unchanging amidst the tumultuousness of life. Hemans draws from the early nineteenth-century discourse on love in her depiction of the affections: like love, the affections link the divine with the human, thoughts with feelings, immateriality with materiality. What is distinct in this poem, as opposed to those of Wordsworth and Shelley, is

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7 The tension between war and domesticity also plays a major role in “The Angel of the Sun” and the volume’s longest poem, “War and Peace.”
the definitively domestic (and thus feminine) nature of love with which Hemans works (and the complete lack of sexuality). She feminizes Romantic love by using the term “affections.” Love of nature does not lead to love of humankind in Hemans, nor does love possess a profoundly philosophical and abstract nature. But love does forge communities; it connects people to each other, it creates the home, and it dwells directly in the domestic sphere.

For Hemans the affections are eternal and unchanging. In another poem of the 1812 volume, “To My Younger Brother,” Hemans writes that her “affection” is “unfading in truth” and not subject to “decay” (35, 36). She invokes love to articulate a spiritual connection to her brother while he was fighting in the Peninsula War. In language strikingly similar to Lamb’s poem on love, Hemans writes,

No time can impair it, no change can destroy,  
Whate’er be the lot I am destin’d to share;  
It will smile in the sun-shine of hope and of joy,  
And beam thro’ the cloud of despair! (37-40)

Hemans clearly conflates affection with love—or rather, she here uses the term “affection” as a synonym for “love.” Consider the similarities with Lamb’s poem (cited in the introduction to Part Two):

Love is the passion which endureth,  
Which neither time nor absence cureth;  
Which nought of earthly change can sever:  
Love is the light which shines for ever. (1-4)

Both poets’ descriptions reflect Beaty’s characterization of Romantic love as “the light from heaven.” Moreover, in “To My Mother,” Hemans writes that “filial love,” which like the “softer light” of “heav’n” can “light the cloudy path of woe,” teaches us “to rejoice” in times

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8 As discussed in the Introduction, the entries for “affection” and “love” in the OED demonstrate their entwined etymological histories.
of sorrow, grief, and misfortune (33, 39, 42, 57, 58). In this poem, she invokes love as a kind of Christian consolation for the mutability and misfortune of life. As is the case in “The Domestic Affections,” love emerges in contrast to the instability and uncertainty of war, nation, empire, and change.

The speaker of “The Domestic Affections” presents a conception of love that initially appears escapist and evasive. The personified “Domestic bliss” remains “calm as evening” while “the storms of discord roll” and “While war’s red lightnings desolate the ball, / And thrones and empires in destruction fall” (35, 31, 33-4). Amidst this chaos, feminine bliss remains “serene” (59): “She dwells, unruffled, in her bow’r of rest, / Her empire, home!—her throne, affection’s breast!” (37-8). But, as Tricia Lootens argues, “home” is never just the domestic home in Hemans—it is also the national home. According to Lootens, “Hemans’s conception of the home as both separate empire and the prerequisite for empire” pervades her poetic career (249). The domestic home, that is, serves as the model for the national home. In the lines cited above, Hemans’s poignant references to “empires” and “thrones” reveal the political nature of her treatment of love. Her idealized vision of domestic bliss acts as a projection embedded in and dialectically produced by the material realities of Britain in 1812—that is, an empire continually at war and seemingly on the verge of chaos. A solution for war and instability, the poem suggests, can be found in the unity, interconnectedness, and serenity of love.

The speaker reinforces love’s unifying power in the following stanza through descriptions of the beauty of the natural world. The “loveliest blooms” of nature, the “softer sun-shine,” the awakening of spring, the “creative” power of summer, the “fading loveliness” of autumn (39-46), all reflect the beauty of domesticity. Similar to Wordsworth
and Shelley, Hemans constructs an idealizing and universalizing aesthetics of love. Moreover, the spirit of love produces a new epistemology. For Hemans, the “mental peace” inherent in love “Throws mellowing tints, and harmonizing light” (49, 50) over all that she perceives.

But what happens when individuals are not confined to the home? What happens when we are “torn from all we love” (77)? This is where Hemans turns in the sixth stanza, and she supplies specific examples in the form of narratives to anchor the more universalizing impulses of the poem’s initial lyrical stanzas. Similar to the movement of Wordsworth’s *An Evening Walk*, the interplay between lyric and narrative works dialectically in “The Domestic Affections” to reveal Hemans’s theory of love. As each narrative unfolds, the speaker interjects lyrical lines that conjure the “bright vista” of love, bliss, and affection, the “magnet-star” (80) that draws both thought and body home.

The speaker first presents the narrative of a soldier by means of critique and contrast. She asks a series of questions to establish the purpose of the narrative:

Can war’s dread scenes the hallow’d ties efface,
Each tender thought, each fond remembrance chase?
Can fields of carnage, days of toil, destroy
The lov’d impressions of domestic joy? (111-4)

The answers, already implied in the first five stanzas of the poem, are “no.” The “dreams” of home “cheer the soldier’s breast, / In hostile climes” (115-6) and connect him through love and “pure affection” (121) to those who are living while he mourns the dead that surround him on the battlefield. When he does return to his home, “domestic ties” and “angel-sympathies” embrace him through “love and friendship” (153, 154, 141). Yet the “serene delight” (164) of home does not fully escape the death and destruction of war. The speaker compares the scene to “Arcadian bow’rs” (158), which, as Wolfson points out, subtly
suggest the “darker sense of Death’s pronouncement, *Et in Arcadia ego*” (Felicia Hemans 15). Hemans’s ideal conception of love, that is, remains tied to death and materiality.

Hemans further emphasizes the dialectical nature of love in a lyrical interlude between the narrative of the soldier and the tale of the shipwrecked wanderer. The speaker compares the desire of an eagle to return to his nest after soaring through the sublime heights of the sky (165-74) to the flight of “Genius” into “the wide regions of the mental sphere” (175-6), where he “surveys / The clearest heav’n of intellectual rays!” (179-80). Genius, like the eagle, must descend from his intellectual heights to earthly affection. As Dorothy helps Wordsworth to move from intellectual love to human affection in Book XIII of *The Prelude*, so Genius in “The Domestic Affections” needs the help of domestic bliss to ground his intellectual bliss:

Still, from the bliss, ethereal and refin’d,
Which crowns the soarings of triumphant mind,
At length he flies, to that serene retreat,
Where calm and pure, the mild affections meet;
Embosom’d there, to feel and to impart,
The softer pleasures of the social heart! (1185-90)

The speaker clearly reinforces conventional nineteenth-century gender roles here—Genius is masculine while domesticity is feminine—but she also asserts the necessity of the feminine role more forcefully than does Wordsworth (or Shelley, for that matter). Despite such necessity, Wolfson points out that “The homeward track [of Genius] is as affectively reluctant as it is thematically calculated. … with the dilating syntax of *yet, while, still*, the rapturous phase before the pivot on retreat so temporizes, that retreat from bliss and triumphant soaring comes to seem a reluctant fall” (*Borderlines* 55). Although Genius returns to the domestic home, it would seem that Hemans presents a subtle uncertainty regarding
such “retreat.” Wolfson’s reading of the passage reinforces her argument that the poem as “hymn to home’s serene retreat manages to index solitude, seclusion, loneliness, and a withdrawal from the world that seems a withdrawal from life itself,” and that “the teenage poet was sensing a socially wrought ideal so wearing on woman as to make her long for death as the only release” (Borderlines 55, 56). In contrast, I read love as more powerful than death in the poem. In this passage, Hemans ultimately privileges domesticity, not genius—and love, likened to the domestic affections, is the most powerful force in the material world. Hemans might be reluctant to move from intellectual genius to earthly affection, but she does so in the poem over and over again.

