UNNATURAL FEELINGS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY POETRY

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A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE BY THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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April 2017

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Abstract

This dissertation describes some encounters with unnaturalness in the work of three nineteenth-century writers: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. It focuses in particular on the idea of an "unnatural feeling," an emotion whose source or effect is other than natural. This inquiry grows out of an engagement with Immanuel Kant's claim, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, that the complex feeling "humiliation-respect" has a special status, as a non-pathological affect which awakens moral desire. I find that these writers share Kant's interest in the possibility of a moral or unnatural feeling, and I ask whether that desire might be in some way connected to their affection for poetry, a form of writing which subjects "natural" (or unreflective) human speech to artificial procedures.

My first chapter notes the frequent recurrence of scenes of interpersonal embarrassment throughout Emerson's writing. I distinguish between two kinds of shame in Emerson's anti-systematic body of work: an alienating, existential shame, and an elevating humiliation, on the Kantian model. My second chapter argues that in Dickinson's poetry, "disdain," a word derived from the courtly-love traditions of the middle ages, does philosophical work: it names humanity's inevitable unnaturalness. I also show how Dickinson's notion of the "tropic" largely anticipates Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory, as an anti-metaphysical and a denaturalizing literary form. My third chapter considers Hopkins' desire to be infused by a supernatural patience. I argue that Hopkins' late sonnets lack patience, and adduce some erotic and political causes for their formal distortions.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my advisers Eduardo Cadava, Diana Fuss, and William Gleason for their patience with me throughout the long process of writing this dissertation.

I thank the Princeton English Department for their generous support. Thanks to the Princeton faculty members with whom I have studied and whose guidance I have sought, including my departmental mentor Russ Leo.

Thank you to all of my friends, especially Jordan Fish, Dexter Palmer, Tabor Robak, and Berglind Thrastardottir. And thank you to Geoffrey Sharpless and Hilene Flanzbaum for seeing me as a literary critic.

This dissertation would not have been written without the love and support of my parents Glenn and Margaret Tuckman, and of my siblings Bryan and Erin.

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Introduction

The search for an unnatural feeling

where troops of sunning pigeons spun
from common-garden opalescence
the transience of some other thing

-Amy Clampitt

In an addendum to *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx writes that history can be "considered from two sides:" there is the history of nature, and then there is the history of humanity, of everything unnatural. "Yet there is nothing separating the two sides," he immediately goes on to say. "As long as men exist, natural and human history will qualify each other."[1] Human history breaks decisively with the natural world. From the perspective of a materialist philosophy, however, all human phenomena, from systems of kinship to practical technologies to language and art, can be seen as the outcomes of causes which are already operative in nature. At the same time, nature can be seen as "historical"

[1] This textual variant appears in Karl Marx, *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* Volume 5, Part 1 (Berlin: 1932). Quoted in Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, tr. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge), 358.

in the sense that everything in it comes to be and passes away. The concepts of nature and history, the natural and the unnatural, are thus dialectically mediated; they must always be thought together.

In a work from around 1865, Emily Dickinson attempts such a natural-historical thinking. At first glance, the stanza break in her poem "A Man may make a Remark —" seems to segregate two different processes, one natural (or unintentional), and one unnatural (or deliberative). On a closer reading, however, the concept of "nature" which appears in the first stanza can be seen to qualify the poem as whole—or none of it:

A Man may make a Remark —	
In itself — a quiet thing	
That may furnish the Fuse unto a Spark+	+ignition
In dormant nature — lain —	
Let us divide — with skill —	
Let us discourse* — with care —	+disclose
Powder exists in Charcoal —	
Before it exists* in Fire —[2]	+express

These lines "sermonize," mimicking the form of a moral maxim: "Be careful what you say, because signifiers have unpredictable effects." In the first stanza, a man's speech causes a forest fire, igniting something—rage, sorrow, or desire—in a personified, feminine nature. The speaker then enunciates a resolution to be more careful than the careless man. Of course, the poem can also be read as an allegory of poetic formation. In the first stanza, an inflammatory remark inspires a responsive poet, the "nature" who ignites. She then subjects the man's unreflective language to her "skillful divisions," inserting dashes and line breaks. Poetry turns language, a "quiet" (meaningless) natural phenomenon, into

[2] "A Man may make a Remark" is poem 913. When citing Dickinson's poems, I will use R.W. Franklin's numbering in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998). When pertinent I will also include the marginal "alternates" as they have been reproduced in *Emily Dickinson's Poems as She Preserved Them*, ed. Christanne Miller (Belknap, 2016).

careful discourse, expression. In the process, the forest fire is imaginatively narrowed and intensified, to become a gunshot—a technological explosion, whose target may be the too-natural man of the first line.

Again, we seem to have a clear-cut opposition here: While the first stanza involves two kinds of naturalness (unthinking action and the passively acted upon) the second stanza attempts to envision a more thoughtful, rational alternative. Yet Dickinson's poem strongly implies that the skillful hardly sublimates the natural. The final two lines change the poem's overall meaning: what looks at first like a liberal injunction to love one's neighbor turns out to contain—barely—a desire for violence. There is a continuity, then, between the two stanzas. We cannot finally decide whether the concluding "Fire" represents a regression (a more refined barbarism) or a revolutionary break. Yet it is precisely in this ambiguity, in Dickinson's "disclosure" (revelation and opening) of a conceptual dialectic, that this faintly Promethean poem may attain to enlightenment.[3]

This dissertation describes some encounters with the unnatural, in the work of three nineteenth-century poets: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Dickinson, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. I am particularly interested in the elusive concept of an "unnatural feeling." I use the term "nature" in a broad sense, which includes the second nature of the human social world (György Lukács' "world of conventions"). Most of what human beings do serves ends, such as the preservation of biological life, or the accumulation of monetary and social capital, which can be called natural, in this inclusive sense. The emotions would seem to

[3] Dickinson's "ignition" could also represent a spiritual revelation—Christ's gospel, or the gospel of poetry—which Dickinson's poems successfully transmit. "A man may make a Remark" could mean "I, a poet, write a poem;" and we, Dickinson's readers, are the receptive natures who catch fire. Reciprocally, as readers, we re-ignite the poem, which has continued to exist as charcoal (black print) but which, every time it is read, exists in a higher form, as the "fire" of mental experience.

grow out of and entrench us further in this domain of lawful and at the same time contingent material occurrences. Yet the poets in this project wondered whether certain feelings might have an other-than-natural origin, or point to a more-than-natural human vocation. I argue that this search for an unnatural feeling was closely tied to the conspicuous artificiality of poetic language, whose defining formal features—meter and lineation—confront the poet at every turn with the unnaturalness of language.

This inquiry into natural and unnatural feelings grows out of an engagement with a text from a slightly earlier historical moment, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, the second work in his critical sequence. Throughout Kant's moral philosophy, the concept of nature is equivocal. On the one hand, nature is said to exhibit a beneficent teleology. As the focus of that whole, human nature, when it is fully human, is good. On the other hand, the term "nature" designates everything sub-moral. Our everyday, self-interested feelings are natural and therefore pathological—with one surprising exception. In a section on the "incentives" of pure practical reason, Kant argues that complex emotion "humiliation-respect" represents the only non-pathological feeling, because it has not a phenomenal but an intelligible object, the moral law. What's more, humiliation-respect has the effect of awakening moral desire in the persons who experience it. On the one hand, humiliation-respect is innate and universal to all human beings, thus part of our nature. But what this strange feeling instructs us to do is to assert our own autonomy, thus breaking with the merely natural.

In my first chapter, I ask whether the scenes of humiliation which occur throughout Emerson's poems and essays might function similarly. Emerson's verdict on the natural is generally more positive than Kant's. However Emerson also complains of a pervasive

feeling of alienation, which, if it is not natural to humanity, has come to seem inescapable. Whatever its origins, humiliation has a denaturalizing effect in Emerson's writings; it allows the self to transcend its habitual perceptions and evaluations. In my subsequent chapters, I turn to other feelings—disdain and patience—which, though they were not of much interest to Kant himself, function analogously in the work of Dickinson and Hopkins, as affects whose unnaturalness might make them morally salutary.

Moral hierarchies

As Stanley Cavell has emphasized, Emerson believed that modern human beings were alienated from themselves, due to a pervasive and crippling sense of shame.[4] In Emerson's essays, man is "ashamed before the blade of grass or the blowing rose"—slouched, apologetic, self-conscious, and conformist. There are also moments in Emerson's writings, however, when shame is said to elevate the self. In his so-called "threshold poem" "The Sphinx," Emerson even writes, cryptically, that shame might restore fallen angels to heaven. My first chapter, "The affecting lesson: Emerson, Kant, and the trials of humiliation," attempts to make sense of this poetic utterance, by distinguishing between two types of shame in Emerson's thought. There is the disabling existential shame, a symptom of self-alienation, but there is also a more acute and improving feeling, which I call "humiliation." In his journals and essays, Emerson often describes feeling humiliated when confronted with a person perceived to be morally superior. This impressive other makes the self feel paralyzed, embarrassed, and dispossessed. But this unpleasant

[4] Shame is a concern throughout *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, a collection of Cavell's essays and lectures edited by David Justin Hodge (Stanford University Press, 2003). See especially "Being Odd, Getting Even" and "Aversive Thinking."

perception of one's own inferiority has a redemptive aspect: it leads to the awakening of moral desire. The humiliating other actually serves the self, by concretely representing to it what it wishes to become. For Emerson, at the very moment when the self recognizes what it has failed to be, it acquires a new ideal. Humiliation thus cancels shame. It is a restorative mortification, an affection for the moral.

Intriguingly, Kantian humiliation operates in almost exactly the same way. The second part of my chapter explores Kant's second Critique, where the emotional complex "humiliation-respect," a kind of precursor to the dynamical sublime, is identified as the only moral feeling. For Kant, too, we feel humiliated, involuntarily, in the presence of certain other persons. These others strike down our self-conceit, painfully. But like a sublime object, the humiliating other also compensates us for this injury, by making us aware of our potential moral autonomy. Humiliation thus effects a crucial "subreption:" the universal moral law—which is strictly unrepresentable—becomes humanly intuitable. This moralizing process involves a break both with everyday human reality, and with nature, understood as a strict chain of material causes. Humiliation shows us that it is possible to choose the good for its own sake. This choice is both free and unfree, since it requires that we submit ourselves to the demands of the categorical imperative.[5]

My chapter does not seek to establish a genealogical link between Kant and Emerson. Emerson did not read Kant closely, and his anti-systematic body of work cannot be reconciled with Kant's logical formalism. Instead I ask why, in both thinkers, the "scene of humiliation" comes to play such a prominent role. I also engage with the Marxist and

[5] Kant's discussion of humiliation occurs primarily in Chapter III of the Analytic portion of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, "On the Incentives of Pure Practical Reason." My chapter uses the Werner S. Pluhar translation (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002).

Freudian interpreters, including Theodor W. Adorno and Alenka Zupančič, who have identified points of strain and tension in Kant's second Critique.[6] I argue that many of the contradictions in Kant's moral philosophy—contradictions surrounding the concepts of naturalness, autonomy, universality, and freedom—also pertain to Emerson.

My chapter also considers the ambiguous political implications of Emerson's ethics of humiliation. On the one hand, humiliation is, for both Emerson and Kant, a profoundly democratic phenomenon. Both thinkers take pains to dissociate "respect" from "respectability." A rich person may not manage to humiliate the self; conversely, a person of low station, if she is morally excellent, can. On the other hand, Kant's anti-consequentialist ethics has been accused, reasonably, of an apolitical purism; and some of Emerson's writings, including the essay "New England Reformers" tend in the same direction, towards an attitude of political resignation. Emerson's belief that moral reform happens involuntarily, in response to a charismatic individual, raises serious doubts about the relevance of the public sphere. Like Kant, Emerson often finds himself caught in a kind of gap between experience and the ideal. This perfectionism helps to explain why, in "New England Reformers," every particular political agenda begins to look compromised and deficient.

Humiliation also becomes problematic in the aesthetic sphere. My chapter closes with a reading of Emerson's essay "Shakespeare," from the volume *Representative Men*, where Shakespeare emerges as a figure who certainly commands respect, but whose moral status is questionable. Emerson writes that Shakespeare "adds a new problem to

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[6] My chapter focuses in particular on two philosophical works: Theodor W. Adorno's late lectures, *Problems of Moral Philosophy,* tr. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford University Press, 2001); and Alenka Zupančič's *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000).

metaphysics," a claim which leads in two directions. On the one hand, it means simply that Shakespeare is incomprehensible. Knowing what we do about his unremarkable life, we cannot account for the breadth of his sympathy or his ease of expression. His works are strangely egoless, thus difficult to "naturalize," to understand in terms of psychological or historical laws. But Shakespeare is also problematic for Emerson because his plays and sonnets, for all their impressiveness, lack the "power to inspire;" Shakespeare was, in Emerson's view, amoral. In other words, Shakespeare's fatalistic body of work does not *have* a metaphysics; his works ultimately exclude the dimension of redemption. In the phenomenon "Shakespeare," Emerson confronts an uncanny aestheticism, and a rewardless humiliation.

Emerson's "Shakespeare"—his version of the man—bears a certain resemblance to the phenomenon "Emily Dickinson," whose achievement was also, in a way, supernatural: nothing in her schooling or life experience suffices to account for the intensity or variety of her insights. At the core of her life is something marvelous, a process of assimilation and expression which remains stubbornly incomprehensible. As a result, it is always difficult to decide, for any given poem, just how aware she was of what she was doing. If, as Jed Deppman writes, "we have not yet taken Dickinson's full measure as a thinker," that may because her thinking is always measured, i.e. it takes place in and as verse, or between the poet and the poem, in a gap which is always present in poetry but which seems especially conspicuous in her case. Nevertheless, the relentless openness of her work leads me to follow Deppman in assessing Dickinson both as a gifted "technician" and as a major thinker of morality and metaphysics—and more compellingly, of their limits.[7]

[7] Jed Deppman, *Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson* (Amherst: UMass Press, 2008), 2.

My second chapter "The disdainful soul: Dickinson's tropic," finds Dickinson wavering between two positions which we might call the Kantian and the materialist. On the one hand, Dickinson shares Kant's desire to find a moral feeling, a non-pathological experience. On the other hand, she maintains a Nietzschean skepticism about the possibility of "disinterested" thought or feeling; and in certain poems, this skepticism verges on a melancholy nihilism. As a way of focusing my discussion, I examine a particular word, "disdain," which appears in several Dickinson poems. Disdain is the mirror image of humiliation: the disdainful self feels superior to another object or person. For this reason, we might expect disdain to feed self-conceit, causing the ego to feel full and exalted. And indeed, in her satirical poems, Dickinson ruthlessly exposes this kind of enjoyable disdain, as a mere variant of contempt or vanity. In other poems, however, "disdain" becomes something different and more empowering, a kind of freeing detachment.

This chiller usage derives from the so-called "poetry of courtly love," a tradition which has roots in the middle ages, and which runs through English lyric. The courtly lover typically addresses a high-born "Lady," who is characteristically disdainful, i.e. chastely virtuous, and thus indifferent to him. The lover experiences the Lady's disdain as a kind of cruel violence; yet the Lady herself is strangely passionless. She has no distinguishing attributes aside from her disdain, which is sometimes said to wound or to murder the lover, but which also excites his desire. When Dickinson participates in this tradition, she alternates between the two roles: sometimes she plays the tortured lover, and sometimes the inaccessible Lady. In certain poems, such as the well-known "The Soul selects her own Society," she describes the lover-Lady dynamic as a kind of natural-historical process, declining to identify fully with either position.

For Dickinson, "disdain" is finally the name for this near-scientific refusal to identify. Disdain, when it is more than contempt, moves the self, or the Soul, "away from" or "above" all objects, including the ego. This self-cancelling aspect makes disdain spiritually important. In certain poems, Dickinson seems to wonder whether the source of disdain is divine: perhaps we disdain worldly objects out of fidelity to a Christian ideal, or to the godhead itself. In a late, electrical poem "With Pinions of Disdain," Dickinson even suggests that disdain offers a premonition of "immortality." Yet the disdainful flight of the soul can also be read as a figure for the attainment of moral autonomy, rather than heavenly grace. Like Kantian humiliation, disdain might index our potential unnaturalness. When we feel a Ladylike indifference to something or someone, we are liberated from it. This freeing apathy gives us a glimpse of our potential to rise above particularity, to see and act on the basis of a disinterested universality.

Yet if Dickinson sometimes seems to valorize disdain, as an enlightening "power of distance,"[8] her restless poetic negations cannot present anything as an uncomplicated good. Instead, disdain, like all forms of domination and enlightenment, is seen as a dialectical process, at once emancipatory and incapacitating, enlivening and deadening. My chapter looks closely at a Dickinson poem, "From cocoon forth a Butterfly," which dramatizes this dialectic. Dickinson's "psychological" study (the pun is intentional, and decisive) maps an uncanny natural landscape, in which the relationship between word and referent is shown to be arbitrary, and where we can find no evidence of metaphysical consolation. The poem would seem to confirm Walter Benjamin's discovery of an affinity between the late nineteenth century and the baroque. In both eras, Benjamin argued,

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[8] I borrow the phrase from Amanda Anderson's *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

metaphysical skepticism produced allegorical art forms, which both reveal and contribute to a pervasive nihilism. This dour superstructural outlook is associated, in both epochs, with the expansion of capitalism and the domination of exchange value.

Benjamin's primary modern allegorist is the urban bohemian Baudelaire, who would seem to be quite remote from the rural, courteous Dickinson. Yet I argue that Dickinson's body of work is, like Baudelaire's, "historically responsible" in its commitment to the allegorical mode.[9] What's more, "From cocoon forth a Butterfly" anticipates Benjamin by explicitly theorizing the allegorical, which Dickinson names "tropic show." Disdain and tropicality are closely linked here: like commodity fetishism, the poetic way of seeing makes all things and words into exchangeable vehicles, disdaining their particular identities. In "From cocoon forth a Butterfly," the word "disdain" occurs at the climax of the poem, marking the exact point at which the landscape is "turned" into a field of signifiers, and simultaneously drained of all significance. With great intellectual honesty, Dickinson thus presents disdain in two contrasting lights: as a sign of humanity's supernatural, Kantian vocation, and as a symptom of our subjection to language and exchange, our fated unnaturalness.

Nature under stress

Hopkins might at first seem like a poet who escaped the curse of the allegorical—or, to adopt his vocabulary, "inscaped" it. "Inscape" was Hopkins' word for the shining forth of an object's particular being. An inscaped poem would avoid the tropic, by naming what

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[9] One Americanist critic who has taken note of Dickinson's allegorical thrust is David Porter, in *Dickinson, The Modern Idiom* (Harvard University Press, 1981).

Duns Scotus, Hopkins' favorite philosopher, calls the *haecceitas*, the "thisness" of the object which the poem wishes to make present. Hopkins early "perfect lyrics"[10] paint natural phenomena, from flowing water to moss to birdsong and the invisible air, with an unprecedented attention to detail, and an almost unfathomable receptivity.

Towards the end of his life, however, Hopkins struggled to write concretely. In his later sonnets, especially, there seems to be a shift towards the allegorical: an abstract, moral-theological register comes to predominate, and the musical "approximations" of the earlier work reappear only intermittently. My closing chapter, "Failures of patience in Hopkins' late sonnets," documents some of these difficulties of figuration and pacing, under the rubric of "impatience," an affective condition which can also be seen as an absence of virtue. Critics including J. Hillis Miller and Isobel Armstrong have long suggested that Hopkins' mimetic project was vexed from the very beginning, and that the late sonnets only make visible contradictions that were present in Hopkins' poetry all along.[11] My chapter accepts this continuity; however, I also find that, in the case of each late work, one can identify a repressed "unnaturalness," whether aesthetic, erotic, or political, which returns as writerly impatience, a set of formal problems.

My chapter begins by examining some of the theological and literary background for Hopkins' interest in patience. Three of the early Church Fathers wrote treatises on patience, which was also a topic in medieval theology. In this set of writings, patience has a special status: though it is not a cardinal virtue, it is prerequisite for all other virtues.

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[10] J. Hillis Miller, "The Creation of Self in Gerard Manley Hopkins," in *The J. Hillis Miller Reader*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Stanford University Press, 2005), 121.
[11] See Miller, "The Creation of Self," 121-39; and Isobel Armstrong, " Hopkins: Agonistic Reactionary: The Grotesque as Conservative Form," *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), 409-27.

Patience is also unusual in that it cannot be cultivated, only bestowed or "infused" by God (for this reason, Aquinas classes patience as one of the "theological" virtues). How, then, can human beings attain to patience? How can one will passivity, a quieting of the will? And how can patience be distinguished from other, more unsavory passivities? Patience is at once imperative and impossible, sanctifying and self-dissolving. This situation is bound to generate anxiety—an anxiety which manifests, in these early Christian writings, as sexual confusion, an inability to decide on the sex of patience. On the one hand, patience is associated with Christ's passion or sufferance, his courageous submission to the fate of crucifixion. A central feature of the masculine trinity, patience permeates, penetrates, infuses. Yet patience, as a quiet receptivity, was also considered to be a feminine virtue, and in moral allegories, patience is always a woman. Think for example of Viola's speech in *Twelfth Night*, where, disguised as a man, she alludes to her true feminine identity by likening herself to "Patience on a monument." This veneration of Patience, as a kind of minor female deity, is always difficult to reconcile with Christian dogma. In a faintly heretical early treatise, Tertullian even goes so far as to call Patience the "fourth person" of the holy trinity.

Yet if the concept of patience has a surprisingly destabilizing effect on many writers, there is one important exception. In "To Autumn," John Keats attributes a "patient look" to the fall season, which is allegorized as a woman. "To Autumn" is famous for the balance it achieves between progress and stasis, a feat of pacing which Keats calls "stationing," and which we might think of as poetic patience. In the second part of my chapter, I turn to a late Hopkins sonnet, "Patience, hard thing," which I read as a troubled reply to Keats's culminating ode. In "Patience, hard thing," Hopkins wavers uneasily between allegory and

meditation, complaint and exhortation. The poem expresses a desire to become patient, to "bend" the "rebellious will" to divine service. Yet it also worries that patience, as a melting away or emptying of that "hard thing" the ego, represents nothing more than a regression to nature, a kind of death-in-life. Patience can be salvaged—or made attractive—only if it undergoes a sex change; while the sonnet initially accepts that patience is a "she," the end of the poem takes liberties with Keats's language, for the purposes of representing a homoerotic encounter. This nervous maneuver leaves the sonnet painfully divided, between octave and sestet, while most of the lines exhibit strange accelerations, jumps, or awkward extra syllables. Stylistically, "Patience, hard thing" is characteristic of Hopkins' late work: it fails at the task of stationing. However, it also helps us to account for that pervasive failure, by making visible some of its determinants—including a discomfort with the unnaturalness of allegory.

"Patience, hard thing" calls patience "natural heart's ivy," an ambiguous phrase which could mean that patience is an outgrowth of the natural heart, or that it is an additive, supernatural adornment. For Hopkins, as for Kant, Emerson, and Dickinson, the concept of human nature is equivocal. Humans, as speaking beings, are constituted negatively. Unlike natural objects, we do not "correspond" with ourselves. In the early, Emersonian-sounding poem "In the Valley of Elwy," Hopkins writes that we feel less like beings than like "inmates" in the worlds and in our bodies. On the other hand, humanity, even in this fallen or alienated condition, is part of a divinely sanctioned natural order, and God "completes" his "creature dear O where it fails."[12] Human beings are less patient than everything nonhuman, but they also desire, naturally, to obtain or regain an inhuman (or

[12] Hopkins, "In the Valley of Elwy," in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Philips (Oxford University Press, 2002), 131-32.

fully human) patience. For Hopkins, the beauty of natural objects helps to awaken that desire; and art, by rendering that beauty, makes it more effective.

Hopkins runs into a dilemma, however, when confronted with the beauty of other human agents. Beautiful male bodies seemed to him the most beautiful of objects. Yet they invited him to become the patient of a process—homosexual sex—which the church deemed unnatural. My chapter looks closely at a sonnet, "To what serves mortal beauty," in which Hopkins argues, paradoxically, that the beholder of male bodies must be at once receptive and vigilant. While the poem is sometimes read as a successful, harmonizing statement of "Neoplatonic" doctrine,[13] I argue that in fact the text disintegrates, both formally and conceptually.

