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These Living Hands:
An Introduction to *At the Edge*

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd—see here it is—
I hold it towards you.

—John Keats

The uncanny, even comedic, Gothicism of these enigmatic lines gets me every time. My experience of reading (and rereading) this strange fragment-poem plays out like a practical joke, but slightly more eerie than the phantom shoulder tap or other such classics. Maybe more like that old handshake, where the unwitting target is left clutching a detached arm, the

armless prankster standing in a state of mock horror. The dynamic described in these lines is fairly simple: We conjure the anatomical hand to which our gaze has been directed. We picture it there, and it is full of life. Then, as the lines encourage us to, we imagine the conditional death and burial of the hand (and presumably of the body to which it belongs), and confront our mysterious, though never explained, conscience-driven desire to reverse that hypothetical death. Finally, and as I would suggest, crucially, we are asked to envision the graphic self-sacrifice that would be required to reanimate the limb, which involves a transfusion of “blood” from our “own heart” (which will be left “dry”) to the speaker’s “veins [through which] red life might stream again” (5-6). At the end of the first six and a half lines, we return our attention to the living hand as the speaker utters his final injunction and performs the implied action that accompanies it: “see here it is— / I hold it towards you—” (7-8). Yet in the brief interim between our initial focus on the speaker’s hand in the first line and the final gesture whereby that hand moves towards us in the last, the hand seems to undergo a morbid transformation from living to something else: a hand that has died and been reanimated. Not only is the hand undead in this way when the speaker delivers what we can quite fittingly think of as the fragment’s punchline, but the limb we imaginatively “see” being thrust at us in that final moment seems to have been amputated from its speaker’s body.

This startlingly physical immediacy and its shock effect is produced in a number of ways in these few lines, which are composed in the form of a direct conversational address that accompanies the primary action of foregrounding the speaker’s anatomical hand. Keats’s opening move is one key to achieving the severing effect. His use of the objective pronoun “this” instead of the possessive pronoun “my” to designate the “living hand” distances and

depersonalizes the hand, which is referred to by the speaker three more times as “it” (2, 7, 8), further rendering it an object rather than identifying it as a part of the speaker’s subjectivity. Without this alienating and oddly disembodied move, I doubt the final line would have the same impact. Moreover, the listener/reader is asked to imagine the speaker’s veins transfused with the listener’s blood, and since moving blood from one body to another compromises the boundaries of those individual bodies, this transfusion image contributes to the sense of amputation, as does the speaker’s earlier prediction that “if” the hand were “in the icy silence of the tomb” it would “haunt [the listener’s] days” as a ghostly separation from the body. The fragment, a single speech act, clearly works dramatically rather than lyrically, casting the reader as a listener: a physically present addressee or silent interlocutor. The lines’ directional deixis (“This,” “now,” “see,” “here”) and Keats’s lavish deployment of formal and informal personal pronouns (“thy,” “thou,” “thine,” “my,” “I,” and especially the final “you”) repeatedly implicate and demand a certain amount of participation from the listener, who becomes bound to the imagined speaker in this bizarre and intimate scenario involving life, death, and resurrection.

The lines operate through what might be described as a spatio-temporal poetics of the perpetually here and now¹ that nevertheless create unsettling and abrupt shifts away from the present to the past and future. Once again, the demonstrative pronoun “This” is critical, and along with the temporal adverb “now” in the second line, it works to situate the listener firmly in time and space, an unambiguously present moment that logically should not produce the uncanny changes in the appearance and state of the eponymous body part from

¹ Wolfson claims that the poem “grasp[s] the imagination in a haunting poetics of presence” (*Formal* 189). Although her reading beautifully draws out the lines’ shifts in verb tense and the play among past, present, and future, this particular formulation doesn’t fully account for the lines’ temporal manipulation.

