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Signature:

Armando M. Mastrogiovanni

Date

Outside the Habitable Zone: The Poetry and Politics of Life in Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain Poems

By

Armando Mastrogiovanni
Doctor of Philosophy

Comparative Literature

Deborah Elise White
Advisor

Geoffrey Bennington
Committee Member

Cathy Caruth
Committee Member

Elissa Marder
Committee Member

Accepted:

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

Date

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By

Armando M. Mastrogiovanni
MA, Columbia University, 2007
BA, Bard College, 2004

Advisor: Deborah Elise White, PhD

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Comparative Literature
2019

Abstract

Outside the Habitable Zone: The Poetry and Politics of Life in Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain Poems By Armando M. Mastrogiovanni

This dissertation examines the relation between politics, poetics, and the question of life in William Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain poems. I argue that these poems reveal the poet to be a sophisticated thinker of biopolitics. He undertakes a poetic investigation into the link between life and the political, particularly as it bears on sovereignty and the state conceptualized as primordial technologies for sheltering otherwise vulnerable living beings. Its development may be tracked through the process of revisions leading from *Salisbury Plain* (1793-1794) to *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* (1795-1799), and *Guilt and Sorrow* (1842). The result of his investigation into the articulation of life and the political is a poetics of life that thinks life not in terms of its systematic form (organic or otherwise), or in terms of an essential power underlying that form, but rather in terms of life's *impossibility*. In the Salisbury Plain poems Wordsworth develops a poetics of impossible life. In this study I examine its consequences for Wordsworth's literary employment of (1) the languages, discourses, and figures of life; (2) the philosophical concept of life thus implied; and (3) the difference that this conjuncture, between concept and figure, between *life* and the *impossible*, makes for the fundamental political questions in the literary elaboration of which the poetics of impossible life is inscribed.

Each chapter examines a modality of life which is stripped bare by Wordsworth's "impossibilizing" muse. The Introductory chapter lays out the program. Chapter Two examines Wordsworth's use of Rousseau, Lucretius, and Hobbes, as his sources in the preface to *Salisbury Plain*, which serves as an articulation in miniature of his poetic reduction. Chapter Three examines the teleological structure of the world as the external condition of the possibility of life, and shows how Wordsworth conceives of sacrifice not only as the mechanism that produces political sovereignty, but as the mechanism that produces the teleological structure of the world itself. Chapter Four turns to *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, and within it the figure of the female vagrant, to examine the reduction in terms of life's value and the economies that unfold in and without its condition of possibility.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation has been a long time in the making, and its ideas bear the imprint of the personal and professional relationships that have evolved with it over the years. Every page is marked by the generosity of my family, friends, colleagues, teachers, students, and mentors.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to my advisor, Deborah Elise White, who introduced me, all the way back in the spring semester of 2008, to the scholarly study of romanticism—and to what a disciplined attention to a line of blank verse can make possible for thought. Her guidance is serious and radically trustworthy in its pragmatism, and her faith in me sustaining. Deborah read every line of every version of this project with a meticulous editorial attention which I have no doubt will still be teaching to write me for years. I am honored to have been her student. I first came to Emory to learn about Jacques Derrida from Geoffrey Bennington, and in addition to teaching me a Jacques Derrida stranger and more expansive than I could have imagined, he showed me how to read with a playful rigor open to necessary possibility. Cathy Caruth has taught me, in her writing and in our conversations, that thinking can really be a life. As an interlocutor and as a reader of this dissertation in several forms, Cathy revealed to me ideas buried in my own language that I couldn't quite see on my own. The difference her intellectual generosity has made to me is profound. Elissa Marder's radically inventive readings—her ability to make a text ring surprises me every time—are my model. The final form of this dissertation reflects a conversation in which, seeing exactly what was at stake, Elissa cut through it and made me face the question at the heart of what I was trying to write. Perhaps one day I will manage to answer it.

Alian Teach deserves a line of her own. I am grateful for all her guidance in navigating Emory's institutional and administrative intricacies. She knows everything.

I would also like to thank María M. Carrión, John Johnston, and Walt Reed for all the assistance they've given me over the years in their various administrative capacities in the Department of Comparative Literature at Emory.

My dissertation also draws on coursework and conversations with several other professors at Emory: David Carr, Shoshana Felman, John Johnston, Elizabeth Goodstein, Andrew Mitchell, and Jill Robbins. During an MA year at Columbia University, I benefited from the guidance of Guari Viswanathan, as well as from coursework with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. My debt of gratitude begins to become primordial when it comes to my professors at Bard College. Nancy Leonard, Thomas Keenan, and Daniel Berthold first modeled for me the passion of disciplined thinking.

I owe an enormous thanks to my friends, colleagues, and collaborators whom I have variously met at Emory, Columbia, Bard, and elsewhere: Jacqueline Abrams, Lucy Alford, Barbara Anderson, Naomi Beeman, Patrick Blanchfield, Harold Braswell, Scott Branson, Katie Chenoweth, Jean-Paul Cauvin, Morris Collins, Tina Colvin, Colleen Dunne, Teresa Falgoust, Yelizaveta Goldfarb, Asher Haig, Katie Homan, Jacob Hovind, Robert Huddleston, Abigail Joseph, Maya Kesrouany, Lisa Knisley, Ania Kowalik, Megan Kruer, Christina León, Hannah Markley, David Meek, David Andrew Moore, Sergio Gutiérrez Negrón, Ronald Mendoza-de Jesús, Anthony O'Rourke, Jennifer Orth-Veillon, Christina Parker-Flynn, Matthew Roberts II, Adam Rosenthal, Ariel Ross, Andrew Ryder, Taylor Schey, Melissa Sexton, Brian Smith, Gina Stamm, John Steen IV, Sarah Stein, Mark Stoholski, Tze-Yin Teo, Rodrigo Therezo, Sam Timme, Sean Tommasi, Christine Varnado, Carolyn Vega, Elizabeth Venell, Robert Vork, Jason Wixom, Seth Wood, and Brent Young.

David Collings has been incredibly generous in conversations about Wordsworth both in person and over email. I am grateful to the translators at the Derrida Seminars Translation Project for welcoming me during the summers of 2010 and 2011, and for teaching me so much: Geoffrey

Bennington, Pascale-Anne Brault, Peggy Kamuf, Kir Kuiken, Michael Naas, Elizabeth Rottenberg, Kas Saghafi, and David Wills.

Special thanks is reserved for Luke Donahue, for his intellectual provocations, and Adam Rosenthal, who read and carefully annotated the first chapter of this study. I am thankful, too, for our many conversations about the questions that magnetize these pages. I am grateful to Jonathan Foltz for his kindness and his conversations—sometimes across continents—and his taste for what makes an idea strange.

I am grateful to the students I've had over the years at Baruch College, The Cooper Union, NYU, and York College. I'm particularly thankful to the students in my Fall 2018 seminar on romanticism at Lander College for Women.

I would like to thank my family for giving me that without which I could neither receive nor express thanks for any gift at all. But their gift goes deeper than life: my parents, Lauren and Ron, and my step-parents, Marea and Mark, continue to show me and give me a love and faith without which it is hard to imagine setting out on a path that leads here, or for that matter anywhere. I would like to thank my siblings, Ronny and Taylor, for sharing in common with me something deeper and more unfathomable than what usually passes for likeness. Finally, I owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to Liz Behrend, who has shown me incomparable love and grace. In the last year of this project, her living room accumulated heaps of library books. Her dining room table piled up with chapter drafts which she spent more than a few predawn mornings sharpening with keen critique. This dissertation is about “impossibility” and “life,” but it's no play on words when I say that without her, its completion—like so much else—would have been impossible. The pages that follow are dedicated to her in gratitude and love.

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INTRODUCTION

LIFE OUTSIDE THE HABITABLE ZONE

So on this windy sea of land, the Fiend
 Walked up and down alone bent on his prey,
 Alone, for other creature in this place
 Living or lifeless to be found was none,
 None yet...

~John Milton¹

I know when one is dead, and when one
 lives...

~William Shakespeare²

1. IMPOSSIBLE

Consider the following story of a mutiny and its aftermath, as told by one of its participants:

RIVERS: One day at noon we drifted silently
 By a bare rock, narrow and white and bare.
 There was no food, no drink, no grass, no shade,
 No tree nor jutting eminence, nor form
 Inanimate, large as the body of a man,
 Nor any thing whose span of life
 Might stretch beyond the measure of one moon;
 To dig for water we landed there—the captain

¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. 3, lines 439-444.

² William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 3.5.258. References are to act, scene, and line.

life, and the political.⁴ What Rivers describes here is the mark of Wordsworth's early life-writing, and the manner of his description is emblematic of the issues that inform what follows. It is emblematic, specifically, of the structure in Wordsworth's early writing that binds the question of life and political sovereignty to poetry as figural language. Wordsworth developed the crucial features of that structure in the "Salisbury Plain" project that immediately preceded *The Borderers*, and in this study I propose to unpack that structure and its theoretical implications for Wordsworth's biopoetics through an intensive reading of *Salisbury Plain* and *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*.⁵

Like Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince on his planet or the painted figure of a sea captain mounted on a shiny music box, Rivers's victim—the real, doomed captain—stands alone and as though on display, a single solitary body on a glittering "bare rock." The rock itself is solid, but its "stony surface" doesn't make it qualify as good firm ground. It's less a small island than a sort of liminal structure, a threshold place neither aquatic nor terrestrial at the border between water and air. Because it occupies that exquisitely narrow spatial boundary, its stony surface almost flush with its liquid edge (the rock's glittering suggests a thin layer of sea-water), it is also poised undecidably at the *ontological* boundary that separates the terrestrial and the oceanic. Despite its hardness, the island is an amphibian of matter. To the host of tiny alien "beings" that "swarm" over its surface, the rock is a "world." What does it mean for a border to be a world? Its inhabitants are also borderers, though not because they aren't permanent residents (since otherwise the rock would not be their world). They are "shapes scarce visible," liminal beings that live on the edge of vision, inhabit the

⁴ I am using the figure of the "constellation" in the sense adopted from Walter Benjamin by Jacques Khalip and Forest Pyle in their Introduction to *Constellations of a Contemporary Romanticism*, 1-2. For Benjamin's thinking of the constellation as "image" and its relation to history and messianic time, see Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, 1938-1940, 390-391, 396-397.

⁵ Biopoetics and life-writing are Sara Guyer's terms, and I am employing them in the spirit of her project, which is to pursue a rhetorical reading of the link between politics and life in romanticism. See Guyer's, *Reading with John Clare: Biopoetics, Sovereignty, Romanticism*, and "Biopoetics, or Romanticism," special Romantic Circles PRAXIS issue, "Romanticism and Biopolitics," www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/biopolitics/HTML/praxis.2012.guyer

line between the visible and invisible. The rock's liminality, which is what keeps the captain's head above water, could well be temporary. A large wave could wipe it clean at any moment: "'Twas an island / Only by sufferance of the winds and waves, / Which with their foam could cover it at will" (LV 4.2.1740-1743). Now it seems like a fit place to live for its swarming inhabitants—but not for the captain, whose still living body will no doubt soon be teeming with them. He has been left to die in a place where life—at least for him—is impossible, a border-zone of impossible survival.

The captain is a living being trapped in an impossible situation, and the interval during which he remains alive can be described with one of those distinctly romantic formulations that don't so much combine life and death as go to the border between life and death in order to twist it into knots: it will be a "living death," a "life in death," a "death in life." And indeed, left alive without hope for survival, he is suspended at the edge that separates the living from the dead. To say that the captain will now endure a "living death" or a "death in life" might simply suggest the suffering that comes with the knowledge that he is as good as dead, a dead man walking: the hopelessness of a slow but implacably approaching death sentence.⁶ Yet what makes his "spot" so "miserable" is rather that even before he perishes of dehydration, hyperthermia, or gets swept out to sea, the captain is not legible as a living being. His life is not readable. Here, even before he dies, the captain does not count as alive. This, I think, is what makes the scene exemplary of the way that Wordsworth handles life in his early writing—which is to put it in impossible spots. The poetry of life in Wordsworth's early work is structured by a drive to make life impossible. And this suggests, in turn, a poetics of impossible life, a biopoetry or biopoetics of impossibility.

When I say that the captain, as a living being, has been suspended in a condition of impossible life, I mean that the word "life" cannot meaningfully be applied in his case. Or rather, the

⁶ A dead man walking is exactly how Wordsworth describes him: "A man by men deserted, / Not buried in the sand—not dead nor dying, / But standing, walking—stretching forth his arms: / In all things like yourselves, but in the agony / With which he called for mercy—and even so, / He was forsaken" (EV 4.2.44-49).

“spot” he now occupies is one in which the referentiality of the word “life”—at least insofar as it pertains to him, or “as we know it,” as people like to say—has been suspended. Wordsworth has poetically neutralized the word “life;” he has taken it out of operation. Consider the opening description of the scene, which lists what the rock lacks. “Narrow and white and bare,” it has “no food, no drink, no grass, no shade, / No tree nor jutting eminence, nor form/ Inanimate large as the body of a man.” It begins with an enumeration of the basic elements of physical habitability (food, drink, and shelter) together with the forms of plant life that characterize the “natural” human habitat (grass and trees), the vegetable markers of humanly livable spaces. The “bare rock, narrow and white and bare,” lacks it all. It’s stripped down to a radical nakedness intensified by the repetition of “bare.” It is a bare, bare rock—and barely a rock at that. The captain cannot possibly survive there. What is striking is the gratuitous addition to the list of missing ingredients, following the “jutting eminence” (which is listed as a would-be shelter, a mineral rather than vegetable marker of habitability), of any “*form/ Inanimate large as the body of a man.*” Why does it matter that there are no *inanimate* bodies here? And why add the further negative qualification that they are not scaled to the human body? Everything hangs on the “as,” and what its analogy seems to suggest is that without the presence of another “body” which is *like* the captain in size but different with respect to its relation to life and death, the opposition between life and death loses its applicability, and he ceases to be *either alive or dead in a meaningful sense*. More precisely, it is impossible to decide whether he lives, because that decision is possible only within the matrix a comparative reflection. Whether a body is alive or dead is depends on the structural possibility of comparison with other bodies. And it seems that a “body” is a relative not a positive thing, a function of scale.

Here there no rocks, or stones, or trees, or mineral formations, or any other object on the scale of human (and for that matter animal) life. What is missing is the infrastructure of a world fitted to the human body and the system of the human senses. The captain is the only body here,

“living or dead,” which is to say that the difference makes no difference. Because his body is the *only* body, the question of where it stands with regard to life and death ceases to be pertinent; that difference pertains only to the regime of *bodies*. By stranding him on a desert island, Rivers and the other sailors make his survival impossible and doom him to death; but by subtracting every *inanimate form* which is *like* man in scale, Wordsworth short-circuits the opposition between life and death. The captain is a living being cut loose from the context in which life makes sense, the frame of reference (as a function of scale) in which the being of his life, his very being alive, no longer relates meaningfully to anything else, living or dead. If there is a sense in which the captain is alive, then it must be thought before (or after) the opposition between life and death.⁷

Now that life, at least as we and the human captain know it, has been rendered inoperative, the bare rock comes to life.⁸ It glitters with a profusion of living figures. If at first the desert island seemed a place of “blank desertion,” its naked surface is now a screen of moving images, worked over with the teeming motions of a barely visible, scarcely legible life-writing: “Its stony surface glittered like a shield: / It swarmed with shapes of life scarce visible.” The shapes of life, as figures of life, are figures of figuration. The convergence of the figuration of life with the figuration of figuration holds out a tempting proposition, one poised at the knife’s edge of aesthetic ideology: the spot of time seems to describe, indeed to theorize on the basis of the figure, the poetics that produced it. It is as if Wordsworth has paralyzed the opposition between life and death in the case of the captain’s (now undecidable) body in order to activate a profusion of figures of life, and perhaps in those shapes—though this would also be “scarce visible”—another thinking of life.⁹ This

⁷ Jacques Derrida often associated the project of deconstruction with a new, post-ontological thinking life “before” its opposition death. For example, see “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” *Writing and Difference*, 203: “Life must be thought of as trace before Being may be determined as presence. This is the only condition on which we may say that life *is* death, that repetition and the beyond of the pleasure principle are native and congenital to that which they transgress.” Wordsworth enacts poetically the deconstructive rethinking of life which Derrida describes philosophically.

⁸ The inoperativity I am attributing to Wordsworth’s poetics is developed by Jean-Luc Nancy in *The Inoperative Community*.

⁹ Cf. Jacques Derrida, “Geschlecht I: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference,” *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Vol. 2, 14–15. Wordsworth’s neutralization of the opposition between life and death with respect to the body, which both calls for

dissertation will examine Wordsworth's poetics of impossible life in the Salisbury Plain poems. The scene we are reading in *The Borderers* is in an elaboration and development of a poetic strategy I argue Wordsworth began to formalize in *Salisbury Plain*. The drama's hyperbolic style, however, makes the features of impossible life stand out in sharp relief. Therefore, the first part of this introduction will trace the shape of impossible life with the assistance of the play's sharp edges, and then turn to the Salisbury Plain poems themselves, the real subject of this study.

I claimed above that the captain is *suspended* in impossible life. This is because the complication of life and death is also a matter of temporal scale. For the shapes of life are "scarce visible" not only in space but also in time. Note, first, how at the scale of the human body, motion has almost entirely ceased. The surrounding sea is described as totally "smooth" (EV 4.2.54), for example, and no sooner does Rivers announce the immediate threat of the island being "covered" over by waves and the captain swept away (LV 4.2.1742), than he suspends the scene and places the event itself in permanent abeyance: "Twas an island / But by the permission of the winds and waves; / I know not how he perished; but the calm, / The same dead calm, continued many days" (EV 4.2.57-60). In the nightmare logic of the scene, the captain is *perhaps* still standing on his little island, encased in a dead calm on the boundary between life and death, waiting for either the wind or the waves to decide the issue once and for all. Here, the absence of motion decelerates time—at the human scale. The suspension of motion, time, and the operative possibility of discriminating the living from the dead at the scale of the captain's body corresponds with an acceleration at the lower bound of human visibility. The shapes of life live fast. The outer limit of their lifespan is set at

a rethinking of the body as such (what is a body if its relation to life and death can thus be short-circuited? If it can survive that short-circuiting?) and coincides with a sudden influx of living shapes, is reminiscent of Derrida's reading in "Geschlecht I" of Heidegger's "neutralization" of binary sexual difference in the analytic of Dasein. The latter operation does not negate sexual difference but "liberates" sexual difference in its "original potency." It is as if that potency had been suppressed or inhibited by a binary conception of sexual difference. The problem, for Derrida, is that the binarity erases difference and reduces constitutive multiplicity to the unicity of the one. Derrida is systematically skeptical of the metaphysical entailments that come trailing along with words like "potency," but what Heidegger calls "potency" Derrida reinscribes on the side of the dispersion of an irreducibly non-finite plurality.

twenty-seven days: “nor any living thing whose span of life / might stretch beyond the measure of one moon.” In the double temporality of the scene, the captain slows down. The passage implies, as I noted above, that the swarm will soon take up residence on (and perhaps within) the captain’s body, since to them he is really a transformation of the landscape, the sudden arrival in their “world” of a new substrate to live on. To them, indeed, he must be frozen, a little like the sea-beast-stone hybrid in “Resolution and Independence.”¹⁰

In the end, the captain has become a “giant body / Mid a world of beings / Not one of which could give him any aid, / Living or dead.” The solitary “giant *body*” is distinguished from the “world of *beings*,” and the difference is not only size and number (one large body, many small beings) but life. A mere “body,” is neutral with regard to life and death, but a “world of beings” can only be alive. The neutrality of the captain’s body is not only implied by the semantic value of the word; it is motivated by a metonymy internal to the poem. He would have more affinity, even community with a dead “form” measured to his scale—a “*form*/inanimate, large as the *body* of a man,” which is to say an image or reflection of his body—than with the whole population of living things that inhabit the space. Community with these beings is impossible. The body is caught here, as though trapped in an eddy of winds thwarting winds, between a dead yet visible *form* (unitary, inanimate, and specular) and a *nearly* invisible yet overwhelming profusion of living *shapes* (plural, excessive, and at the lower limit of specularity: “scarce visible”). At one end of the frame, there is specular identity at the cost of death; what is a “form / inanimate large as the body of a man” but a corpse? At the other end of the frame, the upwelling overflow of living shapes carries the threat of a flood lacking in the “dead calm” sea. And what does their “swarming” promise on an island that will soon be adorned with an unburied dead body, but the vital ebullience of decomposition, the image of a corpse bursting with life?

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, “Resolution and Independence,” *The Major Works*, lines 64-77.

There are two other occurrences in *The Borderers* where the body is uprooted from the background of life. The first concerns madness at the brink of decision. Rivers is attempting to seduce Mortimer into a repetition of his own crime by persuading him to kill a blind old man (who is also the father of Matilda, his betrothed) on the basis of a lie: that the old man, Herbert, is not Matilda's biological father but an imposter who bought Matilda as an infant from a beggar, raised her to support him, and is now about to resell her at a profit to the evil Lord Clifford, who plans to imprison and rape her. Mortimer believes the lie, and believes that he should kill the elderly Herbert, both to rescue Matilda and for the sake of vengeance. Whenever he verges on the act, however, the sight of the old man's frailty—which he experiences as an ethical injunction—sends him into aporetic paralysis. Below is his experience of the aporia. It takes place in the dungeon of an old, ruined castle where Rivers has told him Clifford will rape Matilda. As Mortimer approaches Herbert, who lies drugged and unconscious in a corner, a single star blinks through the gaps in the crumbling walls, and this is what halts him. Here is the scene as depicted by both the Early Version of the play (1797-99) and the Late Version (1842):

Last night when I would play the murderer's part

I did believe all things were shadows, yea,

Living and dead all things were bodiless;

Till that same star summoned me back again.

Now could I laugh till my ribs ached. Oh! Fool!

To let a creed built into the heart of things

Dissolve before a twinkling atom.

(EV 3.2.72-78, emphases mine.)

Last night, when moved to lift the avenging steel,

I did believe all things were shadows—yea,

*Living or dead all things were bodiless,
 Or but the mutual mockeries of body,
 Till that same star summoned me back again.
 Now I could laugh till my ribs ached. Oh fool!
 To let a creed, built into the heart of things,
 Dissolve before a twinkling atom!*

(LV 3.2.1213-1220, emphases mine.)

The moment of decision comes, and the world loses its substance. Mortimer lifts the blade and everything derealizes, turns to shadow. The becoming shadow of the world is so radical that it overflows the limits between “things living and dead,” of which there are at least two: the limit between the animate and the inanimate, and the limit between the living and the dead in the sense of the deceased, the having-lived. Animate and inanimate bodies lose their substance and become shadows, but so do the dead, the *shades* and shadows that dwell the other side.

What Mortimer describes in the earlier passage is not only a dematerialization akin to traumatic depersonalization, but a dematerialization that dissolves, that makes shadow, the double border between life and death, the living and dead. The shades become shadows; even the thing called death dissolves. The 1842 revision adds a qualification that seems intended to underscore that what fades out is not the recalcitrant materiality of things as such (for example, their physical resistance to touch) but the legibility of their relations according to the opposition between life and death. Mortimer relates in the form of first-person, autobiographical testimony, a narrative of personal experience, the captain’s situation: “Living or dead all things were bodiless, / Or but the mutual mockeries of body.” The revised description of disembodiment places the body in a configuration analogous to that described by Rivers in his spot of time, where the body of the stranded captain is caught between the absence of any inanimate “form” as large as itself and the

presence of “shapes of life” so small as to be “scarce visible.” Here we are dealing not with any particular body but rather the body in general, or even with body *as such*, which seems suggested by the elision of the definite article. Now this general body, then, caught in the spiral of “mutual mockery” between “things,” becomes a shadow of itself. The revision employs “mockery” as *imitation* to stress that the dematerialization described also concerns “shadow” as *image*. The world goes flat. Things suddenly seem unreal, like *images* or shadows or reflections of themselves. Because a shadow is the spitting image of another shadow, things become images (and mockeries) of each other when they become images of themselves. A physical body looks like an image of itself, as flat as its shadow, but *body* in general—the very *form* of “body” in the Platonic sense—becomes but a shadow projected on the wall of the cave: the monstrous inversion of the true *eidōs*. What goes for the form of body goes for all the forms, including the form of form. What Mortimer describes here (and cannot perceive) is radical formalism that erases all difference. Now what also becomes an image of itself, duplicated in the circle of mutual mockery, is the boundary between life and death. As life and death mock each other across the border, images of themselves and each other, the border goes flat and becomes a shadow of itself. What dissolves in Mortimer’s description is operational effectiveness of the opposition between life and death. What flickers into shadow is the legibility of life as such, indeed the possibility of its referentiality. And this factor is not some airy transcendental. Reference is itself a material concern, even if it cannot be spotted as an instance of positive matter.

The referentiality of the very word “life,” in other words its ability to function in a concrete—lived—speech situation, is suspended when Mortimer, after experiencing the world dissolve and failing to kill the old man in the dungeon, emerges to find Rivers eagerly awaiting to hear how it went:

MORTIMER *reenters from the dungeon.*

RIVERS: Well! 'tis over then—don't you laugh at your own foolish fears? you have done it cleverly—sent him into the other world without a groan; never trouble your head about burying him—we'll shove him into a corner.—In the torrent hard by there is water enough to wash all the blood in the universe. (*Examining him*) Death! I don't see a stain about you. That was dexterously managed indeed. (*Looks at his sword*) Zounds!—did you strangle him?

MORTIMER: What made you come down and lay your hand upon my shoulder? when I spoke to you, why did you not answer? you were afraid of waking him I suppose.—He must have been in a deep sleep, for I whispered to him twice.—There are damned echoes in that place—

RIVERS: Tut! let them gabble to all eternity! 'Twas an excellent method.—You would have the grasp of a daemon.—You are sure you finished him?

MORTIMER: Scarcely had I found the place where he was lying when I felt as though there were a string round my wrist and the blind man's dog pulling at it—

RIVERS: Well! But after? Let me have it.

MORTIMER: There was something in his face the very counterpart of Matilda.

RIVERS: Let that alone—never will my life afford me such another opportunity—why did you not allow me a share in your triumph.—Oh how I envy you—

MORTIMER: Her very looks smiling in sleep—

RIVERS: Hell! have you been playing the coward?

MORTIMER: 'Twas only for a single moment—but it sent me to my prayers.

RIVERS: Plague! is he alive?

Mortimer: Alive! Who Alive?

Rivers: Herbert! The *Baron* Herbert! since you will have it, he who will be the Baron Herbert when Matilda is Clifford's Harlot.—Is *he* living?

Mortimer: The blind man lying in that dungeon is alive.

(EV 2.3.253-283)

“Alive! Who alive?” In 1842 Wordsworth makes the crux of the question even clearer: “What mean you? who Alive?” (LV 2.3.974). The scene is a shade or two away from an ontological murderer’s version of Abbot and Costello’s “Who’s on First?” Mortimer is able to tell a story; he is able to reconstitute what happened to him in the dungeon in the form of a narrative. Yet he is now so dislocated from the framing context that gives his presence there its pragmatic purpose that he simply cannot comprehend Rivers’s question, which cuts to the point: has he “conduct[ed] this business / To its most just conclusion” or not (EV 2.3.177-178)? “Alive! Who alive?” The referential structure that maintains and stabilizes the possibility of an exchange of questions and answers, what Wittgenstein called a “form of life,” has so deteriorated that Mortimer cannot follow the deictic back to its referent.¹¹ It might look like the problem is the referentiality of the pronoun, but really the problem is the referentiality of “life” as already demonstrated by his experience of the “mutual mockery” of body. The form of life has entered such a suspension that the word “life” no longer functions in a concrete, indeed material, situation. Mortimer is so dislocated from context that he can no longer read “life.”¹²

Wordsworth, then, is a poet of impossible life. His poetry attends to figurations of life, and he sometimes seems tempted by the thought that life just *is* a form of figuration, or at least that it is essentially constituted by figuration in some way—and then finds that this figuration makes itself impossible while living on as a figure for that impossibility. The gambit of this dissertation is to

¹¹ Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, paragraph 19 (11): “It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle.—Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering Yes and No—and countless other things.—And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.” See also paragraph 23 (15): “The word ‘language-game’ is used here to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.”

¹² Rivers’s frustration anticipates that of the narrator in “We are Seven,” where an inability to read life results in bad arithmetic.

focus on the articulation of this poetics in the Salisbury Plain poems, the first of which, *Salisbury Plain*, has an earlier composition date than *The Borderers*, *The Prelude*, or *Lyrical Ballads*. I won't argue that Wordsworth's poetics of impossible life has its *genesis* or *origin* in *Salisbury Plain* (or on Salisbury Plain, for that matter, since a long, solitary walk across it is supposed to have inspired it), but it does present a sustained poetic enactment of the theme. I began with *The Borderers* are because it presents the sharpest and most vivid illustrations of the motif I know of, but *Salisbury Plain* approaches it with a prolonged focus that makes it reminiscent of a phenomenological reduction. Indeed, that is precisely what Wordsworth does: he reduces the structures of habitability until life becomes impossible, and then he makes life live there, impossibly.

2. THE SALISBURY PLAIN POEMS: EXPERIMENTS IN IMPOSSIBLE ANIMATION

An anonymous traveler sets out to cross Salisbury Plain. The sun is going down, and its light reflects red foreboding off a bank of nearing storm clouds. The traveler can see them glower with "stormy fire," and the wind is getting worse, but for a while he keeps walking anyway. When he realizes just how dire his situation has become, he turns to head back to Salisbury. The only landmark that might guide him there, however, the spire atop Salisbury Cathedral, has already dropped below the horizon. So he heads in what he *thinks* is the direction of the city, now and then casting his glance backward just in case the spire has reappeared behind him, thanks to an unknown bend in his course or some strange quirk of space. Eventually, crowded by anxious second-guesses and turning his head with more and more backward glances, the traveler decides that the spire would have reappeared by now if he were really on the way back to Salisbury. So he changes course. Soon he changes course again, and again.

Something like this is perhaps what leads Wordsworth's traveler into the situation in which we find him in the fifth stanza of *Salisbury Plain* (1793-1794), where he is alone, lost, and evidently walking in circles:

The troubled west was red with stormy fire,
 O'er Sarum's plain the traveller with a sigh
 Measured each painful step, the distant spire
 That fixed at every turn his backward eye
 Was lost, tho' still he turned, in the blank sky.
 By thirst and hunger pressed he gazed around
 And scarce could any trace of man descry,
 Save wastes of corn that stretched without a bound,
 But where the sower dwelt was nowhere to be found.¹³

The traveler has no name, no history, and no motivating concern but survival. Attempting to traverse Salisbury Plain on a stormy night is not exactly consistent with this concern, and readers are given no explanation for why he embarks on his journey either.¹⁴ The traveler's life is so anonymous, to borrow Jacques Khalip's formulation, that its reason for being in such jeopardy is not given narrative expression at all.¹⁵ What does gain entry to the narrative, however, is the traveler's will to

¹³ William Wordsworth, *Salisbury Plain*, *The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth*, stanza 5, lines 37-45. Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text by stanza and line number, preceded by the abbreviations SP, ASP, and GS for *Salisbury Plain*, *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, and *Guilt and Sorrow*, respectively. All references are to Gill's reading texts unless otherwise noted. Elements of the volume's scholarly apparatus will be cited within the text as *Salisbury Plain Poems*, followed by page number.

¹⁴ Readers agree that something is not quite right. "Salisbury Plain," writes Kenneth Johnston in *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Rebel, Lover, Spy*, "is not a good place for a leisurely walk," and it is certainly "not a place to be caught outside, alone, on a stormy night...It is one of the most desolate places in England, with little or no shade, hardly a stream, and few human habitations" (252). The landscape, he continues, is "not exactly a *plain*, but rather a vast expanse of swales, swelling ridges, and slopes, in which the walker is paradoxically more often out of sight of the horizon and his general whereabouts than he would be in climbing a mountain" (253). See also David Collings, *Wordsworthian Errancies: The Poetics of Cultural Dismemberment*, 27: "only someone out of his right mind, no longer in control of his actions, would embark on such a journey." Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text following the abbreviation WE.

¹⁵ I am referring to the title concept of Jacques Khalip's *Anonymous Life: Romanticism and Dispossession*.

live, his biological drive to preserve himself. By now he has abandoned any expectation of making it back to Salisbury before dark. Now he hopes to find human being who might take him in, but in this search he is not, as David Collings points out, in control of his actions (WE 27). Rather, he is compelled, “pressed,” by “thirst and hunger.” If there were an equivalent name for the bodily urge to find shelter, then we might add that to the list too.

By the time we meet him, the traveler has been reduced to the demands of mere survival. Likewise, the terms of his description and narration are limited to the lexicons of life. He is a walking machine whose locomotion is synced with breath (the sighs) and sensation (his pain). Three markers or “biosignatures” of life—the kinetic, the pneumatic, and the aesthetic—are all tied together in a figure whose very mechanicity recalls the enlightenment conception of the animal as a machine.¹⁶ We know that Wordsworth had read Rousseau’s second *Discourse* by the time he composed *Salisbury Plain* because the poem contains verbal echoes of it.¹⁷ In describing the traveler, he might have had in mind Rousseau’s definition of the animal as an autonomous and indeed automatic self-protection machine: “I see in any animal nothing but an ingenious machine to which nature has given senses in order to wind itself up, and, to a point, protect itself against everything that tends to destroy or disturb it.”¹⁸ The traveler has been reduced to the operations of his living machinery.

Now in stanza 5, the traveler’s reduction to something reminiscent of Giorgio Agamben’s “bare life” coincides with his expulsion from humanity and his entrance into a state of radical

¹⁶ For a recent historical study of mechanism in the life sciences and philosophy, see Jessica Riskin, *The Restless Clock: A History of the Centuries-Long Argument over What Makes Living Things Tick*. See also Catherine Packham, *Eighteenth Century Vitalism: Bodies, Culture, Politics*, and John Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain*.

¹⁷ Paul Kelley, “Rousseau’s ‘Discourse on the Origins of Inequality’ and Wordsworth’s ‘Salisbury Plain,’” *Notes and Queries* 24 (July-August 1977).

¹⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, 140. *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité*, 71: “Je ne vois dans tout animal qu’une machine ingénieuse, à qui la nature a donné des sens pour se remonter elle même, et pour se garantir, jusqu’à un certain point, de tout ce qui tend à la détruire, ou à la déranger.”

disorientation. In the next three stanzas, Wordsworth radicalizes this disorientation into a condition of worldlessness. The traveler steps out onto the plain, and the world disappears:

No shade was there, no meads of pleasant green,
No brook to wet his lips or soothe his ear,
Huge piles of corn-stack here and there were seen
But thence no smoke upwreathed his sight to cheer;
And see the homeward shepherd dim appear,
Far off—He stops his voice to strain;
No sound replies but winds that whistling near
Sweep the thin grass and passing, wildly pain;
Or desert lark that pours on high a wasted strain.

Long had each slope he mounted seemed to hide
Some cottage whither his tired feet might turn,
But now, all hope resigned, in tears he eyed
The crows in blackening eddies homeward borne,
Then sought, in vain, a shepherd's lowly thorn
Or hovel from the storm to shield his head.
On as he passed more wild and forlorn
And vacant the huge plain around him spread;
Ah me! The wet cold ground must be his only bed.

Hurtle the rattling clouds together piled
By fiercer gales, and soon the storm must break.

He stood the only creature in the wild
 On whom the elements their rage could wreak,
 Save that the bustard of those limits bleak,
 Shy tenant, seeing there a mortal wight,
 At that dread hour, outsent a mortal shriek
 And half upon the ground, with strange affright,
 Forced hard against the wind a thick unwieldy flight.

(SP 6.46-8.72)

I quote these stanzas at length to show how their succession performs a systematic series of subtractions. First, Wordsworth subtracts the material structures and substances of habitability (the shade, the mead, the brook). The plain is so *plain* and “vacant,” which is to say spatially unreadable and therefore unnavigable, because it lacks differentiating and organizing elements, some of which would also serve as physical shelters. The plain is thus the radically expanded inverse of the bare rock in *The Borderers*. In fact, the rock is the plain’s repetition, and it works by concentrating the plain’s boundless chaos into the narrow confines of a single spot. The captain inherits the traveler’s legacy of worldlessness.

In the opening chapter of my dissertation, “Unhouzed Life: Autobiography and Biopolitics on Salisbury Plain,” I offer an extended close reading of these lines in order to capture the liminal status of life in Wordsworth as it appears detached from every mode of spatial and temporal orientation. In stanza 6, the traveler seems to see a human being, the shepherd, only to see him vanish. In stanza 7, the traveler, now the only human on the plain, witnesses a spiraling eddy of crows that appear only to disappear, like the shepherd, on their “homeward borne” trajectory.” He thus “stands,” in stanza 8, not only the last remaining human but also “the only *creature* in the wild / On whom the elements their rage could wreak” (emphasis mine). Except for the bustard, which

seems to be an index of his very wordlessness. Like him, its effort to escape is thwarted by the winds. Collings argues that the bustard reflects the traveler's death back to him: "The bustard, who seems to be the traveler's own displaced self-consciousness (or Other), recognizes that the "dread hour" has arrived for the "mortal wight." Its grotesque struggle against the elements figures the traveler's own animallike battle to survive. Here we are at the body's limits of resistance to death" (WE 26). But the traveler's death never arrives: "And yet the traveler does not die; somehow he endures in the following stanzas" (WE 26). Why? Robert Mitchell has recently examined romantic authors under the rubric of "experimental life," which embraces the experimental life sciences, experimental poetry, and experimental forms or styles of life.¹⁹ I argue that Wordsworth is in the process of developing an experimental poetry here, and that this poetry does take life as its central concern. It experiments with life by making it impossible. In these lines, Wordsworth employs a radical form of his leveling muse, which targets the teleological structure of the world, because life can neither survive nor be meaningful *as life* without that framing system. And then, once the world is gone, Wordsworth keeps life alive in its absence, which is to say a condition of impossible survival. The Salisbury Plain poems serve Wordsworth as the experimental terrain or testing ground of what we might call his "impossibilizing" muse.

As I further show in my opening chapter, Wordsworth adopted the technique of reduction from the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality among Men*, where Jean-Jacques Rousseau presents a historico-temporal form of a transcendental reduction as the means for discovering the essence of the human through a retrospective reversal of history and its sequence of alterations. Rousseau's intends his reduction to peel away the layers that conceal the *natural human being*. It seeks to reveal the human being as a *living being*. Wordsworth's invention is to radicalize the reduction and let it strip

¹⁹ Robert Mitchell, *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Literature and Science*. Mitchell's second chapter, "Suspended Animation and the Poetics of Trance," is especially pertinent to the reading I am pursuing here.

away *even* the habitat, the natural milieu, which must be assumed as the condition of possibility of the natural human being (or any living being.) In exactly the same way that Rousseau presents us with “natural man” in isolation from every historically constituted relation (any community at all), Wordsworth presents us with the living being in isolation from the system of relations of nature, which I am calling the world. It is as if he wants to see what life will do, what shapes it will figure, in the absence of any natural condition of possibility.

The technique of radical reduction makes Wordsworth a sophisticated thinker what we now call biopolitics. In *Salisbury Plain*, *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, and related but later works like *The Borderers*, *The Ruined Cottage*, and *Lyrical Ballads*, he is concerned with the point of articulation between life and the political. In The Salisbury Plain poems, the stress falls squarely on sovereignty. Foucault’s conception biopower concerns a historical transformation in the structure of sovereignty. In its classical form, he writes, “the right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live,” whereas the era of biopower is characterized by the emergence of a new right, which coexists with the old, negative right of sovereignty (the power to kill) and is exercised to populations considered as such, as biological material: “the right to make live and let die.”²⁰ Biopower is the administration of populations insofar as they are determined as systems living beings, and therefore able to be affected by interventions informed by the sciences of life: “But what might be called a society’s ‘threshold of modernity’ has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies. For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question.”²¹ The very existence of the human as a living being is in question because it is no longer the substrate of politics, but the object of administrative technologies, not to mention

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, 241

²¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, 143.

biomedical technologies that aim directly to modify it in its very “nature.” In *Reading with John Clare*, Sara Guyer argues that romantic literary writers knew something about biopower that the human and political sciences then emerging with biopower did not: that “making live” is a rhetorical question. By rereading Barbara Johnson’s thinking of apostrophe in “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion (which explicitly posits a relation between the rhetoric of animation and the political) alongside Foucault and Agamben, Guyer makes a double proposition: first that “*biopolitics is a biopoetics*,” and second, “that biopoetics is a possibility of rhetorical (or romantic) reading.”²² I take it that in the second proposition is the hope, in a certain spirit of de Man, that biopoetic readings attuned to the biopoetics at the heart of biopolitics might afford new openings for critique, resistance, or even perhaps to think life otherwise.²³

Salisbury Plain verifies Guyer’s hypothesis about romanticism, at least in its own case. There Wordsworth thinks the relation of life and sovereignty in terms of figure. After the world seems to have been completely erased, and the traveler finds himself, impossibly, the only “creature” on the waste, he encounters hallucinatory visions of human sacrifice at Stonehenge. These visions depict with colorful literalism the transcendental function of sovereignty. Sacrifice reenacts the

²² Sarah Guyer, *Reading with John Clare: Biopoetics, Sovereignty, Romanticism*, 7.

²³ Cf. Paul Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are*. Fry displaces the political interpretation in the service of what he calls an “ontological” interpretation (1-9). Wordsworth’s originality, argues Fry, does consist in a leveling muse, but it is an *ontological* and not a *political* leveling that is at stake. The Wordsworthian imagination discloses what Fry calls the “minerality of being” (10). He opens his study with a lengthy “apology” that justifies the exclusion of politics from the sphere of ontology, which is the privileged jurisdiction of Wordsworth’s phenomenological poetics. But Fry has trouble containing this restriction, and his argument suffers at crucial moments from a return of the political *within* the ontological. In *Wordsworth, Commodification, and Social Concern*, David Simpson retains the link between historically determined political conditions whose traces are imprinted in Wordsworth’s text and the traditional political understanding of the “leveling” function of Wordsworth’s poetics, comparing the band of lonely wanderers, vagrants, and mentally handicapped people, and animals to Giorgio Agamben’s figure of “bare life.” Yet like Fry, he acknowledges that these figures have an affinity with Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, whose thinking of spectrality in *Specters of Marx* is crucial to Simpson’s argument. What is striking about Simpson’s book, however, is that whereas Fry excludes the merely ontical questions of politics from what he considers a poetry of Being, Simpson tries to broker a compromise between the methodological concerns of historicist and deconstructive readings. (Though in any case a deconstructive reading would not affirmatively align with Fry’s interpretation of Wordsworth as an ontological poet.) In the course of this negotiation he grants to the partisans of deconstruction that there is in Wordsworth a certain “ontological emptiness”—and then poses the question of the “historical construction of Wordsworth’s ontological emptiness” (2). The real task would be how not to make that “historical construction” ontologically full.

establishment of the political community while casting a light that reestablishes the structure of the world. My interest in the scenes is that the scenes of sacrifice, which repeat obsessively throughout the poem, *produce the figures of life they sacrifice*. They are, indeed, machines of figuration swarming with “shapes of life scarce visible.” Wordsworth thus reveals a nexus in which the old, classical form of sovereignty that manifests itself by making die, and the new biopolitical sovereignty that makes live, are indistinguishable. The sacrificial machines also seem, perhaps, simply to be self-figuring, inorganic but animate living things. Upon closer analysis these scenes show that the machinery itself, whether it figures the sovereignty of the state or life (and therefore death), operates by simultaneously *erasing* and *producing* the condition of impossible life. If the sacrificial machines produce figures of life that, within the logic of the text, really might be alive *as* figures, then it also produces death against which life is figured in opposition. But the fact that the opposition between life and death itself arises here as a function of figure, and therefore might not arise at all, is precisely stage what Mortimer describes in *The Borderers*: “Living or dead all things were bodiless, / Or but the mutual mockeries of body” (LV 3.2.1214-1215). In *Salisbury Plain*, Wordsworth begins by thinking the point of articulation between life and the political by finding a position, indeed a political question, prior to the connection between the community or the state and the life of the human being as a political animal. Politics happens, on this view, not because life is vulnerable and at risk of death, and therefore needs the state as a supplementary shelter, or even in the first instance because there is a dispute over the arrangement of the state. Rather, there is politics in the wake of a figuration of life, always linked to some figure of sovereignty, that seeks to deny—to figure over—life as an originary experience of impossibility.

I would like to pause here to outline what the dissertation goes on to argue in more detail concerning Wordsworth’s leveling reduction of life. How does he level the conditions of possibility of life in order to produce figures of “impossible life?” In the four stanzas I quoted above (stanzas

6-8), what Wordsworth subtracts is the teleological structure of the world. He burns it away in both its synchronic and diachronic dimension. The missing landscape elements (“No shade was there, no meads of pleasant green, / No brook to wet his lips or soothe his ear”) constitute the synchronic dimension of teleological structure. Were they present, they would come together to make a harmonized, internally differentiated yet systematically integrated *whole* which is able to sustain living beings biologically with its arrangement of materials and structures, and also please them aesthetically with its similarly well-integrated system of form, light, color, and sound. What hangs suspended in the middle position between the conditions of bare survival and aesthetic pleasure (which in the above passage functions as a screen for the former) is the fact that, by virtue of systematic arrangement either for the end of life or the end of beauty, the space becomes legible *as such*. It is possible to orient oneself within it, or with regard to it. Salisbury Plain, however, is blank, an illegible “waste.” The first indication of radical non-navigability is the absence of the spire, which very lack “still” anchors the traveler’s now purposeless, and literally endless, backward looks. Were it present, it would articulate with its vertical line a link, and therefore a difference, between heaven and earth. Without it, the traveler—read by the intimation of the line—might as well be lost, like the spire, in “the blank sky.” Indeed, the horizon itself vanishes, and with it the outer bounds of the plain: “On as he passed more wild and forlorn / And vacant the huge plain around him spread.” The absence of an outer bound means that he is no longer traversing the plain. He has no destination. This lack of a destination indicates the collapse of teleology in its *diachronic* sense. Without orientation in space, it is not possible to orient one’s movement toward a goal which is both in space and, temporally, in the future. In the nightmare logic of the poem, the traveler is the only being subjected to such dysteological torture; he is made to watch the shepherd and the crows conveyed with telecom velocity off the plain toward home. The traveler’s hail, like the traveler himself, is thwarted by the material thickness of the wind, which passes “wildly plain” over his call.

My conceptual resource for understanding Wordsworth's suspension of teleology is Immanuel Kant, especially his discussion of the relation between reflective judgment and the technics of nature in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.²⁴ Scientific progress, for Kant, requires a presupposition that cannot ever be subsumed by scientific knowledge: that nature itself constitutes a system. Now for Kant, the *Critique of Pure Reason* was able to produce a priori universal laws that constitute the condition of the possibility of experience, as well as the possibility of nature as the object experience:

It is true that we do initially find something necessary in the bases of the possibility of experience, namely, the universal laws without which nature as such (as object of sense) cannot be thought. These laws rest on the categories, applied to the formal conditions of all intuition that is possible for us, as far as it too is given a priori. Under these laws judgment is determinative, for all it has to do is to subsume under given laws. For example, the understanding says: All change has its cause ([this is a] universal law of nature), and transcendental judgment need only state the condition for subsumption under the a priori concept of the understanding offered to it, and this condition is successiveness of states [*Bestimmungen*] of one and the same thing. Now for nature as such (as object of possible experience) we cognize that law as absolutely necessary. But apart from that formal temporal condition, objects of empirical cognition are still determined [*bestimmt*], or—if we confine ourselves to what we can judge a priori—determinable, in all sorts of additional ways.²⁵

It is not enough to know that the processes observable in nature are governed by the law of causality. For there is obviously an enormous diversity in the specific modes of causality at work in different natural processes, and each such mode implies an *empirical* principle or law of nature.

²⁴ I am not arguing, however, that Wordsworth had the third *Critique* in mind when he composed *Salisbury Plain*.

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 22.

Because the necessity of empirical laws (like gravity, for example), both in themselves and in relation to each other, cannot be known a priori, they must be contingent.²⁶ It is impossible to *know* whether the relations between the laws of nature are integrated into a unified, coherent system. But it is *necessary* to proceed *as if* this were the case.

Reflective judgment thus carries its own a priori principle. Though empirical natural laws can only be contingent for human understanding, reflective judgment assumes *a priori* that their number and variation are intelligible, and that they are structured in the network of their relations by a coherent, rule governed system. Moreover, reflective judgment assumes that this system is able to be discovered by and cognized by the human intellect.²⁷ Without assuming that nature *is* a system, and that its systematicity is organized such that the human intellect can ascend, by means of analogy, from particular, differentiated laws to the more and more general principles that embrace and relate them, it would not be possible to discover anything at all. The teleology of natural science requires, then, the a priori (unfounded) presupposition that nature is teleologically organized in itself, and, further

²⁶ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 22-23: "Therefore, specifically different natures, apart from what they have in common as belonging to nature as such, can still be causes in an infinite diversity of additional ways; and each of these ways must (in accordance with the concept of a cause as such) have its rule, a rule that is a law and hence carries necessity with it, even though the character and limits of our cognitive powers bar us altogether from seeing that necessity. Hence we must think nature, as regards its merely empirical laws, as containing the possibility of an endless diversity of empirical laws that [despite being laws] are nonetheless contingent as far as we can see (i.e., we cannot cognize them a priori); and it is in view of this possibility that we judge the unity of nature in terms of empirical laws, as well as the possibility of the unity of experience (as a system in terms of empirical laws) to be contingent."

²⁷ Cf. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 23, emphases are Kant's: "And yet we must necessarily presuppose and assume this unity, since otherwise our empirical cognition could not thoroughly cohere to [form] a whole of experience; for though the universal natural laws do make things cohere in terms of their genus, as natural things as such, they fail to provide them with specific coherence in terms of the particular natural beings they are. Hence judgment must assume, as an a priori principle for its own use, that what to human insight is contingent in the particular (empirical) natural laws does nevertheless contain a law-governed unity, unfathomable but still conceivable by us, in the combination of what is diverse in them to [form] an experience that is intrinsically [*an sich*] possible. Now when we find in such a combination a law-governed unity cognized by us as conforming to a necessary aim that we have (a need of our understanding), but at the same time as in itself [*an sich*] contingent, then we present this unity as a purposiveness of objects (of nature, in this case). Hence judgment, which with respect to things under possible (yet to be discovered) empirical laws is merely reflective, must think of nature with regard to these laws according to a *principle of purposiveness* for our cognitive power...Now this transcendental concept of a purposiveness of nature is neither a concept of nature nor a concept of freedom, since it attributes nothing whatsoever to the object (nature), but [through] this transcendental concept [we] only think of the one and only way in which we must proceed when reflecting on the objects of nature with the aim of having thoroughly coherent experience."

that the final end of this teleologically integrated system is its harmonization, its “fit,” with the mode and limits of human cognition and experience. The very possibility of experience *being* a system at all in fact requires it.²⁸

It remains possible, however, that the system of nature is finally impossible to cognize in its totality (that the progress of science will reach its limit at a certain subsystem, in other words), or that it is not a system at all.²⁹ The empirical laws might be “infinitely diverse”—which is to say that they might be infinite in number.³⁰ The specific laws or systems of laws that manifest themselves within distinct types of experience (today we would say phenomena) might in fact be so distant from each other within that series (indeed their distance could be infinite) as to preclude the possibility of human cognition ever discovering the higher principle that unifies them. Now this state of affairs, Kant seems to be saying, of a coherent system containing an infinite diversity of subsystems, is itself “quite alien to the understanding, and that the possibility—let alone the necessity—of such a whole is beyond [our] grasp [*begriffen*].” The concepts of the understanding could never “grasp,” such a system, which would make the very project of scientific progress impossible. Indeed, Kant is perhaps going further here, and arguing that an infinite system is moreover unthinkable, and corresponds to no idea of reason—which would mean that *if* this were the case, then the project of

²⁸ In other words, reflective judgment, which unlike determinative judgment operates without rules, in science as in ethics and politics lacks the bridge that crosses over the abyss; so it simply operates *as if* there were one.

²⁹ Cf. *Critique of Judgment*, 392-393, emphases Kant’s: “For although experience forms a system in terms of *transcendental* laws, which comprise the condition under which experience as such is possible, yet empirical laws might be so *infinitely diverse*, and *the forms* of nature which pertain to particular experience *so very heterogeneous*, that the concept [*Begriff*] of a system in terms of these (empirical) laws must be quite alien to the understanding, and that the possibility—let alone the necessity—of such a whole is beyond [our] grasp [*begriffen*]. And yet for particular experience to cohere thoroughly in terms of fixed principles, it must have this systematic coherence of empirical laws as well; for only then can judgment subsume the particular under what is universal though still always empirical, and so on until [it arrives at] the highest empirical laws and the natural forms conforming to them, and hence only then can it consider the *aggregate* of particular experiences as a system of them. For unless this [systematic coherence of empirical laws] is presupposed, particular experiences cannot have thoroughly lawful coherence, i.e., empirical unity.”

³⁰For a study that thinks the internally interruptive logic of teleology in conjunction with Kant’s thinking of borders and frontiers, see Geoffrey Bennington, *Kant on the Frontier: Philosophy, Politics, and the Ends of the Earth*. Especially pertinent to the issues discussed here is Bennington’s reading of “The Critique of Teleological Judgment” in Chapter Five, “The Abyss of Judgment” (144-197), as well as the book’s Appendix, “On Transcendental Fiction” (205-223).

science could not simply fall back onto a regulative idea. In this case, indeed, the possibility of this possibility, which Kant names when he asserts that the empirical laws of nature “*might*” just be “infinitely diverse” and the pertinent “forms of nature” correspondingly “heterogenous,” is itself an *impossible* possibility, beyond the grasp not only of the concepts of the understanding but also, perhaps, the ideas of reason. Indeed, human knowledge is doomed to operate on the basis of an a priori *as if* that treats the mere aggregates of experience as manifestations of a coherent and humanly understandable system. For to human cognition, it seems, there may be no operational difference between, on the one hand, a nature that at bottom is *in fact* a heterogenous aggregate of systems that can never be unified by a grand “theory of everything,” and, on the other, a nature that is an infinitely diverse system of laws. In *Salisbury Plain*, Wordsworth places the traveler in a situation that cannot be navigated by reflective judgment and resists the fictional presupposition of any teleological *as if*. To say, as he does in stanza 7, that each new slope seemed to hide a cottage (SP 7.55-56) is not far from saying that each new conjuncture of phenomena seemed to hide a new, synthesizing universal law. Orientation is irreducibly linked to teleology. The world in which the traveler has been placed is an aggregate that refuses to be read as a teleologically integrated system. It refuses to yield to the *as if*—which is to say that it is not a world.

For Kant, both the systematicity of nature (as formative power) and the systematicity of life are unthinkable. Life, for Kant, is essentially teleological. He consistently determines life in opposition to physical matter (which is to say the phenomenality of appearance) and aligns it with soul or *psyche*. Life is characterized by a causal structure analogous to the causality of freedom. As the law governing all relations of force and movement in the order of nature, the “causality of appearances” stipulates the general exteriority and anteriority of causes. Never, in the order of nature, does a thing contain the condition of its own alteration, and never is that condition determined by a relation to the future. By contrast, life is a power for self-modification through the

action of an internal principle. The language of legality punctuating this passage helps show that, at least structurally, the causality of life is analogous to the causality of freedom. While physical matter is doomed to causal heteronomy, life is essentially autonomous. The freedom of life is even clearer in a passage from a lecture on rational psychology, where Kant defines matter negatively as the absence of life, or the faculty of self-determination:

All matter is lifeless, has no faculty for determining itself, and the principle of life is something other than matter. For every matter remains in motion or at rest until it is altered by something else. Matter has mere receptivity or passivity. The principle of life, however, is *spontaneity* or the faculty for determining oneself from inner principles.³¹

Life is a capacity for self-modification through the action of an internal principle. It is essentially autonomous. Kant consistently frames the “spontaneity” of psychical life in terms of freedom.³² The association between life and practical freedom shows us why the “Critique of Teleological Judgment” is concerned with biology. An animal, which lives in the world and manifests as matter, seems to have crossed the gap between theoretical and practical reason. They’re walking bridges. Or at least *analogies* for bridges: “*To live*, properly speaking, means to have a faculty for performing actions in conformity with one’s representations. We call an animal *alive* because it has a faculty to alter its own state as a consequence of its own representations.”³³ Life, for Kant, is a teleological capacity. The trouble is that despite the fact that *psyche* is foreign to the domain of phenomenality,

³¹ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, 278. My emphasis. See also Cathy Caruth, *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions: Locke, Wordsworth, Kant, Freud*. Her discussion of matter in Chapter Three, “The Force of Example: Kant’s Symbols,” is especially pertinent here.

³² Cf. *Dreams of a Spirit Seer, Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770*, 301. It is perhaps precisely because the *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* is pre-critical that it contains the such a vivid figuration of the link between living spontaneity and practical freedom: “The undisputed characteristic mark of life, belonging to that which we perceive by means of our outer senses is, doubtless, *free movement*, which shows us that it has *originated from the power of the will*.”

³³ *Lectures on Metaphysics*, 295, Kant’s emphasis. See also *Lectures on Metaphysics*, 61-2, My emphasis: “A being is living if its power of representation can be the ground of the actuality of its objects. Life is thus the causality of a representation with respect to the actuality of its objects... A thing lives if it has a faculty to move itself by choice. Life is the faculty for acting according to choice or one’s desires. But now this is, *practically speaking*, the faculty of desire.”

living things move. The dilemma becomes an aporia when the question is displaced from animal spontaneity to the formative power of natural life, the capacity of living beings to *form themselves*.

In the “Critique of Teleological Judgment,” Kant distinguishes the purposiveness of “products of nature” like organisms from the purposiveness of artificially constructed objects like machines. Organisms and machines are equally determined by teleological causality, for in each the part depends on its relation to the whole. The difference consists in efficient causality: whereas the efficient cause of a machine is *external to it* (in the concept of a being sufficiently rational to construct machines), the organism contains the principle of its origin; it is “both an *organized* and a *self-organizing* being.” This implies the operation in living beings of a “formative force” that must be distinguished from the merely motive force that characterizes the mechanism of inert nature. But because the human cognition of nature is restricted to mechanical causality, the purposiveness of nature can neither be conceptualized nor made an object of determinate knowledge. The science of nature must therefore treat natural purposes *as if* they were technical objects, despite the fact that this analogy cannot claim to render intelligible the formative force which distinguishes machines from organisms in the first place. Regarding the word life, Kant goes on:

We might be closer if we call this inscrutable property of nature an *analogue of life*. But in that case we must either endow matter, as mere matter, with a [kind of] property ([viz., the property of life, as] hylozoism [does]) that conflicts with nature [*Wesen*]. Or else we must supplement matter with an alien principle (a soul) conjoined to it. But [that also will not work. For] if an organized product is to be a natural product, then we cannot make this soul the artificer that constructed it, since that would remove the product from (corporeal) nature. And yet the only alternative would be to say that this soul uses as its instrument organized matter; but if we presuppose organized matter, we do not make it a whit more

intelligible. Strictly speaking, therefore, the organization of nature has nothing analogous to any causality known to us. (CJ 254)

In the form of a negative thesis, Kant replicates his position with regard to the technics of nature and lays down the critical postulate that “strictly speaking, therefore, the causality of nature has nothing analogous to any causality known to us.” A strange umbilical cord links the animal living being (which is only alive *by* analogy) with the technics of nature, which is of course an a priori fiction of judgment.

In the Salisbury Plain poems, Wordsworth targets the other end of the teleological pole: either he places the living being in a disorganized world, a world that is in fact an aggregate, or he makes impossible the teleological capacity of the living being from within. For Kant, life is a power to *act*. It is an active power opposed in its essence to the mere passivity of mechanical matter. Life, in this sense, is determined by a certain ontological sovereignty of self-possession. Wordsworth’s experiments with impossibility reveal another thinking of life, one at odds with any thinking of life as power or possibility. Any such living power is constituted by a primordial passivity. Wordsworth, indeed, anticipates Jacques Derrida here. The following passage, where Derrida calls for the invention of a new thinking of life, systematically reverses the Kantian schema, and describes in conceptual prose precisely the rethinking of life Wordsworth enacts poetically in the Salisbury Plain poems. To escape the closure of the opposition between soul and matter (the causality of freedom and the causality of mechanism), Derrida calls for a double thinking of the event, which is incalculable, and the machine, which works by repetition and therefore proceeds as calculation. This combination would be another thinking of life:

Will this be possible for us? Will we one day be able, and in a single gesture, to join the thinking of the event to the thinking of the machine? Will we be able to think, what is called thinking, at one and the same time, both what is happening (we call that an event) and

the calculable programming of an automatic repetition (we call that a machine)? For that, it would be necessary in the future (but there will be no future except on this condition) to think both the event and the machine as two compatible or even indissociable concepts. Today they appear to us to be antinomic. Antinomic because what happens ought to keep, so we think, some nonprogrammable and therefore incalculable singularity. An event worthy of the name ought not, so we think, to give in or be reduced to repetition. To respond to its name, the event ought above all to happen to someone, to some living being who is thus is affected by it, consciously or unconsciously. No event without experience (and this is basically what "experience" means), without experience, conscious or unconscious, human or not, of what happens to the living.

It is difficult, however, to conceive of a living being to whom or through whom something happens without an affection getting inscribed in a sensible, aesthetic manner right on some body or some organic matter. Why organic? Because there is no thinking of the event, it seems, without some sensitivity, without an aesthetic affect and some presumption of living organicity.

The machine, on the contrary, is destined to repetition. It is destined, that is, to reproduce impassively, imperceptibly, without organ or organicity, received commands. In a state of anesthesia, it would obey or command a calculable program without affect or auto-affection, like an indifferent automaton. Its functioning, if not its production, would not need anyone. Moreover, it is difficult to conceive of a purely machinelike apparatus without inorganic matter.

Notice I say inorganic. Inorganic, that is, nonliving, sometimes dead but always, in principle, unfeeling and inanimate, without desire, without intention, without spontaneity.

The automaticity of the inorganic machine is not the spontaneity attributed to organic life.³⁴ Many of the figures of life that occur in Wordsworth's writing are *active* and spontaneous, like "imagination" lifting itself up in Wordsworth's effort to write his crossing of the alps. They are often surprises—and yet often repetitive, like the figures of ghostly life that rise up from the sacrificial scenes on *Salisbury Plain*. What Wordsworth shows in the Salisbury Plain poems, in the reduction to impossible life, is a passive exposure to the coming of the event. That event is not, however, merely death, but survival as impossibility. He refigures the receptivity of life to events as a structure of impossibility, what I call in this study the "aporia of life."

2. THE TROUBLE WITH LIFE: THE QUESTION OF PLURALITY

Percy Bysshe Shelley formulates the question of life in terms of what is good for life:

Life, and the world, or whatever we call that which we are and feel, is an astonishing thing. The mist of familiarity obscures from us the wonder of our being. We are struck with admiration at some of its transient modifications; but it is itself the great miracle. What are the changes of empires, the wreck of dynasties with the opinions that supported them; what is the birth and extinction of religions and political systems to life? What are the revolutions of the globe which we inhabit, and the operation of the elements of which it is composed, compared with life? What is the universe of stars and suns [of] which this inhabited earth is one and their motions and their destiny compared with life? Life, the great miracle, we admire not, because it is so miraculous. It is well that we are shielded by the familiarity of

³⁴ "Typewriter Ribbon," Limited Ink (2)," *Without Alibi*, 72.

what is at once so certain and so unfathomable from an astonishment which would otherwise absorb and overawe the functions of that which is [its] object.³⁵

Life is the “great miracle,” but so astonishing is the very fact of the miracle—“of life and the world, or whatever we call that which we are and feel”—that, were a living being to experience life directly, it might be astonished to death. The question of life represents a threat to life. And it’s a good thing, too, says Shelley, that our attention is structurally captivated by “transitory modifications,” because life might very well be made impossible by its own question. The very question of life is a threat against the possibility of survival. Shelley’s formulation of the question of life is indeed “striking,” to borrow his term, because he places the question of life *in* life, and in such a way that life is both vitally concerned with it yet unable to access it directly. The question of life, then, is not only a *problem* in the sense of an intellectual puzzle but a highly problematic risk implicated within life itself—not “life” the name or “life” the theory, but life the thing, or anyway whatever it is we call “life.” Striking, too, is the fact that this folding pattern, this implication of the question of life within life, intensifies rather than dissolves the question of reference. Critical attention could easily become absorbed and lose itself here. Shelley’s fragmentary essay, however, is only one “transient modification” of the romantic obsession with life.

That the romantics have a thing for life is a fact. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* alone, Wordsworth refers to the material “conditions of life” in the external world, and renders the operation of the poet’s “organic sensibility” in mechanical terms, so that he becomes an “automatic” writing machine whose printed output is itself figured as alive, as living figure: “variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures”—a trope repeated by Shelley’s depiction of poetic language in “A Defence of Poetry” as “vitally metaphorical.”³⁶ Coleridge composes a “Theory of Life” which begins

³⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “On Life,” *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 505.

³⁶ William Wordsworth 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, *Major Works*, 598. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 513,

with a systematic reflection on the difficulties involved in defining the “word Life;” declares that “*that life is I myself I!*”; composes a *Biographia Literaria*; and devotes *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to describing the repetitive vicissitudes of “the Night-Mare Life-in-Death.”³⁷ Keats centers his conception poetry on negative capability, which is oriented not merely toward death but the possibility of poetically thinking other modes of life. This combination of repetition and difference exhibits a suppleness capable of gratifying any literary critical, theoretical, or historical of view of romanticism: the romantic life text will ably meet demands for organic form, immanent pantheism, phenomenological and existential determinations of life, autobiography and confession. Likewise, it is possible to analyze the concern (or expose the lack of concern) for political and economic conditions of life, and to conduct a discourse analysis on conceptions of life borrowed from natural science, social science, and medicine.

