ROMANTICISM AND THE AESTHETICS OF MODERN TRANSPORT

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ABSTRACT

The Romantics are commonly considered ardently technophobic, especially when it came to the railways. Wordsworth in particular expressed apprehension about the corrosive encroachments modern transportation made on nature and culture, pitting it squarely against “old poetic feeling.” In Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Modern Transport, I reconsider the fraught relationship Romantic writers had with transport modernity. Laying aside well-documented anxieties, I identify many of the ways in which innovations in Romantic-era transport—the air balloon, the postal coach, steam navigation and the railway—made new demands on human feeling that significantly contributed to literary forms and representations. Drawing on contemporary writings about these new vehicles, each of my chapters traces their shaping influence on central Romantic aesthetic and affective concepts, including sublimity, fancy, and nostalgia. I suggest that such categories are each responsible for some form affective displacement (“transport”), whether spatial, temporal, or fictional, that finds representation in at least one new mode of transport. My study thus addresses a neglected area of Romantic studies: the impact of emerging technologies on poetics and aesthetics. It uncovers a history of emotion within a history of technology.

I situate my argument within a long history of philosophy and poetry in which transport features as a trope for the management or willful eruption of emotion, one that stretches from Plato’s Phaedrus to Freud’s writings on trauma. I read the Romantic vehicle as a modern trope that accounts for distinctly modern aesthetic experiences. If poets like Thomas Hood identified the air balloon as “fancy’s car,” a perfect image for a vagrant or dispersed consciousness, J.M.W. Turner and Percy Shelley found in the steamboat an analogue for the counterforce of the imagination during sublime experience. In similar fashion, the supplanting of the mail-coach service by the mechanical railway prompted De Quincey to remark that steam power “disconnected man’s heart from” what moves him. Seizing on the superannuated coach as rhetorical figure to advance his project of impassioned prose, he recruited structures of feeling native to mail-coach transport to generate both nostalgia and trauma in his readers. This study thus proposes that despite their feelings, the Romantics were indebted to modern transport for some of their most essential feelings.
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Introduction: Vehicular Form in the Age of Modern Transport

The Romantic poet is a part of the total process, engaged with and united to a creative power greater than his own because it includes his own. This greater creative power has a relation to him which we may call, adapting a term of Blake’s, his *vehicular form*…Sometimes the greater power of this vehicular form is a rushing wind, as in Shelley’s Ode and in the figure of the “correspondent breeze” studied by Professor Abrams…Sometimes it is a boat driven by a breeze or a current, or by more efficient magical forces in the Ancient Mariner. The image occurs so often in Shelley that it has helped to suggest my title…Sometimes the vehicular form is a heightened state of consciousness in which we feel that we are greater than we know, or an intense feeling of communion…

-Northrop Frye, “The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism”

Motions and Means, on land and sea at war
With old poetic feeling, not for this,
Shall ye, by Poets even, be judged amiss!
Nor shall your presence, howsoever it mar
The loveliness of Nature, prove a bar
To the Mind's gaining that prophetic sense
Of future change, that point of vision, whence
May be discovered what in soul ye are.

-William Wordsworth, from “Steamboats, Viaducts, and Railways”

In an essay that identifies a series of Romanticism’s most central contributions to a long history of poetry, Northrop Frye devotes considerable attention to a Blakean concept called “vehicular form.” In Blake’s poetry vehicular form refers to the energy of the poet’s soul, or, in his intricate mythological program, to Los, the earthly form of human creativity. According to Frye, vehicular form manifests in Romantic poetry as a dynamic spiritual interaction with powerful natural forces—like wind and waterpower—that figures the moment of inspiration.

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2 Wordsworth reprinted this famous sonnet in his *Kendal and Windermere Railway. Two Letters; Reprinted from the Morning Post. Revised with Additions* (Kendal: R. Branthwaite, 1845). He notes there that he first published the poem in 1837, and “composed it some years earlier,” p. 22.
Imagery that captures the projection of feeling onto natural power, a phenomenon that John Ruskin later derided as the pathetic fallacy, symbolizes the Romantic poet’s encounter with nature as an inspiration that springs simultaneously from within and without. As M.H. Abrams argued in his canonical study, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, Romantic emotions, or “motions” of the soul, found analogues in natural forces. We encounter this phenomenon in Romantic tropes, like the Aeolian harp, which produces music according to its attunement with a sweeping wind. We find yet other iterations of it, as Frye notes, in Wordsworth’s famous “correspondent breeze” or the fading coal in Percy Shelley’s *Defense of Poetry*, “which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness.”

The poet’s challenge by a “creative power greater than his own” suggests vehicular form’s ties to aesthetic categories like the sublime, an overpowering experience that provokes the imagination in the creative moment. In theories of the sublime, the recurring term that informs our understanding of vehicular form is “transport,” or the uplifting of the soul during influxes of strong feeling. Edmund Burke called the movement caused by the sublime object a being “hurried on by an irresistible force.” Both “transport” and vehicular form insist on the capacity that powerful emotions have to “move” or displace the self, and the role works of art play in producing this effect. While potentially dangerous because it drives the self into increasingly irrational states, this affective displacement is essential to poetic activity. One might also link vehicular form to theories of genius, which similarly describe the possession of one part of the self by its own demon, a process that spurs the creative faculties. By identifying transport as a

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4 In his little essay on genius, Giorgio Agamben argues that the encounter with it is terrifying, yet poetic, because genius involves a tension between the personal and the impersonal, the ego and the genius aspect: “…the feeling that occurs when Genius exceeds us on every side is called panic—panic at something that
trope for powerful affective states, Blake’s vehicular form participates in a long tradition in philosophical and poetic thinking about the emotions, one that is as old as Plato and as recent as Freud. But, how might we think about vehicular form in an age of modern transport? If Romantic poets projected feelings onto natural power, what does it mean that the modernization of transport fundamentally transformed our relationship to those forces by exerting technological control over them, as in steam locomotion? How might this transformation have impacted the trope? Did new technologies of transport introduce new affective experiences—new ways of being moved—that poets might translate into works of art? This study ponders vehicular form in an age of modern transport.

Unsurprisingly, modernity’s vehicles would prove problematic cases for the Romantics. Despite his own engagement with the trope in the form of thinking horses and metrical rowboats, Wordsworth’s 1837 sonnet, “Steamboats, Viaducts, and Railways,” places modern transport squarely “at war/with old poetic feeling.” The poem offers just one example of Romanticism’s condemnation of technological modernity, and especially transport, as not only fundamentally un-poetic, but also potentially destructive to both mind and body. While Wordsworth’s antagonistic feelings in the opening lines of his sonnet are clear, the triumphant sentiment expressed in the rest of the poem betrays some ambivalence. Celebrating the achievement of man’s technological mastery over nature, Wordsworth anticipates objections to the new modes of transport that his readers might ascribe to him, if only to disappoint. One senses reluctance comes over us and is infinitely greater than what we believe ourselves to bear.” Note how similar the language is to Frye’s account of vehicular form. See “Genius” in Profanations (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2007), pp. 9-19.

5 Robert Southey, for example, complained in an 1839 letter that the rapidity of railway travel might have a “tendency to bring on a determination of blood to the head.” William Arthur Speck mentions the poet’s fear of railway travel in his biography, Robert Southey: Entire Man of Letters (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 247. Wolfgang Schivelbusch has also explored early responses to physiological and pathological consequences to steam travel in The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
and a conflict of interest in his praise. Laying aside the transformation of the British countryside, which is every day “marred” by the planting of these technologies into the soil, Wordsworth sings a hopeful tune about the marvels such technological change will bring. Part of this optimism arises from man’s attainment of that “prophetic sense” of futurity, a vision of what England is then about to become. And, while “sense” here can be understood as an idea of or glimpse into the future, the term also invites a reading about the ways in which Wordsworth likely speculated about the transformation these technologies would have on man’s experience, how they would augment man’s “sense” of travel. Indeed, it is odd to encounter a poet with such an established nostalgic posture look to modernization, if even for a moment, with marked excitement.6

Wordsworth’s praise is reversed in two 1844 letters to the Morning Post about the proposition to extend a railway from Kendal to Windermere in the Lake District. 7 In these letters, the poet makes a strong plea against the introduction of the line to his local retreat by citing two arguments. The first is a sentiment expressed in his sonnet, namely, that the project would spoil the natural beauty of the district. His second objection is that the railway endeavor would allow “speedy access” to hordes of the “humble classes” into the region. Such access would disrupt local rhythms with the various “excitements and recreations” designed for incoming tourists and subject the Lakes to certain “desecration” by a rapidly escalating consumer

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6 This is not the only poem in which Wordsworth praises modern transport. In “To Enterprise” (1820), he extols the air balloon and steamboat: “And hast Thou not with triumph seen/How soaring Mortals glide between/Or through the clouds, and brave the light/With bolder than Icarian flight?.../Or, adverse tides and currents headed,/And breathless calms no longer dreaded,/In never-slabakening voyage go/Straight as an arrow from the bow:/And, slighting sails and scorning oars,/Keep faith with Time on distant shores?”

Ted Underwood has identified an affinity between Wordsworth’s idea of industrial and poetic labor: “Wordsworth interpreted mechanical production, then, along the lines shaped by his theory of imagination: he understood it as an appropriation and humanization of natural power.” The Work of the Sun: Literature, Science and Political Economy, 1760-1860 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 111.

culture. Indeed, both the railway and developments in steam navigation contributed to the kind of mass tourism that Wordsworth dreaded. And yet, *Guide to the Lakes*, which helped fuel such tourism, exposes a frustrating paradox that Denise Gigante has recently identified in her discussion of Romantic taste. For Gigante, the illustrated *Guides* rendered diminutive, by a process of reframing, the poet’s sublime consumption of nature—“a mind that feeds upon infinity”—as mere picturesque ‘sight-bites.’

Railway culture thus exposed Wordsworth’s quiet retreat to the unforeseen dangers of class and consumerism, and his participation in such popular culture carried real aesthetic implications with respect to how his poetry and the landscape would be packaged and digested. In his second letter to the *Morning Post*, dated December 20, 1844, realizing that he has backtracked from his early favorable opinion of man’s innovations in transport, Wordsworth modifies his position: “Once and for all let me declare that it is not against railways but against the abuse of them that I am contending.” In other words, Wordsworth had no desire to antagonize the technologies themselves, but to warn us of their gratuitous encroachments on the rhythms of every day life and on nature. While modern transport undoubtedly represented man’s triumph over nature, the human consequences attending it would prove devastating to the nature he had celebrated in verse for decades as well as man’s capacity for aesthetic appreciation.

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8 “…the very author who had complained of the illustrations as a material reduction of his poetic descriptions in the original *Guide to the Lakes* now proposes a book of small drawings for which he himself will provide the text, illustrating this scenery for the railway traveler as it passes….Reducing the feeding mind to the dimensions of “material portraiture” would destroy the infinity upon which that mind depends for its sublimity.” *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 83-87.


10 One revealing moment might be found in Book 8 of *The Excursion*, when the Wanderer says of the power of the mills, “I rejoice/Measuring the force of those gigantic powers/ That, by the thinking mind, have been compelled/ To serve the will of feeble-bodied mind” (8:204-7). In this study, I underscore a neglected relationship between technology, imagination, and the body that would revise ideas about Romanticism’s antagonistic relationship with modernity.
My study challenges Wordsworth’s claim that modern transport threatened the vitality of “old poetic feeling.” The problem with the nature poet’s assertion is that figures of transport have a long and rich history in poetry and rhetoric, and my aim here is to show that modernity’s vehicles—the air balloon, the steamship, and the mail-coach—were no different. This dissertation thus considers cultural responses to the modernization of transportation in England during the Romantic period in order to expose its unlikely impact on Romantic poetics and aesthetics. Drawing on literary, cultural, and scientific writings, I tell a story about Romanticism’s neglected romance with its modern vehicles. They introduced novel and extreme sensations, unprecedented conceptions of time and space, and an entirely new relationship to natural power. By drawing out the implications of these new experiences, I uncover how innovations in Romantic-era transport actively shaped or restructured human feeling. Each of my chapters examines cultural production surrounding one mode of transport in order to demonstrate how Romanticism’s new tropes of transport contributed to the articulation and reformulation of central aesthetic and poetic concepts like sublimity, fancy, and nostalgia.

The poetic and psychological discourse devoted to each of the aesthetic categories and emotions I address engage a rhetoric of “transport,” or affective displacement. Fancy, sublimity, nostalgia, and trauma each involve some psychodynamic relationship between affect and movement. As distinctly modern faculties and feelings, they revise a language that previously described the human soul as subject to movements or “commotions” in passionate or creative states. Theorists of the faculty Romantics called “fancy” from William Duff to S.T. Coleridge, for example, repeatedly characterized it as mobile or “roving,” propelled along according to the drift of association or shuttling between sense experience and the inner life of the mind. Similarly, writings on sublimity described a challenge to the imagination by a power greater than
the subject. This challenge took the form of a “rising up” of the imagination as in response to the sublime object. By the Romantic period, the most common sublime objects were natural phenomena, like tempests, earthquakes, or vistas of immense proportion. In the poetry of the period, these natural forces provided the occasion for lyric awakening. Unlike fancy and sublimity, nostalgia and trauma are pathological feelings resulting from a threatening encounter with modernity that directly affect the subject’s relationship to temporality. They are similar in that they both involve painful temporal displacements, but maintain a distinct relation to desire. While nostalgia represents a longing for the geography of the past, trauma occasions its unwilled return. By linking each of these aesthetic and affective categories to artworks representing or writings devoted a new transport technology, I situate Romantic modes of transport within a long history of vehicular form.

My argument depends on the fact that major developments in transport took place during the Romantic period. Innovations in locomotion like the air balloon and John Palmer’s revolutionary mail-coach system, which set national transport and postal delivery to a strict timetable, both emerged in 1784. Steam navigation, only an experiment in engineering in the 1780s, gained momentum at the turn of the century, and steam vessels began to ply the Thames carrying parcels and passengers alike as early as the first decade of the nineteenth century. The end of the Napoleonic Wars opened up Europe to a new era of steam travel both between England and the Continent and within Europe. While the railways only pick up steam as a mode of mass transit in the 1830s, permanently transforming travel as well as the English landscape, public demonstrations of locomotives can be traced back as far as 1804. Moreover, the period witnesses an unprecedented boom in English tourism, both within the country and abroad, an
experience that had a profound impact on literature and cultures of aesthetics. But, most importantly for my study, new modes of transport emerged that fundamentally changed the experience of travel as well as the human body’s orientation to what moves it.

By the end of the Romantic period, modern transport had significantly transformed daily life. Even before the steamboat and the railway began to operate as viable forms of transport, the mail-coach had reached the peak of its efficiency and speed. Economic growth and industrial progress demanded that roads be improved, that canals be constructed, and that transportation be quick enough to adapt to the demands of expanding empire and the production of capital. England’s economic prosperity in the late eighteenth century also spurred such leisure enterprises as recreational or “pleasure” coaching, which introduced such vehicles as the barouche and the phaeton so popular in Austen novels. The railways and the steam navigation contributed to mass tourism, which, in an unprecedented way, mobilized large populations of aesthetic consumers of all classes. While the air balloon did not function as a viable means of local or mass transit, its power as an object of spectacle and entertainment drew vast crowds of

11 There were, however, considerable impediments to travel during the wars with France (1793-1815), a time in which safe passage to the Continent was put to a halt. The exception was, of course, the brief, year-long period in 1802 that coincided with the Treaty of Amiens. During this time, Dorothy and William Wordsworth and William Hazlitt brief made trips to Paris and J.M.W Turner sped through Italy sketching Roman sculptures and landscapes. The end of the Napoleonic Wars witnessed a flood of English tourism to the Continent. In fact, we owe the literary production of much of the second generation of Romantics, like Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley to their renewed mobility after the defeat of Napoleon.

12 For a succinct account of the transformation of English tourism from the 18th century through the end of the Napoleonic Wars, see Inge Herold’s study of painter J.M.W. Turner’s travels to the Continent over five decades in Turner on Tour, New York: Prestel, 1997. pp. 7-21. Scottish novelist John Galt wrote a brief travel novel that is set aboard a British steamboat, titled The Steam-Boat (Edinburgh and T. Cadell, London, 1822). The novel is narrated by a central character, Thomas Duffle, who restores his spirits with travel on a steamship after suffering from the “hypochonders” or obstructions in the abdominal organs, the seat of what was then considered the spleen and “vapors.” On the boat, he meets fellow travelers of mixed class and gender along the way, each of who has an interesting tale to offer. He notes that he was “so taken up, not only with the matter, but the manner of the different narrations, while [he] brought them back to mind, and transported, as it were, out of [his] natural body, and put into the minds of the narrators, so as to think with their thoughts and to speak with their words…” p. 4.
mixed class and gender the likes of which England had never seen. Thus, one of the hallmarks of modern transport was its ability to “move” the masses to engage in new aesthetic experiences previously reserved for the wealthy.

Much has been said about the Romantic reaction to modern transportation, which was perhaps the principal target for arguments about the negative encroachments of technology on the natural world. These responses are usually corralled to formulate a prevailing and representative sentiment of Romantic technophobia. Romanticism’s antagonistic relationship with technological advance stems from an idea of the technological as a primarily disruptive force, interrupting man’s bond with nature by a destructive mediating power and the rendering of the natural world mostly unrecognizable. Technology also contributes to a distinct, but related account of alienation described by Marx, whose critique is partly grounded in the increasing expectations for labor productivity, one that binds, and even subverts man to the machines he operates. And as Phillip Bagwell has shown, large-scale development projects such as the construction of canals and railways provided the necessary infrastructure for the circulation of the fruits of that increased human production. The first passengers of the railways had the distinct feeling of being moved around like commodities rather than travelers, a sentiment shared by those first patrons of steamships. Furthermore, modern transport introduced the concept of psychological, rather than merely physical human injury to medical discourse, what we now call trauma. Such a discourse imagined the human body and its nerves continuous with the vehicle itself; which, when interrupted by a crash or a jolt, also interrupted the flow of consciousness to

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For historian Philip Bagwell, the industrial revolution was only possible after a revolution in transportation at the end of the 18th century, one that was both fueled and followed by rapidly increasing commercial demand. See *The Transport Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1974), p. xiv. Rick Szostak has also argued that a modernized system of transportation was necessary for the Industrial Revolution itself. See his introduction in *The Role of Transport in the Industrial Revolution: A Comparison of England and France* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991), pp. 3-49.
protect the self from psychic harm. Modern transport thus made the Romantics anxious about the ways in which the extreme sensations it produced might disorder the self.

More recently, however, critics have begun to reconsider the technological presences within nineteenth century literature and culture. Against the grain of readings that expose Victorian anxieties about industrial advances by writers like Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin, Tamara Ketabgian has revealed some of the surprising ways in which machines introduced a host of new metaphors for writers who explored complex psychic, affective, and even spiritual human experiences. Instead of alienating man from nature, Ketabgian finds in machines, such as hydraulic steam engines, dynamic extensions of the self and its subjectivities as well as prosthetic feelings and communities. John Tresch similarly calls for a reappraisal of the place of technology in the literature and art of Romantic age in his book, The Romantic Machine. Reconsidering the still pervasive opposition between ideas that cluster around Romantic organism—nature, the heart, the spirit, human feeling—and those that have been rallied under the banner of mechanism—reason, calculation, matter—Tresch sheds light on some of the fundamental ways in which romanticism and “mechanism” were in fact intertwined. In doing so, he demands that Romantic scholars begin to uncouple philosophical “mechanism” (a shorthand concept for automatic processes and natural laws) from the mechanical, which might surprisingly

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14 Enda Duffy has recently explored this concept in modern representations of the train and the automobile: “In brief, what took place was a cultural, psychic, and medical reconceptualization of the human organism: it would henceforth be valorized for its capacity for energy. The vehicle as prosthesis takes over some of the powers of locomotion of the body, then demands of it new intensities of sensory perception.” The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, and Modernism (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 6.


play a vital role in understanding how the Romantics engaged with the natural world and with each other.

Identifying a group of “mechanical Romantics” in early nineteenth century France, a group that includes the geophysicist Alexander von Humboldt and the composer Hector Berlioz, Tresch argues that machines wielded by these figures helped extend their technical as well as aesthetic and political projects. This study joins Tresch in precisely this effort to reexamine the technological within the terms of Romanticism. My interest is in transportation in particular because of its historically fraught relationship with Romantic aesthetics and the central role it played in vilifying the mechanical as antithetical to man’s spiritual kinship with nature. Instead, what becomes clear in the works I examine is that man’s technological ability to wield natural power for progress is aligned with Romantic conceptions of the imagination as a fundamentally transformative faculty that is an expression of the will in a way that mirrors the will of God.

Mine is not a study that attends to Romantic cultures of travel and its relationship to aesthetic and literary production. Many critics have already devoted considerable attention to this field. George Dekker’s *Fictions of Romantic Tourism*, for example, examines the rise of tourist culture from Thomas Gray to William Hazlitt, and reads autobiographical accounts of travel into the fictional worlds of Walter Scott, Ann Radcliffe, and Mary Shelley. Dekker traces the significant impact Romantic literature had in promoting tourist culture by representing natural scenery that Englishmen would later pursue in droves, especially after the Napoleonic Wars. Like Dekker, Chloe Chard has written extensively about eighteenth century and Romantic travel

17 About the Romantic machine, Tresch argues: “…taken as aids for externalizing and expressing the self, machines drew forth virtual powers and brought about conversions among hidden forces; they could be used to create new wholes and organic orders, remaking humans’ relationship to nature and renewing nature itself,” p. 3.
narratives by Laurence Sterne, Tobias Smollett, and Lord Byron in relation to aesthetic categories like sentimentality and wonder. In particular, Chard revisits the sublime as an aesthetic emotion that involved crossing boundaries and traversing human limits and traces its usage by real and fictional English travelers into the Continent. While my study is invested in the relationship between travel writing and the aesthetic categories it engages, it is not so much concerned with social attitudes toward travel, the foreign and familiar, or behavioral codes abroad. Rather, my preoccupation is with the surprising impact of new transport technologies on the aesthetic categories with which they become entangled as a result of the revolutionary forms of mobility they introduced.

There is a long tradition of criticism that considers the coach as a structuring device in narrative in the eighteenth century novel. In *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel*, Percy Adams points to the importance of the coach and the inn to narrative progress, particularly in the novels of Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne, each of who wrote in the tradition of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. The Quixotic unit of passenger/ass offers an emblem of digressive and unwilled impulses that the narrating subject struggles to bridle. John Dussinger has also theorized the relationship between carriages and consciousness in the novels of Sterne, who “first identifies consciousness with the kinetic vehicle and set the pattern for countless novelists since the nineteenth century who use the carriage as a metonym of character.” This phenomenon is

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20 Henry Fielding is known to have referred to his inter-chapters as “little inns,” or spaces of momentary respite, insisting on correspondences between plot and spatio-temporal journeying See *Joseph Andrews*, Book II, Chapter I: “…for first, those little spaces between our chapters may be looked at as an Inn or Resting-Place, where he may stop and have a glass…”


especially prominent in *Tristram Shandy*, which returns repeatedly to the vehicular image as a digressive, plot-driving force:

> Though man is of all others the most curious vehicle, said my father, yet at the same time 'tis of so slight a frame, and so totteringly put together, that the sudden jerks and hard jostlings it unavoidably meets with in this rugged journey, would overset and tear it to pieces a dozen times a day--was it not, brother Toby, that there is a secret spring within us.\(^23\)

If for Tristram’s father life is a journey, then man is a vehicle that must weather the rugged conditions of the excursion by the strength of his “spring,” or that spiritual shock absorber, the soul.\(^24\) Sterne certainly transformed coach travel into a trope for the excesses of sensibility as well as of sentimentality. *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768) is essentially a novel about being “moved” to extreme states of sympathetic engagement, and the text, like the carriage, becomes a shock absorber for strong feelings. Yorick’s sensitivity to everyone and everything he encounters during his journey registers in the jolting dashes that halt and redirect the reading experience of the text. Thus, Sterne’s novel is one in which physical movement and the body’s various “motions” are cleverly inventoried in the language of the text itself.

Sterne’s use of the passenger/coach configuration as a figure for the mind’s bond with the sensorium provides a model for my consideration of modern transport. It offers a conceptual map


\(^24\) For an enlightening discussion of this trope in Sterne’s novels, see James Chandler’s “The Language of Sentiment” in *Textual Practice* 22 (1), 2008. pp. 21-39. Chandler argues that Sterne “refashioned the picaresque novel by recasting the picaro’s novels in terms of the discourse of sensibility, the ‘sensorium’ and the soul…Sterne managed to find a conceit in which he could figure the practice of sympathy as a kind of imaginative mobility—the capacity, as Adam Smith had suggested a few year’s earlier, of passing into the points of view not one’s own.” pp. 26. Also useful is his article "Moving Accidents: The Emergence of Sentimental Probability" in *The Age of Cultural Revolutions: Britain and France, 1750-1820*, ed. Colin Jones and Dror Wahrman (Berkeley: University of California, 2002).
of the relationship between affect, movement, physiology, and psychology that I consider in relation to the vehicles that emerge during the Romantic period. The air balloon, for example, allowed for a poetic wish fulfillment of a vagrant mind that shuttles across landscapes and between subjectivities, a type of movement ensured by what the Romantics called fancy. The counter-current movement of the steamboat, which converted natural power to move against natural rhythms, became the perfect image for a mind in a state of Burkean sublimity, transforming the subject’s grand perceptions of the sublime object into figures that would try—and fail—to account for it. And, the mail-coach, with its system of temporal organization, offered writers a means of structuring narrative in a way that registered tensions between feeling and temporality. In short, modern transport would prove more poetic than Wordsworth imagined. In the following sections, I will meditate on “transport” as a feeling and as a figure in order to establish some of the theoretical stakes of this study and end by offering a roadmap of its parts.

Vehicular Feelings

Only begotten Son, seest thou what rage
Transports our adversarie, whom no bounds
Prescrib’d, no bars of Hell, nor all the chains
Heapt on him there, nor yet the main Abyss
Wide interrupt can hold; so bent he seems
On desperate revenge, that shall redound
Upon his own rebellious head…

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (III. ll. 80-86)

In his book on Miltonic style, Christopher Ricks dwells on the poet’s use of “transport” in the passage above to account for the relationship between Satan’s rage and his odyssey to Eden. God, who is speaking here, folds into his concern about the devil’s paroxysm of anger the related issue of his journey back from Hell. Satan’s affective energy quite literally catapults him through
chaos to the fringes of Heaven. Ricks ties this energetic movement to Milton’s strong sense of
transport as a metaphor: “Milton re-establishes the power of the original metaphor, by setting the
word in a context that stresses the physical roots of the emotional meaning, so that what we see
is transport as something that does literally and powerfully move you.”

According to Ricks, rage literally transports Satan out of Hell. This sense of “transport” as physical movement tied to affect is bound up in a long history of aesthetics—and particularly the sublime, a category to which the Romantics repeatedly assign Milton’s works—as well as theories of figurative language. For Longinus, whose seminal essay on the sublime lies firmly within a tradition of rhetoric, sublimity is aroused by poetry or speech that “transports,” or causes commotions in the soul of the audience. Instead of persuading, sublime language inflames the passions and dazzles the subject. What “transport” means precisely has perplexed critics for centuries because the term invites a host of different readings, not only about the function of metaphor in the sublime (is it a literal or a metaphorical experience?), but also about the phenomenological effect of reading, and the spiritual role of poetry, to name a few.

Interpretations of “transport” in this sense proliferated over the course of the eighteenth century, a period during which the sublime became entangled with the discourse of travel writing. When Englishmen toured their own country or went abroad, they applied the language

26 …sublimity is a certain distinction and excellence in expression, and that it is from no other source than this that the greatest poets and writers have derived their eminence and gained an immortality of renown. The effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion, but ‘transport.’” Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, 2nd edition (London: Cambridge University Press, 1907).
27 Peter de Bolla delves into this quandary in his study of the sublime: “For, while ‘transport’ habitually associated with sublime sensation had, by the time of the early eighteenth century, become a figure for sublimity, a trope of the figurative power of the sublime, it is precisely this double figuration which disturbs and troubles theorists we will go on to discuss.” De Bolla suggests that while rhetoric did not set out limit cases for “transport” understood in the figurative sense, aesthetic theory picks this task up in accounting for numerous examples of what might account for this effect. *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics, and the Subject* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989).
of aesthetic categories to sites that accorded with the principles of aesthetic appreciation. In other words, the relationship between movement and feeling implied in “transport” becomes increasingly literal at this time. Anne Radcliffe’s novels, for example, were often characterized as “transporting” because of the enchanting style she fashions to relate her accounts of natural landscapes. “Transport” in Radcliffe’s works accounts for the effect of style and dazzling imagery that draws the reader into the world of fiction. In his discussion of romance, Karl Kroeber characterizes Radcliffe’s novels as “travel combined with rapture.” For Kroeber, there is no real precedent to Radcliffe’s prose, which engages physical and psychological movement at once. Indeed, by the Romantic period, movement and aesthetic judgment are vitally linked, and what I mean by “movement” refers to both travel as spatial displacement and the activation of psychological faculties during an aesthetic experience.

In his essay On the Sublime (1810), the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Dugald Stewart lamented the neglect of theorists of the sublime in addressing its literal or “primitive” senses. In a section titled “Of Sublimity, in the Literal Sense of the Word,” Stewart expresses frustration at the “vague” and “unsatisfactory” accounts of the category in writings by Burke and Henry Home (Lord Kames), who insist that sublimity is “an emotion somewhat similar to what is experienced.” Stewart begins by addressing the quality of elevation:

In reflecting on the circumstances by which Sublimity in its primitive sense is specially distinguished, the first thing that strikes us is, that it carries thoughts in a direction opposite to that in which the great and universal law of terrestrial gravitation operates….An image perfectly analogous to this has universally occurred as an expressive type of those mental endowments which are confined to a few favored

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individuals. It is thus we speak of the flights of imagination and of fancy … The literal sublime presents the most impressive images of an aspiring ambition, or a tendency to rise higher; in opposition to that law of gravity which, of all the physical facts, is the most familiar to our senses (347-348).

Stewart’s essay ponders what it means to take sublimity, and the descriptors tied to it, on its face. Among the examples he poses is the difference between looking upward to, or downward from a precipice. If we see a “fellow-creature” at the brink of a precipice high above us, Stewart argues, “the principle of sympathy transports us instantly in imagination to the critical spot; exciting in us some degree of the same feeling which we should have experienced” (354). For Stewart, those who examine their own play of imagination will notice the shifting direction of its movements. What he describes is akin to the virtual experience of sympathetic shuttling between subjects described by Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The importance of “transport” here lies in the literalization of the sublime as an experience of affective displacement tied to sympathy.

Had Stewart read “transport” more literally than he did, he might have examined the narratives of Romantic balloonists, who also critiqued theorists of the sublime by describing their own feelings of elevation and movement. After making the first air balloon ascent in England in 1784, Vincent Lunardi challenged a dominant aesthetic discourse in his account of the historic voyage:

The critics imagine, for they seldom speak from experience, that terror is an ingredient in every sublime sensation. It was not possible for me to be on earth, in a situation so free from apprehension. I had not the slightest sense of motion from the machine. I knew not
whether it moved swiftly or slowly, whether it ascended or descended, whether it was agitated or tranquil, but by the appearance of objects on the earth.  

Likely drawing from literary distillations of Burke’s aesthetic writings, Lunardi summons a vocabulary of the sublime—terror, vastness, suddenness—only to revise it. His assertion that critics can “only imagine” whereas he draws from experience suggests that the air balloon made sublimity literal where it had only been figurative before, that is, only imagined. Balloon flight is distinct from Stewart’s example of the precipice in that the subject is not only situated at an elevated position, but also in motion. That is, in addition to the movement of the alternating positions of the imagination, the person in a balloon is also moved. Therefore, a person on the ground looking up at a balloonist might be moved to imagine the sight below, while the aeronaut is as moved by the prospect as he is by the machine. In other words, modern transport literalizes “transport.”

Lunardi’s account of sublimity offers just one example of the work of this project, which traces the re-articulation of aesthetic categories in relation to developments in transport. Vital to my argument is the distinction between transport as a figure that persists as a useful image in philosophical and poetic writings about emotion and “transport” as an expression that identifies the experience of displacement by strong feeling, as in the sublime. Of course, these concepts are vitally linked, and my study in many ways depends on their connection. What binds them is rhetoric. A Romantic theory of figurative language is distinct from earlier accounts in that, for Romantic thinkers, like Rousseau, Vico, and Wordsworth, figurative language precedes literal

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30 An account of the first aerial voyage in England, in a series of letters to his guardian, Chevalier Gherardo Compagni, Written under the Impressions of the various Events that affected the Undertaking, by Vincent Lunardi, Esq. Secretary to the Neapolitan Ambassador (London: printed for the author: and sold at the Pantheon; also by the publisher, J. Bell, at the British Library, Strand; and at Mr. Molini’s, Woodstock-Street, M,DCC,LXXXIV, Entered at Stationers Hall, [1784]), pp. 32-33.
language and is born out of eruptions of strong feeling.\textsuperscript{31} The causal relationship is as follows: the figure (metaphor-as-transport) emerges from the passion (“transport”). Metaphor is the Romantic master-trope because it is etymologically tied to an idea of the figure arising out of the passion. It is the linguistic displacement that springs from an affective displacement: the metaphorical vehicle springs from the passion. My study suggests that distinctly Romantic feelings found analogues in modern vehicles.

Recent discussions of Romantic rhetoric have wrestled with the problem of “transport.” In his essay, “Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric,” Paul De Man expands on precisely relationship between “transport” as feeling and figure in his analysis of Baudelaire’s “Correspondences”.\textsuperscript{32} To makes sense of the final line of the poem, “…Qui chantent les transports de l’esprit et des senses” (“[perfumes]…That sing the transports of the soul and the senses”), De Man engages a metaphor of the Paris metro:

It allows, at any rate, for a sobering literalization of the word "transport" in the final line "Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sense." "Transport" here means, of course, to be carried away beyond thought and sensation in a common transcendental realm; it evokes loss of control and ecstatic unreason… In the words of our text, "les transports de l'esprit" and "Les transports des sense" are not at all the same "transports." We have

\textsuperscript{31} Here I am thinking of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s \textit{Essay on the Origin of Language}, Giambattista Vico’s \textit{New Science}, and Wordsworth’s \textit{Preface to Lyrical Ballads}. Wordsworth’s famous definition of poetry as an “overflow of powerful feelings” is in line with these earlier theories: “For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature, and in such connexion with each other, that the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified.”

learned to recognize, of late, in "transports" the spatial displacement implied by the verbal ending of metaphorein. One is reminded that, in the French-speaking cities of our century, "correspondence" meant, on the trolley-cars, the equivalence of what is called in English a "transfer"—the privilege, automatically granted on the Paris Metro, of connecting from one line to another without having to buy a new ticket (251).

For De Man the transfers, or "correspondences," in this poem "merge two different displacements into one single system of motion and circulation, with corresponding economic and metaphysical profits" (252). To transport the senses and the soul is not the same thing, and to confound them is inaccurate. And yet, aesthetics has traditionally done so. What De Man seems to be getting at is the problematic nature of the transcendental promise of "transport" as ecstasy. The title makes a promise that the "transfers" the poem makes will be apparent to the reader, but the affective displacement that makes the transfer possible can never be traced. For De Man, the remarkable nature of metaphorical transfers is that they erase their tracks. It might prove impossible to trace the figure back to the feeling because the feeling is absorbed into the figure in the transfer. One does not need to buy a new ticket when one transfers on the metro, and the economic surplus—the excess of feeling—coincides with the erasure of the original destination. That is, when it comes to the feelings that give rise to them, metaphors cover their tracks.

As De Man insists, then, problem with transfers in Baudelaire’s poem is not the phorein, but the meta: whither are we transferring, and from where? He is uneasy about the correspondences in the poem because they suggest seemingly impossible transfers: “Within the confines of a system of transportation—or of language as a system of communication—one can transfer from one vehicle to another, but one cannot transfer from being like a vehicle to being like a temple or a ground” (253). The difference is that transfers can only be made within a
closed system and not to an altogether separate system. Transcendence is problematic because it takes us nobody knows where. And so, the poem may be self-conscious about the limitations of the transports it promises. I’m interested in De Man’s discussion of the Paris metro in relation to “Correspondences” because it employs a literal illustration to make sense of a rhetorical quandary. If there is anything to take from this meditation on the process of metaphor it is the difficulty one is met with when attempting to literalize, or account for the metaphorical process.

In this study I’m invested in what figures or tropes might tell about the feelings from which they spring. Adela Pinch has offered similar reflections. For Pinch, personification, or prosopopoeia, is “figurative language par excellence, happening spontaneously and demonstrating the capacity of language itself to become animate.”33 In other words, personification is a particularly effective trope because it fuses subject and object by transforming feelings into figurative persons in order to convey particular feelings to readers. In their registration of the feeling, readers are affected by the trope almost as if by sympathetic connection to figurative persons.

For De Man, vehicular tropes help us make sense of metaphor. His reading raises the following question: what might vehicular figures tell us about the feelings that produce them? The explanatory power of the metro lies in its capacity to help us understand the limitations of accessing a transcendental realm in the Baudelaire poem. And yet, the movement made possible by the feeling (the transfer) does, in other ways, point back to the feeling. When your metaphors are vehicles, they expose the two distinct kinds of movements they occasion—the affective and linguistic. The poet is able to move (transfer) precisely because he is moved (“transported”). De Man’s use of the vehicular trope insists that it becomes useful in theorizing strong affective

states because it does indeed expose the feeling. To borrow an example from one of the poets
studied in this dissertation, Asia’s song in Percy Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* illustrates my
point:

My soul is an enchanted boat,
Which like a sleeping swan doth float,
Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing
And thine doth like an angel sit
Beside the helm conducting it,
Whilst the winds with melody are ringing (Act II, scene v.)

In this passage, “transport” works in three ways: as a vehicular metaphor (the soul that is a boat),
as the music that drives the soul/boat, and as the feeling that the singing inspires (“transport”).

Shelley’s verses demonstrate how vehicular tropes make legible the feeling that makes them
possible. Asia’s soul is a boat because she is *moved* by song.

“Transport” is often used to signify abstract excesses of feeling, as when Wordsworth is
“surprised by joy—impatient as the wind/I turned to share the transport.” Here, “transport”
describes overwhelming feeling, but also a reflection on feeling. To be surprised by joy is to
acknowledge its power from a place of detachment or displacement. The speaker of

Wordsworth’s poem is aware of his ecstatic moment, one that is perhaps tied to the division of
the self implicit in the idea ecstasy. We are drawn out of ourselves by feeling and find ourselves
looking in from a place of alterity. Moreover, the “turn” expressed by the narrator—“I turned to
share the transport”—is one that motions toward expression and figuration, but one that will find
no recipient. Even if the excesses of feeling could find a figure, the person for whom they are
meant could never share in them. Nevertheless, the poem expresses a desire to pass on the
passion that erupts. As Pinch and Miranda Burgess have argued, “transport” appears everywhere
in Romantic texts not only as an expression of extreme affective states, but also as a term that
describes the circulation of feelings.\textsuperscript{34} For David Hume the channels created during the experience of sympathy allow the passions to pass with ease from one person to another, producing “corresponding movements in all human breasts.”\textsuperscript{35} In a similar move, Burgess investigates the idea of feeling as contagion, one that caused particular anxiety during the French Revolution. Within these terms, English isolationism during the wars with France might be characterized as a containment strategy that sought to prevent the spread of revolutionary sentiment.

Burgess also locates this anxiety about open channels of contagious sympathy in Lord Shaftesbury’s account of panic in his \textit{Letter Concerning Enthusiasm} (1711), which draws on precisely this metaphor of contagion. For Shaftesbury, panic is raised in large groups and “conveyed by aspect, or as it were by contact or sympathy” “And in this state, man’s very looks are infectious. The fury flies from face to face, and the disease is no sooner seen than caught.”\textsuperscript{36} The well-documented Romantic anxiety about the potential unruliness of politicized crowds finds its source in Shaftesbury’s account of panic and enthusiasm. As Mary Fairclough has recently argued, however, there is a significant evolution in philosophical thinking about the relationship between sympathy and political collectives over the course of the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{37} Early in the century, sympathy is perceived as the communication of manners and sentiments between gentlemen, while later accounts expose a growing fear of the crowd as a democratic mob bent on popular uprising. Percy Shelley’s characterization of the Reign of Terror after the French Revolution as a “panic, which, like an epidemic transport, seized upon all

\textsuperscript{34} See Pinch’s \textit{Strange Fits of Passion} and Miranda Burgess’ “Transport: Mobility, Anxiety, and the Romantic Poetics of Feeling” in \textit{Studies in Romanticism} 49; 2, Summer 2010.
classes of men,” underscores late Romantic concerns about the uneducated masses as even more susceptible to contagions of passion because of deficiencies in judgment and taste.  

Shelley’s sense of “transport” betrays a fear about the inability to manage unruly emotions. The idea of “transport” as contagion is thus bound up with the class politics of the crowd.

For Jacques Rancière, however, it is precisely the poet’s ability to distribute feeling through this very infrastructure of sympathy that contributed the politicization of Romantic poetics. Rancière develops this idea of “transport” as shared feeling in his discussion of the politics of Wordsworth’s poetry, which so depends on the liberty of the poet and his movement across the landscape. 

Wordsworth’s contribution was a poetics that stresses the democratic communication of feelings and natural associations in a state of excitement. According to Rancière, poetry becomes political the moment it evolves beyond mimetic capacity and employs figure as a means of circulating a poetic subjectivity and its utopian visions. 

For Rancière, Wordsworth’s poetic enterprise of projecting the self onto the landscape redistributes the sensible that politicizes aesthetic representation. Natural forces, like Wordsworth’s wandering cloud, became vehicles for human sentiments, metaphorized and mobilized to be shared with the community.

Thus far, I have shown that “transport” describes strong feelings that displace the self as well as how those feelings might be shared with others. Recent Romantic criticism that treats “transport” as contagion bear directly on this study because modern transport mobilized large

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40 Wordsworth describes this process of poetic transmission most clearly in the twelfth book of The Prelude: “I remember well/That in life’s every-day appearances/I seemed about this time to gain clear sight/Of a new world—a world, too, that was fit/To be transmitted, and to other eyes/Made visible” (XII, ll. 367-72). The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850 (New York: Norton, 1973).
populations. While this line of criticism has exposed an anxiety about political mobs, it has not dealt with another type of crowd frenzy addressed here: consumer culture driven by modern transport. I have also shown how “transport” makes a frequent appearance in travel writings that engage aesthetic categories, a presence that gestures toward a relationship between affect and movement beginning in the eighteenth century. Modern transport introduced new kinds of movement—whether flight, or speedy land and sea navigation—but also mass transit. Modernity’s vehicles thus produced new structures of feeling by connecting and moving vast numbers of people whether for business or pleasure. The new forms of mobility they offered made them ideal tropes for writers interested in exploring affective states especially attuned to those “movements.” Innovations in locomotion helped figure some of the peculiar psychodynamic processes Romantic writers explored in their work, processes that involved sympathy, sensibility, imagination, and a new way of theorizing the poetic image. Treated as aesthetic objects, Romanticism’s modern vehicles offered insight into emotions and psychological processes where no earlier tropes were available. In the following section, I trace the development of transport as a trope rather than as a feeling in order to situate the vehicles in this study within a long history in thinking about the emotions and human psychology.

**Transport as Trope: A Brief History**

It is surprising how ubiquitous transport is in philosophical and poetic discussions of emotion. It recurs a favorite trope, not only for inspiration and creativity, but also in figuring the relationship between mind and body, as Descartes would famously do in his *Meditations* (1647). There, the philosopher engages a metaphor of pilot and vessel in his theory of the relation between material and immaterial (or thinking) substance:
Nature also teaches me by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, etc. that I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but that I am very closely united to it, and so to speak intermingled with it that I seem to compose with it one whole... For all these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain, etc. are in truth none other than certain confused modes of thought which are produced by the union and apparent intermingling of mind and body.41

Descartes’ metaphor illustrates the interaction between mind/soul and body and is chiefly concerned with the will: the element of locomotion, located in the body and the passions, is in constant need of management. Expedient as it is, Descartes admits that the difficulty with the metaphor is that mind and body are fused or “intermingled.” In The Passions of the Soul (1649), Descartes sketches a similar interactive, thermodynamic model for the mind/soul-body relation in which the body’s “animal spirits” communicate with the soul by passing, via the nerves, through the pineal gland, which is the organ of the soul and the source of the human will. It translates the body’s “spirits” and energies into thoughts:

…the small gland which is the principal seat of the soul is suspended within the cavities containing these spirits, so that it can be moved by them in as many different ways as there are perceptible differences in the objects. But it can also be moved in various different ways by the soul, whose nature is such that it receives as many different impressions—that is, it has as many different perceptions as there occur different movements in this gland. And conversely, the mechanism of our body is so constructed that simply by this gland's being moved in any way by the soul or by any other cause, it

41 Rene Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, with selections from the Objections and Replies, trans. by Michael Moriarty (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 52.
drives the surrounding spirits towards the pores of the brain, which direct them through the nerves to the muscles; and in this way the gland makes the spirits move the limbs.\footnote{The Passions of the Soul (1649) in Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings, trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 230-238.}

For Descartes, the pineal gland is the mechanism by which the soul (pilot) governs the body (ship). As the organ through which the soul exerts its will, it is the mediator between the material and immaterial world, physical and thinking substance, translating perceptions and emotions into human thought.

The Cartesian figure of pilot/vessel undoubtedly shares characteristics with the ancient rhetorical trope of equestrianism. In poetry and rhetoric, the figure recurs as a fable of mastery over the passions during the creative process. Perhaps the oldest source for this trope is Plato’s allegory of the chariot in \textit{Phaedrus}. There, Plato represents the soul as a charioteer and two horses, a black and a white, corresponding to the rational or moral impulse and the base or appetitive passions, respectively.\footnote{“In my analogy, a soul is like an organic whole made up of a charioteer and his team of horses. Now, while the horses and charioteers of gods are always thoroughly good, those of everyone else are a mixture. Although our inner ruler drives a pair of horses, only one of his horses is thoroughly noble and good, while the other is thoroughly the opposite. This inevitably makes driving, in our case, difficult and disagreeable.” \textit{Phaedrus}, trans. by Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 28.} According to Plato’s dynamic allegory, only a successful navigation of the pair of horses will allow one to gain access to an enlightened state. One of the common uses for the equestrian trope is as a pedagogical analogy that doubles as a figure for the affective labor involved in the compositions of the rhetorician or poet. Not only is there an ethics of the soul implicit in the analogy, as the self governs its own passionate nature, there is a corresponding ethics in the use of the trope for the sake of art, persuasion, or instruction.

Because the reader or listener will be influenced by the discourse produced by the poet or
speaker, there are significant social implications tied to his ability to govern his own creative process.

In his *New Introductory Lectures*, Freud also uses the trope to figure conflicting human drives in his discussion of the psychic anatomy:

The ego must on the whole carry out the id’s intentions; it fulfills its task by finding out the circumstances in which those intentions can best be achieved. The ego’s relation to the id might be compared with that between a rider and his horse. The horse provides the locomotive energy, and the rider has the privilege of deciding on the goal and of guiding the powerful animal’s movement. But only too often there arises between the ego and the id the not precisely ideal situation of the rider being obliged to guide the horse along the path by which it itself wants to go.44

In Freud’s hands, the equestrian trope becomes a model, not for the soul, but for the human psyche. Instead of accounting for the mind’s encounter with the body’s “motions” or circulation of spirits (as in the Cartesian metaphor) or as a figure for the soul’s struggle over its baser appetites, Freud’s horse and rider represent the distribution of psychic energies and motivations. The focus in the passage on “locomotive energy,” or what Freud called psychic *drives*, features as an important development in a long history of the trope.45 As I’ll discuss later, modern transport required new forms of “locomotive energy,” whether this took the form of what balloonists called “rarefied” air or the steam-power that governed the hydraulic engines of steam locomotives. If the human emotions, or “movements” of the soul, are the source of the self’s

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45 In my third chapter, I also discuss the role the railway played in Freud’s theories of trauma. As a modern mode of transport that plays a role in theories of emotion, the train participates in a long history of psychic damage.
locomotive energy, my study proposes that man-made forms of energy that powered modern transport coincided with new feelings that sprung from new conceptions of psychic mobility.

In his essay “Of Practice,” Montaigne engages the equestrian trope in a way that looks ahead to Freud. The essay describes a near-death experience after falling off of a horse and recovering from a brief loss of consciousness. Writing about the episode allows Montaigne to anchor a reflection on the idea that man must prepare himself for death. Montaigne’s displacement from his horse symbolizes a temporary loss of the will and the passion that seizes the soul in the moment of death. He attempts to master the moment of death by accounting for the lost time of the episode through writing. Montaigne’s essay returns repeatedly to the theme of the movement of the soul during his accident, which is also the moment of the vacancy of consciousness. The willfulness of the horse mirrors the state of the body during the passion that seizes him during death. The soul is eventually recovered, but not without difficulty:

It seemed to me that my life was hanging only by the tip of my lips; I closed my eyes in order to help push it out, and took pleasure in growing languid and letting myself go. It was an idea that was only floating on the surface of my soul, as delicate and feeble as all the rest, not only free from distress but mingled with that sweet feeling that people have who let themselves slide into sleep.46

Montaigne’s essay stands in as a rhetorical supplement to the self that he tries to recover from the accident. The experience of death causes a split in the self that is also native to the process of writing, and the essayistic reflection on practice, does the double work of recovering both selves. As Lawrence Kritzman has recently argued, “the simulation of death occurs in a place where memory appeals to a figurative language to transcribe an “experience” that otherwise escapes it.