alive, to dead, to weirdly reanimated. Of course the bodily hand we allow ourselves to see—perhaps can't help but see—coming at us in the final line is not there at all. Reading the poem deconstructively, Jonathan Culler argues that the perpetual presence for the reader of the technically absent hand is the rare achievement of the poem; Culler describes this compulsion to see the hand as “irresistible,” and with language that plays up the hand's final gesture, he claims that the lines “capture the time of the apostrophic *now* and thrust it provocatively at the reader” (154, emphasis Culler's). However, in the drawn out midsection of the speech, a dilated subjunctive mode, as Susan Wolfson's describes it (*Cambridge* 116), Keats introduces a conditional tense that takes the narrative out of the present action and projects the relationship between speaker and addressee into a possible future when the “now warm and capable” hand will be “cold / And in the icy silence of the tomb” (2-3). This future tense is reinforced by that initial description of the hand not only as “warm” but also as “capable / Of earnest grasping” (1-2), which suggests the potential for, and the will to, an action that would necessarily ensue from the present moment. To complicate the poem's temporal logic further, although the death of the hand is a theoretical one and thus technically only a future possibility, the provisional notion that the living hand, if it were dead, “would... / So haunt” (2-4) the addressee, simultaneously invokes a past, since haunting implies return and return temporally requires an earlier state (in this case of a life) that is no more. By focusing on his “warm” body becoming an “icy cold” one, the speaker asks us to envision his future as a buried corpse, and as we replace life with death in our imaginations, we convert the present into the past. As the “living” present recedes, the dead future encroaches upon the present, and we are left with the sensation that in the course of the utterance the hand we now see moving has died.

The dynamic between the life and death and resurrection of the hand can be extrapolated to a more general existential tension in these lines and in Keats's poetic career as a whole. Through its temporal manipulations, the poem engages with the linearity of the normal narrative of life and death, as well as the fantasy of a resurrected or posthumous existence to which the Romantics were no strangers. Written in 1819 on a manuscript page of the unfinished "Faery Tale," *The Cap and Bells*, these lines come at a point in Keats's life when his experience with the "family disease" (his words) that was tuberculosis made him all too cognizant of his own mortality. And so we have Timothy Bhati's observation that we encounter the living hand as "proleptically" dead (219) and Brooke Hopkins's sense that the poem "seems to have been written from the grave" (35). For Hopkins, because these lines are bound up with the temporal structure of human being, they make readers "*perpetually* aware of the difference between life and death," while their fragmentary status and their representation of a hand "cut off" "embod[y] the very truncation [the poem] is about, the truncation of death" (36, emphasis Hopkins's).

For the listener/reader, the movement from the speaker's living existence to his hypothetical future death is natural enough, and in this sense the poem is consistent with Keats's and his fellow Romantic writers' obsession with their mortality. On this account, it is easy to read this fragment as an allegory of Barthes's post-formalist "Death of the Author," as Susan Wolfson points out (*Formal* 188), though the final image of the resurrected hand complicates such a reading. Wolfson reads the poem as a macabre attempt to summon life out of inevitable death, and points to the manner in which these lines "manipulate a peculiar revivifying effect against the death so reported" (*Cambridge* 116). Although the physical hand is the initial focal point, the lines encourage a complementary and synchronic

interpretation that highlights the hand's revivification rather than its death, and this emphasis transforms the poem into an allegory of literary reception. Reading allegorically or figuratively rather than literally, we can contend more directly with what is perhaps the most uncomfortable aspect of these lines, which is that the hand's reanimation requires the self-sacrifice of the listener/reader: as we have seen, in the conditional scenario proposed by the speaker, the listener must trade her own life to resurrect the speaker, a move that will somehow karmically leave her with peace of mind, or "conscience-calm'd" (8). This second interpretation thus shifts attention away from the life and death of the hand and body to the life-giving process of reading, which is figured as a kind of Frankensteinian reanimation of dead matter as text.

But in what sense can any of these entities—the hand, the text, Keats—be living at all? And what makes the dead hand come back to life? The figurative reading depends upon the double referent of the "living hand" as not only the animated body part, but also the form of the handwriting itself: the written text.² The few critics who have addressed the poem in any detail have noted this inherent ambiguity, and it lends the lines a modern, writerly quality, or "textual vitality," as Wolfson aptly puts it (*Cambridge* 116). The living hand to which the poem refers works double duty as a synecdoche for the entity that is "Keats." As a part of the speaker's anatomy, the hand stands in for sentient material existence in a general sense, compelling us to imaginatively summon the rest of the poet's human body and to stage the dramatic encounter described; as the synonymous living hand, or the material, written

² Lawrence Kipling, Timothy Bhati, and Brooke Hopkins each struggle with the referential indeterminacy in these lines and, using frameworks offered by critical methodologies such as deconstruction and Freudian psychoanalysis (the uncanny), these critics try to reconcile or coordinate these two possible readings into some kind of rhetorical integrity.

text itself, the hand stands in for the author's body of work—in this case, a potentially living surrogate for the dead poet.