One feature that characterizes the incessant return of the romantics to all the modifications of life’s question is the recognition, whether implicitly operative or explicitly thematized (as in the opening of Shelley’s essay), that one’s discourse, poetry, or thinking of life is ineluctably implicated within life and that this implication both imposes the question, “What is life?”, and precludes the possibility of an answer, since the immersion of the one who asks the question (and indeed the question itself) within life precludes the stability of reference required to assign a “what” to a thing, to fill in its blank with a determinate content. Shelley’s seemingly last question therefore repeats: “‘But what is life,’ I asked.”³⁸ One is left either with “blank desertion,” or with what, at least at first glance, looks like polysemic dispersion. Indeed, one is left with *both* blank desertion and teeming plurality, and the romantic discourse of life is structured by the paradox of this duplicity. Romantic

³⁷ Coleridge to Thelwall, 31 December 1796, *The Letters of Samuel Coleridge, Vol. 1*, 295. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1817), *The Major Works*, line 193.

³⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “The Triumph of Life,” *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 500.

authors write about life so obsessively that its textual modifications seem to propagate at every level of reference. And yet the word itself remains blank.

How many idioms of life are there in Wordsworth's writing? To how many disparate discourses of life do his intertexts belong? How can we accurately discriminate between concepts, figures, discourses of life? In a given text, how does one determine which sense of *life* is primarily at play? Not only do the logical relations between concepts and figures of life become potentially undecidable, but so do the relations between the thematic areas of life with which Wordsworth's poetry is concerned, from autobiography and lived experience to the documentation of material or social conditions of life, to life variously determined as biological, psychological, spiritual, and even natural. He is concerned with the lives of peoples, cultures, and the survival of the condition of possibility of life. Indeed Wordsworth attributes life to language and figuration itself. It can be shown that his depiction in the 1802 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* of the poet as a writing machine who must be affected and indeed *figured* by experience in order to produce poetry that is "variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures," logically forbids us from assuming that the latter use of a language of life to describe writing is *merely* metaphorical, since the poet is constituted by the same process. Languages drawn from all of these and more are variously marked with thematic priority and variously subordinated to each other as figural or connotative resources. And sometimes the hierarchy is structurally undecidable. The same goes, of course, for the logical relations between the discourses and traditions understood to have a determining influence on Wordsworth's writing. This presents a methodological challenge to scholarship. For scholarship has to define the object of analysis, to plot out the borders of the theme or question under analysis. In the last decade there has been a return to the question life in romanticism, from Denise Gigante's study of life as power, to re-assessments of Coleridgean organicism, to research, like that represented by Amanda Jo

Goldstein's *Sweet Science*, that excavates a materialist, non-organic thinking of life in romanticism.³⁹

The reason there can be such diversity of critical approaches to life in romanticism—the reason that scholarship on life is “variegated, and alive” with critical understandings of life in romanticism, I would argue, is that the romantic poetry of life takes place *before reference*, before the thematic fields of life, so to speak, have settled down, each with its own proper content.

Readers of romanticism find themselves caught in a difficulty with respect to romantic texts analogous to that experienced by the romantics with respect to life. *As soon as one supplies a content for the thing called life in the form of a definition*, one is shipwrecked on a transient modification. The word “life” has no literal sense. When it comes to life there are only figures. What this means is that every philosophical or scientific attempt to construct a definition of life as such beyond its given manifestation is doomed to find itself taking out metaphorical loans from nearby discourses of life. Hence the strange, dizzying transactions between theological, psychological, mechanical, social, uses

³⁹ Denise Gigante, *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism*; Amanda Jo Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life*. These authors can be understood to represent two poles in the contemporary scholarship on romanticism and life. Gigante launches a sophisticated return to romantic organicism under the aegis of “power;” Goldstein privileges a romantic thinking of life irreducible to organic form and linked to the materiality of the Lucretian atom. Sara Guyer's *Reading with John Clare* represents another *biopolitical* direction, which is related but not circumscribed by the prior approaches. The last ten years have seen a profusion of work on romanticism and what can be broadly construed as the life sciences. For a recent study that takes “experiment” as its watchword, see Robert Mitchell, *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science and Literature*. See also Ross Wilson, ed., *The Meaning of “Life” in Romantic Poetry and Poetics*; Clayton Koelb, *The Revivifying Word: Literature, Philosophy and the Theory of Life in Europe's Romantic Age*; Noel B Jackson, *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry*; Alan Richardson, *The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts*; Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe*; Richard C. Sha, *Imagination and Science in Romanticism*; Noah Heringman, *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology*; Nicholas Roe, *The Politics of Nature: William Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries*; Maureen N. McLane, *Romanticism and the Human Sciences: Poetry, Population, and the Discourse of the Species*; H.W. Piper, *The Active Universe: Pantheism and the Concept of Imagination in the English Romantic Poets*; Lisa Ottum and Seth T. Reno, *Wordsworth and the Green Romantics: Affect and Ecology in the Nineteenth-Century*; David Perkins, *Romanticism and Animal Rights*; Christine Kenyon-Jones, *Kindred Brutes: Animals in Romantic-Period Writing*; Onno Dag Oerlemans, “The Meanest Thing that Feels: Anthropomorphizing Animals in Romanticism,” *Mosaic* 27 (1994); Onno Dag Oerlemans, *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature*; Martin Priestman, *The Poetry of Erasmus Darwin: Enlightened Spaces, Romantic Times*; Tilottama Rajan, “Organicism,” *English Studies in Canada*, 30 (2004); David Fairer, *Organising Poetry: The Coleridge Circle, 1790-1798*. Organicism as a motif in romanticism goes back to Coleridge, of course, but the following are particularly useful: Sidney Zink, “The Poetic Organism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 42, no.16 (1945); William K. Wimsatt, “Organic Form: Some Questions about a Metaphor,” *Organic Form: The Life of an Idea*, ed. G.S. Rousseau; Danie Stempel, “Coleridge and Organic Form: The English Tradition,” *Studies in Romanticism* 6 (1967); Ritterbush, Philip C. “Aesthetics and Objectivity in the Study of Form in the Life Sciences,” *Organic Form: The Life of an Idea*, ed. G.S. Rousseau; I.A. Richards, “How does a Poem Know When It Is Finished?” *Parts and Wholes*, ed. Daniel Lerner; Ernst Nagel, “Wholes, Sums, and Organic Unities,” *Philosophical Studies* 3, no. 2 (1952);

of the word and modes of the discourse. That's life. The figures of life—shapes of life whose web of relations is scarce visible, and determinative of thinking—interact and overlap so prodigiously that to find *the thing called life* behind the falling ash of so much language seems likely to be an illusion of life. But this is precisely the situation when one attempts to constrain the domain of the life pertinent to a study of a given romantic poet. Because any area of life will inevitably reveal itself to be constructed by metaphorical elements borrowed from the others. The challenge to read the romantics on life *rigorously*, then, is to read their life-writing before reference.

3. OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

The first chapter, “Unhoused Life: Autobiography and Biopolitics on the Plain,” begins by reading the poetics of impossible life from the perspective of autobiography. The earliest poem in the series, *Salisbury Plain* (1793-1794), was produced by a solitary encounter with the plain, a long “ramble” across it. This encounter, according the autobiographical account Wordsworth recorded in the “Advertisement” with which he prefaced *Guilt and Sorrow*, the version of the poem he finally published in 1842, was the occasion of profound “reflections” on war, history, and the nature of the human being. In the *Prelude*, he tells Coleridge that his walk across the plain was the originary event of his becoming a poet. The critical interest in Wordsworth's autobiographical account of the production of the poem, which is not itself autobiographical, consists in the fact of this conjuncture between politics and poetry, between his poetic retelling of his transformation into a poet, and his framing of his turn toward—or turn away from—the political. My argument in the first section of this chapter is that Wordsworth's autobiographical retelling of the origin of the poem is itself impossible. The event itself is occulted by a system of narrative relays that shuttles critical reading back and forth, or carries it in a circle around the empty place of that event. The absence of the event that inspired the poem matters, I argue, because both his inability to complete the poem and his compulsive return to it in new versions (first *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, then his

autobiographical retelling in *The Prelude*, and finally—decades later—*Guilt and Sorrow*) is determined by this event. The pattern of repetition and return that forms the sequence of the poem is determined by an event that remains—according to Wordsworth’s retelling—impossible. The stakes ratchet up even further when we account for the fact that Wordsworth’s autobiographical poetics, his life writing, does not presuppose a naïve, representational relation between the real events of life and the poetic narrative that describes them. Wordsworth, of course, forms his life by writing it. His recollection of his encounter with Salisbury Plain in *The Prelude* possesses a status parallel to that of his encounter with “imagination” in his recollection of crossing the alps. In both cases, the act of writing produces an event in which Wordsworth finds himself passively called, and in a strange way shattered into silence in being called, into poetry. The event that keeps calling him back, then, with its structure of traumatic temporality and repetition, remains impossible to read.

The second argument of the first chapter focuses on Wordsworth’s use of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the four-stanza preface he attaches to the front of *Salisbury Plain*. Indeed, Chapter One focuses its analyses largely on the two frames with which Wordsworth encases *Salisbury Plain*, the autobiographical “context” which he adds retrospectively, and his Rousseauist preface. That Wordsworth references the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* in the first four stanzas is well known, and indeed Rousseau’s signature is unmistakable. However, critics usually read it as an index of the poet’s early and soon-to-be-abandoned political radicalism. In this section I argue that Wordsworth’s engagement with Rousseau is in fact far more substantive and rigorous. Years later, in the 1842 “Advertisement” to *Guilt and Sorrow*, he writes that what inspired him to write the poem during in his 1793 encounter with the plain was the series of reflections about the difference between the conditions of life experienced by prehistorical humanity and the conditions to which the poor are subjected in the modern world, especially with regard to their disproportionate exposure to the catastrophes of war. In 1793, I argue, Wordsworth enacts these reflections not in the form of

autobiographical recollection (as he does in the 1842 “Advertisement”) but in the idiom of philosophical reflection itself, and with a specific passage in mind from opening pages of the second *Discourse*, where Rousseau argues that any evaluation of our “present state”—whether in comparison to some presumed condition of natural liberty or to some other possible state, present or future—will have no validity until the essence of the human being has been articulated and the principles of a true science of right established on its basis. The method Rousseau advances to arrive at that essence, a transcendental reduction projected retrospectively backward in historical time, is precisely what Wordsworth signals in his own preface. He produces a “savage” by means of that reduction in order to compare the latter’s condition of existence with that of modern humanity. He finds that life in the state of nature is preferable, of course. But what matters is that the synchronic structure of the evaluative comparison is also a genetic narrative that tells how, in Rousseauist terms, the state of nature evolved into the state of culture. The concept which Wordsworth emphasizes here, and which makes his four-stanza preface substantively rather than phatically Rousseauist, is supplementary shelter. Culture, the state, and consciousness—together with the capacity to form the sort of reflections enacted by Wordsworth’s very preface—arise as a supplementary shelter system. So far, Wordsworth shows himself to be a careful student of Rousseau. *Salisbury Plain*, Wordsworth’s great “protest poem” against war and inequality, thus begins with a Rousseauist prolegomena that establishes the conditions of possibility of the protest itself.

Wordsworth has read Rousseau carefully, then. He clears the ground for the possibility of his protest. But now he turns Rousseau inside out. The putatively Rousseauist reduction produces not a Rousseauist nature, which ought to be full of life-protecting shelter. Instead, it produces a nature of radical danger and radically heightened mortality—a condition of “unhouzed life”—which James Chandler and Alan Liu identify as Hobbesian nature.⁴⁰ This suggests that Wordsworth is adopting

⁴⁰ Chandler, *Wordsworth’s Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics*, 130-31.

the terms of Hobbesian nature as a partisan of Rousseau, in other words, upping the ante against Hobbes on Rousseau's behalf to argue that even if Hobbes is right about the condition of nature in itself (that it is nasty, brutish, and short) Rousseau remains right that nature, even Hobbes's nature, is preferable to culture. However, there is another thread here, another intertext that complicates any reading that seeks to position Wordsworth within the debate (however framed) between Rousseau and Hobbes. Paul Kelley, who first tracked down the precise locations in the second *Discourse* cited by the preface to *Salisbury Plain*, came back a few years later with findings that show that the very same four-stanza opening, and indeed the same descriptions of nature, are also citations of Lucretius. Like Wordsworth, Rousseau was a reader of Lucretius, and it is possible simply to extend the reading to include the third figure, and thus map out the precise configuration between the three thinkers which Wordsworth's citations implies. Without disputing the value of this kind of project, I limit myself to arguing that Wordsworth uses the Lucretian echoes to so radicalize the Hobbesian image of the state of nature that it becomes worse than a Hobbesian nightmare. Life, as it is presented in these stanzas, does not have the time even to be "nasty, brutish, and short," because it is impossible. The logic of the passage suggests that it dies even before it awakes. What is depicted here looks less like an origin in nature than an extinction event at the end of it. Indeed, it recalls the Lucretian collapse of the complex structure of nature as a whole into a sea of primordial atoms.

Wordsworth does not permit us simply to choose between origin and end, Hobbes or Lucretius. For his description of nature (whether original or terminal) is characterized not only by the impossibility of survival but also the impossibility of orientation. This disorientation refuses to be contained within the thematic dimension of the text, and contaminates the possibility of the text's legibility. The question of impossible life is compounded and displaced by the question of the legibility of its textual presentation. The resulting disorientation with regard to the text (for example, with regard to its thematic depiction of disorientation) has consequences for Wordsworth's use of

Rousseau. I begin the section by arguing that the first four stanzas of *Salisbury Plain* reenact Rousseau's retrospective reduction in order to then reconstitute the genetic narrative that tells the origin of inequality against which the poem addresses its protest; in order, that is, to establish by means of poetry the condition of the possibility of its political action. Now this origin story ought to be teleological. For Rousseau, the historical unfolding of human culture involves contingency and the interruptions of the system by unpredictable events, but the system is always able to metabolize and incorporate the accident. Indeed, it is by assimilating the accident of a catastrophe that the process got started. Wordsworth's preface, however, marks the transition between nature and culture with a single, Lucretian word, the significance of which Kelley doesn't note: *turn*. The event of a "sad turn of chance" is both what characterizes the condition of culture and what marks the separation between nature and culture. Yet, once the Lucretian traces of the depiction with nature are taken into account, we see that everything was already a disoriented chaos of sad clinamina. In his turn to Lucretius, Wordsworth makes his Rousseauist narrative of origins impossible even as he tells it. He removes the conditions of possibility for his poetic protest even as he establishes them. In the first chapter I show that Wordsworth adopts the Rousseauist reduction but takes it too far. For Rousseau, the reduction should only clear away the sedimentary deposits of history in order to reveal the essence of the human being in the origin. That is, the human should be revealed in the setting of its natural life and *as* a living being. This is why the scene of nature, with its protective shelters, is so significant for Rousseau. But Wordsworth's reduction—and here is his leveling muse at work—descends beneath life, as it were. It burns away from life the conditions of its possibility: the structures of physical habitation and the system of orientation that binds it to the world. Read from this perspective, the (impossible) narrative of origins then unfolds, telling the story of the development of the state itself as a system of supplementary shelter. The same narrative reveals itself to be story of the *repression* or *denial* of this primordial condition of impossibility. What I argue, then,

is that in *Salisbury Plain*, Wordsworth rewrites Rousseau's genetic narrative so that sovereignty and the institution of the state arise as mechanisms of defense that provide shelter not against *death*, but against the experience of *impossible survival*. If the elementary institutions of human politics thus shelter against impossible life by denying it, then Wordsworth's poetic vocation is precisely to bear witness to that denial. His poetry thus exposes life to the condition of its impossibility, and shows how the question of the legibility of life and (im)possibility are themselves implicated within the exposure. To be exposed to the impossibility of life is to be exposed to the question of a possibly impossible reading. The conjuncture of his poetry and politics is to be found here, not in the topos of a determinate and historically local ideology (romantic or otherwise), but at the quasi-transcendental level of the condition of (im)possibility.

The second chapter, "Double Exposure: Reducing Life and Producing Death from *Salisbury Plain* to *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*," follows the conjuncture of life, politics, and poetry into the body of the poem. The first part of Chapter Two turns to Wordsworth's depiction of the traveler as we find him on the plain. By way of a re-reading of Geoffrey Hartman's analysis of *Salisbury Plain*, I show how the collapse of a teleological relation to the world is conveyed by the traveler's radical disorientation, and how, in the extremity of his physical exposure, Wordsworth insists that this is not a merely specular disturbance. Not only has the traveler been deprived of the shelters *within* the world, but also of the shelter *of* the world. Wordsworth's traveler is the figure of a living being plunged into the abyss of absolute inhabitability. If, as I argue, the scene of the traveler lost on *Salisbury Plain* is a scene of impossible life, then the question arises of how to read it. At one level, Wordsworth is repeating the operation he already performed in the preface to the poem, which, by means of a hyperbolic application of Rousseau's reduction, produced not the figure of a living being in its original, natural setting, but the figure of life *without* the conditions of possibility it needs not

only to survive but indeed to *be* life at all.⁴¹ But this time the reduction occurs as the material effect of political conditions and not only as the conceptual product of a transcendental device.

The traveler, after all, is one of Wordsworth's lonely wanderers, and despite his anonymity it seems reasonable to infer that he is the victim of the same enormous economic and political transformation that produces Wordsworth's other figures of vagrancy. Indeed, there's a mark of this historically material transformation in the "wastes of corn," an ironic formulation that describes an enormous area of land which has been carefully cultivated to produce wheat as a wasteland (which has by definition not been cultivated) not only because it might as well be a desert to the traveler lost in it on a stormy night, but because he is lost among its crops looking for *food*. He is emblematic of the fact that there are so many thousands of homeless, starving people produced by the process of enclosure linked to large-scale agriculture. The plain itself, as a wilderness in the process of cultivation, is emblematic of an unjust society that distributes the means of survival so unequally that much of it goes to waste. If there is an implicit protest in the "wastes of corn," it is this: it is a *waste* of corn for there to be so many people starving. At the end of the first chapter I demonstrate that Wordsworth's figuration of the plain in these stanzas contains a further allusion to a passage from Comte de Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*, which Rousseau quotes and glosses at length in one of the discursive footnotes to the second *Discourse*. In it, Buffon describes the transformation, through industry and agriculture, of naturally fertile land into deserts—wastes—fundamentally unable to support life. The "corn" seems to signal not only the Lucretian atom, but also Buffon's use of "the ground of Arabia Petraea" as the exemplary desert which (according to Buffon) is uninhabitable

⁴¹ There is a curious intersection in the question of life between, on the one hand, the conditions of conceptual identity (the conditions under which a thing *x* can be described by the concept *life* and can thus be considered *alive*, and the meta-conditions under which the concept life can be considered possible as a concept, that is, non-contradictory and able to be differentiated from its others), and the conditions of survival of a living thing. Logical impossibility, as a transcendental condition, and *logical* impossibility as a formal condition that pertains to the concept of life as such as well as to the conceptual matrix that maintains it, meet here at the borderline of an undecidability.

thanks to the saturation of its sands (that is, its granules, its corn) with the “volatized” remnants of the animals and plants that once lived there. Such chemical traces deposited in the soil are examples of what biologists and geologists today call the “biosignatures” of past life. For Buffon, in addition to recording the presence of past habitation, these biosignatures prevent the possibility of present and indeed future habitation. They are not only a record of past life but the sign of a coming extinction—and indeed active elements in the process of that extinction. The traveler, then, as he moves through the plain, moves through a space that registers a politics that makes life impossible: both at the scale of a national economy that starves whole populations, and at the scale of planetary death. Wordsworth seems to have been thinking the Anthropocene in 1793.

David Simpson has compared Wordsworth’s swarms of vagrants to Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, the figure of constitutive exclusion bound to the originary structure of sovereignty.⁴² Indeed, what seems to indicate above all that the traveler has been ejected from the domain of the law (or human community), and makes his connection to Agamben’s thinking especially fertile, is the fact that his initial errancy is attributed to the disappearance of the spire atop Salisbury Cathedral. In addition to having served the traveler as a navigational device, the spire functions textually as a figure for the onto-theological sovereignty. It marks the place of the human community and articulates a link between the Earth and the sky. In other words, it marks both the place of human law and its transcendentalizing reach toward the divine. The spire as a figure for vanishing sovereignty, together with the markers I have just discussed (the wastes of corn as signs of economic and planetary extinction), suggests, then, that the traveler—as a figure of impossible life—is produced by the political machinery against which Wordsworth’s protest is addressed. If, for Agamben, the apparatus constituted by the state, sovereignty, and capitalism produces figures of

⁴² David Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification, and Social Concern*, 3, 60-61. For the concept of *Homo Sacer*, see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereignty and Bare Life*.

bare life in the form of stateless people, refugees, and so on, Wordsworth argues that this machine produces life stripped bare even of its possibility as life.

I stated above that for Wordsworth, the elementary institutions of human politics deny the condition of impossible life. As he approaches Stonehenge to take shelter from the storm, the traveler is thwarted by a disembodied voice that rises up and describes the scene of human sacrifice he will find the phantoms of undead Druids repeating there—phantoms that, according to the voice, are material enough to make the traveler their real sacrificial victim. The scene of human sacrifice repeats obsessively throughout *Salisbury Plain*, always repeated secondhand as a tale. I argue that the scenes depict the establishment of political and theological sovereignty, but they do so by establishing an act of sacrifice that, on the one hand, erases impossible life by establishing a linear opposition between life and death, and yet also, on the other hand, produces impossible life in the figures of undead, phantasmatic animations that arise from the (spectral) bloodshed. It is during the scenes of sacrifice that the world becomes legible as such—both within the tale of sacrifice and within the “real” world in which the narrative is told and heard. It is as narrative machine that life is made, alternatively, possible and impossible, and that sovereignty (of the state and of life in its ontological opposition to death) rises up and dwindles away. This politics of sovereignty is what we might call an ontological bio-politics, since sovereignty is co-originary with the opposition between life and death. The novelty introduced by Wordsworth, I argue, is not only that biopolitics produces a figuration of life, but that it produces a figuration of life *as a function of narrative—and before the possibility of life has been assured*.

The second part of Chapter Two examines the form of life of the traveler, as we find him on the plain, with that of the female vagrant. The traveler has been placed in a situation where survival is impossible, but he *wants* to live. Though the teleological structure of the world has been for a time cut away, he retains his own teleological drive to maintain his own existence. He is governed, it

seems, by the life drive. In his very reduction to the exigencies of mere animality, he exhibits the auto-teleological structure of life: the self-relational structure by which the living being takes itself as its own end, whether the end be further determined as mere survival, as pleasure, or as increase of power. What is striking, however, is that when we first meet him, the traveler relates to his own drive to live—that is to say, the self-relation that constitutes him as a living being—as a subjection to an external power. He moves under the *compulsion* to survive, “pressed” by “thirst and hunger” to find shelter from the storm. He moves as though impelled by the external, mechanical pressure of survival. To thus live in passive subjection to an alien will to live is to suffer. Once during his passive search for shelter his despair is able to convert, for a moment, into a desire for death. The teleological structure of life, which continues to attract him toward survival, undergoes a sort of magnetic pole reversal. The teleology of desire separates from the teleological structure of life and attaches itself to the other end, the other pole: death. It is only momentary, however, and as long as it last it remains virtual.

The traveler’s death drive only activates, only becomes able to physically reorient his steps, when Wordsworth rewrites *Salisbury Plain* as *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*. In *Adventures*, he deletes the four-stanza Rousseauist framing device as well as the repeating series of scenes of human sacrifice, which he replaces with its modern, statist equivalent: the death penalty. The traveler has grown some character in the meantime as well. He has ceased to be quite so anonymous. He is now a discharged sailor who was compelled into military service by the “ruffian’s *press* gang” (ASP 9.80), but then, after the termination of his service, denied compensation for his contribution to the bloody work of war.⁴³ Enraged by his exploitation, he returns home—and then robs and murders a man, and then flees for his life. When we meet him on the plain, his backward glance toward Salisbury is motivated

⁴³ It is customary for Wordsworth’s readers to refer to the new version of the traveler as the “sailor” in order to emphasize the difference, which is considerable, between the two stages of the poem. For the sake of consistency, however, I will simply refer to him as “the traveler” throughout.

by the threat of the law, which he knows is after him. Rather than a hallucinated tale of ancient druids performing scenes of ritual sacrifice in Stonehenge's stone ring, he encounters on the plain the corpse of a murderer hanging in an iron frame. At the end of the poem, on the far side of the female vagrant's autobiography, they make their way to the perimeter of the plain, where at a cottage he encounters a dying woman whom he realizes is his own wife, made sick—and indeed killed—as a secondary casualty of the murder that put him on the run. The loop closes, and something changes in the traveler, who now walks straight—"and not without pleasure" (ASP 91.812)—back to the city where he confesses his crimes, claims his right to the death penalty, and immediately receives it. The poem ends with the image of the traveler's corpse hanging suspended in an iron case. What I argue here is that the teleological structure of the life drive is, at least within the universe of the *Salisbury Plain* poems, isomorphic with the death drive. The fundamental drive at work in the traveler, I argue, is not the life drive or even the death drive, but the drive to some *end*, the drive to a telos. For it is only by orienting himself toward some end (life or death) that he can neutralize the torsion of impossibility in which we first find him.

In *Salisbury Plain*, the scenes of human sacrifice attempt to neutralize impossible life by putting life to death. In *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, Wordsworth develops the same line of thinking into an argument about the death penalty—the descendant of the sacrificial machine, whose spectacle, at the end of the poem, has the additional benefit of serving the law of the state and the law of the father. Though we find him submerged in the condition of impossible life, the traveler, I argue, is exemplary of the *drive to teleology*, a meta-teleological structure that, since it is a drive, is teleological in itself and maybe just the very form of teleology in general. Its interest, so to speak, is to suppress the condition of impossible life, and its end is a sheltering sovereignty: either the sovereignty of life (in the case of the life drive) or, in this case, the sovereignty of the law which purports to *save* life by killing it, and which also, by means of the same sacrifice, constitutes itself on

the borderline it draws between the living and the dead. The traveler receives the end he wants. He returns the human community and becomes a part of the law, animated with the dark life of its deterrent function.

Chapter Three, “Re-Signing Being: The Problem of Value and the Formulation of a Critique of Life at the Border of *Salisbury Plain*,” turns from the traveler to the female vagrant. It sets out from a comparison, already begun at the end of Chapter Two, between the form of life of the traveler (which is characterized by the teleology drive), and that of the female vagrant. The female vagrant is a figure of homelessness produced by the same political and economic machine as the traveler. And like the traveler (as transformed in *Guilt and Sorron*), she considers herself guilty of participation in war. His guilt is direct: “For years the work of carnage did not cease, / And Death’s worst aspect he daily survey’d / Death’s minister” (ASP 10.82-84). Her guilt, at least according to her own autobiography, concerns her complicity in organized violence. She and her husband were compelled by poverty, or rather *believed* themselves to be compelled, to live off the bloody proceeds of that violence in order to feed themselves and their children. Unable to secure any another source of income, they decided that he would enlist and that she and their children would follow him to North America, where (like the traveler) he would contribute his labor power to the “work of carnage” required to put down the revolution. They would all live off the bloody pay her husband was to receive in compensation for acting as “Death’s minister.” Or so was the plan: “All perished—all, in one remorseless year, / Husband and children! one by one, by sword / And ravenous plague, all perished” (ASP 44.392-394). The third chapter takes its cue from the female vagrant’s lament, in which she superimposes her expression of grief with an expression of guilt, indeed radical culpability, for the wrong of having attempted to live off human blood:

Oh dreadful price of being! to resign

All that is dear in being; better far

In Want's most lonely cave till death to pine
 Unseen, unheard, unwatched by any star.
 Better before proud Fortune's sumptuous car
 Obvious our dying bodies to obtrude,
 Than dog-like wading at the heels of War
 Protract a cursed existence with the brood
 That lap, their very nourishment, their brother's blood

(SP 35.307-315)

That such a radical expression of moral responsibility would be assigned to a character who is indisputably a noncombatant in the war, only arguably an accomplice in its violence, and certainly one of its victims seems startling. It seems reasonable to read her lament as an effect of her traumatic experience, for example as the translation of survivor's guilt into moral guilt. If guilt always implies some responsibility, then the language of self-blame at least has the advantage of salvaging a sense of agency. Rhetorically speaking, the very act of self-accusation attempts retroactively to recover the agency and self-possession of a subject from the passivity of traumatic experience—which, as Cathy Caruth has shown, shatters not only agency but consciousness itself, the awareness in the moment of surviving an encounter with death.⁴⁴ A traumatic event implies the receptivity of a living surface, the vulnerability of body exposed to the world and to the possibility not only of being wounded, but of being wounded by surprise. If the vagrant speaks in the aftermath of a trauma from within her life, she formulates her crime for which she is responsible as a “crime” against life. And she conceives her survival, the continuation of her “being,” as punishment.

⁴⁴ Cf. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, especially Chapter Three: “Traumatic Departures: Survival and History in Freud.”

Her “crime,” as she sees it, is to have purchased life from the sacrificial machine, to have staked her own survival and that of her children on the deaths of others. More precisely, she had obeyed the imperative of biological survival, which in this case extends from her own living body to those of her children on the basis of a conception of life that privileges reproduction as its essential characteristic (rather than sensibility, spontaneity, organization, etc.), a corresponding naturalistic view of the family naturalistically as serving the same reproductive function, and a conservative thinking of the mother and maternity in general as that which nourishes, that which feeds, the young.⁴⁵ For the mother’s breastmilk is here replaced with the brother’s blood, a substitution of vital liquids that in the vagrant’s retelling reduced her family to animal life (or worse), to the level proper to the interest (procreation) served by the exchange. The specific *human* family thus joins an enormous, undifferentiated, anonymous inhuman “brood,” an unnumbered multitude of living things concerned only with increase: feeding and procreation. The figural system of the passage leaves no room for surprise that together with their death-ministering father, the vagrant’s children were soon devoured by the very thing to which they were brought to suckle their nourishment. The vagrant, indeed, is witness to a monstrous, colossal version of the “Blest babe” scene in *The Prelude*, except that what purports to be the source of nourishment is neither a mother, nor a human being, nor even a unitary living being in any simple sense—but rather a vast economy of human sacrifice, the global war machine.

The vagrant survives, unmothered and unsacrificed, sacrificed as the unsacrificable. Her punishment is of course to receive in the form of a curse just what she wanted. The fact that she alone remains unsacrificed, survives as a remnant of the sacrifice, is her punishment, and indeed another sacrifice: to live without the possibility of value. Chapter Three begins by comparing her

⁴⁵ For a psychoanalytic and deconstructive reading of the mother as an apparatus, see Elissa Marder, *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Psychoanalysis, Photography, Deconstruction*.

fantasies of self-sacrifice to the traveler's actual sacrifice. He returns to the polis and joins his telos by becoming an apparatus of not only the law of the state but also the law of the father. She, on the other hand, imagines going back to the city with her children to stage their deaths as an act of public obstruction and defiance. The politics of this action are certainly ranged in opposition against patriarchy and the law, but the sacrificial desire is nevertheless teleological. However, there remains the fact that she remains alive, that she has stopped short of self-sacrifice. I first argue that this is aporetic function of the law of life she transgressed in her crime; to sacrifice the other's life for the sake of one's own is structurally identical to the sacrifice of one's own life for the sake of retroactively making it a "good life." Life is irreducibly other, and therefore the vagrant can neither live (which is sacrifice) or let herself die (which is sacrifice). Setting out from here, I ask if this aporia is in fact a poetic resource for thwarting the teleology drive exemplified by the traveler. In a reading of her dreamlike passage across the Atlantic, where she hangs suspended wanting neither life nor death, I suggest that impossible life, which she (impossibly) desires here, can be read against the grain, but not in opposition, to the normative conception of life, which has revealed itself to be a phantasm generated by the sacrificial machine. What does it mean for life to suspend the auto-teleological structure of its self-relation? If, in the case of the traveler, the technic of nature is suspended, then for the female vagrant (and her analogues) the inner principle of life's teleology drive is rendered inoperative—and yet they live on. After tracking the development of this aporia through a few analogues of the female vagrant, each of whom suspends her living principle, I analyze a strange, fragmentary poem entitled, "Argument for Suicide," which attempts to launch a critique of the ideology of life.

Two

“UNHOUSED LIFE:” AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND BIOPOLITICS ON THE PLAIN

Against other things it is possible to obtain security.
 But when it comes to death we human beings all live
 in an unwallèd city.

~Epicurus¹

Lest, after the manner of the wingèd flames,
 The ramparts of the world should flee away,
 Dissolved amain throughout the mighty void,
 And lest all else should likewise follow after,
 Aye, lest the thundering vaults of heaven should burst
 And splinter upward, and the earth forthwith
 Withdraw from under our feet, and all its bulk,
 Among its mingled wrecks and those of heaven,
 With slipping asunder of the primal seeds,
 Should pass, along the immeasurable innane,
 Away forever, and, that instant, naught
 Of wrack and remnant would be left, beside
 The desolate space, and germs invisible.

~Lucretius²

¹ Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* 31, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers, Volume 1*, 150.

² Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 1.1102-1111.

Let us picture a living organism in its most simplified possible form as an undifferentiated vesicle of a substance that is susceptible to stimulation... This little fragment of living substance is suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies; and it would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these if it were not provided with a protective shield against stimuli.

~Sigmund Freud³

REFLECTIONS I: HISTORY, TEMPORALITY, AND THE POET'S LIVING BODY

In 1842, when he was seventy-two years-old, Wordsworth published *Poems, Chiefly of Early and Late Years*. In this new collection was a poem called *Guilt and Sorrow; or Incidents upon Salisbury Plain*, which seemed to him to require a prefatory "Advertisement," since "not less than one third" of it would have been recognized as "The Female Vagrant," well-known as a poem in its own right since its 1798 appearance in *Lyrical Ballads*, the collection that launched his career. What called for an "apology" was the fact that readers could purchase the 1842 *Poems* either as a free-standing volume, or with an alternative title-page that made it the supplementary seventh volume of the collected works published two years earlier.⁴ The problem, as Stephen Gill points out, was that the 1840

³ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 28, 30.

⁴ Wordsworth, *The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth*, 215-217. All quotations will be cited parenthetically in the text, following the abbreviations SP, ASP, and GS for *Salisbury Plain*, *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, and *Guilt and Sorrow*, respectively. Unless otherwise noted, I will be referring to Gill's reading texts throughout. To indicate citations of elements of the volume's scholarly apparatus, like Gill's Introduction, I will place *Salisbury Plain Poems* in parenthesis, followed by page number. For the complex composition history of these poems, see Gill's Introduction to the volume. See also Gill's articles, "'Adventures on Salisbury Plain,' and Wordsworth's Poetry of Protest, 1795-97," *Studies in Romanticism* 11, no. 1 (Winter, 1972); and "Wordsworth's Breeches Pocket: Attitudes to the Didactic Poet," *Essays in Criticism* 19, no. 4 (October 1969): 385-401. For Gill's biographical account of the circumstances in which *Salisbury Plain* was written, see *William Wordsworth: A Life*, Chapters 3 and 4. See also Kenneth R. Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth: Poet, Lover, Rebel, Spy*, Chapters 14 and 15; and Juliet Barker, *Wordsworth: A Life*, Chapter 5. See also Mark L. Reed, *Wordsworth:*

collective edition had already collected “The Female Vagrant” in its first volume, where it appeared with other “Juvenile Pieces.”⁵ This meant that those who opted for the alternative title page, intending to collect them all and place *Poems* on the shelf right next to the sixth volume of the collected works, would have collected them all and more. They would have collected “The Female Vagrant” twice, and paid for it twice, too.

Wordsworth, Gill notes, “was sensitive about the bibliographic-moral problem he was creating here, as his anxious letters to Moxon about it reveal, and separate printing of ‘The Female Vagrant’ was discontinued in future collective editions.”⁶ But this “bibliographic-moral problem” is also an autobiographical problem, and what “creates” it is a radically autobiographical poetry patterned by the paradox of autobiography: that because the process of autobiographical writing is itself part of the life whose history it records, each sentence or line of verse *about* that life is also an event *within* it that only adds an item to the list of things that need to be written. The form’s permanent incompleteness and fragmentary status, together with the threat that its retelling will collapse into an infinite regress when it arrives at the moment its author sat down and began to compose it, are not just curious logical features irrelevant to the literary substance of Wordsworth’s poetry, which announces itself as a transformative force within his life. The conceit, or rather the hope, of *The Prelude* is of course that its work of memory will make poetry possible for him—that Wordsworth will form himself as poet by writing poetry, that is, through the figuring and performative power of an autobiographical poetics. And indeed, the act of writing produces events that thwart the “progress” of his autobiographical “song” precisely because they are worthy of inclusion within it. Imagination lifts itself up even as he writes, “the light of sense / Goes out,” and

The Chronology of the Early Years: 1770-1799 (145); Appendix VII, “Wordsworth’s early Travels in Wales;” and Appendix XII, “The Dates of *Salisbury Plain* and some early work on *The Prelude*.”

⁵ Gill, *Wordsworth’s Revisiting*, 243n23.

⁶ *Ibid.*

he is raised into that blessed mood when he feels that Nature has vouchsafed to his account the “influx” to make things new.⁷

But the logic of autobiography also contains a repetition trap, and in the “Advertisement” to *Guilt and Sorrow*, it manifests bibliographically as literal re-collection, a feverishly repeating process of self-archiving. Thanks to its supplementary title page, the 1842 collection *Poems, Chiefly of Early and Late Years* can be said to be repeat, doubling as a free-standing volume, an autonomous and unified whole, and as the seventh volume, a supplementary part added late to another collection that is itself a larger whole—but which, and thanks to the same double title page, doubles as a fragment to the same extent that *Poems* doubles as an autonomous whole. But the now seven-volume collective edition also repeats internally, first presenting a collection of early poems in Volume I, and then doing so again in the last volume—repeating the inclusion of “The Female Vagrant” at both locations, a case of double entry bookkeeping as literal re-collection. To cut the knot and escape the repetition, Wordsworth attempts to effect a sort of retroactive erasure within the auto-bibliographic text by discontinuing the inclusion of the earlier, autonomous version of “The Female Vagrant” from all future collections.

But in 1842, Wordsworth feels that he owes his readers an explanation, so he adds the “Advertisement” as a supplementary apology to the supplementary “Female Vagrant.” Given all these transpositions and interpolations, it is perhaps unsurprising that his anxiety attaches to the position of “The Female Vagrant” within *Guilt and Sorrow*. “The Female Vagrant” is now the middle third of *Guilt and Sorrow*, the eponymous narrator of the earlier poem has become a character, and her autobiography is now a story nested within a story at the very center of the new text, while the other two thirds—the apparently new material—frame it on either side like supplements.

⁷ Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1805, 6.528-529, 12.308. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by the date, followed by Book and line numbers.

Wordsworth seems worried about what might be inferred from this structure about how the poem was written. He wants to insist that *Guilt and Sorrow* did not, in fact, begin with (or indeed as) “The Female Vagrant,” and this is not, appearances to the contrary, the repurposing of some old material to inflate the cost of the book. He did not retrieve the old poem from the archive, wrap an elaborate framing device around it, and conceal the result by giving it a new name. In fact, he tells us, “The Female Vagrant” was really only ever an “extract” which he had taken from a larger, earlier work, the “whole” of which he had written before the end of 1794. Without commenting on why in that case this “whole” had to wait almost fifty years to be printed, Wordsworth explains that in order to publish it, “it was necessary to restore [the extract] to its original position, or else the rest would have been unintelligible” (GS 215). This is less a reprint of an old, well-known literary work than the restoration of a fragment to its proper position within an older, larger, hitherto unknown work which—thanks to this reintegration—is itself restored, returned to the intelligibility of its original unity and thus finally able to be published for the first time, an old new poem. *Guilt and Sorrow* fits the bill of the volume: a poem of early and late years, begun early and ended late.

Here we can see that the problem of doubling and repetition, which the discontinuation of all future printing of “The Female Vagrant” was supposed to solve, was itself the result of an attempt to solve the problem of fragmentation through the restoration of an original unity. That this unity is the unity of life soon becomes clear, for rather than ending the “Advertisement,” Wordsworth extends its project of restoration and turns, “rather as a matter of literary biography than for any other reason,” to “the circumstances under which [*Guilt and Sorrow*] was produced:” that is, the lived experience that made it. Having restored the fragment to the work and thereby the work to the unity of itself, he now restores the work to the historical unity of which it is both a part and the product. As always, Wordsworth historicizes, and the bulk of the “Advertisement” is devoted to this recollection:

During the latter part of the summer of 1793, having passed a month in the Isle of Wight, in view of the fleet which was then preparing for sea off Portsmouth at the commencement of the war, I left the place with melancholy forebodings. The American war was still fresh in memory. The struggle which was beginning, and which many thought would be brought to a speedy close by the irresistible arms of Great Britain being added to those of the allies, I was assured in my own mind would be of long continuance, and productive of distress and misery beyond all possible calculation. This conviction was pressed upon me by having been a witness, during a long residence in revolutionary France, of the spirit which prevailed in that country. After leaving the Isle of Wight, I spent two days in wandering on foot over Salisbury Plain, which, though cultivation was then widely spread through parts of it, had upon the whole a still more impressive appearance than it now retains.

The monuments and traces of antiquity, scattered in abundance over that region, led me unavoidably to compare what we know or guess of those remote times with certain aspects of modern society, and with calamities, principally those consequent upon war, to which, more than other classes of men, the poor are subject. In those reflections, joined with some particular facts that had come to my knowledge, the following stanzas originated.

In conclusion, to obviate some distraction in the minds of those who are well acquainted with Salisbury Plain, it may be proper to say, that of the features described as belonging to it, one or two are taken from other desolate parts of England.

(GS 215-217)

Wordsworth's preemptive effort to account for himself before the skeptically raised eyebrows of the reading public, which wants to know why it was sold the same poem twice, has thus become a belated account of the poem's "origination." It bears the characteristic signature of Wordsworthian revisiting, and far from a preface easily separable from the work to which it is attached and which it

purports simply to introduce and contextualize, this little piece of “literary biography” is a function of the very mechanism that produced the poem in the first place. It repeats the poem—which is itself a repetition written under the compulsion to return, and then to return again, to the plain.

It is customary for Wordsworth’s critics to preface their scholarship on the *Salisbury Plain* poems by staging their own versions of the recollection performed by the “Advertisement” perhaps inevitably implicating themselves in the same mechanism, as they place the poem back on the plain and summon all the factors that must have colored the young poet’s long walk across it.⁸ The “Advertisement” is certainly selective in comparison to the familiar narrative beats of the critical reconstruction, which usually goes something like this: when he was just 23 years old, Wordsworth returned home to England from revolutionary France. He was broke, and although he might have been an aspiring poet—and maybe even believed that Nature had selected him to dwell one day among the immortals in the archive—he didn’t have much to show for himself. The fact that he also came home a father is of course completely redacted here, though it is easy to wonder if the “melancholy forebodings” were mixed with thoughts of Annette and Caroline, whom he had left in France—with the stated purpose, anyway, of finding a source of income to support their new family.

⁸ Gill’s reconstruction in *Wordsworth’s Revisitations*, which I am relying on below, is both vivid and exemplary: “At barely 23 years of age, unemployed and without prospects but having fathered a child on a woman in France, Wordsworth returned to England to seek means of supporting himself and his family only to break irretrievably with the one relative who might have helped. War was declared between the old enemies, France and Great Britain, and Wordsworth, who was already nursing, justifiably, a sense of personal injustice because of the Lonsdale debt, now discovered that he was at odds with not only the government, the aristocracy, and the institutions of this country, but also the rank and file of its people. The mood music about Liberty and Reform that was still being played when he had left England to live in France had given way to more martial tunes by 1793 and Wordsworth was unprepared for such a change” (186-186). Interestingly, Gill is himself revisiting the material here—having reconstituted the events in his biography and in his edition of *The Salisbury Plain Poems*, where, in the course of reconstructing the development of *Guilt and Sorrow*, he also restores the poem to its two earlier versions. See also his Introduction to *The Salisbury Plain Poems* (3-7). For other examples of the critical repetition of Wordsworth’s recollection, see Kurt Fosso, *Buried Communities* (67-69); Quentin Bailey, *Wordsworth’s Vagrants* (51-52); Toby Benis, *Romanticism on the Road* (57-60); Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth* (344-347); David Collings, *Wordsworthian Errancies* (23-27); and Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (182). Gill, Liu, and Johnston, for example, are all drawn into the compulsion to repeat in their very act of critical engagement. But they not only repeat Wordsworth’s effort to re-gather the circumstances of the poem’s origin; like the traveler, they retrace Wordsworth’s very steps onto the plain. Liu observes, for example, that “it would be possible to map where the traveler loses sight of the ‘distant spire’ as he paces north.” Liu also consults weather records to confirm that there was indeed a serious storm over Salisbury just around the time Wordsworth is thought to have crossed the plain in late summer 1793.

But soon war was declared between the two nations, the borders closed, and Wordsworth was cut off from them. What the “Advertisement” also erases is the fact that Wordsworth not only witnessed the French revolutionary spirit but brought it back with him, having become radical enough a republican to argue, in the *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* (which he probably wrote in June of that year, but was never radical enough to publish⁹), in favor of the execution of King Louis XVI, and—once the fighting started—to side with France in the war, “rejoic[ing]” in response to news of massive British casualties, “exult[ing] in the triumph of my soul / When Englishmen by the thousands were o’erthrown, / Left without glory on the field,” and, in response to reports of British victories, “[feeding] on the day of vengeance yet to come” (1805 10.261-263, 276). But he was never radical enough to do so openly. Even as he remembers it here, more than ten years later in the 1805 *Prelude*, his partisanship implies actual enmity against England, and had he publicly declared it in 1793—by publishing the *Letter*, for example—he would not have felt the secret alienation, as he sat in church, of being like “an uninvited guest whom no one owned,” because he would have been treated like an actual enemy of the state, and imprisoned or worse. In the recollection of 1842, the potential for real, outer violence is transformed into a disinterested, analytical forecast about the war: that it would be “of long continuance, and productive of distress and misery beyond all possible calculation.”

Looking back from 1805, Wordsworth describes the conflict between his republican partisanship and his attachment to home (through the metonymy of natural features that can only be described as nationalist, if not nativist), as a civil war within his heart:

.....for I felt
 The ravage of this most unnatural strife
 In my own heart; there it lay like a weight,

⁹ *The Salisbury Plain Poems*, 4.

At enmity with all the tenderest springs
 Of my enjoyments. I, who with the breeze
 Had played, a green leaf on the blessed tree
 Of my beloved country—nor had wished
 For happier fortune than to wither there—
 Now from my pleasant station was cut off,
 And tossed about in whirlwinds.

(1805 10.251-260)

This strife is not only unnatural but also figural, turning on a mobilization of the whirlwind as a figure of stasis, civil war, to capture Wordsworth's inner enmity and the feeling of dislocation it produced in him. But guarding against any sense of stability which might be inferred from the figure of the whirlwind—the stabilized torsion of winds that sustain each other by thwarting each other—and attributed to his heart's stasis, is the celebrated passage that occurs just a few lines above, which figures the more fundamental character of this period in his life with another kind of turn, a turn that fails to close back in on itself and so careens off track. His heart's civil war takes place within a revolution within his life:

.....No shock
 Given to my moral nature had I known
 Down to that very moment—neither lapse
 Nor turn of sentiment—that might be named
 A revolution, save at this one time:
 All else was progress on the self-same path
 On which with a diversity of pace
 I had been travelling; this, a stride at once

Into another region.

(1805 10.235-243)

Wordsworth, the story usually goes, is right in the middle of this inner revolution the year he comes home from France. He takes his heart's whirlwind with him that summer to the Isle of Wight, where he stays with his friend William Calvert, and where he can hear each night the ominous report of the fleet's cannon's firing to mark the sunset. He is still striding at once into another region when he and Calvert leave the island to go on a tour of the West Country together.

But now a literal "shock" puts a stop to them and leaves their carriage shattered in a ditch. "His tour was put a stop to by an accident which might have had fatal consequences," writes Dorothy Wordsworth in her account of the accident:

Calvert's horse was not much accustomed to draw in a whiskey (the carriage in which they travelled) and he began to caper one day in a most terrible manner, dragged them and their vehicle into a ditch and broke it to shivers. Happily neither Mr. C nor William were the worse but they were sufficiently cautious not to venture out again in the same way; Mr. C mounted his horse and rode into the North and William's firm Friends, a pair of stout legs, supported him from Salisbury through South into North Wales, where he is now quietly sitting down in the vale of Clwyd.¹⁰

Stephen Gill has noted that the origin of the poem, the event that "released these feelings and made their energy available to the poet's creating imagination was, literally, an accident" (*Salisbury Plain Poems*, 6).¹¹ Indeed, the resulting long walk across the waste has become, in the backward look of both the author and his critics, one of the primal scenes of Wordsworth's transformation into a poet.

¹⁰ *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Early Years: 1787-1805*, 109.

¹¹ See also Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth*, 345. For his skepticism about whether the accident happened at all, see 361.

Wordsworth writes his way back to Salisbury Plain almost immediately. In the earliest version of the poem, which he may have begun before the end of the summer when his ramble took place, he follows his own footsteps—or rather an anonymous “traveller” follows them, pacing north out of Salisbury into the titular plain as night falls and a storm approaches from the west (*The Salisbury Plain Poems*, 5).¹² The traveler has no name, no history, and no destination. Nor for that matter is he provided with any textual reason, or even any hint of a reason, for having set out on a stormy night to cross the plain, where the absence of trees and human structures will leave him exposed to the elements: an action apparently dangerous enough to require an explanation from a real human being, and an authorial decision that evidently tests critical credulity more than the traveler’s other deficits. “Salisbury Plain,” writes Kenneth Johnston, “is not a good place for a leisurely walk,” and certainly “not a place to be caught outside, alone, on a stormy night.”¹³ “Only someone out of his right mind would embark on such a journey,” writes David A. Collings.¹⁴ We might guess that he is the victim of the same economic transformation as many of Wordsworth’s other lonely wanderers (like the vagrant woman whose path he will soon cross), but we know nothing about him at all except that he has been reduced, somehow, to the minimal exigencies of life.¹⁵ He is alone, exhausted, increasingly disoriented, and, though every step hurts, “pressed” by thirst and hunger to find shelter before the storm breaks:

The troubled west was red with stormy fire,
O’er Sarum’s plain the traveler with a sigh
Measured each painful step, the distant spire
That fixed at every turn his backward eye

¹² According to Gill, “it seems likely that the poem in some form was composed at once, for in a letter of 23 May 1794, Wordsworth referred to it as ‘written last summer.’” Gill is citing W.W. to William Matthews, in *The Early Years*, 120.

¹³ Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth*, 346.

¹⁴ Collings, *Wordsworthian Errancies*, 27.

¹⁵ I am borrowing the phrase “exigencies of life” from Freud, *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, 88.

Was lost, tho' still he turned, in the blank sky.

By thirst and hunger pressed he gazed around

And scarce could any trace of man descry...

(SP 38-43)

To walk away from Salisbury is to walk away from the shelter he may soon need to survive, and yet by the time we are introduced to him, it is already too late. The spire atop Salisbury Cathedral, which had been the only landmark in an otherwise undifferentiated landscape, a sort of navigational tether capable of leading him back to the city, has dropped below the horizon, leaving him disoriented and lost in a landscape made unnavigable by its plainness. Stepping, sighing, and turning his head in time, the traveler plods across the landscape like an automatic walking machine: as though the rhythmic inflation and compression of his lungs, the swinging of his legs, and the periodic swiveling of his head in the presumptive direction of Salisbury to get a fix on the spire, and thus on his own position in space, are all powered by the same assemblage of turning gears. And like an automaton, he executes this sequence of operations as though in thrall to a “fixed” program, “still” looking back over his shoulder despite the fact that this motion lost its navigational utility the moment the spire was “lost” in the “blank sky,” leaving nothing to see in any direction but blank desertion.

Wordsworth’s half-playful remark to his friend William Matthews about how hard it was to come up with a name for a poem as utterly lacking in “character” as this one applies above all to the traveler, of course, who evidently has none. But it also describes the disjointed, incoherent union between his purposeless pacing and the plain’s plain unnavigability:

You enquired after the name of one of my poetical bantlings, children of this species ought to be named after their characters, and here I am at a loss, as my offspring seems to have no character at all. I have however christened it by the appellation of Salisbury Plain, though, A

night on Salisbury Plain, were it not so insufferably awkward would better suit the thing itself.¹⁶

The traveler thus becomes a figure of non-relation, cut off not only from identity, history, and purpose, but also from a determinate relation to the world. His only characteristic is the bare fact of walking. He is less a character than an avatar, a vehicle for Wordsworth literally to repeat his own paces, to return to the plain virtually by simulating the bodily operation of walking there.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the fixed turns of his backward gaze mirror Wordsworth's own retrospective turn in writing his way back—but the traveler turns blindly, mechanically miming the motion like an actual mirror image. And his walking echoes as well Wordsworth's writing: measuring with each plodding step what might well have been the painful effort to compose in the Spenserian stanza.

Following Wordsworth's still fresh tracks, the traveler passes the same "monuments and traces of antiquity" described in the "Advertisement." He stares with "astonished gaze" at the inscrutable marks carved into the landscape, and hears, as he makes for Stonehenge to shield himself from the rain by huddling against its pillars, a voice that rises up from nowhere to warn him about the visions of human sacrifice he will see replayed inside its stone circle, and which, since these visions of the past are evidently not merely spectral, threaten to turn the would-be shelter into a death trap by making him their sacrificial victim, "devouring" him "unwares." When he finally takes shelter in a half-ruined "spital," he encounters the female vagrant, who first tells the story, reported to her by an old shepherd whose path she had crossed on her own journey across the plain, of a young "swain" who witnessed identical visions of ancient sacrifice performed by spectral Druids at

¹⁶ *The Early Years*, 136.

¹⁷ In this sense, the traveler is a literalized, walking embodiment of Wordsworth's mechanical description of the poet in the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, where the operation of the poet's "organic sensibility" is figured in mechanical terms, so that he becomes an "automatic" writing machine whose printed output is itself figured as alive, as living figure: "variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures." *Lyrical Ballads and other Poems*, 750. For the figure of the walking machine, see Celeste Langan, *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom*. In *Wordsworth, Commodification, and Social Concern*, David Simpson develops Langan's readings of Wordsworth's mechanical vagrants in the direction of the link between politics and life.

Stonehenge—and then tells her own story, an autobiography of a modern sacrificial victim of war and economic injustice that concludes with her crossing, like the traveler, the swain, and Wordsworth himself, into the plain’s “hollow deep” (SP 163). The hesitatingly titled *Salisbury Plain* “originates” as a mechanical repetition of Wordsworth’s walk across the plain, and it is structured as a sequence of repetitions: of repeated returns to the plain accomplished by repetitive bodily motions repetitively described by a language itself arranged in verse to mechanical meter; of obsessively recounted scenes of ancient sacrificial violence which specters are doomed mechanically to repeat—scenes which are never seen but always heard and told secondhand as *tales*, that is, as, *repetitions*.¹⁸ This pattern of repetition leads “unavoidably” to a repetition of the *reflective comparison* Wordsworth recalls in the “Advertisement,” between “what we know or guess of those remote times” (the repeated tales of ancient sacrifice committed by the druids on Salisbury Plain) with “the calamities, principally those consequent upon war, to which, more than other classes of men, the poor are subject” (the vagrant woman’s autobiography).

Wordsworth’s written return to the plain during the summer of 1793 is thus already more than one return. “A night on Salisbury Plain,” might be an “insufferably awkward” name, but it is also inaccurate, since this earliest version of the poem already represents a multiplicity of “nights” whose number is fundamentally impossible to count. In 1798, Wordsworth returns to the plain again in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, which he considered so changed by the process of revision as to be “almost another work.”¹⁹ And if the moors, open spaces, and devastated half-living walkers of texts like *The Leech Gatherer*, *The Borderers* and *The Ruined Cottage* should be discounted as repetitions for not literally taking place on (or walking across) Salisbury Plain, he returns to it again in *The Prelude*, where he offers a directly autobiographical account of his journey across it (at least in the formal and

¹⁸ For an analysis of the status of second-hand stories in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, see Karen Swann, “Public Transport: Adventuring on Wordsworth’s Salisbury Plain,” *ELH* 55, no. 4 (Winter 1988).

¹⁹ *The Early Years*, 159.

rhetorical sense of attributing the experiences recounted to an “I”). Finally, decades later, he returns to the plain yet again, and this time for good, under the title *Guilt and Sorrow*.

There is a tension that runs through this pattern of repetition and return. For both Wordsworth and his critics, the significance of the *Salisbury Plain* poems consist in their *autobiographical* character, in what they do and reveal as life-writing. Whatever else is going on here, these returns are *of* Wordsworth’s life—about it, of course, and also affecting it. And yet on the face of it, and with the qualified exception of the variant in *The Prelude*, they really aren’t very autobiographical. Despite her anonymity, the female vagrant is a full-fledged character who not only has a history but tells it autobiographically. With the exception of a few Wordsworthian traces in her story, like the fact that she was raised on the side of the Derwent, the poem’s primary autobiographical component is not Wordsworth’s at all—at least if we credit what he has to say about its status and assume it is not a fictional autobiography, that is, a fiction—but rather the ventriloquized autobiography of a stranger. Wordsworth insists that this is the real story of a real stranger, “some particular facts” about whom “had come to [his] knowledge” through a third party.²⁰ The traveler, meanwhile, as Wordsworth’s proxy, his virtual walking machine, can certainly be considered a sort of autobiographical function, but he is otherwise lacking in qualities and so stripped bare, so reduced to the level of his animal machinery—indeed so utterly lacking in character that it is tempting to invoke not only Agamben’s “bare life” but Jacques Khalip’s notion of “anonymous life” to describe him—that he evacuates the autobiographical form of the content, the life history, it ought to contain.²¹ And indeed, his very automation and his near indifference to death, the border of which he seems at times already to have crossed, raises the further question, which we

²⁰ *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, 162.

²¹ Indeed, at work here is something closer to the indefinite life described by Deleuze which serves as one of Khalip’s conceptual sources: a life without subjectivity inhabiting the interval before death. Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*. Jacques Khalip, *Anonymous Life: Romanticism and Dispossession*. For Agamben’s exposition of “bare life,” see *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.

will examine below, of whether he qualifies as a *life* at all. *Salisbury Plain*, then, in its recalcitrant and nearly unnamable plainness, combines two autobiographies which are not autobiographies: the perhaps fictional autobiography of a stranger (a biography at best), and the borderline case of a radically anonymous autobiography, the autobiography of what Deleuze calls “a life.” What if this disjointed union between a possibly fictional (hetero-)biography and this simulator, this virtual walking machine for returning to the plain that doesn’t resemble Wordsworth in any other way, and which hardly has any experience at all other than suffering and the urge to survive (an urge which falters and soon reverses into the death drive), is still autobiographical? How must we then understand the status Wordsworth’s life-writing? And how would we then have to adjust our understanding of what is at stake in his poetry as life-writing, and in the *Salisbury Plain* poems in particular? For what is at stake is the relation, whether conjunction or disjunction, between his poetry and politics—the consequences of his “progress” for the politics that variously embodies, displaces, disavows, or opens up to new meanings.

The autobiographical impulse, which we first saw manifest bibliographically and which in fact punctuated his relation to the poem as a compulsion to repeat, seems to overflow the boundaries, in the direction of both origin and end, of the scope of a properly autobiographical (that is, personal) life. Indeed, he systematically stops short of attributing his compulsion to repeat to an experience. Consider the Fenwick note to *Guilt and Sorrow*, where, recalling the effect his walk across the plain had on him, he writes that that “my ramble over many parts of Salisbury put me, as mentioned in the preface, upon writing this Poem, & left upon my mind imaginative impressions the force of w^h. I have felt to this day.”²² Something happened to Wordsworth on his ramble, and the experience was so powerful—it made such an impression on him—that he feels it even now, in the present of the Fenwick note, as though the “force” of the “imaginative impressions” which it left

²²As reproduced by Gill in *The Salisbury Plain Poems*, 221n1. See also *The Fenwick Notes*, 163.

behind can no more be exhausted by the passage of five decades than satisfied by the completion, and then finally the publication in 1842, of the poem it had long ago compelled him to write.²³ Yet in the Fenwick note, the event itself remains unnamed (not unlike the poem it produces), and the experience of that event is elided in favor of the experience of its aftereffects.²⁴

With its passive reception of “imaginative impressions” from without, Wordsworth’s mind operates in the Fenwick note more like memory than any power of imagination, creative or otherwise. Indeed, these are literal impressions, and they anticipate the “mnemic substrate” Freud constructs in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* on the model of a physical inscription: a surface able to receive and retain impressions, and thus of accumulating a registry of the events strong enough to

²³ For Gill, it’s not Wordsworth’s imagination at all: “What actually happened, of course, remains uncertain. What is sure is that the encounter with the plain provided Wordsworth’s imagination with a focusing image through which he could express much of what he had been feeling so impotently about the nature of man and society, and that the intensity of that encounter summoned up and fused dormant knowledge of many kinds to elaborate and sharpen this image” *The Salisbury Plain Poems*, 5. Gill fascinatingly insists, when he revisits this material years later in *Wordsworth’s Revisitations*, that an event actually happened there, that the visions Wordsworth describes in the section of *The Prelude* dedicated to his walk across Salisbury Plain *actually* happened: “A spot of time really occurred,” he writes—as if a spot of time can’t actually occur as writing. He insists further that the visions Wordsworth’s describes having had in *The Prelude* actually happened. For an exemplary argument against this view, Karl Kroeber argues that the spots of time are “narrative incidents, not epiphanies, and Wordsworth’s memories of them follow historical sequence, undergoing modifications in time. This perhaps accounts for the reality which his personal reminiscences convey. We believe in Wordsworth’s memories because he does not claim they are unchanging; they, too, are vital.” *Romantic Landscape Vision*, 22. What is at stake here, in the disagreement about whether the spot of time is a real extra-textual referent or a real fact of the text is life. For Kroeber, Wordsworth’s narrative memory, with the plasticity of its feedback structure, is “vital.” Gill, too, adduces a figure of life as the sign of the real: “It is not at all improbable,” he writes about Wordsworth’s encounter with the plain, “that something momentous, some experience of imaginative intensity took place.” He continues: “A further reason for believing that a ‘spot of time’ did occur is simply that *The Prelude* says it did. When experience is reported as being known as second-hand—the tale of Voudracour and Julia, for example, or the Matron’s tale—it is presented as such, but otherwise *The Prelude* offers an account of what Wordsworth declares actually happened to him, not chronologically exact, maybe, but potentially verifiable. While one’s willingness to credit the account at any given point is fostered by specificity—the hedgehog on the ascent of Snowden, for example—it is not important whether such details can be verified or not; but it would be quite fatal to the poem were it to be proved that Wordsworth never did climb Snowden or ever rowed a boat out into Ullswater at night.” *Wordsworth’s Revisitations*, 185–186. Both critics agree on the point of an effect of reality produced by Wordsworth’s poetry: for Kroeber, this reality is produced by a living (organically evolving, that is, auto-affective) text; for Gill, it is produced by the testimony of living specificity: the encounter between a particular dog and a particular hedgehog on a particular mountain—an encounter which is verifiable at least in principle, and (luckily for Gill), impossible in fact. It is worth noting, too, that the question of the romantic ideology and its historical erasures has to do with the erasure of life. For it is the erasure of life, after all, that Marjorie Levinson masterfully exposes in her reading of *Tintern Abbey*. Levinson, Marjorie. *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems: Four Essays*. It is worth noting, too, that life is at stake in recent eco-critical studies on romanticism.

²⁴ The argument that I will pursue here is inspired by Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*, especially her insight that the event of trauma is not experienced.

breach its surface and cut tracks and pathways into its thickness.²⁵ That the “force” Wordsworth feels to this day belongs, grammatically, to the impressions themselves is of course to indicate the intensity of the experience without naming it: so powerful was the event that produced them that the impressions retain a residue of its force, which, like a sort of electric charge, remains dynamically active within them (and upon Wordsworth). But it is also to imply that the imaginative character of the impressions derives from the same source as the impressions themselves: elsewhere than Wordsworth. Imagination, here, is not a power or a faculty but the function of a passive possibility, the registration of a passivity—the effect of an encounter between an exposed surface and a world whose forces are able to breach it.

Wordsworth is passive at every stage of this process. He is passive in relation to the accident that befalls him on the road, of course, since passivity is part of the very definition of an accident. On the plain, his mind is passive in relation to the event of its impression, and we might add that there is marked passivity, too, in Wordsworth’s attestation, when he writes the Fenwick note so many years later, of the hold they still have over him. And he is passive in relation to the composition of the poem itself. He is “*put...upon* writing” it. The sense in which the verb is used here concerns bringing a person into a new course of action: “to set *to* an act or action, or *to* do something.” But in the presence of the preposition “upon,” the prospective subject of the new course of action becomes passive with regard to the change itself:

16. *trans*

- b.** With *to* (formerly †*on*, †*upon*). To set (a person) to study or practise a subject, skill, or profession; to apprentice (a person) *to* a trade. Cf. sense 14b. Now *rare*.

²⁵ For Freud’s concept of the mnemonic substrate, see *The Project for a Scientific Psychology*, and the “Note on the Mystic Writing Pad.” My understanding of these texts—and my use of it here—is grounded in Jacques Derrida’s readings of them in “Freud and Scene of Writing,” *The Postcard*, and *Archive Fever*. It is further grounded in Caruth’s readings of Derrida’s readings in *Literature and the Ashes of History*.