The image of Montaigne on horseback is the driving force behind the allegorical transformation that the text carries out in connection with someone who finds himself “sur le trottoir” [prominently displayed]. Montaigne’s meditation on mastery over death is a clear precursor to Freud’s theory of the death drive and, in particular, the idea of repetition compulsion, which is an effort to master an event of trauma by experiencing it afresh. As I’ll show in my third chapter devoted to The English Mail-Coach, De Quincey’s near-death experience on the coach and subsequent attempts to recover that moment falls between Montaigne and Freud’s reflections on precisely this kind of mastery through the rhetorical management of a vehicle.

Vital to this study is the strong presence of the equestrian trope in a long tradition of poetry, particularly as it symbolizes the moral responsibility of the poet to society at large. Sir Philip Sidney’s Apology for Poesy, for example, begins with a meditation on the virtues of good horsemanship as a metaphor for the regulation of the poetic impulse. For Sidney, the figure represents the poet’s ability to govern or control the impulses of the imagination in forging successful and morally instructive conceits. This is what Sidney refers to when he makes an argument about the necessity of poet’s “erected wit” overcoming his “infected will.” The horse stands in for the poet’s animal nature. The element of restraint native to the trope not only refers to the importance of the poet’s management his own emotional and imaginative impulses, but also to the consequences his art will have on the moral instruction of his reader.

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48 Montaigne’s essay “Of Coaches” returns to this same anxiety of being displaced by a vehicle as a point of reflection about the experience of history and empire.

49 See the introductory remarks on horsemanship in Sidney’s Apology for Poetry; or the Defence of Poesy, edited by R.W. Maslen. (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002). For the discussion of wit and will: “…since our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it.” p. 86.
The trope undergoes significant transformation in the eighteenth century. Swift’s satirical fable in *Gulliver’s Travels*, for example, reverses the traditional rhetorical scheme. Instead of representing man’s obstinate and passionate nature, Swift’s Houyhnhnms parody the horrific triumph of reason over passion, while human beings are deprived of their rational faculties and excised from the society of thinking beings. One is surprised, then, to learn Gulliver’s revelation that the Houyhnhnms are superb poets, despite their distrust and lack of vocabulary for lies and fictions. The Houyhnhnms are thus in many ways align with a Platonic stance on the social ethics of poetry. But, their position on fictions is fundamentally misaligned with the use of figurative language, which thrives on the abuse of words. Swift’s rational horses are an exemplary case within the genre of fable. In that tradition, animals are anthropomorphized for the purpose of moral instruction. However, the Houyhnhnms, while presented as moral paragons, prove detrimental to Gulliver’s sense of humanity, and his capacity for human sympathy in particular. Swift’s fable thus inflicts moral violence instead of cultivating moral edification. And instead of serving as a warning about the passions, the trope functions a critique of Enlightenment reason and the period’s larger anxieties about the emotions.

In Romantic literature, the equestrian trope reverts to a representation of the human passions, but is employed for much different ends than in earlier writings. Romantic horses do not, as in the classical and early modern period, express anxieties about human passions that require vigilant management. Instead, they become instruments for an education in sensibility as

50 Of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver suggests that “in poetry, they must be allowed to excel all other mortals; wherein the justness of their similes, and the minuteness as well as exactness of their descriptions, are indeed inimitable. Their verses abound very much in both of these, and usually contain either some exalted notions of friendship and benevolence or the praises of those who were victors in races and other bodily exercises.” *Gulliver’s Travels: An Authoritative Text, the Correspondence of Swift, Pope’s Verses on Gulliver’s Travels and Critical Essays* (New York Norton, 1970). Quite the contrary, the Houyhnhnms prove to be insensitive to their fellow horses during times of illness and death.
well as stewards of a human equilibrium with nature in an age of increasingly mechanized transport. Wordsworth, for example, uses horses as agents of re-education or moral rehabilitation for individuals who are either affectively deficient, as in Peter Bell, or rationally impaired, as in “The Idiot Boy”. As Paul Fry has discussed in his careful study of these poems, the beast is only summoned in situations where they supply a human lack, which accounts for Fry’s interest in how Wordsworthian representations of horseback signal the mechanism of poetic meter.\(^{51}\) Because Wordsworth is invested in the idea that metrical regularity tempers the passions, his thinking horses represent an affective education for human figures that are sub-human. In this sense, he dispels an anxiety about affective displacement in the history of the equestrian figure and transforms the animals into tropes for feelings that have something to teach us. They become aspects of the self that require reintegration as part of a poetic curriculum for moral education (in line with Wordsworth’s sense that his poems have a “purpose”) instead of rogue energies that require containment. As modern fables, Wordsworth’s equestrian poems humanize horses in order to return emotional equilibrium to humans themselves. However, as reading experiences, the poems also carry moral agendas that are tied to the metaphor of movement as affective reflection, or the idea that we are “moved” by representations. Therefore, progress on horseback mirrors a moral progress, not only for the characters affected by the horses, but also for the reader on whom Wordsworth has a design.\(^ {52}\)

\(^{51}\) See Fry’s chapter, “Hoof After Hoof, Metric Time” in Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 91-118.

\(^{52}\) In Peter Bell, for example, the ass Peter happens upon near the shore refuses to move until he has recognized the corpse in the water. Despite Peter’s relentless abuse of the animal because of its immobility, the horse will only recommence its progress when Peter sheds a tear after reflecting on his behavior under the circumstances. In other words, the ass will not move until Peter is moved. Fry speaks to this point: “Peter gets on the ass’s back, like Johnny, but with opposite results: the ass does not respond to the tug on the halter, and Peter dismounts in frustration. There is the same focus in this poem on seemingly mechanized movement, but automated locomotion is replaced here by the automated rotation of ears and eye—conduits of differential perception…Movement in the absence of will is thus replaced by
In his study of the equestrian trope in the poetry of Lord Byron and Robert Burns, Nigel Leask has identified what he calls the *equestrian sublime*.\(^53\) For Leask, Romantic horses revise an eighteenth century conception of the horse as a labor engine, and become sources of sublime power. As such, they also expose a poetic agenda of engaging the figure to “teach a lesson in how to control, not merely to ‘spur’ or suppress the ‘animal soul.’” Horses are not feared or bridled because of the uncontrollable passions they contain, but function as rhetorical tropes that perform a pedagogical function precisely through the passions they represent. Leask traces the development of this trope to Edmund Burke, who features the animal in his famous discussion of sublimity. In proposing how an animal might be given sublime qualities, Burke suggests:

> Let us look at another strong animal in two distinct lights...The horse in light of an useful beast, fit for the plough, the road, the draft, in every social useful light the horse has nothing of the sublime: but is it thus that we are affected with him, *whose neck is clothed with thunder, the glory whose nostrils is terrible, who swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage, neither believeth that it is the sound of the trumpet?* In this description the useful character of the horse entirely disappears, and the terrible and sublime blaze out together.\(^54\)

The purpose of Burke’s rhetorical sketch is to suggest some of the ways one might transform the quotidian beast into an object of sublime admiration. The description not only incorporates fierce natural forces, like thunder, into its animal locomotion, it also attributes human passions and music to its energetic stride.


\(^54\) *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 113.
Burke’s sublime horses resurface decades later in the “maniacal” horses that drive Thomas De Quincey’s *The English Mail-Coach* (1849). However, their appearance in this essay raises important questions about modernity and transport. Comparing steam locomotion to horsepower, De Quincey’s dynamic description of the mail-coach horses clearly inherits Burkean elements of sublime power:

But, seated on the old mail-coach, we needed no evidence out of ourselves to indicate the velocity. On this system the word was—Non magna loquimur, as upon railways, but magna vivimus. The vital experience of the glad animal sensibilities made doubts impossible on the question of our speed; we heard our speed, we saw it, we felt it as a thrilling; and this speed was not the product of blind insensate agencies, that had no sympathy to give, but was incarnated in the fiery eyeballs of an animal, in his dilated nostril, spasmodic muscles, and echoing hoofs. This speed was incarnated in the visible contagion amongst brutes of some impulse, that, radiating into their natures, had its centre and beginning in man.⁵⁵

De Quincey identifies the affective transformation involved in the passage from an age of natural power to one driven by the mechanical energy conversions of the steam engine. By turning to the ancient equestrian trope to mark this shift, De Quincey historicizes what he considers a break between man and nature occasioned by steam technology. The trope gains new meaning in an age of modernity when its sublime energies are repurposed to inspire feelings of nostalgia for an age gone by. De Quincey insists that the kind of affective displacement mail-coach horses simulate is temporal: they draw us back to a pre-industrial moment. After the triumph of the railways, he warns:

But, now, on the new system of travelling, iron tubes and boilers have disconnected man’s heart from the ministers of his locomotion…The galvanic cycle is broken up forever; man’s imperial nature no longer sends itself forward through the electric sensibility of the horse; the interagencies are gone in the mode of communication between the horse and his master, out of which grew so many aspects of sublimity under accidents of mists that hid, or sudden blazes that revealed, of mobs that agitated, or midnight solitudes that awed (203).

For De Quincey, the modernization of transport reformulates the equestrian trope. The “galvanic cycle” generated by horsepower is disrupted by the mediating mechanical energy of the steam locomotive. In an age of modern transport, horsepower becomes a nostalgic force and the electric bond between man and horse figures a lost integrity and equilibrium within the self, rather than a self at odds with its own affective powers.

Perhaps the most important Romantic development in the history of the transport trope is the remapping of the mind/passions or soul/body configuration. Because the Romantics were more fully invested in a science of poetic creativity, the components that map onto this model shift from the passions and the rational self to the imagination and fancy. As I’ll demonstrate in my discussion of fancy in my first chapter, that faculty aroused anxiety in theories of Romantic creativity because it was tied to a passive or unwilled generation of ideas, and its waywardness demanded strict regulation. One might say that the Romanic model is a precursor to Freud’s psychic anatomy because Freud tied the creative impulses to the unconscious and the id. Coleridge provides an example of what I mean in his short poem, “Inside the Coach,” which represents fancy’s powers:

While thus we urge our airy course,
O may no jolt’s electric force
Our fancies from their steeds unhorse
And call us from thy fairy reign
To dreary Bagshot Heath again!”

In this early poem, Coleridge’s drowsy coach ride figures the passage into a dream reverie that derail[s] the passenger’s trajectory by placing it on fancy’s “airy course,” which strengthens increasingly as the powers of will and consciousness wane. The only threat to the pleasurable reverie is the potential disruption of a bump in the road, which would serve as the reality principle that recalls the rider from fancy’s “fairy reign.”

John Keats draws on a similar configuration writing to Benjamin Bailey in 1817 about his first major poetic attempt, *Endymion*. There, Keats summons the transport trope to account for the space within which a true poet must roam when undertaking a long poem: “Besides a long Poem is a test of Invention which I take to be the Polar Star of Poetry, as Fancy is the Sails, and Imagination the Rudder. Did our great Poets ever write short Pieces?” In this figurative sketch, the transport metaphor features as a boat whose components coincide with the faculties of Romantic creativity. Following dominant theories of mind, fancy figures as the sails because it passively catches the winds of inspiration, while the imagination-as-rudder offers the poet control and volition over the vehicle by giving it direction. Keats’ transport trope insists on the imagination as a vectored, or teleological force, while the fancy is vector-less and prone to wandering.

If for Keats the sailboat figured the dynamic relationship between imagination and fancy, Joanna Baillie and Percy Shelley found in the modern steamboat a new opportunity to distribute poetic energies. Baillie, whose *Plays on the Passions* represent some of the period’s most

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revered experiments in human feeling, takes steam navigation as her theme in her poem, the *Address to a Steam-Vessel* (1823). The *Address* praises the steamboat for granting the public access to nation’s natural beauties by contributing to mass tourism, but it also expresses perplexity at the inner workings of the machine: “What is this power which thus within thee lurks,” the poet asks, “And, all unseen, like a mask’d giant works?” For Baillie, the steamboat not only provides a rich opportunity for an exercise in poetic figuration, it also occasions a reflection about figuration in terms of transport. Comparing steam vessels to sailboat, she remarks:

Dearer to fancy, to the eye more fair  
Are the light skiffs, that to the breezy air,  
Unfurl their swelling sails of snowy hue  
Upon the moving lap of ocean blue:  
As the proud swan on summer lake displays,  
With plumage bright'ning in the morning rays,  
Her fair pavilion of erected wings.--  
They change, and veer, and turn like living things.\(^{58}\)

Unlike the sailboat, which offers itself up as a plaything of the fancy, turning and veering according to the moving power of the wind, the steam vessel induces a unique and surprisingly productive poetic ambivalence, which Baillie expresses at the end of her poem in a vision of technological modernity:

Beholding thee, the great of other days  
And modern men with all their alter’d ways,  
Across my mind with hasty transit gleam,  
Like fleeting shadows of a fev'rish dream:  
Fitful I gaze with adverse humours teased,  
Half sad, half proud, half angry, and half pleased.

Here, strong feelings, poised in conflicting combination, occasion a visceral poetic fit. Baillie’s “adverse humors” mimic the churning of the steam engine, which converts natural power for

new progress. Moreover, the play on the term “adverse,” which suggests a productive countermovement to the stream of the verse, also underscores the power of the steamboat to proceed against the currents of the sea. Baillie thus frames an occasion of poetic figuration in terms of a new transport technology.

But, what exactly might the connection between modern transport and Romantic figuration be? In his discussion of steam navigation, Schivelbusch theorizes the transition in movement from wind/water to steam power by suggesting that “pre-industrial traffic is mimetic of natural phenomena” (9). In other words, traditional ships and sailboats move according to natural currents and overland transport, which was determined by animal power, required following the natural irregularities of roads. Steam power, however, dissolved the mimetic relationship involved in moving according to natural rhythms, and allowed vehicles to proceed directly by reformulating natural energies for smoother progress. This revolution in locomotion allowed man to proceed according to his own will rather than that of nature:

Thus steam power appeared to be independent of outward nature and capable of prevailing against it—as artificial energy in opposition to natural forces…Steam power, inexhaustible and capable of infinite acceleration, reversed the relationship between recalcitrant nature (i.e. spatial distance) and locomotive engine…Motion was no longer dependent on the conditions of natural space, but on mechanical power that created its own new spatiality (10).

This new mobility, which shifts away from a mimetic relationship with natural rhythms toward increasingly independent movement, coincides historically with the revolutionary forms of representation ascribed to the Romantics by M.H. Abrams. For Abrams, Romantic poetry witnessed a transformation in poetic figuration from mimetic representation (the mirror) to
representations that project the poetic self onto nature (the lamp). By projecting life and feeling into the universe, Romantic poets attempted to “overcome the sense of man’s alienation from the world by healing the cleavage between subject and object…” In the case of Baillie’s comparison, fancy finds an analogue in the sailboat image, a move that projects fancy onto a metaphorical vehicle. The steam vessel, however, presents her with a more complex, transformative, and even prophetic object for contemplation. It more accurately represents the total work of the imagination, which fundamentally transforms nature into art. As artificial power, the energy conversion involved in steam locomotion mirrors the process of Romantic figuration, which reshapes nature instead of mirroring it.

We find this modern relationship to natural power best represented in the artworks of J.M.W Turner. Consider his painting, Snow Storm – Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth (1842), a work that meets the new demands of aesthetic representation in an age of mechanical locomotion. Snow Storm offers a strong example of what David Nye has called “technological sublime,” or the exertion of human powers of reason over nature:

The attribution of sublimity to human creations radically modified the psychological process involved in the sublime. Whereas in a sublime encounter with nature human reason intervenes and triumphs when the imagination finds herself overwhelmed, in the technological sublime reason had a new meaning. Because human beings had created the awe-inspiring steamboats, railroads, and dams, the sublime object itself was a manifestation of reason. Because of the overwhelming power displayed was human

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rather than natural, the "dialogue" was now not between man and nature but between man and man-made.⁶⁰

For Nye the technological sublime shifts the sublime object from nature to man’s works, which made human reason itself the source of sublimity. However, within the aesthetic frame of Turner’s painting, the steamboat—the technological power that meets the ferocity of nature head on—represents the physical presence of the imagination as it rises up to challenge the sublime force of the storm. While the technology itself might be interpreted as the triumph of reason over nature, the painting that represents that technological power symbolizes the new demands made on art given this new sublime object. In other words, the technology offers a mediating human presence in aesthetic observation of nature, one that externally figures the exertion of the imagination over sublime natural power. The work of the steam engine as it struggles with the storm is matched by the skill of the artist in representing the struggle.

According to S.T. Coleridge, fancy and imagination involve distinct kinds of movement, a distinction my study will rely on by tying the faculties to different vehicles. His famous example of the water-insect propelling itself upstream offers an illustration of the work of the imagination as a series of active and passive movements. For Coleridge, the water-insect is a useful analogy for a mind in the state of creativity, as in poetic composition or the recollection of memory, because every voluntary movement of the mind is analogous to something like counteracting the force of gravity by our own physical locomotion:

Most of my readers will have observed a small water-insect on the surface of rivulets...and will have noticed, how the little animal wins its way up against the stream, by alternate pulses of active and passive motion, now resisting the current, and now yielding to it in order to gather strength and a momentary fulcrum for a further

propulsion. This is no unapt emblem of the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking. There are evidently two powers at work, which relatively to each other are active and passive; and this is not possible without an intermediate faculty, which is at once both active and passive. In philosophical language, we must denominate this intermediate faculty in all its degrees and determinations, the IMAGINATION. But, in common language, and especially on the subject of poetry, we appropriate the name to a superior degree of the faculty, joined to a superior voluntary control over it.\textsuperscript{61}

I find the steamboat a metaphor of mind remarkably similar in nature to what Coleridge calls the “intermediate” power the imagination. In his famous discussion of the faculty, the imagination is a composite of various powers: fancy, primary and secondary imagination. Fancy, in the water-insect analogy, clearly performs the role of the passive movement, which might be described as a kind of \textit{drift}, or the slackening of the propulsive force of the will so that the mind might explore the chain of association necessary for creativity. This drift, however, must eventually be curtailed and counteracted in order that the materials gathered might be put to active use. The curtailing of fancy’s drift accords with Coleridge’s secondary imagination, which forges the fancy’s excesses into new and organic wholes. Given John Tresch’s useful distinction between “mechanism” and the mechanical, fancy is certainly mechanical because it collects perceptions, and arranges them according to habits of association, while the organic imagination is not because it transforms feelings and perceptions into completely new products according to its own will. One might say, then, that while a Romantic conception of imagination may not be mechanical, it is certainly technological.

The first two chapters of my study expand upon precisely this distinction in mobility between passive fancy and active imagination. There, I suggest that fancy finds an apt figure in the air balloon whereas imagination, which is challenged by sublime objects, finds a proper metaphor in the steamboat. Unlike the air balloon, the steamboat can be directed at will, and, as we learn from Coleridge, the will is what distinguishes those creative faculties. My first chapter, “Fancy in Romantic Balloon Writings,” provides a selective and critical reading of the tremendous body of writing devoted to the air balloon produced in Britain during what contemporaries termed “balloonomania,” a period spanning the closing years of the eighteenth century after the historic balloon ascent of the Montgolfier brothers in 1783. I read the air balloon as a Romantic technology of mobile vision. Pointing to the strong presence of fancy in balloon writings, I argue that the literature of aeronautics significantly contributed to the Coleridgean concept. For example, I demonstrate how the scientific crisis over the inability to direct the balloon’s motion inflected Romantic ideas about the fancy as itinerant or “roving.” Indeed, the fancy came to be coded as “passive,” moving according to the “drift” of association, and responsible for the dynamic shuttling between sense impressions and ideas. Comparing uses of the fancy in context preceding and following the air balloon, I trace the invention’s shaping influence on the faculty. As aeronaut narratives and poems suggest, fancy and the balloon might even function as substitutable technologies, raising important questions about fancy’s relationship to fantasy and realism. In order to locate the strength of fancy’s powers, I examine particular genres of balloon literature, such as epistololarity and prospect poetry, which served as fertile literary zones for fancy to thrive.

In my second chapter, “sublime Archimedean art: Shelley’s Steamboat and the Mechanics of Metaphorics,” I consider the revolutionary movement introduced by steam-
navigation—what I identify as *counterforce* to natural power—within terms of Shelley’s poetics and politics of the sublime. Shelley’s intense interest in science and technology found a practical outlet when he partially financed the steamboat project of friend and engineer, Henry Reveley, in 1819. While Shelley was mostly fond of sailing, he was provoked by the power that Reveley’s machine would exert over the sea. This curiosity is best documented in a verse epistle penned in Reveley’s mechanical studio called *The Letter to Maria Gisborne*, in which Shelley entertains a fascinating comparison between poetry and mechanical engineering. For Shelley the steam engine represented man’s ability to convert natural power for his own ends. Of course, the Romantic poet’s access to this power lies in the discourse of the sublime, which similarly depends on the conversion of energy in poetic figuration. In poems like “Mont Blanc” and “Ode to the West Wind,” the poet’s confrontation with overwhelming natural power is the occasion for an “unremitting interchange” or the arousal of the faculties for the creative moment. Because steam navigation works by converting waterpower for counter-current progress, I suggest that this technology offered Shelley a metaphor for the imagination as reorganizing *counterforce* to nature’s moving power, one that critics have failed to interpret within the terms of Shelley’s poetics.

My third chapter, “Nostalgia and Trauma in De Quincey’s *The English Mail-Coach,*” examines cultural responses to the loss of the English mail-coach, a cherished postal and transport system, in the age of the railway. Disseminating not only correspondence and national news, but also feelings between subjects, contemporaries stressed the coach’s unique potential for affective transmission. I show how Thomas De Quincey’s famous essay generates nostalgia in his readers after the coach’s passage into history. In the second half of the essay, however, De Quincey painstakingly describes a scene of trauma—a nearly fatal accident on the road—and its
recurring presence in his subsequent dreams. The turn from nostalgia to trauma, I argue, is no accident, but an exercise in rhetoric that De Quincey called “impassioned prose.” While these feelings are both concerned with temporal displacement, they have an opposed relation to history: one represents a longing for the past, the other its unwilled return. Because the modernity of the mail-coach rested on its setting travel and the post to a strict timetable, I read De Quincey’s use of it as a narrative device in this essay as a strategy to relive an age gone by, but also an attempt to master—precisely by reliving—an experience of near-death.

In my coda, I turn briefly to J.M.W Turner, a painter who documents the rapid modernization of English transport, from maritime frigates and slave ships to the rise of steam navigation and the railway. Capturing movement in unprecedented ways, Turner’s style meets the challenges of representation in an age of speed and mechanized transport. His paintings evoke sensations that place us on board these vehicles, but do so, paradoxically, from a viewpoint beyond their path. By displacing the viewer from an already displaced position, Turner intends his audience to imagine himself at once within and outside of the moving vehicle. This effect of alternating positions simulates sublime experience, which activates a similar dynamic toggling of the mind between the perception and imagination. Turner’s paintings, I argue, reflect rigorously on how technology extends man’s power over nature, but also how it might expand his capacity for aesthetic experience.
1. Fancy in Romantic Balloon Writings

The element ignored by any psychology of imagination which concerns itself solely with the constitution of images is an essential one, evident and known to all: it is the mobility of images…For a complete psychology, imagination is, above all, a spiritual mobility, the model of the greatest, the liveliest, the most living mobility. We must therefore systematically add to the study of a particular image the study of its mobility, its fertility, its life…

-Gaston Bachelard, On Poetic Imagination and Reverie

After a successful air balloon launch in Liverpool in July of 1785, Vincent Lunardi, the first man in England to achieve human flight, received a dedicatory poem from a female poet whose name he preferred to keep anonymous.¹ As one might imagine Lunardi received quite a bit of fan mail, especially from women, some of which took the form of laudatory verse. The revered balloonist included the poem, titled Ode; Addressed to Vincent Lunardi, Esq. On his Ascension into the Atmosphere, on Wednesday, July 20th, 1785, as an appendix to his published account of the journey. In her ode, the nameless bard summons “fancy” to her aid in praising the aeronaut:

I joy’d to see thee mounted high
In thy triumphal Car!
Whils’t loud Applauses rent the Sky,
And shook the echoing Air!
Again, to Silence hush’d the Awe struck Crowds
Beheld thee sail thro’ undulating Clouds.
Swift airy FANCY, swift pursue;
Behold the GOD-LIKE HERO soar
To distant Realms of boundless View,
And Regions unexplored before!
Unerring Truth shall boldly dare to paint
Prospects, where Fancy’s colors prove to faint…

¹ The female poet’s request to be kept anonymous betrays the sexual politics of the literature and culture of ballooning, which often expresses anxieties about male celebrity, female abduction, and unmonitored sexuality.
My spirit rose along with you!
I saw the grand, the glorious View!
For, soaring high, the freer Mind
May mount upon the fleetest Wind;
May visit Regions yet unknown;
And, darting from Zone to Zone,
Leave Matters Dross and Earthly Cares Behind.²

By representing a poetic eye that hovers out to meet Lunardi’s naked eye, the poet establishes a curious continuity between “fancy” and “truth” as she endeavors to share in the balloonist’s expansive prospect. “Truth” picks up where fancy’s powers should not, at least theoretically, follow. Fancy is both mobile and visual here, but also works according to the powers of sympathy: “My spirit rose along with you!” remarks the poet, who intercepts Lunardi’s view as the vehicle glides over Liverpool. This meeting of “spirits” describes a sympathetic bond aroused by the excitement of the event, one that also activates a sense of fancy as sexual attraction and play.³ From this ecstatic place above the clouds, the poet makes a claim to perception-based experience (“I saw the grand, the glorious view!”) when all she has access to is fantasy. And yet, it is precisely fancy that functions as the visual medium by which she gains access to Lunardi’s vista.

This dedicatory poem, and the role fancy plays in it, is representative of the flurry of balloon writings published in England in the closing years of the eighteenth century following Vincent Lunardi’s historic balloon ascent in September of 1784. In the busy public discourse about the air balloon, fancy frequently intervenes to relay vision between the balloonist and his public. Not only did aeronauts like Thomas Baldwin and Jean-Pierre Blanchard share their aerial journeys with their adoring fans in detailed narratives, the English public, also in turn produced scores of poems, novels, and travelogues that imagined their way into the atmosphere. The

² Mr. Lunardi’s Account of His Ascension and Aerial Voyage, From the New Fort, Liverpool, On Wednesday the 20th of July, 1785, in Three Letters, Addressed To George Biggin, Esq. (London, 1785).
³ See the 8th OED entry for “fancy” as “amorous inclination.”
strong presence of fancy in Romantic balloon writings demands attention because it is at this very moment that English writers and philosophers begin coding the faculty as “roving” or “wandering.” While fancy had in some ways always “wandered” as an indulgence in reverie or daydream, a study of it in context in the closing years of the eighteenth century reveals that fancy becomes increasingly mobile and begins to function as a technology of outward-oriented vision in addition to a window into exclusively interior or psychological territories.  

Balloon writings—poetry in particular—often invite fancy to “paint” or “pencil” the view of the balloonist for an audience with no material perception of what his eye beholds. These representational cues traditionally underscore the falseness of fancy’s representations. Paradoxically, the faculty was considered the recorder and collector of mental images as well as the source of hallucination and delusion. In the first chapter of Leviathan, Thomas Hobbes uses fancy to describe the nature of sense impressions. For Hobbes, objects “press” upon the organs of sense to create sensations (“fancies”), which must be distinguished from objects themselves. In Hobbes’ theory of human psychology, fancies are shadows of the perceptible world created by “motions” aroused by the stimulation of sense organs. Hobbes’ account of fancy in relation to sense experience is pervasive in the eighteenth century. In her sonnet titled “To Fancy,” for example, Charlotte Turner Smith identifies the faculty as the “false medium” of childhood:

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4 According to Julie Ellison, late eighteenth century uses of fancy put poets into direct sympathetic contact with imperial subjects. See “Female Authorship, Public Fancy” in Cato’s Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999), pp. 97-123.

5 In Pleasures of the Imagination, Akenside characterize fancy in the same terms: “Action treads the path/In which Opinion says he follows good/Or flies from evil; and Opinion gives/Report of good or evil, as the scene was drawn by fancy, lovely or deformed: Thus her report can never there be true/Where fancy cheats the intellectual eye/With glaring colours and distorted lines.”

6 In Chapter One, “Of Sense,” Hobbes notes: “All which qualities called Sensible, are in the object that causeth them, but so many several motions of the matter, by which it presseth our organs diversly. Neither in us that are pressed, are they any thing else, but divers motions; (for motion produceth nothing but motion). But their appearance to us is Fancy, the same waking, that dreaming…the object is one thing, the image, or fancy is another.” Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, ed. by Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 14.
Published in 1789—only five years after England’s first balloon ascension—Smith’s sonnet betrays what I perceive to be a growing tension at this time between fancy as a fictionalizing medium and its gathering potential as a framer of geographic or landscape vision tied to forms like the prospect poem.

This chapter investigates the shifting function of fancy as a consequence of its entanglement in the public discourse about the air balloon. My contention is that the literature and culture of the air balloon in late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries helped consolidate qualities that would later prove signature to fancy as a distinct faculty and aesthetic. Provocatively, however, the influence I point to might not be one-directional. Balloon writings not only reveal that fancy begins to take on aspects of the aerial machine, but also that the air balloon’s scientific and popular reception contributed to its classification as a technology of fancy. The air balloon also re-situates anxieties about the unmanageability of the emotions and the creative impulse expressed in the classical equestrian trope. As a modernized version of an ancient transport motif, the balloon retained some of the old concerns—extreme and irrational

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8 What I mean by “technology of fancy” is that the balloon becomes part of the consolidation of the fancy as a Romantic aesthetic because writings about the balloon reinforced and realized attributes native to psychological accounts of fancy. The most prominent attributes are its ties to the balloon’s uncontrollable mobility, visual cultures of landscape and panorama, and the technology’s lack of utility or effective transformation.
affective states, sexual desire, the passive component to poetic inspiration—while introducing new ones, such as the mobilization of a mass public through spectacle, the increasing prominence of popular culture, and growing fears about surveillance, especially after the outbreak of the French Revolution.

The air balloon is perhaps England’s first real pop sensation, and its culture earned it the title of balloonomania among contemporaries. Balloon ascensions in England not only became fashionable entertainment, spurring a lucrative market for memorabilia and souvenirs, they were also one of the earliest and most successful publicly funded spectacles. Tickets were sold in advance or on the day of the ascent, and the funds raised financed the materials necessary for balloon launches. A metaphorics of madness overlaps with one of consumerism and fashion in the culture of the air balloon, and this hybrid discourse betrays the increasing economic power of the working class at this time. An estimated 150,000 persons gathered to witness the first balloon launch by Lunardi in London in 1784, a crowd of mixed class and gender whose size has no real precedent. It’s no surprise, then, that while balloon ascensions proved to be celebrations of a mass public and its interests, they also produced considerable anxiety about a populace that was becoming aware of its own political and economic strength. More remarkable still is the fact that such a potential was realized less than a decade before the French Revolution, an event that forever marked the crowd as an unstable political force that fundamentally threatened social order.  

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1811 cartoon, *Prime Bang up at Hackney or a Peep at the Balloon*, which represents a launch on the occasion of the birthday of George, Prince of Wales on August, 12, 1811 [See Figure 1].

![Figure 1: Prime Bang up at Hackney; or a Peep at the Balloon (1811)](image)

Such fears were raised during failed balloon launches, when thousands of disappointed spectators destroyed the balloon and launch site. When launches were successful, spectators exhibited a wide spectrum of emotional response, ranging from elation to terror that even occasioned fainting fits. In other words, whatever the outcome of these unprecedented spectacles, the English crowd demonstrated an early potential for a unified affective response to a major historical event.\textsuperscript{11} Before Lunardi’s first ascension in 1784 over the Artillery Grounds in

\textsuperscript{11} Michael Lynn notes that “Audience members certainly expressed a wide variety of emotional responses to the moment of ascension; many of these responses were far from analytic, unemotional or logical. Thus, although they were technically witnessing a scientific phenomenon, the audience felt empowered to treat it as they would a theatrical spectacle. This included cheering, fainting, silence and other kinds of
London, for example, the balloonist expressed great trepidation at the size of the crowd and the prospect of an unsuccessful ascension:

One hundred and fifty thousand countenances have all one direction; but I have reason to be anxious not to disappoint such a multitude, every one of which has been wedged in a painful situation the whole morning…The principal area which contains the populace, is bounded by an extensive and noble building, devoted to the most compassionate and affecting of the all the offices of benevolence. It is a retreat for the insane, who are judged to be incurable; and it is called Bedlam…The figures of Phrenzy and Melancholy at its gate are celebrated throughout Europe, and are deemed barely inferior to the admired productions of Greek sculpture. Which of these allegorical beings the people have assigned as my patron, I have not learned. I suppose they may be divided; but they agree in the propriety of making my attempt near Bedlam, as the event, in their opinion, will render it necessary to convey me there. How happy should I be, if some spirit would instruct me, to emulate Astolpho on his flying horse, and to explore those regions where the straying wits of mortals take themselves!12

Lunardi refers to the hippogriff Astolpho rides into the heavens to recover and restore Orlando’s wits in Ariosto’s epic, Orlando Furioso. The balloonist hopes to do the same to alleviate the anticipation and agitation of a crowd longing to witness the launch. The specter of fancy haunts this passage in a number of ways, not the least of which is the activity of flight into an aerial zone that is also the source of poetic inspiration.


According to psychological theories of fancy, it is the poetic faculty responsible for yielding mythological creatures, like the flying steed, which is a product of combining fixed elements together based on accidental coincidence, in this case animal locomotion. Coleridge remarked that “an excessive fancy is delirium,” which, in the poetic moment, produces wild combinations of images that have only a tenuous connection. In this sense, Ariosto’s hippogriff resembles many designs for balloons, which implemented paddles, wings, and even sails to navigate the air. This resemblance places eighteenth century aeronautic engineers and fancy-struck poets in the same category. The excerpt from Lunardi’s account offers just one of the many examples of how balloon writings gather the psychological discourse of fancy: the madness of the crowd, the appeal to poetic inspiration, and flight to a divine zone. In a footnote to his invocation of Astolpho and soaring steed, Lunardi wonders: “Are not the fables of flying horses, dragons, &c. presumptions that the principle of Air Balloons is not a modern discovery?” By placing the balloon in the same category as the poetic creations of romance and epic, Lunardi suggests a continuity between fantasy and modern science that is only possible within the terms of an eighteenth century discourse of fancy.

The intense and unprecedented public fervor over the air balloon produced a body of literature that is vast and varied, a diverse archive that includes ballads, epistolary narratives, balloon manuals, and political cartoons. Regardless of the genre that the sublime technology engaged with, however, balloon writings usually demand the reader’s imaginative displacement

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13 See Coleridge’s remarks on fancy in Biographia Literaria.
14 Wordsworth makes a similar comment about fancy in his Preface to the 1815 edition of his Poems: “To aggregate and to associate, to evoke and to combine, belong as well to the Imagination as to Fancy; but either the materials which she makes use of should be susceptible of change in their constitution, from her touch; and, where they admit of modification, it is enough for her purpose if it be slight, limited, and evanescent. Directly the reverse of these, are the desires and demands of Imagination.” See Poems by William Wordsworth: including Lyrical Ballads and the Miscellaneous Pieces of the Author. With Additional Poems, a New Preface, and a Supplementary Essay, in two volumes (London: For Longman, Hurst, Rees, Oeme, and Brown, Paternoster-Row: 1815), xxxiii.
as the balloonist witnesses and relays an account of a landscape or prospect, and fancy is repeatedly invoked to draw the reader’s vision out into the world. Unsurprisingly, fictional travel narratives abound in the archive, some of which are more farcical than others. One such work, titled *Adventures of an Air Balloon: Wherein are delineated many distinguished Characters, male and female; particularly Dr. M--;G--;H--, Esq.*, follows the progress of an air balloon framed as an “it-narrative” related by the balloon itself. Like other works in this genre, the balloon circulates as an object that maps out networks of sociability and moves relatively easily between persons of class and gender. However, unlike other similar texts narrated by objects like currency, watches, etc., which accrue stories and experiences of individuals by virtue of their being possessed by them, the balloon in this work achieves sociability through the organization of a travel itinerary as it transports persons from place to place. That is, this “novel of circulation” is not structured according to the passage of the object from hand to hand, but by the object’s capacity to circulate persons in the world.

The balloon thus becomes a medium for satirical social narratives, and the transportation of its passengers follows a narrative movement similar to that of picaresque, which also interpolates story with spatial progress. It is no surprise, then, that the advertisement for the text betrays our narrator as the bastard child of Mr. Fancy:

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15 *Adventures of an Air Balloon: Wherein are delineated many distinguished Characters, male and female; particularly Dr. M--;G--;H--, Esq.* (London : printed for H. Hogge, [1780?]).

16 Hester Lynch Piozzi, of the Della Cruscan circle, published a sonnet, titled “On an Air Balloon; or, the Machine speaks,” in *The World* in Feb. 11, 1788 in which the balloon speaks in a poetic it-narrative: “In empty space, behold me hurl’d,/The sport and wonder of the World;/With eager gaze, while I aspire,/Expanded with aerial fire!/And since Man's selfish race demands,/More empire than the Sea's or Land's;/For him, my Courage mounts the Skies/Invoking Nature while I rise!” The balloon’s directive to be seen by its audience underscores the dominance of spectacle in the culture of ballooning, but also in the Della Cruscan writings themselves, which caused scandal by staging extended amorous conversations between anonymous persons in print. The balloon serves a perfect subject for the Della Cruscan set, who were well known for their interest in poetic accounts of emotional excess, drama, and sexual forwardness. It is no surprise that the balloon features in many of their poems in the Florence and Arno Miscellany as a symbol for many of these qualities.
Advertisement. Mr. Fancy, of Leadenhall Street, took it into his head to usher me into
the World, in order to acquire a fortune by rapid flights, by the swift conveyance of
Ladies and Gentlemen to any distance. That I may be capable of communicating many
interesting anecdotes of the different Characters who took their passage in me, my
Readers will be pleased to indulge me with poetical License, and imagine me to possess
the faculties of a living Being. In the course of my Aerial peregrinations I have met with
many great and distinguished personages, and shall give such sketches of the most
remarkable of those as I think might afford entertainment to my numerous readers.¹⁷

The balloon’s request for “poetic license” in relating the accounts she has collected from her
passengers refers back to fancy as a parentage that promotes her unique creative talents for
lucrative projects. Mr. Fancy is a deadbeat dad and an opportunist, prostituting his child to a
world that would give her a go. This parentage, however, seems apt given fancy’s inherently
mobile qualities. Fancy has always been marked by psychological “wandering” or waywardness,
and this suggestive type movement becomes thematized in this particular narrative as a poor girl
forced into a business in which she carries around “remarkable personages” with a story to tell
and a shilling to pay. In her study of eighteenth century it-narratives, Liz Bellamy has recently
noted that a significant subsection of the genre focuses on “metempsychosis and the
transmigration of the soul,” or the passage of one voice/soul from one being or animal to another
after death.¹⁸ Instead, Adventures of an Air Balloon structures the transportation of bodies as the
occasion for the collection of a series of sentimental and picaresque narratives, an enterprise
promoted by Mr. Fancy.

¹⁷ Adventures, pp. iii-iv.
¹⁸ Liz Bellamy, “It-Narrators and Circulation: Defining a Subgenre,” in The Secret Life of Things:
Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in the Eighteenth Century, ed. by Mark Blackwell (Lewisburg:
Despite fancy’s omnipresence in balloon literature, it is within balloon poetry and first-hand aeronaut narratives in particular that it plays the most dynamic role. This has everything to do with the status of flight as poetic fantasy within a long tradition and the aerial zone as an ancient site of poetic inspiration. There is a remarkable tension in balloon literature between thinking about the atmosphere as a fantastical or mythical space and its new status as a “discovered” region akin to the New World, one that Enlightenment science had penetrated after its achievement of human flight. Many balloon writings, for example, feature Greek gods and mythical characters that people the atmosphere alongside aeronauts and their realistic descriptions of geological phenomena and English landscapes. Thus, we might say that the culture of ballooning at once invokes a world of fantasy and dispels it, and fancy becomes an aesthetic territory marked by conflicting representational modes. The 1836 ballad titled “The Aeronaut’s Farewell,” for example, both engages and rejects the poetic impulse when its narrator compares poetic and aerial vision: “The blooming Paradise with which the Poet’s brain may glow/Is nothing to the glorious scene that opens on me now.”

The air balloon thus occasioned a conflict between poetic vision and the realism of the balloon prospect, and it is clear from a survey of this literature that fancy was appropriated for both kinds of sight.

In addition to the application of fancy as an agent of shared and poetic vision, however, I would also suggest that the broad and diverse cultural production dedicated to ballooning offers a strong example of what Jeffrey Robinson has recently described as “cultures of fancy,” or “representations and expressions of lower classes and popular or peripheral cultures.”

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19 “The Aeronaut’s Farewell” (1836) in American Broadsides and Ephemera, Series 1, no. 4972.
20 Jeffrey Robinson, Unfettering Poetry: Fancy in British Romanticism (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). According to Robinson, fancy’s inferior status was constituted alongside a strengthening division between high and low culture during the rise of mass entertainment and consumerism in the late 18th century. That most of the literature devoted to the air balloon was produced by minor or anonymous writers places it in a category of popular writings Robinson identifies as the "cultures of fancy."
Robinson, writers devoted to fancy as a distinct aesthetic, a group that includes the Della Cruscan poets, Leigh Hunt, and John Keats, were aligned with liberal social and even populist interests. They produced a form of social expression resonant with contemporary poetic and psychological articulations of the faculty itself, which included exuberance and emotional excess, play and entertainment, femininity, sexuality, and communal politics. The literature and culture of ballooning maps onto these registers so well, that an inquiry into the technology’s impact on an aesthetic of fancy seems critical. In Leigh Hunt’s poem, “Fancy’s Party,” for example, Hunt transforms a scene of urban sociability—a cheerful gathering in his apartment—into a balloon ride that provides an escape from “dull realities”:

And hey, what’s this? The walls, look,  
Are wrinkling as a skin does;  
And now they are bent  
To a silken tent,  
And there are chrystal windows;  
And look! There’s a balloon above,  
Round and bright as the moon above…

And now and now I see them,  
The poet comes upon me,  
My back it springs  
With a sense of wings,  
And my laurel crown is on me;  
The room begins to rise with me,  
And all your sparkling eyes with me…

What a pleasure ‘tis to be  
Sailing onward smilingly;  
Not an effort, not a will,  
Yet proceeding swiftly still!  
‘Tis to join in one sensation  
Business both and contemplation;  
Active, without toil or stress;  
Passive, without listlessness.²¹

Hunt summons an old poetic trope of fancy as flight, which becomes realized by the aerial technology. The affect of the poem is one of unified social pleasure that also inspires the poet to reflect on the nature of fancy, whose objective correlative seems to be the balloon itself. Fancy here is “active, without toil or stress;/passive, without listlessness,” a description that echoes frustrations by scientists and delight by aeronauts about the difficulty of directing the air balloon’s motion. The passage, in other words, engages with specific diction used by theorists of Romantic fancy, above all Coleridge, who described the faculty as passive, though inventive and pleasurable.22

Despite its intense pleasures, however, the dominant attitude towards fancy in Romantic poetry is one of distrust. Robinson has recently called this sentiment “fanciphobia,” or an expressed fear about a culture or aesthetic of fancy, which thrives on the irrational and excessively emotional element in the creative processes. For Robinson, these same fears align with Tory anxieties about a liberal agenda of political inclusiveness, revolutionary sentiment, play, and spontaneous creativity. Commenting on the balloon image in Hunt’s poem, Robinson notes that “since Edmund Burke’s condemnation of the Jacobins as the ‘aeronauts of France,’ ballooning had been associated with speculative and philosophical schemes, which were often condemned as ‘fanciful’ in the sense that they were dangerously unrestrained and ‘lunatic’…”23

22 Coleridge on fancy: “FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.” Biographia Literaria for Coleridge’s distinction. Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions (vol. 1), ed. by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate in The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge., v. 7. Routledge & Kegan Paul. Bollingen Series LXXV (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). I’m interested in mapping the relationship between fancy’s passivity and that of the balloon as a technology, not only in its design and function, but also in the way it helped expand and reorganize human sense experience. The balloon introduces a crisis of the will that is also present in the public discourse about ballooning.

23 Unfettering Poetry, p. 54.
While Robinson pinpoints the political implications of the air balloon as a Romantic symbol for later writers of a liberal or revolutionary bent, he overlooks the early literature of ballooning to examine the impact of the invention on Romantic ideas about fancy. That the air balloon, a product of Enlightenment scientific endeavor, is at the center of this discourse about fancy raises important questions about the role of technological developments in thinking through problems in psychology and aesthetics. This chapter recoups the air balloon as a technology and a public spectacle that helped establish fancy as an aesthetic by examining its presence in popular literature devoted to ballooning.

Fancy’s Mobility and Romantic Psychology

In order to demonstrate why the literature of aeronautics was so accommodating to an aesthetic of fancy, I must make apparent the many ways in which the faculty exhibited qualities the air balloon would realize, qualities that include psychodynamic mobility, a liberated subjectivity, extended visual possibilities, and play. Turning to the psychological discourse of fancy will provide the language that will allow us to trace the concept’s easy migration into balloon writings. A review of this material reveals that ideas about fancy were reinforced and even extended by the technology in surprising ways. The most well known account of fancy is, of course, Coleridge’s distinction of the faculty from primary and secondary imagination in *Biographia Literaria*. For Coleridge, these three faculties work in conjunction in the creative process. Playing a supporting role in Romantic theories of mind, thinkers like Coleridge demoted fancy to the position of handmaiden to the imagination, a faculty responsible for dynamic associative thought, memory, and energetic image making. It is clear from Coleridge’s writings (and the classification of poetic faculties by Wordsworth’s “Preface” to his *Poems*) that poems
may be judged according to this model of faculty psychology. Thus, Romantic writers were not only interested in articulating the distinct psychological processes of man’s creative faculties, they are also invested in describing the aesthetic principles that accorded with them. Over time, an aesthetic of fancy became tied to luxuriant, volatile and shifting imagery, association, strong affective states, effeminacy, and a dispersed subjectivity. In other words, while fancy was primarily known as a creative faculty, it also became coded for a distinct body of poetry and art that was distinguished by the language of the psychological discourse devoted to it.

We find the earliest and richest accounts of fancy in eighteenth century theories of genius, like William Duff’s *Essay on Original Genius* (1767). For Duff, the “poetical fancy” collects and stores “materials of composition,” or sensations and images from the natural world that become available to the artist during the creative process. Moreover, Duff describes fancy as “lawless and extravagant,” working precipitously to forge analogies and associations out of the materials it has collected. Despite this unruliness, the faculty is essential to the creative process itself and the test of the genius is to manage it during the moment of production. According to Duff, judgment and taste, which are the active powers of imagination, provide checks on fancy (the passive agent of creativity): “Fancy, if not regulated by the dictates of impartial Judgment, is apt to mislead the mind, and to throw glaring colors on objects that possess no intrinsic

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25 I am referring to Wordsworth’s organization of poems according to the faculties and sentiments. In particular, I am interested in his “Poems of the Fancy,” which I will return to later in this chapter. In these poems, Wordsworth is particularly interested in fancy as an agent of excessive feeling, sympathy, visual representation, and movement.

excellence.” Duff expresses an anxiety that persists in later, Romantic accounts of fancy (that of Coleridge, in particular) that the poet’s indulgence in fancy’s “wandering” and intuitive processes might lead to mania or delusion. These fears about an excessive fancy inherit anxieties of control and management native to the equestrian trope in rhetorical writings. While fancy proved to be a force that poets were to be wary of, its powers were considered liberating and remained essential to the creative process.

Perhaps the most common descriptors for fancy in the psychological discourse are its “rambling” and “sportive” nature, terms that suggest a special mobility tied to metaphor making. This is a process driven by the mind’s unconscious search for images by a process of association. In Dugald Stewart’s *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1814), for example, fancy is the custodian of a vast collection of images and eagerly pursues analogies when called to action:

…the principal stores of the Fancy are commonly supposed to be borrowed from the material world…[its] favorite excursions are from intellectual and moral subjects to the appearances with which our senses are conversant…According to this limited idea of Fancy, it presupposes, where it is possessed in an eminent degree, an extensive observation of natural objects, a mind susceptible of strong impressions from them. It is

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27 ibid, p. 69. Robinson notes that suspicions about color are tied to his claim about a Romantic fanciphobia: “Like Fancy, color is dangerous: it is associated with feelings, passion, with bliss; it smacks of excess and the uncontrollable; it proliferates and ‘swallows up thought.’ Color apparently belongs to the unconscious dream state; it intoxicates and acts like a narcotic. And, in the sense of being both artificial and cosmetic, color covers up and deludes…[like color], Fancy is bent on proliferation, on sheer imagery and association rather than on discursive coherence, on multiplicity rather than unity, or excess rather than control.” See *Unfettering Poetry*, pp. 5-6.
thus only that a stock of images can be acquired; and that these images will be ready to present themselves, whenever an analogous subject occurs.\textsuperscript{28}

Stewart turns to a rhetoric of mobility to illustrate fancy’s relationship to association. He also proposes that fancy functions as a bridge between sense impressions and the progression of thought. Its “excursions” refer to the shuttling between the human senses and the inner life of the mind. In other words, fancy is the eye that looks in as well as out. Traditionally, fancy is described as a movement away from sense experience and toward interior mental processes, a vector that is reversed in balloon writings. That is, when aeronauts and their poets invoke fancy, the faculty enables an outward-oriented vision instead of a movement into the world of the mind.

One of the most remarkable contemporary observations about fancy’s special mobility is that it refers to the lateral movement of association as well as the toggling between sense experience and the inner life of the mind. Duff, for example, insists that works of genius occasion “an extraordinary vivacity of Fancy, which includes a certain degree of volatilility, occasioning the mind to start as it were from one object to another, without allowing it time to conceive any of them distinctly, [and] might be prejudicial to that vivid conception and that extensive combination of ideas which indicate and characterize true Genius."\textsuperscript{29} Fancy thus gathers images from the organs of sense and reorders them according to the appropriate analogy. This agility is what ties fancy to wit, which similarly seeks out quick associations in order to “represent MEN, MANNERS, and THINGS, in such a ludicrous light, as to excite PLEASANTRY, and provoke RISIBILITY."\textsuperscript{30} While wit is celebrated for the remoteness of its associations and the pleasurable sociability it cultivates, fancy is tied to original and vivid

\textsuperscript{28} See the section titled “Of Poetical Fancy” in Stewart’s \textit{Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind}, vol. 1. (Boston: Wells and Lilly: Court Street, 1821), pp. 169-171.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{An Essay on Original Genius}, p. 59.