The second narrative unfolds after the lyrical interlude on genius: the tale of a shipwrecked wanderer. This bizarre tale begins with the wanderer stranded on a “deserted” and “lonely isle” (192, 193) in Siberia—although the actual shipwreck is alluded to earlier in the poem (83-100). The eerie island recalls the tone of Wordsworth’s Salisbury Plain, and, like the male wanderer of that poem, the wanderer here finds solace in human affection:

Yes! there, c’en there, in that tremendous clime,
Where desert-grandeur frowns, in pomp sublime;
Where winter triumphs, thro’ the polar night,
In all his wild magnificence of might;
E’en there, Affection’s hallow’d spell might pour,
The light of heav’n around th’ inclement shore!
And, like the vales with bloom and sun-shine grac’d,
That smile, by circling Pyrenees embrac’d,
Teach the pure heart, with vital fires to glow,
E’en ’midst the world of solitude and snow! (241-50)

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9 Hemans appears to draw from Marie-Sophie Ristau Cottin’s Elizabeth; ou, Les Exilés de Sibérie, a popular sentimental novel published in 1806. Hemans, however, presents a confusing geography, where the wandered is stranded on an island in Siberia yet is also surrounded by the Pyrenees.
Unlike Wordsworth’s wanderer, Hemans’s wanderer does not actually find another person. But the wanderer does find the spirit of love, the “spell” of “Affection” which “pours” the harmonizing “light of heav’n” on him and teaches him to see the world in a new way. Although he cannot return to his “cherish’d friends” and “native shore” (213), the wanderer retains a spiritual connection to humanity through love. As the poet writes,

And thus, Affection, can thy voice compose
The stormy tide of passions and of woes;
Bid every throb of wild emotion cease,
And lull misfortune in the arms of peace! (255-8)

Affection again stands in for love, which ideally produces for the wanderer the tranquility and serenity described in the opening stanzas of the poem.

The quatrain cited above serves as an interlude between the narrative of the wanderer and that of the emigrant. Displaced by the Napoleonic Wars, this “gallant exile” (277, 281) wanders the world in grief, but “filial love” assuages his pains and sorrows (265-6). The emigrant’s daughter survived the “carnage” (285) of war—the only other member of his family, it seems, that did survive. She enacts the kind of self-sacrifice that Wolfson finds so haunting in the poem by suppressing her own grief in order to “sooth” her father with the “divine relief” (289) of love and of Christian consolation:

Her angel-voice his fainting soul can raise
To brighter visions of celestial days!
And speak of realms, where virtue’s wing shall soar
One eagle-plume—to wonder and adore!
And friends, divided here, shall meet at last,
Unite their kindred souls—and smile on all the past! (301-6)

The emigrant’s daughter maintains a link to their family and friends through an epistemology of love. She constructs a utopian realm akin to the Christian concept of heaven, but it is a realm produced by the death and destruction of their war-torn reality. Even though the
emigrant and his daughter are forever removed from their home, their love and affection for one another still provide a “harmonizing light.”

The spiritual and religious basis of utopia and love intensifies in the subsequent stanza. The speaker states:

Yes! we may hope, that Nature’s deathless ties,  
Renew’d, refin’d—shall triumph in the skies!  
Heart-soothing thought! whose lov’d, consoling pow’r,  
With seraph-dreams can gild reflection’s hour;  
Oh! still be near! and bright’ning thro’ the gloom,  
Beam and ascend! the day-star of the tomb!  
And smile for those, in sternest ordeals prov’d,  
Those lonely hearts, bereft of all they lov’d! (307-14)

The speaker “hopes” for a Christian afterlife, but this utopian projection remains a “Heart-soothing thought,” a “dream” that does not possess absolute certainty. But it certainly possesses a “consoling pow’r” for those afflicted by the pain and suffering of death, destruction, and war.

Hemans’s utopia is social and political in nature, but it is of a much different order than those of Shelley discussed in chapters four and five. Hemans draws more from conventional Christian ideology than Shelley, but she also domesticates utopia in a parallel of her substitution of “affection” for “love.” Her visions of utopia are subdued and conservative, not intense and radical, but they retain a universalizing impulse. In this sense, Hemans has more in common with Wordsworth than with Shelley. The fourth and final narrative of the poem, for example, is nearly identical to the tale of the female beggar in An Evening Walk. In “The Domestic Affections,” however, the child dies in her mother’s arms “by the couch” (315) and not outdoors in the freezing cold. And instead of turning to the natural world after the death scene, as is the case in Wordsworth, the speaker of Hemans’s
poem turns to the “Visions of hope” (347) of a Christian afterlife in “glory’s boundless
realms, and worlds of living light!” (370).

Each of the narrative fragments in the poem provides particular examples of human relationships that create a dialectic with the more ideal descriptions of love from the first five stanzas and from the lyrical interludes. This dialectical movement forms the basis of Hemans’s conception of love, as it does in Wordsworth and Shelley. In the final stanzas of “The Domestic Affections,” Hemans moves back to cosmic, universalizing impulses as she imagines the spirits of “departed friends” (371) returning to earth to console the living. Love is “something intermediate,” the link between the living and the dead, the divine and the human. Love, in the form of spirits, links the natural world with humans: it exists in the “moon-light,” the “glens, and wood-paths,” “the summer-wind,” and it creates “wild symphonies” in the natural world “With soft enchantments and divine control” (385, 386, 391, 392, 394). The music of love and affection will “Efface the mem’ry of” the departed’s “last farewell” and will instead tell “Of glowing joys” and “radiant prospects”—it will renew “The sweet communion of the past” (401, 402, 403). The spirit of love, in effect, negotiates between individual and universal love.

Hemans ultimately prefers and privileges a universal love. The Christian consolation that pervades the final lines of the poem reinforces the images of the sacred home and of the domestic affections that pervade the initial stanzas:

10 Mourning also plays an important role in the social cohesion and unity forged by love. The sentimental narratives of the poem forge communities—not only between the living and the dead, but also between Hemans and her readers.
Yes! in the noon of that Elysian clime,
Beyond the sphere of anguish, death, or time;
Where mind’s bright eye, with renovated fire,
Shall beam on glories—never to expire;
Oh! there, th’ illumin’d soul may fondly trust,
More pure, more perfect, rising from the dust;
Those mild affections, whose consoling light
Sheds the soft moon-beam on terrestrial night;
Sublim’d, ennobled, shall for ever glow,
Exalting rapture—not assuaging woe!  (427-32)

The utopian heaven which the speaker describes is inaccessible in the material world. This “Elysian clime,” like its classical counterpart, is beyond the earth; it is where the “pure” and “perfect” soul retires after death. But it is also the place where the affections “shall for ever glow.” The speaker, then, suggests a direct link between the domestic home and the utopian afterlife. In this sense, utopia is possibly attainable through the cultivation of domesticity and love. While Hemans rejects the Shelleyan notion that a utopian future is possible and inevitable, she does adopt a notion of perfectibility in which the domestic affections serve as a social and political model of reform for a world ravaged by war. The love, affection, friendship, and familial ties of the domestic home can and should lead to the “domestication” of the national home.

In a more Shelleyan register, Hemans writes of the possibility of a peaceful future for Great Britain in “War and Peace,” the longest poem of the 1812 volume. In this poem, which shares many affinities with “The Domestic Affections,” the poet’s love of country is complicated by the misery of war, but she imagines the eventual cessation of war—that is, “Futurity’s” promise of peace:

Dawn, age of bliss! the wounds of discord close,
Furl the red standard, bid the sword repose!
Then o’er the globe let worshipp’d freedom smile,
Bright as in Albion’s truth-illumin’d isle!
Her Grecian temple rear on every shore,
Where every knee shall bend and heart adore! (stanza 15)

This “age of bliss” is not the kind of utopian paradise that Shelley imagines in *Queen Mab* or *Prometheus Unbound*, but the passage does reflect a Shelleyan certainty in social and political reform. Hemans, however, imagines a utopian world in which Albion rules all other nations like a king, something Shelley would never advocate. Hemans imagines Albion as an adored ruler instead of a tyrant, one who spreads “truth” or democracy throughout the world. As Lootens argues, “The overall argument of ‘War and Peace’ is irreproachably conventional”—that is, war is evil but justified in the case of the Napoleonic Wars—yet the poem possesses a “paradigmatic reversal” in its representations of a triumphant Albion as tyrant through several comparisons to Napoleon (240, 241). Hemans upholds the existing social structures and hierarchies of her time while at the same time subtly critiquing them.

