Reading for the Pause:

The Uses of Suspension in Nineteenth-Century British Poetry

by

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Abstract

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Reading for the Pause investigates the relationship among ethics, epistemology, and form in nineteenth-century poetry. Although they represent a number of different genres, the central texts—Coleridge's *Christabel*, Shelley's "Mont Blanc," Tennyson's *Maud*, Robert Browning's "An Epistle…of Karshish," and *The Prince's Progress* by Christina Rossetti—employ paradigmatic techniques, forms, and images of suspension, unsettling habitual patterns of language and knowledge. The pause of suspension, as distinct from the delays of narrative suspense, both marks the site of epistemological crisis and functions as a potentially powerful response to uncertainty that offers alternatives to skeptical detachment.

The first two chapters establish suspension within Romantic discourses on the sublime. Coleridge defines the sublime as the "Suspension of our Comparing powers." *Christabel*—a text identified with both the "willing suspension of disbelief" and presumably unwilled conditions of "suspended animation"—dramatizes the impasse of an ambivalent sublime. The "trance sublime and strange" in "Mont Blanc" has often been taken as a figure for passive receptivity, but a broader consideration of Shelley's poetry reveals suspension to be a creatively enabling, embodied posture. The second half of this project traces the development of suspension as a mode of not-knowing in the poetry of the later nineteenth century. *Maud* mobilizes images of suspended animation and premature burial in order to draw attention to dilemmas of signification caused by a language whose referential status always remains uncertain. The dramatic monologue "Karshish" has generally been read as a straightforward retelling of Christ's miraculous

resurrection of Lazarus, yet a reading attentive to forms of suspension reveals a more complicated approach to gospel truth. Readers must suspend their own religious knowledge and enter into Karshish's drama of uncertainty. The concluding chapter uses suspension to reconsider the manifestations of religious faith in the poetry of Christina Rossetti. Far from reflecting a posture of renunciation and withdrawal, Rossetti's poetic practices reflect a deep engagement with what she elsewhere calls the "divergences" that order the human world. What thus begins as the visionary experience of the Romantic sublime emerges in mid-nineteenth-century poetry as "poetic faith": a posture of awareness, receptivity, and engagement poised between knowing and not knowing.

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Introduction
The Poetics of Suspension

> Forever unable to saturate a context, what reading will ever master the "on" of living on? For we have not exhausted its ambiguity: each of the meanings we have listed above can be divided further (e.g., living on can mean a reprieve or an afterlife, "life after life" or life after death, more life or more than life, and better; the state of suspension in which it's over—*and* over again, and you'll never have done with that suspension itself) ....[1]

> Those suspensions, those solutions!—must we die?[2]

"The nothingness now"

Thomas de Quincey begins his short essay "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*" (1823) by noting a "perplexity" in his response to Shakespeare's Scottish play: "the knocking at the gate, which succeeds to the murder of Duncan ... reflected back upon the murder a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity: yet ... for many years I never could see *why* it should produce such an effect" (81).[3] The knock in question, heard in the second scene of the second act, interrupts Macbeth and his wife as they discuss the crime that has just been committed. The affective charge or jolt of the scene comes not from the knowledge of the murder itself but rather from the retrospective awareness of the conditions under which it was carried out, conditions that enable both the audience and the characters to suspend typical processes of cognition and experience. "In order that a new world may step in," de Quincey observes, "this world must for a time disappear" (84).

The operation he describes suggests something similar to what Samuel Taylor Coleridge, writing in the *Biographia Literaria* several years earlier, had dubbed "the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment" (2.6). De Quincey's formulation, however, discloses a much more

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[1] Derrida, "Living On / Border Lines" 63.
[2] Robert Browning, "A Toccata of Galuppi's," l. 20.
[3] All quotations from de Quincey's work are taken from *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, ed. Grevel Lindop (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996).

radical process than assenting to a supernatural fiction or even ignoring the trappings of a theatrical production in favor of absorption in the story on the stage. “We must be made sensible,” de Quincey insists, “that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested—laid asleep—tranced—racked into a dread armistice: time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion” (84). The language of this passage is occasionally extreme in its gothic overtones of “dread armistice” and a sense of temporality that must be utterly “annihilated.” Within this interval of suspension, even referentiality itself becomes indeterminate, provisional. When the knocking sound becomes audible, it effects a caesura in the scene, marking the end of one interval at the commencement of another. It communicates the fact that, as de Quincey puts it, “the pulses of life are beginning to beat again: and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them” (85). Suspension, for de Quincey, names a condition of both knowing and not-knowing, of not-knowing at the very moment in which knowledge becomes possible.

Indeed, throughout this short essay, de Quincey proves himself to be a strikingly astute reader of the ways that suspension functioned as a trope of nineteenth-century discourse, hovering always on the border between life and death, the literal and the metaphorical. Arguably the most striking example of de Quincey’s evocation of suspension is his use of the phrase “laid asleep,” which cites the language of a famous visionary moment in William Wordsworth’s “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” (1798). There, the poem’s speaker had described

> 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. (l. 42-47)[4]

David Bromwich contends that "Something in the mood of Wordsworth's sublime moment—which the poem itself will go on to associate with the 'deep power of joy'—evoked from de Quincey instead a sudden retreat from violence and terror" (72). Ambivalently linked through tropes of sleep and suspension, de Quincey's rendering of Shakespearean murder and the conventional, even clichéd, expression of the Wordsworthian sublime exemplify two poles of a broader nineteenth-century preoccupation with liminal states of mind and body, with the possibility of making time stand still, and with the potentially generative but often threatening aesthetic experience of sublimity. For his part, De Quincey takes a recognizably Kantian line, reminding his readers that the sublime does not, ultimately, depend on the impressiveness of a given landscape but on a subject's ability to transform the cognitive breakdown that the encounter with such a landscape produces into a moment of expanded, unconditioned awareness—a process which, as I shall argue throughout this project, is essentially a working-through of different forms of suspension.[5] Although Bromwich perhaps overstates the originality of de Quincey's insight about the sublime as a general concept, the connection is a valuable one in that it helps us locate suspension within a version of sublimity, a connection that will become important in the chapters that follow.

Reading for the Pause is a meditation on the meaning of suspension, as a concept, image, and form in British literature of the nineteenth century. More than just a pause among other pauses, suspension pushes back against inertia, taking us out of our habitual modes of existence. Despite a colloquial affinity with terms such as paralysis, passivity, and deprivation, the act itself

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[4] Unless otherwise noted, all of Wordsworth's poems are quoted from *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford World's Classics, 2000).

[5] In emphasizing the outcome of the sublime as "expanded awareness," I follow Christopher Hitt's argument that the sublime has the capacity to "jolt us momentarily out of a perspective constructed by reason and language" ("Toward an Ecological Sublime" 617).

almost always requires a degree of energy. If its inhibiting qualities cannot be fully ignored, that very inhibition may be transformed into an enabling structure, allowing for new modes of experience to take place. Against the increasingly naturalized continuities of narrative, suspension offers the possibility of alternative temporalities that allow difference and discontinuity to remain unresolved. It is not surprising, then, that the most powerful examples of suspension occur within the genre of poetry, where line breaks and metrical schemes already interrupt normal processes of perception, and where poetic language depends on ambiguities that are not tolerated elsewhere.

Although the primary focus of this study is Romantic and Victorian poetry, the pervasiveness of suspension in de Quincey's prose writings—not to mention his own liminality as a writer who cannot be fully categorized as either "Romantic" or "Victorian"—renders him an important touchstone for understanding the ways in which writers of both periods drew upon the discursive and cognitive resources of suspension to attend to the unrepresentable, unknowable, and unconditioned. "On the Knocking at the Gate" is arguably his most concentrated attempt to theorize the experience of suspension, yet de Quincey's better-known autobiographical works also disclose a comprehensive awareness of how suspension can become embodied, producing states of physical, mental, and temporal disruption. The drug-induced quasi-sublimes of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) offer experiments in self-suspension that are both salutary and dangerous. The "respite granted from the secret burthens of the heart; a sabbath of repose; a resting from human labours" (49) may easily give way to the tortured simultaneity of "dog sleep": "I could hear myself moaning, and was often, as it seemed to me, wakened suddenly by my own voice …" (17). However, though suspension may take on different forms and resonances at different times, it gestures towards categories of experience that resist traditional practices of categorization and periodization. Like de Quincey himself, suspension belongs to neither the

Romantic nor the Victorian period; it is, as I will argue, a concept and figure that arises from and responds to conditions of the early nineteenth century.

The litany of terms that de Quincey deploys to describe the pause in "On the Knocking at the Gate," as well as the myriad versions of suspension that he explores in his other writings, suggests the fundamental instability at the heart of the concept. De Quincey's attempts to understand his reaction to *Macbeth* take the form of allegorical substitutions, offering different scenarios in which his reader may imagine the experience of suspension, without ever specifying a set of essential qualities or identifying a primal scene. First, he reimagines the "awful parenthesis" of *Macbeth* as a domestic set piece: "If the reader has ever witnessed a wife, daughter, or sister, in a fainting fit, he may chance to have observed that the most affecting moment in such a spectacle, is *that* in which a sigh and a stirring announce the recommencement of suspended life" (84). The trope of the fainting woman is recognizable from much of nineteenth-century narrative fiction both before and after de Quincey. The comparison, however, is striking in its failure to correspond fully to the original object of inquiry. The suspended animation of a beloved female body—and the ending of that suspension in a return to life (here implicitly distinguished from the continuation of that suspension into death)—seems a purposefully inadequate analogue to the elaborately staged "withdrawal of the human heart" in *Macbeth*.

Other images of fainting women also register experiences of dislocation and incommensurability. In *Villette* (1853), for instance, Charlotte Brontë imagines Lucy Snowe's reawakening from a fainting fit in terms strikingly similar to de Quincey's: "The returning sense of sight came upon me, red, as if it swam in blood; suspended hearing rushed back loud, like thunder; consciousness revived in fear: I sat up appalled, wondering into what region, amongst what strange beings I was waking" (237). Just as Macbeth and his audience are startled into a resumption of activity that is also a kind of epistemological (and ontological) shock, Lucy's bodily

suspension ends with dramatic violence—blood-red vision, thundering sounds, and an awareness of overwhelming fear. All of this mirrors her emotional derangement, yet it also in a certain sense anticipates and displaces it: that is, circumstances of her fainting fit are more slowly remembered. Delayed realization and seemingly deliberate misreading also characterize George Eliot's use of the fainting woman trope in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857). Describing the revival of Caterina after a long period of syncope, the narrator of "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story" remarks:

> It is a wonderful moment, the first time we stand by one who has fainted, and witness the fresh birth of consciousness spreading itself over the blank features, like the rising sunlight on the alpine summits that lay ghastly and dead under the leaden twilight. A slight shudder, and the frost-bound eyes recover their liquid light; for an instant they show the inward semi-consciousness of an infant's; then, with a little start, they open wider and begin to *look* the present is visible, but only as a strange writing, and the interpreter Memory is not yet there. (215)

The rapturously contemplative description of Caterina's awakening appears at first to belong more to the ostensibly serene elevation of Romantic nature poetry ("rising sunlight on the alpine summits") than to the violent, gothically-inflected awakening of *Villette*. Yet this passage almost aggressively ignores the traumatic scene that had caused it in the first place. Caterina's fainting fit had been precipitated by her discovery of the dead body of Captain Wybrow, the man whom she loves and who had spurned her affections. When the "interpreter Memory" returns, it does so in a way that provokes agony. First, Caterina questions what she has witnessed in terms that evoke a network of associations with bodies in suspended animation: "perhaps he was not really dead—only in a trance; people did fall into trances sometimes" (216). Moments later, she wonders whether she is responsible for having killed him, either by wishing him dead or through some unremembered violent action.[6] What these two examples from later nineteenth-century literature

[6] In this regard, Caterina is something of a prototype for Gwendolyn Harleth in *Daniel Deronda*, who struggles with her own culpability in the death of her husband, an event recently analyzed by Adela Pinch in chapter 5 of *Thinking about Other People*.

share with the brief image in de Quincey's essay is not only the image itself—and its sense of domestic spectacle—but also a dislocation so profound that definitive reading becomes impossible.

De Quincey, however, turns from the fainting woman to a more extended metaphor that is at once more straightforward and more ambiguous than the two that precede it:

> ... if the reader has ever been present in a vast metropolis on the day when some great national idol was carried in funeral pomp to his grave, and chancing to walk near to the course through which it passed, has felt powerfully, in the silence and desertion of the streets and in the stagnation of ordinary business, the deep interest which at that moment was possessing the heart of man,—if all at once he should hear the death-like stillness broken up by the sound of wheels rattling away from the scene, and making known that the transitory vision was dissolved, he will be aware that at no moment was his sense of the complete suspension and pause in ordinary human concerns so full and affecting as at that moment when the suspension ceases, and the goings-on of human life are suddenly resumed. (84)

The "transitory vision" of urban "silence and desertion" also opens a space for reflection, as the extraordinary event of a funeral procession—are we mourning Duncan? Has the young lady's fainting fit turned into something more serious?—interrupts the habitual "human concerns" that would otherwise go on indefinitely and remain unreflected upon. Although the "stagnation of ordinary business" may initially look like mere paralysis, a kind of stony blankness, we would do well to reflect upon just how much effort it takes to do nothing, particularly on a city street. The proximity of "death-like stillness" to "wheels rattling" suggests a death-rattle, evoking associations which range from the gothic trope of live burial (a potent fear of the mid-Victorian period, as we will see in chapter 3) to late-eighteenth-century scientific practices newly able to resuscitate the victims of drowning. Early to mid-nineteenth century readers needed little convincing that a body in a state of "death-like stillness" could house a living, thinking, and feeling individual. The Humane Society was formed in Britain in 1774 with the express intent to "convince laypeople and

physicians that human beings could be alive but appear dead" (Mitchell, "Suspended Animation" 109), and, later, to advocate for greater specificity in diagnosing the presence of death. By mid-century, tales of suspended animation, most enduringly associated with Edgar Allan Poe, drew attention to the disturbing inaccessibility of even basic knowledge about the human body and, just as troubling, the subject's own inability to communicate clearly with others. The dead may appear living, the living dead, and even the most scrupulous observer may fail to read the signs correctly. Indeed, the fainting woman may herself be at risk for falling victim to this type of misdiagnosis, a fate she escapes only by her timely (and, presumably, spontaneous rather than willed) return to life.

The chain of allegorical substitutions and structural suspensions in "On the Knocking at the Gate" lead the reader from *Macbeth* to the fainting woman, the funereal street, and back again to Duncan's death, without fully coming to terms with suspension itself. In each of his examples from "The Knocking at the Gate," de Quincey reverts to the word "affecting" without specifying exactly what that affect is: the feeling of silence, stagnation, absence, or the even more ambiguous dread of *Macbeth* eludes a more precise categorization. They suggest, at the most, a sudden awareness of one's own ungroundedness, a radical disruption of seemingly continuous acts of perception and cognition. Time itself is thrown out of joint; we have no way of knowing what has just happened, or even, more fundamentally, of knowing *that* something has just happened. These suspensions cannot simply be subsumed into a category of suspense, for narrative is conspicuously absent as well: the murder has already taken place, the "great national idol" has passed away, and even in the case of the fainting woman, the feeling that de Quincey describes has to do with her return to life, not the uncertainty as to whether she will do so. Rather than attending to what has been placed in abeyance, that is, de Quincey's text represents an attempt to attend to the moment of suspension itself, even as the possibility of doing so remains at least

partially unrealized in his text.

Paul de Man identifies the "fundamental structure of allegory" with the "tendency of language toward narrative, the spreading out along the axis of an imaginary time in order to give duration to what is, in fact, simultaneous within the subject" (*Blindness and Insight* 225). De Quincey's passage about the hushed metropolis makes explicit the allegorical potential of suspension that had been hinted at in the discussion of *Macbeth* and the figure of the fainting woman, yet de Quincey's examples of suspension, both here and elsewhere in his writings, exceed the temporal functions that de Man ascribes to allegory; they are not able to give duration to the simultaneous but also to give simultaneity to what unfolds in succession. In a striking passage from *Suspiria de Profundis*, de Quincey recalls his contemplation of the corpse of his older sister, who died when he was six years old: "Instead of a short interval expanding into a vast one, upon this occasion a long one had contracted into a minute. I have reason to believe that a *very* long one had elapsed during this wandering or suspension of my perfect mind" (107). Here, suspension collapses time, making a long duration pass in a moment.[7] The present, as de Quincey puts it in *Suspiria de Profundis*, offers "less capacity for [man's] footing than the slenderest film that ever spider twisted from her womb" (159). Suspension does not, of course, stop time, yet it places the experience of temporality into question, inhibiting our ability to compare different intervals or interruptions to one another. And, like the sublime itself, suspension is often an experience of nothing at all, a point that Jean-François Lyotard explores in "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde":

> The possibility of nothing happening is often associated with a feeling of anxiety .... It gives to waiting, if we really mean waiting, a predominantly negative value. But suspense can also be accompanied by pleasure, for instance pleasure in welcoming the unknown .... This is probably a contradictory feeling. It is at the

[7] De Quincey uses this anecdote as an example of temporal disruption that is notable because it "exactly reversed the operation of opium" (107). He also reports that, at the sight of his sister's body "I stood checked for a moment; awe, not fear, fell upon me" (105)—language that clearly gestures to sublime experience.

> very least a sign, the question-mark itself, the way in which *it happens* is withheld and announced: *Is it happening?* The question can be modulated in any tone. But the mark of the question is "now," *now* like the feeling that nothing might happen: the nothingness now. (92)

The realization of suspension is its disappearance; it constitutes and draws our attention to what it interrupts, even as it itself is interrupted.

Suspension and Potentiality

According to the *OED,* suspension denotes intermittence, absence, hesitation, deferral, or delay. It refers to withdrawals and omissions, abbreviations, interruptions, and postponements. Suspension can refer both to the state of being hung up—hanging, perhaps, by a thread—and, moreover, to the "act of holding up or state of being held up without attachment." A musical suspension—such as the one to which my epigraph from Browning's "A Toccata of Galuppi's" refers—occurs when one chord is prolonged into the one that follows, often producing dissonance. A chemical suspension consists of "particles of a solid suspended by shaking or stirring in a liquid or gas. In time the particles of a suspension settle out, unlike the smaller particles in colloids" (Hunt 334). These definitions, in large part, draw attention to what has been suspended or interrupted: a lost privilege, an abrogated law, or the tendency of a heavy chemical particle to sink to the bottom of a less dense solution. (The image of solid particles sinking in a liquid solution has an analogue in the many images of drowned bodies that populate nineteenth-century British literature, from the drowned man of Esthwaite in *The Prelude* to bodies dredged from the Thames in Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*.) The art historian Jonathan Crary describes suspension as "the state of being suspended, a looking or listening so rapt that it is an exemption from ordinary conditions, that it becomes a suspended temporality, a hovering out of time. ... It implies the possibility of a fixation, of holding something in wonder or contemplation,

in which the attentive subject is both immobile and ungrounded" (10). Crary illuminates a surprisingly active, critical dimension of suspension—a resonance that is sometimes missing from discussions of localized forms of suspension, which often imply an absolute hiatus of agency.

Nevertheless, there is always the possibility of something more like the loss of will in the language of suspension, insofar as it is, as Crary suggests, "a cancellation or an interruption … a disturbance, even a negation" (10). Suspension is always the exception to the rule, a gesture directed against the law itself, open to abuse and manipulation.[8] (The suspension of *habeas corpus*, a political action as chillingly relevant to early Romantic Britain as it is to early twenty-first century New York City, gets a special mention in the *OED*.) It is both a punishment itself (one may be suspended from school or from one's position as the result of a serious infraction) and the mitigation of punishment (a suspended sentence, which cannot help but inspire comparison's to Franz Kafka's "In the Penal Colony"). Coleridge, as one scholar has recently argued, "feared suspension, seeing in it only a narcosis of the will" (Mitchell, "Suspended Animation" 109), and while his abhorrence might be overstated, his rendering of "forc'd unconscious sympathy" in *Christabel* (the subject of chapter 1) displays a recognition of the dangers that attend a self placed in abeyance. And while the premature burial panics of mid-Victorian England are today considered as little more than a curiosity brought on by the reading of too much Gothic fiction, at their root was a very real concern with the problem of signification, prompted by the failure of institutional methods to identify a suspended body as either alive or dead. As I argue in readings of poems by Tennyson and Browning (chapters 3 and 4), such an anxiety was reinscribed in and amplified by a religious discourse which frequently confused the language of sleep and death.

[8] Cf. de Man's introduction to *Allegories of Reading*, where he discusses Archie Bunker's "despair when confronted with a structure of linguistic meaning that he cannot control and that holds the discouraging prospect of an infinity of similar future confusions, all of them potentially catastrophic in their consequences" (10).

Elisabeth Weber, writing of the operations of suspension in the work of Jacques Derrida, comments that suspension is "what occurs in space or lapse of undecidability that necessarily precedes any decision, if that decision is to occur as something else than the predictable application of a calculable program" (325). The forms of uncertainty confronted by the nineteenth-century poets in this study trigger similarly urgent crises of signification, along with the recognition of something like the suspended relation that Giorgio Agamben has theorized as impotentiality. "To be potential," Agamben writes, "means: to be one's own lack, *to be in relation to one's own incapacity*" (182). Indeed, the purpose of this project is not, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, simply to reinscribe or repeat de Man's once radical argument that "it is not ... *a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language" (*Resistance to Theory* 11)—an action that would "reprove the proved," as the speaker of Browning's "A Death in the Desert" puts it. Rather, in taking the deconstructive tradition as a point of departure, I draw upon a secondary, though equally rich, tradition of suspension which shares with nineteenth-century British poetry the difficulty of theorizing suspension itself. My subtitle's emphasis on the "uses" of suspension in nineteenth-century British poetry is intended to gesture towards the ways in which undecidability offers the occasion for ethical response and the experience of plenitude without presence.

Though we customarily speak of uncertainty as a lack or privation, suspension enables uncertainty to appear as something other than a negative form of knowing. It provides a way of avoiding typically negative responses to that uncertainty, such as dismissing what is not known as being unimportant, reacting with hostility to that which seems to threaten the claims of epistemology, or, for that matter, falling into the paralysis of a recursive skepticism. Suspension ultimately names a poetics of awareness, constituted by a receptivity to the present moment that interrupts the progressive tendency to move on to the next thing, to remake the world in our own

image. The poets at the center of this study—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Christina Rossetti—all display a willingness (albeit an often reluctant one) to think about absence in ways that are ethically, aesthetically, and formally productive. Both within the visionary Romantic discourse that included concepts like the suspension of disbelief and Keatsian "negative capability" and in the context of Victorian poetry's performative critique of the constructed nature of the social and political world, suspension emerges from what might be understood as constitutive uncertainty—that which is, by its nature and definition, unavailable to epistemological inquiry and resistant to linguistic representation.

Moreover, within nineteenth-century British writing, the meaning and resonance of suspension emerges from a particular experience of the sublime. In this experience, the jolt of incomprehension brings us to the very limit of our conditioned language and cognitive abilities—Coleridge names this the "suspension of our Comparing Powers"—before giving way to a state of open-ended, suspended, yet active awareness in which we do not simply return to the grounds of our own knowledge (nor reject it wholesale) but hold it more lightly. The response to the condition of unknowability that suspension offers is twofold: it marks the moment of initial encounter with the unknowable and, equally if not more important, it enables a generative, even productive response to structural uncertainty. As I argue in the two following chapters, this suspended sublime is theorized—though in a fragmentary and sometimes indirect manner—by Coleridge and receives its greatest poetic expression in Shelley's "Mont Blanc"; yet, as my concluding chapter demonstrates, this visionary form allows the deeply religious Christina Rossetti to imaginatively bridge the incommensurable distance between earthly and heavenly temporalities, remaining responsive to varying orders of signification that operate simultaneously.

One need, of course, not look very far to find objects, bodies, and habits of mind in the process of being suspended in nineteenth-century literature. Romantic poetry offers Aeolian

harps hanging ready to receive the inspiration of the wind and figures in mobile immobility on the side of Grecian urns. Visionary encounters with the natural sublime—of which "Tintern Abbey" remains a privileged site—are frequently marked by either bodily or cognitive suspension: time slows down, progress is interrupted, and we will never be the same afterwards. The network of potential meanings extends into Victorian poetry as well. The Prince in Tennyson's *The Princess* suffers from a vulnerability to cataleptic trances and rather inconveniently falls into suspended animation in the heat of battle, while the speaker of Christina Rossetti's "Remember" conceives of a position in which she may "half turn to go yet turning stay," indefinitely prolonging a moment of hesitation that gains much of its pathos from the lyric's recognition of the inexorable pressures of temporality and mortality. Writing in 1869, the essayist Henry Sidgwick found his contemporaries to be defined by a certain flexibility of mind: "We are growing more sceptical in the proper sense of the word: we suspend our judgment much more than our predecessors, and much more contentedly … the opinions that we do hold we hold if not more loosely, at least more at arm's length" (60). Indeed, for many thinkers of the time—and since—suspension of judgment represented the best of the Victorian mind: the possibility of objective inquiry, and the sober weighing of the facts without regard to prejudices. Skepticism and suspended judgment were, moreover, not limited to intellectual inquiry; as scholars such as George Levine and Caroline Levine have argued, genres such as the realist novel and detective story helped educate readers in the practices of letting go of assumptions and waiting patiently for more complete knowledge.

Now, as then, it is most common to encounter suspension in any number of local, inherently limited manifestations. It appears not only in phrases such as the suspension of disbelief and the "suspension of judgment" but also in critical discussions of concepts like narrative suspense or what J. Hillis Miller terms the "linguistic moment," characterized in poetry by a "suspension of reference": "the moment when language itself is foregrounded and becomes

problematic" (*Linguistic Moment* 41). More often than not, such uses of the term take the meaning of suspension for granted, calling attention instead to what is being placed in abeyance. Suspension itself, that is, seems always to fall just under the radar of critical speculation and theorization. Although the term obviously predates this period, the forms of suspension most important to this project emerge in the early part of the nineteenth century. As Robert Mitchell argues, "Romantic-era authors did not limit themselves to representing states of suspended animation in their poetry and prose but also developed techniques for introducing forms of suspension into the experience of reading literature, treating literature as a technology for creating 'altered states' " ("Suspended Animation" 112), and these techniques—many of them related to the practice of poetry—continue to operate in the decades after the Romantic period, often in unexpected ways. Coleridge, for instance, introduces the phrase "willing suspension of disbelief" into the English language in the pages of the *Biographia Literaria* (1817), yet he also draws upon the resources of suspension throughout his poetry and prose in ways that come to define its use in the decades after its publication that have not, despite the prevalence of the term, been fully recognized. It was this very commonality—even everydayness—of suspension that first attracted my attention, and my experience has been that, once you become aware of suspension, it begins to appear everywhere.

Constituting Discontinuity in the Long Nineteenth Century

Hillis Miller's *Linguistic Moment* provides an instructive counterpoint to the aims and arguments of the present study. Like Miller, I have chosen to place poetry, and specifically Romantic and post-Romantic poetry, at the center of my inquiry, believing, as he does, that poetic language and form are marked by suspension in ways that are distinct from other literary genres. That is, while all language is marked by what Derrida called its iterability or *destinerrance*—a fundamental,

necessary dislocation between signifier and signified—poetic language in particular functions through an essential suspension of reference, operating simultaneously and undecidably on literal and figural registers. The structural features of poetry, such as line breaks, meter, and caesura, perform what Miller describes as a "suspension of the forward-moving working of language toward the production of meaning, in a prolonged, hovering instant of self-reflection" (15) in ways that are unavailable to prose writing. My own decision to focus on poetry in *Reading for the Pause* reflects these assumptions, and while I do not discount the importance of suspension to, for instance, the narrative forms of the nineteenth-century realist novel, I argue throughout this project that suspension achieves it greatest significance in poetic discourse. Formalist critics in particular have been attuned to the workings of poetic suspension. As Herbert Tucker writes,

> The intervention of poetic form denatures and so puts a hitch in cultural business as usual, and from the creative interval that it frames the design of an alternative order can arise. At this synthetic moment the performative becomes the transformative: poetry plays out options, tries out paradigms that, whether or not they find their match in the world beyond the poem, offer elastic exercise to the imaginative faculty that asks how a changed scheme of things, given material embodiment, might actually feel. ("Whither, Yon, and How" 36)

Tucker's celebration of the "transformative" power of poetry evokes many of the claims made by Percy Bysshe Shelley in the 1822 *Defence of Poetry*; Shelley, famously, argued that poetry "awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unappreciated combinations of thought" (*SPP* 517). Poetry's efficacy is largely a matter of its ability to enact forms of suspension: our minds will not be enlarged until we are able to counteract or interrupt the inertia of "cultural business as usual."

More broadly, *Reading for the Pause* responds to a number of critical conversations in nineteenth-century studies that have in the last several years become increasingly attentive to what Anne-Lise François calls "the ellipsis by which experience remains below the threshold of

representation and unavailable to discursive knowledge [and] is constitutive of experience itself" (51). Erik Gray's study of nineteenth-century poetic "indifference," for instance, resists the impulse to construct a narrative of deliberate participation in a recognizable literary tradition, highlighting instead what he calls an "undeclared genre," where influence is "not sequential and apparent but more likely to be cumulative and subconscious" (14)—a claim that parallels the one I am making for suspension in approximately the same time period. A number of studies of novels have also begun to examine non-narrative and non-signifying dimensions of these texts that often fall outside the purview of scholarly attention. William Galperin has recently argued for the importance of missed opportunities in Jane Austen's novels, which not only suspend the forward movement of plot but mark, as he puts it, "an alterity that has been forsaken but not forgotten" (371). Galperin implies that Austen's commitment to "alternative history" (357) is central to an ethical project: "what the missed opportunity exposes," he argues, "is the winner-take-all logic that drives the narrative in the very image of the imperium that it serves. On the losing side of a culture war, in other words, in which both the narrative and its heroine are impressed, are possibilities that time and progress have to a large degree vanquished" (366). Moreover, although many of the dominant paradigms in the field still emphasize the ways that mid-nineteenth-century realism is implicated in the production of knowledge as a means to engendering sympathy, Andrew Miller and Adela Pinch have begun to question these epistemological claims. Miller's work examines what he calls the "optative" mode of Victorian narration, and claims that the "inclination to imagine counterfictional lives" (that is, to muse upon what did not happen) is nothing less than "a structural feature of nineteenth-century realistic prose" (196). Pinch has challenged the epistemological claims made for both fiction and poetry, reminding us of the ways that literature stages the inability to fully—or, in some cases, even partially—know the mind of

the other; our ethical responsibilities, she argues, are not contingent on or, for that matter, productive of knowledge.

What these brief examples suggest is a broader acknowledgement of the urgency of attending to what François calls "unobserved, not-for-profit experience," a category she opposes to "results entered on the public record" and which, she argues, allows us to engage in the practice of "measuring difference not by what an action materially produces but by the imagination of possibilities revelation may either open or eclipse" (21). This shift of attention from epistemology to possibility requires the creation of new critical categories, such as suspension, which enable us to describe a poetics of "not-for-profit experience," while also affirming the critical potentiality of literary language. Moreover, poetry provides a framework for confronting uncertainties that are structural and constitutive, rather than—as they so often are in narrative—symptomatic and contingent.

During the last twenty years, the significant scholarly work on Victorian poetry has strengthened the connection between poetry and the social, drawing attention to the structures and limits of representation and complicating the relationship between knowing and feeling.[9] In particular, Isobel Armstrong's *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (1993) demonstrated that Victorian poets were already aware of the complicated ways that self-expression was influenced by external cultural forces, anticipating the deconstructionist critiques of the

[9] Although the claims I am making throughout this introduction are intended to apply to both Romantic and Victorian poetry, I will be drawing primarily on the work of Victorianist scholars throughout this section. To put it reductively, scholars of Romantic literature do not tend to invest as much energy in theorizing "Romantic poetry," perhaps because that category is virtually synonymous with Romanticism itself. While this allows Romanticists a greater flexibility in dealing with themes across genres, it does mean that the field has not given rise to a critical study equivalent to, say, Armstrong's *Victorian Poetry*. To put it another way, the category of "Romantic poetry" is a distinction belonging to periodization, creating a distinction from poetry at other historical moments. "Victorian poetry" on the other hand, is a category that is often deployed to distinguish it from other Victorian genres—namely the novel, which remains the "default" for Victorian literature.

twentieth century. The Victorian "double poem," which "turns its expressive utterance around so that it becomes the opposite of itself, not only the *subject's* utterance but the *object* of analysis" (12), is, she argues, both skeptical and responsive, struggling to make meaning out of new cultural content and redefining its own aims in the process. The Victorian double poem remains one of the field's most important explanatory models. However, scholars since Armstrong have increasingly foregrounded the ways in which poetry not only responds to the social but also actively creates it. Slinn's work, which borrows the concept of performativity from the field of speech act theory, has been particularly influential in explaining the constitutive (as opposed to the referential) dimensions of poetic language. Victorian poetry serves a performative function, in Slinn's view, when it "engenders the moment of connection between language and reality," making the speaker of a given poem inseparable from the cultural context to which it belongs (*Cultural Critique* 23). Studies by authors such as Matthew Campbell, Kirstie Blair, and Jason Rudy have further elucidated the complex relationship that nineteenth-century poetry maintains to other cultural forms. Campbell attends to the physical experience of poetry, arguing that Romantic and Victorian prosody embodies mental struggle so that they may be felt as physical experiences of rhythm. Blair and Rudy are also concerned with the ways that poetry represents physical experience, examining how poetry's discourse of the heart had literary, medical, and political consequences that could not be easily disentangled.

In *Victorian Poetry as Cultural Critique,* Warwick Slinn, working within a set of terms that he (like Hillis Miller) borrows from de Man as well as from Armstrong, adumbrates the "the potential for cultural critique engendered by referential aberration, by that suspension of normative referential logic that is frequently an effect of poetic utterance. This suspension accompanies the foregrounding of complex, often conflicting, discursive codes" (10). Slinn perhaps too quickly dismisses certain Romantic-era suspensions—including the Coleridgean

suspension of disbelief—as a form of "special pleading" engendered by a misapplication of "affective ambiguity" whereby "readers are … asked to give up their standard expectations of meaning through reference" in ways most likely to provoke a sense of "alienation" (13). Yet, as Slinn more broadly acknowledges, and as I have already proposed, the possibility of alienation and worse cannot be erased from the concept of suspension. "[T]he world," as Browning eloquently remarks in the "Essay on Shelley" (1852), "is not to be learned and thrown aside, but reverted to and relearned" (14). To wish away ambiguity, to ignore constitutive discontinuity, amounts to a refusal of experience itself.

Meredith Martin and Yisrael Levin provide a striking account of an unexpected confrontation with uncertainty in nineteenth-century studies. Writing of nineteenth-century prosody manuals, Martin and Levin remark upon the fundamental disagreements in these texts: "It is not that they simply do not agree about whether or not the iamb exists, but they do not agree about what meter has been in the past and what it will be in the future. For us," they continue,

> this allows a frightening, indeed, a destabilizing amount of freedom. What if, instead of a border, a boundary, a measure, delineation, a container, a shape, meter was more of a discursive in-between space? A no-man's land, a battlefield, a mediator between the writer and the reader—a mediator between the self and the world—but what about a mediator between the self and the self? (157)

What is particularly interesting about this passage—whose listing of multiple possibilities resonates with the style of the de Quincey essay with which I began—is the distinction that Martin and Levin make between, on the one hand, "a border, a boundary, a measure," and, on the other, "a discursive in-between space" or "no-man's land." The latter set of categories, to which prosody belongs, suggests an uncertainty of a rather different order than the former. Meter, that is does not offer a decision between two possibilities or even the potential for deciding. Rather, it

opens a space in which all possibility of certainty is held in abeyance. Dichotomous thinking and formal determination are perpetually suspended.

This is a profound realization, and one that seems particularly important in the context of the rethinking of formalism. One of the most useful insights of the new, or "strategic" formalism has been the recognition that form is not totalizing but rather contingent and incomplete. Caroline Levine claims that "we can understand the cultural-political field as shaped by a web of competing attempts to impose order" and notes that literary forms in particular "participate in a destabilizing relation to social formations" ("Strategic Formalism" 630). The constitutive discontinuity marked by Martin and Levin in writings on even the most seemingly stable elements of poetic form is thus reinscribed as a feature of formalism more generally; it may be, simultaneously, an occasion for both fear and relief—yet, we cannot help but be jolted by our encounter with it. The broader claims that Martin and Levin make for prosody, namely that it "can teach us as much about ambivalence and the desire for stability as it can about experiment and disruption" (158), implies that, in addition to naming a set of practices having to do with the formal dimensions of poetic discourse, prosody could also provide a conceptual category for thinking about forms of suspension that respond to constitutive, rather than contingent, gaps in knowledge.

More immediately, the focus on the "battlefield" of prosody can help us distinguish between suspension and narrative suspense—a category that is perhaps uniquely important in the study of nineteenth-century literature. Certainly, suspension and narrative suspense share a number of common practices, forms, and assumptions. As Caroline Levine argues in her important study of suspense in realist fiction and prose, "the very pleasures of suspenseful narrative lie in the experience of anxiety, the uneasy sense that the world may not conform to predictable outcomes. To have an experience of suspenseful uncertainty is to acknowledge that

there is more than one credible ending to the narrative, more than one potentially plausible solution to the mystery … . [C]losure does not so much dictate an arbitrary conclusion, as it compels us to recognize the *otherness* of the world, the ever-present possibility that the facts may refuse to validate our prejudices" (*Serious Pleasures* 47). Many of these same principles and affective responses apply to suspension more generally; most importantly, both narrative suspense and poetic suspension are bound up with feelings of uncertainty and a respect for what she calls the "otherness of the world." For George Levine, the self-suspension practiced by nineteenth-century scientists was defined by "first, a passion for knowing so intense that one would risk one's life to achieve it; and second, a willingness to repress the aspiring, desiring, emotion-ridden self and everything merely personal, contingent, historical, material that might get in the way of acquiring knowledge" (*Dying to Know* 2). As a more general category, suspension, too, requires a holding back of one's prejudices and conditioning and a willingness to open oneself to the morally and ethically expansive experience of surprise.

However, within the archetypal narrative of experimentation and discovery, suspense and the suspension of judgments are means to an end, moments of uncertainty that will be overcome by the satisfactions of knowledge and mastery—a view that runs counter to the ethical and aesthetic functions that this study claims for poetry. For as much as they celebrate the ethical value of suspense in teaching its practitioners to respond more sensitively to the social, political, and scientific world, both Caroline Levine and George Levine continually elevate its epistemological dimension. Caroline Levine notes that "Nineteenth-century scientists and philosophers insisted that a doubtful pause was absolutely essential to the pursuit of knowledge. … From this epistemological perspective, novelistic suspense performed a crucial cultural role: narrative enigmas and delays could help to foster habits of hesitation and uncertainty" (*Serious Pleasures* 3). George Levine puts it even more simply: "Epistemology, one might say, is something

like a Victorian novel" (*Dying to Know* 20). Thus narrative suspense, understood generally as a contingent feature of plot, always encourages the reader to anticipate and imagine what comes next, promising either implicitly or explicitly that the mystery will be revealed. In short, it creates an object of knowledge to be found out. It represents a different order of experience than the one adumbrated by François as "the suspension of relation between the two hands, which releases the gift of alms, however temporarily, from the circuit of exchange (anticipation and return, sacrifice and reward) in which charity is usually caught, might be taken as a figure for the numerous tropes of passive agency, singularity, and nonrelation informing postmodern ethical thought" (François 27). Suspension, that is, marks that which can never become reified into an object of knowledge, but remains something that can be "known" only in its passing away, only in its difference from the moment in which it is known.

Reading for the Pause

Each of the chapters that follows is organized around the work of a single nineteenth-century poet. Many of the poems under consideration have sometimes been viewed as making unwarranted demands upon their audience, offering too little in terms of aesthetic, referential, or historical payoff to compensate for the work of response. William Hazlitt dismissed Coleridge's *Christabel* (1816) as a greater "psychological curiosity" than "Kubla Khan," and warned readers that it was liable to produce states of "metaphysical suspension" and "theoretical imbecility" that mirrored the paralysis of its author's own poetic and mental powers. While Percy Shelley's "Mont Blanc," published the same year as *Christabel*, has fared better in its reception as a masterful rendering of the sublime, it, too, has sometimes been regarded with suspicion; the New Critic F. R. Leavis cited it as an example of a poetic practice that all too frequently "depends for its success on inducing … a kind of attention that doesn't bring the critical intelligence into play: the imagery

feels right, the associations work appropriately, if (as it takes conscious resistance not to do) one accepts the immediate feeling and doesn't slow down to think" (206). The critical fortunes of Tennyson's *Maud* (1855)—the first long poem he published after being named Poet Laureate in 1850—are still well-known. George Eliot was not the last reader to feel that it contained "scarcely more than a residuum of Alfred Tennyson: the wide-sweeping intellect, the mild philosophy, the healthy pathos, the wondrous melody, have almost all vanished, and left little more than a narrow scorn which piques itself on the scorn of narrowness, and a passion which clothes itself in exaggerated conceits" (*Critical Writings* 173).

In the cases of Robert Browning's "An Epistle ... of Karshish" (1855) and Christina Rossetti's *The Prince's Progress* (1866), the situation has been one of neglect. Critics have seen little in Browning's take on the biblical story of Lazarus beyond a rather straightforward rendering of gospel truth; Rossetti's narrative of failure and indecision has been roundly judged as the dull younger sister of *Goblin Market*. While all of these poems have been, to some degree, rehabilitated and recovered by critical practices that at least profess a greater respect for indeterminacy and ambiguity, they all—with the possible exception of "Mont Blanc"—retain some of the stigma of being second-rate works by first rate authors. However, I argue that this relative neglect is a manifestation of an inadequate understanding of suspension. Once we perceive the gaps, fragmentation, and abyssal dimensions of these texts—the formal markers of suspension—as something other than failures of artistry or privations felt by the reader, they will disclose a much more affirmative function.

Chapters 1 and 2 trace a genealogy of suspension through Romantic-era articulations of sublimity. Specifically, these chapters propose a counter-tradition within the British Romantic reception of Immanuel Kant that emphasizes the sublime's ability to leave the subject unmoored from structures of language and perception. Privileging the event of unconditioned experience in

the writings of Coleridge and Shelley discloses the possibilities of what might be called an ethical or non-coercive sublime that gives way to an open-ended, indeterminate relationship with the unknowable. While Kant uses the language of superiority, mastery, and resistance to characterize the final movement of the sublime, Coleridge's description of the sublime as "the Suspension of our Comparing powers" suggests a posture more like response or awareness, a giving-over of the self to a non-totalizable reality. The force of nature becomes what Kant calls "a might that has no dominance over us" not because we are able to make it go away but because we are able to respond to it from a position of radical non-attachment or suspension. The numerous moments of suspension in Coleridge's writings—from the "willing suspension of disbelief" to the creative paralysis of "Dejection: An Ode"—participate in the forms and structures of sublime experience. Yet, precisely because of suspension's intimacy with the unconditioned, these moments of suspension often have radically uncertain outcomes. Perhaps nowhere is that more clear than in *Christabel*, where the line between willingly suspended disbelief and "forc'd unconscious sympathy" remains perilously thin. This drama of suspended mental and physical animation leaves many of its ethical issues unresolved, yet powerfully affirms a sublime that is neither mastery nor failure.

Chapter 2 develops the mutually-constituted relationship of suspension and the sublime through a reading of Shelley's poetry. Though Mitchell has recently cited the speaker's state of suspended animation in "Mont Blanc" as a paradigmatic example of the powers of passivity, Shelley's "trance sublime and strange" is in fact a more complicated state of awareness that attends, among other things, to the suspension of reference separating the poem's language from the phenomenon it describes. The speaker's state of "unremitting interchange / With the clear universe of things around" comes only through a work of active suspension and, as a result, is a posture that the poem attains only intermittently before falling back upon conditional language

and objectification. “Mont Blanc,” read through the “trance sublime and strange” shapes an understanding of Romantic sublimity as an ongoing affirmation of suspension that is at once the mental process described by Kant and an actively embodied, visceral experience that anticipates (and perhaps surpasses) affective physical responses to narrative suspense that have been identified by scholars of the novel.

While critics have tended to assume that the sublime disappears from Victorian poetry, the second section of *Reading for the Pause* argues that it informs the structures, images, and forms that separate the poetry of this period from other contemporary literary practices, expanding the possibilities for engaging with an uncertain world. The limitations of human knowledge and language are deeply felt in the poetry of Tennyson. Chapter 3 explores the convergence between the suspension of reference that is a feature of poetic language and bodily states of suspended animation that both fascinated and frightened Victorian audiences. By claiming to be a living body wrongly declared dead and prematurely buried, the speaker in *Maud* identifies himself with figures in both scientific and popular literature who suffer nightmarish fates because their signifying processes are at odds with the reading practices of those around them. While scientific treatises and narrative fiction sought more accurate methods of gaining knowledge, Tennyson’s poem suggests that the suspension of reference is a structural feature of signification—uncertainty remains even in the most careful readings. *Maud* directs our attention away from its plot in order to register a profound concern with bodies—and texts—that are held in suspension.

Chapter 4 considers Browning’s dramatic monologue, “An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician.” The central drama of the poem is the attempt of Karshish to explain the miraculous resurrection of Lazarus in scientific terms. As nearly all Browning’s readers know, this is an enterprise doomed to fail, yet the broader

significance of Browning's depiction of Lazarus is often overlooked. The conventions of reading a dramatic monologue allow readers to suspend their moral judgment of Karshish while retaining a sense of superiority over him when it comes to religious knowledge. A more thoroughly suspended reading practice reveals how Browning departs in significant ways from his biblical source in rendering Lazarus' position as an exemplary figure in Christian discourse. The doubleness of the poem's figural language draws attention to the internal ambiguities of the gospel story, exposing a process of troping that renders Lazarus unable to speak on his own behalf. Thus, while this poem has often been read as an unambiguous affirmation of Christian doctrine, Browning's Lazarus resists appropriation into this consolatory discourse and leaves the poem's readers more ungrounded and uncertain than the speaker himself.

Christina Rossetti's long narrative poem, *The Prince's Progress*, has often been dismissed as a creative failure because of the way it frustrates readers' generic, intertextual, and even metrical expectations. In my final chapter, I reread these moments of frustration as manifestations of Rossetti's attempts to practice suspension in a world that often seems out of control. In her devotional work, she counsels her readers to "pray against roothold"; in *The Prince's Progress*, she suggests that we must also read against roothold in order to avoid reducing the multiplicity of the world to a set of rigid signifying practices. By failing to resolve the inconsistencies of her own text, Rossetti reminds her readers of the dangers of both clinging to representations of truth and of identifying too closely with the changing conditions of an imperfect, earthly world. Like Shelley in "Mont Blanc," Rossetti uses language to hold her reader in contemplative, suspended states that nonetheless require their active, critical participation.

