

**“Enough! or Too much”:
Forms of Textual Excess in Blake, Wordsworth,
Coleridge and De Quincey**

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ABSTRACT

My thesis explores the potential and the peril of Romantic literature's increasingly complex forms through a close comparative study of the works of William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas De Quincey. These writers exemplify the Romantic predicament of how to make vision manifest – how to communicate one's imaginative and intellectual expansiveness without diminishing it. They sought different strategies for increasing the capacity of literary form, ostensibly in the hope of communicating more: clarifying meaning, increasing accessibility and intensifying original experience. But textual expansion – materially, stylistically and intellectually – often threatens more opportunities for confused and partial meanings to proliferate, overwhelming the reader by dividing texts and undermining attempts at coherent thought. Expansion thus becomes excess, with all its worrying associations of superfluity. To further complicate matters, Burke's influential tenet of the Sublime makes a virtue out of excess and obscurity, raising the problematic spectre of deliberately confused/confusing texts that embody an aesthetic of incomprehension. I explore these paradoxes through four types of 'textual excess' demonstrated by the writers under discussion: firstly, the tension between poetry and prose adjuncts, such as prefaces and notes, in Wordsworth and Coleridge; secondly, De Quincey's indulgent verbosity and struggle to control the freeing shapelessness of prose; thirdly, Wordsworth's and De Quincey's parallel experiences of revision as both uncontrollably diffusive and statically concentrated; and lastly, Blake's more deliberate, systematic attempt to enact a literary Sublime in which the reader is forced out of passivity by the competing demands of verbal and visual media. All are motivated and thwarted in varying degrees by their anxious preoccupation with saying "Enough", and the difficulty of determining when this becomes "Too much". These authorial dilemmas also incorporate larger concerns with man's (over)ambition at a time of rapid and unprecedented economic, social and intellectual acceleration from the Enlightenment to industrialism. The fear that the concept and process of 'progress', or 'improvement', marks *deficiency* rather than fulfilment haunts Romantic writers.

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	v
Note on Texts	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: “The excess, by which the balance is destroyed”(<i>The Excursion</i>): The Fragile Balance of Prose and Poetry in Wordsworth and Coleridge	17
I: The Ambivalence of Balance	17
II: Malthus and the Difficulty of Determining One’s Limits	36
III: Balancing Individual Genius and Collective Capacity	52
IV: Coleridge’s Strategic Formal Fragmentation	77
V: Reconciling Oneself to Excessive Insufficiency	86
CHAPTER TWO: “Great faults...may grow out of great virtues in excess”(‘Style’): De Quincey’s Struggle for Syntactical Order	90
I: When Infinite Scope meets Finite Syntax	90
II: “the friction of style”	106
III: Mapping De Quincey’s Prose through Piranesi’s <i>Carceri</i>	122
IV: Overwriting and Skim-Reading	145
CHAPTER THREE: “Within more spacious limits, the materials which I have used might have been better unfolded”(<i>Confessions</i>): The Shared Strain of Revision for Wordsworth and De Quincey	163
I: Revision as Expansion and Contraction	163
II: (Re)collecting Oneself	175
III: Revision as Approach and Estrangement	191
IV: The Aesthetic of Process versus the Practice of Procrastination	209
V: The Text as a Living Monument	229

CHAPTER FOUR:	243
“The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom”(<i>Marriage</i>):	
Word and/or Image in William Blake	
I: Systematic Ambivalence	243
II: The Bounding Line	262
III: Reading Images and Viewing Text	284
IV: The Worthy Reader	303
CONCLUSION	310
Appendix	
Bibliography	315

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- FIG.1: William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy B (1790), Plate 10.
 FIG.2: Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Carceri D'Invenzione* (1750, rev.1761), Plate VII.
 FIG.3: *Carceri*, Plate XIV.
 FIG.4: *Carceri*, Plate XI.
 FIG.5: Blake, *The First Book of Urizen* title page, Copy A (1794), Plate 1.
 FIG.6: *Urizen*, Copy A, Plate 10.
 FIG.7: *Urizen*, Copy A, Plate 12.
 FIG.8: *Urizen*, Copy A, Plate 14.
 FIG.9: *Urizen*, Copy G (1818), Plate 11.
 FIG.10: *Urizen*, Copy G, Plate 14.
 FIG.11: *Urizen*, Copy A, Plate 21.
 FIG.12: Blake, *Jerusalem The Emanation of The Giant Albion*, Copy E (c.1821), Plate 6.
 FIG.13: Blake, *Laocoön* (c.1826-7).
 FIG.14: Blake, *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise*, Copy D (c.1825), Plate 1.
 FIG.15: *Gates of Paradise*, Copy D, Plate 3.
 FIG.16: Blake, *America a Prophecy* frontispiece, Copy E (1793), Plate 1.
 FIG.17: *America*, Copy E, Plate 11.
 FIG.18: Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1826), Plate 13.
 FIG.19: *Marriage*, Copy B, Plate 9, lines 7-8.
 FIG.20: *Marriage*, Copy E (1794), Plate 3.
 FIG.21: *Marriage*, Copy C (1790), Plate 3.
 FIG.22: *Marriage*, Copy F (1794), Plate 3.
 FIG.23: *Jerusalem* frontispiece, Copy A (c.1820), Plate 1.
 FIG.24: *Jerusalem*, Copy D (c.1820), Plate 25.
 FIG.25: *Marriage*, Copy B, Plate 21.
 FIG.26: *Marriage*, Copy C, Plate 21.
 FIG.27: *Marriage*, Copy H (1790), Plate 21.
 FIG.28: *Marriage*, Copy E, Plate 21.
 FIG.29: *Marriage*, Copy D (1795), Plate 21.
 FIG.30: *Marriage*, Copy I (1827), Plate 21.
 FIG.31: Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Copy B (1789, 1794), Plate 35.
 FIG.32: *Songs*, Copy L (1795), Plate 36.
 FIG.33: *Songs*, Copy N (1795), Plate 8.
 FIG.34: Blake, *The Song of Los*, Copy A (1795), Plate 8.
 FIG.35: *Song of Los*, Copy C (1795), Plate 8.
 FIG.36: *Los*, Copy D (1795), Plate 8.
 FIG.37: *Los*, Copy E (1795), Plate 4.
 FIG.38: *America*, Copy A (1795), Plate 9.
 FIG.39: *America*, Copy A, Plate 13.
 FIG.40: *Jerusalem*, Copy E, Plate 59.
 FIG.41: Blake, *Europe a Prophecy*, Copy B (1794), Plate 17.
 FIG.42: *Jerusalem*, Copy E, Plate 50.
 FIG.43: *Marriage*, Copy F, Plate 20.
 FIG.44: *Urizen*, Copy A, Plate 28.
 FIG.45: Blake, *Milton a Poem* frontispiece, Copy D (1818), Plate 1.
 FIG.46: *Milton*, Copy D, Plate 11.

- FIG.47: *Jerusalem*, Copy E, Plate 15.
 FIG.48: Blake, *The Book of Los* title page, Copy A (1795), Plate 2.
 FIG.49: *Urizen*, Copy A, Plate 23.
 FIG.50: *Urizen*, Copy A, Plate 13.
 FIG.51: *Milton*, Copy D, Plate 18.
 FIG.52: *Gate of Paradise*, Copy D, Plate 5.
 FIG.53: *Urizen*, *A Small Book of Designs* (1796).
 FIG.54: *Urizen*, *A Small Book of Designs* (1796).
 FIG.55: Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Copy F (1794), Plate 1.
 FIG.56: *Europe* frontispiece, Copy B (1794), Plate 1.
 FIG.57: *Job*, Plate 2.
 FIG.58: *Gates of Paradise*, Copy D, Plate 21.
 FIG.59: *Jerusalem* title page, Copy E, Plate 2.
 FIG.60: *Urizen*, Copy D (1794), Plate 21.
 FIG.61: *Urizen*, Copy D, Plate 15.
 FIG.62: *Songs*, Copy V (1821), Plate 21.
 FIG.63: *Urizen*, Copy B (1795), Plate 3.
 FIG.64: *Marriage*, Copy E, Plate 5.
 FIG.65: *Europe*, Copy A, Plate 22.
 FIG.66: *Urizen*, Copy A, Plate 9.
 FIG.67: *Milton*, Copy D, Plate 33.
 FIG.68: *Urizen*, Copy F (1794), Plate 5.
 FIG.69: *Urizen*, Copy F, Plate 8.
 FIG.70: *America*, Copy A, Plate 10.
 FIG.71: *America*, Copy A, Plate 12.
 FIG.72: Blake, *There is No Natural Religion*, Copy A (1794), Plate 11.
 FIG.73: *Marriage*, Copy A, Plate 17.
 FIG.74: *Marriage*, Copy H, Plate 3.
 FIG.75: *Marriage*, Copy H, Plate 7.
 FIG.76: *Marriage*, Copy H, Plate 21.
 FIG.77: *Job*, Plate 22.

NOTE ON TEXTS

Throughout I refer to and cite the original two periodical articles that comprised ‘Confessions of an English Opium-Eater’ in 1821 using single quotation marks. Its subsequent publication in book form, in 1821 and 1856, is indicated by italics: *Confessions*.

Ellipses are signalled with ‘...’, and are my interpolations throughout.

Asterisked footnotes provide translations, and are my interpolations throughout.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| <i>Biographia</i> | S.T. Coleridge, <i>Biographia Literaria</i> (1817), ed. Walter Jackson Bate and James Engell, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1983). |
| <i>Collected Letters</i> | <i>The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i> , ed. E.L. Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1956-1971). |
| <i>Collected Works</i> | <i>The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i> , ed. Kathleen Coburn, Bart Keith Winer, L. Patton, P. Mann, D.V. Erdman, B.E. Rooke, R.A. Foakes, R.J., White, James Engell, Walter Jackson Bate, John Beer, J. Colmer, H.J. Jackson, J.R.de J. Jackson, G. Whalley, C. Woodring, Thomas McFarland and J.C.C. Mays, 16 vols. (London, 1969-2002). |
| <i>Complete Works</i> | <i>The Complete Works of William Hazlitt</i> , ed. P.P. Howe, after A.R. Waller and Arnold Glover, 21 vols. (London, 1930-4). |
| <i>Complete Writings</i> | <i>The Complete Writings of William Blake</i> , ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1966). |
| <i>Enquiry</i> | Edmund Burke, <i>A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful</i> (1757), ed. David Womersley (London, 2004). |
| <i>Essays</i> | <i>The Essays of Virginia Woolf</i> , ed. Andrew McNeillie and Stuart Nelson, 6 vols. (London, 1986-2011). |
| <i>Fenwick Notes</i> | <i>The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth</i> , ed. Jared R. Curtis (Bristol, 1993). |

<i>Letters</i>	<i>The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth</i> , ed. Ernest De Selincourt, rev. Chester L. Shaver, Mary Trevelyan Moorman and Alan G. Hill, 8 vols. (2 nd ed. Oxford, 1967-1993).
<i>Major Works</i>	<i>Wordsworth: The Major Works</i> , ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 2008).
<i>Notebooks</i>	<i>The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i> , ed. Kathleen Coburn, 5 vols. (New York, 1957-2002).
<i>Population</i>	Thomas Robert Malthus, <i>An Essay on the Principle of Population</i> (1798), ed. Geoffrey Gilbert (Oxford, 2004).
<i>Prose Works</i>	<i>The Prose Works of William Wordsworth</i> , ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1974).
<i>Reflections</i>	Burke, <i>Reflections on the Revolution in France</i> (1790), ed. L.G. Mitchell (1993; repr. Oxford, 2009).
<i>Works</i>	<i>The Works of Thomas De Quincey</i> , ed. Grevel Lindop, Barry Symonds, David Groves, Frederick Burwick, Robert Morrison, John C. Whale, Edmund Baxter, Alina Clej, Julian North, and Daniel Sanjiv Roberts, 21 vols. (London, 2000-2003).

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INTRODUCTION

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, after listing sixty-nine ‘Proverbs of Hell’ by which all people should live, William Blake concludes: “Enough! or Too much”. With typical rhetorical playfulness the fixed resolve of “Enough!” immediately gives way to the equivocating “or Too much”, hovering between statement and question. The line also hovers between being a commentary on the ‘Proverbs’, a ‘Proverb’ in itself and a kind of caption to the illustration below (FIG.1), depicting a devil dictating from a scroll to a pair of scribes who enact the two possibilities his wings point to above: one leans over his work and manages to studiously transcribe “Enough” while the other finds it all “Too much”, stopping and looking over imploringly for help. The image presents an implicit strain between three material forms in the devil’s unfurled fluid scroll, the large tome or tablet at right and the small copperplate being engraved with a burin at left, alerting the viewer to the multiform literal confines that dictate and are shaped by one’s methods of expression. The writer constantly seeks a form expansive “Enough” to contain the extent of their thought and feeling, allowing them to say as much as possible, without that form growing out of control under the weight of “Too much” content – or indeed “Too much” content growing out of formal indiscipline. It is a fragile balance signalled by that pivot-point “or”, and by a composition in which the notional symmetry of the devil’s two wings and spread knees, and the two seated curly-haired scribes framed by organic tendrils, is destabilised as two figures look and lean towards the engraver on the left of the plate. The image in this sense dramatises both the equilibrium of “Enough”, and its disruption – the ease with which one’s mental and material resources tip over into unmanageable, unbalanced, excess. As a ‘Proverb’ itself, Blake’s phrase more widely speculates on the desirability of “Enough” and “Too much” as theoretical and practical states of being and

doing in art. His mischievous non-commitment brims with the ambivalence and ambiguity of necessarily saying “Too much” in order to say “Enough”: the competing motivations and effects when one writes more to better explain oneself, yet in doing so increases the possibility of convoluted self-contradiction. Or conversely when, under the influence of the Burkean Sublime¹, an author aestheticises the incomprehension producing and produced by formal excess, always risking an unaffecting collapse into over-wrought or disorganised diffuseness – that “vicious obscurity, which proceeds from a muddled head”², as Coleridge terms it. The apparent deferral to the small-scale rigid copperplate in Blake’s design indicates the ideal of concentrated and precise forms of communication, but the scribe’s hunched posture and bowed head suggest – as so often in Blake’s illustrations – a perturbing narrowness of perception, a slavish hyper-concentration that stymies the associative mind’s free movement and accretion, for which the devil’s unrolled scroll might be a preferable medium. All these oscillating tensions imply the paradox that excess results from and in an enduring sense of *insufficiency* regarding one’s powers of understanding and technical execution.

I want to suggest that the condition of ‘too muchness’ is one of the defining characteristics of Romantic literature, manifested in its expansive and complex forms. In the quest to clarify meaning with a critically evaluative eye whilst also enacting the constant growth of a receptively creative mind, Romantic texts frequently (over)extend themselves materially and stylistically. Particular examples include a co-dependence of prose and poetry, an indulgence in verbosity as visionary “overflow” and systematic reasoning, and an assertion of artistic expression as a process stretching over space and time – exemplified in revision, which creates multiple versions of a never-quite-complete

¹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

² S.T. Coleridge, Notebook (1796), *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 5 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957-2002), i.280.

work. Such expansion can open up more opportunities for inconsistent or incomplete meanings to proliferate and overwhelm the reader, ironically dividing texts and undermining articulate coherence. This constant concern over the practicalities of expression in increasingly complicated and ambitiously-constructed forms more generally bears out Robert Langbaum's judgment of post-Enlightenment poetry as "founded upon the deliberate disequilibrium of experience and idea"³. The formal incarnation of such authorial ambivalence – an optimism and anxiety about how a work will develop – is made all the more urgent in a climate of unprecedented industrial and cultural expansion from the late eighteenth century onwards, which relished the idea of limitless ambition and technical capability yet feared the unpredictability of uncontrollable growth. Northrop Frye remarks that "The English are famous for transforming their economic and political ambitions into moral principles", so that industrialisation "assumed that freedom of action was the same thing as material expansion...[and] the unchecked growth of England's power involved the emancipation of the world"⁴. But the peril inherent in all this potential is suggested by E.P. Thompson's comment that "the growth of social consciousness, like the growth of a poet's mind, can never, in the last analysis, be planned"⁵. Just when the Enlightenment fostered a pursuit of encyclopaedic understanding in every field of intellectual endeavour – as though all ideas could feasibly be categorised and catalogued – Iain McCalman observes the paradox that "the eighteenth-century information explosion powered by new print technologies...ended the possibility of total knowledge"⁶. Every undertaking was, then, simultaneously "Too much" and not "Enough".

³ Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), p.28.

⁴ Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (2nd ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p.179.

⁵ E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: The Merlin Press, 1991), p.403.

⁶ Iain McCalman (ed.), *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p.6.

Tim Milnes identifies the specifically “agonistic nature of Romantic ambivalence” towards knowledge, whether “total” or otherwise, as a consequence of anxiety about the reception of one’s work: “the conflict of its commitment and indifference to justification...manifests Romanticism’s rebellious dependency upon the foundations of knowledge”⁷. Milnes draws on the fundamental Romantic tension between immediate perception and evaluative communication – the “spontaneous overflow” of “emotion recollected in tranquillity”⁸ – to consider how “The responsibility ‘of knowing’, taken as the detached perspective of the neutral spectator...weigh[ed] heavily on Wordsworth’s brave new poetics of engagement”⁹. It is a responsibility complicated by the sense that, as poetry becomes the “uneasy...rival of philosophy, theology, and science”, Romantic works “know of no mode of knowledge superior to their own”¹⁰. This contributes to a “fragile”(ibid) relationship with one’s audience: writing “Too much” in the ingenuous attempt to explain – and justify – oneself ‘totally’ is both a generous investment in one’s readers, and a sign of mistrust in their knowledge, or their ability to comprehend the author’s knowledge, such as it is. “Total” explanation and concision are both undermined by the Romantic writer’s competing conceptions of form as containing and extending the reach of one’s knowledge.

In ‘A Defence of Poetry’(1821) Shelley voices his concern over the disjunction in contemporary culture between the “experience and idea” of superabundant knowledge: “We have more moral, political and historical wisdom than we know how to reduce into practice...we have eaten more than we can digest”¹¹. The metaphor of “The body [that] has then become too unwieldy for that which animates it”(ibid) calls to mind hefty bodies

⁷ Tim Milnes, *Knowledge and Indifference in English Romantic Prose* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p.3.

⁸ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), i, pp.118-158, p.126, 148.

⁹ Milnes, *Knowledge and Indifference*, p.71.

¹⁰ Michael O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p.xxiii, 36.

¹¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘A Defence of Poetry’(1821), *Shelley’s Prose*, ed. David Lee Clark (2nd ed., London: Fourth Estate, 1988), pp.275-97, p.293.

of text rendering their content cumbersome: “Too much” material may not yield “Enough” sense. Shelley’s famous declaration that “Poetry is a sword of lightning ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it”(285) may assert an ideal of inspired effusiveness, but the concept of “total” consumption points to the strain of containing the intellectually exhaustive, exhausting and overcrowded environment in which Romantic texts emerged. As “the Industrial Revolution had grown too large”¹², the mechanics of thought, society and literary form had become overwhelming; hence the overweening spirit of the age was the question of when “Enough” accedes and exceeds to “Too much”. Hazlitt famously averred that Wordsworth’s poetry “partakes of and is carried along with the revolutionary movement of our age”, so that if he had “lived in any other period of the world he would never have been heard of”¹³. Yet Thomas De Quincey connects this “movement” – the “shifting scenery of the age and the principles of motion at work”¹⁴ – with the instability not merely of political and industrial revolution but of indeterminate definition in general: “No age can be clear to itself”¹⁵, he states, with an awareness that the age in which he lives is particularly (self-) conscious of this fact. In this sense the height of one’s intellectual advancement was knowing “Enough” to realise there was “Too much” activity and antagonism to “reduce” into concise forms of expression, in what Wordsworth’s Wanderer variously describes as “An inventive age”, “strange”, “Industrious to destroy!”¹⁶. In a discussion of what he perceived as misguided optimism surrounding the American gold rush, which could lead to the commodity’s rapid

¹² Jacob Bronowski, *William Blake and the Age of Revolution* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p.124.

¹³ William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age: or, Contemporary Portraits* (London: H. Colburn, 1825), p.233.

¹⁴ Thomas De Quincey, ‘Travelling in England Thirty Years Ago: From the *Autobiography of an English Opium-Eater*’ (*Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*, December 1834, pp.797-802), *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Grevel Lindop, Barry Symonds, David Groves, Frederick Burwick, Robert Morrison, John C. Whale, Edmund Baxter, Alina Clej, Julian North, and Daniel Sanjiv Roberts, 21 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000-2003), x, pp.96-107, p.96.

¹⁵ De Quincey, untitled MS fragment (undated), *ibid*, x, pp.358-9, p.358.

¹⁶ Wordsworth, *The Excursion* (1814), VIII.89, 91, 97. Text follows *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler and Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007) throughout.

devaluation, De Quincey extrapolates that the age of expansion is inevitably an age of imposing excess: every product “whatsoever of this earth” is “liable to most pernicious excess; excess embarrassing, or by possibility ruinous, to the prosperity of human industry; excess confounding to human foresight”¹⁷. With totalising inexactitude he concludes: “Everything, without exception, is liable to this ruinous reaction from excess”(ibid). It is this climate of ‘too muchness’ that heightens a writer’s anxiety about the fact that, as Michael O’Neill observes, “Form creates meaning and indeterminacy alike”¹⁸. In an age where the practical anxieties of excess contend with its aesthetic idealisation in Sublime “obscurity”¹⁹ the issue of how much, or what kind of, “indeterminacy” is desirable in literary form becomes a distinctly Romantic dilemma.

My study focuses on the work of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey as fascinating examples of the many ways in which one can say “Too much” when materially manifesting the “inward eye”²⁰. These four writers share the exponential and thus unattainable ambition to be intellectually and formally all-encompassing, which produces a conflict between their imaginative spontaneity as artists and the compulsion to be their own – and each other’s – first, best and worst critics. Connected personally and professionally through mutual admiration and antagonism, there are intricate points of intersection and distinction as the four similarly fluctuate between wanting to emulate and avoid each other’s excesses. Between them, they demonstrate considerable formal variety as they experiment with how to contain “Too much” in prose and poetry, word and image, conventionally-printed volumes, unique home-made books, mass-produced periodical articles, single epics, collected editions, and multiple published and unpublished versions

¹⁷ De Quincey, ‘On the Final Catastrophe of the Gold-Digging Mania’(*Instructor*, X, 1853, pp.401-4), *Works*, xviii, pp.37-47, p.38.

¹⁸ O’Neill, *Self-Conscious Poem*, p.xv.

¹⁹ Burke, *Enquiry*, Part II, Section III: ‘Obscurity’, pp.102-4.

²⁰ Wordsworth, ‘I wandered lonely as a Cloud’(1804), l.21. Text of Wordsworth’s poems follows *Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: OUP, 2008) throughout, unless otherwise stated.

of texts. De Quincey expresses a characteristic Romantic conception of the imagination as that which “seeks the illimitable; dissolves the definite; translates the finite into the infinite”²¹, but admits some literary boundaries to his own boundless psyche: “My imagination flies, like Noah’s dove, from the ark of my mind...and finds no place on which to rest the sole of her foot except Coleridge – Wordsworth and Southey”²². And what he found there was inarticulacy: asserting that Kant “had no power of explaining his own meaning”, De Quincey states that “In this portion of his mind he resembled Messrs Wordsworth and C[oleridge] who carried the same infirmity to excess”²³. Hence he realises, as John C. Whale notes, that “self-interpretation does not always coincide with intelligibility”²⁴, a “disequilibrium” he encountered in his own writing: Edmund Baxter notes that despite his confessional mode “The possibility of communicating...seems slim, given that for De Quincey all language tends to represent either too little or too much”²⁵.

Indeed, “too little” *because* “too much”. It is this dialogue of superfluity and/as lack that characterises the typical response to Blake’s crowded plates, swarming with interlinear adornment and illustrations which complicate rather than clarify the poetry and confuse the reader. Edward Quillinan determines that Blake’s work “had the fault of too much”, sounding “very like nonsense-verses” in their “wildness & oddness”²⁶, a reading that persists in modern criticism: W.J.T. Mitchell declares that “Blake has *too much* meaning...too many ideas to contain in any pictorial or poetic form”²⁷. This strain

²¹ De Quincey, ‘Notes from the Pocket-Book of the English Opium-Eater’ IV: ‘False Distinctions’ (*London Magazine*, IX, June 1824, pp.642-5), *Works*, iii, pp.175-9, p.178.

²² De Quincey, *Diary* (1803), *ibid*, i, pp.7-69, p.55.

²³ De Quincey, ‘What is Theory?’ (MS, c.1823-4), *ibid*, iii, pp.390-2, p.391.

²⁴ John C. Whale, *Thomas De Quincey’s Reluctant Autobiography* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p.180.

²⁵ Edmund Baxter, *De Quincey’s Art of Autobiography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), p.47.

²⁶ Edward Quillinan, letter to Henry Crabb Robinson (27 July 1848), *The Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson with the Wordsworth Circle, 1808-1866*, ed. Edith J. Morley, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), ii.675.

²⁷ W.J.T. Mitchell, ‘Metamorphoses of the Vortex: Hogarth, Turner, and Blake’, *Articulate Images: The Sister Arts from Hogarth to Tennyson*, ed. Richard Wendorf (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp.125-68, p.155.

between thought and form leads to T.S. Eliot's critique of the longer mythological prophecies: "Blake did not see enough, became too much occupied with ideas"²⁸ – a failing De Quincey identified in himself: "It was my disease to meditate too much and observe too little"²⁹. Eliot's judgement that Blake's philosophy is "put...together out of the odds and ends about the house"³⁰ is extended into an issue of audience interpretation and participation by Jon Mee's comment that "The reader might be seen as the keystone of the Blakian bricolage"³¹. Alina Clej likewise identifies De Quincey's "bricolage"³² subjectivity, which biographer and editor David Masson argues is embodied in the abandon of his talkative prose: "All those characteristics of [his] mind...reproduce themselves...as characteristics of his style"³³. This difficulty of cohering "fragments of a shattered intellect"³⁴ in literary form for writer and reader alike is central to "Romanticism's pathos of self-attention"³⁵, a pathos stemming from both doubt *and* belief in one's ability to communicate one's self fully given "Enough" space and time.

Discussing the indeterminacy of "abstract" and "concrete" nouns and verbs in the *Prelude*, Donald Davie explains: "this is poetry where the syntax counts enormously, counts for nearly everything"³⁶. An understanding of syntactical complexity in Wordsworth's poetry is enhanced by closely reading his often disjointed prose, which strains to explain his poetic theory. As De Quincey warns, echoing Shelley's

²⁸ T.S. Eliot, 'Blake' (1921), *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (7th ed. London: Methuen, 1950), pp.151-8, p.156.

²⁹ De Quincey, 'Confessions of an English Opium-Eater' II (*London Magazine*, IV, October 1821, pp.353-79), *Works*, ii, pp.39-76, p.50.

³⁰ Eliot, 'Blake', *Sacred Wood*, p.156.

³¹ Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford: OUP, 1992), p.18.

³² Alina Clej, *A Genealogy of the Modern Self: Thomas De Quincey and the Intoxication of Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p.vii.

³³ David Masson, *De Quincey* (1881; repr. London: Macmillan, 1909), p.151.

³⁴ Crabb Robinson on Blake, letter to Edward Quillinan (10 August 1848), quoted in *Blake Records*, ed. G.E. Bentley Jr. (2nd ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p.313.

³⁵ Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (1984; repr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p.276.

³⁶ Donald Davie, *Articulate Energy: An Enquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), p.111.

physiological metaphor, “A sentence...is capable of multiform beauty, and liable to a whole nosology of malconformations”³⁷, whereby rhetorical “variety and opulence...is apt to be oppressive”³⁸. Analysing the German Romantic Johann Paul Richter’s “elaborate” style, De Quincey evokes the usefully “oppressive” excess of Burkean Sublimity to suggest that he “wanted...the severe simplicity, that horror of the too much...which is essential to the perfection of a dream considered as a work of art”³⁹. The critique indicates De Quincey’s recognition that verbal effusiveness can dilute dramatic power, encouraged by the diffuseness of prose as a less rigid and disciplined medium than poetry; this is the alternative “horror of the too much” that lies in one’s “experience” of overwriting an overwhelming “idea”, thereby converting it into underwhelming abstruseness. De Quincey perceived Coleridge as, “in a literary sense, our brother”⁴⁰, and furthermore as a “garrulous man” in person and in prose; realising the insufficiency of excess, De Quincey fashions the chatterbox as “a kind of pickpocket without intending to steal anything...rather he is fain to please you by placing something in your pocket – though too often it is like the egg of the cuckoo in the nest of another bird”⁴¹. Writing “Too much” steals readers’ time and energy as they struggle to order the material presented and sift veracity from verbiage.

The garrulousness that infected Coleridge and De Quincey is the product of enthusiasm, without which – according to the former – “nothing great was ever achieved. For what is enthusiasm but the oblivion and swallowing up of self in an object dearer than

³⁷ De Quincey, ‘On the Present Stage of the English Language’ (*Instructor*, VI, 1850, pp.97-101), *Works*, xvii, pp.56-68, p.65.

³⁸ De Quincey, ‘Elements of Rhetoric’ (*Blackwood’s Magazine*, December 1828, pp.885-908), *ibid*, vi, pp.155-189, p.172.

³⁹ De Quincey, ‘System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescopes’ (*Tait’s*, September 1846, pp.566-79), *ibid*, xv, pp.393-420, p.416.

⁴⁰ De Quincey, ‘Coleridge and Opium-Eating’ (*Blackwood’s*, January 1845, pp.117-32), *ibid*, xv, pp.102-25, p.105.

⁴¹ De Quincey, ‘Conversation and S.T. Coleridge’ (MS, c.1849), *ibid*, xxi, pp.42-90, p.44.

self[?]"⁴². This is a sentiment with which Blake "heartily"⁴³ agreed, though with a more practical and conscious emphasis on the "oblivion and swallowing up of self" as a deliberate aesthetic strategy. The fact that building up meaning is burdened by the permanent possibility of collapsing into meaning less, or even meaninglessness, may agitate the "fine-strung" De Quincey "full of wire-drawn ingenuities"⁴⁴, but Blake believes it offers greater potential for demanding a reader's concentration and contribution to visionary myth-making, through some boldly-drawn illustrative "ingenuities". Hence "The parts of Wordsworth's ['Intimations'] ode which Blake most enjoyed were the most obscure", Crabb Robinson relates, sending him "into a fit of rapture"⁴⁵. It was when Wordsworth attempted to explain himself that all hell broke loose: the 'Preface' to *The Excursion* caused Blake "a bowel complaint which nearly killed him"⁴⁶. Blake is therefore distinguished from Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey by his readiness to fully embrace rather than fight the ambivalent and unpredictable effects of textual excess.

Complex forms demand to be closely read above all, with a constant alertness to the all-too-easy "disequilibrium" between an author's intentions and effects. To the extent that both Deconstruction and the McGann model of New Historicism are preoccupied with a work's internal conflicts and self-thwarting practices, the close reading that dominates my study is informed by these two theoretical approaches. They

⁴² Coleridge, *The Statesman's Manual* (1816), *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, Bart Keith Winer, L. Patton, P. Mann, D.V. Erdman, B.E. Rooke, R.A. Foakes, R.J. White, James Engell, Walter Jackson Bate, John Beer, J. Colmer, H.J. Jackson, J.R.de J. Jackson, G. Whalley, C. Woodring, Thomas McFarland and J.C.C. Mays, 16 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969-2002), vi, pp.3-114, p.23.

⁴³ William Blake, *Jerusalem The Emanation of The Giant Albion*, Copy E (1821), pl.77, l.39. Copies and order of plates follow *The Blake Archive*, ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi, 1996, <<http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/>>, throughout. Citations are from Copy A of each Illuminated Book, unless otherwise stated.

⁴⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences* (1881), ed. Charles Eliot Norton (London: Dent, 1972), p.153.

⁴⁵ Crabb Robinson, Diary (24 December 1825) and letter to Quillinan (10 August 1848), *Blake Records*, p.430, 313.

⁴⁶ Crabb Robinson, letter to Dorothy Wordsworth (19 February 1826), *ibid*, p.438.

are similarly concerned, after all, with the problem of how a work goes about “assimilating”⁴⁷ “Too much” linguistically or culturally: “As we say of bombs that they overkill, we can say of literature that it overmeans”⁴⁸, Paul de Man avers. Despite McGann’s assertion that “A socio-historical method...helps to expose” strains without “deconstructing the actual works themselves”⁴⁹, there is a distinctly Deconstructionist rhetoric to *The Romantic Ideology*’s outlining of “the tensions and contradictions which typify Romantic poems”(136), in which the “greatest moments of artistic success are almost always those associated with loss, failure, and defeat”(132). McGann’s belief that “the realm of the ideal is always observed as precarious – liable to vanish or move beyond one’s reach at any time”(72) is echoed in de Man’s practical concern with how a text might “frame a question or undo assertions” through “structures that play off the rhetorical against grammatical elements”⁵⁰. But both theoretical positions threaten to excessively “reduce” – to recall Shelley’s term – the sources, motivations and nature of a work’s tensions, being both too narrow and too general in locating such tensions specifically in the text or its context. McGann makes “Too much” and not “Enough” of a claim for Romantic literature when arguing that “all...specialized studies” of a work’s formal properties “must find their *raison d’être* in the socio-historical background”⁵¹, rather than in the mind of an individual author. There is also “Too much” defeatism in McGann’s stance that Romantic texts operate solely by “evasion”(82) of troubling contemporary events, and in the Deconstructionist belief that all texts merely offer an allegory of their inherent indecipherability, as stated by J. Hillis Miller: “Deconstruction

⁴⁷ Shelley, ‘A Defence of Poetry’, *Shelley’s Prose*, p.293.

⁴⁸ Paul de Man, ‘Roland Barthes and the Limits of Structuralism’(1990), *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. E.S. Burt, Kevin Newmark and Andrzej Warminski (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp.164-77, p.171.

⁴⁹ Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p.1.

⁵⁰ de Man, in Robert Moynihan, *A Recent Imagining: Interviews with Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, Paul De Man, J. Hillis Miller* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1986), p.156.

⁵¹ McGann, *Romantic Ideology*, p.3.

is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself⁵².

The present study claims both more and less than these respective theories: it aims to move beyond their reductive ideological and lexical prisms by restoring the focus of critical attention to the author and their primary dilemma of how to write, considering the particular difficulties Wordsworth, Coleridge, De Quincey and Blake faced when they tried to write well. This obviously involves an awareness of the dual antagonisms in what Blake terms “the stubborn structure of the Language”⁵³ and the anxiety voiced by Wordsworth that history contains “something that enslaves the Fancy”⁵⁴, but only in so far as these pressures intensify rather than determine innate anxieties about formal expression shared by these four writers, and elucidated through close reading. Coleridge declared in his Notebook that “all Consciousness is necessarily conditioned by Self-consciousness”⁵⁵, and it is this fundamental – even pathological – “Self-consciousness”, habitually played out in formal self-reflexivity, that unites the writers under discussion. The exertion of imagination is always bound up with the exertion of its expression and reception for Romantics, who paradoxically share a constant uncertainty about how to articulate what they conceive as their uniquely elevated minds. The thrust of this study lies in an interpretative plurality generated by the fragile, pivoting potential of composition – the sense that an author can veer dramatically and problematically between not “Enough” and “Too much”, between explanation and obfuscation, imaginative abandon and critical evaluation, optimism and resignation, constructive and

⁵² J. Hillis Miller, ‘Stevens’ Rock and Criticism as Cure’, *Georgia Review*, 30 (1976), pp.5-31, p. 34.

⁵³ Blake, *Jerusalem*, 40.59.

⁵⁴ Letter to Richard Sharp (19 April 1822), *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, rev. Chester L. Shaver, Mary Trevelyan Moorman and Alan G. Hill, 8 vols. (2nd ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967-1993), iv.119.

⁵⁵ Coleridge (September 1820), *Notebooks*, iv.4717.

deconstructive impulses, historically-inflected and psychologically-ingrained thought, in the materialisation of vision.

My thesis organises Wordsworth, Coleridge, De Quincey and Blake alone and in pairs across four chapters that each examine a particular form of textual excess – prose ballasting of poetry, prose prolixity, revision and illustration – considering relevant aspects of cultural and social expansion that these writers explicitly comment on. The first chapter explores the precarious position and function of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s copious prose adjuncts to poetry, such as prefaces, “Supplementary” essays, appendices, notes and marginalia. There are manifold tensions produced between poetry as immediate experience and prose as a retrospective systematising or codifying of the pair’s aesthetics – what James Chandler describes as “the ironies inherent in the idea of an intellectual campaign against the very idea of an intellectual campaign”⁵⁶. The most crucial irony is a reliance on prose to assert the value of universally accessible and comprehensive poetry employing “language really used by men”⁵⁷, the novelty of which is precisely that, without over-adornment, it can ‘speak for itself’. The prose/poetry duality is probed through the larger framing concept of *balance* in the operations of the mind, of literary form, and of social behaviours, with a particular emphasis on Malthus’ concerns about unchecked growth in population and intellectual ambition. The idea of prose as offering a necessary, clarificatory resistance to poetry contends with Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s convoluted prose style and the increased possibilities for contradiction once they divide themselves across two media, overflowing into “abstruser musings”⁵⁸. I address both writers’ ambivalence towards the professed aim of accessibility while cultivating a worthy audience amidst an increasingly literate

⁵⁶ James K. Chandler, *Wordsworth’s Second Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.xviii.

⁵⁷ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), *Major Works*, pp.595-615, p.596-7.

⁵⁸ Coleridge, ‘Frost at Midnight’ (1798), l.6. Text of Coleridge’s poems follows *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works*, ed. H.J. Jackson (1985; repr. Oxford, 2000) throughout, unless otherwise stated.

readership, which becomes a source of strained divergence between the pair as they weigh up the uncontrollable dangers and strategic advantages of saying “Too much”.

The second chapter deals with De Quincey’s inheritance of his poetic idols’ desire for limitless intellectual-imaginative scope, and his aim to find a fittingly capacious home for it in prose. De Quincey’s writing is characterised by syntactical excess, an excited and agitated accumulation of clauses which frequently overbalance into incoherence. Carlyle deems him “A bright, ready and melodious talker; but in the end...inconclusive and long-winded”⁵⁹, and it is the precarious potential of his sentences to extend with Sublime power or verbose diffuseness that both fascinates and repels readers, who struggle to discern the essential from the extraneous content. I argue that the drama of De Quincey’s style lies in his fluctuating awareness and obliviousness, acceptance and rejection, of the fact that if one’s writing ranges too far it creates an unsympathetic reader who will not attend closely “Enough” to the distinctive modulations of the author’s ‘voice’ and mind. This unstable attitude to his and others’ overwriting is evidenced in the tonal swerves from self-reflexive humour to pathos-laden apology that can occur throughout one vast sentence. The chapter considers the rapidly-expanding industrialised city as an important locus and impetus for De Quincey’s intellectual ambitions and fears, providing the ‘natural’ urban and urbane environment for the periodical to flourish, yet also exemplifying the confused chaos of uncontrolled growth. Moving from literal to figurative labyrinths, I also examine the architecture of De Quincey’s twisting, mazy prose through his own visual metaphor of Giovanni Battista Piranesi’s *Carceri D’Invenzione* (1761) offered in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*: as a structure built on the principle of “Too much”, the labyrinth of a sentence or a periodical article takes us everywhere and nowhere at once.

⁵⁹ Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, p.152.

Chapter Three compares Wordsworth and De Quincey in relation to their equally fraught “experience and idea” of revision, as the issue of “Enough! or Too much” becomes temporal and not just spatial. Arguing for greater recognition of De Quincey’s significant contribution to Romantic literature, Margaret Russett states that because “majority and minority are mutually constitutive categories...the minor *articulates* the major canon”⁶⁰, and there are many illuminating overlappings between De Quincey and Wordsworth as they try to build a substantial place for themselves in literary posterity. Drawing parallels between the development of the *Prelude* over fifty years and the major reworking of ‘Confessions’ in 1856, as well as never-realised projects *The Recluse* and *De Humani Intellectus*, this chapter investigates how revision for both writers involved expansion and profusion of thought and feeling rather than greater concision or concentration. Wordsworth and De Quincey are invested in the fluid process rather than fixed product of revision as ideally enacting the mind’s limitless advance; Stephen Gill’s comment that “Wordsworth could not bear the idea of finality”⁶¹ resonates with De Quincey’s perpetual emphasis on the “endless growth” and “aspiring labors”⁶² he saw in Piranesi’s *Carceri*. But process as abstract principle contends with pragmatic worries about how the “finality” of a finished (body of) work leaves one open to definitive critical judgement. The chapter explores the pair’s ambivalent attitudes to their disordered working practices as they encounter the problem of having “Too much” time on one’s hands to rethink and revise.

The final chapter departs from the thesis’ broadly chronological structure, returning to the first major Romantic, William Blake, to offer a dramatically contrasting type and conception of textual excess as wholly deliberate, determined and productive

⁶⁰ Margaret Russett, *De Quincey’s Romanticism: Canonical Minority and the Forms of Transmission* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), p.4-5.

⁶¹ Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p.191.

⁶² De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ II, *Works*, ii.68.

about the hermeneutic indeterminacy it creates. Through a confrontational deployment of word and image, in which neither satisfactorily explicates the other, Blake anticipates and resolves the dilemmas of ‘too muchness’ that impede, perturb and often thwart Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey. His Illuminated Books bombard the reader with conflicting, ambiguous and constantly variable ‘interactions’ between and within their verbal and visual content, not only on the single copperplate but across the course of a book, and across all his prophetic books. The purpose is to prevent passive ‘mechanical’ reading: the ambivalence and uncertainty that allow him to mean any and many things forces the reader to determine their own interpretive priorities, inculcating the imaginative and intellectual autonomy necessary to avoid enslavement to reductive systems of thought. It is an excess that unrepentantly estranges the reader in order to aid their own visionary capacity, testing how much the eye will see, and who will see what.

Blake’s foundational principle that “Without Contraries is no progression”⁶³ enables him to accept – and furthermore embrace – the oscillating tensions and self-division of authorial “Self-consciousness” that so troubles his successors. While Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey anxiously experiment with ways to shore up their author-ity, self-negation is Blake’s *modus operandi*: he exploits the ways in which his material medium works against him to depict his personal mythology without didactically indoctrinating the reader. Blake’s forthright, unapologetic distinction between the “wise man” and the “fool”⁶⁴ openly addresses the latent preoccupation Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey have with cultivating a discerning, sympathetic and trustworthy audience. It is this uncertainty about the intellectual and imaginative capacity of one’s reader, after all, that provokes the question of what is “Enough”, and what is “Too much”, to handle.

⁶³ Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy B (1790), 3.7.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 7.13.

CHAPTER ONE

“The excess, by which the balance is destroyed”(*The Excursion*): The Fragile Balance of Prose and Poetry in Wordsworth and Coleridge

I

“the Flux and Reflux of my Mind within itself”(*The Friend*): The Ambivalence of Balance

In the *Prelude* Wordsworth lauds “The perfect image of a mighty mind, / Of one that feeds upon infinity”¹; its intricate workings are idealistically, if a little abstrusely, described by Coleridge as “An endless activity of Thought, in all the possible associations of Thought with Thought, Thought with Feelings, or with words, or of Feelings with Feelings, & words with words”². In seeking to comprehend the “inexhaustible treasure” of “the world before us”³, Wordsworth and Coleridge share a desire for “infinite” imaginative and intellectual insight, piling words on thoughts on feelings. This infinitude is a, or perhaps *the*, basic condition of Romantic ‘Genius’: “The *rules* of the IMAGINATION are themselves the very powers of growth and production”⁴, Coleridge tells us in *Biographia Literaria* (1817). Endless “growth and production” requires the kind of “capacious mind”⁵ possessed by *The Excursion*’s Solitary; indeed, according to Dorothy Wordsworth, her brother lived up to this ideal when composing that very poem: “His faculties seem to expand every day...his ideas flow faster than he can express

¹ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1805), XIII.69-70. Text follows *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979) throughout.

² Coleridge (1808/11), *Notebooks*, iii.3246.

³ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (1817), ed. Walter Jackson Bate and James Engell, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), ii.7.

⁴ *Ibid*, ii.84.

⁵ Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, II.53.

them”⁶. Coleridge had a similar faith in the exponential capacity of his friend and colleague, praising the expansive properties of Wordsworth’s words, which “always *mean* the whole of their possible Meaning”⁷. W.J.B. Owen’s analysis of the eighth Book of the *Prelude*, in which “Love of Nature” leads to “Love of Mankind”, provides a useful general commentary on both Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s thinking about thinking: “the mind grows by being stretched...to the measure of those things which have capaciousness, amplitude, power”⁸.

But such limitless “growth” of intellect, imagination and ambition stands in tension with a vociferous commitment to the aesthetic and moral principle of balance. *Biographia* offers a comprehensive explanation of the imagination, when effectively harnessed in poetry, as a series of counterpointed impulses and effects:

...the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement...⁹

The prose and poetry of both Coleridge and Wordsworth repeatedly express the hope of harmonious reciprocity – “reconciliation” – between physical and human nature, God and man, reason and feeling, individual and collective experience, the artist and critic, parts and wholes, and the mind that half-creates and half-perceives¹⁰. Coleridge’s dissecting definition of the imagination as a sequence of antitheses itself enacts his overarching belief that the poet “in *ideal* perfection...diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and...*fuses*, each into each” by the imagination’s “synthetic and magical power”(ibid): he

⁶ Dorothy Wordsworth to Mary Hutchinson (5 March 1798), *Letters*, i.200.

⁷ Coleridge to Robert Southey (14 August 1803), *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E.L. Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-1971), ii.977.

⁸ W.J.B. Owen, *Wordsworth as Critic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), p.214.

⁹ Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.16-17.

¹⁰ Wordsworth, ‘Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey’(1798), l.107-8.

compartmentalises in order to reassemble. This tenet echoes Wordsworth's 'Preface' to *Poems* (1815), in which he describes the imagination's "innumerable processes" for creating as well as "modifying" objects in the "mighty mind", especially "consolidating numbers into unity, and dissolving and separating unity into number, – alternations proceeding from, and governed by, a sublime consciousness of the soul in her own mighty and almost divine powers"¹¹. Coleridge repeatedly expresses a theory of positive opposition – or "alternation" – in his prose, arguing in the *Notebooks* that "The Dyad is the essential form of Unity"¹² and "Unity is manifested by Opposites. But it is equally true, that all true Opposites tend to Unity"¹³. Likewise in *The Friend* he describes "the universal law of Polarity or essential Dualism", pronouncing that "EVERY POWER IN NATURE AND IN SPIRIT must evolve an opposite, as the sole means and condition of its manifestation: AND ALL OPPOSITION IS A TENDENCY TO RE-UNION"¹⁴. Because "Art is the imitatrix of Nature" and "in all Imitation two elements must exist...Likeness and unlikeness, or Sameness and Difference", art involves "the union of Disparate Things"¹⁵; thus Coleridge's literary efforts are implicated in his philosophy that "every living object in nature exists as the reconciliation of contradictions, by the law of Balance"¹⁶.

Although Wordsworth does not systematise the notion of co-operative opposites to Coleridge's extent, many of his aesthetic pronouncements revolve around the principle of balance – most famously the description of poetry in the *Lyrical Ballads* 'Preface' as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" that "takes its origins from emotion

¹¹ Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Poems* (1815), *Prose Works*, iii, pp.23-39, p.33.

¹² Coleridge (1821), *Notebooks*, iv.4830.

¹³ Ibid (April 1819), *ibid*, iv.4513.

¹⁴ Coleridge, *The Friend* (1818), *Collected Works*, iv(i).94n.

¹⁵ Coleridge (March 1818), *Notebooks*, iii.4397.

¹⁶ Coleridge, Notes to *Lectures on European Drama*, Lecture 4 (26 May 1812), *Collected Works*, v(i).447.

recollected in tranquillity”¹⁷. Paralleling Coleridge’s formulation above of “a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order” born of “enthusiasm” and “judgement”, Wordsworth’s model poet is “a man who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility had also thought long and deeply”¹⁸. Coleridge believed Wordsworth fulfilled this ideal, adopting the latter’s description of imaginative “modifying” to note “the union of deep feeling with profound thought; the fine balance of truth in observing, with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed”¹⁹. Matthew Arnold turns to the issue of formal expression in his similar praise for Wordsworth’s “successful balance” of “profound truth of subject with profound truth of execution”²⁰. The predominant hope for a writer is that thought and form – “subject” and “execution” – will mutually support each other, exemplifying the ultimate equilibrium of “experience and idea” (to recall Robert Langbaum). As Coleridge attests, the “Ideal of earnest Poetry” is “where the Perfection of Form is an outward Symbol of inward Perfection”²¹. This leads to the kind of critical appreciation articulated by John Purkis, who comments on the diction of ‘Stepping Westward’(1807): “The total impression is a nice balance between the colloquial, which might have led to bathos, and an overpolished style which would not have been appropriate to the subject”²². Coleridge attributes metre, meanwhile, to “the balance in the mind effected by that spontaneous effort which strives to hold in check the workings of passion”²³, reiterating Wordsworth’s discussion of metre seventeen years earlier as a “co-presence of something regular” that prevents the “excitement” of “images and feelings” being “carried beyond its proper bounds”²⁴.

¹⁷ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1800), *Prose Works*, i.126, 148.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.126.

¹⁹ Coleridge, *Biographia*, i.80.

²⁰ Matthew Arnold, *Poems of Wordsworth* (London, 1879), p.xxiv.

²¹ Coleridge, *Notes to Lectures on European Drama*, Lecture 4 (29 May 1812), *Collected Works*, v(i).457.

²² John Purkis, *A Preface to Wordsworth* (2nd ed., London, 1986), p.124.

²³ Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.64.

²⁴ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1800), *Prose Works*, i.146.

However, the concern that each writer “strives to hold” enthusiasm “in check” so that it will not be “carried beyond its proper bounds” alerts us to numerous strains within the idea of balance, not least its necessitating a self-regulation that runs contrary to the ideal of an “infinite mind” exponentially accumulating and assimilating ever more information. Balance relies on the sense of encapsulating a ‘whole’ by acknowledging its constituent parts, yet there can be no understanding of the ‘whole’ if one’s mental expansion is “infinite”. This is the fundamental tension of literary form, which simultaneously expresses and constrains limitless imagination. Pondering if books are “the only channel through which the stream of intellectual usefulness can flow”, Coleridge in *Biographia* questions whether they “diffuse or...contain” streaming “truth”²⁵. Using the same imagery, the first of Wordsworth’s ‘Essays Upon Epitaphs’(1810) hints at this conflict in its self-reflexive meditation on the destination of flowing water:

Never did a child stand by the side of a running stream, pondering within himself what power was the feeder of the perpetual current, from what never-wearied sources the body of water was supplied, but he must have been inevitably propelled to follow this question by another: “Towards what abyss is it in progress? what receptacle can contain the mighty influx?”...the *spirit* of the answer must have been as inevitably, a receptacle without bounds or dimensions; nothing less than infinity.²⁶

Wordsworth’s metaphor of the “running stream...perpetual current” echoes Coleridge’s observation in his Notebook that “Truth is compared in scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in perpetual progression, they stagnate into a muddy pool of conformity & tradition”²⁷ – the “mighty mind” is a “mighty influx” always on the move. The ocean-“abyss” “without bounds or dimensions” recalls the native woman’s “greeting”

²⁵ Coleridge, *Biographia*, i.220.

²⁶ Wordsworth, ‘Essays Upon Epitaphs’ I (1810), *Prose Works*, ii, pp.49-62, p.51.

²⁷ Coleridge (1796), *Notebooks*, i.111.

in the poem ‘Stepping Westward’(1807) as “a sound / Of something without place or bound”(l.13-14). Its echoes fuel Wordsworth’s “travelling through the world that lay / Before me in my endless way”(l.25-26) – possibly leading to the “immortal sea / Which brought us hither”(l.166-7) and which “Our Souls have sight of”(l.166) perpetually in the ‘Intimations Ode’(1807). Such is the ideal of “endless”, “immortal” and “never-wearied” roaming, in which “The objects of the Poet’s thoughts are every where”²⁸.

But in ‘Essays Upon Epitaphs’ the infinite “*spirit*” of the answer comes up against the inevitable limitation of the physical “receptacle” that holds, moulds and delimits; “bounds” and “dimensions” are necessarily invoked in their ostensible denial. And even a “receptacle” as vast as the ocean has boundaries that provide a stopping-place of sorts to the flow of Wordsworth’s thought. Discussing religion in the 1815 *Poems*’ ‘Essay, Supplementary to the Preface’, he states that there is no effective “commerce” between man and God without “a process where much is represented in little, and the Infinite Being accommodates himself to a finite capacity”²⁹; hence the “burthen” of divine “indefinite objects” is placed on “words and symbols”(ibid). Furthermore, there is an “affinity” between the representations of religion – “whose element is infinitude...submitting herself to circumscription, and reconciled to substitutions” – and “ethereal and transcendent” poetry that is nevertheless “incapable to sustain her existence without sensuous incarnation”(ibid). Coleridge similarly deems religion “the poetry of all mankind”³⁰, and for all his aversion to stagnating stasis pronounces that he “cannot write without a *body of thought*”³¹, like Wordsworth’s “body of water”. The latter’s ‘Prefatory Sonnet’ in *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807) celebrates being “bound / Within the Sonnet’s scanty plot of ground”(l.10-11) as a “pastime”(l.10) rather than a “prison”(l.8) for those

²⁸ Wordsworth (1802), *Major Works*, p.606.

²⁹ Wordsworth, ‘Essay, Supplementary to the Preface’, *Poems* (1815), *Prose Works*, iii, pp.55-84, p.65.

³⁰ Report on Coleridge’s *Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton in Illustration of the Principles of Poetry*, Lecture 8 (*Morning Chronicle*, 13 December 1811), *Collected Works*, v(i).336.

³¹ Coleridge to Southey (11 December 1794), *Collected Letters*, i.137.

“Who have felt the weight of too much liberty”(l.13). Eleven years earlier Coleridge’s prose ‘Introduction’ to the ‘Sonnets’ in *Poems on Various Subjects* (1796) similarly emphasised that the sonnet form enables “the reader’s mind...[to] rest satisfied” because it is “limited to a *particular* number of lines...so the poem may acquire, as it were, a *Totality*...may become a *Whole*”³².

Both poets, then, exhibit ambivalent conceptions of and attitudes towards form as inspiring “infinity” and encapsulating “*Totality*”, the writer striving to be “without bounds” and “bound / Within”, always “running” towards a place of “rest”. In another sway of thought, Coleridge in 1802 appears suspicious of the kind of ‘wholeness’ he praised in the sonnet, arguing that “*Outline* imprisons the mind of the Artist within the first conception”³³. Echoing the tension between the “current” and the “receptacle” in ‘Epitaphs’, Coleridge’s ‘On Poesy or Art’ proposes a “difference between form as proceeding” organically and “shape as superinduced” artificially, the latter being “the death or imprisonment”³⁴ of that which it contains. An 1807 Notebook entry configures language in these terms: “O what then are Words, but articulated Sighs of a Prisoner heard from his Dungeon! powerful only as they express their utter impotence!”³⁵. His (self-) accusatory questioning – “what are Words but air?...O who has deeply felt...the inadequacy of the symbol to the Being?”(ibid) – anticipates Wordsworth’s lamenting the “sad incompetence of human speech”³⁶ and declaring that “Language, if it do not uphold...is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve”³⁷. In the ‘Essay, Supplementary’ Wordsworth acknowledges that attempts at “sensuous incarnation” through poetry carry the potential

³² Coleridge, ‘Introduction’ to ‘Sonnets’, *Poems on Various Subjects* (2nd ed., London, 1797), p.71.

³³ Coleridge (December 1802), *Notebooks*, i.1320.

³⁴ Coleridge, ‘On Poesy or Art’(1818), in *Biographia Literaria*, ed. John Shawcross (London: Clarendon Press, 1907), ii, pp.253-63, p.262.

³⁵ Coleridge (February 1807), *Notebooks*, ii.2998.

³⁶ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), VI.593.

³⁷ Wordsworth, ‘Essays Upon Epitaphs’ III (1810), *Prose Works*, ii, pp.80-96, p.85.

for “kindred error” and “distortion”³⁸. John Jones states of Wordsworth that “no poet has ever complained so much about the medium of his art”³⁹, but Coleridge probably ran him close. While Wordsworth presents language as possessing an overbearingly “awful...dominion over thoughts” so that they “cannot...assume an outward life without a transmutation and a fall”⁴⁰, Coleridge condemns words as “the meanness of Matter...at once the Link & the Wall of Separation” between a man’s mind and “Soul”⁴¹.

