Boundless Explorations: Global Spaces and Travel in the Literature of
William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, and Mary Shelley
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Abstract
This dissertation focuses on a Romanticism that was profoundly global in scope, and examines the boundary-crossing literary techniques of William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley and Mary Shelley. These authors saw identity as delimited by artificial borders, and we witness in their work competitions between local and global, immediate and infinite, home and away – all formulated in spatial terms. This thesis argues that by using motifs and philosophies associated with “borderless” global travel, these authors radically destabilized definitions of nature, history, and the home. Wordsworth and the Shelleys saw the act of travel as essentially cosmopolitan, and frequently depicted spaces outside of familiar boundaries as being rich in imaginative vitality. Their fiction and poetry abounds with examples of North American primitivism, radical modes of transportation, and unknown territories sought by passionate explorers. Importantly, they often used such examples of foreignness to rejuvenate familiar spaces and knowledge – these were individuals determined to retain a certain amount of local integrity, or connection with the reluctant minds who feared alien contexts. As such, they were each aware of the fragility of embedded minds, and the connection of these minds to bordered historical contexts. Aware of the dangers posed by uninhibited imaginative movements, they depicted travel as an artistically seductive activity. Their impulse as authors was thus to use global experiences as a tool of literary expression, while refraining from a total abandonment of local responsibility. This dissertation therefore argues that the imaginative experience of space in the Romantic period was profoundly split, tethered on the one hand to custom and familiarity, and on the other aspiring to boundless global freedoms.
Acknowledgments

Much of the primary research for this thesis took place at the British Library in London, UK, in the summers of 2004 and 2005. My first research trip to the Library was generously sponsored by Dan White. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity he presented to me, and for his honesty and encouragement.

Karen Weisman, who joined the thesis committee late in the process, had the thankless task of catching up on several years of work in a short amount of time. This she did with aplomb, promptness and tact, for which this acknowledgment seems a paltry reward.

Alan Bewell has guided this project since the beginning with wisdom and care. He was never afraid to challenge my deepest presumptions about the Romantic period, and I am a better and more self-aware scholar as a result of his mentorship.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my grandparents Steen and Willis: for their love, spoken and unspoken; for their lessons, taught by patience and example.
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Introduction

“Coaches and Connexions”: Thomas De Quincey and the Relativity of Travel

i.

Thomas De Quincey’s *The English Mail-Coach* (1849) is deeply concerned with how the imagination adapts to new types of movement in a globally-connected environment. Using anecdotes associated with motion to quantify psychological acts of global travel, De Quincey describes measurable distance in affective and wholly distorted terms. He associates historically-grounded modes of travel with networks of trade and information, particularly mail-coaches and sea-vessels, in the process reflecting the types of visionary boundary crossing that were profoundly impacting the imaginative sensibility of a nation in the Romantic era. De Quincey’s encounters with the mail-coach in particular are most interesting when they involve what he calls “connexions,” effectively events which relativize psychic security based on the act or implication of travel. His work demonstrates how a mind embedded in local customs struggles to reconcile disparate global events with immediate social requirements.

In essence, De Quincey describes how technologies and accounts of travel engender experiences that disembark minds from normative, local frameworks of knowledge. His mail-coach did threaten a sense of British security, but did not necessarily require direct contact with the spaces that were witnessed in the mind. As we shall see in De Quincey’s *The English Mail-Coach*, visionary travel encouraged the fragmentation of what Anthony Giddens calls “ontological security” – “the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of
their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action” (92).¹ In The Consequences of Modernity, Giddens discusses in detail the shattering of pre-modern routines that accompany a dissolved ontological security, and associates the consequent behavioural acts with altered perceptions of place. In essence, he describes the process by which thinking globally is absorbed into an unconscious imaginative zeitgeist. Even without immediate contact, the repercussions on local spaces could be felt; in the case of De Quincey’s mail-coach, technology could facilitate a newfound proximity to exotic spaces and new modes of thinking. I have also borrowed the term “disembedded” from Giddens, which he describes with reference to “institutions” that link “local practices with globalised social relations” (79). When thinking about a modern cognitive or emotional condition, one can employ this term to suggest the feeling of being uprooted, or taken outside of conventional or traditional sensibilities, knowledges, and identities. Furthermore, I have used the term “global” to characterize the nature of tales of foreign lands, but the destabilizing principle still applied within extremely confined geographies as well.

I open this dissertation with a look at De Quincey’s The English Mail-Coach not because it is semiotically unstable (one finds this quality in superabundance in the author’s work) but because, as a master-metaphor of negotiable identity, the mail-coach suggests how travel destabilizes the perception of the local, the immediate, and the familiar. The English Mail-Coach, published in two instalments in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, opens with an incongruous comparison between the famous promoter of the mail-coach system, John Palmer, and Galileo. Setting aside questions of intellectual legacy,² De Quincey upholds this rhetorical licence by collapsing the astronomical implications of the Galilean invocation and

¹ Giddens describes this condition in a phenomenological sense, borrowing terms from Heidegger, namely a “being-in-the-world” (92).
² De Quincey is merely being mischievous in equating Palmer’s “doubled” greatness with his advantageous (though historically untrue) marriage to a duke’s daughter. See Milligan, 290n1.
noting that “the satellites of Jupiter” were “those very next things to mail-coaches in the two capital points of speed and keeping time” (191). Repeatedly, throughout the essay’s four sections – “The Glory of Motion,” “Going Down With Victory,” “The Vision of Sudden Death,” and “The Dream-Fugue” – De Quincey relativizes the Waterloo-era coach-traveller’s identity using similarly wild and disproportionate experiential dimensions. It is no easy task to link the subsequent affective experiences, although De Quincey often tries valiantly to do so. For example, the second published instalment (comprising the latter two sections) opens with a bracketed note, his attempt at a concise thematic and procedural summary:

The Vision of Sudden Death contains the mail-coach incident, which did really occur, and did really suggest the variations of the Dream....Confluent with these impressions, from the terrific experience on the Manchester and Glasgow mail, were other and more general impressions, derived from long familiarity with the English mail...impressions, for instance, of animal beauty and power, of rapid motion, at that time unprecedented, of connexion with the government and public business of a great nation, but above all, of connexion with the national victories at an unexampled crisis, – the mail being the privileged organ for publishing and dispersing all news of that kind. From this function of the mail, arises naturally the introduction of Waterloo into the fourth variation of the Fugue; for the mail itself having been carried into the dreams by the incident of the Vision, naturally all the accessory circumstances of pomp and grandeur investing this national carriage followed in the train of the principal image. (294n38)
The ease with which De Quincey twice inserts “naturally” is unintentionally comical—these transitional movements are anything but. In the context of his other writings (particularly *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* [1821] and *Suspiria de Profundis* [1845]), his cavalier synopsis is notable for its omissions: namely, the profound horror, self-loathing and xenophobia of the text. It is as if he evokes the “grandeur” of the mail-coach as a herald of anarchic, laudanum-soaked dreamscapes, only to undercut this power by describing the minutiae (“natural,” apparently) of a series of deliveries.

How then are we to read the eponymous vehicle? De Quincey’s use of emblematic dilation and contraction has often been remarked upon. In an essay on the Mail-Coach published in the *Guardian* in 1906, Virginia Woolf good-naturedly rolls her eyes at De Quincey’s “gift of seeing everything a size too large” (366), at a mind that mixes such immensities with a paradoxical inability to “pass by an allusion or a statement that is capable of further explanation without setting down the whole burden of the story and proceeding to remove the imperceptible pebble, elaborately, from the reader’s path” (366-67). The role of the mail-coach in his symbolic system consistently spirals out or in depending on the circumstance at hand, something De Quincey self-consciously attempts to rationalize, and which critics have subsequently attempted to unravel. V. A. De Luca identifies in the essay a “progressive manifestation of ... circles of concern,” “a systolic and diastolic variation of focus and emotional intensity, as the line of narrative rebounds alternately between passages of general survey and isolated epiphanic episodes” (97). He argues that “the contrary themes developed out of the symbol of the mail-coach – destruction and glory, chaos and control, a disintegrating England and an England renewed – remain clear throughout the sequence of

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3 Still, Woolf appreciates De Quincey’s mind, “which seems naturally to haunt the region of clouds and glories,” and whose sprawling prose “will carry on the air and sky, and, as words do, invest them with a finer meaning” (368).
visions” (108). John Barrell locates the source of these “contraries” in imperialistic tensions. He recognizes the symbolic role of the mail-coach in De Quincey’s system of deferred “othering” and places it alongside the role of the East in the constantly-cycling series of images of De Quincey’s dreamscapes or opiumscapes: “There is a ‘this’, and there is something hostile to it, something which lies, almost invariably, to the east; but there is an East beyond that East, where something lurks which is equally threatening to both, and which enables or obliges them to reconcile their differences” (Infection 10-11). In this reading, the mail-coach situates a relativized inside and outside depending on an established vantage on top of or within the carriage itself.

But what then is truly “natural,” as De Quincey says, about the “connexion” of the mail-coach? For that matter, how do we think of the mail-coach symbolically, within such systems of imaginative deferral, beyond merely talking about it as a delivery mechanism or a facilitator of orientalist anxieties? I would suggest that De Quincey’s mail-coach is more than a catch-all for his paranoias (of self, or empire), and that it is more than an accidental metaphor occurring in a narrative tendency “to state certain ordinary facts [that] become gigantically ridiculous, like boots in an elongated mirror” (Woolf 366). Rather, we might take him more at his word, and consider how modes of travel had peculiar psychic impacts on the perception of measurable phenomena, from national borders to the metrics of distance to the determination of exoticness within familiar boundaries. His chaotic association of verifiable historical moments with distorted subjective immersion relies almost totally on the

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4 Nigel Leask notes De Quincey’s appreciation for “the organic power of capitalism, a network of communications across the nation forged by technological advance” (East 196). This communications network of capital was about consumption: discussing the Confessions, Leask claims that “To be an English opium-eater was to consume (although maybe...to be consumed by) the East, to enjoy the diversion of luxuries whose grievous scenes of production were over the horizon, but which could none the less be represented by a distant view of the imperial entrepôt” (208). Ultimately, says Leask, “De Quincey believed that imperialism, which entailed the (necessary) abandonment of a civic discourse based on national integrity and moral eminence, would cause Europe to be absorbed by ‘inferior’ races and cultures” (225).
ligatures offered by specific modes of travel. In his synopsis and his essay, De Quincey uses Waterloo as a narrative hitch to connect several anecdotal episodes (dreamed or real). That said, even before “Going Down With Victory,” we witness how his Englishness is challenged by some of the very mechanisms that enable global English pre-eminence.

According to De Quincey, power as a global phenomenon is measured through the ability to master the mechanisms and experience of systems of movement. The jarring opening juxtaposition between the cosmic and the domestic is in effect just such a “connexion,” or rather, an instance of why static astral phenomena are of less experiential value than travel on John Palmer’s mail-coach. Galileo, “a man...who certainly invented (or discovered) the satellites of Jupiter” (191), has his Waterloo-like effect on astronomy – Waterloo being the dominant epochal metaphor in the work – reduced in potency next to the “mighty orchestra” (192) of Mr. Palmer’s coaches. It is on its strength as both mechanism of delivery and source of imaginative vision that De Quincey is able to effect this reversal of sublimity.

Emerging out of his peculiar understanding of sympathetic networks and travel is a fascination with exploding the dimensions of global experience. Take, for example, the role of “horsepower” in the mail-coach system. A recurring illustration stresses the “animal beauty and power so often displayed in the class of horses selected for this mail service” (191). By themselves nothing new or special, when linked to a network of regular and reliable knowledge-distribution, these horse-teams takes on a wholly different order of power. The consistently measurable speed of these carriages – which he averages between 10-13 miles per hour – becomes metonymic for an experience of global travel that is beyond immediate measure:

The vital experience of the glad animal sensibilities made doubts impossible on the question of our speed; we heard our speed, we saw it, we felt it as a
thrilling; ... [it] was incarnated in the fiery eyeballs of an animal, in his dilated nostril, spasmodic muscles, and echoing hoofs. This speed was incarnated in the visible contagion amongst brutes of some impulse, that, radiating into their natures, had yet its centre and beginning in man. The sensibility of the horse uttering itself in the maniac light of his eye, might be the last vibration in such a movement; the glory of Salamanca might be the first – but the intervening link that connected them, that spread the earthquake of the battle into the eyeball of the horse, was the heart of man – kindling in the rapture of the fiery strife, and then propagating its own tumults by motions and gestures to the sympathies, more or less dim, in his servant the horse. (202-3)

The multiple organic metonymies are effected through communication and transmission in a kind of interspecies nerve-network – “the mode of communication between the horse and his master, out of which grew so many aspects of sublimity under accidents of mists that hid, or sudden blazes that revealed, of mobs that agitated, or midnight solitudes that awed” (203). The “heart of man” is an associative, sympathetic power that is truly global, transforming the immediate act of motion into a profoundly visionary experience; this “heart in motion” links disparate events with the relatively mundane activity of a regular mail-route. “Radiating” is a key word here, especially when read in a mathematical or cartographic (rather than an illuminatory) context. Reliable, domestic travel, in effect, catalyzes the sublime experience of warfare and other global conflicts.

In this and other instances of warfare and other global conflicts in the Mail-Coach, De Quincey shows how forms of domestic travel can catalyze sublime global experiences. His sublime travels are, however, only upheld when they are embedded in networks of other such

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5 De Quincey laments the advent of railway-based networks, noting that now, “Tidings, fitted to convulse all nations, must henceforward travel by culinary process” (203).
instances of awe, simultaneously reducing individual ones by focusing on the national effect of systems of knowledge-transmission:

...many of these mails, like fire racing along a train of gunpowder, will be kindling at every instant new successions of burning joy, [which] has an obscure effect of multiplying the victory itself, by multiplying to the imagination into infinity the stages of its progressive diffusion. A fiery arrow seems to be let loose, which from that moment is destined to travel, almost without intermission, westward for three hundred miles – northward for six hundred; and the sympathy of our Lombard Street friends at parting is exalted a hundredfold by a sort of visionary sympathy with the approaching sympathies, yet unborn, which we were going to evoke. (213-14)

In this system of imaginative communication networks, affect is not sustained merely by alienness or exoticness alone. Rather, the existence of the perceiver within a chain of associated communications renders him or her contingent, “progressively diffuse,” in De Quincey’s words. The use of “approaching sympathies” proleptically establishes how a medium of travel and the mind of the global citizen exist within anticipatable corridors, but with the corollary of possible threats to security: physical, as in the crashing coaches of “The Vision of Sudden Death,” or implied, as in the instance of the mother of the 23rd Dragoon who is on the verge of discovering her son’s death at Talavera. The “multiplying” dimensional result, effectively the source of affect, is the sense that domestic ontologies have dissolved, the perceiver disembedded from an immediate context by the imaginative experience of travel.

The mail-coach is an appropriate historical object and metaphor with which to begin discussion of a global Romanticism, particularly in how its boundary-crossing knowledge
delivery threatens imaginative and national identities. Like many Romantic authors, De Quincey lived through the last era in which Britishness was self-defined. The period’s archetypal crisis – that of the isolated, feeling introvert threatened by a fallen world – finds a peculiar but appropriate voice in De Quincey’s hallucinatory travels. Here, the mail-coach-as-global-mind delivers the Romantic subject into a broader, terrifying, imaginatively stimulating world. This object is emphatically (and emblematically) British, yet brings knowledge of a greater world; it embodies interests of higher powers that literally shift people from place to place; it is modern, and a bringer of news; it is dangerous, not merely to the psychic fabric of a region, but also in a raw physical sense (as we see in “The Vision of Sudden Death”); it denies insularity and reminds the viewers or passengers of their own contingency, even their own irrelevancy. In a typical mix of fear and awe, De Quincey reflects on this latter quality as manifested in the delivery of news of great military victories: “The great national sentiment surmounts and quells all sense of ordinary distinctions. Those passengers who happen to be gentlemen are now hardly to be distinguished as such except by dress. The usual reserve of their manner in speaking to the attendants has on this night melted away” (213). Distinctions of class are portrayed here as fragile, subject to the vagaries of available information and historical relativity.

6 The heraldry emblazoned on the side of the mail-coach is of great symbolic and thematic interest to De Quincey, particularly in how he uses the hybridity of monsters to establish the alienation of a participant in a system of global information. The heraldic nature of the coach, in its animistic and political senses, stems from such figures. De Quincey’s portrayal of this is typically metonymic, for instance in his illustration of the other occupants of the roads as “traitorous” and the punning on heraldic designs as submissive and “quartering”: “Look at that long line of carts and carters ahead, audaciously usurping the very crest of the road: ah! traitors, they do not hear us as yet, but as soon as the dreadful blast of our horn reaches them with the proclamation of our approach, see with what frenzy of trepidation they fly to their horses’ heads, and deprecate our wrath by the precipitation of their crane-neck quarterings” (198-99).

7 “No dignity is perfect which does not at some point ally itself with the indeterminate and mysterious. The connexion of the mail with the state and the executive government – a connexion obvious, but yet not strictly defined – gave to the whole mail establishment a grandeur and an official authority which did us service on the roads, and invested us with seasonable terrors” (Mail-Coach 198).
De Quincey’s illustration of the Romantic psyche emphasizes an encroaching ontological instability, and a recapitulation of embeddedness within customs, places, or traditions that help to define him against dissolution in global culture. The psychic upheaval caused by modes of travel goes to the heart of the conflict between the relative interior and exterior spaces in *The English Mail-Coach*. In this paradigm, Barrell sets “The continual attempt to create places of safety” against “the continual return of an ‘alien nature’ which has been so carefully expelled,” culminating in “the repeated discovery of hybridity” (18). Whereas Barrell reads this unending shuffling of identities in cultural/racial terms, we might just as easily discuss hybridity in the sense of movements of information – the interconnected currents of globality against which a sense of self is constantly gauged. De Quincey himself mixes the idiom of trade routes and the safety of compartmentalizing (like the mail-coach discussed at length in the essay) in reflecting on the true horrors of hybridity:

The dreamer finds housed within himself – occupying, as it were, some separate chamber of his brain – holding, perhaps, from that station a secret and detestable commerce with his own heart – some horrid alien nature. What if it were his own nature repeated, – still, if the duality were distinctly perceptible, even this mere numerical double of his own consciousness – might be a curse too mighty to be sustained. But how, if the alien nature contradicts his own, fights with it, perplexes, and confounds it? ... These, however, are horrors from the kingdoms of anarchy and darkness, which, by their very intensity, challenge the sanctity of concealment, and gloomily retire from exposition. (210-11)

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8 “The appearance of the coachman as crocodile is one *mise en scène* ... of De Quincey’s horrified discovery that his is a *hybrid* identity; that his relation with an imaginary East, like that of an imperial power with its colonial ‘dependencies’, is a relation (at best) of symbiotic interdependence, and can no longer be thought of in terms of a safe transaction between a self and an other” (18).
This fascinating notion of a “secret and detestable commerce” with “alien natures” highlights for the reader the complicating role of travel in negotiating identity in a global environment. This seems particularly true when “concealment” and “retirement” are impulsive or instinctive reactions in the face of global pressures. In partaking of the “commerce” of class hybridity, of shared cultural experience, even of interspecies eroticism, the mail-coach passenger erodes the ostensibly stable margins of the self, and subsequently, the nation – but not before effecting an admittedly wondrous (and irreversible) self-transformation.

De Quincey’s unstable perception of global space is what makes this work a compelling introduction to my readings of William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. Metaphors of travel in The English Mail-Coach illuminate how an encroaching global culture challenged domestic and ontological integrities. These other authors would pursue this notion of destabilization in earnest in their studies of accounts and techniques of movement beyond the local. Wordsworth and the Shelleys all sought to unite the material reality of global life in the Romantic era (travel, foreign spaces, radical modes of movement) with metaphysically challenging ones (spatial and psychic dislocation), and strove to articulate imaginative solutions to the threats against hitherto accepted (or familiar) spaces. What they did not do was retreat, or hide: the conflict between global and domestic identities was profoundly social, and their work consistently documents the impact of this conflict on families, nations, and entire races. They also share a rhetorical and thematic drive to move outwards, to engage in techniques of self-articulation and social engagement that denied static formulations of family, geography or politics. In essence, these Romantic authors saw travel, both imaginative and material, as a double-edged sword: it was a challenge to moral and perceptual spaces, but also a means of preserving them.
Yet, in relying on literary acts of travel to displace embedded minds, reconsiderations of the familiar do lead to a kind of phenomenological quandary: they disrupt the presumption that travel to particular places, rather than the vicarious or imaginative experience of the same, was what offered improvement in character or perception. Everything from De Quincey’s shared sympathies of the mail-coach network to Percy Shelley’s witnessed air balloons showcases the pervasive and multifaceted experiences of travel on the Romantic imagination. A devotion to local regions and nurturing domesticity in the works of Mary Shelley and William Wordsworth demands a renegotiated definition of travel at the very least – the global experiences of their rooted fictional subjects are of no less impact than material journeys in foreign lands. Perception of global distance in the Romantic era has been remarked upon by others. Nigel Leask, in *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing*, discusses “the erasure of an ‘aesthetics of distance’ as a phenomenology of proximity and remoteness” in the genre of Romantic travel fiction:

> The very “emplacement” and temporal specificity of travel writing, with its narrative of the traveller’s personal travail and interaction with foreign peoples, and its reliance on superficial “first impressions”, always risked a damaging proximity to curiosity. ... The unshackling of wonder from “rational” curiosity may for this reason have contributed to the demotion of travel writing from the status of “philosophical” discourse to the realm of belles-lettres in the period under consideration. (30)

What are the terms of this “unshackling” as experienced by both the global and the local traveller? And how do experiences of local and global diverge from their geographical correlatives? And most importantly, what techniques do Romantic authors use to articulate these global experiences? The imaginative energy of someone like De Quincey confounds
both ethnographic or cartographic credibility, for example. We must consider the ways in which these Romantic writers sought to redefine the language of travel, the experience of it in a cultural sense, and their confrontations of the use-value of foreignness in the redefinition of domestic spaces. Furthermore, we should take the occasion to consider the ways such redefinitions paved the way for future authors interested in how space is destabilized within wider ontological frames of reference.

Critics of travel literature like Leask and theorists of globalization like Bruno Latour help us to negotiate the material-semiotic dimensions of travel in the Romantic era – the ways in which networks of communication determine value between measurable, material things and broad historical influences. The repeated levels of performance in Latour’s version of actor-network theory, for example, describe the fundamental instability of networks of transition, in which we must consider habitual place and the levels of identity-formation within the local as constructed. In Reassembling the Social, Latour asks penetrating questions about modern conceptions of spatial immediacy, and the need to regard the local – and thus, the self – as contingently as the global:

Sticking obstinately to the “localize the global” slogan does not explain what “local” is, especially if action...is so clearly “dislocated.” On the contrary, everything would be lost if, after having revamped the former “global”

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9 Comprehending travel in this way required surmounting deep generic divisions. Imaginary voyages in literature, for example, were often categorized as either didactic or escapist, and their popularizers had adapted an idiom that divided their uses between the substantive and the ephemeral. Contemporary anthologists of travels such as Henry Weber made no illusions of the necessary role imaginative travel played in the escape from material concern. In his Popular Romances Consisting of Imaginary Voyages and Travels (1812), familiar to all of the Romantic authors studied in this thesis, Weber emphasizes the escapism inherent to any literary travel, asking “What can be more delightful, particularly to a youthful mind, unincumbered by the unavoidable cares and vicissitudes of actual life, and as yet happily ignorant of what he has to learn but too soon, by his own experience, than to be conducted into the bright regions pictured by fancy?” (xx). The clean division drawn by Weber between actual and imaginary travel does, however, seem out of synch with Mary Shelley’s or Wordsworth’s presentation of the stationary visionary, and is certainly at odds with the role of fancy as a mode of destabilizing the landscape, as we see in De Quincey and Percy Shelley.
context, we had to fall back on this other preferred site of social science: the face-to-face encounter between individual, intentional, and purposeful human beings. If the one-way trip from interactions to contexts led nowhere...the return trip back to local sites has no reason to be directed at a more accurate target. Far from reaching at last the concrete ground of a “social hypostasis,” we would have simply gone from one artifact to another. If the global has no concrete existence—except when it is brought back to its tiny conduits and onto its many stages—neither has the local. So we now have to ask...: How is the local being generated? This time it is not the global that is going to be localized, it is the local that has to be re-dispatched and re-distributed. (192)

Latour’s note about how “action...is dislocated” is crucial: it helps us to determine how Romantic authors might have thought about travel, namely as a behaviour within “conduits,” or as a performance translated through technologies which enable the dissolution of the local into a series of provisional networks.

One thing travel was not was discrete, nor was it a simple act of movement between hermetically-bounded spaces. Percy Shelley used radical modes of movement to show how travel and social reform subvert the understandings of shared cultural and geographical spaces. In doing so, he challenged the pre-existing codes of cosmology and the political imagination. His poetic aeronauts and aeronautic motifs possess elements of natural aerial phenomena which utilize what P.M.S. Dawson has called “the natural language of Perfectibility...[that] does not offer any final goals, for it insists on continual change, and
distrusts fixed goals as attempts to limit progress” (120). Percy Shelley’s aeronautic explorations challenge domestic certainties through the experience of new paradigms of vision, both in the means of travel and the kinds of revelations made in new perceptual zones. For example, in *Alastor* (1815), the visionary Poet’s “silver vision” (316) stems largely from the conflation of traditional modes of travel (the “straining boat” [320]) with aerial phenomena (the “resplendent clouds” [318]), allowing him to transition from the sensorially limited “distinct valley and the vacant woods” (194) to the “dizzy precipice” (258) of the world, where he is taken for a “Spirit of the wind” (259). As the Poet from a young age departs from an “alienated home / To seek strange truths in undiscovered lands” (76-7), these vision-flights become explicitly global in nature, ultimately moving across Europe and Asia in a mode increasingly aligned with aerial surveying. His desperate attempts to reach a perspective beyond embedded understandings of nature are visible in his contempt for the flying swan, a creature whose restricted flight only highlights the Poet’s own sensory “attunement” (287) to “the deaf air, to the blind earth, and heaven / That echoes not my thoughts” (289-90).

In the context of global travel, Percy Shelley’s boundary-defying aeronauts deny the safety of domestic and established knowledge, as well as the ontological makeup of that knowledge. Yet by linking sensorial gluttony with “the bright shadow of the lovely dream” (233) of unlimited global surveying, the Poet forsakes the actual spaces that surround him: at his transformational moment of crisis, we see him gazing “on the empty scene as vacantly / As ocean’s moon looks on the moon in heaven” (201-2). The crisis of vision between globally-mobile minds and those who remained perceptually grounded (characterized in this poem by the narrator and the Arab maiden) was of particular interest to Shelley throughout.

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10 Speaking with equal figurative emphasis, Earl Wasserman observes in Shelley’s poetry “aspiration with no definable goal, or with a goal that can be defined only as infinity” (26).
his poetic career. Whether for aesthetic or political reasons, Shelley attended to the inherent dangers of a shift upwards towards global, synoptic perception. He remained conflicted about the desirability of a total rearrangement of human sympathy and the inevitable and alienating conflicts that ensued. While Shelley uses various aeronautic motifs to radically destabilize preconceived perceptual frameworks, as his work progressed, we see an evolving and uncertain notion of such destabilizations. The *Alastor*-Poet has no illusions as to the sublime meaninglessness of brute corporeality – he sees in the limited world a necessary surrender to “pale despair and cold tranquility, / Nature’s vast frame, the web of human things, / Birth and the grave” (718-20) – but his spatial enactment of poetic ascents results in his total dissociation from the humanity he seeks to inspire, and whose works inspired him to greatness in the first place.

Shelley’s aeronautic surveyors experience space in jarring ways, the implications of which, for good or ill, resonate with the other Romantic authors studied here. Clearly stimulated by the wonders, techniques, or powers that drive global exploration and the travels of peoples around the world, these writers understood “local” or “familiar” to be constructed terms (in their fictions at least). The consequence was that exposure to a world of radiating knowledge rendered one’s sense of safety into a fragmented matrix of association. As Latour argues, “scale does not depend on absolute size but on the number and qualities of dispatchers and articulators” (196). The Romantic era seems to revel in the novel psychic phenomena offered by such “articulators”: these authors use travel and an irrevocably connected global community to establish new limits of local and foreign, of conservative and progressive, of sympathetic engagement, and social alienation. They depict

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11 He would later characterize global freedoms quite differently in poems like “Ode to Liberty” (1820), describing for instance the cloud-city of Athens as one that, by its aerial inspirations, destabilizes the certainties of history and social codes: “A wingèd sound of joy, and love, and wonder, / Which soars where Expectation never flew, / Rending the veil of space and time asunder!” (84-6).
these renegotiations variously, though often as forms of emigrancy, technologically-facilitated vantages, or a homeless European exile. Linking all of these depictions is a common thread: isolation, and the pain associated with the dissolution of established or familiar knowledge. Wordsworth’s domestic outcasts and wanderers, Percy Shelley’s determined aeronautical visionaries, and Mary Shelley’s ambitious explorers grapple with a common tension: the imaginative gap between home and away, often experienced as the stresses between closeted provincialism and the unbounded limits of global culture.

Furthermore, these fictional experiences give voice to historical (and often personal) collisions between local and global. Wordsworth’s confrontation with the native dimensions of both England and North America, Percy Shelley’s inquiries into radical travel’s role in political revolutions, and Mary Shelley’s first-hand understanding of rootless global travellers situate them within paradigms of disengagement and the re-evaluation of boundaries.

It is perhaps a weakness of Latour’s discussion of “the concrete ground of a ‘social hypostasis’” that psychic damage is discussed in terms of shared and inhibitory spatial delusions, rather than protective understandings of how places historically provided sustenance. In none of the authors studied here is psychic protectiveness associated with delusion, any more than is the impulse to violate hypostasis. Other critics, such as Giddens and Arjun Appadurai, offer useful and supplementary theories of place in the mind of modern humanity as they pertain to such psychic adaptations. These writers reveal a series of associated human traits and circumstances that emphasize proximal dislocation, a focus on the imagination as an agent in global cultural processes, and a disembedded and reflexive sense of modernity. Each links such rearrangements to an unconscious reflex, but only Appadurai places them within self-aware and deliberate responses to the unravelling of certainties.
As mentioned previously, Giddens places a dialectic of “extensional and intensional” systems in a context of “global modernity.” In *The Consequences of Modernity*, he sees disembeddedness – that unconscious reversal of the sociological condition of being embedded, or rooted within normative sensibilities of a culture – and reflexivity as hallmarks of the modern perception of local place. Society as a “bounded system” (64) disappears in a modern global mindset, replaced instead by a radically disrupted sense of space, wherein “local transformation is as much a part of globalisation as the lateral extension of social connections across time and space” (64). Giddens claims this phenomenological response “is an emotional, rather than a cognitive, phenomenon, and it is rooted in the unconscious” (92). He does not, however, address the imaginative resistances to this process – for example, how anxiety at this globalizing tendency might assert itself in artistic contests between local security and a sense of meaning in a network of “deferrals.”

Appadurai takes the reactions to corroded boundaries of knowledge one step further and situates them within aesthetic contexts, modifying the responsive proposition, and claiming instead some conscious control over the entire enterprise. In an important essay, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” he roots this control specifically in the imagination – a conscious transformation of proximal instability into an artistic tool, rather than a passive cognitive reaction to social-emotional stresses. It is important to consider the role of this aesthetic engagement with modern space as conscious: Appadurai phrases this engagement as an act of will, “the imagination as a social practice” (327). He claims that with mass literacy came the “attendant large-scale production of projects of ethnic affinity that were remarkably free of the need for face-to-face communication” (325). Significantly for the Romantics, this could also lead to a possible “paradox of constructed primordialism” (325). Some of these projects took the form of what
he calls “mediascapes,” or “narrative-based accounts of strips of reality,” “proto-narratives of possible lives, fantasies which could become prolegomena to the desire for acquisition and movement” (331). From a cultural perspective, such articulations made “the search for steady points of reference...very difficult” (335). Living in a world dominated by constructed identities, culture “becomes less what Bourdieu would have called a habitus (a tacit realm of reproducible practices and dispositions) and more an arena for conscious choice, justification and representation” (335). Global and cultural instability, while threatening local security, nonetheless presents a virtually unlimited series of artistic opportunities.

The role played by English travel networks in De Quincey’s The English Mail-Coach foregrounds what is often left unspoken in the works of the three authors studied in this thesis: namely, how psychic stability relied on the provincial codes of an older world, a world built on the borderlines of households, neighbourhoods, towns, cities, provinces, and nations. The collapse of these codes and boundaries was not necessarily a nationalistic crisis, as it was for De Quincey – yet the realization that nations (and their spatial forebears) are mediators of individuality is one of the first and last ontological barriers to a genuine sense of belonging. From the “hidden valley” (8) of Grasmere Vale in Wordsworth’s “Michael” (1800) to the illusory safeties of “palace and throne, / Temple and prison” (33-4) of Percy Shelley’s “Ode to Liberty” (1820), and the locked gates of Geneva in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818), the subjects and characters of these fictions experience the pressures of being from recognized spaces, yet imaginatively drawn away from them. Trade networks, emigration, tourism, exchanges of scientific knowledge, the discovery of new lands, or technologies that enabled faster and more distant locomotion, all contributed to the gradual dissolution of such borders. Determining the limits of individual influence within the context of new and inevitable imaginative paradigms is at the heart of the psychodrama in the fiction
and poetry of these authors. While these material factors may have contributed to a dissolution of Giddens’s ontological security, I would argue that these authors occasionally encouraged this change, revelling in what Mary Shelley’s Lionel calls “discoveries in unknown regions” – not necessarily “discoveries” per se, but the subjective involvement in networks of knowledge transmission, of “Poetry and its creations, philosophy and its researches and classifications” (The Last Man 31).

Yet for all the successes of expanded vision, characters like Victor Frankenstein have difficulty translating such networks of global knowledge into ones that make sense locally. While exposing him to “divine ideas of liberty” (Frankenstein 133), his “little voyages of discovery” in England with Henry Clerval are ultimately ineffective in facilitating a balance between immediate responsibility and global potentials. His “free and lofty spirit” does not last long: unable to reconcile his universal aspirations for humankind with the happiness of those closest to him, Victor experiences the alienation from sites of comfort that only the Creature can claim to understand better. In doing so, Mary Shelley is not comparing the closeted Genevan cantons unfavourably with British “freedoms.” Rather, she describes a figure torn between the conflicting narratives of “glorious expedition[s]” (183) and the pressure to “Seek happiness in tranquility” (186). Such paradoxes are necessarily global in nature, given the convergence of utility and empire: Robert Walton similarly partakes in and perpetuates narratives of global utility that are at odds with local responsibilities, material and sympathetic. Walton’s “study day and night” of “voyages made for purposes of discovery” (6) generates a powerful belief that the utility of his discoveries is proportional to their distance from sites of domestic comfort: “the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind” is linked with a site where mankind has no role, “a part of the world never before

12 All quotations are taken from Morton D. Paley’s 1998 edition.
13 All quotations are taken from Marilyn Butler’s 1993 edition.
visited...a land never before imprinted by the foot of man‖ (6).\textsuperscript{14} De Quincey’s “secret and detestable commerce,” which formed the symbolic link in a global-local identity, was a pressing anxiety for authors such as Mary Shelley. Robert Walton’s appropriation of this belief from the commercialized literature of travel reveals how the global imagination was sustained within such networks of material exchange.

Part of the objective of this thesis is to determine how Romantic authors engaged this very modern rearrangement of global circumstances, how they confronted the erosion of bordered places, and how they challenged pre-existing standards of judgment (whether spatial, political or sympathetic). They all remained anxious about the collapse of domestic ontological security, though their reactions to such collapses varied in intensity and in result.

Some of Mary Shelley’s characters would advocate for the protective impulse (often a rearguard action against historical inevitability), while Percy Shelley’s aeronauts implicitly doubt the power of insularity through the very nature of their visionary activity (and the global standards of a nascent aeronautic science). But even in Mary Shelley’s case, the boundaries of even the most general locality were ultimately illusory, as we see in the closing chapters of her apocalyptic novel \textit{The Last Man} (1826). Here, the spatial dimensions of

\textsuperscript{14} In some ways, the pursuit of different imaginative horizons to the detriment of immediate ones could be considered a matter of taste, rather than ideology. Timothy Morton has shown how poets of the Romantic period reacted negatively to the ethics of global commercial “taste,” and show how Percy Shelley in particular thought that “the stimulated taste for the exoticised is...just what is wrong with a transnational economy. All that supplementarity is harmful to the moral fibre of the body or nation” (Morton 95). Morton observes a kind of relativistic economics of global mercantilism at work in the period, where the manufacturing of need and commodity are based on what he calls “a form of differential semiosis, in which what is named as ‘over there’, ‘that’, ‘the Other’, increases its value as it differentiated from, and yet impinges upon, that which is named as ‘over here’, ‘this’, ‘the self’” (59). This sense of taste could readily be applied to Mary Shelley’s characters’ recurring interest in travel literature, itself a material commodity which stimulated need largely through the imaginative immersion in networks of exoticism. But while Morton’s thesis does indeed make sense of some of the perceptual commerce implied by De Quincey, it does not fully explain how the destabilization of the immediate functions in the presence of narratives of exploration that project a spirit of altruism into their endeavours. It is true that in their pursuit of limitless global experiences, several of Mary Shelley’s visionary explorers partake in discoveries that are, in part, supplementary to demonstrable social utility. But those who maintain hermetic boundaries of domesticity against global economies stifle material commerce even as they project their privileged imaginations outwards onto the global stage.
known creation have collapsed entirely, indeed almost imploded: “The vast universe, its myriad worlds, and the plains of boundless earth which we had left—the extent of shoreless sea around—contracted to my view—they and all that they contained, shrunk up to one point, even to our tossing bark, freighted with glorious humanity” (441). This is no solipsism, grasped in desperation of an impossible plight – it is a psychological representation of a world “contracted,” but also “boundless” and “shoreless.” The number of Latourian “articulators” in Shelley’s apocalyptic future have dropped below a point of critical utility; we witness here how the perception of distance is paradoxical, where the dimensions of the immediate and the cosmic overlap. Furthermore, this new and constricted “universe” is conveyed to the reader as a metaphor of travel, and signifies the involvement of earlier travels in the novel in establishing the context for boundlessness. In their moments of optimism, Lionel, Adrian and Clara consider themselves to be “the world’s free denizens” who “enjoy...a voluntary exile” (432). Ultimately, however, they realize the truly terrifying meaning of infinite perceptual boundaries made manifest – namely, that words like “local” and “domestic” have collapsed along with the networks of culture and social experience. Shelley’s characterization of these “last” figures as travellers and exiles is thus meant to compound the understanding that even the most empty spaces must be considered as global, social ones. But it also highlights how, as Latour points out, local spaces lose meaning outside greater knowledge systems.

The dissolution of local boundaries in favour of an unhinged global vision was a serious imaginative and moral challenge. The kinds of visionary exploration practiced by Percy Shelley’s Alastor-Poet, Mary Shelley’s Robert Walton, and William Wordsworth’s Rivers were geographically liberating, but also sympathetically dubious. Looking at an example of the latter from The Borderers (1796), it is clear that Rivers does not consider travel
or movement as anything but an existential weapon against local responsibilities. Travel and alienness are only food for his imagination, which operates at a distance from the immediate; they also function as internal power-brokers in his re-enactment of global exile. We witness in him the platonic extreme of a transparent landscape: he insists that Mortimer “calculate, and look / Beyond the present object of the sense” (II.i.109-10). In this early play, we see an example of Wordsworth’s philosophical topography, and superimposition of foreignness over the landscape – particularly when Rivers links this debate to questions of spatial perception, travel and global exploration. All movement for Rivers is a potential act of colonization, such as when he notes to Mortimer that “A few leagues hence we shall have open field, / And tread on ground as free as the first earth / Which nature gave to man” (II.i.111-13). The “independent intellect” that opens “new prospects” (III.v.33, 34) is admirable in its creative possibility. But in “pass[ing] alone / Beyond the visible barriers of the world” (IV.ii.143-4) and “travell[ing] into things to come” (145), Rivers obscures his vampiric idealism, which ultimately makes of Mortimer “A thing by pain and thought compelled to live” (V.iii.273).

For Wordsworth as for De Quincey, the psychic alienation produced by leaving one’s home did not necessarily entail physically leaving it. The re-evaluation of known spaces involved unravelling terms like “local,” “family,” “traditional,” or “familiar,” as contingent and entangled with the larger understandings of nature and knowledge. Like the daisy, Wordsworth’s depiction of nature in “To the Small Celandine” (1807) revolves around its immediacy within recognizable areas. The flower’s “smallness” has a paradoxical effect on the speaker, catalyzing a disproportionate discovery:

Eyes of some men travel far

For the finding of a star;
Up and down the heavens they go,
Men that keep a mighty rout!
I'm as great as they, I trow,
Since the day I found thee out,
Little flower! – I'll make a stir
Like a great Astronomer. (9-16)

The ubiquity of the flower, compounded with his pleasure in its common aesthetics, enables the possibility of many such discoveries within known spaces. In “To the Same Flower,” a “Celandine” companion-piece, the speaker passively compares himself to a “Magellan” (43) in the dimension of the discoveries he can attribute to this plant. Wordsworth’s poetic travels show how space and even distance could represent a relationship between zones of influence, rather than a pre-measured set of boundaries. In such ways, the literature of travel, as a model and a product of global knowledge transmission, enabled him to navigate the paradox of stability and movement, of liberty and confinement that typified local spaces in a global environment. His work persistently dissolves local ontologies, deconstructing travel as a spatially exclusive activity, or a movement between exclusive zones.

A sense of travel that reflected the ethical requirements of home is visible in all the works studied here. But this sense is compounded by the seemingly necessary imaginative movements away from home. I use the word “sense” rather than “kind” of travel, since it was clear that individuals could experience the sometimes disorienting effects of travel without participating in any movement whatsoever. In works such as Wordsworth’s “Home at Grasmere” (c. 1800), Percy Shelley’s Queen Mab (1813), and Mary Shelley’s Valperga (1823), figures who enforce static spatial boundaries experience psychological violence when they finally understand the contingency, fragility and mutability of those erected margins.
Consequently, these authors sought out the ways in which travel’s synthetic qualities – of conceptual mobility and comparative rigour – helped re-energize known images, places, metaphors, or social networks. This sense of travel was, to borrow Appadurai’s words, as much a deliberate social practice as it was a literary or commercial one: by definition, it implied recurring contact with other human beings, and could overcome inflexible (or proprietary) understandings of communal space.

In this thesis, I claim that these Romantic authors were grappling with a challenging perceptual trend: a disorienting and novel sense of sociability made possible amidst new global knowledges. This activity was conceived primarily with the destabilized role of space as it prefigured the imaginative ontology of individuals, regions, and nations. An instance of indeterminately distanced travel altering a sense of the local within a very bounded context is visible in a passage from John Clare’s “Autobiography”:

I had often seen the large heath called Emmonsales stretching its yellow furze from my eye into unknown solitudes ... So I eagerly wandered on & rambled along the furze the whole day till I got out of my knowledge when the very wild flowers seemd to forget me & I imagind they were the inhabitants of new countrys the very sun seemd to be a new one & shining in a different quarter of the sky still I felt no fear my wonderseeking happiness had no room for it ... & when I got back into my own fields I did not know them everything lookd so different. (13)

In this example, the experience of exploring a hitherto unknown area generates a re-evaluation of the known locale. Tellingly, Clare describes the experience as “getting out of his knowledge”: when contextualized by “furze” and “countrys,” “knowledge” takes on spatial dimensions which he can “get out of.” J.E. Malpas argues that Clare’s sense of
knowledge indicates “one’s locatedness within a particular region; and perhaps, above all else, at least for Clare, a matter of dwelling or being ‘at home.’ In this sense, one’s ‘knowledge’ is the region in and through which one’s life is established and defined (perhaps this is the real meaning of the notion of ‘home’ that appears so often in discussions of place, self, and identity)” (189). This is a compelling argument, but in assigning to knowledge a specific regional coordinate (namely, “home”), the re-evaluated experience of place is in danger of being not-home. This is not therefore to disagree with Malpas on Clare’s understanding of space-as-knowledge, but to suggest that the experiential moment of abandoning a home – in the sense of immersing oneself in a network of imaginatively contingent global spaces – was for other Romantic authors a bewildering and inevitable event in a global culture. Given the spaces in which these moments took place, characterizing this as an oppositional dialectic between home and away seems slightly misleading. Rather, we might more appropriately see in these authors a drive to synthesize the “familiar” with the “unfamiliar.”

The three chapters and conclusion of this dissertation discuss Romantic fictions of liberation from restrictive codes of self-identification. The authors studied employ literary, technological, and economic factors to achieve these liberations, which are themselves always tenuous: the collapse of ontological security that accompanies this liberation typically comes with a psychic or material price. Given the nature and pace of the changes made by the visionary Romantic travellers studied here, resistance was inevitable. This thesis therefore attempts to discover the means by which a visionary traveller would fit back into society after an exploratory act. Accordingly, it seeks to articulate a definition of belonging in a European culture that had not developed the nuanced vocabulary necessary for ethical, global citizenship. Each of these authors speaks of the privilege as well as the responsibility
of being a visionary traveller, though these similarities diverge on the parameters (personal, domestic, national, global, etc.) such responsibilities would involve.

Chapter One opens my discussion with Wordsworth’s models of North American travel, which he uses to enable the imaginative transformation of known local British spaces. He accomplishes this by emphasizing a conflict between forms of nomadism and closeted settlement, a conflict conceptualised in terms characteristic of North American exploration and colonization. Typically, these terms take the outline of an oscillating, inconclusive contest between rootless hunting and settled agriculture, and forms of emigrancy that display the tensions of adaptation to new and unfamiliar environments. Given the imperial and colonial natures of Wordsworth’s emigrants, and the parallels of displacement between Europeans and Native Americans, we must consider ways in which Romantic emigrancy transcends face-value boundaries of foreignness and domesticity. Writing from colonial America, the Frenchman J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur claimed, “we have all been emigrants in our turns” (Sketches 250). Crèvecoeur implies, and Wordsworth would seem to have agreed, that when we consider emigrancy as a defining quality of modern global culture, we radically redefine the ontology of the native. This lesson applied equally to colonial settlers as to those inhabiting ostensibly settled (in both senses of the word) lands, such as those frequented by Wordsworth. His early poems – particularly those up until the 1807 editions – are peculiar in their characterization of travel as a local phenomenon with global implications. The acceptance of local specificity in a foreign, colonial context, juxtaposed with the travellers’ appreciation for the exotic lures of known lands, were iterations on how to imaginatively inhabit the well-traveled environs of the Lake District. In effect, such juxtapositions helped him subjectively fashion this area into a perceptual “tame wildness.”

Of equal interest to Wordsworth were the forms of global power and culture that affected
individual perception of these local areas – the pressures of economy on a landscape embedded in a network of other places. Aware of the threat posed by an unrooted perception with no commitment to local place, Wordsworth emphasized the virtues of mobile domesticity: a form of embeddedness within a specific place that relied on imaginative wandering, redistributing exotic qualities gleaned from foreign sources onto familiar landscapes.

In Chapter Two I return to a technological approach to imaginary travels in the Romantic period, and examine one of the most remarkable achievements of the age: human flight. I look to Percy Bysshe Shelley’s love of air balloons to extrapolate how visionary exploration was emblematic of broad imaginative shifts – in this case, between sceptical provincialism and idealistic globalism. The material capabilities of the air balloon typically determine the metaphorical limits in his aeronautic poetry – namely, a “grounded” provincialism and a progressively immaterial, “aerial” visionary idealism. These spatial philosophies were, however, couched in the language of radical, Enlightenment travel, and thus generate a tension in his poetry between bounded localism and synoptic globalism. This tension existed not merely because aeronautics was an international science, but because as a mode of travel it facilitated borderless experiences. In Shelley’s mind the balloon was symbolic of a dialogue linking a contemporary, finite human experience with a natural and cosmological infinite. In the process of the aspirational social reforms enabled by visionary flight (gleaned from such thinkers as Joseph Priestley, Adam Walker, Joseph Lind, and Erasmus Darwin), however, Shelley’s poetic aeronauts experience the social costs of radical travels. Their participation in perceptual revolutions runs the risk of sympathetic alienation from those unwilling (or unable) to participate in the experiment. Shelley’s aeronauts and aerial intelligences – who range in form from explicit aeronauts in his earliest poems, to
figurative ones in later works like *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Witch of Atlas* – work in global contexts, struggling to engage those with less access to wide networks of knowledge and perception. Such access might have made his aeronauts powerful, but Shelley was determined to find a language capable of maintaining their humanity without subjecting them to dogmatic worldviews. Clearly frustrated by the limitations of the global-local dialectic within the aeronautic paradigm, Shelley sought to reinvigorate the science by injecting it with a language of constant altitudinal changes and chemical renewal. It is thus through the figure of the globally-surveying aeronaut that I examine Shelley’s paradigm-changing, universal visions, and his wariness of the erosion of local, sympathetic human contact incurred over the course of psycho-social reform.