This is the passivity (perhaps even the passion) implied when a person is submitted to the discipline of a trade or the regimen of a course of study. In the OED's array of quotations, a certain John Clark refers in *An Essay Upon the Education of Youth in Grammar Schools* to "this Custom of putting Boys upon the Greek Tongue, before they understand any thing of the Latin," and to students who are "put upon Versifying." Wordsworth is put upon versifying from without; the poem befalls him as a project, a course of long study and labor. Just as the source of the impressions is external to the mind which receives them, Wordsworth's impetus to write is outside him. Indeed, the Fenwick note capitalizes on the physical sense of "put." It implies—thanks to the repetition of the preposition, which suggests that Wordsworth is put *upon* writing in the same way that the impressions are left *upon* his mind, together with the consonance between "put" and the pressure of which any impression is necessarily the trace—that the same force which stamped the impressions pressed, and still presses, Wordsworth to write and then publish and now to recall yet again the circumstances of the origin of the poem. Wordsworth is acted upon from without, set into motion, pushed, propelled, driven, and placed into writing: "my ramble over many parts of Salisbury put me, as mentioned in the preface, upon writing this Poem, & left upon my mind imaginative impressions the force of w^h. I have felt to this day."

But the sentence runs backwards. Or rather, the forward direction of Wordsworth's drive to write is interrupted, first, by the reference back to the "Advertisement," which separates the verb from its preposition and Wordsworth from his writing—introducing a literal delay that puts off what Wordsworth has been put upon to accomplish only to turn back on itself, thwarted by and absorbed into a force that moves in the reverse direction, back to the plain, but which stops just short of it, at the impressions formed there. Although the parallel construction of the sentence suggests the evenly balanced scale of an analogy, this temporal structure introduces an asymmetry into the relation between the passivity with which Wordsworth is pressed toward writing and the passivity with

which his mind is stamped with impressions from without. For by the end of the sentence (as it approaches but does not reach the origin of the process it describes) the writer has become, not the writing, but the passive substrate that bears the inscriptions, and his very drive to write has devolved upon his exposure to being written upon and ascribed to the violent force of that anterior inscription. Wordsworth's compulsion to versify is a repetition of what has been inscribed, and indeed continues to be inscribed as that repetition, upon him.

As we noted above, the "force" belongs to the "impressions." Now this is seductive, at least as facts of grammar go. For the note's most intuitive reading is that what so deeply impressed him as he crossed the plain is simply what he saw there. And other than Stonehenge, the "monuments and traces of antiquity" he saw were *literal* impressions in the earth itself, like the "strange lines" *Guilt and Sorrow* describes proliferating across the surface plain as far as the eye can see, like a sort of ancient, illegible writing older than writing itself (GS 112). These figures were "left" on the earth by "gigantic arms," but the passage devoted to them in the earliest version of the poem emphasizes the gigantism of the power that went into leaving them there, the force involved in the literal event of their inscription. He stands atop a burial mound and sees, with

astonished gaze,

Frequent upon the deep entrenched ground,

Strange marks of mighty arms of former days.

(SP 74-76)

The "strange lines" of the later version are here "strange marks," but the marks have depth: they are trenches, and as such they are records of the actual power, the "might" which was required to carve them into the ground. Indeed, they literalize the power attributed by the poem to Stonehenge, whose circle of stones retains a memory of the human sacrifices long ago performed there by the druids (at least according to late eighteenth century speculation), and which—seemingly in order to

provide a substitute for the historical documentation which is by definition lacking, these being prehistoric human sacrifices—it is able to play back with a kind of cinematic vividness, in full color, as if the rocks themselves remain charged with the very power first summoned by the violence.

These two recording devices are heterogeneous and asymmetrical. What the “strange marks” signify is of course illegible: they are as silent as the Place du Carrousel in Book X of *The Prelude*, their contents “memorable,” but “locked up” in a writing for which there is no translation (and this is precisely what makes them “strange”), but the magnitude of the power that produced them, the force of their inscription, is perfectly legible.²⁶ The scenes of sacrificial violence remembered by Stonehenge, meanwhile, are only too legible, too clear—but the power by which the events were recorded and the mechanism by which they are now played back in flashes of light and color is entirely inscrutable.²⁷ Yet the Fenwick note combines them. Wordsworth’s “mind,” as he rambles across the plain, is exposed to the source of its “impressions” in the same way that the plain itself was exposed to the “gigantic” powers that pressed down from above to cut tracks, “strange marks,” into its thickness. In this passive receptivity the mind functions more like a mnemonic substrate than a “creative imagination,” or indeed an imagination of any order. For the imaginative character of the impressions derives not from Wordsworth’s mind but, like the impressions themselves, from the force that left the imprints. But like the pillars of Stonehenge, the impressions remain charged with

²⁶ What remains legible in all this illegibility is that this is writing *as such*—along with the power that had to have gone into the process of inscription. The passage can be illuminated by Blanchot’s conception of literary language as the mere “image” of language: “In literature, doesn’t language itself become altogether image? We do not mean a language containing images or one that casts reality in figures, but one which is its own image, an image of language (not a figurative language), or yet again, an imaginary language, one which no one speaks; a language, that is, which issues from its own absence, the way an image emerges upon the absence of the thing; a language addressing itself to the shadow of events as well, not their reality, and this because of the fact that the words which express them are, not signs, but images, images of words, and words where things turn into images.” Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 34n1. Indeed, it is not certain that the strange lines signify at all; like Blanchot’s “image” of language, the only thing legible about them is the fact of their inscription, the possibility that they might, perhaps, signify.

²⁷ It seems necessary to balance the connection to Blanchot with de Man, since the separation between the power that caused the inscription and the power which stands behind (an obviously aesthetic) meaning, indeed *sense*, recalls his late writing on “aesthetic ideology” and the famous knot from “Shelley Disfigured:” “Language posits and language means (since it articulates), but language cannot posit meaning; it can only reiterate (or reflect) in its reconfirmed falsehood.” *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 117.

the power that produced them. Indeed, it is tempting to read “imaginative” in this instance with absolute literality: that, like Stonehenge, the mnemonic inscriptions are capable of projecting images.

But under the compulsion of what does Wordsworth write? What agent “put” Wordsworth upon writing the poem? It is tempting, here, to observe that this agent never makes an appearance on the plain. The power of which the “strange marks” and “strange” lines are records is an absent power. The “mighty arms” of which they are the product are dead arms—“arms of mighty bone, in strength, / long mouldered,” as Wordsworth describes them when he returns to the plain in Book XIII of the *Prelude*, as if to emphasize that of this power there can only be traces, gigantic bones indicating nothing but the past existence of a body which has no motion now, no force.

Wordsworth thus writes under the compulsion of a dead power, a power not sufficiently present to exert a force but operative nonetheless, and which seems to have been transferred from one network of traces to another—to have leapt on contact, as Wordsworth shuffled across the plain, from the material traces of the landscape to the psychological traces of the poet’s mind like a spark of spectral electricity. But the Fenwick note is so striking because it elides any reference to any experience at all which might serve as the source of Wordsworth’s psychological impressions, the point of contact between poet and landscape, and thus as the agent compelling the composition of the poem. We are not even justified to suppose that the mental impressions are representations at all, a mental image of Stonehenge, or a facsimile in the mind of an impression in the ground. For there is nothing but the ramble. Grammatically speaking, it is the ramble that leaves impressions behind in Wordsworth’s mind—as if the traces left by the mighty arms have been replaced by the tracks of Wordsworth’s own, circuitous pacing, the plain itself replaced by a mind which, without the memory of an experience of crossing the plain, is nothing but vacancy, blank desertion, tracks transposed on tracks without even a location.

The Fenwick note refers us back to the “Advertisement.” Where, in the Advertisement, is the agent that puts Wordsworth upon writing his poem? Indeed, we can follow the chain of “impressions” from the Fenwick note back to the slightly earlier and longer “preface,” and though there is no mention there of “the mighty arms of former days” that left them, the chain of their metonymy shows that the force of their inscription is never present on the plain, not as such. The elements of the landscape, the monuments and traces of antiquity, only have their power to impress thanks to their interaction with other times, places, and memories. Indeed, the “circumstances” of the production of the poem can neither be restricted to the geographical boundary of the plain itself nor to the historical time of Wordsworth’s journey across it. Back in the summer of 1793, when he “wandered on foot” over the Plain, it is true, Wordsworth acknowledges, that “cultivation” was already “widely spread through parts of it.” Yet it “had upon the whole a still more *impressive* appearance than it now retains.” Although the implicit suggestion here is that the relative difference in impressiveness between the plain of today and the plain of yesterday comes down to the degree of cultivation (it was less cultivated back then and therefore more impressive) the real source of the landscape’s power to impress—at least on the occasion of the ramble—can be traced along the verbal thread to the “conviction...*pressed* upon [him] by having been a witness, during a long residence in revolutionary France, of the spirit which prevailed in that country.” Now much of the strength of this conviction Wordsworth owes to his having been imprinted during his personal, biographical exposure, to the events of the French Revolution and their specific pressure. He lived through it. But what is also clear here is that this conviction derives some of its strength through its interaction with another memory, that of the American war, the impressions of which are still *fresh*. But here the chain of impressions escapes the boundaries of Wordsworth’s lived experience—not because he wasn’t in North America (like the vagrant), but because he was “born too late to have a

distinct remembrance of the origin of the American war” at all.²⁸ The national memory of that war is still fresh, but it is older than Wordsworth, and though it affects him, it exceeds the possibility of his merely personal retention of autobiographical memory. It belongs to a different order of temporality and historicity, and in its very ability to affect him, to a different order of the “subject,” the “psyche” or the “self” (that is, the collective being exposed to its power and able to experience it). But this still fresh impression of a war in the recent past is mixed, as he watches the fleet prepare for war—and especially as he hears the cannon fire nightly at sundown—with an impression left by something yet to come. For the melancholy forebodings are tinged with future dread, and unmistakable impression of what he is certain is coming: a future of “misery beyond all possible calculation.” Whatever else might be said about his feeling of certainty regarding the legibility of a sign of the incalculable (and therefore uncertain, illegible) opens up not only to the future war, but beyond the projection of calculability in general—far beyond the knowledge of any self, singular or plural. The young man whom Wordsworth looks back on seems, for a moment, like a poet living in the gap between past and future, in the opening of history. But that opening could also be, by virtue of its incalculability, the impression of a force that is “of” future in a sense unrecognizable, let alone desirable (if it is not simply death). And indeed, this impression of what is (perhaps) a future of incalculable suffering, reflects back on the impressions carved deep into the ground: the illegible marks uncannily suggestive of meaning that seem to trace a violence just beyond the border of any retrospective calculation of history, beyond what we “know or guess,” of the past.

The prefatory “Advertisement,” then, returns the poem to the following circumstances of “origination:” a complex ensemble of “reflections” between discontinuous impressions, which are themselves discontinuous temporalities, spaces, and memories that quickly overflow the individual boundaries of Wordsworth’s personal life, to the contemporary European political situation, back to

²⁸ *The Fenwick Notes*, 200.

the still fresh yet nevertheless historical American war (which Wordsworth says he is not old enough to remember)—and then forward to a future of war and suffering beyond all possible calculation or projection, and then back to a past before recorded history, for which there are only inscrutable monuments and speculations.

The extravagance of this relay mechanism and its violation of every reasonable boundary can be compared nevertheless with another restoration of the poem to its context: a quieter etiology of the repetition machine that might be more disturbing in its refusal to offer the solace of verbal threads. Take the following excerpt from a letter to John Kenyon. Wordsworth is thanking him for a poem Kenyon sent him which remembered their youth, and also reminded Wordsworth of his own youthful composition, inspired by his ramble across Salisbury Plain:

Stonehenge has given you alb[ei]t your *advanced* years just such a feeling as he gave me when in my 23rd year, I passed a couple of days rambling about Salisbury Plain, the solitude & solemnities of which prompted me to write a Poem of some length in the Spenserian stanza. I have it still in Mss and parts may perhaps be thought worth publishing after my death among the ‘juvenilia.’ Overcome with heat and fatigue I took my siesta among the pillars of Stonehenge; but was not visited by the Muse in my Slumbers. I am therefore half tempted to think that Milton was a little bit of a Fibber, when he talks of his nightly visitations or ‘when the sun purples the east.’²⁹

What happened to Wordsworth on Salisbury Plain? What agent left such deep impressions in his memory, in his imagination? The poet is finally revealed at the scene of inspiration. This letter forbids us from assuming that Wordsworth *experienced anything at all* on the plain. The “solitude and solemnities” *prompted* him to write—put him upon writing. He was hot and tired, and he took a nap.

²⁹ Wordsworth to John Kenyon, 1838, in Russell Noyes, “Wordsworth: An Unpublished Letter to John Kenyon,” *MLR* III (1958): 546-547.

And if you are tempted to take recourse to the muse, he makes sure to let you know that there were no visitations. Wordsworth's passive, exhausted, overheated, unconscious, dreamless body, ringed round by Stonehenge a little like a sacrificial victim, presents itself as strange analogue to the traveler, his virtual walking machine. One is a figure of bare life (or less than life) construed as poetic device, a poet's mechanism of moving parts he uses carrying himself over, as it were. The other a figure of the poet himself—if not anonymous, then merely alive (and perhaps close to death), but motionless, and without even the possibility of poetry (which would be marked by the muse and her gift)—without relation to that *of* which the poet's autobiographical song *is*.

Now consider Wordsworth's extraordinary yet literally autobiographical account of his encounter with the plain in Book Twelve of *The Prelude*. It is true, he admits to Coleridge, that he has “harbored” the thought that Nature has chosen him to be a poet, and that as such he has his own “peculiar dower a sense / By which he is enabled to perceive / Something unseen before” (1805 304-305). He further confesses—and indeed asks Coleridge for forgiveness—that he has harbored the hope that Nature has “vouchsafed” to his account, as it were, “An influx, that in some sort I possessed / A privilege, and that a work of mine, / Proceeding from the depth of untaught things, / Enduring and creative, might become / A power like one of Nature's” (1805 12.308-312). This is a heightened “mood” of egotistical sublimity in which the poet feels chosen, ordained with such a radical “privilege” of creative sovereignty, and so overflowing with potentiality that his capacity not only to *sense* but also to actualize the radically new, to bring “something unseen before” into the world,” makes him comparable to Nature itself. With the sleeping, uninspired, unconscious, vulnerable, almost vegetative poet in mind, read Wordsworth's description of the *one* time above all that he has felt raised up to such a mood:

To such a mood,

Once above all—a traveller at that time

Upon the plain of Sarum—was I raised:
There on the pastoral downs without a track
To guide me, or along the bare white roads
Lengthening in solitude their dreary line,
While through those vestiges of ancient times
I ranged, and by the solitude o'ercome,
I had a reverie and saw the past,
Saw multitudes of men, and here and there
A single Briton in his wolf-skin vest,
With shield and stone-ax, stride across the wold;
The voice of spears was heard, the rattling spear
Shaken by arms of mighty bone, in strength
Long mouldered, of barbaric majesty.
I called upon the darkness, and it took—
A midnight darkness seemed to come and take—
All objects from my sight; and lo, again
The desert visible by dismal flames!
It is the sacrificial altar, fed
With living men—how deep the groans!—the voice
Of those in the gigantic wicker thrills
Throughout the region far and near, pervades
The monumental hillocks, and the pomp
Is for both worlds, the living and the dead.
At other moments, for through that wide waste

Three summer days I roamed, when 'twas my chance
 To have before me on the downy plain
 Lines, circles, mounts, a mystery of shapes
 Such as in many quarters yet survive,
 With intricate profusion figuring o'er
 The untilled ground (the work, as some divine,
 Of infant science, imitative forms
 By which the Druids covertly expressed
 Their knowledge of the heavens, and imaged forth
 The constellations), I was gently charmed,
 Albeit with an antiquarian's dream,
 And saw the bearded teachers, with white wands
 Uplifted, pointing to the starry sky,
 Alternately, and plain below, while breath
 Of music seemed to guide them, and the waste
 Was cleared with stillness and a pleasant sound.

(1805 12.313-354)

I am half tempted to think that Wordsworth was a little bit of a fibber. Fibbing, of course, might just be one word for the performative dimension of the rhetoric of autobiographical returns—the power to conjure, through the recollection of the sacrificial flames by, a repetition of that light in the time of writing, and as a function of figure. Let's say that an auto-biographical rhetoric of this type is able to affect life by *animating* it, by making live—that is, by giving face and animation to such visions, and by extension animates the very poetic capacity for such apostrophic animations which it itself is,

in other words, animating itself, giving itself life.³⁰ Like Wordsworth's similar encounters with imagination in the Simplon Pass and atop Mount Snowdon, such specular structures will be interrupted by an undecidability arising from figuration itself: a blinding disfiguration, therefore. What difference does the figure of the poet's overheated, vegetative body make to such linguistic predicaments? What relation does his unconscious insensitivity, his lack of receptivity to even the possibility of poetry, closed off in dreamlessness to any visitation by the muse—what relation does this figure of *life*, this undeniably living being, have to the apostrophic fantasy of the poet who constitutes himself as poet by “calling out to the darkness”—by positing not only a potentially *blinding* but annihilating relation with the negative, with death? Why would such a figure of a life without the possibility of poetry be associated with the very primal scene of the poet's autopoiesis as poet? I would like to propose that in the poet's blank yet living body, mute in its overheated “siesta” at Stonehenge, there is something more refractory and resistant than death.

2. REFLECTIONS II: THE REDUCTION

.....But that night
 When on my bed I lay, I was most moved
 And felt most deeply in what world I was

I seemed to hear a voice that cried
 To the whole city, ‘Sleep no more!’ To this
 Add comments of a calmer mind—from which
 I could not gather full security—

³⁰ For an analysis of such retroactive performative structures, see Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” in *Negotiations*.

But at the best it seemed a place of fear,
 Unfit for the repose of night,
 Defenceless as a wood where tigers roam.

(1805. 10.46-54, 77-82)

In the early 1790s, Wordsworth's political allegiances were such that he was able to declare to William Matthews that "I am of that odious class of men called democrats, and of that class I shall forever continue."³¹ It is tempting to read the "reflections" recalled in the 1842 Advertisement as a Burkean erasure of these much earlier and more radical politics: that when Wordsworth recalls how the "monuments and traces of antiquity" scattered across the plain "led me unavoidably"—we might say *pressed* him—"to compare what we know or guess of those remote times with certain aspects of modern society, and with calamities, principally those consequent upon war, to which, more than other classes of men, the poor are subject" (GS 217), he is silently putting "comparison," that seemingly disinterested mode of reflection, in the place of what had originally been an experience of intense and alienating political partisanship, if not political engagement. Of course, *Salisbury Plain*, the version of the poem closest in time to the "circumstances" of production

³¹ William Wordsworth to William Mathews, May 23 1794, in *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, 65. To self-identify as a "democrat" was rare, and, it seems, radical. Historians of the word "democracy" refer to this line as an exemplary occurrence of its late-eighteenth century re-appropriation. See M.I. Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern*, 10. Finley marshals Wordsworth rather lyrical self-identification as a potential complication to his argument that "democracy" returns to the "popular vocabulary" during the revolutionary era as a pejorative word: "In Antiquity it was equally a word whose use by many writers implied strong disapproval. Then the word disappeared from the popular vocabulary until the eighteenth century, when it crept back as a pejorative term. 'It is rare, even among the *philosophes* of France before the revolution, to find anyone using the word 'democracy' in a favourable sense in any practical connection.' When Wordsworth wrote in a private letter in 1794, 'I am of that odious class of men called "democrats," he was being defiant, not satirical.' Finley is repeating the reading of R.R. Palmer, "Notes on the Uses of the Word 'Democracy' 1789-1799," *Political Science Quarterly* 68 (1953): 205. Wordsworth's declaration threatens to resist the historical claim that the word was not *yet* used positively and practically (i.e., politically); it therefore requires a rhetorical reading, and the argument which Palmer and Finley advance seems to be that (1) Wordsworth's "defiance" actually confirms their claim that the word was pejorative, and (2) because it occurs in a private letter, it has no public, "practical connection" anyway. See Zera Fink, "Wordsworth and the English Republican Tradition," *Journal of English and German Philology* (1948): 107-26. For Wordsworth's politics in the 1790s, see Nicholas Roe, *The Politics of Nature; Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years*. For a contextualization of *Salisbury Plain* within the tradition of English republicanism, see Richard Cronin, *The Politics of Romantic Poetry: In Search of a Pure Commonwealth*.

described in the Advertisement, is precisely a “protest poem” against war and the unjust distribution of its calamities upon the backs of the poor. Yet even the great protest poem of 1793—the “most impressive protest poem of its time,” according to Mary Jacobus³²—is compelled to begin with a preliminary treatment of the very same reflections. The compulsion to return is evidently prone to manifest as a preface compulsion, a sort of introduction drive. Indeed, the 1842 Advertisement can be regarded as an allusion to, if not a return to and a direct repetition of, the 1793 homily, which is of course deleted in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* and *Guilt and Sorrow*. But 1793, the preface is built into the body of the poem itself in the form of a four-stanza homily that actually performs the comparison which the Advertisement is content merely to name and locate outside (or rather before) the text in the experience that would become its origin, though the analysis pursued in the previous section has permanently displaced the premises of such an initial gloss. And it does so philosophically, in the very language of philosophical reflection—in order to return by a method likewise borrowed from philosophical discourse (the transcendental reduction Rousseau employs in the second Discourse), not to an autobiographical origin, but rather the ideal, ontological origin which that method posits as its own goal. The problems of contextualization at stake in 1842 Advertisement turn on a concept of *biographical life*—which we then saw radically placed into question first by the figures of mechanical repetition (the traveler’s body) and then by that of the poet’s exhausted, insensate body dozing in the shadows of Stonehenge’s pillars, stripped not only of consciousness but also of dreams and thus of any attendant visitation by the muses. But the fundamental problems of political philosophy at stake in the prefatory gesture of 1793 turn on a concept of *ontological life*, which it seeks in an ontological origin, and which we will likewise see placed into radical question in order to then become, if not the poem’s animating principle, then the source of its restlessness and incompleteness.

³² Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Lyrical Ballads* 1798, 148.

To set the stage in 1793 for his poem of protest against war and inequality, then, Wordsworth enacts the very reflection he will recall but not repeat in 1842. Drawing from Lucretius, Hobbes, and above all from Rousseau, he constructs a four-stanza comparison between, on the one hand, life as it would have been experienced by a “savage” in the state of nature—in “those remote times” before the establishment of the first organized political communities, and thus before the invention of war and economic inequality, and indeed before the origin of history itself—and, on the other, life as it is experienced by the poor within a “modern” social order fundamentally structured by the unequal distribution not only of wealth but also of security from the organized violence required to accumulate it. *Salisbury Plain* begins, in other words, with a four-stanza prefatory discourse on the origin of inequality.

We are thus introduced to a “savage” who lives “naked and unhoused” in the state of nature, where he is “wasted” by solitude, hunger, and endless fear born of endless exposure to the possibility (if not the instantaneous guarantee) of a violent, painful, death. It is a “hard” life, this condition of existence:

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

(SP 1-9)

What does it mean to be “naked and unhoused?” The world in which we find the savage, and in which the savage finds himself as he awakes in these opening lines, alone and in the dark, stretched out on a “fenceless” bed which offers no protection from the wind and rain that rouse him, is “not fit for the repose of night” (1805. 10.54-46, 77-82). The same “rushing rains” that just woke him put out his watch fire, and the wolves that literally roam these dark forests, no longer held back by its flames, close in around him in a nightmarish substitute for the missing fence. Indeed, there is just enough time before the lights go out at the end of the stanza to see that the savage awakes as a figure of absolute vulnerability within a radically hostile and perhaps even uninhabitable world.

To be “naked and unhoused” is to subsist in a condition of absolute insecurity. We find him exhausted, starving, and “wasted by the long days fruitless pains,” which painful labor can only be his body’s struggle to protect itself against death. For the savage is everywhere surrounded by forces that threaten to destroy him: violent storms, ferocious beasts, and human beings who, if they manage to catch him, promise to treat him with the same brutality. His life, as Alan Liu has pointed out, nodding to a possible connection Hobbes, is nasty, brutish, and short. But Wordsworth now proceeds, as James K. Chandler has demonstrated, to paraphrase the Second *Discourse*, and argue on behalf of Rousseau “against the Hobbesian position that any state of civil society is preferable to the state of savage nature:”³³

Yet he is strong to suffer, and his mind
 Encounters all his evils unsubdued;
 For happier days since at the breast he pined
 He never knew, and when by foes pursued
 With life he scarce has reached the fortress rude,
 While with the war-song’s peal the valleys shake,

³³ Chandler, *Wordsworth’s Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics*, 130-31.

What in those wild assemblies has he viewed
 But men who all of his hard lot partake,
 Repose in the same fear, to the same toil awake?

The thoughts which bow the kindly spirits down
 And break the springs of joy, their deadly weight
 Derive from memory of pleasures flown
 Which haunts us in some sad reverse of fate,
 Or from reflection on the state
 Of those who on the couch of Affluence rest,
 By laughing Fortune's cup elate,
 While we of pleasure reft, by pain depressed,
 No other pillow know but penury's iron breast.

Hence where Refinement's genial influence calls
 The soft affections from their wintry sleep
 And the sweet tear of Love and Friendship falls
 The willing heart in tender joy to steep,
 When men in various vessels roam the deep
 Of social life, and turns of chance prevail
 Various and sad, how many thousands weep
 Beset with foes more fierce than e'er assail
 The savage without home in winter's keenest gale.

(SP 10-36)

The savage's life is indeed "hard," Wordsworth writes, but unlike those subjected to economic exploitation and the atrocities of war, the savage of prehistorical nature has no basis for "reflection" on his own situation and no conception of the possibility that things could be otherwise. History has not yet awakened the savage's capacity for "reflection" from its "wintry sleep," and it is precisely the "deadly weight" of reflection and memory that torment the modern poor, for whom these have become, according to John Rieder, "painful modes of self-consciousness which register the inequality of property within a divided society"—a sort of agonized class consciousness.³⁴ As Chandler puts it, the savage just doesn't know any better. In effect, Wordsworth places Hobbesian nature and Rousseauist culture together on the scales—only to find in favor of Rousseau with the conclusion that nature is still far preferable. Wordsworth has in effect upped the ante against Hobbes on Rousseau's behalf, accepting Hobbes's vision of the state of nature in order to show that the choice between it and that of Rousseau has no bearing on the judgment that favors nature as such. Any nature, even the most violent and brutal all of all possible natures, even a Hobbesian nightmare, is preferable to the condition of culture. But why preface a protest poem with a comparison set in the register of philosophical generality? According to most readers, for rhetorical reasons: the hyperbolic comparison intensifies the declamation against the Pitts ministry, while the identification with Rousseau signals his republican partisanship.³⁵

It seems to me that Wordsworth's engagement with his theoretical sources is more substantive than has previously been recognized. Samuel E. Schulman has shown that Wordsworth borrows the form of the 1793 opening from the same tradition that furnishes him with the nine-line

³⁴ John Rieder, "Civic Virtue and Social Class at the Scene of Execution: Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain Poems," *Studies in Romanticism* 30, no. 3 (Fall, 1991): 329.

³⁵ Hermann J. Wüscher provides a precise description of Wordsworth's rhetorical strategy: "Wordsworth breaks with a generally accepted convention of the period, that of portraying the condition of prelapsarian man as a state of bliss. He reverses the tradition of primeval man's existence in a golden age, in the very opening of the poem... To compare the afflicted man of the 1790s with the non-idealized prehistoric man is far more persuasive than to follow the usual poetic practice of idealizing him." *Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity in Wordsworth, 1791-1800*, 45-46.

stanza; its model is the Spenserian complaint, a rhetorical convention that, with its “opportunity to draw an explicit moral, attracted eighteenth century poets.” According to Schulman, there are political reasons to cast a Jacobin poem in the Spenserian stanza (“when writing poems sympathetic to Jacobin principles it would be useful to exploit Spenser’s Englishness, his prestige as a patriot and a native moralist”), but Wordsworth’s use of the complaint itself exceeds its merely rhetorical function the case of the eighteenth-century poets drawn to its didactic capabilities, who use it “in order to establish their seriousness”—and then “proceed simply to prove their complaint or ignore it.” On the other hand, argues Schulman, Wordsworth’s complaint establishes a “unifying theme” which is neither proven nor ignored but developed in increasingly complex and differentiated ways as the poem itself unfolds.³⁶ But as to the theme itself, Wordsworth draws it not from the English Renaissance but, as we have already seen, from the Enlightenment anthropological tradition and, within political theory, the discourses of natural law and right. Discussing the poem’s fusion of neo-Spenserian and Enlightenment elements, David Collings argues that the opening “carr[ies] out on the level of political theory what the rest of the poem performs in relation to poetic antiquarianism.”³⁷ But what is being carried out? Wordsworth begins with a Rousseauist comparison between savage nature and civil society not merely to supplement the persuasive power of his protest—though this is surely at play as well—but because it is called for by the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Men* as the analysis that must precede the determination of value implied by any act of political judgment, whether protest or defense, revolution or reaction. I would like to argue that in the preface, Wordsworth is rigorously following the principle of critical method which Rousseau formulates in the early pages of the second *Discourse*.

³⁶ Schulman, “Wordsworth’s Salisbury Plain Poems and Their Spenserian Motives,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 84, no. 2 (April 1985): 222.

³⁷ Collings, *Wordsworthian Errancies*, 24.

It is a moment in the preface to the second *Discourse* which seems to have put Wordsworth upon writing own preface along these lines. In it, Rousseau insists that what is fundamentally at stake in his effort to uncover the origin of inequality is not so much knowledge about the past but the possibility of judging the present:

For it is no light undertaking to disentangle what is original from what is artificial in man's present Nature, and to know accurately a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never did exist, which probably never will exist, and about which it is nevertheless necessary to have exact Notions in order accurately to judge our present state.³⁸

What so urgently calls for judgment is of course not some imaginary choice between nature and civil society, as though it were meaningful to ask whether we should regret having been born in “our present state” rather than in the state of nature, before inequality arose with the first organized political communities at the beginning of history. At issue is rather how to make judgments within our present—that is, *historical*—state about the legitimacy of our *political* states, when there are so many ways of arranging them, and when the flux of their historicity demonstrates that “nothing is less stable among men than those external relationships that are more often the product of chance than of wisdom, and that are called weakness or power, wealth or poverty” (128).

The problem is not inequality as such, but the fact that there is more than one way of being unequal, and it is this variation in time and space which both calls for judgment and suggests the possibility that the standard of measure is no less contingent (that is, no less historically arbitrary) than the social arrangement the legitimacy of which it would purport to measure. Rousseau wants to

³⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Men*, in *The Discourses and other early political writing*, 125. *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, 53. Hereafter I will cite Rousseau parenthetically in-text, with the paginations of the original following the English translation for reference. For a study that considers the relation between Wordsworth's poetry and the tradition of Enlightenment anthropology, see Alan Bewell, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment: Nature, Man, and Society in Experimental Poetry*. Bewell takes up the status of the figure of “natural man” in the first two chapters of the book: “Retrospective Tales of Idiots, Wild Children, and Savages;” and “First Encounters of the Primitive Kind.”

uncover the rational ground for making valid (“accurate”) judgments of political legitimacy. To thus solve this problem of validity, to purify the standard of historical contamination, means constructing a “genuine definition of Natural Right” (125). Since “the idea of right...and still more of Natural Right, are manifestly ideas relative to the Nature of Man,” this task can only be achieved within the framework of a philosophical anthropology: it is only “from this Nature of Man, from his constitution and his state,” that the concept of Natural right as well as “all the other principles of this science have to be deduced” (126). Since we know, despite this ignorance, that human beings have enough plasticity to be transformed by the propagation of their different ways of living together, it is necessary to “disentangle” the original from the artificial. The philosophical anthropology from which the principle of natural right will be deduced separates essence from accident within the being of “Man.”³⁹ Rousseau interprets the transcendental reduction temporally, of course, and wants to peel away “all the changes which the succession of times and of things must have wrought in [man’s] original constitution,” in order to “disentangle what he owes to his own stock from what circumstances and his progress have added to or changed in his primitive state” (124), and finally reach the essence at the origin. This reduction is precisely what Wordsworth does in the first stanza. Or rather, the stanza begins with the reduction already accomplished. But more significant than the method is Wordsworth’s *reason* for doing so. Rather than simply issuing his protest against the political conditions of 1793 straight away, he begins with a preface that inscribes the protest within the fundamental question of political philosophy as Rousseau formulates it. Wordsworth wants to establish the condition of possibility of the political action his poem is about to undertake.

³⁹ For an analysis of how Rousseau interprets the problem of how to separate essence from accident in temporal terms, see Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, Volume I*, especially Chapter Two, “Technology and Anthropology.”

The preface's connection to Rousseau was first established by Paul Kelley, who has demonstrated that the description of the savage in the first two stanzas is peppered with verbal echoes of Rousseau's description of natural man in the first part of the second *Discourse*.⁴⁰ For the sake of clarity, it helps to reproduce here the set of correspondences uncovered by Kelley:

<i>Salisbury Plain</i>	<i>Second Discourse</i>
Hard is the life when naked and unhoused	<i>que la nudité, de défaut d'habitation</i>
.....	
.....'mid deep forests,.....	<i>et couverte de forêts immenses</i>
.....	
.....	
.....	
.....bears contending growl	
And round his fenceless bed gaunt wolves in armies howl.	<i>Mettez un ours ou un loup</i>
Yet is he strong to suffer, and his mind	<i>Accoutumés dès l'enfance aux</i>
Encounters all his evils unsubdued;	<i>intempéries de l'air et à la rigueur</i>
For happier days since at the breast he pined	<i>des saisons, exercés à la fatigue, et</i>
He never knew, and when by foes pursued	<i>forcés de défendre nuds et sans</i>
With life he scarce has reached the fortress rude,	<i>armes....</i>
While with that war song's peal the valleys shake	
What in those wild assemblies has he viewed	
But men who all of his hard lot partake,	

⁴⁰ Paul Kelley, "Rousseau's 'Discourse on the Origins of Inequality' and Wordsworth's 'Salisbury Plain,'" *Notes and Queries* 24 (July-August 1977): 323.

Repose in the same fear, to the same toil awake?⁴¹

The Spenserian turn “unhouzed” is itself one of these echoes, and it translates “*défaut d’habitation*.”

To be “naked and unhouzed” is to have nothing but one’s own natural defenses. The savage has no clothes, no dwelling, no fence to protect his bed from animals while he sleeps, no watch-fire to project a perimeter of visibility into the darkness: nothing but his skin, his senses, and his limbs. By “unhousing” the savage, then, Wordsworth deprives him of every form of artificial shelter, of any recourse to any form of protection whatsoever—any external shield, security system, or mechanism of defense—and thus executes poetically the reduction Rousseau performs philosophically. What makes the opening stanza substantively Rousseauist is less the external world in which we find the savage, which as we have seen is a sort of Hobbesian nightmare, than Wordsworth’s method for putting him there: subtraction. He peels away the traces of history, “stripping” him “of all the supernatural gifts he may have received, and of all the artificial faculties he could only have acquired by prolonged progress; by considering him, in a word, such as he must have issued from the hands of Nature” (*Discourse*, 124, 134; *Discours*, 52, 64). Consistent with Rousseau’s thinking is also the status of “housing,” which functions here as a general figure for the technical supplement, the artificial, invented (and thus unnatural) device which serves to supplement the living being, and which defines historically constituted human life. Indeed, Wordsworth conforms with Rousseau’s conception of the relation between the supplement and life. If for Rousseau, “any animal” is “nothing but an ingenious machine to which nature has given senses in order to wind itself up, and, to a point, protect itself against everything that tends to destroy or disturb it” (*Discourse*, 140; *Discours*, 71), then Wordsworth has returned the savage to the zero degree of his animality, subtracting every

⁴¹ In addition to reformatting the presentation of the quotes, I have modified the spelling and word order in Kelley’s quotation of Wordsworth to bring it into conformity with Gill’s Reading Text, substituting “unhouzed” for “unhoused” and “yet is he strong” for “yet he is strong.” The citations from Salisbury Plain are, respectively: 1, 3; 8-9, 10-13. I also modified the spelling and punctuation of the quotations from Rousseau to bring them into conformity with the Gallimard edition. *Discourse sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, 69, 65, 66, 65.

protective apparatus which does not intrinsically belong to the self-protecting machine he should already be. The missing items—clothes, the use of fire, fences—are all minimal but nonetheless artificial mechanisms of defense invented to supplement the functioning of a natural assemblage of mechanisms of defense, a natural self-protection machine which ought to perform its primary function self-sufficiently.⁴²

Readers of *Salisbury Plain* often adduce as evidence of its poetic failure either (or both) the “overblown” rhetoric of the opening and the conclusion, as well as their register of philosophical generality, which, on this view, makes for bad poetry and ineffective politics. It seems to me that the point is missed twice. The first point, as I have already argued, is precisely to establish the condition of the possibility of *protesting* in the first place. The comparative reflections that occupy Wordsworth’s thoughts as he walks across the plain in the Advertisement to *Guilt and Sorrow* are precisely this—reflections on the possibility of the political terrain, as it were, on which the battle will be fought. This is why the introduction to *Salisbury Plain* is not only, or even primarily, a comparative scale that fans its two sides out into synchronic space to make its measurement. For it simultaneously projects itself into the diachronic space of genetic narrative. Wordsworth runs the tape backward before the poem begins, enacting poetically the method of transcendental reduction which Rousseau performs philosophically, precisely in order to play it forward again, literally to narrate the origins and gradual evolution not only of war and inequality, but also the very possibility of opposing it.

The narrative begins in an original, natural condition of indifference defined by the impossibility memory and reflection, and ends in a condition (let’s call it a state) of agonized recollection and reflection, which just happens to be the condition of living in a political state.

⁴²I am referring here to Rousseau’s logic of supplementarity, as explicated by Jacques Derrida in *De La Grammatologie*, “Deuxième Partie: Nature, Culture, Écriture,” 143-445. *Of Grammatology*, “Part II: Nature, Culture, Writing,” 96-316.

Everything in between is the historical development of *housing*. For just as artificial systems of shelter are what first had to be stripped away to produce the condition of nature, it is the sudden appearance in the second stanza of an artificial system of shelter that marks the savage's departure from nature. In fact, he exits nature running for his life and as fast as he can into the a "fortress rude," behind the protective walls of which he will be safe from foes which seem to have become human. In an instant the savage has joined a political community. This moment marks a transitional and perhaps paradoxical moment in Wordsworth's housing history, for it is here in this scene—which takes place after the savage has already left the state of nature—that Wordsworth makes his argument about the superiority of nature. We have already noted that it concerns memory, but viewing it in terms of the narrative makes a difference, since in this light it becomes the history of the development of memory—or the possibility of history. Unlike his post-natural counterpart (or unlike counterparts living further downstream in history), the savage lacks the "memory of pleasures flown." He has never known any variation in the distribution of pleasure and happiness, either in his own life or in the lives of others. The memory of these differences is the only possible source from which *psychical* pain may "derive." No matter how unbearable the agony which the savage must suffer in the present (say, the agony of being devoured by starving wolves or being trampled by boars), he is closed off from the possibility of ever referring this experience to memory, and thus from ever reflecting on the possibility that things might have turned out otherwise for him (that is, from performing a calculation concerning possibility itself), or from concluding that things *do* turn out otherwise for others.

And it is not because he dies. Even if beasts don't gobble him up before he has the chance to form memories, the world around him lacks the requisite variation, the degree of difference, required to form the inscription. Nature, for Rousseau, is—or at least once *was*, when it was in the state of nature—naturally invariant, as regular as a clock. The same is true about the savage's

situation when we find him huddled in the fortress. In this condition, which is not of natural but rather quasi-natural political equality, all members of this “wild assembly,” this primitive polity (whose borders are evidently coextensive with the fortress walls) are both equally protected and equally exposed to the threats outside. In this primitive democracy, where everyone in the same “hard lot partake[s], / repose[s] in the same fear,” and “to the same toil awake[s],” is constituted in terms of an equality of *exposure and enclosure*, as a sharing in common of protection and risk. The only difference is marked by the external border.

Without difference, there can be no memory and therefore no concept of contingency. This is why is it impossible in the condition of natural indifference to experience the properly *psychical* pain that arises from reflection on “sad turns of chance.” What is characteristically Rousseauist here is the reversal that recovers strength from the vulnerability of naked amnesiac life (indeed, life’s “hardness” the secondary connotation of toughness: the savage is literally thick skinned), and reveals that the supplementary shields constitutive of historical humanity, though they provide shelter from *pain*, mark the invention of a new vulnerability. The course of history enables human beings to ring their beds with increasingly sophisticated “fences,” but it also gives them differences and memory (indeed it the shelters *are* memory), the site of a new vulnerability.

Note that the political community is itself a regarded as a shelter system, and that, indeed it is not only within the history of the housing apparatus, but *begins* it. At a certain point very early in this history, the shelter system crosses a threshold of complexity that marks the multiplication of fortress walls, and thus the internalization of boundary lines, which at first only marked the separation of outside and inside and the division between fellow citizens of the fortress and foe. This, then, is the emergence of inequality of shelter, the point at which the political community constitutes itself by unequally distributing shelter and exposure—in other words, by sacrificing some of its bodies. Indeed, such a sacrifice is implied in the second stanza: to be at war, to have an enemy

outside your walls, and moreover to constitute the community through an originary gathering polarized in common opposition to an enemy is precisely the unequal distribution of exposure. Inequality in the distribution of exposure—that is, an originary “unhousing” or casting out—is the originary event of the formation of the political community. But when the walls are internalized, this primary event is repeated with a difference. Here the internal lines of difference allow for the formation of memory and reflection, which arise in the form of political conflict. It is not that memory and the capacity for political reflection emerge such that the poor and other subjects of domination and exploitation are now endowed with a faculty that allows them to know that they are poor, and, seeing their shared interests, to constitute themselves as a “we,” as does Wordsworth in the fourth stanza. Rather, the event of the self-constitution of the poor *is* the emergence of memory and reflection, for it occurs as a comparison on inequality that implicitly reflects on the *contingency* of the unequal arrangement. Wordsworth appears to be describing the origin of politics as an experience within the political community in its differentiation with the war going on outside it.

What do we do when we are poor? We “reflect on the state.” The fact this phrase has been left at the end of the line invites us to reflect on whether “state” here, invites us to reflect on whether “state” here *only* means “condition,” or whether it simultaneously carries the secondary sense of an established political community. The textual “we,” the collective subject Wordsworth constitutes by apostrophe (and to which we automatically belong in function of the figure), reflects on the condition of the rich, who are relaxing on the couch of affluence, “By laughing Fortune’s cup elate,” while “we,” on the other hand, know nothing but “Penury’s iron breast.” The reflection on the material conditions in which the rich live, which already includes the trace of a reflection that they owe their enjoyment of that condition to nothing but chance (“Fortune”), becomes a reflection that compares their condition to “ours,” which by implication is also a matter of chance. The reflection on material conditions thus becomes, even as it extends to include within its reflective

folds the division of the conflict itself, a reflection on the political state. What's more, Wordsworth has implicated us in this process—and not merely as a function of the mode of address, but as a function of the very fact of reading. To *read* the textual “state,” that is, to reflect on the relation implied by the referential structure of the word, is to repeat the reflection performed by Wordsworth's poor, and to be enfolded within the reflective structure, imminently dialectical logic of political rationality.⁴³

So far we have followed Wordsworth up to the point where he has recounted the origin of inequality in the formation of the state as an artificial housing mechanism, and narrated the origin of the possibility itself of his protest against it in the very act of reflection upon conditions—which reflection, indeed, is beginning to look a lot like reading. Several readers have noted that this origin story tends to deconstruct itself. Andrea Henderson remarks that “one hardly needs Derrida's subtlety to see how Wordsworth breaks down the savage's originary status...Man in the state of nature is no different from man in his current state of civilization; the savage's only advantage is that he and all those around him have always suffered, so he takes his current condition for granted.”⁴⁴

Examining the same complication by the text of its own boundary between the state of nature and

⁴³Wordsworth's depiction of the reflection on the contingency of inequality seems to prefigure Rancière's placement of the irreducible contingency of the social order as such at the root of all political experience. The question “why this arrangement and not something else?”, usually formulated by a party disadvantaged by the arrangement, precipitates not only the struggles of history but also (according to Rancière) the conservative project of political philosophy as such, which sets to work to formulate the reason for this or that arrangement and thus to vouchsafe at least in principle the foundation of the social order, but is in fact only elaborating so many variants of a simple denial of the answer to the question, which indeed can only be denied: there is no reason. The social order is irreducibly contingent: “Equality must be posited if inequality is to be explained. But the thing that needs explaining, the thing that sets the machine of explanation in motion, is inequality, the absence of reason that must be rationalized, the facticity that has to be put in order, the social arbitrariness that demands the establishment of ranks. In short, the arbitrariness of language that for one rational subject is traversed by another presumes another, social arbitrariness. All that is meant by social arbitrariness is that the social order is devoid of immanent reason, that it is merely because it is, without any organizing purpose. In this it seems at first altogether comparable to the arbitrariness of language. But there is a radical and immediately overriding difference: the material arbitrariness of the social weight of things cannot be traversed by any subject for another subject. There is no reasoning collective subject. Only individuals are endowed with reason. A collectivity can have no lines of communication between Wordsworth and Rancière (who seems to have Rousseau's *Social Contract* in mind), we can begin to see the outlines of the Wordsworth's displacement of Rousseau beginning to take shape.

⁴⁴Andrea Henderson, “A Tale Told to be Forgotten: Enlightenment, Revolution, and the Poet in ‘Salisbury Plain.’” *Studies in Romanticism* 30, no. 1 (Spring, 1991): 74.

the state of culture, David Collings formulates a similar argument in terms the Rousseauist proxy war Wordsworth wages against Hobbes. According to Collings, Wordsworth's depicts a Hobbesian state of nature in order to rehearse Rousseau's argument that the war of all against all is not a natural condition but rather one that follows the institution of culture: "Because the poor have it worse than savages, Rousseau indirectly suggests that the Hobbesian state of nature, of devastating violence and brutality, is not a pre-cultural but a post-cultural condition, the result of culture's corruption."⁴⁵ The "savage" might well have been a historically constituted human being from the beginning.

By virtue of the same logic, the narrative also includes the possibility of a constitutive exclusion from the shelter-system that casts its victims back into the condition of life, whether it is "natural" or not, in which we first find the savage. Indeed, the real basis for the judgment that concludes the fourth stanza, that it would be better to be a "savage without home in winter's keenest gale" than to live within the protective "housing" of a state, is precisely that the logic according to which the shelter system has evolved includes the catastrophic risk of a real, material reduction of real human beings to the mere animality. That is, the ideal, transcendental procedure with which Wordsworth, ventriloquizing Rousseau, produces the savage as a figure of the human as "natural man," that is, the human as an animal, as a merely living being, has a monstrous mirror image. The apparatuses of the state and the war machine, animated by capital, reduce human beings to animality. That the ideal narrative of origins whose logic Wordsworth rehearses poetically is *actually* reversed in real history, that under the "condition" of which the poem is a reflection, whole populations and individuals are in fact stripped of their humanity, is demonstrated immediately—as soon as the traveler staggers onto the plain onto the plain, in the reverse direction of the savage's sprint toward the fortress in the second stanza, all while turning back toward the spire atop Salisbury

⁴⁵Collings, *Wordsworthian Errancies*, 23-24.

Cathedral and the various shelters it signifies. The female vagrant's autobiography is in fact the history of the same material, real reduction—formed as life-writing.

By thus making the human as a living being both the product of the reduction and that which the shelters of history finally serve to protect—by housing and unhousing life—Wordsworth cleaves rigorously to Rousseau's text. Indeed, biopolitics is especially at stake in *Salisbury Plain* not only because its principle characters, the traveler and the female vagrant, are themselves victims of this process of constitutive exclusion, reduced to the exigencies of mere life and cast beyond the borders of any human community, but also because once they are on the outside, they are made to witness obsessively repeating visions of human sacrifice that stage the primordial emergence of sovereignty and the state as deadly shelters. In their portrayal of the relation between sovereignty and life, these scenes swarm with figures of life, and this insistence on the production of life as figure, I will argue, both anticipates Agamben's argument that the originary function of sovereignty is the production of a biopolitical body, and suggests an understanding of life itself *as* self-figuration that resists an "aesthetic" or indeed ontological determination of the relation and difference between sovereignty and life. For in these scenes, sovereignty constitutes (that is, figures) itself as life even while it produces a living, biopolitical body which it is free to kill.

I will argue that even though Wordsworth cleaves rigorously to Rousseau's text, he does so in a way that displaces philosophical anthropology from its position of ontological priority. "Man" is no longer the horizon of politics, the first principle that logically precedes it and from whose contents the elements of political philosophy are to be deduced. The human, Wordsworth suggests instead, arises as an effect of a more originary relation between life and shelter. It is only one more shelter-effect among others. The human is an effect of housed life. The displacement of Rousseau's reduction is already at work in the first stanza. Wordsworth's reduction is exorbitant, extravagant. He hyperbolizes it. In my initial reading of the first stanza, I glossed Wordsworth's reduction as if it

produced what Rousseau stipulates as the very *telos* of the reduction: the essence of the human in the figure of the human animal, the human as a living, not a historical or a cultural or indeed even linguistic, being. By prioritizing shelter as the a-posteriori acquisition that the human must be deprived to reduce it to its essence, Wordsworth is indeed consistent with Rousseau. But he takes it too far: the reduction peels back the human, and then it encroaches into nature. Consider the beginning again:

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

Wordsworth has stripped the savage of artificial shelter only to place him in a world where he is most in need of it. Is it enough to say that it comes down to the difference between Rousseau's natural man and Hobbes's state of nature? As I noted above, as far as Rousseau is concerned, when nature was still natural it would have generously protected not only beings but the living in general. Rousseau places his natural man in a nature that, not yet modified and de-natured by the history of technological progress, houses him and offers him shelter. Nature, by nature, is a gigantic house:

La Terre abandonnée à sa fertilité naturelle (IV) et couverte de forêts immenses que la
 Coignée ne mutila jamais, offre à chaque pas des Magazins et des retraites aux animaux de
 toute espèce.

(*Discours*, 65)

The Earth, abandoned to its natural fertility (IV) and covered by immense forests which no Axe ever mutilated, at every step offers Storage and shelter to the animals of every species.

(*Discourse*, 53)

Thus stripped of his clothes and expelled from a house whose mortgage belongs to the history of technical progress, man immediately returns to his house—as if the departure into history and everything which followed was itself the real condition of homelessness. But Wordsworth places his savage in a nature that radically threatens not only the savage himself but life in general, and without offering any compensatory protection either. This is a nature where it is seemingly always raining but where there are no natural substitutes, like caves or rocky outcroppings, to compensate for the forms of artificial shelter of which the savage is deprived by definition; where it is seemingly always dark but impossible to replace the absent sunlight with firelight, since any fire is put out as soon as it is lit by the same rushing rains; where the scarcity of food and the surplus of carnivores makes it difficult to eat and easy to be eaten, and causes the very animals themselves to become warlike as they starve to death, and thus to engage each other in a hyperbolic literalization of Hobbes's vision of the state of nature as a war of all against all. The savage, then, must sleep where sleep is impossible (though sleep he must, since sleep is as necessary for life as fire is for light where there is no sun): out in the open, always exposed to what *The Borderers* will call “the rough visitation of the sky,”⁴⁶ but also—if this first visitation doesn't keep him “rouzed”—to the rough visitations of the beasts for whom a sleeping savage makes easy prey.

⁴⁶ William Wordsworth, *The Borderers*, The Early Version (1797-99), IV: i.8. The sense of exposure captured by this phrase bears comparison, particularly in the context of *Salisbury Plain's* radically shelter-less savage, with the lines that replace it in the late version (1842): “Better this bare rock, / Though it were tottering over a man's head, / Than a tight case of dungeon walls for a shelter / From such a dealing.” IV.i.1658-1661. By means of a brutal reversal of earth and sky, the “rough visitation of the sky” becomes the rough visitation of a heavy, falling rock.

It is tempting to say that the only law in this state of nature is necessity and the right of the strongest, where, according to Spinoza, “the greater devour the lesser by sovereign natural right.”⁴⁷ And yet the fact that all the combatants in this war of all against all are so weak—indeed, starving to death, unable even to claim that right—suggests another dimension of hostility, a second war, not among the living beings that populate and inhabit the world, but between the world and life—or perhaps what is at stake is a vanishing of the world. It is not merely the life of the savage that seems to blink out with the watch-fire at the end of the stanza, or at least to be at the very verge of blinking out, but life in general. In the wolves’ gauntness is a trace of their extinction. It is not just fire and sleep but also life that becomes impossible here. Life is on the verge of being *unhoused*, exposed, from its sheltering conditions of possibility.

Wordsworth inscribes a deconstruction of Rousseau within his rehearsal of the reduction, unhousing not only the savage of the shelters of history, but unhousing life itself of its ecological house, as it were. And finally, in this economy of reductions, he unhouses Rousseau’s reduction. But the very extremity of life’s exposure in this stanza opens the question of how the teleological progression could ever have begun. How did it become possible for the savage, who is named only to die in the first stanza, to find himself *running*—that is, able to protect himself, able to shelter himself—into a fortress? An abyss separates these two moments. Indeed, the savage is vulnerable not only in his exposure to inclement weather and ferocious beasts. He is only ever prone, and though I have described him as waking, he never seems to emerge into consciousness in the first stanza, but rather to flit in a dim hypnagogic limbo zone. He doesn’t even qualify as an animal according to Rousseau’s own definition: “nothing but an ingenious machine to which nature has given senses in order to wind itself up, and, to a point, protect itself against everything that tends to destroy or disturb it” (*Discourse*, 140; *Discours*, 71). Indeed, the stanza is constructed grammatically so

⁴⁷ Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 195.

that, between the moment the rain wakes him from sleep and then extinguishes his watch-fire, a series of appositions discontinuously interrupt each other with alternating spatial and temporal markers: “roused mid deep forests, the savage lies down on unknown plains, and lifts his head in fear, while famished trains of boars...” This drift from discordant scene to discordant scene, each of which is marked as simultaneous with each other, produces an effect similar to that of a cinematic montage, suggesting the passage of an indeterminately large (or small) amount of time, and any number of savages: this is a general savage, the dreamlike blur of an era before the organized, unfolding movement of history. But this reading fails to take into account that the text is hovering with almost novelistic proximity here to the savage, and that this effect also renders his hazy of his half-consciousness (waking up on unknown plains, while drifting to sleep in dark forests, while waking up as wolves close in). His drift toward death, or rather toward the very edge of it, has the flickering effect of a rapidly oscillating shutter.

Only a few years after he demonstrated that Wordsworth draws from Rousseau to write his preface, Paul Kelley published a second finding in *Notes and Queries* demonstrating that the same preface is also punctuated by verbal echoes from Lucretius—and in one case a phrase previously marked as an echo of Rousseau now found to be an echo of Lucretius. Critics have not explored the possibilities opened up by this double reflection: of Wordsworth echoing Rousseau echoing *De Rerum Natura*. Although Kelley doesn’t note it himself, since he limits himself instead to linking entire phrases in Wordsworth’s text to phrases in *De Rerum Natura* of which they are demonstrably the echoes or even translations, the fourth stanza puts all of its weight on the defining feature that distinguishes the historical and artificial domain of human culture (here, the realm of “social life”) from the regularity and consistency of nature; under this form of life, swerves prevail: “sad turns of chance prevail, / Various and sad.” Now this is perfectly consistent with Rousseau, but it seems to me that a Lucretian clinamen haunts not only Wordsworth’s reenactment of the transcendental

reduction, but the “real” reduction, the real “unhouzing” of which the vagrant and the traveler are victims. In *Salisbury Plain*, I would like to argue, a deconstruction occurs inside the transcendental reduction, which, first, makes it so extravagant that, as we have seen, the reduction descends past humanity (as Rousseau must stipulate, since the goal is precisely to excavate the essence of the human), but then descends still further, burning away from life itself every sheltering condition of possibility that maintains it as life. The reduction crosses the border of history and claims nature itself: it first destroys everything that makes the titular plain an environment which is at least in principle habitable by living beings, and then it begins to erase the systematic differentiation of space and time—burning away, in other words, the structural elements that come together make a world, and leaving the creatures who remain “there” in a situation akin to that experienced, for example, by Milton’s Satan when he leaps impossibly into a chaos without dimension. Finally, it encroaches into the living being itself, loosening its possession of the very faculties which belong to it by nature for the purpose of its self-preservation, and therefore also by definition, since life is nothing other than a structure of self-relation that preserves itself in time— “the ensemble of forces that resist death,” to borrow Bichat’s famously tautological formulation.

The reduction becomes destructive—as if possessed by a death drive that reorients it not to origins and ends but to obliteration. This, I argue, constitutes a Lucretian swerve in Wordsworth’s text that haunts his reenactment of Rousseau and threatens to interrupt it, being irreducible to the teleological rationality necessarily involved in the very possibility of any transcendental reduction. It also swerves athwart any distinction one might like to maintain between the transcendental reductions and ideal histories on the one hand, and what, on the other hand, I have been rather imprecisely calling the “real” or “material” reduction enacted upon real bodies by states, economies, and apparatuses of control. Indeed, what will seem to swerve is the reduction itself: from a procedure modeled on geometry that seeks an ideal origin by means of a retrospective inference of

reason, to a process of material destruction drawn from Lucretius's apocalyptic vision of nature dying as the walls of the world—its sheltering “ramparts”—dissolve back into the primordial chaos of atoms. At play is therefore a second exposure, a second finitude, which threatens not only the natural life of living beings, or for that matter the possibility of Rousseau's project, but the teleological organization of the world. Between these two exposures, then, Wordsworth's poetry produces figures that resemble a kind of “bare life” which indeed retain a link, despite the radical scale of these exposures, to the political. But they are exposed not only from empirical shelters or from the law, but also from the sheltering conditions of survival: they are bare of their own *possibility as life*. Wordsworth's poetry of life thinks biopolitics from the vantage of *impossible life*.

In the *Salisbury Plain* poems, this thinking is visible in the obsessive depiction of the originary violence by which sovereignty establishes itself and founds the community. The visions of human sacrifice in *Salisbury Plain* and the scenes of legal execution in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* and *Guilt and Sorrow* re-inscribe the stakes of sovereignty's self-positing. These scenes do not merely portray sovereign self-institution in the spectacles of ritual killings and executions. Instead, they show sovereignty arising from a violence that seeks first of all to deny, indeed to liquidate, the aporetic condition of impossible life through a killing that founds not only the community, the law, or sovereignty itself, but the very opposition between life and death presupposed by the transformation that violence aims to bring about in its victim—a victim who is never simply alive before the execution, and who only retroactively accedes to it after a death which for the same reason cannot simply be death. What I am calling the biopoetics and biopolitics of impossible life arise from its resistance, from the fact that it cannot be killed or sacrificed, but only denied. And similarly, perhaps, the structures of repetition, not only within the poems themselves also within Wordsworth's decades-long pattern of repetition, revision, and incompleteness seem to have such an impossible life.

3. UNHOUSING NATURE

La Terre abandonnée à sa fertilité naturelle (IV) et couverte de forêts immenses que la Coignée ne mutila jamais, offre à chaque pas des Magazins et des retraites aux animaux de toute espèce.

The Earth, abandoned to its natural fertility (IV) and covered by immense forests which no Axe ever mutilated, at every step offers Storage and shelter to the animals of every species.

(*Discours* 65, *Discourse* 53)

In a lengthy note addressed to bad readers, Rousseau defines the superabundant fertility which at the origin was sufficient to supply shelter and storage “to the animals of every species.” He then outlines the historical mechanism of the earth’s progressive defertilization, in the light of which Wordsworth’s *Salisbury Plain* reads as a projected extrapolation—if not radicalization. Indeed, the leveled landscape of the plain represents Rousseau’s history of planetary defertilization taken to the outmost limit, to the point at which there is no world. Inside the note we find a lengthy quotation of Buffon:

IV. Should there be among my Readers so poor a Physicist as to raise objections regarding this assumption of the natural fertility of the earth, I shall answer him with the following passage:

“Since plants draw much more substance for their nourishment from the air and water than they do from the earth, it happens that when they decay they restore more to the earth than they had drawn from it; besides, a forest regulates rainwater by preventing evaporation [shelter from the sun]. Thus, in a wood left untouched for a long time, the layer of earth that supports vegetation would increase considerably; but since Animals restore less to the earth than they take from it, and men consume

enormous quantities of wood and plants for fire and other uses, it follows that in an inhabited country the layer of topsoil must inevitably decrease and eventually become like the ground of Arabia Petraea, and so many other Provinces of the Orient which, indeed, is the oldest inhabited Clime, and where [now] only Salt and Sand are found; for the fixed Salt of Plants and of Animals remains, while all their other parts of volatilized.” M. De Buffon, *Hist[oire] nat[urelle]*.

To this may be added the factual proof of the great number of trees and of plants of all kinds that filled almost all the desert islands discovered in recent centuries, and of what history tells us about the huge forests that had to be cut down everywhere on earth as it was populated or civilized. I shall make the following three additional remarks on this subject. The first is that, if there is a kind of vegetation that could compensate for the kind of depletion of vegetable matter which, according to M. de Buffon’s reasoning, is due to animals, then it is mainly woods, the crowns and leaves of which collect and absorb more water and moisture than do other plants. The second is that the destruction of topsoil, that is to say the loss of the substance suited to vegetation, must accelerate in proportion as the earth is more cultivated and as its more industrious inhabitants consume its various productions in greater quantities. My third and most important remark is that the fruit of Trees provide animals with a more abundant supply of food than can other [forms of] vegetation, an experiment I myself performed by comparing the production of two plots of ground equal in size and quality, the one covered with chestnut trees, and the other sown with wheat.⁴⁸

(*The Discourses*, 192-193; *Discours*, 128-129)

⁴⁸ Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, *Buffon’s Natural History*, vol. 1, 197.

Here is a recipe for unhousing life. The nutrients essential to life come not from the substance of the earth, but from the air and water, and in this respect Buffon's thinking of life remains pneumatic, as though resistant to a materialism that attributes the essence of life to inert matter of the earth: in the series "rocks and stones and trees," what sets off the third term and distinguishes it as living is not to be found in the dark, massy, planetary substrate in which they are all embedded and with which they roll round. For the defining characteristic of life, Buffon looks instead to air and water, elements foreign to the dark matter of the earth. He describes a system in which plants represent an intermediary function between the elements, absorbing nutrients (the substance necessary for life) from water and air and then, through decay, transferring that substance to the earth which stores it in turn. Vegetation grows not from the earth *as such* but from the decayed matter of other plants (there must have been dead plants, therefore, at the origin of the first plant), which forms a topsoil, a kind of supplementary covering or clothing comprised of the substance of life and from which life feeds and springs. Plant life is the materialization of the first two elements (water and air) on the surface of the earth, a sort of condensation. Accordingly, plant life and its rich substrate of living death should grow hyperbolically: the more plants die, the more plants grow.

Counterbalancing this tendency toward radical accumulation, animals represent a net loss to the quantity of nutrients in the earth because the process of animal decomposition returns less to the soil than the animal required from it during life. Presumably the deathly exhalations of the dying animals are inhaled by plants which in turn reinvest it into the soil (or rather reconvert it into the form of soil: here, death is a phase shift). The symmetrical inverse of plants, human beings hyperbolize the subtractive function of animals. They require even more from the earth and even return less to it than other animals. They cut down forests and burn timber, and perhaps the incineration of plant matter affects the nutritive substance in such a way that it cannot be returned to earth; but what matters for both Buffon and Rousseau is that trees supply additional protection to

life: forests offer life a protective shield by enclosing it. They *shelter* water (one of the two elements from which plants take nutrition) by shielding it from evaporation, and, thus shoring it up into standing reserves, function as a storage system for the substance of life itself. Therefore, insofar as the expansion of human populations requires a proportional deforestation, the unlimited growth of human progress attacks the condition of life in general. A kind of death drive is at work in human history, which consumes the double condition of life on earth—its substrate (topsoil) and its housing (forests)—as it moves forward: “The destruction of topsoil, that is to say the loss of the substance suited to vegetation [la substance propre à la végétation], must accelerate in proportion as the earth is more cultivated and as its more industrious inhabitants consume its various productions in greater quantities.”

The earth owes the finitude of its natural fertility (and thus the finitude of the life that inhabits it, that is to say the mortality of terrestrial life in general) to the fact that it has a finite surface. Human beings burn topsoil away in the act of *inhabiting* land: it is as if the very act of enclosing land, of territorializing it and bringing it under the jurisdiction of *human* sovereignty, were itself the violent and destructive gesture. Rousseau’s use of “abandonnée” to describe pre-historical earth bears the weight of a conceptual linkage between sovereignty and life which can also be traced in *Salisbury Plain*. “Abandon” must be understood jurisdictionally; to say that the earth is “abandonnée à sa fertilité naturelle” is to say that the earth is under the absolute control of her “fertilité naturelle.” Rousseau’s note overdetermines “la Terre” with a double signification: both the dense, substantial ground from which life springs, and the geographical surface charted on maps and divided into the territories of sovereign states. What makes the notion of the earth’s gradual and perhaps inevitable defertilization possible is an identification of the geographical conception of earth with the substantial, earthy conception of earth: if the human inhabitation and cultivation of land constitutes the negation of earth as topsoil, then the process of cultivation is conceived as an act of

sovereign appropriation, the sovereign act of enclosure. But here the earth is transferred from one sovereign authority to another—from the sovereignty of its natural fertility to the sovereignty of man. The sovereignty of nature is expressed in the spontaneity of natural production. The same spontaneity of nature which Kant describes as the capacity to be simultaneously its own efficient and teleological cause, Rousseau attributes in his reading of Buffon to the productivity of vegetable life, the immensity of which productive power is captured in the image of “immense forests” covering the ancient earth and desert islands which remain abandoned to the sovereignty of nature. The sovereignty of man is expressed in the act of cultivating it, in the “mutilating” axe that converts forests into arid deserts laced with the salt deposits of decomposed animals.