\textsuperscript{30} ibid, p. 58.
imagery that strikes the mind with uncommon force. Moreover, fancy’s unique relationship to organs of visual sense as well as its ties to the activity of association, which might be characterized as a kind of psychological drift, made it especially appealing to writers devoted to the air balloon. That is, the language of passive creativity that demanded the checks of judgment entered the public discourse about the balloon, which scientists tried desperately to manage and direct for practical purposes.

For many theorists of fancy like Duff, the faculty operates within a distinct “region,” or idealized space of the mind within which it “roves” unchecked by judgment. This “region,” which Duff describes as the “aerial” zone of fancy, is the psychological space poets enter when one speaks of “flights of fancy”:

… there is therefore great scope afforded for the flights of Fancy in this boundless region. Much may be invented, and many new ideas of their nature and offices may be acquired. The wildest and most exuberant imagination will succeed best in excursions of this kind, ‘beyond the visible diurnal sphere,’ and will make the most stupendous discoveries in its aerial tour. Genius will indulge its adventurous flight without restraint: it will dart a beam upon the dark scenes of futurity, draw the veil from the invisible world, and expose our astonished view to ‘that undiscovered country, from whose bourne no traveler returns’.

As I’ve said, fancy traditionally implies a turning of the poet’s eye inward—what Duff describes as a moving “beyond the visible and diurnal sphere”—to trace the internal movements of the mind as it gathers and reorganizes its stores of ideas and images. In Romantic balloon writings, however, fancy functions as an eye turned outward to an aerial zone beyond the mind to explore a prospect unseen before, specifically as a type of vision devoted to perception-based experience. This is true for both the aeronaut that actually experiences the aerial prospect and writers and

31 ibid, 140.
poets who imagine the prospect at second hand. Thus, fancy’s psychological “region” becomes continuous or coextensive with a “real” or atmospheric aerial zone.

Coleridge provides dynamic example of fancy’s process as well as its “region” in a 1799 entry in his Notebooks. Surprisingly, the passage incorporates an image of the air balloon as a product and example of fancy’s analogical mode. Traveling by coach to London, he spies a flock of starlings from the moving vehicle:

Awoke from one of my painful Coach-Sleeps, in the Coach to London...But as the Coach went on, a Hill rose and intercepted the Sun—and the Sun in a few minutes rose over it, a compleat 2nd rising, thro’ the clouds and with a different Glory. Soon after this I saw Starlings in vast flights, borne along like smoke, mist—like a body unindued with voluntary Power/--now it shaped itself into a circular area, inclined—now they formed a Square—now a Globe—now from a complete orb into an Ellipse—then oblongated into a Balloon with the Car suspended, now a concave Semicircle; still expanding, or contracting, thinning, or condensing, now glimmering, now thickening, deepening, blackening!\(^{32}\)

Coleridge’s observation of the starlings reads as a preliminary poetic moment as the flock shapes itself into various abstract figures for the poet’s contemplation. The work of association here—that province of the fancy—offers up the metaphor of the balloon, an image that situates itself in the proper environment: the morning sky. The role of movement in this scene is critical. As the coach progresses down the country road, it follows the object—also in motion—and the motion of the object shapes itself into an image. Thus the image of the balloon only becomes possible because Coleridge is himself in motion. Entering into the proper angle of vision, he intercepts, so to speak, an image of the balloon and carriage. The balloon is an analogy in nature waiting to be

perceived by a mind with the appropriate storehouse of images. This dynamic notebook entry stages the convergence between the “aerial zone” of fancy and the balloon’s atmosphere. The space of the mind’s internal process becomes indistinguishable from the morning sky.

John Keats’ 1820 poem “Fancy” also displays the pleasurable activity described by Romantic psychologists. As an aesthetic object, it exhibits the influence I perceive the air balloon had on fancy. As the poem opens, Keats invites the reader to unleash her fancy to pursue his own as it glides impatiently over the surfaces of natural scenes:

Sit thee there, and send abroad,
With a mind self-overaw’d,
Fancy, high-commission’d:—send her!
She has vassals to attend her:
She will bring, in spite of frost,
Beauties that the earth hath lost;
She will bring thee, all together,
All delights of summer weather;
All the buds and bells of May,
From dewy sward or thorny spray;
All the heaped Autumn’s wealth,
With a still, mysterious stealth:
She will mix these pleasures up
Like three fit wines in a cup,
And thou shalt quaff it:—

Notice the attention Keats gives to surfaces. For Ruskin, fancy only “sees the outside, and is able to give a portrait of the outside, clear, brilliant, and full of detail,” while the imagination gets at the “heart” or “inner nature” of a subject. Uninterested in transforming its object, but skimming over them, fancy races out encounter ever-new images. The poet’s command to “sit thee there” and send fancy “abroad” insists on an idea of the faculty as an extension of the self that reaches out into the world for sensations and sensual pleasures while the body remains grounded. Here

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fancy explicitly functions as affective transport. Specifically, it is a type of transport that looks forward to a promise of sensual stimulation encountered indirectly rather than as excess feeling resulting from a direct encounter. Fancy thus thrives on a fantasy of sensual experience in the absence of it. Moreover, as a collector of images, there is a marked threat that stasis or prolonged concentration introduces to fancy’s energy, which is generated from the movement from object to object. Like the vulnerable bubbles pelted by raindrops, the fancy must leap to another thought before the mind hones its powers of judgment:

Then let winged Fancy wander
Through the thought still spread beyond her:
Open wide the mind's cage-door,
She'll dart forth, and cloudward soar.

Keats’ idea of throughness here brilliantly figures fancy’s associative play as a passage across something like a transparent medium and its tendency to disperse or “spread” itself across different thoughts, an activity that the mind’s powers of judgment might stymie. Moreover, the movement “cloudward” is a darting outward from the mind’s claustrophobic vault, a marked difference from the more traditional “inward” movement of fanciful activity. By closing on the images of fancy’s “silken leash” or “prison-string,” the poem insists on the faculty’s facility in shuttling between inner and outer worlds and its reliance on the strength and vividness of sense impressions. But, it also points on the role of imagination in curtailing and containing fancy’s roving before it strays too far. I turn to Keats’ poem as a representative of a late Romantic conception of fancy as distinct from imagination, which delineates a circumscribed and stable subjectivity instead of one that is dispersed or “roving.” In dominant Romantic psychological
models, the imagination keeps the fancy in check, yet relies on her energetic powers for movement.\footnote{Keats’ poem resembles so many of Wordsworth’s “Poems of Fancy,” particularly in their rapid skimming over the surfaces of objects. In her discussion of Wordsworth’s poems devoted to fancy, Frances Ferguson calls this movement a “chain of metamorphoses” that fails to reveal the essence of the object. She insightfully points out that the “metaphors of the fancy can never not know that they are metaphors. For the fancy comes to be a principle of pure sequence in Wordsworth’s poems under that category of classification—the movement in metaphor rather than the specific correspondence or link.” See Ferguson’s discussion of Wordsworth’s classification of his poems in \textit{Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 53-68.}

The qualities ascribed to fancy in psychological writings become prevalent and even problematic features of the science of ballooning. Like Duff, Coleridge considered fancy “passive” because it followed the “mechanical” movement of association, a necessary process before the imagination exerted the will to manage the creative moment.\footnote{In his recent book, \textit{The Romantic Machine: Utopian Science and Technology after Napoleon} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), John Tresch makes a call for distinguishing mechanism (the opposite of organicism, the dominant principle of Romantic creation) from the mechanical in order to rescue the contributions that machines made to Romantic aesthetics. However, in my mind, the example of the air balloon is a complicated one, primarily because Tresch is interested in technologies that are extensions of the human will. Because the balloon could not be controlled, it might be categorized as a machine that does indeed accord to the principles of mechanism because it introduces a crisis of the will in that its movements are subject to natural forces. In other words, the air balloon might be classified as mechanistic, if mechanism is defined as being subject to automatic processes. Fancy is similarly “mechanical” because it operates according to the unconscious principle of association. Hence, the balloon and fancy might be said to share in a kind of mechanism. Steam locomotion, on the other hand, aligns with active powers of the imagination because of its capacity to use transformative processes and energy conversion to extend the human will.} One of the practical aspects of ballooning that seems to have invited a rhetoric of fancy was the repeated difficulty that engineers met with when attempting to direct the machine’s motion, which made it difficult to take the technology seriously. Aeronaut Windham Sadler describes the difficulty of steering the balloon:

In the present state of the science of Aerostation, the motion of the balloon is confined to the impulse which it receives from the current of the air in which it moves and the object of the Aeronaut in seeking to reach any given point, is to find a corresponding stream of
wind, and which is now only effected by ascending or descending, as lateral movement has not as of yet been discovered so as to act effectually on the Machine. As Elaine Freedgood has argued, the air balloon presented a challenge to masculinity because it was completely subject to the movement of wind currents. Directing it became the ultimate test—and failure—of manliness. The result of this failure was the cultural coding of the balloon as a feminine technology marked by passivity in the face of natural power. The subjection of the balloon to wind currents coincides with the intuitive movement of association in theories of fancy. Like the gendering of the balloon as a technology, the feminization of fancy had to do with a crisis of the will in the creative process, one that male poets and theorists sought to contain or manage by assigning to the imagination the active, masculine powers of judgment and taste.

The uselessness of the balloon as a mode of transport, according to its critics, resided in its inability to move persons from place to place at will. As such, as a modern mode of transport, the air balloon presented a challenge to an idea travel that has a teleological aim or predetermined terminus. Rather, its technological limitations only allowed for wandering, or merely exploratory journeys. Far from improving modern travel in a practical way, ballooning became associated with spectacle, sport, and play. In France, the machine was considered a technological marvel and a symbol of national ingenuity, so much so that government sponsored and regulated all balloon ascents. In England, however, members of the Royal Society, including its President, Joseph Banks, dismissed the balloon as a failed technology. This reaction was of course tinged with national jealousy over the fact that the French achieved human flight first.

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37 Aerostation: A narrative of the aerial voyage, of Mr. Windham Sadler, across the Irish channel, from Portobello barracks, in the neighbourhood of Dublin, on Tuesday, July 22d, 1817. p. 19.
Writing to Banks from France, where he witnessed several ascensions, Benjamin Franklin bemoaned England’s rejection of the balloon as a serious scientific endeavor:

I am sorry this Experiment is totally neglected in England where mechanic Genius is so strong…It does not seem to me a good reason to decline pursuing a new Experiment which apparently increases the Power of Man over Matter, till we can see to what Use that Power may be applied. When we have learnt to manage it, we may hope some time or other to find Uses for it, as Men have done for Magnetism and Electricity of which the first Experiments were mere Matters of Amusement.39

Scientific objections to the balloon as useless help map the technology onto Romantic ideas about the fancy, whose products result from a mere play with “fixities and definites” rather than contributing to a unified and organic product. What Franklin here labels “matters of Amusement” that precede major scientific developments maps onto the preliminary moment of creativity that Romantic theorists of mind associated with the work of fancy. Like ballooning, fancy later became tied to ideas of play and a resistance to finality of form, which is the hallmark of Romantic lyric.

Coleridge also called the fancy the “aggregate or associative” power, which produced brilliant combinations of ready materials. We find this activity at work in the diverse designs that aeronauts planned for their balloons [See Figure 2]. They expose an engineering conundrum as aeronauts struggled to identify the best method of navigating the air. Some balloons were crafted like ships with oars in the hope that engineers could translate movement on a body of water onto the medium of the air. Others attached wings, fins or sails, hoping to catch the wind to gain control over the balloon’s motion. Mimicking the movement of various animal species was the

most common approach, and many balloon manuals included appendices or dissertations on the physics of animal locomotion. What Claire Brant has recently called the “epistemological crisis” that aeronauts confronted in attempting to navigate the balloon bred curious experiments in analogy that seem to me to activate the fancy.⁴⁰ William Heath’s spectacular 1829 cartoon, the *March of Intellect*, interprets and even caricatures Romanticism’s culture of transportation as a kind of laboratory of the fancy [See Figure 3].

![Figure 2: Early designs by various balloonists](image)

The inventive playfulness exhibited by the aeronautics archive springs from the endless possibilities introduced to modern science by a completely new encounter with the air as a traversable medium. Modern aeronautical design often engages with old poetic tropes (like Pegasus) as well as children’s toys, like the kite. In *The Aeropleustic Art, or Navigation in the Air, by the Use of Kites, or Buoyant Sails*, for example, George Pocock introduces his readers to the science of the *charvolant*, or the kite-carriage [See Figure 4]. While the text is absolute

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science fiction, it insists on the feasibility of its project through engineering schematics, sketches, and even charts that calculate the potential speed of the kite-carriage given the vehicle’s design, weight, and the force of wind current. This tension between the fantastic and the probable underscores the epistemological territory that fancy inhabits in the balloon archive. By insisting that the “toy of childhood still employs the man,” Pocock outlines a history of his invention, which involves a series of experiments whereby increasingly heavier loads are bound to a number of kites. Once he purportedly achieved success, Pocock conveys the disbelief of his audience and the publicity earned by the spectacle:

The newspaper accounts of this new mode of traveling, a mode which more than reduced the Athenian’s fable* (*Daedalus, son of Eupalamus, he who escaped from the Cretan labyrinth by means of wings formed of feathers and wax) to a positive reality, were commonly considered but weak fabrications, for mistaken science, bound in the fetters of ancient prejudices, and led in the chains of popular opinion, listened not for a moment to the dispassionate statements of reality; and ignorance, with ill-behavior, rudely silenced the relations of simplicity…

Pocock generates his own publicity by harkening to the early disbelief surrounding the first air balloon launches. The appeal to myth and fiction, which is a hallmark in the literature of ballooning, serves to bridge the world of fantasy with that of technological modernity. In other words, a modern science of aeronautics realizes ancient myth. Specifically, it is within the terms of fancy that the literature of aeronautics at once indulged an impulse toward fantasy and allowed for its fulfillment and realization.

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* Pocock, p. 4.
Figure 3: *The March of Intellect*, by William Heath (1828)

Figure 4: Design for a “charvolant,” from *The Aeropleustic Art* (1827)
Fancy and the Poetics of the Prospect

Turn we a moment Fancy’s rapid flight
To vigorous soils, and climes of fair extent;
Where, by the potent sun elated high,
The vineyard swells refulgent on the day;
Spreads o’er the vale; or up the mountain climbs,
Profuse; and drinks amid the sunny rocks,
From cliff to cliff encreas’d, the heightened blaze,
Low bend the weighty boughs. The clusters clear,
Half thro’ the foliage seen, or ardent flame,
Or shine transparent; while perfection breathes
White o’er the turgent film the living dew.

From Autumn, James Thomson’s Seasons

In eighteenth century long poetry, fancy exhibits an increasingly mobile quality as poets turned outward for dynamic descriptive sketches of the external world in forms like the prospect poem. The passage excerpted above from James Thomson’s Seasons (1730) offers an early instance of what poets like Thomson called “fancy’s flight,” or the ushering of the poetic eye across geographic spaces. In Thomson’s roving poem, fancy functions as an agent of mobile vision, painting with fine and vivid brush the landscape below as it shuttles the reader from object to object. Imagery in Thomson’s poem moves rapidly over the eye, and this quickness also registers as a spatial darting from one scene to another. The swiftness of Thomson’s poetic eye is often due to rapid scaling: it absorbs the vastness of a prospect as easily (and as quickly) as it can close in on fine details, like the sharp shift from the hanging cliffs to the “living dew” in the passage above. Subjectivity in Thomson’s poem is vagrant and dispersed, refusing to settle on any one object for long before it dashes to another. This psychological vagrancy is repeatedly attributed to fancy, which Thomson summons to lead the reader’s eye across the panorama even
as he paints it. One might say, then, that the prospect poem gave fancy an expansive region within which to range for poets who were interested in exercising their talent for description. As I’ll show, the air balloon proved to be a poetic wish fulfillment, enabling the sweeping, disembodied passage over landscapes eighteenth century poets like Thomson fantasized over in forms like the prospect poem. Balloon poetry engages with the form’s conventions in a way that realizes fancy’s virtual potential.

Recent scholarly assessments of the prospect poem have reconsidered the role of mediation and embodiment in the type of vision offered by the form. Ingrid Horrocks demarcates a shift from the roving, disembodied perspective of the gentleman in retirement who surveys the land to that of the landless and mobile wanderer figure. She identifies the “circling eye” of Thomson’s Seasons as representative of the former, one that rarely, if ever, embodies another human subjectivity for fear of losing sight of the universal prospect. In contrast, the wanderer figure in poems like Oliver Goldsmith’s The Traveller, invoke fancy to engage in sustained sympathetic interaction with denizens in the countryside. Vital to this transition in the genre is fancy’s role in allowing the poet to experience the landscape through other subjectivities rather than through an invisible medium. In a political move, poets like Goldsmith overcome Thomson’s anxiety of inhabiting other bodies, by interacting (even intermingling) with, rather than passing over, other subjects in the landscape, and in doing so including them in the scene.

We find a strong example of fancy’s transpersonal or sympathetic powers in the William

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42 See Kevis Goodman’s reading of Thomson’s Seasons, particularly the role of the microscope in mediating between the minute particulars and the vast prospects of his descriptions. Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 38-54.
43 Ingrid Horrocks, “‘Circling eye’ and ‘houseless stranger’: The new eighteenth-century wanderer (Thomson to Goldsmith)” in ELH. 77(3), Fall 2010, pp. 665-687.
Cowper’s pathetic account of the noble savage who returns to his native country after a short stay in England in Book I of *The Task*. Cowper invites fancy to paint the scene:

> Methinks I see thee straying on the beach,  
> And asking of the surge that bathes thy foot  
> If ever it has wash'd our distant shore.  
> I see thee weep, and thine are honest tears,  
> A patriot's for his country. Thou art sad  
> At thought of her forlorn and abject state,  
> From which no power of thine can raise her up.  
> *Thus fancy paints thee, and though apt to err,*  
> *Perhaps errs little, when she paints thee thus.*  
> She tells me too that *duly ev'ry morn*  
> Thou climb'st the mountain top, with eager eye  
> Exploring far and wide the wat'ry waste  
> *For sight of ship from England. Év'ry speck*  
> Seen in the dim horizon, turns thee pale  
> With conflict of contending hopes and fears.  
> But comes at last the dull and dusky eve,  
> And sends thee to thy cabin, well-prepared  
> To dream all night of what the day denied [italics my own].

The “eager eye” in Cowper’s poem is fancy’s eye. Notice how the poet inhabits this colonial subjectivity in order to simultaneously project sentiments into it and to gain a virtual prospect. Cowper fancies that the savage laments the state of his own nation after gaining a sense of a more expansive global scene. This sentiment is heightened by the longing glance Cowper imagines the savage indulging in as he seeks an English ship in the distant horizon. The work of lyric possession here not only projects sympathies across continents between English and colonial bodies, it also allows fancy to seize a distant scene. Cowper’s poem, published in 1785, betrays a tension between fancy’s “erroneous” powers as an agent of fantasy and the longing or desire for the prospect made available by the eye of empire. By insisting that fancy perhaps “errs

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little” when she offers up this image, Cowper validates his own sentiments while eliding those of his subject, and he uses fancy’s modifying powers to do so.

Julie Ellison has been especially attentive to the fancy’s itinerant tendencies in forms like the prospect poem, and particularly in the works of Romantic women writers like Anna Letitia Barbauld and Phyllis Wheatley. In her recent study of eighteenth century Anglo-American sentiment within the framework of race, gender and empire, Ellison locates the fancy’s mobile potential in a discourse of sensibility that works on a global scale. She urges us to consider the political possibilities of the feminine registers of the discourse of sympathy and sensibility and how these registers helped consolidate ideas about the fancy as a distinct poetic mode:

Fancy forms a key part of the aesthetics and politics of sensibility. It represents subjectivity that is at once ungrounded—liberated from or deprived of territory—and mobile, committed to ambitious itineraries through international space and historical time. As a motion of escape and mastery, fancy lends itself to complex ambitions for public-minded poets of both sexes of different races. As such, it plays a crucial role in the fundamental reorientation of sensibility to the needs of global culture…[it connects] race, melancholia, artfulness and empire—all in relation to gender and the career of the woman poet.45

Developing the convention of the poet in retirement who surveys international events—like Cowper’s taking pleasure in newspapers as “loopholes of retreat/to peep at such a world”—a globally-oriented fancy allows female or feminized poets wander out to participate, at least virtually, in the politics of empire in the absence of real political agency. But fancy also plays an important role in a genre closely related to prospect poetry: the progress poem. In “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven,” for example, Barbauld relies on fancy to tour a global geography as she

45 Ellison, p. 100.
traces the “progress” of poetic genius over a wide historical arc that coincides with fancy’s passage across continents. Thus, Barbauld’s disappointment over the British government’s management of the Napoleonic Wars manifests itself as the expulsion of fancy westward from England to America:

Where wanders Fancy down the lapse of years
Shedding o'er imaged woes untimely tears?
Fond moody Power! as hopes—as fears prevail,
She longs, or dreads, to lift the awful veil,
On visions of delight now loves to dwell,
Now hears the shriek of woe or Freedom's knell:
Perhaps, she says, long ages past away,
And set in western waves our closing day,
Night, Gothic night, again may shade the plains
Where Power is seated, and where Science reigns;
England, the seat of arts, be only known
By the gray ruin and the mouldering stone;
That Time may tear the garland from her brow,
And Europe sit in dust, as Asia now.46 (ll. 113-126)

In Barbauld’s poem, Fancy is the harbinger of civilization and genius, and proceeds westward. Folded into the global prospect of fancy is a history of global empires. Thus, fancy here is not only visionary (in that it presages the enlightenment of future empires), it also functions as a custodian of history and memory.

Decades before Barbauld’s political progress poem, the American poet Phillip Freneau capitalized on fancy’s mobile potential to tour the globe in his 1770 poem, “Power of Fancy”. Calling fancy “a wakeful, restless, vagrant thing,” Freneau takes pleasure in tracing its roving movements over a vast global territory:

Swift, she stretches o’er the seas
To the far off Hebrides,
Canvas on the lofty mast

Could not travel half so fast—
Swifter than the eagle’s flight
Or instantaneous rays of light!
Lo! Contemplative she stands
On Norwegia’s rocky lands—.

Fancy, to that land repair,
Sweetest Ossian slumbers there;
Waft me far to southern isles,
Where the soften’d winter smiles,
To Bermuda’s orange shades;
Or Demarara’s lovely glades;
Bear me to the sounding cape
Painting death in every shape…

Lo! She leads me wide and far,
Sense can never follow her—
Shape they course o’er land and sea,
Help me to keep pace with thee,
Lead me to your chalky cliff,
Over rock and over reef,
Into Britain’s fertile land,
Stretching far her proud command.

Fancy, thou the muse’s pride,
In thy painted realms reside
Endless images of things
Fluttering each on golden wings,
Ideal objects, such a store,
The universe could hold no more:
Fancy, to thy power I owe
Half my happiness below;
By thee Elysian groves were made,
Thine were the notes that Orpheus play’d;
By thee was Pluto charm’d so well
While rapture seiz’d the sons of hell—
Come, O come—perceived by none,
You and I will walk alone.

Here, fancy is both the eye myth and empire; it pursues fictional locales as eagerly as it does real political territories. For Freneau, sense experience races out to keep pace with fancy’s restless motion, but ultimately fails to extend so far. What makes Freneau’s poem remarkable is not only its publication date (it precedes major Romantic distinctions between imagination and fancy as
well as the advent of the air balloon), but also its status as a uniquely American reflection on fancy that emerges from an experience of imperial expansion. As Ellison argues, fancy allows poets like Freneau to frame a vision of global empires by ushering the poetic eye between England, the Americas, and Asia, in order to praise and critique imperial networks. But fancy’s mobile potential also coincides historically with the advent of the air balloon in Europe, an invention whose amateur practice spread across the Continent and the Americas within a few years after the first ascension in France in 1783.47

In air balloon poetry, fancy allows the poet to inhabit the subjectivity of the balloonist who actually hovers over the landscape. These same poems pick up on the conventions of prospect poetry, but do so via the aeronaut as a figure of experience that is channeled using fancy’s sympathetic powers. Paradoxically, the poet achieves both intimacy and detachment in the process, sharing the expansive, mobile scene of the aeronaut from a grounded position. In a poem titled “Aerophorion,” written on the occasion of watching the balloonist James Sadler ascend in a balloon in November of 1784, for example, soon-to-be poet laureate Henry James Pye uses the poetic occasion to seize Sadler’s perspective as he soars over Dublin:

Hail then ye daring few! Who proudly soar
Through paths by mortal eye unview’d before!
From earth and all her humble scenes who rise
To search the extended mansions of the skies.
If firm his breast who first undaunted gave
His fragile vessel to the stormy wave,
How much superior he! Whose buoyant car
Borne through the strife of elemental war,
Driven by the veering wind’s uncertain tide,
No helm to steer him, and no oar to guide,
See Earth’s stupendous region spread below,

47 According to Lynne, balloon manuals circulated across the English empire so quickly that records of balloon ascensions in the North and Latin America, including Mexico City, are found as early as the late 1790s, only a few years after the first ascension in France in 1783. The rapidity of the distribution of information like balloon manuals underscores precisely the global scene the balloon is called on to picture. The Sublime Invention, p. 56.
To hillocks shrunk the mountains loftiest brow.
Who now his head sublime, astonish’d shrugs
In the dull gloom of rain-distended clouds,
And sits enthroned ‘mid solitude and shade
Which human eye-sight can never pervade,
Or rides amidst the howling tempest’s force
Tracing the volley’d lightning to its source,
Leaves all the jarring Atmosphere behind,
And at his feet, while spreading clouds extend,
While thunders bellow, and while storms descend,
Feels on his head the enlivening sun-beams play,
And drinks in skies serene the unsullied stream of day…

Pye seizes an opportunity of poetic inspiration to enter into Sadler’s experience of the stormy sky. The balloon is a sublime object that draws the mind upward. Pye imagines Sadler’s balloon rising swiftly above the tumult of the tempest, “tracing the volley’d lightning to its source” and surfacing to feel the sun on his head. The passage is extraordinary because the poem sets out to track the aeronaut’s ascent until he disappears from the view of spectators below and into the clouds. Once he does, there is a marked shift in perspective that involves slipping into Sadler’s subjectivity to experience the calm weather above the lightning storm. Accounts of particular sensations—like the heat of the sunbeams on Sadler’s head—are excellent examples of how fancy relays sense experience through sympathetic networks from a distance. Moreover, the disappearance of the balloonist above the clouds marks a transition from viewing the balloon rise with the naked eye to a scene offered by fancy beyond the eye’s field of vision. For Pye, the balloon introduces “regions open’d to the astonish’d sight/Beyond Imagination’s wildest flight.” It does so not only for the aeronaut whose eye extends beyond all human sight, but also for the poet, whose fancy gains new territory in the age of ballooning. In other words, Pye insists that imagination is extended by the aerial technology.

In balloon poems like this, fancy and “sense” often overlap, and can even augment each other. But, even as the balloon opens new avenues for fancy that were not previously available, it also forecloses fancy’s region by limiting its powers to the realism of a balloonist’s prospect. In other words, these poems suggest that fancy’s creative potential takes a backseat to its ability to frame the perspective of another through channels of sympathy. In his 1785 poem “The Progress of Balloons,” Phillip Freneau points to a similar conflict between poetic fancy and balloon prospect:

Assist me ye muses (whose harps are in tune)
To tell of the flight of the gallant balloon!
As high as my subject permit me to soar
To heights unattempted, unthought of before…

But who would have thought that invention could rise
To find out a method to soar to the skies,
And pierce the bright regions, which ages assign’d
To sprits unbodied, and flights of the mind?49

Here poetic inspiration competes with the psycho-spiritual uplift of balloon flight. Freneau uses the classical invocation of the muse to frame his poetic praise for a technology that offers a similar elevated sensibility to that which poets engage in during the creative process. In the age of the air balloon, “flights of the mind” no longer provide exclusive access to the skies. There is a fascinating competition in balloon poetry between the heaven achieved by such mental flights and that “pierced” by the technology. The “region” or zone of poetic fantasy and inspiration becomes continuous with the atmosphere of modern science opened up by the air balloon. The practice of imagining that zone requires a shift between the soaring, disembodied activity of ancient poetic inspiration to a sympathetic, embodied sharing of vision between poet and aeronaut.

One might say that the air balloon put poets and aeronauts in competition for a claim over the aerial zone. For James Tytler, a failed aeronaut himself, Vincent Lunardi’s successful balloon launch over Edinburgh inspired verses that expressed both envy and shared joy. After meeting the celebrated balloonist, Tytler sent Lunardi a dedicatory poem, which Lunardi included in his detailed account of launches over several northern locales. Titled To Mr. Lunardi, on his Successful Aerial Voyages from Edinburgh, Kelso, and Glasgow. by J. Tytler, the poem includes a lengthy footnote that rehearses Tytler’s many failed attempts to beat Lunardi to the punch by climbing the sky near Edinburgh first. Lunardi, who was a master of publicity and the language of sensibility, introduces the poem by offering effusions of sympathy in light of the young man’s unlucky career:

Before my arrival in Scotland several attempts had been made to launch a large Fire Balloon, but all without success. The poor man who should have gone up, how I commiserate his situation! Judge of his sensibility and misfortunes by the enclosed papers. Do not wrong me so much as to suppose that I have been contented with sitting down idly to drop the unavailing tear over them. I have seen the man; I have offered the voice of consolation to alleviate his distresses; and dictates of humanity have been obeyed as far as lay in my power: alas how circumscribed that power! It is only upon occasions like these that I lament its narrow bounds. Adieu! Approve, and join the prayer, and the UNFORTUNATE may ever find a sympathetic friend in. Your cordially affectionate, VINCENT LUNARDI.50

50 For Tytler’s poem and Lunardi’s discussion of it, see the closing pages of Lunardi’s An Account of Five Aerial Voyages in Scotland in a Series of Letters to His Guardian, Chevalier Gerardo Compagni, Written Under the Impression of the Various Events That Affected the Undertaking, By Vincent Lunardi, Esq. (London: Printed for the Author, and Sold by J. Bell, Bookseller to his Royal Highness The Prince of Wales, and J. Creech Edinburgh, 1786).
Lunardi’s introduction to Tytler’s poem is both patronizing and self-serving, but betrays his tendency to emphasize his bonds of friendship with patrons and admirers both on the ground and in the sky as a public relations maneuver. Lunardi’s textual engagement with Tytler turns one man’s failure into a poetic occasion that bolsters the success of another. The occasion, however, presents yet another opportunity: Tytler’s poetic flights aim at a shared vision that subsequently becomes canonized or memorialized in Lunardi’s published account. Like the reader who Keats urges to remain seated while fancy wanders abroad, Tytler dispatches fancy to experience Lunardi’s ascension at second-hand from the grounded place of a spectator:

But while in hopeless exile thus I mourn,
My mind with desp’rate gloomy passions torn,
I see thee graceful and majestic rise,
Mount on the winds, and triumph in the skies;
Till envious clouds conceal thee from our view,
And eager Vision can no more pursue.
At once Ambition points to Fame the way,
Dissolving clouds of cold Despair decay;
Celestial Hope again her influence flow’rs,
Again my soul calls forth her latent pow’rs.
To follow thee my inmost bosom burns,
Tumultuous thoughts possess the mind by turns;
Unconquer’d yet, with thee my fancy flies,
My soul aspiring yet explores the skies.
Impatient now I long the ground to spurn,
Like THEE to rise in fiery chariot born;
To leave the earth, to leave the clouds behind,
To mount on pinions of the rapid wind;
Beyond the reach of vulgar ken to soar,
Beyond the space where blustering tempests roar,
To see the bright Phoebus pour unsullied day,
While thro’ wide heavy’n he darts his cloudless ray;
To see the splendors f the Moon arise.
And all the glories of the spangled skies.
Not as thro’ Vapour’s medium dull we view,
The clouded concave of Ethereal blue;
But as from Aetna, or the Alpine Hills,
Th’exalted mind the glorious prospect fills [italics my own]…
As in Pye’s dedicatory verse addressed to Sadler, there is a marked shift in perspective between the moment in which the grounded observer watches the aeronaut (“with eager vision”) disappear from sight into the clouds and the time the aeronaut spends above them. Passionately stirred by the historic scene, Tytler invokes fancy to follow Lunardi into the clouds in what can only be described as a virtual ascension. The poem expresses a desire for an unmediated vision of the atmosphere, that is, vision unclouded by the clouds themselves. Thus, for the spectator on the ground, fancy is activated once naked vision falters. This is not the case for aeronauts who aim to communicate their prospect to their readers. In this situation, fancy is called on to begin to convey sense experience to the reader or spectator, but ultimately fails because the unmediated prospect is too copious and detailed to form an accurate conception to deliver to an audience. Thus, fancy functions differently for the poet on the ground than it does for the aeronaut on the sky. In the former case, it endeavors to approximate the sense experience of another, and, in the latter, it aims to transform sense experience into a representation that can be conveyed to those without direct experience.

The Romantic satirist and poet Thomas Hood produced one of the most well known balloon poems, the “Ode to Mr. Graham: The Aeronaut” (1823). In the poem, Hood activates fancy’s powers while watching Charles Graham ascend over London in 1823.51 Graham was one of a famous group of aeronauts that included Monck Mason and Hollond Green. Bringing the roaming eye of the prospect poem, a largely rural genre, to the urban metropolis, the poem is unique within its genre. Hood introduces the poem with an epigraph that offers the first line of Wordsworth’s poem, “To a Skylark,” which reads “Up with me! Up with me into the clouds!” Like many of his other poems that attend to plant and animal life, Wordsworth included this

particular poem in his “Poems on Fancy,” which connects Hood’s verses to Wordsworth’s project of classifying poetry according to psychological faculties. What Wordsworth’s poem shares with Hood’s is a desire for flight through sympathetic experience. Rather than project the self into a lark, however, Hood calls on fancy to share in Graham’s view from a considerable distance. Transforming the balloon into “fancy’s car,” Hood’s poem carefully outlines an imagined voyage with Graham over various parts London:

A few more whiffs of my segar  
And then, in Fancy’s airy car,  
Have with thee for the skies:--  
How oft this fragrant smoke upcurl'd  
Hath borne me from this little world,  
And all that in it lies!—…

Ah me! my brain begins to swim!--  
The world is growing rather dim;  
The steeples and the trees--  
My wife is getting very small!  
I cannot see my babe at all!--  
The Dollond,\(^{52}\) if you please!-- …

Oh, Graham! how the upper air  
Alters the standards of compare;  
One of our silken flags  
Would cover London all about--  
Nay, then--let's even empty out  
Another brace of bags!

Although Hood did not in fact ascend with Graham in his balloon, fancy provides the opportunity to experience the aeronaut’s flight at a remove. In other words, fancy seizes the balloon to facilitate sociability and intimacy at a distance. Hood’s poem also engages in a kind of description that remained popular with aeronauts who wrote about their journeys: the desire to communicate scale by analogy. Thus fancy leaves its mark in this poem by assisting Hood in

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\(^{52}\) “Dollond” refers to a type of telescope produced by the Dollonds, an English family known for generations for their work on lenses. John Dollond (1706-1761) was the first to patent an “achromatic doublet,” which reduces aberrations of color and shape in lenses. Here, Graham asks for a Dollond in order to correct the incongruent scale of the prospect.
forging his playful analogies, but also by removing him from society on the ground to engage
with the aeronaut at a distance.

While poets who praise them in verse rely on fancy to approach the balloonist’s view
remotely, aeronauts note repeatedly that the real sense experience of an aerial prospect threatens
to overwhelm fancy’s powers by filling and delighting the eye with new and striking shapes,
scenes and colors, all displayed with an astonishing distinctness. Wyndham Sadler, for example,
who was the first man to cross the Irish Channel in 1812, finds himself at a loss for words in
attempting to communicate a sense of the detail of the prospect he witnessed while sailing
through the air:

From my elevated situation I was not only enabled to penetrate into the recesses of
Wicklow Mountains, but to overlook their ridges and bring within the field of vision the
distant ocean, and the blue Horizon here and there broken by a sail—in a word, the
country to the south and west of Dublin, interspersed with Villages and cultivated Fields,
the Amphitheater of Hills and Mountains, the broad expanse of Ocean, the small
Breakers beating on the Islands, and the rocky shore, the sails of Vessels glancing in the
Sun, all combined presented a prospect which my fancy may contemplate, but words can
give no adequate idea of, and to enjoy which was in itself a reward for any hazard that
might attend my undertaking.53

Like the wandering eye of Thomson’s Seasons, Sadler vision sweeps over the vastness of the
scene even as it hones in on minute details, such as the sails “glancing in the Sun” that break up
the enormity of the sea. Sadler invites his reader’s fancy to “contemplate” the prospect, but he

53 Wyndham Sadler, Balloon. An Authentic Narrative of the Aerial Voyage, of Mr. Sadler, Across the
Irish Channel, From Belvedere House, Dumondra in the Neighborhood of Dublin, on Thursday, October
1, 1812, With Some Observations on the Important Objects Connected with Aerostation. To Which is
Annexed, A Chart of the Channel, Shewing his Course and Place of Descent. Sold for the Benefit of Mr.
Sadler, Printed by W.H. Tyrrell, No. 17, College Green Dublin, p. 9.
also finds himself enchanted by the presence of the scene as if it were presented to him by fancy itself rather than by his naked eye. Unlike poets who rely fancy to imagine the prospect of another, aeronauts like Sadler invoke the faculty to aid in representing the clear distinctness and detail of the aerial panorama. In other words, fancy alleviates and abstracts the hyperrealism of the prospect presented to the eyes.

Thomas Baldwin, perhaps the balloonist to most fully engage in a poetics of the prospect, provides some of the richest aerial descriptions of the countryside in Chester in his 1786 *Airopaidia*. Disappointed with what he called “the defectiveness of the descriptions of aerial scenes and prospects” by other “balloon voyagers” like Lunardi or Blanchard, Baldwin’s account reads as a Romantic travelogue from the air, one that fully engages aesthetic categories like the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque. Just as Charlotte Smith invites the representational activity of “penciling” in her sonnet on fancy—that “false medium” of childhood—Baldwin relies on similar representational cues in his own account. For Baldwin, fancy’s pencil aims at increasing precision and realism as it frames the real prospect: “If there had been any Thing to wish for, it was the living Pencil of ANGELICA, or some other celebrated Painter: in order to gratify the World with the bright Miniatures and Colouring of so much variegated Beauty” (123). Realizing that the task of communicating such a novel and sensational picture would require extraordinary representational powers, Baldwin explicitly summons fancy to approximate the scene for his audience:

As it would be difficult, if not impossible by mere Description, to convey an adequate Idea of the different SENSATIONS experienced while in the Car; (for Pleasure is itself

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54 *Airopaidia: Containing the Narrative of a Balloon Excursion from Chester, the Eighth of September, 1785, taken from Minutes made During the Voyage ... To which is subjoined, mensuration of heights by the barometer, made plain: with extensive tables. The whole serving as an introduction to aerial navigation: with a copious index. By Thomas Baldwin. (Chester: printed for the author, by J. Fletcher; and sold by W. Lowndes, London; J. Poole, Chester; and other booksellers, 1786).*
unspeakable;) yet the Fancy may possibly, without Censure, be a Moment indulged, in its Allusions to such familiar Subjects as approach nearest to THEM: so as not to leave the public Mind wholly in the Dark, with Respect to the above Points of natural and general Curiosity (123).

In Baldwin’s account, fancy proves to be the most effective medium for the relay of the grand prospect to his audience. Impressively, however, Baldwin’s descriptive experiments extend beyond visual representation. In order to convey an idea of the motion of the balloon as it ascends, Baldwin describes the sensation of a swing: “Most young people, whenever they have Opportunity, amuse themselves on the SLACK ROPE, or Swing: the Pleasure increases in Proportion to the Loftiness of Ascent they are able to acquire…The Ascent of the Balloon is not unlike what is felt, in the ascending half of the Swing: and the Descent is attended with that agreeable Sensation known to those who sink through the descending half” (125). This passage is remarkable, not only because it demonstrates Baldwin’s admirable efforts to communicate more precise sensations of balloon flight, but also because it describes the pleasurable passivity native to fancy’s powers thematized in poems like Hunt’s poem, “Fancy’s Party.”

Baldwin’s wonderfully odd title—Airopaidia—which he defines as “aerial recreation,” emphasizes the activity of play in his narrative, one also native to an aesthetic of fancy. Far less concerned with scientific measurement and charting geographic progress than it is with poetic description, Baldwin’s account aligns with the priorities of fancy. His narrative sketches recall the “circling eye” of Thomson’s Seasons in their careful and mobile detailing of the Chester

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55 The Greek “paidia” actually refers to education, not necessarily recreation. The opening page of the text reads “Airopaidia: or Aerial Recreation. Descriptions of the aerial Scenes are illustrated with Engravings, by the best Masters: two of which are Coloured.” That Baldwin explicitly refers to recreation thus confuses play with disciplined learning. The narrative seems to me closer to descriptive play, and yet there is a sense that Baldwin’s aim is to enrich the reader’s conception of the aerial zone with colorful description.
countryside. Indeed, Baldwin’s narrative is by far the most colorful of contemporary balloon writings, and perhaps the most concerned with reflecting on its own process of aesthetic appreciation, as in the following passage:

But what Scenes of Grandeur and Beauty!

A tear of pure Delight flashed in his Eye! Of pure and exquisite Delight and Rapture; to look down on the unexpected change already wrought in the Works of Art and Nature, contracted by a Span by the NEW PERSPECTIVE, diminished almost beyond the Bounds of Credibility.

Yet so far were the Objects from losing their Beauty, that EACH WAS BROUGHT UP in a new Manner to the Eye, and distinguished by a Strength of Colouring, a Neatness and Elegance of Boundary, above Description charming!

The endless Variety of Objects, minute, distinct and separate, tho’ apparently on the same Plain or Level, at once striking the Eye without a Change of its Position, astonished and enchanted. Their Beauty was unparalleled. The imagination was more than gratified; it was overwhelmed.

The gay scene was a Fairy-Land, and Chester Lilliput (40).

Baldwin’s emphasis on the vibrancy of color, elegance, artfulness, and enchanting nature of the scene accords with qualities later associated with fancy. His description of the urban scene as a “fairy-land” or Jonathan’s Swift’s world of satirical miniatures activates fancy’s powers to rearrange and modify forms without completely altering their nature. Moreover, the excessive displays of sentiment in the passage—hallmarks of the discourse of sensibility—are meant to connect the audience with the aeronaut in order to prime them for a striking account of the prospect. Such excesses of feeling and striking detail also characterize Baldwin’s “indulgence”
in fancy’s powers as he prepares to relay an aerial prospect to the eye of the reader. For Baldwin, the activation of sympathetic feelings primes his audience for the communication of his sensations.

At the beginning of Airopaidia, Baldwin makes note of the “tender sympathetic feelings” displayed by the crowd that watched him ascend, and he continuously returns to the theme in his numerous attempts to communicate the experience of flight to his reader:

Before a farther description of aerial scenes is attempted, it would be improper not to mention a circumstance which happened on the first ascent of the balloon: and too strongly called forth the tender sympathetic Feelings, by raising, in the minds of the spectators, alarming apprehensions for the safety of the aeronaut, on seeing the balloon move gently toward the sea.

The striking contrast and novelty of his situation filled him with unusual and pleasing sensations. He had just left, for the first time, his native Earth, where he had continued for a while the central object to some thousand spectators; whose eyes, he knew, were still turned towards him; that he was still the subject of their conversation: yet no human figure met his sight; no human sound vibrated in his ear (44-45).

Reports of balloon ascensions often describe the unified sentiment of the enormous crowds, whether that was joy or, as is the case here, dread that the balloonist might plunge into the sea. The most prominent theme in this passage, however, is vision. The eyes of the balloonist form a circuit of vision with the thousands of upward turned eyes in the crowd. Their “tender sympathetic feelings” attach themselves to Baldwin, and this circuit, which many poets rely on in balloon verse, allows them to share in his revelation. These same feelings are engaged when
Baldwin engages in descriptions of the prospect, which he hopes to communicate with as much precise poetic ability as he can muster.

One of the most impressive subjects of description in the work is Baldwin’s account of the clouds he surveys. Clouds are ideal forms for fanciful activity, not only because their shapes are indefinite and in flux, but also because, like the balloon, they are passively led on by the winds. During his aerial tour, Baldwin is moved by fancy’s powers to give the clouds as many forms as his mind can offer:

Some indeed had not wholly lost their Motion: continuing to be lifted up. Others ponderous and sleepy, nodded by mere Weight, their monstrous Heads. It seemed as if they had persisted in mounting upwards, till they could ride no higher: their lower Parts pressing perpendicularly against the upper, which gradually swelled out on all Sides. By partial and temporary Movements of the Air, some broad unwieldy Caps lost the vertical Direction of their Columns. The Columns likewise underwent a similar, gradual change: rolling from their Pedestals or spiral Bases; and assuming EVERY ORGANIZED SHAPE that Fancy could suggest.

The Constitution of these enormous Masses was such as to reflect some of the Sun’s Rays, and to transmit others in a Variety of Colouring. The parts next the sun were of a snowy Whiteness. Then of a bright luminous Yellow, melting into a dusky Sulphur: afterwards of a Purple. The Rays being now shorn; a Degree of Opacity and Transmission took Place through half the Substances of the Cloud, which seemed of a transparent Blue like the Onyx (55-57).

The clouds arrange themselves in various shapes before Baldwin’s eyes. Like Coleridge’s interception of the balloon shape in the flight of the starlings while in the moving coach, the
wind governs Baldwin’s changing line of sight in the balloon while also driving the shifting activity of the clouds. In a dynamic instance of the pathetic fallacy, Baldwin projects affective states onto them: they are “ponderous” or “sleepy” according to the shapes that suggest those states. The mind’s reaching out for analogies to assign to the cloud formations unmistakably represents the work fancy, which shuttles between sense experience and the inner life of the mind, but also follows the peculiar mobility of association. Everything in this passage is in motion, from the fancy of the aeronaut, to the drift of the balloon and clouds, and the shifting shapes of the clouds themselves.

In his descriptions of the Chester landscape, Baldwin often finds himself turning to artificial analogies, like miniatures, to communicate a sense of scale. These comparisons are also noteworthy because they rely on works of art or other artificial aids to convey the appearance of natural scenes. Descriptions that utilize these aids are situated somewhere between the artifice of fancy, which relies on representational cues like painting and sketching, and the world of sense experience. An example emerges in Baldwin’s account of the plots of land sectioned off by recent enclosures:

The Lawn itself, which composed the Ground-View, was full of innumerable Enclosures almost CLOSE to each other; with much Wood:--dwindling to the Pattern of an elegant Turkey-Carpet: which, according to Principles of Mahommedan Faith, tho’ wrought in gay and vivid Colours, is made to exhibit NO EXACT resemblance to the works either of Art of Nature (110).

In the passage Baldwin insists on the representational quality of the patchwork of the landscape below as it is formed by manmade enclosures. The fields resemble a Turkish carpet, a work of fine art that, remarkably, resists a representational mode altogether in accordance with the
religious principles of Islam. Paradoxically, then, the prospect looks like a Turkish rug, which is specially crafted to look like nothing in nature or art. Thus, the analogy Baldwin provides draws the natural scene toward artifice, but the artifice he summons intentionally bears no resemblance to nature or any art at all. We might say, then, that the prospect of the landscape from the perspective of a balloon realizes a purely fantastical pattern, and that the pattern circles back to a nature it sought to escape.

In order to better aid the eyes of his audience, Baldwin’s minute descriptions are often accompanied by his own drawings, which convey a surprising vision of the country below [See Figure 5]. About Chester’s celebrated River Dee, Baldwin remarks that, although its name signifies black river, the cool climate had given Dee “the unvaried color of red lead,” which produced on his sight, a “broad red line, twining in meanders infinitely more serpentine than are expressed in maps.” In contrast to the blue hues of the City of Chester, Baldwin notes, “the whole had such a beautiful and rich look; not like a Model, but a colored map” (107). Baldwin’s detailed maps work, like the fancy, to paint the scene from above the clouds. By insisting the prospect appears more two-dimensional than three, he again relies on the artificial to communicate an accurate sense of the natural. Because the scene looks like a colored map, including such a map draws the reader upward to the scene of looking from the vehicle itself. Admittedly, some of these drawings seem more true to life than others, which perhaps rely a little too much on the fancy to convey qualities like the convex appearance of the earth’s surface [see Figure 6]. As Susan Stewart has noted in her discussion of the miniature, when it comes to representations that adapt scale “the exaggeration of the miniature must continually assert a principle of balance and equivalence, or the narrative will become grotesque.”

56 Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 46.
the Balloon at its Greatest Elevation, for example, Baldwin sketches a series of concentric circles to emphasize the extreme ascent of the balloon. However, by framing Chester within the center-most circle, the proportion of the town in relation to his representation of the curved surface of the earth exceeds all probability. The two drawings included in Baldwin’s account thus demonstrate the extent to which fancy serves an impulse in balloon writings towards realism, while retaining it transformative powers of analogy and approximation.