Chapter Three examines Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s three early published novels: *Frankenstein* (1818), *Valperga* (1823) and *The Last Man* (1826). This section looks at the rhetorical interactions of visionary, global exploration and isolated domestic spheres, particularly as these categories are typified as divergent character interests within the boundaries of exploratory and domestic travel. I argue that while Mary Shelley does distance herself from the injurious sympathetic tendencies of global visionary exploration, she does not advocate a conservative or reactionary retreat towards secluded domesticity. Shelley often situates her figures of exploration within material contexts – particularly global economies of goods and knowledge, political and military conflicts, and biological crises – that deny the fixed boundaries and nurturing isolation of a static home. These material and perceptual energies result in a socio-spatial impasse – the inability of her characters to determine a truly useful direction of exploration manifests itself as forms of solitude, exile and homelessness. Sympathetic proximity, in the midst of this impasse, is frequently sacrificed for entirely fantasized (and occasionally delusional) spaces and the ostensible utility
of discoveries. Shelley’s characters best illustrate the boundaries of this conflict, for in recurring attempts at global citizenship they articulate exclusive proclamations for the supposed need for either visionary idealism or domestic retreat. The impasse between characters on either side of this divide is, however, bridged by travel, which for some characters is purely imaginative, and for others expressly material. Figures concerned with the stability of the domestic sphere as it relates to a world of expanding knowledge (such as Elizabeth Lavenza, the countess Euthanasia, and Adrian) are explicitly compared to their visionary or exploratory counterparts (such as Victor Frankenstein, Robert Walton, Castruccio, and Raymond). Each of her works features multiple iterations of such conflicts, each representing a dialogue or rationalization on the social utility of the exclusive choices. Unlike many of her characters, Mary Shelley the author does contend that exploration and travel are implicitly wrong. She does, however, seek to better understand how discrete social units – homes, towns, nations, worlds – can survive contact with each other, or with forces beyond the reach of any individual society. For her, the crisis of global identity is most keenly felt at the level of the family, a unit she is clearly not willing to dismiss. So while Percy Shelley’s great struggle would be to find ways to tame his visionaries, Mary Shelley’s problem is in many ways exactly the opposite: how to globalize the family without abstracting it into meaninglessness.

The demonstrable newness of these issues in the literature of the Romantic period underscores a whole series of anxieties that have yet to be discussed. The modernity of Romantic spatial understandings is quite distinctive, and to most of the authors I study, it was a psychically challenging imaginative force. That being said, one can see how the disenmbodied imagination, which perceived global distances in context of the local, had started to be codified even in De Quincey’s time. Returning to The English Mail-Coach as a
concluding example, we are faced with a geographical relativism so great that it challenged
the very system of metrics De Quincey uses to construct national borders. His rhetorical
challenge to an American traveller in England proposes a misunderstanding of how global
connections generate local affect. “[T]hree hundred miles” as a measure of immensity “to an
American...must sound ludicrous” (214), he opines. This imaginary American “thinks it fair
to contrast with the scale of the Mississippi” the smaller, English Thames, the “father of
rivers” (214). De Quincey’s feigned indignation at this diplomatic slight is not without
purpose, however. The outright comparison of distance, which he dismisses as “Columbian
standards,” missed the point entirely: not only had “no Englishman out of Bedlam ever
thought of looking in an island for the rivers of a continent” (214), but such comparisons
ignored the networks of influence that characterized a modern, inhabited globe. This was the
true measure of space: “The glory of the Thames is measured by the density of the
population to which it ministers, by the commerce which it supports, by the grandeur of the
empire in which, though far from the largest, it is the most influential stream” (214). Far
from being a point of colloquial British pride, distance is for De Quincey, as for the other
authors studied here, largely a matter of provisional interest, embedded in currents of
influence and not distinguishable from greater context.

The conditions for each author’s sense of ontological origins are materially quite
different, but psychically very similar: familiarity, safety, and a kind of scepticism towards the
outside world and its various approaches to measuring experience. The collateral effect of
known safeties – the family unit, the wisdoms of rural cultures, or the conventional
expectations of history and nature – serves as a mental palisade for the minds of some
travellers, a protective redoubt against the uncertainties of alien global experiences. The
move away from earlier insular conceptions of space was, as critics like Latour and
Appadurai and Giddens have said, characteristically modern, and these Romantic authors all made adaptations that were modern, to one degree or another.

Our Romantic authors each reacted to such modernities in different ways, but shared a concern for creative influence in an expanding base of cultural references. This struggle was oftentimes extremely personal, affecting the authors as much as their surrounding world: to paraphrase De Quincey, when the “heart of humanity” is unable to reconcile foreignness with an inalienable sense of self, the erection or annihilation of artificial boundaries seemed inevitable. How then did these Romantics envision the role of art in describing the acknowledged decay of “certainties”? How could one reconcile a modern sense of the world (spatial relativity and connectivity) with the essential integrity of creative expression? If the “connexions” of global cultures were inevitable, so were the unbounded and associative powers of the true artist. Navigating the ever-changing limits of creativity, while preserving spaces for some kind of meaning and individual purpose, was a true adaptive challenge.

Perhaps more than any era previously, this period demonstrated that modernity had spatial dimensions, and that the artist needed to understand and articulate a position in larger causal chains. These authors grapple with the psychic impact of these permeable boundaries, and show us that global connectivity required a constant redefinition of one’s sense of belonging.
Chapter One

“A home in every glade”: Wordsworth’s Disembedded Locales

i.

Wordsworth’s imaginative displacements pose fundamental challenges to the structure of the local. His poetic investigations of foreignness destabilize the experience and boundaries of travel, problematizing a sense of belonging that relied on static concepts of nature, home, nation, or ethnicity. Many of his early experiments in particular are characterized by movement within a constrained environment that nonetheless bears the philosophical weight of global exploration. Cautious of the risks associated with explorations into the exotic, Wordsworth, like the other authors studied in this thesis, was wary of a complete abandonment of domestic responsibility in the name of more abstract virtues. Though determined to find innovative ways of preserving the peculiar imaginative richness of the Lake District, he was nonetheless suspicious of the impulse towards isolationism that seemed a natural “fit” for the region’s traditional inhabitants.

Of course, the blurring of geographical lines and the gradual erosion of the specificity of place were as much factors of an increasingly-interconnected globe as they were of the motivations of the explorer. This interconnection operated at the local level as much as it did at the international, something Wordsworth recognized. As we see in the initial sections of his poem “The Brothers” (1800), the opening-up of local places to the circulation of people parallels the disembedded perception of the global traveller Leonard. Movement between places is a material reality in this most colloquial of locations. On the
one hand the Priest of Ennerdale remarks “These Tourists, heaven preserve us!” (1), and on the other, the living Brother Leonard, back from his transatlantic voyages “in the Indian Isles” (65), is described by the priest as “one of those who needs must leave the path / Of the world’s business, to go wild alone” (103-4). Yet the Priest is only half-right, for it is precisely business and trade that Leonard plies in America – “chiefly for [his] brother’s sake” (312). These experiences amidst global networks unhinge Leonard’s psychic experience of place, with predominantly destructive effects. While sailing the oceans, for example, he “in the bosom of the deep / Saw mountains” (58-9), but on his return to that original place sees only the place that was. The same mountains, and the “vale where he had been so happy” (439), are now threatening because they represent a commitment to place, one that he knows is materially and imaginatively impossible. And yet, according to the Priest, it is the act of global travel – which presumably takes place amidst many cultures and peoples – that makes him both “wild” and “alone.” In Leonard, Wordsworth has no simple imaginative solution for the role of place and belonging in a globally-connected world, but the possibility of “going wild” was clearly a central issue: for what was the source of wildness and its role in the generation of an original identity? Place or the individual who inhabits it, considered socially? Was wildness a liberating or an ostracizing quality? Alongside these questions, and aware of the threat posed by an unrooted perception with no commitment to local place, Wordsworth emphasizes the virtues of mobile domesticity: a form of embeddedness within a specific place that prioritized imaginative wandering, redistributing exotic qualities gleaned from foreign sources onto familiar landscapes. These frameworks for exploring known areas were, as many critics have shown, ethnographic and anthropological in origin. Yet they also partake of a sense of place and space that was characteristically modern, representing a radical shift from earlier conceptions of space that prioritized insularity and isolation.
Wordsworth’s interest in the literature of travel and global exploration is well-documented, with both bibliographic and critical work demonstrating the plentiful store of examples of global cultures available to him. John Wyatt, in his book *Wordsworth’s Poems of Travel*, following a division of the poet’s work between pre- and post-1813 periods, claims a significant late thematic “inspiration in travel and in the inclusion of a wide range of localities” (10). Wyatt outlines the ways in which Wordsworth “was the essential poet of wandering, excursion and the experience of journeys” (139), claiming that the late travel poetry emerges from leisure travel, as distinguished from the different kinds of travel (predominantly pedestrian and itinerant) made necessary by his relative poverty at earlier stages of life. There is no doubt that “in his final thirty years, the traveling poet wrote more structured and identified traveling verse” (140). But it is the generic poetry of travel that somehow lacks the punch of imaginative travel made in his earlier works, where his movements are enabled by what Robert Langbaum identifies as Wordsworth’s characteristic “spatial projection of the psyche” (40). On the surface, this absence of impact is confusing, given the relatively mundane generic types of Wordsworth’s early works (being the ballad and the lyric). Indeed, Robert Mayo commented 50 years ago on the contemporaneity of Wordsworth’s loco-descriptive mode, noting that a work like “Tintern Abbey” (1798), “Regarded solely in terms of the modes of eighteenth-century topographical poetry,” must have seemed “one of the most conventional poems in the whole volume” (493).

The tension between actual and imaginary travels demonstrates some of the most unique contributions made by Wordsworth to the language of travel: namely, a method of

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16 “...I mean only the collections of poems that Wordsworth described as itinerary, the *Memorials* of a tour on the Continent, 1820, the visits to Scotland and the Isle of Man, and the memoirs of a tour in Italy, 1837, but also collections which focus on a particular area either in the spirit of the eighteenth-century ‘loco-descriptive’ genre...or in the 1819 collection of *Peter Bell and Four Sonnets*, located in Swaledale, Yorkshire” (Wyatt 10).
describing local areas so that they carried global significance, but without subscribing to a universalizing, flattening paradigm that obscured local uniqueness. In the words of Richard Cronin, how did Wordsworth “forge a new language” (13) of the local by using travel as a motif? What were his political and aesthetic motivations for doing so? It has often been observed, though it needs reiterating here, that Wordsworth’s interest in global cultures stood in contrast to his attempts to illustrate and memorialize familiar and well-documented areas of Britain’s Lake District. The comparative impulse in itself is not particularly remarkable. Chloe Chard has made it clear that in an age so familiar with travel literature, authors concerned with travel “simply take it for granted that the foreign and the familiar are placed in a relation of rivalry to each other, and that the task of the traveler is to choose between them: any opinions about the foreign...must entail some corresponding, symmetrically contrasted opinion about the familiar, and vice-versa” (42). The subsequent re-evaluation of familiar locality based on this opposition is presumed to be positive, offering not merely a broadening of the borders of experience but also a re-energizing of known images and metaphors. This comparative tendency does offer challenges to the Wordsworthian reader, however, given the strong presence in his poetry of foreign natures presented as familiar, or, just as commonly, of familiar natures presented as foreign. We know, for example, that Wordsworth did not actually go to America and witness Indians in their native lands, though he frequently presents himself in rhetorical kinship with such peoples. Though many Indians did visit Europe during the Romantic period, he would not have seen them engaged in any of the activities we see his “literary” natives doing (if indeed he saw any at all). As with so many of Wordsworth’s other experiences with non-European cultures, his global comparisons are not based on lived experience, but were gleaned from literary examples, or witnessed in distressing circumstances in London side-shows or
drawing rooms. His comparisons and his reconsiderations of locality are a disruption of the presumption that travel itself, rather than the vicarious aesthetic experience of it, are what offer the improvement (or the movement) that travel entails.

Some of the more productive critical works on Wordsworth have shown how this seeming paradox is in fact an attempt to reconcile local British conditions with anthropological theories of social development in foreign contexts, amidst different natures. This scenario is recast with the inhabitants of the Lake District – including Wordsworth himself – struggling in the midst of global political strife, all while maintaining a uniqueness of place. Alan Bewell, in *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment*, proposes we examine the poet’s work up until *The Excursion* (1814) as an “experimental” poetry that, at its best, is written in the spirit of escaping a grand philosophical framework in the Enlightenment tradition. The modern quality of these backyard explorations is characterized by a selective global consciousness – one that attempts to recreate an original man, without original conditions.¹⁷

On a related anthropological note, Tim Fulford has situated Wordsworth’s interest in Native American peoples amidst a contemporary cultural fascination with what he calls “Romantic Indians.” He identifies the ways Romantic authors “[transformed] Indians into fictional figures, some uncanny, some alien, [and] redefined British identity in ways that could not be adequately formulated by the existing social and political discourses” (33). These authors, Fulford claims, “sketched out new, half-realised forms of self, in which foreign and familiar met – ‘strange meetings’ which seemed, and still seem, prophetic of the possibility and the difficulty of living at one with what we like to think we are not” (33). Fulford and Bewell

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¹⁷ See Bewell, 18. Bewell correctly points out that “[t]his principle, which was later to be called the ‘comparative method,’ was integral to eighteenth century anthropological inquiry” (20), and that Wordsworth is fundamentally engaged in a “domestic anthropology” (39).
thus help us to understand that inquiries into original, pre-modern identities sometimes involved modern redefinitions.

This chapter explores a Wordsworth not necessarily opposed to modern global interconnections, but who was a proponent of conservative ruralism founded on an agrarian past, and a disappearing traditional life; a Wordsworth who was well aware of the impossibility of survival without change. This Wordsworth was curious of primordialism, both British and American, but without plentiful domestic examples to build on, he sought parallels in a travel literature that depicted such states. His early poetry never comes to a conclusion about a disembedded consciousness of place, seeing it alternately as a boon to the long-term sedentary imagination, and a peril to enduring domestic affections. This perceptual conflict is evident throughout his life’s work, and is demonstrative of a consciousness that sought more from comparisons than mere superimposition of one place over another. To achieve this result required an understanding of reality that allowed distinctions of difference not bounded by the rules of platonic idealism. That is, a technique for describing how local places were known, how they were perceived to exist. That the details of this perception, this “being-in-place” (to borrow from Martin Heidegger), were relentlessly subjective, should not detract from their applicability in other minds. The global mentality of the local traveller opened new possibilities for classifying experience, as shown by Maureen McLane in her study *Romanticism and the Human Sciences*. Yet, while McLane’s work establishes the interplay of ethnic and anthropological identities and politics in his lyric poetry, she does so at the expense of the crucial role of place. A supplement in the spirit of this inquiry is clearly needed, one that considers the encounter between anthropological subjects as a literary

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18 This work productively explores the dialectic of ostensibly undeveloped thought “in contradistinction to...modern, or educated thought” (49) – particularly between “primitive” American thought and “modern” British thought – and in her chapter on Wordsworth, “how [he] oscillated between an impulse to domesticate the exotic, in Bewell’s terms, and an impulse to preserve difference” (44).
encounter between places, between natures, and between ways of living in those places. Effectively, we require a study of Wordsworth that incorporates forms of perceptual emigrancy – a condition that remains rooted geographically, but free to travel and to make homes in imagined spaces.

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ii.

As a way of situating these notions in Wordsworth’s poetry, let us examine briefly instances of disembedded locality, which will bring to light a number of things: namely, the explorer’s conflation of local place with global spaces, the situation and condition of emigrancy in an American context, and instances of subsistence taken from colonial contexts (particularly hunting and agriculture). These demonstrate Wordsworth’s interest in perceptual travel as a form of anthropology and economic life-practice, situated in an imaginative frame that conferred an indefinitely-imaginative potential within a bounded (and seemingly limited) local area. Identity and identity-formation were essentially loco-centric for Wordsworth, but as we shall see, the concept of place in his poetry was fluid and subject to radical change on the basis of imagined responses to global examples.

Wordsworth’s unpublished early poem “Salisbury Plain” (c. 1794), and its revised and published sibling, “The Female Vagrant” (1798), employ examples of primitive American life as a means of circumventing the depth of political vice in late eighteenth century Europe. By applying archetypes as a means of expressing difference, Wordsworth

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19 The American context of “foreignness” in Wordsworth’s poetry does not exclude the other locales that influence his work. This chapter focuses on the poet’s use of the American region because it, more than the other global regions Wordsworth read about, deals with the collision between primitive cultures and modern ones.
reverses the negativity of the savage, asserting that ostensibly primitive lifestyles offer more emotional comfort than those available to the modern poor. Vagrancy in these works is conflated with the condition of “Indianness,” yet Wordsworth is not quite straightforward in the appropriation of the simplicity supposedly inherent in Indian lifestyle. In comparison to the brief joys of the Europeans that follow, the relative joylessness of Indian life that opens “Salisbury Plain” indicates that Wordsworth is not employing an ideal version of New World primitivism. His characterization is complicated by the implication that Indians never had “pleasures” to begin with – ostensibly, misery derives from “memory of pleasures flown / Which haunts us in some sad reverse of fate” (21-2, emphasis added).

A closer reading of “Salisbury Plain” suggests that the source of misery is not exclusively external – in the pressures of powers on the individual – but lies in characters’ perceptions of the local inhabited areas. The destitute people of the poem can no longer conceive of such areas as “home” despite being native to that society. The openly global nature of the poem’s conflict – which moves from the American Revolution to the French Revolution to the enclosures and evictions within British lands – suggests that the alienation of the Indian should be read in the context of global contestations of space. At the core of this work are people, beginning with the Indian, who are alienated from their native lands, as much as they are oppressed by sublime political and economic forces. Furthermore, the characters in the poem are travellers, whether within their own countries or in the transatlantic sense: Wordsworth thus suggests in “Salisbury Plain” that the true source of pathos in modern life derives from spatial dislocation and forms of emigrancy.

The confluence of transmigrations within native lands (both American and British) signals the juxtaposition of an insecure home with an alien place. Wordsworth conveys this juxtaposition through two primary channels. The first is by using notions of primitivism to
pull the characters between a primitive Indian mode of living and an indefinite (though psychically resurgent) British past. The second is by destabilizing the lines of place in local areas – subjecting the characters to pernicious, and timeless, global power structures, denying the uniqueness of place by showing its susceptibility to arbitrary authority. The ultimate victimhood of the characters is perceptual, however: in each case, place provides the means for sustenance and survival, however much the characters are unable to take advantage of it locally. Wordsworth’s goal in using each technique is to demonstrate how emerging global networks and alienation from local place are closely linked, and to show the emotional and dramatic after-effects of those whose minds cannot help but be local.

The “survivalist” narrative of “Salisbury Plain” uses parallel conceits between the opening stanzas and the tales of the two British travellers. Wordsworth employs overlapping ironies to illustrate the plight of his characters, stressing their almost ghostly inhabitation of known places that are saturated with material goods. Their ability to meet basic needs in these lands is curtailed by what seem to be arbitrary and invisible borders, manifested through supernatural forces (“To hell’s most cursed sprites the baleful place / Belongs” [83-4]) and the natural sublime. Two key concepts, established in the opening stanzas within the context of Indian life, anchor this idea as a global narrative: the notion of being “naked and unhoused” (1), and of relying on a “fenceless bed” (9) for comfort. The lone Indian, thus exposed, is shown lying “on unknown plains” (4), notwithstanding the implication later that he inhabits a familiar area. The day’s pains are “fruitless” (2), despite the presence of “famished trains / Of boars” (5-6), themselves starved, that surround him. The emerging picture here is of a nature starving despite itself – primitive means of sustenance are rendered unviable, disturbing any sense of progressive anthropological development (such as agriculture) which might follow.
Likewise, the two dispossessed British characters see their native land as alien and unfamiliar, and they are explicitly excluded from the profusion of resources that surround them. Their status as travellers helps to establish their plight of being psychically detached from the land, despite being able to claim native status. The man is initially described as a “traveler” (38), notwithstanding the fact that we are given no evidence that he has traveled anywhere but in the local lands described in the poem. He enters the poem in stanza 5 walking through “wastes of corn that stretched without a bound” (44). Without the presence of a “sower” (45), or a human mediator, these fields of grain are little better than features of the landscape; even the “antique castle” (78) takes on the form of a “mountain-pile” (82). His inability to derive sustenance from agricultural wealth is proportional to his failure to decipher the external signifiers which have been dissociated from their former correlatives. This susceptibility to a new order of meaning marks him as a vulnerable explorer; his relationship to local place, in the presence of such disrupted signs, takes on the quality of the supernatural.

For her part, the woman’s exposure to global conflict clearly complicates her ability to engage the landscape in productive ways. Her husband shares in her destitution, and is forced into fighting in the wars overseas.\(^{20}\) But Wordsworth ensures we know of a prior manifestation of dislocation, one that precedes the open and external political conflicts that characterize her physical, transatlantic dislocation. The notion of the “fenceless bed” returns through the local powers that disrupt her early life. She had previously struggled to reconcile

\(^{20}\) The war in America is linked to these questions of sustenance, but in the woman’s case, prior to her departure to the New World, starvation is tied to the pride of resisting the call of an illegitimate war:

\begin{quote}
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. (311-15)
\end{quote}

The only available form of nourishment in this environment is described as a form of cannibalism, brought on by the external demands of international conflict.
a youthful vision of her native lands with one transformed by poverty and despair. The “Can I forget” refrains demonstrate her desperation to cling to a memory of a productive place that has been lost:

Can I forget my seat beneath the thorn,
My garden stored with peas and mint and thyme,
And rose and lily for the sabbath morn;
The church bell’s delightful chime,
The merriment and song at shearing time[2] (235-39)

This remembered economy has been disrupted through a redrawing of lines on the map, a cartographic and economic distinction not physically present on the landscape, but which nonetheless makes itself psychically felt in the inhabitants. The damage this incurs on the father has its global correlative in the daughter. 21 The fenceless bed concept, first shown through the figure of the “unhoused” savage, exemplifies the dangers to the mind dislocated from places of familiarity: while it allows the perceiver to sleep anywhere, this openness is also a marker of vulnerability. The condition of being fenceless is employed ironically, since fences, barriers, and territorial lines abound in this poem, implied or real. “Fencelessness” is then partly defined by making a virtue of necessity.

Ostensibly, nature is uninvolved with their flight from persecution. In stanza 37, we see “the smiling morn / All unconcerned with their unrest” (327-28). And yet this very lack of connection means that nature is not soiled with the blood that stains the struggles of humanity. The traveller on the transatlantic voyage, described in the previous stanza, connects the circadian rhythms in the Alexandrine of stanza 37 to the rejuvenation of hope in global movements:

21 And who is to say that the arbitrary redrawing of the lines of his fishing area is not simply a parallel to the origins of the American Revolutionary wars – the desire to preserve artificial lines on a map?
Here paused she of all present thought forlorn,
Living once more those hours that sealed her doom.
Meanwhile he looked and saw the smiling morn
All unconcerned with their unrest resume
Her progress though the brightening eastern gloom.
Oh when shall such fair hours their gleams bestow
To bid the grave its opening clouds illume?
Fled each fierce blast and hellish fiend, and lo!

Day fresh from ocean wave uprears his lovely brow. (325-33)

The conflation of pronouns ("she") links the female vagrant with the sun, implying that its periodicity parallels the itinerant travels of vagrant peddlars. The Spenserian rhyme scheme gives rise to the intriguing paralleling of "doom / gloom / illume" – clumsy enough in breadth of diction, but rich in meaning when considering the gradual reversal of "fenceless" travel’s negativity. While the transatlantic human powers force a deadly relativism on the perceptions of local travellers, the daily cycles of nature offer potential forms of perceptual revival.

Yet in “Salisbury Plain” travel is essential to maintaining this very effect. The sight of the sunrise on Sarum, for example, facilitates a new understanding of transatlantic movement. Such travel was, formerly, symptomatic of her distress: the woman describes the moment when, in America, she “resigns” the dream, which has ended in violence and despair, and begins her passage back across to England. Exile and global dissociation are closely associated here: “Some mighty gulf of separation passed / I seemed transported to another world /... / For me, farthest from earthly port to roam / Was best; my only wish to shun where man might come” (370-71, 377-8). The “passage” here, the “gulf,” is as much
perceptual as it is geographic. The “other world” of despair into which she enters transforms all before her into a possible dying place. The always-shifting barrow, encountered as fixed mounds early on in the poem, has become for her the entire earth. Her newfound “resting-place” (380) is on the deck of a moving ship, on which, “Roaming the illimitable waters round, / Here gaze, of every friend but Death disowned, / All day, my ready tomb the ocean flood” (382-84). The immediate result of her Wandering Jew-like curse is that she now stands “homeless near a thousand homes” (386), paralleling the fenceless condition that precedes this new rootlessness. Counterpointing the sunrise, which has brought her and her companion hope, she describes how formerly she has watched the sun set in the West, on America, and how this pernicious global consciousness has established the precedent for her navigations in her own land: “My eyes have watched yon sun declining tend / Down to the land where hope to me was lost; / And now across this waste my steps I bend” (389-91). The setting sun, the darkening lands, and the visions of horror witnessed thereon, all stem from this oppressive sense of global hopelessness – of irresistible and timeless powers that compress distance and space, turning every visited place into a “tomb.” This is all not so much a way of saying that she “can’t get America out of her head,” as it is to say that America’s misery has its root everywhere else.

Wordsworth’s revised version of this poem, published as “The Female Vagrant” in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, drops the opening narrative of the “naked and unhoused” savage,

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22 Mounds play a strong role in the mythology of the Southeast American Indians, though the cultures that built them precede the eighteenth-century nations William Bartram would have encountered and documented in his *Travels*. These mounds frequently serve to represent the disappeared Indian cultures’ power over natural fertility and the landscape.

23 The gradual strengthening of the characters’ perceptual stability derives in large part from the fact that they are newly able to see local landscape for what it is, what it once was, in a state that precedes human involvement. This new consideration of homeless wandering, while not exactly purged of potential harm, does permit them to absorb these external ills, while not succumbing to despair. After their realization that nature is above the concerns of men, the veil of concern is lifted from their eyes. It is at this point that they are able to find the cottage, and discover the sustenance that to this point has eluded them: “For you yon milkmaid bears her brimming load, / For you the board is piled with homely bread” (419-20).
and excises the various direct references to global oppression.\textsuperscript{24} It does, however, keep the woman’s perceptual plight, and the determining role of oppressive local politics in her (and her father’s) growing detachment from native place. When the woman describes the slow erosion of her father’s economic livelihood – “His little range of water was denied” (51) – Wordsworth supplements the crisis with a note: “Several of the Lakes in the north of England are let out to different Fishermen, in parcels marked out by imaginary lines drawn from rock to rock” (Brett and Jones 90).\textsuperscript{25} Cutting the open references to American primitivity, and reducing the reliance on the political sublime, Wordsworth ensures the conflict between global and local consciousnesses operates within the \textit{lived} experience of the narrative speaker. And yet, the absence of direct comparisons is only pretence. As a way of extrapolating the nature of her perceptual limbo, he opens the poem with the ominous, slavery-inflected “my days in transport roll’d” (5), and centers the theme of vagrancy within the literal transatlantic act of “Roaming the illimitable waters round” (175). America – or in the case of “The Female Vagrant,” the journey \textit{between} America and England – remained a potent cipher in the determination of perceptual disembeddedness. Wordsworth characterizes this imaginative journey as never-ending, and transferred the hopeful sunrise from a land-based and social event to one of isolation on the rocking ocean, making it simultaneously wider and yet more remote.

\textsuperscript{24} Despite the gestures towards a “vagrant” ending with a mitigated harmfulness, Wordsworth seemed unable to bring this discussion of disembedded consciousness to a successful close in the original “Salisbury Plain.” His attempts to relate the unrooted consciousnesses of the vagrants gets bogged down in his ever-expanding allegory of the crimes of a globalised society. The infringement on lands of “paradise” (469) was something that clearly interested Wordsworth, and yet he left unfinished a list of lands that had been despoiled by European avarice. Some of the poem’s awkwardness seems to emerge precisely when he deviates from the tight parallels he was drawing between rural Britain and America, losing track of the ways in which nature facilitated imaginative transformation of the landscape in positive ways.

\textsuperscript{25} Wordsworth sharpens his attack on avaricious landlords in this revised poem; the father’s diverted grounds are attributed to his refusal to sell his lands to the local owner of “a mansion proud” (39).
The apparent omission from the “Salisbury Plain” manuscript is therefore something closer to a synthesis, a distillation of the transatlantic experience as a mode of contrasting former and latter understandings of local place. The woman’s penury and eventual salvation at the hands of the “wild brood” (215) of vagrants on landing recalls “Salisbury Plain”’s Indian “wild assemblies” (16); described as “strong to suffer” (10) and “unsubdued” (11) in the earlier poem, these people, as in the first poem, offer some redemption in a harsh and uncaring world:

My heart is touched to think that men like these,
The rude earth’s tenants, were my first relief:
How kindly did they paint their vagrant ease!
And their long holiday that feared not grief,
For all belonged to all, and each was chief. (217-21)

Come the revisions to his earlier work, Wordsworth had clearly altered his thinking about the “fenceless bed,” to the point where it more closely resembled his later usage of the concept. The woman’s inability to adapt to the conditions offered by the “wild brood” are more a result of her having grown up in a radically different system of education, and from the grief she continues to suffer throughout her troubles.

Both “Salisbury Plain” and “The Female Vagrant” give a very broad depiction of America’s imaginative role in Wordsworth’s poetry. And yet, from this early work, we can see that it was of genuine importance in his development of the dynamics of place. His beliefs about the ability of global power structures to affect perception were in this way clearly not consistent. As his politics shifted away from radical sympathies, he sought to determine how a disembedded sense of place could sustain the wonders of a first impression, of a first explorer. His subsequent focus was progressively internal, indeed,
progressively lyric: his later poetry, until at least The Excursion, moves from the injustices of colonialism to the more intimate, and sometimes obscure, ways that such powers imposed upon geographically distant individuals and areas. Between the Lyrical Ballads and the Poems of 1807, we notice a deceptively colloquial progression, which has sometimes been equated with a sense of “enclosure.” But a constant focus, apparent especially in The Prelude and “Home at Grasmere,” was the split sense of belonging and alienation: a sense shared by the first explorers and the oppressed poor, a sense that lands were not their own, and a sense of dislocation brought on not by human hands, but by the very mechanics of perception itself. While these early experiments are very general, in that they do not seem tied to any specific narrative or story, they demonstrate the essential crisis of wonder and belonging that inflects any individual’s attachment to place. As his poetry progressed, Wordsworth continued to use themes and narratives of American exploration to demonstrate how imaginative context can rearrange the proximal relations of objects and relationships – even familiar ones.

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iii.

Developing a theory of Wordsworth’s perception of place requires drawing on a number of philosophical, sociological, and historical sources. Martin Heidegger’s theories of subjectivity and place offer a useful framework when considering Wordsworth’s poetry of locality, in that they demand a knowledge of historical and cultural situation, but with the caveat that such external currents will manifest themselves entirely differently in the mind of separate observers. J.E. Malpas picks up where Heidegger left off, developing a theory of place and space that determines both subjectivity and agency. Other authors, such as Ron Broglio,
have sought to explain place in the mind with respect to specific historical conditions in the Romantic period – namely the development of cartographic sciences – though he, like Malpas, falls short of addressing the salient concerns of the literary and intertextual imagination. John Barrell, while not responding directly to Heidegger, offers a useful theory of place as manifested in the mind of a modern aesthetic culture. When read together, these critics reveal a series of associated human traits and circumstances that emphasize proximal dislocation, a disembodied and reflexive sense of modernity, and a focus on the imagination as an agent in global cultural processes.

Heidegger’s tendency is to consider broad historical trends and the conditioning qualities of language and habit as determinants of what he calls Dasein, or, his theory of “being-here/there.” Critic Michael Pinsky has done extensive work on the relationship between Hegdegerian place, cognition and ontology, and writes that “Dasein is first and foremost Being as an everyday, existential activity” (29). Pinsky, channelling Levinas, clarifies this confusing pairing of the metaphysical with the mundane by elaborating on “the relationship between the Self as an identifiable starting point, [and] the home ground from which Dasein encounters the Other” (31). Self or place in this regard “posits coherence [by relying] on propositions that cannot be proven from within that system” (32). Heideggerian self, then, “evinces space not within itself, but exterior to itself; separation becomes the primary activity of the self-reflective mind” (32). The Other’s capacity to recognize alterity or difference “does not take place in space” as narrowly defined – in “this place” or “that

26 “The Other, as we define it…is a transcendental field of nonassimilable possibility that arises out of the There Is as pure alterity” (39).
27 “The There Is…requires a subject to frame it as such, although it already takes existential priority over the subject. There Is approaches the subject on all fronts, always becoming present through the anticipated response of the subject” (35).
place” – but instead occurs based on proximal space, or what is “ready-to-hand” (40). In this reading, Heideggerian space is subordinated to perception, “based on usability” (41).

When proximity is denuded of specific and identifiable characteristics, its primary marker “becomes a question of spatial relationships” (41). Heidegger’s theory of Inderweltsein, or “being-in-the-world,” helps to clarify the nature of those spatial relationships. This translator of proximity considers the role of experience, and denies the transcendental ego in its subjective immersion in a system of practical engagements, of concern. Heidegger’s unusual characterization of practicality is one wherein space and place occur before geometry and measurement. Concern in this system can expand or contract space within indeterminate paradigms, as Dasein’s effect of being-in-the-world annuls mathematical space on the subjective basis of everyday utility. Heideggerian descriptions of proximity, in this regard, are essential, for they incorporate both the relativized power of distance over the subjective, desirous mind in the midst of Dasein: “Proximity is not the smallest possible measurement of distance between two places. Proximity makes the Near near, and yet at the same time the sought-after, and therefore the not-near. Proximity consists in bringing near the Near, while keeping it at a distance. Proximity is a mystery.” Heidegger’s proximal conflict, in the midst of being-in-the-world, revolves around the internalized, subjectivized versions of measurements that may under external circumstances be given objective corollaries (such as units of distance or time, valuations of ideologies, appreciations of currency, etc).

This reading of subjective proximity is particularly visible in De Quincey’s measurement of the Thames, as we saw in the Introduction. These linked concepts of Dasein and being-in-the-world are also similar to Wordsworth’s experience of time, which radically alters his understanding of place, making it, like memory, a wholly non-linear encounter. Malpas’s study is not a reading of Wordsworth proper, but he does draw some important
connections to Wordsworthian space that relate to the topic of the local. Beginning from Heidegger’s being-in-the-world, Malpas asserts “the impossibility of properly understanding the human being in a way that would treat it as only contingently related to its surroundings and to the concrete structures of activity in which it is engaged” (8). And yet, given that the human experience of place is not merely of “some notion of position or location within physical space,” “the analysis of place must encompass a broader analysis of space that does not restrict space merely to the sense associated with notions of physical extension and position” (29).\(^28\) His analysis is Heideggerian specifically in his argument that “the connection between place and experience is...integral to the very structure and possibility of experience” (31-2):

The language of place, of self and other, of subject and object, describes the world in a way that is tied to the possibility of agency and attitude, and not in terms of physical processes alone. And, while the existence of a place may be causally dependent on the existence of certain physical processes, the capacity to describe, experience and understand those processes – for those processes to be grasped through notions of objectivity and regularity and even through ideas of process as such – is, in turn, possible only within the framework of place. (37)

One of the problems facing a reader of Malpas’s conception of agency is the presumption that “acting-in-place” is a mechanical undertaking, one that operates in a finite physical realm as a correlative to the mind’s understanding of process. He does not extend this understanding of agency within place to the imagination, let alone the literary imagination,

\(^28\) Malpas’s phenomenological account also seeks to avoid mere ideas of “emotional responsiveness” which “need not ... be grounded in any concept of place or locality at all” (30), which he sees as characteristic of analyses of primitive conceptions of space.
nor does he explain how this imagination’s relationship to agency might be antagonistic to such mechanical conditioning. While a Heideggerian subject may not be able to perceive space independently of self or conditions, surely it must be possible that a subject could strive to articulate zones of independence, even if they are only perceptual, and even if they cannot realize that independence in a way associated with mechanical (not to say historical) agency. It is one of the weaknesses of Heideggerian thought that the act of trying to escape Dasein is itself a condition or a factor of the system itself; Malpas partakes of this tautology by suggesting that all perceptions of place, as well as the actions that carve them out, are formed by the experiences of place in which they occur.

Some critics have taken the work of Heidegger and Malpas and have exposed them to historical factors that, unfortunately, only complicate the phenomenological tautology of place. Broglio, for his part, does not adequately address the role of imagination and literature in his theory of Wordsworthian place. He does contribute some valuable thought to our understanding of the topic, particularly in the suggestion that “The poet wants to make the subject more than a spectator of the scene and to represent a sense of space prior to mental abstraction and categorization of sensations” (73). He cites Michael Wiley and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, each of whom, respectively, discusses the “imaginative configuration of space” and the “spontaneous organization of things we perceive” (qtd. in Broglio 75). And yet, when it comes to Wordsworth’s phenomenological experience of place, Broglio stumbles in his readings of the subjective immersion of the observer within place and the ontological obscurity of the non-observer. Broglio defines his perceptual mediators as “technologies of the picturesque,” or, maps and other tools for interpreting the landscape. In

29 Malpas describes this as a social limit: “While the possibility of human involvement in the world is given only in and through such a place, the unity of the place is also evident in, and articulated by means of, the organised activity of the human beings who dwell within it” (185).
the midst of “imaginative configuration[s] of space,” such technologies “confound layers of intersubjective identity” (82). But this seems not to matter, given that neither nature nor other entities maintain any worthwhile existential priority over the perceiving mind, except as “points of intersection or condensation of vectors” (94). But Broglio never genuinely considers how those very technologies – maps and cartographic tools – were used in the charting of other spaces with which the observing mind could have no possible contact, except through anecdote or literature. In other words, his reading may be technological, but it is not globally so, with respect to the forms of imaginative travel that use the same mechanisms he claims were transforming local understandings of place. The maps and descriptions of William Bartram’s Southeastern America had no small effect on Wordsworth, for example: the poet’s imaginative incorporation of these into his own literary experiences signals that they maintain a verifiable and transmittable existence outside of the observing self. If we take it as pat that “identity is not prior to encounters with the environment but arises from them” (85), it is certainly within the responsibilities of the Wordworthian critic to consider how many environments he actually experienced (and in what form). The other-worldly qualities of his perceived local landscapes – the savannas, the deserts, the foreign seas – are no less meaningful than the familiar qualities that become reorganized.

A modern ontology of place is described in John Barrell’s early work The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, which observes a similar abstracting of the landscape from its ground in the Romantic era. He describes the viewing of specific landscapes from the perspective of picturesque aesthetics, but many of the mechanisms described above apply to his theory (although he approaches the topic from an almost exclusively historical angle). Barrell shares with the critics mentioned a concern with the notion of proximity based on changing levels of concern, and he focuses specifically on how perceptual rearrangements of
place and space can occur on the basis of locally changing relations (of space and time). In arguing that the “organizing tendency of the [poetic] syntax” (26) operates in competition with the “resisting” material view, Barrell focuses entirely on the interplay between physically visited landscape (what he calls “the accidental knowledge” poets might have about a place [59]) and the resulting artistic creation. Many of the poets of the picturesque superimposed these “synthetic” places over the “real” (60) ones, in part to conform to aesthetic doctrine (which he describes as ideological, from the belief that landscapes and nature existed to be “improved”), and in part to satisfy certain practical expectations (in terms of conforming to poetic syntax). Barrell’s historicizing of this dialectic relies on a theory of economy that is both agricultural and infrastructural, but is very useful when considering a sense of Wordsworthian space. The poet was obviously moved by similar impulses to seek balance between the competing interests of local specificity and displaced frameworks of exoticness.

One important term in Barrell’s reading is the notion of the enclosure, which we can understand agriculturally, perceptually, or aesthetically. He ties the idea of the aesthetic enclosure to “the increase in the size and the influence of the rural professional class,” a class “inevitably on the side of agricultural improvement” (72). Simultaneously, he sees in the modernizing of the landscape a paradoxical and unresolved impulse to both preserve difference and deliberately alienate, based on a broadening of knowledge and economic and cultural concerns. So while, on the one hand, he notes how “a greater frequency of exchange between villages and market-towns could encourage...a greater diversity of agriculture” (86),

30 Getting the right view of a landscape was accomplished as much by “rearranging objects in the imagination” as it was by physical rearrangement and modification of the landscape itself. In his discussion of the poet Thomson, for example, Barrell describes the tension characteristic between the “idea” of the landscape and the actual landscape in front of the poet, a tract of land “to be understood as hostile to the notion of being thus organized” (26).

31 “We are dealing...with a class of agricultural ‘improvers’, at a time when ‘improvement’ could be used almost synonymously with ‘enclosure’; and to enclose a place, just as much as to make it into a landscape-garden, meant to work it into a structure more or less ordained elsewhere – and thus – as far as that place is concerned – an arbitrary one” (84).
it also produced a sense of geography that could be described “almost completely in terms of its relation to other places” (92).32

The purpose of the present inquiry is thus to determine the ways in which Wordsworth engaged this rearrangement of circumstances, how he confronted the erosion of bounded systems of place, and the strategies he developed to inhabit a landscape that was, in many ways, no longer its own. To do so requires a closer reading of Wordsworthian perception and a firmer understanding of this perception in a natural setting, particularly through the terms of American space, which competed with his imaginative appreciation of local natures.

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iv.

Up until now we have discussed the ways in which an individual’s perception of an area might oscillate between immanent place and imagined (or implied) space. Broadly speaking, nature – both natural settings and how individuals inhabit them – was for Wordsworth a primary connector within this disembedded global culture. If there was any mechanism through which unconscious action might be linked to Wordsworth’s local transformations, it was in the dialectic between a modern human aesthetic agency and a nature capable of stimulating comparisons between the immanent familiar and the imagined exotic. But this

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32 This dialectic is certainly valuable all on its own, but it does not address the possibility of divergent aesthetic experience as constituting an understanding of place of its own accord. These newly accessible zones of knowledge surely brought knowledge of places not immediately accessible by the improvements in infrastructure. None of this is to refute Barrell’s theory, only to suggest that the principle of disaggregated landscapes permitted a broader understanding of place than could be achieved through the links of “concern” suggested in his text.
dialectic was not merely aesthetic, for nature’s role in generating aesthetic experiences had its correlative in human sympathy.

Contemporary reactions to the *Lyrical Ballads* demonstrate that such a dialectic was on the minds of the readership. Responses from the critics to Wordsworth as an author revolve around the volume’s distinct geographical frames. These reactions recognize the author’s interest in narrowly-focused geographies, yet understand that the text’s implications for “locality” rest on a global stage. The *Lyrical Ballads*’ narrative events are recognized as belonging to a particular band of society, yet the developmental path illustrated therein is described as existing in a continuum of global cultural development. This is not to say that Wordsworth’s readers describe the collection as universal, though they do imply the existence of shifting (and possibly relativistic) valuations outside the area under focus.

For example, John Stoddart’s review of the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* is quick to observe the “closeness” of the new volume, emphasising its regional specificity. The “elementary and durable state of manners” and “beautiful and permanent forms of nature” (Stoddart 384) native to these places are recognized by Stoddart – in a footnote he remarks on the “order of men nearly extinct” who display such qualities:

> Mr. Wordsworth seems to be particularly well suited for the subjects of such a study. The vicinity of the Lakes in Cumberland and Westmoreland (the scene of most of his Poems) is chiefly inhabited by an order of men nearly extinct in other parts of England. These are small farmers, called in that part

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33 As Duncan Wu succinctly points out, Wordsworth believed “natural forms were perceived so as to trigger actions beyond conscious control, whereby affective feelings in them would give life to similar emotions in the perceiving mind, which would in turn be prompted to find like sentiments in others. Love of nature would lead to love of mankind” (103). Put in context of the present discussion, a consideration of nature as disembedded meant a sympathetic engagement with the inhabitants of other natures.

34 Stephen Gill points out Wordsworth’s “uncompromising” (181) attitude towards naming local place in this edition, and notes the poet’s love of his new home at Grasmere. This list includes, but is not limited to: Helm’s crag, Hammar Scar, Silver How, Loughrigg, Fairfield, Helvellyn, Skiddaw, Glaramara, Dunmail Raise, Easedale, and in unpublished versions, Thirlmere, Fairfield, Dove Crag, Grisedale Tarn, and more.
of the country Statesmen, who, cultivating their own little property, are raised above the immediate pressure of want, with very few opportunities of acquiring wealth. They are a mild, hospitable people, with some turn for reading; and their personal appearance is, for the most part, interesting. (384)

Not only is Stoddart’s reading of the *Lyrical Ballads* characterized by a bounded society – such a place being described as “durable” at the same time that it is isolated – but its focus on rarity, “elementary” nature and isolation makes of Wordsworth a kind of local explorer and student of the primitive. Economic isolation is also a factor in Stoddart’s ethnographic description, a quality considered alongside the notion that such people are in a kind of homeostatic environment – able to meet basic needs, but without access to the systems of wealth that define global networks.

A wholly different, though not contradictory, reaction characterizes John Wilson’s response. His personal letter to Wordsworth offers another take on the scope of the project:

...you have shown the effect which the qualities of external nature have in forming the human mind, and have presented us with several characters whose particular bias arose from that situation in which they were planted with respect to the scenery of nature. This idea...serves to explain those diversities in the structure of the mind which have baffled all the ingenuity of philosophers to account for....May not the face of external nature through different quarters of the globe account for the dispositions of different nations? May not mountains, forests, plains, groves, and lakes, as much as the temperature of the atmosphere, or the form of government, produce important effects on the human soul; and may not the difference subsisting
between the former of these in different countries, produce as much diversity
among the inhabitants as any varieties among the latter? (390-91)

Wilson’s *Lyrical Ballads* is fundamentally a global one, although no less local to any individual
inhabitants who might populate these “different countries.” His response is of much larger
scope compared to Stoddart’s, and seeks to explain the relativism of the native, while
remaining fundamentally ethnographic.

Confinement of subject bears directly on method and genre in Wordsworth’s poetry.
Stuart Curran refers to the happy conflict between liberty and confinement in Wordsworth’s
peculiarly impossible methods of composition, the “spontaneous overflow of powerful
feeling.” Curran claims that the poet’s “art emerges from what at once constricts and
empowers it,” where ascending levels of generic limitation act as “an enabling mechanism
for the imagination that plays best when it knows the dimensions of the sandbox” (*Form* 12).
This seems to operate on a fundamental level in Wordsworth’s poetic philosophy,
particularly as the organic perceptual agonism of the mind’s representations struggle to
incorporate the familiar with the alien. Processes of cognition here overlap with poetic
method: this seemingly paradoxical incorporation of mechanism with inspiration is a signal
marker of Wordsworth’s poesis. Curran refers primarily to the relationship between structure
and theme in Wordsworth’s sonnets, though even in the narrative works such as “Home at
Grasmere,” we see how confinement is as much descriptive as it is thematic. Starting from
an “aerial” (18) vantage, he descends into the Vale, one of “a thousand nooks of earth”
(153), “divided from the world / As if it were a cave” (824-25). The intimacy therein
ultimately germinates the expansive themes (later explored in *The Excursion*) “On Man, on
Nature, and on Human Life” (959).
Travel literature, and metaphors of travel, helped Wordsworth to navigate the paradox of stability and movement, liberty and confinement, which typified place in this global environment. The recurring themes of displacement seen in Charlotte Smith’s long poem *The Emigrants* (1793) or Gilbert Imlay’s 1793 novel of the same name testify to the perceptual changes that occur in transnational or transatlantic movement (and in the latter case, the humorous lack thereof). Whether crossing the English Channel or the Atlantic Ocean, such narratives feature the near-universal need to balance the familiar with the exotic. Wordsworth’s poems are often iterations of these notions, and they constantly expose observers and readers to instances of defamiliarization. His response to Wilson identifies poetry as a mode of travel insofar that it fused enduring, repeated forms (nature, feelings) with shifting venues (geography, cultures): “[A] great Poet ought to do more than this he ought to a certain degree to rectify men’s feelings, to give them new compositions of feeling, to render their feelings more sane pure and permanent, in short more consonant to nature, that is, to eternal nature, and the great moving spirit of things. He ought to travel before men occasionally as well as at their sides” (qtd. in Gill 198). It was the poet’s task, then, to introduce these “new compositions of feeling” at the same time he makes their present feelings more “permanent,” all in the midst of a “moving spirit of things.” He uses travel as a metaphor here, but within the context of “compositions of feeling,” it is an apt one. Rather than seeing permanence and moving spirits as conflicting, we must investigate how the poet attempts to reconcile permanency of place with modes of travel, and to see how his poetry facilitated disembedded natures in such areas as the Lake District.

As we have seen in “Salisbury Plain,” Wordsworth was drawn to accounts of North America’s exploration and settlement. He was known to have owned and read many accounts of North American exploration, Samuel Hearne’s *A Journey from Prince of Wales’s Fort*
in Hudson’s Bay to the Northern Ocean (1795) being the most famous of these in its influence on “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman.” J. Hector St. John de Crévecoeur and William Bartram have received less critical attention, but they nonetheless emerge as significant inspirations for Wordsworth’s reinvented local spaces. Crévecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer (1782) was easily the best-known and best-selling fictional account of colonial American life until the publication of James Fennimore Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans (1826). Crévecoeur’s rooted agrarianism was in principle of great interest to Wordsworth’s poetics of place, and the former’s inquiry towards the equalizing (not to say, democratizing) effects of local lands on the ontology of mind meshed eerily well with the latter’s. Bartram’s Travels (1791) demonstrates a distinct imaginative relativizing of Southeast America’s landscape in accordance with that landscape’s ethnographic and ecological specificity. He considered these landscapes to be reflective of a new mode of national consciousness: new global concerns – cosmopolitan and economic, Quaker and scientific – facilitated a disaggregation of space that emphasized imaginative relativism as well as exotic particularity.

While several critics have successfully connected Bartram’s writings to Wordsworth’s, a strong case has yet to be made for the writings of Hector St. John de Crévecoeur. The sentiments and images that occur throughout Crévecoeur’s best-known work, Letters from an American Farmer (1782) – isolated rural agrarians, living in the midst of wild, deer-hunting Indians – was potentially a rich resource for Wordsworth’s visions of his own native landscapes. Indeed, much of his understanding of subsistence economy in primitive spaces – from “Salisbury Plain” to The Prelude – seems to have been motivated by a response to Crévecoeur. It seems probable that Wordsworth’s reading of Bartram was mediated through knowledge of Crévecoeur, and that in concert these American authors formed a framework for Wordsworth’s imaginative understanding of local natures.