Here, as with "Patience, hard thing," the problems with Hopkins' statement on mortal beauty come into relief when we compare it with a predecessor poem, in this case Milton's sonnet "To a Virtuous Young Lady" (1644). Milton's poem recommends the postponement of sexual gratification, and models that deferral syntactically. In its final lines, Milton imagines a heavenly marriage, and delivers a kind of sonic consummation. Hopkins' sonnet, in contrast, seeks to prohibit bodily contact absolutely, without promising a reward after death. It counsels not deferral but frustration, and this violent thwarting of desire gives the poem a desperate tonality. It also literally leaves scars in the body of the text, in the form of some bizarre diacritical markings. "To what serves mortal beauty" strongly suggests that Hopkins' late poetic impatience was connected not only to sexual anxiety, but also to a spiritual disturbance, the erosion of Catholic belief.

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[13] Helen Vendler, "Gerard Manley Hopkins and Sprung Rhythm," in *The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 23-27.

My chapter, and my project as a whole, closes with a turn to the political life of nations, via a reading of what may be Hopkins' most impatient work, the grotesque caudal sonnet "Tom's Garland: Upon the unemployed." The poem is significant as Hopkins' "unique poem of public affairs." I argue that "Tom's Garland" begins as a disguised Romantic lyric, but, when confronted with social injustice, seeks refuge, unsuccessfully, in a fanciful allegory. " Writing in the wake of clashes between protestors and police in Trafalgar Square, Hopkins praises manual labors, and condemns a society which leaves large numbers of people "undenizened"—jobless and transient. Yet he refuses to side with the socialist agitators who demand a radical overhaul. Instead, he looks back nostalgically, and unrealistically, to an ideal traditional "commonweal" governed by a Church-sanctioned monarch. That system may not be recoverable, but no other is preferable.

In its passage from eulogizing lyric to grim allegory, "Tom's Garland" reiterates the trajectory of Hopkins' career as a whole. The poem's overall message is reactionary and despairing. The modern age is said to be plagued by chaos, and no mention is made of divine redemption or retribution. This pessimism has a confessional element: the poem's subtitle, "Upon the Unemployed," refers both to the jobless masses and to Hopkins' own feeling of wasted potential, his poetic frustration and impatience. "Tom's Garland" is honest enough to tie the interruption of lyric expression to social inequality, something Hopkins' other late sonnets fail to do. Yet the "bad unnaturalness" of "Tom's Garland" also belies a bad conscience. I argue that the language of the poem is haunted by the texts which motivated its composition: newspaper reports about the demonstrations in Trafalgar Square, where people from every class gathered together in political solidarity. The poem's grotesque form results at least in part from Hopkins' repression of that utopian image.

"Tom's Garland" wishes to imagine a better world, one which would permit full "employment," but Hopkins finds that he no longer has the emotional, poetic, or linguistic resources to write such a reconciliation. In its vision of a collapsing order and its refusal of religious consolation, "Tom's Garland" is, unhappily, ahead of its time. The poem belongs to an era in which the writing of poetry had begun to feel unnatural—a feeling at the origin of modernism.

Chapter 1

The affecting lesson:

Emerson, Kant, and the trials of humiliation

receiving out of others...
an inhuman person

-Wallace Stevens

In his essays on Ralph Waldo Emerson, Stanley Cavell presents the ethics of self-reliance as a kind of homeopathy. Humanity's modern "malady," whose symptoms are conformity, irresponsibility, and inauthenticity, is "moralized shame." Man is unsure of himself, governed by others, and too timid to say what he really thinks. According to Cavell, rather than spurring us to self-improvement, this kind of shame:

> is debarring us from the conditions of the moral life, from the possibility of responsibility over our lives, from responding to our lives rather than bearing them dumbly or justifying them automatonically. That debarment or embarrassment is for Emerson, as for Kant, a state other than the human, since it lacks the humanly defining fact of freedom.[1]

Shame is usually thought of as something which separates us from the animals. Here, however, shame is what keeps us animal-like, determining our actions and feelings

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[1]"Aversive Thinking," in Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 155. See also "Being Odd, Getting Even," in the same volume.

"automatonically." Because we are too embarrassed to do otherwise, we defer to custom. This amounts to failing to take responsibility for ourselves as free moral agents. As Cavell points out, for Kant, such a shame-governed state is less than human.

In Cavell's telling, Emerson's "proposed therapy" for this shameful condition is, paradoxically, "to become ashamed of our shame." The goal of Emerson's ethical project is not to get rid of shame, but to carry out a revaluation, so that we judge different things to be shameful. Support for Cavell's argument can be found in a well-known passage from "Self-Reliance," in which shame is said to interfere with self-expression:

> Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.[2]

At first, we are afraid to oppose "the whole cry of voices," the human community. Then art, embodied here as a masterful stranger, speaks our own heartfelt opinions when we are afraid to. Great works of art force us take what we already had but did not possess, because we did not give it away. Yet we find ourselves, in these sentences, in a kind of behaviorist interval, between two force-feedings, i.e. two aesthetic encounters. We have been shamed by art repeatedly, but tomorrow could be different. Our aversion to shame could override all prior conditioning, teaching us the lesson of fidelity to the spontaneous.

This chapter examines the dual nature of shame in Emerson's writings. I argue that Emerson's proposed therapy for human insecurity is not exactly "to become ashamed of shame," a self-defeating disciplinary project. Rather, he wishes to draw attention to the

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[2]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (Library of America, 1983), 259. Abbreviated EL.

moments in which we involuntarily become ashamed before the proper object, such as a morally superior person or a genuine work of art. This "higher" shame liberates us from the other, damaging kind. Although Emerson does not discriminate rigorously between the two terms, I will call the useful shame "humiliation." While shame injures, humiliation empowers. While shame makes the self feel lonely and detached from the universe, humiliation re-attaches. At the moment when the self feels most humiliated, it is most exalted, since what humiliates is the self's failure to live up to a perfection it intuitively recognizes and cannot but acknowledge.

My chapter opens with a reading of Emerson's poem "The Sphinx," in which the word "shame" carries this double valence. I then take note of a resemblance between Emerson's redemptive humiliation and Immanuel Kant's concept of "respect-humiliation" in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. For Kant, humiliation provides the human will with an incentive for subjecting itself to the moral law. Humiliation is an important element in the Kantian system, because it involves a "subreption:" moral autonomy, an intelligible object, is represented to the human sensorium. I argue that for Emerson, too, humiliation involves a productive misrecognition, which enables the self to break with its habitual valuations and behavior. My goal in this section will not be to defend an exact equivalence between Emerson and Kant. Rather, I aim to show how the Nietzschean, Freudian, and Marxist critiques of Kantian ethics might also apply to Emerson. Does Emersonian humiliation truly involve a passage to universality? Or is it nothing more than bourgeois hero-worship, an alienated egotism?

While humiliation is primarily a phenomenon of individual moral development, "scenes of humiliation" are not absent from Emerson's writings on politics and aesthetics. My chapter looks closely at two different essays, in order to explore the implications of Emerson's humiliating ethics in these domains. First, I study "New England Reformers," where the figure of a humiliating "just man" is said to be a more effective reformer than all forms of collective advocacy, including the movements for temperance and the abolition of slavery. In this section, I point to a resigned, anti-consequentialist strain in Emerson's moral perfectionism. I then examine Emerson's essay on Shakespeare in the volume *Representative Men*, where Emerson runs into a problem: What happens when artistic skill is not associated with moral power? Here Emerson approaches an uncanny erasure of the self, without the prospect of a metaphysical compensation.

Oafs and angels

In 1841, Emerson published "The Sphinx" in an early issue of *The Dial*. Subsequently, whenever his poetry was collected into a book, Emerson chose to place this "threshold poem" at the beginning of the volume, a decision which has led the critic Saundra Morris to read the poem as "an initiation and a guide through" Emerson's body of poetic writing.[3] A close generic precedent for "The Sphinx" might be Alexander Pope's "Essay On Man," another composition in rhymed couplets, which attempts to comprehend the "vast chain of

[3]Saundra Morris, "The Threshold Poem, Emerson, and 'The Sphinx,'" *American Literature* 69:3 (September, 1997), 547-70.

Being"[4] and man's vexed relation to it. But whereas Pope's poem is enunciated from a single, quasi-divine perspective, "The Sphinx" is a complex "disputation"[5] with many voices, including a lyric "I," who appears suddenly and somewhat traumatically, several stanzas in. The bulk of the poem is voiced by the Sphinx character, who begins by surveying non-human nature, which she finds to be happy:

> The waves unashamed,
>   In difference sweet,
> Play glad with the breezes.
>   Old playfellows meet.[6]

Rather than write that the breezes "play with" the waves, Emerson stresses the mutuality of this interaction, which echoes Adam and Eve's prelapsarian marriage rites. Air and water are different in kind, like men and women (or old and young, or black and white, or rich and poor), but they are not ashamed to play together, to touch. Their difference, unlike human difference, is not antagonistic, but sweet, an aesthetic or social harmony. Or that is how things are presented by the Sphinx. As literary critics have been quick to point out, the Sphinx's words are not necessarily authoritative.[7] This is one perspective on nature, and as readers we are free to consider alternatives. Perhaps air and water cannot really play, because they cannot intend, or cease to intend. Perhaps they are not players, but God's playthings. Or perhaps—more troublingly—antagonism precedes the human. In any case,

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[4]Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Man," *Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston), 200.
[5]Morris, "The threshold poem," 547.
[6]*Emerson: Collected Poems and Translations*, eds. Harold Bloom and Paul Kane (New York: Library of America, 1994), 5-8. Abbreviated PT.
[7]For some hypotheses regarding the identity of the Sphinx, see Charles Child Walcutt, "Emerson's 'The Sphinx,'" *Explicator* 31 (1972), item 20; and Thomas R. Whitaker, "The Riddle of Emerson's 'The Sphinx,'" *American Literature* 27 (March, 1955), 184. Morris's footnotes collate many additional sources.

the Sphinx presents their promiscuous physical contact as an image of something humanity has lost: a state of attachment to nature, and freedom from shame.

According to the Sphinx's argument, human infants share in this open, natural comportment:

> The babe by its mother
>   Lies bathed in joy;
> Glide its hours uncounted,--
>   The sun is its toy;
>
> Shines the peace of all being,
>   Without cloud, in its eyes;
> And the sum of the world
>   In soft miniature lies.

This (unrealistically?) imperturbable infant knows no beyond, no elsewhere. Its world is a soft microcosm, not much bigger than its mother's lap, in which it lies gently supported. Its gaze is directed upwards, to the sun, which, since the baby has as yet no intuition of distance, looks friendly and accessible, like a toy. The infant's bliss in its mother's presence is a familiar Romantic trope; Emerson certainly had in mind the "blest" babe from the *Prelude.* In Wordsworth's epic, we watch as an infant, "subjected to the discipline of love," learns to synthesize his impressions, so that his senses "connect him with the world:" "No outcast he, bewildered and depressed!"[8] Emerson's Sphinx makes no mention of childhood growth, nor of any inborn mental powers. Instead, the Sphinx shifts her attention abruptly, from the blissful infant to an infantile collective called "man:"

[8]William Wordsworth, "The Two-Part *Prelude* of 1709," in *The Prelude: The Four Texts* (London, Penguin, 1995), 28-29.

But man crouches and blushes;
  Absconds and conceals;
He creepeth and peepeth,
  He palters and steals;
Infirm, melancholy,
  Jealous glancing around,
An oaf, an accomplice,
  He poisons the ground.

In a later poem, "Blight," Emerson describes a dead landscape, wasted by humanity's technological intrusions. Here, it is as if man poisons the ground with his own stooping body. Cavell has called attention to the language of "poor posture" in Emerson's essays,[9] and here we are aware of the trope's biblical roots. In Genesis, God gives Adam "dominion" over "every creeping thing that creepeth;"[10] but in Emerson's poem, man himself creeps, like a reptile, or like Satan, thus forfeiting his mandate. The language may be biblical-Miltonic, but the Sphinx's narrative differs from the Christian creation myth in a crucial way: there is no original prohibition, in Emerson's poem, and no eventful transgression. It is not that mankind has fallen. He has never learned to walk fully upright. He no longer lies "embosomed... in nature;"[11] he crouches and blushes, *entstellt*.

That poor posture was an urgent, personal problem for Emerson is evident in a long journal entry from April, 1824, a month before he turned twenty-one, in which he asks himself whether he is up to the task of becoming a Unitarian minister. What begins as a candid assessment of his intellectual strengths and weaknesses quickly devolves into a shame-ridden "Catalogue of Confessions," which makes for painful reading. The entry

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[9]Cavell, "Being Odd, Getting Even," in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 89-91.
[10]Genesis 1:26, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, eds. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 2.
[11] Emerson, *Nature*, EL, 7.

almost sounds like a story by Poe or Melville, in which the narrator searches himself for the "signal defect of character" which prevents him from winning other people's respect. In the company of others, Emerson writes, he feels a "sore uneasiness:"

> a frigid fear of offending & jealousy of disrespect, an inability to lead & an unwillingness to follow the current conversation, which contrive to make me second with all those whom chiefly I wish to be first.

The young Emerson feels too detached to contribute, but too involved not to care. What resigns him to second place may be precisely his "contriving," his competitive jealousy. His fear of offending and his eagerness to please, combined with his sensitivity to insults, all distract him from the very conversation which he feels to be a test of his merit, and of his interlocutors, among whom he discriminates harshly. With some people, he "wishes to be first," a phrase which could mean either that he wishes to gain their esteem or that he wishes to usurp. Instead, he is usurped *by* his own bad conscience:

> Hence my bearing in the world is the direct opposite of that good humored independence & self esteem which should mark the gentleman... A score of words & deeds issue from me daily, of which I am not the master. They are begotten of weakness & born of shame. I cannot assume the elevation I ought,--but lose the influence I should exert among those of meaner or younger understanding, for want of sufficient *bottom* in my nature, for want of that confidence of manner which springs from an erect mind which is without fear & without reproach. In my frequent humiliation, even before women & children I am compelled to remember the poor boy who cried, 'I told you, Father, they would find me out.'[12]

An uncanny double, the oaf, masters or un-masters Emerson's words and deeds, like the impersonal, unconscious force that Henri Bergson identifies as the object of comedy.[13] And the result is comical: Emerson stumbles over himself (in his own words, he loses his

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[12] Emerson*, Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, eds. William H. Gilman, et. Al. (Cambridge: Belknap, 1961), Volume II, 237-42.

[13] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, tr. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911).

erection). When Nietzsche writes about the virtues of nobility and mastery, it is as if he counts himself among the “birds of prey,” the people who dominate easily and gladly. Emerson's peons to Greek athleticism or Roman stoicism or Medieval chivalry —or, in this case, gentlemanly “independence” —always sound more wistful, as if he were describing “the direct opposite” of his own way of being. “Self-reliance,” like every positive ethical ideal, can be understood as a fantasy, and as a corrective.[14] In this journal entry, we observe its origin in the experience of insecurity and wounded egotism.

"The Sphinx" does not provide a straightforward explanation for this condition of shame. In fact, "the fate of the man child" may be the poem's central riddle. On the other hand, one of the poem's characters, who is called "the poet," and who is to be distinguished from the poem's lyric "I," does attempt an elliptical "answer" to the Sphinx's diagnosis:

> The fiend that man harries
>   Is love of the Best;
> Yawns the pit of the Dragon,
>   Lit by rays from the Blest.
> The Lethe of Nature
>   Can't trance him again;
> Whose soul sees the perfect,
>   Which his eyes seek in vain.

in “The Sphinx,” nature is both the harmonious whole from which man has detached himself, and the domain over which he has not quite managed to rule. The poet character identifies the “drug” from the great mother's speech as “The Lethe of Nature;” but he also asserts that this drug is not strong enough to counteract man's “soul-sight,” his sensitivity to an invisible perfection. The poet's position—and again, it is only one position in the

[14] Kenneth S. Sacks makes the obvious point: that “self-reliance... never came readily, if at all, to Emerson.” *Understanding Emerson* (Princeton, 2003), 37.

poem—seems to be that man's discontent is in fact a symptom of his perfectibility. Man's *a priori* knowledge of and love for "the Best" is what "harries" him; but it also represents a potential compensation for his painful detachment from "unashamed" nature.

When the word "shame" finally appears in "The Sphinx," it has a compensating and indeed elevating effect:

> Pride ruined the angels,
> Their shame them restores;
> And the joy that is sweetest
> Lurks in stings of remorse.

“Pride” was the force that drove Satan and his minions to rebel against God, ruining them. But in what epic poem did shame restore the angels (or anyone else) to heaven? “Humility,” not “shame,” is the name of the virtue that checks pride. “Shame” traditionally denotes our affective investment in our own fallenness, and would not seem to be valuable in itself. It is possible that Emerson chose the shorter word ("shame," rather than "humility") because it happens to scan. Yet considered in the context of Emerson's overall body of work, these lines seem to be making a very precise claim. Emerson's poet holds that shame (the affect, as distinct from the virtue humility), is itself redemptive, that is is *the* restorative force. It is not just that shame (of the creeping kind) creates the opportunity for an achieved self-determination. Rather, "remorse" with regard to one's own imperfections gives man access to something positive. To better understand how the sting of shame could be related to something like a moral drive, I will now turn to the Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, in which the feeling provides an essential point of contact between man's natural life and his universal vocation.

Achtung/Demütigung

Throughout his moral philosophy, Kant attempts to separate morality from the emotions. Feelings belong to nature, the realm of pure determinism which includes everyday human existence.[15] Kant's suspicion towards sentiment as a "pathological,"[16] socio-biological phenomenon represents a radical break with the ethical philosophies which preceded him, all of which made a place for emotion.[17] In Spinoza, for example, the affects and passions may help or hinder virtue, understood as an increase in power. In Hume, benevolence, sympathy, and justice are feelings—really, instincts—which predispose people to moral behavior. Kant refuses to derive morality from the merely given, contingent constitution of individuals, or of the human animal. The good is not the useful or the agreeable, but the rational: to be good is to act in accordance with the moral law, which for Kant takes the form of the categorical imperative. There is no specific morality; there is only one timeless morality, which finds its basis in reason, and which is common to all rational beings. The emotions must be counted among the empirical, "heteronomous" determinants which interfere with the exercise of reason, hence with free moral action. According to this logic, there should be no moral affect in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason.* The "pure practical" is the rational; morality is possibly only when the subject is not pathologically affected.

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[15]This point is emphasized throughout Adorno's *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, which take Kant as their focus.
[16]As Alenka Zupanic has pointed out, it is important to note that for Kant, the "pathological" is not opposed to the "normal." On the contrary, our normal, sub-moral existence is pathological. Zupancic, *Ethics of the Real*, 7.
[17]Howard Caygill, "Kant and the Relegation of the Passions," in *Politics and the Passions: 1500-1850*, ed. Vitoria Kahn (Princeton, 2006), 217-230.

At this point, however, Kant runs into a problem. To put it crudely: moral philosophy is boring. Kant takes seriously Hume's thesis that reason, because it is "cool and disengaged," cannot move us to action. There can be no action without subjective movement, emotion. Kant's ethical system requires a link, by which morality, which we have never and never could experience, will be "made present" to us as a possibility within experience.[18] And so Kant does end up endowing us with an innate moral sentiment, after all. But, as if to stress that, since the good is not the agreeable, it is more likely to be discovered in suffering, Kant decides—or, in his terms, deduces—that morality appears "in a guise that is not so likeable."[19] Kant's moral sentiment has nothing to do with beneficence or justice, the congenial virtues. Rather, it manifests as *Achtung*, respect: "an emotional reflection, a mirroring of the principle of reason."[20] And respect itself has only a ghostly, secondary existence, as an "intellectual feeling." Its sensory component, the part we actually experience, is *Demütigung*, humiliation. As soon as we recognize the moral law, we become aware of our own inadequacy; the law strikes down our self-conceit. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, "respect-humiliation" is the only non-pathological, "unnatural" feeling, the only feeling which is allowed to determine the moral will.[21]

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[18]Zupancic: "How can something which is not in itself pathological (i.e. which has nothing to do with the representation of pleasure or pain, the 'usual' mode of subjective causality) nevertheless become the cause or drive of a subject's actions? ...how can 'form' become 'matter', how can something which, in the subject's universe, does not qualify as a cause, suddenly become a cause? This is the real 'miracle' involved in ethics." *Ethics of the Real*, 15.

[19] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 197. Abbreviated CPR.

[20]Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 132.

[21]Kant's discussion of respect-humiliation can be found in the third chapter of the Analytic, "On the Incentives of Pure Practical Reason," which begins on page 94 in the Pluhar translation.

Kant argues that we feel respect-humiliation in the presence of our moral superiors. Although the law cannot itself be represented, such people make the law "intelligible as an example." We sense their total submission to the moral law—and something in our body responds, through a kind of moral tact. Kant is eager to distinguish the emotional dyad respect-humiliation from other forms of admiration. We love our boyfriends; we fear the powerful; and we wonder at talented people. These feelings are derived from experience, and they are relative. We revere extraordinary people insofar as they differ from the ordinary. But moral respect is absolute, and compulsory, "a tribute that... we cannot refuse to pay to merit." It has exactly no relation to our own personal interests, nor to the other person's social status, nor to received standards of value, including the standardized forms of respectability.

In respect, I become aware that I am inferior, both to the other person and to a better part of myself, which Kant sometimes calls "the soul." My soul "bows" to this genuinely respectable other person, acknowledging his righteousness at the expense of my own self-esteem. It would be more accurate to say that my soul respects; while "I," or the sensible part of me, suffers. The suffering of the ego, in the presence of the moral law, is what Kant calls "humiliation." This feeling is initially so unpleasant that many people give way to it "only reluctantly." That is why the public is so eager to discredit great men (Kant's example is Voltaire, who was plagued by scandals): "We try to discover something that could lighten the burden of it for us, some blemish to compensate us for the humiliation that comes upon us through such an example." Most people would prefer never to feel inferior, so they focus on the "human failings" of exceptional people—a false consolation.

Kant's moral subject, in contrast, relishes and clings to the sense of inferiority. That is his distinction, and his joy. Rather than fending off the pain of humiliation, he endeavors to assume it. In the other, humiliating person—the apparent cause of his humiliation—he beholds someone already fully humiliated, an "emptied" being, whose identity consists not in a set of character traits, worldly concerns, or partisan affiliations, but in total submission to practical reason. The other person has "disappeared" into the law. Legitimate self-esteem (what Kant calls "rational self-love") can only be derived from this kind of subjective annihilation, or from the death of the false, "worldly" subject—a death which is also, from the Kantian perspective, the realization of true subjectivity.[22] When we feel humiliated, we become aware of this *a priori* truth. Our souls apprehend the other person's submission to the moral law, and command us to take the same course. The humiliating person, initially an image of what we are not, becomes an image of what we could be. Like the feeling of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment,* respect-humiliation involves "a momentary inhibition of the vital forces, followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger."[23] We doubt ourselves, then wonder at our ability to doubt, at the "splendid majesty" our own conscience.

Kant instructs us not think of respect-humiliation as a "spiritual feeling," as if we could visualize the spiritual by drawing out both ends of a piece of silly putty, until the middle part is reduced to a thin film.[24] Yes, pleasures can be more or less refined. But

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[22]For a detailed investigation into the status of "subjectivity" in Kant's ethics, see Zupancic.
[23]Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. Pluhar (Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), 98.
[24]At an early moment in the second Critique, Kant uses this kind of material metaphor to argue against the idea that the more refined or spiritual pleasures can be moral: "It is just as when ignorant people who would like to dabble in metaphysics think of matter as so refined—so overrefined—that they could themselves get

morality is not the "finest pleasure:" there is no moral connoisseurship, and no scale of moral values. There is only the sub-moral (or natural) and the moral (or human). Respect-humiliation denotes our sensitivity to the absolutely moral, a sensitivity which, although it does require cultivation (and therefore, we might argue, leisure), is not inherently restricted to a particular class of people. Anyone can be humiliated, and anyone can humiliate. Kant is insistent about this:

> A human being can also be for me an object of love, fear, or admiration even to the point of amazement, and yet not be for me therefore an object of respect. His jocular temper, his courage and strength, his power due to his rank among others, can instill such sensations in me, yet inner respect toward him [may] still be lacking. *Fontenelle* says: *"Before a prominent man I bow, but my spirit does not bow"* I can add this: Before a lowly, plain, common man in whom I perceive righteousness of character in a certain measure that I am not conscious of in myself[,] *my spirit bows,* whether I want it or not...[25]

Adorno writes that in Kant, "the immense pathos of the emancipated citizen becomes fused with the feeling of impotence."[26] Here, this "fusion" takes the form of a desire for revenge against the "prominent man." Kant is obliged to bow to his social superior, but another, higher law compels him to withhold his respect. Kant writes here as an emancipated bourgeois citizen who must obey the remnants of a feudal aristocracy. At the same time, Kant declares that his independence is not pomposity, is not vanity, because he can still be humiliated. In a strange way, Kant disavows his own vengefulness here. His spirit "bows" to the low man involuntarily, because it is noble, which retroactively proves that his impudence towards the prominent man was justified. It is not that he is unwilling to acknowledge any authority. He is not a rebel-as-such, but rebellious in certain

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dizzy from it, and then believe that in this way they have devised a spiritual and yet extended being." CPR, 35-36.