Despite its nationalistic rhetoric, “War and Peace,” like “The Domestic Affections,” ends with Christian consolation and universal love. The speaker envisions “angelic love” (stanza 57) spreading throughout the world as angels sing of a peaceful future akin to Shelley’s description of a utopian world in *Prometheus Unbound*:

“Now the work of death is o’er,
Sleep, thou sword! to wake no more!
Never more Ambition’s hand
Shall wave thee o’er a trembling land!

Never more, in hopeless anguish,
Caus’d by thee, shall virtue languish!
Rapture! swell the choral voice,
Favor’d earth, rejoice, rejoice!

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11 There is no standard or scholarly text of the poem, and the available editions have no line numbers.
―Cease to flow, thou purple flood,
―Cease to fall, ye tears of blood!
―Swell no more than clarion’s breath,
―Wake no more the song of death! (stanzas 59-61)

What the angels describe is a utopian future that negates but remains bound to the materials realities of Hemans’s day. The future, utopian world is defined by what it is not: it is a world free from death, ambition, anguish, and war, and, as the speaker continues, exempt from “rage,” “vengeance,” “destruction,” and violence of all kinds (stanza 64). What this world does have is “sweet Affection” (stanza 64), or love, the embodiment and source of unity, interconnectedness, and peace. Ultimately, Hemans offers a conventional description of heaven with which to imagine a utopian future:

Let peace on earth resound from heav’n once more,
And angel-harps th’ exulting anthems pour;
While faith, and truth, and holy wisdom bind,
One hallow’d zone—to circle all mankind! (stanza 67)

This is heaven on earth, or reconciliation of heaven and earth. Hemans replaces the image of a ruling Britain with a spiritual and religious triumvirate of faith, truth, and wisdom. Love—or the rhetoric of love, as Ulmer suggests in his reading of Shelley—thus takes on the tyrannical power that it seeks to displace. But Hemans retains this monarchical power for a specific reason: like the domestic affections, love serves as a model for the national home which requires structural hierarchies. Heaven rules the earth, and love, as the light from heaven, rules humankind.

In “The Domestic Affections” and in “War and Peace,” Hemans draws from established social structures, conventions, and gender ideologies in her conception of love and in her projection of utopia. But the former reveals a subtle critique of those structures, conventions, and ideologies in a way that the latter does not. As Wolfson suggests, “The
Domestic Affections” “betrays a precociously dark intuition: an economy of female self-sacrifice that, however heroic, may leave women without nurture or hope in a world perpetually at war” (Felicia Hemans 4). Wolfson sees this same ambivalence at work in “War and Peace,” but I argue that Hemans’s dialectical conception of love more clearly reveals itself as critique in “The Domestic Affections.” Hemans’s conception of love is certainly bound to nineteenth-century gender ideology, but she would continue to develop and complicate her theory of love over the next twenty years.

Hemans’s fame grew steadily in the 1810s and 1820s, as did her catalogue of publications. In the years following The Domestic Affections, she published many notable poems and volumes, including The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy (1816), Modern Greece, A Poem (1817), Tales, and Historic Scenes, in Verse (1819), Welsh Melodies (1822), The Forest Sanctuary: and Other Poems (1825), Records of Woman: With Other Poems (1828), Songs of the Affections, with Other Poems (1830), Hymns for Childhood (1834), National Lyrics and Songs for Music (1834), and Scenes and Hymns of Life (1834). The semi-autobiographical Records of Woman was her most successful volume, and it has received the most sustained critical attention since her scholarly recovery. The volume is comprised of poems on the lives of famous and anonymous women, poems “of woman’s social fate in a man’s world, her sufferings and love-longings, her abandonments, desperate suicides and infanticides, her release only through death” (Wolfson, Felicia Hemans xvii). Indeed, romantic love plays a central role in Records of Woman, and the dark, melancholy feel of the volume anticipates the tone of many poems in Songs of the Affections.12

12 A sustained analysis of Records of Woman outstrips the limits of this study, but it is worth noting that the title page to the volume contains the following lines from Wordsworth’s Laodamia (1815): “Mightier far / Than
Along with her public rise to fame, Hemans experienced many changes in her personal life during the eighteen years between *The Domestic Affections* and *Songs of the Affections*. As noted in the previous section, she separated from her husband in 1818, which provided constant social anxiety and topic for public conversation. In 1827, her mother died, and Hemans was never quite the same. She had lived in Wales with her mother, her sons, and her brother’s family since separating from her husband, and their home had provided Hemans with the kind of seclusion and serenity she idealized in her poetry. After her mother’s death, two of her boys went to live with their father in Italy; Hemans moved with her other three sons to Liverpool; her brother moved to Ireland; she stayed with Scott for a while in 1828; and she stayed with the Wordsworths for a while in 1829. Hemans eventually moved to Dublin in 1831 to be near her brother, and she died there on May 16, 1835 of a “weak heart” (most likely a symptom of rheumatic fever). As Melnyk suggests, “The breakup of this household and the breakdown of these domestic support systems as a result of her mother’s death brought about a personal and poetic crisis that led Hemans to question the justification of her career and meaning of her life” (“Vatic” 75). The loss of and alienation from friends and family certainly plays a role in the melancholy of Hemans’s later poetry. Her life as a celebrity was shaped by her often irreconcilable desires for literary fame and for familial and domestic ties.

Such desires take shape in “A Spirit’s Return,” the lead poem of *Songs of the Affections*. Hemans said it was her favorite poem, and its topic—interaction with a spirit-lover—aligns it with Shelley’s “Alastor,” Byron’s *Manfred*, Wordsworth’s “Laodamia,” and Keats’s

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strength of nerve or sinew, or the sway / Of magic potent over sun and star, / Is love, though oft to agony distrest, / And though his favourite seat be feeble woman’s breast.”
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249
“Isabella” (which are directly and indirectly alluded to in Hemans’s poem). Hemans abandons domesticity in the poem in favor of spiritual musings and the natural world. Similar to those of “Alastor,” “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” and Epipsychidion, the speaker of “A Spirit’s Return” recounts her lonely, alienated youth and subsequent quest for the secret of life in the natural world, in spirits and ghosts, and ultimately in embodied ideal love, which she finds in her unnamed lover. After her lover dies, she converses with his ghost, an experience that leaves her dissatisfied and cut off from earthly cares and human ties. In the end, she desires a utopian reconciliation that may be attainable only through death.