This dual meaning is present from the start, even as the body part and its vitality appear to be the primary focus. Notably, evincing the hand's initial vitality is not simply its essential body heat, but its capacity for intention and volition: as we've seen, it does not merely exist, but is "now warm and capable / Of earnest grasping" (1-2). The vague syntactical structure of this description—the hand can grasp and it can be grasped—amplifies the tactile, interactive dynamic between the hand and its world, and reinforces the involvement of the listener/reader in the poem's action. But earnest grasping is not merely the act of physically seizing an object, or "an activity inseparable from the body," as Hopkins says (35). "To grasp" is both a physical and intellectual action, and therefore the "grasping" concurrently warrants a more cerebral, more emotional, explication. These descriptors—"warm" and "earnest"—also convey compassion, depth, and sincerity, and when used to modify "grasping," they suggest psychological or intellectual understanding and the kind of openness entailed by reading, broadly conceived.

Especially remarkable, however, is that according to the given details, both referents of the "hand" that the poem encourages us to imagine—the body part and the handwriting—are animated through a giving of the listener/reader's self. The implication is slightly counter-intuitive: rather than conceiving of textual content strictly as something taken in by a reader, Keats casts the reader as materially responsible to the text. As analogous to the way a transfusion of blood restores warmth and life to cold death, reading is figured both as a generous and a generative enterprise. As Hopkins remarks, "It is as if the poem *itself* has become the poet's body, something that can be reanimated only through a transfusion of life

from the reader, the reanimation of the words on the page” (38, Hopkins’s emphasis). In this model of reception, the reader’s agency is depicted as active and outgoing rather than relatively passive. In other words, reception—the interpretive move to grasp text—is figured paradoxically, not as an extraction of meaning from a textual body, but rather as a giving of self or a transfer of life into a text to make it live.

Many Romantic writers were overachievers when it came to struggling with their own mutability, and they frequently longed for a kind of immortality through literary, creative means. The future reception of their work was therefore something in which they were intimately invested, as they saw it as a potential way to achieve a measure of being in perpetuity. If the dramatic, embodied reading of “This living hand” suggests Frankenstein’s dream of an animated creative text, the reading that considers the poem’s construction of reception as an infusion of life by the reader highlights the manner in which Romantic works go forth and prosper: the manner, in other words, in which textual, and thus authorial, life is enabled through the ongoing energies of endless future audiences who will undertake the necessary transfer of life from themselves to textual forms.

In his study of *Keats, Narrative, and Audience*, Andrew Bennett describes “This living hand” as a powerful example of this fantasy of posterity in the way that it constructs its audience. He argues convincingly that “the end-point of figures of reading in Keats, and in the Romantics more generally, is a reading after death—the ‘posthumous life’ of writing, but also the posthumous life of reading” (8). In an elegant interpretation that exploits the metaphorical and euphemistic possibilities of the notion of literary remains, Bennett argues that by producing “an indefinite deferral of reading in posterity” these lines provide a way for their author to paradoxically “remain in the future” (14). Following Bhati and Hopkins,

Bennett grounds his argument in the notion that “if we take the words ‘literally’ we find that the life of the poet’s hand *entails* the death of the audience” and since the hand seems to live in the poem’s last lines, “the reader must have died” (12, emphasis Bennett’s). This overly literal reading is, of course, fundamentally illogical, as Bennett himself acknowledges. The text, as he says, “is ‘only’ a poem” (12), and since Keats’s posthumous existence depends upon ongoing engagement with his textual body, it is unlikely that he would want to effect what Wolfson describes as his own “ghoulish rebirth through his text as the murderer of the reader” (*Formal* 191). Instead, Keats’s triumph of life in these lines is in their depiction of the “the birth of the productive reader,” whose task it becomes to keep the text alive through reading (191). As long as there is a reader, the living hand can die and come back to life over and over again (see Bhati 220-22), which, as we read and re-read the poem, it appears to do. The final word before the fragment’s end is “you,” effectively leaving the posthumous life of the text in future readers’ warm and capable hands.

