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## **Sketches, Impressions and Confessions: Literature as Experiment in the Nineteenth Century**

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Nancy Henry, Major Professor

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Allen Dunn, Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud, Amy Billone, Sarah Eldridge

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**Sketches, Impressions and Confessions:  
Literature as Experiment in the Nineteenth Century**

**A Dissertation Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

**Andrew Ragsdale Lallier  
December 2016**

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## Abstract

In this dissertation, I argue for the existence and critical relevance of a program of experimental literature in the long nineteenth century, developed in the aesthetics of German Romanticism and adapted in a set of texts by Thomas De Quincey, Charles Dickens and George Eliot. My introduction positions this argument in context of larger debates concerning form, theory and literary capacity, provides points of connection between these authors, and outlines the most prominent features of experimental literature. In the first chapter, I present an unorthodox reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, accompanied by a brief account of the literary-critical practice of the *Athenaeum* circle in Germany, as a means of establishing the philosophical values and theoretical underpinnings of the project of experimental literature. As Kant, Schlegel and cohort upheld ideals of beauty and literature grounded in unpredictable productivity and experimentation, De Quincey, Dickens and Eliot produced texts that seek to realize unanticipated connections in thought and sensation, following lines of association and speculation. Next, I argue that De Quincey's depiction of Kant as producer of accumulative sentences and texts can provide a useful means of reading the literary experiments of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* and for complicating critical accounts of De Quincey's hostility to Kant. In the third chapter, I read Dickens's less-known *Sketches by Boz* and *Mudfog Papers* as instances of social, scientific and speculative experimentation that deserve to be read in their own light, rather than as anticipations of his novels. In the last chapter, I again offer experimental literature as a means of theorizing literary significance in the eccentric works of a novelist, with Eliot's "The Legend of Jubal" and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. Far from reproducing an image of a natural and sympathetic realist, in these texts Eliot pursues vagrant lines of literary speculation and cultivates critical difficulty. Taken together, these literary and philosophical texts present an ideal and practice of experimental literature that prioritizes speculation over didacticism, the play of thought and language over their habitual use, and the exercise of criticism, analysis and humor over the veneration of the received and familiar.

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## Introduction: Experiments in Life and Literature

In a much-quoted line from a letter to the physician Joseph Frank Payne in January of 1876, George Eliot, writing with a mixture of authority and apology, avowed that “my writing is simply a set of experiments in life.” This quote has generally been taken to refer to her novels, as in, for example, K. M. Newton’s use of it in his reading of Eliot as a philosophical novelist or in Bernard Paris’s revision of the line to the claim that “her novels were ‘simply a series of experiments in life’” (209). The immediate context of the letter, however, is Eliot responding to Payne on a subject arising from her long-form poem, “The Legend of Jubal.” In this exchange, Eliot adopts a tone often employed in her later life when dealing with ardent admirers, both instructing Payne and encouraging him to temper his expectations of receiving some great teaching or decisive revelation.<sup>1</sup> Here, she redirects Payne’s request for a lesson or consolation on future life into a sketch of or outlines for an aesthetic-moral program, “an endeavour to see what our thought and emotion may be capable of – what stores of motive, actual or hinted as possible, give promise of a better after which we may strive.”<sup>2</sup> After adverting to the need to keep hold of “gains from past revelations and discipline,” she continues: “I became more and more timid – with less daring to adopt any formula which does not get

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<sup>1</sup> For critical discussion of Eliot’s portrayal as Prophetess, oracle or “Sibyl” later in life, see David Carroll’s “George Eliot: The Sibyl of Mercia” (*Studies in the Novel* 15. 1 (Spring 1983): 10-25). This issue also intersects with work done by Charles LaPorte on the Prophetess figure in Victorian Poetry (see bibliography) and work on Eliot’s various admirers, male and female.

<sup>2</sup> Payne’s letter discusses this primarily in terms of a question of hope, as he appears both to accept the reality of death and to be unable to concede his desire, and a more general desire (“but let me not put it as an individual wish ... it is the longing of all freethinkers now that I am trying to express”), for some kind of futurity beyond death. This issue make sense given the poem at hand, which concludes with the death of Jubal’s body and the continued life of the art to which he gave birth. Payne introduces the subject “You have, I know, touched a very noble chord in ‘Jubal’ as to the function of death in human life” (216 n2).



itself clothed for me in some human figure and individual experience, and perhaps that is a sign that if I help others to see at all it must be through the medium of art” (*Letters* VI. 216-7). These outlines could certainly be put to use in examining and thinking about Eliot’s novels, and familiar concerns attached both to them and to the nineteenth-century British novel more generally: matters of moral improvement, sympathy, individuality, interiority, etc. Alternatively, we can read these lines as a reflection prompted by her work at hand and a proposition for what experimental literature – writing as a set or series of experiments – might involve or require; not so much a demand for what literature must be, but a proposal for what it could be.

In this dissertation, I offer an account of a set of texts by Eliot, Thomas De Quincey and Charles Dickens, all enacting and embodying an experimental mode of literary writing. These experimental works tend to approach their materials pragmatically, seeking to find what in thought, emotion and sensation can be engaged, excited and mobilized through their particular medium of art. This approach entails prioritizing speculation over didacticism, the play of thought and language over their habitual use, and the exercise of criticism, analysis and humor over the veneration of the received, familiar and traditional or already-known. It also tends to place these works at a remove from established and major genres, as they seek to find what literary use can be made of minor genres, or what new uses might be discovered or invented in apparently familiar genres. These works employ various human figures as speakers, types within masses and singular entities for the purposes of literary experiment and expression, appealing to and seeking to produce forms of experience that, while not individual

(“subjective” in the expanded sense of the *Critique of Judgment* would be closer to the point), are hardly formulaic. As in Eliot’s call for actual or possible stores of motive that would “give promise of a better” not yet given, these texts operate without any guiding rule already furnished, as much seeking as guided by sources of motive for literary writing, and the conditions and situations under which such writing can become vital and effective. This is not to say that these works exist in some pure and total originality, without connection or reference to prior works. On the contrary, each of them is an intervention in a pre-existing series – De Quincey’s reworking of what a “Confessions” entails, Boz’s attempt to repurpose and collect a mass of urban sketches, Eliot’s transformation of the character sketch into a roving mode of cultural critique in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* – and, I contend, they collectively realize and adapt an aesthetic-literary program already laid out by Kant and a group of German literati centered around Friederich Schlegel (as I shall discuss below).

The critical motivations that guide my account of these works and their German predecessors operate on multiple levels of generality. On the more specific end of the spectrum, I am proposing a series of readings grounded in particular texts, conducting these readings as a means of arguing for the literary significance and critical importance of neglected texts (as in Dickens’s “The Mudfog Papers” or Eliot’s “The Legend of Jubal”), and in order to suggest how the program and practice of experimental literature can inform and modify our readings of more familiar texts. In advancing these text-specific readings, I am also aiming to help modify our dominant or habitual understandings of the work of the authors at hand. Dickens and Eliot may be the

Victorian realist novelists *par excellence*, but insofar as we read all of their work through the lens of the realist novel (suggesting that any given work of theirs must fall within this genre, or is relevant only insofar as it relates to the genre, by way of anticipation, supplement or opposition), we eliminate in advance a wealth of critical possibilities. I have no desire to do away with the useful and self-inflicted title of minor writer for De Quincey, but we should not be too ready to read his works under the limitations of familiar associations and oppositions (De Quincey as Tory snob, as worshipper of the sublime, as essayistic pseudo-philosopher, etc.). If we allow the possibility that literature may constitute itself as a playful and critical activity of experimentation, undertaken without any result provided in advance of the attempt, then we should also make intellectual room for the recalibration of the critical-institutional apparatuses through which we inevitably come to arrange and organize texts in advance of the labor of actually reading them.

The object of this dissertation is historical insofar as it deals with historical texts and, in seeking to provide an adequate account of these texts, necessarily invokes relevant literary, intellectual and cultural contexts. This account of experimental literature developed can and should be extended to other texts in the Victorian and Romantic periods. Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833-4) is perhaps the most glaring omission in this account, as its author served as one of the central purveyors and communicators of German thought and culture to Britain and held numerous connections to De Quincey, Dickens and Eliot; moreover, the text itself exhibits many of the features I treat subsequent chapters. A more complete account of literary and generic

experimentation would also likely extend themes here present with the inclusion of texts like James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853). There also remains a great deal to be said for connections between the development of fantasy and speculative fiction in the United Kingdom and German Romantic literary experiments (building in particular off of work inaugurated by U. C. Knoepfelmacher). That being said, my *primary* object here is neither an account of historical influence nor anything like an exhaustive historical survey of experimental literature in the nineteenth-century. The texts here presented are gathered and read with respect to their conceptual, thematic and practical proximities. Read together, these texts produce a theory, program and self-conscious practice of experimental literature, of literature as a body or event only adequately realized through experimentation, worth attending to both for its own sake and for its possible application to other textual bodies and collections.

My theory of experimental literature starts from the proposition that a literary text operates in a parallel manner to the beautiful in Kant, resistant to the governance of fixed rules, models and precepts, but acting in a manner that seeks a maximal mobilization and stimulation of intellectual and sensitive faculties and materials. A program or theory of experimental literature does not and cannot determine in advance what exactly a literary text is capable of doing. At the same time, such a theory or program can furnish a(n admittedly open) procedure for connecting literary texts, for recognizing literary modes of operations, and for identifying or proposing sources of value in literature. The point in all of this is not to decide that literature is to be at last absorbed into the welcoming mass

of history, nor that it must be granted its inviolable space of autonomous life apart from the ravages of quantifying science, nor even that literature constitutes a practice standing in native alliance with philosophy (although this last claim does most closely approach my own biases). Experimental literature refuses both the positive determination of identity and the negative determination of autonomy-as-exclusion, instead proffering “literature” as a phenomenon and process tending to produce variable relationships and connections with different fields of human thought, expression, organization and research. I further contend that experimental literature, with its simultaneous emphasis on variable multi-domain connection and literary value and capacity, can contribute to contemporary debates over methodology in literary studies.

A complete articulation of this last argument is beyond the scope of this introduction (and the immediate work of this dissertation), but to drive in a few stakes that may later be used for setting a foundation, I will provide a brief indication of points in criticism relevant to this claim and the project at hand. This will be followed by a capsule anticipation of the first chapter, dealing with Kantian aesthetics and German Romanticism. Next, I will provide a few points of connection between these German precedents and the works of the British writers occupying the remaining chapters (together with indications of the matter of those chapters), followed by the central themes and features that characterize experimental literature, as realized in the texts dealt with herein.

### *Critical and Literary Capacities*

In Victorian literary studies, there has been renewed interest in methodological concerns, touched off in part by a special issue of *Representations*, *The Way We Read Now*, and its advocacy for a variety of literary practices grouped under the collective title of “Surface Reading.” The introduction to this issue by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus connects a range of literalist, descriptive, distant and other critical methodologies via a common commitment to under-attended textual surfaces and opposition to symptomatic readings overly reliant on suspicion. Accepting that Best and Marcus are synthesizing a non-trivially heterogeneous field, we can recognize formalist elements within the project of surface reading here announced – from the remaining initial term of Heather Love’s “close, but not deep,” to an explicit nod to New Formalism (the editors at once welcoming this latter movement and holding it at arm’s length), to a common focus on questions of attention and attending to texts. The decision to cast symptomatic reading as the common enemy and to take Frederic Jameson as its *Urvater* seems to recall high New Critical suspicions about over- and under-reading Freudians and Marxists. At the same time, the material literary histories, sociological readings, and distant readings that also make up surface reading owe clear debts to New Historicism and its levelling attitude towards literary texts. As Marcus and Best themselves recognize, Foucault’s concern with discourse was necessarily and explicitly a concern with surfaces and archives. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that surface reading has met with objections, rejoinders and highly conditioned endorsements from all manner of literary quarter.

Part of the cause for both the praise and blame for surface reading comes with its quasi-utopian hope for a radically different (more direct, productive, positive, etc.) way of doing things in literary studies. There is a sense running throughout Marcus and Best's introduction (and many of the other essays associated with this movement) that literary studies have been hitherto subject to the oppression of the dominant mode of ideological or suspicious reading, and that we have at last found a way out. Having discarded this outmoded and now-irrelevant practice, we can at last experience, enjoy and talk about the texts that have been in front of us all along, but which we have not adequately seen or appreciated. I follow critics like Audrey Jaffe and John Kucich in seeing cause for concern in the simplifications and exclusions this kind of thinking can lead to. Insofar as surface reading proceeds in this rhetorical mode, building unity around a common imagined enemy, there seems little reason to suspect it will offer lasting material for literary criticism. That does not mean that we should not see or seek value in different practices falling under this title, as one of the strengths of the terms is arguably its capacity to connect highly different forms of literary practice, ranging from sociological approaches (like Moretti) to unapologetically material histories (like Price) to hopefully affective reparative reading (i.e., Sedgwick) to the kinds of attention that interest New Formalists. I suspect that we have much to gain from seeking out broader understandings of literary criticism and experimenting with different methodologies. I see less value in proclaiming that we are the at-last enlightened ones, ready to shrug off the prejudices of our predecessors. These last two sentences should serve to indicate the beginnings of a position on the V21 Manifesto: insofar as this movement emphasizes the need for new

connections to other fields (particularly including philosophy and science), for robust theory, and for experimentation with methodologies and form, I take it to be consonant with the aims of experimental literature. Insofar as it replicates the rhetoric of surface reading, valorizing the absolute break and seeking to disown those who have come before, I see it as less useful.

To head in the direction of a more useful account of literary capacities, I will move through critical positions and priorities advanced by Lauren Goodlad and Andrew Sartori (who are directly responding to surface reading), Frances Ferguson and Amanda Anderson, terminating with Gilles Deleuze; all of this being simultaneously a means of laying out some of the central critical intents and aspirations of this account of experimental literature. I discuss each of these figures to draw out different aspects of capacity, as something we should seek both in the practice of criticism and in the texts with which we work. Goodlad and Sartori help to develop some of the general desirable features of critical capacity, while Ferguson and Anderson elaborate specifically formal and ethical capacities, respectively, and Deleuze advances an open use of the term that will be helpful in accounting for some of the more radical behavior of the texts dealt with in this dissertation. While Deleuze is frequently associated with (allegedly) outmoded poststructuralists, a reputation probably aided by some incautious attempts to apply his theories, a recent surge of interest in Affect Theory suggests the continuing relevance of his thought and writings.

In the introduction to an issue of *Victorian Studies* titled *the Ends of History* (Summer 2013), Goodlad and Sartori advocate for a “capacious historicism,” a concept



developed in connection with Jameson. While Jameson was criticized in the 1980s and is again being attacked for perceived critical narrowness, it is important to remember that one of the central justifications for Jameson's Marxist literary practice as imagined in *The Political Unconscious* is precisely its capacity to work with and include different interpretive frameworks. This inclusion is far from a neutral procedure, but neither is it clear that we would be well-served by a neutral procedure, either in resisting neoliberal world systems or in the immediate practice of reading a text.<sup>3</sup> Critical capacity does and should indicate capaciousness in the sense of comprehensiveness or broad extensivity, whether one is discussing literary history, critical history, or a given text. But it must also include a sense of adequacy and power in the production of literary accounts, supplementing extensivity with fittedness and intensity; the account must work with its object and provide us with purchase that is otherwise unavailable. As described by Goodlad and Sartori, Jamesonian critical practice contains precisely these features, starting from situating its object in the field of relations that constitute its coherence as an object, recognizing a mode of articulation particular to literature and art, and recognizing in this articulation the expression of “structures that elude ordinary cognition” (596-7). The critical development of this articulation is not the suspicious constitution of an absent object, but rather the product of an intimate engagement with the literary text. While my own project leans closer to philosophically-inclined formalism than historicism, “capacious historicism” implicitly offers a connection between the two in seeking to develop material already present in literary texts but that does not appear in “ordinary

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3 These two practices are meant to indicate poles in a broad and multi-directional continuum, not a simple dichotomy of options.

cognition,” provided that we can discard the idea that formalism must sooner or later collapse into New Criticism.

Completely unapologetic in claiming the title of formalist, Frances Ferguson has argued that this position indicates not an abandonment of historicism, but rather a refusal to separate theoretical and historical (and presumably textual) issues. In *Solitude and the Sublime*, Ferguson maintains that what is at stake between Kantian and Burkean versions of the sublime and their critical legacies is not so much a contest of empirical history and idealist theory as a question of how we are to imagine critical capacity: is criticism bound to an image of empirical materiality as pure manifold that ultimately binds us to social givens, or might we find in the formal operations of the aesthetic other possibilities for creation and criticism? Form is a famously slippery concept, sliding from the space between two words all the way up to the shape of a text as a whole. Carefully creating her account of form in conversation with Kant, Ferguson offers us critical purchase on this term and its continuing utility for literary studies. Form for Ferguson is not an excuse to flee from history or to take refuge in New Critical dogma. Instead, form is a space not given or determined in same way as other domains – for which an image of Humanism is already an imposition – that nevertheless promises material for thought, reflection and production.<sup>4</sup>

If form, with its connected concerns of genre, structure and textual effect, is one of the critical poles of this project, another lies in the related concepts of testing and

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<sup>4</sup> The connection of form and material here is intentional. The opposing term to formal idealism as described by Ferguson is not so much any possible materialism as a particular form of empiricism leading from Burke through Deconstruction. For an example of productive relations between form and material, see *Solitude* (94).

experimentation, in part with reference to ethical capacities. In *The Powers of Distance* (and elsewhere in writing on cosmopolitanisms), Anderson stresses the need for the development of an ethical mode of testing, in which as readers and as critics we sound out our competencies, sensitivities and communicative capacities. Like Ferguson's aesthetic form, Anderson's ethical testing embodies and requires intense self-reflexivity, with the crucial supplement for Anderson of sensitivity – this latter being a term that enables the counterintuitive connection of figures like Eliot and Oscar Wilde. Self-reflexivity and sensitivity form necessary critical terms for Anderson both because they offer insight into nineteenth-century texts and because they are needed capacities in the ongoing process of criticism. This latter process must incorporate past insights (and Anderson herself works with Enlightenment as well as post-structuralist traditions), but must also cultivate active skills or competencies in developing and testing critical accounts. For Anderson, literary work, critical work and philosophical work demand similar kinds of engagement and offer related kinds of benefits, centered on building as well as testing, recognizing and accounting for ethical and cognitive capacities.

One of the greatly appealing features of Anderson's work, much like Ferguson's in this respect, is its insistent turn to the writings of the period she examines in developing her critical framework. Anderson and Ferguson are far from alone in turning to the literature, criticism and philosophy of their periods in developing their theoretical approaches. To cite only a handful of critics, Andrew H. Miller, Amanpal Garcha, and David Kurnick all use nineteenth-century writings (in admittedly quite different ways) to

shape the critical frameworks they bring to bear upon their materials.<sup>5</sup> We have little reason to believe our critical era should have any pre-eminent claim on truth (or optimal critical practices, the best understanding of the literature of an era, etc.), and critical approaches that seek collaboration with past criticism and practice have at least the potential benefit of broadened perspective to plead. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I discuss German critical and literary precedents as a means of providing a frame for the experimental British texts dealt with in subsequent chapters – like Ferguson, focusing on Kant, while also drawing on German Romantic figures engaged in larger aesthetic debates to which Kant decisively contributed. But in developing the conceptualizations of literature and literary practice employed in this dissertation, I also draw directly on the kinds of inventive practice and thought found in the works by De Quincey, Dickens and Eliot. It is not enough that these writers simply experimented with different genres or speakers; instead, in their works, literature itself becomes an experimental activity capable of producing reflection and intellectual and sensitive play, and of creating and recreating itself in this reflective and playful action.

To round out the account of literary and critical capacity here advanced, let us turn to Deleuze. In discussing capacity, Deleuze has frequent recourse to Spinoza's assertion in the *Ethics* that “no one has hitherto laid down the limits to the powers of the body,” or that we do not yet know what a body can do. The point here is not to say that we are completely unfamiliar with bodies; rather, it is to indicate that the power of a

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<sup>5</sup> This list is not meant to be at all extensive, even for the critics cited in this dissertation. The field of Romantic critics who use late eighteenth / early nineteenth philosophical and critical writing in shaping their own theory alone is likely beyond the scope of any note or remark, however large.

body, its capacity to act and interact with other bodies and to modify itself (to become), does not coincide with the limits of our present understanding. Although this involves taking some liberties with Deleuze's philosophy, I argue that, for the writers herein dealt with, a literary work involves taking stock of the proposition that we do not yet know what a text can do, and acting on this proposition.<sup>6</sup> These literary works will naturally engage with familiar material and familiar genres, major and minor. But we misread them insofar as we read them as reproductions of these materials and genres. Instead, these works strike out against familiar understandings, demanding that we reconceive what a text may do – what sort of formal, ethical and aesthetic work a literary work is capable of effecting. Ferguson and Anderson provide a sense of the sort of concrete work of criticism, what one should seek to attend to within a text and the sorts of capacities we would do well to cultivate. Equally important to their work is a sense of critical openness – form must enable different kinds of thought for Ferguson, ethics must be a matter of testing as well as normative content for Anderson. It is on this latter point that I read them as being on an admittedly broad continuum with Deleuze and his desire for a radically open form of critical practice. A full account of capacity, whether of literary texts or critical approaches, must include an awareness that possibilities of generation and production exceed whatever we are likely to see at present as given limits. Realizing this awareness entails putting greater emphasis on formal possibilities than given knowledge,

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6 I should note that, in their (in)famous introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari use quite similar language in describing “the book in the world” as they elsewhere apply to bodies and their environments (see, e.g., p.11, 22), perhaps most explicitly in claiming that “As an assemblage, a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs” (4).

on ethical testing than established norms, and on aesthetic experiments than fixed and reliable objects.

*Was ist Literatur?*

This aesthetic shift from static objects to process, experience and activity is anticipated by Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. The beautiful enters this Critique as a problem of judgment, more particularly as a problem as to how we recognize validity in judgments of the beautiful that is not merely individual, when there appears to be no objective basis for such judgments – either in a fixed set of guiding rules, or in an established body of fixed objects that could serve as determining models. In going about establishing how judgments of the beautiful carry intersubjective power and importance, Kant disaggregates the beautiful from the agreeable, as purely individual gratification (non-communicable particularity), and from the good, a moral category demanding universal assent. Unlike either of these forms of determination, the beautiful creates a free play between sensitive and intellectual faculties and materials. “The beautiful” indicates at once the abstract operation of this play (as a mode of activity), the subjective, intersubjective and trans-subjective experience produced by this play, and what is held in common by an indefinite set of products exhibiting or inciting this play.

Aesthetic judgments and experiences, like beautiful products of art (including literary texts), are singular rather than particular, and thus cannot be predicted, determined in advance, or repeated. They serve to indicate the limits of fixed rules and models, and demand an approach sensitive to novelty and the unfamiliar, and capable of

improvisation, experimentation and speculation. Kant's repeated formula for the beautiful is *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*, purposiveness without purpose. Without any *determining* end, precept or type, the beautiful as realized in nature and art nevertheless conveys force, leads to sensitive and intellectual effects, and appears before us with a sense of significance. It is this apparently unlikely combination that produces the connective and productive form of singularity definitive of the beautiful. The basis for this combination is complex, being constituted between the free play of the faculties (an intersubjective phenomenon), aesthetic form as a form of communicability, and nature as a force preceding conceptualization and individuation.

While literature is not a principal concern for the third Critique, Kant does provide an account of poetry, and this in combination with the foregoing features can provide the groundwork for a theory of experimental literature. Kant ranks poetry as first among the arts under the justification of its ability to make aesthetic ideas manifest – in my reading, due to the connective productiveness inherent in its apparently bare proximity to language as indeterminate practice. Experimental literature in a mode of Kantian aesthetics produces connections across thought and sensation, in the process eliciting play, exciting energies, mobilizing materials and creating lines of vital speculation – all without the guidance of rule or model. Like the beautiful, it elicits rather than coerces, operates more in possibility, suggestion and implication than dogmatic certitude, and instills in us a sense of anticipation and expectation (*Erwartung*), rather than enabling us to sit in judgment or demand agreement of others.

If literature is more of an indirect concern for Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, it is clearly an issue of pre-eminent importance of the literary-critical group that gathered around Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel and collaboratively produced the experimental journal *Athenaeum* (1798-1800). In the hands of this group, the connective and experimental tendencies in Kant's aesthetics are extended, intensified and transformed into a radical program of literary production. Romantic poetry, as the realization of Literature, is in a perpetual state of experimental becoming that acts a grand nexus, bringing together poetry and prose, philosophy and rhetoric, and all manner of genres, and establishing intimate relations between poetry, society and life. This conception, articulated most famously in *Athenaeum* fragment 116, is likewise realized in the literary-critical pieces running throughout and in the vicinity of the journal, most evidently in the forms of fragments and dialogues. As in the works of De Quincey, Dickens and Eliot that I consider in later chapters, Literature in the *Athenaeum* is a process without fixed model or received tradition, an event of unexpected and manifold connection and collaboration, and a collection of incomplete ventures and endeavors (aphorisms, sketches, etc.) to see what might happen or be created in writing once familiar borders between genres, between disciplines, and between domains of experience and production have been discarded.

### *Points of connection*

At the conclusion of "On four poetic formulas which might summarize the Kantian philosophy," Deleuze asserts the value of these formulas "in relation to what



Kant has left us for the present and the future,” adding “De Quincey’s admirable essay *The Last Days of Emmanuel Kant* summed it all up” (xiii). In this latter text, De Quincey presents, as “the best impression” of “the purity and philosophical dignity” of Kant’s daily life, an extensive translation from E. A. Wasianski’s *Immanuel Kant in his last years of life*, “checked and supported by the collateral testimonies of Jachmann, Rink, Borowski, and others” (104-5). The sizeable majority of the text is in fact Wasianski’s memoir, complemented by De Quincey’s prefatory pages and alternately informative, digressive, and argumentative (and sometimes massive) footnotes.<sup>7</sup> This text is indicative of De Quincey’s engagements with Kant in more ways than one. Like De Quincey’s footnotes in the text, one can find references to Kant spread far and wide across De Quincey’s work, appearing even in essays and pieces with little obvious connection to philosophy. At the same time, De Quincey’s manifold mentions of Kant circulate around a grand work that (like some of Coleridge’s grand projects) never ended up appearing. In “Kant in his Miscellaneous Essays,” De Quincey speaks of Kant’s “Critical or Transcendental System” and the offensively inadequate handling it has received in criticism up to the present time, promising that “my statement of Kant’s system will be very different” – before clarifying that none of this statement will be appearing in the review essay at hand (439-46). Though De Quincey repeatedly avows his admiration for Kant’s transcendental philosophy and the great system of the critiques (not without frequently attaching conditions to this admiration), his work reminds us that Kant did not consist solely of this work. The Kant of De Quincey’s writings generally

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<sup>7</sup> De Quincey’s presence obtruding, for instance, as an early footnote in the text begins by flatly declaring “Mr. Wasianaski is wrong” (114).

appears under one of two guises: a being of almost purely destructive philosophical rationality, achieving great and terrible work at great cost, or the writer as a mode of accumulation (Kant's body in "The Last Days" being an uneasy wedding of rationality and accumulation, the dignified and the ridiculous, the horrific and the humorous). This latter Kant generates and releases miscellaneous pieces, wandering through matters geographical, astronomical, political and sifting materials philosophical, historical and anthropological – whatever comes to hand, whether that be pondering Swedenborg or attacking organized religion.<sup>8</sup>

I concur with Deleuze that De Quincey can suggest something of what Kant has left for us and those who come after, although my reading is more centered on *Confessions* than "The Last Days." As a reading focusing on the latter text and presenting De Quincey's work as a hyperbolization and materialist reworking of Kant's philosophy has already been produced in Paul Youngquist's article, "De Quincey's Crazy Body," I feel no need to repeat this particular operation. More significantly, although I am also concerned with De Quincey's often eccentric and agitated portrait of Kant, my principal interest is less how De Quincey makes a monster of Kant than how De Quincey's monstrous text carries out and adapts a literary-philosophical program inaugurated by Kant and a handful of German Romantics (some of whom, incidentally, De Quincey venomously attacks). De Quincey's portrait of the speaker of the *Confessions* as an opium-eating philosopher is absurd or inadmissible only insofar as we insist on an image of the philosopher and philosophy as grounded in austere moral

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<sup>8</sup> In presenting this ranging image of Kant outside of the Critiques, De Quincey anticipates a growing tendency within contemporary criticism of Kant.

dignity and bodily and intellectual stoicism.<sup>9</sup> In this place of this image, the Opium-Eater offers a vitally agitated text, blending matters philosophical, critical and experiential, and furnishes from this a feast of unexpected connections and indeterminate accumulation.

If De Quincey read Kant extensively and shows (admittedly hostile) familiarity with the Schlegels, the same cannot be said for Dickens. For most readers of Dickens, the term “philosopher” is likely to bring up the unflattering parodies of these figures in novels like *Oliver Twist* or *Hard Times*, self-designated rationalists or practical thinkers lacking the humanizing influences of sympathy, fantasy, and sensitivity – and the Dickens who wrote *Sketches by Boz* (1836) certainly shows no particularly strong interest in or familiarity with developments in philosophy on the continent. The same may not be true for German literature, as Dickens does appear to have shown interest in German literature that participated in the broad generic spaces of romance and fantasy.<sup>10</sup> In 1834 (well before the collected publication of *Sketches by Boz* or any of the novels), Dickens published a satirical political piece in the guise of a fairy tale, “The Story Without a Beginning (translated from the German by Boz).” As Elaine Ostry notes in *Social Dreaming: Dickens and the Fairy Tale*, this text is a play on F. W. Carove’s *Das*

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<sup>9</sup> Here, I am using this last term in De Quincey’s intentionally (and somewhat facetiously) limited sense, as when he refers to the trading stoics of Manchester clubs.

<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately for this study, most of the evidence for this comes after the period in Dickens’s work with which we are here concerned. Nevertheless, there is a strong parallel between Dickens and Hoffmann on one motif noted in Helmut Viebroch’s “The Knocker: Physiognomical Aspects of a Motif in Hoffmann and Dickens” (*English Studies* 43 (1962)), and there are a significant number of overlapping narrative techniques, themes and motifs indicated in Kenneth Ireland’s “Urban Perspectives: Fantasy and Reality in Hoffmann and Dickens” (*Comparative Literature* 30.2 (Spring 1978): 133-156). Calling “fantasy” a genre risks anachronism here (as the genre of the “fantasy” novel does not come into named being until later), but is helpful for characterizing a broad category of different kinds of writing that nonetheless possessed common features and were often grouped together (and the words “fantasy” or “phantasie” was in common use in connection with literature or literary matters).

*Märchen Ohne Ende* – which was also translated in 1834 by Sarah Austen as “The Story Without End.” While Dickens’s “Story” is clearly intended as a political attack, his decision to frame this attack as a translation of a *Märchen* speaks to his familiarity with German fantastic literature, his belief that his audience would possess a similar familiarity, and his belief in the adaptability of this literature for different purposes.

Like many Victorians, Dickens’s most decisive encounter with German philosophy and literature may have come in the writings of Carlyle.<sup>11</sup> Dickens’s personal and literary familiarity with Carlyle is well documented, and it is clear that Dickens read and was influenced by Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (initially serialized in 1833-4).<sup>12</sup> Carlyle may have also introduced Dickens to different aspects of German literature through his translations, including his translation of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* (1824), his *Life of Schiller* (1825), and a “fragmentary” multivolume selection of what Carlyle dubs “German Novelwriting,” *German Romance* (1827).<sup>13</sup> But it is in *Sartor Resartus* that we can most clearly see Carlyle adopting the ambitions of his German forerunners,

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<sup>11</sup> For the general influence of Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* in particular, see Michael Goldberg’s *Carlyle and Dickens*, 3-4 and the first chapter of William Oddie’s *Dickens and Carlyle: The Question of Influence*.

<sup>12</sup> For evidence of this latter point, see Oddie, 2, 57n2 and 117-8. Both Oddie’s and Goldberg’s work suggest that Dickens read Carlyle well before meeting him in person in 1840.

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that all of this comes before Carlyle’s well-known deprecatory remarks about novels. Within his preface to *German Romance*, Carlyle identifies German Novelists as a “mixed, innumerable and most productive race” (iv) and notes that his own selections fall into a few different literary categories: “*Märchen* (Popular Tale[s])” by Musäus and Tieck, a *Ritterroman* “(Chivalry Romance)” by Fouqué, a “Fantasy-piece” by Hoffmann, who Carlyle claims originated the genre, Novels corresponding “to our common English notion” by Richter and a “*Kunstroman* (Art-novel)” by Goethe (ix-x). Carlyle’s practice here marks a kind of German usage in English, leaving “Novelwriting” as one term rather than two, and attempting to preserve the original formulation with the genres of Hoffmann (*Fantasiestück* is the term translated) and Goethe. In this preface, Carlyle is already complaining about the “manufacturing” of popular novels, but he also seems interested in and even admiring of Hoffmann’s experimentation and Goethe’s literary ambitions at different edges of novel form, attempting to elicit the attention of his readers to something different and worthy of notice through their designation.

producing a text that swings through different generic styles and modes (with pervading ironic energy) while attempting to tear down the walls between literature and philosophy.<sup>14</sup> Dickens's *Boz* may not prophesy like *Teufelsdrökh*, but they have a common tendency to speculative digression and searching, and *Boz* appears to share the Editor's mix of sympathy, interest and exasperation in approaching his materials. Dickens's sketches and papers share with *Lucinde* and *Sartor Resartus*, an impulse to blend and juxtapose different generic registers, and to fuse a drive towards speculation and fabulation with a searching critique of present realities. *Boz* shares with the voices of the *Athenaeum* a play of intimate distancing with their readers, and the *Mudfog Papers* indulges in the kind of editorial play exemplified in *Sartor Resartus*. As Kant's beautiful, whether falling under nature or art, moves in the direction of a natural vitality that exceeds our known and given categories, Dickens's sketches and papers pursue a singular and pervasive life whose expression demands experimentation with the formal and material capacities of literature.

George Eliot's wide-ranging readings make tracing particular lines of influence – e.g., whether a particular concept is picked up from Carlyle, Coleridge, Hegel, Schelling or Kant (or someone else altogether) in a given text – a difficult task. I have elsewhere argued at length for Eliot's familiarity with Kant, which would have been at an advanced stage of development by the relatively late dates at which she wrote *The Legend of Jubal and other Poems* and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (published in 1874 and 1879,

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<sup>14</sup> In line with the *Athenaeum* project, we could add rhetoric alongside literature and philosophy, as Carlyle verges repeatedly on oratory in this text, and was clearly interested in using rhetorical techniques to render his work "lively and vital."

respectively).<sup>15</sup> This familiarity was part of an intense interest shared by Eliot and her de-facto husband, G. H. Lewes, in German literature and intellectual culture, running through many of Eliot's essays for the *Westminster Review* and texts like Lewes's *Life of Goethe* (1855). While Eliot's only references in her letters to texts from the *Athenaeum* circle are to August Wilhelm Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* and Novalis's fragments, it seems unlikely that she would have been unaware of the wider work and cultural influence of this group.

For the purposes of my chapter on Eliot's late experimental works, it is necessary to supplement the literary-philosophical program described above with a critical line preceding and following Kant and the Schlegels. Before Mary Ann Evans became George Eliot, she authored two translations of major works of higher criticism by David Strauss (in 1846) and Ludwig Feuerbach (in 1854). The suspicion with which many English viewed Kant throughout the nineteenth century was due in no small part to his association with critical and skeptical philosophy issuing out of Germany, of which Strauss and Feuerbach were exemplars. Although Strauss's meticulous textual and historical analysis varies widely from Feuerbach's barefaced polemics and utopian humanism, both were (largely correctly) seen as attacking the textual, historical and ideological grounds of established Christianity. Eliot's "The Legend of Jubal" does not replicate either of these styles, but instead makes use of Strauss's close textual work, Feuerbach's larger concerns about human culture and expression, and the work of both on myth in service of Eliot's own purposes of literary fabulation. Texts like "The Legend

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<sup>15</sup> See p15-27 of "Writing Duty: Religion, Obligation and Autonomy in George Eliot and Kant," located at [http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_gradthes/993/](http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes/993/)

of Jubal” and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* articulate their literary experimentation through a mode of criticism, in which the operations of critical epistemology and aesthetics, criticism of literature and culture, and biblical and historical criticism collaborate and connect.

If Strauss and Feuerbach were developing critical and skeptical concerns that had been influenced by Kant’s interventions, Kant’s own critical philosophy was effectively introduced to the world of letters by Reinhold as an answer to the *Pantheismusstreit*, a controversy in German intellectual circles late in the eighteenth century concerning the status of Spinoza’s philosophy. In this controversy, Spinoza came to be associated (at least by his detractors) with a blend of criticism, skepticism and atheism that would later attach to Strauss and Feuerbach – so it is perhaps not surprising that Eliot also translated Spinoza’s *Ethics* in 1856.<sup>16</sup> Although Kant and Spinoza were occasionally depicted as promulgators of skepticism and disbelief, it is doubtful that we should take intellectual or cultural destruction to be the primary intellectual contribution of either thinker. Many of Kant’s successors came to regard Spinoza as a vitally important figure in the development and future of philosophy, as in Athenaeum fragment 274, “Every philosophy of philosophy that excludes Spinoza must be spurious” (201) or Hegel’s identification of Spinoza as a testing-point in modern philosophy, according to which “You are either a Spinozist or no philosopher at all.”<sup>17</sup> I can pretend to no grand statement concerning Spinoza’s place in philosophy and history, but I do see the regard

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<sup>16</sup> This work was unfortunately not published, for reasons that are not entirely clear from what records we have. Besides the *Ethics*, in which his best-known statements of Pantheism are contained, Spinoza also authored a work of biblical and political criticism, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.

<sup>17</sup> This latter quote derives from Hegel’s *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.

with which writers like Eliot and Schlegel held his philosophy as suggestive for the theory and practice of literature outlined in this dissertation. Spinoza's philosophy contains a vitally pragmatic element, in which the limitations imposed by our particular human situations are acknowledged, while we nonetheless seek out as wide a knowledge of the larger connections, actions and relations between bodies and thoughts as possible. Kant's aesthetics starts from what might look like a limitation – namely, that we cannot universalize an aesthetic judgment – to construct a new vision for possibilities of how we might conceive of and deal with the intellectual and sensitive terrain of experience and aesthetics. Likewise, Spinoza's claim that we do not know what a body is capable of acts as a prompt for us to exercise and test the capacities of our own bodies and other bodies we encounter. In the texts that I examine in what follows, De Quincey, Dickens and Eliot follow a similar line of thought, in which the open concept of what a literary text might be or do leads to a ranging wealth of experimental activity.

### *Experimental operations*

The object of this last section is to identify a central set of operations or axes of experimentation along which the texts dealt with in the following chapters. These are by no means meant to delimit or restrict what experimental literature can be or what sorts of experimental activities literature is capable of (in part, as these activities may be inexhaustible – not so much infinite as uncountable). Instead, I attempt here to indicate the principal means through which these texts constitute and enact themselves as experimental literature, what makes them such in the light of the contexts given above.



There is something incongruous about attempting to fashion a set of categories to contain what experimental literature – a literature constituted in part through its resistance to the domination of organizing categories, models and rules – does or can do, even within a small collection of literary texts. It may be best, then, to think of this set of axes as, like Kant’s account of the fine arts, a sketch of a possible division, incomplete and inviting further work to be done. Alternatively, we might view these descriptions as behavioral tendencies in a bizarre species, observed inclinations existing as a concrete body only in the fictions of criticism and analysis, where one may grant oneself a temporary reprieve from the confusions of surfaces with the fabulation of a hard line. In any event, the experimental play and operations of these texts are here gathered under the following headings: genre, speaking figures, reflective criticism, language and life.

“Genre” is a term perhaps more easily used than defined. One is quickly reduced to synonyms, throwing out type, kind, category, appealing to subject matter or availing oneself of the even more slippery term, “form” – unless one gives up on definition entirely and resorts to a list. Genre is at once among the most necessary and fundamental of the tools of criticism (hearkening back to tragedy and comedy) and a term of opprobrium (“genre” writing, as opposed to good literature). It is nearly impossible to avoid some degree of reading backwards when attempting to deal with genre in criticism, to cleanse the mind of generic developments and associations that come after the historical moment of the text at hand. At the same time, genre is always already present in any literary period studied, bringing its collecting force to past texts, alongside its

assumptions about what constitutes both a text in general and a text of its generic type, its implicit and explicit values, its resources, affordances and limitations.

Experimental literature neither submits to (allows itself to be encompassed and determined by) a given genre, nor does it perform the farce of somehow being able to do without genre. Instead, it prefers a strategy of play and alternation, refusing to stick to any one style or mode of writing. Generic titles head the different works herein examined: confessions, sketches, papers and a legend – “Impressions” may appear to escape precedent, but its title character of Theophrastus invokes the genre of the character sketch. Each of these titles is an opportunity for play. The confessions, a subjective genre if ever there was one, turn out not to belong to the eater, but rather to the opium. Boz’s sketches, immediately broken further into parish sketches, scenes, characters and tales, foreground the problem of how and if one may collect and organize sketches at all (while the Mudfog papers strain their claims to reportage). Jubal’s legend troubles literary, religious and critical boundaries (and turns out not to exactly be *his* legend in the end, when, as with the opium-eater, the subject is displaced by the force and life that has driven and informed the text), and character is as much an impressive question as an object of description for Theophrastus. Generic experimentation can proceed at levels of high generality, as in De Quincey’s “impassioned prose” of the *Confessions*, attempting to create a practice of prose form running parallel to poetic form, or Eliot’s “Legend,” pitched somewhere between prose fable, biblical text and poetic recounting.

However, the majority of generic experimentation in these texts falls somewhere between their singular use of the generic titles they claim and the foundational division

between poetry and prose. De Quincey's *Confessions* appears by turns to be biography, philology, medical critique, a series of anecdotes ranging from social gossip to pathetic sufferings to mock-heroic episodes, a collection of visions, an occasion for editorial digression and discourse with the reader, and an experiment to see what if any combination of modes of writing could be adequate to the experiences produced by opium. Dickens's sketches and papers set a singular course through diverting tales, scientific proceedings, place portraiture, urban research in the mode of Engels or Mayhew, cultural criticism, commodity fantasies, social visions, and testimonies of intimate familiarity with coaches and cabs (sometimes including their drivers). Eliot's Theophrastan *Impressions* employ the character sketch in great part as an extended reflection on writing and the various institutions, habits and forms of production in which writing is implicated, a reflection presented in an agitated tone blending and juxtaposing criticism, complaint, humor and speculation. But her work also makes use of personal confession, recollection, fable, speculative fiction, polemic and dialogue – all while engaged in a campaign of abstruse allusion that could put even De Quincey at his most arch and learned to shame.

In reading this generic experimentation, it is important that we not forget ourselves and simply equate De Quincey with the Opium-eater, Dickens with Boz, Eliot with Theophrastus.<sup>18</sup> The names under or through which these works are written matter, as they designate speaking figures who serve as sites of literary experimentation through

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<sup>18</sup> On similar grounds, one might also point that “George Eliot” was a complex pseudonym or textual entity, persisting well after its introductory functions, and being decidedly non-identical (which is not to say unrelated) to Marian Evans, Mary Ann Evans Lewes, and their associates.

the expressions they create and find in the texts to which they adhere.<sup>19</sup> None of these figures is exactly an individual. Properly speaking, it is *An English Opium-Eater* who speaks and reminds us at the beginning of his text that he belongs to a diverse and numerous mass of fellow opium-eaters (composed of all levels of English society), who associates with and sensitively merges into the crowds of London, and who is extended across the accumulation and metonymic sliding of his opium dreams and visions. Boz can be as much a presence as a person, approaching to Emerson's transparent eye-ball, taking in and recording scenes and figures without seeming to have any bodily impression on them at all (this being only one of his functions). Theophrastus's bodily agitations may rival the Opium-Eater's, but a body does not an individual make, and Theophrastus is a habitant of the Nation of London: a compound of thought and sensation caught up in "multitudinous links" of labor, culture and production, and a character and system not readily disentangled from others.

None of which is to say that these speaking figures collapse into some pure generality, fading from the horizon of articulation. Each of these figures is caught up in a form of life that carries them beyond habitual practices of narrating and biographizing, but also creates singular lines and opportunities for connection, for expression, speculation and production. *An English Opium-Eater* is also a philosopher (or at least considers himself as such), and engages in singular modes of criticism, happiness and textual accumulation in his attempt to find adequate expression for the experiential

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<sup>19</sup> The fact that the Opium-Eater and Boz were assigned to a large number of different texts does not so much weaken this claim as disabuse us of the idea that a textual speaker must be limited to a particular text (if we had previously suffered under such a misapprehension).

substance that pervades his body, nation and text. Boz's voice alternates between different first and second persons, plural and singular, while producing speculations and visions inaccessible – or, more precisely, inarticulable – to habitual modes of living, thinking and writing. Theophrastus's character and body may not be individual (i.e., autonomous, non-divisible, impermeable) but they generate textual effects and agitations that carry a significance and sensitive-intellectual force irreducible to the following of received models or the rules that govern the institutions that divide and organize the Nation of London and its literary issue. The expressions, speculations and productions of these texts are neither individual nor universal, nor should they be thought of as the exclusive property of these speakers, as they occur and exist in the singular communication and dialogue conducted between these speaking figures and the readers they address, respond to, and seek.

The extensive and often intensively direct dialogue carried on between these figures and their readers is part of a tendency on the part of these texts to encourage and elicit critical reflection. In the *Critique of Judgment*, reflective judgments are distinguished from their determinative siblings by virtue of a lack: whereas the latter begin with a given rule or universal, the former must find or fashion any critical or organizing tools they wish to bring to their experiential materials. As experimental literature begins from a similar position, its texts tend to produce a conspicuous degree of criticism and reflexivity – not so much to create a wanting rule as a result of the activities and tendencies that constitute the texts as experimental in the first place (e.g., resistance to the determination of the given and habitual and the maximal pursuit of unexpected

connections and relations). In presenting themselves, the speakers of these texts provide no shortage of signs that reflection, examination, and some degree of caution or distrust are needed. The Opium-eater openly admits to breaking faith with his readers, Boz draws attention to the porous border between his factual reporting, his speculations, and his (or others') fantasies, and Theophrastus avows ownership of any number of obstacles to clear perception and reliable accounting.

In these texts, critical reflection and reflective criticism can be thought of as necessary counterpoints and complements to the anarchic accumulations and speculative swervings of literary play. This does not imply that they act as some sort of catch or safety valve. To the contrary, the modes of accumulation and speculation present in these texts become possible *and effective* only under conditions of criticism and reflexivity. It is because she has been tested, provoked, and invited into acts of self-conscious criticism and analysis that the reader is able to follow and derive something of value from these erratic speaker figures. In these texts, neither speaker nor reader can occupy the position of inhuman moralist, well-fed philosopher, judgmental viewer or self-satisfied author – positions in which the critical actions of thought and reflection pass from the horizon of probable action. As the beautiful can adequately pursue its open connections and creation of felt significance only once it has been freed from the determining interests of moral law and individualizing gratification, experimental literature can only maintain its claims to novelty, force and productivity through a resolute program of criticism and reflection waged against the interests and incursions of habit and satisfaction. This does not entail a war against pleasure and joy, which are necessary and useful elements of

experience and writing – only against the stoppages of thought, sensation and work that pervade human institutions and culture, and find their way into even the most revolutionary of bodies and texts.

In conducting an experiment, one needs ensure that one's instruments are functioning, that they are calibrated to at least potentially produce useful results. While both the Opium-eater and Theophrastus render their bodies instruments (and give them appropriately close attention in conducting their experiments), the foremost instrument of these textual experiments is the technology of writing itself. The activities of examination and recalibration can be seen throughout the textual bodies of these confessions, sketches and impressions – in the self-examination of their speakers, but also in their attending and drawing the attention of their readers to the modes of writing in which they are engaged, and between which they alternate and attempt fusing, splicing, and the carrying of literary currents.

These activities can also be seen in the attention these texts give to, and the experiments they conduct with, the operations of language. Eliot comes quite close to repeating Kant in her claim that poetry “has this superiority over all the other arts, that its medium, language, is the least imitative, & is in the most complex relation with what it expresses” (*Essays* 435). Each of these texts evinces a close concern with the operations of language in a proximate mode of Kantian aesthetics: with its tendency to generate and proliferate unexpected connections, its productive but intricate distance from imitation, and its tendency to replace given and unexamined hierarchies with fields of complex and non-dominative relations. The Opium-eater's claim to the title of philosopher is

grounded in part on his attending to languages, on his ability to disentangle confusions and inadequate apprehensions resulting from insufficiently reflective use of language, and his capacity, with the aid of opium, for drawing out and following the associations inherent in its forms and histories. Boz's ventures and wanderings through the domains of language both exploit and reroute popular usage, applying, for instance, the rhetoric of praise usually bestowed on prosperous public men of business to an unscrupulous omnibus cad or imbuing a figurative phrase with a startling literality. Jubal's music enacts a logic of novel connection and association strongly resembling the beautiful in both its social and natural facings. In addition to its obsessions with the linguistic productions of contemporary culture, Theophrastus's *Impressions* also present a fantasy of an unconscious and inhumanly effective language conducted by a race of machines.

This last point should remind us that we should not be too quick to assume we already know what forms and types of life literature is capable of experimenting with – what kinds of life may find expression in the medium of art. The Opium-eater knows and testifies to the kinds of life and power that reside in opium and its capacity to alter and transform human perception, thought and life. Likewise, he speaks of the sorts of vital movements and associations that it can draw out of a musical performance, a market conversation, or the daily and nightly activities of the living and breathing (and consuming, thinking and waste-producing) Nation of London. Boz is fascinated by the lives of singular individuals and character masses inhabiting every corner of this nation, but he is no less drawn to the lives residing in secondhand clothes or the inexhaustible stores of life in the book of an old coach. The mad scientists of Mudfog and the reporter



Boz commissions to investigate them are no less interested in probing the limits of human life and the operations of life in animals and automata. Jubal's art is generated at the junction of human labor and animal and inorganic motion and life (the life of oceans as well as that of the fish that inhabit them), and Theophrastus delights in collapsing the pretensions to exceptionality dwelling in the confused cognition of human animals.

In their experiments in life, each of these texts comes to a point of misanthropy, whether in Boz's figure of the misanthrope, the Opium-eater's desire for a total retreat from mankind, or Theophrastus's fantasy of the destruction of humanity in their supersession by more potent and less encumbered machines. Misanthropy forms a necessary, but insufficient moment in the experimental self-constitution of these texts. Humanity is apt to become a determining image, a seat of the natural as what is given or received, what is demanded and expected of living subjects, a standard of the morally correct, and of what it is that texts are made to express. Misanthropy acts a violent correction to these tendencies, destroying our most natural presumptions and desires and providing a perspective able to take a critical (or at least negative, which is less useful) view of any and all human institutions and traditions. At the same time, as Boz recognizes, misanthropy easily slides into its own form of deadening or blinding satisfaction, its own habits of thought and action, its own production of limiting character – or, as De Quincey, Eliot, or Spinoza might put it, of producing its own inadequate forms of thinking and feeling. The life sought by experimental literature cannot be determined by an image of the human, but neither can experimental literature simply have done with humanity on that account. This life is less the world without us than

nature as it appears in the aesthetic half of the *Critique of Judgment*: an agent or presence that we cannot fully comprehend (i.e., mentally encompass), but that appears with a force of novelty and significance and speaks to something within and before us, eliciting indeterminate but intensive intellectual and sensitive action.

## Chapter One: Aesthetic Problems and Literary Experiments

Glancing at Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, it is not immediately apparent why this work should be seen as the foundation for a program of experimental literature. Structurally, the Aesthetic and Teleological parts are organized according to the movement from analytic to dialectic present in both prior Critiques, both moving through definition and deduction to the presentation and “solution” of antinomies.<sup>20</sup> Both introductions stress the incorporation of judgment within the larger system or divisions of philosophy, in continuity with the concerns of nature and reason guiding its predecessors. This continuity is further reinforced by the structural termination of the two parts: the aesthetic gesturing towards the second critique in “On Beauty as a Symbol of Morality” and the teleological returning to the concerns of the first in its meditations on mechanism and internal purpose. In his first preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant speaks of “a call to reason to take on once again the most difficult of tasks – viz., that of self-cognition – and to set up a tribunal that will make reason secure in its rightful claims and will dismiss all baseless pretensions, not by fiat but in accordance with reason's eternal and immutable laws,” identifying this tribunal with the work before the reader (8). What more fitting conclusion could there then be to the project of the critiques and their attempt to establish a legitimate and legislative basis for knowledge than a turn to the legal and deliberative domains of judgment?

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<sup>20</sup> Kant's famous caution and carefulness about his solutions or reconciliations of antinomies that cannot permit a resolution in the terms of their presentation, or that would fulfill all the desires produced by nature and/or reason, is in particular evidence in the halting organization of the dialectic of teleological judgment, with sections such as “The Reason Why It Is Impossible to Treat the Concept of a Technic of Nature Dogmatically Is That a Natural Purpose Is Inexplicable.”