Figure 6: A View from the Balloon at its Greatest Elevation
From Thomas Baldwin’s Airpoaidia (1786)
Figure 5: A Balloon Prospect from Above the Clouds
From Thomas Baldwin’s *Airpoaidia* (1786)
Epistolarity, Vision, and Fancy in Balloon Writings

In addition to participating within a tradition of prospect poetry, balloon writings are also heavily invested in conventions of epistolarity. This has partly to do with the eighteenth century practice of using the epistle form to frame and distill complex and specialized knowledge in scientific and philosophical writings for a lay readership. However, the pervasiveness of the epistle in ballooning literature seems more likely due to an idea of the letter as a mobile medium that relays sentiments and experience between persons. If balloonists utilized fancy as a faculty that assisted in the communication of human sensations through sympathetic channels in their descriptions of prospects, they capitalized on the epistle as a form that does similar work. Because epistles convey descriptive accounts and feelings in a way that calls attention to the form itself, balloon writings often experiment with epistolarity in order to emphasize fancy’s powers of shared vision, sentiment, and mobility. Letters in the literature of ballooning engage with a number of discourses tied to fancy, including a liberal sociability, sensibility, gender and sexuality, revolutionary politics, and surveillance.

Only weeks after Vincent Lunardi made the first balloon ascent in England from the Artillery Grounds in London in September of 1784, he published his *Account of the First Aerial Voyage in England, in a series of Letters to his Guardian, Gherardo Compagni*. Reading through the momentous text, one is surprised to find that it contains more than one type of epistle. The heart of the text is Lunardi’s correspondence to Compagni, detailing his observations and

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57 According to Elizabeth Cook: “the letter-form encouraged the participation of non-specialists in scientific endeavors. The correspondence columns of general-interest journals often contained letters on natural history observations or mathematical questions, and submissions to Philosophical Transactions, the journal of the Royal Society, appeared as letters. Under the rubric of epistolary sociability, the correspondence published by these journals composed a scientific community that linked rural subscribers with city dwellers and amateurs with experts.” *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 18.
sentiments during the historic flight. Astonishingly, however, in an appendix to the account, we are also provided with transcriptions of letters Lunardi released into the air from his sailing balloon. These letters, which are addressed to the aeronaut’s friends residing in London, were almost immediately discovered by Englishmen who happened to be in the countryside below his aerial path and delivered shortly thereafter by their own hands. Perhaps the first very occasion of “air-mail,” these air-born epistles might be interpreted in a number of ways. They not only reference their own mode of conveyance and transmission—the balloon itself—they also corroborate the authenticity of Lunardi’s account. As scholars have shown, the epistle has traditionally been a highly suspect form because of an ever-present potential for the forgery, dissimulation, and interception of letters. 58 Perhaps anticipating these suspicions, Lunardi included within his account notarized depositions by witnesses to his landing a few miles from the launch site, as well as by those who recovered his dispatched air-epistles.

At the conclusion of his narrative, Lunardi also incorporated a verse epistle composed on the occasion of his ascension by an anonymous poet who was among the 150,000 persons to watch him ascend. The nameless poet makes clever use of the verse epistle form, employing it to close the distance between himself and Lunardi in order to attempt to visualize the aeronaut’s prospect from the rising balloon. The account thus contains three types of epistles: the transcriptions of the air-mail, the verse epistle included in the appendix, and the letters to Compagni that form the body of the text. Lunardi’s Account is only the first of numerous balloon writings framed as epistles. The popularity of the form in the archive demands attention because of some of the extraordinary ways in which balloon epistles extend or re-conceive conventions of epistolarity. If, as Janet Altman has argued, epistolarity facilitates union between persons and

58 For a discussion of these anxieties, especially during wartime, see Mary Favret’s Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
opens vistas into private interiors and sentiments, it arguably also bears the potential to distribute other forms of first-person perspective to a larger public. For Altman, letters can function metonymically, forming a material substitute for the other, but they can also work metaphorically, “conjuring up interiorized images” of that other.⁵⁹ Lunardi’s letters offer both metaphoric and metonymic permutations proposed by Altman, and much more. That is, the epistle form makes one man’s aerial revelation a collective one. By framing his narrative as a series of letters, Lunardi disseminates his panorama not only to his addressee (Compagni), but also, by extension, to the general readership of the account. They become shared mobile windows hovering over the English landscape.

Members of the public writing about the balloon often seized the perspective of the aeronaut to imagine what it is he might perceive from above the clouds. That many of these imaginative exercises were framed as epistles exposes a significant relationship between epistolarity, fancy, and the air balloon. By using an epistolary mode, balloonists and the writers devoted to them participated in a circuit of vision and feeling, one mediated by the very technology that provided the occasion for the scene of writing. Indeed, I would suggest that the popularity of the epistle in the balloon archive emphasizes the form’s native potential for precisely this relay of sense and sentiment. We are used to thinking about epistolarity in the eighteenth century as a means of accessing private spaces and subjectivities—and particularly female interiors—a fact that ties the form directly to a politics of gender and voyeurism. Balloon epistles retain some of these concerns while introducing new possibilities, including the communication of a private, yet exteriorized experience, such as a balloon prospect.

⁵⁹ Janet Altman, Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p. 19.
When the first female aeronaut in England, a Mrs. Sage, climbed the skies in a balloon with Vincent Lunardi and George Biggin in 1785, she published her account of the momentous event as a series of epistles to a female friend [See Figure 7]. Drawing on conventions of sensibility, Sage’s narrative exists in the moment of writing, complete with scenes of interruption that account for episodes of overwhelming feeling. Reflecting on her experience in the heavens while writing to her friend, she notes:

You’ll say I begin to prose, and indeed the present turn of my mind, shut up by myself, and reflecting, every line I write, upon the idea that I was daring enough to push myself, as I may say, before my time, into the presence of the Deity, inclines me to a species of terror; but I will lay down my pen, till I can reason myself out of my melancholy, and then go on with my narrative (15).

While her experience ascending in the balloon with Lunardi and Biggin produced unmistakable awe, Sage repeatedly emphasizes her strength and fortitude during the ascension. Countering claims in newspapers that she had been “agitated almost to fainting,” Sage stressed that she was “never more mistress of [her] reason” (13). One detects in her assertion a personal defensiveness about public concern over female aeronauts. Unsurprisingly, her account refers more than once the public disapproval of having a woman rise in a balloon with two single men, not necessarily because the endeavor was dangerous in and of itself, but because the situation might lead to a sexual encounter in the skies. Many balloon poems and ballads betray this anxiety:

But as ladies now mount with our trav’lers on high,
Should a child be begot while they’re up in the sky,
The question I’d ask, you’ll not judge to be wrong,
To what parish on earth would the bantling belong?

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60 A Letter Addressed to a Female Friend. By Mrs. Sage, The first English Female Aerial Traveller; Describing the General Appearance and Effects of Her Expedition with Mr. Lunardi’s Balloon; Which Ascended from St. George’s Fields on Wednesday, 29th June, 1785, Accompanied by George Biggin, Esq. The Third Edition (London: Printed for the Writer, and Sold by J. Bell, British Library, Strand, 1785).
Since a higher descent he might boast than his Grace,
Whom a ribband bedecks, tho’ a rope should disgrace,
Or ‘twould laughter promote, should the man in the Moon,
Give a hint of what pass’d in the airy Balloon.  

Despite public concern, however, Sage reassures her addressee that she remained perfectly composed in the air and that her escorts were more than accommodating. Nevertheless, the coding of the sky as a zone of potential romance activates a sense of fancy as amorous inclination or sexual attraction. In other words, while the sky became a new site for liberty and freedom, it also proved to be a new source of anxiety because it was beyond the reach of social codes and regulations. Sage’s letters simultaneously invite a reading of a flirtation between her and the aeronaut Biggin and ward off potential accusations about an indiscretion, a tension that places her letters in a tradition of female protagonists in the novel of sensibility.

Like aeronauts before her, Sage was compelled to remark on the unified affective expression of the crowd below:

At five and twenty minutes after one, Mr. Biggin gave the signal for cutting the cords, and your happy friend found herself secure from disappointment, and floating in the boundless regions of the air. We arose in a slow and majestic manner, forming a most beautiful object, amidst the acclamations of thousands, whose hearts at that moment appeared to feel but one sentiment, and that for the safety of two adventurers…. My first attention was taken up in contemplating the extensive plain of up-turned faces, in fixed

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61 From “The Air Balloon, a New Song” (London, 1785). A slip-song - "What various diversions now swarm in this town." These concluding verses refer to Blanchard, who made a famous flight in 1785 from England to France.
62 For Jeffrey Robinson, “the history of the word Fancy as something that can penetrate the world projects at times a strong sexual connotation…Concretized in unsanctioned sexual behavior and, linguistically, in slang, the Fancy as mental faculty becomes linked to forms of the unregulated and transgressive mind.” Unfettering Poetry, p. 10.
and ecstatic attention. The pleasure and surprise I felt was so great, that I was lost in admiration, and expressed my satisfaction by repeated salutations (14-15).

The communal transport of the crowd is undoubtedly one of the most common pleasurable experiences recorded by balloonists. Sage is equally uplifted by her growing celebrity status as the first female balloonist in England as she is by the balloon itself. Her published letters detailing the event distribute this perspective of the awe-struck crowd (and the series of observations of the prospect below) to the general public via her intimate correspondence to a private friend. The historic event is thus framed as a series of personal female addresses. Paradoxically, the distance the rising balloon places between Sage and her society below forms the occasion for the intimacy invested in the epistles themselves. Thus, Sage is careful to note that “…the objects of my affection or esteem were at that time (and are still indeed) so very distant from me, and so perfectly unacquainted with my situation, that I seemed to exist but for myself.” The sensation of the balloonist who is utterly removed from social codes of the world below carries particular weight when it comes from a female perspective. To seem to “exist but for [one]self” underscores a female independence that contributes to the extraordinary incident and occasion for the published account. Moreover, the letters contribute to the feminization of ballooning itself, not only as a harmless recreation and a fashionable form of entertainment, but also as a potential zone for romance with male balloonists whose celebrity status grew rapidly after the first few ascensions.
The gendered politics of privacy in the epistolary genre began to shift significantly toward the end of the eighteenth century, when Europe’s charged political atmosphere made the uninhibited and unmonitored circulation of letters tantamount to national threat. Mary Favret has recently attributed the waning of epistolarity as we approach the French Revolution to increasing public anxiety about the heightened surveillance by European governments of the movement of letters across national lines.63 The free and open exchange of correspondence, which provided the necessary infrastructure for the Enlightenment republic of letters, could, after the 1780s, no longer hold due to the tremendous unease and isolationism caused by the potential spread of

revolutionary sentiment outside of France. One might say, then, the epistle had its final flourish of the century during the first few years of balloonomania. The political anxiety of the 1780s and 90s was later amplified by the real military potential that air balloons introduced to modern warfare. Not only might balloons allow for aerial surveillance, they could also be used to attack enemy camps from the sky.

Such a fear was raised when the *Dublin Evening Post* published an allegedly intercepted correspondence between a Frenchman, Citizen Campenas and Napoleon in 1796, then General in Chief of the Army in Italy, outlining a plan to invade England by a fleet of aerial ships conveying the French army. In these letters, Campenas boasts of a strategic attack on the city of London by releasing explosives from the floating balloon:

> You can thus, without any danger, hover above the fleets of enemies jealous of our happiness, and thunder against them like a new Jupiter merely by throwing perpendicularly downwards fire-brands made of a substance which will kindle at the end of its fall, but which it will be impossible to extinguish…From the calculations I have made, I am convinced that, with this machine, you may go from Paris to London, and return back again to Paris in twenty-four hours, without descending. 64

While the authenticity of this alarming epistle is impossible to determine, both its fictional and historical status yield fascinating readings. If the correspondence is accepted as an authentic, seized letter, it demonstrates the heightened surveillance of the post by government powers during the war, one that contributes to manifestations of wartime paranoia. However, if we read the Campenas letter as a fictional document, we might wonder about its authorship and its intended purpose, which appears calculated to raise the alarm of a nation at war in order to

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64 Excerpts from the Campenas letters are included in the article, “Aviation Dreams in Napoleon’s Day,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1914.
justify the government’s continued monitoring of the post. Both possibilities disclose the role of
the post as a panopticon of wartime government, and, as this example shows, the function of the
balloon as not only a new means of surveillance, but also, a new reason to reinforce its older
strategies.

The public response to the Campenas letter includes one poem, *A Mock Heroic Epistle.*

*To Citizen Campenas, Hydraulic Engineer at Paris On his Proposed Invasion of Great Britain In
A Fleet of Balloons*, published a year later in Dublin in 1797.65 Lampooning the outlandish
proposal suggested in these letters, the poet of the mock epistle shares in what he describes as the
overactive fancy that must have compelled Citizen Campenas to devise such a scheme:

No more let children marvel with delight,
On Swift’s feigned travels, or th’Arabian Night,
Where Synbad’s bird or Gulliver’s balloon
Bears them aloft ’twixt ocean and the moon:
Abstruser projects from thy brain arise,
To puzzle science and astound the skies…
Thou prime Projector! Give my fancy wing,
To reach thy flights, and Docks aerial sing;
Where, wide extended o’er th’Elysian vale
The bark, self-buoyant! waits to ride the gale [italics my own].

Calling the military plan “Munchausen-like,” the author of the mock epistle relegates it to the
same category as the exaggerated tales of the German nobleman Baron Munchausen, who
published his *Surprising Adventures*, a series of wildly fantastical stories whose incidents include
the Baron riding a canon ball and visiting the Moon in an aerial ship: 66

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65 *A Mock-Heroic Epistle To Citizen Campenas, Hydraulic Engineer at Paris On his Proposed Invasion
of Great Britain In A Fleet of Balloons* (Dublin: Printed by William Sleater, 28, Dame-Street, 1797).
According to the author’s advertisement that precedes the poetic epistle, the letter from Campenas to
Bonaparte appeared “in the Dublin Evening Post on Thursday, October 5th, 1797.”
66 An English translation of Baron Munchausen’s *Surprising Adventures* was published in London in
1785. They feature fantastical accounts and exaggerations that became associated with the Baron himself.
The poet likens Munchausen with Campenas in order to discredit Campenas’ plan as nonsense, and uses a
language of fancy to underscore the improbability of the scheme. At the same time, the poem relies on
the language of fancy for a critique of Campenas’ plan.
O! then alone, thy country must depend
On thee, Campenas! Her aerial friend.
Whose ships of war and merchandize shall tower
Beyond the cannon or the mortar’s power:
From danger distant and removed from sight,
At pleasure, serve for commerce or for fight:
By ropes connect the earth with the balloon,
Munchausen-like! Whose fancy hook’d the moon:
Whence goods aloft, or galley-slaves are borne,
A crew, best fitted for a hope forlorn!
Or terms submiss, from London’s humbled town,
Ere hovering demons⁶⁷ rain destruction down!

The mock-heroic epistle addressed to Campenas thus participates in the same fanciful
“projecting” that it attributes to the plan for invasion. Nevertheless, while the poem mostly
attacks the proposition as “extravagant” and even ludicrous, it exhorts the reader not to dismiss
the possibility of an aerial assault, improbable as it may at first appear. Despite the unlikely
nature of the event, the anonymous bard insists that he wouldn’t put it past the “desperate
councils of the French Republic” to invest their resources in such a scheme. The poet’s decision
to frame his response to the intercepted letters as an epistle as well reads as the exchange of
poetical fancy using the same generic conventions that Campenas uses to present his military
strategy to Napoleon.

One recurring proposal for public use of the balloon was as a speedy, long-distance postal
carrier, conveying mail internationally and at unprecedented rates. It is likely that Lunardi’s
published correspondence to Compagni played a role in suggesting this idea to the public
imagination. A similar candidate for such a project might be the famous delivery of a bundle of

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⁶⁷ Milton’s Satan appears often in accounts of military ballooning, and will also later feature prominently in public reactions to the railways as “Satanic” ventures. The binding of the Satanic to the technological is quite pronounced and it stresses the transformation of nature through the conversion of energy for the improvement of society as the realization of Pandemonium on earth. Allusions to the Satanic engines flung around in Milton’s war in heaven, especially in relation to France and the Napoleonic Wars, abound in balloon writings as the probability of plans for dropping explosives from the sky increased as the technology was perfected.
English letters to France when the balloonist Jean-Pierre Blanchard and American physician John Jeffries first crossed the English Channel in a balloon in January of 1785. Like Lunardi, Jeffries tried his hand at communicating by air-mail, and one of these epistles, addressed to his Harvard colleague, Arodie Thayer, survives as the oldest piece of air-mail [Figure 8]. Like the letters Lunardi released from his balloon, Jeffries’ epistle assures his friends on the ground of his safety, expresses the pleasurable aspects of the balloon ride, and communicates a sentiment of friendship. This astounding artifact contributes to the discourse of sensibility in a number of ways, but perhaps the most salient is the way it dramatizes the sense of intimacy, immediacy, and a sense of narrating in “real time” native to epistolary narratives in the period. But, fancy emerges here in the reinforcement of networks of sociability that distribute sentiments via a mobile medium.

Figure 8: “Air-mail” from John Jeffries to Mr. Arodie Thayer, November 19, 1784 [Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College]68

68 Jeffries’ air-epistle to Thayer reads: “From the Balloon above the Clouds: Let this afford some proof, my dear Mr. Thayer, that no separation shall make me unmindful of you,—have confidence,—happier, and I hope much better days await you—pray tell my dear Mrs. T. I salute her from the Skies [Section
Epistolarity implies language and feeling in transit, but the balloon epistle substantially develops this implicit concept by making the letter’s mode of conveyance the central subject and occasion of the correspondence. Unsurprisingly, then, Lunardi’s account is often self-conscious about its own epistolarity. In this momentary digression while writing to Compagni about his 17876 ascent in Glasgow, the balloonist contemplates the art of the epistle:

With what additional pleasure I once more take up my pen to inform you of another aerial voyage. Happiness is doubly dear when thus communicated to a friend! What numberless blessings has the Art of Writing!…Without this, the dearest friends, when separated by distant countries, would be as dead to each other: By means of this noble discovery, we communicate our inmost thoughts to, and receive the kind sentiments of those who love and esteem, while intervening oceans roll their rude waves in vain…

Many contemporaries believed that the air balloon would soon make the problem of distance obsolete. Lunardi’s own letters and this meditation on the “noble discovery” of letter-writing signal back to his role in contributing to the Enlightenment’s fascination with the balloon as an invention that would similarly facilitate increased intimacy between persons at a distance. Just as Thomas Baldwin provoked fancy in his readers by engaging their “tender sympathetic feelings,” Lunardi capitalizes on the potential epistles have to share human experience by simulating proximity. As a strategy of triangulating sociability, the balloonist uses his intimacy with

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illegible except for word “pleasure”]…believe me as I ever have been, faithfully yours, J. Jeffries.” For more information regarding Jeffries’ air-mail and the historic balloon flight across the English Channel, see William A. Kinney’s article, “He Started It” in *Airman*, vol. 4, no. 8. (August, 1961) pp. 48-51. Washington D.C.: Published by the Air Force Service Information and News Center (AFSINC) for the Office of Information, Office of the Secretary of the Air Force.

Compagni as structured by the epistles to draw his reader into a personalized experience of his aerial journeys.

Lunardi composed several letters *in transit*, in addition to those written between voyages, a fact that distinguishes his epistles from other forms of travel correspondence. The aeronaut’s narrative teems with these floating scenes of writing:

All my affections were alive, in a manner not easily to be conceived; and you may be assured that the sentiment which seemed to me most congenial to that happy situation was gratitude and friendship….I sat down and wrote four pages of desultory observations, and pinning them to a napkin, committed them to the mild winds of the region, to be conveyed to my honored friend and patron, Prince Caramanico (35).

At the conclusion of his narrative, Lunardi notes that one air-borne epistle was discovered in Northaw Common by one William Baker, who, following the instructions printed on the letter, delivered the correspondence to its addressee. The impulse to compose letters to friends from a balloon whose duration of flight could be no longer than a few hours seems odd. However, the decision might be read as an ideal public relations maneuver in its cultivation of a circuit of intimacy between Lunardi, the addressees of the letters, and his readers. The letters written from the moving vehicle thus invite his audience to participate in the journey by standing in as recipients of a correspondence whose mode of delivery is the very subject of and occasion for the scene of writing. In other words, as the means of delivering news from above the clouds, the balloon promotes itself.

Incorporating these pieces of air-mail into the work, Lunardi’s narrative accentuates the air balloon as both the subject of the letters and their mode of conveyance—the balloon is thus transformed into medium and message. The epistles document quadrants of space, time,
temperature and elevation, mapping the self on a grid of data based on scientific measurements and human sensations:

The thermometer is at 50; and I will keep myself in this station till three o’clock. I shall then ascend higher, to try the effect of a different aerial climate, as well as put my oar to a fair trial.

I beg the persons who take up this letter, to observe the time and place, and to convey either letter or the contents of it to my kind friend and patron, Prince Caramonico, No. 56 in New Bond Street; to Sir Joseph Banks, Soho-Square, or to Doctor Fordyce, Essex Street; and who many have the goodness to be concerned, if they should not soon learn I am cheerful and well (50).

The balloon becomes, at least, a partial postal carrier, conveying messages from a foreign atmosphere to the appropriate hands for their completed delivery. Moreover, the letters record the aesthetic experience of the journey, which Lunardi proposes revises an aesthetic the sublime by overwhelming the eye with a capacious prospect:

The stillness, extent and magnificence of the scene, rendered it highly awful. My horizon seemed a perfect circle; the terminating line several hundred miles in circumference...[the scene] was so reduced on the great scale before me, that I can find no simile to convey an idea of it.... the whole scene before me filled the mind with a sublime pleasure, of which I never had a conception. The critics imagine, for they seldom speak from experience, that terror is an ingredient in every sublime sensation. It was not possible for me to be on earth, in a situation so free from apprehension. I had not the slightest sense of motion from the Machine. I knew not whether it moved swiftly or
slowly, whether it ascended or descended, whether it was agitated or tranquil, but by the appearance of objects on the earth.

Sublimity without terror is what Lunardi describes, or perhaps he means sublimity as an experience removed from apparent harm, a common feature of the aesthetic category proposed by its theorists. The smoothness of the vehicle lulls one into a sense of security, despite one’s precarious place in the clouds. But, the prospect itself is sublime because it presents a clarity that seems without end. Just as the microscope and telescope unveiled world within world to Enlightenment society, contributing to conceptions of infinity in the discourse of the sublime, the balloon extended the eye’s capabilities by revealing an expansive and detailed vision of England from above.

Remarkably, Lunardi would later confess that his mode of sight was significantly altered by his experience of flight. While in Scotland, where he made an ascent in 1785, the aeronaut notes that his urban stroll through Edinburgh provoked thoughts about what the cityscape would look like from the air when he finally ascends:

For my part, I am so much an inhabitant of the ethereal regions, that my ideas already anticipate the pleasure soon to enjoy, in beholding from various angles of elevation, the spires of Edinburgh, and the hills of Arthur Seat and Calton….Objects like these, united in one view, must form a scene, the magnificence of which cannot be conceived by any but an aerial traveler (13).

Lunardi’s extended scope, which he attributes to “the power of the fancy,” is the product of a prior expansion of mind aiding him in the conception of a potential prospect as well as the process of description. Conveying a sense of Edinburgh’s St. Giles Cathedral to Compagni while moving through the city on foot, Lunardi puts this scope to use:
There is a solemnity steals over the soul upon entering these majestic ruins: What a scene for contemplation! Memory loves the idea, and Fancy pants to pursue it uncontrolled; for once my dear friend indulge me while I give her free scope.

I will carry you with me on the wings of imagination, to this venerable Pile, at the solemn hour of midnight, when universal nature sleeps. Here we will alight at this nigh tottering wall, whose cleft side gapes, a passage to admit the traveler. What a meditative silence! It deepens the gloom!... Let us quit this scene, whether we have been transported by the power of the fancy and return to the description of others not less interesting (42).

Lunardi’s use of fancy here literalizes its powers to transport Compagni by drawing him into his private experience of the urban scene as he composes it in the letter. Indeed, fancy and the epistle come together to virtually convey Compagni (as well as Lunardi’s readership) to the ruins of St. Giles. But, the virtual power of the epistolary description also relies on the extension of fancy’s powers due to Lunardi’s experience aboard the air balloon. Thus, the epistle, fancy, and the air balloon all participate in simulating a mediated experience between the aeronaut and his Italian addressee.

At the end of his first aerial account, Lunardi included a verse epistle by an anonymous poet who was among the 150,000 persons to watch him ascend. The poet cleverly employs the verse epistle form, as well as the fancy’s analogizing powers, to visualize the aeronaut’s view:

Ah! Tell me LUNARDI.—hereafter you may!
What new scenes of wonder your flight must display?
How awful the feel, when through new regions gliding,
Through currents untry’d, and from cloud to cloud sliding?
With what new ideas your mind must o’erflow!
With what new sensations your bosom must glow!—
How little, how trifling, must then in your eyes
Have seem’d what below we look up to, and prize!
No more than a molehill, the Tower’s old walls,
A Hope-pole the MONUMENT,—Bandbox, St. Pauls.
The vast host of people you quitted so lately,  
Which spread to each present a scene the most stately,  
To one who so distant on all of us gazes  
Must look like a meadow embroird’ed with daisies.

Critics of the verse epistle, like William Dowling, maintain that the dominance of the form in the eighteenth century serves as an antidote to the solipsistic nature of the lyric, one comparable to that of the letter-writer, namely “isolation in time and space.” In other words, the verse epistle establishes open lines of communication between subjects for the distribution of poetic sentiments. J.S. Mill would later argue that poetry is “feeling confessing itself to itself.” But, if poetry is overheard, rather than heard, one might argue that the verse epistle exposes the intrinsic voyeuristic nature of reading poetry by transforming the reader of the poem into an actual, rather than an implied, eavesdropper. What the balloon verse epistle Lunardi includes in his narrative might contribute further to this line of thinking about the relationship between poetry and epistolarity is that, in the process of overhearing, we as readers of the poem might also oversee. The self-consciousness of the balloon epistle makes use of the form to establish intimacy between subjects at a distance, but also, with the help of fancy, access to human perception on the move. It allows the poet—and the reader—to trace the aeronaut’s shifting panorama.

Conclusion

No sooner does fancy become entangled in the discourse of ballooning than some poets begin to question the need for it altogether. As Mary Alcock suggests in her 1784 poem, “The Flying Mortal,” the technology might render the fancy obsolete:

Nor more shall Fancy now, (bewitching Fair!)  
Erect me castles, floating in the air;  
Such vague such feeble structures I despise

I’ll kick them down as I ascend the skies;
For higher far in Air Balloon I go,
And leave the wond’ring multitude below.

No longer, now, at distance need I try
To trace each planet with perspective eye;
Nor longer wish with fairies from afar,
To slide me gently down, on falling star;
For up and down with equal ease I steer,
And view with naked eye the splendid sphere.71

For Alcock, fancy and the balloon are substitutable technologies, or at least reside in the same
category. The balloon displaces fancy as some “more feeble” version 2.0. Striking here is
Alcock’s faith in the balloon as a means of traversing spaces even beyond the reach of the fancy,
as if their respective functions were continuous and merely a matter of distinct measure. But the
poem also systematically rejects fancy’s fictionalizing powers by insisting that the clarity of
sight achieved in balloon flight somehow forms a just replacement: “No more of Phaeton let
Poets tell” Alcock says “I care not where he drove or where he fell…/In Air Balloon to distant
realms I go/And leave the wondering multitude below.”

In the advent of Victorian photography, fancy’s stronghold over the culture of the air
balloon began to weaken considerably. The French photographer Gaspard-Félix Tournachon,
better known as Nadar, took the first aerial photographs from his balloon, “Le Géant,” over Paris
in 1858. What is clear about aerial photographs is that the realism they offered outshined the
more creative forms of representation yielded by fancy that made the Romantic balloon archive
so unique. Surprisingly, however, aerial photography presented its own challenges that fancy’s
representations could easily accommodate. The long exposure time required for early
daguerreotypes meant that the balloon’s mobility would prove problematic.72 Unlike primitive

71 Mary Alcock. “The Air Balloon; or a Flying Mortal” (London: Macklew, 1784).
72 This discussion may be found in “The Camera is Airborne” in Beaumont Newhall’s Airborne Camera:
cameras, fancy thrived on representing objects in motion because its creative principle relied so heavily on tracing the mind’s vagrant attention. It was not until a new photographic technique that required shorter exposures—the *collodion*, or “wet plate process”—was introduced by the Englishman Frederick Scott Archer in 1851 that aerial photography became a true possibility.\footnote{73 ibid, p. 19.} However, Archer’s new method required a dark room that would also have to be mobile, indeed, it was mounted onto a balloon car. This is precisely what Nadar took out a patent to do in 1858, and, despite many technical hiccups, the experiment proved a success. Remarkably, just as Hobbes’ “fancies” were theorized as sense impressions that he conceived to be interiorized shadows of real objects, the first aerial photographs would similarly require a space of mobile, enclosed darkness to limn the image onto paper.

Nadar’s historic photograph does not survive because the gas rushing out of the balloon damaged the plate on which the photographic image was printed, making it both weak and fragile.\footnote{74 ibid, p. 21.} Ironically, then, the very chemical reactions that made flight possible also interfered with the chemical reactions that would give us the first aerial photograph. The oldest surviving aerial photographs were taken from an air balloon called the *Queen of the Air* above Boston in October of 1860 by three Americans: Dr. William H. Helme, James Wallace Black, and Samuel Archer King. Writing about the exhibited photograph for *The Atlantic Monthly*, the American poet and journalist Oliver Wendell Holmes expressed surprise at the image despite his own lifelong familiarity with Boston:

> Boston, as the eagle and the wild goose see it, is a very different object from the place as the solid citizen looks up at its eves and chimneys. The old South and Trinity Church are two landmarks not to be mistaken. Washington Street slants across the picture as a
narrow cleft. Milk Street winds as if the cowpath which gave it a name had been followed by the builders of its commercial palaces. Windows, chimneys, and skylights attract the eye in the central parts of the view, exquisitely defined, bewildering in numbers. Towards the circumference, it grows darker, becoming clouded and confused, and at one end a black expanse of waveless water is whitened by the nebulous outline of flitting sails. Holmes’ surprised reaction to the photograph resembles that of Romantic balloonists who first saw England from above. However, while aerial drawings and descriptions by aeronauts, like those by Thomas Baldwin, do often attempt a precision in representation, they also play with and distort scale, color, and outline in order to convey an “accurate” scene to his readership. In other words, the success of Baldwin’s representations lies in their reliance on analogy in addition to detail.

Unlike the aerial photograph, early aerial representations and descriptions required the mediating powers of fancy, which connected the mind of the balloonist to that of his audience in a way that the technology of the daguerreotype would obviate. Thus, Mary Alcock’s claim about the balloon serving as a substitute for fancy might be truer of the photograph. If poets writing about the air balloon insisted that fancy extended its powers as a visual poetic medium by fusing itself to the balloon, we might read the aerial photography of the Victorian period as another technology that displaces rather than integrates fancy. The realism promised by the photograph no longer required the fancy’s powers, which marked Romantic balloon writings by its charmed capacity to shuttle seamlessly between the shapes of fantasy and the organic pictures of the human senses.

See O.W. Holmes’s essay that addresses the photograph titled “Doings of the Sunbeam,” in Soundings from the Atlantic (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1864), p. 269.
2. “sublime Archimedean art”:
Shelley’s Steamboat and the Mechanics of Metaphorics

And in this bowl of quicksilver—for I
Yield to the impulse of an infancy
Outlasting manhood—I have made to float
A rude idealism of a paper boat:—

-P.B. Shelley, from the Letter to Maria Gisborne (1820)

The Romantic poet is a part of the total process, engaged with and united with a creative power greater than his own. This greater creative power has a relation to him, which we may call, adapting a term of Blake’s, his vehicular form…Sometimes the vehicular form is a heightened state of consciousness in which we feel that we are greater than we know…

-Northrop Frye, from “The Drunken Boat: The Revolutionary Element in Romanticism”

If thinking about metaphor is always circular, doesn’t process always accompany image? Or, to put it another way, doesn’t metaphor always disclose its process?

-Paul Ricoeur, from The Rule of Metaphor

Any reader familiar with Shelley’s poetry will observe how crowded it is with images of transport—vessels, barks, chariots and cars—that convey characters to fantastic locales and metaphysical realms. This recurring poetic trope no doubt sprang from his love of sailing and his interest in advances in nautical science. In their accounts of the poet both Mary Shelley and his friend Thomas Hogg affectionately describe Shelley’s hobby of fashioning paper boats for friends out of scraps of verse or aborted letters, a habit that eventually takes a more serious form in his financial investment in a private boat, the Bolivar, and the steamboat enterprise of his close
friend, the engineer, Henry Reveley. My first epigraph, from the Letter to Maria Gisborne, offers a personal account of his enduring hobbyhorse. His characterization of the makeshift boat in these lines, its poetic presence as some “rude idealism,” bridges the nautical toy’s materiality and the verse-world in which we as readers encounter it. The small skiff is likely formed from the same stack of paper used to draft the epistle to Gisborne during a moment of distraction while he lived in Maria Gisborne’s home in Leghorn, Italy in the summer of 1820. Perhaps underscoring the epistle form, this whimsical scene points to the poem’s activity in the world as an envoy of language, thought, and feeling. During this little moment of creative indulgence, the epistle calls attention to itself as both medium and message.

The ubiquity of transport in the world of Shelley’s poetry has been a phenomenon much remarked on, yet surprisingly under-examined, especially within the context of the new mobility available to Englishmen after the Napoleonic Wars. W.B. Yeats points to the formative impact of Shelley’s passage to a post-Waterloo Europe on his major poetical works. The early experience of these voyages, Yeats remarks, proved critical to the establishment of Shelley’s symbolic constellation, one that includes the signature figures of caves, springs, rivers and, of course, boats. As Yeats suggests, Shelley’s experience of travel at this time likely presented the

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1 Mary Shelley says in her “Note on Poems of 1817” that “there are few who remember him sailing paper boats, and watching the navigation of his tiny craft with eagerness—or repeating with wild energy The Ancient Mariner, and Southey’s Old Woman of Berkeley; but those who do will recollect that it was in such, and in the creations of his own fancy when that was most daring and ideal, that he sheltered himself from the storms and disappointments, the pain and the sorrow, that beset his life.” The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford U. Press, 1927), p. 547. I will cite Shelley’s poems using Hutchison’s edition throughout this chapter.

2 See Yeats’ essay “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry” in Ideas of Good and Evil (London: A. H. Bullen, 1903). Specifically, Yeats comments, “When Shelley went to the Continent with Godwin’s daughter in 1814 they sailed down certain great rivers in an open boat, and when he summed up in his preface to Laon and Cythna the things that helped make him a poet, he spoke of these voyages: ‘I have sailed down mighty rivers, and seen the sun rise and set, and the stars come forth, whilst I have sailed night and day down a rapid stream among mountains.’” p. 115.
bulk of the visual imagery for his most important poems. More recently, scholars have been attentive to Mary Shelley’s brief, but richly detailed travelogue of that journey—the *History of a Six Week’s Tour* (1816)—which offers a deep reservoir of imagery that surfaces in poems like *Alastor* and *The Witch of Atlas* in much the same way that scenes from Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals were culled and reworked by William into verse. Mary’s account of the time Shelley’s coterie spent crossing the English Channel, their maneuvering the streams of Germany and Switzerland in flimsy “canoes” is brought to life in many of Shelley’s most well known poems.

Indeed, the renewed influx of Englishmen to Europe after Waterloo and their enthusiasm for travel writing is a historical fact of which Shelley’s poetic narratives of transport are certainly representative. Of course, the difficulty of historicizing these narratives lies in their fantastic destinations, a series of romantic trajectories that fuels scholarly critiques of Shelley’s escapist tendencies. But, this is nothing new. Shelley’s verse has always been censured (by friends and critics alike) for what Mary Shelley called, in response to *The Witch of Atlas*, his “lack of human interest” or reference to reality. However, that Shelley’s idealized narratives of transport coincide with the opening up of Europe to English travel might disclose something about what the Continent meant to Shelley as a poetical, but also political setting. With revolutionary activity in France, and, later, Spain and Greece, Europe represented for the poet an environment of potential social and political change where England stubbornly refused to succumb to such reform. Thus, the recurring narrative of transport or passage to a visionary space, when mapped onto Shelley’s own crossing of the English Channel, transforms Europe into a geography of revolutionary possibility. The other narrative that maps onto this passage is Satan’s expulsion from Heaven, and the ingenuity with which he gathers the rebellious energy of

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3 For a close study of the impact of these travel accounts on Shelley’s verse, see Benjamin Colbert’s *Shelley’s Eye: Travel Writing and Aesthetic Vision* (London: Ashgate, 2005).
the fallen angels to construct the awful Pandemonium. Indeed, it is clear that the wreck of a post-Waterloo Europe did nothing to diminish Shelley’s revolutionary sentiment, but, instead, only fueled his political fervor.

Shelley’s narratives of transport also offer readers insight into his poetic process. We learn from Mary Shelley’s notes to the 1839 edition of Shelley’s complete poems of Shelley’s habit of writing verse while inside boats. This is a habit Shelley famously indulged while composing his ominous final work, The Triumph of Life, before famously meeting his end in a boat shortly thereafter. This illuminating detail about Shelley’s process raises a number of critical concerns, such as the impact of transit, rhythm, and passivity to his method of composition. How, for instance, might this fact inform our understanding of the volatility and highly metaphorical nature of the poetry, the way it refuses to settle on any particular image? One encounters this interest in the phenomenological experience of transport in poems like A Vision of the Sea (1820), which represents a harrowing account of a ship tossed in a storm. In confronting this poem, the reader meets with the vertigo of a violent tempest head on, a turbulent effect produced by a series of careening and shifting images. Placed in formal tension with the neat couplets that structure the work, rhyme functions as the sole anchor for the chaos of imagery that whirls within the poem. Thus, A Vision of the Sea hauntingly dramatizes Shelley’s developing attraction to transport’s staging of sublime natural forces as sources, not only of

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4 Mary Shelley says in her “Note to the Poems of 1822”: “When Shelley was on board [the Bolivar], he had his papers with him; and much of The Triumph of Life was written as he sailed or weltered on the sea which was soon to engulf him.” The Complete Poetical Works, p. 671.
5 Mary Shelley and Shelley experienced such a tempestuous storm during their first crossing of the English Channel in 1814, which Mary documented in the History of a Six-Weeks’ Tour.
6 The cloudy energy of Shelley’s A Vision of the Sea in many ways anticipates the nautical paintings of J.M.W Turner, who circulated a story about having bound himself to a steamboat during a storm to understand the essential quality of sublime threat. Both Shelly and Turner are interested in representing the power and the vulnerability of man at sea, a tension that becomes particularly acute in Turner’s paintings of steamboats, which introduce entirely new conceptions of the sublime when considered in terms of modern forms of energy, such as steam.
inspiration but also of potential annihilation, and of the poet’s struggle to represent such awful scenes.

One also finds sketches of transport littered throughout Shelley’s rich manuscripts. As Neville Rogers has noted, the poet’s notebooks expose an impulse toward visual play, bearing illustrations to particular scenes within the poems right on the page. Thus, Shelley’s practice of taking up the materials of writing for creative distraction, which we encountered in the epistle to Gisborne, additionally manifests in the poet’s numerous notebook sketches, a great number of which, are devoted to illustrations of transport such as sailboats weaving in and out of lonely islands. Reviewing Shelley’s corpus, then, one begins to understand that the poet’s interest in transport achieves a certain variety of dimension. The Letter to Maria Gisborne—with its paper boats, steam-vessels, and figurative vehicles—exhibits the intensity of this interest in addition to offering one of the most candid self-portraits of the poet at work. These biographical details reinforce my observation that poetic making is intimately linked to the figure of transport in Shelley’s work. This chapter examines its recurring presence, its role in structuring poetic narrative, and the way it informs our understanding of Shelley’s figurative language and his aesthetics. Such a review will make it possible to interpret Shelley’s interest in steam navigation and the poetic and aesthetic implications of that modern vehicle. The energy conversion of the steam engine and its revolutionary counter-current progress proved to be an important technological development for Shelley, whose intense interest in modern science often found its way into his work.

In advance of any particular analysis, I’ll forecast a few claims. First, a review of scenes of transport in Shelley’s poetry reveals that they often coincide with heightened affective

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states that correspond with the crossing of spatial boundaries that lead to idealized locations. In *The Revolt of Islam* and *Queen Mab*, transport introduces and closes longer visionary narratives that are accompanied by altered states of consciousness. These scenes of physical and psychological displacement insist that transport’s trajectory is coterminous or coextensive with a world beyond sense, a possible world. Secondly, Shelley’s narratives of transport often illustrate a passivity central to his theory of poetic inspiration. That is, transportation stages a being moved or acted upon by natural forces, and the poet’s affective or imaginative response to these forces becomes the primary occasion for the poetic moment. As my second epigraph indicates, Northrop Frye has identified this posture as the poet’s “vehicular form,” or the poet’s identification with a more powerful creative force. Frye’s claim, which is most explicitly at play in poems like *Mont Blanc* and *Ode to the West Wind*, is reinforced by Mary’s comment that Shelley so often enjoyed composing while on the water. Shelley’s “vehicular form” is most strikingly thematized during those countless scenes in which transit figures states of affective energy and responsiveness in the presence of nature’s power. Given this figure of inspiration as passivity-in-transport, the reader’s encounter with the poem seems designed to produce a similar response to that experienced by the poet. Therefore, the poet’s relaying of some influx of natural power to the reader via verse is a central motif in Shelley’s work, one that carries great political potential.8

8 In particular, I am thinking about poems like *The Ode to the West Wind*, where wind power and its transforming potential is thematized as a force that is encoded in verse and offered up to the reader. Shelley’s interest in natural catastrophe or disaster in poems like *A Vision of the Sea* or *Prometheus Unbound* is also of interest here, precisely because Shelley believed that, if nature could be shown to host cataclysmic change or revolution, he could naturalize social revolution. For Shelley, natural power had a potential value in persuading his readership and kindling their sentiments for political change. Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
Finally, Shelley’s figures of transportation are often tied to poiesis, or artistic making, a claim I’ve begun to outline in my opening statements. For Shelley, the engineering of transport becomes a recurring allegory about the reformulation of older myths and metaphors for new use, one that is most explicit in *The Witch of Atlas*. Moreover, his curiosity and financial investment in several transport projects substantiate Shelley’s budding interest in the emerging field of nautical engineering during the years leading to his death. This fascination with navigation technology is most evident in the verse epistle, *Letter to Maria Gisborne* and in his correspondence with his friends, the Gisbornes and Edward Trewlany. What the *Letter* exposes is Shelley’s interest in an analogy between mechanical engineering and poetic making, a subject I’ll return to later in this chapter. As I’ll show, the application of steam power to navigation offered Shelley an image of the imagination as human counterforce to natural power, one that has yet to be interpreted under Shelley’s poetics and politics of the sublime. Running counter to my second claim about the expediency of transport as an illustrative figure for the passivity of poetic inspiration, steam navigation presents an example of transport that converts natural power in order to *resist* and *challenge* that very same power. The distinctly modern concept of transport forms a productive counterpoint to scenes of transport that represent a potentially disastrous passivity because it successfully figures an exertion of the poet’s will in response to natural power during the creative process.

These first three propositions lead to a fourth, which forms a broader hypothesis of this chapter, namely, that narratives of transport in Shelley’s verse might image metaphorical process itself. In other words, I am ultimately interested in how transportation in Shelley’s work might contribute to an understanding of the process of metaphor. If, as Paul Ricoeur argues, metaphor is “always disclosing its own process,” might we read Shelley’s images of transport as
metaphorical vehicles? And, if we could, what would this equivalence tell us about the poetic narratives that those same vehicles structure? Further, if the spatial progress of Shelley’s images of transport in some way map onto the psychological and linguistic transfers of metaphor, what might these images contribute to our understanding of poetic space, particularly given Shelley’s strong rejection of the division between mind and matter? If, as poetic theories preceding Shelley proposed, metaphor is “the figure of transport,” how can we begin to think about the relationship between transport, affect, and space in Shelley’s poetry?

Shelley’s Vehicles

As an avid translator of Greek texts, Shelley would have been especially attuned to the etymology of metaphor, which is grounded in transport. The Greek root accounts for a transfer or carrying over of one idea to the context of another. Aristotle, whom Shelley translated, conceived of metaphor as deviance or transposition in language, the proposition of an untruth for the purposes of pleasure, instruction, or persuasion. In his treatise On Rhetoric, Aristotle describes the phenomenon of “bringing-before-the-eyes” produced by an expert command of metaphor, which he called energeia, or “actualization.” By this Aristotle understood the infusing of a lifeless object with lively qualities in the metaphorical proposition. Our modern conception

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9 Carlos Baker notes that Shelley began a translation to Aristotle’s Ethics in the spring of 1811. Baker also makes a strong case that the poet’s Defense of Poetry is likely influenced by the method and structure of Aristotle’s writing. See his “Shelley’s Translation of Aristotle,” Modern Language Notes, vol. 61. No. 6 (June 1946) pp. 405-406. It is clear from Shelley’s prose writings that while Plato was the stronger influence, Shelley also admired Aristotle’s works.

of storable or usable “energy” derives from this early rhetorical term. A central quality of energeia is motion, which, in Aristotle’s works, is as characteristic of the soul (as in De Anima) as it is of movement. Thus, giving “motion” to language would account for giving it something of a soul in addition to dynamic movement. According to Aristotle, the representation of motion in metaphorical language constitutes the most effective example of the figure because the work of metaphor is already in itself linguistically dynamic. Aristotle insists, then, that energeia occurs when language “brings-before-the-eyes,” and it does so best when it represents dynamic imagery. Energeia will be useful in discussions of Shelley’s poetics because one of the vital qualities of the Romantic sublime was energy, which was tied to the potential of poetry to transport the reader.

Paul Ricoeur has called Aristotle’s concept of energeia one of the most puzzling propositions in On Rhetoric. He notes:

Is this not what the most enigmatic passage of the Rhetoric suggests? Metaphor, it relates, makes one see things because it “represents things as in a state of activity.” The Poetics echoes that one may “speak narrative” or “present personages as acting and doing”. Might there not be an underlying relationship between “signifying active reality” and speaking out phusis [nature]?12

11 Indeed, the modern understanding of “energy” was only beginning to emerge during Shelley’s lifetime. Thomas Young, M.D., who was a professor of natural philosophy and physics at the Royal Institution, is documented as first using the term energy in its modern sense, which he describes as “the tendency of a body to ascend or to penetrate a certain distance, in opposition to a retarding force.” See A course of lectures on natural philosophy and the mechanical arts. (London: Taylor and Walton, 1845) (First published in 1807), p. 41. Later, I will demonstrate how Shelley imagined poetic language as encoding or absorbing natural energy, an insight that comes at a time when “energy” was gaining prominence as a term to describe the power of physical forces. The timing of modern energy is interesting given that the history of the sublime is one that moves from rhetorical power (Longinus) to natural or physical forces (Burke, Kant).

Ricoeur explains that activity and motion in the choice of metaphor represents the culmination of its powers, primarily because, in those cases, figurative activity mirrors and supplements metaphor’s narrative capacity. That is, metaphors representing movement are exceptional because they refer back to the figurative process and bring the image most intensely before the mind’s eye. Ricoeur further notes that the chief quality metaphor is movement—epiphora—or a displacement or shift “from…to.” Accordingly, a phenomenology of metaphor must involve some co-presence of sensual and spatial change. Thus, we might say that imagery generated by the metaphorical process dislocates because the move from an idea to its image is a contextual change.

After Aristotle, metaphor is understood as an alteration of the sense by some image corresponding to a principal idea of sense. Therefore, the progress of metaphor is usually conceived of as one from “sense” to an ideal. We experience something and search our minds for a corresponding image. This trajectory is understood of as “illusory” because it is manifested as a proposition in language of the relationship between two ideas, the first of which is offered by sense and the second of which establishes an abstract relation to an imagined or proposed image. This movement from idea to image has been historically interpreted as a “deviation” from the logic of language because the introduction of the second term requires the reader’s reorientation.

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13 “To explain metaphor, Aristotle creates a metaphor, one borrowed from the realm of movement; phora, as we know, is a kind of change with respect to location.” ibid, p. 17.

14 Ned O’Gorman elaborates on this dual phenomenon: “In my discussion of phantasia in De Anima, I noted that Aristotle describes phantasia as a movement produced by sense perception (429a). Likewise, he argues that "bringing before the eyes" is a lexical form of energeia, a type of motion (kinēsis) realized through the capacity of the mind for seeing objects in action (Newman 2002, 20; see Rhetoric 1411b and Metaphysics 1048b). In Aristotle's conception, through lexis, words can be made to move so as to activate the phantasmatic capacities of audience members. What is absent before the eyes physically is made present to the mind through lexis, in the same way that an individual may 'put' images before her mind while imagining. Thus, the processes of private cognition analyzed in De Anima, and the process of lexical spectating in "bring before the eyes" discussed in the Rhetoric, both entail a dynamic and visual form.” See “Aristotle’s Phantasia in the Rhetoric: Lexis, Discourse and the Epideictic Function of Discourse.” Philosophy and Rhetoric 38.1 (2005), pp. 16-40.
of mind in order for the statement to follow logically. And yet, the “deviation” of metaphor is usually in the service of clarifying the primary idea by abstracting some of its native properties and comparing those properties to properties of the related idea. Metaphor, then, is a process whose ultimate aim is an increased cognitive understanding of the nature of the primary idea that first requires being routed through a secondary idea in order to more completely grasp the primary idea’s position within a larger web of ideas. To simplify the matter, one might say that metaphor takes our eyes away from the world to understand it more clearly.