“A Spirit’s Return” originated from a fireside conversation about ghosts, as Henry Chorley remembers in his Memorials:

we began to talk of the feelings with which the presence and the speech of a visitant from another world….would be most likely to impress the person so visited. … Mrs. Hemans said that she thought the predominant sensations at the time must at once partake of awe and rapture, and resemble the feelings of those who listen to a revelation, and at the same moment know themselves to be favoured above all men, and humbled before a being no longer sharing their own cares or passions; but that the person so visited must thenceforward and for ever be inevitably separated from this world and its concerns: for the souls which had once enjoyed such a strange and spiritual communion, which had been permitted to look, though but for a moment, beyond the mysterious gates of death, must be raised, by its experience, too high for common grief again to perplex, or common joy to enliven. (445)

Chorley’s description of the poem’s origin speaks to its otherworldly nature. Hemans does not write of the affections but of love, both “earthly” and “heavenly” (adjectives used in the poem itself). As in “The Domestic Affections,” it would seem Hemans privileges heavenly love in “A Spirit’s Return”—that is, the love that raises the individual to transcendence of the material world—but it remains embedded within the actual human relationships of the speaker and her lover and of the speaker and silent auditor.
Hemans gestures toward her dialectical conception of love in verses that appear on the title plate of *Songs of Affections*. She describes the poems of the volume:

They tell but dreams—a lonely spirit’s dreams—
Yet ever through their fleeting imagery
Wanders a vein of melancholy love,
An aimless thought of home:—as in the song
Of the caged skylark ye may deem there dwells
A passionate memory of blue skies and flowers,
And living streams—far off!

The blank verse form makes these lines especially conducive to Hemans’s abstract and philosophical description of her poetry. The “vein of melancholy love” characterizes what I see at work in “A Spirit’s Return”: a notion of love tied to the “thought of home” but also dream-like and ideal in nature, a love of and from another world. The “dreams” of the “lonely spirit” parallel the “passionate memory” of the skylark’s natural home, a simile that recalls Shelley’s ode “To a Skylark.” Like Shelley, Hemans expresses in these verses her inability to access the ideal about which she writes: the imagery of her dreams is “fleeting”; the “vein of melancholy love” wanders aimlessly; the memory of home is “far off.” How to regain that memory of home, that sense of love, that ideal dream of unity, is the focus on the 1830 volume, especially of its lead poem.

“A Spirit’s Return” is what Michael Williamson calls “an elegiac dramatic monologue” (30). The poem is a direct address by the speaker to a silent auditor, her “dear” and “gentle Friend” (1), and the speech concerns her communion with and desire for her departed lover. The speaker asks her friend to “Come to the woods” where she will unseal her “long-shut heart” by revealing the “troubled” story of her life (9, 2). Her tale, then, is framed by a personal exchange in a private dell amidst the beauty of the natural world. The secluded woods provide an ideal spot, a place “where all strange wandering sound / Is
mingled into harmony profound‖ (9-10). As in Wordsworth, the natural world reflects the unity of love, although the speaker admits that she has a “deep thirst for something too divine” (20). The natural world reminds her of earthly affection and unity, but, like the caged skylark, she can no longer access it.

Alan Richardson points out that “A Spirit’s Return” works in many ways as an adoption and rejection of “masculine” Romanticism. Richardson shows how the poem develops as “an intertextual conversation” with Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley that “ultimately develops in a unique direction of [Hemans’s] own, building on but also crucially departing from the works she alludes to, borrows from, emulates, and criticizes” (124). In the speaker’s conversational address to her “dear” friend, reminiscent of Wordsworth’s address to Dorothy in *An Evening Walk* and in “Tintern Abbey,” Hemans “begins by emulating the dialogic poetics of Wordsworth and Coleridge” (Richardson 136), but she reverses gender roles with a female speaker and a silent male auditor. Moreover, in the communion with a spirit-lover, Hemans develops “a scenario codified by Byron and Shelley” in “Alastor,” “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” and *Manfred*, but she “eventually turn[s] aside or diverg[es] from her models in choosing to represent what in *Manfred* and *Alastor* tragically resists representation: the ‘glorious intercourse’ between questing human subject and her spirit-lover” (Richardson 136). The poem enacts, as it were, Hemans’s development of and challenge to Romanticism itself. In my reading of the poem, I develop Richardson’s reading by looking at how love plays a central role in this “intertextual conversation.”

After the initial address to her friend, the speaker outlines her “companionless” (23) childhood. When she was young, her friends and family either died or were detached from
her: “the voices from my home / Pass’d one by one” (26-7). Without a domestic home, the speaker searches instead “For the deep sympathies of mind” in nature and in the “secret knowledge” of the “rich world unseen! / Thou curtain’d realm of spirits!” (30, 37, 45-6). This Shelleyan quest for knowledge becomes her “life’s lone passion,” and she searches for the essence of “the floods,” “the pure fountains,” rocks, and hills (36, 50, 51, 52). But, as she reveals, the “language” of the earth is “weak and cold” and “vain” (55, 56); it pierces “not one fold / Of our deep being!” (56-7). She desires “gifts more high” than the earth, but, like other Romantic poets, she “woke from those high fantasies, to know / My kindred with the Earth—I woke to love” (57, 61-2). She moves from desire for the ideal to a love of nature, and this love leads to her intimate connection with a single person, an unnamed male lover.

Love of nature leads to love of humankind for the speaker, but she becomes too focused on the individual. She abandons her “kindred with the Earth” and forgoes social communities:

  the world held nought
  Save the one Being to my centred thought.
  There was no music but his voice to hear,
  No joy but such as with his step drew near. (71-4)

She sees her lover as the embodiment of ideal love, and such love acts as a filter that shapes her perceptions of the world: it “threw / O’er all things round a full, strong, vivid light” (79-80). Her earthly love has a kind of ideal or divine element that shapes her epistemology much like the “harmonizing light” of love described in “The Domestic Affections.” Hemans uses the word “love” throughout “A Spirit’s Return” to emphasize its dialectical nature, which she now seems to embrace and to understand more fully. Love is more powerful than affections, which form only one aspect of her conception of love. The speaker describes her
love as magical (86-7) and as possessing “a heavenly strain” (92) tempered with fear and pain. It is not simply an emotion but a whole way of thinking and feeling.

Yet the speaker’s love is “fearful” in its intensity (77). Her love is too passionate, too individualized, and she anticipates, it seems, the death of her lover and her subsequent grief and despair. She cannot divorce the pain of love from the joy of love—love remains melancholy for her even in its ideal state. The speaker ultimately arrives at the disturbing conclusion that she can achieve neither ideal love nor utopia on earth. In an address to her friend reminiscent of the final lines of Epipsychidion, the speaker states:

But, oh! sweet Friend! we dream not of love’s might
Till Death has robed with soft and solemn light
The image we enshrine!—Before that hour,
We have but glimpses of the o’ermastering power
Within us laid!—then doth the spirit-flame
With sword-like lightning rend its mortal frame;
The wings of that which pants to follow fast
Shake their clay-bars, as with a prison’d blast,—
The sea is in our souls! (105-13)

The speaker does not understand the full “might” and “power” of love until death claims the ideal “image” she “enshrines” in her lover. She cannot attain ideal love any more than she can unite with her lover after his death. Love itself does offer fleeting moments of sublime transcendence, but the speaker can only catch “glimpses” of the ideal in the material world.

Hemans describes a similar moment of transcendence in “The Rock of Cader Idris,” which gives the speaker the kind of favored elitism Hemans describes in her explanation of “A Spirit’s Return.” In this later poem, the poet-speaker spends a night on the Welsh mountain alone and encounters a “spirit” which, as the head note to the poem explains, endows the speaker “with the highest poetical inspiration” (9). The speaker reveals that “Man’s tongue hath no language to speak what I saw” (10):
I saw what man looks on and dies—but my spirit
    Was strong, and triumphantly lived through that hour;
And, as from the grave, I awoke to inherit
    A flame all immortal, a voice, and a power! (25-8)

Hemans constructs her own Romantic narrative of divine poetic awakening. She can envisage this typically male experience; she understands poetic genius. The speaker of “A Spirit’s Return” gains a similar “power” through communion with her spirit-lover. In both cases, poetic language has the ability to articulate the link between life and death, which Hemans represents as love.