To recognize what is genuinely experimental in Kant's aesthetics, it is first necessary to free ourselves from this way of thinking, for this last Critique, in Steven Shaviro's words, "implies an entirely new form of judgment" (1). Aesthetic judgment does not and cannot function in a manner reducible or equivalent to moral judgment (which takes its orientation from moral-rational law) or the judgment of conceptual understanding. This type of judgment is bound up and grounded in the beautiful – a term that encompasses a mode of experience, a form of cognitive activity and relation, and a process of judgment and production, as well as an indication of something beyond us. The beautiful comes before us and acts within us in a way that disables prior modes of legislation, organization, and sense-making, while enabling new forms of experience and cognition. It does not have a domain, properly speaking, because it enacts no logic of domination or determination; it provides us with no means to fix and know its objects, productions or experiences in advance. An aesthetic judgment, or, for that matter, an aesthetic work, is a singular event or encounter that can only be adequately dealt with by means of sensitive and thoughtful experimentation.

My account of Kant's third critique does not emerge *ex nihilo* with respect to prior criticism. The most basic starting points of this account – e.g., the independence of aesthetic judgments from determining interests or the ability of beauty to operate without concepts – are commonly accepted within Kant studies. However, the conclusions I draw from these starting points work against common tendencies in philosophy to integrate the third critique into Kant's epistemic and/or moral philosophy, and a fixation in critical-literary studies on Kant's theory of the sublime over and against the beautiful. My

understanding of the structure and arguments of the third critique has been shaped by the work of Werner Pluhar, J. M. Bernstein and (as much by opposition to as agreement with) Paul Guyer. There have been a number of scattered attempts to recover (more or less) Kantian versions of the beautiful for the purposes of philosophy and theory from the 1980s to the present, and I am in strong sympathy with Shaviro's alignment of Kant on beauty with the philosophy of Whitehead and Deleuze in *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze and Aesthetics*.<sup>21</sup> Deleuze may have identified Kant as an "enemy," but this was an enemy with whom there was work to do, an enemy who could produce surprising results in the labor of thought. In "On four poetic formulas which might summarize the Kantian philosophy," Deleuze presents the *Critique of Judgment* as just such a surprising result: Whereas each of the previous two critiques is organized by a dominant and determining faculty, in the third, "we see Kant, at an age when great writers rarely have anything new to say, confronting a problem which is to lead him into an extraordinary undertaking: if the faculties can [enter into variable but determined relationships], it must follow that all together they are capable of relationships which are free and *unregulated*, where each goes to its own limit and nevertheless shows the possibility of some sort of harmony with the others ... Thus we have the *Critique of Judgment* as a foundation of Romanticism" (xi-xii). The Romanticism that results from Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and manifests in the experimental texts I consider in the

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<sup>21</sup> Shaviro stands in a recently growing company in positing productive connections between Kant and Deleuze – as, for instance, in work by Beth Lord, Levi Bryant and Daniel W. Smith and a recent collection, *Thinking Between Deleuze and Kant* (Eds. Edward Willatt and Matt Lee, London: Continuum, 2009). Most of this work, however, has been on Kant's philosophy in the first critique, and what work has dealt with aesthetics (e.g., by Dorothea Olkowski) has not focused particularly on beauty.

remaining chapters is, I argue, less a period than a program; less a concrete body of stable texts than a literary-philosophical (and practical-theoretical) event or endeavor more adequately expressed through sketches and fragments than comprehensive systems and complete works.

In this chapter, I present an account of concepts and developments in Kant's aesthetic philosophy in the *Critique of Judgment* relevant to this Romanticism and its connected theory of experimental literature, followed by a brief indication of their extrapolation and transformation in the critical and literary work of a circle of German Romantics. My account of Kant's aesthetics is centered on two closely related ideas: the beautiful (a term used for a variety of different but related functions in this text) and aesthetic ideas. I begin by examining Kant's disentanglement of the beautiful from determining interests, and his insistence that judgments of the beautiful must be free from determination. I then move on to the forms of activity belonging to the beautiful and aesthetic ideas – to their tendencies to produce excited and non-dominative action and interrelation on the part of the faculties, and set materials in vital and unexpected motions and relations. This mode of activity anticipates the sensitive and intellectual free play we will find at work in experimental literary texts. I follow with Kant's account of fine art (as a product of *Geist*) and poetry, with particular stress laid on the roles of communication and nature. This account in turn provides the materials necessary for a theory of experimental literature – not so much a theory explicitly articulated by Kant, as a theory produced in fidelity to his aesthetics. It is with the work of a group of critics and writers gathered around the journal *Athenaeum* (1798-1800) that we can see a transition

from a theory of aesthetic experience and production to a more explicit program and practice of literature. Friedrich Schlegel and his collaborators called for a theory and practice of literature that would connect disparate genres and materials, that would blend criticism, literature and philosophy, and would create vital connections between literature and society – and they sought to realize this in their own critical-literary fragments and experiments. In doing so, they laid the groundwork for experimental literature as realized in texts by De Quincey, Dickens and Eliot, but also for Romanticism itself as a critical and experimental endeavor with relevance well beyond the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

*The Beautiful, its Mode and its Activity*

One of the most famous and least obviously intuitive features of Kant’s aesthetics is its insistence that aesthetic judgments or judgments of taste are disinterested.<sup>22</sup> With everyday art and media objects, most persons in western media cultures would likely cite some form of interest – concern for a character, curiosity about what is going to happen next, getting caught up in the music, fascination with some feature – as the primary motivation for their engagement with the object. Academic and professional critics may differentiate their judgments from these popular instances, but this differentiation is usually in the service of some other interest: a desire to reach a more objective or adequate judgment of the object, the demands of cultural politics, an aspiration to arrive at some sort of historical and/or aesthetic truth at work in the object, etc. Indeed, the term

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<sup>22</sup> “uninteressierte” is the adjective used in section two, which also employs the formula “ohne alles Interesse” (without or devoid of all interests).

“disinterested” will later be employed in the interest of such differentiation – exemplified within English literary studies by Matthew Arnold’s call for disinterested aesthetic judgments that would dispense with ideological and personal particularities in order to recognize and promote the best that has been thought and said. Arnold’s version of disinterestedness is directly related to Kant’s, and reflects Kant’s desire to free aesthetic judgment from the determination and domination of pre-existent interests, but that does not mean that we should simply equate the two. Where Arnold is attempting to correct bad practices he sees as threatening English literary criticism and appreciation, Kant is attempting to carve out an experiential space of judgment and production unanticipated in his previous philosophy and most European philosophy about art up to this point in time.

Kant’s first step in this attempt is to distinguish our liking for the beautiful from two types of interested liking: for the agreeable and for the good. The agreeable denotes that which gratifies the senses and produces inclination, while the good indicates what is desired for a determinate purpose, and our interest in the good is either functional or moral in nature.<sup>23</sup> Our liking for the good is necessarily a conceptual liking, and thus determined or rule-governed in a manner that is incompatible with the free activity of the beautiful. Kant repeatedly invokes examples of consumption in speaking of the agreeable, implying that all desires for the agreeable are something like our desire for

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<sup>23</sup> This last distinction is introduced in section 4 of the *Analytic of Aesthetic Judgment*, in which Kant distinguishes between that which is liked a means to something else (functional good, being good for an external purpose) and that which is desired for itself (moral or intrinsic good). Throughout most of the critique, Kant is primarily concerned with the latter sense of the term, as the question of the relation of the beautiful to morality is one of the central concerns of the work. Nevertheless, the distinction is useful insofar as it reminds us that there are forms of liking and desire which are utilitarian and purpose-driven without either possessing the sensational immediacy of the agreeable or the properties of the morally good (e.g., its ability to command or demand absolutely and universally in relation to subjects).



food or wine (even if they are grounded in the hearing or vision, for instance). The agreeable sets us and our bodies in relations of desire, need, and gratification to its objects. While it may be tempting to read a Platonic value schema into the third critique, especially given Kant's valorization of form, what is going on here is not a simple opposition between debased bodies and good and beautiful ideas; like the agreeable, the beautiful also acts on us and our bodies.<sup>24</sup> The problem lies rather in how the agreeable acts on us. The agreeable tends towards privacy – any judgment that a given object or experience is agreeable can always be supplemented with a “to me,” and one has no right to expect that others should find the object agreeable.<sup>25</sup> In making such a judgment (i.e., under the influence of the agreeable), all that I am doing is reporting on individual sensation. This individual sensation is moreover limited by the mode of its expression; all that we come to know or feel from the agreeable (and judgments thereof) is whether or not gratification has been produced. In spite of their largely different natures, the good and the agreeable are connected in this: each is determined by its own interest, and can only deal with what it encounters through the determination of this interest – whether that interest is the moral law or the production of gratification.

When Kant contends that aesthetic judgment, or judgments of the beautiful, are disinterested, he indicates that they are not and cannot be subject to these kinds of

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<sup>24</sup> Kant goes into particular detail about the complex bodily activity involved in “two kinds of play with aesthetic ideas” (beauty being the expression of aesthetic ideas (section 53)), the play of tones (music) and the play of thought (wit) in section 54, the comment to “Comparison of the Aesthetic Value of Various Fine Arts.”

<sup>25</sup> In section 7, Kant does allow that, of course, multiple people might happen to find a given thing agreeable, and this type of commonality is even sought after (e.g., when entertaining guests). However, this kind of commonality is necessarily greatly limited in its possible extension – presumably given the diversity of dispositions, knowledge and experiences among human subjects.

determination. There is no rule by which one could decide in advance what falls under the beautiful, for the judgment and experience of the beautiful takes place “prior to any concept,” and is necessarily singular in its mode (154). The term “singular” (*einzelne*) is repeatedly connected with judgments of taste – in sections 8, 9, 23, 321, 33, 37 and 57 – and, as Pluhar notes, is elsewhere distinguished from the general or universal (*allgemein*) and the particular (*besondere*).<sup>26</sup> Aesthetic judgments are neither predictable nor repeatable, as they are a result of a “singular empirical presentation” (154) that cannot be mistaken for or equated with any other and cannot be contained by any given (pre-existent) purpose or rule. Unlike the legislative activity of moral reason or the conceptually-guided activity of understanding, judgments of the beautiful are products of “mere reflection,” and retain the singularity of the experience or encounter from which they result. Kant asserts that a judgment of taste is based on autonomy (146, 224), but we should be careful not to collapse Kant’s aesthetic autonomy into either later nineteenth-century versions of aesthetic autonomy (particularly Aestheticism à la Wilde) or Kant’s own account of moral autonomy. The autonomy or disinterestedness of the aesthetic consists precisely in its freedom from determination, from being guided and fixed by external interests (including moral laws). This does not mean that art or aesthetic

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<sup>26</sup> That is, in the *Logic*, Kant distinguishes between these modes of judgment (59 n27). Kant also repeatedly uses the term in section 17, connecting it with imaginative and empirical presentation/exhibitions (*Darstellungen*) and intuitions (*Anschauungen*), although here he also uses it as a noun-form, meaning something like an individual being (Pluhar’s translation uses “individual” for *einzelne(n)* in this section, excepting the last paragraph – unlike his practice elsewhere, which mostly uses “singular”). I see Kant’s more general use of the term as distinguishing between predictable or limited particularity and unpredictable and connective (without being susceptible to adequate conceptualization or generalization) singularity. Thus, in this chapter I try to distinguish between individual subjects, who have been subjected to particular individualization, and singular events, experiences, judgments or beings.

experience exist in some sort of space radically severed from other spheres of human experience and activity.<sup>27</sup> The puzzle and the power of the beautiful lies in its ability to be singular in such a way that it remains both indeterminate and capable of producing unforeseen connections and actions.

We can see this kind of singular activity at work in Kant's account of aesthetic ideas. In the *Critique of Judgment*, aesthetic ideas underlie both artistic production and our aesthetic experiences of nature, as Kant remarks that "we may in general call beauty (whether natural or artistic) the *expression* of aesthetic ideas" (189). An aesthetic idea is a "presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no [determinate] concept, can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it" (182). An aesthetic idea can never be grasped or contained by a concept, but it does not simply dispense with concepts and abstract thought. Instead, an aesthetic idea augments and transforms concepts, prompting "so much thought as can never be comprehended in a determinate concept and thereby the presentation aesthetically expands the concept itself in an unlimited way." The activity of an aesthetic idea is the activity of imagination, as it becomes "creative in [all of] this and sets the power of intellectual ideas (i.e., reason) in motion: it makes reason think more, when prompted by a [certain] presentation, than what can be apprehended and made distinct in the presentation" (183). Any number of intuitions or presentations might be indistinct or indeterminate, but aesthetic ideas manage to be indeterminate in a way that is both sensationally and intellectually

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<sup>27</sup> In section 41, Kant even notes that interests can be connected with aesthetic judgments, so long as they do not take the form of a determining basis (163).

productive, extending the powers of the mind and senses past their customary uses. The free action of aesthetic ideas corresponds to the imagination in a judgment of taste, in which it is no longer “reproductive, where it is subject to the laws of association,” becoming instead “productive and spontaneous” (91).

The beautiful, as the expression of aesthetic ideas or as actualized in imagination (in its aesthetic mode of action), is described by Kant as tending both towards novelty and towards harmony. Kant’s most radical statement of the former is probably the assertion, in the context of defining aesthetic ideas, that the imagination “creates, as it were, another nature out of the material that actual nature gives it” (182). In this claim, we can see the approach of the Romantic ideal of the artist as creator-god, however far its tone may be from Kant’s usual style of writing. The beautiful is a radical emergence of novelty, a bringing or coming into the world of something neither anticipated nor capable of being anticipated as a continuation of what has previously happened and been. At the same time, the beautiful does not designate some sort of hermetically sealed space, a new palace of art detached from the old and vulgar world. In section 9, Kant describes the operation of the imagination in intimate relation to the understanding in a judgment of taste – a judgment which is also a sensation of pleasure, or aesthetic experience. Here, the usual operation of the understanding, subsuming intuitions and objects under concepts and schematisms, is replaced by a “state of free play of cognitive powers,” in which both the understanding and the imagination are quickened to “an activity that is indeterminate but ... nonetheless accordant” (62-3). Kant’s language around the beautiful is consistently connective, speaking of joining, harmony, accordance, communication, and

even lawfulness. Terms like harmony or aesthetic lawfulness are likely to bring up thoughts of New Critical strictures, static unities and outmoded critical values and approaches for a literary scholar of the present day.<sup>28</sup> However, Kant stresses that aesthetic lawfulness or purposiveness is not determined by an actual, articulated law or purpose at its center, but instead is a means of indicating causality without positing a causative will and a means of connection by reference to the possibility of experience and perception without determining this possibility in advance by concepts or schemata.<sup>29</sup> Like the beautiful itself, the kinds of harmony produced by the beautiful come about without a pre-ordaining law or conceptual schema and act with a vital and playful motion.

At this point, a reader might justly ask what exactly is being harmonized and played with in the beautiful. The resistance the beautiful offers to different forms of determination prevents any overly exact or prescriptive answer being given with respect to any given instance of a beautiful experience or judgment, but Kant does provide some broad indications of the sorts of materials or spaces with which the beautiful engages. In section 9, Kant characterizes the beautiful as a state of free play between the cognitive powers of the imagination and the understanding, and does not appear to place any restrictions on what sorts of objects or encounters can lead to this state (excepting the

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<sup>28</sup> With some possible exceptions made for persons within New Formalist camps.

<sup>29</sup> In this reading, I am drawing primarily on Kant's discussions of singular harmony in section nine (from which I am here extrapolating in relation to his comments on aesthetic indeterminacy in relation to the understanding) and of purposiveness in section ten, although his explicit discussion of lawfulness without a law arrives in the general comment following section 22. I should emphasize that it is specifically *aesthetic* lawfulness or purposiveness that has the above qualities, as it is certainly possible to have lawfulness with a law, or purposiveness with a purpose – only at such a point, by Kant's account, such lawfulness or purposiveness will have ceased to be aesthetic.

implicit tautology that only those that can lead to this state can do so). Potentially, therefore, the beautiful may engage with anything falling under the domain of the empirical understanding, i.e., any of the objects of the phenomenal world.<sup>30</sup> In discussing aesthetic ideas, Kant speaks of beauty and genius as imparting motion and life to the mental powers, again invoking a model of harmonizing freedom between cognitive domains and capacities – albeit now with the supplement of reason and its rational ideas added to the imagination and understanding. Whereas rational ideas are described as simply being concepts (albeit super-experiential concepts to which no intuition is adequate), aesthetic ideas possess a more complex relationship to concepts: They are connected or conjoined to concepts, but no concept can ever be adequate to or determine an aesthetic idea. As quoted above, aesthetic ideas produce thought in excess of concepts; they make reason think *more* (183). From a given concept, the imagination spreads “over a multitude of kindred presentations” forming an “immense realm,” the view of which serves to enliven (*beleben*) the mind (183-4).<sup>31</sup> As an aesthetic idea harmonizes with a given concept, it carries with it “a wealth of undeveloped material for the understanding” that exceeds this concept and enables the vital play of the imagination (185).

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<sup>30</sup> That is, we cannot fix in advance any class or type of phenomenal objects to be excluded from possible participation in or use by the beautiful.

<sup>31</sup> These presentations are somewhat ambiguous in terms of ontological status. Earlier, Kant speaks of presentations as presentations of given objects, indicating that they should be regarded as primarily sensible or phenomenal. Aesthetic ideas have “supplementary presentations of the imagination,” which express a “concept’s implications and its kinship with other concepts” – implying an intellectualist, or at least conceptual character (183). Given that aesthetic ideas themselves are characterized as both “presentations” and “intuitions,” it would seem unreasonable to detach them from the conjoined realms of the imaginative and the sensible.

So far in the argument, I have been talking about the beautiful without distinguishing between beauty in nature and beauty produced in human art. Kant repeatedly indicates that we cannot subscribe to an objective interpretation of the beautiful, in which beauty is available to us as an obvious property of a given class of objects. Beauty and judgments of the beautiful are subjective, not objective – although we should not mistake “subjective” for “individual.” Aesthetic judgments possess a kind of validity or value that is never merely individual, while always requiring the participation of experiential subjects.<sup>32</sup> Insofar we maintain the perspective of subjective experience, there is no necessary and fundamental difference between the beauty of natural and human-made objects, as beauty obtains to an experience or encounter, not an independent and fixed object. Kant underscores this commonality by defining “beauty (whether natural or artistic) [as] the expression of aesthetic ideas” and genius, the ability to produce fine art, as “the innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art” (189, 174). In this latter definition, nature is less a law-giver per se than a means of explaining (or not entirely explaining) how fine art evades determinate rules and scientific explanation in its production while retaining an exemplary (but not imitative) force in its products.<sup>33</sup> Kant does later distinguish between artistic and natural

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<sup>32</sup> “Experiential subjects” leaves open the question as to whether we might include non-human experiential subjects in an account of aesthetics, in the direction of Leibniz, or, following Shaviro, in the direction of Whitehead. This does not appear to have been a topic of particular concern for Kant (whose insistence on the universality of morality, on the hand, mandated an extension to *all* rational subjects), but that does not resolve the question of whether such an extension might be nonetheless permissible or desirable within the framework of Kantian aesthetics.

<sup>33</sup> Kant clearly states that the products of genius cannot be classed or produced under determinate rules. The “rule” provided by nature may thus stand at odds with an intuitive understanding of what may constitute a rule in the first place, as it appears neither clearly articulable nor comprehensible by means of conceptual determination. Kant justifies the need for a rule at all in two ways: by alleging that “every art presupposes rules, which serve as the foundation on which a product, if it is to be called

beauties, but in proceeding to deal with art and literature in particular, we should keep in mind this is no clear severance, but rather a distinction that ceases to obtain from certain perspectives of production and experience.

### *Poetry, Communication and Nature*

Kant's discussion of art and the fine arts takes up a relatively small portion of the *Critique of Judgment*, running from section 43 to section 54 – although the placement of these sections at the conclusion of Division I, the Analytic of Aesthetic Judgments and immediately before the Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment may suggest their importance as a point of culmination. Kant's opening definitions in these sections emphasize art's relations to action, production and freedom, characterizing art as “a production through freedom” animated by a spirit of play and embodied in a medium providing constraints and requiring labor (170-1).<sup>34</sup> In Kant's German, fine [*schön*] art could also be rendered “beautiful art,” and Kant's definition of fine art clearly indicates its connection to the beautiful: “Fine art ... is a way of presenting that is purposive on its own and that furthers, even without a purpose, the culture of our mental powers to [facilitate] social communication” (173) (I will be returning to the issue of communication shortly). It is in

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artistic, is thought of as possible in the first place” and as a response to the threat posed to genius by the fact that “nonsense too can be original” (175). These justificatory claims are each conditioned by a rejoinder immediately following them emphasizing fine art's freedom from conceptual determination and scientific explanation, respectively. The rule provided by nature appears to be less an articulable axiom, then, than some sort of minimal condition or degree of coherence that permits something to be recognized as art or as being other than nonsense.

<sup>34</sup> The form of labor demanded by art is distinguished from the forms of labor requiring the coercion (in Kant's language) of pay to be performed (171). The constraints and labor provided and demanded by art are thus at least quasi-utopian, capable of inciting action, being engaged and performed, eliciting attention and sustaining themselves without the determining participation of market systems and the coercive forces they bring to bear on human activity and production.



the context of fine art that Kant's discussion of genius and aesthetic ideas arise, as the fine arts are identified with the arts of genius, and genius is explicated as the ability to exhibit aesthetic ideas (174, 217). As aesthetic ideas are characterized by their ability to evade determination and reproduction and to engender novel production, genius and the fine arts are characterized by a playful and free mode of creativity at odds with imitation. Properly speaking, fine art, as the product of genius, cannot be taught as one might teach a craft, but only encountered and experienced.<sup>35</sup> A previous work may serve as an inspiration or spur to further work, as an example of the free play of sensations and ideas, but simply copying or repeating this work would be to abandon the possibility of fine art.

As fine art exhibits this general resistance to repetition and strong continuity, Kant is understandably cautious in formulating a division of the fine arts. Kant introduces this division as an answer to a hypothetical wish to divide these arts, offered *wenigstens zum Versuche*. Pluhar renders this phrase "at least tentatively" (189), but *zum Versuche* could also be translated or "by way of an attempt" or "experimentally."<sup>36</sup> Kant underscores the contingent and experimental quality to his division in a footnote: "The reader must not judge this sketch of a possible division of the fine arts as if it were intended as a theory. It is only one of a variety of attempts [*Versuche*] that can and should still be made" (190 n58). Kant's sketch proceeds on the basis of an ideal of maximal communication and expression, in which "thought, intuition, and sensation are [all] conveyed to others simultaneously" (190). The three elements necessary for such

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<sup>35</sup> Which is not to say we cannot learn from a work of fine art, only that we cannot learn any set of rules or precepts that would allow us to repeat or recreate this work ourselves.

<sup>36</sup> *Versuch* can mean, among other things, attempt, experiment, effort, test, and essay.

communication and expression are given as “*word, gesture, and tone* (articulation, gesticulation and modulation)” to which correspond the artistic categories of the arts of speech (oratory and poetry), the visual arts (the plastic arts and painting) and “the art of the beautiful play of sensations” (music and the “art of color”) (190-3). Kant provides a familiar distinction between oratory or rhetoric and poetry (poetry here appearing as an ally to philosophy), painting the orator as one who “accomplishes less than he promises” due to an inevitable element of deception in his work, while the poet provides an audience with more than the “mere play of ideas” he promises (191). At the opening of section 53, Kant declares “Among all arts poetry holds the highest rank,” though I contend that we would do better to read this as an experimental description of the value implications of his theory of the beautiful and the arts than a dogmatic statement of the natural hierarchy of the arts.<sup>37</sup>

As Kant discusses no other forms of literature, if we are to find something like a program of literature or theory of literary value in the *Critique of Judgment*, we will have to look to his discussion of poetry.<sup>38</sup> Kant’s initial definition of poetry recalls his account of the operation of cognitive powers in a judgment of taste: poetry “is the art of conducting a free play of the imagination as [if it were] a task of the understanding” (190). Pluhar’s bracketed addition here helps to emphasize the counterfactual

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<sup>37</sup> Kant also breaks with the implied hierarchy of his speech / visual / sensations division in placing music second in his ranking of the arts, conditioning this ranking with the proviso “if our concern is with charm and mental agitation.” The justification Kant provides for this placement is not concerned with rational, moral or logical order, instead offering music’s capacity to “agitate the mind more diversely and intensely” even than poetry (198).

<sup>38</sup> Kant does mention the existence of drama, tragedies in verse and didactic poems in section 52 as combinations of the three categories mentioned in section 51, but provides no discussion of these forms of art as literature.

implications of the German *als*, for this is a free play conducted in the manner, mode or guise of understanding, making use of its capacities without adopting its forms of habitual determination. Poetry's ranking appears due to its preeminent ability to express aesthetic ideas, for it "expands the mind ...sets the imagination free, and offers us, from among the unlimited variety of possible forms that harmonize with a given concept ... that form which links the exhibition of the concept with a wealth of thought to which no linguistic expression is completely adequate, and so poetry rises aesthetically to ideas." Among the arts, poetry is "least open to guidance by precept or examples" and it communicates this sense of autonomy to minds that encounter it, rendering them "free, spontaneous, and independent of natural determination" (196).<sup>39</sup> In defining poetry, Kant does not appeal to any particular formal features, generic conventions or established traditions, opting instead to define it through its free activity and its ability to generate unpredictable and indeterminate effects.

Kant's discussion of poetry is mostly conducted on an abstract level, a pattern that holds in his only close reading of a poem in the *Critique*. Any readers hoping to find Kant engaging with innovative and challenging literature in 1790 (in the wake of *Sturm und Drang* and in the midst of Weimar Classicism) are likely to be disappointed, as the poem selected is a relatively unremarkable French piece by Frederick the Great. Moreover, the actual close reading of the poem consists of a single highly convoluted sentence: "The king here is animating his rational idea of a cosmopolitan attitude, even at

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<sup>39</sup> Note that freedom from natural determination – which tends to take on either mechanistic connotations in Kant's usage – does not mean freedom from natural influence. To the contrary, Kant's commentary on natural beauty and genius suggest that aesthetic experience, both in art and nature, tends to generate spaces of openness to the influence of nature as an unpredictable and generative force.

the end of life, by means of an attribute which the imagination (in remembering all the pleasures of a completed beautiful summer day, which a serene evening calls to mind) conjoins with that presentation, and which arouses a multitude of sensations and supplementary presentations for which no expression can be found” (184). What matters here is not the poem’s connection between the idea of rational cosmopolitan benevolence and the image or presentation of a closing day, which would be obvious enough from the poem itself. The point of importance lies rather in the connective and generative power exhibited by the attribute. Before this reading, Kant distinguishes between logical attributes, which “constitute the exhibition of a given concept,” and aesthetic attributes, which express “the concept’s implications and its kinship with other concepts” (183). This associative activity constitutes both an aesthetic attribute and an aesthetic idea, and their ability to summon an inexpressible multitude of sensations and presentations. Where logical attributes serve to exhibit, define and specify a concept, aesthetic attributes express lines of connection, implication, harmonization and connotation moving out from that concept in an indeterminate but motivated and proliferating manner. Kant characterizes the movement towards inexpressibly proliferating and associating multitudes and multiplicities as having an enlivening, animating or quickening (*beleben[end]*) effect on human minds and cognition, also connecting “language, which would otherwise be mere letters, with spirit” (183, 185).

The term spirit or *Geist* contains a fundamental and necessary ambiguity at work in aesthetic ideas and the concept of the genius, and by extension in poetry, literature, fine art and aesthetic experience or beauty altogether. In the above quote, spirit serves to

render language vital and effective, rendering what would otherwise be lost in a meaningless literality publicly accessible and communicable. This is spirit as a kind of sociability and liveliness, closely connected with the use of language and broadly connected with the use of *Geist* as wit (as in saying someone has *Geist* in German). At the same time, spirit also appears as the definitive mark of the work of genius, and thus as a dispensation of nature not subject to familiar modes of explication and communication. As Kant notes in the context of describing genius, “the artist’s skill cannot be communicated but must be conferred directly on each person by the hand of nature” (177). The products of spirit and possess a remarkable capacity for communication, but spirit itself, like genius, is a definitive artistic talent, which is not itself similarly communicable.<sup>40</sup>

The social aspect to spirit is evident in Kant’s definition of fine art as “a way of presenting that is purposive on its own and that furthers, even without a purpose, the culture of our mental powers to [facilitate] social communication” (173). To address how such a facilitation and furtherance is possible, it is first necessary to step back to the problem of how a judgment of beauty can lay claim to anything more than an individual subjective validity. This problem is arguably confused by Kant’s tendency to use language recalling the moral issues of the second critique, as for instance in the close to section 40, where Kant ponders “how it is that we require from everyone as a duty, as it were, the feelings [contained] in a judgment of taste” (162).<sup>41</sup> Properly speaking, we

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<sup>40</sup> See 181-2 and 185-6. Both genius and spirit are defined as the ability to exhibit aesthetic ideas.

<sup>41</sup> Notably, this phrase appears at the end of a sentence beginning with an assumption Kant clearly indicates (within the same sentence) we are not justified in making – an assumption that would offer an explanation for the phenomenon described in the phrase.

cannot demand assent to a judgment of taste in the way that we can demand assent to a moral judgment or imperative (e.g., that we ought to treat others as ends, and never as means). As the validity of judgments of beauty does not derive from particular objects, these judgments are not of the sort that we allow us to demand others find any given art object beautiful. In section 9, Kant instead grounds the validity of such judgments on the harmonizing relation between the understanding and the imagination, and thus as holding for “everyone who is so constituted as to judge by means of the understanding and the senses in combination (in other words, for all human beings)” (64). That is, the validity of judgments of the beautiful are grounded in a primary connection to powers and conditions required for cognition, and thus should be able to obtain for all beings that possess the possibility of setting these basic powers into a relations of free harmony.<sup>42</sup>

We cannot *demand* that others find the same things beautiful that we do, but we can

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<sup>42</sup> In the Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment, Kant traces a different route for establishing the validity of aesthetic judgment, the most immediately relevant formulation being “only because we refer the beautiful to the morally good (we all do so naturally and require others also to do so as a duty) does our liking for it include a claim to everyone else’s assent” (228). Kant also goes on to posit “the morally good” as “the *intelligible*” that permits the harmonization of cognitive powers, in part due to its status as a counter-contradictory principle of consistency (228-9). I concur with Pluhar in reading this latter approach as possessing a problematic relation with Kant’s earlier assertion of how this harmonization comes about, and in any event do not think we have grounds to believe that this latter approach rules out the former. A complete examination of this issue would necessarily involve a close investigation of Kant’s use of the category, idea or intelligibility of the good across the three critiques, which, though potentially useful for other purposes, is not immediately relevant to the present discussion about literature. For the present, I would merely have to advance as unsubstantiated claims the following points: a) we need to pay close attention to the different conditions and conditionals at work in and leading up to section 59, “On beauty as the Symbol of morality”, b) the way that Kant uses the good in this section as a sort of bare but potent condition of intelligibility suggests that we may need to detach the function of the good here from more articulated forms of its manifestation, and describe it in terms more proximate to issues of perception and thought not obviously moral in nature and c) we should also keep in mind the possibility that certain habits of thought and phrase may obscure some of the more radical achievements of this Critique, particularly in deciding what strategies of reading, selection and interpretation to employ in making use of it.

*recognize* in advance the power of others to find things beautiful at all.<sup>43</sup> The mode of operation here is not coercing agreement, but rather anticipating (*erwarten*) commonality – a commonality grounded in a shared plane of experience and shared powers of cognition, rationality and imagination.

As Shaviro contends that Kant’s “disinterested contemplation of beauty is a utopian conception, in that it requires and presupposes a world in which human needs have been fulfilled” (4) (unlike the need-determined interests of the gratifying and the moral), I maintain that Kant’s account of fine art takes on similarly utopian terms, in which humans become capable of radically capacious communication, through which unequal divisions of power and education cease to obtain (at least for the duration of the communication). Shaviro is hardly the first critic to read utopian content in Kant’s aesthetics, and without going back to Schiller, we can stop over in Arendt’s reading of the *Critique of Judgment* in her *Lectures on Kant’s political philosophy* (delivered in 1970, published in 1989) as a means to arrive how Kant’s account of judgment and communication might be read as utopian. This reading focuses on Kant’s conception of a *sensus communis*, a kind of social sense or, in Kant’s words, the “power to judge that in reflecting takes account (a priori), in our thought, of everyone else’s way of presenting [something], in order *as it were* to compare our own judgment with human reason in general and thus escape the illusion that arises from the ease of mistaking subjective and

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<sup>43</sup> A negative corollary of this would be that we can never deny others the faculty of aesthetic judgment and sensibility, even if the particular aesthetic judgments they make conflict with our ideas of what should count as beautiful. At its logical limit, Kant’s claim would seem to imply that we could not even rule out the faculty of aesthetic judgment in someone who had never made an aesthetic judgment in his or her life, as they could still possess the power to do so (admittedly, it is difficult to imagine what sort of existence this subject would have had to have led in order for this to be the case).

private conditions for objectives ones” (160).<sup>44</sup> For Arendt, this intersubjective conception opens the way for replacing the monologic dictates of a coercive rationality with political judgment and practice grounded in dialogue and conditions of communicability within human communities. Within the very act of aesthetic judgment lies an orientation that acts against the determination of private interests and in favor of communication and co-operation with others. Kant connects this cultural-political ideal with the arts in speaking approvingly of exposing oneself to the *humanities* (*humaniora*), called thus “presumably because *humanity* [*Humanität*] means both the *universal feeling of sympathy*, and the ability to engage universally in very intimate *communication*” (231). While Kant does not explicitly follow his logic through to Arendt’s political destination, he closes the aesthetic half of the *Critique of Judgment* with a vision of fine art and culture as a kind of humanity defined by sociability and mental and collective cultivation, in which people of different backgrounds and social standings find space for extensive and intimately intense communication.<sup>45</sup>

Although it is presumably a necessary ingredient, it is not clear that a disciplined removal of personal prejudice from judgment is sufficient for producing such communication.<sup>46</sup> As indicated earlier, Kant’s experimental division and valuation of the

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<sup>44</sup> Note that I am here giving the most relevant quote from section 40 of the *Critique of Judgment*, “On Taste as a Kind of Sensus Communis.” The status of “human reason in general” in this quote and its relation to human community, and the impartiality afforded by this other-facing orientation are at the center of what is at stake in Arendt’s reading, and require careful parsing.

<sup>45</sup> Kant also uses his concluding appendix (section 60) to project a quasi-mythic story of “people during one age” seeking “sociability under laws” and “peoples of any future age” who will somehow lack “any enduring examples of nature” (232). While these projections are clearly related to Kant’s understanding of culture, a complete discussion of them would necessitate delving into texts well beyond the scope of this dissertation, such as Kant’s *Anthropology* (1798) and *Conjectural History* (1786).

<sup>46</sup> If we follow Arendt’s reading, the *sensus communis* is not just a rationalistic mode of the removal of personal prejudices, but a broader communal orientation and basis for judgment and dialogue. The



arts relies on an ideal of communication in which “thought, intuition, and sensation are [all] conveyed to others simultaneously” (190). Along with an orientation that creates a distance from personal limitation and an inclination out or other-wards, something is also needed to provide a motive force and enable the kind of radical openness indicated in this conception of communication. *Geist* is a likely candidate here, as a force that enables language to become more than “mere letters” and has an enlivening effect on minds and materials. By this reading, *Geist* should be connected with the peculiar activity of the aesthetic idea and the beautiful of producing, alongside a given concept or presentation, an indefinitely extending multiplicity of thought and sensation, of significance and agitation. By virtue of this exciting force, present in the fine arts and acting on faculties that can be attributed to any human subject, it becomes possible for humans to communicate, to share not just information, but something approaching to complete experience. Poetry, as a field of the fine arts, would derive its ultimate value from its ability to produce this kind of communicative experience, to enable these sorts of human and cognitive connections.

Before moving on to the other aspect of *Geist* (its facing toward nature) and its implications for art and literature, let me pause here a moment to underscore what sets poetry apart from the other arts for Kant. Intuitively, we might imagine that if the object of art were maximal communication, a sort of total conveyance of experience, then a form of art that would engage as many senses as possible, say theater or opera (or, in our

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question would still remain, however, as to whether Arendt’s humanistic and communal version of the *sensus* would on its own provide a sufficient basis for Kant’s maximalist hope for aesthetic communication.

time, cinema) should be the greatest of the arts. Paradoxically, it is poetry's apparent abstraction or bareness, its proximity to mere letters on a page that enables it to communicate with a maximal degree of openness. This productive bareness comes out in Kant's discussion of logical and aesthetic attributes, a discussion preceded and followed by discussions of poetry. While Kant does not use these precise terms, his description of the difference between these two types of attributes suggests that logical attributes have a denotational relation to their concepts, whereas aesthetic attributes, as expressions of a concept's "implications" and "kinship with other concepts" (183) follow lines of connotation, metaphor and metonymy.<sup>47</sup> As the form of art closest to bare language (i.e., language without accompanying sense media), poetry is best able to exploit its possible range of social, cultural and structural – as well as merely contingent or incidental – connections. While a painting of an eagle entails certain forms of determination by virtue of its visual medium (being fixed in its particular appearance), the word "eagle" might take on any number of connotative meanings or implications depending on situational variables. Kant envisions poetry, the art in which the power "of aesthetic ideas can manifest itself to full extent" (183), as being best able to make good on this structural openness – as acting on us in such a way that we follow a given presentation, concept or word out along its explicitly- and implicitly-connected range of conceptual and sensory content (its "wealth of undeveloped material" (185)) as far as possible. This vision need not be limited to poetry, as presumably it should be able to hold for any form of literature that engages in this kind of speculative use of language.

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<sup>47</sup> The Roman instances Kant offers as aesthetic attributes in discussing poetry suggest that these attributes encompass both relations of substitution and association.

If poetry exploits the connective potentiality of language to the ends of producing a maximal communication of experience between human subjects, then the question remains as to where this experience originates. As Kant endorses the idea of the genius-artist, we might posit some manner of sender-receiver model, in which this figure uses his exceptional sensibility to arrive at some refined experience, and then uses his skill to obviate the resistance of his medium and communicate this experience in as complete a form as possible to his audience. Aesthetic experience, in this account, would properly be experience belonging to the artist, as we identify works of art by the artists that fashioned them (e.g., Van Gogh's *The Starry Night*). Two points work against this. The first is that Kant describes the genius's creation or composition, which remains inexplicable in terms of concrete purposes, but not any particular experience preceding this process. If anything, it would make more sense to situate aesthetic experience around the encounter with the art (or natural) object, as Kant spends a great deal of time sorting out issues around this site. The second point working against a personalist or artist-centered model of aesthetic experience is the role that nature plays in fine art.

In discussing genius and fine art, Kant repeatedly depicts nature as a force or agent preceding and overruling any intention on the part of the artist or any determinate rule for composition or creation. Nature not only endows the artist with genius or confers artistic skill or sensibility, but also "gives the rule to art" – i.e., it generates the mode of singular purposiveness proper to beautiful or fine art.<sup>48</sup> Far from an earlier model of a regular mechanical system, nature here serves to indicate limitations to rational

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<sup>48</sup> Recall that the "rule" given by nature is neither determinate, articulated, nor conceptual.

description and scientific explanation.<sup>49</sup> Nature acts in art in such a way that it cannot be anticipated or “brought about by any compliance with rules, whether of science or of mechanical imitation” (186), nor can we (re)construct any determinate set of rules or precepts to describe and contain the work of art once produced. In contrast to the sublime, which makes use of a presentation of nature in the direction of reason and maintains subjective enclosure, “for the beautiful in nature we must seek a basis outside ourselves” (100). In an experience of the beautiful, whether in an encounter with a natural object or in an object of fine art nature has shaped through genius, nature is a name of an emergence, something unanticipated that escapes our conceptualization, that exists outside of us and yet activates something in us, setting our minds and bodies into unaccustomed and vital relations and motions. As a judgment of the beautiful (which is more like an experience, sensation or intuition than anything determined by rules, logic or schemata) takes place prior to any conceptualization, nature in the beautiful acts on us before we have had a chance to think, perceive and understand as fully individualized, autonomous, intentional and rational beings, before we have had a change to rig the familiar stage settings of ourselves and our surroundings.

I suspect it is only by taking these features of communicability and an emergent nature together with Kant’s structural model of an experience of the beautiful that we can adequately account for his enigmatic claim the liking for the beautiful “carries with it

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<sup>49</sup> The most relevant passage here being: “Genius itself cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products, and it is rather as nature that it gives the rule” (175). Kant does not state that the philosopher or critic is in any better epistemic position than the genius on this issue, and his commentary on the genesis of art products suggests that they are in much the same position. Section 47 spends a good deal of time contrasting production and education in the arts and the sciences, stressing the (apparent) incommensurability of the two.

directly a feeling of life's being furthered" (98). This furtherance, like the furtherance of "the culture of our mental powers" by fine art, is related to the self-sustaining activity of the beautiful. Early in the *Critique*, this appears as a form of purposiveness or causality that, without an external purpose, acts to keep our attention on a given beautiful presentation and to keep "the cognitive powers engaged without any further aim ... We *linger* in the contemplation of the beautiful, because this contemplation reinforces and reproduces itself" (68). Reproduction here suggests a biological rather than a mechanical model, as the beautiful takes on a life of its own within us and a new entity (or event) emerges, rather than another copy being made. Later, Kant speaks of *Geist* as imparting to the mental powers "a purposive momentum ... a play which is such that it sustains itself on its own and even strengthens the powers for such play" (182). As we know, this is a play that activates and enlivens our mental faculties without allowing any given faculty to dominate, a play that becomes self-sustaining and capable of augmenting our capacities in this free and purposive activity. There is no concrete and determinate purpose we have before us in an experience of the beautiful, and yet in such an experience we feel ourselves acted upon and answering with a sense of force and motive, thinking and feeling in unaccustomed ways and desiring to follow these thoughts and feelings. It is notable that Kant does not specify whose life is felt being furthered in our liking for the beautiful. Presumably, we ourselves feel enlivened in having our understanding, imagination and reason called into an indeterminate and unlimited mode of action. At the same time, in our liking for the beautiful we feel ourselves in the midst of a sense and experience we share and which connects us intimately to other humans in a

more communal life, being itself something like a form of communicability. Finally, an experience of the beautiful comes to us as an encounter with a life outside us, preceding us, informing us, and eliciting something hitherto unrecognized within us.

Where does all this leave us for a Kantian theory of literature? To begin with, I contend that this theory would make no pretense at neutral description (i.e., description without any form of anticipation or hope), favoring a pragmatic and value-seeking approach to its field: the object being not to detail or catalog (and then generalize from) what has been or come to be called “literature” but rather to indicate what to what sorts of use literature may be put, and how literary texts can serve as sites of particular or even singular value. To be clear, I am here using “pragmatic” in a sense opposed to judgment through determining interests: whereas morality and gratification each fix their judgments in advance (through law or individual limitation), pragmatism assumes that action and theorization (practice and criticism) become necessary in situations in which we possess incomplete knowledge and determination of our situations. Rather than awaiting the arrival of certitude, a pragmatic aesthetics favors experimental activity – the production of sketches, outlines, attempts and the tracing of speculative and excessive lines of association (like those produced by aesthetic ideas). Kant’s discussions of communication and nature suggest how philosophy and aesthetics might go about seeking sources of value without collapsing this search into the predetermination of interest, and this mode of value-seeking is re-enacted in the textual attempts of De Quincey, Dickens and Eliot to produce literary forms of value distinct from more familiar and habitual forms of writing.

As Kant distinguishes *schöne* (fine / beautiful) art from other sorts of practical and cultural production, “literature” as a term of value could be distinguished in a Kantian theory of literature from other more habitual forms of textual production.<sup>50</sup> In this hypothetical account, literature cannot be encompassed or defined by given genres, conceptual systems and interests, being instead characterized by its resistance to such forms of determination. In the place of the guidance of tradition, canon, or the conventions of genre, literature is here defined by its relation to language, seeking to make the most of the openings for unanticipated connection, association and speculation afforded by use of its bare form. This pursuit is informed by two priorities or sources of value and motive: the first, to produce a maximal form of communication, eliciting thought, intuition and sensation by virtue and in service of an extensive but non-deterministic community of those capable of being thus affected.<sup>51</sup> The second is to find and create expressions of a life and nature that acts against isolating individuation, conceptual rigidity, and the habitual formations of what we come to accept as given and natural. The most significant element of Kant’s aesthetics for an experimental theory of literature, however, may not be any particular claim made, but rather an approach taken. As a judgment of beauty is necessarily singular in mode, literature in Kant’s aesthetics is a field in which both theory and practice must resort to experimentation, offering what

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<sup>50</sup> without necessarily denigrating the latter forms, the object of the designation being a carefully developed distinction of mode, capacity and use rather than a purist worthwhile / worthless or art / junk dichotomy. That literature might serve as a site of singular value does not imply that other sorts of text must not possess value.

<sup>51</sup> Although this formulation verges on circularity, I am here favoring it to indicate the necessarily open nature of this community, and its possible extension beyond human subjects (or possibly even subjects, depending on how one defines the term).

attempts and sketches they can in lieu of a complete account knowable *a priori* or a finished product that would have the last word on the matter.

*Friedrich Schlegel, the Athenaeum and Romantic Literature*

There are any number of historical sketches one might make concerning the influence of Kant's philosophy on German literature and culture. As indicated earlier, Goethe and Schiller both asserted their influence by, and/or confluence with, the *Critique of Judgment*. Alternatively, one might start from Kant's more discordant work on epistemology and consciousness, moving onto divisions, problems and interests that would shape German Romanticism. One might even combine Kant's determined insistence on human limitation (in particular in the first critique) with his absolute claims of duty to trace a line through Kleist to Kafka, ending up somewhere quite different from Schiller's *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen (On the Aesthetic Education of Man)*. In turning to the critical-literary work of the circle around Friedrich Schlegel, I do not pretend to be selecting the most broadly influential adaptation of Kantian aesthetics. Instead, I am offering this brief summation of an aesthetic program advanced by this group for the theoretical and literary bridge it provides between the aesthetic claims and developments of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and the literary experiments of confessions, sketches and impressions in the following chapters.

If Kant does not seem to have done much with literary genres, saving the broad category of "poetry," the same cannot be said for the principle contributors to the *Athenaeum* (1798-1800). The format of the *Athenaeum* displays an interest in mixing and



playing with literary and critical genres, offering up dialogues, reviews, poems (hymns, idylls, elegies, sonnets), notes (*Notizen*) and items we would probably classify as essays (e.g., “On Incomprehensibility”) without obvious hierarchy. Sometimes the titles of these works suggest a kind of generic playfulness or transgression, as in the incongruous joining of abstract generality and personal intimacy in “On Philosophy. To Dorothea” or the repetitious excess of the opening text of the first issue, *Die Sprachen. Ein Gespräch über Klopstocks Grammatische Gespräche* (“The Languages: A Dialogue about Klopstock’s Grammatical Dialogues”). As it appears in this same issue, Novalis’s *Blüthenstaub* (Pollen) challenges its readers to fit its aphorisms or fragments into any clear generic space (epigrams? philosophy? poetry? criticism?), only providing a clue to its title in its last aphorism, 114: “The art of writing books is not yet invented. Yet it is at the point of being invented. Fragments of this type are literary seeds. There may well be many barren grains among them: However, if only a few come up!”<sup>52</sup> This sense of temporal place, of standing at the verge of radical new form of literature, informs the generic practice of these *Frühromantiker*. The fragment evinces this sense most clearly, as a concentration of force, form and thought aimed at a literary life to come (while this concentration lends it a hedgehog-like enclosure and coherence (see fragment 206)); but this is likewise apparent in the play of different generic modes and tones and the rapid alternation between philological notes on Greek and Roman poetry and satire, criticism of contemporary culture and philosophy, and proclamations of forms of literature more

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<sup>52</sup> I am here employing my own translation. Note that the term here given as invented (*erfunden*) can also mean fabricated or made up. Also, the “grains” of the last sentence has a diminutive form in the German (*Körnchen*) for which I lack a ready English equivalent.

properly belonging to the future than any given present. If we have not yet arrived at the art of writing literature, then we must gather all generic, intellectual and historical resources available as materials for our experimental work at hand.

One of the most well-known experiments of this group, which serves (at least in broad strokes) as an example of the sorts of generic experimentation they sought, was Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde*.<sup>53</sup> Schlegel gives this work the subtitle *ein Roman* (a novel), but this designation should not cause us to pre-impose on it the conventions and canonical tendencies that would come to form the novel as genre in the nineteenth century and later. The reader has no sooner crossed the prologue (invoking both the poet Boccaccio and the novelist Cervantes) than she is attacked by a crowd of generic indicators: Confessions (*Bekentnisse*), a Dithyrambic Fantasy, a Character Sketch (*Charakteristik*) and an Allegory in just the first four section or piece titles. The text alternates between letters and pieces addressed from one character to another, dialogues, quasi-philosophical and/or lyrical interludes and narrative accounts and recounting. The two most obvious textual references in the structure of *Lucinde*, to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (*Lehrjahre*) and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, indicate something of Schlegel's ambitions. As in the *Lehrjahre*, an ostensible story of biographical progress (of a young man's education or an affair) becomes quickly complicated by encounters, digressions of thought and conversation, and fantastic intrusions. As in the *Metamorphoses*, human life and life in nature more generally is in a state of constant

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<sup>53</sup> I should note that, for the purposes of a theory and practice of experimental literature, I am more interested in the motivating aspirations and broad formal features of *Lucinde* than the often less interesting individualizing tendencies of the matter of the text.

flux, and art is tasked with expressing and reflecting this flux, as in Fantasy's imperative to the author (or Julius) to "create, discover, transform and retain the world and its eternal forms in the perpetual variation of new marriages and divorces" (58). One could also point to Ovid's playful collection of apparently miscellaneous materials, shifts in tone and style and use of satire as influential features for Schlegel's chaotic novel.

In the *Athenaeum* fragment 252, Schlegel lays out a number of requirements for a "real aesthetic theory [*Kunstlehre*] of poetry," "the keystone" of which would be "a philosophy of the novel, the rough outlines of which are contained in Plato's political philosophy" (197-8). As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy note, there is a strong proximity between how Schlegel and company theorize the novel and how they theorize poetry, at least insofar as both are informed by a Platonic model of dialogue and grounded in a Romantic conception of Literature.<sup>54</sup> The most succinct formulation of this conception appears in fragment 116, "The romantic kind of poetry [*Dichtart*] is yet in [a state of] becoming; indeed that is its actual essence [*Wesen*], that it is eternally only becoming, and can never be completed [*vollendet*]."<sup>55</sup> As in the Kantian beautiful, romantic poetry is free from conceptual, moral and scientific determination, for "It can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterize its ideal" (175). Schlegel's signal formulations of the novel and poetry, e.g., novels are "Socratic

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<sup>54</sup> This point is variously developed and complicated in chapter 3 of *The Literary Absolute*, "The Poem: A Nameless Art," in particular with reference to *Athenaeum* fragment 116 and the "Letter on the Novel" in Schlegel's *Dialogue on Poetry*.

<sup>55</sup> My translation diverges somewhat from Firchow's here. This passage presents the translator with a number of difficult choices – e.g., how much to sacrifice of original phrasing and abstract economy in the phrase "*noch im Werden*" for the sake of English comprehensibility ("yet in becoming" being one alternative), how to render "*eigentliches Wesen*" (here, "actual essence," but "real nature" or even "intrinsic being" could also work), and whether to translate "*vollenden*" in the direction of completed / finished, or perfected / accomplished / achieved.

dialogues,” a “free form” offering refuge, or “poetry is republican speech” (*Lyceumsfragmente* 26 and 65), orbit around this free play, in which different voices and genres mix and have their say without the imposition of external rule.

In the more manifesto-like moments of the *Athenaeum*, the relations Kant’s beauty and fine art tend to create between domains of thought and experience and linguistic-conceptual, human and natural communities are transformed into aesthetic and political imperatives. In fragment 116, Romantic poetry becomes a kind of supreme nexus and agent, bringing together all genres [*Gattungen*] of poetry; poetry, philosophy and rhetoric and desiring to “mix and fuse poetry and prose; ingenuity and criticism; art-poetry and nature-poetry” and render “poetry vital and sociable, and life and society poetic.” Romantic poetry and Romantic literature are not simply one genre among others, and Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy are certainly correct to assert that they constitute “Literature itself, the *Literary Absolute*” (as opposed to this or that genre) and “a sort of beyond of literature itself” (91-2). But we must add to these totalizing and transcendent chords a note of experimental contingency: Romantic poetry’s *Bestimmung* (destination or determination, but also purpose or disposition) is to bring together poetry, philosophy and rhetoric; it *wants* to (*will*) and should (*soll*) mix and fuse fields of human (and natural) action and experience. A vital and sociable poetry must be open to the experimental and experiential indeterminacies that attend the pursuit of maximal communication between human subjects and nature as a force of novelty.