What complicates Rousseau’s fairly simple opposition of man and nature as two forms of sovereignty (the one “productive” and the other “mutilating”) is the schema in the quotation from Buffon from which it is derived. There the pertinent distinction is not first of all between man and nature but, within nature, between plant and animal, which are distinguished as two types of nutritive transaction between earth, air, and water, in a systematic economy of life. As we have seen, Buffon determines man as a hyperbolized modification of animal life. The human breach with nature is therefore a mutation, a quantitative leap, in the particular economic relation of animal life to the earth. What differentiates the human animal from all others, by this reading, lies in its capacity to consume entire forests (the mutilating axe) and thereby destroy the “outward frame of things,” the structural undergirding of life and the world. It is as if man is a carnivore that eats not particular living beings but the structural possibility of life in general, the animal that devours the teleological organization of the world.

This great leap forward in predation is enabled by the enclosure of land. Like Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau defines enclosure—and the spatialization of power that results from the correlation

of authority to land, that is to say territorialization—as an originary structure of political and juridical sovereignty.

The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say *this is mine*, and found people sufficiently simple to believe him, was the true founder of civil society.

(*Discourses*, 161; *Discours*, 94.)

From the cultivation of land, its division necessarily followed; and from property, once recognized, the first rules of justice necessarily followed.

(*Discourses*, 169; *Discours*, 103.)

“The first man” of the first passage stands as the sovereign legislator from whom the first enclosure originated, albeit by means not of decree but rhetoric fitted to the simplicity of an easily fooled audience. In the second passage, cultivation (and consequently the enclosure of land) precedes the establishment of the juridical sovereignty which it necessitates. At work here is an aporia where each term claims logical and therefore chronological priority. Rousseau analyzes its vicissitudes in view of a conceptualization of life. As his note on Buffon shows, the transformation resulting in the enclosure of land is an alteration in the structure of animal life: the development in natural man of a “virtual capacity” which remains wholly (or almost wholly) potential as long as he remains in nature. One of the earliest and most significant consequences of its actualization and gradual perfection is the projection of power into space as a means of procuring artificial shelter (huts, houses, etc.), but also as a means of securing orientation in space, of establishing a system comprised of centers and peripheries.

It would seem that in the *Discourse*, Rousseau derives the spatial organization of juridical sovereignty from life. Beginning with an analysis of life as virtual capacity, he traces the development of that capacity in the invention of “housed” life, from artificially constructed huts and principles of

orientation in space to the full establishment of juridical sovereignty and the civil state. Nature is already defined by a sort of sovereignty at the origin—sovereignty which is determined as the radical spontaneity of the Earth’s original and unconditional “natural fertility,” a sovereignty that moreover becomes increasingly limited in proportion to the progressive expansion of human sovereignty over the earth. Therefore sovereignty will already belong to life in the structure of the virtual capacity definitive, I will argue, not only of man, but of life in general. The mutation that transforms what is really one animal among others into a dynamically expanding master of the world is in fact a transformation *of* sovereignty, in the very structure of sovereignty. Rousseau analyzes the establishment of sovereignty in the same moment of this virtualization while keeping in view the thesis that life is always already a structure of virtuality—and even, indeed, originally involves the projection of power in space, just as it involves the synthesis of time.

And here we can see the real stakes of “housing” for Rousseau, and why Wordsworth’s use of this figure to “unhouze” life threatens the teleological organization of Rousseau’s project of reduction while also taking its lead from a catastrophic possibility in Rousseau. Wordsworth may well have read this footnote—and I will argue that there are traces of “volatization” in the depiction of the plain’s materiality. For Rousseau, the dwelling (housing) has a transcendental function relative to the conditions of possibility of historical progress, and thus the activation of perfectibility, of man’s “virtual capacity.” (It therefore bears as well on the progress of his own virtual reduction.) What is so difficult about the actualization of the virtual capacity is precisely that one of the most important things actualized is itself virtual, a virtual actuality. For Rousseau is concerned not only with the genetic paradoxes bundled up in the question of the origin of language in general, but also of *abstract* language capable of expressing “ideas which, having no sensible object, could not be pointed to by gesture or by voice” (146). The formal logic of the paradox is well known: with a certain embarrassment, Rousseau confesses that he cannot construe the logical-historical origin of

language without presupposing the very thing he wants to establish, and his 20th-century readers have shown how this can be generalized and attributed to the structure of language and ideality in general:

If men needed speech in order to learn how to think, they needed even more to know how to think in order to find the art of speech...Speech seems to have been very necessary in order to establish the use of speech. (*Discourses* 146, 147)

The *dwelling* is an emblem for the concrete, spatial infrastructure that fixes the relations and differences among human beings. The dwelling helps ground that social institution called the family which previous commentators have confusedly transposed out of history and into nature by fixing its various functions (the transmission of property through reproduction, the institution of sexual difference as an idea, as an abstraction) to a *place*, by linking them topographically. Without the existence of such a system of human relations, without a network of dwellings, without a reason or a place to assemble, why would the original humans ever begin to speak? –The dwelling is like a node in the system of human relations, conditioning the abstraction it nonetheless requires in turn. It is very close to what Derrida calls *spacing*, and in Part I of the second *Discourse* it is the condition (literally an architectural figure) of the gathering or assembling of human beings into bodies. A corresponding figure is the road:

Indeed, it is easy to see that, among the differences that distinguish men, several are taken to be natural although they are exclusively the result of habit and of the different kinds of life men adopt in society...The same is true of strengths of Mind, and education not only introduces differences between Minds that are cultivated and those that are not, but it also increases the differences that obtain between cultivated Minds in proportion to their culture; for when a Giant and a Dwarf travel the same road, every step will give the giant an added advantage. (*Discourses*, 158)

The road is a common measure. For without the road, there is no frame to measure relative progress or indeed relative speed. Neither the difference in stride length nor the difference in speed can be conceptualized, let alone conceptualized as measurable, if the giant and dwarf traverse a purely limitless space. Without a third element—a finishing line, a horizon—the rate at which the gap between them changes cannot be measured. This is of course to take the road literally, to stop short of its figuration of historical progress. But then this is just Wordsworth’s speed, or anyway that of the traveler when we finally meet him in stanza five.

I would like to make two closing points here. First, when we are introduced to the landscape of Salisbury Plain, it resembles point for point the deforested landscape described by Buffon and Rousseau:

The troubled west was red with stormy fire,
O’er Sarum’s plain the traveler with a sigh
Measured each painful step, the distant spire
That fixed at every turn his backward eye
Was lost, tho’ still he turned, in the blank sky.
By thirst and hunger pressed he gazed around
And scarce could any trace of man descry,
Save wastes of corn that stretched without a bound,
But where the sower dwelt was nowhere to be found.

(SP 37-45)

Buffon argues that the final result of human habitation is inhabitability. Because “men consume enormous quantities of wood and plants for fire and other uses, it follows that in an inhabited country the layer of topsoil must inevitably decrease and eventually become like the ground of Arabia Petraea, and so many other Provinces of the Orient which, indeed, is the oldest inhabited

Clime, and where [now] only Salt and Sand are found; for the fixed Salt of Plants and of Animals remains, while all their other parts of volatized” (*Discours*, 128). The significance for Buffon of the Roman Province named after the capital city Petra is the image of an ancient desert of ruins, associated by way of the bible with the earliest human habitation—the geographical and geological exemplar of what remains at the end of human habitation: rocks. Literally “Arabia the rocky,” Arabia Petraea evokes in the context of Buffon’s argument a usage of the adjectival form of *petra* in post-classical Latin (*petraeus*) and Ancient Greek (*petraios*) retained by Middle French: not “stony” but “growing on or among rocks...living on or among rocks”⁴⁹—a description of the very condition of life in “countries” whose exposure to human habitation has transformed them into deserts where everything has been “volatized” but sand and salt, the chemical remnant of organisms unable to survive without shelter from the evaporating heat of the sun. A landscape where *nothing* is left but sand and salt is a landscape where life is not only absent but strictly impossible, extinct without the possibility of return. Conceived in these terms, a stony or petrean life (in the sense of the adjectives *petraeus* and *petraios*) is life deprived of its minimal conditions of possibility. For Buffon and Rousseau, that condition of possibility is the shelter afforded by forests, without which there can be neither water nor topsoil, the substrate that, covering the earth, allows the ground to be the ground of life. Salisbury Plain is exactly the kind of desert that results from the elimination of “shelter” or “housing,” the structural condition of life. In *Salisbury Plain*, Wordsworth undertakes a radical exploration of “naked, unhoused” life, and the “house” which he subtracts is the teleological organization of the world. The central question of the poem is what remains of life *after* it has been

⁴⁹ Etymological entry for “petrean” in the Oxford English Dictionary: “< post-classical Latin *petraeus* living among rocks (5th cent.), of or relating to St Peter (5th cent. in Augustine), rocky, stony (6th cent.; < classical Latin *petra* rock, stone (see *petro-* *comb. form*) + *-eus*: see *-eous suffix*) + *-an suffix*. Compare classical Latin *petraeus* growing on or among rocks (< ancient Greek *πετραῖος* growing on or among rocks, living on or among rocks, rocky, stony < *πέτρα* rock + *-ιος*, suffix forming adjectives). With sense 2 compare French *pétré* rocky, stony (1788 in this sense; earlier in sense ‘(of a plant) growing on stones’ (1550 in Middle French)), Spanish *pétréo* (1537 or earlier in this sense).” See also the entry for *petraios* in Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, definition A., “living on or among the rocks.”

radically separated from its condition of possibility—the world. This reduction of the world, whose emblem is the horrifying flatness of the plain, suggests the radical vocation of Wordsworth’s “leveling muse,” which demands not an organicism or a vitalism, but a poetry that suspends life in the situation of its own impossibility.

Like the deserts of Buffon’s Orient and Arabia Petraea, Salisbury Plain is a place which human habitation has made uninhabitable. The cultivation of the landscape has taken it beyond the point of possible human habitation, as though human settlements have been displaced by cultivation. A kind of Druidic corollary Petra, Salisbury Plain is a “desert” and a “waste” whose only traces of human dwellings are the stone ruins that jut here and there from an otherwise homogenous field of “corn” stretching in every direction without bound. The “night on Salisbury Plain” which the two vagrants share is a story that suggests that the hard life, the unhouzed life, is literally *stony* life: life among and of the stones. The landscape of the plain is defined by the impossibility of shelter. But Wordsworth derives the structure of this impossibility from within the conceptual organization available in Rousseau’s note:

By thirst and hunger pressed he gazed around

And scarce could any trace of man descry,

Save wastes of corn that stretched without a bound,

But where the sower dwelt was nowhere to be found.

The traveler is in the paradoxical position of being unable to discern in the landscape “any trace of man” (that is, any evidence of a human community which might offer him the hospitality of shelter) because the totality of that landscape is itself one enormous trace of man that has erased the possibility of any other. That is, the only visible trace of man is a juridico-agricultural system that requires as the condition for the enclosure and cultivation of land the exclusion from it of human

life in general. The plain is absolutely enclosed, the paradox of unlimited enclosure. It is thus a figure of absolute exclusion, a vast prison of open and indifferent space.

The connection to Buffon and Rousseau is in the ironic knot formed by the phrase, “wastes of corn,” which combines Buffon’s belief that human habitation ends with the transformation of the earth into desert (“waste”), with the wheat (“corn”) Rousseau mentions in his “third and most important remark” on the quotation from Buffon, that “the fruit of Trees provides animals with a more abundant supply of food than can other [forms of] vegetation, an experiment I myself performed by comparing the production of two plots of ground equal in size and quality, the one covered with chestnut trees, and the other sown with wheat.” Rousseau’s experiment corroborates Buffon’s thesis by showing that, compared with fruit producing forests, cultivated fields of wheat are a waste. If cultivated land supplies fewer nutrients to animals, then the appearance wheat fields represents a step closer to extinction, planetary desertion. A field of wheat is a point of mediation between forest and desert. By comparing the yield of trees and wheat in this way, Rousseau positions himself in symmetrical opposition to Locke, who argues that the enclosure and cultivation of land multiplies rather than diminishes its productive capacity:

...he who appropriates land to himself by his labour, does not lessen but increase the common stock of mankind. For the provisions serving to the support of humane life, produced by one acre or inclosed and cultivated land, are (to speak much within compass) ten times more, than those, which are yielded by an acre of Land, of an equall richness, lying waste in common. And therefore he, that incloses Land and has a great plenty of the conveniencys of life from ten acres, may be truly said, to give ninety acres to Mankind. For his labour now supplys him with provisions out of ten acres, which were but the product of an hundred lying in common. I have here rated the improved land very low in making its product but as ten to one, when it is much nearer to an hundred to one. For I aske whether

in the wild woods and uncultivated waste of America left to Nature, without any improvement, tillage or husbandry, a thousand acres will yield the needy and wretched inhabitants as many conveniencies of life as ten acres of equally fertile land does in Devonshire where they are well cultivated?⁵⁰

Subtracting land from the “common waste” through enclosure in fact increases the “common stock” because the process of enclosure introduces complex differentiation into what is otherwise an undifferentiated level expanse. For Locke, the common is mere potential. Wordsworth’s “waste of corn” evokes Rousseau’s reversal of the Lockean position by ironically applying “waste” to cultivated land: what makes the plain a “waste” is precisely the fact that its enclosure and cultivation have transformed it into a desert. If for Locke, “waste” designates not the impossibility of habitation or cultivation, but simply the state of land when uninhabited and uncultivated, then Wordsworth’s plain has been laid waste by the act of enclosure that separated it from the common waste.

The juxtaposition of this stanza with Rousseau’s note brings out yet another resonance in the phrase “waste of corn.” In this context, “corn” refers literally to fields of cereal plants, probably wheat. But a literary use of “corn” communicates with the desert of salt deposits the historical approach of which, according to Rousseau, every wheat field is an omen. As a translation of Latin *grānum*, corn may refer to “a small hard particle, a grain, as of sand or salt.” Thus in 1571 J. Jewell writes, “We must vnderstand this authoritie with a corne of salt [L.cum grano salis] otherwise it may bee vnsaurie.”⁵¹ Wordsworth’s “wastes of corn” presents the double image of cultivated land and empty, lifeless fields strewn not with seeds of grain but with tiny, worn down, recalcitrant bits: rocks

⁵⁰ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 294.

⁵¹ Oxford English Dictionary, definition I.a. “Common Germanic: Old English *corn* corresponds to Old Frisian *korn* (East Frisian *kōrn*, *kōren*), Old Saxon *corn* (Middle Dutch *coorn*, *coren*, Dutch *koren*), Old High German *chorn*, *choron* (Middle High German *korn*, *koren*, modern German *korn*), Old Norse (Swedish, Danish) *korn*, Gothic *kaurn* n. < Germanic **korno-* from earlier **kurnóm* grain, corn = Old Slavonic *zrŭnŏ* (Bohemian *zrno*, Russian *zerno*) grain < Aryan type **gr̥nóm*; in form, a passive pple. neuter from the vb. stem *ger-* (*gor-*, *gr-*), in Sanskrit *jṛ* to wear down, waste away, past participle *jṛṇá*, < *gr̥nóm*, whence also Latin *grānum*. A *corn* or *grain* is therefore, etymologically, a ‘worn-down’ particle.”

and stones and *salt*, a material remnant of otherwise eliminated life. From this perspective, too, a similar resonance can be heard in the sunset on line 37 which begins the stanza, “The troubled west was red with stormy fire.” The “stormy” fire that troubles the horizon evokes the movement west of the fires which according to Buffon first consumed the forests of the “Orient” and Arabia Petraea. At one level, the “wastes of corn” ironically reverses the sense of the Lockean waste in the service of a Rousseauist argument: unlike like the “common waste” which brims with life and potentiality that that remains uncultivated, Salisbury plain has been consumed, exhausted, and worn out, without life and strewn with its remains. But the grain also evokes Lucretius’s atoms, the seeds of things. At this second level, the plain combines more than one negative sense of waste, evoking both the vacant anonymity of empty space and the dense materiality of wasted soil which refuses cultivation. Salisbury Plain is a waste without (or, as we will see almost without) life, but that absence is figured at the same time by *matter* and *void*: the dense materiality and stony hardness exhibited by particles of “corn” and the sheer emptiness which may be described as the very absence of matter. Salisbury Plain is both resistant and empty. Wordsworth thus finds in Rousseau’s note on Buffon and the destruction of nature a language he puts to work in enacting the leveling of the teleology of the world.

My second closing point is a second language of the teleological destruction of the world. For even while the plain is figured as materially recalcitrant—*hard*—it is also a seascape. It whelms one with oceanic disorientation. The plain resembles the sea because it is *boundless*: there are no bounded and bounding structures, no elements that, gathered by vanishing points into systems of relatively fixed, determinate, and stable differences, constitute the structure of terrestrial space. There are no trees, no bushes, no brooks, no artificial structures like houses or even huts dispersed across the plain in a way that would allow the traveler to map his location by gauging their relative positions and differences in scale. If elements like these did exist on the plain, they would function

as limits, internal boundaries, edges and contours carving the space of the plain into a legible structure: indeed, they would carve the plain into a *structure legible as space*.⁵² This, as we will see, culminates in the final passage of the poem, where the poet bemoans a globalized enlightenment that, by enclosing the world in a rational grid, carries it apocalyptically toward death.

The process of revision that produces *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* in 1799 will transform the traveler into a sailor, but he is already construed as a mariner lost at sea, abandoned to a scene of specifically nautical disorientation. The “wastes of corn that stretched without a bound” evoke the conventional literary trope the renders the open sea a boundless waste of waters, a figure which the female vagrant applies more than once to the Atlantic Ocean—a “mighty gulf of separation,” a vast “ocean flood” of “illimitable waters,” the calm of whose surface sleeping in the sun she likens to Salisbury Plain at dawn:

Peaceful as this immeasurable plain
 By these extended beams of dawn impressed
 In the calm sunshine slept the glittering main.
 (SP 370, 384, 382, 352-54)

The conceptual pivot that allows the plain to be figured as a sea and the sea to be likened to the plain—what is common to both and what makes the structure of their mutual figuration reversible—is the illimitable and the immeasurable. Their likeness consists, paradoxically, in the lack of any limit and the resistance to every measure—in a similitude (indeed, an equality of

⁵² Johnston touches on the same idea when, writing as much in Gilpin’s margins as Wordsworth’s, he notes that the landscape is “not exactly a *plain*, but rather a vast expanse of swales, swelling ridges, and slopes, in which the walker is paradoxically more often out of sight of the horizon and his general whereabouts than he would be in climbing a mountain.” Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth*, 347. According to Gilpin, this is because there is *more than one horizon*, and this excess of horizons (of limits, bounds), this exorbitance of the limit, translates in *Salisbury Plain* as boundlessness. There are too many horizons to see the horizon. The plurality of horizons causes a general erasure of the limit. Paradoxically, the “swales, swelling ridges, and slopes”—which, as Johnston notes, are indeed registered in *Salisbury Plain*,—function as leveling agents. The landscape is *more* plain by virtue of not being a plain in the geological sense or a plane in the geometric sense. If anything is *leveled* on Salisbury Plain, it is the principle of orientation that makes possible the differentiation of the flat and the elevated.

incommensurables) that places in question the analogy which posits it. The plain is a “boundless heath,” a “hollow deep” that withholds the very possibility of orientation in general, like an ocean cut off from both the stable structure of land and the system of celestial bodies in the sky:

’Twas dark and waste as ocean’s shipless flood
Roaring with storms beneath night’s starless gloom.

(SP 109-110)

Later revisions insert new descriptions of the ocean into the first line, but the second line remains the same

’Twas dark and void as ocean’s barren deep
Roaring with storms beneath nights starless gloom.

(MS.1, 110)

’Twas dark and void as ocean’s watery realm
Roaring with storms beneath night’s starless gloom.

(ASP 174-75; GS 138-39)

Whether it is roaring with storms or not, a starless ocean is impossible to navigate. If there were not a system of difference in the sky, built into the celestial bodies and their mobile web of relations (or built, as Paul H. Fry has noted, into the magnetic field of the planet’s metal substrate⁵³), it would be impossible to sail into open waters out of sight of land.

At the moment a ship loses sight of land, every terrestrial reference point withdraws, the sea expands in level homogeneity in every direction, and the ship itself is severed from the perspectival logic of terrestrial space and good firm ground, where one spontaneously perceives distance, movement, and relative position by tracking the intervals of negative space that separate objects, and

⁵³ In a recent study of Wordsworth, Paul H. Fry describes “The North Star, the guiding star that keeps travelers on course,” as “a symbol of the human compulsion—in the absence of iron’s nonhuman magnetism—to organize the world by accepting the pull of an arbitrary attraction.” *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are*, 15.

where one perceives one's own movement by tracking the apparent shifts in position of the surrounding objects relative to a series of background layers that recede towards a vanishing point. Because the fluidity of the sea bars the formation on its surface of the complex, highly differentiated, vertical, and *durable* structures that make a landscape, a seascape in itself cannot in principle yield any visual data from which spatial orientation can be constructed: without the supplementary aid of a navigational measure that limits space by determining it as a *structure*, it is impossible to know where you are, where you were (relative to where you are), nor where you are going; to tell the difference between linear progress and circular repetition; nor even to know whether you are moving at all. Phenomenologically speaking, on the surface of an ocean it is impossible to *see* one's relation to a determinate external object, and in this sense an ocean is a "mighty gulf of separation" defined by the radical impossibility of orientation in space, at least insofar as it depends on the senses of a body—or, rather, insofar as it is governed by a certain "language of the sense," an idiom of orientation—fitted to land, where the fixity and endurance of complex structures over time paradoxically make possible the perception of relative motion among its elements, and therefore the control over one's own position in and movement through space. Celestial navigation is a supplementary technique that comes into play when the earth's surface is lacking, too limited by the horizon for the appearance of a stable structure (a determinate object, a thing) against which distance may be measured. A mariner thus looks to a determinate object in the sky—for example, "the planet of the pole," which plays a prominent role in the reflection on war and reason that ends *Salisbury Plain*—and measures its distance from the horizon in order to calculate his own position on the globe. Navigation is a global positioning system that allows for the *calculation* of position and direction where it cannot be *perceived*: by projecting the paths of the stellar objects onto the surface of the earth, it uses them like rearview mirrors or periscopes to peer around the corner, so to speak, of the visible horizon.

Crossing an ocean requires that one assume a planetary perspective, to virtualize the space of movement by replacing the surface of a plane (or at any rate the rectilinear space that seems to structure the perception of a landlocked animal) with that of a sphere—to take a virtualizing leap that lands at the place from which it is possible to cognize the world as a rational object, a globe wrapped round and netted by a grid, mastered by human reason. This totalizing impulse stands behind Wordsworth's selection, in the passage at the end of *Salisbury Plain* where the North Star appears by name, of celestial navigation as a general figure for enlightenment. For the upshot of the mastery afforded by the rationalization of the celestial bodies is the teleological organization of the world, not merely as geometric space but as a field of action. It is now possible quite literally to communicate with places and things that cannot be seen, to project force and power to ends so distant in space and time that they are hidden by the convexity of the earth and located on the far side of mighty gulfs of separation defined by the radical impossibility of ("natural," terrestrially structured) orientation.⁵⁴ Wordsworth renders this enormous multiplication of power with a slight figural displacement of a scene that is literally—and indeed politically—teleological:

Oh that a slave who on his naked knees
Weeps tears of fear at Superstition's nod
Should rise a monster Tyrant and o'er seas

⁵⁴ My description of ends "hidden by the convexity of the earth" is loosely borrowed from a passage in *Observations* where Gilpin provides a vivid—and, I think, analytically precise—illustration of hyperbolically powerful navigation: "But though Salifbury Plain is a remarkable scene in England, it is nothing in comparifon of many fenes of this kind of the face of the globe, in which the eye is carried, if I may so phrafe it, *out of fight*; where an extent of land, flat, like the ocean, melts gradually into the horizon. Such are many parts of Poland and Tartary. The plains of Yedefan, on the borders of Beffarbia, are among the moft extraordinary. Baron de Tott defcribes them on his journey to the Cham of Tartary, as fo immente, that he tells us, (fomewhat I think hyperbolically,) the piercing eyes of the Tartars, who rode before him, could diftinguifh the heads of the horfemen in the horizon, when the *convexity of the earth hid the reft of their bodies*. His defcription is more natural afterwards, when he fays, he faw the fun rife and fet of the plains, as navigators do at fea." *Observations*, 90-91. Their eyes are so "piercing" that they come *just short* of penetrating the horizon. Gilpin distinguishes between two forms of what might be called "plain vision," a mode of seeing in which the eye is carried by the horizontality of the plain "out of sight." In its hyperbolic form, the gaze is on the verge, as it were, of passing right through the horizon as though the latter were no limit at all, a pure transparency. When the eye passes out of sight in a more natural way, on the other hand, the step beyond leads not into clairvoyance but blankness. It *hits* the limit, like the eyes of navigators at sea, which see as far as the horizon, the edge of the world where the sun rises and sets.

And mountains stretch so far his cruel rod
 To bruise meek nature in her lone abode.
 Is it for this the planet of the pole
 Sends through the storms its stedfast light abroad?
 Through storms we ride with misery toward her goal:
 Nor star nor needle know the tempests of the soul.

(SP 460-468)

The planet of the pole sends abroad such steadfast beams of light that they pass unrefracted through storms of presumably dark, opaque, sky-concealing clouds.⁵⁵ But because storms are also windy, the compliant transparency of their clouds to the light of the pole star functions metonymically to suggest the equally hyperbolic scene of whole armadas that somehow sail (presumably by the cloud-penetrating light of the pole star) through storm-winds just as easily and with as little interference as light streaming through a transparent medium—without encountering any resistance, without the risk of being blown off course or even capsized by the very process of atmospheric displacement which sails are designed to harness and which should, unless there is a sudden counter-wind, unless winds thwart winds, carry them to their destination. The light of the pole star—indeed, the light of the enlightenment—performs a radical reduction of contingency. And the catastrophic consequence of this reduction is political.

By making navigation of the globe possible, the North Star multiplies the reach of sovereign power. What began as an unenlightened “slave” of superstition now “rise[s]” as a monster Tyrant” which expresses its enlightenment by transmitting violence and domination across ever greater

⁵⁵ In this regard, the light emanating from the planet of the pole resembles the magnetic attraction radiating from the magnetic north pole—and, indeed, what is at stake here is precisely invisible navigation, a system of orientation that works in the dark, freed from the constraints of the visible horizon and the horizon of visibility, however narrow they might be.

distances at ever greater speeds. Its instrument of violence, the “cruel rod,” figures the fleets of warships which have increased their range of movement thanks to the pole star, and its very shape evokes the linear geometry of light, the infinitely extendable line with which light can send itself abroad: the rod, with its ever “stretching” reach, bears the shape of light, a laser beam capable of targeting “meek nature in her lone abode.” But the increase in mastery over the sphericity of the earth and the consequent magnification in the territorial capacity of political sovereignty—the potential of a sovereign authority to claim and effectively govern portions of the earth’s surface—results in a radical reversal in polarity. The poles flip. The more reliably the planet of the pole shines in unrefracted rays through the atmosphere’s dense medium, the greater the teleological precision with which ships dispatched by warmongering sovereigns reach their destinations undisturbed, unthwarted by the interruptive contingency of storms—the more quickly “we ride with misery toward her goal.” According to Wordsworth, in the long (or not so long) run that goal is total global war. Given the universality of enlightenment (given the very steadfastness of the pole star’s illumination), the principles of celestial navigation are universally available. At least in principle, the science of navigation can be acquired by any real or potential sovereign—by *every* sovereign. The catastrophe arises from the structural complicity between navigation’s rational universality and sovereignty’s juridico-territorial universality: as soon as navigation posits the globe a single space, a single field of action, the world becomes the possible territory of every sovereign in the world, each one of which stakes a claim—or, at least in principle, could always stake a claim—to universal jurisdiction over it. The result is a war of all against all. Navigation is boundlessly, hyperbolically powerful. It therefore threatens to dissolve not only the bounds (the borders, the frontiers) that separate the territorial bodies of sovereign powers, but also, indeed, the very bounds of the world. Wordsworth thus begins by framing celestial navigation as a teleological organization of the globe that magnifies one’s teleological capacity—the capacity to project oneself (or one’s power, one’s forces, one’s ability to

act upon the world) outward toward a telos in space and time; then, in the final two lines, he installs a death drive within the historical process of teleological amplification, as if progress without resistance toward the “goal” may in fact be the catastrophic progress toward “misery,” absolute disorientation: a condition in which it is impossible to strike—or perhaps even to conceive—of a goal, a storm where orientation of any kind (spatial, temporal, conceptual, ethico-political) is impossible, where neither “star nor needle know the tempest of the soul.” The historical approach toward the total teleological organization of the world contains the risk of destroying it. The teleological organization of the world has a telos: to become more teleologically organized. But this telos is haunted by the threat of radical disorganization and disorientation. Unhoused life can be expressed as a sort of navigational death drive: the pole star shines its steadfast light in order, finally not to shine at all. The result of this process (misery, the tempest of the soul) *is* radical disorientation, one so profound and deep that no principle of orientation is adequate to it. This chapter has stayed in the margins, devoting itself to the nested frames and prefaces of *Salisbury Plain*. In the next chapter we will turn to the central narrative itself to see the teleological collapse at work—life unhoused at once in disorientation and material exposure to the grain of the world.

TWO

DOUBLE EXPOSURE: REDUCING LIFE AND PRODUCING DEATH FROM *SALISBURY PLAIN* TO *ADVENTURES ON SALISBURY PLAIN*

1. "THE HORROR OF THE HORIZONTAL"

The traveler walks north out of Salisbury into the plain as the sun sets on a horizon "red with stormy fire." I noted in the last chapter that we know almost nothing about the traveler at all. We know neither his name, nor his purpose in venturing out into such a desolate landscape on a stormy night, nor what has reduced him to the physical condition in which we find him, though we might imagine that it is the same historical transformation that produces so many of Wordsworth's homeless wanderers, including the sailor that he will become when Wordsworth rewrites *Salisbury Plain* as *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*. What we do know, however, is *that* he has been reduced to the "minimal exigencies of life," to borrow Freud's phrase.¹ He walks alone, exhausted, and "pressed" by "thirst and hunger" to find shelter before the storm breaks. And we know that he is lost, thrown into disorientation by an event which occurred before the beginning of the poem: the disappearance of the spire atop Salisbury Cathedral, the only landmark in an otherwise blank and undifferentiated landscape, a plain unnavigable thanks to its very plainness:

The troubled west was red with stormy fire,
 O'er Sarum's plain the traveler with a sigh
 Measured each painful step, the distant spire
 That fixed at every turn his backward eye
 Was lost, tho' still he turned, in the blank sky.
 By thirst and hunger pressed he gazed around
 And scarce could any trace of man descry,

¹ Freud, *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, 88.

Save wastes of corn that stretched without a bound,

But where the sower dwelt was nowhere to be found.²

In his influential reading of *Salisbury Plain*, Geoffrey H. Hartman calls this process of blanking out “the horror of the horizontal:”

Such stanzas express less a physical than a spiritual ordeal. The traveler, like one of Hardy’s later figures, is an “exposed” person: he moves solitary and shelterless, and neither the sights of nature nor the thoughts of man bring him any relief. The changeable scenery, the up-and-down vacillation of *Descriptive Sketches* is replaced by a horror of the horizontal which increases the sense of exposure.³

Though Hartman claims that what is truly at stake in the traveler’s “ordeal of the waste” is spiritual rather than physical, and though this reading advances his larger argument that *Salisbury Plain* is a step toward the apocalyptic separation of Wordsworth’s imagination from nature, he must nevertheless begin by reading the landscape literally, with the fact that it is a “plain,” a leveled space where there are no vertical elements, no bounded and bounding structures like spires, trees, and human habitations.

But by keeping our attention on the literality of the landscape, we can see that there are really two horrors here, two horrifying absences of verticality. The first disorients the traveler, the second exposes him. If there were vertical structures on the plain, then it would be divided visually by a system of partitions, boundary lines, and limits that would organize it as a space and indeed compose it as a landscape. It would not be “blank” at all but written over, populated by a grid-work

² William Wordsworth, *Salisbury Plain*, in *The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth*, stanza 5, lines 37-45. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text, with the abbreviations SP, ASP, and GS indicating *Salisbury Plain*, *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, and *Guilt and Sorrow*, respectively, followed by stanza and line number. All references are to Gill’s reading texts unless otherwise noted. Elements of the volume’s scholarly apparatus will be cited in text as *Salisbury Plain Poems*, followed by page number.

³ Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry: 1787-1814*, 118-119.

rendering it at least minimally navigable. And since some of these vertical structures would also offer at least some protection from the wind and rain, the traveler, enabled by their visibility to orient himself in space, could approach them. But as it is, there is nothing on the plain vertical enough either to catch the traveler's eye or to resist the wind. There is nothing that stands distinctly enough against the empty background to be seen, held in view, and approached. Nor is there anything planted firmly enough in the ground to "shield" him from the "rage" of the elements (SP 7.60, 67). The logic of the scene is thus both specular and kinetic. Just as the storm's powerful and indeed life-threatening forces will soon move across the landscape without encountering the resistance of so much as a wall, a "hovel," or "lowly thorn" (SP 7.59-60), the traveler's line of sight cuts across the blankness without encountering the visual resistance of any vertical mark at all.

Wordsworth determines the vertical mark as both *navigational principle* and *wall*, both vanishing point and protective shield.⁴ Their double absence places the traveler's very survival on the line. Without the aid of a solid vertical he will probably die of exposure, and even if such a shelter exists on the plain in the first place, his chances of finding one decline with the sun. Hartman tacitly acknowledges, of course, just how concrete, physically acute, and mortally urgent a depiction

⁴ The traveler's situation recalls that of the tiny "vesicle" described by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (31-32). Freud proposes the "vesicle" as a figure of minimal life, of life reduced to the essential structure held in common by all living beings: "a living organism in its most simplified possible form...an undifferentiated vesicle of a substance that is susceptible to stimulation." The horizontality of the plain throws up no resistance against the enormous forces that at once traverse it and strike it from above, so that the traveler lies exposed to a chaos of winds thwarting winds. Freud's tiny vesicle is likewise submerged in a world whose forces tend to level, and thus destroy, all vertical structures: "This little fragment of living substance is suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies; and it would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these if it were not provided with a protective shield against stimuli. It acquires the shield this way: its outermost surface ceases to have the structure proper to living matter, becomes to some degree inorganic and thenceforward functions as a special envelope or membrane resistant to stimuli. In consequence, the energies of the external world are able to pass into the next underlying layers, which have remained living, with only a fragment of their original intensity; and these layers can devote themselves, behind the protective shield, to the reception of the amounts of stimulus which have been allowed through it. By its death, the outer layer has saved all the deeper ones from a similar fate—unless, that is to say, stimuli reach it which are so strong that they break through the protective shield. *Protection against* stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than *reception of* stimuli. The protective shield is supplied with its own store of energy and must above all endeavour to preserve the special modes of transformation of energy operating in it against the effects threatened by the enormous energies at work in the external world—effects which tend towards a leveling out of them and hence toward destruction."

of exposure this is. But he reads the traveler's "Tess-like" exposure to the elements as an intimation of the underlying "spiritual ordeal," so that the literal exposure *to* nature is also a figure for the apocalyptic exposure *from* nature: "he is literally an outsider, as if nature had ejected him."⁵ Nature, then, is therefore at once the literal world, the space that contains the enormous forces against which the traveler must secure protection, and also the bounded shelter of which the traveler is soon deprived. What matters for Hartman, in other words, is less the "physical ordeal" of the traveler's natural death, made imminent by his ejection from the human community into nature, than the loss or indeed the death of nature itself, which the former serves to figure. Hartman shifts the stress from the physical to the spiritual by privileging the specular dimension over the kinetic, noting that the absence of fixed points precipitates a radical expansion of the plain as the traveler's gaze, unimpeded by any discernable structure, shoots out into infinity. The horizon itself seems to vanish, and the resulting disorientation—the resulting *specular* disturbance—allows Hartman's reading to pass from one exposure to the other, from the exposure *to* nature to the exposure *from* nature—which is also, indeed, the mortal exposure *of* nature itself to its own destruction.

I propose to name the logic of the ordeal that unfolds from the absence of any verticality the logic of double exposure. For Hartman, it is not the traveler's mundane, natural death but the death of nature itself which serves to signify the splitting of imagination from nature. In *Salisbury Plain*, Wordsworth "comes a step closer to the separation of his imagination from nature or to interpreting that apocalyptically as involving a death of nature."⁶ Death functions as the name for the negative through which consciousness (or imagination) must pass in order to breach nature. The traveler's exposure to death (through exposure to the elements), like the other examples of physical death in the poem (human sacrifice, war, dismemberment, trampling, starvation, etc.), functions

⁵ Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry*, 119.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

simultaneously as a figure for the death of nature, the destruction of the realm of matter and possible experience. But this is only the hyperbolic form of the negative as the moment of separation and self-relation that interests Hartman. And yet the death of nature cannot be anything like natural death, first of all because what dies with it is the possibility of natural death itself. This chapter proposes to respect both the figural overdetermination and the difference.

That the traveler's physical exposure to nature (his exposure to the elements) is a metonymy for his exposure to death as such, that is, to death as the constitutive possibility of his life, is visible in the sheer passivity that distinguishes it from the other, more actively violent, artificially imposed modes of death in the poem. The traveler and the female vagrant are exposed to the forces of nature in just the same way that they are exposed to death in general. As long as the instinct for self-preservation holds sway over them, it is a question of delaying death, of holding it in abeyance by finding a suitable shelter or some other temporizing strategy. In precisely the same way that particular forms of death serve, on Hartman's reading, to figure the apocalyptic death of nature, exposure to the elements figures both the general possibility of natural death and the possibility of the death of nature. My claim about Hartman and the logic of double exposure, then, is that his reading prompts a slippage from the first exposure (exposure to nature and the elements; exposure to the possibility of natural death) to the second exposure (the mortal exposure of nature, not the mortal exposure to the forces of nature). When we are introduced to the traveler in stanza 5, both exposures are already in play. Indeed, the whole poem is characterized by a double exposure: first of all, the traveler is exposed to the elements and is at risk of dying. As David Collings notes, he seems to live too long.⁷ Indeed, at the same time, the world itself (for Hartman, "nature") undergoes a radical collapse. Salisbury Plain evacuates itself of every living creature, and even becomes a site of extinction. The material conditions for survival vanish. Indeed, not only the material but also the

⁷ David A. Collings, *Wordsworthian Errancies*, 26.

logical conditions of life collapse, for the very dimensions of time and space seem to disappear as well. The horizon disappears, and with the world's outer, determining edge, all its internal, complex and differentiated structures go as well. The traveler survives the collapse of the world, still exposed. But how must this survival be read?

The analysis that follows first section builds on Chapter One to present a reading of the teleological collapse of the world, showing how Wordsworth systematically removes the conditions of the possibility of life. The two privileged figures of the teleological organization of the world will be shelter and navigation. What distinguishes *Salisbury Plain* from later revisions is the rhetorical frame structure, usually considered of critical interest as evidence that the poem is a “poem of protest.” In the previous chapter, readings of these two sections established what shelter, orientation, and teleology signify in *Salisbury Plain*, especially in relation to the categories of life, possibility, politics. The first four stanzas offer a sort of philosophic consideration of shelter-less or “unhouzed” life in the state of nature (SP 1.1-4.36). The end of the poem contains a reflection on war and reason that asks the characteristically Wordsworthian question: is it for this—war, colonialism, the global transmission of brutality—that the planet of the pole sends her steadfast light abroad? Whereas the preface of the poem focuses on the original relation between politics and “unhouzed” life, the end of the poem describes the operation of a global death drive where the multiplication of the capacity for orientation in space multiplies the teleological organization of the world—a multiplication which accelerates, in turn, our movement with misery toward her “goal”—which is not death but the radical impossibility of orientation.

Wordsworth's poetic project involves a “poetry of life,” but that poetry of life poses the question of life by suspending it within the condition of its impossibility. What haunts him is the possibility that life survives beyond its term. The conceptual and literary burden falls on the difference between, on the one hand, life's exposure to surviving within its own impossibility, and

death on the other. My argument here is that Wordsworth introduces a new “constitutive finitude” into the philosophical understanding of life. If death is classically the essential possibility of every living thing, then Wordsworth discovers a second finitude which is not identical to death, though logic might insist it should be: impossible life. This will be my attempt to contribute to the ghosts and specters that haunt Salisbury Plain, and, more generally, to the broader romantic question of “life in death” and “death in life.” The second finitude, I will argue, is both what holds the world back from totalized teleological organization and also what keeps it from collapsing into apocalypse without remainder. At the limit, it renders death itself indeterminate and thus calls into question the difference between itself and death. For Wordsworth, the experience of the second finitude is above all political. The final section of the chapter treats the problem of sacrifice and the revision that, in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, transforms sacrifice into the death penalty. These quasi-originary political technologies are construed to constitute the community by sheltering it from the second finitude, that is, by projecting a principle of orientation that, from one perspective, reduces the indeterminability of death and impossible life—either by strictly guarding the difference or strictly erasing it. This operation requires, for Wordsworth, recourse to sacrificial violence, sovereignty, and penal law. The problem of impossible life is the source of Wordsworth’s compulsion to return and repeat his poetic engagement with Salisbury Plain, just as it is the irreducible exigency to which the political is the quasi-originary answer.

This chapter begins with the traveler and his post-teleological condition. The loss of the spire is first of all registered at the level of his bodily existence. He resembles a kind of automatic walking machine: as he measures each step with a sigh and repeatedly turning his head, it is as though the pneumatic operation of the lungs, the locomotive operation of the legs, and the operation of a head that swivels on its axis to aim its gaze, have all been integrated into the same assemblage of gears, so that the traveler steps, breaths, and turns his head in time. What justifies the

comparison of the traveler to a machine—and to the eighteenth-century figure of the automaton in particular—is the fact that the rotation of the head persists beyond its function with the automatic compulsion of a machine unable to self-sufficiently modify itself in response to changes in the world. But superimposed upon this minimal description of the traveler as a machine is the classical lexicon of life: locomotion (his “steps”), sensibility (the “pain” accompanying each step), and breath (the “sighs” that measure each painful step). Where breath stands as a figure of the soul, a theological criterion separating the living from the dead, locomotion and sensibility represent the two capacities essential to animal life in general. The first is the active power expressed in the spontaneity with which animals cause their own motion in apparent defiance of Newtonian causality, and the second is what might be called the passive power by which animals are susceptible to being affected by external stimuli. At bottom, locomotion and sensibility entail a relation between the living being and the world: the active relation by which one spontaneously moves within the world, and the passive relation by which one comes to experience that world. By combining the mechanical figuration of the traveler with a language of life, Wordsworth trades on the enlightenment view of the organism as a machine. But the mechanization of the traveler, especially insofar as it serves as an index of a pathological condition of life (the sense of pain, the head that turns without purpose), seems tied above all to the traveler’s disorientation, which is increasingly figured as the loss of a habitable world—and, indeed, the loss of any world at all.

It is thirst, hunger, and the basic exigencies of life that drive the surveying rotation of the head as he gazes around to scan the horizon for evidence of a human community that might offer shelter. But he can discern nothing: no cottage, no upwreathing trail of smoke from behind a ridge that suggests the existence of human habitation, no outline of a town or city on the horizon, in short, “no trace of man” save fields of wheat that offer absolutely no protection whatsoever, “stretched and stretching without bound” in a horizontality that defies the verticality required by the

very form of physical shelter. Wordsworth's use of "bound" must be read with hyperbolic literalism as the erasure of the horizon itself. In stanza 5, this is registered in the disorientation that ensues with the loss of the spire, and that its disappearance puts at stake a teleological relation to the world is indicated by the fact that the purposelessness of his movement through space (captured by the redundant "still turn") is counterbalanced by pressure applied, as if from behind, by life's minimal need to survive. It as though the specular function of the spire, which orients the traveler by fixing his gaze to a point behind him, has been replaced by another, more physical, retrospective relation which drives him to recover the specular relation he has lost by spotting, precisely, a *goal* in the distance toward which he might "bend" his steps.

On the one hand, then, the "still turn" of the head that looks back toward the vanished spire continues into the next line in a manner that evokes the spinning vertigo of disorientation; on the other hand, even as the turn continues into the next line, it is joined to a gaze that seeks to recover, under the pressure of life, a teleological relation to the world: the traveler "gazes around" for "traces of man" because they offer the best chance of survival. In other words, the turn undergoes a turn with respect to the object sought by the gaze as it extends from one stanza to the next. The disappearance of humanity in stanza 5 develops, in stanza 6, into the disappearance of natural elements of the landscape which might also supply shelter:

No shade was there, no meads of pleasant green,
 No brook to wet his lips or soothe his ear,
 Huge piles of corn-stack here and there were seen
 But thence no smoke upwreathed his sight to cheer;
 And see the homeward shepherd dim appear,
 Far off—He stops his voice to strain;
 No sound replies but winds that whistling near

Sweep the thin grass and passing, wildly pain;
 Or desert lark that pours on high a wasted strain.

(SP 6.46-54)

The negative series running from lines 46 to 47 describes the absence of that variation in nature which Wordsworth would later specify as his particular poetic vocation to record. What is missing is not natural variation as such but what Coleridge calls “multeity in unity,” the organized (and thus teleologically determined) unity of different elements that makes a beautiful, indeed picturesque, landscape. What is so striking in this early instance is the proximity of the nutritive figure to a literal sense; it is almost as if the explicitly named pressure of thirst and hunger, and the all but explicitly named necessity of securing shelter from the storm have been displaced into aesthetic terms, but only just barely. The lack of “shade” designates by way of metonymy the absence of trees which, in addition to shielding one from the sun, stand—or rather would stand, if there were any—as natural substitutes for dwellings and other forms of artificially constructed human shelter, and thus would offer at least some protection from the storm whose wind is ominously foretold by the gusts which pass “wildly plain” over the surface of the plain without meeting the resistance of any vertical structures, natural or artificial. Similarly, the absent mead and brook aesthetically designate biological necessity: by naming the lips which cannot be wetted, Wordsworth comes just short of describing the real possibility that the traveler might die of dehydration and exposure. At stake in the teleological reduction of the world to an all but featureless plain, to a condition of radical disorientation bordering on a worldlessness the sheer irreality of which demands to be read allegorically (in the fantastical tradition of Spenser’s Salisbury Plain), is the question—both concrete and phantasmatic—of life.

That the traveler has been cut off from a teleological relation to the world is perhaps most vividly illustrated by the dim appearance of the shepherd on line 50. The shepherd possesses

precisely that relation to the landscape which is impossible to the traveler; his movement through it is teleologically determined, and his telos is nothing other than a “home” which remains obstinately invisible to the traveler. I would attribute the nightmarish quality of *Salisbury Plain* less to Wordsworth’s use of generic Gothic elements than to the way in which the traveler is made to see the relation of which he is deprived. If it is possible for a shepherd to appear, however dimly and however far off, then the plain is a shared space; if it is possible for the traveler to *see* the shepherd moving towards a home, then the plain must also be a *navigable* space. First, the shepherd can either see his destination or knows how to orient himself within the landscape such that he can approach it without seeing it; second, because the shepherd is visible to the traveler, the traveler should (at least in principle) be able to communicate with the latter such that he can re-integrate himself within a human community and the world. Instead of walking toward the shepherd, the traveler calls out to him—but the wind thwarts the projection of his voice toward a fellow human being, acting as a sort of counter-teleological gust whose “reply” makes the shepherd an ironic emblem of the traveler’s isolation from humanity. If the homeward shepherd is the figure of a being maintained within a teleological relation to the world, then to “see the homeward shepherd dim appear” is to see the appearance of a disappearance. The shepherd appears as a disappearance: the sight of a human figure pacing out of the plain marks the disappearance of that very possibility for the traveler.

The apparition of a disappearing teleological relation to the world repeats in the next stanza, where the traveler resigns all hope of finding shelter even as he witnesses a flock of crows borne home by what is presumably the very counter-teleological wind that, moments before, mocked his effort to open lines of communication with a fellow human being:

Long had each slope he mounted seemed to hide
 Some cottage whither his tired feet might turn,
 But now, all hope resigned, in tears he eyed

The crows in blackening eddies homeward borne,
 Then sought, in vain, a shepherd's lowly thorn
 Or hovel from the storm to shield his head.
 On as he passed more wild and forlorn
 And vacant the huge plain around him spread;
 Ah me! The wet cold ground must be his only bed.

(SP 7.55-63)

Having caught a glimpse of the “homeward shepherd,” the traveler assumes, at least at first, that his cottage must be nearby, perhaps behind the next ridge. The first two lines of the stanza evince a strategy that holds out the hope that the traveler may still find his way to shelter and indeed retains a teleological character. In order to find the shepherd's (or any) cottage, he posits, again and again, the crest of nearby ridges as the provisional goal toward which he bends his tired feet because the height he thus gains yields a better view. The illusory way that each slope *seems* to hide a cottage recasts, in a language that links appearance with illusion, the character's rational calculation as a sort of desert mirage, a delusion of which the nightmare logic of the plain demands he be disabused, and indeed he progressively lowers his hopes from spotting a cottage to finding a hovel or even a thorn *within* the plain. The lesson he is forced to accept is that in fact he has no hope—neither shelter nor orientation in space are possible for him: he must resign all hope. What is peculiar here is that this law of hopelessness applies to the traveler alone. His exceptionality is illustrated to him by the sight of the crows, which appear only to disappear. Like the “homeward shepherd,” the “homeward borne” crows move purposively through space, even if they are, grammatically speaking, passively carried by the wind which holds them aloft and affords them a view, unattainable by the wingless traveler, of a home that is presumably beyond the outer bounds of the plain. By virtue of the fact that they are “homeward,” that is, oriented in space toward their sheltering telos, they are able to

close the gap between themselves and it. The traveler, by contrast, is carried further and further away from the perimeter of the plain with each advancing step, since the plain stretches and empties out, growing ever plainer in proportion to his pacing. The plain's hyperbolic expansion and evacuation finds its counterpoint in the "blackening eddies" formed by the crows above it. The whirlpools are darkening because they are intensifying, becoming more and more concentrated as their constituent crows draw closer and closer together, flying round each other in ever tightening circles like a living yet irreducibly plural spot of time. Because they traverse the plain in a linear movement toward home, the darkening crow eddies possess a teleologically determined relation to space which the vanishing spire has deprived the traveler; the image of dark particles gathering in circles toward a point in the sky recalls the orienting function of the spire, and indeed it seems that it is their altitude—the fact that they move in the sky, on a plane other than the plain, as it were—that permits them to see the horizon which, for the traveler, has been erased. The second vector of their motion, meanwhile, the spiraling turns with which the crows wheel round each other, models the teleological structure of self-relation constitutive of life, the recursive turn by means of which a living being constitutively turns back on itself.

When the figure is read literally as a flock of crows flying away from the storm toward a shelter invisible to the traveler, their rotational movement recalls the disoriented turns of the traveler's own head, which Wordsworth renders with an attention to the physiological mechanism of bodily life. In stanza 5, the traveler's disorientation is registered at the level of his bodily existence in pathological terms; that is, his alienation from a teleological relation to the world (or, to put it differently, his expulsion from a teleologically determined world) is figured by means of an analogy with illness and in terms of an enlightenment determination of the organism as a machine: to be cut off from a teleologically organized world is bad for life, reducing it to the level of its mechanical substrate. The "crows in blackening eddies homeward borne" present in the shape of an eddy a

homeward bound sort of turn which contrasts with the narrator's homeless turning: the turns of his course through space are neither "bound" for any home nor for that matter any telos whatsoever, just as his head is made to spin with vertigo when, turning on its neck, it can see no "bound" to the world at all. The crow eddy repeats the same double-determination of teleology as orientation in space and shelter, in the figure of the home—which is a destination, an architectonic principle centering the world, and physical shelter. For example, the crows are not only moving teleologically toward some shelter on the horizon, but shelter themselves by gathering into ever tighter, ever darker circles. In their literal function, the crow eddies bind these teleological affinities to the question of life. In the previous stanza, the appearing disappearance of the "homeward bound" shepherd declares the traveler's homelessness as an exclusion from the human world, and now the "homeward borne" crows broadens the domain from which he has been expelled to the world of the living. The very fact that he "eyes" the crows "in tears" suggests that what is at stake in the comparison between them is the increasing improbability of his survival. They are tears with which the traveler mourns his own life—the jealous, infuriated tears with which the dying (or the dead) envy the living. Likewise, the fact that the appearance of the crows coincides with the resignation of all hope suggests that what he resigns is the possibility that he has a future at all: if the concept of hope analytically entails a relation to the future, then to be "resigned of all hope" is to be resigned of the minimal possibility of a future, which even the crows possess insofar as their movement is determined by a destination projected in both space and time. Whether this projection belongs to the crows (attribution to them, say, by animal psychology), or to the cognition of the traveler who watches them in tears, does not matter here: textually speaking, the crows are figured in terms of this temporal teleological structure, and the traveler's loss of hope, conjoined to it, identifies this structure not with humanity (figured in the shepherd, the spire, and the wastes of corn), but with life

in general. It is not only the traveler's humanity that becomes problematic when he enters the plain, but his status as a living being.

As the stanzas which introduce us to the traveler and his plight on the plain proceed, Salisbury Plain transforms from a place uninhabitable by man to a place uninhabitable by life in general, a space where life is impossible. This process, where the teleological reduction of the world approaches the impossibility of life, reaches its culmination—or, rather, its limit—in stanza 8, when, seemingly at the moment before the storm breaks, the traveler reaches a state of utter solitude. He is solitary in his condition of exposure on the plain, but as a living thing rather than as a human being. The traveler has become a “creature” and a “mortal wight:”

Hurtle the rattling clouds together piled
 By fiercer gales, and soon the storm must break.
 He stood the only creature in the wild
 On whom the elements their rage could wreak,
 Save that the bustard of those limits bleak,
 Shy tenant, seeing there a mortal wight,
 At that dread hour, outsent a mortal shriek
 And half upon the ground, with strange affright,
 Forced hard against the wind a thick unwieldy flight.

(SP 8.64-72)

The process of going blank and emptying out reaches its limit here: when the stanza begins, the traveler stands as the last remaining “creature” on the plain, all the others (the desert lark, the shepherd, the crows) having been able by now to vanish, fleeing for regions where shelter and home are possible. Absolute solitude and absolute exposure combine to bring about a double reduction of the traveler to creaturely life. In his isolation from mankind, the traveler becomes an animal; in his

isolated exposure to the rage the elements will soon wreak upon him, he is an animal brought to the very edge of death and thus returned to the minimal exigency of survival that defines the living being in general. His loss of speech before the “homeward bound” shepherd and his teary-eyed, negative identification with the eddying, “homeward borne” crows have already shown that, as the poem proceeds, the traveler is decreasingly determined in human terms and increasingly determined as an animal—if a male but otherwise anonymous human animal. In this regard, the same holds for the “homeward bound” shepherd, who exists in a sort of parity with the “homeward borne” crows. The equation of shepherd and crow is an instance of Wordsworth’s leveling muse operating outside the anthropocentric field by positing a figural equality—that is, an analogy—between human and nonhuman figures. Indeed, the first two lines refer to the traveler as a “creature” in the biological sense of the word, inscribing him in the series of disappearing animals: he is a living being like any other. What is new here is that the traveler is alone *as* an animal; he is not, like Robinson Crusoe, a human being alone in the wild among the animals, but the only animal in the “wild” of the plain.

At the opening of the stanza, then, the traveler is reduced to the level of animality and alone in his exposure to death. This moment would mark the completion, the arrival at its telos, of the poem’s reduction of the traveler to life in itself, purified in his solitude of every relation were it not for the arrival of yet another bird, a bustard that directly refutes the radicality of the traveler’s isolation no sooner than its achievement is announced, thus cutting short the process of reduction toward the zero degree of its telos. Indeed, the traveler stands as a “creature” in the biological sense thanks in large part to the fact that the sentence immediately qualifies his absolute solitude by noting the presence of the bustard, which acknowledges the traveler as a fellow animal—a “mortal wight”—even as it attempts with much less success than its more elegant and fully airborne cousins, the crows, to move as far away from the traveler as possible by beating an ungainly, half-grounded flight against a wind that resists it rather than holding it aloft. Wordsworth utilizes the same

grammar of exception that, in stanza 5, qualifies the absence of any trace of human culture (“scarce could [the traveler] any trace of man descry, / Save wastes of corn that stretched without a bound...” (SP 5.43-44)), to qualify the traveler’s solitude. Grammatically speaking, the bustard occupies the same position as the “wastes of corn” in stanza 5, and it assumes a similar figural function as well. If the exceptional “trace of man” capable of being descried in an otherwise inhuman landscape presents the traveler with an ambivalent reflection of his own threatened humanity, then the bustard offers him an ambivalent reflection of his own increasingly precarious creaturely life. And just as the wastes of corn only deny with their boundless stretching the reflection they initially establish, the bustard only intensifies the solitude and precarity which its grammatical function seems to limit.

The exception works by establishing an analogy between the bustard and the traveler. Like the traveler, the bustard is a borderer, a “tenant...of those limits bleak,” and it responds to the sight of the traveler in a way that recalls the traveler’s response to the “dim” appearance of the “homeward bound” shepherd:

And *see* the homeward shepherd dim appear

Far off—he stops his voice to strain...

(SP 6.50-51)

.....*seeing there* a mortal wight

At that dread hour, outsent a mournful shriek...

(SP 8.69-70)

A verbal echo binds the two moments. The language of the second scene renders explicit what could remain implicit in the first, almost functioning as its expository repetition. The “mortal wight” is clearly offered as the *reason* for the shriek: the bustard “outsends” the shriek in response to its experience of “seeing there...at that dread hour” the shape of the traveler appear in the distance,

just as the traveler outsend a cry to the dimly appearing shepherd; indeed, Wordsworth's utilization of the Spenserian compound "outsent" describes the traveler's failed act of transmission—of long range communication with a fellow human being. What sets the bustard apart from the crows, the desert lark, and even the shepherd, is the fact that it has *seen* the traveler, and indeed Wordsworth's grammar of exception places its weight less on the bustard itself than on its act of "outsending" the shriek ("save that the bustard...outsent a mournful shriek..."), suggesting, moreover, that the bustard sees the traveler first, whose attention is only called to the animal when the sound of its cry disturbs his solitude and in effect takes him by surprise. The bustard's desire to move as far away from the traveler as possible and increase the measure of space between them is exactly opposed to the traveler's desire to close the gap between himself and the shepherd, but both reactions seem motivated by a recognition of semblance. The social animal calls out to his fellow in order to approach him; the "shy tenant" of the plain cries out "with strange affright" as it struggles to escape. What these two borderers, bustard and man, share, despite the fact that the respective directions of their desired movements are symmetrically opposed, is that both posit a teleologically determined, spatial relation to a fellow creature. And both fail: the counter-teleological wind thwarts both.

The phrase "mortal wight," which describes what the bustard sees when it sees the traveler, stands as one of the deliberate archaisms that contribute to the poem's gothic atmosphere, but it also functions within the stanza's rhetoric of exception. From Old Saxon *wiht* for "thing," "creature," and "demon," "wight" describes a "living thing in general," as the translators of Phillipe de Mornay's *A worke concerning the trewness of the Christian Religion* (1587) illustrate with a sentence that, included by the OED in its resume of exemplary uses of the word, offers a taxonomic definition of man as a particular subset of living thing: "We reduce...all men under the terme of Wight, all wights under the terme of liuing thing." A quote from the 1586 translation of Stefano Guazzo's *Ciuile conuersation* performs a similar specification of man as an exceptional kind of wight: "Man is the only

white whereat infinit...infortunes doe aim at.”⁸ Although “wight” often translates as “man” in Middle and early modern English, it retains the uses of its ancestor, applying (especially when paired with an epithet of either positive or negative valorization) to “supernatural, preternatural, or unearthly beings”—beings, in other words, whose status as “living” cannot be restricted to the domain of the mundane world, like ghosts, angels, and demons. Even as late as the 17th century, “wight” frequently referred to the four beasts of the apocalypse.⁹ But what is so striking about this word is that even while it refers to beings whose life subsists beyond the world, it also names low and indeed lowly living things on earth. In Middle English, “wight” designates non-human creatures, beasts, and especially vermin whose foulness is invested with such a sense of evil that they can be difficult to distinguish from demons and other supernatural monsters to which the word “wight” also refers.¹⁰ And yet it also applies to small and indeed vulnerable living things, like unborn children.¹¹ “Wight” can thus designate evil things, but also (the evil of) the finitude to which all mortal wights are exposed. Its Semantic weight falls on finitude.

Wordsworth’s introduction of the bustard, that “shy tenant” of those “limits bleak,” as an exception to—that is, a limit on—the traveler’s claim to be the “only creature in the wild,” tends to pull “wight” so close to “creature” that it is tempting to read them as near synonyms. The sound of the “mournful shriek” informs the traveler, so to speak, not only that he is not the only creature on the plain, but also that the other creature sees him as a creature, a “living thing.” At first, the traveler

⁸ OED Online, s.v. “wight (*n.1.a.*),” accessed July 2, 2018,

<http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/Entry/228973?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=JcNnLa&>

⁹ OED Online, s.v. “wight (*n.1.b.*):” “Orig. and chiefly with (good or bad) epithet, applied to supernatural, preternatural, or unearthly beings. *Obsolete or rare arch.* In the 17th cent. *esp.* of the four beasts of the Apocalypse.” Accessed July 2, 2018,

<http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/Entry/228973?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=JcNnLa&>

¹⁰ Middle English Dictionary Online, s.v., “wight (*n.*),” accessed July 2, 2018,

<https://quod-lib-umich-edu.proxy.library.emory.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED52699&egs=all>

¹¹ OED Online, s.v. “wight” (*n.1.c.*). A late-eighteenth century use of “wight” as “a local name for the shrew mouse” presents an intersection between two kinds of evil, both small: that of vermin, which are evil in themselves, and the evil condition of vulnerability in which tiny creatures live out their lives: “A small species of mice, commonly called here [*i.e.* on Orkney] wights.” Accessed July 2, 2018,

<http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/Entry/228973?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=JcNnLa&>

is alone as an animal; now he sees himself seen *as* an animal *by* another animal.¹² The mournful shriek inscribes the traveler within a plurality of living beings. But because the mournfulness of the bustard's shriek seems to respond to the mortality of the wight it sees off in the distance, the shriek itself—together with the “strange affright” with which the bird attempts to flee and the fact that its fear arises not merely from the presence of the wight but from the timing of its appearance, which Wordsworth describes with the stock gothic formulation, “there...at that dread hour” places the wight's mortality and thus its status as a living being, that is, as a wight, into question. It is possible to read the encounter such that the bustard sees the traveler as an animal near death, at the very edge of his mortality. On this reading, the phrase “mortal wight” recalls the Middle English application of “wight” to unborn children, and the creaturely life it evokes is one defined by its mereness, its smallness and exposure—not only to the elements—but also to the constitutive possibility of its negation. If the traveler sees himself seen by the bustard as a living being, the life which he is recognized to possess is defined by the proximity of its destruction. To be seen as a “mortal wight” is to be seen as a *dying* animal, a living being at the edge of the negative possibility that defines it.

In his reading of this passage, David Collings locates the crux of the analogy between the bustard and the traveler in the bird's “grotesque” struggle against the elements. The bustard is a figure for the traveler's very condition of life:

The bustard, who seems to be the traveler's own displaced self-consciousness (or Other), recognizes that the “dread hour” has arrived for the “mortal wight.” Its grotesque struggle against the elements figures the traveler's own animallike battle to survive. Here we are at the body's limits of resistance to death.¹³

¹² For an analysis of “seeing oneself seen” by the animal other, see Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that therefore I Am*, 11-18.

¹³ Collings, *Wordsworthian Errancies*, 26.

Collings goes on to observe that although the traveler has been brought to the very limit of his capacity to survive (which he notably defines as a power of resistance, the ability to resist death), he “nevertheless does not die; he somehow endures in the following stanzas. Were he to die, he would cross the boundary between life and death and arrive at a symbolically secure condition.”¹⁴

According to Collings, the poetic specificity of *Salisbury Plain* consists in precisely the blockage (or, indeed, blockade) that keeps the traveler from passing over into death. By forcing him to endure at the limit of life’s survivability—that is, by allowing him to approach the frontier of life but not to cross it—Wordsworth opens up a space of “symbolic insecurity” that bears on the originary function of culture as Collings defines it in Lacanian terms: to “treat death as if it were readable, appropriating it for its own purposes through the rites of memory and the writing of epitaphs.”¹⁵

The fiction of death’s legibility (registered in the “as if”) is the quintessential institution of culture, and it lies at the heart of the symbolic order. As it is figured by *Salisbury Plain*, Salisbury Plain is a space outside the law of death’s legibility, and therefore corresponds either to a time before the establishment of culture or a time after what Collings’s calls its “dismemberment.” The originary mark of death’s legibility is its opposition to life. If, as Collings argues, the plain is the site of a profound “symbolic insecurity” where death can no longer be read as such, then it is also the region where the very “boundary between life and death” is undecidable. It is not simply that the traveler is held up at the border, prevented from crossing over from the world of the living to the other side, but that his very relation to life and death, and thus the status of his very being (living or dead) has become undecidable. Death can only cease to be legible if the boundary distinguishing it from life is itself illegible. This illegibility, in turn, opens the question of whether the traveler’s very survival is

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

the survival of the living or the dead. By trapping him in the border zone between life and death Wordsworth opens a substitutability between biological and spectral survival.