[25]CPR, 100-101.

[26]Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 133.

circumstances. His spirit worships truly great men, no matter how common. And his moral assessments are totally reliable, because they are not a matter of conscious will, but of moral affection. Humiliation levels, socially; but this leveling is immediately followed by the institution of a new, more authoritative hierarchy, where Kant is perfectly happy to find himself on the bottom. It would seem to be a three-tier hierarchy: there is Kant, there is the "low, plain, common man," and then there is the moral law to which the common man has submitted himself.

The hierarchy enforced by humiliation-respect is Kant's vision of a just world. It is just because it is impersonal. Yes, what we respect in the other is her personality, in the sense of her personhood, her elevation above nature. But this personality does not belong to an individual: it is supra-personal, or, in Kant's universe, universal. Humiliation is supposed to extract us from the interpersonal play of mastery and subordination, since it makes us aware that we are universally subordinated to the moral law. On the other hand, here, in the sensible realm, we cannot escape from the field of mirroring and reversal, and the imaginary (fantastic) element in Kant's "scene of humiliation" is pronounced. Is the "low, plain, common," but respectable man any lower than Kant, on the social totem pole? Or is he Kant's double? If Kant's spirit bows to the common man, might the prominent man's spirit bow to Kant? We could say that Kant has re-identified himself with the common man and, by extension, with the moral law itself.

Some commenters, influenced by Nietzsche and Freud, have stressed the "stain of enjoyment" which dirties Kant's morality. Can we really say that submission to the moral law is "non-pathological," when any subjective feeling or decision is involved in a psychic

economy of pride and pleasure? The moral law is just that—a law, an imperative statement. Within the psyche, it requires a locus of enunciation, the superego, whose every communication excites.[27] Even in Kant, the supposedly unrepresentable moral law sometimes takes on a gaze and a voice, as if it were a character in a psychological drama. The "scene of humiliation" would thus seem to confirm Freud's intuition that "Kant's categorical imperative finds its origins in the Oedipal complex." The "low, plain, common man" who humiliates me is just an externalization or projection of my superego, which is itself the internalization of parental (symbolic) authority. In these materialist, genealogical accounts, no morality—not even Kant's abstract, formal categorical imperative, which seeks to transcend all social determinants—can have an *a priori*, "supernatural" source; there is no self-regulation without socialization (and the repression of instinct). According to this logic, there is nothing "special"[28] about humiliation (which Nietzsche might classify as an "ascetic value"), nothing which distinguishes it from shame. Feeling inferior to another person is just an expression of what Freud calls "moral masochism," in which "the sadism of the super-ego and the masochism of the ego supplement each other." For these thinkers, no action—not even self-sacrifice—could ever be truly moral, in the Kantian sense, since "even the subject's destruction of himself cannot take place without libidinal satisfaction."[29]

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[27]Adorno: "The empirical irresistibility of the super-ego, the psychologically existing conscience, is what assures him, contrary to his transcendental principle, of the factuality of the moral law—although, for Kant, conscience ought to disqualify factuality as the basis of autonomous morality, as much as it disqualifies the heteronomous drives... Not only all of the specific substance of the moral law refers constitutively to facts of existence, but so does its supposedly pure imperative form... The law, even in its most abstract form, has come to be; its painful abstractness is sedimented substance." *Negative Dialectics*, 271.

[28]CPR, 104.

[29]Sigmund Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," tr. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth, 1968), Volume 19, 159-172.

Kant might counter that these suspicious readings only prove his point, that it is the effort to "re-pathologize" humiliation (to return it to the chain of causality) which must be read as determined, irrational, symptomatic. We try to demystify and historicize the second Critique as a way of fending off our respect for it; we are not ready to do what it requires. There is something "unfathomable for speculative reason" in what Kant calls "moral interest," the interest we take in the good, even when it is not *our* good. The ethical is literally "unfathomable," non-conceptualizable, because it consists in "an act without a cause." But it is also "unfathomable," unthinkable, in the way that violence is unthinkable: it cannot be thought about, because it must not be thought about. We balk at the idea of the "non-pathological" because we know that we *are* our pathologies; if we were to act as universal agents, we would have to sacrifice our finite identities. We reject the notion of a disinterested morality because we cannot bear to hold ourselves to so high a standard—we cannot bear it, and yet at the same time, on some level, we do. What would it mean really to humiliate oneself, to base one's self-esteem solely on an absolute standard of morality, rather than simply accumulating material or spiritual capital? What if this meant behaving in a totally shameless manner, without any regard for other people's opinions? What if being genuinely respectable meant being unloveable? And what if it also meant resisting the urge to congratulate oneself for having given up so much? If we wish to enter the conceptual space of the truly ethical, then we may have to lay down our suspicious "critical" weaponry, and take up the truly critical, Kantian task of attempting to think the unthinkable; a morality without egotism.

Manly reformations

In Kant's scene of humiliation, an impossible event transpires: an intelligible object, the moral law, is made intuitable, negatively, to sense. The removal or striking down of self-conceit briefly renders apprehensible humanity's moral vocation. The famous closing passage of the second *Critique*, in which Kant names the two legitimate objects of wonder, "the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me," thus involves a repression. Kant forgets the third source of wonder, "the low, plain, common man," the original father of respect. Arguably, Kant's depersonalization of the object of respect (or its literal sublimation, in the feeling of the sublime) is reversed over the trajectory of Emerson's career. In his first book, *Nature*, almost no people appear, though authorities are cited. Subsequently, in the *Essays*, we meet not only Emerson's countless interlocutors, from Homer to Plotinus to the Quaker George Fox, but also an expansive cast of unnamed lovers, friends, heroes, poets, "characters," and reformers. Here, people as well as natural objects are the focus of his reverent attention. Then, at the end of his major phase, in the fascinating and under-prized (if stylistically regressive) *Representative Men*, Emerson devotes each essay to a single dead man who commands his respect.

It cannot be claimed that Emerson was influenced directly by Kant's moral philosophy. I have encountered no evidence that Emerson ever read Kant's second *Critique*. Instead, he absorbed German idealism through intermediaries, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, and the Unitarian minister Frederic Henry Hedge. By the time Kant's ideas reach Emerson, they had been filtered and reinterpreted, and Emerson had

zero philological interest in fidelity to the source material. Moreover, Emerson rejects (or, put another way, he cannot rise to) Kant's logical formalism. It seems clear that Emerson and Kant mean different things when they use such terms as "reason," "law," and "universality;" and many critics have questioned whether Kant's moral system could every be reconciled with Emerson's radically individualistic ethics. It can be tempting to dismiss any affinities between the two thinkers as evidence of nothing more than their having inhabited roughly the same historical era.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that both thinkers were drawn to scenes of humiliation, and that humiliating encounters serve a similar purpose in both cases. In Emerson as in Kant, knowledge of the good is an *a priori* possession, but this knowledge has to be "switched on" or activated within experience. For both, humiliation causes what Kant calls a "subreption," a kind of productive fallacy, in which the universal becomes recognizable in some observable, finite instance.[30] Kant is not willing to claim that the encounter with another, more moral person is a necessary condition for our moral maturation, since he holds that we are morally responsible regardless of experience. (As Kant stresses in the very first paragraph of the main text of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "even though all our cognition starts with experience, that does not mean that all of it arises from experience."[31]) However, as we have seen, the *form* of the *Critique*—its example-heavy method—may *imply* that such an encounter is necessary.

[30]Kant uses the technical term “subreption” in his discussion of the mathematical sublime (in the *Critique of Judgment*, 114).

[31] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar (Cambridge: Hackett, 1996), 44.

In his own writings, Emerson is more willing to treat the encounter with a moral superior as a prerequisite for the awakening of moral desire, as he does in this 1841 journal entry:

> We care for individuals, not for the waste universality. It is the same ocean everywhere but who would ever value any given number of miles in the middle of the Atlantic bounded only by lines of latitude & longitude? It is only where it is confined & pent by granite rocks or washes some shore which men have made a garden that it becomes an object of interest & the point of greatest interest is precisely that where the sea & land meet.

People cannot discover a version of the good life in the "waste universality" of abstract reasoning, a process of deduction as monotonous as sea travel. Reason's concepts, like the lines of longitude and latitude, are useful as guidelines, but they can only be imagined, not felt. According to Emerson, when we meet someone we respect, it is like sighting land.[32] Like the sea, moral power only becomes apprehensible when it is "confined & pent" up in individuals, like the condensed figures who populate dreams. In the journal entry, the interesting shore at first contains the universal ocean, within its (aestheticized) limits. Later, the "sea & land," like the waves and the breezes in "The Sphinx," are said to "meet," at a shoreline which, according to the logic of Emerson's tropes, corresponds to the cared-for individual, the person whose way of life awes and humbles.

In "New England Reformers," which closes Emerson's second series of *Essays*, some of the political implications of this highly individualized morality come into view. This essay examines the growth of reform movements in early nineteenth-century New England, the "thousandfold relief societies," religious sects, study groups, and utopian communities

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[32] Kant also used marine imagery, especially in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where an island represents the restricted "territory of pure understanding" within the ocean of human illusion. See Part II, Chapter III: "Transcendental Doctrine of the Power of Judgment."

which emerged in the years before the Civil War. Emerson generally approves of these efforts, "no matter how violent and surprising," because they encourage the "scrutiny" of established institutions. Yet he is exceedingly anxious about what we would now call reification, or the fetishization of moral convictions. "Each Cause," he writes,

> becomes speedily a little shop, where the article, let it have been at first never so subtle and ethereal, is now made up into portable and convenient cakes, and retailed in small quantitates to suit purchasers.[33]

This is a Kantian concern: how can we isolate the moral cause from self-interested "retail?" On one level, the problem is historical: the reformers must operate within conditions of scarcity, competing for resources (attention and money). Moreover, like actual shop owners, they derive a kind of profit from their wares: social capital, the aura of a philanthropic affiliation. What Emerson apprehends in the reform movements is the emergence of an activist culture—still with us—which takes its model from the market, because it must. Only an organization willing to package (and thus betray) its principles can make any headway under a capitalist system. The result is a Babel of special-interest groups, squaring off in administered pseudo-debate, turning each cause into a salable "article."

While Emerson explicitly connects this process of fetishization to the American "system of trade," however, he also writes that it is "a pedantry" to ascribe social evils to any particular factor, including the institution of private property. So the "retail" problem is also, in another sense, structural or metaphysical. Reformers are inevitably "partial," because their conception of virtue is "piecemeal." In their enthusiasm, they become "tediously good in some particular, but negligent or narrow in the rest." To advocate a

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[33]Emerson, "The Transcendentalist," *EL*, 203.

particular political agenda is to neglect everything else, and for Emerson this partiality is close to futility. “Do not be so vain of your one objection,” he cautions; “All our things are right or wrong together.”[34] Because it is always possible to "draw a wider circle," every specific demand begins to look contingent and deficient. Why settle for women's suffrage, when we await the true feminism, the true humanism, the true universalism? Even if we were to invent a new, better system, we would have to begin from “the actual order of things,”[35] the remnants of which could not be eradicated. At certain moments in "New England Reformers," it appears that the end result of the Emersonian drive towards “circumference” is the negation of all that exists, including every concrete political program. Reform must be upheld as a regulatory ideal, since the pressure of reality prevents us from even conceptualizing, much less realizing, the new.

As the essay progresses, Emerson's appraisal of the reformers, initially bemused, grows increasingly pessimistic, until he has no choice but to introduce a transformative "point of greatest interest." "I cannot afford to be irritable and captious," he writes. "In another way the right will be vindicated:"

> In the midst of abuses, in the heart of cities, in the aisles of false churches, alike in one place and in another,—wherever, namely, a just and heroic soul finds itself, there it will do what is next at hand, and by the new quality of character it shall put forth, it shall abrogate that old condition, law or school in which it stands, before the law of its own mind... It only needs that a just man should walk in our streets to make it appear how pitiful and artificial a contrivance is our legislation.[36]

[34]Emerson, “New England Reformers,” *EL*, 596.
[35]Emerson, “The Conservative,” *EL*, 178.
[36]Emerson, “New England Reformers," EL, 597.

Some version of this messianic fantasy can be found in many of Emerson's essays. While the reformers drown each other out with arguments, the "just and heroic soul" silently brings "the new quality of character"—not just his own particular quality, but qualitative difference as such. In comparison with the respectable soul, everything familiar reveals itself to be inessential and exchangeable. The existing body of law is abrogated (repealed or annulled), not only for the newcomer, but for the spectators as well. The particular maxims which guide the just soul—the "law of its own mind"—are not specified here. Rather, Emerson stresses the soul's distance from convention. The sight of someone or something autonomous reveals that the rules we have consented to live by are not necessary or even expedient, but a "contrivance," an awkward technology, "artificial" as opposed to natural, or artful. Emerson's respectable soul thus humiliates entire societies.

Moral transformation, Emerson suggests, operates by an involuntary mechanism which the voluble reformers refuse to understand. We are persuaded not by arguments but by persons whose moral force presents itself to us indisputably. In "New England Reformers," as in Kant's second Critique, this encounter is not necessarily pleasant, since it strikes down any self-conceit we have managed to build up. Yet a person whose ambition is pure will not avoid "those men who make his fine gold dim." Instead, he will seek them out; he will "woo and embrace this his humiliation and mortification:"

> until he shall know why his eye sinks, his voice is husky, and his brilliant talents are paralyzed in this presence. He is sure that the soul which gives the lie to all things will tell none. His constitution will not mislead him. If it cannot carry itself as it ought, high and unmatchable in the presence of any man; if the secret oracles whose whisper makes the sweetness and dignity of his life do here withdraw and accompany him no longer,—it is time to undervalue what he has valued, to dispossess himself of what he has acquired, and

> with Caesar to take in his hand the army, the empire, and Cleopatra, and say, 'All these will I relinquish, if you will show me the fountains of the Nile.'[37]

The story about Caesar comes from Lucan's *Pharsalia*.[38] The important point is that Caesar believes that the Nile indeed has a source, even if it has remained hidden from most people. And he is willing to relinquish everything in the hope that someone could show him to the source. Likewise, Emerson's speechless, downcast "he," deprived of dignity, believes that his humiliation must have an external cause. Something has paralyzed and mortified his body, some (possibly immaterial) force, emanating from another human. And like Caesar, Emerson's moral purist turns the source into his fetish. That is what it means for one's ambition to be pure: what pure ambition desires is purification via humiliation. The arrival of a moral superior entails a reevaluation, which disburdens Emerson's purist of all his incidental acquisitions, including his acquired "bad" shame," while enthralling him to a power lodged, at least initially, in the body of a charismatic authority.

Can this kind of hero-worship really be emancipatory? Are Emerson's archaisms (dukes, princesses, warlords, and "primitives") and his lust for humiliation symptomatic of his nostalgia for a crumbling patriarchal order? Does his revaluation of values (which boosts power and downgrades pity) lead in a totalitarian direction? As with Nietzsche, we are constantly confronted with these troubling questions, when we consider Emerson's complicated moral arguments. With regard to the problem of hierarchies, and the question

[37] "New England Reformers," EL, 604.

[38]I was able to track down the reference thanks to Edward Waldo Emerson's footnotes in a centenary edition of his father's writings: *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Volume 12, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Houghlin Mifflin, 1904), 420. Caesar's speech, addressed to the priest Achoreus, can be found in Book X of *Pharsalia*, around line 200. Lucan, *The Pharsalia*, tr. Edward Ridley (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905), 313.

of who gets to be on top, we might note that Emerson's spiritual "dukes" are not always rich, or male. In "Man the Reformer," he goes out of his way to argue that unlikely persons are sometimes worthy of respect:

> Is it not the highest duty that man should be honored in us? I ought not to allow any man, because he has broad lands, to feel that he is rich in my presence. I ought to make him feel that I can do without his riches, that I cannot be bought,—neither by comfort, neither by pride,—and though I be utterly penniless, and receiving bread from him, that he is the poor man beside me. And if, at the same time, a woman or a child discovers a sentiment of piety, or a juster way of thinking than mine, I ought to confess it by my respect and obedience, though it go to alter my whole way of life.[39]

The remarkable similarity between Emerson's hypothetical and Kant's reply to Fontenelle is probably unintentional. In both cases, we see the socially disruptive effects of respect, which attaches to persons without regard for their status. In Emerson's version of the scenario, the contrasts are even more dramatic. The rich man is a landowner, and the "I" is not only penniless, but dependent on the rich man for bread (or the means to purchase it). Even in this condition of material dependency, however, "I" ought not to honor the rich man, if he is dishonorable. On the other hand, in the presence of someone who has made a moral discovery, I am obliged to respect and obey—even if this moral person is "a woman or child." Theoretically, there is nothing in Kant's *Critique* that precludes any class of persons from commanding respect; his universalism is absolute. On the other hand, Emerson's formulation explicitly extends the honorable community to include women and children (the pious and just ones).

There are also suggestions, in Emerson's essays, that the humiliating influence, whatever its source, is short-lived. As the sociologist Max Weber once observed,

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[39] Emerson, "Man the Reformer," EL, 146.

charismatic authority is inherently opposed both to bureaucratic rationality and to patriarchal stability.[40] A man who commands respect through the force of his personality is not a founder; he is a disrupter. And his authority is precarious, since it does not rely on the aura of a tradition. Another "just soul" can always arrive, and is always expected. In the end, it may be most fruitful to understand Emerson's humiliating soul not as a positive image of an ideal, but as the determinate negation of a society based on the logic of exchange. Because exchange abstracts and alienates, the image of change has to be embodied. The revolution has to be concrete, and may affect us most strongly when it is personified.

Dreams

In Emerson's famous essay "The Poet," the moment of humiliation is nowhere specifically emphasized, yet it is continually present, as a kind of motive or drive. The "I" of "The Poet" knows himself and his peers to be impaired by "some obstruction, some excess of phlegm," which prevents them all from seeing clearly, and from "reporting" on their own subjective experience. It is as if a series of previous encounters with poets have humiliated the "I" so thoroughly that he is now empty of all self-conceit. In his totally humiliated condition, Emerson can encounter the respectable poet joyfully, with a sense of liberation, while letting go of old, wearied idolatries:

> I remember, when I was young, how much I was moved one morning by tidings that genius had appeared in a youth who sat near me at table... How gladly we listened! how credulous! Society seemed to be compromised. We sat in the aurora of a sunrise which was to put out all the stars. Boston seemed to be at twice the distance it had the night before, or was much

[40]Max Weber, "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. Hans Girth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford, 1946), 245-252.

> farther than that. Rome,—what was Rome? Plutarch and Shakespeare were in the yellow leaf, and Homer no more should be heard of.[41]

Here it is not the "we" but Shakespeare who is humiliated, along with Plutarch and Homer. The young genius—probably William Ellery Channing—has an effect like that of the "just man" in "New England Reformers:" he re-centers the world on himself, debasing the cities formerly revered. And here too, this deflected humiliation ends up elevating "us." If this kind of auroral re-valuation is possible, then we no longer have to regard our own peripheral status as an inalterable given.

Of course, there is an irony in the passage above: Emerson is quoting Shakespeare in order to pronounce him passé (the "yellow leaf" figure comes from Sonnet 73). Intriguingly, when Emerson comes around to writing a lecture titled "The Poet" as part of his series *Representative Men*, he devotes the entire piece to an assessment of Shakespeare which is similarly irreverent, and similarly conflicted. *Representative Men* includes an introductory lecture on "The Uses of Great Men," along with several portraits of esteemed persons. The book's Table of Contents refuses to decide whether they are more important as named individuals, or as types:

> Plato; or, the Philosopher
> Swedenborg; or, the Mystic
> Montaigne; or, the Skeptic
> Shakspeare; or, the Poet
> Napoleon; or, the Man of the World
> Goethe; or, the Writer

Emerson uses the common nineteenth-century spelling "Shakspeare," but I will modernize the name. The duplication of authorial figures in the table of contents (Goethe could easily

[41] Emerson, "The Poet," EL, 451.

have been "the Poet") turns out to be significant, since Shakespeare, for all of his skill and insight, is presented as a deficient exemplar, less useful to the reader than might be expected. Whereas Goethe is said to "teach courage," among other things, Shakespeare is, in Emerson's view, all "talent and mental power," an entertainer rather than educator. In the early series of essays, "The Poet" is the most comprehensive genius. In *Representative Men*, "The Poet" is a relatively restricted category, compared to the more universal "Writer."[42]

Emerson's Shakespeare essay begins with some reflections on the unoriginality of genius. In Emerson's view, Shakespeare benefited from the lack of prestige which attached to Renaissance theater. He catered to mixed audiences in a playful atmosphere, where no one worried about copyright. Every playwright was "heir and dispenser of all the hundred tales of the world," drawing on and refashioning a common stock of epic poetry, classical essays, historical chronicles, and continental drama. Shakespeare himself was regarded as "a popular player,—nobody suspected he was the poet of the human race." This environment gave Shakespeare the freedom to experiment, and to wear his talent lightly. Emerson's argument here cuts both ways: Shakespeare was eminently the product of his age, but he was also eminently untimely. Because no one took theater seriously, they could not recognize the seriousness of Shakespeare's works, at the time they were first staged. It was not until the emergence of the German Romantics that it became possible to "write the history of Shakespeare"—to read him properly. With a suddenness, *Hamlet* began to speak to the "speculative genius" of the nineteenth century, "a sort of living Hamlet;" and literature was finally "Shakspearized." We could paraphrase Emerson's point by saying that

[42] Emerson, "Shakespeare; or, the Poet," EL, 710-26.

the sonnets and dramas finally attained to recognizability, like one of Walter Benjamin's "dialectical images."[43]

This historicizing view of Shakespeare may seem to imply that artistic merit is in fact time-bound; but that is not at all Emerson's point. What the nineteenth century discovers in Shakespeare is poetry, and poetry is for Emerson a kind of metaphysical form, sourceless and durable:

> It is the essence of poetry to spring, like the rainbow daughter of Wonder, from the invisible, to abolish the past, and refuse all history.[44]

The rainbow daughter is not a rhapsodic invention, but a subtle reference to the *Theaetetus* dialogue (recall that Plato is also one of Emerson's "representative men"). When the youth Theaetetus admits that Socrates' puzzles "set me wondering," Socrates responds with a reference to Thaumus, the god of wonder, whose daughter was Iris, the rainbow:

> This sense of wonder is the mark of the philosopher. Philosophy indeed has no other origin, and he was a good genealogist who made Iris the daughter of Thaumus.

Socrates' remark is ambiguous, but we can say that Iris and philosophy are either siblings, both fathered by Wonder, or else Iris is a figure for philosophy. Either way, Emerson' simile would seem to equate poetry with philosophy (an equation which refutes some of Plato's dialogues). To say that poetry is "like the rainbow daughter of Wonder" is to say that poetry is like philosophy which, in the *Theaetetus*, elevates the contemplative soul above worldly concerns, by attuning it to "invisible things."[45] This means that we can provide an account of poetry's necessary conditions, and of the circumstances in which it has historically

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[43] See Jennings and Eiland, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, 389.
[44] Emerson, "Shakespeare," EL, 719.
[45] 155 c-d. Plato, "Theatetus," trans. F.M. Cornford, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Bollingen Series, 1989), 860.

arisen. But ultimately, the origin of poetry is in some sense wonderful, unaccountable, and thus removed from the causal chain of natural and human history.

For Emerson, Shakespeare's poetry is especially wonderful, in this particular sense, because the author himself was so unremarkable. The "scraps of information" Shakespeare's biographers have uncovered "shed no light" on his "infinite invention." On a personal level, he was no different from other actors and stage managers. Emerson reiterates this contradiction several times: although nothing about Shakespeare's *life* inspires respect, his body of work is implausibly awesome:

> He is inconceivably wise; the others, conceivably. A good reader can, in a sort, nestle into Plato's brain, and think from thence; but not into Shakspeare's We are still out of doors... He was the farthest reach of subtelty compatible with an individual self... and only just within the possibility of authorship... Shakspeare has no peculiarity, no importunate topic; but all is duly given; no veins, no curiosities: no cow-painter, no bird-fancier, no mannerist is he: he has no discoverable egotism... He is strong, as nature is strong, who lifts the land into mountain slopes without effort, and by the same rule as she floats a bubble in the air, and likes as well to do one as the other.[46]

In Emerson's view, the essence of Shakespeare is his range. While the just man of "New England Reformers" impresses us instantly with his moral autonomy, and while Shakespeare's refinement is evident in every individual line, it is the cumulative totality of his corpus, "a merit so incessant," which defies comprehension, like the size of the universe. Even Plato, the theorist of universal forms, looks comparatively human. One can "nestle into Plato's brain," thinking from his perspective and anticipating his thoughts. He has idiosyncrasies and lapses. Shakespeare's ability to write convincingly about any topic in any voice means that we can never find the author himself. Every element is perfectly in balance, so that he never gives himself away.