Stone outlines the extraordinary popularity of Letters in both Britain and Europe. See Stone, “Introduction” 8.

In addition to being well-acquainted with the circle of radicals and intellectuals in Paris known to Crévecoeur (such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Helen Maria Williams), Wordsworth shared time with travellers who had spent considerable energy traversing the young America on foot. Recent work by Kelly Grovier has made links between John “Walking” Stewart and Wordsworth in Revolutionary-era Paris. The association of a man well-known in radical circles, and who had walked the trails of a burgeoning United States, can surely have had no small influence on a young Wordsworth. He had just returned from America when he met Wordsworth, and given the networks within which each man moved, it is not inconceivable that Crévecoeur was either in audience or was a subject of discussion. (Crévecoeur had been “trapped” and was in hiding in France since 1789, as his aristocratic background made him a subject of suspicion.) Thomas Philbrick reveals that despite Crévecoeur’s controversial status, he was able to attend meetings of the French Academy, and he was made an honorary member of the French Agricultural Society (Philbrick 34-5).
These accounts of spaces that were simultaneously inhabited (by newly transplanted Europeans or Native American “Indians”) and still unquestioningly wild were the perfect paradigm for Wordsworth’s developing understanding of local areas. Bartram’s *Travels* in particular emphasizes a perceptual mobility that enabled the idea of rebirth that was so essential for Europeans living under radically different global conditions (and particularly America). Not many critics have pursued this thread, nor have they seized upon Crèvecoeur’s sentiment that “we have all been emigrants in our turns.” In *Romantic Dialogues*, Richard Gravil calls attention to why literary studies have so often focused on Wordsworth’s influence on the American Romantics, rather than how Wordsworth was inspired by American authors of an earlier time. His hypothesis is that despite the idealized quality of cultural levelling offered by America’s revolution and settlement patterns, Wordsworth saw no real draw, due to a kind of providential accident: “What he praises in the economy of the lakes, and defends in ‘Michael,’ is the relative quality of its yeoman culture, in effect its Americanness...To Wordsworth, the Cumbrian republic of his childhood, with its democratic worth and sturdy freeholders, already was America, in any sense likely to be realized this side of utopia” (41). This seems like an exaggeration – Wordsworth’s complacency of the 1840s should not retroactively detract from the quiet outrage with which “Michael,” like many of his early works set in rural isolation, is infused. The fact that Wordsworth insisted that “Michael” end the second volume of the 1802 *Lyrical Ballads* is telling of his fears for his “utopia.” The poem’s haunting conclusion, which in effect ends the isolated economy, is in part brought about by the closeted provinciality of Grasmere Vale. While Nature might be kind to Michael, Luke and Isabel, the question remains whether their perception of the area is sufficient to sustain affective imaginative engagement in the world. The “fields” and “hills” that are Michael’s “living being” (74, 75) are so engrained in
his perception that he believes Luke’s departure will secure them economically. Yet the laying of the covenant-stone and the securing of paternal bonds are no match for the pleasures of the city. Luke’s double-emigrancy (“he was driven at last / To seek a hiding-place beyond the seas” [455-6]) indicates the fragility of the utopian vision of isolation. Even the ground on which the family’s cottage stood has been ploughed over, in the midst of “great changes...wrought / In all the neighborhood” (487-8). The role of the poet as a mediator in this local upheaval is an issue here, for one must ask whether Michael would have been aware of his affective imaginative shortcomings to begin with; and if he would not have, what then is being asked of readers in their own considerations of domesticity? Regardless, Luke’s refuge “beyond the seas” implies that transatlantic exile was a significant factor in qualifying the fragility of England’s most isolated regions.

As we observed in “Salisbury Plain” and “The Female Vagrant,” the recurring presence of native natures – whether philosophies, peoples, flora, or fauna – in Wordsworth’s early poetry suggests a sympathetic alignment between England’s displaced rural peoples and those various exiles – emigrants, but also Indians forced off their own lands – in colonial-era America. As Maureen McLane points out, Wordsworth’s encounter with the primitive is not used to show a pre-dialectical state, nor to describe how the ostensibly modern European can benefit from cultural reversion. Rather, it involves what she calls a “double revelation” (56) of European and Indian minds – in this case, a dialectic on the condition of perceptions of place. Contributing to this sense were the new economic and imaginative potentials offered through perceptions of the landscape that privileged a mythical geographic freedom and local responsibility. Wordsworth’s interest in nature, like Bartram’s, prioritized a variable understanding of locality, where nature in a specific place
was the product of native concepts and of respectful intermixture of the new or foreign. It was this exotic tapestry of familiar and exotic that Wordsworth sought to display within his own local areas, and to that end he considered imaginative travel as a way of integrating perceptual changes with what would otherwise be a stagnant and isolated nature. Like Bartram and Crèvecoeur, Wordsworth was fearful of wholesale changes to the landscape; like these American predecessors, his many characters and landscapes of emigrancy display a need for adaptation in the midst of changing economic pressures.

Understanding Wordsworth’s global localities requires a nuanced comprehension of his usage of concepts of local and foreign, and his curious depiction of exoticism which frequently relied on the explicitly banal. One way of accessing these representations is through characters and perspectives that emphasize modes of emigrancy – ways of inhabiting the world which oscillate between permanency and peregrination, belonging and rootlessness. These representations are not limited to human figures, either: Wordsworth’s local nature experiences the same ontological instability in the face of global pressures. As we see in some of his 1802-07 lyrics, such as the “Daisy” and “Celandine” cycles, his depictions of local flora alternate between a kind of dull ubiquity and imaginative profusion.

Few critics of Wordsworth have examined the depth of influence he took from Bartram in terms of local knowledge, choosing instead to delve into the quagmire of ideological competition between European and Indian styles of living. Wiley’s work challenges a reading of Wordsworth’s understanding of American spaces, which similarly requires addressing. Wiley observes that Wordsworth’s early work, such as *Poems on the Naming of Places* and *The Prelude* frequently “subverts many of [the] colonialist and imperialist intentions” (80) of accounts of exploration of the Americas. Specifically, Wordsworth “attempts to avoid exporting Old World institutional values into the New World and to avoid narrowly commodifying or exploiting the New World, trying, rather, to refashion the Old World to bring it into accord with what he perceives as New World pastoral-utopian values” (80). Wiley’s implication of a political imperialism exhibited by Bartram (and other travellers) is out of synch with the realities of both Wordsworth’s poetry and the texts he was reading. Briefly taking the example of “Ruth,” which responds in part to Bartram’s narrative, we can see the *American* perverting *English* innocence, *English* nature. While Wordsworth does represent the Lake District “as a once-independent space that the rest of Britain recently had colonized” (81), at no point does he formulate a consistent ideological sympathy between the “colonized ‘others’” of America and the threatened inhabitants of the Lake District. More often than not, these latter inhabitants are shown to be victims of their own perceptual limitations. While their victimization may be lamentable, rarely does Wordsworth point a finger at anything resembling an organized program of exploitation akin to the nationalized commercial interests of the New World.
The daisy – a flower closely associated with imaginative discovery in Crèvecoeur’s depiction of William Bartram’s father John Bartram – is called at once the “unassuming Common-place / Of Nature” (“To the Daisy” [2] 5-6), and a “Bright Flower, whose home is everywhere!” (“To the Same Flower” 1). This very triviality makes it a source of inspiration for global comparisons, from which an observer might “weave a web of similes, / Loose types of Things through all degrees” (“To the Daisy” 9-10). Reading “degrees” as both cartographic and a measure of variable potency, the representation of travel shifts from a geographically-boundless activity to one that occurs within the strictly limited areas. He also juxtaposes youthful restlessness with mature deliberation, without portraying the latter within colloquial parameters:

In youth from rock to rock I went,
From hill to hill, in discontent
Of pleasure high and turbulent,

Most pleased when most uneasy;
But now my own delights I make,
My thirst at every rill can slake,
And gladly Nature’s love partake

Of thee, sweet Daisy! (“To the Daisy” [1] 1-9)

This push-pull experience between the tangible immediate and the unlimited imagined is reflected in the moving mind of the poet, whose early restlessness conflicts with his desire to come to a state of material respite. And yet there is the sense that the experience of travel – in a past tense, rather than present action – and of having been dislocated is essential to appreciating the condition of perceptual emigrancy, at the same time that he asserts that present rootedness is at the core of a truly exploratory encounter.
Being exclusively dedicated to the local could also go horribly awry, as we see in the
doomed myopia of the happy family of “Michael,” the prison-like remembrances of Leonard
in “The Brothers,” or the figure of “Ruth” when faced with the seductive, deer-like character
of the Georgia Youth. In this latter poem, America acts as a kind of imaginative trap,
fulfilling the exotic potential for imaginative travels, but damaging the subsequent
possibilities for re-assimilation in the local British environment. The condition of emigrancy
is doubled here: it operates between the Youth (who is an emigrant of sorts from America to
England) and Ruth, who, while as rooted to place as can be expected, is not displaced
enough to appreciate the full imaginative impact of tales of America (themselves derived
from Bartram’s *Travels*). As we shall see later, this is a poem that clarifies emigrancy as a
psychic, as well as a historical, phenomenon.

Did Wordsworth’s imaginary travels therefore exclusively prioritize the numinous
aspect of the poetic experience? Such a question raises the spectre of the major debate in
Wordsworthian circles in recent memory – that is, Wordsworth’s poetic preference for the
ideal, or imaginative world. Do we witness in him the literary natural-local, best summed up
by John Barrell and echoed by those that followed him, such as Jerome McGann and
Marjorie Levinson? If so, we must confront a nature that is “more or less platonic, and the
‘spirit’ of a place was something, for him, to be found by looking through the place itself”
(Barrell, *Landscape* 182). On the other hand, several critics have done excellent work to reveal
the importance of local specificity to Wordsworth’s poetry. The work of Jonathan Bate,
Nicholas Roe and Alan Bewell has gone some way towards calling attention to the
importance of environmental and natural immediacy in Wordsworth’s appreciation of the
landscape. Such appreciation is shown to be anthropological in an organizational sense, as
proposed by Bewell, but it is also Edenic and idealistic, as claimed by Roe. However, some
have taken the materialist side of the debate to an extreme. Onno Oerlemans claims that local specificity emerges in Wordsworth’s marriage of an “awareness of the indifference, hostility, and inimicalness of material reality to an idea of the ‘one life’” (35). This “unknowable and untranslatable” (37) nature imputed by Oerlemans does seem to engage in a certain amount of phenomenological tail-chasing, however.39

Richard Cronin advances our understanding of Wordsworth’s sense of specific locality with respect to travel and a politics of geographical oscillation, suggesting the wider import of the local to Wordsworth’s poetry when he gestures towards the increasingly-conservative “pure Commonwealth” (111) of the Lake District. The critic brilliantly correlates the distressing political climate of the time between the Lyrical Ballads and Poems, 1807 to an increasing tendency on Wordsworth’s part to “represent[ing] freedom as the condition of those who willingly accept restraint” (112). Cronin suggests that Wordsworth’s progressive reliance on formal poetic constraints – and his increasing dependence on the sonnet – prefigures his deliberately “enclosed” political vision, and his “subordination of the public to the private” (117). This dialogue between “liberty and confinement,”40 made possible by imaginative explorations of the local filtered through accounts of travel in America, displays a primacy of familiar place over actual global travels.41

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39 If we take for granted that Wordsworth’s relativization of nature is mediated through individual perception, we might call this a subordination of nature to mental process – something resisted by Oerlemans. The critic is right to assert that material changes in nature are needed to precipitate perceptual changes, without which they have little standard for judgment. But this process of learning from nature does not reduce nature to a catalyst for emotional growth. Indeed, the process of adaptation, either in material terms or psychological ones, is not always successful, implying an inconsistent reading of nature as either nurturing or inimical (as Oerlemans would have us believe). But neither of these positions changes the fundamental impulse of the human mind in processing and subordinating nature’s outward appearance to instances of psychological need. In this sense, Oerlemans’s argument around nature’s ultimate alienness hits an ontological dead end in the presence of a mediating intelligence (namely, both poet and reader).
40 Eric Leed, qtd in Jarvis 37.
41 Discussing Coleridge, but with equal applicability to Wordsworth, Jarvis asks a profound question: “Would the satisfactions of life in a small, self-sufficient pastoral community in Pennsylvania such as the Pantisocrats fantasised have appeased the migratory urge that took them there in the first place?” (37). For Wordsworth, the
Some critics have elaborated on Wordsworth’s imaginative engagement with the New World as read through the perception of local space and encounters with indigenous inhabitants. In his book *Romantic Geography*, Michael Wiley is right to point out that many of Wordsworth’s material concerns are “geographical concerns,” and that when “he describes nature or enters into the realm of the imagination, he still situates himself in relation to named geographical sites” (3). This is a crucial point, and Wiley’s emphasis on the reality of place as informing the imaginative structure of Wordsworth’s poems needs to be acknowledged. However, when it comes to the articulation of Wordsworth’s “real perceptions and practices” (3), Wiley muddles the issue in describing a *real* practice of perception. By suggesting “displacement” as a utopian goal, he fails to emphasize the material nature of how “utopia [can] project the structures of the actual world elsewhere and reconstruct them in an alternative...form” (6). His theory fails to consider the role of the prodigal, the re-turn, and furthermore, of the sheer banality of any space to its traditional inhabitants. The figure of the outward-bound explorer-turned-prodigal fits at least with some conceptions of the “quest romance”-formula laid out by Harold Bloom and M.H. Abrams. Wiley does remedy the geographical deficit of these earlier critics by positing a broad utopian schema that he claims is superimposed by Wordsworth on real spaces: “Just as the traveler configures the living scene into a lifeless book by focusing his eyes, he reconfigures the lifeless book into a utopian living geography by re-focusing his eyes with the evident expectation that an alternative configuration is potential” (15). A “living geography” is perception of local spaces changed in the face of knowledge of foreign ones – actually going to those places was rendered superfluous in light of the sublimated travel impulse.

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42 Wiley on the nature of Wordsworth’s “reconstructed world”: “Such a community would be comprised mostly of economically independent artisans and agricultural laborers, living lives centered primarily within the family dwelling and secondarily within a limited social circle. The family and social circles would be held together largely by mutual affection, rather than by social or political coercion. Family and community government, insofar as it existed, would operate according to paternal authority and a kind of natural law; property would be transmitted patrilineally. The community would have much in common with traditional literary modes of pastoral idyllic life, though with a fuller range of complex emotions and behaviours” (16-17).
indeed what we see in Wordsworth’s natures, but his natures are as mundane as they are exotic. The banality and recurrence of such geographies are not, however, given much space in Wiley’s reading.

In relying heavily on displacement, and overlooking familiarity, Wiley bypasses the role of the common that characterizes Wordsworth’s understanding of landscape and nature. It is primarily through the concept of the local that his known material spaces gain their strength; as so many of his poems are grounded in travel amongst familiar locations, we must be cognizant of the role of repeated visits to specific locations. After Wordsworth’s return from France, and the death in 1795 of Raisley Calvert (whose legacy provided Wordsworth with some financial relief), Dorothy and William began the wanderings about their native countryside that would become the most important muse of his productive years. It was this new ability to engage with the landscape in a concentrated, focused way that allowed “some new sense / Of exquisite regard for common things” (Prelude XIII.241-42). These methods of exploration were thus not a superimposition of one pattern over another, but iterative; that is, they reflected an emergent narrative built on sequences of visits, repetitions of steps, and the development of new versions of perception over time. It is clear that such narratives were based heavily on a synthetic knowledge of global networks and their influence on local spaces. The phenomenon of the return in his works symbolizes a pragmatic understanding of the landscape and the changes it faced. In such a way, travel allows the perception of a singular landscape over time, but with a self-reflecting understanding of that landscape’s contingency and relatedness (material or imaginative) to other places. His adaptations are painful and of mixed success, but they are adaptations.

43 Unless otherwise stated, all citations from The Prelude will refer to the 1805 version.
Poetic method thus becomes both a mode of accommodation in time and a philosophy of change in nature.

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v.

For all of Wordsworth’s philosophical interest in borderless travel, many of his early works reveal the challenges of perceptual adaptation within a static and bordered landscape. Looking towards instances of rootless wandering and forms of emigrancy, we see recurring parallels with the aforementioned American examples that posed quandaries to stable British identity. Those parallels included: perceptions of familiar domestic natures overlapping with exotic foreign natures; the problems in identifying the needs of nature within specific locales (either familiar or domestic); recognizing the limitations of perception when immersed in a foreign nature; and, finally, acknowledging the exotic potential of what was once familiar ground. This last notion is particularly important. Beginning with the first volume of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and moving through the 1805 *Prelude*, Wordsworth’s lyric, balladic and narrative verse becomes increasingly concerned with creating spaces which incorporate borderless imaginative travel, yet which did not sacrifice a bounded, local specificity. These anxieties come to a head in “Ruth”: inspired by Bartram’s descriptions of exotic landscapes, Wordsworth creates a world wherein local belonging is impossible, especially when faced with knowledge that dampens the imaginative impact of familiar nature.

As he grew more settled, Wordsworth’s personal life became increasingly concerned with local needs, and with reconciling those needs to the knowledge of a larger global nature. It is also clear that the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* marked a turning point in this
gradual process. The poems written for this edition and those that follow it demand we acknowledge the growing power of settlement in the poet’s mind. Looking back on “An Evening Walk,” one of his earliest works, the poet recalled that “the plan of [the poem] has not been confined to a particular walk or an individualized place; a proof (of which I was unconscious at the time) of my unwillingness to submit the poetic spirit to the chains of fact and real circumstance. The country is idealized rather than described in any one of its local aspects” (qtd. in Gill 683). The poem introduces several types and notions into his vocabulary that would persist in various forms throughout his writing: in particular, the contrast between roads and mobility, and those who are supposedly fixed in a locale. The symptom of the poem’s idealization is its propensity to bypass local essentials in favour of a touring panoramic. While the speaker positions himself as a sympathetic wanderer (“While, Memory at my side, I wander here, / Starts at the simplest sight th’ unbidden tear” [43-4]), he, like a “sail that glides the well-known alders by” (48), is not truly committed to this locale. “[W]ild meand’ring” (199) is also the source of his bafflement at the swans, for they represent (falsely) the kind of sanctuary that he ultimately acknowledges as impossible in Book III of The Prelude (see below). Such settled calm is unavailable to the “hapless human wanderers” (239), in particular the female “wretch” (242) who echoes the Female Vagrant of later poems. Domestic fragmentation is given an international context even here, as one of the displaced woman’s sons raises, “like one that prays, his hand, / If in that country, where he dwells afar, / His father views that good, that kindly star” (264-66). But the star is “a shooting star” (260), and like her pathetic family’s hopes of settlement, is always moving beyond reach. This constant movement is totally without secure foundation, like the speaker’s perception of the landscape, about which he says, “‘Tis restless magic all” (345).
The question remained about how to communicate ideas of “simplest sight” with “restless magic” that nonetheless maintained a dedication to specific place. Shifting focus from vagrant figures and speakers (including himself) to minds established in specific locales (or settled minds unhinged by global circumstance), we also witness the transition in Wordsworth’s own life from financial and social instability to relative calm. And yet the calm and domestic bliss he depicts in a poem like “Farewell, Thou Little Nook of Mountain Ground” is delicate, tentative. Written in 1802 at Dorothy and William’s departure from Dove Cottage, the poem shows a movement out into an unsettled world in the hopes of returning to a situation of equal (not to say greater) happiness; it is a poem preoccupied with comings, goings, settlement, and emigrancy. Their world in Grasmere is tangible, immediate, where their “private store” is “in our sight: we have no more” (14, 16). Despite the ostensibly joyous reason for their departure – their going to fetch Wordsworth’s future wife, Mary – the mood is pensive and uncertain. They are, in effect, bringing an interloper into their established situation. The “Dear Spot” (33) where they took pleasure in planting gardens is called “a most constant and most fickle place” (41), one “That hath a wayward heart, as thou dost show / To them who look not daily on thy face” (42-3). Feeling keenly that in leaving he may lose a sense of locality as that place runs a “wild race” (46) of its own, the deeper fear is that Mary may not adapt as he and Dorothy have. There is an almost desperate, fearful edge to his hopes for her successful integration into that landscape:

We go for one to whom ye will be dear;
And she will love this Bower, this Indian shed,
Our own contrivance, building without peer:
A gentle maid! whose heart is lowly bred,
Her pleasures are in wild fields gathered;
With joyousness, and with a thoughtful cheer
She'll come to you; to you herself will wed;
And love the blessed life which we lead here. (25-32)

As noted by McLane, Wordsworth’s condition of being Indian has little here to do with the primitive and more to do with dialectics – in this case, the power dynamics between the human and the local ground. William and Dorothy have studied the specific needs of the place and their happiness there comes from their moral increase from its use. In this sense, being native, or Indian, has more to do here with flexible adaptation to local ground. Wordsworth configures this adaptation not as a passive acclimatisation but through a dynamic, involved imaginative husbandry:

Dear Spot! whom we have watched with tender heed,
Bringing thee chosen plants and blossoms blown
Among the distant mountains, flower and weed
Which thou hast taken to thee as thy own,
Making all kindness registered and known;
Thou for our sakes, though Nature’s Child indeed,
Fair in thyself and beautiful alone,
Hast taken gifts which thou dost little need (33-40)

The “Spot,” then, accepts their gifts as if they were part of its original constitution, though not themselves needed; the “chosen plants and blossoms” are, after all, not native to that place, although they suit the location well enough. Despite describing a pattern of settlement, this process of ecological adaptation becomes a microcosm of integrated difference. Isolation does not define this setting so much as the characters’ ability to mimic Nature’s fundamental adaptability. This capacity is apostrophized as a “Dear Spot,” who is able to
“make all kindness registered and known,” where “kindness” is a foreign element and “registry” is the capacity to incorporate. Mary thus becomes a political candidate for inclusion in this ecology, herself having been brought from “distant mountains.”

“Home at Grasmere” reverses the concern of “Farewell” and posits the speaker as the outsider, albeit one with pretensions of being native. Although not released until the publication of *The Excursion* (where it was published in modified form as a “Preface”), it was composed sometime between 1800 and 1806 and does maintain consistency with the concerns over settlement and vagrancy so distinctive in his early work. The poem describes, at its opening, the arrival of himself and Dorothy at Dove Cottage, Grasmere, in December 1799, and courses with the anxiety of being an outsider. This place, which gives him “Such power and joy” (36), spurs the desire to integrate locally. This impulse is strong enough that he hopes his perception will somehow retroactively close itself in, and make of him an original of that place, without need of external validation: “Within the bounds of this huge Concave; here / Should be my home, this Valley be my World” (42-3). This desire for insularity of place – “Embrace me, then, ye Hills, and close me in” (129) – functions as a solipsistic fantasy, realizable were it not for the unavoidable “destiny of life” which, for a traveller, “Remained unfixed” (183-84):

Something that makes this individual Spot,

This small abiding-place of many men,

A termination and a last retreat,

A Centre, come from wheresoe’er you will,

A Whole without dependence or defect,

Made for itself, and happy in itself,

**Perfect Contentment, Unity entire.** (164-70)
The ambivalent “termination and last retreat” foreshadows a kind of perceptual death. For now, however, his aspirations are for a creative impulse much like that possessed by the birds he witnesses above Grasmere, who “with a thoughtless impulse...wheel there,” “whose way / And motion is a harmony and dance / Magnificent” (289, 290-92). These birds too may be strangers, for the Lake above which they sing is their “Adopted region” (295), which they fly about “In wanton repetition, yet therewith / With that large circle evermore renewed” (296-97). As potential emigrants themselves, they offer him a loose hope for his own sense of belonging.

But the speaker is “from wheresoe’er” – that is to say, outside – and he has chosen this valley as a place to engage his imaginative travel. His very existence and desire to partake of a fixed destiny speaks to his not being a part of what he aspires to – not for him “wanton repetition” within “that large circle,” even though he may “Adopt” the region as the birds have done. The unidentified outside from which the speaker has emigrated makes him and “Emma” (or Dorothy Wordsworth) “we strangers” (340) who, like the absent swans, “have chosen this abode” (339). That act of choice unconsciously inserts this “holy place” (366) into a network of places that exist outside, and the consciousness of that outside will forever impinge upon the ignorant bliss of that valley’s isolation. Thus the original inhabitants “require / No benediction from the Stranger’s lips” (367-68): for the act of doing so would somehow shatter their fragile ontological security, the utterance exposing them by association to a network of concern beyond the “lofty barriers” (455) of the Vale.

Unavoidably excluded from happy obliviousness, the speaker is nonetheless drawn to the gravity of “local circumstance” (465), for “In this enclosure many of the old / Substantial virtues have a firmer tone / Than in the base and ordinary world” (466-68). But as a representative of the “ordinary world,” such virtues take on a different character. Thus his
impulse to “repeat in tuneful verse” “Some portion of its human history” (632, 635): as a “Stranger,” his only redemption is to relativize these virtues to an audience, playing the roles of insider and outsider. Only as a Stranger, or traveller, is he able to transmit the Vale’s lessons meaningfully. Rather than immersing himself entirely in parochialism, the speaker finds comfort in gleaning import from this place, and describing the process by which its lessons can be appropriated for use in any locale:

Nor am I less delighted with the show
As it unfolds itself, now here, now there,
Than is the passing Traveller, when his way
Lies through some region then first trod by him
(Say this fair Valley’s self), when low-hung mists
Break up and are beginning to recede.
How pleased he is to hear the murmuring streams,
The many Voices, from he knows not where,
To have about him, which way e’er he goes,
Something on every side concealed from view,
In every quarter some thing visible,
Half-seen or wholly, lost and found again,
Alternate progress and impediment,
And yet a growing prospect in the main. (696-709)

This beautiful passage recounts perfectly Wordsworth’s technique for engaging local space: namely, his use of intervals of understanding. At once the speaker grasps the value and meaning of a scene, and at the next moment he is made aware of his own alienness within it.

The sum of such experiences is his realization of his role as a connector of such scenes. As
Wordsworth mentioned in his letter to Wilson, in such circumstances a poet “travels before men,” which occasionally means his exclusion from being a native “Voice” of such a place. But the “last retreat” of isolated locality is also, he realizes, a defeat, which he characterizes in geographical terms: “I must not walk in unreproved delight / These narrow bounds and think of nothing more, / No duty that looks further and no care” (877-79). He therefore suggests that the agonistic process of “Alternate progress and impediment” leads towards a gradual and secure comprehension of things.

The lure of “narrow bounds” and a “sanctuary” that would “remain inviolate” (685, 686) are recurring themes in Wordsworth’s poetry, and are occasionally used to different ends. He frequently employs images of the American Southeast to colour his fantasies of escape from drudgery and sensory oppression – what in “Home at Grasmere” he called the “ordinary world.” In Book III of the Prelude, where he despairs of the dreariness of school, of the hollowness of religion, and the empty repetition of science, he conjures up a vision of stately calm and exotic beauty taken from Bartram’s Travels – specifically, the Alachua Savannah:

Oh! what joy it were
To see a Sanctuary for our Country’s Youth,
With such a spirit in it as might be
Protection for itself, a Virgin grove,
Primaeval in its purity and depth (439-43)

“Sanctuary” as a domestic recourse for pedagogical oppression is rather ironic, as his source for such isolation is a foreign text, set in a foreign land – isolation thus expressed is reflexively denied before it can even begin:

A habitation sober and demure
For ruminating creatures, a domain
For quiet things to wander in, a haunt
In which the Heron might delight to feed
By the shy rivers, and the Pelican
Upon the cypress spire in lonely thought
Might sit and sun himself. Alas! alas!
In vain for such solemnity we look;
Our eyes are crossed by Butterflies, our ears
Hear chattering Popinjays; the inner heart
Is trivial, and the impresses without
Are of a gaudy region. (448-458)

The absence of humans – Indian or otherwise – in Wordsworth’s (as opposed to Bartram’s) Alachua Savannah is not as important as his surprisingly negative reaction to local or domestic natures. Bartram’s “ordinary world” is clearly heavily qualified, defined as much by fantastic intervals as by the material presence of local natures. His cry of despair against “Butterflies” and “Popinjays” seems to contradict his arguments for the “pure grandeur” of rural life, of the “Common-place” nature encountered in the Daisy and Celandine poems. His desire to relocate the imaginative locus of the ordinary world beyond the realm of biographical experience is unsuccessful in this attempt, as it fails to adapt to his own local conditions. What we have here, then, is a paradoxical desire on the part of Wordsworth’s schoolboy recollections: he aspires to an exotic sanctuary, to help him escape the “chattering” and “trivial” world which is, ironically, not open enough to incorporate “a domain / For quiet things to wander in.” “Sanctuary,” under such conditions, founders on its own origins and desire.
The portable native perspective being discussed in this chapter met its limits in many instances in Wordsworth’s poetry. Another notable example from The Prelude is Book VII, “Residence in London.” For Wordsworth, city life was dangerous not so much because it represented some inherently malign system of reproducible habits, but because of quite the opposite, in that it actually prevented the formation of a recognizable identity founded on a secure sense of place. The city for Wordsworth was a network of places and natures so totally changeable as to eliminate the “essentially ennobling” (Oerlemans 57) qualities of rural nature; the city defied his concept of the local. The slow-changing familiarity of rural localities did allow nostalgic retreats, but they also enabled perspectives through which one could measure change in oneself against change in nature. The city simply moved too fast for Wordsworth, and confounded his attempts to gather meaningful imaginative fodder for his rural visions.

As we see in Book VII, Wordsworth was uncomfortable with London’s unsettled character. The “hell / For eyes and ears!” (659-60) defied the chief characteristics of “simplicity and power” (721) in a landscape. On what basis therefore could Wordsworth find reconciliation between the presence of so many human beings with a landscape that demands “a pure grandeur” (724)? The answer lies in the poet’s perception of the local and the ability of the imagination to create its own unimposed exotic spaces. The pertinent subject is thus “how men lived / Even next-door neighbours, as we say, yet still / Strangers, and knowing not each other’s names” (117-20). This concept of the Stranger far outpaced that of the Travelling Stranger we see in “Home at Grasmere.” In that work, the Stranger was always able to gauge himself against the stable values of the Vale. Not so in The Prelude’s depiction of the city: Wordsworth carefully calls our attention to the physical proximity of people in London, and their perceptual dissociation from both each other and the space they
inhabit. And yet it is not the space itself which causes this break; indeed, the predominant joy of inhabiting London comes from his appreciation of space, though within an entirely displaced context. His fantasies before living there put London above the imagined spaces of “Romance” (83) but also those of “Authentic History” (84) such as “Rome, / Alcairo, Babylon, or Persepolis” (84-5). Much as we see the silent city in “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge” (“that mighty heart...lying still” [14]), London’s physical space emptied of human activity is a rich imaginative template. No people are visible here in the midst of this “silent, bare” (5) collection of buildings, the “calm so deep” (11) amidst “the smokeless air” (8). Such an unpeopled space is a joy to him. Overlooking the lurking misanthropy of the book’s end is therefore no easy task: “The calmness, beauty, of the spectacle, / Sky, stillness, moonshine, empty streets, and sounds / Unfrequent as in deserts” (VII.634-6). The only way to salvage some moral quality to humanity’s presence within this space is to consider it not as an imposition, but as a poor fit. Despite flourishing, humanity does not serve the specific needs of the spaces, nor do the inhabitants contribute to a “simple power.”

So while we can observe the city’s spatial potentials in the mind’s eye, Wordsworth is unable to use those spaces as a mode of imaginary travel without first emptying them of the very people who make these spaces problematic. This is much akin to the structure of nature in “Tintern Abbey”: nature’s arrangement flows directly from the consciousness of the speaker. Discussing that poem, Marjorie Levinson notoriously argued that Wordsworth selectively elides details from the landscape, an inclination to “escape from the social body and the historical moment” (33). The social reality of the actual, material abbey “defeats even Wordsworth’s genius for imaginative alchemy” (35). His problem in the city stems from the absence of a spiritual template or original monument from which he could judge his own conscious reactions (as did the ruined abbey in the eponymous poem). With no genuinely
native models for him to employ in London, no sustainable examples for him to follow, he is without connection to a recognizable tradition or past. Furthermore, the city’s tendency to appropriate native narratives from their original contexts offends him morally and aesthetically. The theatrical exploitation in London of the Maid of Buttermere story is used as an example of a familiar figure taken out of context – those “same mountains” (343) Coleridge and Wordsworth were “nursed” (342) on. Wordsworth conveys his dismay at the Theatre’s artistic incongruity by remembering, with relief, that the maid Mary “lives in peace / Upon the spot where she was born and reared” (351-52). The nameless Babe’s literal death serves as a form of compensation, for while a victim of “Pain and abasement” (406), he yet “sleeps / Beside the mountain Chapel, undisturbed!” (411-12). For this innocent to be “disturbed” in the context of place is a form of necromancy, a violation not just of nature but of individual memory.

It is the wild profusion of false, usurping, overlapping natures within a potentially “still” space that alienates him so deeply. This leads to a conflict in both perception and sympathy, a breaking point for Wordsworth’s own ontological security, where tradition and place dissolve amidst a global sea of Strangers. With no meaningful reference points, in Wordsworth’s view, it is the urban cosmopolitan curse to be a slave to sensory and intellectual overload. He expresses the impossibility of sensual satiety through a kind of perceptual greed, highlighting the artificiality of incongruous natures in an urban setting. London overflows with “all species of man” (VII.236) and “the Spectacles...Of every nature, from all climes convened; / And, next to these, those mimic sights that ape / The absolute presence of reality” (245, 247-9). An artist’s ability to represent “Nature’s circumambient scenery...with his greedy pencil taking in / A whole horizon on all sides” (257, 258-9) was of

44 Wordsworth’s yoking of perception and inhabitable space echoes Johann Gottfried von Herder’s, who had claimed before him that “the inundated heart of the idle cosmopolitan is a home for no one” (qtd. in Halsall).
concern to Wordsworth: art, like the city, could get lost in virtual possibilities and lose focus on familiar natures. Such unhinged aesthetic prerogatives were accretive, gluttonous, an attempt to catalogue “every tree / Through all the landscape, tuft, stone, scratch minute, / And every Cottage, lurking in the rocks, / All that the Traveller sees when he is there” (277-80). “Absolute reality” is here invoked as an ontological barrier, used to evaluate the criteria for inclusion of a given nature within the synoptic eye of city life.

The reality of this global spectacle was, however, contested even by those sympathetic to Wordsworth’s poetics. In regarding the city as a place devoid of a meaningful sense of locality or vital spirit, Wordsworth does go against some of the opinions of his closest friends, including Charles Lamb. Lamb clearly considered the “best society” of London dismissed by Wordsworth as a source of joy. In a letter about *Lyrical Ballads*, Lamb writes:

Separate from the pleasure of your company I don’t much care if I never see a mountain in my life.—I have passed all my days in London, until I have formed as many and intense local attachments, as any of you *Mountaineers* can have done with dead nature. The Lighted shops of the Strand and Fleet Street, the innumerable trades, tradesmen and customers, coaches, wagons, play houses, all the bustle and wickedness round about Covent Garden, the very women of the Town, the Watchmen, drunken scenes, rattles; ... coffee houses, steams of soups from kitchens, the pantomimes, London itself, a pantomime and a masquerade, ... The wonder of these sights impels me into night-walks about her crowded streets, and I often shed tears in the motley Strand from fullness of joy at so much *Life*. (qtd. in Gill 210)
Lamb’s characterisation of Wordsworth’s rural spaces as “dead nature,” and his own vision of the city as full of “so much Life,” was surely an acute challenge to Wordsworth, as well as his poetics of representation. It must have rankled the poet to know that sympathetic barriers existed to such a joyous and earnest vision of local attachment, even if they were located within the city.

Despite his aversion to the mutable environments of the city, Wordsworth nonetheless did not consider the rural spaces of England to be sufficient inspiration on their own. He returned again and again to examples of American primitivism, as these allowed him to tap into a discourse of wildness that was nevertheless tempered by an outsider’s European, anthropological self-awareness. In the midst of this tendency, we do still see the poet’s attempts to check himself against this seductive wildness. Throughout the *Prelude*, and elsewhere in his early poetry, he uses the twinned metaphor of the hunting Indian and the wild deer to illustrate his indulgence in a kind of sensory gluttony. Crèvecoeur’s American farmer James is sceptical of the Indians and those who learn from them – “Hunting is but a licentious idle life, and if it does not always pervert good dispositions, yet, when it is united with bad luck, it leads to want” (*Letters* 78). Echoing this, Wordsworth imagines his past through an imaginative filter, one where he “had been born / On Indian Plains, and from my Mother’s hut, / Had run abroad in wantonness, to sport” (I.301-3). The “sport” he mentions is the hunt, and as mentioned, he involves himself within the metaphor by aligning himself as both hunter and hunted:

...greedy in the chase,
And roamed from hill to hill, from rock to rock,
Still craving combinations of new forms,
New pleasure, wider empire for the sight,
Proud of its own endowments, and rejoiced
To lay the inner faculties asleep. (XI.190-95)

Wordsworth's poetic representation of nature witnessed as a youth is here as akin to the stereotype of the overstimulated pleasure-hunting Indian. And yet because both Crèvecoeur and Bartram work hard to dispel the image of the hunting native as the only possible access to wildness, it is no surprise to see Wordsworth doing precisely the same thing in *The Prelude*. The perceptual gluttony he associates with this economic activity is shown to be unsustainable, and he critiques it in several fictional manifestations (along with his autobiographical identity in the work).

“Ruth” is notable in the context of this discussion, from depictions of the hunt as sensory gluttony to the unwillingness of locals to recognize domestic spaces as a source of perceptual development. This poem takes sites that are identified by name and described in very specific terms, and places them in context of an abuse of disembedded vision – that is, a treatment of the landscape, or of ways of living off it, that do not respect the specificity of that place. “Ruth” is a sustained meditation on a perceptual balancing act: between an immanent and an imagined distance, and of the dangers that may ensue when this perceptual balance tips too heavily to one side.

“Ruth” takes the example of the hunting Indian figure and submits it to a cutting critique. Perhaps more than any other poem in Wordsworth’s oeuvre, “Ruth” takes its lead from Bartram’s depictions of the American Southeast. Explicitly referring to Bartram’s text on multiple occasions, the poem’s superficial tragedy stems from the seduction of an ordinary young English woman by an exotic young American man and his tales of the sublime beauty of his native shores. Though it is referenced as a source for botanical exoticism, this study of transatlantic natures has no counterpart in the actual text of
Bartram’s *Travels* (except perhaps as vague cautionary tales about the dangers of licentious behaviour endemic amongst certain Indian communities). But herein lies the conundrum of “Ruth”: the emotional crisis takes place not in America, the seat of such purported hedonism, but in England. Indeed, Wordsworth tells us in a footnote exactly where in England: “The Tone is a River of Somersetshire at no great distance from the Quantock Hills. These hills, which are alluded to a few stanzas below, are extremely beautiful, and in most places richly covered with Coppice woods” (Brett and Jones 231). The presence of domestic criteria for beauty next to exotic ones raises the question of relative aesthetics, relative natures, and the variant perceptions used to sift through each. Fundamentally, then, we must examine the reasons why Ruth is seduced in the midst of a beautiful setting of her own, one which she had previously inhabited with productivity and success.

Maureen McLane’s reading of “Ruth” is to date one of the most thorough, and certainly one of the best when considering the important intersubjective and intercultural implications of the text. She focuses on the “acquired and displayed exoticism” (71) of the Georgia Youth, demonstrating that “it is not the fantasy of ‘savage lands’ that attracts [Ruth] as much as the romance of domesticity which seems possible ‘over there’” (73). McLane is right to point out that “The Youth’s speech moves incrementally from evocations of wildness and wonder to the pastoral of hearth and home” (74), and that “for Ruth, America comes to signify a future domestic pastoral,” while “for the Youth America represents a still unresolved complex” (75). The one flaw in McLane’s argument is that she assumes the Youth’s “crossing” over to Britain “is of course a re-crossing, and we may well speculate

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45 In his “Foreword” to the 2005 edition of Brett and Jones’s *Lyrical Ballads*, Nicholas Roe points out the important philosophical and political implications the Quantock Hills had for Wordsworth and Coleridge. Observing that the area was a historical site of rebellions (xvii) as well as sources of folklore (xv), Roe notes that the socioeconomic constitution of that area at the time suited the “low and rustic life” that Wordsworth hoped to base his early experiments on (xvi-vii).
what fantasies and material circumstances propelled the Youth to emigrate in the first place” (76). No evidence exists in the poem that the Georgia Youth is anything but a first-time emigrant to Britain: the first verb to describe the Youth’s crossing is “came” (19). Given the evidence in the poem, we have little choice to assume that his primitivity is not “a perverse acquisition” or “something of a simulation” (76), but rather, a native behaviour that has been learned through nothing more than normal channels of growth and development. Under these circumstances, to read his ostensible “acquisition” as “perverse” is to assume that those he learned it from are themselves perverse – a problematic gloss, given that we are speaking of the very Indians Wordsworth frequently admires.

Re-evaluating the poem’s perceptual dynamics so as not to assume the Youth’s origins are malign is merely a first step to reconsidering “Ruth.” Of deeper concern are the actions and attitudes of the girl herself, for the poem is unambiguous in presenting Nature’s punishment of her. As we shall see, Wordsworth hoped to find in “Ruth” a way of expressing concern with local myopia, at the same time that he saw global networks as engaged in the dissemination of narratives that, when applied inappropriately in local contexts, could be rendered injurious. Unlike McLane’s assertion, the Youth’s exoticism may well be genuine, in the sense that he does not employ narratives of colonial America in the attempt to dupe Ruth. Depicting the relationship between the young couple as deceitful is only accurate insofar as the Youth is boastful and Ruth is naive. But if we see him as possessing these qualities from the position of a native agent, he does not pose “a challenge to authenticity” (71). Indeed, the very possibility of a general crisis of authenticity poses a true challenge to the inhabitation of any local spaces, be they British or American.

The repetition of “thoughtlessness” and the emphasis on “irregularity,” particularly in the 1802 version of the poem, reveal a strangely meditative and diffuse quality to the
Georgian Youth’s method of travel. Whether journeying at home or abroad, randomness “justified” the workings of the Youth’s heart, and this seems a “kindred impulse” (1802 ins. stanza 3) to the way in which Ruth appreciates nature as a child. But her wanderings are ostensibly innocent, taking place only within the scope of a confined local area. The Youth’s wanderings are global, and display insensitivity to both immediate areas and the inhabitants within them. Wordsworth thus makes a crucial distinction between types of wandering perception, and the narrative does not at first reading mince words in articulating disdain for the Youth’s flightiness. This individual highlights all the problems Crèvecoeur observed in those white settlers who had “gone native”: on the surface, his preference for the hunt over sedentary agricultural domesticity confirms the Frenchman’s belief that many Indians, and specifically those who hunted, led a “licentious idle life.”

But is condemning the Youth’s imaginative excitement really an appropriate response? Surely his joy is not sufficiently contemptible – after all, Wordsworth footnotes with apparent admiration the very beautiful scenery (gleaned from Bartram’s respectable and respected book of travels) that seduces poor Ruth into a debased life. His behaviour much more closely resembles the perceptual conflict expressed by Bartram himself in his observation of the Augusta, Georgia landscape:

...and although here much delighted with the new beauties in the vegetable kingdom, and many eminent ones have their sequestered residence near this place, yet, as I was never long satisfied with present possession, however endowed with every possible charm to attract the sight, or intrinsic value to engage and fix the esteem, I was restless to be searching for more, my curiosity being insatiable....Thus it is with regard to our affections and
attachments, in the more important and interesting concerns of human life.

(54)

We witness here the desire to move one’s perception of the landscape beyond the present, but also the threat to one’s immediate social surroundings. In this sentiment, which recurs throughout the _Travels_ (frequently in reference to the failure of agricultural projects in the wild Southeast), Bartram makes a direct connection between observations of the landscape and the “affections and attachments.” The implication here is that a deferred perceptual satiety is symptomatic of a more profound sympathetic social concern. But this distraction is mostly shown by _Europeans_ in Bartram’s narrative, and not the Indians whom the Youth is apparently shown to emulate. It is the European subject who, in acts of ignorance and out of motives of abstracted knowledge, reshapes the landscape in destructive and often unsuccessful ways.⁴⁶

That Wordsworth uses Bartram’s Southeast American nature to configure a state of global difference should not, however, relegate the Georgia Youth to a position of iniquity simply because he represents (or appears to represent) a more exotic nature than Ruth’s. Her initial “wandering” (5) is prompted by domestic trouble – her father’s taking of “another Mate” (2). The “thoughtless freedom” (6) she discovers upon her departure from that domestic environment is revealed “at her own will” (4), indicating the conscious power she has over her own existence. Still, her movement from this unhappy environment is a perceived necessity, rather than wanderlust, and her life afterwards is characterized by rustic

⁴⁶ Often they are simply unable to even read the land accurately. Part of the problem of European adaptation to the landscape of the American southeast is, according to Bartram, its failure to accommodate the local ground into its cartographic and agricultural development. One of the most amusing and illustrative of these is the farce surrounding the “Buffalo Lick Orientation,” in which the white surveyor insists on the accuracy of his compass over the local knowledge and advice of the Indian guides. “The surveyor replied, that he himself was certainly right, adding, that that little instrument (pointing to the compass) told him so, which, he said, could not err. The Indian answered, he knew better, and that the little instrument was a liar; and he would not acquiesce in its decisions, since it would wrong the Indians out of their land” (58). Of course, the Indian proves right in the end, and apologies are necessary on behalf of the white men.
innocence. Consequent to moving out into the wider world, her fashioning of the reed-pipe and bower demonstrate her aesthetic as well as practical capacities.

Upon her encounter with the Georgia Youth, we are told that the Youth’s tales are “perilous to hear” (42). The “peril” in question stems from their imaginative impact on someone who might have Ruth’s limited worldly understanding. Wordsworth references several events in Bartram’s *Travels*, although only one directly: the encounters with the *magnolia grandiflora*, or great magnolia tree. These he describes as mysterious, trees “That every day their blossoms change / Ten thousand lovely hues” (50-1). The other significant, though indirect reference, is to one of the more famous scenes from the *Travels*, the Cherokee “strawberry-gatherers.” Bartram describes the encounter:

...a meandering river gliding though, saluting in its various turnings the swelling, green, turfy knolls, embellished with parterres of flowers and fruitful strawberry beds; flocks of turkies strolling about them; herds of deer prancing in the meads or bounding over the hills; companies of young, innocent Cherokee virgins, some busily gathering the rich fragrant fruit, others having already filled their baskets, lay reclined under the shade of floriferous and fragrant native bowers of *Magnolia, Azalea, Philadelphus*, perfumed *Calycanthus*, sweet Yellow Jessamine and cerulian *Glycine frutescens*, disclosing their beauties to the fluttering breeze, and bathing their limbs in the cool fleeting streams; whilst other parties, more gay and libertine, were yet Collecting strawberries or wantonly chasing their companions, tantalising them, staining their lips and cheeks with the rich fruit. (356-57)

In Bartram’s narrative, the maidens, associated with the sweet fruit, represent an attractive solution to survival in a hostile land. Bartram’s voyeuristic observers are torn between the
Odyssean command of the rational traveller unwilling to risk the repercussions of sexual involvement, and the “easy fruit” of the sexualized strawberry.

In “Ruth,” the Youth’s position as an outsider in England transforms him as an individual into a kind of exotic specimen – a “strawberry,” or magnolia blossom, in the context of the narrative – of his own. His seductive beauty, compounded with his tales of fascinating and curious productions of the New World, makes him a parallel creature in both narrative and metaphorical senses. There is an irony here that has been overlooked by critics: while Ruth is akin to an innocent Bartramian “strawberry-gatherer” (in that she is vulnerable to predation), she herself is drawn by the same seductive narratives that motivate the voyeuristic interlopers of Bartram’s account. The Youth’s transference of the “kindred impulse” of irregularity to Ruth is accomplished willingly, and in her own ignorance of the local beauty that she unwittingly overlooks. Ruth’s eventual connection with these impulses is what allows the Youth’s spirit to “burn” (1802 ins. stanza 6), along with the imagined “spire” of cypress flowers, which “seem / To set the hills on fire” (59-60). In fulfilling the role of perceptual transference, and emphasising her inability to successfully navigate codes of exotic nature, Wordsworth in effect accuses Ruth of neglecting a nature to which she had become responsible.

Wordsworth’s elaboration of this associated impulse is significant, especially in his transatlantic alliance of Ruth with these exotic locales. She finds the Youth exotic in his embodiment of a specific narrative of New World Edenism, while he does not so much find her exotic in a specific way at all, except as how she fits in with the repeated “whatever” and “seems” of his imaginative impulses. She is only contingently attractive to him, depending on a shifting set of circumstances and concerns seemingly beyond her control. His tales are entrancing to her according to a particular set of expectations, a recognizable narrative of
New World primitivism. The Youth’s conditioning in an environment of sensory excess, however, makes him a receptor of continual perpetual wonder, but at the cost of local appreciation. His woolgathering of this New World of “many an endless endless lake / With all its fairy crowds / Of islands” (62-4) is an ironic counterpoint to her (initially) grounded vision of the Quantock Hills. Positing an entirely theoretical existence, the Youth asks,

How sweet it were
A fisher or a hunter there,
A gardener in the shade,
Still wandering with an easy mind
To build a household fire and find
A home in every glade. (67-72)

His ease in aligning Ruth with the burning hills of cypresses – in effect, his unhinged capacity to synthesize varying aesthetic experiences – reveals his inability to domestically inhabit any of the environments he travels in. The campfire-lifestyle proposed by the Youth emphasizes its lack of permanence, instead focusing on the previously-discussed stereotype of the Indian hunter that is negatively qualified in so many accounts of travel.47

Led by his own endlessly-deferred thirst for exotic sensation, the Youth’s perception only betrays Ruth, whose life becomes miserable by his criminal association. But it is his imaginative gluttony, rather than any particular deed, that wrongs her out of her land. After fleeing imprisonment, she becomes a vagrant, of whom “none took thought, / And where it liked her best she sought / Her shelter and her bread” (184-6). Back in her native environment, she is able to experience the same kinds of freedoms as does the Youth, albeit in very different and broken circumstances. His freedom was premised on an endlessly-

47 He hopes to run with his “own adopted bride, / A sylvan huntress at my side / And drive the flying deer!” (88-90)
deferred beauty, a species of “low-desire” that constantly sought “new objects” of pleasure. Her freedom, on the other hand, recalls the injurious liberty experienced by the vagrant mother figure of Wordworth’s earlier poems: Ruth now inhabits a “fenceless bed” in much the same way as that type. Her case differs from theirs, however, in that her penury is largely the result of her own decisions. Unhinged now from the comforts of place by her experiences with the Youth, “The master-current of her brain / Ran permanent and free” (188-89).