Despite a scholarly tradition that continues to see passive belief as the most plausible alternative to the skeptical habits of science and realism, suspension, particularly as it appears in the non-narrative forms of nineteenth-century poetry, offers more nuanced critical possibilities

for experiencing uncertainty. It offers a conceptual category for thinking systematically about not-knowing that both arises from within the historical conditions of the nineteenth century and functions as a workable theoretical concept in a post-deconstructive age. Suspension invites the reader to investigate the conditions of the present moment, even as that moment remains subject to change. It counteracts our tendencies towards reification and detachment in favor of an event that can be "known" only in its passing away. To put it simply, then, suspension teaches us to read for the pause as much as we read for the plot.

<u>Chapter 1</u>
"She could not tell":
Christabel, the Sublime, and the Suspension of Our Comparing Powers

> It is not strictly accurate to say, that we believe our dreams to be actual while we are dreaming. We neither believe it nor disbelieve it—with the will the comparing power is suspended, and without the comparing power any act of Judgement, whether affirmation or denial, is impossible.[1]

> If we sometimes suspect [Coleridge] of a certain pleasure in paradoxes for their own sake, we must recollect that his great object is to make us feel the necessity of contradictions to our understanding, and the duty of facing them, if we could have a vision of the all-embracing Truth which lies beyond them.[2]

The Pleasures and Pains of Suspension

Among the "abuse … in a spirit of bitterness" (*BL* 2.238) that attended the publication of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Christabel, Kubla Khan, and the Pains of Sleep* in 1816 was William Hazlitt's unsigned review in the *Examiner*. "The fault of Mr. Coleridge," Hazlitt declared, " is, that he comes to no conclusion. He is a man of that universality of genius, that his mind hangs suspended between poetry and prose, truth and falsehood, and an infinity of other things, and from an excess of capacity, he does little or nothing" (J. R. Jackson 205). While the estimation of Coleridge's incapacities and prodigious powers of procrastination is hardly new and was, in fact, well-acknowledged by the poet himself, Hazlitt's deployment of the figure of suspension in his critique of both poet and poem is especially perceptive, if also quintessentially Coleridgean. Indeed, Coleridge had already admitted to imaginative immobility in the very preface to *Christabel*, noting that "My poetic powers have been," he writes, "till very lately, in a state of suspended animation" (*CPP* 161). The poem itself, like its creator "comes to no conclusion": while a text such

[1] Coleridge, letter to Daniel Stuart, 13 May 1816; qtd. *Biographia Literaria* 2.6n2. Hereafter all references to the *Biographia Literaria* will be denoted by *BL*.
[2] F. D. Maurice on Coleridge, *Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy* 2.54. Qtd. in Neville 57.

as "Kubla Khan" gains a kind of ersatz completeness through its generic identification as a "fragment," Coleridge's refusal (or inability) to fully let go of *Christabel* holds poem, poet, and reader in an uneasy state of suspended expectation where *Christabel* is always and perpetually "to be continued."

Indeed, more than any other British writer of the nineteenth century, Coleridge is responsible for shaping the meaning of suspension as a literary and philosophical concept. It functions—both ambiguously and ambivalently—as both a signifier of incapacity and torpor (the valence that Hazlitt finds most relevant) and a potentially generative, critical practice that is also at the center of his understanding of the sublime. This chapter traces the most significant threads of Coleridge's deployment of the figure of suspension, focusing specifically on his influential concept of "the willing suspension of disbelief" (*BL* 2.6) and on his insistence throughout his fragmentary writings on that the sublime consists in suspending our powers of comparison. Reading the "willing suspension of disbelief" in terms of Coleridge's thinking on the sublime allows us to recover the former concept from many of the pejorative uses to which it is often put; moreover, it enables us to become more aware of the range of possibilities that attend each moment of suspension in Coleridge's work—possibilities that may be elevating (as they are in the conventional understanding about the sublime) as well as destructive (as in Coleridge's image of readers of popular fiction who suffer from the "suspension of all common sense and definite purpose" [*BL* 1.48n]). Furthermore, just as the discourse of the sublime expands our understanding of the suspension of disbelief, reading the Coleridgean sublime with a greater awareness of his preoccupation with suspension discloses a profound concern with the traumatic, potentially annihilating potential of the sublime that is less legible in poems such as "The Aeolian Harp," "This Lime-Tree Bower, My Prison," and "Hymn Before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni"—all of which are usually seen as privileged sites for the articulation of Coleridgean sublimity. Yet,

perhaps most importantly, the association of suspension and the sublime in Coleridge's work places the former concept within a discourse of aesthetic judgment, the kinds of judgments which, according to Immanuel Kant, are singular and disinterested, wholly unconditioned by conceptual thought.

Christabel—the poem which triggered Hazlitt's terror of suspension—lacks many of the conventional figurations of the sublime that populate Coleridge's more conventional poems on the topics. Mountain vistas are replaced by dark woods and confined indoor spaces, elevating language is replaced by lurid detail, and in the place of a serene, and presumably adult male perceiving subject, the reader is placed in almost claustrophobic proximity to Christabel, a young woman who is subject to a systematic silencing by the sinister machinations of the older, more threateningly-sexualized Geraldine. Most critics have tended to read the poem as something of an object lesson in unintended consequences or as an enactment of authorial and generic excess amplified by the gothically-inflected mobilization of feminine imagery. Excluded from *Lyrical Ballads* in favor of William Wordsworth's "Michael," *Christabel* has been much read but has never quite achieved the status of Coleridge's other poem of the supernatural, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Read, however, through a concern with tropes of suspension, *Christabel*, as I argue in the second half of this chapter, becomes newly readable as one of Coleridge's most adventurous and uncompromising explorations of the Romantic sublime. Coleridge's deployment of suspension as both a formal practice and as a verbal motif renders much of what we take for granted about the poem—for instance, that Christabel errs in welcoming Geraldine into her home—far more undecidable and, in turn, much more available for a "sublime" reading. *Christabel* focuses its readers' attention on those who do not necessarily benefit from the experience of terror, incomprehension, and cognitive breakdown that constitutes sublimity in the accounts of both

Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant.[3] Coleridge's sympathy with Christabel in her feminine fragility[4] leads him to foreground the extent to which the "willing suspension" of poetic faith results in absolute vulnerability, the literal giving up of one's powers of self-preservation and, importantly for the poem, of speech and other powers of comparison. Nevertheless, the "suspended animation" in which Coleridge leaves his poem creates a space in which sublimity may still be affirmed, even in the face of a seeming traumatic collapse, as a potentiality yet to be realized.

Reflecting on the composition of *Lyrical Ballads* in chapter 14 of the *Biographia Literaria* (1817), Coleridge recalls that

> … it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of the imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. (2.6)

According to the *OED*, this is the first use of the phrase "willing suspension of disbelief," defined as "the voluntary withholding of skepticism on the part of the reader with regard to incredible characters and events." It constitutes one of Coleridge's most lasting, albeit poorly or incompletely understood, contributions to popular and critical discourse. Today, the phrase is most commonly applied to theatre and film, though in the context of the above passage, it most strictly names a reading practice founded on the acceptance of incredible elements in

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[3] Daniella Mallinick has recently noted a similar movement in Mary Wollstonecraft's posthumous novel *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*. She convincingly argues for Wollstonecraft's critique of a Burkean sublime through a reimagining of the topos that combines elements similar to Kant's *Critique* as well as an explicitly political agency based on religious faith. Coleridge, particularly in a poem like *Christabel*, clearly demonstrates that he shares many of Wollstonecraft's sympathies, though he ultimately takes this sympathy in a direction that is more aesthetic than political.
[4] "Where Wordsworth—in poems about mad mothers, lost daughters, and abandoned wives—watched women suffer, Coleridge felt this crushing of a girl child from within as if it were his own" (Taylor, "Phantom Soul" 722).

supernatural poetry. Broadly speaking, suspension of disbelief describes the process through which authentic affect can be experienced through an explicitly fictional text. Elements that are clearly outlandish, Gothic, or supernatural require only that we assent to them as fictions. Once we have accepted that premise and agreed not to be distracted by its conflict with what we know as reality, we may more clearly recognize the "human interest and semblance of truth" that remains as the familiar among the unfamiliar.

Yet suspension of disbelief is frequently invoked, especially in popular usage, to acknowledge authorial and creative lapses that must be overlooked by generous readers, and to warn those readers not to become ensnared by an author's lies, manipulation, and incompetence. Indeed, it is difficult to escape the possibility that the willing suspension of disbelief encourages a foolhardy holding back of one's judgment at the moment when that judgment is most necessary. This idea is implicit in the *Biographia* passage when we remember that the "shadows of the imagination" for which Coleridge wishes to procure the willing suspension of disbelief, that is, for *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*, are two poems which place the very concept of agency in doubt. Readers may find themselves, like the wedding-guest, held in thrall by the Ancient Mariner's "glittering eye," unable to do more than "liste[n] like a three year's child" (l. 13, 15). And there may seem to be a rather short distance from the reading practice Coleridge prescribes for supernatural poetry to the "forc'd unconscious sympathy" (l. 597) that robs Christabel of her autonomy and renders her little more than a puppet controlled by Geraldine.

This, indeed, is the inflection that Robert Mitchell has recently given to Coleridge's views on suspended animation: it is a "dangerous condition," marking "a loss of subjective autonomy produced by the distractions of modernity" ("Suspended Animation" 108). Mitchell's emphasis on the connections between suspension and early nineteenth-century print media lead him to foreground Coleridge's negative, limited views of suspension: "Coleridge happily endorsed the

bracketing of belief and disbelief so long as this suspension was under the legislation of the will (i.e., a willing suspension of disbelief), but he was critical of states in which the will itself seemed suspended" ("Suspended Animation" 116). All forms of suspension, Mitchell argues, are not created equal. Yet such a view, as compelling as it might seem for readers of Coleridge in particular, presupposes an ability to "read" the terms of suspension in definitive ways. Yet, as I will argue in this chapter as well as in chapter 3, such legibility is precisely what suspension itself inhibits. Mitchell is certainly not the first to suspect that the "willing suspension of disbelief" might be little more than disingenuous special pleading on the part of Coleridge, an instance where he asks more of his reader than her cares to expect from himself. Yet this perspective does not give Coleridge credit for the extent to which even a willing suspension of disbelief may entail a more complete and unconditioned letting-go of one's desire to keep the experience within certain bounds.

Michael Tomko offers a more nuanced view of Coleridgean suspension that avoids the easy opposition that prescribes skepticism and paranoia as the only means of avoiding an overly-accepting credulousness. He describes the suspension of disbelief as a "combination of active engagement and vulnerable receptivity [that] promises to provide not only a new perspective that comes from the other but also an experience otherwise unavailable" (244). Poetic faith, in Tomko's reading, interrupts the rush to judgment and allows us to learn from others whose experience would otherwise be inaccessible to us. Placing the "willing suspension of disbelief" within the context of Coleridge's extensive theological writings, Tomko rightly apprehends the dual structure of mental activity and vulnerability that is part of suspended disbelief (and, moreover, of suspension as a more general concept). In this regard, Tomko's understanding of poetic faith also anticipates some of the claims that Caroline Levine makes for the Victorian novel, namely that "suspense fiction was all about teaching readers to suspend judgment" (*Serious*

Pleasures 2). Similar too is Levine's description of how the "pleasures of suspenseful narrative" lie in the surrender of expectations and certainties, giving the self to "the experience of anxiety, the uneasy sense that the world may not conform to predictable outcomes" (*Serious Pleasures* 47). But the "pleasures" of the suspense in Levine's archetypal narrative of discovery depend on the text itself achieving a very specific kind of closure, and this is not what happens in *Christabel*.

Ultimately, Tomko's conception of what Coleridge means by "poetic faith" is limited and provisional, much in the same way that Mitchell's is. Tomko, too, understands "willing suspension" as inherently partial, always fully under the volitional control of the critic: "a reader never surrenders his or her power of disbelief or dissent. This power is suspended, but not relinquished. It remains under the control of the will … " (245). He does not deny the potential pitfalls of suspended disbelief, yet he also establishes an active critical mind as a safeguard against epistemological embarrassment. Because he places so much emphasis on the saving intervention of the active critical mind, Tomko, like Mitchell, underplays some of the more radical possibilities of Coleridge's term. A conception of poetic faith and suspended disbelief that would not simply be, as Tomko puts it, "wrecked upon the rocks of the romantic stage and fractured by Coleridge's ambivalence concerning his past and political opinions" (243) must include and affirm the uncontrollable as well as the volitional.

Read in the context of Coleridge's other suspensions—chief among them the suspension of the comparing powers in the experience of sublimity, the willing suspension of disbelief becomes much more than "the happy relinquishment of the reality principle" (Swann, "Wandering Mother" 157-58) that allows us to enjoy and perhaps learn from fantastic and otherwise fictional scenarios. While suspension shares with narrative suspense a respect for the unexpected, it ultimately *breaks* with teleological inevitability so that it can no longer be recovered in an epistemologically-productive narrative. Holding back the movements of

judgment and doubt, the willing suspension of disbelief is equally a giving-over of the self without limit or expectation to an experience of unconditioned possibility. That Coleridge finds some of these possibilities deplorable or even terrifying does not necessarily mean that he limits his conception of suspension—or the sublime—only to what can be controlled by the will.

The broader possibilities of Coleridgean suspension emerge within the set of fragments that constitute much of Coleridge's thinking on the sublime. "Suspension," as Christopher Stokes has recently argued, "is the key trope in all Coleridge's discussions of form: it is not even that imagination rebounds off one of its limits with a certain energy, it is merely arrested by a stasis born of total absorption by and into its object. It is not so much a failed imagination as a paralysed one" (136). In a passage representative of many others Coleridge writes, "The Beautiful is the perfection, the Sublime the suspension, of the Comparing Power" (*Shorter Works* 1.597). In elevating the suspension of the comparing power to the central mental movement of the sublime, Coleridge amplifies a more limited claim made by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment:* "That is sublime in comparison with which everything else is small" (105). Included in that "everything else" are our own mental powers, however considerable they are in other contexts. Indeed, Clarence DeWitt Thorpe sees Coleridge's emphasis on suspension as a significant departure from Kant, seeing the former's language as a "censuring" of the German philosopher for not having been sufficiently radical in his own formulation (198).

Yet, regardless of whether the deployment of suspension is a deliberate break from Kant—I am inclined to read Kant's own phrase as amounting to more or less the annihilation of comparison—Coleridge's use of suspension to mark "the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger" (Kant 98) is highly significant for the ways that British Romantics, not only Coleridge but also Wordsworth

and Shelley, thought about sublimity.[5] The reimagining of the sublime as a "suspension of the comparing power"—as subtle as it may seem—has real implications for the way that we think about this category of experience because it reminds us that suspension does not simply mark that first moment of inhibition, but it also has to do with the "outpouring" that follows it. When our powers of comparison are suspended, the sublime moment takes us by surprise in the sense that it cannot even be compared to *other* feelings that might also be called sublime.

One of the qualities that suspension shares with the sublime is a potential to be constitutive and elevating through the spontaneous relation to something beyond ourselves, something beyond simple sensibility. One of the most striking examples of this kind of experience in Coleridge's poetic work comes in the representation of the infant Hartley's first stirrings of consciousness in "The Nightingale": "he beholds the moon, and hush'd at once / Suspends his sobs, and laughs most silently" (l. 102-3). While at first this moment does not seem to include the element of intentionality to fully qualify as a *willing* suspension, we should read these lines as the infant's first stirrings of that volitional consciousness—here marked by its absence or suspension. So too, the speaker's complaint in "Dejection: An Ode" discloses a kind of existential deprivation, characterized by self-concern—

> But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
> Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth,
> But oh! each visitation
> Suspends what nature gave me at my birth
> My shaping spirit of Imagination (l. 82-86)

[5] Wordsworth, in a passage from his fragment "On the Sublime and the Beautiful" clearly influenced by Coleridge, writes that "whatever suspends the comparing power of the mind and possesses it with a feeling or image of intense unity, without a conscious contemplation of parts, has produced a state of mind which is the consummation of the sublime" (*Prose Works* 353-54).Cf. Susan Wolfson's discussion of Coleridgean comparison in "Hymn Before Sunrise": "The way these similes reveal fragmentation and the self-conscious disjunction of mind and world helps explain the pervasive interest among the Romantics in events which put comparative power radically into question or suspend it altogether" (182).

The irony that this description of creative paralysis occurs in one of the most beautiful passages in one of Coleridge's finest poems has long been recognized. Noel Jackson has recently reevaluated this conclusion, arguing that the poem is not so much a valediction to waning creative powers but the initiation of a new mode of "critical" writing that depends upon seeing the mode of dejection as "not so much a paralyzing as an enabling condition, if only by its power to suspend relations between the creative imagination and the workings of the philosophical mind" (22). What Jackson, following a phrase that Coleridge uses in the "Essays on the Principles of Genial Criticism," calls "blank attachment," an "open-ended" (21) critical relation to the present moment, parallels the radical form of the willing suspension of disbelief read through Coleridge's writings on the sublime.[6]

Approaching the willing suspension of disbelief from the direction of the sublime illuminates a critical, yet radically receptive posture poised between knowing and not knowing, a suspension that accepts the risk of "metaphysical suspense" as the condition of sublime possibility. Although Kant strictly excludes "romances and maudlin plays" from "anything that could be classed with beauty, let alone sublimity" (133), Coleridge challenges this view through a concept of poetic faith that shares a structure of indirection with the Kantian sublime. "Willing suspension"—the deliberate abandonment of the self and cognition, a decision taken at the moment when we could still choose to do otherwise—provides the ground from which Coleridge affirms his version of the sublime in which suspension—not only of the comparing powers, but the more general abeyance of discursive thought and selfhood—is the central term. His call for poetic faith and the suspension of disbelief functions as a reminder that the sublime must remain

[6] Jackson links this posture to the beautiful rather than the sublime: "the blank perception of beauty makes palpable modes of experience that appear in terms far from aesthetically organized, bringing into view moments marked as much by violence and terror, disorientation and boredom, as by beauty" (33). However, his reading of "Principles of Genial Criticism" and the "Dejection" ode suggests that suspension might thus provide a site of crossing or resonance between these terms which are usually opposed.

heterogeneous to all systems of regularity and representation, that it is never guaranteed to take place, and that it is essentially spontaneous and surprising. Figuring sublimity through the trope of suspension enables Coleridge to defer indefinitely the moment of expansion and release upon which Kant insists. Coleridge thus emphasizes the risks associated with the sublime by taking seriously the consequences of suspending our critical faculties of comparison, even as he ultimately affirms sublimity as such. Whether or not this crisis leads to the intuition of all-ness or unity (which Stokes and others have claimed as the other privileged term of the Coleridgean sublime[7]) or whether, as in *Christabel*, the outcome remains uncertain, suspension both marks the initial encounter with the incommensurable and structures a potential response to it that accepts givenness without the kinds of judgments that would return to the discourse of comparison—or, for that matter, to discourse itself, insofar as language is always already predicated on the exercise of comparing powers.

Judith Halberstam characterizes the gothic as "the crisis occasioned by the inability to 'tell,' meaning both the inability to narrate and the inability to categorize" (23). In following section, I argue that the suspension of our powers of comparison in the sublime is analogous to the inability to "tell" that is so pervasive in *Christabel*, a poem that Karen Swann suggests, "frightened its reviewers, not because it was such a successful tale of terror, but because they couldn't decide what sort of tale it was" ("Enigma of Form" 160). The poem overwhelms its readers with so many interpretive choices that interpretation itself becomes impossible. The madness, stupidity, and speechlessness that afflict Christabel "redound on the reader, who continually feels mad or just stupid, unable to 'tell' how to characterize the verse at any given point" (162). Following Coleridge's use of suspension, I locate the occasion of the sublime in the many

[7] Raimonda Modiano, for instance, uses the Coleridgean suspension of comparison to argue for a "transcendence [that] occurs gradually, not violently, through an intense engagement with the objects of sense, and not through an abrupt disconnection from them" (117).

moments in the poem in which "telling" is disrupted. These moments of suspension may be read as figures for the disruption of cognition—the suspension of the comparing powers—associated with sublime feeling; as such, moreover, they remain inherently undecidable in ways that have not always been recognized by previous scholars.

"A sight to dream of, not to tell!"

Christabel is comprised of two parts. Part 1 stages the encounter between Christabel and the supernaturally mysterious Geraldine; struck by the latter's beauty and vague hints of distress, Christabel invites her into her father's castle. This act of generosity—or, as most readers have argued, a foolishness marked by gender weakness—sets in motion the enchantment whereby Christabel, in Part 2,, is rendered incapable of speaking about what she has seen of Geraldine's (possibly disfigured) body—and perhaps more. Coming before her father the next morning, Christabel attempts to repent of her initial act of hospitality, and pleads with him to send Geraldine away. Yet Sir Leoline, entranced by Geraldine's beauty and her claims to be to the daughter of a long-lost friend, is not moved by his daughter's concerns, nor does he heed the more ambiguous warnings of his court chronicler, Bard Bracy. Thus Geraldine's spell, Swann observes, "does no more than render explicit the inhibition of [Christabel's] 'telling' already operative in the opening scene of the poem, where her silence was obscurely connected to the brooding, dreaming, 'lord' of the castle, the father who loved the daughter 'so well'" (157). Unable to resist the spell and unsupported by those to whom she turns for sympathy, Christabel falls under the influence of Geraldine's gaze. By the end of the poem, Christabel has been emptied of her selfhood and is left stuttering, drawing a blank, unable to maintain her presence of mind.

These two sections of the published poem had been composed in 1798 and 1800, respectively, and circulated in manuscript form for more than fifteen years before they were

published. Until the end of his life Coleridge insisted that he would continue the story, bringing it to a more hopeful conclusion. A number of attempts to account for Coleridge's failure to complete the poem look to structural and thematic difficulties that may have activated his prodigious power of procrastination. Walter Jackson Bate was among the first modern Coleridge scholars to look beyond "bad luck and personal problems" as the main impediments to the completion of *Christabel*. Sympathetic as these explanations may be, Bate claims, "they forget Coleridge's immense fluency when he was confident of what he was doing. There was really nothing to prevent him during these three years (not to mention the next fifteen) from finishing the poem—expect the nature of the poem itself" (74). John Beer, on the other hand, remains confident that a clear ending to the poem could be imagined, yet admits that this is easier said than done in a "context which demanded that Christabel should remain 'innocent' in a very literal sense" (82). Susan Eilenberg sees *Christabel* in terms of a broader structure of "dispossession": just as Christabel falls victim to Geraldine's stronger influence, *Christabel* gives way to Wordsworth's poetic powers and stronger presence in *Lyrical Ballads* (99-100).

My purpose here, however, is not to speculate once again about Coleridge's failure to finish *Christabel* but rather to read the suspension of the text on its own terms, a task that readers have often found to be somewhat difficult. Hazlitt characterized Coleridge's "dim, obscure, and visionary" poem as "more like a dream than a reality. The mind, in reading it, is spell-bound … . The faculties are thrown into a state of metaphysical suspense and theoretical imbecility" (J. R. Jackson 207). This is not a complaint that the poem is merely confusing: the language of "metaphysical suspense" and "theoretical imbecility" suggest an experience of reading that is aberrational at best, one that inhibits a reader's mental faculties rather than expanding them.[8]

[8] Hazlitt's reaction to *Christabel* was not, of course, the most dramatic of the period. Doctor Polidori provides an account of what is arguably the most famous incident in *Christabel*'s reception history: the night when Byron's reading of Coleridge's manuscript induced Percy Bysshe

Indeed, as readers continue to discover, the faculties *are* liable to be thrown into a state of "theoretical imbecility"; one *does* risk the paralysis of "metaphysical suspense" when we read Coleridge's poem. Eilenberg locates the "difficulty of speaking properly in or about 'Christabel'" in the poem's broad undermining of identity: "There can be no language proper to an undefinable subject" (89). Anya Taylor notes that the poem both attracts and repels readers through "lulling, almost lobotomized repetitions" and "metrical hesitations and forward rushes" that threaten, in her view, to break down readers' powers of understanding—or simply leave them "transfixed" ("Phantom Soul" 707).

Indeed, *Christabel* begins by speaking incessantly about its inability to speak. Its narration is characterized by gaps and hesitations, breaking off abruptly just as it seems to really be getting started. The mindless chatter of the poem's catechism of trivia—"Is the night chilly and dark? / The night is chilly, but not dark" (l. 14-15)—resist the practices of literary reading and create a text that, as Hazlitt suggests, tends towards the production of discursive paralysis. While the first stanzas resound with the noises of the "castle clock," the "crowing cock," and the "Sixteen short howls" of the "mastiff bitch" (l. 1, 2, 12, 7), Christabel herself moves silently and—presumably—registers silently her surprise at the moan that emanates from behind the oak tree: "what it is, she cannot tell,—" (l. 42). This initial iteration of not being able to "tell" sets up the double meaning of silence and suspended powers of comparison. The prohibition on or suspension of "telling" (in both the narrative and comparative senses) is marked by the presence of mute bodily markers of surprise that reflect something like "the momentary inhibition of the vital forces" (Kant 98) that marks the jolt of the unknown and (at least potentially) initiates the experience of the sublime which, for Coleridge and his English counterparts much more than for Kant, was one that was always at least partially embodied, an emphasis that pervades Christabel's first encounter with

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Shelley to hallucinate women with eyes for nipples—or was it nipples for eyes?—and ran screaming from the room. See Taylor, "Phantom Soul" 714; Favret 113; and Minot and Minot 34.

Geraldine. Christabel "leaps up suddenly" (l. 39) at the sound from behind the oak. In the several lines before she is able to collect herself enough to be able to speak again, the narrator intervenes to attempt to "hush" her "beating heart" (l. 54).

Geraldine avows her own confusion as she attempts to narrate her story of kidnapping (and perhaps worse). That she has (perhaps) "lain in fits" (l. 90) suggests a more extreme version of Christabel's shock. About her captors, Geraldine can only say "Whither they went, I cannot tell—" (l. 97), mirroring the terms in which Christabel's mute surprise had been rendered by the narrator, even down to the punctuation marks. The gaps in Geraldine's story have typically rendered her a figure of suspicion. The seemingly inadvertent self-dividing expressed in a line like "Me, even me, a maid forlorn" (l. 80) comes to foreshadow her ultimate duplicity—and not even a particularly clever duplicity at that. At the same time, however, Geraldine's narrative, in addition to echoing the structures of Christabel's own reaction, makes an explicit connection between silence and a particularly paralyzing kind of vulnerability and violence. Geraldine's captors, in her account, "chok'd my cries with force and fright" (l. 81), a particularly brutal image of violence against a female body that remains unresolved in Coleridge's text.

Responding with sympathy and openheartedness, Christabel invites this mysterious figure into her home. Most readers have seen this gesture as a sign that she must necessarily believe Geraldine's story and, moreover, have assumed that this is an inappropriate response, tantamount to that which Coleridge attributed to "devotees of the circulating libraries" who, falling under the spell of "the moving phantasms of one man's delirium," become "afflicted with the ... trance or suspension of all common sense and all definite purpose" (*BL* 1.48n). Swann, alluding to this footnote to Chapter 3 of the *Biographia Literaria*, observes that, "For Christabel, but also, for any absorbed reader of circulating library romances, Geraldine's story of abduction works as a seduction—Christabel recognizes Geraldine as a certain type of heroine and embraces her"

("Wandering Mother" 152). In this reading, Christabel is the first victim of the "theoretical imbecility" threatened by the poem; having inappropriately or excessively suspended her disbelief, Christabel fails the most basic test presented to any reader of fantastic literature—telling the difference between fiction and fact. The coding of this action as a failure is largely a matter of genre and of a failure to recognize generic conventions as conventions. Walter Jackson Bate puts it more simply: Geraldine's story "would convince no one except an innocent and rather obtuse maid" (68). Christabel suffers because she reads like a girl.

However, in spite of the near-uniformity of critical opinion that dictates a negative reading of Christabel's actions, the poem itself fails to offer clear grounds for a better-informed reaction to Geraldine's plea for her to "Stretch forth thy hand ... / And help a wretched maid to flee" (l. 100). No mention is made of her reading practices, nor of any "obtuse" tendencies (beyond those, presumably, that Bate would associate with her gender and age). All the reader knows about Christabel from the first hundred or so lines of the poem is that she is deeply religious (suggested not only by the narrator's comment that "she in the midnight wood will pray / For the weal of her lover that's far away" [l. 31-2] but also by her numerous appeals to Jesus and Mary) and that she—like her creator—suffers from difficulties in sleeping. The first of these qualities—that is, Christabel's religious nature—would seem to dictate and, indeed, affirm the rightness of Christabel's offer of unconditional hospitality, and would do so not only in spite of but because of the risks it entails. Indeed, as much as this gesture may be unwise in terms of the plot, it is defensible on an ethical level. Ultimately, the disturbing consequences of Christabel's generosity are troubling not because the action itself is foolish, but because all actions of this kind, undertaken from a place of suspended certainty, are inherently undecidable in their outcomes. The unfinished status of *Christabel* means that the "rightness" of her decision to welcome Geraldine cannot ever be fully determined.

The undecidability of Christabel's action—one that comes to characterize suspension itself, which can never be fully determined as either "good" (the suspension of disbelief) or "bad" (the suspension of common sense or allowing oneself to be taken in)—is mirrored in the poem as a whole, and has much to do, I contend, with the frustration it appears to provoke in readers. Mary Favret implicates the willing suspension of disbelief in a project of strategic obstruction in *Christabel*: "Coleridge's push for 'poetic faith,' the 'willing suspension of disbelief' … especially in *Christabel*, leave readers scratching their heads in perplexity and submitting, gratefully or begrudgingly to the inscrutable genius of the poet" (110). *Christabel* is written, she claims, in a way that "draws our allegiance away from natural causality and toward unnatural explanation" (114). For Favret, willing suspension must be at least partially unlearned and overcome by "validating" those seemingly stupid questions that expose, for instance, how the poem makes female sexuality something of an unspeakable horror, even if it means shattering other illusions. Hazlitt, too, had criticized the poem's generic confusion. The elements of beauty which occasionally inflect the writing are ill-suited to the lurid plot; the effect, he claims, is "like moon-beams playing on a charnel-house, or flowers strewed on a dead body" (J. R. Jackson 207). Failing to be one thing or another, or even to define the terms among which it refuses to decide, *Christabel* holds the reader in a position of suspension which parallels that of the main character, foreclosing response and refusing resolution, even as it demands an interpretive response.

Perhaps the most notorious instance of authorial misdirection masquerading (it seems) as a lesson in poetic faith, is the narrator's description of or, more accurately, his refusal to describe Geraldine's body as it appears to Christabel in the young lady's chamber. The narrator directs the reader to look at Geraldine's body—"Behold! her bosom and half her side"—only—perversely, in the minds of many readers—to block our view: "A sight to dream of, not to tell!" (l. 246, 247). Hazlitt, who was familiar with the manuscript version of *Christabel*, had objected to these lines as

an obscene gesture masquerading as "an exquisite refinement in efficiency" (J. R. Jackson 206). He protested the published version's omission of "a line which is absolutely necessary to the understanding of the whole story" (J. R. Jackson 206) because it had more clearly identified Geraldine as a witch. For Hazlitt, the interests of propriety would seem to be better served in this situation by a more explicit "telling"—that is, by a description specific enough to limit the number of constructions that could be put on Geraldine's identity and, thus, on the poem as a whole. What Favret sees as limiting and obstructionist, Hazlitt finds too disturbingly ambiguous, too dangerously unlimited. This excessively articulated silence around Geraldine's body allows readers to imagine a seemingly endless set of horrors (or, for that matter, utter banalities) to fill in the gap.

Undoubtedly, *Christabel* asks its readers to suspend their own resistance and give themselves willingly to the experience of the text, and, as Favret's and Hazlitt's responses suggest, an intelligent reader may choose not to participate—often for good reasons. However, the concept of poetic faith that I have outlined above at least raises the possibility that the poem's performance of suspension can be something other than a self-serving authorial evasion. Indeed, though *Christabel* does not pose great difficulties in terms of its language, themes, or poetics, its generic indeterminacy, produced through both the excessive deployment of certain (especially gothic) tropes and the incompleteness or absence of others, keeps the reader from being able to locate a stable ground of interpretation. By undermining learned reading practices—even the ones that normally help us avoid the pitfalls of "theoretical imbecility"—*Christabel* reminds us, in Swann's view, of how "our experience of genre … affects what signs we take to be significant. It also informs our capacity to interpret them. For merely to know that signs mean *something* is of course not to know *what* they mean" ("Teaching *Christabel*" 123). Employing a strict set of learned reading practices can backfire, Swann notes, particularly with a text like *Christabel* that "seems at

least uneasily aligned with the genres it also invites us to reflect on" (124). Swann quite rightly implies that much of the discomfort readers feel about *Christabel* reflects their own attachment to generic divisions and the work of comparison (or "telling") that the text continually forecloses or resists. Even such seemingly settled critical questions, such as that of the advisability of Christabel's hospitality, become much more uncertain once generic and other critical assumptions are suspended.

So, too, do Geraldine's words become much more explicit after her body has been revealed in the narrator's oblique manner. Her infamously "mighty" spell is also, read carefully, a strategic retelling of the story that underlines the undecidability of interpretation:

> In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell,
> Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!
> Thou knowest to-night, and wilt know to-morrow
> This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow;
> But vainly thou warrest,
> For this is alone in
> Thy power to declare
> That in the dim forest
> Thou heard'st a low moaning,
> And found'st a bright lady, surpassingly fair:
> And did'st bring her home with thee in love and in charity,
> To shield her and shelter her from the damp air. (l. 255-66)

What occurs in these lines is not simply a prohibition on all speech, though it has often been read that way. The "spell" instantiates a division between knowing and telling—a knowledge gap, so to speak, that is embedded within the poem's form as well as its plot—and it is not merely a matter of insufficient knowledge but of an inappropriate kind of knowledge (that which cannot be communicated). The subsequent generations of readers who will struggle to establish just what, in fact, has happened in *Christabel* are, in Geraldine's narration, offered a compellingly (and provocatively) simple story. Gone are the chattering questions, the howling mastiff bitch, and Christabel's beating heart. Where we had originally seen Geraldine in "distress" and stumbling over her words "for weariness" (l. 71, 72), we now see a composed "bright lady" who does not speak

at all: there is no longer anything to "tell." This more elegant version of *Christabel* emphasizes Geraldine's physical attractiveness over her uncanny apparition and represents Christabel as being motivated by hospitality—a version of events that rather strikingly renders Christabel's reading and interpretive practices beside the point. She responds with generosity, not foolishness. Limiting Christabel's "power to declare" to that which is seemingly straightforward (if thereby inaccurate), the spell inaugurates a narrative that, in a sense, makes fewer demands on an audience's willingness to suspend disbelief.

But this is not the only revision of the poem's opening lines that takes place in Part 1. The narrator offers yet another rendering in the Conclusion:

> It was a lovely sight to see
> The lady Christabel, when she
> Was praying at the old oak tree.
> […]
> Her slender palms together prest,
> Heaving sometimes on her breast;
> Her face resign'd to bliss or bale—
> Her face, oh call it fair not pale;
> And both blue eyes more bright than clear,
> Each about to have a tear. (l. 267-69, 274-79)

Where Geraldine sought to erase the uncertainties and shock of the pair's first meeting and to elide the difficulties of telling, the first lines of the narrator's version erase Geraldine. That Christabel becomes a "lovely sight" suggests nothing so much as a sentimentalized portrait of conventional feminine piety. But even here, the calm of the scene is troubled by the image of the tears that are about to fall. In a certain sense, they foreshadow everything that is to come or that might come, even though the narrator in the following stanzas jumps from the "lovely sight" of Christabel in the woods to the disturbing image of her asleep in Geraldine's arms—leaving the interactions between the two women in the gap between stanzas until the reader is abruptly returned to the present of the narrator's outrage at "the worker of these harms, / That holds the maiden in her arms" (l. 286-87). Yet just as Christabel is held by Geraldine, the poem holds these

very different interpretive possibilities in tension with each other, an uneasy suspension that remains unresolved.

Unresolved, except, perhaps, in dreams. While Geraldine sleeps soundly, Christabel is described

> With open eyes (ah woe is me!)
> Asleep, and dreaming fearfully,
> Fearfully dreaming, yet I wis,
> Dreaming that alone, which is— (l. 280-83)

The chiasmus of "dreaming fearfully" / "Fearfully dreaming" opens an abyssal space within the text—and it is in this abyss where the narrator, if only speculatively, locates "that which is." Yet this image is also a striking rendering of a mental state parallel to the combination of knowing and not-knowing which, in Kant's account, is the necessary condition of sublime experience. Dreams can present the sensation of overwhelming force and images of danger that we could not possibly resist, and, so long as he is dreaming, the dreamer feels as vulnerable to these forces as he would if they were pressing upon him in real life. Yet, he is able to experience these dangers from a place of safety: at some point he can awake to say, "It was only a dream," and this realization will suspend any further consequences of the experience. Or, at least, this is how things are supposed to go. Kant insists that the feeling of pleasure produced by the dynamical sublime "loses nothing from the fact that we must find ourselves safe in order to feel this exciting liking, so that (as it might seem), since the danger is not genuine, the sublimity of our intellectual ability might also not be genuine" (121). The safe place is a kind of non-fictional fiction, a mental projection that ostensibly raises our soul's "fortitude" beyond the cares of the body without really placing that body at risk.

But the projection of the "safe place" within the sublime, like the insecurely secure sleep of Christabel, is nonetheless a kind of strategic misrecognition calculated to create, however narrowly, the conditions of this authentic experience. Thomas Weiskel observed more than thirty

years ago that "the mind convinced of its own sublimity cannot in fact experience the sublime moment" (77). If, on the one hand, we cannot make of these mindless, overwhelming natural forces an object of present fear and still call them sublime, neither can we rest too firmly in the safety of our own position. To avoid becoming too secure, too complacent, we must somehow know and not know what we are experiencing. Or—to put it in less binary terms—we must cultivate a kind of awareness of our safety that does not turn into knowledge of the same. The possibility of the sublime experience lasts only as long as this willing suspension can be maintained. Indeed, at the moment we feel safe enough, grounded enough to call the experience "sublime," the suspension is broken. We return to the order of knowledge, language, and emotion recollected in tranquility. The suspension holds in that Christabel herself does not pass judgment on her dream, but its consequences are not expansion and a renewal of strength, but a lingering instability and vulnerability.[9] Since both dreaming and sublimity are marked by the suspension of "comparing powers," they are also, Coleridge implies, subject to the same insecurities and dangers.

"Forc'd unconscious sympathy"

It is under the condition of suspension—of judgment, of certainty—that the poem enters its second part. Indeed, if Part 1 instantiates a conflict between knowing and telling as a consequence of the suspension of the comparing powers, in Part 2, Christabel internalizes this conflict, which reinforces her inability to "tell." The section opens with a particularly portentous image of suspension:

> With ropes of rocks and bells of air
> Three sinful sextons' ghosts are pent,
> Who all give back, one after t'other,
> The death-note to their living brother .... (l. 340-43)

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[9] "The Pains of Sleep," of course, contains one of Coleridge's most definitive stagings of the complicated relationship between dreams and reality.

Vibrating to the heavy sounds and "warning knell" (l. 330) of Sir Leoline's public melancholy, the "sinful sextons" resemble nothing so much as a grisly parody of an Aeolian harp gone bad, a nightmare version of a suspension prolonged into an execution—yet this, too, without a determinable end, a death sentence that continues after death. Later Victorian writers such as George Eliot would come to be fascinated with the idea of "sympathetic vibration," but Coleridge empties out that idea in advance. He uses the ghosts (who, in order to be able to "give back … The death note" would have to be imagined more as corpses) to foreshadow the "forc'd unconscious sympathy" (l. 597) that Christabel will display towards Geraldine near the end of the poem.

Appearing before her father the next morning, Christabel reconstructs the events of the previous night only slowly and incompletely. The memory to which she gradually awakens as she watches her father embrace Geraldine—whom he believes to be the daughter of an estranged friend—is "The vision of fear, the touch and pain!" (l. 441). This is not, in a strict sense, a vision at all, for fear, touch, and pain can only be represented indirectly through allegory and metaphor. The narrator again enforces a distinction between what Christabel knows and what she tells:

> She shrunk and shudder'd, and saw again
> (Ah, woe is me! Was it for thee,
> Thou gentle maid! such sights to see?) (l. 442-44)

While we may be expected to understand that the visceral memory of "that bosom old" and "that bosom cold" (l. 445, 446) causes Christabel's first involuntary physical reaction (the "hissing sound" of the following line), the parenthetical interruption and the stanza break after it visually reinforce the reader's sense that the poem is reacting to something other than the events and images portrayed in Part 1. The rules seem to shift here, and we must once again respond by *willing* our suspension of disbelief, even at the risk of being taken in. Then again, it's also possible that the vision that Christabel recalls with such terror is the previous night's storytelling session, even though she had been so sympathetically represented.

In the absence of speech, the conflict between knowing and telling comes to be performed through Christabel's body as a series of seemingly disconnected, aberrantly-signifying postures. Geraldine

> folded her arms across her chest,
> And couch'd her head upon her breast,
> And look'd askance at Christabel—— (l. 567-59)

The long dash functions as a visual representation of the trajectory of Geraldine's gaze; like a lightning bolt it enters Christabel's body, suspending its vital mental and physical movements. The narrative stumbles under the weight of this moment. The next stanza records that, "with somewhat of malice and more of dread / At Christabel she look'd askance!—" (l. 574-75), a repetition that undermines the narrator's following claim that, "One moment—and the sight was fled!" (l. 576). This sight has already lingered over several lines. Christabel is thrown into a "dizzy trance" that leaves her "Stumbling on the unsteady ground—" where she "Shuddered aloud with a hissing sound" (577-9). Her gaze, which had been fixed on Geraldine's unspeakable body the night before, is turned back on her, as she becomes the unwilling victim of the latter's "serpent's eye." It short-circuits her ability to communicate, trapping her within herself. She can neither speak nor choose to remain fully silent: the audible shuddering and the "hissing sound" that escapes from her mouth suggest involuntary movements that draw attention to her distress without allowing her to explain it, further disrupting the narrative.

Although the visual exchange between Geraldine and Christabel takes place in the presence of Sir Leoline and Bard Bracy, neither of these other characters witnesses the "look askance" as it happens. In fact, at least where Sir Leoline is concerned, Geraldine appears much differently:

> Geraldine again turn'd round
> And like a thing, that sought relief,
> Full of wonder and full of grief,
> She roll'd her large bright eyes divine

Wildly on Sir Leoline. (l. 580-84)

The "look askance" is addressed to Christabel alone and occasions a result that robs the latter of her powers of speech. She cannot "tell" the origins of her bodily distress any more than she could be called upon to exercise her powers of comparison. Yet, rather than leading to expansion and resistance, the experience erases Christabel's selfhood, will, and senses: "her thoughts are gone, / She nothing sees—no sight but one!" (585-6). The emphasis on "no sight but one" again points to the suspension of powers of comparison and leaves little doubt as to whether Geraldine's influence, insofar as it is exercised on Christabel, can be considered "overwhelming force." The "look askance" produces, in the following lines, the distortion of Christabel's features.

Just as Geraldine's inability to tell the whole truth made her appear mad or simply dishonest, the distortions of Christabel's body estrange her from the understanding she might otherwise expect from her father:

> [A]ll her features were resign'd
> To this sole image in her mind:
> And passively did imitate
> That look of dull and treacherous hate.
> And thus she stood, in dizzy trance,
> Still picturing that look askance,
> With forc'd unconscious sympathy
> Full before her father's view—
> As far as such a look could be,
> In eyes so innocent and blue! (l. 591-600)

The striking visual interchange between the two women has much more efficacy than the verbal one the night before, at least when it comes to making Christabel do what Geraldine wants. If she cannot force Christabel to recite the story she was supposed to tell, Geraldine has, in a certain sense, done something even more powerful. Her facial features contorted into a fun house mirror-image of Geraldine's, Christabel seems to realize Coleridge's dire predictions for those "devotees of the circulating libraries" who, for lack of their own mental powers, passively consume the worst of someone else's delusion to the point of "trance or suspension of all common sense and all

definite purpose." Christabel is an appropriate signifier of neither her own inwardness nor Geraldine's. She becomes instead a subject trembling in a violent oscillation between two conflicting, incommensurable demands, unable to give reliable information about either. It's not the willing suspension of disbelief, since the gaze seems to annihilate whatever was there to be suspended. Even so, this moment should remain at least somewhat undecidable, acknowledging the instability of the border between willing and unwilling suspension rather than a definitive transition from one to the other. Like *Christabel*, the reader, at this moment "cannot tell" precisely what is going on.

To the extent, however, that Christabel's body is readable in Part 2, it appears to be so in a superficially Burkean mode, drawing upon a number of eighteenth century conventions for representing the effects of sublimity, many of which are enumerated in the *Enquiry*. That Christabel experiences a "dizzy trance," for instance, suggests vertigo, one of Burke's most powerful triggers for the sublime. Her stumbling and shuddering function as physical markers of a mind and body out of control, trapped in "convulsive agitations" (162). Even the comparison of Geraldine's eyes to those of a snake is significant here. To the symbolic overdetermination of the serpent, we may add Burke's observation that these animals "though far from being large, are yet capable of raising ideas of the sublime, because they are considered as objects of terror" (102). Yet, just as Christabel's mimetic relationship to Geraldine produces a pathetically poor imitation of the latter's features, the passing inscription of these sublime markers on and through Christabel's body is closer to parody—and not the least because Burke considers the sublime to be inaccessible to women, who are, in his view, better suited to be beautiful objects that merit condescension rather than respect.

The undecidable status of Christabel's suspension is authorized, moreover, by the poem's emphasis on its transitory nature. The next stanza marks an interruption of Christabel's "trance"

state, allowing her to collect what remains of her "common sense" and "definite purpose" so that she may plead:

> "By my mother's soul do I entreat
> That thou this woman send away!"
> She said; and more she could not say,
> For what she knew, she could not tell,
> O'er-master'd by the mighty spell. (l. 604-8)

If the reader is moved by Christabel's words, it is at least partly for the same reasons that de Quincey found himself so affected by the knocking in *Macbeth* or, perhaps more aptly, by the sight of a fainting woman coming to. That is, the break in Christabel's trance enacts the pathos of indeterminacy. It is rather surprising that Christabel can say anything at all by this point, let alone that she can manage to address her father. Christabel's persistent failure to "tell" what she knows again makes it nearly impossible to even ask the question of what "actually" happened or what Christabel "really" knows. The situation may, of course, be evidence of an ongoing obstructionist project on Coleridge's part, just another opportunity for us to be duped in the name of literature.