Thus there are oppositional implications in this idea of linguistic and formal inadequacy: in one sense words and their arrangement do “Too much” – contorting, constraining and even ‘imprisoning’ the “mighty mind” – yet in another they do not do “Enough” to sufficiently contain the “mighty influx”, threatening to give way under the weight of profuse and profound subjects. So Coleridge writes, “my *Poetry* is crowded and sweats beneath a heavy burthen of Ideas and Imagery”⁴². Because there is no formal “receptacle” spacious enough to reflect “my own mind so populous, so active, so full of noble schemes” – conceived as “the deep reservoir into which all these streams & currents...flow”⁴³ – such “streams” instead become a “fiendish crowd / Of shapes and thoughts that tortured me”⁴⁴. Thus there is a further pivoting uncertainty about whether language and form are inherently limiting, or subject to barely-sustainable strain by an undisciplined or over-cautious writer. Considering the culpability of the messenger rather than the medium, Coleridge remarks in *The Friend* on the ease with which extremes of “excitement” and reason disrupt the balance of “subject” and “execution”: “exuberance of mind, on the one hand, interferes with the *forms* of Method; but sterility of mind, on the

³⁸ Wordsworth, ‘Essay, Supplementary’, *ibid.*, iii.66.

³⁹ John Jones, *The Egotistical Sublime: A History of Wordsworth’s Imagination* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954), p.65.

⁴⁰ Wordsworth, ‘Epitaphs’ III, *Prose Works*, ii.85.

⁴¹ Coleridge (February 1807), *Notebooks*, ii.2998.

⁴² Coleridge to Southey (11 December 1794), *Collected Letters*, i.137.

⁴³ Coleridge (19 October 1803), *Notebooks*, i.1577.

⁴⁴ Coleridge, ‘The Pains of Sleep’ (1817), i.16-17.

other, wanting the spring and impulse of mental action, is wholly destructive of Method”⁴⁵. “POETIC GENIUS” being “a very delicate...plant”⁴⁶, there is a tentative equilibrium to be struck between the writer’s “attending too exclusively to...the moods of his own Thought” so that he is “in danger of overlooking...[the] sympathies of his hearers”, and becoming an overenthusiastic “unreflecting talker” who “overlooks *all* mental relations, both logical and psychological” and thereby “precludes all Method, that is not purely accidental”(ibid). The ideal writer expresses the “accidental” nature of imaginative inspiration and the “noble schemes” of a measured intellect, as well as balancing the inward-focus on ‘Moods of my own Mind’⁴⁷ with an external concern about relating to one’s reader. Hence Purkis’ emphasis on Wordsworth’s oral composition, instructing that his work should be “read aloud, in a quiet meditative manner, as if we were listening to a man trying hard to clarify his own thoughts about a difficult topic and at the same time explaining it to somebody else”⁴⁸. But for Wordsworth and Coleridge there is arguably more fraught *wavering* than stable balancing as they contend with the stymieing and propulsive effects of literary form to both emote and explain. This is evidenced particularly in the strain between poetry and prose.

Roger Sharrock notes Wordsworth’s “radical pessimism about poetry’s capacity for recording experience”⁴⁹, and it is the quest to increase this “capacity” that leads both Wordsworth and Coleridge to employ prose as a means of conveying the immensity and intensity of their visionary import. “Our intellectual soul”⁵⁰ can be expressed literally far and wide in prefaces, notes, footnotes, endnotes, adverts, appendices, marginalia and essays, extending into the gutter of a page and across every page of a book; in this most

⁴⁵ Coleridge, *The Friend*, Section the Second, Essay III, *Collected Works*, iv(i), pp.436-47, p.454.

⁴⁶ Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.132.

⁴⁷ Category in Wordsworth’s *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807).

⁴⁸ Purkis, *Preface to Wordsworth*, p.139.

⁴⁹ Roger Sharrock, ‘Wordsworth’s Revolt Against Literature’, *Essays in Criticism*, III (1953), pp.396-412, p.397.

⁵⁰ Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, IV.1271.

material of senses, “the Poet’s thoughts are every where” and his writing “allows...for an endless rippling onwards, inwards and outwards”⁵¹, as Michael O’Neill states of Wordsworth. Gérard Genette’s definition of ‘paratext’ is useful for considering the prose/poetry alignment and disjunction in Wordsworth and Coleridge, distinguishing the primary imaginative body of an author’s work (the ‘text’) from all other types of discourse that “surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it”⁵² to the public. This ranges from bibliographic practicalities like titles and headings, to more substantial thematic support like prefaces and appendices. Letters to Nathaniel Biggs and Joseph Cottle, the publishers of *Lyrical Ballads*, when Wordsworth and Coleridge were preparing the revised 1800 edition reveal a meticulous attention to paratextual detail and the division of poems. On 13 August Wordsworth asks Biggs to “take particular care” that ‘Ruth’ is “printed with a separate Title page”⁵³ and a month later stipulates, in Coleridge’s hand, that “The poems beginning at ‘It was an April Morning’ are to have a separate Title page and advertisement”⁵⁴. Having viewed a proof, Wordsworth on 18 December stated that he did “not exactly like the Title-page” and “must...particularly request that my name be printed in a smaller character”, before addressing his previous “intention to prefix an Essay on the 2nd volume” which he now “must decline”⁵⁵. He added a postscript that it was his “*particular desire* that no advertisements of Books be printed at the end of the volume”(ibid), suggesting he had the ability to influence the total effect of his writing as a book and not just a ‘text’.

Attempting to broadly theorise the relationship between prose and poetry, the *Lyrical Ballads* ‘Preface’ conflates them rhetorically, positing that “some of the most

⁵¹ O’Neill, *Self-Conscious Poem*, p.xviii.

⁵² Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), p.1.

⁵³ Wordsworth to Biggs and Cottle (13 August 1800), *Letters*, i.292.

⁵⁴ Ibid (15 October 1800), ibid, i.305.

⁵⁵ Ibid (18 December 1800), ibid, p.307-8.

interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well written”⁵⁶, before more boldly asserting, “there neither is nor can be any essential difference”(134) between the language of the two. The ‘Preface’ even refers to the ballads as “short essays”(126), intimating the vast reach of every word’s “possible Meaning” that Coleridge praised in Wordsworth. But this phrase also insinuates that “essays” have a greater formal “capacity” than poems, and that the latter are valuable in so far as they possess properties of the former. Here is a small sign of a much larger tension that, when it comes to the practicalities of paratext, there is a curious co-dependence of prose and poetry that involves each element constantly referring and deferring to the other, distinguishing rather than merging their purposes and effects. Thus we are presented with the somewhat bathetic ‘Note’ to ‘The Thorn’, added to the revised *Ballads*, that apologises for the insufficiency of the poem, which “ought to have been preceded by an introductory Poem, which I have been prevented from writing by never having felt myself in a mood when it was probable that I should write it well”⁵⁷. Instead Wordsworth is in the “mood” for a less formal prose substitute that is ostensibly meant to mediate the inadequate voice of the poem’s narrator, but then must ludicrously justify – and apologise for – itself: “The Reader will have the kindness to excuse this note as I am sensible that an introductory Poem is necessary to give this Poem its full effect”(ibid). The reader is therefore openly denied the poem’s “full effect”, even as Wordsworth complains that it has been misinterpreted. Similarly, the ‘Preface’ to *The Excursion* emphasises the poem’s ancillary role in relation to the larger projected epic, *The Recluse*, but ends by tentatively suggesting the best summation of the planned work will be found in a section of poetry “taken from the conclusion of the first book of *The Recluse*”, which “may be acceptable as

⁵⁶ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1800), *Prose Works*, i.132.

⁵⁷ Wordsworth, ‘Note’ to ‘The Thorn’(1800), *Major Works*, pp.593-4, p.593.

a kind of *Prospectus* of the design and scope of the whole Poem”⁵⁸. Contemplating a definitive posthumous edition of his work in November 1847, Wordsworth views the socio-biographical context provided by paratext as integral to the interpretation – or “total” effect – of the poems. He requests his nephew Christopher Wordsworth “prepare for publication any notices of my life that may be deemed necessary to illustrate my writings”, clarifying that they will be “attached”⁵⁹ rather than forming the separate body of notes dictated to Isabella Fenwick in 1843.

This interdependence and distinctness of poetry and prose for Wordsworth resonates with Coleridge’s ideology of reciprocally illuminating parts and wholes – “‘Tis the sublime of man”, we are told in ‘Religious Musings’(1794), “to know ourselves / Parts and proportions of one wondrous whole!”(l.126-8). Thirty-one years later Coleridge reaffirms that “the Parts can be understood aright, only in relation to the Whole! Yet it is no less true, that the Whole must be understood in each part”, so that it does not become “an indistinction outlined by its own extent, like a shadow”⁶⁰. Coleridge argues that “Totality is Multitude participating of Unity”⁶¹, and the complex relationship between text and paratext is itself part of his “devotion to a totalising sublime”⁶² in which critical and imaginative perceptive powers are combined. As he writes to John Thelwall, “I seldom feel without thinking, or think without feeling...My philosophical opinions are blended with, or deduced from, my feelings”⁶³. In *Biographia* Coleridge argues for the “sameness, with difference” of poetry and prose by pointing out their shared “elements”⁶⁴ – “GOOD SENSE...the BODY of poetic genius, FANCY its DRAPERY, MOTION its LIFE, and

⁵⁸ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’ to *The Excursion* (1814), *Prose Works*, iii, pp.5-9, p.6.

⁵⁹ Wordsworth, ‘Autobiographical Memoranda dictated by William Wordsworth, P.L., at Rydal Mount’(November, 1847), *ibid*, iii, pp.371-5, p.369.

⁶⁰ Coleridge (May 1825), *Notebooks*, iv.5228.

⁶¹ *Ibid* (January 1811), *ibid*, iii.4047.

⁶² Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p.78.

⁶³ Coleridge to John Thelwall (17 December 1796), *Collected Letters*, i.279.

⁶⁴ Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.11.

IMAGINATION the SOUL”(18) – but asserting the different “combination” of those elements due to different aims: philosophical prose seeks “truth”, while poetry’s “*immediate* object” is “pleasure”(13). Coleridge claims that poetry is “opposed to works of science” and distinguished from “all other species” of composition by striving for a “delight from the *whole*” that is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*”(ibid). But framing and mediating paratext blurs this distinction by insinuating itself into the “*Totality*” not only of a collected volume of poems, but of individual poems themselves – most famously the ‘Preface’ to ‘Kubla Khan’ and the marginalia to ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ – so that we might consider critical or “philosophical prose” a “component *part*” of Coleridge’s poetry, especially in light of his pronouncement that “a work of art” is “the coalescence of the diverse”⁶⁵. Thus Wordsworth as a habit of practice and Coleridge as a point of principle exemplify the wider “dialogue between Romantic poetry and prose”⁶⁶ that Annette Wheeler Cafarelli argues is a vital characteristic of the movement.

However, this desire for mental expansion through formal variety creates a curious paradox that both writers are reliant on prose to help articulate the transcendent power of poetry as the best means of universal communication. Prose adjuncts offer more opportunities for exploring the experience, status and purpose of the poet and poetry, yet in doing so imply that prose compensates for poetry’s shortcomings. Thus Wordsworth’s pronouncement in the 1802 *Lyrical Ballads* ‘Preface’ that “Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge”⁶⁷ is inherently self-undermining: dependency on prose betrays an uncertainty about poetry’s expressiveness, and/or the poets’ ability to execute their medium effectively. As Coleridge warns regarding his own mingling of reason and

⁶⁵ Coleridge, ‘On Poesy or Art’, *Biographia* (1907), p.255, 257.

⁶⁶ Annette Wheeler Cafarelli, *Prose in the Age of Poets: Romanticism and Biographical Narrative from Johnson to De Quincey* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), p.151.

⁶⁷ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1802), *Major Works*, p.606.

feeling, “it is sometimes a beauty, and sometimes a fault”⁶⁸. The need for prose and belief in balance is propelled by the perpetual fear of *overbalancing* emotionally and stylistically within the formal limits of poetry – the “mighty mind that feeds upon infinity” might become “overcrowded” and proliferate out of the artist’s control. But this produces another anxious ambivalence that, in operating to hold the passions of poetry in check, prose creates more room for complex ideas to multiply and spill over into confusion. Thus time and again prefaces and notes in particular create more interpretative problems than they resolve by both failing in and *fulfilling* their dual intentions to cohere and expand the poems. Genette astutely observes that “paratext sometimes tends to go beyond its function and to turn itself into an impediment, from then on playing its own game to the detriment of its text’s game”⁶⁹. He specifically cites the preface as problematic because it offers “an advance commentary on a text the reader has not yet become familiar with”, and therefore “constitutes an unbalanced and even shaky situation of communication”(237). Wordsworth repeatedly reveals this fear of explanation toppling into abstruseness, whereby he says “Too much” and not “Enough” at once: the ‘Preface’ to *Poems* (1815) concludes apologetically, “When I sate down to write this Preface, it was my intention to have made it more comprehensive; but, thinking that I ought rather to apologise for detaining the reader so long, I will here conclude”⁷⁰. Similarly, in an 1800 letter to Longman and Rees he refers to an “introductory Essay” he had intended to prefix to the second volume but abandoned because “it required so many quotations to illustrate the argument, that the Essay must unavoidably be spun into so great a length as to render it utterly unfit for the Work”⁷¹. The pattern of excess resulting from constant insufficiency – explanations of explanations – was established in the *Ballads* ‘Preface’,

⁶⁸ Coleridge to Thelwall (17 December 1796), *Collected Letters*, i.279.

⁶⁹ Genette, *Paratexts*, p.410.

⁷⁰ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’, *Poems* (1815), *Prose Works*, iii.39.

⁷¹ Wordsworth to Longman and Rees (18 December 1800), *Letters*, i.309.

where Wordsworth concedes “adequately to display my opinions and fully to enforce my arguments would require a space wholly disproportionate to the nature of a preface”⁷². The ‘Preface’ tries to contain the ballad genre’s “excess of voice – feeling over the articulate word”⁷³ by placing it within an overarching socio-literary manifesto. Yet Coleridge criticises the ‘Preface’ for, ironically, paying “too exclusive attention” to the application of abstract theory to literary practice and thereby “[carrying] those truths beyond their proper limits”⁷⁴, echoing both Genette’s and Wordsworth’s warnings of paratext going “beyond its function” and a writer being “carried beyond” their “proper bounds”. In a perversion of the balance ideal, to Coleridge’s mind Wordsworth “suffered himself to express” his belief in unadorned poetic style “in terms at once too large and too exclusive”⁷⁵.

Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) provides an insightful summation of the “too large” and “too exclusive” aims that beset the investigative methodology of a philosophically-minded writer. Initially Burke argues for efficient compartmentalisation of “complex matter”: “we ought to examine every distinct ingredient in the composition, one by one; and reduce everything to the utmost simplicity” according to human nature’s “very narrow limits”⁷⁶. Yet later in the *Enquiry* he eschews the practice of “definition”, which is the implied end-point of “reducing” anything to its “utmost simplicity”: “For when we define, we seem in danger of circumscribing nature within the bounds of our own notions”, which are usually formed “out of a limited and partial consideration of the object before us”(197). Definitions prevent us from “extending our ideas to take in all that nature comprehends, according to her manner of combining”(ibid). Burke here anticipates the difficulties of

⁷² Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1800), *Prose Works*, i.120.

⁷³ Geoffrey Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (London: Methuen, 1987), p.99.

⁷⁴ Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.119.

⁷⁵ Ibid, ii.90.

⁷⁶ Burke, *Enquiry*, p.54.

“combining” – balancing or reconciling – “Multēity” and “Unity”⁷⁷, or what Coleridge in *Biographia* designates the “technical process of philosophy” to “intellectually separate” the “distinguishable parts” of an idea, and “the result of philosophy” to “restore” those parts to “the unity, in which they...co-exist”⁷⁸. Burke argues that once “we are able to...see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds” it can no longer “strike the mind with its greatness” because it cannot “make some sort of approach towards infinity”; consequently “A clear idea is...another name for a little idea”⁷⁹.

Hence the risk that, in seeking to rationalise and schematise one’s poetry through exploratory and explanatory paratext, one instead belittles the nebulous “greatness” of numinous inspiration and even descends into trivialising detail. Dorothy Wordsworth wrote to Mary Hutchinson about Coleridge’s comprehensiveness, “His conversation teems with soul, mind, and spirit...like William, [he] interests himself so much about every little trifle”⁸⁰. With not untypical ambivalence, Coleridge defends “hypercriticism” in his Notebook, averring “how little instructive any criticism can be which does not enter into minutiae”⁸¹; but in *Biographia* the second “defect” he attributes to Wordsworth is “a laborious minuteness and fidelity in the representation of objects”, symptomatic of a larger “anxiety of explanation and retrospect”⁸². In a letter to Joseph Cottle Coleridge criticised “microscopic acuteness” for rendering “great things...a blank”⁸³, supporting Burke’s opinion that “the judgment is for the greater part employed in throwing stumbling blocks in the way of the imagination, in dissipating the scenes of its enchantment, and in tying us down to the disagreeable yoke of our reason”⁸⁴. Burke’s imagery calls to mind

⁷⁷ Coleridge, ‘On the Principles of Genial Criticism Concerning the Fine Arts’ III (1814), *Collected Works*, xi(i), pp.366-86, p.372.

⁷⁸ Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.11.

⁷⁹ Burke, *Enquiry*, p.235.

⁸⁰ Dorothy Wordsworth to Mary Hutchinson (June 1797), *Letters*, i.188-9.

⁸¹ Coleridge (September 1810), *Notebooks*, iii.3970.

⁸² Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.126, 129.

⁸³ Coleridge to Joseph Cottle (6 January 1797), *Collected Letters*, i.354.

⁸⁴ Burke, *Enquiry*, p.207-8.

Wordsworth's famous lines in 'The Tables Turned'(1798): "Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things; / – We murder to dissect"(l.21-8). The addition of prefaces, appendices and notes that aim to extend the philosophical and spatial parameters of poetry while pulling disparate poems together might in fact "Mis-shape" their "beauteous forms" or diminish their elemental emotional force. Matthew Arnold would make the same point in relation to posthumous editions of Wordsworth, arguing in the 'Preface' to his own 1879 collection of the poems that editors should "clear away obstructions from around" Wordsworth's work "and let it speak for itself", so that "he will make his way best not by our advocacy of him, but by his own worth and power"⁸⁵. Paratextual prose might in fact be more of an obstacle than a route to greater accessibility for the reader, destabilising a text precisely when it intends to balance it out; Coleridge himself alerts us to the tension between "Contraries that preclude, and Opposites that reciprocally suppose and require, each...other"⁸⁶. This is the kind of tension Nicola Trott and Seamus Perry perceive in the *Lyrical Ballads* 'Preface', deeming it "one of the defining documents of British romanticism – even though (perhaps, especially because) its definitions are so contradictory and paradoxical"⁸⁷.

The contradiction and paradox of mentally and formally balancing infinity, or infinite balancing, is encapsulated in both writers' concept of "flux and reflux". In *The Friend* Coleridge talks of "all the Flux and Reflux of my Mind within itself"⁸⁸, a see-sawing movement he also attributes to Wordsworth, asserting that the 'Intimations Ode' "was intended for such readers only as had been accustomed to watch the flux and reflux of their inmost nature"⁸⁹. Wordsworth provides an explanation for the phrase in the revised *Ballads* 'Preface', describing how the poet "considers man and the objects that

⁸⁵ Arnold, *Poems of Wordsworth*, p.xiv.

⁸⁶ Coleridge (1816-17), *Notebooks*, iii.4326.

⁸⁷ Nicola Trott and Seamus Perry, *1800: The New Lyrical Ballads* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.2.

⁸⁸ Coleridge, *The Friend* I: 'Prospectus'(1 January 1809), *Collected Works*, iv(i).178.

⁸⁹ Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.147.

surround him as acting and re-acting upon each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure”⁹⁰. The “pain and pleasure” duality indicates how a fluxing and refluxing state of mind paradoxically offers both motion and paralysing stasis: infinite restriction. It keeps the poets and their readers constantly moving between – but never beyond – implied limits, emphasising divided loyalties rather than harmonious co-operation. As Coleridge pithily remarks in his Notebook, it is a “trite because ever-recurring Truth” that “Errors beget opposite Errors...it is our imperfect Nature to run into extremes”⁹¹. Regarding Wordsworth, W.J.B. Owen considers the “disunity” of the *Ballads* ‘Preface’, both “as a whole” and in “the inconsistencies between [its] two versions”, as “symptomatic” of how “for some years after 1798 Wordsworth’s theory and practice were in a state of flux: he could write poems objective and subjective, and theory mimetic and expressive”⁹². Owen argues that the ‘Preface’ is therefore not an “explanation of, but a commentary on, the growth of a poet’s mind”(ibid), though its literal proximity to the poetry and Wordsworth’s “shaky” convoluted style renders it more than a “commentary”: it is an *enactment* of the “flux and reflux” between artistic and critical, experiential and observational, selves.

Coleridge in his Notebook is aware of the kind of elusiveness – even evasiveness – of “flux” that Owen identifies, describing how the “fluidity” of music hints at and hunts after the “stable organisms of Mind” by “particularizing” yet maintaining the “Abstracts of Emotion and Passion”; with these contrary movements a musical piece is “a *fluxion*”, “never resting in any one expression long enough to...determine it as this or that”⁹³. While this indefinability is frustrating for the writer-as-critic and critical readers, for the writer-as-artist it can offer the energising potential of conflict. As Coleridge confesses, “I

⁹⁰ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1802), *Major Works*, i.605.

⁹¹ Coleridge (October 1803), *Notebooks*, i.1562.

⁹² W.J.B. Owen, *Wordsworth’s Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1957), p.109.

⁹³ Coleridge (28 October 1826), *Notebooks*, iv.5458.

have heaven knows! conflicts enough to exercise me”⁹⁴. Objecting to Charles Lamb’s charge that *The White Doe of Rylstone* (1815) is not dramatic enough, Wordsworth writes to Coleridge that Lamb should try being a “narrative Poet” rather than a “Dramatist”: “then let him see if there are no victories in the world of spirit, no changes, no commotions, no revolutions there, no fluxes and refluxes”, which are made all the more “interesting” in contrast to “the stiller actions of the bodily frame” or “the gentler movements and milder appearances of society” and “nature”⁹⁵. Coleridge’s philosophy repeatedly asserts the necessity of “Excitability and Resistance” – the “weight and counter-weight at the ends of a Lever”⁹⁶ – to generate mental “growth and production”. In 1803 he argues that “our consciousness of motion” arises from “the interruption of motion = the acting of the Soul resisted”, because motion is a “Synthesis” of “unlimited” space and the “resistance or limitation”⁹⁷ that is time. In 1805 he asserts that the soul is “unresisted action” and the body is where “action is resisted” and “limitation begins”; consequently “all body necessarily presupposes soul, inasmuch as all resistance presupposes action”⁹⁸. He abstracts his argument further to conclude that “In all limited things, that is, in all *forms*” action is “*stopped*”, but this creates an effect of “Magnitude”: “action and resistance to action...spaciousness in which Space is filled up”(ibid). In *The Statesman’s Manual* he similarly avers that “the natural man is always in a state either of resistance or of capacity to the understanding and the fancy, which cannot represent totality without limit”⁹⁹. “Flux and reflux” – including that between poetry and paratext – involves encountering resistance and pushing against it, overfilling limited space in a way that can both invigorate and endanger a work. O’Neill sees in Coleridge’s poems “a

⁹⁴ Coleridge (May 1825), *Notebooks*, iv.5228.

⁹⁵ Wordsworth to Coleridge (19 April 1808), *Letters*, ii.222-3.

⁹⁶ Coleridge (January-August 1825), *Notebooks*, iv.5188.

⁹⁷ Ibid (30 December 1803), ibid, i.1771.

⁹⁸ Ibid (January 1805), ibid, ii.2402.

⁹⁹ Coleridge, Appendix C, *The Statesman’s Manual*, *Collected Works*, vi, pp.39-93, p.60.

capacity to endure and live with discord”¹⁰⁰, a point both reinforced and undermined by recourse to supplementary prose – an outlet that raises the question of whether a *reader* has the “capacity to endure” authorial discord.

II

“there is a limit to improvement, though we do not exactly know where it is”(On the Principle of Population): Malthus and the Difficulty of Determining One’s Limits

Tracing the history and seeking the origin of the mind’s “capacity” for “flux and reflux” in its forms of expression, one is led to an age preoccupied with “powers of growth and production”, to recall Coleridge’s definition of ‘Genius’. Paralleling the poets’ hope for intellectual and imaginative limitlessness, the turn of the nineteenth century found a nation experiencing unprecedented social and economic development, driven by industry’s “boundless ambition”¹⁰¹ and the relentless demands for labour that resulted from and fuelled a rapidly-increasing population. Massimo Livi-Bacci records how, as “the result of a rapid accumulation of resources”, the population of Europe almost doubled from 111million to 209million between 1750 and 1850¹⁰². Influential thinkers like Burke regarded this as the sign of an economically healthy country¹⁰³, but there was an attendant anxiety about the unpredictable effects of such a dramatic escalation in numbers over a short period of time. Harold Perkin observes that “Between population and economic growth the relationship is never a simple, one-way, causal link but a sensitive, two-way servo-mechanism, which transmits from one to the other the shock of every change of

¹⁰⁰ O’Neill, *Self-Conscious Poem*, p.xl.

¹⁰¹ E.N. Williams, *Life in Georgian England* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1962), p.68.

¹⁰² Massimo Livi-Bacci, *A Concise History of World Population* (3rd ed., Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), p.25, 27.

¹⁰³ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. L.G. Mitchell (1993; repr. Oxford: OUP, 2009), p.128.

momentum”¹⁰⁴. Here is a tentative balancing of “growth” with, and within, “changes of momentum” – a fluxing and refluxing movement that Perkin finds in the mind, asserting that “Population growth is the most fundamental of social factors, and its ultimate drives are psychological”(ibid). Perkin recalls E.P. Thompson’s aforementioned assertion that economic growth necessitates and responds to the “growth or change of a culture”, which, “like the growth of a poet’s mind, can never...be planned”¹⁰⁵. Wordsworth makes a similar connection between personal and collective growth when avowing that a poet must examine “the general moral or intellectual merits of an Age – or a People, or of the Human Race”¹⁰⁶. He even argues that “the labours of the statesman ought to advance – upon calculations and from impulses similar to those which give motion to the hand...of a mighty Poet”, combining “outline...conceived in distinctness” with a trust in “resources that are not tangible, though known to exist”¹⁰⁷. The issue of how to control superabundant “resources” – both “tangible” and intangible – therefore connects “social consciousness” with the growth of a poet’s “mighty mind”, contributing to what Frances Ferguson describes as “the Wordsworthian sublime and the fear of overpopulation”¹⁰⁸. Ferguson identifies Wordsworth’s preoccupation with “an empirical sublime, one in which the numbers of persons, things, and properties seemed continually increasing past the limit of individual control”(31-2) – in particular, past the limit of the poet’s ability to represent the profusion of his age. Her argument echoes Shelley’s pronouncement in ‘A Defence of Poetry’ that

¹⁰⁴ Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p.101.

¹⁰⁵ Thompson, *Customs in Common*, p.403.

¹⁰⁶ Wordsworth, ‘Reply to Mathetes’, *The Friend* (14 December 1809, 4 January 1810), *Prose Works*, ii, pp.8-34, p.11.

¹⁰⁷ Wordsworth to Captain Pasley (28 March 1811), *Letters*, ii.481-2.

¹⁰⁸ Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p.46.

The cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceeds the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature.¹⁰⁹

Shelley hopes that poetry and the poet's "internal" resources have the "capacity" to contain and evaluate the overabundance of "external life". But Wordsworth and Coleridge demonstrate the risk of *over-extending* oneself formally when attempting to 'assimilate' Sublime mental and material "excess". Literary form – the poetry of interiorised experience and the paratext of external presentation – constantly threatens to grow with "Too much" ambition and not "Enough" control.

The most famous thinker of the time on the dangers of uncontrolled expansion was Thomas Malthus. His *Essay on the Principle of Population* provides an insightful commentary on the struggle to reconcile "boundless ambition" and the impossibility of "totality without limit". The first editions of *Lyrical Ballads* and Malthus' *Essay* were published in 1798, evaluating the present cultural and social climate and anticipating the uncertain potential of a new century's material, moral and aesthetic "resources". The *Essay* was published by the radical London bookseller Joseph Johnson, and Wordsworth and Coleridge were given copies when they visited Johnson that summer¹¹⁰. We find evidence of their engagement with Malthus in *The Excursion* and the *Prelude*, and in Coleridge's marginal annotations to the *Essay*¹¹¹. Attesting that "the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man"¹¹², Malthus argued that "premature death must in some shape or other visit the human

¹⁰⁹ Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', *Shelley's Prose*, p.281.

¹¹⁰ Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth's Reading 1770-1799* (Cambridge, 1993), p.94; Marilyn Gaull, 'Malthus on the Road to Excess', *1798: The Year of the Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Richard Cronin (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp.93-107, p.93.

¹¹¹ For example, Wordsworth, *The Excursion* IX.205ff; *Prelude* XII.85ff; Coleridge, Marginalia to Malthus' *Essay* (c.1803), *Collected Works*, xii(iii).806-9.

¹¹² Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), ed. Geoffrey Gilbert (Oxford: OUP, 2004), p.13.

race”(61), with famine being “the last, the most dreadful resource of nature”(ibid). Wordsworth and Coleridge explicitly disapproved of this doctrine as callous in its implications that nature is cruel and that poverty is necessary to check exponential increase. Coleridge even criticised Malthus’ style as verbose and digressive, which he deemed “very impertinent in a philosophical work” that takes “350 pages to prove an AXIOM! to illustrate a self-evident Truth! – It is neither more nor less than Book-making!”¹¹³. He wrote that there were “8 lines of Sense & Substance to...240 Lines of Verbiage and senseless repetition”(806).

Yet for all the distancing from Malthusian doctrine, Coleridge notably acknowledged the “Sense & Substance” and the “self-evident Truth” of Malthus’ primary concern with reconciling a nation’s “resources” to its “capacity”. Malthus expresses just the anxiety about unpredictable opportunity that preoccupied intellectuals of the age, including Wordsworth and Coleridge: whether progress would be limitless or a more strained and contained pattern of “flux and reflux” – and, indeed, if there is a correlation between physical, intellectual and moral growth. Malthus describes the hopeful momentousness of the impending century – “a period big with the most important changes” that would decide “the future fate of mankind”:

The great and unlooked for discoveries that have taken place of late years in natural philosophy; the increasing diffusion of general knowledge from the extension of...printing; the ardent and unshackled spirit of inquiry that prevails throughout the lettered, and even unlettered world...¹¹⁴

Malthus’ words hint at the hopeful sense of novelty and democratising enthusiasm – the “spirit of inquiry” – that fuelled the *Lyrical Ballads* ‘Preface’, but his tone takes a more cautious turn when comparing the French Revolution to “a blazing comet”, which “seems

¹¹³ Coleridge, *Marginalia to Malthus’ Essay* (1803), *Collected Works*, xii(iii).806-9.

¹¹⁴ Malthus, *Population*, p.9.

destined either to inspire with fresh life and vigour, or to scorch up and destroy the shrinking inhabitants of the earth”(ibid). Malthus is hesitant in the face of the future, identifying “the great question...now at issue”:

...whether man shall henceforth start forwards with accelerated velocity towards illimitable...improvement; or be condemned to a perpetual oscillation between happiness and misery, and after every effort remain still at an immeasurable distance from the wished-for goal.

(ibid).

Malthus’ tension between “illimitable” advancement and “oscillation” resonates with Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s wavering conceptions of the mind – and literary form – as “feed[ing] upon infinity” yet subject to “fluxes and refluxes”. Malthus defines the dilemma as a state of “painful suspense”(ibid), and his response is to assert the necessity of limitation in an attempt to maintain a very delicate balance. In a climate of intense intellectual exchange, Malthus’ sceptical speculations feed into the poets’ ambivalence about balance as self-restraint, philosophically and practically: exponential growth – intellectual and material, in a nation and a text – is unsustainable. Like Shelley’s concern that “the internal laws of human nature” not be found wanting, Malthus proposes that “continual additions” could be made to “the mass of human knowledge” for “millions of years...and yet...it may be a matter of doubt whether what may be called the capacity of mind be in any marked and decided manner increasing”(153). Crucially, the general ‘spirit of the age’ does not carry all men with it: “reason and experience seem both to assure us that the capacity of individual minds does not increase in proportion to the mass of existing knowledge”(154).

The “structural equivalence of intellectual and corporeal wants”¹¹⁵ that underlies Malthus’ thinking helps to produce the model of the Sublime outlined by Ferguson, whereby both mental and material “objects” proliferate out of control. Philip Connell observes that in Malthus’s philosophy bodily wants “call forth equally insatiable ‘intellectual wants’”, and that “like the thirst for corporeal sustenance, the ‘thirst of knowledge’ can never be satisfied”(ibid). Hence Malthus’ argument that, just as the life span of humans can never be “indefinite”, their intellectual advancements can never reach the point of ‘perfectibility’ propounded by William Godwin in *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793). Malthus asserts the “fallacy and absurdity”¹¹⁶ of the argument that “because the limit of human life is undefined...its extent may increase for ever, and be properly termed indefinite or unlimited”(70). Supposed progress towards unproven apotheoses mean instead that we “are thrown upon a wide field of uncertainty”(232). This apprehension about the “wide field” of human endeavour strongly informs Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s gnawing “uncertainty” about the “capacity” of the “mighty mind” for error as much as insight. In a vital footnote Malthus states that naïve Godwinian optimism stems from the “present rage for wide and unrestrained speculation...a kind of mental intoxication”, whereby “every thing appeared to be within the grasp of human powers, and under this illusion they confounded subjects where no real progress could be proved, with those where the progress had been marked, certain, and acknowledged”(ibid). Based on “unfounded principles”, flights of fancy like ‘perfectibility’ masquerade as scientific thinking, paradoxically reducing the usefulness and nobility of the “mighty mind”: “so far from enlarging the bounds of human science, they are contracting it; so far from promoting the improvement of the human mind, they are obstructing it; they are throwing us back again almost into the infancy of

¹¹⁵ Philip Connell, ‘Wordsworth, Malthus, and the 1805 Prelude’, *Essays in Criticism* (2000), Vol.50(3), pp.242-267, p.252.

¹¹⁶ Malthus, *Population*, p.70.

knowledge”(ibid). The thwarting/thwarted pattern of “flux and reflux” reasserts itself – a sign of the danger Wordsworth saw in excitement “carried beyond its proper bounds”.

Coleridge, too, warned that “Ambition, of all the passions that actuate individuals, or states, is the least susceptible of restraint; the most likely to be carried to excess”¹¹⁷. Notably, when Coleridge wrote to Josiah Wedgwood in May 1799 critiquing the *Essay* for being “extremely illogical”, he nevertheless articulated “doubts” about the uncertain direction of humanity that strongly accord with Malthus: “I am sufficiently sceptical & in truth more than sceptical, concerning the possibility of universal Plenty & Wisdom”, he writes, before asking: “Is the march of the Human Race progressive, or in Cycles?”¹¹⁸ – i.e. in a state of “flux and reflux”. This letter betrays something of “The realist counter-current opposing Coleridge’s idealist progress” that Perry identifies as “an extremely important ingredient of the full muddle”¹¹⁹ of his mind and work. Wordsworth seems to answer Coleridge a decade later in ‘Reply to Mathetes’, published in *The Friend* (1809-10), the subject still plaguing them: “The progress of the Species neither is nor can be like that of a Roman road in a straight line. It may be more justly compared to that of a River, which both in its smaller reaches and larger turnings, is frequently forced back towards its fountains”¹²⁰. Furthermore, this struggle confronting “the Species” is reflected in the individual’s aim to expand the mind: “the way to knowledge shall be long, difficult, winding, and often times returning upon itself”(23). For Wordsworth and Coleridge the “way to knowledge” lies in extending, but not over-extending, the parameters of one’s work, so that writer and reader are not thrown or “forced back” by paratextual “obstruction”.

¹¹⁷ Coleridge, ‘Our Future Prospects’ (*Morning Post*, 6 January 1803), *Collected Works*, iii(i).419.

¹¹⁸ Coleridge to Josiah Wedgwood (21 May 1799), *Collected Letters*, i.518.

¹¹⁹ Perry, *Uses of Division*, p.135.

¹²⁰ Wordsworth, ‘Reply to Mathetes’, *Prose Works*, pp.8-34, p.11.

Malthus articulates a fear of indiscriminate or chaotic behaviours that must be regulated, a tenet of self-restraint that offers interesting parallels with Wordsworth's and Coleridge's attempts to order and cohere their poems for publication without suppressing the "fructifying"¹²¹ individuality thereof. With associations of sexual profligacy, the 1798 edition of the *Essay* describes how "nature has scattered the seeds of life abroad with the most profuse and liberal hand", yet "Necessity, that imperious all pervading law of nature, restrains them within the prescribed bounds"¹²². Coleridge uses the image of scattering in a 1796 letter to lament his state of intellectual and emotional "Frenzy"¹²³. He compares the "Industry" of the "Husbandman", who "puts his seed in the Ground" and reaps "Bread, and Health, & Quietness", to "The AUTHOR" who "scatters his seed – with aching head, and wasted Health, & all the heart-leapings of Anxiety" and is only rewarded with "Printers' Bills & the Debtors' Side of Newgate"(ibid). With a similar sense of disarrayed thought, Wordsworth in his 'Preface' to *Poems* (1815) links scattering to the "unstable or transitory" workings of "Fancy", which "depends upon the rapidity and profusion with which she scatters her thoughts and images"¹²⁴, creating a "rivalship" with "indestructible" and "eternal" Imagination in "the compositions of all eloquent writers, whether in prose or verse"(37). However Coleridge implies a contrary notion that "restrain[ing]" scattered thought within "prescribed bounds" reduces mental scope. 'On Poesy or Art' asserts that "the rays of intellect which are scattered throughout the images of nature" find their "focus" in "man's mind", yet Coleridge immediately figures this "focus" as confinement, whereby nature's "images, totalized" are "fitted to the limits of the human mind"¹²⁵. Analogously, the ambivalence of an author's reducing vastness into the "bounds" or limits" of material form is intimated in a letter from Dorothy Wordsworth

¹²¹ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1799), I.290.

¹²² Malthus, *Population*, p.14.

¹²³ Coleridge to Thomas Poole (13 December 1796), *Collected Letters*, p.275.

¹²⁴ Wordsworth, 'Preface', *Poems* (1815), *Prose Works*, iii.36.

¹²⁵ Coleridge, 'On Poesy or Art', *Biographia* (1907), p.258.

to Coleridge, in which she describes Wordsworth's manuscript poems "scattered about here and there in this book and that, one stanza on one leaf, another on another"¹²⁶, before they are required to be ordered and literally 'bound' in a book for presentation to the public.

Wordsworth's discomfort with this process is most evident in his 'Preface' to *Poems* (1815), which strives to balance the reader's expectation of organised "classes" for the poems with the writer's desire to maintain their fecund 'organic' life. He advises the order of the pieces should broadly "correspond with the course of human life"¹²⁷ by chronologically progressing from childhood to posthumous immortality in the 'Intimations Ode', but then explains that he has also compartmentalised them according to the confoundingly diverse schema of subject matter, genre – "the mould in which they are cast" – and the "psychology of literary creation"(ibid). So we have twelve categories¹²⁸ ranging from 'Poems Referring to the Period of Childhood', through 'Poems of the Imagination', to 'Epitaphs and Elegiac Poems', in the hope that "there is a sufficient variety in each class to prevent"(ibid) diluting the nuances of each poem. He even states, "I should have preferred to scatter the contents of these volumes at random, if I had been persuaded that, by the plan adopted, any thing material would be taken from the natural effect of the pieces, individually"(ibid); of course the variety of the categories – arguably tending to randomness – and the existence of the 'Preface' itself betrays this very fear.

Ever issuing disclaimers, Wordsworth strenuously tries to blur the boundaries of his categories as quickly as he imposes them, hastily stating that "as I wish to guard against the possibility of misleading by this classification" he must remind the reader that

¹²⁶ Dorothy Wordsworth to Coleridge (6 March 1804), *Letters*, i.448.

¹²⁷ Wordsworth, 'Preface', *Poems* (1815), *Prose Works*, iii.28.

¹²⁸ In order: 'Poems Referring to the Period of Childhood', 'Juvenile Pieces', 'Poems Founded on the Affections', 'Poems of the Fancy', 'Poems of the Imagination', 'Poems Proceeding from Sentiment and Reflection', 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty: First Part and Second Part', 'Poems on the Naming of Places', 'Inscriptions', 'Poems Referring to the Period of Old Age', and 'Epitaphs and Elegiac Poems'.

“certain poems are placed according to the powers of mind, in the Author’s conception, predominant in the production of them; *predominant*, which implies the exertion of other faculties in less degree”(28-9). Therefore Wordsworth feels the need in paratext to explicitly tell us of his poems’ “striking” capacity for “mutual illustration”, not quite trusting the “natural effect of the pieces”(28) to do that themselves. In a further undermining of the poetry’s autonomy and the volume’s unity, he asserts that the poems should comprise “an entire work within themselves” – possessing “the three requisites of a legitimate whole, a beginning, a middle, and an end” – yet also act as “adjuncts to the philosophical Poem, *The Recluse*”(ibid). The 1815 ‘Preface’ reveals the fragile balancing of competing impulses when “profuse and liberal” imagination meets the restraining effect of publication: it must implicitly and explicitly espouse the properties of Wordsworth’s poems individually and *en masse*, caught between “the unreflecting Reader” and “him who reads with reflection”(ibid). The arrangement of poems, we are told, “serves as a commentary unostentatiously directing [the reader’s]...attention to my purposes, both particular and general”(ibid), yet a preface – “perhaps, of all literary practices, the one that is most typically literary”¹²⁹ – is necessarily an ostentatious setting forth of an author’s purposes. We thus perceive a state of Malthusian “painful suspense”: thought and feeling cannot be “scattered” with unchecked abandon if they are to be coherent, but attempts to ‘contain’ poetry in prose show the strain of “holding in check the workings of passion” by (de)limiting the “plastic, the pliant, and the indefinite”(36) Imagination.

Lyrical Ballads obviously sets a precedent for this difficulty of providing a prefatory framework to a collection of poems characterised by a diversity of voices and moods. There is a clear wish to present a unified authorial voice in the ‘Preface’ that

¹²⁹ Genette, *Paratexts*, p.293.

paradoxically relies on obfuscating the book's actual authorship shared between Wordsworth and Coleridge. John Blades argues that the 'Preface' marks "perhaps...the beginning of literary theory *per se*"¹³⁰, as the pair aim to establish and justify their novelty. Blades notes its influence on the emerging generation of periodical writers – especially Hazlitt, De Quincey, Hunt and Cobbett – who "began to see the establishment of literary criticism as an intrinsically meaningful and systematic intellectual activity"(222). But the diffuse and constantly-shifting structure of the ballads from 1798 to 1802 resists the Preface's "systematic" delineations of poetic purpose and style that were intended, with a degree of helpful fixity, to "interest mankind permanently"¹³¹. Derek Roper goes so far as to argue that the 'Preface' is "outright misleading" because it implies that "this miscellaneous and somewhat haphazardly assembled volume is the product of a critical programme"¹³², calling to mind Genette's aforementioned observation of the "shaky" position the preface occupies as a retrospective assessment of poems that have yet to be read. Seamus Perry's observation that the ballads' "sprightly individuality" constitutes a "counter-voice...against the prophetic universalism"¹³³ of *The Recluse* could also apply to the 'Preface' as a "prophetic" overarching commentary on the succeeding poems. The sense that the volume ended up extending far beyond the bounds prescribed by the genre title 'Lyrical Ballads' is implicitly acknowledged in its full title *Lyrical Ballads, With a Few Other Poems*. Wordsworth wanted to rename the second edition just 'Poems'¹³⁴, a more "capacious" title trying to overleap the limits of formal categorisation and more readily lend the collection to generalised theorising. But Coleridge's perturbation at the *Ballads* running away from him and with Wordsworth was due to a

¹³⁰ John Blades, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2004), p.217.

¹³¹ Wordsworth, 'Preface'(1800), *Prose Works*, i.120.

¹³² Derek Roper (ed.), *Lyrical Ballads 1805* (2nd ed., London: Macdonald & Evans, 1986), p.265.

¹³³ Seamus Perry, 'Wordsworth and Coleridge', *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), pp.161-179, p.169.

¹³⁴ John Beer, 'The Unity of *Lyrical Ballads*', *The New Lyrical Ballads*, pp.6-22, p.8.

sense of their disintegrating – even scattered – plurality: the latter’s prolific output meant that “my compositions, instead of forming a balance [with Wordsworth’s], appeared rather an interpolation of heterogeneous matter”¹³⁵. Indeed, George Watson describes ‘The Nightingale’ – one of only four Coleridge offerings in 1798 – as having “a scattered air, as if it had been written with an altogether exceptional indifference to design and scale”¹³⁶. Wordsworth could not escape the persistent sense of the poems’ “fundamental and...disabling heterogeneity”¹³⁷ springing from the minutiae of manifold characters, tales and tones, so that the most Donald Davie can claim of Wordsworth is that “he pieced his discoveries together into systems”¹³⁸, rather than one unified ‘system’.

The “interpolations” of smaller prose adjuncts scattered throughout *Lyrical Ballads* – footnotes, endnotes and the anxious introductory Notes acting almost as disclaimers in and around ‘The Thorn’, ‘The Brothers’, ‘Michael’ and ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, among others – aim to quell but in fact exacerbate the volume’s pressure of internal excess. Even more “heterogeneous matter” is created by the fluxing and refluxing “counter-voices” of author and editor, as introductions and explanations create division not only between, but within, poems. The competing demands of different kinds of paratext (dis)placed throughout the 1800 edition’s two volumes reveal a basic uncertainty about how to demarcate and prioritise information in the ‘hierarchy’ of prose adjuncts, ranging from factual descriptions of local settings and traditions, to literary criticism and intertextual allusions. Hence a reader’s experience is one of rupture, the spatial disjunction between poetry and prose heightening the possibility of their tonal and thematic dissonance. The tensions between ‘The Thorn’ and its ‘Note’, for example, are exacerbated by the latter’s position over 150 pages away from the poem at the end of the

¹³⁵ Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.8.

¹³⁶ George Watson, *Coleridge the Poet* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p.71.

¹³⁷ Perry, ‘Wordsworth and Coleridge’ (2003), p.169.

¹³⁸ Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), p.113.

first volume, rendering Wordsworth's wish to "add a few words closely connected"¹³⁹ with it ironic in a literal sense. The distance heightens the strain of Wordsworth's attempt to distinguish the poet's skill from the narrator's incompetence; a double negative betrays the uneasiness of his intention "to represent a picture which should not be unimpressive yet consistent with the character that should describe it"(ibid). Wordsworth insists on the craft required to speak in the diminished way of a "credulous and talkative" person "prone to superstition", whilst at the same time "[taking] care that words, which in their minds are impregnated with passion, should likewise convey passion to Readers who are not accustomed to sympathize with men feeling in that manner or using such language"(ibid). He takes the opportunity to reinforce his poetic authority by extending the 'Note', adding more than "a few words"(ibid) on repetition and tautology, but in doing so emphasises *limitation* rather than might: the attempt to "communicate impassioned feelings" engenders an "accompanying consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language"(594). Hence recourse to "the same words, or words of the same character"(ibid) when there is a "craving in the mind" for clarity that remains "unsatisfied". Here one of Wordsworth's most famous statements on poetry ironically exposes the struggle at its heart: it is a medium that strives to be "the history or science of feelings"(ibid), but its very materials – words, which are "*things*, active and efficient"(ibid) – impede the defining and systematising required for historical and scientific analysis.

Similarly, before 'The Brothers' even begins its title is footnoted with a typical mitigation and half-clarification placing it in literary and geographical contexts that were not executed according to plan: "This Poem was to be intended to be the concluding poem of a series of pastorals...laid among the mountains of Cumberland and Westmoreland. I

¹³⁹ Wordsworth, 'Note' to 'The Thorn', *Major Works*, p.593.

mention this to apologise for the abruptness with which the poem begins”¹⁴⁰. The pre-emptive note wants to be a ‘buffer’ between the text and the reader, but its self-deprecating “counter-voice” – or “counter-spirit” – relegates it to the page’s gutter and thus defeats its own purpose, instead becoming an afterthought-introduction. There seem to be no such qualms though about the “abruptness” with which another footnote explaining the location and etymology of “The great Gavel” mountain interrupts the Priest’s crucial, poignant speech disclosing Leonard’s identity and his family’s fate. Here is a jarring transition of first-person authority from the Priest-within-the-poem to the commenting poet without: “...so called I imagine, from its resemblance to the Gable end of a house...”(37). Perhaps concerned about crowding-out rather than harmoniously ‘embellishing’ his poem with such factual details, another layer of paratext is added at the conclusion to the volume where two endnotes explain the “bubbling springs” on Kidstow Pike and local attitudes towards death. We are told that “There is not any thing more worthy of remark in the manners of the inhabitants of these mountains, than the tranquillity...with which they think and talk”¹⁴¹ about death, but this observation has been consigned to the back of the book. Given that the reader can easily close the volume without reaching its final pages – where substantial notes are jumbled with errata and advertisements – they might remain unaware of the apparently most important aspect of the poem’s Cumberland/Westmorland setting.

The problematic status of endnotes also highlights the struggle to reconcile, or balance, two different types of reader: the hypothesised ideal audience of “real men” in rural communities that Wordsworth attempts to identify himself with and within, and the educated metropolitan classes most likely to have access to the *Ballads*. ‘Michael’ has lengthy endnotes on Ings Chapel and the story of Richard Bateman – “well known in the

¹⁴⁰ Wordsworth, ‘The Brothers’, *Lyrical Ballads* (London: Longman and Rees, 1800), ii.19.

¹⁴¹ ‘Notes to the Poem of *The Brothers*’, *ibid*, ii.221.

country”(227) but presumably not in the city – as well as an outline of what exactly a “sheep-fold” is “in these mountains”. Wordsworth begins these notes with a self-consciously formal phrase “It may be proper to inform some readers”(ibid), alerting us to the division between readers initiated and uninitiated in country ways. It appears that endnotes, to which so many readers are oblivious, are paradoxically the best place to site factual material that has thematic resonance; there is more room for solid blocks of prose that do not ‘weigh down’ or ironically marginalise the poetic text as hefty footnotes appropriating most of the page. However, their separation from the main text simultaneously accords them a diminished, extraneous status, as though materially exposing their superfluity. Hence an inherent internal strain whereby endnotes are unnecessary for the “common” rustic with whom he is striving to find common ground, yet integral for the urban elite he needs to impress in order to sustain a literary career. These kinds of endnotes are elusive addenda for the latter – deferentially included because it is “proper” and yet almost disparagingly segregated by the phrase “some readers”. The internally-divided nature of footnotes and endnotes – and the readers they imply – thus threatens to undermine the uniting theme of collective story-telling and shared experience embodied in the character of James from ‘Michael’, “the child of all the dale”(l.338) raised by the whole community. Stephen Maxfield Parrish’s claim that the *Ballads* “were rooted more in conflict than in harmony”¹⁴² reveals the nadir of ‘balance’ as two warring sides. The intention of providing helpful factual information is admirably sincere, but the unpredictability of paratext’s hazy parameters and “counter-voices” produce limitless uncertainties. As Genette wryly observes: “From the fact that the paratext always fulfills

¹⁴² Stephen Maxfield Parrish, *The Art of the Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge: CUP, 1973), p.viii.

[sic] a function, it does not necessarily follow that the paratext always fulfills [sic] its function well”¹⁴³.

Malthus encapsulates his argument about the impossibility of unchecked population growth and intellectual ‘perfectibility’ with the invaluable axiom that “there is a limit to improvement, though we do not exactly know where it is”¹⁴⁴. Therefore, “a careful distinction should be made between an unlimited progress, and a progress where the limit is merely undefined”(70). This uncertainty about the “unlimited” and the “undefined” offers an extremely useful context for, and commentary upon, the problems of balancing prose and poetry. Genette describes paratext as an “undefined zone between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary...an edge”¹⁴⁵ where “transition” for the writer and “transaction” with the reader occur. Michael O’Neill observes that Romantic poets “press against the limits of what we take poetry to be”¹⁴⁶ in their quest for infinite “production”, which is both laudably ambitious and hazardous. Prose paratext can act as a necessary check on the “overflow of powerful feelings” in verse, performing the many desirable functions of introduction, explanation, analysis, justification and schematisation of disparate poems into an aesthetic philosophy. But at the same time it constitutes an “undefined” space that, by allowing the author to say more and to say it in a different form, may offer false hope. Both poets’ attempts to extend their authority frequently draw attention to the inconsistencies of their content, form and style. A.C. Bradley’s assessment of Wordsworth as “the complex poet of strangeness, paradox, equivocality, and dark sublimities”¹⁴⁷ reveals the threats inherent in ‘balance’, echoing *The Excursion*’s meditation on “the conflict and the sounds that live in darkness”(I.217) –

¹⁴³ Genette, *Paratexts*, p.409.

¹⁴⁴ Malthus, *Population*, p.71.

¹⁴⁵ Genette, *Paratexts*, p.2.

¹⁴⁶ O’Neill, *Self-Conscious Poem*, p.xxii.

¹⁴⁷ Bradley, A.C., ‘Wordsworth’(1903), *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1934), pp.99-148, p.101.

the darkness of the “undefined” zone between text and paratext, the psychological and the material sublime. Hence Coleridge and Wordsworth are always writing “on the very brink of vacancy”¹⁴⁸, where the contradictions, “paradoxes” and “equivocality” created by the inevitable comparison of retrospective prose and “spontaneous” poetry risk destroying the aesthetic and philosophical unity of the whole work. Just as in Malthus’ mighty mind “a substantial portion of society is condemned to live at the ragged edge of subsistence”¹⁴⁹, a substantial portion of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s work operates, quite literally, “at the dramatic edge of something difficult and dark”¹⁵⁰.

III

“a great Poet...ought to travel before men occasionally as well as at their sides”(Letter): Balancing Individual Genius and Collective Capacity

The primary indeterminacy of paratext is the relationship between writer and reader; the couching and explicating performed by prefaces and notes indicates a degree of mistrust not only in one’s poetry, but in the kind of audience such poetry ostensibly values. The *Lyrical Ballads* ‘Preface’ famously attests to Wordsworth’s – and implicitly Coleridge’s – admiration for and allegiance to “Low and rustic life”, in which “the essential passions of the heart find a better soil...are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language”¹⁵¹. Mary Jacobus summarises the ‘Preface’ as an attempt to “bridge the gap between literature and life, asserting a community of feeling between sophisticated and simple, literate and illiterate”¹⁵² – an ideal balancing of “sameness, with

¹⁴⁸ Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, VII.513.

¹⁴⁹ Geoffrey Gilbert (ed.), *Population*, p.viii.

¹⁵⁰ Paul Jay, *Being in the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.41.

¹⁵¹ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1800), *Prose Works*, i.124.

¹⁵² Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth’s Lyrical Ballads 1798* (1976; repr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p.185.

difference". Thus the interlude on the poet's role in 1802 makes counterpoised distinctions in order to unify its audience: "In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs...the Poet binds together by passions and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time"¹⁵³. This is another manifestation of the preoccupation with "capaciousness" of mind and form: the 1800 'Preface' argues that "the most valuable object of all writing whether in prose or verse" is the depiction of "the great and universal passions of men, the most general and interesting of their occupations, and the entire world of nature"¹⁵⁴. Arnold praises Wordsworth's "primary affections" as "accessible universally" and "in the widest commonalty spread"¹⁵⁵, reiterating Wordsworth's pronouncement that "we have all of us one human heart!"¹⁵⁶. Coleridge explicitly extends this philosophy to the ideal of a universal "human" reader in marginalia to *Robinson Crusoe*, where he praises Defoe as a "Writer who makes me sympathize with his presentations with the *whole* of my Being" rather than "a *part*": "he who makes me forget my specific class, character, & circumstances raises me into the Universal Man"¹⁵⁷. For once Coleridge wants to do away with parts – all those classifications and divisions – in service to a democratically accessible type of literature. The epigraph to the first essay of *The Friend*, from Petrarch's *De Vita Solitaria* and translated in a footnote, expresses "my earnest wish" to "benefit the largest number possible of my fellow-creatures"¹⁵⁸.

But there is a "reflux" to these pronouncements concerning commonality of feeling: Wordsworth and Coleridge shared a wariness of mass psychology, of people in large numbers vehemently and violently driving Revolution, war and reform – in the

¹⁵³ Wordsworth, 'Preface' (1802), *Major Works*, p.606.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid (1800), *Prose Works*, i.144.

¹⁵⁵ Arnold, *Poems of Wordsworth*, p.154.

¹⁵⁶ Wordsworth to Crabb Robinson (27 April 1835), *Letters*, vi.44.

¹⁵⁷ Coleridge, Marginalia to *Robinson Crusoe*, (c.1812), *Collected Works*, xii(ii).158-9.