Ruth’s immersion in her native environment is so complete, so total, that she could never have been anything but an innocent when confronted with his exotic tales. The nature which was formerly nurturing for her has become almost mechanical in its effect on her, a forceful reminder of her betrayal:

The engines of her grief, the tools
That shap’d her sorrow, rocks and pools,
And airs that gently stir
The vernal leaves, she loved them still,
Nor ever tax’d them with the ill
Which had been done to her. (193-198)

We must ask how she could “tax” the surrounding nature in the same way that she had been violated. Given her unwitting neglect of her native nature, the “engines of her grief” – ironically, the “gentle” features of her domestic terrain – chide her through their continued benevolence. Wordworth’s message seems clear with respect to yet another example of innocents led astray: responsible knowledge of natural examples can assist in the adaptation to new circumstances, but no amount of global knowledge can overcome the abstract
neglect of a domestic environment.\textsuperscript{48} Ruth’s seduction away from a productive and benevolent concern, as well as from the native beauty of her landscape, reveals the improper understanding of both local natures and exotic ones. The Youth is presumably Native to some kind of environment, but his need to externalize his inspiration (in the representative of a static nature, being Ruth) shows that he is exclusively exotic in his imaginative projection; the local exists in his mind only contingently. He does not truly lie when he claims she is the source for his inspiration, and we must be mindful that every exotic locale is itself local in its respective place. If he is then genuinely native to the Georgia shores, why then should he not find Ruth exotic (even if passingly so)\textsuperscript{2}

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vi.

Dorothy Wordsworth’s \textit{Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland} (1803) demonstrates a reflexive self-awareness of local limitations, particularly with respect to the perception of nature as one leaves the confines of a familiar space. The beginning of her narrative, centered around the border country in and around Carlisle, registers a disconnect between the expectations of a natural landscape and what she and William actually witness on their travels. While Carlisle had been from 1746 in English possession, it nonetheless represented, in political, military, and commercial terms, a place of transition.\textsuperscript{49} This was as true for the landscape as it was

\textsuperscript{48} Chloe Chard, discussing travel literature, mentions an inherent danger in all such forms: “the hope and expectation that the foreign will supply a drama and excitement in which the familiar is lacking. Such an expectation raises the constant possibility that travellers will indeed be prompted to praise foreign and the expense of the familiar” (43).

\textsuperscript{49} Carlisle Castle, located on the border of Scotland and England, was a site of real strategic importance to both countries during the Jacobite Uprising. Its capture in 1745 by Jacobite forces was the first key victory in the incursive campaigns into English territory, and its recapture in 1745-6 by English forces was the last recorded siege on English soil.
politically. Grasmere, where the Wordsworths were living during this expedition of 1803, was geographically close to Carlisle, being approximately 50 km away. Topographically, however, Grasmere was quite different: with the nearby tall peaks of Bow Fell, Fairfield and Helvellyn (itself over 900 m), the Lake District formed a dynamic contrast to the relatively flat, river basin lands around Carlisle. Despite the relatively short distance to home, when they arrived at Hadrian’s Wall, the Wordsworths could be forgiven for thinking they had arrived in a different country.

Dorothy registers some confusion in her perception of the place, visible in her description of the overlapping aesthetic and economic illustrations of the area. Having just crossed the border into the neighbourhood of Carlisle, she notes of the trees that “The city and neighbourhood of Carlisle disappointed me; the banks of the river quite flat, and, though the holms are rich, there is not so much beauty in the vale from the want of trees—at least not to the eye of a person coming from England, and, I scarcely know how, but to me the holms had not a natural look” (3). Her open acknowledgement of an aesthetic bias bleeds over into her conscious use and emphasis of “nature,” a preference for primitive wildness and orrida bellezza that was not merely in keeping with a fashionable Gothic sensibility. After visiting Burns’ grave in the Vale of Nith, Dumfries, we see her attempting to reconcile the agricultural and aesthetic prospects using a familiar pattern: “We made our way to the cottages among the little hills and knots of wood, and then saw what a delightful country this part of Scotland might be made by planting forest trees. The ground all over heaves and swells like a sea; but for miles there are neither trees nor hedgerows, only ‘mound’ fences and tracts; or slips of corn, potatoes, clover—with hay between, and barren

50 A form of evergreen tree.
51 It is likely that her revision of the landscape was also made in acknowledgement of the centuries-old commercial deforestation of the Scottish lowlands; Dorothy notes of the Lowlands scene in general that “some travelers might have been disposed with it for its general nakedness; yet there was an abundance of corn” (8).
land” (8-9). The natural variation within these agricultural scenes thus did not mingle with her concordant expectations of the same within an English context. This is not to say that she is dismayed at the preponderance of agriculture on the landscape in the Lowlands, but she does feel it necessary to point out that the “natural” agricultural practices and division of property were not so uniform. Contrary to contemporary stereotypes (literary and otherwise) of Scotland, such as those inculcated by Johnson, Burns, and Macpherson’s Ossian, Dorothy did not find Scotland wild enough.

Narratives of local specificity, then, could disappoint as much as they could pose dangers of attraction. And yet even someone as attuned to local specificity as Dorothy Wordsworth was not immune to the impulse to superimpose patterns of familiarity over alien ones. Other accounts of travel by the Wordsworths display a similarly tenuous capacity for adaptation. For example, the poems written by William during their 1798 expedition to Germany, show very little influence of travel in a general sense, or anything particularly German for that matter. Given that it was written during continental travels, it is somewhat ironic that the most famous of these, “Michael,” is one of Wordsworth’s most insular poems in geographic terms.\(^2\) Is it any wonder, then, that Wordsworth sought alternate means of expressing travel, when his own material experiences of the action were so strongly characterized by disappointment and hardship?

Indeed, not only was Wordsworth able to acknowledge his own failings as a material traveller, but he was able to use his position as a foreigner to deepen his appreciation for

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\(^2\) Another poem, “Written in Germany, on one of the coldest days of the century,” is on the surface a self-deprecating, Burns-esque transposition of sympathy between an observer and a fly, written in a sing-song rhythm meant to ironically reflect the warmth and welcome of fireside verse. And yet, despite the poem’s “home-γ,” domesticated feel, it demonstrates a particular confusion of orientation, climate and directionality that accompanies the departure from known bearings. A poem about “insularity” to the point of claustrophobia, or even sensory stultification, “Written in Germany” is as much about failed adaptation to local customs as it is about Wordsworth’s opinion of Germanic languages: “A fig for your languages, German and Norse” (1).
those familiar locales he had left behind. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones point out that “As with many other writers, exile fed the springs of his inspiration” (25). Exile for the Wordsworths not only generated artistic inspiration, but facilitated a perceptual limitation that mediated their understanding of the natural landscape. For all their apparent laments for insular domesticity, Wordsworth’s German additions to the *Lyrical Ballads* continually call attention to the larger danger inherent in a lack of self-knowledge with respect to local-foreign natures. Unlike his characters, however, being “fenceless” was never something Wordsworth aspired to in any material sense. And so he sought his own self-imposed exile in the midst of familiar comforts, in a Lake District that could sustain a continuous imaginative reinvention. Here, he was free to reinvent local spaces, immersing himself in a global culture that slowly encroached on an isolation he knew well to be drawing to a close.

The imaginative instability of place, whether familiar or exotic, is a fundamental quality of early Wordsworthian locales. William Hazlitt was always interested in Wordsworth’s devotion to local places, and in his essay “My First Acquaintance With Poets” (1823), mentions Coleridge’s observant appraisal of Wordsworth’s character: “that there was something corporeal, a-matter-of-fact-ness, a clinging to the palpable, or often to the petty, in his poetry, in consequence”; and on the other hand, he was possessed of “a grand and comprehensive spirit...so that his soul seemed to inhabit the universe like a palace” (224). Some of this spatially unstable tendency is detected by the young Hazlitt, who, when alone with Wordsworth, confronts him about the source of the latter’s very locally-specific *Poems on the Naming of Places*, seeing in it traces of Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s 1787 novel *Paul et Virginie*. Hazlitt clearly observed the overlap between “local inscriptions” (212) and the context of international slavery and emigrancy that dominates the novel’s narrative; he sought to draw conclusions based on Wordsworth’s idea of naming “blank” geographic
spaces in his poems. We can draw many conclusions from this, but foremost amongst them, and most relevant to this study, was the persistent presence of Wordsworth's relativizing of local spaces, and drawing freedom from the value of the local in a global context.

But was this revitalizing tendency consistent? How then did Wordsworth’s devotion to a fluid-yet-rooted imaginative experience calcify into what has since been called conservatism? And did his marked reactionary tendency in later life signify a corresponding imaginative obstinacy? Without delving too deeply into a biographical reading, I would posit that his own loco-centricity got the better of his desire for variation. After 1807, the periods of domestic displacement and financial uncertainty began to fade; in residence at Allan Bank in 1807 and later Rydal Mount in 1813, his poetry and life began to take on a decidedly settled quality. Perhaps this was inevitable, and was what he desired all along in “Home at Grasmere”: to lose the “unfixed” (184) quality of the traveller, and to have the “Hills…close me in” (129). There was little to “pleasurably” alienate the poet as he grew older, save what existed outside his Hills, and even that outside context grew increasingly concerning; certainly, he grew more to resemble his outraged Priest of Ennerdale, suspicious of those who made intrusion into what he saw as defined spaces.

Was this movement towards perceptual dislocation inevitable, or was it merely sublimated into a new kind of imaginative elasticity? The relationship between local place and a greater world is present in works like The Excursion, where we see an appeal to find the glories of the world in local spaces:

Paradise, and groves
Elysian, Fortunate Fields – like those of old
Sought in the Atlantic Main, why should they be
A history only of departed things,
Or a mere fiction of what never was?

For the discerning intellect of Man,

When wedded to this goodly universe,

In love and holy passion, shall find these

A simple produce of the common day. (xii)

And yet the sense of outrage Wordsworth expresses at the violation of local spaces is reactionary, and the prospect of a rejuvenated man in the wake of global examples is greatly diminished. Later, in Book VIII of *The Excursion*, he cries with dismay at the relationship between nature, globalized culture, and the failure of traditional life to compete with a modern economy:

And, wheresoe’er the Traveller turns his steps,

He sees the barren wilderness erased,

Or disappearing; triumph that proclaims

How much the mild Directness of the plough

Owes to alliance with these new-born Arts!

— Hence is the wide Sea peopled, — and hence the Shores

Of Britain are resorted to by Ships

Freighted from every climate of the world

With the world’s choicest produce. (364)

This was ongoing, according to Wordsworth – “erased, / Or disappearing” indicates a process not yet complete, and which he was witnessing first-hand. Whatever imaginative “produce” he might have gained from global stores, he evidently considered secondary to the very real material pressures the outside world brought to bear on its most vulnerable inhabitants.
Chapter Two

“Wanderings Over Heaven”: Percy Shelley’s Aeronautic Explorations

i.

This chapter considers Percy Shelley’s historical relationship with the science of aeronautics and his use of aeronautic motifs in his poetry. It is generally accepted that Shelley’s thinking and writing are torn between a limitless idealism and an empirical reality. I wish to avoid the pitfalls of a debate about such tensions, and focus instead on a concept Shelley believed synthesized these beliefs. In his poetry and his own life, Shelley wrote of aeronautics in ways that brought together empirical science and visionary idealism – the one facilitated the other. The science of flight developed in the eighteenth century, and during later years contributed greatly to what were undoubtedly empirical understandings of the world, its landscape, and the role of technology in human social progress. That such a science was often characterized as visionary or idealistic requires some understanding of its history, its treatment in literature, and its role in political reform. In short, however, it was a science that enabled extraordinary sensory impressions which, combined with its improbable methods of locomotion, left it an object of suspicion by conservative thinkers.

What particularly interested Shelley in the paradigm of human flight were the perceptual tensions between the relative observers of the aeronautic event. With access to vision beyond the scope of terrestrial observers, an aeronaut came to symbolize for him an escape from historical barriers to human development. On the other hand, witnessing the act of human flight gave hope to those still enchained within those barriers. The tension
between these two perceptual vantages led Shelley to consider a whole series of associated scientific and philosophical principles, from hydrostatics to a transhistorical progress of reform. Accordingly, Shelley’s balloons were both material products of human ingenuity and metaphors for the role of visionary activity within a grander historical process. In this sense, they were more than a convenient trope: their radical political association, their remarkable physical properties, and their facilitation of new perceptual vistas meant that they were, in so many senses, a unique and powerful artistic tool.

I am particularly interested in the ways Shelley uses aeronautics to illustrate examples of threats to “ontological security.” As discussed in the Introduction, aeronautics fit into a modern framework that linked “local practices with globalised social relations” (Giddens 79), the result of which disturbed “the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action” (92). In the paradigm of Romantic-era aeronautics, vision was measured globally – from scientific treatises to Shelley’s own poetry, the implications for human understanding of the world are habitually described as being global, and often cosmic, in scope. Shelley’s work depicts the continual confrontation of mental barricades, though these metaphors often characterize imaginative limitations as much as material ones. In many of his best-known poems, balloons and flying cars demonstrate the erasure of purely local landscapes, replacing them instead with global and transhistorical ones. The impulse to escape from proscribed spatial confines is in part utopian, though Shelley would, as we shall see, become wary of the role of the aeronaut-prophet in bringing about this reform. He seems most interested in how the mind of the aeronaut changes in reflection of the altered landscape, but demonstrates a progressive attitude towards the “witnessing” of flight by grounded minds. In this sense, his aerial raptures are shared experiences,
fundamentally social, and as much about the methods used to reach the skies as they are about the sights witnessed thereafter. Shelley left unresolved the possibility that spatial release would ultimately bring about utopia: as his aeronauts demonstrate, the liberation from restricted perception also carried with it an escape from history, an ethically problematic act in light of the reformist’s eschatological principles.

Historically, these qualities represented a political challenge: the air-balloon in particular was closely aligned with revolutionary-era reform and the discourse of universality more often than with a peaceful and imaginative liberation. Balloons in Shelley’s era were not neutral objects, but were rather invested with very ambivalent (and often negative) implications for a British public. While certainly popular, in the sense of the exposure they had received in the press from the years of Shelley’s childhood to his adolescence, by the time he was composing “To a Balloon, Laden with Knowledge” (c. 1812) they had fallen quite out of the favour in the public eye. Yet for Shelley, who was intimately familiar with and financially invested in several radical technologies, the balloon represented a special bridging mechanism between a fallible human perception and an unbounded medium (the sky/cosmos).

Several key features are apparent within Shelley’s fictional aeronautics, including: a gap between a grounded subject (usually the addressee or implied historical prisoner) and an aerial observer (typically the speaker or narrative focus); the juxtaposition of aeronautic liberty with the drive to escape terrestrial conflict; the solitary nature of aerial observation and visionary insight; an erosion of sympathy across the aeronautic boundary; and the presence of an elemental exchange, where the sharing of mutable (and artificially reproducible) energies – often shown as vapours or fires – forms the basis of known types

53 Much of the early history of ballooning has been covered by J. E. Hodgson, in his seminal work on British aeronautics.
of aeronautic locomotion. Linking these interests are acts of message-bearing, or what Timothy Morton calls Shelley’s “politics of dissemination” (“Introduction” 6). These forms of “broadcasting” are typified in poems such as “Ode to the West Wind” (1820), where Shelley prays that his words will be “scattered” like “Ashes and sparks” (67): “Be through my lips to unawaken’d earth / The trumpet of a prophecy!” (68-9). Morton accurately locates these strategies within Shelley’s interest in “efficient, ‘globalizing’ social plans” (5). Yet the tension in, for example, “West Wind” – between a limited global access and a radical, aerial “prophecy” – stems largely from Shelley’s lifelong interest in radical, global modes of travel, for the aerial medium of message-bearing in the poem is as important as the revolutionary message. His poetical and material investments in aeronautical devices (and their related natural phenomena) are an underappreciated part of his philosophy of historical progress; such ideas represent how borderless global experiences could undermine the perceptual confinements erected by political and material interests. The context of these aeronautic features is almost always global, and occasionally cosmic – the aeronautic gesture typically signifies an aspirational movement (thematic and narratively) “up and away” from provincial or local concerns.

While the scientific import of his poetry has been well established, aeronautics has yet to receive significant attention as an intellectual and poetic inspiration. Carl Grabo, Michael O’Neill, Desmond King-Hele, and Debbie Lee, among others, have discussed the role of aeronautics in Shelley’s writings, though without a systematic appraisal in context of his overall thought. In his excellent essay “The ‘Balloonomania’: Science and Spectacle in 1780s England,” Paul Keen gives extensive treatment to the role of ballooning in the popular press and the consumer consciousness in that period, but does not extend his
analysis far beyond this point.\textsuperscript{54} Other readings of Shelley’s poetry tend to downplay aeronautic motifs in favour of the abstracted idealism so long associated with his work. Jerrold Hogle’s masterful reading of \textit{The Witch of Atlas} (1820), for example, transmutes all physical action in the poem – including the important flying tropes – into a purely metaphorical process, emphasizing the deferral of meaning in the Witch’s rehabilitation of “metaphoricity from the clutches of stable codes as a way of keeping alive the ‘visions’ of ‘truth’” (346).\textsuperscript{55} In his book \textit{Shelley and the Chaos of History}, Hugh Roberts perhaps comes closer to understanding Shelley’s intellectual engagement with aeronautics, particularly in his intriguing analysis of the meteorological symbolism of the author’s poetry.\textsuperscript{56} Yet by focusing on “Entropic ‘unbuilding’” (433), Roberts glosses over the “sympathetic flux” of Shelyean minds with divergent access to global perspectives. For example, in his conflation of the characteristics of the Cloud (from the poem of the same name) with those of the eponymous Witch), he overlooks how the Witch’s utopian actions are premised on the predominantly un-chaotic principles of sympathy and love. Roberts’ fusion of the Witch’s playfulness with “infinite mutability” (433) overlooks the reasons Shelley situates her in the clouds to begin with – namely, to reveal her sympathetic dialogue (or lack thereof) with an earthbound and oppressed humanity.

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\textsuperscript{54} Keen’s reading of the balloon as a popular distraction, or escape, is particularly astute, and I am indebted to his analysis of Barbauld’s “Washing Day.”

\textsuperscript{55} While this interpretation is certainly accurate with respect to Shelley’s greater interest in poetry’s “unconfined ripples of interpretation” (329), Hogle nonetheless avoids specific historical grounding that might illustrate the “shape and motion” of the “embodied power” (\textit{Witch} 79-80) that gives rise to the “winged Vision” (17) of the Witch’s flight.

\textsuperscript{56} Working from the laudable premise that Shelley “attempts to reconcile...‘idealist’ and ‘skeptical’ aspects of his intellectual heritage” (30), Roberts proposes a reading of Shelley’s work that privileges a kind of chaos science, defined by “the lack of a definite goal, or telos, of revolutionary change” (43). He claims that “Shelley’s self-proclaimed ‘love [of] waves, and winds, and storms’” [\textit{Song: Rarely, comest thou’}, 33] is a love of transcendental, entropic flux” (432); further, that “The sky, and the clouds in it, are, for Shelley, visible emblems of the playful amnesiac changefulness personified by the Witch of Atlas” (432).
There is no doubt that in his own life, Percy Shelley displayed a love of air-balloons that bordered on the peculiar. He wrote about them to his friends, familiarized himself with the principles of their flight, and even built his own working models. Yet Shelley’s personal experience with aerostatic experimentation was closely associated with social alienation and radical political reform. The 1812 episode at Chestnut Cottage (near Keswick), in which he ignited hydrogen gas and, most likely, smoke balloons in the garden, caused his landlord to evict him from the premises, in addition to incurring the ire of the local countryside, who greatly distrusted his unusual (and flashy) activities. Shelley also frequently tried to enact his own “politics of dissemination”: following his return from Ireland in 1812, Shelley distributed copies of his works “A Letter to Lord Ellenbrough,” “The Devil’s Walk,” “To a Balloon, Laden with Knowledge,” “On Launching Some Bottles Filled with Knowledge into the Bristol Channel,” and “A Declaration of Rights” using decidedly strange techniques. Corked bottles, waterproofed bladders with lead keels and stick sails, and, most relevantly, fire balloons, all served a role in spreading his seditious words. By some accounts, his techniques were successful: the Navy intercepted some of his bottles, identified the author specifically as Percy Bysshe Shelley, and noted that “this novel mode of disseminating...pernicious opinions” could reach “many hundreds...and do incalculable mischief” (qtd. in Bieri, Youth 255). It is also clear that he imparted some of his knowledge to those closest to him: aware of his passion for the devices, and apparently schooled by Shelley.

57 There was no indication that his activities were a danger to anyone, only that they were unusual, and disturbing. For a full account, see Bieri, Youth 212-13.
58 Bieri, Youth 255.
in their manufacture, Mary constructed for him a hand-stitched balloon for his birthday in 1816 in Geneva, designed to be flown from the boat he had recently purchased. 59

Thomas Jefferson Hogg’s letters reveal Percy Shelley’s Oxford-era interests in ballooning, particularly of the contemporary lack of development in aeronautics, the alterations in consciousness made possible through technological or scientific innovation, and the global implications of radical technologies. Hogg’s recollection of Shelley’s fascination with aeronautics reveals an apparent naivety about the liberatory powers of the air balloon:

The balloon has not yet received the perfection of which it is surely capable; the art of navigating the air is in its first and most helpless infancy. It promises prodigious facilities for locomotion, and will enable us to traverse vast tracts with ease and rapidity, and to explore unknown countries without difficulty. Why are we still so ignorant of the interior of Africa? – Why do we not despatch intrepid aeronauts to cross it in every direction, and to survey the whole peninsula in a few weeks? The shadow of the first balloon, which a vertical sun would project precisely beneath it, as it glides silently over that hitherto unhappy country, would virtually emancipate every slave, and would annihilate slavery forever. (qtd. in Grabo 8)

Shelley’s speculative comment on balloons in Africa was not, in fact, farfetched: the French republican army, under Napoleon, had utilized such devices in the failed Egyptian occupation of 1798. 60

59 Seymour 159.
60 Upon the French defeat, the British destroyed all these devices, with the possible exception of that used by Frenchman Joseph Gay-Lussac. His balloon was thus unique, having made the transition from military to scientific function.
Many years after his Oxford-era aeronautic fantasies, Shelley would describe such an aerial “emancipator” in *Prometheus Unbound*, in the guise of the Spirit of the Hour. Despite his best hopes for the devices, which stemmed from their promise of universalist liberation, an association with idealism and extremism was almost inevitable during and after France’s Revolutionary era. The celebrated Battle of Fleurus (26 June 1794) saw the first known use of military observation balloons: a French balloon, named *L’Entreprenant*, relayed messages to the French commanders, ultimately providing essential intelligence in their victory against the Austrians. The implications of their usage in such a theatre would have been obvious enough for a British audience, especially after Napoleon formed a secretive wing of his military called Les Aérostiers, dedicated to the development and use of balloons in warfare. (France’s Committee of Public Safety chose the famed inventor Nicolas Jacques Conté to open a military aeronautics school at Meudon.) What had formerly been a device used for the purposes of universal fraternity was now being used for the spread of conquest.

Balloons in the eighteenth century were unavoidably political, and Shelley was not the first author to use them in a political fashion in fiction. Elizabeth Inchbald used the balloon to farcical intent in her short play *The Mogul Tale; or, the Descent of the Balloon*. Originally performed in 1784, the play saw a resurgence in interest in 1796, during a short-lived literary revival of the imaginary voyage. This interest was visibly informed by the change in relations with France following the start of the Revolution. Early literary linkages of air-balloons with progressive and far-fetched political ideals meant the French origins of the device were a fair target during this period of political extremism. The radical and revolutionary balloons found in the pages of the late-century imaginary voyage (a literary genre long out of vogue in the Romantic era) were often employed as a medium for
communicating alternative political positions (typically satirical). In such instances, the balloon would carry its occupants to some alternate political realm as a means of evaluating familiar conditions – what Thomas Erskine referred to in *Armata* (1817) as that quality of foreign voyage or travel “only as the bolus, in which a medicine for the mind is to be administered” (15). Within such a context, the role of the balloon seemed to be one of either facilitating or critiquing utopian fancy. The late eighteenth century mini-revival did witness a new discussion of the balloon as both a symbol and a method of such reform. Authors during this time clearly saw in it artistic and political potential: the use of the device as a means of philosophical travel (a method of going to hitherto unexplored places, or a way of seeing old places in novel ways), and as a way to show the relativizing effect perspectival privilege had on perception (which would have both linguistic and political dimensions).

Shelley’s aeronautic fictions clearly take their lead from such discussions, but with the added focus on the spatial dimensions of the experience of flight. Aerial liberation for Shelley implied the mapping of unknown global terrains, spatially uninhibited movements, and the effects such activities had on the minds of those observing the aeronautic act. Looking back to his early Oxford statements, one can nonetheless detect some curious qualities to the liberation of the slaves. For example, his conflation of the aeronautic mind of the emancipator with the newfound freedoms of the grounded slaves does not explain how

61 The imaginary voyage made a brief resurgence in the latter two decades of the eighteenth century, and frequently featured balloon-voyages as the primary means of reaching their fantastical destinations. Percy Shelley was greatly fond of Robert Patlock’s *Peter Wilkins* (1751), perhaps one of the last great popular imaginary voyages of the mid-eighteenth century. The significance of this is increased when one considers the role of flight and political liberation in that novel.

62 In some manifestations, the balloon was used in a rather superficial role, symbolizing merely the presence of radical politics, rather than suggesting how it facilitated a process of reform. In the Godwinian-influenced *Voyage to the Moon, Strongly Recommended to All Lovers of Real Freedom* (1793) (written by “Aratus”), the protagonist “departed from this whirling globe of ours, fully determined to visit the lunar world” in “that curious machine an Air-Balloon” (1). After serving as an initial mode of transport, the balloon takes no real role, and the story itself is really only a platform from which to pontificate on the contemporary injustices of the British monarchy: “They refuse to approach the Great Snake, or the defects of that tottering fabric I shewed you, *with pious awe, and trembling solicitude*; affirming, that truth and justice can never be hurt by temperate and honest discussions” (23).
or why their freedom is to be achieved, except through the mere vision of the balloon itself (and necessarily that, for the shadow of the balloon is deemed sufficient to generate emancipatory sentiments in the witnesses). This balloon is deemed to have provided knowledge and vision for the aeronautic party, and inspiration for those on the ground. When Shelley describes the impact on the slaves witnessing the shadow of the balloon, he evokes a rhetorical framework that eighteenth-century observers would have recognized, a controversy of the former century: namely, the shift in sympathies and perception that occurred in the space between positions of perspectival privilege. Following William Drummond’s argument that “to change one’s mind is quite literally to change one’s mind,” Shelley seems to revel in this device’s potential for instigating a “mental change [that] is an effacement of former identity (a new birth ‘brisant tout à coup le lien des souvenirs’) and an absolute discontinuity” (Roberts 43). In effect, the witnessing of the device was akin to seeing from its position of global privilege. Nonetheless, if discussing balloons in the context of global political liberation was conceivable, the mechanism for achieving this success stretched credibility.

In using the balloon to represent alternate modes of thought, perception and communication, Shelley sought to rehabilitate the notion of the visionary traveller as social reformer. Shelley’s aeronauts display a persistent drive to communicate through a kind of visionary dialogue with established philosophical positions, for example those of William Godwin, who in Political Justice (1793) had articulated a form of sceptical gradualism as a means of social renovation. As Shelley noted in A Philosophical View of Reform (1820), discussing Berkeley, Hume, and Hartley, the chief errors with sceptical empiricism as a means of reform “consisted chiefly of a limitedness of view” (640); he figured it was for “the sake of immediate relief” (in terms of “the terrible sufferings of their countrymen”) that they
avoided “the abstractions of thought” (unlike the philosophers who had preceded them) (641). Bridging the chasm between the visionary perspectives and those with a “limited view,” Shelley’s aeronauts struggle to articulate their messages of progress. The “poetic moment,” or the distance to be crossed between a sensually-limited existence and the enlightened, reformist perspective of flight, is in such works as The Witch of Atlas and Queen Mab (1813) clearly distinguished between a grounded disbelief (often characterized in each work as corporeal suffering) and an aerial liberation with an unlimited view and surveying eye. The aeronaut’s true challenge was therefore not to dismiss sceptical minds, but to entice them to look “upwards.”

It is important to understand the relationship between visionary reform and the dialogue between the aeronautic zones in Shelley’s poetry. By aligning the poetic utterance with aeronautic flight and visionary reform, Shelley was able to draw on his beliefs in poetry’s power to change a person’s perceptual outlook. In the The Defence of Poetry, he argued that the “diviner manner” (681) of the poetic vision “enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought....and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” (681). In order to adjust the mind to revise “familiar objects,” the visionary poet must adopt an idiom wherein divergent perceptual states are given distinct roles. The figurative gap that separates the idealist from the sceptical cosmology is analogous to Shelley’s understanding of the poetic imagination’s essential mechanism – what Ronald Tetreault calls the “delicate balance of uncertainties,” where “the

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63 Ronald Tetreault reads the drive to cross such gaps as a rhetorical exercise, grounded in the power of poetry to effect public change. He points to The Defence of Poetry (1821), focusing on the visionary belief that “the pleasure resulting from the manner in which they express the influence of society or nature upon their own minds communicates itself to others and gathers a sort of reduplication from that community” (676).

64 Shelley is careful to temper his expectations for the revelations of the visionary generally: “Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they know the spirit of events” (Defence 677). This tempering of visionary capacity still accepts a significant defamiliarizing technique, despite its ignorance of the “form” of events.
poet’s own act of faith in his medium calls to the reader across the poetic moment to suspend disbelief and enter into a community of assent” (11). Tetreault understands this social poetics as operating in Bakhtinian terms, where “Discourse lives...on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context” (11). At issue, then, is the poet-prophet’s capacity for moral relationships, or Love, the “going out of our own nature” that will “put himself in the place of another and of many others” (Defence 682).

Shelley’s aeronautic communities, like all of his poetic dialogues, struggle for moral purchase. They are consistently sympathetically divided; effecting social change hinges on the poet’s capacity to bridge this sympathetic gap, without compromising the nature of his vision or his means of travel. The strength of the aeronautic paradigm in portraying this conflict was its capacity to contextualize spatially the emergent moral conflicts within global networks and systems of ontological mobility. The oft-noted divide between the Narrator and the Poet in Alastor (1815) is one prominent example in Shelley’s poetry of the tensions between those with a revelatory global vision, and those who inhabit more secure but limited spaces. The scope of the Poet’s vision-quest is specifically trans-national: it is qualified as a form of voyeuristic Orientalism, specifically one that seeks to transcend cultural signifiers and move into a landscape defined by a pure geography purged of sympathetic contact. Nigel Leask calls attention to how the Poet’s global vision of the landscape differs from the figuratively limited version of the Narrator – specifically how the “Protagonist’s metaphors are recast as metonymies,” and “the Caucasian source is represented as a stony mountain wasteland, a landscape of absence” (East 130). According to Leask, the Poet’s quasi-imperial quest for “origins” “[moves] ever further and outwards, employing ever more powerful resources in his search for an intellectual beauty which always gives him the slip” (124).
This movement “outwards,” however, might more accurately be called a movement 
upwards, supplemented by a diction of perspectival privilege unavailable to the Narrator, or to 
the other people who inhabit the poem. Modes of exploratory travel, and the conditions of 
the explorer’s mind, are made indistinguishable the further away the Poet travels from a local 
mindset. The Poet’s “wandering step” is described as “Obedient to high thoughts” (Alastor 
106, 107), and the method of travel that precedes his vision of the veiled maid is described in 
terms reminiscent of a synoptic surveying, depicting a seamless movement between huge 
distances: “The Poet wandering on, through Arabie / And Persia, and the wild Carmanian 
waste, / And o’er the aerial mountains which pour down / Indus and Oxus from their icy 
caves” (140-43). That his “flight” (231, 237, 280) is both unnatural and an escape is made 
clear by his sympathetic distance from those around him (“...the Spirit of wind / With 
lightning eyes, and eager breath, and feet / Disturbing not the drifted snow” [259-61]), and 
the ease with which he passes in “blind flight / O’er the wide aery wilderness” (231-32). On 
the other hand, the Narrator establishes his deliberately blinkered approach to perceptual 
variance and cultural semiosis; unlike the Poet, he remains geographically and cognitively 
rooted in place. He considers the world full of “deep mysteries” (23) that remain unresolved 
even after his self-deprecatingly described “obstinate questionings” (26); his position stays 
essentially “moveless” (42), having made his “bed / In charnels and on coffins” (23-4).65 The 
Narrator, even while remaining within ontologically-familiar human communities, submits as 
a “willing slave to the empirical world” (Tetreault 48). Ultimately, his own survey of “the 
bright arch of rainbow clouds, / And pendent mountains seen in the calm lake” (Alastor 213-
14) is committed to the predetermined sensory void of “death’s blue vault” (216).

65 Tetreault sees the Narrator as partaking of Shelley’s greater critique of Wordsworthian thought, where 
Shelley questions the older poet’s vision of man as “a vessel bound to the earth and dependent on time, the 
hubris of whose aspirations beyond mortality is checked by the meanest objects of nature” (48).
The state of aloofness in *Alastor* requires close attention, particularly in relation to the dynamics of distance and the mechanisms that allow visionary flight. The narrative tension in the poem emerges partly from the Narrator’s inability to appreciate the “vitally metaphorical” qualities of a geographically unbound and visionary travel scheme. The Poet’s visionary exploration is, we are told, motivated by the dream-maid’s “lofty hopes of divine liberty” (*Alastor* 159), unaware that there is no geographical correlative to the aspiration. His misanthropy is at least partially rationalized in the poem’s Preface, where we are told that the “adventurous genius led forth...to the contemplation of the universe” (“Preface” 92). This activity, which plays a necessary role in Shelley’s social renovation, takes place with the paradoxical risk of “self-centered seclusion” (92). Deliberately confusing outward, exploratory movement with modes of perceptual remoteness, this Preface states in no uncertain terms that “moral death” (93) comes to those who favour a communal seclusion over progressive imaginative investigation. Curiously, and in a reversal of a conventional understanding of figurative distance and the sympathetic impact of outward-bound exploration, the Preface states that those who remain obstinately “grounded,” as does the Narrator, partake in the more egregious form of distancing: that delusion and ethical collapse will come to those who, “loving nothing on this earth, and cherishing no hopes beyond, yet keep aloof from sympathies with their kind” (93).

The spatially-opposed positions discussed above, which highlight the struggle between ontological security and its unravelling, echoed the contemporary debates on the science of aeronautics. These debates paved the way for Shelley’s aeronautic utopia-making and the sympathetic conflicts that resulted from this process. Accordingly, we must consider

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66 Michael Scrivener has claimed that “the Visionary’s fate is not even remotely exemplary,” noting that the poem achieves ethical salvation through the “lesson-teaching” of the Narrator’s “communitarian act of sharing” (*Radical* 84).
how the mind is represented in a condition of enclosure, and how the putative aeronautic
liberation encourages spatial freedom. Before examining Shelley’s poetry directly, however, it
is helpful to examine some of the history of aeronautics, and its imaginative role in
supplementing social reform.

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Shelley’s chosen technological vehicle for illustrating social reform was without doubt
idiosyncratic. This was as true historically as it was poetically, not least because during his
most productive years the subject would have been somewhat outdated. This was not the
case during his youth, however. Between 1782 and 1804, developments in aeronautics were
fast, furious, and intensely scrutinized by a fascinated European (and eventually transatlantic)
public. Following the almost accidental creation of the first hot-air balloon in 1783 by Joseph
Michel and Jacques Étienne Montgolfier in France, that country became the de facto centre
for aeronautic science. It should be understood that there were two methods of balloning explored and practised in the Romantic period. These were, in the order of their discovery, the hot-air balloon (sometimes called the “smoke balloon”), and the hydrogen balloon. Each method had numerous variations – including the infamous “hybrid” varieties, such as Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier’s combination hydrogen-hot-air balloon.

John Wise, a successful American aeronaut, wrote in 1850 that after
the success of the Montgolfier brothers, France, and Paris in particular, was “the point of
embarkation for other worlds…a depot in the solar system. Even the skeptical in religion
began to think that a more exalted destiny awaited man, than to sink in the earth and sleep
forever in its mouldering ashes” (50). Wise describes a massive shift in the cosmological and
locomotive realities of the day as a result of these developments:

To make a long journey, or to circumnavigate the earth, fell into

insignificance, compared with the projects and ideas that were conceived.
The earth appeared now related to man, as the haycock in the field was to the lark, when he mounted its top with expanded wings, to launch himself into the immensity of space. Voyages to the moon and neighboring planets haunted the imagination of more than weak minds. The binding cord of gravitation had been severed, and there was no restraint above. No one could define the limit of operations to this new and important discovery. (50)

This lack of “restraint” was evidenced in a veritable explosion of terrific aeronautic experiments, employing the newest developments in chemistry, physics, and engineering on both sides of the English Channel. In the previous year, over twenty-two very public and very popular ascents had taken place, most of them in France. England was not entirely left out: the first non-Continental flight took place in London on September 15, 1784, under the direction of Vincent Lunardi. The ascent, near Moorfields, was attended by the Prince of Wales, and was watched by over 100,000 people. The early age of ballooning in Europe reached its popular peak in 1785, with Jean-Pierre Blanchard’s celebrated crossing of the Channel in a hydrogen balloon – an act for which he was lucratively rewarded by Louis XVI, to the tune of 12,000 livres.

And yet, even prior to the introduction of the balloon to the French military during the Revolutionary era, some in the British public were clearly wary of what the device signified. The reaction to the air-balloon was divided. Wise’s description of the new

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69 An anonymous publication, The Air-Balloon, or Blanchard’s Triumphal Entry into the Ethereal World (c. 1785), demonstrates the hesitant praise that accompanied the introduction of this device into British public life. The long poem begins in typical epic tone, yet the din of “Heavens’ Artill’ry” (8) that announces Jean-Pierre Blanchard’s machine leads ultimately to “universal-Fire,” with “Destruction hurl’d on ev’ry side / And Desolation spreading wide!” (9). The importance of the balloon is so monumental that Britain is reduced to a position of unequivocal subservience: “Britania th’ glorious scene survey’d / While prostrate on the ground she laid, / Fir’d with anxious expectation, / Wrapp’d in silent admiration!” (12). Indeed, the nebulous figure of Britannia is silent throughout, robbed of expression, as the classical gods Zeus, Minerva and Fame explain why they have seen fit to allow the French to develop this technology first. Minerva does express concern that the
“cosmic relativity” that arose in the wake of global aeronautics helps to explain the distrust of the perceptual vantages made possible by flight. The device’s apparent propensity to encourage progressive idealism in the form of philosophical abstractions was certainly behind some of the distrust. Tensions manifested themselves as debates over the perspectival “gap” that opened up between grounded and aerial observation. The preface of the anonymous six-canto poem, The Air-Balloon; or, The Sages Adventures in a Flight to the Moon (1784), recalls a time “when the public attention has been much roused by the wonderful tales propagated in Newspapers of the astonishing phaenomena of that machine, called an Ærostatic Ball or Air-Balloon, every place of consequence in the kingdom glowed with impatient ardour to become eye witness of the facts, which surpassed their credibility” (iv). The piece pokes fun at the uncertainties of observation characteristic to this activity – specifically, the inaccuracy of visual measurements made during aerial voyages, where the errors are the result of “philosophic pride” (ii). The author was also clearly disturbed by the way local spaces disappeared amidst greater global vistas. Referring specifically to Jacques crown of wisdom, “Which Britain’s Sons alone can claim” (22), has been passed on for the glory of “Bourbon’s Plains” (23). Ultimately, however, she can only rejoin with the thought that

As Wisdom should be unconfin’d
For to illuminate the mind,
And Blessings flow of ev’ry kind,
Each Kingdom should of these receive
As Lessons for them how to live;
And each to each I gave a share,
But reserv’d my Laurel here –
– For young Briton’s I have tri’d,
And o’er the Clouds have seen them ride,
To make each anx’ous for to wear
The Garland, which I hung in Air,
To stimulate each noble mind
In search of glory for to find… (23)

That Garland of genius and innovation had, unfortunately, already been given – the most Britons might hope for was the reflected glory of those who had gone before them. The fire might be “Universal,” but it was clearly more readily employed by some than others.

The publication reprints a letter of 10 Feb 1784, originally printed in the Norfolk Chronicle by one Blyth Hancock, which is said to have given birth to this “jeu d’esprit.” The author mocked the events of an actual aeronautic experiment conducted by one Mr. Bunn, “master of the Pantheon, at Norwich,” and noted, “I think it is like my friend Billy’s attempting to measure the exact height of Salisbury spire without his ever seeing it; or his taking the dimensions of a house in the Moon” (vi).
Charles – the first man to ascend in a hydrogen balloon and reach 1,800 feet – we are told of how the man “ascended so high as to lose sight of every thing below him, and could see nothing but the wide expanse in which he moved” (vi).

Works such as these go to great lengths to ridicule the privileging of theoretical science of aeronautics, much in the mode of Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). In that work’s third book, a Mennipean satire on experimental science (embodied in the flying island of Laputa itself), we see how the lack of practical credibility forms the basis for critique. Unlike Shelley’s aeronauts, Swift’s Laputans are remarkably incurious: “Imagination, Fancy, and Invention, they are wholly Strangers to, nor have any Words in their Language by which those Ideas can be expressed” (137); “neither Prince nor People appeared to be curious in any Part of Knowledge, except Mathematicks and Musick” (147). Even the “grounded” Balnibarbirians are not immune to the seductive nature of Laputan science: leaders who returned from Laputa “came back with a very little Smattering in Mathematicks, but full of Volatile Spirits acquired in that Airy Region” (150). The result is a profusion of Academies that produce ridiculous inventions, leaving the country with a collapsed agriculture and industry.

Judgments of this type carried on into the Romantic era. The balloon’s association with astonishment and pride (in the name of universal science) would eventually earn the ridicule of William Blake, who in “An Island on the Moon” (c. 1785) features balloons in a free-ranging satire on the salon environment (including a ridiculous portrait of Joseph Priestley as Mr. Inflammable Gas the Wind-finder). The foreign origin and internationalist implications of the science may have threatened a secure sense of British social progress, but these objections to aerostatics focused on its impracticality: being the product of a kind of dogmatic idealism, servicing the vanity of the inventor or pilot, and being without serious
public utility. Such issues would haunt the science well into Shelley’s lifetime. Conversely, the literary depiction of those remaining on the ground (and the objectors to the science) kept within a consistent range, moving between boorish ignorance to the self-imposed safety of conventional thinking (and occasionally, mere cynicism). Certainly, the extreme adherence to either position was reflected in many facets of political life, from domestic arguments about spending policies to the debate about the role of aeronautics in the French Revolution.

The air-balloon’s capacity for borderless travel was the source of both its wonder and its ridicule. The Romantic-era debate around the science of aeronautics re-enacted many contemporary ideological conflicts, particularly Revolutionary ones. Ballooning was also at this time an international science, in terms of its explorations of hitherto inaccessible areas of the world, and in the origins and aspirations of those performing these experiments. Its capacity to destabilize spatial understandings of the world was frequently characterized as a unifying activity, a true Enlightenment project. The first major publication to emphasize these qualities was the anonymous *The Aerostatic Spy, or, Excursions with an Air Balloon* (1785), which unabashedly advocated the use of aerostatics so that “the Men of the present Times [might] add the Element of Air to their Empire, and soar sublime in Fields of trackless

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71 In spite of the strong interest expressed in ballooning by European communities in the 1780s, as an activity it began a decline in popularity and technical development when Shelley was a young schoolboy. By 1810, when Joseph Gay-Lussac was performing high-altitude experiments at 21,000 ft, attention was waning. The number of articles in the popular press discussing balloons fell off precipitously. Increasingly risky experiments – particularly ones featuring high-altitude flights, hydrogen and mixed hydrogen-hot-air balloons – coupled with the cost and inefficiency of materials (to say nothing of the inability of aeronauts to direct their craft in any meaningful way), left the discipline with something of a suspect reputation. Still, most ballooning experiments were carried out with the utmost attention to human life. Louis XVI purportedly refused to allow human-piloted flights until the devices were determined to be safe; instead, animals – a sheep, a duck, and a rooster – were the first living beings to ascend in a human-designed flying machine. Not long afterwards, however, Pilâtre de Rozier became the first human to ascend in a balloon, on 21 November 1783, near Paris. Tragically, however, he was also the first fatality attributed to human flight: on 15 June 1785, he and his co-pilot, Pierre Romain, perished when their hybrid hydrogen-hot air balloon ignited and crashed, to the horror of the thousands of spectators who had gathered to watch. The peril of “fire” in ballooning was thus something that the public would have been aware of. Shelley certainly was, though in many of his early works, aeronautic fire is both a destructive and a creative force.
Æther” (iv). In the Preface, the author suggests many conventional uses for aerostatic engines: “By their Means Intelligence may be conveyed to Cities besieged; inaccessible Mountains and trackless Wastes may be explored; and, in short, scarcely any Place on the Surface of the terraqueous Globe will be impervious to the Aeronauts” (v). The beneficiaries from the science would be men unbound by nation, and the universal spirit of scientific advancement with which the aeronautic project is undertaken was eventually sublimated into a single figure who facilitates the speed of borderless travel. The unnamed protagonist of the work pursues his lost love across the “trackless wastes” in his balloon, assisted by Amiel, a “Spirit of the Atmosphere,” who powers his vehicle through supernatural agency (83). Acting as a guide and translator for all the places of the world they observe, the spirit’s external manifestation is eventually seconded to an internalized change of perception within the mind of the narrator. As such he is a personification of the alterations of mind made possible by this “destined” human innovation. As Amiel notes,

Men take to themselves the praise of having found out the science of Aerostation; but it was written in the Book of Destiny, that this discovery should be brought to light....The design is laudable, though the means might appear romantic....I have it in my power to give you a view of various scenes on earth below, which may tend to improve your heart, and to enlighten your understanding. I mean to show you what is passing in various parts of the globe, and leave it to your reflection to draw from the whole applications suitable to wisdom and morality. (82-3)

72 This work went through at least six editions, eventually ending up as The Balloon, or, Aerostatic Spy in 1786. Why the reordering of the story’s subject was thought necessary remains somewhat obscure, though there is certainly more and increasing attention on “spying” than on ballooning in the later editions.
The experiences of a fictionalized real-world travel narrative thus provide the framework for a reformist commentary, enabled by a synoptic global access. Those who travel by balloon are, with Amiel’s guidance, beyond earthly temptation, making them a kind of “ultimate” traveller when examining international moralities.

The voyage itself is a kind of whirlwind Grand Tour, and in many ways, *Aerostatic Spy* is a conventional “men-and-manners” travel narrative. The key difference is that for the majority of the time, Amiel and the narrator go totally unobserved by those on the ground. In this sense, the narrative mingles the conventions of a continental travel narrative with a technological mechanism that allows a spatially dissociated observation. For instance, visiting sumptuous and decadent Constantinople, they attend the seraglio of “Achmet,” a ruling figure of the Ottoman Empire:

[We] glided at a vast height over the walls of the Seraglio. Our descent was in the most unfrequented part of the gardens, when our Aerostatic globe ascending again, took the form of a beautiful star. This meteor attracted the sight of a groupe [sic] of beautiful young women at some distance, who had before been amusing themselves with various musical instruments. Alas! (said I) that so many fine creatures should thus be kept in perpetual imprisonment. (85-6)

To the spatially imprisoned denizens of this heavily bordered class, the device takes the form of a natural phenomenon. This passage also suggests the dual nature of the imprisonment. Unable to determine the true nature of the balloon, the physical limitations of their artificially finite world limit their ability to contextualize observed phenomena. The narrator pities them, but the critique goes beyond the boundaries of the seraglio: the narrator and his
guardian spirit are never caught or inconvenienced by the various and unenlightened societies they visit, and their scopic liberty is both international passport and way of seeing.\(^{73}\)

While history did vindicate some of the *Aerostatic Spy*'s author’s aspirations for these vehicles, one wonders to what extent he might have been pleased to see most of his ideas developed even further by the French and the Americans during the period of the Napoleonic Wars. The association of these vehicles with a globalized French radicalism was facilitated by scientific networks between the “revolutionary” countries of America and France. Across the ocean, in Philadelphia, Jean-Pierre Blanchard was busy assisting the birth of a young American aeronautical science, and cementing the image of the balloon as a symbol of transatlantic revolution. Blanchard – perhaps the most influential aeronaut of the 1790s (along with Lunardi) due to his having crossed the Channel – openly wished for France’s success in arms in his *Journal of My Forty-Fifth Ascension* (1793), while extolling the benefits of the perceptual liberties made possible by aeronautic ascents. His *Journal*, which details the first ascent of an aeronautic device in North America, reveals its association with the principles of the Revolution and universal emancipation. Blanchard’s experiments were fully endorsed by George Washington, complete with an autographed passport providing him *carte blanche* in his activities. These documents acted as icons of privilege,\(^{74}\) but also as

\(^{73}\) This liberty, and its transformative effects on both perceiver and perceived, is frequently remarked-upon. While traveling over the Pyrenees, the narrator remarks that these “Mountains which, viewed from the surface of the earth, shew like a stupendous pile that, penetrating the clouds, seems to pierce the aetherial sky. But such was our height in the Atmosphere, that they appeared scarcely as large as so many ant-hills, and their long-projected shade was lost” (198). This change in perception transfers easily onto his understanding of the dynamics and scope of human societies. Reflecting on the ambition of Kings, and their territorial desires and lust for power, he notes that “they contend for a small space on the Globe, which, of itself, is but a point in the vast extent of the Universe” (199). The moral compass, in the face of such expanded visual consciousness, is proportionally affected here, rendering the ambitions of those terrestrial beings nothing more than a species of myopic vanity. The presentation of that myopia is, however, determinedly social in nature: like the women in the seraglio, those obstinately sceptical minds – those who contend for “small spaces” – are “kept” (86) in perceptual servitude.