But in the midst of what seems to be a kind of subjective death of the title character, *Christabel* contains the possibility of alternative outcomes. Although the narrator credits the "spell" with the production of Christabel's silence, it is significant that Christabel never actually affirms Geraldine's version of events. It is the narrator who collapses the effects of the spell into Christabel's speechlessness, not only in the section quoted above but throughout Part 2. Yet Geraldine told Christabel what to say; she didn't prohibit speech entirely. Indeed, an exchange between Christabel and her father earlier in Part 2 lends itself to a much different construction than the narrator puts on it:

> "What ails then my beloved child?"
> The Baron said—His daughter mild
> Made answer, "All will yet be well!" (l. 458-60)

The narrator glosses Christabel's response thus: "I ween she had no power to tell / Aught else: so mighty was the spell" (l. 461-62), and it is easy enough to follow him in dismissing this utterance entirely as something inconsequential, a cliché uttered from weakness of mind. But this is only one of many suppositions on the narrator's part, and it underestimates Christabel's act of resistance and the context of the utterance. Christabel's physical response to the memory of the night before attracts the attention of Sir Leoline who, at least in this moment, responds with fatherly concern. Rather than speaking Geraldine's story, taking the easy way out offered by the inconsequential, limited tale laid out in the "spell" from Part 1, Christabel looks beyond—beyond herself, beyond her text, beyond even the powers of her creator. "All will yet be well!" offers no certainty and, remaining cryptic and unreadable, refuses any immediate consolation that her father might have been willing or able to provide. But it is equally possible to see this line as an expression of hope: not a naïve hopefulness that denies the centrality of pain and risk, but the hope that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as a "fracturing, even … traumatic thing to experience" that exists "among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates" (*Touching Feeling* 146)—a hope founded, that is, on the regular experience of disappointment.

What we get in Part 2 of *Christabel* is largely fractured and traumatic. The rejection of the daughter by the father, the abandonment of Christabel in favor of Geraldine, is not only a poignant scene from a Gothic family drama but also, in a more formal sense, a reminder of what is risked in every experience of mental striving that lets go of its own powers of knowing: a loss of control that is not immediately recuperated in elevation and triumph. It is equally an exploration of the limits of authorial withholding. The reiterated "rage and pain," "pain and rage" that attend Sir Leoline's "confusion" (l. 626, 628, 627) and resurface in the poem's penultimate line foreshadow those responses to *Christabel* by perplexed and frustrated readers. They may find

their own “safe place” to have been violated by this poem, which takes them to the edge of the abyss and then stops in—to borrow again the term that Coleridge applies to his poetic powers: “a state of suspended animation.” Because the sublime cannot take place if we are fully convinced that we are not in imminent danger, the strength of that safe place always remains to be tested. We always run the risk that the safe place will not be safe enough and that we may be crushed—and *Christabel* takes its readers to the very edge of this abyssal possibility. Yet the acceptance of this possibility is for Coleridge the condition of our being able to talk about the sublime, about hope, about suspension.

Christabel **and Poetic Faith**

Just before the narrator’s climactic declaration that “what she knew she could not tell / O’er-master’d by the mighty spell” (l. 606-7), Christabel gains respite from her “trance” and, “Paus’d awhile, and inly pray’d” (l. 602). This moment is the culmination of several prayers in the poem, including the prayer “for the weal of her lover that’s far away” (l. 32) that placed her in silent contemplation at the oak tree and Christabel’s numerous addresses to God and the saints to “save” her. Indeed, prayer appears to be a quite natural state for Christabel insofar as she resembles a “youthful hermitess,” “Who, praying always, prays in sleep” (l. 308, 310). J. Robert Barth, one of the few scholars to have studied these moments, writes that prayers, “spring from a desire to reach beyond oneself: to love and embrace the other—as Christabel longs for her lover, for her departed mother, even for Geraldine—and ultimately to reach beyond one’s own weakness to a transcendent meaning or reality” (81). I depart from Barth in his belief that “the underlying current of the poem is love and its movement is unity” (79); at the same time I affirm his view that prayer, even in its seeming impotence, offers a possibility for reading the poem that does not take

the "pain and rage" as the necessary conclusion. Rather, they adumbrate the possibility of poetic faith, issuing from, as Coleridge argues it does, the willing suspension of disbelief.

In a well-known letter to Joseph Cottle, Coleridge muses on the role of prayer, as it appeared to him at the lowest point of his struggles with opium: "O I do pray inwardly to be able to *pray*; but indeed to pray, to pray with the faith to which Blessing is promised, this is the reward of Faith, this is the Gift of God to the Elect" (qtd. *Aids* xlvi). According to Alan Vardy, "This central infirmity, the lack that is always expressed as part of a damaged interiority, haunts much of Coleridge's work .... Partial amelioration of his condition remains paradoxically possible as the very irreparability of his incapacity constitutes an endless series of possible moments where his wishes for others leave open the realization of oneness with the divine, even if not for himself. For Coleridge, this abyss is nonetheless the space of faith" (80). Granted, in comparison to the Ancient Mariner's spontaneous blessing of the sea creatures, Christabel's prayers seem to be all but useless. Though "saints will aid if men will call: / For the blue sky bends over all" (l. 318-19), Christabel's prayers seem to fail spectacularly, at least if we assume that she is praying for immediate protection from Geraldine. Of course, Christabel does not "call" any more than she "tells"; her powers of invocation are weak, to say the least. Yet, lack and infirmity—other ways, perhaps, of looking at suspension—are themselves constitutive of much of Coleridge's thinking on prayer.

To whom or to what is Christabel praying? What, finally, is she praying for? Are those prayers answered? Yet, the Apostle Paul writes in the letter to the Romans that "the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses: for we do not know how to pray as we ought: but the Spirit itself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). Prayer may seem to achieve the most when the animating intention of the supplicant is least articulated, and in some ways it functions as the speech act *par excellence* of a figure like Christabel. The emphasis on silent prayer works to

contain the poem's language and to suspend the consequences of words that will always be spoken too soon. Just as Kant's sublime originates in the displeasure that comes from feeling our own inadequacies, recent phenomenological work on prayer has identified what Michael Andrews calls "the economy of violence that underlies every act of prayer *qua* act of consciousness" (196). "To pray," Andrews writes, "means always to pray to God, to pray with the passion of the infinite, to pray for the possibility of givenness *without condition*, to pray for the impossible" (196). Given the failures that attend Christabel's reiterated supplications, we are also continually reminded of the impossibility of prayer—even as this impossibility provides the grounds of an absolute faith. It is through prayer, moreover, that Coleridge stages the sublime as a matter of poetic faith, a leap taken into the abyss regardless of danger and against all certainty.

Had Coleridge taken *Christabel* to a less ambiguous conclusion such as one envisioned in the plan that he related to James Gillman, then it would perhaps be justifiable to classify the poem as a Gothic text made legible by that particular generic code. However, Coleridge left *Christabel* in that state of "suspended animation" by asserting and reasserting an intention to "finish" the poem throughout the rest of his life—intentions that he never expressed, for example, in regard to "fragments" such as "Kubla Khan." Regardless of whether Coleridge actually intended to finish *Christabel*—or whether such a completion was even within his power—his insistence in the preface and elsewhere on his intention to finish the poem allows the ending to remain radically open, suspended—the prayers remain perpetually offered, always still to be answered. To show clear answers to Christabel's prayers would bring them back into circulation within a restricted economy of representation that prayer itself does not allow. Indeed, any kind of conventional "ending" to the poem would render the suspension of disbelief—and, thus, faith itself—unnecessary, reducing it to a matter of the chattering questions with which the poem began. However, since the narrative is suspended rather than ended, these prayers cannot be determined

as unanswered, either—this, too, would be an inadequate, not to mention emotionally- and theologically-intolerable, ending that forecloses any possibility of hope and denies the potentially performative force of Christabel's "All will yet be well!"

Within a poem implicated with the sublime—and a concept of poetic faith—Christabel's prayers are thus crucially important. They establish a discourse of silence and resistance to representation in a noisy, sometimes overdetermined text. It is through prayer, moreover, that Coleridge stages the sublime as a matter of poetic faith, a leap taken into the abyss regardless of danger and against all certainty. Thus, while Taylor has written that, "Coleridge advocates in different ways at different times the sacred distinction between persons and things; the necessity of not using others as things; or not letting oneself be used by abdicating the will" ("Phantom Soul" 708), his articulation of prayer in "Christabel" functions as a reminder that "not letting oneself be used" is no simple defensive matter but requires also the faculty of "willing suspension"—of judgment, of comparing powers, indeed of self-preservation in general. Only through such a willing suspension and consenting abandonment to the unknown can true self-realization through religious faith become possible. As Coleridge writes in chapter 12 of the *Biographia*, "we proceed from the self, in order to lose and find all self in God" (1.283). The broader context of Coleridge's theology means that prayer must be taken seriously: impossibility, in this situation, is not grounds for dismissing it altogether.[10] Indeed, according to Keith Putt, the act of prayer that Paul sets forth in Romans 8:26 is meant to be read against the background of "eschatological gestation," a Messianic context that demands "hope and … faith in a context *sans voir et sans avoir*—without seeing exactly what awaits us and without holding on to the security

[10] Cf. Barth's view on Coleridgean prayer: "As he came to realize more and more the innate weakness of man's finite will, Coleridge came more and more to see prayer as an essential means of achieving the necessary union of the finite will with the Absolute Will….And yet this act is supernatural, performed under the influence of grace, and so is an act both of God and of man" (182).

of our own presuppositions" (149).[11] The condition of suspension in turn alters the questions about prayer: it is not, ultimately a question of address or response, but of the posture itself and of a posture in which both the sublime and prayer are implicated with each other.

The demands of faith are rigorous, requiring not merely adherence to a law, but a conscious choice to abandon the self to the sublimity of a faith without seeing, without touching, without sensibility. The vision that Coleridge offers is not so much a critique of the sublime but an expansion of it, a glimpse of an experience in which the recentering movement of reason is perpetually deferred and where the subject, like the poem itself, must remain articulated only in a state of "suspended animation." More importantly, though, by stopping on the threshold of a fully-realized sublime experience, *Christabel* goes as far as it can to guard the possibility of the sublime as a wholly spontaneous event, even if some experiences, particularly in the natural world, seem better-positioned to trigger it. The sublime, in this view, is a test of faith precisely because it is likely *not* to take place, at least not according to our schedule or expectations. It may take us by surprise or it may disappoint us. Willing suspension goes beyond simply the holding back of our disbelief under the influence of supernatural illusion. Instead, the text holds the possibility of the sublime while giving itself over to the potential for being misread, sharing the risk of stupidity with its readers. In *Christabel*, Coleridge attempts to maintain the sublime in its contradictions and to apprehend it without representing it—in short, to speak what it "cannot tell," respecting the unknown as unknown.

To experience the sublime, we must be convinced that we are safe and yet be able to forget that knowledge at the moment it becomes most important. Thus, although the willing suspension of disbelief, particularly in its popular usage, may certainly denote an experience of

[11] In this same passage, Putt observes that the groanings of the spirit are also linked with the "pains of childbirth." Coleridge uses a similar image to describe the composition of *Christabel* where "Every line has been produced with labour-pangs" (qtd. *CPP* 161n1).

pleasurable abandonment to an artistic illusion, it cannot be understood simply in terms of escapism or entertainment. Only a willing suspension—a deliberate giving over of the self and of cognition, a decision taken at the moment when we could still choose to do otherwise—can cultivate the mental attunement that allows the subject to both know and not know that he is safe. Both the sublime and Coleridge's poetic faith make use of an imagined experience to produce genuine affect; at the same time, of course, the failure of imagination remains internal to the experience itself. The call for poetic faith and the suspension of disbelief functions as a reminder that the sublime must remain heterogeneous to all systems of regularity and representation, that it is never guaranteed to take place, and that it is essentially spontaneous and surprising. The sublime, as it is staged in and through *Christabel*, exceeds all boundaries and reveals itself only as impossibility—the perpetual suspension, the deferral of certainty on which all other feelings and conclusions are based. It resists the domestication necessary to fully secure a place of safety and leaves its subject open instead to experiences that come much closer to trauma than Kant allows. *Christabel* thus functions as a complementary, if seemingly oppositional, narrative to the "successful" sublime, and as a site where Coleridge questions certain foundations of his spiritual and philosophical projects. He faces the darkest of his very real spiritual doubts—including the possibility that his efforts are in vain, and that the sublime experience can provide at best an unstable foundation for religious belief—and these are no small matters for him in 1816. If *Christabel* continues to unsettle and disturb its readers its power comes not from any strictly psychological or thematic concerns, but from the refusal to rest on the guarantees of reason and the supersensible against the abyss at its center and its willingness to attempt to speak—even momentarily—from a place of vertigo and danger rather than of safety and elevation.

Chapter 2
"A might that has no dominance over us": Suspension as a Mode of Relation in the Shelleyan Sublime

> Poetry begins in wanting to make contact with the reality, the truth, of all that surrounds and inhabits us .... Yet as we approach the world with our words, and with the sounds of our words, we become aware, if we are listening intently, that the world remains silent. Poetry, which desires communion and speech, is a privileged way to perceiving the refusal of the world, at first, to respond, to offer its meaning. It is in the interest of poetry to acknowledge this arresting dumbness, and to ask what the silence itself means ....[1]

> ... as one between desire and shame
> Suspended, I said—"If, as it doth seem,
>   Thou comest from the realm without a name,
> "Into this valley of perpetual dream,
>   Shew whence I came, and where I am, and why"—[2]

The Uses of Subreption

"[T]rue sublimity," Immanuel Kant tells us in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), "must be sought only in the mind of the judging person, not in the natural object the judging of which prompts this mental attunement" (113). Edmund Burke, in his own treatise on the sublime and the beautiful, had also located the sublime in the subject's mind and body, yet his *Philosophical Inquiry into our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) enumerates at great lengths the different sort of sensory triggers that can initiate experiences of embodied terror—including "serpents and poisonous animals of almost all kinds" (102); loud noises, particularly when allied with suddenness or expressed as the inarticulate cries of wild beasts (123-25); as well as "sad and fuscous colours, as black, or brown, or deep purple, and the like" (122)—demonstrating how the sublime can be triggered by any one of the five senses, as well as by ideas of eternity or infinity.

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[1] Edwards 10.
[2] Shelley, *The Triumph of Life*, l. 394-98. All passages from Shelley's poetry are quoted from *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2008). Hereafter *SPP*.

Where Burke suggests a sublime of accumulation, one that can be analyzed through the aggregation of examples, Kant's sublime resists representation, even in its use of natural objects to illustrate the kinds of things that might provoke a sublime feeling. Coleridge's emphasis, discussed in the previous chapter, on the sublime as the suspension of comparing powers, amplifies the Kantian withdrawal: the sublime moment takes us by surprise as being "beyond all comparison" (Kant 105) not merely in its presentation of absolute magnitude or force, but also in that it cannot be compared to *other* feelings that might also be called sublime. Even if a hundred people experience a feeling of the sublime at the sight of the same "threatening rocks, thunderclouds piling up in the sky…volcanoes with all their destructive power" (120), the sublime remains, in a certain sense, unpredictable and unique, happening for the first time each time it happens. Indeed, once we come upon a certain scene with the expectation that we will find it sublime, it loses much of that sublime power.

"Indeed," Kant writes, "who would want to call sublime such things as shapeless mountain masses piled on one another in wild disarray with their pyramids of ice, or the gloomy raging sea?" (113). The question is rhetorical, yet it draws attention to a popular discourse of sublimity—one that, to some extent, continues today—that fails to draw the distinction between mind and object upon which Kant insists. There has, of course, been no shortage of people willing to participate in the error which Kant describes. The expansion of the Alpine tourist industry in the nineteenth century was, as Ann C. Colley has recently argued, at least partially the result of a popular desire to seek out the sublime in nature, particularly in those locations that had been the subject of Romantic poetry. Colley's *Victorians in the Mountains* provides an entertaining chronicle of misplaced assumptions and mountaineers' attempts to gain mastery over nature, yet it is also a story of a concept of the sublime becoming exhausted through overuse. Colley implies that the mountaineers who "instead of standing in awe before the Alps … now demanded that the

peaks surrender to them" (47) had, in a sense, out-Kanted Kant by locating the source of the sublime so firmly within their own minds and bodies that it rendered their physical conditions irrelevant. However, I propose a different interpretation: the tourists and adventurers who sought the sublime in the Alps (and, later, in the Himalayas and other sites of imperial conquest),[3] were in fact relying too much on the idea that the sublime was something to be sought "out there" in nature at the expense of the cultivation of the mental attunements—a suspended receptivity—that would allow them to access the sublime.

Kant, to a certain extent, already anticipates the phenomenon through which the meaning of the sublime will be lost. Human beings—even those who possess the most refined mental attunements—perpetually fall into what Kant calls the error of "subreption," a catachresis through which "respect for the object is substituted for respect for the idea of humanity within our[selves, as] subject[s]" (Kant 114). When we, like so many mid-Victorian tourists, point to Mont Blanc and say, "How sublime!" we are engaged in what Kant describes as a "subreption," an error of attribution that locates the sublime in nature (or anything outside us) rather than where it belongs. Subreption, this "set of possible confusions concerning the distinction between subjective and objective conditions of knowledge" (Sng 80), seems—at least in the case of the sublime—to be something of a design flaw. As I will argue in this chapter, subreption does, in a very real sense, help to insure the very possibility of the sublime by instantiating an essential suspension of reference in the experience itself—an interval, that is, between description and experience, to ensure that our comparing powers will be inhibited and suspended—if, that is, we are paying attention.

[3] For an account of the ways in which the sublime was already implicated in imperialist projects of the Romantic period, see Alvey, particularly chapter 3, which deals specifically with Shelley's resistance to eighteenth century travel narratives in "Mont Blanc."

Though Colley locates the conceptual drift of the sublime within the discourse of the early-to-mid-Victorian period, the problematic that she identifies is already at work in the Romantic period.[4] In this chapter, I turn to Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni," composed in 1816 and first published at the end of the *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* in 1817, a poem that has been understood as both the origin and apotheosis of the British Romantic sublime, in order to trace a somewhat different genealogy of experience. Although "Mont Blanc" deploys the full range of outward signifiers of sublimity as it was understood at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it ultimately turns our attention from those objects to the forms and practices of suspension that enable the experience in the first place. While it's important, as Kant implies in the third *Critique* and elsewhere, to guard against this error and work to eradicate it from aesthetic discourse, it's also equally—and perhaps more—important to remain aware of the way it works, to pay attention to the moments at which it arises as opportunities for us to reflect upon the conditioned nature of our existence and the ways that we buy into ideological and linguistic fictions. Even attempting to label (and thus to reify) some mental process as sublime participates in the subreption to the extent that it makes a certain state of mind into a goal to be achieved, rather than allowing it to remain a phenomenon that must be experienced non-conceptually in its arising and passing away.

"Mont Blanc," that is, reveals that subreption is not something that "happens" to the "pure" concept of the sublime at some time after it first takes place; rather, the inevitability of the confusion between subject and object (a confusion triggered by what Coleridge called the "suspension of our Comparing powers") is part of what characterizes sublime experience itself. Suspension of reference, this constitutive difference between what we call sublime and what is sublime, is, in "Mont Blanc," figured not as a problem to be overcome but as part of the enabling

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[4] For discussions of early-nineteenth-century tourism in Chamonix and at Mont Blanc, see Leask 184-88 and Alvey 83-93.

conditions of sublimity. Shelley's speaker both acknowledges the inadequacies and emptiness of representational language and while also suggesting that sublime experience is made possible by those gaps, by its own impossibility. For even as the poem attempts to represent the scene, it is simultaneously engaged in a disavowal of representation, which is, of course, predicated on our ability to make comparisons—the faculty held in abeyance by the sublime. We must suspend not only our powers of comparison, but our expectations of referentiality.

In this regard, it is highly significant that the only time the word "sublime" appears in the poem, it refers not to the mountain, rushing river, or implacably destructive glacier. Instead, it describes the speaker's mental and bodily state: "I seem as in a trance sublime and strange" (l. 35). At once immobilizing and empowering, the speaker's state of suspended animation situates him in a relation to the natural landscape that neither dominates nor is dominated by him. In the previous chapter, I explored the association between suspension and the Kantian sublime in the works of Coleridge. Taking seriously this association, I argued, enables us to see Coleridge's famous dictum about the "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment" not as a surrender of the critical faculties but rather as a privileged critical posture that enables the expansion of reason and awareness that has been conventionally associated with the Kantian sublime. But as much as he affirms suspension, Coleridge maintains a markedly ambivalent attitude towards this posture of openness; even the most redemptive reading of Coleridgean suspension must contend with the ethical dilemmas of influence that are encapsulated in the final scene of *Christabel*.

By contrast, the "trance" experienced by the speaker of "Mont Blanc" marks a more fully-realized understanding of the ways in which postures and forms of suspension function as enabling structures that allow us to make sense of the feeling of not-knowing. In ways that exceed the Coleridgean scheme, it helps us to see suspension as a critical posture of response to that which overwhelms our powers of perception and resistance. Christopher Hitt has argued that

"The power of 'Mont Blanc' (not to mention the 'Power' of Mont Blanc) is that the poet is aware of and compelled to seek that which lies beyond the circumference of the imagination *despite* the irresistible urge to mythologize, allegorize, or otherwise project outwards" ("Unwriting" 143). That is, when Shelley's speaker confronts the physical mountain, he is always already confronting a textual construction and a longstanding discourse of sublimity that raises a viewer's expectations that he will experience the sublime, not to mention a literary discourse of the sublime that was already tending towards the stereotypical. Emblematic of this latter tradition is the poem to which Shelley's "Mont Blanc" has often been seen as a response: Coleridge's flamboyantly pious "Hymn Before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni," a poem inspired not by the Alps but by the Lake District and which—as de Quincey would note in the 1834—bore an all-too-striking (read: plagiarized) resemblance to a German text.[5] Any poetic speaker's experience of the mountain is to some extent always already conditioned by the tradition to which it belongs. Shelley's poem, then, implicitly raises the question of whether it is even possible to "see" Mont Blanc for the first time—or, for that matter, whether we can ever read "Mont Blanc" for the first time.[6] Taking Hitt's argument a bit further, it appears Shelley is asking his readers to do the one thing with "Mont Blanc" (to read it for the first time) that the critical apparatus around the poem makes utterly impossible. This realization may be a commonplace, except that so much seems to be at stake in

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[5] See *CPP* 195n2. For a more sympathetic account of the "theistic sublime" in Coleridge's "Hymn," see Stokes, chapter 5.

[6] An intriguing commonplace in the criticism on "Mont Blanc" is a scholar's disavowal of the possibility of his or her saying anything new about "Mont Blanc" before going on to attempt to do just that. (See, for instance, Hitt, "Unwriting" 139 and Jager 611.) While this is not by any means a ubiquitous occurrence, it happens enough to be noticeable, and curious—in part because the interpretation of "Mont Blanc" is relatively unsettled. By contrast, we can all more or less agree on what a poem like "My Last Duchess" is about (even though we can disagree over what some of it means); yet we find no similar disavowals in Browning criticism. What this suggests, in my view, is that "Mont Blanc" poses a quite specific crisis of reading having to do with its performance of discontinuity; it asks us to read as if for the first time while simultaneously demonstrating the impossibility of doing so.

the question of whether it's possible to get beyond our own conditioning, to see—even for a second, even for the length of a pause between words or syllables—without mediation.

Many of the most influential readings of "Mont Blanc," including those of Earl Wasserman and Frances Ferguson, describe it as "a poem about the relationship between the human mind and the external world" (Ferguson 202). The speaker's "human mind" (l. 37) seeks its place within "a universe of things" (l. 1) far beyond its powers of perception, but thanks to what Ferguson calls "an elaborate schema of reciprocity" (205) in the structure of the poem, the speaker, or "individual mind" is able to "participate in thought and sensation without ever having to originate them for itself" (206). The most convincing readings of "Mont Blanc" take into account the ways in which Shelley stages the interaction of mind and matter, balancing an idealism we might associate with Kant and the embodied representations of the sublime inherited from Burke and an eighteenth-century British tradition. Christoph Bode, for example, argues that "Shelley's universe is decidedly a *material* one, which does not exist for man but confronts him indifferently. This realization overwhelms him and would leave him helpless were it not for the insight that such knowledge and such self-knowledge is possible *only in his mind*, this new quality of the universe, and that there alone the world exists as a meaningful one. In 'Mont Blanc' ... Shelley is an ontological materialist and an epistemological idealist at the same time" (347). While Bode's insistence on the phenomenological quality of the aesthetic experience of the sublime balances out the relationship between mind and object,[7] not all commentators have been so careful. In most of these kinds of readings, though, the very ability to posit the relationship that Ferguson takes as the baseline for interpreting "Mont Blanc" means that the dialectic has already been decided in favor of mind. It is

[7] Bode, unlike most readers of "Mont Blanc," argues for the primacy of the outside world in this relationship. Commenting on the poet's reference to his mind's passivity within the "trance sublime and strange" (a passage which I discuss at length below), Bode argues that "For those who still cannot see how the roles are distributed, where Shelley puts activity and where passivity, the ... lines should be an eye-opener because he describes the relationship of subject and object as a continuously dialectical one, but one in which the object-pole is clearly dominant" (334-35).

only human exertion that can experience relationality. The mountain, for all its potential power remains "blank," a projection screen for the mind's imaginings and mythologizing.

Perhaps more fully than any other poem of the period, though, Shelley's rendering of the human mind's encounter with the incommensurable force of nature—an encounter that is at once sustained and recognized as unsustainable—discloses a radical form of suspension and, by extension, of undecidability. The state of suspension affects not merely the speaker's powers of comparison (as it does in the Coleridgean sublime explored in chapter 1), but also disrupts thought processes, referentiality, and subjectivity—that is, all those categories which typically condition the experience of the self in the world. In its place, Shelley's poem imagines the possibility of something more open-ended and uncertain: "an unremitting interchange / With the clear universe of things around" (l. 39-40). Yet this relationality is also enabled by a performance of discontinuity. The gap between signifier and signified in "Mont Blanc" has, of course, been observed by a number of other scholars, many of whom follow Ferguson's emphasis on "ironic" distance. As she argues, "the poem insists, most importantly, on the inability of one's resting in such irony [i.e., the ironic distance between signifier and signified] as it exhibits its own repeated failures to let Mont Blanc be merely a blank, merely a mass of stone: *Mont Blanc* leads to attempts to think of the mountain as physical and without metaphysical attributes, and fails; it attempts to imagine a gap between the mountain and the significances that people attach to it, and fails" (Ferguson 203). So, too, does Hitt observe that "insight is generated in the gap between the mountain and 'the human mind's imaginings'" ("Unwriting" 143). However, that "gap" has not always been seen, as I am proposing, as something that is also central to "Mont Blanc"'s staging of

sublimity: a working through of the consequences of seeing subreption and division as constitutive rather than catastrophic.[8]

Paul de Man said that Kant's sublime was, essentially, "a story of an exchange, of a negotiation in which powers are lost and gained in an economy of sacrifice and recuperation" (*Aesthetic Ideology* 87). Kant writes that the sublime "is produced by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger" (98). Though Kant stresses the immediacy of the experience (an immediacy that, at least potentially, amounts to the same thing as simultaneity), the effect is, indeed, that of de Manian allegory, in that it reflects "the tendency of language toward narrative, the spreading out along the axis of an imaginary time in order to give duration to what is, in fact, simultaneous within the subject" (*Blindness and Insight* 225). "Mont Blanc" obviously cannot escape the temporality of experience itself, but it nonetheless troubles the allegorical function of Kant's sublime by throwing it into reverse. That is, the first two sections present a sublime experience that is already in progress, leaping over the sacrificial scene to render the "One Mind"[9] of sublime expansiveness capable of receiving the "rapid waves" (l. 2) of the "everlasting universe of things" (l. 1). Yet, almost as soon as the individual speaker is located within this universe ("I gaze on thee" [l. 34]), it is placed in abeyance ("I seem as in a trance sublime and strange" [l. 35]), and the sublime experience begins to dissipate in the face of "one legion of wild thoughts" (l. 40). In the third section, the speaker begins to reach outside himself for an explanation of what he is experiencing, a gesture that is as comprehensible in human terms as it is antithetical to the sublime, which

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[8] Here I take issue with Wasserman's view that "vacancies" should be understood as "moments of discontinuity, that threaten to deny immortality and render life and the world meaningless and 'false' ... the 'nothingness and dissolution' with which the mind is instinctively at enmity" (221). While the relationship between mind and vacancy is far from simple—as I hope this chapter will make clear—it cannot, under the terms laid out here, be seen as merely threatening or nihilistic.

[9] Cf. Wasserman's commentary on section 1 of "Mont Blanc": "The mind Shelley has been describing, however, is not the individual mind but the One Mind, which constitutes total Existence and of which each individual mind is a portion" (223).

broaches no such explanations. The fourth section marks a continuation of what we might, borrowing Keats's famous phrase, describe as "irritable reaching after fact and reason." Here, however, such musings initiate a language of violence and incommensurability, as if to underline the absolute "contrapurposiveness" that Kant attributed to natural force. It is only in the final stanza that the mind of sublimity (that is, of the possibility of sublimity) once again arises.

The sublime, in Shelley's rendering, also has the power to suspend temporality. It presents itself as radical simultaneity, both happening and not happening. The poem may be seen as an anticipatory working-through of that famous final question: "And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?" (l. 142-44). The return to vacancy as an actively-maintained posture reaffirms the speaker's commitment to participation in the "unremitting interchange / With the clear universe of things around" (l. 39-40). "Mont Blanc" suggests that such an "interchange" is both always already available to the mind of vacancy and, for that same reason, inherently fragile and contingent. Any attempt to grasp and fix this relation leads to its dissipation by reactivating powers of comparison, language, and separation. Here, we once again return to the importance of subreption: the failure to maintain the interval between the feeling of the sublime and the object that triggers it—by, that is, failing to maintain a suspension of referentiality—returns us to the "mundane epithets" of Colley's Victorian tourists. Yet such phrases as "How sublime!" expose not the "emptiness that the language of the sublime had masked" (Colley 53), but rather the inherent emptiness of language itself at the limit of conceptual, conditioned thought. When we go looking for the mind of sublimity in "Mont Blanc," what we discover is a "vacancy." The vacancy is not what we find "instead of" the sublime; this suspension is the condition under which the sublime may arise; according to Kant, this is all we ever really find. The suspension of reference—or, for that matter,

non-referentiality—marks not a failure of language in the face of the sublime, but rather the best language can do.

A "hymn to suspended animation"[10]

The sublime may be found only in the mind, yet it is fully realized only as a mode of relationality. The trance or suspension of the "separate phantasy" simultaneously enables participation in the "unremitting interchange of things." Section 2 of "Mont Blanc" contains what is perhaps Shelley's finest realization of a non-dichotomous sublime, figured as a "state of suspended animation—that is, a state in which the narrator's faculties of knowing and desiring are placed in abeyance—[wherein] the specificity and complexity of the faculty of feeling can be best revealed" (Mitchell, "The Transcendental" par. 17):

> the strange sleep
> Which when the voices of the desart fail
> Wraps all in its own deep eternity;—
> The caverns echoing the Arve's commotion,
> A loud, lone sound no other sound can tame;
> Thou art pervaded with that ceaseless motion,
> Thou art the path of that unresisting sound—
> Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee
> I seem as in a trance sublime and strange
> To muse on my own separate phantasy,
> My own, my human mind, which passively
> Now renders and receives fast influencings,
> Holding an unremitting interchange
> With the clear universe of things around … (l. 27-40)

This passage is, among other things, an effective illustration of a formal dimension of "Mont Blanc" that William Keach identified nearly thirty years ago; namely, its "crossing of extended blank verse enjambment with irregular rhyme in a poem which raises … fundamental questions about the mind's powers and limitations" (671). Following Keach's conclusion about the rhymes in "Mont Blanc" as a whole, we may see that the form of this passage both structures an otherwise

[10] Mitchell, "Suspended Animation" 113.

untamable experience and also undoes that power—whatever these rhymes and resonances enable, they fundamentally do not allow us to speculate about a rule for reading the rest of the poem.[11] Poetic form cannot mask contingency; it serves as an aid to suspended (that is, active and ungrounded) receptivity rather than a fixed rule. Though most of this passage scans as traditional blank verse, we also have the rhyming words and phrases "Arve's commotion / ceaseless motion," "sound / around," and "eternity / gaze on thee / phantasy." This last series is particularly suggestive in its linking of temporality and visual perception to the construction of a self separate from its surroundings. Indeed, three of the poem's five uses of the word "I" involve acts of visual perception: "I gaze on thee" (l. 34); "I look on high" (l. 52); "I gaze" (l. 99).[12]

In a recent extension of Keach's formal argument, Robert Mitchell claims that "Mont Blanc" "privileges readers, speakers, and listeners who give themselves over to a trance, in which the relation between the sonic medium and the meaning of the poem continually modulates" ("Suspended Animation" 115). Strikingly, Mitchell's celebration of this particular form of suspended animation echoes observations made by F. R. Leavis some seventy-five years earlier. Writing in *Revaluations* (1936), Leavis had complained that Shelley's poetry "induces—depends for its success on inducing—a kind of attention that doesn't bring the critical intelligence into play" (206); the poet's "eloquence … demands that active intelligence shall be, as it were, switched off" (210). Critics of Shelley usually cite this essay as a kind of historical curiosity, a relic from the days of a New Criticism that failed to appreciate Romantic poetry in those dark days before the advent of the Yale School. In substance, though, both Mitchell and Leavis are saying the same

[11] "Shelley's irregular rhymes," Keach concludes, "do not tame the wildness of a 'sound no other sound can tame,' nor can they break the inaccessible silence at the summit of Mont Blanc. But they impose on his and our experience of both an order of language that accepts the arbitrary and submits it to the deliberation of art" (675).

[12] The others are "I seem as in a trance sublime and strange" (l. 35), which places the lyric self in abeyance, and a moment of ontological uncertainty in section 3: "Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled / The veil of life and death? or do I lie / In dream …" (l. 53-5).

thing, just with a different inflection: what was once criticized as a breach of poetic propriety is now celebrated as a gesture of poetic genius able to create "a state of suspension that frees sensation, enabling new links between elements of the open system of the world" ("Suspended Animation" 119).[13] However, a closer reading of this passage suggests that the first movement of the trance is not the surrender of a self dissolved in immobility as much as it is the precondition of self-reflection. As John Rudy observes, "it is from within the dimensions of deathlike 'trance,' a condition normally viewed as a half-conscious state midway between sleep and waking, that he regards his own mind. And here again, to the extent that he conceives mind—in this case, his *own*, his *human* mind—as in some way distinct from the surrounding world, it is distinct, or 'separate,' only as 'phantasy,' as apparition or specter" (55-56). Poetic form, which helps initiate a similar awareness in the reader, thus becomes a way to "muse" on the "separate phantasy"—coming up against its limits, we are once again thrown back upon the failure of explanatory "voices" (found in nature or elsewhere) and, more broadly, on the unconditioned and unconditional interchange that marks Shelley's sublime.

The self of the "separate phantasy" arises first as a visual phenomenon, as if to suggest that the act of looking (or, at least the kind of looking that introduces the individual's "point of view") inhibits the expansion of sublime experience by implicitly reactivating the comparing powers. By contrast, the "trance" becomes sublime insofar as it effects a certain personal absence on the part of the speaker—an absence, that is, of the expectations, desires, perceptions, fears, and conditioning that cause us to confuse the "separate phantasy" with the reality constituted by "the clear universe of things" (l. 40).What "the strange sleep / Which when the voices of the desart fail / Wraps all in its own deep eternity" (26-8) suggests that the speaker's "human mind" is at its

[13] Laura Wells Betz celebrates a similar movement in the language of *Prometheus Unbound*, arguing that, even at its most spell-binding, Shelley's language is aimed at "instilling in the reader the dynamics of resolve and awakening, and passivity and openness" (172).

most passive when it is engaged with its "separate phantasy," a kind of sleep that obscures what Rudy calls "the fully interanimate dynamic of the world he perceives" (53). Awakening to that dynamic, the speaker finds that his discriminatory mind (the mind of comparing power) must be held in abeyance. As Rudy argues, "If it is sleep for the discriminatory mind, however, it is a wakeful state for the attentive, nonjudgmental mind that opens upon the seeming paradox of the visible hiddenness of things" (53).

One need not, however, adopt Rudy's Zen Buddhist framework to arrive at this point. Indeed, as a form of suspended animation, the speaker's "trance sublime and strange" enables the experience of "unremitting interchange" to the extent that it remains actively responsive to "the clear universe of things." The trance, insofar as it can be called sublime, serves not to merely negate the self, nor does it simply enforce a state of passivity in the face of overwhelming natural force. Both of these poles would negate the sublime itself. Rather, the trance enables the speaker to both know and not know what he is experiencing; he may reflect upon "My own, my human mind" (l. 37), neither judging it nor identifying with it. The mind that "passively / Now renders and receives fast influencings" (l. 37-8) is, paradoxically, a mind that at some level actively constitutes and maintains its own suspension—and, for that matter, also allows the trance to remain "sublime and strange," that is, at least partially untheorized and uncontrolled, even as the possibility of response remains open.[14] Much as was the case with Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief," there is more to this "strange sleep" than simply the abrogation of the will, as a brief

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[14] By contrast, in "Hymn Before Sunrise," Coleridge declares, "Awake, my soul! not only passive praise / Thou owest!" (l. 24-5). This more conventional apostrophe has the force of a compulsion—something owed by the soul to the creator of the scene it witnesses—that is entirely absent from "Mont Blanc," even though the latter poem certainly does not lack images of overwhelming natural violence. The echo with the "Hymn" suggests that, in Shelley's view, we should perhaps be less hasty in rejecting the position of "passive praise," exploring, instead, the ways in which it might be transformed into a state of suspension that, in turn, initiates "unremitting interchange" instead of a hierarchy of the praiseworthy and the one who praises.

comparison between the speaker's trance in section 2 and an image of hibernation in section 4 illustrates:

> The torpor of the year when feeble dreams
> Visit the hidden bud's or dreamless sleep
> Holds every future leaf and flower;—the bound
> With which from that detested trance they leap .... (l. 88-91)

Although the language of "detested trance" suggests a degraded form of the "trance sublime and strange" that foregrounds inactivity and a kind of death,[15] even this enfeebled dream "holds" the potential for overcoming it, that same promise that Shelley will more famously articulate in the final line of 1819's "Ode to the West Wind": "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (l. 70).

Elsewhere in Shelley's poetry states of suspension—or, more accurately, *acts* of suspension or suspending—function as powerful enabling structures and gestures. As it does in the work of Coleridge, however, Shelleyan suspension maintains an ambiguous, even dangerous or painful cast—particularly when it is used to explore the proximity of suspended animation, sleep, and death. The opening lines of *Queen Mab* (1813), for instance, mingle the discourses of sleep and death as the former casts its spell on Ianthe:

> How wonderful is Death,
> Death and his brother Sleep!
> One, pale as yonder waning moon
> With lips of lurid blue;
> The other, rosy as the morn
> When throned on ocean's wave
> It blushes o'er the world:
> Yet both so passing wonderful! (l. 1.1-8)

"Wonderful" here suggests a form of sublimity without the promise of mastery;[16] it is, moreover, an affective position entirely appropriate to the poem. In what can be understood as an early

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[15] Wasserman, for instance, writes that "In its abhorrence of a vacuum, nature springs from its 'detested trance' of inactivity, but it is, paradoxically, by means of trance that the poet has had insight into his own active mind and, by means of a trance-like vision, has experienced the 'mightier world'" (229).
[16] Cf. Heringman 49-53.

version of “Mont Blanc”’s “trance sublime and strange,” the sleep of Ianthe’s body and conscious cognitive faculties liberates her soul, “The perfect semblance of its bodily frame, / Instinct with inexpressible beauty and grace” (1.133-34), to accompany the fairy queen on her visionary journey. Only by separating soul and body, holding the latter in abeyance, can Ianthe comprehend a freedom from the “desolating pestilence” of power that “Makes slaves of men, and, of the human frame, / A mechanized automaton” (3.175, 179-80).

In *Alastor*, moreover, the figure of suspension marks the narrator’s deliberate openness to inspiration and readiness for the task of creation:

> serenely now
> And moveless, as a long forgotten lyre
> Suspended in the solitary dome
> Of some mysterious and deserted fane,
> I wait thy breath, Great Parent .... (l. 41-5)

The suspended lyre suggests an Aeolian harp, that quintessentially “Romantic” image of poetic genius constituted by receptivity that always hovers on the edge of passivity. Shelley returns to this image in the opening lines of *Epipsychidion* (1821), again using the act of suspension to invoke a spirit which may be that of Mary Shelley or his own soul:

> Sweet spirit! Sister of that orphan one,
> Whose empire is the name thou weepest on,
> In my heart’s temple I suspend to thee
> These votive wreaths of withered memory. (l. 1-4)

Other suspensions are more ambiguous, even as they are also more literal. *Alastor*’s natural world (like many others in Shelley) is structured by images of overhanging rocks, arching domes, bending trees, and hovering clouds:

> The pyramids
> Of the tall cedar overarching, frame
> Most solemn domes within, and far below,
> Like clouds suspended in an emerald sky,
> The ash and the acacia floating hang
> Tremulous and pale. (l. 433-38)

Such images are often undecidable as to whether they should be read as threatening or protective; suspension itself, moreover, seems more often than not to be a figure of speech on the verge of embodiment. And, in at least one moment in *Alastor*, the term manages to suggest both stillness and implacable forward motion:

> The boat fled on,—the boiling torrent drove,—
> The crags closed round with black and jagged arms,
> The shattered mountain overhung the sea,
> And faster still, beyond all human speed,
> Suspended on the sweep of the smooth wave,
> The little boat was driven. (l. 358-63)

Suspension for Shelley involves both holding and being held, and, read as part of a network of images of lingering, overhanging skies, and "solitary domes," suggests worlds of potentiality and possibility—something far different from simple passivity. However, darker strains of the image operate as well, particularly in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), where the Titan first appears in his agony of suspension on the side of a cliff: "a writhing shade / 'Mid whirlwind-peopled mountains" (1.203-4). Yet, even this image, as readers of the poem well know, contains a great deal of potential energy: "what an awful whisper rises up! / 'Tis scarce like sound, it tingles through the frame / As lightning tingles, hovering ere it strike" (1.132-34).

Wasserman glosses the image of the "long forgotten lyre" from the beginning of *Alastor* as Shelley's attempt to figure an experience of transcendent or immanent visitation—an ecstatic, if not specifically religious experience. "These moments between vacancies," Wasserman argues, " are the human mind's encounters with divinity and supply the model on which to pattern human life" (197). However, read within the context of even the handful of examples I have cited of Shelleyan suspension, such vacancies, even when they appear to be "detested trances" (to return to the language of "Mont Blanc"), are hardly beside the point. To place the inflection and emphasis on suspension means that "vacancy" itself becomes an opportunity for response, and the same suspension of dichotomous thinking that enables "Mont Blanc"'s speaker to become aware

of the delusional nature of his “separate phantasy” may also suspend the negative valuation that Wasserman and others apply to the concept.

Here, I am thinking specifically of the argument that Catherine Gallagher makes about Shelley and Walter Pater in “Formalism and Time.” Both of these writers, in her view, use literary form to “cheat time” by focusing in on moments of the most intense sensation at the expense of all the spaces—vacancies—in between. Of Pater, Gallagher comments: “Just as one should get through life by leaping from one high point to the next, one should get through, for example, Wordsworth by hopping from one formula-transmuted crystal to the next. Skipping the ordinary is crucial” (241). However, if we understand suspension, as it comes down from the Romantic figurations of Coleridge and Shelley in particular, to be a form of response that does not prejudge the thing to which it responds to as being either a high or low point. The ability to become “conscious of an infinite number of ideas in a minute,” as Shelley writes in his note to canto 8 of *Queen Mab* (*SPP* 65n1), is available at every moment. We have limited abilities to control our reality in the sense of mastery or closure; neither “Mont Blanc” nor the rest of Shelley’s poetry suggests otherwise. At the same time, however, the suspension of the “trance sublime and strange” suggests a reflective posture of being towards the uncontrollable that consists in an ongoing practice of response.

“The things that we call sublime,” Kant says, “raise the soul’s fortitude above its usual middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of quite a different kind, and which gives us the courage [to believe] that we could be a match for nature’s seeming omnipotence” (120). Although the superiority that Kant describes as the compensatory gesture of the sublime—what we get in return for the initial sacrifice of our imagination—has often been stereotyped as mastery or domination, the experience that Shelley realizes in “Mont Blanc” offers a possibility of thinking beyond those discourses. Indeed, as the previous chapter demonstrates,

the Coleridgean suspension of comparing powers had already begun to question the possibility of Kantian mastery and to mark the collapse of the "safe place" that enables the subject to experience superiority. Shelley takes us further. His sublime allows us to imagine a superiority that is independent of external forces not because it is stronger or it ignores them, but simply because it is able to respond to them, without the kinds of non-aesthetic judgments that we are otherwise accustomed to make. This elevation may be more like dangling by a thread, or simply hovering. The sublime thus does not culminate in a feeling of mastery (at least not as we usually understand the word), nor does it consist in finding the powers of our human mind reflected back to us in nature. To have these experiences is necessarily to re-activate, and hence to un-suspend, our comparing powers. The ethical, non-coercive sublime does not exchange the power of nature for the power of man, but rather points to a momentary suspension of dominance itself: not the negation of power, but the suspension of the very structures of reference and conceptual thought that make it possible to distinguish the dominant from the dominated.

The Abyss and the Guardrail

The "unremitting interchange / With the clear universe around" marks Shelley's realization of a sublime that is a sublime of connectedness without clear superiority. The moment of inhibition, the breakdown of cognition gives way to something like what Kant calls a sense of "respect for our own vocation" (114). The sublime offers no epistemological access to knowledge of the world outside of us, yet it nevertheless enables—at least fleetingly—an unconditioned, non-reciprocal relationship with it. Moreover, although Kantian "respect" has often translated into a kind of negation or dismissal of the material object that triggers it, Shelley offers a non-hierarchical possibility within the feeling of expansion, something closer to the "heightened understanding" that Hitt attributes to the "ecological sublime" ("Ecological Sublime" 611). That Shelley calls the

interchange “unremitting” suggests not only that it is unbounded, without a clear point of closure, but also that it is, in a certain sense, always already available to the mind willing to suspend its typical processes of comparison.