When the bustard is read literally—as a bird and nothing more—its shriek confirms the traveler’s reduction to creaturely life but at the same time negates his solitude.¹⁶ But the figuration of their relation deprives the traveler of the very biological life to which, moments before, he seemed to be reduced: no sooner does he become an animal than he becomes a ghost. The “mournful shriek” reduces him *at once* to animality and ghostliness. It reduces the minimal principle of orientation that allows one to distinguish between the living and the dead. At first, the affinity between the animal the ghost appears to possess a symmetrical structure. By virtue of the fact that, shrieking mournfully, the bustard seems to posit the traveler as a ghost, the bustard itself appears ghostly. The strangeness of its “strange affright” marks the uncanny experience of living to see oneself mourned, as though already dead—or, to translate into Wordsworth’s gothic idiom, it marks the haunting experience of living to see oneself regarded as a ghost. The shriek’s strangeness consists in seeing oneself seen by the living as dead—of being the dead haunted by the living. The substitutability between the animal and the ghost as figures of life allows the bustard to be read as *both* a displaced reflection of the traveler’s reduction to biological life, as David Collings argues when he describes it as a figuration of the traveler’s “animallike battle to survive,” and also as the displaced reflection of the traveler’s spectral survival beyond death. For example, it is possible to read the bustard’s mournful shriek as the traveler’s own, projected self-mourning, in other words, as a repetition of the act of self-mourning implied by the traveler’s teary-eyed crow gazing in stanza 7. But the difference between the vision of the crows and the encounter with the bustard throws off the symmetry that, so far, has seemed to characterize the system of figural affinity linking animal and ghostly life. In the previous passage, the tears and the loss of all hope result from a process of cognition bound, like the tears it

¹⁶ I am borrowing the phrase “creaturely life,” from Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*.

produces, to the eye: the traveler sees that the crows are homeward borne and, comparing their condition to his own, computes the probable consequence for himself: death. The calculation results in the loss of all hope, in the conclusion that the traveler has no future. But the calculation is itself a projection into the future, and as such it remains teleologically capable despite the fact the telos it projects is death. Only a living being can lose all hope in the possibility of survival, and in this regard life may be said to recuperate mastery in the calculative knowledge (the cognition) of death. So far, the difference between life and death has been preserved—and the teleological machinery remains in play. In the bustard scene, by contrast, the act of mourning (insofar as the shriek is an act of mourning) takes the traveler by surprise. As it belongs to the audible texture of the bird's cry rather than to the cognitive operation ascribed to the traveler himself, it impinges on him from without. What results is an uncanny de-realization of life similar to what David Simpson has recently observed in his examination of Wordsworthian homelessness.¹⁷ What can be assumed in the first place—that the traveler is alive—becomes a question in the second: the traveler cannot be sure that he is alive and this, again, is what gives the bustard's flight its "strangeness," and the whole scene its uncanny, haunting texture.

To the extent that the shriek impinges on him from without, affecting him at the level of his sensibility, the traveler's relation to it is passive. It is not a rational operation that projects death as a possible future to thereby master, but rather an event where death—or at least an intimation of it—takes the traveler off guard, coming by way of a capability or sense which defines him as a living being. Read as an event, this second moment cannot be determined as a dialectical sublation of death by life, since death is not a conclusion cognitively synthesized from the senses but rather given

¹⁷ Cf. David Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification, and Social Concern*, 56. Simpson considers the de-realization of life a general feature of the Wordsworthian encounter with alterity: "The spectrality of the Wordsworthian encounter signals not just the threat of the unknown other but a derealization of life itself, and for the self as well as for the other."

by the senses—with the result that the traveler must live his own death. He must die alive.¹⁸ From the standpoint of critical methodology, the “death in life” which emerges around the figure of the bustard can be described as a function of the way that the mournfulness of its shriek refuses to be reintegrated into a teleologically determined schema of rational cognition (as the traveler’s tears did) or, to adopt the language of the four-stanza philosophic song that begins the poem, refuses to become “reflection.” The intimation of mortality that arrives in the shriek stands, indeed, as a “turn of chance” that “prevails” over reflection even while it necessitates its establishment.

It is necessary to distinguish between the various leveling operations at work here. Up until the encounter with the bustard, the teleological reduction of the world could be followed on two parallel tracks: the tendency toward radical disorientation (the loss of the spire, the disappearance of the horizon, the loss of temporal orientation, etc.) and the evacuation from the plain of life. It is as if, paradoxically, the teleological reduction of the world requires that living creatures be re-introduced to the plain because the traveler’s knowledge of his own solitude as a living being before death is far too teleological—even hyperteleological. The traveler’s encounter with a living thing confounds the attempt to teleologically recuperate his solitude (in life before death) as mastery: first, because he finds himself to be the passive object of the bustard’s perception; and then because he loses mastery over the status of his own being qua object of perception. The event of seeing himself seen by the living other (the bustard), and finding himself inscribed within a plurality of living beings is more counter-teleological than the traveler’s solitude, resulting in a radical disorientation with regard to the difference between life and death. In the gap opened up by this disorientation (of life/death) the traveler is figured as (a) being without world. I would like to argue that Wordsworth figures the undecideability of the difference between life and death from the side—or rather from

¹⁸ “Dying alive” is a motif that runs through the first volume of Jacques Derrida’s seminar on the death penalty. For examples of “dying alive” and “dying awake” respectively, see *The Death Penalty, Volume I*, 277, 42.

the vantage of—life. He forces the traveler to survive *without* a stable distinction between life and death, to live without it, to live within the condition of its suspension. To the extent that the opposition of life and death is itself a teleological condition of the world—and to the extent that without that opposition there can be no world—Wordsworth forces the traveler to live without living, to live within the condition of life's impossibility.

“Creature” begins to take on its etymological and indeed theologically strict sense. At the opening of the stanza, the traveler was biologically solitary, the last creature in the wild. Paradoxically, it is only when his biological solitude is contradicted by the bustard that he becomes a creature in the theological sense—the last created being, the last remaining “trace of creation” so to speak, after the disappearance of the world, the intimation of which, to be precise, is in the resistant, recalcitrant, counter-teleological *fact* of plurality presented by the bustard. The fundamental challenge of *Salisbury Plain* is that the disappearance of the world (i.e., the demolition of its teleological organization) coincides perfectly with the reappearance of a living being. What is truly counter-teleological is not the encounter with death, but the encounter with another creature. The world disappears in the appearance of the other. Indeed, what could be more teleological than confronting what Hegel calls “the absolute lord and master,” or submitting oneself to the radical negativity of “being towards the end?”

Hartman's description of the traveler as “literally an outsider, as if nature had ejected him” may be translated into Wordsworth's creaturely terms. Like the bustard and indeed with the bustard (in a sense, they are alone together, living with each other in living death), he is a creature outside creation, a creature lost in the solitude of worldlessness. The capacity to be “homeward bound” or “homeward borne” can be understood as constitutive of the living being in a double sense. If animals live only for as long as they are able to resist the forces pulling them back toward the state of inanimate matter, the “minerality of being” in Paul H. Fry's terms, then they live by delaying

death, and they do so by securing various forms of shelter against it.¹⁹ Any temporizing strategy assumes that death is the final end, so that every delay tactic is susceptible to ironic reversal. Being “homeward bound” thus becomes a figure for the mortality, the finitude of life as orientation toward death as the end of life, and all life is bound to the home of inert matter, the shelter of death. But it also assumes that there exists a stable criterion that, like a spire or a vanishing point, allows one to descry the horizon that divides life and death. The differentiability of life and death is itself a form of shelter, and is the deprivation of this shelter that *Salisbury Plain* takes as the subject of its philosophic song. At stake here is a sort of homelessness that no natural living being can suffer. If the plain is read as a natural though desolate landscape, Wordsworth can be said to be conducting a poetic thought experiment that brings the traveler to very edge of death and, by stopping just short of negating him, reduces him to bare, creaturely life. On this reading, *Salisbury Plain* zeroes in on the question of life by bringing it as close as possible to the negative possibility which constitutes it. I began this chapter reading the blanking out of the plain (the radical disorientation, the demolition of shelter, the subtraction of living things) as a crisis within the minimal teleological structure that binds a living being to a world, to a habitat, a place where existence and survival are possible. But because any such teleological organization requires a boundary separating life from death it becomes possible to read the traveler’s vulnerability and solitude against the grain as a figure for the exposure of life not to death as such but to the possibility of the radical loss of the minimal relation *to death*—that is, to the difference between life and death, the legibility of which is the condition of the possibility of life itself, its survival, and its teleologically organized relation to the world.

For Wordsworth, to be deprived of the shelter provided by the differentiation of life and death is not necessarily to die. In *Salisbury Plain*, Wordsworth develops something that might be described as a poetry of life whose originality consists in submerging life within the condition of its

¹⁹ Paul H. Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are*, 22, 37-38, 88.

impossibility—making life live beyond the death, so to speak, of the system that allows life to be distinguished from the negation of life. If the classical philosophical approach to the question of life eventually bottoms out in defining life in terms of the possibility of death, the passive possibility which constitutively haunts the positive characteristics attributed to it as its essence (organization, the possession of a soul, sensibility, motility, assimilation, reproduction, etc.) then Wordsworth complicates this schema by introducing a second constitutive exposure, a second finitude. Death belongs to life as its ownmost negative possibility, but so does the possibility of losing every relation to an end or a means or a world, *including the relation to death, a relation to the difference between the living and the dead*—and surviving impossibly within that condition of absolute privation. Wordsworth robs life of death, its negative possibility. The essential question which motivates his poetic project does not concern the principle by means of which one might “descry” the boundary between life and death. It concerns, instead, the difference between the two finitudes constitutive of life: what does it mean to survive after life has become impossible? What must life be if it can survive beyond the advent of its radical impossibility without dying? As I will try to show in the remainder of this chapter, Wordsworth refers the question of sovereignty and the political not to life and death but to the two finitudes. Politics is an answer to the possibility of living without the possibility of life.

2. FABLES OF SACRIFICE, SACRIFICIAL FABLES

Having reduced the world to the level of its grain, Wordsworth begins to reconstruct it in a manner reminiscent of Rousseau and other enlightenment philosophers. It is a matter of re-introducing verticality into the plain as physical shelter (walls) and systems of orientation in space (spires). What seems necessary to get this system up and running again is theologico-political sovereignty, to which the poem compulsively returns in scenes of ritual human sacrifice conducted by druids. It is possible to find in these passages the traces of a classical theological and philosophical argument according to

which sovereignty (and that of which sovereignty is the guarantee) requires the sacrificial spilling of blood, that is to say the destruction of life. But what is most important in this regard is the fact that the poem underscores the highly mediated status of the sacrificial scenes. Never in *Salisbury Plain* is a sacrificial scene experienced in the mimetic present of the narrative. Never is a ritual scene of human sacrifice enacted *as such* and witnessed by the traveler or the vagrant. Instead, the poem insists on its status *as* narrative. The first sacrificial scene, which takes place at Stonehenge, is reported to the traveler by a disembodied “voice” which addresses him “from beneath” and whose lack of “face or form” leaves the traveler “mocked as by a hideous dream” (SP 9.81, 11.100-101). The second scene is reported by the female vagrant as hearsay, or rather a sort of local legend recounted to her by an old man whom she encountered on the plain, and who spoke of events which occurred not to him but to a “swain who far astray / Reached unawares a height and saw beneath / Gigantic beings ranged in dread array” (SP stanzas 19-22). The third repetition occurs as an intra-textual citation within the closing argument of the poem, and its rhetorical status is extremely ambivalent: the narrator in effect argues that modern war and socially instituted poverty are the dissimulated forms of the very human sacrifice which the progress of history has supposedly superseded. These modern forms of sacrifice appear throughout the narrative of *Salisbury Plain* carefully quarantined by generic markers: gothic specters, ghost stories, stories told in the “spital” to pass the time until the storm is over. In the narrative of *Salisbury Plain*, human sacrifice is never encountered as such, but the poem concludes with the assertion that human sacrifice occurs in the real, material world, and spills real blood. The poem thus begins by posing the question of human sacrifice as fiction (legend, fable, or myth), only to stage a reversal by arguing that fiction belongs to the very structure of *historically real* sacrifice. It is not only that sacrifice (or those who have an interest in sacrificing others) deploys fiction for its own ends, or that sacrifice wears disguises. A key aspect of Wordsworth’s insight is rather that fiction belongs to the intrinsic mechanism of sacrifice. Indeed, I will argue that in

Salisbury Plain, fiction is the point of contact between life, sovereignty, and sacrifice, especially as it bears on the passage between the materiality, on the one hand, of *stones* and *grain*, and the virtuality of spectral voices and other phantasms which appear and disappear, rising like lucent gasses off the surface of plain. For Wordsworth, the life of the living beings shares with the formations of political sovereignty this peculiar combination of the material and virtual, the real and fictional.

At the very moment of the world's "blank desertion," when the traveler has been reduced to "the only creature in the wild / On whom the elements their rage could wreak," the poem rapidly reintroduces a complex system of orientation. The traveler finds himself standing on a hill (implicitly a burial "mound") the verticality of which, re-introduced into the landscape, organizes the spatial orientation of the traveler's gaze. In rapid succession, the traveler looks *down* onto figures carved into the ground, and then *up* into the distance at Stonehenge, whose "naked" walls might house his life:

The sun unheeded sunk, while on a mound
 He stands beholding with astonished gaze,
 Frequent upon the deep entrenched ground,
 Strange marks of mighty arms of former days,
 Then looking up at distance he surveys
 What seems an antique castle spreading wide.
 Hoary and naked are its walls and raise
 Their brow sublime...

(SP 9.72-80)

The stanza traces a path from radical disorientation in the form of a blindness to blindness itself ("the sun unheeded sunk"), to the "astonished" return of vision in the relay between the "strange marks of mighty arms" inscribed in the soil and the architectural structure grounded on it. In a manner reminiscent of what Hartman has described as the rapid up-and-down movement

characteristic of *Descriptive Sketches* and Wordsworth's passage through the Gorge of Gondo, the traveler's gaze seems to skip along the surface of the plain into the distance toward a newly installed horizon. Standing at a medium position along the vertical, the traveler first looks down at the inscriptions in the earth and then—his gaze reflecting up again like a bouncing ball—immediately looks both up and away, “up and at distance,” at Stonehenge. This regressive movement toward the vanishing point implies that the return of a horizon has followed from the re-installation of the vertical. Wordsworth is reconstructing a world in three dimensions susceptible to navigation, itself suggested by the conversion of a passively surprised “astonished gaze” into a sovereignty with which the traveler “surveys” Stonehenge.

That verticality allows for depth can be seen in the progression from the marks in the earth, which evoke figures drawn on a page, to the erection of solid, voluminous stones on the ground. It is as if the stanza passed instantly from the two-dimensional blueprints to the architectural object itself, “raised” up on the earth. The key point here, however, is that the very figure of two-dimensional drawings is able to appear only in terms of depth—only once verticality has punctured the surface of the sheet. The blindness with which this scene begins is represented by the leveling of the plain into a purely two-dimensional dimensional surface, a surface without depth, but it follows from the appearance of inscribed “marks” upon it that the surface has a thickness and that the very act of inscription modifies it to a certain depth: “frequent upon the *deep entrenched* ground.” It is as if the surface of the plain were doubling over onto itself and thus producing depth out of pure surface.

The passage in Book 12 of the *Prelude* where Wordsworth narrates his experience of being lost on Salisbury Plain in 1793, returns to the “strange marks of mighty arms of former days” by reading them as star maps drawn on the earth. At stake, by his reading, is a system of orientation that unifies earth and sky:

At other moments, for through that wide waste

Three summer days I roamed, when 'twas my chance
 To have before me on the downy plain
 Lines, circles, mounts, a mystery of shapes
 Such as in many quarters yet survive,
 With intricate profusion figuring o'er
 The untilled ground (the work, as some divine,
 Of infant science, imitative forms
 By which the Druids covertly expressed
 Their knowledge of the heavens, and imaged forth
 The constellations), I was gently charmed,
 Albeit with an antiquarian's dream,
 And saw the bearded teachers, with white wands
 Uplifted, pointing to the starry sky,
 Alternately, and plain below, while breath
 Of music seemed to guide them, and the waste
 Was cheared with stillness and a pleasant sound.

(1805.12. 337-353)

In the repetition of 1805, the “strange marks of mighty arms of former days” have become an “intricate profusion” of figures that, beginning with simple geometrical forms (“lines, circles”), seem to increase in complexity with every iteration in their profusion, finally becoming images and “imitative forms.” Again, the movement is structured by the progression along a vertical: the passage from lines and circles to referential figures is marked by the intervention of increasingly hyperbolic verticality, first in the “mounts” and then in the stars. The scene ends with the vision of pedagogical deixis, “bearded teachers” utilizing their wands to *point* at the correlating figures in earth and sky.

The system of reflection between earth and sky marks the achievement of a teleologically organized world with an experience of harmony as guide—indeed of harmonized breath, a pneumatic harmony, which may be contrasted with the traveler’s painful measurement of breath in *Salisbury Plain*: “The breath of music seemed to guide them...” If neither compass nor needle know the “tempest of the soul,” then here breath itself, which may be read as soul by way of *pneuma*, serves as both compass and needle. This is the dream that identifies life (determined pneumatically as breath) with a totally oriented world. Here, life is nothing other than the pure orientation of the world.

Alan Liu has noted that a less benign sort of druid appears right alongside the old bearded teachers, the druids of human sacrifice.²⁰ I would like to argue that Wordsworth shows a sacrifice of life to be necessary for, not just complementary to, the teleological organization of the world.

Then looking up at distance he surveys
 What seems an antique castle spreading wide.
 Hoary and naked are its walls and raise
 Their brow sublime; while to those walls he hied
 A voice as from a tomb in hollow accents cried:

“Oh from that mountain-pile avert thy face
 Whatever betide at this tremendous hour.
 To Hell’s most cursed sprites the baleful place
 Belongs, upreared by their magical power.
 Though mixed with flame rush down the crazing shower
 And o’er thy naked bed the thunder roll,

²⁰ Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, 196.

Fly ere the fiends their prey unwares devour
 Or grinning, on thy endless tortures scowl,
 Till very madness seem a mercy to thy soul.

“For oft at dead of night, when dreadful fire
 Reveals that powerful circle’s reddening stones
 ’Mid priests and spectres grim and idols dire,
 Far heard the great flame utters human moans,
 Then all is hushed: again the desert groans,
 A dismal light its farthest bounds illumines,
 While warrior spectres of gigantic bones,
 Forth issuing from a thousand rifted tombs,
 Wheel on their fiery steeds amid the infernal glooms.”

(SP 9.78-11.99)

These stanzas enact a sort of totem and taboo moment. No sooner does the traveler “survey” Stonehenge than he “hies” toward it, positing a teleological relation to it and the shelter it offers. The reappearance of verticality within the world now extends, on the one hand, to the very concrete, stony “walls” the very absence of which at first define the plain, and, on the other, to teleologically determined action and purposive movement—toward those walls (which, strangely, take on the properties of the plain just as they “raise their brow sublime:” “naked” and “spreading wide”). The return of navigability to the world coincides with the return of a sheltering enclosure—and like the narrator of *The Ruined Cottage*, the traveler projects as his goal the only spot in that wide, stretched and stretching waste, where his life might be yet again be securely housed, safe and sound. But the disembodied “voice” seems to intercede before the traveler can even take a step. Grammatically

speaking, its enunciation exactly coincides with the traveler's movement toward Stonehenge (“*while* to those walls he hied, / A voice...cried”). The effect, narratively speaking, is temporal simultaneity: the voice speaks at the zero degree, perhaps even before the first step, at the moment of the goal's intentional crystallization. The voice thus speaks at the very moment of the traveler's *turn* toward Stonehenge. I would like to propose is that this turn precedes both the physical turn of the traveler's course across the landscape, and the mental turn with which Stonehenge becomes the traveler's destination in the theater of his mental representation. What the voice interrupts is the *teleological turn*, the turn of the world toward the full crystallization of itself around a single spot—or, as Geoffrey Hartman describes Stonehenge in this context, a “One.” The disembodied voice is a teleological counter-spirit: Stonehenge is the only spot toward which the traveler could walk, the vanishing point upon which the teleological organization of the world—itsself under construction, as it were, a goal, a work in progress—tends to converge. By crying “avert thy face,” the voice places a taboo on the only possible goal, interrupting and interdicting teleological progress itself—not so much throwing the traveler off course, as threatening to throw him off the course toward the very possibility of having a course.

At this moment in *Salisbury Plain*, at stake is a sort of meta-teleology that projects teleology itself as its goal. The plain is situated somewhere between the sheer lack and the full presence of a teleologically organized world.²¹ I propose to read the poem's obsession with specters and ghosts—the nightmare quality which critics have alternately read in terms of a Spenserian and Gothic inheritance—as a figural expression of this quasi- or semi-teleology that posits the minimal possibility of teleology in general as its perpetually deferred telos. An examination of the specters, particularly as they emanate from the combination of material figures assembled in the scenes of

²¹ My reading of the voice's counter-teleological effect is indebted to Geoffrey Bennington's conception of “interruptive teleology.” The “scattering” that constitutes the very structure teleological systems in general Bennington analyzes in *Scatter I: The Politics of Politics in Foucault, Heidegger, and Derrida*.

sacrifice, will show that Wordsworth is conducting an experimental thinking of life that suspends it in the ghostly margin of teleological half-light. Wordsworth is examining the co-originary of life and teleology by constructing sacrificial scenes that function like machines for projecting teleology—or, to adopt Bergson’s language, “machines for the making of gods.”²²

The interruptive relation of the voice to teleology may be traced in the figuration of its phenomenality and in the argument with which it persuades the traveler to “avert his face” from Stonehenge. Beginning with its sensuous register, its advent on the scene of the plain serves to scramble the traveler’s field of perception and thus disorient him. The traveler is able to hear the direction of its source, but the source itself remains invisible, blank:

The voice was from beneath but face or form

He saw not, mocked as by a hideous dream.

(SP 12.100-101)

At work here is a dismemberment of the traveler’s perceptive fields which, by severing the relation between the aural and visual, places a check on the traveler’s orientation in space. The bodily mechanics by which the senses supplement each other has been rendered inoperable. The sequencing of these lines suggest that the narrator has turned his face toward the direction of the sound, *but*, bending his gaze down toward the ground, he sees neither face nor form—nothing but the vacant anonymity of the plain returned to its original blankness. It is as if the voice’s enunciation erases the figures—“the strange marks of mighty arms of former days” (9.76)—which had just become visible on the “deep entrenched ground” (9.75), traversing and thereby canceling the newly established relation between the ground and the “astonished gaze” (9.74) suddenly capable of seeing into its depths. The traveler is implicitly returned to the situation described in stanza 5. The double appearance of the marks in the soil and Stonehenge coincides with the possibility of surveying the

²² Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, 275.

landscape with a gaze projected “up and at distance” (9.76) toward the horizon, while the event of the voice’s speech coincides with the collapse of this structure. The traveler turns his head in the direction of the voice in the same way that he “still” turned his head in direction of the vanished spire at the beginning of the poem (5.41)—except that, in this repetition of what might be called the “still turn”—the voice takes the place of the vanished spire and the plain assumes the role of the still blank sky. Only *partial orientation* is possible with respect to the voice, which resists full spatialization. Its very phenomenality interrupts the teleological organization of the world. It follows from the preceding analysis that it therefore resists its own phenomenalization (that is, insofar as phenomenality requires teleological organization). The voice cannot be adequately sensed. But, paradoxically, that the voice cannot be adequately sensed is a very sensuous, sensible, experience. The traveler’s disorientation is not that of one lost in the depths of an abyss, but the disorientation that follows from the impossibility of depth, the disorientation of pure surface.

The materiality of the voice involves a spatialization which stands in tension with the disorienting horror of the horizontal it seems to produce. First, insofar as it comes from beneath, it enters the scene of action by rising up along the same vertical axis as the walls of Stonehenge, which—like the “uprearing” imagination in Book 6 of *The Prelude*—“raises its brows sublime” (1805.6.79-80). The event of emergence operates as a spontaneous self-verticalization, a sort of sudden upward motion without any visible external conditions. In the case of Stonehenge’s walls, this upward movement coincides with the return of the world to spatial orientation; in the case of the voice, the same arising motion coincides with the leveling of depth as the negation of the possibility of spatial orientation. The tomblike hollowness of the arising voice links the elimination of depth with death, reinforcing my hypothesis that Wordsworth (like Lucretius, Hobbes, and Rousseau) understands space (or the capacity for self-orientation in space) as an essential characteristic of life. That is, *Salisbury Plain* identifies pure surface with death or, at least, the

impossibility of life. But, in the voice, space returns under death's banner in the figure of a hollow tomb carved out beneath the surface of the plain. As such, the space of this hollowness is *invisible*, capable of being heard in the phonic texture of the voice—but not seen. It is a space that, thanks to its invisibility, thwarts the orientational imperative that space be *visible* and thus susceptible to the sovereignty of the gaze. This is dark space, space that—coded in the “hollowness” (9.81) that suggests both the emptiness of death and the texture of a sound that echoes in a subterranean chamber—interrupts the possibility for orientation in the depth of space. What vertically arises with the voice is the space of life's impossibility. The specters of *Salisbury Plain* speak to the paradoxical maintenance of life in the depthless space of its impossibility. Both the traveler and the voice are, in this sense, specters, remnants of life beyond its term.

The voice's spectrality is not restricted to its generic, Gothic signature. If it is a specter, it is because the spontaneity with which it rises up bears the form of the auto-affective structure which defines the living being (as illustrated by an animal's capacity to be the cause of its own movement through space), but lacks the obdurate materiality of the body. Its spontaneity does not belong to a visibly determinate body, that is to say a body which can be oriented in space as an extended object. The spectrality of the voice can be described in terms of the disarticulation of the senses. The voice cannot be referred to “face or form” because it occupies only one dimension of the sensible (sound). The absence of a visible bodily source in space returns, by means of a synesthetic detour, within the sound itself as the empty space of a hollow tomb, so that the specter involves not just the invisibility of the body but a rematerialization of space as *audible*. Understood as the principle of life, the soul is defined by its heterogeneity to matter and spatial extension. Rather than the pure immateriality of a soul liberated from the body (from matter as extension in space), the specter insists on its relation to both space and matter to the extent that it is capable of affecting relations of force, that is, insofar as it is sensible at all. At the same time, it refuses to be cognized according to concepts of nature that

would render knowledge of it possible. It renders the spacing and materiality of the body problematic, thus scrambling the duality of virtual soul and material body. The formless, faceless voice of the plain hangs suspended at the threshold between virtuality and materiality, appearing alternately as materialized virtuality and virtualized materiality. Like the vagrant it haunts, it belongs to the pantheon of Wordsworth's borderers.²³

The spectrality of the voice consists in the fact that the spontaneity of its occurrence evokes the teleological auto-finality peculiar to life, which I have described as the sovereignty of life. But the life-like autonomy with which the voice "uprears" from the surface of the plain cannot, despite this teleological echo, be *figured* through an act of reference to face or form. Its resistance to teleological integration manifests as an event that counteracts the teleological reorganization of the world and thus returns the traveler to the state of radical disorientation in which we found him—lost like Milton's Satan in an abyss without dimension. In other words, what makes the voice a *specter* is the separation between the *spontaneity* of life and the *organization* of life. It is likewise thanks to its manifestation of spontaneity without organization (without an articulation of *limbs*, an important figure for Wordsworth) that the voice achieves its paradoxically counter-teleological function (and it may be a generally formalizable rule that for Wordsworthian specters are counter-teleological spirits). What resists intelligibility here is *life*, or rather life's spontaneity stripped bare of its organic, teleological frame. The spectral, disembodied voice stands as a variation of "unhouzed" life,

²³ The status of the voice with regard to materiality and virtuality may be analyzed in terms of Wordsworth's Lucretian inheritance. Like the first four stanzas of *Salisbury Plain*, both the description of the voice and its ghost story of human sacrifice contain extensive verbal echoes of *De rerum natura*. One of Lucretius' favorite illustrations of the porosity of matter is the fact that voices are capable of passing through them. The following reflection on the porosity of all composite bodies contains not only the example of voices passing through seemingly solid walls, but a description of the passage of lightning and heat through stones and other metals the echoes of which Wordsworth picks up in the ensuing sacrificial scene, where spectral voices and emanations of light and heat rise up through the ring of stones at Stonehenge. An full interpretation of *Salisbury Plain* with a view to the operation of these Lucretian figures of materiality would hang on how—and whether—Wordsworth appropriates the Lucretian notion of the simulacrum, which moreover bears systematically on the Lucretian concept of life. For a study of Lucretian materialism in the romantic conception of life, see Amanda Jo Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life*.

alongside the naked, exposed body of the traveler.²⁴ What has been evicted from its housing is the sovereign, active principle of life (auto-kinesis, motility: the capacity to “rear up”), not the passive principle, sensibility, itself the very capacity *of* exposure, the capacity to be affected from the outside. Its intimation of unhoused life as naked strength instead of sheer vulnerability lends the voice its haunting air, and perhaps suggests the horror of the vertical as a corollary of Hartman’s horror of the horizontal.

Wordsworth’s unhoused life exhibits a pattern of internal differentiation. The unhoused spontaneity of the spectral voice and the unhoused, vulnerability of the literally homeless traveler are distinguished according to the inflection given to life. In the case of the traveler, life is identified with sensibility, the definitive passivity of which allows for a slippage toward the constitutive vulnerability of life as such. Wordsworth’s originality consists in the fact that, in *Salisbury Plain*, life is constitutively exposed not to *death* as its simple negation, but to the deprivation of the teleological capacity traditionally considered inherent to living beings, and which the poem figures as the capacity of the living being to orient itself in space. In the traveler, then, Wordsworth enacts the survival of life beyond the teleological housing that makes life possible by making it capable of *inhabiting*. In the case of the spectral voice, however, the accent is placed not on sense but motility as the definitive capability of living beings. To unhouse life defined as the power to be the cause of one’s movement (that is, to share in the sovereignty of the prime mover) throws the paradox into sharp relief. The active principle of life cannot be conceived without reference to teleology, of which it is a particularly dynamic expression. The spectral voice embodies the paradox of teleology without teleology, self-alienated teleology, autonomy without finality. This structure, I think, can account for the tensions bundled in its minimal but dense figuration: the combination of life and

²⁴ Cf. my discussion of the opening stanzas of the poem in Chapter Two: “‘Unhoused Life’: Biopolitics and Biopoetics in Wordsworth’s Salisbury Plain Poems.”

death, the flatness of the plain with the depth of a hollow tomb, verticality with horizontality, the encoding of space within the texture of sound, and so on.

The differential logic of unhoused life operates within the voice itself, opening a split between the counter-teleological event of its enunciation and the teleological presupposition of its rhetorical strategy. It tells a story calculated to dissuade the traveler from bending his course toward Stonehenge, whose “naked walls” (SP 9.79) he hopes will substitute for his own nudity by absorbing the brunt of the forces traversing the plain. But once enclosed by the stones, the traveler will suffer a fantastically more terrible death than what he risks by spending night on the plain, his “naked bed” (SP 10.87) struck from above by a “crazing shower” “mixed with flame” (SP 10.86) and from the side by thunder that “rolls” (SP 10.87) across a leveled landscape unable to throw up any structures to meet it with resistance. What appears “up at distance” (SP 9.77) to be the one mechanism of defense in a landscape defined by the impossibility of defense, is in fact a trap, a carnivorous ruse that only intensifies the traveler’s vulnerability through its dissimulation. Stonehenge belongs to demonic spirits, “hell’s most cursed sprites,” who magically “upreared” it (SP 10.84-85), and if they do not fall upon the traveler to “devour” him before he has the time to be conscious of becoming their “prey,” they will subject him to endless tortures “until very madness seem a mercy to thy soul”—maybe just enough time to see the mouths which might have eaten him “grin” and “scowl” (SP 10.88-90). The voice thus gives a Gothic cast to the argument first presented by the opening of the poem, that although it is “hard,” the “naked and unhoused” life (SP 1.1) is preferable to enclosed life because the advantages of the latter are offset by a resulting multiplication of difference, contingency, and enmity:

When men in various vessels roam the deep
 Of social life, and turns of chance prevail
 Various and sad, how many thousands weep

Beset with foes more fierce than e'er assail

The savage without home in winter's keenest gale.

(SP 4.32-37)

The traveler has more enemies inside the deep enclosure of Stonehenge than outside on the plain. In fact, he has no enemies on the plain, because without shelter there can be no enmity. The description of the carnivorous “sprites” transfers the Hobbesian rhetoric of natural war from savage nature to enclosure. The first of the traveler’s two possible fates at Stonehenge is a sort of monstrous parody of the savage’s unreflective relation to the militarized wolves encircling his bed. He is unaffected because he does not *know* that he suffers; he has not known anything else since he was at his mother’s breast. In Rivers’s language, the savage lives (under constant threat of death) but does not know that he lives (under constant threat of death). To be “devoured unawares,” is to be consumed, incorporated, assimilated into the life of another without being alive to it: without knowing it, possessing the consciousness of it, or *feeling* it.

The voice’s exhortation repeats in a Gothic register the philosophical argument presented by the opening of the poem against sheltered life. Full exposure to rain and lightning is preferable to the risks entailed by approaching Stonehenge. It presents an alternative between, on the one hand, death by exposure in the mundane world (which might be called “real death,” produced by materially real conditions, both natural and social), and on the other, a fantastically more terrible death that belongs not to a documentary realism but to the realm of fantasy and fable. It is better to die of exposure in the rain than to be “devoured” by the demon torturers (“hell’s most cursed sprites”) who erected Stonehenge by means of “magical power” (SP 10.84-85). The voice’s construal of this alternative, the complexity of which is susceptible to rhetorical and conceptual analysis, marks a development in the poem’s thinking of unhoused life. Before death on the plain and death at Stonehenge are differentiated by the criterion of *real* and *imaginary*, they are distinguished as death by

exposure and death by *enclosure*. The “cursed sprites” are the genii of the place, but their relation to the place is proprietary and juridical. Stonehenge “belongs” to them because it was they who magically “upreared” it: the right to the enclosure belongs to the encloser—a rhetoric legible according to a Lockean key of property and cultivation. More than a place, Stonehenge is a *territory*, the spirits’ right over which extends in a technically rigorous sovereign fashion over the life of any traveler who might by chance happen to cross the border of the circle, thus entering the jurisdiction of that “baleful place” (SP 10.84)

The rhetoric of the voice’s interdiction unfolds as the narrative of the constitution of sovereignty as enclosure. In the conceptual style of the contract theorists, it operates according to a quasi-fictional retrospective inference of reason that repeats and intensifies the bind, established as originary by the opening stanzas of the poem, between the “naked and unhouzed” life and politics. The argument pivots on an insight into the risk life runs when it seeks to shelter itself. The enclosure that promises to shelter life may also threaten to *devour* it. The “cursed sprites” are predators and Stonehenge is a ruse contrived to attract “prey” (SP 10.88), which the traveler is at risk of very quickly becoming. If the voice is to be believed, then the danger is such that the “fiends” might fall on the traveler with a suddenness exceeding even that with which the voice itself took him by surprise just moments ago. The ability to identify an approaching threat presupposes the sovereignty of a certain orientation. The traveler had no such frontal view of the voice before it struck him from below, effectively pulling the ground from beneath his feet. Having thus ambushed him, the voice warns him of a threat that the traveler cannot see coming and will not see upon its arrival because the effect of its coming will have been the absolute negation of the very possibility of any awareness whatsoever.

The warning voice thus presents the traveler a double choice: he can take his chances on the plain and risk dying of exposure (the threat of unhouzed life), or he can take his chances at

Stonehenge and risk dying of enclosure (the threat of housed life). The determination of the latter as the specific danger of falling victim to carnivorous predation—of being *eaten* by another living thing—produces a series of displacements within the text’s schema of unhoused life. First, what offers itself as shelter is not the hard, insensible, non-living matter of a supplementary protective shield (a ring of stones, a fragment of bone or iron), though at first it might appear this way, the cunning strategy of a carnivore that makes its living by playing dead. The threat to life comes from life, not from the pure other but from the otherness of the same: other living beings capable of camouflaging themselves—at least in the case of Stonehenge—in the guise of the nonliving. Like the disembodied voice, the “sprites” which rule over Stonehenge exhibit the vertical capacity of living beings. But this same autonomy expresses itself as the capacity for disguise and deception which is textually determined as the ruse of predation: what seems to the sheltering ring of Stonehenge is really a carnivore’s maw in disguise.

3. AUTOMATON, TELEOLOGY, REPETITION

The figures of exposure that populate Wordsworth’s poetry of the 1790s are so many pacing variations of the question of life and its relation to the political. I argued in the previous chapter that when Wordsworth subjects his characters to conditions of radical exposure in the *Salisbury Plain* poems, he is enacting poetically the method of transcendental reduction Rousseau performs philosophically in the second *Discourse* on the grounds that, as he argues in the Preface to that work, such a reduction must be carried out to establish the rational ground of a true science of right. Since “the idea of right...and still more of Natural Right, are manifestly ideas relative to the Nature of Man,” it is necessary first to learn to separate what is artificial from what is original in the latter. For it is only when the essence of “Man” has thus been excavated from beneath the accidental sedimentations of history and a “genuine definition of right” constructed on its foundation, argues Rousseau, that we will be able to know with certainty when decisions about the validity of human

political arrangements are themselves valid, and be able to “judge accurately our present state.”²⁵ Apparently with these words in mind, Wordsworth begins *Salisbury Plain*, his “protest poem”²⁶ against war and inequality, with a four-stanza prefatory discourse on the origins of war and inequality, as if to establish, by thus targeting the trans-historical conditions of his historically specific targets of protest, the very condition of possibility of the protest itself as a judgment of (and within) the present. Wordsworth follows Rousseau by running the tape backwards, stripping the human being “of all the artificial faculties he could only have acquired by prolonged progress,”²⁷ and then, having thus produced a figure of “natural man,” plays it forward again, showing the gradual evolution of political communities, and with them the concomitant development of increasingly complex systems of inequality, increasingly powerful war machines, and an increasingly refined faculty of reflection which allows the poor and other subjects of domination to *know* that they are poor, indeed to reflect on the contingency of their condition—to “reflect on the state,” Wordsworth writes (SP 1.23), inscribing within his genealogy not only the origin of political philosophy but also the possibility of the genealogy itself.

We saw how, in both the backward and the forward movements, *shelter* serves as Wordsworth’s master figure. For of all the a posteriori acquisitions which must be subtracted to execute the reduction, he especially privileges figures of artificial shelter: any protective shield, mechanism of defense, or security system external to the living body and added to it in order to supplement the defenses which, because they already belong to it organically (“by nature”), are spontaneously available to a human or any other animal by right of their very animality. But an

²⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Men*, in *The Discourses and other early political writing*, 125. *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, 53. Cf. my discussion of Wordsworth’s use of Rousseau in Chapter Two: “‘Unhoused Life’: Biopolitics and Biopoetics in Wordsworth’s Salisbury Plain Poems.”

²⁶ For *Salisbury Plain* as “protest poem,” see Stephen Gill, “‘Adventures on Salisbury Plain,’ and Wordsworth’s Poetry of Protest, 1795-97,” *Studies in Romanticism* 11, no. 1 (Winter, 1972). See also his Introduction to *The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth*, 4-7.

²⁷ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, 134; *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité*, 64.

animal, for Rousseau, is precisely an autonomous self-protection machine: “nothing but an ingenious machine to which nature has given senses in order to wind itself up, and, to a point, protect itself against everything that tends to destroy or disturb it.”²⁸ Wordsworth’s reduction thus produces an exposed, naked “savage” reduced to the zero-degree of his animality, “unhouzed” of every protective apparatus which does not intrinsically belong to the self-protection machine he already is. What then unfolds is the progressive emergence of artificial systems that shield life from forces that would otherwise destroy it: walls and fortresses, the mastery of fire, the faculty of rational reflection, and finally the state itself, which, at a certain level of complexity, shelters some bodies by unequally distributing exposure to others. All of these historical acquisitions, for Wordsworth, are *shelters*, if only because in their absence life is mortally exposed.

The reduction becomes destructive—as if possessed by a death drive that reorients it not to origins and ends but to obliteration. This, I argued, constitutes a Lucretian swerve in Wordsworth’s text that haunts his reenactment of Rousseau and threatens to interrupt it, being irreducible to the teleological rationality necessarily involved in the very possibility of any transcendental reduction. Indeed, what seems to swerve is the reduction itself. It swerves from a procedure modeled on geometry that seeks an ideal origin by means of a retrospective inference of reason, to a process of material destruction drawn from Lucretius’s apocalyptic vision of nature dying as the walls of the world—its sheltering “ramparts”—dissolve back into the primordial chaos of atoms. At play is therefore a second exposure, a second finitude, which threatens not only the natural life of living beings, or for that matter the possibility of Rousseau’s project, but the teleological organization of the world. Between these two exposures, then, Wordsworth’s poetry produces figures that resemble a kind of “bare life” which indeed retain a link, despite the radical scale of these exposures, to the

²⁸ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, 140. *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité*, 71: “Je ne vois dans tout animal qu’une machine ingénieuse, à qui la nature a donné des sens pour se remonter elle même, et pour se garantir, jusqu’à un certain point, de tout ce qui tend à la détruire, ou à la déranger.”

political. But they are exposed not only from empirical shelters or from the law, but also from the sheltering conditions of survival: they are bare of their own *possibility as life*. And yet they live.

Wordsworth's poetry of life thinks biopolitics from the vantage of *impossible life*.²⁹

In the *Salisbury Plain* poems, this thinking is visible in the obsessive depiction of the originary violence by which sovereignty establishes itself and founds the community. The visions of human sacrifice in *Salisbury Plain* and the scenes of legal execution in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* and *Guilt and Sorrow* re-inscribe the stakes of sovereignty's self-positing. These scenes do not merely portray sovereign self-institution in the spectacles of ritual killings and executions. Instead, they show sovereignty arising from a violence that seeks first of all to deny, indeed to liquidate, the aporetic condition of impossible life through a killing that founds not only the community, the law, or sovereignty itself, but the very opposition between life and death presupposed by the transformation that violence aims to bring about in its victim. But this victim who is never simply alive before the execution only retroactively accedes to execution after a death which for the same reason cannot simply be death. What I am calling the biopoetics and biopolitics of impossible life arise from its resistance, from the fact that it cannot be killed or sacrificed, but only denied. And so perhaps do the structures of repetition arise, not only within the poems themselves also within Wordsworth's decades-long pattern of repetition, revision, and incompleteness.

The focus of the last section was thus a structural link between (impossible) life and the political. But in the margins of the analytic procedure of reduction in which that structure is revealed, and possibly motivating it, is a preoccupation with the question of life's value. The question is implicitly at stake in the figure of the traveler, about whom Wordsworth's half-playful remark to William Matthews about the poem's total absence of character seems especially apt: "You

²⁹ For Agamben's conception of "bare life," see *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, especially Part Two: "Homo Sacer."

inquired after the name of one of my poetical bantlings, children of this species ought to be named after their characters, and here I am at a loss, as my offspring seems to have no character at all.”³⁰

The traveler is likewise devoid of character. He has no name, no history, no stated reason for crossing the plain on a stormy night, and no destination. The attention of the text falls rather on the precarity of his biological existence, and, as we have seen, its description of his body as a mechanism of synchronized turns alludes to Rousseau’s definition of the animal in general as machine that “winds itself up” in order to move, as though by means of a spring drive, away from death. The traveler’s own concern is precisely to avoid dying of exposure, and whatever first brought him to the plain, his movement across it now serves the single purpose of finding shelter. He is thus truly a case of “anonymous life,” to borrow Jacques Khalip’s phrase, and does what any animal would do in the same circumstances (and he encounters several of them, each better equipped to get itself out of harm’s way than he is)—except that he experiences the biological imperative of survival as a form of subjection. Soon he “resign[s]” all hope and begins to wish for death (SP 7.57), but continues the search anyway, pacing mechanically under the compulsion of an instinct for self-preservation that, like an alien force acting upon him from without, “presses” (SP 5.42) him forward until—“With flight unwilling, / Worn out and wasted, wishing the repose / Of death” (SP 14.119-121)—he finally comes across the ruined shelter where he meets the female vagrant.

The traveler’s alienation from his own blind, animal drive to live, especially when it takes the form of an impotent death wish, already constitutes a judgment on the value of mere survival. Implied here, indeed, is a judgment on the part of a figure of mere life regarding the worthiness of mere life to be lived—and the traveler’s decision, though his very organism seems to constrain him from action, is definitively negative. It is only when *Salisbury Plain* becomes *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* and the traveler gains some character, or rather becomes one, transformed by Wordsworth’s

³⁰ William and Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Early Years: 1787-1805*, 136.

revisions into a discharged sailor who has murdered a stranger in an act of traumatic repetition, does it become possible for him to free himself from the directive of his animal machinery, *survive*, and bend his steps, as it were, away from survival towards death.³¹ In *Adventures*, he begins his journey across the plain for the very specific purpose of evading capture and execution—that is, in compliance with the life drive. But when he learns at the end of the poem that the dying woman whom he and the female vagrant encounter at the cottage is in fact his wife, rendered barely recognizable by poverty and illness, and that her death will be yet another consequence of his crime (to say nothing of his children, who are either orphaned or dead themselves), the imperative of biological survival is finally able to be overcome by guilt. He gains a purpose. His life gains its end:

Confirm'd of purpose, fearless and prepared,
 Not without pleasure, to the city straight
 He went and all which he had done declar'd;
 “And from your hands,” he added, “now I wait,
 Nor let them linger long, the murderers fate.”
 Nor ineffectual was that piteous claim.
 Blest be for once the stroke which ends, tho' late,
 The pangs which from thy halls of terror came,
 Thou who of justice bear'st the violated name!

(ASP 91.811-819)

The traveler is transformed. His aimlessness and extreme disorientation have vanished, along with the tangled mess of swerves he must have plotted for a course as he paced, “all track quite lost” and without any destination to begin with, not so much across the plain as all over it. He has his bearings

³¹ Although critics often refer to the new (and still anonymous) version of the traveler as “the sailor,” I have chosen to continue calling him the traveler for the sake of consistency.

now, and his bearing has changed accordingly. The terrified animal motions of his “unwilled” flight from death, which had been figured in terms of the even more involuntary because essentially non-living (and thus already dead) machine-like motions of inert matter, have become a resolute, fearless, not at all unpleasurable, but above all *willed* movement “straight” toward it: toward the city where death is waiting for him. That his trajectory could have gained such uniformity of direction tells us not only that the plain has become navigable, traversable in a line or two, but that he is no longer passive with regard to the movements of his own body, in thrall to his own animal machinery, driven by it this way or that as though “pressed” from behind, as it were, by the external impulses of mechanical causality. That machinery is now under the control of his will, and he moves on his own power. The change consists in the difference of orientation marked by *toward*. His motion originates not behind him, in the past, but ahead of him. To be “confirmed of purpose” is to be determined, fixed, stamped by it in his very life. The almost religious formulation indicates that he has *become* teleological. He is organized now, placed within the orienting matrix of teleological causality.

On the face of it, his purpose is to take responsibility for his crime—to pay for what he has done with his life and thereby expiate his guilt. It is also, as Quentin Bailey has noted, to renegotiate his relation to humanity.³² The teleology of natural life, according to which every living being is determined by the final end of its own self-preservation, is thus surpassed and placed in death beneath a higher end. And in the interval between his decision and his execution, which is only the short time it takes him to march from the cottage to the city, his life becomes a life worth living. This improvement in quality life can be seen in the dignified deportment of his arrival. But it also registers at the level of his biological existence, within his still living body as *pleasure*. It is as if, now that he has entered the talionic economy of penal law, which stipulates that he must pay for having taken a life by forfeiting his own, he gains pleasure as an advance return on the expenditure that will

³² Quentin Bailey, *Wordsworth's Vagrants: Police, Prisons, and Poetry in the 1790s*, 77.

soon cost him the very possibility of feeling pleasure, pain, or anything else for that matter, ever again.

In the case of the traveler, the question of life's value is a question of economy. For in order to return to the community and his humanity, he must pass through an economy of life and death, and within it we can see both the initial, low value of merely natural life and the sacrificial mechanism for increasing its value such that it becomes worth living. Indeed, it is less a particular decision on life's value than a form of valuation bound to life's very concept, and it matches Derrida's description of the aporia he contends structures the core of the western notion of life's sacredness. According to Derrida, the aporia consists of a "double postulation" between the "absolute respect for life, the 'Thou Shalt not kill' (at least thy neighbor, if not the living in general)," and "the no less universal sacrificial vocation" which regularly puts to not only death members of other species but also human neighbors.³³ Within this tradition, which Derrida calls onto-theology, "life has absolute value only if it is worth more than life."³⁴ Life demands absolute respect not because it is absolutely valuable in itself, "by nature," but because it contains the mark of something that does have absolute value, something from another order, other and higher than life: "what gives value to life is what in life is worth more than life."³⁵ Unable self-sufficiently to produce its own value, to secrete from its own living body a standard that could justify the survival it wants, life can only borrow its worthiness to be lived from the transcendental. Life takes out the loan, so to speak, by subordinating itself to the transcendental in a way that also incorporates it. It is precisely in order to preserve this partial immanentization and to keep flowing this transfusion of value from above, that life periodically sacrifices itself in the name of that foreign, extra-living element it has taken into itself. The very inviolability that calls for the establishment of a proscription like the "Thou shalt not

³³ Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," in *Acts of Religion*, 86.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Death Penalty, Volume II*, 40.

kill” is itself constituted in an originary violation that inscribes death in life through unnatural or artificial means. The only way to preserve the inviolability is to repeat the violation, and the apparatus charged with bringing it about is the whole machinery of sacrifice.³⁶

For Derrida, the logic of sacrifice operates at the heart of the death penalty, though the latter is not necessarily a species of sacrifice. Indeed, that the economy of life and death to which the traveler returns by the end of *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* extends beyond that of the death penalty, with its talionic substitutions of life for life, is indicated by the pleasure he takes in moving so quickly toward death—a pleasure which, as a fact of the living body about to be sacrificed, is exorbitant of the rationality and dignity which ought to be gained through free submission to punishment. At work here is not merely the substitutability of life and death, but the reversibility of the life drive and the death drive. The economy—that is, the economy of sacrificial onto-theology—has extended into his life, into the very structure of the living being. Pleasure, which “by nature” ought to serve the final end of the living being’s self-preservation, has been rerouted to conduct the living being toward self-destruction. This reversal is possible at all thanks to the logical structure of teleological systems, and the system of the living being need only to be linked to the system of law and humanness for its functions, like pleasure, to be thus bent away from “nature.” The death drive is isomorphic with the life drive, and such swerves are only natural. The traveler’s attitude toward the value of mere, natural life is consistent with the onto-theological, and fundamentally teleological, thinking of life of which he stands as a representative figure. For if, when we meet him in the opening lines of *Salisbury Plain*, he seeks shelter, survival, and the human community, by the end of

³⁶ For a more extensive examination of this particular juncture within the logic of sacrifice, see my “The Death Penalty within the Bounds of Life/Death Alone: From the Deconstruction of Life to the Possibility of a Future Abolition,” in *Deconstruction and Survival*, special issue of *Oxford Literary Review*, edited by Lucas Donahue and Adam Rosenthal, December 2018 (40.2): 188-189.

Adventures on Salisbury Plain he merely seeks the shelter of death, and within it succeeds in returning to the human community. Only the telos has changed.

This section will examine the final two stanzas of *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* in more detail in order to track the conversions between the life drive and the death drive within the process of the traveler's return to teleology, the program of which climbs up the old "chain of being:" proceeding from the mechanism of dead matter, to living being as an integrated system of self-relation, to the living being supplemented by a system of symbolic self-relation, to spectacle the body politic at whose heart there hangs an inert sovereign, a spectrally living—indeed symbolizing—corpse. This structure reprises the pattern we have already seen in *Salisbury Plain*, where sovereignty posits itself and institutes death, or rather invents the fable of a simple border between the living and the dead, in order to repress, or rather deny, impossible life. Finally, we will turn to the female vagrant, whose thinking of the "price of being" (SP 35.307) repeats the same logic while effecting a slight yet radical displacement that opens up another politics—the politics, and indeed the poetry, of impossible life. In the next chapter, I will follow this other thinking into *The Borderers*, which pushes both these rhythms to the limit in its fantasy, or rather nightmare, of a life so exposed from sheltering possibility of its own survival that it "[lives] by mere intensity of thought."³⁷

In the above stanza, it is the fact that the traveler has finally been "confirmed of purpose" that tells us that he is becoming-teleological again. Now this re-finalization of his life is dramatized as a transformation within his structure as a living being. Just as his passive enslavement to his animal instinct to survive is first figured in terms of the mechanical passivity of inert matter—that is, in terms of the less-than-animal passivity that belongs to the nonliving, to what cannot affect itself or relate to itself in any way—his guilt-awakened power to direct himself toward goals is manifested

³⁷ William Wordsworth, *The Borderers*, The Early Version, 5.3. 272. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text by act, scene, and line number, following the abbreviations EV for the Early Version and LV for the Late Version.

by especially purposive walking, a literal function of animal spontaneity.³⁸ The first effect of his “confirmation of purpose” is the restoration of his animal spontaneity. It has effected a teleological reintegration of his animality. He seems to be climbing the chain of being. But he employs his newly enlivened power of animal locomotion to conduct himself to the city, where he will be not metaphorically but actually reduced to the passivity of inert matter. His decision, it seems, is to exchange his agonized subjection to the law of biological survival, which the text figures as mechanical passivity and he experiences as the brutal domination of some external power rather than an impulse endogenous to his living body, for subjection to the domination of an *actual* external power—indeed, the very same, and very real, power which until now he has been endeavoring to escape under the compulsion of the law of life (and which it might actually have been possible to

³⁸ At work here is the classical definition of life, exemplified by animal life, to which Kant frequently returns in his lectures on metaphysics: “All matter is lifeless, has no faculty for determining itself, and the principle of life is something other than matter. For every matter remains in motion or at rest until it is altered by something else. Matter has mere receptivity or passivity. The principle of life, however, is *spontaneity* or the faculty for determining oneself from inner principles” (*Lectures on Metaphysics*, 78). Life is a “faculty” or “capacity” for self-modification through the action of an internal principle. The inertia of matter, figured here as “mere receptivity or passivity” is contrasted with a living spontaneity that is radically heterogeneous to matter in general. Identified with self-determination from inner principles, spontaneity appears here the faculty for projecting ends—a teleological capacity or a power of teleology. In *The Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, a discussion of the relation between mere matter and life in terms of physical laws begins to mobilize the wider rhetoric of law in a way that has particular relevance for our reading of traveler’s subjection to the law of life, and Wordsworth’s figuration of that subjection in terms of the inert passivity, or what Kant calls the heteronomy, of merely mechanical matter. Here he distinguishes the “law of inertia” from the “faculty of life:” “This mechanical law must alone be called the law of *inertia* (lex inertiae); the law of an equal and opposite reaction for every action cannot bear this name. For the latter says what matter does, but the former only what it does not do, which is more appropriate to the term *inertia*. The inertia of matter is, and means, nothing else than its *lifelessness* [*Leblosigkeit*], as matter in itself. *Life* [*Leben*] is the faculty of a *substance* to determine itself to act from an *internal principle*, of a *finite substance* to change, and of a *material substance* [to determine itself] to motion or rest, as change of its state” (*Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, 83). The causality of life is, for Kant, at least analogous to the causality of freedom; whereas physical matter is doomed to causal heteronomy, life is essentially autonomous. Now this capacity for dynamic self-relation, which Derrida will call auto-affection, is for Kant only possible thanks to the power of forming representations: “*To live*, properly speaking, means to have a faculty for performing actions in conformity with one’s representations. We call an animal *alive* because it has a faculty to alter its own state as a consequence of its own representations” (*Lectures on Metaphysics*, 295). “A being is living if its power of representation can be the ground of the actuality of its objects. Life is thus the causality of a representation with respect to the actuality of its objects. ... A thing lives if it has a faculty to move itself by choice” (*Lectures on Metaphysics*, 261–262). By contrast, Wordsworth’s traveler experiences his own compulsion to survive as heteronomy—and that passivity, that passion, is figured on an analogy with the radical passivity of the dead. And as we will see, even the act of symbolic self-representation, and perhaps his very capacity for forming representations, is proleptically grounded, even when he still alive, on the representational capacity of his corpse.

escape³⁹): the law whose deadly enforcement waits for him back in the city. But because he approaches it freely, under the power of his own will, and indeed with an autonomy reminiscent of that with which the Kantian subject submits itself to the categorical imperative, he virtually *internalizes* the external power and appropriates it for himself.

He owns it. He walks straight to the city, presents himself to the authorities, and issues a “declaration” of “all which he had done.” At this moment, what Derrida calls auto-affectivity, the possibility of self-relation that characterizes the structure of life, and which is revealed whenever a living being affects itself in some way, undergoes a mutation. There is something here that looks like a transition in the traveler’s soul, to adapt a phrase from the perhaps similarly transitioning hero of *The Borderers*. Animal auto-affectivity, the specific modes of self-relation that define the animal living being, and which activate when a creature senses or feels (itself), but above all when it *animates*, engages its ability to be the cause of its own motion, and thus its ability to resist in some small degree and for at least a little while the dead laws of mechanical causality—these auto-affective possibilities within the structure of animality have been supplemented by another mode of auto-affection, the self-relation of symbolic self-reference. Auto-affection was already implied by Rousseau’s definition of “any animal” as a machine that *winds itself up* in order to move (itself) away from what threatens it. Rousseau’s animal only moves to save itself; the traveler moves to symbolize himself and to save himself symbolically. He positions himself in the “halls of terror” in order to refer to himself, to appear, to exhibit his living body before others. His act of self-positioning has

³⁹ For, as Walter Benjamin observes in “Critique of Violence,” the contingency of positive law’s enforcement, the fact that a criminal can always hope to “get away with it,” is an essential element of its structure. For Benjamin, this is not a bug but a feature, so to speak, of the law’s “threat.” “For law-preserving violence is a threatening violence. And its threat is not intended as the deterrent that uninformed liberal theorists interpret it to be. A deterrent in the exact sense would require a certainty, that contradicts the nature of a threat and is not attained by any law, since there is always hope of eluding its arm. This makes it all the more threatening, like fate, on which depends whether the criminal is apprehended. The deepest purpose of the uncertainty of the legal threat will emerge from the later consideration of the sphere of fate in which it originates.” Benjamin then turns to a useful “pointer” to the sphere of fate, in which the real nature of the threat consists, within “the sphere of punishments:” the death penalty itself. “Critique of Violence,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, 285.

addressees. He has used the locomotive capacity of his living body to refer to himself in his very life.⁴⁰

To answer for himself, he goes to the public space of legal decision and judgment, and lets himself be seen alive. And there he simultaneously performs a second, narrative act of autobiographical self-reference the totality of whose scope (“all”) makes it as much memoir as confession, the counterpoint to the female vagrant’s autobiography and the traveler’s own unwritten life-writing. With this double mechanism of self-reference, the traveler appears before the law, says “I am,” and constitutes himself as a subject of the law. Indeed, for a moment he re-appropriates himself as subject, gathers himself together into the sovereignty of auto-positional self-reflection that almost entirely erases the very public to whom he speaks. For having declared “all which he had done,” he now—and as though it were more a matter of right or title than punishment, or as though he were the one to whom his death is owed—stakes his “claim” on the death penalty. “And from your hands...now I wait, / Nor let them linger long, the murderers fate” (ASP 814-815). By means of this strangely passive imperative (I am tempted to call it a passive aggressive performative), the traveler re-appropriates his own death and, through this denial, survives it. Even as he throws himself before the law in submission, or rather beneath it in subjection, he threatens to *claim* the law

⁴⁰ For the question of this passage from the self-relation of animal auto-affectivity to the self-relation of symbolic self-reference, the capacity to say “I,” see Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am: More to Follow*, 94-95: “This would perhaps be the moment to clarify once more the both subtle and decisive stakes of the ‘I.’ No doubt it will not simply be a case of the relation to self, nor even of a certain auto-motion, an auto-kinetic spontaneity that no one, even the most negative minds vis-a-vis the animal, not even Descartes, disallows in the animal. Let me repeat it, every living creature, and thus every animal to the extent that it is living, has recognized in it this power to move spontaneously, to feel itself and to relate to itself. However problematic it be, that is even the characteristic of what lives, as traditionally conceived in opposition to the inorganic inertia of the purely physico-chemical. No one denies the animal auto-affectation or auto-motion, hence the self of that relation to the self. But what is in dispute—and it is here that the functioning and structure of the ‘I’ count so much, even where the word *I* is lacking—is the power to make reference to the self in deictic or auto-deictic terms, the capability at least virtually to say ‘this is I.’ For, as Benveniste has clearly emphasized, that is what utters and performs ‘I’ when I pronounce or effect it. It is what says ‘I am speaking of me’; the one who says ‘I’ shows himself in the present of his utterance, or at least in its manifestation. Because it is held to be incapable of this autodeictic or auto-referential self-distancing [*autotélie*] and deprived of the ‘I,’ the animal will lack any ‘I think,’ as well as understanding and reason, response and responsibility. The ‘I think’ that must accompany every representation is this auto-reference as condition for thinking, as thinking itself: that is precisely what is proper to the human, of which the animal would be deprived...”

along with his death, since with this utterance, which is presumably addressed to the authorities whose duty it is to apply the law, the traveler renders judgment in his own case. He declares himself guilty of murder, hands down his own sentence (death), and orders that the sentence be carried out. With the fact of this utterance, the traveler has therefore implicitly claimed the right to judge, sentence, and command, and in this moment he less resembles a subject standing with dignity before the law than the very source of law, the sovereign. But it is also to commandeer his own execution in advance and strip it of all legality by making it a suicide.

The authorities obey. They give him his death swiftly, and perhaps not without a certain pleasure. But they are never named as such, and there would be no trace of them at all were it not for the apostrophe at the end of the stanza and the traveler's use of direct address to announce that he awaits his punishment from "your hands." He conjures the hands behind the stroke that will kill him, and dies. In the next stanza, he appears dead, but the agent of the stroke never appears. No magistrate hands down the verdict, no executioner tightens the noose. Nor for that matter is there any description in the stanza of the execution itself beyond the stroke's elliptical reference. Instead, we are told only that the traveler's speech act, his "piteous claim," has been felicitous. It is as though he has spoken his own death and thereby exhausted his spectral sovereignty. The authorities before whom he has declared his confession have almost entirely disappeared. In fact, they only arise as an effect of his apostrophe. They never respond, and we never see them discharge their duty: they do not judge him, they do not deliberate, and they do not make him wait. Instead, they execute his law mechanically, like automata. They have been reduced to the function of mediation, which they perform with machinelike reflexivity and electrical speed. They are the almost imperceptible hiatus within the specular circuit of his own vanishing self-reflection, his self-annihilating return to himself.

The auto-affectivity of animal life is thus supplemented by the auto-affectivity of symbolic self-reference only to be destroyed by it, only to destroy itself. Clearly, if there is a teleological

finality to be salvaged from the traveler's termination, it is that in death he has returned to the human community and restored his very humanness. In this regard, the city itself might be more significant than the unnamed magistrates, and perhaps a rigorously literal reading should regard it, and not any ghostlike ministers of the law, as the traveler's real addressee, and possibly even that of the concluding apostrophe. As his geographical destination, it is the city Salisbury, but as the *telos* toward which his motion is directed (and thanks perhaps to the tension between the particularity of the place name and the generality of the word, so suggestive of abstraction) it carries a strong connotation of the classical *polis*, the political community as Aristotle defines it: the specific sort of association that defines the human being as the essentially political animal, the *zoon politikon*, and which arises naturally as a function of this animal's possession of the *logos*, the uniquely human "gift" of speech:

Now, that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals is evident. Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal who has the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the intimation of them to one another, and no further), the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and the inexpedient, and likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state.⁴¹

The forms of association exhibited by naturally "gregarious" animals are determined by the modes of communication, and the corresponding modes of sense, which a species has at its disposal. Like other animals, human beings vocalize to express pleasure and pain, but they owe the specific

⁴¹ Aristotle, *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens*, 13.

character of the way they live together to speech, which enables them to communicate with reference to normative categories that pertain not merely to the condition of the living, vocalizing body, but also to the state of relations of which the association of bodies itself is constituted. The *polis* is the “association of living beings” who pose the question of their association, and who, in the course of deliberating on how to live together and what is to be done, represent it symbolically.

For Aristotle, it is natural for human beings to live in *poleis* in the sense that it is their essence to do so. It constitutes the very definition of the human. As Geoffrey Bennington has formulated it, the human being is the naturally political animal “in the sense that the nature of any thing is its *telos*, and the *telos* of man is to form part of a *polis*.”⁴² Individuals and families belong to a *polis* in precisely the same way that organs and systems of organs belong to an organism as parts belong to a whole, teleologically. Which is to say that they belong to a whole that is logically (if not chronologically) prior to them, and depend on that belonging for their very being:

The proof that the state is a creation of nature and prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing; and therefore he is like a part in relation to the whole. But he who is unable to live in society, or has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god; he is no part of a state.⁴³

A living being lives in a *polis* to the precise extent that it is human, and still alive. Living in a *polis* so fundamentally defines the human as the naturally political animal that Aristotle regards a truly isolated person not only inconceivable but a logical impossibility. Such a being would be “human” only in name—and to call such a being by that name would be like referring to the lifeless appendages attached to a dead man as “hands” and “feet,” when these had stopped being hands and feet at the very moment death severed them from the system that maintained their potentiality to

⁴² Geoffrey Bennington, “Political Animals,” in *Diacritics*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (2011): 25.

⁴³ Aristotle, *Politics*, 14.

function as, and thus to be, hands and feet, and thus to fall away from their names. The dead man's hand coincides with its name homonymously, and to the same degree as a "stone hand; for when destroyed the hand will be no better than that."⁴⁴ A living being that appears human yet is unable to live in a *polis*, or has no need to, is either less than human (a beast) more than human (a god) or something like the stone image of a human, the fragment of a sculpture formed by humans to resemble the human form—an animal-automaton, perhaps. Note the asymmetry with which this figural system lets its tropes gravitate toward the inhuman. Those who have been teleologically wounded like the traveler, who have been radically severed from the *polis* and thus cut off from their relation to the *telos* in which their being subsists, are thus cut off from the essence of being human *as a specific form of being alive*. The deprivation of the *telos* makes them comparable to beasts in their inhumanity, but because the *telos* defines a form of life, they are also like corpses, once living things now cut off from their source of animation. They are comparable again to what has always been inanimate, and yet has been made by living beings into the image of living form.