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[46] Emerson, "Shakespeare; or, the Poet," EL, 722.

In what may be the essay's most revealing moment, Emerson writes that this idealized Shakespeare "adds a new problem to metaphysics." By this, he at first seems to mean that Shakespeare's artistic achievement should not have been humanly possible. The phenomenon "Shakespeare" thus transgresses the metaphysical boundary between the human and the divine. We have seen how Emerson is usually keen to take advantage of this kind of subreption. Why then does he call Shakespeare a "problem?" One source of difficulty may be Shakespeare's inimitability. While other respect-worthy persons ultimately energize the self, Emerson seems to have found the experience of reading Shakespeare to be somewhat stifling, even oppressive. When he says that Shakespeare "has no discoverable egotism," there are overtones of frustration, as if Emerson has tried and failed, more than once, to discover Shakespeare's ego—to "naturalize" the man, and by extension his work. "No recipe can be given for the making of a Shakspeare," he announces, "but the possibility of the translation of things into song is demonstrated." Shakespeare shows us what can be done, but not how to do it.

This practical difficulty, however, may tell us less about Shakespeare than it does about our own limitations. As Emerson's essay draws to a close, a more essential and urgent metaphysical problem emerges: while Shakespeare is certainly respectable, in Emerson's estimate, he is also amoral. Emerson detects an unsettling superficiality in Shakespeare's productions:

> Shakspeare employed them as colors to compose his picture. He rested in their beauty; and never took the step... to explore the virtue which resides in these symbols... He converted the elements which waited on his command, into entertainments. He was master of the revels to mankind... As long as the question is of talent and mental power, the world of men has not his

> equal to show. But when the question is to life... how does he profit me? What does it signify? Is it but a Twelfth Night, or Midsummer-Night's Dream, or a Winter's Evening Tale ...?[47]

It is not just that, as "master of the revels," Shakespeare cared more about entertainment than edification. Rather, there is something *in* Shakespeare's merit, in the ease with which he wrote and his psychological penetration, which, counterintuitively, ends up draining the world of significance. Latent in Emerson's sentence is a kind of generic critique: Shakespeare was not a true poet, but only an allegorist. We will revisit the notion of allegory in the next chapter; here, it will be enough to say that in allegorical art forms, the link between object and meaning is severed. In Emerson's view, Shakespeare's Baroque-era plays paint colorful, beautiful pictures, but they are unreal, like night-time reveries or dreams (hence the list of nocturnal titles, and the insertion of "Evening" into "A Winter's Tale"). Yes, some of Shakespeare's characters are virtuous, but the author " loves virtue, not for its obligation, but for its grace." In other words, Shakespeare aestheticizes morality itself; the only obligation he feels is the aesthetic one to be graceful, to create something enchanting.

The bourgeois metaphor of "profit," in the passage above, is telling. Here, we can see clearly the transactional nature of humiliation, when it is successfully carried through. In Emerson's view, a literary genius should impoverish us initially, by striking down our self-conceit. But we will be compensated with wisdom, and a new self-respect. In Shakespeare's case, the sums do not work out in our favor. We acknowledge his talent, and our own

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[47] Ibid., 725. The unnamed foil here is undoubtedly Milton, the poet with the greatest "power to inspire." In an essay on Milton, Emerson makes this contrast more explicit: While "Shakspeare is a voice merely... Milton stands erect, commanding, still visible as a man among men, and reads the law of the moral sentiment to the new-born race." Emerson, "Milton," in *Emerson's Literary Criticism* (University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 183.

comparative lowliness, without learning anything about life. The phenomenon "Shakespeare" thus points to a certain intrinsic pettiness—and an underlying contradiction—in the idea of humiliation, whether Kantian or Emersonian. Humiliation should cancel all interest, leading us to act morally for the sake of morality itself. But even the most civilized or cultivated person, the person who most wishes to be moral, can be accused of an unsavory fetishism, a greed for moral capital. In Emerson's view, poetry which does not elevate the reader is not truly moral. In the next chapter, we will consider whether it is precisely here, in the allegorist's refusal to edify, that modern art best fulfills its responsibilities.

Chapter 2

The disdainful soul:

Dickinson's tropic

I think that's when I begin to be dead, the best

-Patricia Lockwood

In *Paradise Lost*, feelings lead upwards or downwards. Love between married human beings, for example, is called "the scale / By which to Heav'nly love thou may'st ascend;" love "Leads up to Heav'n, is both the way and guide."[1] Disdain, in contrast, leads downward; those who refuse to bow humbly to God are cast out of heaven. Disdain is Satan's most characteristic feeling: it motivates his rebellion, and later keeps him from repenting. It is a feeling closely associated with pride, ambition, envy, and "sense of injured merit," the resentment of the less powerful. While love elevates and ennobles, disdain can be thought of as "the way and guide" into Hell.

[1] These assertions about love are made by Raphael, in an instructional speech to Adam from Book VIII. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, eds. William Kerrigan, et. al. (New York: The Modern Library, 2007), 279.

In the late, difficult poem (1448, c. 1877), Emily Dickinson disputes Milton's canonical judgment on disdain. Read in connection with *Paradise Lost*, her argument is unexpected, and potentially blasphemous:

> With Pinions of Disdain
> The soul can farther fly
> Than any feather specified
> in — Ornithology —
> It wafts this sordid Flesh
> Beyond its dull — control
> And during its electric gale+ — +spell +stay +might +act +span
> The Body is — a soul —
> instructing by the same —
> How little work it be —
> To put off filaments like this
> for immortality —[2]

Here disdain leads upwards, without the threat of a fall. Like Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, Dickinson's poem takes a metaphysical interest in an affective experience. She studies disdain in order to make inferences about an intelligible object—in this case, immortality. Through a series of subtle analogies, the poem argues that disdain, rather than enlarging or inflaming the ego, should help the self to transcend its pathological limitedness. When we feel disdain towards a particular object, we feel elevated above it; disdain gives us angelic wings. Like ether looking down at earth, the disdainful self feels relatively dematerialized, all soul and no body. Disdain thus gives us a premonition of dying and going to heaven. It teaches us that leaving our bodies will feel like removing our clothes ("filaments") at the end of a long day—one final task, "a little work," which leaves us

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[2] As noted in the introduction, when citing Dickinson's poems, I will use Franklin's numbering and dating. When pertinent, I have also included the marginal alternates from Cristanne Miller's edition. Franklin, *Poems of Emily Dickinson,* 547; Miller, *Emily Dickinson's Poems*, 606.

innocently naked. Disdain "instructs" us about heaven, and it also contains a latent moral imperative: we ought always to disdain the material world, reorienting ourselves towards the infinite.

"With Pinions of Disdain" makes an argument about the significance of disdain. But it is remarkably nonspecific about the experience itself: we do not learn what is being disdained, or by whom, or in what sense. The word "disdain" can refer to a spectrum of feelings, from impassivity to violent contempt, and the poem does not exclude any of these usages. On the one hand, disdain is said to be unfleshly, implying indifference; on the other, disdain delivers an "electric" thrill, which might entail a Satanic arousal. This chapter will explore the range of meanings Dickinson assigned to "disdain," which I take to be a central concern of her poetry. I explore the origins of this term in the early-modern "poetry of courtly love," where disdain both excites and obstructs desire. I find that in Dickinson's poetry, the conventional relationship between a disdained lover and a disdainful beloved is largely internalized. In place of the high-born "Lady" character, Dickinson often substitutes a "Soul," which tyrannizes over the rest of the self. This internalization means that her courtly love poems are more than avowals of feeling, or experiments in rhetoric; their subject, instead, is the human "instinct" for valuation. Dickinson's Soul wishes to discover an ideal object, a "One" worth of total devotion"—while disdaining "All else." Her poems view this psychological impulse from a detached perspective, exposing disdain as a pathology of the self.

Here, however, an ironic reversal takes place. For "disdain" is also Dickinson's name for precisely this detached, enlightened outlook. My chapter looks closely at what I take to

be a world-chronicle in miniature, "From Cocoon forth a Butterfly," in which disdain is presented as the defining activity of the human subject. In this historically significant work, disdain emerges as a socially-mediated form of enlightenment, which involves both a loss of sensual immediacy and a gain in intellectual perspective. This process is recapitulated at multiple levels: in the same way that the woman disdains her girlhood self, the leisured classes disdain laborers, and the speaking human collective disdains its natural context. Disdain is at once a natural-historical process, and an event or rupture, which marks the origin of unnaturalness. In "From Cocoon forth a Butterfly," disdain is associated with poetry, and specifically with the "tropic," Dickinson's word for the allegorical. Tropic poetry is explicitly shown to have a melancholy, demystifying effect on the world, and to exclude the dimension of redemption. The allegorical poet, Dickinson suggests, may seem to be exceptionally disdainful, but that is only because she acknowledges the deadening effect of all signification.

The poetry of courtly disdain

Dickinson's interest in disdain derives from her familiarity with the so-called "poetry of courtly love." This phrase denotes not a genre, exactly, but a sentimental motif, which can be found in ballads, romances, dramas, and, especially after Petrarch, in sonnets. Usually, a male lover of humble station professes his love to a noble Lady, who rejects his advances. The speaker's love for the Lady is a dignifying, as opposed to a merely lustful,

passion, but her superiority and indifference make him feel worthless.[3] While a rival may or may not be present, the poetry of courtly love is always, in a certain sense, competitive. The game is to demonstrate one's poetic ingenuity by abasing oneself and praising, in hyperbolic terms, the Lady's supremacy. "No European poetry has been more profoundly *rhetorical*," argues one critic, and "no rhetoric has been more productive of high-flown fervour."[4]

Although there are precedents in antiquity (most notably, Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*), the discourse of courtly love is closely tied to the development of Christian civilization, especially from the 12th century onward. Scholars disagree as to whether this means that courtly love was in fact originally Christian.[5] Some claim to have discovered early Christian precedents for this courtly culture, including the Cisterian cult of the Virgin. Like a Christian mystic, the courtly lover enters a trance-like state at the sight of his beloved. He casts aside all worldly concerns, in order to prove his moral worth. Moreover, the agony he feels when the Lady rebuffs him bears some resemblance to the sufferings of the martyrs. One can generally read these poems as Christian allegories, without too much of an interpretive strain.[6] On the other hand, courtly love poetry is in some ways at odds with

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[3] "Courtly love," in Alex Preminger and T.V.F Brogan, eds., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 245-46.
[4] Charles Albert Cingria, *Measures* No. 2 (Paris, 1937), quoted in Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, tr. Montgomery Belgion (Princeton, 1983), 75.
[5] In his influential study of courtly love, originally published in 1936, C.S. Lewis argued that the tradition arose from a misunderstanding of Ovid's satirical intent. See C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Cambridge, 2013).
[6] Roger Boase, *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love: A Critical Study of European Scholarship* (Manchester University Press, 1977), 83-85.

early Church representations of women. As Karl Vossler, a follower of Benedetto Croce, argued in a 1929 study of medieval culture:

> Woman, whose mouth the medieval Church had closed, became the aristocratic lady who set her claims against those of the Church. The service of women took its place beside religious worship; woman's code of morals rivalled that of the Church.

According to Vossler, the exaltation of the Lady subtly undermines Church authority. The emergence of courtly love thus signals the growing power of women and of the aristocracy at the expense of the Church, during the later Middle Ages.[7]

Whatever the Lady represents, the word most closely associated with her, and with her attitude towards the courtly lover, is "disdain." To disdain is the Lady's favorite activity, and whatever else she does, she does it with "high disdain." In Latin, the verb form, "dedignare," is an antonym for "dignare," "to think or treat as worthy" (the original meaning of "deign"). From there it becomes what the OED calls a "common Romantic verb:" in Italian "disdegnare" or "sdegnare;" in Provençal "*desdegnar;" in* Old French "*desdeignier",* etc*.* "Disdain" appears occasionally in the troubadour ballads and epic poems of the early Renaissance. Significantly for English poetry, scenes of disdain recur throughout Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1609). For Spenser, disdain is an idiotic form of pride, which invariably leads to unnecessary conflict. *The Faerie Queene* also features an allegorical character named Disdayne, a menacing giant "more fit amongst blacke fiendes, then men to haue his place."[8]

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[7] Ibid., 31-32.

[8] Book II, Canto VII, stanza 41. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1987), 290.

Beginning in the 16th century, "disdain" becomes especially common in lyric poetry. Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) uses "disdain" dozens of times in his lover's complaints. Here, for example, are the closing lines to "That Unkindness Hath Slain His Poor True Heart:"

> For I by high disdain
> Am made without redress;
> And unkindness, alas! hath slain
> My poor true heart, all comfortless.[9]

And here is a stanza from "The Lover Renounces His Cruel Love Forever:"

> I have wailed thus, weeping in nightly pain,
> In sobs, and sighs, alas! and all in vain,
> In inward plaint, and hearts woful torment.
> And yet, alas! lo! cruelty and disdain
> Have set at nought a faithful true intent,
> And price hath privilege truth to prevent.[10]

Clearly, the word "disdain" has certain formal advantages, for an English-language poet. As an iamb with many rhyme words, it works well at the end of a line. Interestingly, the beloved Lady does not appear in these passages from Wyatt. Instead, the lover contends with a set of free-floating abstract nouns: disdain, unkindness, cruelty, and "price"—presumably a reference to the Lady's high status. The tendency of these words to act as agents, taking on a life of their own, may point to desire, on the part of the lover, to exculpate the Lady. He experiences rejection as cruel violence, but he also reveres the Lady for rejecting him; her aloofness is a sign of her chastity.

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[9] The dating of Wyatt's poems is disputed. *The Poetical Works of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, ed. Nicholas Harris Nicolas (London: William Pickering, 1831), 88-89.
[10] Ibid., 72.

In other poems by Wyatt and his contemporaries, the lover is more willing to censure the Lady, whom he accuse of choosing to wield her disdain as a weapon. For example, in Wyatt's "The Lover's Lute Cannot Be Blamed" the lover accuses the Lady of using her disdain to break the strings of his instrument.[11] "Harpalus' Complaint" (1557), attributed to Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, is slightly atypical for a courtly love poem, insofar as the beloved is a pastoral maid, not a high-born Lady. But this aberration actually brings out the automatic, customary nature of Harpalus's protests, when he asks the reader to inscribe the following on his tombstone:

> "Here lieth unhappy Harpalus
> By cruell love now slaine;
> Whom Phylida unjustly thus
> Hath murdered with disdaine."[12]

Within the context of the poem, Harpalus's proposed epitaph is laughably unconvincing. To begin with, Harpalus is not actually dead, only threatening to die. Moreover, Phylida does not act "unjustly," out of malice; she merely prefers another man, Corin (who seems to disdain *her*). To accuse Phylida of murder-by-"disdaine" is to apply a hyperbolic, bellicose vocabulary to a relatively low-stakes situation. Love—the god or the feeling—may indeed be the "cruell" force behind the poem's unhappy triangle. But if Harpalus dies, one feels that it will be his own fault. Perhaps his mistake is to identify too closely with the archetype of the courtly lover, so that he cannot understand Phylida's indifference to him as anything

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[11] Ibid., 98-99.

[12] Several versions of the poem exist. I have cited the text from *English Pastorals*, ed. Edmund Kerchever Chambers (London: Blackie & Son, 1895), 6-10.

less than death-dealing disdain. Something within him seems to relish being tormented by Phylida. His dissatisfaction is fatal but also, on some level, enjoyable.[13]

In "My Soul — accused me" (793, c. 1863), Dickinson demonstrates her command of courtly love rhetoric, in all its tortured ambivalence. Here the female beloved, whom Dickinson calls "My Soul," is endowed with the same omnipotence as the traditional Lady:

> My Soul — accused me — And I quailed —
> As Tongue of Diamond had reviled
> All else+ accused me — and I smiled —   +the World
> My Soul — that Morning — was My friend —
>
> Her favor — is the best Disdain
> Toward Artifice of Time — or Men —
> But Her Disdain — 'twere lighter bear
> A finger of Enamelled Fire —[14]

The poem can certainly be read as an erotic interpersonal drama. The speaker is a courtly lover, whose gender is not specified, though it will be convenient to say "he." "My Soul" can be heard as an epithet for his beloved, along the lines of "My Love" or "My Heart." The lover uses similes to "reinterpret" her resistance as a form of intimate attention. Her accusations are compared to a "Tongue of Diamond," licking off his skin. Her disdain for him, similarly, feels "lighter"—more intense—than "Eamelled Fire," a beautiful impossibility (which

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[13]In his influential psychoanalytic reading of courtly-love poetry, Jacques Lacan interprets the Lady's inaccessibility, and the lover's powerlessness before her, as figures for the human relation to the Real—not reality, but a constitutive antagonism which cannot be imagined or symbolized. Adopting the Lacanian jargon, we could define the Real as that which humanity seeks to understand, but which disdains to appear or represent itself. See Jacques Lacan, "Courtly Love as Anamorphis," in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, tr. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), 139-54; and Slavoj Zizek, "Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing," in *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (Verso, 2005), 89-112.
[14] Franklin, *Poems of Emily Dickinson,* 353; Miller, *Emily Dickinson's Poems,* 388.

Dickinson probably borrowed from Plutarch, via Emerson[15]). Clearly, these similes combine pleasure and pain. Like Harpalus, the lover takes an excessive pleasure in his own debasement; he may love the Soul *because* she disdains him.

"My Soul —accused me" works well enough as a courtly-love poem. However, its outer horizon is not erotic or even psychological, but philosophical: embedded in these lines, we find a critique of morality, and indeed of all metaphysics. "If "My Soul" is not a person, but an internal object or agency, then this phrase would seem to refer to a part of the self to which the speaking ego is subjected, and which renders judgment. "My Soul" can thus be read as a figure for the conscience, the moral will, or the superego, whose reign is absolute and tyrannical. "Disdain" here designates an internal division, between the speaking self and the Soul. Dickinson's flamboyant courtly-love rhetoric treats that division comically. What is being satirized here is not male infatuation, but moral perfectionism, the idea of consulting one's conscience. Anticipating Nietzsche and Freud, Dickinson's poem presents the desire to be good, to act in accordance with the dictates of the Soul, as a pathological project, akin to sexual masochism.

More broadly, the poem offers a "genealogy of metaphysics," which emerges thanks to its chiastic structure. In the middle four lines of "My Soul — accused me," the speaker and the beloved are "friends," while the larger world is unfriendly:

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[15] From Emerson's essay "Love:" "For the figures, the motions, the words of the beloved object are not like other images written in water, but, as Plutarch said, 'enamelled in fire'". EL, 330.

All else+ accused me — and I smiled — +the World
My Soul — that Morning — was My friend —

Her favor — is the best Disdain
Toward Artifice of Time — or Men —

Like the mocked Christ, the speaker is indifferent to the world's contempt for him, because he abides by a heavenly standard. But these lines should raise our suspicions. That My Soul's favor is "the best Disdain" suggests that the speaker has been comparing multiple varieties. His ego finds no support in the world, which means that he has a (pathological) interest in disdaining "All else" as temporary contingency. In other words, My Soul is instrumentalized, within the speaker's psyche. His metaphysical belief in a Soul thus serves a social purpose: it is exposed, within the poem, as a means to an end.

The triangulated configuration of "My soul — accused me"—wherein the speaker disdains the world in favor of a beloved who may disdain him—is probably modeled after Shakespeare's Sonnet 112. Although the word "disdain" is missing from Shakespeare's sonnet, the poem is very much concerned with what happens when the lover himself becomes disdainful:

Your love and pity doth th' impression fill
Which vulgar scandal stamped upon my brow;
For what care I who calls me well or ill,
So you o'er-green my bad, my good allow?
You are my all the world, and I must strive
To know my shames and praises from your tongue;
None else to me, nor I to none alive,
That my steeled sense or changes right or wrong.

> In so profound abysm I throw all care
> Of others' voices, that my adder's sense
> To critic and to flatt'rer stoppèd are.
> Mark how with my neglect I do dispense;--
> You are so strongly in my purpose bred,
> That all the world besides methinks are dead.[16]

Like Dickinson, Shakespeare reveals the beloved to be an instrument of the will. "You" have been bred to a purpose, made to order. The beloved is not some absolute which the lyric "I" discovers, but the result of a self-interested, productive operation. Whether the beloved represents a person, an ideal, or a moral principle, she or he is reduced, in both of these poems, to a fetishistic projection of the ego. And the costs of this idolization—and the concomitant neglect of "all the world"—may be greater than the rewards. Both Dickinson's and Shakespeare's speakers make themselves ridiculous. Shakespeare's neglectful Lover compares himself to the proverbial adder whose tail is curved over its body, to plug up its ear.[17] His sense is not only "steeled" but stolen: love has rendered him senseless, insensate. Likewise, Dickinson's disdainful speaker walks around with a stupid smile on his face, when the entire world is accusing him. He looks down on a world which looks down on him, as an undignified fool.

Dickinson's epithet "My Soul" adduces an analogy between this kind of desensitizing, world-neglecting love and what we might call the stupidity of metaphysics. The speaker of "My Soul — accused me" is like the beautiful soul who, dissatisfied with the pains and insults of the temporal world, posits a compensatory beyond. He clings to his bloodless ideal, while slandering—disdaining—life in its multiplicity as mere "Artifice."

[16] *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Stephen Booth (New Haven: Yale University, 1977), 96.
[17] Ibid., 364.

"My Soul — accused me" finds a nihilistic impulse at the heart of metaphysics, a depreciation of "All Else," all sensible existence. As we will see, for Dickinson, this still-affirmative Soul-worship lapses all too easily into a total disdain, or total nihilism, the eclipse of every value and every meaning.

Monomania

This whole problematic, of a privileged singular instance which impoverishes "all Else," recurs throughout Dickinson's early poetry. One well-known iteration is "The Soul selects her own Society —" (409, c. 1862), in which an imperious Soul remains "Unmoved" by almost every solicitor:

> I've known her — from an ample nation —
> Choose One —
> Then — close the Valves of her attention —
> Like Stone —

Helen Vendler calls this "a poem of absolute choice."[18] The Soul chooses to devote herself to one object, or to the object oneness. But these lines foreclose any such certainty on the part of the reader. We cannot decide whether the Soul's choice amounts to a becoming-immortal, a "diamondization" (as at the ending of Hopkins' "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection"), or merely a self-entombment, rigor mortis. The echoes of courtly-love rhetoric can be heard in this poem, which transfigures Dickinson's domestic environment into a medieval manor, visited by chariots and an emperor. Here, however, nothing tells us from which position the sentences are

[18] Helen Vendler, *Dickinson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 187.

enunciated. Is the speaker an unlucky member of the ample nation, one of the suitors whom the Soul disdains? Or does the Soul belong to the speaker? And if so, is the speaker pleased by her own Soul's choosiness? Or does she wish that the Soul were more promiscuous, more easily moved?

In other poems, Dickinson inhabits more unambiguously the role of a disdainful character. Although these poems do not always use the word "disdain," they describe the subjective experience of rejecting an object or person, and the feelings of scorn, dislike, or indifference which accompany the knowledge that one can just as well do without. In many of these poems, her speakers retain a mental image of a preferred ideal. That is the case in "How sick — to wait" (410, 1862), where the speaker's disdain is "addressed" to an absent partner. Here are the first two of the poem's three stanzas:

> How sick — to wait — in any place — but thine —
> I knew last night — when some one tried to twine —
> Thinking — perhaps — that I looked tired — or alone —
> Or breaking — almost — with unspoken pain —
>
> And I turned — ducal —
> *That* right — was thine —
> *One port* — suffices — for a Brig like *mine* —[19]

Yet again, we hear the reverberations of courtly love poetry and of Shakespeare, in the Elizabethan "thine," the naval metaphors, and the infinitive "to wait," with its associations of vassalage or servitude. However, Dickinson departs from her early-modern sources by freely combining multiple verse forms, in order to convey, with impressive precision, shifts in emotional tonality. The beginning of the poem is written in an iambic pentameter frequently interrupted by dashes, as if the speaker were choking back tears. She recounts a

[19] Franklin, *Poems of Emily Dickinson,* 189.

recent proposition: "Last night," some unnamed and ungendered person "tried to twine" with her—attempted to connect, whether emotionally or physically. But the speaker found herself to be unavailable to this "some one," due to an "unspoken pain" which, we can infer, has to do with the poem's addressee, the "thou." At this point, in the break between the first and second stanza, the meter shifts abruptly. As the speaker turns "ducal," the poem turns martial, hammering like a gavel or drum. The last line of the second stanza contains five stresses, but its trochees sound nothing like the iambs of the first stanza. We hear it in three musical measures, with long rests in between (think of the snare drum before the 20th-Century Fox fanfare).