Indeed, the “unremitting” quality is already suggested by the poem’s opening lines:

> The everlasting universe of things
> Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,
> Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—
> Now lending splendour, where from the secret springs
> The source of human thought its tribute brings
> Of waters .... (l. 1-6)

This section is striking in its resistance to referentiality; all of the natural description of a “feeble brook” and “wild woods, among the mountains lone,” all the “waterfalls,” “winds,” and “rocks” are part of Shelley’s figuration of a mental experience that takes place prior to discursive grounding. Leavis takes a predictably dim view of the opening, writing that “The metaphorical and the actual, the real and the imagined, the inner and the outer, could hardly be more unsuitably and indistinguishably confused. The setting, of course, provides special excuse for bewildered confusion; but Shelley takes eager advantage of the excuse and the confusion is characteristic—what might be found unusual in *Mont Blanc* is a certain compelling vividness” (212-13). Not until the first line of the second section, where the speaker apostrophizes the “Ravine of Arve—dark, deep Ravine—“ (l. 12) does an objective correlative appear. Yet, Shelley is not simply out to take advantage of his reader’s confusion for some manipulative end. Neither fully material nor immaterial, captured only in a kind of ungrounded, non-referential movement, the poem’s first stanza imagines what the sublime might feel like from the inside, before the full deployment of conceptual thought. Shelley envisions the human mind as “a feeble brook” (l. 7):

> In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,
> Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,
> Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river
> Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves. (l. 8-11)

The image marks a differential in scale and ability without attaching a value judgment. As Cian Duffy notes, it also anticipates the relationship of multidirectional relationality that arises more fully at the end of the second section: “The mind is passive in perception, the ‘universe of things’ is prior to ‘human thought.’ But the mind is also capable of limited, active reflection upon the information that it receives from the senses. The products of this active reflection—the mind’s contribution (‘tribute’) to conscious experience—are occasioned by but also to some extent distinct from the determining information received from the senses” (114).

Moreover, when the language of the poem does turn to a more direct—though still figurative, since these elements cannot really be disentangled in “Mont Blanc”—description of the natural scene, suspended relationality governs the relationship between its different parts. Much as the mind is capable of responding through active reflection to that which it could not resist through force alone, the ravine, the first object of the speaker’s address, is both “passive” and determinative, channeling the “Power in the likeness of the Arve” as it “comes down / From the ice gulphs that gird his secret throne” (l. 16-17). A similar relationship is suggested by the image of the ravine’s “caverns echoing to the Arve’s commotion” (l. 30). The caverns, though seemingly inert when compared to the movement of the river, structure and amplify its power; we should read “commotion” not merely as confused or disruptive activity but also a mode of unconditioned relationality: a co-motion.

This “awful scene” (l. 15) is dramatically rendered in language that evokes many eighteenth-century conventions of representing the sublime. It is both alien and also somehow domesticated, particularly when Shelley describes a cluster of pine trees as “Children of an elder time” (l. 21). The river comes “Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame / Of lightning through the tempest” (l. 18-19); “chainless winds” (l. 22) suggest untrammeled—and undirected—power. Freed from the mind of rationalization and separate phantasy, the speaker perceives

“earthly rainbows stretched across the sweep / Of the etherial waterfall” (l. 25-6), even though the connotations of these images are usually reversed, “rainbows with the sky, waterfalls with the earth” (Rudy 53). Such images do not only signal Shelley’s commitment to “unwriting” the discourse around “Mont Blanc,” as Hitt argues. Much in the same way that the natural unnaturalness of “Mont Blanc”’s form—the blank verse that is not (particularly in these early sections) wholly unrhymed—has the effect of sparking a reader’s attentiveness, the subtle reversal that grounds the rainbow and untethers the waterfall jolts the reader’s perception in the midst of the roaring of the “loud, lone sound no other sound can tame” (l. 31). It is a reminder, too, that everything the speaker describes in the first two stanzas is happening at the same time; it’s only our limited human perspective that forces us to read the coursing of the river as a narrative. The otherness of nature is never brought fully within the compass of the poem’s referential language. The scenes in the first two sections especially seem to undo themselves as they are constituted. The destructive power of the river appears capable of shattering everything in its path, even though such power does not attract a negative valuation until later in the poem. The “interchange” upon which the speaker reflects is, for all its availability, marked by its fragility and contingency; paradoxically, the speaker has to work to maintain the “passivity” of the trance.

Section 3 of “Mont Blanc” presents a series of partial yet powerful attempts to make this scene of natural force comprehensible in human terms. Shelley’s speaker entertains such explanations as “the busy thoughts … / Of those who wake and live” (l. 51-2). Hitt describes a “characteristic pattern” in these passages, which introduce conventional or intertextual elements in the service of its quest for some positive truth about the universe, mind, or nature. But no such truth is ever fully articulated, for whatever might be provisionally posited is inevitably reexamined, questioned, and finally left to collapse on itself” (“Unwriting” 145). The speaker of Shelley’s poem gazes upon “frozen floods, unfathomable deeps” (l. 64) and wonders:

> Is this the scene
> Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young
> Ruin? Were these their toys? or did a sea
> Of fire, envelope once this silent snow? (l. 71-4)

Drawing upon a language that is at once mythological and conversant with contemporary scientific theory, the speaker muses on a kind of catastrophic geology, attempting to read the origin of the ravine in its current "Ghastly, scarred, and riven" (l. 71) state. Although he briefly anthropomorphizes Earthquake and her young (an echo, perhaps, of the "giant brood of pines around thee clinging" of section two), Shelley also—as Nigel Leask has comprehensively demonstrated—shows himself to be cognizant of the geological debates of the day, in which naturalists and geologists such as James Hutton and George-Louis Buffon were asking many of the same questions about origin and catastrophe (190-93).

"In presenting the sublime in nature," Kant writes, "the mind feels *agitated*, while in an aesthetic judgment about the beautiful in nature it is in *restful* contemplation. This agitation (above all at its inception) can be compared with a vibration, i.e., with a rapid alternation of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object. If a [thing] is excessive for the imagination (and the imagination is driven to [such excess] as it apprehends [the thing] in intuition), then [the thing] is, as it were, an abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself" (115). The philosopher John Sallis describes the sublime with an emphasis on interruption, eccentricity, spacing, and interval, all of which suggests that the "proper" positioning of the sublime is not a position at all, but a practice of maintaining a posture of suspension. The sublime is, he writes, "a position ever so close to the dissolution of every position; a position that broadens—almost—a rout(e) of reason extending toward an abyss and transgressing all limits. Everything depends on whether or not a certain recentering supervenes, on whether or not a certain guardrail suffices to limit the slippage into eccentricity" (85). Such a description is strikingly apt for "Mont Blanc," particularly the crucial break between sections 2 and 3. For the

speaker's naming of the "unremitting interchange" must inevitably initiate its undoing, placing a "guardrail" against the abyss opened up by the sublime.

Even the most perceptive of the explanations in section 3 are ultimately no more than "busy thoughts" that have little traffic with the inaccessible power of the mountain. The mind that, in section two, could "rende[r] and receiv[e] fast influencings" (l. 38) fails when it attempts to exercise discursive control over that exchange. Indeed, in both style and import, the language of section three echoes that of the Book of Job, particularly the final section where the Lord, from within the whirlwind, responds to Job's complaints in a litany that begins:

> Where we you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
> Tell me, if you have understanding.
> Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
> Or who stretched the line upon it?
> On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone,
> when the morning stars sang together,
> and all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:4-7)

Job, like the speaker in "Mont Blanc," has sought origins and explanations far beyond his power to comprehend them—beyond, indeed, the reach of explanation itself. Coleridge's exploration of origins in the "Hymn"—"Who made you glorious as the Gates of Heaven / Beneath the keen full Moon? Who bade the Sun / Cloath you with rainbows?" (l. 54-6) had ended with the ecstatic answer, "GOD! let the Torrents, like a Shout of Nations / Answer! and let the Ice-plains echo, GOD!" (l. 58-9), Shelley's speaker finds, like Job, that "None can reply" (l. 75). However, as these echoes suggest, that impossibility of reply, of knowledge itself, does not so much suggest a radical alienation but rather more flexible posture of faith. For, as partial as human imagination may be (in both its mythological and scientific dimensions), it is not for that reason fully powerless. The suspension of reference enacted in this passage creates a reflective space within the catastrophe itself.

The question that arises most powerfully from this space of reflection is how one can function under a condition of incomplete knowledge, that is, how we can move from a search for epistemological guardrails towards a more open-ended, ethical relation with the world. The last lines of section three propose the form of a possible response:

> The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
> Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
> So solemn, so serene, that man may be
> But for such faith with nature reconciled;
> Thou has a voice, great Mountain, to repeal
> Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood
> By all, but which the wise, and great, and good
> Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel. (l. 76-83)

Much attention has been devoted to exploring the meaning of this passage, in part because the "but" of line 79 is ambiguous, especially in light of a manuscript variant that replaces "but" with "in" (cf. the editors' commentary in *SPP* 99n4). Given Shelley's avowed hostility to organized Christian religion, moreover, the use of the word "faith" seems especially vexing. Yet, this "faith so mild" must be read in terms of its conjunction with "awful doubt"—that is, a doubt that springs from the "awful" or awe-filled experience of the sublime. As such, it becomes possible to read "faith" more flexibly as that posture of suspension that results from the experience of the sublime. Certainly, this is by no means a simple prescription. Much of the difficulty of this passage results from the ways in which the poem as a whole moves quickly across different registers of discontinuous experience, often with little warning. However we read the "but," it provides a jolt of dissonance, a gap or interval that throws us back on the awareness of how artificial expectations condition our thinking in subtle but definitive ways.[17] Perhaps, then, the mildness of

[17] In this context, it is worth mentioning Michael Erkelenz's reading of Shelley's "faith" passage, which argues that a dogmatic Christian faith inhibits the broader faith of reconciliation with nature. Tracing Shelley's manuscript revisions, Erkelenz notes: "Shelley first wrote, 'To such high thoughts of Nature reconciled!' This line implies a conflict between man's faith in a creator and the faith in nature's eternal existence which the wilderness offers. Dropping this idea of conflict, he then wrote, 'In such a faith with Nature reconciled'. Faith is so mild that the Christian might

faith registers a non-ideological, non-linguistic dimension, the aporia of suspension that allows only a process of partial, temporary reconciliations with nature. The promise of serenity extends not to nature itself but only to the human subject, available only insofar as the experience of the sublime ends with an affirmation of acceptance—an acceptance that extends not only to our smallness in the face of Mont Blanc's power but to the awareness of our own mortality.[18]

If all this anticipates the disappointment felt by the tourists who would later come to France clutching volumes of Shelley's poetry, it is not without a liberating dimension as well. Shelley, as Laura Wells Betz has argued in an analysis of *Prometheus Unbound*, was highly sensitive to the ways that linguistic enchantment could be used by institutions as a tool of tyranny.[19] In "Mont Blanc," the speaker claims that the mountain "hast a voice … to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe" (l. 80-1), and we should, following Betz's logic, place the emphasis not on "fraud and woe"—that is, on repealing just the "bad laws," as it were—but on "codes" themselves, as being inherently fraudulent and woe-producing to the extent that they are, even in their most benign forms, prescriptive. Shelley's sublime, for all its unbridled force and ability to destroy human categories of speech and thought, does not ultimately compel us to believe anything—about God, nature, science, or ourselves. That is, we do not *have* to engage in a process of

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learn to accept it and thus to end his estrangement, not in this case from faith, but from nature itself. Finally, Shelley decided on 'But for such faith with nature reconciled'. He combined the sense that faith can be the means of man's reconciliation with nature, and the sense that faith necessarily conflicts with man's Christian belief. Faith is so mild, solemn, and serene that it might reconcile man and nature, but for its incompatibility with faith in a Creator" (102).

[18] I have been influenced here by Hitt's discussion of a parallel sublime in Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: "She is faced with the unsettling realization that human beings may not be at the center of the universe. And although she herself is in no physical danger, she comes face to face with her own mortality" ("Ecological Sublime" 610-11).

[19] "… Act 1 of *Prometheus Unbound* draws upon the idea of negative spell-casting in a more extensive and varied way, thus facilitating its portrayal of tyranny not only as a political force personified in the figure of Jupiter and to some extent Prometheus before his change of heart, but also, and especially, as *a mental force that stems from conditions of political and religious authoritarianism l*ike those Shelley protests in his sonnet, the *Mask*, and other texts" (Betz 164, emphasis added).

reconciliation. Not everyone can or, more specifically, will choose to hear the mountain's voice; this element of choice and non-coercion is what, paradoxically, makes those "large codes of fraud and woe" (l. 81) so difficult to repeal. What emerges from the pedagogical scene of section 3 is an obedience that does not feel as though it has obeyed anything.

Seeing Mont Blanc "as the poets do"

Attempting to once again take up the thread of unremitting interchange, Shelley's speaker finds that it can only be apprehended by maintaining a gap or suspension. The silence of the mountain that, in the first line of the section five "yet gleams on high" (l. 127) reminds us that it is not enough simply to return to a certain place in order to recapture a certain experience. Far from realizing the reconciliation of "awful doubt, or faith so mild" envisioned in the previous stanza, section 4 represents a retrenchment of conceptual, conditioned thought, exploring still further the performative power of language to—ostensibly—tame an uncontrollable, illegible scene. The section begins by enumerating

> The fields, the lakes, the forests, and the streams,
> Ocean, and all the living things that dwell
> Within the daedal earth; lightning, and rain,
> Earthquake, and fiery flood, and hurricane .... (l. 84-7)

The adjective "daedal," evoking as it does the myth of Daedalus, the architect of the Labyrinth, suggests an artificiality and constructedness that had not been present until this point in the poem. The rhyming couplet "rain" / "hurricane," so unusual in this poem, also reinforces a sense of arbitrary structure. Here, "Earthquake" is no longer the name of a mythical deity but rather a category of catastrophe that destroys the fruits of human labor. Taking us away from the Ravine of Arve, the opening of section 4 thus reflects a mind bent on classification and control.

While it may be tempting to read these lines as something of a loss of that "faith so mild" that had been so difficultly won in the previous section, Hitt quite rightly argues that it is not an

“equivocation,” although, “it certainly does acknowledge the difficulty of maintaining the ‘strange sleep’ for very long. Except in those rare moments of illumination, moments which cannot last, the familiar external voices exert a strong influence on consciousness” (“Unwriting” 153). And, as John Rudy observes about this section, “equality achieved either despite or in defiance of supreme power is at best a relativistic state that limits the human mind in the very scheme of things it seeks to engage” (64). The human mind determined to stay within its self-imposed limitations naturally feels threatened by that which exceeds limits or crosses categories. Indeed, section four of “Mont Blanc” contains some of the most violent, destructive, and threatening images in the poem, all while “Power dwells apart in tranquility / Remote, serene, and inaccessible” (l. 96-7). Mont Blanc’s “glaciers creep / Like snakes that watch their prey” (l. 100-1), an image of a deliberately threatening, violent natural world that anticipates Tennyson’s view of “nature red in tooth and claw.” The famous image of the mountain as “A city of death. distinct with many a tower / And wall impregnable of beaming ice” (l. 105-6) also appears in this section, though the speaker almost immediately undoes the image: “Yet not a city, but a flood of ruin / Is there” (l. 107-8). The implacable, slow-moving glaciers contain within them a seemingly unlimited power to destroy the human (and much else that lies in its path). The “perpetual stream” (l. 109) lays waste to trees, soil, and rocks:

> The dwelling-place
> Of insects, beasts, and birds, becomes its spoil;
> Their food and their retreat for ever gone,
> So much of life and joy is lost. The race
> Of man, flies far in dread; his work and dwelling
> Vanish, like smoke before the tempest’s dream
> And their place is not known. (l. 114-20)

Admittedly, these images do not immediately lend themselves to the project of reconciliation envisioned in section three. No amount of unremitting interchange can fully revalue or erase the potential for violence and destruction. Shelley amplifies this point by using the word “Rolls” (l.

109) to describe the movement of the glacial "flood of ruin," thus recalling the poem's first two lines—"The everlasting universe of things / Rolls through the mind"—in a much darker context. What this suggests, then, is that the potential for violence has been there all along, and must at some level be taken as given. What the wilderness teaches cannot fully be known or anticipated; the mountain's voice may be able to repeal "large codes of fraud and woe," but those codes have little to do with nature itself.

On the other hand, given that "Mont Blanc"'s "*telos* is 'vacancy'" ("Unwriting" 145), as Hitt suggests, then we should be careful not to privilege section four's images over the others in the poem. Ultimately, these lines belong to another set of "voices," another explanatory structure like the ones that had been set out in section three. The point is not to cling to one explanation as being better than all the others, but to hold lightly to all of them, understanding them to retain only a suspended, eccentric, and aberrational relationship to the unconditioned reality towards which they gesture. Vacancy does not so much mitigate the violence as it enables us to include it in our awareness. No one ever said that reconciliation with the incommensurable would be easy.

"Mont Blanc yet gleams on high:--the power is there, / The still and solemn power of many sights, / And many sounds, and much of life and death" (l. 127-29). So begins the poem's final section, which brings us back to silence, voiceless lightning, solitude. We still get a sense of the power, but we are able to glimpse the possibility of a less agonistic response than section four. In these final lines, which lead up to that "vacancy" that Hitt and others have found so important, the poem comes much closer to once again realizing the sublime as an aesthetic judgment in Kantian terms. In the concluding section of the Analytic of the Sublime, Kant goes to great lengths to delimit the boundaries of an aesthetic judgment. To see the "starry sky" or ocean as "sublime" means that

> we must not do so on the basis of how we *think* it, enriched with all sorts of knowledge which we possess (but which is not contained in

> the direct intuition) .... for all such judgments will be teleological. Instead we must be able to view the ocean as the poets do, merely in terms of what manifests itself to the eye—e.g., if we observe it while it is calm, as a clear mirror of water bounded only by the sky; or if it is turbulent, as being an abyss threatening to engulf everything—and yet find it sublime. (130)

We must be able to view the ocean—or the mountain—as the poets do. This is a strange prescription, at a certain level, for so much of "Mont Blanc" is directed at undoing the preconceptions and "knowledge" that had already been transmitted, at least in part, through literary tradition and the conventions of poetic form. One poet's aesthetic judgment is a later writer's conditioned response. Viewing the mountain "as the poets do" must therefore be an active practice or method, not a matter of content. It is the perpetual exercise of the suspension of comparing powers—a suspension so actively maintained that it can see the destructive power of Mont Blanc's glaciers, experience the sense of dislocation and danger of untamed sounds and "chainless winds," and even suffer the failure of the spirit itself—and still judge such a scene sublime.

Though section 5 does not fully recapture the state of sublimity that marked the interchange of the first two stanzas, the poem is perhaps closer than it had been. The questions have not been answered; rather, the poem comes to a point that enables reflection on what we are trying to achieve by asking them in the first place—how would it change us, if we did know? "[T]he mountain's voice," Hitt observes, "must be left indefinite lest it be reified, reintegrated into the imaginative and discursive structures it should exceed" ("Unwriting" 149). The final question: "What were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?" (l. 142-44) remains somewhat cryptic, yet it suggests both the terrors and possibility of coming to terms with that vacancy. Maintaining that space allows the possibility of sublimity to continue, even if it provides no guarantees about this particular natural landscape,

nor offers any certainties for what another subject will experience. All we have is the potential for awareness, the willingness to give ourselves over to suspension and meet our limitations.

To see the sublime in terms of suspension—the suspension of our comparing powers, the suspension of reference, and suspension as a more broadly-available set of practices and forms—enables us to understand uncertainty as not simply a negative form of knowing or a lack of knowledge, but also as a discourse and a posture in its own right. It can help us not only to think differently about the sublime in Romantic writing, particularly the way that the romantic sublime is almost exclusively identified with the natural world, but also to trace an alternative trajectory for the sublime in later nineteenth-century writing. For, although Mont Blanc—the mountain and, to some extent, even the images in Shelley's poem—becomes a signifier of disappointment and decline—it does not, as the next three chapters will demonstrate, represent the end of the opportunity to become aware of the constitutive limits of one's own knowledge and perception.

Chapter 3
"I thought the dead had peace, but it is not so": Premature Burial and the Crisis of Signification in *Maud*

> We know that there are diseases in which occur total cessations of all the apparent functions of vitality, and yet in which these cessations are merely suspensions properly so called. They are only temporary pauses in the incomprehensible mechanism. A certain period elapses, and some unseen mysterious principle again sets in motion the magic pinions and the wizard wheels. But meanwhile, where was the soul?[1]

> It is within the experience of many medical practitioners, that a patient, with strange and unusual symptoms of disease, has been more distressed in mind, more wretched, from the fact of being unintelligible to himself and others, than from the pain or danger of the disease ....[2]

The Shallow Grave of Signification

The most compelling question in Tennyson's *Maud* (1855) is not, as has frequently been suggested, "What is it, that has been done?" (2.7)[3] but rather, "Who knows if he be dead?" (2.121). Both of these inquiries, in their immediate contexts, relate to the speaker's uncertainty about the fate of Maud's brother after their duel, but each also represents a more general method of reading the poem. Most readers have approached *Maud* with the first question in mind, attempting either to reconstruct the events that take place in this notoriously fragmented narrative or to analyze these absences and gaps themselves.[4] Such efforts to answer the question "What is it, that has

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[1] Poe 666-67.
[2] Coleridge, *BL* 2.234.
[3] Tennyson's poems are quoted from Christopher Ricks' selected edition.
[4] This approach has been especially common among those who take a psychological view of the poem. Jonathan Wordsworth's 1974 essay identifies "What is it, that has been done?" as the "central question" of *Maud*. In a brief but importantly suggestive piece, Wordsworth applies that question not only to the problems of narrative reconstruction that continue to vex critics, but in a certain sense to Tennyson's composition of the poem, specifically in regards to the interplay of conscious intention and unconscious slippage into images that, for post-Freudian readers are unquestionably sexual: "The narrative has little coherence, and there are many signs that the poetry depends not on Tennyson's conscious intention, but on forces within him that he was not

been done?"—whether on a psychological or historical level—have often supported the more general tendency in *Maud* scholarship to privilege the "O that 'twere possible" lyric as the biographical, compositional, and thematic "germ" of *Maud.*[5] By contrast, "Who knows if he be dead?" directs our attention on the function of *Maud*'s so-called "madhouse canto," which appears just after the more famous lyric. Here, the speaker infamously and almost enthusiastically surrenders to the insanity that has haunted him throughout the poem. He raves under the delusion that he has been buried in a makeshift tomb that nonetheless retains many of the features of the living world.

This chapter will take the question "Who knows if he be dead?" as a starting point for examining what E. Warwick Slinn calls the "brilliance of Tennyson's dialectical and figurative ambiguity which shifts dramatic action away from external event towards signifying process" (*Discourse of Self* 76). Poetic language, as Slinn understands it, "foregrounds its own linguistic action" and, moreover, "against the tendency of narration to imply a pre-existing social landscape that is being described (language as constative), the intensively figurative quality of most poetic language draws attention to the opacity and constitutive action of the description itself (language as performative)" ("Poetic Acts" 68). Understood as a narrative utterance, "Who knows if he be dead?" creates suspense about the status of the brother's body and perhaps seeks an individual who could restore communication between the speaker and Maud's family, someone who could provide him with the information he seeks. When this same question is understood as part of the

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at all likely to understand or condone ….The workings of the unconscious have as usual extended and enhanced the product of the conscious mind, but they have done so in a way that the writer would presumably have wished to prevent" (361). A more recent example of the narrative reconstructionist method, and one that is not as dependent on psychological criticism, is Seamus Perry's description of *Maud* as "a sequence of dramatic lyrics, all uttered by the same speaker, diversely set in moments when action is imminent or its aftermath evident—a poetry of inflections and innuendos, then, on the edge of events or just after. We can more or less deduce a story, but the narrator does not reflect much upon incidents to produce a narrative for us; and the pivotal event of the story is left obscure: 'What is it, that has been done?' " (118).

[5] Cf. Shatto 1, 2-5.

poem's signifying process, however, it draws attention to the impossibility of establishing whether the brother is dead—and suggests that this impossibility may also extend to other bodies. Invoking the act of knowing, the question also implicitly invites a critique of *Maud*'s epistemological structures. For we should not forget that the "madhouse canto" is also the location of the speaker's quasi-apocalyptic declaration that "everything came to be known" (2.289). The gaps, hesitations, and narrative lacunae in *Maud* suspend questions of referentiality, focusing instead on the performative power of poetic language.

Given the poem's preoccupation with death and madness, it is easy to dismiss the speaker's conflation of the asylum with a "shallow grave" as an obvious trope that demonstrates the extent of his insanity. Most of Tennyson's readers have done something of the sort, if they have noticed this section at all. As the well-known story goes, Tennyson composed *Maud*'s "mad scene" in about twenty minutes early in 1855, making it one of the last sections of the poem to be written (Shatto 208-9). He inserted it just after the "O that 'twere possible" lyric and just before the poem's perpetually controversial conclusion, ostensibly to "make the transition between the two less abrupt" (Rader 142n4). But the madhouse canto disrupts the progression from lyric melancholy already bordering on madness to the celebration of the glories of war as much as it seemingly links the two. Herbert Tucker, recalling Aubrey de Vere's comment about *Maud*'s having been "written, as it were, *backwards,*" (*Memoir* 1.379), has observed that "*Maud*…is a poem not only written backward, but inevitably read backward as well, from moment to moment, despite this forward thrust of plot" (*Tennyson* 413). However, in the "madhouse canto," that backwards reading reappears as a manifestation of obsession and insanity. Narrative is suspended rather than advanced. When the speaker revisits the circumstances that occasioned his present crisis, the emphasis is not on events ("What is it, that has been done?) but on betrayal: "Who told *him* we were there?" (2.290).

The madhouse canto mixes the speaker's inconclusive personal reflections with jeremiads against the greed, hypocrisy, and general decline of his era that recall the preoccupations he voiced in *Maud*'s opening stanzas. In fact, nearly all of the canto's images and language, from the epithets he applies to Maud's father ("grey old wolf") and brother ("Sultan") to the speaker's attacks on national perfidy and the financial motives of Quaker pacifists, appear elsewhere in *Maud*. But repetition does not amount to stabilization. The speaker remains powerless in his attempts to make meaning out of his plight; though he occasionally achieves an emotional poignancy as he recalls Maud's garden, he does not appear to gain any new insights. At this late stage, he no longer possesses even the modicum of self-awareness that earlier had enabled him to wonder whether he was "raging alone, as [his] father raged in his mood" (1.53). Now, however, he simply rages as this mood takes him, no longer bothering to struggle against it. For a poem that draws so much of its "peculiar force" from the "representation of near madness" (Day 156), this section where madness is fully and unambiguously realized risks failing to compel readers' interest in the speaker's plight. Part 3, for example, has generated a passionate debate about the status of the speaker's language and the legitimacy of his ostensible return to a kind of sanity; the madhouse canto offers no comparable ambiguity.[6]

For Tennyson's readers, at least, are never meant to think that the speaker is dead, nor that he has been (literally) buried alive. Thus, Slinn seems to state the obvious—and establishes a critical commonplace—when he writes that "according to the rules of normal existence, where dead men do not speak, this claim to literal burial must of course be figurative, shedding doubt on the speaker's sanity" (*Discourse of Self* 82). Certainly, the speaker is mad. Clearly, the burial is

[6] Part 3, where the speaker asserts his sanity and enlists to fight in the Crimean War, has provoked Tennyson's readers since the poem was published, and Tucker suggests that "The poet's insatiable demand for social ratification of this work suggests that he, like the rest of us, found it impossible to endorse *Maud* wholeheartedly" (*Tennyson* 406). Robert Lougy connects *Maud*'s conclusion to its speaker's madness, writing that Part 3 "reveals nothing less than a voice that believes itself to be the voice of God speaking to Himself" (426).

figurative. But these two conditions are not necessarily as intimately connected as we tend to assume. To believe oneself buried alive (whether that belief is based in a delusion or an objective reality) is more often than not to believe oneself the victim of a massive failure of social signification through malice, neglect, bad luck, or a combination of all these. Throughout the nineteenth century both scientific writing and speculative fiction imagined bodies resistant to all systems of signification, that is, bodies that present evidence of death to even the most rigorous investigators while yet harboring a living, thinking, and often terrified subject. Whether presented as case studies in medical treatises or as somewhat more sensational Gothic fantasies, stories of suspended animation, apparent death, and premature burial have the effect of engendering considerable skepticism about the trustworthiness of other people, even as they also reinforce a sense of absolute dependence on them.

Tennyson's use of live burial as the organizing metaphor for his "most faithful representation of madness since Shakespeare" (*Memoir* 1.398) reflects a preoccupation with what might be broadly termed insignificance: not only the lack of societal importance the speaker complains of across the poem, but also a textual condition in which one's very survival depends on other people's reading practices which are themselves always open to dispute. Indeed, the status of the insignificant or non-signifying individual within a social context remains undecidable even—or especially—when, as in *Maud,* the burial is figurative rather than literal. "Who knows if he be dead?" is best understood as a rhetorical question in Paul de Man's sense of the term. This category of utterance, de Man writes, "engenders two meanings that are mutually exclusive: the literal meaning asks for the concept (difference) whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning" (*Allegories* 9). Although we usually privilege the figural meaning over the literal (that is, we understand that the speaker is not literally searching for a person who could report on the status of Maud's brother but is commenting on the impossibility of establishing that

status), de Man invites us to consider the possibility that the literal meaning might also be equally urgent—and, moreover, applicable to the speaker himself. The conjunction of meanings that are mutually exclusive and mutually dependent creates what de Man calls a referential aberration, an undecidable suspension of reference between literal and figural. The two meanings thus no longer "exist side by side" but "engage each other in direct confrontation, for the one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and has to be undone by it. Nor can we in any way make a valid decision as to which of the readings can be given priority over the other; none can exist in the other's absence" (*Allegories* 12). Tennyson situates these issues within the social world, unsettled and sometimes marginal as that world occasionally appears in the poem. The mode of the rhetorical question and the referential aberration it opens in the text help us recover the literal connotations and consequences of the *Maud* speaker's figural burial.

"They cannot even bury a man"

While today it is associated almost exclusively with Gothic fiction, premature burial was to the nineteenth century a possible (if not entirely likely) consequence of medical error. A body in suspended animation (a term that covered a number of conditions which induced paralysis or insensibility), gives every appearance of being dead; even the most rigorously observant physician could be led into a misdiagnosis resulting in a premature burial. All of this is, of course, to say nothing of the unthinkability of death itself, particularly in the context of Christian doctrines about the immortality of the soul. So, even if we accept that the "burial" experienced by the *Maud* speaker is the disturbed reality of a deranged mind, the image reflects the concerns of a nineteenth-century cultural and scientific discourse about suspension—specifically, suspended animation and its risks—that is missed when we focus too much on Tennyson's sheerly psychological skill in rendering madness. At a time when widespread uncertainty about the signs

of death helped cultivate a population that was, in general, "deeply ambivalent about the ambitions of medical science" (Behlmer 207), the *Maud* speaker's understanding of the madhouse as a grave and his confinement as an unpeaceful death manifests a more general skepticism about signification and knowledge.

Many of these concerns are already at work in one of Tennyson's most famous early poems, "The Two Voices" (1842), which dramatizes the struggle of a melancholic speaker against his own suicidal thoughts, personified as a "still small voice" (l. 1). Implicitly invoking a religious discourse that casts the grave as a site of peaceful sleep, the "voice" promises that death will bring a cessation of the speaker's emotional pain. Responding to the speaker's fear that his "anguish" may become "fixed and frozen to permanence" (l. 235, 237), the voice conjures the image of a peacefully indifferent corpse:

> His palms are folded on his breast:
> There is no other thing expressed
> But long disquiet merged in rest.
> His lips are very mild and meek:
> Though one should smite him on the cheek,
> And on the mouth, he will not speak. (l. 247-52)

Freed from the burdens of earthly consciousness, the dead man envisioned here sinks insensibly into oblivion—even if such a state is characterized by an uncanny mirroring of Christian equanimity. Yet the poem's speaker does not find this image of death's "outward signs" (l. 270) to be decisive, replying that "These things are rapt in doubt and dread, / Nor canst thou show the dead are dead" (l. 266-67). The implications of this rejoinder are most obviously theological. If we believe, as Tennyson did, in the immortality of the soul, then the mere cessation of physical life does not guarantee a liberation from anything other than that physical life. And, in the following stanzas, the speaker does argue, in language that anticipates many of the more hopeful passages of *In Memoriam*, for the existence of this immortal soul that responds to the "Heavenly friend" (l. 295). However, in the context of nineteenth-century medical debate over the signs of death, the

debate over the status of the corpse also discloses a more immediate material difficulty: the appearance of death may be only an appearance, and death itself may be something different than what we imagine it to be. The skepticism of the utterance, "Nor canst thou show the dead are dead," exposes a rupture at the center of our concept of death itself, an essential suspension that cannot be fully resolved. The Victorians, as we will see later in this chapter, were particularly adept at imagining forms of death that did not involve the end of consciousness and feeling.

Suspended animation becomes even more directly embodied in the figure of the Prince in Tennyson's *The Princess* (1847), who, as the result of a family curse, suffers from a susceptibility to "weird seizures" (1.14) that leave him unable to distinguish "the shadow from the substance" (1.9).[7] A court physician diagnoses the Prince's malady as "catalepsy" (1.20), yet, as James Sait points out, this term only inexactly captures his condition (206). While cataleptic attacks are usually marked by paralysis, the Prince generally retains his motion during his episodes so that: "while I walked and talked as heretofore, / I seemed to move among a world of ghosts" (1.16-17). It is easy enough to understand the Prince's condition as reflecting, at least in part, a weak moral or mental constitution and a kind of morbid sensitivity that was sometimes attributed to Tennyson himself. Sait further proposes that the diagnosis produces "a double-edged irony: for the physician's inability to understand matches the ambiguity of his diagnosis" (206). The irony that Sait identifies is taken further during the poem's battle scene. Here, the Prince *does* seem to manifest typical symptoms of catalepsy, as he is left "stark / Dishelmed and mute, and motionlessly pale" (6.84-85). He gives physical form to the mythical "Death in Life, the days that are no more" (4.40) apostrophized in the final line of "Tears, Idle Tears" (one of the "songs" from *The Princess*). Indeed, to his father's eyes, the Prince appears to be dead. Only Princess Ida is able to discern that the Prince still lives, though in a kind of deep trance of coma, "silent in the muffled cage of life"

[7] The passages establishing the Prince's cataleptic condition were mostly added for the fourth edition of the poem in 1851.

(7.32). The Prince's paralysis thus places him at the mercy of other people's ability to intuit the presence of life without any external the signs thereof. The irony is particularly acute because, as I suggest above, this is the moment at which his condition best fits his diagnosis.

Even though the Prince remains unconscious for most of his trance, the interval between his return to awareness and his regaining powers of motion is enough to allow his thoughts to turn to live burial as a potential consequence of thwarted signification:

> I could no more, but lay like one in trance,
> That hears his burial talked of by his friends,
> And cannot speak, nor move, nor make one sign.
> But lies and dreads his doom. (7.136-39)

True, the Prince speaks figuratively; these reflections take place just after his first attempt to speak to Princess Ida and he does not know whether his words of love have been heard.[8] Yet, it is a fragile figuration, given that he *has* been lying in a trance that very nearly could have ended with the "doom" he envisions in the final line but for Ida's timely intervention on the battlefield. Indeed, the language of burial approaches referential aberration, in part because of the text's multiple levels of narration. It is never completely clear whether the image of "one in trance" describes a thought that the Prince had at the moment he emerged from his coma (where he could not have known that he had already been saved from one premature burial) or a gloss added later, as he reconstructs the story from the recollections of others. Doubtlessly, the image heightens the suspense, making the reception of his utterance of love a matter of life and death. At the same time, however, the language of trance and premature burial is perhaps oddly appropriate to capture the Prince's situation as he struggles to "come to" (as we say of people who

[8] Robert Browning also makes use of this figure in "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," where the speaker compares himself to "a sick man very near to death" (l. 25) who overhears his friends discussing his funeral. In this context, the confusion is bitterly ironic: "the man hears all, and only craves / He may not shame such tender love and stay" (l. 35-6).

emerge from unconsciousness) after a prolonged period in which the functions of life had been suspended.

The "doom" that Tennyson's Prince imagines takes on a physical reality in George Henry Lewes's unsigned narrative "Death-in-Life," which appeared in the July 1847 issue of *Fraser's* magazine. Staged as a discussion among a group of educated men at a dinner party, this fictional tale surveys contemporary medical and anecdotal information about bodily states that confound attempts by members of the medical profession to reliably diagnose death. The discussants explore at length the implications of an episode of apparent death that one of them experienced as a young man. Recalling the "concomitance of keen sensibility, with a complete absence of all outward indications thereof" (110), this Captain Hurst describes how his deathlike paralysis, brought on by no discernable cause, left him able to hear everything around him and feel everything that was done to his body without being able to make any sign to show that he was still alive. He recalls in detail how the psychologically-harrowing two days he spends as a sentient corpse force him to reconsider everything he had previously believed to be true about his own body:

> I began to ask myself, "Is this death? Am I really alive? Do the dead hear and feel?"
>
> I then thought of the imperishable nature of my soul. It, of course, preserves itself through all bodily decay. Is it imprisoned in the body as long as the body holds together? and shall I be liberated only on the utter falling away of these fleshly walls that encompass me? Am I to be buried, sensible of all that is going on around me? (109)

After two days of hearing people describe him as dead, without being able to make a sign that would prove otherwise, Hurst comes to consider the possibility that he has simply been wrong about death as the cessation of consciousness. This is essentially the possibility that the speaker of "The Two Voices" raises as an objection to the more peaceful images of death that seem to invite self-annihilation. We might be inclined to dismiss this section of "Death-In-Life" as a Gothic

monologue, but Hurst's tale is presented as an appropriate subject of scientific discussion, a kind of first-person case study. The description of him as a military man only increases his credibility. We know all along that Hurst, like the *Maud* speaker, is not actually dead, but we are never expected to think that he is mad. Hurst's reflections are treated matter-of-factly, as though they represent the thoughts of any educated person in a similar situation. Even though this combination of paralysis, consciousness, and sensibility seems medically unlikely,[9] it is interpretable within the bounds of a Victorian medical imagination that drew upon "an opulent if unstable vocabulary to designate bodily conditions that hovered between the fully animate and the irrecoverably dead. Trance, coma, syncope, catalepsy, insensibility, suspended animation, human hibernation, and anesthesia were only the most common labels for what appeared to be corporal frontiers" (Behlmer 208). Yet, even with all of these terms, "Death-in-Life" demonstrates just how easily bodies like Hurst's could elude definition—with potentially terrifying consequences.

The preoccupation with unreadable bodies and the risks to which they are thus exposed is also a central concern of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Premature Burial" (1844), a widely-acknowledged source for *Maud*'s graveyard imagery (Shatto 208-9). Although Gerhard Joseph, in his definitive study of the two authors, dismisses the *Maud* speaker's delusion of live interment as a rare lapse wherein "states [of immobility] in Tennyson's work achieve some of the more luridly gothic effects of Poe" (36), "The Premature Burial" is relatively restrained, situating its subject within the realm of everyday possibility. Jan Bondeson comments that "Compared with the flights of fancy enjoyed by some of the serious medical writers on the perils of premature burial, Poe was a mere dismal realist; compared with the *grand guignol* visions of horror they conjured up, his images

[9] Unlikely, but not entirely implausible, as suggested by research on anesthesia awareness. Patients who suffer from this condition, which can only be diagnosed after the fact, recall having experienced consciousness and sensations of pain when they have supposedly been put under general anesthesia for major surgery (Avidan et al. 1097-98).

were those of a squeamish maiden aunt" (11). Appealing to "the direct testimony of medical and ordinary experience" (667), Poe's narrator describes a number of live burials, complete with names and specific details, before introducing his own "positive and personal experience" (672) with his topic. Like Tennyson's Prince, Poe's narrator suffers from catalepsy, which may manifest itself as "hemi-syncope, or half swoon" that produces "a dull lethargic consciousness of life and of the presence of those who surrounded my bed" (672). Ironically, the narrator's increasing fear of being buried alive during these attacks of deathlike paralysis only increases his vulnerability to catalepsy and, thus, the threat of being buried alive.

No doubt, Poe's aggregation of plausible-sounding reports, case studies that cited (albeit fictional) medical journals, and the narrator's first-person account of catalepsy and paranoia induced by the reading of these reports, gave his more credulous readers material for terrified meditation. But Poe hardly invented the underlying fears. Indeed, the historian George Behlmer has observed that Poe's story "would not have resonated so powerfully with its transatlantic readership had medicine been of one mind about human vitality" (215). The subtle terror of "The Premature Burial," in contrast to Poe's better-known tales of live interment, "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," comes from its depictions of live burial as a result of honest and possibly inevitable cognitive mistakes in reading unreadable bodies. Medical mistakes can happen even when all the procedures have been followed. The narrator's fear of being buried alive originates in his body's tendency to assume an outward form that might lead others to assume (not illogically, hastily, or maliciously) that he has died. The emphasis on the mystery and absolute illegibility of bodily signs in "The Premature Burial" tends to leave the impression that all "cessations are merely suspensions" (667) and that all burials are potentially premature, no matter how long one waits to carry them out.

The affinity between "The Premature Burial" and *Maud*'s mad scene extends beyond the theme of immobility. Both texts also express shared uncertainties about signification, and, more specifically, about signification in a social context, wherein the subject becomes absolutely dependent on other people. The aberrational image of live burial is indeed a fitting culmination for *Maud*, a poem that, in Matthew Rowlinson's reading, demonstrates "a pervasive thematic concern with utterances that fail and suffer foreclosure" (156). The narrator of "The Premature Burial" becomes so fearful of his condition being misread that he sharply circumscribes his social movements, and then, in an impressive feat of circular reasoning and panic, begins to distrust even his closest companions:

> I no longer dared trust myself out of the immediate presence of those who were aware of my proneness to catalepsy, lest, falling into one of my usual fits, I should be buried before my real condition could be ascertained. I doubted the care, the fidelity of my dearest friends. I dreaded that, in some trance of more than customary duration, they might be prevailed upon to regard me as irrecoverable. I even went so far as to fear that, as I occasioned much trouble, they might be glad to consider any very protracted attack as sufficient excuse for getting rid of me altogether. (673)

The breakdowns in bodily communication in Poe's rendering are not so different from the collapse of social communication that is realized across *Maud*; in both cases, the individual who fails to be one thing or another—or who presents outward signs that contradict some inward truth—comes under life-threatening pressure. Moreover, both speaker adopt obsessively paranoid epistemological positions as a response to their breakdown, further alienating themselves from the social world without solving the problem of their dependence on it.

"To hear a dead man chatter"

At the end of "O that 'twere possible," the speaker expresses a desire to retreat into a "still cavern deep" where he will be able "to weep, and weep, and weep / My whole soul out to thee" (2.236,

237-38). This tenuous lyric hope is abruptly shattered by the disembodied opening of the madhouse canto: "Dead, long dead, / Long dead!" (2.239-40). The transformation of that "still cavern deep" into the unpeaceful tomb that lies "Only a yard beneath the street" (2.245) disrupts lyric topography and implies, by extension, that the speaker's "soul" may be as shallow as he finds his grave. From this vulnerable position, the speaker experiences the "stream of passing feet" (2.249) above him as a torturous intrusion on his broken body. The constant presence of urban noise functions as a reminder of the speaker's personal insignificance: he is not even important enough to merit a decent burial.[10] To a certain extent, the speaker's hysterical rendering of his situation (that is, of what he understands to be his situation) supports Eve Sedgwick's observation that live entombment, as a Gothic trope, "derives much of its horror not from the buried person's loss of outside activities (that would be the horror of dead burial) but from the continuation of a parallel activity which is suddenly redundant" (*Coherence of Gothic Conventions* 20). It is partially this Gothic horror of redundancy, surplus consciousness, which seizes *Maud*'s speaker, disclosing a more general sense that his presence in the world was also redundant and insignificant.

The consequences of the foreclosure of utterance are more relentlessly embodied in the madhouse canto than anywhere else in the poem. The starkly repetitive report, "the hoofs of the horses beat, beat, / The hoofs of the horses beat, / Beat into my scalp and my brain" (2.246-48), is the only section of the poem where the speaker meaningfully experiences the outside world in the present tense. And it is also what Eric Griffiths has called a "humiliating parody" of the hopes that the speaker expressed at the end of Part 1 when he "thinks he is coming at last into possession of the social world which is his due; he is going to get his girl" (137):

> She is coming, my own, my sweet;

[10] The stanza also marks an ironic reversal of Tennyson's "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington" (reprinted in *Maud and Other Poems* in 1855). That 1852 poem had rewarded the war hero and statesman by interring him "in streaming London's roar" where "the feet of those he fought for / Echo round his bones for evermore" (l. 9, 11-12).

Were it ever so airy a tread,
My heart would hear it and beat,
Were it earth in an earthy bed;
My dust would hear her and beat,
Had I lain for a century dead;
Would start and tremble under her feet,
And blossom in purple and red. (1.916-23)

This extravagant promise of erotic reawakening figures prominently in critical readings of *Maud*, many of which express less sympathy with the speaker than Griffiths' work does. While this passage is sometimes praised for its beauty as a love lyric, it is just as frequently cited as an example of the delusional, self-regarding language that the speaker (and, by implication, Tennyson) must overcome. Samuel Schulman, for instance, sees in these lines nothing less than "the death of inspiration, and the closing off of utterance," where "the speaker imagines himself embraced by a muse-figure but in a death-grip, strangling not strengthening his poetry" (644). In short, it is a moment of linguistic madness that effectively foreshadows the collapse that will be complete by the end of Part 2.

The figural play of the madhouse canto also allows Tennyson to explore the tensions and suspensions of reference that underlie Victorian cultural attitudes towards death. For the speaker's horror at finding himself still conscious in a shallow grave quickly gives way to a sense of disappointment:

I thought the dead had peace, but it is not so;
To have no peace in the grave, is that not sad?
But up and down and to and fro,
Ever about me the dead men go;
And then to hear a dead man chatter
Is enough to drive one mad. (2.253-58)

Though he has aspired throughout the poem to a "passionless peace" "Far-off from the clamour of liars belied in the hubbub of lies" (1.151, 152), the speaker's delusional self-burial, when it takes place, leaves him *more* vulnerable to the incursions of the outside world than ever before. His ability to respond is all that he has managed to foreclose; the "Clamour and rumble, and ringing

and clatter" (2.251) persist. The speaker's disillusion stems from the sense that he has been let down not just by his personal delusion but has been betrayed by an entire Victorian cultural and theological discourse, in which we might well include Tennyson's own *In Memoriam*, that constructs the grave as a site of rest, security, and peaceful sleep. Even the New Testament uses sleep as a figure for death in order to generate hope for the resurrection of the body and eternal soul. Popular nineteenth-century usage employed euphemisms related to rest and sleep in order to reflect consolatory beliefs about death as the end of all earthly sufferings.[11] Much of this language remains current in the twenty-first century, where we continue speak of the dead as being "at peace" and of the grave as a "final resting place."