¹⁵⁸ Coleridge, *The Friend*, Essay I, *ibid*, iv(i), pp.7-13, p.9.

process transitioning from “fellow-creatures” to “senseless”¹⁵⁹ hordes. In an article on ‘The Men and the Times’(1803) Coleridge laments how an unreflecting overflow of feeling can lead to “dangerous” behaviours, exhibiting “an excess of those passions by which the understanding is clouded”¹⁶⁰. He made the same point in relation to collective mentality four years earlier: “It is perhaps impossible for any body of men, who have *met together*, to preserve a perfect calmness of intellect...so contagious is passion”¹⁶¹. This attitude is attributable to both poets’ disillusionment with the “universal ferment”¹⁶² of the French Revolution, its early fervour reconfigured as destructively uncontrolled and misdirected: the “whole nation...mad with joy”¹⁶³ quickly finds “mildest men...agitated” with “commotions, strife / Of passion and opinion”¹⁶⁴, before an apocalyptic “Devastation”¹⁶⁵ in which “The land all swarmed with passion, like a plain / Devoured by locusts”¹⁶⁶. The enthusiastic mass – “brothers all / In honour, as in one community”(IX.227-8), to whom Wordsworth’s heart was initially “all / Given”(I.123-4) – was engulfed in “Domestic carnage”(X.356) during the ‘Great Terror’ of 1794: “all perished, all –/ Friends, enemies, of all parties, ages, ranks...never heads enough”(X.360-2). Coleridge averred that “all Revolutions” feed upon an infinity of “rabid Hope” through angry destruction, whereby “the blind Father is sure to beget on his own Child a yet madder Extravagance, a Hope still more bloodthirsty”¹⁶⁷. Both writers accede to “the old concept of the crowd as ‘mob’, with all its disparaging connotations”¹⁶⁸. In an 1812 letter Wordsworth bemoans the “alarming” increase in popular agitation, believing it to

¹⁵⁹ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), X.43.

¹⁶⁰ Coleridge, ‘The Men and the Times’(*Morning Post*, 18 July 1803), *Collected Works*, iii(i).427.

¹⁶¹ Coleridge, ‘On the French Constitution’ I (*Morning Post*, 7 December 1799), *ibid*, iii(i).35.

¹⁶² Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), IX.162.

¹⁶³ Wordsworth to Dorothy (6 September 1790), *Letters*, i.36.

¹⁶⁴ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), IX.164.

¹⁶⁵ Coleridge, *The Friend*, Section the First, Essay XVI, *Collected Works*, iv(i), pp.326-38, p.327.

¹⁶⁶ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), IX.175-6.

¹⁶⁷ Coleridge (March-April 1834), *Notebooks*, v.6916.

¹⁶⁸ George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (1964; rev. London: Serif, 1995), p.10.

originate in the preceding century's Revolutionary endeavours; using imagery of sickness, he scornfully describes how "the lower orders have been for upwards of thirty years accumulating in pestilential masses of ignorant population...the disease has been growing, and now breaks out in all its danger and deformity"¹⁶⁹. Similarly, when discussing the widespread opposition to the 1815 Corn Laws, he emphatically dissociates himself from the "deplorable...errors of the mob"¹⁷⁰. Coleridge emphasises the pre-eminence of the educated and enlightened individual set against the mob "Unillumined by philosophy, and stimulated to a lust of revenge by aggravated wrongs"¹⁷¹, recalling Malthus' insistence that intellectual 'improvement' could not be universal. Condemning France's "excesses of terrorism"(329), he perceives the Revolution as the oppression of insightful individuals by the thoughtless collective: "the knowledge of the few cannot counteract the ignorance of the many...the light of philosophy, when it is confined to a small minority, points out the possessors as the victims...of the multitude"(327). Feeling, then, can be shared too far and wide for anyone's good.

Revolution exemplifies the noble desire for improvement being "carried beyond its proper bounds" – indeed, into its antithesis – so that "a war of self-defence" became "one of conquest, losing sight of all / Which they had struggled for"¹⁷². The 'Preface' to *The Borderers* (c.1796-1800) states that "in the trials to which life subjects us, sin and crime are apt to start from their very opposite qualities, so are there no limits to the hardening of the heart, and the perversion of the understanding"¹⁷³. Paradoxically, the Revolution demonstrated an excess of reason as well as "passion", with Godwinian principles of anarchic rationalism being taken too far in 'hardening the heart'. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) censures the "sort of people [who] are so taken up with

¹⁶⁹ Wordsworth to Catherine Clarkson (4 June 1812), *Letters*, iii.21.

¹⁷⁰ Wordsworth, postscript, Dorothy Wordsworth to Sara Hutchinson (16 March 1815), *ibid*, iii.219.

¹⁷¹ Coleridge, *The Friend*, First Section, Essay XVI (1795), *Collected Works*, iv(ii).331.

¹⁷² Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), XI.207-9.

¹⁷³ Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *The Borderers* (c.1796-1800), *Prose Works*, i, pp.69-86, p.69.

their theories about the rights of man, that they have totally forgot his nature”; thus the over-rational leads to “the excesses of an irrational, unprincipled...ferocious, bloody and tyrannical democracy”¹⁷⁴. Again, the need for self-regulation – a balanced state of mind – asserts itself: Wordsworth wrote in 1811 that France’s power needed to be “brought within reasonable bounds”, its people “so undisciplined in civil arts and habits”¹⁷⁵. Coleridge likewise asserts that “He alone is entitled to a share in the government of all, who has learnt to govern himself”¹⁷⁶ – to “Tame the Rebellion of tumultuous thought”¹⁷⁷. Thus the delicate “conjunction of Reason and Passion” necessary for excellent writing “in prose or verse”¹⁷⁸ requires a “reasonable” and sensitive, disciplined and enthusiastic, reader to appreciate it fully: someone who is well-balanced, but also has the “capacity” for imaginative growth that – with the martialling help of paratext – will not overspill into wild misinterpretation.

The value of this reader lies in their rarity, yet the value of writing is so often judged by its popularity. Wordsworth and Coleridge were consistently torn between their desire to be read widely, and read well. Coleridge may have wanted to “benefit the largest number possible” and Wordsworth to place “Truth...within reach of the humblest”¹⁷⁹, but both poets expressed concern about the fact that “readers in the humbler ranks of society are multiplying most rapidly”¹⁸⁰, so that mass readership might be indiscriminate and undiscerning. As Andrew Blades observes, the democratising effect of greater literacy, public libraries and cheaper reading matter meant that “the possibility of self-education among the poor became feasible”¹⁸¹, with an attendant concern that this could encourage

¹⁷⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, p.156.

¹⁷⁵ Wordsworth to Pasley (28 March 1811), *Letters*, ii.475.

¹⁷⁶ Coleridge (November 1806), *Notebooks*, ii.2955.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid* (October 1796), *ibid*, i.272.

¹⁷⁸ Wordsworth, ‘Epitaphs’ III, *Prose Works*, ii.85.

¹⁷⁹ Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, Book IX ‘Summary’.

¹⁸⁰ Wordsworth, ‘The Law of Copyright: To the Editor of the *Kendal Mercury*’ (12 April 1838), *Prose Works*, iii, pp.309-20, p.309.

¹⁸¹ Blades, *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, p.229.

“subversion by making labourers dissatisfied with their lot”(228). The assertion of individual ‘Genius’ and novelty as defining virtues of Romantic literature exacerbates the innate authorial anxiety that one’s audience will not understand or appreciate one’s work in the right way, or to the right degree. In the 1800 ‘Preface’, Wordsworth laments how the impatient and “hurried” character of the age “blunt[s] the discriminating powers of the mind, and...reduce[s] it to a state of almost savage torpor”¹⁸². The “life and manners, the literature...of the country have conformed themselves” to this “degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation”: novels are “frantic” and poetry merely “deluges of idle and extravagant”(ibid) narratives. Coleridge vehemently asserts the need for “a learned class” as “an essential element of a state”, concerned that “the attempt to *popularize* learning and philosophy...will end in the *plebification* of knowledge”¹⁸³. An 1811 lecture complains that “the greater desire of knowledge”, “The enormous stimulant power of Events” and “the enormous multiplication of Authors & Books” has created “a World of Readers...100 readers where a century ago there were one”¹⁸⁴, and every one a (presumptuous) critic. Coleridge resents the “pernicious effect” of “flattering basely the imaginary Word, Public” and thus “habituating every Reader to consider himself as the Judge & therefore the Superior of the Writer who yet if he had any justifiable claim to write ought to be his Superior”(ibid).

Wordsworth offers his own vague elaboration on Coleridge’s dismissal of the “Public” in ‘Essay, Supplementary’, describing it as “that small though loud portion of the community, ever governed by factitious influence”, as distinct from “the People, philosophically characterised, and...the embodied spirit of their knowledge” which

¹⁸² Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1800), *Prose Works*, i.128.

¹⁸³ Coleridge, *The Friend*, Section the Second, Essay III, *Collected Works*, iv(i).447.

¹⁸⁴ Coleridge, Notes for *Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton*, Lecture I (18 November 1811), ibid, v(i), pp.185-97, p.186-7.

“moves” between “the present...the past and the future”¹⁸⁵. To “the Public” he offers mealy-mouthed civility – “the Writer hopes that he feels as much deference as it is entitled to” – but to “the People...his devout respect, his reverence, is due”(ibid). He privately reiterates – though does not clarify – this distinction in a letter to Sir George Beaumont, bemoaning “The *People* would love the Poem of Peter Bell, but the *Public* (a very different Being) will never love it”¹⁸⁶. To Lady Beaumont he fully expressed his contempt for “what is called the Public” when discussing *Poems* (1807), averring that no expectations for its reception could be “lower than mine” given “the pure absolute honest ignorance, in which all worldlings of every rank and situation must be enveloped” regarding “the thoughts, feelings, and images, on which the life of my Poems depends”¹⁸⁷. Responding to the poet Samuel Rogers’ particular criticism of *Poems*, Wordsworth’s ultimate rebuttal is to consider him “only as a representative of a class, and not as unique!”(146-7). Coleridge displays a similarly pointed self-defensiveness amidst ostensible self-deprecation when anticipating a limited audience – which he would like to think of as self-selecting – in the ‘Preface’ to his 1796 *Poems*. He states that “as many will be interested in these sorrows, as have experienced the same or similar”¹⁸⁸, asking “What is the PUBLIC, but a term for a number of scattered Individuals?”(ibid) – of distinct “People”, as Wordsworth might conceive it. This ambivalence regarding condescending and deferring to the reader as a collective and as individuals – desiring popularity yet fearing populism – indicates consistent reservations about the optimistic conviction to communicate universally, leading to the compromised tenet of “fit audience let me find though few!”¹⁸⁹. It is an ambivalence dramatised in paratext which pivots

¹⁸⁵ Wordsworth, ‘Essay, Supplementary’, *Prose Works*, iii.84.

¹⁸⁶ Wordsworth to George Beaumont (February 1808), *Letters*, ii.194.

¹⁸⁷ Wordsworth to Lady Beaumont (21 May 1807), *ibid*, ii.145.

¹⁸⁸ Coleridge, ‘Preface’, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.xiv.

¹⁸⁹ Wordsworth, ‘Home at Grasmere’(composed c.1800), l.972, first published as the ‘Prospectus’ to *The Recluse* in the ‘Preface’ to *The Excursion* (1814).

between explaining oneself to an audience and dictating that audience – “*creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed”¹⁹⁰ – particularly when setting forth “a systematic defence of the theory”¹⁹¹ in “large” and “exclusive” terms: Wordsworth and Coleridge want to be their own critics because they might be their only worthy readers.

Hence the consistently oscillating tone of both writers’ self-commentaries, whereby the vulnerability of offering or mediating their poetry through prose results in a passive-aggressive wariness of both the unthinking “Public” and over-thinking critics. Their prefaces constantly fluctuate between a desire for sympathy and a disdain for that desire – perhaps from a fear or resentment that it might actually be a *need* for sympathy. In his 1807 letter to Lady Beaumont Wordsworth talks of the inevitable “envy and malevolence, and all the bad passions which always stand in the way of a work of any merit”¹⁹², revealing his keen sensitivity to criticism – or alternatively what Parrish considers “an immoderate need for praise”¹⁹³. Asking her friend Jane Marshall for an honest assessment of the draft *The White Doe of Rylstone*, Dorothy assured her that she need “not fear to give [Wordsworth] pain” because “He is far too much accustomed to be abused to receive pain from it”¹⁹⁴, but his affronted response to Francis Jeffrey’s criticism of *Poems, in Two Volumes* only four months earlier as showing “a gross want of the common feeling of a British Gentleman”¹⁹⁵ suggests otherwise. The ‘Essay, Supplementary’ gives full vent to his constant anger at the “ignorance...disingenuousness...incompetence” and “malice” of “my enemies”, setting “the orb of my genius” against those “opponents whom I internally despise”¹⁹⁶;

¹⁹⁰ Wordsworth, ‘Essay, Supplementary’, *Prose Works*, iii.80.

¹⁹¹ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1800), *ibid*, i.120.

¹⁹² Wordsworth to Lady Beaumont (21 May 1807), *Letters*, ii.145.

¹⁹³ Parrish, *Lyrical Ballads*, p.47.

¹⁹⁴ Dorothy Wordsworth to Jane Marshall (11 May 1808), *Letters*, ii.236.

¹⁹⁵ Wordsworth to Walter Scott (18 January 1808), *ibid*, ii.191.

¹⁹⁶ Wordsworth, ‘Essay, Supplementary’, *Prose Works*, iii.62.

undermining Dorothy's claim, Crabb Robinson regretted that the 'Essay' "betrays resentment and that he has suffered pain"¹⁹⁷.

Consequently Wordsworth hopes to inveigle the common reader into his work as an ally against the critic; the *Lyrical Ballads* 'Preface' enforces a rigid division of loyalties for the reader, who must "utterly reject" a "canon of criticism" against Wordsworth's plain style "if he wishes to be pleased with these volumes"¹⁹⁸. The original opening of the 'Essay, Supplementary' places "trust" in "the judicious Reader" to share his belief that "a very senseless outcry has been raised against [Wordsworth's poems] and their Author"¹⁹⁹. But this "trust" is not assured – indeed, the statement was not published in subsequent versions of the 'Essay', as though it betrayed a presumptuous confidence in an audience he was never completely comfortable with. A letter to Coleridge discussing the "principle aims" of *The Excursion* includes a determination to "remind men of their knowledge, as it lurks inoperative and unvalued in their own minds, [rather] than to attempt to convey recondite or refined truths"²⁰⁰. But in 1807 he is notably anxious about the possibility that "Some of my relations and friends who have not strength of mind to judge for themselves"²⁰¹ will be unduly influenced by poor reviews of the *Poems*, indicating the protective, self-protective and mistrustful impulses that necessitate not only introductions but 'Supplementary' additions to his work. It is a perturbing irony that the ultimate sign of his ideal reader's intellectual autonomy is an appreciation of his transcendent Genius. This tension is evident in the *Lyrical Ballads* 'Preface', where his "one request" is that the reader "would abide independently by his own feelings" and "not

¹⁹⁷ Crabb Robinson (16 April 1815), *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*, ed. Edith J. Morley (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1938), p.165.

¹⁹⁸ Wordsworth, 'Preface' (1800), *Prose Works*, i.132.

¹⁹⁹ Wordsworth, 'Essay, Supplementary', *ibid*, iii.62.

²⁰⁰ Wordsworth to Coleridge (22 May 1815), *Letters*, iii.238.

²⁰¹ Wordsworth to Francis Wrangham (12 July 1807), *ibid*, ii.155.

by reflection upon what will probably be the judgment of others”²⁰². But within a couple of paragraphs he expresses concern at “inexperienced” readers, attesting that though it is “ridiculous...to prevent” anyone “judging for himself” the author must “temper the rashness of decision” that uninformed readers are prone to, even stating that their “judgement may be erroneous, and...in many cases it necessarily will be so”(156). Wordsworth’s warning compromises the tentative sympathy previously implied by the collective possessive pronoun: “our decisions upon poetry...may conduce in a high degree to the improvement of our own taste”(ibid). He wants to share in and simultaneously dictate the terms of free thought; paratext creates a place for one’s author-ity, and keeps readers in their place.

With similar ambivalence, Coleridge in *Biographia* attempts to assert his “careless indifference to public opinion, and to the attacks of those who influence it” as an “original sin of my character”²⁰³, but he famously insisted on anonymous publication of *Lyrical Ballads* because “Wordsworth’s name is nothing” and “to a large number of persons mine stinks”²⁰⁴. From the outset of his career, Coleridge chastised himself for the “defects & sillinesses” of his poetical efforts, which “instantly...come upon my mind, and haunt me, till I am completely disgusted with my performance, & wish myself a Tanner, or a Printer, or any thing but an Author”²⁰⁵. Such are “the accidental constitution of my intellect”(ibid) and the “labor-pangs”²⁰⁶ of composition that in 1800 he vows to “abandon Poetry altogether” and devote himself to critical writing, yet in the same breath he dismisses his prose too, rejecting the “thought of ever collecting my *Morning Post* Essays” because “they are not worth it”(630). This self-deprecation is publicly exhibited in the Introduction to the Sonnet section of his 1797 *Poems*, in which he cautiously confesses

²⁰² Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1800), *Prose Works*, i.154.

²⁰³ Coleridge, *Biographia*, i.44.

²⁰⁴ Coleridge to Joseph Cottle (28 May 1798), *Collected Letters*, i.412.

²⁰⁵ Coleridge to James Webb Tobin (20 September 1800), *ibid*, i.623.

²⁰⁶ Coleridge to Daniel Stuart (7 October 1800), *ibid*, i.629.

that though the sonnet “has been ever a favorite species of composition with me...I am conscious that I have not succeeded in it” and therefore “From a large number I have retained ten only, as not beneath mediocrity”²⁰⁷. However, the ‘Preface’ to this second edition of the *Poems* displays two parallel tones of sincere modesty and irked sarcasm when ‘thanking’ “the different Reviewers for the assistance, which they have afforded me, in detecting my poetic deficiencies”, including “a general turgidness”²⁰⁸. The equivocating caveat “I have endeavoured to avail myself of their remarks” implies both the effort and wilful failure to change “Too much”; he stresses that “the imperfections of the republished part must be considered as errors of taste, not faults of carelessness”(ibid) because he has apparently “pruned the double-epithets with no sparing hand...to tame the swell and glitter both of thought and diction”(ibid). He defends himself against the charge of obscurity, which “every poet, whose imagination is warm and rapid, must expect from his *contemporaries*”(xviii) – the italicisation heavy with contempt – and implies he will be better served by posterity, with a self-aggrandising comparison to Milton, Gray and Collins. In no uncertain terms, “The deficiency is in the Reader”(ibid). Coleridge declares that “If any man expect from my poems the same easiness of style which he admires in a drinking-song, for him I have not written”, mimetically reinforcing his exclusivity with the Latin addition, “*Intelligibilia, non intellectum adfero*”(xviii-xix).

Coleridge’s ‘Preface’ establishes a pattern for the tone of both writers’ future introductions – the “part apology and part strident fanfare”²⁰⁹ Blades perceives in the 1798 ‘Advertisement’ to *Lyrical Ballads*, for example, in which self-deprecating humour becomes a combative tool. “Readers accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion”, we are told, “will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness”,

²⁰⁷ Coleridge, Introduction to ‘Sonnets’, *Poems on Various Subjects*, p.74.

²⁰⁸ Coleridge, ‘Preface’, ibid, p.xvii.

²⁰⁹ Blades, *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, p.235.

forcing them to “enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume [the] title”²¹⁰ of poetry. Like Coleridge, Wordsworth’s rhetoric fluxes and refluxes between deference to and disregard of critical opinion. In the 1800 ‘Preface’ he apparently reassures the reader that he will “take all reasonable pains to correct” any “faulty expressions” they dislike, but then immediately states that “it is dangerous to make these alterations on the simple authority of a few individuals, or even of certain classes of men” because a writer’s “own feelings are his stay and support”²¹¹. He fears that were he to abandon his linguistic choices “in one instance, he may be induced to repeat this act till his mind shall lose all confidence in itself, and become utterly debilitated”(ibid). He then pointedly states that the critic is “himself exposed to the same errors as the Poet, and, perhaps, in a much greater degree” because “above all...they are so much less interested in the subject” and therefore “may decide lightly and carelessly”(ibid). Wordsworth’s use of the term “debilitated” conceives of the reader/writer relationship as pathological. It is a metaphor Coleridge resorts to in *The Friend* when offering a spectacularly underwhelming rebuttal of the accusation that he is “the Blind offering to lead the Blind”: he remarks that “though all men are in error, they are not all in the same error, nor at the same time” and therefore writer and reader “may possibly heal” each other, “even as two or more physicians, all diseased in their general health yet under the immediate action of the disease on different days, may remove or alleviate the complaints of each other”²¹². A sympathy of mutual sickness does not suggest or inspire much confidence.

The ‘Preface’ to *Lyrical Ballads* best encapsulates the self-thwarting potential of paratext when it attempts not only to codify exponential mental growth, but to decide how far the reader – as judge, peer or disciple – is incorporated into the writer’s ideal

²¹⁰ Wordsworth, ‘Advertisement’, *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), later incorporated into the ‘Preface’(1802), *Prose Works*, i, pp.116-7, p.116.

²¹¹ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1800), ibid, i.150.

²¹² Coleridge, *The Friend*, Essay I, *Collected Works*, iv(i).10.

“capacious mind”. The ‘Preface’ is a ‘founding’ document of the Romantic movement not merely – or perhaps even, not really – due to the abstract principles it sets forth, but rather its groping for an unique authorial voice that must “struggle with” the “awkwardness” of balancing poetry’s principles and practicalities. Such a voice must be educative and endearing, declamatory and intimate, didactic and persuasive, confident and humble, assured but not entrenched, documenting opinions that are fluid enough to change as one’s ‘Genius’ expands. Thus the ‘Preface’ initiates and immediately problematises “The self-defining process which underlies *Lyrical Ballads*”²¹³ as a whole, with Wordsworth abdicating authority just when he tries to assert it. He begins on a note of evasive reluctance, emphasising that he was “unwilling to undertake the task” of theorising his poetry and only did so because “Several of my Friends have advised me to”²¹⁴. He suggests defeatedly that if nothing else the ‘Preface’ absolves him of “the most dishonourable accusation...of an indolence which prevents him from endeavouring to ascertain what is his duty”(122); this negative formulation of avoiding laziness rather than expressing truth emphasises the book’s overall theme of the ‘noble attempt’ – “endeavouring”, if not accomplishing – which is both conventionally modest and personally defensive. But from the outset Wordsworth undermines his own purposes by condemning the “selfish and foolish hope of *reasoning* [the reader]...into an approbation of these particular Poems”(120); the italicisation perhaps implies (his) theory ought to be rooted in feeling rather than reason, though feeling inescapably involves imprecision. With some of that Genette indefiniteness and Malthusian “suspense”, Wordsworth refuses to delineate “the exact import of the promise” a poet “makes to his Reader”, but nevertheless assures us the one thing he is “certain” of is that “many persons” will think “I have not fulfilled the terms of an engagement thus voluntarily contracted”(122). In

²¹³ Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment*, p.11.

²¹⁴ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1800), *Prose Works*, i.120.

another negative statement of intent he writes with lurching convolutedness: “I hope...the Reader will not censure me, if I attempt to state what I have proposed to myself to perform, and also, (as far as the limits of a preface will permit) to explain some of the chief reasons which have determined me in the choice of my purpose”(ibid). All attempts at positive assertions break down into circumlocutory definitions-by-denial, as when he states “I will not suffer a sense of false modesty to prevent me from asserting...”(128).

This stuttering style – falling over mounting verbs, commas and parentheses – is typical of the Preface: Wordsworth’s attempt to tighten the piece with a seemingly more scientific, objective precision of phrasing has the opposite effect of insidiously unravelling his argument in strung-out, wrung-out sentences. The striking contrast between the confident simplicity of the 1798 ‘Advertisement’ and the tortured 1800 ‘Preface’ is evidence of this tendency. The former briskly declares: “The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure”²¹⁵. In 1800 the same sentiments straggle into a single disjointed and contorted sentence, cramped with commas marking endless hedging sub-clauses:

It was published, as an experiment which, I hoped, might be of some use to ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart.

(118).

The alteration from plural “experiments” to the singular “an experiment” indicates his increasing desire to cohere the ballads into a “system”; however, there is a clumsy circularity in the repetition that aims to clarify meaning but instead obstructs the

²¹⁵ Wordsworth, ‘Advertisement’, *Lyrical Ballads*, ibid, i.116.

sentence's flow: "that sort"/"that quantity", "pleasure", "imparted"/"impart", all thrown into the compromised modality of "might" and the cautious "I hoped". The 'Preface' 'hopes' a lot: "I hope it will be found that there is...little falsehood of description"(131), as Wordsworth "hopes the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature"(124) through his "more permanent"(ibid) language. The quantifier "more" of course immediately negates the absolute sense of "permanent", so that there remains a disjunction between natural and linguistic "forms". Wordsworth's faltering sense of purpose is further betrayed by recurrent double negatives, including a hope that his poetry's "moral relations" will be "not unimportant"(120) and the statement that "I had formed no very inaccurate estimate of the probable effect of those Poems"(118). Wordsworth is self-confessedly concerned about the possibility of over-explication, acknowledging that he might have been "culpably particular"(130) and "too minute in pleading my own cause"(150) – contributing to what Perry describes as the Preface's "cluttered"²¹⁶ effect.

This anxiety of verbosity – never having enough space to express one's mental "capacity" – is where Wordsworth and Coleridge are most closely aligned in their prose. In *Biographia* Coleridge admits that "My prose writings have been charged with a disproportionate demand on the attention; with an excess of refinement in the mode of arriving at truths...with the length and laborious construction of my periods", producing "obscurity" from "the toil of thinking"²¹⁷. In *The Friend* Coleridge talks of "an anxiety which may perhaps have misled me into prolixity"²¹⁸ – akin to the "anxiety of explanation" he perceived in Wordsworth. Walter Pater writes that Coleridge's "very language is forced and broken"²¹⁹, a description that could equally apply to Wordsworth

²¹⁶ Perry, *Uses of Division*, p.255.

²¹⁷ Coleridge, *Biographia*, i.220.

²¹⁸ Coleridge, *The Friend*, Essay XIV, *Collected Works*, iv(i), pp.100-106, p.100.

²¹⁹ Walter Pater, 'Coleridge', *Appreciations* (London: Macmillan, 1889), pp.64-106, p.69.

as a chronic feature of his prose. *The Excursion* 'Preface', for example, reveals not much has changed in his tone of measured hesitancy from 1800, the actual object of the sentence being constantly deferred amidst a flurry of prevaricating verbs: "The preparatory poem...conducts the history of the Author's mind to the point when he was emboldened to hope that his faculties were sufficiently mature for entering upon the arduous labour which he had proposed to himself"²²⁰.

This ironic tendency to equivocation and complication in the quest for clarity gives rise to the major uncertainty in the *Lyrical Ballads* 'Preface' regarding poetic modification of the "rustic" voice Wordsworth claims to use. The specificity of the 'Advertisement' discussing "the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes" becomes by 1802 a more indistinct endeavour to depict "the primary laws of our nature...as far as possible, in a selection of the language really used by men"²²¹. The latter phrase is a dilution of the Preface's first sentence regarding "selection of the real language of men" – "language really used" is more conveniently vague than "real language". He implicitly emphasises the distance between author and reader in his repeated determination to only "imitate" the rustic, and the regulatory impulse of "removing what would otherwise be painful or disgusting in the passion"(604). He argues that "selection, wherever it is made with true taste and feeling...will entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life"(602). This lexical "distinction" and "dissimilitude"(ibid) between the mean "ordinary" and the elevated "real" provide "gratification" for the "rational mind"(ibid) – though presumably a "rational mind" not approached by "reasoning", which Wordsworth had dismissed in 1800 as a "foolish" method. He determines instead to "throw over" everyday incidents "a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual

²²⁰ Wordsworth, 'Preface', *The Excursion* (1814), *Prose Works*, p.5.

²²¹ Wordsworth, 'Preface'(1802), *Major Works*, p.596-7.

way”(597). Yet the term “colouring” here sits uncomfortably with its use elsewhere in the ‘Preface’ to disparage the lexical limits of the poetic classes: “the dramatic parts of composition are defective, in proportion as they deviate from the real language of nature, and are coloured by a diction of the Poet’s own”(607). Wordsworth complains of just the kind of separation and “dissimilitude” between nature and representation that he had earlier praised; he even states that poetic language “fall[s] far short of that which is uttered by men in real life, under the actual pressure of...passions” which the poet only “describes and imitates”, rendering his position “slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real...action and suffering”(604). Authorial “colouring” is thus confusedly illuminating and tainting, in the same way that “low and rustic” diction is alternately exalted and excused, “adopted” and “carefully excluded”²²². Such is the fluxing and refluxing when one “imposes a limit on the kind of language which can properly be called ‘real’”²²³ – and when the boundless potential implied in prosaic theory rubs up against the limits of poetic practice.

Wordsworth’s lexical mixing of instinctive and analytical processes exacerbates the strain of “selection”: “if the Poet’s subject be judiciously chosen, it will naturally, and upon fit occasion, lead him to passions the language of which, if selected truly and judiciously, must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures”²²⁴. The poet must proceed and be led “judiciously” and “naturally” to attain those “passions” that are “fit”, producing and produced by “dignified” language that is nevertheless spontaneously “alive”. The struggle to balance or reconcile “the contrary impulses of communitarianism and proprietorialism”²²⁵ is encapsulated in an awkward parenthetical insertion about the rustic language “adopted (purified indeed from what

²²² Ibid (1800), *Prose Works*, p.122.

²²³ Susan Manly, *Language, Custom and the Nation in the 1790s: Locke, Tooke, Wordsworth, Edgeworth* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p.125.

²²⁴ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’ (1802), *Major Works*, i.603.

²²⁵ Manly, *Language, Custom and the Nation*, p.110.

appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived”²²⁶. The immediate modification of “adopted” to “purified” throws into disarray Wordsworth’s repeated extolling of the “real”, and of rustic life absolutely embodying “the best objects” and originating “the best part of language”. Hence Coleridge’s damning judgement of Wordsworth’s “rule” of selection as “useless, if not injurious”²²⁷ in *Biographia*, figuring “purified” language as in fact wholly “re-constructed”(52), rendering its origins obsolete. *Biographia*’s critique interestingly attacks Wordsworth for the kind of universalist thinking that Coleridge had wanted in a “human” reader, emphasising that “Every man’s language varies, according to the extent of his knowledge, the activity of his faculties, and the depth or quickness of his feelings”, having “first, its *individualities*”(55). Coleridge’s contention that there is no “real” language that unites speakers, as Wordsworth claims, tacitly implies that there can be no unified readership that would mark the best kind of writer. Just as the “*lingua communis* of every country....exists every where in parts, and no where as a whole”(56), a writer’s readership is necessarily divided – comprehending of “parts” but perhaps struggling to cohere the “whole” of a work, or body of work. The overarching ideal of “capaciousness”, then – in language, (para)text and audience – in fact involves just as much judicious exclusion as inclusion.

Coleridge believed he was “completely subverting the Theory &...proving that the Poet himself has never acted in it”²²⁸ by pointing out the impossibility of Wordsworth depicting the “real language” of ‘real’ men. Ironically, however, Wordsworth’s being at a remove from “real” diction verbally enacts the narrative pattern of the *Ballads*, in which

²²⁶ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1800), *Prose Works*, i.124.

²²⁷ Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.42.

²²⁸ Coleridge to R.H. Brabant (29 July 1815), *Collected Letters*, iv.579.

the poet is repeatedly – to use Coleridge’s own description – “spectator *ab extra*”²²⁹, observing and framing the lives and voices of others with “the sympathy...of a contemplator, rather than a fellow-sufferer or co-mate”²³⁰. He literally and rhetorically approaches the humble rustic – “brings his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes...for short spaces of time”, correspondingly bringing “my language near to the language of men” – before withdrawing. This is pointedly evidenced in ‘The Pet-Lamb’(1800), where the speaker travels homeward reciting the ballad the maiden had sung – “half of it was hers, and one half of it was ‘mine’”(l.64) – and concludes, “she looked with such a look and she spake with such a tone, / That I almost received her heart into my own”(l.67-8). “Almost”, but not actually; as Donald G. Marshall explains, Wordsworth’s “narrators are not quite personal, not quite impersonal...[he] is a shadowy subject”, his style “a borderland between ordinary...and extraordinary language”²³¹. The uncertainty around adoption or approximation of rustic language is encapsulated in the unwitting ambivalence of the Preface’s statement, “Poets do not write for Poets alone, but for men”²³²: writing *for* others advocates in their interests, and/or speaks in place of them. Attesting to the haziness of this “borderland”, Perry states that Wordsworth as “an extraneous figure” in his narratives is “testing the boundary where poetry runs out, and the accidental and unpoetical external world takes over”²³³, whereas Parrish believes that the dominant outsider-narrator reveals “the limits of Nature’s role in the creative process”²³⁴.

Certain self-conscious tricks of perspective contribute to these “fluxes and refluxes” of critical thought, as the first person speaking voice is interrupted by the narratorial third person, shifting the poem from experience to observation of experience.

²²⁹ Coleridge, *Table Talk* (1835), *Collected Works*, xiv(i).306.

²³⁰ Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.150.

²³¹ Donald G. Marshall, Foreword to Hartman, *Unremarkable Wordsworth*, p.x.

²³² Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1802), *Major Works*, i.608.

²³³ Seamus Perry, ‘Coleridge and Wordsworth: Imagination, Accidence, and Inevitability’, *The New Lyrical Ballads*, pp.169-95, p.183.

²³⁴ Parrish, *Lyrical Ballads*, p.7.

‘The Female Vagrant’, for example, inserts a parenthesis that calls out to be hidden away: “By Derwent’s side my Father’s cottage stood, / (The Woman thus her artless story told)”(1-2), much like the opening monologue in ‘The Brothers’ which is abruptly ruptured by an omniscient voice on line 15: “To Jane, his Wife, / Thus spake the homely Priest of Ennerdale”(15-16). It is a drama of elided and distinguished voices – of immersion and separation – that to Coleridge proved Wordsworth “never sympathized with, any man or event”²³⁵, yet to critics such as Richard Gravil indicated that “no Romantic poet, was ever inclined to suffer so much *with* his characters”²³⁶. “With”, rather than “as”: David Bromwich argues that Wordsworth’s ‘nearness’ constitutes a “consistent...denial that a feeling *about someone* becomes deeper by pretending to be a feeling *from the other person’s point of view*”²³⁷, though Wordsworth ‘throwing his voice’ in the movement between first and third person foregrounds the sense of authorial presence and ‘pretence’. Thus the reader can find their sympathy with the rustic characters disrupted or facilitated by Wordsworth’s distancing. Casting himself as one of the “strangers” to the rural landscape is a vicarious means of initiation into this world for the reader, dramatising an individual’s imaginative “capacity” growing through the experiences of others. But the moments of slight disconnection between Wordsworth-as-narrator and those he meets – cavalierly chopping the tree root “At which the poor old man had so long / And vainly had endeavoured”(l.95-6) in ‘Simon Lee’(1798), for instance – warn the reader about the ease of sympathetic failure, of misinterpretation. He and we are on the cusp of immersion into the community yet keep being confronted by moments of estrangement thanks to the dubious virtue of a “mighty(er?) mind”.

²³⁵ Coleridge, *Table Talk* (1835), *Collected Works*, xiv(i).306.

²³⁶ Richard Gravil, *Wordsworth’s Bardic Vocation, 1787-1842* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.84.

²³⁷ David Bromwich, *Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth’s Poetry of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p.40.

These fluxing and refluxing critical stances on Wordsworth's overflowing or underpowered sympathy indicate how he gets himself into trouble tonally by wanting to meet his reader half way. Often attempts at modesty inadvertently reveal a self-elevation in which the "mighty mind" must lower itself in order to be accessed by "ordinary men", as in the 1802 version of the 'Preface' when, having announced that "Poets do not write for Poets alone, but for men", Wordsworth states: "the Poet must descend from this supposed height, and, in order to excite rational sympathy, he must express himself as other men express themselves"²³⁸. Similarly defending himself against negative reaction to 'The Idiot Boy', he states that "men of a higher rank" must "descend lower among cottages and fields and among children...habitually"²³⁹ before he will countenance their opinions on poetry. He states in *The Excursion* that "Wisdom is oft-times nearer when we stoop / Than when we soar", the Wanderer "Trusting that not incongruously I blend / Low things with lofty"(VII.1046-7). *Biographia* describes "the impassioned, lofty, and sustained diction, which is characteristic of his genius"²⁴⁰, echoing Dorothy's praise for the "lofty tone"²⁴¹ of the 'Preface' and 'Essay, Supplementary' to the 1815 *Poems*. W.J.B. Owen describes Wordsworth's "selection" as "a pruning of the over-abundant eloquence of real life...a *writing-down*" of 'real' men's "excessive vehemence"²⁴². Owen's phrasing recalls Wordsworth's response to criticism of *Poems* (1807): "I am condemned for the very thing for which I ought to have been praised; viz., that I have written down to the level of superficial observers and unthinking minds"²⁴³.

This pronouncement would seem to bear out Coleridge's claim that "for the human soul to prosper in rustic life a certain vantage-ground is pre-requisite...Education, or

²³⁸ Wordsworth, 'Preface'(1802), *Major Works*, p.608.

²³⁹ Wordsworth to John Wilson (7 June 1802), *Letters*, i.355.

²⁴⁰ Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.8.

²⁴¹ Dorothy Wordsworth to Sara Hutchinson (18 February 1815), *Letters*, iii.200.

²⁴² Owen, *Wordsworth's Preface*, p.74.

²⁴³ Wordsworth to George Beaumont (February 1808), *Letters*, ii.195.

original sensibility, or both, must pre-exist”²⁴⁴, undermining the Preface’s ostensible rejection of poets who “think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men”²⁴⁵. In 1802 no sooner does Wordsworth attest plainly that the poet is just “a man speaking to men” than he clarifies: “a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind”²⁴⁶. The deluge of comparatives concludes with the declaration that the poet “rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him”(ibid). Wordsworth recapitulates this sentiment to John Wilson: “[a poet] ought to travel before men occasionally as well as at their sides”, doing “more” than just “reflecting faithfully...the feelings of human nature” by trying “to a certain degree to rectify men’s feelings...to render their feelings more sane pure and permanent”²⁴⁷. The corrective bent of that word “rectify” and the distancing possessive pronoun “their” is the ultimate self-separation from the ‘common man’.

The ambivalence of being one man speaking to and for many men, travelling “before” and beside them, is most pronounced in the tension between the repeated hope for “comprehensive” fellow-feeling and a preoccupation with taste – a faculty that relies on making ‘judicious’ distinctions, defining hierarchies and determining one’s own and others’ aesthetic limits. The primary motivation for linguistic “selection” is to fit the demands of conventional social and literary taste, yet in their repeated discussions of the subject both Wordsworth and Coleridge seek to establish themselves as moral and aesthetic arbiters, aiming to refute the charge of naivety that their professed novelty might prompt. Wordsworth declares to Lady Beaumont, citing Coleridge, “every great and

²⁴⁴ Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.44-5.

²⁴⁵ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1800), *Prose Works*, i.124.

²⁴⁶ Ibid (1802), *Major Works*, p.603.

²⁴⁷ Wordsworth to John Wilson (7 June 1802), *Letters*, i.355.

original writer, in proportion as he is great or original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished; he must teach the art by which he is to be seen”²⁴⁸. Hence Dorothy observes “the power of my Brother’s poems” over Thomas De Quincey’s “lonely and contemplative mind, unwarpd by any established laws of taste...a pure and innocent mind!”²⁴⁹. This is the educative, didactic function of paratext that supports Wordsworth’s belief that “Every great Poet is a Teacher; I wish either to be considered as a Teacher, or as nothing”²⁵⁰, but as ever the conflict between commonly-accepted notions of taste and the poet’s particular criteria lead to “fluxes and refluxes” of confidence played out in the prose.

The 1798 ‘Advertisement’ first invokes the idea of taste in its mainstream sense, offering a pre-emptive apology that simultaneously places Wordsworth and Coleridge outside the boundaries of generally-accepted aesthetic criteria. Thus their prose is decorously self-deprecating but conversely aims to confer on their poetry a kind of immunity from critical condemnation because they are incomparable: “Readers of superior judgment may disapprove of the style in which many of these pieces are executed: it must be expected that many lines and phrases will not exactly suit their taste”²⁵¹. It may appear that “the author has sometimes descended too low, and that many of his expressions are too familiar, and not of sufficient dignity”(ibid). But then a precise lexis of pseudo-objectivity is deployed to make the hasty or complacent reader “temper” their “rashness of decision”: “An accurate taste in poetry, and in all other arts...is an acquired talent, which can only be produced by severe thought, and a long continued intercourse with the best models of composition”(ibid). The ‘Advertisement’ warns that “if poetry be a subject on which much time has not been bestowed, the judgment may be

²⁴⁸ Wordsworth to Lady Beaumont (21 May 1807), *ibid*, ii.150.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid* (6 December 1807), *ibid*, ii.180.

²⁵⁰ Wordsworth to Beaumont (February 1808), *ibid*, ii.195.

²⁵¹ Wordsworth, ‘Advertisement’, *Lyrical Ballads, Prose Works*, i.116.

erroneous”(116-7), suggesting that there is clearly ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ taste. This language of “accurate” and “erroneous” absolutes becomes morally inflected in the 1800 ‘Preface’, as Wordsworth attests that to consider poetic theory one must “determine how far...[the public] taste is healthy or depraved” in relation to “the revolutions not of literature alone but likewise of society itself”(120). He adds in 1802 that if his poetic principles are “carried as far as they must be carried...our moral feelings influencing, and influenced by these judgments will...be corrected and purified”²⁵², though the nation’s aesthetic health had not improved by 1808 when he condemned “the sickly taste of the Public in verse”²⁵³ that prevented poems like ‘Peter Bell’ being appreciated. Coleridge in *Biographia* reaffirms Wordsworth’s rigid morality of taste, whereby “correct and even sensitive” judgements are set against “the contagious familiarity with the far more numerous offspring of tastelessness or of a perverted taste”²⁵⁴.

The irony is that taste should in theory be a shared standard, but it is used by Wordsworth and Coleridge to assert their aesthetic independence and originality – its purpose is more to vindicate and elevate them than to engender intimacy with their readers. Competing notions of taste as passive or active, a universal or elite attribute, instinctively created by the individual or cultivated by the collective, were widely debated at the time. Hazlitt insisted that “Taste is a luxury for the privileged few”²⁵⁵, echoing arguments made by Hume and Schiller that ‘good taste’ must be determined by the social elite²⁵⁶. Whereas Burke maintained in the *Philosophical Enquiry*’s ‘Introduction on Taste’ that it was more a matter of ‘common sense’: “the standard both of reason and

²⁵² Wordsworth, ‘Preface’(1802), *Major Works*, p.603.

²⁵³ Wordsworth to Beaumont (February 1808), *Letters*, ii.194.

²⁵⁴ Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.142.

²⁵⁵ William Hazlitt, ‘On the Conversation of Authors’(1826), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, after A.R. Waller and Arnold Glover, 21 vols. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1930-4), xii, pp.24-44, p.27.

²⁵⁶ David Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’(1757); Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794).

Taste is the same in all human creatures”(196), “So far as Taste is natural, it is nearly common to all”(204), “So far then as Taste belongs to the imagination, its principle is the same in all men”(205) and “the whole ground-work of Taste is common to all”(206). But he nevertheless admits that while “there is no difference in the manner of their being affected, nor in the causes of the affection” there is “in the *degree*...either from a greater degree of natural sensibility, or from a closer and longer attention to the object”(205). Furthermore, “sensibility and judgment...vary exceedingly in various people. From a defect in the former of these qualities, arises a want of Taste; a weakness in the latter, constitutes a wrong or a bad one”(206).

Coleridge’s conception of taste appears, in yet another paradox, to be universally exclusive to the individual: “There is a feeling in every man: there is a deviation, & he knows it, between that which is common to all mankind and that which individualizes him”²⁵⁷. This is recapitulated in the second essay ‘On the Principles of Genial Criticism concerning the Fine Arts’(1814), when he talks of how there may be “a sense, and a regulative principle, which may indeed be stifled and latent in some, and be perverted and denaturalized in others, yet is nevertheless universal in a given state of intellectual and moral culture”²⁵⁸. Recalling Burke, he argues the “regulative principle” is “dependent only on the degree in which the faculties of the mind are developed”(227) – a balanced theory of taste as both shared and unique. Yet Coleridge cannot help but assert the idea of intellectual and imaginative authority – particularly his own – at the heart of his musing:

...it is in the nature of all disquisitions on matters of taste, that the reasoner must appeal for his very premises to facts of feeling and of inner sense, which all men do not possess, and which many, who do possess...them, yet have never...made them objects of a full and distinct consciousness.

(225).

²⁵⁷ John Payne Collier, Notes to Coleridge’s *Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton*, Lecture 8 (12 December 1811), *Collected Works*, v(i).336.

²⁵⁸ Coleridge, ‘Genial Criticism’ II, *ibid*, xi(i), pp.361-5, p.365.

In typical (re)fluxing fashion, the reader is invited to participate in the processes of personal ‘Genius’, but with the teasing conversion of “all” into the negative formulation “all men do not possess” they are reminded that they may not have the poet’s “degree” of privileged insight. Indeed, as though to reinforce this point Coleridge arguably uses determinedly vague phraseology: “It is not necessary, that A or B should judge *at all* concerning poetry; but *if* he does, in order to have a just taste, such and such faculties *must* have been developed in his mind”(ibid). Coleridge does not deign to explain the specifics of “such and such” or “just”, the implication being that if a reader is not in possession of the requisite “inner sense” they should not be reading him in the first place.

This wavering over taste encapsulates the strain of breaking away from “pre-established codes of decision”²⁵⁹ by creating new ones, fashioning oneself as a rebel against and originator of systems of thought. It furthermore draws attention to the ambivalence of paratext’s limitations as detrimental and desirable: Wordsworth and Coleridge are anxious about having a limited audience, yet also want to limit that audience to ensure, paradoxically, that the intellectual exclusivity of their progressively ‘democratic’ approach to poetry is maintained.

IV

“Perhaps ’tis pretty to force together / Thoughts so all unlike each other”(‘Christabel’): Coleridge’s Strategic Formal Fragmentation

In relation to the reader, Wordsworth and Coleridge had difficulty in deciding whether they were “before” or beside *each other*. Wordsworth quite literally struggled to place Coleridge in *Lyrical Ballads*, relegating ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ from the start of the volume and adding a mediatory endnote in 1800 to excuse its “great defects” of

²⁵⁹ Wordsworth, ‘Advertisement’, *Lyrical Ballads, Prose Works*, p.116.

character, narrative and “laboriously accumulated”²⁶⁰ imagery. His unease stemmed from the poem’s “old words and...strangeness” which “deterred readers from going on” and offended “the common taste”²⁶¹ he had supposedly disregarded, perhaps not trusting his audience after all to persevere in the “struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness” promised in the ‘Advertisement’. In 1847 Wordsworth stated that he had given “some assistance...in planning the poem” and had even written “a few verses”, but “our styles agreed so little, that I withdrew from the concern”²⁶², a path of divergence and discord that parallels the pair’s initial emphasis on collaboration for the *Ballads* ‘Preface’ before Coleridge dramatically “withdrew” from its assertions in *Biographia*. Wordsworth’s concern over ‘Rime’ – and wider accusations of the whole volume’s “rather precious cleverness”²⁶³ – demonstrates a major tension between the two writers regarding obscurity and how far it is lessened or heightened by integrating prose into poetry. While Wordsworth’s paratextual insertions, great or small, have an impetus towards explanation and ingratiation, Coleridge’s more dramatic, playful and insidious formal experiments reveal how prose elements can deliberately obstruct simple communication in order to test the merit of one’s readers.

Coleridge’s numerous statements about the essential difficulty of literary expression and interpretation have an intriguing parallel in Malthus’ insistence on “the necessity of constant exertion”²⁶⁴. Malthus talks of how “Evil exists in the world not to create despair, but activity”(158) which “seems evidently necessary to create mind”(145), frequently “awaken[ing] faculties that might have otherwise lain for ever dormant”(149). Thus “the difficulties of life contribute to generate talents”(ibid), a state of “universal exertion” producing “that infinite variety of situations, and consequently of impressions,

²⁶⁰ Wordsworth, endnote to ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, *Lyrical Ballads* (London, 1800).

²⁶¹ Wordsworth to Joseph Cottle (24 June 1799), *Letters*, i.264.

²⁶² Wordsworth, ‘Autobiographical Memoranda’(1847), *Prose Works*, iii.374.

²⁶³ Purkis, *Preface to Wordsworth*, p.101.

²⁶⁴ Malthus, *Population*, p.394.

which seems, upon the whole, favourable to the growth of mind”(147-8), if not of material resources. Coleridge repeatedly applies this concept, noting in 1827 that “*intension and attention cannot be united in the same act without a great & to most minds a painful Effort*”²⁶⁵ on behalf of both reader and writer. He asserts in *The Friend* that “No real information can be conveyed, no important errors rectified...without requiring some effort or thought on the part of the reader”²⁶⁶. He condemns the “aversion to all intellectual effort” as “the mother evil of all which I had proposed to war against”(ibid), insisting that “In the establishment of principles and fundamental doctrines, I must of necessity require the attention of my reader to become my fellow-labourer”(21). The source of his objection to “the mere excitement of curiosity and sensibility” that novel-reading offers is that “the habit of receiving pleasure without any exertion of thought” encourages intellectual indolence, reducing readers’ “understandings to a deplorable imbecility”(ibid). Wordsworth shares this sentiment in theory when explaining in ‘Essay, Supplementary’ that “Passion...is derived from a word which signifies suffering...the connection which suffering has with effort, with exertion, and *action*, is immediate and inseparable”²⁶⁷. But Coleridge is arguably more eager to practically pursue such “exertion” through integrating the authorial-editorial prose voice into the fabric of many of his poems, exploiting and simultaneously overstepping the boundaries between ‘text’ and ‘paratext’. So when ‘On Poesy or Art’ proclaims that “victory or strife is necessary” for “life” and artistic “beauty” – because “virtue consists not simply in the absence of vices, but in the over-coming of them” – Coleridge stipulates that “what is subordinated and conquered...should be exhibited by the artist either inclusively in his figure, or else out of it, and beside it to act by way of supplement and contrast”²⁶⁸. Coleridge’s ancillary authorial-editorial insertions

²⁶⁵ Coleridge (July 1827), *Notebooks*, v.5533.

²⁶⁶ Coleridge, *The Friend*, Essay III, *Collected Works*, iv(i), pp.18-24, p.22.

²⁶⁷ Wordsworth, ‘Essay, Supplementary’, *Prose Works*, iii.81.

²⁶⁸ Coleridge, ‘On Poesy or Art’, *Biographia* (1907), ii.262-3.

serve as a form of fracturing “supplement and contrast”, included in the overall body of the poem yet simultaneously “out of it” and “beside it”.

Coleridge’s famous principle of “Multitū in Unity”²⁶⁹ ideally leads to “a climax up to the perfect form of a harmonized chaos”²⁷⁰. The formal fragmentation produced by juxtaposing prose and poetry might help achieve this, while foregrounding the agony of writing as a process of disassembling – and dissembling – as much as ‘harmonising’ disparate imaginative elements. The performative ‘Preface’ to ‘Kubla Khan’ encompasses and aestheticises the ambivalence of fragmentation as both a “psychological curiosity”²⁷¹ and compositional difficulty – it embodies “oscillation’s very self”²⁷², according to Elisabeth Schneider. The work “fluxes and refluxes” between tendencies to construct and dismantle: the presence of a ‘Preface’ attempts to provide a context that places the two verses in the more substantial and unified whole of a ‘dream-vision’, yet the content of this ‘Preface’ defines the work as partial, “some eight or ten scattered lines and images” reconstituted from “some vague and dim recollection of the general purpose of the vision”²⁷³. While the ‘Preface’ seems eager to depict the poet labouring under a lack of imaginative material, the poem’s landscape dramatises a mind suffering from “Too much” stimulation, uncertain about how to order or where to place its diverse (in)sights. The ‘Preface’ to ‘Christabel’ – originally published alongside ‘Kubla Khan’ – in which Coleridge defends himself from the charge of plagiarism by stating “there are such things as fountains in the world, small as well as great”(vi), inflects our conception of Xanadu’s “mighty fountain momentarily...forced” from “this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething”(l.19, 17). Coleridge figures the fitfulness and fleetingness of mental exertion –

²⁶⁹ Coleridge, ‘Genial Criticism’ III, *Collected Works*, xi.372.

²⁷⁰ Coleridge, ‘On Poesy or Art’, *Biographia* (1907), p.262.

²⁷¹ Coleridge, ‘Preface’ to ‘Kubla Khan’, *Christabel; Kubla Khan, a Vision; The Pains of Sleep* (London: John Murray, 1816), p.51.

²⁷² Elisabeth Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium, and Kubla Khan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p.91.

²⁷³ Coleridge, ‘Preface’, ‘Kubla Khan’(1816), p.53.

imagination and its expression – through the fountain’s “half-intermitted burst”(1.20), wherein “Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail, / Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail”(1.21-2). It is a “chaos” seeking its “perfect form” – perhaps the Wordsworthian “mighty influx” described in ‘Epitaphs’: “’mid these dancing rocks at once and ever / It flung up momentarily the sacred river”(1.23-4). Notably the river’s life lies in “a mazy motion”(1.25), rather than the shapeless, “measureless”(1.28) fixity of “a lifeless ocean”(1.27): energy relies on the movement towards an ever-retreating stable formal “receptacle”. It is a state of scattered profusion and necessary confusion in which some revelations “[pass] away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone had been cast”(53), but others remain, for reasons that are not understood yet must be trusted.

This is dissatisfying, however, for the author who wishes to publish – to “*present*”(Genette) the poem to the world – and be read critically by those desiring conclusive coherence. Hence Hazlitt determines Coleridge’s “fault” is “that he comes to no conclusion...from an excess of capacity, he does little or nothing”, resulting in “nonsense verse”²⁷⁴. For Coleridge, merely acknowledging the insufficiency of excess paradox is laudable given that it seems irreconcilable. If he cannot beat it he will attempt to gain “some” compensatory ‘control’ through a ‘Preface’ that forces the *reader* into the poet’s overloaded state of mind, trying to distinguish the vital from the superfluous in synthesising moods and “Thoughts to all unlike”²⁷⁵ across the prose and poetry. With the distraction of the ‘person from Porlock’ as possibly one of literature’s most famous red herrings, the shifting from biographical retrospective in the ‘Preface’ to imaginative reverie in the first verse to projected imaginative retrospective in the second leaves the reader “seething”, flailing, “rebounding” and “dancing” in the hope of “some” momentary

²⁷⁴ Hazlitt, Review of *Christabel*, &c. (*Examiner*, 2 June 1816), quoted in Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Darker Reflections, 1804–1834* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), p.434.

²⁷⁵ Coleridge, ‘Christabel’(1817), 1.667.

insight amidst some chaff, the drawing together of some fragmented lines and images that might stretch the mind's "capacity". By rupturing the poem's reverie with the prosaic practicalities of his everyday life outside the "dome" in the 'Preface', Coleridge becomes the reader's 'person from Porlock', drawing attention to the inherently compromised nature not only of authorial composition, but audience interpretation.

This same mimetic fracturing of the reading experience occurs in the revised 'Ancient Mariner' published with marginal annotations in *Sibylline Leaves* (1817), itself a collection of Coleridge's poems that had "long suffered to remain" in a "fragmentary and widely scattered state" from 1793 onwards, "with the exception of a few works not yet finished"²⁷⁶. The Latin epigraph to the poem, from Thomas Burnet's *Archaeologiae Philosophicae* (1692), discusses how "the human mind has always circled the knowledge" of "invisible" creatures in the universe but "never touched" it definitively. This sense of hesitant approach and dissociation from the divinely supernatural is literalised in the 'editorial' commentary circling the poem, which, like the 'Kubla Khan' 'Preface', aims to mediate the "strange" narrative action yet in so doing creates an even more disjointedly perplexing structure as the reader tries to balance the work's 'internal' and 'external' realities. As Perry observes, the marginal gloss implies "the fear of incoherence" whilst simultaneously revealing that "ideas of interpretation and fallibility are abroad"²⁷⁷. The meta-level fluxing and refluxing between Coleridge's authorial and editorial personae parallel the abrupt transitions between the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest, illuminating a tension over who 'owns' or is ultimately at the centre of the poem's moral: does the predominant power and purpose of the tale lie with its teller or its listener? Is the most capacious "mighty mind" one that imparts or gleans truths that make us "sadder and wiser"? Does the origin-"fountain" of the poet's 'Genius' lead to the dead-end of a

²⁷⁶ Coleridge, 'Preface', *Sibylline Leaves: A Collection of Poems* (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), p.i.

²⁷⁷ Perry, *Uses of Division*, p.285.

stagnant reader, or does the reader have the “capacity” to keep in motion the imaginative fragments “flung up” by a fevered author, “Up-starting from the fiendish crowd / Of shapes and thoughts that tortured me”²⁷⁸? O’Neill observes that Coleridge needs to be read with as much “vigilance” as “sympathy”: “Vigilant openness might describe Coleridge’s own approach to aesthetic enquiry”²⁷⁹. The disorientating movement between the marginalia and the poem in ‘Rime’ ensures this kind of uncomfortable alertness; the reader as “fellow-labourer” is tasked with trying to distinguish “the certain from the uncertain, day from night”, as Burnet urges in the Epigraph, reflecting the struggle of both the Mariner and the Wedding Guest to do the same.