In “A Spirit’s Return,” the power of poetic speech and the correspondent dialectical nature of love intensify after the speaker’s lover dies. She claims that “earthly love” retains its power after death, that it is already in a way divine and heavenly (155-9). Love links life and death. The speaker implores the spirit of her lover to “Awake, appear, reply!” (154), and it does: the speaker’s “words…themselves are magic high” (143). Language possesses a “magical” power to summon the dead and to transform material reality, even as it fails to adequately express the fullness of thought: “Oh! for strong words to bring / Conviction o’er thy thought!” (173-4). The speaker describes her lover in terms of a classical Greek sculpture (178-84), an otherworldly description which tells “of the gulfs between” their beings (185). He is of another “sphere” (188), but her love, it seems, can penetrate into another world. The speaker converses with her lover, and she learns the secrets of the universe. After hearing the “mysterious accents” of the spirit, she states, “I woke / Then first to heavenly life!” (194, 192-3). In a parallel to her awakening from “high fantasies” to earthly love, she here awakes from earthly love to “heavenly life.” She again perceives and understands the world in a new way, and this shift from earthly to heavenly love has a drastic effect on her
epistemology. Like the “Alastor” Poet, she awakens to “A faded world, of glory’s hues bereft, / A void, a chain!” (226-7). She dwells “apart” (227) from humankind; her “gift hath sever’d” her “from human ties” (230).

It is important to note that the speaker refers to her new isolated existence as a “gift” akin to the “power” gained by the poet-speaker of “The Rock of Cader Idris.” Richardson points out that such isolation is a “curse” in Manfred and “an irremediable sense of loss” in “Alastor” and Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage (132). Hemans, however, stresses the kind of “ennobling feeling of election that one finds in Wordsworth” (Richardson 132), but even more importantly, she departs from the notions of affection and domesticity that dominate much of her earlier poetry. The speaker is cut off from the domestic sphere and from her silent friend, which is a good thing—it is a “gift.” Williamson similarly suggests that “the drama of the poem lies less in the spirit’s return than in the situation of social speech that frames it. Instead of drawing the speaker back into the folds of the living, Hemans uses the auditor’s presence to reinforce the separation between the speaker’s iconoclastic mourning and the auditor’s more idealized mediating feminine purity” (32). In another gender reversal of poetic conventions, the silent male auditor stands in for “idealized mediating feminine purity” while the female speaker assumes the more traditional masculine role.

The speaker’s rejection of human community and earthly affection leads to the ennui and detachment with which she characterizes herself at the start of the poem. The conversation with her friend—that is, the poem itself—represents the speaker’s incapacity for genuine human connection. After communion with her spirit-lover and temporary (or anticipated) reconciliation with the ideal, the speaker only looks forward to a utopian afterlife. She no longer cares for the material world but becomes focused solely on reunion
with her lover in a place where we will “breathe purer air” and “feel” and “know / Things wrapt from us” on earth (248-9). The speaker does not specify a Christian afterlife but rather a reconciliation of spirit and body, of earthly and heavenly love. Such reconciliation is continually deferred in the material world, where the two create a dialectic central to Hemans’s conception of love. It is only with death that reconciliation is possible—only with death can dialectical synthesis truly take place. In this way, Hemans constructs a Shelleyan negative dialectic that generates hope amidst uncertainty through love and unfulfilled desire: “Yet we shall meet!—that glimpse of joy divine, / Proved thee for ever and for ever mine!” (261-2). The “glimpse” of utopian reconciliation projects a future when negative dialectics will no longer be necessary—even if this can only be accomplished in death.

Richardson provides a different reading of the poem’s conclusion. He writes,

Hemans’s speaker fully expects to “dwell” with her beloved Spirit in what might be termed post-domestic bliss. This difference…represents an extension of Shelleyan idealism in its preference for spiritual congress over earthly (including domestic) attachments. In the poem, that is, Hemans proves more impatient of the earthly sphere and its limitations, and consequently more committed to a spiritual, transcendent alternative (though hardly an orthodox one) than Wordsworth or Byron, while seeming far more sanguine about the possibility of a higher, post-mortem eros than even Shelley does in his most typical poems. (133)

While I agree with Richardson’s interpretation of “the optimistic tone of [the] speaker toward the end” (133), I disagree with his characterization of Hemans’s ultimate engagement with Shelley. I do not think the speaker of “A Spirit’s Return” is “more impatient of the earthly sphere and its limitations” than the Visionary Poet of “Alastor,” but Hemans herself does express more impatience than Shelley. As I show in chapters four and five, Shelley’s idealism remains bound in a dialectical relationship to earthly attachments. Hemans works within this same dialectical framework: the speaker’s articulation of ideal love is only possible
through her earthly attachment to the silent auditor, however weak that relationship may be. Yet her optimistic expectation at the conclusion of the poem rejects the deferral of negative dialectics. Although the final lines of “A Spirit’s Return” could be read as statements of panic, anxiety, and uncertainty, Hemans ultimately relies more on transcendence in her theory of love than does Shelley.

The concept of love that Hemans deals with over her career develops, challenges, and refines the broader idea of Romantic love with which Wordsworth, Shelley, and other major Romantic poets work. From the conventional and domestic strains of love and affection in her early poems to the melancholy and otherworldly elements of love in her later work, Hemans consistently returns to love as a central inspiration and theme in her poetry. Her specific textual engagements with Wordsworth and Shelley in “A Spirit’s Return” speak to the ways in which she continues to sustain and shape Romanticism well after its height during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. At a time when the first-generation Romantics were seen as conservative and backsliding and when the second-generation Romantics had all died, Hemans passionately continued the Romantic poetic tradition through her developing theory of love.

2. Romantic Love and the Victorians

By 1835 a new generation of poets had begun to take the place of the radical Romantics who had dominated the first two decades of the nineteenth century in Britain. Although the Victorian period would not officially begin until the ascension of Queen Victoria to the throne in 1837, Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning began publishing poetry in the early 1830s (and in the case of Tennyson and
Barrett Browning, the 1820s). Indeed, the early poetry of these three Victorian poets so closely relates to that of the major Romantics that David Riede suggests they can be thought of as a third-generation of Romantic poets (*Allegories* 1). The poets’ contemporaries acknowledged this continuity. In his famous review of Tennyson’s 1830 volume of poems, Arthur Henry Hallam places his friend in the “Sensation School of Poets” along with Shelley and Keats. Similarly, Browning’s early poems are in many ways imitations of Shelley, and Barrett Browning’s popularity in the 1840s and 50s parallels that of Hemans.

Scholars have approached the shift from Romanticism to the Victorian period in a variety of ways: socially and culturally, from Romantic Nature to Victorian Culture; politically, from Romantic radicalism to Victorian reform; psychically, from the Romantic whole to Victorian fragmentation; psychologically, from Romantic joy to Victorian melancholy; and formally, from the Greater Romantic Lyric to Dramatic Monologue, to name just a few. The ways that early Victorian poets adopt and adapt Romantic love encompass all of these shifts, and as such love is a useful way to investigate the evolution of British poetry during the first half of the nineteenth century. Tennyson, for example, was immensely concerned with his place in the literary tradition. Herbert Tucker argues that Tennyson’s “poetry is caught between the desires of the self and the demands of a power

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whose recognition exacts, in one way or another, the dissolution of the self” (25). Tucker speaks here of the shift from the idealized Romantic individual to the fragmentation of Victorian selfhood, a shift he identifies with Tennyson’s “habitual melancholy” (25). In this same vein, Riede argues that Tennyson’s melancholy results “as a split between a politicized Victorian ‘character’ and an infinite Romantic self” (Allegories 17). For both Tucker and Riede, coming to grips with the Romantic tradition is a central aspect of Victorian poetics, and I believe the Romantic conception of love plays a central role in that tradition.

