Noncathartic Intimacies in Nineteenth-Century Poetry

by

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Abstract

Noncathartic Intimacies in Nineteenth-Century Poetry joins two significant trends in nineteenth-century scholarship: a growing interest (particularly over the past decade) in how poetry responds to the emerging understanding of evolution and species extinction, and a focus on poetry's unique capacity for describing intimate relationships. Using poems of the long nineteenth century as my archive, from verse novels to sonnets, epistolary narratives to scientific studies, I situate the emergence of noncatharsis as a mode of poetry within the century's existential re-evaluation of love and art as uniquely human pursuits. Across the dissertation, I develop modes of "noncathartic reading" that suspend interpretative certainty in favour of ambiguity and surprise.

My dissertation investigates, firstly, why so many poets were drawn to noncatharsis as a poetic practice and a mode of relation, and how narratives of noncathartic intimacies enabled writers to respond to the newly unsettled category of the "human". Through its embrace of dissatisfaction and persistence, noncatharsis inspired writers to question common assumptions—such as the need for intimacy to be mutual or synchronous or experienced only by humans—and provoked poetic experiments that tested out new theories of love. In these experiments, intimacy threatens the taxonomic stability of the "human" as species and planetary agent. Consequentially, noncathartic poems hypothesise that the intimate relationships they document have the profound capacity to change bodies on a molecular level.

The introduction sets forth a definition of "noncatharsis" and demonstrates how it interacts with my main terms: intimacy, poetry, and the nonhuman. My first chapter uses the poetry of Percy Shelley, Erasmus Darwin, and Mathilde Blind to consider how nineteenth-century writers established a poetics of waste that reflected on the increasing irrelevancy of the human species. Comparing Shelley to Blind, I show how the association of the human with waste changed over the century: from a belief in humanity's unique inadequacies to a post-Darwinian belief in the inherent similarity of the human and nonhuman, and thus the human's essential redundancy. In my second chapter, centred on Algernon Charles Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* and Michael Field's *Long Ago,* I investigate how these poets created forms of voice distinct from the figure of a human speaker. I argue that Swinburne devised a "voice" that adopted the accretive, repulsive, and repetitive aspects of waste, which inspired Field to create their own vocal experiments influenced by the amalgamating properties of the atmosphere.

My third chapter analyses John Keats's 'Isabella; or the Pot of Basil' and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Willowwood sonnets, both of which stage romantic encounters between human and nonhuman bodies. By stretching the definition of "love" to its breaking point, Keats and Rossetti turn amorous bodies into experimental laboratories in which love manifests through the taxonomic alterations experienced by the participants. In my fourth chapter, focused on the genre of the long Victorian poem, I use the concept of "nonmutual time" to evince the connection between love and asynchronicity in poems such as *Aurora Leigh* and *Amours de Voyage*. Rather than reading these relationships and their idiosyncratic reliance on delays and miscommunications as failed intimacies, I contend that nonmutual time enables alternate and counterintuitive forms of intimate pleasure.

Introduction

Throughout the nineteenth century, writers developed poetical treatises that attempted to identify and explain what made a poem a good poem. Among the attributes Leigh Hunt assigns to good poetry are "straightforwardness, unsuperfluousness, *variety*, and *oneness*".[1] For Cardinal Newman, poetry "bounds and finishes off the confused luxuriance of real nature", in which "unnatural peculiarities are laid aside, and harsh contrasts reconciled".[2] Matthew Arnold suggests that poetical enjoyment fails in works where "there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done", where "suffering finds no vent in action"; good poetry should evince an interest in "human actions" and "elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time".[3] Together, these writers make a case for good poetry as universal, internally consistent, atemporal, and polished. And yet many nineteenth-century poems deliberately diverge from these aims, creating instead an aesthetic of irresolution, frustration, ambiguity, and temporal convolution.

[1] Leigh Hunt, 'An Answer to the Question, "What is Poetry?"', *The Works of Leigh Hunt: Volume IV, Selections from English Poets,* Philadelphia: Willis P. Hazard, 1856. pp. 1-48 (p. 26).

[2] Cardinal Newman, 'Poetry, with Reference to Aristotle's *Poetics*', *Essays: Critical and Historical, Vol. I,* London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1897. pp. 1-29 (p. 9).

[3] Matthew Arnold, 'Preface to First Edition of *Poems* (1853)', *The Works of Matthew Arnold,* Vol. XI, London: Macmillan and Co, 1904. pp. 270-293 (p. 273, p. 275).

Drawing on Arnold's description of poems where "there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done", I term this aesthetic *non*cathartic.

Noncathartic Intimacies in Nineteenth-Century Poetry investigates, firstly, why so many poets were drawn to noncatharsis as a poetic practice and a mode of relation, and how narratives of noncathartic intimacies enabled writers to respond to the newly unsettled category of the "human". I argue that writers were drawn to noncatharsis because it provided an alternate route to working through seemingly irresolvable issues surrounding love, life, and writing. Through its embrace of dissatisfaction and persistence, noncatharsis inspired writers to question common assumptions—such as the need for intimacy to be mutual or synchronous or experienced only by humans—and provoked poetic experiments that tested out new theories of love. In these experiments, intimacy threatens the taxonomic stability of the "human" as species and planetary agent. Consequentially, noncathartic poems hypothesise that the intimate relationships they document have the profound capacity to change bodies on a molecular level—and that this is the result of the kinds of experiences noncatharsis enables, such as accessing temporal and spatial scales far beyond the human, or endlessly generating frustration and disappointment as affective states tied to intimate events.

Using poems of the long nineteenth century as my archive, from verse novels to sonnets, epistolary narratives to scientific studies, I situate the emergence of noncatharsis as a mode of poetry within the century's changing attitudes towards the role of the "human" in the context of geological history and the societal purpose of marriage. Separately, scholars have tracked how both of these phenomena have ties to the era's poetry. Leigh Hunt describes the relationship between verse and the poet as "lovers,

playfully challenging each other's rule",[4] and publications from Patricia M. Ball's *The Heart's Events: The Victorian Poetry of Relationships* (1976) to *Love Among the Poets: The Victorian Poetics of Intimacy* (2024), edited by Pearl Chaozon Bauer and Erik Gray, recognise poetry as a form uniquely equipped to articulate intimate relations. Meanwhile, the relationship between nineteenth-century poetry and a growing consciousness of the "human" as species and planetary agent has been explored by Jesse Oak Tyler, Devin M. Garofalo, Tobias Menely, Dana Luciano, and others. My project breaks new ground by tying these approaches together, demonstrating that the century's poetic experiments should be read as a response to the increasing insecurity about the significance of the "human" as one species of many, and that intimate relationships became the locus in which these experiments were conducted.

Why Noncatharsis?

I take the term "noncatharsis" from Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005). Ngai describes how the "minor and generally unprestigious feelings" she documents, from envy, irritation, and anxiety, to stuplimity and paranoia, are "explicitly *a*moral and *non*cathartic" in opposition to Aristotle's understanding of catharsis as a "particularly aesthetic emotion, the arousal and eventual purgation of fear made possible by the genre of tragic drama".[5] These ugly feelings provide "no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release", but rather "give rise to a noncathartic aesthetic: art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release (another form of 'suspended action') and does so

[4] Hunt, p. 25.

[5] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. p. 6.

as a kind of politics".[6] Ngai identifies in these minor and petty feelings a veneer of irrelevance and impotence that in fact veils their significant capacity for mediating between the aesthetic and the political. I am guided by her identification of a "noncathartic aesthetic" founded on "a failure of emotional release", which I see as defining one narrative that can be told about the development of poetry in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, I follow her example in examining that which may seem superficially to fail at its achieved task—or to have no particular task at all—but which when scrutinised demonstrates a profound ability to give art meaning. Unlike Ngai, however, whose compendium of ugly feelings ranges across genre, form, and time period, I focus on one literary genre (the poem) and a restricted period of time (roughly from 1790 to 1900).

Before I elaborate on the ways in which I see the concept of noncatharsis emerging in nineteenth-century thought on intimacy, poetry, and the status of the human, I want to delineate some aspects of what I term "noncatharsis":

> 1) Unlike narrative devices such as anticlimax (an underwhelming or unsatisfactory finale to a narrative) or cliffhangers (an ending designed deliberately to maintain irresolution and suspense), which both pivot on a moment of unmet expectation, noncatharsis is durational. It is both the continual accumulation throughout a poem of elements such as frustration, ambiguity, repetition, incoherence, and provisionality, and the refusal to resolve these elements into a satisfactory culmination, or what Ngai calls "therapeutic release". A poem is not designated noncathartic simply because of how it ends, but because the poem as a whole is designed to subvert the expectations a nineteenth-century reader brings to it. These poems—and the intimacies they document—are studies in emotions or

[6] Ngai, p. 6, p. 9.

experiences that never go anywhere; in fact, they can be said to never definitively end, but rather endure without ever seeming to be put to use. Part of how they do this is through defying the deceptively neat categories of "narrative" and "lyric", or "chronos" and "kairos". In a noncathartic poem, time can be nonlinear, looping back in on itself in order to return to what has already occurred, or it can be suspended and static, frustrating any sense of forward momentum: either way, it functions through a kind of discontinuous duration that reverberates between epiphanic moments and that which persists over time.

2) Because of these temporal convolutions, noncathartic poems often look beyond the human when trying to structure their scales of experience and relationality. If the human was associated with linearity, transience, and a fixed sense of time passing, poets sought to get outside of the human by writing poems that undermined or contested these assumptions. One way, therefore, in which noncathartic poems sought to challenge expectations about both poetry and intimacy was by creating structures, scales, and rhythms that operate counterintuitively when seen from a human perspective. By counterintuitive, I mean that these modes of experience often favoured systems that the human was unable to access, whether through vast temporal scales that far exceeded the human lifespan or vast spatial scales like the growing distribution of land occupied by the British Empire. In this sense, they are comparable to what Timothy Morton terms hyperobjects: "so massive that humans can think and compute them, but not perceive them directly".[7] Art becomes one way in which these hyperobjects are approached sideways in order to imperfectly perceive them through gaps, disjunctions, inconsistencies, and contradictions. For the poets I look at, intimacy itself becomes a hyperobject, exceeding the individual, impossible to perceive and identify except in localised flashes, resistant to comprehensive understanding. After

[7] Timothy Morton, 'Victorian Hyperobjects', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts,* Vol. 36, No. 5, 2014. 489-500 (489).

all, according to Morton hyperobjects are a distinctly Victorian phenomenon. "These entities began to impress themselves on us humans in the Victorian period," he explains. "We know them, for instance, as geological time, capital, industry, evolution, cities, the unconscious, electromagnetism, climate phenomena such as El Niño, and so on".[8]

3) Noncatharsis operates through continually deferring and displacing recognition and revelation. It does this in order to maintain possibility, but another consequence is that it reveals the impossibility of ever truly knowing another person, or experiencing mutuality, synchronicity, and reciprocity with another. Desire is misdirected or misperceived; it becomes a theoretical problem that resists a consensus. The tension between possibility/impossibility exposes how, for nineteenth-century poets, noncatharsis was a way of making things happen and simultaneously a method for understanding how absence, resistance, and illegibility are generative to think alongside and through. As a mode of relation, noncatharsis offers a kind of intimacy that never crystallises or becomes apparent. There is no moment of realisation, no clear confession of feelings, but rather an accumulation of obscure and unfulfilled longing. This is true even of intimate relationships that do not present as romantic love. In Chapter 1, for example, which focuses on poems that interrogate more broadly the idea of human/nonhuman coexistence and dependence, the relationship is still defined by the conceptual difficulty of imagining an intimacy where one will vastly outlive the other and where proximity often leads to harm and extinction.

4) Another way of thinking about how noncatharsis alters our concept of desire is that desire often manifests as unrecognisable or illogical forms in the poems I

[8] Morton, 489.

study. What, for instance, does it mean to romantically desire the nonhuman, or even to hold open the possibility that the nonhuman might also experience a version of romantic desire? What happens to our understanding of desire when we take seriously its potential for transforming the body as a manifestation of that desire? If desire remains unspoken and unacknowledged, if desire is not only never acted on but never even claimed as desire, is it still intelligible as desire? Many of the poems I have chosen for this study embrace the representational challenge these questions gesture towards. In these texts, desire is suitably unwieldy and enigmatic, often becoming comprehensible only as "frustration" or "disappointment" or "ambivalence", but my argument is that the framework of noncatharsis reconfigures these otherwise obstructive affects to become rewarding and inexplicably pleasurable experiences in their own right. In this sense, noncathartic intimacies are not failed intimacies, but rather unorthodox versions of intimacy that consider convoluted orientations and uncomfortable conditions not as an obstacle or challenge but as an invitation.

5) Noncatharsis is defined through a continual accumulation of seemingly useless and/or negative affect, but this definition is contingent on this accumulation being refused release, rather than the lack of opportunity for release. If the possibility of satisfaction exists within the world of the work—along with the possibility that intimacy might lead somewhere and mean something explicable—then the poet's decision to refuse this possibility in favour of the noncathartic tells us something important about the opportunities that noncatharsis afforded these writers.

The question then becomes, why? Why do these works favour a lack of resolution, an aggregation of frustration and confusion, a kind of poetics and relationality that endeavours to emulate nonhuman attributes? My dissertation seeks to answer that question.

Why Intimacy?

One aspect that differentiates my interest in noncatharsis from Ngai's—or from forms such as Anne-Lise François's recessive action[9] or Rei Terada's dissatisfaction[10]—is my conceptualisation of noncatharsis as a mode of relation as well as an aesthetic. The nineteenth century is a particularly rich area for this kind of relational study because of the many ways in which intimacy was being newly theorised by emerging scientific disciplines as well as the social revaluation of the purpose of romantic partnership. In *Primitive Marriage,* Kathy Psomiades examines how the rising field of anthropology in the mid-nineteenth century offered novelists a model "in which marriage [was] the object of intellectual inquiry".[11] She argues that "the conflict between outmoded structures and modern erotic subjects was repeatedly staged" through "a range of literary fields".[12] *Noncathartic Intimacies in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* studies poems that explore relations to and with other beings in order to answer the following: why were so many poets drawn to conceive of intimacy as noncathartic? What does this alternate, transgressive model of

[9] François describes this alternately as "eventless experience", "nothing happening", "nothing being allowed to happen", "escapes or near misses" and "uncounted experience". I am interested in similar phenomena, but specifically as they relate to forms of being intimate with another and what consequences this has for how we conceive of intimate relationships. See *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022. pp. 47-48.

[10] See Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.

[11] Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Primitive Marriage: Victorian Anthropology, the Novel, and Sexual Modernity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. p. 9.

[12] Ibid, p. 31.

relationship do that more normative, cathartic narratives of love do not? And why, specifically, were so many of these experiments enacted through poetry?

I have already ventured a definition of noncathartic intimacy in my previous section. Here, I am more concerned with considering what was at stake for poets in their counterintuitive reconceptualisation of intimacy and outlining some of the theoretical and scholarly models that have influenced my own thinking about relationality. Love, for Charles Darwin, is not a specifically human emotion; moreover, it has no "proper or peculiar means of expression" and "has not habitually led to any special line of action".[13] Indeed, "The feelings which are called tender are difficult to analyse".[14] In other words, love resists being spoken about, or being understood, or being perceived. Unlike most other emotions, it is not tied to a particular action or outcome but exists simply to be felt. Thus, following Darwin, love is an ideal specimen for a study of noncatharsis precisely because of how it evades comprehension and clarity. The absence of a "proper or peculiar means of expression" provides an opportunity for a new, experimental kind of poetry that responds to the challenge of not knowing how to talk about love.

The decision to use "intimacy" as my primary term rests on its invocation of a sort of prized and reified form of relationship which need not be romantic in nature, but which nevertheless permits deep insight into another. "Intimacy", more than something like "relationality", has an idealised value attached to it; simultaneously it is shadowed by its etymological tie to "intimation", that which is not said clearly. It is this friction between

[13] Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals,* New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1886. p. 215.

[14] Ibid, p. 216.

clarity and obscurity I am interested in, along with the various definitional dilemmas it engenders. Nancy Yousef observes that intimacy "crystallizes a tension between sharing and enclosing as opposed imaginations of relational possibilities", the seemingly irreconcilable tension between what should be made public and what should be kept private.[15] This grows particularly complicated when "the boundaries between solitude and sociability, psychic and intrapsychic experience become permeable and labile under the pressure of romantic scrutiny";[16] when, in other words, intimacy threatens the sanctity of the individual. Like Yousef, I am interested in the surprising, counterintuitive, and often baffling ways writers in the nineteenth century conceived of intimacy, particularly as they subvert what we have commonly come to associate with intimate relationships: mutuality, reciprocity, synchronicity, and proximity.

Unlike Yousef, however, my dissertation is less interested in the ethical implications of intimacy, and more interested simply in what nineteenth-century writers thought intimacy could make possible when enacted through the writing of poetry. While Chapter 1 explores the struggle of coexistence between the human and the nonhuman, Chapters 2, 3, and 4 all take romantic relationships—and their unorthodox erotic manifestations—as their point of interest, and do so in order to examine the new and fantastical prospects for romantic love that seemed to be heralded by the shifting social and scientific landscape of nineteenth-century Britain. Chapter 2 examines relationships that amalgamate lovers into one entity; Chapter 3 studies romantic relationships with the nonhuman; in Chapter 4, I look at

[15] Nancy Yousef, *Romantic Intimacy,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. p. 1

[16] Ibid, p. 23.

relationships that preclude the participants from ever being in sync with each other. If these prospects appeared to take possibilities to their extreme, this is part of the appeal, both for us as readers and for the poets themselves, who saw these exciting and illogical opportunities for intimacy as natural reactions to the increasingly obscure and complex discussion around what it meant to be human.

One of the aims of this dissertation is to model a noncathartic reading of poems and to argue that this was a particular kind of reading experience cultivated by poets throughout the nineteenth century that was often at odds with their theoretical arguments for what made good poetry. (More on that discrepancy in the following section). Briefly, however, I wish to demonstrate what interpretive opportunities become available when reading a poem on love through the lens of noncatharsis. John Keats's odes offer a particularly cogent example as a form that is simultaneously traditional and radical, "elaborate poems of address" that are also "untraditionally personal, intimate, and reflective";[17] as Anahid Nersessian notes, "they make intimacy into a form of endurance, difficult but necessary".[18] Building on this formulation of intimacy as "a form of endurance", which bears resemblance to my earlier identification of noncatharsis as durational and frustrating, I turn to Keats's 'Ode to Psyche' to show how he structures a fantasy of intimacy that is defined primarily by the way in which the fantasy refuses to progress or culminate. Furthermore, I am interested in how 'Ode to Psyche' makes a case for noncathartic intimacy as pleasurable in its own

[17] John Creaser, 'John Keats, *Odes*', *A Companion to Romanticism* (ed. Duncan Wu), Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1999. pp. 255-265 (p. 258).

[18] Anahid Nersessian, *Keats's Odes: A Lover's Discourse,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. p. 8.

right, rather than being defined by laborious work or the failure of pleasure. In this sense, my reading will anticipate many of the arguments I make in the body of my dissertation.

The poem begins where the Ovidian myth and Mary Tighe's *Psyche* (1805) end, with Psyche and Cupid's reunion. This paradoxical shape emerges also in descriptions of intimate action between Psyche and Cupid, who at one point lie together, though "Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu / As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber".[19] The contact implied by "soft-handed" is pre-emptively negated by the "disjoin[ing]" act of sleep, while together they linger on the cusp of a kiss that seems to have neither began nor ended. Towards the end of the poem, Keats promises to build Psyche a "rosy sanctuary" with "A bright torch, and a casement ope at night, / To let the warm Love in!"[20] This not only reconfigures the transgression that parted Psyche and Cupid (Psyche looking at Cupid by torchlight after being expressly told not to), it also maintains a state of deliberate irresolution, in which the window is left open but its implied invitation to enter is not taken up within the bounds of the poem. Like the kiss, it exists as an eternal possibility waiting to be either fulfilled or rejected, but the lovers gain amorous pleasure from the act of dwelling in anticipation—or even from the active maintenance of that unfulfilled invitation. As Marjorie Levinson observes of Keats's poetry more generally, "Keats works at his pleasure and stations himself by that oxymoron".[21] Indeed, the poem appears to imply that the transition from possibility to certainty, from strenuous effort to accomplishment, would in fact diminish the pleasure.

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[19] John Keats, 'Ode to Psyche', *John Keats,* (ed. Susan J. Wolfson), London: Pearson, 2006. Lines 17-18.

[20] Ibid, lines 59, 66-67.

[21] Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style,* Oxford: Blackwell, 1988. p. 24.

Another way of reading the ending lines is by seeing the poem working backwards, beginning at the end but irresistibly moving towards Psyche's violation of her promise to Cupid, though once more the poem does not arrive *at* this moment but merely anticipates it. In this interpretation, the poem's unwriting of Psyche's redemption suggests that the pleasure of intimacy comes only from its ambiguity, the shared promise to not see the other clearly. I favour my first interpretation, however, partly because the open window inviting Love "in" implies that his separation from Psyche has already taken place, and partly because of the poem's celebration of sight. "At tender eye-dawn of aurorean love"[22] likens the lovers staring at one another to the rising sun and the emergence of a new day, while midway through the poem Keats declares, "I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspir'd",[23] tying the act of poetic composition to the act of looking.

The poem does work backwards, and in doing so exploits the revisionism that noncatharsis makes plausible, in which what once was the impetus for Cupid banishing Psyche becomes instead the possibility of them coming together. Even if the pleasure is transient, evasive, and predicated on suspension rather than action—the prospect of the kiss, or the return, rather than the thing itself—it is still pleasure, "all soft delight / That shadowy thought can win",[24] the bright torch simultaneously casting its own shadow as it banishes others away. Pleasure also comes from the poem's conviction that intimacy can collapse individual boundaries in favour of a plural togetherness, with Psyche and Cupid seeming to exist communally. In the first stanza, they are "two fair creatures, couched side

[22] 'Ode to Psyche', line 20.

[23] Ibid, line 43.

[24] Ibid, lines 64-65.

by side", "their arms embraced, and their pinions too".[25] The repeated structure of the line, bisected by a comma with each half creating its own pair (two creatures, side by side, their arms, their pinions), one line beginning with the number "two" and the other ending with "too" as a marker of excess beyond the individual, suggests that there are intimate acts that can only be performed through language.

We find this blurring of boundaries present also in the figure of the poet, who is declined as the poem progresses into "some untrodden region of my mind" with "branched thoughts" until he is simply "the wreath'd trellis of a working brain".[26] What remains of the poet are his thoughts, which enable the "soft delight" of the intimacy between Psyche and Cupid. And, just as Psyche herself is a figure of belatedness ("too late for antique vows, / Too, too late for the fond believing lyre"),[27] so too is the act of writing a poem past its time, Keats's "tuneless numbers"[28] "recall[ing] that poetry is no longer sung or recited to an accompanying musical instrument, such as pipe, lute, or lyre".[29] The poem thus argues for intimacy as a kind of thought experiment, one enacted through and by the merging of Psyche and Cupid's relationship with the form of the poem itself and the increasingly environmental figure of the poet.

In their introduction to *Love Among the Poets* (2024), Erik Gray and Pearl Chaozon Bauer argue that, "With some notable exceptions, the Victorian poetry of intimacy has

[25] Ibid, lines 9 and 16.

[26] Ibid, lines 51-52, 60.

[27] Ibid, lines 36-37.

[28] Ibid, line 1.

[29] Geoffrey Hartman, 'Listen Up! Keats's "Ode to Psyche"', *The Yale Review* Vol. 99, No. 2, 2011. 86-93 (87).

received relatively little sustained critical attention".[30] While I position my dissertation as a study of nineteenth-century poetry more broadly, seeing more confluence and thematic resonance between Romantic and Victorian poetry than disparity, my intention is to offer one example of a sustained critical study of intimate poetry throughout the century. Through this, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which this critical attention can offer new insight into not only the way the nineteenth century thought about intimacy, but also how they thought about poetry.

Why Poetry?

If catharsis is an affective mode engendered by and through the genre of tragic drama, noncatharsis, I will argue, is an aesthetic tied principally to poetry during the period of my study. This is in spite of the fact that a variety of poetic manifestos throughout the nineteenth century sought to tether their arguments for what makes a good poem to the principle of catharsis more generally, and Aristotle's *Poetics* more specifically, from which the concept of "katharsis" originates. When Arnold describes his rationalisation for including or excluding certain poems from his 1853 collection on the basis of cathartic principles—in a preface which refers specifically to "the admirable treatise of Aristotle"—he is putting forth an argument about good poetry as inherently cathartic, founded on permanency, satisfaction, and cohesion.[31] If, in practice, Arnold's poems do not necessarily fit the rubric he establishes, the gap between intention (or expectation) and result itself

[30] Erik Gray and Pearl Chaozon Bauer, 'Introduction: Counting the Ways of Love in Victorian Poetry', *Love Among the Poets: The Victorian Poetics of Intimacy,* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2024. pp. 1-10 (p. 3).

[31] Arnold, p. 280.

provides useful insight into what was at stake in the decision to turn to noncatharsis as an aesthetic or thought experiment. The same can be said of Leigh Hunt, whose work according to David Stewart sustains "the possibility of aesthetic failure" and "interpretative uncertainty" that seems wholly in contention with his celebration of straightforwardness and oneness.[32] If a good poem is cathartic, why write a noncathartic one?

As my earlier section on noncatharsis reveals, throughout my dissertation "catharsis" does not mean precisely what it meant to Aristotle. This is partly because the nineteenth century maintained a continuous debate over what exactly Aristotle even meant when he used the term "katharsis". The most useful survey of this definitional sea-change can be found in Samuel Butcher's translation and commentary on the *Poetics,* first published in 1895, where he points to the "fundamental difficulty" of the question.[33] For Butcher, the German philosopher Jacob Bernays' provocative contention that *katharsis* "denotes a pathological effect on the soul analogous to the effect of medicine on the body" entirely transformed the conversation around catharsis in the middle of the century, but failed to account for its significance as a "principle of art", one which offers "a distinctively aesthetic satisfaction" that clarifies emotions such as pity and fear by "passing them through the medium of art".[34] In this understanding, catharsis demands universalism: "The dramatic

[32] Significantly, for Stewart this is not simply a matter of Hunt's poetry failing to achieve his ambitions, which would make the question I am interested in answering—"why did poets champion a theory of catharsis but in fact choose to write noncathartic poems?"—fairly redundant. Instead, Stewart argues that a crucial dynamic of Hunt's poetry is its interest in interrogating its own value and ability, in a sense undercutting its own possibility of success. See 'Leigh Hunt's Accidental Poetry', *Essays in Criticism* Vol. 62, Issue 1, 2012. 25-40 (26).

[33] S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art: with a Critical Text and Translation of The Poetics,* 1895, 4th edition, London: Macmillan & Co Limited, 1920. p. 243.

[34] Ibid, pp. 253-255.

action must be so significant, and its meaning capable of such extension, that through it we can discern the higher laws which rule the world".[35] At the same time, Aristotle is used as a touchstone for many significant works on poetic theory, which co-opt terms such as catharsis as an increasingly poetic feature: Hunt's 'What is Poetry?', William Hazlitt's 'On Poetry in General', Cardinal Newman's 'Poetry, with Reference to Aristotle's *Poetics',* Robert Browning's 'Aristophanes' Apology', Oscar Wilde's 'Critic and Artist', to name some of the more influential texts.[36]

Perhaps the most (in)famous attempt to define poetry in the century comes from John Stuart Mill's 'Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties' (1833). Mill operates first through negation, explaining what makes poetry *not* science, *not* prose, *not* fiction, *not* eloquence, all definitions that end very far away from what he is trying to grasp. When Mill focuses on "eloquence" as the final antithesis of poetry, he does so through once more elaborating on what poetry lacks or excludes: "the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener", "feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude". Poetry stops being poetry when "[the poet] turns round, and addresses himself to another person".[37] It is this notion of turning round that particularly interests me. If a poem is metaphorically composed with the poet's back turned to any potential reader, situating us as either an unwelcome voyeur or an ignored and rejected participant, then writing poetry becomes an act of refusal. It is not like this, or this, or that; it does not permit X or Y; it is not written in order to be read, but rather

[35] Ibid, p. 270.

[36] See Marvin Theodore Herrick, *The Poetics of Aristotle in England*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930.

[37] John Stuart Mill, 'Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties', *The Works of John Stuart Mill,* Vol. IV, London: George Routledge and Sons, 1905. pp. 51-76 (pp. 57-58).

to "express his emotions exactly as he has felt them in solitude".[38] Mill, of course, recognises this as a fiction: instead of writing "the peculiarity of poetry lies in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener," he writes, "the peculiarity of poetry *appears to us* to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener" (emphasis mine). "Appears" renders the claim tentative, superficial; "to us" exposes the necessary externality of a person to the poetry in order to define it.

For Mill, the question of 'what is poetry?' is one that resists a satisfying answer. Essentially, the question itself is noncathartic, fated to remain unresolved and unsatisfying despite (or perhaps due to) the lengths Mill goes to in his essay to establish a fixed definition. Part of what makes the question so contentious and slippery is Mill's tendency to see issues of poetry as bound up with issues of relationality. Reading 'Thoughts on Poetry' alongside his later *On the Subjection of Women* (1869), Adela Pinch argues that "Mill's suspicion of address" was tied both to his distinction of poetry as "*over*heard" and his belief that, even among married couples, not everything could be known about the other. "Overhearing, eavesdropping, and voyeurism become the conditions of confidence," Pinch explains, "and intimacy is the enemy of knowledge".[39] To perceive poetry and relationality as both complicated by what can be transferred from one person to another is to expose the ideal of poetry as "soliloquy" as precisely that: an ideal, difficult if not impossible to achieve. Part of what my dissertation endeavours to understand is how noncathartic poetry offered writers an alternate mode of intimacy predicated on the alien and inaccessible,

[38] Ibid, p. 58.

[39] Adela Pinch, *Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. p. 103.

embracing what Mill saw as an emotional proximity that paradoxically precluded access. Noncatharsis exploits rather than resolves this dilemma in order to reimagine poetry's capacity for creating new ways of being together.

It seems impossible to conceive of poetry as written in a vacuum, the way Mill attempts, just as it seems impossible to fully buy into Arnold's claim for poetry's "boundaries and its wholesome regulative laws",[40] which argues for poetry as a fixed, stable entity. This was certainly not the case in the nineteenth century: the idea of the "lyric" was continually in flux, as was a consideration of genre more broadly. Any perceived stability has been inherited from the twentieth-century consolidation of the nineteenth century.[41] Yet the story is more complex than Arnold being misguided, creating an unattainable, inoffensive, and frankly boring ideal of poetry (who wants poetry to be "wholesome"?) that no-one can live up to. In fact, Arnold admits that the poems he selected for his collection may not "possess this discipline" or "breathe its spirit" in part because of "the bewildering confusion of our times". He turns to "the ancients" such as Aristotle because "[t]hey, at any rate, knew what they wanted in Art, and we do not".[42] When catharsis is tethered so fundamentally to an artistic tradition that appeared ill-suited to or incompatible with the

[40] Arnold, p. 293.

[41] In their introduction to *The Lyric Theory Reader,* Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins explore how, "If nineteenth-century thinking about poetry sought to distinguish a transcendent version of lyric from contemporary cultures of circulation and at the same time imagined an ideal (and perhaps impossible) new culture of circulation, the twentieth-century criticism that inherited these ambitions for the lyric tended to embrace it not as an ideal to be aspired toward but as the given poetic genre already in circulation. … Thus what began in the nineteenth century as an aspiration became in the twentieth century a real genre—indeed, became not only the genre to which poetry aspired but the genre so identified with poetry that poetry became another name for it." *The Lyric Theory Reader* (eds. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins), Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014. p. 4.

[42] Arnold, p. 292.

century, simultaneously belated and premature, it is no surprise that poets looked elsewhere in order to grapple with the present. So: the real crisis that nineteenth-century poets faced was that they no longer knew what a good poem was, or what they should aspire to make their poems do, and this absence of certainty ends up with noncatharsis feeling like a minor aesthetic when in fact it was one of the dominant poetic paradigms of the century.

This is one reason why the nineteenth century was notable for its variety of generic and prosodic innovations: they were attempting to find new forms that could articulate this uncertainty. The verse-novel (which features in Chapter 4) sought to blur the seemingly distinct boundaries between novel and poem and to undercut or complicate many of the assumptions often brought to bear on those forms, such as the distinction I questioned earlier between "chronos" and "kairos" as temporal models associated with either the novel or the lyric. The dramatic monologue, popularised by Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning, was also a "hybrid genre" in defiance of Mill's insistence on the insulated character of the poet.[43] At the same time as poets were responding to existing genres by crafting new forms to shape their thinking, other genres were being revived and transformed by modernity. The renaissance of the sonnet towards the end of the eighteenth century evidenced "the first period of literary history in which women poets showed that they could match skills with male poets in an arena earlier closed to them",[44] and in the first

[43] Herbert Tucker, 'Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric', *Victorian Poets: A Critical Reader* (ed. Valentine Cunningham), Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2014. pp. 74-89 (p. 81).

[44] Paula R. Feldman and Daniel Robinson. 'Introduction', *A Century of Sonnets: The Romantic-Era Revival, 1750-1850* (eds. Feldman and Robinson), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. pp. 3-19 (p. 10).

decades of the nineteenth century it offered simultaneously a highly personal crystallisation of a moment and a marker of sociability or public participation.[45] All three examples reveal a communal investment in collapsing rigid binaries—narrative versus lyric, private versus public, masculine art versus feminine art—through generic experimentation. Poems become laboratories for working through larger philosophical and social questions, an argument I make throughout my dissertation.

These experiments took place not only through genre, but also through prosody. Edited collections such as Jason David Hall's *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century* (2011), along with the special issue in *Victorian Poetry* on 'Victorian Prosody', and books such as Meredith Martin's *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860-1930* (2012) and Jason R. Rudy's *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics* (2009), share an interest in cataloguing the staggering diversity of metrical forms that characterised nineteenth-century poetry. Throughout, prosody became a way of shaping and transforming kinds of philosophical thinking: one reason my dissertation takes poetry as its principal site of interest is because poems are places in which questions of meter, rhythm, and form are foregrounded. In Part One, I look specifically at how poets use the tensions and temporal convolutions inherent in their prosody as ways of experimenting with the limits and affordances of poetry, whether through interrogating the fate of poetry in a

[45] Mark Raymond explains, "Whether published with an eye toward the literary marketplace in collections and magazines, or composed through coteries and contests, the sonnets that proliferated in the period were produced in a reciprocating circle of aesthetic consumption and feedback. Sonnets serve as gifts and as tokens of a poetic conversation, highlighting the exchange of cultural capital between authors and readers, especially those hitherto excluded by gender or class from earlier forms of classical patronage". See 'The Romantic Sonnet Revival: Opening the Sonnet's Crypt', *Literature Compass* Vol. 4, Issue 3, 2007. 721-736 (732).

century increasingly aware of the human's irrelevancy, or through endeavouring to create a form of poetic voice divorced from our concept of the human. Both chapters study poets who sought to imagine a radical future for poetry outside of the realm of the human and in doing so re-examined the human's seemingly unique claims to things such as love, language, and poetry.

So: why select poetry for my study? What does it offer my exploration of (non)catharsis that perhaps prose would or could not? According to Coleridge, in opposition to Wordsworth's claim that there was no important distinction between "the language of prose and metrical composition",[46] poetry instigates an idiosyncratic form of arousal:

> As far as metre acts in and for itself, it tends to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention. This effect it produces by the continued excitement of surprise, and by the quick reciprocations of curiosity still gratified and still re-excited, which are too slight indeed to be at any one moment objects of distinct consciousness, yet become considerable in their aggregate influence. As a medicated atmosphere, or as wine during animated conversation; they act powerfully, though themselves unnoticed. Where, therefore, correspondent food and appropriate matter are not provided for the attention and feelings thus roused, there must needs be a disappointment felt; like that of leaping in the dark from the last step of a stair-case, when we had prepared our muscles for a leap of three or four.[47]

Much of this description resonates with my earlier definition of noncatharsis. The interplay between the "continued excitement of surprise" and the "quick reciprocations of curiosity"

[46] Quoted in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, '*Biographia Literaria* Chapter XVIII', *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose* (eds. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano), New York: Norton, 2004. p. 506.

[47] Ibid, p. 510.

Coleridge notes in the varied effects of meter—specifically, the juxtaposition of "continued" and "quick"—demonstrates an interest in moving between the permanent and the temporary. He further suggests that each manifestation of meter by itself is "too slight" to be registered, only gaining significance in "their aggregate influence". Just as noncatharsis is created and sustained through an accumulation of evasive and/or obscure affects, forms of affect that complicate more straightforward attempts to pay attention, meter also functions as an indiscernible and yet "powerful" influence on the ways in which readers pay attention. Interestingly, Coleridge concludes his passage by considering how meter can produce "disappointment" or surprise through the disconnect between sound and content, which he likens to an underwhelming jump, an expectation of more than there turns out to be. The last point suggests that meter encourages a kind of expectation in its reader—an anticipation or presumption of coherence, perhaps, or fit—that the material of the poem can undermine.

One of my arguments throughout this dissertation is that sometimes poets create this unbalance deliberately, using the particular forms of attention and expectation roused by poetic meter to produce a feeling of dissatisfaction or confusion that is central to the poem. This is achieved through a) the move between "a kind of discontinuous duration that reverberates between epiphanic moments and that which persist over time" that I noted in my earlier section on noncatharsis, or in other words a new way of thinking about and through time; and b) "accumulation being refused release", or in other words meter creating the opportunity for satisfaction and purgation which the poetic materials do not take advantage of. I thus see poems as mechanisms for arousing and stimulating kinds of attention that foreground form and craft more deliberately and self-reflexively than prose.

Throughout, I consider poems as useful laboratories through which I can examine departures from the conventional arousal and purgation model associated with Aristotle's *Poetics*. This becomes, then, a question of genre. If we associate catharsis primarily with the genre of tragic drama, I see the affordances of poetry as crucial to the stimulation of an alternate kind of arousal and purgation model in which arousal primes readers to develop certain kinds of expectations and presumptions that the poems then refuse to satisfy. And while I do not see this alternate model as restricted solely to nineteenth-century poetics, I believe it becomes a surprisingly dominant preoccupation with poets of the nineteenth century, one that comes to define the way in which we narrate the development of nineteenth-century poetry and the many formal and prosodic innovations associated with the era.

Why This Focus on "the Human"?

In recent years, there has been a rise in scholarship that interrogates the relationship between nineteenth-century literature and the emergence of the Anthropocene, particularly as a growing awareness of human-led climate change inspired new ways of thinking about what it meant to be human.[48] For Jesse Oak Taylor, "the Victorian era offers a glimpse of the Anthropocene *in medias res*, from the midst of still-unfolding, slow-motion

[48] Along with texts I reference elsewhere in this introduction, I have been guided by Barri J. Gold's *Thermopoetics: Energy in Victorian Literature and Science,* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010; Maureen N. McLane's *Romanticism and the Human Sciences: Poetry, Population, and the Discourse of the Species,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; Gregory Tate's *Nineteenth-Century Poetry and the Human Sciences,* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020; Elizabeth Carolyn Miller's *Extraction Ecologies and the Literature of the Long Exhaustion,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021; *Material Transgressions: Beyond Romantic Bodies, Genders, Things* (eds. Kate Singer, Ashley Cross, and Suzanne L. Barnett) Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020; and *Marking Time: Romanticism and Evolution,* (ed. Joel Faflak), Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017.

catastrophe".[49] This vantage point led writers to find new forms to grapple with a phenomenon they did not yet fully understand. In 'Victorian Lyric and the Anthropocene', Devin Garofalo identifies "how the intersubjective, extrahuman, geologic inflections of the lyric "I" radically disarticulate the anthropos at the precise moment in which it otherwise appears to have attained absolute mastery over the planet".[50] In a later article on lyric geology, Garofalo points out, "That the normative lyric subject and the human as planetary agent come to consciousness at precisely the same historical moment is no mere coincidence".[51] One of the arguments I make throughout *Noncathartic Intimacies in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* is that the unsettled category of the "human" during the nineteenth century was a significant influence on many of the generic and prosodic innovations that have come to define the Romantic and Victorian eras.

Several key scientific breakthroughs during the nineteenth century destabilised the belief in the idea of human exceptionalism. This provoked a reimagining of what it meant to be human when the human was no longer the center around which the rest of the world revolved. The rise of geology in the first decades of the century was tasked not only with refuting the nation's investment in the Book of Genesis as an origin story for the human race, but also "forging a new Creation-myth for the imperial age",[52] one that in the case of Charles Lyell restricted theology to "God's maintenance of the economy of nature and …

[49] Jesse Oak Taylor, 'Anthropocene', *Victorian Literature & Culture* Vol. 46, Issue 3-4, 2018. 573-577 (575).

[50] Devin M. Garofalo, 'Victorian Lyric in the Anthropocene', *Victorian Literature & Culture* Vol. 47, Issue 4, 2019. 753-783 (756).

[51] Devin M. Garofalo, 'Lyric Geology: Anthropomorphosis, White Supremacy, and Genres of the Human', *Diacritics* Vol. 50, No.1, 2022. 32-61 (34).

[52] Ralph O'Connor, *The Earth on Show: Fossils and the Poetics of Popular Science, 1802-1856,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. p. 2.

the status of humans as moral, rational beings".[53] His refusal to entirely divorce his geologic theories from theology was partly a result of writing for a predominantly Christian audience, and partly due to Lyell's own squeamishness around the idea of evolution and the consequences it held for the significance (or otherwise) of the human species.[54] Nevertheless, his work provided fertile ground for Charles Darwin, whose *On the Origin of Species* (1859) directly tackled what Lyell skirted around as it "challenged the single life span as a sufficient model for understanding experience".[55] As Darwin himself exclaimed: "How fleeting are the wishes and efforts of man! how short his time! and consequently how poor will his products be, compared with those accumulated by nature during whole geological periods".[56] To be human was no longer to inhabit a privileged space in the universe nor to provide a uniquely advantageous opportunity for understanding. Instead, humans were fated to only ever imperfectly understand the world they lived in, and to be outlasted by much that was previously considered inferior and limited.

The new awareness of human precarity was coupled with the growing fears of extinction, both in terms of biological extinction and the threatened extinction of indigenous populations. David Sepkoski explains:

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[53] James A. Secord, 'A Philosophy for a New Science: Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology', Visions of Science: Books and Readers at the Dawn of the Victorian Age,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. pp. 138-172 (p. 165).

[54] "This distaste for bestial origins remained deeply private, a matter of personal faith inappropriate for airing in the public world of quarterly reviews, scientific meetings, or London clubs. Lyell thus concealed his fears behind a public stance that all recognized as scientific. On such grounds, the *Principles* could mount a credible case against the wide-spread assumption of a progressive history of life and reject Lamarckian transmutation as an imaginative fantasy. Contemporary readers, even Lyell's closest friends, never learned of the pervasive significance of the status of the human species for his science". Ibid, p. 171.

[55] Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, third edition 2009. p. 11.

[56] Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (ed. Gillian Beer), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. p. 70.

> From the 1830s and 1840s onward, it became more and more common, for example, to find discussions of the "extinction" of "primitive" tribes encountered by Europeans in newspaper articles and parliamentary reports as the British and French expanded their imperial holdings, and in the United States as westward expansion intensified conflict between settlers and Native Americans. At the same time, questions about human race and social progress increasingly became implicated in scientific arguments about biological extinction. … Lyell's influential interpretation of extinction as consistent with a balance of nature in dynamic equilibrium gave it a kind of positive moral valence: extinction was necessary, and even good, for the maintenance of a stable economy of nature. The flip side of this notion, of course, is that those species that became extinct were somehow at fault since they had failed to adapt to their changing environments, and that it was only just that they should make way for those that could survive. In a political context, the supposed inevitability of extinction reinforced cultural attitudes about social progress that justified the spread of European civilization, even at the cost of assimilation, subjugation, and even extermination of native peoples.[57]

By the close of the century, however, any rationalisation of extinction would be weighed against the recognition of the role the human played in species extinction, whether through excessive hunting or the exploitation of animal bodies for clothing and other luxuries.[58]

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[57] David Sepkoski, *Catastrophic Thinking: Extinction and the Value of Diversity from Darwin to the Anthropocene,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. pp. 49-50.

[58] A good book on this subject is Helen Louise Cowie's *Victims of Fashion: Animal Commodities in Victorian Britain,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. As she explains in the Introduction: "Until the early nineteenth century, the idea that God's perfectly designed creations could become extinct was simply unthinkable and contradicted entrenched biblical understandings of the cosmos. The discovery of the bones of giant ground sloths, mammoths, moa and other creatures for which no living counterpart could be found, however, gradually forced naturalists to accept (often reluctantly) the possibility that species could die out, radically changing man's perception of nature. More pressingly, examples from recent times of animals that had been pushed to the brink of extinction (or beyond) by overhunting proved that it was possible for even the most numerous species to become extinct. This was illustrated most graphically by the plight of the bison, reduced from millions to just a few hundred animals in less than a century of incessant slaughter, and the passenger pigeon, gone from the wild by 1900 and completely extinct by 1914." p. 11.

In order to reconfigure the concept of the human, nineteenth-century poets were newly preoccupied with the increasingly blurry boundaries between human and animal, or even human and environment. To know what it means to be human requires an attempt to imagine nonhuman experience. I use the word "attempt" in order to stress the speculative nature of any endeavour to understand what it means to be nonhuman. As Laura Brown explains, "fundamentally, any asserted human access to the other-than-human is confounded by the indisputable intervention of the human in that process".[59] My argument is not that poets succeed in authentically defining the difference between human and nonhuman or accessing modes of being that exist beyond the human. It is precisely the friction between the ambition to remove the human from the frame of reference while simultaneously being inextricably embedded *in* the human that animates so many of the poems I study. The significance, for me, lies in the move towards creating speculative scenarios that play with the newly unsettled nature of the human in order to answer very real questions about everyday problems. What, in other words, do poets gain from imagining a form of poetics that emulates environmental processes rather than human voice (Chapter 2) or a kind of romantic relationship between human and nonhuman participants (Chapter 3)? And how does noncatharsis provide a productive framework for these imaginary scenarios?

The possibility of being intimate with the nonhuman is an uncontroversial one: animals are often companions, living side by side with humans, and in the last decades we have come to understand more thoroughly how entwined human lives are with the environment.

[59] Laura Brown, *The Counterhuman Imaginary,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023. p. 7.

My focus on intimacy, however, goes further, in arguing that poets drew on the concept of the nonhuman in order to structure their experimental fantasies of romantic love and sexuality. In this, I take guidance from the growing field of queer ecologies. Collections such as Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird's *Queering the Non/Human* (2008) and *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (2010), edited by Catriona Sandilands-Mortimer and Bruce Erickson, signal a growing interest in "the powerful ways in which understandings of nature inform discourses of sexuality, and also the ways in which understandings of sex inform discourses of nature; they are linked, in fact, through a strongly evolutionary narrative that pits the perverse, the polluted and the degenerate against the fit, the healthy, and the natural."[60] As Robert Azzarello observes in his chapter on queer ecologies in *Dracula,* "Queer nature, by refusing the opposition between the natural and the unnatural, dramatises its own ontological impossibility and asks us to consider alternative modes of representation, new constructions of humans, natures and sexualities, and unconventional ethical systems grounded in the indeterminate subjects of queer theory and environmental studies."[61] These categorical dilemmas are not intended to be resolved. Rather, the resistance to resolution, and the frictions and scrapes that demarcate encounters between incongruous states, enables these dilemmas to function as a site of possibility for new and alternate relations. This is one way in which noncatharsis becomes a playground or

[60] Catriona Sandilands-Mortimer and Bruce Erickson, 'Introduction: A Genealogy of Queer Ecologies', *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (eds. Sandilands-Mortimer and Erickson), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. pp. 1-46 (pp. 2-3).

[61] Robert Azzarello, 'Unnatural Predators: Queer Theory Meets Environmental Studies in Bram Stoker's Dracula', *Queering the Non/Human* (eds. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird), Oxford: Routledge, 2008. pp. 137-157 (p. 154).

laboratory for poets to imagine kinds of relationships that seem to challenge or oppose received notions of intimacy.

Chapter Outlines

Each of my chapters investigate one species of noncathartic intimacies by pairing texts that share ontological preoccupations, though often with markedly different responses.

Part One, "Experiments in Nonhuman Poetry", investigates how nineteenth-century poets sought to infuse their work with nonhuman attributes in order to speculate about what poetry might look like divorced from the human. My first chapter, 'Percy Shelley, Erasmus Darwin, Mathilde Blind, and the Fate of Poetry in an Age of Human Irrelevancy', examines Romantic-era poems that confront the increasing irrelevance of the "human" by rendering themselves obsolete, internally contradictory, and/or amorphous—in other words, poems that turn themselves into forms of waste as a response to the disposability of the human species. Reading Percy Shelley's poems 'The Sensitive-Plant' and *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude* alongside Erasmus Darwin's notoriously long and digressive scientific poems, I demonstrate the ways in which both poets reflect on the relationship between humans and the environment in poems that advertise their own futility. I end with a reading of Mathilde Blind's *The Ascent of Man,* which responds to the century's increasing awareness of human superfluity and redundancy by modelling a form of poetics predicated on likeness and excess. Together, these three poets consider the ways in which poems can be, become, and create waste as an aesthetic statement and a response to the growing acknowledgement of human irrelevancy.

Building on my investigation of waste as a form of poetics, my second chapter, 'Voice Beyond the Human: Swinburne's *Poems & Ballads* and Michael Field's *Long Ago*', analyses how poems of the late Victorian era created forms of voice distinct from the figure of a human speaker. I contend that Swinburne and Michael Field's explorations of "nonhuman voice" manifest in their poems as an element of noncatharsis, in which language is either accumulated to an unsustainable, acoustic extreme as a form of waste or manipulated as a kind of metamorphic force that changes whatever it encounters, subordinating personality and subjectivity in favour of an amalgamated presence. My comparative approach foregrounds the aspects of their poetry that invited controversy from their peers in order to show the impact their experiments had on contemporary theories of poetics.