\(^{74}\) “How dear the name of WASHINGTON is to this people! with what eagerness they gave me all possible assistance, in consequence of his recommendation!” (25)
symbols of political solidarity with Blanchard’s country of origin (as conditioned by the French support of the American Revolution). 75

Echoing later in Percy Shelley’s hoped-for liberation of African slaves, Blanchard understood both French and American peoples as undergoing perceptual revolutions after witnessing – from either end – aeronautic experiments. From one angle, such experiences were inspiring, reminding the witnesses of their contingent and limited position in larger frameworks. 76 Yet, as seen in the Aerostatic Spy, the change in perception that followed the use of the air-balloon revealed a potentially problematic gap between the pilot and the grounded minds. “Liberty” was a condition that could be achieved even through the witnessing of such a device. Still, Blanchard’s descriptions of the reactions to aeronautic flight reveal a hierarchy of freedoms between the aeronaut and the witnesses: the latter often remained confined within a perceptually determined state. 77 Blanchard’s narrative demonstrates as much after landing in a rural field, where he encounters a “country-man” unfamiliar with such a device. This meeting, which Blanchard calls “a picturesque scene” (25), has all the hallmarks of a first contact narrative of exploration:

I spied him and enjoyed his whole surprize, when he saw through a tuft of trees such a monstrous machine, balancing on itself, and sinking in

75 Indeed, the flag carried by Blanchard’s balloon “was ornamented on one side with the armoric bearings of the United States, and on the other with the three colors, so dear to the French nation” (15).
76 Ascending to the skies above Philadelphia, Blanchard took in “the view of the country, whose vast extent was expanded before my eyes, [and] opened my mind to softer and more agreeable contemplations” (17). The “contemplations” brought on by his ascent “to the highest elevation” (17) are a pointed conflation of the political choices made by the American people and their willingness to pursue new avenues of “liberty.” “What sweet ecstacies take possession of the soul of a mortal, who leaving the terrestrial abode, soars into the ethereal regions!” (19), he gushes. This statement follows an extended discussion of the American people “which by philosophy as well as by dint of courage has acquired its liberty” (17).
77 The observers of his Philadelphia ascent, for example, pleased him greatly: “This people naturally serious and reflecting, whose mirth is so much more true and rational, as it is not apt to give away to the transports of the moment, shewed from all parts the most unequivocal marks of astonishment and satisfaction” (15). “Astonishment,” here as elsewhere, is a kind of openness to possibility, a kind of first stage that precedes the synthesizing of genuinely large-scale perceptions into the rational mind. In this context, such simplistic reactions encourage a primitivist reading of those grounded minds.
proportion, as the spirit wherewith it was animated left it....I let him hear my
voice, inviting him to draw near, but he either did not understand me or was
retained by a certain distrust....recollecting that the exhilarating juice of the
grape was always amongst mankind the happiest sign of friendship and
conciliation, I shewed him a bottle of wine....I invited him to drink, he would
not venture, then I drank first, and he followed my example. Becoming soon
familiar, he assisted me in my operations; when another country-man, armed
with a gun, came to the spot. Never did I see the expression of astonishment
so striking as in the features of this man: he dropped his gun and lifted up his
hands toward heaven: how I wished to be able to understand him! The first
country-man...spoke to the new-comer, and persuaded him to draw near with
confidence. Come hither, said he...this is an honest man who has descended
here, he has excellent wine, whereof he has given me to drink already; he has
a certificate from our WASHINGTON, he has shewn it to me; but as I
cannot read, come here and read it. (24-5)
The recurring role of “astonishment” reveals the hierarchy of “perceptual liberty”: while
both American and Frenchman are united in a spirit of political liberty through the figure of
Washington, it is the balloon which figuratively translates a more sophisticated freedom,
wrapped up in a discourse of ethnographic observation and coercion. To the country-man,
the machine is “animated” by “spirit,” and even the quasi-religious exclamations of the
second country-man are reduced to a primal act.

Nonetheless, the balloon maintained a lasting appeal amongst radical social critics,
artists and common folk alike. Some artists depict everyday encounters with the air-balloon
in settings more modest than the revolutionary utopia.\(^7\) The sanguine expectations of a liberation from earthly concern can be seen in Anna Barbauld’s “Washing Day” (1797), which displays the juxtaposition of air-balloons with domestic drudgery. Barbauld exploits the gap between “sport” and “toil,” showing how youthful hope can be rekindled even in the most depressive material circumstances. In this poem, she uses the balloon to effect a symbolic triumph over formerly-insurmountable adversities, translating the fragility of the balloon-vision through an interplay of immediate despair and idealistic triumphs. The “petty miseries of life” (28), presented in mock-epic form, are both domestic and feminine in effect; relief is sought through the “bubbles” (85) of verse, characterized in the poem as the “shelter” of the grandmother and the “floating bubbles” (81) of soap blown by the children through pipes. And yet the fragile escapism of the soap-bubbles is tempered by the very real historical development of air-balloons: “little dreaming then / To see, Montgolfier, thy silken ball / Ride buoyant through the clouds – so near approach / ‘The sports of children and the toils of men” (81-4). Though it is Barbauld, and not the washer-women, who witnesses the balloon, she nonetheless draws together the metaphors of women’s escape by paralleling such fragile spheres in several disciplines: washing (soap-bubbles), radical travel (air-balloon), and poetry (“bubbles of verse”). The juxtaposition of the dreamed balloon with the implied

\(^7\) Those interested in manufacturing their own balloons had plentiful access to the many pamphlets and manuals detailing how to home-make such devices. One such publication from 1784, entitled *Breslaw's Last Legacy* (after Philip Breslau, a German magician who came to England in the 1760s), gives specific information on how to make an air balloon. The manual is dedicated to discussions of sleights of hand (*legerdemain*) and other magic trickery. It is not clear whether Breslau himself actually wrote the *Last Legacy*. The *Broadview Anthology of Romantic Literature* notes that he was its author; yet no attribution appears in the publication itself, and it is not clear whether Breslau wrote anything at all during his lifetime. It seems just as likely that Breslau’s name was used as a selling point, given his popularity, and that it was a compilation of “how-to” magic tricks, which were themselves growing in popularity at the time, as evidenced by such publications as *The Conjurer's Magazine* (which ran from 1792-4), the works of Henri Decramps (particularly his *Philosophical Amusements; or, Easy and Instructive Recreations for Young People*) and the many works of *legerdemain* attributed to Henry Dean. Byron, in a letter to Francis Hodgson, associated Breslau with the mollifying performances of an impossible Christian God, whose religion encouraged the belief in absurdities: “As to miracles, I agree with Hume, that it is more probable men should lie or be deceived, than that things out of the course of nature should so happen. Mahomet wrought miracles; Brothers the prophet had *proselytes*, and so would Breslau the conjurer, had he lived in the time of Tiberius” (606).
difficulty of women’s popular success in poetry is touching, but Barbauld’s artful paralleling 
of chronology and gender suggests that these barriers would be overcome eventually. As the  
“dreamed” balloon offers temporary relief from domestic toil, the symbol of the actual  
balloon – communicated through the apostrophized Montgolfier – represents both a 
material and a symbolic hope for transcendence. For Barbauld, poetry’s phenomenological 
function works in similar ways to real technological developments: in the case of the balloon, 
offering both a temporary relief and a possible transcendence of arbitrary and gendered 
codes that leave women “stretched upon the rack” (29). 

No stranger to such radical technologies, Barbauld had experienced firsthand during 
her close friendship with Joseph Priestley the pneumatic troughs and air pumps which 
became the material inspiration for several other poems (most famously in “The Mouse’s 
Petition” [1773]). Percy Shelley’s idea of the air balloon as having volatile imaginative and 
political potentials fits into a tradition of Priestleyan thought – namely one that considered 
how the scientific basis for a new technology might itself be the key to understanding the 
nature of message it could deliver. Priestley had advanced such notions in his Experiments and 
Observations (1790), describing a phenomenological “domino effect” upon encounters with 
radical philosophies or technologies: 

No philosophical investigation can be said to be completed, which leaves any 
thing unknown that we are prompted by it to wish we could know relating to 
it. But such is the necessary connection of all things in the system of nature, 
that every discovery brings to our view many things of which we had no 
imagination before, the complete discovery of which we cannot help wishing 
for; and whenever these discoveries are completed, we may assure ourselves 
they will farther increase this kind of satisfaction….It was ill policy in Leo X.
to patronize polite literature. He was cherishing an enemy in disguise. And the English hierarchy (if there be anything unsound in its constitution) has equal reason to tremble even at an air-pump, or an electrical machine. (137-38)

Priestley’s linking of philosophical, technological and political change was part of his project of connecting the material to the divine. His scientific prophets were, in the minds of radicals and conservatives alike, heralds of a revolutionary age. The technological result of the philosophical explorer’s projects – the air pumps and balloons of this era, for example – became kinds of “difference engines” for calculating progressive potential. The symbolic role of such exploratory devices amounted to a psychological shift all on its own, as such devices represented not only the Promethean drive of the inventor/explorer, but also a kind of “collateral witnessing” (“the English hierarchy”), wherein exposure to them forms a “necessary” cognitive connection.

Having been introduced to the balloon by progressive and radical thinkers, it was little wonder that Shelley considered aeronautics as being fundamentally connected to the imaginative resistance to conservative thought. The man who first exposed him to the science of aeronautics was Dr. James Lind, physician to George III, amateur scientist and itinerant lecturer at Eton. It was during Shelley’s late Eton years that he encountered Lind, though the two apparently met outside the classroom, discussing literature, science and philosophy. In his biography of Shelley, James Bieri claims that there were “many parallels

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79 Lind has recently become a figure of some interest to Shelleyan scholars, particularly in investigations that seek to uncover the depth of his scientific influence on the Shelleys. See in particular Chris Goulding’s “The Real Doctor Frankenstein?”, in which Goulding argues that it was Lind’s scientific authority, as received through Shelley, that most influenced Mary Shelley’s writing of Frankenstein.

80 Scholars such as Carl Grabo and P.M.S. Dawson have suggested that it was Lind who first introduced Shelley to the writings of William Godwin, in particular Political Justice. The association of a science accused of abstraction with the political theorems of Godwin’s grand statement must surely have been no coincidence in the development of Shelley’s politicization of the balloon.
between Lind’s interests and those Shelley developed, but both already had a fondness for air balloons when they met” (Youth 94). A pamphleteer and traveller (as far as Iceland in one direction and China in the other), Lind’s association with aeronautics went beyond mere “fondness.” The older man had corresponded regularly with those who were performing some of the earliest practicable aerostatic experiments in Great Britain. Lind’s influence in this field, combined with his dissemination of information on chemistry, suggests that the imaginative effect on Shelley’s poetry was constructive. The older man was Shelley’s connection to a time when hopes still ran high for the science before it became tainted by nationalistic politics and militarism.

In addition to his knowledge of Lucretius, which Hugh Roberts claims was his primary source of meteorological information, Shelley’s readings of Erasmus Darwin and Adam Walker provided him with the inspiration for the peculiar atmospheric interactions in his aeronautic poetry. Walker’s 1799 System of Familiar Philosophy was well-known to Shelley, Walker having lectured at Syon House and Eton during Shelley’s stay at those schools. Shelley saw the “transitional” nature of aeronautical flight – which in some models included the generation of hydrogen to the inflammation of combustible materials – as participating

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81 A lifelong devotee of the practical applications of chemistry, Lind was a friend and correspondent of Dr. Joseph Black of Edinburgh (who amongst other things was the first person to isolate carbon dioxide). In the midst of the balloon-craze of the 1780s, Dr. Black reminisced in a letter to Lind on Henry Cavendish’s 1766 discovery of hydrogen, and Black’s subsequent (he notes 1767 and 1768) aerostatic experiments using that gas. See Wise, 39-40. Viable materials were, however, unavailable at the time, and Black’s experiments were unable to proceed to fruition. He does note of his techniques, however, that “a gentleman in the South of Ireland…had tried [them], and that [they succeed] perfectly well” (Wise 40). It may be of further interest to investigate the association between Irish revolutionary discourse and the development of aeronautics there. This investigation might be particularly useful given Shelley’s radical experiences in Ireland during his early literary career.

82 This is to say nothing of Shelley’s general feelings of affection for the man. Thomas Jefferson Hogg reflected that Shelley considered “This man [to be] exactly what an old man ought to be. Free, calm-spirited, full of benevolence, and even of youthful ardor; tempered, as it had ever been, by his amiable mind. I owe to that man far, ah! far more than I owe to my father; he loved me, and I shall never forget our long talks, where he breathed the spirit of the kindest tolerance and the purest wisdom” (Bieri, Youth 95n69).

83 Walker’s 86-page pamphlet “Analysis of a Course of Lectures on Natural and Experimental Philosophy” contained discussions of pneumatics and astronomy that would have been informative reading for those interested in aeronautics (particularly as these related to the concept of changes in chemical states and global positioning).
in a greater natural and chemical cycle. Darwin’s writings, on the other hand, provided him with an early literary vision of Walker’s discussions, particularly ones that linked flight with discussions of steam and steam power. In *The Botanic Garden* (1791), Darwin speculated that the advent of steam technologies would facilitate the science of flight:

Soon shall thy arm, *Unconquer’d Steam!* afar
Drag the slow barge, or drive the rapid car;
Or on wide-waving wings expanded bear
The flying-chariot through the fields of air.

– Fair crews triumphant, leaning from above,
Shall wave their fluttering kerchiefs as they move;
Or warrior-bands alarm the gaping crowd.

And armies shrink beneath the shadowy cloud. (I.289-96)

This association of steam and flight would have important ramifications for Shelley’s moral conception of aeronautics. In Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, chemical interactions resembling steam are associated with both love and flight, a fusion of chemistry and philosophy clearly gleaned from the earlier poet. The social ramifications of radical science was obvious to Darwin: the physical properties of steam, combined with the imaginative potential of the balloon, led to a remarkable vision of human freedom. As the steam which powers Darwin’s balloon is “Unconquer’d” (that is to say, chemically and spatially liberated from other states), it correspondingly “un-conquers” by “dis-arming” both the aeronauts and the conventional

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84 The interrelations between animal and “natural” realms is hinted at by Darwin when he notes, “Priestley’s analysis of the constituents of the air and certain gases, Lavoisier’s determination of the nature of water, and the wide interest and experimentation in electricity and meteorological phenomena contribute to the explanation of that round of creation, destruction, and renovation in which clouds, heat, rain, gases, the growth and destruction of plants and animals, and the activities of electricity all play a part” (qtd. in Grabo 50).
armies: the aeronauts, armed with “kerchiefs” and shadows, accomplish their revolt through non-violent means.

Following the kinds of peaceable perceptual revolutions he witnessed in Darwin, Shelley uses aeronautics to gesture towards unconfined freedoms that ultimately herald the obsolescence of perceptual and historical boundaries. Balloons were in this sense part of what Michael Scrivener calls Shelley’s “utopian negation of actuality,” where “utopia is pointed to rather than embodied in the language” (240). With its capacity to depict landscape and culture from the ever-changing perspective of aerial vantages, aeronautics seemed, in principle, to be a mode of travel literally exempt from debasement. This symbolic access gave the science an aura of perpetual discovery that Shelley would use to strong effect in Promethens Unbound. For example, in the concluding act of the drama, the Earth celebrates flight as the apotheosis of a human science in a liberated and unconfined age:

The lightning is his slave; heaven’s utmost deep
Gives up her stars, and like a flock of sheep
They pass before his eye, are numbered, and roll on!
The tempest is his steed, he strides the air;
And the abyss shouts from her depth laid bare,
‘Heaven, hast thou secrets? Man unveils me; I have none.’ (4.418-23)

The ostensible benefits of such spatially-unlimited explorations always seem impending, symbolically mobile and devoid of material form. For Shelley, visionary travel was defined in large part by its imaginative ability to sustain itself indefinitely, and he consistently used a

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85 Shelley was attentive to the abuse of technical innovations, particularly as they revealed what he considered to be a lack of imaginary foresight in terms of social development. In the Defence, he asks, “To what but a cultivation of the mechanical arts in a degree disproportioned to the presence of the creative faculty which is the basis of all knowledge is to be attributed the abuse of all invention for abridging and combining labour, to the exasperation and inequality of mankind?” (696).
metaphorical lexicon that reflected the changing circumstances of a movement without a definable limit.

Technologies which employed unstable chemical states facilitated such needs directly. The transformations occurring at the cognitive level have their correlative in the physical changes necessary to aerostatic travel. Fire, hot air, steam, smoke, and clouds in his poetry are all variously employed as representative transitional states linked with new modes of locomotion in general and flight in particular. Steam played a particularly important role in this symbolic system: as a transitional elemental phase, steam, and vapours resembling it offered the perfect image of an ephemeral state within a greater chemical cycle. Steam, smoke, clouds, and the production of hydrogen were also all central to early aeronautical experiments, due in part to experiments using oxidized iron in the generation of hydrogen. Shelley associated vaporized water with a greater historical and intellectual process that tended both chemically and figuratively with upward movement that nonetheless maintained a connection with both purely vaporous and aquatic physical states. His poetry abounds with steams and vapours, and most of the time these chemical states are associated with an oracular or visionary capacity, as seen in Demogorgon’s cave or the vapour-borne revolutionary messengers of *Prometheus Unbound*. I would argue that Shelley’s visionary travellers, who worked within progressive dimensions of perceptual liberation, drew their energy from the natural phenomena associated with technological flight. What remains is for the Shelleyan reader to parse the incidents of flight in his works, to determine how this mode

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86 Wise notes that early aeronauts “based the idea of success in having discovered how to make artificial clouds, supposing they were constituted of a vapor or gas specifically lighter than atmosphere. This doctrine was even maintained by the advocates of the Montgolfierian system, after the hydrogen balloon was introduced” (Wise 34). Thus, while no actual steam was used in the immediate powering of the balloon, it would have been acknowledged to play an important role in the generation of flight as a mode of locomotion.
of global travel facilitated the imaginative relativity he saw as necessary to the liberation of ontologically-imprisoned minds.

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iv.

This section will examine in detail several of Shelley’s poems – “To a Balloon, Laden with KNOWLEDGE,” “The Two Spirits: An Allegory,” Prometheus Unbound, and The Witch of Atlas – and will demonstrate how aeronautic exchange mitigates the dehumanizing effects of visionary exploration. The side-effect of this mitigation was the rendering contingent of local space and ontological security. Shelley’s desire for a technologically-assisted, psychological revolution is characterized by the minds of his revolutionary prophet-aeronauts, but the poet was also fascinated by the social repercussions following the introduction of the destabilizing artefact. His poetry demonstrates distinct changes in his conception of the air-balloon, moving from an early stage that emphasizes rapidly shifting spatial perception to a later, more reserved hope for political progress through visionary dialogue with embedded minds. In these poems, the balloon is never merely the messenger for Shelley’s desired changes, but is an essential component of the message itself.

Part of this analysis thus requires some understanding of aerial perspective, and the relationship between an observer and the objects of a landscape. It does seem part of Shelley’s plan to discover a new ontology of a “universal landscape” (Barrell, Landscape 7), as seen from aerial vantages. As John Barrell notes in his discussion of Thomson (in relation to landscape painting), a poetic eye’s aerial, general prospect gave “an impression of the order of its own progress over the objects in the landscape, rather than of those objects themselves” (22). Those objects within the landscape “are in turn governed by the
preposition ‘o’er’, as the eye is snatched over them” (22). I do not think that, in depicting landscapes, Shelley partakes in the total subordination of particularity; nor do I believe that he is necessarily forcing some formal idea of what constituted a proper diachronic understanding of that landscape. There is no doubt that in writing of real and imagined landscapes from aerial vantages the features of that landscape will often all be placed as objects of a single verb: “‘survey’, for example, or ‘view’. They are made to be passive under the eye, if they are not always felt to be so, and they suffer the action of the verb” (22).

Nonetheless, if the Shelleyan aeronaut expected boundless landscapes, Shelley the poet exerted energies to the contrary, seeking ways to avoid closing them “within [a] usual rigid structure” (29). It is safe to say that there is some tension between his aeronauts’ surveying of spaces as they occur in broad historical frameworks; if those spaces embody the materially-limited minds of non-privileged visionaries, they are, as spaces, transformable, as we shall see in *The Witch of Atlas*. His landscapes are always representative in some way of human interest, and as such he is aware of how they are shaped by perceiving intelligences. His visionary aeronauts thus repeatedly struggle with a “historical topography” that was dominated by the embedded interests of local spaces, and local minds.

The role of fire in “To a Balloon, Laden with KNOWLEDGE” is an excellent place to start an analysis of aeronautic exchange in Shelley’s poetry. The poem’s early date of composition (c. 1812) and its use of fire reflect the author’s interest in modes of locomotion used within revolutionary paradigms. The sonnet opens with an invocation of a “Bright ball of flame” (1), which, in context of ballooning, could signify either an illuminated balloon,\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{87} Many early aeronautic night-flights, both hydrogen and hot-air, featured multiple lanterns both for effect and for the ability to see.
or the flames powering a hot-air balloon. The nature of the “Knowledge” borne by the balloon is never referred to specifically, only that the achievement of it will allow liberation from a nebulous tyranny. And yet in line 5, he mentions “the Fire thou bearest,” distinguishing it from the “Bright ball of flame” (which is the “thou” being addressed). The separation of the “Fire” from the “flame” is the distinction between the knowledge that allows the flight and the mundane object itself. The “ray of courage” given to the “oppressed and poor” (9) is transmitted in part through sources of light – like the “spark…gleaming on the hovel's hearth” (10). The fire-knowledge transforms that “spark” into a greater political fire, “which through the tyrant's gilded domes shall roar” (11) – a process paralleled with the physical act that allows the flight of the balloon in the first place (the “gilded dome” itself being a stand-in for the balloon).

When he pronounces “soon shalt thou / Fade like a meteor in the surrounding gloom” (5-6), he is speaking of the balloon, but the implication is that the Knowledge is essentially uncontainable. Timothy Morton clarifies the spatial indeterminacy of Shelley’s revolutionary agent (which could either be Knowledge or some material facilitator):

Rather than embodying a sense of “here,” of home and hearth, Shelley’s imagery of the star or meteor presents nature (and culture) as decentered, unfamiliar, elsewhere. Shelley figures enlightening knowledge as a spark or star that persists within the vastness of space. The space of nature has become the “gloom” of political oppression, the figurative logic is of concentric containers: the knowledge is a ball of light contained in the

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88 Shelley sets his balloon-flight in the evening, describing the passage of the Balloon “through the gloom of even” (“Balloon” 1). Nighttime balloon-ascents were regarded as a fantastic spectacle. On 4 August 1807, André-Jacques Garnerin (incidentally also the inventor of the parachute) made the first known a nighttime ascent, over Paris, his hydrogen balloon illuminated by twenty lamps. (Coincidentally, Shelley was also born on 4 August.)
balloon, itself contained in the sky. Each container in turn becomes the contents of the next, in a flip-flopping transition between figures and grounds. (“Nature” 191)

This “flip-flopping transition” occurs not merely because Knowledge is literally immaterial and “unquenchable” (7), but also because of its configuration as an aeronautic phenomenon: it stands in for a transmittable, physical process – in this case, the exothermic transformation of one physical state into another. The perceptual revolution is thus as contingent as the systems that have been torn down. The Balloon is therefore the Fire-messenger – an object rendered important by what allows its ascent beyond an earthly plain, where Fire can be merely a spark in a household fireplace. The “unquenchable” knowledge borne by the balloon is in this way comparable to the “Unconquer’d steam” of Darwin’s air balloons, both in how it destabilizes conventional symbols of reigning power, and in the humble means by which this destabilization is effected. Shelley’s flight-knowledge is, unlike Darwin’s, notable for its implied violence – the “roaring” fires that purge the tyrant’s domes – against a reigning tyrannical order. Furthermore, this purported knowledge announces its own usurpation, forecasting the notion that the technology of ballooning will eventually slide into obsolescence, having given way to some future process (the “fading” of the Balloon reflecting the descent of the container, rather than the Fire).

Such symbols fascinated Shelley, in that they facilitated the kinds of ontological instability central to his poetic and political ethos: they were material products of human ingenuity which allowed a prophetic vision of progressive development, ever-escalating visions so farsighted they could anticipate their own decline. The potential conflict between globally mobile and static minds inherent in this process did, however, remain a pressing concern for the poet. The inability to engage subjects on a common sympathetic level was a
prominent fear in this paradigm. The danger in such a radically divergent perceptual makeup was the possibility of a kind of visionary paternalism. As his poetry developed, so did the notion that, as far as visionaries were concerned, some kind of dialogue between reformer and embedded mind was necessary. Shelley’s subsequent poetry begins to concern itself with the relationships such disparate philosophic “realms,” typified in his aeronautic poetry as the inhabitants of earth and sky. The motif of an aerostatic exchange in this conceptual system – whether of information, opinion, or even chemical interactions – is evident in poems such as “Ode to Liberty,” “The Cloud,” and “Ode to the West Wind.” Images of clouds, steam, and vapours pervade such works, with atmospheric phenomena taking on characteristics of sentience. Shelley used such interactions to approximate a dialogic exchange, wherein lower states could ascend to higher ones while still maintaining awareness of their former condition. “The Cloud,” for example, emphasizes Shelley’s essentially cyclical, reciprocal view of atmospheric elements, the mutual electric love between the genii and the pilot; or the cloud’s noting that “I change, but I cannot die” (76) as “the winds and sunbeams, with their convex gleams, / Build up the blue dome of air” (79-80). “Ode to the West Wind”’s “tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean” (17) are, according to Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill, “based on the exchange of water and vapour between sky and sea” (763). This transition does, however, rely on the aerial – or “higher” – phenomena as being the apotheosis of this progressive change: the earthbound subject, in this case, seeks agency to join the wind in its “wanderings over Heaven” as a “comrade” (“Wind” 49).

In such instances, the “comradeship” between elemental zones is premised on a linear perceptual improvement: those on the ground are in a way subject to the inspirational energies of the higher figure. This relationship is particularly obvious in his earlier works, such as Queen Mab (1813). Generally speaking, Mab’s role is to escort humanity through an
inevitable and progressive change. Her time with Ianthe in the poem is predominantly described as a cosmic flight, from which is visible a grand tapestry of historical unravelling. Mediating change with spatially- and imaginatively-confined human subjects is less of a priority for Mab. In this poem, Shelley struggles to articulate a mechanism that permitted the sharing of visionary power, where that act of sharing did not relegate the earthbound to a state of passive reception – a slack-jawed astonishment akin to the “native” American witnesses of Blanchard’s balloon.

For instance, the spirit of Ianthe, when divorced from its corporeal limitations,89 “aspires to Heaven, / Pants for its sempiternal heritage” (1.147-48). This directional need, experienced as something like a corporeal lust, situates Mab’s privileged position. Shelley’s metaphor for Mab’s visionary flight is clearly derived from aeronautic paradigms: her “magic car” (1.207), possessed of “celestial hoofs” (1.213) and “burning wheels” (1.215), is both a dignified symbol and a means for accessing this “heritage.” Throughout the poem, moments of imaginative transformation are linked to directed flight, where aeronautic moments represent the liberation from material determinism and spatial confinement. The opening of the second canto, for example, sets up the reader as a solitary observer awaiting the controlled liberation of Mab’s flight: as “the sun’s highest point / Peeps like a star o’er ocean’s western edge” (2.14-5), “Then has thy fancy soared above the earth / And furled its wearied wing / Within the Fairy’s fane” (2.19-21). Here, as elsewhere in his poetry, the diction of “elevation” transposes the sun (the immediate celestial orientation) into a greater system of reference. This association of height and prophetic vision is understood as a triumph over limited sensory access:

...the events

89 “[T]he unwilling sport / Of circumstance and passion” (1.152-3).
Of old and wondrous times
Which dim tradition interruptedly
Teaches the credulous vulgar, were unfolded
In just perspective to the view;
Yet dim from their infinitude. (2.246-51)

Just as Shelley’s aeronauts view the landscape changing from the vantage of aerial privilege, so too do they understand the corresponding change in culture. It is important to include culture within the pathetic fallacy of nature’s fundamental transformation, and, in fact, to understand “nature” as largely dependent on the altered ontologies of culture. Two concerns are apparent, however, after the depiction of these revelatory moments: isolation and the imperative nature of visionary travel’s revelations. The first, a recurring motif in the works of Wordsworth and Mary Shelley, is the solitude of the imaginative subject at the moment of global apotheosis. Silence and isolation are what preserve the subject’s “metaphor of peace” (4.15), linking the revelation to a kind of Wordsworthian regeneration, purged of social contact, as witnessed in some readings of *Tintern Abbey*. However, Shelley’s vision of global ontological change differs from Wordsworth’s in that Mab directs Ianthe’s vision. Ianthe’s spirit, instructed to “stand / High on an isolated pinnacle” (2.252-53), is made to discover that that “solitude might love to lift / Her soul above this sphere of earthliness” (4.16-7). The “High...isolated pinnacle” necessary for this “unearthly” vision distinguishes the viewer so starkly from the “intermingling din” (4.41) that she eventually comes to resemble not merely the Fairy, but an inscrutable and inhuman deity:

...all that the wide world contains
Are but thy passive instruments, and thou
Regard’st them all with an impartial eye,
Whose joy or pain thy nature cannot feel,
Because thou hast not human sense,
Because thou art not human mind. (6.214-19)

This is quite different from the shared vision in Wordsworth’s poem, and contains little sense of a return to society (as we see in that poem). The surveying, “impartial eye” – which is variously the eye of Ianthe, Mab, the spirit of Nature, and the apostrophized reader – located high above the sphere of earthly concern, may indeed have as its object the removal of earthly wrongs. Nonetheless, its motivations for doing so inevitably edge into a paternalistic dogma. If the ultimate goal of spatially liberated global vision was to encourage spiritual and political reform, Mab’s method comes with the price of sympathetic proximity.

Visionary travel and reform in *Queen Mab*, which are positively compared to the “dim tradition” of a myopic, earthly existence, require surrender to a dogmatic, almost inhuman, authority. What spatial liberation is gained from the breaking of earthly boundaries is subsequently lost in social proximity during her mediated aerial travels. Furthermore, Mab’s necessitarian imagination cannot be considered truly spatially liberated, as it resembles more of a metaphysical “tour guide” than the kinds of free historical association we will later see in *Prometheus Unbound*. The “glorious privilege / Of virtue and wisdom” (2.53-4) possessed by Mab and impressed upon Ianthe during her ascent “above this sphere of earthliness” also raises the concern about the kinds of minds who instigate such changes. While Shelley is unequivocal about the need to ascend “The gradual paths of an aspiring change” (9.148), his diction reveals some ambivalence about this change’s necessity. Tetreault, arguing that Ianthe is a surrogate for the reader’s imagination, detects a straightjacketed experience of this ostensibly unbounded apotheosis: “Mab’s reiterated ‘Behold...behold’ directs our attention irritatingly. Her fondness for the imperative mood is matched by the flatly declarative
utterances with which she develops the vision. Whether referring to the past, present, or future, her language always indicates some determinate signified that admits of no interpretation....Mab leaves little to the imagination” (33). The implications of this “imperative mood” in the midst of a visionary dialogue are that genuine imaginative exploration is deferred in favour of Mab’s surrogate revelation. Ianthe’s ability to “witness” is so reliant on Mab’s “magic car” and “impartial eye” that her own capacity for visionary perspective is compromised. Even that glorious Galilean transformation of sun to star is made vaguely sinister by the repetition of a directed “necessity”: “Thou must have marked the lines...Thou must have marked the billowy clouds” (2.6, 9; emphasis added).

Michael Scrivener has observed that while “Utopian speculation” in Shelley’s writing “sustains desire for social change, and encourages activism,” it nonetheless “has a legacy of authoritarianism” (xiii). Shelley’s subsequent Utopian visionaries, from Laon and Cythna to Prometheus and Asia, maintain decidedly less imperative tones in charting reform and directing the perspectives of unenlightened minds. Many of his later poems demonstrate the relativity necessary to a fruitful dialogue between visionary traveller and embedded minds. “The Two Spirits: An Allegory” (c. 1818) offers what is perhaps the most convincing portrait of Shelley’s growing consciousness of the space between aeronautical and earth-bound imaginations. Working from manuscript evidence, O’Neill and Leader assert that “Spirits” “cannot be regarded as finished” (739), but overlook its symmetry when measured as a philosophical dialogue on the subject of embedded and disembedded minds. Like many of his aeronautic paradigms, the basis for the allegorical conflict is perceptual, premised on spatial division. This division is reproduced structurally: the poem’s strophe-antistrophe-epode structure gives rise to an exchange between proponents and opponents of aeronautic travel, followed by an ambiguous resolution that accepts both imaginative indeterminacy and
a more limited gradualism. The arguments of the aerial and grounded figure are given equal
formal weight, each being synthesized by an arbitrating epodic vision of similar length and
value.

Critics have traditionally distinguished the first and second spirits as Byronic-cynic
and Shelley-idealyst; Charles Robinson, for example, claims that in this poem, as in Julian and
Maddalo (1819), “Shelley succinctly distinguished his ‘spirit’ of meliorism from that of
Byron’s fatalism” (2). However, in “The Two Spirits,” if the terms of the allegory are not
couched in some kind of system of aeronautical metaphors, they lose some of their effect.
Situating the allegory in purely biographical terms is a rather limited affair, given the obvious
stress implied between spatially airborne and grounded voices. Scrivener observes that
“Shelley never fully resolved the tension, which is embodied in his concept of the poet-
prophet or philosophical reformer, who exists between actuality and potentiality. He is at
once a philosophical reformer, like Godwin, and a millenarian, impatient to drag heaven
down to earth or pull earth up to heaven” (36). Scrivener’s use of the ultimate boundaries of
Earth and Heaven as the respective philosophical zones of cautious gradualism (“actuality”) and
radical reform (“potentiality”) are appropriate when considering “Spirits.” To each of
these relative observers, their position of observation is the primary factor limiting the
impact of their recommendations. One “float[s] above the Earth” (2), while the other is on
“dull earth slumberbound” (30). Second Spirit’s flight is “plumed with strong desire” (1), and
scores a “flight of fire” (3) across the heavens (much like the “Balloon”’s); First Spirit
inhabits a ground where “the gloom is deep and stark” (29) (aligning him with Alastor’s
Narrator). This gap in perception is the unspoken thematic centre of the poem: as each Spirit
works through their respective warnings and encouragements, they become, in Scrivener’s
words, “impatient to drag heaven down to earth, or pull earth up to heaven.”
In Shelley’s Neoplatonic understanding of the perfectible mind, sources of light are a major metaphorical concern relative to how individual consciousness grapples with greater social and cosmic spaces. Universal light (and its source) is frequently shown without geographic correlation, or fixity in a local context. The anxiety over sources of light – and the implied beneficial knowledge that issues from them – becomes clear in the face of First Spirit’s reluctance to be persuaded by Second Spirit’s argument. This reluctance stems less from Second Spirit’s intimidating magnificence and more from his narcissism and arrogance – his belief is that his flight provides him with superior perceptual access. He attempts a kind of Copernican revolution in perspective when he asks First Spirit to “mark” its position “On high, far away” (32), to see him as a new point of celestial reference, indistinguishable from the “moon” and “meteors” that “linger around my flight” (15). The psychic, rather than physical, distance between the two is manifested through compulsive sequences in the First Spirit’s cosmology, shown in his four-fold, fatalistic refrain of “Night is coming.” These repeated warnings are expressive of fear and caution, for even the dependable sources of light used in the “revolutionary space” of the Second Spirit can be extinguished: “swift the clouds of the hurricane / Yon declining sun have overtaken” (21-22). Darkness for the First Spirit represents the perverse safety of immediacy, and a violent oblivion obsessively welcomed by virtue of its inevitable, familiar recurrence. This reliance on verifiable perceptual phenomena marks the First Spirit as one who is sure of its own ontological security beyond his own experience; outside his constructed “actuality” lies the inarguable (though exaggerated) threat of annihilation. Oblivious, or in defiance of this warning, Second Spirit asserts his reliance on “the calm within and light around / Which makes night day” (27-8). The experience of perceptual change is thus twofold for the Second Spirit: not only does his position in the heavens mark a new celestial measurement for all observers, but
“within [his] heart is the lamp of love” (11), a source of light and inspiration that identifies both his psychological distance from his “slumberbound” cousins and his understanding of earthly transcendence. The spatial dynamics of the relationship are thus paradoxical: the First Spirit remains confined, but bases its ontological security on external phenomena; the Second Spirit is spatially unbound, but desires assurance from “the calm within.”

The strophe-antistrophe exchange between Second Spirit’s perceptual revolutions and First Spirit’s “grounded” fatalism reproduces a by-now familiar set of positions: the haughty, almost careless visionary, unheeding of measurable realities, and the overly cautious, conservative voice who is reluctant to accept a radically new way of thinking. Shelley is, however, less favouring of the Second Spirit than is immediately apparent. The concluding two epodic sections of the poem occur outside of the philosophical dialogue; they are designed to create a sense of balance in an otherwise contentious debate (in which, deceptively, the Second Spirit has the last word). These stanzas are enigmatic, refusing to give up a position on either fatalistic caution or visionary desire. The spatial indeterminacy of the dialogue is supplemented by a secondary layer of polyphony, taking the visionary debate to a metafictional level. Each of the final stanzas also begins with the conversational “Some say” (33, 41), introducing a community beyond the dialogue of spirits. The respective arguments of the spirits become, in effect, adjunct to the “Some say” – positions in a greater debate, significant without being domineering or overbearing. The interpolation of a greater

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90 Yet this “lamp” is benign in design, the source of light being of mutual comfort to the spirits. The gap between the spirits is one that Shelley describes in “On Love” as being surmountable through sympathetic dialogue: “I see that in some external attributes they resemble me, but when misled by that appearance I have sought to appeal to something in common and unburden my inmost soul to them, I have found my language misunderstood like one in a distant and savage land” (631). The mutual alienation of the “traveler” and “savage” results from the premise of universal concern, and is yet only remediable through the attempts to bridge “the chasm of an insufficient void” that divides that “community with what we experience within ourselves” (631). The balance between general progress and interpersonal sympathy is typically characterized by Shelley as a form of travel or movement, where changed minds must seek that common understanding that once would have been implicit.
social context, then, synthesizes the allegory into an idealistic recommendation, an arbitration of the debate between heavenly and earthly concerns. The negotiating identity within this metafictional debate is, significantly, a human traveller, who appears in the final stanza. As a traveller, his role is never to remain static; indeed, he is reminiscent of the Alastor-Poet in that his travels seem motivated by the fleeting vision of beauty (“a shape like his early love doth pass” [45]). This figure, who hears the “sweet whispers” “Which make night day” (43, 44), and who is the surrogate audience for the preceding debate, is capable of being seduced by the fleeting beauty of an idealistic vision, yet remains subject to the sad realities of mundane existence (the “death dews” that “sleep on the morass” [42]). Positive transformation through visionary height is thus implied, with the lingering sensation that such genius is illusory and even potentially irresponsible. The actual manifestation of an idealistic vision is made clear when those “Sweet whispers,” which in Alastor are a species of narcissistic self-creation, emerge into the awakened state: “He finds night day” (48).

The ground-air division in “The Two Spirits” differs from the global disengagements of Alastor in that the debate is characterized in terms of distinct perceptual states within an aeronautic paradigm. The development of this paradigm out of the aerial epiphanies of Alastor emerges primarily from a metaphorical system wherein Heaven and Earth represent the outer boundaries of the perceptual divide. As the Second Spirit demonstrates, the sympathetic gap resulting from the enactment of idealistic aspiration carried with it a disconnect from the affairs on the ground: the ever-present danger was in showing the grounded inhabitants a dangerous and potentially illusory liberation. Second Spirit, whether through his own “inner light” (which may be delusional) or his ability to soar among new sources of light, has removed himself from the quotidian rhythms – the recurring cycles of night and day – that delimit First Spirit’s existence. Second Spirit’s call for perceptual
revolution seems unheeding of the pressing concerns expressed by the First Spirit – the actual material repercussions of history – which, despite their morbidity, seem irrefutable.

Prometheus Unbound marks a turning point in Shelley’s use of aeronautic phenomena, for it is here that he begins to unpack the ramifications of visionary exploration within a global theory of utopian prophecy. What this poem brings to a discussion of spatially-coded (and provisional) freedoms is a profoundly scientific and psychic reflection on the role of visionary exploration in social renewal. Prometheus displays the poet’s developing interest in visionary transformation as an uncontrolled, infinitely sustained and overall human activity, coded as modes of flight, transitional sources of power, and a liberation from spatially-confined progression. If the poem’s central “problem,” as Kelvin Everest has said, is “the problem of human agency in history, the extent of its possibility and the nature of its means” (188), Shelley’s understanding of the visionary-reformer-as-aeronaut helps bridge the gap between deterministic and limitless spaces within which history can evolve. His focus in Prometheus on chemical phenomena associated with aeronautics (steams and vapours), and the transformation of vision that occurs when the soul is liberated from ontologically determined confines, demonstrates his first successful synthesis of aeronautic science with historical process. The abolition of “arbitrary restraint” (Scrivener 153) within utopia’s spatial manifestation is illustrated in large part through transitional chemical states and images of aeronautic ascent. Sharon Ruston models Shelley’s scientific processes on a “science of life” or “vital principle” (115) – particularly electrostatics and vitalism – and describes the mutual-interconnection of love, a concept implicit to his theories of aeronautic locomotion.  

Discussing Panthea’s envelopment by Prometheus’s “vaporous fire,” she observes how “Panthea describes the experience as like the sun’s action on a cloud when it

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91 Such “relationships,” she argues, “offered the scientific and medical information to represent human physical conditions in his present day and to imagine how they could be improved” (125).
absorbs the water that the cloud carries. In effect, Panthea loses her own individual identity and becomes part of him: she is first enveloped by his ‘all-dissolving power’ and then consumed, as a cloud is absorbed” (112-13). As we see in Act 2 scene 5, Asia manifests such “love” as a metaphor of uninhibited nautical navigation indistinguishable from aerial phenomena and its associated modes of transitional chemical interchange. Atop a snowy mountain, and accompanied by the transformational Spirit of the Hour, Asia describes her “soul” as “an enchanted boat” that “floats” “Without a course, without a star” (2.5.72, 73, 89), powered by “desire” (94). Not only does she witness Earth’s transformation from the vantage of high altitude, but she merges there with other aerial phenomena. What Panthea mistakenly assumes is an illuminated “cloud” is Asia herself: “...the light / Which fills this vapour... / Flows from thy mighty sister‖ (11-12, 14). Her “liquid splendour,” which is part light, part vapour, and part music, is in constant flux, and is an embodiment of Shelley’s love-as-negotiation. This directionless love-process, a fusion of moral and physical systems, recalls what Michael Scrivener calls “a revolutionary process in its ideal form” or “an ideal objective process for anarchist transformation” (156).

These theories of cyclical vitality are commensurable with the motifs of flight in the poem that distribute revolutionary messages. Ruston does mention Shelley’s familiarity with Adam Walker and his work with the hydrogen cycle, though she applies this familiarity to the vitality debate rather than the aeronautic one. However, when discussing the “Faun” episode of Act II, she bypasses the relationships between hydrogen, fire and flight. So when the Fauns discuss the “spirits” who enact “Demogorgon’s mighty law” (II.i.43), and the “lucent domes” (78) they ride on, they describe their actions as a fusion of hydrogen production and the kind of flight producible by the creation of this element. Such domes “Ascend...to flow like meteors through the night, / They ride on them, and rein their headlong speed, / And
bow their burning crests, and glide in fire / Under the waters of the earth again” (79-82).

This surely does describe the cyclical production of hydrogen gas from its aqueous state in its most natural setting. Yet when we consider the intermingling roles of the natural and the historical in *Prometheus*, and look at the subsequent use of three aerial messengers – Mercury, the Spirits of the Human Mind (as they represent Love) and the Spirit of the Hour – it can be no accident that Shelley is considering recurring elementary interactions and aerial, visionary intervention in strikingly similar ways.

One way to confirm the importance of unbound aerial exploration is to examine those sections of the poem where flight operates under the auspices of Jovian control. Shelley frequently uses human-measured time, corporeal pain and the sublime terror of borderless travel as spatially “delimiting” historical experiences. These are all suffered under the umbrella of political stagnation and oppression. Mercury, in his role as “Jove’s world-wandering herald” (1.325), requests the chained titan Prometheus submit, using fear of unending torture as a motive for submission. “Thou knowest not the period of Jove’s power?” (1.412) he asks, “Thou canst not count thy years to come of pain?” (415). These questions are rhetorical; Mercury’s true purpose is to gather information for Jupiter, who is obsessed with limits and restrictions, on the time of his fall. The subsequent scenario of “unlimited” aerial travel is intended to terrify Prometheus, though it has the opposite effect:

Yet pause, and plunge
Into Eternity, where recorded time,
Even all that we imagine, age on age,
Seems but a point, and the reluctant mind
Flags wearily in its unending flight,
Till it sink, dizzy, blind, lost, shelterless (416-21)
As with the issue of corporeal pain, Mercury makes the prospect of an unlimited exploration of time and space seem terrifying. Substituting corporeal punishment for spatial ambiguity, Mercury does not understand that the liberation from restriction is only terrifying to Jupiter and the forces of ontological ossification he represents.

Accordingly, aspects of flight associated with Jupiter take on elementary characteristics that differ strongly from the “vaporous” ones of the Promethean-associated spirits. The Furies that accompany Mercury, for example, fly on “iron wings that climb the wind” (1.327). Such images of flight are, for example, far more materially determined than the amorphous cloud-flights of the Spirits of the Hour and of Human Love. While the notion of uncontrolled flight is anathema to the deterministic Jupiter, “unending flight” will become the hallmark of the Promethean utopia, not its downfall. Unable to master the principles of Shelleyan flight, and indeed of the new reign of elementary interaction premised on Love, Jupiter succumbs, characterizing his defeat as one of a failure to maintain “altitude”: “The elements obey me not, I sink / Dizzily down, ever, for ever, down. / And, like a cloud, mine enemy above / Darkens my fall with victory! Ai, Ai!” (3.1.80-83).

Described as “a cloud,” Prometheus does indeed hang over Jupiter. But the fallen authority does not yet realize that, like Asia, Prometheus's love-flight is “all-dissolving,” rather than restrictive or confining.

It is revealed to Asia and Panthea that the power of such formless and unlimited flights to inspire and represent utopian liberty is akin in nature to human love. In order to develop the analogy between these two notions – flight and love – Shelley first establishes the function of “elevation” that characterizes each. The typical Shelleyan fusion of living beings or technological devices with elementary actions is more than a mixing of metaphors. Prometheus Unbound’s contribution to the utopian legacy comes in the form of emotion
(typically love or desire) as a “sustainer” of aspirational flights. The Spirits of Human Thought, shown by the Earth to soothe the suffering Prometheus, are said to “inhabit, as birds wing the wind, / Its world-surrounding aether” (1.660-61). Among the list of similes, they are likened to “flocks of clouds” (665) and “fountain-vapours” (667), and claim to travel “cloudlike and unpent / Through the boundless element” (688-89). Ione identifies the Fifth and the Sixth Spirit as the “form of Love,” “Twin nurslings of the all-sustaining air / On swift still wings glide down the atmosphere” (1.754-55). The notion of this “twinned” flight as a kind of protracted nourishment recurs when Ione marks that “they float / On their sustaining wings of skiey grain” (759-60). By Act 4 these spirits have inverted the signifier of altitude as a mark of superiority (as employed by Jupiter and his representatives), as in their conversation with the Hours, where they watch “From those skiey towers / Where Thought’s crowned powers / Sit watching your dance, ye happy Hours!” (4.101-3). The composite effect of this portrait of human emotion is to render the act and thought of love indistinguishable from flight, but also, crucially, the purported processes that allow flight. The twinned purpose of this illustration is to show that the process of achieving flight is a prerequisite function of the metaphor. Love is in this sense both a “levelling” mode of sympathetic association and a mode of escape from deterministic systems of measurement.