The “reflux” of genuine insecurity about how to formally contain “Too much” is a defensively teasing playfulness. *Biographia Literaria* most overtly indicates how Coleridge’s strategic fragmentation involves a keen self-ironising that aims to pre-empt and undercut criticism of his excessiveness – or “nonsense”, as Hazlitt termed it. Humour is at once inclusive and exclusive: it is a sympathy of covert collaboration, the pleasure of which relies on estranging part of the audience. Originally intended to preface *Sibylline Leaves*, *Biographia* grew out of proportion so that it had to stand alone as a work of criticism; Blades describes it as an attempt to “coadunate philosophy, literary theory, memoir, religion and psychology with autobiography”, displaying “shades...of *Tristram Shandy*, *Don Quixote* and *Hamlet*”²⁸⁰. Coleridge self-consciously emphasises the patchwork construction of different modes and subjects in the Shandyan mould of tangential verbosity – “the very form of [Sterne’s] genius”²⁸¹ – with “A chapter of digression and anecdotes” and “A Chapter of requests and premonitions concerning the

²⁷⁸ Coleridge, ‘The Pains of Sleep’, l.16-17.

²⁷⁹ O’Neill, *Self-Conscious Poem*, p.71.

²⁸⁰ Blades, *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, p.249-50.

²⁸¹ Coleridge, Notes for *Lectures on European Culture*, Lecture 9 (24 February 1818), *Collected Works*, v(ii), pp.171-7, p.177.

perusal or omission of the chapter that follows”²⁸². Coleridge’s most Sternean moment is the faux-letter critiquing Chapter XIII, claiming it is incomprehensible and advising him to abort it; here is a more overtly comic rendering of the ‘person from Porlock’ motif applied to Coleridge’s critical thinking rather than poetic imagination. Because he has “done too much, and yet not enough”(303) he has been “obliged to omit so many links, from the necessity of compression, that what remains, looks...like the fragments of the winding steps of an old ruined tower”(ibid). The alternating effect of the letter is to explicitly address self-doubt about “the study of so abstruse a subject so abstrusely treated” constituting an “imposition”(ibid) on the reader, yet also to convey the confident belief that the thoughtful reader will be amused by the fact that the letter is itself an “imposition” that *enacts* the problems of philosophical definition that the chapter (necessarily) fails to *describe*. Coleridge seeks a reader he can trust to appreciate that behind the self-proclamations of “immethodical...miscellany”²⁸³ lies an awareness of “the whole that he...intends to communicate. However irregular and desultory his talk, there is *method* in the fragments”²⁸⁴.

Furthermore, the most sympathetically-vigilant reader will understand that *they* are one of the contributory fragments to an ideal work’s “harmonized chaos” in poetry and prose. This is perhaps best evidenced in ‘The Blossoming of the Solitary Date Tree’(1805), a curious partial poem about a man lamenting his absent lover that invites the reader to ‘complete’ it by imaginatively reconstructing its unwritten verses. First published in an 1828 collection of poems directly after ‘Rime’ and ‘Christabel’, in a section entitled ‘Prose in Rhyme: or, Epigrams, Moralities, and Things Without a Name’, it begins with a prefatory notice establishing the work as a fragment because apparently “the first leaf of the MS. from which the poem has been transcribed, and which contained

²⁸² Coleridge, *Biographia*, i.232, 168.

²⁸³ Ibid, i.84.

²⁸⁴ Coleridge, *The Friend*, Section the Second, Essay III, *Collected Works*, iv(i).449.

the two or three introductory stanzas, is wanting”²⁸⁵. Coleridge states that he has “in vain taxed his memory to repair the loss” and instead can only provide prose summaries of the lost stanzas in “rude draught” form as a “substitute”(ibid). He then obliquely suggests that “It is not impossible, that some congenial spirit...may find a pleasure in restoring the Lament to its original integrity by a reduction of the thoughts to the requisite Metre”(ibid), making it whole once again. The conceit of the poem is that the forlorn lover – with “no hand to grasp nor arms to embrace”(II) seeks the fulfilment of his ‘other half’, the title alluding to “a fact mentioned by Linnaeus, of a Date-tree in a nobleman’s garden” which flowered but “never produced fruit, till a branch from a Date-tree had been conveyed from a distance of some hundred leagues”(ibid). The ‘Preface’ talks of “the yearning of the soul for its answering image and completing counterpart”(97), and Coleridge’s ideal “congenial” reader apprehends the rhetorical and formal game as the poem requires their reciprocal creativity to be its “completing counterpart” – to bring it to fruition. A lecture ‘On Shakespeare and Milton’ provides a useful insight into this methodical miscellany, whereby exertion fosters mental growth: “You [the reader] feel him to be a poet inasmuch as, for a time, he has made you one – an active creative being”²⁸⁶. The reader and not only the work “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create”, according to *Biographia*’s definition of the “secondary Imagination” that “struggles to idealise and to unify”²⁸⁷. If Wordsworth’s paratextual incursions intend to guide the reader under the auspices of the omniscient authorial-editorial voice, Coleridge’s experiments with integrating prose into his poems seem more interested in exploiting internal tension as an ‘openly vigilant’ expression of the fraught writing process. He aims to mimetically present the balance and (re)flux – the reconciliation and division – of imaginative and

²⁸⁵ Coleridge, ‘Preface’ to ‘The Blossoming of the Solitary Date Tree’, *The Poetical Works of S.T. Coleridge*, 3 vols. (London: William Pickering, 1828), ii, pp.97-8, p.98.

²⁸⁶ J. Tomalin’s Notes on Coleridge’s *Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton*, Lecture 4 (28 November 1811), *Collected Works*, v(i).251.

²⁸⁷ Coleridge, *Biographia*, i.304.

critical faculties, inspiration and composition, a writer's and reader's "capacity" to "fuse, each to each" by the "synthetic" power of the "mighty mind". In order to do this, though, he risks alienating as many readers as he inveigles into his formal "awkwardness".

V

"the necessity...of compromise"(*The Friend*): Reconciling Oneself to Excessive Insufficiency

If Coleridge sought to blur the distinction between 'text' and 'paratext' psychologically and literally, Wordsworth gradually widened it. It appears that over time he became increasingly aware of and anxious about the discrepancies between his poetic theory and practice, diminishing and displacing his 'supplementary' material in later collections. Charles Lamb's comments on the inclusion of the 'Preface' in *Lyrical Ballads* may have contributed to this reticence: he "wished the critical preface had appeared in a separate treatise" because although "All its dogmas are true and just...they associate a *diminishing* idea with the Poems...as having been written for *Experiment* on the public taste, more than having sprung...from living and daily circumstances"²⁸⁸. Lamb's concern is that the 'Preface' deleteriously prejudices the reader's expectation of what is to follow by throwing a covering of affectation and artifice over the poems. With this in mind, the 1807 *Poems* contain no introductory matter, while the 'Preface' to *The Excursion* is at pains to point out that "It is not the Author's intention formally to announce a system"²⁸⁹. Instead he takes the "more animating" route of placing greater responsibility on the reader to organise meaning: "if...[the poet] shall succeed in conveying to the mind clear thoughts, lively images, and strong feelings, the Reader will have no difficulty in extracting the system for himself"(ibid). It is a notable mark of his rhetorical slipperiness

²⁸⁸ Charles Lamb (30 January 1801), quoted in *Wordsworth: The Major Works*, p.739.

²⁸⁹ Wordsworth, 'Preface', *The Excursion, Prose Works*, iii.6.

that Wordsworth seems to renounce systematising only to vicariously reassert it: he wants to own and disown his authority at once.

This oscillating assertiveness presents itself again in *Poems* (1815), where the *Ballads* 'Preface' is included but relegated to the end of the second volume because, the new edition's 'Preface' haltingly tells us, his early observations "have so little of a special application to the greater part, perhaps, of this collection, as subsequently enlarged and diversified, that they could not with any propriety stand as an Introduction to it"²⁹⁰. He returns to the language of stiff formality and negative definition, "Not deeming it...expedient to suppress that exposition, slight and imperfect as it is, of the feelings...and the principles which had regulated the composition of those Pieces" in 1798. He concludes with the ultimate equivocation that the 'Preface' can "be attended to, or not, at the pleasure of the Reader"(ibid). Again, the onus – and something of the accountability – for Wordsworth's theoretical tenets is transferred to the reader. Coleridge picked up on this trembling sub-clause when dissecting his (former) friend's endemic uncertainty in *Biographia*, wryly noting that "Mr. Wordsworth...[has] degraded this prefatory disquisition to the end...to be read or not at the reader's choice"²⁹¹. The 1847 edition of *The Poems of William Wordsworth* gathers the prose almost as an afterthought-miscellany under the rather perfunctory title, 'APPENDIX, PREFACES, ETC. ETC.'. The introduction to this section argues that, given most of the poems have "been so long before the Public", no explanation of their content or arrangement is "required"²⁹². He attests with another self-negating self-assertion that "had it not been for the observations contained in those Prefaces upon the principles of Poetry in general they would not have been reprinted even as an Appendix in this Edition"(ibid). Here Wordsworth makes a virtue of the gulf between his "principles" and practices, suggesting

²⁹⁰ Wordsworth, 'Preface', *Poems* (1815), ibid, iii.23.

²⁹¹ Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.10.

²⁹² Wordsworth, *The Poems of William Wordsworth* (London: Moxon, 1847), p.567.

the critical prose offers a separate yet equivalent meaning and value from the immersive poetry. But that persistent “counter-voice” conveys a casual disdain for what it clings to, throwing the sentence back on itself: ‘I would disregard my prose except for the fact that it is insightful and educative’, seems to be the strained message. Wordsworth anticipates a sympathetic audience – one familiar with his poems’ origins – yet defensively dismisses his Prefaces as inoffensively forgettable, capable of being edited out of his oeuvre by disapproving or indifferent readers. Almost.

It is a fitting irony that Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s paratext and poetry often mutually reinforce each other – an understanding of the prose helps us to clarify and characterise much in the poetry. But the affinity lies in a shared sense of insecurity, in wildly consistent “fluxes and refluxes” of thought. The strain between prose and verse, and within different types of paratext, draws attention to the poetry’s insidiously pervasive reservations. This is a harmony of discord, of self-division: as the poetry and prose act and react on each other, we perceive their shared tendency for a striking axiom that is enveloped by anxious modality and a few too many qualifying words, which we will return to in Chapter Three. The further irony is that Wordsworth does not realise this union of self-doubt in his struggle to overcome limitation *and* recognise his limits so that he can make constructive use of the imagination. Coleridge did realise the ease with which attempts at critical ‘containment’ could proliferate out of control for writer and reader alike, so emphasised these internal tensions in order to both dictate and appeal to an alert reader capable of understanding, and even sharing in, the see-sawing sensibilities of a poet-philosopher. Coleridge states the ideal in *Biographia*: “Would that the criterion of a scholar’s utility were the number and moral value of the truths” he has “[thrown] into the general circulation” and the minds he has “excited into activity”²⁹³. But he admits with

²⁹³ Coleridge, *Biographia*, i.220.

not a little Wordsworthian convolution, “I may perhaps have had sufficient reason to lament my deficiency in self-controul [*sic*], and the neglect of concentrating my powers to the realization of some permanent work”(221). This schism between ideal and real is glossed in *The Friend*, where Coleridge discusses how “Genius” is “the initiative”, “Talent the administrative” and “Sense...the *conservative*, branch, in the intellectual republic”²⁹⁴. Critical “Sense” is arguably the domain of paratext, and Coleridge describes it as “a feeling of the necessity and utility of *compromise*”(ibid) – the “undefined zone”(Genette) that aims to balance internal “Genius” and publicised “Talent”, all the time remaining “in sympathy with the *general mind* of the age or country”(ibid). This compromise might lie in conceiving of the “mighty mind” as one that changes, swerves, oscillates. As Coleridge requests of “any Stranger” that might come across his “Fly-Catcher” journals, “let him read them not as asserted truths but as processes of a mind working toward truth”, in which “the occasional *positiveness* of the language” is “yet quite compatible with...[a] co-present, sense of the probability of my being in error, or at least of half-truth”²⁹⁵. Owen describes Wordsworth’s belief that “the task of the poet” is to “assist the reader so to add to himself, to add to his own store of power”²⁹⁶; Owen’s indeterminate phrasing suggests that the writer adds to his own “store” – or “capacity” – by adding to the reader’s, in an ideal kind of fluxing and refluxing. But a comment in Coleridge’s Notebook best exposes the inescapably fearful as well as hopeful motivation behind paratextual “processes”, for both poets: “the imagination goes on adding and adding, and if to hide from itself its perpetual failure...Why not more yet?”²⁹⁷.

²⁹⁴ Coleridge, *The Friend*, Section the Second, Essay I: ‘Postscript’, *Collected Works*, iv(i), pp.419-23, p.420.

²⁹⁵ Coleridge (September 1830), *Notebooks*, v.6450.

²⁹⁶ Owen, *Wordsworth as Critic*, p.215.

²⁹⁷ Coleridge (January 1811), *Notebooks*, iii.4047.

CHAPTER TWO

“Great faults...may grow out of great virtues in excess”(‘Style’): De Quincey’s Struggle for Syntactical Order

I

“something of the grandeur which belongs *potentially* to human dreams”(‘*Suspiria*): When Infinite Scope meets Finite Syntax

De Quincey shared his poetic idols’ desire for a “capacious mind”¹, optimistically aiming to exponentially expand the scope of his intellect and worldly experience. As early as 1806, aged twenty-one and possessing the (over)confidence of youth, he outlined his first two of twelve ‘Constituents of Happiness’ as: “1. A capacity of thinking – i.e. of abstraction” and “2. The cultiv[atio]n. of an interest in all that concerns human life and human nature”². There is a strain here between the indefinite articles “A capacity...an interest”, implying partial knowledge, and the totalising vastness of the abstract nouns “thinking”, “abstraction”, “life” and “nature”; but the realisation that “all” humanity cannot be comprehended fuels rather than suppresses De Quincey’s grand ambitions. The ethos of infinite education is compounded by present participles pulsing through the fifth ‘Constituent’, which describes how books inculcate

the consciousness of intellectual advancement (in which are involved the consciousness of extending the scale of means instrumental to happiness...and also of extending one’s hold on the respect of men both on account of the actual increase of respectability and also on account of the increasing power of enforcing one’s claims by conversation and letters.)

(ibid).

¹ Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, II.53.

² De Quincey, ‘Constituents of Happiness’(18 August 1806), *Works*, i, pp.70-6, p.72.

The length of De Quincey's parenthetical sentence extends with every opportunity books afford, enacting his ninth 'Constituent', "A vast predominance of contempl[atio]n"(73) – contemplation so predominant that the practicalities of syntactical construction, like punctuation marks, are overlooked and replaced by the eager refrain "and also". The sentence "extends" apace as the excitement of "intellectual advancement" takes "hold".

De Quincey relentlessly develops his theme in "this addition to my specul[atio]ns. at Coniston"(74) where, with the same abandonment of commas and embracement of the insatiable "and", his lengthy sentence ranges high and low to express

a deep interest in those exhaustless and most lofty subjects of human life and human nature: to these are allied and ministerial all branches of moral science as well as records of human transactions and all that part of history from the found[in]g. of the world and of voyages and travels which records the varieties and traces the revolutions of human nature as exhibiting itself in the forms of manners – customs – literature &c.

(75).

There is a continual process of subdivision in the attempt to fix definitions with the six-times-repeated "of", which strains against the conflating impulse of seven "and"s alongside an "as well as". The tension between partial and whole discovery – reaffirming the inevitably "exhaustless" nature of cultivating "a deep interest" – is encapsulated in the oxymoronic phrase "all that part", apparently referring without irony to that bit of history from "the found[in]g. of the world" to the present. The endlessness of the task is partly enacted by the shorthand "&c.", which signifies prolific possibility extending beyond manageable articulation. Crucially there is an outward-looking momentum in these breathless speculations, as De Quincey finds in "the history of my own mind...The sudden swell and growth of my interest in the origin of associ[atio]n amongst men"(ibid), associations made more readily without the obstacles of punctuation marks that divide and order thought. No doubt De Quincey found a stimulus for this "swell and growth" in Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "a natural delineation of human passions, human

characters, and human incidents”³. De Quincey described *Lyrical Ballads* as “the greatest event in the unfolding of my own mind...an absolute revelation of untrodden worlds”⁴, indicating the tense nature of De Quinceyan learning as both a continual process – “unfolding” – and a fulfilled accomplishment, implied by “absolute revelation”. This discovery of “untrodden worlds” informs the pronouncement in ‘Constituents of Happiness’ that “the grand object” of education is to “cultivate an interest in humanity”⁵ – everything rooted in, yet extending beyond, oneself.

But whereas Wordsworth was at pains to present the rustic as the “pure archetype of human greatness”⁶, De Quincey’s “human-heartedness”⁷ was at home in the city, a site of unprecedented expansion with “astonishing rapidity” that “far exceeded all prior example”⁸ in the industrialised nineteenth century. By 1851 54% of the population of England and Wales was classified as urban⁹, and London was the most populous city in Europe¹⁰; by 1831 one-fifth of the Scottish population lived in Edinburgh¹¹, which became one of the “principal cities of Europe”¹². Despite his residence at Dove Cottage from 1809 to 1820, De Quincey spent the majority of his life in metropolitan surroundings, writing for such an audience: born in Manchester, he found fame in London with ‘Confessions’ and lived in Edinburgh from 1830 until his death¹³, contributing to the *London Magazine*, *Edinburgh Evening Post*, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, *Edinburgh Literary Gazette*, *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*, *Macphail’s Edinburgh*

³ Wordsworth, ‘Advertisement’, *Lyrical Ballads, Prose Works*, i.116.

⁴ De Quincey, ‘Samuel Taylor Coleridge’ (*Tait’s*, September 1834, pp.509-20), *Works*, x, pp.287-308, p.287.

⁵ ‘Constituents of Happiness’, *ibid*, i.76.

⁶ Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, III.951.

⁷ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1805), IV.225.

⁸ Thomas Allen, *The Panorama of London* (London, c.1840), p.79.

⁹ James Walvin, *English Urban Life 1776-1851* (London: Hutchinson, 1984), p.8-9.

¹⁰ James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin (eds.), *Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780-1840* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), p.2.

¹¹ A.J. Youngson, *The Making of Classical Edinburgh, 1750-1840* (1966; repr. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), p.40.

¹² Allen, *Panorama of London*, p.2.

¹³ Grevel Lindop, *The Opium-Eater: A Life of Thomas De Quincey* (1981; repr. London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1993).

Ecclesiastical Journal, *Glasgow Athenaeum Album*, *North British Review* and *Hogg's Instructor* over forty years. He perceived such intricate and rapidly-growing urban environments as fostering and realising the scale of man's intellectual and practical ambition. Here "all that concerns human life and human nature" is housed, a place of "exhaustless" profusion and variety in "manners – customs – literature &c."; the city might even be defined as the "natural" locus of "Too much" – of "excess in every form"¹⁴, as Peter Ackroyd describes London. In the 'Postscript' to 'On Murder' the sprawl of the "infinite metropolis" heightens the Sublimity of the crime, both as a practical aid to the murderer's retreat – "means of disguise Williams now had in excess"¹⁵ – and as spreading the contagion of "public excitement...everywhere burning for ampler information"(54). Turning to literature, in 'The English Language'(1839) De Quincey attests that it is "philosophically impossible" for any "fine or copious language" to be cultivated by "savage people" or "a nation...subsisting chiefly...by agriculture" because they are too "sequestered and monotonous in their habits"¹⁶. Rather, "a language of power and compass cannot arise except amongst cities and the habits of luxurious people", since "Social gatherings, social activity...are the parents of language"(ibid). Notably this "power and compass" is characterised in the city by a sense of variety in component parts – the 'wholeness' of "humanity" breaks down into individual places, people and moments of "interest". In his jaunt through the capital in 1821, the journalist Pierce Egan declares that "There is not a street in London but what may be compared to a large or small volume of intelligence, abounding with anecdote, incident, and

¹⁴ Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (London: Vintage Books, 2000), p.389.

¹⁵ De Quincey, 'Postscript' [To 'On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts'], *Selections Grave and Gay* iv(i): *Miscellanies, Chiefly Narrative* (1854, pp.60-111), *Works*, xx, pp.36-74, p.67.

¹⁶ De Quincey, 'The English Language' (*Blackwood's*, XLV, April 1839, pp.455-62), *ibid*, xi, pp.322-32, p.331.

peculiarities”¹⁷. Walter Bagehot, meanwhile, stated of the city’s diversity that “London is like a newspaper: everything is there and everything is disconnected”¹⁸.

As something between the “large or small volume” and the newspaper, “abounding” with “disconnected” intelligence from multiple sources, the periodical is the prime literary mode for aspirational urban culture. It gathers together all manner of subject matter and authorial voice in a portable form for a wide audience, published regularly to keep pace with the perpetual “fluxes and refluxes” in political fortunes and aesthetic tastes dictated by city-dwellers. It is an urgent genre energised by the rapacious demand for *more*, and therefore appealed to De Quincey’s conception of “intellectual advancement” as socialised and sociable. During the 1820s alone two hundred periodicals were issued spanning a “vast” array of topics, from politics, history and biography to theology, science, sport and art¹⁹. Josephine Bauer attributes the increasing popularity of the medium to industrial growth and urban expansion: “The rapid increase of wealth and population had made for a greater circulation”, aided by “the mastery of steam power to the service of printing and locomotion”(34-5). Meanwhile “the concentration of workers in the manufacturing towns...created new and pressing problems to engage men’s attention”, fostering both a greater variety of subject matter and “a new reading public”(ibid). Bauer asserts that the *London Magazine*, which published ‘Confessions’ in 1821, was “deliberately urban” in tone, “London being the point of reference for all articles”(64). But De Quincey conceived of it as having a broader reach: when he drafted a plan to include “A greater variety of articles”²⁰ in the magazine – including many on the “vast region”(356) of German literature – he argued that broadening the compass of readers’ knowledge and taste befitted a periodical

¹⁷ Pierce Egan, *Life in London* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1822), p.24.

¹⁸ Walter Bagehot, quoted in Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (1994; repr. London: Penguin, 2000), p.280.

¹⁹ Josephine Bauer, *The London Magazine 1820-29* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1953), p.35.

²⁰ De Quincey, ‘On the *London Magazine*’(1821, unpublished), *Works*, iii, pp.349-59, p.357.

emblematising not only London, but the flourishing nation and empire. As the journal's "influence grows...with the support of men of various talent", he wrote, "it may gain the power of giving a new direction for many important purposes with activities of the national mind" and thereby become "worthy of the great Empire to which it is addressed"(359). De Quincey's desire to represent "The Nation of London"²¹ is echoed by James Elmes' *Metropolitan Improvements* (1829), which asserts that modern London is not "the metropolis of England alone, but...the metropolis and mart of...Great Britain and Ireland, of our immense colonies..."²². In this sense London was "extending its hold on the respect of men" from the imposing physical profusion of 10,000 streets, and 250,000 buildings in 1840²³, to "the idea of London"²⁴ – the kind of "abstraction" that is De Quincey's first 'Constituent of Happiness'. The philosopher-sociologist Georg Simmel attests, "The most significant characteristic of the metropolis is [its] functional extension beyond its physical boundaries", providing "the sensory foundations of psychic life"²⁵, and for De Quincey the thriving city is the primary environment "capacious" enough to facilitate intellectual growth, and a correspondent stylistic freedom.

Simmel argues that "The horizon of the city expands...[in much the same way that] wealth develops; a certain amount of property increases in a quasi-automatic way in ever more rapid progression", and concomitantly "the economic, personal, and intellectual relations of the citizenry, the sphere of intellectual predominance of the city...grow as in geometrical progression"(419). The city, then, exhibits an exponential expansion of geographic and mental "capacity" with a "quasi-automatic" spontaneity

²¹ De Quincey, *Autobiographic Sketches* VII: 'The Nation of London', *Gave and Gay* i (1853), *ibid*, xix, pp.109-31, p.109.

²² James Elmes, *Metropolitan Improvements* (London, 1829), p.104.

²³ Allen, *Panorama of London*, p.3.

²⁴ Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *London: The Unique City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1937, rev.1982), p.113.

²⁵ Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life'(1903), *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1950), pp.409-424, p.419, 410.

and unpredictability that we so often see in De Quincey's swelling sentences, where each clause propels another in a barely-controlled stream – or street – of consciousness. As Hillis Miller remarks, “In his mental realm...everything dwells crowded together like the inhabitants of London”²⁶, echoing De Quincey's “endless tributes to the skill or to the luxury of [London's] endless population”, which “crowds the imagination with a pomp to which there is nothing corresponding upon this planet”²⁷. Simmel describes the “psychological conditions” of the metropolis as “the rapid crowding of changing images...and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions”²⁸, calling to mind Burke's definition of the Sublime as “the mind hurried out of itself by a croud [*sic*] of great and confused images”²⁹. William Gaspey pre-empts Simmel in discussing London as a generative site of the experimental and innovative: “ever varying in its features, ever increasing in extent, [it] affords...a theme of which the novelty can never be wholly exhausted”³⁰. It is this sense of “novelty” that drives De Quincey's ever-extending sentences, inspired by the “teeming...power and beauty” he found in *Lyrical Ballads*, “as yet unsuspected amongst men”³¹. Recalling the primary ‘Constituent of Happiness’ – “capacity of thinking” – he specifically lauds Coleridge's unprecedented originality as “the largest and most spacious intellect, the subtlest and most comprehensive...that has yet existed”(ibid). De Quincey, like the “quasi-automatic” organism of London itself, seizes upon and aims to cultivate similarly uncharted territory, boasting a breadth of imagination and understanding that will push sentences to the very limit of coherent meaning – and often beyond.

²⁶ J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (1969; repr. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1975), p.29.

²⁷ De Quincey, *Autobiographic Sketches VII, Works*, xix.109.

²⁸ Simmel, ‘Metropolis and Mental Life’, *Sociology*, p.410.

²⁹ Burke, *Enquiry*, p.106.

³⁰ William Gaspey, *Tallis' Illustrated London*, 2 vols. (London, 1851), i.3.

³¹ De Quincey, ‘Samuel Taylor Coleridge’, *Works*, x.287.

In terms reminiscent of Malthus and Shelley, the historian James Walvin explains that during industrialisation “so rapid did the growth of towns become that they rapidly outstripped the ability of contemporaries adequately to...control that growth, and all its attendant problems”³². The city that inspires and hurries the mind out of itself advances with disorientating speed and unpredictability, and in the same way the growth of De Quincey’s mental scope can rapidly outstrip his ability to “control” it formally, like Wordsworth and Coleridge before him. In a mammoth four-part essay on ‘Style’(July 1840-February 1841) he admits: “Every man who has had any experience in writing, knows how natural it is for hurry and fullness of matter to discharge itself by vast sentences, involving clause within clause ad infinitum”³³ – such is the peril of attempting to realise “vast...contempl[atio]n”. His style exhibits sociability *in extremis*, a desire to communicate that paradoxically leads him to stray into confused and unorganised articulation: “...one of the reasons that led him to fail in his task of self-delineation was not the lack of expressive power, but the superfluity”³⁴, Virginia Woolf observes. “He was profusely and indiscriminately loquacious”(ibid), a tendency exacerbated not only by the periodical mode that encourages “indulgence in so-called personality”³⁵ but also by the need, as Simmel observed, for the “elaboration of individuality” and cultivation of “the utmost in uniqueness and particularization”³⁶ to counteract urban anonymity. The city-dweller must “exaggerate this personal element in order to remain audible even to himself”(422), an impetus perceptible in De Quincey’s idiosyncratic, stridently uncontrolled voice. He was nevertheless alert to the perils of being a ‘talkative’ writer, noting that public speakers can “hide the unwieldiness of the structure, to which oral

³² Walvin, *English Urban Life*, p.1.

³³ De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, ibid, *Works*, xii.15.

³⁴ Virginia Woolf, ‘De Quincey’s Autobiography’(1932), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie and Stuart Nelson, 6 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1986-2011), v, pp.452-9, p.454.

³⁵ Kim Wheatley, *Romantic Periodicals and Print Culture* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), p.3.

³⁶ Simmel, ‘Metropolis and Mental Life’, *Sociology*, p.423.

sentences tend” through “the rapidity, and the cadences of the voice”, but it “becomes disgustingly obvious in written composition, to all who have a cultivated taste”³⁷ – which De Quincey liked to believe included his readers.

Woolf states that “Discursiveness – the disease that attacked so many of the nineteenth-century English writers – had him in her coils”³⁸, emphasising how De Quincey’s loquacity incipiently demonstrates the Victorian tendency for richly descriptive and verbosely hefty writing, in which “every kind of heterogeneous object had to be found room for somehow, somewhere”(ibid). In this sense his form is situated uncomfortably between the Romantic sensibilities inherited from his poetic idols – particularly from the unassuming concision of *Lyrical Ballads* – and the Victorian model of “huge and formless”(ibid) literature that dominated his mature years as a writer. His tone and subject stands between the Romantic ideal of concentrated, and thereby transcendent, ‘Genius’ and Victorian realism as the down-to-earth preserve of objects and “every kind” of everyday thought. His style therefore embodies the tension that as “truth begins to enlarge itself” it “loses something of its sanctity by descending amongst human details”³⁹. Echoing Woolf’s metaphor of insidious coiling, Charles Baudelaire describes De Quincey as “a sort of peripatetic, a street philosopher pondering his way endlessly through the vortex of the great city”⁴⁰, providing a useful analogy for De Quincey’s “peripatetic” prose style that aims to encompass the grand and mundane, the oratorically prophetic and the chattily diverting. Sometimes it meanders indulgently, sometimes it swirls back on itself chaotically, all the time forcing the reader to question how much of the syntactical and semantic excessiveness is “skill” and how much “luxury”.

³⁷ De Quincey, Review of *Blackwood’s Magazine* for October 1827 (*Edinburgh Saturday Post*, 29 September 1827), *Works*, v, pp.88-97, p.89.

³⁸ Woolf, ‘De Quincey’s Autobiography’, *Essays*, v.455.

³⁹ De Quincey, ‘Style’ II, *Works*, xii.31.

⁴⁰ Charles Baudelaire, *Les Paradis Artificiels* (1860), quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (1982), trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 2002), p.436.

The ambivalence of proffering “more” intellectually and materially is encapsulated in the imagery of thoroughfares. De Quincey criticised Hannah More’s overly-rigid thinking as closing down debate: “every avenue is shut up against gaining or communicating anything in her company”⁴¹. By contrast, in ‘Letters to a Young Man whose Education has been Neglected’(1823), he poignantly talks of the inevitability of accumulating “troubles” as life progresses, “more especially [for a young man] who has...formed attachments and connexions, and has thus multiplied the avenues through which his peace is assailable”⁴². Too many avenues of thought and expression are as troublesome as too few. The third ‘Letter’ meditates on De Quincey’s persistent anguish that there are more opportunities available than can ever be fulfilled – the punishment of pursuing infinite knowledge. He discusses being confronted by a library of 100,000 books and deducing through a series of convoluted calculations that he will die “before I can have had time to extract the honey from 1-20th of this hive”⁴³. Because “every man and woman was a most interesting book, if one knew how to read them”, De Quincey’s mind rapidly increases its scope of woe to consider all the “hundreds of millions”(ibid) of people he will never meet, and the music he will never hear. Like another new avenue of the mind, mapped out on the page’s anguished sentence, “Here opened upon me a new world of misery”(ibid). He compares his anxiety that “literature becomes much more a source of torment than of pleasure”(65) to the unwitting scholar visiting London full of confidence only to be overwhelmed by its “wagonloads of unused [book] stores”, so that “a subject which he fancied himself capable of exhausting, he finds to be a labour for centuries”(65). De Quincey implicitly critiques his struggles with prose practice when he comments that instead of “feeling himself master of his materials” the ‘enlightened’

⁴¹ De Quincey, letter to Mary Wordsworth (1809), quoted in *Works*, ix.324.

⁴² De Quincey, ‘Letters to a Young Man whose Education has been Neglected’ I: ‘Literature and Authorship’(*London Magazine*, VII, January 1823, pp.84-90), ibid, iii, pp.39-49, p.44-5.

⁴³ Ibid, III: ‘On Languages’(*London Magazine*, VII, March 1823, pp.325-35), ibid, iii, pp.59-74, p.59.

intellectual “is degraded into their slave”(66). Adopting the Shelleyan metaphor of consumption he laments the “enormous gluttonism for books” that leads to “a miserable distraction of choice...madness”(ibid). The “pain and disturbance of mind”(63) he expresses here echoes the discussion of opium addiction in ‘Confessions’, which offers a nightmare vision of infinite “capacity”: “Over every form, and threat, and punishment, and dim sightless incarceration, brooded a sense of eternity and infinity that drove me into an oppression as of madness”⁴⁴.

The ‘Letter’ shows, though, how the magnitude of the mind’s potential overawes De Quincey in his everyday thinking, manifested in his precarious prose; it is a predisposition amplified rather than produced by opium use. With typical “flux and reflux”, he describes this “madness” of opportunity as “very generally incident to the times”⁴⁵, yet also claims it as a privileged personal burden for those afflicted with great mental scope: people who “escape this disease” of oppressive possibility owe it to “the narrowness of their minds and the contracted range of their sympathies with literature”(65). There is thus a perverse pride in the correlation between complexity of thought and difficulty of expression, but the essay’s dominant theme of expansion as imposition alerts us to the terrifyingly perilous possibilities inherent in all attempts to “master” one’s materials. Hence the pointed italicisation in *Suspiria De Profundis* when describing how the “object” of ‘Confessions’ “was to reveal something of the grandeur which belongs *potentially* to human dreams”⁴⁶, sharply inflected by editor David Masson’s description of De Quincey’s “inability in all ordinary processes for converting

⁴⁴ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ II, ibid, ii.71.

⁴⁵ De Quincey, ‘Letters to a Young Man’ III, ibid, iii.64.

⁴⁶ De Quincey, *Suspiria De Profundis* (*Blackwood’s*, March, April, June, July 1845; vol.57, pp.269-85, 489-502, 739-51; vol.58, 43-55), ibid, xv, pp.126-204, p.129.

the potential into the actual”⁴⁷. There is a wide gulf between abstract potential and practical realisation in those syntactical “avenues through which...peace is assailable”.

“A vast predominance of contempl[atio]n”, then, produces dilemmas about how and where it should be directed. While the periodical ostensibly offered “endless” opportunities for treating a huge range of topics, De Quincey found each individual issue could never contain “Enough”. With his usual emphatic equivocation, he conceived a third “part” to ‘Confessions’ that would consist of “remarks on all subjects” spreading over a seemingly infinite number of articles, including “my Transcendental Letters” and other subjects admittedly “more likely to be popular”:

History – Criticism – Human life – Love – Marriage – Courtship – Polit[al]. Econ[omy]. – Literature – Anecdotes of lit[erary]. men – Mathematics – Morals – Coleridge – Wordsworth – Myself in childhood in ref[erance]. to Educ[ation]. – Germ[an]. Literature – &c. &c. &c. &c. in short the flower of all my reading, thinking, and scheming for twenty odd years...⁴⁸.

One flowering “&c.” is not enough now for the excitable De Quincey, whose copious abbreviations and dashes reveal a feverish desire to catalogue the contents of his giant mind “in short”. The all-consuming nature of his scope and syntax recalls Shelley’s comment that “we have eaten more than we can digest” – a characteristic, too, of the “ramping, devouring pace”⁴⁹ of London’s growth, where “Voracity repeat[s] itself in endless different ways”⁵⁰. But for all the literal and psychological expansiveness offered by urbanisation, De Quincey would have understood Ackroyd’s point that “To live in the city is to know the limits of human existence”(589). De Quincey stresses that these articles are “paving the way” to his stores of wisdom “by short – insulated – and apprehensible explanations on cardinal points”(ibid), but shortness and insulation in any

⁴⁷ Masson, *De Quincey*, p.104.

⁴⁸ Wordsworth, letter to J.A. Hessey (20 April 1822), quoted in *Works*, x.xiii.

⁴⁹ John Summerson, *Georgian London* (1945; rev. London: Yale University Press, c.2003), p.6.

⁵⁰ Ackroyd, *London*, p.306.

degree of formal writing was impossible for him. Such concision requires a clarity of thought and clear line of argument that he could rarely apprehend, and needless to say his plan for the third part never came to fruition. He craved space – “endless leisure and ample elbow-room”, as described by Virginia Woolf – to practise the “subtlest” and “most comprehensive” aspects of his thinking, “here to pick up some trifle and bestow upon it all his powers of analysis” and “here to...widen and enlarge and amplify”⁵¹.

Periodicals, for the patient reader over a long period of time, allow for the examination of minutiae, but lack the sweeping scope and ‘amplitude’ of a more substantial form, as intimated in a discussion of songs versus rhapsodies in ‘Style’ I. An “air – a tune” with “a short succession of notes revolving rapidly upon itself” does not “offer a field of compass sufficient for the development of great musical effects...moving through subtle variations that sometimes disguise the theme, sometimes fitfully reveal it, sometimes throw it out tumultuously”⁵². We perceive a latent self-reflexivity in the mention of “subtle variations”, as De Quincey’s prose moves between formal and conspiratorial registers, defensive humour and deferential confession, antagonism and affection – with his reader and himself. He emphasises the “teeming” power to be found in “ten thousand forms of self-conflicting musical passion”, asking “what room could they find, what opening, for utterance in so limited a field as an air or song?”(ibid), concluding that anyone who finds “gratification” in such a limited form has an “undeveloped” sensibility. De Quincey worries, then, that the directness required of a pithy periodical article does not allow for nuanced thought and modulations of a distinct authorial voice “speaking to men”(Preface). He habitually calls attention to the discrepancy between his extensive objects of study and his material confines. In ‘Style’ III, he promises to address “the very plainest” theories that “apply to the mechanology of style”, which “will not go

⁵¹ Virginia Woolf, ‘Impassioned Prose’(1926), *Essays*, iv, pp.361-9, p.365.

⁵² De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, *Works*, xv.6.

beyond the reasonable limits disposable for a single subject in a literary journal”, but then concedes that “the rest” would “require a ‘strong’ octavo for their full exposition”⁵³. So he offers a curious compromise whereby his article will outline “all the possible subdivisions and sections among the resources of the rhetorician” for “subsequent cultivation and development”(ibid), presumably hypothetically expounded in full outside the periodical. Having stressed the pressure of spatial limitation he returns to the subject in hand with a belated sense of urgency – “Coming back...for hasty purposes, to Greek literature” – but then cannot help immediately expanding his scope once again with another casual “all”: “we wish to direct the reader’s eye upon a remarkable phenomenon in the history of that literature, and subsequently all of human genius...”(48). The “history” of “all of human genius” cannot be encompassed in one, or even four, articles.

De Quincey’s “vast” sentences therefore aim to counteract the overall brevity and compactness of the periodical form. In ‘Dr Parr and his Contemporaries’(1831) he admires the “remarkable compass” of Parr’s conversation, with its “almost Burian quality of elastic accommodation to the fluctuating accidents of the occasion”⁵⁴, echoing the revelatory virtue of opium use as rendering time and space “infinitely elastic”⁵⁵. This “elastic accommodation” is the ideal he has for flexible prose free from the strictures of verse lines, which he hopes will contain but not constrain ideas, able to expand with sub-clause upon sub-clause while still maintaining an overall structural integrity. Burke’s style embodied an organic development of thought, whereby his intellectual and imaginative scope was extended by the freedom of his form: “one sentence was the rebound of another – one thought rose upon the suggestion of something which went before”⁵⁶, so that “every thesis of a sentence, grows in the very act of unfolding it” with many a “new

⁵³ De Quincey, ‘Style’ III, *Works*, xii.46.

⁵⁴ De Quincey, ‘Dr Parr and his Contemporaries’ I (*Blackwood’s*, XXIX, January 1831, pp.61-81), ibid, viii, pp.3-32, p.15.

⁵⁵ De Quincey, *Suspiria*, ibid, xv.144.

⁵⁶ De Quincey, ‘Dr Parr’ I, ibid, viii.15.

determination or inflexion at every clause of the sentence”⁵⁷. He extends the theme in ‘Conversation’(1847) to emphasise the vivacious activity of Burke’s “prodigious elasticity of...thinking, equally in his conversation and...his writings”: “the mere act of movement became the principle or cause of movement. Motion propagated motion, and life threw off life”⁵⁸. However, “infinitely elastic” is an oxymoron: something can only be extended so far before it must contract or snap. We therefore perceive a brittleness in De Quincey’s prose, a frequent sense that he stretches the sentence too far into shapelessness; it is an overwriting that creates unstable meaning, compounded rather than controlled by the rigid material limits of the periodical’s narrow columns.

The ambivalent nature of De Quincey’s “exhaustless” sentences as spontaneous effusions of intellectual vigour and as self-dismantling relics of overblown ambition that exhaust the reader is exhibited in his paean to Johann Richter. He is mimetically carried away by commas that sustain – even accelerate – the propulsive rhythm of life he admires in Richter’s writing:

...an activity of understanding, so restless and indefatigable that all attempts to illustrate, or express it adequately by images borrowed from the natural world, from the motions of beasts, birds, insects, &c. from the leaps of tigers or leopards, from the gambolling and tumbling of kittens, the antics of monkeys, or the running of antelopes and ostriches, &c. are baffled, confounded, and made ridiculous, by the enormous and over-mastering superiority of impression left by the thing illustrated. The rapid, but uniform motions of the heavenly bodies, serve well enough to typify the grand and continuous motions of the Miltonic mind. But the wild, giddy, fantastic, capricious, incalculable, springing, vaulting, tumbling, dancing, waltzing, caprioling, pirouetting, sky-rocketing of the chamois, the harlequin, the Vestris, the storm-loving raven – the raven? no, the lark, (for often he ascends ‘singing up to heaven’s gates,’ but like the lark he dwells upon the earth,) in short, of the Proteus, the Ariel, the Mercury, the monster – John Paul can be compared to nothing in heaven or earth, or the waters under the earth, except to...Shakespeare.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ De Quincey, ‘Elements of Rhetoric’, *ibid*, vi.184.

⁵⁸ De Quincey, ‘Conversation’(*Tait’s*, XIV, October 1847, pp.678-81), *ibid*, xvi.214-22, p.219.

⁵⁹ De Quincey, ‘John Paul Frederick Richter’(*London*, IV, December 1821, pp.606-20), *ibid*, iii, pp.17-38, p.22-3.

Clearly the “teeming” sentences “springing” along on abundant commas aim to enact the “wild” character of Richter’s work, frantically driving the pace to convey an “activity of understanding” whereby the number of words is proportionate to the “capacity of thinking” De Quincey imparts, and the “cultiv[atio]n. of interest” he evokes. This is the Sublime excess of the “the mind hurried out of itself”, the vitalising sensation of being overawed by sheer profusion. But while the mass is undoubtedly suffused with “energy and vitality”, on closer inspection by the end of the last sentence both reader and writer have lost their way. The seemingly inexhaustible “associations” of animals, adjectives and present-participles exhaust the reader, and threaten to disproportionately occupy our thoughts over and above the passage’s central section describing the supposedly “enormous and overmastering superiority” of “the grand and continuous motions of the Miltonic mind”. Continuousness and continuity are in fact obstructed by the “quasi-automatic” commas. Like the self-interruption of “the raven – the raven? no, the lark” – compounded by the disruptive dash and parentheses “(for often he ascends...)” – the “giddy, capricious” details of the passage have impeded our understanding of the “grand” ‘whole’, and of Richter’s asserted tonal grandeur. Biting off more than he can chew, De Quincey finds his elaborate comparisons engorge his sentences.

The frustration for De Quincey and his reader is not the opposition of “lack” and “superfluity”, to use Woolf’s terms, but realising that superfluity is a kind of lack; hence De Quincey’s self-reflexive comment, “Great faults...may grow out of great virtues in excess”⁶⁰. ‘Constituents of Happiness’ describes how man is initially imbued with an “involuntary happiness proceeding from an exuberance of animal joy and spirits”, which is then “withdraw[n] in regular progressions with the advancement of ye intellect and

⁶⁰ De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, *ibid*, xii.5.

through the instrumentality of that very intellect”⁶¹, offering a prescient commentary on the sometimes unhappy effects of De Quincey ‘instrumenting’ his intellect – including the articulation of “animal joy and spirits” themselves in the Richter article. The ideal of infinite scope conflicts with the finite demands of syntax; one can extend a sentence *ad absurdum* but not *ad infinitum*.

II

“the friction of style”(‘Style’)

The problem with saying more and more is that it becomes harder to remember what you have already said. De Quincey’s fluxing and refluxing, even confused, attitude to style – the relationship between a text’s manner and matter – encapsulates the paradox that “Too much” in thought and expression might be nowhere near “Enough” for educative and emotional “advancement”. In ‘Style’ I, he delineates the “narrow” meaning of the word as “expressing the mere...*syntaxis* or combination of words into sentences” and its “far wider extent” as “expressing all possible relations that can arise between thoughts and words – the total effect of a writer”⁶², the latter phrase reminiscent of De Quincey’s foundational ambition to explore “all that concerns human life”. Because this “total effect” encompasses as it expresses a writer’s entire being, to consider De Quincey’s theory and practice of style is to consider his character, and vice-versa – a principle neatly encapsulated in the phrase “the style of his mind”⁶³, applied to Southey in *Lake Reminiscences* (1839). De Quincey’s review of *The Works of Alexander Pope* (1848) discusses how the “scale of an alphabet” – and even the “wider compass” of syllables and

⁶¹ De Quincey, ‘Constituents of Happiness’, *ibid*, i.74.

⁶² De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, *ibid*, xii.25.

⁶³ De Quincey, *Lake Reminiscences, from 1807 to 1830* IV: ‘William Wordsworth and Robert Southey’ (*Tait’s*, o.s.X, n.s.VI, July 1839, pp.453-64), *ibid*, xi, pp.110-131, p.128.

words – are “narrow” in comparison with the exponential potential of “thoughts [that] may outrun the words by many a thousand counters”⁶⁴. With further incremental steps outward in scope he asks:

...what are the thoughts when set against the modification of thoughts by feelings, hidden even from him that feels them – or against the intercombinations of such modifications with others – complex with complex, decomplex with decomplex – these can be unravelled by no human eye.

(ibid).

Yet again clause piles upon clause with each new ‘modifying’ idea, conjunction and dynamic dash, comprising and representing “the infinite music that God only can read upon the vast harp of the human heart”(ibid) – those “great musical effects” and “subtle variations” discussed in ‘Style’ I. The self-generating and self-undoing momentum of “complex” and “decomplex” reaches a timeless and dimensionless conclusion whereby all the previous distinctions between constituents of language and thought collapse into feeling’s “infinite” “intercombinations” – those “attachments and connexions” of ‘Letters to a Young Man’ that “assail” the author as much as inspire him. De Quincey concludes that these relations “can be unravelled by no human eye”, so that thought, feeling and language paradoxically form a Gordian knot of profuse indeterminacy, where wide compass and narrow scale enfold each other.

But elsewhere he declares that “Style is the disentangling of thoughts or ideas reciprocally involved in each other”⁶⁵, aiming to unravel rather than bind all those “intercombinations” of thought, feeling and language. This compartmentalising principle recurs in ‘Style’ I, when De Quincey discusses how England is the only country where

⁶⁴ De Quincey, Review of *The Works of Alexander Pope, Esquire* (*North British Review*, IX, August 1848, pp.299-333), *ibid*, xvi, pp.332-64, p.354.

⁶⁵ De Quincey, ‘Brevia’ III: ‘On Words and Style’(MS, undated), *ibid*, xxi, pp.135-44, p.144.

manner and matter are “capable of separate insulation”⁶⁶ and placing the “substance above the external show” is “a principle noble in itself”(6). Yet with characteristic discontinuity, he declares that this kind of prioritising is “inevitably wrong wherever the manner blends inseparably with the substance”(ibid) – not, however, defining the type of writing where such inseparability occurs. Instead, he continues in a haze of confusing “abstraction”: instances where “the matter and the manner were so inextricably interwoven, as not to admit of this coarse bisection” are attributed to a necessarily indeterminate “unwilling and mysterious sense”(7). Like the ambivalence of Simmel’s phrase “quasi-automatic”, De Quincey’s endeavour to catalogue the workings of style is impeded by the “sense” that style is not wholly conscious. Calculating the proportions of manner and matter are pointless because “The one was embedded, entangled, and interfused through the other in a way which bade defiance to such gross mechanical separations”(ibid). De Quincey even italicises his reiteration for emphasis: “the *intertexture* of style and matter, from the impossibility that one should affect them otherwise than in connexion with the other”(9). This shifting conception of style, even within one essay, persists ten years later in ‘On the Present Stage of the English Language’(1850); here style is defined as “the management of language”, able to “yield a separate intellectual pleasure quite apart from the interest of the subject treated”⁶⁷. It is an “error” to “rate the value of style as if it were necessarily a dependent or subordinate thing” because it has “an absolute value...quite distinct from the value of the subject about which it is employed”(ibid). Yet only a couple of sentences later De Quincey attests that dissociating manner and matter is a “narrow valuation of style”(ibid), implying its “absolute” value relies on “complex” relations with its intellectual and emotional substance. We thus perceive how style is implicated in the process by which “the

⁶⁶ De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, ibid, xii.7.

⁶⁷ De Quincey, ‘On the Present Stage’, ibid, xvii.66.

absolutely infinite influxes of feeling or combinations of feeling...vary the thoughts of man”⁶⁸; as Wordsworth and Coleridge found, “seeking all possible relations” inevitably opens one up to contradiction.

These fluctuations reveal some uncertainty about how integral or incidental style is in both representing and extending mental scope, and furthermore whether good style makes a virtue of luxury over necessity. In ‘English Language’ De Quincey uses architectural metaphors to discuss the “vice” of considering style “as a mere ornamental accident of written composition – a trivial embellishment, like the mouldings of furniture, the cornices of ceilings”; in theory his principle of style as all-encompassing – “the incarnation of the thoughts”⁶⁹ – means that nothing is “trivial” or “mere” adornment. He argues that “Imagery is sometimes not the mere alien apparelling of a thought” that can be “detached”, but is “the co-efficient that, being superadded to something else, absolutely makes the thought”(ibid). The cautiously qualifying “sometimes” contrasts with a very determined expression of the same idea thirteen years earlier, where he argues that imagery shapes rather than just prettifies thought: “every thing figurative is part and parcel of the process of thinking, and incarnated with the thought; it is not a separable descant on what [writers] think, but a part of the organ *by* which they think”⁷⁰. The freewheeling connotative potential of metaphors ignites new thoughts in turn, with an almost subconscious spontaneity: “always there is some latent feature, or relation of the truth revealed by the imagery, which could not have been revealed without it”(ibid). Accordingly De Quincey defends Burke against the charge of “ornamented” or “flowery” composition, defined as “meaning excess of figurativeness sought for its own sake, and not spontaneously prompted”(145). Rather, “it was the necessity of his

⁶⁸ De Quincey, Review of *The Works of Alexander Pope*, ibid, xvi.354.

⁶⁹ De Quincey, ‘On the Present Stage’, ibid, xvii.67.

⁷⁰ De Quincey, Review of the October 1827 *Edinburgh Review* (*Edinburgh Saturday Post*, 24 November 1827, p.230), ibid, v, pp.142-6, p.146.

understanding, dealing with subtle truths, that required a perpetual light of analogy...for making them apprehensible”(146). Analogy allows Burke’s mind to range with “a wider compass of thought, than plain straight-forward understandings...can at all measure or comprehend”(ibid). In this sense, it is a “necessity” not to be “straight-forward” stylistically, to give oneself over to imaginative abandon; Hillis Miller recognises the same Burkean properties in De Quincey’s work: the “very power of analogy leads him to wander...Anything can lead to anything else”⁷¹. Hence De Quincey’s relishing of digressiveness as essential to the “style of his mind”, evidenced at the outset of *Autobiographic Sketches* Chapter Thirteen in which he defends the “Somewhat arbitrary episodes” detailing his experiences in Birmingham that waylaid us for two preceding chapters. He declares that not only is the work “confessedly rambling”, its “very duty lies in the pleasant paths of vagrancy”⁷² – the directionless incidentals of life throw into relief important narrative incidents. With the same “power of analogy”, we consider John Gwynn’s upholding the idea of “luxury” in the habits of urban architecture and citizenry in *London and Westminster Improved* (1776): too often touted as the “vice of a nation”, he deems luxury “publick magnificence...applied to the noblest purposes, the encouragement of ingenuity and industry”⁷³. Luxury is therefore a kind of “utility”(3), a sentiment De Quincey would have admired.

But the belief that indulgence through digression, anecdotage and analogy is part of a work’s superstructure contends with evaluative distinctions De Quincey makes between manner and matter. In the ‘English Language’ essay he states that “it must make all the difference in the world to the success of...thoughts whether they are treated in the

⁷¹ Hillis Miller, *Disappearance of God*, p.29-30.

⁷² De Quincey, *Autobiographic Sketches*, XIII: ‘Premature Manhood’(1853-4), *Works*, xix, pp.206-216, p.206.

⁷³ John Gwynn, *London and Westminster Improved* (London, 1776), p.2.

way best fitted to expel the doubts or darkness that may have settled upon them”⁷⁴. The phrase “best fitted” implies that some elements of a sentence and article might not ‘fit in’, indicating the ongoing dialectic between the ideally infinite mind and the proportions of finite prose, between the visionary artist and the practically-minded critic. There is also the suggestion that a writer should try to erase “doubts or darkness” over their meaning, seemingly disregarding the idea of inherently “complex” and “decomplex” “intercombinations” that reach murky “hidden” depths in all attempts to explain oneself. De Quincey’s assertions that style is not merely ornamental – and thus nothing in his text is truly redundant – vies with an underlying concern that verbally excessive indulgences are not only purposeless but actively detrimental, diluting his “vast contempl[atio]n”. In a review of Laetitia Matilda Hawkins’ *Anecdotes, Biographical Sketches, and Memoirs* (1823), he mocks what he sees as disproportionately insignificant and irrelevant material, pre-empting Woolf’s description of him “pick[ing] up some trifle” when he mocks the “habit of trifling involved in the chase after anecdotes”⁷⁵. In arguably a veiled critique of his stylistic dilemmas, *Autobiographic Sketches* discusses how “Childhood...in the midst of its intellectual weakness, and sometimes even by means of this weakness, enjoys a limited privilege of strength” because “knowledge being then narrow, the interest is narrow in the objects of knowledge”⁷⁶. The “narrow” field of vision means that “sensibilities are not scattered, are not multiplied, are not crushed and confounded...under the burden of that distraction which lurks in the infinite littleness of details”(ibid). We recall ‘Letter to a Young Man’ III lamenting “this miserable distraction of choice”, and Woolf discusses how De Quincey “treats prose as a humble beast of burden, which must accommodate all sorts of odds and ends...an impure substance in which dust and twigs

⁷⁴ De Quincey, ‘On the Present Stage’, *Works*, xvii.66.

⁷⁵ De Quincey, ‘Anecdote’ (*London*, VII, March 1823, pp.261-9), *ibid*, iii, pp.98-9, 99.

⁷⁶ De Quincey, *Autobiographic Sketches*, III: ‘Infant Literature’ (1853-4), *ibid*, xix.68-77, p.68.

and flies find lodgement”⁷⁷. His style favours raggedy “odds and ends” over prettifying “ornament”, and De Quincey is aware this exposes an inability to weigh and hierarchise his thoughts, risking every detail becoming “little”, “trifling” and jarring in the grand scheme of an essay.

De Quincey’s essay ‘War’(1848) demonstrates the ease with which his writing becomes “distracted” and disproportioned, proceeding with “quasi-automatic” enthusiasm that is always belatedly checked. Discussing, in rather Malthusian terms, the necessity of war to regulate human behaviour and population, he moves into a prolonged discussion of anecdotes as lies: people are misled into disapproving of wars by anecdotes of its seemingly trivial motivations, arising “upon a point of ceremony, upon a personal pique, upon a hasty word...momentary caprice”⁷⁸. De Quincey fears that “All anecdotes...are false”, and yet it is an “impossible man” who would “consent to lose a prosperous anecdote on the consideration that it happens to be a lie”(ibid). Rapidly escalating his claims, he declares that “All history, therefore, being built partly...upon anecdotalage, must be a tissue of lies”(ibid). His scope has extended and deviated at break-neck speed from war, to anecdotes about war, to anecdotes as lies, to history as lies. His comma-laden dash-packed sentences, and clauses – not to mention the littlest detail of a word’s prefix – crammed in parentheses, enact his distracting enthusiasm for the new theme:

...hardly one jest, pun, or sarcasm...has not been the occasion...of many falsehoods – as having been au-(and men)-daciously transferred from generation to generation, sworn to in every age as this man’s property, or that man’s, by people that must have known they were lying, until you retire from the investigation with a conviction, that under any system of chronology the science of lying is the only one that has never drooped. Date from Anno Domini, or from the Julian era, patronize Olympiads, or patronize (as I do, from misanthropy, because nobody else will) the era of

⁷⁷ Woolf, ‘De Quincey’s Autobiography’, *Essays*, v.452.

⁷⁸ De Quincey, ‘War’(Macphail’s *Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal and Literary Review*, V, February 1848, pp.1-20), *Works*, xi, pp.267-88, p.273.