One of the most consistent remarks made by contemporaries about Shelley’s style was its “energy,” its kinetic quality, and its speed.¹⁵ These accounts insist on the rapid motion between representations as well as the hastiness of his figurative manipulations. While praised on the one hand for its power, Shelley’s speedy style was also censured for acting too forcibly on the reader’s mind. It is no surprise, then, that Aristotle’s energeia, that quality of “bringing-before-eyes,” is especially active in Shelley’s poetry. However, Aristotelian energeia is not limited to Shelley’s own swift figurative labor. One also finds it staged directly within his poems, specifically in narratives of characters that enter into states of trance or reverie while listening to incantatory speech or diegetic poetry. Remarkably, these scenes of altered consciousness most usually occur during moments of transit. Often introducing longer poetic narratives, scenes of psycho-physical transport function as framing mechanisms, suggesting that spatial progress maps onto a shift in consciousness. That this pattern recurs in Shelley’s work signals what I perceive to be a diegetic representation of the phenomenological effect of poetic

¹⁵ As William Keach has shown, one of the most remarkable aspects of Shelley’s verse is its speed. Warning against a too ready conception of the poet’s quickness as a result either of some idealized process of genius at work or a purely affective reading of the verse, Keach argues that one must look to formal features—“syntax and versification”—to properly locate Shelley’s speed. “Shelley’s Speed” in Shelley’s Style (New York: Routledge, Keagen & Paul, 1984).
language on the listening subject and a diagram for metaphor’s facilitating a trajectory beyond sense.

The earliest poem to exhibit this phenomenon is *Queen Mab*. Visited in sleep by the fairy Mab in her enchanted chariot, the poem’s heroine, Ianthe, is called on by Mab’s captivating address to escape with her into the cosmos for a radical political education. Mab’s speech arouses Ianthe’s soul, rhetorically drawing it out of her animal body:

The chains of earth’s immurement
Fell from Ianthe’s spirit;
They shrank and brake like bandages of straw
Beneath a wakened giant’s strength.
She knew her glorious change,
And felt in apprehension uncontrolled
New raptures opening round:
Each day-dream of her mortal life,
Each frenzied vision of the slumbers
That closed each well-spent day,
Seemed now to meet reality.
The Fairy and the Soul proceeded;
The silver clouds disparted;
And as the car of magic they ascended,
Again the speechless music swelled,
Again the coursers of the air
Unfurled their azure pennons, and the Queen,
Shaking the beamy reins,
Bade them pursue their way. (I, 188-206)

The affective energy of Mab’s language liberates Ianthe’s soul and transforms her “rapturous” and “frenzied” visions into realities. Moreover, her ecstatic escape coincides with and parallels her ascendance in Mab’s magic car. What is clear in these lines is that altered vision and psychological displacement are represented as physical dislocation. Mab’s abduction of Ianthe’s spirit in her figuratively dense chariot forms a prerequisite to her radical education and progressive vision.\(^\text{16}\) Like Ianthe, we as readers are captivated by Shelley’s figurative power as

\(^\text{16}\) A common characteristic of Shelley’s representations of chariots, here and elsewhere (*The Triumph of Life* and *Prometheus Unbound*), is that they are highly metaphorical, by which I mean, they are usually
he depicts the mesmerizing movement of the chariot. Moreover, the rhythmic chorus, “the magic car moved on,” shuttles both Ianthe and reader forward. Thus, Ianthe’s “glorious change” stages “transport” in a number of ways.¹⁷ Her conveyance by Mab’s chariot becomes a metaphor for the “rapturous” phenomenon she experiences when soul is divided from body.¹⁸ Additionally, however, if the reader is meant to identify with Ianthe, she is equally susceptible to Mab’s rhetoric of rational enchantment and primed for the same radical instruction. Thus, reading in this poem is “transport.”

Mab’s vehicle clearly has a rhetorical and moral design on the reader, a phenomenon that, as I’ve pointed out, is part of the history of the transport trope. Here, however, transport figures enchantment and romance instead of the sober and restrained moral curriculum that we experience when we encounter Wordsworth’s equestrian poems. Ushered to a metaphysical realm, Mab offers Ianthe a universal history outlining the perils of political tyranny and organized religion. The framing of the bulk of Queen Mab with the transit and return of the soul suggests an alternate version of the “transport” or “translation” of the soul common to a Christian understanding of what the soul suffers after death. Queen Mab, then, openly revises a Christian concept of the “transport” of the spirit and the revelation of God with an imaginative “transport” that leads to rational enlightenment. The “frenzied” introductory frame to Queen Mab thus proposes that states of affective “transport” or rapture might serve a pedagogical, even moral function.

something like composites of various distinct metaphors of natural powers (i.e. “reigns of light”) held together by the force of inertia or rapid movement of the vehicle.

¹⁷ If “transport” also describes the phenomenology of reading, Shelley’s long poem, and particularly his lengthy footnotes, which represent a kind of radical syllabus, might be understood to further activate this sense of transport.

¹⁸ One wonders whether Shelley encountered Abraham Tucker’s The Light of Nature Pursued, where Tucker proposes that when the soul leaves the human body, it assumes its “vehicular state” before being absorbed into the “mundane soul,” or soul of the world. William Hazlitt published an abridged version of Tucker’s odd work in 1807.
An identical scene of psycho-physical transport frames the central story of the revolutionary lovers, Laon and Cythna, in the opening book of *The Revolt of Islam*. In this frame narrative, a Poet witnesses a supernatural vision of a serpent and an eagle wrestling in the air above the seashore. When the eagle triumphs, a Woman takes up the wounded serpent and invites the Poet to accompany her on a journey in a boat, during which she offers an account of recent political events that recall the French Revolution:

And as we sailed, a strange and awful tale
That Woman told, like such mysterious dream
As makes the slumberer's cheek with wonder pale!
'Twas midnight, and around, a shoreless stream,
Wide ocean rolled, when that majestic theme
Shrinied in her heart found utterance, and she bent
Her looks on mine; those eyes a kindling beam
Of love divine into my spirit sent,
And ere her lips could move, made the air eloquent…  (I. 334-342)

And swift and swifter grew the vessel's motion,
So that a dizzy trance fell on my brain,—
Wild music woke me; we had passed the ocean
Which girds the pole, Nature's remotest reign;
And we glode fast o'er a pellucid plain
Of waters, azure with the noontide day.
Ethereal mountains shone around; a Fane
Stood in the midst, girt by green isles which lay
On the blue sunny deep, resplendent far away.  (I. 550-558)

What interests me here is the setting of the Woman’s speech: the moving boat. Paralleling the energy of the vessel’s motion, her eloquence throws the Poet into a state of amazement. He is as moved by the speech as he is by the gliding vessel. The Poet’s rhetorical trance coincides with the couple’s passage to a visionary locale, where yet another tale is unfolded. That account represents the action of *The Revolt of Islam*. In other words, the Poet’s “transport” leads to his transport. Incidentally, in her note to the poem, Mary Shelley divulges that *The Revolt* was composed near London, on the Thames, mostly “written in his boat, as it floated under the
beech-groves of Bisham.” Given this biographical clue, the Poet’s transport-triggered trance in the frame account echoes Mary’s disclosure about the scene of the poem’s composition. By working transport into the frame, Shelley incorporates the very setting of the poem’s creation. He identifies with the diegetic Poet who is lulled by the vessel’s “dizzy motion” into a trance that prepares him for the communication of the same poem.

In establishing these frames of enraptured listening, Shelley alerts his reader to the effect the poem will have on him: he will be displaced psychologically, removed from his own reality, and presented with an image of a possible world. The poems thus dazzle, but not without warning. Indeed, the progress in these poems from a world of sense to that of an ideal is the very trajectory of metaphor according to Ricoeur. Moreover, coincidence of the Woman’s “airy” eloquence and the “dizzy” motion of the boat insist that transport is, in this moment, *rhetorical*. It is thus no surprise that Shelley devotes considerable attention to the boat’s peculiar craftsmanship:

A boat of rare device, which had no sail  
But its own curved prow of thin moonstone,  
Wrought like a web of texture fine and frail,  
To catch those gentlest winds which are not known  
To breathe, but by the steady speed alone  
With which it cleaves the sparkling sea…(I, ll. 325-30)

The phrase “rare device” is an echo of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” in which the older poet describes the pleasure-domes of that poem as some “miracle of rare device.” The allusion to Coleridge’s dream-poem is apt given *The Revolt’s* own framing of a vision by the trance-state of a diegetic poet who is spurred to verse by a female poet-figure (the Abyssinian maid). This resonance aside, “device” is a suggestive term in this context because it implies ingenuity in

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20 This is also the case with *The Triumph of Life*, also drafted on the water, also featuring a poet-narrator lulled into a trance state by a moving vehicle.
design, and the phrase ties the boat to rhetoric. Following this hypothesis, the “curved prow”, which is “wrought like a web of texture fine and frail,” insists on a signature of design that recalls poetic making. In many of Shelley’s poems, the image of weaving or spinning of a “woof” emblematizes poetic making, a fact that places boat-craft in the same category with versification. Indeed, it is this intricate craftsmanship that allows the boat to miraculously proceed without a sail, instead “catching” subtle winds that allow the boat to gather speed and cleave the ocean waves. The strange aerodynamic “texture” of the boat therefore functions as the very means of its propulsion and facilitates its passage to a visionary space.

It would appear that Shelley accounts for the intricate design of the boat as a signature for the workmanship of his own verse, which also facilitates the transfer of the Poet (and the reader) from the known world to the picture of a possible world. As in Queen Mab, The Revolt of Islam demonstrates how incantatory speech and transportation work together to produce an ecstatic response in the central character prior to their (and the reader’s) displacement to a visionary zone, where they receive a radical education. These vehicles, then, are insistently rhetorical in function. What I hope to underscore here is that the narratives of transport in these respective poetic frames diagram the metaphorical process, if we understand that process to involve an alteration of sense that coincides with a shift in context toward that of the ideal. Moreover, the dynamic nature of these episodes recalls Aristotle’s energeia, a rhetorical quality that accounts for metaphor in its most incisive form, a “bringing-before-the-eyes.” If the

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21 The OED defines this use of “device” as “The action of devising, contriving, or planning; the faculty of devising, inventive faculty; invention, ingenuity. Now arch. and rare. (orig. devis).”
22 The Letter to Maria Gisborne, Shelley compares his work to that of the silk worm who “in the dark mulberry leaves,/His winding sheet and cradle ever weaves.” And, in The Witch of Atlas, the Witch is described as often “broiding the pictured poesy/Of some high tale upon her growing woof.” In Queen Mab, the chariot that draws Mab is carefully crafted of moonstone, just like the boat that conveys the Poet and the Woman in The Revolt.
23 The only available technology that enables man to cleave the ocean in this way circa 1820 is a steamboat, placing this figurative boat in the same category as Reveley’s engineering project.
traversal of space in transit mirrors a change in psychological disposition, one might say that Shelley’s vehicles bridge the phenomenal world to a visionary one.

My proposition that scenes of transport form a diagram for the metaphorical process takes on the particularly difficult burden of accounting for how movement in space figures an experience that takes place in the senses. Renaissance rhetorician George Puttenham offers one of the earliest reflections on the relationship between space, affect, and metaphor. Puttenham’s “The Arte of English Poesie” (1589) discusses metaphor within a chapter titled “Of the figures which we call Sensable, because they alter and affect the minde by alteration of sense, and first in single wordes" and designates metaphor as “the figure of transport.” For Puttenham, metaphor functions by way of the “wresting of a single word from his owne right signification, to another not so naturall, but yet of some affinitie or convenience with it,” a definition that hinges on a semantic deviance in the metaphorical phrase. Puttenham’s most provocative example of this activity is this:

Or to call the top of a tree, or of a hill, the crowne of a tree or of a hill: for in deede crowne is the highest ornament of a top of a Princes head, where the haire windes about, and because such a terme is not applyed naturally to a tree, or a hill, but is transported from a mans head to a hill or tree, therefore it is called by metaphore, the figure of transport.”

24 George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie, Contrived into three Bookes: The first of Poets and Poesie, the second of Proportion, the third of Ornament*, with an introduction by Baxter Hathaway (Kent [Ohio]: Kent State University Press, 1970). Puttenham’s statement is included in the OED entry for “transport,” situating the word etymologically as a figure for metaphor.

25 ibid, p. 189. I find Puttenham’s use of ornament here fascinating. The example encases, in fact, two metaphors: the crown is the top of a man’s head precisely because it is where one would place a crown *if one were* a Prince (an appropriately fanciful notion) and, of course, the crown, by extension, referring to the top of some other objects, in this case, tree or hill. The recourse to ornament, however, is also interesting because, as Puttenham shows in the division of the sections for his treatise, Renaissance thinkers believed poetic metaphors to be ornamental or superadded to verse, something entirely distinct
Puttenham’s illustration is extraordinary by way of a productive confusion. Does he mean that one transfers the idea of a crown from *our idea of* the Prince’s head to the top of a tree or hill? Or, that the crown is transferred from *our own* head to the tree or hill? I would propose that Puttenham likely meant the former, but the interpretive possibility here of reading “mans head” as the source from which the idea is carried out to the tree or hill invites a reading of the metaphorical process as the projection of an idea from the mind outward, where it is applied to our view of external nature. Puttenham’s theory is striking in its attempt to visualize the metaphorical process as the transfer of an idea across contextual, and even psychological boundaries.

The imprecision in Puttenham’s usage of the term “transport” leads to an open question about whether the term is meant to account for spatial displacement or the alteration of sense. Or, are they in fact the same thing? That is, might the “alteration of the sense” also be a kind of spatial displacement such that metaphor is understood as something like the *transit of consciousness* between different contexts, an experience which results in a new scene of meaning-making when language materializes the shift? Metaphor conjoins two senses of “transport” here: the movement of the idea from one place to another (the crown to the hill or tree), but also a state of impassioned hallucination or phantasmagoria. The change in the context of the idea in the metaphor of the crown, for example, could be said to represent an alteration of sense experience as a spatial displacement of the image, abstracted from the principal idea. This is so because “transport” signifies both operations. The ambiguity of Puttenham’s illustration, then, exposes how affective “transport” alters the sense by producing related images, and, in that sense, facilitates the phenomenological experience of spatial displacement.

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from the Romantic notion we understand today: that metaphor is poetry’s vital or formative principle springing from passion.
I.A. Richards enters into a similar discussion of metaphor in his seminal treatment of the figure in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. My shift in attention to Richards has everything to do with his similar preoccupation with transport, and specifically, his offering up to criticism those ubiquitous terms in contemporary discussions of the trope—the infamous tenor and vehicle.  

These two elements, Richards explains, correspond to metaphor’s two component parts, each with a distinct function: the “underlying idea” and “its imagined nature,” or, the idea and its image, respectively. For Richards, metaphor is fundamentally a “borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts, a transaction between contexts.” Metaphorical language is thus the consequence of the activity that first takes place in thought, and is then re-presented in words. That Richards invents the term vehicle as that image that develops the signification of the primary idea, does not necessarily indicate transport per se. “Vehicle” can be employed in any number of ways, such as when we say that language is a vehicle for thought, or that certain pigments use vehicles or solutions in their conversion to paints and other products. 

Strikingly, Richards’ model incorporates a third element, “the ground,” by which he means a circuit of correspondence across which the idea is transferred, presumably from its own context to that of its image. It is this third element that most clearly ties Richards’ model to transport. To use, if I may, yet another metaphor to make the process more clear, what Richards calls “the ground” might be interpreted as the path of similitude along which the primary idea must traverse in order to achieve its metaphoricity. Both Richards and Puttenham summon

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26 I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965). I would note here that that the element of transport pervades even passing comments about metaphor made by Richards, such as this: “The metaphors we are avoiding (increasingly abstract ones) steer our thought as much as those we accept.” p. 92. Whether consciously or not, Richards demonstrates metaphor’s ubiquitous use in theoretical discussions about metaphor.  

27 I find this division of figurative labor fascinating and completely in line with a certain utilitarian impulse in Richards’ criticism. It is worth commenting that Richards is the first functional model of metaphor, in the sense that he proposes a model in which the elements of the trope take on specialized labor.
spatial models to explain the metaphorical process because metaphor involves the derailing of linguistic logic by a contextual displacement. We are dislocated by metaphor’s positing of a term that is not immediately logical to the linguistic statement, but which introduces a new relationship that increases our cognitive understanding of a principal idea.

As many theorists of metaphor have noted, the figures that we use to talk about metaphor proliferate. Jonathan Culler has called metaphor “the figure of figures, a figure for figurality” and suggests that scholars begin discussing “how metaphor operates in discussions of metaphor, how and why it becomes metaphorical.”\(^{28}\) All figures for metaphor endeavor to fine-tune our understanding of the kind of cognitive process involved in metaphorical activity, a process that, as Paul Ricoeur has noted, can be labyrinthine and circular, presumably because in order to see it at work, we must use it. It is thus no surprise that Shelley’s writings about poetry abound in figures for metaphor. One of Shelley’s most important influences, Francis Bacon, provides a strong example. In the *Defense of Poetry*, Shelley notes that, for Bacon, metaphors are “footsteps of nature, treading or printing upon several subjects or matters.”\(^{29}\) This important image surfaces in poems, like *The Triumph of Life*, when the shape of light dances on the water: “the fierce splendour /Fell from her as she moved under the mass /Of the deep cavern, & with palms so tender/Their tread broke not the mirror of its billow, /Glided along the river…” In his study of Shelley’s theory of poetry, John Wright identifies the circle as one of Shelley’s most important figures for metaphor.\(^{30}\) In the *Defense of Poetry*, Shelley proposes that poetry is the “center and circumference of knowledge,” indeed is the very means by which the “circumference” of the imagination is dilated by “replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the

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\(^{29}\) Francis Bacon, from *The Advancement of Learning*, Book III, chapter 1.
power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new
intervals and interstices whose void forever craves fresh food." As Wright points out, the circle
and what it assimilates within its dilating boundary, forms an apt geometric figure for metaphor’s
dynamic expansion of thought.

I’d like to suggest that figures of transportation also represent metaphorical movement in
Shelley’s poetry. In a great number of his poems, vehicular images double up as metaphorical
vehicles. The first stanza of the Ode to the West Wind, for example, features the chariot image to
animate the activity of the wind:

O thou
Who charioteest to their dark wintry bed

The wingèd seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o’er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill… (ll. 5-12)

The choice in verb—“charioteest”—functions as an especially effective metaphor because it
images the conveyance of the leaves by the wind. Its incisiveness stems from its ability to make
available to the eyes the very activity the term “charioteest” implies where, indeed, no actual
chariot exists. This is precisely the kind of metaphor that Aristotle would classify as achieving
energeia, or dynamic activity in metaphor. The trope “brings-before-the-eyes” because it calls
attention to the very activity of figuration. Moreover, the wind’s visibility entirely depends on all
that it renders vehicular, including the poet:

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share

31 The Defense of Poetry in Shelley’s Poetry and Prose, edited and selected by Donald Reiman and Neil
The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O uncontrollable!...(ll. 43-47)

The passage represents a wish on the part of the poet to achieve an absolutely passive or, what Northrop Frye calls, the “vehicular” state. But the poet, unlike the leaf or cloud, is not absolutely vehicular because his nature demands that he counter natural forces by reworking his impressions of those powers. That is, he must break down and refashion his perceptions and sentiments into new forms, mimicking the activity of the wind by making the process of his own thought visible in language. It has not been remarked that the narrator’s desire shifts between stanzas 4 and 5 from an identification with the vehicular elements (leaves, clouds, waves), to a desire for identification with the wind itself: “Be thou me, impetuous One!” Thus, the poem proceeds from a wish to be moved to a desire to be the mover, a progress that circles back to the crafting of the poem itself.

In *Prometheus Unbound* we encounter another occasion in which an image of transport assumes the labor of the metaphorical vehicle. The image of the boat in Asia’s ecstatic speech at the end of the second act is pivotal because it symbolizes the triggering of a chain of natural events that lead to the release of Prometheus from the rock:

My soul is an enchanted boat,
Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float
Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing;
And thine doth like an angel sit
Beside a helm conducting it,
Whilst all the winds with melody are ringing.
It seems to float ever, for ever,
Upon that many-winding river,
Between mountains, woods, abysses,
A paradise of wildernesses!
Till, like one in slumber bound,
Borne to the ocean, I float down, around,
Into a sea profound, of ever-spreading sound…(II. v. 73-84)
As in the *Ode to the West Wind*, the energy of Asia’s speech lies in the development of a metaphor of transportation: her soul is unmoored by the song of the Spirit of the Hour, and moves upon the tune as if it were a wave. Just like Ianthe’s “rapturous” conversion at the start of *Queen Mab*, Asia’s affective transport has a metaphorical referent in transportation. What is most provocative about this type of metaphor is that it is *double-freighted*. That is, the metaphorical vehicle (boat), which develops the primary idea (soul), is equivalent to the image of an actual vehicle of movement. What is the effect of this phenomenon, if not to trace the work of metaphor itself, which is a transfer of the idea to an image by transforming the idea into that very image? Asia’s soul is transfigured into a mode of transport because she is affectively “transported,” and she is “transported” because the Spirit’s song enraptures her into a distinct type of vision. We can thus see the circularity of metaphor’s figuration (what Ricoeur calls metaphor’s work of revealing its own process) enacted by Asia’s song. Along with the chariot in the *Ode*, the boat in Asia’s song clearly indicates a highly complex reflexivity about metaphorical activity as itself a “transport” or transposition from idea to image. In these two examples, then, transportation and metaphor become indistinguishable. Metaphor becomes literal.

What are the consequences of this double-freighting phenomenon for Shelley’s poetry? The most obvious would be that it connects metaphor to the proper image of its process: transport or transfer, the very means by which the first term of the metaphorical relation is displaced or re-contextualized. Critics of Romantic poetics have long identified the revolutionary quality of metaphor in the period as a “conflation” of tenor and vehicle, but this is altogether

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32 The co-presence of transport and music is one of the most recurring phenomena in Shelley’s poetry. We encounter it in the opening of *Queen Mab* and *The Revolt of Islam*, in the elegant gliding of the twin swans in *Alastor*, but also in the chariot’s ghastly progress in the *Triumph of Life*. Linking poetry’s lyricism and an image of the metaphorical process, music and transportation are entwined because the verse “transports” affectively, sensually, and cognitively.
distinct from what Shelley is doing in these passages. When William Wimsatt discusses the “conflation” of metaphorical terms in light of Coleridge’s “To the River Otter” in his essay, “The Structure of Romantic Imagery,” he notes that the tenor and vehicle “are scarcely noticed in the main statement of the poem” because the terms are “wrought in the same process out of the same material.” In that poem, Coleridge’s reminiscent thoughts about the river are indistinguishable from the river’s activity because memories “rise up” like waters, and so any trace of “disparity” between the terms disappears in the transparence of the metaphorical activity. My interest in Shelley’s figures of transport, however, is not that they blend tenor and vehicle seamlessly, but that the vehicle visibly enacts metaphor’s work of transfer. The activity of metaphor in general is actualized or made lively by this particular metaphor. The difference in effect is that, while what Wimsatt is describing represents the successful erasure of the tension between metaphor’s two terms, the double-freighting phenomenon in Shelley’s verse reinforces the visibility of the metaphorical process. This phenomenon not only displays Shelley’s craftsmanship, but also exemplifies the intensity of his reflexive figurative play.

“Transport” as Metaphor’s Affect

In accounting for the ways in which transport figures metaphorical activity as a sensual and a spatial displacement, the subject of the role of emotion in metaphorical language has emerged. When George Puttenham called metaphor “the figure of transport,” he suggested a sense of “transport” that insists on the potential of strong feelings to generate images in the sense. Thus, in Puttenham’s theory, “transport” takes on a resonance that accounts for the self’s vehicular relationship to its own passions, a posture that replaces normal routes of perception.

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through the senses with a process by which powerful feelings arouse an internal stream of images (projection) that override the world of sense. Scholars like Jon Mee, Shaun Irlam, and Samuel Holt Monk have identified “transport” as a term that moves freely between 18th century discourses of religious enthusiasm, poetics, romance, and the aesthetics of the sublime.

According to Mee, the term “transport” became increasingly associated at this time with a dangerous enthusiasm or fanaticism that posited an unmediated encounter with God. The concept also developed into a more general label for an “overheated” or passionate state of mind that called forth illusory images. Larger social and political anxieties resulting from the entanglement of “transport” within these critical discourses (aesthetics, religion, politics) meant that poets had to patrol their own metaphors because of their potential galvanizing influence over the reading public. It is within this context that Shelley’s vehicles acquire an ethical dimension.

Mee argues that poetic “transports” were believed to result from inability to regulate the passions during a literary or social encounter, a vulnerability that particularly characterized persons of the lower classes. Because of this susceptibility in the majority of English readership, Romantic poets had to negotiate a dangerous rhetoric of inspiration that hinged on the regulation of the images conjured by their speaking bodies. Indeed, Shelley himself participates in this rhetoric in his preface to *The Revolt of Islam*:

The panic, which, like an epidemic transport, seized upon all classes of men during the excesses consequent upon the French Revolution, is gradually giving place to sanity. It has ceased to be believed that whole generations of mankind ought to consign themselves to a hopeless inheritance of ignorance and misery because a nation of men

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who had been dupes and slaves for centuries were incapable of conducting themselves with the wisdom and tranquility of freemen so soon as some of their fetters were partially loosened [italics mine].

Shelley’s account of the Reign of Terror as an “epidemic transport” rehearses widespread contemporary arguments about the lower classes as psychologically unprepared for abrupt revolution. These comments also prefigure an idea expressed in Shelley’s later prose writings about the importance of “cultivating” the imagination before any drastic and instantaneous social change took place. The “cultivated” imagination represented the capacity to sublimate, or counteract dangerous enthusiasm for socially constructive ends, a proper employment for liberty. Shelley feared that premature revolution would stymie overall progress and that an “epidemic transport” such as that which seized France would ultimately stall the revolution that had already begun its course. It is likely that this anxiety manifests in the targeted circulation of his late major works, like *Prometheus Unbound*, a poem designed to “familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence.”

His early long poems, *Queen Mab* and *The Revolt of Islam*, do not bear this stamp and are directed to a more general reading public.

Shelley’s idea of an “epidemic transport” is perhaps most vividly depicted in *The Triumph of Life*, where the ghastly procession of a bewildered crowd attends the progress of a mesmerizing chariot:

> The crowd gave way, and I arose aghast,  
> Or seemed to rise, so mighty was the trance,  
> And saw, like clouds upon the thunder-blast,  
> The million with fierce song and maniac dance  
> Raging around; such seemed the jubilee

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35 See Shelley’s “Preface” to *The Revolt of Islam* in *Complete Poetical Works of Shelley*, p. 33.  
36 ibid, p. 203.
As when to greet some conqueror's advance

Imperial Rome poured forth her living sea
From senate-house, and forum, and theatre,
When Freedom left those upon the free

Had bound a yoke, which soon they stooped to bear.
Nor wanted here the just similitude
Of a triumphal pageant, for where'er

The chariot rolled, a captive multitude
Was driven; (Il. 107-120)

While in the *Ode to the West Wind* the chariot provided an image for the moving power of the wind, in *The Triumph of Life* the vehicle figures the rapt crowd conquered by their own passionate natures, underscoring the inspiring, yet potentially destructive potential of Shelley’s vehicles. While the Roman victory procession is the most active allusion here, there might also be a Platonic resonance. Plato’s allegory of the chariot in *Phaedrus* accounts for the soul of man as a composite of various psychic powers, figured as a charioteer and twin horses. Those who, unable to restrain their affective energies, succumb the unruliness of the dark horse, which represents an appetitive or passionate nature, and are dragged to earth with it. In this poem, the crowd is similarly overcome by their feelings, unlike, we learn, the “great bards of old who inly quelled/The passions which they sung, as their strain/May well be known: their living melody/Tempers its own contagion to the vein/Of those who are infected with it…” These lines are spoken by the grisly figure of Rousseau, who regrettably confesses to the Poet that his own words “were seeds of misery” that ultimately contributed to the energy of the frightening procession. It is by virtue of what Shelley calls “an impotence of will” in the members of the crowd that they are pulled into the inertia of the procession. There is much to be said about the

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chariot in *The Triumph*, but what I would like to stress is that it functions here as a metaphor for the frenzy or “transport” of the maniac crowd.

Despite Shelley’s concern about the potential for the passions to turn “epidemic,” he recognized their formative role in the poetic process. Like antique bards that “inly quelled” or “tempered” their feelings while producing verse, Shelley understood that poets must have a passionate, yet well-managed nature. Indeed, Shelley’s own beliefs about the role of emotion in the creative process focused specifically on discussions about metaphorical language.  

These beliefs were shaped by eighteenth century theories of language by the philosophers Giambattista Vico and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who stressed the centrality of the passions in original languages and in poetry. Both philosophers insist on the function of passion in primitive articulation and further posited that man’s first pronouncements must have been metaphorical. Fear in response to threatening natural powers (thunder and lightning for Vico) or other elements of potential threat (Rousseau’s giant) found utterance in metaphor. According to both thinkers, this theory accounted for man’s evolving from a state of passionate ignorance with respect to his environment to one of reason. Impassioned utterance, they argued, must be metaphorical because passion calls forth illusory images. However, they are only illusory in retrospect. That is, when the environment or object of the metaphor is better understood, the original metaphorical or passionate utterance is replaced with what we might classify as “literal” language, or the language of reason. The passions were thus understood as generating original language. Literal

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39 It is unclear whether Shelley came in contact with the writings of Vico’s *New Science*, but he certainly read Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages.*
language became the language of reason, while the metaphorical was consigned to abuses in language, as in poetry.\footnote{The temporal schema of primitivist theories of language map onto Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as an “an overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility.” The moment of tranquility is also the beginning of composition, after the power of the feelings has subsided.}

Shelley subscribed to these Enlightenment theories of original languages. In the *Defense of Poetry*, he expresses that “in the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry.” As scholars have shown, Shelley’s theory of poetic language drew heavily from Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, in which Rousseau insists that, “figurative language rose first, proper [literal] meaning was found last”. For Shelley, the motive for first use of speech is to express strong passions:

Since the illusory image presented by passion showed itself first, the language answering to it was invented first; subsequently it became metaphorical when the enlightened mind recognized its original error and came to use expressions of that first language only when moved by the same passions as had produced it.\footnote{Shelley’s *Poetry and Prose*, p. 254.}

Poetic language thus became primitive under Rousseau, who understood passionate responses like fear as the result of a “misreading” of an object. From the vantage point of a reasoning subject, man came to identify the illusoriness of the object with the passion from which it sprang. It is only when reason is achieved, that the metaphorical becomes metaphorical, with the understanding that the initial response was in itself an ignorant, but genuine reaction to an unknown object. Metaphors, then, are borne out of a moment of affective “transport,” whose articulation is later “corrected.” However, the theory also asserts that the illusoriness of the metaphorical vehicle lies not in the primary *feeling*, but in the secondary *knowing*. The relationship of tension between two terms of metaphor is not possible without both stages. Thus,
“transport” could be said to describe both metaphor’s affect and the trajectory of its linguistic displacement.

In a letter to Leigh Hunt, Shelley argued that, “strong passion expresses itself in metaphor, borrowed from objects alike remote or near, and casts over all a shadow of its own greatness.”\textsuperscript{42} Shelley doesn’t provide a satisfactory account for the mechanism by which this is so. However, his letter to Hunt insists that the expression of passion achieves its metaphoricity because it requires a “borrowing” of meaning from other “objects alike remote or near.” What Shelley posits here is that literal language is incapable of representing strong passion because strong passion is always in excess of language, as such (literal language). Therefore, the expression of passion requires a moving beyond the logic of language, so to speak, in search for passion’s relation to some other object in order to accurately account for the feeling. When that object is discovered, it takes its place within the logic of language, where language was previously inadequate to the feeling. The feeling thus gives the retrieved object (the metaphorical vehicle) its place within the logical framework of language, where it previously had no place.\textsuperscript{43} Not only is metaphor the product of an impassioned state, it is also the very means by which the passion which brings it into being becomes legible in language.

This theory of passion’s relationship to metaphor is perhaps best illustrated in the first canto to The Revolt of Islam. The revolutionary character of the Woman encountered by the poet-narrator on the water, when recalling her experience of receiving news of the Revolution in France, describes the awakening of her political enthusiasm:

\textsuperscript{43} Shelley’s account of passion and metaphor presages T.S. Eliot’s theory of the objective correlative in which Eliot proposes that the expression of emotion in art requires a “set of objects, a situation, or a chain of events which shall be the formula for that particular emotion.” “Hamlet and His Problems” in The Wasteland and Other Writings (New York: Modern Library, 2001).
‘When first the living blood through all these veins
Kindled a thought in sense, great France sprang forth,
And seized, as if to break, the ponderous chains
Which bind in woe the nations of the earth.
I saw, and started from my cottage hearth;
And to the clouds and waves in tameless gladness
Shrieked, till they caught immeasurable mirth,
And laughed in light and music: soon sweet madness
Was poured upon my heart, a soft and thrilling sadness.’ (I., 469-477)

Shelley’s account of the Woman having “kindled a thought in sense” the moment that France “sprang forth” from her “ponderous chains” symbolizes the actualization of political hopes. While one is accustomed to the idea that thought is the product or consequence of perception (sense), Shelley here reverses the process. Instead the Woman’s zealous feelings for revolutionary change produce a “thought in sense,” by which we are made to understand the actualization of an ideal, or the rendering of a mental idea as a material perception by sheer force of feeling. In other words, the Woman has a vision. Afterwards, she immediately runs out to nature to express her “gladness” until nature mimics back or “catches” the “immeasurable mirth.” This fascinating scene reads like the reverse of Vico’s theory of original language. In other words, the passage suggests that the Woman has effect a change in nature by the very language of her enthusiasm, inverting Vico’s proposition that passionate articulation is a consequence of an encounter with sublime natural power.44 A uniquely Shelleyan fantasy, this ability to alter nature through a poetic utterance finds its proper mechanism in metaphor’s capacity to project an image that corresponds to the feeling outward into the world.45

44 As Angela Leighton has argued, sublime natural forces in Shelley’s poetry naturalize political and social revolution. See Shelley and the Sublime.
45 Recent scholars have been especially attuned to Shelley’s particular relationship to the sublime, which is closely related to both natural power and enthusiasm. For Cian Duff, for example, “‘Enthusiasm’ as a source of revolution and ‘enthusiasm’ as a source of reaction…Shelley’s early exploration of the imaginative response to the natural sublime treads a thin—and often blurred—line between these conflicting accounts of the faculty.” Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 9.
In Shelley’s poetry, the passions are often translated into natural forces through the work of metaphor. These external forces are not only metaphors or analogues for inner forces, they also materially work on the poet’s senses, a phenomenon that becomes clear in his various metaphors for poetic inspiration. In the *Defense of Poetry*, for example, we encounter the image of the burning coal: “for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within…” The equation established by the passage is this: the wind affects the fading coal, as the passions affect the mind. But, the poet’s responsiveness to natural power forms a series of power relations, beginning with passivity and ending with active creation. The illumination of the coal depends on the external powers of the wind, but also the force (heat) “from within”—the imagination. This image recalls similar figures like Wordsworth’s image, in the first book of *The Prelude*, of the correspondent breeze, awakening poetic numbers:

For I, methought, while the sweet breath of heaven  
Was blowing on my body, felt within  
A correspondent breeze, that gently moved  
With quickening virtue, but is now become  
A tempest, a redundant energy,  
Vexing its own creation. [italics mine] (I., 32-37)

Notice the way Wordsworth gathers affective energy from natural power, energy that will be reformulated and returned to the world. There is a momentary passivity in the encounter, but the work of the wind on his frame arouses a similar power within that rises up to meet the wind, what Wordsworth calls “redundant energy.” Scholars like Paul Fry have shown how metrical regulation allows Wordsworth to keep this corresponding inner power from lapsing into enthusiasm.46 His thinking horses in “The Idiot Boy” and “Peter Bell” as well as the stolen boat

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46 See Paul Fry in *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 91-118.
episode in *The Prelude* are strong examples of the way Wordsworth figures passion as transport and regulates it through meter.47

But, what if this inner power is not activated? We might say that Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind* flirts with this extreme situation in the enthusiastic lines that caused many New Critics to cringe: “O! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud! / I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!” These lines clearly approach a state of total irrationality and passivity, one that is ultimately destructive to both poet and reader. Shelley’s imaginative ability to sympathetically merge with series of objects has a limit and can only be temporary. He must ultimately return to his own body, and the “fall[ing] upon the thorns of life” articulates something about the pain of returning to the world of sense. Affective “transport” (Frye’s “vehicular form”) and the occasion for metaphorical transformation are ultimately fleeting. If one cannot temper or counteract the powers (passions) within, which are directly inspired by sublime nature, one runs the risk of lapsing into frenzy, sharing the fate of the enthusiastic crowd in *The Triumph of Life*. Nevertheless, it is also true that the imagination cannot function without the passions, just as the coal cannot glow without the breeze. It is the poet’s active responsiveness to these external forces in the form of figuration that produces poetry. The energy must be converted or sublimated by what Shelley called a “cultivated imagination” otherwise the threat of an absolute vehicular state or unmitigated passivity becomes tantamount to enthusiasm.

Thus far, I have demonstrated Shelley uses figures of transport to image the metaphorical process, but also how he relies on it as a figure for the posture of affective passivity necessary for the production of poetic images. In the next section, I will bring these ideas to bear on Shelley’s interest in steam navigation, a Romantic innovation in nautical engineering that

47 For a discussion of this aspect of Wordsworth’s poetry, see Jon Mee’s chapter, “Wordsworth’s Chastened Enthusiasm” in *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*, pp. 214-256.
offers up to the poet a novel figure of transport, one that I perceive forms a counterpoint to the affective passivity figured by more traditional means of transport, like sailing. As I’ll show, steam power becomes for Shelley a modern figure for what Wordsworth called the poet’s “redundant energy,” or his ingenuity in converting nature’s sublime power for his own creative purposes. With all that steam navigation represents, the poet’s ability to return nature’s power—in a reworked form—to the world makes him simultaneously moved and prime mover.

The Mechanics of Metaphorics: Shelley’s Steamboat

While most of Shelley’s metaphors for poetic making are organic, following eighteenth century theories of genius, in the Letter to Maria Gisborne Shelley experiments with a metaphor of mechanical invention: the steam engine. He composed the Letter at the home of the Gisbornes in Leghorn, Italy while the family made a short trip to London in the summer of 1820. The purpose of that excursion was to seek out employment for Henry Reveley, Maria Gisborne’s son, a young engineer whom Shelley took under his wing while in Italy. By the 1820s, London was the world capital of steam, and engines were being quickly manufactured after Watt’s innovative model and shipped to Europe and America for the construction of steamships. Shelley had become something of a mentor to Reveley and, eventually, a primary investor in his steamboat project. During the Gisbornes’ trip, Shelley used Reveley’s engineering studio as a study for his own writing. His letters from this period are filled with excitement and anticipation about the project, and Mary would later characterize Shelley’s involvement as “a Promethean effort.” The understanding was that Henry would construct the vessel for the purpose of establishing a commercial tourist line off the coast of Italy. Since the fall of Napoleon, steamboat tourism had

48 “His letters to Mr. and Mrs. Gisborne, and to Mr. Reveley, the son of the latter by a former marriage, display that helpful and generous benevolence and friendship which was Shelley’s characteristic. He set
been on the rise in France as well as England, and Shelley hoped to extend this project to the Mediterranean. As Mary explains, the poet hoped to contribute something useful to the Italian society of which he had recently become a part. The enterprise was, unfortunately, never seen through, partly because of Shelley’s strained financial situation as well as the eventual dissolution of the friendship between the Gisbornes and the Shelleys.\textsuperscript{49}

Within the poem, Shelley assumes the role of engineer or “mechanist,” a momentary lyric possession of Henry’s trade that demands some reflection about Shelley’s theory of poetic making in relation to this particular metaphor. If, as I’ve shown, the figuring or engineering of transport became one of Shelley’s favorite emblems for poiesis, the revolutionary mobility that the steamboat offered prompts some reflection about what the modern vehicle meant for Shelley’s poetics and aesthetics. Admittedly, Shelley’s poem begins with a metaphor of organic, not mechanical making. The poet represents himself as “a thing whom moralists call worm” (a silk-worm), spinning verse that forms a “soft cell” or cocoon. This worm will metamorphose into a flying moth, be fed by “the asphodels of fame,” and live in the hearts of those that would remember him and his work. The poem thus begins on a defensive note. Not meant for the “idle buzzers of the day,” referring to Shelley’s harsh London reviewers, the verse he spins here is meant for those in his most intimate circle. The poem, however, quickly shifts from this image of

\textsuperscript{49} According to Mary Shelley, Shelley was intellectually and emotionally invested in the project in 1820: “His thoughts were a good deal taken up also by the project of a steamboat, an engineer, to ply between Leghorn and Marseilles, for which he supplied a sum of money. This was a sort of plan to delight Shelley, but he was disappointed when it was thrown aside…In the Spring we spent a week or two near Leghorn, borrowing the house of some friends who were absent on a journey to England…He addressed the letter to Mrs. Gisborne from this house which was her: he made his study of the workshop of her son, who was an engineer” \textit{The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley}, p. 629.
organic productivity to one of mechanical making when he assumes the role of “mighty mechanist” laboring diligently on his engine. The move from “worm” to “mechanist” is not adventitious; it recalls Milton’s Satan, who also assumed both guises and with whom Shelley playfully identified throughout his writings. In *Paradise Lost*, Satan features as a dazzling political and mechanical engineer, forging destructive “engines” to battle God’s army. Indeed, Satan’s engines are both mechanical and rhetorical. Addressing the fallen angels, the fallen angel proposes:

…no, let us rather choose  
Arm’d with Hell flames and fury all at once  
O’er Heaven’s high Tow’rs to force resistless way,  
Turning our Tortures into horrid Arms  
Against the Torturer; when to meet the noise  
Of his almighty engine, he shall hear  
Infernal thunder, and for lightning see  
Black fire and horror shot with equal rage  
Among his Angels. (II., 60-65).

This rich description fuses the mechanical and the rhetorical in ways that become apparent in Shelley’s own poem. In Book VI of *Paradise Lost*, we learn that Satan constructs his engines using gunpowder that he draws from the bowels of Heaven. In other words, Satan takes Heavenly matter and converts its energies against its own maker. If God’s word materializes the universe, Satan turns God’s word against Him.

Milton’s diction here explicitly connects the engines to rebellious speech acts, transforming the to the cannons into huge “mouthes/with hideous orifice gap’t…wide”:

…Immediate in a flame,  
But soon obscur’d with smoke, all Heav’n appeared  
From those deep throated Engins belcht, whose roar  
Emboweled with outrageous noise the Air,  
And all her entrails tore, disgorging foule  
Their devilish glut, chained Thunderbolts and Hail  
Of Iron Globes (VI, 584-590)

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This physics of energy conversion is a signature theme in Milton’s poem, whose universe is well balanced: every action has a reaction, even for God. His expulsion of Satan “recoils” back on him in the form of Satan’s attack on Eden, just as Satan’s own rage:

…like a devilish engine back recoils
Upon himself; horror and doubt distract
His troubl'd thoughts, and from the bottom stir
The Hell within Him, for within him Hell
He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell
One step no more then from himself can fly
By change of place” (IV, 17-23)

The mechanical turns in this passage are rhetorical: the chiasmus of “the Hell within Him, for within Him Hell” renders in language the turning of thought and strategy Satan will deploy against the parents of man, a turning which directs intellectual energies inward to augment and strengthen them before they’re released anew. We find this language of recoiling or “redounding” energy everywhere in the poem, and I’ll bring this activity to bear on Shelley’s sense of the steamboat technology in relation to his poetics of the sublime, which involves a similarly active, even willful responsiveness to nature.

Unsurprisingly, Shelley thrives in Reveley’s studio, and the motley machinery that lies about this writing environment provokes a meditation on correspondences between engineering and poetic making:

Whoever should behold me now, I wist,
Would think I were a mighty mechanist,
Bent with sublime Archimedean art
To breathe a soul into the iron heart
Of some machine portentous, or strange gin,
Which by the force of figured spells might win
Its way over the sea, and sport therein;
For round the walls are hung dread engines, such
As Vulcan never wrought for Jove to clutch
Ixion or the Titan:—or the quick
Wit of that man of God, St. Dominic,
To convince Atheist, Turk, or Heretic,  
Or those in philanthropic council met,  
Who thought to pay some interest for the debt  
They owed to Jesus Christ for their salvation,  
By giving a faint foretaste of damnation  
To Shakespeare, Sidney, Spenser, and the rest  
Who made our land an island of the blest,  
When lamp-like Spain, who now relumes her fire  
On Freedom’s hearth, grew dim with Empire…(ll. 15-35)

The first matter to address in this poem is tone. While Shelley’s attitude in assuming the persona of “mechanist” is playful enough here, he was undoubtedly serious about his participation in Reveley’s steamboat project. His financial investment in the endeavor, in addition to the construction of his own boat, The Bolivar, clarifies this point. If we entertain Shelley’s comparison, the poem invites reflection about what the relationship between poetic and mechanical making meant to Shelley. The poem certainly aligns their labor quite neatly. The phrase “force of figured spells,” which would allow the steamboat to “sport” in the sea is a clear reference to poetic figuration. For Shelley, the poet’s magic—his mastery over figure—bears equal potential to animate the “machine portentous” to the ingenuity of the mechanist.

The comparison seems, at least initially, rather unlike Shelley, but his language insists on the substitutability of mechanics (engineering) and rhetoric, disciplines that, as I’ve begun to show in my discussion of Satan’s cannons, share a rather surprising poetic history in the term “engine.” The reference to Archimedes and “sublime Archimedean art” is significant in light of Shelley’s use of the Greek mathematician and engineer’s famous dictum “Give me somewhere to stand and I shall move the earth” as an epigraph for both of his early revolutionary long poems,

51 The Defense makes clear that poetry might not necessarily come in the form of verse. Plato’s writings, for example, are absolutely poetic according to Shelley. Poiesis, in Shelley’s mind, is much more akin to an abstract making. Moreover, he notes the act of composition, which begins when the poetic moment is already on the decline, requires technical skill to execute.
Queen Mab and The Revolt of Islam. The centrality of the Archimedean lever as an emblem for these revolutionary long poems demands that we consider the connection between poetics, politics, and mechanical engineering. Shelley’s allusion underscores his signature belief in poetry’s potential to facilitate the reorientation of the world-order in much the same way that Archimedes imagined his mechanical lever would do. Moreover, it is clear from a study of contemporary reviews of Shelley’s early poems that while most critics agreed that Shelley possessed an undeniable talent for verse, they lamented that his energies were misdirected or misapplied to morally ambiguous (revolutionary) ends.

This problem of the application and misapplication of genius is central to the Letter to Maria Gisborne, a poem in which there is an ethics drawn out by several examples of how the applied sciences have been historically exploited by political institutions for destructive ends. Aside from being credited for his genius with respect to the mechanical lever, Archimedes is also recognized as having successfully harnessed steam power in his construction of the steam-cannon, which was famously used during the Siege of Syracuse by the Romans. The reference thus binds the Letter to Maria Gisborne and steam power to Shelley’s revolutionary politics. Indeed, the image of the Archimedean lever also played an active role in revolutionary pamphleteering by writers like Thomas Paine, who used the Greek’s famous statement in The Rights of Man. The second part of Paine’s pamphlet begins: “What Archimedes said of the mechanical powers, may be applied to reason and liberty: ‘Had we,’ says he, ‘a place to stand upon, we might raise the world.’” The revolution in America represented in politics what was

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52 Richard Holmes points out Shelley’s boyhood experiments with engines and chemistry in his detailed biography, The Pursuit. Shelley’s fascination with the sciences and especially with the mechanical provokes some consideration, precisely because of the ubiquitous oppositions of mechanical and organic form in Romantic discourse. For Shelley, the steam engine was a source of delight and a sign of man’s triumph over the elements. The mechanical in his imagination mostly referred to those operations that would seek to replace the energies of imaginative activity.
only theory in the world of mechanics.” Paine’s discussion of “theory” and “mechanics” in relation to the American Revolution suggests an idea of radical politics as applied science, one that might effect real social change only if put into practice. The metaphor of politics as “mechanics” was active in the electric rhetoric of the 1790s, and it seems clear that Shelley considered Queen Mab and The Revolt of Islam in the tradition of Paine’s treatise: they were designed to provoke sympathy for revolutionary sentiment.

Another likely source for Shelley’s allusion might be Erasmus Darwin, whose poetical works Shelley admired. In the Temple of Nature (1803), Darwin similarly represents Archimedes’ mechanical prowess during the Siege of Syracuse:

Inspir’d by thee, with scientific wand,
Pleas’d Archimedes mark’d the figur’d sand;
Seiz’d with mechanic grasp, the approaching decks,
And shook the assailants from the inverted wrecks.—
Then cried the Sage, with grand effects elate,
And proud to save the Syracusian state;
While crowds, exulting, shout their noisy mirth,
‘Give where to stand, and I will move the earth.’
So Savery guided his explosive steam
In iron cells, to raise the balanc’d beam;
The Giant-form its ponderous mass uprears,
Descending, nods, and seems to shake the spheres. (IV. 240-252)

Darwin interprets Archimedes’ participation in the political campaign of Syracuse as a triumph for scientific progress and an occasion for poetic tribute. The image of the “scientific wand” seems a precursor to Shelley’s phrase “force of figured spells” in the Letter in its attention to the mysterious, even magical processes of technology. Placing England within a Greek tradition, Darwin equates the mathematician’s glory with Thomas Savery, an Englishman who, in 1699, obtained a patent for an engine from the Royal Society. Savery’s design was meant to use steam

54 Erasmus Darwin, The Temple of Nature; or, the Origin of Society. A Poem, with Philosophical Notes (Baltimore: Printed by John W. Butler, and Bonsal & Niles, 1804).
power to work mills, drain mines, and serve towns and villages with water. The section of
Darwin’s poem from which this stanza is drawn lays out the progress of society and the role that
“Sensation,” “Sympathy” and “Volition” played in man’s ability to make certain social and
scientific advancements. For Darwin, “volition” is central to man’s creative potential:

Thy acts, Volition, to the world impart
The plans of Science and the works of Art
Give to proud Reason her comparing power,
In Life’s first cradle, ere the dawn began
Of young Society to polish man…” (IV., ll. 223-228).55

In this passage, volition “instructs” man in all the arts, art and science alike, and these disciplines
rely on each other for human progress. Advances in the sciences, Shelley learns from Darwin,
offer poetry new metaphors as well as new applications for those metaphors, a theme clearly at
play in the epistle to Gisborne.