If the Spirits of Human Love attain flight through a dialogue represented figuratively through elementary exchange, the Spirit of the Hour employs the principle of interchange within a greater historical and cosmic process. Its aerial message-bearing action is, like those of Human Love, symbolically natural and human in origin, but also reflects a necessary connection between immediate and macroscopic utopian processes. In its role as global messenger, whose “chariot cleaves the kindling air” “over the cities of mankind” (3.3.79, 76), the Spirit is both deliverer and recipient of prophetic, visionary change. Yet in this dual role,
it mitigates the perceptual extremes that characterize the spatially-determined consciousnesses of panoptic paternalism and terrestrial ignorance (extremes that problematized Shelley’s earlier aeronautic poetry). Its ability to fly explicitly offers the vantage from which prophecy can be discerned: “My vision then grew clear, and I could see / Into the mysteries of the universe” (3.4.104-5). Furthermore, as a participant in transformational love-flights, it has the capacity to reach and empathize with the earthly inhabitants who are the primary benefactors of utopian destiny: “Dizzy with delight I floated down” (106); “As I have said, I floated to the earth; / It was, as it is still, the pain of bliss / To move, to breathe, to be; I wandering went / Among the haunts and dwellings of mankind” (124-27). Like so many aerial message-bearers in the poem, and throughout Shelley’s works, methods of locomotion and delivery share the philosophic weight of messages themselves.

The Spirit of the Hour delivers and witnesses the utopian transformation at the end of Act 3, thus providing the spiritual climax of the poem. Yet the Spirit also embodies a kind of reverse ascendancy when it “floats down” to humanity’s level. As an enlightened figure with access to more privileges than historically embedded minds, its act of utopian boundary-collapsing in Prometheus Unbound is nonetheless demonstrably dialogic; its revelations are earned though proximal negotiation, and are devoid of paternalism. Shelley’s description of the Spirit’s human involvement emphasizes its experience of corporeal limitations: “the pain of bliss / To move, to breathe, to be” morally balances his ability to “oversoar / The loftiest star of unascended Heaven” (201-2). It is beyond history in a material sense, but partakes of the experience of it, and as such, is sympathetically bordered within human parameters.
It is difficult to overestimate the importance of Shelley’s deliberate evolution of his aeronautic visionaries. By the time of *Prometheus Unbound*, it was clear that he saw the gross corporeality of “outward things” (3.4.130) to be necessary for any commensurate evolution of uninhibited spirit and confined humanity. In other words, the ontological restrictions of a materially-bounded humanity were a necessary component of visionary change. What *The Witch of Atlas* brings to this discussion is an analysis of the psychology of a powerful aeronautic visionary whose psychic well-being is tied to the material fate of humanity. The Witch’s prophetic vision, which extends to the very ends of mortal existence, recalls the elemental Spirits of Human Thought from *Prometheus Unbound* who “inhabit, as birds wing the wind / Its world-surrounding ether” (1.659-60). Described by Ione as “Like fountain-vapours” (1.667), these Spirits act as “guides and guardians...Of heaven-oppressed mortality” (1.673-4); on the thoughts of “man’s own mind” they “make there our liquid lair, / Voyaging cloudlike and unpent / Through the boundless element” (1.685, 1.687-9). Like these Spirits, the Witch’s powers of flight and change are linked directly to unpredictable aerial, elemental powers such as vapours and clouds.

The Witch differs from the somewhat one-dimensional role-players in that spiritual drama in that she is both moved and unmoved by mortal plight. Her sympathetic proximity is largely determined by her observational capacity – her ability to “behold / Beyond that twilight realm, as in a glass, / The future” (*Prometheus* 1.661-63). Unlike the Spirits of *Prometheus*, who fill a role in that spiritual drama’s eschatology, the Witch’s sympathetic allegiance is uncertain. She is constantly torn between supernatural privilege and worldly concern, typified through flight and a mercurial physical state. Shelley’s earlier Spirits “breathe, and sicken not, / The atmosphere of human thought” (1.675-76) – their role is usually relegated to acts of observation, and it remains unclear how their guardianship is
actuated except through a nebulous utopian process. On the other hand, the Witch is a being at odds with her position as a powerful role-player and dynamic sympathetic soul. It is only in the Witch that we see anything resembling an internal conversation about balancing visionary prophecy/travel with actual involvement in human affairs.

The Witch of Atlas follows the emotional sports of a goddess who is classified largely as such for her ability to soar among the clouds and other atmospheric phenomena. The poem has been read by critics such as William Keach as privileging a poetic reflexivity, whose “locutions call unusual attention to the act of mind they presuppose in the writer and provoke in the reader” (Style 79). Harold Bloom has read the poem as a critique of Wordsworth’s Peter Bell, particularly as it uses the notion of the “flying boat” to escape from earthly concern. But Michael O’Neill, in what is perhaps the most thorough study of The Witch of Atlas to date, cautions against readings which, in focusing on ever-deepening circles of reflexivity, collapse into mere escapism themselves. He highlights the links between the fickle detachment of the Witch and her connection to human interest; the way in which her visionary misanthropy “causes a chasm to yawn momentarily between reader and character” (128). He rightly pays attention to the Witch’s “love,” which he sees not so much as “the laudable nature of [her] activity” as “the perpetual release of creative energy that is central to her nature” (132). However, it must be said that her nature is characterized primarily by an aloofness from human concern that parallels the imaginative liberty of the poem. Being spatially uninhibited and without any physical limitations, her invulnerability is a source of both “pathos and comedy” (148) – the alternation between amusement and seriousness parallels the mental process of an imagination at odds with minds shaped by deterministic

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92 Scrivener also adds: “The Witch is created by the gods and the elements to remind the reader that her real creator is the poet – or rather, the poetic imagination” (260).

93 Bloom, 174.
ontologies. If Shelley’s *Witch* is indeed a visionary reply to Wordsworthian pedestrian travellers, it is for O’Neill deeply ethical in its concern “with the vulnerability of ‘innocence’” (138), where that innocence is a determined “imaginative freedom from constraints” (139).

Yet it is this question of “nature,” and the actual *form* of the Witch’s love, which requires a more diachronic reading with respect to Shelley’s other works. The poet locates many of her “imaginative freedoms” within processes that represent elemental interchange and locomotive liberty from terrestrial constraints. While the Witch’s supernatural nature plays a large role in her sympathetic distance from humanity, her detachment is not capricious exclusively in accordance with an immortal nature. As is revealed in the teasing dedication to Mary Shelley, “human interest” is of most concern to both the reader and the Witch: both seek a resolution of the conflicts of the poem, which are the frailty of human progress, political adversity, and historical embeddedness. Shelley illustrates the Witch’s sympathetic trysts, and her variable attachment to humanity, through images of aerostatics and meteorology found elsewhere in his work. While we might choose to call the chaotic imagery of her locomotion a kind of imaginative freedom, it is nonetheless rooted in a visionary philosophy that did not, as we have seen in Shelley’s gradually-changing opinion of the matter, encourage total detachment. He certainly did not consider the physical processes of the weather (nor the technical achievements of human engineering) to be expressive of mere anarchic energy. The Witch, however, utilizes both in her acts of formless and borderless global travel. In using a vocabulary and a symbolic lexicon that privilege changeability, transitional states, visionary knowledge, and a mastery of “all thing that seem untameable” (*Witch* 193), Shelley seeks to deepen understandings of how consciousness could be altered, for good or ill, by the god-like power of new modes of perception. The conclusion of the poem, which details a hilarious (yet wistful) collapsing of malign political
systems, masks the degree to which the Witch remains both hidden and alien to those she assists. Ultimately, however, assistance is rendered thanklessly; the Witch’s sympathetic escape (and her initial misanthropy) is mitigated by her unseen, yet improving hand. While the fragile inhabitants of the earth cannot directly reciprocate the love she bestows upon them, she nonetheless represents the spirit of altruism Shelley hoped all progressive beings might exhibit towards those who were spatially and materially confined.

The aforementioned dedication to the poem, which reads “To Mary / (On her objecting to the following poem, / Upon the score of its containing / No human interest),” reveals not only the role of “misunderstanding” in the poem, but also the divergent paths taken by Mary and Percy in their evolving sympathetic politics. His imploring “Prithee, for this one time, / Content thee with a visionary rhyme” (7-8) bespeaks Mary’s suspicion of those “rhymes” which, “silken-wingèd” (9) and “inconstant” (10), seek to make those reformatory changes such as those laid out by the failed “wingèd Vision” (17) of The Revolt of Islam.94 The link between these iterations of reform is the meeting ground between “visionary” and “human interest,” for it was the perceived lack of the latter implicit in the former that apparently was the cause of Mary’s dislike of Percy Shelley’s visionary reformers.

The Witch suffers from a surfeit of macrocosmic thinking – she is too global in the scope of her perceptions and concerns. Her lack of perspective on the minutiae of human existence – the particular causes of their sufferings, and the incomprehensible corporeality of their deaths – has less to do with selfishness and more to do with an understanding of destiny that lacks a mechanism for direct sympathetic engagement. Still, there can be no doubt that the Witch is at least partly guilty of Mary’s accusations: her escape from the emotionally-damaging brevity of mortal existence to the isolation of the heavens exacerbates

94 The suggestion that this line refers to Revolt is made by O’Neill and Leader (788).
her already-significant distance from those whom she knows will “perish one by one” (233). She is so concerned about being emotionally damaged by the deaths of mortals that sympathetic removal is the only immediate option. Yet, by the end of the poem, following her retreat to “those streams of upper air, / Which whirl the earth in its diurnal round” (488-89), she has achieved a newfound proximity to the mortally-limited humanity she sought to escape at the poem’s opening. Her flight to the heavens mid-poem brings about a dialogic perspective, and a clarity of vision that stems from a sympathetic exchange with the elements that power her flight. Powered by systems of vapour, which as we have seen in *Prometheus Unbound* were associated with love and flight, her escape gives her the perspective to understand the historical basis for human misery. Previously, she had attributed this misery to other causes – namely, the inexorable march of time (“If I must weep when the surviving sun / Shall smile on your decay” [235-36]). Her unseen, aeronautic intelligence-gathering of “the strife / Which stirs the liquid surface of man’s life” (543-44) is performed under conditions of a previously-unheld clarity, due in no small part to that “liquidity.” This allows her to productively bypass what was before a sympathetic quagmire: “little did the sight disturb her soul” (545). Ultimately, her happy bridging of the global/cosmic with human immediacy enables the perspectival alterations necessary to engage in a fundamental upheaval of “custom’s lawless law” (541).

The Witch’s increasing comfort with elementary transience reflects her progressive involvement in human affairs. Her birth even resembles the vaporization of water and an ascent to an aerial state. At first, the sun “kissed her with his beams, and made all golden / The chamber of grey rock in which she lay – / She, in that dream of joy, dissolved away” (62-4). Following this, “she first was changed into a vapour, / And then into a cloud” (65-6), eventually morphing into a meteor, and a star. The progressively-stellar nature of the Witch’s
being in these opening verses acts as a kind of teleological outline, marking the world and its inhabitants as cursed, compelled in an immediate sense to spatially confined and tragic ends. While Shelley seems to be elaborating on the Earth-Air dichotomy that structures the divide as seen in “The Two Spirits,” he hints here at the possibility of an interchange and material transcendence. The description of her cave reveals the knowledge that will influence human destiny, taking it from earth-bound concerns into the stars:

Her cave was stored with scrolls of strange device,

The works of some Saturnian Archimage,

Which taught the expiations at whose price

Men from the Gods might win that happy age

Too lightly lost, redeeming native vice;

And which might quench the earth-consuming rage

Of gold and blood – till men should live and move

Harmonious as the sacred stars above. (185-92)

Humanity’s ultimate fate is clearly confusing for the immortal being, namely in the tension between a hoped-for perceptual liberation (expressed as a celestial reference point), and the material inevitability of death. The Witch’s concern with time, for example, is somewhat misleading. Her despair and sympathetic evasion – “Oh ask not me / To love you till your little race is run” (236-37) – at the plight of mortal creatures (represented in the cave by the Ocean-nymphs, Hamadryades, Oreades and Naiades) operates in ignorance of mortality’s potential triumph over the hardships of time, “gold and blood” (representing the limitations of earth and corporeality).

It is the need for a retreat in the first place that signifies the Witch’s vulnerability, even though it may be comic in its histrionic excess. This retreat takes place in two stages
before her eventual sympathetic alteration: a research of arcane knowledge and her ascent to the skies above the earth. This progressively global involvement follows her construction of a flying “Boat” (289) – an allusion both to the boat of Peter Bell as well as to the visionary craft of Alastor – and her manufacture of a “windless haven / Out of the clouds whose moving turrets make / The bastions of the storm” (429-31). The language employed is figured heavily towards aeronautics, conflated in characteristic Shelleyan fashion with natural elements and meteorology. The research and construction of the Boat describes, on the one hand, the celestial and global scope of the locomotion; on the other, it establishes the indeterminate and unsettled nature of both the Boat’s and the Witch’s power. Both Boat and its “hermaphroditic” power are characterized in terms of chemical and aerial phenomena, where “sexlessness,” mutability and the shifting between aerial and grounded states are essential to flight.

A progressive spatial indeterminacy, described as a byproduct of aeronautical travel, characterizes her physical domain after she leaves her cave of earth, which represented too closely for her the ontological inevitability of mortality. Indeterminacy also characterizes her technological mechanisms of flight. Following her horrified reaction to mortality, “the wizard lady sat aloof, / Spelling out scrolls of dread antiquity” (249-50). The knowledge revealed within assists her powering of the Boat, made by Vulcan for Venus “as the chariot of her star” (290). This Boat is “lit” (313) with “A living spirit within all its frame, / Breathing the soul of swiftness into it” (314-15), and is described as “like a cloud / Upon a stream of wind” (369-70) designed to carry her “to the Austral waters” (423) and to the “windless haven.” The strange, unnamed hermaphroditic creature who pilots the Boat is created when “by strange art she kneaded fire and snow” (321), generating a “liquid love” that “tempered the repugnant mass” (323, 322). This creature, called “sexless” (329), is noted
to have “wings” “Tipped with the speed of liquid lightnings, / Dyed in the ardours of the atmosphere” (337, 339-40). Later in the poem, the Witch is similarly described as “a sexless bee / Tasting all blossoms, and confined to none” (589-90) as she flies about the Nile delta. To be sexless in this poem is therefore not merely to be categorically capricious, though the Witch is certainly that. It also implies the source of her power, as formal indeterminacy – embodied in figures of hermaphroditic, clouds and steam – fashions the basis of her explicitly material powers. Upon her arrival at the aerial “meadow which no scythe had shaven” (425), the Witch constructs her haven using these same “sexless” methods that allowed flight. The flux of her aerial domain is summed up in the notion of “the intertexture of the atmosphere” (463), a shifting, evasive state that bridges the surface of the planet and the sky. It is in this place that the Witch “played her many pranks” (449), and from which “she called out of the hollow turrets / Of those high clouds, white, golden and vermillion, / The armies of her ministering spirits” (457-59). These spirits, which resemble the electrostatic charges within clouds, enable the construction of the many “cloud pavillions”; the Witch’s own tent is made framed “Of woven exhalations” (466), and her throne sits “Upon those wandering isles of aery dew” (474).

From her “intertextual” throne, the Witch gathers information about the goings-on of the earthly realm. Her situation within the “bridge-state” progressively engages both her supernatural excess and her sympathy with the plight of mortal creatures. But the globally-mobile nature of her domain also means that surveying is an essential precursor to material involvement. Her rhetorical connection to aeronautical experimentation, particularly of a military and scientific nature, highlights the observational vocation of the aeronaut. Her global privilege in this place is stressed, alongside her increasing sense of responsibility for those in perceptually-confined states. From her aerial throne,
She sate, and heard all that had happened new
Between the earth and moon, since they had brought
The last intelligence – and now she grew
Pale as that moon lost in the watery night –
And now she wept, and now she laughed outright.  (476-80)

Her intelligence-gathering catalyzes a sympathetic tension (weeping and laughter), and from this point on in the poem, she becomes increasingly preoccupied, like the voyagers in the *Aerostatic Spy*, with discerning broad social patterns (in this case, witnessing the marked joys, follies and miseries of the Nile Delta). Unlike the *Spy*’s voyagers, however, she moves quickly from observation and commentary to correct the observed wrongs. While the shift between weeping and laughter exposes her conflict at the observed events, it is only after her ascent to her intertextual throne that this gathering of actual (that is to say, material) intelligence moves her to a positive sympathetic response. Her formerly-histrionic retreat, based on a visionary forecast of human suffering, here recedes in importance to the witnessing of immediate misdeeds and abuses of power.

The conclusion of the poem details how the Witch’s aeronautical privilege is used to produce peaceful political change, in keeping with Shelley’s changing ideas of how visionaries could factor productively in processes of reform. He stresses this much like he did the Spirit of the Hour in *Prometheus Unbound*: by using flight and transformational elements to unite the spatially-divided realms of the visionary and the oppressed. By the end of the poem, the Witch has overcome her fear of human death and has involved herself directly in their lives. Her transition to this point also emphasizes her playful tourism of inhabited areas. Gradually, and despite all the preoccupations that affect a supernatural being – joyous rides, “singing through the shoreless air” (485) – her “choice sport” (497) is to glide
through the “crested heads / Of cities” “And many a vapour-belted pyramid” (502-3, 504).
Her involvement is more than sympathetic, for it changes her too, much as with the Spirit of
the Hour: using a “charm of strange device” to “make that spirit mingle with her own” (574, 576), she unravels her previous confusion about the fear of mortal death. She determines
that mortal limitations are primarily spatial and perceptual in origin, resulting from human
corruption and a confusion of the true sources of energy. The “strife / Which stirs the liquid
surface of man’s life” is a state of fraud and vice where “princes couched under the glow /
Of sunlike gems” (553-4), and where “row after row, / She saw the priests asleep – all of one
sort, / For all were educated to be so” (555-7). This tightly conventional state, with its false
sources of knowledge (from the light), constitutes a repressive orthodoxy that is unilateral in
its energy. The “liquid surface of man’s life” is acted upon with little agency from mortal
hands to stop the disturbance; the Witch alone is described as being able to navigate the
turmoil of both time and political existence.95

It is thus through her skills in stellar piloting, and understanding of the “intertexture”
of the space between mortal and immortal realms that the contrast and her authority are
established. That is to say, the constantly-shifting intertexture which powers her flight is the
very essence of her sympathetic development. This revolution is achieved though a dispersal
of love that could never be mutual – it is an act of benevolence on her part, and her
enjoyment of the ensuing lovers’ trysts (649-664) is one of detached, yet sympathetic
appreciation. Shelley implies, however, that her newfound interest in the happiness of
earthbound beings emerges out of a partial victory over the ravages of time she had initially
considered to be a primary obstacle to sympathy. This example of aeronautic altruism is
therefore literally humanizing for the aeronaut – and though she has liberated the pre-

95 “But she in the calm depths her way could take, / Where in bright bowers immortal forms abide, / Beneath
the weltering of the restless tide” (550-2).
existing human potentials in her subjects, they do not so much become like her as she like them.

* * *

v.

Radical technologies were a fundamental part of Percy Shelley’s life, and underpinned many of his beliefs in travel, imagination, and global culture. As with aeronautics, Shelley was for example intimately familiar with steam technologies: while living in Italy, and during the period of Prometheus’s composition, he helped fund Henry Reveley’s project to develop a steam engine. Such concerns were part of the Shelleys’ everyday lives, and their plans for the future. Although Reveley’s project eventually collapsed, it was for a time an enormous imaginative influence on Percy Shelley – one that spurred him to consider myths of creation as well as those of voyage and travel. Writing to Reveley, he claimed that “God sees his machine spinning round the sun, and delights in its success, and has taken out patents to supply all the suns in space with the same manufacture. Your boat will be to ocean of water, what this earth is to the ocean of ether – a prosperous and swift voyager” (in Bieri, Exile 170). This cosmological relativity – the analogized movement of planets orbiting other stars, to the terrestrial solar system, to the planet Earth, to a steam-boat on the ocean – reflects the importance of “transitional” chemical states in his construction of visionary locomotion. Mary Shelley clearly shared some of Percy’s interests in this science: she included steam technologies and the air-pump in the category of “Promethean” discoveries studied by Victor Frankenstein, discoveries which were closely associated with both his and Walton’s world-changing projects.
Mary’s criticism about the absence of human interest in *The Witch of Atlas* was nonetheless related to the Witch’s capricious and aeronautical nature – the immortal being embodied a dangerous relativity of vision that had been an undercurrent throughout Percy’s works. Her criticism about the absence of human interest in *The Witch of Atlas* was accurate, although not perhaps for the right reasons: while the Witch has no direct interest in human affairs, in the sense of her potentially benefiting from them, she nonetheless enables their capacity for anti-conformist (and in this case, comic) excess. The “liberty from imaginative constraint” observed by O’Neill is given a material correlative in the deconstructed and colloquial perceptions of the Egyptian masses. While the Witch may not be subject to spatial constraint, her emotional condition is nonetheless affected, albeit irregularly, by proxy. Her sympathetic vulnerability is thus presented in elemental terms – clouds and magical flying vehicles – that, while removed from direct human understanding, still represent a dialogic mechanism that is eventually productive of genuine social change. Her enactment of a peaceful revolution in the minds of earthly, mortal inhabitants in no way implies that she is human, or even that her sympathy for mortal beings is premised on some sort of shared ideal. Indeed, her perception is as different from human ones as the minds of the Two Spirits differ from each other.

And yet, the Witch’s progressive understanding of spatio-temporal restraint, and the processes of navigating them, directs her attention to the role of mutual influence that dictates even the most fundamental chemical laws. Her newfound appreciation of a “love” that is tethered to the mortal existence is one of the ways that Shelley recuperates the role of the visionary aeronaut in radical systems of reform. Her global intelligence-gathering, her modification of the weather, and her operation of aeronautical machines are allegorical representations of the complex interrelationships between radical reformers and the
oppressed public these reformers wish to assist. Shelley’s evolving understanding of such
global figures incorporates the dialogue involved in acts of ontological deconstruction: he
sought the visionary distance we see in Queen Mab, without the teleological impulse that left
Ianthe merely “astonished.” Had the Witch simply retreated to the defeated, orthodox (yet
pleasingly simple) belief in a unilaterally-operating “time” as the controlling factor in
sympathetic disappointment, her plight would have resembled that of the people living
under the false beliefs of oppressive thought-regimes. Her discovery of the principles of
meteorological change and aeronautics, however, leads to her understanding of an elemental
connection between human existence and the powers she manipulates for her whimsical
pleasure. The exoneration of her position of global privilege – she easily might herself have
become one of the “absolute” powers of the poem – is thus due in large part to her choice
to live suspended between the worlds of sky and earth. Her “sexless intertexture of
atmosphere” allows a flight and constant change that represents a limitless sympathetic
renewal.

Do Shelley’s aeronautic visionaries overcome the historical suspicions associated
with air-balloons, or with radical sciences? Do they enable perceptual liberty and the
dissolution of injurious ontologies, or do they merely cater to a sense of astonishment and
awe? The question goes to the heart of radical politics in the Romantic era, and reveals how
modes of travel made radicalism a global phenomenon. As the culmination of Shelley’s
aeronautic project, the Witch symbolizes a maturing political vision, one that relies less on
“observation” and more on dialogue and participation. Most startlingly, it indicates an
acceptance, though regrettable, of material pain in the midst of reform. Spatial and
perceptual instability were essential for portraying this process: for the global traveller, it
required a constantly-negotiated movement and the ability to witness historical minutiae –

notably, the misery of those who could not gain access to a more “distant” prospect. That conflict between “actuality and potentiality” was manifested as a material figure – the aeronautic traveller – who embodied a huge spectrum of scientific phenomena, from electrostatics to steam technology to chemistry. He synthesized these knowledge systems into figures who could alternately represent messengers or fiery heralds of revolution.

The dissolution of global boundaries signified by Shelley’s aeronauts indicates more than a propensity towards universalism. Throughout his use of aeronautics in his works, we see a “human” component – whether Ianthe, the First Spirit, or the subjects of political oppression. He never lost sight of the perceptual cost of global vision; indeed, mitigating the excess of visionary radicals was a progressive concern in his poetry at large. The ability of his aeronauts to peer into the mysteries of the universe is always tempered by their distance, physical and sympathetic, from those who could not or would not join them. Perhaps this was not an ideal situation for the poet; perhaps, in a different world, he would have preferred the apocalyptic global transformations we see in *Queen Mab*. But if one looks for evidence of a Shelley who moved away from a metaphysical idealism and into a sceptical materialism, his use of aeronautics must rank highly as a tool of dialogue and imaginative exchange.
Chapter Three

“Undiscovered Solitudes”: Exiles, Explorers and Domestic Isolation in Mary Shelley’s Novels

i.

The visionary travellers of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), *Valperga* (1823) and *The Last Man* (1826) face challenges of social utility and perceptual boundary-making. In each of these works, some variation on the following question is asked: how does one define the limits of “home” without unduly sacrificing either domestic sympathy or progressive creativity? The repeated failure of deliberately exclusive imaginary boundaries in these works reflects Shelley’s anxiety about the condition of domestic exile. Much of her fiction is devoted to the study of isolated domestic units – their ability to sustain imaginative stimulation, and their adaptability to the changing conditions of utility in an increasingly connected world. Conversely, the sympathetic and material havoc wreaked on the home as a result of uninhibited exploration – reflected in an increasingly macroscopic and escalating devastation, from single families to city-states to the entire world – demonstrates her wariness of the ethics of contemporary global exploration. The impasse faced by her various travellers is the seemingly inevitable and limiting return to the exclusive options of home or world, both as they are measured spatially and sympathetically. This is a crisis experienced through various configurations of global modernity, which Shelley demonstrates in her characters’ adaptive explorations of the outer boundaries of their worlds.

I argue that Shelley addresses acts of exclusive boundary-making by submitting her geographically static, imaginary travellers to a dynamic domestic imagination. This has the
effect of expanding the ethical dimensions of exploration beyond those movements of travel around the world. Conversely, the author makes clear that economic and imaginative exclusivity also drove her global travellers to resist domestic security, all the while seeking a phantom replacement for the stable boundaries they constantly reject. The repeated failure of Shelley’s most ethically salvageable and cosmopolitan characters begs further study, and a question: what is the future of “home” in a fundamentally global context, where various social or imaginative pressures paradoxically demand isolation of its genuinely progressive minds?

While Shelley’s novels should not be read as enabling exclusively exploratory or domestic ideologies, tendencies to impute either extreme do nonetheless exist in fictional and critical forms. In attempts to identify a Mary Shelley who catered to these divergent ideological extremes, most readings of her work mirror the conflict faced by the characters within her novels. In an effort to overcome this critical inflexibility, this chapter suggests that Mary Shelley considered life in transit as an inevitable state of affairs in modern, post-war Europe. The evidence seen in the aforementioned novels points to an author determined to preserve the notion of home in as many ways as possible without sacrificing either security or the exploratory impulse. Her early work demonstrates how global pressures consistently erode secure ontological boundaries, a process accentuated by the excruciating failures of her characters to adapt to the inevitable categories of home and world. Over the course of these three novels Shelley develops a theory of imaginative travel whose purpose enables adaptation to a global culture, and yet which aspires to preserve a set of sympathetic associations that mitigate the solitude of dislocated travel. If she thought that her husband’s model of progressivist and farsighted exploration was a failure, so too did she demonstrate how the Burkean model of static, trusting paternalism was unsuited to the realities of global
cosmopolitanism. But do we then believe in a Mary Shelley who, as some critics have claimed, criticized idealist, visionary, “masculine” excess in favour of a set of progressive feminist, pragmatic “tiny republics”? If so, we must confront her presentation of artificially bounded social groups – Elizabeth’s enlightened farming communities, Euthanasia’s libertarian and localist Guelph state, or Lionel’s post-plague “rural country, where each small township was directed by the elders and wise men” (LM 27) – that all ultimately fail in guarding against the outside world.

In one sense, the tension between inside and outside worlds stems from Shelley’s participation in the genre of the coterie novel. As Gary Kelly points out, “The politicized and consciously avant-garde domesticity and private social life and culture of the Godwin and Shelley coteries became represented in various ways in their novels” (149), which were informed by the presence of “enlightened individuals working in a political coterie or revolutionary vanguard” (150). Shelley, like her father William Godwin, utilized the genre’s autobiographical and first-person narratives “with explicit reflection on the relation between the narrator’s experience and the prevailing social and political order. This was intended to be the appropriate form for authoritative representation of systemic oppression experienced at the personal level, by both narrator-protagonist and implied author” (154). Mary Shelley’s representation of the domestic sphere in the context of the coterie maintained the custom of representing “vanguard individuality and individualism” (156) which, however much it facilitated the coterie tradition of debate and intellectual exchange, nonetheless challenged functional personal relationships. A continuing project within Shelley’s tradition was the capacity of the intimate coterie to sustain and perpetuate complex systems of oppression in the domestic sphere, despite the resistance to such systems on the global scale. As we see in the exclusive domestic environments of the three novels studied in this chapter, attempts to
reproduce a progressive, isolated security in the pursuit of social reform could backfire. This is particularly visible in *The Last Man* and *Frankenstein*, where some representatives of the coterie, who love and admire and seek to perpetuate the intimacy of that setting, are nonetheless agents of destructive global powers and politics.

Time and time again, we see a paradoxical loneliness and solitude in her characters – paradoxical because of the intimacy within so many of her communities. The role of solitude, as it occurs in both its domestic and exploratory forms, is central to this chapter and its evaluation of Shelley’s crisis. Solitude, a recurring concept in Shelley’s novels, links static domestic communities with modes of exploration that expand the boundaries of global knowledge. As a measure of exclusivity, solitude is used to determine the moral safety and privilege of the family unit in all three novels; as an indicator of economic privilege, it reveals both the emptiness and the advantage of visionary exploration and conquest. Shelley frequently employs concepts of exile in this dynamic of exclusivity, often combined with the excruciating loneliness that accompanies each form of isolation. The solitary travellers of *Frankenstein* – Walton, Frankenstein and the Creature – perpetrate their excesses in excruciating emotional seclusion and in the name of social utility. Operating in parallel are their domestic counterparts, who decry a corrupt outside world and buffer themselves against its influence. *Valperga’s* Castruccio transforms his exile from Italy and his home city into a perverse form of exclusivity that facilitates his political megalomania; meanwhile, Euthanasia rationalizes her remoteness by overindulging in imaginative, visionary and ultimately ineffectual history-making. In *The Last Man* we witness social performances of exile, virtual enactments of isolation that will be cruelly and ironically counter-pointed by the upward-scaling levels of separation and exclusivity forced by the global plague. Furthermore, that novel’s repeated lament for a lost era of brave exploration stands in contrast to
individuals who continuously erect new borders – sympathetic, medical, and political – at the local and national level.

Mutually-exclusive categories of improvement and interest are central to Mary Shelley’s discussion of the effects of global exploration. An examination of these categories within the activity of global exploration goes a certain way to address the grander conservative-liberal discussion that marks the reception of her career. Interest, in the dual sense of inquisitiveness and private advantage, informs the public function of utility (the “improvement” of society and of individual value), which is the master-notion driving the pursuit of knowledge and the formation of geographies of empire. As we will see in a reading of Adam Smith, the appeal to exclusive personal interest was precisely what drove public utility, albeit through entirely oblique means. Conversely, the demand for domestic dedication signified responsibilities for social development based on principles of passive inheritance and acceptance of established boundaries, rather than innovation. In this sense, participation in an economy contained implicit spatial restrictions. Taken together, the pursuit of utility in Shelley’s fiction occurs through appeals to interests with spatially displaced beneficiaries – frequently expressed as an inverse relationship between utility and the proximity of the beneficiaries to that improvement. Looking at the role of travel in her novels, and its relationship to philosophies of utility, it becomes clear that domestic and global economies impact her characters by engaging their never-satiated capacity for imaginative fulfillment. It seems clear that Shelley deplored this separation: in her fiction, the elision of a genuine, sympathetic society from either exploration or domesticity exacerbates the pre-existing ideological conflicts she observed at home and in her travels. Her characters inhabit global economies wherein interest exerts its energy far from sites of familiar
sympathetic contact, leaving those entrusted with domestic responsibilities isolated from worldly affairs.

Shelley establishes the parameters for the global-local divide by demonstrating how the domestic environs would have had access to international trade, knowledge and political networks. Literary narratives of exploration frame many of Shelley’s investigations into the phenomenon of global interest. The early effect of this is the awareness of local boundaries as provisional, primarily in the imaginative sense. *Frankenstein*, for example, reflects the Romantic era’s obsession with travel by depicting individuals inspired by accounts of public projects designed to extend scientific, commercial or political dominions: for example, Robert Walton “read with ardour the accounts of the various voyages which have been made in the prospect of arriving at the North Pacific Ocean though the seas which surround the globe” (6). Euthanasia’s accounts of pilgrimages, one made by herself to Holy Rome, stem from an Italian literary revival that was closely associated with itinerant travels and spiritual voyages: both Castruccio and Euthanasia would at one point “apply [themselves] exclusively to literature” (20), “partak[ing] of that curiosity which made Petrarch but a few years after travel around Europe to collect manuscripts...which would otherwise have been lost” (20).

The entire “framed” tale of *The Last Man* is, as Charlotte Sussman points out, “a tale written by an emigrant from a vanished culture [which] is found and ‘translated’ by a tourist, who finds it while ‘wander[ing] through various ruined temples, baths, and classical spots’” (298). Furthermore, each of the three novels begins with an account of the early formation of the protagonists’ characters, describing in detail their imaginative relationship between their local environment and the world at large. Whether this relationship is gleaned through literature, tourism or imaginative emigrancy, Shelley is always intent on establishing the local within networks of signification.
In this sense, Robert Walton’s obsession with travel literature is only a microcosm of what would become a great literary focus on the author’s part: the negotiation between fictions of travel (considered broadly) and the domestic motives that inculcate a desire for travel in the first place. It is hard to overlook the similarity in her treatment of geographically static, imaginative travel and the more conventional kind made on the global stage. Such moments of imaginative liberation are not necessarily positive, however. In showing us characters such as Elizabeth Lavenza, Euthanasia, Beatrice, and Perdita, Mary Shelley is surely commenting on the gendered limitations of exploration – these women could never participate in travel as do their exploratory counterparts Victor Frankenstein, Castruccio, and Raymond. What remains is to determine the role of geographically static travellers in exploration’s excesses, and to move beyond a gendered explanation of the repeated failures of Shelley’s domestic explorers.

The reflexive relationship between exiles and explorers underpins the entire construction of philosophical solitude in her novels, particularly in the blurred boundary between social and geographical isolation. *Frankenstein* demonstrates a recurring event within her novels: how characters undertake boundless and compulsive wandering, where exile is often a self-imposed condition. In this work, Arctic explorer Robert Walton defines the areas of the globe he hopes to explore as “undiscovered solitudes” (5), or places defined by an absence of human contact. Solitude occurs throughout the work in various forms, though in its most tragic moments in pursuit of a lofty or unreachable goal. Victor, for example, in his pursuit of life-generation, “wished, as it were, to procrastinate all that related to my feelings of affection until the great object, which swallowed up every habit of my nature, should be completed” (37). Shelley’s extension of solitude to geographical zones extends the
import of the sympathetic barrenness experienced by Walton and Victor. Yet, as Walton’s frame narrative suggests, the solitudes sought by these characters are “undiscovered.”

This curious phrase, “undiscovered solitude,” begs closer examination if Shelley’s paradox of the isolated (and domestic) explorer is to be understood. Of particular concern is the way the phrase identifies geography and space in purely human terms. Central to the concept of the undiscovered solitude is an ambivalent representation of travel that foregrounds an incipient, yet desperately sought-after, isolation. This geographical metaphor describes an as-of-yet unrealized space that is qualified in both spatial (from the context of global exploration) and social (the state of being alone) terms. The undiscovered solitude broadcasts its own notional uneasiness – can the solitude even be discovered? does willingly-sought solitude not suggest a causal misanthropy? – and represents a procedural crisis.

“Undiscovered” as an adjective suggests an unfulfilled action, an ambition towards and a deferral of meaning: for those who physically travel, such locations may be discoverable; for those who travel by other means (reading is a common mechanism in Shelley’s works) its not having been discovered enables this phantom place’s semiotic instability; its imaginative multiplicity and the impossibility of its ever being realizable deeply undermine its utility, but perversely make it more attractive.

This solitude results from the failure to achieve a balance between intra- and interspatial aspirations. Walton is demonstrably conflicted in his solitude: while he endures voluntary exile from his domestic environs for “the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind” (6), he nonetheless laments the lack of “the company of a man who could sympathize with me; whose eyes could reply to mine” (8). That such undiscovered solitudes will somehow reverse the causality of loneliness signals Walton’s confusion, and highlights the disjunction in means and ends – the solitude necessary to achieve such a place is, by his
own admission, devoid of human interest. The recommendations and programs for ideal Shelleyan communities often schizophrenically prioritize this sense of familial isolation and an alienating will-to-power. They are utopian in the truest sense of the word – they aspire to “no-place,” employ a deferral of imaginative fulfillment, and show an ever-receding horizon. The undiscovered solitude, in this way, stimulates a Manichean perversity in a character like Victor, forcing him to choose between “chimeras of boundless grandeur” and “realities of little worth” (30). This artificial impasse is as sympathetic as it is civic, as the possibilities for engagement or some iteration of Percy Shelley’s dialogic “Love” are constantly deferred by the imaginative projection beyond the requisite zone of influence.

The null-space of the undiscovered solitude is both geographically and sympathetically unstable, in that it is both “boundless” (30) and unachievable – the pursuit of it in the name of utility leaves families separated and exploratory objectives unfulfilled. One of the most compelling shared characteristics of Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton is their shared exploratory solitude. Nevertheless, it is the Creature who suffers the most poignant burden of the imaginative crisis – the savage divide between worldly exile and domestic security. Maureen McLane has called Victor Frankenstein “an exile within Europe” (92), but in being “cut off from all the world” (F 120), the Creature achieves this undiscovered solitude merely by being. Poignantly, he wishes to escape from this null-space in his request to Victor for a partner, “some existing thing” (120, emphasis added), as if he himself did not exist (or could not without like society). His geographic and epistemological instability are one and the same, leaving him with no sense of local stability or sympathetic immediacy. By inhabiting a state of permanent exile, the Creature’s only recourse to
existence is purely destructive, indeed inflicting such instability on Victor himself. When Victor floats on the Irish Sea, he demonstrates how his ostracism from places of domestic comfort has progressed to levels of global, even metaphysical consequence: “I had no compass with me, and was so little acquainted with the geography of this part of the world that the sun was of little benefit to me. I might be driven into the wide Atlantic, and feel all the tortures of starvation” (144). This bitter report of exile ironically forecasts Victor’s account of his aborted wedding night, which proposes alienation as an altruistic alternative: “if for one instant I had thought what might be the hellish intention of my fiendish adversary, I would rather have banished myself for ever from my native country, and wandered a friendless outcast over the earth” (161). This concept of the world-wandering exile as being in a phantom-relationship with a juxtaposed domesticity is fascinating – it encourages us to think of the boundaries of responsibility, between the domestic and the outside world, as permeable and reflexive. Exile and belonging operate here, as elsewhere in Shelley’s fiction, in relative, rather than absolute, ways.

But a proscribed sense of belonging and a limited vision of the world is precisely what Victor has abandoned, despite acknowledging its positive sympathetic effects. Fred Randel, remarking on Victor’s solitude in the Scottish Orkneys, notes “his decision to kill [the Creature’s partner] while suffering the pathological effects of the island existence celebrated by Defoe and Rousseau,” and that his “‘solitude’...is not just a matter of miles from population centers. He is psychologically remote from the few impoverished inhabitants of the island, whose misery facilitates his isolation by numbing their awareness”

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John Bugg has investigated the interplay of “education and exile” in the novel, revealing the ways in which the Creature actualizes the reversal of his own exile by forcing Victor to take a parallel route – shadowing his European and Russian travels – that eventually causes Victor’s actual banishment (legally quite literal, in the murder of Clerval in Ireland) from civilized confines. The interplay between sympathetic and geographic isolation is key here, keeping in mind that for much of the novel social isolation and imaginative boundlessness are actually courted as altruistic methods.
This “psychological remoteness” complements his earlier self-imposed isolation in Switzerland at university, where an imaginative (and socialized) division between domestic and exploratory spaces justifies his principled misanthropy. This division is not only facilitated by his family, but he will later encourage it in Walton. He submits that a devotion to the domestic and a deliberate limiting of oneself to a narrow provincialism can act as a buffer against the outrages of global expansion and ambition: “how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow” (35).

Navigating these recommendations can be a tricky business. *Frankenstein*, like *Valperga* and *The Last Man*, does not demand a proscription against travel, but rather an opposition to imaginative distancing that takes sympathies too far outside a portable domestic mindset. The failure to balance a spirit of exploration with the responsibilities of domesticity occurs throughout these novels. In *Frankenstein*, the responsibility lies within the scientists’ and explorers’ confusion of the limits of utility – the principle of benefit their discoveries are ostensibly designed to serve. Shelley uses global travel to portray an imaginative imbalance, engaging the confused dimensions of the explorer’s motivation. Within this framework is a recurring nautical idiom, where vessels of exploration stand in for everything from isolated explorers to microcosms of society. The effect of the exploration motive radically skews the perception of space, ethics, and responsibility. When reflecting on the scientific revolutions and discoveries that are his “enticements,” Walton claims that “they are sufficient to conquer all fear of danger or death, and to induce me to commence this laborious voyage with the joy a child feels when he embarks in a little boat, with his holiday mates, on an expedition of discovery up his native river” (6). The stark conflation of potentially fatal voyages with a child’s expedition is problematic in itself, even more so
considering the envelopment of others into a patently misplaced metaphor. The inference that his crew – the same unwilling crew who nearly mutiny – are his “holiday mates” is also a considerable absurdity given the acknowledged dangers of Arctic exploration.

The scope of the domestic imagination in a fundamentally connected world is at stake in much of Shelley’s fiction. If her characters can experience varying forms of imaginative exploration after exposure to a larger material world, so too can they face reactionary responses in the guise of apparently beneficial seclusion. Not all her characters are as geographically outcast as Frankenstein’s Creature, who in his own words remains “cut off from all the world” (120). Yet within the imaginative framework of solitude and exploration, Shelley’s domestics are often as exiled as those wandering the world. All three novels give voice to characters who remain exiles within communities, figures who are never content with the boundaries of the visible, figures who project their imaginations beyond the reach of immediate confines. Valperga may seem insular in the geographical scope of its narrative action, but this narrowness is deceptive. True, Euthanasia, countess of the eponymous castle, proclaims she has “lived a solitary hermitess,” which for her is a prerequisite for “[becoming] an enthusiast for all beauty” (107). And yet, both Castruccio and Euthanasia develop their imaginative priorities as a result of their own early travels, Euthanasia in Rome and Castruccio in Edward II’s England. For his part, Victor Frankenstein struggles to reconcile the imaginative precepts of Elizabeth, who maintains that a “farmer’s is a very healthy happy life” (F 45), with the aforementioned “boundless chimeras” of his ambition. The Last Man continually interrogates the inadequacy of self-imposed isolation on the individual as well as the national level: as Lionel’s exposure to a world beyond his “cloud-enshadowed land” of England results in a burst of perspective – a

\[97\] All quotations are taken from Stuart Curran’s 1997 edition of the novel.
“sudden extension of vision, when the curtain, which had been drawn before the intellectual world, was withdrawn” (31) – so too must the nation of England after the plague shatters its illusion of isolation, a fantasy that persists even as its citizens are reduced to the “vagabond pursuit of dreadful safety” (326). Shelley’s most benevolent characters – Henry Clerval, Euthanasia, and Adrian – all strive to balance the requirements of visionary exploration and domestic responsibility. All three fail in these endeavours, whether through naïveté or the inability to enforce a balance of their responsibilities.

We should not overlook the ways in which Shelley’s rooted, domestic characters participate in visionary travels of their own, nor should we explain away their failures through recourse to narrative expediency or the mantle of gendered victimhood. The spatial component to her system of ethics is both peculiar and very much of the time: like Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, and De Quincey, Mary Shelley conceived of the global imagination as both ontologically unstable and potentially liberating. After looking at Shelley’s distinctive narrative fluctuation between the affairs of micro-level domestic relationships, and the macro-level concerns of exploration, science, and politics, we would be mistaken in characterizing the former frame as pragmatic and the latter as idealistic. Her novels demonstrate that while the spatial dimensions of domesticity may be smaller and more conceptually achievable, the infringement of global narratives and powers is an imaginative, as well as economic, inevitability. As this chapter will discuss, the successful spatial negotiations between domestic retreat and exploratory action represent what is for Shelley a true challenge of leadership, global ethics, and creative expression.

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ii.
Critics of Shelley’s fiction tend to read at face value her fictional recommendations for either imaginative expansion or domestic isolation. Michelle Levy has recognized that Shelley’s domestic alternatives to outward-bound history-makers offer moral, sympathetic or imaginative compensation for excesses committed on the global stage. Kate Ellis and Adam Komisaruk, on the other hand, suggest that Shelley decries forms of obstinate boundary-making – the raising of artificial borders against inevitable global realities – as forms of bourgeois exclusivity. Overall, these critics tend to reproduce the divisions within Shelley’s novels themselves – forcing the choice between home or abroad, in conceptual terms. Some critics, however, have tried to reconcile these divisions by analyzing key metaphors that transcend hermetic distinctions. Tilottama Rajan’s work on *Valperga* seeks to rehabilitate Euthanasia’s efficacy through alternative definitions of domesticity and history making. Meanwhile, in their work on *The Last Man*, other critics have highlighted the need to reconfigure our expectations of individual agency in global contexts. Alan Bewell, Charlotte Sussman and Mark Canuel analyze this novel’s metaphors of emigrancy, disease and the epistemological context of group-based decision-making in apocalyptic scenarios; taken together, they demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of how the domestic translates across, and is affected by, such global contexts.

In her discussion of *Frankenstein*, Ellis grapples with the novel’s recommendations for domestic retreat, and blames the horrific aftermaths on ambitious exploration. She notes that “Shelley gives us examples of the ways in which the bourgeois family creates and perpetuates divided selves in the name of domestic affection by walling that affection in and keeping ‘disunion and dispute’ out” (197). Elizabeth, for example, “translates her [imaginative] interest into a substitute for experience, a way of filling a void created by her
lack of contact with the outside world” (193). Ellis gestures towards the “walls” of domesticity, and the corresponding effect these have on the imaginative detachment of those within them; this is reinforced when we see the behaviour of Walton, whose attachment to histories of “voyages made for purposes of discovery” were his “study day and night” (F 6). Shelley uses both contexts of exploration and domesticity to explain the psychodynamics of space and experience: in the face of his relative social seclusion, which is the basis in part for his motivation to explore the world, Walton has the audacity to criticize his ship’s master on the topic of romantic experience. While he admits the man to be a “noble fellow,” he condemns his generosity and equanimity as a species of ignorance, claiming that “he has passed all his life on board a vessel, and has scarcely an idea beyond the rope and the shroud” (10). His power to effect change, as a man, is perceived to be proportional to his exposure to new environments. And yet, in arguing that Shelley uses the narrative structure of Frankenstein to comment on the “‘outer’ and ‘inner,’ the masculine sphere of discovery and the feminine sphere of domesticity” (183), Ellis reinforces the notion that meaningful acts of discovery cannot take place within domestic confines. By placing gender before the experience of exploration, Ellis regards space as deterministic.

Michelle Levy takes up the mythos of global travel in Frankenstein and seems to claim that the entire notion and culture of discovery is toxic to that of domesticity, identifying the tension in Frankenstein as existing primarily between “discoveries” and domestic affections.98 She is right to talk about exploration in parallel with the domestic, and to identify the spatial

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98 Levy observes that “narratives of discovery tended to promise excitement and glory without consequences.... Frankenstein self-consciously reflect[s] on the power of tales of the unknown, paying particular attention to the way such stories inspire imitation, both in the physical world and on the page” (694-5). She sets up an opposition between these categories, where sympathy is a by-product of a focus on the family, conducted to the exclusion of discovery. Levy claims that in this work, “the domestic affections are the primary tool for restraining [the] excesses” (695) promoted by such narratives. Working primarily from the observation of Walton as an explorer inspired by travel narratives to discover the secrets of magnetism and the passage through the Arctic Circle, Levy’s reading is one that confuses literary genre with larger ideologies.
boundaries of sympathy as central to the quandary of ethical responsibility. According to Levy, “Shelley’s denunciation of the project of discovery...concentrates on and culminates in Frankenstein, the first of a new generation of discoverers who refuses to acknowledge any ethical constraints. Indeed, Frankenstein is attracted to science because it seems to be without limits: ‘in a scientific pursuit there is continual food for discovery and wonder’” (700). The culmination of this project of denunciation may indeed be Victor, as Levy claims, but to believe this we must assume an implicit tie between borderless exploration and lack of ethical foundation (something Percy Shelley would at any rate have vehemently denied). Her thesis is premised on the notion that “For Shelley, the potential for harm is minimized and the capacity for good enhanced if one remains at home, or, at the very least, respects the claims of domestic ties when abroad” (701). Certainly, Levy is correct to identify the mechanism for the reconciliation of these tensions, which is similar to Percy Shelley’s metaphor of imaginative dynamics: “what the Creature describes as ‘going out of oneself,’ later elaborated by Percy Shelley in ‘A Defence of Poetry’ as ‘a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own’” (706-7). Levy is also correct to read Victor’s science as being “without limits,” and to see the aim of domestic sympathies as operating within a bounded system.99 As we have been discussing, however, such domestic identifications do nothing to guarantee success; furthermore, they can exacerbate the problems of an exploratory culture by fostering a deep sense of division between these spaces of action. While Levy is right to suggest that the bulk of the blame rests with the neglect of domesticity, she misidentifies the tone and nature of the corresponding critique of the home-front. If Victor can be

99 There is something ironic about Levy’s deployment of Percy Shelley’s system of love in support of a closed domestic system of sympathy. Not only was there little in his own life that might support his adherence to such a system, but there is also little to suggest that something like what Jerrold Hogle calls Shelley’s poetic “transference” might function at all within a pre-determined or bounded system.
condemned for ignoring his domestic capacity for good, it is not clear how staying at home will facilitate Percy Shelley’s “going out of our own nature” except in the most parochial sense.