If Romantic literature is, by virtue of its nature, a disposition or peculiar mode of being or acting, always in a state of experimental becoming, we should add that this is

always a non-individual becoming, even should it result in a text with an individual's name on the cover. The collaborative authorship of the *Athenaeum* serves as a literal and overt example of this principle. Even though the names of August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel appeared on each cover, in the actual content of these issues the work of the brothers was joined with that of Friedrich Schleiermacher, A.L. Hülsen, Novalis, Caroline Schlegel (later Schelling), Dorothea von Schlegel, and Sophie Bernhardt (née Tieck), with mixed degrees of attribution. The desire for a kind of authorial collectivity manifested in different ways, including reducing an author's name to a letter in attribution, leaving the multi-authored fragments anonymous and including work by more than one author under one name. These maneuvers are not the result of arbitrary play or carelessness. Fragment 125 presents a fantasy of "a birth of a whole new era of the science and arts" taking place as "symphilosophy and sympoetry [*Sympoesie*]" become "so universal and heartfelt that it would no longer be anything extraordinary for several complementary minds [lit. natures] to create communal works" (177-8). These coinages invite their readers to discard their solitary images of philosophy and poetry (the sage with his books or the poet with inspiration) while indirectly invoking Plato's *Symposium* and with it a model of philosophical dialogue, agonism and friendship at odds with monological dispensation and doctrine.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy among other critics have noted, Schlegel's *Dialogue on Poetry* is structurally modeled on the *Symposium* (see 86-8). Although the use of Plato by Schlegel, Schleiermacher and company could constitute several dissertations in itself, I would point the reader to *Athenaeum* fragment 165 for the most direct statement concerning Plato's combination of different generic types in a literary-philosophical mode.

While the works by De Quincey, Dickens and Eliot that I treat in the following chapters lack the kind of intensive collaborations between authors of the *Athenaeum*, this model and desire for agonistic collaboration forms a necessary supplement to aesthetic non-determinative relationality, communicative and speculative literature, and generic play in understanding these works. *Athenaeum* fragment 112 asserts that “Philosophers that aren’t opposed to each other are usually joined only by sympathy, not symphilosophy” (174). A productive dialogue or text needs opposition, as a genuine friendship allows for and requires conflict (and perhaps even a degree of playful hostility). A kind of conflictual cooperation informs how the confessions, sketches and impressions that follow form themselves in relation to other texts and readers. De Quincey’s *Confessions* articulates itself among works scientific, speculative, literary and popular, drawing on their materials while seeking to outdo or reach beyond their field-specific limitations. Dickens’s sketches and papers seek to provide an immanent reworking of the forms they take up, turning them to social, speculative and parodic purposes. Although widely different in form, Eliot’s “Legend” and *Impressions* blend a close and critical approach to given cultural and textual materials with a desire for radical fabulation. The speaking figures of each of these texts assume a form of non-individuality: *an English Opium-Eater* among many; Boz’s lack of any fixed position in his crowds; Theophrastus’s animal membership in the Nation of London. At the same time, they all seek to create an extensive, intensive and singular dialogue with their readers, incorporating their audience as interlocutors, co-conspirators or -speculators,

fellow critics and participants in the experimental constitution of the texts at hand.<sup>57</sup> The writers of the *Athenaeum* create a compound voice riven with paradox: intimate and distancing, scholarly and crudely casual, populist and elitist, at the beating heart of cultural and literary production and heaping scorn on the follies and hypocrisies that make up contemporary society, culture and politics from a cynical or prophetic retreat. The different voices that speak in these later experimental texts fashion their complicated relations to their readers in line with these German predecessors, under names like An English Opium-Eater, Boz and Theophrastus. The success of these literary experiments depends in no small part on the intellectual good will of their readers, together with a stomach for speculative, agitated and combative texts.

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<sup>57</sup> These dialogues, in the hands of De Quincey and Eliot-as-Theophrastus, can often become a kind of test for their reader to see how far she might follow their abstruse allusions. In this respect, they tend to produce a coterie-effect not unlike that of the Athenaeum circle. Boz's tests may require less formal learning, but he is no less inclined to make demands on the faculties of judgment, imaginative sensation and speculation residing within his readers.

## Chapter Two: Opium as Philosophy

In June of 1836, Thomas De Quincey published a number of his series “Sketches of Life and Manners; from the Autobiography of an English Opium-Eater” in *Tait’s Magazine*, in which he provides one of his more extensive accounts of Kant’s philosophy – indicating that the life that matters most here is his encounter with Kant and its communication to the reader.<sup>58</sup> De Quincey opens with a meditation on reading a New Testament in a foreign language, identifying consistency in linguistic forms as an aid to learning said language, as they “compose the essential frame-work or *extra-linear* machinery of human thought” (X 159). This consistency breaks down, however, once the reader enters German prose, for though “to German poetry there is a known, fixed, calculable limit [and] Infinity, absolute infinity, is impracticable,” this is “not so with German prose.” In the absurd landscape of German prose all notions of order and sentence construction are abandoned, for “style, in any sense, is an inconceivable idea to a German intellect” and a German book of prose may “consist of one or two enormous sentences” (160). De Quincey asks the reader to take up Kant as an example, noting that “he has actually been complimented by the cloud-spinner, Friedrich Schlegel, who is now in Hades, as a most original artist in the matter of style” (160-1). Incensed by the thought of Kant’s prose and its infernal apologist, De Quincey is carried into his own act of prose excess:

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<sup>58</sup> This text also appears as “German Studies and Kant in Particular” and “The German Language, and Philosophy of Kant” in collected versions of De Quincey’s writings. Although I am by no means the first critic to have taken note of this piece, it appears to have been largely noted and then let be by the critics and biographers I have come across. Jonathan Luftig in “Style: De Quincey on Kant” (an essay published on Academia.edu) also quotes the extended image I do later in this paragraph from this piece, but largely takes De Quincey’s attacks at face value, reproducing an oppositional model between De Quincey and Kant that appears frequently in criticism of De Quincey.



‘Original’ Heaven knows he was! His idea of a sentence was as follows: – We have all seen, or read of, an old family coach, and the process of packing it for a journey to London some seventy or eighty years ago. Night and day, for a week at least, sate the housekeeper, the lady’s maid, the butler, the gentleman’s gentleman, &c., packing the huge ark in all its recesses, its ‘imperials,’ its ‘wills,’ its ‘Salisbury boots,’ its ‘sword-cases,’ its front pockets, side pockets, rear pockets, its ‘hammer-cloth cellars,’ (which a lady explains to me as a corruption from hamper-cloth, as originally a cloth for hiding a hamper, stored within viaticum,) until all the uses and needs of man, and of human life, savage or civilized, were met with separate provision by the infinite chaos. Pretty nearly upon the model of such an old family packing, did Kant institute and pursue the packing and stuffing of one of his regular sentences. Everything that could ever be needed by way of explanation, illustration, restraint, inference, by-clause, or indirect comment, was to be crammed, according to this German philosopher’s taste, into the front pockets, side pockets, or rear pockets, of the original sentence.

(161)

Rather than reading this as simply an exercise in hyperbole (and national chauvinism) by De Quincey, I contend that we can find in this extended quotation a basis for the experimental literary operations of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* – a text that acts much like one of these imagined Kantian sentences.<sup>59</sup> Different features in this

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<sup>59</sup> Operations that continue, in different forms, throughout many of De Quincey’s succeeding texts – as the serial text, authored under the name “An English Opium-Eater,” to which this quote belongs. In the interest of maintaining a focus appropriate to the space allotted, however, this chapter will be mostly

passage suggest possibilities for cultural and linguistic experimentation – e.g., the question of what it means for thought to be both mechanical and non-linear, or how the absolute movement of German prose disrupts the smooth motion of formal consistency between languages, vouchsafed by shared scripture. For that matter, it seems significant that in imagining the behavior of an unruly text, De Quincey turns to the same image Dickens takes up in *Sketches by Boz* – an old coach, loaded with the chaotic freight of human materials and lives.<sup>60</sup> What most interests me, however, is the way in which De Quincey performs the same offense for which he attacks Kant, complete with a parenthetical indirect comment to cram into his overloaded image and sentence. De Quincey may complain that Kant and his national cohort lack style altogether, but his textual example demonstrates a kind of excessive, even absolute style of connection and accumulation at work in their texts and infecting his own, seeking to fill the apparently unlimited recesses and pockets of its vehicle.

While “beautiful” is unlikely to be the first term to come to mind when thinking of *Confessions* and the opium around which it takes shape, De Quincey’s work enacts an unorderly style that strongly resembles the activity of the beautiful in Kant’s aesthetics

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concerned with *Confessions*, leaving the extension of the analysis of these operations (and their changing modes of expression and articulation) to later projects.

<sup>60</sup> The sketch by Dickens here concerned is “Hackney-Coach Stands,” discussed in the next chapter, which prompts Dickens to exclaim: “What an interesting book a hackney-coach might produce, if it could carry as much in its head as it does in its body!” (108). Both Dickens and De Quincey stuff the improbably-capacious coaches with families, their servants and a mass of goods in a hectic and descriptively-extended loading process, the servants appearing first in each case. Likewise, each author emphasizes the age of the vehicle – De Quincey by means of the temporal setting of his scene, more likely to have been read of than seen by his audience (saving for some quite long-lived readers in his audience), and Dickens by reference to the history of the coach prior to its current employment, its more honorable days indicated by a “faded coat of arms” (this hint of nobility, or at least the aspiration thereto, also suggested by the family possessions loaded on De Quincey’s coach).

and its extrapolation by his prose compatriots. As the beautiful acts in a manner that cannot be contained by law, precept or concept and Kant's sentence is crammed without regard to the dictates of good style, the *Confessions* develops a singular course, proceeding without reference to moral or stylistic law. As aesthetic ideas generate proliferations of thought and sensation, the Opium-eater's writing swings between intellectual and sensitive registers, carried along by digressions, imagined dialogue and visions. Assuming the guise of confession and autobiography, De Quincey creates a text closer to the generic and intellectual free play sought out by the *Frühromantiker* than these individualizing titles imply. As Friederich Schlegel, Novalis and company called for a Romantic literature that would mix prose and poetry, the academic and the popular, philosophy and science, here an opium addiction provides the occasion for a text that alternately meanders and strikes out through matters medical, national, psychological, sociological, economical, philological, musical and philosophical (among other categories). The *Confessions* are an extended experiment conducted by an opium-eater who also lays claim to the title of philosopher, seeking to present and exercise the operations of opium – its tendencies to produce associations, connections, disorder, experience, etc. – through the text he shares with the reader.

In advancing this unorthodox Kantian reading of *Confessions of An English Opium-Eater*, I am seeking to add to critical debates about how to read this complex text and De Quincey's no less complex relation to Kant. In recent decades, criticism of De Quincey has focused increasingly on reading his work in the contexts of nationalism, the

British Empire, and the expanding print market.<sup>61</sup> In offering a reading that blends formal and philosophical concerns, I by no means intend to set myself against these political and economic-materialist approaches. If these readings claimed that formal readings or readings connecting literature to other intellectual domains and histories had somehow become unnecessary, I should certainly take issue with them – but I have yet to encounter any such claim coming out of the various historicist camps.<sup>62</sup> As in any reading, there are degrees of greater affinity or more intuitive connection with other points in criticism. For example, I find it instructive that the central image of Sedgwick’s chapter on De Quincey in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1986), live burial, is a figuration of language – and, as Anna Clej argues, De Quincey may acknowledge “language itself, with its meandering, parasitical growth” as the “true object” of his “Opium Confessions” (22).<sup>63</sup> Likewise, I take work by critics like Robert Morrison and Barry Mulligan tracing radical content in the 1821/2 *Confessions* as clear evidence that we ought not to read De Quincey’s texts in advance through the predictably arch-Tory

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<sup>61</sup> I should note that this increase does not mean either that these subjects were ignored prior to recent decades, or that these themes have done away with older modes of reading this work – e.g., in modes that place more emphasis on psychological or literary-referential concerns. What De Quincey scholarship is experiencing, and has been since the 70s, 80s or 90s, depending on where you wish to place your emphasis (and what you think makes up a sufficiently significant mass of texts sharing relevant qualities), is a shift in concentrations, rather than any sort of total transformation. For more on large-scale developments in criticism of De Quincey from the 1980s up to the first decade of the 2000s, see the opening chapter of *Thomas De Quincey: New Theoretical and Critical Directions*, “‘I Was Worshipped; I Was Sacrificed’: A Passage to Thomas De Quincey.”

<sup>62</sup> However strenuously the battles of historicists and formalists, old and new are carried out in certain quarters, and however eager most new generations of critics may be to disown their more recent predecessors.

<sup>63</sup> The passage Clej reads here is the introductory notice to De Quincey’s *Suspiria de Profundis*, in which De Quincey contrasts between the biographical content of the *Confessions*, its “naked psychological theme” which is as a “murderous spear,” and “those wandering musical variations on a theme – those parasitical thoughts, feelings, digressions, which climb up with bells and blossoms round the arid stock,” distinguishing the latter as the “true object” of the work (qtd in Clej 22).

persona he developed in writing for the conservative *Blackwood's Magazine*.<sup>64</sup> Whatever we may have to discard of De Quincey's thought in pursuing the purposes of modern criticism, I hope that we may yet maintain the belief that literature is a space in which an author *could* come to write something more than he or she intends or knows.

Experimental literature takes it as a necessary proposition that we cannot know what a text is capable of in advance of the labor of reading, and I contend that we should be wary of any form of biographical or political criticism which would determine literary texts through a given image of their author.<sup>65</sup>

Criticism on De Quincey and Kant has tended to focus on the concept of the sublime and De Quincey's often vexed and combative textual relationship to the sage of Königsberg. The former is an intuitive site of interest, given De Quincey's interest in emotional, psychological and aesthetic registers usually associated with the sublime (e.g., horror and wonder), and the latter is plainly present in De Quincey's extensive references to Kant throughout various publications. These tendencies may, however, lead us to neglect other features and constructions at work in De Quincey's interpretations of, attacks on, and adaptations of Kantian philosophy. Claims like Steve Vine's assertion that, in "In De Quincey's carnivalesque meditations, murder overmasters philosophy by

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<sup>64</sup> See Morrison's and Mulligan's chapters in *De Quincey: New Theoretical and Critical Directions*, "Earthquake and Eclipse": Radical Energies and De Quincey's 1821 Confessions" and "Brunonianism, Radicalism, and 'The Pleasures of Opium,'" respectively, as well as Morrison's article for *Wordsworth Circle*, "Red De Quincey" – Morrison's work being particularly useful for De Quincey's negotiation of the political waters of popular print in the early-to-mid nineteenth century.

<sup>65</sup> As I hope the introduction to this dissertation has already made clear, I am not here referring to more comprehensive modes of political and historical literary criticism advanced by figures like Frederic Jameson and Lauren Goodlad. Likewise, the objection here is registered against deterministic biographical criticism, rather than biographical criticism altogether. Of course, no true scotsman would write deterministic biographical criticism.

reducing and exceeding it” (144) or Paul Youngquist’s characterization of the Confessions as De Quincey’s “first and darkest riposte to Kant’s philosophy” (350) risk reducing De Quincey’s relation to Kantian philosophy to pure opposition, and an opposition often grounded in a relatively limited reading of Kant.<sup>66</sup> One striking alternative to this, which I will unfortunately be unable to make much use of here, is David L. Clark’s “We ‘Other Prussians’: Bodies and Pleasures in De Quincey and Late Kant;” This article reads De Quincey’s work as following up a self-refashioning and reimagination which Kant had already begun in late life, particularly in the strangely intimate and confessional concluding piece to *Streit der Fakultäten (Contest [or Conflict] of the Faculties)* (1798). Nigel Leask’s “Toward a Universal Aesthetic: De Quincey on Murder as Carnival and Tragedy” can also be useful in disentangling some of De Quincey’s attacks, as it focuses on De Quincey’s “dissatisfaction with the ‘Germano-Coleridgean’ tradition” and the greatly narrowed *sensus communis* it sought to establish as a basis of taste, centered on literature as a gentlemanly pursuit (95-7). As Leask clearly indicates that Coleridge’s aesthetics and social politics are the object of attack here, I would add that this attack comes at a juncture where Coleridge simplifies and frankly misreads Kant’s aesthetics, collapsing any difference between the beautiful and the intellectual and betraying the aspirations of Kant’s assertion of the unlimited communicability of the beautiful.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> The dominance of the sublime (as rational procedure) and a reading of critical philosophy as restrictive and disciplinary idealism being particular culprits in such readings. In fairness, I should note that Vine’s primary term is ambivalence, rather than simple opposition, and Youngquist recognizes some overlap between De Quincey’s opium and Kant’s beautiful – while still insisting that the former stands in superior opposition to the latter (352).

<sup>67</sup> The text which Leask turns to here is Coleridge’s “On the Principles of Genial Criticism” (100).

In what follows, my argument will advance through a number of different steps. To establish a background for my reading of *Confessions*, I will first provide an account of De Quincey's textual engagement with Kant, in which the figure of Kant is a recurrent matter for writings, serving as both a problem and provocation to thought. This will be followed by an account of the text as a whole, with reference to its generic playfulness and literary activity. The next section examines the figure of the Opium-eater as pleasure-seeking and linguistically-attuned philosopher, and the presentations and performances of philosophy in the text. The penultimate and longest section deals with the operations of opium, according to the rough division provided by De Quincey of pleasures and pains, and with particular reference to its parallels with Kantian aesthetics of the beautiful (e.g., associative play, generating unexpected and unlimited connections, resisting the determination of rule or order). The conclusion provides a brief account of how experimentation is posed as a bodily and textual problem in De Quincey's concluding Appendix to the *Confessions*.

#### *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Immanuel?*

The figure of Kant is present throughout De Quincey's published work, starting from a severe correction of a mischaracterization of the philosopher by the *Kendal Chronicle* during his editorship of the *Westmorland Gazette* (1818-9) up to an incidental reference in an argument for how we should read the term "aeon" in an essay "On the supposed Scriptural Expression for Eternity" in *Hogg's Instructor* in 1853 (3-4). This presence could take a more extended form, as in the piece with which I opened this

chapter or his partial translations of Kant (in 1824 and 1833), but it could also be no more than a few lines, Kant's writings and figure serving as a well for reference and remark, information and entertainment, and praise and complaint. De Quincey could at one moment refer to Kant as a "Titan" among human philosophers (in the Westmorland piece) or as one of his three favorite writers, alongside Schiller and Jean Paul Richter (in his essay on Richter for *London Magazine* (1821)), and at the next attack Kant as a radical and infidel, religion being a recurrent line of attack, or depict him as a being half-crazed with rationality and personal particularities – most famously in "The Last Days of Emmanuel Kant."

De Quincey provides a biographical grounding for this conflicted presentation shortly following his hyperbolic image of the Kantian sentence – although here, as throughout De Quincey's writings, we do the text injustice if we collapse all of its stylistic and performative work to a simple matter of biographical accuracy. In laying out the rise and fall of his regard for the German philosopher, De Quincey constructs a textual experience through which his readers gain a sense (not exactly knowledge) of Kant and his literary national cohort. Adverting to his early encounters with German literature, De Quincey presents "the stupendous world of America, rising, at once, like an exhalation, with all its shadowy forests, its endless savannas, and its pomp of solitary waters" as an apt image of the "vast billowy ocean of the German literature." Free from "inheritance and tradition" as well as "Ancestral titles," German literature lays claim to a present and futurity unlike that of any other literary polity. Among the vast wealth of literature annually issuing from Germany, "spawn infinite, no doubt, of crazy dotage, of



dreaming imbecility, of wickedness, of frenzy, through every phasis of Babylonian confusion; yet, also, teeming and heaving with life and the instincts of truth – of truth hunting and chasing in the broad daylight, or of truth groping in the chambers of darkness.” German literature is a continent, an ocean, a jungle, a vast plain, a mighty river, a miraculous promise and El Dorado itself. Even De Quincey’s superlative figures fail, however, for “not from the tropics, not the ocean, not from life itself, is such a type of variety, of infinite forms, or of creative power, as the German literature, in its recent motions . . . And the central object in this interminable wilderness of what then seemed imperishable bloom and verdure – the very tree of knowledge in the midst of Eden – was the new or transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant” (X 162). As the shift in figures from the new world and the globe-encompassing ocean to the biblical suggest, a fall approaches. Nevertheless, before this descent, mark the how the moving forms desire takes here – proliferation in excess of any possible ordering or law (or dispensation of ancestral titles), immense and vital variety beyond any bounds of taste or comprehension – match the bustling actions and the provision of the “infinite chaos” in Kant’s packed sentence for all uses and needs of human life in any form.<sup>68</sup> Within this context, the aberrations and monsters of literature – texts become crazed, dreaming, wicked, etc. – are not signs of failure, but rather an indication and necessary product of a larger literature “teeming and heaving with life,” a various and variable issue that must come alongside any truly energetic and vital seeking after truth in whatever form it might come to take.

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<sup>68</sup> There is of course no shortage of imperial overtones in De Quincey’s hungry European gaze over the unpeopled expanses of American land and limitless ocean.

If Kant's philosophy had once seemed to him a tree of knowledge, De Quincey soon learns not to mistake its fruits for those of any tree of life, or the vital energies he saw in the oceanic landscape of German literature. In the place of the "new and creative philosophy he seeks," six weeks of reading are enough to inform De Quincey that all he will find is a "philosophy of destruction," which "destroys by wholesale, and ... substitutes nothing" (162-3). This image of Kant as wholesale destroyer reappears in different forms throughout De Quincey's writing.<sup>69</sup> As Daniel O'Quinn notes, De Quincey's attacks on Kant participate in a larger "conservative patriotic assault on the two-headed monster of political radicalism and religious infidelity" and Kant's philosophical destructiveness shades into national and religious registers – most notably as "the Gog and Magog of Hunnish desolation" and as the bearer of an "Apollyon mind" (261-4).<sup>70</sup> Although De Quincey was perfectly well aware that labelling Kant an atheist was an oversimplification (as an occasional acknowledgement of the second critique, e.g., in an 1847 essay "Protestantism," indicates), this did not stop him from speaking of Kant's "atheistical tendencies" and presenting the philosopher as an infidel and enemy to Christianity, or, for that matter, as an Attila of the Enlightenment.

Rather than dissociating the destructive Kant from the vast and vital wilderness of German literature, De Quincey presents the centrality and continued popularity of the Kantian philosophy to his readers as a mystery or problem: "Perhaps, in the whole history of man, it is an unexampled case, that such a scheme of speculation – which

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<sup>69</sup> De Quincey even resorts to some borrowed German from Moses Mendelssohn, calling Kant the *alleszermalmender*: the everything-crusher or -breaker – initially in his 1834 piece on Coleridge, and later reproduced in *Autobiographic Sketches*.

<sup>70</sup> This characterization appears in the same 1834 essay on Coleridge referenced in the last footnote.

offers nothing seducing to human aspirations, nothing splendid to the human imagination, nothing even positive and affirmative to the human understanding – should have been able to found an interest so broad and deep among thirty-five millions of cultivated men.” To readers who imagine this interest only “confined to academic bowers,” De Quincey counters that “Sects, heresies, schisms, by hundreds, have arisen out of this philosophy – many thousands of books have been written by way of teaching it, discussing it, extending it, opposing it.” Though both English and German critics (including F. Schlegel) have alleged that the influence of Kant’s philosophy has receded with time, “It cannot even be said that its fortunes have retrograded.” The accidents of instruction and fashion have led to the rise and fall of “this or that new form of Kantianism,” but Kant’s thought and language remain in force, as “no weapons, even if employed as hostile weapons, are now forged in any armoury but that of Kant.” To finish, De Quincey argues that none of the pre-Kantian philosophies (e.g., those of Descartes or Leibniz)<sup>71</sup> are seen “as adequate to the purposes of the intellect in this day, or as capable of yielding even a sufficient terminology. Let this last fact decide the question of Kant’s vitality” (163).<sup>72</sup> The question as to whether Kant’s work and philosophy live may be decided, but the

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<sup>71</sup> It may be worth noting that De Quincey does not mention Spinoza in this context.

<sup>72</sup> “This last fact” may refer to the terminology alone, or the terminology with the additional criteria of intellectual adequacy. De Quincey’s lines following this one suggest that intellectual adequacy may to some extent rely on well-developed terminology: “Now, he who imposes new names upon all the acts, the functions, and the objects of the philosophic understanding, must be presumed to have distinguished most sharply, and to have ascertained with most precision, their general relations—*so long as his terminology continues to be adopted*. This test, applied to Kant, will show that his spirit yet survives in Germany” (163). Here, as in the *Critique of Judgment*, spirit is connected with language, and appears as a kind of life that obtains to attentive, perspicacious and effective uses of language. The spirit or force of Kant persists by virtue of his introduction of novelties into linguistic practice within philosophy and the power and effectiveness of these novelties, attested to by their continued use and the way in which they continue to generate and shape possibilities of expression and argument.

questions as to how they continue to live, or why they live on (and its dead maker lives on through them), despite reasonable expectations one might have to the contrary, are less clearly or unproblematically resolved. De Quincey's text strains to accommodate two apparently hostile propositions: first, that Kant's philosophy has been (since the 1790s) and remains a live and popular interest, and second, that it is fundamentally destructive and negative and that "no popular interest can long be sustained by speculations which, in every aspect, are known to be essentially negative and essentially finite," with the Carlylean-sounding addendum that "Man's nature has something of infinity within itself, which requires a corresponding infinity in its objects" (164). Against the nature and order of man and God, Kant's negative philosophy and its destructive speculations yet live and rule, their reign attested by a continuing flood of texts and the forger's brand stamped on the words through which contemporary intellectual combats are conducted.

As the thought of an *absolutely* negative philosophy gaining such life and power appears intolerable, De Quincey concedes "both truth and value there certainly is in one part of the Kantian philosophy; and that part is its foundation" (164). He then proceeds to give a "few sentences" in order to "gratify the curiosity of *some* readers" likely to take an interest in "the peculiar distinctions of this philosophy," a cohort amounting perhaps to "two or three in a hundred" (165).<sup>73</sup> There is a notable discrepancy between the popular

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<sup>73</sup> De Quincey even seems to have doubts about the extent of interest residing in this 2-3 percent of the magazine-reading population, and confines himself thusly: "Even to these two or three out of each hundred, I shall not venture to ascribe a larger curiosity than with respect to the most general 'whereabouts' of its position – from what point it starts – whence and from what aspect it surveys the ground – and by what links from this starting-point it contrives to connect itself with the main objects of philosophic inquiry."

interest Kant's philosophy has attained in Germany and the far less expansive interest De Quincey anticipates for his condensed conveyance of the kernel of truth and value in this philosophy: the former spreading like wild-fire through the intellectual life of a nation, the latter being a curious instance for the wandering minds of a few abnormal readers. As critics from Mary Poovey to Margaret Russett have built convincing cases for De Quincey's role in creating a space in the nineteenth-century publishing marketplace for capital "L" Literature as a rarefied commodity (both integral to and self-distancing from this expanding market), we might read this discrepancy as an attempt to assure the reader of his intellectual superiority to the consumer of mass entertainment. This would accord with De Quincey's tendency to disparage the intellectual climate of England as dominated by commercial and narrowly practical interests. Nevertheless, even having come to the end of his "slight" but relatively technical<sup>74</sup> account of what should be the true and valuable interest of Kantian philosophy, i.e., its foundation, De Quincey seems unable to have done with the subject. Well after his discovery of the true essence of Kant's philosophy, De Quincey finds himself drawn to it with a bittersweet attraction, albeit "with a hatred to the German philosopher such as men are represented as feeling towards the gloomy enchanter, Zamiel or whomsoever, by whose hateful seductions they have been placed within a circle of malign influences." Nor has the enchantment of Kant's disenchanting philosophy yet been broken, for "As often as I looked into his works, I exclaimed in my heart, with the widowed queen of Carthage, using her words in

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<sup>74</sup> Besides De Quincey's usual recourse to Latin, the reader may find in this text a fairly thorough (given the space allotted) venture into issues of perception, experience and causation, situating Kant's work as a major advance on the empiricist approaches of Locke and Hume.

an altered application— / 'Quæsivit lucem – *ingemuitque repertâ.*'” (175).<sup>75</sup> Whatever of truth and value there may be in the systematic foundation of Kant’s philosophy, there is something in that philosophy that escapes the account of its true foundation, and yet manages to stimulate the thoughts and excite the passions of a literary-cultural nation of millions, as well as exert a continued force over the sensitive textual subject (both an experience and an accounting or narrating of experience) subsisting between De Quincey and his readers.

What is that Kant, or his philosophy (the two blur frequently in this text) does, that can generate such excitement and force? Despite De Quincey’s assessment of the long-term prospects of “essentially negative” speculations, the rhetoric of his text clearly recognizes the interest images of destruction (including warfare and dark magic) – or, for that matter, the image of philosophy as a destructive force coming to shatter cultural and religious institutions – can excite. In laying waste to old certitudes and habitual modes of thought, Kant’s philosophy creates a clearing. De Quincey places significant stress on Kant’s introduction of new terminology, but this stress relies on an understanding that the *effectual* introduction of new terminology in philosophy implies the annihilation of old associations and beliefs and the creation of new courses and possibilities (or landscapes) for the speculative explorations and relations of thought. Having answered (hypothesized) readers complaining of Kant’s philosophical foundation, De Quincey responds to the reader wishing “to see it further pursued or applied, I say that the possible

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<sup>75</sup> De Quincey here omits the “coelo” (heaven(s) / skies) from Virgil’s line in the *Aeneid*. This omission may be part of his translation of Dido’s death cries to a less immediately lethal situation, but seems to do little to disperse the mixing of erotic and epistemic (as a problem of light, vision and desire/anguish) in the original line.

applications are perhaps infinite” (173). Whatever we are to think of the actual applications pursued by Kant, the philosopher has opened the space for and introduced novelties into philosophy, the consequences and applications of which possess no obvious limitation. Having led the reader along the problem of how we can come to attribute causation to external reality,<sup>76</sup> De Quincey stops for a moment to invite the reader to take the confusion into which he has been led as a more general experience: “Let a man meditate but a little on this or other aspects of this transcendental philosophy, and he will find the steadfast earth itself rocking as it were beneath his feet; a world about him, which is in some sense a world of deception; and a world before him, which seems to promise a world of confusion, or '*a world not realized*'” (174). To reach this extreme point of disorientation, it may be necessary to engage in acts of intellectual violence; to refuse the seductions of human (all-too-human) aspiration, to level the pleasure-grounds to which fancy and imagination have grown accustomed, to deny the familiar positions and affirmations of received understanding. To speculate on and seek value in a world not (yet) realized, one first needs feel the ground of the world one inhabits, whose reliable solidity has long since exempted it from being any object of critical or searching thought, shake.

Stepping for a moment into a world of his own not realized, De Quincey briefly speculates on what he would have done, “had the transcendental philosophy

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<sup>76</sup> De Quincey offers this problem up as one of a variety of applications by Kant, and formulates this particular problem as a serial of moments (including epistemic subsumption and conceptual investment), concluding with a negated counterfactual: “finally, that there is the greatest reason to doubt, whether the idea of *causation* is at all applicable to any other world than this, or any other than a human experience” (173).

corresponded to my expectations.” In this counterfactual world, De Quincey proceeds from his studies at Oxford to Canada, claiming “I had even marked out the situation for a cottage and a considerable library, about seventeen miles from Quebec.” The object is not some Coleridgean plan of Pantisocracy, but rather a favorable vantage for solitude.

Unlike the climactically moderate and demographically crowded British Isles, Canada offers “the exalting presence in an under-consciousness of forests endless and silent, the everlasting sense of living amongst forms ... ennobling and impressive,” complete with “Great heats, or great colds” – reminders of natural presence and power here unobscured by too dense a population (175).<sup>77</sup> The excessive presence of humanity becomes a threat and occasion for misanthropy: “in England, it is possible to forget that we live amongst greater agencies than those of men and human institutions. Man, in fact, 'too much man,' as Timon complained most reasonably in Athens, was then, and is now, our greatest grievance in England. Man is a weed everywhere too rank” (175-6).<sup>78</sup> It is easy at this point to forget that this is the counterfactual world in which De Quincey *remains* within the paradisiacal expanses and hopeful enchantment of German literature and Kantian philosophy, for it follows an account which presents Kant’s critical philosophy as a skeptical, then ultimately cynical proceeding.<sup>79</sup> Even in its true foundation, the Kantian philosophy is a warlike entity, but take a step beyond this foundation, and Kant’s

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<sup>77</sup> The fantasy of Canada here recalls the Opium-eater’s call, following the “science of happiness,” for “as much snow, hail, frost, or storm, of one kind or another, as the skies can possibly afford us” and “a Canadian winter, or a Russian one, where every man is a but co-proprietor with the north wind in the fee-simple of his own ears” (II 59).

<sup>78</sup> This formula, “Man is a weed,” had been previously written in reference to humanity in East and South Asia in the *Confessions* (II 70).

<sup>79</sup> This transition occurs despite De Quincey’s relatively clear distinctions drawn between the dogmatic and skeptical philosophies to which Kant responded and the critical philosophy that he offered as a correction to the shortcomings of each towards the beginning of his account.



speculations and applications “are of a nature to make any man melancholy” and, if De Quincey’s experience is anything to go on, will tend to “shed the gloom of . . . misanthropy” on one’s views, making man appear “an abject animal,” member to “a reptile race” (173, 165). I will return to the question of misanthropy once we have reached the pleasures and the painful visions of opium, but for now, let three points suffice: 1) nature, both in its appearances as “under-consciousness” and as extreme events or experiences demanding attention, serves as a corrective to the tendency of humans existing in concentration to mistake themselves and their institutions for being superlatively great or decisive; 2) some degree of misanthropy – at least in this limited sense of correction, together with a desire for distance and solitude – obtains to both the unrealized fantasy of literature and philosophy, and the disenchanting (though still capable of exerting attraction) actuality of the transcendental philosophy presented in the text; 3) De Quincey never actually mentions what it is he would do with Kant’s philosophy and the considerable library in Canada – what we are left with, as with German literature before our philosophical detour, is landscape as a mode of thought, work and life.<sup>80</sup>

In this sketch, as in his compound essay-translation-review “Kant in his Miscellaneous Essays” (1830) and elsewhere, De Quincey indicates his desire and

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<sup>80</sup> Earlier, De Quincey speaks of his imagined “future life” as “a life dedicated and set apart to philosophy” before his disenchantment (164), and he does here attach the suggestion that in this counterfactual world, Kantian philosophy “left important openings for further pursuit” (175). Life, in these contexts, is necessarily indefinite or indeterminate, a possibility of genesis and experience rather than organic as natural and given, or life as a collection of known/knowable bodies and operations (the object of biology, or biography, etc.). Hence De Quincey’s need to include “life itself” among the number superseded by the creative proliferation of German literature (which nonetheless teems and heaves with life), and why, rather than providing any particular plan or course of life for the Canadian De Quincey, our author contents himself with providing conditions under which something different and less human (as a type of self-satisfaction and error) can emerge.

intention to write a work on Kant's critical philosophy. The specific dimensions of the work varied between mentions – sometimes encompassing all three of the Critiques, at other times focusing primarily on the first and its consequences (perhaps with other works playing secondary roles) – but the intent throughout was to present a clear, critical and functionally complete account of Kant's philosophical system in a manner accessible to English readers (or at least those among them with some experience in reading philosophy). De Quincey's account of the transmission and criticism of Kant's work into England (e.g., in "On the English notices of Kant" (1823), letter five in his *Letters to a Young Gentleman whose Education has been Neglected* series, or in the Miscellaneous Essays piece mentioned above) repeatedly indicated the need for such a work, but this work, like many frequently mentioned by De Quincey and Coleridge, never ended up materializing. Kant's transcendental philosophy clearly exercised a powerful hold on De Quincey, but looking through his published work on or related to the philosopher, one encounters something quite different from the obligatory paragraphs on the *Critique of Pure Reason* through which Kant is most often introduced in contemporary university courses (unless the topic is ethics, in which case the paragraphs concern the categorical imperative via the *Grundlegung*).

De Quincey's Kant is less the thinker of the Grand System or Great Idea (though his image as warlord and world-destroyer maintains a negative version of this) than a variable figure, an intellect now concentrated to a point of inhuman power, now roving through miscellaneous materials. He is also a significantly more bodily figure than his present-day academic image, as critics who have written on "The Last Days of

Emmanuel Kant” would be quick to remind us.<sup>81</sup> De Quincey occasionally seems to go out of his way to find mistakes and mis-steps by the philosopher – as in his decision to introduce his readers to Kant’s early and unfortunately insubstantial and (worse) Burkean *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* in an 1824 essay through the embarrassing theme of its remarks on “National Character.” This particular decision is all the more strange given that De Quincey was clearly familiar with Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, but never goes beyond a few bare mentions of the text in his publications.<sup>82</sup> These askance approaches and perspectives can also produce more compelling or suggestive images of the philosopher, as in “On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts,” where Kant’s absolute position on truth-telling renders him an advocate of homicide, and an aider of murderers.<sup>83</sup> In a footnote nearly as long as its parent text, “On Superficial Knowledge” (collected with other miscellaneous pieces in the Ticknor, Reed & Fields edition into *The Note-Book of an English Opium Eater*), De Quincey asserts the value of Kant’s sometimes apparently monstrous or inhuman thought: “Just as certain as it is that all human beings could never, by clubbing their visual powers together, have arrived at the power of seeing what the telescope discovers to the astronomer; just so

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<sup>81</sup> This text has probably done the most in the Anglophone world to spread and keep alive the anecdote of the citizens of Königsberg setting their clocks by Kant’s afternoon walk.

<sup>82</sup> One possible explanation on this point would could be a wariness at wandering into Kant’s aesthetics, given Coleridge’s extensive borrowings from them. Alternatively, one of the contributing factors to De Quincey’s non-production his great work on Kant’s philosophical system (or “the transcendental philosophy”) might also be a factor here – i.e., a desire to do justice to what he knew to be a decisive and important work, and a consequent disinclination to set aside the time and procure the labor needed to do such justice. Barring the discovery of some new correspondence or personal notes, however, we are unlikely to arrive at any decisive answer on this point.

<sup>83</sup> The humor here may be a product of the absurdity of a respectable philosopher actually advocating homicide, but De Quincey’s text also recognizes something genuinely disturbing in Kant’s clearly expressed opinion on the matter of whether one may lie to a murderer seeking out a victim.

certain it is that the human intellect would never have arrived at an analysis of the infinite or a *Critical Analysis of the Pure Reason* (the principal work of Kant), unless individuals had dismembered (as it were) and insulated this or that specific faculty, and had thus armed their intellectual sight by the keenest abstraction and by the submersion of the other powers of their nature” (522).<sup>84</sup> The image of the philosopher becoming an instrument (here a telescope) will recur in the *Confessions*. Here, as an act of supreme concentration, abstraction, discipline (“submersion” or mutilation), it achieves and discovers something in analysis impossible under normal circumstances and the regular operations of human bodies and minds; a kind of creation or construction in thought and a becoming-mathematical.<sup>85</sup> At the same time, De Quincey’s Kant writes, and writes with interest, even fascination, across any number of different subjects – eager to stuff the pockets of his works as well as his sentences as full as possible. This same Kant writes of conjectural or universal histories as well as proto-anthropology<sup>86</sup>, of international politics and of everyday sayings. A dour (and slightly satanic) Kant might systematically take apart all existing proofs of God’s existence or confine religion to the bounds of bare reason, but a Kant with more wit and bonhomie could satirically skewer the spirit-seer Swedenborg, or convey an agreeable catalog of instances of the beautiful. This also a

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<sup>84</sup> The footnote (the only footnote to this short piece) begins with reference to Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* – hence (in part) the concern with combination and dismemberment of human faculties.

<sup>85</sup> It is important to remember here that “an analysis of the infinite” for De Quincey’s mid-nineteenth-century audience would invoke both the much earlier pioneering achievements of Newton and Leibniz and cutting-edge mathematical and philosophical work, in this period between the invention of calculus (which was reformulated in this century) and the advent of set theory (in the 1870s). While mathematicians may have become (at least somewhat) used to the calculations of infinitesimals, “an analysis of the infinite” could yet be a journey quite deep into unmapped regions of thought.

<sup>86</sup> I use this term as a catch-all for various texts on human cultures and races, as well as Kant’s lectures in a course on the emerging field of anthropology, many of which De Quincey references.

more scientific Kant than most of us are used to, whose second published work was on astronomy and who wrote with authority on geology.<sup>87</sup>

There are then two primary presentations of Kant by De Quincey to keep in mind when we encounter the Opium-eater reading him: this motley portrait that emerges across the span of De Quincey's publications, and the elaborate performance of reading, hating and loving Kant (Kant the tree, the destroyer, Aeneas) put together in the 1836 sketch. As in his sentence extending beyond all propriety or common sense, Kant is a collection of texts, subjects, thoughts, projects: a thousand and one instances of and for writing. It is never enough to designate Kant 'destroyer' and have done with the matter, for the philosopher always demands another figuration (the warlord, the Hun, the demon) and always excites the production of more imagery and text, always calls up another association or creates the need for another reaction or remark.<sup>88</sup> Kant is an event rendering return to what came before impossible, as indicated by De Quincey's decision in his 1821 essay on Jean-Paul Richter to set the influence of the first critique alongside the French Revolution as effecting a radical change and stimulating new life in German literature and culture, each making "one truth ... clear – whatever was, was bad." In this new era, good authors in Germany – previously rare – have become "so numerous, that in

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<sup>87</sup> This is a side of Kant De Quincey has good grounds to draw attention to. On the subject of astronomy, De Quincey singles out Kant for his accurate prediction of Uranus (before the planet had been observed), although today his formulation of the nebular hypothesis in advance of Laplace might seem his most important astronomical insight, and in his own time, Kant won a Berlin Academy prize for work on the earth's rotation. Kant also continued to work and publish in different forms of natural philosophy throughout his life. Although in the present day, we are unlikely see teleology as having anything to do with real science, Kant's decision to split the *Critique of Judgment* into two aesthetic and teleological halves might have suggested to his readers a desire to find a juncture or *Treffungspunkt* between the arts and sciences (or, given Kant's version of aesthetics, between human experience and culture on the one hand, and non-human life and causation on the other).

<sup>88</sup> Or footnote.

the any sketch of their literature all individual notice becomes impossible.” Despite this de-individuating proliferation of good authors, De Quincey responds to the question of the correspondent (who had prompted this piece by asking for general direction in German authors) as to his favorite author by providing three.<sup>89</sup> Kant is placed first in the company of Schiller and Richter, and then immediately set aside “as hardly belonging to the *literature* – in the true sense of that word” (*IV* 607). The classificatory systems of present-day libraries and bookstores may concur by banishing Kant’s writings from their fiction / literature sections, but De Quincey’s presentations of Kant trouble any too-strenuous exclusion of Kant’s philosophy and writings from realms imaginative, speculative and aesthetic. Setting aside the less interesting question of whether Kant *writes* literature, one can still ask whether his philosophy and writings, and the presentations of these by De Quincey, provide a model or project (or fantasy, or vision) for literature. It is in the context of this latter question that De Quincey’s *Confessions* relate to Dickens’s *Sketches* and Eliot’s *Impressions* as a sustained and generically-playful aesthetic experiment, testing the bounds of literary presentation and vital association.

### *Confessions*

If De Quincey off-handedly rejects Kant from the domains of literature, it is not immediately obvious that we should recognize the rights of *Confessions of an English*

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<sup>89</sup> While the selection of individual authors may work implicitly against this uncountable or individually unnoticeable mass of (post)revolutionary authors, De Quincey’s refusal to select and elevate just one author, substituting three in his place, accords with this process of pluralization and proliferation.

*Opium-Eater* to that territory. “Confessions” might invoke the high example of Augustine, but the full title speaks to the kind of vulgar and crassly urban-commercial interests and excitements De Quincey followed Wordsworth in denigrating and establishing as the enemy to true literature or poetry. Moreover, it is far from clear why we should consider a work to be literature that professes, from its first sentence to be “the record of a remarkable period in my life” (II 9). This image of *Confessions* as essentially biographical has proven tremendously difficult to dispense with; even critics who recognize significantly more than direct autobiography going on in this text end up falling back on the term, as in Cannon Schmidt’s characterization of it as “gothic autobiography” or Daniel O’Quinn’s claim that “the *Confessions* is less an autobiography than a biography waiting to be written” (“Murder, Hospitality, Philosophy” 155). De Quincey’s rhetoric in his introductory section, “To The Reader,” even throws into doubt whether we ought to classify the *Confessions* as literature “in the true sense of the word” that he himself provides. Here, De Quincey offers up his text, avowing “I trust that it will prove not merely an interesting record, but in a considerable degree useful and instructive” (9). While the interesting / instructive pair recalls Horace’s imperative to instruct and delight, it also anticipates an invective against bad definitions or characterization of literature De Quincey will publish only a year after the second part of *Confessions*. In the third letter from *Letters to a Young Gentleman whose Education has been Neglected*, “On Language,” De Quincey offers up his well-known distinction between power and knowledge as a means of distinguishing between literature in its philosophical and popular senses. Taking issue with received knowledge (what “we are

told”), De Quincey rejects the opposition between pleasure and knowledge and the claim that books exist “to instruct or to amuse” as a “vulgar antithesis” and “wretched antithesis,” respectively, completely useless for any true understanding of literature (*III* 53-4). This way of thinking is one case among many showing “how men, by their own errors of understanding, feeble thinking, and inadequate divisions, form chains of meanness and servility for themselves” (54).<sup>90</sup> De Quincey’s language here seems worlds away from the conservative image he carefully cultivates elsewhere, using the language of enlightenment against the slavery of received tradition (here aesthetic-critical traditions both Latin and English), and likewise raises the question as to how we are to read De Quincey’s introduction to his own work – a work which De Quincey will later unequivocally class as literature, under his self-created subheading of “impassioned prose.” If this text is literature, and literature with the significance with which De Quincey desires to invest the word, then it will have to be in terms other than those with which he opens the piece.

Kant’s aesthetics, particularly his account of the beautiful and aesthetic ideas, can provide an alternative that eludes the enslaving inertia of received formulae, and the pitfalls of a too-absolute exclusion of knowledge from literature,<sup>91</sup> while providing a basis for aesthetic value particularly relevant to the varied forms and operations of the *Confessions*. The aesthetic idea does not simply negate concepts and the forms and

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<sup>90</sup> The language here recalls both Kant’s definition of enlightenment as the emergence from self-incurred tutelage and Spinoza’s concerns that inadequate knowledge (of which affects can be a form) creates human bondage. It also raises the question as to how much De Quincey may have known of Blake’s work.

<sup>91</sup> De Quincey himself later moderated the more absolute opposition between knowledge and power presented in the 1823 letter.



bodies of knowledge they entail in evading the domination of concepts and rational ideas. Instead, aesthetic ideas produce an excess of filiation, generating such a wealth of empirical and intellectual materials – unlimited chains of associating thought and sensation – as can never be expressed in a determinate concept or fall under the rule of an individual idea.<sup>92</sup> Likewise, it is of no use to claim that *Confessions* is literary by virtue of its exclusion of anything that might not be considered literature, for fear of contamination or dilution. Instead, the Opium-eater's work constructs its literary identity, like Kant's aesthetic idea and the ideal of literature (and poetry and the novel) advocated by the *Athenaeum* circle, by proliferating and combining genres, tonal registers and frames of reference, under a mode of play, rather than directed knowledge-seeking, systematic didacticism, predictable entertainment, or other deterministic modes of textual proceeding. "Biography" and "autobiography" can be useful terms here, provided we do not end up mistaking a text containing biography, and playing with the genre thereof, for a biography simpliciter. *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* is a confessional relation of a life (not always De Quincey's), but it is also a (failed) Bildungsroman; a series and sequel of encounters; a miscellany of episodes; an attempt at scientific analysis of a misunderstood substance for the edification of contemporary medicine; a sustained discourse with the reader on happiness, pharmacology and language; an excuse for poetic apostrophe and classical reference; a collection of visions; a meditation on reading,

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<sup>92</sup> I cannot over-state the importance of Kant's assertion that aesthetic ideas "make reason think more" (183). In this concise claim, Kant establishes the means for overturning any account of his philosophy that relies on the dominance of reason (practical or otherwise), and anticipates much of the substance of De Quincey's various aesthetic provocations to any too-masterly version of rationalism (e.g., in the form of those "affecting the Stoic philosophy" and encouraging "desperate adventures of morality" in the *Confessions* (II 54-5) or Kantian moral imperative in "On Murder, considered as one of the Fine Arts,").

experience, and works not written; and an experimental text making use of a body to hand.<sup>93</sup>

This list should not be taken a sequence, according to which *Confessions* is a Bildungsroman, then a series of encounters, etc. De Quincey's divisions (e.g., "Preliminary Confessions," "The Pleasures of Opium,") are by no means meaningless, but neither they nor the list above provide anything like a clean cutting of discrete elements. The "Introduction to the Pains of Opium," for example, spends only a paragraph fulfilling its titular function, preferring to devote its time to speculating on the lives of academic and domestic objects, painting a circuitous portrait of the author's conditions, entertaining and threatening the reader, reflecting on happiness, and relating "a little incident," now much gone over by critics, of a visit to his cottage by an inhabitant of Malaysia. Nor are the different tonal and generic registers of this text at all sectioned off from one another; within a short space of text and without clearly demarcated transitions, De Quincey will offer a medical account set against the speculations of doctors and precise in quantity, an amusing quote from "the Duke of ----," an anecdote concerning large-scale patterns in national consumption, casual racism, an extended quotation from Athenaeus, a scatological joke, and an apostrophe modeled on Milton. As in the Kantian sentence, there is always the possibility of further stuffing and compounding in its play of disorder. This tendency is complemented by several of the more obvious features of De Quincey's writing style as expressed in this text, often working in combination: the frequent impositions of quotes (and parentheticals) – the use

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<sup>93</sup> This list is by no means exhaustive.

of the dash for addition, continuation, side-comment and interruption as well as elision – the sentence employing colons, comma-carried clauses, exclamation and question marks, italics for emphasis or foreign phrases, semi-colons; anything to prevent the sentence from devolving into a series of unmarked characters coming to a full stop. The publishing history of an English Opium-Eater attests to a similar reluctance to come to any full stops – the *Confessions* itself requiring an Appendix shortly following the publication of Part II and a substantive revision and expansion in 1856, and spawning two textual legacies following directly from this text: the *Autobiography of an English Opium-Eater*, present in a scattered series of articles (with and without the “Sketches of Life and Manners” fore-heading) with a similar degree of straying from the strictly biographical, and the never-exactly-completed *Suspiria de Profundis: Being a Sequel to the Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (published in parts in *Blackwoods* in 1845). In a mode of writing where the demands of dialogue and literary interest and play take precedence, there is always the possibility of another digression, reflection, anecdote, interjection, comment; another occasion to see what writing might do by way of experiment.

All this being said in favor of De Quincey’s literary dis-organization, one note should be made with reference to the confessional form of *Confessions* before proceeding to the operations of opium and philosophy within the text. De Quincey’s use of this form is by no means conventional. The full title is somewhat contradictory, as in the first and most clearly autobiographical part, De Quincey is not yet an opium-eater, while in part II De Quincey spends more time justifying himself and his actions than confessing them per

se. Unlike Augustine, there is no clear arc of sin and repentance, and De Quincey is significantly to provide the sort of (appearance of) fullness of disclosure evinced in Rousseau.<sup>94</sup> There are two central lies that, assuming we include the 1822 Appendix as part of the text, provide the text with shape and movement, and both betray and fulfil the form of confession. The first is that the Opium-Eater has completely recovered from his addiction at the point of writing the *Confessions*. Even though addiction literature was in no particularly developed state at this point (being largely didactic and cautionary in nature),<sup>95</sup> De Quincey's readers would nevertheless have found a narrative of fall, struggle and recovery to be a familiar structure. From the opening section of Part I, De Quincey uses the language of enthrallment, struggle and self-conquest, and as Part II draws to a close, he satisfies the curiosity of importunate readers: "I triumphed" (II 9, 75).<sup>96</sup> In the Appendix, De Quincey acknowledges that he has left his readers with "the impression that I had wholly renounced the use of Opium," avowing that he had he intended to convey this impression (82). While this impression is in fact false, he gives as his reasons for the deception first, that the recording of his suffering "necessarily presumes in the recorder a power of surveying his own case as a cool spectator, and a degree of spirits for adequately describing it" and second, that his rapid reductions of use had caused him to think of himself "as a reformed opium-eater," with a third proviso that "even this impression was left to be collected from the general tone of the conclusion,

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<sup>94</sup> The posthumous publication of Rousseau's text complicates the claim here within broader context, but my concern here is primarily with how texts present themselves. I should emphasize that this is a *relative* claim, and does not entail that Rousseau gives us some sort of clear and direct view of his life, but rather that the presentation of disclosure with an appearance of directness or removing barriers is important to how this text formulates and presents itself.

<sup>95</sup> This remains, admittedly, the primary function of the mass of addiction texts to the present day.

<sup>96</sup> Immediately conditioning this triumph, however, with continued and intense sufferings.

and not from any specific words – which are in no instance at variance with the literal truth” (82). So, the lie was necessary as assumption or implication for my act of writing itself, the proximity of the lie to the truth was such that I was also deceived, and finally the lie was only (strongly) implied, never technically stated. All of these protests do nothing to obscure the fact that De Quincey has broken a sort of faith or fidelity promised to the reader, and denied her the satisfaction of a predictable and (here) vouchsafed conclusion. At the same time, the confession is doubled, being both a confession of a life and a course of addiction, and a confession of the lie under which this confession had been conducted.