One thing at stake in these explorations of poetry outside of the human was a revised notion of intimacy. What did it mean, for example, to conceive of voice not as a means of human communication but rather as an accrual of environmental products, or to use poetry to explore the human's increasingly subordinate role in our relationship with the world around us? Part Two, "Experiments in Love" shifts the focus to romantic relationships to study how poets structured their work as experimental laboratories for alternate, counterintuitive forms of intimacy. If poetic voice is one thing we struggle to disassociate from the human, my third chapter tackles another concept seemingly inextricable from the human experience: romantic love. 'Transplanted Intimacies in Keats's 'Isabella; or the Pot of Basil' and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Willowwood Sonnets' studies the ways in which Keats and Rossetti stage romantic encounters between human and nonhuman bodies in which the nonhuman are active entities in the relationship, rather than vessels on which to project human desire. Drawing on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century investigations which used

plants as experimental laboratories, I argue that both Keats and Rossetti position the desiring body as experimental ground through which to test out more capacious theories of love. These relationships jeopardise the taxonomic stability of the human participants and, I suggest, turn both Keats's Isabella and Rossetti's speaker into more-than-human amalgamations by transplanting genetic traits from one body to the other.

My first three chapters are interested indirectly in extreme temporal scales, a concern which my fourth chapter ties directly to noncathartic relations through examining what Elizabeth Barrett Browning terms "mutual time" in *Aurora Leigh*. '(Non)Mutual Time in the Long Victorian Poem: Barrett Browning, Clough, Tennyson' argues that the genre of the Victorian long poem confronted the conceptual difficulty of envisaging multiple, co-existing temporalities, particularly when those temporalities seem to resist or combat one another, by twining the experience of love with the experience of asynchronicity. My chapter considers misalignment, misdirection, misunderstanding, and near misses, as temporal orientations which define certain kinds of intimate relationships in opposition to mutuality, reciprocity, and synchronicity. Instead, I suggest that the experience of nonmutual time transforms romantic disappointment into an alternate mode of togetherness with its own affordances and pleasures. In doing so, these poems explore the new intimacies that spring from the century's vexed endeavours to regulate time and space.

By drawing together the century's turbulent reconfigurations of intimate relationships, the status of the "human", and the purpose of poetry, my project proposes a new account of the development of nineteenth-century poetics and the vital role it played in the century's attempts to work out what it meant to be human. Noncatharsis, I argue, offered poets a conceptual framework through which to explore and advance speculative solutions

to real problems, and in doing so came to define an enduring mode of poetic inquiry throughout the century that celebrated irresolution, confusion, excess, and contradiction.

PART ONE: EXPERIMENTS IN NONHUMAN POETRY

Chapter 1:
Percy Shelley, Erasmus Darwin, Mathilde Blind, and the Fate of Poetry in an Age of Human Irrelevancy

"Poetry," Percy Shelley declares at the opening of 'A Defense of Poetry' "is connate with the origin of man". Its history is coterminous with "the history of our species".[1] Other poetic manifestos of the period, from William Wordsworth's preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* describing how "the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society" to William Hazlitt announcing that "Man is a poetical animal", similarly connect the history of humankind to the art of writing poetry.[2] The question this shared fate encourages, then, is: how and why do nineteenth-century poems grapple with a growing

[1] Percy Shelley, 'A Defense of Poetry', *Shelley's Prose and Poetry,* ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Freistat (2nd edition), New York: W. W, Norton & Company, 2002. pp. 509-535 (p. 511, p. 518).

[2] William Wordsworth, 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802)', *William Wordsworth: The Major Works,* ed. Stephen Gill, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. pp. 595-619 (p. 606); William Hazlitt, 'On Poetry in General', *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt,* Vol. V (eds. A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover), London: J. M. Dent & Co, 1902. pp. 1-18 (p. 2).

recognition of human irrelevancy in the larger scheme of geological history? In this chapter, I explore the ways early nineteenth-century poems use waste to imagine what it might mean for our intimacies (or, the things we are intimate with) to outlast us. In doing so, these poems examine the revised stakes of being human in a world that is no longer dependent on us, and to which we belong as only one species of many, vastly overshadowed by the breadth of geological history, a recognition that started in the nineteenth century. Throughout the chapter, I trace an ongoing conversation in the early decades of the nineteenth century about poetry's ability to take on the attributes of waste as a means of temporarily accessing nonhuman forms of life, desire, and knowledge.

Waste is an exemplary specimen for my study because of its many co-existing and contradictory incarnations. It is organic: rot, decay, mould; long stretches of uninhabited land; fossil fuels. It is inorganic: discarded plastic, crumpled tins. And it is also immaterial, abstract: a waste of time or opportunity or talent. It is both that which remains unused or used improperly and that which is produced as a result of use, an excess of material. Consider T. H. Huxley's description of the "abundant evidence of marine waste" to be found at the seaside,[3] or Balfour Stewart and Peter Guthrie Tait's declaration in *The Unseen Universe; or, Physical Speculations on a Future State* that "[j]ust as no single action of the body takes place without the waste of some muscular tissue, so, it is believed, no thought takes place without some waste of the brain."[4] Both used and unused, useful and useless, present

[3] T. H. Huxley, *Physiography: An Introduction to the Study of Nature*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1888. p. 168.

[4] They continue, "Nay, physiologists go even further, and assert that each specific thought denotes some specific waste of brain matter, so that there is some mysterious and obscure connection between the nature of the thought and the nature of the waste which it occasions." B. Stewart and P. G. Tait, *The Unseen Universe; or, Physical Speculations on a Future State,* London: Macmillan & Co, 1879. p. 77.

and absent, excessive and deficient, natural and unnatural, brief and enduring, waste exists on the borderland between many different antithetical prospects. As an event and process of intimacy, it jeopardises the taxonomic stability of desiring bodies; as a theory of poetics, the accretive excess of Erasmus Darwin's prosody, and the internal formal contradictions of Percy Shelley's verse, are a function of this categorical mutability, in which we are encouraged to scrutinise our expectations for what good poetry should and can do. In a century where many poetic manifestos fixated on "unsuperfluousness" (Leigh Hunt),[5] "regular[ity] and uniform[ity]" (Wordsworth),[6] and poetry's ability to reveal "the whole of our existence, the sum total of our passions and pursuits" (Hazlitt),[7] Shelley and Darwin are notable for writing poems that refuse to be useful. Towards the end of the century, Mathilde Blind takes up this challenge with *The Ascent of Man* (1889) by cultivating a state of poetic attention that eschews the question of useful/uselessness in favour of revealing the underlying likeness between all living and non-living things. Attention thus does not signify importance or usefulness, but rather resonance and correspondence: it is effectively rhizomatic.

Not to say that these correspondences bely a stable relationship in contrast to the inherent incompatibilities Shelley locates in the human's relationship to their environment. In fact, likenesses that spanned the human/nonhuman divide more often troubled the integrity of the human throughout the nineteenth century. In the previous century, man's

[5] Leigh Hunt, 'An Answer to the Question, "What is Poetry?"', *The Works of Leigh Hunt: Volume IV, Selections from English Poets,* Philadelphia: Willis P. Hazard, 1856. pp. 1-48 (p. 26).

[6] Wordsworth, p. 608.

[7] Hazlitt, p. 6.

ability to domesticate nonhuman life was more certain. "From the 1740s onward," Marc J. Ratcliff explains, "the natural experimental laboratory … began to acquire its distinctive modern physiognomy, of riotous life enclosed in a designated space. The many jars containing infusions, plants, insects, worms, batrachians, eggs, and the like exhibited the swarming of nature—but under the control of scientific instruments and subjected to the naturalist's gaze".[8] 'The Garden', the third book of William Cowper's *The Task* (1785), demonstrates the extent to which science and horticultural cultivation enabled full control over environments which may not otherwise be hospitable to life. Cucumbers grow "at first, / Pale, wan, and livid" (523) before transplantation, fermentation, and composting redeem those attributes that otherwise bear striking resemblance to a corpse.[9] The cucumbers cannot sustain themselves: they are reliant on the gardener's ability to repurpose and recycle the components of their artificial environment for survival:

> The soil must be renew'd, which often wash'd
> Loses its treasure of salubrious salts,
> And disappoints the roots; the slender roots
> Close interwoven, where they meet the vase,
> Must smooth be shorn away; the sapless branch
> Must fly before the knife; the wither'd leaf
> Must be detach'd, and where it strews the floor
> Swept with a woman's neatness, breeding else
> Contagion, and disseminating death.
> […]
> Well they reward the toil. The sight is pleased,

[8] Mark J. Ratcliff, 'Abraham Trembley's Strategy of Generosity and the Scope of Celebrity in the Mid-Eighteenth Century', *Isis* Vol 95, No. 4, 2004. 555-573 (568).

[9] William Cowper, *The Task,* London: John Sharpe, 1817.

The scent regaled, each odorif'rous leaf,
Each opening blossom freely breathes abroad
Its gratitude, and thanks him with its sweets.

(609-617, 620-3)

The greenhouse which is used to grow "exotic beauty" (568) demands the intervention of the human gardener. We see also in the verse's elaborate attention and the seemingly mutually beneficial arrangement (he supplies the roots with what they need, the plants breathe gratitude and reward him) a relationship between the human and nonhuman reliant on fighting *off* waste and decay in order to create and maintain an artificial simulacrum of Paradise. A portion of this chapter investigates how waste transforms depictions of the Garden of Eden in the work of both Percy Shelley and Erasmus Darwin, the garden's excessive and uncontrolled growth sustaining alternate forms of life that brush very close to death. These versions are destructive, often hostile to the human, or at the very least disinterested; yet simultaneously they are central to an understanding of life and its many complex intimacies. Life itself is waste, after all. As Robert Pogue Harrison declares, "What distinguishes life from the inanimate matter in which it has its origins is the continuous self-exceeding by which it bursts forth from the lifeless and ecstatically maintains itself in being through expenditures that increase rather than deplete the reserves of vitality. Life is an excess, call it the self-ecstasy of matter".[10]

If Cowper's *The Task* diagnoses the relationship between human and nonhuman as one invested in eliminating waste as a means of controlling the environment, this chapter

[10] Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. p. 33.

demonstrates how fraught and potentially inverse the human/nonhuman relation becomes in the beginning of the following century. Environments are often seen to resist or reject the human, and waste becomes a mode of intimacy and survival that is available to its human participants only as a precursor to extinction. In other words, a mode of intimacy and a mode of life that prioritises the nonhuman. I trace a sustained interest in waste's ability to create, complicate, and transform intimacies between humans and ecosystems in the poetry of Percy Shelley and Erasmus Darwin, demonstrating how Darwin's digressive long scientific poems *The Botanic Garden* and *The Temple of Nature* provided Shelley with a framework for poems that turn themselves into forms of waste as a recognition of human irrelevancy and disposability. Both poets endeavour to confront what remains inaccessible and/or hostile to the human through questioning what it would mean for a poem itself to be waste, and how the materials of poetry might temporarily render waste accessible if never comprehensible. My final section then turns to Mathilde Blind's *The Ascent of Man,* a poem in clear conversation with both Shelley's poetics and the theory of evolution pre-empted by Erasmus Darwin at the turn of the nineteenth century and then documented by his grandson, Charles Darwin, in 1859. While Blind's poetry advertises its debt to Shelley through the profusion of metaphors, what it gains from these metaphors is very different: a recognition, following Darwin, that all features of human life can be found elsewhere in the animal kingdom, and thus the human species is characterised primarily by redundancy. All three develop a poetics of waste that is distinctly noncathartic in its refusal to satisfy the expectations of what poetry should and can do through internal contradiction, incoherence, and stylistic excess; features that endeavour to embody the event and product of waste.

Shelley and the Inadequacy of Poetry

In this section, I investigate the ways in which waste places pressure on the integrity of the human in Percy Shelley's *Alastor: or the Spirit of Solitude* (1816) and 'The Sensitive-Plant' (1820), two poems preoccupied with what it means for the human to be defined by our increasing irrelevancy. In other words, I am interested in thinking about the human *as* a form of waste, one inextricably tied to processes of decomposition and decay,[11] and what responses become available to us either as a result of acknowledging our essential disposability or as a consequence of our inability to confront this reality. My argument rests on my suggestion that Shelley offers two antithetical examples of these reactions through *Alastor* and 'The Sensitive-Plant'. While *Alastor* charts the Poet's frustrated quest to overcome the perils of his organic form in order to become something that will last, 'The Sensitive-Plant' shifts the perspective toward the nonhuman to demonstrate the affordances of things that do not and cannot last, or that endure far beyond our comprehension, which enable new kinds of intimacy, knowledge, and life precisely because they are imperfectly accessible.

Timothy Morton declares that "No critic of *Alastor* is happy to acknowledge the contrast between its description of extreme introspection and the material horrors of slimy water, teeming animal life and the Poet's decaying body".[12] This scholarly anxiety stems

[11] In this sense, I am interested in the physiological status of the human: for thinking about how capitalism and modernisation turn certain groups into 'superfluous populations', such as refugees, see Zygmunt Bauman's *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004. Towards the end of this chapter, in my reading of *The Ascent of Man,* I look at how Blind confronts the sacrifice of certain populations in order to protect others through the lens of waste.

[12] Timothy Morton. *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: The Body and the Natural World,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. p. 102.

from the difficulty in reconciling the Poet's complex immaterial pursuits with the dismaying and disrupting reality of the corporeal. For Morton, the contrast becomes a source of conflict as a consequence of the Poet's alienation from nature, what he later identifies in a column on queer ecology as our exclusion "from dirt and pollution", our reluctance to acknowledge "where our waste goes" in favour of deifying nature as ideologically pure.[13] The Poet's refusal to co-exist with nature in all its fecund, repulsive, and decaying vitality results in "a violent, disfiguring death, the very thing his vegetable diet would have counteracted".[14] In beginning with this rupture between the human and nonhuman, one activated by the human's inability to exist within and alongside waste, I wish to emphasise that my reading of *Alastor* relies on what is deliberately irreconcilable. It is not only the Poet's repudiation of the experiences shared between all organic life forms, human and nonhuman alike, but in fact his failed attempt to evolve beyond the organic—beyond the promised state of rot, decay, decomposition—into something incompatible with life that secures his annihilation at the end of the poem.

Alastor is a poem that generates inconsistencies and ambiguities within structural gaps, whether this is in the discordance between preface and poem, the slippery distinctions between the Narrator and the Poet, or in the friction between the poem's vast, abstracting ambitions and the circular loop of decay that demarcates its beginning and ending.[15] These

[13] Timothy Morton. 'Guest Column: Queer Ecology', *PMLA* Vol. 125, No. 2, 2010. 273-282 (274).

[14] Morton (1994), pp. 105-6. The comparison Morton draws to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner underscores the essential failure in the Poet's bond with nature: unlike the Mariner, he never experiences the redeeming burst of sympathy for the ugly and populous organisms that surround him.

[15] See particularly Barry Magarian. 'Shelley's *Alastor*: The Mutability of Identity', *The Keats-Shelley Review,* Vol. 12, No. 1, 1998. 77-103.

frictions exploit the reader's desire for interpretation. Simultaneously, it is precisely the drama of classification and identification played out through Shelley's elastic language that enables him to articulate a nascent form of fantasised evolution, a term I use consciously with the proviso that it was not in Shelley's lifetime used to describe species evolution. Anthony John Harding suggests that, "At its most original and innovative, Shelley's poetic language makes conceivable for the reader the plasticity, lack of permanent form, and capacity for variability that must be posited in living beings in order to imagine them "evolving" in something like the way Darwin believed possible in 1837–1838". For Harding, this occurs particularly through "Shelley's frequent habit of transferring properties from one kind of natural phenomenon to another". [16] If we call upon evolution to describe the linear growth or development of a particular thing, from an idea to a body to the notion of generational species advancement, the OED reminds us it also describes "a wheeling, twisting, or turning movement",[17] motions that capture the inevitable cycle of the poem as it compulsively returns to a scene of death. Inherent in this double meaning is both the Poet's vertical desire to exceed the bounds of his species and the defeat of this desire, which triggers instead the reiteration of wasted material.

If Shelley's evolutionary poetics works through a transfer of properties, as Harding suggests, it works also in moments where this transfer falters or imperfectly occurs.

[16] He further attends to, "Shelley's […] fondness for synesthetic effects ("sounds/sweet as a singing rain of silver dew"; "The music of the living grass and air," Prometheus Unbound 4.234-235, 257) [which] constitutes a way of using language that is indeed plastic, or capable of shaping new concepts, and that extends and complicates a reader's sense of how language might work not merely to represent an agreed-upon reality but to reshape it." Anthony John Harding, 'Signs of Change: Percy Shelley's Language of Mutability as Precursor to Darwin's Theory of Evolution', *Literature Compass* Vol. 13, No. 10, 2016. 617-627 (623).

[17] *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "evolution (*n.*), sense I.2.a".

Throughout *Alastor,* the Poet positions his humanness as a limitation to be transcended in favour of the immaterial and perdurable. The description of his boat as "safely fled / As if that frail and wasted human form, / Had been an elemental god" (349-51) contrasts his fantasy of overcoming the "wasted" nature of the human body with his error in turning to alchemy ("elemental") to animate this transformation. If the Poet wants to eliminate decay and waste from his existence by transcending into an elemental form, then alchemy cannot be the answer: later stages of the alchemical process include procedures such as dissolution, putrefaction, and fermentation,[18] all of which explicitly centre waste. What, then, is left? I believe the answer can be found in the emphasis on fire earlier in the poem, with repeated references to the Poet's life "as in a furnace burning secretly" (253) together with his "decaying flame" (247). Calcination is the first stage in the alchemical process and relies on increasing temperatures removing the impurities from a certain substance—in this case, the impurities of the Poet's body are its tendencies to turn to waste, and the "decaying flame" accomplishes this through eroding and refining the body. While Benjamin Colbert reads *Alastor* as an exploration of palingenesis (rebirth or recreation), one "where the *desire* for translation, transfusion, and transhistorical regeneration alone must suffice",[19] I read the collapse of the alchemical process into its first stage as the Poet's doomed attempt to access the immensity of nonhuman, evolutionary time, which does not rely on distinct and perceptible stages. Thus, the attempted transition from "wasted" to

[18] See, for example, Bruce T. Moran's *Distilling Knowledge: Alchemy, Chemistry, and the Scientific Revolution,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005, especially his chapter 'Paracelsus and the "Paracelsians": Natural Relationships and Separation as Creation', pp. 67-98.

[19] Benjamin Colbert**.** 'Romantic Palingenesis, or History from the Ashes', *European Romantic Review* Vol. 28, No. 3, 2017. 369-378 (375).

"elemental" has nowhere to go. What I hope to convey from this seemingly narrow and isolated example is how Shelley uses language as a site in which to enact the human's failure to become something other than what it is.

The Poet's desire to exceed the bounds of his species in a compressed form of evolution seeks to make him embody both the present and the future prospects of his race. Rather than create something new (i.e. reproduce, in whatever form we understand that to take), his desire for improvement turns inward. What triggers this turn is his dream-encounter with the veiled maid, where:

> His strong heart sunk and sickened with excess
> Of love. He reared his shuddering limbs, and quelled
> His gasping breath, and spread his arms to meet
> Her panting bosom:—she drew back awhile,
> Then, yielding to the irresistible joy,
> With frantic gesture and short breathless cry
> Folded his frame in her dissolving arms.
>
> (181-7)

The threat of this intimate encounter lies in both its "excess / Of love", a surplus that exceeds the bounds of the line itself, and in the maid's "dissolving arms". The Poet's corporeal frame is undermined through the embrace, an enactment of the inevitable disintegration of organic matter that the poem recoils from and compulsively returns to: he both rears (raises, cultivates, grows) and quells (suppresses, ends) his signs of life in preparation to meet her, before effectively burying himself in the caesura of line 184. For the remainder of the encounter, he is diminished and superseded by the maid whose embrace both dissolves and is dissolved. What follows on from dissolution is his sight "veiled" (151) (like the maid), his senses temporarily evacuated, until he returns from his

trance to a world that does not feel the way it once did. The maid and her dissolving touch haunt the Poet throughout the rest of the poem, guiding his frustrated efforts to "overleap the bounds" of his species (207). I argue this is because she has revealed to him the end of all intimacy, where the human is always overcome by the tendencies of the corporeal body to turn to waste and become incorporated in something else. Their transfer of properties is a threat he is determined to avoid.

Yet, organic waste is not the only kind seemingly available to the Poet. Shelley also attends to "the waste / Where stood Jerusalem" (109-10), the "wasting dust" belonging to "desolated tombs / Of Parthian kings" (242-4), and ruins which may be eroded by time but are never assimilated once more into their environment—like the monument in 'Ozymandias', whose decay ensures its separation from everything around it. The inorganic, thus, offers a form of waste that is both less permeable and less violating, and one which rejects the cycle of rearing and quelling that compromises the Poet's body in favour of an enduring line of dissimilation.[20] I say the inorganic is 'seemingly available' to stress that, though we find the act of wasting in *Alastor* to circulate between the biological, the sedimental, and the temporal, the Poet's organic form cannot survive the move from one type of waste to another.

The outcome of the Poet's attempted evolution, therefore, is not the purification of matter promised by calcination, but a catastrophic turn to the inorganic, where the Poet's

[20] For William Miller, a significant distinction between organic and inorganic waste is the latter's inability to elicit disgust because "[i]t is not dead, having never lived." *The Anatomy of Disgust,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 39. If the inorganic is excluded from the cycle of life, it is excluded also from the intimacy and obligation that life begets.

eyes are transformed to "stony orbs" (536)[21] and his living form recedes to reveal the horror of the hand "hung like dead bone within its withered skin" (251). In attempting to reject organic decay as the inevitable endpoint of the human by moving to the nonhuman—and even the inanimate—the Poet encounters a more hazardous form of waste which imperils each organic form it encounters:

> And nought but knarled stumps of antient pines
> Branchless and blasted, clenched with grasping roots
> The unwilling soil. A gradual change was here,
> Yet ghastly.
>
> (530-3)

The Poet's footsteps harm the environment. While Shelley emphasises the continued coexistence of its various living forms, the soil becomes "unwilling", the roots "clenched", the pines "branchless and blasted", their union transformed into a painful and barren encounter between hostile forms. Enjambment makes audible these altered relations, the end of each line revealing a rupture in once natural transition points between tree and earth. Here we find waste not in its productive form of rot and decomposition, but rather an environment transformed into an inhospitable wasteland that is unable to maintain the vital interrelations between living beings. If this paradoxically sterile form of waste is generated by the Poet's continued presence in the vast ecosystem he is attempting to evolve outside of, transferring into the moss the "shuddering from his burning limbs" (517), it is symbolic of human failure to acknowledge our place *within* the complex interrelations of the ecosystem.

[21] The Poet's eyes are his last aspect to retain a sense of life and connection with those around him, even if "the glare of those wild eyes" (264) disturbs more than invites.

So far, I have argued that the Poet's desire to escape and transcend the organic (and the intimacies enabled by the organic) has isolated him from the environments he exists within. In *Shelley and Vitality,* Sharon Ruston traces Shelley's engagement with the vitality debate of the 1810s, which was responding to the emergent claim that "for the first time, life was considered a universal state", something shared by humans, animals, and plants alike.[22] For William Lawrence, one of the major players in the debate and the Shelleys' physician, life was a process rather than a product, in which "we see a continued change, so that the body cannot be called the same in any two successive instants".[23] If the integrity of the self is jeopardised by this developing understanding of organic life, the definition of the 'human' is also under threat: what would it mean for our cosmic significance if we are simply one participant in a vast ecosystem, all of us tending towards the same endpoint of decomposition and redistribution? This is a disturbing conclusion to arrive at, one where the human is not privileged, and where we are eventually swallowed into the landscape and recycled. And yet, for Shelley, recognising our essential irrelevancy is not only preferable to the Poet's catastrophic and annihilating attempts to evolve beyond the organic, but also necessary if we are to interrupt the poem's looping structure of decay.

The poem ends where it begins: with the Poet's corpse.

> Upon those pallid lips
> So sweet even in their silence, on those eyes

[22] Sharon Ruston. *Shelley and Vitality,* New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005. p. 3.

[23] Quoted in Ruston, p. 9. Lawrence's understanding of the body as constantly evolving can be connected to the anxieties of dissolution present in the Poet's dream-encounter with the maid, in which his body is compromised and emerges into an "empty scene" (201) where nothing is reminiscent of what it once was. If every moment is in essence one of dissolution and re-composition, this offers a way of understanding the indeterminacy of the figures in *Alastor* and the various contradictions embedded in the structure of the poem as a consequence of life itself, which refuses to be made comprehensible, consistent, and familiar.

That image sleep in death, upon that form
Yet safe from the worm's outrage, let no tear
Be shed--not even in thought. Nor, when those hues
Are gone, and those divinest lineaments,
Worn by the senseless wind, shall live alone
In the frail pauses of this simple strain,
Let not high verse, mourning the memory
Of that which is no more, or painting's woe
Or sculpture, speak in feeble imagery
Their own cold powers. Art and eloquence,
And all the shows o' the world, are frail and vain
To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade.
It is a woe "too deep for tears," when all
Is reft at once, when some surpassing Spirit,
Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves
Those who remain behind, not sobs or groans,
The passionate tumult of a clinging hope;
But pale despair and cold tranquillity,
Nature's vast frame, the web of human things,
Birth and the grave, that are not as they were.

(699-720)

The ending lines work by continually deferring any realisation—consider, for instance, the repeated use of “upon/on” at the beginning of the lines I have quoted, which delays the command to “let no tear / Be shed”. This is exaggerated further by “nor/or”, conjunctions that work to either negate what has come previously or offer an alternative to what has been said. Together, they enact Shelley’s declaration that all art is, essentially, insufficient to describe what has occurred, by populating the poem’s conclusion with prepositions and conjunctions that redirect any move towards understanding. And yet the final line of the

poem acknowledges that something has changed: “birth and the grave, that are not as they were”. This is perhaps not as contradictory as it might seem at first. Something has changed, but the poem cannot help us understand what, or why, or how. It can only register the difference in what “remain[s] behind” after the death of the human, that which can survive being recategorised into waste alongside the rest of the poem. If it is a counterintuitive place for a poem to arrive—admitting its own inadequacy in narrating the consequences of the story it has already told—this is by design. It is impossible for the human to genuinely grapple with a world that excludes them and/or no longer relies on them, and Shelley exploits this by ending *Alastor* with a refusal to even explicate the meaning of our extinction.

In Shelley’s later poem, ‘The Sensitive-Plant’, he offers a similar meditation on the usefulness (or otherwise) of a poetics of waste from a nonhuman vantage point. The poem narrates the seasonal cycle of a garden tended to by a human gardener; among her plants is the titular plant, the only being in the poem other than the gardener who does not survive the wintry turn to rot and death. The human exists in the poem only on the periphery: in the figure of the gardener, who dies at the end of the second canto, and the allusions throughout to Milton’s Garden of Eden. We are told the garden is an “undefiled Paradise” (1.58) with the gardener as its “Eve” (2.116), though an Eve with “no companion of mortal race” and thus no Adam (2.127). The garden experiences its own version of a Fall throughout the course of the narrative, generating a new form of excessive fecundity which reproduces through rot, mould, and decay and continues to accumulate without the gardener’s cultivational attention. In this sense, it is comparable to Milton’s Eden, which must be tended to by Adam and Eve in order to regulate its growth, though Shelley’s

garden is overtaken by a particularly repulsive sort of excessive growth that liberates and renews the nonhuman at the expense of the human.

We might think here of another fantasised rotting Eden,[24] that of Jenny Hval's *Paradise Rot*, where the growing erotic intimacy between Joanna and Carral is often instigated or enhanced by the smell of rotting fruit. Hval's novel follows Norwegian student Joanna as she travels to a new country for university and moves into an abandoned brewery that has been converted into open-plan housing. The damp and porous ambience of her new home and her mycological research both become amplified when she meets her flatmate Carral. Joanna describes Carral's skin as "soft, softer than I remembered, as if she were rotten too, a fallen Eve"[25] in the wake of them cleaning out rotten apples from their flat, a description that resonates with the description of Shelley's garden in the third canto of the poem as "like the corpse of her that was its soul" (3.192), another fallen, rotten Eve. Later, in *Paradise Rot:*

> The stench of rotten fruit had spread through the entire flat. It felt like the brewery had been transformed into a big wet tank that was waiting for Carral and I to

[24] Sophie Gee makes the persuasive argument for waste as a central fixation in Milton's poem: "For Milton, waste is a potentially confusing and negotiable category because it is a form of abundance. Milton was, after all, writing about the grandest kind of abundance there is: divine creation. Like abjection, luxurious excess is at once alluring and alarming, threatening to decline into putrefaction but also a source of life, energy, and renewal. Degraded leftovers in *Paradise Lost* are as cosmically significant as their much more glorious counterparts because in Milton's republican imagining of the cosmos, waste and abundance are equally necessary as markers of a theologically and philosophically coherent universe." See 'Wastelands, Paradise Lost, and Popular Polemic at the Restoration' in *Making Waste: Leftovers and the Eighteenth-Century Imagination,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. pp. 41-68 (p. 42). Both Shelley and Hval are perhaps responding to the anxious debate over the role of waste and excess in *Paradise Lost* in their depiction of Eden's excessive liveliness turning to rot.

[25] Jenny Hval, *Paradise Rot: A Novel,* (trans. Marjam Idriss), New York: Verso Books, 2018. p. 123.

> decompose within it: a rotting, reeking Garden of Eden. The apples were in the bin where we'd left them, mouldy and collapsed.[26]

The accumulation of rot and decay offers a space of imagined erotic consummation where two bodies decompose into one, disturbing in its sensuality, a space of damp breathing, excessive smells, repulsive softness. An abundance of life gone to waste. The decay in Shelley's garden is equally embodied and equally unsettling in its corporeality: the drying sap acts like "blood to a heart that will beat no more" (3.259) while the tears of the Sensitive-plant's lids "changed to a blight of frozen glue" (3.255), reminiscent of eyelids stuck together with secretion. In the garden, bodies are considered to be things that rot, decompose, waste away. The garden itself is an enormous body, the metaphorical corpse of its gardener, and the process of rotting brings new, disturbing life to a space choked by death. While scholars have recognised in Shelley's poetry a horror of petrification,[27] Shelley locates within the garden's death a vivid, lively contrast in *putre*faction, where the weeds and the rotten growth ensure that the garden remains unfrozen even through the winter, repulsively alive.

Rot is another form of life: it is simply one inaccessible to humans. 'The Sensitive-Plant' offers one way of thinking about waste as enabling an intimate encounter which is sensual and disgusting and fixated on accretion rather than release, and one that is specifically *non*human. The first two cantos offer overwhelming sensory details of the garden, its complex ability to blend multiple forms of synesthetic knowledge: consider the "boughs of

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[26] Ibid, p. 130.

[27] See specifically Rowan Boyson glossing John Wilkinson's reading of 'Ozymandias' in 'Shelley's Republic of Odours: Aesthetic and Political Dimensions of Scent in 'The Sensitive Plant'', *The Keats-Shelley Review* Vol. 27, No. 2, 2013. 105-120 (112-3).

embowering blossom" (1.42), the "sinuous paths of lawn and of moss" (1.49), the "quivering vapours of deep noontide" (1.90) and "the beasts, and the birds, and the insects, … drowned / In an ocean of dreams without a sound" (1.102-3). But by the start of the third canto, we are overwhelmed not by lush floral scents but damp smells that choke and irritate and nauseate. It is a disturbingly tactile experience. If we consider, tongue in cheek, that you can't spell 'erotic' without 'rot', we begin to see how the poem centres waste as the mechanism enabling the continual survival of the garden, where our now defiled Paradise is defined by what is going to waste inside it: a togetherness activated by forms that disintegrate, turn unstable and fleshy and limp, before mouldering together.

My reading of Shelley's poem is heavily informed by Robert Mitchell's 'Cryptogamia', which argues for the "Romantic love of plants" as "ambivalent, grounded as much in a sense of vertiginous loss as of devotion and respect".[28] Rather than reading plants as a stand-in for some specifically human concept or experience, Mitchell encourages us to read 'The Sensitive-Plant' while attending to the "elusive form of vitality" that the plants experience and generate.[29] What is central to Shelley's poem is the understanding that plants are *not* like us—they are able to flourish in conditions that lead to human extinction, though this vertiginous (to reuse Mitchell's term) dynamic is of course heavily informed by

[28] Robert Mitchell, 'Cryptogamia', *European Romantic Review* Vol. 21, No. 5, 2010. 631-651 (632). Mitchell takes 'cryptogamia' from Linnaean taxonomy, where it refers to plants that hide their reproductive organs, and repurposes "the Greek roots of this term (crypto = hidden + gamia = generation) to mark and amplify the Romantic fascination with the strange life of plants" (632). I extend Mitchell's interest in the ambivalent relationship between human and plant to argue that Shelley's poems formally enact moments of incomprehension and recoil activated by encounters with inaccessible modes of being. While Mitchell examines the mutual atmospheres produced by different forms of life, my focus is on the affordances of waste as both a type of noncathartic intimacy and a means of continued survival incompatible with the human.

[29] Ibid, 634.

the connection drawn between the vegetal and the human in the first two cantos of the poem, where the companionless and thus reproductively wasteful nature of the mimosa and the lady enables their cross-species intimacy. Waste and its estranging capacities establish a form of erotic togetherness predicated on divergence and inaccessibility, carrying within it the same ambivalence Mitchell locates in the Romantic conception of plants.

Waste demands we think about use and reuse. Rot is interesting to Shelley because it can bestow new life on something that has already been used up. The garden's growth is likened to the "decaying dead … animated!" (3.238-9) and when winter comes to an end, certain plants "[r]ose like the dead from their ruined charnels" (3.287). The Lady's metaphorical corpse alters its environmental possibilities and brings new things to the surface.[30] Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* understands our bodies as acting as an enormous and complex community for bacteria[31]—decay and rot allow this interior process to rise to the surface, redefining how we view the body and its uses. Waste has the capacity to signify both the cluttering detritus of things already otherwise used or used up that we cannot help but see, such as litter clogging our oceans and parks, and the pervasive, harmful, often invisible episodes Rob Nixon terms slow violence, harm that is multigenerational, silent, and corrosive, like air pollution.[32] In demonstrating these coexistent contradictory aspects,

[30] Morton (2010) encourages us to attend to the "zombielike nature of interconnected life forms" which reveal that "Nature looks natural because it keeps going, and going, and going, like the undead, and because we keep on looking away, framing it, sizing it up." 279. Recognising the sense of uncanny, excessive, and persistent life against all odds is a key feature of queer ecology for Morton and one that characterises the fate of the garden in the third canto of Shelley's poem.

[31] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things,* Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. See especially her chapters on 'Edible Matter' and 'Vitality and Self-Interest'.

[32] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.

waste therefore brings into conflict inner and outer, our ability to note where our bodies begin and end.[33]

Plants muddle this further. Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden*, which I discuss in greater detail in the next section, makes the case for each plant as an erotic environment of its own rather than an individual entity. At their roots, plants connect to the earth and to each other as a form of transfer and communication. Glossing Foucault's speculation about why naturalists often displaced or ignored plants in favour of studying animals as figurations of life, Jeffrey T. Nealon proposes that plants seemed less appealing precisely because they could be pulled from the ground and studied root to stem:[34] their complete accessibility precluded the ability to feel curious about them. Yet, as Colin Carman points out, this isn't true of the mimosa (the subject of Shelley's poem) because its internal sex-organs made it resistant to external study.[35] Neither is it true in this case because of the attention the poem places on roots as the transitional site from plant to earth, the connection between world and individual. In the earlier cantos, it is the mimosa's roots which enable its intimate and unique knowledge: it experiences love "from the leaf to the root" (1.71) though significantly it receives but cannot give, a one-sided communication. In the third canto, however, attention goes to distinguishing what can and cannot survive in

[33] *Paradise Rot* notably also depicts an environment without clear boundaries: Jo and Carral's flat has no separating walls, meaning a sound as small as the other breathing in their sleep can be heard from the opposite end of the building as if it is occurring up close. Their intense attentiveness to each other's basic signs of life becomes amplified the more things go to rot within their home.

[34] Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Plant Theory: Biopower & Vegetable Life,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015.

[35] Colin Carman, 'Percy Shelley's Hermaphroditus: Queer Nature and the Sex Lives of Plants in *The Sensitive-Plant* and *The Witch of Atlas', The Radical Ecology of the Shelleys: Eros and Environment,* Oxford: Routledge, 2018. pp. 77-117 (p. 86). Carman's exploration of plant sexuality in Shelley's poetry is particularly useful for his interest in "*eros* that is both perverse and unlivable" (p. 94).

the garden. “The moles and the dormice died for want” beneath the roots of the Sensitive-plant (3.272-3); the river becomes choked with “roots knotted like water-snakes” (3.243); sap grows thick and useless in the root. Like the clenched roots in *Alastor,* these inhospitable roots reveal the difficulty of connection in the garden, its tendency to go to waste—unless it can be repurposed. The tragedy of the human is that they cannot access and reuse what they waste: the gardener is fixated on removing undesirable things from the garden with the express intent of ensuring that the environment contains only what can be useful and productive, but it is precisely that which is cast aside that thrives.

The narrator also functions on the periphery of the poem. The lyric “I”, which is often associated with human subjectivity, emerges only once in the poem prior to the gardener’s death. “I doubt not” is repeated in regards to the speaker’s assertion that the plants physically experienced pleasure at the presence of the lady. The next time Shelley’s speaker acknowledges his own self, shadowed by the loss of the human, it is to cast doubt over everything that comes before.

> Whether the Sensitive Plant, or that
> Which within its boughs like a Spirit sat,
> Ere its outward form had known decay,
> Now felt this change, I cannot say.
>
> (C.288-91)

The third canto leaves us with a world that thrives in the wake of the human, less a garden with the connotations of cultivation and design, more an environment which creates and sustains the conditions by which it continues to survive. Up until now, Shelley has demonstrated the irrelevance of the human, our essential disposability despite our claims for responsibility, our belief we can impose change from above rather than from within,

which Stacy Alaimo persuasively connects to our rhetoric of sustainability.[36] But 'The Sensitive-Plant' also refuses an alternative. There is no opportunity for the human to access the alternate modes of existence that enable plants to live despite their fecund decay; instead, the demise of the human is inevitable. Our death might alter the way the environment operates—and perhaps even liberates it—but Shelley crafts a version of human existence meaningful only in its fundamentally peripheral nature. 'The Sensitive-Plant' asks the same questions as *Alastor*, but from a different angle: rather than foregrounding the decline of the human, we are in the realm of the vegetal, which exposes how little our species matters in the vast planetary scheme.

Shelley responds by turning the poem itself into a form of waste, and thus reopens ambiguity and uncertainty in a work that otherwise possesses unwavering clarity in its extremity of description. In undoing what he has done, reusing the material of the poem for a different purpose, Shelley acknowledges the difficulties and limits of confronting the reality of our extinction. After all, the poem can only exist in the context of human language—without the human, the poem cannot exist either. If the announced failure of *Alastor*'s ending is partly a result of poetry's inability to articulate the crisis of human decline, 'The Sensitive-Plant' embraces this contradiction. It questions its own existence, its own use, in the shadow of human irrelevancy; and it endures in spite of these potentially catastrophic answers.

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[36] Stacy Alaimo, 'Sustainable This, Sustainable That: New Materialisms, Posthumanism, and Unknown Futures', *PMLA* Vol. 127, No. 3, 2012. 558-564. I have in mind specifically her following statement: "Even as the practices of sustainability foster the recognition that nearly everything one does has environmental effects, the epistemological stance of sustainability, as it is linked to systems management and technological fixes, presents a rather comforting, conventional sense that the problem is out there, distinct from one's self" (561).

Though Theresa M. Kelley states that 'The Sensitive-Plant' "appears to take the notion of plant vitality and run with it [but] cannot run very far",[37] I read the conclusion's deliberate wasting of the previous cantos as another acknowledgement of the ways in which plant life thrives in conditions that annihilate the human. Similarly, in *Alastor* Shelley suggests that, unless we accept decay as yet another thing that binds us to the nonhuman beings around us, we will continue in a destructive, fruitless cycle that harms what we encounter and ultimately leads to extinction. Shelley drives both poems towards an unreconcilable endpoint that exposes the limitations of poetry and thus demands to be un/rewritten. Without this undoing, we might end up in the realm of the deformed and belated that constitutes Rousseau's existence in *The Triumph of Life* (1822), where the corruption visited on his living body becomes the only thing that endures beyond the moment of death, and his autobiography documents instead the lives of "those forms … which thus stained / The track in which we moved" (517-8).[38] As Amanda Jo Goldstein perceptively shows, life in *The Triumph of Life* is defined less by the co-constituting vitalism present in Shelley's earlier poems than by that which vitalism excludes: "the inorganic, the material, the mechanical, and the dead".[39] A complete acknowledgement of the body's

[37] Theresa M. Kelley. *Clandestine Marriage: Botany & Romantic Culture,* Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2012. p. 210.

[38] Amanda Jo Goldstein. *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. p156. Several scholars have commented on the presence of Rousseau in *Alastor*, including the fact that Shelley was reading his *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* around the time of *Alastor*'s composition, and have identified similarities between the Poet and the figure of Rousseau in *The Triumph of Life*. See, for example, Donald L. Maddox's 'Shelley's "Alastor" and the Legacy of Rousseau', *Studies in Romanticism,* Vol. 9, No. 2, 1970, 82-98, and Monika Lee's '"Some Lone Ghost, Nature's Messenger": Rousseau and Organic Language in Shelley's *Alastor*', *ESC: English Studies in Canada,* Vol. 19, No. 4, 1993, 417-438.

[39] Goldstein. p. 149.

porous vulnerability, susceptible to "figures shed from nearby persons and things [and] also with aged particles and long-traveled images",[40] reveals the disturbing life of things that have endured far beyond a human framework of space and time, things we cannot possibly comprehend and yet are forced into intimacy with.

Erasmus Darwin's Accretive Poetics

> The event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed, by Dr Darwin, and some of the physiological writers of Germany, as not of impossible occurrence.
>
> (Percy Shelley's Preface to *Frankenstein*, 1818)[41]
>
> They talked of the experiments of Dr Darwin, (I speak not of what the Doctor really did, or said that he did, but, as more to my purpose, of what was then spoken of as having been done by him,) who preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion.
>
> (Mary Shelley's Foreword to *Frankenstein*, 1831)[42]

It is notable that both 'The Sensitive-Garden' and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, two works that in different ways investigate the possibilities of repurposed waste,[43] owe a debt to

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[40] Ibid. p. 162.

[41] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (ed. Maurice Hindle), London: Penguin, 2003. p. 11.

[42] Ibid. p. 8.

[43] There is, of course, much to be said about the role of waste in *Frankenstein* far beyond the remit of this chapter. For the consequences of Frankenstein's inability to retain an "antiseptic detachment" from his creature, see Peter Heymans, 'A Problem of Waste Management: *Frankenstein* and the Visual Order of Things', *Animality in British Romanticism: The Aesthetics of Species,* London: Routledge, 2012. pp. 118-133 (p. 126). Janelle A. Schwartz, 'A Diet of Worms; or *Frankenstein* and the Matter of a Vile Romanticism', *Worm Work: Recasting Romanticism,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012, pp. 149-188, considers the role of worms in "transmuting decay into a kind of regeneration" as a precedent for Victor's experiment (p. 153), in which "the creature exists as an exaggerated artifice of the role of decomposition in nature's organic cycle" (p. 154) and the retrospective narrative only materialises once Victor is dying. See also Denise Gigante on the creature as a disturbing symbol of excess, 'Facing the Ugly: The Case of *Frankenstein*', *ELH* Vol. 67, No. 2, 2000, 565-587, and Anna K. Mellor, 'A Feminist Critique of Science' in *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters,* London: Routledge, 1989, pp. 89-114, for a discussion of Darwin's influence on the novel.

Erasmus Darwin, a figure whose own poetry was irresistibly associated with waste. His contemporaries experienced his poetic style as possessing certain excessive or wasteful attributes, modelling a bewildering style of poetry that brought newly into question what poems could do or be as the eighteenth century drew to a close. In this section, I use Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* (1791) and *The Temple of Nature* (1803) to reflect on the claims I made in my readings of Shelley: namely, that there was a growing curiosity about the ways in which poetry itself could produce or be waste, and these theoretical pursuits engaged in broader conversations about the status of the human in the wake of revised understandings of life. I argue that we should attend to the immediate reception of *The Botanic Garden* as a guide for accessing Darwin's deliberately unproductive, evasive, and accretive poetry. If Martin Priestman is correct in his understanding of Darwin's poetic structures as designed after "real botanic maps",[44] a conclusion I find highly persuasive, I ask what it would mean if our path through these verse-gardens was difficult to navigate, overcrowded, and resistant to the cultivation of the gardener-poet, rather than well-maintained and convenient for human exploration—in other words, to ask alongside Caroline Levine, "What is a walled enclosure or a rhyming couplet capable of doing?"[45] I then turn to Darwin's final and posthumously published poem *The Temple of Nature* (1803) to explore poetry's ability to stave off the classification of waste through maintaining a state of indeterminacy. Overall, I hope this retrospective detour will provide a sense of why the

[44] Martin Priestman. *The Poetry of Erasmus Darwin: Enlightened Spaces, Romantic Times,* Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. p. 66.

[45] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. p. 6.

language of waste was so productive for Shelley, as well as offering a theory of waste-centred poetics that will contextualise my reading of Mathilde Blind's *The Ascent of Man*.

Despite his admiration for *The Loves of the Plants*, the second part of *The Botanic Garden* (though the first to be published), Horace Walpole admits, "I can read this over and over again forever, for though it is so excellent, it is impossible to remember anything so disjointed". He goes on to despair "that such profusion of poetry, magnificent and tender, should be thrown away on what neither interests nor instructs".[46] 'Profusion' and 'thrown away' capture two essential aspects of waste, in which the squandering or misuse of the poem is heightened by its excessive quantity. For Walpole, the pleasure he experiences when reading the poem paradoxically springs from its essential transience, an accumulation of material and experience that can never be rendered productive because nothing can ever be done with what cannot be retained—and yet, because of this impermanency, the pleasure is never used up. There is a strange and seemingly irreconcilable tension in Walpole's analysis between "what neither interests nor instructs" and the "magnificent and tender" poetry. Can pleasure exist separate from either interest or knowledge? And if so, what does this pleasure look and feel like?

Tristanne Connolly offers "overstimulation" as one potential category of conflicted pleasure,[47] a term that captures the relentless progression of Darwin's verse. As will become increasingly clear, this refusal to pause or retract is a characteristic experience of reading *The Loves of the Plants*. For Coleridge, the poem is "a succession of Landscapes or

[46] Quoted in Tristanne Connolly, 'Flowery Porn: Form and Desire in Erasmus Darwin's The Loves of the Plants', *Literature Compass,* Vol. 13, No. 10, 2016. 604-616 (609).

[47] Ibid. 610.

Paintings - it arrests the attention too often, and so prevents the rapidity necessary to pathos", while Southey suggests it suffers from a lack of "relief—its shade, as well as its light".[48] In other words, there is too much stuff crowding each line, leaving no empty space in which an idea or a feeling can develop. Because nothing develops, nothing can connect, creating the disjointed effect Walpole identifies in his own reading which becomes for Coleridge a series of static images without a narrative. Darwin's emphasis on the multitudinous and busy nature of *The Botanic Garden*, and thus his juxtaposition of various images and figures, reflects the poem's interest in plants as events and communities of their own rather than individual entities. There is something overwhelming in the microscopic detail the poem achieves, where we become party to polyamorous erotic encounters numbering in the tens or even hundreds that appear to the superficial perspective to be separate and singular. Darwin's lines mirror his content in giving us too much, turning what was enjoyment into discomfort or awkwardness. As I suggested earlier, we should understand noncatharsis to produce both lack and excess simultaneously, and I see this occurring in the stylistic compression of *The Botanic Garden,* where the excess (of material) directly creates the lack (of knowledge, satisfaction, even pleasure).

And yet this does not feel wholly satisfying as an explanation for the poem's peculiar stasis and resistance. One further complication is the poem's complete lack of narrative, with each stanza building in the anticipation of a particular event or transformation that can take place only after our gaze has been distracted towards something else, whether towards a footnote or another organism. Janelle Schwartz describes our filtering of these

[48] Quoted in Priestman, p. 34.

multiple modes as “an effected double vision, or diplopia”, which “manifests a cognitive inconsistency between what is perceived and what is actually present”.[49] While Schwartz’s focus is on *The Temple of Nature*, her emphasis on *re*-seeing and seeing double in Darwin’s verse as a demonstration of nature’s “process of motion” can be just as usefully applied to his earlier poems.[50] Each time we are required to split or compromise or revise our reading practices for *The Botanic Garden,* the forward momentum we might expect from a poem designed to be walked through is impeded, as if we have encountered a dead-end or an abrupt corner turn.

The poem’s tendency to swerve or interrupt itself characterises almost all its stanzas, further evidence of its curious and directionless productivity. This example from the first canto demonstrates Darwin’s paradoxical ability to create stasis through activity, much like treading water:

> VALLISNER sits, upturns her tearful eyes,
> Calls her lost lover, and upbraids the skies;
> For him she breathes the silent sigh, forlorn,
> Each setting day; for him each rising morn.--
> "Bright orbs, that light yon high ethereal plain,
> Or bathe your radiant tresses in the main;
> Pale moon, that silver'st o'er night's sable brow;--
> For ye were witness to his parting vow!--
> Ye shelving rocks, dark waves, and sounding shore,--
> Ye echoed sweet the tender words he swore!--

[49] Janelle A. Schwartz, *Worm Work: Recasting Romanticism,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. pp. 28-9. Here, Schwartz is alluding to the way in which the presentation of the page is split in two between poem and footnote, and how the doubling of material is demonstrative of the many modes necessary to achieve a totality of knowledge.

[50] Ibid. p. 66.

Can stars or seas the sails of love retain?
O guide my wanderer to my arms again!"

(I.361-72)[51]

The stanza continuously generates loss but in a way that refuses to remain empty as a marker of that loss: instead, each line either rearticulates her longing for her former lover or calls upon the densely populated world of inanimate forms to participate in her lament. The fact they can only passively witness or echo signifies the impossibility of creating something new from the abundance of lack, as does the opposition of "setting day" and "rising morn". Many of the neat lines of iambic pentameter end with a dash that stretches beyond the confines of the line itself, indicating a forward momentum obstructed by the poetic form, which instead returns time and time again to the anxiety of love going to waste.