Nabonassar, – no matter, upon every road, thicker than mile-stones, you see records of human mendacity, or – (which is much worse in my opinion) of human sympathy with other people’s mendacity.

(275).

The self-interrupted compound word “au-(and men)-daciously” encapsulates the habit of the passage, where each punctuation mark is a lurching springboard to a new turn of thought and phrase. De Quincey ranges over lying as “property” and “science”, handed down “from generation to generation” and across from “this man” to “that man”, from the classical and Biblical worlds to the everyday “every road” walked “until you retire”. Despite the disruption to the pace and sense, he cannot resist the incidental details elbowed in via brackets, inserting himself explicitly into proceedings, which is the ultimate indulgence and source of anecdotage: “as I do...in my opinion”.

The incursive parentheses that extend rather than contain thought are replicated at a paratextual level by a footnote on the etymology of ‘anecdote’. As Wordsworth found, footnotes provide an ‘outlet’ for overabundant material yet create visual, verbal and tonal ruptures. In ‘Style’ I De Quincey argues the “excrecence” of a footnote results from syntactical insufficiency: “the sentence to which it is attached has not received the benefit of a full development for the conception involved”⁷⁹. He suggests that the sentence ought to be “so re-cast as to absorb the redundancy which had previously flowed over into a note”(ibid). It is a typically paradoxical suggestion that excess can be overcome by revising – and inevitably expanding – the sentence to “absorb” the extra material. With such uncertainty regarding the value of notes, the anecdotal abandon of the extensive footnote in ‘War’ is halted by a moment of critical self-consciousness reminding De Quincey of what is “best fitted” to the essay’s ostensible subject: “This digression...is what the learned call an excursus, and I am afraid too long by half...not strictly in proportion”(ibid). Exercising his perennial ambivalence, he then playfully offers another

⁷⁹ De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, ibid, xii.26.

disproportion to make up the ‘whole’: “I’ll make it all right by being too short upon something else at the next opportunity: and then nobody can complain”(ibid). However, when De Quincey returns to the essay for *Selections Grave and Gay* (1854), this Coleridgean brand of self-protective humour has acceded to almost guilty thoughtfulness: “from having faultily adjusted its proportions in the original outline, I find that I have dwelt too briefly and too feebly upon the capital interest at stake”⁸⁰. De Quincey does mind after all, promising to rectify the error in his redistributed, reinforced, version of the article.

We are never quite certain how much, or at what point, De Quincey is aware of exceeding the bounds of proportion, because he is so invested in the concept of style and form as a Wordsworthian “overflow of powerful feelings”. His recourse to the metaphor of syntactical streams proffers the same tension as Wordsworth and Coleridge between genuine abandon in the experience of writing and crafted abandon as a self-conscious aestheticising of composition. With phrasing startlingly similar to Wordsworth’s ‘Preface’, De Quincey in ‘Elements of Rhetoric’ praises “eloquence” as “the overflow of powerful feelings upon occasions fitted to excite them”, in contrast to the architectural rigidity of “rhetoric” as “the art of aggrandizing and bringing out into strong relief...some aspect of truth which of itself is supported by no spontaneous feelings, and therefore rests upon artificial aids”⁸¹. De Quincey’s teenage diary from 1803 sets forth the Sublime ideal of unselfconscious, “quasi-automatcal”, writing with mimetically surging dashes:

A man of genius...pours forth his unpremeditated torrents of sublimity – of beauty – of pathos, he knows not – he cares not – how: he is rapt in a fit of enthusiasm or rather in a temporary madness and is not sensible of the workings of his mind anymore than the ancient seer “wrapt into future

⁸⁰ De Quincey, ‘Explanatory Notices’, *Grave and Gay* iv(ii) (1854, pp.v-xiv), ibid, xx, pp.29-35, p.31.

⁸¹ De Quincey, ‘Elements of Rhetoric’, ibid, vi.160.

times” – during the tide of prophetic frenzy – or a man in the wild delirium of a fever – is conscious of the words he utters...⁸²

The current of dashes allows for constant self-modification, enacting the fitful and frenzied fluidity of thought he lauds: “of sublimity – of beauty – of pathos, he knows not – he cares not”, flowing from “enthusiasm” to “madness” and from the metaphor of the “ancient seer” to the “wild” delirious man. Thus in enabling “intercombinations” of realised and unrealised thought and feeling, Sublime fluidity is both the cause and the effect – source and destination – of fluent style. Southey is not as good a companion as Wordsworth because “the style of his conversation is less flowing and diffusive – less expansive – more apt to clothe itself in a keen, sparkling, aphoristic form – consequently much sooner and more frequently coming to an abrupt close”⁸³. There is the sense that pithy aphorisms stop the flow of intellect dead, “clenching a subject, which makes it difficult to pursue”(ibid), unlike the dashes in De Quincey’s sentence that open up space for each new idea coming hard on the heels of the preceding one. We recall the disapproval of “every avenue...shut up” by More in the description of Southey “cutting off all opening for discussion and desultory talk, through the sudden winding up that belongs to a sententious aphorism”(128-9). The passive “hearer” therefore “feels that ‘the record is closed’” in “something like an oracular laying down of the law *ex cathedra*”(129). Ever one for desultorily meandering, De Quincey is uncomfortable with the degree of authority and lack of reciprocity implied by the pejorative “sententious” and legalistic “*ex cathedra*”, such fixity making for the “narrowness of mind” he so often laments. Indeed, the vague “something like” shows his discomfort with finitely absolute statements.

⁸² De Quincey, *Diary*, ibid, i.30.

⁸³ De Quincey, *Lake Reminiscences* IV, ibid, xi.128.

The major obstruction to this ideal of Sublime “overflow” is the voice of De Quincey the critic checking De Quincey the visionary, in a clear echo of the strain between Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s poetry and prose. The “man of genius” who “pours forth his unpremeditated torrents” without knowing or caring how is the same man who perceptively assesses the literary merits of Burke, Richter, Parr, More, Locke, Southey, Coleridge, Wordsworth, &c. With youthful bombast his diary declaims, “a poet never investigates the principles of the sublimities which flow from him: that is the business of the critic”⁸⁴, but to his enduring unease he never became the poet he originally aspired to be: “I have...always intended of course that poems should form the cornerstones of my fame; - but I do not (at this moment) recollect any subjects that I have chosen for my poetical efforts”(38), his diary confesses. Instead as a journalist/essayist he became reliant upon the down-to-earth rationalism he had previously eschewed as “the critic’s perpetual coldness”(ibid). ‘Style’ I, discussing “popular eloquence thrown into all channels of social life”, reveals De Quincey’s concern that because “to feel is not to feel consciously” it is “difficult to distribute the true proportion” of matter and manner’s “joint action”⁸⁵.

This recurring return to the critical demands of proportion sheds an ambivalent light on the pronouncement in ‘Style’ III: “The modes of human feeling are inexhaustible; the forms by which feeling connects itself with thought are indefeasibly natural; the channels through which both impress themselves upon language are infinite”⁸⁶. In order for a “channel” to expand infinitely, it must have burst its banks – advanced out of control. Hence Hillis Miller’s comment that “spreading slowly but surely in all directions”, De Quincey’s writing produces “a remorseless flooding”⁸⁷, obliterating the

⁸⁴ De Quincey, *Diary* (14 May 1803), *ibid*, i.30.

⁸⁵ De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, *ibid*, xii.8.

⁸⁶ De Quincey, ‘Style’ III, *ibid*, xii.47.

⁸⁷ Hillis Miller, *Disappearance of God*, p.40.

contained, controlled “channel” of a moderate sentence and delimited periodical article. Another metaphor for London life provides a helpful commentary on this confusion of “infinite” opportunity: in one of the ‘Sketches of Life and Manners’ (March 1834) De Quincey describes the motion and momentum of approaching the industrious city as “entering the stream as it were of a Norwegian *maelstrom*; and the stream at length becomes a rush”⁸⁸. He describes it as “*trepidatio*” or “agitation”, “belong[ing] as much to the hurrying to and fro of a coming battle, as of a coming flight...[until] at length it would absorb and extinguish all other sounds whatsoever”(ibid). The apocalyptic overtones of “a coming battle”, “flight” and “extinguish” reveal how the inexorable flow of torrential sentences have become a source of “agitation” rather than the joyous abandon De Quincey described in his diary. The paradoxically paralysing momentum of “hurrying to and fro” is his version of Wordsworthian/Coleridgean “flux and reflux”.

This aqueous imagery is naturally counterbalanced by architectural metaphors that reveal a concern for the solidity of the work as a whole, and the structural integrity of its individual sentences. Woolf expresses this strain when she equates De Quincey’s “fatal verbosity” with “weakness of architectural power”⁸⁹. More particularly, there is a pivoting tension regarding the substantiality of prose as a “beast of burden”: De Quincey wants his essays to be weighty but not weighed down. His analysis of the political commentator Samuel Parr’s style uses the imagery of weight related to ornamentation to express an anxiety that one’s work might not accurately reflect, or be proportionate to, one’s intellectual capacities – in this case a showy style masking want of intellectual heft. Contrasting Parr with Burke, whose “most combining intellect...awoke no sense of disparity or false balance in his powers”, De Quincey states: “the disproportion is

⁸⁸ De Quincey, ‘Sketches of Life and Manners’ (*Tait’s*, March 1834, pp.83-96), *Works*, x, pp.27-50, p.29.

⁸⁹ Woolf, ‘De Quincey’s Autobiography’, *Essays*, v.456.

enormous...between the talents that he possessed and the effects that he accomplished”⁹⁰. Parr “gave a bright and gaudy colouring to truths which were too often trite, mean, or self-evident”, his style one of “perpetual swell, glitter, and false inflation...without a corresponding activity or power of thought”(ibid). De Quincey damningly concludes that the “architecture” of Parr’s writing was therefore “barbaresque – rich in decoration, colossal in proportions, but...reposing on no massy foundations”(ibid). Later, discussing style’s “powers for good and evil”⁹¹, De Quincey is again preoccupied with its ability to be a securing foundation or flighty after-thought: “one man out of windy nothings has constructed an overwhelming appeal to the passions of his hearers, whilst another has thrown away the weightiest cause by his manner of treating it”(ibid). ‘Letters to a Young Man’ III provides an indirect commentary on the danger of not being anchored enough in profound substance and style, leaving one subject to the vagaries of passing enthusiasms and fitful thoughts which fail to build up a solid argument. De Quincey criticises the deploying of too many languages as “mere levity”, the speaker

...unballasted by any sufficient weight of plan or settled purpose, to present a counterpoise to the slightest momentum this way or that, arising from any impulse of accident or personal caprice. When there is no resistance, a breath of air will be sufficient to determine the motion.⁹²

De Quincey’s ideal of style as proportionate to mental scope would validate his lengthy and ‘heavy’ sentences, which boast a vital “counterpoise” or “resistance” – a “flux and reflux” – between the mind’s “grand and continuous motions” and its “vaulting, tumbling, dancing” modes of expression, as identified in Richter. But of course De Quincey’s sentences and essays are often driven by the “impulse of accident or personal caprice”, and given his recognition of the frequent disjunction between manner and matter

⁹⁰ De Quincey, ‘Dr Parr’ IV (*Blackwood’s*, XXIX, June 1831, pp.901-12), *Works*, viii, pp.81-97, p.87.

⁹¹ De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, ibid, xii.7.

⁹² De Quincey, ‘Letters to a Young Man’ III, ibid, iii.62.

he is alert to the irony that longer sentences can be lightweight, crammed with the transient diversions of little details. This is what he observes in Parr: “the luxury of his periodic sentences, with their ample volume of sound and self-revolving *rhythmus*” – recalling the self-revolving “*maelstrom*” – captivates for a moment before the reader is left feeling only that “it is time to be gone” from these mere “velitations, skirmishes...exercises”⁹³.

This syntactical anxiety extends to the periodical as a whole, which De Quincey views as a transient and insubstantial form, consisting of small columns a reader can skip over, always “distracted” by another interesting titbit – usually on a topical subject and so by definition temporary – before “it is time to be gone”. The periodical’s small component parts, from the size of articles and advertisements to typeface, make for an “unballasted” form with no “massy foundations”; its literal weightlessness and ultra-finite proportions impede “any labour of great compass or research”(ibid). An address in the *Westmorland Gazette*, which De Quincey edited from July 1818 to November 1819, apologises for a decrease in the length of articles due to foreign policy developments that need to be ‘fitted in’. He asserts defensively that “a communication ought to be valued by it’s [sic] weight, but certainly not by it’s [sic] weight *avoirdupois*”, yet the reader senses regret at the implied diminution in value when he talks of how “neither the proprietors...nor the subscribers...nor the dimensions of our columns will allow”⁹⁴ heftier articles. The fear that the periodical might not provide a strong enough superstructure for the weight of De Quincey’s visionary capacity, philosophical interests and political import, explains his massively extended sentences. Just as he wants to accord style more weight – avoiding mere “decoration” – his sentences and clauses pile up in the hope of laying “massy” enough foundations to anchor his thoughts. An “aphoristic” style,

⁹³ De Quincey, ‘Dr Parr’ IV, ibid, viii.87.

⁹⁴ De Quincey, ‘To the Correspondents of the *Westmorland Gazette*’(9 January 1819), ibid, i, pp.175-8, p.175-6.

typified by John Locke, evinces and produces work “without a plan” and therefore “without a foundation”⁹⁵.

But if sentences are of sufficient weight to build up a subject, their inexorable length can also pull it down. De Quincey combines water and weight imagery in his criticism of “newspaper eloquence”, which exemplifies “the plethoric form of period, this monster model of sentence, bloated with decomplex intercalations”⁹⁶ – a grotesque manifestation of those “decomplex” relations comprising the “vast harp of the human heart”. But again he identifies this “tumid and tumultuary structure of our sentences” as a “characteristic defect of this age”(ibid), from which no writer is safe. The juxtaposition of “tumid” and “tumultuary” emphasises the paradox previously implied in *Sketches* that the “rush” and “hurrying to and fro” of the poured sentence can in fact produce a disagreeable heaviness – a verbal saturation – that impedes fluent reading and slows intellectual “advancement”. With so many swirling words and sub-clauses the “*maelstrom*” risks being a mere eddy, a kind of energetic dead-end in “that cumbrous and unwieldy style which disfigures English composition so extensively”(18). In another sign of his wariness regarding style’s overly “massy foundations”, De Quincey deploys his other favourite metaphor of music to describe how successful writing should “break up massy chords into running variations”(8). But there is the constant threat in this ‘defective’ age of producing “dropsical and shapeless”⁹⁷ sentences, “Crude undigested masses of suggestion, furnishing rather raw materials...than any formal developments of the ideas”(15).

So De Quincey’s “unwieldy” sentences and articles – all those digressions and footnotes, dashes and parentheses – exhibit a “flux and reflux” between an under- and over-developed style of mind, attempting to do “Too much” and not “Enough” to

⁹⁵ De Quincey, ‘Letters to a Young Man’ II: ‘Outline of the Work’(*London Magazine*, VII, February 1823, pp.189-94), ibid, iii, pp.50-8, p.57.

⁹⁶ De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, ibid, xii.15.

⁹⁷ Woolf, ‘De Quincey’s Autobiography’, *Essays*, v.456.

communicate his “capacity of thinking”. In his biography, Masson avers that “All those characteristics of De Quincey’s mind...reproduce themselves...as characteristics of his style”, so that we become “minutely acquainted with his mental resources and processes”⁹⁸ if we read carefully enough. But he also defines style as “mental behaviour from moment to moment”(152), alerting us to the crucial paradox in De Quincey that the “style of his mind” is one of habitual caprice, thoughtful frivolity, ostentatious “trifling”, paralysing activity. This is what is meant by De Quincey’s belief in “the *friction* of style; the needless joltings and retardations of our fluent motion”⁹⁹, with the implication that their being “needless” is vital to the drama and interest of his writing. These “joltings and retardations” are configured as extensions and constrictions in scope when De Quincey analyses Jeremy Taylor’s style as an “everlasting strife and fluctuation between his rhetoric and his eloquence...like the systole and diastole – the contraction and expansion – of some living organ”¹⁰⁰. What De Quincey saw “unfolding” in Coleridge and Wordsworth – and consequently in the style of his own mind – was the “flux and reflux” of counterproductive communication, of opening up so many possibilities that you shut down the “avenues” or “channels” of securely coherent thought, and thereby say something other – something more *and* less – than you intend or even realise. This is why “A capacity of thinking” constitutes an “impure”(Woolf) happiness.

⁹⁸ Masson, *De Quincey*, p.151, 152.

⁹⁹ De Quincey, ‘Style’ III, *Works*, xii.47.

¹⁰⁰ De Quincey, ‘Elements of Rhetoric’, *ibid*, vi.172.

III

**“[The] pursuit of labyrinthine truth”(‘Style’):
Mapping De Quincey’s Prose through Piranesi’s *Carceri***

The most important metaphor for the style of De Quincey’s “capacious mind” is a visual one, and is described at length in ‘Confessions’. Attempting to communicate the oppressive expansiveness of “my architectural dreams”,¹⁰¹ De Quincey invokes the most famous work of the eighteenth century Italian engraver Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Carceri D’Invenzione** (1750, rev.1761). The sixteen plates depict sprawling and simultaneously confined dungeon-like torture chambers, crammed with mechanical devices and mounting staircases that envelop the minute human figures imprisoned within (FIGS.2-4). De Quincey relates that he discovered the *Carceri* “Many years ago” through “Mr. Coleridge’s account” and claims to be relating them “only from memory”(68), but the detail and accuracy of his description suggests he had by 1821 seen a copy in person. With an ever-handly “etc.” he outlines “vast Gothic halls, on the floor of which stood all sorts of engines and machinery, wheels, cables, pulleys, levers, catapults, etc., etc., expressive of enormous power put forth, and resistance overcome”(ibid). Staircases are seen “Creeping along the sides of the walls”, with Piranesi himself apparently “groping his way” up them, until they “come to a sudden abrupt termination...allowing no step onwards to him who had reached the extremity, except into the depths below”(ibid). But rather than his “labours” ending there, the viewer “[beholds] a second flight of stairs still higher: on which again Piranesi is perceived, but this time standing on the very brink of the abyss”(ibid). We are then asked to “Again elevate your eye, and a still more aerial flight of stairs is beheld: and again is poor Piranesi busy on his aspiring labors: and so on, until the unfinished stairs and Piranesi both are lost in the upper gloom of the hall”(ibid).

¹⁰¹ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ II, ibid, ii.69.

* ‘Imaginary Prisons’.

It is a terrifying and intoxicating vision of spiralling heights and abyssal “depths” illuminated here and enshrouded in hatching there; the Escher-like trajectories of the interrupted staircases extend beyond the limits of the plate and of feasible proportion. The designs exemplify the paradox of infinite imprisonment: architectural forms building seemingly exponentially into an “upper gloom”, but offering so many “avenues” that stop short or turn back on themselves, “Creeping” up one side and down the other. It is a “mental realm” that one can explore but never escape.

The *Carceri*, in other words, are labyrinths. And the labyrinth was a metaphor De Quincey could never escape; with a typical light-heartedness that belies an important truth he discusses the ubiquity of this image in ‘Secret Societies [II]’(1847): “Was the hon[ourable]. reader ever in a real labyrinth...? We have all been in labyrinths of debt, labyrinths of error, labyrinths of metaphysical nonsense”¹⁰². For all De Quincey’s levity, Hillis Miller rightly identifies the *Carceri* as “a motif” that is “one of the fundamental habits of his mind”¹⁰³, and this is probably because it provides the most ‘fitting’ landscape for the “darkly wonderful” Sublime hero De Quincey envisioned himself as in his diary. Like one of Piranesi’s figures “groping his way” through the mazy prison to the “upper gloom”, De Quincey’s alter-ego “passes along” in “the dim and shadowy perspective” of “a dream” with “something gloomily great in him”, before “he wraps himself up in the dark recesses of his own soul”¹⁰⁴. With characteristically self-aggrandising self-deprecation he asserts that “his fate is misery such as ye. world knoweth not”, and yet this “misery” elevates him “above the beings of this world” – he “looks over all mankind” paradoxically from the heights of his *Suspirc* insight in “deep clouds of mystery and darkness”(ibid). The diary was written during De Quincey’s years of vagrant travelling after fleeing from Manchester Grammar school in 1802, ending up in the “endless

¹⁰² De Quincey, ‘Secret Societies’ II (*Tait’s*, XIV, October 1847, pp.661-70), *Works*, xvi, pp.165-82, p.167.

¹⁰³ Hillis Miller, *Disappearance of God*, p.67.

¹⁰⁴ De Quincey, *Diary* (5 May 1803), *Works*, i.22.

labyrinth of streets”¹⁰⁵ that comprised a “constantly expanding” London “reaching outwards towards infinity”¹⁰⁶. It was a “wilderness”(2) in which he found and lost his lone friend, the prostitute Ann. The ‘Prefatory Notice’ to the revised *Confessions* cites the “search after the lost features of Ann...pursued in the crowds of London” as “*that* which, more than any other, coloured – or...shaped, moulded, remoulded, composed and decomposed – the great body of opium dreams” in which she was later “pursued through many a year”¹⁰⁷. He links “the perplexities of my steps in London” with “the feeling of perplexities moral or intellectual, that brought confusion to the reason, or anguish...to the conscience”(50) in adulthood.

These ‘moulding’ experiences of imaginative and urban labyrinths insinuate themselves into the lexis of his mature work. An undated manuscript explains how “The same thing precisely takes place in literature as in spiritual things”¹⁰⁸, and in the article ‘System of the Heavens’(1846) De Quincey discusses how the “three dimensions” of external space represent “the depths and the heights which are in man, the depths by which he searches, the heights by which he aspires” – space that “swells upon man with the expansion of his mind”¹⁰⁹. The “motif” of the abyss’ brink recurs as he describes how man “trembles at the abyss into which his bodily eyes look down, or look up” because he hopefully and fearfully contemplates “a mightier abyss that will one day be expanded in himself”(ibid). In the same article he translates from Richter’s ‘Traum uber das All’* but stresses that because he is doing so from memory he is “greatly disturbing” the original and making it “partly ‘my own’”(416). In terms starkly reminiscent of the *Carceri*’s architecture, and with his characteristic appetite for expansive dashes, he describes

¹⁰⁵ Robert Southey, quoted in Ackroyd, *London*, p.585.

¹⁰⁶ Ackroyd, *London*, p.585.

¹⁰⁷ De Quincey, ‘Prefatory Notice’, *Confessions* (1856), *Works*, ii, pp.100-102, p.102.

¹⁰⁸ De Quincey, untitled MS (undated), *ibid*, xx, pp.443-4, p.443.

¹⁰⁹ De Quincey, ‘System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescopes’(*Tait’s*, September 1846, pp.566-79), *ibid*, xv, pp.393-420, p.401.

* ‘Dream upon the Universe’, from *Der Komet* (1820-2).

“mighty constellations” that “towered” by “self-repetitions and...counter-positions, built up triumphal gates, whose architraves, whose archways – horizontal, upright – rested, rose – at altitudes, by spans – that seemed mostly from infinitude”(ibid). He depicts “stairs that scaled the eternities above, that descended to the eternities below”, so that “depth was swallowed up in height insurmountable, height was swallowed up, in depth unfathomable”, all the time “tilted over abysmal worlds”(417). It is an eloquent encapsulation of the highest and lowest reaches of the human psyche, but again the daunting imposition of perceiving yet “other heights, and other depths” appears: “the man sighed, and stopped, and shuddered...His overlaid heart uttered itself in tears” as he vows to “go no farther. For the spirit of man aches with this infinity”(ibid). The pervasive Piranesian metaphor exemplifies the “systole and diastole” of imprisoning extensions of perspective, of concrete structure and obscure “gloom”, of constant accumulation with the constant anticipation of “abrupt termination”, always on the precipice of an all-consuming “abyss”.

The Piranesian maze is also marked by “abrupt” turns in its ascending and descending staircases. Having joked about all manner of “metaphysical” labyrinth, ‘Secret Societies’ inevitably takes a more sombre and self-reflexive turn to discuss De Quincey’s “labyrinthine childhood” and a literal maze at Bath that “pathetically shadow[ed] out the fatal irretrievability of early errors in life. Turn but wrong at first entering the thicket, and all was over; you were ruined; no wandering could recover the right path”(ibid). He elaborates on the imposition of too many possible turnings, each one reducing the “chance of escaping error”(168). Led by analogy, the mind wanders to the twists and turns of syntactical construction, as De Quincey himself does when explaining how the philosopher John ‘Walking’ Stewart “always gives us one strong and

comprehensive word as the hinge on which the rest of the sentence hangs and turns”¹¹⁰. The “hinge” of a word or punctuation mark “hangs” precariously in a convoluted De Quincey sentence, like those temporarily terminated staircases looming over an abyss of incomprehension – the point at which a sentence disintegrates into “nonsense” with one clause too many. Woolf’s analysis of De Quincey’s style figures the sentence as a vertiginously “aerial” accumulation of clauses with a Piranesian resonance: “He turned from the neat, precise speech of his time to Milton and Jeremy Taylor and Sir Thomas Browne; from them he learnt the roll of the long sentence that sweeps its coils in and out, that piles its summit higher and higher”¹¹¹. As a metaphor applied to De Quincey’s writing, we see how the material constraints of the periodical create a convoluted and tortured space in which he tries out endless routes to self-expression on any number of staircase-sentences.

Echoing the fear that “no wandering could recover the right path” after too many turns, Hillis Miller declares that at the broader level of a De Quinceyan article “One thing has led to another as easily as a man turns a corner in the city, and yet two or three such turns have led us so far away from the original vista that it is hopeless to try to get back”¹¹². Hillis Miller recalls the figures “perched on the dizzying stories of the *Prisons*”¹¹³ in his assessment of the “strange and exasperating...disorientation” readers feel as “we become aware that we have insensibly wandered...miles away” from the declared “outline of the course to be followed”, so that we eventually “draw ourselves up short in a kind of dizzy amazement”(ibid). Hillis Miller’s phrasing reverberates with De Quincey’s own description of roaming in ‘Recollections of Grasmere’(1839), where “distraction of mind, and irresolution...cause the wanderer frequently to change his

¹¹⁰ De Quincey, *Diary, Works*, i.31.

¹¹¹ Woolf, ‘De Quincey’s Autobiography’, *Essays*, v.454.

¹¹² Hillis Miller, *Disappearance of God*, p.28.

¹¹³ Marguerite Yourcenar, *The Dark Brain of Piranesi; and Other Essays* (Henley-on-Thames: Aidan Ellis, 1985), p.103.

direction...according to any new fancy that starts up to beguile him...often insensibly and unconsciously”¹¹⁴. When he invokes the *Carceri* in ‘Confessions’ he states that “With the same power of endless growth and self-reproduction did my architecture proceed in dreams”¹¹⁵; the movement implied by “proceed” associated with static “architecture” renews the mixed metaphors of conscious solidity and insensible fluidity that characterise De Quincey’s conception of style. It draws attention to De Quincey’s preoccupation with both the pragmatic demands of the fixed material structures in which he operated, and the idealistically indeterminate vastness of his contemplative mind. Therefore, the *Carceri* as an analogue for the diffuse structure of De Quincey’s articles and sentences also encapsulates the problematic Wordsworthian/Coleridgean duality of the critically-minded prosaic technician and the Sublimely poetic spontaneous visionary. As Giuseppi Galli Bibiena – whose sprawling staircases are said to have inspired Piranesi¹¹⁶ – asserted: “a painter of perspectives must not only be a stern architect but a man who dreams in the dark”¹¹⁷.

Brooding over, or under, all of this is the ever-present threat of “abrupt termination” and the yawning “abyss” – the point at which a train of thought breaks down, and an exasperated reader stops persevering with De Quincey’s insensible wandering. In *Sketches* he likens his fraught childhood to being “suspended by some colossal arm over an unfathomable abyss”¹¹⁸, and it is an image so potent it extends to the “style of his mind” teetering on the edge of accessibility. The ‘Preface’ to *Grave and Gay* concedes “the perilous difficulty besieging all attempts to clothe in words the visionary scenes derived from...dreams, where a single false note, a single word in a wrong key,

¹¹⁴ De Quincey, ‘Sketches of Life and Manners: Recollections of Grasmere’ (*Tait’s*, o.s.X, n.s.VI, September 1839, pp.569-81), *Works*, xi, pp.141-7, p.164.

¹¹⁵ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ II, *ibid*, ii.68.

¹¹⁶ Hector O. Corfiato, *Piranesi Compositions* (London: Alec Tiranti, 1951), p.6.

¹¹⁷ Giuseppi Galli Bibiena, *Architetture e Prospettive* (1740), quoted in *ibid*, p.8.

¹¹⁸ De Quincey, ‘Sketches of Life and Manners’ (*Tait’s*, August 1835, pp.541-50), *Works*, 10:142-58, p.142.

ruins the whole music”¹¹⁹. Conceptions of the “abyss” veer between engrossing Sublimity and authorial incompetence because it is the “gloomy” realm of experience “wholly incommunicable by words”¹²⁰. With pivoting loyalty De Quincey admits to an occasional “Delphic obscurity” in Wordsworth but asserts “this is no more than that inevitable gloom or murkiness which besieges all very profound descents into our human nature”¹²¹. Similarly ‘The Household Wreck’, a short story saturated with Piranesian imagery, pronounces that “in the vast halls of man’s frailty there are separate and more gloomy chambers of a frailty more exquisite and consummate”, so that “in the lowest deep there still yawns a lower deep”¹²².

De Quincey perceives the trajectory of the “literature of power”, which gives “exercise and expansion to your own latent capacity of sympathy with the infinite”¹²³, in Woolf’s terms of “higher and higher” progression: rather than “All the steps of knowledge” which “from first to last, carry you farther on the same plane...the very *first* step in power is a flight – is an ascending into another element where earth is forgotten”(ibid). Milton is cited as the ultimate exemplification of such Sublimity, in which “every pulse and each separate influx is a step upwards – a step ascending as upon a Jacob’s ladder from earth to mysterious altitudes above”(ibid). But this ideal of constant climbing comes up against the pragmatic imperative of syntax for an eventual conclusion, and ‘Style’ I recalls the horror of being “suspended over an unfathomable abyss” when De Quincey acknowledges “the suspense, the holding-on, of the mind until...[the] coming round of the sentence commences”, a state of uncertainty that “wears

¹¹⁹ De Quincey, ‘Preface’ to *Grave and Gay i: Autobiographic Sketches* (1853, pp.v-xix), ibid, xx, pp.9-16, p.16.

¹²⁰ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ II, ibid, ii.66.

¹²¹ De Quincey, ‘Letter to Mr Tait Concerning the Poetry of Wordsworth’ (MS, 16 May 1838), ibid, xi, pp.582-95, p.588.

¹²² De Quincey, ‘The Household Wreck’(Blackwood’s, XLIII, January 1838, pp.1-32), ibid, ix, pp.209-63, p.210.

¹²³ De Quincey, Review of *The Works of Alexander Pope*, ibid, xvi.337.

out the faculty of attention”¹²⁴. When a sentence “begins with a series of *ifs*”, for example, “you cannot dismiss and have done with the ideas as you go along; all is hypothetic; all is suspended in air”(ibid). This notion was applied to “the compass, and huge circuit” of Coleridge’s voluminous sentences in 1834: “Long before [the] coming-round commenced, most people had lost him, and naturally enough supposed that he had lost himself”, left only to “admire the separate beauty of the thoughts” because unable to ascertain “their relations to the dominant theme”¹²⁵. When explaining how De Quincey “can never stop” Hillis Miller appropriates his subject’s Piranesian analogy for the overextended sentence that “hangs” perilously to describe the fate of the essay structure overall: “incomplete at the end, either with a huddled conclusion, or with no conclusion at all, a meander which ends in the air”¹²⁶. De Quincey has to prevent his efforts descending – or rather, ascending – into airy nothingness.

A labyrinth, however, also offers the potential for revelling in a kind of vacuum where one has more than “ample” time and space to explore. De Quincey uses the metaphor in ‘Elements of Rhetoric’ when expressing his hope to write “at leisure from the agitations of eternal change”: “To hang upon one’s own thoughts as an object of conscious interest, to play with them, to watch and pursue them through a maze of inversions, evolutions, and Harlequin changes”¹²⁷. There is delight and pride in attempting to exhaustively cover every possible element and permutation of a subject, which can very easily become too urgently fervent – what Hillis Miller calls a “madness of desire to be everywhere at once”¹²⁸. Coverage through digressiveness that supposedly develops thought in fact causes an eddying through many a backward turn, creating a “new space” De Quincey “has given up all thought of going beyond...until he has

¹²⁴ De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, ibid, xii.21.

¹²⁵ De Quincey, ‘Samuel Taylor Coleridge’, ibid, x.296-7.

¹²⁶ Hillis Miller, *Disappearance of God*, p.55-6.

¹²⁷ De Quincey, ‘Elements of Rhetoric’, *Works*, vi.164, 163.

¹²⁸ Hillis Miller, *Disappearance of God*, p.40.

completely filled up the present area by circling around and around in it until every point has been traversed”(ibid). De Quincey’s “ramblings, whether elliptical, circular, or zig-zag”¹²⁹ are similarly explained by Baudelaire as a “desire to occupy space, rather than to go in a straight line from one place to another”¹³⁰. *Suspiria* makes this intention explicit when De Quincey asserts, with a slew of diverse and diverting metaphors, that the “true object” of *Confessions* is “not the naked physiological theme...but those wandering musical variations upon the theme – those parasitical thoughts, feelings, digressions, which climb up with bells and blossoms round about the arid stock”¹³¹. The counterpointing of “climb up” and “round about” – indeed, the phrase “round about” itself – encapsulates the ambivalent paradox that digressiveness is both free nonchalant “wandering” and “parasitical” strangulation, just as the labyrinth *unfolds* and *enfolds* with ever-expanding circumlocution. De Quincey admits his tangents “ramble away from” the primary theme “at times with perhaps too rank a luxuriance”, but possess a securing and nebulous “eternal interest” which “spread[s] a glory over incidents that for themselves would be – less than nothing”(ibid). The singular ideal of “The true object” diffuses – and possibly dissipates – into the “rank luxuriance” of clauses, commas, dashes, repetition and some very mixed metaphors.

With the “luxuriance” of an “electric aptitude for seizing analogies”¹³² De Quincey also figures this wide-ranging occupation of mental and material space as the refraction of light – approaching a topic from multiple angles. This image was possibly inspired by the typical course of an opium dream that “once roused, never left me, and split into a thousand fantastic varieties, which often suddenly reunited, and composed

¹²⁹ De Quincey, ‘Astrology’, *Works*, xvi, pp.297-304, p.297.

¹³⁰ Baudelaire, *Les Paradis Artificiels*, quoted in Hillis Miller, *Disappearance of God*, p.39.

¹³¹ De Quincey, *Suspiria*, *Works*, xv.135.

¹³² Masson, *De Quincey*, p.143.

again the original dream”¹³³. With one eye as ever on the abyss, ‘Style’ I attests that it is only a “mad-man and a *felo-de-se*” who is “content” with “a single condensed annunciation of a perplexed doctrine”; instead, “Like boys who are throwing the sun’s rays into the eyes of a mob by means of a mirror, you must shift your lights and vibrate your reflexions at every possible angle” in order to “agitate the popular mind extensively”¹³⁴. He explains further how a “startling or complex novelty” is “obtained for the intellect by varying the modes of presenting it, – now putting it directly before the eye, now obliquely, now in an abstract shape, now in the concrete”(ibid). Editor Alexander Japp adopts the analogy when advising that De Quincey should be read thoroughly: “Such a nature...needs to be seen in many lights before it will reveal itself with even the degree of fullness necessary to consistent interpretation”¹³⁵. Hillis Miller similarly compares reading De Quincey to surveying the vista of a city: “He cannot see it all piece by piece, for it is too vast, and yet neither can this ‘Babylonian confusion’ be comprehended from any single point of view”¹³⁶. Importantly De Quincey conceives of ‘angularity’ as distinguishing ideas from each other with precise clarity, rather than “round about...luxuriance”: in ‘Style’ II he argues that the writer’s quest to “project his own inner mind” requires him to “pass through a prism, and radiate into distinct elements, what previously had been even to himself but dim and confused ideas, intermixed”¹³⁷. In ‘Style’ I he insists that “varying the modes” of his sentences in this refracted way is a “proper technical discipline” and therefore “ought no longer to be viewed as a licentious mode of style, but as the just style in respect of those licentious circumstances”¹³⁸. This emphasis on “distinct” as opposed to “intermixed” elements therefore makes allowance

¹³³ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ II, *Works*, ii.72.

¹³⁴ De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, *ibid*, xii.8.

¹³⁵ Alexander Japp (ed.), *De Quincey Memorials*, 2 vols. (London: William Heinemann, 1891), i.ix.

¹³⁶ Hillis Miller, *Disappearance of God*, p.24.

¹³⁷ De Quincey, ‘Style’ III, *Works*, xii.71.

¹³⁸ *Ibid* I, *ibid*, xii.8.

for jarring or incongruous manner and matter in the aid of a greater unity, or “glory”, in the work’s sum total.

But Piranesi’s labyrinths show us that a composition of all angles creates a “world without a center”¹³⁹, without a stabilising anchor for the eye. The staircase-dominated *Carceri* exhibit the then-popular technique of *scena per angolo*, in which the image is formed primarily of diagonal lines, creating perspectives that are constantly askew and have no hierarchy in their constituent elements. Nicholas Penny explains how “instead of a lucid sequence” and “a uniform progression towards a central vanishing point”, we perceive “a complex interpenetration of spaces...and opposing temptations for the eye”¹⁴⁰. *Scena per angolo* is Piranesi’s way of being “everywhere at once”, displaying a “desire to hurl into space all possible curves and parallels”¹⁴¹, but we can see how the idea of clearly-defined views through multiple angles is elusive. Given the weight of the *Carceri* analogy in De Quincey’s style of mind, he is always aware that “shifting your lights and vibrating your reflexions” reveals an inability to prioritise the semantic and grammatical elements of a sentence, paragraph and article. With no central resting place, we are forced to explore the terrain of his texts at length, but to roam so extensively risks getting lost at every turn and about-turn.

Hence De Quincey’s recourse to a competing metaphor of thread stringing elements together in his syntactical labyrinths, indicating the deficiency of the refraction motif. Discussing the abstruseness of Acts of Parliament – “where the exceptions, the secondary exceptions to the exceptions, the limitations and the sublimitations, descend *seriatim*, by a vast scale of dependencies” – he claims William Pitt the Younger “declared himself to be lost in the labyrinth of clauses: the Ariadne’s clue was wanting for his final

¹³⁹ Yourcenar, *Dark Brain*, p.113.

¹⁴⁰ Nicholas Penny, *Piranesi* (London: Oresko Books, 1978), p.6.

¹⁴¹ Yourcenar, *Dark Brain*, p.113.

extrication”¹⁴². De Quincey repeatedly deploys this imagery of “Ariadne’s clue” – the thread of one’s argument – to keep his straying ideas and texts broadly on course, to “retrace...our speculations, lest the reader should suppose us to be wandering”¹⁴³. He declares that *Confessions* is devoted to “the task of unthreading the labyrinth by which I had reached, unawares, my present state of slavery to opium”¹⁴⁴. After a lengthy “dissertation” on George III in ‘Sketches of Life and Manners’, he promises “to resume the thread of my narrative”¹⁴⁵, repeated almost verbatim in ‘Samuel Taylor Coleridge’ – “to resume the thread of my wandering narrative”¹⁴⁶ – and in *Sketches* again a year later: “To resume...my own thread of personal narration”¹⁴⁷. Of course the need to continually rein himself in indicates the loose hold De Quincey has on “the style of his mind”. In ‘Style’ II he cannot resist pluralising “the thread” when attempting to tease out the “labour of composition”: “you have to put your separate threads of thought into a loom; to weave them into a continuous whole; to connect...to blow them out or expand them; to carry them to a close”¹⁴⁸. For all that he talks of “resuming the thread”, in reality he is continually unreeling new threads with each new train of thought, each new angle of approach on a subject. So in fact an article comes to encompass ever-expanding numbers of subjects; his sentences thus become “entangled” in “ever new” threads of argument, “spinning” out of control. Indeed, a draft fragment on Coleridge’s struggles with prose style discusses how difficult it is to thread individual clauses, never mind sentences and paragraphs, together: “The aggregation of circumstances is so enormous – that all unity –

¹⁴² De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, *Works*, xii.23.

¹⁴³ *Ibid* IV, *ibid*, xii.70.

¹⁴⁴ De Quincey, *Autobiography of an English Opium-Eater*: ‘Recollections of Charles Lamb’ II (*Tait’s*, June 1838, pp.355-66), *ibid*, x, pp.255-76, p.262-3.

¹⁴⁵ De Quincey, ‘Sketches of Life and Manners’ (*Tait’s*, February 1834, pp.18-30), *ibid*, x, pp.3-26, p.26.

¹⁴⁶ De Quincey, ‘Samuel Taylor Coleridge’, *ibid*, x.305.

¹⁴⁷ De Quincey, ‘Sketches of Life and Manners; from the Autobiography of an English Opium-Eater’: ‘Oxford’ (*Tait’s*, February 1835, pp.77-83), *ibid*, x, pp.108-20, p.118.

¹⁴⁸ De Quincey, ‘Style’ II, *ibid*, xii.38.

all power of Ariadne's thread – of subordin[atio]n. is as much lost as in the parenth[esis]. within parent[hesis]. clause involved in clause”¹⁴⁹.

Hillis Miller argues that De Quincey's “distaste for breaks, blank places, hiatuses” motivates his belief that a writer must proceed “with the utmost care over every bit of the space between ‘here’ and ‘there’, connecting every point...and never for a moment allowing the thread to break”¹⁵⁰. Alive to ambitious leaps in thought and tone between clauses, sentences, paragraphs and even periodical issues, De Quincey is always anxious about how he and the reader are to avoid “abysses” of incoherence and instead bridge semantic and literal gaps. Drawing a comparison between Voltaire and Coleridge he associates gaps with structural disintegration: he praises the pair's “vast compass of miscellaneous knowledge” before remarking “pity that it was so disjointed, *arena sine calce*”^{*}, leaving their writing as a precarious “flourish on the tight-rope of sublimity”¹⁵¹. But De Quincey's Piranesian prose uncomfortably teeters between conceiving clauses and “points” of punctuation as architectural building blocks and as “breaks, blank places, hiatuses” that create both structural weakness and necessary openings for thoughtful feeling. This fluxing and refluxing attitude is evidenced in the ‘Present Stage of the English Language’, which discusses how the “moving intellect reveals itself and prospers” by the “relation of sentences, in what Horace terms their ‘*junctura*,’...The mode of their nexus”¹⁵². This is where “the true life of composition resides”, as “the separate clauses of a period become architectural parts, aiding, relieving, supporting each other”(ibid). But there must also be gaps to break up the heaviness of a lengthy sentence: there can be no “intellectual advancement” for “him who hides and buries all openings for parts and graceful correspondences in one monotonous continuity of period, stretching

¹⁴⁹ De Quincey, ‘Samuel Taylor Coleridge’(MS fragment, undated), ibid, xx, pp.372-3, p.373.

¹⁵⁰ Hillis Miller, *Disappearance of God*, p.38-9.

* ‘sand without lime’

¹⁵¹ De Quincey, ‘Conversation and S.T. Coleridge’, *Works*, xxi.56.

¹⁵² De Quincey, ‘On the Present Stage’, ibid, xvii.65.

over three octavo pages”(ibid). The aim is to prevent too vast and void-like an “opening” that “one monotonous...period” creates, whereby “Parts so remote as the beginning and the end of such a sentence can have no sensible relation to each other” in their “logic” or “their more sensuous qualities – *rhythmus*...or the continuity of metaphor”(ibid). Thus aesthetically and semantically “the internal relations of a sentence fade under the extravagant misproportion of its scale”(ibid). De Quincey echoes his description of the *Carceri*’s “chasms and sunless abysses”¹⁵³ when warning of overlong sentences wherein “A chasm, so vast as to prevent the synthesis” of two mutually-modifying objects “in one co-existing field of vision, interrupts the play of all genial comparison”¹⁵⁴. Ironically there is only unity through the distinct “parts” of “Periods, and clauses of periods [that] modify each other, and build up a whole...cohering and conspiring to a common result”; but if each part is “separately so vast as to eclipse the disk of the adjacent parts, then substantially they are separate wholes”(ibid) – and separate holes in the “nexus” of one’s “moving intellect”.

With a characteristic (over)turning of metaphor, these cavernously “vast” periods are configured in ‘Style’ I as the kind of “arches within arches, bridges across bridges”¹⁵⁵ that comprise Piranesi’s landscape: De Quincey laments journal writing in which “each separate monster period is a vast arch” that does not receive its “keystone...locked into self-supporting cohesion, until you nearly reach its close”¹⁵⁶. Consequently the fragile sentence is only sustained by “the unhappy reader” on which it strenuously “imposes...all the onus of its ponderous weight through the main process of its construction”(ibid). He repeats this exact metaphor in his critique of Pope’s *Essay on Man*, which is suffused with a self-reflexive concern about overreaching one’s capabilities: Pope’s “faculty of

¹⁵³ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ II, ibid, ii.66.

¹⁵⁴ De Quincey, ‘On the Present Stage’, ibid, xvii.65.

¹⁵⁵ Miranda Harvey, *Piranesi: The Imaginative Views* (London: Academy Editions, 1979), p.9.

¹⁵⁶ De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, *Works*, xii.21.

execution...[shrank] in horror from the enormous details of such an enterprise to which so rashly he had pledged himself”¹⁵⁷. The result was “A work which, when finished, was not even begun; whose arches wanted their key-stones; whose parts had no coherency; and whose pillars...were already crumbling into ruins”(ibid). De Quincey laments how, under constant threat of collapse, Pope’s “thinking proceeded by insulated and discontinuous jets”, so that in *Essay on Man* “dismal rents, chasms, hiatuses, gaped and grinned”¹⁵⁸, eroding the stability of the whole.

All the huff, puff and bluff of incorrigible verbiage without grammatical and formal “keystone”-supports might blow a text’s house down, but the ultimate “keystones” of punctuation marks are perhaps the most important force for instability and ambivalence in De Quincey’s sentences, because they both forge and bridge “blank spaces”. Ostensibly, punctuation serves as a literal and figurative breathing space, a necessary “hiatus” in the relentless progression of syntax’s “moving intellect” that allows a reader to absorb the preceding matter before proceeding to the argument’s next phase and phrase. The address ‘To the Correspondents of the *Westmorland Gazette*’, ironically requesting “greater compression” in letters due to the “disproportion between the space for publication and the matter to be published”, demonstrates the need for such pauses to check De Quincey’s enthusiasm. In an “enormous” sentence one solitary comma cannot hold back the tide of thought:

We should accordingly have addressed our Correspondents on this subject long before this time, if we had not hoped that our promised plan for conducting this Paper would when unfolded of itself suggest to our Correspondents as an obvious corollary the necessity for imposing upon themselves a severe parsimony of words when offering themselves as claimants for a share of that space which would have been pledged by this new plan to the fulfilment of so many duties and the gratification of so many tastes.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ De Quincey, Review of *The Works of Alexander Pope*, ibid, xvi.359.

¹⁵⁸ Masson, *De Quincey*, p.62.

¹⁵⁹ De Quincey, ‘To the Correspondents of the *Westmorland Gazette*’(9 January 1819), *Works*, i.175-6.

The confused accumulation of past and present conditional tenses “should...have addressed”, “would when unfolded” and “would have been pledged” reveals the tension between the potential and actuality of De Quincey’s errant articles, and sentences; he attempts to keep himself on course through steadying repetition – “our Correspondents”, “themselves”, “so many” – that results in rhetorical clumsiness. The “monster” sentence extends ever more tenuously and strenuously without the supportive ballast of commas and semi-colons.

But another purpose of punctuation is to ensure the thread of connection is maintained between individual “parts”, facilitating smooth transitions in the writer’s thought and tone. Trust De Quincey to take this virtuous purpose too far in ‘Confessions’ when depicting his opium-induced wanderings through London. Attempting to carefully guide us, he presents a succession of extremely short clauses ‘hinged’ together by eleven commas:

For the sake...of witnessing, upon as large a scale as possible, a spectacle with which my sympathy was so entire, I used often, on Saturday nights, after I had taken opium, to wander forth, without much regarding the direction or the distance, to all the markets, and other parts of London, to which the poor resort on a Saturday night, for laying out their wages.¹⁶⁰

De Quincey exerts too tight a control, the commas strangulating the clauses rather than providing ‘stepping stones’ between them; if the *Westmorland Gazette* editorial was too breathless, here the excessive ruptures slow the sentence to a stumbling pace. With characteristically paradoxical “systole and diastole” the short clauses are an attempt to rein in his expansive tendencies but, feeling their insufficiency, he simply adds more of them, so that the sentence takes a ludicrous number of turns relative to its overarching length. In one sense, the commas mimetically enact De Quincey minutely weaving his

¹⁶⁰ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ II, *ibid*, ii.49.

way through “such knotty problems of alleys, such enigmatical entries, and such sphynx’s riddles of streets”(53). But the lack of variation in the “scale” of the clauses creates a measured monotony that does not befit the “exalting and multiplying power of opium...stretching out to...immeasurable and vanishing termini”¹⁶¹, dulling the excitement that stems from unpredictable “misproportion” in prose form. ‘Style’ I warns of just this over-reliance on punctuation to cohere profuse clauses, evoking the *Carceri* to describe punctuation as “an artificial machinery for maintaining the integrity of the sense against all mistakes of the writer”¹⁶². The “quasi-automatic” nature of such mechanical operations means that punctuation “withdrew the energies of men’s anxieties from the natural machinery, which lay in just and careful arrangement”(ibid) of clauses, making writers neglectful of sentence length and structure. The perceived innate ‘ordering’ effect of punctuation ironically produces unthinking, and therefore often uncontrolled, writing.

More often than not punctuation that delimits and imposes too much ‘order’ is outweighed by marks that propel De Quincey’s thoughts and lead his sentences inexorably onwards, gathering momentum as they add clause upon clause to the paradoxically unravelling and “knotty” whole. This is especially the case with dashes, those gossamer-like threads of connection woven throughout so many of his sentences. Interestingly, Penny observes that “Flights of stairs in the *Carceri* etchings always impress one as a series of parallel dashes before they are seen as steps”¹⁶³, and there is something preconscious and ‘impressionistic’ about De Quincey’s use of dashes – how easily he gets emotionally as well as intellectually carried away by them. This is demonstrated in the *Lake Reminiscences* passage where De Quincey intensifies and extends the scope of his negative feelings towards Wordsworth, borne along by expansive dashes – with the aid of a substantial semi-colon – which vie with self-checking commas:

¹⁶¹ De Quincey, *Suspiria*, ibid, xv.144.

¹⁶² De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, ibid, xii.25.

¹⁶³ Penny, *Piranesi*, p.11.

More by far in sorrow than in anger – sorrow that points to recollections too deep and too personal for a transient notice – I acknowledge myself to have been long alienated from Wordsworth; sometimes even I feel a rising emotion of hostility – nay, something, I fear, too nearly akin to vindictive hatred.¹⁶⁴

The sentence moves irrevocably from “sorrow” and “anger” to the infinite associations of “recollections too deep” in an irresistible sub-clause, to alienation, to “rising...hostility”, to “vindictive hatred”. The very Wordsworthian tentativeness of “sometimes” and “something”, combined with the self-distancing “I fear” and “nearly akin” – all couched in restraining commas – reveal a reluctance to confess the extremity of his feelings, but the organic impetus of the dashes is enough to overcome this resistance and expose the truth with an “abrupt” interruption of “nay”. The next mammoth sentence contains a fluxing and refluxing equivocation of several hovering commas that ascribes this antipathy to “error, more or less, on one side or the other, either on Wordsworth’s in doing too little, or on mine in expecting too much”, but this accedes to “exhaustless” dashing when De Quincey admits to being:

– carried so far away from that early position which, for so long a course of years, I held in respect to him – that now, for that fountain of love towards Mr Wordsworth and all his household – fountain profound – fountain inexhaustible...*now*, I find myself standing aloof...

(ibid).

In yet another marker of his consistent and far-reaching ambivalence, in this sentence the dashes encourage De Quincey to extemporise on his admiration for Wordsworth with the compound modification “– fountain profound – fountain inexhaustible”, an enthusiastic indulgence that heightens the pathos of its dead-end conclusion in the present circumstance of “gloomily granting (because I cannot refuse) my intellectual homage” to

¹⁶⁴ De Quincey, *Lake Reminiscences* I: ‘William Wordsworth’ (*Tait’s*, o.s.X, n.s.VI, January 1839, pp.1-12), *Works*, xi, pp.40-65, p.62.

Wordsworth, but no longer “rejoicing in the prosperity of my idol!”(63). The passage as a whole exhibits the knife-edge teetering potential of De Quincey’s dashes to lead him to condemnatory anger or laudatory excitement with ease, making for extreme tonal swerves.

The major strain of erratic punctuation use is the virtual impossibility of clarifying the purpose of each comma, dash and semi-colon until the end of the sentence. The reader struggles to ascertain early enough whether De Quincey is demarcating a list of items, introducing a sub-clause, resuming an earlier clause, or transitioning between these functions. This is a cause and symptom of an overall inability or refusal to clearly prioritise grammatical and thematic elements in a sentence – to distribute the weight of ascending and descending cadences evenly, directed by punctuation marks that are deployed consistently and distinctly from each other. This is part of his “desire to be everywhere at once” by having all his ideas occupy the same sentence space, the component parts of an argument being absorbed into the whole in the same way as Piranesi’s architectural features are subsumed into the labyrinth’s larger superstructure. In ‘Style’ I De Quincey identifies this potential for grammatical confusion, even chaos, as a feature of English sentences’ “too general tendency...towards hyperbolical length...instead of one rise and one corresponding fall – one *arsis* and *thesis* – there are many”¹⁶⁵. Rather than a controlled balance of “Flux and reflux, swell and cadence...our modern sentences agitate us by rolling fires...[like] those internal earthquakes that, not content with one throw, run along spasmodically like boys playing at...‘drake-stone’”(ibid). The ‘drake-stone’ comparison conveys a sense of ‘skim-writing’ as De Quincey skips on his punctuation from one metaphor to the next, enacting the “oblique

¹⁶⁵ De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, ibid, xii.20.

glances and surface-skimming allusions”¹⁶⁶ that he argues impede Richter’s intelligibility and leave readers “puzzled”(ibid).

A manuscript fragment on grammar reveals De Quincey’s concern over non-hierarchised and unbalanced punctuation leading to incomprehension and/or diminution of aesthetic power; as so often, it is unclear whether his abstract discussion is knowingly, if implicitly, self-reflexive or whether he is at best only selectively or sub-consciously aware of his stylistic faults. He states that “the very purpose and use of points is to aid the logic” of syntax, but argues that in a sentence where “the involution of clauses went 3 deep, and...each was equally marked off by commas”, it in fact requires “an immense effort to distribute the rel[ation]s. of logic”:

If indeed you could see the points all in this rel[ation]-.

strophe			antistrophe*			
1	2	3		3	2	1
____,	____,	____,	apodosis	____,	____,	____,

then indeed all wd. be clear.¹⁶⁷

In this diagrammed ideal the ‘apodosis’ – the main clause that “hinges” a conditional sentence – is “clear”, the symmetrical subsidiary clauses around it neatly counterbalancing and distinguished from each other by commas. However, the reality of modern grammatical laxity means that commas, instead of helping to prioritise thoughts, are employed and read indiscriminately and therefore have little value in relation to each other, and to the ideas they present:

...the six commas will and must be ordered by every reader unversed in logical mechanisms of sentences, as merely a succession of ictuses*, so many minute guns – having no internal system of correspondence but

¹⁶⁶ De Quincey, ‘John Paul Friedrich Richter’, ibid, iii.24.

* ‘turning’, ‘turning back’.

¹⁶⁷ De Quincey, ‘Punctu[ation].’(MS fragment, undated), *Works*, xx, pp.408-9, p.409.

* ‘thrusts’: stresses in verse.

merely repeating and reiterating each other: exactly as in men, guns, horses, tumbrels, baggage waggons, standards.

(ibid).

There is, then, a troubling equivalence between vastly different grammatical items, between collective “men” and plural “horses”, between literal humble “tumbrels” and idealistic abstract “standards”. The passage ironically laments precisely the kind of “quasi-automatic” accession to the rhythmic repetitiveness of commas – in which the main clause can easily be lost amidst a succession of equally-weighted clauses – that frequently occurs in De Quincey’s own writing. With typical ambivalence, this is an indeterminacy he often makes a virtue of for dramatic impact, as in the mammoth Richter analysis: one comma, one dash, engenders another in the unthinkingly rapid succession of Sublime ‘hurry’, overriding the supposed grammatical and semantic ‘centre’ of the sentence with the force of one’s feeling.