Victorian poets such as Tennyson reveal a preoccupation with love in their poetry that is closely tied to the conception of love in Wordsworth, Shelley, and Hemans. The Victorians understood love to be a central element of Romantic poetry, so that an engagement with their predecessors was necessarily an engagement with Romantic love. Tennyson’s early “poetry of sensation” certainly reveals the influence—and perhaps misreading—of Romantic love. In the increasingly modern and industrialized world of Victorian England, the perceived Romantic withdrawal into the self came to be seen as a coping mechanism in a chaotic and capitalistic society. Individuals lived in isolation, “each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world” (Pater, Renaissance 151). An appeal to basic human emotions and sensations in poetry, then, was a reaction to this isolation, an attempt to unite what was common to everyone.

For the Romantics, this attempt centered on love, but many Victorian poets (and modern scholars) were not as certain or optimistic about the Romantics’ belief in the social and political power of love. Many Victorian poets and writers were suspicious of the inward-turning and reflective nature of much Romantic poetry (exemplified by Wordsworth). They
tended to see only self-love and the so-called “egotistical sublime.” In opposition to poets of reflection, Hallam writes that poets of sensation are

[s]usceptible of the slightest impulse from external nature, their fine organs tremble into emotion at colours, and sounds, and movements, unperceived or unregarded by duller temperaments. Rich and clear [a]re their perceptions of visible forms…. Other poets seek for images to illustrate their conceptions; these men ha[ve] no need to seek; they live in a world of images; for the most importuned and extensive portion of their life consist[s] in those emotions, which are immediately conversant with sensation. (582)

Hallam emphasizes the physicality and sensuousness of poetic expression. Unlike Wordsworth, whose poetry emerges from long and careful periods of meditative thought, poets of sensation like Tennyson, Shelley, and Keats can articulate an unmediated, immediate experience with the sensual world of perception—the intense desire for beauty—and in doing so express the basic emotions common to humanity: “the true poet addresses himself, in all his conceptions, to the common nature of us all” (Hallam 584). Yet, as I show in chapters one through three, Wordsworth’s conception of love is sensuous and material in nature. Wordsworthian love dialectically moves between intellectual thought and the “sensations sweet” of physical experience.

Tennyson abandons intellectual love in favor of material love. Indeed, several poems in his 1830 volume reflect the intense materiality of love. In “Mariana,” the title character wanes away in beautiful decay as she awaits the return of her lover. In “The Burial of Love,” “Love, Pride and Forgetfulness,” and “Love and Sorrow,” the poet bemoans the physical (and psychological) agony of love. Tennyson links love and death in these poems through a melancholy aesthetic that anticipates “The Lady of Shalott” (1833, 1842), where the Lady’s desire for love and community leads to her death. There are only two poems in the 1830 volume that reference the divine and immaterial aspects of love—the complementary
“Love” and “Love and Death”—but, again, physical mortality and earthly decay take precedence over the beauty and immortality of love.

A detailed analysis of the Victorian engagement with Romantic love (or of Tennyson’s, for that matter) demands another study altogether. I will therefore conclude this dissertation with a brief consideration of Matthew Arnold’s poetry of the 1850s. Arnold speaks to the ongoing Victorian engagements with and reassessments of Romanticism, and in his poetry he relates to Wordsworth perhaps more than any other Victorian poet. In this sense, I wish to bring together this study’s conclusion with the initial chapters on Wordworthian love.

Many scholars consider Arnold the father of literary criticism and culture studies. He certainly played a role in shaping our current understanding of Romanticism, and his essays on nineteenth-century poetry and culture remain invaluable in reconstructing the link from Romanticism to Modernism. Yet the ideas that shape his prose writings emerge in his earlier poetry and poetics. Arnold continues the same Romantic tradition of a critical poetics that Schlegel defined in his *Fragments* over 50 years earlier (as discussed in the Introduction). As he poignantly writes in “Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse,” the Victorians were “Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born” (85-6).

Arnold most clearly reveals his engagements with Wordworth and Romanticism in *Poems: A New Edition*. This 1853 volume was a selection and revision of poems from his first two volumes, *The Strayed Reveller and Other Poems* and *Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems*. In the 1853 volume, Arnold left out “Empedocles on Etna” and explained his decision in a substantial Preface that shares many affinities with Wordworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. 
Arnold’s Preface serves as a kind of poetic manifesto and as a study of Victorian culture. In the beginning of his Preface, he writes,

What those who are familiar only with the great monuments of early Greek genius suppose to be its exclusive characteristics, have disappeared; the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have disappeared: the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves[.] (203)

Arnold contrasts an idealized vision of Greek poetry from classical antiquity with an inferior vision of modern Victorian poetry. In place of a “disinterested objectivity” which allowed the Greeks to represent greater action, nobler personages, and more intense situations in their poetry, modern Victorian poets have established an internal and isolated “dialogue of the mind with itself,” a dialogue that is inimical to what Arnold asserts is the purpose of poetry: enjoyment. He argues that “a poetical work…is not yet justified when it has been shown to be an accurate, and therefore interesting representation; it has to be shown also that it is a representation from which men can derive enjoyment” (204). And what is most enjoyable, what most leads great minds toward perfection and “disinterested objectivity,” is “an excellent action” (Arnold 205). The dialogue of the mind with itself, by contrast, is not an action but a psychological representation of the poet himself.

What is implicit and more important in this comparison of Greek and Victorian poetry is Arnold’s critique of Romanticism. It was the Romantics, after all, who initiated the poetic traditions inherited by Arnold and the other major Victorian poets, and it was the Romantics who erringly mixed poetry, criticism, and politics in the wake of the French Revolution, as Arnold argues in “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.” Although Arnold sets up a dialectic of Greek antiquity and Victorian modernity in his Preface, what is really at stake is Arnold’s concurrent critique and embrace of Romanticism. Arnold reveals
such ambivalence in his essay, “Wordsworth,” in which he praises the Romantic poet as “the most considerable [poet of] our language from the Elizabethan age to the present time” while admitting that “in his seven volumes the pieces of high merit are mingled with a mass of pieces very inferior to them” (334-5). Yet Arnold declares himself “a Wordsworthian” (346) in the same essay. Indeed, Arnold’s poetics is much closer to a Wordsworthian-Romantic conception of poetry than he himself admits, and in his poems he reveals a developing sense of Romantic love.

Arnold rejects poetry of suffering in his Preface, but he writes poems of suffering in the 1852 and 1853 volumes. This contradiction acts as a manifestation of Arnold’s uncertainty toward Romantic poetry in general, which was and is often viewed as a poetry of suffering and contradiction. In many of Arnold’s poems, allusions to the Romantics and to Romantic poems abound. These allusions could be seen as an “anxiety of influence” in which Arnold rejects the Romantics in order to clear space for his own poetic endeavors, or they can be seen more usefully as self-conscious (and failed) attempts to reconcile the ideals of Romanticism with “the strange disease of modern life” (Arnold, “The Scholar Gypsy” 203).

Arnold frames his Preface as an explanation for why he decided to leave out “Empedocles on Etna,” but he ultimately presents a poetic manifesto. “Empedocles,” Arnold argues, failed as a poem exactly in its abandonment of the Greek-like characteristics of “disinterested objectivity,” excellence of action, and enjoyability. The poem was, as it were, too inward-looking, too melancholy, too Romantic. For Arnold, poetical works achieve greatness when they present an accurate representation of an excellent action that produces pleasure and enjoyment. Arnold asks,
What then are the situations, from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done.[1] (204)

Echoing Thomas Carlyle’s cries earlier in the century for Victorians to “close thy Byron” and to shut out the inarticulate wailings of Shelley, Arnold here attacks the self-reflective, subjective poetry of the Romantics which he aligns with the tradition going back through Goethe’s Faust and Shakespeare’s Hamlet. In this kind of poetry, there is “no vent in action,” there is no “incident,” “nothing” is done. As Riede suggests, Arnold identifies “a disabling post-Wordsworthian melancholy” that paradoxically enables and inspires him to write poetry (Allegories 1-3), a melancholy that emerges as “a split between a politicized Victorian ‘character’ and an infinite Romantic self.” Victorian poets turn to allegory to express this infinite and ultimately inaccessible Romantic self, and Arnold suggests here that the solution to the modern poet’s dilemma is a rejection of Romantic poetic sensibilities.