What are we to make of a poem that is preoccupied with the fecundity of life and yet nevertheless refuses to be used or reused, which insists on everything it contains remaining *apart* despite also endeavouring to capture the human experience of being *among*? This contradiction is activated by Darwin's recognition of our necessary intimacy with and proximity to things we cannot truly understand, which must be filtered multiple times through language and metaphor to even be seen, though it is this filtering in part that causes the ephemerality of the seeing. The above stanza is a useful example of what this filtering looks like: the lines are crowded with adjectives that seek to explicate the content or substance of the thing that is the subject of their attention, but it is precisely the

[51] All in-text citations are to Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden: Volume II,* (eds. Adam Komisaruk and Allison Duschane), Oxford: Routledge, 2017.

overburdened descriptions that make the lines difficult to parse. There is simply too much information. The ending half-rhyme of retain and again reinforces the indeterminacy and imperfectability of language in rendering experience accessible: 'retain' promises a sense of endurance and presence that 'again' undercuts, because it calls to mind something that has been lost and must be rediscovered. Together, the couplet suggests that everything we wish to last is already gone before we can properly experience them. In documenting something both there and not there, a state of always-frustrated desire for something already had and lost, the stanza arrives at a point with nowhere to go.

In order to think more closely about how Darwin's poem takes on the attributes of waste (abundance, accretion, a refusal to be made useful or coherent), I turn to Anna Seward's *Memoirs* of Darwin. While Seward acknowledges his tendency to "cover every inch of the walls" with figures and landscapes, leaving "no interstitial space",[52] she argues that it is the reader's obligation to select an image and "insulate it by his attention".[53] Unlike Walpole, who bemoans that such poetry "should be thrown away", in effect discarded rather than used, and Coleridge, who finds fault with its peculiar, stultifying pace, Seward sees the poem's lack of breathable space as an impetus to thought. Seward's use of "interstitial" is a particularly productive word in this regard. Interstice refers to both an "intervening space (usually empty) … between things or the parts of the body",[54] such as

[52] Quoted in Priestman, p. 34.

[53] Ibid.

[54] *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "interstice (*n.*), sense 1.a." https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8625451004

interstitial organs or tissue, and an interval of time. Its absence signals the poem's discordant compression of space and time into images always on the cusp of action.

The Loves of the Plants documents numerous moments of seeking, an action that remains curiously unsatisfied: insects are compelled to "seek your gilded mates and infants hives" (I.141) instead of meeting their deaths, but the verse swerves away before their fates are decided; Vallisner fruitlessly seeks "her Lord amid the trackless tides" (I. 374) immediately following the frustrated trap of 'retain' and 'again'; and though Dypsaca is successful in seeking a "low dell" for retreat, her next action comes "in vain" (I.335-336), where a state of indeterminacy always exists to disrupt the natural transition from one act to the next. In a poem that resists a guiding narrative, seeking is always a foreclosed action, one either eternally defeated or ultimately pointless in a world where neither time nor space progress. Similarly, if the reader is seeking something in *The Botanic Garden*, Seward is right to recommend they perform the interstitial work themselves, for the poem reveals itself to be wholly disinterested in exhibiting a garden that can be fully understood or explored.

If *The Loves of the Plants* operates more as "a 'poetic exhibition' or botanical garden in which to get lost than as a narrative timespan",[55] what happens to our experience of the poem when our paths aren't kept free? If the reader is instead meant to battle through overgrowth, retrace their steps, occasionally encounter a dead-end or lose their footing—in other words, to become more aware of themselves and their particular complicated, material journey through an abundance of information than the information itself? Even

[55] Priestman, p. 85.

space that we might expect to remain free, such as the passage from one canto to the next, is filled with dialogic interludes that complicate or undermine the connection between the different parts. Turning back and forth between verse and footnote makes it very easy to get lost without events to anchor the reader in the poem; instead, the imperfect doubleness of the two modes creates the sense of meeting something familiar once again and finding it minutely altered. Consider the following:

> Fierce in dread silence on the blasted heath
> Fell UPAS sits, the HYDRA-TREE of death.
> Lo! from one root, the envenom'd soil below,
> A thousand vegetative serpents grow;
> In shining rays the scaly monster spreads
> O'er ten square leagues his far-diverging heads;
> Or in one trunk entwists his tangled form,
> Looks o'er the clouds, and hisses in the storm.
>
> (III.237-244)

And the accompanying footnote:

> There is a poison-tree in the island of Java, which is said by its effluvia to have depopulated the country for 12 or 14 miles round the place of its growth. It is called, in the Malayan language, Bohon-Upas; with the juice of it the most poisonous arrows are prepared; and, to gain this, the condemned criminals are sent to the tree with proper direction both to get the juice and to secure themselves from the malignant exhalations of the tree; and are pardoned if they bring back a certain quantity of the poison. But by the registers there kept, not one in four are said to return. Not only animals of all kinds, both quadrupeds, fish, and birds, but all kinds of vegetables also are destroyed by the effluvia of the noxious tree; so that, in a district of 12 or 14 miles round it, the face of the earth is quite barren and rocky, intermixed only with the skeletons of men and animals; affording a scene of

> melancholy beyond what poets have described or painters delineated. Two younger trees of its own species are said to grow near it. See London Magazine for 1784, or 1783. Translated from a description of the poison-tree of the island of Java, written in Dutch by N.P. Foereh. For a further account of it, see a note at the end of the work.

These two accounts of the upas tree associate it with different forms of waste. The verse documents a vast profusion of stuff springing from a single deadly root: "a thousand vegetative serpents" with "far-diverging heads", the rhyme of below and grow indicating a kind of fecundity that swallows the entire landscape over and underground. The footnote, by contrast, describes the devastated landscape that once was populated with overgrowth, so that nothing remains on the "barren and rocky" earth except for skeletons and other inorganic forms entirely devoid of life. Waste as excessive growth; the dearth of plains turned to wastelands unable to support any kind of growth. In moving between these two scales, the poem appears to layer them on top of one another, so that we are given the sense of enormous productivity and labour producing absolutely nothing at all. What is even more striking is Darwin's admission in the footnote that the "scene of melancholy [is] far beyond what poets have described or painters delineated", as though the exclusion of the landscape's hazardous fate from the verse is a necessary concession due to poetry's inadequacy as a mode of representation. Indeed, considering my contention that our experience of *The Botanic Garden* is defined by uncontrolled and overabundant life, that which is so much *there* that we are quite stymied by it, perhaps the only way this recognition can exist within the poem is in the footnote's final directives to go elsewhere.

When we return to the poem, however, we find the information of the footnote re-enacted—as if by acknowledging the limits of poetry, Darwin has found a means of attempting to exceed them:

> Steep'd in fell poison, as his sharp teeth part,
> A thousand tongues in quick vibration dart;
> Snatch the proud Eagle towering o'er the heath,
> Or pounce the Lion, as he stalks beneath;
> Or strew, as marshall'd hosts contend in vain,
> With human skeletons the whiten'd plain.
>
> (III.245-50)

If waste is more an event or process than a particular identifiable moment, it is not here. We have the before (the snatching, pouncing) and the after (the strewing of bones) but the actual transition into waste, the decay, rot, and ruin that the term signifies, is blocked from the description. I argue that this resistance stems from the transfer between verse and footnote, so that the information we receive here is in some sense surplus to requirements, having already been placed in the footnote. It thus bears a convoluted familiarity, familiar because we have encountered the same thing before, convoluted because everything about it appears different. In a poem without interstices, before and after must be collapsed into one as there is no sense of time passing in the narrative for them to co-exist.

In the verse above, humans appear only as skeletons scattered across the landscape, whereas the footnote foregrounds the convinced criminals sent to their likely deaths to collect the tree's poisons. If Darwin's poetry resists the intrusion of the human or at least scatters human attributes so they are no longer associated with the human, rather with metaphors called upon to describe the nonhuman, the footnotes signify the human's

significant role in the distribution of knowledge and experience. We are thus in the precarious position of being entangled in an ecosystem that considers us more an impediment than a benefit, and yet which offers the illusion of domestication through the cultivation of language. In its depiction of an overstimulating garden that turns everything into waste, *The Botanic Garden* offers a useful model for Shelley's 'The Sensitive-Plant' and its more explicit confrontation of the role of poetry in enacting waste.

As its title suggests, Darwin's later poem *The Temple of Nature* creates a different kind of ecosystem, one which signals a fusion of human technology and nonhuman life. The poem endeavours to describe "how rose from elemental strife / Organic forms, and kindled into life" (I.3-4), [56] ambitiously covering both the origin and progression of life on earth. The relationship between verse and footnote also differs from Darwin's earlier poem. Whereas in *The Botanic Garden* they grew in proximity to one another though separately, in *The Temple of Nature* they operate more as inosculated trees, an image that emphasises both the ruptures in the text's integrity and their necessary reliance upon one another. In Canto III, one footnote guides us to "the sequel of this Canto, l.453, on sympathy; and l.331 on language; and the subsequent lines on the arts of painting and architecture" (III.fn to 288) while others repeatedly refer to similar concepts such as the "superior sense of touch" inherent to humans (III.fn to 122, 270, 401, 411, 435), perhaps as a means of countering the transience of earlier poems. The former technique complicates our temporal path through the poem, rejecting linearity (or, at least, suggesting the viability of rejecting linearity) and

[56] All in-text citations are to Erasmus Darwin, *The Temple of Nature*, (ed. Martin Priestman), *Romantic Circles Electronic Editions,* 2006.

therefore refusing the interval that might otherwise have existed between the line and the corresponding explanation. The latter technique in some sense creates the convoluted familiarity I described in *The Botanic Garden,* but the footnotes also work to render the information more permanent as it endures throughout the movement of the poem. While it is tempting to interpret the footnotes as providing the connective tissue so absent from earlier poems, across lines and across cantos, it is also true that the footnotes function to defer explication and therefore require the reader to undermine the integrity of the poem, in flipping back and forth between the third and fourth canto, for example, or searching back in the pages for phrasing that feels familiar.

For Ada Smailbegović, poems can "act as instruments of amplification, allowing us to in some way sense spatial and temporal scales that are relevant for other organisms, or the geological or climatic events occurring on the planet, that would otherwise remain sensorially inaccessible to us".[57] In *The Temple of Nature*, Darwin provides narrative on two oppositional scales, the grand, sweeping history of the earth that extends far beyond the lifespan of a human and the "filiations, incremental repetitions and near changes", to use Sophie Laniel-Musitelli's description,[58] which are always occurring but remain unobservable to the human eye. Laniel-Musitelli argues that we can understand Darwin's verse as a fossilising agent, or even a fossil in itself, which enables the enormous span of ecological history to be evidenced through minute, imperceptible changes. Through this,

[57] Ada Smailbegović, *Poetics of Liveliness: Molecules, Fibers, Tissues, Clouds,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. p. 25.

[58] Sophie Laniel-Musitelli, 'Shells, Fossils, and the Flesh of Time in Erasmus Darwin's Poetry', *Études Anglaises*, Vol. 72, No. 1, 83-96 (95).

the poem grants us temporary recognition of a process that would otherwise be invisible to the individual. But Smailbegović's "to in some way sense" is an important modifier—the scales must be adapted, compressed, and effectively simplified to become intelligible to humans, much like the fused remains of a fossil.

Laniel-Musitelli's reading of *The Temple of Nature* recognises Darwin's different intentions in comparison to the botanical exuberance of *The Loves of the Plants*: if a fossilised shell is like "a strange artefact no one ever crafted",[59] a collation of dead matter that can be revived at any moment with the right care, then the poem itself is torn between animate and inanimate matter, that which can use waste and that which cannot. Except, the poem optimistically announces nature's ability to resist and evacuate "the noxious" while digesting "the pure" (II.38). In other words, nature can sift good from bad matter, protecting itself from the hazards of industry.[60] Everything is useful. Everything dies and is incorporated back into the whole. Consider the prefatory summaries of each cantos that detail the material to come, which can be found also in *The Economy of Vegetation,* the first part of *The Botanic Garden* and a poem similarly interested in the reciprocal relations of human and nonhuman. The prefatory summaries do not, however, feature in *The Loves of the Plants* which resists the intrusion of the human. The expansive footnotes venturing across different stanzas and cantos can be read as another example of Darwin's belief in instinctive sorting, where the organic, metamorphosing form of the poem and its sifting of

[59] Ibid. 86.

[60] "Darwin theorized that "the earth has been formed out of organic recrements," that is, "the secretions of organic life" (Zoonomia 509). By extension, he also believed that the by-products of human industry would not destroy but enrich the environment." Lisa Ann Robertson, '"Kindred Forms": Erasmus Darwin's Posthuman Ethics of Relationality', *European Romantic Review,* Vol. 32, No. 5-6, 2021. 551-566 (563).

poetic materials ensures that growth and development are unnecessary when those connections already predate the poem, underpinning everything.

Whereas *The Botanic Garden* was suffused with waste, *The Temple of Nature*'s continuous work and enormous scope defers the classification of waste. The poem's faith in matter that "mounts from the wreck, unchanging but in form" (II.44), "fluctuating" (II.39) in a cycle of "live but to die, and die but to revive!" (II.42) suggests nothing is ever gone or wasted, but exists always in a state of indeterminacy where it may one day be adapted or reused. Darwin populates his poem with organisms that see death as a form of generating life: for example, the tapeworm "grows old at one extremity, producing an infinite series of young ones at the other" (II.fn to 87) or the polypus, which has "been shown by ingenious observers to revive after having been dried, to be restored when mutilated, to be multiplied by dividing them, and propagated from portions of them, parts of different ones to unite, to be turned inside outwards and yet live" (II.fn to 85). Even the reiterations of Adam and Eve in the first three cantos (I.33-52, II.135-158, III.445-460) enact the circular system of life into death into life, for they symbolise both the origin of the human species and the origin of death. In returning to them, we experience these twin origins repeatedly.

The Temple of Nature portrays not the individual form or even the individual species but the process of metempsychosis, with atoms passing from one living form to the next through death:

> With ceaseless change how restless atoms pass
> From life to life, a transmigrating mass;
> How the same organs, which to day compose
> The poisonous henbane, or the fragrant rose,
> May with to morrow's sun new forms compile,

Frown in the Hero, in the Beauty smile.
Whence drew the enlighten'd Sage the moral plan,
That man should ever be the friend of man;
Should eye with tenderness all living forms,
His brother-emmets, and his sister-worms.

(IV.419-28)

Instead of mapping a hindered progress through a garden, *The Temple of Nature* enacts the transmigration of atoms from one life to the next, creating a form of "ceaseless change" that can only exist as a consequence of frequent ruptures. Darwin locates the discovery of new kinds of use in these ruptures, which take place through the death of form. Where *The Botanic Garden* explores the potential for poetry to enact abundance and incoherence as forms of waste, *The Temple of Nature* investigates poetry's ability to sustain a state of indeterminacy which forever defers the classification of 'waste'. Both affordances can only operate through poetry that excludes interstitial space.

If Darwin's exclusion of interstitial space becomes one way in which his poems endlessly defer conclusions in favour of transforming everything into waste, I argue this offers a new context through which to read Shelley's treatment of waste and, particularly, the alarming vortices of life his treatment reveals. Life itself might be a condition shared by a variety of organisms, but it is precisely the crowded, frantic threat of everything that exists alongside and against the human that activates much of the anxiety of *The Triumph of Life,* and the unsettling intimacy between different kinds of life in the garden of 'The Sensitive-Plant' that ultimately decides what survives. These intimacies are central to life yet catastrophic; and they continue to exist for Shelley, as they do for Darwin, only in the absence of an ending.

James Harrison concludes Darwin "had in his grasp all, or almost all, the constituent parts of the full theory of evolution by natural selection … without ever piecing them together in the way his grandson was able to".[61] It comes as little surprise that his impediment lies in the lack of piecing together that I have shown to be otherwise so productive for Darwin's thought. And though his grandson, Charles Darwin, achieved this piecing together, *his* work sparked heated debate over the revised significance of human life in the whole history of the universe. Writing of the impact of evolutionary theory, Gillian Beer suggests one of the more distressing implications was that "the individual is thus both vehicle and dead end",[62] participating in the process of evolution but never able to see the effect in their own lifespan. In this sense, evolutionary thought demands different strategies for how to model a life or a text on waste. What would it mean to understand your life as one small aspect of a vast and incomprehensible whole? If Shelley and Darwin both understand the status of the human to be increasingly tied up with questions about waste in the first decades of the nineteenth century, I argue in my final section that Mathilde Blind's decision to set the majority of *The Ascent of Man* in an urban environment takes these questions to their logical, if extreme, endpoint: what happens when the human is not only the product of waste, but also the producer of new and unproductive kinds of waste?

[61] James Harrison, 'Erasmus Darwin's View of Evolution', *Journal of the History of Ideas,* Vol. 32, No. 2, 1971. 247-264 (260-1).

[62] Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, third edition 2009. p. 38.

The Ascent of Man and the Redundancy of the Human

In the final section of this chapter, I turn to Mathilde Blind's 1889 poem *The Ascent of Man* to investigate how her poetics of waste responds to the post-Darwinian repudiation of human exceptionalism. Like *The Botanic Garden* and *The Temple of Nature, The Ascent of Man* is notably long at over one hundred pages, and Part I is prosodically and structurally experimental as a mirror of human evolution, rising from formless chaos to the rigidity of modernity. I am more interested, however, in looking closely at Parts II and III, which exploit and explore a very different kind of waste to that present in the work of Shelley and Darwin: manmade, urban waste such as pollution. Part II describes the narrator's discovery of Love, who exists in the poem in the form of a starving child abandoned on the city streets as an allegory for the ways in which social relations have been corrupted by wealth and power, while Part III depicts a phantom figure leading the narrator through the world to reveal to her the inescapability of death. I argue that *The Ascent of Man* enacts the irrelevancy of the human species as a kind of poetics through its excess of similes and conjunctions, in which inhabiting the condition of waste enables the poet to cultivate a mode of attention that is focused on relationality and correspondence. This is true especially in regard to Blind's association of the figure of Love with multiple forms of waste. My contention is that Blind models her poetics of waste after Shelley's, and thus also inherits the influence of Erasmus Darwin, but she arrives at very different conclusions about the human's relationship to waste.

In his biography of Blind, James Diedrick devotes an entire chapter to the radical intellectual circles she participated in as a result of her fervour for Shelley's life and poetry. Alongside William Michael Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Richard Garnett, and

others, Blind "contributed to the increasing sophistication that characterized Shelley scholarship in the latter half of the nineteenth century",[63] and specifically championed his work as engaging with "the most important question of our time,—a question now agitating all minds, and which has found such a powerful advocate in the greatest and noblest Englishman now living. I am of course speaking of Mr. John Stuart Mill and the social and political affranchisement of women".[64] In 1872 she published a one-volume selection of Shelley's poems for Bernhard Tauchnitz's *Collection of British Authors*. And, in many ways, she pre-empted my interest in reading Shelley's poetry in dialogue with both Darwins and the theory of evolution by almost one hundred and forty years in her 1886 essay, 'Shelley's View of Nature Contrasted with Darwin's'. In it, she argues that a poet's conceptualisation of nature is unavoidably influenced by the age they live in. She contends that Shelley came close to the views "so luminously developed by Darwin, Alfred Russel Wallace, and other scientific thinkers",[65] except for his conviction that Man was the singular living creature incapable of co-existing peacefully. This, as Blind goes on to observe, is an idea impossible to hold up in a post Darwinian-society:

> Inch by inch every available space of air, of earth, and of water is contested, fought for, finally conquered by some living creature or other, the stronger ever devouring the weaker, or at least beating him out of the field and leaving him to perish. So that the reckless competition, the selfishness, the cruelty which to Shelley appeared as essentially the result of bad government, nay, as almost an accident of human

[63] James Diedrick, *Mathilde Blind: Late-Victorian Culture and the Woman of Letters,* Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2017. p. 39

[64] Mathilde Blind, 'Shelley', London, 1870. p. 6.

[65] Mathilde Blind, 'Shelley's View of Nature Contrasted with Darwin's', London, 1886. p. 12.

> society, might have been traced by him feature by feature throughout the animal kingdom, from the slave–making ant to the thievish sparrow.[66]

As I have shown already in this chapter, poems such as 'The Sensitive-Plant' and *Alastor* reveal that Shelley is interested in the attempt to isolate and/or decentre the human as mere ephemera in favour of the nonhuman's capacity to continually adapt and revive. For Shelley, rot produces an alternate mode of life that the human cannot access; death and waste are not cause for conflict in nature the way they are in human society, but rather modes of being and becoming. This is not discredited by Blind's discussion of Darwinism, but she is more interested in drawing out the many parallels between human and nonhuman life that evolution reveals—specifically, the inherent violence, disorder, and tyranny of nature. Examples from bees to cuckoos to ants demonstrate that humans are neither innately bad and inferior nor innately superior, but simply one example of "the implacable struggle of one individual with another" that Blind sees as defining all organic life.[67]

Thus, human irrelevancy is further exaggerated: no aspect of humanity remains unparalleled in the wider context of the animal kingdom, except, perhaps, language, and more specifically poetic voice. The sheer profusion of similes throughout *The Ascent of Man* offer one way in which Blind reveals the scale of human superfluity. Her similes work to identify and create likeness much in the same way that Blind's essay investigates how humans and nonhumans are behaviourally linked rather than binary opposites. In *The*

[66] Ibid, p. 15.

[67] Ibid, p. 16.

Ascent of Man, as humanity progresses, "the future like a foe in ambush lies" (p. 19),[68] bringing with it storms, floods, and fires; when Blind's narrator encounters the personified figure of Love in the shape of a young boy, his hair is described as "like a flame which at twilight burns stilly", which is immediately followed by a description of "his tears [which] fell like rain on a storm-stricken lily" (p. 64). What is neither human nor living (the abstract concept of the future) is imbued with a mammalian predator's stealth, while the human attributes of Love (hair, tears) are likened to natural occurrences associated more with the weather or nighttime than living creatures. Correspondences so overwhelm the poem, often coming twice or thrice in a single verse, that nothing can exist in isolation. Instead, the organising principle of the poem operates through linking one thing inevitably to another as a mode of attention and using these moments of seeing to animate and texture the poem.

'Attention' might seem a paradoxical word to use when describing what I see as Blind's poetics of waste, for attention often implicitly confers upon its object a sense of importance and usefulness, a rationale for why the attention is being paid. To pay attention is to focus on one thing over another, to establish a hierarchy of interest that conceals all else from the reader's knowledge. However, I understand the kind of attention Blind cultivates through her similes to suggest, firstly, that importance and usefulness are not one and the same. In fact, the similes and their divergence from the poem's narrative suggest, like Erasmus Darwin, that the digressive nature of thought—and thus, the digressive nature

[68] All in-text citations are to Mathilde Blind, *The Ascent of Man, with an introduction by Alfred R. Wallace,* London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1899.

of attention, which leads you away from one thing in order to attend to another—enables an understanding that would not be made available through more straightforward means of engagement. Secondly, Blind's similes and their dominant presence in the poem operate as a surplus, in which each individual thing cannot be contained to its own body or attributes but must instead reach towards something else, becoming more than itself. In doing so, these similes reveal that hierarchy becomes impossible when each thing exists communally, in response to or in the context of another thing entirely. 'Usefulness' is not the parameter by which attention is cultivated, because usefulness has no place in Blind's poetic perception of the world, wherein each body is in conversation with those that surround it, defined by relationality rather than its defined boundaries.

Consider, for example, how many similes are attached to the poem's figuration of Love, who appears throughout Parts II of *The Ascent of Man* in the guise of a young, starving, homeless child. Yet even this materialisation of Love is complicated by the presence of other similes called upon to describe him. Above, I have shown how his hair is likened to flame and his tears to rain, but his voice is also described,

> Like the plaintive lament of a sickening dove
> On a surf-beaten shore, whence it sees past returning
>
> The wings of the wild flock fast fading above
>
> (p. 66)

Alastor also contains an abundance of similes, but Shelley uses them as a means of revealing the difficulty of ever understanding or perceiving a thing: instead, your mind is driven elsewhere in order to grapple with what you do not understand. By contrast, Blind's poetic voice is characterised by its tendency to observe and establish likeness borne *from*

understanding. Here it is Love's voice that forges a likeness with another being—in this case, the body of an ailing dove on the verge of being abandoned by its flock. As is made apparent from my description, the simile is not merely contained to the sound of Love's voice reminding the narrator of a bird, but it instead generates an entire scene in which the abandonment from the dove's fellows "on a surf-beaten shore" is staged: an overflow of creativity, where the actual moment of vocalisation is overwhelmed by likeness. In an article on Christina Rossetti's botanical women, Ashley Miller asks, in relation to the dominance of harvest imagery in Rossetti's poetry: "But what happens when you are what is sown, what is reaped?"[69] For Blind, what defines Love—or, at least, this modern figuration of Love—and what connects the concept of love to the living creatures populating the poem, metaphoric and real, is that all inhabit the condition of waste, all are made to be wasted. All beings, in other words, are material resources whose purpose is to be used up, and this affects not only their conceptions of themselves but their place in the world. The setting of the dove's abandonment on the shore is recalled in Love's description of himself:

> Behold me cast out as weed spurned of the ocean,
> Half nude on the bare ground, and covered with scars,
> I perish of cold here.
>
> (p. 66)

Love places himself metaphorically on the borderland between land and sea as "weed spurned of the ocean", marine waste that is washed up on the shore and inevitably rots

[69] Ashley Miller. 'Ripeness and Waste: Christina Rossetti's Botanical Women', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 64, Issue. 2, 2019. 194-203 (196).

once it is no longer in the water. Like the metaphoric scene of the dove being abandoned by its healthier peers, the image of the ocean rejecting the weed is a natural environmental consequence that takes on a more unsettling aspect when we recognise what it is being used for in the poem. Blind is equating the status of love in the modern city to a bird that can no longer keep up with its fellows or a weed that will swiftly go to rot: something whose damage either leads to or is a product of its abandonment. Combining these two images—the dove and arrival on a shore, swept there by the tides—produces a distorted version of the biblical tale of Noah's Ark, whereby land can provide no evidence of safety or home but only rotting weeds. What, then, are we to make of the figure of Love reduced to a child left to die on the streets, "half nude on the bare ground, and covered with scars", particularly in conjunction with these similes that reject any sign of flourishing life in favour of peril? Love is multiple and simultaneous forms of waste: unused, leftover, unwanted; wasting away through ill health; and also a vast empty stretch of metaphoric space, unable to be satisfactorily filled by any one comparison, a metaphor couched within another metaphor and thus essentially redundant. What does the comparison of Love to a weed or a bird achieve that Love as an abandoned child does not?

Perhaps the better question to ask is: why situate Love in the body of a mortal child in the first place? These multiple similes all circulating around the concept of waste reveal that in the world of the poem, Love is incapable of changing or transcending form and is instead restricted to a singular manifestation. Even the boundless creative power of the imagination returns compulsively to scenes of love being abandoned. All of Love's guises are unwanted, hopeless, close to death. The narrator of the poem is similarly "homeless and spurned of all mortals" (p. 68): note, here, both the use of "spurned", which repeats

several times to indicate how intimacy within the world of the poem is defined primarily by how it is rebuffed, and the emphasis on “all mortals”, suggesting once more a doubleness of waste, waste in terms of human mortality and waste in terms of being cast out by the rest of her species, abandoned like the dove. This self-reflective categorisation heralds the narrator’s account of what led her to search for Love, in which she explains to Love:

> “Blest walls that were vowed to the Virgin now bristle
> With weeds of sick scarlet and plague-spotted moss,
> And stained on the ground, choked with thorn and rank thistle,
>
> "Rots a worm-eaten Christ on a mouldering Cross.
> From the House of my fathers, distraught, broken-hearted,
> With a pang of immense, irredeemable loss,
>
> "On my wearying pilgrimage blindly I started
> To seek thee, oh Love, in high places and low.
>
> […]
>
> "And, behold, thou art helpless—most helpless to tender
> Thy service to others, who needest their care.
> Yea, now that I find thee a weak child and slender,
>
> "Exposed to the blast of the merciless air,
> Like a lamb that is shorn, like a leaf that is shaken,
> What, Love, now is left but to die in despair?
>
> (pp. 69-70)

Shelley’s influence is most evident in Part II of *The Ascent of Man* because of Blind’s choice to use terza rima throughout, which notably structures Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life*. The

interlocking rhyme scheme works here, as in *The Triumph of Life,* to emphasise interconnectedness between different aspects of life; it also functions as a demonstration of how modern life is driven towards loss, such as the movement of "care" to "air" to "despair". The image of Christ as "worm-eaten" and still on his "mouldering Cross" refutes the biblical narrative of his entombment and resurrection in favour of trapping him in his mortal body, doomed along with the rest of mortality to rot. Although the image refers to an icon of the Crucifixion rather than the actual, corporeal body of Christ, the invasion of rot, worms, and decay bring powerfully to mind a decomposing body, just as mouldering plants have invaded the interior of religious buildings "that were vowed to the Virgin" and brought them strangely to life as the walls "bristle". Religious icons are often used to encourage a particular form of devotional attention through prayer: often ceremonial, cyclical, and repetitive (all words we might use to describe *The Ascent of Man,* its processional and teleological movement juxtaposed with its investment in repeated structures, images, and natural cycles), prayers cultivate a state of prepared attentiveness to what the scene of the icon is communicating. I suggest that the same thing is true of Blind's similes, which have also been invaded/shaped by the presence of waste and are designed to reveal something about the particular object or concept they centre on through staging a scene such as the dove being abandoned. What distinguishes the provocative and generative poetics of waste that Blind uses throughout *The Ascent of Man* from the desecrating waste of the religious building her narrator encountered is that the former

provides a framework for attention whereas the latter conceals or obstructs attention.[70] There is no ability to focus on what the scene of Christ on the Cross is communicating because the rot has taken over its narrative: see, for example, how Blind rhymes "Cross" with both "moss" and "loss". By contrast, the word "behold" is used twice in Part II as a command to maintain focus on Love and what has become of him.

What *has* become of Love is that he has been reduced to the category of "human rubbish" (p. 89) that haunts the city, a label that works similarly to the mouldering religious icons in that it stymies attention. These are the "flotsam, jetsam of the monster city, / Spurned, defiled, reviled" (p. 91) and rendered objects of abject waste in an attempt to conceal the iniquities of the city. Note once more the use of "spurned", which has been called upon to describe both Love and the narrator and which underscores that the available perspectives in Parts II and III of *The Ascent of Man* are all from those who have been cast out of society and who inhabit a state of complete estrangement. Flotsam and jetsam both refer to objects that have been either deliberately or accidentally thrown overboard into the sea in order to prevent disaster—in other words, these people have been sacrificed by and for others in order to preserve their security. Blind's metaphor exposes that the only kind of sacrifice allowed to remain within modern society is not the redemptive sacrifice of Christ on behalf of all humanity but the selfish sacrifice of people who are deemed to not matter, whether that be pregnant, unmarried women, orphans, or the concept of love. We might, tongue-in-cheek, term this 'unnatural selection' to

[70] Blind's atheism is well documented and I think her move here is similar in parts to her description of the increasing secularisation and decreasing superstition of modern culture in her essay on Shelley and Darwin, in which a religiously-inflected perspective is no longer available; but I do not see this so much as a critique of religion as a meditation on what has been lost in the development of urban isolation.

demonstrate how a deliberate and artificial effort is made to aid the dominance or submission of a particular subset of the population. Here, the indirect nature of the simile is turned to the direct assimilation of the metaphor: these bodies are not *like* rubbish, they *are* rubbish, internalising the cruel logic of the city as it decides who or what is allowed to survive—who is considered useful and who must be thrown away.

What distinguishes the environment of waste in *The Ascent of Man* from the overgrown landscapes and gardens of Shelley and Darwin is its urbanity and its focus on the city's unique forms of pollution and disease. Part of what I understand Blind to be demonstrating is that the city is so corrupted and invaded by pollution that everything within has also gone bad, and this is true primarily of relationships, heralded by the reduction of Love to a starving, injured child abandoned on the streets. The apocalyptic rendering of the city originates in the icons of industry that populate it:

> On, on, loud and louder the rough night was blowing,
> Shrill singing was mixed with strange cries of despair;
> And high overhead the black sky, redly glowing,
>
> Loomed over the city one ominous glare,
> As dark yawning funnels from foul throats for ever
> Belched smoke grimly flaming, which outraged the air.
>
> On, on, by long quays where the lamps in the river
> Were writhing like serpents that hiss ere they drown,
> And poplars with palsy seemed coldly to shiver,
>
> On, on, to the bare desert end of the town.
> When lo! the wind stopped like a heart that's ceased beating,

And nought but the waters, white foaming and brown,

Were heard as to seaward their currents went fleeting.
But hark! o'er the lull breaks a desolate moan,
Like a little lost lamb's that is timidly bleating

When, strayed from the shepherd, it staggers alone
By tracks which the mountain streams shake with their thunder,
Where death seems to gape from each boulder and stone.

(pp. 63-64)

The setting is reminiscent of James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874) in its bleak depiction of life's failure to thrive. Blind ties together the deterioration of human society with the infected nature of the city: the trees behave as if diseased, the lamps writhe as if poisoned and drowned, the sky is obscured with dark smoke from "foul throats" of industry that "outrage the air", the waters appear "brown" aside from their white foam. Amid all this torment and tumult, the narrator hears Love's "desolate moan", comparing him once more (though this is chronologically the first time the simile appears) to a vulnerable lamb left to wander alone. Elsewhere, people ascend "dim flights of oozy stairs / Where through gap-toothed, mizzling roof the yellow / Pestilent fog blends with the fetid air" (p. 89). The stairs are so fecund with mould they have dissolved from solid to liquid; the colour yellow, which in all other usages in *The Ascent of Man* refers to blossoms, fruits, and leaves, becomes the "pestilent fog" that invades homes through broken roofs and permeates "the fetid air". Much as the "worm-eaten Christ on a mouldering Cross" obscures and damages the religious icon to the point it can no longer be prayed to, the city's smoke so chokes and

blackens the sky that no light can be emitted—everything is "dim" and "dark". Once more, manmade waste has rendered a state of attentiveness impossible.

Blind is certainly not the only late nineteenth-century author to observe this peculiarly modern form of inescapable and human waste. The desolate, eternal dark of Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night* is diseased by "charnel air", where each person's exhalation "add[s] poison to the poisoned air / Infections of unutterable sadness, / Infections of incalculable madness, / Infections of incurable despair". If "all the air / Is charged with human feeling", whatever is human in Thomson's city has been corrupted into pestilence and gloom.[71] In his lectures on 'The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century', which he quickly amends to "plague-cloud",[72] John Ruskin describes the phenomenon as a kind of cloud formation with no precedent in previous literature from Homer to Byron. The cloud emits "a hiss rather than a wail",[73] calling to mind the noise of a gas valve; it is described as indifferent, tremulous, and intermittent, its inconsistency becoming a sign of its unnaturalness; it is the "bitterest, nastiest, poisonous blight"[74] in which, "by the plague-wind every breath of air you draw is polluted, half round the world".[75] In the examples Ruskin provides, one thunderstorm is "pitch dark, with no *blackness*—but deep, high, *filthiness* of lurid, yet not sublimely lurid, smoke-cloud";[76] in another, "looking over my kitchen garden yesterday, I

[71] James Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night, and Other Poems,* London: Reeves and Turner, 1888. II.11, XV.18-21, XV.1-2.

[72] John Ruskin, 'The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century: Lecture I', *The Complete Works of John Ruskin* Volume XXXIV, London: George Allen, 1908. p. 9.

[73] Ibid, p. 34.

[74] Ibid, p. 38.

[75] Ibid, p. 39.

[76] Ibid, pp. 36-37.

found it one miserable mass of weeds gone to seed, the roses in the higher garden putrefied into brown sponges, feeling like dead snails; and the half-ripe strawberries all rotten at the stalks".[77] For Ruskin, much like Blind, these polluted forms of life gone to waste (decaying roses like dead snails, rotten strawberries, filthy clouds of smoke that invade the lungs) become "the signs of the times",[78] a condemnation of individual and societal failure that is reflected in the unhealthy weather. In turn, it further corrupts the possibilities for coexistence within by turning everything into "one miserable mass of weeds gone to seed". Thomson's description of each person's breath adding to the foul air similarly connects proximity to sickness.

What kind of intimate relationships become available when bodies and minds are polluted—when love is poisoned and reduced to a sickened outcast on the streets? And what hope is there for a poetics of waste in a world where new forms of waste are developed that explicitly degrade or resist attention? One answer might be found in returning to *The Botanic Garden* and *The Temple of Nature,* poems that encourage digression through the amount of detail crammed into each line and the lack of connective tissue between different verses. Darwin evidently models his poems on more organic forms of waste but, as I have shown, his work (for better or worse) complicates and undermines the notion that poems should be read by cultivating a sustained state of attention. And yet, in order to digress, a state of attention must already be achieved—there must be a point of focus that is departed from. Blind's challenge, then, as elucidated through Parts II and III of

[77] Ibid, p. 38.

[78] Ibid, p. 41.

The Ascent of Man, is to cultivate a prosody that rejects the unproductive and foreclosed nature of manmade waste (poverty, pollution, etc) that functions through impeding concentration, and replaces it instead with a poetics of excess and exuberance that exploits the responsive nature of language as something that is always growing. For, as Blind shows at the end of *The Ascent of Man,* only when language is restored to its fertile and capacitive state can intimacy be returned to the world: "from formless Chaos thou shalt mould her / And translate gross earth to luminous heaven" (p. 101).

One way Blind begins to enact this restoration is through her use of "and" as a means of creating and expanding space within the world of the poem. Look, for example, at the multitudes of "and"s wielded in the above description of the city which, along with the repetition of "on, on" at the start of multiple stanzas, endeavours to push back against the stifling descriptions of factory smoke and pollution by reintroducing the movement of the narrator's perspective straying from one thing to another, peering through the diseased gloom. The poem's strained movement towards a moment of attention leads the narrator to Love:

> I turned to the murmur: the clouds swept asunder
> *And* wheeled like white sea-gulls around the white moon;
> *And* the moon, like a white maid, looked down in mute wonder
>
> On a boy whose wan eyelids were closed as in swoon.
> Half nude on the ground he lay, wasted *and* chilly,
> *And* torn as with thorns *and* sharp brambles of June.

(p. 64, emphasis mine)[79]

Unlike my discussion of the ending of *Alastor,* which is dominated by "or", "and" functions here, and elsewhere in the poem, additively, each line building on the previous to add more examples, details, and likenesses in conjunction with Blind's similes. The clouds are like seagulls; the moon is like a maid; both are described as white, linking them also through another observation of similarity. This is further reinforced by the parallel of both lines starting with "and" together with one line ending by noticing the moon and the next line beginning with this moment of noticing. In a sense, Blind's many "and"s are teaching the reader how to pay attention to the world by providing a model while the similes are designed to reveal how everything is connected to everything around it. Partly, as Isobel Armstrong suggests, what this achieves is "a new language … to suggest a plastic transformation and possibility in matter, a vocabulary of movement and coalescing vitality", though for Armstrong this search is "not entirely successful".[80] Lindsay Wilhelm describes Blind's "virtuosic array of verse forms" throughout *The Ascent of Man* as "exemplif[ying] a variety and excess that seems to recreate the conditions of Darwinian evolution on the level of form itself".[81] In a more localised manner, I see both Blind's similes and her use of conjunctions such as 'and' performing a similar job, installing her

[79] It is tempting here to draw a comparison with *Alastor,* a poem which I have showed is preoccupied with attempts to reject or transcend mortality and whose circular beginning and end focuses on the "wasted" body of its titular character, wasted in his attempt to sever his interdependency from other living creatures, but what is notable in turning to *The Ascent of Man* is that it tackles the issue from the opposite end, condemning the abstract concept of Love to a frail, mortal body.

[80] Isobel Armstrong. *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, London: Routledge, 1993. p. 376.

[81] Lindsay Wilhelm. 'The Utopian Evolutionary Aestheticism of W. K. Clifford, Walter Pater, and Mathilde Blind', *Victorian Studies* Vol. 59, No. 1, 2016. 9-34 (27).

language with a sense of transformative and exploratory motion that responds to what has come before and seeks new connections.

Unlike *The Botanic Garden,* whose progression Darwin stages as random and spontaneous, resisting the interstitial space that many of his readers desired to encounter in his verse, the excessive nature of Blind's verse operates primarily through providing connective tissue. For Gregory Tate, Blind "postulate[s] a kind of rhythmic communication that connects living organisms and non-living things across the universe" which "is made audible, she argues, in the rhythms of verse".[82] As Blind describes towards the end of Part I:

> The poet, in whose shaping brain
> Life is created o'er again
> With loftier raptures, loftier pain;
> Whose mighty potencies of verse
> Move through the plastic Universe,
> And fashion to their strenuous will
> The world that is creating still.
>
> (pp. 50-51)

Organic waste operates on a cyclical rather than linear mode, as seen in 'The Sensitive-Plant''s seasonal cycle of life and death that the human gardener cannot access and in *Alastor* both beginning and ending with the death of the Poet and his "mouldering bones" beneath "mouldering leaves". Here, the poet controls the cycle, enabling life to restart anew through her "shaping brain". The emphasis on "again" and "still" reveals that poetry enables temporary access to these nonhuman forms of experience and existence, as does

[82] Gregory Tate. 'Mathilde Blind: Rhythm, Energy, and Revolution'*, Nineteenth-Century Poetry and the Physical Sciences: Poetical Matter*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. pp. 185-224 (p. 185).

the rhyme of "verse" and "Universe", which draws a correspondence between poem and world much like the ways in which Darwin crafts *The Botanic Garden* as a poetic garden which the reader moves through and explores. Where I see Blind differing from Shelley's decision to turn his poems into waste as a meditation on human irrelevancy and Darwin's belief in everything being in a state of potential usefulness is her conviction that waste is a vital organising and metrical principle in her poetry *because* it is waste and thus can view and engage with the world from a new vantage point. In essence, Blind recognises the category of the superfluous—to which the poet, as human, though a human with the potential to momentarily transcend time and space, must belong—as an important site of relationality, whereby the human's redundancy provides new opportunities for intimate knowledge.

In Juliana Spahr's 'This Connection of Everyone with Lungs', the author admits: "I had to think about my intimacy with things I would rather not be intimate with even as (because?) I was very far away from all those things geographically. This feeling made lyric - with its attention to connection, with its dwelling on the beloved and on the afar - suddenly somewhat poignant, somewhat apt, even somewhat more useful than I usually find it".[83] Like Blind, Spahr embraces poetry's ability to use proximity and distance, connection and repulsion, as means of achieving alternate kinds of intimate knowledge. She finds it 'useful'. And similarly, nineteenth-century poets found a poetics of waste useful in providing new or unfamiliar structures, forms, words, through which they could explore

[83] Juliana Spahr, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs: Poems,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. p. 13.

their own investments in what poetry should and can do, as well as what happens when poems are called upon to enact their own defeat. In the next chapter, I pursue this line of thought to its extreme by studying how some of Blind's contemporaries fashioned a kind of poetic voice modelled not on human subjectivity but rather ecological processes. In doing so, these poets explore the possibility of divorcing poetry entirely from the human.

Chapter 2:
Voice Beyond the Human: Swinburne's *Poems & Ballads* and Michael Field's *Long Ago*

In 1852, parroting detractors of poetry, critic and journalist E. S. Dallas asks: "Poesy may be very fine, very beautiful; but where is the use of it?" Although Dallas proceeds to undermine such queries as measuring "utilities of the very lowest order," the concern over the usefulness and purpose of poetry animates many poems of the period.[1] Consider Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), a poem riddled with concerns about the futility of writing poetry, where song will "wither in the vast, / Ere half the lifetime of an oak," though he intends "my darken'd ways / Shall ring with music all the same";[2] or Aurora's impassioned defense of her poetry to Romney in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), in which she claims "You'll grant that even a woman may love art, / Seeing that to *waste* true love on anything, / Is womanly, past question" (emphasis added).[3] In this chapter, I investigate the Victorian lyric's capacity for imagining alternatives to the figure of the singular human speaker as one answer to Dallas's question, focusing specifically on two poets from the latter half of the nineteenth century: Algernon Charles Swinburne and Michael Field. Swinburne is a particularly interesting case study because of the excessive

[1] E. S. Dallas, *Poetics: An Essay on Poetry*. London: Smith, Elder, and Co, 1852. p. 272.

[2] Alfred Tennyson, "In Memoriam A.H.H." *Tennyson's Poetry* (ed. Robert W. Hill), New York: Norton, 1999. 76.11-12, 77.13-14.

[3] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh: A Poem*, 6th ed, London: J. M. Dent, 1905. II.495-7.

and immoderate reactions his work provoked in his admirers and his critics alike, and because his poetry is often thematically, stylistically, and formally concerned with waste, a word often applied as the antithesis of 'useful'. Similarly, Michael Field serves as a provocation to many of the assumptions held about poetry in the period as the singular male pseudonym of aunt and niece Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper. Their work is inherently preoccupied with testing both the limits and the affordances of the lyric, in which the fiction of the lyric speaker's solitude is not only exposed but nullified as a result of their shared authorship.[4] Read together, what becomes visible in the work of both Swinburne and Field is their attempts to imagine what poetic voice might look and sound like when removed from the category of the human.

As I will show, Swinburne and Michael Field respond very differently to the possibilities and complications engendered by nonhuman voice, but they share an interest in using the nonhuman—and, more specifically, the environmental—as a framework for articulating queer desire and alternate modes of intimacy. For Swinburne, waste functions in his poetry as both a mode of relation and a theory of poetics, and the two dovetail in my readings of 'The Triumph of Time' and 'Anactoria' from the first series of his *Poems and Ballads* (1866). For Michael Field, my focus on the Ovidian poems of their first volume of poems, *Long Ago* (1889) reveals a meditation on the event of metamorphosis as a means of

[4] As Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins point out in their introduction to *The Lyric Theory Reader,* "It is a bit ironic that the nineteenth-century definition of the lyric as "utterance overheard"—the construction that appears most often in twentieth-century literary criticism—is taken from an essay in which Mill failed to find any poet who could be called truly lyric, who could represent the "lyric" essence of poetry. … But of course the solitude of the lyric poet is a solitude we witness, a solitude exhibited in public." *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology,* (eds. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins), Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014. pp. 1-8 (pp. 3-4).

both translation and the intimate act of shaping voice. What is produced through metamorphosis exceeds both 'before' and 'after' in favour of a third state which I term 'atmosphere'. My choice in terms is deliberate: waste and atmosphere are ecosystem processes or events that work to connect individual organisms to their environment through change over time. Sianne Ngai describes noncathartic emotions such as envy and paranoia as possessing "a remarkable capacity for duration"[5] and I see desire functioning in the poetry of both Swinburne and Michael Field as a similar affective narrative, in which resolution or consummation is rejected in favour of endlessly generating more desire.

Thus, what connects Swinburne and Michael Field is not only their shared interest in excavating a form of poetic voice influenced by environmental processes rather than human articulation; they are connected also by how they use their version of "nonhuman voice" to imagine and structure alternate forms of intimacy. These alternate intimacies are predicated on a notion of perpetual re/combination, in which sounds, words, letters, and even bodies are continually transformed through what they come into contact with. If Swinburne's prosody is defined partly by his preference for certain rhymes and constellations of words that appear compulsively throughout his work, the persona of "Michael Field" is "a site of ongoing contest and revision, where meanings are constantly being crossed out and overwritten".[6] Everything within the world of the poem becomes, for both Swinburne and Michael Field, eternally provisional, subject to being transformed by what becomes before and after. In this sense, the new and unconventional modes of

[5] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. p. 7.

[6] Virginia Blain, 'Michael field, the two-headed nightingale': lesbian text as palimpsest', *Women's History Review,* Vol. 5, No. 2, 1996. 239-257 (247).

intimacy made available within the poems are predicated on the act of reusing, recycling, and intermixing: forms of togetherness that defy human comprehension and articulation in favour of a relationality influenced by the environment's capacity for perpetual change.

Throughout this chapter, I will make the case for reading Swinburne and Michael Field's experiments with "nonhuman voice" as rooted specifically in their endeavour to reimagine intimacy outside of heteronormative structures. Separating intimacy from heteronormativity requires, for both poets, a separation from the human. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen reminds us, one notable limit of many "queer domains" is "anthropocentricity, an unfolding of the world from a human point of view rather than a questioning from the start of how the human comes to be made, of why the category should so dominate that the universe must arrange itself around its small form."[7] In the introduction to their special issue of *GLQ*, "Queer Inhumanisms", Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen ask: "has the queer ever been human?" The answer, unsurprisingly, is complicated. While the "sustained interrogation of the unjust dehumanization of queers insistently, if implicitly, posits the human as standard form," it is nevertheless true that "'full humanity' has never been the only horizon for queer becoming."[8] Their yes/no answer echoes the deliberate slash in Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird's *Queering the Non/Human,* which acknowledges in the introduction "the impossibility of applying a hermetic seal to the distinction between –

[7] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Queering the Inorganic', *Queer Futures: Reconsidering Ethics, Activism, and the Political* (eds. Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Eveline Kilian, and Beatrice Michaelis), London: Routledge, 2013. pp. 149-163 (p. 151).

[8] Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen, 'Has the Queer Ever Been Human?', *GLQ* Vol. 21, No. 2-3, 2015. 183-207 (188).

however temporary and shifting – what gets to count as Human and nonhuman."[9] Both introductions understand the question of being (or not being) human to be meaningful in the sense that it galvanises new ways of configuring relationships and classifications through moments where definitions fail. In the nineteenth century, the category of the human was similarly unsettled, provisional, and interpenetrated, even as it began to emerge meaningfully for the first time as a species and geological agent.

I read the acoustic excess of Swinburne's poetry as a means of pushing beyond Robert Buchanan's claim that "poetry is perfect human speech", discovering instead in his recycling and repurposing of words and sounds an alternate kind of vocal performance that tests the limits of both "human" and "speech".[10] Language cannot be entirely divorced from the human, but it can be rendered unfamiliar—even alien—through being accumulated to an unsustainable, aural extreme as a form of waste. Turning to Michael Field, I argue that they use the narrative of Ovidian metamorphosis to explore the fraught nature of a desire so powerful it repurposes the desired body entirely. One way of reading this dependency on reuse is to argue that Swinburne and Michael Field situate their work in a world of scarcity, in which poets are forced to recycle in order to arrest new value from what has come before. In this reading, poetry becomes a belated art that produces meaning only through stitching old things together in new ways, and the intimacies forged through this stitching are ones already foreclosed, with no future existence or value. More optimistically,

[9] Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, 'Introduction: Queering the Non/Human', *Queering the Non/Human* (eds. Giffney and Hird), London: Routledge, 2016. pp. 1-16 (p. 3).

[10] Robert Buchanan, *The Fleshly School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day*, London: Strahan & Co, 1872. p. 50.

these perpetual re/combinations might be seen as animated by a belief in the bounty of language, in which it is specifically the act of mixing that stimulates desire and wonder. The question then becomes: is it scarcity or excess that motivates these prosodic experiments? I will argue that Swinburne's poetry produces a seemingly contradictory excess of scarcity, in which the absurdity of repetition and circular rhyming pairs advertises simultaneously the insufficiency of language and its capacity for perpetual change and innovation. By contrast, Michael Field's poetry investigates that which is left over, the excess that lingers as the residue of transformation or amalgamation, and how best to understand the significance of this intimate overspill.