This formal shift implies a psychological tightening. In the first stanza, the speaker beholds herself retrospectively, through the other's sympathetic or predatory gaze. In the second stanza, she compares herself to two high-status men: a duke and a ship's captain. Clearly, this self-gentrification is a way of protecting herself from pain, and perhaps also from the temptation to twine with "some one"—anyone—out of sheer loneliness. Against that possibility, she defends herself with the idea of the Thou, the one "port" (an intriguingly feminine metaphor) who can sufficiently receive her. Evidently, the speaker feels or believes herself to be under an exclusive contract to this absent Thee. The fact that the prospect of mooring ("more-ing") in another port makes the speaker feel physically sick suggests that this contract is, on a certainly level, constitutive. The "I" survives for only so long as she holds out for Thee; she is nothing but a Thine-ness.

But if the speaker's policy ("accept no substitutes") is a method of self-preservation, it might also be her undoing, as we learn in the poem's closing stanza:

Our’s be the tossing — wild through the sea —
Rather than a mooring — unshared by thee —
Our’s be the Cargo — *unladen — here* —

Rather than the “*spicy isles* —”
And thou — not there —[20]

These lines, which have the sound of a drunken sailor's ballad, present us with two alternate endings. In the first two lines of this stanza, we see how disdain operates "beyond the pleasure principle." Like Melville's monomaniacal Ahab, Dickinson's speaker wildly pursues an elusive fetish. But her stubborn refusal to moor just anywhere could condemn her to permanent sea-sickness (or her brig might go down, like the Pequod). This outcome is not so different from that of "The Soul selects her own Society," although the sensation induced by disdain is here one of nausea rather than mortification. In Line 10, however, something surprising happens. The shifter "here" asks us to think about the act of writing poetry as a discharging of cargo, a substitute satisfaction. This unloading is removed from the "spicy isles" of face-to-face intimacy, or sexual contact, but it has the advantage of making the Thou present, at least in fantasy. As we will see, this possibility, that the experience of writing poetry is itself the "One" which not only "suffices" but surpasses every other pleasure, is something Dickinson treats both affirmatively and critically in other poems.

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[20] Ibid., 189-90.

The bog of particularity

The identity of the rejected "some one" in "How sick to wait" is more or less incidental. He or she is disdained not for possessing any particular abhorrent quality, but for what he or she lacks, Oneness. The poem does not pause to consider what violence the speaker inflicts on this someone by turning ducal, or the experiences the speaker might be giving up, by refusing to connect. All the emphasis is on the One. In other of Dickinson's disdainful poems, however, what comes into focus is the moment of negation. In this section, I will approach a few poems not as lyrics, but as dramatic monologues, which put their speakers on trial.[21] Through her speakers, Dickinson asks: can a human being ever truly achieve the sublime indifference of the courtly Lady? Or is every human act of rejection tainted by egotistical reactivity? In Kantian terms, we could say that these poems are concerned with the question of whether disdain is a moral feeling, like Kantian respect, or a pathology, like pride. These monologue-poems may distance themselves from the Kantian worldview, however, by drawing attention to what is lost when the phenomenal realm is treated as a mere "Artifice." Like "My soul — accused me," they raise the possibility that metaphysics is itself a human pathology.

Some of Dickinson's poems are so pervaded by irony that we cannot single out a primary object of ridicule. A good example is the 1872 satire "He preached opon 'Breadth'" (1266):

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[21] Isobel Armstrong has documented a similar shift from lyric expression to dramatic enunciation in Browning's monologues, which Dickinson admired: "...the poem turns its expressive utterance around so that it becomes the opposite of itself, not only the *subject's* utterance but the *object* of analysis and critique... To re-order lyric expression as drama is to give it a new content and then introduce the possibility of interrogation and critique." "Introduction: Rereading Victorian Poetry," *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics*, 12.

He preached opon 'Breadth' till it argued him narrow —
The Broad are too broad to define
And of 'Truth' until it proclaimed him a Liar —
The Truth never flaunted a Sign —

Simplicity fled from his counterfeit presence
As Gold the Pyrites would shun —

What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus
To meet so enabled a Man![22]

Critics are right to understand this poem as a wry critique of liberal Christian ideology. The preacher (who may or may not be an actual clergyman) proclaims the importance of breadth, or broad-minded tolerance, and of truth. But there is a conflict between his words and his hubris. If someone else tried to contribute to the conversation, he would probably talk over her. The "Truth" of his statement is the opposite of what he says. As he proclaims truth, "it," his speech, exposes him as a fraud. What he lacks is "Simplicity," humble clear-spoken-ness, the virtue of the genuinely good, which "shuns" him in the same way that gold is never found with pyrite, fool's gold. The poem "dramatizes an antithesis between pompous pulpit fiction... and the simple authenticity of the 'innocent Jesus,'" as Patrick J. Keane writes.[23]

But if this is a poem about the inevitable hypocrisy of positing values, then why does it sound so preachy? The few critics who've written about this poem have all failed to pick up on the fact that the poem's speaker makes precisely the same mistake as the offensive preacher. While the first stanza is an immanent critique, entirely negative (it tells us how

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[22] Franklin, *Poems of Emily Dickinson,* 494-95.
[23] Keane, *Emily Dickinson's Approving God*, 202. See also Cynthia Griffin Wolf, *Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1988), 261; and David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 37.

the preacher contradicts himself, and what Truth doesn't do), the second stanza defends "Simplicity," and lays claim to that virtue:

> Simplicity fled from his counterfeit presence
> As Gold the Pyrites would shun —
> What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus
> To meet so enabled a Man!

We can read this stanza as an impersonal assessment of the preacher. However, the first sentence could also be written in a kind of crypto-first person. "Simplicity" is the speaker's name for herself; she plays the role of an allegorical figure. It is she who flees from the preacher, in the same way that Dickinson stopped going to church. But would a truly simple person write a poem? Would she compare herself to pure gold, or waste her energy insulting the preacher? And would she go so far as to imagine how Jesus would feel? The final lines acknowledge that while Jesus would merely be confused by his Victorian-era followers, the speaker is not confused, because she is not innocent. She understands the preacher's sophistries, and "flaunts" her own relative superiority. "He preached opon breadth" is not built around a simple antithesis. Instead, it constructs a tripartite, gendered hierarchy. On the lowest rung is the falsely "enabled" Man, whose confidence is founded on blindness to his own faults. On the middle rung is the feminine speaker, who at least has "the right idea:" she understands that Truth only appears in an inverted form, that it cannot be spoken as such. On the highest rung is the authentically masculine or innocently unsexed (Billy Budd-like) Jesus, who can only blush.

Perhaps there is yet another intermediary level. In a way, the poet Dickinson transcends her speaker, i.e. her "natural" self, simply by committing her own pathological reactions to the page. She laughs at the preacher, but also at her own roleplaying, her

pretentious Simplicity. This ironic gesture is so subtle that it is easily missed. Think, for example, of Dickinson's most famous poem, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" (260, c. 1861).

> I'm Nobody! Who are you?
> Are you — Nobody — too?
> Then there's a pair of us!
> Don't tell! they'd advertise — you know!
>
> How dreary — to be — Somebody!
> How public — like a Frog —
> To tell one's name —the livelong June —
> To an admiring Bog![24]

Like the speaker of "He preached opon 'Breadth,'" the "Nobody" in this poem contradicts herself: she claims to possess non-being, while "telling her name" to the listener, proclaiming her own superiority. She is not a "Nobody" but an "I" who defines herself in relation to what she is not. The object of satire is not the bog, but the speaker's reverse-elitism.

The same holds for another, less famous bog poem which Dickinson sent to her brother Austin in 1861:

> Austin -
> Father says Frank Conkey - touched you -
>
> A Burdock —clawed my Gown —
> Not *Burdock's* — blame —
> But *mine* —
> Who went too near
> The Burdock's *Den* —
>
> A *Bog* — affronts my shoe —
> What *else* have Bogs — to *do* —
> The only Trade they *know* —
> The *splashing Men*!
> Ah, *pity - then*!

[24] Franklin, *Poems of Emily Dickinson,* 116-17.

'Tis *Minnows can despise*!
The *Elephant's* — calm eyes
Look *further on*!

Emily -

The letter alludes to what Thomas H. Johnson calls a "keen political rivalry" between Emily's father, Edward Dickinson, a conservative Whig, and an Amherst local named Ithamar Francis Conkey, who had reformist inclinations. In Johnson's view, Emily Dickinson seems to be suggesting, in her letter, that Austin had been "touched" by Conkey's politics.[25] Critics usually read the resulting poem as a playful chastisement, in which Dickinson betrays her own political conservatism. For example, Betsy Erkkila, who considers Dickinson an unapologetic elitist, assumes that Frank Conkey is the poem's "Burdock:"

> Dickinson's high-class speaker cautions Austin not to deign to engage Conkey's 'affront.' Whereas the speaker appears to stand for republican virtue and principle, the opposition is a mere 'Bog' that only knows the 'trade' of besmirching the settled authority of real *Men*. It is only inferior beings—*Minnows*—who engage in passionate displays of public spleen.[26]

Errkila makes no distinction between Dickinson and her "high-class speaker." But the context of the letter should lead us to question that equivalence. Which is funnier: the bog, or the fastidious speaker? Doesn't the poem sound like a private joke between siblings? It seems possible that Dickinson is mocking not the opposition, but her parents, who are so

[25] Letter 240 and accompanying notes, in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas Herbert Johnson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 381.
[26] Betsy Erkkila, "Dickinson and the Art of Politics," *A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson*, ed. Vivian R. Pollack (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 138. See also: Erkkila, "Emily Dickinson and Class," *American Literary History* 4:1, 1992, 1-7. A similar reading of "A Burdock — clawed my Gown -" can be found in Marietta Messmer, *A Vice for Voices* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 114.

easily scandalized by the "touch" of radicalism. While the poem certainly disdains the bog, Dickinson, as usual, maintains a certain skeptical distance from her own disdain.

Within the next year, Dickinson re-wrote the poem in a more minimal form (289). In this version, the speaker sounds less shocked, more resigned:

> A Burdock twitched my gown
> Not Burdock's blame — but mine
> Who went too near the Burdock's Den —
>
> A Bog affronts my shoe.
> What else have Bogs to do —
> The only Trade they know
> The splashing men?
>
> 'Tis Minnows — should despise —
> An Elephant's calm eyes
> Look further on.

The absence of italics and exclamation marks turns the poem into an absolutely equivocal document. In this form, the stanzas produce two contradictory readings. At first, we are likely to hear the poem as a didactic allegory. The speaker has strayed from the path of spiritual purity. She has wandered into the woods of sin, where she tore her gown and muddied her shoe. She feels tempted to get angry at the bog, but instead admonishes herself: it is only natural for nature to affront (for sin to sting). The speaker is a moral exemplar, who resolves to "look further on," towards heaven. In this reading, the elephant's calm eyes are emblems of piety, and the Lady can look forward to a blissful afterlife.

On a second reading of this poem, however, we become aware of a stifled whine, which compromises the Lady's moral authority. She will give up her nature-walks, but reluctantly, and only because civilization requires her to renounce the pleasures of "The

Burdock's Den." What the Lady forgoes is hinted at by the bizarre gender inversion in line nine, which, read on its own, produces a spectral scene:

> The splashing men?

Officially, "men" is being used in a gender-neutral sense, to designate the human collective. But for a moment we might be confused: is this a poem about a man wearing a gown? And at some grammatically muddy level of discourse, the bog is now populated by highly eroticized masculine bodies. The compensations sought by the Lady are also potentially spectral. The elephant stares "further on," which is to say, *into nothing*. In this second reading, the elephant's glazed-over eyes, and the Lady's disdain, now look less like signs of spiritual purity than symptoms of voluntary inanition.

Dickinson's stripped-down form makes visible a set of contradictions and antagonisms, intrinsic to her speaker's worldview. Like "My Soul — accused me," this bog poem is less a political statement than a phenomenology of a certain mindset.[27] More specifically, there is a strong resemblance between Dickinson's speaker and one of the "types" from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In the section devoted to "the Unhappy Consciousness," Hegel describes a Christian soul that is "agonizingly self-divided," because it locates its own spiritual essence in "the unattainable *beyond*." Whereas Greco-Roman religion had discovered anthropomorphic deities throughout nature, the Judeo-Christian tradition worships a single God, who is so radically unlike human beings that he cannot be known or perceived. As a result, the unhappy consciousness becomes ashamed of its own

[27] For Armstrong, the Victorian dramatic monologue is a "phenomenological form," which allows the poet "to describe and analyze the manifestations of consciousness," as culturally-mediated constructs. Armstrong, "Introduction," 12.

material "wretchedness," in comparison with the spiritual realm:

> Consciousness is aware of itself as *this actual individual* in the animal functions. These are no longer performed naturally and without embarrassment… it is in them that the enemy reveals himself… This enemy… renews himself in his defeat, and consciousness, in fixing its attention on him… remains for ever in contact with him, and for ever sees itself as defiled… a personality brooding over itself, as wretched as it is impoverished.[28]

According to Hegel, Greeks and Romans were not ashamed of their own bodily functions. These were identified with base animality only after the gods were banished from the material world. The modern soul's disdain for its own embodied condition condemns it to unhappiness. Its world is "impoverished," since its pleasures are radically restricted. We might say that the unhappy consciousness permits itself no pleasure, aside from the enjoyment it takes in a paranoid project of spiritual purification which, as Hegel points out (long before Nietzsche's critique of ascetic values), is necessarily self-defeating.[29]

In "A Burdock twitched my gown," we can observe each of these moments. The speaker, like Hegel's unhappy consciousness, disdains the changing material world, the "bog" of becoming. But she cannot make contact with her ideal, which is elsewhere, "further on." Nor can she ever fully transcend her own bodily needs and desires, which leave traces in her speech. In contrast to the den and to the bog, the Lady presents herself as a self-determining subject, who can be held responsible ("blamed") for her behavior, which she plans and controls. Yet her language, like that of the preacher in "He preached opon 'Breadth,'" gives her away, inadvertently revealing the unmastered interior forces which master her. Unintended ambiguities express her pain, her resentment, her self-

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[28] Paragraph 217. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller, ed. J.N. Findlay (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 131-32.

[29] My summary of the Unhappy Consciousness is based on Michael N. Forster's reading in "Curing Modern Culture," *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 17-125.

loathing, and her elephantine stupidity. The “splashing men” who appear to the attentive reader are symptomatic of a failed effort to disenchant the material world. Her words, like her gown and her shoe, have been touched by nature.

Natural history

In Nietzschean terms, we could say that Dickinson's poems with disdainful speakers mark the transition between the latent nihilism of metaphysics and the acknowledged nihilism of modernity. Her speakers cling to metaphysical ideals, which the poems go out of their way to demystify. It is more unusual for Dickinson to write from the perspective of an assumed nihilism—to show us a world devoid of metaphysical compensations. We could say that even in Dickinson's most depressed poems, the speakers are usually grieving, which means that they are still capable of forming strong attachments. Only rarely do her poems give expression to a griefless melancholy, or to what Walter Benjamin calls mournfulness: a total depersonalization of the universe, and a foreclosure of all significance. When Dickinson does write a fully disenchanted, mournful poem, she anticipates Benjamin's literary criticism, by drawing an explicit connection between the prospect of a godless world and a certain literary form: allegory. In "From Cocoon forth a Butterfly" (610, c. 1863), Dickinson reflects on her own aestheticizing attitude, which turns every particular instance into an interchangeable sign, reducing the actual physical world to mere semblance. As a result of this self-reflexive maneuver, what at first appears to be a

somewhat frivolous nature poem turns out to be one of the most historically responsible artworks of the nineteenth century.[30]

"From Cocoon forth a Butterfly" is relatively long for a Dickinson poem, at six stanzas. It is also generically odd, in that the "I," which appears unexpectedly in the second stanza, is neither a dramatic speaker nor a lyric thinker, but closer to a novelistic narrator. Here is the poem's first act, or chapter:

> From Cocoon forth a butterfly
> As Lady from her Door
> Emerged — a Summer Afternoon —
> Repairing Everywhere —
>
> Without Design — that I could trace
> Except to stray abroad
> On miscellaneous Enterprise
> The Clovers — understood —
>
> Her pretty Parasol be seen
> Contracting in a Field
> Where Men made Hay —[31]

It would be absurd to think that Dickinson is describing an actual natural scene. Obviously, the butterfly is a poetic contrivance, which stands in for a person. The simile in line 2 is inverted: Dickinson is mobilizing a set of conventional poetic tropes in order to tell a story about a Lady who appears *as* a butterfly. The poem tells the story of a fallen woman, something like *Adam Bede*. At first, the butterfly flirts innocently—"Without Design"—with the masculine clovers. What they understand about the butterfly is that she lacks understanding, that she can be taken advantage of. In the third stanza, she closes her

[30] There is evidence that Dickinson was aware of the poem's significance, and of its perfection. She placed it at the beginning of a fascicle, and included no marginal alternates. Miller, *Emily Dickinson's Poems*, 300.
[31] Franklin, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 274.

modest parasol, exposing herself to multiple men. The word "contracting" prefigures the dire consequences of this action. It alludes to bodily contact, the contracting of multiple bodies into one; to the contractual nature of sex, the exchange of respectability for pleasure; and to the birth-pangs which a deflowered woman sometimes has to suffer.

What happens to this novelistic narrative when its characters are transformed into insects, vegetation, and pastoral laborers? The allegorical language is in part a matter of delicacy. If Dickinson is thinking of someone she knows, or more probably of herself, then adopting this dream imagery allows her to write honestly if circumspectly about embarrassing indiscretions. At the same time, her "miniature" emphasizes at every turn the ephemerality and insignificance of human affairs. The story begins after the butterfly has emerged from its cocoon, which means that the poem probably will not end with this conventional image of resurrection. It takes place during "a Summer Afternoon," not a spring morning, which means that we are moving towards night or autumn. And the men's labor—haymaking—literally inscribes the poem with multiple emblems of death (since the men are reapers, and each one presumably wields a scythe). The naturalization of the story seems to have predisposed the poem to an unhappy ending. The narrative unfolds impersonally, in a moral vacuum, and from the very first line, there is little room for redemption.

In the poem's second act, we witness the butterfly's downfall, from a state of unselfconscious straying to one of despair:

Then struggling hard
With an opposing Cloud —
Where Parties — Phantom as Herself —
To Nowhere — seemed to go

In purposeless Circumference —
As 'twere a Tropic Show —[32]

We might expect the butterfly's encounter with the haymakers to end in a violent event. Such an event may be implied; however, what the poem actually depicts is a change in the weather. A cloud darkens the landscape, and seems to swallow up its inhabitants. The poem gives us two alternate ways to interpret this darkening. We could be witnessing the aftermath of a sexual trauma, or a social trauma (ostracization) issuing from a sexual transgression. There are also indications that the "opposing Cloud" stands for death, or the knowledge of mortality. Coming of age as a butterfly involves watching others die, or ascend to "Nowhere"—not, significantly, to heaven. Whatever the "opposing Cloud" represents, it initiates a shift in mood. Under the aspect of the cloud, life is reduced to semblance, or "Tropic Show:" the appearance and disappearance of types, rotating mechanistically in and out of existence.

Of course, this is precisely the aspect under which the poem presents its narrative from the beginning. The detachment which the butterfly affects in the fourth stanza is the very attitude which the poem's narrator takes towards the world. Or we might put it this way: What the cloud does to the landscape, Dickinson's "tropic" narration does to life. Moreover, in both cases, the devastating cloud introduces a paradoxical lightness. Because the butterfly knows she has nothing to lose, she can rise above the rest of the landscape:

[32] Ibid.

And notwithstanding Bee — that worked —
And Flower — that zealous blew —

This Audience of Idleness
Disdained them, from the Sky —[33]

The last line in this excerpt comes as a triumphant climax. Yes, the butterfly is alienated from the bees and the flowers, or the lifeworld which appears to her as an assemblage of tropes. But her alienated condition affords her the freedom to disdain—a freedom from care (she is, like the allegorical figures on Keats's urn, "all breathing human passion far above"). It is a freedom which Dickinson connects with leisure, or "Idleness." This means that the poem is offering us a social genealogy of disdain. The butterfly can afford to disdain because she is not involved in any instrumental projects, the labor of obtaining sustenance. She can regain something like the "designlessness" of her pre-cloud existence. Again, it is important to emphasize that this achieved disdain is personally expensive. The butterfly has stared into the abyss of meaninglessness, and forfeited every bodily pleasure. She is totally estranged from the material, eroticized world of the bees and the flowers they penetrate, the "work" and "zeal" of lively involvement. But her estrangement is also a luxury. It allows her to transcend ("notwithstand," not suffer) the oppositions which structure life in the meadow.

The complex of experiences in "From Cocoon Forth a Butterfly"—experiences of mortality, melancholy, allegory, and disaffection—bears a remarkable affinity to the constellation of concepts treated in the second section of Benjamin's *The Origin of the German Mourning Play*. For Benjamin, allegorical art forms are those which signal their

[33] Ibid.

own arbitrariness. When we read an allegorical poem, we are constantly aware that its imagery is drawn from a reservoir of conventional tropes. No object is identical with itself, or important in itself; what matters is what the allegorist intends for it to signify. This exchangeability implies a certain view not only of art, but also of life. For Benjamin, allegory is not merely an aesthetic technique. It is derived from (and in turn reinforces) a worldview. The allegorist sees the world as a "natural-historical" continuum, from which all transcendence has been evacuated. Nature is not a divine order, but a mass of material, subject to aimless cycles of growth and decline. Human history makes no definitive break from nature, but is likewise vulnerable to death and decay. In every face, the allegorist sees the underlying skull; in every building, a future ruin. This vision is fundamentally atheistic. When the allegorist wishes to construct a redemptive narrative, his efforts are unconvincing. His reifying method—which transforms every object and person into a commutable thing—would seem to preclude any salvation or eschatology. In allegory, history does not progress. Instead, it is "the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline."[34]

In his book on the German mourning play, Benjamin associates allegory with the historical era of the Baroque. However his true interest, in that early critical work, is to point to certain correspondences between Baroque culture and the art of capitalist modernity, which is similarly fragmented, reified, ugly, and lacking in religious faith. For Benjamin these correspondences become most pronounced in German Expressionism. In

[34] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Brooklyn: Verso, 1998), 159-235. My summary is based on the commentary in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*, 225-31. See also Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 16-21.

his later work, however, Benjamin eventually traced the modern allegorical sensibility back to the mid-nineteenth century. Among poets, Benjamin identifies Baudelaire as the preeminent modern allegorist, someone who strategically employed allegorical techniques, such as capitalization and "a calculated disharmony between image and object," to devastating effect. In Baudelaire's poetry, objects appear as fragments, stripped of their aura of significance. Baudelaire capitalizes on allegory's demystifying potential; his verse shatters every ideology of moral progress, beauty, and totality. In a preparatory fragment about his unfinished Baudelaire book, Benjamin emphasizes a passage from "Obsession," a sonnet in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, where Baudelaire ironically apostrophizes the night, wishing for the stars to disappear:

> Comme tu me plairais, ô nuit! sans ces étoiles
> Dont la lumière parle un langage connu!
> Car je cherche le vide, et le noir, et le nu!
>
> [How you would please me, O night, without these stars
> Whose light speaks a language known too well!
> For I seek the void, and the black, and the bare!]