Indeed, when the speaker voices his desire near the beginning of the poem to "bury myself in myself" (1.76) and to thereby refuse to participate in an uncertain social world, his language is hardly unusual—if it is a delusion, it is not a particularly unique one. Slinn quite rightly comments that the madhouse canto "climaxes the theme of self-burial, apparently making literal the incarceration of the self within the hollow of withdrawal and absence" (*Discourse of Self* 81). But that culmination, through which the figurative burial becomes literal, is literal only from the point of view of the speaker's delusional state. The speaker's burial is thus incomplete on at least two levels: in his mind, he has been shunted into a shallow grave that affords no peace, while at the same time the burial has not literally taken place at all. We may also helpfully recall J. Hillis Miller's description of the functioning of an allegorical sign from his discussion of "Tears, Idle Tears." Drawing on de Man's "Rhetoric of Temporality," Miller writes that "An allegorical sign is characterized by its failure to put the one who contemplates it in present possession of what it stands for, not by its cognitive efficacy. It has performative force, not a constative function" ("Temporal Topographies" 285). What remains constant here is a structure of referential

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[11] See Wheeler 25-68 for an extended discussion of the figural language of death in the Victorian era.

aberration, producing an unstable, hybrid discourse, where literal and figural meanings remain undecidable, and where figural meaning, however delusional, must be treated, at some level, as lived experience.

One of the most important sites of referential aberration—and one that foreshadows the speaker's disappointment with his "grave so rough"—is Maud's home at the Hall, which becomes the object of the speaker's self-consciously inappropriate reaction:

> I look'd, and round, all round the house I beheld
> The death-white curtain drawn;
> Felt a horror over me creep,
> Prickle my skin and catch my breath,
> Knew that the death-white curtain meant but sleep,
> Yet I shudder'd and thought like a fool of the sleep of death. (1.521-26)

As if to demonstrate that he still holds, albeit tenuously, to his sanity, the speaker is able to use what he "knew" to check his initial physical reaction, even criticizing it as the mark of a "fool." He will not, of course, be able to regain his presence of mind so easily by the end of Part 2. As Slinn writes, "The way this perception of alienation and death emerges through a network of associations—mist as curtain, curtain as enclosure, enclosure as exclusion, whiteness as death, death as sleep, curtain as shroud—points to its basis within discourse. In effect, the narrator becomes a victim of his own discourse, unwittingly deconstructed, simultaneously woven and unwoven, by its metonymic and metaphoric possibilities" (*Discourse of Self* 79). The speaker's problem is not that he must decide between the false and the true, but rather that he is caught between two compelling sources of information: his internal bodily experience and the objective reality behind the curtains at the Hall. The conflict between these two levels of meaning is not reducible to madness, and the speaker remains excluded from the origin of determinable meaning, here envisioned as the inside of the Hall. The delusion or error, that shuddering horror, remains in some ways more "true" to the speaker, as an actual bodily experience that does not

need objective correlation. Rather than the triumph of the reasonable explanation over the unreasonable or excessive response, the *Maud* speaker's reaction to the "death-white curtain" demonstrates the effects of referential aberration.

The narrator's misery and eventual madness comes from his inability to negotiate those associations and to choose the appropriate interpretation of the curtain. As Slinn implies, the narrator is never fully in control of his own discourse, and is produced by it as much as he is responsible for producing it. Yet, because it fails to break the associative link between sleep and death, the *Maud* speaker's divided response is linguistically and culturally determined. Indeed, according to Michael Wheeler, the undecidability of sleep and death is arguably the most significant instance of linguistic uncertainty in Victorian eschatology (28). In a rigorous theological sense, of course, sleep and death maintain an analogical relationship through which the otherwise ineffable spiritual truth of the resurrection can be expressed. However, as Wheeler's analysis of representative Victorian writings on death demonstrates, this discourse was characterized by the crossing of rhetorical and material boundaries, so that "although [figurative language] may suit a particular context or spiritual need, other extraneous and purely physical associations can be evoked. This is a particularly frequent occurrence in writing on death and burial, where the other-worldly perspective of a bereaved person is all too likely to be interrupted by the physical reality of this world" (57-58).

Kirstie Blair's analysis of heart images in Victorian poetry provides a useful counterpoint to Wheeler, treating "the physical reality of this world" not as an interruption of figurative discourse, but rather as an important partner in producing poetic language. Commenting on the *Maud* speaker's language at the end of Part 1, Blair notes that, strange as it might seem as an expression of affection, it nonetheless reflects "the common cultural perception that his heart might be a separate and indistinguishable entity, with a beat that will never let him rest" (219).

Blair's study recasts the relationship between literal and figural meaning as a negotiation that is partially determined by the intersection of the physical and metaphorical within nineteenth-century cultural discourses. The speakers of Tennyson's two major poems of the 1850s are, she argues, "struggling to come to terms with their lack of poetic command, their inability to separate the metaphorical from the literal, and their helpless consciousness of underlying heartsickness" (185). Since we are, presumably, never intended to believe that the speaker has been buried alive rather than confined in a madhouse,[12] we might see the movement as happening among several different levels of experience that are never entirely determinable as either figural or literal—the referential aberration. Behlmer also notes a kind of referential drift in the deployment of live burial as "a metaphor for cruel confinement" in popular discourse: "innocent girls immured in nunneries … the financially feckless entombed in debt … pottery workers slowly suffocating in clay dust; and of course … coal miners and grave diggers who, on occasion, were literally buried alive. Where the trope ended and true vivisepulture began could be nearly as hard to distinguish as the body's vital signs" (208-9). Both Blair and Behlmer's work demonstrates how an attentive reading of the cultural and material significance of burial can better illuminate how the collapse of different levels of signification, experience, and knowledge becomes Tennyson's way of aligning his speaker's plight with those insignificant and non-signifying bodies that are most liable to seem

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[12] Tennyson was of course neither the first nor the last British author to associate confinement in a mental institution with live burial. Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1859) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) are two prominent later examples of the figuration. (Chapter 15 of Braddon's novel is even titled "Buried Alive!" to draw attention to the title character's understanding of her exile to a Belgian asylum after her crimes are discovered.) The "buried alive" metaphor was generally deployed to convey the implication of wrongful confinement such as the machinations surrounding Count Fosco's theft of Laura Fairlie's identity in Collins' novel. In addition to the difficulty of defining and diagnosing madness in general, the expansion of the asylum system in the mid-nineteenth century generated further public uncertainty about who should be institutionalized—and who should have the authority to make these determinations. See McCandless on the rhetoric of the Victorian wrongful confinement panics and Behlmer 222-28.

dead and be buried accordingly, not the random projection of a disordered mind operating in isolation from social and cultural influences.

"Who knows if he be dead?"

The social and cultural influences which have come to press on the mind of the *Maud* speaker are not limited to theological discourse. They also come from contemporary debates about the signs of death that drew upon both traditional funeral practices as well as scientific advances in techniques of resuscitation. A closer look at some of these discourses, in which the boundaries between science and legend were not always rigorously maintained, further situates the *Maud* speaker's dilemma within a cultural milieu and demonstrates how signification and epistemological rigor come to be a matter of ethical urgency. Traditional funeral practices, according to Ruth Richardson's classic study, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*, responded to both the physical realities of putrefaction and spiritual beliefs about the existence of the soul. In Richardson's view, practices such as providing food and drink for the dead (just in case they woke up) indicate "a widely held conviction that the human corpse possessed both sentience and some sort of spiritual power" (15). Richardson speculates that this "conviction" may stem from the physical difficulty of defining death (15). Seemingly settled questions about the definition of death were reopened in the mid-eighteenth century when advances in resuscitation made it possible to revive victims of drowning and asphyxiation. Redefining death as "a sometimes treatable, not always irreversible medical condition" (Bondeson 86), these discoveries encouraged new confidence in lifesaving practices, but also gave rise to questions about the process through which a body could be declared dead.

One of the most important texts on the signs of death was Jean-Jacques Bruhier's *Dissertation sur l'incertitude des signes de la mort.* First published in the 1740s, Bruhier's

sensationalized and much-expanded translation of a more rigorous work of anatomy asserts that putrefaction is the only reliable sign of death and recommends sometimes cumbersome reforms of burial practices throughout Europe.[13] To make its case, Bruhier's first edition detailed no less than 181 examples of apparent death. Yet in spite of the dubious authenticity of many of his examples and the sensationalism of the text as a whole—or, perhaps, because of it—Bruhier's work enjoyed a long period of prominence. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the cessation of breathing had been definitively rejected as a definite sign of death, but, save for putrefaction of the limbs, no other infallible criterion had emerged. The ideal mark of death must not only be absolute and unequivocal—and, preferably, free of the logistical and hygienic inconveniences associated with allowing a body to begin to rot—it must also respond to reliable tests that could be administered and interpreted by anyone, regardless of his level of medical expertise. To institutionalize a test that was too complicated or not sufficiently specific would, obviously, do harm than good by officially classifying certain living bodies as dead (Bondeson 138).

Anecdotes about live inhumation, many of which have their roots in folklore and local legend, are frequently and laughably formulaic, which is why Poe is able to so effectively parody them in "The Premature Burial." Yet, as Poe's story also demonstrates, these kinds of stories retain an undeniable resonance, a core of psychological truth and terror even when they are extravagantly rendered. This resonance can be mobilized to disclose the ethical dimension of social signification and medical practice. Charles Clay, writing in the *Medical Times* in 1845, prefaces his discussion of apparent death with an acknowledgement of the uneven quality of his evidence:

> It is true, many circumstances have been related of so marvellous a nature, as to lead to a doubt of their authenticity, but there are

[13] See Bondeson 57-71 for a more detailed history of Bruhier's work and its contents.

> many others so well attested, that we cannot deny their general accuracy, particularly when connected with circumstances that have occurred in the experience of almost every person of mature age, and acute observation: sufficient will be established to prove the importance to futurity, as well as the best means of avoiding the errors and prejudices of former times, and to place this important subject on a surer basis than it has hitherto been. (270)

Even if the particular circumstances around each anecdote of premature burial cannot be historically verified, they nonetheless disclose more important principles of humanitarian urgency and experience common to "almost every person of mature age, and acute observation." There is, no doubt, a certain irony (not often remarked upon in these kinds of texts) in the act of suspending questions of verifiability as they apply to stories that demonstrate the necessity of verification, but it is an irony that pervades the scientific literature on the signs of death and stories like "The Premature Burial" and "Death-In-Life"; Clay refers his readers to Bruhier and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* for further information.

The debates over the signs of death encouraged a not-entirely-unfounded skepticism among the general public about the ability of professionals to make a reliable diagnosis of death, a skepticism already reflected in the medical mistakes aggregated in Poe's "Premature Burial." Nineteenth-century speculative fictions combined scientific discussion and Gothic fantasy, imagining death as an indefinite, hybrid state with potentially terrifying implications for those who find themselves inhabiting this indeterminate state. Referential aberration takes on a troubling physical aspect in these bodies that resist all systems of signification by presenting evidence of death to even the most rigorous investigators while nonetheless harboring a living, thinking, and often terrified subject. Avoiding error in all such cases is almost impossible. The attempt to rigorously ascertain someone's physical state may be, as it is for Captain Hurst, a kind of "moral and physical torture": "The surgeons thought it was necessary to stimulate my nerves and restore them to their sensibility, *but their sensibility was frightfully acute*! and the pain I

suffered in the attempts to restore my sensation of pain was indescribable" ([Lewes] 109). If Bondeson's research into Continental techniques of resuscitation is any guide, we can imagine that over the two days of Hurst's paralysis, his sensibility could have been fruitlessly stimulated by itching powder, razor cuts to the soles of his feet and palms of his hands, needles inserted under his nails, a crawling insect in the ear, or an enema of tobacco smoke (Bondeson 137-43).

"Death-In-Life" illuminates the problems associated with grounding claims about death in "the rules of normal existence." One of Lewes's other characters observes that Hurst's experience "throws a doubt on that which hitherto has been acknowledged as indisputable, viz. that the dead feel no pain. But do they not? I am not at all sure of it. How are we to prove they do not? The mere absence of any of the signs which, in a normal condition of the body, indicate pain, is no proof; because death is abnormal" ([Lewes] 110). Just as Alan Sinfield argues that lyric poetry "reminds us that meaning, communication, language, work only because they are shared, that making yourself understood is interactive, a social affair" (176), medical diagnoses require at the very least communication between two parties. Death is a matter of signs like anything else. If dead men do not speak, that is partially because not being able to speak is a kind of death. If we understand speaking as representative of signification in general, we could say that it is not so much that dead men do not speak, as that dead men no longer speak in a way that is intelligible to other people as a sign of life.

Horace Smith's "Posthumous Memoir of Myself," another work of periodical fiction that dates from the late 1840s, meditates on a related theme from Tennyson and Poe: what it might mean to be a living dead man.[14] Incompetently poisoned by his son, Smith's first-person

[14] In the "Letter to Maria Gisborne" (1820), Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote that "Wit and sense, / Virtue and human knowledge, all that might / Make this dull world a business of delight, / Are all combined in Horace Smith" (l. 247-50); Smith served for some years as the poet's financial adviser. The "Posthumous Memoir" was his last literary work, and he passed away as the first installment of the story was going to press.

narrator—a somewhat selfish country squire with an unhealthy reliance on quack medicines—falls into one of those dangerous states of paralysis with which we are now familiar. Without the presence of his level-headed personal physician familiar with his propensity to catalepsy, the narrator is, of course pronounced dead. In fact, his cataleptic trance makes many of his faculties even more acute: "although my limbs were stretched out in all the rigidity of death, my senses and my consciousness were by no means obliterated. They were in some respects intensified, for I could hear a distant whisper which would have been previously inaudible; one eye, being only half closed, retained its full power of vision …" (7). This configuration of consciousness and paralysis similar to that of Hurst makes the posthumous memoirist's situation particularly poignant on the night before his (suspiciously speedy) burial. His thoughts, not surprisingly, turn towards the familiar figures of live burial stories, these "miserable victims who, being buried in a trance, had turned round in their coffins; and of some who, having forced themselves out of them, had been discovered as huddled skeletons in a corner of the vault, whether they had crawled to die of hunger and exhaustion" (8). Yet while he is able to banish these kinds of speculations—perhaps because they are entirely conventional—the narrator cannot so easily imagine his way out of the possibility that he, as an individual, might be doomed to a "perpetual consciousness" beyond death and, even more, a madness made more painful by the fact that it cannot possibly be understood by anyone other than the sufferer: "how could a man be mad and motionless, a maniac and a statue? What inconceivable misery, to feel your brain raving and raging with an insanity which can find no vent for its fury, either by the explosions of the voice or the convulsive violence of the limbs!" (9). This "inconceivable misery" expresses the affect associated with these states of insignificance we have been discussing throughout, whether it is the body or language itself that, rather than mediating between the mind and the external world, proves to be an

absolutely impermeable boundary to expression. It is a prison made more inescapable by the fact that it does not even announce itself as such.

The image of the madman known only to himself anticipates the situation of the *Maud* speaker, ineffectually "loud in the world of the dead" (2.263). The *Maud* speaker and those "dead men" around him remain at the mercy of an outside world that remains ignorant of their plight, communicating brutally through the impersonal vibration of horses' hoofs or a well-intentioned but misapplied tobacco enema. But stripped of its more explicit Gothic trappings, the fear of premature burial hinges on the loss of signifying power that renders one completely dependent on other people who, simply because they are other people, can never be capable of knowing everything. Like a locked vault or earthy grave, this dependence is inescapable. Of the many schemes for the prevention of premature burial launched in Britain and Europe during the nineteenth century, not a single one—from the waiting mortuary to the several models of security coffins—could function without the intervention of some other person or persons. That intervention in turn always depended on restoring interpersonal communication where interpersonal communication was the very thing that the entire live-burial complex we have been examining showed had been massively breached.[15] In *Maud,* the situation is even more precarious, for the poem demonstrates that the social body is itself in disarray: "it is not merely the protagonist who is mad but Maud's brother, the young lord, the two feuding fathers, the shopkeepers and mine operators, the baker who adulterates his bread, the lying politicians, the Quaker who does not know peace from war, the treacherous and tyrannical czar—all are mad, and there is a sense in which the protagonist, who alone seems to perceive this fact, is the only

[15] For a description of schemes to prevent live burials, including waiting mortuaries and security coffins, see Bondeson chapters 5 and 6. As he notes, one of the reasons why security coffins offering a permanent air supply did not sell as well as expected was anxiety about what would happen if the system of alarms failed and nobody responded, leaving the victim alive and still buried (136).

sane person among them" (Culler, *Tennyson* 207). But such sanity can actually make the situation worse: as the narrator of the "Posthumous Memoir" discovers in later installments of the story, the only thing worse than being buried alive is the knowledge that you have been buried alive.

"Everything came to be known"

A typical assumption of the "signs of death" debate is that official bodies need to prescribe more specific reading methods in order to reliably interpret individual bodies; this principle depends on a belief in the ultimate transparency and legibility of those individual bodies that can be exposed through official codes. What *Maud* and the speculative fictions imply is that there exist certain states which cannot be "read," no matter how careful those reading processes are which are brought to bear on them. One of the more unsettling possibilities that thus arises from *Maud*'s madhouse canto is that the power to rectify the kinds of reading disorders that lead to live burials may not even lie within the official, social world, even if it could be cleansed of its babble, gabble, and sundry other sins of "linguistic deviancy" (Tucker, *Tennyson* 426).

A moment in "Death-in-Life" makes this fact brutally clear: "If your motory nerves are paralysed, how am I supposed to know that your sensory nerves are not likewise paralysed? You give me no clue. To a spectator there is absolutely *no* indication of the sensory nerves being in a normal condition. How, then, is it to be known?" ([Lewes] 111). Yet, it is precisely the possibility of being known that surfaces in the madhouse canto, not as a possible escape from the pressures of epistemological breakdown, but rather as the expression of a paranoid fear of exposure:

> I never whispered a private affair
> Within the hearing of cat or mouse,
> No, not to myself in the closet alone,
> But I heard it shouted at once from the top of the house;
> Everything came to be known. (2.285-89)

When uttered by a victim of live burial, "Everything came to be known" is both an equivocation and a provocation. For, as we have seen, the referentially aberrant body is a body about which everything cannot, in an absolute sense, be known. The *Maud* speaker's complaint comes just after his denunciation of the "idiot gabble" (2.279) that surrounds him, chatter that yields little in terms of useful information. The language of the madhouse is, in a sense, both too private and too public, and the disordered excess serves as a reminder that expression *per se* does not automatically lead to intersubjective understanding. The discursive frames provided by premature burial and apparent death shed new light on Tucker's argument that the "devastating exposure" the speaker recalls in the madhouse canto is nothing less than the exposure of "the notion of privacy itself" (*Tennyson* 427), allowing us to separate the form of privacy (which is revealed and thus collapses) from the content of the private (which remains unarticulated even after this collapse). What the speaker suggests is that the very category of "everything" is produced and constituted by the fact of its being "shouted at once from the top of the house"—it is a performative betrayal that produces its revelations as they are exposed. Thus, the nightmare does not lie in the revelation of any specific secret (the speaker's intentions towards Maud, for instance) that he had wanted to keep hidden, but rather with the impossible demands made on a body that is constitutionally resistant to signification.[16] Even the patient may not know the status of his own case.

Knowing and being known in *Maud* are rarely, if ever, represented straightforwardly; more often, it is a matter of not knowing and of remaining unknown. The rhetorical "who knows?" appears twice in the opening sections of the poem, marking first the speaker's disavowal of his

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[16] Cf. Blair's observation that "*Maud* is Tennyson's most sustained effort in the creation of a character and a narrative which are trapped in subjectivity, morbidly aware of sensation, and, in his words, 'constitutionally diseased.' 'Constitutionally' suggests both a disease inherent in (and inherited by) the individual and one caused at least partly by 'the circumstances of the time,' the constitution of the country" (204).

father's sordid past—"Did he fling himself down? who knows? for a vast speculation had failed" (1.9)—and, second, a rejection of responsibility for his own future:

> Sooner or later I too may passively take the print
> Of the golden age—why not? I have neither hope nor trust;
> May make my heart as a millstone, set my face as a flint,
> Cheat and be cheated, and die: who knows? we are ashes and dust.
> (1.29-32)

The palpable fatalism in these utterances reappears when the speaker pauses in one of his early rants against British society: "Who knows the ways of the world, how God will bring them about?" (1.145). In a different context, this question could be interpreted as an expression of faith and acceptance; here, it denotes a radical negativity. With the "who knows," the speaker pushes away his own agency through indifference rather than faith. The question reinforces the self-alienating passivity that is implicit in the speaker's reiterated desire for withdrawal from both the social and the ethical world, especially as it comes later to be applied to the effects of his own actions against Maud's brother.

When apparently indisputable knowledge does come, it often appears out of nowhere, again obscuring the question of agency. Maud's arrival in the poem is indirect and couched in hearsay: "I have heard, I know not whence, of the singular beauty of Maud" (1.67). The aside suggests a certain lack of rigor in the speaker's own epistemological practice, and his disavowal is quite far from the ethically-charged calls towards careful reading and investigation that echoed in the premature burial texts. An even more extravagant instance of spontaneous discovery grounds the speaker's belief that Maud has been promised to him from the time of her birth:

> Did I hear it half in a doze
> Long since, I know not where?
> Did I dream it an hour ago,
> When asleep in this arm-chair? (1.285-88)

Even though Maud herself, so far as the reader can tell, validates the dreamed agreement between their two fathers with her own childhood memories, the entire claim remains comically out of proportion with the weight the speaker puts on it.

Knowledge again collapses into assertion at a crucial point in Part 2. The "Courage, poor heart of stone" passage—added in 1856 as an attempt to clarify the plot (Shatto 203)—announces the event of Maud's death, but makes absolutely no attempt to establish how the speaker knows it. Coming just after the section where the speaker asked "Who knows if he be dead?" as he contemplated Maud's brother, the omission of this concern as it relates to Maud herself ironizes the entire epistemological project of the poem. The close juxtaposition of these two scenes reveals another important quality of knowing in *Maud*, namely, that knowledge is quite frequently simply asserted, with little or no reference to externality. To render knowledge indistinguishable from assertion is a potentially life-threatening gesture, as implied by the concluding line of "Death-in-Life": "*Death is a name we give to the Unknown. We name it, and fancy we have explained it*" ([Lewes] 112). Words come to stand in for conditions that themselves remain ungraspable, beyond (or beneath) human powers of perception.

The most infamous of these are, perhaps, the reiterated sets of conditional statements through which the speaker rewrites Maud's filiation as a more pleasing fiction. Describing her father as "A gray old wolf and a lean"—an image that recurs in the madhouse canto—the speaker goes on to claim that

> Scarcely, now, would I call him a cheat;
> For then, perhaps, as a true child of deceit,
> She might by a true descent be untrue;
> And Maud is as true as Maud is sweet:
> … Maud to him is nothing akin:
> Some peculiar mystic grace
> Made her only the child of her mother …. (1.471-75, 481-83)

In his zeal to separate Maud from her father, the speaker comes just short of accusing the mother of infidelity: but that, of course, would make her a "child of deceit" from a different perspective. Only the "mystic grace"—or what we might call magical thinking—of the speaker's will to believe allows Maud's impossible heritage to stand, even as it deliberately contradicts his understanding of his own family's history. The "cheat" / "sweet" rhyme recalls the speaker's earlier speculations that

> if she were not a cheat,
> If Maud were all that she seemed,
> And her smile were all that I dreamed,
> Then the world were not so bitter
> But a smile could make it sweet. (1.224-28)

But when the speaker returns to this logic in the passage that performatively asserts Maud's difference from her father, the rhyme is extended to "deceit," which causes the line endings to run interference against the asserted content of the speaker's statements. What he knows becomes reduced to what he feels, in part, we must surmise, because the speaker may also suspect that the Maud of his dreams is not entirely the girl who lives at the Hall.

When the speaker insists that he does know something, it is generally in the context of a paranoid utterance sparked, as I suggested earlier, by the fear of his own insignificance, e.g., the speaker's claim to "know" that his servants are "ever ready to slander and steal" (1.121, 120). A similar anxiety about persecution undercuts his attempts to view Maud's brother in a more positive light:

> Rough but kind? Yet I know
> He has plotted against me in this,
> That he plots against me still. (1.762-64)

The threat determines the speaker's obsessive fear of being taken in by other people's machinations or tricked by his own overwrought brain:

> For a raven ever croaks, at my side,
> Keep watch and ward, keep watch and ward,

> Or thou wilt prove their tool.
> Yea, too, myself from myself I guard,
> For often a man's own angry pride
> Is cap and bells for a fool. (1.246-51)

If the speaker's self-directed vigilance can be read generously as an example of a "glimmering self-knowledge" that supports his "attempt to struggle away from the place, the pit, and the fear" (Day 145), such vigilance nonetheless becomes part of his self-negating madness, a passion for going beneath the surfaces that is part of the ironic reversal that takes place in the madhouse canto.

"O me, why have they not buried me deep enough?"

What is finally at stake in *Maud*'s complaint that "everything came to be known" is nothing less than the possibility of interiority itself. Writing of "O that 'twere possible," Rowlinson argues that the impossible desires expressed in that canto's first and final stanzas "virtually cancel themselves," leaving that first "O" to mark the boundary between inside and out, "set[ting] in motion a discourse structured by this difference as an expression of longing for an interiority from which it is constitutively excluded" (133, 134). Though Rowlinson does not discuss it, that residual "O" recurs with even greater consequences in the final stanza of the mad scene: "O me, why have they not buried me deep enough?" (2.334). Here, the repetition of "me" appears to cancel his very identity, leaving a trace that persistently remains too close to the surface. Similarly self-canceling reflexive pronouns have earlier represented the speaker's desire for withdrawal ("bury myself in myself") and his essentially paranoid skepticism ("myself from myself I guard").

The "O me" also prefaces the speaker's final complaint in Part 2—not that he has been buried alive, but that he has been buried alive in a shoddy and perfunctory manner:

> Maybe still I am but half-dead;
> Then I cannot be wholly dumb;
> I will cry to the steps above my head
> And somebody, surely, some kind heart will come
> To bury me, bury me

Deeper, ever so little deeper. (2.337-42)

Slinn sees in these lines "an effort to elude the torment of present consciousness, the torment of the self as a discourse that is no longer in possession of the means for transforming its sense of meaninglessness and incompletion" (*Discourse of Self* 84). The speaker's desire for a more complete burial forecloses the possibility of recuperation (moral or otherwise) through an encounter with one's authentic, grounded inner being. More disturbingly, that foreclosure calls into question the very existence of that inner being. The most fundamental—one hesitates to say "deeper" in this context—anxiety expressed in this stanza is that there might be nothing worth burying at all, that the speaker's insignificance is not, ultimately, a result of any societal oversight but is simply a function of his own shallowness.

Most stories of premature burial and apparent death, including some of the more scientific examinations of the subject, do not deal directly with that last possibility, believing to the end that some kind of truth exists. Even if meaning comes tragically late, or if some confusion persists about the condition itself, these circumstances, too can be partially recuperated by being absorbed into an archive of anecdotal evidence and generating conversations and investigations that will allow such mistakes to be avoided in the future. Living through one's own death, as it were, can also inspire a more personal conversion experience, as it does for the narrator of Smith's "Posthumous Memoir." This craven country businessman receives ample opportunity to reflect on the moral quality of his life, find it lacking, and resolve to change his ways in the future. It is not an easy road, for he must actually experience interment in the family vault and become the victim of a body-snatching expedition before he abruptly regains his powers of motion. But retaining his consciousness as well as his powers of hearing and sight during his paralysis allow the narrator to gain unprecedented insight into the character of his children and friends, who let their guard down to speak honestly in the presence of his seemingly dead body.

These kinds of scenarios function within a discourse that understands the "buried life" as a figure (albeit an unstable one, always threatened by physical reality) of authenticity that, at least in our daily life, remains just outside our consciousness. Such authenticity is so powerful that it cannot be accessed under the conditions of normal life; only a dangerous limit experience such as the many different articulations of apparent death can bring us into contact with what William Wordsworth calls in the 1850 *Prelude* "The prime and vital principle … / In the recesses of thy nature, far / From any reach of outward fellowship" (14.215-17). This passionate, authentic, yet unreachable (and thus protected) selfhood takes its Victorian form as the "buried life" of Matthew Arnold's 1852 poem. In "The Buried Life," Arnold mourns his estrangement from this deeply submerged sources of a personal identity untainted by the masks that society requires. Though Blair situates Arnold's language of the buried life in this and other of his poems of the 1850s within a tradition that uses "the void within the breast [as] an established literary trope connected to heartsickness and the inability to feel" (171), the poem nonetheless remains confident that such interiority exists apart from and prior to its enunciation. It is maintained as the object of "unspeakable desire / After the knowledge of our buried life" (l. 47-48). This possibility for recuperation depends upon a discourse that understands the "buried life" as a figure (albeit an unstable one, always threatened by physical reality) of authenticity that remains just outside our everyday consciousness. Such authenticity is so powerful that it cannot be accessed under the conditions of normal life. Only a dangerous limit experience can bring us into contact with this unreachable selfhood.

Poe's "Premature Burial" provides an ironic view of the restorative structures at work in the myth of the "buried life," revealing a series of allegorical structures that never reach an origin or ground. At the story's climax, the narrator awakes to the horrible knowledge that his fears of premature burial have been realized:

> I could not summon courage to move. I dared not make the effort which was to satisfy me of my fate—and yet there was something at my heart which whispered me *it was sure*. Despair—such as no other species of wretchedness ever calls into being—despair alone urged me, after long irresolution, to uplift the heavy lids of my eyes. I uplifted them. It was dark—all dark. I knew that the fit was over. I knew that the crisis of my disorder had long passed. I knew that I had now fully recovered the use of my visual faculties—and yet it was dark—all dark—the intense and utter raylessness of the Night that endureth for evermore. (677)

However, in spite of the narrator's many reiterations of "I knew," and all of the physical evidence to confirm that he "could no longer doubt that [he] reposed within a coffin at last" (677), all of this is a delusion. The narrator's further reflection, and the presence of other people, allows him to "come to" and reconstruct his short term memory of having been sleeping soundly in a tiny berth of a sloop on the James River. Nevertheless, Poe's narrator maintains the legitimacy of his initial reaction, as they "arose naturally from the circumstances of my positions—from my ordinary bias of thought—and from the difficulty … of regaining my memory, for a long time after awaking from slumber" (679). Indeed, it is easy to overlook the absence of premature burial at the heart of "The Premature Burial," in part because some of the most iconic illustrations for the tale represent human figures (presumably the narrator) in underground graves—representing the speaker's fear rather than his physical situation.[17] As in the "death-white curtain" episode of *Maud,* the shock of the experience remains absolutely authentic and true for Poe's narrator, capable of initiating a hitherto impossible transformation in his life: "The tortures endured … were indubitably quite equal, for the time, to those of actual sepulture. They were fearfully—they were inconceivably hideous; but out of Evil proceeded Good; for their very excess wrought in my spirit an inevitable revulsion" (679).

The only thing capable of curing the narrator of "The Premature Burial" from his fear of premature burial is the illusion of premature burial—an illusion that depends to some extent on

[17] Two of these illustrations are reprinted in Bondeson (10, 210).

the ironic reversal of the sleep and death metaphor. Poe's title thus names the structure of what is revealed to be a delusion rather than an objective reality. What is "buried" in "The Premature Burial" is delusion and inauthenticity. Yet, what finally "cures" the narrator of his fear of premature burial is the delusion of having been buried alive, and he insists upon the legitimacy of that delusion to the end. The circular structure of his malady—he reads about premature burials, becomes afraid of premature burials, and as a result becomes subject to cataleptic trances that place him at risk for premature burial—establishes it as an allegorical signifier, in that it functions by referring to other signs in a process that is avowedly inorganic and arbitrary. Because it always involves a rupture from the origin, the meaning produced through allegory, as de Man has argued, "can then consist only in the *repetition* … of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority" (*Blindness and Insight* 207). In its place is presented a de Manian allegorical series of conventionalized anecdotes constituting a merely arbitrary anteriority.

In *Maud*, Tennyson too rejects the organic pretensions of selfhood in favor of the artificiality of allegory. As in the underworld-madhouse, where the speaker's imagined interment offers a literalized commentary on the metaphor of the "buried life," meaning is both too frequently on the surface and buried "ever so little deeper" beyond the reach of public circulation. One of the most important consequences of Tennyson's citation of Poe is that it allows us to see the buried life as being crossed by discontinuity and incapable of yielding an origin. *In Memoriam* had still expressed a faith in the "the soul within," even if the condition of language meant that it was always "half revealed" and "half concealed." *Maud* suggests something quite different—that the reserve implied by the inexpressibility topos cannot, ultimately, serve a redemptive function through confession, and that the large grief, given in outline, is also strangely hollow and ungrounded.

That Tennyson has been criticized, at different times, both for putting too much and too little of himself into *Maud* is symptomatic of the poem's vexed relationship to the "buried life." George Eliot objected to *Maud* on the grounds that it contained "scarcely more than a residuum of Alfred Tennyson; the wide-sweeping intellect, the mild philosophy, the healthy pathos, the wondrous melody, have almost all vanished, and left little more than a narrow scorn which piques itself on the scorn of narrowness, and a passion which clothes itself in exaggerated conceits" (173). Later her review returns to this idea: "it perhaps speaks well for Tennyson's genius, that it has refused to aid him much on themes so little worthy of his greatest self" (178). Eliot gives us no less than three Tennysons: the "greatest self" to which he should aspire, the "genius" that animates his writing towards that goal, and this narrow-minded "him" that persists in writing on inferior themes. The discourse of poetic genius imputes an immortality to the poet's "greatest self," but the status of the "him" remains more uncertain.

During the twentieth century, Ralph Wilson Rader, in the course of writing an entire book devoted to the "biographical genesis" of *Maud*, extends Eliot's criticism to what he sees as the many parts of the poem that keep their meaning too "buried": "for [Tennyson] and his speaker the queer disjointed story told in the poem had a hidden emotional dimension which it cannot have for the reader, who must remain perplexed and perhaps annoyed by its insistent and inexplicable manifestation in the poem. The dramatic mask brought still other difficulties: it relieved Tennyson of any moderating sense of responsibility (which otherwise he might have felt) for the exaggerated sentiments expressed, while at the same time, perhaps, it encouraged him to still further exaggeration as a means of convincing himself (and others) that it was after all not he but his distraught hero who spoke" (116). Rader seems to be offended by *Maud*'s failure to be *The Prelude*, and his criticism of Tennyson as a poet bears more than a passing affinity with critics such as Schulman who, as we have already seen, condemn the poem's speaker because his

language is not sufficiently referential. Underlying this complaint is the assumption (perhaps unavoidable for those who practice biographical criticism) that all references that cannot be traced back to a specific intention, event, or historical person are therefore devoid of possible meaning.

But, as I have been arguing throughout this chapter, these suspensions are themselves generative of meaning, even if they do not shed light on our conception of "Tennyson" as such. These gaps, referential aberrations, and delusions—not to mention our readerly frustration with them—are what reveal the anxious tension between the surface and the depths. Griffiths eloquently describes this more general movement in Tennyson's work:

> Tennyson works for trust in the surfaces of language, and in the hopes of those surfaces, while he is aware of what reflection teaches about the deceptions of the surface, and, even more acutely aware, of how the surface of language belongs to that "*everybody*" who will say almost anything, thereby producing the risk that a poet's reliance on the language might turn into a shallow trust in illusory depths, his own hopes being only the refraction of corrupt idiom. (143-44)

Though it is not necessary to retrace here Tennyson's transformation from the post-Romantic lyricist to the Victorian public poet, a story that has been told in *Maud*'s criticism as well as in more wide-ranging considerations of his career, it may be useful, by way of conclusion, to see the figure of a living dead man, helplessly resistant to every practice of reading his society has to offer, as emblematic of that difficult transition.

Maud offers a critique of a reading that depends on preexisting categories of the genius and the self, the public and the private, the interior and the exterior. While writing *In Memoriam*, Tennyson had still been able to gain poetic strength by "drawing (through the inexpressibility topos) on the soul-saving reserve of what he cannot say" (Tucker, *Tennyson* 380-81). In *Maud*, the "buried life" is revealed as empty of significance and possibly nonexistent. To the extent that it does exist as a potentiality, it is characterized by its vulnerability, penned in a grave that remains

"so rough" (2.335) and insecure. The self-canceling gesture of the madhouse canto and the seemingly aberrant desire to be buried more securely mean that this reserve, if it ever existed in the first place, has been emptied; it, too, is subject to a being-known that depends on performative articulation. The meaning promised and mourned in the Arnoldian vision of the buried life is, in Tennyson's reading, both too accessible to the influence of the external world and too far estranged from that world.

De Man describes the affect of referential aberration in terms of "confusion," "anger," and "despair" when a reader is "confronted with a structure of linguistic meaning that he cannot control and that holds the discouraging prospect of an infinity of similar future confusions, all of them similarly catastrophic in their consequences" (*Allegories* 10). To some extent, the institutionalization of deconstructive reading practices has had the effect of neutralizing some of that negativity, transmuting the frustrating encounter with a text that refuses to be one thing or the other into a pleasurable experience of "both/and" ambiguity—at least for certain kinds of readers. Thus, today a scholar such as Seamus Perry can write appreciatively and movingly about "the luxuriance of Tennysonian suspendedness" (95). However, while "[b]eing neither one thing nor another is a recurrent Tennysonian state," Perry also reminds us that it is also a dangerous, sometimes terrifying condition (82), and it is this experience that a reading of *Maud* can help to recover. This condition becomes even more poignant when we recognize that, where de Man envisions a single subject negotiating the referential aberrations of literary language, Tennyson envisions a situation in *Maud* in which signification is inherently social—and has consequences that are potentially a matter of life and death.

Chapter 4
The Gospel According to Lazarus: Referential Aberration in Robert Browning's "An Epistle ... of Karshish"

> [T]hat Jesus, in his resuscitations of the dead, made it a consideration whether the persons to be restored to life might, from the spiritual condition in which they died, derive advantage from the restoration or the contrary, we find no indication; that ... the corporeal awakening was attended with a spiritual awakening, or that such a result is expected, is nowhere said. These resuscitated individuals, not excepting even Lazarus, recede altogether from our observation after their return to life .... [1]

> And you, ye stars, ...
> Have *you*, too, survived yourselves?[2]

Prodigious Imports

Stopping for the night in a small town just outside of Jerusalem, a traveling physician is confronted with a perplexing medical mystery. The elders of this village present to him a man they claim is a living corpse: some thirty years earlier, they say, he had died and was resurrected, returning to earth after seeing the mysteries of heaven. The living dead man himself offers little in the way of direct insight into his experience and seems strikingly unmoved by the attention given to him. He displays an unfeigned gentleness, an almost childlike wonder in the smallest details of the world around him. He is likely to be transported by the contemplation of "some trifling fact ... / as if in that indeed / He caught prodigious import, whole results."[3] Yet, these moments of contemplative rapture very quickly become a maddening, zombie-like "stupor." The man cannot be made to care about great or pressing matters in the present, about the "prodigious armaments / Assembled to besiege his city now" (l. 146-47)—a posture so frustrating to the physician that it provokes him to hurl insults at his patient, but all to no avail. The traveler, being a man of

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[1] Strauss 487.
[2] Arnold, *Empedocles on Etna*, 2.276, 280.
[3] Robert Browning, "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician," l. 150, 152-53. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Browning's poetry are taken from *Robert Browning's Poetry*, 2nd ed., ed. James F. Loucks and Andrew Stauffer; hereafter *RBP*.

science, comes to the only logical conclusion he can: the patient is "stark mad" (l. 264). But he concedes the possibility that the kinds of awareness displayed by this man may indeed signify a knowledge of mysteries usually kept hidden from human beings. The man's demeanor, combined with a reticence not usually found among the insane, captures the doctor's imagination and, indeed, his sympathy. For if all these behaviors signify madness—and the physician keeps returning to this as the only plausible, albeit incomplete, diagnosis—that madness has its source in an experience that ruptured the limitations of experience itself, "flinging (so to speak) life's gates too wide" (l. 87).

What comes to matter most to the physician are the conditions of the man's present life, his experience of impossible afterlife. Suspended between heaven and earth by some miraculous, traumatizing force, this man lives a life determined by a seemingly endless series of negotiations between absolutely incommensurable demands: the requirements of the "It should be" crashing against the barrier of "here it cannot be" (l. 190). He lives in the village where he was born but is no longer in harmony with his neighbors, who treat him, at best, as a curiosity to be displayed to visitors. The riches of the spiritual life and heavenly knowledge have come at the cost of his ability to participate in the everyday concerns of human community—or even communicate with those around him, regardless of whether they believe him to be a madman or a miracle. Through all of this, the physician notes that the man maintains a "prone submission to the heavenly will" (l. 203) as well as a patience with earthly authority, accepting all that has happened to him and all that will happen to him. He neither fears death, even the return to the unspeakable horrors of the grave, nor does he seek it out, attempting prematurely to return to the heaven he left behind. For now, the man appears content to live on in his (after-)life, the infinite soul fitting only uncomfortably in the finite body.

The encounter I have just described between the physician and the living dead man who may or may not be insane is the subject of Robert Browning's "An Epistle Containing the Strange Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician," one of the poems that appeared in *Men and Women* (1855). Set in the first century C.E., Browning's poem imagines the physician's account of this meeting, as communicated to a mentor and colleague in his home country. Writing as one man of science to another, Karshish alternately marvels at the "strange" case that he has just observed and tries to diminish its more troubling significance, using a diagnostic idiom to assert an objective distance. Whether that distance is sustainable—and, indeed, whether it was ever there to begin with—remains questionable. The letter's famous and oft-cited postscript raises the possibilities that the main letter tries to evade, specifically the possibility (raised and then quickly shut down) that everything his patient says may in fact be true: "the All-Great, were the All-Loving too" (l. 305)—that is, that everything his informant has said is true. In keeping with the Browningesque tensions of the rest of the poem, Karshish undercuts the force of this revelation in the last line by attributing these revelations to the "madman" (l. 312). But the joke, as it were, is on Karshish. By this point in the poem, it has become manifestly obvious to Browning's readers that "the Nazarene physician" (l. 100) credited with the miracle is none other than Jesus Christ, and that Lazarus, the "madman," is the biblical figure whose miraculous resurrection is narrated in the eleventh chapter of the Gospel according to John. At least one critic has gone so far as to call the entire poem "the Gospel according to Browning" (McClatchey 14). The "dramatic irony"—a term frequently associated with the Browningesque genre of dramatic monologue—is that Lazarus is telling the "simple" truth and Karshish, though he has never heard of Christ or Christianity, unwittingly employs the language of biblical typology while insisting on the objective nature of

his diagnosis: he thus "speaks better than he knows, unwittingly anticipating biblical idea, theme, and imagery" (McClatchey 4).[4]

Generically speaking, the dramatic monologue is "epistemologically on the dangerous edge" (Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry* 288), partially because the reader must frequently balance a sympathetic relationship with the speaker, withholding moral judgments so as to better enjoy the performance of self-fashioning, with an increasing awareness of the limits of the speaker's point of view. The reader thus goes beyond the objective facts of the words on the page to perceive the ironies of the speaker's performance. But that famous "tension between sympathy and judgment" that Robert Langbaum popularized in *The Poetry of Experience* depends largely on a dramatic monologue's ability to communicate "facts from within" (85, 78). "An Epistle" diverges from this convention by taking Lazarus as its subject. Unlike many of the other figures described by Browning's monologists—Porphyria, the Last Duchess, the Bishop of St. Praxed's mistress—the name of Lazarus is familiar to most of Browning's readers from the story in the gospels.

Browning was too skillful a writer to end with a conversion or its rejection; rather, the poem concludes with Karshish's musing, "it is strange" (l. 312). Yet much of what Karshish perceives about Lazarus, what he considers to be so "strange," either does not appear strange to Browning's readers (because they have a knowledge of Christian doctrine) or is simply dismissed out of hand as Karshish's error or misrepresentation (because it does not fit in to readers' pre-existing understanding of Christian doctrine). What the poem displays, according to the critical tradition, is the power of Christian truth to surpass the limitations of local idiom, historical situatedness, and skeptical methodology (whether of Karshish's implied scientific training or, in Browning's own time, of the Higher Criticism). The title of an article by Michael Berens, for

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[4]For a close reading of Browning's typological imagery, including many details that may not be as readily apparent to the secular reader, see Joe McClatchey's "Interpreting 'Karshish' " and Thomas Kass' "Incarnational Tension in Robert Browning's 'Karshish'."

instance, calls Karshish “an unwitting gospeller,” and describes the poem’s “central event” as “Karshish’s articulation of the effect this ‘strange medical experience’ has had on him—the effect, as becomes increasingly clearer as the poem develops, of his soul’s response to the gospel of Christ witnessed by Lazarus” (41). Though Karshish does not experience a full religious conversion, he nevertheless “starts with a blank slate as regards Christianity, and is brought by the conditions of the poem to a perception of need for the kind of answer provided by Christianity” (Langbaum 98). This approach is mirrored in a recent biography of Browning, where the authors observe—almost in passing—that the success of “An Epistle” “lies in the gradual disclosure of Karshish’s response to an event that lies outside his professional understanding and that evokes unexpected feelings about totally new religious concepts” (Kennedy and Hair 269).

The handful of attempts to de-emphasize the religious content of the poem have been only partially successful, and they tend to yield results that are at least structurally similar to the religious interpretations. Writing in a Hegelian mode, Roma King charts the development and realization of Karshish’s soul and sees the poem as a staging of the “tension between the fully conscious, the rational and logical, the calculated and the predictable; and the unconscious, non-rational and a-logical, the unpremeditated and the unpredictable” (25). Cheryl Walsh argues that “the function of irony in the poem is much deeper than the surface play of biblical allusions in the mouth of an Arab innocent of biblical knowledge. Through the reaffirmation of Christianity’s inherent ironies, ‘An Epistle’ recreates the dialogue necessary to express a ‘living truth,’ as opposed to the ‘dead dogma’ of received opinion” (214). Like King, Walsh is able to deemphasize the specifically religious content of the poem but, like these earlier generations of critics, she continues to see “An Epistle” in terms of binary oppositions and tensions that can generally be mapped on to some version of the familiar Victorian debate between scientific rationalism and religious faith.