I have used waste to describe Swinburne's prosody for several reasons: 1) to draw a throughline with my previous chapter, where I demonstrated how poets such as Percy Shelley and Mathilde Blind (one a significant influence on Swinburne, the other a notable contemporary) found in a poetics of waste a way of rethinking the human; 2) to emphasise the somewhat disconcerting and disturbing aspects of his poetry in the eyes of many of his contemporaries 3) to situate his prosodic experiments as ones particularly interested in imagining the environmental affordances of poetry as an alternative to human voice. However, a term that might supersede waste as more specifically useful for the argument I will make is "amalgamation", in which both his prosody and the forms of intimacy documented in his poems are interested in recombinations and reuse borne out of new kinds of togetherness. Not only will this later help reinforce the comparison I draw with Michael Field, whose poetic persona is more explicitly invested in poetry's capacity to enact a form of intimacy that turns two into one, it also foregrounds alternate manifestations of relationality: ones that recognise "we are all queer multispecies consortia,

always already involved in countless and unpredictable constitutive relationships at all scales".[11] Thus, throughout this chapter, I will call on both "waste" and "amalgamation" as similar (though not identical) possibilities that Swinburne imagines for his alternate kind of poetic voice and the intimacies it might enable. I will then show how Michael Field inherits Swinburne's interest in prosodic and linguistic recombinations but provides a more stable version, in which amalgamation is not merely an unfulfilled fantasy of queer intimacy but a genuine alternative to heteronormative relationships.

"Rose graftings set in dung:" Responses to Swinburne

In what follows, I make the case for reading Swinburne's verse as an exercise in exploring language's capacity to become waste by cataloguing responses to his poetry that focus on excess, repetition, and disgust. In his introduction to *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860-1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival*, Dennis Dennisoff describes Robert Buchanan's infamous review "The Fleshly School of Poetry" (1871) as "turn[ing] to an ecological framework to declare 'unnatural' the works of primarily Swinburne and Dante Gabriel Rossetti", using "a language of illness, infection, and procreative excess".[12] Swinburne scholarship more broadly has been stimulated by an interest in notions of

[11] David Griffiths proceeds to argue, "The symbiotic view of life suggests that all organisms are involved in boundary crossings and gene-shuffling. All organisms (including humans, carrying genes from other organisms on and beneath our skin, in our guts and in our cells) are thus transboundary, and like Haraway's transuranic elements or transgenic creatures, simultaneously fit within historically and socially constructed taxonomies while drawing attention to their constructed, non-essential and non-transcendent nature." 'Queer Theory for Lichens', *UnderCurrents: Journal of Critical Environmental Studies,* Vol. 19, 2015. pp. 36-45 (p. 43).

[12] Dennis Dennisoff, 'Decadent Ecology and the Pagan Revival', *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860-1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. pp. 7-32 (p. 13).

excess, procreative and otherwise, and this interest has taken on even more life in the last decade. Take, for example, Marion Thain's argument for reading Swinburne's "generic hybridity" as a contributing factor to the "erotics of excess" in *Poems and Ballads,*[13] or Isobel Armstrong's identification of "the central problem of Swinburne's poetry, the slippage from a poetics of excess and transgression into a circular 'economy', driven by perpetual repetition, the overproduction of the same substitutes for the same thing".[14] Even Keri Stevenson's declaration that "Swinburne is a poet of the sterile and the desolate" is not necessarily a contradiction—in poems such as 'Hermaphroditus', 'A Forsaken Garden', and 'Hymn To Prosperine', sterility accrues a stifling hyper-presence and profligacy.[15] This recent current in Swinburne scholarship is not a break away from established interest so much as an intensification of what has always defined the experience of reading Swinburne's verse: in the words of E. C. Stedman, "[t]he fruit may be, and here is, too luscious; the flower is often of an odor too intoxicating to endure. Yet what execution!"[16]

Indeed, even the earliest reviews reveal that Swinburne's work compelled his contemporaries to reckon with their deep-rooted beliefs about the nature and purpose of good poetry. In describing the "peculiar challenge" of Swinburne's verse, Laura Kilbride

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[13] Marion Thain, 'Desire Lines: Swinburne and Lyric Crisis', *Algernon Charles Swinburne: Unofficial Laureate* (eds. Catherine Maxwell and Stefano Evangelista), Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013. pp. 138-154 (p. 141).

[14] Isobel Armstrong, 'Swinburne: Agonistic Republican', *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics,* Oxford: Routledge, 2019. pp. 371-387 (p. 382).

[15] Keri Stevenson, 'The Death of Birdsong, the Birdsong of Death: Algernon Charles Swinburne and the Horror of Erosion', *Fear and Nature: Ecohorror Studies in the Anthropocene* (eds. Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles), University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State Press, 2021. pp. 91-109 (p. 92).

[16] E. C. Stedman, 'Latter-Day Singers: Algernon Charles Swinburne', *Swinburne: The Critical Heritage* (ed. Clyde K. Hyder), New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970. p. 160.

notes how it "frequently exceeds the expectations and critical vocabulary of his readers".[17] Exceeds is particularly apt, considering many of Swinburne's reviewers appeared to experience his poetry as a form of waste and were inspired to new heights of analytical bravado in attempting to respond to his work. Gerard Manley Hopkins described Swinburne's excessive layering of images as akin to "a bloody broth", broth indicating a kind of insubstantiality that the materiality of "bloody" unpleasantly thickens.[18] John Morley begins his review of Swinburne by declaring "it is mere waste of time" to find fault with an artist for their interest in topics that repulse the critic, before remarking, "it is not every poet who would ask us all to go hear him tuning his lyre in a stye".[19] John Ruskin goes even further. At a loss to respond to the poems Swinburne sends him, he admits "I should as soon think of finding fault with you as with a thundercloud or a nightshade blossom. All I can say of you, or them—is that God made you, and that you are very wonderful and beautiful. … There is assuredly something wrong with you—awful in proportion to the great power it affects, and renders (nationally) at present useless." He then concedes, "you are rose graftings set in dung".[20] Ruskin's inability in this case to separate Swinburne from his poems—in effect, claiming something is "wrong" with him, and this "wrong"ness gets into his poetry, rendering it "useless"—extends what both Morley and Hopkins identify as something deeply undesirable or even inappropriate in the

[17] Laura Kilbride, *Swinburne's Style: An Experiment in Verse History*, Cambridge: Legenda, 2018. p. 2.

[18] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Letters of G. M. Hopkins to Robert Bridges*, (ed. Claude Colleer Abbott), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935. p. 202.

[19] John Morley, '*Saturday Review*, 4 August 1866', *Swinburne: The Critical Heritage,* p. 23.

[20] John Ruskin, 'Letter to Swinburne, 9 September 1866', *Swinburne: The Critical Heritage,* pp. 120-1.

poems. All three conceive of Swinburne's poems as substances or spaces that defile what once was beautiful and jeopardise notions of what poetry should be for or about.

Ruskin believes that critiquing Swinburne for his poetic materials would be like critiquing a plant or the weather: essentially finding fault with something that simply acts by its nature, even if we find this nature incomprehensible, inaccessible, or anathema to human sensibilities. Even in his admirers, he inspires a pleasure as bemusing as it is electrifying. In his defense of Swinburne, William Michael Rossetti describes *Hesperia* as "vaporous verses" which demand a second reading to be comprehended, and even then, "clear, in the proper sense of the word, they never become".[21] Elsewhere, he acknowledges Swinburne's tendency to favour and overuse certain words or phrases, which he calls "typical, or verbal *revenants*" (emphasis in original.)[22] Revenant commonly refers to a reanimated corpse, something that returns from the dead, but it also can mean "a person who returns to a place":[23] both definitions underline how the concept of returning is crucial to Rossetti's understanding of what he terms "Mr. Swinburne's reproductive poems", and specifically the reoccurrence of particular words, sounds, and rhymes that characterize Swinburne's prosody.[24] As I will go on to show, Swinburne's poems are preoccupied with what is used and what is not, what goes to waste and what is instead repurposed or reformed, and language becomes the locus of this inquiry.

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[21] William Michael Rossetti', Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*', *Swinburne: The Critical Heritage,* p. 85.

[22] Ibid, p. 83.

[23] *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "revenant (*n.* & *adj.*), sense 2". https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4277736598

[24] Rossetti, 'Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*', p. 70.

Reading Swinburne's long poem *Tristram of Lyonesse* as "an abundant, excessive instance of what we can call the poetics of waste" through its increasingly discursive rhythm, Ewan Jones argues that the poem's endless drive towards a state of exhaustion is a result of "the force that binds together two bodies (or a couplet)".[25] More broadly, we find Swinburne's interest in waste inscribed on the surface of his poems. In the first series of *Poems and Ballads* alone, "waste" and "wasted" are used twenty-one times; in the second and third series, a further fifteen; and as with many words Swinburne returns to time and time again, waste suffuses everything it touches, including the collection's preoccupation with intimacy. The repetitions suggest, then, that we think of waste as a mode of being intimate that the poems render accessible, or at the very least indispensable to the texture of the verse. For the purposes of my argument, I have identified three types of waste emerging throughout *Poems and Ballads* that inflect issues of intimacy: firstly, waste as excess; secondly, waste as that which is useless or unused, such as the "waste wedlock of a sterile kiss" (l.19) in "Hermaphroditus"; and, finally, waste in its most material and disturbing presentation, as decay, such as when Demeter leaves "all cattle waste and rot" (l.121) in protest of her daughter's abduction in "At Eleusis."[26] These three aspects of waste are not entirely dissociated from one another, but in separating them out my intention is to gesture at their different relational possibilities. Much as the binaries of natural/unnatural and human/nonhuman (or even excess/scarcity) are revised and challenged by an

[25] Ewan Jones, 'Thermodynamic Rhythm: The Poetics of Waste', *Representations* Vol. 144, No.1, 2018. 61-89 (63).

[26] All in-text citations are to Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Major Poems and Selected Prose* (eds. Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh), New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.

attention to queer ecology, waste activates new forms of togetherness, some rooted in failure, others in repulsion or superfluity.

In *Poems and Ballads,* the intimate event of waste is everywhere, and everything rubs up against it, jostles with it for space, co-exists alongside. As Gay Hawkins argues,

> When we notice waste, or when it touches the most visceral registers of being and unsettles us, we are reminded of the body's intensities and multiplicities. These affects can feel like a qualitative overspill, an excess that escapes the knowable, manageable subject. Recognizing the affective dimensions of waste makes trouble for all those epistemologies that begin with the knowing subject ready to act on the world, ready to "do the right thing"; for the affective body does not simply stand as subject to the world's objectivity, it is an "articulated body in transition". This is Brian Massumi's term, and he goes on to explain how affect is relationality, how to be in the world is to be in an ever-unfolding relation.[27]

In his repetition of the word waste, Swinburne enacts the continual, inescapable contact between waste and body that reveals the instability of both. Just as we encounter physiological limits through the way in which coming into contact with waste upsets the integrity of the individual body, we discover the limits of language through the things that most cognitively repulse us. Robert Browning called several of Swinburne's poems "moral mistakes", and Swinburne utilises the visceral affective recoil of both his speakers and his readers to access the "qualitative overspill" Hawkins describes, "an excess that escapes the knowable, manageable subject".[28] In poems such as 'The Triumph of Time' and

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[27] Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005. p. 121.

[28] Browning moderates this claim by suggesting they were "redeemed by much intellectual ability." 'Letter to Monckton Milnes, 7 July 1863', *The Swinburne Letters* (ed. Cecil Y. Lang), New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959-62. I.84.

"Anactoria," waste becomes a mode of erotic intimacy that manifests in the meeting space between desire and perishability. Both affective events threaten in some way to extend beyond the individual and position this as a mode of intimacy: desire as longing for something outside of the self; perishability as the recognition that things will outlast the self. 'The Triumph of Time' and 'Anactoria' indefinitely produce fantasies of bodily collapse and amalgamation that offer alternate routes to intimacy and do so because intimacy is both a process and a product of waste. What is at stake for Swinburne in this investigation is poetry's capacity for creating and evolving intimacy—and what this says, in the end, about intimacy's role in constructing the category of the human.

"Ruined at root": A Poetics of Waste in Practice

'The Triumph of Time' is a curious first example to pick for my study: it is a poem that fails to use any version of the word "waste" even once in its forty-nine stanzas. And yet it is fundamentally preoccupied with an intimate relationship made meaningful only through its failure. The poem opens on the cusp of a final parting, "before our lives divide for ever" (1), which is nevertheless an ending to something that "could never have been; and never / Though the gods and the years relent, shall be" (7-8). The final lines of the first stanza enact the crisis of this parting, which ends something that never was and never could have been, a foreclosed experience that the poem still contends is a form of intimacy in itself. To never be together is a state that has brought the speaker and his beloved physically proximate and has enabled the complex wrangling of time that death will uncomplicate—there is no undoing death, after all. The question that haunts the poem, therefore, is: when and how is

desire wasted? If it never comes to any conclusion? If it fails to be reciprocated? If desire is projected in the wrong direction, misinterpreted, confused?

The opening stanzas suggest that, perhaps paradoxically, it is not the unrequited nature of the desire that renders it wasted, but rather the risks of comprehending it as a chronological narrative. Desire is generated by the perpetual deferment of satisfaction, the anticipation of conclusion and reciprocation, and the mortality of the speaker and his beloved demands an end: there will be a before and after in death that positions the unrequited love as "ruined at root" (21), composed of "fruitless husk and fugitive flower" (11) and destined to "not grow again" (17, 21). In calling upon the imagery of damaged, perished vegetation to describe the speaker's anxious confrontation of his unused desire, Swinburne exploits the organic, thus mortal, properties of the body as a crisis of linearity: decay may be a form of life, but one refused to the human. Desire must instead remain in a peculiarly trapped posthumous state, "ruined" and yet also "ungrown" (16).

The only means of rescuing the body from its linear fate is the fantasy of merging:

> Yea, I know this well: were you once sealed mine,
> Mine in the blood's beat, mine in the breath,
> Mixed into me as honey in wine,
> Not time, that sayeth and gainsayeth,
> Nor all strong things had severed us then;
> Not wrath of gods, nor wisdom of men,
> Nor all things earthly, nor all divine,
> Nor joy nor sorrow, nor life nor death.
>
> (145-52)

In the move from "yea" to the repetition of "nor" that crowds the latter half of the stanza, Swinburne depicts the struggle to reintroduce the body into a cycle larger than the

individual life. Despite the attempt to negate that which might separate the potential lovers, the negatives overwhelm the image of lovers mixed together. Though Sarah Eron observes that Swinburne seeks the "fusion of forms" which is "the state towards which all elements are destined",[29] something the speaker of the 'Triumph' struggles to imaginatively enact, we find this desired unity imperfectly rendered.

> Death could not sever my soul and you,
>
> As these have severed your soul from me.
>
> (159-60)

'Triumph' becomes an elaborate negotiation of pronouns and address. Just as time is earlier reshaped in order to defer the body's inevitable decline, here the speaker attempts to rearrange the two bodies and their components in a way that keeps them together, even though this reticulation of bodies and souls is fundamentally damaging to form itself: the speaker's soul is still grafted onto "you", though the beloved's soul has been violently severed from the speaker's body, leaving him doubly empty. Dwelling in an excessive state of absence and emptiness enables the speaker to know his beloved through what he no longer is, a speculation that turns away from what is in favour of alternate paths and missed opportunities, though he cannot bear to linger too long on any one possibility. "I shall not change you. Nay, though I might," (193) he considers at one point, performing an immediate undoing that characterises the entirety of the poem. If Hawkins sees the qualitative overspill occurring through the visceral contact between waste and the body, in 'Triumph' the overspill occurs through the fraught negotiations of "you", "I", and "we",

[29] Sarah Eron, 'Circles and the In-Between: Shaping Time, Space, and Paradox in Swinburnian Verse', *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 44, No. 3, 2006. 293-309 (293).

incompatible pronouns that the speaker uselessly wrestles to bring together. Registering these affective and corporeal limits is an unbearable experience both the poem and the body must recoil from.

But Swinburne then *undoes* the recoil. His speaker returns to what cannot be endured in order to experience these brief contortions of intimacy, though they are little more than temporary connections in faulty wiring. Catherine Maxwell observes that Swinburne is interested in possibilities for regeneration outside of human reproduction, and in these moments of recoil I argue Swinburne is speculating about what can be made from intimacy when it isn't designed with our usual expectations of time, generation, purpose, longevity in mind.[30] If these expectations are rejected as a product of this intimacy, other products emerge: new frameworks for a life, new experiences of knowing another person, new opportunities for intimacy created through the event of failure and disappointment.

Towards the end of the poem, the speaker embraces an intimacy that seems destined to remain unreciprocated, unacknowledged, through speculating about dissolving into the sea—an amalgamating fantasy Emily Harrington observes is "less like swimming and more like drowning".[31]

> Fair mother, fed with the lives of men,
> Thou art subtle and cruel of heart, men say.
> Thou hast taken, and shalt not render again;
> Thou art full of thy dead, and cold as they.
> But death is the worst that comes of thee;

[30] Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001. p. 208.

[31] Emily Harrington, 'Time's Intervals, Swinburne's Triumph', *SEL Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* Vol. 57, No. 4, 2017. 799-821 (801).

Thou art fed with our dead, O mother, O sea,
But when hast thou fed on our hearts? or when,
Having given us love, hast thou taken away?
(289-96)

The poem opens on the despair of a parting that cannot be undone; here, the fantasy of merging with the sea is figured as a return, a reunion. It is not necessarily the return of the individual but rather the reiteration of "the lives of men" that end in the sea. Instead of the earlier swapping of pronouns, the speaker becomes one of many, "our dead", "our hearts". The speaker repurposes his anxiety of things not growing again that troubled his unrequited love. In the destructive incorporation of his body into the sea, he locates an unassailable, permanent intimacy, something that cannot be "taken away". Furthermore, the sea takes on the attributes of that which it feeds on, or vice versa: "thou art full of thy dead, and cold as they", indicating that something of the dead endures though it has been transformed. This fantasy of amalgamation offers the speaker an alternative to what he diagnoses in his own mortal desire as useless, accusatory waste—an all-encompassing intimacy that will last forever, a means of surviving as a form of intimacy itself. And just as the speaker is changed by the sea, so too is the sea changed by what it takes into itself, an unexpected mutuality that is at odds with the earlier double loss caused by the speaker's human beloved.

The stanza ends with a question that is designed to be unanswered because its premise (the sea giving then taking love away) is implied to be impossible. The same convoluted speculation opens the poem—the ending of that which never was—and unsettles its ending.

Come life, come death, not a word be said;

Should I lose you living, and vex you dead?
I never shall tell you on earth; and in heaven,
If I cry to you then, will you hear or know?
(389-92)

The final lines of the poem struggle with the dilemma of whether to speak out or stay quiet. The two questions disrupt the pledge towards silence made in the lines that precede them, and the final line reopens the indeterminacy of the poem. While this unanswered question revives the foreclosed intimacy that the poem continually battles to sustain, the prospect of contact beyond the grave—and thus contact beyond the human—is rendered not only conditional but potentially useless. It might never be heard or understood.

By concluding his poem in a state of existential irresolution, Swinburne consciously echoes the notorious final lines of Percy Shelley's 'The Triumph of Life', which ends on the brink of an answer to the question, "what is Life?" Swinburne was an attentive reader of Shelley, as demonstrated by his two perceptive essays on Shelley's poetry, his correspondence with William Michael Rossetti as the latter compiled *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, and Matthew Arnold's early reaction to Swinburne as "a sort of pseudo-Shelley".[32] His debt to Shelley, and his effort to remain in poetical conversation with his precursor, is evident in "The Triumph of Time," which recalls 'The Triumph of Life' not only in its title but also through Swinburne's decision to end the poem on a question that perhaps fundamentally can never be answered or received. But where Shelley's question inspires an answer, however foreshortened and interrupted, however inevitably unsatisfying, Swinburne's question remains within the closed circuit of the speaker, perhaps

[32] Letter from Matthew Arnold to his mother, 16 June 1863, *Swinburne: The Critical Heritage,* p. 116.

also “ruined at root”. We end with a cry that goes unanswered, one that predicates the intimacy between the speaker and his beloved on an act that can only be completed outside the confines of the poem itself, and therefore an act that language cannot access or foretell.

In moving from ‘Triumph’ to ‘Anactoria’, Swinburne demonstrates how different kinds of waste can create varying intimate possibilities, despite both springing from the same fantasy of total and destructive amalgamation. Where ‘Triumph’ fixates on the language of infertility and uselessness (“fruitless”, “ruined”, “ungrown”), ‘Anactoria’ celebrates the language of superfluity (“abound” (4), “flower on flower” (13), “satiated” (23), “superflux” (28)). Both poems share the image of the winepress, an object that repurposes other ingredients to create a new product, though in doing so also creates more waste (the skins and seeds of the grape). The speaker of ‘Triumph’ declares, “I have given no man of my fruit to eat; / I trod the grapes, I have drunken the wine” (25-6), revealing his attempt to repurpose something that has previously been discarded (unrequited desire) in order to consume it. Yet, the unrequited and thus useless nature of his love means that this process is an internal one, the grapes and wine remaining within the circulation of his own body without reaching beyond. ‘Anactoria’, in documenting a love that once was reciprocated, turns the winepress into a source of pledged intimacy. Sappho pleads with Anactoria to “crush love with thy cruel faultless feet” (18) as a form of loyalty to Sappho and their past. The violence of this request bleeds through into later fantasies of Anactoria, in which Sappho imagines “the earth had thy body as fruit to eat” (25) before Sappho too “abolishe[s] and consume[s]” her (113). If desire is “this fruit of my heart” in ‘Triumph’ (17), desire and the desired body are dangerously equated in ‘Anactoria’, both perishable and

digestible products that are alternates to satisfactory love. Abolished is a significant word in this context, an extinction event that enables the desired body to be recycled and repurposed for another form of consummation. Anactoria is both turned to waste (dead, on the cusp of decomposition) and reused (through being eaten).

The full fantasy exploits the destructive and excessive consequences of the blazon:

> Ah that my lips were tuneless lips, but pressed
> To the bruised blossom of thy scourged white breast!
> Ah that my mouth for Muses' milk were fed
> On the sweet blood thy sweet small wounds had bled!
> That with my tongue I felt them, and could taste
> The faint flakes from thy bosom to the waist!
> That I could drink thy veins as wine, and eat
> Thy breasts like honey! that from face to feet
> Thy body were abolished and consumed,
> And in my flesh thy very flesh entombed!
>
> (105-14)

The excess comes both from the intensity of the details and its transgressive implications. The erotic intimacy of Sappho's mouth tasting and tonguing Anactoria's bleeding body invokes both the Eucharist and the Crucifixion, the connotations of sacrifice *and* the specular blur of the metaphorical and the literal present in the material transformation of Anactoria's body.[33] It is a fantasy with significant, tangible consequences. Her blood dries into "faint flakes", the "bruised blossom of thy scourged white breast" turns to honey. Sappho's imagination converts the properties of Anactoria's body into whatever she likes, flesh to sweet, sugary substances, bodily fluids to debris, as a means of cultivating new

[33] Christ has also been associated with the winepress: for example, George Herbert's 'The Agonie'.

forms of togetherness. These are not necessarily desirable or satisfactory forms of togetherness, though Sappho invests them with a pleasure that exceeds all polite limits, but they do model an intimacy that flourishes in circumstances that obliterated the longing of the speaker in 'Triumph', an intimacy that sidesteps or even goes through the mortality of the human to survive in altered form. As in 'Triumph', the event of death becomes a form of consummation that acts as an alternative to normative, heterosexual intercourse—but unlike the former poem, where the desire must be projected elsewhere into the ocean for incorporation to be attainable, 'Anactoria' brings Sappho and Anactoria together in one final, ecstatic union.

Comparing what she terms Swinburne's "expansive poetics" with the work of the Pre-Raphaelites, Elizabeth Helsinger identifies an interest in "the inhuman—a more than human—scale of both time and space" that persists throughout his poetic career.[34] The contrast Sappho draws between herself and Anactoria is explicitly about their (in)ability to access these nonhuman scales. Though Anactoria's body is transformed through metaphor to first become fruit, then flowers, and finally food absorbed into Sappho's body, she remains trapped in the organic cycle that dooms the speaker of 'Triumph'. Sappho, however, becomes one with the inanimate and even noncorporeal. Not only does she identify herself with the earth, both fantasised to feed on Anactoria's decomposing or lifeless body, she is also the "waste white noon" (222) and her yearning matches "the

[34] Elizabeth Helsinger, 'Swinburne's Expansive Poetics', *Defining Pre-Raphaelite Poetics* (eds. Heather Bozant Witcher and Amy Kahrmann Huseby), New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. pp. 233-254 (p. 234).

yearning sound of waves" (227), metaphoric attributes she can possess because of her poetic virtuosity.

For Swinburne, poetry enables at least temporary access of scales that have previously been incompatible with the human precisely because it offers ways of escaping and/or eliding human attributes. Like Love, Sappho seeks a state of imperishability that allows her to both become intimately proximate to waste, but also become the event of waste itself. It is significant that in claiming her name for the first and only time in the poem, Sappho also emphasises her ability to waste:

> I Sappho shall be one with all these things,
> With all high things for ever; and my face
> Seen once, my songs once heard in a strange place,
> Cleave to men's lives, and waste the days thereof
> With gladness and much sadness and long love.
>
> (276-80)

Earlier, the fantasy of cleaving enabled the full dissolution between Sappho and Anactoria through their "sifted ashes" (10), and Swinburne places heavy emphasis on the dual ability of cleaving to bring together and divide. Here, the friction between the two seemingly incompatible movements allows waste to intercept. If we consider Sappho herself as a wasting force, this is because she makes herself synonymous with both desire and poetry, two things Anactoria stands for at the start of the poem that Sappho later becomes. Not only do we have the connection between fruit and Anactoria's body, Sappho's desire for Anactoria and her increasingly extreme attempts to sustain this desire inspire the existence of the poem. In terms of Anactoria's identification with poetry, Sappho confesses "thy body is the song, / Thy mouth the music; thou art more than I" (74-5) and later envisages her

body repurposed as "a lyre of many faultless agonies" (139). Like the sea in 'Triumph', which takes on the attributes of the dead it eats, Sappho acquires Anactoria's metaphorical identities and preserves them. Poetry demands a more-than-human scope of time, space, and collaboration, which cannot be contained to a single generation or lifespan.

One of the questions Swinburne is interested in proposing—if not answering—through 'Anactoria' is what it means to conceive of desire as being experienced by someone no longer human, who has instead been elevated to the realm of myth, voice, history. We see this particularly in Sappho's musing on her relationships to both Love and God, who offer different models of amorous domination and harm. She draws a contrast between Love, for whom she has an affinity and almost a partnership, and God, whose metaphors can only offer a cruel, unsatisfying form of intimacy Sappho must repurpose. "Is not his incense bitterness, his meat / Murder?" (171-2) she asks, contrasting the senselessness—and uselessness—of murder with her imagined devouring of Anactoria, whose "meat" is not wasted but instead used to create and convey intimacy. The translation of the nonhuman into something comprehensible and observable—however briefly, however imperfectly—can only be achieved through metaphor, and thus for Swinburne produces an intimacy that must be experienced through poetry.[35] Metaphor enables both the meeting of incompatible entities and the activation of new properties and affordances through this meeting. This is specifically a nonhuman desire, one that involves the transformation of form as a means of

[35] Susan Signe Morrison argues that we can think of intertextuality and metaphor as "recycling, composting, and reuse … the compression of language into image and symbol." See *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter,* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. p. 10.

continued togetherness—whereas incorporation with the human always involves something final, finite, and mortal:

> Hath he not sent us hunger? who hath cursed
> Spirit and flesh with longing? filled with thirst
> Their lips who cried unto him? who bade exceed
> The fervid will, fall short the feeble deed,
> Bade sink the spirit and the flesh aspire,
> Pain animate the dust of dead desire,
> And life yield up her flower to violent fate?
> Him would I reach, him smite, him desecrate,
> Pierce the cold lips of God with human breath,
> And mix his immortality with death.
>
> (175-84)

The half-rhyme of "aspire" and "dead desire" also recalls "expire", particularly with the later coupling of "breath" and "death". To exist as a mortal being is to always tend towards death, each breath slowly but inexorably wasting the body. In making things that do not last, God becomes associated with that same impermanency and vulnerability. It is significant that Sappho activates this through a kiss that "pierce[s]": an act of amorous and erotic connection that imperils the body.

The intimacy in 'Anactoria' relies on asymmetry and nonmutuality, manifesting in the vast temporal distance between Anactoria's mortal, linear fate and Sappho's immortal fame.

> Thee too the years shall cover; thou shalt be
> As the rose born of one same blood with thee,
> As a song sung, as a word said, and fall
> Flower-wise, and be not any more at all,

Nor any memory of thee anywhere;
[…]
Yea, thou shalt be forgotten like spilt wine,
Except these kisses of my lips on thine
Brand them with immortality; but me—

(189-93, 201-3)

Spilt wine: the product of the repurposed waste in the winepress that is once more wasted in going untasted. "Except," Sappho reminds us, there is yet another opportunity to rescue what has been lost, reuse what has seemingly been misused or abandoned, and it comes from the nonhuman promise of a memory that exceeds a lifespan. Anactoria is already consigned to the past, "sung" and "said" and "spilt", but her absence is simultaneously projected into the future. She is a static body like the speaker of 'Triumph', caught forever in an anticipated moment that has already come to pass for Sappho. But what Swinburne's verse enables us to do is shed the human, push into the qualitative overspill that comes from an intimacy between one in a linear trajectory (Anactoria) and one for whom time has no real or singular shape, but instead spreads forwards and backwards and around. For Swinburne, an erotic intimacy manifested through conditions that are unbearable to experience functions as a meditation on what poetry can make happen and what new opportunities for togetherness it can create.

"A voice and nothing more": Possibilities for Nonhuman Voice

At the start of this chapter, I suggested that reading Swinburne with an eye to queer ecology—and, specifically, waste as a mode of intimacy—reveals his interest in exploring

alternatives to the figure of the human speaker in his poetry. One reader who identified these experiments, though without much appreciation, is Alfred Austin, who described Swinburne as "a voice and nothing more" that "reminds us of the noise made by a prepared quill blown in a glass of water rather than of the song of a bird, much less of a human throat".[36] It is easy to dismiss the claim as merely an inventive way of declaring Swinburne's poetry to be bad, but to my mind the formulation (perhaps unintentionally) provides insight into the particular challenges of Swinburne's verse for his contemporaries, in which voice is entirely disarticulated from a corporeal body, and even an animate one: not a person, not a bird, but the rasp of a quill in water. Voice, with its implications of subjectivity, articulation, personality, is often considered inseparable from our concept of the human, something that distinguishes the human as a meaningful and valuable category; but here, in Austin's understanding, Swinburne's style denigrates "voice" to simply "noise". What, then, would it mean for poetic voice to be dissociated from the human and the living? What might this tell us about both the ways in which Swinburne's investigation of waste as a form of queer intimacy demands new states of being, and how his prosody emphasises accumulation, repetition, excess, and exhaustion as a theory of poetics? And how does his exploration of nonhuman voice exploit categorical and taxonomic instability to establish types of togetherness characterised by the meeting of incompatibilities?

These are questions that stretch far beyond the purview of this chapter, but I want to use this transitional section to reflect on how their possible answers provide insight into what a poetics of waste offered to Swinburne, and what it is that Michael Field may have

[36] Alfred Austin. 'Mr. Swinburne', *Swinburne: The Critical Heritage,* p. 108.

gained from their reading of *Poems and Ballads*. One poem that explores the unsustainable accumulation of language that Swinburne practices is 'Dolores', a poem that particularly raised Austin's ire. He complained that "when we have read the opening lines, we already know all of it", the other fifty-four stanzas a mere repetition of what has come before in a poem that has no obvious reason for where it begins or ends—it could, Austin says, go on forever, though we are to understand this would be a undesirable turn of events.[37] For Austin, the sameness of 'Dolores' functions less to generate new stuff and more as a mechanical irregularity, the same thing over and over again. While I disagree with this claim—to my mind, Swinburne's poetry is primarily defined by the perpetual reuse of words and rhymes, in which each repetition provides new meaning and resonance with what has come before—it certainly is a poem that gains much of its power from its incantatory, meditative rhythm, establishing the poem as a prayer to be returned to and sustained. Take this stanza, for example:

> Fruits fail and love dies and time ranges;
> Thou art fed with perpetual breath,
> And alive after infinite changes,
> And fresh from the kisses of death;
> Of languors rekindled and rallied,
> Of barren delights and unclean,
> Things monstrous and fruitless, a pallid
> And poisonous queen.
>
> (57-64)

[37] Ibid, p. 107.

I have chosen this stanza, the eighth of fifty-five, for several reasons, though, true to Austin's dismissal, I could have selected any number of verses from 'Dolores' to make my argument. What attracted me to this stanza as a reflection on the argument I have made in regards to 'Triumph' and 'Anactoria' is its preoccupation with the erotics of decay and infertility: two kinds of waste that are studied not only through words ("barren", "unclean", "monstrous", "fruitless") but also through, for example, the rhymes of "rallied" and "pallid", "breath" and "death", that enact a reverberation between antitheses that compels us to define them by what they reject. In the same issue of *GLQ* where Luciano and Chen ask, "has the queer ever been human?", Susan Stryker observes that, "(In)human suggests the gravitational tug of the human for bodies proximate to it, as well as the human's magnetic repulsions of things aligned contrary to it".[38] José Esteban Muñoz identifies a similar relational tension embedded in the attempt to think through the concept of the inhuman, arguing, "The incommensurable thought project of inhumanity is the active self-attunement to life as varied and unsorted correspondences, collisions, intermeshings, and accords between people and nonhuman objects, things, formations, and clusterings."[39] The category of the "inhuman" is not a rejection of, nor complete disassociation from, the human but rather an exploration of moments in which the idea of human exceptionalism is undermined or disrupted. To borrow Devin Garofalo's description of the deanthropomorphised lyric "I" in *In Memoriam,* "to be human is not simply to grapple with

[38] Susan Stryker. 'Transing the Queer (In)Human', *GLQ* Vol. 21, No. 2-3, 2015. 227-230 (228).

[39] José Esteban Muñoz. 'Theorizing Queer Inhumanisms: The Sense of Brownness', *GLQ* Vol. 21, No. 2-3, 2015. 209-210 (210).

entanglement but to actually be "tangle"".[40] If we return also to the deliberate slash in Gaffney and Hird's *Queering the Non/Human,* itself enacting the difficulty of partitioning that which is defined by what it is not, we can begin to understand how Swinburne's poetry operates in a similar way, challenging binaries through each pair of antithetical rhymes.

Voice manifests at the points where opposites become interlinked or entangled. The end rhyme of "breath" and "death" is one that Swinburne evidently favours: in 'Dolores' alone, he uses it five times, displaying an ongoing closing and opening of potential states that mines the correspondence of sound as another form of incompatible togetherness. This expansion of possibility features also in his repetition of "and" and "of" which creates more space in the devotional prayer to the "pallid / And poisonous queen" through a seemingly endless accumulation of attributes. She is both "of languors rekindled and rallied" and "of barren delights and unclean", both revitalised and arid, both a cause of death ("poisonous") and herself drained of life ("pallid"). All these things are true at any one moment, and yet the poem accrues so much language that Swinburne ensures no trait is ever definitive or permanent, but rather, like all of creation, in a state of flux, always responding to its previous antithetical trait, always at risk of being transformed by the trait that succeeds it.

The same push and pull that has appeared in recent scholarly discussions of the in/nonhuman as a living category also features in Victorian explorations of alternatives to

[40] Devin M. Garofalo, 'Victorian Lyric in the Anthropocene', *Victorian Literature and Culture* Vol. 47, No. 4, 2019. 753-783 (766).

the figure of the human speaker.[41] As Yopie Prins persuasively documents, "Victorian poems also worked as a mechanism for the disembodiment of voice, and with similar contradictory effects: sometimes invoking and evoking the spoken word, but also revoking it".[42] In a later article, she explores Sidney Lanier's interest in the "purely instrumental character of the speaking-voice",[43] which she describes as "a remarkable inversion of voice in which lyric reading is alienated from, rather than attached to, the speaking voice".[44] Veronica Alfano identifies "conspicuously anonymous and dislocated voices, [that] emphasiz[e] the disconnection of a putative utterance from a quasi-anthropomorphized poetic speaker" and operate as "a particularly revealing example of the phonographic imagination" in the period.[45] An imagined speaker is one originating principle but my query about nonhuman voice shares Alfano's interest in exploring the opportunities for others: as sound produced by mechanical or instrumental bodies, as "constellations of faint textual

[41] I consider both "inhuman" and "nonhuman" to be useful categories for my argument, though I acknowledge that investigations with these terms at the forefront often distinguish between them. In the context of my argument, however, I find both "in-" and "non-" productive prepositions that signify the category of "human" is being unsettled and deviated from. Although a more thorough interrogation of Swinburne's conception of, and challenge to, the category of the "human" lies beyond the scope of this chapter, some invaluable texts that directly consider the limits of a construction of the "human" as a universal planetary agent are Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, 'Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movement "Beyond the Human"', *GLQ* Vol. 21, No. 2-3, 2015, 215-218; Zygmunt Bauman's *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004, on the ways in which capitalism and modernisation turn certain groups such as refugees into "superfluous populations"; and Kathryn Yusoff's *A Billion Black Anthropocenes, or None,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018, which she positions as a "challenge [to] the racial blindness of the Anthropocene as a willful blindness that permeates its comfortable suppositions and its imaginaries of the planetary—imaginaries that constitute its geographies of concern and attribution" (p. 12).

[42] Yopie Prins, 'Voice Inverse', *Victorian Poetry,* Vol. 42, No. 1, 2004. 43-60 (44).

[43] Sidney Lanier, *The Science of English Verse,* New York: Scribner's, 1890. p. 49.

[44] Yopie Prins, 'Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and The Science of English Verse', *PMLA* Vol. 123, No. 1, 2008. 229-234 (233).

[45] Veronica Alfano, 'Technologies of Forgetting: Phonographs, Lyric Voice, and Rossetti's Woodspurge', *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 55, No. 2, 2017. 127-161 (127-8).

echoes", or, as I see specifically in Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads,* as language accumulated to an unsustainable, acoustic extreme as a form of waste.[46]

I am curious also about the fact that Austin still believes "voice" to be the correct term to use for Swinburne's poetry, while simultaneously divorcing it from anything we would regularly consider possessing a voice, rendering it as little more than noise. The meaninglessness and purposelessness he attributes to the construction of 'Dolores' shares features with what Giorgio Agamben describes as glossolalia in the poetry of Pascoli, which he defines as "a speech whose meaning is unknown", "speech that one does not know … in which understanding is 'unfruitful'".[47] Unfruitful is a particular apt word in the context of my essay, with its implication of a striving towards meaning that refuses to yield result. I see Swinburne's amalgamating poetics utilising the accretive and abundant qualities of language to create a similarly defamiliarising effect, in which "voice" is not tethered to a corporeal speaker but is rather constituted by the incrementation of resonant sounds, more an ecological process than song or speech and thus resistant to being experienced as human articulation.

Voice has always been an exercise in relation between poet and audience, but the relational possibilities that spring from an emphasis on nonhuman voice exaggerate this commonplace. The "gravitational tug" and "magnetic repulsion" that Stryker identifies in the concept of the inhuman, together with the linguistic recoil I observe in 'Triumph', operate as an experiment in establishing a poetic voice only loosely tethered to the concept

[46] Ibid, 144.

[47] Giorgio Agamben, 'Pascoli and the Thought of the Voice', *The End of the Poem* (trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. p. 66.

of the human. Instead, Swinburne employs the attributes of waste (accretive, exhaustive, discomfiting) to create a voice where meaning is located in what is repeated and repurposed, meaning that is designed to obscure, overwhelm, and frustrate. Echo, as a voice without a corporeal form, and a figure tied to the origins of poetry, offers another example of how nonhuman—and even disembodied—voice excavates new possibilities for intimacy that are reliant on repetition and reuse, in which Narcissus's words take on new life and meaning when said back to him.[48] Thus, 'Dolores' may appear to be the same verse repeated over and over again to Austin, but even repetition has the power to radically transform original meaning. Similarly, 'Triumph' is an ongoing attempt to reconfigure the same constellations of pronouns and bodies in order to make an intimate relationship possible, while 'Anactoria' returns to the same clusters of metaphors and images as a means of resurrecting the former romance between Sappho and Anactoria. Both make the conceit of the return vital to the texture of the poems and the relationships they document, even as the return remains provisional and incomplete. As I have shown, Swinburne's poetics of waste exaggerates this capacity for perpetual recurrence through producing a kind of poetic voice that disturbs all bodies from settled categories into new taxonomies. In doing so, his poems become both familiar and alien, recalling the human even as they endeavour to depart from it.

[48] For more on the nineteenth-century use of the Narcissus and Echo myth, see my discussion of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Willowwood sonnets in Chapter 3.

Cohen declares, "any speaking of the nonhuman is a translation, and therefore error prone, filled with guesswork, and inclined towards fantasy".[49] And for Margaret Noodin, "in translation, relation is everything".[50] Each relation requires speculative work and each translation demands, to some degree, an embrace of incommensurability, two things that are intensified through Susan Stryker's aforementioned 'gravitational tug' and 'magnetic repulsion' that tethers the human to the nonhuman. Any attempt to fit the nonhuman in the framework of human language will by design be imprecise, if not entirely inaccurate—and yet, for Swinburne in his experiments with nonhuman voice, this is often the point, for the intimacies he documents are reliant on something going to waste or being, in effect, lost in translation, in order to become meaningful. The subject of the second half of this chapter, Michael Field, perhaps recognised this when they sent a copy of their first collection of poetry, *Long Ago* to Swinburne with a note addressing him as 'Poet of Anactoria' and describing how they had "passed by you & touched the sacred things".[51] 'Passed by you' and its implication of going unnoticed is another kind of imprecise, imperfect communication, even as it also demonstrates Michael Field's sense of themselves as furthering Swinburne's work, just as they aimed to achieve "the extension of Sappho's fragments into lyric".[52]

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[49] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. p. 36.

[50] Margaret Noodin, 'Anishinaabe Translation Studies', *At Translation's Edge* (eds. Nataša Durovicova, Patrice Petro and Lorena Terando), New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019. p. 125.

[51] Letter from Michael Field to A. C. Swinburne, May 27, 1889. Reprinted in *Uncollected Letters of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, 3 vols. (ed. Terry L. Meyers), London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005. 2:47.

[52] Preface to *Long Ago*. My in-text citations are taken from *The Poems of Michael Field* (ed. Sarah Kersh), accessible online at https://michaelfield.dickinson.edu/longago

Like Swinburne, Michael Field was interested in exploring poetry's capacity for challenging and revising the figure of the singular human speaker. The construction of 'Michael Field' as a pseudonym for aunt and niece Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper alone places pressure on our assumption of an individual behind the pronoun "I". Similarly, they conceive of translation as a means of establishing an ongoing conversation with Sappho throughout *Long Ago*: in extending Sappho's work, their poems create a sense of dialogic responsiveness that positions "I" as a container for multiple presences, not only Bradley and Cooper but Sappho as well. What, then, becomes of voice when we can no longer attribute it to a particular speaker? Even when we consider that voice has always been a collaborative exercise between poet and audience, and that translation creates a radical plurality of voices in negotiation with one another, I suspect that Michael Field achieves something in *Long Ago* that cannot be comfortably assigned to either of these propositions.

For the remainder of this chapter, I argue that Michael Field exploits the "evolving and dynamic web" of translation[53] with narratives of Ovidian metamorphosis to produce vocal performances that manifest in the slippages, frictions, and movements between different forms. Perhaps voice is not the correct term to ascribe to these utterances: 'speaker' certainly seems even less useful here than in relation to Swinburne, though on the surface their poetry provoked far less ontological dismay in their contemporaries. What is true for both Michael Field and Swinburne is that their poetic experiments disturb the category of

[53] Anthony Cordingley and Céline Frigau Manning, 'What is Collaborative Translation?', *Collaborative Translation: From the Renaissance to the Digital Age* (eds. Cordingley and Manning), London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. pp. 1-30 (p. 4).

the human in order to explore possibilities for queer intimacy, and this was central to both the texture and the thematic preoccupations of their work.

As the singular male pseudonym of aunt and niece Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, Michael Field functioned simultaneously as an acceptable disguise and a fusion of multiple forms of intimacy: familial, intergenerational, romantic, sexual, creative, collaborative. A disguise, in that Bradley and Cooper were concerned that revelations about their "true" identities would cause their work to be taken less seriously, partly because of their dual authorship, more concerningly for them because they were women.[54] But the degree to which they claimed the pseudonym after the revelation of their true identities, and their insistence on using the name in private correspondence and among friends, indicates that Michael Field was not simply a useful disguise but central to their relationship and their poetic project as a separate identity produced by their collaboration. As Ruth Vanita observes, it was "part of the erotic charge between the two women".[55]

The preface to their first poetry collection, *Long Ago,* emphasises desire as both a thematic concern and an energising principle for their work. For Virginia Blain, the Michael Field persona in their love lyrics creates "an enabling screen through which one woman could address love poems to another in public",[56] while Prins argues that they provide a

[54] Alarmed by Robert Browning's revelation of their identity, Bradley writes to him "to beg you to set the critics on a wrong track. We each know that you mean good to us; & are persuaded you thought by 'our secret' we meant the dual authorship. The revelation of that would indeed be utter ruin to us; but the report of lady-authorship will dwarf & enfeeble our work at every turn. […] And we have many things to say the world will not tolerate from a woman's lips." Quoted in Marion Thain, *'Michael Field': Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Fin De Siècle,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. p. 44.

[55] Ruth Vanita, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. p. 119.

[56] Blain, 249.

"model of lyric authorship in which voice is the effect of an eroticised textual mediation between the two of them rather than the representation of an unmediated solitary utterance".[57] Kate Thomas similarly analyses their botanical writing as offering a sideways intermediary: "they "cry out" not to each other exactly, but "to the flowers"".[58] And Marion Thain opens her study of Michael Field with a definition of 'field': "A region in which a body experiences a force as the result of the presence of some other body or bodies. A field is thus a method of representing the way in which bodies are able to influence each other".[59] All four scholars identify an interest in the intimate work poetry can create and enact, both as imagined meeting spaces for different bodies and as fantasies of union.

These possibilities may seem antithetical, but I suspect this was precisely the point: in creating an intimacy that exceeded any one descriptor, 'Michael Field' became a site for multiple contradictory possibilities rooted in challenging the boundaries of a singular person, much as Swinburne employed the 'wasteful' excess of his verse as a generator of alternate intimacies. These possibilities were made meaningful specifically through their writing: consider Bradley's description of the Brownings's marriage—"those two poets, man and wife, wrote alone; each wrote, but did not bless or quicken one another at their work; we are closer married"[60]—or their shared diary, *Works and Days*. Whether we understand their poems as a screen, or a mediation, or an intermediary, or a field, what

[57] Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. p. 76.

[58] Kate Thomas, 'Vegetable Love' in *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns*, (eds. Sarah Parker and Ana Parejo Vadillo), Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019. p. 33.

[59] Thain, p. 1.

[60] Katharine Bradley, May 16, 1886, quoted in Emma Donoghue, *We Are Michael Field*, New York: Pan Macmillan, 2014. p. 43.

matters is their poems were conceived of as a third space or presence—terms that are often also invoked in discussions of translation. In Adriana Jacob's analysis of 'extreme translations', she describes Leah Goldberg's belief that translation by poets is always a slip between original and translation because of the urge to create: it becomes "an interstitial third space, one that materialises as a limit is pushed and prodded, as it resists and yields".[61] Alfred Poulin declares the result of translation to be a "third poem" in the translator's note to his translation of Rilke, created through the "alchemical process" of the interaction.[62] For Margaret Noodin, writing specifically about the affordances of Anishinaabemowin and her experiences translating her own work, this is a "third dimension, a collated space that is neither solely English nor solely Anishinaabemowin" but rather a "resonance between languages" creating something that is animate though not necessarily a voice.[63] All identify the significance of something neither the original work nor its translation, but instead an occurrence within the movement from one to the other. From the experimental malleability of a boundary which creates new space as its defined contours collapse, to a reverberation between two fixed points, this third 'thing' becomes the lingering product of intimate encounter that exceeds what is brought together.

'Michael Field' as a persona is also created by the resonance between Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, simultaneously a union of the two women and a separate presence with its own voice produced by the two as they "cross and interlace like a

[61] Adriana Jacobs, 'Extreme Translations' in *Prismatic Translation* (ed. Matthew Reynolds), Cambridge: Legenda, 2019. pp. 156-172 (p. 157).

[62] Alfred Poulin, 'Preface' to *Duino Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus,* Rainier Maria Rilke (trans. Poulin), Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.

[63] Noodin, p. 134.

company of dancing summer flies".[64] Elsewhere, Cooper describes their collaboration to Robert Browning "like mosaic work—the mingled, various product of our two brains … This happy union … is sheltered & expressed by 'Michael Field'".[65] Crossing, interlacing, mingling all capture a sense of animacy produced through the ongoing act of translating themselves into Michael Field. It is this collated, animate presence emerging as a result of intimacy that I understand to function as a form of 'voice' in their poems.

"A cloudy throng": A Poetics of Atmosphere

Scholarship on *Long Ago* has tended to focus on the poems that take Sappho and her amorous triangulations as their subject matter: unsurprising, considering the work is framed as a collaboration with and response to Sappho. But there are a number of poems in *Long Ago* that can be described as Ovidian because they foreground the narrative of Ovidian metamorphosis: to my count, 10 poems, though many more invoke Aphrodite, Apollo, or other deities as potential muses. Unlike many of the Sappho poems, which explicitly trouble and play with "I" as a mode of togetherness,[66] I see the Ovidian poems as using the event of metamorphosis as a meditation both on the act of translation and the possibilities for voice as a mode of relation and transition. What the "speaker" of these poems (and I use the scare quotes deliberately, as an indicator I find the term an imperfect or even incorrect description of what Michael Field is doing in these poems) makes

[64] Letter from Katharine Bradley to Havelock Ellis, quoted in Mary Sturgeon, *Michael Field*, New York: Macmillan, 1922. p. 47.

[65] Quoted in Donoghue, p. 39.

[66] See, for example, 'Long Ago XXIV' which plays with the move between first and third person.

possible are forms of being and articulation not tethered to any one body or subjectivity, but rather manifested through the gaps, spillages, and frictions that occur during intimate encounters.