In this heterogeneity the traveler is visible. He is in a similarly condition of dysteleology when we first find him on the plain, where his automatic motions simultaneously figure his animality (a privation relative to humanity) and his alienation from the teleological unity characteristic of life (a privation relative to animality). No sooner does he regain his animal auto-affectivity than he employs it in passing from it, from the self-relation of an animal on the move to survive, that lives only in the name of life, to the auto-affectivity of symbolic self-reference: to the humanity of a speaking being willing to sacrifice its animality, its life—and by extension its humanity—in the name of something worth more than life. This sequence maps onto the reading of the opening lines of *The Politics*, notably at work in Agamben and Foucault, according to which the *logos* is a supplementary capacity added to the living being and irreducible to life (that is, in some sense unnatural), rather than a

⁴⁴ Ibid.

natural manifestation of what this particular animal, this especially political animal, simply does—a creature that just naturally secretes the *logos*, which affects it in turn by stimulating its tendency toward politics to make it more and more, and finally hyperbolically, political.⁴⁵ When the traveler arrives at the city and represents himself—or rather, when he presents himself *to* the city, to the community of humans living together, he reaches the human *telos* which nature has ordained for him. He is a man speaking to men. But even more than the fact that this is public speech, speech before a public, what matters here (and what justifies the reference to Aristotle) is that his act of self-reference is articulated with reference to justice. In proclaiming guilt, in declaring “all which he had done” he embeds himself within the *logos*. But he is only a man speaking to men for a moment.

He is only a man speaking to men for a moment—not only because his act of self-reference constitutes his negation in death, but because his addressees, whether they are authorities or the city itself, *do not respond*. Or rather they do so mechanically. This already suggests that there is something about this city that falls short of the *polis*. Wordsworth seems critical of this return to the *telos*, and of the sacrificial logic which governs it. Take the apostrophe at the end of the stanza, which, in the

⁴⁵ Cf. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, 143. This reading of Aristotle, which regards the *logos* as simultaneously what makes the human living being the essentially political living being and also irreducible to life, informs Foucault’s famous description of bio-power: “What might be called a society’s ‘threshold of modernity’ has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies. For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being into question.” It also serves as the basis of Agamben’s distinction between *zōē* and *bios*, which he introduces in the opening pages of *Homo Sacer* by returning Foucault’s famous formulation of bio-power to its Aristotelian source in the *Politics*, where, Agamben argues, “human politics is distinguished from that of other living beings in that it is founded, through a supplement of politicity [*politikā*] tied to language, on a community not simply of the pleasant and the painful but of the good and the evil and of the just and the unjust” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 5). The politicity proper to the human consists not in *zōē*, which Agamben elevates into a concept that designates the mere fact of existence, but rather in a specific *bios*, or form of life, “the qualified life of the polis,” which itself arises not from animal existence but from the *logos*. The irreducibility of the *logos* to natural life can in turn be glimpsed in the enormous leap from the order of pleasure and pain (which are confined to the living body) to the normative orders implied by such values as “the good” and “justice,” which of course cannot be derived from merely biological or natural categories. For an analysis of the function of signification in Aristotle’s text, see the opening pages of Jacques Rancière’s *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, where he notes that “the supremely political destiny of man is attested by a *sign*” (2). For what seems to be at stake here is the link between language and life. For a critique not only of the division between *bios* and *zōē*, but of this interpretation of Aristotle that makes politics the result of a supplement added on to the animal body, see the twelfth and thirteenth sessions of Jacques Derrida’s *The Beast and The Sovereign, Volume I*.

course of suggesting that the traveler's death is less an execution than a mercy killing, gives the owners of the same "hands" figured by the traveler's apostrophe the paradoxically negative name of not corresponding to their name: "thou who of justice bear'st the violated name." Whoever they are, they bear within the text the name of not being worthy of the name they have presumed to give themselves, and thus do injustice to the name of justice. This means that whatever it is, the "stroke" which ends the traveler's life is certainly no act of justice—and possibly not a true application of the death penalty either, or even a punishment at all, for that matter. What it is, however, is a *good death*, a sort of euthanasic blessing which the apostrophe tells us the violators of justice have "for once," and despite themselves, given their victim. In addition to even further complicating the status of his death—which, as we noted above, seems to hover in undecidability between an execution, a suicide, and the paradox of a sovereign's self-legislated execution—by adding the additional possibility of the mercy killing, these lines put ironic weight on the status of the *good*. For in what sense is this a good death if not a just death? If it is simply the euthanasic end of suffering (whether administered by the self or the other), then doesn't it in fact confirm rather than sacrifice the interest of mere animality? And wouldn't this cessation of pain be just as refractory, just as exorbitant with regard to the sacrificial economy, as the pleasure we saw coursing through his body as he approached the city?

Whether or not the traveler's return to the symbolic serves interests other than those which the logic of sacrifice at least *purports* to serve, it involves not one but two appearances before the public. He appears twice, the first, in two spaces. The first, which we have examined at length, is of course that of the law itself, where he is seen and judged by its magistrates, "Thou who of Justice bear'st the violated name." In these "halls of terror" he is seen *alive*, and here he represents himself in his very life, threatening to claim sovereignty and even to eclipse with the circuit of his own self-reflection those same witnesses. The second space of visibility is out in the open, on a public road or maybe the plain itself, and this time he is seen dead:

They left him hung on high in an iron case,
 And dissolute men, unthinking and untaught,
 Planted their festive booths beneath his face;
 And to that spot, which idle thousands sought
 Women and children were by fathers brought.
 And now some kindred sufferer driven, perchance,
 That way when into storm the sky is wrought,
 Upon his swinging corpse his eye may glance
 And drop, as he once dropp'd, in miserable trance.

(ASP 92.811-828)

He appears twice, in two theaters, first alive in the “halls” of justice, and now, after his execution, dead on display in an “iron case.” We have two spectacles, then, two instances of public representation on either side of death, the border he must cross to arrive at his *telos* and accede to the symbolic order. Indeed, they are less divided by death than coupled by it, as by a hinge, and together they constitute a mechanism for carrying him across, a sort of system of public transport.⁴⁶ Each spectacle exhibits its own symbolic activity, and the whole device works by letting them communicate, to relay signals of their symbolic activities to each other. In fact their respective symbolizations only arise in function of this relay structure. Take his appearance before the law. Here, as we saw above, the self-relation of animal life (auto-affectivity under the principle of survival) was first supplemented by the symbolic self-relation of self-reference: of a subject that goes before the law and, confessing, refers to itself and declares “I.” But the traveler’s purpose was always

⁴⁶ Here I am borrowing one of the central motifs—indeed the titular motif—of Karen Swann’s “Public Transport: Adventuring on Wordsworth’s Salisbury Plain,” in *ELH* Vol. 55, No. 4 (Winter, 1988). In analyzing the tropological affiliations between trance and transport, Swann reads several passages that concern the transition, indeed the passage, between the living and the dead.

at least organized by death, if not simply by the intention to die. He approaches the city intending to be executed, and the act of auto-biographical auto-deixis which he performs there, that spectacle of self-symbolization, contains a representation of his death. Indeed, his only actual reference to himself in the present—his only use of the word “I”—occurs not in his confession, which the text doesn’t permit him to utter in his own voice, but in the sovereignly indirect command that he “now” awaits execution. The *I am* must be inferred from a statement that conjoins the “I” and the “now” only to announce (indeed to order) their immanent disjunction. The spectacle of his self-reference does not merely contain a representation of his death, for it *is* a representation of his death. It communicates with and is determined by the spectacle of his corpse in its iron frame.

The literal autonomy with which the traveler first goes before the law and represents himself in his very life, signifying himself within a structure poised dialectically between activity and passivity, is replaced by the sheer passivity of a corpse. In this sense, living auto-affectivity supplements itself with symbolic auto-deixis only to be supplanted by it, at least in the sense that a dead body, as the sign of absent life, the trace of that of which it is the remains, is a mode of *lifeless* auto-deixis, a monstrous parody of self-reference without self-relation. It is as if death, whose constitutive possibility haunts every “I am” in the form of a latent “I am dead” that lurks within the miniscule hiatus which the circuit of self-relation necessarily describes, has erupted out of that gap and swallowed up the complexity of the two-fold reflective structure within the monolithic uniformity of its single, self-same, and utterly indifferent body. The constitutive contamination by death of any self-relation, whether that of animal auto-affectivity or the self-symbolization of the living present, is of course familiar territory. But now consider the spectacle of the dead body. See how alive it is with the power to mobilize the energies and affects of the body politic.

The corpse refers back to the living traveler, just as the latter projects himself forward toward it before he dies. But in addition to representing the traveler himself as a living being and his

very act of self-representation of which it is the seal, since it was precisely a self-representation unto death, the corpse also becomes a symbolic component within, and of, the law. From here it radiates lines of reference. The traveler had been radically exiled to the outside of the *polis*, excluded from its laws and rights, and even from the more general system of the symbolic order, but his corpse has a spot of its own in the “iron case,” whose material solidity makes it a figure for the symbolic security, to borrow David Collings’s language, of which the traveler was so radically deprived.⁴⁷ And its location is the very center. The corpse almost seems to *be* the center. It attracts people, and as they gather around to view its “face,” the corpse *is seen* out in the open, and not only by the executors (and executioners) of the law, but this time by the people of the city, the public. When the traveler appeared before the law to let himself be seen alive, he constituted himself as a responsible subject of the law. In this scene, the corpse “hung on high” to be recognized by the community acquires a position within the matrix of recognizing human gazes which the traveler had been denied.⁴⁸ “They” put the body on display for the people to see, of course, as proof of the violence which the law has at its disposal. But it does more than simply serve as another visual supplement to the logic of deterrence, a second spectacle that follows the theater of the execution to stamp the seal on the theat. For as the crowd gathers around it, the community begins to constitute itself.

The corpse does not merely signify. It attracts bodies, and as they circulate in its vicinity, it focuses, mobilizes, and redirects their affects and energies. It becomes a kind of switch-point, a relay mechanism within a political economy of passions—a libidinal economy of the body politic. It mobilizes and focuses the energies of “idle thousands,” who would otherwise be unemployed, with nothing else to do. Among them are “dissolute men” who gather with their “festive booths” and

⁴⁷ Collings, *Wordsworthian Errancies*, 27.

⁴⁸ Arguably, the lines’ reciprocal recognition which the traveler and the vagrant maintain during their encounter does not constitute such a network. What seems to matter at the end of the poem is specular structure of the public—of “the world” in the sense of society at large.

make no bones about the pleasure they take in watching a person be put to death. Their violent passions have been animated, but at the same time they have been brought within the ambit of the law, recruited in its service, so that their tendency to violence which would otherwise represent a threat to the law itself, has been contained and metabolized. In the case of certain large numbers of “fathers,” it has been put to work in re-affirming the fundamental structure and ordering—what Aristotle would call the “constitution”—of the state itself. Seeing in the corpse an opportunity to siphon off a little of its power as a symbol of public terror, these fathers drag “women and children” to the spot in an effort to supplement their private threat of domestic violence with the public threat of state violence, and thereby reinforce the strength of their own private domination. The traveler’s corpse, in other words, serves as a site of articulation between the public and private spheres, the single site where the various inhabitants of so many disparate households whose goings on are otherwise concealed to each other, gather in the light of day to see each other. It is thus a point of articulation between public law and private law, a relay mechanism between different orders of the patriarchy. The space around the corpse becomes a public sphere for fathers, who gather for the sake of legitimizing in public, in the light of day and the light of public law, their own private enforcement of the law of the father. (The traveler has truly been integrated into the symbolic order in the strict Lacanian sense.) All these violent fathers and their victims constitute themselves as a community in a structure self-recognition—a structure of self-reflection whose very lines of sight traverse the hiatus, the material division, of the corpse. The traveler, who while alive was cast out from the human community and reduced to the machine-like condition of mere survival, becomes in death its empty center, the abyss around which the state, by means of the mortal apparatus of the death penalty, constitutes itself in specular self-reflection.

That this “city” violates the name of justice, and falls far short of a classical *polis* seems clear enough—if only because the currency circulating in its economy is pleasure, and the interest served

is the advantage of the stronger. No one in these crowds speaks. The critical thrust of the stanza is that though his re-appropriation by the symbolic counts for the traveler as his arrival at the *telos* of his life (not to mention its termination), it does not mark the end of the process at all, but triggers the repetition of the cycle—and that, whatever its symbolic function, whatever it does as a sign, rhetorically speaking the corpse is at least as likely to multiply violence as to deter it. The corpse's strange sympathy with its fellow sufferer, together with its ability to send him into a temporary transport away from life, suggests that the teleological structure of the sacrificial logic at work here is circumscribed within a wider pattern of repetition. The *telos* is projected by a machine, like a cinematic image from a film projector.⁴⁹

4. "THE PRICE OF BEING"

But in tension with this pattern is another view of life which perhaps resists the reversibility that characterizes the traveler's attitude toward his own survival. It is associated with statements of value that place exposure above enclosure. Indeed, they often declare a radical preference for exposure—a desire to expose life. Some of them seem to be borrowed directly from Rousseau, like the declaration in the opening stanzas of *Salisbury Plain* that the "many thousands" who sit huddled within the protective shields of civilization are in fact "beset with foes more fierce than e'er assail / The savage without home in winter's keenest gale" (SP 4.35-36). In *The Borderers*, Wordsworth places a medieval peasant on a heath and has him pronounce an unconditional (and seemingly Rousseauist) preference for winter's keenest gale. "Better this," he says, gesturing at the wind, or rather at the general absence on the landscape of any shelter from it, "than to have a case of dungeon walls to screen a man / From the rough visitation of the sky" (The Early Version, 4.1.6-9). Alan Bewell has

⁴⁹ For a different reading of Wordsworth's death penalty, see Mark Canuel's study of the death penalty in romanticism, *The Shadow of Death: Literature, Romanticism, and the Subject of Punishment*, Chapter Five: "Shuddering o'er the Grave": Wordsworth, Poetry, and the Punishment of Death."

demonstrated the influence that the tradition of enlightenment anthropology (of which Rousseau's transcendental reduction is a privileged if complicating example) had on Wordsworth's conception of his poetic project, and indeed a preference for a potentially death-dealing exposure does appear throughout his early writing.⁵⁰

The most infamous case is probably the end of *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, where the poet sentences the old man to death by exposure:

And, long as he can wander, let him breathe
 The freshness of the vallies, let his blood
 Struggle with the frosty air and winter snows,
 And let the chartered wind that sweeps the heath
 Beat his grey locks against his withered face.
 Reverence the hope whose vital anxiousness
 Gives the last human interest to his heart.
 May never House, misnamed of industry,
 Make him a captive; for that pent-up din,
 Those life-consuming sounds that clog the air,
 Be his natural silence of old age.
 Let him be free of mountain solitudes,
 And have around him, whether heard or not,
 The pleasant melody of woodland birds.
 Few are his pleasures; if his eyes, which now
 Have been so long familiar with the earth,

⁵⁰ Alan Bewell, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment: Nature, Man, and Society in Experimental Poetry*. Bewell takes up the status of the figure of "natural man" in the first two chapters of the book: "Retrospective Tales of Idiots, Wild Children, and Savages;" and "First Encounters of the Primitive Kind."

No more behold the horizontal sun
 Rising or setting, let the light at least
 Find a free entrance to their languid orbs.
 And let him, *where* and *when* he will, sit down
 Beneath the trees, or by the grassy bank
 Of high-way side, and with the little birds
 Share his chance-gathered meal, and, finally,
 As in the eye of Nature he has lived,
 So in the eye of Nature let him die.⁵¹

Why let an old man freeze to death while sparrows pluck crumbs from his palsied fingers? What prescriptive engagement permits such an abandonment? Scholarship in recent years has shown that poem's critical thrust is addressed to the poor laws, Bentham's advocacy of "industry houses," and the cruelty of the Malthusian conception of nature. It is better to die out in the open than live enclosed within conditions of exploitation. As David Bromwich has put it, "to be vexed by the wind and the frost is a blessing, compared to the fate of being restrained by the charter of a poorhouse."⁵² The radical preference for exposure can thus be interpreted as figuring "the affirmation of a freedom that no design can have allowed for"—a freedom, according to Bromwich, which stands equally in opposition to Malthus, with his "praise of 'necessity, that imperious all pervading law of nature" which restrains men and animals "within prescribed bounds," and to "those who refer all conduct to a principle of economic utility."⁵³ To thus opt for death by exposure is to take aim at new techniques of biopolitical domination by questioning, as Georgina Green has argued, "the

⁵¹ William Wordsworth, *The Old Cumberland Beggar*, in *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, 497.

⁵² David Bromwich, *Disowned by Memory*, 36.

⁵³ Ibid.

reification of mere survival.”⁵⁴ The thinking at work here seems to be of a piece with the traveler’s sacrificial sublation of life to a higher principle. And indeed, *The Old Cumberland Beggar* regards exposure as preferable not only for the beggar himself, but for the community in which he circulates, since, as Adam Potkay has demonstrated, the repeated acts of charity prompted by his presence habituates his neighbors to kindness.⁵⁵ His exposure, then, represents a sort of sacrificial exclusion constitutive of the community itself.⁵⁶

But at a certain limit, the call for exposure refuses to be assimilated into the economy of sacrifice which, thanks to the reversible structure of teleology, is simultaneously an economy of death and an economy of survival. The traveler’s counterpoint is of course the female vagrant, who, like him and so many of Wordsworth’s lonely wanderers, has been consumed by capital and the war machine only to be radically expelled. First expropriated of her home and de facto the right to access the means of subsistence its relation to the land would traditionally have entailed, and then deprived by war of her family, she finds herself cut off from every human relation, both physically shelter-less and ontologically homeless. Like the traveler, she finds herself reduced to the mere fact of her existence. Take another look at the lament she places at the heart of her autobiography:

Oh dreadful price of being! to resign

All that is dear in being; better far

In Want’s most lonely cave till death to pine

⁵⁴ Georgina Green, *The Majesty of the People: Popular Sovereignty and the Role of the Writer in the 1790s*, 181.

⁵⁵ Adam Potkay, *Wordsworth’s Ethics*, 36.

⁵⁶ David Simpson reads the beggar’s circulation through the community of which he is the constitutive exclusion in terms of “substitutability,” which is “stronger and less negotiable than sympathy,” and “based on a simpler and much more threatening equivalence: it says that each of us could be in the place of the other without doing anything at all to assist in the exchange. It generates not so much a human bond as a state of panic, because identity itself becomes impersonal and subject only to the laws of exchange” (Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification, and Social Concern*, 61). Simpson draws the notion of substitutability as constitutive of community from Giorgio Agamben’s *The Coming Community*. The quotation employed by Simpson defines it as an essential characteristic not of human communities, or even of the human itself, but rather of life in general: “What is most proper to every creature is thus its substitutability, its being in any case in the place of the other” (Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 23).

Unseen, unheard, unwatched by any star.
 Better before proud Fortune's sumptuous car
 Obvious our dying bodies to obtrude,
 Than dog-like wading at the heels of War
 Protract a cursed existence with the brood
 That lap, their very nourishment, their brother's blood.

(SP 35.307-315)

The female vagrant speaks from within the condition of mere life only to question the value of living it. Indeed, she gives direct expression to the low appraisal of mere survival which remains implicit in the case of the traveler, together with its underlying logic of sacrifice. Celeste Langan has argued that these lines register the female vagrant's "discovery of the 'pure form' of being," and that this purity can only be experienced as "impoverishment."⁵⁷ But the discovery becomes intelligible autobiographically in terms of guilt. What has led her to the purity and impoverishment of being—the very process of her reduction, as it were—she tells as the story of her guilt. In this, too, she resembles the traveler (at least in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*), who is able, thanks to the mediation of guilt, to bend his life away from the telos of its own survival, to the telos—or rather the term—of its death and his redemption. Her guilt, however, is political.

"Oh dreadful price of being! To resign / All that is dear in being:" the vagrant is telling us that she has purchased her survival at too high a cost. Though it is tempting to read the final lines of this stanza as a call to radical nonviolent resistance against the imperial war machine—even a call to the starving masses of the English poor to throw their dying bodies in front of the tanks, as it were, in an act of "obtrusion" that is both public spectacle and physical resistance, a barricade of bodies—they are, of course, spoken after the fact, and describe a retrospective wish, a sort of regret-fantasy

⁵⁷ Celeste Langan, *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom*, 78.

that arises from consciousness of complicity in the very political violence they denounce. In her judgment, it would have been far better simply to die of hunger—and, more to the point, to let her children die of hunger—than to have pursued the only course of action that might have saved their lives. Her husband joined the military because they were starving and out of options. Her decision to follow him with their children to America, where she nourished her children and indeed herself on the bloody proceeds of his work as a soldier helping the Empire attempt to put down the revolution, is likewise constrained by poverty, a literally starved choice. That this was compelled by “necessity, that imperious all pervading law of nature” in no way exonerates her (in her own view) from the crime of prizing life so highly, at least in the case of herself and her own, that she was willing to feed on human blood, to make her living like a feral “dog” that scavenges human carrion on battlefields in the pauses between fighting. More precisely, her moral failure is to have been willing to stake self-preservation on the sacrifice of others. It amounts to a speculation in a global economy of sacrificial violence, a bet placed in the hope of gaining survival as its return.

They lose the bet. “All perished,” she says, “all in one remorseless year, / Husband and children one by one, by sword / And scourge of fiery fever” (SP 36.320-322). But the journey to America at the start of this year was a strategy for preserving not only the biological life of each individual, but also their family itself as a coherent social unity, which is closely entwined with the project of securing their survival but not identical to it. The family codes relations beyond biological life; it *qualifies* life, to use Agamben’s language. Its survival would have meant the survival of the vagrant’s identity as one of its members, and by extension her link to a determinate position within the symbolic order that membership implies, the coordinates of which are named by her roles in the first part of her autobiography: daughter, wife, mother. Each of these counts for more than the mere fact of being, which is all that remains to her when her husband and children perish. Or rather, all that remains to her is the epithet that serves in place of her name, itself a sort of biopolitical

classification: the biological description of her sex, joined with the purely negative designation of her lack of a place within the human social fabric. Though she may *have* her life, she has it *as* dispossession, as the loss of “all that” in relation to which life becomes worth living. The “dreadful price of being” is not merely an expression of mourning, the “resignation” in grief of her husband and children, but the resignation of that in relation to which it is possible *to be* human. For her violation of the sanctity of life, which she commits in the name of life, she finds herself condemned to life.

The retrospective fantasy reverses the current but keeps the sacrificial circuitry perfectly intact. Indeed, it may be what is most consistent here with the logic of sacrifice. In it, the vagrant imagines herself staging a great act of refusal. If living on requires her participation in the economy of sacrifice, if she must eat others to be well fed, then she would rather starve. But isn't this precisely self-sacrifice? The fantasy simply replaces the sacrifice of the other (which is allegedly done in the name of mere survival, for the sake of animal existence) with the sacrifice of the self (in which biological survival is denied in the name of a higher principle). In this regard, it is unambiguously sacrificial in the onto-theological sense, and it almost seems to stand as a radical interpretation of Benjamin's admonition against the elevation of mere life above the just life: “The proposition that existence stands higher than a just existence is false and ignominious, if existence is to mean nothing other than mere life.”⁵⁸ But the vagrant's imagined renunciation of life is only an apparent act of pure self-sacrifice, since she allows not only herself but also her children to die, though it is in the name of a just existence. Rather than allowing her to escape the economy of sacrifice, the fantasy doubles it, and then doubles down on her guilt: in the first (autobiographical) case, she had only hoped to be the indirect beneficiary of sacrificial violence; in the second (imaginary) case, she would have committed passive infanticide. But in both cases, life is sacrificed for life.

⁵⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” 299.

Now this sacrificial economy, with its reversals and circuits of substitutions, and which conducts its transactions not only across time into the past but also between memory and imagination, between the real and the virtual, unfolds within a passage which is itself structured by the reversibility and substitutability of *enclosure* and *exposure*. The vagrant's imagined act of self-sacrifice happens twice, first as enclosure and then as exposure. Or at least it is figured twice in its escalating, double comparison to morally compromised survival. "Better far" than "protract[ing]" such a "cursed existence" would be to retreat into the absolute enclosure of "Want's most lonely cave till death to pine / Unseen, unheard, unwatched by any star." The vagrant would entomb herself alive in a cave that isolates her from the possibility of survival and from the world in every sense: from the system of nature that nourishes the living being; from sphere of human life where one is maintained in the possibility of being seen and heard, and constituted in mutual recognition; and from relation to the divine, with its watchful management of one's fate. "Want" is here conceived as enclosure from the possibility of relation in general.⁵⁹ Also better, or perhaps *even* better, would be the reverse: to stand exposed in full public view, to exhibit their "dying bodies" on the public road, "or in the streets and walks where the proud men are" so that the latter cannot have any confusion about their own culpability (ASP 43.383-384). If this reversal can occur, if enclosure from visibility and the world can thus be swapped out for radical exposure to the world, then it seems that the absolute non-relation conjured by the figure of "Want's most lonely cave" is not so absolute after all, and that these two modes of self-sacrifice are arrayed within a logic of equivalence. We first saw how the vagrant's regretful fantasy of opting out of the economy of sacrifice was only the substitution of hetero-sacrifice with self-sacrifice, and that these were organized by a general logic of equivalence, a general economy of sacrifice. This was illustrated perhaps best of all by the

⁵⁹ "Want's most lonely cave" is therefore another figure of what I am calling "impossible life." For when the relation between life and the world has been radically cut, what remains (*of life*: if there is survival, if something lives on in what remains) is impossible life.

fact that even *within* supposed self-sacrifice, hetero-sacrifice could be found circulating. The reversibility of enclosure and exposure seems to imply another economization within what at first purports to be a refusal of economy. It as if the renunciation of life placed on the scale and appraised as “better far” than mere survival is itself internally divided by a second appraisal. If there are better ways to renounce life, then this already implies calculation, and perhaps temporization, on the differences between acts of sacrificial renunciation. But to capitalize on delaying the renunciation of life in order to regain a better return on the loss is nothing other than survival: a sacrificial economy of life.

We are still inside the system of equivalence in which the traveler circulates, with his reversal of life drive and death drive. Indeed, the vagrant’s rhetorical transition from the worldless enclosure of Want’s cave to public exposure before the human community tracks with the traveler’s actual journey from the plain, where he is radically exposed to death and governed only by the animal will to live, back to the city, where he stands before the law to claim his place in the symbolic order and his right to humanity in death. Like him, the vagrant figures herself returning to the human community to appear before her fellow human beings in the public realm. It is better to renounce life here, out in the open, in the space of common visibility. Instead of hiding your dying bodies, she might say to the starving poor, use them to make a spectacle. Demonstrate with your dying bodies, turn them into a manifestation, and by thus committing to justice what little you have left—your body, and the remaining time of its survival—you will recover a *good life* from what would otherwise be mere, and probably very brief, survival. The vagrant has thus found a better renunciation of life to fantasize about. What makes the difference is the spot, the fact that mere survival now takes place in public. Publicity recovers mere life as political image. Life images itself—and here, again, we can see that a certain auto-deixis of life is again a key element within the sacrificial logic of survival. In this imagined scene, life supplements itself with its own representation and by virtue of this

reflection, or rather within the gap that opens up between life and its image, life recovers for itself a value greater than mere survival. Life becomes worth more than itself.

Between the traveler's and the vagrant's spectacles, between, on the one hand, his double appearance before the law and then before the public in his iron case, and, on the other, her vision of the poor spontaneously re-deploying their own dying bodies into the public realm, as if engaged in a direct action that targets what Rancière calls the "regime of the perceptible,"⁶⁰ echoes begin to propagate. The traveler's debut as an exposed corpse especially invites comparison to the vagrant's blockade of exposed, dying bodies, which takes place on the same "streets and walks" where the bodies of condemned men can sometimes be seen on display, and is addressed to the same audience of "proud men" that no doubt includes the magistrates who quickly grant the traveler's request for death, as well as the "dissolute men" and violent fathers who do not bother to conceal their enjoyment as they gather at the scaffold to watch him die. The difference between these scenes of the public body is clear enough: the spectacle of the traveler's corpse belongs to the very sacrificial system which the vagrant's imagined spectacle of the dying poor seeks to disrupt. He aims to return to the symbolic order and becomes a component of its law, the law of the father. The vagrant

⁶⁰ Rancière's notion of the "partage du sensible," sometimes translated into English as the "distribution of the sensible" or the "regime of the perceivable," designates the order of *aesthesis* that distributes to the bodies of a communities their functions, meanings, their very meaningfulness. Politics, for Rancière, names the event of the sudden irruption into the space of a community of another mode of perception, one unassimilable by the regime of perception that maintains the specific structure of inequality within whose ordering matrix its bodies are deployed to the sites where they are determined as subjects. This derangement and rearrangement of the "distribution of the sensible" can open up the possibility of the spontaneous redeployment of bodies to new positions, and thus the formation of new social configurations, and new modes of determining which bodies matter. The applicability of Rancière's thinking to the Vagrant's fantasy of political action is at first clear enough—except that her imagined blockade is performed by *dying bodies*. But what if we read Rancière through the female vagrant? What difference does her irruption of dying bodies from out of invisibility into public view make to the regime of perceptibility they target—when these same bodies will very soon have neither perception nor any function within the social order? Wordsworth's vagrant thus effects a displacement of life within Rancière's thinking, revealing that it is not only what gets divided by a regime of perceptibility, but also, at another level, what sustains the very possibility of any regime of perceptibility. For Rancière's elaboration of what he means by the "partition of the sensible," see *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, as well as *Disagreement*, especially Chapters Two, "Wrong: Politics and Police," and Three, "The Rationality of Disagreement." For a work of political theory that brings Rancière to bear on an analysis of the politics *inhuman* life, see *At stake* for Bennett is precisely the regime of perceptibility that polices the difference between the human and its others (both living and nonliving), producing a blindness to the specifically political—and indeed vital—activities of inhuman matter.

opposes the system of sacrificial phallogocentrism of which the death penalty (his means of conveyance back to the law of the father) is not only an emblem but an integral sacrificial component. That her protest could not succeed in escaping the economy of sacrifice is not to say that it does not interrupt it nevertheless, or that the event of its interruption does not mark the opening of a genuine political difference. It seems to me that if there is such an opening, we would catch a glimpse of it in another difference between them, at first a seemingly banal one. These scenes of public appearance, of the representation and symbolization of life, are not symmetrical. The vagrant's blockade lacks the two-fold structure of the traveler's return to the symbolic order. Whereas he first appears alive before the law, and then dead before the whole city, the wanderer and her masses have only the streets, and the subject of her manifestation is a plurality, at least in her fantasy. What appears there is not the singular subject of moral guilt and legal responsibility, but a "we." And rather than constituting the city, or becoming the principle of mediation of specular self-reflection with which it constitutes itself, they interrupt the flows of its gates and alleys. And whereas he is first sovereignly, actively alive and then dead, they are only ever *dying*. The difference, in other words—and this is where the economy of sacrifice perhaps reaches an imperceptible limit—is that they remain alive. They approach death without crossing over. Death, perhaps the master figure for the moment and the function of negation, is integral to the logic of sacrifice. No sublation can occur without it. Without this expenditure, or at least the risk of its possibility, there can be no speculative return.

What is the price of being? For the traveler, the price of being is death (which he pays not without a certain pleasure). But for the vagrant, the price of being is itself. This is both her punishment and the site of a possible resistance within the economy sacrifice. "Oh dreadful price of being! to resign / All that is dear in being." In the movement from the first to the second line, from "being" to its repetition, it is possible to detect a subtle shift from the abstract noun to the verb in

the present continuous, as though a very slight destabilization had begun to loosen the reification that had transformed the verb into a noun and then that latter element of grammar into a concept able to be regarded by the understanding from a distance as a thing, an “object of thought” which has now begun to dissolve back into the far more subtly interfused motions and activity of a dynamic process, and the point of view (we might call it a life) immanent to it. When the female vagrant’s autobiography reappears in *Lyrical Ballads* as a separate poem, this immanence receives the rather literal emphasis of an italicized preposition: “Oh! Dreadful price of being to resign / All that is dear *in* being!” (ASP 43.379-380). The lament might be translated: “Oh dreadful price of life! To resign / All that is dear in living!” What is the price of being? The vagrant is *not* mourning herself in advance, conscious that the very fact of being alive incurs a debt that, when finitude comes to collect, will require her to resign, to give up, her being and with it everything that is dear in being. Instead, being (life) is both the price and the purchase. The question, both poetic and political, is to what extent this reduction of the expenditure and the return to the *same* results in a short-circuit of the specular loops that run through the machinery of sacrifice: both its teleological projects and its endless repetitions. Even at the level of the sentence, the effects of a short-circuit can be detected: the ease with which Wordsworth can shift punctuation from one version of the text to the next suggests not the specular movement of a dialectically unfolding idea but an anaphoric regress and the mechanical repetition of language gone blank.

For the vagrant, the politics of ontological emptiness is a politics of life. We have not yet touched on the crucial difference between the traveler (who pays the price of death for murder), and the female vagrant (who pays the price of life for life, the price of being for being). Like the traveler, she is cast out to become a lonely wanderer, physically and ontologically homeless, deprived of all relations and thus of a determinate place within the human community and symbolic community. But he retains the urge to seek physical shelter and human community. When the traveler is unable

to achieve his initial two goals (securing his survival and finding a human community), he exchanges one in favor of the other (returning to the human community in death), a conversion of goals made possible by the preservation of the general structure of teleology. She, on the other hand, is deprived even of the human desire for community:

Some mighty gulf of separation passed
 I seemed transported to another world:
 A dream resigned with pain when from the mast
 The impatient mariner the sail unfurled,
 And whistling called the wind that hardly curled
 The silent seas. The pleasant thoughts of home
 With tears his weather-beaten cheek impearled:
 For me, farthest from earthly port to roam
 Was best; my only wish to shun where man might come.

And oft, robbed of my perfect mind, I thought
 At last my feet a resting-place had found.
 “Here will I weep in peace,” so Fancy wrought,
 “Roaming the illimitable waters round,
 Here gaze, of every friend but Death disowned,
 All day, my ready tomb the ocean flood.”
 To break my dream the vessel reached its bound
 And homeless near a thousand homes I stood,
 And near a thousand tables pined and wanted food.

(SP 42.370-43.387)

We have been comparing the vagrant's fantasy of resistance with the traveler's death driven, teleological return to the human community and to meaning. He achieves this in the form of his own corpse which, as we have seen, becomes a strangely animated point of articulation at the heart of the polis. So far, we have seen how the female vagrant's imagined resistance to this vision of sacrificial sovereignty unconsciously recapitulates its logic. But her imagined resistance remains just that, a retrospective fantasy, and it must be strictly distinguished from what she does in fact: nothing. Indeed, one of the most striking formulations of what I have been calling the poetics of impossible life occurs in the above passage, where she describes an experience of suffering indifference that is perhaps irreducible to the act of self-sacrifice she wishes she had carried out instead.

More than the traveler, the vagrant is teleologically wounded. The machinery of war and capital have indeed reduced her to life as such, but not only by restricting her to the imperatives of biological survival and the interests of her animal body. They have also destroyed her desire to live in common with other human beings, to return to the human community. The damage extends to her psyche; it affects the structure of her subjectivity. But her indifference is even more radical. For in this passage, she describes herself hanging suspended within survival without wanting either life or death. There is no trace in this moment of a desire to secure a life worthy of being lived, or for that matter any willingness to sacrifice others to do so. Nor does she exhibit any impulse to sacrifice herself in the hopes of retroactively making her life a good one by means of a good death, and maybe even attaining the reward on the other side of a life beyond life. This would be the very form of teleological desire, and she suspends it here. But she also stops short of merely suicidal desire, which would be structurally teleological even if the death it wants isn't made noble by reference to a higher good. In the next chapter, we will pursue this paradoxical desire for non-desire,

a desire to remain suspended in one's own condition of impossibility, into the *Borderers*—whose sacrificial economies of survival are determined by the desire to live without life, to live on thought alone.

THREE

RE-SIGNING BEING: THE PROBLEM OF VALUE AND THE FORMULATION OF A CRITIQUE OF LIFE AT THE BORDER OF *SALISBURY PLAIN*

The many men, so beautiful!

And they all dead did lie:

And a thousand thousand slimy things

Lived on, and so did I.

~Samuel Taylor Coleridge¹

The value of a thing sometimes does not lie in that which one attains by it, but in what one pays for it—what it costs us.

~Friedrich Nietzsche²

Judgments, value judgments about life, for or against, can in the final analysis never be true; they have value only as symptoms, they can be considered only as symptoms—in themselves, such judgments are stupidities. One must absolutely reach out and try to grasp this astounding finesse, that the value of life cannot be assessed. Not by the living, since they are parties to the dispute; in fact, they are the objects of contention, and not the judges—and not by the dead, for another reason.—Thus, when philosophers see a problem in the value of life, this even amounts to an

¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, in *The Major Works*, 56.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 74.

objection to them, a question mark attached to their wisdom,
an un wisdom.—What?

~Friedrich Nietzsche³

Who, in a text, ever died a death not fictitious?

~Jean-Luc Nancy⁴

1. AN APORIA IN A DREAM

Being has a price. Consider again the female vagrant's lament, where she mourns not only the death of her family but also her own survival:

Oh dreadful price of being! to resign
All that is dear in being; better far
In Want's most lonely cave till death to pine
Unseen, unheard, unwatched by any star.
Better before proud Fortune's sumptuous car
Obvious our dying bodies to obtrude,
Than dog-like wading at the heels of War
Protract a cursed existence with the brood
That lap, their very nourishment, their brother's blood.⁵

She thus looks back to judge the moral worthiness of her life and to sum up its lesson. As we saw in the last chapter, the vagrant's "crime," at least in her own view, is to have violated the sanctity of life for the sake of preserving her own life and the lives of her children. In a condition of extreme

³ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 13.

⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, 48.

⁵ William Wordsworth, *Salisbury Plain*, in *The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth*, 35.307-315. All quotations will hereafter be cited parenthetically within the text by stanza and line number, following the abbreviations SP, ASP, and GS for *Salisbury Plain*, *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, and *Guilt and Sorrow*, respectively. Unless otherwise noted, I will be referring to Gill's reading texts throughout. To indicate citations of elements of the volume's scholarly apparatus, like Gill's Introduction, I will place *Salisbury Plain Poems* in parenthesis, followed by page number.

poverty and seeing no other options for clothing, feeding, and housing their children, she and her husband had made a starved choice. He joined the military, and they moved as a family to North America, where he made a meager but bloody living off the effort to put down the revolution. But what turned out to be the empire's geopolitical setback was this family's catastrophe. Within a year, she tells us, every member of the family was dead but her (SP 36.320-322). They had sought to preserve themselves by living off human blood, indeed by feeding on it. Joining the "brood / That lap, their very nourishment, their brother's blood," is a risky survival strategy, and it is no surprise that the vagrant and her husband succeeded not in nourishing their children but only in getting them devoured. But this substitution of the brother's blood for the mother's breastmilk reveals the logic of their crime. They had placed the putatively "natural" kinship of the family, with its interest in biological reproduction and survival, above the kinship of humanity. They had permitted the (supposedly) natural brother to eclipse the claims of their (supposed) fraternity with their fellow human beings—and thus ceased not only to be a family but even to be human, transforming instead into a monstrous inhuman "brood." To pursue mere survival as an end in itself is to elevate mere life above the good life, that is, the *ethical* life. Such an existence is a "cursed existence," and the vagrant's punishment is to suffer its "protraction" in the form of a survival without value.

The price the vagrant has paid for her survival (for the preservation of her "being") is thus the loss of everything in it that once made it worth prizing. So much for her crime and punishment. But as to her life's lesson, it is that everything could have been averted. None of it was necessary and there had been a choice from the beginning: to refuse survival. It would have been "better far" simply to accept death for both herself and her children than to have staked their survival on the deaths of others. It would have been "better far" simply to have resigned life directly in death than to have thus purchased it in a form radically severed from the possibility of any value. In the last chapter, we compared her retrospective fantasy of death with the traveler's actual death. Like the

vagrant, the latter does long for death in moments of despair during his night wandering through the dysteleological chaos in which we find him in the early stanzas of *Salisbury Plain*. But he becomes able actively to seek death in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, when he becomes a discharged sailor guilty of murder. For the character—and perhaps for Wordsworth, who named the final version of the poem *Guilt and Sorrow*—death is a means of expiating that guilt and restoring his place within the human community. He does an about face and leaves the plain, marching straight—and “not without pleasure” (ASP 91.812)—to the city where he goes before the law, declares his guilt, and claims his right to the death penalty. The sentence is carried out (so swiftly that the text almost seems to represent his execution as the performative effect of his speech) and the traveler assumes his new, post-mortem position at the heart of the polis, where his corpse is put on display as a dissuasive spectacle of the law’s threat, and where “fathers” bring their wives and children (ASP 92.811-828)—apparently to siphon off a little of its deterrent power as a supplement to their own private violence. In other words, in death, the traveler thus returns from radical exile outside the human community to become an element of the apparatus of the law, not only of the state but also of the father. I argued further that this return to the law is also a strategy for (re)instating a relation to a teleologically organized world. Indeed, it suppresses the condition of “impossible life” in which we first find him suspended, and in which the opposition between life and death has not yet been established. The death penalty here establishes not only sovereignty (be it the sovereignty of the state or of the father) but this ontologically primordial opposition. What the traveler reveals to us, I argued, is a structural solidarity between political sovereignty and the divisions that sustain the ontological sovereignty suggested wherever there is a relation to a “world,” and orient one within it by constituting the matrix of its most fundamental dimensions and directions: space and time, the living and the dead.

When we compared the traveler's death-driven return to the city to the death which the vagrant wishes had ended her before she made herself complicit in war, their political difference—their difference with regard to what we might call the politics of sovereignty—was striking. In her fantasy, the vagrant brings herself and her children to the edge of death twice: first, within the radical enclosure of “Want's most lonely cave,” where she and her children would be sealed off from the world both as a source of nourishment and as the teleological system that organizes and distributes destinies (for here they would be “unwatched by any star”), and then out in the open, where their “dying bodies” are fully exposed to public view and the physical force of the approaching war machine in whose way they've thrown themselves.⁶ This movement from enclosure to exposure, from the deadly enclosure of the cave to a situation of deadly exposure within the city, tracks with the traveler's journey back from the chaos of the plain, where his disorientation and separation from the world are indicated by the absence of any stars (SP 12.103-13.117), to the city, where he reorients himself in relation to the human community and the world through death. Like the traveler, the vagrant returns (though in fantasy) to the city to die. Yet the death she imagines occurring there, which she implicitly deems “better far” not only than life but also than the death that would be secreted away in the cave, does not incorporate her body within the law or make it an element of its apparatus. Instead, she and her children go back to the city to die in full view, to make their deaths an “obvious” “obtrusion.” The second death is superior to the first because it is *staged*. Because she thus makes it *seen*, the second, better death converts the vulnerability of their exposed bodies into a recalcitrant jutting forth that just might jam the machinery that so easily consumes the traveler in the end. Their deaths become a form of resistance.

⁶ There is a question here as to whether the vagrant includes her husband in this suicidal “we.” It seems to me that she does not, which would suggest, on the one hand, that she assumes full responsibility. But it also suggests an identification of her husband with the war machine. He implicitly belongs to the class of “fathers” who bring their children and spouses to the scaffold to witness executions. Indeed, identification of the figure of the father with violence is prominent in the *Salisbury Plain* poems.

It seems clear enough that the vagrant's retrospective fantasy of the better death differs politically from the traveler's actual death in its resistance to the sovereignty of law. In the last chapter, I asked whether it also serves as a site of possible resistance to the more fundamental tendency expressed in the traveler's return, of which the patriarchal vision of sovereignty is a symptom: the drive to rebind life to a telos. But despite its marked difference, her fantasy revealed itself to be fundamentally motivated and organized by the same drive to re-teleologize life. It is, of course, a fantasy of suicidal self-sacrifice calculated to redeem life's worth. The economic circuit that exchanges the first death for the second, "far better" one turns on a comparative assessment that measures the respective value of each death against the standard of life. To make the choice between them, the vagrant asks: Which is better for life? How much value would retroactively accrue to the account of the life fully spent in death? The better death is better able to make the life it ends a *good* life. At stake in the vagrant's fantasy is indeed the deeper, politico-theological fantasy (which she and the traveler share alike) of the coincidence in death of term and telos. The vagrant and the traveler share a wish for a death that not only terminates life but joins it to its retroactively redeeming telos. But this telos is other than life; it must belong to a dimension above and beyond it. The vagrant's fantasy of death obtains its political specificity, which is articulated in its *opposition* to the traveler's own death-driven return to the city, only by virtue of entering the same economy of sacrifice. It stages its own sacrificial subordination of natural life to a principle transcendent to it, a principle foreign to life and impossible ever to be derived from it or fully reduced to it.

But all of this is the vagrant's *fantasy* of self-sacrifice. For she remains, in fact, alive. Indeed, the chance of a possible resistance to the drive to re-teologize life appeared not in her retrospective fiction of how she wishes she had died, but in what she did in fact—or rather, in her recollection of the dreamlike "transport" that befell her on her journey (her literal transportation) back home across the Atlantic. Now this doubled scene of transport within a transport presents us with a paradoxical

nonpassage that might resist the death-driven rebinding of life to a telos. Its structure is also emblematic of what I have been calling Wordsworth's poetics of impossible life. The vagrant remains alive. And she is miserable:

Some mighty gulf of separation passed
 I seemed transported to another world:
 A dream resigned with pain when from the mast
 The impatient mariner the sail unfurled,
 And whistling called the wind that hardly curled
 The silent seas. The pleasant thoughts of home
 With tears his weather-beaten cheek impearled:
 For me, farthest from earthly port to roam
 Was best; my only wish to shun where man might come.

And oft, robbed of my perfect mind, I thought
 At last my feet a resting-place had found.
 "Here will I weep in peace," so Fancy wrought,
 "Roaming the illimitable waters round,
 Here gaze, of every friend but Death disowned,
 All day, my ready tomb the ocean flood."
 To break my dream the vessel reached its bound
 And homeless near a thousand homes I stood,
 And near a thousand tables pined and wanted food.

(SP 42.370-43.387)

The second transport is itself only another fantasy. This psychical “transportation” takes place during the physical transportation that conducts her across the ocean and is also, moreover, *about* it. Its manifest content, that the ship carrying her will never reach England, expresses (according to the vagrant’s self-analysis) a “wish to shun where man might come.” The desire permanently to avoid “man” takes the form of a dislocation of means from end, the radical suspension of the teleological organization of the world. It is the impossible fantasy of the ship forever “roaming the illimitable waters round” without ever encountering land, as though it had crossed unawares through some magic portal into an ocean world without continents, or as though the Atlantic itself were “stretched and stretching” (like the plain around the traveler) at a rate greater than the ship’s possible traversal of it, becoming a “mighty gulf of separation” without limit or bound, immeasurable. This dream of separation from the system of a telos is the fantasy of impossible survival: the image of a perpetually wandering ship that never sinks.

But it is also the fantasy of avoiding the human community after death. By keeping the ship from ever finding the bound of land, the vagrant keeps close a watery grave whose liquid surface can never retain the imprint of a memory or bear the weight of any epitaph. Because a patch of ocean makes a lousy spot of time, burying oneself at sea seems like a reasonably good strategy for postmortem avoidance of human shores. Human communities try to include the dead, and indeed to preserve their membership, precisely by remembering them. What is so striking about the vagrant’s “dream,” however, is that she characterizes the nearness of death in terms of community. Here she will “gaze, of every friend but Death disowned, / All day, my ready tomb the ocean flood.” The absent human community finds a substitute in friendship with death—and yet she holds herself back from communing with it. If she is disowned of every friend, why not close the gap with a step or two and fall headlong into the gigantic, planetary grave whose opening mouth is all she can see? If

the “price of being” is to “resign all that is dear in being,” then why not resign the price of being itself in death?

Why does the vagrant suspend herself at the edge of life? The protraction of her pause at the edge, her suspension of herself before death, arises as a function of the logic of her first crime. To have sacrificed the lives of others for the sake of her own life and the lives of her family is to violate the sanctity of life in the name of life. But because the family as such is not a purely natural, biological formation, the value of its survival can itself be justified by making reference to its sanctity. If we abstract from the circumstances of the crime the particular differences between self and other, together with the self-interest which motivates it, we see that *the vagrant has violated the sanctity of life in the name of the sanctity of life*. The tautology goes some way in explaining why she could not, in fact, act on her fantasy of suicidal self-sacrifice. To destroy one’s living self, or some other whom one regards as a quasi-natural extension of oneself (and whose alterity one thereby runs the risk of denying) is nevertheless a destruction of life and a violation of its sanctity.⁷ To throw herself into the sea now, having been so radically stripped of all cultural formations as to be reduced to a condition she describes as mere “being” would arguably be a more serious transgression of the ban, since there is nothing left but life to be the object of her violence.⁸ Her punishment is itself a diligent

⁷ To be more precise here, we should say that if the ban on harming life is a properly *ethical* injunction, then it is not that it disregards the distinction between self and other, as if life belongs to a substrate deeper than such distinctions that indicates a prior unity, but rather that life as such is always other wherever it is encountered and regardless of who encounters it and to whom it putatively belongs. To the extent that I encounter my life, I encounter it in its alterity. For Derrida’s thinking of the radical alterity of every other, see *The Gift of Death*, which multiplies and explores variations on the phrase, “every other is wholly other.” For a recent reading of Wordsworth through Levinas, see Adam Potkay, *Wordsworth’s Ethics*.

⁸ Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 380. The logic of the aporia in which the vagrant finds herself can be further clarified by Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the twentieth-century historical crisis of stateless people. Statelessness presents a dilemma to the logic of rights. If there are in fact “rights of man” which are logically prior to and condition the “rights of the citizen,” then the condition of statelessness is precisely the condition when they should apply. And yet this situation is in fact a condition of extreme vulnerability and rightlessness. She refers to Burke—and almost seems to recast his critique of the rights of man as their romantic deconstruction: “These facts and reflections offer what seems an ironical, bitter, and belated confirmation of the famous arguments with which Edmund Burke opposed the French Revolution’s Declaration of the Rights of Man. They appear to buttress his assertion that human rights were an ‘abstraction,’ that it was much wiser to rely on an ‘entailed inheritance’ of rights which one transmits to one’s children like life itself, and to claim one’s rights to be the ‘rights of an Englishman’ rather than the inalienable rights of man.

observance of the law that protects life's sacrality. And yet her survival, precisely because it is *mere* survival, constitutes a protraction of the self-interested biologism that motivated the crime. If it is not the repetition of the crime, it is a repetition of the spirit in which the crime was carried out. The vagrant must live—and yet she cannot. She is trapped within the amber of the aporia of impossible life. The difficulty here, however, is that she experiences this aporia not as the imposition of external commands but rather as *desire*. This is, after all, a fantasy and a dream. In the most basic sense, the use of the word “dream” in this passage serves as an index of unreality. What “Fancy wrought” is the false illusion that the ship would never reach any shore. What does it mean to desire that one's life be captured in such a trap? What does it mean for life to desire its own impossibility—yet without desiring death?

My hypothesis here is that the structure of this aporia resists the drive to re-teleologize life, of which sacrifice, for both the traveler (in his actual death) and the vagrant (in her retrospective wish for death), serves as the transcendental technology. As I pointed out above, this resistance operates at a far more fundamental level than the level at which her fantasy of self-sacrifice opposes the traveler's real self-sacrificial return to the law. But this is not to say that the resistance is itself without any politics, or that it possesses a transcendentalism immunized against the political. Rather, what is poetically at stake here is the condition of possibility of politics, a politics before ontology—a politics before the establishment of the teleologies, the architectonics, and indeed the sovereignties

According to Burke, the rights which we enjoy spring ‘from within the nation,’ so that neither natural law, nor divine command, nor any concept of mankind such as Robespierre's ‘human race,’ ‘the sovereign of the earth,’ are needed as a source of law. The pragmatic soundness of Burke's concept seems to be beyond doubt in the light of our manifold experiences. Not only did loss of national rights in all instances entail the loss of human rights; the restoration of human rights, as the recent example of the State of Israel proves, has been achieved so far only through the restoration of the establishment of national rights. The conception of human rights, based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships except that they were still human.” The vagrant's dilemma constitutes a reversal of Arendt's representation of the later historical reality. Unlike the stateless people of the twentieth century, who have learned that to be stateless is to be radically unprotected, exposed to any harm at all, the vagrant observes the ban against harming life all the more intensely now that she has been reduced to what, according to her own description, is mere life.

which then distribute to such categories as life and death their values, titles, purviews, and purposes. In *Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern*, David Simpson notes that in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, the traveler (who is actively guilty of participating in the violence of war, and guilty of murder on top of it) is released from his suffering at the end of the poem in death, while the female vagrant—who is at best an accessory to the crime of war, though certainly its victim—is denied the death that would both end her suffering and round out her story. Why such cruelty?⁹ The answer, I think, lies here: in the trance, the dream of the “mighty gulf of separation” in which she finds herself suspended impossibly between life and death. This is less a punishment than a site of resistance against the (self-)sacrificial desire for death and nicely ended stories, teleologically anchored and beautifully narrated lives. What the female vagrant knows (or at least what her experience of aporia would give one to know) is that even the noblest, most honorable will toward an act of self-sacrifice might very well throw someone else to the wolves in a pinch—and in principle is exactly throwing someone else to the wolves. For in principle suicide is irreducibly heterocide.

But the textual separation between the vagrant’s fantasy and her experience at sea, which is of course only another product of “Fancy,” misleadingly suggests a simple, linear division between the re-teologization drive (expressed in the first passage) and the poetics of impossibility that resists it (expressed in the second). The division is not just too simple but also analytically incorrect, since such a clean boundary, with its orientation between *this* and *that*, is exactly what the poetics of impossibility complicates and resists. So far, I have been perilously close to marking the difference between the two passages as that between her retrospective fantasy—what in the present of her narration she says she wishes she had done—and what according to that narration she did in fact do. Their difference is far more complex. Both are records of fantasy. The first, her retrospective fantasy, occurs in the narrative present of its telling, which the poem marks as happening “live,”

⁹ David Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification, and Social Concern*, 56-57.

spoken aloud by the vagrant and addressed to her companion, the traveler, before he dies at the end. The second fantasy, the dream that befalls her at sea, is a fantasy which that narrative purports merely to recall. But the narration of a fantasy, even a merely remembered one, cannot avoid implicating itself in the fantasy it records. This alone is enough to exclude the possibility of any simple boundary between them. “So Fancy wrought” necessarily applies to each.

The division between the two passages is further complicated by the fact that the second fantasy did not necessarily end, or at least end permanently, with the ship’s arrival at port. “To break my dream the vessel reached its bound,” she says (SP 43.385). But we find her saying it on Salisbury Plain, a landscape which each version of the poem systematically likens to the sea, and which the vagrant herself finds to be a useful metaphorical resource for depicting the Atlantic Ocean:

Peaceful as this immeasurable plain
By these extended beams of dawn impressed
In the calm sunshine slept the glittering main.

(SP 352-54)¹⁰

By venturing into a landscape whose features resemble the sea, and which is itself another “mighty gulf of separation” that cuts off from the earthly world those who attempt traversing it, the vagrant suggests that her “only wish” remains the same, “to shun where man might come,” and that she still deems “farthest from earthly port to roam” to be, for her, “best” (SP 42.370, 377-378). If the vagrant’s dream did shatter when she set foot on firm land, it has since returned. Her autobiography, the very narrative that contains the two passages we have been examining (the one that affirms the sacrificial re-teleologization of life, the other that resists it), is uttered from within that dream. Their division and opposition are preceded by their mutual interweaving within the same fantasy, the same

¹⁰ For exemplary passages that liken the plain to the sea, see SP 109-110, ASP 174-75, and GS 138-39. See also my discussion of this theme (and these passages, including that quoted in full here) in Chapter One, 58-59.

dream text, and thus perhaps within the same aporia. It will take more to isolate what in the aporetic dream can be said to resist the drive—which we have seen can be either of life or death—to rebind life to a telos. For it is not clear how the resistance to re-teleologization is not itself teleological, nor how a dream, a wish fulfilment, a function of desire, could possibly perform that function counter-teleologically, which is to say counter-functionally. It is a question of rethinking the dream, and the wish fulfillment it implies, in relation to the structure of the aporia.

It is also necessary to examine more closely the relation between a dream like that of the vagrant and the death drive, the possibility of which Freud discovers in dreams of traumatic repetition that refuse to be read as wish fulfilments in accordance with the pleasure principle as wish-fulfilments. In the last chapter I argued that at least within the Salisbury Plain poems, the life drive and the death drive reveal themselves to be two modalities of the drive to (re-)teleologize life, and that between them there exists an isomorphism. Otherwise the traveler's desperate wish to live could not so easily be redirected toward death. Nor could the vagrant's reflections on the ethical cost of her family's attempt to live on accommodate the assertion that it would have been "better far" to die. Nor for that matter could it transform with this very judgment into an economy of death within whose system of exchange there circulates not possible goods for life, or even possible deaths (and death can always be economized in the interest of life, at least when it comes to the death of the other), but retrospective fantasies of suicide, that is, acts of death which in addition to not serving the interest of life are impossible as such, unrealizable in the world: acts of deaths which, because their time has passed, can only be fictions. This chapter takes its cue from the possibility that the vagrant's second dream, her fantasy at sea, bears witness, in its aporia, to a movement beyond the pleasure principle, the life drive (of which the pleasure principle is a subsidiary function), and even the death drive, which Freud places on the far side of the life drive and its interpretability.

2. THE GLOWWORM'S "UNEFFECTUAL FIRE:" "THE ROAD EXTENDED O'ER A HEATH"

Many of the pieces Wordsworth composed at this time are variations on the same aporia. What is at stake is consistently the question of life's value, and the ethical and political dilemmas that arise from the fact that, though natural or biological life seems spontaneously to exhibit from within itself an impulse to self-preservation attributable to the operation of an inner principle in terms of which the living being can then be defined (like Freud's life drive or Spinoza's *conatus*), it nevertheless cannot produce a principle that *ethically justifies* its self-preservation with the same spontaneous self-sufficiency. To the extent that an ethical justification is determined by disinterest, a living being's (self-)interest in maintaining its own existence is haunted by its nonidentity—sometimes a “mighty gulf of separation,” sometimes an almost imperceptible fracture line of difference—with the possibility of its claim on survival, its claim on the right to exist.¹¹ Natural life might always be able to muster *force*, but it does not obviously possess *right*.

Take “The road extended o’er a heath,” a fragment composed during the transitional period between *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* and *The Borderers*. Its speaker, one of Wordsworth’s solitary travelers, tells how she once wandered off the “public way” and set out across a heath in order to cut a shorter path to her destination. The idea turned out to be a bad one:

The road extended o’er a heath
Weary and bleak: no cottager had there
Won from the waste a rood of ground, no hearth
Of Traveller’s half-way house with its turf smoke
Scented the air through which the plover wings

¹¹ Not all ethical systems require absolute self-interest, and it is true that the Burkean perspective Wordsworth will soon adopt makes room for it. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the aporia of life in which the female vagrant is suspended implies a tension between the interest of the living being and a principle of disinterest which is reminiscent of (though not directly *influenced by*) Kant. Indeed, it is possible that, for Wordsworth, Burke represented a way out of the aporia.

His solitary flight. The sun was sunk
 And, fresh indented, the white road proclaimed
 The self-provided waggoner gone by.
 Me from the public way the [common] hope
 Of shorter path seduced, and led me on
 Where smooth-green sheep-tracks thriddled the sharp furze
 And kept the choice suspended, having chosen.
 The time exacted haste and steps secure
 From such perplexity, so to regain
 The road now more than a long mile remote
 My course I slanted, when at once winds rose
 And from the rainy east a bellying cloud
 Met the first star and hurried on the night.

(The Salisbury Plain Poems, 289)

Like the traveler in the *Salisbury Plain* poems, she soon finds herself “all track quite lost” (ASP 165). Her path back to the road is thwarted by the “bellying” arrival of the storm. And within the narrative of the fragment, she never reaches it, either—which even now “keeps the choice suspended, having chosen.”

Her story bends not back down to the road, but rather to her encounter with another living being, a tiny inhabitant of the heath, a bioluminescent glowworm nestled in the “sharp furze.” The event almost has the structure of a spot of time:

Now fast against my cheek and whistling ears
 My loose wet hair and tattered bonnet flapped
 With thought-perplexing noise, that seemed to make

The universal darkness that ensued
 More dark and desolate. Though I had seen
 Worse storm, no stranger to such nights as these
 Yet had I fears from which a life like mine
 Might long have rested, and remember well
 That as I floundered on, disheartened sore
 With the rough element and the pelting shower,
 I saw safe-sheltered by the viewless furze
 The tiny glowworm, lowliest child of earth,
 From his green lodge with undiminished light
 Shine through the rain, and strange comparison
 Of Envy linked with pity, touched my heart,
 And such reproach of heavenly ordonnance
 As shall not need forgiveness.

(*The Salisbury Plain Poems*, 289)

This fragment is clearly related to the *Salisbury Plain* poems.¹² Indeed it has all the elements of one: a nocturnal storm sweeping across a landscape whose unforgiving flatness offers no protection against the wind and rain, but which is inscribed with tracks that, though they probably lead nowhere, are nevertheless able to seduce a fearful, solitary wanderer into following them.¹³ But what makes it so

¹² Robert Osborn points out the connection between this passage and the *Salisbury Plain* poems in *The Borderers*, 108n49—55.

¹³ And like the *Salisbury Plain* poems, it depicts a traveler's quick descent into disorientation as well as the heath's strange mirroring of her confusion as it amplifies its already "universal" darkness with every increase in her own "perplexity." This is exactly how the plain responds to the traveler: "On as he passed more wild and more forlorn / And vacant the huge plain around him spread" (SP 7.61-63). But the scene presented here is a little more complex. Her perplexity is produced by the intermediation of the elements, the buffeting of the wind against the surface of her body. The feedback system seems a step closer to the dynamic structures of *The Prelude*, which are so often produced by the intermediation of wind. Indeed, it resembles a catastrophically literal mirror image of the famous breeze system that opens *The Prelude* and serves as a complex metaphor for the self-thwarting possibility of poetic creation. It also serves as the metaphor for

stylistically striking by comparison, and what seems to look ahead to *The Prelude*, is its abandonment of the Spenserian stanza and turn to blank verse.¹⁴

At the heart of the fragment is the encounter with the glowworm. Indeed this is precisely what the speaker “remember[s] well:” how as she “floundered” through the storm she caught a glimpse of its pale bioluminescence shining “with undiminished light” from within the “furze,” and how this signal prompted in turn a comparison between her own condition of exposure to its condition of “safe-shelter.” Why, she wants to know, does “the lowliest child of earth” get to have a “lodge” and not herself, a human being?¹⁵ She has “fears from which a life like mine / Might long have rested,” and yet the glowworm lives sheltered and without fear, sending out pulses of biochemical self-illumination that indicate nothing but a placid indifference to, and perhaps even a total unawareness of, the storm that threatens the speaker’s life even at the very moment she marks its glow. It is a “strange comparison / Of Envy linked with pity,” but the pity is perhaps more for herself than for the glowworm, whose life fits the landscape without a degree of distance. “A life like mine:” but what, precisely, is a life like hers? In the absence of her encounter with the glowworm, one could safely presume that the analogy is bounded by the horizon of humanity, and that she has in mind a certain kind of human life—probably the kind that is not homeless and never feels any fear of death in the arrival of bad weather. It is easy to imagine the female vagrant using similar

the self-thwarting possibility of its own creation as a metaphor: As “the sweet breath of heaven” blows on the surface of Wordsworth’s body, he thinks he feels a “corresponding mild creative breeze” rise up within him to meet it in reply—a “vital breeze” which, though it seems at first to be “gentle” enough, “travel[ing] gently on / O’er things which it ha[s] made,” soon becomes “a tempest, a redundant energy, / Vexing its own creation.” (*The Prelude*, 1805 1.41-47).

¹⁴ Cf. David Rosen, *Power, Plain English, and the Rise of Modern Poetry*, 35. According to Rosen, it marks a “watershed in Wordsworth’s career,” for here the poet “turns...for the first time to blank verse.” Stephen Gill suggests that it should be read less as a fragment which Wordsworth ultimately chose not to include as a part of any of the *Salisbury Plain* poems, but rather as an effort to express in a new way certain of the philosophical questions he was already attempting to formulate in the earlier two poems (*The Salisbury Plain Poems*, 288). It thus represents a new departure which, Gill claims, soon evolves into *The Borderers*, Wordsworth’s philosophical tragedy and only extant experiment with the form. Gill is building on Carol Landon’s argument, in “Wordsworth’s Racedown Period: Some Uncertainties Resolved,” BNYPL 68 (1964), that it and the other texts in DC MS. 2 related to Salisbury Plain poems were probably composed between 1795 and 1796.

¹⁵ See also Adam Potkay, *Wordsworth’s Ethics*, 61, and Chapter Two, “Close Encounters I,” 31-48.

language to describe what a life like hers would have been were it not for the act of primitive accumulation that expropriated her family of their dwelling and their access to the land and river which had previously sustained their existence. At work in the analogy is an implicit comparison between the speaker's kind of human life, which has no "rest" from such fears, and the kind of human life that rests easy in warm houses. But in the glowworm's light, the analogy overflows the limit of the species, and the implicit, intra-human comparison becomes an explicit—and "strange"—*interspecies* comparison. In a glowworm's light, "a life like mine" is an explicitly *human life*. The moment seems to underscore the unfairness of the speaker's exposure: not only other people (say, those belonging to other economic and social classes), but even this lowly insect has shelter.