De Quincey is certainly capable of exploiting insufficiently differentiated punctuation to evoke “something akin” to Sublimity in overflowing sentences. ‘The Pains of Opium’ section of ‘Confessions’, for example, describes how his addiction became overwhelming and “the tyranny of the human face began to unfold itself”:

...the sea appeared paved with innumerable faces, upturned to the heavens: faces, imploring, wrathful, despairing, surged upwards by thousands, by myriads, by generations, by centuries: – my agitation was infinite, – my mind tossed – and surged with the ocean.¹⁶⁸

In the inspired and oppressed “unfolding of my own mind”, the commas acting as both resistant “breaks” and dynamic “hinges” accentuate the rhythmic emphasis of the repeated “by” and present participles “imploring” and “despairing”. The indeterminate function, or ‘type’, of each dash and what they demarcate establishes an unclear – though possibly

¹⁶⁸ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ II, *Works*, ii.70.

“gloomily great” – equivalence between “agitation”, “mind” and “ocean”; they blur into one another, mimetically enacting the transcendent psychic and physical merging enabled by opium. The comma in “my agitation was infinite, – my mind tossed” can be read as counterpointing phrases in one complete clause, with “and surged with the ocean” a separate thought spontaneously added. Or it marks a more emphatic divide between two separate phrases, so that “– my mind tossed – and surged with the ocean” is the distinct syntactical unit. Alternatively, the dashes could distinguish “my mind tossed” as a sub-clause in the phrase “my agitation was infinite...and surged with the ocean”. The multiple ways of reading these unhierarchised phrases, with the possibility of “infinite” emphases, conveys the profusion and confusion of a surging and “tossing” mind. The sentence is probably so effective because it is obviously not trying to reach a fixed destination that it could deviate from or fall short of. The fluidity of the “quasi-automatic” ocean imagery is (paradoxically) bolstered by punctuation’s scaffolding; this is the harmonious union of organic and architectural elements in thinking and writing encapsulated by De Quincey’s determination to “support the activity of his own mind”¹⁶⁹.

But there is the finest of lines between successfully aestheticising incomprehension and merely being overwhelmed by it, as demonstrated in another passage crammed with commas and dashes aiming to articulate the “superhumanly sublime”, from ‘Secret Societies’ I:

The very image, unveiling itself by unsteady glimpses, of men linked by brotherly love and perfect confidence, meeting in secret chambers, at the noontide of night, to shelter, by muffling, with their own persons interposed, and at their own risk, some solitary lamp of truth – sheltering it from the carelessness of the world, and its stormy ignorance – this would soon have blown it out – sheltering it from the hatred of the world, that would soon have found out its nature, and made war upon its life – *that* was superhumanly sublime.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ De Quincey, ‘Letters to a Young Man’ I, *ibid*, iii.43.

¹⁷⁰ De Quincey, ‘Secret Societies’ I (*Tait’s*, XIV, August 1847, pp.513-22), *ibid*, xvi, pp.146-64, p.152.

There are nine syntactical units before the ostensible main subject of the sentence – “some solitary lamp of truth” – appears. The interweaving of dashes and commas uncertainly demarcates clauses, so that there is a succession of indeterminate referents: we can infer the “it” that is sheltered from the world is said lamp, but “it” is clumsily repeated in relation to the careless world – “its stormy ignorance” – before “it” is again used in the phrase “blown it out” and for the rest of the sentence to apparently reference the lamp. The tricky interrelation of “this” and “that” (as both conjunction and pronoun) further strains our grip on the text. The effort to “disentangle” the individual strands of thought and then reconnect them in logical order, giving correct weighting to every “part”, renders the end-point of the “superhumanly sublime” rather anticlimactic. We return to the crucial image of “the overhanging plinth, suspended on the brink of its collapse”¹⁷¹ in the *Carceri*, and contemplate De Quincey’s own warning about the extremely fragile endeavour that is verbal articulation, complete with dashes at full stretch: “where so much depends upon an effort – on a spasmodic strain – to fail by a hair’s breadth is to collapse”¹⁷². The “hair’s breadth” of a dash or comma can dictate the success or failure of De Quinceyan syntax through its misplacement, indeterminacy or overload; each new opening-arch brings an anticipation and apprehension about whether the sentence will build up or break down, will be Sublime or ridiculous, embodying the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ kind of excess.

¹⁷¹ Yourcenar, *Dark Brain*, p.97.

¹⁷² De Quincey, ‘On the Present Stage’, *Works*, xvii.67.

IV

**“that degree of sympathy which is necessary in any case to an author’s purposes”
(Confessions): Overwriting and Skim-Reading**

“Sympathy – how great a power is that! Conscious sympathy – how immeasurable!”¹⁷³, De Quincey pronounces in an essay on the nineteenth century’s ‘Increased Possibilities of Sympathy’. With the potent example of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s constant need for self-explanation, De Quincey recognises that the most precarious aspect of literary endeavour is not only engendering but maintaining a bond of sympathy between “those well-known parties to a book – writer and reader”¹⁷⁴. Sympathy is the bridge between Sublime solitude and public – published – communicativeness, observed in Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of real unaffected passion” running “deep” but being “forced into public manifestation...from the necessity which cleaves to all passion alike of seeking external sympathy”¹⁷⁵. A poor stylist – the worst thing someone can be for De Quincey – fails in “eliciting one scintillation of sympathy...leaving behind one distinct impression in the memory, or planting one murmur in the heart”¹⁷⁶. ‘On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth’(1823) makes explicit this expansive sense of sympathy as a penetrative interfusion between and “into” reader and writer: “a sympathy of comprehension, a sympathy by which we enter into his feelings, and are made to understand them, – not a sympathy of pity or approbation”¹⁷⁷. A footnote stresses the correct phrase is the mutually-supportive “sympathy *with* another” rather than the “monstuous [*sic*] barbarism of ‘sympathy *for* another’”(153). Hence ‘Confessions’ is described as “breaking through that delicate and honourable reserve, which...restrains us from the

¹⁷³ De Quincey, ‘Increased Possibilities of Sympathy in the Present Age’(MS, undated), *ibid*, xxi.40.

¹⁷⁴ De Quincey, ‘Milton’(*Blackwood’s*, XLVI, December 1839, pp.775-80), *ibid*, xi, pp.433-441, p.434.

¹⁷⁵ De Quincey, ‘Sketches of Life and Manners’(March 1834), *ibid*, x.38.

¹⁷⁶ De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, *ibid*, xii.7.

¹⁷⁷ De Quincey, ‘On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth’(*London Magazine*, VIII, October 1823, pp.353-6), *ibid*, iii, pp.150-4, p.152.

public exposure of our own errors and infirmities”¹⁷⁸, creating an opening for writer and reader to approach each other. This desire for reader reception as reciprocation necessitates an intimacy in which professional is personal validation; remembering the importance of “sympathy with another”, the ‘Preface’ to *Selections Grave and Gay* goes so far as to ask readers to send letters praising *Suspiria*, as they had done for ‘Confessions’, because they show “you are disposed to shake hands with me”¹⁷⁹.

But sympathy is only worth seeking with the right kind of reader, as Wordsworth and Coleridge so often suggested. De Quincey shared their concern that expanding the “state of social intercourse”¹⁸⁰ through the growth of London, commercial enterprise, improved travel and increased literacy – a “contagion of sympathy [that] runs electrically through society”¹⁸¹ – dilutes the efficacy of communication among the general public. He states baldly of the “vast multiplication of readers, within the last twenty-five years” that “the quantity has disturbed the quality”¹⁸², dissipating substantial epics of the past such as *Paradise Lost*: “Expanding social intercourse in towns, multiplied and crowded more and more, banishes those gloomier and grander phases of human history from literature”, stirring only “the lower faculties of the mind” in the “minor key of literature”¹⁸³. For all his overt sociability, De Quincey still fashions himself on occasion as a solitary ‘Genius’ privileged with the misery that brings “deep” insight: *Lake Reminiscences* describes how he “lived in profounder solitude than can have fallen to the lot of many people” due to “the unusual defect of sympathy I found in all around me; and this solitude gave a preternatural depth to my master feelings, which originally were deep enough”¹⁸⁴. And he

¹⁷⁸ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ I (*London Magazine*, IV, September 1821, pp.293-312), *ibid*, ii, pp.1-36, p.9.

¹⁷⁹ De Quincey, ‘Preface’, *Selections Grave and Gay* i (1853), *ibid*, xx.16.

¹⁸⁰ De Quincey, ‘Lord Carlisle on Pope’ I (*Tait’s*, XXII, April 1851, pp.229-37), *ibid*, xvii, pp.195-210, p.203.

¹⁸¹ De Quincey, ‘Style’ III, *ibid*, xii.53.

¹⁸² De Quincey, ‘The Antigone of Sophocles’ (*Tait’s*, February 1846, pp.111-6), *ibid*, xv, pp.311-22, p.312.

¹⁸³ De Quincey, Review of *The Works of Alexander Pope*, *ibid*, xvi.340.

¹⁸⁴ De Quincey, *Lake Reminiscences* I, *ibid*, xi.46.

felt a “defect of sympathy” with the modern age’s “systematic warfare...against all that is elevated”, spreading a dangerous “plebeian insolence”¹⁸⁵. The “new influx of readers in our times, the collateral affluents into the main stream from the mechanic and provincial sections of our population” has diluted the intellectual power of authors alongside their audience: “To be a reader is not as it once was, to be of a meditative turn. To be a very popular author is no longer that honorary distinction which once it might have been amongst a more elevated because more select body of readers”¹⁸⁶. He escalates his rhetoric to assert that “writers and readers must often act and react for reciprocal degradation”(ibid), in a lamentable distortion of the ‘sympathetic’ ideal. An unpublished manuscript, ‘Cause of the Novel’s Decline’, reiterates how “the extension of education” makes for “miserably shallow” minds without “any purpose of real elevation”¹⁸⁷. De Quincey’s fear is heightened by an uncomfortable awareness that the “*minor* key” of periodicals is specifically “detrimental to higher literary pursuits (partly because of the quality of their writing and partly because of their potentially all-encroaching extensiveness)”¹⁸⁸. Hence he is eager to distinguish “the higher class of readers”¹⁸⁹ to whom he pointedly addresses his April 1819 *Westmorland Gazette* editorial.

This uncertainty about the worth of his audience, especially given the popular form of the periodical, plays out as an antagonistic ambivalence that “fluxes and refluxes” between joviality and frustration, deference and haughtiness, affection and disillusionment, suspicion and confession. As he states outright in ‘A Sketch from Childhood’ VII: “I fear there is no contenting this person called the reader. Strike high or

¹⁸⁵ De Quincey, ‘Her Late Majesty’(*Westmorland Gazette*, 12 December 1818, p.3), ibid, i, pp.216-20, p.218.

¹⁸⁶ De Quincey, ‘The Life and Adventures of Oliver Goldsmith’(*North British Review*, IX, May 1848, pp.187-212), ibid, xvi, pp.307-331, p.315.

¹⁸⁷ De Quincey, ‘Cause of the Novel’s Decline’(MS, undated), ibid, xx, pp.386-7, p.287.

¹⁸⁸ Wheatley, *Romantic Periodicals*, p.3.

¹⁸⁹ De Quincey, ‘Notice and Explanation to the Reader’(*Westmorland Gazette*, 17 April 1819, p.2), *Works*, i, pp.230-1, p.230.

strike low, move fast or not at all, finish the paper or leave it a torso – no course pleases him”¹⁹⁰. In ‘Milton’ the trope of architectural instability – authorial “*arena sine calce*” – recurs when De Quincey muses on how the reader is “very often a more important person towards the fortune of an essay than the writer”, and therefore sympathy can easily dissolve into vulnerable dependency: “should the reader on whom we build prove a sandy and treacherous foundation, the whole edifice...must come to the ground”¹⁹¹. He talks almost resentfully of how instead of being “entitled to the homage of his reader, as if he were some feudal superior”, the writer is viewed as “little better than an actor bowing before...his audience”(434). Then, in a tone that teeters on the brink of angry sarcasm, he discusses the “truly loyal” writer’s “allegiance...[to] his sovereign”, whose attention and status as impervious anonymous arbiter is unwavering in the face of the capricious “Vandal” author: “‘The reader’ – that great character...ever wise, ever learned, ever courteous” is not “peccable or capable of error”(434-5). He asks with wryly contained aggression “whether there is not even a shade of impiety in conceiving [the reader] liable to the afflictions of sleep, or of yawning”(ibid). In a further oscillation, De Quincey turns from placing the writer “upon our knees”(435) to declaring, with faux-rebelliousness that implies his real sense of authority, via pointed modality, “A cat may look at a king; and upon this or that out-of-the-way point a writer may presume to be more knowing than his reader – the serf may undertake to convert his lord”(ibid). As with most sarcasm, a latent ingenuousness is voiced – De Quincey would like to be “truly loyal” to a reader he trusts, but only in return for attentive commitment and an aspiration to be moved or improved by the proffered work: “He may rise above himself – he may transcend the ordinary level of readers...Being great, he may become greater”(ibid), turning from a bitter to a hopeful “may”. After this continual shifting, De Quincey can only conclude with a tentative

¹⁹⁰ De Quincey, ‘A Sketch from Childhood’ VII (*Instructor*, VIII, 1852, pp.337-9), ibid, xvii.138-44, p.141.

¹⁹¹ De Quincey, ‘Milton’, ibid, xi.433.

compromise of mutual failing: “perhaps, there are faults on both sides. The writer is too peremptory and exacting; the reader is too restive”(ibid).

The plaguing thought is that a writer’s peremptoriness *makes* a reader “restive”. Hazlitt wrote that “The soul of conversation is sympathy”¹⁹² and De Quincey’s verbosity is so often thought of as ‘conversational’, the runaway strains of a confidant chatting with intimate ease. As he wrote in ‘Style’ I, “People who write rapidly every where write as they talk: it is impossible to do otherwise”¹⁹³, and he was always alert to the reciprocal demands of literal conversation. Philosopher and acquaintance Dr. Shadworth Hodgson described him as “the very soul of courtesy in conversation, studious not only to listen, but to respond to every remark”¹⁹⁴, echoed by De Quincey’s daughter’s praise for his “innate courtesy” and “sensitive considerateness”¹⁹⁵. She attests that he was “A master of the art of conversation”, including “his surpassing attainments as a good listener. He was always for giving way; scrupulously on the watch for any...interruption, comment, assent, question, or answer”(ibid). This is the ideal model for a ‘sympathetic’ relationship with the reader, emphasising “courtesy” and reciprocity wherein they, like an active interlocutor, will mirror the writer’s contribution. The problem is that writing for publication is a one-way street, and De Quincey was constantly anxious about his monologue-monopoly, which disregards and rebuffs readers as it demands too much of them. He tries to create openings through direct address and copious punctuation so that the reader can notionally ‘get a word in edgeways’, but it is never enough to overcome an undisciplined garrulity that so often rides roughshod over us at a mail-coach’s pace. As his essay on ‘Conversation’ declares: “To be acted upon for ever, but never to react, is

¹⁹² Hazlitt, ‘On the Conversation of Authors’, *Complete Works*, xii.34.

¹⁹³ De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, *Works*, xii.19.

¹⁹⁴ Quoted in Japp, *De Quincey Memorials*, p.312.

¹⁹⁵ Quoted in *ibid*, p.296-7.

fatal to the very powers by which sympathy must grow”¹⁹⁶. Masson’s biography describes his all-too-easy obliviousness regarding the appropriate limits of social interaction, “Having got your De Quincey, you might...find yourself face to face with the problem how to get rid of him”; with a taste of those apocalyptically expansive opium-dreams, Masson remarks: “the visit of an evening might extend itself to unknown dimensions”¹⁹⁷. In ‘Pronunciation’ De Quincey describes relishing and regretting the sound of his own voice: “*speak* a man must. Leisure or no leisure, to *talk* he is obliged by the necessities of life, or at least he thinks so”, but “the wisest rule upon which a man could act in this world (alas! I did not myself act upon it) would be to seal up his mouth from earliest youth”¹⁹⁸. Naturally he cannot resist a parenthetical interjection that inserts himself into the discussion, whilst lamenting how man “throws away”(99) a “fruitless expense of words”(98).

A critique of Coleridge’s tendency to monologue rather than debate indicates De Quincey’s fear that the sympathy he searches for will be ruptured through wastefully “exhaustless” and exhausting chatter. He notes the “injurious...impression of Coleridge’s finest displays where the minds of the hearers had been long detained in...passiveness” because “To understand fully, to sympathise deeply, it was essential that they should react. Absolute inertia produced inevitable torpor”¹⁹⁹. ‘Coleridge and Opium-Eating’(1845) reiterates this sentiment and its self-reflexive implications: “he gathered into focal concentration the largest body of objects, *apparently* disconnected, that any man ever yet...could assemble” but “His great fault” was that he “narrowed his own field” by “not opening sufficient spaces for reply”²⁰⁰. For a mind always on the move, the prospect of intellectual and emotional inertia through enforced passivity is troubling, and

¹⁹⁶ De Quincey, ‘Conversation’(*Instructor*, IV, 1850, pp.65-8), *Works*, xvii, pp.3-13, p.10.

¹⁹⁷ Masson, *De Quincey*, p.106-7.

¹⁹⁸ De Quincey, ‘Pronunciation’, *Works*, xxi, pp.9-102, p.98.

¹⁹⁹ De Quincey, ‘Conversation and S.T. Coleridge’, *ibid*, xxi.50.

²⁰⁰ De Quincey, ‘Coleridge and Opium-Eating’, *ibid*, xv.120.

De Quincey frequently returns to this theme to remind himself that being “tempted oftentimes into pure garrulity of egotism” leaves listeners “reduced to a state of debilitated sympathy of absolute torpor”²⁰¹. His analysis of torrential talk echoes and distorts Wordsworth’s discussion of the awestruck child standing beside a “running stream” and wondering what “abyss” the “mighty influx” is heading towards: great “mental distress” is caused for listeners when “opinions or doctrines stream past them by flights which they must not arrest for a moment”, resulting in “listless” and “inanimate vacuity”²⁰².

The obligatory “reflux” of this guilt is intellectual pride: overabundant talk is the right De Quincey and Coleridge claim as self-styled “Scholar”²⁰³ and philosopher respectively, for whom nothing is mere “leisure”. When ‘Style’ I compares French literature that “submit[s] to the equities of conversation” and demurs at English prose’s “selfish mode of display”, De Quincey recalls Shelley’s metaphor of ill-digestion by differentiating between volubility “sustained by mere vivacity of animal spirits, without knowledge to support it...a diarrhoea of garrulity, a *fluxe de bouche*” and “the solitary display” that “if selfish, is still dignified by a pomp of knowledge”²⁰⁴. He observes that “we English do still recognise the *metier* of a professional talker as a privileged mode of social display...there is an understanding amongst the company that you are not to interrupt the great man of the night”(ibid). He pivots between admiration and deprecation when explaining how French syntax, in which “reciprocation is indispensable”, typically allows for “equities of conversation” that are “dimly present” to Englishmen: “the form of the sentence is...brief, terse, simple; shaped...to meet the impatience of those who are waiting for their turn”(ibid). The worry with this self-control is that it puts artificial

²⁰¹ De Quincey, ‘Conversation’(1850), ibid, xvii.9-10.

²⁰² Ibid, p.10.

²⁰³ ‘Confessions’ subtitle: ‘Being Extracts from the Life of a Scholar’.

²⁰⁴ De Quincey, ‘Style’ I, *Works*, xii.19.

restraints on one's "capacity of intellect": "the momentary subject of interest never can settle or linger for any length of time"(20). Ambivalent as ever, De Quincey both enjoys "the speaker's position in the centre of an admiring circle"(19) and is alarmed when "The writer is too full of his office, which he fancies is that of a teacher or a professor speaking *ex cathedra*"²⁰⁵. 'Milton' expresses his concern that such power encourages not only passivity but resistance: "the rebellious reader is oftentimes too determined that he will not learn"(ibid), breaking all bonds of longed-for sympathy.

Amid the era's "boundless theatre of pleasures"²⁰⁶ De Quincey desired the novelty of an "intellectual activity" that would require "tense exertion on the part both of auditor and performer"(ibid). But this "tense exertion" was the greatest peril in his attempts to communicate, as he well knew, writing repeatedly about the *ease* with which a reader will abandon a text that takes too much effort to understand. In 'Style' I, he discusses the "weariness" and "repulsion" that arise from "this single vice of unwieldy comprehensiveness in the structure of sentences", producing even "downright physical exhaustion"²⁰⁷. The "effort, the toil, the exertion of mind requisite to follow the discussion through endless and labyrinthine sentences...compels us to forego the journal, or to lay it aside until the next morning"(21), in the most extreme manifestation of Piranesian "abrupt terminations". The "tension of mind required" means that "most readers are repelled from the habit of careful reading"(23); instead "every man who puts a business value upon his time, slips naturally into a trick of short-hand reading. An evil of modern growth is met by a modern remedy"(ibid). The "trick" of skim-reading is described as "an art of catching at the leading words, and...hinge-joints of transition, which proclaim the general course of a writer's speculation"(ibid). But a few sentences later this "art" has become a "random process of 'reading short'", damaging "habits of

²⁰⁵ De Quincey, 'Milton', ibid, xi.434.

²⁰⁶ De Quincey, 'Elements of Rhetoric', ibid, vi.163.

²⁰⁷ De Quincey, 'Style' I, ibid, xii.20.

thinking coherently, and of judging soundly”(24). Whether it be “remedy”, “trick”, “art” or “random process”, in ‘What Is Theory?’ “reading short” is considered a general ill of the times, De Quincey lamenting “the slight hurried way practised by the reading world of this 19th century” in which “All publishers, indeed all men whatsoever” proceed by “skipping 14 words out of every 15”²⁰⁸. He lambasts “the age of Superficial Knowledge”²⁰⁹ resulting from “much diffusion of knowledge”, especially in encyclopaedias: “prodigious extension implies a due proportion of weak intension; a sea-like expansion of knowledge will cover large shallows as well as large depths”(ibid). There might just be too much “vast contemplation” if a writer ranges so far that their “extension” of scope results in “weak intension” of reading.

Woolf argues that prose is an inherently ‘shallower’ medium than poetry because “the length of the sentence is varied and its weight shifted”; unlike the “deep...impression” made by Tennyson, De Quincey’s “measures are diluted to a lower degree of strength and their force is spread over a much greater space, so that the transition from the lowest compass to the highest is by a gradation of shallow steps”²¹⁰. But for all that De Quincey might harbour this very doubt about his form, his repeated discussions of skim-reading indicate his distress at the idea that a reader hurries over the surface of a text without probing the tonal and thematic heights and depths of his conversational style, in which each clause moves like modulated speech. There is no risk of falling into an abyss of Sublime or nonsensical incomprehension, because there is no exertive and penetrating sympathetic investment “into” the writer’s voice. Again using the metaphor of musical composition, with Piranesian echoes of “lights and shadows”, De Quincey discusses how the reader may “make revelations as it were of music lying in

²⁰⁸ De Quincey, ‘What Is Theory?’(MS, c.1823-4), ibid, iii.392.

²⁰⁹ De Quincey, ‘Notes from the Pocket-Book’ V: ‘Superficial Knowledge’(*London Magazine*, X, July 1824, pp.25-7), ibid, iii, pp.184-7, p.184.

²¹⁰ Woolf, ‘De Quincey’s Autobiography’, *Essays*, v.454.

different strata and at varying depths according to his own degree of command over the artifices of modulation, over the lights and shadows of musical emphasis”²¹¹. Similarly, in ‘Samuel Taylor Coleridge’(1834) he asserts that “the grandest [sentiments] are emasculated by a style of reading, which fails in distributing the lights and shadows of a musical intonation”²¹². In ‘Letters to a Young Man’ III he warns that it is a “gross...delusion” to think “that it is *reading* to cram himself with words, the bare sense of which can hardly have time to glance, like the lamps of a mail coach, upon his hurried and bewildered understanding”²¹³. In another “intercombination” of thread and architectural imagery, he avers that for the skim-reader “So slightly is his knowledge worked into the texture of his mind, that I am persuaded a brain-fever would sweep it all away”(ibid). Out flies the web and floats wide, the sentence cracks from side to side, leaving only the shallow and “showy emptiness, of pretence, of noise, and of words”(68).

The great (re)fluxing strain for De Quincey, then, is that he realises the more he writes, the less he is read, yet he is unable to discipline – and thereby endear – himself to an audience that ought to bear with him but understandably cannot. ‘To the Correspondents of the *Westmorland Gazette*’ openly declares: “*the chances of being read are in the inverse ratio of the length to which the article extends*”²¹⁴; hence “the vast importance of compression”²¹⁵ is a paradoxical corollary of “a vast predominance of contemplation”. But with an obligatory ironic turn, in ‘Style’ IV De Quincey argues that the “disposable time” saved by “retrench[ing] one word from each sentence, one superfluous epithet” would simply enable more reading and more writing: “two sentences out of each three might be pruned away; and the amount of possible publication might

²¹¹ De Quincey, ‘Morning Studies; or, Wandering Thoughts suggested by the Accidents of Reading’(undated), *Works*, xxi, pp.4-5, p.4.

²¹² De Quincey, ‘Samuel Taylor Coleridge’(Tait’s, September 1834, pp.509-20), *ibid*, x, pp.287-308, p.321.

²¹³ De Quincey, ‘Letters to a Young Man’ III, *ibid*, iii.67.

²¹⁴ De Quincey, ‘To the Correspondents of the *Westmorland Gazette*’(9 January 1819), *ibid*, i.176.

²¹⁵ De Quincey, ‘Style’ IV, *ibid*, xii.77.

thus be increased in a threefold degree”(ibid). We perceive yet again his persistent determination to fill up as much space and time as possible – “capacity” is a state of constant pressure where infinity of aspiration pushes at and beyond the limits of attainability. With typical self-chastisement that seems so knowingly oblivious, the lengthy rumination on the need for “severe” compression is then acknowledged as “wide of our immediate purpose”(ibid). ‘A Sketch from Childhood’ VII (1852) encapsulates De Quincey’s perpetual fight against himself – and the impatient reader – when he promises to conclude quickly because “the reader complains that I loiter” but immediately warns that it might be *too* quickly: “Now, then, he shall complain no longer; for I will hurry to the conclusion at a killing pace, that may perhaps anger him as much in the opposite direction”²¹⁶. The teasing “Now, then” suggests the “killing pace” might wait for a few more sentences, and sure enough there is an interval before he reiterates with over-compensatory emphasis: “now, whether it angers the reader or gratifies him, it really is my firm intention to conclude”(ibid). Again, De Quincey’s observations on Coleridge’s diffusive tendencies provide the best self-commentary: “he seemed then to wander the most, when in fact his resistance to the wandering instinct was greatest”²¹⁷.

The biggest test of sympathy is humour, which balances uncertainly between initiating and excluding a reader – will we get the (intended) joke? Will we find it endearing or estranging, self-deprecating or self-defensive? He remarks in the ‘Postscript’ to ‘On Murder’ how easily disproportionate levity can alienate a reader, leading to a tonal flat-lining akin to surface skim-reading: when “the gaiety trespasses a little into the province of the extravagant...not to sympathise is not to understand; and the playfulness...becomes flat and insipid, or absolutely without meaning”²¹⁸. In more self-

²¹⁶ De Quincey, ‘A Sketch from Childhood’ VII (*Instructor*, VIII, 1852, pp.337-9), ibid, xvii, pp.138-44, p.141.

²¹⁷ De Quincey, ‘Samuel Taylor Coleridge’, ibid, x.296-7.

²¹⁸ De Quincey, ‘Postscript [To ‘On Murder’]’, ibid, xx.37.

revelatory comments on Richter, De Quincey distinguishes between the narrowness of “wit” as “a purely intellectual thing...punctually concentrated within the circle of a few words” and “humour” as more expansive, requiring “an influx of the *moral* nature”²¹⁹. With the recurrent imagery of all-pervading angles, he states: “rays, direct or refracted, from the will and the affections...enter into all humour...[which] is of a diffusive quality, pervading an entire course of thoughts”(ibid). Thus he advises that by reading Richter’s humorous rather than witty works, “You will...see more of the man”(ibid). Japp, on the other hand, interprets De Quincey’s use of ostensibly engaging humour as a form of obfuscatory withdrawal, his dramatic tonal fluctuations preventing a consistent assessment of his psyche. Perhaps too much of the man makes for incoherence: “any attempt...to penetrate his character, so as to find a completely satisfactory reconciling point for these very disparate tendencies, is unspeakably difficult...along with his self-revelation ran a singular reticence”²²⁰.

We detect the pervasive influence of Coleridge in this respect, the playful Shandyan self-consciousness pre-emptively drawing attention to authorial failings before a critical reader does, as though there is a virtue in at least being aware of one’s faults, if incapable of mending them. In ‘A Sketch from Childhood’ VI, he heavy-handedly makes light of his digressiveness resulting in being skim-read, or skipped-over: “At this point (and why exactly at this point, is a caprice of nature’s, which it rests upon *her* to explain) I pause, in order to indulge an instinct of rambling. It is an intermitting necessity affecting my particular system, like that of migration that affects swallows”²²¹. There follows a bathetic escalation in which he argues that he can wander at will because “Nobody is angry with swallows for vagabondising periodically, and surely I have a better right to

²¹⁹ De Quincey, ‘John Paul Friedrich Richter’, ibid, iii.25.

²²⁰ Japp, *De Quincey Memorials*, p.456.

²²¹ De Quincey, ‘A Sketch from Childhood’ VI (*Instructor*, VIII, 1852, pp.273-7), *Works*, xvii, pp.125-37, p.125.

indulgence than a swallow”(ibid). The self-deflation turns to defiant retort when he declares: “Indulgent or not, however, the reader must really put up with my infirmity”, before swerving again to appeal for pity as a hopeless case in comparison with “that great character” the reader:

Being thwarted...in me this impulse might produce some malady (typhus fever perhaps); whereas, to the reader, the worst effect of it will be, that he must take a flying leap over a page or two if he dislikes the interruption. Yet what evil is there in an interruption? It is a kind of rest, or, as Coleridge used to style it, a *landing-place* in a flight of stairs.

(ibid).

The comical exaggeration of “typhus fever” nevertheless indicates a genuine anxiety that a writer’s undertaking is always more hazardous and demanding than a reader’s, the latter possessing the power to “take a flying leap over a page or two” with insouciant abandon in the face of slavish verbosity. The hope of sympathetic reciprocity between the “two parties” can thus be jeopardised at any moment. Hence the about-turn “Yet” underplaying the sense of rupture as “a kind of rest” carries a pointed poignancy, De Quincey trying to convince himself that “interruptions” in sense need not be cataclysmic for writer or reader despite indicating a failure of sympathy. His allusion to Coleridge²²² also evokes the *Carceri*’s staircases, undercutting rather than heightening their impact on the “style of his mind”. He reconfigures those treacherous chasms as treads that can be effortlessly leapt over; the fatalistic “terminations” become merely “a *landing-place* in a flight of stairs”. Therefore if his verbal excess fails to reach the towering Sublime heights he hoped for in his teenage diary, there is less of a fall – the stakes do not have to be as high as he initially hoped and feared. If the “*parenthesis...excursus...episode*” is a “momentary interruption” that makes for a breathing space rather than a dead-end, it becomes “instead

²²² *The Friend* (1818) is structured with recurring “Landing-Place” sections, described as “Essays Interposed for Amusement, Retrospect, and Preparation”.

of a blemish...the prime luxury and the *bonne bouche* of the whole work”(ibid). De Quincey just has to reconcile himself to the fact that this useful space for further insight and amusement is more often than not for the writer alone, a solitary gambol.

But this pure self-indulgence in turn allows him to disregard issues of efficient expression: “when I am ‘out upon the spree,’ it is really too much to look for the rigour of logical diction. Quite enough if I find energy to mend my pen, without countenancing so wild an expectation as that I could mend my sentences”(127). Sometimes he can unrepentantly please himself and not worry about pleasing his reader. If a reader can appreciate this, then there is room for sympathy still, a sympathy that accepts points of mutual detachment or estrangement – a “systole and diastole” in which we come together and move apart, aware that not all that is written is read. This idea is enacted in *Sketches III* where, after another “unwieldy” self-justification, he resumes with further prevarication: “Let me see. Where was I? Where did I leave off, on last parting with the reader? Oh! I remember...”²²³. There is a relief in that exclamatory “Oh!” at the thought that writer and reader can go their separate ways for a time and be reunited without harm, rather than imprisoned in a “feudal” master-slave relationship; the phrase “parting with”, rather than “parting from”, recalls the mutuality of “sympathy *with* another” in ‘Knocking at the Gate’. This is how De Quinceyan humour forges intimacy with the reader in a “round about” way that is founded on the sense of distance, alienation and “interruption” that overwriting and under-reading create. Such tension bears out De Quincey’s claim in the Richter article that the best writing exhibits an “interpenetration of the humorous and the pathetic”, which form a “Janus with two faces...they assist each other, melt indiscernibly into each other, and often shine each through like layers of coloured crystals

²²³ De Quincey, ‘A Sketch from Childhood’ III (*Instructor*, VIII, 1852, pp.1-4), *Works*, xvii, pp.100-107, p.101.

placed one behind another”²²⁴. De Quincey believes humour admits everything – good and poor, pleasurable and poignant, necessary and wasteful, unrepentant and self-protective, surface manners and deep torments – into the “style of his mind”, creating the tonal and psychological fractures that comprise a “truly grand and capacious intellect”²²⁵.

Edmund Baxter observes that “for De Quincey all language tends to represent either too little or too much”, imperilling attempts to communicate “the truth”²²⁶ about any subject, especially oneself. De Quincey acknowledged this paradox when analysing Richter, arguing that “verbal obscurities are but the necessary result and product of his style of thinking” due to “the vast expansion and discursiveness in his range of notice and observation, [which] carries him into every department and nook of human life, of science, of art, and of literature”²²⁷. Such scope requires a “proportionably extensive vocabulary” alongside the “evanescent brilliancy of his oblique glances”, all of which “fling but half a meaning on the mind”(ibid). The more one is able to comprehend, the less one is able to communicate clearly or completely; this perturbing realisation that there might be such a thing as too vast a contemplation fuels De Quincey’s erratic, almost pathologically hit-and-miss, manner and matter. So much of his self-conscious guilt in discussions of “half”-finished style is rooted in frustration at not being able to fulfil the ideal role of Sublime poet embodied, he believed, in Wordsworth and Coleridge. But he inherited something far more fundamental and truthful about the vagaries of authorship

²²⁴ De Quincey, ‘John Paul Frederick Richter’, *ibid*, iii.22, 20-21.

²²⁵ De Quincey, ‘To ‘Q. in a Corner’’(*Westmorland Gazette*, 23 January 1819, p.3), *ibid*, i, pp.171-5, p.174.

²²⁶ Baxter, *Art of Autobiography*, p.47.

²²⁷ De Quincey, ‘John Paul Friedrich Richter’, *Works*, iii.24.

from his poetic idols: the principle of “flux and reflux”, “systole and diastole”, the “joltings and retardations” of all attempts to convey and elicit “A capacity of thinking”.

The answer to De Quincey’s persistent question ‘What is style?’ is the answer he gives in ‘The Household Wreck’(1838) to “What is life?”, dashing through another seemingly endless comma-strewn sentence:

...the inevitable amount of man’s laughter and his tears – of what he suffers and he does – of his motions this way and that way – to the right or to the left – backwards or forwards – of all his seeming realities and all his absolute negations – his shadowy pomps and his pompous shadows – of whatsoever he thinks, finds, makes or mars, creates or animates, loves, hates, or in dread hope anticipates...²²⁸.

Discussing the dilemma of whether it is “better to be a profound student, or a comprehensive one” he concludes that “A due balance and equilibrium of the mind is but preserved by a large and multiform knowledge”, which is nevertheless “best served by an exclusive (or at least paramount) dedication of one mind to one science”²²⁹. Therefore he strives to be both the Sublime overseer of all and the scientist forensically examining minutiae, the visionary and the journalist, the “extempore” cavalier and the crafty artist, roaming between high and low registers, profound and carefree preoccupations. But he operates by jarring oscillation rather than neatly secure “equilibrium”, because to explore deeply and understand comprehensively necessitates confronting – even being lost in – tortuous complexity and discord. He might hope to emulate Burke’s style of mind “essentially going forward, governed by the very necessity of growth” in “infinitely elastic” sentences, but De Quincey’s prose is so “capacious” that it also accommodates what he identified as Johnsonian “intellect retrogressive, retrospective, and throwing itself

²²⁸ De Quincey, ‘The Household Wreck’, *ibid*, ix.210.

²²⁹ De Quincey, ‘Notes from the Pocket-Book’ V, *ibid*, iii.185-6.

back on its own steps”²³⁰, especially by constantly returning to the subject of writing’s processes and effects. This is also how De Quincey perceives historical progress, a general trajectory of “ascent” that nevertheless involves “continual loss of ground...a repeated falling back”²³¹, echoing the concerns of Wordsworth and Coleridge before him and demonstrating how fluctuating ambivalence becomes “one of the fundamental habits of his mind”.

De Quincey’s faults and virtues of content and method, then, evolve from and revolve upon each other in the course of a sentence, article and literary career. His playfulness demonstrates how he comes to accept and even appreciate these faults as a condition of an aspirational intellect in dialogue with diffusive prose, a form that in its tendency to shapelessness inherently offers something more – if only more uncertainty – than the “narrow” concentrated poetry he originally hoped to write. As Baxter points out, a typical De Quincey text “breaks down in a *productive* way, producing meanings other than...those intended”²³². In this regard he is more consistently – even constitutionally – alert to the self-undermining potential of striving to say “Enough” than Wordsworth and Coleridge, and therefore consciously “cultivates” a voice of compromised Genius that allows for greater sympathy with the reader by playing on the idea of being alternately blithely oblivious and painfully aware of one’s excesses. Aldous Huxley’s description of Piranesi’s *Carceri* as incorporating “a tolerated margin of mess”²³³ provides an apposite commentary on De Quincey’s fluctuating attitudes towards intellectual and formal excessiveness that he relishes and regrets, yet is always enthralled by. This is because De Quinceyan ambivalence is an *activity* of mind; there is virtue for reader and writer in the immersive exertion of ascending and descending – reading and rereading – those twisting

²³⁰ De Quincey, ‘Conversation’ (1847), *ibid*, xvi.218.

²³¹ De Quincey, untitled MS (undated), *ibid*, xv, pp.597-9, p.599.

²³² Baxter, *Art of Autobiography*, p.11.

²³³ Aldous Huxley, *Prisons; with the Carceri Etchings by G.B. Piranesi* (London: Trianon Press, 1949), p.13.

staircase-sentences, even if they do not progress as we expect, or indeed lead nowhere but where we came from: “even that system of motion in reverse of another motion, of mere antistrophe or dancing backward what the strophe had danced forward, is better after all...than standing stock still”²³⁴.

²³⁴ De Quincey, ‘Conversation and S.T. Coleridge’, *Works*, xxi.44.

CHAPTER THREE

“Within more spacious limits, the materials which I have used might have been better unfolded”(Confessions): The Shared Strain of Revision for Wordsworth and De Quincey

I

“of what stuff / Time’s fetters are composed”(The Excursion): Revision as Expansion and Contraction

In August 1851, sixteen months after his death, a commemorative profile medallion of Wordsworth was erected in Grasmere Church, with an inscription describing him as:

...a True Philosopher and Poet who, by the Special Gift and Calling of Almighty God whether he discoursed on Man or Nature failed not to lift up the Heart to Holy Things Tired not of Maintaining the Cause of the Poor and Simple: and so, in Perilous Times was raised up to be a Chief Minister, not only of Noblest Poesy, but of High and Sacred Truth.¹

Tennyson balked at “such needless long-windedness”², preferring the epithet “The Great Poet” as “far nobler in its simplicity” – though “Even that seems too much”³. He asks indignantly, “Is Wordsworth a great poet? Well then don’t let us talk of him as if he were half known”(ibid). Yet that phrase “half known” is strikingly redolent of Wordsworth’s own troubled conception and articulation of his remembered past – those half-perceived, half-created “gleams of half-extinguished thought, / With many recognitions dim and faint”, amounting to “somewhat of a sad perplexity”⁴. The *Prelude* poignantly describes the Discharged Soldier’s

¹ From John Keble, *De Poeticae Vi Medica* (1844), quoted in Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), p.274 n.73.

² Gill, *ibid*, p.37.

³ Tennyson, letter to Thomas Woolner, sculptor of the medallion (10 March 1851), *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F Shannon Jr, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981-90), ii.10, quoted in *ibid*, p.274.

⁴ Wordsworth, ‘Tintern Abbey’, l.59-61.

...strange half-absence, as of one
 Knowing⁵ too well the importance of his theme,
 But feeling it no longer.

(1850, IV.442-4).

Conversely Wordsworth compares his new-found appreciation for earth's "inheritance" to one who "looks upon the spot...moulds it and remoulds, / And is half pleased with things that are amiss"(XI.146, 149-51). Jonathan Wordsworth seizes on the teetering tone of authority and uncertainty in this half-life, explaining how the poet "sets up numerous suggestions, half undercuts them...and leaves them to work in the mind"⁶.

Wordsworth's "half known" nature certainly got to work in De Quincey's mind, which was chronically "half-courting those dangers"⁷ of excessiveness in life and art. Attempting to conclude a 'Sketch from Childhood' article, De Quincey asserts that "it is hard to see how any proper *end* could be devised for a paper of this nature, reciting a few incidents, sad and gay, from the records of a half-forgotten childhood"⁸. With characteristically sardonic morbidness, he adds that only by "putting the child to death" could the piece neatly finish, "for which denouement, unhappily, there was no solid historical foundation"(ibid). Edward Sackville-West echoes this architectural metaphor when assessing how the fraught practicalities of De Quincey's life impeded his work: "Carried thus further and further out to sea by the inexorable current of financial pressure, De Quincey soon lost sight of land altogether", where "stood the half-finished city which he had been building so painstakingly, stone by stone...in the dim distance of past years"⁹. The compulsion to pursue – to "mould and remould" – the frustratingly "dim and faint", "sad and gay" past in search of "High and Sacred Truth" is the propulsive artistic force for

⁵ "Remembering"(1805, IV.477).

⁶ Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Borders of Vision* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p.17.

⁷ De Quincey, *Confessions, Works*, ii, pp.88-278, p.103.

⁸ De Quincey, 'A Sketch from Childhood' III (*Instructor*, VIII, 1852, pp.1-4), ibid, xvii, pp.100-107, p.101.

⁹ Edward Sackville-West, *A Flame in Sunlight: The Life and Work of Thomas De Quincey* (London: Cassell, 1936), p.204.

both Wordsworth and De Quincey, but they risk getting “Carried” away with a pursuit that ensures their bodies of work remain only “half-finished”.

We are familiar with Wordsworth’s descriptions of the *Prelude* as “a sort of portico to the *Recluse*, part of the same building”¹⁰ and as “the antechapel” of the greater work’s “gothic church”¹¹, hoping the former provides a “solid...foundation” for the latter’s all-encompassing study of “Nature, Man, and Society”¹². However, Wordsworth admits “the comprehensiveness of the subject” means that “much the most important part of my efforts cannot meet the public eye for many years”¹³, and the persistent reworking of the *Prelude* over half a century indicates the fundamental tension that “building up a Work that shall endure”¹⁴ creates only provisional, partial versions of a text that is itself just one “part” of a larger “building”. For all his private and public discussions of *The Recluse* throughout his life, it remains a “strange half-absence” in his canon, so much a projected yet unrealised work that “the unsubstantial structure melts...Mist into air dissolving!”¹⁵. Wordsworth discusses his hope that “the main object of my life...the completion of my literary undertakings” will be “to the solid benefit of...my Countrymen”¹⁶, but he inserts a tell-tale “perhaps”, suggesting his concern that even the ancillary *Prelude* was, as Emerson put it, “not quite solid enough in its texture”¹⁷. The *Prelude* explicitly voices the fear that, in the attempt to “shape out / Some tale from my own heart...deadening admonitions will succeed”, so that “the whole beauteous fabric seems to lack / Foundation” and leaves the work “Shadowy and unsubstantial”(1805, I.220-8). This fear was realised for De Quincey, who found *Suspiria De Profundis* “the

¹⁰ Wordsworth to Beaumont (3 June 1805), *Letters*, i.594.

¹¹ Wordsworth, ‘Essay, Supplementary’, *Prose Works*, iii.5.

¹² Wordsworth to James Webbe Tobin (6 March 1798), *Letters*, i.212.

¹³ Wordsworth to Lord Lonsdale (6 February 1812), *ibid*, ii.3.

¹⁴ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), XIV.306-11.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, I.225-7.

¹⁶ Wordsworth to Lonsdale (6 February 1812), *Letters*, iii.3.

¹⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson, Journal (27 February 1858), quoted in Herbert Lindenberger, *On Wordsworth’s Prelude* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p.15.

most overwhelming” of his works to produce due to “the aerial and shadowy nat[ure] of the composition”¹⁸. The *Prelude* professes a faith in the “memory of all books which lay / Their sure foundations in the heart of man”(1850, V.198-200), yet the ‘Essay, Supplementary to the Preface’ of the 1815 *Poems* demonstrates the precariously absolutist rhetoric surrounding Wordsworth’s commitment to “High and Sacred Truth”. He declares that, if he were not certain of his work’s “solid benefit”, he could destroy his poetic corpus and leave not a rack behind:

He...takes leave of his Readers, by assuring them – that, if he were not persuaded that the contents of these Volumes, and the Work to which they are subsidiary, evince something of the ‘Vision and the Faculty divine;’ and that...they will...extend the domain of sensibility for the delight, the honour, and the benefit of human nature, notwithstanding the many happy hours which he has employed in their composition, and the manifold comforts and enjoyments they have procured to him, he would not, if a wish could do it, save them from immediate destruction; – from becoming at this moment...as a thing that had never been.¹⁹

This is one of those De Quinceyan sentences that collapses as it builds, over-extending and “remoulding” itself to defer the stark nihilism – and verbally fill the vacuum – implied by its conclusion in the irrevocable past tense. The ease with which elements of Wordsworth’s career can be erased is poignantly demonstrated in the 1836 reprinting of *The Excursion* without its original subtitle “Being a portion of THE RECLUSE” – that grand project which became evermore a thing that had never been.

De Quincey was similarly haunted by the prospect of “Some great intellectual project to which all intellectual pursuits may be made tributary”²⁰, and produces in *Confessions* only an inadvertent *magnum opus*. Deploying architectural imagery again, ‘Confessions’ describes “the slow and elaborate toil of constructing one single work”, an

¹⁸ De Quincey, letter to Blackwood (19 May 1845), quoted Lindop, *Opium-Eater*, p.358.

¹⁹ Wordsworth, ‘Essay, Supplementary’, *Prose Works*, iii.84.

²⁰ De Quincey, ‘Constituents of Happiness’, *Works*, i.72.

ambitious philosophical treatise entitled *De Emendatione Humani Intellectus*^{*}, after an unfinished work by Spinoza. De Quincey explains how he had “devoted the labour of my whole life, and had dedicated my intellect, blossoms and fruits” to the project, yet it had become by 1821 a “half-extinguished” dream:

...lying locked up, as by frost, like any Spanish bridge or aqueduct, begun upon too great a scale for the resources of the architect...instead of surviving me as a monument of wishes at least, and aspirations, and a life of labour dedicated to the exultation of human nature...it was likely to stand as a memorial...of hopes defeated, of baffled efforts, of materials uselessly accumulated, of foundations laid that were never to support a superstructure, - of the grief and the ruin of the architect.²¹

The poignancy of the passage intensifies when we read it again, word for word, in the revised edition of *Confessions*, three years before De Quincey’s death: nothing has changed over thirty-five years, the work permanently ‘frosted over’. Instead of attempting to scale the heights of *Humani Intellectus* he has decided, like Wordsworth, to return to the more modest and ‘manageable’ autobiographical work round about it; he doubles the length of ‘Confessions’ to 90,000 words by adding numerous digressions and anecdotes in the hope of “constructing” a more “solid” sense of self. But, just as with Wordsworth, this extending and embellishing is also a grand exercise in distraction and procrastination, alerting us to the inherent ambivalence in both writers’ attitudes towards, and practice of, revision throughout their lives. Wordsworth would come to realise that *The Recluse* – “upon which my thoughts have been fixed these many years”²² – had not only been “taken up upon a large scale”(ibid) but “too great a scale”, to recall De Quincey. Both writers are forced to return to their texts by the persistent feeling that one’s past – and therefore one’s present and future identity – is forever only “half known”. Furthermore, revision

^{*} ‘On the Improvement of Human Understanding’.

²¹ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ II, *Works*, ii.63.

²² Wordsworth to Beaumont (25 December 1804), *Letters*, i.518.

pluralises and diffuses the single textual “superstructure” which, unless every version is thoroughly examined, renders major works like the *Prelude* and *Confessions* frustratingly “half known” to their readers – including Tennyson.

De Quincey’s ‘Letter to Mr Tait Concerning the Poetry of Wordsworth’(1838) criticises the poet’s habit of revision in terms that recall the rickety “Spanish bridge” and “half-finished city”. Proposing his own popular edition of Wordsworth, De Quincey declares that he will “restore the original text”:

...for it is noticeable and painful, but not at all surprising to those who know...how totally the eye loses it’s [sic] faculty of seeing things in their just relations when it is forced...into a local punctual convergence of it’s [sic] power upon a little contracted spot, to find that Mr. Wordsworth has half-ruined some dozen of his finest passages by “cobbling” them...altering them when no longer writing under the free flowing movement of the original inspiration.²³

De Quincey pointedly appropriates the word “spot” and phrase “free flowing movement” – invoking the famous tenets of “spots of time”²⁴ and the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” – to evaluate Wordsworth against his own privileging of “original inspiration”. Here begins the now-common argument that Wordsworth’s revisions demonstrate a degree of self-estrangement – paradoxically, the very attempt to clarify his identity diminishes his self-knowledge and thus ‘half-ruins’ his poetry. Wordsworth himself seems to emphasise this temporal and emotional distancing in the alterations at end of the *Prelude*, Book I, where he recalls the “lovely forms / And sweet sensations” that “make our infancy a visible scene / On which the sun is shining?”(1799, I.463-4): in 1805 these lovely forms “almost make our infancy itself / A visible scene...”(I.662), and by 1850 they “almost make remotest infancy / A visible scene...”(I.635-6). The juxtaposition of “half-ruined” and “free flowing” in the ‘Letter to Mr Tait’ reveals a

²³ De Quincey, ‘Letter to Mr Tait’, *Works*, xi.588.

²⁴ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1799), I.288.

fundamental duality in both Wordsworth's and De Quincey's conceptions of works, and lives, as carefully crafted architectural structures – implying fixity and solidity – and as organic processes, suggesting the unconscious and unforeseen growth of a text's verbal, formal and hermeneutic possibilities.

This “flux and reflux” between the organic and the man-made, the moving and the grounded in “the textualization of consciousness”²⁵ is most obviously exemplified by the river metaphor shaping the “portico” *Prelude*, “Where tones of Nature smoothed by learned Art / May flow in lasting current”(1850, VI.674-5). The *Prelude*'s foundational image in 1799 of the actual River Derwent “that flowed along my dreams”(I.5-6) – echoing the “forms of beauty”(I.24) and “sensations sweet...felt along the heart”(I.28-29) in ‘Tintern Abbey’ – is counterbalanced by the idea of the stoically sturdy self in the wake of parental death: “The props of my affections were removed, / And yet the building stood, as if sustained / By its own spirit”(1850, II.279-81). The motivation for and practice of textual revision is a key locus for this central ‘half-and-half’ tension to play out. The mammoth extending of the *Prelude* and ‘Confessions’ aims to produce securely substantial work befitting a “capacious” mind and eventful life, but such constant activity disperses texts over time and space, rendering them never quite “solid” enough. De Quincey's ‘Letter’ argues for Wordsworth's integral place in the edifice of literary posterity – “the Temple of our national grandeur” – “not as another ornament...but as a buttress applied to it's [*sic*] foundations – or a corner-stone from which a large extension may be commenced of magnificence yet to come”²⁶. The grounded “buttress” metaphor contends with the “corner-stone” of Wordsworth's philosophy – for De Quincey at least – of the imagination's “free flowing movement”, and the hope of “something evermore

²⁵ J. Douglas Kneale, *Monumental Writing: Aspects of Rhetoric in Wordsworth's Poetry* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p.xv-i.

²⁶ De Quincey, ‘Letter to Mr Tait’, *Works*, xi.594.

about to be”²⁷. But De Quincey refutes the idea of texts being kept alive by their organic malleability, instead configuring revision as a reductive concentration on “a little contracted spot” that distorts the author’s perspective by imposing artificial frameworks on memory and its articulation. Revision is a kind of “eddy” round a word, phrase or line, to borrow the metaphor for the *Prelude*’s narrative interruption in Cambridge: “...nearer to the spot we drew, / It seemed to suck us in with an eddy’s force”(1850, III.13-14) that “Rotted”(1805, III.339), or “half-ruined”, Wordsworth. De Quincey notes “the tendency of madness to eddy about one idea; and the loss of power to abstract”²⁸, narrowing one’s field of vision. Thus “local punctual convergence” is associated with frustrating stasis – process without progress – explaining De Quincey’s conclusion that, for all the seeming work of revision, Wordsworth “has a brilliant, if not an active, genius”²⁹.

Edmund Baxter notes De Quincey’s tendency to become the “doppelganger”³⁰ of those he critiques, and indeed De Quincey’s first laudatory letter to Wordsworth on 31 May 1803 – when he *wanted* to be a “doppelganger” – presciently demonstrates the paradox that officious revision can fix one to the spot in unhelpful ways. The first draft appears in De Quincey’s diary and is forcefully direct, declaring that the desire to make his idol’s acquaintance has “under every circumstance, been the ruling one in my heart”, amid “many gnawing anxieties – and many bitter recollections”³¹. He begins with a bold statement of intent: “Sir, - To most men what I am going to say would seem strange; and to most men therefore I would *not* say it; but to you I will, because your feelings do not follow the current of the world”(ibid). But the second version of the letter, written three weeks later, offers a more self-conscious convolutedness: “I suppose that most men would

²⁷ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1805), VI.604-8.

²⁸ De Quincey, ‘Madness’(*London Magazine*, IX, June 1824, pp.645-6), *Works*, iii, pp.180-1, p.181.

²⁹ De Quincey, ‘Letter to Mr Tait’(1838), ibid, xi.588.

³⁰ Baxter, *Art of Autobiography*, p.64.

³¹ De Quincey, Diary (13 May 1803), *Works*, i.29.

think what I am going to say – strange at least or rude: but I am bold enough to imagine that...you may be willing to excuse anything uncommon in the liberty I am now taking”³². De Quincey’s initial enthusiasm is “half-extinguished” in this round-about reworking thrown into the conditional tense, beginning with a half-withdrawing “I suppose”. Similarly, the second sentence of the original draft – “From the time when I first saw the *Lyrical Ballads* I made a resolution to obtain (if I could) the friendship of their author”(29) – is replaced by the hedging hesitance of the subjunctive tense and superfluous verbs, compounded by some clunky monosyllables:

My object in troubling you, Sir, is that hereafter I may have the satisfaction of recollecting that I made one effort at least for obtaining your notice – and that I did not, through any want of exertion on my own part, miss that without which what good can my life do me?

(40).

Instead of refining his prose and clarifying his purpose, De Quincey’s reworking produces greater abstruseness, the accumulation of present participles delaying and obscuring the end of the sentence and the irrevocability of his request for friendship. We recall Wordsworth’s own abstruseness in the development of the *Lyrical Ballads* ‘Preface’ from the ‘Advertisement’. The oppositional strain of revision as expansive potential and stymying limitation, organic process and overwrought construction, thus casts an ambivalent light on D.D. Devlin’s assertion that Wordsworth is “an inexhaustible source of energy”³³ to De Quincey. Sackville-West criticises De Quincey’s tendency to “lengthen and perplex...what was already too long”, calling it a “habit...so ingrained” that “when the opportunity occurred...to ‘absorb the redundancies’” in the collected edition, *Selections Grave and Gay* (1853-60), “he only added to them”³⁴. The

³² Ibid (31 May 1803), *ibid*, i.40.

³³ D.D. Devlin, *De Quincey, Wordsworth and the Art of Prose* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p.23.

³⁴ Sackville-West, *Flame in Sunlight*, p.243-4.

“inexhaustible” impetus to remould under the weight of self-consciousness can all-too-easily create fragile formal structures.

Collaborating on *The Convention of Cintra* (1809) is the most strained Wordsworth and De Quincey became in their working lives, and the project exemplifies the destructiveness of excessive attention to “the infinite littleness of details”(Autobiographic Sketches) that over-extends a text. The most overtly topical of Wordsworth’s productions, this pamphlet examining the 1808 peace treaty between France and Spain in the Peninsular War was proof-read and seen through the press by De Quincey. But a combination of Wordsworth’s constant substantial alterations and De Quincey’s unhappiness with compositors’ errors prolonged the task over 216 pages and nine months, from August 1808 to April 1809, risking the work being virtually obsolete as a commentary on immediate events by the time it was published. A “mountainous”³⁵ series of letters were exchanged back-and-forth, as De Quincey tried to keep up with the “flux and reflux” of Wordsworth’s thinking. By March 1809 “Corrections and additions” arrived “almost daily”³⁶, Lindop describing De Quincey’s editing as “exhausting labour” that “seemed to grow more and more arduous”(ibid). Wordsworth commissioned an appended ‘Note’ by De Quincey that, after protracted and agonised effort, was altered by the former, only for him to request of his colleague, “Do mend that stupid part of the Note, which I sent you, in fact my brains were utterly dried up when I wrote it”³⁷. The ‘Note’ ended up being abruptly cut, compounding the sense of futility that pervaded the project, as betrayed in Wordsworth’s frequently apologetic letters “expressing my sincere and deep regret and sorrow that you should have had so much trouble and mortification in this business”³⁸. He urges De Quincey to think of himself as the “Traveller of a

³⁵ Ibid, p.113.