Significantly, many of these Ovidian poems have their subject matter imposed on them by Michael Field rather than being included in the epigraphic fragments from Henry Wharton's translation of Sappho. This tells us they are performing important work in the collection as an identifiable subset of poems. My hope is that my reading will identify the Ovidian poems as a generative, though underutilised, category within *Long Ago* that offers a new way of thinking about the interplay of translation, desire, and voice in the overall collection. One example is 'Long Ago XXXIX', taken from the fragment, 'Me thou forgettest'. The fragment and the opening lines of the poem establish an "I" who, by the end of the poem, resolves to be forgotten in favour of preserving the memory of "thou". In between complaint and resolve, however, is a compressed retelling of two tales from the first book of the *Metamorphoses*:

> 'Tis for his dead girl-love Apollo weaves
> His poet's crown of deathless laurel-leaves
>
> (lines 17-18)

Daphne is subsumed within Apollo's desire, 'dead' in favour of the 'deathless' leaves he plucks from the laurel tree she was transformed into as a protective measure against rape.[67] Between these two kinds of permanency (always dead, never dead) is the act of weaving: a

[67] Ed Madden briefly discusses this poem in the context of the Tiresian poems of *Long Ago*, describing the laurel as "a sign of lost love, a sign that fetishistically replaces the object (of desire) and transforms that desire into poetic victories". See 'Between Two Lives: Michael Field's Tiresian Poetics', *Tiresian Poetics: Modernism, Sexuality, Voice, 1888-2001,* Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008. p. 92.

constant call to memory but also a repeated act of invasion, twined in a poem that concludes song is the only protection against forgetting while nevertheless allowing Daphne to disappear somewhere between her human and nonhuman bodies without fully inhabiting either. Instead, she circulates through the poem as an unvoiced, disembodied presence, caught forever in the translation from one form to another. In this sense, she functions as one manifestation of the fluid animacy of *Long Ago,* a third presence loosened from the constraints of either body. Earlier in the poem, Michael Field describes a similar juxtaposition between dead and deathless:

> With my dead lovers memory is not dead;
> On me they call from many a violet-bed
> Of the still country; or in cloudy throng
> Fill the wide meads with my remembered song.
>
> (5-8)

The 'me' declared at the start of the poem is enmeshed in the environment, relinquishing any stability or individuality in favour of the resonance between knowing and not knowing, remembering and forgetting, song and silence. Desire is vitally embedded into the landscape, enabling the transmission from one form to the next, one presence to the next, whether imagined as flowers rooted into the earth or clouds clustering above a meadow. The rhyming of 'throng' and 'song' indicates the implied multiplicity of verse. As Daphne is translated—as the female body is desired and imperilled by desire—poetry remains in between.

The Apollo and Daphne myth is coupled with that of Pan and Syrinx, another tale of a nymph fleeing the threat of sexual violence only to be transformed into material that is later repurposed for masculine art.

By Ladon's river long must slowly bleed
Pan's heart ere music permeate his reed.

(19-20)

In Ovid's version, Syrinx flees from Pan towards the river and begs the water nymphs for aid; Pan ends up grasping only reeds which he eventually fashions into pipes. This couplet describes the moment after Syrinx transforms into the reeds but before Pan discovers that his breath can stimulate the reeds to create music: in essence, an inversion of the poem's approach to Daphne, whose metamorphosis slips between the two lines. Music and loss both stimulate the perpetual event of transformation, what lies between the historical past of threatened violation and the promised future of Ovidian myth; and yet it is true that Syrinx is still occluded from the narrative, tangible only in the river that provided the setting for her metamorphosis and the reed which has pre-emptively already been claimed by Pan as "his". In choosing the form of the couplet for both metamorphoses, Michael Field draws our attention to what exceeds the limits of the binary.

With Michael Field's admiration of the Brownings in mind, I read the following verse, which describes standing below the "clear moon … as by an altar" (22, 24) as implicitly calling on the ambivalent sexual union in Robert Browning's 'Pan and Luna' which is itself in dialogue with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Pan and Syrinx poem 'A Musical Instrument'.[68] I draw these connections to observe the multiple influences which may lie behind these lines of subterranean female presence and the costs of desire and creation,[69]

[68] For more on the influence of Browning and Barrett Browning in Michael Field's conception of themselves as poets and lovers, see Carolyn Dever, *Chains of Love and Beauty: The Diary of Michael Field,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. pp. 51-4.

[69] Yopie Prins understands these two poems as performing inverse functions: "While his [RB] poem is framed as an aesthetic form that represses a story of sexual violence by performing a poetic redaction, her [EBB]

in which Michael Field charts an increasingly elusive transmission between girl and environment that releases something—wind, breath, luminescence—in between the lines of verse, between one form and another. In a poem preoccupied with the waning relationship between "I" and "thou", in which verse becomes the only available form of togetherness, and where each line is crowded with multiple presences (Sappho, Ovid, Henry Wharton, the Brownings, Michael Field, Bradley, Cooper…), there is still something that evades the binary limits of "I" and "thou", "dead" and "deathless", a separate presence that emerges through resistance and restraint.

Cooper's description of their artistic partnership as "a company of dancing summer flies" imagines them as more than two, an entire company where no one presence is exalted or sidelined. Just as significant is her use of "summer flies", which focuses similarly on the ways in which their poetic voice is shaped through communal movement and interplay, and turns to the nonhuman to do so. This turn is characteristic of the Michael Field persona. By 1881, Bradley and Cooper had adopted the bramble-bough as "the emblem of our united life".[70] "Crucially," Kate Thomas tells us, "the bramble is figured in both fruit and flower" which "refuses the progressivism of fruit-follows-flower" in favour of highlighting the intergenerational, incestuous, and erotic aspects of their multitudinous relationship.[71] More broadly, "Michael Field's figurations of plant life derive sensuousness

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poem tells the painful story of aesthetic mediation as a history of sexual violence." Both are fundamentally preoccupied with voice's role in poetry's ability to expand and/or contract experience. '"What is Historical Poetics?"', *Modern Language Quarterly* Vol. 77, No. 1, 2016. See also Corinne Davies, 'Two of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Pan Poems and Their After-Life in Robert Browning's "Pan and Luna'' in *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2006. 561-569.

[70] Quoted in Thomas, p. 28.

[71] Thomas, p. 29.

from the feeling of being on a temporal edge: grass about to be mown, apple blossoms full blown," as a way of "figuring queer capacities and futurities", "producing a queer and lush 'evermore'".[72] Their intimate relationship—and the poetry that springs from it—relies on alternate relations to space and time, ones that are made visible through the nonhuman.

Translation exaggerates these nonhuman scales through bringing together different presences scattered across the globe and across history. Just as Bradley and Cooper translated their relationship, in essence, into the image of the bramble-bough, the ecological has been a key source of metaphors for translation scholars. In *Translation: A Very Short Introduction* Matthew Reynolds conceptualises the relationship between the translation and its sources, readers, fellow translators, as "like a weather-map, rearranging itself with shifting temperatures, humidities, and winds".[73] Jacobs uses extremophiles ("creatures that live in environments that otherwise would seem inhospitable to life") to argue for translation as an "extreme environment for language".[74] Michael Field's poetry posits a similarly extreme and adaptable environment where encountering the limits of translation creates the conditions for articulating a collaborative space of queer desire. Envisaging translation like various climates enables us to imagine a vast, changeable space over a long period of time, resistant to prediction or transparency, always bigger than what is seen in front of you. It is both material and amorphous, capable of holding within it experiences of enormous, catastrophic phenomena we cannot help but pay attention to

[72] Ibid, p. 40.

[73] Matthew Reynolds, 'Definitions' in *Translation: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. p. 18.

[74] Jacobs, p. 156-7.

alongside the attritional "slow violence" Rob Nixon identifies in more gradual, shadowy, and significantly multigenerational environmental crises like oil spills and climate change.[75] Each climate contains multiple and contradictory forms of temporality (rocks, water, trees versus humans and animals) which are only brought together by the space they coexist within, much as a translation provides a material and textual space which holds within it the original author, the translator, the trace of other translations that came before. Consider, for example, the traversal from Ovid to Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Michael Field within the Pan/Syrinx tale.

Specifically, the Ovidian poems found throughout *Long Ago* foreground environments as adaptive forms and offer a useful connector between the collection's vocal experiments and the narrative of translation. In 'XXXIX', voice becomes something not necessarily attached to a human body, sometimes embedded within an ecological form, sometimes untethered from corporeality altogether. Most significantly, voice cannot exist separately or independently but must rely on the presence of another to be actualised. The flowers calling from the violet-beds require someone to call to, Daphne and Syrinx's metamorphoses require someone to hear their requests for aid, and the poems of *Long Ago* require the existence of Field's many precursors, though specifically Sappho and the genealogy of survival and loss embodied by her fragments. If the central questions of the volume are 'can someone respond to Sappho? collaborate with Sappho? take on Sappho's

[75] See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. See also Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, for an understanding of how certain phenomena such as climate change can exceed even our understanding of what things are and how we coexist with them.

voice?" as a form of "audacious worship",[76] the poems become a meditation on voice and how it might be manipulated, loosened, transformed to encompass the different persons involved in its creation. In doing so, new attention is directed to the text as a material space, an environment or terrain where we discover localised flashes of something we may be tempted to define as voice, but which is far more fluid and disruptive, difficult to track, deliberately frustrating, an agential force created by the movement between texts, bodies, genders, relations.

I term this agential force 'atmosphere' in order to emphasise its affective dimensions: atmosphere as the mood of a certain place. But atmosphere also suggests an amorphous space difficult to see but felt all around, a specific component of an environment which inscribes the terrain, the scent, the air and which enables biological life to thrive through continuously recycling and recombining base elements. In his chapter on atmosphere in *Earth System Science: A Very Short Introduction*, Tim Lenton describes how "all the elements needed by life must be efficiently recycled within the Earth system. This in turn requires energy, to transform materials chemically and to move them physically around the planet".[77] For Jesse Oak Taylor, atmospheric thinking "emphasizes adjacency; it considers the way that bodies of all kinds influence the conditions of possibility in their vicinity".[78] Thus, in mapping the metamorphosis of Daphne and Syrinx from desired girl to creative instrument, I am interested less in what carries over from one form to the next, and more

[76] See the preface to *Long Ago*.

[77] Tim Lenton, 'Recycling' in *Earth System Science: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. pp. 18-37 (p. 18).

[78] Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016. p. 7.

what fails to be perfectly transmitted and is instead released into circulation throughout the poem as an additional, ungoverned presence—and how the poems mark this strange presence-absence.

When considering the main term to use for my argument, I toyed between 'climate' and 'atmosphere'. In many ways, they seem interchangeable, but I settled in the end for prioritising atmosphere. My rationale is tied to the rising scholarly interest in atmosphere in nineteenth-century studies, mapped by Rowan Rose Boyson. In this overview, atmosphere becomes something fitful and elusive, melting boundaries and yet offering a transitory space between spirit and matter, possessing a "borderline materiality",[79] though even here atmosphere and climate are called upon synonymously and I believe there is far more correspondence between the terms than points of departure. At the end of her essay, Boyson calls for a renewed focus on "the ethical and aesthetic complexities of accommodating to air as *neither* degraded nor unspoiled, but complicatedly mixed and changing".[80] This ambiguous imbrication is what I begin to explore in the Ovidian poems of *Long Ago*, where attending to atmosphere rather than voice gives us insight into the fraught negotiations of presence that take place not only in the shift from epigraph to poem, but from "I" to "I", line to line, an exchange always compromised and incomplete yet a catalyst for unexpected intimacies. In the transition from Daphne to Syrinx, Michael Field plots a narrative of imperfect transformation in which the nymphs' subjectivities are progressively removed—and yet the poem's overall belief in song as a means of memorialisation and its

[79] Rowan Rose Boyson, 'Air and Atmosphere Studies: Enlightenment, phenomenology and ecocriticism', *Literature Compass* Vol. 19, No. 1-2, 2022. 1-13 (9).

[80] Ibid. 10.

interest in the imbrication of human and nonhuman suggests that nothing is ever truly lost, merely altered, or, to return to Boyson's suggestion, 'complicatedly mixed and changing'.

Similar to how Swinburne's poetics of waste positioned intimate events as capable of transforming and repurposing bodies, the poetics of atmosphere I identify in *Long Ago*—in which alternatives to both voice and togetherness are created in the move from one form to another—establishes recycling as a queer mode of re/production energised by desire. 'Long Ago XXV', which uses the fragment "Ah! for Adonis" as an impetus for lament, memorialises the moment of Adonis's death through four verses that celebrate the seasonal cycle while deferring Adonis's introduction into the cycle through his metamorphosis. The final lines, which declare "All we have loved is made / To re-appear and fade" (47-8), emphasise 're-' as the guiding principle of the poem, suspending the poem in the moment where Aphrodite's love for Adonis secures him a return though in a different form: the anemone flower, "buds flushed in and out" (7), bearing the "rose-bright" of "Aphrodite's pout" (6, 8). Her desire for him is not simply transferred from one form to another but is in fact the mechanism for his change, the mode of translation itself—and this movement operates as an alternate consummation, creating the anemone as a fusion of Adonis and Aphrodite. Thain states that, "for desire to become the power that Bradley and Cooper value aesthetically it must become divorced from the specific, the political, the bodily, the visceral, and become a force much bigger than the individual",[81] and I read the anemone of 'XXV' as a product of this extreme and communal desire, existing alongside Adonis and Aphrodite as separate matter and yet inextricably tied to both. But this production is

[81] Thain, p56.

predicated on a failure of reciprocity and recognition, a kind of mistranslation that brings their bodies together in an unpredictable manner.

Much as the Earth's atmosphere recycles and recombines elements to sustain biological life, the desire Aphrodite feels for Adonis enables their separate forms to achieve a repurposed togetherness through the life cycle of the flower. Amy Kahrmann Huseby uses the term 'transition'—"a mode of existence valued for its ability to bring about alternatives"—to describe how "these messy, nonbinary, middle spaces, do profound ethical and political work by stabilizing the seemingly impossible state of being "together alone"".[82] While I remain sceptical that anything is 'stabilised' in their poems, my emphasis on atmosphere as a continuously transitional state that separates and unites different beings is intended to capture a similar interest in modes of togetherness that antithetically require amalgamation or compression. The anemone flower is neither Adonis nor Aphrodite but rather a preservation of desire, an alternate relationship that possesses its own separate animacy, much in the same way that 'Michael Field' does.

'Long Ago LX' achieves a similar fusion in Michael Field's version of Leda and the swan. Leda discovers a swan egg nestled "against the purple buds … As in a very blossom-nest" (9-10) which transforms into a human child when she worries that "the crowded flowers will fade" (17). (Significantly, this child is Helen, growing up "beside the hyacinths and swans" to "distract and bless the world with her loveliness" (28, 30).) Unlike the original myth, in which Zeus takes the form of a swan to rape and impregnate Leda, the gift

[82] Amy Kahrmann Huseby, 'Queer Social Counting and the Generational Transitions of Michael Field', *Women's Writing*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2019. 199-213 (201, 203).

of the swan egg implies that the intimate encounter between Zeus and Leda occurs through the air, which carries the polluted trace of sexual violation even as it displaces the threat from Leda herself into the birth of Helen, "who should be bride / To Paris" (29). Like the anemone, the swan egg twines Zeus's transformation into a swan with the versions of the myth that involve Leda giving birth to eggs, while also existing as a separate form, a repurposing of what went into the original encounter and an alternative to sexual intimacy. Lenton describes the concept of 'residence time', which details the amount of time a particular element remains "in the atmosphere before it is taken up, somewhere in the world".[83] The spectre of sexual violence is removed from Leda's encounter with Zeus, only to emerge again once Helen has grown up and been abducted by Paris. Though, on the surface, the swan egg and the anemone seem very different, both are queer acts of re/production that mechanise transmissions from one body to another through desire.[84]

'XXV' and 'LX' sublimate the spectre of sexual violation through intimate events that create a separate third space for the participants to merge and in doing so depict desire as a force or energy that is capable of repurposing or recycling animacies into new forms of life. 'XXXIX', by contrast, retells stories that displace rape onto the nonhuman by converting the girls into two different ecological forms: plants that can be plucked and shaped into objects, and something more transitory, elusive, and discorporate that nevertheless remains in the world of the poem. Other poems I have not discussed also feature these sorts of noncathartic slippages, in which something key to the intimate event

[83] Lenton, p. 23.

[84] See, for example, the queering of the Adonis myth in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis,* which describes the anemone flower as like a child, or the seemingly asexual creation of the swan egg.

is deferred or displaced in order to energise the eternal state of becoming: examples include 'XXXVII', in which Dione's love for Tithonus inoculates him from death but not from aging, and 'LVI', where Niobe's transformation into stone following the deaths of her children is restricted to the realm of metaphor, her hate "turn[ing] her fond heart to stone" (49).

Perhaps most emblematic is 'LII' which retells the myth of Tiresias. The poem delineates female desire in comparable terms to photosynthesis: "through fragrant breath the sun receives / From the young rose's softening leaves, / Her plaited petals once undone / The rose herself receives the sun" (45-48). It is precisely this act of transmission and conversion that I see lying behind the poetics of atmosphere and the supplanting of individual human 'voice' in favour of a more nebulous form of animacy. Tiresias in this case is the perfect fusion of these two experiences, a man who contains within himself the experience of being a woman that enables him to see into the future and prophesy. He is a fusion, also, of the two kinds of atmospheric transfers I have identified in the other poems: in a sense comparable to the swan egg or the anemone flower as a third produced through the imbrication of two separate experiences, but in another like the occlusion of Daphne or Syrinx from the poem, though it is Zeus who is supplanted in the narrative by Tiresias's past experience ("thou hast been woman" (71, 73)) which informs his ability to see into the future.

'LII' also recalls and revises the Apollo and Daphne myth, indicating that the Ovidian poems of *Long Ago* are engaged in a contentious dialogue with one another:

> Can'st thou divine how sweet to bring
> Apollo to thy blossoming

As Daphne; or, as just a child
Gathering a bunch of tulips wild,
To feel the flowery hill-side rent
Convulsive for thy ravishment?

(57-62)

Where Daphne slipped the bounds of 'XXXIX' between the twin poles of dead and deathless, she emerges here alive and growing, not yet imperilled by Apollo's desire. Her arrival is imperfect: see the use of "blossoming", which might simply be gesturing at her youthful beauty and innocence, but contrasts meaningfully with our knowledge she will later be transformed into a laurel-tree, which does not bear flowers and therefore cannot truly be said to blossom. Instead, Michael Field carries the blossoms over to the "flowery hill-side rent / Convulsive for thy ravishment", another transmission between human and nonhuman that questions what we think we know about desire and the kinds of bodies that can experience desire. What does it mean for a seemingly inanimate topographical feature to experience desire so powerful it is deformed by this intimacy? Once more, desire creates an extreme environment for transformation and translation, imperfectly distributed and capable of imbuing forms with attributes they would not usually have without adapting to their new poetic habitat. According to Jeanette Samyn, "The concept of symbiosis originated in the nineteenth century precisely as a way of understanding complex biological relationships in which it was often difficult to distinguish where one organism ended and another began; from the start, symbionts troubled biological conventions, prompting questions about the nature of biological individuality, dependence and interdependence, kingdom and species, and the relationship between parts and wholes as

well as acting as models for human social life".[85] I see these questions lying behind the poetic ecosystems of *Long Ago*, the investment in atmosphere and other fluid animacies as overtaking notions of voice, and in Michael Field's conceptualisation of their artistic and relational identity.

Many of the poetic experiments Swinburne and Michael Field conduct are ones that emphasise the noncathartic elements of their poetry. Intimate relationships are not experienced in linear progression, but rather recycled, repurposed, and repeated indefinitely as a form of intimacy in itself, their narratives endeavouring to exploit nonhuman (often ecological) processes that have no discernible beginning or end. These narratives either take the form of bringing together that which is inherently repulsed (in the case of Swinburne) or merging and imbricating separate desiring bodies into something new (in the case of Michael Field). Both take the perceived failure of intimacy as a starting point for revising the expectations that are brought to desire and its articulations.

In this chapter, then, poetic voice becomes an element of noncatharsis, in which language is either accumulated to an unsustainable, acoustic extreme as a form of waste or manipulated as a kind of metamorphic force that changes whatever it encounters, subordinating personality and subjectivity in favour of an amalgamated presence. Reading Swinburne and Michael Field together allows us to identify these vocal experiments as one of more significant challenges they posed towards common assumptions surrounding poetry while simultaneously demonstrating their engagement in conversations around the

[85] Jeanette Samyn, 'Intimate Ecologies: Symbioses in the Nineteenth Century', Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2020. 243-265 (243-4).

use of poetry that were gaining urgency in the latter half of the nineteenth century. After asking "where is the use of it?", Dallas declares that often art is "deemed most useless where haply it is most useful".[86] If Swinburne's verse was often experienced as insubstantial and superficial, where "no one stanza seems essential",[87] and if Michael Field's fears of being taken less seriously upon the revelation of their true identity were unfortunately well-founded, perhaps the discomfort their work inspired—and the desire to discredit or trivialise it—was due partly to the ways in which it transformed what poetry was capable of doing. In the following chapter, I identify another way in which poets risked scorn or trivialisation through their poetic experiments, by examining poems that argue for the possibility of romantic relationships being conducted between human and nonhuman participants. Like Michael Field, these poets utilise translation as an animating tension in their work, and like Swinburne they understand what passes and fails to pass between bodies to be an event of intimacy. Unlike both, however, they source the experimental nature of their work not in prosodic innovation but rather in crafting their poems (and the bodies within those poems) as experimental laboratories designed to test out unorthodox theories of love.

[86] Dallas, p. 273.

[87] T. S. Eliot, 'Swinburne as Poet', *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism,* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921. pp. 131-136 (p. 132).

PART TWO: EXPERIMENTS IN LOVE

Chapter 3:
Transplanted Intimacies in Keats's 'Isabella; or the Pot of Basil' and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Willowwood Sonnets

> My vegetable love should grow
> Vaster than empires and more slow.[1]

This couplet from Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' (1681) is what we might call a poetic hotspot, an area of a poem that attracts a vast amount of scholarly activity. While much of this activity has understandably concentrated on Marvell's use of 'empires' as both a temporal and spatial scale, his 'vegetable love' in the preceding line offers an equally evocative description of intimacy. Commonly, vegetable is understood as a reference to one of the three aspects of the soul (rational, sensitive, vegetative); yet, as Linda Gregerson acknowledges, this reading tends to "fall flat somehow" against the suggestiveness of the term itself.[2] Pushing beyond this commonplace, Jules Brody draws a parallel with William

[1] Andrew Marvell, 'To His Coy Mistress'. *The Poems of Andrew Marvell* (ed. Nigel Smith), London: Pearson Longman, 2003. Lines 11-12.

[2] Linda Gregerson 'Rhetorical Contract in the Lyric Poem', *The Kenyon Review* Vol. 28, No. 2, 2006. 161-178 (163). A proponent of this interpretation is J. V. Cunningham, who argues, "Vegetable is no vegetable but an

Cartwright's "vegetable embraces" in *The Lady Errant* (1641) to argue that "vegetable love" connotes a love that grows endlessly, infinitely.[3] And both John Cary and Marjorie Swann explore the seventeenth-century investment in reimagining the human through plants, the former suggesting that what appealed to Marvell was "becoming a vegetable", which "allowed an escape from the trap of being human",[4] while the latter observes that "seventeenth-century botanists and poets … yearned to model human existence on the nonsexual otherness of plants".[5] Though I find these readings both productive and persuasive, none address what I see to be the essential question raised by Marvell's formulation: what does it mean for human intimacy to desire nonhuman form?

My answer follows a slightly different path. If, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, "vegetal bodies became a kind of experimental laboratory through which atoms, corpuscles, 'cylinders', and other invisible particles in motion might be imagined, studied, and perhaps understood",[6] might we not interpret the appellation "vegetable love" to signify precisely a kind of love where the bodies of its participants become themselves an experimental laboratory, intended to prove or disprove the pleasure of certain modes of

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abstract and philosophical term. Its context is the doctrine of the three souls : the rational. . . the sensitive . . . and, finally, the lowest of the three, the vegetable soul... It is an intellectual image, and hence no image at all but a conceit." *Tradition and Poetic Structure,* Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960. p. 45.

[3] Jules Brody, 'The Resurrection of the Body: A New Reading of Marvell's to his Coy Mistress', *ELH* Vol. 56, No. 1, 1989. 53-79 (54-57)

[4] John Cary, 'Reversals Transposed: An Aspect of Marvell's Imagination', *Approaches to Marvell: The York Tercentenary Lectures* (ed. C. A. Patrides), London: Routledge, 1978. pp. 136-154 (p. 151).

[5] Marjorie Swann, 'Vegetable Love: Botany and Sexuality in Seventeenth-Century England', *The Indistinct Human in the Renaissance* (eds. Jean E. Ferrick and Vin Nardizzi), New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 139-158 (141).

[6] Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari, 'Radical Botany: An Introduction', *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction,* New York: Fordham University Press, 2019. pp. 1-27. (p. 3).

togetherness? In the case of 'To His Coy Mistress', this would be a togetherness indefinitely but pleasurably delayed, where consummation is anticipated and assured but not yet reached—a pleasure that the speaker and his beloved can never in actuality test out, given their human lifespans: "The grave's a fine and private place, / But none, I think, do there embrace".[7]

This chapter is not about Marvell, nor even poetry of the seventeenth century, but it is preoccupied with similar questions to the ones I raise regarding 'To His Coy Mistress'—namely, what does it mean for human intimacy to seek out the form or feel of the nonhuman, and what does this look like? I propose two case studies from the nineteenth century that will guide my speculations: John Keats's 'Isabella; or the Pot of Basil' (1820) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's four Willowwood sonnets in *The House of Life* (1870).[8] If Marvell urges us to define for ourselves "vegetable love", then Keats's description towards the end of the poem of Isabella "asking after her lost Basil amorously" (line 490) encourages us to consider seriously what happens to our understanding of amorousness when it takes as its object a being rarely, if ever, a recipient of romantic or sexual desire. Then I turn from the vegetal to the aquatic, with Rossetti's sonnet quartet narrating an erotic encounter between the speaker and a woman formed out of a body of drinking water. In this woman, certain attributes of water—most notably, its ability to fit itself into the shape of whatever contains it—become features that enable the intimate encounter.

[7] Marvell, lines 31-32.

[8] All in-text citations are to John Keats, 'Isabella: or the Pot of Basil' in *John Keats,* (ed. Susan J. Wolfson), London: Pearson, 2006, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Willowwood I-IV', *The House of Life,* The Rossetti Archive, ed. Jerome M. McGann, accessed: http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/44-1869.raw.html

The turn to nonhuman intimacy in both poems is activated by the intrusion of mortality into the human relationships, with the basil-plant and the water presenting ways of prolonging the intimacy (though altering it) once the beloved has died.

I intend to take both the basil and the body of water seriously as active participants in the intimate encounter rather than (simply) vessels for human desire to be projected upon and worked through, and it is this emphasis that positions the mode of intimacy I am mapping as noncathartic. By noncathartic intimacy, I mean a form of relationality that neither originates from the human nor follows a teleological trajectory towards the release of human emotion. It thus displaces the human in favour of the nonhuman as the definitional locus of said intimacy. In other words, it is a form of intimacy that relies on a nonhuman participant to set the rules and limits of the relationship. While Keats and Rossetti provide us with two very different examples to work with, the vegetal and the aquatic, I believe their juxtaposition reveals the underlying conditions enabling the human to become intimate with the nonhuman and foregrounds the consequences of these encounters.

The notion of plants as experimental laboratories can be traced back to Francis Bacon's "philosophy of experimentation" in which "[p]lants are the best chemical laboratories; they do naturally and daily what the alchemist is struggling to imitate in his laboratory".[9] In the seventeenth century, Nehemiah Grew planned and executed a series of experiments which studied "the growth of Plants in all kinds of Liquid Receptacles, as

[9] Dana Jalobeanu and Oana Matei. 'Treating plants as laboratories: A chemical natural history of vegetation in 17th-century England', *Centaurus* Vol. 62, No. 2, 2020. 542-561 (544, 547).

Common Water, Snow Water, Sea Water, Urine, Milk, Whey, Wine, Oyl, Ink, &c. Or any of these, with a solution of Salt, Nitre, Sal prunellae, Sope, or other body".[10] Bacon's hydroponic experiments in the *Sylva Sylvarum* evince a similar interest in how plants respond to fluids. Bacon immersed plants in different liquids (including sap) and placed them at various distances from the liquid to see how far and effectively the plants could attract the liquid. "[I]n all generation and transformation of bodies," Bacon says, "it should be asked what is lost and what is given off, what stays behind, and what enters".[11] His experiments were interested specifically in the generation and transformation of bodies through interactions with unlike things, and his questions are similarly relevant to my exploration of poetic depictions of intimacy between humans and nonhumans. Focusing on this idea of the body as experimental laboratory foregrounds the pleasures and risks of a romantic intimacy that might entirely change its participants, both corporeally and taxonomically.

For the rest of this introductory section, I offer one parallel between 'Isabella' and the Willowwood sonnets that can help us understand what was at stake for writers in the nineteenth century when they depicted noncathartic intimacies. Both poems are adaptations. Keats indicates explicitly in 'Isabella' that he is adapting a Boccaccio tale, but scholars such as Billy T. Boyar have observed linguistic and thematic parallels with

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[10] Nehemiah Grew, 'An Idea of a Philosophical History of Plants', *The anatomy of plants with an idea of a philosophical history of plants, and several other lectures, read before the Royal Society*, London: W. Rawlins, 1682. p. 22.

[11] Francis Bacon, *Instauratio Magna, Part II: Novum Organum* in *The Oxford Francis Bacon,* Volume 11 (eds. Graham Rees and Maria Wakely). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. pp. 208-9, accessed: http://www.oxfordfrancisbacon.com/volumes/ofb-xi-instauratio-novum-organum/

Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*,[12] and these Shakespearean resonances have also been commented on by Robert Gittings, who states that, for Keats, 'Isabella' was "a poem in the Shakespearian manner".[13] We know from Keats himself that he kept the first stanzas of 'Isabella' in his copy of Shakespeare.[14] The Willowwood sonnets reuse the components of the Narcissus and Echo myth—the woods, the seductive reflection on the water surface, echoes, the misfiring of desire—along with the figure of Love found in the opening of *Le Roman de la Rose* (1230), a work Rossetti was clearly familiar with.[15] I suspect there is something meaningful in the choice to write about nonhuman intimacies through adaptations of older texts, and specifically in the way both Keats and Rossetti fuse several sources together in their retellings, encouraging us to attend less to the individual sources than the act of translation and adaptation itself as a means of creating and/or accessing these forms of noncatharsis.

When considering how to approach these tactics of multiple, self-conscious adaptations, I took inspiration from *Ovidian Transversions: Iphis and Ianthe, 1300-1650*, edited by Valerie Traub, Patricia Badir, and Peggy McCracken. In her introduction to the collection, Traub defines transversion as "an overarching rubric for the translations, commentaries, appropriations, analogues, intertexts and afterlives inspired by [Iphis and

[12] Billy T. Boyar, 'Keats's "Isabella": Shakespeare's "Venus and Adonis" and the Venus-Adonis Myth', *Keats-Shelley Journal* Vol. 21/22, 1972-1973. 160-169.

[13] Robert Gittings, *John Keats,* London: Heinemann, 1968. p. 205.

[14] Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, 27 April 1818. *John Keats* (2006). pp. 125-6.

[15] See, for example, his 1864 watercolour of a scene from *Le Roman de la Rose*. Naturally, there is a broader lineage of personified Love that Rossetti is also drawing upon, following Dante's *Vita Nuova* and Petrarch's *Canzoniere,* but I think there is an argument to be made for the more particular reworking of Guillaume de Lorris.

Ianthe], as well as an analytic for rethinking the concept of transformation itself", significantly the focus on the before and after of metamorphosis, what traits are carried over or what traces are left behind.[16] The prefix 'trans' plays numerous significant roles in this rubric, from transformation to transit to transfix, as well as essays in the collection variously using the terms trans, trans-, and trans* to "signify a conceptually productive tension between identity and non-identity, positionality and prepositionality".[17]

For my own work, I would like to offer another term: transplant. To transplant is to remove from one place to another, the way Lorenzo's head is separated from his body and then buried once more beneath the roots of the basil; and, figuratively, Willowwood itself is a site of transplantation for memories and desires that can no longer be sustained in their current environment. In the sixteenth century, we find translation used to describe the process of transplanting trees.[18] My contention is that transplanting will not only be a useful term for analysing the strategies of translation and adaptation used by Keats and Rossetti, but also as an acknowledgement of both texts' investment in probing, troubling, and reformulating ideas of relationality that are not defined by or through the human. Instead, transplanting encourages us to attend to the movement and transfer of bodies, the environmental spaces that inform the conditions for intimate encounters, and the tensions that arise from unexpected collisions and dwellings. Talking amorously about basil, or

[16] Valerie Traub, 'Tranversions of "Iphis and Ianthe"', *Ovidian Transversions: Iphis and Ianthe, 1300-1650* (eds. Valerie Traub, Patricia Badir, and Peggy McCracken), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019. pp. 1-41 (p. 15).

[17] Ibid. p. 17.

[18] See, for example, John Lyly's *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578), where he states "plante and translate the crabbe tree, where, and whensoever it pleases you, and it will never bear sweet Apple, unlesse you graft it by Art, which nothing toucheth nature." Birmingham: Alex. Murray & Son, 1868. p. 41.

kissing a woman made entirely from the water of a well, transplant desire—and the capacity to *be* romantically desired—from the realm of the human, and in doing so challenge what we think we know about desire, and what we perceive as the successes and failures of intimacy.

Biographically, the failure of romantic intimacy was a concern for both Keats and Rossetti around the time of their separate compositions. In 1818, Keats confessed to Benjamin Bailey, "I am certain I have not a right feeling towards women—at this moment, I am striving to be just to them, but I cannot—".[19] He proceeded to interrogate himself with morbid scrupulousness in an attempt to pinpoint the reason behind this lack of 'right feeling', which manifested, as Anahid Nersessian notes, in the tension between understanding them to be his equals and wanting to elevate them beyond the mortal.[20] In 1869, Rossetti disinterred the grave of his deceased wife Elizabeth Siddal to rescue the poems he buried there, an act that burdened him with guilt if not regret. But their shared focus on complicated love was also significant in the context of the tales they were revising and reforming, with texts such as the *Metamorphoses,* the *Decameron*, and *Le Roman de la Rose* all inhabiting crucial spots in the Western canon of love and desire.

Keats's Amorous Basil

For Roland Barthes, desire is inherently a noncathartic experience. Midway through *A Lover's Discourse,* he states that "[t]o speak amorously is to expand without an end in sight,

[19] Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 18 July 1818. *John Keats* (2006), p. 191.

[20] Anahid Nersessian, *Keats's Odes: A Lover's Discourse,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. p 12.

without a *crisis*; it is to practice a relation without orgasm".[21] Speaking amorously—what the OED tells us means to speak "in an amorous manner; with love or desire; lovingly",[22] citing Keats's 'Isabella' as one of its examples—is an action tied to indefinite, perhaps even aimless growth. Of more interest to my argument is the second half of Barthes' formulation, where he designates amorous speech as a means of practicing a relation, much as vegetal bodies operated as their own experimental laboratory in the eighteenth century: practicing, specifically, a kind of relation without conventional expectations of consummation and climax that is nevertheless identifiable as amorous. In this section, I argue that Keats details the unorthodox manifestations of desire throughout 'Isabella'—specifically, the relationship between Isabella, the posthumous body of Lorenzo, and the basil—in order to revise the circumstances that are necessary for intimate encounters to occur. In doing so, he uses 'Isabella' to theorise alternate, noncathartic forms of intimacy which surmount obstacles (such as death) that more familiar and human-centred intimacies cannot overcome.

I call upon 'intimacy' to do a lot of different work, though in this chapter it refers particularly to both the desire to be romantically involved with another *and* the events, results, and affects produced through the enactment of this romantic involvement. Romantic love is also a nebulous term, but I use it here to designate the fulfilment of a fantasy most closely associated with the dominant model of 'love', "in which desire is reciprocated: rather than being isolating, love provides an image of an expanded self, the normative version of which is the two-as-one intimacy of the couple form".[23] As I will go on

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[21] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* (trans. Richard Howard), New York: Penguin Books, 1977. p. 72.

[22] *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "amorously (*adv.*)". https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3414999797

[23] Lauren Berlant, *Love/Desire,* New York: Punctum Books, 2012. p. 6.

to show, the ways in which Keats and Rossetti both rethink the concept of human intimacy necessitates an overturning of this dominant model in favour of a more complicated and irregular structure, in which "the two-as-one intimacy" becomes, say, "three-as-one" or "three-as-two". What is at stake—both in this dominant model and in the revised model Keats and Rossetti differently posit—is the concept of physically merging as an event of, and perhaps even evidence of, love. At the same time, these works harness a suspicion of love's rigid conventionality, both inside and outside of literature, in order to challenge the assumptions that tie our concept of the human so tightly to our fantasy of romantic love.[24]

In working through her own description of 'romantic intimacy', Nancy Yousef declares:

> The intersubjective asymmetries typical of romantic intimacy are not only radical (and perhaps radically amoral) in suspending equality (in the form of sympathetic affect or scrupulous respect) as a relational *telos*. They are also radical in their attention to thoughts and feelings that pass and fail to pass between persons rather than to exchanges of thought and feeling. In the complex phenomenology of intimate experience in romantic-era writing, proximity becomes the occasion for awareness of relational possibilities, for intersubjective traversals and encounters that are affectively and conceptually fluid precisely to the degree that they eschew the rigidity of epistemic and ethical demands for symmetry.[25]

[24] As Berlant explains, "The difficulty of determining love's authenticity has generated a repository of signs, stories, and products dedicated to verifying that the "real thing" exists both among people and in other relations — for example, between people and their nations, their Gods, their objects, or their pets. But these signs of love are not universal, and their conventionality suggests, in addition, that love can be at once genuine and counterfeit, shared and hoarded, apprehensible and enigmatic." p. 7.

[25] Nancy Yousef, *Romantic Intimacy,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. p. 22.

Locating asymmetry as a defining feature of romantic intimacy, Yousef encourages us to attend to the movements inherent in these "relational possibilities", both the "thoughts and feelings that pass and fail to pass" and the "intersubjective traversals and encounters" that characterise this particular historical moment of thinking about intimacy. Adela Pinch also investigates the more complicated categorisations of intimacy through the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century writers were "both attracted to and repulsed by radical or substantial notions of purely mental relations between persons" which positioned "the act of thinking about another as an ethically complex, sometimes even a dangerously powerful thing to do".[26] Both Yousef and Pinch identify a marked suspicion of what intimate relationships can make happen, consciously or unconsciously, particularly in terms of what may travel from one person to another. Movement is similarly significant to Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, which "opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors".[27]

I build upon these concepts to argue that noncathartic intimacy operates as a continuous reverberation between oppositional traits and forms of being: repulsion and attraction, closeness and distance, recognition and confusion, animate and inanimate. In constant motion, no one trait is allowed to coalesce and thicken into permanency, and thus each encounter retains infinite possibilities. Transplantation, as one mode of noncathartic

[26] Adela Pinch, *Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. p. 1.

[27] Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. p. 2.

intimacy, maintains this condition of possibility through the transfer of properties between different desiring bodies. This is different from Yousef's identification of asymmetry, in that I recognise this reverberation to entail a reciprocal transfer of properties, though what is given and what is received are not necessarily balanced. As I will demonstrate in the final section of the chapter, these transfers are activated and intensified by the organising principle of the love triangle. But rather than two bodies independently desiring a third, each instead experiences desire simultaneously for both other bodies in the configuration: Isabella loves the basil and Lorenzo, and so forth. If Isabella did not love Lorenzo, she could not love the basil. In this way, the intimate relationship can only work if it remains unresolved, multi-directional, and kinetic—if it refuses the stability of the "two-as-one" model.

What is striking about Keats's use of 'amorous' in defining Isabella's relation to the basil is not that it suggests we can be intimate with the nonhuman, but that we can be intimate with the nonhuman in a way that shares many features with romantic love—a realm we often consider to be indubitably restricted to the human. In order to understand the complex manifestations of love and desire within (what we might call) the polyamorous relationship between Isabella, Lorenzo, and the basil, I begin at the original moment of transplantation: Isabella exhuming Lorenzo's body. In 'On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I am', Karen Barad reveals that what we imagine to be direct contact is never direct at all—in fact, when we imagine touching a mug or a table what we in fact experience is the electromagnetic repulsion between the atoms of our hand and that of the object we believe we are touching. There is always something between us and what we aim

to touch, though this something is invisible to the human eye.[28] Thus, in revising what we understand touch to be capable of making happen, we also rethink its capacity for creating and increasing intimacy between bodies, particularly when those bodies by necessity are no longer fully human. For Sonia Hofkosh, the revision of touch in 'Isabella' occurs earlier through the visitation of Lorenzo's ghost to Isabella's bedchamber. Hofkosh argues that Lorenzo's ghost "acts as an interface, a site of contact or conjecture where one mode of being touches and might be transformed by or into another, the circumstance whereby they become entangled or intertwined, if only for a time, or over time, over again, continually".[29] I am similarly interested in how the poem turns to the nonhuman as a form of "conjecture" about the collisions between different modes of being and what new possibilities for togetherness result. My focus in this chapter, however, concerns touch and entanglement in its most material and embodied sense, Isabella physically uprooting Lorenzo's body, surrounded by the "fresh-thrown mould" (361) of the makeshift grave, and therefore the environmental conditions which dictate the physical reunion.

Isabella's interactions with Lorenzo's corpse require that we expand our interpretation of both 'touch' and 'contact', much as Sarah Ensor reads Wordsworth's 'Nutting' as a poem that "forces us to consider what touch is without the something that it touches, what

[28] Karen Barad, 'On Touching - The Inhuman That Therefore I am', *difference* Vol. 25, No. 3, 2012. 206-223 (209).

[29] Sonia Hofkosh, 'Dancing with Ghosts', *Material Transgressions: Beyond Romantic Bodies, Genders, Things* (eds. Kate Singer, Ashley Cross, and Suzanne L. Barnett), Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020. pp. 191-212 (p. 204).

happens when the verb loses the transitivity that we understand as lying at its very core".[30]

Throughout the exhumation scene, Keats evades direct contact between the lovers:

> Three hours they labour'd at this travail sore;
> At last they felt the kernel of the grave,
> And Isabella did not stamp and rave.
>
> Ah! wherefore all this wormy circumstance?
> Why linger at the yawning tomb so long?
> O for the gentleness of old Romance,
> The simple plaining of a minstrel's song!
> Fair reader, at the old tale take a glance,
> For here, in truth, it doth not well belong
> To speak: - O turn thee to the very tale,
> And taste the music of that vision pale.
>
> With duller steel than the Persèan sword
> They cut away no formless monster's head,
> But one, whose gentleness did well accord
> With death, as life.
>
> (382-396)

Isabella feeling 'the kernel of the grave' occurs eleven lines before the poem reveals what the 'kernel' is, suggesting that at this point there is still a layer of dirt covering Lorenzo from view that the verse uncovers. Keats further enacts this displacement through the turn to 'wormy circumstance' in the next stanza. Though Diane Long Hoeveler is correct to say that "in order to confront the center of this poem we as readers have to ponder the horror

[30] Sarah Ensor, 'The Ecopoetics of Contact: Touching, Cruising, Gleaning', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* Vol. 25, No. 1, 2018. 150-168 (154).

of a decapitated head … the very Gothic and macabre spectacle of a beautiful young woman digging up her lover's body with her own hands and cutting off his head",[31] our ability to imagine this spectacle is inflected by what is withheld from the verse itself, so that we are encouraged to transfer the 'wormy' nature of the poetic material to Lorenzo's 'wormy' body. The transfer of properties through an act of loving contact—even if we cannot locate a familiar form of love in the transmission—is an essential feature of transplantation, particularly when the transfer involves multiple levels of form, from text to flesh and back again. As the dirt is brushed away from Lorenzo's head, the worms are unearthed.

'Wormy circumstance' also makes obvious the poem's status as a retelling, one that is animated by the tensions that arise between original and adaptation through new temporal and spatial configurations. And duration is a key narrative concern during the exhumation scene. 'Why,' Keats asks, 'linger at the yawning tomb so long?'. Contrasting the busy activity implied by 'wormy' with the 'so long' of the narratorial pause at the moment of Isabella's discovery, Keats requires us to sit through the time of Isabella's first response to Lorenzo's corpse though the thing itself is withheld from view. His suggestion that this pause is characteristic of his own distance from 'the gentleness of Old Romance' and 'the simple plaining of a minstrel's song!' positions the slowness, the lingering, of the narrative as a product of translation, which must enact its own temporal displacement from the text it is nevertheless in conversation with. It is a one-sided encounter, much as Isabella

[31] Diane Long Hoeveler, 'Decapitating Romance: Class, Fetish, and Ideology in Keats's Isabella', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* Vol. 49, No. 3, 1994. 321-338 (324).

discovering Lorenzo's body is an encounter only actively experienced by one of them. Both call for new ways of inhabiting and marking time.

Earlier, Isabella upturns "a soiled glove, whereon / Her silk had play'd in purple phantasies", before tucking it "in her bosom" (369-72), another moment in which an act of translation overlays and mediates an encounter between the lovers where only one side actively participates. In this case, the reference is not to Boccaccio's tale but rather to the end of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis.* Venus plucks the purple flower that grows from Adonis's spilled blood and places it against her bosom, where it is anticipated to wither rather than regenerate, thus rejecting the expected cycle of fertility associated with the Adonis myth.[32] Both poems offer images of generation and procreation—think, for example, of "those dainties made to still an infant's cries" (374), the line that gives so many Keats scholars unnecessary second-hand embarrassment—that instead produce death. In *Venus and Adonis,* this is specifically a form of death that negates any possible futures or returns: once the flower has died, there is nothing else. The difference in 'Isabella' is that Lorenzo's body remains instead of dissolving like Adonis. Though the archaic use of 'phantasies' implies that the intimate touch is temporally very distant from the current moment, 'phan' also suggests 'phantom', a ghostly touch that manifests long after death, though the touch has been indelibly altered by death. When we recall that Keats kept the first stanzas of the poem inside his copy of Shakespeare, his words materially proximate to Shakespeare's, the significance of Lorenzo's enduring corporeality becomes clear—both

[32] For more on the ways in which the Venus and Adonis myth is used in nineteenth-century explorations of desire, see my discussion of Michael Field's *Long Ago* in Chapter 2.

the layers of text inside Keats's book and the layering inside the basil-pot that begins with Lorenzo's head are ways of spatially imagining contact between the living and the dead that gain meaning not through a mutually conscious participation in the meeting but through the mere fact of their proximity.

These new experiments in space and time find their articulation through plant imagery. Lorenzo's ghost declares to Isabella, "Thy beauty grows upon me, and I feel / A greater love through all my essence steal" (319-20), while "Upon the murderous spot she [Isabella] seem'd to grow, / Like to a native lily of the dell" (365-6). Just as Marvell's 'vegetable love' grew 'vaster' and 'more slow', Keats uses 'grow' to signify forms of desire that are capable of inhabiting new scales. Another seventeenth-century parallel comes from Thomas Browne, who wishes in *Religious Medici* "that we might procreate like trees, without conjunction, or that there were any way to perpetuate the world without this triviall [sic] and vulgar way of coition".[33] For Keats, the botanical also offers a means of practicing romantic and sexual intimacy without 'conjunction' or direct touch. (It is useful to note here that conjunction not only resonates grammatically but refers also to the collision of two things at the same point in time and space, which in my reading is rendered unnecessary and even undesirable by transplantation.) Keats transforms 'touch' into a speculative event of incorporation, growing into/onto, which compromises the distinctive boundaries between two bodies.

Manuel De Landa draws a distinction between humans and nonhumans through observing that humans perceive the properties of their material environments while

[33] Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici,* London, 1642. p. 140.

nonhumans consider only "the potential for action that those properties supply it with: a piece of ground is perceived not as horizontal, flat, and rigid, but as affording the opportunity to walk".[34] Taking my cue from this difference, I suggest that the rearticulations of touch, space, and time that Keats develops through 'Isabella' matter precisely because they make new actions possible. Growing into one another foregrounds the material effects of intersubjectivity, and the body's capacity to be changed by what it interacts with, while 'lingering' time prioritises reluctance, fixation, and stillness, all of which enable a more extended study of the intimate encounter as though beneath a microscope. This is particularly important when the site of the intimate encounter itself is so consciously designed, with Isabella transplanting the head into the basil-pot:

> In anxious secrecy they took it home,
> And then the prize was all for Isabel:
> She calm'd its wild hair with a golden comb,
> And all around each eye's sepulchral cell
> Pointed each fringed lash; the smeared loam
> With tears, as chilly as a dripping well,
> She drench'd away: - and still she comb'd, and kept
> Sighing all day - and still she kiss'd, and wept.
>
> Then in a silken scarf, - sweet with the dews
> Of precious flowers pluck'd in Araby,
> And divine liquids come with odorous ooze
> Through the cold serpent pipe refreshfully, -
> She wrapp'd it up; and for its tomb did choose
> A garden-pot, wherein she laid it by,

[34] Manuel De Landa, 'Matter Matters', accessed: http://cmm.cenart.gob.mx/delanda/textos/matter.pdf

And cover'd it with mould, and o'er it set
Sweet Basil, which her tears kept ever wet.

(401-16)

"All of matter … is a massive overlaying,"[35] Barad tells us, which I risk overliteralising by using it to discuss the various layers of being at play here. However, Isabella's cultivation of an environment that the basil can flourish within—and thus an environment that makes their intimacy possible—is a significant part of the transplantation process, which requires interactions between different levels of being. She first wraps the head in a scarf perfumed with 'dews' and 'divine liquid' from a 'cold serpent pipe', the winding shape of the snake symbolising the contorted, winding nature of the available intimate contact. Not only does the perfume likely cover the smell of decay, it also represents a different sort of translated flower within the pot: 'precious flowers pluck'd in Araby' recalls *Venus and Adonis,* another flower cut from its original existence and soil in order to be claimed as an intimate symbol. The scarf itself acts as a shroud to disguise the horror of Lorenzo's death in favour of the new life it will be turned into; like the glove, it is an item of clothing that gives Isabella alternative kinds of affectionate touch that are only possible through death. ('Lamia' includes a similar makeshift shroud in Lycius's marriage robes). The pot provides structure to the entanglements it contains, operating as an environment of intimacy that is also an urban alternate to the flowerbed. I leave the mould for last as it is the easiest participant to read. By stimulating growth and the transfer from one kind of consciousness into another (or the reduction of consciousness, signified through the head turning to 'it'), the mould guides the narrative of the transplanted intimacy. None of these inhabitants offers an

[35] Barad, 213.

ordinary sense of loving or affectionate or even desiring touch, but all these affects emerge in altered form through the multiple textures, animacies, and states of matter inside the pot.