“ENCHANTED PORTALS OPEN WIDE”

Because “This Living Hand” literally foregrounds the physical body and the tensions between living bodies and dead ones, it is especially suitable for an introduction to a collection of essays that explores the presence of the body in Romantic writing. Its synchronic emphasis, however, on the responsibility of the reader for perpetuating the life of the text makes it equally appropriate for considering the changing shape and nature of reception, as well as the presence in the academic landscape of new journals like *At the Edge*. Interactive technologies are radically changing the nature of reception, the composition of audiences, and thus the content of our critical conversations. The increasingly digitized

environment in which we now operate is contributing significantly to Keats's ideal of ongoing textual life and the readerly process of animating literary remains, sometimes in rather literal ways.³ Listserves, digital archives, blogs, clubs on social networking sites, and other virtual communities are thriving zones for the interactive and collaborative engagement with literary texts and other cultural forms. These forums suggest that there are more "productive readers" than ever, and as Avi Santos argues, digital possibilities are testing the limits of the academic writing genre. Such sites, which can have all the rigor of peer review or none at all, can be indispensable resources for the teacher and researcher, and will likely be used increasingly by academics as open models for shared knowledge continue to develop. Open access academic journals are emerging as an integral part of this development.

At the Edge is an on-line journal with a focus on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature and culture. It embraces the philosophy of open access publishing, which is to say that it values the sharing of knowledge, the free circulation of knowledge, and the participatory and cumulative critical process of reception enabled and invited by openly shared content. One major impact of making knowledge freely available and easily searchable is the potential enrichment of the scholarly environment and the links and networks forged by that accessibility. From the author's point of view, publishing in an open access journal makes for greater visibility and potentially higher readership of one's research output—especially useful for emerging scholars. From the scholar's, teacher's, or more casual observer's point of view, open models provide barrier-free access to a fuller range of materials, and this access allows for meaningful engagement with these diverse interpretive communities and their ongoing discussions.

³ See, for example, Jim Clark's wonderfully bizarre "[virtual movie](#)" of "This living hand." at the EDGE ————— <http://journals.library.mun.ca/ate> ————— Volume 1 (2010)

I would like to think that Keats would approve of the evolution of our educational and scholarly ecologies into more open, inclusive, and accessible models, given that the issue of access was such an integral and anxiety-provoking feature of his vocational life. It is well known that his modest socioeconomic status was an obstacle that often made him feel out of place and inequitably judged in the exclusive, luxurious world of early-nineteenth-century poetry. In his short writing life, we can see this anxiety manifested in Keats's depiction of the world of poetry as a difficult to reach space—often figured architecturally as a fane, altar, or sanctuary of some kind—that only the privileged mind can fully envision, reach, and draw inspiration from. In his 1816 epistle “To my brother George,” he self-consciously worries that “No sphery strains by me could e-er be caught / From the blue dome” and that he may “never hear Apollo's song, / Though feathery clouds were floating all along” (4-5, 9-10). “The Poet's eye” wants access to “those golden halls” (35), a mystical and fertile realm of love, beauty, and the “golden lyre” (12), in this case existing beyond a portal guarded by mythological horsemen. Keats frequently imagines that access to visionary or poetic space involves the crossing of a kind of threshold, and moving through open windows and doors is generally associated in his writing with the idea that poetry and poetic perspective are transformative. We need only think, for instance, of the nightingale's song that “oft-times hath / Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn” (“Ode to a Nightingale” 68-70); or of the poet's final touch of a “casement ope at night, / To let the warm Love in!” as he prepares his mind for creative work in the “Ode to Psyche” (65-66); or as he famously states in a letter, “if a Sparrow comes before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel,” effectively figuring empathetic and thus poetic identification as a movement of self through space (1.186).