Benjamin picks up on a "destructive energy" in these lines. Traditionally, the stars provide solace, by symbolizing the gods or, as in Kant, man's interior moral worth. In Benjamin's reading, Baudelaire bravely asks to be relieved of this false consolation. He demonstrates a "heroic resolution" to make "lyric poetry at home in the heart of reification," by staring into the black abyss of senselessness.[35]

"From Cocoon Forth a Butterfly" is a long way from Baudelaire, in its genteel, pastoral setting. However, it seems clear that Dickinson's poem is thoroughly and self-

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[35] Walter Benjamin, "The Influence of *Les Fleurs du Mal*," in *Selected Writings,* Volume 4, 97. I have used the translation of Baudelaire from this edition, with some modifications.

consciously allegorical, not only in its form, but also in its secularizing, anti-auratic, and decidedly morbid outlook. Benjamin's observation that allegory pertains to a world "in which the detail is of importance" finds an overt echo in Dickinson's poem, which judges all "Parties" (particularities, individuals) to be "Phantom"-like, transient and insubstantial, therefore insignificant. The poem's alienated treatment of life as "Tropic Show" produces an eternal sameness, unrelieved by the thought of heaven or apocalypse; and her final stanza is arguably even darker than Baudelaire's plea to the night:

> Till Sundown crept — a steady Tide —
> And Men that made the Hay —
> And Afternoon — and Butterfly —
> Extinguished — in the Sea —[36]

This is a vision of history as "the stations of its decline." The poem has already prepared us to read the capitalized nouns as allegorical stand-ins for various elements of human life. The men are animals, or laborers; the butterfly is humanity, or the detached intellectual; the afternoon, their shared world, or civilization. And the sea that rolls in like a tide is the darkness of night (death), which, more aggressively than the "opposing Cloud," swallows all parties, hiding them from the sight of the narrator. Both the stars and the dawn are absent from the poem, which ends with this image of annihilation in a bad totality.

In the fragment on Baudelaire, Benjamin says nothing about the "tu me plairais," in "Obsession," the pleasure Baudelaire would gain from darkness, ugliness, and profanation. Nor does he mention the closing lines of Baudelaire's sonnet:

> Mais les ténèbres sont elles-mêmes des toiles
> Où vivent, jaillissant de mon oeil par milliers,
> Des êtres disparus aux regards familiers.

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[36] Franklin, 274.

[But the darkness is itself a canvas
Where there live, springing from my eyes by the thousands,
Departed beings with familiar gazes.][37]

Having divested the night sky of its actual stars, the artist projects onto the black void "departed beings," images of departed souls, or entities which, at the very moment when they attain to something like "being," immediately vanish. This projection occurs unintentionally; the images spring independently from the poet's eyes, to people the abyss. They are spurious—even less concrete than painted shapes. But they are also reassuringly auratic. They return the poet's gaze, so that the disenchanted universe feels inhabited again. The stars spoke a deadened, allegorical language, an idiom *connu*, known, and exhausted. But these slighter luminosities are "familiar." They are known and know in turn, restoring the possibility of reciprocation, if not between the poet and the universe, then at least between humanity and its own artistic creations. This intercourse prefigures what will transpire posthumously between the poet and his audience. As readers, we reanimate the voice within the darkness of print, which answers our gaze. Baudelaire's sonnet ends on an unexpected note of affirmation—though the comfort it offers is limited to the aesthetic realm.

In Dickinson's butterfly allegory, the moment of affirmation precedes the moment of darkness. However, positivity is not entirely absent, even from the ending. The butterfly—psyche, the soul, human subjectivity—had briefly managed to distinguish itself from the meadow, introducing a distance which the poem calls "disdain." The butterfly's brief flight can be interpreted allegorically, as a moment of individual self-actualization, or, more

[37] My translation. Based on the text from *The Flowers of Evil*, (Oxford University Press, 1993), 150.

generally, as the enlightenment of the human species, an ephemeral, collective emancipation from the forces of nature. Of course, the butterfly, for all her refinement, is ultimately extinguished by death. However, something else does survive: the narrative consciousness itself, the "I" which sees, and which also persists in the poem's language. Dickinson's dark sea is, like Baudelaire's void, a kind of canvas, in which the "departed being" of the poet, activated by our reading, returns our regard, greeting us with a mournful message. Death may disdain the disdainful butterfly—but in written, reified form, the poetic "I" refuses to die.

The honored island

Hope for a literary afterlife is not the same thing as religious faith. The faint persistence of the "I" at the conclusion of Dickinson's miniature does not re-enchant the landscape, which remains cloudy and black. But if "From Cocoon forth a butterfly" is the poem which, thanks to its allegorical form, best captures Dickinson's alienation, there are others which gesture backward in time, towards a more triumphant Romanticism. Among these is "Of Bronze — and Blaze —" (319, c. 1862), one of Dickinson's most beloved lyrics. Here, "disdain" appears not as contemptuous superiority or cold indifference, but in a form much closer to the electrifying soulfulness we encountered at the beginning of this chapter:

Of Bronze — and Blaze —
The North —tonight —
So adequate — it forms —
So preconcerted with itself —
So distant — to alarms —

An Unconcern so sovreign
To Universe, or me —
Infects my simple spirit
With Taints of Majesty —
Till I take vaster attitudes —
And strut upon my stem —
Disdaining Men, and Oxygen,
For Arrogance of them —

My Splendors are Menagerie
But their Competeless Show
Will entertain the Centuries
When I, am long ago,
An Island in dishonored Grass
Whom none but Daisies,+ know — +Beetles[38]

This is about as close as Dickinson comes to Romantic nature-worship. On a first reading, "Of Bronze — and Blaze —" presents itself as a subjective response to a witnessed event, the aurora borealis, which the speaker praises above all for their self-containment. The Northern lights are impassive, "distant to alarm," like a confident duke or queen. They are indifferent both to human observers and to the larger universe in which they are nested. The speaker, infected by the spectacle of their unconcern, becomes disdainful of "Men, and Oxygen:" distant from (male-dominated) human society, and forgetful of her own bodily needs. Vendler, taking the poem literally, argues that it revolves around a contrast between natural perfection and human death. The speaker's feeling of disdainful majesty is, according to Vendler, "unearned." In her poems, Dickinson may have managed to approach the aurora's perfection, but she "must descend from the celestial to the terrestrial" once she remembers her own mortality.[39] Although Vendler does not use the term "bathos," it would seem to capture this apparent downward progression, from the opening "Blaze" to

[38] Franklin, *Poems of Emily Dickinson,* 142; Miller, *Emily Dickinson's Poems,* 153.
[39] Vendler, *Dickinson*, 124.

the closing graveyard scene. The word "Disdaining" would then mark the point of a transition, in the direction of a debasement. The disdainfulness of a natural phenomenon becomes pride—arrogance—when mimicked by a mortal human being.

But what if "The North" refers not to the actual Auroras but, allegorically and self-reflexively, to poetry? Then the poem's central antithesis would not be between humanity and nature, but between the poet and her poems. Here it might be helpful to recall the opening stanzas of Wallace Stevens' "The Auroras of Autumn," which, by Vendler's own account, probably take their cue from Dickinson:

> This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless.
> His head is air. Beneath his tip at night
> Eyes open and fix on us in every sky.
>
> Or is this another wriggling out of the egg,
> Another image at the end of the cave,
> Another bodiless for the body's slough?
>
> This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest,
> These fields, these hills, these tinted distances.
> And the pines above and along and beside the sea.[40]

The various figures (snake's nest, shadow play, landscape) describe the auroras and their nocturnal setting. But the proliferating demonstrative pronouns ("this" and "these") point to the text itself as the poem's ultimate referent, which the images embody concretely but provisionally, in succession. Similarly, the present tense in which "Of Bronze - and Blaze -" unfolds is the present of its own writing. The poem is "so adequate"—sufficient, capable, confident, secure—that it forms itself, practically without the poet's interference. Its independence from the writer guarantees its artistic quality. Appropriately enough,

[40] "The Auroras of Autumn" appeared as the first poem in Stevens' eponymous volume. Reprinted in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, eds. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 355-63.

Dickinson's lines include two coinages, "preconcerted" and "competeless," as if not only the words but the basic semantic units of English were rearranging themselves into surprising new combinations.

Dickinson's artistic victory means that the disdainful posture assumed in the middle of the poem is not exactly "unearned," as Vendler claims. If the speaker is arrogant, her self-esteem is, at the very least, derived from the proper object:

> Till I take vaster attitudes —
> And strut upon my stem —
> Disdaining Men, and Oxygen,
> For Arrogance of them —

"Vaster attitudes" nicely captures a feature of disdain which we have already observed. Because disdain gives the soul wings, it increases one's "circumference," allowing one's viewpoint to encompass a wider field. But this heightening also involves a "vastation," a severe reduction of experience, from which the soul is now mentally removed. In the phrase "Disdaining Men" we may hear an echo of "My Soul — accused me," where the speaker's disdain for the world was a defensive reaction against the world's disdain for him. However there are important differences here, which make this "I" more persuasive than Dickinson's obsequious courtly lover. If "The North" designates a poem that the "I" has written, this means that the prized object is externally and materially embodied, in a way that "My Soul" may not have been. "The North" would also seem to constitute a geographical reality, and thus a more absolute standard, than the capricious dictates of "My Soul." (Think of the northward-pointing compass needle in "Through the Straight Pass of Suffering" [187, c. 1861], an emblem for steadfast resolve.) "Of Bronze— and Blaze —" leaves us with comparatively little doubt about the speaker's judgment or competence.

Taken together, the two poems suggest that Dickinson placed more confidence in aesthetic than in moral valuations, or conflated the aesthetic with the moral.

It seems unlikely, then, that Dickinson is being self-deprecating, in the lines which open the second stanza:

> My Splendors are Menagerie
> But their Competeless Show
> Will entertain the Centuries [...]

For Vendler, the "splendors" are Dickinson's poems, and "their" refers to the auroras. To say that her poems are "menagerie" means that they are miscellaneous, domestic, and ephemeral, unlike the beautiful and timeless Auroras.[41] That is certainly one way to read these lines. However, we could also say that the "splendors" denote the worldly experiences and humble achievements of Dickinson the *person*. These are contrasted with the "Competeless Show" of her poems, unrivalled performances, which are perhaps more than merely tropic, and which do not compete in the literary marketplace. With a sense of self-assurance, Dickinson states simply that these "will entertain the Centuries," i.e. many readers, for hundreds of years (with a possible pun on "sentries," lookouts or guards). This extraordinary claim goes to the heart of Dickinson's decision not to publish. Although she lived in obscurity, she seems to be asserting here that her work will be read and appreciated after her death. "Of Bronze — and Blaze —" seems to affirm an opposition between "menagerie" existence and a poetry "Exterior — to Time,"[42] or in some sense non-mortal—a metaphysics not of religion, but of art.

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[41] Vendler, *Dickinson*, 124.

[42] "This was a Poet —" (446), in Franklin, *Poems of Emily Dickinson,* 206.

We may find ourselves asking whether anything of the poet's particular subjectivity will survive, in the entertainment to come. The final lines of "Of Bronze — and Blaze — "equivocate on this point:

> When I, am long ago,
> An Island in dishonored Grass
> Whom none but Daisies,+ know — +Beetles

What does it mean, for the "I" to be transformed into "An Island?" Does this amount to a permanent extinction, a becoming-dust? Or is this a more defiant metamorphosis? Dickinson's manuscript may provide us with a clue. As an alternate word for "Daisies," which was Dickinson's nickname for herself, she includes the much more morbid and impersonal "Beetles." In Vendler's view, these alternatives are basically equivalent:

> Both choices—"Daisies" and "Beetles"—suggest the poet's final admission, as she faces the celestial Auroras, of her inescapable "dishonor," mortality.[43]

Vendler may understate how much is at stake in the apparently trivial choice between flora and fauna. If we take Dickinson's lines literally, as a graveyard scene, then there is certainly a difference between beetles and daisies. The beetles would "know" the poet's corpse by consuming it, and turning it to dung—a truly dishonorable fate. Daisies, in contrast, could dignify a grave dishonored by human neglect. They would know the corpse by taking root in it, and by transforming the poet's remains into wildflowers.

It seems significant, then, that Dickinson ultimately prioritized daisies over beetles. The flowers introduce the faintest note of beauty, and bittersweet hope, at the poem's conclusion. The "I" is transformed into an island-mound, but her body does not dishonor the grass. On the contrary, she is an island of honor, in a sea of dishonorable grass—like a

[43] Vendler, *Dickinson,* 124.

favorite book on a shelf of indifferent publications. On an allegorical level, the daisies represent Dickinson's readers, who know her so intimately that they have taken her name. Like Baudelaire's lyric speaker, they reactive her "departed being," simply by reading her poems, which contain her. This aesthetic resurrection, this mediated familiarity, is the most that the skeptical, alienated Dickinson can wish for—a wish that reaches out to touch us, in the form of a final dash.

Chapter 3

Failures of patience in Hopkins' late sonnets

pumping out consolation with a vengeance

-Amy Clampitt

It may seem counterintuitive to emphasize, in the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a moment of restless agitation, of stifled potential. Hopkins is usually regarded as someone who managed to revitalize a Romantic idiom that had, by the end of the nineteenth century, begun to grow stale. And generations of poets cited Hopkins as a liberating predecessor. "I suppose Hopkins is the real enabler," said Amy Clampitt, in her *Paris Review* interview, echoing the general assessment. "I simply can't imagine having become a poet without having read his work—the wallowing in sheer sound, in the extravagance of the possibilities of language."[1]

There have been a few dissenting voices. Elizabeth Bishop felt drawn to Hopkins, and wrote a critical essay about him early in her career. But she also suggested that what Clampitt calls the poet's "wallowing" might have resulted from his attraction to ideas "too

[1] Robert E. Hosmer, "Amy Clampitt, The Art of Poetry No. 45," *The Paris Review* 126, Spring, 1993, 77-109.

heavy to be lifted."[2] W.H. Auden presented Hopkins as a "sissy" Don Quixote, one of those artists "whose relation to their art is romantically difficult, full of rows, infidelities, miscarriages, strain."[3] The most formidable scholarly portrait of this difficult, straining Hopkins may be Isobel Armstrong's 1993 essay "Hopkins: Antagonistic Reactionary." Armstrong approaches Hopkins' more anguished poems historically and to some extent politically. They are a kind of gap or scar, indicative of an impasse in late-nineteenth-century philosophy and consciousness. According to Armstrong, Hopkins' effort to mimic "living speech" through a "paratactive, co-ordinative grammar" led him into a dead end, a poetics of solid, discontinuous units. While Hopkins may have aimed to bring about a unity of observed and observer, language and experience, he learned, in the course of his poetic experiments, that this was an impossible task:

> ...that language might be at an increasing distance from its object, is one of the preoccupations of the terrible sonnets of Hopkins' later period. The stem of stress between things and us is severed as the poet finds himself existing as an estranged being. The language acts out an enclosure in consciousness, the consciousness of the isolated subject...[4]

Armstrong refers to the so-called "terrible sonnets," a sequence written towards the end of Hopkins' life. Desperate documents of spiritual agony, they are unbeautiful, or, as Armstrong puts it, "grotesque." If these late linguistic contortions succeed in rendering a subjective experience, it is, paradoxically, an experience of alienation, of language's inability to render. This knowledge—that words "have difficulty in holding onto... what they designate"—is already latent in Hopkins' beloved early nature poems, which flirt with

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[2] Elizabeth Bishop, "Gerard Manley Hopkins: Notes on Timing in His Poetry," in *Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011), 468-75.

[3] W.H. Auden, "A Knight of the Infinite," *The New Republic* 111, August 21, 1944, 223-24.

[4] Armstrong, "Hopkins," in *Victorian Poetry*, 418-25.

a reflexive aestheticism. Yet it is in the later poems, and most movingly in the terrible sonnets, that the lyric speaker claims to feel severed from society, from life, and from God. For Armstrong, this affective shift can be understood as a symptom of Hopkins' growing, though never total, skepticism about language, and about the redemptive power of poetry—a skepticism appropriate to its epoch.

This chapter does not dispute that Hopkins has served and continues to serve as a "real enabler." But it also follows Auden and Armstrong, in finding that Hopkins' subjective experience was dominated by feelings of disability and alienation—feelings which leave their mark on the late sonnets. I focus in particular on the affective condition of impatience, signs of which I detect throughout Hopkins' life and work. As is well known, Hopkins' chosen career of service to the Catholic church entailed many annoyances and hardships, which he was unable to bear with equanimity. His sincere piety did little to quiet his suffering, and he complained sometimes, in his letters, journals, and retreat notes, of a deficit of patience—a virtue religious were expected to have. In one of the terrible sonnets, originally untitled but now called "Patience, hard thing," Hopkins tried to give aesthetic form to this introspective fault-finding, while responding to a long history of theological writings on patience. The result was an esoteric, uncharismatic poem, which turns out to reward careful study. I argue that in "Patience, hard thing," we see Hopkins grappling not only with his own spiritual shortcomings, but with his relation to the English poetic tradition, and especially to the odes of John Keats. The poem is also illuminating in that, once we understand how and why patience was a problem for Hopkins, we begin to notice how it fails to operate in other of his works, on disparate topics. After exploring another

troubled late sonnet, "To what serves mortal beauty," this chapter closes with a reading of Hopkins' most political poem, "Tom's Garland," which is impatient on multiple levels: formally, erotically, and socially. This late work is irritable to the point of incoherence, yet its complications help us to see how Hopkins' anxieties—and our own—might arise from uncompensated concessions.

Quattuor personae

Before turning to "Patience, hard thing," it will be useful to give a brief sketch of the poem's theological background. Etymologically, "patience" belongs to a constellation of words with classical origins. The Greek *pathos* (suffering, feeling, passion) is rendered in Latin as *passio*, which became a name for the crucifixion in the second and third centuries A.D.. The theologian who popularized this new usage was the influential but in some respects heretical (hence un-canonized) church father Tertullian (c. 155—c. 240 A.D.). Tertullian also wrote a treatise on patience, *patientia*, meaning forbearance, tolerance, perseverance, or the endurance of pain. Tertullian's is the first of three early Christian treatises on the subject: the others attributed to Cyprian (c. 200—c. 258 A.D.) and Augustine (354—430 A.D.) (though these attributions are controversial).

Patientia is derived from *pati* ("to suffer")—a word which also yielded *passivus* ("emotionally passionate"). This leads to two semantic difficulties, which persist when these words make their way into English. The first has to do with a lexical doubling. To be passionate is to be passive, i.e. acted on by the passions. It is to be vulnerable to sin. To be

patient is close to the opposite. Patience, writes Augustine in his treatise, is "that by which we tolerate evil things with an even mind."[5] To be patient is to have control over one's subjective response to troubles. For Tertullian, the passion with which patience has primarily to do is anger.[6] In the *Summa Theologica* (1265—1274), Aquinas claims that patience is the virtue which acts specifically "to safeguard the good of reason against sorrow."[7] To be impatient, then, is to give in to anger or sorrow. To be impassive is not to feel, or not to give in to feeling.

The second difficulty has to do with the fact that patience is a quality attributed to God. As Augustine writes, this presents a quandary:

> Although in God there can be no suffering, and patience has its name *a patiendo*, from suffering, yet a patient God we not only faithfully believe, but also wholesomely confess.[8]

On the one hand, this paradox can be explained by pointing to the many bible verses in which we are assured that God waits for sinners to redeem themselves, no matter how offensive their behavior. Cyprian summarizes the scriptural evidence of God's patience:

> ...while God is provoked with frequent, yea, with continual offenses, He softens His indignation, and in patience waits for the day of retribution... He prefers to keep patience for a long while... God's judgment is just, because it is tardy.[9]

Aquinas calls this virtue—the ability to wait—*longanimitas*. This is a neologism modelled after *magnanimitas*, and usually translated as "long-sufferingness" or "longanimity."

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[5] Augustine, "On Patience," trans. H. Browne, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), First Series, Vol. 3, 527.
[6] Tertullian, "Of Patience," trans. S. Thelwall, in *The Ante-Nicene Church Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts (Buffalo, NY, 1887), Vol. 3, 707-717.
[7] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Vol. 3, trans. Fathers of the Dominican Province (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2013), 1744.
[8] Augustine, "On Patience," 527.
[9] Cyprian, "On the Advantage of Patience," trans. Ernest Wallis, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 5, 485.

Whereas patience denotes a negative resistance, *longanimitas* is directed towards a good object—in the case of God, the punishment or salvation of sinners. But Aquinas also writes that when patience, which can be short-lived, is sustained over time, it becomes *longanimitas*.[10] In any case, the bible leaves no doubt that God is longanimous.

And yet the problem remains: is God long-*suffering*? And why is patience described as a heavenly virtue, when there are no hardships in heaven? In his *De Patientia*, Augustine does not really answer these questions, but resorts to the ineffability topos:

> But the patience of God, of what kind and how great it is... in words to unfold this who can be able? Ineffable is therefore that patience, as is His jealousy, as His wrath, and whatever there is like to these. For if we conceive of these as they be in us, in Him are there none. We, namely, can feel none of these without molestation: but be it far from us to surmise that the impassible nature of God is liable to any molestation. But like as He is jealous without any darkening of spirit, angry without any perturbation, pitiful without any pain, repents Him without any wrongness in Him to be set right; so is He patient without anything of passion.[11]

As we will see in Hopkins' sonnet on patience, these ambiguities make it difficult to write about godly patience in human language. There is always a danger of lapsing back into a worldly, sensual vocabulary, when what one wishes to describe is a state of transcendent release.

Examples of earthly patience and human impatience are easier to generate—it is almost too easy, as Tertullian discovers. In his treatise, the categories of patience and impatience keep expanding, until they are almost synonymous with good and evil. It is obvious that Jesus Christ suffered his Passion patiently. But "slaves" and "brutes" also demonstrate patience. In fact, Tertullian argues, all obedience requires patience. At the same time, all sin is said by Tertullian to have its origin in impatience. The Devil was the

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[10] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1747.
[11] Augustine, "On Patience," 527.

first being to feel impatience, "when he impatiently bore that the Lord God had subjected the universal works which He had made to His own image, that is, to man." And this diabolical impatience turned out to be contagious; Eve fell when she was "breathed on by a spirit infected with impatience." Now, "every sin is ascribable to impatience," which Tertullian calls "a hydra of delinquencies."[12] This amounts to saying that all sin is born of unmastered passion. But the straightforwardness of this claim is at odds with Tertullian's style. His *De Patientia*—much more so than Augustine's or Cyprian's treatises—is a work of great rhetorical richness and ardor. It is eager, unreasonable, and confessional. As Tertullian himself admits in the prologue, he is an impatient man. He writes about patience "after the manner of invalids, who since they are without health, know not how to be silent about its blessings."[13]

Tertullian's devotion to a patience which he does not possess is so extreme that it threatens to "regress" into paganism. Towards the beginning of his *De Patientia*, impatience and patience are gently personified. Impatience is the mother of anger, and Patience is faith's "pre-eminent coadjutrix." As the treatise progresses, however, this entirely permissible allegorization rises to idolatry, or theogony:

> What honour is granted to Patience, to have God as her Debtor! ...she keeps all His decrees; she has to do with all His mandates... Her countenance is tranquil and peaceful... with eyes downcast in humility, not in unhappiness; her mouth sealed with the honourable mark of silence; ...her clothing, moreover, about her bosom white and well fitted to her person, as being neither inflated nor disturbed. For *Patience* sits on the throne of that calmest and gentlest Spirit, who is not found in the roll of the whirlwind, nor in the leaden hue of the cloud, but is of soft serenity, open and simple... For where God is, there too is His foster-child, namely Patience. When God's Spirit descends, then Patience accompanies Him indivisibly. If

[12] Tertullian, "Of Patience," 708-711.
[13] Ibid., 707.

we do not give admission *to her* together with the Spirit, will (He) *always* tarry with us?[14]

Patience is draped in white and serene-faced, a bit like a statue. Even more astonishingly, Patience sits on the throne, like a female Christ or Spirit. Tertullian's "*tres personae, una substantia*," the earliest formulation of the trinity, is here expanded to include, "indivisibly," a fourth person. She is not quite God's daughter, but she is his foster-child, and creditor. That this is probably meant to be read as a didactic analogy, rather than a statement of doctrine, does not detract from its exoticism. Of course, any personified virtue can become a minor deity, who rivals God. But as we will see in Hopkins' sonnet, there seems to be something specific to Patience, as a concept, which borders on the profane. There is, it turns out, no hard line between *passio* and *patientia*. To be patient is to assume a passive, feminine stance, which is potentially at odds with the demands of Christian asceticism.

Cells

Hopkins probably composed "Patience, hard thing" in 1885, four years before his death. While it may be a stretch to read the poem as a poetic riff on Tertullian's treatise, it seems to have been written in a similarly state of "invalidity." In 1884, Hopkins had accepted a position as a professor of Greek and Latin at University College Dublin. He felt out of place in the economically depressed city, and missed England. He found his teaching duties to be onerous, and called the university "a ruin and, for the purposes of study very

[14] Ibid., 716-17.

nearly naked."[15] In his letters and lectures from these years, Hopkins also expresses doubts about the value of Classical literature, which he nevertheless continues to cite in his poetry. This combination of circumstances—an impatient outlook, and ambivalence towards the classical past—led Hopkins to write a sonnet in which Patience appears, unexpectedly, as a lounging female deity.