The borders of the human domain have already crossed. Rather than evolving into a condemnation of any political or social order, her reflections become theological. Her thoughts leap up from earth's "lowest" creature to what is most high, the divine itself—in order to "reproach" it. Specifically, she issues the reproach against the divine legislation responsible for this state of affairs, the "heavenly ordonnance" that decrees such an unequal distribution of protection against the "rough element and pelting shower," the unjust ordnance of the sky. "Ordonnance," indeed, refers not only to a statutory instrument but also to "the systematic arrangement, esp. of literary material, architectural parts or features, or the details of any work of art; a plan or method of literary or artistic composition; (formerly also) an order of architecture (*obsolete*)"¹⁶ The object of her reproach is God the author, designer, or architect: the being responsible for the plan. She is a mere part of the plan, and she seems on the verge of stating outright that she experiences the plan itself, the very system of the world, as an injustice. An experience of injustice is indicated by the "reproach" itself of course. But it is also communicated in the silent play on "ordnance" in the phrase "heavenly

¹⁶Oxford English Dictionary Online, "ordonnance (n.1)," accessed January 25, 2019, <http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/Entry/132373?redirectedFrom=Ordonnance> (accessed January 25, 2019).

ordonnance.” It is stipulated in the divine plan, in the “heavenly ordonnance” which it pleases God to legislate, that she be exposed to “the rough element and the pelting shower” falling from the sky, in other words the ordnance (the munitions, the weaponized projectiles) that pelt her from the heaven-as-sky, the *metaphorical* heaven Shelley might call the “earthly sky.” The passage works by means of a metonymy that transfers the injustice of the climatological ordnance, which is part of the ordonnance, to the ordonnance itself. If the plan dictates that she be exposed to falling ordnance, then she experiences the plan itself as a rain of ordnance. The order of the world, the very totality of the cosmic design, *falls* on her from the sky like hail. The architectural dimension of the metaphor is probably also active here, especially given Wordsworth’s preoccupation in this period with the danger of falling rocks.¹⁷ The architectural plan of the world is falling on her. It is collapsing into ruins, a rain of fragments and rubble. The reproach is an upward glance that turns the speaker’s focus away from creature at the bottom of the chain of being—radically simple, minimal life, life in possession of nothing but a “lodge” of green light, reduced, in other words, to a spot in time. But now the focus shifts to God. The reproach is an upward glance. This leap from the bottom to the top of the chain of being establishes a link between the principle of life (embodied by the glowworm) and the *theological* principle of sovereignty.¹⁸

¹⁷ Cf. William Wordsworth, *The Borderers*, The Late Version (1842: 4.1.1658-1661). In it, the character Robert declares that in addition to preferring his exposure to the wind and rain to imprisonment, he’d also rather be crushed to death by a falling rock than be confined within the four stone walls of a jail: “Better this bare rock, / Though it were tottering over a man’s head, / Than a tight case of dungeon walls for shelter/ From such rough dealing.” All further references to *The Borderers* will be cited parenthetically within the text by act, scene and line number, preceded the abbreviations LV and EV for Late Version and Early Version respectively. Wordsworth changes the names of almost all his characters in the Late Version, but for the sake of consistency I will use their names as they are assigned in the Early Version. References to sections of the volume other than the play itself will be cited parenthetically within the text by the editor’s last name, Osborn, followed by heading (e.g., Appendix 2), and page number.

¹⁸ It is tempting to argue this constitutes an elision of the political, and that this leapfrogging of the political is yet another example of Wordsworth’s retreat from it. This sort of interpretation of the politics of Wordsworth’s poetry, understood specifically with reference to ideology as a determining factor in the poetry, is well established. Its productivity is undeniable and amply demonstrated. Without contesting the validity of such readings, I would propose that the fragment reveals a tendency (a tendency that I would argue is exhibited by all of his early writing) to approach the question of the political from the perspective of its condition of possibility. If Wordsworth seems here to approach the question the political from the point of view of the transcendental (what is God but the transcendental?) it is in order to displace it poetically—indeed to place it in deconstruction.

What sort of life does a glowworm have? Not a life “like mine.” The glowworm belongs to the same bestiary as the creatures encountered by the traveler on Salisbury Plain, like the shepherd, the spiraling murder of crows, and the bustard. But the glowworm differs from them in being perfectly at home among the furze on the heath. In *Salisbury Plain*, the traveler does not so much encounter the shepherd and the crows as witness them vanish on “homeward” paths that remain nightmarishly inaccessible to him (SP 7.58). The bustard does inhabit the plain, apparently the sole “tenant” of “those limits bleak” (SP.8.68-69). But it dwells there uneasily. Unlike the crows, who don’t live there, the bustard is too poor a flier actually to leave it. Indeed, it hardly gets off the ground when it spots the traveler and tries to flee: “seeing there a mortal wight,” the bustard “outsent a mournful shriek / And half upon the ground, with strange affright, / Forced hard against the wind a thick unwieldy flight” (SP 8.68-72). In its struggle with the elements, the bustard has far more in common with the traveler and the speaker in “The road extended o’er a heath” than it has with the glowworm. The bustard shares a world with its fellow “mortal wight,” the traveler; otherwise it would not be terrified to see him. Indeed, it would not see him. It is buffeted by the same winds and threatened with the same death.¹⁹ But from the glowworm there will never be any acknowledgment of the storm or any hint of the shared world in which that storm takes place. It lives at too small a scale. More a feature of the landscape than a living being that inhabits it, the “lowliest child of earth” might not qualify as a “wight” at all. Except for its singularity, the glowworm recalls the swarming insects in *The Ruined Cottage*:

Across a bare wide Common I had toiled
 With languid feet which by the slipp’ry ground
 Were baffled still; and when I stretched myself

¹⁹ For this dissertation’s analysis of these animals and the function of the figure of the “wight” in the encounter between the traveler and the bustard, see the first section of Chapter Two, “The Horror of the Horizontal.”

On the brown earth my limbs from very heat
 Could find no rest nor my weak arm disperse
 The insect host which gathered round my face
 And joined their murmurs to the tedious noise
 Of seeds of bursting gorse that crackled round.²⁰

But even these insects share enough of a world with the poem's human speaker to swarm over his face as though it were a sort of landscape. Between the speaker of "The road extended o'er a heath" and the glowworm there will never be contact.

It's almost as if Wordsworth has produced in the glowworm another reduction of life to its most minimal possible form. It is life reduced to light—reduced to nothing but the signal, the trace, of itself. In this regard, the glowworm belongs not only to the bestiary that live in the margins of Salisbury Plain (the bustard lives there, the rest are borderers), but also to the series of illuminated signals that recur throughout the *Salisbury Plain* poems. But like the animals, who are mostly seen disappearing, these signals either light up only to blink out again, to reveal blindness, or—and this is the overwhelming majority—they are only mentioned as absent, described as not being present on the plain. They either appear as disappearance, or are named (appear in the text) as never appearing at all:

No Moon to open the black clouds and stream
 From narrow gulf profound one friendly beam;
 No watchdog howled from shepherd's lonely shed.
 Once did the lightning's pale abortive beam
 Disclose a naked guide-post's double head,
 Sole object where he stood had day its radiance spread.

²⁰ William Wordsworth, *The Ruined Cottage*, *The Major Works*, lines 19-26.

(SP 12.103-108)

No transient meteor burst upon his sight
 Nor taper glimmered from sick man's room.
 Along the moor no line of mournful light
 From lamp of lonely toll gate streamed athwart the night.

(SP 13.113-117)

In this display of missing lamps and “pale abortive beams,” the glowworm is a bit like a bustard of light. It's present, first of all, and it stays lit. Lodged in a fragment at the borders of *The Salisbury Plain* poems, the glowworm thus represents the zero degree, if not the vanishing point, where the (vanishing) animals and the (vanishing) lights intersect. Further evidence of a structural connection between figures of *life* and *light* in this period of Wordsworth's poetry is supplied by the single outlier in the series of lights: the absent watchdog whose howls do not “stream athwart the night” alongside the equally absent “lines of mournful light.” Just as the nonexistent howls come from a *watchdog*, the nonexistent line of light comes from a lamp that implies the presence of a watchman; it would not be lit if the toll gate to which it is attached were not manned. These are not just lights but signal systems, lines of communication that would, were they present, constitute the points of articulation between the parts of the world. They are the sutures of its arrangement, the infrastructure of what I have been calling the teleological organization of the world. In *Salisbury Plain*, they are either plainly absent or appear only to “abort” the visible in an ironic discharge of light's function, like the lightning flash that reveals only a “naked guide post's double head, / Sole object where he stood had day its radiance spread.” The lightning flash reveals unlabeled arrows at the cross-roads, signs that do not say what they point at. It does not reveal what the sun would: that daylight would be of no help either because there is nothing to see in the distance anyway. The guidepost points at nothing. It does not orient, its deixis has no context, and the choice with which it presents a traveler is

necessarily suspended, even if the choice is chosen: “the choice suspended, having chosen” (*The Salisbury Plain Poems*, 289). The lightning flash, in other words, aborts the function of light without illuminating the fact of its abortion. The traveler might be left wishing for daylight.

The glowworm is more like the absent dog, the missing lamp, and the lightning’s “pale abortive beam” than its steadfast light might first seem to suggest. For it is not, in fact, a reliable source of information about the world.²¹ Compare it to glowworms in *Hamlet*, which Wordsworth may have had in mind, and which the Ghost reads to tell the time:

Fare thee well at once:

The glow-worm shows the matin to be near

And ’gins to pale his uneffectual fire.

Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me.²²

²¹ The formulation comes from Paul de Man’s description of literary language in *The Resistance to Theory*, 11. “Literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge ‘reality,’ but because it is not *a priori* certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are like those, of the phenomenal world. It is therefore not *a priori* certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language.”

²² William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Arden Second Series) 1.5.88-91. References are to act, scene, and line. Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text. Harold Jenkins, editor of the second Arden edition, provides a gloss pertinent to the link between the matin, the glowworm, and the ineffectiveness of its fire, at n89-90: “The poetic diction (*matin*) gives heightened significance to the familiar ritual of dawn...But whereas the mortals spoke of daylight beginning, the spirit speaks of darkness ending. *Uneffectual*, not, as Warburton supposed, because the glow-worm gives light without heat, but because its light is now disappearing. Cf. Pericles 2.3.43-4: ‘a glowworm which hath fire in darkness, none in light.’” Erasmus Darwin provides another counterpoint to Wordsworth’s non-responsive and non-relational glow-worm in *The Temple of Nature* (Canto 2. lines 287-292). The bioluminescence of Darwin’s glowworm comes down to the “impassion’d light” of sexual display:

Hence the male Ants their gauzy wings unfold,
And young Lampyris waves his plumes of gold;
The Glow-Worm sparkles with impassion’d light
On each green bank, and charms the eye of night;
While new desires the painted Snail perplex,
And twofold love unites the double sex.

See also his note: “The firefly is at some seasons so luminous, that M. Merian says, that by putting two of them under a glass, she was able to draw figures of them by night. Whether the light of this and other insects be caused by their amatorial passion, and thus assists them to find each other; or is caused by respiration, which is so analogous to combustion; or to a tendency to putridity, as in dead fish and rotten wood, is still to be investigated.” The internal fires of the glowworms at Elsinore may be “uneffectual” because they give off no heat, or it may be because, as Jenkins argues, they go dark at dawn. But Wordsworth’s glowworm glows to no discernable purpose of its own. Its shining has the brutal facticity of an accident, answerable to no reason or purpose. Wordsworth returns to the glowworm more than once, and it is worth comparing the nonrelational indifference of this glowworm to some of his others, which at least present themselves as more akin to those of Darwin, if not inspired by him. In “Among all things my lady had been,”

Hamlet, of course, reflects a situation where things are “out of joint”—not only “the time” but also the cosmological order itself, souls not quite knowing where to go in the aftermath of the reformation’s abolition of purgatory.²³ But the joints are still well enough in place for the Ghost to read the time in an insect’s phosphorescence. Wherever it is he goes now, he goes there on time, because the system of things is so finely tuned that its vicissitudes are registered in the calibrations of a bug. When the speaker of “The road extended o’er a heath” says that her glowworm “shines *through* the rain” with “undiminished light,” she is saying that it shines *despite* the rain. Unlike its cousins in *Hamlet*, which “pale” (or diminish) their light to “show” the dawn before the dawn shows itself, this glowworm’s indifferent shining shows no relation to the world at all. It remains unresponsive to the fact of the trouble in heaven—as if to suggest that between it and the speaker there is not a shared world at all. This could mean that the glowworm belongs to another world, or that there is no world. The question is like a naked guide-post’s head illuminated by the glowworm’s indifferent light: it raises the possibility that there is no teleologically organized world for the speaker to inhabit; or that she has been ejected from it; or that there is no place in it for her. Something, at least, is out of joint with its ordonnance, assuming it has an ordonnance at all.

The speaker’s encounter with the glowworm has a complex relation with the first part of the female vagrant’s lament. The sight of the insect as she describes it, a single point of light shining from within the safety of a darkened enclosure, recalls the vagrant’s fantasy of being sealed alive within what is effectively a tomb:

the glowworm is not only a signal but a gift, an arthropod token of love. “The Pilgrim’s Dream,” meanwhile, depicts a conversation between a glowworm and a star.

²³ See Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*. See also Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and the New International*, in which Derrida weaves throughout the book a reading of the phrase, “the time is out of joint.”

Oh dreadful price of being! to resign
 All that is dear in being; better far
 In Want's most lonely cave till death to pine
 Unseen, unheard, unwatched by any star.

(SP 35.307-310)

To be sure, the elements of these two systems do not perfectly map onto each other. There is, however, a decisive figural affinity between them. As we have seen, in these lines the female vagrant imagines a hyperbolic alternative which she declares “better far” than her condition as she sees it, where her “being” (survival) must persist in the absence of everything that made being worth having, that is, a life worth more than the mere biological existence to which she thus finds herself reduced. The alternative, to be closed up in “Want’s most lonely cave,” is a fantasy of absolute nonrelation: to the sustenance which biological life needs to survive; to the human community and its system of mutual recognition constitutive of the subject (“unseen” and “unheard” by other human beings); but also to *fate*, to the system that regulates and distributes destinies and ends, here figured by the astrological figure of a watchful star. To be unwatched by any star is to be severed from the system that tethers lives to ends, from the arrangement or the ordonnance of a cosmos which is not indifferent but indeed overseen by the divine. To be enclosed within the tomb of such a radical isolation is to be isolated from the condition of possibility of life as such. It is not merely that the vagrant, like a sort of Antigone, would soon perish inside the cave; it is that life cannot be *conceived* there. Life would not be killed there but rather made impossible.

In “The road extended o’er a heath,” the star has assumed the form of the glowworm taking refuge within a cave which, being vegetation, is hardly airtight. But what she sees in its steadfast shining is precisely that she is “unwatched by any star.” She watches it *not* watch (her); its glow shows unwatchfulness, its shine is unseeing. This is why she looks up from her worm-eye view of

things and rebukes God. The star takes the form of what, in the poem, is advanced as “earth’s lowliest child,” the very mere life which the female vagrant’s thinking implies her to be. The star and the living being coincide in the glowworm in a single atom of indifferent unwatchfulness. It neither sees, nor hears, nor watches. It is a figure of life in non-relation, impossible life.

3. THE GLOWWORM, THE STONE, AND THE SOVEREIGN: THE BEGGAR OF *THE BORDERERS*

On the contrary, the lizard has its own relation to the rock, to the sun, and to a host of other things. One is tempted to suggest that what we identify as the rock and the sun are just lizard-things for the lizard, so to speak. When we say that the lizard is lying on the rock, we ought to cross out the word ‘rock’ in order to indicate that whatever the lizard is lying on is certainly given in some way for the lizard, and yet is not known to the lizard as a rock.

~Martin Heidegger²⁴

‘Being’—we have no idea of it apart from ‘living.’—How can anything dead ‘be?’

~Friedrich Nietzsche²⁵

Wordsworth revises the fragment’s concluding lines and uses them for *The Borderers*, where he gives them to the Beggar, another nameless female vagrant. The lines are now addressed to a pair of men, Rivers and Mortimer, whose approach has awakened her where she lies sleeping outside with her infant:

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concept of Metaphysics*, 198.

²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 312.

RIVERS: When next inclined to sleep, take my advice

And put your head, good Woman!

under cover.

BEGGAR: You gentlefolks have got

Warm chambers to your wish—I'd rather be

A stone than what I am—But two nights gone

The darkness overtook me, wind and rain

Beat hard upon my head—and yet I saw

A glow-worm through the covert of the furze,

Shine [] as if nothing ailed the sky

At which I half-accused the God in heaven—

You must forgive me, Sirs—²⁶

The passage is a further development of the same configuration as the fragment. The Beggar compares her exposed, “uncovered” condition with that of the glowworm she sees (somewhat paradoxically) through the “covert of the furze,” where “covert” suggests both visual concealment and physical protection from harm. The glowworm is both *under cover* and *taking cover* in the furze. Whereas its previous iteration shone indifferently through the rain, this glowworm is unresponsive to the fact that something “ails the sky.” David Rosen has observed that “the image is more concentrated here than before, and Wordsworth now lets the speaker’s envy remain unstated, to powerful effect.”²⁷ Contributing to this concentration is the replacement of the play on “ordonnance” and “ordnance” with a structure that emphasizes the tension between divine heaven

²⁶ William Wordsworth, *The Borderers*, The Early Version (1797-99), 1.3.43-55. Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text following the abbreviation EV by act, scene and line number. References to sections of the volume other than the play itself will be cited parenthetically within the text by the editor's last name, Osborn, followed by heading (e.g., Appendix 2), and page number.

²⁷ David Rosen, *Power, Plain English, and the Rise of Modern Poetry*, 42.

and earthly sky as the reason for her “reproach,” which is now a “half-accusation” that, despite not being full-blown, nevertheless does require forgiveness.

What requires forgiveness? Whether it is a “reproach...as shall not need forgiveness” or a “half-accusation” that does, what is at work is a questioning of the order of things. To accuse the ordonnance of the world of injustice or unfairness is to call it contingent. It is to come into proximity with the possibility that, if there is a system of things, the particulars of its ordering can be justified by reference to no reason why. What the vagrant wants to know, when she compares her exposure to the insect’s shelter in the first passage, and when she reflects on the indifference of nature to her own struggle to survive in the second, is *why* the world has been organized in a way inimical to her existence.

In both passages, it is by means of this questioning (first a “reproach,” now a “half-accusation”) that the vagrant again links life to theological sovereignty, constructing a triangle or a sort of parallax between God, the glowworm, and herself. The Beggar’s version of the speech intensifies the emphasis already placed on sovereignty. First of all, she calls God by name, whereas the fragment speaks only of a “heavenly ordonnance” that silently invokes whatever sovereign stands behind that legislation—as if in order to “reproach” the ordonnance itself rather than the agent responsible for it. But the Beggar names God to *accuse* to him, which requires that he be named. This pair of revisions (the substitution of the “half-accusation” for the “reproach” and the substitution of God for the heavenly ordonnance of which he must be author) imply each other; they’re twins. As a formal indictment of wrongdoing, an accusation cannot function without the name. It is not possible to level an accusation without naming the accused. It is similarly impossible for the accuser to *make the accusation itself*, to level the charge, without publicly owning up to the act of accusation itself, that is to say, declaring one’s name—without signing it, so to speak. This is because the concept of the accusation implies the possibility of subjects to whom (juridical or moral)

responsibility can be assigned. It concerns, in other words, not only the *act* of wrongdoing of which the accuser stands accused, but the *act* of the accusation itself. An accusation is a performative speech act. It does what it says it does; an accusation must describe itself as such.²⁸ When it comes to accusations, then, there are only subjects. Only a subject can level an accusation, say *I accuse*, and only a subject can be *accused*—and thus be called upon to respond, to account for itself.²⁹ To level an accusation is to appropriate the sovereignty of the subject. An accusation against God, then, is what the Beggar both half-appropriates and (half-)disavows, or even (half-)abdicates: the sovereignty she automatically usurps in the very act of describing herself as performing an accusation. The difference, then, between a “reproach of heavenly ordonnance / As shall not need forgiveness” and a “half-accusation” that does require forgiveness is the sovereignty claimed in the act of accusation.³⁰

To level an accusation against a political sovereign is already a potentially revolutionary act. But to stand in accusation of God, to assign *culpability* to the divinity for the *wrong* or the *harm* of the ordonnance of the world, is to come up against the border of denying God’s title to divinity. The Beggar is at the border of a certain atheism. What is at stake in the Beggar’s accusation against the

²⁸ A performative speech act produces itself through a structure of self-reference. A performative is produced through a doubling of the constative. The difference between performatives and constatives is established by J.L. Austin in *How to do Things With Words*.

²⁹ For a reading that touches on the performativity of the “I accuse” in the context of the Dreyfus Affair, see Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious*, 115-118. For readings of accountability or responsibility between psychoanalysis and Levinasian ethics, see Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Significantly, she argues that the performativity of the accusation is *constitutive* of the subject. Her touchstone here is Nietzsche, who (on Butler’s reading) argues that self-accusation is retroactively constitutive of the self in general. For Butler’s engagement with this question in Nietzsche, see also *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Chapter Two: “Circuits of Bad Conscience: Nietzsche and Freud” (63-82). In Derrida’s work, the relation between the name and the self, or what he will later call ipseity, is a complex one, and I have run the risk of appearing to assimilate them. For one of Derrida’s sustained reflections on the question of the name, see *Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)* in, *On the Name*. A complex text that touches on the relation between naming, symbolic systems (human and beyond) and the self understood in terms not of a “subject” but rather self-relation and self-reference, is *The Animal that Therefore I am*.

³⁰ A “reproach,” on the other hand, does not imply the juridical sharpness of guilt. A reproach is not necessarily an assignment of guilt; it does not imply a public forum or some other space of public appearance. Indeed it seems to me to be more closely associated with disciplinary gestures performed in spaces that, if not private, are not determined in reference to concepts of legality. It has more to do with shame, it seems, than guilt. Nor is it conceivable only in terms of a speech act, an act of declaration whereby the agent of the reproach, as it were, inhabits the position of self-reflective transparency required to say, *I reproach*. An unconsciously raised eyebrow can do the trick. To be sure, I am taking for granted an operative distinction between the performative and the constative that the Beggar’s own discourse immediately troubles—by “halving” it.

heavenly ordonnance (and the divine author responsible for it) is not the social or historical arrangement that has exposed her, or even the systematization of the physical laws of nature. Rather, it is the ordonnance of ethical reason. Whatever principle to which she implicitly lays claim when she “half-accuses the God in heaven” either belongs to that ordonnance (in which case she is betraying herself as party to the crime), or it does not (and the “God in Heaven” is not responsible for the ordonnance *as God*, which is to say that it is not God).³¹ What is a “half-accusation?” Is it possible? The other half of the accusation is an accusation against herself. In a sense, she accuses herself (of the wrongdoing) of accusing God. After all, she asks for forgiveness—and not from God. Indeed, the subtlety of the structure consists in precisely the fact that her usurpation of sovereignty, as it were, proceeds by way of the self-abnegation of self-accusation. For a self-accusation is still an accusation, and as such involves an appropriation of a certain minimal sovereignty. What’s more, the Beggar is implicitly accusing herself of wronging God, which is to say accusing herself on *behalf of God*. The gesture is still usurpatory.

When Wordsworth modifies the fragment for *The Borderers*, then, his revisions serve to bring into sharper relief a thematic interest in sovereignty. But there is something new here: the stone. The Beggar declares that she wishes she were one: “I’d rather be / A stone than what I am.” The stone is a fourth element added to the triangle comprising herself, the glowworm, and God. And in *Rivers* and *Mortimer*, the men whom she asks for forgiveness, we have a fifth element. Now that the

³¹ Cf. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, § 87- § 91, where he elaborates a version of this double bind. He argues that it is not enough for a proof of God to establish once and for all that the system of nature itself (the universe) was in some way produced or “created” by a powerful being which certain humans on Earth call by that name. According to Kant, a God worthy of the name, as it were, would indeed have to have created the universe; but it would also have to guarantee the a priori rationality of moral law. If your proof satisfies the former and not the latter requirement, you have not proven the existence of God but merely the origination of physical nature in some tremendous, scarcely imaginable creature, an extra-cosmic alien. This creature, alien not only to the Earth but also to the universe we inhabit, would be alien indeed. But radical otherness to the universe, to the system of nature, is not “otherwise than being.” To remain within the terms of Kant’s thinking, God has to vouchsafe what the critical philosophy could not: the passageway between the a priori principles of moral law and the phenomenal domain where they must be implemented. Since it is a categorical imperative to thus put theory into practice, a God who fails to do so, as far as Kant is concerned, is no God at all.

rebuke has become a usurpatory accusation, it is accompanied by a statement of preference that comes down to a death wish: “I’d rather be dead as a stone than what I am.” The Beggar’s preference is a determination of value that recalls the twofold determination of value we saw in the female vagrant’s retroactive fantasy of the two deaths that would have been “better far” than the survival she has purchased only at the cost of “resign[ing] / All that is dear in being” (SP 307-308). As we have seen, the first of these past-conditional deaths is in “Want’s most lonely cave;” the second is out on the street, in full visibility. It would be “better far,” she says, to lock herself and her children inside the radical isolation of “Want’s most lonely cave,” and then “pine” there until death. Better, too—and perhaps *better still*, better far even than the previous death—would be to make their “dying bodies” into a public spectacle, an “obvious obtrusion,” by throwing themselves “before proud Fortune’s sumptuous car” (SP 35.307-315).

Like the vagrant’s lament, the Beggar’s speech unfolds as a complex, escalating pattern of reflective comparisons. She first compares her situation of homeless exposure to what she presumes to be the “housed” condition of Rivers and Mortimer: “You gentlefolks have got / Warm chambers to your wish.” Indeed, this is precisely the comparison that remains implicit in “The road extended o’er a heath,” suggested, as I argued above, only by the speaker’s remark that “Though I had seen / Worse storm, no stranger to such nights as these / Yet had I fears from which a life like mine / Might long have rested” (*Salisbury Plain Poems*, 289). As far as the Beggar is concerned, Rivers and Mortimer are exactly the sort of people, the gentlemen, whose lives are “rested” of such fears as hers.³² (And Rivers, apparently, is the type to breezily advise a homeless person suffering from nightmares to try sleeping indoors.) Unlike these “gentlemen,” the Beggar is ever on the verge of resigning “all that is dear in being” like the female vagrant. Her inability to protect her child, losing it

³² Though, as Adam Potkay notes regarding the Beggar’s assessment of Rivers and Mortimer, “in this play we hear of no one who sleeps warmly.” *Wordsworth’s Ethics*, 42.

to some external threat that comes disguised as a friend (the bee, the dog) is precisely the anxiety her nightmares reflect. It is the “fear” that steals her rest and haunts her dreams.

Her interlocutors rest easy; they have “warm chambers” to their “wish.” But the Beggar lives with a fear that permits no rest and invades her very dreams.³³ These reflections on the inequality of the distribution of shelter between them leads her to judge the value of her condition of existence. Like the vagrant, she seems to conclude that it would be far better simply to “resign” it. And like the vagrant, she resigns it in the form of an impossible fantasy. But the Beggar’s fantasy unfolds as another act of comparison. Indeed, the comparison “re-signs” life in relation to the object—the *thing*—against which it is being compared, the stone. She compares her condition of existence, her being, with the condition of existence or being of a stone, and concludes that within the ordinance of things as they are, it would be better to be a stone than to be herself: “I’d rather be / A stone than what I am.”

The revisions thus place the Beggar in a condition that recalls the female vagrant’s “dream” during her trans-Atlantic journey of “passing” through a “mighty gulf of separation” that “transports” her to “another world” where she can “gaze, of every friend but Death disowned, / All day, my ready tomb the ocean flood” (SP 42.370-43.387). I argued above that this dream expresses a desire to hang permanently suspended at the very edge of death. If, for Freud, dreams are wish fulfilments, then the vagrant’s is a dream of a *suspended death wish*. The situation is made even more complicated by the fact that she “resigns” the dream “with pain” even before the ship reaches port, when, as the wind begins to “curl” the sails, their arrival seems imminent. The self-suspending dream is thus suspended in turn, or rather resigned with pain. This resigning is the repetition of another resigning. The condition of her survival, her very “being,” is the resignation of everything

³³ Compare the Beggar’s sleeplessness, which is an index of her vulnerability, to the restless fear of the savage in the first four stanzas of *Salisbury Plain*. See my analysis of that Preface in the first Chapter of this dissertation.

“dear in being,” of everything that made survival worth surviving, as it were. In the aftermath of that first resignation, she now has to repeat the resignation—this time of the dream: “re-signing being.”

The re-signing repeats again in her lament, within the narrative present in which she tells her story. Recall that the female vagrant expresses her valuation of her life and being today—of her being such as it survives “today,” in the time of her narration—by means of the retrospective fantasy that carries her impossibly to the brink of not one but two hyperbolic deaths, yet without quite carrying her over the border in either case. The retrospective fantasy thus splits her between two deaths that never will have been hers. It hits pause, so to speak, and freezes on the very frame where she stands living at the extreme edge of life, within her very “instant of my death,” to borrow Blanchot’s formulation. But it does so *twice*, producing a superimposition or double exposure of two images of the vagrant’s all-but-death, two “instants of my deaths,” that, precisely because she missed them, she will never get to claim. The vagrant’s retrospective fantasy is impossible, first, because she is too late to receive the value that would make the life it ends “better far,” but also because it doubles that missed death. In the past, she dies (alive) twice and not at all. Her survival is constituted in a retroactive projection of death into the past, where it splits in two and begins to oscillate. Insofar as her survival arises from this double marking, from the movement between the two radically anterior deaths (which never were nor ever can be *present*), it survives as the *re-signing* of being, the halting, nonlinear movement of being’s re-signing.

The Beggar’s valuation of (what is better than) life is structured not by a doubled retrospective fantasy of death, but by a comparison that turns on a sort of ontological *as if*. It is by means of this *as if* that she transposes herself not, like the vagrant, into an impossible double past, but to a position within the ordonnance occupied by a being so radically other as to have never been alive. If there is something like “death” in the stone, it is a death even more foreign than the vagrant’s impossible death, with all its knots of delayed temporality. This death does not even *not*

belong to the Beggar in the mode indicated by such temporal qualifications. It is without relation to life. Her transposition into the stone concerns not temporality but *essence*, not the temporality of a life but the essence of life as defined by the boundary that separates it from its nonliving mineral other. “I’d rather be / A stone than *what* I am.” *What*, not *who*: the relative pronoun is like an indicator light that tells us that we have entered the domain where essences are defined and their borders mapped. It only makes sense; in just the same way that, in “The road extended o’er a heath,” the speaker’s allusion to the form of life that belongs to her (“a life like mine”) becomes an explicitly human life as soon as it is determined by her comparison of herself and her life to that of the nonhuman glowworm, the Beggar’s allusion to the form or mode of *being* that properly belongs to her can only become marked with the generality and inhumanity of an ontological category when it is framed by a comparison to a *stone*. Given the scale of the comparison, of course she becomes a thing; for when she is read in the light of the stone, the Beggar ceases to be a Beggar or even a human woman, and reveals herself to be, instead, a *living thing*. In accordance with the schema suggested by the comparison itself, she does not imagine her death in the paradoxical mode of a future past perfect, but imagines (impossibly) the condition of being (that belongs to) a stone. Her statement of preference (“better far to be a stone!”) conjures the question of “what it is like to be” a stone, to borrow and misapply Nagel’s famous formulation.³⁴

³⁴Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (Oct., 1974). To borrow the phrase but also to abuse it, since I’m applying it to something nonliving, not a bat but a stone. Nagel is of course interested in consciousness, and selects the bat because he regards it as difficult, on the one hand, for his readers to deny that bats have experience (though he acknowledges that there are some who will do just that, and deny it to every living thing but man), yet, on the other hand, also radically difficult (if not impossible) for human beings to imagine what it is *like for a bat to be a bat*, to perceive the world by means of *echolocation*, a sense unknown, or anyway unexperienced, un-sensed, by humankind. But the Beggar detaches “being” from the qualia of life—as if to ask, at the limits of language, a perhaps impossible question: what is it like for a stone to be a stone? Nagel, arguably, asks a romantic question about bats. But the Beggar’s question is still more radical. Another contemporary author who on this point is *arguably romantic* is J.M. Coetzee, or rather his fictional novelist and animal rights activist Elizabeth Costello, the titular protagonist of *Elizabeth Costello*, who, in the course of a lecture dedicated to “The Lives of the Animals,” turns for a moment to Nagel’s question. In reply to Nagel’s skepticism regarding the possibility of thinking one’s way into what it is like for the living other to be itself, Costello ups the ante and argues that, for moments at a time, she can imagine her way into a corpse: “For instants at a time...I know what it is like to be a corpse. The knowledge repels me. It fills me with terror; I shy away from it...All of us have such moments, particular as we grow older. The knowledge we have is not abstract—‘All human beings are

What's so much better about stone-being? Its sleep is far deeper, and untroubled by restless dreams. To say that she would rather be a stone than "what I am" is to say, as a living thing, that it would be better (that is to say, more valuable) to *be* a thing whose being, whose very existence, must be conceptualized without reference to life—and, therefore, without relation or reference to *value*. The Beggar compares her life, which as we have seen is at risk of losing all that is dear in being—to the nonliving being of a stone, and decides that it would have been better to be a stone than "what I am." She is saying, in effect, that it would be *more* valuable to have no relation to value. The mode of being that is without relation to value is, by virtue of that nonrelation to value, more valuable: "better far" to be radically alien to the possibility of forming such a judgment. There is nothing dear to stone-being; nothing dear in being a stone which a stone might lose. A stone is exempt from the price of being.³⁵

mortal, I am a human being, therefore I am mortal"—but embodied. For a moment we *are* that knowledge. We live the impossible; we live beyond our death, look back on it, yet look back only as a dead self can... For an instant, before my whole structure of knowledge collapses in panic, I am alive inside that contradiction, dead and alive at the same time." (J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 77). I would argue that even here, the Beggar is again on the tack of a still more radical question: a stone is unlike a corpse in never having lived at all. Or at the very least, the *différance* that constitutes a stone as a trace of life is a different *différance* than that according to whose law a corpse is a trace, an all too obvious remnant, of life. It is as if the analogy of Nagel's *like* would very much like, as it were, to carry life (the imagined possibility of immediate qualia, of the vivid *likeness* it must be to be a thing that lives) into the domain of the simply inert, not even the dead, the once alive, but the never having lived.

³⁵ For a recent theoretical text that examines the political stakes of relation between life and value, see Claire Colebrook, *The Death of the PostHuman*. In the course of discussing the function played by the concept of life in the axiologies of value at work within the politics of climate change and other catastrophes where survival itself is at stake, Colebrook notes that the very definition of life comes down to value: "What is scandalous, I would suggest, is not that humans have placed their own survival as more valuable than other lives, but that at the heart of moral philosophy is an assumption that nothing is more valuable or definitive of value than human life's capacity to maintain and define itself. We ground value on life, either the sustainability of life, or our capacity to give our lives form and definition, or—to really face up to the circularity—we value life because it is life that makes value possible... Life is, properly considered (which is to say, always considered in terms of what defines humanity), selection: we say that something is living if it maintains or strives to maintain itself through time. The dispersed, the haphazard, the inert, the contingent, the diffuse and the unformed—these are not living. They are therefore not only not valuable but also (significantly) not valuing. We value what values: we defend animal life because it too makes its way in the world, possesses a degree of choosing this rather than that, and is therefore on its way to something like meaning or sense. We seem to think not only that the *prima facie* value of life lies in its modes of flourishing, but that something like destruction and annihilation are other than life and therefore unacceptable" (203). It would be productive to place Colebrook's argument in dialogue with that made by William Hazlitt in "On the Love of Life:" "The love of life is, in general, the effect not of our enjoyments, but of our passions. We are not attached to it so much for its own sake, or as it is connected with happiness, as because it is necessary to action. Without life there can be no action -- no objects of pursuit -- no restless desires -- no tormenting passions. Hence it is that we fondly cling to it -- that we dread its termination as the close, not of enjoyment, but of hope." *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*. Volume 2, *The Round Table: Lectures on the English Poets*, 5.

I just argued that the inanimacy of the stone is other to life in a way more radical than even the retroactive, impossibly doubled death conjured by the vagrant's fiction. But it seems that this is only so that it can be re-appropriated by an even more vigorous *Aufhebung*. "I'd rather be / A stone than what I am." In that *what* there is a reductive, even self-abnegating downward slope away from the human toward thing-hood and an inanimate form of being so alien to life that to call it "dead" is to employ a metaphor borrowed from the realm and language of life. But within the thetic auto-positionality of the Beggar's *I am*, the power of a sovereign is working. It goes back to my earlier discussion of the sovereignty of the subject appropriated or posited by the act itself of any accusation. If every *I accuse* implies an *I am*, then the Beggar's pronouncement of what she would rather be (the essentially nonliving) implies not only a death-driven virtualization of an *I am dead*, but also—in the very sovereignty of her act of self-reference—an *I am alive*. Only the living can symbolize themselves with an *I am*, and only the living can re-sign the fact of that self-reference with a stone, a figure of the radical absence of the possibility of self-reference.³⁶

So far, this seems like a perfect dialectical machine. Her reflections on her exposure and vulnerability lead her to declare that it would be better to be a stone, but this very death wish translates itself into expression of sovereignty, an *I am alive*. Meanwhile, the same death wish

³⁶ Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am: More to Follow*, 94-95: "This would perhaps be the moment to clarify once more the both subtle and decisive stakes of the 'I.' No doubt it will not simply be a case of the relation to self, nor even of a certain auto-motion, an auto-kinetic spontaneity that no one, even the most negative minds vis-a-vis the animal, not even Descartes, disallows in the animal. Let me repeat it, every living creature, and thus every animal to the extent that it is living, has recognized in it this power to move spontaneously, to feel itself and to relate to itself. However problematic it be, that is even the characteristic of what lives, as traditionally conceived in opposition to the inorganic inertia of the purely physico-chemical. No one denies the animal auto-affection or auto-motion, hence the self of that relation to the self. But what is in dispute—and it is here that the functioning and structure of the 'I' count so much, even where the word *I* is lacking—is the power to make reference to the self in deictic or auto-deictic terms, the capability at least virtually to say 'this is I.' For, as Benveniste has clearly emphasized, that is what utters and performs 'I' when I pronounce or effect it. It is what says 'I am speaking of me'; the one who says 'I' shows himself in the present of his utterance, or at least in its manifestation. Because it is held to be incapable of this autodeictic or auto-referential self-distancing [*autotelie*] and deprived of the 'I,' the animal will lack any 'I think,' as well as understanding and reason, response and responsibility. The 'I think' that must accompany every representation is this auto-reference as condition for thinking, as thinking itself: that is precisely what is proper to the human, of which the animal would be deprived..." See also the discussion of the traveler's self-reference in Chapter One. The quotation from Derrida is reproduced there at n40.

precipitates an accusation against God, which, in guilt for thus usurping divine sovereignty, “halves” itself into a self-accusation that nevertheless, and precisely because it is an accusation, still usurps divine sovereignty. This movement, meanwhile, can be mapped onto the configuration that formulates the political question of life in terms safety, shelter, and protection, while also determining life ontologically within schema that differentiates it from the nonliving stone, the living human woman, and God. But the sudden appearance of the glowworm jams this dialectical machine and interrupts this upward movement from the inanimate to the human, and then to the divine.

Between her declared preference for stone-being and her incrimination of God, there is the encounter with the glowworm. It occurs as yet another stage in the unfolding process of reflective comparisons. This time she compares the indifferent, inanimate stone to the indifferent, living glowworm:

—I’d rather be
A stone than what I am—But two nights gone
The darkness overtook me, wind and rain
Beat hard upon my head—and yet I saw
A glow-worm through the covert of the furze,
Shine [] as if nothing ailed the sky
At which I half-accused the God in heaven—

I noted above that given the fact that the conversation begins with an association between the Beggar’s nightmares and her exposure to the elements, her selection of the stone as the sort of being she would rather have been perhaps derives from the fact that a stone’s sleep is undisturbed by the wind and rain. A more literal reading of the passage suggests, however, that she chooses the stone because, unlike her, it cannot be “overtaken by darkness.” What does this mean? Plausibly, it describes a situation like the one that befalls the speaker of “A road extended o’er the heath,” who finds herself lost out on the moor after sunset. But since all of this is thematically framed by a discourse of sleep and dreams, “the darkness overtook me” could indicate the loss of consciousness, for which the formulation is, in any case, a conventional figure. Moreover, the fact that everything

she says is bound to the lie Rivers has paid her to feed Mortimer only further places into doubt the status of the story she tells here. Indeed, darkness overtakes its legibility.³⁷

The glowworm interrupts the dialectic. I would argue that the Beggar's speech exhibits the same splitting of the telos we have seen in the vagrant's retroactive fiction of death. It is perhaps suggested by the pattern of doubles: the fact that the events occurred "two nights gone;" the pairing of the exposed, inert stone with the sheltered, animate yet immobile glowworm; the pairing of the "darkness" that overtakes her and the insect's "shining" then revealed within it; and the transposition of that light along the vertical axis that separates the height of the darkened sky, where there are no stars, and the darkened heath, where its living analogue lights up, an insectile star usurper and lowest creature on earth. It can be seen, too, in the division implied by the Beggar's "half-accusation." But above all it is in the split between the sky and heaven. This, indeed, represents a curious fold in the grammar of her accusation. The darkness overtakes her, and then she sees the glowworm shining indifferently, "as if nothing ailed the sky / At which I half-accused the God in heaven." The "at which" is an anaphoric indicator light that points back to the sky, and it suggests a literal act of speech addressed upward, even aimed at, the sky. In fact, her accusation is a return volley shot in the opposite direction of the meteorological ordnance that "beats hard upon [her] head," that is, toward their source. Phonically, as a communication of force, in her accusation she returns fire.

It is impossible to accuse the sky of anything, of course, and indeed the Beggar does not; it is God whom she accuses. But God is in Heaven, not the sky. The address thus splits between its senses, or even "scatters" among them like electrons fired through an experimental apparatus to strike a screen according to a certain distribution.³⁸ "Address" splits between, on the one hand, the

³⁷ Cf. Alan Richardson, *A Mental Theater: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age*, 23.

³⁸ I am using the figure "scatter" as Geoffrey Bennington uses it in *Scatter I: The Politics of Politics in Foucault, Heidegger, and Derrida*.

physical act of the body projecting the voice as sound upward toward the sky according to a certain orientation and on the basis of the body's capacity to be an instrument for making sound, and, on the other, the intentionality of the communicative act that determines the voice's aim, its telos. That telos, the intended recipient, is God himself, and because the addressee resides in Heaven, the addressivity of the accusation splits as well between that proper address and the sky, the place within the regime of phenomenality toward which the missive flies. But the sky is not a place, and still less a thing. And in any case, it's gone dark: there is nothing to see there but "universal darkness." The metonymic substitute for "Heaven" is itself an abyss. That abyss is a good reason to tell the tale and ask such "gentlefolk" as Rivers and Mortimer for forgiveness. Like the female vagrant's retrospective fictional death that wavers between two positions, God divides between an absent heaven and an abyssal sky, mapped onto the concrete doubling of the stone and the glowworm. But the very ordonnance of the schema that differentiates stone, insect, and human is attributed to that God divided between two nonplaces. The accusation leaps up to reveal that the ordonnance itself has no foundation. It is detached from the possibility of an anchored position within any ordinality.

4. THE POEM AS DEATH-PERSUADER: "ARGUMENT FOR SUICIDE" AS CRITIQUE OF THE IDEOLOGY OF LIFE

"But who's talking about living?": in other words, who can really speak about living? Who is in a position to? Who is already on the other side [bord], little enough alive, or alive enough, to dare to speak about living, not about one life, nor even about life, but about living, the immediate, present, even impersonal process of an act of living that nevertheless guarantees even the spoken word that it conveys and that it thus defies to speak on living: it is impossible to use living speech to speak of living—unless it is possible only with living

speech, which would make the aporia even more paralyzing...Is it really a question of living? In other words, who said that we had to live? Must we live, really? Can “living,” “live,” be taken as an imperative, an order, a necessity? Where do you get this axiomatic, valuational certainty that we (or *you*) must live?

~Jacques Derrida, “Living
on”³⁹

The Beggar’s preference for stone-being entails an unstated but hardly implicit death wish. For her part, the female vagrant comes right out with it and even doubles down on it, giving herself not one but two fictional deaths in her lament and dreaming aboard the ship about staying forever at the ever-present “tomb” of the sea, always open and ever ready to receive her. Given the explicitness with which she formulates this desire and the obsessiveness with which she returns to it, why doesn’t she just take a step or two toward the edge of the deck and fall headlong toward what she wants? In the first section of this chapter, I suggested that her suspension before the edge of death arises from an aporia of life: that she is caught in the torsion of an imperative to sacrifice her life in order to give it value (because without this sacrifice it has none), and an imperative to preserve her life because it has already accrued the value of sacredness from the virtual projection of its future sacrifice. Thanks to the precipitation of this future perfect retroactive projection of value, her life is already sacred and to harm it would violate its sanctity. In the pages that followed I analyzed a variation of this aporia in the encounter with the glowworm, and tracked its evolution from “The road extended o’er a heath” to the Beggar’s speech in *The Borderers*. In these passages, life is caught between self-abandonment and the will to live. However, during the same period, there are voices in Wordsworth’s writing that question the irreducibility of this aporia. The most insistent such voice is

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Living On,” in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, 65.

surely the play's philosopher-villain Rivers (renamed Oswald in 1842). In the course of seducing the young hero, Mortimer, into murdering the blind, elderly father of the woman he wants to marry, Rivers presents a series of arguments that call into question the assumption that life is a value in itself.

In one such instance, Herbert lies drugged and unconscious in the dungeon of a ruined castle while the two men discuss killing him. Rivers wants Mortimer to cut his throat in his sleep. Mortimer, caught in the torsion of a moral crisis and losing his command of language, can only cry, "Poison! Poison!" (EV 2.3.150). But Rivers's response is that it is an act of mercy, if not euthanasia.⁴⁰ "Humanity's the word with me," says Rivers, adding that he only "wish[es]" that "the little time he has left should be / A time of peace." He continues:

While he is human, like ourselves, all night
 Must those cold arches drip on his grey head!
 His blood is thin, his bones can ill sustain
 The rigours of a night like this.—'Tis mercy,
 'Tis very mercy.

(EV 2.3.152-162)

The tragic irony of the play is indeed that this *would* be better than the torturous death which Mortimer, who lacks the stomach for administering such a "good death," finally deals him. And then, as if to make sure that we know that Rivers is demonic, Wordsworth gives him an aside where he reflects on the pleasure he takes in the originality of the dramatic situation he has invented: "'Tis an odd thought—I like the color of it; / To have an old man drugged that he may kill him" (EV 2.3.42-43). In a similar remark elsewhere, he describes those who consider the mere fact of

⁴⁰ Remarkably, Rivers anticipates the anesthetic logic that binds the death penalty to humanism and anxiety about the inhumane as Derrida describes it in *The Death Penalty*, Vol 1, 48-49.

biological existence to be an end in itself, and who would preserve life at all costs—even at the cost to life, by preserving it within its own misery—as “moralists” who need a good “whipping:”

A whipping to the moralists who preach
 That misery’s a sacred thing! For me,
 I know no cheaper engine to degrade a man,
 Nor any half so sure.
 (EV 3.2.17-20)

In Rivers’s view, these “moralists” are uncritical dupes who have been taken in by a superstition without basis in reason. His comment about how inexpensive (“cheap”) it is to make a man miserable in order thereby to “degrade” him, to lower his value, indicates that Rivers considers the moralists to be dupes in their *appraisal* of the value of human life.⁴¹ They *prize* it too highly. This criticism constitutes a systematic critique of an “ideology of life.” To the extent that they live on, the female vagrant and the beggar are precisely moralists “who preach / That misery’s a sacred thing.”

Sometime between late 1796 and the summer of 1797, Wordsworth composed a short poem that responds directly, and in Rivers’s style, to the Beggar and the female vagrant. The poem, whose lines are inscribed under the ominous title, “Argument for Suicide,” is composed in DC MS. 13, the folio notebook in which Wordsworth would later write “Old Man Traveling: Animal Tranquility and Decay,” and “Description of a Beggar,” poems dedicated to the spectral figures of extreme old age, homelessness, and radical dispossession. But it seems to stand at the border between *The Borderers*, from which it appears to be an outtake, and the earlier texts we have been reading. “Argument for Suicide” has an answer for the female vagrant, who laments “the price of being” yet lives: just don’t *prize* life so highly, then.

⁴¹ Cf. Laurent Folliot, “Des paysages impossibles: nature, forme, et historicité chez W. Wordsworth et S.T. Coleridge,” 289-290. Folliot also calls attention to the problem of value in Rivers’s degradation of human life. Moreover, he discusses it in view of the connection between *The Borderers* and the “Argument for Suicide,” which he reads in terms of the relation between life and the transcendental elements that give the latter value.

The “Argument for Suicide” rejects the irreducibility of the aporia of life. But it also marvels at the aporia’s very power to constrain, which it describes in terms of a magic circle’s protective spell. “Strange,” it remarks about the enclosing loops, “and most fantastic are the circles / Drawn round the thing called life—” but it interrupts this moment of aesthetic or perhaps literary appreciation for the circles with a call to lift the spell. The circle must be broken. For until “we have learned / To *prize* it less we ne’er shall learn to *prize* / The things worth living for” (Osborn, Appendix 2, 810-811). These lines suggest that the spell not only protects life, but does so by inducing a radical overvaluation of it that blinds us to life in turn. The circles are strange and fantastic figures—pleasurable fictions, in other words, phantasms. But they keep us from seeing life—from knowing what that “thing” which bears the name “life” *is*. At stake here is the relation between word and thing, the problem of the referentiality of language, understood in its performative and figural capacity, to the world. It is not so much that the name “life” obfuscates or veils the thing, but that it has the power of a spell. “Life” belongs to, or perhaps arises like conjured specter or illusion, from the circles themselves. It could be added to Shelley’s later list of “the names of Demon, Ghost, and Heaven,” though in this poem, Wordsworth is less interested in its status as a “frail spell” unable “to sever / From all we hear and all we see, / Doubt, chance and mutability.”⁴² His interest is rather in its power to determine “all we hear and all we see.”

The “Argument” responds to the aporia of life by developing, in condensed form, *a critique of the ideology of life*. In the opening pages of this chapter, I argued that the vagrant’s aporia resists the drive toward re-teleogization that governs the sacrificial machinery of the *Salisbury Plain* poems. In this section I will further argue that the “Argument for Suicide” exhibits both dimensions simultaneously: both re-teleogization and its resistance. Which is to say that it recapitulates the aporia of life which its ideology critique purports to dissolve, and it finds itself constrained (though

⁴² Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” in *The Major Works*, stanza 3, lines 29-31.

perhaps this time *within*) the same strange, fantastic circles. It suspends the re-teologization of life within life's—and indeed its own—impossible survival. My reading will follow the critique to the point where it opens onto its deconstruction.⁴³ It is precisely in its attempt to develop an explicit argument for suicide that this poem simultaneously formalizes both the sacrificial re-teologization of life and the event of impossible life that thwarts it. We will see how re-teologization, formulated (and presumably accomplished) here precisely by suicide, will be suspended in its turn within the condition of its own impossibility. Suicidal self-destruction thus thwarts itself in a second order self-destruction, recoiling back upon itself like winds thwarting winds.

As this dynamic unfolds, *life constitutes itself as impossible life*. The life in question will again split in two, like the Beggar between the stone and the glowworm, or God between the sky and heaven. This time it will be the life of an extra-textual referent, its addressee, *you*, and the life of the text itself, surviving in its structure of reproducibility. The title, together with the rest of the poem, appears under a faint red line:

Argument for Suicide

Send this man to the mine and that to the battle

Famish a naked beggar at your gates

And let him die by inches—but for worlds

Lift not your hand against him—Live Live on

As if this earth owned neither steel nor arsenic

A rope a river a standing pool

⁴³The “Argument for Suicide” will inevitably undermine itself by inscribing itself within its own object of critique. And “critique, however radical” as Deborah Elise White argues in *Romantic Returns: Superstition, Imagination, History*, “must itself be understood referentially” (113). By tacitly understanding “life” (and the suicidal act of its destruction) in terms of reference (which is to say outside itself) the “Argument” becomes blind to the ineluctability of (its blindness to) its implication in the object to which it presumes to refer, and is thus unwittingly reappropriated by the ideology it purports to critique. White’s comment on the link between reference and critique occurs at the outset of a reading of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Essay on the Punishment of Death.” Shelley’s essay, which argues for the abolition of the death penalty, is outflanked by reference in a way reminiscent to that of Wordsworth’s fragmentary “Argument for Suicide.”

Live as if you dread the pains of hell or think
 Your corpse would quarrel with a stake—alas
 Has misery then no friend?—if you would die
 By license, call the dropsy and the stone
 And let them end you—strange it is
 And most fantastic are the circles
 Drawn round the thing called life—till we have learned
 To prize it less we ne'er shall learn to prize
 The things worth living for.—

The things worth living for⁴⁴

With the exception of a single revision that exchanges the “naked beggar” for an “aged beggar,” and the curious repetition of the last line in pencil beneath the rest of the poem, its fifteen—or, depending on how that last line is read, sixteen—lines seem to have been spared Wordsworth’s compulsion to tinker with his texts.

When he first published “Argument for Suicide” in the *Juvenilia* Appendix to the first volume of *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, Ernest de Selincourt observed that “the mood and style in which these lines were written recall that of *The Borderers*, and especially some of the

⁴⁴ Osborn, *The Borderers*, Appendix II, 810-811. My physical description of the manuscript page and its position in DC MS. 13 relies heavily on Osborn’s note to the transcription on 810. The description of the poem as “neatly written” is Osborn’s. For another bibliographic description of “Argument for Suicide,” see James Butler’s Introduction to *The Ruined Cottage* and *The Pedlar*, 7. There he lists the contents of the recto pages of DC MS. 13. I draw my claim that Wordsworth wrote “Argument for Suicide” before “Old Man Traveling: Animal Tranquility and Decay,” “Description of a Beggar,” “Incipient Madness,” and an early version of “The Ruined Cottage” from Butler, who asserts that “placement in the manuscript is not a good criterion for determining the order of entry in Wordsworth’s notebooks, but here the entries on the rectos may be in chronological order.” James Butler and Karen Green include a detailed description of DC MS. 13 in the *Manuscript Census of Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, xxiii. Bruce E. Graver also describes DC MS. 13 in *Translations of Chaucer and Virgil*, xix, 81. For the probable dating of “Argument for Suicide,” see Mark L. Reed, *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Early Years, 1770-1779*, 346. I draw the fact that the poem is composed under a “faint red line” and that the last line is written in pencil from Osborn.

speeches given to Oswald.”⁴⁵ In his own editorial note to the poem, Robert Osborn remarks its resemblance to the speeches where Rivers-Oswald “inveighs against those who overstress the sanctity of life.”⁴⁶ He points out that the “Argument’s” invocation of “the dropsy and the stone” repeats the ironic gesture employed by Rivers in one such passage, where he exhorts Mortimer to overcome his resistance to murdering Herbert. Killing him, says Rivers, would be saving him:

saving a poor man perchance
 From a ten years visitation of the stone
 Or the more gentle mercies of the palsy.
 (EV 4.2.176-179) ⁴⁷

The argument turns on the same ironic device:

Has misery then no friend?—if you would die
 By license, call the dropsy and the stone
 And let them end you—

By thus giving Herbert a quick death, Rivers reasons, Mortimer would not so much be committing an act of murder as an act of mercy, a coup de grace that would save the “poor man” from suffering the slow death of old age. The stone, the palsy, and the dropsy might constitute a Wordsworthian nosology of “animal tranquility and decay,” a classification of the afflictions of old age that describes three ways a person might die naturally, that is, “by inches” from within: the slow conversion of the organism into inert matter. “The stone” thus names a particular disease characterized by the pathological formation of hard concretions—stones—in the body, which must then be passed

⁴⁵ Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, eds., *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, Volume I: Poems Written in Youth, Poems Referring to the Period of Childhood. The editors file the poem in the Juvenilia Appendix as XXXI on 316. Their note on the text is located at 375.

⁴⁶ Osborn, *The Borderers*, 810. De Selincourt’s observation is also picked up by James Butler, *The Ruined Cottage*, 7: “*Argument for Suicide* seems related to *The Borderers* (especially, as de Selincourt notes...to some of the speeches of Rivers-Oswald);” and Mark L. Reed, 346: “The style and ironic tone of *Argument for Suicide*... probably indicates, as [Ernest de Selincourt] remarks, that this fragment bears a close relationship to *The Borderers*.”

⁴⁷ As quoted by Osborn in his introductory note to “Argument for Suicide,” 810.

through the soft tissues of the organs which originated them. Rivers's description of an old man weathering "ten years' visitation of the stone" evokes the torture of having to expel every morbid mineral concretion that "visits" the kidney, the urinary bladder, or the gall bladder, for a decade. But even as it designates a pathology—lithiasis, the pathological secretion of stones by living tissue—it figures the general pathology that affects every organ by slowly stupefying the body in its very life, rendering it as insensible as stone. What distinguishes the palsy from the stone is that it names a "gentler" process of stupefaction, a trembling slackening of strength that brings the sufferer ever closer to total paralysis. The incremental visitation of the stone, the slow process of ossification, is also "life's" nightmarish reply to the Beggar's statement that she'd rather be a stone than what she is. Just you wait, says life.

For Rivers, the act that puts the aging man to death is in fact an act of mercy that "saves" him from living a slow death "by inches." It saves *time*. The palsy—and, by extension, the stone and the dropsy—are mercies only because they finally end the life made miserable by their symptoms. More precisely, they finally end the process of dying which they themselves are. But even more merciful ("better far") is a violent, artificially imposed—and above all speedy—death that interrupts the slow process of animal decay from the outside, cutting it off and bringing it to an end all at once, before it can reach its natural term, with the punctual stroke of a guillotine's falling blade. The violence of murder saves the old man from the cruelty of a gentler death. It relieves him of his "ten year" debt to the stone. It is debt forgiveness. At one level, then, Rivers deploys an ironic humanitarian argument that, in patent bad faith, recasts murder as euthanasia. He argues, in effect, that it is in Herbert's own best interest to be put to death. At another level, however, the argument is serious. What makes Herbert's murder a good death is that the alternative is itself a form of death—complex, radically decelerated, and extended—like life—in time.

The “Argument for Suicide” thus looks not only like an outtake from *The Borderers*, but like it came straight from Rivers’s own mouth. It makes its case for suicide along the same lines, with the same vocabulary, and according to the same rhetorical strategy, as the play’s philosophical villain makes his various arguments for murder. But it is an argument for suicide, not murder. Georgina Green notes that the poem, which she describes as a “defense of suicide,” echoes the female vagrant’s principled stand against survival for its own sake.⁴⁸ Indeed, there does seem to be a certain point of agreement between the “Argument” and the vagrant’s lament, at least, where she weighs the interest of survival against the interest represented by the ethical obligation owed to the human “brother,” and concludes (in her retrospective fantasy of the two deaths) that it would have been better to die than to live off human blood (SP 35.315). Though she thus endorses the sacrificial subordination to a principle that can never be derived from it, she nevertheless remains, alive—and miserable, “disowned,” she tells us, of “every *friend*” but death. (SP 43.383-384). The “Argument” replies with an echo that is also a dark rhetorical question: “Has misery then no friend?” “Well then, why not join your only friend?” But it is an argument for suicide, not sacrifice.

Both the female vagrant and the “Argument” are against survival. Both seem to say, “no future.”⁴⁹ But the vagrant summons her opposition from within the sacrificial tradition. She distinguishes the mere life that clings to animal survival from the good life, that is, living well or ethically, in conformity to a principle of the good irreducible to the living being. For the vagrant, to cling to animal survival when the good life has become impossible is to violate that principle of the good, if not to sacrifice it in the name of animality. And yet she cannot sacrifice her own animal existence because that same tradition also holds life to be an absolutely sacred value, and one of its methods for protecting it is an unconditional ban on suicide. This is her aporia, the fantastic “circle”

⁴⁸ Georgina Green, *The Majesty of the People: Popular Sovereignty and the Role of the Writer in the 1790s*, 181. As Green puts it, “‘Argument for Suicide’ questions the reification of mere survival.”

⁴⁹ The phrase is of course borrowed from Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.

within whose enclosure she is trapped. The “Argument,” by contrast, is not worried about whether life deserves to die, or whether the fact of survival violates a principle of the good that demands its sacrificial expiation in return. Its complaint is rather with the prohibition against harming it.

As the Beggar and the speaker in “The road extended o’er the heath” encounter the glowworm lodged within the “safe-shelter” of the furze, the “Argument” encounters life lodged within a circle of protective enclosure, and it too responds with a sort of accusation. In this case, though, the accusation proceeds from a desire not to find secure life’s safety but rather to lift the cover that protects it and thus to *expose life to its own self-destructive violence*. Like the Beggar, who levels her accusation against God when she sees the glowworm shining “as if nothing ails the sky,” the “Argument” draws up its accusation around a certain phantasmatic “as if;” the circles are “strange” and “most fantastic” precisely because they generate the spectacular fantasy, indeed the fiction, of a shining phantasmagorical “as if” that concerns the relation between life and the world. But no god stands here accused. Indeed, it does not make its argument for death in the name of any good higher than life. It purports to disavow any such transcendence and dismisses as mere superstition the very thought of anything beyond this mortal, earthly life. Instead, it accuses the sacrificial tradition itself of hypocritically enforcing the ban. What the “Argument for Suicide” argues, then, is that there exists a secret complicity between the sacrificial vocation that puts biological life to death in the name of a transcendent interest, and the very animality which it thus denigrates and regards as redeemable only in sacrificial violence. They are embraced by the same ideology of life. They share the same interest; the circles of the dialectic that link them are “drawn,” inscribed, by the same apparatus. This ideology of life is also *a political theology of life*. And the illusion, the shining “as if,” is sovereignty.

What is the difference between an argument for suicide and an argument for murder? In the passage from *The Borderers*, an act of murder, according to Rivers, saves the old man from the slow

death of the stone. But the “Argument,” describes a rather different situation. In addition to misery (caused, perhaps, by the palsy or like the stone) a person who wants to commit suicide is afflicted by the restraint imposed by the belief that there is no “license” to die by suicide. Such a person lives *as if* the technical means do not exist, or *as if* implements of death are not used to destroy human life every day, or *as if* the punishments of hell await on the other side. “If you would die by license,” you have only one recourse: to “call the dropsy and the stone / And let them end you.” One calls out—indeed, prays—for the visitation of the stone to save oneself from the suffering brought on by the visitation of the stone. One must call out to misery to be saved from misery.

What suicide and murder share is the common basis of their prohibition, the sacredness of natural life; what distinguishes them is the fact that the murderer always *might* escape the law, whereas the person guilty of suicide *always* escapes the law. The poem seems aware that a very good reason not to raise your hand against the beggar is the law- and war-making sovereign himself, who can always demonstrate his right over life and death by sending the beggar’s killer to the scaffold. The ideology of life erases the difference between murder and suicide such that suicide is treated *as if* it were guarded by the same prohibitive threat of punishment. Those who would “die by license” are constrained, not by the threat of violence done to their living bodies, but by the “circles / Drawn round the thing called life.” Enclosing the would-be suicide and life at once, the circles protect what they inhibit. The circles can be compared to an ideological apparatus or a neurotic delusion because their function is precisely to compel human beings to “Live Live on” *as if* the world contained no means of death—neither technologically produced, like steel, arsenic, and rope, nor occurring naturally, like rivers and standing pools.

All of these circular *as if*s come together to form a chain of symptomatic and selective blindness. When it comes to the possibility of suicide, it is easier to suddenly forget the vast machinery of death so plainly visible everywhere in human culture (war, murder, murderously

exploitative economic conditions, the death penalty) than it is to contemplate the willful act of self-destruction in one's own case. So much for the first circle. The second circle displaces the same machinery of death into another world, compelling the prospective suicide to live on *as if* in dread of a life beyond life where he will suffer the "pains of hell." If the first circle erases the fact of artificially produced death as it really exists in the world, the second circle invents the fiction that life survives beyond death, and remains exposed to the same implements of punishment, which are now at the disposal of an equally fictional divine sovereign. This fable denies not only the human uses of death, but even death itself. The ideology of life thus *erases death*. The third delusion in the series of fantastic circles is to live as if you "think / Your corpse would quarrel with a stake." Here death is denied not with the fiction of an afterlife, but with the fiction that inanimate matter is capable of sensation and thus alive. Wordsworth is alluding to the custom of physically punishing the corpses of suicides. For such a punishment not to be an empty threat, he reasons, you would have to believe your corpse will have a postmortem "quarrel" with the stake that impales it. In other words, you would have to suffer a radical confusion concerning the difference between symbolic and real punishment.

These denials can work together or in isolation. For example, an avowed atheist would be susceptible to the first and third even were he to believe himself immunized against the second. And the result is that misery has no friend. "If you would die / By license," your last remaining recourse is to "call the dropsy and the stone / And let them end you." This sardonic formulation presents us with a scene of suicide by apostrophe. That is, the suicide is carried out indirectly, through intermediaries whom the subject of the suicide has summoned by name. You might call it an assisted death by apostrophe. Wordsworth's would-be suicide might be a little bit like Keats in "Ode to a Nightingale:

for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,

Call'd him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,

To take into the air my quiet breath[.]⁵⁰

But the aspiring suicide calls out to dropsy and the stone to receive a death that will be far from “easeful.” To commit suicide by means of a performative speech act, to conjure one’s own death as by a spell, is impossible in every case but this one. The irony, of course, is precisely that this speech act is likely to be felicitous—at least if the speaker is already in old age or manages to live long enough to die during it or “of” it. In the terms of the apostrophic spell, to conjure the dropsy and the stone would, if it worked (that is, if the dropsy and the stone not only hear the call but answer it), guarantee a long life. Between the call and the reply, the subject waits to die, like the aged beggar, a natural death by inches of animal decay. The call, of course, is ironic; it is a “frail spell,” a performative act of suicidal non-suicide. The irony works by turning the performative glove inside out, so to speak, revealing the call to be more of a constative that predicts the future than a spell that conjures it.