In “To my brother George,” Keats emphasizes the faculty of sight as the sense most innately connected to reading and thus interpretation.⁴ For the aspiring poet, access to the golden halls requires a shift from a lay perspective to a more expansive, poetic one—a shift, essentially, in how he reads—so that “what we, ignorantly, sheet-lightning call” becomes instead “the swift opening of their wide portal” (29-30). Only when he can see beyond the literal, so that the natural phenomenon appears transformed by the more metaphorical and open view, does the door to another world open up:

When these enchanted portals open wide,
 And through the light the horsemen swiftly glide,
 The Poet’s eye can reach those golden halls,
 And view the glory of their festivals: (33-36)

The metaphorical language that has been developed to describe how we move through virtual space to engage with digital material—the vocabulary of “windows,” “portals,” “ports,” and “gateways,” of being “open” or “closed”—resonates compellingly both with Keats’s poetic representations of the kinds of thresholds that mark the difference between the daily world of weariness, fever, and fret and the visionary realm of poetry and poetic achievement, and with his general longings for more open access to the sweets of poesy. Poetic success, for Keats, may begin with the poet’s entrance to the creative realm, but true achievement is in the hands of productive readers who, like the contributors to open access publications like *At the Edge*, help to generate and perpetuate the posthumous life of writers and their texts.

Future volumes of *At the Edge* will remain committed to showcasing the work of emerging scholars of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature and culture, and in

⁴ “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” a sonnet very much about literary access, similarly equates seeing with reading.

addition to essays that take more traditional approaches to literary and cultural research and writing, we strongly encourage innovative and creative forms of scholarly engagement that expand the genre of academic writing to reflect the changes and possibilities of publishing in a digital environment. Because *At the Edge* is dedicated to advancing participatory, collaborative, and non-static models of scholarly communication and exchange, we also encourage our readers to actively engage with our contributors by availing of the reading tools built into the Open Journal System. We want to keep these texts and these conversations alive, and by reading and rereading, openly and inclusively analyzing and discussing, we participate in their ongoing textual life.

ROMANTIC BODIES

The eight articles in the inaugural volume of *At the Edge* address a range of authors, genres, texts, and issues under the general theme of the Romantic body and contribute rich and vital readings to the extensive scholarly discussion of Romanticism, physicality, and material nature.⁵ The first two articles consider how class is implicated in the eighteenth-century culture and discourse of sensibility. In “Class, Suffering, and Sensibility in Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*,” Bryan Grace is interested in the issue of pain, and how its interpretation, and thus one’s response to it in both the self and in another, is partially conditioned by sociopolitical factors like gender and class. Elegantly grounded by Althusser’s work on ideology, Grace situates his analysis of the novel’s scenes of suffering in the context of eighteenth-century philosophical writing about sensibility that encourages the upper-classes to privilege and value their pain over the pain of their perceived inferiors. Grace

⁵ For a summary of recent scholarship on the Romantic body, see Richardson.

convincingly shows how the elitist “economy of suffering” that informs the relationship between Tyrrel and Emily in *Caleb Williams* can be read as a model for the novel’s central predatory relationship between Falkland and Caleb, a relationship, Grace argues, largely founded on a kind of hierarchy of pain.

In “Cry Like You Mean It,” Janice Morgan also addresses the elitism inherent in the discourse and practice of sensibility. She offers a deft close reading of Wordsworth’s first published sonnet, “On Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress,” in order to draw out some of the social and potentially artistic hypocrisies of the period’s ideal of fellow feeling. Morgan’s argument focuses on the sonnet’s enactment of sympathy through a kind of physical theatre—performative behaviors that require both the luxury of time and a Burkean aesthetic distance. Morgan’s reading demonstrates how such displays of fellow feeling may be driven by class consciousness rather than genuine social concern, and she extrapolates these arguments to consider the extent to which the aestheticization of pain for Romantic artists—both their own and others—may be a way of distinguishing and distancing themselves further rather than finding a common humanity.