If Keats positions himself as feeding "parasitically off the literary remains of Boccaccio", as Stacey McDowell argues,[36] this disjointed and even damaged relation to his predecessor characterises more broadly Keats's approach to the literary canon. As Marjorie Levinson reminds us, much, if not all, of Keats's access to canonical texts not written in English came through translations, just as much of his access to art came through engravings or the occasional reproduction, experience that exposes his "literally corrupt relation to the languages of poetry".[37] Keats renders this tension audible in his description of the basil-pot. Isabella's dense layering seems to eradicate the empty space within the pot, but the verse itself enacts the separation of action and object, 'did choose / A garden-pot', 'o'er it set / Sweet Basil'. The belated effect on the pot and the basil resembles the transformative, long-overdue exposure to Homer in 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'. Though transplantation makes plausible intimacies that might otherwise appear impossible, it is at its core an act of separation: layering different beings on top of one another, or around one another, necessitates each entity maintaining a separate identity. Keats claims this disjunction even as he evinces an uneasiness about it. "All poems are environmental," Timothy Morton declares, "because they include the spaces in which they are written and read — blank space around and between words, silence within the

[36] Stacey McDowell, 'Grotesque Organicisms in Keats's *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil', The Keats-Shelley Review* Vol. 24, No. 1, 2010. 22-28 (22).

[37] Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988. p. 7.

sound".[38] Keats magnifies this environmental sense through the inferences we are led to make, the pertinent gaps and withholdings that the breaks between stanzas and lines enact, and the meditation on the material manifestations of the art of retelling.

The turn to plant intimacy thus reveals new ways of being embodied, being touched, being alive, being in love. My argument rests on us taking the basil seriously as an active and actively desired participant which signifies that new kinds of relationships are being tested out rather than familiar structures of intimacy being upheld. Writing to Fanny Brawne about feeling "too much separated from you" because of his ill health, Keats suggests he could "almost" speak to Fanny "in the words of Lorenzo's Ghost to Isabella" before quoting those two lines I used above: "Thy beauty grows upon me, and I feel / A greater love through all my essence steal".[39] In turning to Lorenzo's words, Keats reveals that the poem is in his mind tied inextricably to questions about how love operates in conditions that demand separation and distance. And 'almost' importantly modifies the speculation. For one, it is an assertion that he isn't dead; it also acknowledges the physical distance between them that cannot be overcome with an immaterial visitation; but, perhaps most importantly, it is an admission that the transplanted intimacy suggested by 'grows upon' can never be fully and deliberately inhabited because it relies so heavily on the movement and rhythm of poetic language. In other words, it is an intimacy made possible only through poetry.

[38] Timothy Morton, 'Ecology as Text, Text as Ecology', *Oxford Literary Review* Vol. 32, No. 1, 2010. 1-17 (11).

[39] Letter to Fanny Brawne, February 1820. *Letters of John Keats to Fanny Brawne,* New York: Broughton and Dunham, 1901. p. 51.

Though the basil is initially conceived as a substitute for Lorenzo—or, rather, a prosthetic by which his existence is extended, though in altered form—it soon supersedes Isabella's role as cultivator of their intimate environment. Where before Isabella took charge of caring for the basil, it soon begins to actively "dr[aw] / Nurture besides, and life, from human fears" (428-429), managing the ways in which Isabella's tears and Lorenzo's decaying head remain in contact. However, this doesn't diminish its significance *as* prosthesis. Expounding on the importance of poetry for Keats, Levinson states, "What was, initially, a substitute for a grim life became for Keats a substitute life: a real life of substitute things—simulacra—which, though they do not nourish, neither do they waste",[40] a description that can be very easily applied to the basil itself. Neither nourishing nor wasting indicates a sense of frozenness that pervades how Isabella interacts with the basil, such as when she,

> in peace
> Hung over her sweet Basil evermore,
> And moisten'd it with tears unto the core
> (422-4)

Jessica Roberson compares the encounter in this passage to a "drip irrigation system", an image I find particularly useful as it demonstrates what other forms of affectionate (non-)touch become available through transplanting. For Roberson, the use of 'moist' gestures at "a constant but slow, moderated distribution of tears" which departs from the more humanlike implications of weeping.[41] This is nothing like what we expect from amorous

[40] Levinson, p. 9.

[41] Jessica Roberson, 'Necrobotany and the green burials of John Keats', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* Vol. 42, No. 4, 2020. 407-418 (407).

contact—particularly as it seems to resist or dilute consciousness rather than require it as a central facet of love/desire. 'Evermore' and 'hung' imply that Isabella is not deliberately maintaining her posture but experiencing it as a bodily instinct much like blinking or breathing. This naturally discomfits. Intimacy does not have to be actively upheld, and often it develops without us noticing, but we still expect a relationship to involve a degree of awareness, thus consent, and these expectations either fail to be met or are met in a way that remains unrecognisable from a human perspective when we consider how Isabella and the basil interact with each other. 'Isabella' does not offer any particular answer to these dilemmas; instead, Keats presents the poem as the thought experiment proposed by and through transplantation, which is as much a work of theory as it is a poetic device and intimate act. Transplantation pushes conditions to extremes to track exactly how far we can test a flexible label such as 'love' before distorting it beyond comprehension. Though Lorenzo's head represents the complete lack of consciousness associated with the dead, it is suggestively also riddled through with the furious activity of decomposition. The basil is alive and disturbingly readable (the brothers immediately understand its relation to both Lorenzo and Isabella) but to desire it is to desire something that gains affection and nourishment from grief and decay. Isabella has participated actively in assembling the basil-pot and choosing how she engages with its inhabitants, but we soon see how she too is reduced to another one of the conduits in the circulatory system:

> And so she ever fed it with thin tears,
> Whence thick, and green, and beautiful it grew,
> So that it smelt more balmy than its peers
> Of Basil-tufts in Florence; for it drew
> Nurture besides, and life, from human fears,

From the fast mouldering head there shut from view:
So that the jewel, safely casketed,
Came forth, and in perfumed leafits spread.

(425-32)

Here is how it works: the roots of the basil feed from Lorenzo's decomposing head in order to grow and hold Isabella's attention, which in turn continues to make her cry, her tears stimulating the process of decay that brings the basil and Lorenzo closer together. Through the basil, Isabella and Lorenzo remain connected, however unconsciously and indirectly. Much as Keats collapses the distinctions of 'human' and 'nonhuman' through this relationship, other binaries are set up only to be absorbed by the ongoing intimate circuit: 'thin tears' versus 'thick, and green, and beautiful it grew'; 'casketed' and 'shut from view' against 'spread'; 'fast mouldering' versus 'life'. Most important, however, are the 'perfumed leafits', which demonstrate how the perfume from the scarf has been transferred to the basil itself, altering its properties. So far this is the most explicit confirmation of exactly what transplantation can make happen—in rendering visible the transfer of properties from within the garden pot, which is *still* taking place due to the present tense nature of 'spread', Keats demonstrates that the bodies of the participants themselves are at stake in the transplanted intimacy, ever-changing, ever-malleable, and ever-vulnerable to intrusion from new and foreign traits that threaten their taxonomy. The basil flourishes in this environment: another example of its increasing animacy is the reference to its 'peers / Of Basil-tufts in Florence', 'peer' implying person. But we also see how Lorenzo is further

corrupted, no longer an 'it' but merely a 'fast mouldering head' that can invite only disgust.[42]

The corporeal and ontological transformation that the basil, Lorenzo, and Isabella experience through their relationship further troubles an already restrictive human/nonhuman binary. In a conversation with Daniela Gandorfer in 2020, Barad states:

> My point is not to get *beyond* the human, but to ask the prior question of what differentially constitutes the human—and for whom. And it requires addressing it not in some universalizing sense but always in its specificities. That is what I mean by *post*humanism. In other words, rather than assuming the cut (human/non-human) and accepting it as a given, posthumanism, as I mean it, is considering the cut itself as a constitutive part of what the theorizing or analysis entails. For the cutting in itself is always already an agential cut, a materialization. Not questioning that cut means understanding the world in some materialized form as an already given. But this would be to uncritically accept what has been sedimented, rather than understanding the materiality of the world as always already a historicity—the *sedimenting of iterative intra-actions in their specificity*—and the possibilities for reconfiguring what becomes the unquestioned ground of theorizing.[43]

[42] As I mentioned in Chapter 1, mould and rot exist as an alternate to human mortality and thrive in conditions that would annihilate the human: this is partly the reason for the disgust they elicit, their flaunted foreignness. Another reason, however, is their enabling of a transgressive mode of (non)reproduction, in which death is converted into nutrition and life. For more on this, studies of mycology are of particular interest: see Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015; and Michael Hathway, *What a Mushroom Lives For: Matsutake and the Worlds They Make,* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. Much like the mimosa of Shelley's 'The Sensitive-Plant', mushrooms resisted categorisation because of the difficulty in locating their reproductive organs which reinforced "their status as outliers in the sexual system of plants", according to Theresa M. Kelley. *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture,* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012. p. 5. For more on the prospect of composite or amalgamated intimacies, see Chapter 2.

[43] Karen Barad and Daniela Gandorfer, 'Political Desirings: Yearnings for Matterings (,) Differently', *Theory & Event* Vol. 24, No. 1, 2021. 14-66 (18-19).

The ambiguity of Keats's title—in which the "or" between Isabella and the pot of basil might function as connective tissue *or* as a distinction between binary opposites—announces the theoretical problem the poem seeks to explore, namely, how to parse the enigmatic relationship between the two. Or, in Barad's terminology, how to parse "the cut itself" as a feature of these new, material forms of love and togetherness. What distinguishes the mode of noncathartic intimacy emerging from transplantation is its inconstancy. In its continuous pursuit of the foreign and unfamiliar, and in its constant adaptability, transplantation confesses its status as a practice or theory of love. 'Isabella' teaches us to pay attention to what the basil both enables and gains from the intimate relationship—a relationship that specifically demands a reduction or dilution of subjectivity—in order to render love a material exchange between bodies.

This is true even as much of the intimate contact between bodies can be understood as speculative, indirect, or even intangible, for the consequences of intimate experience are the profound alterations of the material body. One way of articulating the basil's development throughout the narrative of 'Isabella' is that from prosthesis to organ: from a substitute for something lost that attaches *onto* the body to provide mechanical support, to that which is grafted and transplanted *into* the body and teaches the body how to incorporate it. When Isabella's brothers discover the basil—now bearing an uncanny resemblance to Lorenzo, though "vile with green and livid spot" (475)—they treat it much like a rejected organ, perceiving it as a threat and removing it along with themselves from the narrative. In doing so, they interrupt the transplantation process, uprooting the basil before it has permanently adapted to its new environment.

The ease by which the basil is removed from the equation by the brothers might seem to contradict my argument: if the narrative of the basil is one of increasing animacy and activity, then how can it be plucked from its environment like any object moved around at the will of another? In my view, this has less to do with the status of the basil than that of the brothers. The symbiotic relationship that develops between Lorenzo, Isabella, and the basil relies on a closed circuit of transferred matter in order to survive. Though Isabella creates for herself an alternate world fashioned by and for love to escape the hazards of the lived world, the eternal ongoing-ness of the intimacy suggests it will always be at risk of invasion and interruption. There is no real escape from the violence of the brothers' colonial, mercantile exploits, which involve the displacement of labour and cruelty onto other bodies and other lands: "for them many a weary hand did swelt / In torched mines and noisy factories" (107-8), "for them in death / The seal on the cold ice with piteous bark / Lay full of darts" (115-6), the forceful repetition of 'for them' stressing the inevitability of their actions leading to violence that does not materially impact them. The invasion of other bodies (in this case, the brothers) jeopardises the environment's ability to sustain life. We see the meeting of two incompatible forms of time: the slow, deep time indicated by the lingering nature of transplantation, and the linear, capitalist time exemplified by the brothers. The basil is thus reduced to merely another object, both victim and evidence of their criminal behaviour.

The ending of the poem thus tracks the disappearance of its key players: first Lorenzo, then the basil, and finally Isabella:

> And so she pined, and so she died forlorn,
> Imploring for her Basil to the last.

No heart was there in Florence but did mourn
In pity of her love, so overcast.
And a sad ditty of this story born
From mouth to mouth through all the country pass'd:
Still is the burthen sung – "O cruelty,
"To steal my Basil-pot away from me!"

(497-504)

Michael Lagory reads 'overcast' in the context of weather, a word that heralds the coming of rain and thus "functions in the symbolism of the vegetable life cycle".[44] While there is nothing controversial in this view, within the context of my argument I believe 'overcast' plays a more significant role as a modifier for Isabella's love, much as I have used 'amorously' to unsettle many expectations about nonhuman intimacy. Searching in the OED, I found that while overcast does mean both "dull, gloomy" and "clouded over",[45] emphasising a certain sense of obscurity, it also can mean the following: "overthrown, overturned; upset, spilt", "in excess of the correct amount", and even, by at least the late nineteenth century, "to stitch over (a raw edge)".[46] The lack of clarity in the line over whether we are to read 'overcast' as an adjective or a verb further indicates the blurring of acting and being that is central to the relationship between Isabella, Lorenzo, and the basil. Despite this opacity of meaning, it is clear that 'overcast' represents the stakes of the intimate experiment. It positions love as a climate or atmospheric condition to be inhabited, with its own particular terrain, temperature, etc, as well as a structure whose

[44] Michael Lagory, 'Wormy Circumstance: Symbolism in Keats's "Isabella"', *Studies in Romanticism* Vol. 34, No. 3, 1995. 321-342 (331).

[45] *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "overcast (*adj.*) sense 1". https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1170664412

[46] *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "overcast (*adj.*) sense 3 and 4". https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1170664412; "overcast (*v.*), sense 8". https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1140764950

boundaries are superseded ('excess', 'spilt') or reshaped ('to stitch over'). Just as Keats worried over his absence of 'right feeling' for women, overcast indicates a love beyond the 'correct amount'. This overspilling extends to the fate of Isabella's story, translated 'mouth to mouth' across Italy. The entire poem has agonised over the imperfectability of translation, its inherent corruption, and the insubstantial half-life of Isabella's final words preserve an amorous longing that no longer has a subject or object. It is memorialised as desire itself: a vague, continuous state, waiting to once again become inhabited.

Before her death, but after the theft of the basil, we are told that Isabella "will die a death too lone and incomplete, / Now they have ta'en her Basil sweet" (487-8). What does an incomplete death look like? It seems to me that a consequence of my argument is that Isabella's humanness is compromised: she is no longer human, part of her now within the basil, part of the basil now inside her, and thus the physical separation of the two may enable the part of her incorporated into the basil to survive, though her body will die. The real experimental discovery that emerges from Keats's poem is that intimacy holds the power to change us at a cellular level and may turn us into something entirely different. By necessity, the way we interact amorously with others must look and feel different from our idea of human intimacy. It is a challenge to abandon what we know in favour of what we can scarcely imagine. And perhaps it is the sincerity of this challenge—and the belief that intimate encounters always leave their trace and stake their claim, always affect some sort of change that cannot be fully erased and which radically transform the limits of

existence—that compelled Keats to ruefully label the poem "too smokeable", something that "will not do to be public".[47]

Rossetti's "Brimming Kisses"

So far, I have argued that 'Isabella' works through a theory of love that revises the circumstances and outcomes of intimacy from the perspective of the nonhuman in order to foreground the fate of the material body in intimate encounters. In doing so, Keats's poem offers one example of the nineteenth century's developing interest in forms of love, desire, and touch that pose complications to the status of the human. If becoming intimate with another being has the power to alter the body at a molecular and taxonomic level, then the desired/desiring body can be used as a poetic stage or laboratory through which to make more expansive arguments about why intimacy matters and where exactly the 'human' ends and the 'nonhuman' begins. Poems that explore the consequences and affordances of nonhuman intimacy came to share many of the questions that drove scientific study as the century progressed. Publications from Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33) to Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) prompted a reassessment of the significance of the human species in the context of planetary history, while naturalists such as Alfred Russel Wallace were beginning to observe the destructive influence of human activity on the environment. But just how far could nonhuman intimacy be taken while still resembling intimacy, however flexibly defined? The remainder of the chapter pursues this question through an analysis of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Willowwood sonnets from *The*

[47] Letter to Richard Woodhouse, 21-22 September 1819. *John Keats* (2006), pp. 267-268.

House of Life, which takes as its nonhuman participants entities that are not only lower on the spectrum of animacy than Keats's basil, but in fact non-living (water) and immaterial (sound). Where Keats expands the possibilities for intimate contact beyond human convention, finding in the closed circuit of Isabella-basil-Lorenzo new and counterintuitive kinds of loving touch, Rossetti's sonnet quartet uncouples even orthodox romantic gestures such as kissing from our understanding of human experience.

In the introduction to this chapter, I described how successors of Francis Bacon took up his directive to use plants as experimental laboratories throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century. A notable feature of these early experiments was their interest in observing how plants interacted with different kinds of fluids. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, these experiments were conducted on larger vegetal bodies such as private botanical gardens. In June 1787, Edward Jenner writes to Joseph Banks about an experiment he started in February of that year:

> a small quantity of the Serum of human blood was pour'd over about a square foot of grass on a grass-plot. Three sprinklings were given at the distance of a fortnight each, and the whole quantity applied was the serum contain'd in forty Ounces of blood.[48]

And by April, he announces, "the effects it has produc'd on the vegetation of the grass is astonishing. It is beautifully green & thick & has sprung up several inches while the surrounding grass has but just begun to shoot".[49] The results of Jenner's experiments

[48] Quoted in Clare Hickman, 'The garden as a laboratory: the role of domestic gardens as places of scientific exploration in the long 18th century', *Post-Medieval Archaeology* Vol. 48, No. 1, 2014. 229-247 (235).

[49] Ibid.

become visible through his isolation of a particular section of grass which was fed with 'human blood'. Like 'Isabella', activity associated with gardening and horticulture has been transformed by the introduction of the human in order to work through a theoretical claim.

I argue that this particular line of inquiry—in which the human and the nonhuman are brought together and amalgamated as a means of examining growth, response, and life—finds its match also in the love-experiment Rossetti tests out in his Willowwood sonnets. Larger than Keats's basil-plant, Willowwood itself is created as an environmental laboratory designed to investigate different relations that are energised by the introduction of water and other fluids to the bodies it contains. In the same century that scientists were investigating the development of plants in conditions that eliminated the force of gravity,[50] or were mapping the methods by which plants adapted and responded to different amounts and kinds of water and light,[51] Rossetti's sonnet quartet demonstrates an interest in what happens to bodies along the human/nonhuman spectrum when inhabiting an environment formed precisely in opposition to their familiar habitats. In this sense, Willowwood's strange pressures, darkness, and extreme conditions resemble those of the deep sea, which raises for John Durham Peters these questions:

> What would it mean to live in an environment immune to shaping and permanence? What would aqueous mind look and sound like? How would we feel if our bodies had adapted to live in water? Would we be anything close to human as we know it?[52]

[50] Thomas Knight (1759-1838).

[51] Specifically, Charles Darwin's *The Power of Movement in Plants* (1880).

[52] John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. p. 57.

Like in 'Isabella', the stakes of the intimate experiment coalesce around the status of the human, but Rossetti pushes the experiment to an extreme by travelling further down the scale of animacy. His speaker desires a woman that is created out of water, experiencing a form of desire that takes as its object a being that is non-living, rather than nonhuman but living. Throughout the sonnet quartet, Willowwood operates as a construct, a separate, enclosed world whereby extinction is not the end of possibility, but in fact its condition. Jesse Oak Taylor reminds us that, "the dawning awareness of a human species in the nineteenth century was also the dawning self-awareness of a species in the midst of becoming a geological agent",[53] capable of influencing its environment in sometimes harmful and catastrophic ways even though the influence may be unknowingly exerted. In Willowwood, the speaker's desire creates each form that inhabits the "one lifelong night" (III.3): like an atmospheric condition, like weather, it circulates through the woods and transforms the ways in which bodies move through their environment, though there is nothing that can be identifiable as a will or consciousness.

My emphasis on the environmental aspect of desire in Willowwood departs from previous recent scholarship on the sonnets, which tend to read the woman developing from the well as a kind of technology. For J. B. Bullen, this manifestation resembles spirit drawing, a form of spiritual communication described by Anna Mary Howitt as when "the hand of the medium feels itself impelled…to rapidly outline with a pencil, or colour, the

[53] Jesse Oak Taylor, 'Tennyson's Elegy for the Anthropocene: Genre, Form, and Species Being', *Victorian Studies* Vol. 58, No. 2, 2016. 224–233 (226).

form of the spirit picture on the paper", and as analogous to the "dissolving view",[54] which Bullen tells us was "a form of Victorian entertainment that produced the illusion of one image merging fluidly with another by using two lantern slides in an alternate sequence".[55] Isobel Armstrong proposes an account of the emergence of the woman from the well as corresponding to a photograph in development in which "the physics of reflection is not an illusion, but it is a material event. The 'photographic' act of the virtual image, though virtual, is a fact of 'touching'."[56] Jesse Hoffman extends Armstrong's interpretation to show that the work of photographic reproduction can replicate the complexity and in/sufficiency of turning to images to mourn, using Rossetti's overpainted photograph of Elizabeth Siddal to indicate a process meant to preserve the lost beloved that in fact obscures her. Hoffman argues that "the poem's troubled temporality — the sense it conveys of a recurring image loop — feels less photographic than proto-cinematic".[57]

All three scholars examine the textural complexity of contact in the sonnets, particularly through forms of touch that are indirect or compromising: both photographic reproduction and spirit-drawing involve merging the relation between image and medium. The era's anxieties over technology "remapping human coordinates" in this manner are replicated for Margaret Linley in the Victorian lyric's "attempt to conjure dead, absent, and

[54] Anna Mary Howitt, 'Thoughts Concerning the Mystical Death of the Insane: No. VI', *The Psychological Review*, 5 Aug. 1882. 133.

[55] J. B. Bullen, 'Raising the Dead: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Willowwood' Sonnets', *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry* (ed. Matthew Bevis), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. pp. 429-444 (p. 436).

[56] Isobel Armstrong, 'D. G. Rossetti and Christina Rossetti as sonnet writers', *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 48, No. 4, 2010. 461-473 (467).

[57] Jesse Hoffman, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Bad Photographs', *Victorian Studies* Vol. 57, No. 1, 2014. 57-87 (68).

lost voices while talking (figuratively) about voice".[58] Linley's emphasis on coordinates serves as a useful reminder of the ways in which poetry was called upon to enact and examine new directions of intimate experience, both in terms of how bodies were oriented towards and away from one another, and in terms of the centrality of navigation and movement to intimate experience, which in the previous section of this chapter I likened to a continual reverberation between different endpoints. While this figuration is spatial in nature, Linley also specifies the interest in recalling 'dead' and 'lost' voices, whereby technology and poetry might both possess the ability to reverse time, or at least reach back into the past. This is true for Walter Pater of Rossetti's *The House of Life,* which he terms "a haunted house", a label implying the layering of multiple temporal states on top of one another that are imprinted into the structure itself.[59] Pater's *Appreciations,* which contains his essay on Rossetti, was published a year after similar language was used in an interview with George Edward Gouraud, the man responsible for introducing the phonograph to England. The interviewer observes to Gouraud, "yours will be a haunted house, in truth", referring to the phonograph's function as an archive preserving the kinds of 'dead, absent, and lost voices' Linley was interested in. Gouraud concedes to this interpretation, though, due to the phonograph's growing popularity, he suggests, "I shall not long monopolise the 'ghosts'."[60]

[58] Margaret Linley, 'Conjuring the Spirit: Victorian Poetry, Culture, and Technology', *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 41, No. 4, 2003. 536-544 (539).

[59] Walter Pater, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *Appreciations: with an Essay on Style,* London and New York: MacMillan & Co, (2nd edition), 1890. pp 213-227 (p. 223).

[60] Quoted in John M. Picker's *Victorian Soundscapes,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. p. 120.

If *The House of Life* is a haunted house in this fashion, it bears resemblance to experimental technologies produced especially in the latter half of the century as an archive of that which has been lost but which retains an uncanny kind of life through the function of the sonnet sequence. The Willowwood sonnets, both as the first poems Rossetti composed in the sequence, and the four poems placed at the midpoint of the sequence, signalling the turn or volta between the two halves, are the central mechanism through which Rossetti enacts the experiment. While I find the arguments made by Bullen, Armstrong, and Hoffman to be persuasive, I am interested in teasing out and exploring the implications of reading Willowwood's plants and water as experimental laboratories in their own right, and thus investigating what water enables within intimacy for Rossetti. Specifically, I am curious about the role that extinction and nonconsciousness plays in the experience of romantic desire,[61] as well as the consequences of a particular desiring/desired form relying on the intimate encounter to maintain its shape—in this case, the water is contained in the shape of the speaker's lost beloved, but risks collapse once his memories are removed from the intimate circuit.

Willowwood is designed as a space of desire that has not yet been satisfactorily fulfilled. Everything that inhabits the woods has been transplanted from somewhere else: there are no native species, only species that have adapted to their alien environment. The sonnets thus chart an embrace between lovers and the resulting departure/loss that has already occurred but repeats indefinitely through its transfer into Willowwood. The first

[61] When I use the term 'nonconsciousness', I have specifically in my mind N. Katherine Hayles' description of nonconscious cognition as that which "extends far beyond consciousness into other neurological brain processes; it is also pervasive in other life forms and complex technical systems". *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious,* Chicago: University of Chicago, 2017. p. 9.

sonnet describes the moment the speaker's beloved returns through transplanting his memories from his tears into the water:

> I sat with Love upon a woodside well,
> Leaning across the water, I and he;
> Nor ever did he speak nor looked at me,
> But touched his lute wherein was audible
> The certain secret thing he had to tell:
> Only our mirrored eyes met silently
> In the low wave; and that sound came to be
> The passionate voice I knew; and my tears fell.
>
> And at their fall, his eyes beneath grew hers;
> And with his foot and with his wing-feathers
> He swept the spring that watered my heart's drouth.
> Then the dark ripples spread to waving hair,
> And as I stooped, her own lips rising there
> Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth.
>
> ('Willowwood I')

The speaker and the personification of Love peer into the water, their reflected gazes inexplicably meeting; Love touches his lute; the speaker's tears drop into the well, which causes Love's image in the water to transition into the reflection of the speaker's beloved, who rises from and through the water to meet the speaker's lips as he bends over the well. Her gradual formation resembles Paul de Man's description of voice as "assum[ing] mouth, eye, and finally face",[62] a designation which in this sense emphasises the fact that the beloved appears human but is importantly not human: "her own lips … / Bubbled",

[62] Paul De Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement', *MLN* Vol. 94, No. 5, 1979. 919-930 (926).

betraying that fundamentally her existence is informed immaterially by the speaker's desire but materially by the body of water that she is made from. The poem never arrives at 'face'. Because of this, if the water-woman is seen in some sense as representing poetic voice—remember, the sound of Love's lute 'came to be / The passionate voice I knew', presumably that of the beloved—she becomes one example of the ways in which the era was working through the possibility of voice separate from the human, as Yopie Prins explores in 'Voice Inverse'. Encouraging a return to nineteenth-century metrical theorists, Prins observes that Theodore Watts-Dunton, for example, saw "poetry as a way of approximating the rhythms of life", with particular focus on his writing on the Petrarchan sonnet.[63] For Watts-Dunton, the sestet "must always act as a response by way of either ebb or flow to the metrical billow embodied in the octave".[64] The sonnet he writes as an example, entitled 'The Sonnet's Voice (A Metrical Lesson by the Seashore)', notably attributes voice not to a human speaker but to the "tidal music" of the nearby ocean.[65] Though Rossetti remained sceptical of some of Watts-Dunton's theories,[66] his water-woman provides a compelling reflection on voice that does not originate in a human speaker, but rather the plucking of an instrument, the splash of water.

[63] Yopie Prins, 'Voice Inverse', *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 42, No. 1, 2004. 43-60 (54).

[64] Theodore Watts-Dunton, *Poetry and the Renascence of Wonder,* London: Kennikat Press, 1916 (reissued 1970). p. 172.

[65] Quoted in Prins, 55.

[66] Angela Leighton tells us that, "When Hall Caine reported to Dante Gabriel Rossetti that Watts-Dunton had proposed strict criteria of rhyme and meter in his choice of poems for *Sonnets of Three Centuries*, Rossetti answered briskly: 'I would not be too anxious were I you about anything in choice of sonnets except the brains and the music.'" 'On "The Hearing Ear": Some Sonnets of the Rossettis', *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 47, No. 3, 2009. 505-516 (506).

It might feel tendentious to conceive of voice not only removed from a human speaker, but from a physical body altogether.[67] But this concept is the central foundation of a classical figure often associated with poetry: Echo. In the myth of Narcissus and Echo, the aural phenomenon of the echo is attributed to a nymph cursed by Juno to only repeat the last words spoken in her presence. When Echo's love for Narcissus is rejected, her material body changes into stone that later crumbles to dust, leaving her 'merely' a voice. Rossetti's Willowwood sonnets have been connected to Narcissus and Echo glancingly—the speaker desiring a reflection in the water is the most obvious component of the tale to feature prominently in the opening poem—but Rossetti's interest in meaningful sound without a discernible human source or consciousness suggests another layer of engagement with the myth.[68] Though many readings of Echo ascribe her a strategic agency in reformulating Narcissus's utterances for her own end, enabling them to engage in something resembling a conversation, versions of the myth that place more emphasis on the involuntary and instinctive nature of her echoing still demonstrate that the ensuing correspondence between Echo and Narcissus is meaningful, even though it fails to convey the correct or intended meaning. Echo becomes a generative poetic figure for interrogating the fate of voice without an identifiable form or origin, and indeed a voice without a self—a fate which (perhaps paradoxically) allows intimacy to develop. Gina Bloom attests, "[i]t is precisely the

[67] Although, as I have shown in my previous chapter on nonhuman voice in the poetry of Swinburne and Michael Field, the tendentiousness of the claim often played a significant role in the experiments themselves.

[68] Aran Ruth employs the twentieth-century avant-garde concept of the "acousmatic" (sound heard without a visible source) in considering two common nineteenth-century poetic tropes: the Aeolian harp and the nightingale. The figure of Echo is another (though exaggerated) example of this phenomenon, in which the impossibility of perceiving the source of the sound is complicated further by the source's inability to produce original sound. See Aran Ruth, "Aeolian Resonance: Acousmatic Sound in the Nineteenth-Century Imagination", PhD Diss., (University of Michigan, 2018).

*dis*articulation of speech from the speaker that opens up a space for Ovid's Echo to express and perform her desire for Narcissus".[69] In Willowwood, it is the failure of the speaker's lost beloved to develop fully from voice into face that maintains the empty space in which the speaker's desire is performed.

While James Williams suggests that the Willowwood sonnets depict a setting reminiscent of the Narcissus and Echo myth only to "muddy the waters",[70] transforming the reflection of the personified figure of Love into an approximation of the speaker's beloved, I suggest that rather than "cancel[ing]" the myth after activating it,[71] Rossetti layers another version of the myth on top: the fountain of Narcissus episode from *Le Roman de la Rose*. More broadly, *Le Roman de la Rose* shares with the first Willowwood sonnet both the personification of Love and an unorthodox amorous desire for a nonhuman being, in this case the rose of the poem's title. The fountain of Narcissus is said in the poem to be so brilliantly clear that the crystals at the bottom of the spring perfectly reflect the entire garden: whoever gazes into the pool is destined to fall in love, which is what happens to Amant as he studies the reflection of the garden and fixates on the rosebush.[72] Significantly, in Rossetti's poem the reader (and perhaps even the speaker) fails to see more than a handful of disconnected features that generate desire without adequately satisfying it. And yet it is the imperfection of her embodiment that stimulates the speaker's desire, the failure

[69] Gina Bloom, 'Localising Disembodied Voice in Sandys's Englished 'Narcisus and Echo'', *Ovid and the Renaissance Body* (ed. Goran Stanivukovic), Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. pp. 129-154 (p148).

[70] James Williams, 'Echo and Narcissus in Victorian Poetry', *Essays in Criticism* Vol. 69, No. 2, 2019. 178-202 (192).

[71] Ibid.

[72] The two crystals are often understood to resemble eyes.

of Love's 'certain secret thing' to clarify, just as it is the distortion and reformulation of the original utterance through the echo that allows Echo, in Bloom's reading, to speak amorously to Narcissus. In other words, the speaker's inability to recreate his beloved entirely is part of the transplanted intimacy, not a flaw or failure. The gap between fantasy and 'reality', that mechanism which energises so many sonnets,[73] provides a channel for the transfer of properties to take place, so that Love's "eyes beneath grew hers", and the disturbance caused by the speaker's tears is extended by Love "swe[eping] the spring". In shifting from one version of the myth to another, Rossetti further enacts the conflicted displacement of desire that animates the transplantation of the speaker's grief from his memories into everything around him, to the figure of Love, to the sound of the lute, to the water within the well.

Both the Ovidian narrative of Narcissus and Echo and *Le Roman de la Rose* emphasise water's ability to inspire romantic desire as simultaneously the object of love and the medium through which desire is sparked and transmitted. 'Isabella' reveals the central role that Isabella's tears play in enabling the intimacy between herself, Lorenzo, and the basil to occur. Tears are also the dominant material of Willowwood, which Joseph Bristow describes as a "quasi-purgatorial domain of weeping".[74] The third sonnet indicates that new species of plants are created from different available fluids—"tear-spurge" and "blood-

[73] Anthony Archdeacon declares, "Poets using the mythical character of Echo [in the early modern period] were, intentionally or otherwise, pushing the abnormal psychology of Petrarchism to the surface: not only was Echo a useful symbol of futile love, but the echoing used as a poetic signifier of that futility was also a symptom of the obsessive compulsion to repeat which drives sonnet sequences." 'The Influence of Ovid's Echo and Narcissus Myth on English Petrarchan Poetry', *Early Modern Literary Studies* Vol. 20, No. 1, 2019. 1-29 (18).

[74] Joseph Bristow, '"He and I": Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Other Man', *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 39, No. 3, 2001. 365-388 (373).

wort" (III.9), both plants with medicinal properties that have been corrupted by their transplanted terrain—while the first sonnet demonstrates that the collision of different kinds of water (in this case the speaker's tears and the still water from the well) activates the intimate event between speaker and water. Most of the human body is composed of water; most of the world is covered in water. Unlike other chemical compounds, water occurs naturally in all three physical states throughout its cycle, which means it is in constant transformative motion and has a profound influence on how the world works. Throughout the nineteenth century, growing scientific interest in the oceanic depths refined the submarine, the diving bell, and the diving suit for deep-sea travel. These innovations inspired literary speculations from Tennyson's description of the kraken lying "far, far beneath in the abysmal sea"[75] to Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, the latter published in the same year as Rossetti's *The House of Life*.[76]

Perhaps most significant, if only for its fantastical intensity, is Jules Michelet's natural history *The Sea (La Mer),* published in 1861, which Natalie Deam argues "reflects the same widespread anxieties that evolutionary theory produced around the world as it asked man to accept monstrous biologies not only as natural but also as products of the same evolutionary forces that led to the human".[77] Indeed, as Deam observes, the deep sea

[75] Alfred Tennyson, 'The Kraken', line 2. *Selected Poems* (ed. Christopher Ricks), London: Penguin, 2007.

[76] Jules David Law suggests that in the nineteenth century, "[f]luids were regarded as the most alienable aspect of an otherwise inalienable human body, and paradoxically, as the least rational element of an increasingly rationalized environment." Furthermore, they were understood as "a principal (and highly contested) medium through which social relations were actually negotiated", particularly in the case of water, which exists both inside and outside of the individual body. See *The Social Life of Fluids: Blood, Milk, and Water in the Victorian Novel*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. p. 2 and p. 12.

[77] Natalie Deam, 'The great melancholy mother: Michelet's evolutionary ocean in *The Sea', The Aesthetics of the Undersea* (eds. Margaret Cohen and Killian Quigley), London: Routledge, 2019. pp. 83-96 (p. 86).

posed perhaps the greatest test to the nineteenth century's concept of the organism: "[c]reatures such as the coral polyp, which naturalists struggled to classify as animal or plant; the hermaphroditic barnacles that challenged Darwin's understanding of reproduction; or the shape-shifting octopus that haunted popular literature all challenged nineteenth-century science's understanding of life".[78] Water was both fundamentally tied to life and the source of its most haunting mysteries. No wonder that Willowwood, in all its bewildering, disturbing extremity, appears to be saturated in water, as if, Armstrong suggests, "the poem is afloat in the medium of these liquid sounds. … Well/tell/fell/ audible/silently: liquids become physically, bodily, incorporated in rhymes that belong to other than their own monosyllabic pairings".[79] And, of course, the name 'Willowwood' itself is a disorienting blur of letters and sounds, the repetition engendering the woods with a destabilising fluidity that refuses to reliably cohere. This lack of coherence gestures towards the illogical existence of a wood full of willows, trees that are known to grow near bodies of water. Willowwood is an environment that can only exist in conditions that entirely subvert species norms.

As I suggested earlier, the nonhuman participant of the transplanted intimacy is the one to inform the possibilities of the intimate encounter, so that the basil enables a form of touch predicated on the invasive notion of growing into/onto, the collapse of bounded subjectivity in favour of an amorous togetherness. Similarly, it is the water (and, more broadly, Willowwood) that alters how the speaker interacts with the form of his lost

[78] Ibid, p. 91.

[79] Armstrong, 466.

beloved. In the second sonnet, the speaker and the water are observed "while fast together … / clung the soul-wrung implacable close kiss" (II.10-11). 'Fast together' modifies the urgency of the encounter, indicating a temporal access seemingly in contrast to Keats's lingering time, but Rossetti's use of 'clung' in the following line not only emphasises the uncomfortable texture of the kiss, the way drenched material clings to the body, but also suggests that there is still something about the interaction that has outstayed its welcome yet refuses to end, a sense of working *against* time rather than with it. The internal rhyme with 'soul-wrung' indicates another interior battle. To wring is often to extract moisture from material in order to dry it; however, the OED also indicates that 'wrung' was sometimes used as a means of forcing tears.[80] Drying out would eliminate the water currently acting as the speaker's beloved, whereas forcing tears would be a means of prolonging the encounter. To my mind, the vacillation between speed and resistance gestures at the experimental complexity of the intimate encounter, which maps the different pressures and their outcomes, as well as the notable changeability of water.

Love's song, which Rossetti provides as the third sonnet in the quartet, further explores the affordances and consequences of an intimacy with water:

> 'O ye, all ye that walk in Willow-wood,
> That walk with hollow faces burning white;
> What fathom-depth of soul-struck widowhood,
> What long, what longer hours, one lifelong night,
> Ere ye again, who so in vain have wooed
> Your last hope lost, who so in vain invite

[80] *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2nd ed, s.v. "wring (*v.*) sense 1. c.". https://www.oed.com/oedv2/00287916

Your lips to that their unforgotten food,
Ere ye, ere ye again shall see the light!

Alas! the bitter banks in Willowwood,
With tear-spurge wan, with blood-wort burning red:
Alas! if ever such a pillow could
Steep deep the soul in sleep till she were dead, —
Better all life forget her than this thing,
That Willowwood should hold her wandering!'

('Willowwood III')

What is most striking at first glance is the poem's excessive, almost absurd, repetition, which provides its own kind of resistance as the reader works their way through the poem. 'What long, what longer hours, one lifelong night' is the most powerful example of how the repetition influences the poem's movement: the forward momentum of the imperfect repetition, with 'long' elongated to 'longer' and then 'lifelong', is repeatedly arrested by the inability to push beyond 'long', creating its own tidal ebb and flow that ends where it begins. The 'hollow faces burning white' and the 'blood-wort burning red' suggest a correspondence between the speaker's alternate selves and the corrupted plants that grow within Willowwood, both altered innately by and for their environment.[81] In this sense, they are like creatures of the deep sea who have evolved to withstand the black and pressurising environment they live within: survival in an extreme realm seemingly hostile to life. Love's reference to the 'fathom-depth of soul-struck widowhood' describes the speaker's affective state as akin to these eerie oceanic conditions. It is unsurprising, then, that the poem itself

[81] Significantly, they are the second line of the octave and sestet respectively, indicating the eternally recurrent nature of Willowwood that will only end when the speaker no longer transplants his memories into the water.

seems liable to collapse in on itself from the internal aural pressure of its "outrageously far-fetched rhymes", to borrow Angela Leighton's apt description.[82]

Thus deprived of their familiar shaping conditions, bodies within Willowwood must look to other pressurising events to gain a semblance of coherence, even if, as seen in the water's approximation of the beloved, the identifiable features are only ever loosely connected, eyes and hair and mouth floating together. The ultimate pressurising event is that which has brought Willowwood into being: the transplantation of the speaker's desire. The water maintains the shape of the beloved through intimate contact with the speaker, first via his tears and then the "brimming kisses" that rise to meet his lips as he bends over the well (I.14). Suspended in this manner until the fourth sonnet, the speaker and his beloved resemble experiments Thomas Knight was conducting at the start of the nineteenth century, investigating the effect of gravity on the growth of plants. "The seeds are transfixed by pins, the pins are stuck into the circumference of a little wheel, and a cover is put over the box in which it rotates which keeps the whole arrangement in a uniform state of moisture and excludes the light. […] The revolution of the seeds round the wheel eliminates the action of gravity, because the seeds are being continually reversed in position".[83] Transfixed, yet in constant motion (as indicated by the bubbling, brimming nature of the kiss), the romantic intimacy between the speaker and the water exerts enough pressure for their forms to persist. The further away from labels such as 'living', 'organic',

[82] Leighton, 508

[83] Described by W. T. Thiselton-Dyer in his lecture 'On Various Apparatus for Investigations in Vegetable Physiology', reprinted in Boris Jardine and Josh Nall (eds). *Victorian Material Culture: Volume II,* London: Routledge, 2022. pp. 273-276 (p. 275).

and ‘conscious’ the concept of intimacy travels, all attributes which are shared by the human, the weirder the possible environments and bodies to be inhabited, the more spectacular and bizarre the modes of togetherness.

Once Love’s song ends, the kiss “unclose[s]” (IV.5). Here, the unclosing gestures once more at the co-existing yet contradictory features of the transplanted intimacy. ‘Unclosing’ contains the potential to mean both ‘becoming less close’, therefore more physically separate from one another, and ‘to reverse the act of closing’, therefore reopening what was once finished. Extinction once again becomes the condition of possibility for noncathartic intimacy. Though the poem appears to suggest that the beloved is destroyed as “her face fell back drowned” (IV.6), I argue that in remaining open and alert to the unorthodox manifestations of intimacy that have been mapped throughout this chapter, the final sonnet can be read as demonstrating the endless configurations of transplanted intimacy, which uses extinction as an impetus for a new becoming:

> Only I know that I leaned low and drank
> A long draught from the water where she sank,
> Her breath and all her tears and all her soul:
> And as I leaned, I know I felt Love's face
> Pressed on my neck with moan of pity and grace,
> Till both our heads were in his aureole.
>
> (IV.9-14)

Mirroring his actions in the first sonnet, where he leans over the well with his mouth brushing the surface of the water, the speaker once more bends towards the water—only this time, he drinks. My contention is that we should read this moment of bewildering contact not as a destructive end to the intimacy, but rather a continuation of the previous

intimacy between speaker and water that simply takes on a different shape. Attending to the water as an active participant in its own right, responding to the speaker's desires and shaping itself to fit what contains it, allows us to follow the water's transition from one shape to another as enabling different kinds of intimate touch and togetherness, though it is no longer possible to kiss. This is not to downplay or rationalise the deliberately unsettling nature of the final sestet, which portrays the speaker consuming what remains of his lost beloved *and* demonstrating an anthropocentric disregard for the nonhuman as soon as it fails to resemble the human. Instead, my argument exploits the weirdness of the sonnet to suggest that Rossetti's literalisation of one of the key images of frustrated, insatiable longing in sonnets (that of the lover consuming the beloved) works here as a form of continued amorous contact. The water/beloved and the speaker become one, 'her breath and all her tears and all her soul' digested and then circulated through the speaker's bloodstream. Most importantly, in taking back his memories through ingesting them once more, the speaker ensures that the intimate cycle will start over again as soon as he transfers them back into the well. Similarly, the water cycle teaches us that water is never lost nor destroyed, only repurposed.

By drinking the water, the speaker also enables another intimate relation to progress. In the first sonnet, he was unable to make direct contact with Love, forced instead to stare at their images in the water, but once the speaker has ingested the water, he feels 'Love's face / pressed on my neck', both their heads 'in his aureole'. What I find most revelatory about reading the Willowwood sonnets alongside 'Isabella' is their emphasis on triangulation as a necessary feature of the transplanted intimacy, both works requiring a dead/lost beloved, a nonhuman medium, and a human participant. Unlike more familiar

versions of poetic triangulation, where the speaker's jealousy over a potential love rival drives much of the geometric entanglement, the design of these relationships is predicated on three participants because the amorous situation becomes impossible when contained to any one pairing. For example, the speaker's aqueous beloved is formed from Love's manifestation in the water, not the speaker's reflection; the speaker is unable to directly interact with Love until he has invited the water inside his own body; and water and Love require the transfer of the speaker's memories before they can join together in the form of the beloved. Romantic desire is experienced as an overspill, an explosion of the binary.

Similarly, the Narcissus and Echo myth involves a third participant alongside Narcissus and Echo in Narcissus's reflection; more broadly, it is a tale of "misdirected desire", in which Narcissus rejects Echo's aural repetitions in favour of the visual repetition of his reflection.[84] Desire for Sara Ahmed is a matter of orientation: we can be directed towards or away from something along a line of desire that helps situate us in our world.[85] The shape of the triangle complicates this because it suggests we can be oriented simultaneously in more than one direction. Both the roots and the leaves of Keats's basil grow, desire sent up to meet Isabella and down to root in Lorenzo. The water in Willowwood takes on the shape of the aqueous beloved through not only the speaker's kiss but also Love's song, with the cessation of both forcing a new configuration of bodies and interactions. In contrast to the more familiar form of triangulation, with two rivals oriented

[84] Miranda Griffin, 'Reflecting on Echo', *Transforming Tales: Rewriting Metamorphosis in Medieval French Literature,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. pp. 68-101 (p. 69).

[85] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. See especially the introduction and 'Sexual Orientation'.

in the same singular direction towards a third, desire in these poems operates on multiple planes, which means that the desiring body is simultaneously directed towards multiple bodies in different locations. My emphasis on triangulation foregrounds the ways in which noncathartic intimacies—in this case, amorous intimacy with the nonhuman—demand alternate forms of relationality that cannot traverse a linear path from one body to the other and so perpetually weave, intersect, and reverse. This is why 'wring' can potentially mean both 'to dry out' and 'to force tears', and how 'cling' can gesture towards an embrace that is simultaneously fast and protracted, 'unclose' a kiss that both ends and begins: each competing line of desire establishes a different configuration of bodies. The claustrophobic repetition of the poems further enacts the dense layering of temporalities.

Christina Rossetti identifies the importance of triangulation to the intimate encounter in her own Willowwood sonnet, 'An Echo from Willowwood' (1890), whose title positions it as a reverberation from both her brother's sonnet quartet and the Narcissus and Echo myth.

> O ye, all ye that walk in Willowwood
>
> D. G. Rossetti
>
> Two gazed into a pool, he gazed and she,
> Not hand in hand, yet heart in heart, I think,
> Pale and reluctant on the water's brink,
> As on the brink of parting which must be.
> Each eyed the other's aspect, she and he,
> Each felt one hungering heart leap up and sink,
> Each tasted bitterness which both must drink.,
> There on the brink of life's dividing sea.
> Lilies upon the surface, deep below

Two wistful faces craving each for each
Resolute and reluctant without speech:—
A sudden ripple made the faces flow
One moment joined, to banish out of reach:
So these hearts joined, and ah! were parted so.[86]

What does it mean to write a poem in the form of an echo? Most readings of the poem classify 'An Echo from Willowwood' as a response,[87] but the title directs us elsewhere: an echo is partly a response, but it is a very particular kind of response that uses the original utterance against itself to produce a separate meaning and affect. Reading Christina's Willowwood poem can help illuminate aspects of her brother's poems through throwing them into relief and/or departing from them. In this case, the speaker resembles Ovid's Echo, seemingly spying on two lovers as they gaze enraptured at their reflections in the water, but the speaker is also jumbling many of the features found in the original Willowwood poems to produce an alternate intimate event. Once again, water is the medium through which the lover's relationship is enacted, the 'water's brink' turning into 'the brink of parting' and then 'the brink of life's dividing sea'. The 'two wistful faces craving each for each' can only occur 'deep below' the water, just as Willowwood provided a hostile environment analogous to the deep sea. Rippling water is the instigator in 'Willowwood I' for the aqueous beloved to emerge from the water; here, the ripple 'made the faces flow / one moment joined', amorous contact once more a fact of merging.

[86] Christina Rossetti, 'An Echo from Willowwood' in *Poems and Prose* (ed. Simon Humphries), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

[87] For example, Hoffman, 69.

Instead of the kiss and the speaker ingesting the water, the reflections flow into one, an intimacy performed entirely through the properties of water.

However, Christina's echo looks different from her brother's poems—there is no explicit separation between octet and sestet—and sounds different, deploying the more compressed Petrarchan sonnet form. Furthermore, her conclusion with the two lovers parting appears definitive, in contrast to the temporary lapse in 'Willowwood IV' before the cycle begins once more. If the echo relies on an utterance ending to come into existence, as well as the space between articulation and reception, the presence of silence in 'An Echo from Willowwood' becomes a generative force. The deliberate pause after 'without speech' and before the ripple encourages the reader to attend to the em-dash as proof of linearity which promises an end to the cycle of impossible desire. By delaying the sonnet's volta until the eleventh line, the suspended 'craving' of the two reflections performs a reluctance to move forward that is disturbed by the natural movement of the water. If the poem is truly an echo of Rossetti's original sonnets, then Christina's poem is evidence of an echo so estranged from the original utterance that it is encountered as something new. Instead of the cyclical entrapment of perpetual desire, where the past is constantly revisited, 'An Echo from Willowwood' demonstrates the relief that Love urges in 'Willowwood III': 'better all life forget her than this thing / That Willowwood should hold her wandering!' Notably, it is the first line of 'Willowwood III' that serves as the epigraph to Christina's poem. In liberating her echo from its source, Christina documents an alternate version of the original Willowwood quartet in which the many echoes that populate its woods are also freed from the speaker's self-generating grieving mechanism.