"Finality," argues Joseph Dupras, "is stayed; 'strange' holds open the possibility of further meaning, engaging even the poem's reader in uncertainty (if in no other way than in wondering what still troubles Karshish)" (16). But, as even my brief survey of the scholarship on "An Epistle" suggests, such uncertainty is generally noted more as a matter of critical habit than conviction. Interpretation may be inherently unstable, but our understanding of the poem is, for all practical purposes determined in advance by its seemingly stable referential relationship to the gospel of John. Lacking the satirical bite of "Bishop Blougram's Apology" or the haunting ambiguities of "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," "An Epistle" is generally considered to be more useful than great, a teachable—even safe—introduction to the practice of reading more complex dramatic monologues. Writing in the first issue of *Victorian Poetry* in 1963, Wilfred Guerin declared that "An Epistle" "is not a great poem," while acknowledging that it nonetheless has a use value for the teaching of New Criticism in that it "regularly provides material for consideration not just of what Browning wrote, but of certain basic techniques of poetry and criticism. For what 'Karshish' *is* is a nicely balanced work of art. It is structurally successful" (132). Today's reader may turn to the *Complete Critical Guide to Robert Browning*, published in 2002, where she will find the poem schematized thus: "Karshish, a sceptical hard-headed empiricist, would like to conclude that Lazarus (a man claiming he has been 'raised from the dead') is mad, but the character of Lazarus himself—level-headed, straightforward, and saintly—gives him pause" (Hawlin 92). The fact that few significant longer considerations of "An Epistle" have been published since the mid-1990s implies that we have, in a sense, solved the poem's riddle and settled its place in Browning's oeuvre.[5]

[5] Forthcoming work by Jonathan Loesberg and Aaron Worth will no doubt provide happy exceptions to this state of affairs, but "An Epistle" remains relatively neglected even in the context of renewed scholarly interest in nineteenth-century religion.

Much of the existing scholarship on “An Epistle” thus assumes that Karshish’s language about Lazarus is interesting only insofar as it demonstrates the ways in which the physician is limited by his non-Christian, scientific frames of reference. Early in the poem, for instance, Karshish describes the root of Lazarus’ condition in the following terms:

> ’Tis but a case of mania—subinduced
> By epilepsy, at the turning-point
> Of trance prolonged unduly some three days .... (l. 79-81)

As we saw in the previous chapter, Victorian readers would likely connect the terms in this passage with conditions that could produce the appearance of death without its actuality, leading to a near-death experience and the trauma of live burial. Karshish, as a physician, could be taken to be engaging in a version the act of thinking out loud, trying out a preliminary diagnosis of a difficult case (even if himself is also trying to downplay that difficulty). Critics, however, have been quick to judge his intentions. Dupras dismisses the physician’s efforts on the grounds that “explaining Lazarus’ condition as ‘mania,’ ‘epilepsy,’ and ‘trance’ does not exactly reproduce Lazarus’ claims” (8). Berens’ interpretation of the same passage gives Karshish more of the benefit of the doubt concerning his motivations, but his reasoning still more or less resembles Dupras’ in its structure: “The whole thing comes off as a bluff, and one senses that Karshish himself does not believe all he is saying. The problem is that what he wants to *think* is true does not jibe with what he *feels* to be true. He is working against his own fiction by trying to analyze rather than tell his story” (45). All Karshish needs to do, in Berens’ view, is “find the right idiom” (45), moving from psychological to spiritual interpretations. This type of criticism too frequently depends on a referential assumption about Lazarus’ speech: namely, that the claims he makes are identical to those made about him by the author of John’s gospel and that those claims are being silenced or distorted by Karshish’s mediation. And, perhaps, more importantly, this line of thinking assumes that there is an identifiable true story or “right idiom” from which Karshish is measurably

diverging. This is an astonishing claim to make—implicitly or explicitly—about Browning's poetry.

Certainly, it does not require a meeting of the Browning Society for us to determine that "the sage himself, the Nazarene / Who wrought this cure" (l. 244-45) is Jesus Christ, and this sort of knowledge does give the reader a measure of superiority over Karshish, who can only move fumblingly and incompletely towards a "right" answer. It is almost impossible to resist the temptation to make that seemingly obvious referential leap. Yet when we move to connect Lazarus with the resurrected figure in the gospels and then to compare Karshish's description of him unfavorably to our own more or less orthodox assumptions, we fail to really engage with Karshish's words on their own terms. We pass quickly through Karshish's experience of doubt because its broad strokes seem familiar; we can appreciate it from a safe distance without risking our own salvation, our own certainties. The opening paragraphs of this chapter, in which I gave an account of the poem that strategically suspended the references to the gospel of John, marks a preliminary attempt to approach "An Epistle" from a different standpoint, one that takes the identification with the Gospel of John as a starting point for interpretation, rather than as the answer. The point here is not that a reader must forget all of what she previously knew about Lazarus from the gospels, nor is it that she must accept everything that Karshish says uncritically. Rather, the poem demands that readers understand Karshish's language as, first and foremost, a good-faith attempt to respond to Lazarus as he finds him. For the relationship between the Lazarus of John's gospel and the Lazarus of "An Epistle" is much *more* complicated than it has usually been given credit for. Even when Karshish is "wrong" about Lazarus, he is wrong in specific and interesting ways, and his perceptions reflect not a sort of amorphous skepticism that has been casually and somewhat wrongly associated with scientific thought and the Higher Criticism. Indeed, during the mid-nineteenth century, both practitioners of the Higher Criticism

such as David Friedrich Strauss and Christian theologians such as John Henry Newman and F. D. Maurice grappled with the deeply-felt ambiguities of this story, coming to vastly different—and often disturbing—conclusions. Browning's poem should, I argue, be seen in the context of these kinds of works, in part because they all attempt to articulate the terms on which one can be intimate with uncertainty and unknowing. Precisely because he is not bound by centuries of Christian doctrine, Browning's Arab physician presents to a richly-imagined description of its subject that is marked most strikingly by its ambivalence about Lazarus' exemplary status in Christian discourse and by its representation of the impossible situation of living on after one's own death.

Donald Hair offers a helpful insight here, noting that "An Epistle" illustrates an undecidable suspension of the human and the divine: "Human speech, so ostensibly foolish, is also the means by which the Spirit operates, and human breath, so apparently material and empty, may also be one with that divine breath" (19). Although Hair's conclusion that Lazarus "looks like the wise man, and Karshish looks like the fool" resembles the arguments of Berens, Dupras, and others, we may also understand the paradox he proposes more broadly to mean that Karshish's words, even when they seem not to conform to what we would expect from the gospels, may also offer important information about Lazarus' situation. A. S. Byatt sees the poem in more capacious terms than many other readers, placing "An Epistle" in the context of a European culture that "agonised over the fear that beyond the grave there was no future life." Browning, in her view, "has daringly taken the one witness who, in Christian narrative, *could* have reassured us about the afterlife, the one man who came back, Lazarus, and made him speak, as he did not. It is a sleight of hand, and it works, but not quite as the orthodox side of Browning might have wished" (14). But, of course, Lazarus *doesn't* speak, at least not directly, and his presence in the poem is more uncanny than it is consolatory. Adam Roberts cogently observes that, "There *is*

something unnerving about the idea of coming to meet a dead man" (117) and draws a parallel between Lazarus and a "grim little simile" in "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," where a "sick man very near to death" (l. 25) retains just enough consciousness to hear his friends speak of him as if he has already died. If the Lazarus of "An Epistle" is not (or no longer), like the aberrantly suspended bodies we saw in the previous chapter, in imminent danger of a live burial, he nonetheless belongs to a similar problematic of suspension and signification. Having lived through his own death, he does not return to life as it was. Much of his "strange experience" remains strange, resisting interpretation. And just as Lazarus is a disruptive presence in Karshish's world, troubling even the definitions of life and death, Lazarus is also a disruptive figure within the genre of dramatic monologue, a force that can only be imperfectly contained by the poem.

Indeed, the richness and ambiguity of Browning's rendering of Lazarus, even if we leave room for the distorting effect of Karshish's discourse and personality, cannot be reduced to a referential relationship to the gospels or even to Christian doctrine more generally. For the gospel's story of the raising of Lazarus is not really about Lazarus at all. His sisters, Mary and Martha, are the ones who send word to Jesus on his behalf; it is their faith, and that of the disciples, that is seen to grow and change throughout this event. Lazarus, on the other hand, is declared dead near the beginning of the story and remains so until the very end. The absence of Lazarus is underscored in Newman's 1835 sermon "Tears of Christ at the Grave of Lazarus," where he imagines the scene that greeted Jesus on his arrival at Bethany,

> What was it He saw? He saw visibly displayed the *victory of death*; a mourning multitude—everything present which might waken sorrow except him who was the chief object of it. He was not—a stone marked the place where he lay. (133)

It is that stone, that seemingly immovable trace of Lazarus' presence, that Christ orders to be removed in the gospel account. Yet Lazarus, uncannily, remains a cipher at his resurrection: "The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages, and his face wrapped in a cloth"

(John 11:44). The writer of John's gospel is unable to even show Lazarus' face, to suggest whether he is grateful for having been called back from the grave, to register any emotion or reaction at all. Not long after this moment, and without revealing anything further about his inner life or even whether he is happy to be back, Lazarus disappears entirely from the canonical Gospels.

Browning, however, wants to reveal the man's face. Yet interpretations focused on the dramatic ironies of Karshish's unwittingly religious speech cannot not address many of the most significant consequences of this project. Even on a quite cursory examination, it becomes clear that Karshish—contrary to what most other critics have claimed—does not uniformly maintain the language of science; he frequently recurs to extended metaphors and figures as he attempts to access the truth of Lazarus' condition. That he does so could to some extent be explained as the superior power of Christian discourse at work—a version, perhaps, of Berens' "unwitting gospeller" argument—but I would suggest, rather, that Karshish's language should be understood as a deliberate attempt to communicate the spirit of his observations as precisely as he can even if that commitment at times seems to threaten the breakdown of representational language. Indeed, there is little evidence in the poem for the sort of stubborn hubris that has often been attributed to him, the better to enable a convenient binary between faith (Lazarus) and reason (Karshish). To judge Browning's Lazarus based wholly on Christian discourse effectively repeats the error that has often been attributed to Karshish—the minimization of Lazarus' claims by assimilating them to a preconceived structure of experience. The seemingly familiar subject matter of "An Epistle" should not be allowed to obscure or explain away the gaps and hesitations of Karshish's act of writing. These gaps are as essential to the poem's structure as its referential relationship to the Gospel. In the following sections of this chapter, I will explore and unfold these issues at greater length, offering a comprehensive reinterpretation of Browning's poem centered around images, structures, and practices of suspension. Assuming that we do not either ignore the role that

Karshish plays in perceiving and mediating the poem's vision of Lazarus or, for that matter, categorize all the dissonant or disturbing elements of the poem as evidence of Karshish's ignorance and limitations, we are left with the sense that Lazarus is suspended uneasily between his finite human existence and the infinite disjunction of having, in a manner of speaking, survived himself.

"For see, how he takes up the after-life"

Karshish spends relatively little time discussing the scientific merits of Lazarus' resurrection. Much more of his letter describes how he finds Lazarus thirty years after the event; the reader is enjoined to "see, how he takes up the after-life" (l. 107). Karshish chooses to reserve his judgment about the event that provoked Lazarus' symptoms, focusing instead on what he may observe in the present moment. Indeed, Karshish insists upon the immediacy of his observations:

> I bid thee take the thing while fresh in mind,
> Almost in sight—for, wilt thou have the truth?
> The very man is gone from me but now,
> Whose ailment is the subject of discourse. (l. 73-76)

The claim that Karshish has just seen Lazarus establishes the authority of a recent eyewitness. Even if it is the Holy Spirit working behind the scenes that pushes Karshish to the brink of a conversion, the more immediate source of that "itch ... a sting to write, a tang!" (l. 67), is the figure of Lazarus himself. For the poem's readers, this attestation of proximity is an important clue that the poem cannot simply be read in terms of the gospel account; it introduces a temporal drift and an important discontinuity between Browning's poem and John's gospel. Karshish's repeated references to the impending Roman invasion of Palestine allow us to date "An Epistle" to around 66 C.E. (*RBP* 174n1, n4). To date the moment of Browning's speculative fiction to some thirty years *after* the raising of Lazarus allows us to imagine the passage of time during which memories may have faded and Lazarus himself may have changed. This remains true even though

we as readers lack the necessary information to identify what precisely has changed. Moreover, the fictional conceit of "An Epistle" makes it a text that predates the gospel account of Lazarus' resurrection, projecting a more (rather than less) immediate encounter with Lazarus himself than can be claimed by the writer of John's gospel.[6] Poetry thus makes available to the historically-minded reader the sense of immediacy and reality that, after the Higher Criticism, can no longer be provided by the gospels themselves.

In the Bible, Lazarus appears just once after his resurrection to attend a supper with Jesus (John 12:1-2) and to become the object of curiosity (from the crowd) and hostility (from the chief priests who will use this event as the impetus to move for Christ's arrest) (v. 9-11). What F. D. Maurice, in a sermon on John 11, calls the "awkwardness and incoherency" of Lazarus' return to earth appears in Browning's realization not as temporary situations to be overcome but as the defining, ineradicable condition of his life. Roberts argues that Lazarus embodies "the wavering life-death ambiguity that so fascinates Browning" (118), but "wavering" here is an understatement: Lazarus is "perplext with impulses" (l. 186) that are curiously out of proportion with what appears to trigger them. He is susceptible to mood swings and sudden onrushes of overwhelming emotion: a moment of excitement is suddenly extinguished by "a word, a tick o' the blood within / … then back he sinks at once / To ashes, who was very fire before" (l. 194-96). Any accommodation he has made to his condition, his humility and submission, should not be confused with a lessening of that painful rupture—even the trauma—that was his resurrection.

Whatever we may think about Karshish's insight (or lack thereof) concerning Lazarus' resurrection, Browning's letter-writer is undeniably aware of the ungrounded, suspended position that his subject occupies, of the impossible possibility of living on. Where we might expect evidence of some kind of preternatural spiritual development (recall, for instance, the description

[6] Most contemporary biblical scholars hold that the four canonical gospels were written after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. (Gopnik 73).

of Lazarus as “saintly” in the *Complete Critical Guide to Robert Browning*), Karshish offers a much more ambivalent portrait that suggests a mind in constant confrontation with a traumatic suspension:

> He holds on firmly to some thread of life—
> (It is the life to lead perforcedly)
> Which runs across some vast distracting orb
> Of glory on either side that meagre thread,
> Which, conscious of, he must not enter yet—
> The spiritual life around the earthly life:
> The law of that is known to him as this,
> His heart and brain move there, his feet stay here. (l. 178-85)

It is not difficult to imagine that the “thread of life” vibrates in sympathy with the forces and awareness of the “glory” around it; the image suggests a kind of electrical charge passing through a conductor without remaining there. Although Guerin has argued that “the very suspension that Lazarus experiences is a kind of equilibrium” (134), this passage tells a different story: the word “perforcedly” registers an experience of trauma or compulsion, a reminder that the “meagre thread” cannot hope to survive the “blaze” (l. 189). Lazarus appears not as a higher, spiritually-awakened being nor is he portrayed in the process of trying to attain some transcendent knowledge flashed upon him during his “strange medical experience.” Indeed, the relationship between the spiritual and the earthly is not envisioned hierarchically, which would offer at least the possibility of transcending one into the other; rather, Lazarus is situated at the point of suspension between these two incommensurabilities, and he must maintain himself in that suspension indefinitely. It is difficult, even painful work to remain so suspended.

Poetry’s intimacy with incommensurability was well understood by Browning, who conceptualized the work of poetry as “putting the infinite within the finite” (Collingwood 1.232). The figurations of the incommensurability between the infinite and the finite that recur throughout the poem suggest that Browning was concerned with this problematic as well. The reader seems meant to understand that Karshish is taking Lazarus quite seriously despite (or

because of) his own inability to rationally explain the causes of his condition. Browning's speaker returns again and again to the dual themes of Lazarus' isolation and his atypical processes of perception that reinforce his separateness from those around him:

> The man is witless of the size, the sum,
> The value of proportion in all things,
> Or whether it be little or be much.
> Discourse to him of prodigious armaments
> Assembled to besiege his city now,
> And of the passing of a mule with gourds—
> 'T is one! Then take it on the other side,
> Speak of some trifling fact,—he will gaze rapt
> With stupor at its very littleness,
> (Far as I see) as if in that indeed
> He caught prodigious import, full results;
> And so will turn to us the bystanders
> In ever the same stupor (note this point)
> That we too see not with his opened eyes. (l. 143-56)

We are presumably meant to intuit that Lazarus' processes of perception are actually superior to those around him, that the attention he pays to a "trifling fact" somehow reveals his superior spirituality, that "privileged knowledge" that Byatt describes. That the reiterated "stupor" of Lazarus appears more engaged, more spontaneous than the ostensibly measured perceptions of the "bystanders" (who are really the ones who exist in "ever the same stupor") is obviously part of the poem's irony. Then again, it's possible that, especially as twenty-first century readers, we aren't exactly seeing "with his opened eyes" either and would probably take the villagers' side, given half the chance.

Lazarus' ability to be transported to the point of stupor by seemingly insignificant "trifles" of nature while remaining unmoved by the machinations of war can also be read as a poetic faculty, a kind of Romantic susceptibility to visionary trances that was often heightened by disruptions in the body.[7] Indeed, words such as "rapt" and "stupor" gesture towards the Romantic

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[7] McClatchey suggests that "Lazarus, like Karshish, is something of a poet, a maker and ... it is his resurrection that has made him a poet" (10). The description of Lazarus' susceptibility to small

discourse of the sublime, a connection that is heightened by Karshish's insistence on Lazarus' inability to grasp "the value in proportion of all things." Such repeated references to Lazarus' lack of moderation in relating to the world ("The golden mean, is lost on such an one" [l. 137]) recall the "Suspension of our Comparing powers" that Coleridge, as we saw in chapter 1, associates with the feeling of the sublime (*Shorter Works* 1.597). The same emphasis also emerges from Karshish's attempts to express in metaphor some formal truth of Lazarus' experience, particularly in the extended metaphor of the "beggar, in fixed middle life" (l. 126) who suddenly becomes rich beyond his wildest dreams:

> So here—we call the treasure knowledge, say,
> Increased beyond the fleshly faculty—
> Heaven opened to a soul while yet on earth,
> Earth forced on a soul's use while seeing heaven ... (l. 139-42)

The image evokes Kant's conceptions of the overwhelming force of the dynamical sublime, as well as the violence done to the subject that is confronted by something beyond its powers of cognition or resistance, an "inability to *take it in*" (Kant 116). That Lazarus does survive suggests that he has experienced something like the "indirect pleasure" of the sublime, "the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger" (Kant 98). Yet, as we have just seen, Lazarus' comparing powers remain suspended, almost as if he has entered a feedback loop of sublime experience, wherein each moment creates the potential for a subjective shattering, for the arising of a supersensible awareness of "the spiritual life around the earthly life."

The Higher Criticism, in the view of Suzanne Bailey, "confronted Victorians with the specter of unstable texts and inaccessible historical subjects, quite apart from the religious

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details also bears a striking resemblance to the ways in which Browning experienced his own thought processes, as discussed in Suzanne Bailey's recent book, *Cognitive Style and Perceptual Difference in Browning's Poetry*. Although this book was published too late to fully inform my study, it nevertheless provided an important reason to look carefully at the descriptions of Lazarus in "An Epistle."

challenges it posed" (" 'Decomposing' Texts" 117).[8] The influence of this mode of thinking on Browning's poetry was significant: "poems written throughout his career demonstrate Browning's ongoing concern with oral testimony and what might be termed the attenuation or fading of the human voice in time, an issue that comes to him directly from the higher criticism and reflects the epistemological problem of the vanishing historical subject" (119). At one level, "An Epistle" may be seen to bypass such epistemological quandaries by presenting a view of Christian truth able to overcome the corrosive effects of unreliable narration and the vagaries of historical evidence; this, of course, is essentially the way the poem has been read for the last hundred and fifty years or so. Yet, though the intention would seem to be to reassert his historical presence, Browning's Lazarus comes to embody that "vanishing historical subject." The potential for vanishing is registered in Karshish's claim that "The very man is gone from me but now." As much as it is meant to establish proximity and the immediacy of eyewitness testimony, as I discussed earlier, it is also possible to place the emphasis elsewhere, underlining the fact that "The … man is gone" rather than the recent nature of that departure. "Almost in sight" is not precisely the same thing as "in sight"; thus, in the first stanza that Lazarus is mentioned directly, he is described in his retreat.[9] The irony in Karshish's instruction to "see, how he takes up the after-life" is that Lazarus never becomes fully visible. Lazarus' silences are more evocative than his indirectly rendered speech, if only in underlining his ultimate isolation and impenetrability. Thus we see Lazarus, "obedient as a sheep" (l. 119), brought before Karshish by the village elders:

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[8] Bailey, for instance, opens her essay by quoting Herbert Tucker's view that Higher Criticism was "the Continental deconstruction of its day" (" 'Decomposing' Texts" 117; Tucker, *Browning's Beginnings* 8).

[9] Structurally, Lazarus' closest parallel in Browning's other work may be Pompilia of *The Ring and the Book,* who survives the brutal attack by her estranged husband's assassins just long enough to give her testimony and die talking. Like Lazarus, Pompilia inhabits a moment of suspension, the uncanny, dissonant space of living-on. Unlike, say, the Bishop of St Praxed's (whose dying proceeds in a more or less linear fashion), Lazarus and Pompilia have both been given a respite that is also a disruptive—even traumatic—reversal of the process (Pompilia by a team of physicians, Lazarus by Jesus Christ).

While they spoke,
Now sharply, now with sorrow,—told the case,—
He listened not except I spoke to him,
But folded his two hands and let them talk,
Watching the flies that buzzed: and yet no fool.
And that's a sample how his years must go. (l. 120-25)

Although we are made to understand that Lazarus chooses his silence in this instance—even at the risk of looking foolish—his objectification by the village elders goes largely unquestioned by Karshish. That he is also described as being "apathetic" (l. 226) and as having been "made and put aside to show" (l. 112) reinforces this sense that Lazarus is something of a living artifact, functioning as his own relic or memorial.[10]

At one level, of course, Lazarus would seem to be the case *par excellence* for what Carol Christ calls "One of the problems of plotting that most engages Browning … the projection of narrative beyond death" (397). What "An Epistle" presents, though, is not so much a narrative of after death than a rendering of the impossibility of such a narrative, with the implication that plotting itself cannot extend beyond death. The suspension of death appears not as the occasion for a new beginning (as it often does, for instance, in narratives of premature burial or in a text like Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*) but as the suspension of beginnings and endings, a limit case of the "moment, one and infinite" of Browning's "By the Fire-Side" (l. 181). Lazarus lives on in a

[10] To the extent that its presence confounds Karshish's ordering of the world in scientific terms, thus exposing that ordering as inadequate or partial, and in that it calls attention to the work of representation, the body of Lazarus operates in a fashion similar to that of many of the corpses in Browning's oeuvre. Browning, in the view of Carol Christ, "sees the dead body as an object that can constitute its own representation. However, he portrays this attempt as a macabre project on the part of the living to use corpses to support their own fictional constructions of reality" (393). The Lazarus of "An Epistle" is of course something of an outlier here, for he is not exactly a corpse, and the tone of the poem is uncanny but not macabre. Cornelia Pearsall also explores the connection between Victorian memorializations and Browning's poetry, particularly "The Bishop Orders His Tomb": "The Bishop's sudden revelation, one so horrible that it breaks the rhetorical pattern he has established, is that not only the body but, more crucially, its representation, is subject to decomposition. The body figured in death is as subject to disintegration as the body itself; even representation cannot evade mortality" (54).

moment of suspension, a suspended sentence of death that could be brought down on him at any time. Living on, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, is not identical to living:

> This enduring lasting, going on, stresses or insists *on* the "on" of a living on that bears the entire enigma of this supplementary logic. Survival and *revenance*, living on and returning from the dead: living on goes beyond both living and dying, supplementing each with a sudden surge and a certain reprieve, deciding [*arrêtant*] life *and* death, ending them in a decisive *arrêt* …" ("Living On / Border Lines" 89).

The "sudden surge" and "certain reprieve" evoke Browning's images of Lazarus rising and falling, poised between heaven and earth, life and death, this sublime instant prolonged indefinitely but not infinitely. "When we think of the return of Lazarus to his house at Bethany," observes Maurice, "it is not with an unmixed delight. We ask whether he could have welcomed the world's confusions which he had escaped? whether the thought must not have haunted him, that after a little while he should be in the same cave again?" (315). What haunts Browning's poem—and, indeed, every version of this story—is the knowledge of what awaits Lazarus at the end of this instant of suspension: "that same death which must restore his being / To equilibrium" (l. 206-7). Newman, perhaps, makes the point most starkly: "though [Christ] was about to turn back the scene of sorrow into joy again, yet, after all, Lazarus one day must die again—He was but delaying his own decree. A stone lay upon him now; and, though he was raised from the grave, yet, by His own inscrutable law, one day he must lie down again in it. It was a respite, not a resurrection" (135).

The problem that arises for Browning's representation of Lazarus is that of mapping the non-narrative space opened up by the suspension of death. With the exception of the infrequent moments when Karshish records direct exchanges between Lazarus and himself,[11] the poem's

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[11] In addition to the meeting scene quoted above, Karshish directly questions Lazarus about his situation in l. 220-25 ("I probed the sore as thy disciple should …"). A second encounter between

descriptions of Lazarus' afterlife are all in the iterative mode; that is, a type of narrative discourse "where a single narrative utterance takes upon itself several occurrences together of the same event" (Genette 116). Even the seemingly singular description of Lazarus' presentation to Karshish by the village elders contains an iterative dimension, for it is marked not as a unique encounter but as "a sample how his years must go." Virtually every other descriptive passage in the poem that has to do with Lazarus' mode of existence suggests moments repeated indefinitely, rather than any kind of narrative (or, for that matter, personal) development; they function as "so many almost motionless moments when the passage of time is masked behind repetition" (Genette 156).

The iterative, suspended rendering of Lazarus' afterlife in "An Epistle" offers an instructive contrast with the narrative of progression imagined by Maurice. In "The Raising of Lazarus," which is roughly contemporaneous with "An Epistle," having been preached in 1856, Maurice offers a series of speculations on Lazarus' post-resuscitation life. At times, Browning and Maurice seem to be in agreement; they both, for instance, imagine that Lazarus practices a "prone submission to the heavenly will" (Browning l. 203). Yet, Maurice imagines a process through which Lazarus gradually reintegrates into the world around him because he recognizes it as the will of God. The questions raised by the experience of Lazarus, in Maurice's rendering, are

> not different in kind from those which arise when any one who has been on the borders of the unseen world, who has had glimpses of another country, suddenly recovers, and has to adapt himself once more—for a time probably with a strange sense of awkwardness and incoherency—to the business and intercourse of the earth. In one case as in the other, I conceive there is but this solution to the difficulty. The man must be glad to be placed where it pleases Christ that he should be placed. (315)

Such an explanation seems almost self-consciously inadequate, coming dangerously close to downplaying the miraculous force of the resurrection of Lazarus. For the difference between

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Karshish and Lazarus is described at the end of the poem (l. 290-97), though the structure and language of this passage complicates any straightforward reading.

death and a near-death experience is one of kind and not, as Maurice implies here, of degree. However, particularly if one is operating within a Christian tradition, it is much easier to identify with Maurice's Lazarus than with Browning's. Whereas Browning's poem envisions Lazarus as altogether other, Maurice suggests that there might be a connection after all between death and near-death experiences, that the latter might help us gain access to the former. Certainly, this move enables Maurice to make Lazarus available not only as a site of identification but also as consolation for his audience. This is, of course, part of the point of a sermon, and Maurice performs it well at several points in his text. Yet, "The Raising of Lazarus" cannot fully contain the ambiguities and strange qualities of the gospel text that it comments upon.

In the next section, I turn to the story contained in the eleventh chapter of the gospel of John, a text which Newman describes as reflecting "the marvellous abyss of love and understanding" in Christ's nature (128). Although the gospel does not tell us how Lazarus "takes up the after-life," Browning's speculative fiction is nonetheless shaped by its relationship to John 11, and the poem, in both structure and language, bears witness to the rupturing effects of the events narrated in the biblical text. But the relationship between the Lazarus of John 11 and the Lazarus of "An Epistle" is not transparently referential. Indeed, much of the power of "An Epistle"—its difficulty, its resistance to being easily summarized—comes from the poem's ability to draw its readers' attention to the elements of the gospel narrative that are themselves "strange": first and foremost, the *absence* of Lazarus from the gospel text. Thus, as we will see, the relationship between "An Epistle" and the eleventh chapter of the Gospel according to John might be characterized as one of strategic discontinuity that neither rejects the story of Lazarus' resurrection out of hand nor attempts to explain away all of its ambiguities.

"Our friend Lazarus sleepeth"

The blind men, paralytics, and lepers who seek Jesus' healing touch throughout the gospels do so of their own accord because they believe that a reversal or correction of their condition will benefit them directly.[12] Even though the gospels do not afford its readers a glimpse of the life of the healed leper or paralytic, we have no reason to believe that his condition has not improved. Frequently, these scenes also point to a direct spiritual benefit for the person who seeks to be healed, as in the story of the paralytic whose friends lower him through the roof of a building where Jesus is preaching:

> [W]hen he saw their faith he said, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." ... –he said to the man who was paralyzed—"I say to you, rise, take up your bed and go home." And immediately he rose before them, and took up that on which he lay, and went home, glorifying God. (Luke 5: 20, 24-25)

In the resuscitation miracles, of which the raising of Lazarus is the most elaborate, other parties must seek Jesus' help on behalf of the dead person. While the mourner will no doubt have his or her faith restored, we can only speculate about how the person brought back from the dead may have felt. The lack of interiority displayed by these figures is part of the critique that the German author David Friedrich Strauss, one of the central thinkers of the Higher Criticism, makes against the resuscitation miracles in *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*.[13] Strauss's work, along with that of many other European writers throughout the nineteenth century, attempted to locate the gospels—and the events and figures they describe—within a human, historical context.[14] His

[12] Cf., for example, the story of Jesus' healing of the leper in Matthew 8:1-4, Mark 1:40-45, and Luke 5:12-16.
[13] Strauss's work was published in German in 1835; Mary Ann Evans' English translation of the fourth edition of *The Life of Jesus* was published in 1846.
[14] Although the article is by now more than fifty years old and has little to say specifically about "An Epistle," Kingsbury Badger's "See the Christ Stand!" provides a comprehensive overview of the major debates of mid-nineteenth century biblical criticism as an important context for Browning's religious poetry. The Browning who emerges from Badger's analysis is a figure searching for a spirituality somewhat broader than that offered by either traditional religion or its critics, an

speculations about Lazarus and the other resuscitation stories raise the disturbing possibility that the people who are seemingly the most direct beneficiaries of the exercise of Jesus' power in these cases may not have realized a benefit at all in being returned to their earthly lives—and they certainly seem not to have gone on to do great works, as one might expect from someone given a second chance. If Christ had really been capable of the actions with which he was credited, Strauss asks, would it not have made more sense to resuscitate more prominent or "useful" figures such as John the Baptist? The obscurity of the beneficiaries of this most extravagant of all miracles, as well as the second death they suffer through the silence of the gospel writers, become part of the ground on which Strauss finds these miracles to be not only logically but ethically and emotionally intolerable.

The story of Lazarus poses a number of particular difficulties for Strauss, who observes that "the conduct of Jesus throughout, and to a considerable extent, that of the other parties, is not easily to be conceived":

> When Jesus receives the information of the death of Lazarus, and the request of the sisters implied therein, that he would come to Bethany, he remains still two days in the same place, and does not set out toward Judea till after he is certain of the death. Why so? That it was not because he thought the illness attended with no danger, has been already shown; on the contrary, he foresaw the death of Lazarus. That indifference was not the cause of the delay, is expressly marked by the Evangelist (v. 5). What then? (487)
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> Now another motive is clearly indicated ... in the declaration of Jesus, v. 15, that he is glad he was not present at the death of Lazarus, because, for the object of strengthening the faith of the disciples, the resurrection of his friend would be more effectual than his cure. *Thus Jesus had designedly allowed Lazarus to die*, that by his miraculous restoration to life, he might procure so much the more faith in himself. (488)

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understanding of "God as Love...the manifestation of Love in a soul or souls of human beings" (62).

The Christ who emerges from Strauss's reading is little more than a cynical stage manager, manipulating those around him, particularly Lazarus, so as to produce a more impressive sign of his divine powers. Without the perspective of faith—which is precisely what Strauss and the other practitioners of the Higher Criticism wish to exclude from considerations of the reality of Scripture—the raising of Lazarus is hardly a cause for celebration. Later versions of Higher Critical works on Jesus retain this emphasis; commenting on Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus* in an 1863 letter, Browning will allude to "the wretched affair with Lazarus" (McAleer 180).[15]

English theologians such as Maurice and Newman do not so much obscure the "wretched" aspects of the tale as much as they attempt to make room for ambiguity. For them, the raising of Lazarus is fraught with all the difficulties that are stumbling blocks for Strauss; they do not simply disappear when read with the eyes of faith. Christ seems to act inexplicably, even inexcusably and he speaks cryptically throughout the episode, often to the point of being misunderstood by those who heard him. For Newman, the most perplexing (or, perhaps, poetic) moment of the story is not the raising of Lazarus itself, but the gospel writer's report that "Jesus wept" (v. 35). Newman emphasizes, rather than elides, the difficulty of the text, pointing out several "remarkable" discrepancies in Christ's language and behavior, yet also suggesting that these "seeming inconsistencies" may "prepare us for such other difficulties as may lie from a deeper comparison of history with doctrine" (129). One of the most significant examples of Christ's paradoxical speech arises when he comments from afar on the state of Lazarus' health:

> he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I
> might awake him out of sleep.
> Then said the disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well.
> Howbeit Jesus spake of his death: but they thought that he had
> spoken of taking rest in sleep.

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[15] Browning's comment on the "wretched affair" is most accurately applied to Renan's rendering of the scene, which follows the suspicions of Strauss. Nevertheless, the evidence of the "Epistle" suggests that the possibility of wretchedness is already contained within the Gospel story and that it had, perhaps, crossed Browning's mind before he began reading the Higher Criticism.

Then Jesus said unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead. (John 11:11-14)

Though this is not the first time in the gospels that Jesus uses sleep as a figure for death,[16] the disciples find themselves to be caught off guard by this instance of referential aberration; they first understand sleep in a literal sense, as being restorative for an invalid. Finding themselves on the wrong side of this suspended relation, they must rush to recalibrate their thinking without ever being sure that they have fully understood Christ's utterance. This is not the only dissonant moment in John 11, but it was, as Michael Wheeler observes, one of the most important for nineteenth century consolatory discourse, serving as a kind of point of origin for the metaphorical association of sleep and death (16-21). Yet it is also unstable, an undecidable suspension of reference between two mutually exclusive and mutually dependent meanings.

Maurice comments that in this passage "Our Lord is evidently teaching his disciples a new language; … which was not easy for them to learn, and which we understand very imperfectly yet" (306). That so-called "new language" that causes so much difficulty has to do with the Christian doctrine of the resurrection—the teaching that death is only a temporary pause for the redeemed when viewed from the perspective of the second coming of Christ. As much as he endorses this message, Maurice also cautions his listeners against relying too much on the identification of sleep and death, directing attention to the rhetorical performance involved in this transformation and, implicitly, to the discontinuity that gives this trope its miraculous force. Wheeler singles out Maurice as the figure who "in his uneasiness concerning the danger of applying Jesus' 'new language' to the clichés of the Victorian epitaph, comes close to acknowledging that it is at the very point of stress or fracture in the discourse of consolation that both the provisional nature of language and communication *and* the grounds of Christian faith are laid bare" (21). That "new

[16] Jesus uses similar language in his resuscitation of Jairus' daughter: "the girl is not dead but sleeping" (Matthew 9:24; cf. Mark 5:39, Luke 8:52). Strauss, citing this precedent, finds it incredible that the disciples would misunderstand Jesus' use of the figure in regards to Lazarus and considers their confusion to be a stylistic invention of the writer of the fourth gospel (488).

language" is also, implicitly, the language of poetry itself, of figuration, suspension of reference, and undecidability, as Newman's sermon implies:

> on the whole there is quite enough in the narrative to show that He who speaks is not one whose thoughts it is easy to get possession of; ... in a word, I wish to impress upon you, that our Saviour's words are not of a nature to be heard once and no more, but that to understand them we must feed upon them, and live in them, as if by little and little growing into their meaning. (130)

Newman describes the challenge posed by Christ's language in terms that we might conceivably associate with literary criticism, and, indeed, one of the consequence of the interpretive and theological debates of the nineteenth century was an extension of hermeneutical methods to the reading of non-sacred texts as well.[17]

Like Jesus' disciples, Browning's physician confuses the metaphorical sleep of death with the literal sleep of convalescence. Karshish marvels at the lasting positive effects that "three days' sleep" (l. 115) has had on Lazarus' physical well-being, making the fifty-year-old man seem young in both body and spirit. But the "three days' sleep" in Browning's poem is an error in more ways than one. For it was Jesus who was dead for three days; Lazarus, according to the Gospel writer, was in the grave for four. Thus, at the moment our attention is directed towards Lazarus it is also deflected away from him and towards Christ, a rhetorical move that reinforces Lazarus' absence from the Gospel. In the traditional reading of "An Epistle," the "three days' sleep" simply offers another rather obvious clue to the poem's irony: even when he thinks he is talking about Lazarus in clear medical terms, Karshish is talking—in metaphor—about Jesus. These effects are perpetuated throughout the poem and are, indeed, encoded in its very structure. Not only does Lazarus seem to leave silences and gaps wherever he goes—recall the scene of his first meeting

[17] Suzy Anger's *Victorian Interpretation* provides a comprehensive account of this historical development.

with Karshish in the town square—he frequently seems to slip beneath the surface of the poem's language at the very moments when he is ostensibly being described.

Perhaps the best example of this phenomenon comes when Karshish attempts to explain Lazarus' disproportionate, startled, and exasperated reactions to seemingly insignificant matters such as "a word, gesture, glance" (l. 162) from a child:

> Demand
> The reason why—" 't is but a word," object—
> "A gesture"—he regards thee as our lord
> Who lived there in the pyramid alone,
> Looked at us (dost thou mind?) when, being young,
> We both would unadvisedly recite
> Some charm's beginning, from that book of his,
> Able to bid the sun throb wide and burst
> All into start, as suns grown old are wont.
> Thou and the child each have a veil alike
> Thrown o'er your heads, from under which ye both
> Stretch your blind hands and trifle with a match
> Over a mine of Greek fire, did ye know! (l. 165-77)

In this long passage, Karshish turns to a memory he shares with his correspondent of their old teacher in order to better illustrate Lazarus' actions. Yet the comparison itself goes on for so many lines and introduces so many new details that it falls short as an explanation of Lazarus' behavior—the referents and correspondences become unclear. The final sentence of this section ("Thou and the child ...") can, of course, be taken as the explication, bringing the metaphor back under control, but it, too, remains ambiguous. While the reference to "the child" would seem to imply that these are the words of Lazarus, they are not graphically marked as such (a striking contrast to the directly quoted speech in the lines just above it) and thus could also arguably be understood as the words of Karshish and Abib's teacher. (And, Karshish notes earlier in the poem that "This grown man eyes the world now like a child" [l. 117]). Indeed, the image of "Greek fire" seems far more appropriate coming from an alchemist than from a village carpenter—and so this

extended metaphor never quite makes its way back to being a representation of Lazarus or his own words.

Walsh observes that "the reader cannot really identify with Lazarus" (223), because, in having died and being brought back to life, he has come to inhabit "the no-man's land between heaven and earth" (224). The no-man's land created by Lazarus' experience is also reinforced by his structural position within the convention of the dramatic monologue. He is neither the poem's speaker, nor its implied addressee or audience.[18] He is not exactly one of John Maynard's "duds of consciousness," doomed to serve as a foil for Karshish's non-existent self-aggrandizing aims. His closest relatives are all dead women—Porphyria, the Duchess or Ferrara, and the many other nameless corpses who reflect back the prejudices and solecisms of other speakers of other dramatic monologues. To the extent that we still read dramatic monologues as primarily a reflection of the mind of the speaker in all its limitations, Lazarus is quite simply beside the point. But Lazarus is not beside the point and, moreover, he is not—at least, not exactly—dead. In fact, he is doubly undead: within the poem, he lives, speaks, provokes, and, within our world, his name "lives on" as a testament to the power of Christ and the truths of Christianity. Structurally, then, the poem situates Lazarus as the inevitably obscured object of a dramatic monologue; the poem is not really "about" him.

Some justification for refocusing our attention on Lazarus is suggested by Catherine Maxwell's reading of "My Last Duchess." Noting that many of Browning's critics "curiously mirror the Duke's attempts to suppress his Duchess by failing to engage with the depiction" (143), Maxwell offers a revisionary reading of this paradigmatic dramatic monologue that places the

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[18] The classic discussions of the relations between the speaker and reader of the dramatic monologue appear in Langbaum's *Poetry of Experience* and Culler's "Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue." Two excellent considerations of the listeners or internally implied audiences of dramatic monologues are that of John Maynard and Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor. However, none of these authors offers guidance on what to do with a figure such as Lazarus.

portrait at its center as a source of power that resists the seemingly overwhelming discursive regime of the duke. Though the duke believes he has exercised his authority over the wayward woman by reducing her to a portrait and most of Browning's readers have agreed, Maxwell argues that the duchess continues to evade the duke's control: "Her spirit breaks out of the supposed enclosure of the painted sepulchre. ... [T]he Duchess comes through not in spite of the Duke's words but because of them. What the Duke says is totally bound up with the fact that he cannot extricate himself from the woman who prompts this speech, who, while she was an episode in his past, insists on every word of his present" (146). Karshish hardly cuts the same powerful, mesmerizing figure as the Duke of Ferrara; the self-described "picker-up of learning's crumbs" (l. 1) is sometimes tentative in his observations, inclined to bookishness and over-reflection, and too easily distracted by snakestone, spiders, and scalp disease to produce the kind of discourse that would overwhelm a projected audience into awed silence for the duration of a poem. But, just as Maxwell's emphasis on the shaping power exercised by the portrait reveals a counter discourse operating within "My Last Duchess," a more extended consideration of Karshish's description of Lazarus reveals insights that are no less valid and intriguing for their not having been strictly conditioned by the gospel account. Karshish *does* speak better than he knows—to once again cite McClatchey on this point—but the typological dimensions of his speech are ultimately less interesting than his representations of Lazarus' present life and his metaphorical descriptions of the events that led to it.

Troping Lazarus

As I suggested earlier, Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, are the central figures in the gospel story. It is their grief that prompts the emotion of Christ, a display made possible by the Incarnation itself. And it is the sisters who invite a reader's sympathetic identification. When

Mary's grief prompts her to exclaim, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:32), Newman discerns a universal complaint: "Men have seen sin and misery around them, and, whether in faith or unbelief, have said, 'If Thou hadst been here,' if Thou hadst interfered, it might have been otherwise" (134). Maurice, similarly, holds up the grief of Mary and Martha and the faith they maintain through their sorrow as an example for his audience: "is there anything in that thought to make a chasm between the household in Bethany, and any English household in the nineteenth century? Is not the feeling the very same, in the heart of every one who has lost a friend or brother?" (311-12). Mary and Martha emblematize transhistorical notions of family and domesticity and thus provide Maurice's listeners and readers with a site of identification in an otherwise difficult text. The sisters remain central to Maurice's conception of Lazarus' afterlife as remaining more or less continuous with his prior existence.[19] When Maurice celebrates Lazarus' return to life, he does so by focusing on the domestic affections emblematized by Mary and Martha: "I cannot read this story without feeling that, among these things in heaven and earth, the sympathies and affections of the family are some of the chief. I know not why St. John would have dwelt so much upon the sorrows of the sisters of Lazarus, and upon Christ's feeling for them, if he had not meant us to understand this" (318).

Although Browning's poem at least alludes to Lazarus' personal connection to Christ (l. 272), Mary and Martha, these sisters who weep so bitterly over his death, are entirely absent, even though "in writing to a leech / 'T is well to keep back nothing of a case" (l. 265-66). Such an omission is perplexing, to say the least, and constitutes one of the most significant barriers to the direct and unproblematic identification of "An Epistle" with its gospel source. I do not think that we are meant to believe that Browning wishes his letter writer to be seen as a misogynist who finds women to be beneath his notice as a medical professional, nor is it plausible that Browning,

[19] Newman, in this sermon, refrains from offering speculations about the afterlife of Lazarus; his concern remains grounded in Jesus' "particular and actual works, set before us in Scripture" (131).

a careful reader of the Bible, would have left them out inadvertently. This apparently deliberate exclusion of Mary and Martha from "An Epistle" certainly reinforces the situation described earlier: the fact that, for Browning's Lazarus, there is no possible normalization, no return to family life, no process of equilibrium through which heaven and earth may be brought into relation to each other. Such an absence may also reinforce the uniqueness of Lazarus' temporal experience, his living on. There is no room in his iterative, suspended instant for Mary and Martha, who represent a more progressive narrative (that is, at least to the extent that they develop and change over the course of the story). We are left again in a kind of suspension, one that has Lazarus himself at its center—or, at least, the figure that we assume is Lazarus, underneath the grave clothes and bandages, his face obscured by the gospel's cloth.

Instead of particular affections, Browning's Lazarus professes a kind of general love that extends to people, animals, and even plants. Karshish likens such love to the way "a wise workman recognizes tools / In a master's workshop, loving what they make" (l. 230-31), an image that serves to heighten Lazarus' isolation from those around him; there is a limit to the intimacy one can have with a tool, particularly if that tool is seen largely as a means to an end. (Perhaps Lazarus, having been a vehicle for Christ's power, feels a certain sympathy here.) Similarly, a passing reference to "his child" (l. 159), though it does give us some clue as to the existence of a domestic establishment, is deployed in such a way that it once again marks Lazarus' difference:

> Should his child sicken unto death,—why, look
> For scarce abatement of his cheerfulness,
> Or pretermission of his daily craft!
> While a word, gesture, glance from that same child
> At play or in the school or laid asleep,
> Will startle him to an agony of fear,
> Exasperation, just as like. (l. 159-65)

Here again Lazarus is represented at "cross purposes" (l. 158) with the world, his reactions marking a reversal of typical human response. It's also not entirely clear from textual evidence

whether Karshish is talking about Lazarus' actual child or whether these lines should be understood as an example invented for Abib's benefit. At the time of his (first) death, the biblical Lazarus was unmarried and presumably childless. The phrase "sicken unto death," moreover, evokes Christ's cryptic comment upon receiving the message that Lazarus was ill: "This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it" (John 11:4). Therefore, while on the one hand this is a classic example of Karshish's unconsciously Christian reportage, it is also, on the other, an example of a very complicated suspension of reference. It obscures as much as it intends to illuminate, and it again prevents a reader from identifying with Lazarus.