In Matthew Arnold and the Betrayal of Language, Riede points out that Arnold “cut[s] himself off as a poet from his immediate poetic predecessors” (26) in the Preface, a move that places him in the position of a poetic critic. Isobel Armstrong agrees, arguing that “Arnold has done his work so well that his subsuming of all Romantic poetry into a psychology of expressive feeling remains a powerful account of such poetry” (208). Indeed, one can see such residual Arnoldianism in Jerome McGann’s characterization of Romantic poetry as one of suffering, despair, and contradiction. Similarly, Jonathan Arac argues in Critical Genealogies “that a ‘Victorian’ stratum still decisively determines our own criticism, and not only among those who follow Lionel Trilling in continuing to admire Arnold,” and that “Arnold rejects the romantics in theory, while in fact continuing to elaborate Coleridgean
positions” (4). What I find intriguing in these critics’ claims is the presence of Arnold’s own construction of Romanticism. Arnold seemingly presents a critical framework for understanding Romanticism through negation and self-critique. Riede remarks that Arnold’s “assertions are memorable less because of their paraphrasable content than because they are beautifully—poetically—expressed” (Betrayals 2). Arnold’s Preface works so well because of its fusion of poetry, theory, and criticism—because of its Romantic critical poetics.

As a poet and critic, Arnold establishes his authority to discourse on the idea of poetry:

The Poet, then, has in the first place to select an excellent action; and what actions are the most excellent? Those, certainly, which most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time. These feelings are permanent and the same; that which interests them is permanent and the same also. The modernness or antiquity of an action, therefore, has nothing to do with its fitness for poetical representation; this depends upon its inherent qualities. To the elementary part of our nature, to our passions, that which is great and passionate is eternally interesting. … Poetical works belong to the domain of our permanent passions.

(Preface 205)

For the Romantics, love is certainly the greatest, most powerful, and permanent of the “primary human affections.” Romantic poets consistently present love as a universal, “elementary feeling” that exists “independent of time” in the material world. Arnold does not fully reject Romantic love and its correspondent valorization of feeling and human passion, but he insists that what is most important is that the “excellent action” gives importance to the feeling; action trumps love. Certain actions, Arnold suggests, are inherent to our human nature, but it is the action which must come first. Armstrong refers to this idea Arnold’s “ethical aesthetic of the great human action” (Victorian Poetry 205), and she sees
the Preface as part of “Arnold’s long and ultimately successful attempt to recentre English poetry in a moral tradition” (208).

Arnold’s emphasis on ethics and morality, however, can also be seen as a critique of Wordsworhian Romanticism. Whereas Arnold argues for the primacy of the action, Wordsworth argues in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* “that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation the feeling” (394-5). Arnold has, in essence, reversed the feeling/action dialectic first proposed by Wordsworth and later adopted by the major Romantic poets. Yet this reversal pales in comparison to the poets’ shared beliefs regarding poetry and its effects, and in many ways the passage cited from Arnold above can be seen as a paraphrase (with a few minor modifications) of Wordsworth’s defense of his own poems. Similar to Arnold, Wordsworth frames his poetic manifesto as an explanation for his new style of poetry. Wordsworth explains:

> The principle object, then, which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Low and rustic life was generally chosen because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and, form the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. (Preface 392-3)
All of these points, as I discuss in chapters one through three, serve to illuminate “the spirit of love” from which all poetry and beauty derives. What is important for Wordsworth in this passage is that the poet presents an accurate representation of “incidents and situations” using “a selection of language really used by men” for the purpose of what the Russian Formalists would later call defamiliarization. Furthermore, such a poetry should “make these incidents and situations interesting” by means of the representation not of an external action but of the internal mind and its “elementary feelings.” Rural, rustic life best represents such feelings both in its Greek-like simplicity and its ability to reincorporate humanity with “the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.”

Arnold replaces Wordsworth’s “elementary feelings” and “permanent forms of nature” with an “excellent action” and “those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time.” Arnold has, as it were, flipped Wordsworth on his head, but this does not mean the two poets’ poetic theories are wholly incompatible; Arnold still believes that “Poetical works belong to the domain of our permanent passions” as Wordsworth believes that poetry incorporates human passions “with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.” Arnold even asserts in “Wordsworth” that “poetry is nothing less than the most perfect speech of man, that in which he comes nearest to being able to utter the truth” (333). This explicitly Wordsworthian statement would seem to be at odds with Arnold’s anti-subjectivist position, but it also reveals Arnold’s poetic ambivalence. Two ideas of Romanticism emerge from this Arnold-Wordsworth dialectic: one in which a utopian future is still possible and one in which the failure of utopia results in melancholy and suffering.
Wordsworth was also aware of the melancholy and suffering of modern life. As M. H. Abrams discusses, twentieth-century critics inherit from Arnold the problem of the “two Wordsworths”:

One Wordsworth is simple, elemental, forthright, the other is complex, paradoxical, problematic; one is an affirmative poet of life, love, and joy, the other is an equivocal or self-divided poet whose affirmations are implicitly qualified (if not annulled) by a pervasive sense of mortality and an ever-incipient despair of life; one is the great poet of natural man and the world of all of us, the other is a visionary or ‘mystic’ who is ultimately hostile to temporal man and the world of sense and whose profoundest inclinations are towards another world that transcends biological and temporal limitations; one is the Wordsworth of light, the other the Wordsworth of chiaroscuro, or even darkness. (Correspondent 149)

Although Abrams rightly claims that Arnold upholds “the Wordsworth of light,” the Victorian poet seems to embody “the Wordsworth of darkness” in his own work. Arnold and the Victorians seem to emphasize the despair of modern, mechanical life, but Wordsworth also discusses this despair even as early as his Preface to Lyrical Ballads. Wordsworth writes, “a multitude of causes, unknown in former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor” (Preface 395), a sentiment echoed by Arnold:

The confusion of the present times is great, the multitude of voices counselling different things bewildering, the number of existing works capable of attracting a young writer’s attention and of becoming his models, immense. What he wants is a hand to guide through the confusion, a voice to prescribe to him the aim which he should keep in view. (Preface 209)

Both poets ultimately proffer the great men of genius (i.e., themselves) as guides for the masses through the melancholy and confusion of modern life. Poetry becomes the means for each poet to express this inward melancholy, confusion, and to move toward a better
(and perhaps utopian) future. Yet this kind of Romantic poetry is exactly what Arnold rails against in his Preface, and the paradox reveals Arnold’s adherence to seemingly rejected Romantic artistic sensibilities.

“Tintern Abbey” represents the type of philosophical, psychological poetry Arnold brushes off in his 1853 Preface. It could be argued that there is no action at all in “Tintern Abbey”: the entirety of the poem is a self-representation of Wordsworth’s inner mind as he contemplates the Wye Valley, his own subjectivity, and love. Although “five years have passed” (1) since his first visit to the Abbey, Wordsworth explains that his contemplations have resulted in the fruit of poetry:

But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din  
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,  
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,  
And passing even into my purer mind  
With tranquil restoration[.] (26-31)

Wordsworth expresses his own fears regarding the emerging modern and mechanical way of life. The loneliness and fragmentation of urban civilization contrast with the pleasure and unity of nature. Modern life inhibits community, while nature provides the interconnectedness inherent in Wordsworthian love. Wordsworth’s goal in poetry and in life is to achieve

that blessed mood,  
In which the burthen of the mystery,  
In which the heavy and the weary weight  
Of all this unintelligible world  
Is lighten’d[.] (38-42)

The poet overcomes his own despair of modernity through love. In this sense, Wordsworth, like Arnold, is not disabled but inspired by melancholy. Melancholy enables great men of
genius to produce beautiful poetry. Wordsworth in particular attains a knowledge and understanding of love that “rolls through all things” after the melancholy resultant from the inevitable loss of a perfect union with nature.