Adam Komisaruk’s insightful essay “‘So Guided by a Silken Cord’: Frankenstein’s Family Values” successfully blends an analysis of domestic ideology with spatial dynamics as they relate to national economic models. He claims that Shelley “scrutinizes the principles upon which the bourgeois family itself is erected” and that “no family in this novel escapes reproach” (410). Central to Komisaruk’s argument is an economic metaphor that upholds boundaries of “exclusivity” (415); such boundaries are damaging to domestic happiness, and operate in spite of claims that they offer security. He argues that “Shelley draws a precise analogy between the ethos of personal (e.g. domestic) privacy and economic privatization, which flourished in tandem during the age of revolution” (411). The illusory boundaries of home are thus supported on an economic model which denies such limits: “Both the private sphere and the private sector pretend to inclusivity—the former by taking various outsiders into its midst, the latter by chasing capitalism across national borders. Such practices, however...homogeniz[e] instead of upholding difference” (411). Komisaruk’s reading of Shelley’s economic critique does not focus on exploration, but when read as a cipher of spatial relationships, the principles of exclusivity function in parallel. The fundamental problem of borders in this fiction, be they economic or imaginary, is the failure of the imagination to interpenetrate these spheres of exclusivity, which Komisaruk argues “is the principal lesson Victor applies from his own upbringing to his only ‘child’” (415).

Responding to Anne Mellor’s claims that Shelley celebrates bourgeois values, Komisaruk notes that “Victor wishes that history’s movers and shakers had stayed home with their families instead of perpetuating their tyrannical programs....He naively wishes for a return to
the domestic affections as an alternative to political oppression, without realizing that the
construct of the domestic affections owes itself to political oppression” (Komisaruk 423). If
the paradoxical recommendations of domestic stasis and outward global movement remain
unresolved in most of her novels, so then does the problem of satisfying the needs of
economic ambition and security.

Komisaruk’s claim for Shelley’s reaction to bourgeois domesticity seems too strident,
however, and indeed works against the evidence at hand. It is difficult to believe that a
novelist would dedicate so much space in nearly every novel she wrote to victims of
domestic collapse if she did not herself feel some degree of sympathy for her subjects,
regardless of what ideologies they might unconsciously perpetuate. If we cannot fathom a
Shelley who believed in a *deliberately* myopic domesticity (an intellectual paradox at any rate),
it is just as difficult to reconcile her recurring subjects with an uninhibited, misanthropic
progressivism. Thankfully, Tilottama Rajan has attempted to bridge the gap between these
spheres of action by positing a new space for feminist history-making. In the introduction to
her 1998 edition of *Valperga*, she attempts to forge a new formalist reading of Mary Shelley’s
fiction that does not collapse into a progressive-conservative divide, and identifies two
opposed schools of thought with respect to Shelley’s attitude to what she calls “masculine
Romanticism” (“Introduction” 11). Rajan, seeking to reconcile these schools through
detailed character readings – typically based on reactions to male-performed political excess
and the capacity for women to articulate effective vision within a constrained sphere of

100 The first school, which she identifies with critics such as Mary Favret and Anne Mellor, holds that Shelley’s
early novels “bitterly critique the political and imaginative ambitions of Byron, Percy and other male Romantic
writers” (12). Rajan identifies another type of reading, characterized by Mary Poovey, which divides Shelley’s
work into two “profoundly separate” stages: essentially, pre- and post- 1830s, where the true divider came in
the form of an “altered intellectual climate” (12), more conservative and restrictive, requiring compromise and
adaptation on the part of a female author. “[T]he sphere of domesticity and moral values” to which she was
consigned was, in fact, an acceptable place “to express her aggression’ against the Romanticism she felt ‘had
driven her to her adolescent excesses’” (12).
influence – sees the Romanticisms of Mary Wollstonecraft, Percy Shelley and William Godwin as mitigating factors in Mary Shelley’s “advocacy of a feminist history” (13). Rajan grounds this history in a reading of the “discrepancy between women’s creative potential and their biological fate [as] played out in *Valperga* through Euthanasia and Beatrice” (22).

Rajan’s work to bridge these boundaries is important, but it does not make the connection between Euthanasia’s visionary history-making and forms of travel – despite the evidence in *Valperga* and elsewhere in Shelley’s early fiction that travel and exploration are central outlets of male power. The ability to move between spaces, in a material sense, consequently determines those areas of imaginative priority for gendered travellers. Recent work on *The Last Man* moves to address this discrepancy by shifting the focus of agency to a more macroscopic human level, and examining how individuals factor into global events that challenge stable identities. Mark Canuel indirectly furthers the discussion of Rajan’s unresolved tensions in his “Acts, Rules, and *The Last Man*.” In this essay, Canuel remarks on the critical divisions in discussions of this novel, specifically the tendency to dwell on “either the details of character or the devastation worked by the plague” (149), and the corresponding agency characters wield depending on the spatial limits in which they operate. These “divisions...carry theoretical import: this is a novel with an acute awareness of referentiality (in which characters from the author’s biography can be inferred from the fictional scenario), or it is about a breakdown of that referential account of meaning” (149).

The reconciliation, both critical and mimetic, emerges from a boundary-crossing dynamic: between the small coterie that dominates the novel’s sympathetic action and the global scale that forms the backdrop of the plague and subsequent emigrations. Rather than

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101 Canuel recalls Audrey A. Fisch, who notes of the novel that “The Plague practices a kind of deconstruction which, because it undercuts the possibility of human agency, is of little value for progressive politics” (qtd. in Canuel 150).
seeing the limits of domesticity as “dependent upon individual associations, the plague powerfully and contradictorily reveals the extent to which individual associations are dependent upon group formations: the plague persistently requires that individual action be contextualized by group action” (151). This apparently demonstrates a need to reconcile the social limitations of either end of the communal spectrum – a reconciliation Canuel sees as “cooperation based upon the coordination of actions rather than beliefs or genetic filiation” (152). Shelley articulates this process through constant ideological and political dialogues, all of which are verifiable in the parliamentary and regulatory narratives in the novel. Despite the failure of these reconciliations within the novel itself, Canuel’s point is well-made: whether talking about coterie relationships or international politics in Shelley’s fiction, it is nigh-impossible to think about the domestic or the global in Shelley’s fiction in frames that exclude each other.

The recurring impossibility of true isolation in _The Last Man_’s global plague-community has been discussed in terms that highlight the contingency of nations and culture. Alan Bewell, in _Romanticism and Colonial Disease_, uses the “metaphor and sad reality” (4) of global disease to show the ways in which Romantic literary culture struggled to reconcile the medical and geographical results of encounters with other people and diseases. “[M]odern diseases,” he notes, “do not respect geographical boundaries. On an earth unified by the continual movement of people, goods, and pathogens, there are no safe places and nobody is exempt from possible contact” (296). An essential component of Shelley’s “ongoing negotiation of this geographical frame, with its continually fluctuating and uncertain boundaries” (17), was the kind of conceptual, spatial renegotiation necessary to accommodate the obsolescence of national borders. While Bewell’s thesis does not dwell on such imaginative reconfigurations across Mary Shelley’s fiction, his work on _The Last Man_
raises a fundamentally important question: how did exploration of the globe, whether imaginative or real, force a concurrent imaginative reorganization of domestic space? Charlotte Sussman provides an interesting counterpoint to Bewell’s “fluctuating” medical globe by connecting emigrancy to the notion of an individual or metaphysical loneliness. She points out the paradox inherent in the title of the novel – “the loneliness of the last man takes up a bare twenty pages of the almost five-hundred page narrative” (286) – and the “relation between the abstractions of nation and culture and the empirical measurements of population” (287). What emerges from these contests of definition by interconnection is “a world where mobility is inevitable and cannot be delimited to the superfluous and unproductive few” (295). While such interconnections challenge racial and national identities, they also mitigate the notion of solitude in the novel by collapsing barriers between individuals.

Sussman provides excellent evidence for such connections, but leaves unclear the links between solitude and acts of exploration, particularly as these relate to decisions to avoid domestic isolation. In order to better understand the epistemological source of solitude, we must consider the possibility that, as Canuel suggests, traditional political and reading strategies may need to be further adjusted. One must, in effect, examine the space between the competing utilities of the domestic and the exploratory in Shelley’s fiction. The three novels studied here display a hyper-awareness of their place within interconnected spheres of reading – between reader and world, between novel and author – and demand an agonistic effort in navigating between them. Shelley’s stubborn reluctance to grant victory to domestic, or cosmopolitan, or ideological forces in her early novels contributes to a kind of imaginative elasticity that has yet to be fully appreciated. Before turning to Shelley’s work in detail, however, it is necessary to examine more closely the mechanism that enables both
isolated domesticity and outward-bound travel, and to determine how utility and interest interact in such spatially exclusive ways.

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iii.

Never living for long in one place during her early authorial years – between 1814, when she co-authored the travel book *History of a Six-Week’s Tour* with Percy Bysshe Shelley, and 1823, the year she returned to London and began *The Last Man* – Mary Shelley must have understood domesticity to be a fragile thing indeed, hardly a secure value in an unstable and shifting world. Stability for her family was always out of reach, and her early adult life was marked by European peregrination, with brief pauses of settlement punctured by any number of pressing matters: financial concerns (mostly stemming from Percy’s hopeless disrespect for money and her impecunious father William Godwin’s endless demands for cash), mental exhaustion, the sickness and death of her children Clara and William (in 1818 and 1819 respectively), or simple wanderlust (which cannot be discounted). Her years in Italy offer multiple instances of both unsettled discovery and a wistful hope for domesticity. In a letter sent to Leigh and Marianne Hunt in late 1820, Mary half-jokingly implored that family for refuge in the midst of her own family’s frequent déménages between households. “Are we not wanderers on the face of the Earth—have pity on us,” she entreats (qtd. in Seymour 259). Of course, as the Hunts would have known, Mary was settling in well at Pisa, and work on *Valperga* was progressing. As a newly repatriated Briton in 1823, when she began composition of the *The Last Man*, she had been abroad for five years, nearly the entirety of her adult life. The keen sense of displacement, particularly from the intimate-yet-exiled coteries in Switzerland and Italy, is obvious in *The Last Man* – Shelley uses such circles early
on in the novel to focalize the impact of global catastrophe on individuals, friends and families.

Conversely, against the backdrop of her habitual displacement, Mary Shelley never fully wandered as far as the unknown regions of the world in the ways demonstrated by Frankenstein’s Robert Walton, who aimed to reach the “undiscovered solitudes” of the Arctic Circle. Nonetheless, in her life and in her fiction, any discussion of an isolated domestic sphere should necessarily include its role in wider chains of signification. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, had written of the causal association between domestic ideologies and global misdeeds. This process, which would become the basis for the Creature’s isolation, was raised most urgently by Wollstonecraft in Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), when she writes that that “great proportion of the misery that wanders, in hideous forms around the world, is allowed to rise from the negligence of parents” (293). Mary Shelley clearly took these words to heart and infused the Creature’s wandering with the spirit of her mother’s very own miserable travels in the Scandinavian countries in A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark (1796) (a work that blended feminist critique with observations of domestic conditions abroad). Yet, as much as Shelley follows this program, and focuses her attention on the cruelties of hearth and home that structure malign codes of entire nations, she also poured her authorial energy into explaining how those cruelties wander, and what kind of person promotes or enables such unfortunate movement.

When we discuss global movements in Shelley’s fiction, we invariably discuss social motivation: Shelley’s travellers are achingly self-conscious when it comes to the justification for departing the safeties of home. A recurring paradigm of spatial and sympathetic displacement used by Shelley is the appeal to public and private interest, something she is always at pains to qualify as having conflicting effects on particular spaces. The use-value of
travel, imaginative or material, was a subject of recurring discussion in Shelley’s time. In *Literature, Science and Exploration in the Romantic Era*, Timothy Fulford, Debbie Lee and Peter Kitson describe a culture of exploration that was profoundly social, that “depended on the person’s ability to shape his practice so that it satisfied the needs, or spoke to the anxieties, of groups within the culture. Focusing people’s hopes and fears within a persuasive explanatory frame was a rhetorical, and often political, activity” (2-3). The mediation between travel literature, fictions of travel – or the many forms of eighteenth century imaginative travel – and the public use-value of such works was frequently remarked upon by authors and anthologists of the period. Fulford, Lee and Kitson do well to highlight Mary Shelley’s familiarity with authors who theorized the fictional and material aspects of travel and exploration, particularly those writers of exploration in the post-Cook era who characterized the networks of national interest as stemming from scientific universalism and economic individualism. The chroniclers of exploration read by the Shelleys, such as John Pinkerton, characterized the public utility of exploration as “disinterested,” a notion stemming in part from universal discourses of science but also from the economic means by which wealth could be transmitted across a broad social spectrum. This discussion of interest is relevant to the sympathetic rifts in her fiction, as it is most visible between

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102 Pinkerton was the author and anthologist of the most widely-read and comprehensive collection of travels during the period. His monumental *A General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels* (1808-14) was doubtless the kind of collection Shelley had in mind when she wrote of Walton’s obsession with “a history of all the voyages made for purposes of discovery [that] composed the whole of our good uncle Thomas’s library” (F 6). In an essay prefixing the first volume of the collation, entitled “Retrospect of the Origin and Progress of Discovery,” Pinkerton offers a remarkably frank analysis of the history of global exploration, claiming that “In the early period of human history...the discovery of adjacent countries was chiefly effected by war, and of distant regions by commerce” (i). Since the eighteenth century, however, things had changed for the better. He strongly believed that since the “illustrious epoch” (xxix) of Cook’s voyages, motives for exploring and the techniques used to achieve this had been infused with a beneficent spirit; a systematic, disinterested program whose primary function was the accumulation of knowledge. Universal discourses, of the type exemplified by Cook’s travels, had “not only led to solid instruction, but to great practical improvements in many countries. Even the pruning knife of Johnson helped to plant Scotland with trees: and the travels of Young in France, having become a classical book with the French farmers and country gentlemen, have contributed greatly to national improvement” (xxxii).
domestic or global players; it highlights the ways in which they believe they can benefit home or society at large by an exclusive attention to narrow or broad means of improvement.

Shelley’s unique turn on this phenomenon is to foreground the spatial and sympathetic instability of utility in an exploratory context, accomplished through a representationally variable system of imaginative interest.

As the fictional and critical conflicts have shown, there is a tension between the ostensible utilities of exclusive domesticity and exploration. Operating between disinterested (yet imaginatively projective) systems of knowledge and the imperative ethical demands of domestic concerns is a model of social practice premised on desires that are fundamentally spatially dislocated. This principle of interlocution, as employed by Shelley, bears a close resemblance to Adam Smith’s theories of social utility, particularly those explained in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Each author details the ontology of the social imagination, and the ways that things come to be valued inside and outside of domestic and global parameters. In Smith’s formulation, the perceptual mechanics of the imagination configure the figurative, emotional distances of desire and utility. Desired objects which might appear infinitely distant or unachievable are brought closer in the imagination through social

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103 Smith’s construction of sympathy as a selfish mode of sense reception was the foundation for what he saw as the makeup of a modern economy, one he would later develop in detail in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). This “disposition to experience feelings, values included, in parallel with other people with whom we are in some kind of contact” (Parker 137), is centripetal in that “the transfer of feelings is bolstered by the usefulness attributed to the feelings in question” (137). This capacity for reception is primarily sensorial, although this disposition, in light of Smith’s other philosophical developments, can be extended to one’s position within a political or knowledge economy.

Smith’s notion of the utility of a philosophical object can be classified in one of two categories. The first is essentially the concept or thought of the object by itself. The second is a relative utility, which is essentially social context, in which utility is largely divorced from an innate practicality. Smith observes that in modern economies the tendency is towards the second case, and that most will avoid viewing anything of potential value – whether an object or a scheme for public improvement – in an “abstract and philosophical light” (IV.i.348). The pleasure one receives at contemplating an object is, according to Smith, the result of sympathetic understanding, ideally from an impartial and well-informed spectator. Yet this sympathetic understanding is recognized by Smith to be fundamentally centripetally-oriented, factored by a process of aggrandizing emulation. Thus emerges the essentially paradoxical model that has structured economies to this day: all public improvement must be both social (to provide context for what would otherwise be useless) and selfishly-individual (to structure models for sympathetic emulation).
context. The relative utility of a desired object is given value by this social context, essentially capitalist, which situates that value in the midst of systems, networks and markets divorced from an object’s original purpose or point of origin. This social imagination, which through the sensory capacity of sympathy projects a desire to emulate and better oneself, allows the perceiver to speculatively bridge the gap between a state of “have not” and “have.” Smith is always careful to give spatial parameters to his imagination, clarifying “society” as global in scope. Doubtless influenced by Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Smith asks,

To one who was to live alone in a desolate island it might be a matter of doubt perhaps whether a palace or a collection of small conveniences as are commonly contained in a tweezer-case, would contribute most to his happiness and enjoyment. If he is to live in society, indeed, there can be no comparison, because in this, as in all other cases, we constantly pay more regard to the sentiments of the spectator, than to those of the person principally concern’d, and consider rather how this situation will appear to other people, than how it will appear to himself. (*Theory* IV.i.343-44)

Smith openly admits the danger of his system, which lies in the imagination’s vulnerability to a misjudgement in spatial effectiveness; the desired object of an ambitious imagination will likely be, in an “abstract and philosophical light” (IV.i.348), perversely pointless. But this hazardous belief, which he openly calls a “deception” (348), is also the essence of material progress. So strongly is the imagination integrated within social utility that its dangers can manifest themselves in an intense monomania, a “distant idea of...felicity” that drives a person to the waste of “toil and disease” in spite of whatever “real tranquility that is at all times in his power” (342). These “distant ideas” have, he says, “entirely changed the whole face of the globe, have turned the rude forests of nature into agreeable and fertile
plains, and made the trackless and barren ocean a new fund of subsistence, and the great high road of communication to the different nations of the earth” (348-49). Spatial dislocation, the imagination and social utility are thus yoked to a global network of self-interest. Within the context of social space, the imagination motivates the pursuit of desired objects beyond any immediate boundaries or proportion. According to this premise of spatial dislocation, social utility is a status accorded to those objects, methods or conditions which enlarge the means of individuals. Society does not directly benefit from what is actually useful, so much as from what individuals can hope to selfishly benefit from. Social progress, Smith implies, occurs through the pursuit of desired and distant horizons, embedded in networks of global interest and always beyond the context of immediacy.

The confusion between a “necessary here” and an “unnecessary over-there” drives the imaginative efforts of all of Shelley’s novels’ readers and explorers. We should be careful not to assign specific spatial coordinates to Shelley’s condemnations of travel and the disorder of sympathetic proximity. If we denounce Frankenstein’s Robert Walton for unreflectingly absorbing tales of wonder, and for engaging in an endeavour of pure self-interest, how then do we read the entirely voluntary imaginative activities of the domestic imaginary travellers in Valperga and The Last Man? If indeed these activities are rendered possible by a commercial trade in books of travel, and if these literary travels of the world occur only through the page and in the minds of readers, how then can we condemn those who actually travel as always being guilty of imperialistic deeds, witting or not? Surely Shelley is not proposing that those who remain at home are immune to delusions of grandeur or of neglect of the immediate. If those who actually travel – Walton, Castruccio, Raymond – are either consciously or unconsciously exploitative, then those who do not physically travel, and who travel only on the page or in the mind, are ineffectual, and occasionally solipsistic.
It is the exclusivity of self, as the enactor of local improvement, which is at issue here: Shelley’s novels are deeply concerned with the neglect of immediate and pressing social obligations. And yet, the obligations to social progress, to the humanistic expansion of knowledge and individual betterment, all inform the motivations of her characters who in most critical evaluations have not been read as explorers. A balance of obligations warrants the discarding of the solitudes of uninhibited exploration and isolated domesticity. This reading requires us to expand our expectations for acts of discovery, for in doing so, we learn, for example, that “the study to which you apply yourself” (F 37) mentioned by Victor as an exploratory corrective carries its message to individuals with no direct connection to global endeavours. Yet, many of her later novels’ discoverers – at the very least, those with an openness to new experience – are well-rounded and sympathetic individuals. Are we then to believe that Shelley condemned such characters as Euthanasia and Lionel for reading works of travel, much in the same manner as did Walton? Did not the Shelleys themselves have a noted affection for fictions of travel? Did the mere act of reading such works condemn one to an unsympathetic exile and domestic failure? According to the evidence in her novels, this duty to balance sympathy and discovery does not preclude travel, of either the corporeal or imaginative kind; in point of fact, the characters’ obligations in new or foreign situations are often used as measurements of their sympathetic health. Esther Schor points out that “[f]rom Shelley’s figure of egotism as a sentimental journey emerges a recognition of travel writing as an exploration of the self through an encounter with the other” (237). This “ethic of travel” is for Schor a material as well as a figurative factor in promoting civil society: “only when travel is an affair of the body and the mind does it become a matter for the heart; the failure to sympathize indicates a homebound mind” (239). This inversion of the space in which sympathy takes place is, I think, a cornerstone of
Shelleyan thought: there was simply no home distinct from greater ontological contexts. I agree with Schor’s conclusions on how the traveller’s failure to sympathize paradoxically reflects a static spatial location – I would, however, more closely associate Shelley’s early reflections on “travelling sympathy” with global exploration than with the biographically-proximal issues of Mary Wollstonecraft’s sentimental journeys. The issue as it faces the reader, at this juncture, is to locate those moments in Shelley’s fiction where the balance between outside and inside worlds is celebrated, or broken down entirely.

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iv.

I will focus on two figures in my discussion of *Frankenstein*, which is concerned with the tension between spatial and sympathetic dislocation in global travel. The first figure is the Creature, whose connection to exploration stems from his literally dislocated body, and his isolation from economic systems of direct human interest. These factors establish his connection with the solitudes experienced by Victor and Walton. Opposed to Victor’s courtship of solitary exploration is Henry Clerval, a figure who embodies a spatially mobile sympathy. Clerval uses the unfamiliarity of foreign environs to experience a sympathetically-engaged adaptation, an existence of variable proximal relations not determined by metrics. Liberated from the blinkered confines of his “incredulous” father’s narrow mercantilist careerism and “dislike of learning,” Clerval is able, with a sweetly innocent excitement that recalls Keats’s best sonnets, “to undertake a voyage of discovery to the land of knowledge” (*F* 41) that stands as the most ethically sustainable model for travel in these three novels. Each of these figures travels and lives (either voluntarily or unwillingly) outside of static domestic environments. It is against them that Victor most frequently compares himself, and
through these comparisons, Shelley explores the repercussions of dislocation and solitude in
the midst of different global paradigms of travel.

Anne Mellor, in “Frankenstein, Racial Science, and the Yellow Peril,” has identified
the racialized nature of the Creature, who from the outset is characterized by Walton as “a
savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island” (13). While Mellor does go on to identify the
specific racial qualities she believes are central to the Creature’s characterization as an alien,
John Bugg takes a step back and questions the more indirect raciality – indeed, the indirect
ontological origin – of the Creature. Central to this project is his identification of the “vague
geography” (659) of the “undiscovered island” from which the Creature supposedly
originates. “Vague geography” is a key motif in this novel, as it would be in her later works,
and neatly sums up the unsettled location for the novels’ most radical exploratory
endeavours. Like the variably fatalistic horizons of Valperga and the unstable cultural
semiotics of Istambul in The Last Man, “vague geography” links up with undiscovered
solitude in Shelley’s presentation of the tragic homelessness and exile produced by visionary
excess. Unlike Percy Shelley’s Alastor-poet, however, Mary Shelley’s explorers are given actual
homes (or some domestic analogue) from which they are exiled. In this sense, global,
imaginative displacement in Shelley’s fiction has more in common with Wordsworth’s global
localities, and the exiled itinerants who wander through them. But this comparison only
stretches so far, for Shelley’s exiles operate within a full knowledge of greater ontological
contexts, unlike Wordsworth’s figures, who are to greater degree victims of such contexts.

The vague geography of the Creature’s body bears directly on his exile from sites of
domestic comfort. Shelley moves quickly to establish the relationship between global
colonialism, property ownership, and the Creature’s exile. As a living manifestation of the
explorer’s undiscovered solitude, he has no material point of origin from which to project
his own “distant ideas of felicity”; he is not trying to escape from anywhere, in other words. His discovery of Smithian economies thus comes as a surprise to him. Specifically, the Creature learns of the centrality of Smithian economic values – the need to aspire beyond the immediate (as seen in the *Theory*), and “the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty” (96). Delineations of property and ethnographic history go hand in hand in *Frankenstein*: the observation on property follows on the heels of tales of “the discovery of the American hemisphere,” and “the hapless fate of the original inhabitants” (95). On a surface level the Creature’s sympathy for these foreign people is merely one of altruistic concern, the same he displays for the De Lacys. Another way of reading this sympathy comes from his fundamental economic alignment with these inhabitants. Komisaruk, summarizing the Creature’s implicit understanding of the historical and economic principles laid out by Volney and Smith, notes that “To be without property is to be without rank; to be without rank is to be without identity; and to be without identity is to be deprived of all human ‘intercourse’” (431). It is hardly a coincidence that the Creature shares with them some of the “property boundaries” that, as Adam Carter has noted in his discussion of Samuel Hearne’s *Journey*, determine “the extent to which the European can judge the Native [American] to be human” (839).

The Creature’s capacity to effect change within proscribed and domestic boundaries is curtailed by his existence outside of global economic norms. Not only do boundaries of property determine the Creature’s human limits, but his domestic benevolence is suspect, as it is antithetical to global and local maxims of improvement. As the dying Native Americans fall outside of normative habits of property ownership (and what C. B. Macpherson calls “possessive individualism”), so the Creature represents the failure of sympathetic connection in an economic system that relies on ontologically tangled modes of progress (namely, the
confusion of needs with wants and the tendency to abstract the former outside the boundaries of immediate influence). The De Lacys are unable to determine the correct origin of the good works done on their behalf: “I afterwards found that these labours, performed by an invisible hand, greatly astonished them; and once or twice I heard them, on these occasions, utter the words *good spirit*, *wonderful*; but I did not then understand the signification of these terms” (91). While Shelley emphasizes the terms “good spirit” and “wonderful,” the true religious mystery of the De Lacy’s boon emerges from the implicit reference to Smith’s “invisible hand,” the supposed mechanism by which an economy will regulate itself through appeal to sympathetic ambition and emulation. When his inability to successfully integrate into these emulative systems exacerbates his geographic alienation – he is, paradoxically, both “undiscovered” and “original inhabitant” at this point – he voices his economic and spatial confusion as follows: “I was dependent on none, and related to none. ‘The path of my departure was free’” (104).

This last sentence, modified from Percy Shelley’s poem “Mutability” (1816), represents the paradoxical sense of isolated freedom demonstrated by so many explorers in this novel (and one Mary Shelley would develop further in her later works). But the Creature takes something very different from Percy Shelley’s poem than the unstable measurement of human potential implicit in its meteorological metaphors: the “mood or modulation” (“Mutability” 8) has become for him spatial, directional; instability distorts his capacity for global navigation and positioning. The geographic instability experienced by the Creature, like that which Walton and Victor bring to the exploratory endeavour, bears itself out in this novel as a kind of epistemological null-space. The Creature’s role as a mobile metaphor for spatial displacement is confirmed in an episode in the Scottish Orkneys. Victor Frankenstein’s “solitary rambles” on the “remote spot” show that place to be a kind of
imaginative template, “hardly more than a rock,” “monotonous” – and yet, an “ever-changing scene” (136). This protean site represents the twinning of misanthropy and discovery that is the key to Victor’s and Walton’s exploratory impulses. Ironically, however, Victor holds the Creature responsible for “quit[ting] the neighbourhood of man, and hid[ing] himself in deserts” (138), overlooking the fact that it is he himself who feels the need for segregation in “deserted” areas. These spatially barren sites overlap with his corroded faith in domestic fulfillment. Anticipating the unborn female being’s outrage at the Creature’s hideousness, Victor declares her ready to “quit” the Creature, “and he be again alone, exasperated by the fresh provocation of being deserted by one of his own species” (138).

Shelley’s ironic deployment of “desert” in parallel with Frankenstein’s own situation in the Orkneys demonstrates the depth of his psychosis: unable to detect his own scientific and exploratory reliance on being alone, he directs the pathology of callous abandonment and misanthropy into a judgment by an imagined and superficial woman. Victor perversely transposes solitude from his own exploratory pursuits onto the Creature’s domestic comforts.

In developing a sense of home that allows full imaginative development and is still nurturing and protective, Shelley presents us with the irony of characters that aspire to, yet are totally unfitted for, any settled or cloistered place. She questions how closed domesticities inculcate equally damaging solitudes. Victor admits that a “remarkably secluded and domestic” life had “given [him] invincible repugnance to new countenances” (28). The “new countenance” of the Creature might represent the alien in a more rarefied form, but for Victor, this imaginative alienation precedes the Creature’s birth. Regular people are just as subject to Victor’s sympathetic shortcomings, for he “believed [himself] totally unfitted for the company of strangers” (28). In Victor, we are given early evidence of the perceptual
divide that separates the domestic mindset from the exploratory one. Furthermore, we are taught to regard this very division as suspect, as premised on a false understanding of progress and of sympathetic responsibility. The perceptual categories of the real and the imaginary are thus dubiously associated with the disciplinary categories of domesticity and exploration. Once these battle lines of concern are drawn, however, we must question each side, and the divisions of character that exacerbate tensions between them. Victor claims that when he and Elizabeth Lavenza were young, he “delighted in investigating the facts relative to the actual world; she busied herself in following the aerial creations of the poets. The world was to me a secret, which I desired to discover; to her it was a vacancy, which she sought to people with imaginations of her own” (21). Here, Victor shall be the “discoverer” of “facts,” and Elizabeth the “aerial” being who “peoples” the world in a quasi-Edenic manner. The latter sketch of Elizabeth is curious, however. It is surprising that critics have not seized upon this characterization of Elizabeth as a “Creator”: the overwhelming popular consensus is that Victor bears the responsibility of world-creation and sympathetic obstruction, strengthened by the Creature’s allegorical internalizing of the Satan-God relationship from Paradise Lost, and Victor’s “pre-lapsarian” decision to deny reciprocal sympathetic community to the exiled being. His refusal of world-creation represents an imaginative impasse, a collision of his earlier self-characterization as a “discoverer of facts” with Elizabeth’s aerial “peopling” of alternate worlds. While she does maintain a commitment to material norms, these are largely couched within an evasion of greater social responsibilities beyond the gated Swiss cantons.104

104 As the trial of Justine reveals the “wretched mockery of justice” (61) that prevails in the blinkered canton courts, Elizabeth counsels Victor’s brother Ernest into a retiring farmer’s life, in order to evade the pitfalls of “meddling with the dark side of human nature” (61) that is professional lawyering. Yet there is no indication that the Frankenstein household itself might be conscious of their responsibilities in perpetuating Victor’s by-then obvious self-imposed isolation, nor does Victor himself see the link between this isolation and his “curiosity and lawless devices” (61).
Rather than advising a retreat into seclusion, Shelley gives us the figure of Henry Clerval, who employs a kind of rooted cosmopolitanism that requires travel, exploration and social contact, supplemented by the sympathies of a close-knit domesticity in those new places.\(^{105}\) Victor and Clerval are directly compared in their ability to maintain differing capacities for sympathy while they travel and explore, a comparison easily made due to Clerval’s proximity to the domestic circle of the Frankenstein household. An “only child” (22), Clerval is forced from the beginning to seek out domestic circles outside his own home. His father, “a merchant of Geneva” (21), hopes to introduce him into the business, despite his son’s predilection for “books of chivalry and romance” (21). The older Clerval maintains a strong isolationist standpoint, however, asserting “his favourite theory, that learning was superfluous in the commerce of everyday life” (28). This myopic understanding of commerce as only the exchange of goods, however, is unable to prevent Clerval from absorbing the greater, global implications of economic exchange. Clerval resists his father’s program, claiming that he “was well-pleased to become his father’s partner, but he believed that a man might be a very good trader, and yet possess a cultivated understanding” (28). Clerval’s contrasting of “commerce” and “trade” with “cultivation” presupposes that connectivity (or the global associations necessary for trade) inhibits the kinds of growth that occur outside of “everyday life.” Curiously, however, it is precisely Clerval’s willingness to submit to “everyday life” in the midst of intercultural traffic (particularly his voyages in

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\(^{105}\) The subject of much past criticism, the Clerval of the 1818 *Frankenstein* deserves further attention. Joseph Lew is largely responsible for the current climate of opinion surrounding Clerval, reading him as having “Oriental ambitions” (255) that link him to “Western dominance” (257) of India and the Orient. Lew’s argument relies heavily on changes to the 1831 edition of the novel, changes that make Clerval “less sympathetic by linking him far more strongly to Walton’s ambitions and to British trade and empire-building in India” (263). On the subject of Clerval’s education, Lew is astute in his consideration of the alterations to the character, but his conflation of Clerval Sr.’s ambitions with his son’s mastery of Oriental languages leaves some behavioural stones unturned, particularly as regards Clerval’s quite ethical notions of travel in domestic lands. I would advocate a broader approach to the notion of exploration (not to say commerce or imperialism, terms too broad to be covered here) as applied to Clerval, taking into consideration the possibility that even in the 1831 edition that Clerval has reformatory ambitions not at all akin to his father’s imperialist ones.
England and Scotland) that he achieves his finest moments as a traveller. Rather than privileging such “cultivated” principles at the expense of mundane details, Clerval’s social explorations are defined by domestic immersion, sympathetic connection and a desire to genuinely improve the lot of those with whom he associates.

This constant relativization of domesticity means that while traveling, Clerval relies on a borderless identity-formation to produce his home. Victor claims that Clerval’s capacity for adaptation and “friendship [were] of that devoted and wondrous nature that the worldly-minded teach us to look for only in the imagination” (130). Victor admires how this adaptation is not purely imaginary – how Clerval’s refusal to erect borders is not fantastic, but realizable. His travels with Victor in England reveal this strength: “I could pass my life here,” he says to Victor, “and among these mountains I should scarcely regret Switzerland and the Rhine” (134). Victor is particularly attentive to the strain travel and exploration place on this model of sociability, remarking that Clerval “found that a traveller’s life is one that includes much pain amidst its enjoyments. His feelings are for ever on the stretch; and when he begins to sink into repose, he finds himself obliged to quit that on which he rests in pleasure for something new” (134). For his part, Victor has hardened himself to such activity, which deepens his parallel with Walton’s uninhabited regions, “a part of the world never before visited...a land never before imprinted by the foot of man” (6). While touring Scotland, Victor “was impatient to arrive at the termination of [his] journey” (135); so intent is he on the completion of his own agenda that he “was in no mood to laugh and talk with strangers, or enter into their feelings or plans with the good humour expected from a guest” (135). The very essence of his paradoxically cloistered exploration is a sense of usefulness that eschews human contact.
All of the driven explorers in *Frankenstein* are defrauded by their perceptual monomania, and they are dissociated from the enriching sympathetic exchanges around them. Shelley seems particularly interested in the notion of the fixed point, a recurring idea she gives geographical characteristics and twins with the idea of the undiscovered solitude. Early in the novel, suffused with self-assurance, Walton claims that “nothing contributes so much to tranquilize the mind as a steady purpose, – a point on which the soul may fix its intellectual eye” (6). That “point,” a stand-in for the undiscovered lands which motivate his and Victor’s journey, figuratively excludes the proximal relationships that determine an actual context for their discovery. Curiously, and in contradistinction to the grounds of the spatial metaphor of the fixed point, *Frankenstein*’s explorers engage in acts of discovery that are chronically directionless. Indeed, to be directionless in the service of universal good seems to be a primary point of criticism in Shelley’s novel, specifically the attention to the ends and means of her two main explorers’ visions. On the one hand, the means of discovery are left to question: telling how Victor’s “discovery was so great and overwhelming, that all the steps [which] had ... progressively led to it were obliterated, and I beheld only the result” (34). And yet, Victor’s and Walton’s efforts undeniably yield something, misdirected though their energies may be. The self-inspired glory and potential utility of his actual discovery is enough to keep Victor convinced of his work as progress. Ends unaware of means is thus a hallmark of the Frankensteinian creation, Walton’s exploration, and Shelley’s portrayal of global systems of social benefit in general: all seek to achieve a directionless distant prospect despite being unsure about how exactly to get there, or the employment of it when reached.
I would like to turn to Shelley’s two subsequent novels, *Valperga* and *The Last Man*, to show her continued extrapolation of this phenomenon of divided exploration. I am particularly interested in this phenomenon as it relates to the motifs of borders and exiles. These novels demonstrate many of the same concerns as *Frankenstein*, including the role of the isolated retreat in both exploratory and domestic contexts, the substitution of imagined travels for material experience of the world, and the erection of fragile boundaries designed to keep the greater world out. These experiences facilitate alternate types of exploration, and in them we observe Shelley’s evolving philosophy of the categories of home and away.

Shelley’s second and third novels are strongly characterized by the association of stable-bordered spaces with moral and political remediation. The predominantly cloistered scope of *Valperga*’s action belies its involvement in a larger European politics, one that, as Tilottama Rajan has said, “leads from regionalism to hegemony”; this highlights its setting “in an unstable period between local state-forms such as the bishoprics and the communes, nation-states such as the German Empire and the papacy, and local tyrannies (such as that of Castruccio) that both prefigured and sought to forestall national hegemonies” (“Possibility” 98-9). Traditionally, critics have linked these territorial hegemonies to the constraints of gender that keep Euthanasia from power: Rajan, voicing the opinions of many critics of Shelley, claims that Euthanasia “embodies the republican ideals of Percy Shelley; she is a woman ruler who combines rationality and sensitivity, but is denied Promethean power because of her gender” (“Introduction” 9).

There is surely an unavoidable gender crisis inherent in Euthanasia’s ability to wield power, and thus to discover and forge new avenues of exercising it. *Valperga* is a novel that laments the isolating qualities of either gender. Still, a closer examination of the imaginative
boundaries erected by Valperga’s key figures reveals that what we might codify as gendered and ideological distinctions are rather distinctions of the imagination and its interactions with bordered spaces. Euthanasia’s isolation within Valperga and the limited public sphere over which she presides leads, for example, to a kind of valorization of “the universe of my own mind” (107), as she terms it. Her status as a political figure in the midst of war and revolt is continually weighed against her tendency to spatially abstract material efficacy, instead situating it in sympathetic and historiographical terms. The sphere of her interest (and influence) becomes progressively ethereal and dislocated from the material events in the greater world: “What is the world, except that which we feel? Love, and hope, and delight or sorrow, and tears; these are our lives, our realities, to which we give the names of power, possession, misfortune and death” (107). This progression of inefficacy is presented in contrast to different kinds of spatial isolation; for example, from her “violent partizan” mother, who “thought that the whole globe of the earth was merely an appendage to the county of Valperga” (110). Mary Shelley’s construction of these two powerful women and their political motivations hinges on their shared spatial imprisonment within the exclusive interest of Valperga.

But if Euthanasia (and, to a lesser extent, Beatrice) is not blamed by Shelley for her ultimate ineffectuality within the historical continuum, then neither is Castruccio at fault for his participation in codes that keep women apart from the sphere of political dominance. Rather, his imagination, developed over the course of a painful exile and extensive travels, facilitates his outward territorial hegemonizing even while Euthanasia’s interest dilates in sympathetic and chronological scope. Forms of exile, in other words, define each of their engagements with material history. The problem of interest and public utility in Valperga is the transmutation of power into restricted or unbounded spheres of imaginative desire,
depending on the nature of one’s particular exile. Euthanasia’s imagination situates individual or historical action within a relativistic but thoroughly fantastic “green earth,” where people are “but the minutest speck in the great whole” (288); Castruccio’s ambitious imagination sees contingency as a linear series of material impediments to be surmounted: “He thought coolly on the obstacles in his way; and he resolved to remove them” (233). These character distinctions go beyond the ability to imaginatively render fate into confrontable metaphors, or the postulation of a gendered imagination. Rather, they represent Mary Shelley’s attempts to unravel the more profound ideological divisions that precede the categories of good and evil, republican and imperialist, that each faction in *Valperga* levies against one other.

Critics Stuart Curran and Betty T. Bennett have set the tone for nearly all subsequent readings of the novel in identifying, in broad strokes, its political and historical stakes. Between them, they establish that political space is tied to specific regional and territorial markers, in which a characters’ historical power is defined as action for or against the defining characteristics of the places she inhabits. Curran, in his 1997 edition of the novel, observes that Shelley does not look “backward to cultural traditions gradually forged by a male hierarchy across time but forward to a free, egalitarian and liberating society” (xiii). If, as Curran claims, *Valperga* offers “totally realized ideological programs, the one libertarian and the other authoritarian,” then Euthanasia “stands for a liberal democratic alternative not just to Castruccio Castracani, fourteenth-century warlord, but also to the war-weary Europe of the early nineteenth century and particularly to England, where the first moves of reform to consolidate the power of a free middle class were bearing fruit as this novel was being written and published” (xxiii). The essence of Euthanasia’s undeniably modern portrayal, in opposition to the traditions of male hierarchy, is thus her advocacy of the historically-associated Guelph virtues of “individual and civic responsibility” (xxi).
Curran is right to point out that these “totally realized ideological programs” have roots in geo-political factionalism. He attributes the identification of this partizanship to Bennett’s “The Political Philosophy of Mary Shelley’s Historical Novels,” one of the early associations of geography and political alignment in *Valperga*. Here, Bennett helps to establish the prevailing opinion that Euthanasia is not merely the contrast to Castruccio proving “the Shelleyan view of history as a struggle between two sets of forces.” Shelley does make Euthanasia “the symbol of liberty and democratic government by interconnecting her fate and that of her family’s castle, Valperga” (357). Within this paradigm, however, Bennett advances the interesting notion that the castle Valperga “is situated...partway between Lucca, the symbol of Ghibelline power, and Florence, which was...a Guelph republican city,” and that “its very locale suggests it is the logical mediation point between the opposing factions” (357-58). This geopolitical reading of the novel is very useful in relativising the dynamic relationships between local political contests and the larger-scale power-brokering occurring in Italy at this time. As we see in the opening chapter of the novel, which establishes the boundaries of “domestic faction” (V 8), the castle of Valperga becomes a refuge from persecution, thus acting as a later counterpoint to Castruccio’s destruction of it in the name of accretive imperialism. According to Bennett and others, Euthanasia’s inhabitation of this mediating Valperga symbolizes her transhistorical, modern role in “a new order committed to love and forgiveness...She is the personification of universal love and elects to suffer the loss of her love, and the loss of her life, rather than capitulate to a political system based on power and revenge” (362-63).

And yet Shelley stages the conflict between republicanism and imperialism in *Valperga* as a contest waged internally within individual minds – a contest between a self-affirming, generative isolation and a reactive, voracious appetite for the vagaries of historical
event. These minds are always given geographical or spatial analogues – bounded enclaves for Euthanasia, borderless territories for Castruccio. Euthanasia’s failure to access systems of power are certainly related to her gender. Still, many critics seem prepared to take this explanation of her failure to the level of orthodoxy. Few look to associate Euthanasia’s domestic isolation with that seen in *Frankenstein*, in which a valorised seclusion results in a narrowness of material vision; nor do they seek to explain her ineffectuality by looking at forms of exile provoked by economic imperatives that require exclusivity while promising public benefit.

Furthermore, and in contrast to Curran’s and Bennett’s valid points about the novel’s political relevance, Mary Shelley was not living in England at the time of *Valperga*’s composition. As mentioned previously, she was wandering Italy, technically though not desperately homeless; she was in no secure position from which to draw an accurate parallel with the life or lifestyle of a Euthanasia, whose intellectual and emotional identity derives largely from a privileged domesticity in a native country. Certainly, Shelley’s sentiments were republican; she and Percy lived through and were encouraged by the upswing in revolutionary activity across Europe, from Spain in 1820 to the closer Italian uprisings in Naples, Palermo and Piedmont. But ideological partizanship, in Euthanasia’s case, almost always comes second to her desire for an imaginative isolation that transcends even the most libertarian policies of the Guelph states.

Through these primary players, greater political conflicts are staged as contests of mobility within and between places of power. Travel as an actuator of ideology is an implicit discussion in *Valperga*, and much of the novel concerns those who are at liberty to travel the outside world, those who are not, and both groups’ subsequent imaginative understanding of history and an individual’s ability to effect change on it. While it may be true that Castruccio
is progressively distanced as an object of readerly affection, defining Euthanasia by mutual exclusion as the liberal hero seems both re- and deductive. Curran’s overlooking of the activity of solitary, “hermit-like” imaginary wandering, with its “enthusias[m] for all beauty” (V 107), within a reading of Euthanasia’s visionary liberalism, softens the impact of her positive influence and diminishes the causes of her failure. Perhaps Shelley is indeed seeking to confront a history dictated by male-negotiated events (as suggested by Rajan), but making Euthanasia a victim of masculinist historiography does significantly detract from her complexity and value as a character, to say nothing of diminishing whatever responsibility she might have had in her own downfall. It is undeniably naïve to construct a theory of imaginative dynamics within Valperga that does not in some way rely on gender. It is, however, crucially important to supplement any such reading with a consideration of how imaginative travels within and beyond domestic boundaries beget deeper ideological divisions.

The contests of power in Valperga are codified in spatial and geographical terms. The novel’s characters are shaped within bordered areas or are left free to explore open ones, and are judged on their ability to wield power effectively on a changeable world that is delineated largely upon feudal demarcations. Generally speaking, the conflict of republicanism at the centre of this work is also a conflict about how the representatives of imperialism or liberalism (respectively, though not exclusively, Castruccio and Euthanasia) adhere to quite distinctive imaginative relations with the material and historical world. That is to say, their imaginative conditioning within certain spaces determines, to a degree, their political alignment. Michael Rossington has discussed Mary Shelley’s synthesis of Percy Shelley’s idea that “transience and material flux are...seen as the very essence of time in which all activity takes place” (“Republican” 117). Using this metaphor of the flux, and how characters adapt
to it, we can draw more detailed conclusions about actions within spatial categories: if “Euthanasia’s understanding of freedom in terms of dynamic change in *Valperga* [corresponds] to the idea [of historical flux] in *A Defence of Poetry* that the poet is uniquely gifted with an ability to understand,” then Castruccio “is interested in pursuing a narrowly delimited fixity in a foreseeable future when he will have control” (116). These ideas are, I believe, fundamentally sound, though Rossington glosses over the specific ways the imaginations of these characters negotiate the *spatial* boundaries of the imagination in the pursuit of their goals. Determining the limits of domesticity and security, and the corresponding effects of exile and ambition, helps reveal Shelley’s interrogation of political communities with very different intellectual understandings of travel and power.

For Castruccio, freedom is the power to subdue any potential threats or impediments—anything restricting this power appears to him as a form of tyranny. The opening chapters of the novel establish the importance of exile and domestic safety in the formation of characters’ imaginative lives. While Castruccio begins the novel with a set of impulses aligning him with openness and freedom of travel, these impulses arise primarily as a result of his family’s persecution in Lucca: “Our exiles found many of their kinsmen on the same road, on the same sad errand of seeking protection from a foreign state” (13). While it is true that such incidents help to nurse the “implacable hatred” (13) of the persecuted, and reinforce the strength of domestic factions, the exile experienced by Castruccio nonetheless foments within him the capacity to meaningfully adapt to the changing circumstances of a volatile political climate. The need for protection subsequently leads to a limitless or borderless ambition. Yet, the same forms of persecution that result in his unhappy flight from home in Lucca are, perversely, transformed into rationalizations for further flights; later, they will come to underpin his philosophy of territorial and political accretivism.
Even prior to his travels Castruccio is figuratively defined as receptive to the alterations brought on by travel:

Riding hard, and changing his horse on the road, he arrived in five days at Florence. He experienced a peculiar sensation of pleasure as he descended from the mountains into Tuscany. Alone on the bare Apennines...he felt free; there was no one near him to control his motions, to order him to stay or go; but his own will guided his progress, swift or slow, as the various thoughts that arose in his mind impelled him. He felt as if the air that quickly glided over him, was a part of his own nature, and bore his soul along with it; ... his thoughts wandered to his native town; he suffered his imagination to dwell upon the period when he might be recalled from exile, and to luxuriate in dreams of power and distinction. (17)

This receptiveness is counterbalanced by a linear will-to-power that tries to assert itself in the face of apparently directionless external circumstances. Castruccio’s education and upbringing partake of the roguish picaresque, a series of coincidences and chance encounters intended to rationalize his political astuteness and militaristic hunger. The tales framing his exile from the Florentine region to England are an obvious homage to Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, but Shelley shies away from the Wheel of Fortune and Fate seen in the earlier text. In fact, Shelley seems determined to bypass any form of determinism at all in the figure of Castruccio, as the character remains focused on shaping the world in his own image.

What Rossington calls “a constant lack of definition in Castruccio’s portrayal” (“Introduction” xx) is in fact a byproduct of his adaptability to the conditions of travel as an exile. “Events are now my masters,” he tells Benedetto Pepi, “soon I hope to rule them, but at present I shall be guided by accident” (V 87).
The development of Castruccio’s ambition through his travels is neither straightforward nor inevitable, neither the product of gendered action nor the intervention of fate. Instead, Shelley constructs Castruccio’s ability to project himself into the imaginative distance through a method of material adaptation learned in his unwilling exile. After the death of his family, Castruccio “experienced that feeling which deceives us at every age, that by change of place, he could exchange his unhappy sensations for those of a more genial nature” (27). This “change of place” leads him first to the benevolent Guinigi and then to England, ultimately experiencing very divergent notions of ambition. Guinigi, an ex-soldier, admits his eyes “do not glow with the same fire” as Castruccio’s, an evaluation which translates into his understanding of the landscape: the older man’s sense of the “new scene” of an isolated farming community “recognized the affinity of the meanest peasant to his own noble mind” (32), combining “imaginative flights” with “humble occupations” (33). When Guinigi gestures to the “bare” country around Monte Selice, his imagination projects a “summer, when the corn waves among the trees, and the ripening grapes shade the roads” (33). He entreats Castruccio to consider happiness as “the family of a dweller among the fields, whose property is secure, and whose time is passed between labour and intellectual pleasure” (35). Tellingly, this functional relationship between the immediate and the imaginatively distant is lost on Castruccio: Guinigi is to him “an enigma that [he] could never solve,” and he “neither sympathized with nor understood him” (33).