What Browning's text, more so than the sermons or even Strauss's critique, must confront is the incommensurability between Lazarus' individuality and his exemplary status within Christian doctrine. Christ, says Maurice, "did not come into the world to show special favours, but to assert and manifest universal truth. He did not come into the world to break God's laws, but to establish them and to show forth the will which was at the foundation of them" (309). One of the consequences of Lazarus' resurrection is that he is turned into a signifier of the doctrine of the resurrection; this makes his individual subjectivity something of a remainder or supplement. The resurrection effected by Christ's words does not fully erase Lazarus the man; the miracle depends on our ability to imagine an afterlife for him. At the same time, Christ's miracle—the event that will come to be associated with the name of Lazarus—is fully realized in the moment. So, while Lazarus lives on, as he must, his name itself remains somewhat suspended and frozen in time, increasingly distant from the man himself. Like Tennyson's Ulysses, Lazarus has "become a name," the signifier of the doctrine of the resurrection, the type for each human being who is rescued from eternal death through the grace of Christ. Lazarus both is and is not himself; he is

not the Lazarus he was prior to his death, but neither is he the Lazarus who was called from the grave.

Maurice's sermon speculates that Lazarus himself might have become aware of his exemplary status within his lifetime: "this may have been to him, if he could take it in a greater comfort than even his appearance again beside the old hearth,—a compensation for all he might suffer then or afterwards,—that through him multitudes unborn were to learn the meaning of their own death, the secret of their own life, and who is the Friend who interprets them both" (315-16). Maurice's Lazarus draws consolation from his ability to serve as a sign to others. If he is not immediately "useful" in the sense that Strauss had in mind, the meaning of his name and his life will outlive him, a durable signifier. Yet Maurice does add "if he could take it in" as a qualification on Lazarus' imagined equanimity (the word Maurice uses is "discipline"), opening the possibility at least that such consolation is more easily articulated than realized. What seems clear in Maurice's sermon is the destabilizing force of Lazarus' particularity. To dwell too long on Christ's personal affections for Lazarus and his sisters risks making the miracle a simple suspension of the rules for selfish reasons rather than an exemplary conversion of a man into a sign. Thus, too, does Newman portray the succession of Christ's emotions. Though his sympathy may be sparked by the particular spectacle of Lazarus' death, "we may suppose," Newman writes, "... that His pity, thus spontaneously excited, was led forward to dwell on the various circumstances in man's conditions which excite pity" (133).

The poem is, to a great extent, written from the space of discontinuity, from this interval between Lazarus and himself. Which is to say that Lazarus is the center of "An Epistle," but he is the kind of center envisioned by Derrida in *Writing and Difference*: "a central presence which has never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute" (280). Browning's Karshish, of course, does not perceive Lazarus' exemplary nature; he arrives in

Bethany without any preconceived notions about what Lazarus "means." The most meaningful irony of the poem is not the way in which Karshish misunderstands the conventional signifiers of gospel discourse; rather, it is the project itself, this attempt to treat Lazarus as an individual human being, as a stable point of reference, a ground for description and diagnosis. This is the project that must necessarily fail in advance, and, indeed, Karshish's description of Lazarus as an individual registers the disruption caused by Lazarus' dual function, his inability to be one with himself. Indeed, among the many "strange" behaviors of Lazarus, Karshish records the following:

> I perceive not he affects to preach
> The doctrine of his sect whate'er it be,
> Make proselytes as madmen thirst to do:
> How can he give his neighbour the real ground,
> His own conviction? (l. 213-17)

Ian Jack provides a "standard" reading of the passage, arguing that "Lazarus appears so obedient to God's will that he does not even preach about his experiences, having no inner prompting to do so" (236). But that view only partially understands the function of Karshish's query. "How can he give his neighbour the real ground…?" is a rhetorical question, in which Karshish is not actually seeking information about the process by which Lazarus gives his neighbour "his own conviction"; rather, he is understood to be commenting on the impossibility of that exchange. The Christian reading of the poem already registers this rhetorical valence: from an orthodox perspective, Lazarus does not "affect to preach" because his existence itself is the warrant, the "real ground," a more powerful—and transparent—proof than any preaching.

In its immediate context, "conviction" seems to refer to the "creed prodigious" (l. 250), which we imagine to be some version of the Christian message, that elusive "good news of Christ" that so many authors have credited Lazarus with disseminating—even though "prodigious" already suggests a kind of excess, an uncontrollable message that may or may not be brought under control; recall the "prodigious armaments" (l. 146) of the Roman Empire poised to overrun

Bethany as well as the "prodigious import" (l. 153) that only Lazarus can see in small details. But Karshish's question, like the poem's numerous references to Lazarus' silences and refusals to speak, necessarily indicates the existence of a limit on the possibility of communication, placing the existence of that "real ground" in doubt. Lazarus's paradoxical, suspended situation prevents him from fully accessing the "real ground" of his own beliefs, including the evidence that would seem to come from his own experience. "An Epistle," through its focus on Lazarus, questions the very possibility of witnessing, the process by which one person's conviction becomes that of his neighbor. And, just where the meaning of a given sign seems to be most unambiguous—Lazarus is, quite literally, "living proof" of Christ's power—it appears rather as suspended and contradictory.

If that "conviction" was demonstrably identical to the good news of Christ, the theological irony would still be clear enough. However, Browning's speaker also uses the word "conviction" earlier in the poem in his account of Lazarus' testimony about his experience:

> the man's own firm conviction rests
> That he was dead (in fact they buried him)
> —That he was dead and then restored to life
> By a Nazarene physician of his tribe:
> —'Sayeth, the same bade "Rise," and he did rise. (l. 97-101)

This passage is the closest that Karshish comes to representing Lazarus' experience in biblical terms. The second line of this passage holds together both the content of Lazarus' "conviction"—the death that he *believes* happened to him—and the parenthetically-noted *fact* of his burial. The passage thus takes us to the very limit of what can be known about anyone's death. Although Karshish neither affirms nor denies the plausibility of this account, his reserve has been dismissed as posturing or hedging, an index of the "fatally circumscribed view of the scientist" (Altick 494) that prevents him from being able to take the leap of faith that will save his eternal soul. Dupras,

similarly, accuses Karshish of "relentlessly minimiz[ing] the madman's ardent 'conviction,' although the nature of an incarnate 'Creator and sustainer of the world' fascinates him" (11).

If Lazarus's story is true—if he was truly dead and not merely buried—then it cannot be proved. His own death remains, as it must, beyond the reach of his ability to experience it, much less to testify to it. The problem posed by Karshish's question, "How can he give his neighbor the real ground / His own conviction?", is thus performative rather than constative. It matters less to Karshish and to the poem's readers that Lazarus doesn't really know (and, in fact, can't fully know) what happened during the time he spent in the grave than it does that Lazarus believes that he has been resurrected. Ideally, of course, burial signifies that the person being buried is actually dead. But the suspension of reference that consoles us with the idea that death is really like sleep has a more gothic flip side where one's sleep may be mistaken for the sleep of death and that burial will actually take place without death occurring. That implicit uncertainty is carried through in the next line. The repetition of "That he was dead" enforces the Gospel's account, but it does not erase the parenthetical uncertainty about the status of Lazarus' body. Indeed, the dash dislocates the second iteration of the phrase, offering a visual representation, however slight, of uncertainty. The repetition thus serves to mark the suspension of certainty instead of resolving it. Such uncertainty, in fact, is what constitutes this experience in the first place. If we are to accept the miracle of Lazarus's existence—that is, that he was *actually dead* and not simply an exceptionally hardy victim of a live burial—we must also, paradoxically, accept the fact that the actuality of his death can never be more than a "firm conviction" supported, but not proved, by the fact of his burial. To speak about the material experience of one's own death undoes the very finality of death itself, placing the witness in an impossibly contradictory position: if you were truly dead, there would be no coming back, no speaking about it.

The last line, "the same bade 'Rise' and he did rise," refers, of course to the moment in the gospel account when Jesus calls Lazarus forth from the grave. It is a striking incident of performative speech: the line seems to accelerate as if to emphasize the simultaneity, rather than the succession, of Christ's words and Lazarus' action. "Rise" functions as what Donald Hair calls a "turning word" in Browning's poetry, effecting a turning, troping or conversion. "A trope," Hair writes, "…is literally a turn which typically takes a word and rotates it, so that it points away from its ordinary referent" (73). "Rise" not only marks the conversion of the dead man into a living one, it also turns—or tropes—Lazarus the historical individual into Lazarus the symbol. Indeed, "rise" emphasizes the kind of transcendence of the self that Lazarus is being called to perform. That double turning, through which Lazarus becomes both more and less than himself, is essential to the theological meaning of the Gospel story. "Lazarus" no longer points specifically to the person described in Browning's poem, it also (and perhaps more vividly) indicates the broader consolatory discourse of Christianity.

It is also, however, a rather striking misquotation of the gospel text. Jesus tells the cripples and paralytics to "rise," while English translations such as the King James Bible render Christ's call as: "Lazarus, come forth" (John 11:43). It seems too simple to dismiss this incident as an accidental misreading or as a substitution made simply to better fit the poem's meter. Nor should we assume that Browning considered "rise" and "come forth" to be interchangeable terms. Indeed, it seems almost more plausible, albeit disturbing, to believe that we are being given to understand that Lazarus himself has forgotten parts of his own story. The doubling of the word "rise," like the repetition of "that he was dead," creates a gap in the text that remains open, a kind of *mise en âbyme* at the point of the poem's contact with the gospel story. Like the absence of Lazarus' sisters, this is a perplexing departure on Browning's part, particularly at such a crucial point for the story to which the poem ostensibly refers—and it is a departure whose intention must remain

somewhat undecidable. The “Rise” / ”did rise” formula appears later in the poem as well: “…oft the man’s soul springs into his face / As if he saw again and heard again / His sage who bade him ‘Rise’ and he did rise” (l. 191-93). The “sage” of course refers to Jesus; thus, at a moment where Christ becomes very palpably present (at least in the sense of animating the memory and responsiveness of Lazarus), the poem rather directly declares its discontinuity with the gospels.

This rupture, this suspension, bears witness to the nature of miracle itself as incommensurable, unexpected, ungraspable, and—most importantly—unrepeatable. This undecidable suspension in “An Epistle” anticipates the testimony of the Apostle John in Browning’s “A Death in the Desert” (published in *Dramatis Personae*, 1864).[20] Browning’s John (whose name is, of course, traditionally associated with the gospel that contains the account of Lazarus’ resurrection) emphasizes the singularity of miracles:

> I say, that miracle was duly wrought
> When, save for it, no faith was possible. (l. 464-65)
>
> So faith grew, making void more miracles
> Because too much; they would compel, not help. (l. 472-73)

The miracle that is repeatable or expected ceases to belong to the order of the miraculous – faith tainted with expectation and knowledge is no longer fully faith. We must somehow believe that something will happen (Jesus will come and save our brother, even though he is not here and our brother is dead) and do so in the face of overwhelming evidence that nothing will happen at all. Such are, indeed, the exorbitant demands of faith that converge, impossibly, on the figure of Browning’s Lazarus.

In *Browning’s Beginnings*, Herbert Tucker identifies “imaginative suspension” as a technique central to Browning’s work that operates somewhat separately from the more fully theorized tropes of tension and balance. In *Sordello*, for instance, Tucker sees “a fruitful

[20] Lines from “A Death in the Desert” are quoted from Karlin’s *Robert Browning: Selected Poems*.

suspension between past and future knowing" (21) in which the poet performatively constructs what he knows through writing. Suspension makes the future possible in Browning's work by leaving something still to be discovered, something still to be said; Tucker's thesis is that Browning is fundamentally a poet of futurity, a futurity that goes beyond the perpetual tension of known alternatives. The pauses of "suspenseful hesitation" (143) work against a tendency to know everything in advance and maintain a sense of openness; in a sense, it is always whispering, "not so fast" (206). Lazarus, Karshish reports, holds on to "the thread of life." Once we begin to pull at that thread, the poem threatens to unravel, and even seemingly simple referential statements are revealed to be more complicated. The suspension of the question of Lazarus's death helps us see how the poem itself comes to be constituted as an event, whether we see that event as the making of a myth or the taking of a leap of faith. A performative gesture, the bracketing of the question of Lazarus's death ensures that its possibility will remain active and unsolved. Structurally, the question of Lazarus's death cannot be solved without denying the miracle; at the same time, that suspension functions constitutively to establish the premise and "ground" of the poem.

Within the frame of the poem, Karshish knows none of this. Yet, his language does register these turnings and discontinuities. To describe Lazarus' condition as arising from a traumatic event "at the turning-point / Of trance prolonged unduly some three days" may be a misdiagnosis, but it nonetheless correctly apprehends the form of the event as a conversion, turning, or troping. Perhaps appropriately, it is also a second instance of the "three days" error that incorrectly identifies the length of Lazarus' death as the length of Christ's. Lazarus' suspended subjectivity is a result of the exemplarity with which the gospel narrative endows him. Without ever denying the theological necessity of this event or its status as "good news," Browning captures the ambivalence of Lazarus' position. The miracle—so to speak—of Browning's poem is that the poet is able to capture some of the poignancy and, indeed, the

tragedy of Lazarus' impossible situation, without diminishing the importance of the miracle itself. We should not be surprised to find that Lazarus appears to an outsider to be mad for, by necessity, he is "not all there." Suspension—not only of his comparing powers but of his subjectivity itself—is the defining fact of Lazarus' afterlife. The energies of the sublime remain uncontained in the poem, and cannot fully be subsumed back into an orthodox Christian narrative. "An Epistle" marks the disappearance of Lazarus, his withdrawal from the scene of signification and from referential discourse. At the same time, Lazarus' willingness to hold firmly, in spite of everything, to the "thread of life" suggests another meaning of suspension as well: suspension as responsive, aware, and faithful.

Reading with the heart

For more than half a century, students of poetry have been instructed in the "suspension of moral judgment" prescribed by Robert Langbaum's influential 1957 work, *The Poetry of Experience*: "we understand the speaker of the dramatic monologue by sympathizing with him, and yet by remaining aware of the moral judgment we have suspended for the sake of understanding" (96). This particular form of suspension works best when we are confronted with a speaker such as the Duke of Ferrara—and, indeed, "My Last Duchess" is Langbaum's paradigmatic example of the genre. Langbaum goes on to compare the suspension of moral judgment, and the sympathy that results, with the posture of scientific research:

> The pursuit of all experience corresponds to the scientific pursuit of all knowledge; while the sympathy that is a condition of the dramatic monologue corresponds to the scientific attitude of mind, the willingness to understand everything for its own sake and without consideration of practical or moral value. We might even say that the dramatic monologue takes toward its material the literary equivalent of the scientific attitude—the equivalent being, where men and women are the subject of investigation, the historicizing and psychologizing of judgment. (96)

Langbaum's approach is manifestly epistemological: the reader of the dramatic monologue, like a scientific researcher, is interested in gaining knowledge, and if sympathy helps that cause along, then sympathy must also be required. As liberating as it might seem to examine everything "without consideration of practical or moral value"—and we would certainly not want to *denigrate* that very important work—ultimately, we run up against the very strict limitations of detachment. Moreover, in subsuming the reading of dramatic monologue into a scientific or quasi-scientific process, Langbaum's formulation risks effacing the important differences between the work of science and the humanities, the difference between the epistemological and the ethical relationship outlined in the introductory chapter.

The limitations of Langbaum's "scientific attitude of mind" are also suggested by the fact that this is precisely the posture with which Karshish approaches Lazarus in "An Epistle"—and it is precisely that posture that is shown to be too limited to deal with what it observes. Neither a self-satisfied murderer like the Duke of Ferrara or a pathologically delusional character such as the Bishop of St. Praxed, Karshish could easily resemble a reader of a dramatic monologue spoken directly by Lazarus. Throughout the poem, we see him attempting to suspend his moral judgment in the interest of entering in to Lazarus' experience, even though he does not assent to it at the end. Many of the most interesting passages of the poem are those in which Karshish tries to assess what has really happened, what is really going on with Lazarus, again following the same process that a well-trained reader of dramatic monologue would perform on a poem. So, too, for the readers of "An Epistle." To sympathize with Karshish in the way that Langbaum recommends does little to address what Dupras calls "our confident religious oversight" (11) that blocks any engagement with his experience of radical uncertainty. As long as we know that Jesus is the answer, we remain distanced from much of the poem—the most we can do is indulge Karshish in his confusion. Indeed, the ironic mode that is still privileged in the reading of dramatic

monologues makes Langbaum's suspension of moral judgment into a kind of false sympathy of condescension—and it has a tendency to lock us into the process of discovering the same ironies over and over again in these kinds of poems.

A more interesting possibility, and one that might allow us to do more justice to what makes "An Epistle" "complex and subtle and impossible to sum up, or describe *away*, as it were" (Byatt 13) is suggested by Jonathan Loesberg's recent work. Commenting on "A Death in the Desert," Loesberg observes:

> Without being persuaded by [John's] belief, necessarily, we accept it for the duration of the poem. But if we read the poem this way, ought we not to read other dramatic monologues, whose speakers manifestly do not share what we take to be Browning's beliefs, with equal sympathy for alterity? ... [O]ne would think that the obvious formal point of a poem given to us in another's voice would be to engage with that voice, at least for the duration of the poem, rather than to determine its logical shortcomings and, which half of what a speaker says we should agree with and which not. Even sympathizing, which still implies an evaluation rather than an engagement, seems an insufficient response to the form. (233)

The response to alterity that Loesberg describes highlights the necessity of a suspension much less limited than Langbaum's model, a suspension that gives up its scientific detachment and polite agnosticism in favor of an engaged and active experience of uncertainty. We might, at least provisionally, call this poetic faith. Though McClatchey insists too much on the transparent Christianity of the poem, he is one of the few critics to take the role of metaphor seriously in Karshish's description of Lazarus: "It may also be a metaphor of the dramatic monologue, a hint to Abib (and, possibly, the reader) on how to read this poem .... Thus Abib should read with the 'heart' in order to comprehend Karshish's real intent" (McClatchey 7). We, however, do not read dramatic monologues with the heart; for us it is less about comprehending Karshish's "real intent" than it is about watching the way he constructs himself and his reality, being attentive to the ways that construction fails. Once we make the decision to engage Karshish on his own terms, to see

his language as something other than an index of his rather obvious errors, a very different version of this poem emerges. We see Lazarus not as a stable signifier of saintliness or Christian faith, but as a shattered, suspended—even perhaps tragic—figure.

Poetic form allows us to imagine ourselves in a posture of receptivity that is not passivity, where we might hold ourselves in suspension, not simply by refusing to judge but by welcoming uncertainty and confusion—even at the risk of misreading, underreading, overreading, or simply being taken in by the spectacle. It is something other than expectation or entitlement, reflecting a willingness to welcome the experience of not-knowing and to respect it as such, to become intimate with those figures that resist intimacy. To see the poem as discontinuous instead of referential enables us, in the words of Eve Sedgwick, to "open a space for moving from the rather fixated question, Is a particular piece of knowledge true, and how can we know? to the further questions: What does knowledge *do*—the pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving again of knowledge of what one already knows? *How*, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects?" (*Touching Feeling* 124). Applied to "An Epistle," Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading, a process by which a reader may come to "entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did" (146), reminds us that the miracle of this "strange medical experience" lies not in its inevitability but in its contingency, and that miracles themselves can never be made normative or repeatable—they can never be proved by the laws of regular existence nor be spoken of in language. This discontinuity or suspension of reference, inherent in the structure of miracle itself insofar as it signifies a suspension of natural laws and the order of the possible, is what Karshish, bereft of the aids of Christian discourse and arriving, as all of us do, after the Age of Miracles has ended, must bear

witness to the best he can. And the representation of this discontinuity in all of its ambivalence, is, ultimately, Browning's greatest achievement in "An Epistle."

Chapter 5
"Slowness fleet":
Practicing Suspension in Christina Rossetti's *The Prince's Progress*

> At its most stable, modernity becomes the management of its aimlessness, the routinization of its (un)founding, a practice of perpetual suspension.[1]
>
> Which way?—which way?[2]

Reading Against Roothold

Christina Rossetti is, in many ways, the Victorian poet of suspension *par excellence*. Poised between the aspiration towards spiritual perfection and the necessity of speaking of the divine in a fallen, human language, the allusiveness of her writing frequently takes us to the edge of referentiality without effecting closure. The speakers of Rossetti's poems oscillate between the desire to go and stay, to be both present and absent, to allude to deeper meanings and revelations, while leaving open just enough of an interval to render certainty an impossibility. Many of her most famous lyrics dramatize liminal positions and anticipatory states: waiting, wishing, hoping, dying. The speaker of "Remember" evokes the time "When you can no more hold me by the hand, / Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay" (l. 3-4), a gesture which looks forward and backwards at once, lingering on the threshold between life and death, but also between love and renunciation. The play of revelation and concealment in "Winter: My Secret," the poem that Isobel Armstrong has described as "almost a summa of [Rossetti's] work" (*Victorian Poetry* 357), elevates the suspension of reference to the status of a paradigmatic lyrical practice. The content of the speaker's "secret" remains uncertain and oblique, perhaps even nonexistent. The pleasure of the poem lies in the play of signification and non-signification: "Or, after all, perhaps there's none: / Suppose there is no secret after all, / But only just my fun" (l. 7-9).

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[1] Collings 350-51.
[2] Christina Rossetti, *The Prince's Progress* l. 317. All quotations from Rossetti's poetry are taken from Crump's *Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti.*

But the playful withholding of "Winter: My Secret" always threatens to turn, perhaps without even a moment's notice, into something fixed and frozen, a hysterical paralysis that freezes at the moment of disappointment and is doomed to repeat it. Angela Leighton describes the "twilight thresholds" as "places of disorientation and delay. They open up a vague and obsessional dreamland in which consciousness seems suspended between heaven and earth, remembering and forgetting" (159). And twilight, as Lizzie reminds her errant sister in *Goblin Market*, "is not good for maidens" (l. 144). Indeed, it is the pain of suspension—the agony of delay, the trauma of forced renunciation—that we more readily associate with Rossetti's poetry: "Hope deferred made my heart sick in truth" (l. 2), reflects the speaker of "A Pause of Thought," using a phrase that echoes throughout much of Rossetti's other work. Whether a result of the creeping habits of years of self-renunciation or the effect of the jolt of traumatic rupture and disappointment, suspension manifests itself as a kind of illness whose symptoms include fixation, arrested development, and acts of withdrawal (forced and otherwise) that uncannily resemble premature burial or living death.

Indeed, whether they are playful or painful, Rossetti's practices of suspension are most clearly represented as acts of withholding or withdrawal, becoming, as in the infamous image from "The Heart Knoweth Its Own Bitterness," "a fountain sealed thro' heat and cold" (l. 44). But this image, as powerful as it remains in Rossetti studies, tells only a partial story of suspension, privileging refusal and willful insensibility. However, as Dinah Roe has aptly observed, "Rossetti is often presented as a poet of resignation where there is a strong argument that she is a poet of acceptance" (169). The distinction between resignation, which suggests passivity and withdrawal, and actively engaged acceptance, offers a cogent and much-needed corrective to the longstanding critical tendency to see Rossetti as a poet of withdrawal and unacknowledged repression. In turn, Roe's emphasis on Rossetti's practices of acceptance, especially as they manifest themselves in her

religious poetry and prose, helps situate my own interest in how suspension functions as an enabling structure for the complexity of Rossetti's religious faith and, moreover, how readers may also accept the challenges of practicing poetic faith. To see Rossetti as a poet of acceptance does not devalue the very real traumas and renunciations that her work dramatizes, but it does provide room for thinking beyond the narratives of repression and privation that still tend to be associated with her work, particularly the writing that most directly engages her religious faith.

Suspension, as practiced by Rossetti, is not merely an oscillation between two mutually exclusive meanings as we have seen, for instance, in the work of Tennyson. Rather, Rossetti's "pausal poetics" (a term I borrow from a recent essay by Armstrong) go beyond the structures of "both/and" in order to create the sense of being held up, to interrupt the forward flow of reading and enable us to contemplate both our own responses as well as the possibility of thinking or believing otherwise.[3] Understood broadly, suspension functions in Rossetti's work as a practice of awareness that not only dwells in uncertainties but embraces and accepts them. Suspension enables what Armstrong has recently called the "ethical relativism which can be the only possible response to a world in which everything that lives is holy" ("Christina Rossetti in the Era of the New Woman" 31). Our responses must always remain in motion, not clinging to a single meaning as absolute truth, but rather incorporating newer and more subtle shades of meaning. Rossetti's posture of radical non-attachment and suspended faith counteracts tendencies towards mental and spiritual inactivity, whether those tendencies are produced by sloth or an overreliance on inflexible rules or uncritically-accepted orthodoxies. Indeed, as paradoxical as it appears at first, Rossetti's suspension is first and foremost a matter of activity; it deliberately opens spaces for

[3] My thinking in this section has been influenced by Armstrong's discussion of Rossetti's *A Pageant and other poems* (1881), the last work she addressed to a secular audience: "Her management of stress and pause, and her risk-taking use of irregular patterns matches the uneven world encountered in her theogeny. It matches a world not only of plenitude but of death and catastrophe. ... The caesura holds us up, enables a new perspective, a new measure of experience" ("Christina Rossetti in the Era of the New Woman" 32).

contemplation and even confrontation within her work. It is this suspension, these different versions of pausal poetics, that keep "the poet's meaning in motion" (Roe 9).

Writing in the 1892 devotional text, *The Face of the Deep*, Rossetti observes that "Divergences are the order of our day; insomuch that it has even been alleged that no two leaves can be found alike; and I for one am ready to believe it" (118). Turning her attention towards the "incalculable if not infinite variety" (118) of human life, Rossetti makes it clear that this variety is not what separates us from God; rather, it is our separation from God that tempts us to code differences negatively as divergences and to establish arbitrary standards and expectations to manage those differences according to our own desires. By contrast, Rossetti suggests that a world governed by exceptions and contingency—one in which "divergences" are the order as well as the principle of that ordering—requires a faculty of flexibility and awareness:

> Foothold we must need have, at least until we be made equal to the angels; but let us pray against roothold. A foot may spurn the ground it cannot choose but tread; a root grasps and holds fast to the soil whence it sucks subsistence, and whence it oftentimes cannot be wrenched except to die. (119)

What is perhaps most striking about this counsel to "pray against roothold" is the fact that Rossetti does not distinguish between "good" and "bad" objects of attachment. That is, she does not challenge her readers to replace one set of hopes, expectations, or outcomes with ones that are more reasonable or acceptable. Neither does she advocate a wholesale project of renunciatory transcendence, of holding oneself "above it all." Foothold cannot be dispensed with; to cling to one's future transcendence is still clinging. Even the most admirable attitudes and interpretations, the most orthodox beliefs and practices—or, for that matter, the concept of ethical autonomy itself—can become objects of attachment. To be "made equal to the angels" is not to be redeemed from the condition of change, but is rather a liberation from the condition of attachment itself, a state of suspension without object.

The difference between foothold and roothold thus lies in the presence of an active will: footholds are sought by sentient, conscious beings, while rootholds are more appropriate to vegetation or vegetative states. The image appears to reflect what Colleen Hobbs has called "a clear preference for the celibate visionary's autonomy rather than the submission of an earthly woman 'not beloved' or burdened with a family" (419) at work throughout Rossetti's devotional prose. Instead of reading a lack of social ties—marriage and children, most obviously—as a privation or, for that matter, as sites of hysterical or traumatic renunciation, Rossetti here imagines an ethically-enabling autonomy based on a posture of both acceptance and non-attachment. The structures and methods that I am describing are undoubtedly related to Rossetti's commitment to the religious and poetic practices of Tractarianism. Emma Mason, in a recent essay that extends previous work by Diane D'Amico, G. B. Tennyson, and others, reminds us that the poetry of reserve does not generate poems that are riddles that may be definitively solved but rather texts that remain ambiguous, requiring perpetual interpretation and reinterpretation as one's spiritual knowledge expands. In the present chapter, however, I seek to separate—albeit provisionally and incompletely—the forms of Rossettian reserve from their content. That is, I am interested in uncovering suspension as a more general practice that operates in a supplementary relationship to the specifically Tractarian elements of her poems. Where Mason, for instance, reads "Winter: My Secret" as "compliant with reserve" to disclose what for her is an inevitable connection between the poem's speaker and God himself (208), the emphasis of this chapter will be on the affective and intellectual structures of suspension that come to bear on a practice of "poetic faith" that both intersects with and may be considered at least somewhat separately from Rossetti's theological concerns.

Rossetti articulates the distinction between foothold and roothold late in her writing career: *The Face of the Deep* is among the last works she published in her lifetime. However, as

this chapter will argue, her critique of attachment is already taking shape much earlier as suspension comes to inform her poetic projects. That this critique is occasionally difficult to pin down should be taken as a mark of Rossetti's commitment to the practice of not only praying but also writing against "roothold." I will focus specifically on the practices of suspension at work in her long narrative poem published in 1866, *The Prince's Progress*. This is an unusual text to associate with an active, potentially empowering form of suspension. If anything, *The Prince's Progress* appears to offer a straightforward critique of suspension. The Prince is prone to delay and misdirection, moving only indecisively along his path. "Strong of limb if of purpose weak" (l. 47), Rossetti's Prince displays little independent resolve: he undertakes his journey to claim his bride only at the urging of the disembodied "true voice of [his] doom" (l. 19). Throughout much of the text, he trudges through a bleak landscape, wishing to be elsewhere and to be doing something else. He succumbs to the earthy charms of a lamia-like milkmaid, avails himself of the chance to participate in an Alchemist's pursuit of the elixir of life, and lingers in the gentle ministrations of the mysterious women who pull him from the waters of a flash flood. Each of these encounters distracts him from his more meaningful journey, and, despite good intentions and a belated renewal of purpose just before he reaches the Princess's palace, the poem ends not in the celebration of the promised fairytale marriage but with the Princess's funeral procession, wherein her handmaidens blame the Prince's tardiness for their mistress's lonely death. But if the Prince's often passive consumption and shallow reading practices are the problems, the answer offered by the Princess—simply closing our eyes—is not really an answer at all.

The Prince's Progress overtly critiques forms of suspension such as delay, paralysis, indecision, and sloth. Yet, the poem is also (perhaps counter-intuitively) a critique of progress itself, at least in its unthinking, rigidly acquisitive modes. It anticipates, among other things, Rossetti's later concerns with what Armstrong describes as "the automated time of nineteenth-

century modernity and what she thought to be the dangers of its optical culture" ("Christina Rossetti in the Era of the New Woman" 26-27), while also demonstrating the ways in which fixed expectations—the "roothold"—inhibit more active response. That critical and readerly passivity can be figured as a form of visual enthrallment echoes the language that Coleridge had used to describe the "devotees of the circulating libraries" in the *Biographia Literaria*, where he envisions a mass of consumers engaged in "a sort of beggarly daydreaming" triggered by the projection of the "moving phantasms of one man's delirium, so as to people the barrenness of an hundred other brains afflicted with the same trance or suspension of all common sense and all definite purpose" (1.48n). The problem in Rossetti's poem is not suspension itself, but rather the unthinking acceptance of paralysis. Suspension is part of what is given in *The Prince's Progress*, not something to be explained or pushed away. The reader must actively participate in maintaining that suspension, giving herself over to the experience without identifying with either the Prince's tendency towards complacency and lassitude or the Princess's all-too-willing withdrawal.

Representing failure is not without its risks, chief among them the possibility that an attempt to write successfully about failure may be misunderstood (or, for that matter, may be correctly understood) as a failure to write successfully. Much of the critical reception of *The Prince's Progress* has followed these narratives of failing and falling short. *The Prince's Progress* is frequently cast as the pale younger sister of the more popular *Goblin Market*, a view that arguably was held by Rossetti herself.[4] When he put together a selected edition of his sister's poetry taken from the *Complete Works* published earlier in 1904, William Michael Rossetti commented only that "*The Prince's Progress* is the only rather long narrative, besides *Goblin Market*, which my sister produced. She preferred *Goblin Market*, and the great majority of readers have, I think,

[4] The most often-cited evidence for Rossetti's having held this view is a March 1865 letter to Dante Gabriel, where she writes, "I readily grant that my *Prince* lacks the special felicity (!) of my *Goblins*," though she goes on immediately to add, "yet I am glad to believe you consider with me that it is not unworthy of publication" (*Rossetti Papers* 83).

concurred with her" (ix). Readers since have tended to follow this line of judgment and considered *The Prince's Progress* to be an inferior sequel to *Goblin Market*; Constance Hassett has recently described the frequent and seemingly unavoidable comparison between the two narrative poems as "mildly unfortunate" (87). Even the efforts of scholars such as Diane D'Amico to find more productive ways of reading these two poems has tended to do more for *Goblin Market* than *The Prince's Progress*. Hassett, indeed, is far from alone when she concludes that "A poem about failure can be a success—but not in this instance" (87).

But the question, it seems to me, is not whether a poem about failure *can* be a success, but whether a poem about failure *should* be a success, or whether success and failure have any meaning when it comes to a poem that is so up front about the ways in which it falls short, a poem that draws attention to failure again and again. The poem asks us, on some level, to accept failure and, more than that, to respond to it by thinking of failure as something other than a privation or lack (of success, of reward, of proper information and tools). To the extent that *The Prince's Progress* "fails" (fails to be interesting, emotionally compelling, aesthetically satisfying, or simply fails to be *Goblin Market*), it does so in part by a design that proves to be a fertile ground for the cultivation of suspension and receptivity—a suspension that goes far beyond the images of procrastination and narcotic hibernation. A "successful" reading of this poem that thematizes failure must on some level recognize the provisionality of the meanings that we make from it. It must respond, that is, to ethical as well as epistemological demands, including the demands of falling short, of missing the crown, of failing.

The following sections will use suspension to reconsider the staging of failure in *The Prince's Progress*, examining its implications for both the poem and the reader. I am particularly concerned with Rossetti's figures of disappointment, attachment, and frustration: the arid, lonely scenes of desolate landscape; the doomed Alchemist; and, perhaps more unusually, the image of

the Prince's drowned body, captured in a moment of suspended animation after a flash flood. Rossetti's practices of suspension hold us up, transforming negative affects—failure, boredom, and frustration, among others—into sites for the contemplation of our own attachments and expectations. More broadly, suspension at the level of form, narrative, and genre enables *The Prince's Progress* to be more than just a reversal of fairy-tale tropes, a critique of Victorian patriarchy, or a stern warning about the dangers of procrastination and shallow reading.

"Ambiguous and even incorrect"

The Prince's Progress is not only, as Rossetti described it, a "reverse of the *Sleeping Beauty*" (*Letters* 1.184), it is also—as the poem's title suggests—a rewriting of John Bunyan's classic 1678 allegory of Christian life. The poem's relationship to *The Pilgrim's Progress* has defined the most influential critical understandings of the nature and consequences of the Prince's failure. Mary Arseneau observes that, "Both Rossetti's Prince and Bunyan's pilgrim are seeking the reward promised to them in the Celestial City, and both must cross a landscape fraught with physical challenges and spiritual temptation; but the Prince seems to have little sense of himself as a pilgrim and does not make the 'progress' that Bunyan's pilgrim makes" (*Recovering* 144-45). The exemplary journey of Bunyan's protagonist sets a standard for spiritual pilgrimage against which the shortcomings of Rossetti's Prince may be understood in explicitly Christian terms as failures of perseverance, reading, and general spiritual rectitude. Even a scholar such as Dawn Henwood, who makes the case for a "subversive" reading of the images in *The Prince's Progress*, accepts the basic premise that the Prince "has access, naturally, to all the orienteering tools of the Christian context. ... [A]long with his pilgrim staff, the Bridegroom has at least the proddings of his God-given conscience, even if explicit Biblical guidance has not reached his fairy-tale kingdom" (86). Though Arseneau and Henwood disagree on the intentions behind Rossetti's intertextual

borrowings, they both accept the premise that the quest fails because the Prince does not comprehend the need to carefully interpret the signs around him in order to comprehend their greater significance.[5]

An earlier version of Arseneau's study concludes by drawing a clear parallel between the work of the Prince and the work of the reader: "In *The Prince's Progress* the protagonist never comprehends his responsibility to probe the moral and spiritual dimensions of his experience," she writes. "But the lesson that the Prince does not learn is one that Rossetti's readers must, for it is only when we look beyond the beautiful and apparently simple surface of Rossetti's poems and become aware of the multiple layers of literary allusion and moral and spiritual signification that we begin to fully appreciate her art" ("Pilgrimage and Postponement" 295). Arseneau keeps the aesthetic and moral/spiritual dimensions of Rossetti's poem in a kind of tension; regardless of one's response to the aesthetics of the poem, each reader has the duty to "look beyond" it to the more important religious meanings that the Prince misses.

Arseneau's influential interpretation extends a tradition within Rossetti scholarship that marks *The Prince's Progress* as a site of interpretive restriction, the poem that reins in the kinds of readerly excesses inspired most obviously by *Goblin Market*. Indeed, if *Goblin Market* has traditionally seduced its readers with the promise of unbridled female sexuality, luxuriant imagery, and a seemingly endless field for speculation, *The Prince's Progress* is presented as the text that forces us to get serious again. We must be the religiously- and historically-aware interpreters that the Prince fails to be or risk falling into the perdition reserved for reckless

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[5] A significant dissenting view of the worldview available to the characters in *The Prince's Progress* has recently been offered by Simon Humpheries. Though he agrees with Arseneau and others who read the poem in essentially Christian terms, Humphries' broader argument attempts to undo the "critical orthodoxy" that considers the Prince and other figures in Rossetti's fairy-tale poems to be "capable of making a Christian interpretation of events—and therefore ... held culpable for failing to make that interpretation" (695). It is, in his view, "a serious misunderstanding of the symbolic method of these poems to suppose that the inhabitants of Fairyland can be examined on their grasp of theology" (696).

readers. In an essay from the mid-1980s, when Rossetti's poetry was still a relatively recent object of mainstream critical study, Joan Rees lays out her "essentially ... traditional" reading of *The Prince's Progress* in order to "draw out the essential qualities of Christina Rossetti's poetry on which her claims to serious and respectful treatment rest" (60). These are qualities that, in Rees' view, were being grievously ignored by then-current developments in feminist and political criticism centered on *Goblin Market*. For Rees, examining the less-studied narrative poem allows her to recover the "real" Rossetti from the grip of critics whose interpretations amount to "an act of disrespect to a woman who was at her best a powerful, distinctive and highly skillful poet" (71).

The self-described "conservative critical perspective" (3) that Arseneau adopts in her 2004 study, *Recovering Christina Rossetti*, has assimilated much of the feminist orientation that troubled Rees and mobilizes historicist practices to reexamine the relationship between Rossetti's domestic and spiritual life and her writing. Yet, like Rees before her, Arseneau uses her interpretation of *The Prince's Progress* to contain the effects of what she believes to be inappropriate or excessive reading practices related to Rossetti's work in general:

> The protagonist's repeated misreadings and inappropriate decisions throughout *The Prince's Progress* highlight the difficulties and dangers inherent in symbolic interpretations, but Rossetti is not suggesting that the world is intrinsically indecipherable. In reaching this conclusion, I am necessarily suggesting that Rossetti's uncompromising orthodoxy strenuously resists deconstructionist approaches to her writing. (*Recovering* 156)[6]

The implicit promise of Arseneau's work, as with that of Rees before her, is that as long as we read according to Rossetti's expectations and desires we will be safe from the kind of failure that the Prince experiences. The attempt to contain Rossetti criticism spinning dangerously out of control

[6] Arseneau's chapter on *The Prince's Progress* in *Recovering* revises and expands her 1994 article, "Pilgrimage and Postponement," which uses much of the language that I have quoted above. However, while both versions respond to Katherine Mayberry's *Christina Rossetti and the Poetry of Discovery* (1989), which mentions *The Prince's Progress* only in passing, it is only the 2004 monograph which names "deconstructionist approaches" as its target.

into feminist and "deconstructionist" methodologies is in some sense also an attempt to contain the experience of failure that pervades the poem, allowing us to appreciate and understand the Prince's failure without being tainted with it ourselves.

However, despite its seeming concern with illustrating the importance of right reading and interpretation, it is easier to note the Prince's failure than locate "a model of interpretive astuteness within the poem" (Henwood 87). Far better readers than Rossetti's Prince have made and will make interpretive mistakes. This seems to be at least partially what is at stake in the more conservative approaches to *The Prince's Progress*. Surface readings of the poem lend themselves to easy binaries—male/female, bride/bridegroom, good/bad—that collapse upon closer examination. Such ambiguities prove particularly disruptive to interpretations that depend on the legibility of Rossetti's intertextual borrowings. "The title's reference to *The Pilgrim's Progress* may seem a straightforward enough guide to interpretation," as Simon Humphries observes, "but this turns out to be a poem so full of subtle hints, and so promiscuous in its biblical and literary intertextuality, that it can induce interpretative queasiness" (685). What seems at first to be a fairly straightforward reworking of a quest narrative remains a text in which, as Henwood observes, "it is surprisingly difficult to gain a critical foothold" (87).

Blending a secular, fairy-tale quest narrative with a texture of biblical allusions, *The Prince's Progress* fails, in a certain way, to be one thing or another. The poem frustrates us largely because it raises eminently reasonable generic, narrative, intertextual, and even metrical expectations and then—maddeningly—declines to fulfill them. The reader's sense of frustration or "interpretive queasiness" functions as an affective parallel to the poem's thematization of betrayal. As Antony Harrison argues, *The Prince's Progress* critiques the "false expectations of love"—not only those held by the Prince, Princess, and other characters, but those fantasies that may also be harbored by "the reader of this quest romance whose events undercut the tradition

from which it emerges" (115). Kathryn Burlinson similarly cites *The Prince's Progress* as an example of how Rossetti's "use of fairy-tale structures and motifs coexists with formal revisions which upset conventional expectations of stable morals or transparent allegories" (7).[7] *The Prince's Progress* clearly performs a number of local critiques of ideologies associated with, among other things, Victorian gender roles and the medieval quest epic; it offers, moreover, a fairly straightforward satire on the romantic hopes of a certain kind of young woman. As Harrison and Burlinson's comments suggest, Rossetti's poem also appears to be concerned with the breakdown of even seemingly reasonable expectations held by the Prince and Princess, the poet and the reader.

Henwood cites inappropriate readerly expectations in her assessment of why *The Prince's Progress* has failed to achieve the centrality enjoyed by many of Rossetti's poems. "If the sequel to *Goblin Market* disappoints," she writes, "it is not, as many have claimed, because it is one-dimensional or monotonous. The poem only disappoints those readers who delight more in answers than in questions" (92). To delight in questions more than in answers is undoubtedly a prerequisite for being a "good" reader in a literary-critical sense. But Henwood's defense of *The Prince's Progress* falls short. These comments are more appropriate for a lyric like "Winter: My Secret," which achieves partial legibility through its performance of concealment. In this case, a "good" reader will be able to apprehend the limits of knowledge and action. she will take care not to identify with the epistemological desires of the imagined addressee of "Winter: My Secret," knowing that the implied disappointment is part of the reader's pleasure. But where "Winter: My Secret" flaunts its own secrecy in a way that allows a cannily-positioned reader to take pleasure in its suspension, *The Prince's Progress* is merely frustrating and the questions more tedious than

[7] Sarah Fiona Winters' argument that *The Prince's Progress* expresses a potentially blasphemous sense of personal disappointment with God on Rossetti's part represents an extreme articulation of the "betrayal" argument, though one that is less convincing than the readings offered by Harrison and Burlinson.

enjoyable. Its frustrations are not meant to be fully recoverable, nor may they be mitigated by the application of a more refined reading process, a situation that Henwood registers when, towards the end of her piece, she concludes, "*The Prince's Progress* proves, in the end, to be a disorienting and disturbing text because it provokes so many queries without raising the hope of resolution" (92). The poem performs a general, structural critique of expectation *as such*, prior to its being attached to any specific desire, hope, or goal.

The Prince's Progress resists our attempts to reify its lack of closure into a quasi-resolution, asking us to accept suspension and belatedness not as limitations but as potentially—if paradoxically—generative conditions that are the foundation for the experience of faith, poetic or otherwise. Indeed, its coherence as a text comes largely from its refusal of coherence, from a reluctance to have done with instability. Opening towards the contingent and unstable, *The Prince's Progress* brackets uncertainty, keeping it present even as it attempts to think through it. These uncertainties function even on the level of meter. Writing for the *New Review* in early 1895, just after Rossetti's death in December 1894, Alice Meynell cites *The Prince's Progress* as an illustration of a scheme of versification that "is apt to be ambiguous and even incorrect":

> Take the beautiful lyric at the end of *The Prince's Progress* … . It seems, in one stanza, that the poet has chosen to let the beats of her time fall—punctually and with full measure of time—now upon a syllable and now upon a rest *within the line*; so that the metre goes finely to time, like a nursery song for the rocking of a cradle. But the succeeding stanza is, as often as no, written with no rule except that of numbers and accents. One stanza throws doubt upon the others. Read the poem which way you will, there is no assurance as to the number of beats which she intended. (204)

Meynell treats Rossetti's meters as deliberate aesthetic choices, selected from a range of metrical forms in order to produce a certain effect.[8] She nevertheless expresses ambivalence about the

[8] In this, at least, Meynell departs from the stereotyped vision of Rossetti as an unreflective and spontaneous poet propagated most forcefully in William Michael Rossetti's biographical note to his sister's *Collected Works* and repeated in many biographies and critical studies since. She also

results of Rossetti's choices. The ambivalence concerns not so much the aesthetic effect of the meter but its ethical implications. Rossetti's meters, rather than providing a sense of stability and a clear guide for reading the poem, turn exceptions into the rule and leave her audience to wonder whether they have read the poem correctly. [9] Such choices are especially troubling because—like many other elements of the poem—they do not seem to yield their meaning any more easily upon further study: the "good" reader will be left even more ungrounded and confused than a superficial one. *The Prince's Progress* thus suggests that there might exist limitations to even the seemingly unimpeachable project of figuring out what the poem means, at least that kind of "figuring out" that depends on "getting" the poem, on grasping a certain straightforward reading or tracking down a specific set of references that will offer a way to decode its meaning.