In “The Buried Life,” Arnold longs to uncover the Romantic conception of self as an autonomous essence of one’s being, and he represents this longing through a poetic allegory of his own mind. Riede argues that the poem is “Arnold’s clearest and most earnest effort to find an entirely sincere poetic language” (Betrayal 182), and indeed, Arnold seeks to uncover the “buried life” through poetry. Like Shelley and Hemans, however, Arnold addresses the failure of language to achieve such ideal results. The “tension between his poetic ambition and his doubts about his medium” results in a psychological poetry of suffering (Riede, Betrayal 28).

“The Buried Life” is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker attempts to overcome the melancholy of modern life through idealized Romantic conceptions of love and self. Romantic love ultimately proves as inaccessible as the unified Romantic self, but the speaker concludes with hope for the utopian possibilities of love. Arnold begins the poem with a “war of mocking words” (1) between the speaker and silent auditor, who are apparently unable to connect to each other through language. The speaker states,

I feel a nameless sadness o’er me roll.
Yes, yes, we know that we can jest,
We know, we know that we can smile!
But there’s a something in this breast,
To which thy light words bring no rest,
And thy gay smiles no anodyne.
Give me thy hand, and hush awhile,
And turn those limpid eyes on mine,
And let me read there, love! thy inmost soul. (3-11)
“The Buried Life” is thus a kind of love poem—not in the traditional sense, but more akin to T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Like Eliot’s poem, Arnold questions the very possibility and existence of love in the modern (or post-Romantic) world. In this passage, the speaker experiences a melancholy (“a nameless sadness”) resultant from his inability to uncover either his true self (the “something in” his “breast”) or his lover’s “inmost soul.” Perhaps, he suggests, they can understand each other through love.

Love, however, fails initially in the poem. In the second stanza, the poet turns inward as he is led to reflect on the inability of love “To unlock the heart, and let it speak” (12-3). Love and language are unable to forge genuine human community. The speaker laments the loss of “His genuine self,” “The unregarded river of our life” that lies in “the deep recesses of our breast” (36, 39, 38). He desires to “see / The buried stream” but instead is “Eddying at large in blind uncertainty, / Though driving on with it eternally” (41-2, 43-4). Such poetry of suffering intensifies in the fourth stanza with a direct allusion to Wordsworth:

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But often, in the world’s most crowded streets,
But often, in the din of strife,
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life;
A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
In tracking out our true, original course;
A longing to enquire
Into the mystery of this heart which beats
So wild, so deep in us – to know
Whence our lives come and where they go. (45-54)
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Arnold suggests that the Romantic desire to discover and represent the true, authentic self as well as the totality of existence itself is now “unspeakable” in the modern Victorian age. Arnold does, as Arac argues, reject the Romantics only in theory—the poet’s “disabling post-Wordsworthian melancholy” is not so much a rejection of Wordsworthian
Romanticism but a realization that this Romantic project is no longer possible. Arnold does, however, declare that “many a man in his own breast then delves, / But deep enough, alas! None ever mines” (55-6). Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Hemans, and Arnold all desire the same effects from love and poetry—a restoration of unity and totality—but Arnold expresses a deeper sense of melancholy than his Romantic predecessors. For Arnold, Wordsworth ultimately failed during the last historical moments when such a restoration might have been possible. As Arnold would write the following year in yet another psychological poem of suffering, “The Scholar-Gypsy,”

O born in days when wits were fresh and clear,  
And life ran gaily as the sparkling Thames;  
Before this strange disease of modern life,  
With its sick hurry, its divided aims,  
Its head o’ertaxed, its palsied hearts, was rife[.] (201-205)

The “strange disease of modern life,” which was only just emerging during the Romantic period, is exactly what Arnold identifies as the problem for the modern Victorian poet.

Despite modernity and its inevitable poetic failure, Arnold does seem to hold on to the idea that his language can “refer…outward, toward truth and purposiveness” (Riede, Betrayal 26). The poet states,

Yet still, from time to time, vague and forlorn,  
From the soul’s subterranean depth upborne  
As from an infinitely distant land,  
Come airs, and floating echoes, and convey  
A melancholy into all our day. (72-6)

In another direct allusion to Wordsworth (“Intimations Ode”), the speaker provides an allegory of his own mind in order to represent both his “buried life” and his melancholy. Riede rightly characterizes this passage as presenting “echoes of echoes, recollections of Wordsworthian recollections” (Betrayal 186), and in doing so Arnold paradoxically represents
himself as both a Wordsworthian and one who is twice removed from Wordsworthian Romanticism.

The poem ends, however, on an optimistic note that reinforces Romantic love.

When two people connect through love, Arnold writes,

A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast,
And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again.
The eye sinks inward, and the heart lies plain,—
And what we mean, we say, and what we would, we know.
A man becomes aware of his life’s flow,
And hears its winding murmur; and he sees
The meadows where it glides, the sun, the breeze. (84-90)

The irony of this passage is that the “buried life” can only be recovered or recognized through the actual experience and embrace of love; the poem (i.e., language) fails to accurately represent the “something” that stirs “somewhere” in the poet’s breast. The language remains vague and self-referential despite its appeal to clarity and truth. Arnold transforms Wordsworth’s “sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused” into an awareness that the “something” “somewhere in our breast” can in fact be revealed, if only for a moment:

And there arrives a lull in the hot race
Wherein he doth for ever chase
That flying and elusive shadow, rest.
An air of coolness plays upon his face,
And an unwonted calm pervades his breast.
And then he thinks he knows
The hills where his life rose,
And the sea where it goes. (91-8)

The poet, however, is able to express in language only a shadow of the “buried life,” only “floating echoes” of “something” that is beyond language. Ultimately, what Arnold presents
is a “dialogue of the mind with itself” that turns to Romantic love as the means to achieve human community.

As a final example, Arnold also explores the constraints and affordances of Romantic love in “Dover Beach.” He published the poem in 1867 but most likely composed it in 1851 after staying at Dover Beach on his honeymoon. Like “The Buried Life,” “Dover Beach” is a dramatic monologue in which Arnold laments the loss of Romantic unity, religious faith, and ideal love in the new, modern world. The recurring image of pebbles on the beach that are flung and swept in confusion by the waves of the ocean causes the speaker of the poem “eternal sadness” and remind him of “the turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery” (14, 17-8). The pebbles serve as an emblem of individuals in the Victorian world, and in the final stanza the speaker questions whether love and human connection can ever make whole self or experience:

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night. (29-37)

The new, beautiful, modern world offers nothing but uncertainty, doubt, and confusion. The string of negatives, however, is preceded by the speaker’s plea to the silent auditor (presumably his lover): “Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!” Human connection is the only solace to “the strange disease of modern life.” The world no longer possesses love, but perhaps individuals can create love through particular relationships. The idealizing and universalizing love of the Romantics, Arnold suggests, is not a viable option for the
Victorians. But Arnold retains hope for a personal utopia of love. Like Wordsworth’s connection to Dorothy in *An Evening Walk*, “Tintern Abbey,” and *The Prelude*, or Prometheus and Asia’s bower in *Prometheus Unbound*, or Shelley and Emily’s island in *Epipsychidion*, or Hemans’s afterlife in “A Spirit’s Return,” perhaps individualized love is all that remains for the modern world. The hope for utopia in “Dover Beach” is not a nostalgic longing for a Romantic past that never existed but a continued engagement with Romantic love that consistently shapes British poetry and poetics throughout the nineteenth century.
References


294