The Archimedean reference seems to have inflected criticisms of Shelley’s work. After
his death, S.T. Coleridge would lament that Shelley, whom he never met, “was a man of great
power as a poet, and could he only have had some notion of order, could you only have given
him some place whereon to stand, and look down on his mind, he would have succeeded.”56 The
specter of Archimedes also haunts Coleridge’s sense of Shelley’s poetry as requiring some
proper fulcrum for his extraordinary powers. Another example of this response to Shelley’s verse
is the following comment in a review of Queen Mab by an anonymous writer for The Literary
Gazette in May 19, 1821:

Our desire is to do justice to the writer’s genius, and upon his principles, not to deny his
powers, while we deplore their perversion; and above all, when we lay before our readers

55 ibid, pp. 161-162.
56 For collection of 19th century reviews of Shelley’s works, see Shelley: The Critical Heritage, ed. by
examples of his poetry, to warn them against the abominable and infamous contagion
with which in the sequel he poisons the splendid effusions.”

This review insists on the enviable power and craftsmanship of Shelley’s verse, which is,
unfortunately the vehicle for absurd and reactionary ideas. In other words, Shelley’s critics agree
that while his skill and technical ability as a poet are impeccable, they are misguided by bad
politics and misapplied to those ends. This idea of poetry as technological and misapplied will
frame a dilemma Shelley would later face about didactic poetry. Should poetry influence man’s
political decisions and, if so, how? Revolutionary writers in England had already figured
political rhetoric within the terms of mechanical and military engineering, and Shelley’s
investment in Reveley’s steamboat project gains a political charge when put into conversation
with the rhetorical, poetical and political history of engineering. This background to the poem
invites a reading about the “machine portentous” that Shelley anticipates will “sport in the sea.”
Reveley’s steamboat promises to be something quite distinct from those “dread engines” forged
by Vulcan and Jove to torture Prometheus and others who opposed Jove’s absolute authority.

Shelley is surely self-conscious about the history of the term “engine,” which in Miltonic
and pre-industrial discourse refers to a machine devoted to torture and destruction. But, the OED
additionally notes the rhetorical valence of engine, calling it “An instance or a product of
ingenuity; a contrivance or means. In a bad sense: a plot, a snare, a wile.” Engine, then, is rooted
in ingenuity and natural disposition or talent, as well as the application of this ingenuity for
oppressive or destructive means. In the passage cited earlier, Shelley catalogues the political and
poetic history of the engine in order to distinguish his own “enginery” from the oppressive
machinery of his predecessors. For Shelley, modernity’s engine, when applied to land and sea
transport within his lifetime, augments man’s powers by enabling him to achieve greater freedom

57 ibid, pp. 74-75.
and speed and to move against natural forces such as rivers and winds. Engines in Shelley’s poem are thus metaphors wrested from the discourse of authority and torture, and applied to a poetic discourse of liberation grounded in an increased opportunity for mobility. Offering up to poetry a novel applicability of the engine, steam transport expands its meaning to include a revolution in mobility.

In his discussion of the contributions of steam navigation to modern science, Wolfgang Schivelbusch distinguishes steam locomotion from traditional transport by arguing that “pre-industrial traffic is mimetic of natural phenomena.” In other words, ships and sailboats move according to natural currents and overland transport, which was determined by animal power, required following the natural irregularities of roads. Steam power, however, dissolved the mimetic relationship involved in moving according to natural rhythms, and allowed vehicles to proceed directly, or in a straight line, by reformulating natural energies for smoother progress. This revolution in locomotion thus allowed man to proceed according to his own will rather than that of nature:

Thus steam power appeared to be independent of outward nature and capable of prevailing against it—as artificial energy in opposition to natural forces…Steam power, inexhaustible and capable of infinite acceleration, reversed the relationship between recalcitrant nature (i.e. spatial distance) and locomotive engine…Motion was no longer

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dependent on the conditions of natural space, but on mechanical power that created its own new spatiality.  

Provocatively, this new form of mobility, which shifts away from a mimetic relationship with natural rhythms toward increasingly willful and independent movement, coincides with the revolutionary forms of representation and figuration ascribed to the Romantics by critics like M.H. Abrams. For Abrams, Romantic poetry witnessed a transformation in the poetic image from one of mimetic representation (the mirror) to representations that project the poetic self onto nature (the lamp). By projecting life and feeling into the universe, Romantic poets attempted to “overcome the sense of man’s alienation from the world by healing the cleavage between subject and object…” If for Shelley transport is linked to figuration, the steamboat might be said to have represented not only a new kind of poetic figuration, which projects an inner ideal out into the world, but also the practical application of poetry for social and political reform.

Making ingenious use of Reveley’s studio and its mechanical clutter, Shelley takes up the tools and devices of the workspace as material for composition. He delights in the “harmonious disarray” of mechanical parts (“Great screws, and cones, and wheels, and grooved blocks”) and his own reading, presumably some Spenser and Shakespeare, given the references in the adjacent lines. The motley “disarray” only achieves harmony in Shelley’s poetic activity and in his identification with Reveley’s mechanical labor: the ability to take up all available materials for creative making. In a gesture that fuses the two, Shelley fashions a paper boat to float atop bowl of mercury on Reveley’s desk:

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60 ibid, p. 10.
And in this bowl of quicksilver—for I
Yield to the impulse of an infancy
Outlasting manhood—I have made to float
A rude idealism of a paper boat:—
A hollow screw with cogs—Henry will know
The thing I mean and laugh at me,—if so
He fears not I should do more mischief.—Next
Lie bills and calculations much perplexed,
With steam-boats, frigates, and machinery quaint
Traced over them in blue and yellow paint.
Then comes a range of mathematical
Instruments, for plans nautical and statical…(ll. 72-83)

The childhood “impulse” in the passage refers not only to his habit of crafting paper boats for
friends, but also his hobby for sailing and his penchant for poetic composition inside of his boats.
The presence of the paper boat here links the toy to the steamboat, and, by extension, the
steamboat is linked to other vehicles appearing in Shelley’s poetry. Moreover, the element of
quicksilver functions as a symbol for mutability, a theme emphasized throughout Shelley’s work.
Atop this sea of mutability, floats the “rude idealism” a phrase with astounding implications for
Shelley’s verse, which is littered with such “idealisms” of transport. Most importantly, however,
the setting of the paper boat in quicksilver successfully marries the contexts of engineering and
poetry. Shelley amplifies and complicates his identification with the engineer when he proceeds
from Archimedes to Spenser’s Archimago, the “subtile” wizard of *The Faerie Queene*, whom
David Quint has read as a diegetic architect of Spenser’s poetic plot.62

And here like some weird Archimage sit I,
Plotting dark spells, and devilish enginery,
The self-impelling steam-wheels of the mind
Which pump up oaths from clergymen, and grind
The gentle spirit of our meek reviews
Into a powdery foam of salt abuse,
Ruffling the ocean of their self-content;—
I sit—and smile or sigh as is my bent,
But not for them—(ll. 105-114)

In this passage, Shelley summons the strategic plotting of Spenser’s Archimago and Milton’s Satanic “enginery,” only to align them both with Reveley’s mechanical invention and his own poetic labors. The lines also resonate powerfully with Satan’s complex ploy against Adam and Eve as the “devilish engine” that “back recoils upon Himself.” Once again, the poem ties engineering to rhetoric, a relationship that, as I’ve argued, is quite explicit in *Paradise Lost*. While in Europe, Shelley’s poetry famously chafed reviewers back in England, who produced notoriously acerbic responses to his work. They often characterized him as a malignant poet-magician whose verse inflamed young minds. In a brilliant move, Shelley updates the Spenserian and Miltonic metaphor of the engine as a figure for poetic trickery and military warfare, to include advances in nautical science. Thus, the metaphor of the steamboat as poetry that “ruffles the ocean of their [reviewers’] discontent” is a masterful turning of this historically oppressive tool into a mechanism that transmutes the language of harsh reviews into a power that grants Shelley ever more poetic freedom.

Does Shelley really mean to compare poiesis to the energy conversion of a steam engine in his characterization of poetic labor as governed by the “self-impelling steam wheels of the mind”? It would appear so. Relating an account of his own process of composition to friend Richard Trelawny, Shelley notes: “When my brain gets heated with thought, it soon boils and throws off images and words faster than I can skim them off. In the morning, when cooled down, out of the rough sketch (as you so justly call it) I shall attempt a drawing.”63 We find echoes of this enthusiastic account in the *Defense of Poetry*, where Shelley notes that, once

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composition process begins, “inspiration is already on the decline.”64 Like Wordsworth, Shelley envisions an energetic initiating moment of inspiration followed by a secondary moment of laborious composition. But, whereas Wordsworth’s metaphor is that of a rapid “flood” of affective power, Shelley invokes the figure of overheated machinery, speedily producing images that need to be “skimmed” off just as quickly as they are generated.65 Shelley’s account of his process recalls the workings of the steam engine, which, when applied to transport, transmutes natural matter to generate its mobility.

If the poet resembles the engineer in the Letter to Maria Gisborne, figuration must be interpreted as a kind of technology. Both poet and engineer reform nature by virtue of a particular technology. For Shelley, the poet reforms the world by reforming language through the strength of his metaphors. One might argue, then, that in updating the poetic history of the engine, Shelley essentially reforms the world in the arena of language.66 Like Milton, who

64 “…but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet. I appeal to the greatest poets of the present day, whether it is not an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labor and study. The toil and the delay recommended by critics can be justly interpreted to mean no more than a careful observation of the inspired moments, and an artificial connection of the spaces between their suggestions by the intertexture of conventional expressions; a necessity only imposed by the limitedness of the poetical faculty itself.” See The Defense of Poetry.

65 What has been left out of the conversation about Shelley’s speed is that the poet lived through a period in which greater speeds were being introduced by emerging technologies of transport. Thus, to historicize speed in Shelley’s work is to consider his interest in these technologies. See Keach’s chapter, “Shelley’s Speed” in Shelley’s Style.

66 Engine and genius share a fascinating etymological history. The OED’s third entry for “engine” notes an obsolete usage of engine that denotes genius: “a. Inborn talent, intelligence, or wit; genius. Obs.” and “Natural disposition.” This usage of engine falls away by the 18th century, a period that witnesses the rise of industrialism, but also the beginning of a discourse of genius founded on metaphors of organic development. Thus, genius and engine share an etymological branch until the 18th century, after which they fork into organic and mechanical descriptors. Shelley’s attempt to inspirit the “machine portentous” with poetry’s animating power is a scene that gathers this poetic history after what he calls in the Defense, the “disorganization” of language.
incorporated technologies of military warfare into his depiction of the war in Heaven. Shelley makes poetical and political use of new human powers granted by steam navigation. The steamboat is sublime precisely because it rises up to challenge natural forces by altering them, a process that mirrors the work of the imagination. The theme of the Archimedean ideal re-orientating the world by means of mechanical ingenuity takes the form of an understanding of poetic language as malleable energy with great social and political potential, one also found Milton’s Satanic engineering. Indeed, Shelley is not the only artist in the period to associate Satan with modern technology, transport, and reform. The paintings of the Romantic artist and civil engineer John Martin often fuse Satanic scenes and elements with nineteenth century technological advances, especially the railways. In The Palace of Pandemonium (1825) and Satan Arousing the Fallen Angels (1824), paintings that Martin eventually incorporated as engravings into 19th century editions of Milton, he features architectural structures that clearly evoke early railway tunnels and stations (See Figures 1 & 2).

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68 For a discussion about Martin’s Satanic paintings and railway technology, see Michael Freeman’s introduction, “The Devil’s Mantle” in Railways and the Victorian Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 9-27.
Shelley’s attitude toward the steamboat project is undeniably positive and his own incorporation of the Archimedean statement as a banner for a revolutionary poetics prompts us to think about how he would distinguish technologies beneficial to mankind from those “mechanical arts,” which, he argues in the *Defense of Poetry*, stunt the cultivation of the
“poetical faculty.” Engineers could be said to produce machines that, while improving man’s condition by rendering certain types of work more efficient, also replace or interrupt human thinking and imaginative activity as a consequence of their use. Further, one could say that poetry is related to engineering in its renovation of language via metaphorical renewal (the taking up of “deadened” materials for new use), something deeply embedded in Shelley’s thought, and specifically in the *Defense of Poetry*. However, whereas the products of engineering might interrupt mental work in their use, the encounter with poetry demands a similar cognitive activity that went into its making, and thus renovates the imagination of the reader, in addition to refreshing dead forms of language. Shelley’s poem, then, arguably asserts that engineers and poets share in a creative or “poetic” moment, even as their respective products might generate disparate effects. And yet, as confident as Shelley is in poetry’s power to reform the mind, this poem also exposes an acute anxiety, exhibited elsewhere in his work, about the use and abuse of poetry. This concern is manifested most clearly in the ghastly figure of Rousseau in *The Triumph of Life*, who confesses to having “spread the seeds of misery” among his countrymen by the circulation of his words. While Shelley might playfully assume the roles of plotting poet-wizard or sublime engineer, he cannot entirely escape being haunted by the potential social and political implications of poetic genius.

As I’ve said, Shelley’s interest in steam navigation stems from the capacity of steam technology to counter natural forces like wind and waterpower, forces that represent the human passions in Romantic poetry. In Shelley’s poetic iconography, these natural forces stimulate sublime experience because, in their extreme forms, they pose a potential threat: they can inspire, but they also promote a dangerous enthusiasm. Only a very thin line separates inspiration and frenzy in Shelley’s works. If transport served Shelley as a metaphor for nature’s power to inspire
(“move”) the poet’s feelings, merely passive forms of transport fail to completely account for his responsiveness to these powers. In much the same way J.M.W. Turner’s paintings of steam transport would represent decades later, Shelley’s excitement about steam power has to do with an extension of man’s powers to challenge nature by his own ingenuity. For Shelley, the engine’s conversion of natural energy serves metaphor for the exercise of the strong imagination, which sublimates potentially dangerous excesses of feeling (enthusiasm) into art. The steamboat thus becomes a modern emblem for the imagination’s ability to transmute natural power into artistic forms that lead to social transformation. Just as steam was celebrated for its “plasticity,” its capacity to be shaped to perform the work of moving mechanical parts, like the wheels of a mill, Shelley understood poetry as convertible and transmissible energy in the form of language, especially within the framework of the sublime.

Shelley’s steamboat makes a surprising appearance in The Witch of Atlas, a companion piece for the Letter to Maria Gisborne. The poems not only share composition dates (the summer of 1820), but also parallel investments in the engineering transport. By turning to this poem, I

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69 David Nye discusses the role of technology in contributing to the discourse of sublimity: “The attribution of sublimity to human creations radically modified the psychological process that the sublime involved. Whereas in a sublime encounter with nature human reason intervenes and triumphs when the imagination finds herself overwhelmed, in the technological sublime reason had a new meaning. Because human beings had created the awe-inspiring steamboats, railroads, bridges, and dams, the sublime object itself was a manifestation of reason. Because of the overwhelming power displayed was human rather than natural, the ‘dialogue’ was now not between man and nature but between man and man-made. The awe induced by seeing an immense or dynamic technological object became a celebration of the power of human reason, and this awe granted special privilege to engineers and inventors. The sense of weakness and humiliation before the superior power of nature was thus redirected, because the power displayed was not that of God or nature but that of particular human beings.” American Technological Sublime (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 1996), p. 60.

70 This process of energy conversion resembles the productive and willful activity of the “esemplastic” imagination defined by writers like Coleridge. Obviously, my claim raises the issue of organic vs. mechanical accounts of creativity explored by both Coleridge and Shelley. The steamboat is, after all, a “mechanical” metaphor. However, it is one thing to identify the distinction as useful in constructing a theory of poetic making or genius, and another to restrict the poet’s metaphors to merely organic ones because one believes they more accurately picture the creative process. It seems quite feasible that one might reconcile mechanical or technological metaphors within an organic theory of poetry if the occasion for the poem calls for the subject.
will demonstrate how steam locomotion informs the central plot of *The Witch* and its heroine’s sprightly “living” boat. If as many scholars have argued, the Witch is Shelley’s most ideal representative of the imagination at work, her invention of a vehicle that functions like a steamboat by moving against natural forces deserves some attention. Largely a playground of figuration, *The Witch of Atlas* is a plot that hasn’t, as Mary Shelley put it, any “human interest.” This lack of human interest removes the enginery we’ve been examining the epistle to Gisborne from its ethical universe and places it in a purely aesthetic realm, which reveals something about Shelley’s understanding about the function of poetry as a moral agent without a strictly didactic aim. Unlike *Queen Mab* or *The Revolt of Islam* (or even Wordsworth’s equestrian poems), transport in *The Witch* does not have a direct political or moral design on its reader. That is, while it incorporates technological elements, it does not have technological or rhetorical aim other than to exercise the imagination.

Many critics support Harold Bloom’s claim that Shelley’s Witch is his purest mythopoeic creation and performs the role of fanciful poet-proxy. But, as I’ll show, she might also be an engineer. Many scholars have commented on the symbolism of the Witch’s cave, but Jerrold Hogle is most accurate in his claim that it functions as a space of metaphor making. Within her cave, Shelley’s Witch transmutes the elements that surround her for whatever purpose she desires: “And her own thoughts were each a minister,/Clothing themselves or with the Ocean foam,/Or with the wind, or with the speed of fire,/To work whatever purposes might come/Into her mind…” (ll. 210-215). This account might very well be a description of Shelley’s own method; she finds a vehicle for every thought that springs from her mind. Although the Witch wields tremendous powers within her fantastic home, she requires a means of escape to establish

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contact with the society of men. We learn that the Witch comes into possession of a wondrous gift, a living boat. Shelley provides two creation myths for her boat, a fact that has baffled many critics. In my mind, the presence of twin origin stories speaks to the way in which distinct myths surrounding a particular figure accrue over time, a phenomenon that ties directly to Shelley’s own rewriting of Greek mythologies, in addition to his accounting for the poetic history of the engine metaphor in the Letter to Maria Gisborne. We also learn that the boat is discarded material of an older order, and has undergone various transformations: it is too “feeble” to chariot Venus’ star, so Apollo purchases it as a gift for the Witch (his daughter), but not before the sun god sends it to the shop for a lighter and swifter design. The second history is devoted to an organic origin story in which Love forms the vehicle from a seed that ripens into a fruit whose rind is fashioned into a canoe. Shelley’s taking up of the discarded boat to position it within his own original mythopoeic plot reads as a narrative about the renovation of myths and metaphors, and, as I’ll show, the steamboat plays a part here.

Like a living, feeling being, the boat energizes itself in the Witch’s fountain:

Couched on the fountain like a panther tame,
One of the twain at Evan's feet that sit—
Or as on Vesta's sceptre a swift flame—
Or on blind Homer's heart a winged thought,—
In joyous expectation lay the boat.” (ll. 315-320).

The series of similes links the renovated boat to Homer’s “winged thought” (a common figure in Shelley’s verse), and also illustrates Shelley’s custom of recycling metaphors (winged thoughts) to describe other recycled metaphors (the discarded boat). This proliferation of similes places the vehicle in a larger poetic network. It becomes apparent that the boat is undergoing a process of

73 In the Defense, Shelley refers to the long history of poetry as one vast poem that is constantly expanding, which means that its metaphors are also always in flux.

kinetic charge while moored near the fountain. The comparison of the boat to a “couched”
panther implies that it is an object of powerful potential energy, an observation corroborated by
the line, “in joyous expectation lay the boat.” Attributing joy to the boat figures emotion or affect
in the terms of potential and kinetic energy. The boat not only facilitates physical transport, but
transports of emotion during the Witch’s flight. Like Blake’s Tyger or Rilke’s Panther, Shelley’s
boat is a suspended coil of energy, ready to sport along the streams of the Witch’s cave.

Before the Witch mounts the wondrous boat, she fashions a monstrous companion that
will help her in navigate the vehicle. This scene of creation involves the fusion of unlike
elements that echoes the “harmonious disarray” if mechanical parts in Letter to Maria Gisborne:

> Then by strange art she kneaded fire and snow
> Together, tempering the repugnant mass
> With liquid love -- all things together grow
> Through which the harmony of love can pass;
> And a fair Shape out of her hands did flow --
> A living Image, which did far surpass
> In beauty that bright shape of vital stone
> Which drew the heart out of Pygmalion. (ll. 314-328)

I read the Witch’s “strange art” as an allegory of metaphor making, a power that Shelley
describes as the fusion of disparate or “repugnant” elements. The Witch “kneads” together “fire
and snow” and tempers the “repugnant mass/With liquid love.” Shelley is obsessed with the idea
of love not only as a connective social force, but also as an animating, vital power. Love
congeals; it brings together opposite elements, and attracts the countless mythical beings that
worship the Witch on her throne. Shelley is toying with the idea of the two sexes as distinct
chemical elements brought together by a vital fluid that her calls “love.” He also invites an
allusion to the Aristophanes myth in Plato’s Symposium. For Aristophanes, the split
hermaphrodites attempt to return to their supreme, unified state by reconnecting with one another
through love. But Aristophanes also remarks on the peculiar mobility of these androgynous creatures, which “tumbled” along in a circular motion. This detail informs the specialized movement Shelley assigns to Hermaphroditus when the Witch awakens the creature during flight.

Shelley characterizes the companion as a “Shape” or “Image,” underscoring the pure artifice of his being. Critics unanimously read this moment as an allegory of aesthetic production. Indeed, the Witch’s creative process of hermetically binding two disparate elements by the harmonious power of love certainly reads like poiesis, but, even more specifically, it stands as Shelley’s own allegory for metaphor making. Recalling Shelley’s work of “harmonizing” the miscellaneous “disarray” of mechanical parts and poetic allusions in Reveley’s engineering studio, the Witch’s crafting of the monstrous Hermaphroditus insists on the unity of distinct parts held together by natural energy. Hermaphroditus is not an independent being with its own soul, but a creation that must obey its mistress. It is no organic product, but a beautiful and wondrous machine. The Witch, then, behaves like Shelley’s own Archimago, applying her powers to engineer an artificial being in order to carry out some determined scheme. Where they might differ is in their moral purpose: whereas Archimago endeavors to divide Redcross from Truth, Shelley’s Witch is only clowning around, and Hermaphroditus is a playmate.

The creature’s utilitarian purpose is remarkable; it provides the Witch with a specialized mobility. As Denise Gigante has noted, there is a strong connection between Reveley’s

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76 According to Aristophanes, the ambition and strength of these creatures posed a threat to the gods, who divided the hermaphroditic race of men as a punishment for their threat to the order of things. In the context of the myth, the Witch’s fashioning of such a being can be read as the hubris or overreaching of the imagination, especially because the creature is at odds with nature itself.
steamboat and the Witch’s living boat. For Gigante, they are linked creations, but fundamentally opposed: while the steamboat is an undeniable symbol for “modern mechanism,” the Witch’s boat embodies an organic and self-impelling force.\textsuperscript{77} While I agree with Gigante that the two vehicles are constitutionally distinct, I would suggest that their operations, particularly with the help of Hermaphroditus, are similar enough to invite a second thought. We learn that the Witch navigates the organic boat along the streams \textit{within} her cave with great ease and facility, and does so without the aid of her monstrous companion. As she sails, Hermaphroditus remains dormant in the boat, quietly dreaming. However, when the Witch wishes to \textit{leave} her cave, she rouses her mate:

\begin{quote}
And when the wizard lady would ascend
The labyrinths of some many-winding vale,
Which to the inmost mountain upward tend --
She called "Hermaphroditus!" -- and the pale
And heavy hue which slumber could extend
Over its lips and eyes, as on the gale
A rapid shadow from a slope of grass,
Into the darkness of the stream did pass.

And it unfurled its heaven-coloured pinions,
With stars of fire spotting the stream below;
And from above into the Sun's dominions
Flinging a glory, like the golden glow
In which Spring clothes her emerald-wingèd minions,
All interwoven with fine feathery snow
And moonlight splendour of intensest rime,
With which frost paints the pines in winter time.

And then it winnowed the Elysian air
Which ever hung about that lady bright,
With its aetherial vans -- and speeding there,
Like a star up the torrent of the night,
Or a swift eagle in the morning glare
Breasting the whirlwind with impetuous flight,
The pinnace, oared by those enchanted wings,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{77} “A winged thought waiting to take off down streams that seem to flow from the Witch’s mind, the boat provides a contrast to the ‘unintelligible brass’ and ‘horrid mass’/of tin and iron’ that clutter the floor of Henry Reveley’s studio-shrine to modern mechanism.” \textit{Life}, p. 185.
Clove the fierce streams towards their upper springs. (ll. 385-408)

This passage is one of the most brilliant in the entire poem, and the single moment in which our attention is removed from the Witch herself. The beauty of Hermaphroditus lies in the swift and graceful movement of Shelley’s mutable imagery. Much of his energy is devoted to a lengthy description the creature’s lively and lustrous “vans,” a term that, while signifying wings, also suggests the forefront or vanguard. Shelley’s attention to the marvelous pinions has everything to do with their capacity to facilitate a novel, indeed modern mobility. But, like many other vehicles in Shelley’s work, the wings are composites of numerous metaphors bursting out of each other or branched like an intricately linked network; the pinions are “heaven-coloured,” with spots of brilliant stars and a glow like the Sun, details that recall Shelley’s self-characterization as a mind that heats up and requires that the rising images be speedily skimmed off. Shelley’s elaborate excursus on the majestic wings, whose motion becomes most perceptible through this rapid series of metaphors, recalls I.A. Richards’ suggestion that metaphoric vehicles sometimes risk overwhelming their tenors. Rather than merely tell us that the Witch sped out of her cave into the world, Shelley captivates his reader in order to move him or her using precisely the figurative power the Witch represents.

There is a wild quality in the creature’s flight, but it is ultimately governed by the Witch’s directive. Her command for Hermaphroditus to “Sit here!” (the prow of the boat) is the only trace of spoken language in the entire poem. Her isolated linguistic directives undoubtedly facilitate a very specialized mobilization. That is, the Witch only awakens her androgynous pilot when she has grown tired of navigating the cave’s waterways along the current. Hermaphroditus enables the boat to “cleave” the “fierce streams to their upper streams.” Of course, the only
technology available to perform such a feat in the 1820s is the steamboat. Because upstream movement is an unnatural progress, it is fitting that Hermaphroditus is the creature that enables it. The Witch is capable of moving contra nature by employing the unnatural mechanism Hermaphroditus represents. In other words, in fusing together opposing elements in the shaping her androgynous companion, the Witch produces an artificial being whose very existence is contra nature and whose function reflects that existence. While the Witch’s “living Image” is overtly a mere clownish travel companion for the Witch, it behaves as a kind of modern engine affixed to the Witch’s boat, enabling it to move against natural currents and inclinations. While travel to the source of rivers has long been mocked as a signature Shelleyan (and, indeed, Romantic) fantasy, the technology of the steamboat enabled such upstream movement, a historical fact that substantially grounds Shelley’s oft-critiqued “flights.”

By transporting the Witch out into the world, the creature serves as an engine in more ways than one, driving forward not only the plot of the poem, but its figurative activity. Using her modernized machine of flight, the Witch traverses psychological landscapes; she moves from the shady recesses of her mythopoeic cave and out into a human geography, recalling George Puttenham’s “transporting” of the image from the mind outward. If, as Gigante has noted, the Witch’s cave represents Shelley’s “transcendental center of consciousness,” the motorized boat helps facilitate escape and provides the very means by which Shelley’s poetical product achieves circulation in the world. Unlike other scenes of transit examined thus far, the trajectory of transport in The Witch of Atlas proceeds from a visionary to a human world. The circulation and distribution of the Witch’s powers among men of depends on the mobility promised by new

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Wordsworth would characterize the steamboat in a similar way in his poem, “To Enterprise,” oddly enough, a poem written in the same year as the “Letter to Maria Gisborne” and “The Witch of Atlas”: “Or, adverse tides and currents headed,/ And breathless calms no longer dreaded,/ In never-sackening voyage go/ Straight as an arrow from the bow;/ And, slighting sails and scorning oars,/ Keep faith with Time on distant shores?”
metaphors. Although I wouldn’t necessarily label Witch’s pinnace prior to the appearance of Hermaphroditus a “dead metaphor,” particularly given its very own vital power source, I would propose that its status as a discarded mythological product gifted by Apollo as kind of godly hand-me-down, allows one to read the Witch’s renovation of the boat (through the creative application of her companion-motor) as an allegory for refreshed metaphor and a uniquely Shelleyan artifact of poetry and modernity.

**Conclusion: Shelley’s Technological Sublime**

The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy, which can be extracted and stored as such…The revealing that rules throughout modern technology has the character of a setting-upon, in the sense of a challenging-forth. Such challenging happens in that the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, and what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is in turn distributed, and what is distributed is switched about ever anew.

-Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology”

The counter-current movement I identified in *The Witch of Atlas* represents a similar dynamic movement to Shelley’s sense of the imagination in the encounter with the sublime object, as in the “trance sublime” he experiences in *Mont Blanc*:

And when I gaze on thee
I seem as in a trance sublime and strange
To muse on my own separate fantasy,
My own, my human mind, which passively
Now renders and receives fast influencings,
Holding an unremitting interchange
With the clear universe of things (ll. 115)

The phrase that accounts for the movement I’m describing is the poet’s “unremitting interchange” with the natural universe, which involves the imagination’s fluctuating passive and

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active movements. As a sublime object, Mont Blanc throws the poetic mind back on itself, an ecstatic moment that stimulates a reflection about how the mind both “receives” and “renders” the world to itself. Shelley’s mind is thus moved by the world it draws in, but also by its own powerful capacity to shape the world anew with its own internal pressures. This pressure is the figuration that constitutes poetic will, which is the shaping force of the verse. The process reflected in the passage is the conversion of energy and the exertion of the will in the face of natural power, a process that steam navigation also made possible for modern locomotion. Thus, read in the context of the science of steam power, the sublime experience Shelley describes in Mont Blanc bears new meaning.

In his essay, “The Question Concerning Technology,” Martin Heidegger argues that poiesis and technology share an ancient history in techne, or poetic making. Over time, both art and technology became something different. Art became something that one contemplated aesthetically, and removed from the realm of use. Technology was also removed from the realm of use, but not in the same way. Instead of a means to an end, technology became a way to organize, calculate, and “enframe” nature. While art reveals nature by “bringing forth,” according to Heidegger, technology “enframes” nature by “challenging-forth.” It represents man’s will to master nature. The danger, however, is that technology’s process of enframing

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80 “The Question Concerning Technology.” pp. 311-341.
81 In his analysis of Heidegger’s philosophy, Webster Foot clarifies this point: “Technology also encompasses nature in the form of energy. Nature is not only ‘around’ man as material, but also ‘before’ him as energy. Nature offers direction for the execution of tasks; it suggests to man how he might make better use of his environment. The direction that nature offers man is not particular but variable…the employment of technics renders the energies of nature accessible by bringing such energies into contextual-totalities where they can be used.” See Foot’s essay, “The Aristotelian Versus the Heideggerian Approach to the Problem of Technology” in Philosophy and Technology: Readings in the philosophical problems of technology, ed. with an introduction by Carl Mitcham and Robert Mackey (London: Free Press, Collier-Macmillian Limited, 1983), p. 358.
forecloses all other possibilities of revealing nature because it is totalizing in its process and
stymies all other possibilities:

    Above all, enframing conceals that which, in the sense of poiesis, lets what presences
come forth into appearance. As compared with that other revealing, the setting upon that
challenges forth thrusts man into a relation to whatever is that is at once antithetical and
rigorously ordered. Thus, the challenging-enframing not only conceals a former way of
revealing (bringing-forth) but also conceals revealing itself and with it that wherein
unconcealment, i.e. truth, propriates.  

For Heidegger, the real danger of technology is not that it is demonic or destructive, but that it
prevents an encounter with nature that will reveal truth. Man is misled by fantasies of mastery
over nature, which, paradoxically, draw him nearer to it in his shaping of it, but also draws him
away because he comes to think himself as distinct from it.

    In a surprising turn, however, Heidegger offers a way out of our precarious relationship
with technology that depends on art itself:

    Because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon
technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one
hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it.
Such a realm is art. But certainly only if reflection upon art, for its part, does not shut its
eyes to the constellation of truth, concerning that which we are questioning.  

Heidegger suggests that we must contemplate our relationship to technology through art because
it is the nature of art to reveal. In this chapter, I have been thinking about the poetics of the
sublime as a kind of technology in the sense that Romantic poets like Shelley used the language

83 ibid, p 341.
of aesthetics and rhetoric for political aims, and later questioned that use. I have also attempted to place Shelley’s figure of transport within this long history of rhetoric, and steam locomotion in particular because a philosophy of modern transport coincides historically with Romantic poetics and its engagement with the sublime.

A comparison between poetry and technology presumes that poetry is a means to an end, and if poetry is to be political it must function as such. Shelley’s poetic engagement with steam technology framed these questions for us. By representing steam locomotion in a poem that has “no human interest” or moral aim, however, Shelley’s art frames technology in a way that reveals its power and its limitations. In the Witch of Atlas, Shelley cultivates the imagination without placing on it the demands of a moral curriculum. If the Witch of Atlas is a response to Wordsworth’s Peter Bell, the aesthetic play of the Witch’s joy ride offers a critique of the moral instruction imparted by Peter’s horse. In Shelley’s late poems, he becomes increasingly wary of representing scenes of revolution because of his distaste for didactic literature. By embedding technological metaphors within a purely aesthetic frame, Shelley urges the reformation of the mind in a more abstract or disinterested space. Such activity would influence human action in the political arena in an indirect way. Thus, the rhetorical quality of his early poetry, as a means of influencing the reader’s politics, later gives way to rhetorical play with abstract forms.

A question remains about the political implications of Reveley’s steamboat enterprise. It is no doubt surprising that Shelley invested in a commercial tourist line with Reveley given his well-known elitism about the “vulgar great” who flocked to places like the Alps for aesthetic consumption. But, as Cian Duffy has shown, Shelley’s objection to this kind of tourism had everything to do with class. Shelley believed that only the “wise, and great and good” who
possessed a “cultivated imagination” could correctly “interpret, or make felt or deeply feel” the radical political potential of sublime nature.\textsuperscript{84} For Duffy,

\begin{quote}
…the ‘Shelleyan’ sublime can therefore be (re)defined as…an aesthetic ideology: as a discourse concerned not only to regulate and politicize the affective response to the natural sublime, but also to emphasize the historical and political implications of the landscape.\textsuperscript{85}
\end{quote}

The cultivated imagination required a response to the natural sublime that resisted a sentiment of religious enthusiasm that drove the kind of tourism to the Alps that Shelley derided. This superstitious reaction to sublime scenery like Mont Blanc is founded on a revelation of God in nature’s works, and this is a response Shelley attributed to the “vulgar great,” or the wealthy tourists who invaded the Alps. Wealth did not necessarily coincide with Shelley’s cultivated imagination, especially when it fueled a consumerism that promoted this very commercial enthusiasm. Instead, Shelley developed a sense of the natural sublime that discloses political and social truths through natural processes of decay and change, action and reaction, processes that heralded political reform. This is the sublime Shelley hoped travelers would recognize.

Innovations in modern transport, like the steamboat, drastically transformed the class politics of travel by opening access to what was traditionally known as the Grand Tour to a larger fraction of the population than ever before. In his promotion of Reveley’s tourist line off the coast of the Mediterranean, then, it is likely that Shelley wished to expose men and women of all classes to nature’s grandeur. Thus, Shelley’s steamboat is symbolic of a democratic politics of aesthetics, not only by its offering up a modern figure for the imagination exercising its freedom of will, but also by providing expanded access to natural sublimity. What is surprising is that

\textsuperscript{84} For an excellent discussion of Shelley’s unique sense of the imagination and the sublime, see Duffy’s \textit{Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime}, pp. 113-119.

\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime}, p. 9.
Shelley shared some of Wordsworth’s sentiments regarding mass tourism, especially with respect to frenzy of aesthetic consumerism that was only then becoming an industry. However, Shelley’s concern was distinct from the elder poet’s. If Wordsworth sought to prevent mass tourism to protect the beauty of the Lakes and keep out the uncultured masses, Shelley’s aesthetic vision was to open access to the natural sublime to more men and women who would discern in the landscape metaphors for social change. He invested in the democratizing potential that modern transport and tourism had for distributing aesthetic experience to a class that should be awakened to the truths that lie within the natural sublime. Cultivating the imagination, however, would not be so easy as merely exposing all classes to sublime scenes. It would also require recognizing that because the natural sublime does not reflect society’s “large codes of fraud and woe,” it should function as a reason and a catalyst for social reform.
3. Nostalgia and Trauma in De Quincey’s *The English Mail-Coach*

The mail-coach period still has a firm, and possibly increasing hold on the public mind, but the officials and others who actually took part in the work of that stirring time—whether on the highroads or within the walls of the post-offices—are rapidly passing away.

-F.E. Baines (1895)¹

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.

-Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*²

Of the available modes of transport in the Romantic period, none is more freighted with feeling than the King’s Royal Mail-Coach. For the essayist Leigh Hunt, the vehicle bears the load of human feeling that its social use generates and circulates:

How many friends hast thou carried to merry meetings! How many young parties to the play! How many children whose faces thou hast turned in an instant from the extremity of lachrymose weariness to that of staring delight! Thou hast contained as many different passions in thee as a human heart; and for the sake of the human heart, old body, thou art venerable.³

Figuring the coach as a human heart, Hunt’s sentimental address pulses with nationalism and premature nostalgia. As a reliable steward and vehicle for the heart’s sentiments, the august “old

¹ See the preface to *On the Track of the Mail-Coach, Being a Volume of Reminiscences Personal and Otherwise* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1895).
body” seems, in 1820, before the triumph of railways, already at risk of passing into history. William Hazlitt similarly praises the coach for its capacity to gather and distribute public and private feeling in his 1830 essay “The Letter Bell”:

I never see a Mail-Coach…but I look at it as the bearer of glad tidings—the messenger of fate. I have reason to say so. The finest sight in the metropolis is that of the mail-coaches setting off from Piccadilly. The horses paw the ground, and are impatient to be gone, as if conscious of the precious burden they convey. There is a peculiar secrecy and dispatch, significant and full of meaning, in all the proceedings concerning them.⁴

For Hazlitt, the mail-coach functions as a universal signifier with the capacity to encode and convey news, sentiments and, of course, correspondence. Perhaps with Wordsworth in mind, Hazlitt’s mail-coach horses assume human knowledge and feeling, expressing the impatience of their message in their uncontainable animal sensibility.⁵

Championed as a triumph of the age, John Palmer’s innovative mail-coach service operated as a joint transportation system and postal carrier, setting the delivery of the mail to a strict timetable and arming the coach with a guard for security against highwaymen.⁶

Transporting persons and letters with increasing celerity and reliability, the mail-coach facilitated an unprecedented network of social communication. As is clear from the common pulse of

⁵ I refer to the thinking horse in Wordsworth’s “The Idiot Boy,” as well as the rather worried horses in “Benjamin the Waggoner,” animals that sense the potential dangers that might arise from Benjamin’s drunk driving.
⁶ Palmer revolutionized a highly unorganized and inefficient postal system by producing a group of royally endorsed mail-coaches that would travel at unprecedented speeds, remain protected by guards, deliver correspondences and news across the country, and follow a strict timeline. These coaches could pass through turnpikes without payment and could not be stopped for any reason upon penalty of interfering with the Royal Postal System. Postage prices were also standardized under Palmer’s management. R.C. and J.M. Anderson, *Quicksilver: A Hundred Years of Coaching, 1750-1850* (Newton Abbot [Eng.]: David & Charles, 1973), pp. 95-115.
contemporary accounts, like those by Hunt and Hazlitt, the mail-coach was culturally coded as a vehicle for affective transmission. It is remarkable, then, that the lifespan of the mail-coach system—between 1784 and the 1840s—coincides with those decades we have come to know as the Romantic period, a fact that embeds the mail-coach within a literary culture similarly invested in understanding the nature of the emotions and their impact on private, public and political life.\(^7\)

![Figure 1. The Mail-Coach in a Thunderstorm (1827)
Engraving by R.G. Reeve](image)

The most well-known and well-cited cultural reflection on the mail-coach is Thomas De Quincey’s essay, *The English Mail-Coach*,\(^8\) which appeared in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in two

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\(^7\) By the 1840s, major mail-coach routes had been discontinued and replaced by “Travelling Post Office” compartments on railways, where mail was sorted out while in transit. Only local mail-coach routes persisted for another decade or so after this point. Frederick Wilkinson, *Royal Mail-Coaches: An Illustrated History* (Stroud: Tempus, 2007), pp. 234-244.

\(^8\) *Thomas De Quincey: Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, ed. by Barry Milligan (New York: Penguin, 2003). As Mulligan notes, De Quincey published the three parts of the essay in installments, the first (“The Glory of Motion) in October 1849, and the final two (“The Vision of Sudden Death” and “Dream-Fugue”) in December of that year. pp. 293.
installments in October and December of 1849. De Quincey participates in the pervasive sentiment of the age, lauding the mail-coach system as a marvelous infrastructure that circulated personal and national feelings. At that time, the coach functioned as England’s primary source of news about the outcomes of pivotal national victories and losses during the Napoleonic Wars. Of the writings devoted to the mail-coach, De Quincey’s essay is exceptional because of the time of its publication, which coincides with the supplanting of the mail-coach by the railway. That is, the occasion for his essay is the rendering of the mail-coach into a historical sphere by the advent of a new technology of transport. Because of its lateness, De Quincey’s essay benefits from a considerable vantage point in that it gathers an exhaustive account of political, cultural, and affective significations tied to the coach. Thus, the essay fosters a strong sense of historicity by embedding personal reminiscence within a national history. Indeed, De Quincey’s essay remained a reliable first-hand reference for historians of the “golden age of coaching” in the Victorian period and beyond.

Beginning primarily as a nostalgic project, the essay recoups popular sentiments generated by the vehicle after its obsolescence—its speed, the exhilaration it aroused, its bearing of “glad” tidings, its nationalizing aesthetic. However, it also occasions the eruption of powerful feelings associated with a nearly fatal accident De Quincey experienced on the coach decades prior to the essay’s composition. He recounts the accident in painstaking detail in “The Vision of Sudden Death,” the second installment of the essay. We learn that the accident results in decades

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9 Subsequent histories of the post often cited De Quincey as a historical source, despite the experimental and highly stylized nature of his essay. The historicity of the essay, we might say, transcends its poetic quality. Nineteenth century historians lent credence to De Quincey’s grasp of the structures of feeling of the mail-coach experience, despite some objections that the essay tends to exaggeration.

10 The publication of the essay gives it an uncanny history in that it is produced at the very moment in which the mail-coach enters history. In this sense, the timing of the essay’s appearance and the timing in the essay’s narrative are both critical to understanding the extent to which the essay capitalizes on the relationship between affect, time, and history.
of nightmares that take shape in the form of a prose poem in the final section of the essay, “Dream Fugue,” published together with “The Vision of Sudden Death.” What has evaded critics interested in this text, and what I aim to expand upon in this chapter, is the way in which nostalgia gives way to trauma over the course of the essay. This is a significant coupling of emotions if for no other reason than that they have an opposed relationship to the history. While nostalgia represents a longing for the geography of the past, trauma manifests as its unwilled return. In other words, these affective experiences are both concerned with historical objects, but they characterize fundamentally distinct responses to the object. That is, nostalgia aims to recuperate historical consciousness and trauma suffers its eruption after initially rejecting the past event. It is perplexing, then, that the mail-coach becomes an object that hosts both of these seemingly incompatible feelings for De Quincey, and even more so that he replicates them in the reader’s encounter with his essay. As we’ll see, however, both present fascinating opportunities for narrative.

This chapter investigates the dual presence of these ostensibly irreconcilable feelings in *The English Mail-Coach* in order to elucidate what I perceive to be the essay’s vexed relation to history and historiography, and the assertions it makes about the role of emotion in structuring and preserving cultural memory. De Quincey’s essay is highly self-conscious about its historical moment and its position at the dawn of technological modernity. It exploits this uncanny moment in order to cultivate an affective response to the loss of the mail-coach that accounts for the speed of modernization. By producing both nostalgic and traumatic feelings, the essay accurately registers a historical consciousness drawn simultaneously into the past and future. The rhetorical trajectory of De Quincey’s essay dramatizes the difficulty a historical subject faces when

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11 I would underscore here that the idea of trauma as we now know it is only beginning to emerge around the time De Quincey’s essay is published. Part of the work of this chapter will be to identify De Quincey as an early theorist of trauma.
psychologically assimilating rapid cultural and technological change. The textual vertigo produced by the style, structure and subject of De Quincey’s essay thus exposes the Romantic subject’s experience of nostalgia and modernization as historical “counter forces,” a concept articulated by De Quincey himself:12

Already, in this year 1845, what by the procession through fifty years of mighty revolutions amongst the kingdoms of the earth, what by the continual development of vast physical agencies,—steam in all its applications, light getting under harness as a slave for man, powers from heaven descending upon education and accelerations of the press, powers from hell (as it might seem, but these also celestial) coming round upon artillery and the forces of destruction,—the eye of the calmest observer is troubled; the brain is haunted as if by some jealousy of ghostly beings moving amongst us; and it becomes too evident that, unless this colossal pace of advance can be retarded (a thing not to be expected), or, which is happily more probable, can be met by counter forces of corresponding magnitude, forces in the direction of religion or profound philosophy, that shall radiate centrifugally against this storm of life so perilously centripetal towards the vortex of the merely human, left to itself, the natural tendency of so chaotic a tumult must be to evil; for some minds to lunacy, for others to a regency of fleshly torpor.13

12 Kevis Goodman has recently identified nostalgia as a form of “motion sickness,” situating the disease in 18th century transatlantic medicine. Her research considers the term’s circulation in medical treatises that diagnose the condition as a physiological disease occasioned by transatlantic travel to the Americas, producing symptoms similar to modern depression, fever and scurvy. It is during the Romantic period that nostalgia becomes co-opted by aesthetics as an expression of longing for spatialized temporalities. See “Romantic Poetry and the Science of Nostalgia” in The Cambridge Companion to Romantic Poetry, ed. By James Chandler and Maureen McLane (New York: Cambridge, 2008). This chapter will pick up on Goodman’s sense of nostalgia as tied to experiences of displacement. As I’ll show, De Quincey’s metaphors for nostalgia and modernity are similarly tied physical forces like speed, energy, and lag.

13 See “Introduction” to Suspiria de Profundis in Thomas De Quincey: Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings, pp. 89-90.
Most striking in the rhetoric of this passage is the way De Quincey figures modernization as a physical force whose gravitational pull seems impossible to resist. Insisting that “counter forces” must be cultivated to respond to the “colossal pace” of modernity, he suggests that exercises in human meditation (philosophy, religion, etc.) stage resistance the titanic tug of modernization. For De Quincey, man’s powers of thought and language will require vigorous redoubling to survive the modern age.

*The English Mail-Coach* stages this very posture of counteracting modernity. That is, the essay cultivates its style to foster nostalgia as a “centrifugal” counterforce to modernization. By transforming structures of feeling unique to mail-coach culture into rhetorical and narrative devices, De Quincey transports his reader to an earlier epoch.¹⁴ His direct address to the reader during the essay serves as an invitation onto the coach as we move through the essay’s several parts. Each of these elements is summoned, in the first half of the work, to generate feelings of longing for the lost vehicle. By the time De Quincey recounts the details of his accident, however, the same rhetorical structures used to place the reader on the coach will keep him bound to the runaway vehicle. In other words, De Quincey utilizes style not only to produce communal nostalgic feeling about the mail-coach, but also to share his experience of trauma with the reader. As I’ll demonstrate, *The English Mail-Coach* suggests that the nostalgic recuperation of the past might make one vulnerable to certain perils of remembering. In approaching these questions about the relationship between emotion and history, I consider De Quincey’s motivation behind the composition of the essay, its consummate status within his theory of rhetoric, and its inclusion within his extensive corpus of experimental prose.

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¹⁴ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 133. Williams argues that “structures of feeling” are historical material contained within and unique to literary and artistic production because these works graph lived experience of the age, which usually escapes traditional methods of historiography.
“Impassioned Prose” and the “Motions” of Language

The energy of The English Mail-Coach relies on De Quincey’s signature prose style, one designed to communicate “power” to the reader. This idea of transmissible “power” is a strategy that forms a major part of his theory of rhetoric. If we understand the role of the mail-coach as the principal distributor of personal and national feeling, it becomes clear that De Quincey harnesses this potential to further his understanding of the relationship between language and emotion. De Quincey considered The English Mail-Coach to form part of his Suspiria de Profundis, a captivating collection of fastidiously crafted prose exercises that depict extreme mind states such as dream and intoxication. As a journalist working over many decades, De Quincey amassed an extraordinary body of writing on an admirably wide range of topics. However, the Suspiria in particular represents a series of experiments in what De Quincey called “impassioned prose,” a precisely controlled rhetoric designed to reproduce particular sensations and emotions in his reader. These writings, he argues in the introduction to the Suspiria, are the products of sustained meditation on subjective experiences like dream, precisely the kinds of human experiences he envisions being daily threatened by modernity.\footnote{“How much this fierce condition of eternal hurry upon an arena too exclusively human in its interests, is likely to defeat the grandeur which is latent in all men, may be seen in the ordinary effect of living too constantly in company…Among the powers in man which suffer by this too immense life of social instincts, none suffers more than the power of dreaming. “Introduction” to Suspiria de Profundis, pp. 90.}

The mail-coach essay is exemplary within the category of impassioned prose because its subject occasions such a diligent reflection on language. That is, the mail-coach represents the circulation of language in the world, and as such it provides a unique opportunity for De Quincey to explore his own ideas regarding the capacity of style to convey thought and feeling. For him,
the success of style measured by its “power,” and only that which we can legitimately call “literature” communicates power:

All that is literature seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature, to communicate knowledge. Now, if it be asked what is meant by communicating power, I in my turn would ask by what name a man would designate the case in which I should be made to feel vividly, and with a vital consciousness, emotions which ordinary life rarely or never supplies occasions for exciting, and which had previously lain unawakened, and hardly within the dawn of consciousness—as myriads of modes of feeling are at this moment in every human mind for want of a poet to organize them?—I say, when these inert and sleeping forms are organized—when these possibilities are actualized—is this conscious and living possession of mine power or what is it?¹⁶

Writers whose language communicates power are those who can reproduce strong sensations and emotions in his reader, and do so by sheer force and organization of style. These feelings may only be potential, lying “unawakened” within the reader until the appropriate literary encounter. De Quincey’s theory of power follows in the long tradition of Longinus, whose treatise On the Sublime played such a major role in articulating the aesthetic category in the 18th century. Longinus’ essay is preoccupied with the ability of rhetoric to produce psychological or spiritual “transport” in the reader. In a parallel way, the idea of transmissible “power,” or the ability of language to galvanize latent energies in a reader, is among the central tenets to De Quincey’s rhetorical project.