Returning to Rossetti's engagement with the Narcissus and Echo myth in his Willowwood sonnets with 'An Echo from Willowwood' in mind, I argue that, beyond the speaker as a Narcissus-esque figure desiring a reflection in the water,[88] and beyond the water-woman resembling voice divorced from a (human) speaker, the sonnet quartet reveals that Willowwood is itself an echo. Miranda Griffin reads Echo's elided figure in the fountain of Narcissus episode in *Le Roman de la Rose* through the trope of "imperfect repetition",[89] a reading I suggest is equally applicable to the Willowwood sonnets. Everything in Willowwood imperfectly reflects the speaker's memories: the water fails to accurately maintain the shape of the beloved, while the second sonnet shows that the woods are populated with the material remnants of past selves:

> And I was made aware of a dumb throng
> That stood aloof, one form by every tree,
> All mournful forms, for each was I or she,
> The shades of those our days that had no tongue.
>
> They looked on us, and knew us and were known;
>
> (II.5-9)

'One form by every tree' suggests that there is no distinction within Willowwood between the discarded versions of the speaker and his beloved and the nonhuman environment that acts as the backdrop to each intimate encounter.[90] Nothing goes away forever in

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[88] For Isobel Armstrong, the reflection of Love is both "the poet's self and not himself, Narcissus and not Narcissus", transforming in the water from an abstract aspect of the poet to the "feminine face which rises to the surface". See *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics,* London: Routledge, 1993. p. 420.

[89] Griffin, p. 91.

[90] In Benjamin Morgan's *The Outward Mind,* an investigation of how the aesthetic experience was imagined in the Victorian era as a series of dynamic physical reactions, and how in turn the mind was imagined to project

Willowwood but is rather de- and recomposed into the environment, fashioning a world that holds all possible configurations of a relationship in the same pressurised space. In some ways, these are anti-echoes, for they are 'mournful forms … that had no tongue', but their 'dumb' and 'aloof' presence suggests that they should be instead understood as echoes in their most reactive, unconscious form, simply the products of acoustic phenomena, which are the byproducts of an entire world (Willowwood) that inverts the laws of nature to become a material echo. Rossetti's poems exploit a desire to attribute human intention and meaning to something that is essentially alien, misreading inherent properties (water's ability to take the shape of the container it is poured into, the echo's reflection of sound) for comprehensible requited desire. This isn't to say that desire isn't there, an argument which would undo most of the work I've done in this chapter, but it is to observe that nonhuman desire would not resemble anything a human perspective could comprehend as mutual, requited, or legible. If the Willowwood sonnets are an exercise in depicting an amorous relationship between the human and nonhuman, their bewildering and convoluted nature instead depicts a fundamental failure of transmission. Partly, this failure is a result of how overpopulated the sonnets are: in a world where ghosts and echoes linger and multiply indefinitely, any available channel of transfer becomes clogged with the residue of previous intimate cycles. Willowwood perpetuates its own failure, and it is this that renders the intimate relationships within noncathartic.

'outwards' in an interaction with the world around it, he maps how increasingly it came to be believed that "[t]he seemingly inanimate stuff of the world could, in certain cases, also be understood as potentially conscious; or, at least, the line between the conscious self and its nonliving surroundings could seem philosophically difficult to draw". *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. p. 136.

One of the unsettling questions raised by both the Willowwood sonnets and Keats's 'Isabella' is: can love be made material, and if so, what would that change about the ways in which intimacy is conducted and experienced? This is partly what I mean when I suggest that desire can be environmental, in that it can have its own textures and terrain, its own tangible effect on the world in which it operates, and why I have used 'transplanted' as a key term throughout this chapter as a means of drawing attention to the physical dimensions of the relationships between different bodies. At the close of this chapter, however, I suggest that the peculiarity of intimacies conducted with beings far lower on the scale of animacy than humans (if they at all feature), particularly intimacies that resemble the dominant model of what we perceive to be romantic love, urges a revaluation of what love looks and feels like when it no longer is defined by the human. Instead of the experience of loving the basil leading Isabella to trade her humanness to grow increasingly plantlike, can her transformation be read as the act of love itself, their transfer of properties the way in which their love is enacted? Can the same be said of Rossetti's speaker, who becomes 'one' with the water through drinking it? My answer is yes. If the bodies of desiring participants in the noncathartic intimacy become the experimental laboratories through which the love experiment is tested, it is only logical that the physical transformation of the bodies is what reveals love to be present and alive. And in expanding the capacity of romantic love, these experimental poems probe the limits and capacities of the human when faced with the inordinate complexity of geologic time and space, the pressures of evolutionary history all gathered into one 'lifelong' moment. In my final chapter, I will more directly explore the nineteenth century's anxiety over the scale of

nonhuman temporalities through examining the genre of the long Victorian poem and the ways in which it structures romantic relationships through “nonmutual time”.

Chapter 4:
(Non)Mutual Time in the Long Victorian Poem: Barrett Browning, Clough, Tennyson

In this chapter, I use the concept of nonmutual time to unsettle and rework an understanding of intimacy as necessitating mutuality, reciprocity, and synchronicity. Instead, I argue that the intimate relationships I discuss, all of which are taken from long poems published in the latter half of the nineteenth century, require the experience of misalignment and untimeliness as a central feature of the intimacy. The notion of mutual time as a relational orientation originates in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), which I discuss further in the next section: it describes how physical intimacy between two bodies over time causes them to adapt to each other's independent temporal experiences and establish a shared sense of time. Nonmutual time, by contrast, occurs when physical intimacy and desire do *not* result in two bodies inhabiting the same experience of time. Instead, intimate moments manifest through the unexpected collisions of two incompatible temporal experiences in a manner reminiscent of the century's growing awareness of the place of the human in the vast nonhuman scales of time and space evidenced by theories of evolution and species extinction. Just as Aurora observes during the conversations that precede her discussion of mutual time that every word said between her and her cousin Romney "seemed tangled with the thunder at one end"

(IV.409),[1] she experiences Romney's declaration of love in the final book of the poem not as words but as climatic phenomena, as though "an angel spoke / In thunder" or "a cloud came down, / And wrapt us wholly" (IX.738-739, 740-741). In doing so, Barrett Browning connects an experience primarily associated with the human (romantic love, though my previous chapter has suggested the matter isn't quite that simple) with the "thick time of a weather event".[2]

If mutual time involves two persons actively establishing a shared sense of time through their proximity, then nonmutual time demands that this attempt at communion either never occurs or, if it does, it cannot be sustained, so that the intimate relationship is instead experienced as noncathartic. By noncathartic, here I mean that the intimate relationship never comes together in a satisfying moment of consummation or recognition because of the perpetual deferral of synchronicity and therefore togetherness. Rather than two bodies inhabiting the same established temporal experience, we find two separate timelines intersecting, colliding, reverberating. The intimate relationship becomes repeatedly but only momentarily viable in a manner reminiscent of Elizabeth Grosz's description of time becoming thinkable only "in passing moments, through ruptures, nicks, cuts, in instances of dislocation", "events that disrupt our immersion in and provoke our conceptualization of temporal continuity".[3] Thus, these relationships are not ones that have failed to achieve the correct kind of intimacy; they are successes in their own right,

[1] All in-text citations to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh: A Poem*, 6th ed, London: J. M. Dent, 1905.

[2] Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker. '"Weathering": Climate Change and the 'Thick Time' of Transcorporeality' *Hypatia* Vol. 29, No. 3, 2014. 558-575 (562).

[3] Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. p. 5.

though not in a way we may be accustomed to thinking of as 'successful'. A noncathartic intimacy, one that in the context in this chapter is contoured and maintained through the experience of nonmutual time, accumulates frustration and misunderstandings as ways of being intimate with another: through near misses, time lapses, missed opportunities, and delays.

My focus on poems that have been termed long poems and/or verse novels is deliberate. Scholarship on both has uncovered a generic investment throughout the nineteenth century in threading complex, multiple temporalities, which resonates with my interest in nonmutual time as a form of relationality. Stefanie Markovits sees the verse novel as twining the *kairos* of lyric, "what might be called time out of time, or the capture of the moment of ecstatic intensity" with the *chronos* of narrative, which creates "an awareness of time passing, of the inevitability, not only of death, but of aging, of duration".[4] If the binary opposition of narrative time and lyric time does not hold up to scrutiny, the presumption that time is measured differently in novels and poems is nevertheless one that undergirds many of the verse novel's experiments in seemingly incompatible temporalities.[5] More broadly, scholars such as Irmtraud Huber and Rebecca Stern have mapped the ways in which the Victorian period challenged many of the temporal

[4] Stefanie Markovits. *The Victorian Verse-Novel: Aspiring to Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. p. 8. See also Dino Felluga's entry on the 'Verse Novel' in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry* (eds. Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman and Anthony H. Harrison), Oxford: Blackwell, 2002, and Monique R. Morgan, *Narrative Means, Lyric Ends: Temporality in the Nineteenth-Century British Long Poem*, Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009.

[5] According to Emily Allen and Dino Felluga, "By straddling the divide between verse and novel—a divide that is often (mistakenly) reified as one between narrative movement and lyric stasis—the verse-novel is peculiarly positioned to expose the framing assumptions of both forms, and it provides us a marvelously self-aware critique of both realistic chronology and the ecstatic, lyric "moment"". Emily Allen and Dino Felluga, *Novel-Poetry: The Shape of the Real and the Problem of Form,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. p. 38.

assumptions surrounding the status of the human in the wider universe. For Stern, the natural sciences were "transforming the temporal landscape" in which, instead of "a flat, linear backdrop against which human beings played out their lives, time became multiple and mobile".[6] Similarly, Huber observes that the changing understanding of the natural environment revealed it to be "the result of dynamic and contingent processes, continually changing and open-ended".[7] Both strands of scholarship—on the long poem/verse novel and the dramatic temporal revolutions signalled by developments in nineteenth-century sciences—indicate the century's interest in what Marco Caracciolo, Marlene Karlsson Marcussen, and David Rodriguez describe in their introduction to *Narrating Nonhuman Spaces* as the "deep entanglement" that ties humans to our nonhuman environments.[8] Inherent in the decision to write a long poem or a verse novel is an interest in the conceptual difficulty of envisaging multiple, co-existing temporalities, particularly when those temporalities seem to resist or combat one another.

While I am not setting forth an argument for a conscious connection between these forms and a more capacious awareness of the nonhuman, I want to examine the shared interest in engaging with speculative temporal and spatial scales as a means of creating new relational possibilities—particularly when these relational possibilities manifest in the scrapes, clashes, and stumbles between scales. For Elizabeth Freeman, "[o]f the various

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[6] Rebecca Stern, 'Time Passes', *Narrative* Vol. 17, No. 3, 2009. 235-241 (238).

[7] Irmtraud Huber, *Time and Timelessness in Victorian Poetry*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023. pp. 17-18.

[8] Marco Caracciolo, Marlene Karlsson Marcussen, and David Rodriguez (eds). Narrating Nonhuman Spaces: Form, Story, and Experience Beyond Anthropocentrism, New York: Routledge, 2021. p. 5. Entanglement is a useful term because it emphasises the fact that the individual entities do not collapse into one another: they maintain a degree of integrity and independence while being intimately connected.

media through which representation takes place, only the durational ones— the ones that unfold over a stretch of time rather than being apprehensible all at once, like a painting— can capture the process of coordinating, gathering, transmitting, and otherwise transferring energies from one body to another".[9] I am particularly interested in moments where these acts of coordination, transmission, and transfer between bodies falter or misdirect, and in doing so reveal the temporal discordance or disunity within the intimate relationship. This is one place in which these intimacies turn noncathartic: we see this, for example, in Aurora's inability to understand Romney's declaration of love, which exists even though it is incomprehensible, and which turns his feelings for her into a symptom of weather, a peal of thunder, the obscure interior of a cloud.

My chapter will argue for misalignment, miscommunication, and a sense of missed opportunity as activating and enabling noncatharsis, where mis- and missing both implicate the intimate relationship as something outside of the norm or incomplete by normative standards. In the next section, I show how Barrett Browning defines Aurora and Romney's relationship through their refusal to synchronise their independent experiences of time in order for them to inhabit every possible variation of each intimate encounter, even once they have declared their romantic feelings for each other. If *Aurora Leigh* ends with an unconventional union, other verse novels, according to Markovits, delight in "disrupt[ing]

[9] Elizabeth Freeman. *Beside You In Time: Sense Methods and Queer Sociabilities in the American Nineteenth Century,* Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. p. 19.

the courtship plot".[10] Clough's *Amours de Voyage* (1849),[11] the focus of the third section of this chapter, entirely confounds the expectations that its narrative sets up by confining Claude and Mary's relationship to the conditional. Not only do they fail to transform their latent affections into an actual relationship, but they never even reunite to admit their feelings, a feature of the poem further emblematised by the one-sided correspondence in the cantos. The twin hindrances of the postal system and the withholding, embarrassed nature of Claude and Mary's desire preserve their feelings for one another as a 'what if', a missed opportunity. This drama of misalignment is true even of lovers who *are* able to access a kind of mutual time between themselves that instead throws them out of sync with the rest of the narrative. The final section of this chapter will therefore explore the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885), a romance that is notably conducted on the periphery of Tennyson's polyptych narrative and yet warps many of its central intimate relationships, from Geraint punishing his wife Enid for her proximity to Guinevere, to one brother accidentally killing the other in 'Balin and Balan', to Vivien using knowledge of Guinevere and Lancelot's infidelity to seduce and trap Merlin. Their forbidden union proliferates increasingly

[10] Markovits, 'Novel, verse' in *The Encyclopedia of Victorian Literature* (ed. D. F. Felluga), 2015. Felluga (2002) similarly observes the tendency for verse novels to "revolve around perverse or failed domestic relationships" (p. 174).

[11] Describing *Amours de Voyage* as a long poem in the same breath as *Aurora Leigh* and *Idylls of the King* might be considered stretching the definition too far: indeed, when I took a class on the long Victorian poem as an undergraduate, my professor confessed that when he described the syllabus to his colleagues, they protested at his inclusion of both Clough's poem and Hopkin's *Wreck of the Deutschland*. Still, *Amours de Voyage* is a far more defensible choice than *Wreck*, and it is certainly interested in many of the temporal and durational mechanisms inherent in truly long Victorian poems.

catastrophic dramas of miscommunication and misunderstanding that recall the convoluted temporality of the relationships in *Aurora Leigh* and *Amours de Voyage*.

Aurora Leigh and the Limitless Possibilities of Intimacy

I have chosen *Aurora Leigh* as my first case study because it is the poem that both originates and challenges the concept of "mutual time". Midway through the poem, Aurora speculates about the awkward rhythm of her conversations with her cousin Romney in the wake of their reunion:

> 'Tis plain
> We had not loved nor hated: wherefore dread
> To spill gunpowder on ground safe from fire?
> Perhaps we had lived too closely, to diverge
> So absolutely: leave two clocks, they say,
> Wound up to different hours, upon one shelf,
> And slowly, through the interior wheels of each,
> The blind mechanic motion sets itself
> A-throb, to feel out for the mutual time.
> It was not so with us, indeed. While he
> Struck midnight, I kept striking six at dawn,
> While he marked judgment, I, redemption-day;
> And such exception to a general law,
> Imperious upon inert matter even,
> Might make us, each to either, insecure,
> A beckoning mystery, or a troubling fear.
>
> (IV.417-432)

Her image of two clocks on one shelf offers a version of normative intimacy where physical proximity enables individual bodies to develop a shared, "mutual time" between them.

Rather than something that exists prior to the intimate relation, mutual time is created as a consequence of the intimacy itself, in which the way an individual moves through the world is transformed by their relationship to another person. And yet, by connecting the "mechanic" bodies of the clocks to the organic bodies of Aurora and Romney, Barrett Browning also prompts a reconsideration of what intimacy is, and why it matters. In the realm of the metaphor, mutual time is a consequence of intimacy, but intimacy itself is a consequence simply of proximity and probability, and certainly not an experience restricted to the living. In fact, the mechanical bodies are *better* at this sort of relationship than Aurora and Romney, whose physical closeness is offset by their inability to create a sense of synchronicity. They keep passing each other by: "While he / Struck midnight, I kept striking six at dawn". Barrett Browning's use of 'while' to establish their divergent paths is typical of their relationship throughout the poem. Mary Mullen observes that the poem directly undermines any attempt to create a sense of 'meanwhile' between Aurora and Romney: indeed, "Aurora thinks about what Romney is doing elsewhere at various moments of the text, but she is almost always mistaken in these moments".[12] Unlike Donald S. Hair, who suggests that Aurora and Romney only 'seem' far apart, when in fact "they are parts of one continuous process",[13] I agree with Mullen in reading the misunderstandings and time lapses between Aurora and Romney as emblematic of a more convoluted, even self-contradictory intimacy that warps universal norms: "such exception to a general law".

[12] Mary Mullen, 'Two Clocks: "Aurora Leigh", Poetic Form, and the Politics of Timeliness', *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 51, No. 1, 2013. 63-80 (75).

[13] Donald S. Hair, '"The Rhythmic Turbulence / Of Blood and Brain": Aurora Leigh', *Fresh Strange Music: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Language*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. pp. 205-252 (p. 227).

Yet, though these time lapses characterise their relationship to each other as a rupture in linearity, their failure to achieve mutuality is not a failure of intimacy, but rather the unexpected stumbles and clashes of two persons existing within incompatible temporal frames that nevertheless are drawn to one another—a shared attraction so powerful it pulls together what is designed to remain apart.

Experiencing nonmutual time thus becomes a mode of relation in itself, where the relationship is contoured by moments of near (or not so near) misses. Preceding Aurora's conclusion about her relationship with Romney is her description of them walking in the rain, "my hand upon his arm, / His voice in my ear, and mine to my own sense, / Appeared unnatural" (IV.396-398). Ordinary acts of affection and presence are rendered unfamiliar and 'unnatural' between them. Instead of acknowledging this unnaturalness, they rapidly discuss a variety of topics:

> We talked modern books,
> And daily papers; Spanish marriage-schemes,
> And English climate—was't so cold last year?
> And will the wind change by to-morrow morn?
> Can Guizot stand? is London full? is trade
> Competitive? has Dickens turned his hinge
> A-pinch upon the fingers of the great?
> And are potatoes to grow mythical
> Like moly? will the apple die out too?
> Which way is the wind to-night? south-east? due east?
>
> (IV.398-407)

The excessive use of questions demarcates the temporal relationship between Aurora and Romney as one predicated on curiosity, provisionality, and the anticipation of a response;

in other words, a temporal experience defined by a back-and-forth movement. What appears most prominent in this haphazard collection of conversation topics is their double focus on weather and endings, the latter jostling the potential extinction of apples and potatoes with the possibility there is physically no more room in London. To talk about weather and endings is to talk about time: in this case, the year-on-year comparison of England's climate, the wind shifting between night and day—between, perhaps, midnight and six at dawn—and the temporal marker of genus extinction which creates a definitive before and after. I am curious about the connection between these conversations on duration (specifically duration that transcends the limits of human life, such as a local history of climate or the timeline of the apple) and Aurora's following confession that the closeness between herself and Romney involves an enormous contortion of 'general laws' to bring their timelines momentarily together. My provisional answer posits that the ruptures and discontinuities so characteristic of encounters between Aurora and Romney are analogous to the frictions inherent in placing the human within the span of nonhuman history. In other words, attempting to fit 'Spanish marriage-schemes', 'modern books', and 'daily papers' alongside the history of the potato: two entwined and co-existing concepts of time that nevertheless often occlude, evade, or impede one another. It is precisely in attempting to imagine the unimaginable (the extinction of an entire food, the entire breadth of weather) that we can inhabit the speculative framework of Aurora and Romney's staggered, untimely intimacy. The inclusion of questions without an answer—whether the answer is inconceivable or simply withheld from the narrative of the poem—maintains the untimely intimacy through a refusal of closure, providing instead more unanswerable speculations.

A friend has reassured me that it *is* possible for two clocks displaying different times to eventually coincide, though this has nothing to do with their proximity to each other. Rather, the mechanical movement of a mid-nineteenth-century clock was likely to gain or lose between 5 to 20 seconds a day; thus, as long as the clocks had different margins of error, which was likely, they would eventually display the same time.[14] And yet Barrett Browning's image—and her broader depiction of Aurora and Romney's relationship—uses proximity and distance as the enabling forces for multiple forms of intimacy, synchronised or otherwise. "We came so close, we saw our differences / Too intimately" (I.550-551) Aurora explains midway through Book I, pre-empting her later image of the two clocks whose proximity reveals their ideological divergence.

> Often we walked only two
> If cousin Romney pleased to walk with me.
> We read, or talked, or quarrelled, as it chanced.
> We were not lovers, nor even friends well matched:
> Say rather, scholars upon different tracks,
> And thinkers disagreed, he, overfull
> Of what is, and I, haply, overbold
> For what might be.
>
> (I.1103-1110)

Characteristic of many of Aurora and Romney's encounters throughout the poem is this sense of encyclopaedic scale, in which one conversation endeavours to represent all the possible conversational topics that might be covered as well as the different modes of conversation: walking, reading, talking, quarrelling. While their walking establishes a

[14] My thanks to Joey Song.

temporary synchronicity that attempts to prevent them from veering "upon different tracks", juxtaposing physical proximity with intellectual discrepancy, the sheer profusion of material that defines their conversations models an urge to cover literally 'everything' as a way of capturing their divergent temporal directions, one "overfull / Of what is", the other "overbold / For what might be". Just as their discussion of marriage-schemes and the future of the apple searched far beyond their own individual lifespans to consider the larger implications of love and species extinction, so too do their very first conversations reveal a desire to move outside the individual moment of their conversation to imagine every possible permutation. "We read, or talked, or quarrelled, as it chanced", Aurora explains, her emphasis on "chance" suggesting that at any one time, any of those modes of interaction was available and it depended on the moment which one would come true. This is due, perhaps, to their essential temporal incompatibility: in order to come together at all, they must exploit both the randomness of life and the vast scale of universal probability in which anything could happen.

Aurora and Romney's relationship is thus built on the uncontrollable generation of possibilities: through the limitless and unanswerable questions they fling at each other, their inability to establish a joint and singular "mutual time" between them, and their misinterpretations of each other. In her book *Victorian Contingencies,* Tina Young Choi explains how "contingency focused attention on time—its historical pastness, the process of its passage, and its malleability in and as narrative, the possibility of going back or

stepping outside time".[15] A similar description can be applied to *Aurora Leigh,* which involves Aurora frequently speculating about versions of Romney's life that do not come to pass, and explicitly demonstrates that Aurora and Romney fundamentally disagree about their relationship to time: "While he marked judgment, I, redemption-day". Choi explains that contingency was "a key tool in scientific inquiry, where it assumed a place alongside the laboratory and the natural world as a domain for empirical observation and experiment" and, for mathematicians such as Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace, "it became central to the thought experiments they mounted, as they altered conditions and envisioned outcomes on the printed page".[16] Michael Tondre similarly suggests that a focus on possibility led writers to ask, "What did it mean to be more than an isolated self? How, in other words, might the individual suggest a matrix of possible paths in relation to the lives of others?"[17] I contend that *Aurora Leigh*'s exploration of possibility in regards to Aurora and Romney's relationship reveals an interest in the kind of new temporal narratives made accessible through the era's growing interest in contingency. Their relationship functions as a case-study, much as in Chapter 3 I argued that poets such as Keats and Rossetti used the human body as an experimental laboratory to work through theories of love as an experience not restricted to the human. Unlike Keats and Rossetti, the testing ground of Barrett Browning's experiment is not the individual body, but rather the ways in which paired bodies distort time and space to engage in intimate encounters.

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[15] Tina Young Choi. *Victorian Contingencies: Experiments in Literature, Science, and Play*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. p. 5.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Michael Tondre. *The Physics of Possibility: Victorian Fiction, Science, and Gender*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018. p. 4.

Barrett Browning thus uses Aurora and Romney's relationship to work out what intimacy looks, feels, and sounds like in a century defined in part by vast revolutions in individual and social time—and, just as importantly, what modern poetry looks like. "Every age, / Heroic in proportions, double-faced, / Looks backward and before, expects a morn / And claims an epos" (V.152-155) Aurora declares, before continuing, "Every age, / Through being beheld too close, is ill-discerned, / By those who have not lived past it" (V.166-168). Here, the attributes of writing a poem of the age—grappling with distance and proximity, multiple temporal orientations, tying together units of time ("expects a morn") and narratives ("claims an epos")—are identical to the features of Aurora and Romney's intimate relationship. The business of writing modern poetry is thus also the business of writing about modern kinds of love, relationships made available only in the unique conditions of the nineteenth century's social, scientific, and environmental climate and conveyed through the nineteenth century's generic experimentation epitomised by the verse novel.

After Aurora refuses Romney's proposal, she describes herself explicitly as a kind of specimen on display, detailing how, "I lived on and on / As if my heart were kept beneath a glass, / And everybody stood, all eyes and ears, / To see and hear it tick" (II.856-860). In other words, she is put on display because of the way her heart functions as a time-keeping device, though it is unclear what, if anything, time is being recorded *for*. What is clear is that the simile directly connects Aurora's heart—and her confused feelings for Romney—with the movement of time. (Interestingly, this connection also emerges in Barrett Browning's description of the two clocks, in which one "sets itself / A-throb, to feel out for the mutual time", engendering the "blind mechanic motion" with the rhythmic pulsing of a

heart.) At the end of Book II, when Aurora and Romney meet for the last time before their reunion several years later in the house of Marion Erle, the image that demarcates their parting recalls the geological history that dwarfs their own lifespans, drawing attention once more to the difficulty in placing individual human experience within the larger breadth of nonhuman history:

> But so,
> Even so, we let go hands, my cousin and I,
> And in-between us rushed the torrent-world,
> To blanch our faces like divided rocks,
> And bar for ever mutual sight and touch
> Except through swirl of spray and all that roar.
>
> (II.1243-1248)

Earlier, I suggested that Aurora and Romney's relationship has always been defined by their nonmutual time, which their encyclopaedic conversations endeavour to temporarily wrangle into submission, Romney's proposal in Book II gestures at an alternate outcome to their relationship whereby Aurora's own temporality is subsumed into Romney's: as she says when she rejects his proposal, "You misconceive the question like a man, / Who sees a woman as the complement, / Of his sex merely" (II.434-436). Aurora's rejection is thus a rejection of a more traditional, historical form of marriage in which the woman becomes merely an accompaniment to the man's experience. In place of this alternate life comes the distortion represented by the "swirl of spray"; or, as Aurora says of Romney, looking back on the moment she rejected his proposal: "He bears down on me through the slanting years, / The stronger for the distance" (II.510-511). Unlike the proximity of the two clocks in Aurora's image that produced mutual time, the way her relationship with Romney

unfolds is predicated on the constant oscillation of likeness and dissimilarity, closeness and distance. This is Barrett Browning's provisional answer to the questions raised by documenting the new kinds of relationships produced by the era's investment in unifying time: for example, what does intimacy look like when it involves two individuals maintaining their own independent experiences of time? Or, what do intimate encounters look like when they reject synchronicity and mutuality? Aurora and Romney's relationship operates as a speculative answer to this question, in which the only potentially satisfying and meaningful version of their relationship is produced through nonmutual time, their access to one another temporary, asymmetrical, and predicated on the generation of alternate encounters.

In the wake of Romney's failed wedding to Marion, Aurora recognises they are "unequally fatigued", Romney "a little sunburnt by the glare of life" while for herself "it seemed no sun had shone on me" (IV.1138, 1140-1141). This sense of them as diametrically opposed, not only in their temporal orientations but also their gendered social positions, is complicated by the occasional delayed metaphoric resonance between them: in Book II, Romney describes Aurora as "a netted lioness" (II.1097), while in Book IV Aurora describes Romney pacing "like some prisoned lion sprung awake" (IV.1052). These paired similes occur thousands of lines apart, demonstrating once more that likeness and understanding becomes visible only through a contortion of linear chronology, whereas physical proximity produces dissimilarity and opposition. Importantly, this asynchronicity does not impede understanding; rather, it enables them to arrive at similar conclusions about each other, though at a significant delay. The final two books further demonstrate what intimate encounters actually look like when borne out of the new kinds of love and

time made available by the nineteenth-century's temporal experiments, and do so through tying together Aurora and Romney's physical closeness and Aurora's struggle to discern what is really occurring within the fog of contingency that has animated their previous interactions, in which every possible variation exists simultaneously. "Did he touch my hand, / Or but my sleeve? I trembled, hand and foot-- / He must have touched me" (VIII.78-80) she wonders. Even the "must" in the final line does not indicate which version is correct, only that some physical encounter has taken place between them.

The resistance to permanency and definitiveness is enabled by the written word, which is capable of juxtaposing the real and the speculative without favouring one over the other. Not only are Aurora and Romney operating under different beliefs about what the other has experienced since their last encounter (most importantly, Aurora not knowing Romney has been blinded by the fire at Leigh Hall), these false narratives contain just as much weight, if not more, as the chronology of past events which are eventually revealed to have taken place. As Tondre explains, drawing on Herschel, "nonhappenings … have the weight of ontological events in themselves, so that 'happenings' and 'nonhappenings' become mutually constitutive categories".[18] Earlier in his argument, he declares, "'Nonhappenings'—alternatives to the constellated chain of events—emerge through this vantage as distinctive features of the Victorian novel, with positive moral and social content, rather than as symptoms of a lack".[19] This is a result, then, not only of *Aurora Leigh*'s status as a poem, but its status as a *long* poem or verse novel, with that form's

[18] Tondre, p. 35

[19] Ibid, p. 26

"estranging ability to position us both within novelistic chronology and outside of it".[20] For Allen and Felluga, the realist narrative of the Victorian novel "suggests that there is a right time, right place, and right person for every action, a time that might well be missed or misrecognized".[21] Conversely, *Aurora Leigh* argues that each of Aurora and Romney's encounters are conducted during moments that are simultaneously the right time and the wrong time, with the capacity to function as both a missed opportunity and a coincidental meeting. For example, the conversations between Aurora and Romney in the final two books are primarily defined by their extended focus on the moment of parting:

> We're parting. Certainly not once nor twice,
> Tonight you've mocked me somewhat, or yourself,
> And I, at least, have not deserved it so
> That I should meet it unsurprised. But now,
> Enough: we're parting…parting.
>
> (VIII.1160-1164)

Nonmutual time contours their encounters such a way that the moment of divergence is always at the forefront of their interactions, their temporary synchronicity obvious in its impermanency. 'Parting' in fact is mentioned five times in their conversation in Book VIII and three in Book IX. The emphasis on multiplicity ("not once nor twice"), the connection between the present moment and termination ("But now, / Enough") and the ellipsis between the second and third mention of parting, which throughout *Aurora Leigh* has often undermined certainty in favour of once more inserting possibility,[22] endlessly defers the

[20] Allen and Felluga, p. 38.

[21] Ibid, p. 23.

[22] For example, Aurora's insistence that "And yet I know / I did not love him … nor he me … that's sure…." (II.505-506) after she rejects Romney's proposal.

concrete nature of an ending by drawing attention instead to the time passing between each anticipation of parting. Often a narrative approaching its end tends to increasingly close off possibilities to produce a stable set of events, but Barrett Browning resists this urge and its implications of synchronicity and cohesion in order to maintain the atmosphere of provisionality. Even the kiss between Aurora and Romney is rendered as obscure and uncertain as everything that has come before, holding all the possibilities of their physical encounter in the same verse:

> Could I see his face,
> I wept so? Did I drop against his breast,
> Or did his arms constrain me? were my cheeks.
> Hot, overflooded, with my tears or his?
> And which of our two large explosive hearts,
> So shook me? That, I know not. There were words
> That broke in utterance…melted, in the fire—
> Embrace, that was convulsion…then a kiss
> As long and silent as the ecstatic night,
> And deep, deep shuddering breaths, which meant beyond
> Whatever could be told by word or kiss.
>
> (IX.714-724)

Once more, questions stave off the permanency and determinacy of any one variation of their embrace, maintaining instead an extravagant litany of different variations: Aurora seeing his face or not seeing his face, him crying or her crying, "words / That broke in utterance" and therefore could not be remembered, an "embrace, that was convulsion". Tondre suggests that alternative possibilities, though seen sometimes in the period as "epiphenomena", "were often implied to have an actual existence, in the hyperconnected ensembles of movement and interrelationship that scientists intuited in the nether reaches

of the real. Solid and substantial things were melting into air, and air into precariously assembled forces".[23] The melting of the "fire" and the melding of Aurora and Romney's individual sensations to the point that Aurora struggles to tell where individual sensory experiences originated from, suggests that the endless variations of their climactic kiss encompass a life of their own, all equally real as each other, and all colouring the experience of the "actual" kiss.

His breath against my face
Confused his words, yet made them more intense,–
As when the sudden finger of the wind
Will wipe a row of single city-lamps
To a pure white line of flame, more luminous
Because of obliteration; more intense
The intimate presence carrying in itself
Complete communication, as with souls
Who, having put the body off, perceive
Through simply being. Thus, 'twas granted me
To know he loved me to the depth and height
Of such large natures, ever competent
With grand horizons by the land or sea,
To love's grand sunrise.

(IX. 743-756)

On the surface, this final encounter seems to move towards a state of catharsis: "[t]he intimate presence carrying in itself / Complete communication" suggests that Aurora and Romney have achieved a perfect and synchronised understanding of each other. But two aspects resist this achievement. The first is that the proximity between Aurora and

[23] Tondre, p. 10

Romney—"his breath against my face"—simultaneously grants them a more "intense" and "intimate" understanding of one another, a "complete communication" that is transferred just as "the sudden finger of the wind" can blur a row of lamps, and ensures that Aurora cannot understand what Romney says to her. If they transcend the need to verbally communicate, it comes at the expense of clarity. The second is that what is transferred from him to her is her "complete" knowledge that "he loved me": once more, another communication between them that encompasses every single possible thing they might have said to one another and does so in order to convey love. The Victorians, Choi tells us, "invested time with meaning and an almost material significance—whether the slow time of broad chronological expanses and long causal trajectories, or what Jimena Canales calls the "microtime" that emerged through nineteenth-century scientific efforts to measure, scrutinize, and subdivide the moment into ever finer increments".[24] Both urges are evident in this final conversation which combines instantaneity and comprehensiveness, an extended metaphor with a single, "sudden" moment. We find this combination embodied also by Aurora and Romney, whose relationship is predicated on the infinite variations of intimate encounters and animated by the clashes and collisions of their independent experiences of time.

As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, the century staged a dramatic revolution in conceptualising time in relation to the experience of being human. Part of what was staked on these reconceptualisations was the relationships between bodies: their coordination, or otherwise; their responsiveness; their corporeal and taxonomic instability.

[24] Choi, pp. 10-11.

Lara Karpenko notes in her introduction to the *Victorian Review*'s special issue on Victorian Posthumanism, "Marked by scientific advancements that destabilized categories once thought inviolable as well as by literature that often featured boundless, pliable bodies, the nineteenth century oversaw a radical reimagining of the very category of the human".[25] The evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin were at the heart of this reimagining. "For Darwin," Grosz tells us, "[l]ife is construed as a confrontation with the accidental as well as the expected, a consequence of the random as well as the predictable. It is the response, the very openness, of material organization to the dynamism of time".[26] Barrett Browning's depiction of the relationship between Aurora and Romney emphasises that their intimacy—its contingency, its encyclopaedic scale, its durational affinities and sudden dissonances—manifests as the result of the century's increasing understanding of the "dynamism of time" and its relation to human experience. This is also true to a certain extent of the poem I will discuss in the next section, *Amours de Voyage*. Although *Amours de Voyage* was composed largely in 1849 and published in 1858, a year before *On the Origins of Species* and two years after *Aurora Leigh,* and although it is preoccupied with matters often considered innately human—love, writing, tourism, revolution, cosmopolitanism—the poem conducts an oscillation between human and geological time that endeavours to capture the mid-century categorical turmoil of what it means to be 'human'. By choosing to stage the unorthodox, noncathartic courtship between Claude and Mary within these taxonomic anxieties, Clough

[25] Lara Karpenko. '"Is Victoria Actually Human?": Posthuman (Pre)histories', *Victorian Review* Vol. 48, No. 1, 2022. 45-52 (45).

[26] Grosz, p. 7.

uses their relationship as an experimental ground to work out how the changing status of the human creates new possibilities for intimacy.

Amours de Voyage and Asynchronicity

Clough's epistolary poem *Amours de Voyage* is notable for what Ralph Waldo Emerson complained is its "baulking end or no end".[27] The last two cantos of the poem document the efforts of Clough's protagonist Claude to reach the woman he has decided he loves, Mary, following scraps of correspondence and second-hand information throughout Italy—only to resign himself seemingly to disappointment when the trail appears to run dry. The final letters of the final canto depict Claude deciding to travel to Egypt, while Mary announces she and her family will return to England, widening the geographical gulf between them. For Emerson, this is an unforgivable sin in poetry: to refuse the reader any kind of resolution, to refuse, in other words, to end the poem at all. "How can you waste such power on a broken dream?" he proceeded to demand in the same letter. "Why lead us up the tower to tumble us down? It is true a few persons compassionately tell me, that the piece is all right, and that they like this veracity of much preparation to no result. But I hold tis bad enough in life, and inadmissible in poetry".[28] And yet, as Clough admitted when he reported Emerson's criticism to a friend, "all my defence can only be that I always meant it to be so and began it with the full intention of its ending so":[29] its "baulking end or no end" was part of the genetic makeup of the poem.

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[27] Ralph Waldo Emerson to Clough, "excerpt from a letter dated 17 May 1858", *Clough: The Critical Heritage* (ed. Michael Thorpe), New York: Barnes & Noble, 1972. p. 124.

[28] Ibid.

[29] *The Correspondence of Arthur Hugh Clough,* Volumes I and II (ed. F. L. Mulhauser), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957. II.551.

Scholarship on *Amours de Voyage* has tended to echo Emerson in finding the poem's ending—and, in fact, the entirety of its romantic narrative—to be deliberately obscure and anticlimactic. In a chapter on the verse novel, Dino Felluga describes the "intimated if not intimate plotted union of Claude and Mary",[30] riffing on the etymological similarities of intimate as an adjective and as a verb. What would an intimated intimacy look like—one defined by its indirect routes, by suggestion rather than explication, an intimacy that remained unspoken or secret or implied? And how might intimation develop or sustain an experience of nonmutual time? I see Clough's *Amours de Voyage* as an experiment in writing about forms of intimacy that never become direct, reciprocated, or synchronous, that manifest instead in the gaps produced by miscommunication and missed opportunities. In other words, an intimacy that only becomes meaningful and viable through the lens of nonmutual time. I take my cue from Grosz's description of time as "a kind of evanescence that appears only at those moments when our expectations are (positively or negatively) surprised". We notice time only "when something untimely disrupts our expectations".[31] The crisis of the final cantos of *Amours de Voyage*—once Claude and Mary are separated—becomes a temporal one, in which their failure to communicate directly with each other is what also clarifies their romantic feelings for each other. For Emerson and other readers, these final two cantos also clarify their thinking around poetry: what poems should do and not do, how a poem should end, and what subjects and narratives choices are suitable for poetry.

[30] Felluga (2002), p. 179.

[31] Grosz, p. 5.

Thus, my argument is two-pronged. On the one hand, I am interested in reading *Amours de Voyage* as an exploration of alternate kinds of intimacy that rely on the participants in the relationship never achieving mutuality, and always being out of sync with one another. On the other hand, I am curious about *Amours de Voyage* as a case study in mid-century debates surrounding poetry as either a cathartic or noncathartic product. Both Emerson's articulation of Clough's supporters enjoying the "veracity of much preparation to no result" and his judgment of the poem's "baulking end or no end" as "inadmissible in poetry" signal that readers experienced the poem as noncathartic, though they weigh the value of noncatharsis as a form of poetics very differently. This noncatharsis is tied directly to the result of Claude and Mary's indirect and often embarrassed courtship—and the ways in which time inflects and warps how and when they think about each other.

My first contention is that Clough uses nonmutual time as a means of accessing a consciously modern and/or "new" kind of poetry, one that uses the generic hybridity of *Amours de Voyage* to reflect on the temporary meeting of incompatible experiences. If, in *Aurora Leigh,* nonmutual time provides the conditions for an intimate experiment which explores how paired bodies influence each other and their surroundings, *Amours de Voyage* takes this experiment to an extreme. The poem examines how nonmutual time becomes the *only* enabling force of Claude and Mary's unorthodox intimacy, an intimacy that relies on the organising principles and generic innovation of Clough's poetry which advertises its investment in dual structures and modes of experience. Each canto opens and closes with an italicised elegiac that claims an omniscient, even collective, perspective, and these elegiacs package or bookend a series of intensely personal letters written by Claude, Mary,

and Mary's sister Georgina. Many readers have attempted to resolve or explain the disjunction between the two, seeing the elegiacs as belonging to a separate, impersonal narrative voice, such as Clough's, or as products of Claude's attempts at writing a poetic travel narrative a la *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.[32] Christopher Keirstead suggests we can read the elegiacs as an "envelope … posing questions about Claude's direction and purpose".[33]

Without discounting any of these interpretations, I am interested less in naming the relationship between the letters and the elegiacs, and more interested in the ways that the relationship produces discordance and missteps, designed by Clough deliberately to not fit comfortably together. Anahid Nersessian notes how the "imperfect calibration" of William Cowper's *The Task* manifests in "the uneven fit between what his pocket-size epic can plausibly relate and the moral urgency of his effort".[34] I see the deliberate disjunction between the elegiacs that open and close each canto and the letters that make up the bulk of the narrative as performing a similar function, exploring the presence of gaps, disjunctions, and absences as significant (and meaningful) presences of their own. In effect, the two kinds of poetry—the elegiacs and the epistolary hexameters—enact a temporal struggle that resonates with the struggle of placing individual, human history in the wider context of geological and historical time.

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[32] See Markovits, p. 183.

[33] Christopher Keirstead, *Victorian Poetry, Europe, and the Challenge of Cosmopolitanism,* Columbus: University of Ohio State Press, 2011. p. 46.

[34] Anahid Nersessian, *The Calamity Form: Poetry and Social Life,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. p. 17.

I argue that this temporal misalignment plays an important function throughout *Amours de Voyage* as a means of imagining and articulating the meeting of incompatible temporalities. "At the end of the eighteenth century," Robert Markley observes, "climatological time emerges as a distinct ontological challenge to theocentric time in three interlocking sets of developments". These developments—"the nebular hypothesis of planetary formation advanced by Pierre Simon de Laplace, the argument for species extinction by Georges Cuvier, and the "discovery" of geological time by James Hutton"—worked to "decoupl[e] history from human experience and memory".[35] Dipresh Chakrabarty outlines how, "as humans, we live in two different kinds of "now-time"", "in our own awareness of ourselves, the "now" of human history has become entangled with the long "now" of geological and biological timescales, something that has never happened before in the history of humanity".[36] While decoupling and entangling appear contradictory modes of relation, one an act of separation, the other an act of bringing together, they both identify the existential crisis of existing within two seemingly incompatible temporal scales that originates of the start of the nineteenth century—and informs the "thoroughly contemporary"[37] *Amours de Voyage*'s interest in intimacy as a negotiation of antithetical propositions, such as attraction and repulsion, or juxtaposition and affinity.

The elegiacs and the hexameters function in a similar, contradictory way: in the former, Rome is "a land wherein gods of the old time wandered" (I.3); in the latter, Claude

[35] Robert Markley, 'Time', *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change, Vol I* (ed. Tom Cohen), Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2012. p. 51.

[36] Dipesh Chakrabarty. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. p. 7.

[37] David Masson, 'in *Macmillan's Magazine*, August 1862', *Clough: The Critical Heritage*. p. 150.

admits to his friend Eustace, "Rome disappoints me much" (I.13), though "this, however, perhaps is the weather, which truly is horrid" (1.15). The conversational nature of Claude's letter becomes exaggerated by his attempts to grapple with the spectre of the inaccessible historical past and the vast temporal and spatial scale of the climate.

> Rome disappoints me much; I hardly as yet understand, but
> *Rubbishy* seems the word that most exactly would suit it.
> All the foolish destructions, and all the sillier savings,
> All the incongruous things of past incompatible ages,
> Seem to be treasured up here to make fools of present and future.
>
> (I.19-23)[38]

What remains of Rome can only be experienced as "rubbishy", a term that suggests what has survived is no more than a trace of earlier civilisations' waste, all the things they did not want. There is no narrative harmony, no correspondence between objects that are fundamentally "incongruous" and "incompatible"; their proximity fails to establish a sense of mutual time. And yet, despite Claude's overwhelmingly negative view of this 'rubbish', its existence creates the conditions for unlikely, temporally incompatible, intimacies. Nothing quite fits together and yet correspondences occur: the alliteration of "sillier savings", the shared beginnings of "incongruous" and "incompatible", the echo of "foolish" in "fools of present and future", and the way in which the "past" of "past incompatible ages" is visually proximate to "present and future", though separated by a line.

It makes sense, then, that Claude and Mary meet in Rome, as they are also drawn together by circumstance and coincidence though the poem's narrative soon implies they

[38]All in-text citations are to Arthur Hugh Clough, *Amours de Voyage*, *Selected Poems* (ed. Jim McCue), London: Penguin, 1991.

do not easily belong together. Their encounters are withheld from the surface of the poem, existing within the letters as either something that has already taken place or something that is expected to happen, a reverberation between anticipation and reflection that reveals the impossibility of existing together within a mutual 'now'. One way in which Clough makes this convoluted togetherness essential to the texture of the poem is how, as above, Clough creates unexpected visual proximities across different lines, suggesting that poetry's capacity for more explicitly foregrounding issues of form and structure in fact enacts the coming together of nonmutual temporalities that Claude and Mary's relationship represents. Another way is through the length of the hexameter—a metrical line that is particularly resistant to the English language and whose additional foot in contrast to the more popular pentameter seems to stretch out time itself beyond expectation. Indeed, the English hexameter was particularly relevant to mid-nineteenth century debates over how to measure time in a poem, whether quantitatively (through length of syllables) or accentually (through the number of stressed syllables). For Matthew Arnold, "I believe that modern poetry is actually in want of such an instrument as the hexameter",[39] and he saw in Clough's meter the closest the hexameter had come to being translated into modern English.[40]

Yet, Clough complicates the hexameter's sense of elongation by arresting its forward momentum in Claude's second letter to Eustace:

Rome disappoints me still: but I shrink and adapt myself to it.

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[39] Matthew Arnold, *On Translating Homer,* London: Smith, Elder, & Co, 1896. p. 160.

[40] See pp. 237-239 in Yopie Prins, 'Metrical Translation: Nineteenth-Century Hexameter Mania', *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation* (eds. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. pp. 229-256.

Somehow a tyrannous sense of superincumbent oppression
Still, wherever I go, accompanies ever, and makes me
Feel like a tree, shall I say, buried under a ruin of brickwork.

(I.35-38)

The repetition of "still" asserts a return to what has already been established, even as the nature of moving from one letter to the next implies a sense of change through time passing. Similarly, in Canto III, Claude's letter to Eustace, in which he attempts to refute Eustace's suggestion that he loves Mary, demonstrates a chronic circularity:

I am in love, meantime, you think: no doubt you would think so.
I am in love, you say; with those letters of course you would say so.
I am in love, you declare. I think not so; yet I grant you
It is a pleasure indeed to converse with this girl.
[…]
I am in love, you say; I do not think so exactly.

(II.250-253, 263)

The repetition attempts to establish the synchronicity of a dialogue, but the chronic nature of the repetition reveals the difficulty in maintaining this sense of responsiveness. "Letters help us navigate discordant temporalities," Barbara Leckie explains. "Their material form reminds us of the layering of time: the past that a letter animates in the present-reading as well as future returns and rereadings. They embody the carrying forward of time".[41] But Claude's letter attempts to resist or reverse this 'carrying forward' by returning compulsively to Eustace's observation, as though in doubling back he can undo the time that has passed and thus allowed his feelings for Mary to grow. The use of "meantime"

[41] Barbara Leckie. *Climate Change, Interrupted: Representation and the Remaking of Time*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022. p. 163.

indicates that their intimacy develops in the time intervening between two events; it can also indicate an intimacy that is "provisional, temporary".[42] Both definitions identify his feelings for Mary as temporally inflected, requiring a lapse between different moments of time to coalesce and gain meaning, such as the gap not only between the letters that Claude and Mary send, but also the gap between their encounters (which are withheld from the narrative of the poem) and the choice to write or not write about them when they begin their letters. As the intimacy is defined primarily by its existence between two temporal events, it can never be completed; it relies instead on the open-ended nature of anticipating what comes next. The provisionality informs (and obscures) Claude's feelings on the matter. "I think not so; yet" and "I do not think so exactly" gesture at the possibility of an intimated intimacy, one that never becomes clear or explicit even to the participants. Both "meantime" and "still" emphasise the struggle of connecting independent temporal events, whether from person to person, or from one person's past to their present or future, just as the poem's structure is shaped by the intervening gaps between letters and the one-sided nature of the correspondence.

The poem's reliance on repetition and circularity as a contrast to the length of its hexameters—simultaneously pushing beyond and looking back—becomes a defining feature of its self-conscious modernity and reflections on the new (or newly urgent) intimate dilemmas arising in the mid-nineteenth century. Many scholars of Victorian temporality acknowledge the construction of Big Ben as a significant moment in the nineteenth century's drive towards regulated time. Construction began in 1843 and finished

[42] *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "meantime (*n. & adj. 2)".*

in 1859, the same year *On the Origin of Species* was published, and a year after the publication of *Amours de Voyage*. What is notable to me is the fact that the composition of *Amours de Voyage* occurred entirely in the span of Big Ben's construction, informed by this laborious attempt to bring together multiple discordant local temporalities as an "endeavour to control and systematize time" that only occurred after the poem was published.[43] In other words, it is written in the anticipation of temporal cohesion that never comes to pass. The generic experimentation of *Amours de Voyage*, with its combination of classical hexameters and modern letters, should be read within this context as a means of embodying the struggle towards synchronicity. Similarly, Clough's essay 'Recent English Poetry' argues for modern poetry taking on some of the attributes of the modern novel in order to "convert … at least into some form and shape, some feeling, at any rate, of content – the actual, palpable things with which our every-day life is concerned", or what he goes on to call "the latest addenda", a phrase which reinforces his sense of "every-day life" as supplementary or belated.[44] It is perhaps this stance that makes *Amours de Voyage*—and, particularly, Emerson's experience of its ending as "baulk[ed]"—so controversial as a poem, because it rejects catharsis in favour of endlessly generating anticipation for a moment that never comes.