The other lie is more subtly introduced, although no less necessary to a project of personal confession, or, for that matter, biography. It enters with the first full sentence of *Confessions*, promising “the record of a remarkable period of my life” (9) – or, in other words, it is my story that I am about to tell you, a portion (or “extract”) of my life that I am about to relate. The two lies are of course related; as the confession will take the narrative form of subjection, struggle and triumph, it will be my story and more particularly my story of agency and self-possession imperiled and regained. In the portrait of his surroundings in “Introduction to the Pains of Opium,” De Quincey concedes that, “that being the hero of the piece, or (if you choose) the criminal at the bar, my body should be had into court” (60-1). This concession both identifies the Opium-eater as the active center of this piece and brings his agency into question, as he slides from hero to criminal to body. Nearly at the end of Part II, De Quincey completes the movement of doubt initiated here (and arguably exacerbated at the opening of the dreams

and visions section). The Opium-eater may have seen it as necessary to create “interest of a personal sort in the confessing subject” back in the “Preliminary Confessions” (12), but here the interest is shifted by means of attribution to “the judicious reader” from the “subject” of the visions to their “power:” “Not the Opium-eater, but the opium, is the true hero of the tale, and the legitimate centre on which the interest revolves.” In an eleventh-hour transformation of the purpose of his text, De Quincey renounces any claim to provide a “useful and instructive” record, instead asserting that “the object was to display the marvellous agency of opium, whether for pleasure or for pain: if that is done, the action of the piece has closed” (74). While the criteria of interest arguably remains, this is cannot be the “merely” interesting as a mode of amusement, as pleasure and pain are rendered of equal value in service to the imperative to exhibit the power of a hero who exceeds the capacities of any human actor.<sup>97</sup>

### *The Philosopher and the Opium-Eater*

If the true hero of the tale, if what the reader has been led through is as much *a* life of opium as anything the Opium-eater might claim as *my* life, then the tale of the *Confessions* is also tale of philosophy, or of an encounter between philosophy and opium. Philosophy in this tale is less a system (transcendental or otherwise) than a mode of living, relating and writing, a line of thought and a means of producing. In first

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<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, as in the *Critique of Judgment*, this sentence seeks to foreclose the participation of external interests *as determining forces* altogether (even as, in the context of publication, De Quincey is perfectly aware of various interests residing in and existing for the purchasing public), the only interest capable of providing the power of determination being, in the end, the opium itself. Also note that this indifference to pleasure or pain stands in marked contrast both to the Opium-eater’s early justifications of writing this text and its parts (e.g., wishing to avoid what “would painfully obtrude” on reader’s consciousness (12)) and his self-characterization as “Eudaemonist” (54-5)

introducing himself to the reader, the Opium-eater affirms “without breach of truth or modesty” that his “life has been, on the whole, the life of a philosopher: from my birth I was made an intellectual creature, and intellectual in the highest sense my pursuits and pleasures have been, even from my schoolboy days.” Philosophy then, is not just a matter for the academy or church, nor is it only the training needed for justice, the fulfilment of civic duties and the proper function of the body politic; philosophy is also a mode of life, something that can be present in a body from birth, a means of identifying creatures, and something that informs, directs and participates in pursuits and pleasures. Our narrator will later cash in this reference to his “schoolboy days” for unabashed boasting, singling himself out for remarkable and precocious intellectual accomplishments. More immediately, he places himself with the “class of opium eaters ... a very numerous class indeed” (10). Against the reader too-ready to impose his own preconceptions on this class, De Quincey lists among its members “the late Dean of ---, Lord ---, Mr. --- the philosopher, a late Under-Secretary of State ... and many others hardly less known, whom it would be tedious to mention.” While this list continues a strategy of self-distinction, placing the Opium-eater among an honored company, he follows it with associations notably less elevated. According to “respectable London druggists” stationed “in widely remote corners of London,” the city contains an “immense” number of eaters, many of whom eat in such quantities that the question for any given of these purchasers is whether this is a habit grown over time, or an attempt at suicide. Evidence also appears from Manchester cotton-manufacturers, whose employees “were rapidly getting into the practice of opium-eating,” taking to it as a relatively

economical form of recreation (11). Readings emphasizing national and global markets have gotten good mileage out of De Quincey's frequent references to prices and patterns of consumption, and the Opium-eater's switch from personal acquaintance to the testimony of purveyors and mass employers as a basis for evidence suggests that the class of opium-eaters are so numerous that only statistics and large-scale economic behavior can even begin to provide a means of coming to understand (or come to terms with) them. The philosopher may be a singular animal seeking out peculiar pursuits and pleasures, but the opium-eater floats along in the ocean of his or her uncountably numerous class, carried along by currents and tides too massive to be made sense of on any individual scale.

De Quincey cannot let the Opium-eater's drama of distinction and immersion conclude so quickly and picks it back up in easing his reader into the Preliminary Confessions. "If a man 'whose talk is of oxen' should become an opium-eater, the probability is that (if he is not too dull to dream at all) he will dream about oxen."<sup>98</sup> Unlike this agricultural beast, in whom habitual economic activity engulfs all discourse and interiority, "the Opium-eater boasteth himself to be a philosopher." This title "that the phantasmagoria of *his* dreams (waking or sleeping, day-dreams or night-dreams) is suitable to one who in that character, / *Humani nihil a se alienum putat*" (12). The intellectual tension between the Opium-eater's snobbish dismissal of the agriculturally-concerned man and his affirmation that nothing human is alien to him is so glaring as to demand interpretation, possibly as strained joke. This could also accord with the Opium-

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<sup>98</sup> As various editors have noted, this is a slight mis-quote from *Ecclesiasticus*.



eater's conditional language around his title, as he "boasteth himself to be," and speaks of the need to sustain one's "claim to the title of philosopher," rendering his own claim at least potentially unsettled (12). Nevertheless, this passage provides the reader with a basis for beginning to imagine what forms of life and thought the title entails. Whereas other sorts of occupation and identity (or creature-being) tend to become consuming interests, blotting out the vision and imagination of what lies beyond their ken and concern, philosophy starts from a negation of limited and isolating interest, or, more precisely, a refusal to exclude, a refusal to admit alienation and dissociation into the field of human experience.

Deep into the Preliminary Confessions of Part I, the Opium-eater further develops this humanistic character of the philosopher in relation to two female figures. The first is the anonymous child in the vast house of Mr. ---, the lesser law practitioner, who is "apart from her situation, ... not what would be called an interesting child; she was neither pretty, nor quick in understanding, nor remarkably pleasing in manners." Having eliminated these sources of interest – her possible attractions physical, intellectual or social – the Opium-eater goes on to aver that he had no need for the "embellishments of novel accessories," for "plain human nature, in its humblest and most homely apparel, was enough" to elicit his love for a fellow sufferer (24). From a neglected child, the Opium-eater's affections proceed to attach "a young woman, and one of that unhappy class who subsist upon the wages of prostitution" (24). Against the anticipated disgust and judgment of the reader, he repudiates said reader at length (while taking the opportunity to engage in a bit of self-aggrandizement):

But the truth is, that at no time of my life have I been a person to hold myself polluted by the touch or approach of any creature that wore a human shape; on the contrary, from my very earliest youth it has been my pride to converse familiarly, *more Socratio*, with all human beings, man, woman, and child, that chance might fling in my way; a practice which is friendly to the knowledge of human nature, to good feelings, and to that frankness of address which becomes a man who would be thought a philosopher. For a philosopher should not see with the eyes of the poor liminary creature calling himself a man of the world, and filled with narrow and self-regarding prejudices of birth and education, but should look upon himself as a catholic creature, and as standing in equal relation to high and low, to educated and uneducated, to the guilty and the innocent. (25)

The philosopher must be able to inhabit the non-space apart from all worldly interests and situations, in which the separations of social hierarchy and position cease to obtain, and from which connection and conversation become possible with any other human.

Alongside the reference to Socrates, the Opium-eater adds another image of philosophy in the guise of austerity, here blended with an etymological joke: being “at that time of necessity a peripatetic, or a walker of the streets, I naturally fell in more frequently with those female peripatetics who are technically called street-walkers” (25). Having claimed this allegiance, the Opium-eater reinforces his claim by noting that these same wanderers have taken his part against watchmen –linking the philosopher, like the Opium-eater, to a human mass ranging within, outside of, and at the edges of jurisdiction.

The sort of philosopher this opium-eater might be cannot be one too wedded to enforcement of morality and the rendering of judgments. Confessing to an infirmity of being “too much of an Eudaemonist” the Opium-eater continues, “I hanker too much after a state of happiness, both for myself and others; I cannot face misery, whether my own or not, with an eye of sufficient firmness” (54). Standing against “the gentlemen in the cotton trade at Manchester ... affecting the Stoic philosophy” (a quasi-facetious conflation explained in a footnote), he takes “the liberty of an Eclectic philosopher” and lays claim to the mercy of a more tolerant sect (54). As Youngquist notes, he also renders morality a question of digestion, explaining “An inhuman moralist I can no more endure in my nervous state than opium that has not been boiled.” Reserving his energies for his “intellectual labours” at hand, the Opium-eater refuses to proceed on any “voyage of moral improvement” or “desperate adventures of morality” (55). Youngquist and other critics have read these lines as direct attacks on the famous moralist Kant, and not without reason. While it would be difficult to fit Kant into the clothes of a Eudaemonist as described by De Quincey, the fuller portrait of Kant provided in De Quincey’s published works provide no shortage of materials for the portrait of an eclectic, given to flights of speculation and not without interest in the happiness of others (e.g., in “Perpetual Peace”). While we have neither cause nor evidence to make any equation between the Kant of the second critique and De Quincey’s eclectic eudaemonist, his sensitive perception and impression of pleasures and pains beyond his individual person (body and interests) suggests at least some common ground with the social operations of an aesthetically-apprehended *sensus communis*.

Neither Kant nor any other philosopher makes any very extensive appearance in the *Confessions*, but the appearances that Kant does make are significant. The first is in a footnote in the introduction to the Preliminary Confessions, in which the Opium-Eater is reflecting on the paucity of philosophers in England fulfilling the demands of the title. The footnote explains a hesitation as to whether include an unnamed figure (Hazlitt) among their number, considering him more a critic than a philosopher per se. Further, his education has been wanting, for “he has not read Plato in his youth (which most likely was only his misfortune), but neither has he read Kant in his manhood (which is his fault)” (13n). If Plato marks a necessary stage of education, a culmination of philosophy’s past, Kant stands for its present and futurity, as necessary reading for any who would take part in its development. The second mention takes place at the Opium-eater’s cottage retreat: “And what am I doing among the mountains? Taking opium. Yes; but what else? Why reader, in 1812, the year we are now arrived at, as well as for some years previous, I have been chiefly studying German metaphysics in the writings of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, &c.” and being classed by himself and his neighbors under “that indefinite body called *gentlemen*” (52-3). As the title of gentleman makes no concrete claims on one’s occupation, studying German metaphysics is an uncertain occupation, its duration, motivation, and what may be expected to result from it being all beyond the scope of reliable prediction. As if to underscore this unpredictability, the Opium-eater reveals that these encounters with philosophy and opium have rendered him pregnant: Responding to the reader asking after his health, he responds: “In short, how do I do? Why, pretty well, I thank you, reader; in the phrase of ladies in the straw, ‘as well

as can be expected” (53). Whether the issue of this pregnancy finds its way into life depends entirely on which text we imagine to have had this triple parentage.

One possible child, a child stillborn after a long and difficult labor, appears shortly after the opening of *The Pains of Opium* proper (not their introduction). After 1812 (this is a pregnancy carried well past nine months), the Opium-eater finds himself unable to pursue his “proper vocation,” i.e., “the exercise of the analytic understanding,” to study and to read for pleasure. Analytic studies require the possibility of continuous effort, and are “not to be pursued by fits and starts, or fragmentary effort.” This enfeeblement is aggravating both for the remembrance of past power now lost and the life it terminates: “I had devoted the labour of my whole life, and had dedicated my intellect, blossoms and fruits, to the slow and elaborate toil of constructing one single work, to which I had presumed to give the title of an unfinished work of Spinoza’s—viz., *De Emendatione Humani Intellectus*.” The decision to take the title of an unfinished work becomes entirely appropriate. “Locked up, as by frost, like any Spanish bridge or aqueduct, begun upon too great a scale for the resources of the architect” the corpse of this book becomes “a memorial to my children of hopes defeated, of baffled efforts, of materials uselessly accumulated, of foundations laid that were never to support a super-structure” (63). The accumulation of architectural metaphor invokes the grand analytic architect of philosophy, who in a text De Quincey obsessed over, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, wrote of “the architectonic of pure reason,” and of reason itself as “architectonic,” i.e., as tending to create systems out of mere collections or aggregates. Capable only of fitful labor and fragments, the Opium-eater is incapable of pursuing any

such systematic achievement, and is reduced to a “state of imbecility” – a state only confirmed by an abortive attempt at a work of political economy. It is worth noting, however, that the unfinished life labor was not a Critique or critical analysis, not a work like the architect or the moralist, personae of the first two critiques, but a work for the emendation of the human intellect, modeled at least in title on Spinoza. As the Opium-eater steadfastly refuses to go on any voyage of moral improvement, it seems more likely that his emendation would draw closer to Spinoza’s *Ethics*, aiming at the elimination of errors in understanding and limited perception and the development of adequate knowledge of the relations of bodies and thoughts, with the proviso that we do not know in advance all that a body may be capable of.<sup>99</sup>

However, neither De Quincey nor the Opium-eater have quite had done with Kant yet. At one point after physical collapse and increased dosage (temporalities begin to run together near this point in *Confessions*),<sup>100</sup> the Opium-eater decreases the quantity of his consumption, and finds that “my brain performed its functions as healthily as ever before; I read Kant again, and again I understood him, or fancied that I did” (56). Here, Kant is an intellectual test, but also a sign of health: an exercise of the mind and thus an

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<sup>99</sup> There is no small amount of overlap between Spinoza and Kant as far as the imagery and concerns of enlightenment are concerned. Nevertheless, I would draw a sharp line between De Quincey’s *portrayals* of Kant as Attila or Moralist, who either introduces only the freedom of destruction, or insists on a freedom indistinguishable from the moral law (an abyss of possible concerns and comments opens here – run), and Spinoza’s enlightenment as an attempt to free ourselves from inadequate modes of knowledge that restrict our ability to perceive, act and relate to others and our surroundings. This latter figure does, however, have a significant amount in common with the Kant of the third critique (and, for that matter, Kant in parts of *Was ist Aufklärung?* and *Streit der Fakultäten*).

<sup>100</sup> At last reckoning before this point, the reader stood at three years after a physical and intellectual struggle in 1813. It is not precisely clear from the text whether the intellectual struggles described in the last paragraph are the same as those of 1813, or if these are two separate instances of physical collapse and intellectual enervation.

affirmation of the healthy operations of the body and its brain. Kant's final appearance is indirect, coming in an extended painting of his cottage retreat, according to the "science of happiness." Correcting the reader-painter's tendency to substitute the familiar or ideal for the real, the Opium-eater instructs: "No, you may as well paint the real receptacle, which was not of gold, but of glass, and as much like a wine-decanter as possible. Into this you may put a quart of ruby-coloured laudanum; that, and a book of German Metaphysics placed by its side, will sufficiently attest my being in the neighbourhood" (60). O'Quinn is entirely correct to take this "double sign" of the bottle and the book as "the sign of the Opium-eater," but I cannot concur with him that "as an indirect presentation," they "only indicate what the Opium-eater has refused to present directly" ("Murder, Philosophy, Hospitality" 157). The Opium-eater does later refuse to present his body before the court, asking or instructing the reader-painter to paint him "according to your own fancy" (61) – although this could be read as either a substitution of the pleasant and familiar for the real (as the Opium-eater has not previously left this image up to the fancy or whim of the painter), or as an acknowledgment of the necessity of the painter-reader's imaginative participation in any textual endeavor. In any event, the double of sign of bottle and book *is* a presentation of the creature and body that the Opium-eater is, of the intellectual and physical connections and relations the Opium-eater is capable of forming, of what collects the thoughts and bodily affects that find expression in this text.

Before we move from book to bottle, a note should be given as to what sort of actions the Opium-eating philosopher undertakes. A complete account would be

impracticable, for it would encompass the entirety of *Confessions*, and many other texts besides. Nevertheless, the conjoined title indicates a mode of life and operation, and some indication of this mode (beyond what has already been given) should be provided. Take, then, the Opium-eater's war on medical accounts of opium. Against "all that has been hitherto written on the subject of opium," whether by travelers or professors, he has "but one emphatic criticism to pronounce – Lies! lies! lies!" (43). Being no Stoic, the Opium-eater is bound to no particularly strenuous dictates of self-control, and is free to wield whatever weapons of rhetoric, humor, insult and insinuation are to hand. Amidst this miscellany of aggression, two strategies of attack stand out as weapons of the opium-eating philosopher. The first is an intimate relationship with language, with its otherwise neglected precisions and with an understanding of the apprehensions and misunderstandings that can result from its associational sliding. In arguing that opium cannot produce intoxication, the Opium-eater is careful to emphasize that this inability obtains both in degree and kind and to distinguish between the object itself and laudanum (which can intoxicate by virtue of its alcohol) (44). While the laudanum may be called opium in casual discourse, a more precise use of language would exercise analysis in its literal sense, and avoid error by unloosing the part from the whole. Having come across testimony from a presumably well-qualified surgeon alleging that intoxication is in fact produced, a careful disentangling of the senses of words resolves the situation: the surgeon might "proceed on a logical error of using the word intoxication with too great latitude, and extending it generically to all modes of nervous excitement, instead of restricting it as the expression for a specific sort of excitement connected with certain



diagnostics.” To strengthen this claim, the Opium-eater marshals the evidence of both the habitual language use of non-practitioners claiming to be drunk on green tea, and of a medical student “for whose knowledge I have reason to feel great respect,” maintaining that a recovering patient “had got drunk on a beef-steak” (46). Whatever qualifications one may possess by virtue of knowledge and/or training, we are all liable to confusion in language, and require the aid of philosophy to achieve adequate knowledge and clear perception and distinction.

Lest we make De Quincey into another Diotima or Wittgenstein, let us turn to the next offensive stratagem, which lies in a vehement appeal to experience.<sup>101</sup> “Unscientific authors” writing on opium demonstrate (by their reactions) their lack of “experimental knowledge,” but the Opium-eater speaks “from the ground of a large and profound personal experience” (45-6). This experimental experience qualifies him to speak not only against unscientific writers, but against medical experts as well.<sup>102</sup> Whereas the professors of medicine write *ex cathedra*, from the comfort and distance of their chairs, the Opium-eater establishes his authority to speak in this manner: “Now, reader, assure yourself, *meo perieulo*” (44). In a legal sense, he takes responsibility for the account to follow, but more literally, he is one who has placed himself in peril through the direct means of his subject/object, and speaks from experience and knowledge only to be had from a position of danger. Even against the good surgeon, the Opium-eater “must plead

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<sup>101</sup> For an account of De Quincey’s appeal to experience in *Confessions* situated within debates of medical expertise and practice, see Barry Mulligan’s “Brunonianism, Radicalism, and ‘The Pleasures of Opium.’”

<sup>102</sup> One could also plausibly posit that De Quincey intends a good number of so-called experts under the title of “unscientific,” given his specialized use of the term with reference to particular operations of knowledge-formation.

my experience, which was greater than his greatest by 7,000 drops a day” (46). While the appeal affects humor in its standard of expertise, it also indicates a point to which we would do well to attend. The experience to which De Quincey appeals is not some precious interiority, threatened by measurement or quantification. The enemy of experience is not science in itself or its methods, but rather the speech and power of men that have forgotten “that we live amongst greater agencies than those of men and human institutions” – i.e., those that come to accept the dispensations of received knowledge and established offices, customs and traditions, and delude themselves that they can dispense with the need for analysis and experiment.

### *The Hero and its Agency*

How are we to avoid this kind of misconception, this erroneous habit of thought to which we are prey as surely as any of *Adam Bede*'s readers or Eliot's Lady Novelists? Even Boz's misanthropes, as we will see in the next chapter, tend to reproduce within themselves the structures and values of self-concerned human institutions, albeit in (nominally) inverted form. Paradoxically, to counter the pleasures and satisfactions of habit and power (i.e., power as given order and received knowledge – *not* the sort of power opium is) the Opium-eater proposes happiness and a means of recording it. On this matter, we should listen “to any man's experience or experiments, even though he were but a plough-boy, who cannot be supposed to have ploughed very deep into such an intractable soil as that of human pains and pleasures, or to have conducted his researches upon any very enlightened principles.” In the matter of happiness, experience and

experiments hold a means of eliciting attention irrespective of the station or qualifications of experiencing / conducting subject.<sup>103</sup> The Opium-eater's particular qualifications on this matter stand out, however, as he has "taken happiness both in a solid and liquid shape, both boiled and unboiled, both East India and Turkey" and has "inoculated myself, as it were, with the poison of 8000 drops of laudanum per day." This latter point is introduced as being "for the general benefit of the world," and parenthetically connected to a collection of scientists experimenting on themselves by introducing diseases to their bodies for the benefit of medical knowledge.<sup>104</sup> In this flurry of quasi-satiric qualification and self-elevation, a reader might miss the Opium-eater's central self-figuration, in that he has "conducted my experiments upon this interesting subject with a sort of galvanic battery" (58). If opium may become a hero, and happiness take a solid form, it is perhaps no great leap of imagination to suppose that a human might become a battery. The famous experiment on the executed corpse of George Foster in 1803 had brought the image of a human body and its life or the signs thereof as susceptible to electric current powerfully before the imagination of the British public.<sup>105</sup> It is not enough that the

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<sup>103</sup> The democratic impulse in listening to the plough-boy being admittedly undercut by the conditioning assumptions attending this listening.

<sup>104</sup> Oddly, De Quincey does not refer to the development of the small-pox vaccine here, instead opting for experiments with much less obvious success.

<sup>105</sup> Incidentally, De Quincey's 1822 *Confessions* comes shortly after significant theoretical and experimental advances in electrical theory – e.g., Ampère on electrostatics and Seebeck on heat and electric current – to say nothing of the mass of speculative materials on animal electricity, galvanic energies, etc, drawing from Galvani and Volta's earlier experiments or subsequent work building on them. By 1822, "battery" had long since entered the vocabulary and Volta's piles had enabled a wealth of new experimentation, but we are still a great way off from anything like a modern battery, with many versions of batteries still to be produced, diffused and discarded. De Quincey's decision to speak of himself as a "galvanic battery" is complicated, given the conflict between Galvani's followers and Volta's – the decision to speak of the battery may indicate a voltaic model, and thus indicate the need for an external source of electricity / energy apart from the organic body (this would accord with some of the ways De Quincey speaks of opium in relation to bodies), but the decision to speak of a galvanic battery may invoke Galvani's notion that bodies carried something like an innate electricity or power

Opium-eater refer to experiments conducted by others: rather, he must himself become a tool and type of experiment, a bodily device for the intake, storage and discharge of vital energies, a compound (man/opium) or invention for registering and recording, for experiencing and producing speculations from within experience.

While the primary reports of this speaking battery are divided into the pleasures and the pains of the opium, he is quick to inform us that we ought not to mistake the sort of pleasure produced by opium, the sort of happiness it is, for mere contentment or some minor rise in spirits. Recalling his first dose, the Opium-eater dives into mystical registers without reserve: “oh, heavens! what a revulsion! what an upheaving, from its lowest depths, of inner spirit! what an apocalypse of the world within me! That my pains had vanished was now a trifle in my eyes: this negative effect was swallowed up in the immensity of those positive effects which had opened before me—in the abyss of divine enjoyment thus suddenly revealed.” The uneasy wedding of a divine abyss serves to register the magnitude and power of this gift of the celestial druggist. Far from just another drug, opium is “a panacea, a φαρμακον νήπενθεξ for all human woes,” even “the secret of happiness, about which philosophers had disputed for so many ages” (43). Indeed, opium itself appears to tend towards thought and philosophy, for even “in his happiest state the opium-eater cannot present himself in the character of *L’Allegro*: even then he speaks and thinks as becomes *Il Penseroso*.” This last note becomes necessary after meditations on opium creating a situation in which happiness could be had for a penny or “peace of mind . . . sent down in gallons by the mail-coach” required an apology

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(then again, “galvanic” may simply be a means of invoking electricity operating within animal bodies, without a commitment one way or another as to their source).

for tone, for fear that “the reader will think I am laughing,” as “I have a very reprehensible way of jesting at times in the midst of my own misery.” Rather than omitting the practice, the Opium-eater begs the occasional indulgence of his “infirm nature,” promising that otherwise he “shall endeavour to be as grave, if not drowsy, as fits a theme like opium” (43). If we imagine De Quincey’s intent here to be to actually apologize for and reduce the jesting and mixed tone of his text, then the author surely fails on both counts. Leaving the extra-textual De Quincey to his rest, I propose that the Opium-eater is in fact presenting the reader with the sort of false distinction or dilemma that it is the philosopher’s work to remove and replace with adequate knowledge. The Opium-eater is laughing, and expects the reader to join in from time to time. This does not mean that either is insincere, that what is being said is not meant, or that the matter invoking laughter is not grave, not calling for close and serious attention, even awe. As the distinction between grave and drowsy (the lethargic, that which tends to weaken perception, thought and movement) suggests, the happiness that is opium brings together the weighty, the serious, the wondrous – even the horrific or threatening – and the vital and wandering motions of association, speculation and humor.

Inveighing against the medical experts alleging intoxication, the Opium-eater gives an account of opium’s operations in contra-distinction to wine that requires us to keep in mind this dual-facing nature of opium’s happiness.<sup>106</sup> The pleasure of wine follows a model of male orgasm, “always mounting and tending to a crisis, after which it declines,” whereas the pleasure of opium tends to plateau, for, “when once generated, [it]

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<sup>106</sup> Dual-facing at least from our limited perspectives, expectations and perceptions.

is stationary for eight or ten hours.” Likewise, and “the main distinction lies in this ... whereas wine disorders the mental faculties, opium, on the contrary (if taken in a proper manner), introduces amongst them the most exquisite order, legislation, and harmony.” While wine “unsettles and clouds the judgement ... opium, on the contrary, communicates serenity and equipoise to all the faculties, active or passive, and with respect to the temper and moral feelings in general it gives simply that sort of vital warmth which is approved by the judgment” (44). Recognizing the strong overlap with Kant’s language in the third critique, O’Quinn argues that De Quincey substitutes opium for Kant’s moral-aesthetic judgment as the source of harmonious and quickening activity among the faculties, as part of a larger strategy of “indirect resistance” to Kant’s moral absolutism and its exclusion of concerns like happiness and prudence from judgment (159-61). The joining of “order, legislation, and harmony” nearly perfectly expresses the image of Kant even in the third critique as moralist, judge, legislator – an image that continues to prove difficult to dismiss. But the Opium-eater does not stop with the beautiful, or happiness-as-opium, as the symbol of the morally good.<sup>107</sup> Not content with the merely indicative or symbolic, he continues into the prelapsarian and divine, claiming that the order, serenity and pleasurable balance of opium is what “would probably always accompany a bodily constitution of primeval or antediluvian health” (44). Furthermore, the drinker of alcohol may be “in a condition which calls up into supremacy the merely human, too often the brutal part of his nature; but the opium-eater ... feels that the

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<sup>107</sup> This being the most decisive point in favor of a fundamentally moral reading of the third critique, which O’Quinn cites as a target of De Quincey’s (159).

divines part of his nature is paramount; that is, the moral affections are in a state of cloudless serenity, and over all is the great light of the majestic intellect” (45).

These statements require care in unpacking. There is a recurrent image in the *Confessions* of opium as divine, as a godlike power standing above all that is “merely human.” In this passage, that image appears as enlightening revelation (the dis-covered, the cloudless) and serene order, the counterpoint to Kant-as-Apollyon’s strewing of destruction, confusion, and his generation of infinite applications and dispersions. This image is not the only operation of opium being manifested. Any reader of the *The Pains of Opium* will recognize the hopeful lie in the claim that “opium always seems to compose what had been agitated, and to concentrate what had been distracted” (45), but it also opens up the possibility of a less absolute and legislative version of opium’s harmony. Distraction is a sort of falling out of relation, an inability to connect or concentrate, and composition as a force acting against what threatens to become isolated need not entail the overwriting of difference and vital energies. Concentration is in fact necessary for the production of intensities and intensive associations and proximities, even for the creation of certain forms of health and the construction of lines of speculation. If “the expansion of the benigner feelings incident to opium is no febrile access, but a healthy restoration” (45), then this a restoration to a state that may not have previously existed, that requires a constructing in which analysis and intellect must cooperate with fantasy, desire, sensation, and chemical force, as the faculties cooperate without domination in a state of free play. Opium is a majesty and an intellect, but this is but one among many of its images and the manifestations of its power.

Like the earlier reference to the man dreaming of oxen, the Opium-eater's discussion of music suggests that opium is in fact many things to many people (and thus difficult to class as any one image or manifestation). Recalling taking opium and going to the Opera to hear Grassini, he remarks that "music is an intellectual or a sensual pleasure according to the temperament of him who hears it." Drawing from a passage in Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*,<sup>108</sup> the Opium-eater sets out to correct those who think themselves "purely passive" in relation to music: "But this is not so; it is by the reaction of the mind upon the notices of the ear (the *matter* coming by the senses, the *form* from the mind) that the pleasure is constructed, and therefore it is that people of equally good ear differ so much in this point from one another." As in Kantian aesthetics, an encounter with the beautiful is a singular junction of sensitive and intellectual materials, and any judgment of the beautiful cannot be predicted in advance or made an object of obligatory assent, even among those with similar sensitive capacities. In this sensitive-intellectual terrain of aesthetic experience,

opium, by greatly increasing the activity of the mind, generally increases, of necessity, that particular mode of its activity by which we are able to construct out of the raw material of organic sound an elaborate intellectual pleasure. But, says a friend, a succession of musical sounds is to me like a collection of Arabic characters; I can attach no ideas to them. Ideas! my good sir? There is no occasion for them; all that class of ideas which can be available in such a case has a language of representative feelings. (48)

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<sup>108</sup> This is a text that, like Richard Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, anticipates De Quincey's *Confessions* in enough ways to require dissertations of its own.



Rather than giving any details or further description of this language, the Opium-eater is led along a chain of recollection to listening to “the music of the Italian language spoken by Italian women,” which elicits pleasure in the non-Italian-speaking subject, “for the less you understand of a language, the more sensible you are to the melody or harshness of its sounds” (48). While the raw / constructed opposition implies a hierarchical value assigned to the intellectual, the correction and the pleasurable listening forestalls any too-great claims for intellectual comprehensibility. That one cannot read music like English words built out of Roman characters, or affix clear and determinate concepts to a succession of notes, is no objection to music, nor does this incapacity imply that we must simply evacuate intellectual and linguistic registers. There are operations of art and language that can never be grasped or contained by the apparatuses of systematic knowledge and determinate understanding, that may in fact be thus inhibited, but will still register on a human battery sensitive to confluence and conflict, harmony and discord, pleasure and pain. As an agent that quickens the activities of any and all of the faculties, opium can extend the power of sensitive registration and can act accelerate or intensify the process of turning sensitive apprehensions to the purposes of productivity and play.

Broadly speaking, the pleasures of opium mirror the two central aspects of Kant’s *Geist*, directed and acting towards either communication and open sociability, or by and towards nature, i.e., a force preceding and overruling intentionality, conceptualization and subjectivity and an uncomprehended space of possibility, novelty and action. Not content to merely listen to the language of others, the Opium-eater sets out of a Saturday night in search of a more direct sympathy with their pleasures. After taking opium, he

wanders “forth, without much regarding the direction or the distance,” to places of commerce and recreation particular to the lower classes. Listening to family parties as “they stood consulting on their ways and means, or the strength of their exchequer, or the price of household articles” the Opium-eater becomes gradually “familiar with their wishes, their difficulties, and their opinions.” In justification of this choice of occupation for flaneural attention and sympathy, he offers: “taken generally ... the poor are more philosophic than the rich — [] they show a more ready and cheerful submission to what they consider as irremediable evils or irreparable losses” (49). Upon the contingent provision of sufficient and unobtrusive occasion, “I joined their parties, and gave my opinion upon the matter in discussion, which, if not always judicious, was always received indulgently” (50). Having achieved this injudiciously communicative communion or quasi-slumming,<sup>109</sup> the Opium-eater becomes susceptible to a mass of market influences, e.g., the anticipation of wages or the prices of basic foods. He gains not an understanding of experience, but an experience itself (however proxy or de-individualized) in the joined exchanges of conversations, wages, lives, and goods.

These sociable wanderings proceed on no fixed plan, guided only by the nautical measure of “fixing my eye on the north star,” and consequently lead through all manners

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<sup>109</sup> Admittedly, De Quincey does not indicate whether these wanderings occurred when his means, if not his social training and education, would place him in relative proximity to these probably confused but apparently tolerant families. The politics of this passage are complicated to say the least – De Quincey appears to be engaging in a sort of class tourism, but also draws attention to this fact and to his lack of place among these accommodating classes (or, for that matter, among the up-and-coming middling classes (lacking their work ethic and business-mindedness), the gentlemen (lacking their means and security) or the nobility (lacking their titles)). While it is clear that De Quincey romanticizes the poor and here draws on them as a source of interest and entertainment, it does not follow that we need read his praise of and sympathy with the poor against the rich here and elsewhere in the *Confessions* as entirely without political import.

of streets, alleys, dead-ends to the point that “I could almost have believed at times that I must be the first discoverer of some of these *terrae incognitae*, and doubted whether they had yet been laid down in the modern charts of London” (50). The streets of London may hold no Canadian winter, but they can produce their own types of oceanic disorientation and even unmapped regions (or at least regions in which maps would tell one nothing of use), useful to the wanderings and writings of opium. Later, a price is paid for these wanderings as “the human face tyrannised over my dreams,” but even in the midst of pleasures, removals from humanity sometime become necessary “as indispensable conditions of those trances, or profoundest reveries, which are the crown and consummation of what opium can do for human nature” (50). To illustrate this capacity, the Opium-eater offers first a reverie of “the town of L---” (presumably London), and then an apostrophe to “just, subtle, and mighty Opium!” The former town comes to represent “the earth, with its sorrows and its graves left behind, yet not out of sight, nor wholly forgotten ... the ocean, in everlasting but gentle agitation, ... might not unfitly typify the mind and mood which then swayed it.” At the height of the opium reverie, there is no longer any means of separating the motions and exchanges of persons and those of nature and the inorganic earth, between mind, mood and matter, between the living and dead. The order and the tranquility produced by opium persist not as a “product of inertia, but as if resulting from mighty and equal antagonisms; infinite activities, infinite repose” (51).

The apostrophe to opium continues along these quasi-pantheistic lines, praising Opium as something between the potent but merciful *Deus* and the inhuman pair of

*natura naturans / natura naturata*. Opium brings balms for the wounded, calm to the wrathful, peace to the guilty, comfort to the afflicted, and even resurrects the dead, at least within the sphere of experience and thought. It persists and acts through countless human bodies, present in each but never limited by any given membrane of skin. It is also an agent and force of novelty and construction: “thou buildest upon the bosom of darkness, out of the fantastic imagery of the brain, cities and temples beyond the art of Phidias and Praxiteles—beyond the splendour of Babylon and Hekatómpylos” (51). Both in pleasure and pain, opium is a force of discovery and revelation, but it also a radical agent of construction, production and connection, capable of works beyond any example from human history.

The Pains of Opium, or more particularly the dreams that take up most of the section, probably constitute the most critically-discussed part of the *Confessions*, with the possible exception of the meeting with the Malay. The dreams furnish apparently inexhaustible materials for criticism concerned with this text and its subject in relation to psychology, history, nationality, empires, animality, religion and spirituality, death and any number of other themes. For this purposes of this chapter, I will only be taking up the prefatory notes and facts the Opium-eater provides before diving into the matter and particulars of the dreams proper. This exclusion proceeds from a double motive: first, as these are the most immediately relevant sections of The Pains of Opium to my argument (excepting the discussion of the unwritten opus of Spinozan title already covered).

Secondly, a good amount of the critical work done on these dreams already acknowledges the pervasive presence in them of lawless courses, agitating juxtapositions

and speculations and unexpected connections. Thus, my own reading of them would tend to become a tediously repeated formula: first, acknowledging past criticism along these lines; next, indicating a tendency in much of this critical work to emphasize desire, horror and the sublime; and finally insisting that this latter emphasis on a vertically-orientated sublime needs to be conditioned by a counterbalancing horizontal orientation towards association and culturo-linguistic metonymic sliding (with occasional nods to anticipations of this last point in prior criticism). None of which is to say that we have somehow exhausted the work to done on these dreams (e.g., on the transition from architectural fantasy a la Piranesi-via-Coleridge and Wordsworth's "wilderness of building" to aquatic figurations, and thence to the "tyranny of the human face" (67)),<sup>110</sup> only that this work is either not the most immediately pressing or not the most immediately relevant work to this present chapter.

At the opening of *The Pains of Opium*, the Opium-eater provides the reader with three notes on the text to follow, the first two of which might be classed under a hypothetical heading of "Notices In Justification and Favor of Non-Composition." While the Opium-eater might argue that opium tends to bring about order and composition (I would argue that his account demonstrates this tendency to be one of opium's many functions), he here confesses that "I have not been able to compose the notes for this part of my narrative into any regular and connected shape. I give the notes disjointed as I find them, or have now drawn them up from memory." Time, so given to dilation and erratic

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<sup>110</sup> On this last point in particular, I suspect that we are long overdue a theoretically robust reading of De Quincey on faces working with the chapter on Faciality in *A Thousand Plateaus*, and possibly Levinas on the encounter with the Other through the face.

movements within the dreams, can claim no particularly orderly appearance in these notes: they are alternately dated or undated, and “Whenever it could answer my purpose to transplant them from the natural or chronological order, I have not scrupled to do so ... Sometimes I speak in the present, sometimes in the past tense” (61). There is in all of this the implicit justification of a form appropriate to the dreams themselves – dreams which are either completely unavailable to the reader, as some extra-textual psychological phenomena, or are momentarily unavailable to the first-time reader, residing in a part of the text not yet arrived. This would be neither the first nor the last time that the Opium-eater would demand of his readers a temporally displaced construction, anticipating or coming after the materials from which it operates. In the meantime, he offers only an enigmatic reference to what “could answer my purpose” as excuse or justification for violating the orders of linear time and the natural (either as extra-human order, or as a category applicable to the regular and accepted order of texts – what has come to seem as natural).

We are provided with a suggestion as to what this purpose might be, presuming we do not read it as some atom of pure contingency or willfulness, with the next note. Against a posited reader complaining over an excess of confidentiality and communicativeness concerning private matters, the Opium-eater responds: “But my way of writing is rather to think aloud, and follow my own humours, than much to consider who is listening to me; and if I stop to consider what is proper to be said to this or that person, I shall soon come to doubt whether any part at all is proper” (62). The reader may be surprised to find this speaker now claiming that he does not consider much who is

listening, given how frequently he or she has been accosted, appealed to, engaged in dialogue, disagreed with, complimented, insulted, or has become an object of description and speculation.<sup>111</sup> This may be considered a diversion, as the primary target of attack is in fact a habitual notion of “what is proper” that would stop any given flow of communicative-textual experience, and the conditions necessary to maintain this flow – a notion that would begin by silencing this or that bit of excess thought or impropriety and end by silencing writing as an act capable of producing something unexpected altogether. Against this notion, the Opium-eater offers not another standard of propriety or generalizing judgment, but rather a way of writing, a mode of action not grounded in any particularly restrictive or consistent standard. Following one’s “own humours” invokes the medical theory of the humors, not yet entirely supplanted by more modern medical theories even in 1822, and to which the Opium-eater’s stress on the balancing effects of opium is presumably indebted. One’s purposes are a product bodily states and affects, both of which are decidedly altered by the introduction of opium, whose effects can persist well after the chemical substance has left the body.<sup>112</sup> This also recalls the Opium-eater’s personal tendency to jest in the midst of misery; this textual being whose name adorns the title, we may recall, is often incapable of *not* following up lines of association and figuration against the precepts of propriety and the natural, of not speculating or extrapolating from whatever materials are to hand. “My own humours” here signifies less the humours which belong to me than the humours that constitute me

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<sup>111</sup> The opening of the Introduction to the Pains of Opium, speculating on the indulgence of the reader, being in recent paginal memory.

<sup>112</sup> As in, e.g., the remaining effects on the Opium-eater’s dreams with which Part II concludes.

as the sort of being that I am, affects and forces that converge and give rise to whatever of a singular life pass might through this body.

After these notices but before providing the details of specific dreams produced under the influence of opium taken in large quantities for pain, the reader is provided with four “facts,” largely common across these dream experiences, not so much rules as tendencies or approximate species traits, features and behaviors, suitable for “memorably distinguishing my dreams from those of health” (67). The dreams of health may refer to those without the influence opium (presumably obtaining to many if not most of De Quincey’s readers), often unremembered and posing no particular problem or encumbrance for the regular conduct of habitual human life, or they may refer to dreams of the opium-eater having eaten in health, which, if they follow the pleasurable reveries of opium, tend in part at least to produce tranquility and composition.<sup>113</sup> Immediately before listing his facts, the Opium-eater speaks of a decisive change in his dreams, in which “a theatre seemed suddenly opened and lighted up within my brain, which presented nightly spectacles of more than earthly splendour” (66). The loss of health as a kind of regularity or composing force is simultaneous to the opening of this cerebral theater, its unearthly lighting and spectacles apparently requiring some degree of disordering of or decomposition in bodily systems and the orderly operation of organs.

One of the early signs of such a disordering comes at the beginning of the first fact, with an increase in “the creative state of the eye.” In discussing music, the opium-eater spoke of the “notices” of the ear, but seemed to reserve creativity to the faculty of

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<sup>113</sup> With all of the conditions introduced earlier in the chapter.



the intellect, in accordance with the dichotomies of sense / matter / raw and mind / form / constructed. Opium, however, increases the activities of the sense-organs no less than the intellect (or that even less definite body, the mind), even where customary thought and language attribute passivity. In excited state, “a sympathy seemed to arise between the waking and the dreaming states of the brain,” leading to a commerce between conscious fantasies or imaginings and dreams: “So whatsoever things capable of being visually represented I did but think of in the darkness, immediately shaped themselves into phantoms of the eye; and by a process apparently no less inevitable, when thus once traced in faint and visionary colours, like writings in sympathetic ink, they were drawn out by the fierce chemistry of my dreams into insufferable splendour that fretted my heart” (66). The agent of opium is no particular respecter of persons and their boundaries both internal and external, and finds no difficulty in rendering an insubstantial and half-willed thought a conscious perception, and then a spectacular and splendid presentation of the unconscious theater, agitating to any merely earthly organs. The reference to “sympathetic ink” also indicates one of the core aspirations of this text, that opium in an act of complete or adequate communication is capable of overcoming the boundaries between text and experience, pages and persons, and of connecting the sympathies of ink, minds and bodies – albeit in a manner only apparent under certain chemical and experimental conditions.

The second fact registers the customary Romantic trope of presenting in language an emotion that escapes the powers of language to capture: here, anxiety and melancholy “such as are wholly incommunicable by words” and a gloom “amounting at last to utter

darkness, as of some suicidal despondency, [that] cannot be approached by words.”

What is of interest here is not the performance of the pseudo-protests of this trope (“I tell you reader, I then felt such an overwhelming sense of x as I cannot hope by any means to be able to describe, including through the rhetoric of omission and incapacity just employed”), but rather what follows them: “I seemed every night to descend, not metaphorically, but literally to descend, into chasms and sunless abysses, depths below depths, from which it seemed hopeless that I could ever reascend ... Nor did I, by waking, feel that I *had* reascended” (66). Opium has a power to literalize the figurative, to transform customary linguistic expression into immediate and disturbing experience, persisting alike through dreaming and conscious states.

The third fact provides excellent fodder for critics looking to find content of the sublime in De Quincey, speaking of appearances, presentations or objects that overwhelm any bodily organ of perception or imaginative intuition. “Buildings, landscapes, &c., were exhibited in proportions so vast as the bodily eye is not fitted to receive. Space swelled, and was amplified to an extent of unutterable infinity” (66-7). Even more disturbingly, “I sometimes seemed to have lived for 70 or 100 years in one night—nay, sometimes had feelings representative of a millennium passed in that time, or, however, of a duration far beyond the limits of any human experience” (67). As critics too numerous to be individuated have noted, with time and space, De Quincey is invoking the categories of experience set out by Kant in the first Critique. In doing so, he / the Opium-eater is making it clear that Opium is not merely capable of the operations of fancy – combining and moving about materials already furnished by experience – but instead is

capable of altering (though not eliminating) the most basic and fundamental dimensions of experience, perception and imagination, of altering the categories that allow for experience as we know it to happen at all. In altering the operations of the human mind and body in relation to these categories, Opium is capable of producing experiences of which no human body left to itself would be capable.

The fourth and final fact appears to return to biographical concerns, speaking of the revival of “the minutest incidents of childhood, or forgotten scenes of later years.” However, the Opium-eater is quick to inform the reader that the process at work here cannot be called recollection, for being consciously informed of these events, “I should not have been able to acknowledge them as part of my past experience. But placed as they were before me, in dreams like intuitions, and clothed in all their evanescent circumstances and accompanying feelings, I *recognised* them instantaneously” (67). These incidents and scenes have detached and become dissociated from the narrative constructions of past experience, which number among the means through which we arrive at individual and persistent selves, and cannot be recovered by any conscious or intentional means. Through opium, however, they are presented “like intuitions” (which may carry a Kantian connotation here, as the means through which objects are given us) and in robust webs of associated content, becoming an immediate experience for (or at) the Opium-eater. It is only after this presentation is accomplished, and as the sign of the completion of this accomplishment, that the instantaneous act of re-cognition sets in, that these incidents and scenes become already part of the past of an individual. It is only through the agency of opium, through its ability to create and present experience in a

singular and singularly effective manner, that the Opium-eater is able, in this text and elsewhere, to assert that “there is no such thing as forgetting possible to the mind” (67).

*Fiat Experimentum*

As the Opium-eater is only capable of incorporating the dissociated experience after it has been presented through the dreaming agency of opium, it is only after the two parts of the *Confessions* have been published that he is able to come to a decisive characterization of what he has been about in the midst of all of this writing, in an Appendix appearing for want of any third part (a part which has departed from the horizon of possible publishing in the time of Appendix). Beginning in the third person, this Appendix apologizes (with De Quincey’s usual conditions) for the non-appearance of this last part, and offers itself and the continuation of related experience as part of a case that might possibly contribute “a trifle to the medical history of opium:”

*Fiat experimentum in corpore vili* is a just rule where there is any reasonable presumption of benefit to arise on a large scale. What the benefit may be will admit of a doubt, but there can be none as to the value of the body; for a more worthless body than his own the author is free to confess cannot be. It is his pride to believe that it is the very ideal of a base, crazy, despicable human system, that hardly ever could have been meant to be seaworthy for two days under the ordinary storms and wear and tear of life (81).

If the German literature and the streets of London offered up oceanic hopes for exploration and discovery, this semi-recovered body is retrospectively figured as

unworthy vessel, persisting in life more through accident than any shaping intention. The Opium-eater concludes his quasi-conclusion by offering up his body to the “the gentlemen of Surgeon’s Hall,” “as soon as I have done with it myself,” alleging that he would be glad of some “posthumous revenge” on this vessel and cause of pain (87). This offer, with an appeal to “pure love of science,” is given with the Opium-eater’s usual dose of troubling and jesting, being preceded by a wish for a quiet rest in a “green church yard amongst the ancient and solitary hills” (86), and followed by anecdote of a Roman prince with a habit of killing those who have willed property to him, with whom of course the honorable English surgeons can have nothing in common (87). Whatever the state of De Quincey’s body, the Opium-eater is unlikely to rest quiet in his textual life. But we should not be too quick to dismiss the thought of bodies. The Opium-eater may in fact take pride in his body (pride not incompatible with hatred), as a means of exhibiting genuinely impressive, i.e., forming intense and/or lasting impressions, degrees of systematic disorder. A body in state of proper and healthy order demands protection and preservation, attention being consumed in the maintenance of what it is. The body of an opium-eater may yet be put to uses beyond itself.

In preparing to donate his body to medical science, the Opium-eater claims “to communicate this result of my experiment – was my foremost purpose.” The immediate reference is to an experiment conducted in the reduction of dosage of laudanum, a reduction mapped out by chart and of anything but an even or linear course. This particular experiment, incidentally, is one of the few undertaken in collaboration with another individual (as opposed to a group or mass of people), at least insofar as it is

conducted in consultation with “a neighboring surgeon.” Suffering from intense stomach pains, the Opium-eater asks whether “the opium might have acted as a stimulus to the digestive organs,” and its present reduction thus lead to indigestion. The surgeon disagrees, opining “that the suffering was caused by digestion itself, which should naturally go on below the consciousness, but which from the unnatural state of the stomach, vitiated by so long a use of opium, was become distinctly perceptible” (83). Unlike his usual reactions to the advice and knowledge of experts, the Opium-eater here agrees, even expanding on the surgeon’s point: “The intention of nature, as manifested in the healthy state, obviously is to withdraw from our notice all the vital motions, such as the circulation of the blood, the expansion and contraction of the lungs, the peristaltic action of the stomach, &c., and opium, it seems, is able in this, as in other instances, to counteract her purposes” (84). Health is a pleasant form of habitual ignorance, a natural and regular production of inadequate knowledge, and a satisfying removal of disturbing perceptions. Faced with the prospect of such a health, the philosophic opium cannot do otherwise than take action and lead bodies to follow its own unhealthy humours. In the *Confessions*, which belong as surely to opium as to any given eater, the object is less to communicate a particular result for the sake of a science aimed at the establishment of regular health than to conduct an experiment to create and communicate experience in and through the textual body at hand, using whatever resources of literature are at hand.

*Sketches by Boz* also concludes with the production of a body, albeit this time of a dead drunkard rather than that of an opium-eater anticipating his demise. In each case, the corpse serves as an indication that the imagined audience – the anonymous shore-

dwellers who find the “swollen and disfigured mass,” or the by-no-means-murderous surgeons – have missed the vital point. The moment of textual intensity has already come and gone, in the dying flash and surge of life running through the drunkard, or in the vital and philosophic operations of opium. The object that has guided the pens of Boz and the Opium-eater to these bodies is the construction of an experimental literary apparatus capable of registering, drawing associative-speculative production from, and creating textual expression adequate to the life to which these imagined audiences no longer have access, but which may yet become open to their readers.

### Chapter Three: Boz's Vital and Speculative Sketches and Papers

In one of his two last essays, "Immanence: A Life," Deleuze lays stress on the indefinite article in the latter term, as indicating a vitality both singular and impersonal (*a* life as opposed "his/her life," "the life of . . .," or even simply "life"). In order to illustrate this, he continues: "No one has described what *a* life is better than Charles Dickens, . . . A disreputable man, a rogue, is held in contempt by everyone, is found as he lies dying. Suddenly, those taking care of him manifest an eagerness, respect, even love for his slightest sign of life. Everybody bustles about to save him, to the point where, in his deepest coma, this wicked man himself senses something soft and sweet penetrating him." As the reader of *Our Mutual Friend* knows, this is not the whole story. "But to the degree that he comes back to life, his saviors turn colder, and he becomes once again mean and crude." The interest of this figure lies not in his personality or subjectivity, but rather in something else that appears in his liminal state between life and death: "The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens" (28). This latter life is by no means limited to moments on the verge of death, for "A life is everywhere, in all the moments that a given living subject goes through and that are measured by given lived objects: an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualized in subjects and objects." The indefinite life is not organized as we might retrospectively construct a timeline of significant moments and developments running along an individual's life, offering instead "the immensity of an empty time where one sees the event yet to come



and already happened, in the absolute of an immediate consciousness” (29). By way of providing an instance of what singular but non-individual life might look like, Deleuze suggests that “very small children all resemble one another and have hardly any individuality, but they have singularities: a smile, a gesture, a funny face” (30).

The two sites in which Deleuze centers his account of *a* life – the scene of approaching death and human figures distinguished by gestures or expressions, rather than some highly-developed individual subjective interiority – should be familiar to any reader of Dickens. For Dickens and his readers, the drawing-close of death often holds at least as much narrative attention as the death itself (whether it is Little Nell or Master Paul, Fagin or Carton at hand). Likewise, and to the alternate interest, praise and complaint of critics, Dickens’s minor characters are often identified by expressions or gestures that both render them at once singular and caught up in a sea of types (social, physiological, professional-economic, theatrical, etc.). My object in this chapter, however, is to employ Deleuze’s concept of singular but non-individual (impersonal, non-subjective) life as a means of reading the experimental activities of two of Dickens’s early literary works: *Sketches by Boz* and *The Mudfog Papers*. *Sketches* is usually read as precursor to Dickens’s mature novels, and *Mudfog* is not usually read at all.

Nevertheless, I argue that in their minor genres of papers and sketches, these works embody a literary practice running counter to the novel as a space for stories of individuals related in a (relatively) linear manner and the exploration of subjective interiority. Instead of organized stories or personal histories, these works are ranging collections of pieces, never entirely unified but connected by proximate devices (the

indefinite figure of Boz, the dispatched reporter for *Mudfog*) and a common experimental attempt to create a literary form capable of sustaining a comprehensive and intensive vision of social and speculative lives and singular figures and thoughts.

In writing on these experimental sketches and papers, I am seeking to extend and add to an existing body of scholarship. In *Dickens and the 1830s*, Kathryn Chittick has persuasively argued that we misread the author's early works if we read into them an inevitable development towards becoming him a novelist (9). Dickens was a reporter and editor as well as novelist (and playwright) in the 1830s, and the judgment of his works by contemporary critics serves to remind us of the historical contingency of the category "Literature" (x-xi, 179-82). Nevertheless, it seems practically impossible to dismiss the image of Dickens-as-novelist from our critical imaginations. Even critics like Chittick and Amanpal Garcha, who stress the variable historical categorization and distinctive form of Dickens's early work, still return through these works to the later novels, each emphasizing the importance of these works for the shape and techniques that would define the Victorian novel. Rather than trying to find another means of reading from sketch to novel (as in Garcha's title), I propose that we try to read Dickens's sketches and papers as literary works in their own right and capable of generating their own practices of reading – "own" here understood, as in Kant's ideal of aesthetic autonomy, as indicating freedom from determination, not exclusion from relation to other fields (e.g., scientific and journalistic writing).