Meynell's description of Rossetti's metrical scheme—one in which "there is *no assurance* as to the number of beats she intended"—ultimately points to a structural predicament. The message is not that we must identify better objects of attachment or have different, more reasonable expectations, but rather that expectation and attachment themselves are the problems. Suspension operates throughout *The Prince's Progress* as a technique of non-attachment, generating ungraspable and irresolvable ambiguities. It is not simply that Rossetti, in individual instances, flouts the rules of narrative, meter, or form: the poem is, I argue, designed to

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gives Rossetti more credit for aesthetic and formal knowledge than someone like John Ruskin had been inclined to several decades earlier. In a famous 1859 letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Ruskin had criticized what he read as a kind of Coleridgean "willfulness" or irregular meter in Christina's work: "your sister," he wrote, "should exercise herself in the strictest commonplace of metre until she can write as the public likes. Then if she puts in her observation and passion all will become precision. But she must have the Form first" (qtd. in Harrison 40).

[9] A number of critics have of course praised the subtleties of Rossetti's versification on strikingly similar grounds. Anne Jamison, for example, describes the meter of *Goblin Market* as a kind of proto-collage: "despite engaging in marked metrical play, 'Goblin Market' could not be said to 'have' a meter, itself, at all: no system emerges to dominate and unite the whole" (154), a technique that Jamison argues is central to Rossetti's artistic authority and flexibility—as well as her literary modernity.

frustrate those who were expecting to read an epic quest, a spiritual pilgrimage, or a poem as good as *Goblin Market*—that is, pretty much every reasonably informed reader. *The Prince's Progress* operates through a kind of suspension more closely linked to a Coleridgean "poetic faith"—a faith that first and foremost must reject attachments in favor of a more volatile and active receptivity and response.

The Fairy Prince Who Always Already Arrived Too Late

Much as Tennyson's *Maud* was "written, as it were, backwards" from the "O That 'Twere Possible" lyric, the final section of *The Prince's Progress*—what Meynell called the "beautiful lyric"—was the first to be composed. This sixty-line funeral dirge that mourns the Princess was written in 1861 and published as "The Fairy Prince Who Arrived Too Late" in the May 1863 issue of *Macmillan's Magazine.* The idea of turning the lyric poem into a medieval quest epic was suggested by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1865, on the grounds that such a text might be "commercially viable" (Rosenblum 47) if marketed to a reading public eager for another volume from the author of the immensely popular *Goblin Market and other poems*. A number of Rossetti's critics have connected some of the poem's narrative and aesthetic shortcomings to the circumstances of its production. Dolores Rosenblum, for instance, describes *The Prince's Progress* as "peculiarly blocked, as stubborn, in its way, as Rossetti herself was in resisting her brother's prescriptions" (Kent 140). However, my intention here is not to revisit the well-traveled ground of siblings' collaboration.[10] I

[10] There are a number of ways to interpret the implications of Dante Gabriel's influence on *The Prince's Progress.* Hassett takes a dim view of his directions on *The Prince's Progress* (86-89), blaming them to some extent for the poem's failure. Katherine Mayberry, on the other hand, cites the same history, including some of the same letters, as evidence of Christina's artistic agency and commitment to charting an independent course in her work (10, 41). Arseneau places an intriguing twist on the sibling relationship, arguing that Christina had her brother in mind when she created her romantically feckless Prince. The poem, according to Arseneau, is partially a criticism of her brother's spiritual indifference and romantic prevarications: "by the time Christina was writing *The Prince's Progress*, ... she might very well have seen Dante Gabriel as one

wish to draw attention instead to the compositional and structural context of the 1865 poem. Scholars have long understood that Rossetti's poetry lends itself to thematic as well as chronological readings, so that poems late in one volume may invite rereadings of texts that appeared earlier in the same book; similarly, the collected volumes that Rossetti put together allow for new relationships to emerge.[11] I am suggesting that the same technique may be fruitfully applied to *The Prince's Progress*, a text that is neither one fully unified poem nor two entirely separate ones. What emerges, then, is an understanding of *The Prince's Progress* that is better poised to deal with the fact that the Prince's failure is, as Kathy Psomiades argues, "not only the poem's climax but its origin" (113).

What I propose here is no less than a deliberately suspended reading practice that enables us to read forward, backwards, and perhaps simultaneously. In addition to marking the continuities between the first 480 lines and the final sixty, we should also appreciate the discontinuities that arise from the order in which Rossetti composed the two sections (and the circumstances under which she did so), as well as from a shift in thematic emphasis and poetic form. The 1861 poem is composed of six stanzas of ten lines each; the rest of the poem features six-line stanzas. The narrative sections added in 1865, moreover, "make far more obtrusive use of symbolism in order to evoke a dreamlike atmosphere" (Harrison 117). Indeed, dirge seems relatively secular, making use of only subtle biblical images and avoiding, for instance, any references to the dead Princess's afterlife. Although the symbolic scheme of the long poem has sometimes prompted speculation that the Prince is a failed Christ figure, his designation as a "Fairy Prince" in the 1861 title seems to foreclose that interpretation by expressing (among other

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incapable of the moral and spiritual interpretation that her incarnational poetics demand and which she sees as essential to understanding this life and its relation to the next" (*Recovering* 162). For a broader critical reading of the siblings' creative interactions, though with less emphasis on *The Prince's Progress*, see Chapman, chapters 4 and 5.

[11] See Rosenblum's discussion of Rossetti's poetic sequencing in Kent 132-56.

things) a generic difference from the Son of God.[12] None of this necessarily negates the religious readings of *The Prince's Progress* as a whole. Nevertheless, it does suggest that the poem's Christian borrowings should be read as a supplement, rather than as the definitive key to interpretation.

Dispensing with any trace of narrative framing, the opening lines of "The Fairy Prince Who Arrived Too Late" interpellate the title character with the accusation: "Too late for love, too late for joy, / Too late, too late!" (l. 481-82).[13] These voices excoriate him at some length for his procrastination: "You loitered on the road too long, / You trifled at the gate" (l. 483-84)—though, significantly, they do not accuse him of being a poor reader or link his procrastination to misinterpretation or shallowness. The Prince, for his part, is never allowed the chance to speak; he is not able to defend himself, nor is he able to acknowledge an awareness of having failed, if he indeed possesses such an awareness. Preceded by his reputation for belatedness and convicted in advance by his late arrival, the Prince must suffer in silence as he listens to a long enumeration of the admirable qualities of the "enchanted princess in her tower" (l. 487) whose "heart was starving all this while / You made it wait" (l. 489-90):

> We never saw her with a smile
>   Or with a frown;
> Her bed seemed never soft to her,
>   Tho' tossed of down;
> She little heeded what she wore,
>   Kirtle, wreath, or gown;
> We think her white brows often ached
>   Beneath her crown,
> Till silvery hairs showed in her locks
>   That used to be so brown. (l. 511-20)

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[12] Diane D'Amico groups *The Prince's Progress*, along with *Goblin Market* and the less-well-known "Maiden-Song" under the general rubric of "Christian Fairy-Tale poems" (68), but it remains an open question whether the secular fairy-tale form can be fully assimilated to the purposes of communicating Christian messages.

[13] The line numbers given are for *The Prince's Progress* as a whole.

The handmaidens' accusations against the Prince are based on external signs; they can only speculate about the Princess's inner state, whether or not her "brows often ached" as she awaited her fairy prince. And the Princess, like the Prince, is rather abruptly silenced by the voices of her handmaidens. In the next stanza, we learn that "We never heard her speak in haste" (l. 521), but we are not told what she said, or even whether she had any interest in marrying a man who was having so much trouble showing up. We are only informed that: "Her tones were sweet, / And modulated just so much / As it was meet" (l. 522-24). In life, as in death, "Her heart sat silent thro' the noise / And concourse of the street. / There was no hurry in her hands, / No hurry in her feet" (l. 525-28). Her rectitude is so perfect that she dies from it, leaving all the complaining to her serving women. Yet for all of this sense of eerie equanimity, the Princess of the funeral dirge is much more active than she's given credit for in the 1865 version, which begins with scene of deliberate enchantment: " 'Sleep, dream and sleep: / Sleep,' (they say): 'we've muffled the chime, / Better dream than weep' " (l. 10-12). That the Princess mourned in the dirge had at the very least a figural connection to the "concourse of the street" suggests something other than the "spell-bound" (l. 23) woman who seems to be watching without ever opening her eyes.

A similar disjunction operates between the time schemes of the dirge and that of the poem's opening. In "The Fairy Prince Who Arrived Too Late," the handmaidens are quite specific about what that "too late" entails:

> Ten years ago, five years ago,
>   One year ago,
> Even then you had arrived in time,
>   Tho' somewhat slow … (l. 491-94)

Clearly, we are not meant to read this passage as a literal description of how long the Prince's journey took; it is, of course, a rhetorical strategy that draws attention to the enormity of his tardiness. Yet, the litany at least draws upon a method of time measurement familiar to those of us who are not denizens of fairy-land. Although we are dealing with a "fairy prince," the

handmaidens avoid more conventional markers of fairy-tale temporality, the "once upon a time" and the "ever after" that bookend a tale like *Sleeping Beauty*. By contrast, the time scheme of the 1865 version is much more opaque. Its opening lines—

> Till all sweet gums and juices flow,
> Till the blossoms of blossoms blow,
> The long hours go and come and go (l. 1-3)—

do not carry the same referential resonance as the more precise measurements invoked in the dirge. The indeterminate, timeless time of the first two lines, with their gestures towards an ungraspable other time, seems to dissolve the "hours" of the third line, making them not only seem "long" but also somehow both infinitely recurrent and profoundly disconnected. Set against the vague promises of the first two lines, these hours seem aimless and insignificant, not to mention ungrounded and incommensurable with our typical experience of time.

Structurally, then, the 1865 *Prince's Progress* enacts the deferral of completion that its narrative represents. The sections added in 1865 never fully explain the failure called forth in "The Fairy Prince Who Arrived Too Late"; all explanations are themselves belated and thus incomplete.. What the exclamation of "too late" registers is thus at least partially this recognition of the impossibility of arriving on time. In this sense, the reiterated invocation of belatedness in "The Fairy Prince Who Arrived Too Late" provides uncannily paradigmatic background music for that strain in Victorian poetry characterized, as Armstrong has argued, by the experience of being "too late." "To be modern was to be overwhelmingly secondary," Armstrong writes in her introduction to *Victorian Poetry*. The Victorian poet, she argues, was "post-Romantic," "post-revolutionary," "post-industrial," "post-technological," "post-teleological," and "post-Kantian"—to name only a few (3). The Victorian double poem develops not from an attempt to make up for one's belatedness or assert primacy by some other standards, but rather to respond to the condition of being-secondary. For Rossetti, as for the male poets at the center of Armstrong's

study, the state of being "too late" is a starting point, the condition of one's existence—a condition that has to be met, experienced, and responded to, rather than being overcome, pushed away, or ignored. This fundamental failure is thus bracketed and suspended—not resolved or overcome.

Thus, although Dante Gabriel Rossetti, as editor of his sister's work, may have intended to "forge simpler poetic forms out of [Christina's] more complicated, unsettling poems," as Alison Chapman argues (75), it is not clear, at least in this case, that his intervention produced a text that actually is simpler than the funeral dirge. Because the Prince's originary failure is not necessarily conditioned by the same kinds of intertextual relations as the rest of the poem—the conditions which enable us to read his failure as a lapse in reading and a lack of spiritual depth—it remains somewhat beyond the bounds of interpretive practice and cannot be fully accounted for by the narrative. The complexity of the dirge does not dissolve in the solvent of medieval quest narrative; rather, the two sections are added together without fully mixing. That is, *The Prince's Progress* is not one poem, but neither is it two. Failure in *The Prince's Progress* is both the consequence of the Prince's actions and the occasion of his existence; it is not something that the poem seeks to avoid as much as it is a pre-existing circumstance that it seeks to explain.

Holding Up / Being Held Up

"The philistine prince," Psomiades contends, "is above all else *bored*; like a model bourgeois consumer, he seeks to be amused and entertained. By the time he finally decides he wants direct experience of the princess, there is no princess to be had. The greatest danger that everyday life poses to the aesthetic for Rossetti is not that it will, as in [Swinburne's] 'Laus Veneris,' attempt to stamp out the aesthetic realm but that, content with other amusements, it will simply not care enough about the aesthetic even to attempt to stamp it out" (112). Although she emphasizes the

aestheticist, rather than the spiritual, dimension of the poem, Psomiades draws upon the same structures as these more traditional readings in arguing that *The Prince's Progress* is, essentially, the story of the failure to appreciate meaning. Just as critics such as Arseneau, Rees, and Henwood point to the Prince's indifferent powers of perception as a flaw to be overcome by better readers, Psomiades' designation of the protagonist as a "philistine" offers the reader access to a kind of aesthetic connoisseurship. If nothing else, the fact of being interested enough to read a scholarly essay on *The Prince's Progress* means that we are not subject to the same limitations of bourgeois sensibility that we identify in the Prince. But to say that the Prince is a bad reader is not exactly the same thing as saying that he is a bored one. And the latter designation, the one that Psomiades claims should define our understanding of the Prince's actions, perhaps moves closer to Rossetti's point—even if, at the same time, it collapses some of the distance between the Prince and the reader. Although Psomiades comes far short of the potentially self-incriminating admission that *The Prince's Progress* can, at times, be boring (even to readers who are not necessarily philistines), she at least implicitly acknowledges the role that this negative or minor affect plays in the poem.

The Prince's Progress itself is strikingly straightforward in the recognition of its own disaffection: the Prince journeys through a "tedious land" (l. 152), engages in the "tedious trial" (l. 250) of the Alchemist's work, and travels a "tedious road" (l. 392) to reach the Princess's home. At one level, these phrases may be seen as renderings, in free indirect discourse, of the Prince's reactions to his journey and, as such, they function as yet another index of his interpretive shortcomings and a philistine failure to appreciate the experience he has undertaken. However, the Prince isn't exactly wrong to observe the tedium of his task, and these phrases thus also provide a kind of metacommentary on the poem itself, an almost aggressive reminder that we are

reading a poem that is not afraid to bore us. Indeed, Rossetti quite deliberately wrote boredom into the poem, as she explained in an 1865 letter to Dante Gabriel:

> [M]y actual *Prince* seems to me invested with a certain artistic congruity of construction not lightly to be despised: 1st, a prelude and outset; 2nd, an alluring milkmaid; 3rd, a trial of barren boredom; 4th, the social element again; 5th, barren boredom in a more uncompromising form; 6th, a wind-up and conclusion. See how the subtle elements balance each other and fuse into a noble conglom! (*Rossetti Papers* 77-78)

Rossetti offers this outline as a rebuff to her brother's infamous suggestion about including a tournament scene; to a certain extent, then, the Prince's encounters with boredom take the place of the jousts and other contests designed to entertain readers of more traditional quest epics. And while interpretations of *The Prince's Progress* by and large privilege the Prince's interactions with different characters as the main narrative, Rossetti elevates the trials of "barren boredom" of the Prince's long hours on his trek to the same level of importance as the more studied social interactions with the milkmaid and the Alchemist. If we disagree with the Princess's handmaidens that it is *not*, in fact, "Better [to] dream than weep" (l.12)—at least for the duration of *The Prince's Progress*—we must, therefore, confront many of the ambivalent or simply unpleasant feelings that can arise from a position of suspension: a sense of imminent (and immanent) failure, as well as the negative affects like frustration, thwartedness, and boredom with which the Prince struggles.

Indeed, although the title leads us to expect *Progress*, what we get instead is something like what Tennyson's *In Memoriam* called "vast eddies in the flow / Of onward time" (128.5-6)—scenes that seem to pool and spread out indefinitely rather than moving forward. thwarted expectations and misplaced assumptions engender a sense that things are not working out the way they are "supposed to," that the reader is being "held up" along with the efforts of the main characters. As the Prince struggles to rouse himself from sleep and leave the milkmaid, for instance, the stanza almost aggressively pulls him back:

> "Up, up, up," sad glad voices swelled:
> "So the tree falls and lies as it's felled.
> Be thy bands loosed, O sleeper, long held
>   In sweet sleep whose end is not sweet.
> Be the slackness girt and the softness quelled
>   And the slowness fleet." (l. 115-20)

The narrative voices and the careful, sympathetic reader urge the Prince towards the actions that will ensure the successful completion of the quest. The structure of the stanza secures the foregone conclusion of his failure. There are quite obvious contradictions—the up, up, up of the first line "falls" in the second; a bit further down we hear about "sweet sleep whose end is not sweet" in a line whose ending is, of course, the word "sweet." Rather than performing the reveille it describes, much of the stanza is soporific, liable to rock us back to sleep instead of getting us moving. Paradoxical constructions such as "sad glad voices" and "slowness fleet" and the enjambment "long held / In sweet sleep" strengthen the bonds that the Prince is exhorted to escape. Repetition—"sleeper"/"sweet sleep" ... "not sweet"—and slippery alliteration keep this sleeper in a kind of agitated suspension: do this! Don't do that! Don't wait! Hold on! For all of these reasons, it is also a somewhat difficult passage to read aloud, even though its meter is not irregular. Ultimately, it is nearly impossible to attend both to the demands of the meaning and the demands of the structure.

When the Prince finally succeeds in overcoming the temptations of sleep and the milkmaid, not to mention the structural bonds of the poem itself, he experiences his first direct confrontation with "barren boredom." He encounters the "stagnant air" of a "land of neither life nor death" (l. 144, 140):

> Untrodden before, untrodden since:
> Tedious land for a social Prince;
> Halting, he scanned the outs and ins,
>   Endless, labyrinthine, grim,
> Of the solitude that made him wince,
>   Laying wait for him. (l. 151-56)

We may detect a note of gentle irony in the narrator's view of the "social Prince" unable to deal with his own solitude. But the image of that barren landscape is more than a little menacing, and suggests an often unrecognized capacity for reflection on the part of the Prince: the rhyme with "wince" is especially suggestive of the relationship between physical and psychological stress. That this "characteristic grim little simile" (Rees 62) has been plausibly described as "a Childe Roland wasteland" (Rosenblum 88) does not exactly advertise its legibility. A slightly deeper comparison between these texts goes even further to refine the isolation and disaffection of Rossetti's Prince. Childe Roland possesses his horse, the memories of fallen companions, and—having had the good fortune to have been a creature of Browning's imagination—a rich inner monologue to accompany him upon his journey. Rossetti's Prince, who travels on foot and has no inner life or memory to speak of, becomes an even more depleted figure by comparison.

Both of these passages produce the feeling of being unable to move forward, a largely successful attempt to thwart the *Progress* the title insists upon. As Rossetti's outline suggests, these are also the moments in which we are most liable to experience our own boredom, noting the distance between our preconceptions of medieval quest narratives (whether the traditional forms followed by Tennyson in *Idylls of the King* or the weirder revisions of Browning's "Childe Roland"). But this is a potentially productive frustration, framed at once by "stagnant," self-contradictory images and produced elsewhere by metrical jolts and slipping sounds—all of which hold us up. To be held up is generally considered to be a negative experience, particularly when what is being pursued is an object of desire. The phrase, however, also suggests contemplation, as one might hold up an object to the light in order to perceive it more clearly. In this sense, being held up may also be enabling, allowing for the consideration of new possibilities, creating an interval in which new interpretations arise. The structural and alliterative properties of these stanzas, particularly in the first example, call attention to the present moment, holding it up and

examining it, even as the ostensible "message" of the section and its place in the broader narrative put pressure on that awareness, reminding us that time moves on even as we pause.[14] This is not suspense in the narrative sense, for we are not being asked to withhold judgment until further information is given, nor are we necessarily invited to offer hypotheses about what happens next. Indeed, it is not strictly epistemological at all: what we are being asked to investigate and be aware of is, in some sense, our own conditioned responses to the Prince's plight, our own processes of reading and interpretation—all of which, in the final accounting, are just as important as catching Rossetti's allusion to "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." Cultivating awareness is a the work of ethics, and perhaps a certain posture of "poetic faith," more than it is an epistemological process.

Not-So-Great Expectations

Burlinson argues that the poem's "spinning in time, its scrambling of temporal terms, and its verbal dallying are part of the point" (23), a point that, in her view, is about resisting the literary and gender conventions of a masculine quest epic. It is tempting to establish a similar binary opposition between the time schemes associated with the Princess and Prince, making them roughly equivalent, respectively, to eternal or heavenly time and linear, finite, human time. Yet, the poem resists even this seemingly reasonable comparison. The Princess may not feel the passage of time, but she is nevertheless affected by it; she ages and dies while she sleeps. Furthermore, although the passing of specific days and hours within the Prince's journey are marked throughout the poem, the measurements of time as a whole are so inconsistent in their referentiality that it is impossible to tell how long his pilgrimage takes. We can only surmise that

[14] Kenneth Crowell, my fellow panelist at the 2011 British Women Writers Conference expressed the situation quite well when he commented that "Christina Rossetti doesn't always mean what she says, but she means how she says it."

it's somewhere between several days and "Till the blossoms of the blossoms blow." This period of time is, so far as we know, equivalent to the time it takes to read 480 lines of Rossetti's verse, but it can hardly be said to be commensurable with it.

The Princess's experience of time is similarly relative and dependent: "How long shall I wait, come heat come rime?" (l. 7) she asks. (It is the only time her speech is rendered directly.) The answer is tautological: "Till the strong Prince comes, who must come in time" (l. 8). The circular nature of this response mirrors the dreamlike enchantment of the Princess, as she is seemingly withdrawn from the sensation (though not, of course, the actuality and consequences) of forward-moving time. In the poem's first two stanzas, she "sleepeth, waketh, sleepeth, / Waiting for one whose coming is slow" (l. 4-5); her handmaidens quickly intervene to interrupt the cycle of sorrow and urge her simply to sleep: "'we've muffled the chime, / Better dream than weep'" (l. 11-12).

By contrast, the Prince sets out on his quest with the appearance of someone who knows exactly what to expect:

> Forth he set in the breezy morn,
> Across green fields of nodding corn,
> As goodly a Prince as ever was born,
> Carolling with the carolling lark;—
> Surely his bride will be won and worn,
> Ere fall of the dark. (l. 49-54)

The Prince treats the outcome of his quest as a foregone conclusion, achievable within a defined period of time with a minimum of effort: a day trip that bears little relationship to the journey that actually lies ahead. His unfounded expectations about the timing of his quest help set the pattern for his successive misinterpretations: if you assume that you've set out on a lark with an obvious and easily-won outcome to anticipate, then it seems almost reasonable to stop for a drink and the company of a "wave-haired milkmaid, rosy and white" (l. 58) when you have "journeyed at least a mile" (l. 59).

The Princess's handmaidens at first appear more able to take into account both the difficulty of the journey and, implicitly, the Prince's tendencies towards distraction. When they cast their spell on the Princess, they do so in part because they recognize that the Prince's quest is likely to be arduous and long: "there's a mountain to climb, / A river to ford" (l. 9-10). Certainly, events predicted with such portentousness in the first ten lines of a narrative poem *must* play a large role in the story to follow. Except that they don't. A river is forded, and a mountain is climbed—both, incidentally, with an enthusiasm that belies the Prince's otherwise laggardly habits—but these incidents take place near the end of the poem. Though the riverbank is "steep" (l. 393) and the "mountain frowned" (l. 397), these two allegedly important tasks—tasks that the Prince completes successfully and without undue procrastination—are dispensed with in the space of three stanzas; the episode with the milkmaid occupies eleven. Indeed, what is so striking about these events is their insignificance. The Prince's resolve in these matters comes too late to have any practical effect on the outcome; two instances of his being "strong to do and dare" (l. 403) cannot outweigh the rest of his actions. Most scholars don't even mention them, skipping over these lines in order note that the Prince's first glimpse of the Princess's kingdom offers the interpretive consolations of rich biblical and sexual imagery.

It is possible to read the mistaken assumptions of the Prince and the handmaidens as comic moments that gently encourage the reader to identify inappropriate or unreasonable expectations in her own life and revise them accordingly. However, *The Prince's Progress* is, I argue, more deeply concerned with critiquing the structure of expectation in general. The figure of the Alchemist, a man whose search for the elixir of life has left him "mildewed for the grave" (l. 213) calls into question the possibility of ever distinguishing a reasonable expectation from an unreasonable one.[15] The Prince initially enters the Alchemist's cave seeking shelter and company

[15] For an alternative interpretation of the Alchemist, see Humphries.

for the night; this is the second of his "social" trials. Intrigued by the sorcerer's claim that the potion bubbling in his cauldron is the elixir of life, the Prince stays in the cave much longer in order to help realize this dream of immortality. The Prince begins his work "in hopeful mood" (l. 219), justifying this particular delay on the grounds that being able to offer the Princess the elixir of life will make up for any delays he happens to be incurring: "If I tarry, why life is good, / And she may forgive" (l. 221-22)—another rationalization based on a series of misplaced assumptions.

As the Prince works the bellows "thro' the tedious trial" (l. 250), the Alchemist attempts to perfect the elixir. But, as is well-known, the Alchemist is destined to give his own life in the pursuit of immortality, as suddenly:

> The dead hand slipped, the dead finger dipped
> In the broth as the dead man slipped,—
> ...
> The last ingredient was supplied
> (Unless the dead man mistook or lied). (l. 242-43, 247-48)

The narrator's parenthetical aside leaves the question of the efficacy of the elixir undecided. Whether "fool or knave, / Or honest seeker who had not found" (l. 260-61)—all possibilities opened by the poem—the Alchemist functions as the avatar of fixation, of attachment that is problematic simply because it is attachment. As Rees elegantly points out, he is a disturbing reminder that even the most admirable, self-sacrificing effort may still turn out to have been founded on a delusion: "The alchemist ... sacrifices his life for his elixir and in his way, like any Christian ascetic, he is a dedicated soul. ... To lose one's life, it appears, may not necessarily be to save it, the light within may be darkness, a sacrifice may be polluted and rejected" (70). The undecidability of human effort, a theme refracted through much of Rossetti's writing is, for Rees, the defining "nightmare" of *The Prince's Progress*—and, though she does not take her own analysis in this direction, it is arguably this nightmare that destabilizes the symbolic systems at

work in the poem, persistently running interference against attempts to identify a clear message or a guide to appropriate reading practices.

The narrator's parenthetical aside leaves undecided the question of the efficacy of the elixir. The Prince, for his part, "filled a phial" (l. 252) to carry with him through the rest of his journey, apparently believing until the end that he does indeed possess the elixir of life. Indeed, he justifies the detour into the Alchemist's cave on the grounds that being able to offer the Princess the elixir of life will make up for any number of consequences: "If I tarry, why life is good, / And she may forgive" (l. 221-22). The irony of maintaining one's attachment to an occult potion that may or may not work while one's beloved is dying the death that will place her beyond the potion's reach is abundantly clear and, in its form at least quintessentially Rossettian. This irony is made more complex by the fact that the phial does appear to provide a thread of symbolic continuity in the second half of the poem. With each successive reappearance of the image, it seems more and more reasonable to conclude that part of the Prince's problem, part of his failure, is this fixation. Our ability to understand the inappropriateness of the Prince's attachment to the phial thus becomes something for us, as readers, to hold onto as we make our way through the rest of the poem. But to insist too firmly on the status of *The Prince's Progress* as a parable of non-attachment is itself a kind of attachment. And, indeed, the same scene which purportedly secures the ironic status of the elixir of life—the flash flood in which the Prince nearly perishes—also marks a point of absolute and largely unrecoverable uncertainty.

"Is there life?—is there hope?"

The Prince leaves the Alchemist's cave only to encounter the "tedious land" once again; this is the second of his trials of "barren boredom." Predictably, he once again falls prey to the desire to evade this trial, fantasizing about the possibility of further female company:

It's oh for a second maiden, at least,
To bear the flagon, and taste it too,
And flavour the feast. (l. 298-300).

The "fl" sounds from "flagon" and "flavour" ooze into the "l" sounds of the next stanza, continuing the experience of slowness and boredom that gives way to the deluge:

Lagging he moved, and apt to swerve;
Lazy of limb, but quick of nerve
At length the water-bed took a curve
The deep river swept the bankside bare;
Waters streamed from the hill-reserve—
Waters here, waters there. (l. 301-6)

The disaster approaches over the course of the first three lines, yet we have only a moment for the "water-bed" to evoke an image of the sleeping Princess before the waters overflow their banks. When the poem does finally decide to move forward, it does so with a motion that is figured as the traumatic outbreak of unexpected natural force.

Unlike the other scenes of delay, the flood is excessive and seemingly impersonal: at no other point in the story is the Prince revealed to be so much at the mercy of forces outside of his control. What the flood is missing is that moment of choice that was central to the encounters with the milkmaid and the Alchemist. That is, the Prince chooses to drink the milk offered to him, and he enters the cave under no particular duress beyond the desire for conversation and repose. Though none of this necessarily excuses the Prince's procrastination, either before or after the flood, the unmistakable echo of the Ancient Mariner's lament in Rossetti's "Waters here, waters there" should caution us against making the assumption that the flood is a commensurable result of the Prince's actions. Rossetti's citational practices again obscure as much as they reveal, offering little in the way of a discursive foothold. Indeed, the violently churning flood, described in language that evokes the Romantic sublime, disrupts the symbolic scheme of the poem as well as its narrative pattern. Perhaps not incidentally, it is also by far the most exciting passage (if not the only exciting passage) in the entire poem. The reader, like the Prince, is swept off her feet by

the "dizzying whirl," "thunderous downshoot," and "lashing spray" (l. 314, 315, 316)—language that evokes Shelley more than Christ or Bunyan. The flood itself is powerfully disorienting, not to mention physically terrifying:

> High above, and deep below,
> Bursting, bubbling, swelling the flow,
> Like hill-torrents after the snow,—
> Bubbling, gurgling in the whirling strife,
> Swaying, sweeping, to and fro,—
> He must swim for his life. (l. 307-12)

The repeated "ing" sounds and the hard consonants strain the boundaries of Rossetti's stanza form; they don't create soporific eddies as much as they seem to erupt from the page and overwhelm the end-rhymes of "below," "flow," "snow," and "fro." The Prince's consciousness is momentarily submerged in these waters, delaying the realization upon which his very survival appears to depend: all in all, it takes eight lines from the river's initial overflow (l. 304) for the Prince to realize that he needs to respond to the situation. When he does respond, he is plunged into utter confusion as his senses of direction, sight, and hearing are overwhelmed:

> Which way?—which way?—his eyes grew dim
> With the dizzying whirl—which way to swim?
> The thunderous downshoot deafened him;
> Half he choked in the lashing spray:
> Life is sweet, and the grave is grim—
> Which way?—which way? (l. 313-18)

The dashes evoke the flailing of limbs in rough waters; one can almost feel the Prince's body as it is pulled under by the current. This is the only time in the poem where the "way" has been in question—the Prince may not like the path he must follow, but he has not, at least up until this point, had to spend much time considering the direction of his itinerary.

The appearance of the language of the Romantic sublime creates a disturbing sense of catastrophe and excess, raising the specter of nature that does not follow a divine plan—at least, not a divine plan that is at all legible. In a sense, this section imagines Shelley's "Mont Blanc" as if

it had been written from within the raving waters of the Ravine of Arve. Of course, it is precisely the lack of critical distance (the safe place that for Kant enables a disinterested contemplation of one's own powerlessness) that prevents us from seeing Rossetti's poem as gesturing towards the same sublimity as Shelley's. One cannot experience sublime elevation if one is simultaneously experiencing the necessity to "swim for his life." Nevertheless, the suspension of the Prince's subjectivity at these crucial moments forcefully recalls Edmund Burke's account of sublimity. We may at least surmise that the Prince experiences something like astonishment, which Burke defines as "that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it" (101). Rossetti's language invites the comparison, but the poem's response to this outbreak of power is weak, to say the least. The "life is sweet" cliché—an echo of the platitudes offered by the voices earlier in the poem—surfaces here with a heavy uselessness; it cannot answer the more pressing question of "which way?" Once again, *The Prince's Progress* has failed to live up to a certain set of expectations.[16]

For all of its excitement and suspense, the flood scene has received relatively little attention. Most critics seem to accept the explanation of a general Christian significance offered by Arseneau: "These waters have many biblical counterparts and so could be seen as potentially redeeming. Like the cleansing flood of Genesis, or the cleansing waters of baptism, this flood could restore the Prince and offer him a second chance: 'Is there life?—Is there hope?' (l. 324)" ("Pilgrimage and Postponement," 288).[17] The Prince is not redeemed, cleansed in baptism, or

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[16] Of course, as Ann Colley has recently demonstrated, these kinds of sublime scenes had collapsed into cliché themselves long before the 1860s. Rossetti's images thus also draw attention to consequences of depending on a certain set of external circumstances to effect an internal transformation; this passage underlines the emptiness of much traditional sublime discourse even as it demonstrates the effects of natural force.

[17] Rees, too, sees the flood in terms of what is not there rather than what is: "The death of the soul which the convent girl fears for her lover becomes, in the metaphor of the prince's journey, a

given a clear second chance—at least, not the kind of second chance that one would expect from a fully "Christian" poem. More importantly though, the symbolic excess of nature out of control—a nature that cannot be fully reconciled with the designs of an active, Christian God, draws attention to vulnerability and contingency. What prevents the Prince, and, by extension the language of the poem, from fully responding to the situation in front of him is that his energies are directed towards clinging to the phial that contains the Alchemist's elixir: an inappropriate "life preserver" in this situation. The language of slipping that described the Alchemist's death is repeated here: the bottle remains "clutched in one drowning hand" (l. 321), and while the Prince fumbles for a rope with his free hand, "His feet slip on the slipping sand" (l. 323).[18] Since this is an act that nearly costs the Prince his own life (as opposed to one that causes delay), it functions as a powerful object lesson: the problem is not a failure of interpretation but a failure of awareness and response, figured by an act of willful attachment. Rossetti's staging of sublime excess and catastrophic natural forces has the effect of undermining the certainties offered by religious knowledge alone: once again, "good" readers are thrown off course as their own attachments to certain symbolic structures and assumptions about narrative progression are exposed and uprooted. We, too, might be overwhelmed by the force of a poem to which we cannot readily respond.

The show of sublime natural force in a poem that seems otherwise preoccupied with the working through of Christian images (albeit to an ambiguous end) situates *The Prince's Progress* as the heir to a Romantic tradition that David Collings has recently described in terms of a preoccupation with "disastrous transcendence." These texts—among them *The Rime of the*

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threat of real death as the flood waters sweep over him. ... The prince experiences no ... purgation and salvation, though saved he is in what in effect is a parody of Christian salvation" (64).

[18] Even this near-death experience does not convince the Prince to let go: in the poem's final section he continues to cling to the phial and its contents as a talisman that will magically make everything right with the Princess he has made wait so long.

Ancient Mariner, "juxtapose the representation of … contingency with allusions to aspects of the Christian tradition" (347) in ways that are not fully resolvable. Although she does not comment on *The Prince's Progress* specifically, Catherine Musello Cantalupo describes Rossetti's relationship to Romanticism as at best "ambivalent," commenting that "In several major poems Rossetti carries on an argument with Romanticism that is at once a critique of Romanticism and an elucidation of the life and difficulties of her Christian faith" (Kent 283). Rossetti's staging of sublime excess and catastrophic natural forces has the effect of undermining the certainties offered by religious knowledge alone: once again, "good" readers are thrown off course as their rootholds are exposed. The symbolic excess of nature out of control—a nature that cannot be fully reconciled with the designs of an active, Christian God, draws attention to vulnerability and contingency.

When he is finally rescued, the Prince is "Just saved, without pulse or breath,— / Scarcely saved from the gulp of death" (l. 325-26). Up until this point, the poem's emphasis has been on the Prince as the agent of interpretation and, by extension, as a point of cautionary identification for the reader who is urged to make better choices. The flood ruptures these relationships: in this moment, the Prince is not the interpreter but the object of interpretation, a body in suspended animation. The image of the drowned Prince thus marks the point where knowledge, expectation, and attachment end. As I discuss elsewhere,[19] this is a vulnerable position, for an extreme state of suspended animation could cause a living body to be mistaken for dead. Indeed, throughout much of the nineteenth century, there was no reliable method for determining whether a drowning victim (or a body in a coma or other form of extreme trance) was alive or dead. To the extent that Rossetti's poem does contain the method for its own interpretation—an assumption that is implicit in much of the scholarship on *The Prince's Progress*—then the drowning of the Prince demands our attention, even if the uncertainty of his bodily state lasts for only a few lines,

[19] See chapter 3 as well as Mitchell's "Suspended Animation."

for the drowned body represents nothing less than the failure of methodology, the evasion of reading practices, and the specter of an ineradicable uncertainty.

The Prince's suspended animation (a state that suggests a degraded version of the Shelleyan "trance sublime and strange" that no longer has the capacity to enable enhanced sensibility) allows him to be held up as an object of interpretation. Yet, it does so in such a way that rules of interpretation are also themselves suspended and even thwarted. The questions that the poem poses about the Prince's body in the preceding line—"Is there life?—Is there hope?" (l. 324)—reflect not only two of the central emotional preoccupations of Rossetti's poetry[20] but also this popular scientific uncertainty about the signs of death. The caesura reflects the lingering, absolute uncertainty of this moment: in a very real sense, there is no way to "know" the status of the Prince's body, no index of reading practices that will enable a determination in that moment. Indeed, the dash itself reproduces this sense of ruptured temporality, for there is no easy transition from the concern with the present ("Is there life?") to confidence in the future ("Is there hope?"). Without a way to verify the presence of either life or hope, the Prince's rescuers act on faith to save his life, and in so doing they perform—somewhat ironically—the only unambiguously successful act of interpretation in *The Prince's Progress*. As figured by the drowned body of its protagonist, *The Prince's Progress* refuses to conform to rules of intertextuality, narrative, or genre. The response that it does call for is something like suspension—the form of suspension that enables poetic faith and ethical investigation. What it does not allow is fixation or attachment to a single rule, a reading that depends upon a single "symbolic protocol" that will make the poem's multiple levels of signification "manageable" (Humphries 697). No single protocol can account for every possible combination of consciousness

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[20] The emotional valence is more explicit when the same set of questions is posed about the Princess: "Is there life?—the lamp burns low; / Is there hope?—the coming is slow" (l. 379-80).

and insensibility that places a suspended body in danger of being mistaken for a dead one; the unmanageability, in all its dizzying or nauseating movement, is part of the point.

A subtle but significant change in tone marks the end of the Prince's dalliance with his rescuers. The languidly-expressed suggestions about taking action that characterize many of the interludes earlier in the poem disappear in favor of a more urgent and straightforward emphasis on impermanence:

> Slip past, slip fast,
> Uncounted hours from first to last,
> Many hours till the last is past,
>   Many hours dwindling to one—
> One hour whose die is cast,
>   One last hour gone. (l. 361-66)

The stanza's uncharacteristically short first line, composed of just four beats whose stresses remain ambiguous, provides an abrupt metrical jolt, marking the change in direction. In this stanza and in the following one, repetition seems to have lost its suspensive powers and serves rather to intensify the forward pressures of time:

> Come, gone—gone forever—
> Gone as an unreturning river—
> Gone as to death the merriest liver—
>   Gone as the year at the dying fall—
> Tomorrow, today, yesterday, never—
>   Gone once for all. (l. 366-72)

The word "gone" cascades through the stanza, replicating the flow of the "unreturning river." If the end rhymes provide the melody, "gone," which appears at or near the beginning of five of the stanza's six lines, functions as a harmony marking loss and operating somewhat outside the dominant structure of the passage. Although the sentiment "Gone once for all" suggests closure and finality, the stanza as a whole resists closure and containment. It slips away as we read it, performing the evanescence it describes and once again remaining ungraspable, unavailable to attachment or "roothold."

Reading Against Roothold, Once More

Reading *The Prince's Progress* in terms of the metaphor from *The Face of the Deep*—reading, that is, against roothold—reveals that the problem is not the object of one's attachment, but rather the entirely human drive to form attachments in the first place. The Alchemist's attachment to his quest for a material means of salvation, the Prince's clutching of the phial, and the Princess's rootedness in her own delusion are all versions of the dangers of roothold that Rossetti imagines in *The Face of the Deep*. The Princess, who at the beginning of the poem is surrounded by flowers—"By her head lilies and rosebuds grow" (l. 25)—has by the end of the Prince's quest become something of a plant herself. It is not just her willingly vegetative state, but the suggestion that she has, in a certain way, begun to "suck subsistence" from her dreams rather than reality, and that the coming of the Prince is the uprooting that shocks her system to death.[21]

The image of a root that "sucks subsistence" from ground that can never satisfy it calls to mind the language of *Goblin Market*. Laura "sucked and sucked and sucked the more" (l. 134) upon the fruits offered by the goblin men, only to return home to "gnas[h] her teeth for baulked desire" (l. 267) and waste away in "sullen silence of exceeding pain" (l. 271). We are told that "Her tree of life drooped from the root" (l. 260), an image that parallels the state of the Princess who "languisheth / As a lily drooping to death" (l. 385-86). Laura's desire becomes fixated on an object: the "kernel-stone" that she keeps as a souvenir of her goblin-fruit feast:

> One day remembering the kernel-stone
> She set it by a wall that faced the south;
> Dewed it with tears, hoped for a root,
> Watched for a waxing shoot,

[21] Rosenblum argues that "Symbolically ... the princess dies because the arrival of the prince means the end of her as virgin princess, because she exists only insofar as she 'lacks.' She pines because her garden is incomplete without him; she dies because his coming means the end of her garden: the phallic power that she lacks is also the phallic power that destroys" (89). See also Leighton and D'Amico.

But there came none ... (l. 281-85)

Ripped from the fruit it came in, the kernel-stone is just another dead object, a fact that underscores the tragic nature of Laura's fixation. Though "kernel" suggests fecundity and possibility, the potential for growth and expansion, "stone," suggests hardening and opacity, a certain limitation: it can multiply only by being broken or shattered.

In contrast to these images of attachment hardened into fixation, a series of entries in Rossetti's devotional "reading diary," *Time Flies* (1885), offers an example of what it might mean not only to pray, but also to read, against roothold.[22] In the entries for July 17 and 18, Rossetti unfolds the implications of an experience she had as a child of waiting patiently for a wild strawberry to ripen, only to find that she had "watched in vain: for a snail, or some such marauder, must have forestalled us at a happy moment. One fatal day we found it half-eaten, and good for nothing" (137). The anecdote plots the meeting of reasonable expectation with seemingly arbitrary disappointment to which the speaker must accommodate herself. However, Rossetti frames the story of the strawberry in a way that emphasizes her interpretive agency as well as her capacity for ethical action. She is actively engaged in rereading and rethinking her story, deferring its conclusion: "Thus then had we watched in vain: or was it altogether in vain?" (137) she wonders, acknowledging that she and her childhood companion had learned lessons other than the ones they were expecting. Rossetti's work of self-revision continues in the entry for July 18, where she returns to the phrasing of the day before: " 'Half-eaten and good for nothing,' said I of the strawberry. I need not have expressed myself with such sweeping contempt" (137). Widening her gaze to include "other living creatures, including creepers on the earth" who also have "a

[22] *Time Flies*, according to Roe, "borrows its structure from *The Book of Common Prayer*, providing a devotional prose passage or poem for each day of the Christian calendar year. The entries also imitate liturgical tradition, as they are organized by question and response. Nearly every entry in *Time Flies* poses questions, some of which are rhetorical. However, Rossetti's is a rhetoric meant to inspire contemplation" (133).

share in strawberries" allows Rossetti to consider the problem of anthropocentric greed and the ethical demands of living in what Armstrong eloquently describes as "a world in which plenitude and dearth and the consequent *intensity* of desire and lack are not individually created, not solely caused by the self, but arise from the given conditions of experience" ("Christina Rossetti in the Era of the New Woman" 31).

Taken by itself, the story of the strawberry could be dismissed as yet another example of what Rosenblum describes as Rossetti's "childhood experiences of little horrors in nature, a Victorian garden-Gothic variation of Wordsworthian tutelage by fear" (22). From this perspective, it becomes just another small act of renunciation remembered by a woman who has lived her life in a kind of passive acquiescence to authority. However, the entry for July 16, a sonnet provides a troubling juxtaposition with the strawberry story, even if Rossetti does not draw an explicit connection with the two subsequent entries:

> Have I not striven, my God, and watched and prayed?
> Have I not wrestled in mine agony?
> Wherefore dost Thou still turn Thy Face from me?
> Is Thine Arm shortened that Thou canst not aid?
> Thy silence breaks my heart: speak though to upbraid,
> For Thy rebuke yet bids us follow Thee.
> I grope and grasp not; gaze, but cannot see.
> When out of sight and reach, my bed is made,
> And piteous men and women cease to blame,
> Whispering and wistful of my gain or loss;
> Thou Who for my sake once didst feel the Cross,
> Lord, wilt Thou turn and look upon me then,
> And in Thy glory bring naught to my shame,
> Confessing me to angels and to men? (136)

The sonnet expresses the speaker's alienation from God, an alienation made sharper by the speaker's belief in her own efforts. It opens with a series of rhetorical questions, where the speaker seems to adopt an indignant tone, demanding recognition for having "striven," "watched," "prayed," and "wrestled." Yet there is a disturbing undertone here as well, a knowledge that it is possible—likely, even—that her efforts have fallen short even though she has given her utmost.

This questioning gives way to the acknowledgement of her limited perceptions and abilities ("I grope and grasp not; gaze but cannot see"). The failure of sensation prompts the proleptic meditation on the speaker's death, constituted by a more extreme form of the privations from which she already suffers; it is in this anticipatory space, beyond the horizon of awareness, in which the speaker locates the possibility—expressed in something other than certain terms—of her salvation.

Taken alone, these two entries in *Time Flies*—the sonnet and the story—could each be seen as largely conventional, *pro forma* recognitions of human frailty that ultimately collapse faith into passive resignation. Yet, read together in all of their incommensurability, these entries become part of a more complex action of suspension and self-revision, one temporary "foothold" in the project of cultivating faith. Because she sees each act of expression as a foothold—temporary and ultimately incomplete—rather than a roothold to be clung to indefinitely, Rossetti is able to maintain a posture of radical acceptance, not the imposed self-denial that has so often been attributed to her. Right reading, in this sense, is not a matter of having the right answers, but rather of being able to respond to a poem like *The Prince's Progress* without excluding any of the affects it produces. For, at some level, a poem like *The Prince's Progress* does resist our efforts to read "correctly," demanding instead that we confront and include our limitations before we claim to have transcended them. In short, we must maintain suspended certainty, and an active poetic faith—even at the pain of failure and disappointment—enables response even as it forecloses judgment. The suspension of disbelief is not, for Rossetti, the *exclusion* of anything, not repression or forgetting, but a way of bracketing, keeping something present, including it, even though it no longer serves the same inhibiting function—making disbelief simultaneous with belief and poetic faith. The failure that Coleridge could not bear to portray in *Christabel,* the thought of which threw his poetic powers into a state of suspended animation, becomes for

Rossetti the very possibility of faith in a universe in which it must always be possible to lose the girl and miss the crown, in which certainty is always deferred, and roothold is always a delusion.

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