The irony works in another direction, too. Given the magnitude of the delay that separates the performative act of the call from the event it aims to produce (which is nothing less than the delay of “so long life,” as Hamlet would put it), and judging the performative by its effect, the call is less an act of suicide than a prayer for survival. The act of giving oneself death converts into its opposite: giving oneself life. This is not too surprising, since this is a scene of suicide by apostrophe. Apostrophe *animates*. In an article about what would now be called the biopolitical dimension of apostrophe’s animating function, Barbara Johnson defines it as follows:

Apostrophe...involves the direct address of an absent, dead, or inanimate being by a first-person speaker: O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being...” Apostrophe is thus both direct and indirect: based etymologically on the notion of turning aside, of digressing

⁵⁰ John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale,” in *The Complete Poems*, 347.

from straight speech, it manipulates the I/Thou structure of direct address in an indirect, fictionalized way. The absent, dead, or inanimate entity addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropomorphic. Apostrophe is a form ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness.⁵¹

The call to dropsy and the stone figures them as agents capable of acting in the world. It animates them; it invests them with life. Like the Christian myth of an afterlife and the delusion that imaginatively invests corpses with sensation and interest to avoid pain, the death-driven prayer reinvents the illnesses as fabulous, even *living* gods. They are living because they are capable of being addressed, capable of responding, and capable of responding through action. What Barbara Johnson calls the “mute response” will be the appearance, after a delay, of their symptoms in the body. By the same token, therefore, the call posits life—including the very life it wants to end—as a fiction, a fable, an invented fairy tale. The call thus repeats the *as if* and the erasure of death effected by the circles. It works not through myth or by creating the content of some fictional world (like hell) but rather by means of the rhetoric of animation. The strange, fantastic circles thus re-appropriate the

⁵¹ See Barbara Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1(Spring 1986), 29-30. Johnson’s focus is the determining function of apostrophe, and the animation it elicits, in the structure of the political and ethical struggle over abortion in North America. In *Reading with John Clare*, Sarah Guyer notes that not only is abortion paradigmatically a question of biopolitics, but that Johnson’s use of apostrophe as a figure of animation to read the structure and terrain of a political conflict opens up the possibility of a new, *rhetorical* approach to the concept of “biopower” itself as it was formulated by Foucault. See, for example, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, 241. Here Foucault explains that in its classical form, “the right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live,” whereas the era of biopower is characterized by the emergence of a new right which is exercised on populations as such: “the right to make live and let die.” But apostrophe is just this, the figure that makes live. Reading Johnson “after Foucault and Giorgio Agamben and their readers,” Guyer argues that Johnson’s “reflection on apostrophe, animation, and abortion is an argument for the essentially poetic structure of what we will later have come to call biopolitics...Johnson shows that biopolitics is a figural predicament, and at the same time that apostrophe is a biopolitical predicament” (*Reading with John Clare*, 14-15). For Foucault’s other key texts on biopolitics and biopower, see *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction; Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78; The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79; On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979-1980*. For theoretical and rhetorical work on apostrophe related to Johnson’s, see Paul de Man, “Autobiography as De-Facement,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, and Jonathan Culler, “Apostrophe,” in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*.

tangent line that seemed for a moment to escape it, but which now circles back as if following the curved surface of some higher-order geodesic.

At first, Wordsworth reads all these circles, all linked together in a strange overvaluation of life itself, as effects operating *in the interest of life*. The ideology of life works by fabricating fictions, fantasies, and phantasmatic projections—like the magic implied by the myth of the afterlife, or the magical thinking involved in a prayer to dropsy and the stone. Wordsworth seems to marvel at the very production of those myths and fictions—as if the production were itself strange, fantastic, and inexplicably magical. If what is at stake here is indeed an ideology of life, then it is a matter of life deploying phantasms and fictions in the name of its own interest (survival, self-preservation, growth). But the poem exceeds the bounds of ideology critique when it posits life itself—that “thing” round which the obfuscating magic circles are drawn—as essentially involved in the process through which the circles are drawn, if not itself just another magic circle. The poetic thesis toward which the “Argument” tends is that life just is the auto-poietic process of drawing the circles. The ideology critique requires the reproduction of the illusion: the thing in the interest of which the illusions are created is itself a fiction.

I noted above that Wordsworth’s use of Shakespeare in *The Borderers* has been well documented. As a fragment of that drama, the “Argument” reads like an atheist’s rejoinder to Hamlet’s “to be or not to be.” We were already dealing with traces of Hamlet’s suicidality in “The road extended o’er the heath.” In light of the female vagrant’s explicit suicidal fantasies and the Beggar’s implicit death wish, it seems reasonable to hear an echo of *Hamlet* in Wordsworth’s play on “ordonnance” and “ordnance.” Hamlet does declare something to be “heaven ordinant” (5.2.54). But more importantly, and in the context of his own death wish, he employs an artillery metaphor to describe the ban on suicide he wishes had never been legislated by God:

O, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt,
 Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,
 Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
 His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!

(1.2.133-136)

There's a play here, of course, between the cannon of God's ordinance and the canon that fires ordinance. It anticipates those even more famous projectiles, the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" which Hamlet will later adduce as a very good reason not to be (3.1.58). In that death driven discourse, the "rub" in the choice of whether "to be or not to be" is the question of the "undiscover'd country from whose bourn / No traveller returns" (3.1.56, 79-80). If not "for the dread of something after death," no one would put up with all these slings and arrows, bear so many "fardels," or "grunt and sweat under a weary life" (3.1.76-78). If Hamlet lives on for a little while, then, it is thanks to the possibility of hell. The "Argument for Suicide" recognizes no such possibility: Hamlet lives *as if* there were a hell. It contends that the real mystery is not death, the undiscovered country beyond the "bourn," but what lies within it: life. There is a hint of *The Tempest* in the "Argument's" displacement of the question from death to life. Its strange circles recall Prospero's description of life as a dream-work enclosed by a magic circle, or rather a manifold of dream "stuff" whose shape is rounded off by the bourn of a certain slumber: "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep."⁵² Wordsworth's interest in the "Argument for Suicide" is the stuff on the near side of the bourn.

I would like to propose that Wordsworth has a previously unmarked interlocutor here, Hegesias of Cyrene, and a previously unmarked intertext, the latter's *A Man Who Starves Himself*, which, though lost, is described by Cicero in the first book of the *Tusculan Disputations*. Duncan Wu

⁵² William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 4.1.156-157. References are to act, scene, and line number.

has noted that though Wordsworth had certainly read the *Tusculan Disputations* by 1814 (since it inspired the *Recluse*), he probably read it at Hawkshead.⁵³ Indeed, the “Argument for Suicide” might constitute evidence for Wordsworth’s familiarity with the text, since it contains several possible verbal echoes of it. Now according to Diogenes Laertius, Hegesias was known as “The Death-Persuader” (*peisithanatos*), a well-earned nickname if what Cicero says about him is true—that his argument for suicide resulted in so many dead students that the authorities banned him from teaching in Alexandria.⁵⁴ As a hedonist and follower of Aristippus, Hegesias identified pleasure with the good. To live well, within this system, one must maximize one’s own pleasure and minimize pain as much as possible. Life, for Aristippus, becomes an economy of pleasure and pain, where in the pursuit of maximum pleasure, one temporizes, speculates, performs cost-benefit analyses, and assesses risk. But in the end—indeed, from the very beginning—there will have been a balance sheet of expenditure and return, some relative mixture of pleasure and pain. Because death is neutral with regard to pleasure and pain, the “wise man” opts out of the game as quickly as possible—in order, precisely, to cut his losses and minimize pain.⁵⁵ If pleasure only occurs in an economy with pain, if the experience of pleasure is constitutively contaminated by the experience of pain, then the best

⁵³ Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth’s Reading, 1800-1815*, Vol. 2, 51.

⁵⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Vol. 1, Bk. 2, “Aristippus.”

⁵⁵ For a study on suicide in classical antiquity, see Anton J.L. van Hoof, *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self-Killing in Classical Antiquity*. See also Wallace I. Matson, “Hegesias the Death-Persuader; Or, the Gloominess of Hedonism,” *Philosophy* 73 no. 286 (Oct 1998). Matson offers a helpful synthesis of the thinking in “Hegesias the Death-Persuader; Or, the Gloominess of Hedonism,” *Philosophy* 73 no. 286 (Oct 1998), where he compares the reasoning to game theory and, interestingly, to the principle of rational calculation employed by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*. He notes the exclusion of “prenatal suicide,” that is the rejection of life as such, from the calculation that occurs behind the veil of ignorance, in other words before the beginning: “Rawls never discusses why his rational persons behind the veil of ignorance do not opt for prenatal suicide, though Hegesias could justly claim that he owes it to us to do so” (556). Matson does not follow his parenthetical observation on Rawls to its conclusion: that Rawls’s automatic exclusion of the possibility of “prenatal suicide” (which, it must be said, is an *impossible* possibility) suggests that life or natality is the condition of possibility of the calculation rather than an object of it. The value of life as the condition of possibility of value is posited a priori by political thought as the condition of possibility that escapes its categories and calculative machinery. For a relatively recent work of academic philosophy that actually makes the case for a sort of “prenatal suicide,” see David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. The basic stake of the book—that “coming into existence” is itself a harm—forces Benatar to reckon with all the attendant paradoxes that arise when one makes calculations concerning the interest of a self that, because it does not exist, by definition has no interest at all. Significantly, though, Benatar is no Hegesiac. He opposes suicide on the grounds that does harm to others.

strategy for playing the game is not to maximize pleasure but rather to minimize pain, and the surest way to do that is to make pain impossible by dying, destroying the living body without which there can be no experience at all.

Cicero picks up this line of thought in *Tusculan Disputations*, where he argues that “even if the soul does perish” with the body, the total extinction of death would nevertheless not be an evil.

Where, asks Cicero, is the evil in death? In this context, to ask after evil is to ask after *pain*:

For let the soul perish as the body: is there any pain, or indeed any feeling at all, in the body after death? No one, indeed, asserts that; though Epicurus charges Democritus with saying so; but the disciples of Democritus deny it. No sense, therefore, remains in the soul; for the soul is nowhere. Where, then, is the evil? For there is nothing but these two things. Is it because the mere separation of the soul and body cannot be effected without pain? But even should that be granted, how small a pain must that be! Yet I think that it is false, and that it is very often unaccompanied by any sensation at all, and sometimes even attended with pleasure; but certainly the whole must be very trifling, whatever it is, for it is instantaneous.⁵⁶

The body is not capable of sensation after death, and neither is the soul (since its extinction is granted by the argument). The moment of “separation” cannot be painful either, because it is “instantaneous”—and we might add, the event itself cannot be experienced in any case, since its very occurrence is the erasure of the possibility of experience.

For Cicero, then, there is no pain (evil) after death or during it, at least to any significant degree. The evil is rather in the dread we feel in advance of it. The source of our “unease” is the anticipation of “leaving the good things of life:”

What makes us uneasy, or rather gives us pain, is the leaving the good things of life. But just consider if I might not more properly say, leaving the evils of life; only there is no reason for

⁵⁶ Marcus Tullius Cicero, “On the Contempt of Death,” *Tusculan Disputations*, 45.

my now occupying myself in bewailing the life of man, and yet I might, with very good reason. But what occasion is there, when what I am laboring to prove is that no one is miserable after death, to make life more miserable by lamenting over it. I have done that in the book which I wrote, in order to comfort myself as best I could. If, then, our inquiry is after truth, death withdraws us from evil, not good. This subject is indeed so copiously handled by Hegesias, the Cyrenaic philosopher, that he is said to have been forbidden by Ptolemy from delivering his lectures in the schools, because some who heard him made away with themselves...The book I mentioned of that Hegesias is called Ἀποκατεργῶν, or “A Man Who Starves Himself,” in which a man is represented as killing himself by starvation, till he is prevented by his friends, in reply to whom he reckons up all the miseries of human life. I might do the same, though not so fully as he, who thinks it not worth any man’s while to live. I pass over others. Was it even worth my while to live, for, had I died before I was deprived of the comforts of my own family, and of the honors which I received for my public services, would not death have taken me from the evils of life rather than from its blessings?⁵⁷

Like a good orator, Cicero reframes the question. Death is not privation. To die is not to be deprived of the good, it is to abandon the whole economy of good and evil, pleasure and pain. If pleasure is always paid for with some kind of pain, then death removes one from the obligation of having to pay. It closes down the system of substitution and difference, and destroys the second-order evils (of substitutability, delay, and indeed *différance*) on which that system turns. It is the impossibility of any value, and of anything happening at all.

Now Cicero is more prudent with his claims than Hegesias; he won’t presume to legislate for others. Even in his own case, he will only ask the *question* of whether death will not have “taken me

⁵⁷ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 45-46.

from the evils of life rather than from its blessings.” But his depiction of Hegesias seems to have left its signature on Wordsworth’s “Argument for Suicide.” Its title describes the very rhetorical operation which Hegesias’s book is supposed to have performed, and which Diogenes Laertius tells us earned him the nickname “The Death-Persuader” (*peisithanatos*). Wordsworth’s poem thus speaks in Hegesias’s rhetorical voice. Its title, “Argument for Suicide,” might even allude to Hegesias’s nickname, “The Death-Persuader.” If it could be demonstrated that Wordsworth had read Diogenes Laertius in the 1790s, then it would be possible to argue that the title of Wordsworth’s poem is a displaced translation of Hegesias’s nickname. In any event, the poem has inherited Hegesias’s rhetorical project of death-persuasion from Cicero (though not the name “The Death-Persuader,” which doesn’t appear in Cicero’s text), for it contains a figure reminiscent of the title character of *Death by Starvation*—a man starving to death (the beggar), on whose behalf it seems to make its “argument.”⁵⁸ In itself, the description of an “aged beggar” starving at the city walls does not constitute evidence that Wordsworth had read Cicero’s precis of Hegesias, since there are starving beggars everywhere in his early writing. But the “Argument for Suicide” also makes ironic reference to the belief which is so absurd, says Cicero (and which we already saw him say above), that not even Democritus and his followers have ever really held: that a corpse can feel pain. It is as though Hegesias’s lost book has come back, the specter of “A Man Who Starves Himself” returning from the radical death of its archival erasure, translated across time and at least three languages, into the form of a literary fragment that is itself at the border of, and thus in translation between, literary forms. For the “Argument for Suicide” is perhaps a strange lyric poem, or a piece of oratory

⁵⁸ For Wordsworth and classical humanism, see Jane Worthington, *Wordsworth’s Reading in Roman Prose*. See also Bruce Graver, “Wordsworth and the Stoics,” in *Romans and the Romantics*, John Cole, *Wordsworth and Classical Humanism*, in *The Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth*, Richard Clancey, *Wordsworth’s Classical Undersong: Education, Rhetoric, and Poetic Truth*. For more general research on Wordsworth’s education, see T.W. Thompson, *Wordsworth’s Hawkshead*, and Ben Ross Schneider, *Wordsworth’s Cambridge Education*.

composed in verse (it does claim to be an “argument” after all), or else a discarded part of a drama, a speech without a scene or a person of the drama to speak it.

There is something demonic about this little poem, and it has to do with the fact that the most we can say about its relation to *The Borderers* is that it *might* be an outtake from the play. The less it belongs to *The Borderers*, the more it belongs to Hegesias’s ghost. For unlike Rivers’s set speeches, the “Argument” is contained by no larger work. The field of its rhetorical operation is thus unlimited, contained not even by the already transparent borders of fiction, unframed and unbound. If it were a part of the play and occurred within it as a literal “argument for suicide”—an exercise in persuasion whose purpose is to bring its addressee to the point of actually committing suicide—it would be sequestered within the work, fixed to a place in the plot and to the body of the person in the drama who utters it. That theater implies a certain danger is well known. It happens live, of course, and the fact of living spectators means that every utterance, indeed every act, has real as well as imaginary addressees. Make the suicidal poem a set speech and put it in Rivers’s mouth. But take every precaution. Mark his utterance up and down with every didactic signal to inform the audience in no uncertain terms, loud and clear, that the play approves of neither suicide nor arguments in favor of it; punish the characters to make it even clearer; nest the “Argument” in so many brackets of fictionality and embed it in so dense and particular a web of imagined circumstances that no one on earth would credit the possibility of it ever detaching itself from this context to become a free floating, autonomous “Argument for Suicide” capable of addressing not fictional but real people; use every prophylactic yet invented or possibly inventable—and still the risk of containment breach will be irreducible.⁵⁹ In principle, the very fact of its theatrical performance carries the “Argument” across all of these borders and into the world, and because performative language (the persuasive

⁵⁹ It belongs to the structure of the iterable trace. For iterability, see Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” in *Limited Inc.*

function of its argumentation) does not respect the distinction between real life and fiction—real performatives operating precisely by means of theater and fiction—a fictional argument for suicide might always produce a real one. Rivers opens his mouth; every dam is whelmed.

But the “Argument for Suicide” we are dealing with here has already escaped its dramatic context, assuming that it had ever been confined to *The Borderers* in the first place. It is easy to imagine Rivers addressing it to one of his victims. Or, what seems more likely, Mortimer might address it to himself during the madness brought on by his crisis of decision, a suicidal soliloquy. In fact, it is not a speech and it lacks the two bodies that would otherwise contain it: the body of the drama and the body of a person in the drama to utter it. It is tempting to say that in the “Argument” Rivers is speaking to us directly straight out of the play, from the very border of *The Borderers*. But there is no Rivers here. The scandal, indeed, is that there is no speaking body.⁶⁰ There is no body here, that is, other than the “Argument” itself, which, now that it is freed from the larger work to which we cannot definitively say it ever belonged in the strict sense as a functionally determined part, begins to circulate like a virus that automatically engages every passing reader with a direct address and an incitement to suicide. We can be even more concrete about the context from which it escaped: the recto of the second leaf of the folio notebook labeled DC MS. 13, where, as Osborn writes, both the title and the poem are neatly inscribed under a “faint red line.” There it had lain dormant, in a kind of holographic latency state, until Ernest de Selincourt made a series of decisions (first of all, that it is a poem and that “Argument for Suicide” is its title) that translated the handwriting into print and liberated this “virus” the substrate of a single page to the accelerated reproducibility of print.⁶¹ And now its apostrophe posits a subject in whom it then endeavors to

⁶⁰ I am borrowing the formulation from Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*.

⁶¹ However, my claim about Hegesias’s ghost—that Wordsworth had Cicero in mind as he wrote the “Argument,” and that its rhetorical function is inspired the latter’s description of *A Man Who Starves Himself*, complicates any supposition that DC MS. 13 represents, as a “textual body,” the “original context” from which the poem escaped. Not only because, as writing, it has always already escaped in principle, but because the context that *informs* the production of the poem

produce—by means of argumentation, rational discourse—an act of radical self-destruction which its agent, having been influenced by reason, would presumably regard as a transparently rational conclusion, the product of self-reflection, the end of reason.

The “Argument for Suicide,” free floating and tricked out with the machinery of direct address, is more threatening than any of Rivers’s arguments for murder, and more sinister too, even were the latter to escape the fiction and become arguments for murder as such. Such a *general* argument for murder, one that directly urges its reader to go out and kill someone, can trope its addressee into a virtual murderer, but its interpellative power can never provide the newly recruited killer with a specifically identified victim. But an apostrophic argument for suicide automatically specifies the victim in the very structure of its address: *you*. Subject and object perfectly coincide in this deictic. To address the one is to name the other: the killer finds his victim in himself. The *you* converts instantly upon receipt of its address into an *I* within whose identifying embrace the one who gives death and the one who receives it become the same. You thus find yourself suspended in the interval between these two receipts, your receipt of the argument’s address and your receipt of the death it addresses you to address to yourself, to receive from yourself. What does it mean to be interpellated as the subject of a suicide by an “Argument for Suicide?” To be recruited into an act of deliberation: you are not purely passive here, borne by the text’s addressivity toward death as by a wave. Instead, you are invited to occupy the position of a rational subject who will actively consider the argument placed before you. Any encounter with a text that directly addresses its reader is also a self-encounter, the line of reference reacting back from the deictic upon the reader, a recoil or reflex-action whose very “turn back” can be readily mobilized as a trope for the structure of self-

involves not only Cicero’s text but also, through Cicero’s precis of it, a lost text. Among the elements of its line of descent, as it were, is a lacuna in the archive. For a recent examination of the relation between Derrida’s thinking of translation, poetry, and what he calls the “verbal body,” see Elissa Marder, “Force and Translation; Or, the Polymorphous Body of Language,” *PhiloSOPHIA* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2013), and “Derrida’s Matrix: The Births of Deconstruction,” *The Oxford Literary Review* 40.1 (2018): 1-19.

relation precipitated by the address. But here, the event of self-encounter produces the structure of self-relation *as delayed self-destruction*. Its addressivity is thus structured by a middle voice that moves in flashes between activity and passivity to generate a proleptic deferral into futurity.⁶² The pattern of deferral recalls the vagrant's doubled fantasy of retrospective death—except that we have been absorbed by it. We are implicated in its oscillations.

Apostrophe gives life. As we saw above, it is the rhetorical device employed to animate the dead, the abstract, and beings otherwise unable to respond, whether they be gods, urns, or winds. But in a case like this, it also animates you: whatever actually living reader happens to intercept the *you* of a direct address like the one we are dealing with in the “Argument.” It is not quite right to say that we find ourselves in the position of accidental overhearers, or even that we are eavesdropping on the “Argument for Suicide.” Its nonbelonging to a larger text prevents the deictic function of its *you* from being locked down to any intra-textual referent. There is no overdetermination, no dangerous slippage from the proper, fictional referent to someone in the world. Its deixis can only be extra-textual. The reader is animated as the subject of his or her own suicide, that is, animated at least virtually into giving him- or herself death—and thus animated into the position of the very sort of absence that would call for a classical, funerary use of apostrophe. The apostrophe animates her into the phantasm of her living death, conjures her virtually into the spectral form that rises to answer the apostrophic hails of grieving survivors. Even to reject the argument implies a minimal participation in its structure, some virtual projection of oneself into a scene of suicide, whether rationally calculated or concretely imagined, and thus a minimal animation of oneself within one's own radical absence—which is, of course, an impossible animation. This movement implies a

⁶² If we wanted a figure for the scene of self-recognition precipitated by the encounter with this text, we might replace the optic instantaneity of light's reflection in a mirror with the concussive event of a bullet ricocheting off a wall—but with its deadly velocity almost frozen in time, suspended in extreme slow motion like some terrible accident in a ballistics lab recorded by a high-speed camera. At the heart of this demonic machine is indeed the playback, the repetition made possible by its structure of address.

temporalization, and this temporalization is life. On the other hand, in the morbid, hopefully fantastical (but irreducibly possible) case that the poem actually manages to persuade a living reader, he or she will still have had to live through the same phantasmatic temporalization—indeed, live long enough to read it to the end and consider its reasons. Only the living are susceptible to persuasion. Indeed, the “Argument” animates itself as well, as though susceptible to electrification by the conductive powers of its own addressivity. The apostrophe reactivates with each new reading, and the text to which it is attached lights up with a kind of dark, inorganic life—and with each new reading it urges a new suicide. The mechanism is thus able to repeat itself endlessly, at least “so long lives this,” so long as the text itself and its material substrate manage to survive.⁶³ There’s a demonism, too, in the strange interest it would seem to have in keeping itself in the catalogue and in enlisting the editorial labor of the likes of de Selincourt and Osborn, or the critical labor of this reading for that matter. To archive or read the “Argument for suicide” is to respond to its address, to implicate oneself within its machinery by precipitating its repetition and survival.

In principle any formal argument for suicide, even one lacking an explicit use of apostrophe, would silently address its reader merely by virtue of the addressivity implied in the rhetoric of argumentation. An argument always presupposes someone to persuade; it is an inevitable structural effect, a function of the form. But the “Argument’s” use of the second person is uniquely effective in being ever so slightly indirect. In fact, it uses the generic you rather than the personal you of direct address. It unfolds as a formal argument, and rather than issuing an explicit directive to suicide, lets that final consequence come into focus through a generic you—that more colloquial, more vivid, and immediate version of “one”—which in this context seems barely able to keep itself from tipping over into a full on direct address, the final consequence of the “Argument” being precisely that one, you, ought to commit suicide. When the argument of the surrounding discourse

⁶³ William Shakespeare, Sonnet 18.

bears on the general singularity of all every possible life to which the general singular *you* refers, the generic use of the second person can only become indistinguishable from its function as a direct address, its deictic charge unable to keep itself from leaping outward like an electric spark toward every animated and animating pole.

When we turn from what the title declares to reconsider what the text beneath it actually does, we see that the case it makes for suicide is an oblique one. At the heart of the poem is not a command to commit suicide, but a command to live. Suicide serves the poem's more fundamental concern, which is to level a critique against an ideology of life that issues its interpellation not in the form of a hail but that imperative: *Live Live on*. Unlike Althusser, whose "theoretical theater" requires him to conjure a street scene and put the hail in the mouth of a policeman who calls out, "hey you there!", eliciting the "turn" of an individual into a subject, Wordsworth dispenses with every stage, indeed with the theater altogether. *Live Live on*: it arises neither from a speaker (some embodied analogue to Althusser's cop, in other words) nor from any rational principle or ground, some authorizing basis or origin to which one might refer to confirm the legitimacy of its command. It comes from nowhere like an unfathered vapor, source-less.⁶⁴ As to its authority we have nothing but the typographical sovereignty of two capitalized L's. And this very repetition, lacking even the little space of a comma, both urgent and mechanical, tells us that we are in a territory where what matters is not the validity of a command but its effectiveness. But perhaps this is only because the sovereignty in question is just that fundamental, just that invisibly obvious.

To illustrate the character of ideological "obviousness," Althusser refers to St. Paul:

As St Paul admirably put it, it is in the '*Logos*', in other words, in ideology, that we 'live and move and have our being'. It follows that the category of the subject is a primary 'self-

⁶⁴ It is impossible to check its papers, to borrow Kant's rather charged metaphor for critically assessing the authority of the claims made by "facts of reason." But then again this is not a claim but an imperative, and not a fact of reason but life.

evident fact' for you and me (self-evident facts are always primary): it is clear that you are a (free, moral, responsible, and so on) subject, and that I am, too. Like all self-evident facts, including those that make a word 'name a thing' or 'have a meaning' (including, therefore, the self-evident facts of the 'transparency' of language), the 'self-evident fact' that you and I are subjects—and that that is not a problem—is an ideological effect, the elementary ideological effect. For it is characteristic of ideology to impose self-evident facts as self-evident facts (without in the least seeming to, since they are 'self-evident') which we cannot *not* recognize and before which we have the inevitable and eminently natural reaction of exclaiming (aloud or in 'the silence of consciousness'): 'That's obvious! That's right! That's true!' ⁶⁵

You and I are both alive, clearly. Obviously. ⁶⁶ Neither of us can bear witness against this fact without betraying ourselves as party to it. ⁶⁷ "That's obvious! That's right! That's true!" But, says Wordsworth, this very obviousness is itself an ideological effect. His intervention in "Argument for Suicide," then, is this: We do not live, move, or have our being in anything at all (or for very long) unless we are already enlisted by the recruitment of an address more originary than any policeman's hail, and old (at least) as life: *Live Live on*. The category of life, together with its claim on survival—and by definition, life must extend in time and live at least a little while—represents an obviousness so primary as to condition the possibility of any experience of obviousness, since without life there is no experience whatsoever. At stake here is thus an address so obvious that it arises from nowhere at all and addresses no one in particular, that is, everyone living. It is an obviousness upstream of

⁶⁵ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 88-89.

⁶⁶ Except for the fact that, as Derrida has demonstrated, death is structured within the mark. Every "I am Alive" also implies an "I am dead." For the derivation of the "I am dead" from every "I am," see *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 83.

⁶⁷ Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 9: "one cannot bear witness against [the knowledge of love] without being party to it."

ontological difference, so originary as to condition any possible obviousness. Which is to say that it is far from obvious: without any policeman to speak it, without even the pretense of having papers to be inspected. Wordsworth thus invites us to consider the rhetoric, indeed the arche-rhetoric of its production, since a living being is nonetheless constituted by its arche-interpellation. Without its operation there would be no individual susceptible to the recruitment of any imaginable ideological apparatus at all. Live long enough to hear a hail. Every possible “hey you there!” presupposes it. And every possible ideological critique has already been enlisted by the imperative to *Live Live on*. The directive repeats on the second (indeed before the first unit of time gets ticking, in the very movement of life’s originary temporalization), since ideology critique could not live at all without in some way claiming to be good for life, without bearing the placard that another world (another life) is possible.

Live Live on—“That’s obvious! That’s right! That’s true!” What does it mean to be the addressee of this primordial imperative? Nothing can be named as its speaker since such a being would itself have to be figured as alive and therefore already in thrall to its own imperative. It is for this reason, and contrary to all obviousness, that the directive cannot simply be said to originate in life, to be issued from life to itself. To issue the imperative is already to have been affected by it: “And to my life I say, Live Live on...” Wordsworth’s critique of the ideology of life, rather, focuses on just this circularity. It works by translating the command back into some of its concrete manifestations, and then shows how these material translations come together to form a system. The chief “obviousness” at stake here concerns life’s value, or rather the hyperinflation of value that results from the implicit (indeed usually unconscious, if not reflexive and automatic) belief that life is worth saving at any cost, even at the cost of the “good life,” and that mere survival can be an end in itself—able self-sufficiently to give life its value, to make life worthy to be lived without making any

reference to factors borrowed from regimes external to that of biological interest, like justice, for example.

The poem opens by using the imperative to indicate the general *permissibility* of harming human life, and places the reader not in the position of a person contemplating suicide but in that of a sovereign exercising his right over life and death, “send[ing] this man to the mine and that to the battle.” The implied directive in this sovereign allocation of human capital, no doubt issued in the imperative of a command and signaled by the deixis of a royal hand that, with the “motion of a muscle,” points “this way” and “that” to feed the apparatus of the state with human lives. Sending here, is also spending (EV 3.5.61). At stake is the economy of governmentality. It is permissible to spend, indeed to expend, *this* human life on the extraction of iron from the bowels of the earth which will then be manufactured into weapons; and it is permissible to expend *that* human life on the war where it will use and perhaps be destroyed by weapons. The *raison d’État* also permits the implementation of economic policies like enclosure that result in the displacement and mass starvation of whole populations. But take a single “starving beggar” from this vast dying population which it is permissible to produce and “lift your hand against him”—and the prohibition against harming human life instantly kicks in. Where does the “Argument” draw the line between lifting your hand against a naked, starving beggar, and the violence in destroying lives through resource extraction, war, and the redistribution of the very means of subsistence? “But for worlds / Lift not your hand against him:” the violence is immediate. This is marked first of all in the appearance of the generic *you*, which, though its address is of course implied by the imperative in the preceding lines, adds a sense of immediacy to both the prohibition and to the act which is thus prohibited. The hand that does the harm, “your hand,” also becomes explicit, emerging from the pointing words (*this, that*) whose very deictic function merely implies it. And the sovereign himself, who is likewise only suggested but not named in the previous three lines, now bodies forth as well—but only to

encounter a limit that makes us wonder if we are still dealing with a sovereign. Finally, the ban's very hyperbole—that not even “for worlds” is it permissible to harm the beggar—tell us not only that the ban is unconditional but also that the violence itself is purposeless. It is justified by no end and integrated into the system by no teleological calculation.

By contrast, the permissible forms of violence enumerated by the first three lines are indirect and mediated, as suggested by the absence of an explicitly named grammatical subject. They also take place *within the world* for concrete, clearly determined reasons. Indeed, they are justified within a system of means and ends, and as we have seen, they seem to suggest such a system as they unfold on the page, moving from the mine, to the battle, to the displaced populations whose homeless and starvation results from the preceding economic and military activities. In this context, to explain such a phenomenon as a function of a system in terms of which it can possibly be justified or even opposed is already to justify it. They are integrated within an economy in which death circulates like debt, calculably, and is given to this or that living subject in accordance with (and thus justifiable in terms of) principles of utility. That is to say, *teleologically*: if they seem mediated and indirect, it is because they are *means*, tethered to a telos. The death of the men sent to the mine and to war bear the imprint of an end. These are deaths with a *reason*.

The allegation of the “Argument,” then, is this: life only becomes sacred and worthy of unconditional protection when its utility has been exhausted by power, when it has been so depleted of value, so used up, as it were, as to be good for nothing. Implied here is a double ban against purposeless violence, violence that serves no end, and violence done against purposeless life—life that has managed to survive the total extraction of value from its body, like a remnant or a waste product, and which is no longer worth the expense of any further violation. The hypocrisy against which the “Argument” thus pitches its fight is not just a culture's failure to live up to the standard it espouses. Revealed in this hypocrisy is an originary structure of the political that bears on the link

between the value of life and sovereignty, whether the latter be that of the individual, the state, or the onto-theological. The originarity of the structure, it seems to me, is strongly suggested by the progression of the three sovereign decisions in the opening lines: from the use of bodies to extract metals from mines buried like tombs inside the very earth beneath the polis, to the use of bodies to wage war at the frontier, at some disputed border, to the production of surplus populations which are then left starving outside the “gates,” expelled or even abjected, a constitutive exclusion that anticipates the paradoxical moebius strip logic that, for Giorgio Agamben, connects the figure of sovereign to that of *homo sacer*, and, for Derrida, links the sovereign and the beast.⁶⁸ Moreover, its movement from introjection and entombment to exclusion and abjection repeats perfectly the sequence plotted out by the vagrant in her lament, from a vision of death in the radical enclosure of a cave to a vision of death in radical exposure out on the streets in a confrontation of passive resistance to the on-coming war machine. What the “Argument” now goes on to argue, so to speak, is that there exists an obscure complicity between the hypocritical ban on harming the starving beggar, whose life is only unconditionally protected because nothing can be gained from harming it, in other words because it has no value (or so goes the argument), and the hypocritical ban on suicide. For “Argument,” it seems, suicide is the only other instance where life is protected *unconditionally*. But it applies not only to cases of “wasted life” like the beggar, but to any life at all, like yours or mine. And for good reason: if even a sovereign offends by killing the beggar, it is because it is too costly to do so; thrift opposes it. If the injunction against suicide applies not only to the exception (the beggar) but to the rule, the rest of us, it is because these lives might still be put to good use. What protects the beggar from murder, from being killed by the other, is what restrains the would-be suicide from committing an actual act of self-destruction. Killing the beggar is a waste

⁶⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and The Sovereign*, Volumes 1 and 2, and *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*.

of perfectly good violence, violence that would be better spent elsewhere; suicide is a waste of a perfectly good life, a life that would be better spent otherwise (spent, that is, by the other in death), a life always able to be invested in a more judicious, expedient death. The unconditional ban on suicide thus makes the decision on life's worthiness to be lived a prerogative of a sovereignty other than that of the individual, and this sovereignty is presumably political.

As we have seen, the opening lines address us with a permissive imperative that implicitly places us in the position of a political sovereign exercising the power over life and death over his subjects, perhaps with the actual commands. No sooner does this implicit sovereign begin to acquire the explicitness of an actual body in "your hand" than the series of permissive imperatives which suggest it is cut short by a dash—and the sovereign vanishes with them into a *prohibitive imperative* that commands the same addressee *not* to harm the beggar. The sovereign is expropriated of his right over life and death. And for a moment we suddenly seem to find ourselves in the position of a would-be murderer whose reason not to kill the beggar is the very sovereign whose law threatens to punish him with death. It is perhaps unsurprising that an "Argument for Suicide" would exhibit an unstable structure of address that refuses to set us down in a single subject position but rather swings instead through a dreamlike series of positions that are only ever implicit and linked by metonymy alone. The prohibitive imperative is supplanted just as quickly—itsself interrupted by dash and usurped on the very same line by an affirmative imperative, indeed a *positive command* that indifferently enjoins the implicit sovereign, the implicit murderer, the explicitly named beggar, and indeed you, to "Live Live on."

—but for worlds

Lift not your hand against him—Live Live on

As if this earth owned neither steel nor arsenic

A rope a river a standing pool

Live as if you dread the pains of hell or think
 Your corpse would quarrel with a stake—alas
 Has misery then no friend?—

The line begins with “Lift” and ends with “Live.” It moves from the prohibitive “Lift not” to the similarly capitalized but affirmative and repeating “Live Live on.” The legal prohibition against murder, the imperative that tells you never to lift your hand in violence against the other, converts into the positive command, still addressed to you, to survive. The legal ban on murder is so persuasive because it threatens its addressee with punishments ranging from imprisonment and torture to death. We might add that in this respect, the poem silently adds the death penalty, which belongs to the sovereign, to the list of legitimate killings to which the illegitimate killing of the already dying beggar is compared. The prohibitive imperative that precedes the dash safeguards the other’s life with the possibility of your death. The imperative that follows it is still implicitly addressed to you, but what is at stake here is not the other’s life but your own. Precisely because it is an imperative, you nevertheless receive the positive directive to live on in just the same way that you receive the threat of death, or would receive anything else addressed to you by the law: from without, as though from an alien, external power.

The change is registered verbally, at the level of the word, in the substitution of the double “Live” with “Lift”—or rather, at the level of the letter, since what is involved here is a substitutive displacement that shifts a few letters down in the order of the alphabet. It is also registered in the preposition “on,” which occupies an analogous position relative to “Live” as that of the negation relative to “Lift.” It almost seems to invite us to read it typographically as a near reversal of the “not,” as the “not” and its negation played backwards. The grammatical negation that makes the first imperative a prohibition is tinged with the negation of death whose threat is what makes the corresponding legal and theological proscriptions against murder (which it is the function of the first

imperative to signify) real proscriptions, proscriptions worthy of the name, by making them enforceable. But on the far side of the dash, the “not” becomes an “on” that transforms the negative imperative and its silent threat to end life early with an execution into the positive command—even the imperative coercion—to draw life out, to keep extending it in time, in short, to add more life on life. The imperative repeats without taking even the breath of a comma, as though speaking from the compulsion of some machinic necessity. It also does what it commands, producing a literal accumulation of “Live” on the page. By repeating, the directive obeys itself; it gives itself what it wants. The capitalization of the two L’s, which is not a function of convention (unlike their predecessor in “Lift,” which is itself capitalized only because it begins the line), might be read as the imprint of whatever sovereign issues the command to “Live Live on.” It goes unnamed, but if the L’s suggest a sovereign, serve as its typographical seal, it would be Life. On the face of it, they might simply be mechanical echoes of the capitalized “Lift,” a holographic accident produced by Wordsworth’s own living hand in the act of writing, and then preserved by Osborn, who seems to have recognized in it the possibility of a critical interest. The question is whether we are justified in folding this machinic contingency into the thematic skein of the poem by inferring that the sovereign which the imperative to “Live Live on” thus suggests is itself machinic. This would itself open onto the difficult question of what to make of the very identification between an inorganic, machinic life and sovereignty. Can an inorganic life be sovereign?

There is no symmetry here between “Lift not” and “Live on.” Reversal does not imply reversibility. If symmetry were the determining priority, we would expect the negative imperative against murder to be paired with a negative imperative against suicide: “but for worlds / Lift not your hand against him—or against yourself.” Other than ruining the poem aesthetically, my symmetrical rewriting, (you might call it an ugly counter-textual) is also less rigorous. For one thing, suicide is inconsistent with the economic logic that controls the ironic comparison that structures

the previous lines. To indict the prohibition of suicide with hypocrisy by means of the same rhetorical device—“live indirectly off the proceeds of a political and economic system the scale of whose violence is worldwide, but for worlds lift not your hand against yourself”—makes no sense, since life’s principle of self-preservation sees nothing amiss in the contrast between an absolute aversion to self-harm and a willingness to sacrifice everyone else in the service of its own interest.⁶⁹ No one commits suicide to secure a particular advantage within the world, let alone to gain anything so great as to be metaphorically commensurate with whole “worlds.” One commits suicide because “the world is too much with us,” that is, to resign it—unless of course the idea is to cross over to the other world, in which case the irony would be lost anyway. Aside from being a probably inadvisable strategy for gaining entry into heaven, such a suicide would be just another act of economic speculation, a high risk bet that capitalizes on death to exchange this world, which everyone agrees is lousy, with a world that people who claim to be in the know say is an infinitely, even unimaginably, better one.

The dash thus marks a downward shift to a register more fundamental and radically more general. Before its interruption, the sovereign violence of the opening lines (which is *de facto* permitted) contracts to the absurd tininess of a single prohibited murder framed as an encounter between two particular individuals. The specificity of the scene, which is in fact an indirect but well-articulated narration of an event conveyed by metonymy, now disappears into what perhaps is the most general of all possible imperatives. This generality does away with the specificity of any individual because it applies equally to all of them. Any imperative—whether it prohibits, commands, permits, inquires, or serves merely to illustrate—presupposes that its addressee is alive.

⁶⁹ Whereas a partial, limited, or conditional self-harm can always be economized, absorbed into the system as a cost as long as it serves the bottom line, total-self harm is a radical waste, expenditure without return. On the other hand, the absolute harm of others, even whole species or cultures, is justified as long as it cashes out in the end. The imbalance is not ironic; it computes.

Just as every imperative entails an apostrophe, every imperative animates. To lift one's hand against the other (or to abstain from doing so), one has to be alive. To be commanded to do so (or to be prohibited from doing so), one has to be alive, or at any rate figured as such by the address. Every imperative that enjoins its addressee to bring about this or that particular event (or not) or to perform this or that particular act (or not) also says, silently, "Live Live on." If, as J.L. Austin argues, imperatives are "implicit performatives," then this is the implicit performative at the root of every implicit performative, the *implicit* implicit performative: the *Live Live on*.⁷⁰ It is the arche-imperative embedded in every imperative and indeed in every address.

It is therefore tempting to say that Wordsworth descends here from the ontical to the ontological. But what kind of *action* is living on? Can it meaningfully be the referent of an imperative? The imperatives that precede it all employ literal language except for the last, which, though it does use a conventional figure of speech, is easily replaced with literal language that designates a whole set of concrete acts of violence, one such act it narrates in place of all the others. Likewise, each of the preceding imperatives correspond to literal imperatives employed as speech acts within the world: a sovereign ordering the deployment of new workers to the mines and another detachment of troops to the front, and who dismisses the consequences of the war effort on the poor with that permissive use of the imperative so characteristic of kings: let them starve. And as we have seen, the negative prohibition that forbids harming the old man corresponds to the legal prohibition of murder and seems moreover to translate the theological basis for many of those laws, the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," mixed perhaps with the injunction to love the neighbor. But to "live on" is not an action or an event but a state of being, indeed the minimal fact of existence without which it would not be possible to receive any imperative at all. While there is nothing unusual in itself about an imperative that invokes a state of being (English is full of

⁷⁰ Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 32.

examples, like the salutary “be well!”) this imperative seems to have no corollary in the world.⁷¹ The existential generality of its exhortation forecloses the possibility of it ever being paired with an actual imperative uttered in a real speech situation. What is happening here is rather that Wordsworth is employing the grammatical imperative as a figure for the imperative to live. More precisely, we might say that on the far side of the dash, the *imperative mood* becomes a metaphor for the mood with which we live—and it’s easy to see how, since life *is* living on (life must extend in time to be life) this mode just *is* the modality characteristic of life in general. The imperative is presented in terms of an analogy with the literal imperatives that precede it; it is imposed coercively from the outside like a sovereign’s command upon a subject. But if Wordsworth is here employing the imperative as a figure for how we live, then he is describing how we live—and the *Live Live on*, then this most general of all possible imperatives, is also not an imperative at all. The imperative trembles here and dissolves back down into the indicative. The *Live Live on* thus places into question the literality of what it commands.

The fact that it is determined by analogy as a sovereign command already presents a difficulty for reading, since a positive command pertains properly only to actions, yet “to live on” can only be called an action—at least without the supplementary aid of a conceptual discourse that defines it as such—on the basis of a grammatical metaphor that borrows its material from the classification of the verb, where action is a possible *figure* for the function of that part of speech. In other words, the very form of the imperative thrusts us back onto the question of the very legibility of the word “live.” The word’s obtrusion into legibility is perhaps most striking in its repetition, which replaces the narrative that precedes the dash. That narrative, though condensed within the figure, is a teleologically articulated structure with an agent, an act, and a victim. After the interruption, this little story, with its beginning, middle, and end, devolves into with a monosyllabic

⁷¹ Except for certain directives issued by God: “Be fruitful and multiply.”

stutter, the literality of a pure repetition. At work here is the suspension of a teleological movement we have been tracing. The descent toward the ontological question of life founders on the question of the word's legibility. Our first surprise was that a poem that announces itself as an "Argument for Suicide," thus suggesting that it will address its reader toward death, not only never directly urges its reader to commit suicide but actually contains an imperative to "live on," albeit one ironically ventriloquized. Instead of employing a rhetoric of "death persuasion," it ironically repeats the very thing against which it pitches its critique. The second surprise is life itself becomes a question for the poem. As if unsure of how to read its own use of the word "live," the poem refers not to life but "the thing called life." The "Argument for Suicide" cannot quite see into "the life of things."

The apparently tidy lesson that ends the poem depends on a seemingly straightforward premise: life alone is not sufficient to justify its proclivity to survive, to continue to extend itself into the future, because "the thing called life" has no value in itself; in order for it to become worthy of having a future, it must be subordinated to something else: the value of "the thing called life" arises from its relation to "things" other than life, and it is only on the basis of this relation that life becomes worth living. The poem concludes accordingly by announcing that we need to learn as much: we are in urgent need of a pedagogy that, in two steps, will teach us what we have forgotten (or must never have known in the first place) given our ability to live as we do—as though life were an end in itself, an independent, substantial "thing" autonomously and transparently possessed of its own value. We have prized life too highly, subjecting it to an inflationary overvaluation that blinds us, not so much to its real value, but to the actual structure of its valuation, the fact that life's value comes from a dimension foreign to it. We must first learn to prize life less because it is only then, thanks to a kind of dimming effect resulting from its devaluation, that "the things worth living for" might become sufficiently visible to be taken as the objects of the lesson's second phase, where we learn to prize them in a way that restores life to its proper value and allows it to finally become—

now that it has passed through the negative mediation of a preliminary devaluation—worthy of itself, of living. The fragment seems to be proposing the substitution of one kind of “thing” for another in the form of a circular exchange that earns a return on its expenditure, and what makes it at least appear to conform to the upwardly spiraling logic of a classical dialectic is the fact that the returning surplus value is registered in the shift from the nominal form “life” to the intransitive “living”—in the shift, in other words, from life determined as a “thing” (more specifically, as the name for an otherwise anonymous thing: “the thing called life”) to the active, continuous process of “living,” the very intransitivity of which suggests a coming to life of life itself, a spontaneous animation where the economy of “things” overflows itself. But if the transition from “life” to “living” suggests that the restitution of life’s value would mark a transformation of life itself, then the preposition coupled to “living” and left hanging at the very end of the poem suggests that the circuit has not yet closed and that the transformation is still to come: “living for.—”

The purposive relationality of the “for” seems to point, incomplete, into the blank white of the page as if waiting for a more determinate referent than “things.” Indeed, Wordsworth’s claim is precisely that we cannot yet know what those things are since life’s preliminary devaluation has not yet been accomplished: we are still under the influence of life’s inordinate valuation, and that the content of the “things worth living for” remains undetermined is indicated by the re-inscription of the phrase below the poem. Indeed, the phrase seems to prompt the activation of Wordsworth’s editorial compulsion while at the same time withholding the semantic orientation required for the transformation of mere repetition into revision, for anything new to happen at all—as if the words “the things worth living for” contained the urgency of a question that, on the one hand, can only be repeated, but that, on the other, also refuses to be formulated in the grammar of questions. Struck and perhaps troubled by its blank insignificance, Wordsworth can only re-write it in pencil beneath

the poem, so that the only difference—the switch from ink to pencil—makes it more susceptible to erasure.

That question is the question of life. Indeed, the poem is less an “argument for suicide” than a complex, if indirect, formulation of the question of life that already contains the dimensions and poetic strategies of Wordsworth’s later work. The problem at the heart of the *Argument* is that the link between life and living remains blank. The circular repetition of the line, “the things worth living for,” results in part from the fact that Wordsworth, who is forbidden from knowing what the “things” are until he has accomplished life’s preliminary devaluation, is trapped in a sort of hermeneutic circle. What intensifies the dilemma is the fact that this moment of negation seems to have some relation—though the precise form of the relation remains unspecified—to suicide. If the actual commission of suicide is the price of that initial devaluation, then the first phase of the lesson destroys the conditions under which any student can live long enough to arrive at the second phase: death by self-destruction interrupts the progress from “life” to “living.” The logic through which the sole condition under which “life” may accede to “living” will also destroy life without remainder leaves us permanently excluded from the dialectic advanced by the poem: either we continue to prize life too much, or we die in the process of learning to prize it less. The “Argument for Suicide” launches a critique of the ideology of life we have already seen embodied in a complex way in the *Salisbury Plain* poems, where it is embodied but also placed in question by the female vagrant. The “Argument” figures the drive to subordinate life to a telos as a drive to *encircle* it in an obscuring prize of valuation. Value, here, is a function of the grip of a telos. But the “Argument” is itself enlisted by the drive, as the repetition of “the things worth living for” suggests. It re-teologizes life in its effort to critique the drive to teleologize life, and what results is a new iteration of what we have been calling the aporia of life, which does not capture a character (like the female vagrant or

the traveler) in its torsion, but rather determines the text itself in the non-biological, inorganic, inanimate life that structures its survival as text.

5. BLACK BODY RADIATION: SACRIFICE AND THE PROSOPOPOEIA OF LIFE IN *SALISBURY PLAIN* AND *THE PRELUDE* OF 1805

The glowworm on Wordsworth's heath exhibits a more radically "uneffectual fire" than its paling cousins in the predawn darkness at Elsinore, and thus suggests a more radical disarticulation of joints. The fact, though, that its "green lodge" sits at the nexus (indeed the site of articulation, the joint) of the chain of vanishing animals and the chain of vanishing lights suggests that it is functionally analogous to the proto-spot of time that repeats obsessively through the text of *Salisbury Plain*, the sacrificial wicker man:

For oft at dead of night, when dreadful fire
Reveals that powerful circle's reddening stones
'Mid priests and spectres grim and idols dire,
Far heard the great flame utters human moans,
Then all is hushed: again the desert groans,
A dismal light its farthest bounds illumines,
While warrior spectres of gigantic bones,
Forth issuing from a thousand rifted tombs,
Wheel on their fiery steeds amid the infernal glooms.

(SP 11.91-99)

In the following iteration, the sacrificial scene appears in juxtaposition with its peaceful mirror image:

And oft a night-fire mounting to the clouds
Reveals the desert and with dismal red

Clothes the black bodies of encircling crowds.
 It is the sacrificial altar fed
 With living men. How deep it groans—the dead
 Thrilled in their yawning tombs their helms uprear;
 The sword that slept beneath the warrior's head
 Thunders in the fiery air: red arms appear
 Uplifted thro' the gloom and shake the rattling spear.

In Chapter Two, I argued that these scenes, which are never directly *witnessed* by the female vagrant or the traveler in their wanderings across the plain, but only ever *heard* in the form of the narratives quoted here, tell the story of the *re*-constitution of the teleological structure of the world.⁷² The narratives can be *read*, but the process which they narrate cannot itself be *experienced or sensed* in the full phenomenality of light and color, even though light and color is what they describe. The process of re-teleologization occurs as the rebirth of phenomenality. When the traveler, for example, is stopped short by a disembodied voice that rises up from below to recite to him the first sacrificial passage quoted above, he is adrift in the dysteleological fragmentation of the world. The narrative ironically suspends its relation to the scene in which it is embedded and in fact occurs as an event. The traveler does not see what it describes actually unfolding around him, but the fact of its very legibility as a tale of re-teleologization implies the possibility of a certain re-teleologization. It thus forms an aporia in which it is impossible to decide whether the world has re-organized itself teleologically or not, or whether the event of re-teleologization occurs as a structure of undecidability. “The road extended o’er a heath” names this structure when it describes the

⁷² See the second section of Chapter Two, “Fables of Sacrifice, Sacrificial Fables.” To say that the vagrant and the traveler never see what these passages describe is not to say that the narratives themselves do not contain any first-hand witnesses. In the tale recounted to the vagrant by an old man who stumbles down a hill to ask for the time, a “swain” wanders off track to find himself suddenly in the presence of “Gigantic beings ranged in dread array” (SP 20.173-180).

speakers suspension, in the pause before the storm, between the sheep paths on the heath and the road: “the choice suspended, having chosen.”

The rebirth of phenomenalization which the narratives of sacrifice virtually enact follows an almost mechanical procedure; indeed, it is produced by the complex movements of the sacrificial machine. Here I would like briefly to re-read *Salisbury Plain*'s sacrificial machinery in order to compare its structure and logic with that of the encounter of the glowworm in “The road extended o'er a heath.” The latter, I argue, is itself miniaturized variation of the earlier poem's sacrificial apparatus. Now in the two scenes of human sacrifice quoted above, everything begins with the appearance on the darkened plain of a spot, a brightening circle. In the first passage, the circle literally appears within (or indeed as) a kind of spotlight, the staging of which betrays a theatrical and perhaps even a quasi-cinematic sensibility. Stonehenge's “powerful circle” begins to light up in the night, “revealed” by the “reddening” of its stones near the fire—not all of a sudden but gradually, since “reddening,” with its specific temporal inflection, suggests a process of intensification extended in time. It also tells us that the stones redden not only in the illumination of visible light, in the increasing brightness of the growing fire, but in consequence of thermal radiation: the stones are heating up. The second passage begins again with the brightening of a circle, and its illumination is again a question of heat, of thermal radiation as the dark underside of light. Here, the circle is alive, and draws itself out of the very darkness in the form of “black bodies of encircling crowds” that gather either to witness the spectacle of human sacrifice or to be tossed into the fire themselves as the sacrificial victims. It is again a question of dark body radiation. For this circle of living bodies, like the mineral circle with which it is concentric, also reddens into visibility. But here the process of reddening is carried by a conventional metaphor that turns the color into a garment, so that the “black bodies” are now dressed in “dismal red” by the fire. The night-fire “clothes” them with it. This attire scans equally well as light and heat. It can supply an image of black bodies appareled in

the colors of firelight whose shades play across the darkened surfaces of the crowd gathered to watch living victims burn as the light of spectatorship mixes with the color of guilt, blood red. It can also supply also an image of black bodies appareled in the very tongues of the fire itself, enrobed by flames that blacken the flesh it plays across, charring, carbonizing bodies—but also penetrating their depths, peeling back skin and boiling away fat, exposing the reticulations of new, inner surfaces only to eat through them in turn, finally consuming the whole.⁷³

The destruction of living bodies by fire is what happens next. But the focus is on what my description at the end of the previous paragraph omitted: pain. The difference between the ring of reddening stones and the ring of reddening bodies is that the latter suffer. Inside the circle, the “sacrificial altar [is] fed/ with living men,” and these living victims scream. The result is an articulation not merely of light and sound, but of light and voice: “the great flame utters human moans.” These “moans” are “far heard,” projected beyond the circumference of the circle in a line that carries them deep into the plain, from which depths, after the interval of a “hush”—the hush of death, or at least the silence that falls when the vocal apparatus has been destroyed—there returns an echo. “Then all is hushed: again the desert groans.” In this call and response of inarticulate cries across the border of death, there is the articulation of a difference. First, the fire “utters” a plurality of *human moans*. The fire’s utterance itself is of course a figure. As to the plurality of “human moans” which the fire thus vocalizes by means of its single uttering act, these are the literal voices of a certain number of still living people moaning in agony as they burn to death inside it. The fire borrows the phonic content of its utterance from them—but that content remains literally plural and

⁷³ It’s worth noting the asymmetry between these two images. In the first, to be appareled in light is to participate in the space of appearance where things come to light or show themselves by reddening into the visible, as it were. The event of sacrifice is made visible to the dark bodies of the spectators. To infer from the redness with which a body is automatically dressed by virtue of its spectatorship, and thus to read that redness as the color of a dark (indeed black) guilt, is also to engage—in the very act of reading—in the same specular system of appearance. The other scene, though, concerns not the specularity of vision but the touch of flame, the tactility of thermal radiation. It destroys the body and destroys the possibility of vision. It makes ash.

literally human. The process of burning, especially its effect on the human voice, is here a figure for the figure of giving voice. As the people burn, they moan, and these moans are carried over to the fire which, uttering them, is thereby given (or maybe gives itself) voice. That from which the voice is taken is not only silenced by the transfer but burned, literally destroyed, made into ash. This system makes moan to give voice. It uses fire to *make moan* in order to then *give voice* to the fire itself. But the operation of the fire upon the sensibility of the bodies fed to it is not enough to operate the transfer; a residue of literality insists in the plurality of the moans and in their humanness. Only in the desert's response to the fire's call is the plurality gathered from a circle of multiplicity to the singularity of one vocalization.

The scene is a nightmare's origin of a certain "language of the sense."⁷⁴ "The great flame utters human *moans* / Then all is hushed: again the desert *groans*." Though it is masked by the conjugation of the verb that rounds off the rhyme, and by the parallelism that rhyme suggests in turn, the fact is that the desert replies to the "great flame" with one voice, a single "*groan*." And the groan is no longer human. The groan is attributed to the desert without any adjectival qualification or any residue of humanity. The "great flame" seems to have been an intermediary mechanism for the prosopopoeia that unifies the desert itself. For it is only with the desert's groan, which is marked by the "again" as a repetition-with-a-difference of the great flame's suffering chorus of human moans, that the spotlight ceases to be confined to the circle of Stonehenge and expands to the outer periphery of Salisbury Plain itself, light following at a certain lag behind sound, along the path laid down by flame's acoustic projection of moans. At the very moment that the desert groans, "a dismal light its farthest bounds illumines." The "dismal red" has become "dismal light." The reddening of pain and heat, and the color strewn over the sacrificial spectacle, has been erased. What remains is

⁷⁴ William Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798," in *The Major Works*, line 109.

almost the transparent light of enlightenment, of an illumination capable of mapping the totality of a space. Its borders defined, Salisbury Plain can now be known and navigated. The focusing of the moans into the single groan marks the snapping together of so many disarticulated fragments into an organized system. The light is transparent, then—except that it remains *dismal*, a colorless, dismal light, affected by an extra-optical interference with the medium.

What interferes with the becoming transparent of the system, with its tendency toward universality, is the fact that the groan has never been singular. It always a repetition in a series: “The great flame utters human moans / Then all is hushed: *again* the desert groans.” The system of reflection and echo arises from a figural sleight of hand that recasts the repetition of the sacrifice itself—a new batch of victims tossed into the flames—as an echo of the first, the sounds of suffering and death attributed by means of synecdoche to the plain on which the circle stands and in which the sacrifice takes place. The re-teleogization arises as a narrative effect applied to repetition. Which is not to say, within the bounds of the tale at least, that re-teleogization does not take place. Within this structure, then, the pattern of specular reflection depends on the patterning of acoustic echoes, which is in fact an effect of narrative (its figural and rhetorical functions) itself, the ordering of repetition as reflection and echo. And what repeats? What repetition is thereby recast as a specular system of echoes, reflections and returns, that allow for the totalization of a system in time and space? It all depends on the repetition of burning sacrificial victims alive, and on the supposition of that vocalizations—moans—will rise up from the body in pain with the same mechanical necessity as a body falling in passive thrall to gravitation. The mechanicity of a solar model is transferred to the mechanicity of suffering body brought to the very cut at its edge, burning yet still living. The specular system of illumination—and from this perspective the system of acoustic echoes is still specular, a reflection—depends on a dark multiple substrate, a plurality of dark substrates (call them “black bodies”), which, exposed and sensible, can *feel* themselves burn. The specular system

depends on the invisible tactility of what it feels like to burn, on the moaning that rises with the same mechanical automaticity as the nervous impulses that signal the agony—before the whole system of the organism is thermalized, first into numbness and then unto death and ash. And it depends on repeatedly burning these substrates, repeatedly clothing the body in thermal radiation. A screaming thermalized body, living on fire, is what feeds the possibility of the double structure of reflection in sound and light. Needless to say, this is a system that lives off repeatedly burning its own conditions of possibility, which it must activate with the application of fire to constitute them as its conditions of possibility.

The sacrificial rebirth of phenomenalization, as I have been calling it in this section, is a complex expression of the drive to re-teleologize life. Indeed, when we read the repetitive sequence of scenes of human sacrifice that punctuate the *Salisbury Plain* poems from the retrospective vantage afforded by the “Argument for Suicide,” Stonehenge and its rings of reddening stones resemble the fragment’s “strange” and “fantastic” circles drawn around life, though increased in complexity and seemingly transformed into a machine that does involve at its periphery, “strange marks of mighty arms of former days” (SP 9.76). These marginal figures seem to serve as the blueprint for the burning stones that actually encircle “the thing called life.” Even as it sacrificially destroys life, the strange machine produces phantasms of life. We have seen how, after the silence, the “great flame” utters “human moans” that illuminates the plain out to its very horizon. The illumination seems to occur only so that beings can appear within it: “red arms” can be seen “uplift[ing]” themselves “thro’ the gloom” (SP 18.188); the “dead” can be seen “uprear[ing]” their “helms” (SP 21.185-186); “warrior specters” can be seen “issuing forth” from their tombs on “fiery steeds” (SP 11.97-99). These figures are not only phantoms, figures of the reanimated dead. As “uplift” and “uprear” suggest, they are figures of life which seem to exhibit spontaneous movement from within. And yet they arise only in response to the second moan, as if the latter served as an apostrophic, animating

hail. The “dead,” in fact, are “thrilled” in their very tombs by the sound, and the fact that they are thus “thrilled” implies the receptivity of a living thing. The conjuncture of life’s animation with its destruction is further verified by the fact that interspersed within the sequence of scenes of human sacrifice are scenes of placid phenomenalization where the teleology of the world is unveiled:

Not thus where clear moons spread their pleasing light.
 —Long bearded forms with wands uplifted shew
 To vast assemblies, while each breath of night
 Is hushed, the *living fires* that bright and slow
 Rounding th’aetherial field in order go.
 Then as they trace with awe their various files
 All figured on the mystic plain below,
 Still prelude of sweet sounds the moon beguiles
 And charmed for many a league the hoary desert smiles.

(SP 21.181-22.198, emphasis mine.)

In this placid scene of teleological mapping, “bearded forms” perform a deictic operation that connects the celestial objects (the light giving moons) with the figures inscribed on the “mystic field below.” The “uplifting” of the deictic “wands” corresponds with an uplifting of life. “Living fires” lift themselves up and mix their light with that of the moon, as they move in the middle space between the ground inscribed with figures and the heavens populated with stars. The deictic relay at work here would not be possible without their bloody complement. The proof, I think, is that the placid scenes of the world’s re-teleogization occur within the series of sacrificial repetition.

In the first chapter, I noted in my reading of the “Advertisement” to *Guilt and Sorrow* that the event of Wordsworth’s encounter with the plain, like the plain as the space of that encounter, is structurally unconfined to any place and time. We saw how the event reaches forward into a future

catastrophe beyond calculation and into a past beyond the reach of any historical record. The sacrificial machine that produces life by destroying it, that establishes the condition of the possibility of life (the teleological system of the world) by interrupting it, is likewise unconfined by any border. For according to Wordsworth, one of its phantoms of animation is Wordsworth himself, in his very life and as poet. In *The Prelude*, he witnesses himself arise from within the sacrificial machine. He tells Coleridge how he was “raised up”—a little like a phantom on the plain—into his poetic vocation:

To such a mood,
 Once above all—a traveller at that time
 Upon the plain of Sarum—was I raised:
 There on the pastoral downs without a track
 To guide me, or along the bare white roads
 Lengthening in solitude their dreary line,
 While through those vestiges of ancient times
 I ranged, and by the solitude o’ercome,
 I had a reverie and saw the past,
 Saw multitudes of men, and here and there
 A single Briton in his wolf-skin vest,
 With shield and stone-ax, stride across the wold;
 The voice of spears was heard, the rattling spear
 Shaken by arms of mighty bone, in strength
 Long mouldered, of barbaric majesty.
 I called upon the darkness, and it took—
 A midnight darkness seemed to come and take—
 All objects from my sight; and lo, again

The desert visible by dismal flames!
It is the sacrificial altar, fed
With living men—how deep the groans!—the voice
Of those in the gigantic wicker thrills
Throughout the region far and near, pervades
The monumental hillocks, and the pomp
Is for both worlds, the living and the dead.
At other moments, for through that wide waste
Three summer days I roamed, when 'twas my chance
To have before me on the downy plain
Lines, circles, mounts, a mystery of shapes
Such as in many quarters yet survive,
With intricate profusion figuring o'er
The untilled ground (the work, as some divine,
Of infant science, imitative forms
By which the Druids covertly expressed
Their knowledge of the heavens, and imaged forth
The constellations), I was gently charmed,
Albeit with an antiquarian's dream,
And saw the bearded teachers, with white wands
Uplifted, pointing to the starry sky,
Alternately, and plain below, while breath
Of music seemed to guide them, and the waste

Was cleared with stillness and a pleasant sound.⁷⁵

In these lines, the mature Wordsworth animates himself as poet by means of the sacrificial machine. Future research might follow the sacrificial machinery into the poet's autobiographical production of himself as poet. What difference does Wordsworth's thinking of life make to his autobiographical poem when the sacrificial apparatus, which as we have seen is at once *before* and *interruptive* of life's condition of possibility, is inscribed within the very movement of autobiographical life-writing? What happens to our understanding of Wordsworth when the machinery of impossible life is found whirring in the gap between "the thing called life" (obscured by the circles) and the poet's claim poetically see into "the life of things?"

⁷⁵ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1805 12.313-354.

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