Doing so requires taking seriously the formal techniques and activities of these sketches and papers without neglecting the ways in which they seek connections and

material on which to speculate on matters social, economic, technological and scientific. After setting up the critical framing for *Sketches by Boz*, I argue for the complex formal work in Dickens's handling of the figure-persona of Boz, and his employment of first- and second-person narration. Next, I turn to the middle sections of *Sketches*, focusing the discussion on figures, characters, and the common scenes and crowds they inhabit. Within the environs of London, Boz's speculations tend towards the features of *a* life, either in the singular presences and actions of figures, or in the movement towards plurality and impersonality in crowds and characters – movements that tend to dissolve distinctions between individuals and between the human and the non-human. My discussion of *Sketches* concludes in dealing with Boz's misanthropes, the deaths that conclude the different sections of the work, and the connection between these deaths and modes of life realized in literary speculation.

*The Mudfog Papers* (also titled *Mudfog Sketches*, and, in one instance, *The Mudfog Society*<sup>114</sup>) have not received enough critical attention to warrant or sustain a separate section on their criticism – at least in part due a lack of familiarity on the parts of critics and readers. Robert Patten dismisses *Mudfog* as a “stillborn” series, lacking anything like a continuous narrative (139-140), while even G.A. Chaudhry, the only critic to have written an article on the work, is alternately dismissive of and apologetic for Dickens falling “back on what is mainly a facetious topicality” (104).<sup>115</sup> If we can

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114 *The Mudfog Society: and other Sketches and Stories* (London and New York: Lock, Ward & Co., publication dates given as 1886 and 1910).

115 Chaudry makes some allowance for the first sketch in *The Mudfog Papers*, on the mayor Nicholas Tulrumbly, but is far less sanguine about the reports of the association. Nevertheless, Chaudry's article helpfully specifies the particular historical phenomena to which Dickens was responding and the publishing context in which these papers were released, as well as indicating some of the critical edge at work in and around the facetious reports.

suppose that a work does not necessarily need a continuous narrative to possess value, or that topical humor need not preclude literary merit, then I argue that *The Mudfog Papers* are worth our critical attention. My account of this work centers on two sites of experimentation: narratorial experimentation around the figure of the reporter, as mediator between the voices of Boz the editor and the professors of the Mudfog Association, and the experimental activities of said organization. The proceedings of this organization are clearly intended for satire, but they also offer speculative lines of thought that produce connections and gesture towards forms of life at a remove from familiar experience, organization and humanity. While Dickens produced any number of works not falling under the heading of “novel,” this incomplete series of Mudfog papers or sketches evinces an unusual and noteworthy degree of formal and speculative-intellectual experimentation in the process of presenting the imagined experiments of its scientific association. Its speculative and satiric take on its scientific materials also offers a useful supplement to the more socially-oriented *Sketches by Boz*, besides complementing the medical, scientific and research-oriented concerns of the Opium-eater and Theophrastus.

### *Reading Sketches*

The prefaces and introductory notes to *Sketches by Boz* give the reader no reason to believe she is going to encounter any particularly unified, organized or successful form of writing ahead of her. Dickens’s earliest preface speaks of his “trepidation” in embarking his literary career in “so frail a machine,” the 1839 advertisement draws

attention to the conditions of the production of the sketches (occasional and to meet the needs of newspapers and magazines), and the preface to the 1850 cheap edition admits to “obvious marks of haste and inexperience” (7, 3, 11). The first preface compares Dickens’s starting his career with these sketches to an aeronaut setting out his balloon – a comparison that Danielle Coriale argues would have been underscored by a sense of danger and risk to his Victorian audience (803).<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, Coriale claims, anxieties about formal integrity inform not just these opening statements, but the entirety of *Sketches*, as Dickens sought but never quite managed to “create the illusion of an immanent design, formal coherence, and narrative progression” (809).

There is a notable difference in tone, however, between Dickens’s 1836 and 1850 prefaces. Where the latter seems eager to excuse the young productions of an author who now knows better, the former is dominated by a sense of anticipation (excitement augmented by an artfully presented sense of danger), adverting to the collaborations with Cruikshank and the publisher that have produced these sketches in their present form, and hopefully eliciting the collaboration of their readers in their future progress. The preface to the second series of sketches (published later in 1836) playfully returns to this latter appeal, as the author and publisher appear as obnoxious charity-seekers, knocking at the door of a suspicious public in an imagined dramatic dialogue. As Dickens was

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<sup>116</sup> For a more general discussion of risk and the cultural significance of ballooning in the Victorian Period, see the fourth chapter of Elaine Freedgood’s *Victorians Writing about Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World*. Both Freedgood and Coriale stress the presence of risk and danger in accounts of ballooning, but I would stress one point of difference for the purposes of reading the image of ballooning in *Sketches* by Boz. Coriale appears to read the ostensible optimism of Dickens’s account as undermined by the real awareness of risk and danger associated with the activity. While acknowledging discourses of risk and terror, Freedgood also underscores the ways in which narratives of ballooning could also produce a sense of tranquility or even safety in their removal from terrestrial affairs (77-83).

assembling these works into the series collections that would later become the single version of 1839, his focus appears to be less on the coherence or even content of his sketches than on their production and reception, these two dimensions being explicitly connected in the preface to the second edition of the first series. As we saw in chapter one, the Schlegels had advocated for an ideal of cooperative authorship and literary dialogue, and here Dickens fictively co-opts his audience as stimulators and producers of literary labor.<sup>117</sup> Within this framework, what matters is less criteria of coherence and narrative progression than the successful evocation of readerly interest and generation of compelling aesthetic experiences.

In the rhetorical work of his early prefaces, Dickens attempts a feat of temporal dexterity to garner this interest, at once appealing to past positive reception, present urgency and aims, and the prospect of future production. Alison Byerly argues that the “fragmentary form” of the sketch tends to this last form of appeal or reading, as it alludes “to more finished work that is either withheld or promised in the future” (362). This displacing tendency is in turn connected to a “dilettantish” posture, in which the sketch tends to efface both the effort that has brought it into being and its commodified nature (353, 350). The image of Boz-as-flaneur is used by Byerly, Garcha, Woloch, Audrey Jaffe, and others – and with good justification, as the activity of free wandering and observation is central to the *Sketches*. Nevertheless, we should not be too quick to read

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117 In this preface, Dickens collapses any difference between readers’ response to literary works and their responsibility for stimulation and production of “fresh” efforts and sketches (8). In the logic of Dickens’s sentences, agency is removed from the author and placed alternately on the public and the instrument of the pen (the pen being responsible both for “design” and “labours”) – implying an intimate connection between the two.

the anticipatory trajectories of the sketches as the simple displacement or effacement of labor (and its market values).<sup>118</sup> The imagined dialogue of the preface to the second series of the Sketches shows an acute awareness of the literary marketplace. Likewise, the anticipated productions are presented as an extension and augmentation of labors already present. The preface to the second edition promises both “fresh sketches” and “even connected works of fiction” to add to the present store, and the preface to the first speaks of repeating the “experiment,” of these sketches “with increased confidence, and on a more extensive scale” (8, 7). A scientific experiment requires repeatability (i.e., reproducibility) if its results are to be considered valid, but here the repetition must be in the mode rather than the particulars of writing, in order to permit the production of novelty (freshness) and extension. These criteria for production, along with a third criterion of intensity, should caution us against any simplistic assertions about the mimetic functions of Dickens’s sketches.<sup>119</sup> While the subtitle suggests a bias towards the present of “Every-Day Life,” this life is a complex mixture of history, living in habits, institutions and memories; contemporary forces, persons, types, objects and motions; future-oriented desires, and forms of life receding from or coming into being.

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118 Samuha Sen offers an alternative to Byerly's reading of Boz's urban ambulations: “That is, we could think of the ‘speculative’ pedestrian’s walk through London not as something that involves a superior, *flaneur*-like enjoyment of the endless variety of urban life but rather as an act that will join together socially and disparate parts of the city to produce a ‘story’” (97). While Sen ultimately follows other critics in reading the *Sketches* as anticipating Dickens's novels, I find this particular suggestion helpful in thinking out how we can read Boz's speculative wandering as activities of socially-interested connection, rather than aesthetic exemption or tourism.

119 For the role that Dickens, his contemporary reviewers and later critics have played in creating or encouraging some of these assertions, see J. Hillis Miller, p.5-7. Miller here draws in part from the work Kathleen Tillotson.

Wherever else they may disagree, critics of Dickens mostly agree in connecting him to nascent and growing forms of life in Victorian England, succinctly indicated in Robert Patten's subtitle to his biography of Dickens (and Boz), "The Birth of the Industrial-Age Author." Of course, once we have recognized Dickens in this role, the question arises as to what exactly we might mean by an Industrial-Age author. Following Patten and Coriale (among many others), one could point to the kinds of print culture that flourished early in the Victorian era, including print forms that Dickens popularized – most famously with serialization. Following critics like Jonathan Grossman, one could base this role on particular connection or insight into material industrial networks – transportation, manufacturing and trade networks featuring most prominently here. Alternatively, it might be Dickens's connection to classes deeply connected to industrial production and transformation; Dickens being connected both with the commercial middle classes and the suffering lower classes from the times of his earliest reviews. Dickens's identity as the definitive author of the urban-industrial landscape of London is of an equally established provenance. To all this, I would add the modern as a category of epistemic-scientific development, connected to the growth of industrial technologies and institutions. This last category appears in varying degrees of strength in the criticism, from brief but significant observations (e.g., J. Hillis Miller comparing Boz's work in the sketches to the work of an archaeologist (12)) to more systematic connections (e.g., Allen MacDuffie's connection of Dickens's novels to the emerging fields of environmental studies and ecology in *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination*).



Reading *Sketches by Boz* as a series of literary experiments entails taking these contexts seriously without reading any one of them as necessarily preeminent within the text – as capable of providing a definite means of reading in advance of the labor and play of the sketch (or the *Sketches* as a whole). Two of the most influential critical accounts of *Sketches by Boz*, both of which inform my own reading, illustrate potential dangers in either neglecting these contexts or in positing a master context. Miller's "The Fiction of Realism" has done invaluable work in undoing any simplistic mimetic account of *Sketches*, and in arguing for the literary and intellectual complexity of the work (against, e.g., handling it as a simply miscellaneous collection). At the same time, the deconstructive commitments of Miller's reading tend to involve Dickens's sketches in unbreakable chains of self-reference and self-relation, in which imitation begets imitation, underneath convention lies another convention, and "the definition of literature" becomes "a use of language which exposes its own rhetorical devices and assumptions" (37). While this kind of self-critical and self-referential movement is an essential function of literature (and plays a role in the forms of literary experimentation I examine in this dissertation), limiting literature to this definition seems to me to risk a kind of lethal self-enclosure, in which Boz's (or our) speculations and actions find themselves incapable of connecting with any form of life outside of themselves.

At the same time, reducing these speculations and actions to a single mode of connection is equally troubling for experimental purposes. Garcha's *From Sketch to Novel* offers a thorough-going historically situated reading of the *Sketches* without sacrificing close attention to their literary operations. His account has also been useful in

rejecting Miller's teleological account of the *Sketches*' movement from static scene to dynamic narrative, with the completion of this movement lying in the novel. However, Garcha replaces this formal teleology with a commitment to the predominance of class ideology. According to this reading, the static-dynamic dichotomy is remapped from the progress of the sketches to the depiction of different classes, the poor and underclasses depicted as basically immobile and unchanging, while Dickens can identify himself with middle-class forces of commercial motion and energy in the figure of Boz, picturing the members of this class with corresponding mobility and activity. In the third section of this chapter, I will provide more specific objections to the application of this class dichotomy to *Sketches*. For now, it will suffice to indicate that it provides a means of reading the sketches in advance, of setting up positions and interpretations into which one need merely move the literary parts as they arrive.

Experiments in *Sketches by Boz* are generally connected with suspicious, damaging, or illegal activity: the half-pay captain “experimentalise[s] on the old lady's property” by unwelcome implanations, disrupting the regular function of a clock, and unleashing silk-worms on her rooms. The daytime denizens of Vauxhaull Gardens conduct “secret and hidden experiments” which consist primarily of adulteration, dilution, and suspect compounding. The omnibus Cad Bill Barker “experimentalised with the timidity or forbearance of the wrong person” by lifting and shoving that person (along with many other persons) bodily into the omnibus and conveying and charging them against their wishes – for which experimentation, he is frequently before the magistrates. Experimentation for Boz implies exploiting opportunities and testing limits,

always with the possibility of damage, disruption, failure, unwelcome growth or change, and trespassing against formal and official boundaries. If we are to read Boz's sketches as experiments, then we must leave critical space open for these kinds of possibilities, allowing as full a scope as possible (both on our part and through the terms of the text) for them to engage in indeterminate and unexpected activities, relations and speculations.

### *Boz and his Persons*

The speculations and activities of these sketches are bound up in the figure that nominally connects them all, Boz. Setting aside biographical questions about Dickens's relations to Boz as his literary persona and invention, there remains the problem of how to understand the figure of Boz as manifest within *Sketches by Boz*. Boz, I contend, is an open figure, being defined more by motion and varied impression than any fixed position and not reducible to given identities (author, persona, editor, character, etc.). At the same time, it would be a mistake to equate Boz with some sort of general omniscience, entirely without location or limitation. As critics have long recognized, Boz is entirely capable of showing signs of personality, in expressing preferences, exhibiting emotional responses, bestowing praise and blame, engaging in satire, and so forth. These signs play an essential role in Boz's activities of connection and filiation, constructing grounds for sensation, observation and speculation. But that is not the same thing as saying they add up to a person, either as an extra-literary identity, or as a character with narrative position. Boz is a figure or a function, active and produced within *Sketches*, both the conductor of the experimental sketches and himself a kind of literary experiment – a

sounding out the possibilities of different forms of narration, address, perspective, experience and expression.

Following the order of the collected sketches (rather than their original publication dates), the reader begins by encountering Boz as an indefinite first-person plural attached to a parish. Or, to speak more properly, the reader does not encounter Boz at all, until first being introduced to “The Parish,” its social functions, some of its significant members, and a bit of parish conversation and anecdote. Dickens’s/Boz’s post-prefatory practice here distinguishes him from his contemporary writers of similar collections. The most famous of these, Mary Mitford, begins *Our Village: Sketches of Rural Life and Character* by inviting the reader to walk with her through said village, while Charles Lamb leads his reader through a commercial space of old personal memories in the first essay by Elia, and Washington Irving begins by furnishing the reader with an account of himself in his *Sketch Book* (these latter two being presented through their respective quasi-fictional personae of Elia and Geoffrey Crayon).<sup>120</sup> In the place of these direct and/or personal introductions, Boz only makes a gradual appearance as his parish sketches progress: as a personal possessive towards the end of the first sketch (or compound-sketch chapter), as a personal pronoun introducing the second, and alternating between a presenter of sketches and a member of a speculating crowd in the third, using “we” for both roles. This third sketch even seems to have an indirect joke at

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<sup>120</sup> Each of these works also anticipates something of Boz’s techniques of presentation: Mitford’s use of the term “Our” in ways that co-opt without entirely including the reader and lay claim to a populated space, Irving’s connection of his persona with a roving inclination and disposition to observe what others might miss, and Lamb’s deferral of his persona’s identity, beginning his second essay by playfully drawing the reader’s attention to its omission in the first.

Boz's free play with plural first-person pronouns. In this sketch, Boz attempts along with his fellow parishioners to determine which of four close and quite similar sisters is getting married – an endeavor not assisted “by the announcement of the eldest Miss Willis, – ‘We are going to marry Mr. Robinson’” (31). Just as the parishioners (and Boz, and his readers) are confounded in their attempts to disentangle the engaged member from the collection of sisters, the reader is given no clear means to discern just how far outwards Boz's “we” extends.<sup>121</sup>

The last parish sketch appears to give Boz's plural self-designation a more specific location, or at least some more distinct content, than the foregoing six. In this last sketch of its section, Boz begins by pulling away from the more narrative accounts of the sorts of events that have been going on in the parish (presented in a manner somewhere between a reporter, a town gossip, and a ruminative observer) and following instead a less directed line of thought. “We are very fond of speculating as we walk through a street,” Boz remarks, “on the characters and pursuits of the people who inhabit it.” But rather than following up with the sorts of named human figures that he has previously discussed, Boz turns his attention to “the physiognomy of street-door knockers” (58). Boz then goes on to present his theory of the correspondence between

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121 While the sister's story appears to resolve the issue with the event of a birth (presumably the result of the marriage), it is notable that we never actually see the recently pregnant sister or her child. The mere fact that there now is a means of distinguishing the sister may be enough to conclude the sketch, and seems to satisfy Boz and the parishioners. Nevertheless, in terms of the narrative function of the sketch, what is revealed is not an identity (the sister who was married), but rather the exclusion of an individual from an identity – the eldest sister, who reports on the newborn child and new mother, cannot be the married sister. At least for the reader, who cannot see into the inner rooms of the four sisters and has no further textual material with which to work, Mrs. Robinson, the sister who was actually married in the compound ceremony and has distinguished herself in engaging in biological reproduction, remains an unidentified someone within the group of the remaining three sisters.

the appearance of these objects and the characterological dispositions of the persons who reside behind them. After presenting a few instances of these alleged connections, Boz extrapolates from this theory that, should a man's disposition change and differ from his present knocker, he would be likely to seek out a more congenial knocker, or even move to correct the discrepancy. Before this sketch, the reader may have had speculations of her own about Boz's character based on the material he has taken up and the different treatment he gives to different characters and public events – deflating beadles and presenting elections and charity events in their full regalia of pomp and nonsense, but with clear sympathy for the pauper schoolmaster and respect for the charitable old lady.<sup>122</sup> This sketch, however, appears to give us a “we” one could not mistake for just another parishioner – a social member and writer with peculiar interests and habits of thought and expression. While Boz's neighbors may take a strong interest in which sister is getting married, or who is to be the new beadle, they are not particularly likely to start trying to read their neighbors through a pseudo-biological or ethnographic analysis of the inanimate objects that adorn their doors.<sup>123</sup>

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122 These satirical and emotive effects or judgments should not be seen as exclusive of other apparently contrary affective states. The sort of parish reporting-storytelling Boz engages in is often most effective when blending interior/engaged forms of speech, observation and interest, excitement or intrigue with a reflective commentary that take the time to read over words spoken in haste, and select the ones most likely to return to the speaker with interest and/or give something to the reader they would not have for the imagined in-text audience.

123 Boz alludes to the pseudoscience of phrenology (another means of connecting material facts with personal character), while his practice blends cultural associations with attention to physical designs and a reading of face-like expressions (hence physiognomy), even where no faces exist per se. The divisions of persons Boz produces from these different door-knockers broadly recalls the kinds of character type-systems going back to Theophrastus (character types, for example, like the man of petty ambition or the avaricious man).

No sooner has Boz advanced his distinguishing theory, however, than he begins to give his readers reason to doubt it. Having just drawn out its boldest claim, Boz then speaks of his desire to launch his new theory “as being quite as ingenious and infallible as many thousands of the learned speculations which are daily broached for public good and private fortune-making” (60). The singular activities of a curious mind gathering and connecting apparently disparate data, threatening to solidify into a systematic theory, are dissolved in humor – and, in the same movement, Boz’s strange speculations are re-envisioned as the entirely commonplace desire for material gain (the “public good” being optimal rhetoric for acquiring private fortune). Boz then confesses to the danger posed to his theory by the replacement of door-knockers by bells, unanticipated by him. Boz resolves to make up for this failure of imagination by “fancying” the “entire abolition” of his theory “in the swift progress of events” and resolving to “vent our speculations on our next-door neighbors in person” (61). The remainder of the sketch relates the successive inhabitants of an adjoining residence: a single gentleman given to loud celebration with his friends, a con man feigning humility, and a widow and son – the death of the son concludes the sketch. Boz’s “we” disappears into the third person for the former two characters but returns for the latter pair, as Boz seeks out their acquaintance and intimacy, “actuated, we hope, by a higher feeling than mere curiosity” (65). Each of the four sections that make up *Sketches by Boz* concludes with a death of one sort or another, and here the death of the boy is occasioned by disease and apparently exacerbated by labor and the urban environment. As Boz started the sketch developing his theory of reading the countenances of leonine door-knockers, he concludes it with the face of the boy,

which becomes marked by a “strange expression ... not of pain and suffering, but an indescribable fixing of every line and muscle” – the direct and relatively neutral language here contrasting with the effusive emotional exchange of the widow and her son immediately preceding (66).

Incidentally, the house that was inhabited by these varied and unstable characters, apparently incapable of sustaining a permanent resident, had no knocker. Boz does not make anything of this detail, having tossed it off before delivering the concise narratives of the successive inhabitants, and there is no indication that he will draw any sort of general theory from the singular event of the son’s death, expressed through his face in a motion (fixing, the drawing taut of muscles) that precludes any future motion and indicates a limit of vital possibility. Boz has presented the reader with a mini-drama arcing through curiosity, hubris and humbled labor, complete with a tragic confrontation with death that evades the sense-making activities of articulation (in its “indescribable fixing”). Yet in none of this does Boz abandon the activity of speculation, and the detail of the knocker-less door remains – not as a proof of the discredited general theory, but as an extension, another connecting node, following a line of speculative thought which may yet produce something of value. Boz’s distinction from his fellow parishioners, which must be understood as co-existing with his involvement with (or even immersion in) them and their habitual forms of life, action and expression, consists precisely in his tendency to observe and speculate. Boz’s “we” is, at minimum, caught up in four directions of filiation: the parish and London crowds; the readers of Sketches, with whom Boz observes these crowds and their typical and singular figures; the reporter’s “we,” a



conventions within certain kinds of journalism and other forms of popular writing, indicating journal affiliation and also opening up ironizing possibilities of anonymity; and finally, an aspirational “we,” indicated in the “we hope” from the above quote, that can be occasioned by curiosity but will seek to move beyond it, that will speculate on interest-seeking observation and will see what may be got out of such speculations. Like the second form, this last “we” exists (or, better, occurs) between Boz and his readers, but less with reference to their present persons than to the possibilities of thought, feeling and action that can pertain to them. Boz cannot slow down into the fixed position of the systematic theorist,<sup>124</sup> and must instead move through these different spaces for connecting and bases for observation and speculation, advancing as experimenter, or an essayist – reading the root of the latter term in its sense as a verb.

Before turning to the scenes and characters that provide much of the material for Boz’s speculation, there is one more grammatical person to consider, apart from the multiform “we” employed by Boz and the third person forms that dominate the Tales section. Repeatedly in the sketches, Boz also employs the second person, sometimes as a brief remark to the reader, while at other at greater length and in a less clear manner.<sup>125</sup> “Early Coaches” (a sketch in the scenes section) provides an instance of the latter, which relates a narrative of booking, preparing for, and taking off to catch an early-morning coach. In analyzing this sketch, Jonathan Grossman asserts that the “you” Dickens

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124 Which is not to say he cannot theorize – especially not if we consider that, etymologically speaking, theorizing is connected both to the theater and spectating, both central concerns of *Sketches by Boz*.

125 Even within the opening parish sketches, we can find more and less extended employments of “you,” either as a brief address or as a more extended point of reference, drawing out a hypothesized course imagining the reader to be moving through the parish and interacting with the inhabitants thereof, not counting the extended use of the second person within quoted text in Mr. Bung’s Narrative (which comprises most of the sketch “The Broker’s Man”).

employs in this sketch “is similar in many ways to a third person ‘one.’ The ‘you’ acts in a present-tense that at once refers both to Boz’s uniquely specific past present-moment and also to anyone’s experience anytime, inclusive of the reader’s” (61). These two referential tendencies – towards the particular past experiences on which Boz draws and towards a generalized space of “anyone’s experience” – are both essential to how “you” is functioning here, but they do not exhaust this function. The sketches in which Dickens’s Boz employs “you” as the subject of an extended progress or demi-narrative, such as “Early Coaches” or “Private Theatres,” come before the reader with a peculiar force and manner precisely because “you” is not the same as “one,” or, for that matter, “we.” Neither of these latter terms is directly and necessarily connected to reader, whereas the second person places a direct demand – sometimes an impossible demand – on the reader to integrate the sketch as an element of his or her experience.

In the course of a sketch like “Early coaches,” this integration becomes an increasingly difficult activity. The sketch opens speaking in the voice of we, with a speculative inquiry of how much time incessant traveling by post-chaise “it would take to kill a man” (159). This third person (“a man”) who will then become “you” is already not quite any one, but still fairly general – a generality Boz seeks to underscore once the transition has been made by referring to “your place of business – whatever that may be, or whoever you may be” (161). Despite this general character, the “you” of this sketch is not free, like its “we,” to wander freely in speculation (in this sketch, through juxtaposed mythology, history and machinery). “You” are summoned by business, and from that point act, suffer and experience under a course set by the intertwining demands of the

said business, narration, and contingencies (e.g., the weather, being woken up an hour early). As Grossman's characterization suggests, the content of this narrated course runs between the poles of the particular experiences Dickens/Boz has had, and the kinds of experiences a large and indefinite (but decidedly non-universal) group of person can have, and/or habitually do have. Roughly midway through the sketch, Boz swings to the former pole, attributing to "you" a confused compound dream – an item whose odd contents (with their appropriately dreamlike string of connections and disconnections) seem to vouchsafe their status as personal. Whatever the reader may have been able to accept in "your" experience in this sketch as something corresponding to his (or her) own, surely something as personal and particular as a dream must fall outside of that range.

And yet Dickens/Boz underscores the ways in which this dream is not a closed personal property, either of the "you" of the text, or of its narrator or fabulator. The early stages, coming in and out of dozing, are dominated by an enlarged version of the same clock that is going to wake you at an unaccustomed hour to catch your coach. The middle section involves your occupation of different spaces within and on the coach, of the sort you and any number of other Londoners will be taking soon, and the last has you fashioning coach luggage, concluding with a noise both within and outside the dream to rouse you (162-3). Throughout, this dream is permeated by external material, prompting the query to what extent psychological interiority may be or become the product of forces that set timetables and drive coaches. Singular details prevent the reduction of the dream to simple images of these forces, as in the display of athletic horsemanship or the

inclusion of the dead schoolfellow as coach guard.<sup>126</sup> The details of this dream, like the other details of perception and experience throughout the sketch, are at once particularized (this stray train of thoughts, this convergence of persons or speech acts within this space at this time, and no other) and broadly available, at least potentially (these are the kinds of things one would be given to think of, or would be likely to see or hear, under similar conditions). “You” and Boz occupy a common terrain of the habitual experiences and activities of social lives, centered in London and its spheres of influence. Boz’s productivity, the means by which the sketches move towards an indication of or encounter with *a* life, is not based on any transcendence of this every-day terrain, but rather a reflective and attentively speculative inhabitation of the same. The demand of “Early Coaches,” in addressing the reader as the suffering actor “you” of the sketch, is that the reader begin to take up a similar inhabitation, caught up in state of agitation and disorientation that pervades the waking and sleeping hours of the sketch.<sup>127</sup>

The “you” of the sketches is of course not always the harried man of indefinite but pressing business that appears in this sketch. In sketches like “London Recreations” and “The River,” you appear in the guise of a young gentleman seeking out amusement and going courting (with limited success, to all appearance). In “Criminal Courts,” you are a curious pedestrian, and then in the more serious position of an observer at a trial of a man (after the verdict) soon to be executed. In the midst of the mostly joyous

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126 Although DeQuincey would remind us that to think of English Coaches is always also to think of death on national and personal scales.

127 Dickens supplements the usual agitations of coach travel in this sketch with details like a water-loosing thaw and accidentally packing up one of your boots and being unable to find it when needed in the morning.

“Christmas Dinner” sketch, you are the parent that must be reminded not to dwell on an empty seat at the table, to “think not that one short year ago, the fair child now resolving into dust, sat before you, with the bloom of health upon its cheek, and the gay unconsciousness of infancy in its joyous eye” (256).<sup>128</sup> Frequently, Boz will employ a structure in which the sketch opens with an extended observation or reflection in “our” voice, transitioning to the second person once the action is underway and the specifics of a particular course of experiences is at hand (often concluding the sketch with a short note from “we”). While this structure would seem to separate they we- and you- functions, sketches like “Greenwich Fair,” “Private Theatres,” “A Parliamentary Sketch” and “A Visit to Newgate” all blur the distinctions between Boz’s “we” and the reader’s “you,” “we” getting caught up and pushed around in the same crowds as the reader, and “you” delving into the same kinds of detailed observations and reflections that characterize Boz.

### *Scenes, Figures and Characters*

The necessary condition for the production of these observations and the reflections (and the occasion for the above-mentioned proximity between the reader’s “you” and Boz’s “we”) is the urban terrain of the Sketches, situating the parish, furnishing materials for the Tales, and providing the public scenes and singular characters

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128 While the following lines reflect on the experience of “every man,” the preceding lines present the child as “gladden[ing] the father’s heart” and “rous[ing] the mother’s pride” with apparently equal weight (incidentally inverting familiar gender stereotypes tying the feminine to “softer” emotions and the masculine to the quasi-social domains of pride and esteem). In this line, Boz seems to draw close to the mourning parent, performatively dwelling on the lost child while asking the parent to abstain from such dwelling.

that make up the best-remembered pieces of the work.<sup>129</sup> This terrain is most clearly on display in the paired opening of the scenes section, “The Streets - Morning,” and “The Streets - Night.” Boz begins the *Sketches* by reflecting on the indefinitely vast proliferation of stories that take place within a given parish - a proliferation that is only augmented in the transition of “Scenes“ to London and its streets. This proliferation of persons, objects, scenes and stories to observe appears in these street sketches as Boz presents the movement of human figures, animals, vehicles, packages, consumer goods and even the shops themselves. The people in and around the streets are alternately given proper names or identified by their profession or appearance with a near-indifference, any individual properties being secondary to their net diversity and common motion as they form “a vast concourse of people, gay and shabby, rich and poor, idle and industrious” and fall together into “the heat, bustle and activity of NOON” (74). As Alex Woloch notes, the “fundamental plentitude of urban reality” is registered even on the level of syntax, as the “distended sentences” of *Sketches* strain “the phrase itself, torn between hypotaxis and parataxis” (188). Woloch is doubtless correct to insist there is always more to this urban reality “than is dreamt of in the narrator’s projected frame of observation” (189); that is, provided that we keep in mind that Dickens/Boz produces a *sense* of this surplus, as an appearance of overflowing content in sketches like “The Streets” pair of sketches, as a formal phenomenon (as in the distended sentences of the same), and as a matter of narratorial reflection. This last point manifests in Boz’s

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129 While there are sketches that do not occur within the official precincts of London, these generally take place within range of the convenient business travel and expeditions for amusement that went out from the capital ever day. Moreover, the *Sketches* as a whole are subject to and partially a product of the forces of written production and consumption emanating from London.

avowals when an expression or scene becomes “indescribable” or a crowd becomes uncountable, and Boz’s tendency to indicate that a sketch concludes not because the material is exhausted, but rather because his/our own powers of description or producing interest or pleasure threaten to fail (as in the conclusion to “The Streets - Night”).<sup>130</sup>

While I have been stressing the connection of the proliferating animate and inanimate members of “The Streets” in their common motion and contribution to a sense of a surplus running beyond (behind, ahead of, etc.) the text, this does not mean that we should neglect the differences running throughout these crowds. According to Garcha, the central structuring opposition of *Sketches by Boz* is between a mobile, profit-making middle-class, usually presented in narratively progressive forms, and the paralyzed, unchanging lower classes, represented in static, descriptive forms (114-5). In “The Streets - Morning,” Garcha claims, Dickens “makes it clear that his interest lies primarily in perhaps the most disciplined, orderly members of those masses – the ‘apprentices and shop-men’ who are ‘busily engaged in cleaning’; the middle-aged men who steadfastly go to counting-houses each week; and the ‘small office lads’” (120). The people of “The Streets” are written over with and clearly marked by non-individual differences - class, occupation, age, gender, ethnicity, etc. It is not clear to me, however, that Boz attends and directs attention primarily to the disciplined, orderly figures that vigorously participate in and benefit from Britain’s commercial culture (and empire). We begin the

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130 Alternatively, Boz will also reflect on the necessity of closing a sketch not because of either of these causes, but instead due to some external contingency - being hurried along by a suspicious policeman or being unable to follow the progress of a prisoner’s van, for instance. In these cases, the material remains unexhausted, but limitation sets in around matters of perspective and/or the contingencies of particular embodiment.

sketch tracing the stagger and song of “the last drunken man” and the retiring rest of “the last houseless vagrant” (69). In terms of page-space, the character we spend the most time with is either the anonymous female “servant of all work” or Mr. Todd’s young man; the former figure must be forcibly awakened and goes grudgingly to work, while the latter is taking his time on a return trip to Mr. Todd’s shop. In both cases, the reader’s interest rests on the character’s attempts to resist or evade the work given them, preferring the interests of conversational and amative pursuits. The streets are a place of business and selling, but also transport, talking, courting, shouting, fighting, idling, and stray events of destruction. In the midst of these activities, sociable interactions and conflicts, relations are mediated (or constituted) by differences, and Dickens/Boz clearly shows that some of these differences mark profound inequalities. In “The Streets – Morning,” this is most clearly on display in Boz’s invocation of milliners’ and stay-makers’ apprentices as “poor girls! - the hardest worked, the worst paid, and too often, the worst used class of the community” (74). The massed crowd (and its stray members) that Boz seeks to bring before the reader is shot through with a vast bulk of relations and differences – and to narrow our attention to the portion of it pursuing their middle-class business would be to miss a great portion of its life, activity, experience and interest. It is in this context that I would stress that the business-focused (although not wholly dominated) “Morning” is paired with an amusement-centered “Night,” in which we see screams, conversation and songs carried on at greater length, and the events that lead to the last drunken man staggering home at the beginning of the prior sketch.<sup>131</sup>

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131 Nor are the social distinctions of the morning lost in the amusements of the night, as different classes and persons are afforded and driven towards different forms of consumption, sociable pleasantries, conflict



This figure, of the last drunken man, is a specific instance of a more general type – the last man or woman (usually of some given profession, class or character) – that runs throughout and contributes to the literary construction of the “Scenes” section of *Sketches by Boz*. The title “Scenes” should be understood as a term of relative emphasis, and not as excluding material dealt with in other sections (e.g., the characters of the next section). The scenes Boz presents are broadly composed of three components: first, settings, including architecture, infrastructure, and whatever else pertains to location by way of feature or object. Secondly, crowds and classes are presented as loose collections of bodies or subdivisions within these collections, as scattered members, and as stray voices or shouts, named or otherwise. Finally, these scenes are inhabited by singular figures, figures set apart for narrative attention and something notable in their behavior, speech, demeanor or disposition, without losing their status as *a* member of a pack of human animals, more or less densely distributed. These include figures like the last drunken man, the combative “half-dressed matron” of “Seven Dials,” and the last cab-driver. The relative distribution of these three components varies sketch by sketch in the Scenes, with this or that component gaining a temporary predominance, but on the whole they inform and augment one another. “The Streets” gain their significance insofar as their pavement is trodden and their shops frequented, and the crowds find expression and extrapolation in the mouths and actions of more or less singular figures.

In recognizing the intimate relations between these three components of the scenes, we should not mistake these relations for effectual identities, in which the scene

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and suffering. The female apprentices of the morning have a loose analogue in the night's “wretched woman” with a hungry infant, singing in a futile attempt to gain pence and thus bread.

or the crowd appear in different guises.<sup>132</sup> This belief would first require that there be something like a consistent identity for a crowd or scene to have, and send forth disguised as a scene, crowd or figure. The sketch immediately following “The Streets” pair, “Shops and Their Tenants” helps to dispel the notion that scenes and their buildings have some sort of innate or consistent identity. Within the course of this short sketch, a shop goes through a rapid series of changes in function and dignity, starting out as a house, becoming an ostentatious linen-drapery, a stationer's, being split up into multiple shops (and partially a school at one point), and finishing the sketch as a dairy, the only visible occupants “a party of melancholy-looking fowls” (84). This final turn to non-human inhabitants, used as a kind of punchline to this alternately tragic and humorous sketch, underscores the potential divergence of apparently human settings, buildings, and commercial enterprises from recognizably human qualities and ends. “Scotland-Yard” replaces this turn to the non-human with a defamiliarizing strategy towards the human inhabitants of the Yard, imagining the London locale as a strange land accidentally discovered by a lost gentleman, inhabited by (presumably English) settlers and a “a race of strong and bulky men,” “primitive traders” who are in fact coal heavers and traders (85). These inhabitants begin the sketch in a setting well-adapted to their desires and

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132 While otherwise instructive, Woloch's contention that, in the *Sketches*, “Underneath the mass of vehicles, or of languages and sounds, or of places and things, are the *people* who have shaped and are shaped by these material objects and sensory processes” (189) may risk this mistake. Woloch recognizes the mutuality of the relation between persons, object, and sensory process, but nevertheless sets the human people as occupying the place of underlying reality, as the location and destination of experience, meaning and narration. Once we have made it past the mass of material non-humanity to the people beneath them (and presumably the means by which these people affect and are affected by this mass), we have reached a real terminus of reading. There is still work to be done at this terminus, as Woloch goes on to discuss living conditions for these people, but there is a sense here of sufficient reality for interpretive methods, negating the need for further motion.

habits of life, complete with an appropriately coal-infused public house. In this meeting space, rumors begin to circulate that London Bridge is going to be destroyed and a new bridge erected – a change the heavens are convinced will result in the Thames drying up. After this change has been accomplished and the result has not followed, the inhabitants are subjected to further disorientation as the Police establish their office, and their corner of London becomes subject to “the advance of civilization,” here presented as combined process of large-scale planning, less predictable large-scale social change, and a multitude of minute changes (e.g., the fruit-pie maker calling himself a pastrycook) (88-9). Eventually, many of the inhabitants adjust to their changed settings, but Boz finds a site of resistance to “all this change, and restlessness, and innovation” in one old man, who he dubs “the presiding genius of Scotland Yard.” This singular character is granted this title not because of any special adaptation to the location (in which he appears to have no immediate employment) or its population, for he “holds no converse with human kind,” but rather because of his motionless and silent fidelity to the space, in which he will hold his spot until his death (89-90).

Boz concludes the sketch imagining “the antiquary of another generation looking into some mouldy record of the strife and passions that agitated the world in these times” glancing at this sketch, and being completely unable to determine the location of Scotland Yard, or any of the landmarks just mentioned (90) – an appropriate enough conclusion, given that neither of the buildings that the present-day reader is likely to associate “Scotland Yard” are located in the place just described. This turn to the future reader, equally distant in time from Boz and his contemporary audience, raises the more general

question of the value or function of this sketch – originally published in relatively ephemeral format (a magazine article), about a changing location and its forms of life, and presented in a manner that presents, dramatizes and reflects on these ephemerality. Boz's act of writing this sketch takes place between two figures: the genius of the Yard, who is intimately connected to the place, but is also tied to a dying way of life and remains silent in the present, and the future historian, who has access to historical training and a vast collection of publications, but has no means of recreating the place Boz references, or making these references meaningful. The potential failure of Boz's writing with reference to a future reader (or at least this antiquarian future reader) is a necessary condition of the type of experimental writing that Boz is doing, as an experiment without a possibility of failure is no experiment at all. The scenes, and the sketches more generally, are designed to attend to the kinds of places and people that will be lost, are in danger of being lost, and/or are seen incompletely, despite being there for all to see in the present. Boz's writing not an act of salvation – the genius will die and be lost, along with his Yard, to the future historian.<sup>133</sup> Before this, however, there remains the problem of what Boz might make, or what use he might find in, figures like this genius, set alongside the changing places they inhabit and the crowds that fill these places.

While the literary utility of this genius lies (in part) in his immobility, his resistance to the types of commercial motion and change around him, Boz's singular

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133 Although this historian, it should be noted, may not be the ideal future reader. Boz characterizes him as having lived mostly in “dry studies” and among “dusty volumes” (90). Besides wanting vitality, this historian is also apparently interested in history in a major mode – “the strife and passions that agitated the world” and drives its narratives – and thus may not be entirely well-equipped for the more minor and local forms of life which Boz describes.

figures are not always of the static type. Two of Boz's figures defined by their exceptional mobility make an appearance in the compound sketch, "The Last Cab-driver and the First Omnibus Cad." The Last-Cab Driver, identified within the sketch as the driver of the red cab, is defined by such swift motion that his cab takes on a supernatural quality, becoming "omnipresent" across London environs; this almost instantaneous speed endangers both passengers and pedestrians and is less observed in itself than testified to by a wake of luggage, uprooted posts, and crowds, "shouting and screaming with delight" (172). The Omnibus Cad, born William Barker, but transformed into Bill Boorker and Aggerawatin Bill by familiarity and profession, has a more set course, but imparts a motion to his passengers at odds with the regularity one might expect of a bus line. Against this cad's detractors, Boz asserts that even they "cannot deny that he has taken more old ladies and gentlemen to the Bank who wanted to go to Paddington, than any six men on the road ... [and] that he has forcibly conveyed a variety of ancient persons of either sex, to both places, who had not the slightest or most distant intention of going anywhere at all" (180). Aggerawatin Bill operates in a manner precisely opposite to the way in which Jonathan Grossman argues the public transport system works as the structural core of the *Pickwick Papers*: whereas the former creates a shared temporality and constitutes a massive system of coordination, in which "the system [is] subordinated to its individual users' purposes" (46), Bill's bus line takes on an importance entirely out of step with its place within the larger transport system and his actions are often directly opposed to the intentions of his passengers. Against smooth systematic operations and the directions of individuals' desires, Bill pursues a line of motion neither entirely

individual (as he is at least nominally following a company line) nor properly common (as he forcibly gathers the unwilling on its path). Besides imparting unwanted physical motion on unwary passengers, Aggerawatin Bill also seems to impart an unwonted internal motion to them, as Boz informs us that his name derives from “his great talent in 'aggerawatin' and rendering wild” these subjects (177).

Although Dickens does not use the term in this particular sketch (as fond as he is of it elsewhere), this cad and cab-driver provide an excellent illustration of what constitute markedly *singular* figures in *Sketches*. Boz begins the sketch on a note of unapologetic fascination, distinguishing the driver of the red cab from the extensive group of drivers he knows by sight as the one “who made an impression on our mind which can never be effaced, and who awakened in our bosom a feeling of admiration and respect, which we entertain a fatal presentiment will never be called forth again by any human being” (170). The fact that Boz then goes on to recognize a family resemblance between the omnibus cad and this cab-driver (imagining the former a “distant relative” of the former) is entirely beside the point; regardless of what follows, the impression or sensation occasioned by a singular figure is one that strikes and persists without any promise of repeatability. While the title of the sketch seems to divide the two figures according to past (the last cab-driver) and future (the first omnibus cad) orientations, Boz's conclusion unites them as noteworthy members of a “class of men ... [who] are fast disappearing” in the relentless advance of “Improvement,” “cleanliness” and “civility” (181). Crucially, these men are not gone, being rather in the process of disappearing, of rapidly becoming non-apparent in the course of progressive organization and social

improvement. In the midst of this ceasing-to-appear, Boz presents these two members as figures of inordinate interest. This interest derives, at least in part, from what these figures manage to accomplish from within this position. As J. Hillis Miller argues, figures like Barker “play their roles to the hilt, perform their part with such abandon that this hyperbolic verve constitutes a kind of freedom ... It is a paradoxical freedom which both accepts the role ... and, at the same time, reveals in the excess with which the part is played that it is a part, that it could be otherwise” (37). Barker recognizes a logic in the bus line for which he serves as cad (the bus is to help people get from point A to point B), but carries it to the point that it becomes unrecognizable and inimical to the kinds of social efficiency that transport systems are supposed to further (the bus will carry people from point A to point B, regardless of any desire on their part or larger social utility in transporting them).

Both Bill Barker and the driver of the red cab must be understood in terms of this vital excess, which constitutes their singularity and their value within the context of Boz's sketch. Indeed, this vitality and the excessive behaviors in which it finds expression and actuality forms an intimate connection between these figures and Boz. As Miller recognizes, the “admirable displays of deliberately outrageous behavior” performed by the cad and cab-driver “are exactly parallel to the function of hyperbole in Dickens’s own playing of the role of Boz, the speculative pedestrian” (37).<sup>134</sup> It is no small part due to the recognition of a shared commitment to excessive and singular behavior (utterance,

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134 As Miller draws our attention to Boz's own ironic play with language, I would add that 'Aggerawatin' Bill's very name stretches the bounds of proper English, following out the rhythm of its initial term to the inclusion of a syllable that is not there.

labor, expression, etc.) that Boz latter identifies hackney-coachmen, cab-drivers and cads as “our very particular friends, whom we admire in proportion to the extent of their cool impudence and perfect self-possession” and the class of people who provide him with the greatest degree of amusement (254).<sup>135</sup> This commitment and filiation should give us pause before endorsing Garcha's class-based reading of Sketches, in which Boz presents mobile and productive middle classes, with whom he associates himself, set against static images of the poor. The last cab-driver and the first omnibus cad are each highly mobile, and, in their own ways, productive – and the omnibus cad shows himself quite capable of pursuing fares. At the same time, these figures, for whom Boz expresses both admiration and friendship, are anything but respectable middle-class figures: the cab-driver attacks a passenger for the sake of free board at the jail (where he refuses to work, opting instead to sing in his cell) and the omnibus cad, after being transported for theft, is regularly sent to prison in the less lawful proceedings of his profession. A significant portion of the humor of this compound sketch derives from Boz's decision to eulogize these figures with terms one might expect to hear used for the great men of England, praising their industry, innovation and determination, while drawing the reader's attention to how far their actions fall from respectable or socially admirable behavior.

Given how focused this sketch is on its two central figures, the reader may wonder at Dickens's electing to place it in the “Scenes,” rather than the neighboring

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135 Boz's sentence is phrased in the negative, such that, “next to” these friends, “there is no class of people who amuse us more than London apprentices” (254). Technically, the sentence allows for the possibility that the apprentices and the transportation professionals both provide the greatest amusement. Nevertheless, the phrasing “next to” seems to imply a relative subordination of these apprentices, who in any event are not singled out as Boz's friends, particular or otherwise.



“Characters” section. As I indicated earlier, the sketches of “Scenes” vary in the relative balance of their three chief components – this does not, however, mean that this sketch abandons either setting or crowds. In his confidence “in the strength of his own moral principles, like many other philosophers,” the cab-driver may be “wont to set the feelings and opinions of society at complete defiance” (173). Nonetheless, he and Bill are putting on a performance, a vital, dedicated and skilled performance, for the amusement, interest and aggravation of the crowds of the streets and the denizens of the court (Lord Mayors and gallery members alike). We see some of this skill in Boz's praise of Barker's ability to read the characters and desires of his passengers – a skill only occasionally compromised by his “experimentalis[ing] with the timidity or forbearance of the wrong person” (180). As Boz's experiments are initially conditioned by his operation within the bounds of his parish, only thence moving outwards to London and its satellites, the last cab-driver and the first omnibus cab's excessive behaviors constitute a kind of ongoing experimentation within a transportation system that might be rendered less organized than its commercial managers would claim or its judicial overseers would prefer. Aggerawatin' Bill and the driver of the red cab are singular figures because they recognize and actualize possibilities of action that are non-apparent but inherent to the scenes and settings they frequent. Without the capacities and opportunities afforded by the omnibuses and the larger transportation system in which they run, Bill might have been a thief, but could not have become the force of innovation and aggravation that attracts Boz's interest and entitles him to lay claim to our attention.

If the human figures of “scenes” only become singular with reference to their non-human contextual settings, both local and systematic, the inanimate elements of these sketches often take on a vitality that moves in the direction (without ever quite crossing the threshold of) the human. This is sometimes subtly indicated, as when the actions of the driver are attributed to the red cab itself, when a pair of impudent young men become identified as “the waistcoat and whiskers,” or when Boz speaks of “having had the pleasure of knowing” a building “ever since it has been a shop” (271, 81). As J. Hillis Miller notes, “Meditations in Monmouth-Street” probably provides the most “striking” instance of this animating activity, in which Boz imagines the clothes of a secondhand shop moving about on their own. In Miller's words, “The life which properly belonged to the wearers is transferred to the clothes[, which] leap up with an unnatural vitality to put themselves on the ghostly owners conjured up by Boz's speculative imagination” (13). The startlingly free movement of these items of clothing “give rise[], however, to a wholly conventional narrative, the story of the idle apprentice” (35). While Miller is right about the predictable course of this narrative, it is also important to note that this is not where the sketch ends. After having speculatively followed the motions of “rows of coats,” “lines of trousers” and “half an acre” of shoes and the progressive decline of the boy/man/prentice/ruffian, Boz returns to footwear. Observing boots, shoes and pumps, Boz returns to his earlier activity of speculatively fitting them out with wearers, now imagined in greater detail. Whereas the narrative portion of the sketch has previously focused mainly on an imagined past for clothing, here the footwear and their imagined wearers enter into previously non-existent relations: conversing, flirting, and all

gathering into a grand dance, exhibiting motions varying according to their skill, energy and enthusiasm. In this midst of this activity, Boz alternates between referring to the summoned wearers (the “old gentleman” or “very smart female”) and letting the names of the articles of clothing suffice (“the boots” or “the Denmark satins”). This latter practice both anticipates the linguistic practice of Sam Weller in his initial role as boots (before becoming the faithful servant of Pickwick), and implies the fantastical capacities of the footwear to act and interact without regard to their wearers.

It is telling that, in this state of relative autonomy, the boots, shoes and pumps join in the partially-patterned chaos of a dance – a dance that is not unified by any one style, and encompasses a mix of attraction, hostility, and amusement. The initial encounter with animated clothing resulted in said articles “gone stumping down the street” with a noise that awakes Boz (98), and the second resolves particular articles into steps in a sequential narrative, “as if we had” the imagined subject's “autobiography engrossed on parchment before us” (99).<sup>136</sup> Unlike this set narrative, projected backwards from the articles before Boz, the dance collects motions, expressions and events without subordinating them to a given narrative logic or exterior end. The Denmark satins jump and bound, the old gentleman indulges in “gestures expressive of his admiration” and the boots treads on his toes, without any sense that any of this need move in the direction of something beyond the dance. We should not make the mistake of reading the

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<sup>136</sup> Although Boz prefaces this narrative with a note that he had been trying to fit “a pair of lace-up half-boots on an ideal personage, from whom, to say with truth, they were a full a couple of sizes too small” (98) and concludes it with the admission that he as “no clue” as to the termination of the narrative, however easy to guess it may be (101). This last admission stands in contrast to his previous practice of providing concrete physical evidence on which to base his speculations, however convincing or otherwise the reader might find them.

significance of the sketch as lying in its end – which, at any event, lies not in this dance but in another disturbed interruption of reverie (this time by the voice and face of an old woman at whom Boz has been staring). The sketch contains all three moments of the speculative reverie, as well as descriptions of Monmouth-street and its inhabitants. However, it is precisely this capacity to contain related but unlike elements without unifying or hierarchically organizing them that suggests a connection between the practice of the sketch and the dance of the footwear. Towards the end of the sketch “Hackney-coach Stands” (which immediately follows “Meditations”), Boz breaks from considering the habitual (and sometimes less common) behavior of people around coaches to change perspective for a moment: “What an interesting book a hackney-coach might produce, if it could carry as much in its head as it does in its body!” (108). Contemplating the plenitude of stories taking place of people who have ridden in it, Boz draws a humorous parallel to scientific expeditions (going *with* the pole, as opposed to *to* the pole), and gestures towards different ways of dividing these stories, by purpose (business or profit), emotive weight (pleasure or pain) or by the characters conveyed (109). Neither Hackney-coaches nor their modern transportation equivalents are well-known for their activities of authorship. Nevertheless, they (and cabs, omnibuses, streets, etc.) form important elements of the larger forms of life and more singular events in which individual human lives transpire and of which they are constituted. These coaches may have no means of writing on their own, but they take their part in experience (human and otherwise) and bear marks of the relations they have held over time (the wear on seats, a wheel grown a little uneven, the remains of a coat of arms, etc.). To extract any

direct or complete narrative from these marks would be an act of pure fabrication.<sup>137</sup> But the kind of book a hackney-coach would produce, however impossible an actuality, is potentially productive thought. This thought pushes Boz and the reader to imagine both an uncountable proliferation of stories and a radically foreign perspective on and way of organizing them. What would it mean to have a book from something that interacts with humans and takes on (and registers / comes to bear the marks of) passengers, information and history like a hackney-coach? As a tacit acknowledgment of the impossibility of providing any adequate answer to this question, Boz instead gestures towards an indefinite multiplication (the “many” stories), broad strategies for dividing stories, and then two subjects presented in sequence: “the country-girl – the showy, over-dressed woman – the drunken prostitute” and “the raw apprentice – the dissipated spendthrift – the thief” (109). These two subjects cannot of course stand for the actual crowds that have inhabited the coach, and Dickens makes no attempt to hide their status as familiar narrative types (from morality tales, prints by Hogarth, etc.). These subjects are characters – either two characters or six, depending on how you count them – and it is an open question as to what extent they provide a response to the prompt of what sorts of book (or sketch) a coach might write.