So far, I have argued that an interest in nonmutual time informs both the dual structure of *Amours de Voyage* and Clough's experimentation with the features and

[43] Trish Ferguson, 'Introduction', *Victorian Time: Technologies, Standardizations, Catastrophes*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. pp. 1-15 (p. 1).

[44] Arthur Hugh Clough, 'Recent English Poetry', *Victorian Poetry and Poetics* (eds. Walter E. Houghton and G Robert Stange), Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968. 395-403

complications of the English hexameter. I will turn now to consider the second affordance of nonmutual time in *Amours de Voyage:* the ways in which it defines and enables certain kinds of intimate relationships, both romantic and otherwise, within the world of the poem. Claude's reference to Rome as "rubbishy"—and his description of himself seeming "like a tree … buried under a ruin of brickwork"—reveals the poem's interest in turning to similes of incommensurability in order to diagnose the particular intimate dilemmas facing lovers in the nineteenth century. Both trees and brickwork experience time on a scale that far outstrips the human lifespan, but the tree's living, organic experience of time is radically different to the endurance of stone, brickwork, and other non-living objects. In the realm of the simile, and in the setting of the poem, however, these incompatible temporal experiences come briefly together. In detailing the struggle of nineteenth-century writers to see "the individual instance and the massive system" at the same time, Nathan Hensley and Philip Steer suggest, "these issues of scale were also problems of aesthetic form".[45] Here, the disruptive and formally-destructive image of the tree and the brickwork as two different kinds of "ruin" entangled with each other demonstrates a physical fissure that stands also for a fissure in time, allowing their relationship to bridge, however unevenly, their incompatible temporalities. In Mary's first letter to her friend Miss Roper, she unknowingly echoes Claude's earlier image when speculating about the kind of woman he is romantically suited to.

> She that should love him must look for small love in return,—like the ivy,
> On the stone wall, must expect but a rigid and niggard support, and

[45] Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer, 'Introduction: Ecological Formalism; or, Love Among the Ruins', *Ecological Form: System and Aesthetics in the Age of Empire* (eds. Hensley and Steer), Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2018. pp. 1-18 (p. 9).

E'en to get that must go searching all round with her humble embraces.

(III.37-39)

Although here we have a stone wall covered in ivy, rather than a tree buried in brickwork, both similes are invested in the possibilities for intimacy that spring from incompatible beings and imagine direct touch as oppressive and/or unsatisfying. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes that, "Withdrawal and remoteness are inevitable themes within any romance of stone, since rock outlasts that which it draws close, that which draws it close, that to which it is strangely bound".[46] In Mary's attempt to imagine a proximate, if temporally asymmetrical, relationship through fitting them into a biological or geological stretch of time that outlasts the human, she places them within what Cohen calls an "affectively fraught web of relation",[47] one that is resistant, unsatisfying, frustrated, and ultimately nonmutual in its physical manifestations. This is further complicated by the fact Mary is not imagining *herself* with Claude, but rather another woman who does not exist outside of the fantasy, exaggerating even further the sense of misalignment and remoteness that characterises the poem's narrative of intimacy. Indeed, Claude couches his romantic disappointment in the final canto in much the same language:

I, who refused to enfasten the roots of my floating existence
In the rich earth, cling now to the hard, naked rock that is left me. –

(V.66-67)

[46] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. p. 41.

[47] Ibid.

Once more, the frustration of impeded desire leads to an image of asymmetrical, incompatible intimacy, in which what lives searches in vain for a satisfying embrace that the inorganic and non-living seems constitutionally unable to provide.

Notable in the comparison I have drawn here is the implication that Claude's description of his relationship to the city of Rome is at all analogous to his romantic desire for Mary. Indeed, the poem's most detailed meditations on intimacy rarely distinguish between romantic or human attraction and relationships to the environment or the nonhuman more broadly; instead, Claude describes himself "fusing with this thing and that, entering into all sorts of relations" (I.233), or declares, "I can be and become anything that I meet with or look at … E'en from the stones of the street, as from rocks or trees of the forest, / Something of kindred, a common, though latent vitality, greets me" (III.162, 168-169). In an essay on 'Industrial Culture and the Victorian Novel', Joseph Childers describes how "[r]eceived notions about everything from gender to nationalism, from class to religion, from propriety to biology were open to question. Even assumptions about such fundamentals as space and time were challenged. Not only were people living differently, they were thinking differently, talking and writing differently, acting differently. They were existing differently".[48] I see in these descriptions of "entering into all sorts of relations" with beings along the spectrum of animacy an interest in exploring what 'existing differently' could mean and what new kinds of relationships it could produce. Intimacy in *Amours de Voyage* is defined primarily by divergence and asymmetry, seeking out what is familiar in

[48] Joseph W. Childers, Industrial Culture and the Victorian Novel', *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel* (ed. Deirdre David), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. pp. 77-96 (p. 77).

the alien, and alien in the familiar. It manifests in moments of temporal misalignment which bring together what should not fit and in doing so jeopardises the taxonomic stability of desiring bodies.

In fact, many of Claude's letters to Eustace are preoccupied with theorising about and categorising different forms of attraction, cataloguing all the ways in which two bodies can be yoked together. The two prominent examples are juxtaposition and affinity, which in Claude's description are both temporal relations:

> Juxtaposition, in fine; and what is juxtaposition?
> Look you, we travel along in the railway-carriage, or steamer,
> And, *pour passer le temps* [to pass the time], till the tedious journey be ended,
> Lay aside paper or book, to talk with the girl that is next one;
> And, *pour passer le temps,* with the terminus all but in prospect,
> Talk of eternal ties and marriages made in heaven.
>
> (III.107-112)

Juxtaposition is an intimate relation made "to pass the time", dependent on a chronological stretch with a beginning and an ending where feelings develop simply because of proximity and a temporary shared experience of time. Thus, juxtaposition is an intimate event tied to travel: the length of a train or boat ride, where bodies are synchronised in moving together towards the same endpoint. The closer the terminus gets, the more intense and unsustainable the intimacy. Affinity, in comparison, conveys a sense of being magnetically attracted to someone else through bodily instinct.

> Ah my friend, there are many affinities, greater and lesser,
> Stronger and weaker; and each, by the favour of juxtaposition,
> Potent, efficient, in force, - for a time; but none, let me tell you,
> Save by the law of the land and the ruinous force of the will, ah,

None, I fear me, at last quite sure to be perfect and final.

(III.152-156)

Both affinity and juxtaposition foreground the ways in which bodies sense one another—their placement, their orientation, the feelings that pass or fail to pass between—within a moment in time. They are not opposites, but rather presented as two solutions to the same problem: what does it mean to be romantically attracted to someone else? Juxtaposition suggests an impersonal, circumstantial attraction, a way of noticing time through experiencing desire that would occur to anyone in that situation. It is less a subjective experience than an affective response to being in a certain environment. Affinity focuses instead on the ways particular bodies communicate with and seek out each other, even across spans of time or space. In using the form of the letter, which foregrounds asynchronous relationality, as a site in which to work through questions about intimacy, Clough prioritises the ways in which bodies communicate through time and space.

These intimate experiments—and the new forms of insight and interaction they produce—also have narrative consequences, particularly in the third canto with its convoluted structure. By the start of Canto III, Claude and Mary have been physically separated. Mary's first letter to Miss Roper recounts how her family fled Rome to avoid the French invasion of the city and indicates that Claude was meant to accompany them, only to change his mind at the last moment. (Unrelatedly, the importance of this letter lies also in its inclusion of the ivy/stone wall image, suggesting that Mary gains access to the language Claude uses to make his experiences explicable only once they are apart.) Despite the canto opening with Mary's half of this episode, it is only in the final letter of Canto III that Claude acknowledges in his letters to Eustace what occurred. His interest in Mary, and

perhaps her reciprocal interest, was noticed by George Vernon (a friend of the Trevellyns engaged to marry Georgina) who spooked Claude by asking after his intentions towards Mary. “How could I go?” Claude demands in his letter, “to conduct a permitted flirtation / Under those vulgar eyes” (III.278). Confessing his feelings through letter—and, significantly, not to Mary, but to Eustace—provides an indirect route towards intimacy that protects it from the intrusion of others, whereas the idea of *sharing* time with Mary (and her family) threatens to take all the pleasure out of it. It will boil their relationship down to the flat temporal plane of the present, rather than the experiences of anticipation and wondering and reflection that shapes their desire for one another. Instead of relating things as and when they happen, the poem’s narrative is guided by Mary and Claude’s joint attempts to process what occurred, so that time functions differently in the third canto: it is defined primarily by the effort to piece together what has already happened, so that the last letter of the canto ends up in a similar place to the first.

That being said, it is also true that Claude is unwilling (or unable) to mention what happened to Eustace until Mary indirectly intervenes to clarify for herself what happened. Her letter to Miss Roper, directly preceding Claude’s, describes her discovery of Vernon’s interference and questions whether or not it would be best to let Claude know that she was unaware of the conversation. “If you think it is sincerer to tell him I know of it, do so,” she agrees at one point, before privately admitting, “I should like very well to show him myself I forget it” (III.258). In the following P.S., however, she says, “you surely, surely can manage, / Not to let it appear that I know of that odious matter”, for “I do not think he would like it” (III.260-262, 264). Her attempt to predict the future consequences of Claude learning what happened indirectly from Miss Roper is characteristic to the way time moves

throughout the canto. She pauses several times while writing her response to read Miss Roper's preceding letter, punctuating her response with multiple P.S.es that attempt to navigate the multiple temporal moments in play. We have the present act of Mary reading and writing, we have her recollections muddied and/or clarified by the new information she gleams from her reading, and we have her anticipation of Miss Roper in turn reading her letter and acting on her contradictory advice, which changes to reflect her shifts in thinking.

Claude only writes to Eustace once he hears from Miss Roper on behalf of Mary, assuring him the interference was "wholly unsanctioned" (III.283) and provides the rationale behind him refusing to travel with Mary's family. The third canto thus emblematises the ways in which their physical distance and asynchronicity paradoxically enables them to order themselves in time together through the constraints of the narrative, exploiting the convoluted manoeuvring of the one-sided correspondence that is characteristic of *Amours de Voyage* to structure their growing intimacy through a series of disruptions, gaps, and misunderstandings. The third canto ends where it begins—with Claude and Mary separated, reluctantly coming to terms with their romantic feelings for each other—but its labyrinthine and circular progression in a work that otherwise does unfold in a mostly linear fashion mirrors Clough's interest in incommensurate similes as ways of depicting not only the complications that arise from temporally incompatible lovers, but also the unexpected and unintuitive moments of togetherness.

In the final turn of this section, I make the case for reading the temporal lapses and misalignments in *Amours de Voyage* through the lens of queer time. It may seem a stretch to claim that Claude and Mary's untimely and ultimately frustrated courtship should be read

as queer, given the explicitly heterosexual nature of their romance, and there is always the risk of applying the label "queer" to anything remotely subversive or unexpected to the extent that it becomes a meaningless signifier. With those cautions in mind, I believe engaging with theorisations of queer temporalities helps us to understand how the contorted temporality of *Amours de Voyage* produces an intimate relationship that neither fails not flounders but becomes meaningful precisely in the divergent narrative it takes, one that Claude describes in opposition to the linear chronology embedded in a heterosexual marriage. In doing so, I recognise, as Carolyn Dinshaw does, that queerness provokes "forms of desirous, embodied being that are out of sync with the ordinarily linear measurements of everyday life, that engage heterogeneous temporalities or that precipitate out of time altogether".[49] My hope is that reading the final two cantos of *Amours de Voyage* with this in mind will allow the stakes of Clough's divisive and deliberately unresolved ending to emerge as both a model of poetics that endeavours to showcase the "ordinary" and "obvious" rather than the "rare facts of human nature",[50] and a defense of unlikely intimate relations that manifest from experiences of nonmutual time.

In Claude's most expansive imagining of relationality, in which he considers himself capable of being "the dog in the doorway, the kitten that plays in the window" (III.164) or "the furtive and fugitive lizard" (III.165), intimacy "become[s] uninvested in lineage as a temporal paradigm",[51] instead constituting a blurring of categorical allegiance as a means of

[49]Carolyn Dinshaw. *How Soon Is Now? Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. p. 4.

[50] Clough, 'Recent English Poetry', 396.

[51] E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen, 'Introduction: Becoming Unbecoming: Untimely Mediations', *Queer Times, Queer Becomings* (eds. McCallum and Tuhkanen), Albany: SUNY Press, 2011. pp. 1-12 (p. 9).

accessing alternate forms of connection and inheritance. Similarly, his desire for "growing, where I was growing, / There more truly to grow" (II.268-269) models a form of becoming predicated on remaining in place, refusing to "be moved" (II.268) by the demands of linear time and growing older. Significantly, Claude's preference for growing in place over being "disturb[ed], unsettle[d]" (II.265) is tied in his mind to species of "human attraction" (II.264). Desire's capacity for constituting the self—and the relations that define the self—is rooted in the ways that bodies experience their own adaptations and evolutions through time.

The moment that engineers Mary and Claude's separation is Vernon's attempt to publicly regulate their relationship through enquiring about Claude's "intentions". Claude understands (or fears) that, if he were to stay with Mary, they would be forced to perform their burgeoning relationship for the benefit of her family, going through the motions of what a courtship should look like; what is not said, but what I think is likely, is that he also fears the attempt to assimilate their relationship, founded on nonmutual time, within a larger temporal landscape. In other words, he fears the consequences of synchronicity. As he describes in Canto IV, their relationship—its actual, unassailable present, rather than its speculative "what ifs"—is defined in opposition to the linear chronology of heterosexual marriage:

> There is a tide, at least in the *love* affairs of mortals,
> Which, when taken at flood, leads on to the happiest fortune, -
> Leads to the marriage-morn and the orange-flowers and the altar,
> And the long lawful line of crowned joys to crowned joys, succeeding. –
> Ah, it has ebbed with me!
>
> (IV.33-37)

The increasing length of each line parallels the chronological forward-stride of happiness to marriage to procreation, only to fall abruptly short when Claude turns to his own experience of intimacy, formally demonstrating his divergence from an expected timeline. Part of this, of course, is his dismay over having wasted too much time in Rome after the Trevellyns left, embarrassed by Vernon's interrogation, time that might otherwise have closed the physical distance between him and Mary. But together with the other ways in which the poem catalogues Claude's resistance to linear progression, I suspect there is something more chronic in his experience of himself as belated or untimely specifically when it comes to "the love affairs of mortals" (which shares much with his earlier consideration of "human attraction" as a kind of ontological crisis). Fundamentally, the relationship between Claude and Mary relies on temporal discrepancies and distance; it is structured by the "meantime" between them. Not only is synchronicity unwanted, it is in direct opposition to the terms of their relationship.

In this sense, it is not their asynchronicity that impedes their pursuit of a more normative relationship but their joint endeavours to alter the conditions of their intimacy through communicating directly. Markovits points out that it is "striking that both notes Mary did compose stand out for being intended to communicate only through time, not through space: they were meant to be picked up by Claude when he arrived on the spot".[52] Mary's correspondence anticipates the time lapses that define what passes between them, but fails to adjust for their unpredictable movements, nor the ways in which the forward momentum of her travels contradicts the circling back and dead-ends of Claude's attempt

[52] Markovits, p. 184.

to follow her. In the following letter, he realises that he overlooked a note from Mary that guided him to Bellaggio, but "at Bellagio I find no trace, no sort of remembrance" (IV.43). In turn, Mary's correspondence with Miss Roper becomes increasingly circular, peppered with urgent questions that will not get an instantaneous response and reliant on assumptions that prove to be untrue:[53] "You had told him Bellaggio. We didn't go to Bellaggio; / So he would miss our track … But he could write to you; - you would tell him where you were going" (V.47-48, 50).

The "semi-farcical"[54] nature of these near (and not so near) misses demonstrates that it is paradoxically the strength of Claude and Mary's desire for one another that creates distance between them or repels them in the manner of a magnetic force. The more they want to be together, the further apart they are pushed. Perhaps Claude recognises this when he writes to Eustace and asks him not to intervene on Claude's behalf:

> Indeed, should we meet, I could not be certain;
> All might be changed, you know. Or perhaps there was nothing to be changed.
> It is a curious history, this; and yet I foresaw it;
> I could have told it before.
>
> (V.170-172)

The mixture of tenses here creates a convoluted sense of a relationship that has a history, though it has never existed, and a future, though it has already been deemed impossible. "All might be changed" and "there was nothing to be changed" in the same overlong line enact an impossible antithesis in which both things are true, because neither can be proven;

[53] This is reminiscent of Aurora and Romney's relationship, and Mary Mullen's observation that Aurora is always incorrect when she imagines what Romney is doing.

[54] Philip Horne. 'Clough, James, and Amours de Voyage: A Juxtaposition', *Literary Imagination* Vol. 15. No. 1, 2013. 89-104 (94).

the relationship exists in the nebulous space of speculation and possibility where nothing can be resolved, but nothing can be ruled out. Karen Barad defines electromagnetic repulsion as when "negatively charged particles communicating at a distance push each other away", and it is precisely the distance of both space and time and their furious attempts to communicate through notes and third parties that create the difficulty of their ever being together. Barad continues, "That is the tale physics usually tells about touching. Repulsion at the core of attraction. See how far that story gets you with lovers. No wonder the romantic poets had had enough";[55] or, perhaps, no wonder Emerson found himself underwhelmed and frustrated by the product of Claude and Mary's feelings.

What, then, should we make of an intimacy that can so easily be classified as failed, or forestalled, or disappointing, the kind of intimacy Emerson felt poetry shouldn't be written about? The final letters are often read as admitting defeat, with Claude travelling in one direction and Mary travelling in the opposite, both resigned to never seeing each other again. However, I want to resist the urge to fall in line with this interpretation and instead consider what my focus on convoluted, staggered, and even queer temporalities as enabling conditions for intimacy change about our expectations for a satisfying and/or conclusive ending. Mary's final letter, which arrives after Claude abandons the attempt to synchronise their relationship, demonstrates that it is precisely in this rejection of mutuality and synchronicity that she can understand him:

> Oh, and you see I know so exactly how he would take it:
> Finding the chances prevail against meeting again, he would banish

[55] Karen Barad, 'On Touching - The Inhuman That Therefore I am', *difference* Vol. 25, No. 3, 2012. 206-223 (209).

Forthwith every thought of the poor possible hope, which
I myself could not help, perhaps, thinking only too much of;
He would resign himself, and go. I see it exactly.
So I also submit, although in a different manner.

(V.210-215)

In the final lines, Mary positions herself and Claude as two extremes of a spectrum, her thinking too much of what might have been, him refusing to speculate at all about the possible success of their reunion. "I see it exactly," she declares, gaining this simulacrum of direct access to him only in the moment they both decide their relationship can never in actuality happen, but must always remain conditional, speculative, and consigned to the arena of "what if". Even her declaration that "I also submit", which implies a final kind of synchronicity between them, is offset with, "although in a different manner," just as her acceptance of the impossibility comes long after Claude has decided not to act any further. In the end, then, a kind of reunion is effected, even if it is a psychic one and characteristically achieved at different points of time. In their joint decision to resign themselves to not seeing one another again, nonmutual time enables a final "exact" knowledge to be won, which required the conditions of distance, disappointment, and asymmetry to occur.

Tennyson and the Perils of Mutual Time

But what of mutual time? So far in this chapter, mutual time has emerged only as a shadow, the inverse of the romantic temporal orientations I located in *Aurora Leigh* and *Amours de Voyage*; so far, mutual time might be an impossible fantasy held up in these poems merely to expose the intimate dilemmas that arise from the nineteenth century's attempts to

regiment time. In these concluding pages, therefore, I want to make an argument for a long poem that examines the narrative consequences of two people who inhabit a shared experience of mutual time. My case study is Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, a cycle of twelve poems retelling narratives from Arthurian legend which are bookended by a dedication and epilogue addressed to Queen Victoria. My argument is that the adulterous romance between Lancelot and Guinevere threaded through the separate idylls demonstrates an experience of mutual time that warps and distorts the more prominent paired relationships of the narrative. The forbidden and transgressive nature of Lancelot and Guinevere's synchronicity, I suggest, becomes such a powerful force of attraction that it can be the *only* point of synchronicity, thus causing other relationships designed to operate through mutual time to inherently fail.

Unlike *Aurora Leigh* and *Amours de Voyage* which position themselves as self-consciously 'contemporary' poems, Tennyson's *Idylls* anxiously lean into their own anachronism even as they reflect the Victorian interest in reviving the medieval tradition. In practice, these attempts at reviving the past came into conflict with natural everyday occurrences such as bad weather and apathy. The Eglinton Tournament of 1839 advertised itself as a reenactment of a medieval joust and attracted over 100,000 spectators—before proceeding to fail miserably. As Derek Pearsall describes, "the knights slithered through the mud, rarely made contact; the covered grandstand started to leak in bucketfuls".[56] Another example offered by Pearsall is Kenelm Digby, "who was always trying to create the

[56] Derek Pearsall. 'The Arthurian Sleep and the Romantic Revival: Tennyson's Idylls of the King', *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. p. 119.

circumstances of medieval Arthurian chivalry – holding tournaments, keeping vigil in King's College Chapel from dusk to dawn, rescuing a seventeen-year-old girl from 'a felon of the road' and escorting her home with all the gallantry of a knight-errant (no one is quite sure that she wanted to be rescued)".[57] Indeed, the term "medieval" was only coined in 1817 by Thomas Dudley Fosbroke in his *British Monachism: Or, Manners and Customs of the Monks and Nuns of England,* the title indicating the restricted applicability of its first usage.[58] In its way, then, the Victorian construct of the "medieval" was simultaneously consciously anachronistic and surprisingly modern. I suggest we read the particular version of mutual time that emerges throughout Tennyson's *Idylls* as an alternate way of engaging with the juxtaposition of a poem that opens and closes by declaring its contemporaneity but focuses its narrative on retellings of Arthurian myths. Mutual time, here, becomes a thing of the past, already over before the writing of the poem has even taken place—and a manifestation of illicit desire that warps the relationships around it.

In the two poems that were originally published under 'Enid', 'The Marriage of Geraint' and 'Geraint and Enid', the Prince of Devon, Geraint, hears a rumour about Guinevere that "touch[es] her guilty love for Lancelot" (25)[59] and immediately fears a possible "taint / In nature" (31-2) in his wife Enid, who is a close friend of Guinevere. His obsession over his wife's unproven infidelity leads him to neglect his responsibilities and force Enid through a series of increasingly difficult tasks in order to test her obedience,

[57] Ibid, p. 118.

[58] Joanne Parker and Corinne Wagner, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Medievalism,* (eds) Parker and Wagner, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. p. 3.

[59] All in-text citations are to Alfred Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (ed. J. M. Gray), New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

though several times he suspects her, like Guinevere, of adulterous desires. The following poem, 'Balin and Balan', documents the irrevocable rift between two brothers. Balin accidentally eavesdrops on an encounter between Lancelot and Guinevere that troubles him; it appears curiously choreographed, as if it has been done before. Lancelot seems to approach Guinevere only to change course until she challenges him for his perceived disloyalty in turning away. The encounter ends with a "deep-tranced" (273) glance between them. "Queen? subject? I see not what I see," Balin declares in confusion. "Damsel and lover? I hear not what I hear" (276-277). The epistemological anguish that their impossible (and yet nevertheless real) desire for one another ignites in Balin causes him to turn "mad for strange adventure" (284) and flee from Camelot, eventually murdering a knight who refers to Guinevere's "secret shame" (355). When his suspicions about Lancelot and Guinevere are confirmed by the manipulative and wily Vivien, Balin releases a terrible shriek that causes Balan to attack and kill him, mistaking him for a demon.

Vivien returns in 'Merlin and Vivien', intent on seducing Merlin in order to weaken Arthur's court, armed with slanderous rumours about many of the knights at court. Merlin repudiates each accusation until Vivien asks him about Lancelot and Guinevere:

> And Vivien answered frowning yet in wrath:
> "O ay; what say ye to Sir Lancelot, friend
> Traitor or true? that commerce with the Queen,
> I ask you, is it clamoured by the child,
> Or whispered in the corner? do ye know it?"
>
> To which he answered sadly, "Yea, I know it.
> Sir Lancelot went ambassador, at first,
> To fetch her, and she watched him from her walls.

A rumour runs, she took him for the King,
So fixt her fancy on him: let them be."

(766-775)

Guinevere seeing Lancelot and mistaking him for Arthur enabled them to gain access to the synchronicity and mutuality that should have been reserved for the marital couple. The alliteration of the confession—"at first, / To fetch her", "watched him from her walls", "rumour runs", "fixt her fancy"—underscores the affinity between Lancelot and Guinevere that destabilises the rest of the court, and the relationships within it. Merlin's weakness, and his inability to disprove Vivien's accusation, leads him to reveal to her a spell that traps him forever in a nearby oak tree, preventing him from stopping the inevitable fall of the Round Table in the following idylls. It is precisely the proximity of Lancelot and Guinevere, both physically and on the page and line, that distorts the intimacy of others. In 'Balin and Balan', Balin's initial confusion over the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere was prompted by the way in which their desiring glances caused them to move as one:

Then Lancelot lifted his large eyes; they dwelt
Deep-tranced on hers, and could not fall: her hue
Changed at his gaze: so turning side by side
They past, and Balin started from his bower.

(272-275)

And when Vivien first recognises the illicit desire between Lancelot and Guinevere, she notices it too from a glance that then causes them to move together:

That glance of theirs, but for the street, had been
A clinging kiss—how hand lingers in hand!
Let go at last!—they ride away—to hawk
For waterfowl. Royaller game is mine.
For such a supersensual sensual bond

As that gray cricket chirpt of at our hearth—
Touch flax with flame—a glance will serve—the liars!
(103-109)

Even in 'Pelleas and Ettare', a later tale that ironically inverts the earlier 'Gareth and Lynette', it is Guinevere's preference for Lancelot that sours Ettare's potential feelings for Pelleas. Both 'Pelleas and Ettare' and 'Gareth and Lynette' are idylls that explore a young, unproven knight attempting to win the favour of a woman who is unimpressed by his lack of experience in comparison to Lancelot. 'Gareth and Lynette' ends with Lynette embracing Gareth as her champion, but when Pelleas wins the Tournament of Youth, declared so by Arthur to give the younger knights a chance at victory, Ettare dismisses his triumph to Guinevere, pointing out, "Had ye not held your Lancelot in your bower, / My Queen, he had not won" (175-176). Despite it being Arthur's decision, the connection between Lancelot and Guinevere that compels others to assume they are in the same place at the same time ("in your bower") leads Ettare to blame Guinevere for Lancelot's absence. As Margaret Linley states, "active knighthood is increasingly beset with a sense of belatedness throughout the poem";[60] 'Pelleas and Ettare' further demonstrates that opportunities for intimacy and mutuality grow increasingly rare and untimely, even impossible due to the climate of the Round Table at this point. Later in the tale, Gawain promises to help Pelleas win Ettare's favour, only for Pelleas to discover Gawain and Ettare asleep in bed together—another example of how Lancelot and Guinevere's affair leads other relationships to grow misshapen and incorrect within the narrative of the *Idylls* in

[60] Margaret Linley. 'Sexuality and Nationality in Tennyson's "Idylls of the King"', *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 30, No. 3/4, 1992. 365-386 (368).

contrast to Gareth and Lynette who end up together. Furious over this betrayal, Pelleas leaves the court and becomes the Red Knight in the North, setting up a parody of the Round Table which spreads violence and fear across the land.

The penultimate narrative of the *Idylls* is 'Guinevere', a tale that depicts Mordred's discovery of Lancelot and Guinevere's affair and the consequences of his revelation, which include war waged between Arthur and Lancelot and the fall of the Round Table. 'Guinevere', however, focuses only glancingly on these larger national concerns, with most of the narrative describing Guinevere's flight from Camelot in order to seek sanctuary in a convent—and her parting from Lancelot. Much like the final two books of *Aurora Leigh,* which centre on repeated references to the anticipated parting between Aurora and Romney that never comes to pass, Guinevere begs Lancelot to leave before some "smouldering scandal break and blaze", "And Lancelot ever promised, but remained, / And still they met and met" (90, 92-93). Once more, alliteration and the repetition of "met and met" emphasise the irresistible attraction that draws Lancelot and Guinevere together.

> And then they were agreed upon a night
> (When the good King should not be there) to meet
> And part for ever. Vivien, lurking, heard.
> She told Sir Modred. Passion-pale they met
> And greeted. Hands in hands, and eye to eye,
> Low on the border of her couch they sat
> Stammering and staring. It was their last hour,
> A madness of farewells.
>
> (95-102)

Unlike *Aurora Leigh*'s compulsive generation of partings that never come, 'Guinevere' inserts a "madness of farewells" into a single hour that must come to an end because they

both experience the same "last hour". Guinevere and Lancelot are subsumed into each other here, "they" rather than "he" and "she", "hands in hands, and eye to eye". The fantasy of mutual time is the fantasy of two bodies incorporated into one through their desire, existing in the same time and space, annihilating their independence in favour of a synchronicity that comes at the expense of other pairs around them. When Arthur later visits Guinevere in the convent, he describes his hopes for their marriage, which unbeknownst to him had already been made impossible by Guinevere's earlier meeting with Lancelot:

> Then came thy shameful sin with Lancelot;
> Then came the sin of Tristram and Isolt;
> Then others, following these my mightiest knights,
> And drawing foul ensample from fair names,
> Sinned also, till the loathsome opposite
> Of all my heart had destined did obtain,
> And all thro' thee!
>
> (484-490)

Although I would suggest that Tennyson himself lays the blame for the collapse on the Round Table not on Guinevere's adultery (or, at least, not entirely on her adultery), but rather the extreme demands of celibacy and purity placed on those that sought to belong to Arthur's court, it is clear that Arthur himself traces the decline of the Round Table to Guinevere's infidelity—he accuses her of "spoil[ing] the purpose of my life" (450). The chronology he establishes implies that Lancelot and Guinevere's affair proliferated throughout the court, setting other catastrophic experiences of mutual time into motion. If nonmutual time, for Aurora and Romney, enables them to experience each iteration of their potential intimate relationship at the same time without ever inhabiting one particular set of

events, and for Claude and Mary creates opportunities for meaningful intimate encounters through distance, misunderstandings, and mediation, mutual time in Tennyson's *Idylls* operates like a destructive natural force, one that cannot be tamed or restricted but instead irreversibly transforms everything it comes into contact with. It is the "collective state of denial" of this nature—what Allen MacDuffie likens to climate denial—that "precipitates the unravelling" of Arthur's civilisation:[61] a refusal, in other words, to directly perceive mutual time and its effects.

There is an argument to be made for Lancelot and Guinevere's disruptive status in the narrative being tied to their transgressive intimacy more broadly, rather than the more specifically destructive consequences of the mutual time they illicitly inhabit. My argument presumes there *is* something significant in the particular form of mutual time stimulated by Lancelot and Guinevere's adultery which, while produced by and through their usurpation of a more conventional marital mutuality, functions differently to other examples of adultery in the *Idylls*. Take, for example, Tristram and Isolt, whose own adulterous affair unfolds throughout 'The Last Tournament'. Tristram's victory in the tournament over Lancelot—and his refusal to proclaim any of the women present the Queen of Beauty, as "[t]his day my Queen of Beauty is not here" (209)—is seen to signal the beginning of the end of "the glory of our Round Table" (212). It is Isolt's physical separation from Tristram, and their lack of synchronicity, that here becomes the disruptive force, as later in the idyll it

[61] Allen MacDuffie. 'Charles Darwin and the Victorian Pre-History of Climate Denial', *Victorian Studies* Vol. 60, No. 4, 2018. 543-564 (556).

works to sow tension between the lovers when they accuse each other of not sufficiently rejoicing in their reunion. Isolt says,

> "I had forgotten all in my strong joy
> To see thee—yearnings?—ay! for, hour by hour,
> Here in the never-ended afternoon,
> O sweeter than all memories of thee,
> Deeper than any yearnings after thee
> Seem'd those far-rolling, westward-smiling seas,
> Watch'd from this tower. Isolt of Britain dash'd
> Before Isolt of Brittany on the strand,
> Would that have chill'd her bride-kiss? Wedded her?
> Fought in her father's battles? wounded there?
> The King was all fulfill'd with gratefulness,
> And she, my namesake of the hands, that heal'd
> Thy hurt and heart with unguent and caress—
> Well—can I wish her any huger wrong
> Than having known thee? her too hast thou left
> To pine and waste in those sweet memories.
> O were I not my Mark's, by whom all men
> Are noble, I should hate thee more than love."
>
> (578-595)

Isolt describes the year they were separated as a form of static time, wiling away “hour by hour” in the “never-ended afternoon” while Tristram wedded another woman also called Isolt, “fought in her father’s battles” and was “wounded there”. The disjunction between Isolt’s suspended afternoon and the vast amount Tristram experienced without her

emphasises that their own transgressive intimacy does not permit them to synchronise their experiences the way Lancelot and Guinevere can. It is in fact the two Isolts that seem to share experience, though at a delay: "her too hast thou left / To pine and waste in those sweet memories". There are of course several narrative factors that justify the difference between Tristram and Isolt and Lancelot and Guinevere—the former are both married, their personalities are markedly different, and their transgression is more overtly erotic[62]—but to my mind Tennyson primarily uses Tristram and Isolt to further demonstrate the radically destabilising effects of Lancelot and Guinevere's unique mutuality. Tristram and Isolt are merely another consequence of the original adulterous relationship within Arthur's court, another pair knocked out of sync. Indeed, when Tristram presents Isolt with the jewels he has won from the tourney (which were originally given to Guinevere), "he bow'd to kiss the jewell'd throat" (745) only for Isolt's husband Mark to return and "clove him thro' the brain" (748). Any possibility of synchronicity between the lovers is swiftly disrupted by violence and retribution, and the return of order in the form of the legal husband.

This is not to suggest that the poem—or, in fact, any of the poems I have discussed in this chapter—present the achievement of mutual time as a measure of relational success. I suspect there is a difference between the fantasy of mutual time, which is held up as a reified and socially legible form of intimacy in novelistic and societal convention, and the actuality of achieved mutuality. The fantasy exists in both *Aurora Leigh* and *Amours de*

[62] At one point, Tristram says scornfully, "she [Guinevere], haughty ev'n to him, / Lancelot; for I have seen him wan enow / To make one doubt if ever the great Queen / Have yielded him her love". 559-562.

Voyage to be complicated by the generic hybridity of the texts and, in the case of *Amours de Voyage*, to project the assumption of a fail state that the poem itself undermines: the romantic intimacy between Mary and Claude could not withstand the specific pressures of mutual time, even if the world of the poem presents this as the expected way to conduct a relationship. Neither does Tennyson suggest that the relationships he documents throughout the *Idylls* that are disrupted by Lancelot and Guinevere's mutual time (Geraint and Enid, Balin and Balan, Pelleas and Ettare) would necessarily be successful and without conflict if they maintained a shared temporality.

The poem's existence is structurally and formally founded on the inherent fissures in the attempt to join Arthurian mythology with nineteenth-century British modernity; or, in other words, the attempt to fuse two separate temporal moments in one. This also creates a sense of inevitability in the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere; their synchronicity is preordained. In *Amours de Voyage*, Claude and Mary's nonmutual time presents an alternative to the mutuality presumed to be created through marriage and other more socially legible forms of intimacy—it is another route to an unorthodox romantic pleasure, even if that romantic pleasure is rooted in delays and refusals. In *Aurora Leigh,* nonmutual time resists linearity and permanency in favour of the pleasure that stems from possibility. Even when marriage becomes the expected end, there is still a celebration of the uncertain and the unresolved, in which Romney and Aurora might be occupying different versions of their final encounter. Thus, the fantasy of mutuality becomes a fantasy of legible intimacy, in contrast to an intimacy that must be read through gaps, absences, withholdings, or what ifs. The disruption of mutuality is not in itself a failure, but it requires previously conventional and socially coherent relationships to be conducted differently,

and it is the inability to adapt to nonmutuality that dooms many of the relationships in the *Idylls*. Geraint suspects there must be infidelity in his marriage because of the company Enid keeps when away from him. The two brothers come to blows because one of them has gone mad, no longer inhabiting the same kind of mental temporality as his brother. In 'Pelleas and Ettare', the chivalrous conventions of the Round Table are undermined by Ettare's contempt for Pelleas and Gawain's betrayal of Pelleas, resulting in another kind of infidelity, though this is the betrayal of the knightly code rather than marital betrayal. All three fail to adapt to the new temporal environment shaped around Lancelot and Guinevere's relationship.

Tennyson wrote to his publishers in 1858 requesting that they "disabuse your own minds and those of others, as far as you can, of the fancy that I am about an Epic of King Arthur. I should be crazed to attempt such a thing in the heart of the 19th century".[63] To write an Arthurian epic was to risk anachronism; more urgently, as Matthew Margini observes, Tennyson was concerned about "the potential futility of writing in a genre that asserts an anthropocentric cosmology when paleontology, evolutionary theory, and other scientific discourses were busy revealing just how far the universe extended beyond the scope of the human".[64] Tennyson's emphasis on the radically destabilising effects of Lancelot and Guinevere's mutual time is one way in which the *Idylls* recognises how the human's place in the universe has been reconfigured to reflect these new anxieties about the status of the human. Arthur himself is decentred, not only in the intimate relationships

[63] See Matthew Margini. 'The Beast with the Broken Lance: Humanism and Posthumanism in Tennyson's "Idylls of the King"', *Victorian Poetry* Vol. 53, No. 2, 2015. 171-192 (171).

[64] Ibid.

the poem depicts, but in the narrative itself. He is outside of time: “from the great deep to the great deep he goes” (‘The Coming of Arthur’, 410), according to Merlin. By contrast, Lancelot and Guinevere are explicitly embedded in time. Though they emerge in most of the *Idylls* only in brief mentions, allusions and recollections rather than sustained narratives—the intensity of the moment encapsulated by the lyric, perhaps—their intimacy embodies the irreversible nature of linear time and the ways in which the concept of “mutual time” Barrett Browning establishes in *Aurora Leigh* has the potential to be just as unorthodox, just as resistant, and just as noncathartic as the versions of nonmutual time that shape the relationships between Aurora and Romney and Claude and Mary.

Coda

For much of my academic career, my thinking about the nineteenth century has been tied to many of my closest relationships. It started in my second year of undergraduate when my friends and I took a class on the Romantic Period and quickly made it our entire personality and has remained consistent throughout my time in graduate school. When I told my friend Amy I was writing a chapter on Keats's 'Isabella', she sent me a stone plant-pot that was shaped to look like a human head. When I wrote a conference paper on Wordsworth's *The Prelude* as an "archive of friendship", I was thinking about the sitcom I collaborated on with my friend Nancy which was all about the Romantic poets in modern-day England and self-indulgently took many cues from our personal lives: another sort of friendship archive. The spring of my fifth year at Michigan, the three of us along with our friend Niall spent a weekend in the Lake District for my birthday, visiting Dove Cottage and retracing some of the walks that Wordsworth and Coleridge took over two hundred years before. I do not really have an explanation for what it was about this particular moment in literary history that appealed to us so strongly and so persistently over the years. There is something, I think, in the profusion and accessibility of letters and other documents passed between nineteenth-century writers that we do not have for earlier periods of literature; and something also in the intensely consolidated network of Romantic poets where everyone seemed to intimately know everyone that rarely appears in more modern literary movements. But that does not seem an adequate explanation.

In many ways, this dissertation is about the inadequacy of explanation as a way of understanding experience, affect, and love. It is about the myriad ways in which intimacy complicates any sense of easy access or resolution in many poems of the nineteenth century and what this says about both the century's shifting beliefs about love and sexuality *and* the ways in which poems trained nineteenth-century readers to read differently to what might seem intuitive or instinctive. In these final pages, I wish to reflect more explicitly on what that might look like—and how this dissertation presents different modes of noncathartic reading that are influenced by nineteenth-century writers but have much to offer to scholars outside of my specific field of interest.

Each chapter of my dissertation has thought about a different way in which nineteenth-century poets cultivated a particular reading experience grounded in resistance, ambiguity, and frustration. In my first chapter, I showed how Shelley, Darwin, and Blind all created their own "poetics of waste" which used the digressive and excessive aspects of waste to create poems that reflected on the irrelevancy of the human. If poetry was considered to be something innately human, what did it look like when acknowledging that the human itself is redundant or wasted? Whether through the internal contradictions of Shelley's poems or Blind's varied and excessive similes, my chapter demonstrated how nineteenth-century verses prompted readers to reflect on their role as a human reading a text that admitted either their irrelevancy or their mundanity. My second chapter explored how poets such as Swinburne and Michael Field crafted poems that unintuitively endeavoured to separate the category of the human from our understanding of poetry, and in doing so provoked confusion and discomfort in many of their readers. Their crafting of poetic voice as not necessarily tethered to human articulation, but sourced rather through the transfer of

ecological processes, draws many assumptions about "voice" specifically, and "poetry" more generally, into question. My third chapter used poems by Keats and Rossetti to explore how they adapted canonical works in order to depict intimate relationships with the nonhuman that took on several attributes of romantic love. Through the frictions inherent in adapting texts that would be familiar to their readers, they situated intimacy as a process of corporeal transformation that probes the limits of "love". My final chapter studied how the long Victorian poem offers examples of intimate relationships that unfold in counterintuitive and temporally convoluted ways that only become visible through the mechanisms of verse. Clough's merging of the epistolary and the elegiac—and the shuttling between informal and formal, limited and omniscient—offers one example of how the formal and structural tendencies of poetry can teach readers to attend to gaps, withholdings, and obstructions as meaningful moments of intimacy.

My methodology is thus one that has come to me slowly over the course of writing the dissertation, and which even now seems both intuitive and unfinished, because each text taught me something different about how to read poetry. My final case study, then, is not designed to definitively showcase the many benefits of a noncathartic reading, though I hope it will suggest the insights that can be gained through the lens of noncatharsis. It is instead designed simply to draw some continuities between my reflections here and reflections I have made throughout the dissertation and to offer another example of what a noncathartic reading might look like. I have chosen Robert Browning's 'Two in the Campagna' (1855), which explores questions I raised both in my previous chapter (on the possibilities and consequences of non/mutual time) and in my introduction's analysis of Keats's 'Ode to Psyche' (on the ways in which intimacy is tied often to issues of knowledge,

access, and the dissolution of boundaries). Because of this, it seems as fitting a place as any to negotiate the ambiguous "ending" of this dissertation project, which in keeping with the dissertation as a whole is not really an ending at all.

The poem begins, "I wonder do you feel to-day / As I have felt since, hand in hand, / We sat down on the grass",[1] tying the development of the poem to the speculative movement of a thought experiment. Isobel Armstrong observes that the poem opens in the present tense, a tense "about *being* here and now" (emphasis in original). She continues, "The Victorian present tense attempts to live out the essence of striving as process".[2] But the temporal movement of the first few lines is not straightforward: Browning's speaker contrasts his beloved's current feeling ("do you feel") with the persistence of his own feeling ("I have felt since…"). The opening lines position the poem as developing a fantasy of access, knowledge, and symmetry that it later draws into question or undermines entirely, just as the title acknowledges the presence of two while the poem itself gives voice to only one participant.

Like the speaker of 'Ode to Psyche', thought is embedded in the landscape, the exterior environment tangled with the operations of the poet's mind:

> For me, I touched a thought, I know,
> Has tantalised me many times,
> (Like turns of thread the spiders throw
> Mocking across our path) for rhymes

[1] Robert Browning, 'Two in the Campagna', *The Poems of Robert Browning,* London: Oxford University Press, 1928. Lines 1-3.

[2] Isobel Armstrong, 'Syntax', *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry* (ed. Matthew Bevis), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. pp. 112-129 (p. 113).

To catch at and let go.

Help me to hold it! First it left
The yellowing fennel, run to seed
There, branching from the brickwork's cleft,
Some old tomb's ruin: yonder weed
Took up the floating weft,

Where one small orange cup amassed
Five beetles,—blind and green they grope
Among the honey-meal: and last,
Everywhere on the grassy slope
I traced it. Hold it fast![3]

The imagery of these stanzas juxtaposes knowing and unknowing, the poet's conviction that the thought "has tantalised me many times" confounded by the absence and degradation of weeds and "some old tomb's ruin" and the "blind[ness]" of the beetles. The thought becomes a physical entity that must be held and which is only temporarily fixed in place by rhyme: "know" and "throw", for example, or the unexpected pairing of "amassed" and "last". Instead of the poet's brain being rendered into wreaths and branches, as in 'Ode to Psyche', Browning conducts an expansion of the poet's ability to speculate that transforms everything that is physically surrounding the couple: the fennel, the brickwork, the beetles, alive and dead, moving and still. Part of this might be because the speaker of

[3] 'Two in the Campagna', lines 6-20.

this poem is a direct participant in the relationship that provides the poem structure, rather than solely the vehicle through which lovers are brought together. While 'Two in the Campagna' is evidently also a vehicle for intimacy, it is one that implicates its speaker, who becomes an object of thought in himself. Perhaps this is the difficulty of the poetic exercise, then: to try and "hold…fast" what you cannot separate yourself from. To think about intimacy in this poem, then, is to chase the temporary and the elusive, to try and fix in place what naturally is inclined to wander from being to being, spot to spot. "I would that you were all to me,"[4] the poet proclaims in the eighth stanza, seeking the dissolved boundaries that enabled Psyche and Cupid to become inseparable entities, more than one and less than two.

> I would I could adopt your will,
> See with your eyes, and set my heart
> Beating by yours, and drink my fill
> At your soul's springs,—your part my part
> In life, for good and ill.
>
> No. I yearn upward, touch you close,
> Then stand away. I kiss your cheek,
> Catch your soul's warmth,—I pluck the rose
> And love it more than tongue can speak—
> Then the good minute goes.[5]

[4] Ibid, line 36.

[5] Ibid, lines 41-50.

Desire and the fantasy of assimilation ("I would I could"…"your part my part / In life") turns to the explicit separation of bodies as the enabling condition of their intimacy. "I yearn upward, touch you close, / Then stand away" depicts the physical intimacy of the couple as enacted through the negotiation of proximity and distance, coming closer and then retreating once more. The fact that this is enabled through the verb "yearn"—in which what might conventionally be considered a state of feeling becomes a physical movement—positions desire within the poem as a particular kind of thought process that can also reach out into the environment and change what it touches. And yet the expansion of thought into the environment is troubled by the acknowledgement of boundaries that cannot be collapsed or overcome no matter the strength of the desire. Consider the movement from "close" to "rose" to "goes" throughout the stanza, shifting from intimate touch between the couple to a recognition of linear time's disruptive and interruptive qualities: everything tends towards the moment of separation. As Armstrong says, "[The poem] is almost about the caesura, the gap between language and world, thought and experience, the gap between two people (despite being 'hand in hand')",[6] though I would remove the word "almost". My reading of the poem suggests that it enacts an enduring preoccupation with the ways in which intimacy operates through withholdings, absences, and gaps, and how these seemingly negative and/or obstructive cues allow other kinds of loving touch and togetherness that are predicated on the impossibility of two becoming one. These cues also mimic the promiscuous nature of thought, straying from one

[6] Armstrong, p. 122.

disconnected thing to another and offering this as a model of reading (and perhaps, also, a model of imperfect togetherness).

> Already how am I so far
> Out of that minute? Must I go
> Still like the thistle-ball, no bar,
> Onward, whenever light winds blow,
> Fixed by no friendly star?
>
> Just when I seemed about to learn!
> Where is the thread now? Off again!
> The old trick! Only I discern—
> Infinite passion, and the pain
> Of finite hearts that yearn.[7]

The final stanza retreads the movement of the overall poem, going from "learn" to "discern" to "yearn" and recreating the movement from the desire to have something (knowledge, access to the other) to the longing for something that is now lost. "Yearn" also leads us back to the previous stanza's usage as a verb meaning to move towards the beloved, so that even though the "finite hearts that yearn" might feel static, the yearning is imbued with activity, the restlessness of once more waiting to be close to someone. Browning's literalisation of thought as something that can be held in place—like seeds or paper gusted on the wind—suggests that thinking is in itself an act of intimacy, whether or

[7] 'Two in the Campagna', lines 51-60.

not the thought experiment "succeeds" in gaining access to the mind of the beloved. I use scare quotes here to suggest that access is not always, or perhaps ever, a measure of success. Though it is what Browning's speaker desires throughout the course of the poem, the kiss he shares with his beloved comes only after he has rejected the fantasy of complete togetherness with "No." The joint inability to realise the fantasy (they are both involved in attempting to "hold it fast") is in fact the mechanism for intimacy.

Many of the questions I have raised in this reading of 'Two in the Campagna'—whether intimacy ever permits real knowledge of another person, what happens to intimate relationships when they become patterned by discursive and contradictory movements rather than linear progression, how distance and separation might in fact enable different sorts of intimacy, whether what we think we desire is in fact what we desire—are speculative scenarios I have investigated throughout this dissertation in the context of nineteenth-century poetry. In doing so, I have tried to maintain an openness of interpretation where I linger with ambiguities rather than definitively trying to resolve them, a method that I have struggled with at times because of an ingrained belief that uncertainty and curiosity are less useful as analytical tools than the conviction of offering something new to the field. Part of my own development through this methodology has thus been to learn how to follow the cues of the poems I study in order to gain access to certain aspects of their form and content that are resistant to interpretation, or which require a different approach.

My goal for this coda has been to show, one final time, how reading a poem through the lens of noncatharsis can help identify its stakes and provocations. Read together, 'Ode to Psyche' and 'Two in the Campagna' reveal ways in which poems throughout the

nineteenth century were explicitly and deliberately theorising intimacy in order to consider newly what poetry can make happen. They locate these thought experiments in what we might term "environments of desire", in which thought becomes exterior or the landscape becomes interior as an alternate mode of crafting fantasies of intimacy. As bookends of the dissertation, these close readings also offer striking continuities in how what might seem like a failure of total intimacy—the way in which a desired togetherness is never entirely allowed, but rather must always linger on the edge of possibility—is reconfigured through the poem to become the locus of romantic pleasure. Just as Coleridge suggests in *Biographia Literaria* that poetry is a form capable of structurally and formally enacting disappointment with his imagery of the jump that is shorter than expected, Browning's dismayed questioning of "Already how am I so far / Out of that minute?" demonstrates the unexpected pleasures of reading a poem that grapples with failure as the impetus for its creation. In a sense, this dissertation has also entirely sprouted from the seed of failure: my tendency to identify what I find confusing or difficult about a poem and then strive, not to clarify these ambiguities, but to write my way through the process of lingering with each individual difficulty.

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