Meaghan Malone provides a fresh and compelling look at the visual culture of desire and intimacy in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* by focusing on how Austen uses that visuality to fashion sexualized characters of both genders. Malone cleverly marries eighteenth-century debates about masculinity found in the polemical prose of figures like Edmund Burke and Mary Wollstonecraft to more modern theorizations of the gaze and thus establishes a rich context for reading the character of perennial Austen hero, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. Malone shows how both Burke and Wollstonecraft treat the masculine subject, and gender more broadly, in terms of visual spectacle. While Burke draws on the performative

and emotional culture of sensibility and chivalry, Wollstonecraft refutes that culture in favor of manly vigor and reason and a reorientation of femininity that does away with a woman's damaging dependence on a solicitous man. As Malone argues, Austen positions her characters between these two models of masculinity and manipulates the visual culture of desire by constructing and emphasizing a distinctly female gaze that empowers her female characters. By skillfully balancing the terms of contemporary debates about gender roles in her portrayal of sexual dynamics, Austen creates an idealized and innovative model of masculinity whereby men are both subject and object of women's desire.

In "All Text and No Image Makes Blake a Dull Artist," Peter Heath undertakes a formalist analysis of Blake's textual bodies to reaffirm the importance and value of reading the illuminated works for the interaction of their verbal and visual media. Heath begins by arguing that access to the critically productive interplay of media is limited in major, frequently used teaching anthologies such as the *Longman* and Wu's *Romanticism: An Anthology*, whose editorial decisions seem to largely divide the words of Blake's poems from their graphically rendered origins. Heath proposes the mathematical analogy of multiplication as a way of understanding and valuing the word/image dynamic in Blake's art, and then demonstrates his theory in readings of "The Sick Rose," "Earth's Answer," and "The Chimney Sweeper," all from *Songs of Experience*. The products of reading media interactively—or multiplicatively, as Heath describes it—are potentially far greater than the sum of Blake's illuminated texts' constitutive and composite parts.

Both Kathie Houser and Maggie Hyslop address issues of the body in narrative poems by Keats. Houser's "Sensuous Embodiment in *The Eve of St. Agnes*" undertakes a wonderfully detailed close reading of the embodied language in Keats's medieval poem of

young lust. She reads the opening forty-one lines as a kind of establishing shot for the contrasts between hot and cold, fire and ice, and life and death that Keats develops in the rest of this poem and that complicate any simple assessment of Madeline's virginal innocence. Embodiment helps Keats develop what Houser calls, following Sharp, Keats's radicalized humanism, which she finds exemplified in Keats's thoroughly sensory and sensual portrayal of Madeline as a budding sexual being and a fully active agent in her sexual awakening, rather than a passive victim of, at best, seduction, or, rather more ominously, sexual assault.

Maggie Hyslop's "Body Work" presents a highly engaging reading of *Isabella, or, the Pot of Basil* that focuses on the poem's labouring bodies and the impact of occupation on those bodies. Working with Paul Youngquist's concept of the "proper body" and its intersection with free-market economics, Hyslop considers how in Isabella's world the type of work that one does influences the way one's body is valued. Hyslop addresses the so-called "capitalist stanzas" in the poem, in which Keats describes Isabella's brothers' exploitative business practices, but her analysis also devotes subtle attention to the economic inflection of scenes and characters not frequently discussed in such terms. Hyslop notes that Keats's sustained representation of working bodies and the physical tyranny of the class system is a marked point of divergence from the story's source in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. In particular, Hyslop shows how Keats's significant revisioning of economics as the more explicit motive for Lorenzo's murder ought to be taken as evidence of Keats's ideological beliefs about class and status, work and leisure, and the value of human flesh.

Alice Dickinson and Jacob Bachinger take very different approaches to materiality in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a text whose investment in the corporeal has never really been under dispute. Bachinger's "The Arctic and 'Other Spaces' in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*"

is interested less in the physical bodies in the novel, however, than in the significance of the spaces in which those bodies operate—both the hostile and frozen northern environments of the Alps and the Orkneys, and Walton’s ship as it is bound by the intractable Arctic ice in the midst of its captain’s mission. In a refreshing departure from historically inflected arguments about the relevance of the Arctic in the novel—readings that emphasize the currency of interest in polar exploration, for instance—Bachinger uses Foucault’s concept of the heterotopia as an othered space to explore the role that frozen settings play in Shelley’s narrative structure and in the arcs of her central characters.