There is no such thing as a single character in *Sketches* – hence the two characters who are already six, or a series, and the importance of taking note of the plural in the section title “Characters.” Behind and to the side of any given character stand a more or

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137 Not to say that Boz would not engage in such an act – merely that he would be unlikely to leave it at such a fabrication without either drawing our attention to the act of fabricating and/or supplementing it with a greater or more extensive improvisation of extrapolation or improvised speculation.

less dense group of other characters, possessing like characteristics and sharing elements of experience and environment. As in character traditions going back to Theophrastus, Boz's characters collect human pluralities in ways that tend to blur social, biological and psychological categories; this collection of pluralities proceeds without recourse, however, to the universality used to justify poetry and literature by Aristotle and critics like Samuel Johnson. In "The Parlour Orator," "The red-faced men" of whom said orator is a member may be "a numerous race," but they offer no apparent purchase on general truth or knowledge, human or otherwise. Instead, Boz proffers their wide presence across rooms, societies and parties and the local forms of harm they are capable of as the cause for taking a "likeness" of this particular instance of their character type in the sketch he has just written (277). The sketches of "Characters" moves between this sort of general statement on characters as classes and accounts of particular persons that embody some typical character type.<sup>138</sup> In the latter case, the plot is generally driven by a character lacking awareness or possessing inadequate knowledge of what sort of character he or she is and/or following out the course of actions to which he or she is predisposed as a character, without consideration of larger practicalities or consequences. In this sense, the sketches of "Characters" are very much like those of "Tales," the primary distinction being the shorter length of the former, and hence their less extensive narrative development. Within this shorter span of description and narration, any space between a character's subjectivity and his or her action tends to diminish, and this action in turn

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138 This movement holds between, but also within sketches – as in the general statement on "old boys" giving way to the more particular account of John Dounce, or the illustration of Boz's remarks on "Shabby-genteel people" by a given specimen.

defines the type into which this character falls – obviating the need for individuality or interiority. John Dounce has only four paragraphs in his sketch before he begins the doomed flirtation that will render him the ridiculous old boy, Potter and Smithers are cast in the role of loud and obnoxious young men from their first order for whiskey and “a couple of [the] 'very mildest' Havanas,” and the young Mr. Augustus Cooper is made for a dupe from the moment he steps into Signor Billsmethi's establishment.<sup>139</sup> Even Miss Amelia's Martin's apparently innocuous conversation with serving girls shows the ambitious and overreaching type in her that will later prove her downfall.

Broadly speaking, Boz provides two means for understanding the plurality of character types and their relations to particular characters. The first is most clearly present in “A Christmas Dinner” and “The New Year,” which each present a kind of typical experience for the occasion, framed by typical characters – presented in the form of a “fancy” of a new year's party (built with reference to observed external details) in the latter, and a Christmas family-party “you” take some part in in the latter. The characters in each sketch are generally named, but these names are as likely to be familial or professional titles (grandpapa or the junior clerk) as proper names (Mr. Tupples or Mr. Dobbles), or some fusion of the two (poor aunt Margaret or, to the probable confusion of the modern reader, aunt George as well as uncle George). These characters are members of anyone's family, or anyone's party. Not everyone's family or party, or the member of this or that family or party; rather, they are the kinds of characters one might see, or could see, at a wide, indefinite but non-universal number of families or parties (and the kind of

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<sup>139</sup> In the last case, we already know from their names that the naively incongruous august barrel-maker will be no match for the work of the brazenly ill-disguised Mr. Bill Smith.

character likely to be present in yours, so long as you hang in the indefinite “you” of the sketch-addressee and do not descend to whatever particularities await you off the page).<sup>140</sup> Characters are just these sorts of people, the sorts of people generally present in these sorts of groups and gatherings, and whose identities are constituted primarily as relational elements of these groups and gatherings. The second means Boz provides of understanding the plurality of characters is in relation to larger environments, either in the urban environment of London, or the institutional or demographic environments of society. While the institutional lives of London and England are mostly strongly on display in the opening two sections of *Sketches by Boz*, “Characters” nevertheless finds its types circulating through and demonstrating their characters in public hospitals (“The Hospital Patients”) and penal institutions (“The Prisoners’ Van”), as well as institutions of entertainment and judgment (“Miss Amelia Martin” and “Making a Night of it”). A character is something generated by an environment, something generated in bulk and without *intentional* regard to individuals or, for that matter, singular figures.

Throughout *Sketches by Boz*, Boz twice distinguishes products as “belong[ing] solely” or “appertain[ing] exclusively to the metropolis”: first, “hackney-coaches, properly so called” (as opposed to the impostor vehicles in other cities) and second, “certain descriptions of people,” one class of whom are shabby-genteel people (104, 303). These “descriptions of people” are encountered “every day in the streets of London,” but never elsewhere, and “they seem to be indigenous to the soil, and to belong as exclusively to London as its own smoke, or the dingy bricks and mortar” (303-4).

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140 As indicated earlier, the “you” here should still be read as a complex of functions, rather than any one function.



Rather than being generated within human communities or the familial relations of “A Christmas Dinner,” these people (or descriptions of people) seem a latter-day *autochthones*, starting up from a mixture of soil, aerial waste, and architectural materials (the latter two with industrial connotations). Like the bricks and mortar whose dinginess testifies to the smoke around them, hackney-coaches and shabby-genteel people are distinguished by signs of wear and fading indications of a past as something different from what they now are. For the hackney-coach, this is as an aristocratic coach (to which their vehicular type is party, whether or not a particular coach may be), and for the shabby-genteel man, it is a past as someone more well-off, more respectable, and more integrated or coherent in clothing and person.<sup>141</sup> The Shabby-genteel man is a “strange compound” – a term once used in the *Sketches* to describe another character (Watkins Tottle is “an uncommon compound” (494)), but more commonly used to describe mixed liquids (often alcoholic) or more abstract amalgamations (of feelings, attitudes, noises, numbers, etc.). He is strange both because of the apparent incompatibility of the ingredients of the compound, and because he is never an entirely stable compound, being always in the process of losing another button or losing yet more threads in an already threadbare coat (the application of “reviver” offering only a very temporary relief of delusion). Like the red cab, Shabby-genteel people possess an apparent omnipresence, being equally likely to be met with on the street, at Debtor's court, at the Exchange or in

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141 Boz claims that women can be either shabby / slovenly or “neat and respectable,” even in poverty, but not both. It is not immediately apparent why Boz grants females the familiar / typical defined position while denying them the compound position.

the British Museum.<sup>142</sup> This ubiquity, however, is less the product of incredible speeds than a consequence of their seeming to have no “principal resort” (belonging nowhere, they can be anywhere), and of their apparent status, like cabs and coaches, as “objects” of the city (Boz refers to an individual of the group as “this poor object,” while taking the group as a whole as “such objects” (305, 307)).

“Characters” opens with a counterpart to shabby-genteel people, “a very numerous class of people” defined by their lack of social connection. Like the shabby-genteel, these people are in a state that is both strange and apparently common: “Tis strange with how little notice, good, bad, or indifferent, a man may live and die in London. He awakens no sympathy in the breast of any single person; his existence is a matter of interest to no one save himself; he cannot be said to be forgotten when he dies, for no one remembered him when he was alive” (251). However, whereas the shabby-genteel man is in a state of *progressive* decline, and becomes an object of pity on account his continually increasing degradation, these isolated people have mostly reached a state of equilibrium, for they have “gradually settled down into mere passive creatures of habit and endurance” (251). This state offers protection of a sort from the gazes of the crowd that bear down on the shabby-genteel, but at a steep price: “Poor, harmless creatures such men are; contented but not happy; broken-spirited and humbled, they may feel no pain, but they never know pleasure” (253). The example of this class who Boz singles out is found walking in a small circuit “not as if he were doing it for pleasure or recreation, but as if it were a matter of compulsion” with a face that looks “as if it were incapable of

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142 The reader of the *Sketches* in their collected form has been prepared for this note by the single or plural appearances of shabby-genteel men in various places throughout the “Scenes” section.

bearing the expression of curiosity or interest” (252). To Boz, who is committed to speculation if to nothing else, there is no worse incapacity.

This character, or creature, or object, is at once anathema and necessary to the project of Boz's *Sketches*. Enduring in a space of almost maximal isolation and repetition, this impersonal person is incapable of producing any sense of difference (emotive or otherwise), and thus is incapable of bearing either interest (internally) or its expression. Beyond the suffering of the shabby-genteel and the wretched, and incapable of the desires and pleasures that drive characters to their downfall or comeuppance and drive figures toward their singularities, this character falls out of the usual registers of the *Sketches*, lacking even a specifying class name. He (or it) cannot be the proper object of tragedy or comedy (or the unevenly blended forms of the two Boz often presents), and his mode of life, in which one day cannot be meaningfully distinguished from another, refuses the very possibility of narrative development. For all this, the friendless urban man or isolated creature inaugurates both “Thoughts about people” – the most general of any of Boz's sketch titles – and the “Characters” section. He is as much a human limit as a character, a thought about people (rather than an individual person) produced under strange conditions subsisting within London. Like the shabby-genteel or hackney-coaches, he provides a kind of inflected knowledge and sense of the city and the forms of life that circulate through it. In his incapacity to disguise the compulsions and forces that drive his movements, in the effacement of difference in his action, emotion and expression, he most clearly indicates the logic behind characters in general: that they are always fundamentally like members of classes, existing and persisting in conditions over

which they have no control, attesting to their non-individuality even in their mistaken belief in their own particular capacities or exceptionality.

*Misanthropy, Death and Speculative Life*

Unmasking the characters behind these mistaken pretensions to individuality is part of a larger project Miller identifies as the uncovering of “fraud” and “the fictive nature of society” – a project that ultimately leads Miller to identify the misanthrope (present in two sketches as an individual) as “a surrogate for Boz himself” (25, 26). The sketches of both “Characters” and “Tales” repeatedly feature the development, exploitation and puncturing of social pretensions and fictions; this is a feature as clearly present in the basic plots of many of these sketches as in the forms of theatrical language on Boz's part to which Miller draws our attention (23-7). As Miller argues, much of the comedy of the *Sketches* as a whole “arises from the juxtaposition of Boz's knowledge of this situation [i.e., imitative behavior and “fraudulent culture”] against the blindness of his characters to it” (27), and we might add that much of the tragedy follows from the inability of characters to deviate from the courses set by their types and environments.<sup>143</sup> Does this then entail that we see Boz as the “spectator who sees the insubstantiality of the spectacle he beholds” (28) and who, in recognizing the falseness of human life and society, comes to hate it? In evidence for his claim of Boz's surrogacy in the misanthrope, Miller relies mostly on a common distaste for children shared by Boz and

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143 I should note that I am conditioning Miller's claim, which refers simply to “the comedy of the *Sketches*” rather than *much* of the comedy of the *Sketches*. I add this condition as Miller's formulation appears to omit comedy passing between Boz and the readers, either in Boz's interactions with the readers, or in the activities of self-parody in which he sometimes engages.

misanthropes (26).<sup>144</sup> After making note of Nicodemus Dumps's hate for children, Boz continues: "However, he could hardly be said to hate anything in particular, because he disliked everything in general; but perhaps his greatest antipathies were cabs, old women ... musical amateurs, and omnibus cads" (537). Having gone through most of *Sketches* at this point in the collection, the reader knows that these characters and items are occasions for amusement, pity, respect and intense and energetic interest (this last holding particularly for the first and last items) for Boz, not hate.

The misanthrope may despise society and its characters, but he is not on that account any more free from self-deception than any other character.<sup>145</sup> Behind their hatred for mankind, formula of the misanthrope is the class of people that take "great delight in thinking themselves unhappy," or the individual who "is never happy but when he is miserable" and can produce this misery in others (253, 535). There is a humor and interest in this paradoxical state, but this is a humor and interest unavailable to the misanthrope, who is too caught up in the pursuit of his peculiar mode of pleasure (which must disavow and seek to destroy pleasure) to be able to reflect on it. It is not that Boz is more consistent or any less given to the pursuit of pleasure than the misanthrope; rather, Boz differs primarily in his ability to recognize and draw our attention to the limitation invisible to but binding on the misanthrope, and to follow the lines of speculation that emanate from this limitation and the character it constitutes. There are lines and values

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144 Miller also notes that the misanthrope is the center of perspective for his respective stories and that Mr. Dumps uses "a style of metaphor peculiarly Boz's own" (26). While I grant both points, the former seems indecisive (following a perspective does not entail identifying with or approving of a character), and the latter is suggestive, but indeterminate, as it is only a single incident.

145 Boz indicates something of the theatrical type and character performance of the misanthrope by his reference in "Thoughts about People" to old men grown suspicious who "do the misanthropical in chambers" (253).

peculiar to misanthropes – the humorous opportunities of differences in perspectives, the interest of perverse desires (all the more so when they close themselves, as in Mr. Minns, in the garb of order), a momentary freedom of thought in the abandonment of recognized and habitual centers of cultural value and esteem – which are open to Boz's sketches, but never entirely to the misanthrope himself.

One of these literary-speculative lines, imperfectly apprehended by the misanthrope but more adequately engaged and mobilized by Boz, is in death as an object of interest. Mr. Minns is a type who would take “the liveliest satisfaction” at viewing “the execution of a dog, or the assassination of an infant,” and, besides approving of King Herod's massacre, Mr. Dumps enjoys burial services and his apartment's view of a local graveyard (363, 537). While these perspectives may have the virtue of the unexpected, of temporarily confusing notions of horror, grief, and enjoyment, this is a confusion that resolves itself too rapidly into a limited mode of pleasure seeking: a mode which reduces to the desire to simply have-done-with. Left to themselves, these misanthropes will remain mostly within the confines of their own domiciles, requiring the narrative impetus of an ambitious cousin or incautious nephew to bring their powers of experiencing and causing suffering into full play. Death is clearly an object of interest, even fascination for Boz, but it cannot be reduced to the object of simple desire it becomes for the misanthrope. In advancing this point, I am primarily taking issue with Garcha's reading, according to which Boz delights in imposing the deleterious effects of time, including death, on the bodies and persons of his sketches (particularly those of their lower-class

members) while himself remaining exempt in the figure of Boz (140-1).<sup>146</sup> Although Boz is by no means above the use of death for melodramatic purposes, this posture of sadistic exemption (like Byerly's claims about Boz's dillentatism) would be to again mistake Boz for one of his misanthropes, albeit one with a far greater surfeit of energy than Dumps or Minns. As Boz himself is a variable function, exhibiting greater and lesser degrees of personality, particularity and plurality in different sketches, death is not limited to a single fundamental function in *Sketches*, being instead a complex phenomenon with variable affordances and restrictions for experience, speculation and writing.

As I noted earlier, each of the four sections of *Sketches by Boz* concludes with a death, and these deaths serve as a culminating note to and gesture beyond the sections they terminate. The death of the boy at the end of "Our Next-door Neighbor" finally makes good on the note about the commonness of death and misery in the parish that began the Parish sketches, while also anticipating the concerns with larger urban settings and environment that define "Scenes." "A Visit to Newgate" is recognizably a "scenes" sketch, with its circulating crowds and habitually familiar spaces viewed from an angle of greater attention; at the same time, its cell-mates begin to move in the direction of

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146 This claim is formulated variously in and around this section, but is consistent in its basic assertion. Garcha singles out the old couple of "London Recreations" as a particularly clear proof that "Dickens ... wishes to impose futurity's lethality on his subjects" (140). While a full argument would be out of place here, I would contend that this reading relies on a fundamental disjunction between Dickens / Boz's narration and the lives and desires of the characters here presented. In the context of the sketch, the old couple exhibit a mode of living for which Boz expresses clear affection and admiration, a mode which intimately relates labor as a activity of cultivation and pleasure with life and which makes no attempt to provide illusions about the inevitability of mortality (indicated by the picture of their dead son on the mantelpiece). Setting aside the questions of whatever intentions Dickens may have apart from Boz, it seems to me that Boz is not so much imposing lethality on this couple (an activity he may engage in elsewhere) as recognizing a kind of sincere and vital expression in the local and disciplined operations and enjoyments of this couple, all the more admirable for their lack of pretense in relation to death.

character, not least in the character of a condemned felon, who mistakenly believes almost to the last that he might escape the mortal fate of his type. The elder and younger sisters of “Prisoner's Van” fall squarely into their criminal type and its “tragic drama, but how often acted!” (317). There is no escape from the lethal narrative trajectory of the characters they now are, a tragic capsule version of the narratives of non- or anti-progressive change in the “tales” section (“The Boarding House,” “The Tuggs's at Ramsgate,” “Passage in the Life of Mr Watkins Tottle,” etc.).<sup>147</sup>

Each of these deaths also serves as a vector of escape, though with a different inflection in each case. The death of the boy in “Our Next-door Neighbor” allows the boy to escape the sickly urban environment that has killed him, while rendering him an object (a corpse, a face, a set of features) that escapes emotional comprehension and human intelligibility. The death towards which the girls of “The Prisoner's Van” are moving is not an escape for them at all, being instead an escape of the characterological narrative trajectory they bear from an individual limitation, as it progresses “as rapid[ly] as the flight of a pestilence, resembling it too in its baneful influence and wide-spreading infection” (317).<sup>148</sup> The condemned man's physical escape from the Newgate is a dream, a confused hope that only returns the prisoner to the cell in which “in two hours more he is a corpse” (248). At the same time, he is the only prisoner present in the sketch as something more than habitual actions, habitual conversation and external appearance.

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147 These failing changes are predominately humorous in the Tales section, but “The Black Veil” and “The Drunkard's death” are exceptions in this general trend and Boz twice finishes humorous narratives of this sort with sudden death: a sporting accident in “The Great Winglebury Duel” and suicide in “Passage in the Life of Mr Watkins Tottle.”

148 Incidentally, the death these girls bear and towards which they move very much resembles the anticipated death of the isolated man in “Thoughts about people,” being “friendless, forlorn, and unpitied” (317).



Boz renders the thoughts and dreams of this man speculatively available to the reader, thoughts and dreams driven by his approaching fate, at once disrupted and imbued with a frantic energy by the tolling bell. In this condition (or “situation” as Boz puts it), nothing particularly continuous or coherent by way of narrative is likely to form, but uncommon thoughts can arise and interact: a worn bible can lead to an old school book and the experiences accumulated around it, a different relationship with a transformed wife comes into being, a line of flight at “astonishing” speed across impossibly clear streets and wide country becomes possible (247-8). Viewed from the perspective of the tolling clock, this all occurs within a small space of hours, but within the interval, particularly in its portion of dreams, the organization of time and experience is altogether less clear and defined. In Deleuze's terminology, the sketch juxtaposes defined clock time to the empty time of immediate consciousness: within the sketch, the prisoner's death is coming, and in some sense already come (for this death is the exciting force behind the prisoner's thoughts, and there is no ultimate escape), but the event of death never actually arrives, as the sketch leaves off at the two-hour mark.

The prisoner to whose thoughts and dreams the reader has been granted speculative access is not any particular prisoner Boz observed in his visit to Newgate; he has been introduced by way of imperative to the reader: “Conceive the situation of a man, spending his last night on earth in his cell” (246). There is always a degree of invention in speculation, a supposing, asserting or fabricating of something not-yet-there; far from disguising this creative or fabulative feature of speculation, Boz enlists the reader's

cooperation precisely on this point.<sup>149</sup> Which is not to say that the indefinitely articulated man the reader and Boz conceive is a pure or completely free fabrication, whatever that might be. He has been anticipated, immediately by descriptions of a cell and the features and motionless positions of other condemned men, less immediately by the forms of life grown in and fitted to Newgate the sketch has spent itself in detailing. Likewise, Boz begins the concluding tale of *Sketches* (in its collected form), “The Drunkard's Death,” with an appeal to the social experience of any frequent pedestrian of London, who “‘knows by sight’ ... some being of abject and wretched appearance whom he remembers to have seen in a very different condition, whom he has observed sinking lower by almost imperceptible degrees, and the shabbiness and utter destitution of whose appearance, at last, strike forcibly and painfully upon him, as he passes by” (554). Like the isolated man or the shabby-genteel, these persons are caught in a freefall of dissolution or degradation (of which the drunken form a large subtype, the reader is shortly informed) take on a social omnipresence, one which the reader would be free to test either by appeal to his or her own past experience, or by an alteration of his or her locomotive habits. The Drunkard whose death Boz narrates is always “Such a man as this” (555), i.e., such a man as we might pick out of the indefinitely numerous but non-universal crowd of like characters, known to the experience that resides within, between and without us.<sup>150</sup> “A

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149 The work of invention and artificiality in Boz's allegedly mimetic sketches is a running theme throughout Miller's reading of *Sketches*.

150 The title of this sketch contains a fundamental ambiguity: does the definite article “the” in “The Drunkard's Death” refer to the Drunkard, or to the death? Is it the death that provides the story with definition and particularizes one who would otherwise just be another drunkard? Is it a tale of the individual drunkard, who comes into contact with a more massive and less definite death? Finally, might there be some value in leaving the ambiguity unresolved, accepting that something singular transpires between the character-figure of the drunkard and the event of death, that does not permit the complete fixing or definition of either?

man” for Boz is both “such a man,” an object of experience, habit and familiarity, and a speculative entity, an object or being of thought capable of entering into relation with death, or a life, within the activity of writing.

The narrative portion of “the Drunkard's death” begins not with the death of said drunkard, but rather with his wife on her death-bed. This death has been anticipated by Boz's foregoing characterization of “drunkenness” as “that fierce rage for slow, sure poison, that oversteps every other consideration: that casts aside wife, children, friends, happiness, and station; and hurries its victims madly on to degradation and death” (555). The narrative trajectory is as surely set out for the drunkard as for the girls of the prisoner's van, the sequence of losses clearly established at the outset. After the wife has departed and the friends deserted the man, his children leave, two of them after he has betrayed them; the daughter through neglect and inadequate provision, a son to the hands of the law, and both through the influence of the drink. The final destination of the drunkard is as fixed as that of the condemned man, except that this time a corpse appears.

Despite this overweening sense of narrative inevitability, the presentation of the sketch tends to emphasize contingency and choice. Boz spends an entire paragraph elaborating the kinds of horrors, tales and ravings that can attend a death bed, only to inform the reader that none of these were present at the wife's death (556). In a bout of indirect discourse, Boz presents the drunkard's disavowal of his role in his wife's misery and death, and the change in demeanor this shifting of responsibility, complemented with an infusion of alcohol, enables (557). Each step in his path is presented as a choice whose alternative is present to the reader and sometimes to the man's thoughts, even as

these choices lead to a diminution of his subsequent power to choose: “he *did* drink; and his reason left him” (561). Deep into decline, become homeless and withered in body, the drunkard loses the distinction of dreams and waking reality, falling into conscious visions of his past, people he has known, and drinking and feasting.<sup>151</sup> In this state, the drunkard experiences an internal distantiation and the dissolution of his person and body: “Suddenly, he started up, in the extremity of terror. He had heard his own voice shouting in the night air, he knew not what, or why. . . . His senses were leaving him: half-formed and incoherent words burst from his lips; and his hands sought to tear and lacerate his flesh” (564). Even in this state, however, the drunkard is yet capable of some form of volition, and, recognizing his condition, he resolves to kill himself.

Before the sketch closes, there are two moments of vitality left to the drunkard. The first lies in this resolution, under which “his limbs received new life” (564). The hitherto almost immobile figure becomes capable of rapid motion, for “never did prisoner's heart throb with the hope of liberty and life half so eagerly as did that of the wretched man at the prospect of death” (565). In the prospect of death, there is a kind of hope for liberation, for freedom from what the drunkard has been and what he has become, from the forms of life now available to him. Greeted at the surface of the water by “strange and fantastic forms,” he leaps into the river. “Not five seconds had passed when he rose to the water's surface—but what a change had taken place in that short time, in all his thoughts and feelings! Life—life in any form, poverty, misery,

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151 Boz emphasizes both the apparent reality of these visions – in a phrase Miller emphasizes and reads as central to the Sketches more generally, “the illusion was reality itself” – and the actual situation of the drunkard, which the drunkard knows as well as the reader (564).

starvation—anything but death” (565). The man struggles, nearly manages to make it to shore, experiences on last instant vision of the scene around him. There is no recovery or rescue, but there is a kind of recognition and vector of desire, underscored by the “Bright flames of fire [that] shot up from earth to heaven” as the drunkard drowns (565). Like De Quincey's Opium-eater, Boz's drunkard has been penetrated by a psycho-chemical form of life not entirely his own, a life that produces actions, thoughts and visions without concern for the subject and body it inhabits. This form of life has manifested primarily in the destruction of social connections, physical integrity and bodily powers. Yet at this final moment, between the repetitious degradations of the life he has lived and the death that will annihilate him, the drunkard redirects the compulsive forces of that life that had fixated on a single object into a plea for “life in any form,” for an indefinite but absolute life, unbound by qualification.

The sketch closes with “the body” (no longer connected to the drunkard by designation or possessive article) washing ashore, a week later, “a swollen and disfigured mass” that is borne “unrecognized and unpitied” to the grave, where it “has long since mouldered away” (565-6). The “unrecognized and unpitied” fate of this body should recall for the reader the fate of the isolated persons of “Thoughts about people” and prisoners throughout sketches, as its disappearance in the ground recalls the future perspective Boz adopts towards the genius of Scotland Yard. Even the vigorously animate figures of the sketches appear only under a condition of disappearing more or less obvious. The pleasure-seeking crowds of “London Recreations” have no more secure a hold on futurity than the old couple in their garden, however different their

responses to this contingent condition. Boz is no more capable of saving their subjects from this condition than the physician is capable of saving the woman's son in "The Black Veil." Instead, his sketches are tasked with the calling to respond to this condition, to register and express the forms of life, the figures, the characters in their condition of passing and in literary forms that seek to come to terms with that condition.<sup>152</sup> These sketches would need to be capable of rapid progression, to produce observations and speculations under this condition, while still maintaining a capacity for sustained attention, in order to produce an expression adequate to (which is not the same as a representation of) the subjects of the sketches and the lives in which they are involved.<sup>153</sup>

Boz's sketches pursue two objectives issuing from the general desire for "life in any form": the first is an objective of extensivity, the second an objective of intensity. Any total picture of life in any form is presumably beyond the capacity of any work, literary or otherwise – and Boz makes no attempt to capture forms of life beyond the borders of the United Kingdom. Hence, the objective of extensivity in *Sketches by Boz* is to present as extensive an expression of life and lives as possible, centered primarily in London. While *Sketches* shows an unmistakable bias towards the lower and middle classes, we do receive glimpses of the wealthy – even if the uppermost echelons of society tend to be presented only briefly, as in the young nobleman killed in a sporting

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152 "come to terms" here meaning more the arrival or drawing-up of words and the entering into verbal and literal negotiations than the closing or settlement of the case at hand.

153 While there is a more formal philosophical distinction between representation and expression explored at length in Deleuze's work on Spinoza, broadly the distinction here involves replacing the category of true or false representations with the category of adequate or inadequate expressions. Dickens's / Boz's sketches do not truly or falsely represent the particular lives of any actual given Britons (I take Miller to be decisive on this point). They must be understood as acts of production, not copying. These productions may be adequate or inadequate to what they engage – that is, they may or may not be able to enter into relations which generate both feeling and knowledge.

accident in “The Great Winglebury Duel” or Boz's attempts to imagine why Her Majesty would be visiting the “Public Office, Bow-street” (315).<sup>154</sup> Boz's interest in and maneuvers around characters, crowds, institutions, and habitual spaces and activities are all attempts to produce this kind of extensive vision.

At the same time, the social spaces in and around London are by no means level, and the reader is likely to bring biases of his or her own to bear in viewing them and the persons who inhabit them. Boz provides an instance of this general feature in “Gin-shops,” speaking of “well-disposed gentlemen and charitable ladies” who are likely to turn from those who patronize these shops “with coldness and disgust ... forgetting, in the pleasant consciousness of their own high rectitude” the conditions of poverty and temptation in which these denizens of the shops live (220). As a corrective to this tendency, Boz follows a second objective (as much of intensity as extensivity), which demands an intense focus on persons and forms of life most subject to passing and most likely to escape the vision and recognition of the public. Boz has frequent recourse to the language of sympathy and pity, but his literary practice does not accord with a simple desire for the reader to feel sorry for unfortunates. The reader crashes against the immobile face and form of the genius of Scotland Yard, is at once exhilarated, amused and taken aback by the last cab-driver and first omnibus-cad, and speculatively follows lines of terror, disorientation, and desire in the condemned prisoner. Speculation is

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154 The confusion in the latter case being caused by an ambiguity of designation - “Her Majesty's carriage” being intended for the soon-to-be inmates of Her Majesty's Gaols, not the vehicle to carry Her Majesty. Besides providing a humorous improbability, Boz's speculation indicates the ways in which the queen's name may carry her to places unfrequented by her person, and the odd proximities it is capable of producing.

attracted to and produces interest around nodes of intensity, but is incompatible with simplistic moralism and the easy digestibility of pity, or the kinds of sympathy likely to lead to the self-satisfactions of pleasant consciousnesses. At its best, in its moments of most adequate expression, “The Drunkard's Tale” is not something we immediately make sense of, instead serving as a provocation to thought and feeling – feeling in the sense that we feel out something we do not yet know.

A life, for both Dickens and Deleuze, is everywhere, but it is also something we do not know insofar as we habitually misapprehend it, insofar as we preconceive it according to inadequate regimes of organization, attention and valuation. These regimes are present when we see the gin-drinker, but not the conditions under which he or she exists, when we see a man pacing in a park, but not the economic and psychological forces bound up in his motions and isolated existence, when we see the drunkard's corpse, but do not think of the experience, desire, and life that preceded and, to some extent, may have escaped it. Through them, we see the clothes to buy or coach for hire, without speculating on the kinds of experience in which they have played a part, the kinds of stories and life they might carry. These regimes are potent and durable, as they nest in everything from social institutions to the habits of individuals, to the instances of language that pass between us every day.<sup>155</sup> In opposition to their prolific reproduction, Boz's sketches adopt a doubled defensive stance, at once facing this proliferation in the occupation of social spaces and the production of social characters and attending to

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155 At the beginning of “A Visit to Newgate,” Boz draws the reader's attention to the unthinking habitual use of the phrase “force of habit,” and the ways that the use of this phrase by different persons may help to hide from them how they themselves operate primarily (or entirely) under this force.



events and lives that produce without proceeding according to this logic of reproduction. The pages of the *Sketches* are filled with figures detached from the familial logic of healthy heterosexual reproduction and the continuity of generations. This is probably most obvious in the repeated scenes of abusive spouses, dying spouses, and dying children (often only children). Courting in *Sketches* is generally unsuccessful either through misapprehension or personal illusion (e.g., “Miss Evans,” “John Dounce”) or through intentional frauds (“Horatio Sparkins,” “The Dancing Academy,” “The Tuggs's at Ramsgate”). Even when the courting is successful, it is either accidental and unlikely to produce issue (e.g., “The Great Winglebury Duel”) or in opposition to the order desired by the central characters (e.g., “The Boarding House”). The modes of life embodied by the various singular figures of the sketches are basically incompatible with familial commitment, and the young men, bachelors, and spinsters make up and make their way across the sketches with connections, but no attachments. Somewhere among and between them all, Boz finds a kind of life capable of producing interest and motivating the speculative activity of sketches. Finding an adequate expression for this life (an expression somewhere between anticipation, articulation and actualization), however, requires a continuous and indeterminate process of literary experimentation, without clear terminus or closure.

### *Mudfog, Satire and Speculation*

The speculative activity of *Sketches by Boz* has two primary grounding forces: the social-material environs of London, and the figure of Boz, even if this latter figure is

more of a variable function than literary character per se (or detached narrator, for that matter). In the course of *The Mudfog Papers*, Dickens maintains the activity of speculation and seeking out literary forms suited to this activity while abandoning both of these means of grounding these activities. This may in part be due to the respective circumstances of the two works: whereas *Sketches by Boz* is a collection assembled and organized by Dickens, *The Mudfog Papers* consist of pieces written by Dickens for *Bentley's Miscellany*, only collected and organized as a separate work after Dickens's death. Even the title is not fixed: while *The Mudfog Papers, etc.* was released by Richard Bentley and Son in 1880 (London, George Bentley being the surviving Bentley and editor), a 1901 edition of Dickens's works gives the title as *The Mudfog and Other Sketches* (London: Chapman and Hall). Properly speaking, only three of the sketches directly reference the fictional locale of Mudfog; the other sketches are presumably included for their common authorship (attributed to Boz) and appearance in the same publication.<sup>156</sup> The decision to title the collection *The Mudfog Papers* was likely an attempt on the part of the publisher to get readers to associate it with the highly successful *Pickwick Papers*, and has a kind of justification in the miscellaneous quality of the two texts, and their common interest in satirically presenting the proceedings of scientific organizations.

It is not at all obvious from the first Mudfog sketch, “The Public Life of Nicholas Tulrumbly,” that Mudfog will have anything to do with scientific organizations. After

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<sup>156</sup> Two of these latter sketches, “Pantomime of Life” and “Some Particulars Concerning a Lion” appeared under the headings of “Stray Chapters by 'Boz'” (*Bentley's Miscellany*, Vol. 1 (1837): London). The fact that these “Stray chapters” were numbered sequentially (Chapters 1 and 2, respectively) suggests that they were meant to be received as parts of a series.

introducing the reader to the damp and industrially-afflicted but provincial town of Mudfog, the narrator proceeds to relate a political story that would not be out of place in the “Tales” section of Sketches, being centered on the humorous deflation of a character who has developed a hubristic sense of self-importance. As in other sketches collected in the Mudfog, particularly “The Pantomime of Life,” the primary interests here are social and political. The sketches later collected in the *The Mudfog Papers* were released alongside the initial numbers of *Oliver Twist* - “Mudfog” being the original title of the town of Oliver's birth, that became “a certain town, which for many reasons it will be prudent to refrain from mentioning” in subsequent editions.<sup>157</sup> Attempting to account for the transition to reports on a scientific meeting, G. A. Chaudhry speculates that “Mudfog was not a place, but an idea; a fit town for the 'philosophers' satirised in *Oliver*; and perhaps only after that it became the first meeting place of the [scientific] Association” (106). Recalling Dickens / Boz's designation of both the board and Mrs. Mann as “experimental philosophers” in *Oliver Twist*, we might ground the transition in a common ground of overweening and self-interested “rationality”; as Tulrumbly attempts to impose overly strict rules on his comfortable provincial town, the scientists satirized in the two reports attempt to pursue lines of apparent rationality well past their breaking point – both with a concomitant aim of self-aggrandizement. Alternatively, as Chaudry suggests, the connection between the two parties may have more to do with a common love of public display without substance.

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157 This change had taken place by the time the three volume version began appearing in 1838, so that only the issues in Bentley's and unauthorized editions bore the original name.

Whatever the cause for the transition, *The Mudfog Papers* move from a relatively continuous narrative, framed by descriptions of place and a concluding editorial note, to reports, split between temporally sequential fragments and notes from the proceedings of a fictitious scientific association. The narrator of “The Public Life of Mr. Tulrumbles” was given as Boz, although this was only made clear in the conclusion of the sketch, wherein Boz alleges that the same Tulrumbles has “requested us to write this faithful narrative” (46).<sup>158</sup> In the reports, however, Boz slides into the role of presenting editor, introducing both reports and concluding the first, otherwise leaving them to an “able, talented, and graphic correspondent” (47). Boz's tone in these framing sections recalls the superlative and inflated discourse of the Pickwick club, with the same sense conveyed to the reader of the inadequacy of the subjects (in this case, the editor and reporter, the reports, and the meeting of the association) to the pomp and ornamental language bestowed upon them. The reporter generally adopts a pose of fawning adoration towards the proceedings of the scientific association, although he does show signs of agitation and suspicion of particular members and figures of authority. Dickens makes no attempt to obscure his target of satire in these reports, the British Association for the Advancement of Science becoming the Mudfog Association for the Advancement of Everything.<sup>159</sup> Two points, however, should prevent us from dismissing these reports as satires intended simply to mock an abandoned form of a national institution, without any

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158 The signature “Boz” appears at the conclusion in the original version of the sketch in *Bentley's Miscellany*, but not the collected 1880 version. The use of the first person plural in this sketch recalls Boz's practice in *Sketches by Boz*, although the opening ironic description of Mudfog hints at the obtuse and somewhat pretentious speaker to come in the reports.

159 The British Association for the Advancement of Science is now known as the British Science Association, and still holds annual meetings.

particular literary interest or complexity: the first being the formal presentation of these reports, and the second being the degree of speculative freedom exhibited in these satirical versions of scientific proceedings.

The reports are framed as a sequence of letters, each with date and time marked (sometimes down to the minute), followed by an account of the proceedings of different sections of the meeting, divided by subject area (e.g., anatomy and botany, mechanical science). The latter sections are given over to the reporter relaying what was said in these meetings, as Dickens exploits the potentials for humor in immediate speech relayed in the third person, with the characteristic affordances of distancing and delay this practice permits. If the figure of the reporter recedes in the proceedings of the society, he more than makes up for this in his frequently dispatched letters. Boz draws his reader's attention to the form of these dispatches, justifying his lack of editorial mediation thus: "We give our correspondent's letters in the order in which they reached us. Any attempt at amalgamating them into one beautiful whole, would only destroy that glowing tone, that dash of wildness, and rich vein of picturesque interest, which pervade them throughout" (48-9). While Boz is in the role of self-important editor here, playing up the importance of his subject and the skill of his reporter, he is quite correct to connect the interest and the wildness of these dispatches with the form in which they are given. Where an organized and coherent article might avoid mentioning the event at all, this reporter successively informs us that a boy has fallen through a pastry cook's window, that the boy has died – not from the fall, but rather from the shock of being asked to pay

for the window – and that the boy is not dead at all, having instead been at a raffle (51, 55, 60-1).

In the distraction of the exciting event, the reporter tends to abandon considerations of truth, objectivity and consistency to the interests of speed, setting what has been given to him (e.g., by way of rumor) into circulation, and whatever happens to catch his attention, approval or ire. Examples of the last two develop as the reporter develops cultivates intense admirations and intense dislikes for different professors and a particularly strong case of animosity towards the local beadle, “the tyrant Sowster.” In his excited state, the reporter can produce apparently contradictory juxtapositions without any appearance of being at all hindered or slowed down, as in this description of Professor Slug: “His complexion is a dark purple, and he has a habit of sighing constantly. He looked extremely well, and appeared in high health and spirits” (53-4). The most succinct of these moments comes in the report of the second meeting, appearing thus on the page:

*“Half past nine.*  
“Some dark object has just appeared upon the wharf. I  
think it is a travelling carriage.”  
*“A quarter to ten.*  
“No, it isn’t.”  
(101)

In this passage, Dickens (as authorial function organizing the statements of Boz and the reporter) creates a sense of excessive, possibly needless speed and draws the reader's attention to the highly fallible vehicle through which information is allegedly being conveyed. Crucially, the reader is never informed as to what the object actually was, being left with the bare moments of apprehension, supposition, and the recognition of

misapprehension. In both his concise and overflowing statements, the reporter tends to remind the reader of the peculiar form, fact and style of his writing. Examples of both types can be found as Wednesday eleven o'clock's "I open my letter to say that nothing whatever has occurred since I folded it up" is followed immediately on the page with Thursday's "The sun rose this morning at the usual hour. I did not observe anything particular in the aspect of the glorious planet, except that he appeared to me (it might have been a delusion of my heightened fancy) to shine with more than common brilliancy, and to shed a refulgent lustre upon the town, such as I had never observed before" (66). The point in all of this is not that we simply have a naive, unreliable or excitable narrator; rather, given such a narrator or reporter, the point is to see what kinds and forms of writing might result, to see what kinds of apprehensions, misapprehensions and interactions this imagined figure might produce when set in relation to the event of the scientific meeting.

Our first acquaintance with the activities of this meeting is no particularly pleasant one, as it is presented with a tone of humor falling somewhere between highly uncomfortable and macabre. The experiments conducted by characters and figures Sketches by Boz generally avoided inflicting lasting harm on living bodies, even if they were not altogether harmless to property or innocent in character. The same cannot be said of the experiment that professors Muff and Nogo undertake as a kind of preliminary to the official activities of the meeting. Ordering a local dog to be procured, the professors attempt to set about some unspecified course of experimentation, which the animal resists in an attempt that is ultimately futile: "The dog's tail and ears have been

sent down-stairs to be washed; from which circumstance we infer that the animal is no more. His forelegs have been delivered to the boots to be brushed, which strengthens the supposition” (58). In the midst of the soon-to-be-itemized animal's howling, the reporter's thoughts evince anything but sympathy, even as Dickens ironically invites the reader to a consideration of the animal's perspective: “You cannot imagine the feverish state of irritation we are in, lest the interests of science should be sacrificed to the prejudices of a brute creature, who is not endowed with sufficient sense to foresee the incalculable benefits which the whole human race may derive from so very slight a concession on his part” (57-8). This incident concludes as the lady who owned this stolen dog discovers the incident and attacks the professors, leaving them with bites (from the dog), scratches and pulled hair (from the lady) and the “consolation ... to know that their ardent attachment to scientific pursuits has alone occasioned these unpleasant consequences” (60). While the attachment of these professors to their profession may be clear, what it is that their experiments actually accomplished is never indicated or specified, furthering the sense that all that has transpired is an act of careless cruelty and violence, a literal instance of Wordsworth's science that “murder[s] to dissect.”

The proceedings of the meetings appear to reflect the kind of inhuman, allegedly rational perspective at work in Muff and Nogo's experiment. The headings of the different sessions, in sequence, Zoology and Botany, Anatomy and Medicine, Statistics and Mechanical Science, all evince a commitment to quantification, external description



and practical application, without regard to interior life.<sup>160</sup> Like Paul Dombey or the board of *Oliver Twist*, the members of the Association demonstrate their limitations of imaginative perception and appreciation in their distrust of fiction, flatly rejecting Jack and Jill (and by extension all of the children's books under discussion) reasoning that “the whole work had this one great fault, *it was not true*” (88).<sup>161</sup> Upon being introduced to the infinitesimal system, whereby a small portion of a substance well-distributed across a body may have the effect of a much larger portion, the members of the association begin to sound very much like Oliver's board, calculating on how little adult and infant paupers might be sustained (84). In the face of rational calculation, efficiency and speculation, concerns of morality and humanity fade from the view of these enlightened members.<sup>162</sup>

It is precisely this lack of regard for humanity as a standard of and limitation on thought, however, that provide the proceedings of these meetings with their literary and speculative interest. As the omnibus cad carries the logic of the transport system well past the point of logic, these professors and scientifically-inclined members of the public follow lines of speculative and reasoning with their origins in human, natural and national interests well past any point of rationality and humanity. Freed from these constraints,

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160 Following the given order, an animal is much like a plant, both possessing anatomical organization and capable of being quantified individually or in mass, functioning in both cases in a mechanistic manner.

161 Like Paul Dombey, the professors emphasize “the immense and urgent necessity of storing the minds of children with nothing but facts and figures” (88) – a process they evince the effects of in their own persons and the decision to class children's fiction under the heading of “Statistics,” dealing with these texts primarily through their numerical diffusion throughout classrooms and lack of utility in getting students to remember facts and figures. Chaudry notes that this discussion “already points to the Fact-Fancy theme of *Hard Times*” (109).

162 This point being brought home perhaps most obviously at least on the front of customary morality in the high approval a new machine designed to pick pockets far more efficiently than any human agent meets with in the mechanical sciences section. The members of meeting turn indignant at the refusal of London criminals to adopt it on the basis that it would render a good number of them unemployed.

Mr. Jobba can consider it no particularly great objection to his machine that it is given to exploding, and Professor Queerspeck can propose to chain groups of gentlemen together, and sending them by means of pocket-sized portable railways along the London sewers “at the easy rate of sixty-five miles an hour, which, to gentlemen of sedentary pursuits, would be an incalculable advantage” (91).<sup>163</sup> In his paper, a character identified only as “the author” seems to bring the full instrumentalizing forces of state, capital and colonization to bear in demanding that a group presently engaged in frivolous pursuits be converted to honest labor, with the co-operant action of the creation of “houses of industry,” the civilizing forces of schooling (practical and moral), and provisions for the unfortunate, including the creation of almshouses – in this process, recruiting the more intelligent members of the group to organize and teach the rest (70-3). The group in question are performing fleas. Within this miniature lens, the truly strange conditions under which Britons and many of their subjects live becomes apparent, as “the author” expresses his determination to extract national productive power from these insects. While this process primarily manifests in the colonial logic of imposing the colonizer's social orders and structures on the colonized's society, there is a moment of reflux in influence: “as insect architecture was well known to be in a very advanced and perfect state,” “the author” suggests that it could inform the future construction of human buildings (71).

The proceedings of the Mudfog Association for the Advancement of Everything return time and again to these moments where the borders between the human and the

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163 As with Bill Barker, the intentions, comforts and desires of the passengers appear to be entirely secondary to the preeminent concern of producing speed and motion for Professor Queerspeck.

non-human become porous. This can happen in relation to other animals, as when the president of a session speculates on the ancestry of the pig-faced lady or various members throw in their concerns that young men may in fact be becoming bears in their excessive consumption of bears'-grease. This can happen in relation to inanimate objects, as when Mr. Knight Bell (M.R.C.S.) informs his audience that a man who swallowed a key early in life “for some years ... was troubled with a night-mare, under the influence of which he always imagined himself a wine-cellar door” (82). If these examples speculate about the penetration and transformation of human bodies and minds by inhuman materials, a proposition by Mr. Coppernose for “providing some harmless and wholesome relaxation for the young noblemen of England” considers the replacement of human agents by automatons. Essentially, Mr. Coppernose proposes to set up and enclose a “retreat” of model villages in which young gentlemen can engage in their propensities for reckless behavior, damaging property, and violence.<sup>164</sup> To provide for this last propensity, a force of automaton policemen is to be constructed and placed throughout the enclosure. It is not enough that a police automaton be capable of independent movement and receiving beatings: “if set upon and beaten by six or eight noblemen or gentlemen, after it was down, the figure would utter divers groans, mingled with entreaties for mercy, thus rendering the illusion complete, and the enjoyment perfect” (136). To the sadistic desires

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164 Coppernose frequently appeals to methods for limiting costs within this enclosure, suggesting that the purpose would be to shelter the rest of England from the destructive behavior of these gentlemen for the benefit and at relatively low cost to the public. However, Coppernose's also suggests that live pedestrians could be procured at low cost from workhouses for the cabriolet-driving gentleman to endanger and possibly injure or kill for the “full enjoyment” of these gentlemen (135). Thus, Coppernose is not solely concerned with containing costs – taking value to reside in the violent desires of the gentlemen – and leaves out workhouse inhabitants out of any calculation of public goods (and by implicit extension, the lower classes / those unlikely to possess many goods of their own).

of the young gentleman, there is no functional difference between the enjoyment to be taken from the automaton displaying pain and fear behavior, and what can be derived from such behaviors exhibited by a human subject.<sup>165</sup>

The logic of replacement does not end, however, with these police automata producing signs of suffering. Within this pleasure-space for aristocrats, consequences still follow from violent acts, and the young men are brought to model station houses and then examined before automaton magistrates before being fined. Meeting the objection that these magistrates should talk, Coppernose touches a spring, at which “one of the figures immediately began to exclaim with great volubility that he was sorry to see gentlemen in such a situation, and the other to express a fear that the policeman was intoxicated. The section, as with one accord, declared with a shout of applause that the invention was complete” (139-140). Both Eliot's *Theophrastus* (in “*Shadows of the Coming Race*”) and Dickens's *Coppernose* speculate on the replacement of human consciousness or human inferiority by the operations efficient machines. But where *Theophrastus* imagines the total replacement of humanity by more capable machines, *Coppernose* provides only a first step in a larger process of increasing efficiency, productivity and enjoyment on the scale of society. Moreover, where Eliot focuses on consciousness and its replacement by material processes, Dickens emphasizes the

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<sup>165</sup> The President raises an objection on this account, wondering if the gentlemen would “require the excitement of threshing living subjects.” Coppernose responds by noting that the number of gentlemen to victim makes the difference insignificant, and stresses the durability of his automata, who might lose limbs but still be fit to serve the next day, or even testify with their detached limb for evidence (138) – a scene contained in Cruikshank's corresponding illustration (which appears in the original publication in Bentley's and in the Chapman and Hall edition, but oddly not in the 1880 publication by the younger Bentley). Whether or not the reader accepts the core argument, this last detail of the testifying automaton underscores the entity's strangeness (with its detached limb) while reinforcing the sense that it can serve as a complete or perfect replacement for a human, at least from a functional and official perspective.

creation of perfect or complete performances. These perform necessary functions of life, realizing motion, expressing emotion, and passing judgment, in such a way that renders the question of consciousness effectively irrelevant. The question of interior understanding can be set aside, as the magistrate's performance of their roles, down to the exact right lines, testify sufficiently to their having "got it." If the wooden heads of the magistrates indicate a logical terminus of the isolated man's flight from both pleasure and pain, the cowering entreaties of the police automaton suggest that it might even have a leg up on that man in exhibiting emotion in the performance of its character.

As in Eliot's or De Quincey's texts, the point here is not that we ought to uncritically welcome or accept these speculations as fact or future. Dickens's reporter has hopefully prepared the reader against forgetting the formal vehicles through which these thoughts are being presented, and the conditions under which they find expression. Rather, the object in *The Mudfog Papers*, as in *Sketches by Boz* (among other works), is to create a literary experiment capable of engaging with given social, institutional and habitual lives and materials in such a way that something unexpected can emerge, a sudden difference in perspective or thought, an opening for a line of flight, a life. A life might appear in any number of forms – a figure defined by a singular fidelity to a locale, the frantic dream of a prisoner or drunkard, the unintentional irruptions and slippages of desire and meaning in the speech of a narrator or professor, the line taken by a renegade cab or a speculative thought once disengaged from familiar courses. The sketches produced under the name of Boz and the papers collected under the heading of Mudfog

experiments, attempts to find literary forms adequate to these vital and speculative bodies and events.

In the Chapman and Hall version, *The Mudfog and Other Sketches*, the series concludes with “Familiar Epistle From a Parent to a Child, Aged Two Years and Two Months,” a piece Dickens wrote on leaving the editorship of *Bentley's Miscellany*. Although the child in question is the journal itself, the placement of this piece at the end of the Mudfog Papers or Sketches provides a useful end note to what must in any light appear a relatively unfinished work (both incomplete and lacking the sort of finish applied to more polished works). In the “Familiar Epistle,” Dickens / Boz is led on by thoughts about transportation and historical change to move from focusing on his parental care for his child to comparing that child to an engine, adding parenthetically “not a Tory engine, nor a Whig engine, but a brisk and rapid locomotive” (569) and blending the two images as the piece closes. Whatever we might imagine this strange progeny of child-locomotive to look like, the forces at work in the compound image are made clear: the desire for speed and motion unencumbered by the dictates of external interests (politics as a predictable conflict of established parties), and the desire for a form of life that changes and grows, exhibiting singularities (a smile, a gesture, a funny expression) in the process – requiring in the meantime, as our editor reminds us, labor, sustenance and care. In the mesh of technological motion and energy with the unpredictable and contingent but purposive and promising activity of organic growth, Dickens provides us with an image of a kind of life his sketches and papers work to produce.

## Chapter Four: The Artist and the Eccentric: Experimental Writing in “The Legend of Jubal” and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*.

In reviewing Eliot’s *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems* for *The North American Review*, Henry James admits to more than a touch of consternation. The presumably fair procedure of evaluating poetry without thinking of her prose is unavailable to the reader and critic alike. In reading Eliot’s novels, “the imagination comes to self-consciousness only to find itself in subjection” and accordingly “it was impossible to disengage one’s judgment from the permanent influence of ‘Adam Bede’ and its companions” (484). This caveat hangs over the whole review, conditioning whatever positive statements arise with the sense echoed by many later critics of Eliot’s poetry that the poems don’t quite measure up. But James also has a more specific accusation to level against the poems and their author. These poems have an excess of artifice and “polished cleverness” about them, in line with “a sort of conscious and ambitious skepticism” at odds with Eliot’s true genius. Citing *Romola* and *Middlemarch* as evidence, James contends that “at bottom,” Eliot “has an ardent desire and faculty for positive, active, constructive belief of the old-fashioned kind, but she has fallen upon a critical age and felt its contagion and dominion.” Just in case we might miss the intended parallel between Eliot and Dorothea (or Dorothea as latter-day Theresa), James continues: “if, with her magnificent gifts, she had been borne by the mighty general current in the direction of passionate faith, we often think that she would have achieved something incalculably great” (489). A want of natural simplicity in the poems becomes

a symptom for a much larger ailment, stretching back through her novels (which are, after all “products of the same intellect” (485)) and out to a corruption of her culture at large.

The reference to the contagion of a “critical age” indicates something of the root problem. Even before Mary Ann Evans became George Eliot, she had translated both David Friedrich Strauss’s groundbreaking work of Higher Criticism, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1835 / 1846 (tr)) and Ludwig Feuerbach’s more accessible humanist opus, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841 / 1854 (tr)). Both texts offer a revision of Christian doctrine and narrative along historical and materialist lines, with a consequent loss of certain consolations of supernatural faith (although each offers a different form of compensation for this loss). These texts are part of a larger and sometimes amorphous development that stretched across religious, philosophical, scientific and cultural debates. In seeking to lay hold of this contagious force, James links three central terms: critical, skeptical and pessimistic. The first term indicates a lineage both to the works of higher biblical criticism mentioned above, but also to developments streaming out of (and sometimes against) the critical philosophy inaugurated by Kant. While both skepticism and pessimism are ancient in origin, they would also have had more contemporary associations for James’s audience. A new and influential form of philosophical skepticism, connected with empirical methodology, had been formulated most forcefully by Hume. While Rousseau’s pessimistic tendencies may have exercised great power over the Romantics, at this time Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy was beginning to show some of the influence that it would carry over into the late Victorian and early modernist eras. While we may be accustomed to think of deep



pessimism and skepticism as more in accord with the self-conscious decadence around the turn of the century, the intellectual of the 1870s would have had more than enough resources to draw on in laying claims to the terms. It is in this context that James can identify the title poem of Eliot's collection as "the expression of a pessimistic philosophy" and assume his readers will recognize something more at stake than the eccentricity of an individual writer.