De Quincey’s theory of “organic style” develops this theme by describing the interplay between what he calls the “motions” of thought and language itself:

Style may be viewed as an organic thing and a mechanic thing. By organic, we mean that which, being acted upon, reacts, and which propagates the communicated power without loss. By mechanic, that which being impressed with motion, cannot throw it back without loss, and therefore comes to an end….Now, the use of words is an organic thing insofar as language is connected with thoughts, modified by thoughts. It is a mechanic thing, in so far as words in combination determine or modify each other.\(^{17}\)

According to De Quincey’s theory, in “mechanic” style, thought is introduced to language merely for the purpose of communicating information. In this case, the power of thought does not attend or structure that information. Thus, thought fails to enter into reactive play with language. It represents its subject without any interference of thought other than that the initial “motion” impressed upon it, where “motion” refers to the power of the author’s ideas. The opposite is true of organic style, which might be understood as a sustained and reciprocal play between thought and language. In organic style, thought is transmitted via language without any diminution in its power and reverberates during the reading experience. In other words, thought becomes embodied in and dynamic with language itself.

For De Quincey, “motion” refers to a force that enters language (with which it may or may not interact organically) and remains to be absorbed by the reader in the literary encounter. In this sense, his theory of style is concerned with the transmissibility of authorial “motions” between writer and reader. This idea of “impressing” “motion” on language plays a significant role in *The English Mail-Coach* because the essay thematizes the coach’s capacity to set language in motion and, in doing so, its capacity to transmit emotion. The power communicated by the mail-coach lies precisely in its function as an envoy of language and feeling, making it an

\(^{17}\) *Essays on Style, Rhetoric and Language*, edited, with an introduction by Fred N. Scott (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1893), p. 37.
ideal subject for impassioned prose. De Quincey also notes that the “literature of power” and “organic style” necessarily approach poetry and its project of organic form. It is no surprise, then, that the climax of the mail-coach essay, “The Dream-Fugue,” is structured as a prose poem that weaves together personal and national imagery associated with mail-coach travel.

The centerpiece of De Quincey’s project in impassioned prose is, of course, his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, a work whose extraordinary success is to be measured not only by its numerous class of copy-cats, but also by those many men and women compelled to experiment with opium to experience the visions described therein. The power of the *Confessions* lies in its persuasiveness and the masterful obfuscation of ethics by style. I would stress, however, that it does not persuade by argument. Instead, the rhetoric of the *Confessions* might be characterized as stylistic evasion through a stimulating, but ultimately distracting aesthetic. The work thus manages to undercut the genre of confession by implicating the reader in the very experience of opium through the consumption of a language itself transformed by the drug. The reader’s encounter with such prose reads as literary and cultural incorporation (or, more precisely, consumption) with adverse side effects. Josephine McDonagh has called this strategy “representation as contagion.” Proceeding from the “pleasures” to the “pains” of opium, De Quincey’s aim in *Opium-Eater* is to enchant the reader in order to entrap him. By losing sight of the morally compromising dimensions of opium-use, he succumbs to its lustrous aesthetic.

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18 De Quincey borrows his idea of “organic style” from Wordsworth, who argued that poetic style is the “incarnation” of thought. De Quincey explains in his essay, “Style,” that “the two elements [thought and language] are not united as a body with a separable dress, but as a mysterious incarnation. And, thus, in what proportion the thoughts are subjective, in that same proportion does the very essence become identical with the expression, and the style become confluent with the matter.” ibid, p. 119.

While *Confessions* is preoccupied with literalizing the metaphor of reading as consumption, *The English Mail-Coach* is primarily concerned with exploiting the metaphor of reading as “transport” a strategy that becomes increasingly forceful as the essay approaches the accident. The prose of the essay is crafted to reproduce sensations available to a mail-coach passenger, sensations that have become, at the time of the essay’s publication, historically unavailable. Despite their subject matter, *Confessions* and *The English Mail-Coach* share a similar structural layout, evoking controlled pleasure first, then inescapable pain and horror. The first installment of the mail-coach essay, “The Glory of Motion,” celebrates the national triumphs of the Royal Mail and its electric social function. Its tone is nostalgic since, as we learn, the postal system has been incorporated into the railway system at the time of the essay’s composition. By the second installment, however, nostalgia evaporates. In “The Vision of Sudden Death” and “Dream Fugue,” De Quincey describes another opium experience that ends in the lucky evasion of death on the road. The drug is consumed one summer night while aboard a speeding mail-coach. The coach driver falls asleep due to heavy drinking and nearly collides with a couple in an oncoming gig. The terror of this rattling experience lies not only in De Quincey’s very real brush with death, but in the guilty feelings attributable to his delayed response to wake the driver due to his own intoxication. The episode thus reads as a scene of drunk driving both on the part of the driver and De Quincey himself, and the disclosure about his participation in the event comes thirty years after the fact, packaged in the form of a stylized essay delineating a personal and national history of the mail-coach. By describing the structure of the essay, I mean to suggest that, just as the progress of feeling in the *Confessions* is from pleasure to pain, in *The English Mail-Coach* we are made to experience nostalgia first, then trauma.
In the *Confessions*, De Quincey set out to “display” the wondrous power of opium, a power that one discovers is as much evasive as it is rhetorical. The aim of *The English Mail-Coach* is similar. Readers are told from the outset that the essay is intended to communicate the glory of the mail-coach, but we later learn that it will also account for how the memory of the coach developed “the anarchies of [his] subsequent dreams,” referring to the impact of the traumatic accident on De Quincey’s later mental life. Once again, the ethical implications of the essay are obscured by its rhetorical brilliance. It becomes evident that the mail-coach is no arbitrary subject matter, but one carefully chosen to further develop his theory of style and its ability to communicate authorial power through the “motions” of language. But, why transport? As I’ve made clear, the mail-coach was culturally coded as a means of circulating language and feelings. The work of the subject, then, organically develops that of the style. This was also true in the *Confessions*, where the power of opium is clearly intended to mask the “confession” by making the reader susceptible to the opium’s dangerous allure. By disseminating his textual opium-effect, De Quincey ostensibly distributes his own confession by diffusing culpability among his readers. Following this logic, just as the mail-coach served as a technology for the distribution of feeling between persons, it will do so between author and reader. For De Quincey, emotions are textual, reproducible, and transmissible.

**Nostalgic Forces: “The Glory of Motion”**

“The Glory of Motion” operates according to an idea that nostalgia accounts for a being stranded by modernity. Dislocation from the past is an abyss that De Quincey attempts to bridge by producing the phenomenological experience of mail-coach transport as a means of revisiting and re-experiencing the past. A language of affective “transport” provides the method for
recovering the past, and in recovering it, experiencing it afresh. The nostalgia that pervades the first section is generated by the immense stress laid on the loss of what De Quincey perceives is a physiological and affective bond between man and natural power, one that is severed with the advent of steam technology. The body thus becomes the very means by which feelings of nostalgia are generated:

But, now, on the new system of travelling, iron tubes and boilers have disconnected man’s heart from the ministers of his locomotion. Nile nor Trafalgar has power any more to raise an extra bubble in the steam-kettle. The galvanic cycle is broken up forever; man’s imperial nature no longer sends itself forward through the electric sensibility of the horse; the interagencies are gone in the mode of communication between the horse and his master, out of which grew so many aspects of sublimity under accidents of mists that hid, or sudden blazes that revealed, of mobs that agitated, or midnight solitudes that awed (203).

This oft-cited passage carries tremendous historical importance because it reflects so carefully on what is surrendered in the shift toward mechanized transport: an electric and continuous “interagency” between the human body and that of the horse. De Quincey summons a language of Romantic galvanism to connect human and animal bodies, and the steam engine disrupts this electric bond. Horsepower functions as a figure for nostalgic feeling for an age gone by, but De Quincey also capitalizes on the horse to develop a rhetoric that accounts for the kind of energy that steam power supplants. The strength of the rhetoric thus lies in its capacity to transmute the natural power generated by mail-coach horses into an affective energy continuous with man’s heart.
The passage also calls attention to one of De Quincey’s dynamic examples of the way the coach facilitates affective transmission, namely, by broadcasting news during the Napoleonic Wars. The feeling of national joy is generated by man’s heart and rapidly disseminated between British subjects via the coach’s affectively charged horses. This formulation transforms the human body into a medium for the message, one that fails to synch up with mechanical transport. De Quincey insists that, in the modern age, “man’s imperial nature no longer sends itself forward through the electric sensibility of the horse,” but is subject to the mechanical mediation of the railway system. Modern transportation and communication risks disrupting the “motions” of language, which can only proceed along an organic circuit. The dynamic man-horse figure in this passage provides a fascinating counterexample to late nineteenth century ideas about the human body as a motor. For Anson Rabinbach, the placement of machines alongside human labor established a competitive relationship between humans and their technological counterparts. England thus became dependent on the energy-efficiency and limitations of human bodies in factories within the framework of capitalist production.\(^20\) While for Rabinbach, the energy of the human body becomes a limit-case for the productivity of the machine age, De Quincey’s mail-coach functions as an affective super-conductor that transforms the feelings generated by the human body into the coach’s principal energy source, enabling the body to relay national feeling to other subjects. In other words, De Quincey recruits a modern conception of energy for nostalgic aims.

The question of agency as a point of contrast between the mail-coach and the train becomes apparent here. While the railway car renders man completely passive in his

\(^{20}\) Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 19-42. One of the main requirements for hiring mail-coach drivers and guards was that they have “considerable stamina” and the ability to “withstand great fatigue.” See Wilkinson, p. 70. Real endurance (and alcohol) was required to push through the harsh winters and long rides of the mail, an early example of the pressures of modernization on the body.
conveyance, horsepower involves an interactive relationship in the experience of transport, which generates an energy that makes considerable demands on human desire:

The vital experience of the glad animal sensibilities made doubts impossible on the question of our speed, we saw it, we felt it as a thrilling; and this speed was not the product of blind insensate agencies, that had not sympathy to give, but was incarnated in the fiery eyeballs of an animal, in his dilated nostril, spasmodic muscles, and echoing hoofs. This speed was incarnated in the visible contagion amongst brutes of some impulse, that, radiating into their natures, had yet its center and beginning in man. The sensibility of the horse uttering itself in the maniac light of his eye, might be the last vibration of such a movement; the glory of Salamanca might be the first—but the intervening link that connected them, that spread the earthquake of the battle into the eyeball of the horse, was the heart of man—kindling the rapture of the fiery strife, and then propagating its own tumults by motions and gestures to the sympathies, more or less dim, in his servant the horse (203).

De Quincey’s language transforms affective charge into physical force (speed), which propels the coach (and the news it carries) swiftly forward, but also feeds the passenger’s heightened affective experience of the ride.\textsuperscript{21} This conception of speed’s relationship to affect seems counterintuitive, but is ultimately productive and expedient for De Quincey’s purposes. We are used to thinking about speed as contributing to or resulting in a heightened affective response, as the thrill of a new experience and the possibility of danger rises. De Quincey’s sense of speed, however, reformulates this idea by suggesting that horsepower may work the other way around:

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{21} For Enda Duffy, the “conjunction of subject body and speed machine” in automobile transport “offered inklings of cyborg subjectivity,” mechanically enhancing the capabilities of the body. \textit{The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 6. For De Quincey, the capabilities of horsepower find their limit only in the power of the subject to tap into the full potential of his own affective energies.
\end{footnote}
speed and energy are generated *from, or as a result of*, the heightened affect of the passenger. Because the speed of the horse “radiates” out of the horse’s nature yet begins in the heart of man, De Quincey proposes that the generation and regulation of speed in horse-drawn transport depends on human emotion. The body of the passenger thus becomes part of the circuit that publishes important national news. De Quincey’s language not only suggests that the horse and the human body functioned as mediums for affective relay, but also that the horse is representative (synechdochally) for that aspect of human nature from which his own passions are derived.

The essay’s attention to the human body in accounting for major shifts in transportation is not limited to horsepower. De Quincey transforms the unprecedented organization of the mail-coach system into a vast and orderly organic system:

> To my own feeling, this Post-office service recalled some mighty orchestra, where a thousand instruments all disregarding each other, and so far in danger of discord, yet all obedient as slaves to the supreme baton of some great leader, terminate in a perfect harmony like that of heart, veins and arteries, in a healthy animal organization (193).

Set in stark contrast to the metaphors of mechanical organization that the steam engine and the railway introduce to the postal service beginning in the late 1840s, De Quincey’s characterization of the mail-coach system is of a fit and healthy national body whose survival depends on a perfect coordination of parts, a unity that pulses with electric, affective life. These parts are the means by which the electricity of a personal as well as national affective response to important events is conducted and circulated:

> Tidings, fitted to convulse all nations, must henceforth travel by culinary process; and the trumpet that once announced from afar the laurelled mail, heart-shaking, when heard
screaming on the wind, and advancing through the darkness to every village or solitary
house on its route, has now given way for ever to the pot-walloppings of the boiler (203).

De Quincey’s nationalism is replete with metaphors of anatomic organization and coordination. The nation is a vast and sprawling body that, when united in common feeling, “convulse(s)” like a galvanized body. Nostalgia, in De Quincey’s imagination, is predicated on metaphors of organic power. Once the system of transportation and communication submits to a mechanical organization, the galvanic transmission of feelings fails to find its appropriate or most conductive receptor: the human body.

The function of the mail-coach within a historical framework is elaborated on in the section titled “Going Down With Victory” in which De Quincey relates a personal experience aboard the mail-coach publishing news about victories from Waterloo. This section reads like national propaganda, glorifying the mail-coach by flaunting its royal emblem and charging the vehicle with official importance. Part of this official function is as the facilitator of political and military news from abroad, and, in particular, the series of war victories and losses from 1805-1815. Taking up a metaphor of a fiery fuse racing toward a store of gunpowder, De Quincey relates the experience of arriving at a village before dawn and spreading news to local ears about a military victory:

The half-slumbering consciousness that, all night long and all the next day—perhaps for even a longer period—many of these mails, like fire racing along a train of gunpowder, will be kindling at every instant new successions of burning joy, has an obscure effect of multiplying victory itself, by multiplying to the imagination into infinity the stages of its progressive diffusion. A fiery arrow seems to be let loose, which from that moment is destined to travel, almost without intermission, westward for three hundred miles—
northwards for six-hundred; and the sympathy of Lombard Street friends at parting is
exalted a hundredfold by a sort of visionary sympathy with the approaching sympathies,
yet unborn, which we are going to evoke (213-214).

The passage describes the kind of affective relay that the mail-coach facilitates, and recalls the
“unawakened” feelings aroused by De Quincey’s conception of organic style. Here, affective
transport is transmitted by this technology of transport, and national sympathy takes the form of
the widespread kindling of a brush fire. As De Quincey notes, the effect of messages such as this
was a stimulating sense of national coordination: “One heart, one pride, one glory, connects
every man by the transcendent bond of his English blood.” Mary Favret has recently suggested
that the boundaries of an “affective zone” of wartime in the Romantic period are difficult to
locate because violence occurs at such a vast distance. For Favret, news from abroad has the
ability to reach our ears at home through circuits of news, but “does not move or penetrate” the
receptive subject. De Quincey’s participation in the mail-coach, however, transforms his own
body into a direct extension of that affective conductor, an activity from which he draws
considerable pleasure, but also a sense of social and historical inclusion.

Because of the affective efficiency with which it transmitted news, the mail-coach had
tremendous political implications. As John Plotz has argued in his careful study of crowds in
Romantic literature, De Quincey’s account of the coach recognizes the its ability to “counter the
fears of interior fragmentation” within British public opinion. It employs its unique affective
charge to foster solidarity during critical moments of potential political dissent by eliminating
any difference in feeling. The view from above, seated atop the mail-coach, enables the

perspective of the uniform crowd charged with coordinated national joy. This position is in many ways a compromise to De Quincey’s own well-documented anxieties about his “pariah” status within his generation of writers. The mail-coach enables a particular kind of inclusion for him, but only as an extension of the medium by which national feelings circulate. From this heightened view, De Quincey is at once able to participate in the “glad tidings” transmitted by the coach, all the while retaining the critical distance (as a writer, documenting the historical moment) he believes is necessary for a full recognition of its grand effect.24

The continuous electric bond between man and vehicle described at length in “The Glory of Motion” curiously anticipates later characterizations of 19th century railway spine and violent shock to the body that constitute writings on early railway accidents.25 As these writings suggest, the current of industrial shock and damage ran from the railway carriage through the human body, and, inevitably, the psyche. The vehicle becomes an extension of the human body, suffering equally any contact with another object or body. “The Glory of Motion” thus communicates two strong points. First, it insists that man’s transition to steam power represents a fundamental disconnection with what moves him. But, it also incorporates an early language of industrial trauma—that idea of continuous extension between mind, body, and man’s mode of transport—into his nostalgic conceptions of horsepower. It is no coincidence that De Quincey’s essay emerges precisely at a time when the language of industrial trauma is beginning to form in descriptions of early horrific accidents on the railway. Accounts of persons developing anxiety

24 One might read this perspective from above as the perspective of history, or a looking backward from a point in the future. The posture of looking back after the scene of the accident seems the moment the whole history of mail-coach is recorded in De Quincey’s memory.
25 Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s discussion of early passenger response to the train, which was characterized by fear and anxiety about the threat of death or accident, pertains here. The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 162-163. Schivelbusch notes that Freud draws on the train as a historical example of his theory of the “stimulus-shield,” a mechanism that protects against fright through a preparedness for shock, a theme I’ll return to at the end of this chapter.
disorders after surviving railway accidents without any apparent physical harm begin to fill newspapers at this time. This language of shock emerges in De Quincey’s prefatory note to “The Vision of Sudden Death.” Indeed, it is at this point that the essay turns from cultivating a sense of history using a rhetoric of nostalgia to employing the very same language to share a personal trauma.

The Genesis of the Essay and the Moment of History

The central question that presents itself in the second half of *The English Mail-Coach* is this: is the occasion for the writing of a history of the mail-coach the trigger for the return of feelings of horror associated with the accident? Or, is it the other way around: does the return of that accident in De Quincey’s dreams occasion the writing of a mail-coach history? Given the order in which the events are textually organized, one is tempted to interpret nostalgic reminiscing as a watershed moment for the traumatic feelings associated with the accident. However, the prefatory note to the second installment of the essay, published in December of 1849, calls this sequencing into doubt:

The reader is to understand this present paper, in its two sections of “The Vision of Sudden Death” and the “Dream-Fugue,” as connected with a previous paper on *The English Mail-Coach*, published in the Magazine for October. The ultimate object was the “Dream-Fugue,” as an attempt to wrestle with the utmost efforts of music in dealing with a colossal form of impassioned horror. The Vision of Sudden Death contains the mail-coach incident, which did really occur, and did really suggest the variations of the dream, here taken up by the Fugue, as well as other variations now recorded. Confluent with these impressions, from the terrific experience on the Manchester and Glasgow mail,
were other and more general impressions, derived from the long familiarity with the English mail, as developed in the former paper; impressions for instance, of animal beauty and power, of rapid motion, at the same time unprecedented, of connexion with the government and public business of a great nation, but above all, connexion with national victories at an unexampled crisis,—the mail being the privileged organ for publishing and dispersing all news of that kind. From this function of the mail, arises naturally the introduction of Waterloo into the fourth variation of the Fugue; for the mail itself having been carried into the dreams by the incident in the Vision, naturally all the accessory circumstances of pomp and grandeur investing this national carriage followed in the train of the principal image (294).

The most provocative statement in this passage is the last, or the idea that all “accessory circumstances” tied to De Quincey’s memory of the mail-coach “followed in the train of the principal image.” This account of the essay’s genesis places the mail-coach at the center of a grand network of personal and cultural memory. Once one aspect of the network is activated, the entire web of recollection reverberates, introducing episode after episode of associated image and sentiment. We are also told that the accident “suggests” the imagery represented in the prose poem called “Dream Fugue,” the final episode of the multi-part essay. Thus, the trajectory of the essay proceeds from a space of history to a dream zone with the terrifying accident represented in “The Vision of Sudden Death” mediating the passage from the one to the other. While the prefatory note discloses that the terrifying accident strings together a long series of personal and cultural significations associated with the mail-coach, it also suggests that the sections of the essay conform to the order of these associations. The text is thus organized around a traumatic event. Enigmatically, we learn that trauma begets nostalgia, not the other way around.
There is a peculiar stress laid on the historical reality of the event of the accident, as if to place this portion of the essay in a different class of experience from the other episodes that precede it. This hyperrealism of the accident offers itself up as a testament to the intensity of the near-death encounter, which continues to haunt him for the space of thirty years. Among the statements that open the “Dream-Fugue,” De Quincey confesses to the compulsory and repetitive nature the incident has triggered:

Epilepsy so brief of horror—wherefore is it that thou canst not die? Passing suddenly into darkness, wherefore is it that thou sheddest thy sad funeral blights upon the gorgeous mosaics of dreams? Fragment of music too stern, heard once and heard no more, what aileth thee that thy deep rolling chords come up at intervals through all the worlds of sleep, and after thirty years have lost no element of horror” [italics my own] (236-237).

If the accident has plagued De Quincey for dozens of years, why wait until 1849 to write the essay? The impetus behind its composition certainly has everything to do with the cultural loss of the mail-coach. In other words, it seems quite clear that the occasion for the essay is significantly tied both to the discontinuation of mail-coach transport by the success of the railway and the repeated return of the traumatic event of the accident that nearly steals his life in dream. The prefatory note also underscores the role of emotion in accessing historical consciousness. Thus, a nostalgic narrative about the glory of the mail-coach is only possible because it is “accessory” and associative with respect to the return of the traumatic feelings De Quincey experiences during his accident. In other words, this essay is the product of a moment of cultural and national loss that aligns or coincides with the return of a personal trauma.

De Quincey’s sense of the “epileptic” nature of the return of the accident, as well as its forceful reality, recalls Cathy Caruth’s account of the possession of the traumatized subject by
the historical event. Caruth’s interest in the relationship between narrative and trauma is tied to a Freudian understanding of traumatic neurosis. Freud describes trauma as the unwilled return of the traumatizing event after an incubation period. Indeed, the development of Freud’s theory of trauma occasions the example of surviving a railway accident, as if unharmed (precisely what De Quincey suffers on the mail-coach). De Quincey’s essay thus represents a proto-Freudian account of traumatic neurosis, not only in its expression of symptoms similar to that disorder, but also because of the history and timing of its composition. That is, the essay is written during the era of the railway, but describes a cultural moment that precedes the railway. Its uncanny nature stems from the fact that it is symptomatic of what theorists of trauma would diagnose as industrial trauma, but about an experience that is categorically pre-industrial.

If for Freud, the incubation period of a trauma is that space between the initial, unregistered shock and its unwilled return, the incubation period for the trauma of De Quincey’s accident ends the moment the history of the mail-coach begins to be written. What makes the history of this essay’s composition so peculiar is that it suggests that the textual life of a personal trauma hinges on a larger, cultural loss. But what is the relationship between trauma and transport? The answer would seem to lie in the idea of interrupted transport corresponding to interruptions in consciousness, and, in the case of literary representation, lapses or gaps in narrative. In Freud’s account of trauma there is a moment of failed sense registration of the

27 “The time elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the traumatic symptoms is called the ‘incubation period’…it is a feature which one might term latency.” See Freud’s Moses and Monotheism, trans. by Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage, 1939), p. 84.
28 John Dussinger has pointed to the relationship between carriages and consciousness. For him, novelists like Sterne ‘first identify consciousness with the kinetic vehicle and set the pattern for countless novelists since the nineteenth century who use the carriage as a metonym of the character.’ Setting up the spaces of human experience (“inside” and “outside”) the coach proved a useful device for figuring the subjectivity of characters as they move through plot. See “Glory of Motion: Carriages and Consciousness in the Early
event because its overwhelming nature causes the retreat of consciousness. Thus the unregistered experience recurs after an incubation period when some other mechanism (sight, sound, etc.) triggers the unwilled return of the event to consciousness. The mechanism acting as the “trigger” for De Quincey’s essay, however, seems to be historiography.

While it is convenient to apply twentieth century conceptions of trauma to the essay retrospectively, De Quincey’s writings admittedly precede this clinical category. As Jill Matus has observed in her recent study on shock and memory in Victorian writers, we should be cautious to apply trauma, which is a patently modern, industrial concept, to literature in a trans-historical manner. The texts Matus engages with in her study are all completed during the rise of railway culture, a period that, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch has argued, witnessed the early articulation of psychic disorders like railway spine that will later develop into what we now understand as traumatic neurosis. Her work thus explores the “rich variety of Victorian thinking about the relationship between somatic and psychic registrations of shock.” Part of that work involves demonstrating the way literary production represents subjects who experience symptoms of shock due to “emotional and psychological rather than purely physiological causes.” I agree with Matus claim about the difficulty one faces in reading trauma “from the rear,” as De Quincey would say. However, the language of De Quincey’s essay accords so well with that of early accounts of trauma that one must consider the possibility that they influenced De Quincey’s style.

While identifying trauma in De Quincey’s essay may nevertheless seem an ahistorical diagnosis, there are earlier theories of shock that likely contributed to the feelings at work in The English Novel” in Country Myth: Motifs in the British Novel from Defoe to Smollett (Britannia, Vol. 4) GmbH (Germany: Peter Lang, 1991).


Mail-Coach and, perhaps, to trauma theory itself. Addressing these theories will allow us to situate the essay within a longer history of narrativizing shock.

Unsurprisingly, De Quincey proved to be an avid reader contemporary psychological theory, some of which made a lasting impact on his writing. The work he most admired, however, was David Hartley’s, Observations on Man, His Frame, and His Duty (1749), a treatise that leaves a clear mark on De Quincey’s ideas about the relationship between language, thought, and the body. Hartley’s influence on De Quincey is clearly at work in the prefatory note to “The Vision of Sudden Death” where he suggests that the logic of the essay’s structure follows Hartley’s theory of association. Hartley’s theory places stress on the contiguity of certain ideas in the mind as an explanation for the way in which patterns or nodes of thought develop. One of De Quincey’s stylistic markers, what he terms an “involute”—a recurring knot of ideas, images, or feelings—likely springs from Hartley’s important work.\(^\text{31}\) Hartley’s theory of “vibration” proposes that the interaction between sense impressions and ideas that structures human consciousness might be characterized as a series of shocks of experience or “vibrations” that interface with and develop “internal” feelings. Writers such as Lawrence Sterne satirized Hartley’s theory by demonstrating how language absorbs the “shocks” of daily life and how the “train” of consciousness is affected both by external and internal stimulus.\(^\text{32}\) Human emotion interacts with sense impression to shape and guide conscious experience. De Quincey’s essay, I

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\(^{31}\) For a detailed discussion of the “involute” in De Quincey, see John Barrell’s The Infection of Thomas De Quincey: A Psychopathology of Imperialism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991). Barrell is invested, as I am, in identifying traumatic feelings within De Quincey’s writings. For Barrell, De Quincey’s trauma stems largely from childhood memories, like the loss of his sister. My interest, however, is more attentive to the disorder as a historical concept emerging during his lifetime, and one that makes a structural, rather than thematic impact on the essays.

\(^{32}\) In The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Tristram notes his father’s advice: “Though man is of all others the most curious vehicle, said my father, yet at the same time tis of so slight a frame, and so totteringly put together, that the sudden jerks and hard jostlings it unavoidably meets with in this rugged journey, would overset and tear it to pieces a dozen times a day--was it not, brother Toby, that there is a secret spring within us.” (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 209
argue, is in the tradition of Sterne’s style. His prose experiments underscore the extent to which language is powerfully susceptible to both the author’s physiology and his affective responsiveness.

Hartley’s treatise also develops Locke’s theory of association by proposing that the contiguity of certain ideas in the mind create repetitive habits in man. But, Hartley also suggests that violent emotions might be the source of strong association because of their power to cement a group of ideas and feelings together by sheer force of feeling. Thus, in a section titled “Of Violent Passions,” he notes:

Persons that are under the influence of strong passions, such as anger, fear, ambition, disappointment, have the vibrations attending the principal ideas so much increased, that these ideas cling together, i.e. are associated in an unnatural manner…Violent passions must therefore disorder the understanding and judgment while they last; and if the same passion return frequently, it may have so great an effect upon the associations, as that the intervention of foreign ideas shall not be able to set things to rights, and break the unnatural bond…It appears also that violent fits of passion, and frequent recurrences of them, must, from the nature of the body, often transport persons, so that they shall not be able to recover themselves, but fall within the limits of the distemper called madness emphatically [italics my own].

Recall De Quincey’s prefatory note, in which he describes the mail-coach incident, “suggesting” the variations in the “Dream-Fugue,” but also identifying it as “the principle image” around which this history of the mail-coach represented in “The Glory of Motion” is organized. What I would like to stress here is the way in which the prefatory note defines the essay’s historical

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logic as structured by the violent emotions arising from the accident. Setting down to write the essay summons not only the powerful feelings associated with a threatening event long-past, but, also, all other experiences attending De Quincey’s lifelong use of the mail-coach. Hartley’s insistence on the “unnatural” association of ideas occasioned by violent passion seems to best account for the co-presence of nostalgic and traumatic sentiments in De Quincey’s essay. The web of images, according to De Quincey’s prefatory note, erupts as a direct consequence of the unwilled return of the accident in dreams. Moreover, the “transport” or “distemper” De Quincey suffers as a result of the “epilepsy” of the recurring encounter with death also squares with Hartley’s theory. While the experience of reading the text suggests that the writing of a history of the mail-coach gives way to the terrifying memory of the accident, the note reverses this logic, substituting the essay’s narrative structure with one that follows the violent affective return of the event to consciousness. History in De Quincey’s essay thus “attends” sublime emotion. That is, in The English Mail-Coach, time is structured by feeling.

Time, Narrative, and the Mail-Coach Timetable

It is clear that the essay as it is finally compiled enacts a swerving into a completely different narrative mode from that in which we first set off. This rhetorical shift is figured in terms of transportation: a historical consciousness derailed and rerouted gradually toward a dreamscape. This progress follows a temporal structure: the essay represents decreasing segments of time with the accident as terminus. This countdown to death, if I may call it that, culminates in the “Dream-Fugue.” This dramatic structure of De Quincey’s essay demands some reflection about the relationship between dream and history. Arguably, dream assumes aspects of history; they are both storehouses of events and memories. However, perhaps the most
significant difference between them has to do with chronology—while history organizes events using an “objective,” guiding timeline, dream, according to Freud, is a timeless space in which events resist such organization.\textsuperscript{34} I read the “Vision of Sudden Death” as a transitional zone between history and dream, and a space in which a strict temporal framework is developed with the aid of an organizing mail-coach structure—the timetable—before it is abolished altogether in “Dream-Fugue,” where the narrative loses all relation to time or historical logic.

That the mail-coach moves seamlessly between history and dream speaks to De Quincey’s sense of historical consciousness at the moment of transport modernity. This section will explore the consequences of this trajectory for the essay’s conception of history and historical time.\textsuperscript{35} Although this movement toward dream is not unique within De Quincey’s oeuvre, it is only in this essay that the manipulation of style corresponds so artfully with a strong sense of this historical time. In other words, I will explore the impact of the mail-coach’s speed and strict timetable on the account of sudden death and its aftermath.\textsuperscript{36} What I will suggest is that De Quincey employs historical time to give form and organization to a traumatic event that has penetrated his dreams. As the essay nears its horrid terminus, De Quincey uses this temporal structure to create a sense of narrative lag, which grants him the opportunity to document the

\textsuperscript{34} “We have learnt that unconscious mental processes are in themselves ‘timeless.’ This means in the first place that they are not ordered temporally, that time does not change them in any way and that the idea of time cannot be applied to them…On the other hand, our abstract idea of time seems to be wholly derived from the method of working of the system of Pept-Cs [the borderline between the inside and outside world] and to correspond to a perception on its own part of that method of working.” \textit{Beyond the Pleasure Principle}, trans. by James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 32.

\textsuperscript{35} Robert Maniquis makes the argument that the shift from the personal to the historical is a movement from “an unreal inner time” which fluctuates, to “historical time.” \textit{Mid-Nineteenth Century Writers: Eliot, De Quincey, Emerson}, ed. by Eric Rothstein and Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), p. 82. De Quincey’s timetable becomes a tool for organizing affective experience in relation to historical time.

\textsuperscript{36} Enda Duffy, remarking on the possibilities of representing speed, notes that the experience of it made unique demands on the subject: “that the individual rapidly improvise new powers of alertness and seeing, that she match her own response time, her sense of her self-control of her own energy…etc.” \textit{The Speed Handbook}, p. 5. We see these demands at work De Quincey’s writing, where narrative manipulates temporality and speed for its effect.
traumatic moment. His compulsive style exposes an effort to master an otherwise unmanageable experience.

This section of the essay is significant as a transitional zone. It is set during the summer, right before dawn, a season associated by De Quincey with the death of his sister who passed away on a hot summer day. It offers a precise account of a near-accident of the mail-coach with an oncoming gig after the mail-coach driver drifts into sleep due to heavy drinking. De Quincey also takes opium before mounting the coach, which produces hallucinogenic effects along the way. As in the *Confessions*, the shift in narrative mode is attributable to the effect of intoxication on the essay’s style. The opium triggers the “dreaming faculty” during the ride, an effect that is formally cued by the marked change in style and the manipulation of time and space in the narrative. More specifically, the opium slows time down. This section is also distinct in that it is narrated in “real time.” Thus, the episode begins with an impatient address to the reader while De Quincey prepares to set off from the Manchester post office:

Meanwhile, what are we stopping for? Surely we've been waiting long enough. Oh, this procrastinating mail, and oh, this procrastinating post-office! Can’t they take a lesson upon that subject from me? Some people have called me procrastinating. Now you are witness, reader, I was in time for them.38

This passage cues the reader that the progress of narrative will, from this point in the essay, be synchronized with the progress of the mail-coach on this particular night. De Quincey's digressions up to this point are due, we learn, to the coachman’s own tardiness; he is simply

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37 De Quincey’s detail about the coachman having had an appointment that day, making an appearance before a judge, might refer to a hearing addressing the coach-man’s alcohol problem, a common concern at the time. Mail-coach men were notorious drinkers, but understandably so. In the winter drinking was often necessary to counteract the cold. See Wilkinson, p. 167.

38 *Confessions*, p. 226.
filling the available time before boarding for the night’s journey. Being “on time” locks the narrative into the present-ness of the historical event.

Once on the road, the coachman falls asleep at dawn and De Quincey finds himself managing the vehicle alone. This interval between his realization of being without a driver and the appearance of the oncoming gig is one of "halcyon repose" and aesthetic enjoyment, without any consideration for his own safety. The beautiful silence of the dawn and the increasing effect of De Quincey's opium dose lull him into a state of pure aesthetic appreciation, despite the danger steadily approaching: "I myself, though slightly alive to the possibilities of peril, had so far yielded to the influence of the mighty calm as to sink into a profound reverie" (229). 39 It is during this reverie that the coach speeds up and narrative time begins to slow:

The sea, the atmosphere, the light, bore an orchestral part of this universal lull.

Moonlight, and the first timid tremblings of the dawn, were now blending; and the blendings were brought to a still more exquisite state of unity, by a slight silvery mist, motionless and dreamy, that covered the woods and fields, but with a veil of equable transparency (229).

This beautiful passage recalls the stunning travel descriptions in Radcliffe’s romances, where the eye of the heroine (usually on a coach ride) wanders forth as if unattached to her body. 40 The marvelous "blendings" of dawn in this scene underscore the effect of temporal gradation I’m describing: the slowing of the narrative allows De Quincey to fill stretched temporal intervals with an affective history of the event.

39 For Duffy, “speed, intimately woven into a new paradigm of the modern subject’s nexus of desires, becomes the new opiate and the new aftertaste of movement as power” The Speed Handbook, p. 35. In this passage, speed, like opium, expands aesthetic experience.

40 Radcliffe, a writer that De Quincey admired, takes this type of description directly from the poetry of James Thomson, from which she frequently draws passages for her chapter epigraphs.
De Quincey hears the horn of the oncoming gig before seeing it, a fact that introduces the element of sound that he will amplify in “Dream Fugue.” The realization of the possibility of a collision fails to elicit the natural response of awakening the coachman. Intoxicated, he simply continues to draw pleasure from the impending danger. To account for his paralysis, he explains that he is not a man of action:

I pretend no presence of mind. On the contrary, my fear is, that I am miserably and shamefully deficient in that quality as regards to action. But, on the other hand, this accursed gift I have, as regards to thought, that in the first step towards the possibility of a misfortune, I see its total evolution: in the radix, I see too certainly and too instantly its entire expansion; in the first syllable of the dreadful sentence, I read already the last (230).

De Quincey's assertion here about his witnessing the temporal evolution of the even registers in the narrative mode as the essay proceeds. Indeed, the looming future of disaster is figured in grammatical terms—“in the first syllable of the dreadful sentence, I read already the last”—underscoring the narrative’s simulation of temporal lag as well as a desire for control. The reader is primed for the collision through the masterful control over the temporal and spatial denouement of the accident, and this mastery is in part a response to the desperate lack of control

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41 In this realization of about his moral paralysis, De Quincey dramatizes Lacan’s ideas on the relationship between prohibition and jouissance (enjoyment in the face of opposition): “Transgression in the direction of jouissance only takes place if it is supported by the oppositional principle, by the forms of Law. If the paths to jouissance have something in them that dies out, that tends to make them impassable, prohibition, if I may say so, becomes its all-terrain vehicle, its half-track truck, that gets it out of the circuitous routes that lead man back in a roundabout way toward the rut of a short and well-trodden satisfaction.” The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: 1959-1960, Book VII, trans. by Dennis Porter in The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1997), p.177. If opium unleashes De Quincey’s “alien nature,” the renegade coach in this scene becomes a figure for the pursuit of an instinct that would otherwise be monitored by some regulating power (the sleeping coachman).
he suffers within the time of the action. In other words, narrative control compensates, retrospectively, for actual paralysis.42

That De Quincey transforms the coachman into Homer’s Polyphemus monster deserves some comment. Scholars have reserved their remarks for the crocodile-coachman appearing earlier in the essay, which many have interpreted as an oriental force that possesses the narrative.43 The Cyclops coachman seems to represent an agent of surveillance and regulation. De Quincey, who refers to the coachman as Cyclops “diphrelates” (Cyclops the Charioteer), praises his mastery in the art of coaching and maintains assures us that he himself has “studied under him the diphrelatic art.” Coaching thus becomes a figure for writing. Mastery over the horses is compromised when the Polyphemus driver slips into a drunken slumber while driving at thirteen miles an hour. Once this happens, the regulatory aspect of the psyche has dropped away, leaving De Quincey’s “alien nature” free to explore the dangerous pleasures of the wild ride, transforming the episode into a stunning Romantic allegory of the unbridled unconscious.44

42 Frederick Burwick has contributed an incisive reading about this episode, which enacts an “ekphrastic paralysis” in order to represent the “frozen moment” of enduring art: “Not the embalmment of the artifact, but the embalmment of its author is what seemed so terrifying to those Romantic writers who perceived their work as somehow identical with the activity of the mind.” Bringing Lessing’s Laocoon to bear on his reading, Burwick notes that “De Quincey repeats Lessing’s objections to abrupt events, but he goes on to elaborate the importance of revealing sequential continuity in ‘the frozen moment’,” see “Motion and Paralysis in ‘The English Mail-Coach.’” Wordsworth Circle, 26:2 (1995: Spring), p. 6. 43 The crocodile makes appearances in the Confessions as well as earlier in this essay. Under an opium-spell, De Quincey transforms the father of a young crush, Fanny of the Bath Road, who is also a coach-driver, into a crocodile because he “never turns his head” to view behind his broad back. This account leads De Quincey to a discussion about the proper way to evade a crocodile, that is, not to run away, but to jump on its back: “The mode of escaping from the reptile he showed to be, not by running away, but by leaping on its back, booted and spurred” p. 207. De Quincey takes this humorous account from Charles Waterton’s Wanderings in South America (1825) where he also leaps on the back of a cayman in order to avoid harm. See David Dundeleon’s “Evading the Crocodile: De Quincey’s ‘English Mail-Coach’” Psychocultural Review, Winter 1977. 44 See Warrington Winters’ “De Quincey and the Archetypal Deathwish: A Note on ‘The English Mail-Coach’” in Literature and Psychology, vol. XIV, no. 2 (Spring:1964), pp.61-63, as well as Sander L. Gilman’s brief, but thorough reading in “The Uncontrollable Steed: A Study of the Metamorphosis of a Literary Image” in Euphorion (66: 1973), pp. 32-54. I’m also reminded of Duffy’s claim about regulating the destructive potential of speed: “Everywhere speed came to be monitored and patrolled by
Remarkably, Freud also summoned the horsemanship analogy to figure the ego’s attempts to manage the impulsive id.\textsuperscript{45}

I foreground these Freudian connections to try to make some sense of the relationship between transport, dream, and the unconscious that the essay identifies. Part of the pleasure De Quincey derives from riding the mail-coach stems from the destructive potential of its speed. In the opening paragraphs of “The Glory of Motion,” De Quincey expresses precisely this pleasure, one that is half-generated by the possibility of death: “[the mail-coach] first revealed the glory of motion: suggesting at the same time, an under-sense, not unpleasurable, of possible though indefinite danger...”\textsuperscript{46} For De Quincey, there is instinctual “under-sense” of danger is tied to the “alien natures” that proliferate within the self:

The dreamer finds within himself—occupying, as it were, some separate chamber in his brain—holding perhaps, from that station a secret and detestable commerce with his own heart—some horrid alien nature (210).

\textsuperscript{45} “One might compare the relation of the ego to the id with that between a rider and his horse. The horse provides the locomotive energy, and the rider has the prerogative of determining the goal and of guiding the movements of his powerful mount towards it. But all too often in the relations between the ego and the id, we find a picture of the less ideal situation in which the rider is obliged to guide his horse in the direction in which it itself want[s] to go.” See Freud’s \textit{New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis}, 2nd edition, translated by W.J.H. Sprott (London: Hogarth Press, 1937), pp. 102-103.

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Confessions}, p. 191. This concept of an “under-sense” is Wordsworthian, taken from the seventh book of \textit{The Prelude}, where the poet encounters the threatening sublimity of a London crowd in Bartholomew Fair: “But though the picture weary out the eye,/ By nature an unmanageable sight,/ It is not wholly so to him who looks/ In steadiness, who hath among least things/ An under-sense of greatest; sees the parts/ As parts, but with a feeling of the whole.” (\textit{The Prelude}, VII, ll. 731-7). For Wordsworth “under-sense” takes the form of an instinct facilitating the distinction of the parts (individual persons) in the whole of the crowd.
The multiplicity of the self is a terrifying reality for De Quincey, and a theme critics have explored extensively.\textsuperscript{47} In this particular essay, however, his “alien nature” might be said to take the form of a renegade coach and the “storm-flight of these maniacal horses,” whose unsupervised progress threatens not only his own life, but also those of the oncoming coach.\textsuperscript{48}

De Quincey derives sublime pleasure from reliving the event because he believes himself to be in a position of safety. If we recall, the authority of the Royal Mail-Coach meant that all other coaches had to yield to its passage, a sense of immunity developed earlier in the essay. Thus, the threat of annihilation, he imagines, is entirely on the side of the other party: “Whoever it was, something must be attempted to warn them. Upon the other party rests the active responsibility, but upon \textit{us}—and woe is me! that \textit{us} was my single self—rests the responsibility of warning” (231). This cold calculation represents an ethical failure and the aesthetic pleasure of the event takes precedence over any other concern, a theme De Quincy develops at length in \textit{Murder Considered as a Fine Art}. In many ways, the stylistic intensity of this section aestheticizes—by giving form and structure to—a serious ethical dilemma. The rhetorical energy invested here may thus be interpreted as a working through feelings of guilt for not acting sooner.

\textsuperscript{47} See J. Hillis Miller’s essay on De Quincey in \textit{The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 66-69. Hillis Miller calls the multiplication of “alien natures,” as well as of space and time, De Quincey’s “Piranesi effect,” after the dreamscape etchings of the Italian artist. It represents the dizzying and sublime experience of a subject grappling with identifying his position and orientation in the world.

\textsuperscript{48} This moment also recalls Plato’s chariot myth in \textit{Phaedrus}. The gods have chariots made only of “good” horses, but men have a mixture of good and bad making our souls difficult to navigate. When we give into our desires, the dark horse takes the reigns: “So when the charioteer sees the light of his beloved’s eyes, his soul is suffused with a sensation of heat and he is filled with the tingling and pricking of desire…The other [dark] horse, however, stops paying any attention to the charioteer’s goad and whip; it prances and lunges forward violently, making life extremely difficult for its team-mate and for the charioteer, and compelling them to head towards the beloved and bring up the subject of the pleasure of sex.” \textit{Phaedrus}, translated by Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford U. Press, 2002), p. 38.
In an effort to experiment with narrative mode and the strict timetable mail-coaches were notorious for, De Quincey proceeds with an account of the trip that at once slows time down, allowing for a development of suspense and danger arising from the imminent accident, but also documents the factual progression of the coach's speed, its distance from the next stop, and, also, later, its rapidly narrowing distance from an oncoming coach. De Quincey’s strong sense of historical consciousness slips by degrees into dream, but makes a great effort to retain the rigidity of the mail-coach’s schedule by employing it as a narrative device. The growing difference between coach and narrative speed contributes to an intense narrative lag, one that affords De Quincey the opportunity to represent the evolution of his feelings, feelings that might otherwise escape historical record. The spatio-temporal accounting in this section is considerable:

From Manchester to Kendal, which virtually (though not in law) is the capital of Westmoreland, were at this time *seven stages of eleven miles each*. The first five of these, dated from Manchester, terminated in Lancaster, which was *fifty-five miles north of Manchester*, and the same distance exactly from Liverpool. The first three terminated in Preston…at which place it was that the separate roads from Liverpool and from Manchester to the north became confluent. Within *these first three stages* lay the foundation, the progress and the termination of our night’s adventure (227).

At last, *about ten miles from Preston*, I found myself in charge of his Majesty's London and Glasgow mail then running *about eleven miles an hour* (228).
Ten years’ experience had made my eye learned in the valuing of motion; and I saw that we were now running thirteen miles an hour. I pretend to no presence of mind (230).

Before us lay an avenue, straight as an arrow, *six-hundred yards, perhaps, in length*; and the umbrageous trees, which rose in a regular line from either side, meeting high overhead, gave to it the character of a cathedral aisle (232).

The little carriage is *creeping at one mile an hour*; and the parties within it, being thus tenderly engaged, are naturally bending down their heads. Between them and eternity, to all human calculation there is but *a minute and a half*. What is it that I shall do? (232).

…all our grief will be reserved for the fate of the helpless girl, who now, upon the least shadow of failure in him, must, by the fiercest translations—must without time for a prayer—must within seventy seconds, stand before the judgment-seat of God (233).

*For seven seconds*, it might be, *of his seventy*, the stranger settled his countenance steadfastly upon us, as if to search and value every element in the conflict before him. *For five seconds* more he sate immovably…*For five* he sate with eyes upraised (233).

Yet even now it may not be too late: *fifteen or twenty seconds may still be unexhausted*; and one almighty bound forward may avail to clear the ground (234).
The moments were numbered. In the twinkling of an eye our flying horses had carried us to the termination of the umbrageous aisle...(236) [italics all my own.]

Indeed, the moments are numbered. De Quincey’s absorption of the timetable into the narrative functions as a structure of feeling that allows for rhetorical control during his re-encounter with a moment of danger. The compulsive narrative works to counteract the speed of the coach, elongating the temporal intervals it works so hard to structure so that the self might be accounted for. Instead of being oriented toward some geographical destination, De Quincey’s narrative timetable is organized around the accident as terminus. This phenomenon attests to a consciousness sensitive to a historically localizable schema of space and time. It also reveals a Kantian sense of the subjective nature of space and time by placing narrative time in relation to feeling, creating a dramatic tension between subjectivity and an objective framework for those categories. This spatio-temporal manipulation creates a spectacular opportunity for suspense and a stricter management of De Quincey’s own (and the reader’s) emotions.

Fortunately, the driver of the oncoming gig finally becomes aware of the mail-coach barreling down the road, pulls the reigns of his horse, and skids at nearly “a right angle” to the mail-coach. The coaches do not collide head on, but do come into contact:

Either with the swingle-bar, or with the haunch of our near leader, we had struck the off-wheel of the little gig, which stood rather obliquely and not quite so far advanced as to be accurately parallel with the near wheel. The blow from the fury of the passage resounded terrifically. I rose in horror to look upon the ruins we might have caused. From my elevated station I looked down, and looked back upon the scene, which in a moment told its tale, and wrote all its records on my heart forever (235).
De Quincey charges the entire scene with terror, a shock that even the little carriage absorbs: 
“…partly perhaps from the dreadful torsion of the wheels in its recent movement, partly from the thundering blow we had given to it—as if sympathized with human horror, was all alive with tremblings and shiverings” [italics my own] (235). That the gig is figured in terms of a traumatized human body reinforces the sense of the mail-coach as an organic extension of that body. Just as the coach can acquire an affective charge in its transmission of national news, it is also a vulnerable site of trauma, reverberating the psychological impact of the near-accident. Although the mail-coach is not unscathed in the contact it makes with the gig, it remains intact when it speeds away from the scene. While a physical crisis is averted, De Quincey receives a powerful and lasting impression of Death in the reflection of the face of the woman in the gig. The image fills him with remarkable dread and continues to repeat in his dreams “after thirty years” from the event: “Will that spectacle ever depart from my dreams?” (235). The encounter thus results in an indelible inscription etched on the mind in the form of a permanent dream record.