"Patience, hard thing" was found in Hopkins' papers, and appears not ever to have been sent to Robert Bridges, or any other of Hopkins' correspondents. It opens prayerfully:

> Patience, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray,
> But bid for, Patience is! Patience who asks
> Wants war, wants wounds; weary his times, his tasks;
> To do without, take tosses, and obey.
>   Rare patience roots in these, and these away
> Nowhere. Natural heart's ivy, patience masks
> Our ruins of wrecked past purpose. There she basks
> Purple eyes and seas of liquid leaves all day.[16]

Hopkins' complaint is somewhat eccentric. In the first quatrain, what he who asks for patience has to endure is not pain, but pain's absence, or a pain so diffuse that it manifests as exhaustion. He can "do without" luxuries, but he still "wants war, wants wounds." It is the mundanity of his duties which wearies him (the absence of what Robert Frost calls the "shocks and changes we need to keep us sane"[17]). While the identity of the "he," this impatient person, is never actually specified, many cues support an autobiographical reading. The martial language evokes the Jesuit order, known as the "soldiers of Christ." As

[15] Letter of March 7, 1884. Quoted in Paul Mariani, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Life* (New York: Viking, 2008), 322.
[16] Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Patience, hard thing," in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, 170. Abbreviated MW.
[17] Robert Frost, "On Looking Up by Chance at the Constellations," in *Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*, eds. Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1995), 246

noted above, in his letters, Hopkins referred to the University College Dublin as a naked ruin. And, most poignantly, the wreckage in line 7 has to be read as a reference to Hopkins' long poem "The Wreck of the Deutschland," of which he was immensely proud, and which no one would publish. Although "Patience, hard thing" is the only terrible sonnet in which the word "I" does not appear, it is, like Tertullian's treatise on patience, a confessional work. Not only must Hopkins, like all mortal beings, exist in a state of deprivation; he is also mentally perturbed, and cannot take his "tosses" calmly.

Maybe the most interesting thing about the octave is the way it cannot decide what trope best suits patience. In the first line, patience is a "hard thing," then "the hard thing," the superlatively recalcitrant, most punishing aspect of spiritual discipline, since it can only be asked for, not actively grasped. But everything has changed by the end of the octave. The transformation begins with "roots," in line 5, which germinates the vegetative figure "Natural heart's ivy," with its suggestions of natural law. This in turn leads to a concrete natural-historical image—one that inverts the initial configuration:

> Natural heart's ivy, patience masks
> Our ruins of wrecked past purpose. There she basks
> Purple eyes and seas of liquid leaves all day.

Now the heart is hard and inorganic, like stone ruins, a heap of broken promises and unfulfilled wishes, of now-enigmatic significance (the syncopated meter asks us to hear "runes" in "ruins"). And patience is the soft ivy which masks (and protects and adorns) these hard fragments. The implication may be that Patience remains hard and inaccessible so long as we keep asking and bidding for it. But once we accept our place in the natural order, patience undergoes a state change. As in Tertullian's treatise, the personhood and

femininity of Patience are gradually asserted: Patience is a "she," dissolving into liquid seas of herself.

This is an unorthodox way to personify Patience. Even in Tertullian, Patience is imagined as a seated, regal figure, not a reclining Siren or Venus. Moreover, for English speakers, the word "patience" is often associated with a speech from *Twelfth Night*, delivered by Viola while she is disguised as the manservant Cesario:

> She never told her love,
> But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud,
> Feed on her damask cheek: she pined in thought,
> And with a green and yellow melancholy
> She sat like patience on a monument
> Smiling at grief.[18]

By the nineteenth century, "like patience on a monument" was close to proverbial.[19] The phrase asks us to imagine patience as a statue of a seated, melancholic woman.[20] The difference between this conventional, Shakespearean Patience and Hopkins' "basking" version is striking. Viola's seated statue represents the triumph of chastity and constancy, and would be at home in a church setting. Hopkins' Patience, in the octave of his sonnet, is reclining, probably nude, and brazenly available. It is as if Hopkins sets out to write a devotional meditation, and ends up in an animistic universe where plants have "eyes," and

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[18] The speech is from Act 2, Scene 4. William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, eds. Roger Warren and Stanley Wells (Oxford University Press, 1994), 140.

[19] Shakespeare's simile appears in many Victorian novels. The conceit of a monumental Patience is also expanded upon in an 1829 poem by Coleridge, titled "Love, Hope, and Patience in Education." More recently, the phrase was quoted by Corrado John "Junior" Soprano in an episode of *The Sopranos*, suggesting that it is still current, at least among HBO writers.

[20] Critics seem not to have been able to determine whether Shakespeare had a particular artwork in mind when he wrote Viola's speech. Perhaps he had seen reproductions of the illusionistic grisaille paintings by Giotto, in which the cardinal virtues are depicted as niche statues. Patience is not a cardinal virtue, but, as Shakespeare implies, she would make the perfect subject for this kind of sculpture (since all patience is statuesque, and all statues are patient).

the human observer is lost in a seductive object world. "Patience" becomes, bizarrely, a synonym for aesthetic distraction, an idleness indulgently prolonged "all day." As the octave closes, one might even be tempted to read "patience" as a name for a particular art form, poetry, whose leaves (pages) are liquid, and whose eyes and seas (letters, I's and C's) are purple (majestic).

As if to punish itself for this aestheticizing lapse, Hopkins' sonnet shifts abruptly, in the beginning of the sestet, to a description of spiritual suffering:

> We hear our heart grate on themselves: it kills
> To bruise them dearer. Yet the rebellious wills
> Of us we do bid God bend to him even so.[21]

Our hearts already "grate on themselves," like clashing swords, or cogwheels slightly out of alignment. God asks us to injure ourselves further, by requiring us to bend our stiff wills to his. This provokes a Satanic response; our wills rebel, and it is a hellish, bruising labor to break them—a labor which may never succeed. As the poem closes, Patience reappears, but she or it inhabits someone else:

> And where is he who more and more distills
> Delicious kindness?—He is patient. Patience fills
> His crisp combs, and that comes those ways we know.[22]

The "crisp combs" are honeycombs, and Patience is a honey-like fluid. The moral antithesis presented in these lines is fairly straightforward, and strictly Christian. "Our" rebellious condition leads us to ask a messianic question: Where is he, the one who transcends our impatience? This is a Trinitarian "he," which could plausibly refer to God, Christ, or the

[21] Hopkins, "Patience, hard thing," MW 170.
[22] Ibid.

Spirit—since both God and Christ are patient, and the Spirit's characteristic activity is to "fill." Initially, "he" plays the alchemist or chemist, distilling kindness multiple times, into a purer and purer liquid. But as the final lines progress, they dramatize, syntactically, a transformation:

> he who... distills...
> He is patient. Patience fills
> His crisp combs.

"He," initially the subject of the transitive verb "distills," is subsequently attached to the mere copula "is." By the final line, He becomes the grammatical patient[23] *of* patience, which suffuses him, or his parts (the combs). In fact, He is finally less than an object, since he appears as "his," the pronominal accessory to another noun. This total passivity is even more striking in juxtaposition with "our" rebelliousness, which can only be relieved by God's grace. The message of the final lines is consistent with Aquinas's teaching that patience is not a natural but a theological virtue, i.e. one that cannot be actively acquired, only "infused."[24] What "we know" at the poem's end is that we cannot make Patience arrive. We can only wait helplessly by, preparing the way. Patience has nothing to do with human subjectivity, or at least with the subject of this poem.

So far, I have refrained from remarking on what may be the most eccentric feature of "Patience, hard thing:" its allusions to an unlikely source text. Beginning with "bend" in line 11, Hopkins' sonnet ostentatiously adopts the diction and imagery of the first stanza of Keats's "To Autumn." I have italicized the pertinent words below:

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[23] This usage of "patient," specific to linguistics, seems not to have emerged until the twentieth century. However, the use of "patient" as a noun meaning "a person who or thing which undergoes some action, or to which something is done" dates back much farther. "patient, adj. and n.," OED Online. Oxford University Press.
[24] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1750.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
  Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun,
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
  With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To *bend* with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
  And *fill* all fruit with ripeness to the core;
    To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding *more*
  And still *more*, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
  For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their *clammy cells*.[25]

Hopkins' puzzling, seemingly unmotivated "crisp combs" become much more legible as a revision of Keats's "clammy cells." The word "delicious" is also borrowed from Keats's odes (there is a "delicious moan" in "Ode to Psyche"). But why refer to Keats here? What is the connection between monumental patience and "To Autumn?" The answer can be found in the second stanza of Keats's ode, where Autumn appears as an allegorical woman. After we watch her sitting on a granary floor and sleeping on a half-reaped furrow, we last catch sight of her in these lines:

Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
Thou watches the last oozings hours by hours.

For Keats, Autumn is patient; that is one of her qualities. She waits through the spring and fall, and patiently oversees the processes of ripening, harvest, and decay. In "Patience, hard thing," a personified Patience is understatedly Autumnal. It is Keats who first makes a connection between Autumn and Patience. In Hopkins' sonnet, the two female deities merge. (This may account for all fruit-bearing vine in Hopkins' octave.)

[25] John Keats, "To Autumn," in *The Oxford Authors: John Keats*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (Oxford University Press, 1990), 324.

An argument could be made that "Patience, hard thing" exemplifies patience, insofar as it allows itself to be overtaken by another text. But it seems important to take note of two ways in which Hopkins' sonnet impatiently departs from "To Autumn." The first concerns meter. The final tercet of "Patience, hard thing" carries on a muted aesthetic debate with Keats, about what it means to properly "fill" a line. As Helen Vendler has shown, Keats swells his gourds, or shells, or cells—all figures for the poetic unit—conceptually, loading each with a maximum density of meaning, until they threaten to explode. However, Keats's lines all remain contained within five beats, never breaking with the pattern (though they do vary the meter slightly). Hopkins' lines, in contrast, literally "o'erbrim" with extra beats, irregularly inserted. In "Patience, hard thing," the final lines of the octave and the first tercet are Alexandrines—already a departure from the traditional sonnet form, into which Hopkins' exuberance cannot be stuffed. This leads us to expect a long final line, at the end of the sonnet.[26] But the extra beat comes "early," in the penultimate line, which is hard to scan:

> Delicious kindness?—He is patient. Patience fills...[27]

This awkwardly inserted sixth beat makes thematically appropriate demands on the reader's patience. In Keats's universe, it would be an unsanctioned, unruly eruption. Hopkins' cells are thus far clammier than Keats's, which now look comparatively crisp! On a formal level, "Patience, hard thing" is disobedient—not patient.

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[26] More specifically, we anticipate a closing sequence of two five-beat lines, followed by another Alexandrine.
[27] The syntactically unnecessary dash enforces a caesura, while literally elongating the line, stretching and attenuating the print on the page. Line 14 then contains ten syllables and five stresses, irregularly distributed according to the principles of sprung rhythm.

Perhaps more significantly, Hopkins' sonnet deviates from its Keatsian source material by re-inscribing a first-person pronoun in line 14:

> His crisp combs, and that comes those ways we know.

The lyric "I" is famously missing from the final ode in Keats' sequence. But because the poet is nowhere in "To Autumn," he is everywhere. In the ode's first stanza, Keats's poetic speaker can be identified with the seasons, with the sun, or with the natural objects which they impregnate. Whether as agent or patient, he takes part in the "loading and blessing" of nature.[28] Later, Autumn's "patient look" can be read as a figure for what Keats sometimes referred to as "completion," the tenacious working through of a conceit; or for his "stationing", the balance he achieves between progress and stasis. Again, the "patient look" is a process which the poet may not dominate, but in which he undoubtedly participates. In "Patience, hard thing," in contrast, Patience fills *his* crisp combs, while "we" are left wanting. Although the poem describes a transportive encounter, it is one which excludes us. Read in conjunction with Keats's ode, Hopkins' sonnet feels less like spiritual counsel than an admission of incompleteness, or of defeat. "Patience, hard thing" leaves readers disturbed and unsatisfied, in a state of impotence and un-fulfillment—which is to say, of impatience.

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[28] See Vendler's essay on "To Autumn," in *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1983), 227-88.

Marriage

To say that Hopkins' poem is less patient than Keats's is, admittedly, tendentious, since they are writing in very different modes. Is the sonnet, with its compressed length, tight rhyme scheme, and rhetorical involutions, inherently impatient as a form? Maybe it is unsurprising that the author of "Patience, hard thing" should never tire of writing sonnets, and leave all of his longer works, with the exception of "The Wreck of the Deutschland," unfinished. On the other hand, the sonnet provides the poet with enough space to develop multiple images, to sustain and qualify complex thoughts, and to orchestrate several movements of emergence and deferral, tension, consummation, and release. Since my argument in this chapter is that Hopkins' poems are organized in a manner which I am calling "impatient," I want to look briefly at a sonnet which makes a display of its own patience, in order to demonstrate what Hopkins' are not doing, or struggling and failing to do. As an exemplary patient sonnet, which also happens to counsel patience, I want to look briefly at Milton's Sonnet 9 ("Lady, that in the prime of earliest youth") composed in the early 1640s.[29] It will be convenient to refer to Milton's poem as "To a Young Lady." Milton was, along with Keats and Shakespeare, one of the few major English poets Hopkins cared for. However, my interest here is ultimately not genealogical; rather, I wish to use Milton's sonnet to illustrate what I mean by formal "patience," as a structure that is missing from Hopkins' late works.

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[29] Milton's more famous sonnet "When I consider how my light is spent" (usually numbered Sonnet 16) actually contains a speaking Patience, and may have been yet another source text for Hopkins' "Patience, hard thing." I have decided to focus on Sonnet 9 in this section, since its great formal restraint contrasts more sharply with Hopkins' late works. However Sonnet 16 is certainly worthy of further investigation in this context.

"To a Young Lady" was addressed to a woman who has never been identified, but who was apparently mocked for devoting herself to religious study. The sonnet's octave celebrates the patience she shows with her detractors:

> Lady that in the prime of earliest youth
> Wisely hast shunned the broad way and the green,
> And with those few art eminently seen,
> That labour up the Hill of Heavenly Truth,
> The better part with Mary and with Ruth
> Chosen thou hast, and they that overween,
> And at thy growing vritues fret their spleen,
> No anger find in thee, but pity and ruth.[30]

This poem is as much about syntax as it is about morality. We must struggle with the Petrarchan Lady, as we "climb" the clauses separating her from her predicate ("hast chosen"), a grammatical plateau. Then, we look downward, ironically, at "they that overween" (i.e. those who mock the Lady and rate themselves too highly). We brace ourselves, expecting the enemies to be punished. But there is no two-handed engine here. Instead, the Lady regards the overweeners with a contemptuous "pity," and a more unambiguously comforting "ruth." The "Ruth/ruth" antanaclasis obviously reaffirms the parallel between Milton's Lady and the biblical Ruth. But it also links her to the Archangel Michael, as he turns up in "Lycidas" (1637), where another longwinded sentence ends in a similar way:

> Look homeward Angel now, and melt with ruth.

Like the Lady, Michael is located up on a hill ("the guarded Mount").[31] Why does Milton repeat this whole configuration, in the sonnet? I think it is because he associates ascension

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[30] John Milton, "Sonnet 9 ('Lady, that in the prime')," *John Milton: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, eds. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford University Press, 1991), 35.

with the writing of a long sentence, and ruth with its ending. Producing a sentence is laborious, and when the sentence finally reaches its close, the writer's tense concentration melts, as if the language itself were finally taking pity on him. At the same time, the labor of writing actually transforms anger into ruth, by sublimating the poet's resentment and self-hatred into a sense of achievement, and tolerance.

The sestet of "To a Young Lady," which reworks the parable of Christ and the ten virgins (Matthew 25),[32] is another tour de force of deferral:

> Thy care is fixed, and zealously attends
> To fill thy odorous Lamp with deeds of light,
> And Hope that reaps not shame; therefore be sure,
> Thou, when the Bridegroom with his feastful friends
> Passes to bliss at the mid hour of night,
> Hast gained thy entrance, Virgin wise and pure.

First, we trim our lamps. Then we glimpse the marriage feast, as if peeking through a keyhole. Then in the last line Milton, have entranced us, admits us. The poem's ravishing payoff comes in the first part of the final line, just before the magnificent caesura. This is exactly the effect Hopkins attempts in the final line of "Patience, hard thing." But whereas Hopkins' line is imbalanced, with a strong opening and a lukewarm conclusion, Milton's final three beats fall beautifully, while performing an apotheosis, by conferring a Marian epithet on the Lady.

In its pacing and musicality, "To a Young Lady" is perfectly patient. Yet it is crucial to note that Milton's elegant, controlled technique accomplishes an utterly radical feat: a dynamic, dialectical interpenetration of male and female, subject and object, matter and

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[31] John Milton, "Lycidas," in Orgel, 43.
[32] Orgel and Goldberg gloss the reference in their notes.

spirit. Clearly, the Lady is to some extent a persona or projection, a proxy for Milton himself. Like her, he has shunned the broad way (of popularity) and the green (of idle pastoral). He too has dedicated himself to an endless, epic task, in the pursuit of wisdom and a pure life. Yet if the Lady is obviously a paragon, she can also be seen as a prize. From one perspective, Milton "misreads" Matthew 25, identifying himself not with the devout virgins, but with the Bridegroom Christ:

> therefore be sure,
> Thou, when the Bridegroom with his feastful friends
> Passes to bliss at the mid hour of night,
> Hast gained thy entrance, Virgin wise and pure.

At the end of the poem, Milton promises himself full carnal enjoyment of the Lady in heaven, provided he does his spiritual duties on earth. The Lady is, finally, "pure"—a word which chimes uncannily with the first line's "prime." "Be sure thou hast gained thy entrance" means "rest assured, or make sure, that I will get to enjoy your virginal body." Or perhaps it would be even better to put it this way: The sonnet's last lines describe an encounter which transcends all simple identifications. At midnight, the moment when souls pass into bliss, it is no longer possible to say who is the Lady and who the Bridegroom, who enters and who is entered. Although this reconciliation presumably takes place in the future, after death, Milton uses the present tense to suggest: 1) that bliss is extra-temporal, a state beyond time; and 2) that we are experiencing a premonition of this bliss, as we read (and as the poet did too, when he unfolded the sonnet). Paradoxically, the poem offers, if not an instant gratification (since it requires our focused attention), a worldly one—a glimpse of heaven, for the impatient.

Dangerous, lovely

Hopkins's later poetry has difficulty representing this kind of encounter. In comparison with the voluptuous spirituality of "To a Virtuous Young Lady," "Patience, hard thing" seems relatively un-sublimated. Hopkins' sonnet oscillates between abstract moral language and concrete sensualism. There is no corresponding interfusion of heaven and earth, speaker and addressee, subject and object. While the God who "fathers forth" in "Glory be to God for Dappled Things" can be taken as a figure for divinity or the poet, and while "The Windhover" famously blurs the line between Christ and the artist, beholder and beheld, Hopkins' later poems tend to hold their material "at arm's length," refusing to become what they describe. In spite of their syntactical innovations, they are in a sense too grammatical, or not fully poetic. It is as if Hopkins, "the widow of an insight lost,"[33] stops consenting to "pass into bliss." In "Patience, hard thing," this inhibition produces an unresolved conflict between Keatsian aestheticism and pious regret. Other of Hopkins' late poems pursue, in anxious language, a moralistic agenda for which there may be no better descriptor than "Puritanical."

As an example of a moralizing or cautionary Hopkins poem, I will examine another sonnet, "To what serves mortal beauty." This is a thought-heavy, discursive poem, which, like "Patience, hard thing" incorporates relatively few concrete images. It is also uniquely rhyme-poor. Hopkins adopts a French variation on the Petrarchan sonnet, a form which can be restricted to two sets of rhyme sounds, like so:

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[33] The phrase comes from "To R.B.," a sonnet Hopkins addressed to Robert Bridges shortly before his own death. Hopkins, MW, 184.

ABBA
ABBA
CCD
CCD

Hopkins bleaches the French sonnet even further, by choosing a set of rhyme sounds for the sestet which barely differ from those in the octave. (In other words, A and D are slant rhymes, as are B and C.) This makes the poem sound gruff and monotonous—an effect which turns out to be apposite, since the text recommends that we limit our sensuous enjoyment:

> To what serves mortal beauty ' —dangerous; does set danc-
> ing blood—the O-seal-that-so ' feature, flung prouder form
> Than Purcell tune lets tread to? ' See: it does this: keeps warm
> Men's wits to the things that are; ' what good means—where a glance
> Master more may than gaze, ' gaze out of countenance.
> Those lovely lads once, wet-fresh ' windfalls of war's storm,
> How then should Gregory, a father, ' have gleanèd else from swarm-
> ed Rome? But God to a nation ' dealt that day's dear chance.
> To man, that needs would worship ' block or barren stone,
> Our law says: Love what are ' love's worthiest, were all known;
> World's loveliest—men's selves. Self ' flashes off frame and face.
> What do then? how meet beauty? ' Merely meet it; own,
> Home at heart, heaven's sweet gift; ' then leave, let that alone.
> Yea, wish that though, wish all, ' God's better beauty, grace.[34]

Before proceeding any further, it is necessary to gloss the lines on the "lovely lads," which refer to a story from the sixth century:

> Pope Gregory I, when abbot of a Benedictine convent, saw in the slave-market of Rome three Anglo-Saxon boys offered for sale. He was impressed with their fine appearance, fair complexion, sweet faces and light flaxen hair; and learning, to his grief, that they were idolaters, he asked the name of their nation... When he heard that they were Angles, he said: "Right, for they have *angelic* faces, and are worthy to be fellow-heirs with angels in heaven" ...He proceeded at once from the slave market to the pope, and entreated him to send missionaries to England...[35]

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[34] Hopkins, "To what serves mortal beauty," MW, 167.

[35] Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Volume IV: Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: Scribner, 1891), 31. Hopkins' reference is identified in Catherine Phillip's notes to the Oxford edition of the poems.

In Hopkins' version of the scene, the singular Pope Gregory beholds multiple Anglo slaves. Their blonde hair reflects light, so that they stand out among the massive, swarthier crowds of "swarm- / ed Rome" like glistening wet fruit fallen on dark earth. Hopkins indicates that God sent the slaves, his angelic messengers, to Rome, specifically to arouse Gregory—who obliged his divine father by sending proselytizers to England. In the sonnet, this anecdote is presented as evidence that beautiful bodies might lead souls, and through them whole nations, to Christ.[36]

For most critics, "To what serves mortal beauty" makes a persuasive argument that visual experience can point the soul towards God. In a short essay on the poem, Thomas Dilworth suggests that it has the structure of a didactic sermon: "a subject is introduced, a story is told, and a lesson on the subject is drawn from the story." Hopkins acknowledges that beautiful bodies can be "dangerous" to souls seeking salvation. But he also makes a case for their usefulness, and advises us to adopt a particular comportment. We may "glance" at beauty, but we may not "gaze" at it, much less touch it. If we hold ourselves sufficiently aloof, then we will be granted a Miltonic reward: "what might have been an erotic relationship becomes a metaphorical, spiritual eroticism—uniting the divine Lover with the bridal soul of man."[37] Helen Vendler concurs, while laying greater emphasis on the maleness of Hopkins' beautiful mortals. In her reading, the poem is admirably direct.

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[36] Hopkins wished for a further national conversion, or re-conversion, whereby England would return to Catholicism. See Meredith Martin, "Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Stigma of Meter," *Victorian Studies* 50:2 (Winter, 2008), 243-523.
[37] Thomas Dilworth, "Hopkins' To What Serves Mortal Beauty," *The Explicator* 48:4 (1990), 264-66.

Hopkins "faces up to" his own homoerotic desires, thus "enlisting male beauty into a consonant Platonic hierarchy:"

> The rule of thumb for the Christian is to pass rapidly—after only a 'glance'—from the positive sensuous dimension to the comparative ethical, intellectual, or theological one, and thence to the superlative divine one. Each of the two "higher" degrees, once entered, enables in the poet a sinless brief return to the sensual "dancing blood." ...Each plane of the hierarchy can allow itself the sprung rhythm of rapture.

In this reading, bodies become the material emblems of a supernatural good. To its own titular question, "What is beauty for?", the poem answers, "education." Hopkins thus neutralizes without disavowing a dangerous threat to his "spiritual equilibrium."[38]

Vendler's insistence that "To what serves mortal beauty" constitutes a unified whole is odd, given that each line is literally split in half, by an eccentric mark usually transcribed as a vertical dash or an apostrophe. The formal purpose of the mark is to help us distribute the line's stresses, so that there are always three beats before the mark, and usually three beats after. But these markings, combined with a potpourri of horizontal dashes, colons, semicolons, and question marks, give the sonnet a montage-like appearance. Sonically, too, the poem is anything but "consonant." If it is a sermon, it is being delivered by someone prone to stammering, blushing, and losing his train of thought. The formal and thematic discontinuities strongly suggest that the poem is more troubled, both conceptually and affectively, than either Vendler or Dilworth acknowledge. More specifically, I would argue that the eccentric diction and syntactical license which Hopkins elsewhere uses to mimic the surfaces and movements of exterior objects, or the grating and grinding of interior suffering, here convey cognitive confusion.