Under the influence of this philosophy, Eliot may be debarred from incalculable literary greatness, but this does not prevent James from conceding some value in her poems:

We imagine George Eliot is quite philosopher enough, having produced poems mainly as a kind of experimental entertainment for her own mind, to let them commend themselves to the public on any grounds which will help to illustrate the workings of versatile intelligence, – as interesting failures, if nothing better. She must feel they are interesting; an exaggerated modesty cannot deny that.

We have found them extremely so. (485)

The accusation here of producing poetry mainly for self-amusement is surely unjust to a writer as conscientious and concerned with the value of both her own writing and writing generally as Eliot – a concern testified to by Eliot's letters and criticism as well as her literary practice. Nevertheless, the affective shift between these poems and Eliot's novels is telling. The novels captivate and bind our imagination, they seize hold even of our capacity to render judgments. James later speaks of Eliot's representation of

“magnificently generous women – the Dinahs, the Maggies, the Romolas, the Dorotheas” as her greatest accomplishment; their passionate moral beneficence ruling out readerly objection or dissent (489). These poems do not place the same moral-affective demands on us; they instead produce interest. As James demonstrates, this is an interest we are free to disengage our judgment from – skepticism, we have been told, is catching. Instead of meeting the pressing moral demands of the public, these poems produce something more idiosyncratic, a manifestation of free-ranging intelligence and of a philosophy at once pessimistic and playful.

If one can set aside James’s patronizing moralism, I suspect that there is something useful in his evaluation, both for “The Legend of Jubal” and Eliot’s last published work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. Both texts are deeply skeptical and critical, both in a general sense and with reference to the intellectual lineage outlined in the first chapter of this dissertation. Cultural traditions, writings and production must be rendered objects of examination, analysis and experimentation. The label pessimistic is accurate in part, but must be conditioned. These works subject familiar sources of consolation and value to critical scrutiny, and often find these sources wanting. Nevertheless, this is emphatically not a pessimism that can preclude action, creative engagement, and a grounding affirmation of vital interests. These interests are vital in that they draw us to the concerns of embodied life and a particular historical moment that Eliot inhabits. They also involve the imagination of and argument for a life in writing that goes beyond organic habits and what we call natural. It is in the defense of these

interests that a skeptical or even pessimistic rejection of familiar consolations and values becomes necessary in the first place.

In the artifice and complexity of the poems at hand, James finds a spirit in Eliot “mysteriously perverted from her natural temper” and genius, which are “essentially of a simpler order” than these manifestations (489). These features are not accidental. I contend that in her poems and in *Impressions*, Eliot is attempting literary constructions that makes us aware of their process of construction. These works manifest a desire to make full use of the resources of art, and thus entail an artificiality that refuses natural satisfactions and literary complexity at odds with simple communication. They are a kind of experimental entertainment, although expressly not just for Eliot herself. They seek out readerly pleasure, even as they bear relatively little relation to the stereotypical sources of such pleasure. In crafting these works, Eliot encourages her audience to develop a particular form of discipline, to engage in the labor and the play of difficult reading. The pleasures, pains and values belonging to these texts are neither natural nor simple, as they prefer instead an experimental mode of critical and laborious playfulness as their means of literary self-articulation. It is missing the point to complain that in this mode, they produce an excess of unnatural art and artifice, or impede the familiar operations of sympathy.

### *Criticizing “Jubal”*

If “The Legend of Jubal” comes up at all in Eliot criticism, it usually comes up with respect to her biography. Eliot began this poem while her stepson Thornton Lewes

lay on his deathbed and finished it after he died, a fact to which Nancy Henry, Alexis Easley, Charles LaPorte and Bonnie Lisle (among others) have drawn our attention. This fact seems to encourage emphasis on the central themes of mortality and creativity in the poem. Henry and Easley both connect these themes with Eliot's concerns with futurity and fame, while LaPorte and Wendy S. Williams focus on Eliot's relation to a Victorian poetess tradition, particularly with respect to connections in this tradition between religion and femininity. Both Lisle and Martin Bidney read Jubal as a sacrificial figure whose struggles figure Eliot's own as an artist (for Bidney, as mediated through major Romantic themes). Even as form-focused a critic as Herbert Tucker takes death as the decisive moment in this poem, which makes poetry possible by a consciousness of morality and limits. These readings are more than warranted by the text at hand. The narrative of "The Legend of Jubal" is structured around the deaths of Lamech's fairest son and Jubal, and the poem gives a good deal of space and emotional expression to each.

In reading "The Legend of Jubal" as a philosophically, culturally and aesthetically experimental work, I am not objecting to these prior readings. I am, however, suggesting a shift in emphasis, which downplays personal concerns and the dominion of mortality in favor of the cultural and intellectual work of the poem and its articulations of work, play and life. It is not wrong per se to say that in the figuration of art and creativity in "Jubal," Eliot finds a consolation or compensation for death. But it does miss something of the perversity, skepticism and ambition that James picks up on. To attempt to recover these interesting features of Eliot's work, I will be reading this text first in connection with German Higher criticism, and then with the aid of Spinoza's philosophy. Both here and

in Eliot's later *Impressions*, a textual presentation of bodily production connects to, without entirely encompassing, what it is that Eliot's writing is supposed to be doing for the reader. For "Jubal" in particular, understanding this latter work requires setting the central event of the poem, the production and propagation of music, with its formal work and critical frames.

In starting from a biblical passage in "Jubal," Eliot was returning to the textual fields of her earliest major published work, her translation of David Friedrich Strauss's *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*. Although little known today, Strauss's *Life* provoked passionately indignant reviews both among the Germans and the English and drove Strauss out of one university position only to be prevented from taking on another due to a revolt in part against his appointment.<sup>166</sup> This work was widely – and not inaccurately – seen as an attack on revealed religion and any supernatural content belonging to Christianity. Strauss's mode of criticism nominally synthesized traditional or supernatural and naturalist (or materialist) readings of the gospels, producing a mythic reading that drew from both. Strauss's practice, however, was radically opposed to right Hegelian orthodoxy, as he sought to cleanse the gospels of miraculous content and to identify and destroy inconsistencies in the texts. Strauss's work (and its translation) required a severe discipline, both in its conscientious deconstruction of belief, but also in its determined, almost obsessive critical proximity to the texts it analyzed. The kinds of

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<sup>166</sup> See Douglas R. McGaughey's "David Friedrich Strauss and the 1839 Revolution in Zürich," originally given at the Pacific Northwest Regional AAR/SBL Annual Meeting in Portland, Oregon: April 30, 1994 and hosted at <http://www.chora-strangers.org/article/mcgaughey1994> and the second chapter of Richard S. Cromwell's *David Friedrich Strauss and His Place in Modern Thought* (Fair Lawn, NJ: R.E. Burdick, Inc., 1974).

destruction Strauss engaged in could only be justified and substantiated by an intensive approach working within the gospels themselves, leaving no textual detail free from analysis.

Although Strauss was ultimately dedicated to a naturalistic and materialist worldview, he nevertheless had a genuine commitment to a mythic mode of interpretation. Reading the gospels either literally or allegorically is an error for Strauss, an error which the critical category of myth allows one to avoid. Rather than being either the Word of God or the whim of the interpreter, myth is a social expression. Myth is thus not true, assuming we try to directly equate its characters and narratives with particular historical persons and events – but neither is it false, as it is grounded in the experience and desires of a historical community. Myths are real in that they possess a real human content, and tell us about the lived experience and collective desires of a people. Critics like Avrom Fleishman and Barry Qualls correctly cite the humanistic turn in Strauss, emphasized and universalized in the more positive conclusion to the *Life*, as a major influence on Eliot. This particular influence is somewhat hard to disentangle, however, from that of Feuerbach's humanism. Unlike Strauss's sometimes painstakingly precise textual procedures, Feuerbach generally worked on larger-scale religious and philosophical concepts and practices in *The Essence of Christianity* and similar works. Nevertheless, both critics agree in finding a fundamentally human significance behind religious characters and narratives.

Picking up a humanistic theme in the opening of "Jubal," LaPorte suggests a Feuerbachian reading of Cain's wandering from the land of Jehovah. More specifically,

LaPorte points to Cain's conviction that he will find a set of gods arising from seeing them mirrored in an inward glance as an almost prototypically Feuerbachian instance of divinity as idealized projection (*Victorian Poets* 208). While LaPorte characterizes Cain as standing godless between henotheism and monotheism, Cain's immediate desire in wandering seems to aim more towards polytheism. The poem begins with Cain seeking a pantheon less bloodthirsty than Jehovah, who replace animal with vegetable sacrifice, with which "food and wine" they feed "the subtler sense of frames divine." It moves then to "Wild joyous gods, who winked at faults and folly, / And could be pitiful and melancholy." These gods are never named, but the latter line suggests a specifically Greek form of paganism, with Dionysian overtones.<sup>167</sup> Given her omnivorous reading, Greek paganism for Eliot would likely have been mediated through both German and English Romantic inheritors of Winckelmann (whose influence would later continue through figures like Nietzsche, Spengler and Heidegger). These inheritors often sought to use idealized versions of ancient Greek religion for the purposes of contemporary intellectual and artistic projects, and would sometimes blend paganism with pantheism or generalized nature worship. Eliot's connection with these artists and critics is suggested both by the impersonal and natural-vegetal character of these gods and her reference to emotions connected to dramatic performance. I quite agree with LaPorte's claim for a Feuerbachian mechanism at work in Cain's projection – but even from the beginning of

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<sup>167</sup> See Henry's references to Orpheus myths and Maenad choruses in Eliot's poetry and *Romola* (*Critical Biography* 149, 186, 189-190) as well as Felicia Bonaparte's argument for a Maenad presence in *Romola* (*The Triptych and the Cross* 158).

this poem, Eliot is already moving beyond a solely biblical or Christian (direct or inverted) frame for the legend of her minor biblical figure.

One of the first features of this work likely to confront a reader either of Eliot's day or our own is its evident distance from the original biblical text it takes up as its source and nominal frame. As LaPorte notes, Eliot's poem starts from a brief (7 line) and relatively obscure passage in Genesis, but most of the poem "derives from her own imagination" ("Poetess" 165). Eliot's text also diverges significantly from typical biblical content. Jehovah has no speaking parts or prophet to declare his will, only being an inferred presence through the mark left on Cain's children and the persistence of death in the new community. Moreover, in the eastern city Cain founds, humanity finds an exemption from Adam's curse to toil and sweat as they labor "gently" and "in glad idlesse." This condition is broken by the arrival of death among the populace, but Jubal's music seems to offer some partial recovery of an Edenic state. This movement of loss and recovery aligns with a Feuerbachian narrative of alienation and reclamation – an alignment reinforced by the absence of the Judeo-Christian divinity and the poem's focus on emotive truth and maternal figures (the Madonna being a central figure in *The Essence of Christianity*). At the same time, Eliot's poem ultimately distances itself from both an idealized religious community of the faithful and from Feuerbach's hope for a utopia founded on an essential human nature, now to be recovered and transfigured (I will return to the question of utopia later in the chapter). In reading this text, we should not be too ready to find a Christian narrative underneath, even in humanist garb.



“Jubal” breaks from its biblical frame in tone and form as well as narrative content. In place of the direct, even sparse prose of Genesis, Eliot works in rhymed couplets, drawing out scenes and descriptions, images and figures. Between its “unhurried” couplets and its indefinite eastern setting, LaPorte plausibly argues that readers would have connected the poem with Romantic Orientalist poetry like Moore’s *Lalla Rookh* or Southey’s *Thalaba* (“Poetess” 166). However, I would qualify LaPorte’s further claim (shared with critics like Lisle, Bidney and others) that Eliot’s poem is basically sentimental in tone. A clear instance of this comes in Eliot’s reimagining of Lamech’s murder of an unknown person into an unintentional homicide of his own son, which becomes a scene of domestic mourning. “By framing events in this way,” LaPorte argues, “Eliot clears away the obscure violence of Genesis and provides a tender sentimental vignette” (*Victorian Poets* 209). Sentimental language and conventions attend the mourning, but the death itself? It abruptly enters “Till, hurling stones in mere athletic joy, / Strong Lamech struck and killed his fairest boy.” Herbert Tucker’s jesting characterization of the event as a “fatal sporting accident” (26) at least has the virtue of getting at the absurdity of the incident. Though surrounded by mild or sentimental language, the event described is nothing short of horrific. Lamech may be an innocent if we like, but he is no less disturbing for that. Beyond a mere lack of forethought, Lamech’s action becomes that of a body given up to mindless and purposeless physical exertion – placing him below even Huxley’s (or Theophrastus’s) non-reflective automatons, who have the proto-rational character of pursuing of fixed ends.

The point here is not that we should ignore the sentimental content and language in Eliot's poem, but rather that we need to recognize the poem's mixed tonality and tendency to produce breakages with readerly expectations and ease. Before the death of this anonymous but beloved son, Eliot's poem had been waxing pastoral, describing the gentle labor above mentioned and meter matching a mood in which "Time was but leisure to their lingering thought." Eliot's lines themselves seems to linger, as a concluding "will" connects by rhyme to the initial "Till" across the stanza break, only broken by the harsh alliteration (Strong / struck) announcing the death in the next line. The sentimental morning at this death, expressed as a state of helpless confusion in the indefinite familial mass, is then in turn disrupted by Cain's grimly frank declamation. Eliot's poem often does indulge in flowing sentimental lines, reflecting on pleasant or pleasantly sorrowful emotional states – the domestic scenes noted by several critics being a particular site for this. But it is no less given to ironic (or even absurd) turns, to reflective unease or to obscure action and description on that account. These features serve to underscore a recurrent tendency in the poem to present mistakes that are nevertheless productive, both for the purposes of the narrative and for the reflective interruptions of habitual thought they offer the reader.

Several of these structuring mistakes are errors in interpretation. The earliest of these lies in the beliefs that guide Cain in his eastward journey. One of these beliefs has already been indicated – his conviction from reading his interior desires and needs that he will find gods to match. Cain also initially believes that in fleeing eastward and leaving the land of Jehovah, he has thereby escaped death. Cain derives this belief from an

explicitly partial reading of his own body: taking note of the healthy and still youthful appearance of his body, he neglects the brand that he bears and has passed down to his descendants. Although both interpretations are errors, they are also part of a general energy and drive that enables Cain's departure and the construction of a city (in Genesis, the first city). At the death of Lamech's son, Cain recognizes his mistake but does not thereby free himself from interpretative error. Realizing that his tribe is not free from death, Cain concludes that it was the God Jehovah, angered at all mankind, that has found them at last and that it was he "Who came and slew the lad." The embodied personalization of God is not out of keeping with Genesis – we might think of Jacob wrestling with God, or Yahweh walking in the Garden of Eden. But this alleged cause is decidedly at odds with the poem at hand, which has already provided the concrete physical cause of the death, accomplished without conscious intent. Eliot thereby forces the reader to posit and interrogate her own interpretation of the relation between the two texts. The reader knows Cain to be capable of mistaken interpretations, and he seems here to be overcompensating from an earlier mistake, warning his tribe of a homicidal deity on the loose. At the same time, it would seem wrong to completely detach the events here from those of Genesis – Cain does, after all, still bear the brand (and did wander, found a city, etc.).

As a translator of Strauss, Eliot would have been familiar with the idea that a biblical text could contain different and even conflicting traditions. While the most famous instance of this in Genesis is the two juxtaposed creation stories, Eliot chose another such instance as the initial source for her poem. In the biblical passage, the sons

of Lamech are each described as the ancestors of a living group of people – apparently in contradiction to the flood narrative in which only the line of Seth survives through Noah.<sup>168</sup> In Strauss’s hands, such a passage would indicate the necessity for the destruction of any sense of accessible historical actuality in the base text. For Eliot, it may be enough to indicate to the attentive reader that, even if we were to appeal to the base text, we would have no guarantee of a consistent and unambiguous narrative that would resolve horizons of undecidable interpretation of itself. Insofar as we seek to go beyond Eliot’s text – a desire the text itself clearly encourages – we run up against these horizons. While Lamech’s unconscious violence may have slain his child, the larger question of the origin of the brand and the general condition of mortality are not given by the text, as it neither explicitly affirms nor denies Genesis on this point. Likewise, the peoples and events of “Jubal” could be made consistent with the biblical flood narrative (the children of Cain growing in strength and hubris on their way to oblivion – and Eliot does later mention a Flood to come), or Eliot could expect her reader to follow the possibility of alternative historical lineages implicit within the biblical text.

The textual indecision on this last point is itself telling, as part of a larger and oppositional reworking of some of the fundamental concerns of Genesis. None of the great title events of Genesis (The Creation, the Fall, the first murder, the Flood, etc.) are on display here, and Jehovah is absent. Genesis is concerned first and foremost with generations, initially of the world and humans, but for most of the text with the

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<sup>168</sup> See commentary on Genesis 4:19-22 in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Augmented 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2007). The genealogical lines are somewhat complicated by the appearance of the same names on both Cainite and Sethite lines, but Jubal, Jabal and Tubal-Cain are all clearly identified with the former.

genealogical line of patriarchs that leads eventually to Joseph. This is a line from which Jubal is doubly removed – first by ending up on the wrong line from Adam, and next by not participating in biological reproduction (at least within the space of Eliot’s text). While the text in Genesis speaks of Jubal as “ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe” (4:22), Eliot’s Jubal finds no biological line. Against a narrative of male begetting that leads ultimately to the Nation as the destiny of a people, Eliot proposes a narrative of artistic invention and propagation, centered on but not contained within a minor biblical figure ultimately excluded from the only community with which he has any biological connection. In the place of the linear and patriarchal biological reproduction of Genesis, Jubal embodies a mode of artistic production that proliferates without re-producing or, for that matter, re-presenting (as Ruth Solie reminds us, it is important to remember that Jubal produces music, rather than art in general).

### *Producing Art*

In reading “Jubal,” we must be careful to distinguish the occasion of this artistic productivity from the more general entrance of self-conscious work – and thereby avoid the over-quick shorthand by which critics like Lisle and LaPorte come to the conclusion that Jubal’s art is caused by a consciousness of death. Cain’s declaration that Jehovah now stalks among them as Death does have an immediately productive effect on the tribe. A new consciousness of time as a force inhabiting and directing all things “to some unknown close” dawns, and with it the advent of memory and a mode of production unlike the idle, repetitive processes hitherto prevalent, as “Work grew eager, and Device

was born.” During this transformation, the subjects of the lines alternate between abstract personifications and an indefinitely plural “them” coextensive with “the race of Cain.” These general drives become particularized and intensified in the three remaining sons of Lamech, who resolve to “Let soul and arm give shape that will abide” and to “fashion acts that art to be” after they depart. The poem then provides the dispositions and characters of the three sons before going on to describe how they set about fulfilling this general imperative. Jubal turns his calm demeanor to taming wild animals, bringing them within a human domestic fold. Tubal-Cain’s restless strength finds forceful exercise in harnessing fire for smithing. Jubal’s indefinite desire, his “want that did but grow with gain,” however, does not immediately find a productive outlet. Instead of arising all at once, Jubal’s artistic production comes about as a slow growth arising from a mixture different connections and reflections.

Jubal’s first point of contact (after the pact) comes in the labor of his brother, Tubal-Cain. In this labor, force of will and the imposition of form are joined in the transformation of matter as mass. This shaping act exceeds the limits of whatever intentions Tubal-Cain brings to bear, as “Each day he wrought and better than he had planned.” In his restless creativity, Tubal-Cain creates and throws off objects whose ends he does not, perhaps cannot, foresee. Violence and communal harvest lie mixed in these “various forms,” awaiting the hands of the tribe to be realized.<sup>169</sup> As Tucker notes, Tubal-Cain’s labor helps to suggest form and definition for Jubal’s “inchoate yearning”

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<sup>169</sup> Eliot also includes thirty silver pieces among Tubal-Cain’s various produce, which go on to be Judas’s payment and a curse upon all who handle them. As Henry notes, this anecdote, together with the distinct but connected legacies of Jubal and Tubal-Cain probably suggest the “antithetical yet inseparable” relation of art and money for Eliot (“George Eliot and Finance” 325-6).

(27). At the same time, Jubal seems fairly uninterested in any particular form the labor gives rise to, instead focusing on the generative movement and incidental sounds produced. Following (should we say producing?) Jubal's experience, the poem's lines alternate between something like sense-data and rapid abstractions therefrom. From the motion of the hammer and the resonant sounds of metal, Jubal moves to something beyond sight and out to "skyey spaces in spaceless thought."<sup>170</sup> The condition for these abstracting movements lies in resonance and collisions rather than harmony per se; a blend of "concord and discord" from which Jubal derives an energetic trajectory out to "Some living sea that burst the bounds of man's brief age." Tubal-Cain's labor is active and concerned with "act-producing thought," but it is also consistently characterized as forceful and a kind of conquest. In this activity, he experiences a continual return of the will he exerts on matter in the new forms it comes to bear. Even before Jubal has developed his own mode of labor, he is moved to desire something different: something which goes beyond a return of the self-as-will while partaking in (or abstracting from) the creative unpredictability of Tubal-Cain's craft, and something which connects to a larger and even super-human plane.

Before moving on to the further growth and fruition of Jubal's music, it will be useful to take a step back and give a terse account of Spinoza's philosophy as relevant to the text at hand. While Isobel Armstrong is correct in stating that there have been no book-length studies on Eliot and Spinoza since Dorothy Atkins's *George Eliot and*

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<sup>170</sup> For the trope of hearing sight in Eliot, see Henry Critical Biography 185-6. On the poetic production of space in this poem, see Tucker 27-8. While I concur with Tucker's emphasis on the communal nature of this space elsewhere in the poem, here I take its operation to be altogether more abstract and indefinite.

*Spinoza* (1978), there have been a number of articles since then, most frequently taking up Spinoza's determinism, his account of the emotions and of the imagination – usually with a note on this last point that Eliot's fiction exceeds Spinoza's philosophy in some way or another.<sup>171</sup> Spinoza's philosophy is centered on a dual-aspect monism, in which Thought and Extension form two aspects of a common plane of Nature, on which minds and bodies interact. Thus, the human is radically embedded within her environment and minds cannot be dissociated from bodies. Bodies as we encounter them consist in a relation of a great number of parts or simple bodies and cannot be adequately understood – or, for that matter, continue to exist – outside of the relations in which they stand to their own parts and to other bodies (and ultimately in relation to the plane of Nature that grounds all existence and thought). It is within these relations that emotions are produced, as felt experiences of furtherance and increase in power or contraction and decrease in power to act and think. While the above-mentioned studies tend to emphasize the role of sociality in this emotional production, it is important to recall that such production is by no means limited to human bodies. In a line that Deleuze makes much of, Spinoza declares that we do not know what a body can do, or, in Samuel Shirley's translation, “nobody as yet has determined the limitations of the body's capabilities” (III. 2s, 106). From this perspective, the *Ethics* becomes a text not about normative morality, but rather about the situation in which we find ourselves and the

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<sup>171</sup> The articles I am referencing here are by Moira Gatens, Virgil Nemoianu, Ted Zenzinger, Miriam Henson and Isobel Armstrong, and can be found in the bibliography. Of these articles, I probably draw closest to Virgil Nemoianu's “The Spinozist Freedom of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*,” which stresses the ideal of human liberation that runs alongside Spinoza's determinism and Spinoza's insistence on human embeddedness in Nature.



prospects we have for making the most out of the to-us indefinite capacities we possess and the situations and bodies we encounter – of maximizing our powers of thought and action. Lest this drift into humanistic self-cultivation or Nietzschean power fantasies (neither of which is entirely avoidable), I should emphasize that not knowing a body's capacities also entails not knowing exactly what a body is – and knowing that a body consists in relations, in its capacities to affect or be affected, gives us little reason to suspect a body should stop with the skin or a projected self.

Jubal's body is immediately affected by its sensual-abstractive encounter with labor in a way that seems at odds with its presumably male type: he is struck "with such blissful trouble and glad care / for growth within unborn as mothers bear." In this paradoxical emotional state, the newly impregnated Jubal wanders into the "far woods" listening to birdsong. In listening to this song, the body of Jubal and that of an indefinite "we" are blended, as the notes of these songs "reach / More quickly through our frame's deep-winding night, / And without thought raise thought's best fruit, delight." This passage testifies both to our incomplete knowledge of our body and its relations, and to its capacity to produce affects without the immediate supervision of conscious thought. It is only after this second encounter that Jubal returns to his tribe, there being further seeded by a miscellany of human noises. These noises are mostly linguistic utterances of varying emotion, pitch and function, but also include laughter, noises used in herding, the meaningless repetitions of echoes and the rhythm of Tubal-Cain's hammer. It is only after this triple impregnation that Jubal's can advance his gestation, and his bodily impressions begin to circulate and connect to form a new body: "So streamed as from the

body of each sound / Subtler pulsations, swift as warmth, which found / All prisoned  
germs and all their powers unbound / Till thought self-luminous flamed from memory /  
And in creative vision wandered free.” Here as elsewhere in the poem, thought is never  
really separable from the relations and actions of bodies, although the actions of bodies  
and their conjoined thoughts can produce a sensation or experience of freedom (related,  
in some sense, to the production of novel bodies and relations).

Having absorbed the needful impressions, Jubal must still rework his conceptual-  
physical materials and actually make the lyre before sharing the infant music with his  
tribe. Rather than focusing on the human side of Tubal-Cain’s labor, Jubal identifies the  
sounds of smithy with “the mighty tones and cries” of the “giant soul of earth.” The  
sounds pouring from metal and clay are reimagined as a “sightless swarm” that “fill the  
wide space with tremors.” Music is in turn imagined as the wedding of this inhuman  
swarm of sounds with human voice “as does but glimmer in our common speech.” As  
Tubal-Cain’s work is rendered at once geological and insectile, the voice must reach an  
intensity beyond habitual use and need, becoming capable of informing “the sense / With  
fuller union, finer difference.” Unlike Tubal-Cain’s ignorance of and apparent  
indifference to the future use of his tools, Jubal imagines music as promising “new life”  
for future generations to grow “As spring from winter, or as lover’s bliss / From out the  
dull unknown of unawaked energies.” Jubal’s vitalism, it seems, is less interested in the  
distinctions between human and planetary processes than in their common source in  
imperfectly understood powers and energies. There is still the matter of the instrument to  
be fashioned, and Eliot engages in a little mild irony in contrasting Jubal’s soaring

aspiration to “the plenteous choir / Of the world’s harvest” with his own harvest of “one poor small lyre.” Against the tremendous masculine effort of Tubal-Cain’s wresting of forms from stubborn matter, Jubal’s “lonely labors” are relatively unimpressive, being characterized more by patience than heroism, discipline than force, and limited experimentation than accomplished grandeur.

Jubal’s emotions after making and trying out the lyre are far less humble, as he descends from his retreat in the hills, “glorying as a god beneficent, / Forth from his solitary joy he went / To bless mankind.” Jubal’s descent from his elevated privacy to share aesthetic wisdom and joy with lowland humanity might remind a modern reader of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra – although the connection here is probably through the Romantic figure of the prophet-poet and the biblical tropes with which both Eliot and Nietzsche play. As Jubal descends, the tribe is arranged in a round engaged in leisurely play or rest centered around Cain, with an epicyclical sub-center on Jabal and Tubal-Cain, now become simply “Tubal,” off working on his own. The effect of Jubal’s music is instant and captivating, as “Joy took the air, and took each breathing soul, / Embracing them in one entrancèd whole.” Eliot is careful not to collapse this whole into an undifferentiated mass, however, as “each varying frame” is thrilled “to various ends.” As the vernal impulse produces “rage or tenderness” in different animal bodies, different human bodies react differently to this musical impulse. Worn older bodies are carried back to memories of youthful experience and security, while “younger limbs / thrilled to the future” and even Tubal feels the music to enter him and instantly awake thoughts of new creations. The bodies thus thrilled become immediately active in both mind and body – or, rather,

they become active in such a way that the thought, sensation and bodily action enter into a state of jointure and mutual augmentation. From its epicenter in Jubal, music flows out through the tribe, who are caught in its tidal impulse, taking up a dance which redounds upon the music. Once music has been communicated through the tribal body, it becomes a common property of sorts, and Jubal seems to have fulfilled his desire to inaugurate a form of life and invention to be carried through to future generations. By a basic sort of narrative logic, it would make sense to end the story here. Cain seeks to, but cannot flee death, which returns to his tribe. A consciousness of death wakes labor and anxious consciousness. After various impressions and inspirations, Jubal finds a form of art that ensures a kind of futurity that does not die with the individual body and offers its hearers a momentary exemption from the normal operations of time.

### *Departures*

Jubal, however, is not content. As the instruments and songs made by Jubal proliferate, Jubal himself alleges that “Hearing myself . . . hems in my life” and resolves to set off for a different land. Even in this antediluvian state, art may fall into habitual repetition and ossify, and thus must seek out fresh experience to maintain its vital character and power. As Cain sought lands “ruled by kind gods” projected from his own desires, Jubal imagines and decides to seek out lands composed of desire. These lands are partially pure imagination, as in the higher mountains “that touch the blue at the rising of the stars.” They are also a simple desire for geographic and biological difference, for new weather, trees, for new “bees and birds and beasts that hunt or browse” that “Will

teach me songs I know not.” Jubal imagines that in such lands his “life shall grow like trees both tall and fair / That rise and spread and bloom toward fuller fruit each year.”

Besides this organic existence, however, Jubal is also seeking after a land in which he can hear “the great clear voices” of the stars themselves without the “rough mingling” of the terrestrial lands he knows.

While Cain never did find his kind gods (unless we count the Arts that sprung up in his land), Jubal does manage to find new lands and, with them, new peoples.

Following an unnamed stream south, Jubal has the prototypically Romantic experience of encountering mountains and being struck with song and a sense of the sublime – although Eliot’s condensation of this usually lengthily expounded experience into five lines raises the troubling question of meta-textual tone. In his journeying, Jubal comes across the region “long inhabited / By all the race of Seth” and resolves to take his rest.<sup>172</sup> Whereas Jubal’s earlier body is impregnated, here he is momentarily self-infantilized as he resolves to “feed anew from my great mother’s breast, / the sky-clasped Earth, whose voices nurture me” only then to be figured as a bee feeding on a flower.<sup>173</sup> In Eliot’s paradoxical juxtaposition of rest and motion, Jubal “lingered wandering” across these and other lands. In this wandering, Jubal is “sowing music” that will bear fruit beyond the flood, “for the poor late-begotten human brood.” Against the “race” of Seth or Cain,

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<sup>172</sup> Eliot is fairly obscure as to geographical locations in this poem, offering Tartary and Ind and possibilities for Cain’s city without affirming either and offering no clue as to Seth’s region beyond its proximity to mountains in the east and the presence of “deep waters” in the west. The primary matter of importance here, however, seems to be the geographic difference between the lands of this branch of Adam’s family and the one Jubal previously knew.

<sup>173</sup> Although the imagery is domesticated here, one is tempted to think of the deterritorializing operations of the orchid and the wasp.

modern-day humanity briefly appears as animalistic brood (Eliot later uses the term to characterize insects), still affected by a body grown to term in a forgotten corpse.

This glance outwards to an indefinitely multiple human (though not entirely human) futurity comes immediately before Jubal, who has hitherto been steadily augmented by social, biological and geological impressions, reaches a breaking point. All this time, Jubal has continued his search for the meeting point between the terrestrial and the stellar, finding only “wider earth” from each peak ascended. Finally, Jubal runs up against the ocean, hears its “multitudinous roar” and falls silent. Although bodily capacities exceed the scope of our knowledge, we also do not know where they will run up against limitations. Jubal is not vanquished at once, for after this encounter, he does take in “new voices” and share music with peoples apparently unconnected with either Seth or Cain.<sup>174</sup> But the vital connections and relations that enabled his art have weakened. As he now can only “hear confusedly,” he can no longer “tell” – both in the sense of understand and express – “what the earth is saying to me.” In this weakened state, Jubal decides to return home, in the hope of reclaiming something of the song which he has shared. In doing so, Jubal now seeks precisely what he had earlier sought to escape – i.e., “hearing myself” in the repetition of his songs in other voices. While Eliot’s poem uses pleasant language to describe the thoughts of home pulsing through Jubal, we should not lose sight of the fact that said thoughts are the product of an

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<sup>174</sup> Eliot describes Jubal wandering “through far regions strange / With Gentile homes and faces,” blending the peoples with their lands and dwellings. By identifying these peoples as gentiles, Eliot is reading Jewish identity backwards onto the earliest sons of Adam – possibly reminding her English readers that Genesis can be and was read quite differently from the beginning of a Christian story of all peoples.

enfeebled body, no longer possessing the extensive capacities for connection, desire and production it once held.

By the time Jubal has reached his home lands, extended wandering, the encounter with the ocean and simple age have all contributed to wear his body to the point of becoming unrecognizable. After spending several lines describing the numerous signs of physical deterioration running through this body, Eliot concludes, “he was the rune-writ story of a man.” It is difficult to parse exactly how to read the presence of runes here – whether, for instance, to connect them with Germanic memorial or funereal practices (Jubal’s body is later described as a “tomb defaced”), or simply to read them as an inscrutable alphabet, falling outside of both the Latin letters of the text or the Hebrew characters of the original. By either reading, Jubal has been transformed from the site of a vital and changing music to a fixed story, already written out. In this state, Jubal greets the familiar landscape with joy, but is horrified by the “dread Change” he finds in the city. The city has spread out, foot-paths have become paved roads, houses have multiplied, grown, tombs have sprung up and in Jubal’s disturbed imagination, the city has become “a murmuring crowd ... / Or a monster huge in heavy-breathing sleep.”

Having collapsed at the sight of this monster, Jubal is awakened by the sound of music coming from a moving procession. From Jubal’s simple lyre, instruments have multiplied into “cymbals, flutes and psalteries” and voices have learned new means of alternation and combination in concert or by turns. Throughout this various musical production, the crowd chants the name of Jubal. Overjoyed, Jubal hears the music and feels moved to join the crowd and “claim his fuller self.” Unable to contain himself,

Jubal rushes among the crowd, declaring “I am Jubal, I! . . . I made the lyre!” The crowd is shocked, then erupts and laughter, and then turns indignant. This claim from the weak and aged body before this crowd offends their religious belief that “Jubal was but a name in each man’s faith / For glorious power untouched by that slow death that creeps with creeping time.” From an absurdity, Jubal’s act passes into a crime, and the two most devout worshippers rush upon Jubal and beat him with their flutes until he flees and falls unseen. In a couplet of supremely bitter irony, Eliot remarks “The immortal name of Jubal / While Jubal lonely laid him down to die.”

Against the sympathetic bitterness thus occasioned, reinforced by the affective language surrounding Jubal’s dying body, we should not forget the critical exercises of this poem. While we cannot help but sympathize with Jubal, the text presents us with errors on the part of both the worshippers and Jubal in the immediately foregoing events. The most obvious of these are the mistakes of the worshippers, who have fashioned an aggressive and insecure religion out of a living and inclusive practice. Moreover, they have read their felt impressions of the power of music backwards, projecting their inadequate ideas of godlike perfection into its origin. From this, they conclude that music – or at least its origins – is basically incompatible with the fragility and contingency of the human body. But we also misread what we are given if we fail to see the errors that Jubal also makes. When the worshippers first laugh at Jubal, he doubts for a moment “whether he could Jubal be,” and, in some sense, he is not. Jubal bears an intimate and even singular relation to the origin of music, but in claiming the name used by the crowd he is laying claim to the life of a body that grown far beyond him. Comparing Jubal with



the Byronic hero, Bidney claims “Jubal’s fate is that of an uncomprehended outcast, a hated singularity, an exception apparently not only psychological but ontological, for it was his superhuman, godlike gifts that promoted him in the public view to a divine status now used as a weapon to destroy him” (43-4). Jubal is indeed an uncomprehended outcast, but we need to distinguish between the superhuman productions he once created and the quite human body he has become at this point. Part of Jubal’s desire is an entirely understandable desire for social life and for love for his former actions. But he is also seeking to fix song to his identity, to make the borders of the body of music and those of his body match up, and to lay claim to a life that was never entirely his to begin with.

Jubal is not left to die without consolation, but the consolation that he receives is entirely in line with the pessimistic philosophy that worries James – for this consolation is also a reconciliation to physical and individual mortality. In a dying vision, Jubal sees a feminine face he identifies as Song, and who identifies herself variously as his past, his soul (in line with the external soul he first hears in Tubal-Cain’s forge), his “outbreathed being” and his “dear dead bride.” Whether or not Jubal maintains his earlier error of laying claim to a life no longer his, he is granted the consolation of having participated in the life of music, of having born its body and having been the initial conduit through which Music has spread to the peoples of the earth. In the poem’s arboreal metaphors, Jubal has passed from being a fruited tree, to a dying oak, back to being a seed for a growing forest. Jubal is assured that only the Earth’s destruction can his gift of music be destroyed, and then, in an oddly Nietzschean moment, is told that “‘Twas but in giving

that thou couldst atone / For so much wealth amid their poverty.” While the language of the poem borrows from Christian registers in describing Jubal’s expiration, the process appears closer to notions of dissolution and reabsorption into Nature. Far from meeting any Jehovah in his death, Jubal instead finds the “All-creating Presence” – a likely nod to Spinoza’s *natura naturans* – for his grave.

### *Music, Utopia and Poetics*

In May of 1868, shortly after completing and publishing her other title poem, *The Spanish Gypsy*, Eliot wrote a letter to Frederic Harrison, responding to an idea for a poem he was advancing and responding with a bit of aesthetic theory: “My own faint conception is that of a frankly Utopian construction, freeing the poet from all local embarrassments. Great epics have always been more or less of this character, only the construction has been of the past, not of the future” (*GEL* 448). Before quoting from this letter in a later publication, Frederic Harrison added the condition, apparently drawn from conversations with Eliot, that “She shrank from any Utopia in which there was danger that ‘the picture might lapse into the diagram’” (*Memories and Thoughts* 142). “Jubal” is of course a significantly different poem from *The Spanish Gypsy*, from their settings to their subjects to their narratives and so forth. Nevertheless, these two statements provide a useful instrument for examining and working with “Jubal.” Eliot’s poem is frankly utopian, seeking out a mode of art that burst the bounds of realism and resonates across cultures and even in excess of the strictly human. At the same time, it is conscious of the danger of falling into predictable didacticism and schemata – of moving from an open

picture to a closed diagram – often attendant upon utopian writings (literary or otherwise).

I suspect that on the whole Ruth Solie is right in saying that not enough attention has been given to the fact that Jubal produces and the poem reflects on music, rather than other forms of art (117-8). Rather than following her lead in connecting this music with Victorian “moral teaching,” however, I want to connect the central presence and action of music in this poem to Eliot’s earlier comments on poetry and Utopia. Solie is quite right to point out that in “Jubal” Eliot does make several comments implying the presence of a moral component to music. Yet the occasional reference to Right or moral feeling in the poem seems mostly beside the main interest and poetic energy Eliot’s work draws from music. Solie incidentally mentions Pater’s famous pronouncement that “all art constantly aspires to the condition of music.” In the essay on the school of Giorgione in which this appears, Pater also characterizes music as the “ideally consummate art” and “the object of the great Anders-streben [other-striving] of all art, of all that is artistic,” for in it the distinction of matter and form becomes impossible (134-5). Art in general is the “striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception” and in music this striving is realized as end and means, form and matter, and subject and expression lose their distinction, “inhere in and completely saturate each other” (138-9). The ideal of music here advanced can be found in Pater’s aestheticist successors, perhaps most prominently in Nietzsche, but is also present in greater or lesser degrees in some of his Romantic forebearers – Nietzsche’s early mentor, Wagner, among

them. Music, for many of these writers and critics, was not a representation of experience – rather, it was experience itself, direct and unmediated.

We can see clear traces (or, arguably, anticipations) of this ideal of music in Eliot's "Jubal." Jubal's music is born of and directly produces perceptive experiences for its audience. As soon as the chords are struck, limbs and minds alike thrill and react, caught up in sensual force. Music in Jubal possesses an apparently mystical quality, its immediate power apparently connected with Jubal's unmediated access to the vital and geological forces that move about him. In his moments of greatest vital and creative strength, Jubal enters a state of indiscernibility with respect to the body of the music that pours out and reshapes the bodies around him. It is by no means an exaggeration to call this ideal utopian – provided that we can discard the notion that Utopia must refer to a particular political schema (or an impossible political state). As used by critics like Bloch and Jameson, Utopia can also designate an impulse or imaginative act that impels one to conceive (imagine, hold, posit, etc.) of forms of life, modes of existence and ways of interacting with others and the world around us different from those operant in the social reality we accept as common or given. In this sense, Jubal's music is a radically utopian fantasy of art, which reconfigures human lives and bodies on macro- and micro-scales.

Eliot's poem, however, does not collapse its form, writing, with the music it takes up as its object and matter. A certain space must be allowed between the operations of the music with which the poem is unapologetically fascinated and the literary and critical operations of the poem itself. Within the reflective warp of writing, Eliot expects the

reader to attend to the operations of interpretation and error, both on the part of the characters and within the reader's own cognitive actions and reactions. While James may demand to be taken up in a passionate subjection and suspension of judgment, Eliot invites her readers to exercise their own conscious and ambitious skepticisms. None of which is to say the reader is not to engage with the ideal of music presented. To the contrary, Jubal's music is the central provocation to thought presented by the text. This ideal as presented in the text is meant to provoke a sense of playful freedom with respect to received traditions, literary expectations and our understanding of what bodies can do. But precisely on that account, the writing that invokes this ideal must provoke critical examination and work to test the kinds of potentials thus afforded, must make use of its form to sound out the opportunities and limitations thus produced.

Nor should we infer that Eliot would agree with Pater in placing literary form secondary to music. In a late essay titled "Notes on Form in Art," Eliot starts from an abstract consideration of form and moves through matters biological before making her way to poetic form. After excusing herself from the obligation to draw on prior authorities, Eliot asserts that even "Plain people" will recognize that form, as distinguished from "merely massive impression" starts from an experience of difference or separateness, initially of wholes and then parts (*Essays* 432). From this basic beginning, she connects the growth of knowledge with its capacity to recognize and account for increasingly precise and varied distinctions and connections. This in turn provides the basis by which we arrive at the conclusion that "the highest form, then, is the highest organism, that is to say, the most varied group of relations bound together in a

wholeness which again has the most varied relations with all other phenomena” (433).

This conclusion in turn leads eventually to the inference that poetry may lay claim to a high station among the arts:

In Poetry – which has this superiority over all the other arts, that its medium, language, is the least imitative, & is in the most complex relation with what it expresses – Form begins in the choice of rhythms & images as signs of a mental state, for this is a process of grouping or association of a less spontaneous & more conscious order than the grouping or association which constitutes the very growth and natural history of the mind (435).

Whereas Pater’s music wears the crown through its complete proximity of form and matter, Eliot’s poetry lays its claim on the basis of a productive distance that, precluding any set equation of expression and subject, enables an optimally complex variety of relations. While Eliot concedes that Poetry “begins when passion weds thought,” poetic *form* requires the obtrusive consciousness of an at least partially arbitrary choice of elements. Far from a simple effusive eruption of emotion, poetic form necessitates a break from the habits of thought, the orders and associations, which have become natural to us over time.<sup>175</sup>

Before moving on, I should note two conditions that Eliot includes alongside this praise of poetic form. The first is that her sense of wholeness may not quite fit with our

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<sup>175</sup> Eliot’s decision to speak of the “growth and natural history of the mind” rather than that of the human mind may be important here. In Lewes’s five volume *Problems of Life and Mind*, the last two volumes of which Eliot edited, reworked and published, Lewes begins by arguing for Mind as a function of the biological organism – and hence something held in common with animals, at least so far as feeling and sensibility extend (in the second chapter, Lewes even extends a conditional version of sensibility to vegetal life).

preconceptions of the term. Eliot's notion of poetic form requires an established parallel with biological form, but the biological form that she takes up, the human organism, seems to possess a somewhat miscellaneous composition, consisting of such things as: "the finger-nails & tooth-ache, as nervous stimulus of muscle manifested in a shout, & the discernment of a red spot in a field of snow" (433). Far from a nicely ordered image of the human body's interdependent organs, this organism is a body scattered across keratin, a sensation of pain, a biological process and a precise perceptive engagement with an external environment. It is not immediately clear where exactly this body ends. Does it include the sound-waves of the shout as well as its nervous stimulus? If the tooth-ache leads to a nervous stimulation such that the hand takes pen to paper to write a complaining letter, are the impressions on the page (or the associations another might gather from them) in some sense part of this body?

The second condition shows Eliot's debt to a line of Romantic aesthetic theory starting from Vico and perhaps (for us) most famously articulated by Blake. Poetic form starts from a choice that is essentially inventive, being a break from habitual associations, while drawing from and shaping emotional force; it is thus both "spontaneous" in itself and "less spontaneous" than pre-formal associations in Eliot's phrasing. After its beginnings, form tends to lose its spontaneous or creative quality, eventually losing the "emotional thinking" which was its origin in self-refinement. "Poetry, from being the fullest expression of the human soul, is starved into an ingenious pattern-work, in which ticks with vocables take the place of living words fed with the blood of relevant meaning, & made musical by the continual intercommunication of sensibility & thought" (436).

This passage shows a clear concern with a tendency of form to harden into a habit of its own and to lose the vital qualities that generated it in the first place. Poetry itself, insofar as it becomes an overly familiar and repeated form, may become an impediment to poetic expression.

Eliot's ideal of poetry may thus appear contradictory. It must be conscious and it must be spontaneous. It must be formal and it must break with form. It must be whole but also multiple. It must be vital and yet break with natural history. Nor does Eliot entirely resolve all these tensions. Nevertheless, I suspect that we can infer a connected set of priorities for Eliot's poetics from these comments. Poetry must resist form that hardens into habit, form that becomes predictable and a closed operation of self-relation. It must attend with precise focus to the differential limitations and connective affordances of the materials it takes up. It must seek out and seek to further the intercommunication and mutual augmentation of thought and sensibility. It must make use of the resources of its medium, language, to produce a maximal state of complex relationality, both within its textual body and with other bodies (textual and otherwise). In doing so, it must create a form that would excite both sensation and reflective consciousness, a form at once vital and unnatural.

In pursuing this poetics, Eliot would ultimately abandon both verse and the novel, turning instead in her last published book to a modified version of sketches she chose to designate Impressions.



### *Reading Impressions*

We may be at a point where we can move criticism of Eliot's *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* off the endangered list and upgrade it to relatively neglected. There is still no book-length study, but recent years have seen a definite uptick in articles. After the relative quiet of the nineties and early 2000s (Nancy Henry's 1994 edition and 1996 chapter and Andrew H. Miller's 2003 article being notable exceptions), 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014 have all seen significant articles on *Impressions* published. However, critics still seem a little confused about how to class this work, with many opting for the designation of a "collection of essays," thereby evading the problem of how to connect this apparently miscellaneous text. James Buzard's chapter on *Impressions* in the 2013 *A Companion to George Eliot* demonstrates some of this ambiguity: despite recognizing the complex operations of character and (anti-narrative) narration, even comparing Theophrastus to various modernist fictional narrators, Buzard identifies the work as "nonfiction prose" (213, 205).

This confusion is partially inherent in the text. *Impressions* works from the ambiguously fictional-anthropological genre of character sketches, with origins in Theophrastan typology and later put to the various uses of cultural description, moral critique and entertaining invention (among others). Nor does the work stay entirely within this genre. As Buzard among others notes, the last section does not sketch any individual character; to the contrary, it looks much more like a Victorian essay of cultural-political criticism. Nor would we be mistaken in following this essayistic connection, provided we follow the playful and literary line of *Sartor Resartus* rather

than the more polemical of *Latter-Day Pamphlets*.<sup>176</sup> Like Eliot's novels on this point, *Impressions* draws in material from a wide variety of fictional and non-fictional sources. The formal use that it makes of these sources, however, troubles our usual distinctions of fictional and non-fictional writing. What are we to do when a fictional narrator invokes Dante and the distinctive songs of bird-species to advise us about the current state of England (advancing a program that we suspect is the author's own)? Rather than deciding *Impressions* is either essentially fictional or essentially non-fictional, I argue that it is literary precisely because it experiments with these sorts of complex engagements in which it becomes difficult to read by accustomed modes, either fictional or non-fictional. This difficulty, I argue, is not an obstacle to be overcome, but a formal feature resulting from an experimental practice which seeks to avoid giving us a means to comprehend the literary text at hand according to predetermined modes of reading – to decide in advance what it is that this text must or can be up to.

In crafting these experiments, Theophrastus seems to be determined to draw on as wide a range of intellectual registers as possible – philosophical, poetic, scientific, cultural-critical, political, ethnographic and historical, just to name a few. As Henry notes in her introduction, *Impressions* is filled with puns and allusions scattered across such varied fields that one is never quite sure that one is getting them all, and audiences will tend to divide at different points into those who do and those who do not follow a given line (xiii). Aside from a mostly common acknowledgment of Theophrastus's

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<sup>176</sup> In a fairly different context, Helen Small connects *Impressions* with *Sartor Resartus*, as a text whose cynicism is “fully embraced, stylistically and (by way of experiment) ethically” (97). Small also emphasizes the connection between the two texts in their mutual possession of a “tonally unstable and destabilizing voice” (100).

*Characters* as a root source, recent critics seem to be following these bifurcating referential lines out from the text. Thus, Ortwin de Graef latches on to language dealing with nationalism and national anxieties; Helen Small recognizes echoes of ancient rhetoric and cynicism; Jennifer Raterman emphasizes inter-cultural translation and exchange; and S. Pearl Brilmyer builds her reading around the extensive scientific material in the text. Nor does any one of these interpretive lines necessarily infringe on any other, except insofar as any might lay claim to a mode of reading that would at last master the text. *Impressions* is intensively meta-critical, and encourages a frantic growth of interpretation without granting explicit and consistent authorization to any given mode of reading.

This work stands both among Eliot's most laborious and most playful – although play here is often closer to James's skeptical pessimism than Jubal's unadulterated joy (in the moments where this joy appears). This laborious and playful character consists partially in the referential density just indicated. There is also the matter of tone, which is no easier to follow across the surface of the text. Theophrastus seems to delight in the production of paradoxical emotional and expressive states, from cruel joy to energetic enervation to hostile amiability. One of the more obtrusive moments of such paradoxical production comes in a parenthetical moment of the first section, in which Theophrastus alludes to an earlier "humorous romance" by him that has become "much tasted in a Cherokee translation, where the jokes are all rendered with the serious eloquence characteristic of the red races" (6-7). While Raterman reads Theophrastus as criticizing the Cherokee for "appreciating a translation precisely because it has had all the humor

and allusion flattened out,” this seems to miss something of the complex play of sincerity and humor at work in the aside (55). There is an uncomfortable sense that the English Theophrastus *may* be sharing a racial joke with his English audience. But there is also the suggestion that the Cherokee are getting something out of this text that the English audience has missed. Inferring that the Cherokee are reading or translating it wrong requires the enthymeme that a joke is incompatible with eloquent seriousness, and that seems like just the sort of self-evident commonplace the irascible Theophrastus would be likely to question. Theophrastus is not such a one to deny himself the pleasure of a little resentment, and he may be enjoying a scornful chuckle at the English audience who have failed to appreciate his work likewise failing in their over-hasty judgment of a foreign other. All of which seems like a good deal of work for a joke that is not terribly pleasant by either reading.<sup>177</sup>

I suspect it is something of this exhausting mode that leads Buzard to complain about Eliot’s “scatter-shot performance ... [that is] frequently dragged down by a labored prose style that seems almost a self-parody of her usual elegant complexity” (214). For Buzard, this labored style connects to a misanthropy on Theophrastus/Eliot’s part that sheds the meager rags of its disguise as the volume progresses. Buzard avoids James’s offense of asking Eliot to follow her natively simple genius, but there is a sense that he too is accusing Eliot of unnaturally departing from her novelistic voice and grace.

Moreover, why need she be so terribly unpleasant – and isn’t there something a bit sickly

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<sup>177</sup> While disagreeing with her initial interpretation, I should note that I entirely concur with Raterman’s follow-up statement that “Theophrastus challenges his current audience to appreciate his essays in all their instability and contrariness” (55).

and even corrupted in these late writings?<sup>178</sup> The work of reading *Impressions* can be a frankly unpleasant experience. I take it to be part of Eliot's wager in writing this text that certain unpleasant literary sensations and effects have their own kind of productivity worth experimenting with – that they can act as useful provocations to thought and feeling. In Jubal's music, we encounter a fantasy of art that would enable an affirmative mutual augmentation of thought and feeling that widens our ability to connect and experience. In *Impressions*, we encounter a literary practice that seeks to produce an augmentation of capacities critical and sensible, speculative and emotive. In seeking to produce this augmentation, Eliot draws upon complex, confusing and unpleasant affective registers, writes a text formally out of step with literary habits and sends us through this text guided by a thoroughly eccentric narrator.<sup>179</sup>

It makes a deal of difference where a critic decides to start reading this text – or, as is often the case, where outside the text one decides to begin one's reading. *Deronda's* dealings with Judaism and nationalism provides a natural lead-in to the “Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!” and, particularly in shorter reference, this cultural-political concluding section often becomes the emblem for the text. Contrariwise, a perceptive thought experiment in *Middlemarch* might provide the needed entry pass for following descriptive-scientific threads. Or, starting within the text, a not-entirely-chance violent

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<sup>178</sup> It strikes me as perhaps worthy of note that Theophrastus's pleasure in unpleasantness seems to be catching – particularly among his male critics. Thus, Buzard verges on gloating on the lack of continuing popular success of the work (215), de Graef builds to an ultimately uncontained disdain at what he dubs Eliot's “final farce” (38) and Miller nearly rejoices that in Theophrastus Eliot finally drops some of her forced “gratitude towards the sheer existence of the world and towards the acts of others” (312). I leave the reader to judge the extent to which I also have been contaminated.