In summary, De Quincey uses the mail-coach timetable to organize feelings that remain thirty years after the accident in the narrative re-telling. It provides De Quincey with an objective grid onto which the evolution of his feelings during the event can be mapped and recorded. The self thus becomes available to narrative plotting according to time, space and speed. Moreover, the spatially and temporally fixed routes of the mail-coach and the recurrence of this exact event in his dreams suggests that De Quincey understands memory as operating according to predetermined pathways. Involutes—clusters of images and feelings—find spatial organization according to laws of contiguity. The progress of mail-coach in this essay follows the fixed route of a mental map reinforced in De Quincey’s mind after years of repetition in dream, one that
always finds its terminus in yet another possibility for death. These pathways thus form a circuit: it is because he continues to survive the accident that he must return to it after thirty years.

Figure 2: The Mail-Coach Guard’s “Time Bill”

But, is the absorption of the timetable into the narrative a sign that De Quincey has mastered the event? Or, might we say that the event has mastered him? While the scrupulous temporal accounting in the narrative does at least suggest De Quincey’s exertion of control over the accident, I believe that the text discloses the power of the event over De Quincey’s language.
In other words, it not just that the timetable enables the retelling of the accident. Rather, it is the *only* way the accident can be recovered. Another question the essay raises is whether language can embody the horrors of near-death, what we now call trauma? Can it achieve the narrativization of traumatic experience, a point of contention among trauma theorists? The use of the mail-coach as a subject for the experiment of impassioned prose provided De Quincey with a unique opportunity to revisit a scene of trauma by transforming it into narrative. The success of the essay, in my mind, lies in its ability to narrativize trauma according to a structure of feeling (the timetable) local to the event itself. The essay does, in other words, what contemporary trauma theory suggests cannot be done.

The “Vision of Sudden Death” ends with a departure that is also a survival. The mail-coach collides with the small gig at an angle, taking out its wheel, and continues down the road. As he drives away from the location of the accident, De Quincey notes that “the turn of the road carried the scene out of my eyes in an instant, and swept it into my dreams forever” (236). There seems to be a double survival in the completion of the essay itself. On the one hand, De Quincey allows himself to survive the accident again, as a repetition in narrative. But, he also survives the very lifespan of the mail-coach. Outliving the mail-coach system is thus the occasion for De Quincey to re-encounter (and master) his survival of the accident itself and all the feelings “attending” the event. In other words, it is only from a moment in the future, beyond history, looking back to the rear, that De Quincey can write his survival at all.

At this point, the relationship between nostalgia and trauma in the essay becomes clear. Within De Quincey’s project of impassioned prose, the mail-coach functions as an ideal rhetorical figure at the moment of its displacement by the railways. It is so not only because it is freighted with language—a literal vehicle that is also metaphorical—but also because it is a trope
displaced by modernity. This displacement establishes the occasion for nostalgia, as well as the historical gap that makes desire and narrative possible. What is problematic about this essay, and also what makes it successful, however, is that the occasion and gap responsible for nostalgic narrative is also the occasion for the return of De Quincey’s trauma. These two pathologies, however, might be distinguished by the nature of the past they revisit and retell. The past of nostalgia is characterized by its inauthenticity. As Susan Stewart has argued, the narrative produced by nostalgic longing is inauthentic because it can only reproduce itself as a “as a felt lack.” Nostalgic narratives are generated out of a desire driven by the very absence of the object; they depend on this lack. Narratives born out of trauma, however, result from unwilled and unmediated eruptions of historical experience. Desire plays no part here. Instead, traumatic narratives, according to Freud and other theorists, are produced in an effort to master an unmanageable experience that threatens to annihilate the self. Traumatic narrative is not the product of a desire for a lack, but a means of accounting for lost time; it does not seek to recover an object, but a part of the self.

Both narratives involve historical dislocation, but have conflicting relationships to desire. If the nostalgic narrative is an inauthentic fabrication, the traumatic narrative is the return of the real. The “real” in De Quincey’s essay takes the form of a narrative structured according to an objective temporality local to the event itself. As I’ve shown, the causal relationship between them is complicated by the misleading order of the text, which suggests that nostalgic longing leads to traumatic eruption. For De Quincey, the traumatic event lies dormant until the occasion for nostalgia—and for history—triggers its return. Remarkably, however, his personal trauma hinges on a national loss and its narration. Because the terminus of the essay is the accident and

49Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 23
the ahistorical space of dream that follows it, we must read the traumatic narrative as the primary ordering mechanism for the essay itself. It is no surprise, then, that “The Glory of Motion,” which generates nostalgia, already bears the seeds of the reader’s eventual encounter with death, such as the sounding of the horn and the near-accident with the cart in the marketplace.

“Dream-Fugue” and the Transports of History

That the essay ends in a dream-space structured as a prose poem suggests that the reader has entered an atemporal zone, where the strict organization of the prose using historical time considerably unravels. “Dream-Fugue” might be read as a kind of historical rapture, where events of historical experience are not subsumed under a strict spatio-temporal framework, but are instead arranged according to the power of the emotions associated with the event. In this way, this little history of transport is restructured according to De Quincey’s affective “transport” aboard the mail-coach, one that he describes as “the passion of sudden death.” In the final moment of “The Vision of Sudden Death,” De Quincey describes the paroxysms of the woman in the oncoming gig, noting that in her reflection he witnesses the appearance of Death. He looks back on the scene in the moment of the occurrence, only to witness it again in dream: “…the turn of the road carried the scene out of my eyes in an instant, and swept it into my dreams for ever” (236). This moment is transformed from a sense perception (“out of my eyes”) into a dream-image after the dreadful “instant.” Looking back in this scene represents a double action. It describes De Quincey turning back to the scene he has just witnessed, but it also implies that his dreams are a window into the past. As is always is the case in De Quincey’s writings, he is rendered passive in the episode: it is the turn in the road that “carrie[s] the scene out of [his] eyes
In an instant,” a grammatical formulation that simulates the perspective of looking behind a moving vehicle to a scene that is receding.

In “Dream-Fugue,” De Quincey articulates the terms of modern trauma as explored by Freud, who developed his own ideas about the pathology after the shock delivered during a railway accident. For Freud, the dreams of traumatized subjects are the result of an attempt at exerting control over the traumatic event: “These dreams are endeavoring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” [italics my own].

Anxiety represents the preparedness for shock, especially in its absence. De Quincey’s prose certainly represents a preparation for the reliving of the shock he experiences thirty years prior. That is, the work of composing the essay is charged with just this anxiety, and the “under-sense” of danger De Quincey describes is a manifestation of the emotional preparation he offers from the very first sentences of the text. De Quincey’s use of the mail-coach as a rhetorical figure inherits the poetic tradition of the equestrian trope in that it serves as a metaphor for the practice of mastery in writing about the traumatic event. The essay might thus read as De Quincey’s preparation for death, where no time for such preparation was available in the instant of death.

De Quincey tells us there is a thirty-year lapse between the episode in “The Vision of Sudden Death” and the composition of the essay. If for Freud, the trauma only resurfaces after a latency or incubation period after the shock,⁵² we could read the timeline of composition for De Quincey’s essay as suffering an incubation period. We know that thirty years lapse after the near-accident before he takes up his pen to record the event. This same thirty-year period also witnesses tremendous historical and technological change, including the railway’s replacement of the mail-coach as the dominant form of transportation in England. It is remarkable that the incubation period coincides with the lifespan of the mail-coach system and that the trauma returns alongside a historical reflection about transportation and modernity. The composition of the history of the mail-coach can thus be interpreted as a way of confronting and accounting for the “lost time” of his traumatic experience. In “Dream Fugue,” he recovers (and experiences afresh) the loss of control native to the event in order to exert authorial control in the writing. In this sense, De Quincey’s essay figures the experience of transport as the return of history as unmediated experience.⁵³

In theories of trauma “unmediated experience” describes the idea that the internal wound does not allow for immediate registration of the event, which is why it returns after the latency period. For Cathy Caruth, “what is truly striking about the accident victim’s experience of the

⁵² “The time elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the “incubation period”…it is a feature which one might term latency.” Moses and Monotheism, trans. by Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage, 1939), p. 84.

⁵³ Lacan argued that “the death drive is to be situated in the historical domain; it is articulated at a level that can only be defined as a function of the signifying chain, that is to say, insofar as a reference point, that is a reference point of order, can be situated relative to the functioning of nature. It requires something from beyond whence it may itself be grasped in a fundamental act of memorization, as a result of which everything may be recaptured, not simply in the movement of the metamorphoses, but from the initial intention.” The Ethics of Psychoanalysis:1959-1960, Book VII, translated by Dennis Porter in The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1997), p. 177. The mail-coach timetable offers what Lacan identifies as a “reference point of order” for the appearance of the death-drive.
event, and what in fact constitutes the central enigma revealed by Freud’s example, is...the fact that the victim of the crash was never fully conscious during the accident itself: the person gets away apparently ‘unharmed’.”

De Quincey’s footnote about the overwhelming impression recorded on his mind of the woman’s fright provides a particularly strong example of this phenomenon. He explains that the woman’s face was never actually registered until after the mail-coach speeds from the scene:

‘Averted signs.’—I read the course and changes of the lady’s agony in the succession of her involuntary gestures; but let it be remembered that I read all this from the rear, never once catching the lady’s full face, and even her profile imperfectly (236).

This note seems contrary to the extremely detailed accounting of those “involuntary gestures” of the woman transported by fear. We learn, however, that the details of the intense and vivid scene we’ve just read in “The Vision of Sudden Death” arose in his mind as an afterimage, that is, “from the rear” of the traumatic experience. The failure to “catch” the lady’s full face is a testament to the gap in consciousness occasioned by the trauma. After thirty years, however the “involuntary gestures” of the woman in the gig, “bursting [from] her sepulchral bonds,” continue to haunt De Quincey in sleep.

It is clear that “Dream-Fugue” is a twin effort on De Quincey’s part to deal with his survival of the “horrid” event, as well as with history’s swallowing up of the mail-coach itself. The prose poem resumes where history leaves off: “for the mail itself having been carried into the dreams by the incident in the vision, naturally all the accessory circumstances of pomp and grandeur investing this carriage followed in the train of the principal image” (294). This claim makes a causal relation between the episode of the near-collision and the dream-narrative provided to the reader, reinforcing the traumatic reading of a psychic wound that stages an

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54 Unclaimed Experience, p. 17.
unmediated return of the historical moment in the dreaming subject. J. Hillis Miller remarked of De Quincey’s near-death experience:

It is not death which is the liberation—not death, but the moment before death. In this moment, and only in this moment, can a man rise again before he dies. The moment of dying has no earthly future. In another moment the evil of the life of the dying man will be consigned to oblivion, and the good will be joined to God. The last moment of life can never return to haunt the memory of the dying man in eternal resurrections, and it cannot be the first link in a causal chain, which will reverberate down his future life to curse him with its consequences.\(^{55}\)

What Hillis Miller describes are the consequences of surviving potential death. Dream is the curse of the surviving subject because he recalls the event repeatedly over time. The inclusion of the dream sequence within De Quincey’s essay makes an important claim, I think, about the relationship between history and the powerful feelings of traumatic experience. If as Walter Benjamin noted in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke)...[but] to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger,” De Quincey’s essay seems to suggest that true historiography might always be a dangerous endeavor. As a historiographical exercise organized around a traumatic event, it is attentive to structures of feeling that help articulate the past in way that goes beyond recalling events. Indeed, in the dreamscape, the essay also recalls non-events. What De Quincey seems to be suggesting is that, within the framework of history, affective experience often evades or resists representation. Dream, on the other hand, is offered as a viable space for this kind of representation, and for that reason, “Dream-Fugue” might be said to function as an appendix to history.

\(^{55}\) *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth Century Writers*, p 77.
Afterlives of the Mail-Coach: The Case of Moses Nobbs, Last of the Mail-Coach Guards

Despite the quickness with which the railways supplanted the mail-coach system, Englishmen clung to an idea of the King’s Royal Mail-Coach service as the golden age of transport. To return to the epigraph that opens this chapter, drawn from an 1895 collection of “reminiscences personal and otherwise” about the mail-coach by F.E. Baines, Inspector General of Mails, the late nineteenth century desire to romanticize first-hand accounts of mail-coach system proved to be quite strong:

The mail-coach period still has a firm, and possibly increasing hold on the public mind, but the officials and others who actually took part in the work of that stirring time—whether on the highroads or within the walls of the post-offices—are rapidly passing away…I have been eager to preserve what those who remain, and some of those who are no more, have told me of matters within their own observation in that remote epoch, as well as what in other ways has come to my knowledge. I have included, too, such of my own recollections, not necessarily postal, as should secure continuity and cohesion in the narrative.56

What does it mean for the mail-coach to have an “increasing” hold on the public imagination in 1895? The passage suggests that the impulse to commemorate the grand postal system of days gone by has everything to do with seizing a limited opportunity: documenting first-hand accounts and testimonials by coachmen who lived to witness the modernization of British transport and the national post. The men from whom Baines collects narratives from “that remote epoch” are treated in this work as living, speaking time capsules whose precious memories

56 On the Track of the Mail-Coach, Being a Volume of Reminiscences Personal and Otherwise (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1895). The title curiously suggests the repetition of events through narrative retelling as historical travel.
increase in value the closer they are to their deathbeds. For De Quincey, the occasion for an essayistic history of the mail-coach was the replacement of that system with the more efficient TPO, or Traveling Post Office, on the railway car. But, for Baines, it is the passing away of those who provided service to the mail-coach system. In other words, it is the potential loss of personal testimonies that occasions the desire for a nostalgic narrative. If De Quincey’s rhetorical project in *The English Mail-Coach* was to reproduce the feelings of nostalgia and trauma in his readers, these later texts allow us to measure the success of his project by virtue of their historical possession by the very feelings De Quincey generated.

In this final section, I’d like to reflect on Victorian writings about the mail-coach to track the nostalgic sentiment that pervades later thinking about the mail-coach. Publications produced by the General Postal Service in the closing years of the 19th century, including *A Hundred Years by Post: A Jubilee Retrospect* (1891) and *The Royal Mail: Its Curiosities and Romance* (1889), construct histories of the Royal Mail-Coach system by weaving together narrative accounts collected from the oldest living coach drivers, guards, and other agents of the offices directing the mail-coach. Such personal histories of the post went into several editions within a few years, a fact that underscores the public interest in the age of coaching. Late Victorian reminiscences of mail-coach culture are as symptomatic of nostalgia as they are of the type of trauma articulated in De Quincey’s essay. In fact, they seem to inherit their sense of historicity directly from De Quincey himself. Indeed, many of them cite they essayist as they would a historical record. As I’ll demonstrate, these Victorian texts are haunted by De Quincey’s essay in that the framework they establish for the narrative production nostalgia also triggers or jostles loose traumatic memories and events. If as Hazlitt and Hunt insisted, the mail-coach bore the emotions of its
travelers and transported them between persons, the vehicle continued to function this way even in its afterlife as an object of historical reflection.

In *Old Coaching Days. Some Incidents in the Life of Moses James Nobbs, The Last of the Mail Coach Guards* (1891), the London Postal Service commemorated the retirement of the last surviving coach guard by recording a series of personal reflections:

In order that this good old man may not depart without some testimony that his sterling qualities have been recognized and respected, it has occurred to me that the publication of some incidents of his life, told by himself, may be of interest, as the words of a man who has seen the old order of things entirely displaced by the new, and who, by his integrity and unflagging zeal in a long life of faithful devotion to duty, has well exhibited…⁵⁷

As we learn in the preface to Nobbs’ narrative, London Postmaster General, R.C. Tombs chose to celebrate Nobbs’ fifty-five years of service in the published report on Post Office work in the Christmas season of 1889:

He [Nobbs] well recollects that on Christmas Eve, 1839, just prior to the introduction of the Penny Post, he was the Guard to the Mail Coach running between Cheltenham and Aberystwyth. What a contrast! His Christmas night’s load of Mails in 1839 did not exceed a hundredweight. In 1889 he saw off from Paddington twenty tons of Mail matter in the day, in the most prosaic manner, with no blowing of the musical horn, and no carrying of the deadly blunderbuss, as of yore. The still hale and hearty old gentleman, in the picturesque costume of the Mail Guard of the past, is a prominent figure at Paddington Station, and long may he so remain.⁵⁸

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⁵⁷ *Old Coaching Days: Some Incidents in the Life of Moses James Nobbs, the Last of the Mail Coach Guards, Told by Himself: with a Preface by the Controller of the London Postal Service* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1891).

⁵⁸ *ibid*, p. 8.
The decision to circulate Nobbs’ story during the Christmas season primes the reader for the sentimentality of the narrative. As we learn from Tombs, Nobbs continued to wear the same uniform he donned fifty years prior to perform a duty that had changed considerably. Nobbs’ superannuated attire betrays a being bound by duty to another time. His costume is described as “picturesque,” an aesthetic category that frames Nobbs within a distinct temporality: he is a living picture of a persistent past.

Figure 3. Moses James Nobbs, the Last of Mail-Coach Guards

Tombs also reveals that Nobbs was asked to attend major events in the development of the post, such as the Jubilee of the Penny Postage in 1890 and the inauguration of the of the City Telegraph Messengers’ Institute, which trained young men to operate the telegraph.59 When Nobbs participated in the inauguration of the Parcel Post Service by road between London and Brighton, he rode with the coach in full mail-coach attire: “He was fully equipped, as of yore, for

59 ibid, pp. 10-11.
that perilous journey, a timepiece from Jamaica serving to complete the outfit. The episode proved pathetic as the 91 year-old Nobbs’ attempts to blow the horn repeatedly failed owing to his having lost several teeth. The horn that galvanized English crowds half a century earlier now only aroused the sentimental humor. This pathetic account frames the repetition of an antiquated service that inaugurates a future postal line; it marks the old ushering in the new.

A remarkable fraction of Nobbs’ account is devoted to coaching accidents that are recounted in painstaking and gory detail. While Nobbs notes that such accidents on the road were “not uncommon,” he confesses that “some, of course, made more impression on [him] than others.” The narrative, then, becomes a receptacle of traumatic incidents even though its primary aim is to promote nostalgic reflection about the glory days of coaching. These incidents form the bulk of the narrative because they stand out from the ordinary course of business:

We had a very sad accident with that Mail once between Whitchurch and Andover. The coach used to start from Piccadilly, where all the passengers and baggage were taken up…My coachman had been having a drinking bout with a friend that day, and when we had got a few miles on the road I discovered that he was the worse for drink, and that it was not safe for him to drive; so when we reached Hounslow I made him get off the box seat. After securing the Mail bags, and putting the coachman in my seat and strapping him in, I took the ribbons. At Whitchurch the coachman unstrapped himself and exchanged places with me, but we had not proceeded more than three miles when, the coach giving a jolt over a heap of stones, he fell between the horses, and the wheels of the coach ran over him, killing him on the spot.  

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60 ibid p. 9.
61 ibid, p. 22.
After trying to seize the reins again, Nobbs fell into the road, but only sustained a sprained ankle and a few bruises. The unmanned horses returned the coach mechanically to the next station. Despite the traumatic event, Nobbs dutifully delivered the mail, and only returned the following day for the inquest for the accident. Nobbs’ persistence and duty to the mail-coach system reinforces the narrative of human endurance in the face of extreme circumstances. His body is almost placed in competition with the relentless efficiency of the postal system as it was absorbed by the railway. Just as De Quincey had celebrated the organic energy of the mail-coach horses in contrast to the mechanical organization of the railway system, Nobbs’ body exhibits superhuman strength and stamina, not only in physically trying circumstances but also during moments of emotional duress.

Nobbs goes onto describe an episode that proved a testament to his devotion to the Royal Mail. When his coach broke down near Randhor Forest a during a terrible snowstorm one winter, Nobbs confesses that he carried the post by foot in the snow over Plinlimmon mountain with the coach driver and two shepherds:

There was nothing for it but to press on again on foot, which I did for many miles until I came to Llangerrig. There I found it was hopeless to think of going over Plinlimmon, and was informed that nothing had crossed all day, so I made up my mind to go round by way of Llanidloes, and a night I had of it! I was almost tired out, and benumbed with cold, which brought on a drowsiness I found very hard to resist. If I had yielded to the feeling for an instant I should not have been telling these tales now. When I got about eight miles from Aberystwyth I found myself becoming thoroughly exhausted, so I hired a car for the remainder of the journey, and fell fast asleep as soon as I got into it. On arriving at Aberystwyth I was still sound asleep, and had to be carried to bed and a doctor
sent for, who rubbed me for hours before I could get my blood into circulation again. The next day I felt a good deal better and started back for Gloucester, but had great difficulty in getting over the mountain. Again I had the honor of receiving a letter from the Postmaster-General complimenting me on my zeal and energy in getting the Mail over the mountain.  

Mail-coach men were celebrated for their health, stamina, and their ability to hold their drink during long winter rides. Nobbs’ heroic report highlights the efforts of the post to keep alive the mail-coach age as one that relied on exhibitions of extreme human endurance, devotion, and coordination in the face of harsh natural conditions. While the railway certainly helped overcome the hardships of inclement weather by keeping the post on schedule, the mail-coach system was lauded for the human element that overcame those same hardships in the service of the timeliness and reliability of the Royal Mail system. Moreover, the same body that was threatened by a timely delivery of the post registers the trauma and cost of that endeavor only to report it decades later. And yet, despite the duress experienced on during this “winter adventure” the near-death experience is inflected by the nostalgia that frames the account.

The final section of Old Coaching Days, called “Other Coaching Incidents” forms a catalogue of similarly unfortunate and even traumatic tales of the mail-coach days of yore, including deaths, robberies, and storms. One episode involves the collapse of a bridge over the river Evan between Elvanfood and Beattock during a flood. The mail-coach apparently plunged into the rocky bed of the stream, killing the outside passengers and the horses and seriously injuring the inside passengers. Nobbs’ narrative thus in many ways resembles that De Quincey’s essay in its hosting both nostalgic reflection and the documentation of traumatic

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62 ibid, pp. 32-33.
63 ibid, p. 40.
experience that would have gone unrecorded. In their publication, they reinforce nostalgia and trauma as the dominant emotions communicated by a reflection on the mail-coach era.

The public fervor for the mail-coach era persisted until as recently as 1996, when Norwich Union sponsored a historical reenactment of the very last mail-coach service to leave London bound for Norwich on June 14, 1846.\(^{64}\) The coach run commemorated the 150\(^{th}\) anniversary of that final mail-coach journey by following the precise route of the London-Norwich Mail and completing the journey in the exact time it would have taken in 1846. Remarkably, the passengers of the mail-coach, including organizer John Parker, experienced the cold, fatigue, and drowsiness of the mail-coach guards. Moreover, the coach was met with the jubilee of great crowds at each of the inns the vehicle stopped at to change horses. The description of these electric gatherings fascinatingly recalls De Quincey’s account of the crowds receiving news about the Napoleonic Wars. By following the precise track of the final mail-coach run, the organizers of the event suggest that repetition is the most powerful form of nostalgia, one that thrives on the narrative reconstruction of the past.\(^{65}\) But, as De Quincey’s essay demonstrated, repetition is also a symptom of traumatic experience. And yet, trauma’s relationship to narrative is problematic. While nostalgia depends on narrative for its effect, trauma finds in it a potential cure, specifically as an attempt at mastery over an event that can never be totally experienced. That is, as De Quincey’s essay demonstrates, traumatic feelings are always in excess of narrative (“Dream-Fugue” formed the space of that excess), while nostalgic feelings can only exist within narrative.


\(^{65}\) *On Longing*, p. 23.
Coda: J.M.W. Turner, Transport, and Aesthetic Modernity

J.M.W. Turner’s painting *The Fighting Temeraire* (1838) bears striking thematic and symbolic similarities to De Quincey’s *The English Mail-Coach* [See Figure 1]. Both works are both clearly calculated to arouse nostalgia for a superannuated mode of transport at the moment of its displacement by modernity. Both vehicles are freighted with a rich patriotic history of the Napoleonic Wars conjured decades later when the modernization of transport has rendered them obsolete. Once again, modernity is the occasion for nostalgic narrative. Turner’s painting, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1839, emerged during a moment of contemporary concern about the memorialization of military heroes from the Napoleonic Wars. One such hero, Admiral Horatio Nelson, led the British navy to victory in the pivotal Battle of Trafalgar, an event to which Turner also famously lent his brush (*Battle of Trafalgar*, 1823).¹ Perhaps one of the most beloved of all of Turner’s paintings, *The Fighting Temeraire* is carefully arranged to provoke reflection about history and modernity. Gustave Courbet famously called the work an “allégorie réelle,” or a “real” (or modern) allegory,² and it has certainly been treated as such by art historians from the time of its exhibition to the present day. The most common reading is the most obvious: that it offers a narrative about the ushering out of the old by the new. The decaying, august warship is gently hauled to shore by the nimble modern steamer to be broken up for spare parts. The painting expresses what De Quincey proposed in his *Suspiria De Profundis*: the speed of modernization generates affective resistance in subjects caught up in its “colossal pace of advance.” Nostalgia is modernity’s counterforce.

² ibid, p. 167.
Because Turner lived through the Napoleonic Wars as a young man and also witnessed the rise of transport modernity, which he unequivocally revered, a painting like *The Fighting Temeraire* must have been produced with some ambivalence. As Leo Costello argues in his study on Turner and history painting, Turner’s work represents “the challenge of producing history paintings during a period in which the individual as a subject—of history, of the state, and of empire—was rapidly changing.”

Turner’s complex sense of historicity might partly be ascribed to painting during a time in which the subjectivity of the artist began to express itself in the work, a topic I’ll return to shortly. In *The Fighting Temeraire*, Turner uses foreground and background to structure its temporality: the hazy figure of the venerable ship, a ghostly presence seen as if through the fog of history, is led from the sea by the small tugboat, which presents

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itself in crisp focus and glides effortlessly to shore. Turner assembled the picture with the sunset on the right, marking the passage of the frigate into the space of history. And yet, the brilliant vermillion of the sunset also reverberates with the fiery engine of the steamboat: the element of modernity in the painting thus resonates with an image of inescapable temporal progress of the mail-coach. It is as if the sun itself were dragging the ship to rest. The pun on “berth” in the original title—“tugged to her last berth”—has interested many critics, but Richard Stein puts it well when he finds in the term elements of midwifery as well as burial; the pun suggests that the “the act of bringing a new being into the world is remembered the moment it is ushered out.”

The Fighting Temeraire humanizes the body of the old ship in such a way that it transforms the scene into a somber procession before an execution, which makes the tugboat—and modernity itself—a sinister executioner. Writing as a young journalist for Blackwood’s Magazine, William Makepeace Thackeray penned an oft-quoted review of the painting, calling it “the best picture in the room” and the small steamer in it a “diabolical little demon.” This was a common response. In her full-length study of the painting, Judy Egerton reveals that “emotions run so high over this picture that if you ask anyone about the role of the tug, they will inevitably answer that it is dragging the Temeraire along in a diabolically eager and spiteful manner.”

These aggressive reactions summarize the contemporary vilification of modern transport, and the tendency to associate it with the elements of the Satanic. And yet, the stillness of the water before the gliding ships surely indicates that, despite the somber occasion, England has finally achieved peace after years of political strife.

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4 Stein, p. 187.
5 Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine. XLVI. July-December 1839, pp. 312-313.
Ruskin believed that “of all the pictures not visibly involving human pain, this is the most pathetic that ever was painted”; nothing, he thought, could be as affecting as this “gliding vessel to her grave.”

I’m fascinated by this sentimental identification with the noble Temeraire, the way it provokes not only pity, but also feelings of nationalism and pride. Contemporary responses transform the ship into the corpse of a war hero honored at a funeral. But, Turner’s painting inspired more than just feelings. Dozens of poems derived from viewings of the work survive, some from writers as revered as Herman Melville, who gave the frigate a human heart in his verses: “O, Titan Temeraire,/Your stern-lights fade away;/Your bulwarks to the years must yield/And heart-of-oak decay.”

Just as Leigh Hunt’s mail-coach “contained as many passions [in thee] as a human heart,” Melville’s Temeraire bears one with which Englishmen universally sympathized, and this collective, indeed electric sentiment owes its power to Turner’s affecting painting.

In this dissertation, I have been arguing that figures of modern transport became, in the hands of Romantic writers, tropes for modern feelings, and in these last few pages, I’d like to suggest that Turner’s artistic oeuvre participates in this tradition. That transport was one of Turner’s favorite subjects is not news. However, I’d like to underscore the extent to which the painter used this particular subject as a rhetorical figure, not only for the purpose of inspiring British nationalism, but to arouse complex, sometimes conflicting feelings about nature, history, and technology modernity. Like the writers at the center of this study, Turner contributes to the

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9 “Seeing the picture for the first time, many contemporary critics instinctively reacted to its beauty and complexity by deeming it to be a poem: ‘a nobly composed poem,’ according to the Art-Union and ‘a very poetical conception,’ according to Blackwood’s. More resoundingly, Thackeray was to liken the picture to ‘a magnificent ode or piece of music.’” Egerton, pp. 11-12.
articulation of vehicular form by finding in man’s changing relationship to natural power a point of reflection about his own creative impulses and investing in his pictorial depictions of modern vehicles feelings like nostalgia, sublimity, and even trauma. Most importantly, however, his transport paintings proved central to his artistic project and, as such, their contribution to aesthetic modernity cannot be overestimated. Art historians agree that works like *Snow Storm. Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth* (1842) and the famous *Rain, Steam, and Speed* (1844), represent the culmination of Turner’s style and encapsulate his most rigorous reflection about industrialization and modernity. Modern transport in particular offered itself as an ideal subject for experiments in style because novel experiences like speed and counter-current progress required new forms of dynamic representation to meet the peculiar demands of modern locomotion.

Turner is an ideal subject for my study because his excursions to the Continent to collect sketches for new paintings involved using the very modes of transport that made their way into his paintings. The fall of Napoleon opened up travel to and within the Continent, but it was travel unlike anything Europeans had experienced before because advances in steam navigation made touring the area quicker and available to a larger class of travelers. The first steamboat on the Rhine went from London to Rotterdam and up to Cologne as early as 1816, a trip that took on ly four days instead of the six weeks that were usually required to complete the journey.\(^\text{10}\) Within a decade, steam travel in France and Germany became commonplace, and Turner used such waterways to gather preliminary sketches. Like Wordsworth, he helped produce guidebooks for tourists moving through the region, which contained engravings of many of his drawings.\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{10}\) Inge Herold, *Turner on Tour* (New York: Prestel, 1997), p. 10

\(^{11}\) Turner was one of the first to introduce the steamers into the engravings of the travel guidebook genre, as in his *Wanderings by the Seine, with twenty-one engravings* by Leitch Ritchie and J.M.W. Turner (1834). Thus, he not only used these channels of transport for his own work, he also promoted them in his
Indeed, his direct experience with steam travel made a clear impact on Turner’s style, as his late work demonstrates. However, it is also true that transport had always been a central preoccupation of Turner’s. His early paintings feature subjects like commercial shipping boats and historic naval battles, paintings that are considered some of the most brilliant seascapes in the history of British art. Enormous warships and fishing vessels not only proved to be rich sites for the exploration of his revolutionary technique of representing dynamic natural scenes, like moving water and storms, they also served as effective vehicles for patriotic sentiment. Indeed, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the British Empire had reached its apex due to the power of its navy, and Turner’s work documents this sense of national pride.

A much different sentiment emerges, however, when observing paintings like, *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying - Typhon Coming On* (1840) [See Figure 2]. This work represents that ghastly episode in history in which the crew of the Zong threw overboard dozens of ill and dying slaves to claim an insurance policy on its human cargo. While clearly stylized to inspire sublime feelings, the painting also arouses disgust at the inhumanity of the event, which even nature rejects in the lurid colors that mix in the sea and the storm that approaches as if to punish the crew. *Slavers* thus represents a vehicle charged with inhumanity and its natural repercussions. If the painting summons the natural sublime in any way, it is in the service of moral instruction, and, as I’ve shown, figures of transport in this study often function as affectively pedagogical tropes in the tradition of equestrianism. Designed to provoke horror and indignation about modern trade and the human casualties of capitalism, *Slavers* offers a strong example of the rhetorical claims Turner’s transport paintings make on their audience.

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engravings. For an interesting discussion about Turner’s debate with his publisher about whether to include steamboats in the engravings, see William Rodner’s *J.M.W. Turner: Romantic Painter of the Industrial Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 31-32.
Figure 2: *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying - Typhon Coming On* (1840)
J.M.W. Turner

My readings of transport in writings by Shelley and De Quincey, and those produced in the Romantic culture of ballooning, develop the political implications of using modern vehicles as rhetorically expedient tropes. Turner’s transport paintings function similarly through their impressive style, which was immediately recognized as modern because of its distinctive ability to draw focus to the materiality of his medium while communicating, with haunting accuracy, a dynamic impression of the subject. Often, one is surprised that a subject emerges at all from the ordered chaos of color and brushstroke; but it does, and his paintings manage to convey surprisingly precise feelings about imprecise objects. Like Shelley, Turner was often referred to as a dazzling magician whose style deviated from nature so willfully that to look on his paintings was misleading.\(^{12}\) The truth that emerged from them had less to do with realism and more so

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with the subjective experience of the artist and the effect of being displaced from reality by the emotions occasioned by the object. Many contemporaries recognized the importance of this movement away from imitation, and critics still debate the extent to which Turner’s style marks the turn toward impressionism and modernist abstraction. In his essay “On Imitation,” William Hazlitt remarked that Turner took our eyes away from nature to focalize his medium:

Turner is the ablest landscape painter now living, whose pictures are, however, too much abstractions of aerial perspective, and representations not so properly of the objects of nature as of the medium through which they are seen. They are the triumph of the artist, and of the power of the pencil over the barrenness of the subject. They are pictures of the elements of air, earth, and water…Someone said of his landscapes that they were *pictures of nothing, and very like.*

The proposition that Turner’s pictures represent “nothing” underscores the idea that his subject matter is subsumed or overwhelmed by his style. As my chapter on Shelley and metaphor discussed, Shelley’s poetry suffered similar criticisms: his technique was unmistakably strong, but his representations were off, and worse, misapplied. Like Shelley’s critics, Turner’s grew wary of his artistry and its moral implications. His severest objectors condemned Turner’s turning away from nature and using his medium to create *effects.* One such critic, Robert Fry, offers a representative reading:

Turner was a man of glittering genius, but with an imagination that could not express itself within the limits of the painter’s medium…Turner did create a new vision; he explored hitherto unrecorded aspects of nature, he noted passing effects that had eluded

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14 Such a concern was also true of writings by Ann Radcliffe and Thomas De Quincey, who, like Shelley and Turner, produced aesthetic effects using a style that introduces tremendous ethical and political implications.
less alert observers, but his observation and his power of recording what he saw were at
the bidding of a non-pictorial imagination. It was not, strictly speaking, a painter’s
sensibility that prompted him. It was the love of whatever was scenically impressive or
dramatically striking that fired his imagination. He used all his resources and all his
stored-up images of things seen to heighten effects that are not primarily concerned with
the visual aspects of things. In short, Turner was primarily a *sublime illustrator*; he
created almost a new conception: that of dramatic illustration by means of a landscape.15

For Frye, Turner did not *look at* nature, but rather *looked past* her to the conceptions of his own
imagination, and used his medium to materialize that conception. According to his biggest
critics, then, Turner used his style to overwhelm the subject and to project his own image of
nature outward.

I raise these critical discussions in preparation for a discussion about Turner’s late
paintings of modern transport. I’d like to suggest that the transformation of nature involved in
modern locomotive power mirrors Turner’s own stylistic manipulation of nature. What he saw in
steamboats and speeding trains was an expression of man’s technological prowess in competition
with sublime natural power. In other words, Turner identified in modern vehicles objects that
offered apt analogues and occasions for his own style. It is a style that incorporates an
understanding of modern transport’s revolt against natural rhythms, or what Wolfgang
Schivelbusch called a revolt against mimesis. For T.J. Clark, the presence of steam in modern
art beginning with Turner represented, first and foremost, power, but also the pliability of nature

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15 *J.M.W. Turner: The Making of a Modern Artist*, p. 109. Smiles notes that “to acknowledge Turner’s
genius, dexterity and adroitness is, for Fry, to accept Turner as a conjurer who dazzles to deceive; instead
of looking, he makes pictures. Rather than contemplate the world disinterestedly, as great artists do,
Turner is too frantic in his pursuit of his career, using his skill to buttress his overweening authority.” p.
110.
in the modern age, and all the promise that this capacity to refashion nature had for art’s “sense of futurity”:

…I began to realize that steam, in the art of the last two centuries was, never unequivocally, a figure of emptying and evanescence. It was always also an image of power. Steam could be harnessed; steam could be compressed. Steam was what initially made the machine world possible. It was the middle term in mankind’s great reconstruction of Nature. *Rain, Steam, and Speed.* The speed that followed from compression turns the world into one great vortex in the Turner, one devouring spectral eye, where rain, sun, cloud and river are seen, from the compartment window, as they have never been seen before. Steam is power and possibility, then; but also, very soon, it is antiquated—it is a figure for nostalgia, for a future, or a sense of futurity, that the modern age had at the beginning but could never make come to pass.\(^{16}\)

Wordsworth had also prophesied this sense of futurity in his sonnet, “Steamboats, Viaducts and Railways”:

Nor shall your presence, howsoever it mar
The loveliness of Nature, prove a bar
To the Mind's gaining that prophetic sense
Of future change, that point of vision, whence
May be discovered what in soul ye are.\(^{17}\)

For Clark, steam represented infinite possibility, a symbolic potential that wanes considerably in the postmodern age. Steam also signified pliable nature: man wrests nature’s powers, transmutes them, and renders them back again, indeed, uses nature’s powers against her in a reworked form.

In the case of modern transport, steam reformulated natural power to introduce new forms of

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\(^{16}\) See “Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam” *October*, 100 (Spring, 2002), pp. 156-157.

\(^{17}\) Wordsworth reprinted this famous sonnet in his *Kendal and Windermere Railway. Two Letters; Reprinted from the Morning Post. Revised with Additions* (Kendal: R. Branthwaite, 1845). He notes there that he first published the poem in 1837, and “composed it some years earlier.” p. 22.
locomotion. Wordsworth’s sonnet makes Clark’s point: modern transport opened up a “sense” of the future by producing sensations and experiences that art would struggle to represent, but that struggle would also yield new forms of art. This is the modern challenge of vehicular form. What Wordsworth meant by the “soul” of modern transport, however, remains a question. If for Northrop Frye, vehicular form described the demands of a “a greater creative power” on the soul of the artist, one might argue that what Wordsworth meant by “soul” was steam.

No painting represents the soul of steam like *Snow Storm. Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth* (1842), which Turner exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1842 [See Figure 3]. The question that immediately emerges is this: what makes this painting different from *Snowstorm: Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps* (1812), which represents the same meteorological phenomena and arouses similar sublime feelings? How does *Snow Storm* (1842) revise Turner’s ideas about sublimity? The painting certainly does re-articulate the aesthetic category by introducing the element of technological power. In *Snow Storm*, we identify with the power of the steamer, the human element in the scene. As David Nye has argued of the technological sublime, the source of sublimity shifts from natural to “man-made” power. But, there is more to be said here. In traditional sublime painting, like that of Hannibal and his army, we imaginatively identify with the human element to experience, at one remove, from a position of safety, the power of nature over the people in the scene. In the case of *Snow Storm* (1842), however, the aesthetic dynamic is distinct. We identify with the steamer, but the steamer is just as much a source of power as the storm. While the threat remains, the painting suggests that the conflict with nature has changed because the technological element offers a redoubled challenge on behalf of man. The nature of the identification with the human element thus evolves from experiencing the threat of annihilation to experiencing that threat in addition to a power that

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comes from within the self that is expressed in the challenge. In other words, the power of the imagination to project the self into the artwork is exposed by the technology as a diegetic power source.

Steam, then, might be said to do three things in Turner’s painting. First, it extends man’s power over nature, and in doing so transforms the experience of sublimity. Second, it frames and represents precisely the psychological activity described in theories of the sublime. That is, the steamboat stands in for the human imagination as a counterforce to natural power. Whereas in Hannibal Crossing the Alps, man’s confrontation with a destructive nature is unmediated, in Snow Storm, technology intervenes to reformulate the struggle articulated in the aesthetic category. Third, Turner’s style and technique in representing such a scene mirrors the technical skill of the engineer, whose machine wrestles with the storm. In other words, both painter and engineer confront the storm with technical ability. What makes the technological presence striking in this particular sublime painting is that it frames the technical and rhetorical skill of the artist.

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19 Rodner suggests that “industrial subjects vied with nature in stimulating Turner’s romantic imagination. Yet while steam technology drew from Turner ever more daring painterly approaches, it also worked to discipline his imagination.” I’m interested in what Rodner means by “discipline” here as the development of a style that is called on to meet the new demands of modern transport. J.M.W. Turner: Romantic Painter of the Industrial Revolution, p. 19.
Figure 3. *Snow Storm. Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth, making signals in Shallow Water, and going by the lead. The author was in this storm the night the Ariel left Harwich.* J.M. W. Turner (1842)

In *Snow Storm*, the relationship between modern transport’s reworking of natural power for new movement and Turner’s revolutionary use of materials to create the effect of “transport” becomes clear. If in theories of the sublime, “transport” indicates the movement of the reader through forceful representation, Turner’s style displaces the viewer by drawing him or her into the diegetic space of the painting. In other words, Turner’s technique represents the effect of being moved by that vehicle in the storm. There is a dynamic toggling between our own world and the tumultuous space of the steamboat platform, one that is native to the discourse of the sublime. But, another question arises in the painting’s engagement with this discourse: if the aim of the painting is to place us on board the steamboat during the tempest, does it abolish the distance required to retain a position of safety so crucial to sublime experience? Is it still
sublime? While the element of security is certainly compromised in the elimination of aesthetic distance, it takes new form in the power supplied by the steam engine, which the painting suggests allows the steamer to navigate the storm with more security than a mere ship or sailboat.\(^2\) Turner’s style thus abolishes aesthetic distance in favor of a sense of immediacy, all the while retaining, indeed heightening, the experience of sublimity.

Turner’s famous anecdote about the origin of the painting, which is suggested in the original title, places the artist himself at the center of the tempest. According to Ruskin, it was Reverend William Kingsley of Sidney College who offered the account in a letter. During a showing of Turner’s paintings to his mother, Kingsley remarked:

She said she had been in such a scene off the coast of Holland during the war. When, some time afterwards, I thanked Turner for his permission for her to see his pictures, I told him that he would not guess which had caught my mother's fancy, and then named the picture; and he then said, 'I did not paint it to be understood, but I wished to show what such a scene was like; I got the sailors to lash me to the mast to observe it; I was lashed for four hours, and I did not expect to escape, but I felt bound to record it if I did. But no one had any business to like the picture.' 'But,' said I, 'my mother once went through just such a scene, and it brought it all back to her.' 'Is your mother a painter?' 'No.' 'Then she ought to have been thinking of something else.' These were nearly his

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\(^2\) John Hamilton corroborates my point about the sense of security Turner suggests with his steamboats: “As an indicator of his general attitude to the technological progress he saw all around him, we should note at the outset that although there are many shipwrecks in Turner’s paintings they are all of sailing ships or rowing boats. There are no wrecked steamships in Turner.” See “From Sail to Steam: The Absence of Trouble” in *Turner and the Scientists* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1998), p. 75.
words; I observed at the time he used 'record' and 'painting,' as the title’s 'author' had struck me before."

Scholars unanimously agree that the story is false, as Turner was sixty-seven at the time of the event and such an experience would have surely killed him. However, the proposition of presence itself, which is reinforced by the long title (“The author was in this storm the night the Ariel left Harwich”), places the “author” in the scene of the painting. What is the importance of this? Why should it matter that Turner witnessed the storm? What is clear is that, for Turner, the experience of modern transport, of being moved by its vehicles, became vital to their representation. It had less to do with arriving at any precision of representing the object and more about conveying a sense of what it was like to be aboard these modern vehicles as well as the power that drove them. And so, an important element of these works is the phenomenological experience of the vehicle. The paintings displace as the vehicles would displace. What is provocative about this artistic endeavor is that the viewer of the painting suffers a divided subjectivity: he exists somewhere between his own position and the diegetic space of the steamer.

Kingsley’s account of the origin of the painting opposes experience and understanding. Turner’s alleged remark is indeed perplexing. But, if we consider understanding to mean that one

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21 *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1905), vol. 7, p. 445. Ruskin paraphrases the anecdote in *Modern Painters*, where he says of the painting: “Of course it was not understood; his finest works never are; but there was some apology for the public’s not comprehending this, for few people have had the opportunity of seeing the sea at such a time, and when they have, they cannot face it. To hold a mast or a rock, and watch it, is a prolonged endurance of drowning which few people have courage to go through.” *Modern Painters*, vol. 1 (New York: John Wiley & Son, 1866), p. 382.

22 As John Gage discusses in his study of the painting and its contexts, *Rain, Steam and Speed* carries a similar back story in which Turner spots the scene depicted in the painting from the window of another moving train (or coach, depending on the version). Whether true or not, the importance of witnessing or having experienced the mode of transport (whether on the vehicle, or from a viewpoint beyond its path) is central to Turner’s representations. *Turner: Rain, Steam and Speed* (London: Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 1972), pp. 14-17.
has a firm grasp on a subject, while an “experience” might suggest a more phenomenological account of it without a totalizing grasp, the explanation becomes clear. To accurately communicate, in a work of art, what it is to be at sea during such a storm is precisely not to grasp the subject because the event involves the helplessness of consciousness. In its confusion and chaos, the painting does justice to the event. There is no sky and sea, but only a tangled intermixture of grey air and water. There is no center, or source of orientation except the glowing of the engine, which is the painting’s gravitational point, the source of the energy of the action. As the center of the vortex, the engine organizes the chaos of natural power even as Turner’s skill organizes the elements of the painting.

Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway (1840) presents us with a different kind of locomotion than Snow Storm [See Figure 4]. While steamboats convert energy for counter-current progress, railway cars moved along tracks that smoothed away nature’s irregular surface to reduce its resistance. That is, what is most impressive about steam navigation is that its energies are directed to resist the sea during its progress, while railway locomotives achieved escalating speeds because nature’s resistance was cleared before its progress began. Rain, Steam and Speed might be called an ode to speed. The order of its staccato title suggests a narrative of energy conversion: Rain. Steam. Speed. As in The Fighting Temeraire, foreground and background structure the viewer’s encounter with the work, with the train coming into increasing focus as it “approaches” the viewer. The hazy indistinctness of the painting’s background, an effect of the moisture in the air on this presumably rainy day, frames the locomotive by virtue of a contrast in focus. But, might this contrast have a temporal dimension, as it did in The Fighting Temeraire? One could read the approaching train as Wordsworth did: as an “incoming” prophecy of technological modernity. Or, one could interpret the painting’s background as
history itself, fading slowly behind what De Quincey called the “colossal pace of advance.” If so, the painting makes an argument about the relationship between speed and history. In the age of speed, the past becomes paradox: it is at once more intimate (something just “passed up”) and increasingly murky, as something seen from the rear of a moving vehicle.

Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway. J.M.W. Turner (1844)

In his recent meditation on speed and modernism, Enda Duffy suggests that Turner’s painting expresses the helpless passivity of early railway travelers:

But speed’s power is acknowledged as awe-inspiringly impressive: it literally vaporizes the landscape through which it cuts. Nature becomes diaphanous when speed out-natures it. This spectral, magically transformed landscape is effective as speed spectacle because
in its vague comfort, it corresponds to the helplessness with which Victorians experienced this speed: passively, as passengers.\textsuperscript{23}

Duffy reads in the painting elements of spectacle: the sense of being shuttled by a speedy vehicle is akin to the passive nature of being a spectator. The “diaphanous” quality of the landscape is seen as through the lens of speed, almost as an after-image. For Duffy, such a perception is only possible under the passive conditions in which speed places the subject. While I find this argument convincing, there is also a power that this painting demands from the viewer that corresponds to its power of locomotion. The sensations that speed produced surely made new demands on human consciousness that called on the active powers of the mind. In a statement that somewhat contradicts his assertion about passivity, Duffy argues elsewhere that “the individual rapidly improvises new powers of alertness and seeing, that she matches with her own response time, her sense of self-control of her own energy” (5). The new level of “alertness” and “self-control” is precisely what Turner translated into a style that represented the power of modern transport as a function of a displaced subjectivity. Thackeray remarked in his response to the painting in the June 1844 issue of \textit{Fraser’s Magazine} that it was made “with real rain, with real sunshine” and that one expects the train to dash away at fifty miles an hour.\textsuperscript{24} This characterization is remarkable because it registers the effect of subjective experience the painting designs: the viewer’s sensual contact with the painting as an object is transformed, by the sheer force of style, into contact with the actual natural elements in the painting. Thackeray’s suggestion also points to the pliability of the elements involved in steam locomotion in relation


\textsuperscript{24} Thackeray’s comment that the train appears as if it will dash out of the picture plane reminds me of responses to the earliest films by the Lumière brothers, who shot railway locomotives pulling into stations. Members of the audience were reportedly so terrified by the novelty of the moving image, they left their seats in fright, fearing the train would fly beyond the screen.
to Turner’s technical mastery over his medium. In the age of modern transport, new forms of energy made new demands on the artist and his materials, and Turner certainly met the challenge.
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