³⁶ Lindop, *Opium-Eater*, p.167.

³⁷ Wordsworth to De Quincey (28 March 1809), *Letters*, ii.304.

³⁸ Ibid (10 May 1809), *ibid*, ii.341.

disagreeable journey” which, once completed, he “will not have to repeat”(ibid). Calling to mind the *Prelude*’s “self-haunting spirit”(1850, XIV.284), Wordsworth confesses the eddying stasis of *Cintra*: “I am haunted with notions which I cannot get over...that I leave my meaning undeveloped”³⁹. De Quincey shared this anxiousness in relation to what he viewed as compositorial incompetence, lamenting in March 1809 that “the proofs are filled with such monstrous errors...that I am now obliged to insist on having a *second* proof”⁴⁰. Not that Wordsworth appreciated De Quincey’s efforts, complaining that the latter’s zealous pedantry over vocabulary, punctuation and spacing – which Coleridge, too, found “strange & most mistaken”⁴¹ – was evidence of constitutional weakness: “that he has failed is too clear, and not without great blame on his own part (being a man of great abilities and the best feelings, but...not fitted for smooth and speedy progress in business)”⁴². Wordsworth seemed to be only intermittently aware that *Cintra*’s tortuous delays demonstrated a *shared* aversion to the “smooth and speedy”, combining self-confident perfectionism and self-doubting indecision.

The pressure of revision is not only due to pursuing aesthetic ideals, but also combatting practical imperatives of deadlines and column widths in periodicals and collected editions. Conversely, the *Prelude* exemplifies how revision is a problem of *excessive* as much as limited time and space: too many months and years propel the act (if not ‘activity’) and frustrate its purposes in the same way as too few, casting an ambivalent light on Wordsworth’s belief that “You will in the end get far more work out of yourself if you spread it over a larger space of time”⁴³. Hence the inherently pivoting nature of revision as expansive and reductive, organic and artificial, local and general, internally and externally imposed, by turns developing and fixing, clarifying and obscuring, original

³⁹ Ibid (28 March 1809), *ibid*, ii.304.

⁴⁰ De Quincey, letter to Wordsworth, quoted in Lindop, *Opium-Eater*, p.167.

⁴¹ Coleridge to Stuart (13 June 1809), *Collected Letters*, iii.767.

⁴² Wordsworth to Stuart (28 May 1809), *Letters*, ii.350.

⁴³ Wordsworth to Frederick William Faber (6 August 1844), *ibid*, vii.583.

feeling. Wordsworth encapsulates the tension well when he calls one of his amended sonnets “an imperfect correction”⁴⁴. De Quincey’s observation on his greater familiarity – and disillusionment – with his sometime idol is also apposite: “the price” of Wordsworth’s “extraordinary power and originality” was that “in some points, and those of large extent, he was frailer and more infirm than most of his fellow-men...I viewed him now as a *mixed* creature, made up of special infirmity and special strength”⁴⁵. Revision attempts to fathom, yet paradoxically perpetuates, the idea of the always “half known” self and text “of large extent”, in yet another example of excess revealing and yielding insufficiency. When De Quincey is “called upon to wind up a narrative which has already extended to an unreasonable length” in the 1821 ‘Confessions’, he attests that “Within more spacious limits, the materials which I have used might have been better unfolded”⁴⁶. He adds as an afterthought, “Perhaps, however, enough has been given”, the assertion “half-ruined” by the infirm “Perhaps”: he and we implicitly recognise that what he produces will never be “Enough”. It is an attitude he has “learned, gradually”⁴⁷ from Wordsworth, whose reply to that first fawning letter of De Quincey’s concluded: “How many things are there in a man’s character of which his writings however miscellaneous or voluminous will give no idea”⁴⁸. Given the foundational principle that nothing is “Enough”, the question is how far, and how successfully, Wordsworth and De Quincey aestheticise the arduousness of “considering and reconsidering, changing and rechanging”⁴⁹ as contributing towards larger harmonious ideas of text-as-process and identity as continually evolving. Or whether the exponential potential of revision to

⁴⁴ Wordsworth to Benjamin Robert Haydon (11 September 1840), *ibid.*, vii.111.

⁴⁵ De Quincey, ‘Sketches of Life and Manners’ (*Tait’s*, o.s.IX, n.s.VII, October 1840, pp.629-37), *Works*, xi, pp.245-60, p.258.

⁴⁶ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ II, *ibid.*, ii.74.

⁴⁷ De Quincey, ‘Sketches of Life and Manners’ (October 1840), *ibid.*, xi.258.

⁴⁸ Wordsworth to De Quincey (29 July 1803), *Letters*, i.401.

⁴⁹ Wordsworth to Haydon (7 September 1840), *ibid.*, vii.107.

complicate rather than order the past exposes both writers' core uncertainty – "infirmity" – regarding the nature and articulation of individual experience over time.

II

"the way in which insanity begins to collect and form itself"('Madness'): (Re)collecting Oneself

Wordsworth asserts privately that he "never cared much for what is called reputation or even for that rather more solid acquisition, fame" and that the thought of "doing some good in one's generation" is "the only support on which I have ever leaned or wished to lean"⁵⁰. But his insistence on reforming copyright laws towards the end of his life suggests a concern for the security of his place in literary posterity by preventing unofficial versions of his texts being circulated. Urging the MP Philip Henry Howard to support Thomas Noon Talfourd's Bill for the extension of copyright, Wordsworth argues that writers "look beyond" making an "immediate impression by their works, and...wish to leave behind them permanent Memorials of their endeavours"⁵¹. Accordingly, De Quincey is troubled by what he sees as the inherent fragility of the periodical form, especially when buckling under the pressure of his enormous sentences; it is literally flimsy and by definition transient. This is keenly felt as a galling contrast to his mentor's attempts at a new kind of epic poetry in the *Prelude* and *Recluse*, Wordsworth implicitly dismissing the slightness of a medium like the periodical when he writes to Edward Moxon that "it would never answer to sell the miscellaneous Poems without the *Excursion*": "a thin Volume...is a very disagreeable pamphlet shape. It is too thin to bind, and won't stand easily upon a shelf"⁵². The essayist Charles Lamb compared the declining

⁵⁰ Wordsworth to Aubrey De Vere (31 March 1842), *ibid*, vii.312.

⁵¹ Wordsworth to Philip Henry Howard (23 March 1838), *ibid*, vi.537.

⁵² Wordsworth to Edward Moxon (17 January 1841), *ibid*, vii.167-8.

London Magazine to a ramshackle deserted building: “I linger among its creaking rafters, like the last rat. It will topple down, if they don’t get some buttresses”⁵³, which it duly did in 1829. Wordsworth criticised the trend in America for selling lengthy works “in a newspaper form”, lamenting how “They are as carelessly treated and as recklessly destroyed, as they were unthinkingly bought”⁵⁴. Reaffirming the correlation between a text’s literal and intellectual substantiality, he declares that “The books which really improve the human mind are those that tempt to repeated perusal...and are even treasured up in the very shape they bore”(ibid). De Quincey jokes about exploiting the self-erasing nature of periodical articles – the failings of the present shoddy piece will be forgotten, gone with the next issue – but a pathetic tone pervades his “reliance for the redress of any harsh judgment on the absolute certainty that each successive month washes out of the public mind every trace of what may have occupied it in any previous month”⁵⁵. As H.A. Eaton observes: “Instead of impressive outlay, [De Quincey] must spend his mental wealth in small sums”⁵⁶. Hence the importance of the much-extended and unified single volume of *Confessions* in 1856: De Quincey wants to erect a (literally) weightier monument to a fragmentary career comprised by articles dissipated over time and space. Thus revision – by systematically adding to make a work more substantial, and/or ‘stabilising’ it through a concentration on individual words – seeks some kind of literary “resting place”, a certain steadfastness in the face of “exhausting labour”(Lindop) which survives death.

The *magnum opus*’ solidity is predicated on a belief in the self’s continuity and coherence – “the primal sympathy / Which having been must ever be”⁵⁷. This is an ideal

⁵³ Lamb, letter to Bernard Barton (2 September 1823), *The Letters of Charles Lamb*, ed. E.V. Lucas, 3 vols. (London: Dent, 1935), ii.394.

⁵⁴ Wordsworth to Thomas Wyse (3 May 1838), *Letters*, vi.575-6.

⁵⁵ De Quincey, ‘Sketches of Life and Manners’(October 1840), *Works*, xi.259.

⁵⁶ H.A. Eaton, *Thomas De Quincey: A Biography* (London: OUP, 1936), p.256.

⁵⁷ Wordsworth, ‘Ode. Intimations’, l.182-3.

frequently asserted by Wordsworth and De Quincey, and critics like Zachary Leader who argue for the underlying constructive consistency of revision by an author who “In Nature’s presence stood, as now I stand, / A sensitive being, a *creative* soul”⁵⁸. Leader contends that Wordsworth’s textual and literal returns are “restorative, establishing unity and continuity in the face of loss and change”⁵⁹; the sympathetic act of “identity with”(38) one’s past self allows for “the expression of a truth latent – not fully realized – in the early version”(72). Keith Hanley similarly argues that Wordsworth’s “alterations” work towards “the denial and concealment of change”, aiming “to make past utterance speak for an ever-present conviction”⁶⁰ – the “Poetic spirit” of trust in nature “Through every change of growth or of decay / Preeminent till death”⁶¹. De Quincey’s famous theme of the “natural and mighty...deep memorial palimpsest of the brain”⁶² provides a helpful gloss on Wordsworth’s professed faith in revealing “the undecaying mind...the immortal soul” experienced through “glimmering views”⁶³. *Suspiria* discusses how the mind is a manuscript inscribed with “Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings...Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet in reality not one has been extinguished”⁶⁴. While physical palimpsests often contain thematically unrelated writings, in “our own heaven-created palimpsest...there are not and cannot be such incoherencies”:

The fleeting accidents of a man’s life...may indeed be irrelate and incongruous; but the organizing principles which fuse into harmony, and gather about fixed predetermined centres, whatever heterogeneous elements life may have accumulated from without, will not permit the grandeur of human unity greatly to be violated...

(175).

⁵⁸ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), XII.204-7.

⁵⁹ Zachary Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (1966; repr. Oxford, 1999), p.54.

⁶⁰ Keith Hanley, ‘Crossings out: The Problem of Textual Passage in *The Prelude*’, in Robert Brinkley and Keith Hanley (eds.), *Romantic Revisions* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), pp.103-35, p.103.

⁶¹ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1799), II.305-310.

⁶² De Quincey, *Suspiria*, *Works*, xv.175.

⁶³ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), IV.165-6, 164.

⁶⁴ De Quincey, *Suspiria*, *Works*, xv, pp.171-87, p.175.

The idea of the palimpsest-brain is not only a useful analogue for, but also incorporates, the successive semantic “layers” involved in revision, and the author’s motivating belief that he is “organizing”, fusing and harmonising the past when modifying his texts. De Quincey’s concern that “human unity” not be “violated” is echoed in Leader’s contention that because Wordsworth’s past self “is still felt as, or needs to be felt as, *this*...present self, revision is no violation”⁶⁵. Indeed, De Quincey wants to ensure ‘sympathetic’ revisionary practices: because he is initially “obliged to compose the whole almost in my mind before I can write a line”⁶⁶, when he returns to articles for collected editions he insists “all must be revised *concurrently as a whole*”⁶⁷.

The 1856 *Confessions* demonstrates De Quincey’s desire to “provide a continuity of experience...feeling vividly the various levels and intensities of his life”⁶⁸, as he self-consciously explains the overall structure and tries to cohere the disparate sections of the 1821 version. Cutting the original pedantic distinction between the ‘Introduction to the Pains of Opium’ and ‘The Pains of Opium’ proper, he is anxious to justify the lengthy description of his childhood preceding the addiction itself, which structurally threatens to divide the work into “two disconnected sections”, as the original magazine publication did. He claims that “the opium miseries...connect themselves with my early hardships in London...by natural links of affiliation – that is, the early series of sufferings was the parent of the later”⁶⁹, appealing to the organic model of a mind’s and text’s development. He emphasises the palpability of the “link” between the two halves by claiming that his youthful wanderings “determined the particular form and pressure”(240) of his later “dream-scenery”, so that there is “one interrupted bond of unity running through the entire

⁶⁵ Leader, *Revision*, p.35.

⁶⁶ De Quincey, letter to Taylor and Hessey (c. August 1821 or December 1822), quoted in Lindop, *Opium-Eater*, p.294.

⁶⁷ Quoted in H.A. Page, *Thomas De Quincey: His Life and Writings*, 2 vols. (London: John Hogg & Co., 1877), ii.39.

⁶⁸ Whale, *Reluctant Autobiography*, p.69.

⁶⁹ De Quincey, *Confessions*, *Works*, ii.240, 231.

succession of experiences”(241). Clearly anxious that the fragmentariness in 1821 obscured his purpose, he explicitly clarifies: “The final object of the whole record lay in the dreams. For the sake of those the entire narrative arose”(ibid). The expanded grandiose imagery typical of the 1856 *Confessions* aims to overcome structural dislocation by making universalising claims for opium as an almost omnipotent, omnipresent power that can unite disparate experiences “beyond all other agents made known to man...the mightiest for its command...over pain”(235). The ‘smoothing out’ of the transition between “remotest infancy” and opium-infected adulthood sympathetically enacts De Quincey’s assertion in the original that his “proper vocation” lay in “analytic studies [which] are continuous, and not to be pursued by fits and starts, or fragmentary efforts”(63).

However, strenuously stressing “the strictness of the inter-connection”(240) between the text’s halves undermines the idea of “natural” and inevitable progression “out of one mode of existence into another”(75-6). There is an authorial and critical concern not only that the self-consciousness motivating revision artificialises original feeling, but more specifically that its “restorative” and “organizing” impulses conflict with a counter-conception of the self as irreconcilably pluralised and piecemeal, possibly in unprogressive ways. When Hazlitt talks of how Wordsworth “cannot form a whole” because “He has not the constructive faculty”, he distinguishes between Wordsworth’s “fine tones of thought drawn from his mind by accident or nature” and his technical failings: “He is totally deficient in all the machinery of poetry”⁷⁰. He cites *The Excursion* as an exemplar of “noble materials thrown away” in a poem that ultimately “stands stock-still”(ibid). Here is a compounded sense of self-division, not only between inspiration and execution, but within the multifarious and spontaneous workings of a mind that extracts

⁷⁰ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets* VIII: ‘On the Living Poets’(1818), *Complete Works*, v, pp.143-168, p.156.

and organises material “by accident or nature”. Hazlitt appears to reinforce this notion as universally applicable when he acknowledges in *The Spirit of the Age* that the mind is inherently pluralised, “the organ and the receptacle of accumulated feelings: it is not analytic, but synthetic”⁷¹. The conversion of present participles into plural nouns in the ‘Intimations Ode’(1807) implies the profusion – and possible confusion – of mental process as the ‘accumulation’ of parts:

...But for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realised
(l.144-50).

The movement from definite to indefinite articles in the ‘Ode’ similarly indicates a tension between overarching abstract principles and their specific types or instances, as with “The glory and the freshness of a dream”(l.5), which itself accedes to the paradoxically vague and exact “a glory”: “There hath pass’d away a glory from the earth”(l.18). The foundational indeterminacy of “There was a time”(l.1) and our birth being “a sleep and a forgetting”(l.59) heightens the poignancy of specific yearning when Wordsworth asks, “Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?”(l.57-8). This yearning then yields “a thought of grief: / A timely utterance”(l.22-3), leading to the ultimate expression of fixed uncertainty: “something that doth live”(l.131). It is a similar strain we find in the 1850 *Prelude*, which alters “the matter of my song”(1805, l.56) to “the matter of a song”(l.47).

The textual history of *The Recluse*’s many component parts – including the *Prelude*, *The Excursion* and ‘Home at Grasmere’ – reveals the poem to be much more like

⁷¹ Hazlitt, *Spirit of the Age*, p.242.

“Some fragment from his dream of human life”⁷² than a monolithic epic whole. ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’ and ‘Old Man Travelling’ are condensed into the Discharged Soldier episode concluding Book IV of the *Prelude*, while Book I of *The Excursion* contains a version of ‘The Ruined Cottage’, itself evolved from ‘The Pedlar’. After George Ticknor visited Wordsworth in 1838, he recorded the state of *The Recluse* as still obstinately disjointed: “the Introduction...is completed...The rest is divided into three parts, the first of which is partly written in fragments...the second is the Excursion; and the third is untouched”⁷³. In the context of such partial and provisional “gleams” in both “fine tones of thought” and “the machinery of poetry” that tries to contain them, the attempt to assert a continuity of self in composition and revision might be somewhat disingenuous, or at least oblivious of how a mind or a text really works.

This tension is arguably much more urgent in De Quincey due to the periodical mode that literally and psychologically separates the self, becoming “a process...of interruptions, disruptions and discontinuities”⁷⁴. The periodical partitions the mind, the “movements” of which, he attests, “cannot be continuous, but are either of necessity tumultuary and *per saltum**, or none at all”⁷⁵. The compartmentalised form shapes the life it presents, De Quincey offering his memories in a seemingly endless series of ‘Sketches of Life and Manners’ (1834-41) and *Autobiographic Sketches* (1853) over three decades. Defending the partial, slight nature of these articles – and thereby revealing his insecurity about the heft of his literary reputation – De Quincey states: “A sketch, by its very name, is understood to be a fragmentary thing: it is a *torso*, which may want the head, or the feet,

⁷² Wordsworth, ‘Ode: Intimations’, l.92.

⁷³ George Ticknor, Diary (9 May 1838), *The Life, Letters, and Journals of George Ticknor*, 2 vols. (London, 1876), ii.167.

⁷⁴ Whale, *Reluctant Autobiography*, p.197.

* ‘by a leap’.

⁷⁵ De Quincey, ‘Letters to a Young Man’ I, *Works*, iii.43-4.

or the arms, and still remain a marketable piece of sculpture”⁷⁶. Here De Quincey is attaching himself to the Romantic notion of the ‘fragment’ as autonomous aesthetic object in order to give the periodical article greater literary legitimacy, and compensate for the failure to produce a *magnum opus*. Alina Clej notes of *Suspiria De Profundis* that “De Quincey’s masterpiece survives only in piecemeal fashion – in the form of a ‘torso’”⁷⁷. But he is also asserting an idea of selfhood as “half known” and “half-forgotten” moments that the mind refuses to arrange in a linear narrative, a disjointedness that the periodical form half-reflects and half-creates. So in the original ‘Confessions’, De Quincey’s “explanatory note” to ‘The Pains of Opium’ ironically outlines his inability “to compose the notes for this part of my narrative into any regular and connected shape”⁷⁸. Instead, “I give the notes disjointed as I find them, or have now drawn them up from memory”(69), which mimetically reflects both the disparate nature of his dreams and the feverish immediacy of his remembering and recording them. He defensively pronounces that “constructing into a regular narrative” would be to “constrain myself”(61), deploying the refraction metaphor again to make a comparison with his mother’s near-drowning as testament to the emotional verisimilitude of his structure: “she saw in a moment her whole life, in its minutest incidents, arrayed before her simultaneously as in a mirror; and she had a faculty developed as suddenly for comprehending the whole and every part”(67). Even when ‘Confessions’ is “carefully revised...and greatly enlarged”, its new title in full implies greater fragmentariness and provisionality: from “Being Extracts from the Life of a Scholar” in 1821 to “Confessions of an English Opium-Eater. To which is added *The Daughter of Lebanon*, forming part of ‘Suspiria De Profundis’”⁷⁹ in 1856. This

⁷⁶ De Quincey, ‘A Sketch from Childhood’ III, *ibid*, xvii.100.

⁷⁷ Clej, *Genealogy*, p.38.

⁷⁸ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ II, *Works*, ii.69.

⁷⁹ De Quincey, *Confessions*, *ibid*, ii.88.

reconfiguring of the work as partial – a *Prelude*-like “supplementary”⁸⁰ to a greater project – betrays De Quincey’s lingering awareness, “on reviewing the volume as a *whole*”⁸¹, that many readers might “prefer it in its original fragmentary state to its present full-blown development”(ibid).

The chaotic construction of De Quincey’s diary – “a shabby little volume...with torn leaves and untidy scribbled pages”⁸² – is testament to Clej’s definition of his “bricolage” subjectivity. This “collage-like chaos”⁸³ of philosophical meditations, mundane daily activities, accounts, lists and draft letters has only a vague chronological sequence, which is frequently interrupted by “squeezed-in marginal waifs and strays”(ibid). Single entries are split, rather like a periodical division, across different parts of the book, with draft letters – including those to Wordsworth – usually written upside-down at the back. De Quincey ambivalently discusses how the “neglect of chronological order” in ‘Sketches of Life and Manners’(1834-41) is “inevitable” because ideas and events “connect themselves with my own life, at so many different eras...backwards or forwards they must have leaped, in whatever place they had been introduced”⁸⁴. Thus it proves as “difficult to assign them a proper place” in the series of ‘Sketches’ as it does in his mind: so often “the mere incidents are not connected, nor could be, any more than the items in an auctioneer’s catalogue”(213). De Quincey strains thematically to arrange his memories into “intellectual abstractions”(ibid) in an unsympathetic literary form all too similar to the “catalogue”, leading to his typically peripatetic style: “I have wandered backwards and forwards, obeying any momentary impulse, as accident or sometimes even as purely verbal suggestions might arise to guide me”(ibid). We see a considered *exploitation* of sense of this dis-located selfhood in the

⁸⁰ Wordsworth to Richard Sharp (29 April 1804), *Letters*, i.470.

⁸¹ De Quincey, letter to daughter Emily (undated), quoted in Page, *Thomas De Quincey*, p.109.

⁸² H.A. Eaton (ed.), *A Diary of Thomas De Quincey* (London, 1927), p.1.

⁸³ Barry Symonds (ed.), *Works*, i.8.

⁸⁴ De Quincey, ‘Sketches of Life and Manners’(*Tait’s*, March 1838, pp.152-63), ibid, x, pp.212-233, p.212.

opening sentence of the very first ‘Sketch’, where he immediately presents an end in his elder sister’s death, rupturing the conventional structure of autobiography: “About the close of my sixth year, suddenly the first chapter of my life came to a violent termination...‘It is finished,’ was the secret misgiving of my heart”⁸⁵.

Though sharing Wordsworth’s compulsion to re-construct the past, De Quincey’s dismantled life across magazine issues makes for a different kind of epic task: “The complexity of experience...resides not only in its organic expansion, but in its fragmentation; in loss that cannot adequately be accounted for”⁸⁶. While the *Prelude* is similarly concerned with balancing “mere incidents” and “intellectual abstractions”, the “spots of time” philosophy implies a more consistent and ascertainable correlation between events and their moral, intellectual and psychological effects than De Quincey allows. Or rather, the farthest-reaching effect of De Quincey’s extreme sufferings was to inculcate a sense that life is uncontrollable and frequently incomprehensible. The extended *Prelude* falls into a broad chronological structure, with a sense of the developing and expanding self that is nevertheless anchored by principles gleaned from childhood’s “gleams”. There is a latent tension in De Quincey’s persistent desire to live up to a Wordsworthian notion of an essential self that endures, and in his own scrappy sense of self reflected and formed by the periodical. Hence a dichotomised attitude to revision between the two writers: Wordsworth wants to obfuscate his earlier versions and their subsequent ‘corrections’ – “My first expressions I often find detestable...it is frequently true of second words as of second thoughts, that they are the best”⁸⁷. Whereas De Quincey proudly declares that despite “very considerable changes from the original

⁸⁵ De Quincey, ‘A Sketch from Childhood’ I (*Instructor*, VI, 1851, pp.145-51), *ibid*, xvii, pp.69-86, p.71.

⁸⁶ Whale, *Reluctant Autobiography*, p.216.

⁸⁷ Wordsworth to R.P. Gillies (22 December 1814), *Letters*, iii.179.

papers” in *Selections Grave and Gay*, he has no “intention...expressly to disown any one thing that I have ever published”⁸⁸.

Collected editions striving to contain “these wandering memorials of my own life”⁸⁹ encapsulate and complicate the palimpsest idea, as the verbal strata of a text’s alternative versions cumulatively co-exist for the critical reader, rather than usurp each other. Wordsworth viewed re-collecting as a liberating opportunity for altering the substance and structure of one’s poetic corpus; he published fifteen books of new verse and nine collected editions throughout his career, with major revisions in 1845 and 1836/7⁹⁰. He tells Moxon that the “value” of the 1837 *Poetical Works* “lies in the pains which has been taken in the revisal of so many of the old Poems, to the re-modelling, and often re-writing whole Paragraphs, which...have cost me great labour”⁹¹. If to Wordsworth collections present new openings for expanded thought, to De Quincey they reveal the frustration of trying to “bind together the different scattered visions of our personal identity”⁹². De Quincey hopes collections provide a more substantial, unified and sympathetic context for his writing than “scattered” periodical articles. He vociferously assures readers in the ‘Preface’ to *Autobiographic Sketches* (1853), forming the first two volumes of his authoritative ‘collected’ works, *Selections Grave and Gay*, “Never for an instant did I falter in my purpose of republishing most of the papers which I had written”⁹³. Yet this determination is directly contradicted by an interview he gave in 1850, where he rejected the possibility of collecting his essays as “absolutely, insuperably, and for ever impossible. Not the archangel Gabriel, nor his multipotent adversary, durst

⁸⁸ De Quincey, ‘Extract from a Letter: Written by Mr. De Quincey to the American Editor of his Works’ (8 January 1853), *De Quincey’s Writings*, ed. J.T. Fields, 20 vols. (Boston, 1850-9), *Works*, xx, pp.3-5, p.4.

⁸⁹ De Quincey, ‘Sketches of Life and Manners’ (March 1838), *ibid*, x.213.

⁹⁰ Leader, *Revision*, p.20.

⁹¹ Wordsworth to Moxon (28 January 1837), *Letters*, vi.353.

⁹² Hazlitt, ‘On Reading Old Books’ (1821), *Complete Works*, xii, pp.218-227, p.222.

⁹³ De Quincey, ‘Preface’ to *Autobiographic Sketches*, *Selections Grave and Gay*, i (1853, pp.v-xix), *Works*, xx, pp.9-16, p.11.

attempt any such thing”⁹⁴. There is a perpetual sense of De Quincey’s collecting not as unifying, but as drawing attention to dispersal and disorder across those articles that “lie scattered in prodigal profusion through the thousand and one volumes of our periodical literature”⁹⁵, constituting “the voluminous expanse of his authorship”⁹⁶. De Quincey admits his aversion to “for ever tracing my own fugitive papers” and the daunting realisation that “I had so scattered myself and diffused my wisdom over all waters”⁹⁷. He recognises his permanent struggle to “pull himself together”⁹⁸ by crafting a literary monument *ex materia*: “I would more willingly undertake to compose two entire volumes *de novo*, than to weave a coherent whole out of critical fragments”⁹⁹.

The attempt simultaneously to cohere and extend article instalments in *Grave and Gay* enacts the fundamental tension in conceiving the self – and the text – as unified or fragmentary, permanent or provisional. The pivoting tone of the first volume’s ‘Preface’ reflects the “half known”, or half-realised, nature of De Quincey’s work: he proposes to integrate “miscellaneous writings...in part to be regarded as a republication of papers scattered through several British journals twenty or thirty years ago” into a “body of Selections”¹⁰⁰, an almost oxymoronic phrase implying a monster of patchwork limbs. The works are “in **part**...to be viewed as **entirely** new”, and “by giving very great expansion, give **sometimes** a character of **absolute** novelty”(9-10; my emphases). Sackville-West discusses how the collection was motivated by awareness that the public had “long lacked an opportunity to judge his work as a whole”, yet *Grave and Gay*’s “lack of homogeneity” and “journalistic improvisation...militated against that uniformity of impression which is

⁹⁴ George Gilfillan, *A Second Gallery of Literary Portraits* (Edinburgh, 1852), p.302.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p.xi.

⁹⁶ Francis Jacox, quoted in Page, *Thomas De Quincey*, i.379-80.

⁹⁷ De Quincey, draft ‘Introduction’ to *De Quincey’s Writings* (1851, pp.6-8), *Works*, xx.8.

⁹⁸ Lindop, *Opium-Eater*, p.224.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Page, *Thomas De Quincey*, p.59.

¹⁰⁰ De Quincey, ‘Preface’, *Autobiographic Sketches* (1853), *Works*, xx.9.

so necessary to the growth of a reputation”¹⁰¹. Wordsworth emphasised how “nothing can compensate for the neglect” of “classification by subject, or by mould or form”: “Miscellaneous poems ought not to be jumbled together at random”, but “one poem should shade off happily into another – and the contrasts where they occur be clear of harshness or abruptness”¹⁰². De Quincey ostensibly had the same intention to ‘organically’ arrange his essays, moving from those that will “amuse” the reader and possibly “[pass] into “impassioned interest”, to those devoted “purely to the understanding”, to the third “far higher class of compositions”, including *Confessions* and *Suspiria*, which represent “modes of impassioned prose ranging under no precedents that I am aware of”¹⁰³. But we perceive a certain looseness in this categorisation, De Quincey admitting the “mixed character” of the essays for amusement and offering some over-accommodating volume titles that fracture rather than cohere his corpus, such as *Miscellanies: Chiefly Narrative* (1854 and 1858) and *Speculations Literary and Philosophic: With German Tales and Other Narrative Papers* (c.1859). De Quincey openly discusses the “full pressure” and “difficulty of framing titles for books”¹⁰⁴, which is “prodigiously aggravated when the separate parts, that are suddenly and unexpectedly required to cohere into a systematic whole, arose originally upon casual and disconnected impulses”, with no “view to final convergence, or...a central principle”(ibid). He quickly calls it “an impossibility...it becomes a mere fantastic chase after a rainbow to pursue any comprehensive title such as can override the whole”(ibid).

Sackville-West argues that “the order in which [De Quincey] revised his articles...[was] entirely capricious”, determined by whatever papers “happened to come

¹⁰¹ Sackville-West, *Flame in Sunlight*, p.lx.

¹⁰² Wordsworth to Henry Crabb Robinson (6 April 1826), *Letters*, iv.440.

¹⁰³ De Quincey, ‘Preface’, *Autobiographic Sketches* (1853), *Works*, ibid, xx.16.

¹⁰⁴ De Quincey, ‘Prefatory Notice’, *Leaders in Literature, with a Notice of Traditional Errors Affecting Them, Selections Grave and Gay*, ix (1858, p.vii-xii), ibid, xx, pp.104-7, p.104.

next to hand, in the chaotic sea of manuscripts among which he was working”¹⁰⁵. De Quincey admitted as much when he described his bath full of papers – “a reservoir for my MSS. filled to the brim” – from which he literally draws out his next article topic: “Every paper...is to be found, after an impossible search, in this capacious repertory”¹⁰⁶. The chaotic disorganisation of De Quincey’s ever-accumulating papers reflects the potential and peril of the palimpsest-mind – or, as Page describes, “his inveterate incapacity to relieve himself of the *debris* of former undertakings”¹⁰⁷, quite literally. He states in ‘Confessions’ that he is a “helpless sort of person, who cannot even arrange his own papers without assistance”¹⁰⁸, and his biographers give often-bathetic accounts of agonisingly gathering together his manuscripts for the compilation of *Grave and Gay*. De Quincey was perpetually waylaid by “the vast aggregate of books, periodicals, and newspapers, in mounds on the floor and in tiers along the walls”¹⁰⁹ of his Lothian Street, Edinburgh, home. Publisher Hogg recalled how “Boxes of papers filled the corners, and papers lay scattered on every available bit of flat surface...his very table so littered as scarcely to allow him a corner to write upon”¹¹⁰. Consequently, “he had to rummage for his old papers...hurriedly squeezing together what was readiest at intervals, to make up a volume when the press became ravenous”¹¹¹. These chaotic conditions contribute to the sense of *Grave and Gay*’s haphazard, even slapdash, organisation, reflecting and resulting in an overcrowded mind.

Suspiria De Profundis is the clearest example of the collection’s binding/unravelling paradox. De Quincey was entirely dissatisfied with its original

¹⁰⁵ Sackville-West, *Flame in Sunlight*, p.265.

¹⁰⁶ De Quincey, ‘Sortilege on Behalf of the Glasgow Athenaeum’ (*Glasgow Athenaeum Album*, 1848, pp.9-31), *Works*, xvi, pp.291-304, p.292.

¹⁰⁷ Page, *Thomas De Quincey*, p.35.

¹⁰⁸ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ II, *Works*, ii.69.

¹⁰⁹ Masson, *De Quincey*, p.119.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Page, *Thomas De Quincey*, ii.7.

¹¹¹ Masson, *De Quincey*, p.116.

publication across four parts in *Blackwood's* (March, April, June, July 1845): noticing the 'Levana' section in the April issue was omitted from the proof-sheets, he argued that he was "perilously dependent" on a "relaxation" of the 16-page word limit, "since there are many passages that will lose all...meaning, if torn away from the context"¹¹². (Characteristically, the instalment without 'Levana' still reached 24 pages.) He also lamented the interruption to the series in May as a "knock-down blow": "The disgust of readers from a balking, when expectation has at all been encouraged by the promises thrown out of coming effects or shocks, is profound"¹¹³. He comforts himself with the intention that "The four parts...be gathered into a volume without any delay, and introduced by a Letter of some length to my three daughters" because the articles represent "the *ne plus ultra* as regards the feelings and the power to express it, which I can ever hope to attain"¹¹⁴. Lindop describes *Suspiria* as "the essence distilled from many years of introspection and psychological speculation"¹¹⁵, but this image of hyper-concentration dissolves when the work is revised. The essay never appears in its entirety in *Grave and Gay*; instead 33 pages of the original manuscript (MS B) are removed from *Suspiria* and dispersed throughout *Autobiographic Sketches* in an act that violently tears passages away from their original context. There is a competing claim for unity in this dismantling, with new section titles in *Suspiria* suggesting a more coherently chronological development of the work: 'The Affliction of Childhood' from the original *Suspiria* is succeeded by 'Dream-Echoes of these Infant Experiences', and then 'Dream-Echoes Fifty Years Later', replacing 'The Apparition of the Brocken'. Lindop points out how this separation of the original text creates further problems for subsequent editors: "either reprint *Suspiria* whole and thereby duplicate text that must appear elsewhere, or

¹¹² De Quincey, letter to *Blackwood's* (27 March 1845), quoted in *Works*, xv.128.

¹¹³ De Quincey, letter (22 April 1845), quoted in *ibid*, xv.129.

¹¹⁴ De Quincey, letter to Lushington (February 1846), quoted in *ibid*, xv.128.

¹¹⁵ Lindop, *Opium-Eater*, p.356.

leave out the parts he had reused and present *Suspiria* in a form even more fragmentary than its somewhat erratic original *Blackwood's* version"¹¹⁶. Baxter's comments on *Autobiographic Sketches* thus resonate on a *material*, as well as structural and tonal level: "the violent juxtapositions, interruptions and revisions which comprise the finished text, produce the self – a fragmented, intermittent identity"(37). The scattering of *Suspiria* throughout the revised *Autobiographic Sketches* is a microcosm of the collected edition's opposing tendencies, as the authoritative gathering-up of essays runs over seven years and fourteen volumes. The intended cohering of his body of work to make some kind of memorial threatens to merely repeat the dispersal of texts over time and space that was the blighting pattern of periodicals.

This messy, confused and convoluted expansion and dislocation of texts across volumes and over a decade compromises the aim of building a book-monument to De Quincey. By extension, editors of the posthumous De Quincey are burdened by a sense of obligation to his multiple versions, and their inability entirely to erase by 'writing over' what they see as his imperfections, because in "the mighty palimpsest" of literary canonicity the successive states of De Quincey's texts exist simultaneously, as they do for Wordsworth. The comprehensive Pickering & Chatto edition (2000-2003) that publishes both periodical articles and revised book versions through twenty-one volumes is reminiscent of the monumental Cornell edition of Wordsworth's poetry (1975-2007). These editions each embody the literal "dread book of account, which...[is] the mind of each individual" that De Quincey describes in 'Confessions', demonstrating that for the literary critic in particular "there is no such thing as *forgetting* possible to the mind"¹¹⁷. Revision's contrary movements of cohering and dividing, expanding and containing the self experientially and materially can thus be confounding for the reader, while also

¹¹⁶ Symonds, *Works*, i.xxvi.

¹¹⁷ De Quincey, 'Confessions' II, *ibid*, ii.67.

enabling the fulfilment of criticism's function to "reduce the personality to a series of parts before it can reconstruct them into unity"¹¹⁸.

III

"each man is a memory to himself"(*Prelude*): Revision as Approach and Estrangement

Jack Stillinger articulates the essential duality of revision as "clarifying [an] original idea" and/or "expressing a different idea"¹¹⁹, and these two conflicting yet closely aligned impulses are consistently exhibited by Wordsworth and De Quincey. As Lindenberger states, "The textual problem is not...a matter of getting back to the author's original intentions, but of distinguishing between two different sets of intentions"¹²⁰. The paradox of revision – indeed, of memory – is that in verbal revisiting the author seeks a close emotional proximity to, and identification with, the past, but this process is necessarily motivated by and exacerbates a keen sense of detachment from it. De Quincey expounds this paradox of sympathy with, and estrangement from, oneself in *Suspiria*:

An adult sympathizes with himself in childhood because he *is* the same, and because (being the same) yet he is *not* the same. He acknowledges the deep, mysterious identity between himself, as adult and as infant, for the ground of his sympathy; and yet, with this...necessity of agreement, he feels the differences between his two selves as the main quickeners of his sympathy¹²¹.

Paul de Man's discussion of "the origin" as 'other' reinforces this point: "We can understand origin only in terms of difference: the source springs up because of the need to

¹¹⁸ Page, *Thomas De Quincey*, i.2.

¹¹⁹ Jack Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), p.93.

¹²⁰ Lindenberger, *Wordsworth's Prelude*, p.295.

¹²¹ De Quincey, *Suspiria*, Works, xv.133.

be somewhere or something else than what is now here”¹²². For Romantic writers especially, the idea of ‘reconstructing’ the self – as Page termed it – is associated with ‘reclaiming’ the purity and intensity of originary sensations; hence the critical tendency to judge the merit of revisions on this basis of ‘faithfulness’ to the spirit of one’s original text and self. While not endorsing it, Susan Wolfson explains the common view of the *Prelude* as “a self-corrupting text” whose later versions tell the same “story of decline...and anti-climax that gets told about the career as a whole; correspondingly, earlier and earliest versions gain praise for their vitality and fidelity to the best ‘Wordsworth’”¹²³. Comparing the 1799 and 1805 texts, Herbert Lindenberger perceives Wordsworth as increasingly self-oblivious: “among the impressions one gains...is that the later Wordsworth had forgotten much that the younger poet was trying to do”¹²⁴. Wordsworth certainly gives credence to this argument when he recounts to Crabb Robinson how Mary stopped transcribing one of his sonnets to exclaim, “‘that’s a plagiarism’ — from whom? ‘from yourself’...I believe she is right tho’ she could not point out the passage, neither can I”¹²⁵. Wordsworth well knew the truth that “We see but darkly / Even when we look behind us”¹²⁶ – probably *especially* when we do.

But we must conversely recognise the “self-haunting spirit” of loss and the unattainable past that is self-consciously built into the narrative of the *Prelude* and so many of Wordsworth’s great poems. Wordsworth repeatedly dramatises forgetting and failure both in interior monologues and character-driven narratives, as when Margaret laments her “sore heart-wasting!”(l.910) in *The Excursion*, “knowing this / Only, that what I seek I cannot find. / And so I waste my time: for I am changed”(l.800-02). The

¹²² Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.4.

¹²³ Susan Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p.102, 101.

¹²⁴ Lindenberger, *Wordsworth’s Prelude*, p.297-8.

¹²⁵ Wordsworth to Crabb Robinson (5 December 1838), *Letters*, vi.644.

¹²⁶ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1805), III.491-2.

faith expressed in the ‘Intimations’ Ode of the “primal sympathy / Which having been must ever be” is undercut by meditations on “The memory of what has been, / And never more will be”¹²⁷. This sense of constructed “decline” clearly complicates our assessment of the power of Wordsworth’s revisions, which is a difficulty shared by readers of De Quincey as he “reconstructs” loss of and in childhood throughout his work. *Suspiria* configures all kinds of disconnection from one’s past self as a form of loss – even the loss of uncertainty: “He pities the infirmities” and “looks indulgently upon...the limitations of view” in “his young forerunner, which now perhaps he does not share”. The wavering “perhaps” tips over into the circumspect “sometimes...he honours in the infant that rectitude of will which...he may since have felt it so difficult to maintain”¹²⁸.

Therefore De Quincey and Wordsworth need to be evaluated according to how ‘true’ their revisions are to the “half known” spirit of equivocation, uncertainty and ambivalence as much as vivacity, hope and endurance in the texts’ original versions. This is the kind of pivoting assertiveness that charges Helen Darbishire’s comment on Wordsworth: “The truth is that he both changed and did not change”¹²⁹. Stillinger’s endorsing the “the legitimacy and interest...of *all* the versions”¹³⁰ of the *Prelude* calls to mind De Quincey’s “deep memorial palimpsest”; Geoffrey Hartman says of the “reiterated successions”(*Suspiria*) that pluralise a text: “the freshness of earlier versions [is] dimmed by scruples and qualifications...that usually overlay rather than deepen insight”¹³¹. In truth, the deepest insight for readers is the disconcerting realisation that it is impossible neatly to pattern the nature and effect of the pair’s revisions given the overlapping – “overlying” – of different tones, voices and styles within and across their

¹²⁷ Wordsworth, ‘Three years she grew in sun and shower’(1798), l.41-2.

¹²⁸ De Quincey, *Suspiria*, Works, xv.133.

¹²⁹ Helen Darbishire, ‘Wordsworth’s *Prelude*’(The Nineteenth Century, XCIX, May 1926, p.718-31), *The Prelude: A Casebook*, ed. W.J. Harvey and Richard Gravil (London: Macmillan, 1972), pp.81-98, p.93.

¹³⁰ Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship*, p.94.

¹³¹ Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p.xvii.

respective original and amended texts. What seems a *successive* act over time in fact invites *simultaneous* tonal and thematic readings of layered multiple versions. The writers' revisions uncover problematic tensions between co-existent tendencies to increasingly emphatic and self-effacing rhetoric, expansive and concentrated narrative structures, cerebral abstraction and dramatic intensity, and explication and obfuscation. Wolfson offers a summation: "Even as an illusion of mastery propels revision, the revisions work otherwise: if some fix the phantoms more securely, others often unfix the text with new uncertainties", so that "The process is not always" – or only – "additive but often contrary"¹³². Hence Wordsworth's addition to his confession in 1805 of "Vague longing that is bred by want of power"(1805, I.241): "Thus my days are past / In contradiction..."(1850, I.237-8).

The *Prelude*'s most famous statement on dual selfhood reads:

...so wide appears
The vacancy between me and those days,
Which yet have such self-presence in my heart
That sometimes when I think of them I seem
Two consciousnesses – conscious of myself,
And of some other being.

(1799, I.26-31).

The cautious "sometimes" is compounded by the imprecision of "some other being" and the indeterminacy of "appears" and "seems"; the very attempt to define self-division enacts contrary impulses of clarification and convolution. The sense of the past being so near and yet so far that *Suspiria* expounded is encapsulated in the *Prelude*'s 1805 addition, retained in 1850: "Unfading recollections – at this hour / The heart is almost mine with which I felt..."(1805, I.517-8). It is a typically half-retracted attempt to align himself with the past, the absolute "Unfading" immediately undercut by the glaring modifier "almost" and another insidiously vague "some". This undetermined "some"

¹³² Wolfson, *Formal Charges*, p.101.

recurs in Book XII, 1850: the original phrasing “When I am in the woods, unknown to me / The workings of my spirit thence are brought”(1805, XI.387-8) is replaced by “some working of the spirit, / Some inward agitations thence...”(1850, XII.331-2). The slide into equivocation reveals the self-thwarting ambivalence of Wordsworth’s “trust / That mellow years will bring a riper mind / And clearer insight”, enabling him to complete “some philosophic song”(1805, I.236-8). The oscillating uncertainty of these “Two consciousnesses” is even enacted at a material level, the original composition moving “backwards and forwards in an irregular progression”¹³³ across the notebook in the same way the critical reader’s eye moves between the facing pages of the 1805 and 1850 versions in the Norton, Penguin and Oxford editions of the *Prelude*; we risk blurring the “Two consciousnesses” just as we try to distinguish them.

When the *Prelude* is first expanded, Wordsworth expresses the difficulty of determining what is “in truth / The naked recollection” of past experiences and “what may rather have been called to life / By after-meditation”(1805, III.644-8). In Book XIV he expresses the hope of keeping “In wholesome separation the two natures, / The one that feels, the other that observes”(XIV.331-2), but an 1840 letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon reveals his ambivalence towards the value of immediate and reflective responses. Sending his friend a new sonnet, he requests that it not be “put into circulation for some little time, as it is warm from the brain, and may require, in consequence, some little retouching”, and yet he notes that the fact it was “actually composed while I was climbing Helvellyn” will “add to its value in your eyes”¹³⁴. There is a similar “flux and reflux” in De Quincey’s Appendix to the single-volume *Confessions* (1822), when he admits giving a false impression of himself in the original work as a “cool spectator” on his addiction,

¹³³ Wordsworth, *Borders of Vision*, p.36.

¹³⁴ Wordsworth to Haydon (2 September 1840), *Letters*, vii.100.

rather than “speaking from the station of an actual sufferer”¹³⁵, which he still was. He affected the authority of retrospective observer “because the very act of deliberately recording such a state of suffering necessarily presumes in the recorder a power of surveying his own case...[and] for adequately describing it”(ibid), but now ironically in genuine retrospect he emphasises his compromised state to justify the text’s inadequacies, which he has done little to redress in the book of *Confessions*.

This tension between “naked recollection” and “after-meditation” contributes significantly to the larger issue of performative self-awareness: in autobiography there is a “disparity between the writer’s sense of being a private individual and a member of the public, and the related fact that self-consciousness might lead to self-alienation”¹³⁶. Whale’s comments on De Quincey could equally apply to Wordsworth: “The so-called truth of his autobiographical works manifests itself not in one or the other, but in a reciprocal movement between public and private”(ibid, p.8). Even at the most local level, the *Prelude* mimetically demonstrates such half-realised self-distancing, where the change is so slight and seemingly innocuous we are always unsure of how deliberate it is: describing his “community” with the “highest truth” of nature, Wordsworth alters “But peace, it is enough / To notice that I was ascending now”(III.1120, 118-9) in 1805 to “it is enough / To record...”(III.125) in 1850. This movement is in keeping with Lindenberger’s assessment that the poem demonstrates “a constant flight from the subjectivity of private experience to the assertion of publicly communicable...truths”¹³⁷, compounded by Coleridge’s death that converted the poem “from epistolary to lyric, intimate to monumental...[gaining] at once a dimension of fiction”¹³⁸. Likewise, Whale discusses how De Quincey’s “various autobiographical writings move between the

¹³⁵ De Quincey, Appendix to *Confessions*, ed. Taylor and Hessey (1822), *Works*, ii, pp.80-7, p.82.

¹³⁶ Whale, *Reluctant Autobiography*, p.3.

¹³⁷ Lindenberger, *Wordsworth’s Prelude*, p.5.

¹³⁸ Jonathan Arac, ‘Bounding Lines: The *Prelude* and Critical Revision’, *Boundary 2* (Spring 1979), Vol.7, No.3, pp.31-48, p.37.

extremes of provocative confession, lyrical introspection, *moralistic* declaration and polite anecdotage”¹³⁹; as with the *Prelude* we detect all these voices in the original text, further complicated by its multiple versions.

Public self-consciousness encourages dramatic intensification in revision, the effectiveness of which might be a matter of personal taste. De Quincey is alert to the pitfalls of such “amplification” in the revised *Confessions*: “a heavy or too intricate arrangement of sentences may have defeated the tendency of what, under its natural presentation, would have been affecting”¹⁴⁰. Likewise, at the outset of ‘The Affliction of Childhood’ in *Suspiria* (1845) he pronounces that “It is so painful to a lover of open-hearted sincerity, that any indirect traits of vanity should even seem to creep into records of profound passion”¹⁴¹. However, the revision of *Suspiria* embellishes the simple explanatory sentence “The faculty of shaping images in the distance out of slight elements, and grouping them after the yearnings of the heart...grew upon me at this time”(ibid, p.148) with imagery viscerally connotative of bodily consumption: “At this time, and under this impulse of rapacious grief, that grasped at what it could not obtain, the faculty of shaping images...grew upon me in morbid excess”¹⁴². This “morbid excess” echoes a similar expansion of the original “Interesting it is to observe how certainly all deep feelings agree in this, that they seek for solitude, and are nursed by solitude”¹⁴³ to *Grave and Gay*’s:

Now began to unfold themselves the consolations of solitude, those consolations which only I was destined to taste; now, therefore, began to open upon me those fascinations of solitude, which, when acting as a co-agency with unresisted grief, end in the paradoxical result of making out of

¹³⁹ Whale, *Reluctant Autobiography*, p.1.

¹⁴⁰ De Quincey, ‘Prefatory Notice’, *Confessions, Works*, ii.101.

¹⁴¹ De Quincey, *Suspiria*, ibid, xv.136.

¹⁴² De Quincey, *Autobiographic Sketches*, ibid, xix.15.

¹⁴³ De Quincey, *Suspiria*, ibid, xv.148.

grief itself a luxury; such a luxury as finally becomes a snare, overhanging life itself, and the energies of life, with growing menaces.¹⁴⁴

The repetitions across clauses – “consolations”, “solitude”, “grief”, “luxury” – help to build the passage with an inexorable pace to the ominous conclusion of “growing menaces”, another manifestation of “morbid excess”. As with the bodily associations of “rapacious”, “grasped” and “morbid”, De Quincey introduces a sense of the creeping organic growth of solitude, as there “began to open upon me those fascinations” which paradoxically endanger “the energies of life”.

The suspended/suspenseful “overhanging” reminds us of the boy Wordsworth hanging “on the perilous ridge” to reach the raven’s nest, “ill sustained”(1799, I.63, 60), and the poet had his own lurking awareness of the “morbid excess” of luxuriant language. The *Prelude* voices a concern that too many words overgrow original feeling: “Rank growth of propositions overruns / The stripling’s brain; the path in which he treads / Is choked with grammars”(1805, V:323-6). Wordsworth’s time at Cambridge is similarly characterised by “a treasonable growth / Of indecisive judgements that impaired / And shook the mind’s simplicity”(1850, III.214-16). There are many instances of Wordsworth’s heightened poeticising in revision, with mixed results. The crossing the Alps passage, for example, that is so prosaically matter-of-fact in 1805:

Hard of belief, we questioned him again,
And all the answers which the man returned
To our inquiries, in their sense and substance
Translated by the feelings which we had,
Ended in this – that we had crossed the Alps.

(1805, VI.520-24)

becomes more self-consciously presentational in 1850:

¹⁴⁴ De Quincey, *Autobiographic Sketches*, *ibid*, xix.15.

Loth to believe what we so grieved to hear,
 For still we had hopes that pointed to the clouds,
 We questioned him again, and yet again;
 But every word that from the peasant's lips
 Came in reply, translated by our feelings,
 Ended in this, - *that we had crossed the Alps.*

(1850, VI.586-91).

The heavy assonance of “Loth”/“so” and “believe”/“grieved” establishes an overtly poetic register, with its trite metaphor of “hopes that pointed to the clouds” and to the more emphatic momentousness of the italicised conclusion. Suspense opens up in the repetition of “again”, reinforced by the urgent adverbs “still” and “yet”, as he and we hang on the words from the man’s “lips”. Only this is no longer a “man” but a “peasant”, recalling the crafted humility of Wordsworth’s conversing with rustics discussed in Chapter One.

But in keeping with revision’s “contrary” movements, increased public self-awareness can also result in a diminution of originary emotion and an intellectualising emphasis – “little fact and big doctrine”, as De Quincey admonishes Coleridge for¹⁴⁵. The *Prelude* seems to endorse how “thoughts and things / In the self-haunting spirit learned to take / More rational proportions”(1850, XIV.283-5), but Lindenberger points out how “in the process of tidying up stray phrases here and there, [Wordsworth] had forgotten that much of the success of the poem...depends upon the conversational tone, the off-handedness, the struggle toward definition which he was trying to portray”¹⁴⁶. De Quincey applies this opinion to prose in his ‘Preface’ to Volume VIII of *Grave and Gay*, where he marvels at how “inspirations born from the momentary fervours of improvisation” can capture “evanescent gleams of original feeling” when writing under the “fierce compression of mental activities”¹⁴⁷ that comes with periodical deadlines. We recall Wordsworth’s yearning search for “the visionary gleam”(l.57-8) and “gleams of

¹⁴⁵ De Quincey, *Confessions*, *ibid*, ii.104.

¹⁴⁶ Lindenberger, *Wordsworth’s Prelude*, p.298.

¹⁴⁷ De Quincey, ‘Preface’ to *Essays Sceptical and Anti-Sceptical, on Problems Neglected or Misconceived, Selections Grave and Gay*, viii (1858, pp.i-iv), *Works*, xx, pp.101-3, p.101.

half-extinguished thought”(1.58). Hence his “tidying up” of the essays, with the luxury of much “after-meditation”, might yield no significant imaginative advances. Interestingly, Mary Wordsworth expressed a similar opinion of Wordsworth’s revising in a letter to her friend Jane Marshall: “his alterations, or corrections...*seem* to convince my understanding and judgment — but like you, not always my *feelings*”¹⁴⁸. Although she affirms that “we must give him credit for being right” in his rationally-minded “corrections”, her ultimate comfort is to retreat to the works’ original sentiments and “cherish...what we have loved”, concluding that “those to whom the Poems are new, may find a higher — I am sure not a deeper, pleasure from them than we have done”(332-3). Mary’s phrasing recalls De Quincey’s strained conceptions of elevation and depth with regards to intellect, emotion and style, discussed in Chapter Two.

With this in mind, there appears to be a very conscious transition from heart to head in *Prelude* revisions: the “tranquilizing spirit” that has “such self-presence in my heart” in 1799 becomes from 1805 onwards “such self-presence in my mind”(1805, II.30), while the initial wandering through Cambridge “From street to street with loose and careless heart”(1805, III.27) shifts to a “careless mind”(1850, III.29). Even when Wordsworth admits a new-found “human-heartedness about my love”(1805, IV.225), the revivifying “new-born feeling”(1805, IV.233) gives way to “A pensive feeling!”(1.241) by 1850. Presciently affirming Mary’s opinion, Wordsworth writes in 1827 when “correcting” a set of poems for publication: “I am shocked to find how indifferent I am becoming concerning things upon which so much of my life has been employed”, even confessing that “I seem to have lost all personal interest in everything which I have composed...upon the whole my own works at present interest me little, far too little”¹⁴⁹. The “self-alienation” of being oxymoronically “shocked” by his “indifference” is

¹⁴⁸ Mary Wordsworth to Jane Marshall (24 December 1836), *Letters*, vi.332.

¹⁴⁹ Wordsworth to John Edwards (27 March 1827), *ibid*, ii.471.

reinforced by the assertion that he would have liked his poems “if they had been produced by another”; yet in a default reflux of the mind, he confesses that he is not sure if he would approve of the poems due to his “self-love”, where “my own powers and knowledge supply to complete what is imperfect in the poems themselves”(ibid). The letter fluctuates between disowning and (re)appropriating the poems, in a baffling confrontation of the twin “consciousnesses” of “myself” and “some other being”: “I seem to have small regard for them as my own, and yet cannot independently and purely admire them as I do what I deem good or excellent in those of another”(ibid). Here Wordsworth restates the anxiety expressed twenty-two years earlier regarding the “strange half-absence” of “Remembering too well” and yet “feeling it no longer”, which paradoxically reaffirms continuity with his past just as he feels most estranged from it.

De Quincey’s structural alterations to ‘Confessions’ “hang” in the balance between alienating attempts to (over)rationalise one’s self and the breakdown of such attempts thanks to an all-too-tenacious “personal interest” in the minutiae of one’s life. Lindop explains how the aim of the new *Confessions* was to “set the record straight...and generally embed the short narrative of 1821 in a kind of commentary or apologia”¹⁵⁰. We see that tendency almost immediately in the addition of the 1822 Appendix, where De Quincey focuses more practically on the medical and scientific aspects of opium addiction and treatment. Ian Jack discusses the peril of such over-explication: “Perhaps the very scantiness of detail and inadequacy of motivation contribute to the power of the original version. In 1856 De Quincey is relatively intelligible, and therefore exasperating” where once he had been “a mysterious, enigmatic figure...moved by sorrows beyond our comprehension”¹⁵¹, so that “If the revised version is truer to fact, the original version is truer to feeling”(145). The vision of transcendent Romantic solitary disintegrates the

¹⁵⁰ Lindop, *Works*, ii.90.