<sup>179</sup> Although, as Raterman notes, we cannot read this title as suggesting with conventional notions of narrative (53-4)

remark at the onset of “How We Encourage Research” might provide the needed warrant for interpreting violence and violent interpretation, both in/of Eliot’s text and the academic situation from which we criticize it. One might instead accept the apparent desire of the text and begin with Theophrastus’s introspective introduction, reading out what we ourselves desire to get from Theophrastus, Eliot or more formal matters (narration, voice, character, etc.) from there.

### *Writing Conditions*

My own reading starts from the concluding paragraphs of the second section, “Looking Backward,” after Theophrastus has introduced himself but before he has quite got down to the business of sketching other individuals. Throughout the course of the section, Theophrastus has been using a mix of logical argumentation, humorous asides, affectionate reminiscence and mild concession to advance a program of proximate nostalgia, or attachment to a recent past, as opposed to our romanticized notions of pasts more distant. Such a program (and possibly the method of argumentation) will no doubt gratify critics who have known all along that Eliot was at heart a conservative. But just as Theophrastus has put the finishing touches on own his quasi-romanticized past, developed in a manner like the affectionate realism in *Adam Bede* or *The Mill on the Floss*, in which the humble and unimpressive become dear to us through association, proximity and a common past and landscape, he turns suddenly. “But I check myself. Perhaps this England of my affections is half visionary – a dream in which things are connected according to my well-fed, lazy mood, and not at all by the multitudinous links

of graver, sadder fact, such as belong everywhere to the story of human labour.” After defending beneficent illusions and refusing to relinquish his childhood loves,

Theophrastus continues:

Since then, I have learned to care for foreign countries, for literatures foreign and ancient, for the life of continental towns dozing round old cathedrals, for the life of London, half sleepless with eager thought and strife, with indigestion or with hunger; and now my consciousness is chiefly of the anxious, metropolitan sort. My system responds sensitively to the London weather-signs, political, social, literary; and my bachelor’s hearth is imbedded where by much craning of head and neck, I can catch sight of a sycamore in the Square garden: I belong to the ‘Nation of London’” (26)

The most important point in all of this is not that Theophrastus (or Eliot) does or does not hold a given view, but rather that Theophrastus’s rambling text draws our attention to the conditions under which the view and the writing in which it is presented originate.

Theophrastus’s pastoral vision may have something to do with a rural past, but it is more immediately an urban product, an expression of longing generated by the agitations and anxieties of London within its present historical moment being worked out through the textual and narratorial bodies before us.

The critical implications of this turn quickly proliferate. If the preceding vision and writing are a product of Theophrastus’s disturbed attunement to his London home, is the subsequent break in the vision and reflective turn to this environment also a product

of the same?<sup>180</sup> Is the largely London-dwelling Eliot using the writing of the London-dwelling Theophrastus to reflect on the conditions of her own literary productions? Is all of this textual mechanism an exceedingly complicated means of bringing the reader along to view advocated from the beginning of the essay? A modern reader so inclined might read a kind of neo-conservative strategy at work in Theophrastus's acknowledgment of an illusion about a national past, only to resolve to hold all the stronger to said illusion because of beneficial effects it is supposed to have apart from its truth value. This is a text that contains disturbing political possibilities and, as literary critics, we should not ignore that. But I suspect on the whole a label and its attendant desire to finally blame (or praise) Eliot does us less good than seeing what kinds of work the text at hand can do for us. After producing a significant amount of rhetorical and emotive work to enlist the reader, Theophrastus turns to reflect that, after all, this kind of labor is much out of keeping with that of most of humankind endures – exceptional in its affordance of ample eating and the luxury of leisure, among other ways. Theophrastus furthermore reminds us that even highly acute and sensitive critics are unlikely to catch at all the “multitudinous links” of human labor that have built up the nations we inhabit and that maintain and augment the cities to which we belong.

As Henry notes, the phrase “Nation of London” refers to the title of an 1834 essay by Thomas De Quincey (172 n27) – an essay, I might add, later incorporated as a chapter into his *Autobiographic Sketches* (1853). This partially revised collection of pieces published earlier shares some qualities with *Impressions*, being characterized by De

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<sup>180</sup> Yes.



Quincey as “a work confessedly rambling,” following “vagrant” lines of thought, amusement and interest and inviting the reader to make what connections she can beyond the personality assembling the sketches (346). De Quincey begins this essay or sketch by communicating the magnitude of London first through “the vast droves of cattle” that are regularly driven into the city, moving from there to the vast lines of all manner of material supply “operating, night and day, summer and winter, and hurrying forever into one centre the infinite means needed for her infinite purposes” (179). From this material base, De Quincey describes the agitated sensation that grows as one approaches this suctional entity, figuring London variously as a magnetic force, an approaching battle or marriage, and as Niagara (182). Upon reaching the vast crowds of London, one realizes one’s state as “a poor shivering unit in the aggregate of human life ... [as] but one wave in a total Atlantic, one plant (and a parasitical plant besides, needing alien props) in a forest of America.” In this city, De Quincey’s subject encounters a mass of “faces never ending, without voice or utterance for him; eyes innumerable, that have “no speculation” in their orbs which *he* can understand; and hurrying figures of men and women weaving to and fro, with no apparent purposes intelligible to a stranger, seeming like a mask of maniacs, or, oftentimes, like a pageant of phantoms” (183).

Theophrastus’s *Impressions* manifests a range of reactions to the sorts of sensations and thoughts De Quincey here connects with the experience of London. Agitation and disturbance run through Theophrastus’s tone and body, as well as in the rapid alternation of and frequent interruption within the sketches or sections. As De Quincey finds himself drawn into the city as a massive center of consumption,

Theophrastus is deeply concerned with the literary production and consumption centered in the city – as Henry notes, many of the characters are minor authors, and authorship is here connected with larger questions of cultural health (*Critical Biography* 241). As several critics have pointed out, the character sketch in the Theophrastan tradition is intended more as a classificatory or taxonomic project than something invested in particular psychological depth per se. Eliot's Theophrastan practice seems to both draw from and resist De Quincey's massive crowds of psychologically flattened alien faces. On the one hand, in singling out and describing particular characters, the latter-day Theophrastus seems to resist the tendency of the city to form homogenous masses, to drown individuals in living seas. At the same time, a type is something that collects and identifies individuals, rendering certain differences irrelevant for the sake of functional knowledge.<sup>181</sup> Within the character sketches of *Impressions*, there is a hope to find something eccentric, something likely to provide an energetic shock to the reader, something with the energy of maniacs and the disturbing qualities of phantoms. At the same time, Theophrastus seeks to mobilize these characters for speculation, to get them to lend their voices to something beyond their purview and to turn their ticks and jerks to textual and indicative purposes. There is no way of knowing in advance what productions of the city, including its characters, will prove to be of greatest use for thought and sensibility. Even the apparently enervating perspectives may prove to have their uses – as De Quincey's imagined parasitic plant should at least dispense with the illusion that it will achieve much growth without seeking out alien props.

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<sup>181</sup> For more on Theophrastan taxonomy and character types in relation to *Impressions*, see Brilmyer, p. 39, 41-2

The opening section of *Impressions*, “Looking Inward” is articulated through a kind of alienated intimacy with three external props: Theophrastus’s acquaintances, his audience, and the writing that connects him to, and disconnects him from, both.

Theophrastus introduces himself through his “habit to give an account to myself of the characters I meet,” both indicating and troubling distinctions of interiority and exteriority (in line with a Spinozan commitment to identity as relation). Despite an assurance of self-relation, he quickly returns to his interactions with his acquaintances, whose gross ignorance of his travels and constitution blend into the lack of intimate knowledge about him on the part of his intimate friends. Theophrastus then engages in a quasi-paranoiac construction of knowledge concerning him in these ignorant acquaintances and turns from his unintentional physical performances to the literary performance in which he is now engaged. Miller is quite right in pointing out that in this section, Theophrastus uses pain and painful vulnerability to establish a sense of human community, and here and elsewhere forms an “intimacy [between] masochism and humor” (308-9, 311). The more Theophrastus draws out and laughs at the “labyrinthine self-delusions,” the inconsistencies, and their general follies and failed endeavors, the more he acknowledges a fellowship built on common “weaknesses” (4). Theophrastus’s procedure here recalls Democritus Junior’s call for a “Democritus to laugh at Democritus” and the connections with which he concludes his preface between laughter and suffering, labor and pain. The apparent universalism of Theophrastus’s sense of folly makes it sometimes unclear where exactly we are to draw the line between his acquaintances and his audience – and particularly why he should expect a more attentive reception from the former than the

latter. That he does carry such expectation is attested to by the alternately digressive, involutive and aggressive movements of the text (testing, one might imagine, who is willing to follow a track thus warped).

Between the acquaintances who have never really cared to listen to him and the audience he cannot in some sense know, Theophrastus reflects on the operation of writing. He ultimately concludes in identifying a pleasing illusion produced as a necessary condition of writing – figured as the “inspiring illusion of being listened to” and as a “far-off, hazy, multitudinous assemblage . . . making an approving chorus to the sentences and paragraphs of which I myself particularly enjoy the writing” and being immersed in a necessarily incorporeal haze (13, 12). Making note of this passage and the disturbing countenance that obtrudes shortly thereafter, Miller concludes “writing is neatly suited to conserve uncertainties of self-respect: it sustains our exorbitant ambitions by doubting them” (310). While I take this to be an ultimately inadequate reading of how writing works in *Impressions*, Theophrastus’s sustaining doubts are on display in this first section. Theophrastus explicitly desires approbation, but equally distrusts consolation, which flatters “native illusions, a feeding-up into monstrosity of an inward growth already disproportionate” (9). Moreover, it threatens our powers of perception and interpretation: “examining the world in order to find consolation is very much like looking carefully over the pages of a great book in order to find our own name, if not in the text, at least in a laudatory note: whether we find what we want or not, our preoccupation has hindered us from a true knowledge of the contents.” While Theophrastus then turns to claim that “an attention fixed on the main theme or various

matter of the book would deliver us from that slavish subjection to our own self-importance,” the speck of self is not something we simply can do away with (10). Instead, writing is a necessarily partial process, bound up in the limitations of bodies – although between the operations of enjoyment (that enables imaginative and connective activity) and critical discipline (that frees us from consolation as self-absorption), there seems some hope for becoming at least a little unstuck from our particular skin.

Before moving back out to the sketches of other characters, let us pause for a moment in another part of “Looking Backward” before the nostalgia has built up to such an extent that it must be conditioned by Theophrastus’s urban acknowledgements. Having rejected the fanciful wish that one might have been born in another age, Theophrastus classes the desire under the more general “fool’s hectic”<sup>182</sup> of “wishing about the unalterable” and admits to suffering a variant strain. Before getting to this strain, however, he scolds “literature” for usually offering a past imagined to contain life “altogether majestic and graceful” and offers a counter-narrative of time travel (16). Traveling to the other Theophrastus’s Athens and Sappho’s Mytilene, the narrator finds himself among the unsung and base masses, not made any more interesting by a change of costume. Had Theophrastus been “another sort of person,” however, he could have turned the resources of the present to accomplishment in theory, poetry, or general well-being, and in any event become “so filled from the store of universal existence” that he should be free from “empty wishing” like a child desiring to enter a golden cloud, “its imagination being too ignorant to figure the lining of dimness and damp” (16-7). From

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<sup>182</sup> “The fever caused by a wasting disease” (Henry 171 n6)

the beginning, Theophrastus acknowledges himself to be replacing one form of empty wish with another, but it is easy to lose that for a moment in his juxtaposition of the two fantasies. Theophrastus's alter-literary imagination presents the reader with a transformation more radical than a transplantation in time, and one that resolves the desires and discards the inadequate imagination of the former – only upon reflection thereby offering its own dissolution in the selfsame cloud. Although nominally discarded, the imaginative exercise prompts the reader to supply the conditions under which one fantasy might be seen as preferable to another, offering its own suggestions of reimagining the fantasizing subject and containing the conditions of an epistemically productive self-destruction.<sup>183</sup> The content of the fantasy may contain something of a death of desire in its imagination of an absolute and satiating production, but its formal presentation certainly does nothing to hide the narrator's continued hunger and activity.

While Miller reads this whole performance as a testament to “imaginative endurance in the midst of [Theophrastus's] fatigue” in the face of a perfectionism that is ultimately triumphant (305), I believe what is happening in this performance is more along the lines of an exuberant experimentation with literary limits and capacities. Labor does not require being routed through the correct or the perfect in order to relate to pleasure or produce significant results, as we have seen already in playful works and sketches of the Opium-eater and Boz. Why, after all, need we return either to the given body of Theophrastus or the perfect body that would not suffer the world's partial affordances when the exercise has clearly demonstrated the radical variability of the body

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<sup>183</sup> Or, depending on how we choose to read it, a subtler form of fictional self-closure.

within literary figuration? Theophrastus provides a subtle gesture towards this kind of literary freedom in one of the earlier, less adequate imaginative transplantations. Touching down on Greek soil under the rule of Philip and Alexander, Theophrastus concedes that he might not add anything to organizing human knowledge, but also considers that he “might have objected to Aristotle as too much of a systematiser, and have preferred the freedom of a little self-contradiction as offering more chances of truth” (16). This allusion suggests possible connections with skeptical and sophistic traditions in ancient Greece while also indicating that Theophrastus’s own freedom in his current mode of expression may not be entirely bound to the mandates of logic.<sup>184</sup> This freedom does not entail a loss of responsibility, as shortly after this passage Theophrastus calls for our “affection and fairness for those who are doing the actual work of the world” (the proximate nostalgia here replaced with presentism). It does, however, offer a perspective that can catch what a determinately logical one might miss. Such a possibility appears in a cynical<sup>185</sup> subjectivity that, operating from an other-worldly perspective, starts by scorning the present generation, then the generation from which they have inherited their “diseases of mind and body” ultimately be driven by this “universally contemptible life” to “scorning to infinity.” Lest we consider this a pure fantasy, Theophrastus counters that “this may represent some actual states of mind, for it is a narrow prejudice of

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<sup>184</sup> Whitman’s famous declaration of indifference to self-contradiction may or may not be relevant here, as Eliot did own a copy of *Leaves of Grass* and quoted from Whitman in an epigraph to *Daniel Deronda*, although Eliot also apparently wanted to expunge this motto, as “it might be taken as a sign of a special admiration, which I am very far from feeling” (Cross III 228). For more on this particular and troubled connection, see Beverley Rilett’s “Victorian Sexual Politics and the Unsettling Case of George Eliot’s Response to Walt Whitman.” in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 31 (2014). In any event, Eliot would quite likely know defenses of self-contradiction from Gorgias or some of the more truculent subsequent members of the Academy or Lyceum.

<sup>185</sup> Modern sense of the term – not the other contemporaries of Aristotle and Theophrastus

mathematicians to suppose that ways of thinking are driven out of the field by being reduced to an absurdity. The Absurd is taken as an excellent juicy thistle by many constitutions” (17). We might take the allusion to Aesop’s fable of the ass eating thistles to be an insult to these constitutions, except that Theophrastus later defends the ass as an “intelligent and unpretending” and “historic and ill-appreciated” animal (to be set above some humans), and within the fable, the ass clearly has a wider and more immediately useful range of appreciation than the humans for whom he carries his provisions (52).<sup>186</sup> While Theophrastus makes clear his disapprobation of this infinitely scornful subject, he also considers it worthy of thought and remark and grants it at least a conditional gustatory efficacy. Given the time at which his *Impressions* were published, one wonders how close Theophrastus’s occasional taste for the Absurd might draw to the scornful practices of the Russian nihilists who set to war with all existing orders or the pessimistic philosophy of life expounded by Schopenhauer.

### *Provoking Characters, Situating Characters*

Viewed in a certain light, the whole of *Impressions* might become a vast textual appreciation of the Absurd – of the absurd within Theophrastus’s habits and desires, of the absurd within his larger culture and nations, and of the absurd manifest in the affective bodies and habitual thought and speech of the characters he examines, and possibly even of the absurd inconsistencies and convoluted aims and expression of the

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<sup>186</sup> I would also add that Theophrastus’s practice throughout clearly indicates that comparison with an animal is by no means necessarily an insult, however embarrassing it may be to the occasional inflated human ego.



text itself. Even an absurd character like Hinze, who patently exasperates and disgusts Theophrastus, serves as a site of textual attraction and interest. What distinguishes Hinze as a character is his reverential attention to and repetition of the opinions of others. This may not seem like much, but it does manage to make him a matter of confusion in polite society, carrying an energy and circulatory value into their opinions that the original bearer can hardly have desired. This confusion carries over to Theophrastus, who begins by classing him under an unacceptable form of insincerity but concludes by being unable to dub him false or hypocritical, which would require a greater coefficient of reflectiveness. From a probably minor bother in social circles, Hinze here becomes a source of attention, disdain, frustration and even rage in Theophrastus's disturbed writing. There may be a touch of uncomfortable proximity here, a momentary doubt as to how distant Theophrastus's own attentive (but habitual) observations are from Hinze's absurdly reverential but unreflective gatherings and repetitions. Hinze's transparent desire to be agreeable, however, is taken as a sign of his complete and unforgiveable lack of any "sharp appetite" or "deep hunger" – a fault with which the ass to which he is falsely compared is completely innocent.

It is a critical commonplace that the character sketch is not conducive to psychological depth, but there is something Theophrastus finds particularly provoking in the depthless imperviousness exhibited by characters like Hinze and, later, Theophrastus's "sort of valet and factotum," Pummel. Pummel enters as an interruption of a character sketch of Mordax, being brought in as an instance of "that various actor, Conceited Ignorance" and gives us our only glimpse of the domestic life of Theophrastus.

Against Hinze's exuberant recording, Pummel shows a complete impenetrability in his indifferent confirmations of whatever is given him. Stimulated by Pummel's lack of affect, Theophrastus confesses to laying "traps for his astonishment" all of which come to naught before his "respectful neutrality" or apparent bland conviction that he is already possessed of the knowledge (71). Theophrastus throws a few of these traps in the way of the reader, most of which are scientific or anthropological features of the world beyond their nation, although clothed in language that might encourage the incautious listener or reader for fancy. His assertion, for instance, that "there are ducks with fur coats in Australia" requires recognizing that duck refers to part of a larger name and the appearance of the bill, having no biological connection to the familiar animal waddling around England. If he cannot manage to evoke shock or surprise attesting to some impression of novel thought in Pummel, Theophrastus will settle for the reader. In all of this, Theophrastus is not painting a terribly flattering portrait of himself, but then, that's not really the point.<sup>187</sup>

Theophrastus appears to have more approval for the less-than-kind Mordax, although again an absurd relation to knowledge obtrudes on any unconditional affirmation. Theophrastus's initial praise of Mordax sounds quite similar to the sort of praise of bad-tempered characters that he has just condemned two sketches ago, and the

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<sup>187</sup> Compare on this point Henry's discussion of Theophrastus's cruel treatment of Pummel, arguing that Pummel's name comes from Theophrastus's tendency to pummel the hapless valet (*Impressions* xxii). While I agree with the presence of cruelty in Theophrastus's character being put on display for the reader, the comic enjoyment of the scene relies on Pummel's placid imperviousness to his truculent, mildly manic master. Through Theophrastus's sometimes cruel characterizations of his servant, we get also receive an impression of Pummel's "respectful neutrality" being that of "one who would not appear to notice that his master had been taking too much wine" (71) – with the implication that in his own way the unimaginative but sober Pummel is more master of the situation than the excitable and inebriated Theophrastus.

present sketch briefly becomes a conversation as a third party, Acer, enters and objects to Mordax's want of benevolence. Acer sounds briefly very much like Theophrastus, stating "it is my way to apply tests," but then ruins the likeness by insisting on a single test for judging a character (67). Objecting to "that fallacious standard of what is called consistency," Theophrastus defends Mordax's basically worthy nature while acknowledging occasional scornful violence in publication. The distinction from the indiscriminately raging Touchwood seems to lie in the focus – Mordax having harnessed his violence towards the advancement of knowledge. Theophrastus raises and rejects motive as a possible source of distinction, and then obscures to what extent he is praising Mordax's practice as opposed to his potentials. Ultimately, the reader seems guided to a notably more equivocal judgment of Mordax than Theophrastus alleges he holds, as the character's inhibiting incapacity to admit novel ideas comes to the fore of the text. The text offers something like a genuine defense of arrogance that can be put to productive ends, but it also makes clear that Mordax's desire to put down ill-founded presumptions and conceits is bound up in an arrogant self-regard that can be blinding and numbing – implicitly asking us to reflect on Theophrastus's own practice. As this sketch of three characters (not including Theophrastus) closes, Mordax as the type of the "arrogant man" takes the initial step of the infinitely scornful subject of "Looking Backward," rejecting his present age as a whole. Rather than follow this trajectory to its logical conclusion, he prefers to stop over "in the schools of Magna Graecia, the sixth century of our own era or even under Kublai Khan" where he finds a "comparative freedom" from his presumptive contemporaries (73). Each of these periods is connected with a collapse – of the

Presocratic schools of philosophy in Italy, of the Western Roman Empire, and of the pre-Mongol Empires, and the latter two with the ascendancy of migrating or nomadic “barbarians.”<sup>188</sup> While Mordax practices self-delusion through this historical transplantation, there remains the question as to whether this might be a useful illusion – whether certain forms of clearing become necessary in order to produce different kinds of intellectual and historical formations. This backward glance also raises the question of what sorts of historical and cultural conditions may be producing this desire in Mordax and interest in Theophrastus around periods of cultural collapse and radically different formations in the wake of old empires or intellectual traditions.

Working with reference to larger cultural conditions and formations, sketches like “A Political Molecule,” “A Half-Breed” and “How We Encourage Research” apply quasi-scientific Spinozan themes of bodily embeddedness in a larger causal plane, identity-as-relationality, and the limited perspective we possess over the possible productions of bodily interactions to their more particular fields of legislative politics, matrimony and anthropological studies. The political molecule Spike is a physically attractive but otherwise unremarkable character who in the distractible state of having lost his professional drive in his success of finding a fortune finds his way into Reform politics. Guided by his economic interests, becomes a “representative of genuine class needs,” and, due to “the nature of things” finds “his active egoism [transmuted] into a

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<sup>188</sup> Although the decision to go with Kublai rather than Genghis establishes a distance from the initial conquests and an implied futurity in the Yuan dynasty. The schools of Magna Graecia were succeeded by classical philosophy, starting from Socrates, but we might also read the Sophists as successors to the Italian Greeks (particularly if we think of the schools of Magna Graecia under figures like Pythagoras and Parmenides), as, though Gorgias was born in Italy, figures like him and Protagoras found their success and influence in Athens.

demand for a public benefit” (66). Though Theophrastus emphasizes the contingency of Spike’s position, imagining different fates had he been born or situated differently, he also confesses that such imaginings are “empty speculation” in the face of “the Possible” that stands as “the ultimate master of our efforts and desires” (65-6).<sup>189</sup> Rather than tracing out the large-scale operation of class interests, “A Half-Breed” follows a more immediate operation of bodies in the fate of one Mixtus after marriage to a fashionable young woman, Scintilla. In extended proximity to this adroit “pretty animal of the ape kind” and the society and forms of life connected with her, Mixtus undergoes a continuous and gradual series of changes in from a religiously and reform-minded young man to a wealthy man externally indistinguishable from his monied peers. This external indistinction corresponds to an interior state in which Mixtus cannot quite reconstruct how he has arrived at his present condition and does himself know what he “really is” (80). The somewhat predictable narrative here is of less interest than Theophrastus’s focus on the uneasy consciousness and indefinite character of Mixtus, which is like “an organ with its stops in the lawless condition of obtruding themselves without method, so that the hearers are amazed by the most unexpected transitions – the trumpet breaking in on the flute, and the oboe confounding both” (74). While Mixtus’s encounter leaves him indeterminate and out of tune, but still wealthy, Merman is ruined in both mind and means by his encounter with the body of the criticism of “comparative history.” He begins by drastically misunderstanding the body he wishes to take part in, imagining it to

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<sup>189</sup> While an excessive focus on contingency would theoretically place Theophrastus outside of Spinoza’s more necessitarian mandates, the somewhat vague formulation here of the Possible appears compatible with Spinozan Nature as a common and absolute plane of physical and cognitive action.

be simply awaiting the arrival of the best account, for which it stands ready to award the discoverer. Having found the “right clue” about an architectural connection between two disparate ancient peoples, Merman announces to his startled wife that he will “regenerate history ... win the mind of Europe to a new view of social origins [and] bruise the head of many superstitions” (30). He soon learns that comparative history, like other social institutions, has its vested interests and impediments to change. The institution, incidentally, eventually does come round to incorporating his primary insight, but without its originator, who in the meantime has passed into (and presumably departed from) a wider European cultural consciousness as an object of general satire.

While no human (or molecule) can possess the kind of knowledge that would make a transcendent morality possible and practicable in Theophrastus’s world, that does not mean that we are thereby excused from moral responsibilities. Throughout “Moral Swindlers,” Theophrastus rages against any conception of morality that would reduce it to kinship, local amiability, or as a consideration separate from any sphere of human life. Within the sphere of human culture at least, he stresses the connections between habitual speech, theory and action and argues for a deeply embedded understanding of morality. In this sense, morality would refer to “as the conduct which, in every human relation, would follow from the fullest knowledge and the fullest sympathy – a meaning perpetually corrected and enriched by a more thorough appreciation of dependence in things, and a finer sensibility to both physical and spiritual fact” and would intimately connect “duty and the material processes by which the world is kept habitable for the cultivated man” (136). Although some stereotypically moralistic notes may be sounded

here, we should also attend to the sense that the moral understanding is necessarily incomplete and dependent on cognitive and material work. “Debasing the Moral Currency” works off of the vulnerability implied in this conception of morality, arguing for the need to defend aesthetically and morally improving cultural products.<sup>190</sup> Theophrastus’ politics here are troublesome to say the least – from his barely contained class hatred of demotic art forms to his call for the “invisible police” of “sentiments or ideal feelings” (86).<sup>191</sup> The same Theophrastus who was earlier energized and interested in exploring (and manifesting) the absurd here retrenches into an almost paranoiac contracting conservatism with only the momentary acknowledgment that there can be a “delicious sense of the ludicrous” productive of “invigorating shocks of laughter” (83).

This indignant retrenchment seems at odds with both the form and tone of much of the rest of *Impressions*, and we can sound out a somewhat different conception of ethics (as opposed to normative morality) in “How We Come to Give Ourselves False Testimonials, and Believe in Them.” Raterman’s reading of this section highlights the central importance of two quotes by Dante, both paradoxical formulations (rude courtesy and not false errors) and the latter left untranslated and thus taking on a kind of productive opacity for the English reader (57-9). They also recall Theophrastus’s comments about contradiction offering “chances for truth” and his objection to reasoning through (false) consistency. While Raterman (correctly, I think) connects the not false aspect of *non falsi errori* with fictional pluralities of meanings and readings, I would also

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<sup>190</sup> Avrom Fleishman connects Eliot’s conceptualization of culture with Arnold’s in several texts, starting with Felix Holt

<sup>191</sup> Theophrastus also explicitly connects crowd-pleasing entertainers and burlesque actors with the radical figures of English and French workers uprisings.

lay stress on the latter term, as a provocation to imagine what it would mean to make not false errors. The section as a whole takes up the imagination, particularly seeking to refute, through the character of Callista, the conflation of imagination and inaccuracy. Fictional imagination must be no less attentive than other forms of consciousness to fine discriminations and be capable of bringing to view “the less obvious relations of human existence” (110). Theophrastus opens by working through human mental environments by extended analogy with terrestrial biomes, imagining differential conditions of flora and fauna, different affordances of “solar energy” and incidentally remarking that “the eccentric man might be typified by the Australian fauna, refuting our judicious assumptions of what nature allows” (104).<sup>192</sup> Nevertheless, we can at least assume the presence of “lurking life,” whatever the environment, and external habits, tricks and efforts give us the needful means to read towards this life and its conditions. Such a reading is bound to be error-prone, insofar as we read anything short of a complete reconstruction as an error. Nevertheless, Theophrastus holds out hope for an imagination invigorated and disciplined by focused perceptual exercise and a healthy distrust of preconception. Indeed, Callista’s terminally false error is not seeing things other than as they are, but rather substituting for the genuinely foreign objects around her a self-closed loop of conventionally “imaginative” objects – thus destroying the possibility of any vital presentation.

These twinned dangers of convention and self-closure run throughout three of Theophrastus’s sketches of other authors actual and potential, “Diseases of Small

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<sup>192</sup> The furred duck here confounding a larger audience than Pummel.



Authorship,” “The Too Ready Writer” and “A Man Surprised at his Originality.” “Diseases” takes up a provincial author who has produced the rambling “The Channel Islands” as an outlet to her “uneasy vanity.” As with Spike, there is a sense that her forces might have been otherwise directed had circumstances differed, but, as with Mixtus, there is also the sense that her encounter, here with the “chronic complaint” of authorship (and intensive regard to the reputation of her book) has changed both what she does and who she is or can be. Theophrastus, meanwhile, takes an exhausted pleasure in detailing his encounter with the author and the effusive reviews of the text in the provincial presses (juxtaposed with the eight lines of disdain in the London press) before tacitly admitting to stealing a copy and closing with a parodic argument that in authorial vanity “too the male could assert his superiority and show a more vigorous boredom” (126). Pepin suffers somewhat from a similar complaint, although here it is brought on by a conviction of capacity arising from an absent work, rather than the over-estimation of an existing work. Having never actually written a great work occasionally contemplated, Pepin grows in his belief of his capacity for such work, permitting a disdainful glance at those who produce actual works. Pepin’s actual works, a series of middling articles touching on a multitudinous range of materials, prompts Theophrastus to ponder “what if we were only like the Spanish wine-skins which impress the innocent stranger with the notion that Spanish grape has naturally a taste of leather” (114).<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> This may well be a reference to Hume’s empirical aesthetic treatise, “Of the Standard of Taste,” in which Hume takes up an episode from *Don Quixote*, in which two refined pallets respectively recognize a flavor of iron and of leather in a hogshead of wine into which an iron key and thong has been dropped. If so, Theophrastus is converting the fine aesthetic sense in Hume – which accurately detects an unexpected presence – into a sensual impression that leads to confused ideas through an inadequate notion of causality.

Rather than lay all the blame of his inadequate writing on this too-ready writer, Theophrastus reflects that, after all, the Pepin is a social symptom, a sign that the wider public seems to have a taste for leather. In Lentulus, Theophrastus finds a sort of perfection of Pepin's conceit, in which elevated views and great works are maintained by a complete abstention from writing.<sup>194</sup> When prompted by Theophrastus as to whether he has written any poetry consonant with his poetic ideal, Lentulus responds that he has not, but that he sees "how things might be written as fine as Ossian, only with true ideas" (44). Lentulus here shows himself doubly unable to escape from convention – both the abandoned convention of praising the fictional works of Ossian as an ideal model of poetry and the conventional correction of that ideal.

We should not be misled by Theophrastus's tendency to produce unfavorable portraits into thinking that all that these sketches offer is satire. At the beginning of "Diseases of Small Authorship," Theophrastus finds himself carried far out from his allegedly intended object, preemptively provoked by his encounter with Vorticella. Starting from vocational diseases, Theophrastus wanders out to a world stage, with a sideways glance at a version of his own character: "Authors are so miscellaneous a class that their personified diseases, physical and moral, might include the whole procession of human disorders, led by dyspepsia and ending in madness – the awful Dumb Show of a world-historic tragedy. Take a large enough area of human life and all comedy melts into tragedy, like the Fool's part by the side of Lear" (120). While we seem headed outwards

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<sup>194</sup> With both Pepin and Lentulus, there is more than a hint of Hegel's beautiful soul (a intellectual and Romantic type of sorts) – a concept that may have passed to Eliot directly or through the work of Carlyle.

into a Middlemarch-scale meditation from here, the figure of Vorticella enables a return to the comic that outlasts her presence, leading ultimately to an imagined battle of large beards and tight skirts across Victorian drawing rooms (128). Pepin's unwritten "roman and world-historical" masterwork may have its conventional shortcomings, but its quality of unabashed desire may nonetheless be informative both of him and his audience – and his desire for a piece of writing that break with earlier works and be at once "more passionate and more philosophical" recalls elements of Eliot's poetics.<sup>195</sup> Even Lentulus's poetics give the text something to work with, as concludes his Ossianic aspiration with the note that "the world has no notion of what poetry will be." Theophrastus both confirms and builds on this point: "It was impossible to disprove this, and I am always glad to believe that the poverty of our imagination is no measure of the world's resources. Our posterity will no doubt get fuel in ways that we are unable to devise for them" (44). Lentulus may have intended little in his observation beyond a touch of personal regard (the world has not yet seen his poetry), but his words can be mobilized for other purposes going well beyond and being ultimately destructive to the same. While Theophrastus is momentarily relieved that his appreciation of old works are saved from being put "under a new electric light of criticism" by Lentulus, this is precisely the operation he himself performs throughout these *Impressions* (45). Moreover, in doing so, Theophrastus has made use of a critical mechanism that must operate upon his own text, and, having originated elsewhere, must carry on beyond it.

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<sup>195</sup> However, besides an unfounded arrogance, Pepin's conceived work also suffers from a decided exclusion of the low and rustic

### *Fabulating literature*

Like “Jubal,” *Impressions* must be understood as a text both critical and fabulative, and Theophrastus forcefully reminds us of this latter quality in “The Wasp Credited with the Honeycomb” and “Shadows of the Coming Race.” The former section begins with a mocking portrayal of one Euphorion, who borrows freely from the intellectual productions of others, “expatiate[ing] on the diffusive nature of intellectual products, free and all-embracing as the liberal air” (88). While Theophrastus implicitly seeks to defend the rights of the “eminently perishable dyspeptic author” (a figure not unlike the narrator, also recalling Jubal’s weakened frame), his main analytic combat is with the means by which we produce conviction origins, rather than Euphorion’s nominal claims of the rights of “that multiple entity,” the human race (89). Despite the selfish use made of the thought by Euphorion, the text holds out the thought that there is in fact a plane on which “Mine and Thine disappear and are resolved into Everybody’s and Nobody’s” as personal considerations fade from view from the perspective of “the solar system in general” (90).<sup>196</sup> The text wanders through varied intellectual and historical registers, ending up moving from social debates over origination to a revised version of Aesop’s (among others) fable from which the section takes its title, moving through an intermediary paragraph in which it is unclear if the animal names refer to (presumably) human figures, as in other sketches, or if we have already entered into a fabulative world of anthropomorphic but non-human animals.<sup>197</sup> While the fable should presumably have

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<sup>196</sup> Theophrastus’s language here recalls Eliot’s unpublished poem, “I grant you ample leave.”

<sup>197</sup> See Henry *Impressions* p179 n1 for the different versions of the fable and note that Eliot reverses the usual moral of the story (the animals not finding out the honeybee). Eliot’s characterization of the

the moral object of illustrating our capacities for self-delusion, there is also a patent sense of play at work as different animal bodies find characterological expression around a common epistemic problem. The fable thus presented probes the question of what creates false belief, but also shows a strong interest in what can generate and sustain controversy – the climax to the fable coming less with the deputation sent off to the wasp than with the wild display of animal affect immediately preceding the political action.<sup>198</sup>

We find a different sort of non-human parliament in Theophrastus's penultimate impression, "Shadows of the Coming Race" – the title alluding to *The Coming Race* (later *Vril, the Power of the Coming Race*) by Edward Bulwer-Lytton.<sup>199</sup> Quite apart from the approaching machine-race imagined by Theophrastus, Bulwer-Lytton's race referred to an imaginary group of superhumans living underneath the surface of the earth, descended from a common ancestor but having learned to harness Vril (an electro-vital-spiritual force), who, the narrator repeatedly insists, will one day conquer the surface. Where the Vril (also the name of the race) radically exceed the human race in intellectual as well as physical powers, the machine races render the question of consciousness effectively irrelevant in their material operations – which include parliamentary proceedings. The two races do share two prominent features, however: they both make use of forces we imperfectly understand, and their future ascendancy is already vouchsafed (although we see fail completely to see this at the moment).

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animals as in an ordered but angered council may indicate a reference to John Day's *Parliament of Bees*, playfully alluding to the missing animal.

<sup>198</sup> It is also perhaps worth noting that Theophrastus goes beyond the usual orbit of European species in making up his parliament, including besides species from the Americas, Africa and South-east Asia.

<sup>199</sup> Henry 183 n1.

The presence of science fiction (scientific romance? scientific fable?) in a work by Eliot has understandably excited critical interest. Raterman interprets “Shadows” as a nightmare, frightening Theophrastus with the thought of a world without narrative (60). De Graef reads a note of cultural anxiety in Theophrastus’s fantasy connected to the “alien” Jews and the common connection of the machines and the Jews as depicted in “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!” to financial instruments (35-7).<sup>200</sup> Miller reads this fable as in keeping with a larger anxiety running through *Impressions* about human status, as brought into question by Eliot’s long-running perfectibilism (306). Reminding us that “Shadows” draws on both degenerative and evolution theories of the day, Henry reads the last remaining humans as indicative of the “overwrought nervous sensibilities” of the emerging aestheticist movement – a movement already attacked through Baudelaire back in “Moral Swindlers” (251). Probably the most developed reading comes with Brilmyer’s case for “Shadows” as a crucial moment in “the literary critique of human-centered ontologies in Eliot’s *Impressions*” (45). This reading draws from “Shadow’s” intensive focus on perceptual and material processes and presentation of a world without consciousness to connect Eliot to Nietzschean posthumanism (46-7).

Although both Henry and Brilmyer note that “Shadows” takes the form of a dialogue, they join the other critics above in not following this feature up, basically treating the text as another monologue by Theophrastus. Conversations, reported or mimetic, make a fairly regular appearance in the different sections of *Impressions*, but “Shadows” is probably the closest we come to an equal exchange in this work (although,

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<sup>200</sup> A general note of cultural anxiety would certainly be in keeping with Bulwer-Lytton’s text.

as the critical notice suggests, Theophrastus still has the most noteworthy lines). Though Theophrastus is skeptical of his friend's position, he is removed from any position of judgment, the tone here best indicated by Theophrastus's parenthetical remark that "We are on very intimate terms" as explanation of Trost's rebuffing him with the interjection "Pooh!" (140). The majority of the readings indicated above hear a fundamental tone of fear or anxiety into "Shadows" – an understandable reading for a dialogue that anticipates the end of mankind. At the same time, if we attend to the interaction of the two characters, it is clear that Theophrastus takes part in a playful and engaged bantering argument with a bit of heat communicated from Theophrastus to Trost (and consequently dissipated in himself) as the conversation goes on. In her 1855 essay, "Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming," Eliot complains of the Professor's argumentative practices, objecting that so long as belief in propositions are held to be necessary for salvation, "the pursuit of truth *as such* is not possible, any more than it is possible for a man who is swimming for his life to make meteorological observations on the storm which threatens to overwhelm him" (*Essays* 167). Theophrastus indicates his extreme distance from this kind of panicked reasoning by his amused rejoinder to Trost that the beliefs he has been advocating "bear the same relation to real belief as walking on the head for a show does to running away from an explosion or walking fast to catch a train" (142). At a distance from the pressing concerns of survival, or the concerns of cultural survival that seem to shape a sketch like "Debasing the Moral Currency," Theophrastus enjoys a relative freedom of speculation and discussion. Nor exactly does he fall into self-abnegating

pursuit of the objective truth as such, instead preferring to sound out what sorts of possibilities the encounter of the conversation reveals.<sup>201</sup>

In advancing a more conversational reading of “Shadows,” I should emphasize that I nevertheless substantially agree with much of Brilmyer’s posthumanist reading. I entirely agree that the central provocation to thought offered by this dialogue lies in its presentation of a world in which human linguistic consciousness has been replaced by efficient material processes – in which communication becomes something radically different from anything we would identify as such.<sup>202</sup> The kinds of perceptual and communicative activities Theophrastus’s machine races perform compel us to try to imagine what such operations would look and be like. And, as I will return to shortly, this literary experiment does invite us to differently imagine the capacities of literature, to imagine the body of the text as a differential space of generic, sensitive and intellectual possibilities. There is, however, more than one species of posthumanism. There is a touch of joy in Nietzsche’s imagined obliteration of the “clever beasts” that we are in “On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral sense” – a joy that critics like Buzard and Miller may be correct in worrying that Theophrastus shares. The text of “Shadows” contains another possibility, in which consciousness is accelerated, not obliterated by the continual improvement of machine capacities. While Theophrastus imagines humans either dying

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<sup>201</sup> Theophrastus’s use of logical terminology to justify his argumentation is not entirely in jest, as there are elements of logical consequence at work here, but neither is it in good faith, as he has also been happy to draw on not-strictly logical means of progressing his points. The latter point is underscored by his playful disavowal of the premises on which his argument has been based.

<sup>202</sup> Although arguably Theophrastus’s metamorphic communications might now be read as an early anticipation of elements that would find their way into computer sciences. Whether or not Eliot’s thought experiments go beyond anything in the automaton debates – and how they relate to early work on information handling by figures like Lovelace and Babbage – would be the subject for another paper.



or fading out before their machine superiors, Trost imagines humanity and machines entering into a state of mutual amplification, in which “the subtly refined powers of machines will react in producing more subtly refined thinking processes” which in turn aid the development of machine powers (139). Where earlier Trost had imagined a sort of master/slave relation between humans and machines, here he appears to respond to Theophrastus’s expanded portrayal of machine powers and begins to advance a view in which machines draw closer to the processes of consciousness and provide a virtually inexhaustible store of work for both.<sup>203</sup>

Worthwhile conversations do not generally have winners and Eliot’s *Impressions* is perfectly capable of entertaining both Trost’s and Theophrastus’s fantasies without demanding we choose one to the exclusion of the other. The simple act of attaching a position to a narrator may establish a default inclination to said position in the absence of all other considerations, but within the operative logics of this text, it seems unlikely that Theophrastus would find much pleasure (or work to be done) with a reader given greatly to agreement. Moreover, just as Trost must develop his argument in the face of Theophrastus’s counterproposals, Theophrastus’s productions become both more extreme and, in their own way, more refined in the face of opposition; ultimately being moved to the wonderful distinctions of beings “without sensitive impression” nevertheless being capable of remarkable precise material impressions and transformation, and besides producing “mute orations, mute rhapsodies, mute discussions” (142). Without genuine

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<sup>203</sup> Although Trost still places humans at the “nervous center” of this machine assemblage, this imagery at least implies that humans too would probably change from what we now know them to be.

intimacy, which surely comes with its share of hostility as well as amiability, these developments would not be possible.

Nor, perhaps, would Theophrastus step back from his premises, instead figuring them as “flying about in the air with other germs, and have found a sort of nidus among my melancholy fancies” and reflecting that “Nobody really holds them” (142). The language here is somewhat ambiguous, drawing on germ theory (whose institutional strength had been growing since Snow’s map of the London Cholera epidemic in 1854) but blended with a transmission mechanism more in line with miasma theory. By either reading, Theophrastus here imagines thought as a communicable disease borne by nonhuman means. Theophrastus and Trost both catch and serve as hosts for thoughts carried by the cultural currents, breathing in an air dense with signs political, social, literary – and, I would add, scientific, technological and philosophical. But their different bodies enable different opportunities of growth for these thoughts. As Brilmyer notes, Theophrastus imagines himself as a “reflective carp” contemplating the end of humanity from a less energetic state – although he also speaks of his relatively feeble state as bringing him “nearer . . . to the human average” (140).<sup>204</sup> As in Jubal’s dying vision, there is a sense that certain forms of knowledge and sensation may only be possible in a state of weakness. While Trost seems unable to contemplate the death of humanity, there is also something inhuman in the strength of his optimism, carried beyond the scope of any verifiable human vision (starting, as he does from “the duration of the solar system” (137)) and careless of human frailties. Again, the work of *Impressions* lies not in

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<sup>204</sup> One can, of course, argue that the human average is something basically animal for Theophrastus – as both Miller and Brilmyer suggest.

rendering of an exclusive judgment, but rather in recognizing and seeing what work there is to be done with the articulations of Theophrastus and Trost as presented in the text.

While Eliot's text originally ended with "Shadows,"<sup>205</sup> the published version concludes instead with the understandably controversial "Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" – a text often referenced as an essay by Eliot in connection with the proto-Zionism of Daniel Deronda. In truth, I do not have a great deal to add to existing readings of this final section. I would second Raterman's reminder that the form of nationalism advocated for here is at least in part "a nationalism without chauvinism" (62) – although we must remember that this is a partial attempt. As Henry notes, Theophrastus is engaged in complex interactions with both the Jewish culture which he defends and the English culture to which he belongs, not obscuring the ugly imperial aspects of this later formation (xxviii). There are moments in this text in which nationalism is posed as a potentially temporary phenomenon: "that spirit of separateness which has not yet done its work in education of mankind" (160) implying that one day it will have done this work (and then perhaps the time for cosmopolitanism now deferred may arrive (147)). Unlike "Shadows," however, this impression is squarely focused on "this stage of European culture" (143). If we are to take seriously Theophrastus's claim that his system responds sensitively to the discursive, intellectual and cultural forces of London, then it should come as no surprise that nationalism should appear here – as an object of analysis and scrutiny, but also as a radiating source of sensations, attractions and impressions. To the contrary, in the disturbed rhythms and transitions of Theophrastus's body written across

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<sup>205</sup> Henry, Impressions pxxxiv.

the page, we should expect to find the traces of that force we call nationalism whose work in stimulating, collecting, mobilizing and destroying bodies would shape much of the next century.

In “Unspeakable George Eliot,” David Kurnick argues that in *The Spanish Gypsy*, Eliot makes manifest a ragged, even incoherent pulse and rhythm through both the form (down to the meter) and content (in the abject gypsy collectivity) of the text. In doing so, Eliot explores “the possibility of a form that would resist the hardening of form itself – and the possibility of a community that would resist the closure and reification of the community itself” (497).<sup>206</sup> *Impressions* does not have any abject collectivity at its core, preferring usually to draw our attention to the maniacs that wander London streets in respectable cravats, the beasts that make their dens in drawing rooms and the strange breeds that press themselves on pages, hoping to produce a hybrid progeny that may find life in the uncertain weather emanating from metropolitan centers. Nevertheless, *Impressions* produces its own resistance to fixed forms, from the generic experimentation of its sections to the jagged interruptions of conversation and unexpected thought that punctuate these sections to the persistent sense that neither the reader nor Theophrastus know what kinds of thoughts and sensations a given character may provoke – what sorts of work and play the encounter may produce. For whom is all this done? I suspect Henry’s indication of the late Eliot’s concern with cultural futurity is fundamentally correct here, although, as in “Looking Inward,” a degree of haze may be a necessary condition here. In “Jubal,” the inheritance of the musical artist falls principally not

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<sup>206</sup> I should note that Kurnick here is explicitly working with and building on Neil Hertz’s groundbreaking *George Eliot’s Pulse* (2003).

within the named lines of genealogy, but instead on the “poor, late-begotten human brood.” In *Impressions*, Theophrastus never names exactly whom he is addressing, although the reference to a “far-off, hazy, multitudinous assemblage” may be of use, provided we can abstract it from the “approving chorus” that Theophrastus certainly does an odd job of courting.

The somewhat dissatisfying answer is that there is no actual, named or established community to whom Theophrastus, and Eliot in this last piece, writes. Instead, in suspiciously reflexive phrasing, we might say that this writing is undertaken to see with what sorts of groups spread across the indefinitely expanding networks of print and communication this writing will resonate. Pepin is certainly mistaken in regarding himself as “telegraphic centre of all American wires,” but this illusion is produced by real material and technological conditions that are connecting and producing new bodies involving humans (116). The primary form of technology that *Impressions* pursues, as Brilmyer argues, is writing, as a kind of “nonhuman extension of the human body” that produces “new modes of feeling and perception” (45, 48). I would only add cognition and communication, for cognition involves attention as well as more abstract actions of knowledge (and concepts are not without their own modes of creativity) and sensations share the quality with bodies that they do not persist outside of the relations in which they transpire and extend themselves. The community (if that is the right word) that *Impressions* seeks out is the community for whom this kind of sensitive and cognitive production is fuel and play and work whose purposes we cannot foresee.

## Conclusion

This orientation towards an audience yet to come may be an inevitable result of any experiment in literature that takes seriously Kant's claims for aesthetics and the aesthetic program advanced by the Athenaeum circle. "Literature" does not name the property of any known (given, familiar, fixed) individual, countable group of individuals, or nation, and cannot permit itself to become determined by the interests of such bodies. Theophrastus, An English Opium-Eater and Boz may be all alike habitants of the Nation of London, but this is a nation that yet possesses unmapped regions, uncounted persons, and human, intellectual and material resources for agitation, happiness and speculation. Kant's beautiful anticipates a world in which basic needs have already been met, and humans can engage in intensive forms of communication that carry them beyond immediate hierarchies, interests, and forms of given knowledge. Likewise, Schlegel and company call for a literature that could create a vital interrelation between poetry and society, transforming each in the process, i.e., rendering each a new and newly living entity. Eliot's, De Quincey's and Dickens's speaking figures all write to criticize and critique the over-determined, naturalized, and habitual social institutions and practices they shared with their readers. But they also wrote for – for the sake of and in the direction of – speculative forms, movements and bodies of life, anticipated by the texts they produced.

Experimental literature constitutes itself in the double movement of criticism and imagination: the apparatuses of writing must be calibrated and corrected in the interests of adequate knowledge and expression, but they must also be exposed to and permeated

with a life that resists determination and pursues novelty as basic conditions of its existence (or subsistence). As such, it tends to prefer eliciting attention to demanding assent and speculating on lines of implication and connection to asserting given certitudes. Experimental literature is not on this account unable to carry ethical weight. Each of the speaking figures of these texts writes against the institutions and habits that would preclude ethical sensitivity and hinder imaginative capacity, and subject their readers to critical testing and aesthetic provocation in an attempt to aid them in resisting such influences. Moreover, though it does not act like a moral imperative, the life that experimental literature attempts to express nevertheless carries a sense of ethical significance and import. This is not only a life one might express, but a life that one feels one ought to try to imagine and express, something that seems capable of calling to and making a claim on us, even if the precise terms of this claim remain inarticulate and non-systematizable.

As this life has yet to find adequate expression, the literature that seeks to fashion such an expression is in some sense done for the sake of a community that has yet to arrive. This community is indicated as much by omission as by inclusion: those who catch what evades the surgeons operating on the corpse of the Opium-eater, the audience persisting somewhere between the unspeaking genius of the Yard and the confused future historian, or the language, conscious or otherwise, that survives the supersession of the human race. This is not exactly the coming community of Agamben, but it does share a resistance to interest and identity. I might propose as a formula for the community yet to arrive the problem of whether one can have hope that is not already an interest. Insofar

as “interest” denotes a stake in or of a determinate or given object or entity, insofar as interest entails the maintenance and reproduction of the familiar and received, writing done for or in hope of an audience yet to come ought to be disinterested. At the same time, there is nothing in the bare appeal to futurity that precludes its employment for pre-existent interests. If literature is to be capable of creating new functions and relations, of preparing materials to answer needs we have not yet encountered, then its practitioners must wage a continued combat against the interests that would determine their work in advance, that would render it familiar fare for familiar ends.

Despite Theophrastus’s penchant for pessimistic philosophy, the Opium-Eater’s desire to flee to the wintry solitude of Lower Canada and Boz’s affection for bachelor misanthropes, I maintain that their work in literary play and combat is ultimately hopeful and even optimistic – assuming we do not read these terms in opposition to others like disciplined or critical. This hopeful quality is manifest in the experimental literary form they adopted and adapted, or, more particularly, in the way they produced literature in accord with a meeting between the Kantian beautiful and the *Athenaeum* dialogue (*Gespräch*). As beauty invites us to imagine an experiential space of unpredictable production and intimate communication (communication of sensation as well as thought), the form and practice of dialogue presents conversation as a possibility of transformative communion, in which speakers, writers and readers come together to create something greater than either could attain left to themselves. Hypothetically, one might try to measure the success of a literary experiment by the readership gained or the number of textual progeny produced in its line. However, this measure would be at odds with the



practice employed in these resolutely eccentric texts and their cohort of singular (productive but not reproductive) characters and figures. As experimental literature, these texts are less given to obvious resolution, persisting and finding expression in the moment of the attempt, test, or wager. The experimental success or failure of these texts cannot be determined in advance, but it also cannot be retrospectively attained by simple calculation or collection. It rests instead on the capacity of the texts to create singular and productive experiences, free lines of thought and events in literary life and sensation. The literary life and experience between author, speaking figure and reader is not the community yet to arrive, but it may prove an anticipation thereof.

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