In “An Excess of the Deficient,” Dickinson provocatively confronts the problem of ugliness in *Frankenstein*. Dickinson is fundamentally interested in the reception of the creature and the horror and revulsion it inspires, both in the novel’s other characters and in readers. By considering the differences between “ugly” and “normal” bodies as Shelley represents and deploys them in her text, this article engages with the novel’s uncomfortable exploration of the boundary between the human and the abhuman, and suggests that ugliness exists in pre-existing categories that produce a compulsion in readers to normalize where they find deviance. As Dickinson argues, Shelley constructs a creature that provokes fear because of its differences from the human, but even more so because of its similarities to the human—an existence Dickinson defines as “almost human.” Combined with her narrative’s gradual alignment of Victor with his monster, Shelley uses her creature’s body to challenge readers to reevaluate their definitions of normality and perhaps to consider whether the idea of ugliness is of any value at all in discussions of human nature.

The reference to “These Living Hands” in the title of this introduction is also meant to underscore the collaborative effort that has already gone into the existence of this first

volume of *At the Edge*. The stunning cover image for the volume—inspired by another of Keats’s poem in which the physical figures prominently—is an original design and pencil drawing I commissioned from Stacey K. Cheater, a former undergraduate student who had showcased her artistic talents on several creative assignments for my courses. Her graphic visual rendering of Isabella’s tear-watered basil plant growing lushly over the interred head of her murdered lover rivals in its beauty and in the quality of its artistic execution any of the luxurious pre-Raphaelite interpretations of the poem, such as the well-known paintings by [William Holman Hunt](#) (1868), [John White Alexander](#) (1897), or [J.M. Waterhouse](#) (1907). But Cheater’s illustration far exceeds those works in its visceral quality, with its lush combination of natural growth and decay. Most visual renderings of *Isabella’s* narrative elements emphasize the heroine’s relentless mourning by depicting her in a grieving posture while tending to her potted plant. By focusing in on the plant itself and demystifying the reason for its robust growth—it is more likely thriving from the organic fertilizer of the decaying head than Isabella’s relentless, salty tears—Cheater’s interpretation beautifully exposes the somewhat grim but fertile materiality of the poem’s central image. As in “This living hand,” the death-leading-to-life image depicts the idea of textual reanimation with which this introduction began.

The volume’s subtitle, *Romantic Bodies*, is the name of the Studies in the Nineteenth Century graduate course I offered in the Fall of 2009 ([see syllabus](#)). Our weekly discussions of the physical bodies of and in Romantic writing focused on a wide range of texts and subjects, and seven of the eight papers⁶ that comprise this volume began with these

⁶The eighth article, by Meaghan Malone, is a revision of a larger Honours project on Jane Austen, masculinity, and the gaze that I supervised in the Winter 2010 term; its treatment of

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discussions. As part of the term paper assignment for the course, we conducted a blind peer review, so that each paper was read and comprehensively evaluated by myself as well as one anonymous student. The authors received their detailed reader's reports, had editorial meetings with me, and then revised, resubmitted, and continued to refine their work until the final spit and polish. The dedication of these scholars to the collaborative editorial process and to their own extensive and thoughtful revisionary work is evident in every article.

Finally, *At the Edge* would have no life at all without the support of Lisa Goddard and Aaron Rudkin, whose expertise with online journal management, graphic design, and all things technical has been essential in making this publication happen. As Memorial University's Scholarly Communications Librarian and champion of Open Access, Ms. Goddard initiated and manages MUN Libraries' Open Journal System (OJS), and I thank her, the OJS System Administrator Aaron Rudkin, and Memorial University Libraries in advance for continuing to support and host this project and others like it. Ms. Goddard also helped me create the *At the Edge* logo using a spectacular photograph taken by Georgina Short at Middle Cove Beach, Newfoundland, where a view of the Canadian Atlantic sublime is guaranteed ([see original photo](#)).

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the sexual and visual dynamic in *Pride and Prejudice* fits very naturally among the volume's other explorations of Romantic bodies and forms.

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