Security of the type exemplified by Guinigi (and later Euthanasia) is premised on a reliance on landed property, a system of inheritance that failed Castruccio once, and which he now associates, paradoxically, with emigration and exile. Castruccio immediately rejects this static existence, with its secure lines of property, saying “I must act, to be happy,” and that his father wished him “to tread in his steps, and go beyond them” (35). While he does
develop some sympathy towards Guinigi’s way of life, little is done to change his grand aspirations, which he gives a truly unlimited scope: “he would throw his arms to the north, the south, the east, and the west, crying,— ‘There—there—there, and there, shall my fame reach!’” (29). These “steps,” which first take the form of travels and then a military ambition that cannot truly be fulfilled, characterize Castruccio’s attitude towards material happiness and action – it is only important that he possess ambitions which will lead unto others. Contingency and unsettled action becomes a mode of travel and a way of doing politics. Guinigi recommends travel to England for its own sake, for it will “enable you, when you return, to judge impartially of the state of your country, and to choose, without being influenced by narrow party feeling, the course you will pursue” (38). This is a fairly standard rationalization for travel, but the advice is wasted on Castruccio, who is either unable or unwilling to experience England outside of the court politics of Edward II. As someone whose “childish mind...shrunk into itself” when it experienced “the stained and gold-laced state” (39) of Italian nobles, it seems inevitable that he would lose sight of any comparative ethnography made available by traveling abroad in England. Following his return from exile, Castruccio has internalized the outcast state, transforming the condition into an imaginative technique for articulating political and military action: as “the uncertainty of his destiny only gave more scope to his imagination,” his “success made him extend his views to something beyond; and every obstacle surmounted, made him still more impatient of those that presented themselves in succession” (37, 245, emphasis added). This boundless determination is described, paradoxically, in linear terms: “he fixed his whole soul on the point he would attain, and he never lost sight of it, or paused in his efforts to arrive there” (246). This unusual fusion of interminable and unidentifiable goals pursued though a monomaniacal resolve is certainly in keeping with Shelley’s literary experiments with overreaching figures
such as Walton, Frankenstein, and Raymond. It therefore appears to be a foundational component of her theory of explorers and conquerors who operate under the auspices of security and public benefit. It is in Castruccio, however, where Shelley first identifies such an explicitly political potential in the spatial imagination.

Mary Shelley’s portrait of Beatrice, on the other hand, is radically different in its approach to boundless wandering, though it looks to examine the negative effects of this activity as experienced by both Castruccio and Euthanasia. Beatrice demonstrates how exile functions on a mind without any true sense of borders: this is a character who represents a synthesis of madness, philosophical travel, and ideological conflict. Noted by Rajan as one who provides a “synergy” that mediates “between feminism and the masculine modes of imagination and ambition” (“Introduction” 9), Beatrice becomes for Shelley an experiment in “madness and hysteria within a ‘psychoanalytic’ framework” (25), one who negotiates the emotional boundaries of both liberation and solitude. In our reading, it is important to consider where these competing wills-to-power function within a spatially dynamic context. Rajan observes “a curiously pre-Freudian passage,” wherein “Euthanasia compares the human soul to ‘a vast cave’ in which ‘Consciousness’ sits ‘as a centinel at the entrance,’ but in which there is a further ‘recess’ that ‘few visit’ and that ‘receives no light from outward day.’ This ‘inner cave’ is at once the source of crime and evil, of the ‘daring...secrets’ of heresy, and of poetry and imagination” (25). Rajan’s construction of Beatrice’s madness as stemming from experiences of secrecy and mystery is important, particularly within a psychoanalytic reading. Nonetheless, it does not consider how this “inner cave” might be reflective of the girl’s experiences of exile – particularly in the ways it differs from the other, relative exiles of Castruccio and Euthanasia. In her sympathetic and material distance from society, as well as her supernatural alignment with Mandragola, Beatrice bears comparison to the Witch from
Percy Shelley’s *The Witch of Atlas*, the lonely and capricious cloud-dwelling goddess who alters history through the dreams of mortal men. In such a role – involved in, yet beyond, mortal affairs – she is truly a synergetic figure, and does shift mercurially between Castruccio’s and Euthanasia’s different sensibilities of imaginative travel. Yet, if Castruccio requires forms of imaginative exile to articulate his political ambitions, and Euthanasia feeds off her imagination as a “solitary hermitess” within the confines of a relatively secure domicile, then Beatrice is a victim of a heretical and liberated emotional life that represents a total exile. In this way, Beatrice bears comparisons to Shelley’s Creature, whose “vague geography” ([Bugg](#)) makes of her “a monster...whom all men disowned” (*F* 96).

Euthanasia’s penchant for employing metaphors of boundless perceptual geography has a cruel analogue in the types of mental illness and bigotry suffered by Beatrice.

Euthanasia speaks of “depths of intense emotion veiled in the blue empyrean” (*V* 335) as an aesthetic observer of nature, one who by her own word has “become an enthusiast for all beauty” (107). Beatrice, however, *truly* occupies such limitless spaces, figuratively and emotionally: she describes herself as “vain, self-sufficing, cloud-inhabiting Beatrice,” an “ethereal prophetess, who fancied that I could feed upon air and beautiful thoughts, who had regarded my body as but a servant of my will, to hunger and thirst only as I bade it” (345). The sad figure of Bindo says of Beatrice to the Witch Mandragola that “Her eye sees beyond this world” (363); correspondingly, the Witch tells Beatrice that while her “body and...spirit may master all the kings of the earth,” that her “other self...wanders at will over the boundless universe,” and “commands all creatures” (372). This is truly a crushing response to Percy Shelley’s Witch, particularly of his parroted portrayal of Mary’s claim that his tale contained no “human interest.” While Percy’s Witch satisfies herself with the limitless imaginative effects of meteorology and the peaceful political evolution of human
society, Mary’s Beatrice suffers the worst effects of “interest” in witnessing the pain of isolation from both involved and uninvolved levels of human affairs. Her characterization of global economies as premised on sensorial pain and exploitation highlights how boundless systems have ruined local relationships:

...there is not an atom of life in this all-peopled world that does not suffer pain; we destroy animals; – look at your own dress, which a myriad of living creatures wove and then died; those sables, – a thousand hearts once beat beneath those skins, quenched in the agonies of death to furnish forth that cloak. Yet why not? While they lived, those miserable hearts beat under the influence of fear, cold and famine. Oh! better to die than to suffer! The whale in the great ocean destroys nations of fish, but thousands live on him and torment him. Destruction is the watchword of the world; the death by which it lives, the despair by which it hopes... (330)

In Shelley’s illustration of a figure both “cloud-inhabiting” and cave-dwelling, we witness not so much a synthesis of gendered power dynamics as their obliteration and removal from any sympathetic human contexts. Imaginative travel between the universal and the immediate is for Beatrice a smokescreen for masking the invariable constants of pain and death. In the song commemorating her own death, her “despoiling” enacts her dislocation and lack of faith in natural goodness, lamenting that “she wandered forth a wretch upon the earth” (388).

In diametric opposition to Beatrice’s boundless wandering stands the Castle Valperga, the other significant bridging figure used by Shelley to highlight the role of spatial dynamics in political histories. The castle represents not merely the political “middle ground” observed by Bennett, but also a perceptually immovable object that (supposedly) obstructs
Castruccio’s freedom. In the sense of the spatial imagination, Valperga is both a magnifier and an opaque obstacle. Rajan notes that while “Euthanasia functions effectively as long as she practices a local and domestic form of government,” “she knows her territory must eventually be absorbed by a larger state” (“Possibility” 100). That territory, Valperga specifically, represents for Euthanasia not merely locality but also stability, security, and a vantage point from which to observe the passage of history and time.

Looked at through the “free” experiences of Castruccio, Euthanasia’s imaginative experience of the world is conditioned largely by specific and delimited geo-spatial confines: namely, the bounded securities of Valperga, a structure and a concept associated with both imaginative perspective and isolation from history (until its encounter with Castruccio). This sense of security runs afoul of Castruccio’s twisted sense of freedoms: early in the novel, determined to recompense the generosity of Euthanasia’s family for supporting him, Castruccio conflates his outcast role with a desire to become, in effect, a new Valperga for Euthanasia, a new base of material stability. “I am an exile,” he says, “and can do no good to you who are prosperous; mine must be barren thanks. Yet not the less will I fulfil my promise, if our fortunes change, of being your friend, your knight, your rock, on whom you may build your hope and trust in every misfortune” (I’25). Contrasting “barren exile” with “prosperous building,” Castruccio misses the obvious: Euthanasia already has such a “rock,” one that previously sheltered him from misfortune. The same form of security that he aspires to, that he was deprived of in his own youth, is something already possessed by Euthanasia, and he misreads her material and emotional needs: “this castle is as dear to me as all his dominion is to him” (272), she says. Viewed in this manner, the dimensions of imaginative concern are clear: both desire Valperga, one because it enables imaginative liberty, and the other because its liberty represents a threatening barrier to his self-actualization. That place
which was once a refuge for him is eventually transformed into a militaristic byproduct (“Castruccio, who now looked on nature with a soldier’s eye, remarked what an excellent defence Valperga might make” [101]), and a symbol of her defiance against him (that he eventually destroys).

While she does participate in small ways within her civic communities, the bulk of Euthanasia’s imaginative energy is spent contemplating nature and society from a detached vantage. Rajan notes that Euthanasia’s “republicanism and idealism are at odds with modernity” (“Possibility” 100); historical and social changes are resisted by Euthanasia, as they represent contrary forces to that stability which has in the first place allowed her the act of observance. This resistance extends to her immediate social relations, for example her suspicions of “the gaieties of Florence,” though “the wit and imagination of the people formed an agreeable variety to her life; but there was a mutable and changeful spirit among them, that did not invite her confidence” (V 105). So while Euthanasia is able to appreciate “mutability” from a historical or intellectual point of view – a fact which has caused critics to chronically align her politically with Percy Shelley – she nonetheless remains powerless to effect change in a meaningful way outside of her own home, and her own mind.

As Castruccio’s self-actualization is measured in territorial accretion, Euthanasia’s is proportionally intellectual and imaginative. Towards the end of the novel, she is still perfectly capable of change, though it is always relentlessly domestic and local: “Her character was always improving, always adding some new aquirements, or strengthening those which she possessed before; and thus for ever enlarging her sphere of knowledge and feeling” (403). Change in the sense purchased by travel denies her the stable vantage she expects as a passive observer, and she typically rejects material networks of association in favour of a more controlled and idealistic representation of the world. This is demonstrated most clearly
in her early travels to Rome, a journey that offers a stark contrast of learning opportunities compared to Castruccio’s time away from a stable domesticity. Her preconception of Rome colours her whole experience, to the point where, when relating her travels to Castruccio, she notes she “was about to approach the shadow of Rome” (112, emphasis added). This gesture to the unfulfilled expectations of travel is ironic, given her own wistful claims that, in order to better communicate what Rome could really mean (in a sense of its purity of purpose), that she “should draw in the sacred air which had vivified the heroes of Rome; their shades would surround me; and the very stones that I should treat were marked by their footsteps” (112). Which “shade” we should trust is not clear. What Shelley does make clear is that Euthanasia’s imaginative travels outweigh in importance her material ones; that any destination cannot provide what she calls the “soul of beauty and wisdom which had penetrated my heart of hearts” (112). If, as Rossington points out, she “inherits from her father a richly discerning awareness of temporal significance” (“Republican” 116), this awareness does not extend to her imaginative ability to navigate present, material conditions of history.

The metafictional vantage of her aristocratic seat at Valperga does align her with the reader, who must know of her eventual downfall, and is thus nominally sympathetic to the currents of change that she detects but is powerless to alter. We are never led to believe that her isolation is motivated by selfish or ambitious desires, although at worst she might be accused of a kind of aesthetic gluttony in her devotion to detection and appreciation over creation and intervention. Her lack of curiosity for the world outside of Valperga is offset by her ability to bring comfort to those within the walls of the castle, as well as her imaginative immersion in the “possible.” In her care for her ailing father, she establishes her dual role as sympathetic unifier and philosophical traveller: “...she passed whole days over these dusky
manuscripts, reading to the old man....The effect of this education on her mind was advantageous and memorable...she saw and marked the revolutions that had been, and the present seemed to her only a point of rest, from which time was to renew his flight, scattering change as he went; and, if her voice or act could mingle aught of good in these changes, this it was to which her imagination most ardently aspired‖ (I’22). This encouraging allusion to Percy Shelley’s philosophy of historical change is, however, offset by her incapacity for “mingling aught of good in these changes” outside of Valperga’s confines. For instance, in her plans for action against Castruccio, her need for mental travel as a mode of political expression manifests itself in a rather sad delusion, a culminating fantasy of expansive isolation which completely misunderstands his will-to-power. Her anticipation of his arrest and imprisonment conjures images of “some lovely island on the sea of Baiae—his prison. A resting-place, whose walls would be the ocean, and whose bars and locks the all-encompassing air....Thence he would survey the land where the philosophers of past ages lived; he would study their lessons; and their wisest lore would descend into his soul, like the dews of heaven upon the parched frame of the wanderer in the Arabian desarts. By degrees he would love obscurity‖ (409). This imagined island, the site of wandering from which further wandering takes place, denies the material nature of change of which Castruccio is a self-willed construct and agent. She seeks to transform this island into an alternative Valperga, but avoids the material procedures, such as her mother’s partisan zealotry, that have allowed her to inherit the castle to begin with.

It is true that Euthanasia’s engagement with controlled boundlessness does not partake of the same explicit ethical dilemmas as Castruccio’s territorial seizures. That said, the language Shelley uses to describe the simultaneous expansiveness and closed-mindedness is often very similar: each seeks to surmount present boundaries through the projection of
distant prospects. In this sense of denying the world of the immediate, Euthanasia’s relationship with Valperga vis-à-vis her “violent partizan” mother reveals a significant confusion in her imaginative experience of the world. Partizanship in its many forms is of great interest to Shelley, but perhaps the most fascinating is the way in which Euthanasia unconsciously participates in it: she is unable to transcend her own imaginative rootedness in that place, as much as Castruccio is unable to formulate a political ambition that does not turn inwards to his own selfish, security-obsessed obstacle-surmounting. Euthanasia falls victim to her own broad-mindedness: imaginative liberation relegates her physically to the castle, where she remains for the near-entirety of the narrative action. Partizanship, in Shelley’s formulation, becomes a species of imaginative isolation, an unwillingness or inability to experience the world outside of a pre-defined set of confines or sets of action. Castruccio’s factionalism may appear to be dedicated entirely to imperialism, but following Shelley it is clear that the author is attempting to broaden the motivations and implications for involvement within seemingly entrenched political positions. Euthanasia may “despise the spirit of party” alongside her preferred philosophers, but her isolation within Valperga makes her into a form of imaginative partizan, one unable to appreciate the vagaries of political culture that Castruccio harnesses so well.

While Euthanasia’s failure does not signify a whitewashing of Castruccio’s excesses, Shelley nonetheless raises questions about how power can effect change when it is isolated (even with benevolent goals). While the successes of these methods are obviated by the historical realities of the novel’s setting – we know, for example, that Castruccio Castracani degli Antelminelli eventually overcame the Guelph League, became the Duke of Lucca and was generally successful in facilitating the Habsburgian interests throughout the early fourteenth century – we should not fall into the trap of sympathetic alignment simply on the
accusations of tyranny and repression levied against Castruccio. While it may be compelling to think of the spatial and geographical coordinates of freedom and oppression in a way that privileges an imaginative and sensitive woman, I am doubtful of how rigidly this dichotomy must apply to the issues of imaginative dynamism which conditions these figures within their respective political realms.

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vi.

Mary Shelley must have been sceptical of Euthanasia’s indulgence in philosophical escapism. Besides basing her character’s behaviour on that of Walton and Elizabeth in Frankenstein, she would retain some of these qualities in The Last Man in the figures of Lionel, Adrian, and, most damningly, the nation of England itself. In closing this chapter with The Last Man, I hope to highlight what I see as Shelley’s confrontation of the exclusivity that defined England as a global, exploratory culture. Her travellers define their security, as well as their capacity to effect public good, as either sympathetically or spatially exclusive – either isolated from or dissolved within networks that transcend the local. Such implications are inherent in Frankenstein’s exploratory solitudes and in Valperga’s bordered modes of political progress. The author’s third novel is in so many ways a logical extension of her critique of visionary modes of self-articulation – modes that depict an endlessly-deferred border-crossing, or which rely on definition by isolation and the creation of new (and artificial) lines of separation.
Though the concept of the global in *The Last Man* is communicated to the reader primarily through intimate and local groups, some critics have claimed that Shelley advocates precisely the *reverse* of these limited networks of interaction. Alan Bewell frames the negotiation of inside and outside worlds in terms of medical demographics, claiming that a kind of phenomenological social “ecology” (*Disease* 298) underpins this “earth unified by the continual movement of people, goods, and pathogens” (296). Bewell points out that “The metaphor of England as a ‘vast and well-manned ship, which mastered the winds and rose proudly over the waves’ establishes at the beginning of the novel that it is not an ‘island nation’ isolated from the rest of the world but an empire based on maritime trade. The cost of maintaining Britain as a social environment prevents it from isolating itself from the rest of the world” (305). Ultimately, “plague reverses the progress of empire” (306) not merely through its material destructiveness, but in its deconstruction of the frames of exclusivity that the concept of empire is built upon. Read in this spirit, Shelley’s *The Last Man* offers much to a reader willing to consider the space of “home” as symbiotically linked to the notion of exploration and outward worldly movement. *The Last Man* is a novel that consistently mingles global-local causalities, calling into question the possibility of human agency on either micro- or macro-scale matters. In this sense, it is a very modern novel, although it does not celebrate its modernity through these shifting spheres of potential influence. *The Last Man* is a lament for a bygone time – not so much an innocent time as an emotionally insulated one, separated from the events and repercussions of boundary-pushing around the globe. The novel certainly never allows us to think that this boundary-pushing phenomenon is new, only that the advent of global plague forces the issue that has presented itself throughout the novel in various guises – global interconnection through commerce, political interventions, immigrations, and emigrations.
The Last Man’s focus on the plague as a byproduct of global networks, and the inevitable movements of populations, demonstrates Shelley’s need to articulate a sense of home that can survive the rigours of a modern, cosmopolitan culture. The sense of spatial dislocation that accompanies the various economic and imaginative exclusivities of the novel requires more attention, particularly in light of the author’s interest in forms of imaginative travel. Prior to the material experiences of exile in the novel, many characters perform exile, submit themselves to virtual instances of it, or employ it as a means of seeing the world. These “virtual exiles” court forms of solitude as a means of imaginative travel, unaware that history and nature will force them to re-enact these roles on a global stage, where their secure identity as Britons will be meaningless. For example, Lionel’s ostensibly social and worldly existence is relativized through his youthful time when he “wandered among the hills of civilized England as uncouth a savage as the wolf-bred founder of old Rome” (LM 14). Following this wandering, and his introduction to Adrian, he “began to be human,” and “was admitted within that sacred boundary which divides the intellectual and moral nature of man from that which characterizes animals” (29). This admission into a bounded society, however, is reversed by the end of the novel: in his concluding experience in Rome, Lionel fantasizes “that the cities were still resonant with popular hum, and the peasant still guided his plough through the furrow, and that we, the world’s free denizens, enjoyed a voluntary exile, and not a remediless cutting off from our extinct species” (432, emphasis added).

Lionel’s move from exile, to happy aristocratic coterie, back to exile, highlights the wistful term “voluntary” in the application of exclusive border-crossing. This term occurs elsewhere in the novel, verbatim or in spirit, each time to emphasize how nations and individuals construct psychic walls dividing themselves from the rest of the globe. When faced with moments of actual exile – such as when the British emigrants are forced to flee their island
home for the continent – the fragility of voluntary exclusivity is revealed: “We could not feel even as a voluntary exile of old, who might for pleasure or convenience forsake his native soil; though thousands of miles might divide him, England was still a part of him, as he of her....Not so with us, the remnant. We left none to represent us, none to repeople the desart land, and the name of England died, when we left her” (325-26). That England should “die” when its people leave its borders is a curious thought, but reflects how nation in *The Last Man* is constructed on a bedrock of voluntary solitude and geographical exclusivity. In fact, metaphors of exploration, from the sciences to voyages of discovery, are premised on a fundamental division: whether they are used in the name of individuals or nations, they represent homes that are imaginatively distinguishable from their surroundings.

The novel emphatically registers the collapse of progressive and boundary-shattering knowledge as a means of interacting with the globe: “Farewell to the giant powers of man,—to knowledge that could pilot the deep-drawing bark through the opposing waters of shoreless ocean,—to science that directed the silken balloon through the pathless air,—to the power that could put a barrier to mighty waters, and set in motion wheels, and beams, and vast machinery, that could divide rocks of granite or marble, and make the mountains plain!” (321). The freedoms offered here by technologies of exploration – seen throughout the novel as motifs of sailing, whether nautical or aeronautical – stem in part from a perception of a world composed of a series of obstacles or impediments. They also stem from a loss of human contact and labour, which was previously excluded from a valuation of exploration as an imaginative activity (which we witnessed first in the “invisible hand” of *Frankenstein’s* Creature’s altruistic efforts). The lament for the lost “giant powers of man” misses the point – the sympathetic support structures that enable isolated nationhood are lost, not the activities of exploration themselves. At the end of the novel, in their travels,
Lionel and Adrian are proof enough that such activities can continue, though they are without an audience.

Yet for all this lost border-crossing and boundary-destruction, we are presented with individuals who cannot seem to generate visionary projects without erecting entirely new borders against sympathy within areas of local interest. We are presented, for example, with the figure of Merreval, who “was too long sighted in his view of humanity to heed the casualties of the day, and lived within the midst of contagion unconscious of its existence” (289). From his stable vantage point, he does resemble Euthanasia in Valperga, although unlike that figure, he is openly redeemed by the narrator. His redemption is, however, mitigated by his observational role, and his inability to have a material effect on his own domestic sphere: “This old man, tottering on the edge of the grave, and prolonging his prospect through millions of calculated years,—this visionary who had not seen starvation in the wasted forms of his wife and children, or plague in the horrible sights and sounds that surrounded him—this astronomer, apparently dead on earth, and living only in the motion of the spheres—loved his family with unapparent but intense affection....It was not till one of them died that he perceived their danger” (305). Merreval’s recognition of his domestic obligations at the expense of farsighted ambition is a Pyrrhic victory: “The old man felt the system of universal nature which he had so long studied and adored, slide from under him, and he stood among the dead, and lifted his voice in curses” (305). Shelley’s portrait brilliantly encapsulates the crisis of imaginative proximity typical of The Last Man: his concern fluctuates dramatically between immediate and cosmic frameworks, highlighting his inability to discern any kind of a sympathetic utility until too late. The crisis surrounding the dimensions of utility and influence defines Raymond in the same way. Each sees the “structure of society as but a part of the machinery which supported the web in which his
life was traced” (45). Even more so than Raymond, however, “the heavens built up as a canopy” for Merreval in his methods of determining courses of useful action (45). It is only at “the edge of the grave” that his visionary exploration is revealed as myopic, and exclusive, despite its cosmic scale.

Merreval, like many figures in this novel, oscillates between visionary states with little successful balance between the two. Perdita, Lionel, Raymond, and Adrian all function in similar capacities, alternately embodying the aspirations to continue the great expansive enterprise of an imperial culture and, simultaneously, the kinds of indulgent, domestic, and very British retreat that would make Edmund Burke’s heart glow with pride. This confusion between domestic and global interest is used to illustrate the very nation itself – its character, and the hopes of its inhabitants. In a description which shifts quickly between vehicles of discovery and an isolated geographical subject, Lionel configures England as a region with very changeable imaginative boundaries: it is to him a “sea-surrounded nook,” “cloud-enshadowed land,” and something that “visits [his] dreams in the semblance of a well-manned ship, which mastered the winds and rode proudly over the waves” (9). England is for Lionel a nation of isolated explorers, a quality he witnesses throughout the work and will reproduce unwittingly in his own exile at the novel’s end. In the interim, study of books awakes in him a “sudden extension of vision” (31) that he conveys via the metaphor of Columbus: “I felt as the sailor, who from the topmast first discovered the shore of America; and like him I hastened to tell companions of my discoveries in unknown regions....I had lived in what is generally called the world of reality, and it was awakening to a new country to find that there was a deeper meaning in all I saw, besides that which my eyes conveyed to me” (31). Through his identification with England, Lionel becomes the main spokesperson for its oscillating attitudes towards domestic retreat and imperialistic expansion. The signal
that “reality” is a contested term, or one with reduced value, indicates an early warning that zones outside real space will come to define “deeper meaning.”

In the first volume of *The Last Man*, most of the initial moments of discovery are accompanied by a sense of undiluted joy and excitement. Yet as we go through the novel, such vantages and moments of exploration define a type of vulnerability: characters formerly open to discovery increasingly regard travel as a retreat for psychic or material salvage, or as a bitter memory of past visionary promise. Each volume opens with metaphors of the voyage: first, the aforementioned wave-riding ship as a patriotic discoverer and herald of Adrian and Raymond’s ascendance; second, a voyage towards Athens, wherein Perdita’s expectations of seeing Raymond again felt to her like “leaving barren sands for an abode of fertile beauty; a harbour after a tempest” (168); and thirdly, where the plague has relativized the dangerous borders of the “tempest” into a kind of paradoxical calm. “Hear you not the sound of the coming tempest?” asks Lionel, “Where was pain and evil? Not in the calm air or weltering ocean” (315). Instead, by their relative inefficacy alongside the devastating plague, these former impediments to discovery offer a taunting glimpse of the glories of the past:

Plague is the companion of spring, of sunshine, and plenty. We no longer struggle with her. We have forgotten what we did when she was not. Of old navies used to stem the giant ocean-waves betwixt Indus and the Pole for slight articles of luxury. Men made perilous journies to possess themselves of earth’s splendid trifles, gems and gold....Our minds, late spread abroad through countless spheres and endless combinations of thought, now retrenched themselves behind this wall of flesh, eager to preserve its well-being only. We were surely sufficiently degraded. (316)
Empire’s reliance on this spirit of borderless and limitless pursuit gives way beneath its own weight; unable to fulfill the demands during domestic crisis, a nation looks on in defeat as its former external limits cease to hold their symbolic or material power. Nature thus tames the expectations of culture by pushing beyond human power the natural borders that were used to justify a culture of expansion in the first place. The plague has made the world not so much dangerous, but “a vacant space, an empty stage” (308), wherein the performance of voluntary exile has been rendered moot, or perverse. While “human minds embrace infinity” (230), in the face of a truly infinite enemy – the plague – “man shrinks into insignificance, he feels his tenure of life secure, his inheritance on earth cut off” (230).

The imagined and material borders erected by Adrian and Lionel against this escalating existential challenge have their source in “a ceaseless observance of the laws of general utility, the only conscious aim of human ambition” (150). But these borders also prefigure the plague’s entrance; the limits of protection offered by domestic solitude and security are rapidly shown to be as detrimental as those techniques of “heaven-climbing” (194) advocated by Raymond. Upon his retreat to Windsor following the deaths of Raymond and Perdita, Lionel asks “How unwise had the wanderers been, who had deserted its shelter, entangled themselves in the web of society, and entered on what men of the world call ‘life’[?]” (218). His solution in the face of such disappointments, even before the global catastrophe, is to “shut the door on the world, and build high the wall that is to separate me from the troubled scene enacted within its precincts. Let us live for each other and for happiness; let us seek peace in our dear home, near the inland murmur of streams, and the gracious waving of trees, the beauteous vesture of earth, and sublime pageantry of the skies. Let us leave ‘life,’ that we may live” (218).
The conditional definition of “life” recalls his earlier self-defined escape from “reality,” throwing into further confusion the spatial ontology of this newly demarcated existence. In much the same way, after the plague has arrived, Adrian’s response is to “quit the world” (242), to “enchain the plague in limits, and set a term to the misery it would occasion” (247). His aspirations for millennial utopia in the midst of such measures reveal an idealized engagement between a society in retreat and macroscopic historical change: “Let this last but twelve months,” he says, “and earth will become a paradise. The energies of man were before directed to the destruction of his species: they now aim at its liberation and preservation” (219). Adrian’s fault is to assume that an ideological construct – the nation – can keep out nature, or push back its power in much the same way that imperial power had tried to do in Constantinople. Like Lionel’s, Adrian’s misinterpretation of worldly influence precedes the plague: his solutions for preservation prior to the outbreak mirror the establishment of disconnected precincts after its advent. Shelley goes out of her way to avoid blaming Adrian – as a humanitarian and a philosopher, he touchingly believes “the ties of kindred and friendship” are the only “ramparts to protect the invaded territory of human life” (273). But this faith in the self-satisfaction of an isolated humanity is naive on Adrian’s part, and it is not long before a desperate peregrination overtakes their better aspirations.

Shelley has no illusions on this subject: such outward-bound movements are inevitable, plague or no plague. Adrian’s exodus, led to seek “the luxuries and delights of a southern climate” (383), expresses the unavoidable longing of a modern people confined within a primitive, artificially-bounded space. Whether we see it in *Frankenstein* or *Valperga*, Shelley gives us characters constantly torn between the responsibilities of “holding one’s

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106 These earnest hopes are contradicted by the cynical politician Ryland, who ends up being correct for all the wrong reasons: “Be assured that earth is not, nor ever can be heaven, while the seeds of hell are natives of her soil” (219). Setting aside Ryland’s eschatological readings of England’s looming economic crisis, he is nonetheless correct that the perception of heaven resides primarily within the purview of the “natives of her soil.”
own” and the visionary aspirations for social (or personal, or imperial) improvement. The Last Man takes this confrontation to a poignant but tragic end: the point where society can no longer hold an exclusive domestic coherence, and where the systems for evaluating wealth or glory collapse entirely. British society, reduced to Lionel, Clara and Adrian, witnesses the climaxing metaphysical crisis of the novel: “The vast universe, its myriad worlds, and the plains of boundless earth which we had left—the extent of shoreless sea around—contracted to my view—they and all that they contained, shrunk up to one point, even to our tossing bark, freighted with glorious humanity” (441). Lionel’s “contracting view” is, here, quite literally, all the human universe contains. When he is left alone, following the deaths of Clara and Adrian, the apotheosis of Lionel as a solitary traveller is revealed:

For a moment I compared myself to that monarch of the waste—Robinson Crusoe. We had been both thrown companionless—he on the shore of a desolate island: I on that of a desolate world. I was rich in the so-called goods of life. If I turned my steps from the near barren scene, and entered any of the earth’s million cities, I should find their wealth stored up for my accommodation—clothes, food, books, and a choice of dwelling beyond the command of princes of former times—every climate was subject to my selection. (448)

Though he later realizes the absurdity and emptiness of his “wealth,” Lionel has nonetheless achieved what most explorers and discoverers have quested for throughout the novel: the glory of an undiscovered solitude. He does not need to sacrifice his sympathetic responsibilities in the achievement of it, for he has none. It is in the example of Lionel that Shelley forces the tragic issue of the solitary, exiled traveller—he is both domestic exile and an explorer without a context for his glory. Without the perspective of a domestic
environment, he is unable to appreciate the literal fruits of a triumphal cosmopolitan culture. His concluding inhabitation of an empty Rome highlights the most profound tragedy of Shelley’s domestic-exploratory divide: the way neither can give meaning without the other.
Conclusion

“The very world which is the world”

i.

Throughout this dissertation, we have seen how psychic stability in Romantic-era literature depended to a great degree on the borderlines and boundaries of nature, home, science, domesticity, and the nation. The realization that these categories of knowledge and being were contingent was not necessarily new; nor was the presumption that travel beyond the borders of the familiar could help broaden one’s experience of familiar space. The modernity of the Romantics with respect to this contingency stems from their understanding that conditions of space, being, or history were all linked to causal chains beyond the constructed localities. In so many senses, these concerns were confronted on spatial terms, but with social ramifications. As we discussed in the Introduction, the new kinds of global citizenship made necessary by these global spaces helped these authors challenge the foundations of bordered lines and predetermined limits. These authors understood, or came to understand better, that the ontological security made possible by local cosmologies was fragile and prone to disastrous collapse when faced with greater frameworks of meaning. Controlling that collapse, and focusing its energies through their art, enabled a vast range of aesthetic opportunities.

The fictions of travel seen in this thesis explore the consequences of the collapse of the local, but stop short of showing the local to be obsolete. If the manufactured arbiters of
identity were provisional when exposed to broader systems of meaning, that provisional nature meant dealing with a resurgent sense of locality. Travel destabilized the perception of the local and the familiar, regardless of whether those travels were material or imaginative. This imaginative flexibility did preserve some role for a “local globality,” however tenuous – if the local was destabilized, it nonetheless offered a familiar vantage from which to understand broader global patterns. These authors encouraged this destabilization: if global travel reflected a challenge to domestic and ontological integrities, it also facilitated a profoundly assertive artistic redefinition of secure spaces. The Romantics in this dissertation saw the act of travel as essentially cosmopolitan, and frequently depicted spaces outside of familiar boundaries as being rich in imaginative vitality, illusory though that might be. In seeking to supplement the vitality of familiar spaces, they sought to avoid the myopia of provincial minds, how, in the words of Tzvetan Todorov, a “person who knows only his own home... runs the risk of confusing culture and nature, of making the custom the norm, and of forming generalizations based on a single example: oneself” (291-2).

It is important to acknowledge the differences between modes of travel and travel itself. One of the objectives of this thesis has been to chart the means by which travellers could “fit back in” after exploratory acts, or to find new meanings of belonging within rearranged global circumstances. Thomas De Quincey considered that the mail-coach (and later the steam engine) would radically alter the visionary potentials of the social world; time, space, and identity were all rendered malleable when exposed to its influence. And yet riding on a mail-coach only brought one into provisional contact with places the individual would never experience on his or her own. That this provisional contact did not diminish the affective experience reminds us that for the Romantics, the importance of travel, in principle, preceded any advantages offered by a technological medium, or the material act in
itself. Technological artefacts like Percy Shelley’s air-balloon or De Quincey’s mail-coach represented facilitators of a transformed vision, but they did not replace the imaginative effort of individuals in the attempt to bridge gaps in perception and sympathy. The truly radical form of travel was imaginary, not technological – “fitting back in” was for figures like Wordsworth’s Ruth a challenge regardless of their actual movements.

So if during the quest to separate nature and culture they sought foreign examples, our Romantic authors were also determined to retain a certain amount of local integrity, and to respect the fragility of embedded minds. In using motifs of travel and exploration, the challenge was to generate sufficient sources of alienation within known contexts, without resorting either to solipsistic allegories or the misanthropy of detached, objective observation. In the antagonism between a relational autobiography and a categorical science, the only meaningful alienation could occur within what Todorov calls a “true travel narrative,” being “the discovery of others,” and “the feeling of alterity in relation to the people (and the lands) described” (293). To supplement Todorov’s philosophy of travel, I wish to re-assert that the authorial subjects of this thesis liberate this social notion of alienation from geographically foreign lands, showing how a travel-like alienation could take place in familiar locales. The effects of alienation could therefore take place within the boundaries of ontologically stable places, rather than submitting the alienation to the requirement of geographical alterity. But as Todorov notes, there was a fundamentally social component to this impulse: as we witnessed with Percy Shelley’s Spirit of the Hour and Witch of Atlas, human interest was a prime motivator for using travel to dismantle the barriers between people. This was as true for Wordsworth’s rural innocents as for Mary Shelley’s domestic visionaries, though their methods for achieving a pleasurable alterity often founder in the face of material pressures.
In Wordsworth, we witnessed how imaginative travel beyond the present landscape could threaten domestic stability: using examples gleaned from American exploration, the poet lamented the ways global networks of knowledge impacted local understandings. Unwilling to engage in an outright condemnation of provincial values, he nonetheless understood how embedded minds (particularly of the Lake District) were threatened by a very human, imaginative hunger for spaces outside of the familiar. Percy Shelley was just as cognizant of such prejudices, and his poetic aeronauts argue that historical and philosophical progress could only be achieved by regarding potentiality as a borderless concept. Travel, and particularly aeronautic travel, was an essential metaphor for communicating such progress; the poet clearly believed flight to be emblematic of the decay of pervasive and restrictive codes of self-identification. His motifs of aeronautics are characterized by their shedding of local spaces – but where his early iterations are radical and revolutionary, his later ones show that a global consciousness need not signify a sympathetic abandonment of restricted minds. It was, however, the use-value of boundless visions that troubled Mary Shelley’s domestic and global spaces – the motives and means for achieving truly liberated discoveries. We see in her novels the emotional response to boundlessness – the deliberate construction of artificial boundaries designed to keep global systems out. This did have gendered consequences: the borders of action were often determined along lines of the domestic and global economy, which meant women were left to defend predetermined zones, while men moved outwards towards undefined boundaries. But contrary to expectations, her restricted characters often engage in border-crossing imaginative behaviours that defy gendered spaces. The resulting isolation of her primary figures highlights her awareness that the domestic sphere itself might be involved in moral codes that exacerbate global injustice, just as much as male-dominated patterns of exploration.
As we have seen, global Romanticism places an inherent value on imaginative displacement and alienation, often (as with the authors here) qualified through notions of space. Space was, and is, a definable measure of staticity or change; one’s psychic comfort with confined or unbounded spaces reflected one’s attitude towards travel, or how deeply embedded one was within normative customs. Instead of looking at the local as a static phenomenon, we should instead see it as embedded within networks of meaning, and then consider how boundaries are retrospectively erected. Thinking back to Latour’s question “How is the local being generated?”, we see indeed that “scale does not depend on absolute size but on the number and qualities of dispatchers and articulators” (192, 196). It is precisely the generation and deconstruction of the local that drives the narrative tension of so many of the works we have studied. Wordsworth’s local explorers, Percy Shelley’s aeronauts, and Mary Shelley’s tormented outcasts typically share the characteristic of having chosen their exiles from familiar spaces. This leads to the realization that alienation is an essential part of the aesthetic process for any Romantic traveller, but is also connected to a social consciousness defined by global parameters. Local space, in so many Romantic narratives, was global space, but this did not mean that global spaces had defined narratives of their own that could provide remedial comfort or supplement directionless identity.

Paradoxical narratives of isolation and boundless global vistas were still very much in evidence later in the nineteenth century, particularly in the genres of speculative fiction and the colonial adventure novel. Nonetheless, the Romantics anticipated the ontological instabilities of the Victorian era by broadening definitions of travel to incorporate imaginative acts that placed bounded minds in dialogue with unbound spaces. The realization that local space could support entire “possible worlds” without collapsing entirely into solipsism was, I think, a unique and profound one. Whether one arrived at this point by
conflating known spaces with exotic ones, or by using unique methods of travel gleaned from radical technology, depended on one’s faith in the fundamental value of those spaces. And this is perhaps where the modernity of the Romantics was most challenged: balancing artistic, proximal dislocation with the primal affiliations associated with local spaces (such as family, ethnicity, or nation). Latour’s reinvention of the local in modern, global contexts tells us of the difficulty in unravelling the phenomenology of local faith in the face of larger semiotic codes. He observes that, “Far from offering some primordial autochthony which would be ‘so much more concrete’ than abstract contexts, face-to-face interactions should be taken, on the contrary, as the terminus point of a great number of agencies swarming toward them” (196). This radical sense of possibility, of inventing the very meaning of the local, is, I think, counterintuitive. It does, however, go to the heart of Romantic investigations into the subject. Indeed, this radical sense goes some way to explain why motifs of global travel in this period are often conflated with movements through familiar, and even primal, spaces.

It is sometimes hard to remember that the Romantic period was a time where space and place were imbued with a potent aura of possibility: unlikely things did happen in known places, and unlikely events caused an imaginative re-evaluation of how space was understood. In any revision of Romanticism that seeks to align it with “possible worlds” not immediately apparent to the eye, the categories of space, place, and interest must be taken into account: otherwise, the bugbear myth of Romantic introspection will supplant any possibility of material actions on the environment. One needs look no further than Wordsworth’s joyous, Revolutionary transposition of imagined spaces within real ones, of “a Country in Romance” (Prelude X.699):

And in the region of their peaceful selves,

Did now find helpers to their hearts’ desire,
And stuff at hand, plastic as they could wish,
Were called upon to exercise their skill,
Not in Utopia, subterraneous Fields,
Or some secreted Island, Heaven knows where,
But in the very world which is the world
Of all of us, the place in which, in the end,
We find our happiness, or not at all. (719-727)

The radical quality of this vision of France following the fall of the Bastille is the way it makes all local spaces dizzyingly “potential” in nature. Wordsworth’s denial of Utopia proper (literally, “not-place”) is in keeping with utopian philosophy, but his tautological spatial assertion (“the very world which is the world”) points to a complex (and idealistic) understanding of how to shape real places as witnessed in the imagination. It is the “plastic” nature of “the very world” first, and not second, that makes it a *dynamic* utopia. The apparently random creation of “Heaven knows where” relies on “exercise,” or trial; the mere existence of the world *as it is* speaks to the possibility of its improvement.

The paradox of liberty and confinement that characterizes Romantic understandings of space is an early and very modern challenge to native identity. The arbitrary constraints this idea places on character, the family, and the nation are the cause of agonizing choices in the fiction of this era, as narratives of duty and history compete with individual imaginative impulses. De Quincey’s hybrid racial anxieties stem largely from the mere possibility of diffuse locomotive contact with other cultures. Wordsworth, channelling Bartram and Crèvecoeur, undermines almost all spatial coordinates for autochthony, relying instead on a local ground to first establish character, following it with a subjectivized, superimposed imaginative filter gleaned from a wealth of global cultures. Percy Shelley confronted the
entire structure of experience by submitting the human mind to a technological cipher, in the process challenging both spatial determinants and the motives for breaking them. Mary Shelley, keenly aware of the associations between gender and space, used exploring minds to find new ways of linking the collapse of families and nations. All of these authors confront the primary landscapes of youth or the past, find them wanting, and seek artistic alternatives in the wider world. If the downside to the collapse of the native was a new kind of global exile, it did not diminish the artistic and social potentials of the collapse in the first place.

The persistence of bordered consciousness as a barrier to imaginative development did continue to challenge the aesthetic energies of these Romantic writers. Other authors had reflected on the imaginative resistance posed by the barriers of nation, in particular. In her apocalyptic jeremiad *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812), Anna Barbauld used the territorial lines of empire to reveal a profound weakness in the nation, which would later be of great influence on Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*. In Shelley’s novel, “plague reverses the progress of empire” (Bewell, *Disease* 306); political dominion is weakened in part by narratives of exclusivity that had their root in ostensibly beneficial domestic fantasies. For Barbauld, the symptoms of apocalypse were likewise traceable to the home, but she reminds the reader of the role of empire in perpetrating this sense of denial. She accomplishes this not only with references to products of a burgeoning global capitalism, but also to knowledge production that aggravates the distinctiveness of particular nations within global networks. Alluding to the continental wars of the time, she describes “the spread map” perused by loved ones who remained at home in England, how the “anxious eye explores, / Its dotted boundaries and pencilled shores” (35-6). The map, along with the “daily page” (33) of the newspaper, was symbolic of a divide between emotional longing and worldly understanding, and reflected an imaginative confusion of England’s national interests.
Barbauld encapsulated the nation’s pre-eminence and hubris using language that emphasized a detached spatial identity:

And think’st thou, Britain, still to sit at ease,

An island queen amidst thy subject seas,

While the vext billows, in their distant roar,

But soothe thy slumbers, and but kiss thy shore?

To sport in wars, while danger keeps aloof,

Thy grassy turf unbruised by hostile hoof? (39-44)

Barbauld’s diction – “island,” “distant,” “shore,” “aloof” – ironically counterpoints Britain’s very real presence in global networks: “Wide spreads thy race from Ganges to the pole, / O’er half the Western world thy accents roll: / Nations beyond the Appalachian hills / Thy hand has planted and thy spirit fills” (81-4). The act of “spreading” across the globe in such a way is quite opposed, in practice, to the self-perception of being “aloof.” Ultimately, however, “Genius” departs the nation, leaving the decay and ruins of empire behind it; it reveals its “vagrant Power” (259) to be borderless and inimical to ontologies premised on exclusivity. Barbauld’s poem therefore does not condemn England’s isolationism – a myth she quickly dissolves – but the false pretence of it.

The ideology of nation, it seemed, was a profound barrier to the improving qualities of travel. As in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, Barbauld’s caricature of British immunity served as an omen of a greater teleological decline. Her cry to arms to resist the imaginative displacements of global colonialism and trade is certainly strident; yet in anticipating a coming cultural apocalypse, it is certainly no more severe than Mary Shelley’s imputation that British globalism is “diseased.” Each demonstrates anxiety about imaginative flexibility in the face of “unbounded” cultural and natural vistas, alongside the stress on the resistant nature
of local character. So does the Romantic habit of engaging “borderless” imaginative travels facilitate the erosion of nation-state consciousness? Such a trend is at least suggested in all the writings of the authors examined here. Yet in some ways, in these writings, we witness the final days of a synthetic imagination of globe and the myth of the “untouched” and immutable refuge. Response to the dissolution of nation and “character” were not at all consistent, even among our authors: William Wordsworth and Mary Shelley feared the total dissolution of border and arbitrary character; while on the other hand, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and to a lesser extent, Thomas De Quincey, revelled in the imaginative, anarchic possibilities, with the corollary that any “borderless” places were never delineated by immutable rules.

Later nineteenth-century speculative fictions would, according to Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., demonstrate an almost compulsive urge to disturb homogenous social groups – “isolated,” provincial or territorially guarded peoples, whether familiar (British) or foreign. Aside from the paradigms of estrangement in these fictions, undercurrents of “globalism” and other “rationalistic models” (219) erode specific spaces as viable avenues of self-identification, culminating in the obsolescence of nation as a marker of character. “To feel like part of a nation,” argues Csicsery-Ronay Jr., “one must idealize the arbitrary facts of one’s birthplace and parentage, revere the mysterious knowledge of one’s national language, religion, and mythology, and, above all, accept and enjoy distinctive and irreducible differences among human groups” (219). These categories of knowledge are precisely what so many of our Romantic authors investigate: the “irreducible differences” of local place and mind, seeing them alternately as both helping and limiting perceptual and imaginative development. That this notion of the local is continually measured against global circumstances, is contingent, and paradoxically identity-forming, is something these authors all approach differently. From Wordsworth’s use of foreign natures in imaginatively
rejuvenating local ones, to Percy Shelley’s faith in the power of technology to facilitate visionary transformations, to Mary Shelley’s attention to the responsibilities of domesticity and exploration, we witness the effects that disparate events have on embedded minds. We have also seen how methods of travel provoke the experience of psychic disembedding from these spaces, and how these methods of travel were deliberately deployed as aesthetic tools.

But what was the lasting impact of their artistic challenges, in the face of changing definitions of the culture which sought to mitigate any real changes of character? It would not be accurate to say that ontologically unhinged spaces were always conducive to an artistic liberation and a freedom from arbitrary constraint. As much as Percy Shelley fantasised about a “dialogue” between global enlightenment and local limitation, it is clear that the chauvinism of embedded minds restricted the positive potentials of the act. Trade, emigration, tourism, global exploration, and scientific development all helped dissolve the borders of local certainty, but Barbauld’s *Eighteen-Hundred and Eleven* shows that these same qualities exacerbated global detachment. Similarly, the “progressive diffusion” of the human imagination mentioned by De Quincey in *The English Mail-Coach* was something that was hoped for, but not guaranteed of success. His own reactions to the phenomenon waver between awe and terror, and his revulsion at hybridity severely limits the positive impact of his imaginative liberation. Any success was acknowledged to come with a cost: describing in the Preface to *Alastor* the necessary paradox of “universal contemplation” and “self-centered seclusion” in visionary reform, Percy Shelley shared with Mary Shelley the understanding that the utility of exploration needed to be carefully balanced with sympathetic obligation.

Subsequent characterizations of our Romantic authors as either liberal or conservative have tended to obscure the ways in which spatial dynamics presaged their involvement in larger political conflicts. We would be wise to consider their works as
negotiating locutions within changing global circumstances before preparing ideological templates for their careers. This is a particularly pressing matter in light of the tendency to associate various periods of these authors’ lives with either conservatism or radicalism, dependent on their movement between or fixity within spaces. Regarding Mary Shelley as a domestic protectionist, for example, denies her own experiences of travel and emigrancy, as well as her professional involvement in a developing international culture of journalism and biography. Similarly, this is not to deny that as he became “settled,” Wordsworth developed reactionary tendencies in his advanced years; nor is it to deny that Percy Shelley’s chronic homelessness was entirely distinguishable from his visionary excess. It is clear that these authors considered the multiplicity of global knowledges as a primary threat to the familiar, though they tried to mitigate this threat by discovering the social potentials within these new global paradigms. The new imaginative frameworks were not always successful, as so many of them so often illustrate.

It is exciting to consider how truly modern was the Romantic imaginative appreciation of space – the ways it could be both local and global. Travel was both a metaphor for negotiating these constructed concepts, as well as a material experience which offered demonstrable techniques articulating the relationship of the individual to the outside world. The balancing act between the two spatial categories may not ultimately have been successful, in the sense that it could be “solved”; these authors did not offer formulas to settle the rates of change. As history churned onwards, new technological and natural worlds were uncovered, which caused any ontological stability earned in the meantime to be unbalanced. The texts we have studied only hint at the possible permutations between interspatial engagements, but, taken together, they reveal a pattern that suggests that distance, while measurable in a direct sense, is, in another, entirely constructed.
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