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[38] Helen Vendler, *The Breaking of Style*, 23-27.

If "To what serves mortal beauty" were truly Platonic, as Vendler contends, then it might trace a journey outward, from enclosed selfhood to the apperception of another body, and from there to the attainment of abstract "grace." Such narratives of "beautiful enlightenment" can be found throughout *The Renaissance*, the collection of essays by Walter Pater, with whom Hopkins studied. One in particular bears some resemblance to Hopkins' version of the Pope Gregory anecdote (though the similarities are not strong enough to suggest a direct borrowing). The story can be found in an essay about the fifteenth-century scholar Pico della Mirandola. Pater's intellectual portrait contains not only an appraisal of Pico's books, but also a lengthy description of his physical beauty, as it was perceived by an elder scholar, the translator Marsilio Ficino:

> It was the very day... on which Ficino had finished his famous translation of Plato into Latin... And now the work was completed, the door of the mystical temple lay open to all who could construe Latin, and the scholar rested from his labour; when there was introduced into his study, where a lamp burned continually before the bust of Plato, as other men burned lamps before their favourite saints, a young man fresh from a journey, "of feature and shape seemly and beauteous, of stature goodly and high, of flesh tender and soft, his visage lovely and fair, his colour white, intermingled with comely reds, his eyes grey, and quick of look, his teeth white and even, his hair yellow and abundant," and trimmed with more than the usual artifice of the time...[39]

Ficino's account is a strange amalgamation of two Platonic myths. The setting (a lamp-lit study, with its fetishistic bust) modifies Plato's cave allegory. And the image of Pico evokes Socrates' second speech from the *Phaedrus*, in which the beloved awakens the lover's soul to an ideal beauty known before birth. In this case, the awakening is really a re-awakening, since Ficino has already dedicated his life to the good. Pater continues:

> The word mystic has been usually derived from a Greek word which signifies to shut... the Platonists themselves derive it... from the act of shutting the eyes, that one may see the more,

[39] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 27-28.

> inwardly. Perhaps the eyes of the mystic Ficino, now long past the midway of life, had come to be thus half-closed; but when a young man, not unlike the archangel Raphael, as the Florentines of that age depicted him in his wonderful walk with Tobit, or Mercury, as he might have appeared in a painting by Sandro Botticelli or Piero di Cosimo, entered his chamber, he seems to have thought there was something not wholly earthly about him... they fell into a conversation, deeper and more intimate than men usually fall into at first sight. During that conversation Ficino formed the design of devoting his remaining years to the translation of Plotinus, that new Plato...[40]

Pater presents living beauty as an ongoing corrective to the insulating, hermetic drift of Platonic mysticism. Idealism, taken to its extreme, is death-in-life. Why should the mystic have any contact with the ephemeral, deceptive forms of false consciousness? Pater's set piece suggests that this "shutting of the eyes" to outward objects might be another cave, or at least an evasion of responsibility. "Something not wholly earthly" appears to Ficino in the guise of a terrestrial, mortal object, something he would have missed if he had kept his eyes closed, or his study door locked. This vision inspires Ficino to undertake another earthly labor, the translation of Plotinus into Latin, which will in turn inspire Pico's account of the " grades or steps by which the soul passes from the love of a physical object to the love of unseen beauty."[41]

Pater's telling of this meeting is by no means salacious. But his attitude towards desire is far more relaxed than what we find in "To what serves mortal beauty," where mortal beauty is said to be "dangerous." A comparison of these two works suggests that it is the repression of homoeroticism which distorts the form of Hopkins' poem. The daring mid-line enjambment of "danc- / ing blood" is emblematic: It is as if the prim hesitation over "dancing," and the splitting of a short word over two separate lines, releases blood, as

[40] Ibid., 28-29.
[41] Ibid., 36.

if the word were violently torn and hemorrhaging. This shredding gesture gets repeated every two or three lines, as the sonnet shifts abruptly to a new topic. The poem's various propositions— about the relationship between bodily beauty and music; about the sharpening of men's wits; about Pope Gregory; about idolatry; and about subjective comportment—all seems to exist on different levels; and the "graceful" conclusion feels imposed, rather than earned.

The pair of alliterative pedagogical lines, towards end of the poem, seems to revert to the initial thesis—that beauty is more a temptation than a favor:

> What do then? how meet beauty? ' Merely meet it; own,
> Home at heart, heaven's sweet gift; ' then leave, let that alone.

Hopkins could be advocating something like Kant's "disinterested enjoyment," an aesthetic attitude based in the "heart" (as opposed to the genitals), and free of the desire to possess. If so, then these lines bear witness—inadvertently—to the painfulness of the requisite renunciation. The second half of each line contains an imperative verb, and is more strongly stressed than the first. If they were set to music in 3/4 time, the measures would alternate: ...dolce / Marcado / ...dolce / Marcado. The colloquial "let that alone" sounds especially desperate, even vicious. Like the "lovely lads," the pronoun "that" seems both to index and to conceal some particular "mortal beauty," who has occasioned the poem, and who remains mentally or physically present to the speaker. To refrain from touching this person is no easy task. The temptation to pass over from disinterested appreciation to contact is so strong that the speaker cannot permit his eyes to linger on the beautiful body. He can only "meet" it and turn away, or turn inward. Patient, sustained contemplation—even when writing—is out of the question. While "Patience, hard thing" laments the

difficulty of being patient, "To what serves mortal beauty" tries to make a virtue of impatience.

Employment

So far, the works by Hopkins I have discussed have all been "introverted;" they focus neither on external natural objects nor human society, but on internal struggles. Among nineteenth-century English poets, Hopkins may be the most aesthetically withdrawn and self-reflexive, the most cloistered (his main rival might be Keats). However there is one poem by Hopkins which does not fit this overall pattern: the maddeningly bizarre and contorted caudal sonnet "Tom's Garland: Upon the Unemployed." In its apocalyptic outlook and dissonant form, "Tom's Garland" anticipates the modernism of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound. To borrow the language of "Patience, hard thing," we could say that "Tom's Garland" does not want for war or wounds. Inspired by violent clashes between protestors and police, the poem is a heterogeneous mass of scar tissue, for which readers have had little patience (it is no one's favorite).

"Tom's Garland" thus presents critics with a paradox, well summarized by John Sutherland: Why is Hopkins "unique poem of public affairs" uttered in a language "uniquely private"?[42] By "private," Sutherland means taxing to the point of incomprehensibility, and awkward, lacking in grace—formal traits which we have come to associate with a condition of impatience. So in attending to Sutherland's paradox, we should also ask: Why is Hopkins maximally impatient with the social order, both as a reality and as a subject for poetry? And

[42] John Sutherland, "'Tom's Garland:' Hopkins' Political Poem," *Victorian Poetry* 10 (1972), 113.

what could this tell us about the situation of poetry during an era of spectacular class antagonism?

"Tom's Garland" is modelled after Milton's political sonnets, including the paranoid "On the New Forces of Conscience in Parliament" (c. 1646). Both poems have codas or tails, though Hopkins' is shorter, at six lines (Milton's coda has eight). Both poems also attack pamphlet-writers and other activists, though in very different contexts. "Tom's Garland" addresses the events leading up to "Bloody Sunday," a conflict which took place in London's Trafalgar Square in 1887. For the past several years, London's large population of unemployed men had gathered periodically in the square, to demand "work or bread." Some of the men were homeless, and began to sleep there. These squatters attracted socialist activists (or "agitators," according to the Metropolitan Police), who began to hold meetings in the area. Demonstrations in favor of Irish Home Rule were also organized. The situation had grown chaotic by October of 1887, leading the police to forbid further gatherings. This indiscriminate ban on freedom of assembly angered not only the socialists, but also many middle-class liberals. One day in mid-November, about twenty thousand people congregated in the vicinity. A massive, armed police force blocked entry to the Square, warding off the crowd with truncheons. Three people were killed, and over 200 wounded. Although much of the public was sympathetic to the protestors, the violence turned out to be a major blow to the socialist movement in England.[43] The reaction of George Bernard Shaw, who was in attendance, seems to have been typical: following Bloody Sunday, Shaw abandoned insurrectionary politics in favor of Fabian gradualism.

[43] Lisa Keller, *Triumph of Order: Democracy and Public Space in New York and London*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 126-31; and Mariani, *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 382-85.

William Morris, similarly, participated in the protests, but came to think of the confrontation as having been untimely.[44]

From his post in Ireland, Hopkins seems to have taken an ambivalent interest in the demonstrations. In the late summer of 1887, he began "Tom's Garland." In early November, just before Bloody Sunday, he wrote to Robert Bridges to inquire about the "most approved" form for a caudal sonnet, since he now "felt forced to exceed the beaten bounds" of fourteen lines. Hopkins sent the finished poem to Bridges in late December:[45]

> Tom—garlanded with squat and surly steel
> Tom; then Tom's fallowbootfellow piles pick
> By him and rips out rockfire homeforth—sturdy Dick;
> Tom Heart-at-ease, Tom Navvy; he is all for his meal
> Sure, 's bed now. Low be it; lustily he his low lot (feel
> That ne'er need hunger, Tom; Tom seldom sick,
> Seldomer heartsore; that treats through, prickproof, thick
> Thousands of thorns, thoughts) swings though. Commonweal
> Little I reck ho! lacklevel in, if all had bread:
> What! Country is honour enough in all us—lordly head,
> With heaven's lights high hung round, or, mother-ground
> That mammocks, mighty foot. But no way sped,
> Nor mind nor mainstrength; gold go garlanded
> With, perilous, O no; nor yet plod safe shod sound;
>   Undenizened, beyound bound
> Of earth's glory, earth's ease, all; no one, nowhere,
> In wide the world's weal; rare gold, bold steel, bare
>   In both; care, but share care—
> This, by Despair, bred Hangdog dull; by Rage,
> Manwolf; worse; and their packs infest the age.[46]

On a first reading, we may pick up on the poem's irritability, its wistfulness, and the anger which dominates its ending. But the argument is not easily excavated. Thankfully, Hopkins

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[44] Sally Ledger, "Radical Writing," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature: 1830-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 143-44.
[45] Mariani, *Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 382-85.
[46] Hopkins, "Tom's Garland," MW, 178.

sent a "crib" (a pedagogical summary) to Bridges in February of 1888, which can help us to make sense of the beast. According to Hopkins' own account, the sonnet opens with a description of a character, Tom, who is an English navvy, i.e. a construction worker employed on a public works project, in this case the building of roads. Tom is a happy laborer, and his happiness inspires a condensed meditation on Hopkins' ideal nation, a monarchy. The word Hopkins uses for his perfect society, "commonweal," has socialist undertones; William Morris's newspaper was *Commonweal*. Already there is a tension in "Tom's Garland" between the poem's reactionary recommendations and a radicalism which seeps into its language.

Hopkins goes on to put forward an analogy, familiar from many classical and Renaissance sources, between the commonwealth and the individual human body, each "with many members and each its function." Specifically, "the head is the sovereign," and "the foot is the daylabourer." Both are indispensable parts of a whole, but their occupations are different, which is why they are differently appareled. In Hopkins' poem, the sovereign is imagined as a bare "lordly head," for which "heaven's lights" make a crown. Tom, in contrast, is associated metonymically with his boots, each with a circle of hobnails in each sole—the eponymous "garlands." In his crib, Hopkins explains that while Tom's position is "the lowest in the commonwealth," it is not lacking in dignity:

> But this place still shares the common honour, and if it wants one advantage, glory or public fame, makes up for it by another, ease of mind, absence of care... the scene of the poem is laid at evening, when they [Tom and his companion Dick] are giving over work and one after another pile their picks, with which they earn their living, and swing off home, knocking sparks out of mother earth not now by labour and of choice but by the mere footing, being

> strongshod and making no hardship of hardness, taking all easy. And so to supper and bed... the labourer—surveys his lot, low but free from care... [47]

Hopkins seems to regard the exchange of glory for "ease of mind, absence of care" as a fair trade. Clearly, this scenario departs from reality. Britain's working classes did not cede power or "public fame" willingly; they found themselves near the bottom of an entrenched social hierarchy. To say that manual laborers "mak[e] no hardship of hardness" is patently a fantasy. And the nineteenth-century state which employed navvies on large-scale public works projects was not an ideal medieval commonwealth, but an apparatus designed to protect and facilitate the movement and accumulation of capital.

Hopkins seems aware of the anachronistic absurdity of his "glory for power" model. But the qualification he offers, after the *volta* in line 12, deflects attention from the working classes to the disorganized lumpenproletariat. The problem, for Hopkins, is not that Tom is being exploited, but rather that huge numbers of men—the unemployed—are being excluded from the commonwealth altogether. Hopkins' crib continues:

> But presently I remember that this is all very well for those who are in, however low in, the Commonwealth and share in any way the Common weal [sic]; but that the curse of our times is that many do not share it, that they are outcasts from it and have neither security nor splendour; that they share care with the high and obscurity with the low, but wealth or comfort with neither.[48]

In the sonnet, Hopkins alludes to this exclusion in elliptical language:

> But no way sped,
> Nor mind nor mainstrength; gold go garlanded
> With, perilous, O no; nor yet plod safe shod sound;
> Undenizened, beyound bound
> Of earth's glory, earth's ease, all; no one, nowhere,

[47] Letter of February 10, 1888. Quoted in Phillips' notes to MW, 384.
[48] Ibid.

In wide the world's weal; rare gold, bold steel, bare
In both; care, but share care—

Tom speeds through his labor cheerfully, because he feels himself to be "sped" (supported and made prosperous) by God and society. But there is another class of people who are not even "ill sped;" they are "no way sped," a phrase which implies that they are lacking not only in resources but in vitality and presence. Hopkins calls them "undenizened," an interesting coinage—since "denizens," mere dwellers in the land, are normally opposed to "citizens," those with official status and rights. Hopkins' outcasts are less than denizens. They are cut off both from the polity and from the land, which makes them "no one, nowhere." They have no stake in society, since they share neither "rare gold" (glory) nor "bold steel" (strength), only a corporeal "care"—suffering, sorrow, grief, trouble, bare life.

Hopkins' sonnet conveys something like pity for the outcasts. But the closing couplet also warns that their degeneracy makes them dangerous:

This, by Despair, bred Hangdog dull; by Rage,
Manwolf; worse; and their packs infest the age.

Richard Isomaki has read the couplet as a condensed moral allegory, in which Despair and Rage father multiple "packs" of loathsome canines.[49] Some are merely dull, the destitute living dead. Others are angry, wolf-like, and threatening. In the crib, Hopkins identifies these manwolves as "Loafers, Tramps, Cornerboys, Roughs, Socialists, and other pests of society"[50]—transients and extremists, the kind of people who gathered in Trafalgar Square.

[49] "This," the state of things, breeds with Despair, to beget a dull Hangdog (a dog fit only to be hanged); and with Rage, to beget Manwolf (or worse). Isomaki suggests that these couplings are based on the birth of Death from Sin, in *Paradise Lost*. Richard Isomaki, "Hopkins, Community, Functions: 'Tom's Garland.'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 47 (1993), 479.
[50] According to Phillips' notes, "Cornerboys" is an Irish term for loafers.

The sonnet's condemnation of these "pests" is impersonal, insofar as the infestation is explicitly tied to a collective failure (a failure to share, a failure in all share). On the other hand, by counting the socialists among the pests, Hopkins rules out radical change. The poem makes room for the ideal commonwealth—a reactionary fantasy—and for the actual infestation. But it denies the possibility of a future redemption, theological or otherwise. And it may implicitly endorse the use of violence, to check and disperse the wild dogs.

Some critics have seen a connection between the poem's repression of protest and the Hopkins' repressed homosexuality. At the same time that he was working on "Tom's Garland," Hopkins also composed another sonnet, "Harry Ploughman," which relishes the sight of agricultural laborers:

> He leans to it, Harry bends, look. Back, elbow, and liquid waist
> In him, all quail to the wallowing of the plough. 's cheek crimsons...[51]

"Harry Ploughman" brings out the lustfulness in "Tom's Garland," which, though it pays less attention to the laborers' physiques, does touch on their muscularity and bodily health. "Tom's Garland" has also been linked to the Ford Maddox Brown's 1865 painting *Work*, which, like Hopkins' poem, presents a vision of an ideal commonwealth.[52] At the center of Brown's canvas, a group of muscular navvies are digging up a road. They are surrounded by figures representing various social types, including two gentlemen on the far right edge of the painting. These are in fact portraits of Thomas Carlyle and the socialist Frederick Maurice, and may be intended to illustrate not leisure, but another sort of labor, the work

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[51] Hopkins, "Harry Ploughman," MW, 177.
[52] Julia F. Saville, *A Queer Chivalry: The Homoerotic Aestheticism of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, (Richmond: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 185-88.

of the mind.[53] Within the context of the composition, however, their function is to emphasize the navvies' spectacularity. The laborers are sunlit; the gentlemen stand in the shade. The laborers' forearms are exposed; the gentlemen wear jackets. Maurice surveys the workers, taking in, one supposes, their beauty. Carlyle looks out at the viewer with an expression which could be called roguish.

Hopkins was not blind to the eroticism of Brown's painting, which he encountered as a student. In her book on Hopkins' queerness, Julia F. Saville cites a journal entry in which Hopkins briefly mentions the artwork, then immediately confesses to the sin of "looking at navvies in Swiss Cottage Fields" (a district near London). In Saville's reading, the first section of "Tom's Garland" poeticizes *Work*. In both the poem and the painting, the idea of a well-ordered commonwealth authorizes the amatory gaze with which the intellectual views the working man. If the social hierarchy is operative, and if the worker is consumed by productive tasks, then "the working male body can be the subject of admiration." But idleness—unemployment—imperils this relation:

> Without a legitimate place or share in what should literally be the common wealth, the likes of Tom lose the self-mastery that Hopkins loves to attribute to laboring men and degenerate into creatures of repulsive brute energy. Correlatively, without the alibi of work to moralize his admiration, the admirer of Tom may well come to feel guilty of complicity in a related degeneracy: the gratuitous admiration of the male body.[54]

We might add that the first half of "Tom's Garland" also imagines a "moralized" homosocial relationship between workers, in the fellowship between "sturdy Dick" and "Tom heart-at-ease." When the commonwealth breaks down, these fellows become manwolves, and their dyadic fellowship is transmuted into "pack-belonging." In "To what serves mortal beauty,"

[53] Rob Breton, *Gospels and Grit: Work and Labour in Carlyle, Conrad, and Orwell* (University of Toronto Press, 2005), 43.
[54] Saville, *A Queer Chivalry,* 188.

Hopkins worries about the risk of individual damnation. In "Tom's Garland," the stakes are even higher: the lower classes have regressed into a condition of orgiastic barbarism, and the leisured classes are implicated in the catastrophe. The scale of this problem, too terrible to describe except by indirections, helps to account for the poem's panicked incoherence.

If "Tom's Garland" adverts to Hopkins' queer anxieties somewhat evasively, its subtitle, "Upon the Employed," points more overtly to Hopkins' personal frustrations. As Hopkins' biographer Paul Mariani has pointed out, the sonnet has, despite its political subject matter, a confessional inflection. At the time of its composition, Hopkins was literally outside his native commonwealth, "undenizened," so to speak, in Ireland. Like the poem's unemployed masses, he felt himself to be lacking in "mind" and "mainstrength," mental and physical power.[55] In his journals and notes from the period, Hopkins is often distressed by the thought of his own squandered potential:

> What is my wretched life? Five wasted years almost have passed in Ireland. I am ashamed of the little I have done, of my waste of time, although my helplessness and weakness is such that I could scarcely do otherwise... All my undertakings miscarry: I am like a straining eunuch.[56]

And yet Hopkins might not have felt so weak and infertile if he had never flourished, or delivered. Read in an autobiographical light, the figures of Tom and Dick seem to bear witness to Hopkins' better moments:

> Tom—garlanded with squat and surly steel
> Tom; then Tom's fallowbootfellow piles pick
> By him and rips out rockfire homeforth—sturdy Dick;
> Tom Heart-at-ease, Tom Navvy: he is all for his meal
> Sure, 's bed now. Low be it: lustily he his low lot (feel
> That ne'er need hunger, Tom; Tom seldom sick,

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[55] Mariani, *Gerard Manley Hopkins,* 384.
[56] Retreat notes of January 1, 1889, MW, 303.

> Seldomer heartsore; that treads through, prickproof, thick
> Thousands of thorns, thoughts) swings though.

Tom's foot is garlanded, like the metrical feet in Hopkins' early nature poems. Dick's pick is also a pen, with which he tears through the material world (language), to throw up novel re-combinations, including "rockfire," ephemeral sparks. When inspiration visits and Hopkins is engaged in the healthful labor of writing poetry, he is at once sturdy and easy, sensitive and careless, "prickproof" against the spiny thoughts which otherwise torment him. Though his lot is low, both as a mortal being and as a priest at the bottom of a hierarchy, he finds, occasionally, a way to swing.

We can read the beginning of "Tom's Garland" as a traditional Romantic lyric. The speaker briefly loses himself in the patient contemplation of what may as well be a natural scene; Tom and Dick are as happily unselfconscious as Keats's nightingale. The intellectual drama of the poem should consist in how the speaker handles worldly knowledge, when it intrudes, in line 9:

> Little I reck ho! lacklevel in, if all had bread:

The word "I" is enough to spoil the fantasy. With the return to self-consciousness comes the sad recollection that Tom (the thriving poet) is not in fact a natural object, but a member of a social order now perceived to be in decline. This line is crucial for our study of impatience, because it directly ascribes the poet's wretchedness to the wider political situation. What prevents Hopkins from sharing permanently in Tom's recklessness is the knowledge that not all have bread. It is not only that Hopkins the priest feels a responsibility to assist the needy. The very fact of social inequality interrupts lyric expression, irreversibly. Within his own soul, the poet reproduces the dysfunctional

commonwealth. There are still moments of sovereignty, and of playfulness, but for the most part, like a growing segment of the populace, he feels himself to be stunted and immobile:

> nor yet plod safe shod sound;
> Undenizened, beyond bound
> Of earth's glory, earth's ease, all; no-one, nowhere,
> In wide the world's weal; rare gold, bold steel, bare
> In both; care, but share care—

These lines are impatient in more than one sense. They are restless in style, a series of edgy, alliterative fragments, and exasperated in tone—inconsolably so. Whatever passions patience opposes—Despair, Rage, envy, doubt—Hopkins gives way to them here. Precisely because it is vexing to read, "Tom's Garland" may come closer than any other of Hopkins' poems to conveying what its author felt like most of the time.

While the damaged form of "Tom's Garland" makes manifest Hopkins' subjective frustrations, the poem may also point, obliquely and inadvertently, to certain unrealized utopian possibilities. Like a socialist tract, "Tom's Garland" rejects modern society *in toto*, on the grounds that it is unjust. There is an overlap between Hopkins' reactionary position and that of the revolutionaries: both comprehensively reject the established order. This coincidence of extremes is captured in Morris's speculative 1890 novel *News from Nowhere*, which restages the Bloody Sunday crackdown in the future, at the "appropriate" moment for revolution. In the novel, the liberal newspapers simply report on the government crackdown, or else they condone it. But the editor of another paper, whose employees are "thought to be one of the most violent opponents of democracy," takes a different view:

> ...the editor... found his manhood, and spoke for himself and not for his paper. In a few simple, indignant words he asked people to consider what a society was worth which had to

> be defended by the massacre of unarmed citizens, and called on the Government to... put the general and his officers who fired on the people on their trial for murder. He went further, and declared that whatever his opinion might be of the doctrines of the Socialists, he for one should throw in his lot with the people, until the Government atoned for their atrocity by showing that they were prepared to listen to the demands of men who knew what they wanted, and whom the decrepitude of society forced into pushing their demands in some way or other.[57]

Unlike the fictional editor, Hopkins had not quite "found his manhood" when he wrote "Tom's Garland;" he never says that the actual government crackdown was wrong. Yet he resembles the editor insofar as he finds himself unable to defend a society which must resort to violence. In a tenuous way, Hopkins' "throws in his lot with the people," whose "cares," as we have seen, he unfortunately shares. To say that "Tom's Garland" is impatient is to say that it is haunted by a spectral scene, of bodies sleeping and marching together in the streets, "pushing their demands" because they can't afford to wait.

[57] William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 122.