¹⁵¹ Ian Jack, ‘De Quincey Revises His *Confessions*’, *PMLA* Vol.LXXII, No.1 (1957), pp.122-46, p.146.

more we know about the man behind and before the addiction, effectively changing the genre of the work from “autobiographic rhapsody” to “something more like a conventional autobiography”¹⁵². De Quincey clearly wishes to communicate more of himself through the vastly expanded material about his youthful trials and triumphs – what was merely “preliminary” in 1821 becomes much more integral in 1856.

But the form of these new insights – primarily digressional anecdotes – weakens the work’s structural stability, prompting Jack’s view that the 1821 text’s “proportions are better”¹⁵³. De Quincey himself apologises for a “disproportioned digression”¹⁵⁴ that nevertheless leads inexorably on to another included “at the cost of some disproportion”(135). Paradoxically, the *extempore* appearance of barely-relevant tangents – including the dog-fight with Coleridge, the merits of guardians, the working classes, the neglect of English literature, discipline at Manchester grammar school, the Bishop of Bangor, and the art of conversation – suggest the unselfconscious spontaneity of memory and the particular disparate energy of De Quincey’s character. But they diminish the work as a highly-wrought emotive narrative, as when he delays the resumption of the opium tale after an asterisked break by immediately embarking on a critique of the reading abilities of Kemble, Siddons, Coleridge and Southey (252). (He concluded that they read with too much emotion.) The Shandyan revisionary focus on his life and opinions undermines De Quincey’s pronouncement in 1838 that the dream finale of ‘Confessions’ was “the real object of the whole work”¹⁵⁵. It is no surprise that, despite the inflated claims made for the divine status of opium in 1856, De Quincey omits the original phrase, “Not the opium-eater, but the opium, is the true hero of the tale”(86). Sackville-West describes how the digressional additions “impaired the concentrated poignancy of

¹⁵² Lindop, *Opium-Eater*, p.381.

¹⁵³ Jack, ‘De Quincey Revises’, *PMLA*, p.146.

¹⁵⁴ De Quincey, *Confessions*, *Works*, ii.133.

¹⁵⁵ De Quincey, ‘Recollections of Charles Lamb’ II, *ibid*, x.265.

the earlier work, by overlaying it with so much that, even when it is not absolutely irrelevant, blurs what was sharp”¹⁵⁶, echoing Hartman’s assessment of revisions that “overlay rather than deepen insight”. Loss of concentration, in every sense of the term, is of course a charge that has been justifiably levelled at the *Prelude*, most obviously the initial expansion from 1799 to 1805. J.R. MacGillivray notes how the “stronger sense of formal structure” in the “proto-*Prelude*” encourages a “much more unified theme” and sense of purpose: “The time covered is restricted to childhood and school days only. The single theme is the awakening of the imagination”¹⁵⁷. The expansion into comprehensive autobiography makes it harder for the reader to recognise and evaluate the significance of individual “spots of time”. Virginia Woolf’s comment that De Quincey’s work demonstrated “how one moment may transcend in value fifty years”¹⁵⁸ pointedly echoes Wordsworth’s ‘Lines written at a small distance from my House’(1798): “One moment now may give us more / Than fifty years of reason”(l.25-6). How poignantly prescient those lines were, bespeaking again in that shared cautious “may” the uncertainty and ambivalence of both writers’ recollecting.

The issue of revision as loss is particularly complicated in the *Prelude* because so much of its tonal and narrative thrust is a self-reflexive consideration of the dissociative nature of memory. The poem explicitly depicts the “counter-spirit” of fear, doubt, disaffection and resignation that is bound up with the attempt to compose one’s life. There is frequent structural and lexical self-undermining: in Book XIII, for example, Wordsworth revels in “The windings of a public way” whose “disappearing line” out of sight “Was like an invitation into space / Boundless, or guide into eternity”(1850, XIII.143-50), then in a mimetic counter-turn a book later he uses the image to concede,

¹⁵⁶ Sackville-West, *Flame in Sunlight*, p.300-1.

¹⁵⁷ J.R. MacGillivray, ‘The Three Forms of *The Prelude*, 1798-1805’(1964), *Prelude Casebook*, pp.99-115, p.106.

¹⁵⁸ Woolf, ‘De Quincey’s Autobiography’, *Essays*, v.457.

“A humbler destiny have we retraced, / And told of lapse and hesitating choice, / And backward wanderings along thorny ways”(1850, XIV.136-8). With these “backward wanderings” in mind, an increasing tendency towards equivocation and retraction in revision – so often lamented by Wordsworth’s critics – in fact affectingly reinforces the vital theme of age-related trepidation, as the writer struggles to progress both from and towards the past. Wordsworth asks outright, “How shall I trace the history, where seek / The origin of what I then have felt?” before calling it “a dream, / A prospect in my mind”(1799, II.395-6, 400-1); the line break between “seek” and “origin” enacts his dual motifs of exploration and return, tracing a “prospect” as much as a “history”. Wordsworth is half-pursuing the enthusiastically absolutist genius of his ‘original’ self, all the while half-haunted by the prospect of his failure to produce the ever-anticipated *Recluse*: “The earth is all before me”(1850, I.14) encapsulates a dual sense of looking backwards and forwards, optimistically and anxiously. What was heralded as a “sweet promise of the past”(I.139) in 1805 is acknowledged, unfulfilled, as a more hubristic “bold promise”(I.128) in 1850; the confession to Coleridge that “slowly doth this work advance”(1805, VII.17) acquires the anticipatory angst of its incompleteness: “too slowly moves the promised work”(1850, VII.15). Similarly, the self-assurance that professed “A knowledge”(I.284) of the metaphysical workings of nature in 1805 has deteriorated to allowing only “A foretaste”(1850, I.280). Therefore most of Wordsworth’s revisions that seem to diminish his imaginative or intellectual powers accord with an internally-consistent mood of *inconstancy* and insecurity – they betray the “fainting steps”¹⁵⁹ of a “hesitating choice” and voice.

De Quincey could relate – discussing the occasional usefulness of the periodical’s “narrow limits” to combat his “nervous hindrances”, he attests: “where there is no choice,

¹⁵⁹ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1805), III.199.

that makes one anxiety the less. The act of choosing brings with it a dreadful nervous distraction”¹⁶⁰. Some of Wordsworth’s insertions plainly speak the real, rather than projected, experience of time’s inexorable passing, as when he addresses the “flowery field” of Enna with the question, “is there not some nook of thine, / From the first play-time of the infant world / Kept sacred to restorative delight”, before later adding the line: “When from afar invoked by anxious love?”(1850, XI.419-22). Other changes are those easily-missable slippages that subtly dismantle an emphatic statement: as early as 1805, the secure past tense of “Thus far, my friend, have we retraced the way / Through which I travelled...”(1799, II.1-2) gives way to convoluted sub-clauses: “Thus far, O friend, have we, though leaving much / Unvisited, endeavoured to retrace / My life through its first years”(1805, II.1-3). The literal verbiage “endeavoured to retrace” recalls the circumlocutions of the *Lyrical Ballads* Preface: “...that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart”.

Meanwhile, the main interest and value of the Christianising impulse in 1850 is to exemplify the wider issue of diminishing authority. While in 1805 Wordsworth fashions himself as “a chosen son” innately possessing “holy powers / And faculties”(1805, III.82-4), in 1850 he becomes a shadow of his former incarnation:

For (not to speak of Reason and her pure
Reflective acts to fix the moral law
Deep in the conscience nor of Christian Hope,
Bowing her head before her sister Faith
As one far mightier), hither I had come,
Bear witness Truth, endowed with holy powers
And faculties.

(1850, III.83-9).

The parenthetical piety – itself only half-asserted in those tentative brackets – “remoulds” Wordsworth as a conduit for God’s higher power, attenuating the “force of my own

¹⁶⁰ De Quincey, letter to Jacox (20 December 1851), Pforzheimer MISC.MS.3783, New York Public Library.

mind”(1805, III:88). He must now be “endowed” with such holy powers, “Bowing” his head to “one far mightier” in the addition, “Bear witness Truth”. The alterations in the description of the child’s “prompt and watchful, eager”(1805, II.247) mind in Book II do much the same thing. Originally conceived of “as an agent of the one great mind...creator and receiver both”(l.272-3), the emphatic metaphor retreats into a more modestly distanced simile in 1850, “like an agent...”(II.257). The child’s “vigorous”, “Tenacious” mind “spreads” and is “quickened”(l.253-4) by external stimuli in 1805, but by 1850 this optimistic imagery of activity and growth has deteriorated to a passive observation of nature, the baby “Too weak”(II.246) to pick the flower he is absorbed by. He becomes an image of limitation, stymied growth: “already shades / Of pity...Do fall around him...Frail creature as he is, helpless as frail”(l.245-53). This enervating inclination is encapsulated in Wordsworth’s avowal, made equivocal by another stealthy sub-clause, of his “heroic argument, / And genuine prowess – which I wished to touch, / With hand however weak”(1850, III.182-4): the “majestic sway we have / As natural beings in the strength of Nature”(1805, III.193-4) lapses into the “an empire we inherit”(1850, III.195). All of these alterations enact the sense of discovery so vital to autobiographical writing, but it is a discovery of failure with each year that *The Recluse* remains unwritten.

For both writers, then, self-seeking through revision is about losing as much as finding – and/or finding that one is losing. Therefore even revisions that critics regard as ‘unsympathetic’ can be appreciated for inadvertently – or half-intentionally – proving the pair right in the oscillation between their desire to fix mental and physical “spots” and their recognition that such spots are “fugitive”¹⁶¹. Bennett makes the valuable point about the “difficulty” of reading Wordsworth’s autobiographical poems because “they are

¹⁶¹ Wordsworth, ‘Ode. Intimations’, l.135; De Quincey, ‘Preface’ to *Essays Sceptical and Anti-Sceptical*, Works, xx.101.

structured around an obscurity now concerning...an obscurity then”¹⁶², so that we might conclude original feeling is not ‘forgotten’ because it was never satisfactorily understood in the first place. Hence attempts to “clarify the original idea” necessitate “expressing a different idea”, to return to Stillinger. De Quincey’s “dream-horror” of a Bath mail coachman as a crocodile in ‘The English Mail-Coach’(1849), which was unwisely cut in *Grave and Gay*, vividly articulates the shock of realising one is only ever “half known” to oneself: “The dreamer finds housed within himself” another nature, “occupying...some separate chamber in his brain – holding...a secret and detestable commerce with his own heart”¹⁶³. He asks what can be done “if the alien nature contradicts his own, fights with it, perplexes, and confounds it?”(423), but the question suddenly becomes exponentially agonised when he speculates it could be “not one alien nature, but two, but three, but four, but five, [which] are introduced within what once he thought the inviolable sanctuary of himself”(ibid). In this way, the “Two consciousnesses” of past and present in fact have the potential to yield proliferating versions of one’s self, revision demonstrating the multiple directions of “perplexing” alienation and “commerce”. So the “single voice...of enraptured memory” in the 1799 *Prelude* expands to “many different voices” in 1805, including “inner turmoil”, “didactic satire” and “dream allegory”¹⁶⁴ – modes that could equally describe *Confessions*. The 1805 *Prelude* discusses how human nature assumes new “qualities commixed and modified / By the infinite varieties and shades / Of individual character”(1850, XIII.306-12).

There are such varied, and often contradictory, types of self-estrangement and self-sympathy at work in Wordsworth’s and De Quincey’s revisions that an overarching ‘for better’ or ‘for worse’ assessment of them is crushingly reductive. Living out De

¹⁶² Andrew Bennett, *Wordsworth Writing* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), p.171.

¹⁶³ De Quincey, ‘The English Mail-Coach, or the Glory of Motion’(*Blackwood’s*, LXVI, October 1849, pp.485-500), *Works*, xvi, pp.401-28, p.422.

¹⁶⁴ Lindenberger, *Wordsworth’s Prelude*, p.300, 301.

Quincey's palimpsestic theory, Wordsworth's moments of verbosity reveal a mind immediately revising as the hand (over)writes, leaving all-too-evident traces of former thoughts. He often dramatises such "hesitating choices", as with a description of *The Excursion's* Wanderer that offers several options for the source of his authority:

...even in their fixed lineaments,
Or from the power of a peculiar eye,
Or by creative feeling overborne,
Or by predominance of thought oppressed...
He traced an ebbing and a flowing mind,
Expression ever varying!¹⁶⁵

The triple repetition of "Or" reveals a mind always modifying itself, with an "ebbing and flowing" sense of equal energy and anxiety. He cannot quite make each new emphasis supplant the last, so instead they all co-exist on the page as a testament to his "ever varying" mind, however discordant or unclear it is. In a fittingly ironic turn of events, the best encapsulation of Wordsworth's and De Quincey's disorientating grapples with "naked recollection" and "after-meditation" is an *unpublished* passage from the *Prelude* that describes how the writer is

...by those beauteous forms brought back again
To lose myself again, as if my life
Did ebb and flow with a strange mystery.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, I.174-79.

¹⁶⁶ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (MS. Verse 19), *The Prelude* 1799, 1805, 1850, p.157.

IV

**“a mind that every hour / Turns recreant to her task”(Prelude):
The Aesthetic of Process versus the Practice of Procrastination**

The way that critics, as well as writers, can accommodate the seeming rupture of revision is by assimilating it into an overarching aesthetic of process – of “Effort, and expectation, and desire, /And something evermore about to be”¹⁶⁷. This is Schlegel’s famous tenet of Romantic poetry as “still in the state of becoming...it should forever be coming and never be perfected”¹⁶⁸. It is on these grounds that De Quincey justifies the wholesale changes to ‘Confessions’, arguing for the work’s inherent malleability over time: “...the book must certainly tend, by its very principle of change, whatever should be the *execution* of that change, to become better”¹⁶⁹, if not perfect. The work improves – by “mere logical and inferential necessity” – because the new version contains “a clear surplus of extra matter – all that might be good in the old work, and a great deal beside that was new”(ibid). Unlike the rigid bridge or foundations of the *Humani Intellectus*, *Confessions* is *designed* to be manipulable and moveable in the useful shapelessness of prose, because it traces the living history of a lone mind, not the fixed principles of The Human Understanding. This “principle of change” is what Susan Wolfson attributes to the *Prelude*, so that revision harmoniously becomes part of the poem’s effect/affect: “revision is not just compositional; it is the very trope of autobiography, a resistance, in events large and small, to arresting and fixing phantoms of conceit in a final frame of autobiographical argument”¹⁷⁰. Lindenberger similarly argues for Wordsworth’s “poetry of process...the movement of the contemplating mind”¹⁷¹. Addition and amendment make for the ultimate

¹⁶⁷ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1805), VI.604-8.

¹⁶⁸ Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel, ‘*Athenaeum* Fragments’(1798), quoted in O’Neill, *Self-Conscious Poem*, p.xx.

¹⁶⁹ De Quincey *Confessions*, *Works*, ii.100.

¹⁷⁰ Wolfson, *Formal Charges*, p.104.

¹⁷¹ Lindenberger, *Wordsworth’s Prelude*, p.61.

mimesis, then, enacting the self's continual development and reconfiguration of the past; thus the *Prelude* "theorizes form as revision...an endless opening"(132).

This attitude usefully transcends the fraught issue of "execution", as De Quincey points out: the artistry lies in the very act and *fact* of revision, regardless of the tonal and poetic merits of those individual amendments. Whale's assessment of De Quincey echoes Wolfson, observing how "Autobiography is a means of constantly expanding the depths of personality"¹⁷², allowing "redefinition"(66) of the past. Baxter similarly explains that "Writing produces the autobiographer: it is an on-going process which does not allow for 'final opinions'"¹⁷³ and can "extend itself, possibly for ever"(15). In an unfortunately excised *Prelude* passage, Wordsworth articulates the endlessness of imaginative memory that this structural uncertainty allows, calling to mind De Quincey's labyrinthine "search and...chase...in many shapes"¹⁷⁴ after the memory of Ann:

Along the mazes of this song I go
As inward motions of the wandering thought
Lead me, or outward circumstance impels.
Thus do I urge a never-ending way,
Year after year...Through joy and sorrow¹⁷⁵

Whale outlines the "essential" Romantic belief that "literary 'power' is connected to the expansion of subjective horizons"¹⁷⁶, and ideally habitual revision enables and is enabled by such perceptive expansion.

In 'Letters to a Young Man' II De Quincey attests that to treat of ends "in an absolute sense, as ultimate ends...[is] arrogance in the most repulsive shape", and thus all "Systems" and "schemes" – including literary works – should "provide for future growth

¹⁷² Whale, *Reluctant Autobiography*, p.61.

¹⁷³ Baxter, *Art of Autobiography*, p.8.

¹⁷⁴ De Quincey, *Confessions, Works*, ii.102.

¹⁷⁵ Wordsworth, *Prelude*, unpublished fragment, quoted in Leader, *Revision*, p.34.

¹⁷⁶ Whale, *Reluctant Autobiography*, p.61.

and accretion”¹⁷⁷. Wordsworth’s characteristic obscurity – the half-articulate insights into “something far more deeply interfused”¹⁷⁸ – reveals his sympathy with De Quincey’s aversion to “ultimate ends” as intellectual and imaginative curtailments. Pater argued for the anthologising of what Wordsworth “was ever tending to become”¹⁷⁹, echoing his subject’s even more equivocal “trust / In what we *may* become”¹⁸⁰. Pater’s wording points us to the present participles that suffuse Wordsworth’s poetry from *Lyrical Ballads* to the *Prelude* and enact the principle of (re)writing as discovering:

Think you, ’mid all this mighty sum
Of things for ever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking?¹⁸¹

When he returns to this theme in the first incarnation of the *Prelude*, he memorably layers present participles and insistent repetition in a paean to “possible sublimity”:

...the soul –
Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
Remembering not – retains an obscure sense
Of possible sublimity, to which
With growing faculties she doth aspire,
With faculties still growing, feeling still
That whatsoever point they gain they still
Have something to pursue.

(1799, II.364-71).

This passage is retained verbatim in each succeeding version of the *Prelude*, offering “something” of a commentary on Wordsworth’s motivation for still revising his great work: textual revisiting, in a pursuit of the past, both “retains” and “gains” a work’s

¹⁷⁷ De Quincey, ‘Letters to a Young Man’ II, *Works*, iii.51, 52-3.

¹⁷⁸ Wordsworth, ‘Tintern Abbey’, l.97.

¹⁷⁹ Pater, ‘Wordsworth’, *Appreciations* (1889), pp.37-63, p.39.

¹⁸⁰ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), VIII.649-50.

¹⁸¹ Wordsworth, ‘Expostulation and Reply’ (1798), l.25-8.

“fructifying”¹⁸² impetus. The vagueness of the equivocating terminology – “an obscure sense”, “possible sublimity”, “something” – is driven forward and overridden by the pulsating present participles and repetition of “still” spilling over the enjambed lines, so the act of seeking rather than the “spot” sought is primary. The addition in 1805 describing the “raving stream” and “woods decaying, never to be decayed”(VI.633, 625) speaks of the writer’s necessarily insufficient labours – of “hope that can never die, / Effort, and expectation, and desire”(406-7) – driven by the spirit of “*possible* sublimity that will always lead on, because it will never be realized”¹⁸³. Revision is thus desirable and defensible as a means not only of conveying a capacious life of ever-varying experiences, but also of preventing a presumptuously reductive mindset in general. It is a means of demonstrating the *activity* of imagination and recollection. Wolfson’s explanation that “Revision is synonymous with the energy that postpones death, quickening the imagination with a sense of unknown, limitless possibility”¹⁸⁴ resonates, in turn, with De Quincey’s philosophy that “The imagination seeks the illimitable...translates the finite into the infinite”(‘Notes from the Pocket-Book’).

However, this hopeful *idea* of revision as exemplifying the mind’s limitless scope belies the persistent strain and anguish involved in the time-consuming *act* of amendment for both writers. Stephen Gill’s description of Wordsworth’s “compulsive” revision that “always brought him illness, fatigue, and sleepless nights”¹⁸⁵ could equally apply to De Quincey, who attributes his “impatient” need of “recasting what may seem insufficiently, or even incoherently, expressed” to “a most afflicting derangement of the nervous system, which at times makes it difficult for me to write at all”¹⁸⁶. Numerous letters from

¹⁸² Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1799), I.290.

¹⁸³ Wordsworth, *Borders of Vision*, p.17.

¹⁸⁴ Susan J. Wolfson, ‘The Illusion of Mastery: Wordsworth’s Revisions of *The Drowned Man of Esthwaite*, 1799, 1805, 1850’, *PMLA* 99, (1984), pp.917-35, p.932.

¹⁸⁵ Gill, *Wordsworth: A Life*, p.192.

¹⁸⁶ De Quincey, Introductory Letter and First Part of ‘A Sketch from Childhood’(1851), *Works*, xvii.70.

Wordsworth and his family attest to the physical agonies of painstakingly reworking his poems; he writes to his daughter Dora in 1841: “I have exhausted myself a good deal of late, in disentangling” – a very De Quinceyan word – “a composition or two in which I have been engaged from awkwardnesses that annoyed me much”¹⁸⁷. In 1844 Mary Wordsworth describes a typical “depressing nervous head-ache of Wm’s the consequence of too long-continued labour in the attempt to correct...the *Excursion*”¹⁸⁸. Dorothy notes that he is “always very ill when he tries to alter an old poem – but new composition does not hurt him so much”¹⁸⁹. Andrew Bennett sums up succinctly, if alarmingly: “composition for Wordsworth entails decomposition and discomposure – disturbance, sickness, irritability, insomnia, dejection, death even”¹⁹⁰. To take up Mary’s word, there is a latent ambivalence for both writers on the issue of literary “labour”. Kurt Heinzelman believes that Wordsworth’s “search for the origin of his poetic work is centered in and mediated by his attempt to define poetry as *real* work, genuine ‘labour’”¹⁹¹. He views Wordsworth’s comparing himself to “a home-bound labourer”¹⁹² as an attempt to counter the idea of “directionless wandering” by asserting his “poetic task as a moral and economic equivalent of the work done in the field”¹⁹³. In an 1828 letter, Wordsworth instructs that “thought and labour are equally necessary for the production of correct verse — such as likely to please extensively and permanently”, concluding that “The Poetry of our day is not wanting in spirit — but it is deplorably deficient in workmanship”, which will cause much of it to “perish”¹⁹⁴. The workmanlike effort as much as the literal

¹⁸⁷ Wordsworth to Dora Quillinan (7 December 1841), *Letters*, vii.269.

¹⁸⁸ Mary Wordsworth to Crabb Robinson (7 April 1844), *ibid*, vii.542.

¹⁸⁹ Dorothy to Mary Hutchinson (29 April 1801), *ibid*, i.332.

¹⁹⁰ Bennett, *Wordsworth Writing*, p.151.

¹⁹¹ Kurt Heinzelman, *The Economics of the Imagination* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), p.198.

¹⁹² Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), I.101.

¹⁹³ Heinzelman, *Economics*, p.198.

¹⁹⁴ Wordsworth to Robert Cotton Money (10 October 1828), *Letters*, viii.196.

substance of the poem makes for a “solid enough” enduring text, the implication being that revision is essential to the identity – the ‘job’ – of “a professional poet”¹⁹⁵.

But Siskin notes that “*professional*” is “something one may want *and* dread to be”(105), that word “dread” connoting the poignant self-portrait of “a man / Flying from something that he dreads, [more] than one / Who sought the thing he loved”(71-3) in ‘Tintern Abbey’. The “dread” of professionalisation derives from the struggle to regularly produce material to fit the relentless demands of publication deadlines – as Wordsworth wrote privately: “Poets...seldom succeed when they work to order”¹⁹⁶. Dorothy lamented to De Quincey that Wordsworth “cannot lay down one work, and begin with another. It was never intended that he should make a trade out of his faculties”¹⁹⁷. Preparing an edition of *Poetical Works* (1837), Wordsworth warned his nephew Christopher: “I would not however advise any one who is anxious about the finish of his style to run a monthly race with the press, volume by volume — as I have been doing...as there has not been time to receive revises”¹⁹⁸. This lack of time to satisfactorily amend means the edition “will be far short of what I could wish”(ibid), which was De Quincey’s very frustration with the periodical press. De Quincey anticipated this struggle between the life of the mind and external impositions as early as 1806, appealing for “emancip[atio]n from worldly cares...so that no frequent demands may be made on one’s time and thoughts”¹⁹⁹. The “demands” of “trade” compel Wordsworth and De Quincey to publish, and simultaneously fuel their guilt at the delays created by revision. De Quincey claims in the original ‘Confessions’: “To say the truth...it had never once occurred to me to think of

¹⁹⁵ Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain 1700-1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p.112.

¹⁹⁶ Wordsworth to Samuel Carter Hall (5 June 1835), *Letters*, vi.55.

¹⁹⁷ Dorothy Wordsworth to De Quincey (1 May 1809), *ibid*, ii.325.

¹⁹⁸ Wordsworth to Christopher Wordsworth (9 January 1837), *ibid*, vi.344.

¹⁹⁹ De Quincey, ‘Constituents of Happiness’, *Works*, i.73.

literary labours as a source of profit”²⁰⁰, but by 1826 financial necessity is the primary motivation to write. In a desperate letter to John Wilson he appeals for article topics to clear £40 of debt: “let me know when there is...any question to be discussed...any books to be reviewed – or translated: or in short any literary work looking out for a customer”²⁰¹.

Wordsworth is also subject to the complication of “pecuniary necessity”²⁰². He confesses to Aubrey de Vere – this time with an anxious, rather than hopeful, present participle – that the *Prelude* “is lying, and in all probability will lie...more than a generation of years” because “Publication was ever to me most irksome...if I had been rich, I question whether I should ever have published at all, though...I should have written”²⁰³. After completing an edition in 1842, he angrily tells Moxon that “If I had foreseen the minute Labour” required in “correcting these Poems, I never should have gone to Press with them at all. I actually detest Publication, and all that belongs to it”²⁰⁴. Expanding the point more mournfully in the ‘Fenwick Note’ on ‘Epistle to Sir G.H. Beaumont Bart’(1811), he explains why it was “never seen by the person to whom it is addressed”:

So sensible am I of the deficiencies in all that I write...that even private publication...requires more resolution than I can command. I have written to give vent to my own mind & not without hope that sometime or other kindred minds might benefit by my labours: but I...should never have ventured to send forth any verses of mine to the world if it had not been done on the pressure of personal occasions.²⁰⁵

Although emphasising his industrious “labours”, this is a characteristically hesitant statement in the insidious conditional tense, overloaded with verbs: “should never have

²⁰⁰ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ I, *ibid*, ii.21.

²⁰¹ De Quincey, letter to John Wilson (10 June 1826), Pforzheimer Collection (ALS. 4pp, MISC.700), New York Public Library.

²⁰² Wordsworth to Joseph Cottle (27 July 1799), *Letters*, i.267.

²⁰³ Wordsworth to De Vere (16 November 1842), *ibid*, vii.390.

²⁰⁴ Wordsworth to Moxon (23 March 1842), *ibid*, vii.307.

²⁰⁵ Jared R. Curtis (ed.), *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), p.66.

ventured to send forth...". The staple double negative appears – “not without hope” – as Wordsworth strains to articulate inadequacy, calling to mind the plaintive moral in ‘Elegiac Stanzas’(1807): “Not without hope we suffer and we mourn”(l.60). It all half-speaks of Wordsworth’s chronically deficient “resolution”, lurking uneasily behind the professed aesthetic of process that engenders imaginatively expansive Sublimity.

The hard graft of (re)composing is contrarily half-ennobling and half-abasing, implying simultaneously a measurable worth to the poetic task and the author’s inability to live up to that task. Declining a request to peruse the manuscripts of fledgling poet Thomas Powell, Wordsworth discloses that:

Little matters in Composition hang about and tease me awkwardly, and at improper times when I ought to be taking my meals or asleep...I am sure I should find some thing which I should attempt to change, and probably after a good deal of pains make the passage no better, perhaps worse — This is my infirmity...²⁰⁶.

Here Wordsworth confesses to the “special infirmity”(‘Sketches’) De Quincey detected in him. A fundamental ambivalence hangs – like the skulking “probably” and “perhaps” – between the overarching effect of revision to alter the shape and/or mood of the text as a whole, and the excessive concentration on intensely local words and phrases – those “Little matters” – that such schematisation requires. Thus Sublime obscurity in the grand search for “something far more deeply interfused” and “something ever more about to be” breaks down into the awkward, teasing disjointedness of “some thing which I should attempt to change”. The “infirmity” of Wordsworth’s “resolution” is evidenced in the conflicting assessments he makes of *Yarrow Revisited* (1836) as he compiles it. In December 1836, he declares to Moxon that the poems are revised “according to my best

²⁰⁶ Wordsworth to Thomas Powell (18 January 1840), *Letters*, vii.8.

judgment”²⁰⁷, but immediately complains that “progress bears no proportion to pains...hours of labour are often entirely thrown away — ending in the passage being left, as I found it”(ibid). Only a few weeks later, though, he expresses faith in the ultimate value of his efforts: he does “not regret the labour — because I *know* them to be much improved”²⁰⁸. We perceive from Wordsworth’s and De Quincey’s statements on literary labour that the only consistency is a motivating *and* disabling double-mindedness about the degree of agonised effort involved in long-term revision, the writer’s suitability for working under an excessive “pressure” to publish, and the eventual efficacy of their amendments.

H.A. Page records how De Quincey envied what he perceived as Wordsworth’s “happy immunity from distracting anxieties and carking cares, his lettered ease and tranquil surroundings”, in contrast to his own sorry periodical writing “against time, pressed by overbearing anxieties”²⁰⁹. Wordsworth, for his part, was dismissive of the periodical: rejecting a request for a contribution to his friend Robert Mackenzie’s new magazine, he pronounces, “I have never written a word for a Magazine or Review, and must not surely think of such a thing now”²¹⁰. It is a haughtiness that haunted De Quincey, who forever fought a “war with the wretched business of hack author, with all its horrible degradations”²¹¹. He longs for the kind of sustained sympathetic relationship Wordsworth had with Moxon, believing that “with a good publisher and leisure to premeditate what I write, I might yet liberate myself”(ibid). True ‘liberation’ for him lies in having enough time to *retrospectively* “meditate”, too, through meticulous revision. Recalling *Confessions*’ discussion of the “overmastering impulse”²¹² that drove De

²⁰⁷ Wordsworth to Moxon (late December 1836), ibid, vi.337.

²⁰⁸ Wordsworth to Christopher Wordsworth (9 January 1837), ibid, vi.344.

²⁰⁹ Quoted in Page, *Thomas De Quincey*, p.382.

²¹⁰ Wordsworth to Robert Shelton Mackenzie (17 February 1846), *Letters*, vii.759.

²¹¹ De Quincey, letter to John Wilson (February 1825), quoted in Lindop, *Opium-Eater*, p.277.

²¹² De Quincey, *Confessions*, *Works*, ii.103.

Quincey to opium use, the ‘Preface’ to *Autobiographic Sketches* bemoans “one evil of journal-writing...its overmastering precipitation”: “By its harsh peremptory punctuality, it drives a man into hurried writing, possibly saying the thing that is not. They won’t wait an hour for you...you may as well reason with the sea, or a railway train”²¹³. He views the revised *Confessions*, therefore, not as mere “correction and retrenchment”, but “as integration of what had been left imperfect, or amplification of what, from the first, has been insufficiently expanded” due to being “hastily written” to meet a deadline, and without “any strict revision”²¹⁴.

The complexity of interacting with publishers and printers over such short periods of time increases the likelihood of miscommunication. Wordsworth complained of this in 1840 when an “unfortunate sonnet” was wrongly printed, rendering it “nonsense”: “The liability to these errors is a very strong reason why poetry composed with care should never be first published in Newspapers”²¹⁵. When De Quincey became the leader-writer of the *Westmorland Gazette*, he had up to one hour to write on the latest London news between receiving mail at 6pm and copy being sent to the press at 7pm²¹⁶. Lindop notes of De Quincey’s promotion to editor of the *Gazette* in 1818 that he “produced ‘copy’ at a rate which must have astonished everyone who knew him, but still the paper tended to slip out of control because he could not work fast enough or make firm enough decisions”²¹⁷. We see this ‘slippage’ in a prefatory ‘Note’ to a *Gazette* editorial, published two weeks late: “This communication was delayed for one week after it was promised by want of room, and for a second week by an accidental failure of catching the post”²¹⁸. Feeling the weighty shame of “hack” authorship, De Quincey figured this dependency on and deferral

²¹³ De Quincey, *Autobiographic Sketches* (1853), *Works*, xix.10.

²¹⁴ De Quincey, ‘Prefatory Notice’, *Confessions*, *ibid*, ii.100.

²¹⁵ Wordsworth to Isabella Fenwick (17 September 1840), *Letters*, vii.120.

²¹⁶ David Groves (ed.), *Works*, v.28.

²¹⁷ Lindop, *Opium-Eater*, p.228.

²¹⁸ De Quincey, ‘Communication to the Readers of the *Westmorland Gazette*’ (8 May 1819, p.3), *Works*, i, pp.188-90, p.188.

to regular deadlines as a form of enslavement; when he left the *Gazette* in December 1820 for *Blackwood's* he vowed to its editor, with no little resentment, "I will send you my bond...selling myself soul and body to the service of the Magazine for two years"²¹⁹. Paradoxically, the struggle to keep up with the machinery of the press means that he is seemingly never writing "Enough" – "all is too little"²²⁰ – because his workload is "Too much": "Mere correction of proofs indeed, and corresponding with London on business, is almost enough to fill up my time"(ibid), independent of the primary effort to compose articles. As typical of the always-thwarted De Quincey, the very conditions that compel him to produce work in the first place necessitate the "overmastering" desire to return to and revise such work, in an "everlasting round" of anxiety regarding – to recall Wordsworth – the "deficiencies in all that I write".

However, the need for revision and the protraction of the process over decades indicate a fundamental indiscipline that both De Quincey and Wordsworth are troubled by. It ironically forces them to confront a constitutional *aversion* to sustained methodical work, with implications of irresolution and "infirmity", so that the problems of satisfactorily concluding something/some thing are just as much internally-determined as externally-imposed. The pursuit of improvements over fifty years for Wordsworth and thirty for De Quincey encapsulates "man's noblest tendency, his perseverance, and man's ignoblest, his inertia"²²¹. As Lindop explains, the periodical provides some much-needed structure for De Quincey's disarrayed mind: "Without the stimulus of a rigid deadline he could finish nothing"²²². His daughter Margaret affirms, "His besetting sin is procrastination and nothing but dire necessity can ever drive him to do any thing"²²³. J.G.

²¹⁹ Quoted in Lindop, *Opium-Eater*, p.243.

²²⁰ De Quincey, letter to Wordsworth (December 1824), quoted in ibid, p.268.

²²¹ Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (1843), ed. Richard D. Altick (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p.14-15.

²²² Lindop, *Opium-Eater*, p.240.

²²³ Quoted in ibid, p.372.

Bertram describes De Quincey's "fits of industry"²²⁴, a phrase that resonates with a confessional *Prelude* passage in which Wordsworth, hoping to grapple with "some noble theme" but finding "Impediments from day to day renewed"(1850, l.129-31), expresses the hope instead of exploring "gifts / Of humbler industry"(l.133-4). But even these more modest efforts are stalled because the poet

Hath like the lover his unruly times –
His fits when he is neither sick nor well,
Though no distress be near him but his own
Unmanageable thoughts.

(1805, l.45-49).

De Quincey describes his "Unmanageable thoughts", unsurprisingly, in more apocalyptic terms: "Whatever I may be writing becomes suddenly overspread with a dark frenzy of horror...the very paper is poisoned to my eyes", so that "I sweep it away into vast piles of unfinished letters or inchoate pages" similarly "begun and interrupted" in "the sudden storms of frightful revelations opening upon me from some abyss of an eternity"²²⁵. It is the ultimate destructive "self-haunting spirit", where the tangibility of the past in words on the page renders them repellent. The immediate redundancy, or deficiency, of one's text makes for an "undecipherable horror that night and day broods over my nervous system" in "whirlwinds of impatience"(ibid). The physical extent of this "horror" is apparent in De Quincey's criticism of his essay 'On Murder' for being "far too diffuse", which "I was yet unable to correct...so little self-control was I able to exercise under the afflicting agitations, and the unconquerable impatience of my nervous malady"²²⁶.

²²⁴ J.G. Bertram, *Some Memories of Books, Authors and Events* (1893), quoted in Lindop, *Opium-Eater*, p.359.

²²⁵ Quoted in Eaton, *De Quincey: A Biography*, p.418.

²²⁶ De Quincey, 'Explanatory Notices', *Grave and Gay*, iv(ii) (1854), *Works*, xx.30.

It is an impedimental restlessness that Wordsworth shares: "...how impatient I am under the act of writing, and how averse to enter upon it"²²⁷, he writes in 1842. But this "aversion from writing a little less than madness"²²⁸ has always been with him: he confesses in 1803 that "during the last three years I have never had a pen in my hand for five mins, before my whole frame becomes one bundle of uneasiness...perspiration starts out all over me, and my chest is oppressed..."(ibid). De Quincey ascribes much of his fitfulness to opium use, observing how the drug maddeningly "gives and takes away": "It defeats the *steady* habit of exertion, but it creates spasms of irregular exertion...preternatural paroxysms of intermitting power"²²⁹. Wordsworth, meanwhile, had his own physical obstacles to steady advancement, Dorothy describing in 1821 how he was "obliged to lay aside all employment" due to severe eye strain from working "incessantly...under great mental excitement"²³⁰. Dorothy is always alert to the long-term implications of such "paroxysms", noting: "He has now two works unfinished (the *Recluse* and the *Sonnets* [*Ecclesiastical Sketches*]...it often disturbs him that he is forced to spend so much of his time in idleness"(ibid). But only weeks before, she had acknowledged Wordsworth's inherent inability to progress with the task in hand, complaining that despite being "quite well, and very busy" he "has not looked at the *Recluse*" or *Prelude*: "the will never governs his labours. How different from Southey, who can go as regularly as clockwork, from history to poetry, from poetry to criticism, and so on"²³¹. Her sense of urgency evidently perturbs as much as it provokes Wordsworth, who is half-paralysed by the conviction that "After fifty years of age there is no time to spare, and unfinished works should not, if it be possible, be left behind"(ibid). De Quincey can sympathise, attesting that "All opium-eaters are tainted with the infirmity

²²⁷ Wordsworth to De Vere (31 March 1842), *Letters*, vii.312.

²²⁸ Wordsworth to Beaumont (14 October 1803), *ibid*, i.407.

²²⁹ De Quincey, 'Coleridge and Opium-Eating', *Works*, xv.121.

²³⁰ Dorothy Wordsworth to Catherine Clarkson (25 August 1821), *Letters*, iv.74.

²³¹ Dorothy Wordsworth to Catherine Clarkson (27 March 1821), *ibid*, iv.50.

of leaving works unfinished, and suffering reactions of disgust”²³²: “opium-eaters, though good fellows upon the whole, never finish any thing”(123).

Revision is the most artistically valid way of not finishing anything. It is a manifestation of both writers’ “procrastinating habits”²³³ and “delaying disposition”²³⁴, running contrary to high-minded ideals of process as enabling limitless mental freedom. “I play the loiterer”(III.615), the *Prelude* admits, a word Dorothy uses when bemoaning Wordsworth’s failure to proceed with *The Recluse*: “he has now no time to loiter if another great work is to be accomplished”²³⁵. In one of its doubting moments, the *Prelude* discusses the poet’s “timorous capacity, from prudence; / From circumspection, infinite delay”(1805, l.243-4). Wordsworth implicitly questions the potential “meddling” of revisionary reflection when he cautions against “an over-anxious eye / That with a false activity beats off / Simplicity and self-presented truth”(l.249-51). By 1850 the simplicity of the phrase “false activity” has mimetically dissipated into a hazier sense of “intrusive restlessness”(l.248). Wordsworth suggests abandoning oneself to a wandering impulse, “to stray about / Voluptuously through fields and rural walks / And ask no record of the hours given up...”(1805, l.252-4), but in Book IV he acknowledges how he is “uneasy at the halts I made” on such “dilatory” walks, “busy with the toil of verse – / Great pains and little progress”(IV.99-103). That “busy” gives way to a more charged “harassed”(IV.111) in 1850. Wordsworth invokes the “renovating” virtue of “hope that can never die” throughout the *Prelude* as a self-comforting attempt to explain and accept his habitual incompleteness.

De Quincey, on the other hand, did not hold out much hope of mending his ways, admitting his “want of punctuality in writing” was a “fault...of which I fear I shall never

²³² De Quincey, ‘Coleridge and Opium-Eating’, *Works*, xv.122.

²³³ Wordsworth to Gillies (9 June 1817), *Letters*, iii.384.

²³⁴ Dorothy Wordsworth to Thomas Poole (4 July 1799), *ibid*, i.265.

²³⁵ Dorothy Wordsworth to Crabb Robinson (13 December 1824), *ibid*, iv.292.

be cured”²³⁶. His correspondence with his publishers reveals a pathological inability to expose himself to the scrutiny of a finished text. He appeals to John Taylor, editor of the *London Magazine*, for “your kind permission to delay the conclusion [of ‘Confessions’] for a day (or two), because I shall thus be able to execute some parts of it in perhaps a more satisfactory manner and because I shall have time to write it more legibly”²³⁷. A few hours later he had to leave his lodgings and his conclusion under the threat of arrest. Masson describes the interfusing of perfectionism and perfunctoriness in De Quincey that blighted *Grave and Gay*: his constant proof-reading was “elaborately over-cautious”²³⁸, yet he also displayed “unpunctuality and incapacity for continuous labour”(114). Editor James Hogg agreed: “it was almost impossible to overrate difficulties – his whole constitution and habit of mind were averse from sustained and continuous work”²³⁹. He offered endless excuses for not being ready for the printers: “nervous sufferings”; unpaid taxes and consequent “agitation at the prospect of utter ruin past all repair”; falling asleep and delirium from “want of sleep”; and spring cleaning, which left the papers he needed inaccessible²⁴⁰. The bathetic nadir comes in the hasty missive: “I have been next to distraction all day long, having been up and writing *all* night. I have just set fire to my hair”²⁴¹. By perennially searching for papers De Quincey was searching for obstructions to completion. Trying to reassure Hogg, he claims to be “at the last point of my *innovations* in the Confessions”, after which “pretty nearly a mere reprinting will be all” that is required, but the qualifying casualness “pretty nearly” leads to the admission of irresolution again: “Except, however, as to the final *Suspiria*”²⁴². With the same half-wry,

²³⁶ De Quincey, draft letter to Edward Grinfield (12 April 1803), *Works*, i.14.

²³⁷ De Quincey, letter to John Taylor (9 August 1821), quoted in *ibid*, ii.4.

²³⁸ Masson, *De Quincey*, p.119.

²³⁹ Quoted in Page, *Thomas De Quincey*, ii.3.

²⁴⁰ Hogg, quoted in Masson, *De Quincey*, p.120.

²⁴¹ Quoted in Page, *Thomas De Quincey*, ii.55.

²⁴² Quoted in *ibid*, ii.51.

half-rueful self-awareness as Wordsworth's "infinite delay", De Quincey tells Hogg: "It seems as if to the very last my destiny were to cause delays"(44).

It is apparent that, as much as De Quincey and Wordsworth are paralysed by both their "procrastinating habits" and their "extreme conscientiousness", they are clearly *invested* in deferring the final fruition of their texts because they fear the categorical judgement that completed work invites. All the effort of revision holds off the horror of "Harsh judgements"²⁴³ that a definitive edition can elicit. De Quincey privately questions the worth of the revised *Confessions* in terms of its weightiness: "as a book of *amusement* it is undoubtedly improved; what I doubt is, whether also as a book to *impress*,"²⁴⁴. Publicly, in the *Autobiographic Sketches* 'Preface', he recognises the charge of "carelessness" in not having collected his works sooner, but notes that "in that carelessness, others will read a secret consciousness that the papers were of doubtful value"²⁴⁵. "Here we pause", begins a discarded passage of the *Prelude* from 1805, "Doubtful; or lingering with a truant heart, / Slow and of stationary character"²⁴⁶. There is something half-comforting about the "lingering" nature of continual toilsome revision that keeps a text dormant, or "stationary", preventing the confrontation of failure for the time being. Wordsworth memorably articulates the "doubtful value" of his epic undertaking:

...baffled by a mind that every hour
Turns recreant to her task, takes heart again,
Then feels immediately some hollow thought
Hang like an interdict upon her hopes.²⁴⁷

²⁴³ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), I.459; De Quincey, 'Sketches of Life and Manners'(October 1840), *Works*, xi.259.

²⁴⁴ De Quincey, letter to daughter Emily (undated), quoted in Page, *Thomas De Quincey*, p.111.

²⁴⁵ De Quincey, 'Preface', *Autobiographic Sketches* (1853), *Works*, xx.11.

²⁴⁶ Wordsworth, *Prelude* MS. 18A, unpublished fragment, Book I (1805), *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, p.13n.

²⁴⁷ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1805), I.259-62.

We recall those “Little matters in Composition” that “hang about and teaze” in these precipitous line breaks, which dramatically herald shifts in thought at the start of the second and third lines – “Turns” and “Then”; the eye “fluxes and refluxes” from margin to margin with each assertion and retraction of belief. The passage assumes a greater poignancy in 1850 when it is clear that what might have been more of a conventional modesty trope than confessional at the outset of the project has become an all-too-accurate commentary on its protraction. What merely “baffled” Wordsworth in 1805 “baffled and plagued”(I.257) him in 1850, echoing De Quincey’s lamenting of “hopes defeated, of baffled efforts” in *Confessions*. Wordsworth expresses a “vain perplexity”(1805, I.268) that

...either still I find
Some imperfection in the chosen theme,
Or see of absolute accomplishment
Much wanting – so much wanting – in myself
That I recoil and droop...

(1805, I.263-67).

Wordsworth fears his composing and recomposing of mind and text merely mark his “Unprofitably travelling towards the grave, / Like a false steward”(I.269-70), the line break ‘recoiling’ from the confession just as it does above. Here the “still” is resigned rather than optimistic, a mood reinforced in 1850 by the alteration of the word “indolence”(I.268) to “listlessness”(I.266), as the weight of failure hangs over him. The paralysed stasis of “still” contends with the ongoing impetus of the present participle “wanting – so much wanting”, with its ambivalently punning senses of lack and desire.

Lack and desire motivates the principle Wordsworth and De Quincey share of a text’s continual improvement, which is both self-deprecating and self-aggrandising. Habitually revising indicates a text’s perpetual insufficiency, yet there seems to be a presumptuous implication that, were the pair writing in sympathetic circumstances, they

would produce something indisputably great. For two writers so suspicious of their readers and fearful of their critical reception, it is not surprising that the conditions never were just right for the best expression of their thoughts. Wordsworth could not proceed with *The Recluse* initially without Coleridge's extensive notes and "absolute" encouragement²⁴⁸, and then without finishing the *Prelude*. Dorothy writes to Lady Beaumont in 1805: "He is very anxious to get forward with *The Recluse*, and is reading for the nourishment of his mind, preparatory to beginning; but I do not think he will be able to do much more till we have heard of Coleridge"²⁴⁹. Wordsworth was also distracted throughout 1805 by the tragic death of his brother John; in April Dorothy writes that he has "taken up again the Task of his life, though not in the regular way. Till he has unburthened his heart...he cannot go on with other things"²⁵⁰. De Quincey, too, was constantly apologising for factors beyond the text; in an agonised letter to his friend Francis Jacox he complains: "I Compose with prodigious difficulty at this time; and with still greater difficulty I come to any judgement afterwards upon what I have written"²⁵¹. Exemplifying the always-fluctuating Wordsworthian mind, he then asserts, "But this I do know – that here, as always, I have written my best", before immediately undercutting himself with the qualifying equivocation: "That is, given the conditions under which I wrote...hurry...exhaustion, dissatisfaction with my subject, &c., and latterly overwhelming nervousness"(ibid). The aim is that there is no firm foundation upon which he can be absolutely evaluated – rather, his work stands on an ever-shifting terrain of unpredictable influences and obstacles, compromising our criticism. Baxter explains, in

²⁴⁸ Wordsworth to Coleridge (March 1804), *Letters*, i.452.

²⁴⁹ Dorothy Wordsworth to Lady Beaumont (25 December 1805), *ibid*, i.664.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid* (11 April 1805), *ibid*, i.576.

²⁵¹ De Quincey, letter to Jacox (20 December 1851), quoted in Page, *Thomas De Quincey*, i.373.

rather palimpsestic terms, “The work is never De Quincey’s alone: it is a trace of the publication process, of interference, of error and compromise”²⁵².

This self-defensive strategy is particularly evident in an ‘Explanatory Notice’ to Volume IV of *Grave and Gay: Miscellanies, Chiefly Narrative* (1854): “The series of papers...were originally written under one set of disadvantages, and are now revised under another”, having been composed “generally under great pressure as to time” and “at a distance from the press”, with “no opportunity for correction”²⁵³. The long-awaited collected edition that should be presenting the essays ideally “corrected” is immediately established as just another provisional version, composed “under the distraction of a nervous misery which embarrasses my efforts in a mode and in a degree inexpressible by words”(29). It is possibly even worse: “if the present act of republication had...worn the character of an experiment, I should have shrunk from it in despondency”(ibid). *Confessions*’ ‘Prefatory Notice’(1856) performs the same rhetorical trick of current inadequacy and projected improvement, explaining that “A nervous malady, of very peculiar character”²⁵⁴ had hindered his revising throughout 1855. He appeals to “the humane reader” to “allow for the infirmity which even wilfully and consciously surrenders itself to the error” to save his sanity from the “cruel exertion” of trying to improve the work “at a moment of sickening misery”(ibid) – one of those De Quinceyan ‘moments’ that extends over a lifetime. De Quincey repeatedly reveals a mind turned “recreant to her task”, running in fear from the miserable thought that accumulating hundreds of essays for his definitive edition might expose a hollowness at the heart of his “best” writing. It was a hollowness Wordsworth faced in the ‘finished’ 1805 *Prelude*: with more of those infuriating equivocations he writes to Beaumont, “Here at least I hoped that to a certain degree I should be sure of succeeding, as I had nothing to do but

²⁵² Baxter, *Art of Autobiography*, p.2.

²⁵³ De Quincey, ‘Explanatory Notice’, *Grave and Gay*, iv(ii), *Works*, xx.21.

²⁵⁴ De Quincey, ‘Prefatory Notice’, *Confessions*, ibid, ii.100.

describe what I had felt and thought, therefore could not easily be bewildered”²⁵⁵. The almost resigned tone of the past tense leads to the obligatory expression of regret, “This might certainly have been done in narrower compass by a man of more address”, before he concludes in half-defiance and half-defeat, “I have done my best”(ibid). We perceive that Wordsworth’s and De Quincey’s conception of “best” is more half-hearted compromise than positive conviction.

An excessive emphasis on process – being unable to see a work through to the end – indicates a “secret consciousness” that the product will never be good enough, whatever the circumstances. As the trail of a text’s history extends through the tangled manuscripts and labyrinthine scrawls of multiple versions, the void left by unfulfilled projects – especially *The Recluse* and *Humani Intellectus* – expands. De Quincey provides an apposite commentary on this all-or-nothingness in his assertion that the opium-eater’s “apprehension of what is possible infinitely outruns his power, not of execution only, but even of power to attempt”²⁵⁶. Revision is a process motivated and thwarted by arrogance and insecurity, ambition and resignation, hope and “dread” – as expressed by Wordsworth most fully in the expanded *Prelude*:

...my hope has been that I might fetch
 Invigorating thoughts from former years,
 Might fix the wavering balance of my mind,
 And haply meet reproaches too, whose power
 May spur me on, in manhood now mature
 To honourable toil. Yet should these hopes
 Be vain...

(1805, I.648-54).

The “honourable toil” is sustained by both “Invigorating thoughts” and “reproaches”, but the passage refuses to “fix the wavering balance” of Wordsworth’s mind in any resolute

²⁵⁵ Wordsworth to Beaumont (1 May 1805), *Letters*, i.586-7.

²⁵⁶ De Quincey, ‘Confessions’ II, *Works*, ii.65.

sense, instead twice offering the self-negating modals “might” and “may” along with the tell-tale “Yet” that always stops a Wordsworthian line dead in its tracks. A reader can still trust in the ingenuousness of the mimetic autobiography-as-process ideal that aestheticises revision, whilst also acknowledging the “self-haunting spirit” of the practical limitations and agonised toil that lie behind it. The public and private records of Wordsworth’s and De Quincey’s emending instinct show a constant assertion of the inherent desire and need to revise, set against a constant deferral and/or disavowal of the product of that revision. For two constitutionally “infirm” writers never satisfied with their ambitions or their abilities, the “invigorating” and terrifying question is always whether the execution was worth all the effort.

V

“the hope of being enabled to construct a literary Work that might live”(*The Excursion*): The Text as a Living Monument

In *Revision and Romantic Authorship*, Zachary Leader discusses how “writing is associated with the organic (by which is partly meant the whole or complete) and with process (which implies incompleteness)”²⁵⁷. The ‘organic’ suggests an unselfconscious state of original feeling, “the moment of inspiration, without superadded or ‘inorganic’ refinements”(ibid) – as when the child Wordsworth “held unconscious intercourse / With the eternal beauty, drinking in / A pure organic pleasure”²⁵⁸. Leader cites Edward Young’s *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) as a contemporary expression of how the truly inspired work “rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it grows, it is not *made*”²⁵⁹. De Quincey uses just this metaphor when addressing the nature of

²⁵⁷ Leader, *Revision*, p.2.

²⁵⁸ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1799), l.394-7.

²⁵⁹ Quoted in Leader, *Revision*, p.2-3.

communication: “no complex or very important truth was ever yet transferred in full development from one mind to another: truth of that character is not a piece of furniture to be shifted; it is a seed which must be grown, and pass through several stages of growth”²⁶⁰. Wordsworth’s first letter to the teenaged De Quincey, in which he stresses their relationship cannot be forced, probably planted the seed of this idea: “a sound and healthy friendship is the growth of time and circumstance, it will spring up and thrive like a wildflower when these favour”²⁶¹. *Suspiria* reiterates this half-conscious “intercourse” with Wordsworth: outlining his death-plagued childhood, De Quincey describes how “Some of the phenomena developed in my dream-scenery” as “growths and fructifications from seeds at that time sown”²⁶². Here De Quincey has taken the “fructifying virtue” of Wordsworth’s “spots of time” to “morbid excess”. The shared sense of texts – and literary careers – ideally developing with half a life of their own bears out Leader’s connection of “organic” and “process”: in the Fenwick Notes, Wordsworth emphasises that frequently “one Poem has...grown out of another”²⁶³, and elsewhere describes how William Lowther’s bequest meant that “my talents...were free to take their natural course”²⁶⁴. Similarly, in *Suspiria* De Quincey wants to avoid “laying an unnatural restraint upon the freedom of the narrative”²⁶⁵, which is clarified in revision as “the natural movement of such a narrative”²⁶⁶. Preparing *Confessions* in 1821, he anticipates such a “freedom” of “natural movement” when he writes that the work “in some measure will determine its own length”²⁶⁷.

²⁶⁰ De Quincey, ‘Letters to Young Man’ VI: ‘On the English Notices of Kant’ (*London Magazine*, VIII, July 1823, pp.87-95), *Works*, ii, pp.85-97, p.96-7.

²⁶¹ Wordsworth to De Quincey (29 July 1803), *Letters*, i.400.

²⁶² De Quincey, *Suspiria*, *Works*, xv.134.

²⁶³ Wordsworth, *Fenwick Notes*, p.47.

²⁶⁴ Wordsworth to Joshua Stanger (16 January 1842), *Letters*, vii.281.

²⁶⁵ De Quincey, *Suspiria*, *Works*, xv.136.

²⁶⁶ De Quincey, *Autobiographic Sketches* (1853), *ibid*, xix.4.

²⁶⁷ De Quincey, unpublished letter, quoted in *Works*, ii.6.

What happens to these principles of organic composition when the “fructifying virtue” becomes a retrospective “renovating virtue”²⁶⁸ in revision? Leader’s formulation might encourage us into too absolutist a distinction between the “natural” original text and artificial “superadded” one. This is certainly how William Empson perceives the deterioration of the *Prelude*: “the whole point and delicacy of the first version was to represent a wavering and untrammelled natural growth”, so even attempting “improvement” was “about the most destructive thing [Wordsworth] could have done”²⁶⁹. But Wordsworth’s own comments reveal his contrary view that revision’s “renovating virtue” is what enables “our minds –/ Especially the imaginative power” to be not only “repaired” but “nourished”(1799, I.292-4). Wordsworth’s famous comment on the ‘completed’ 1805 version implies the appeal of revision to keep a work alive, or growing: “I was dejected...when I looked back upon the performance it seemed to have a dead weight about it, the reality so far short of the expectation”²⁷⁰. He associates “the first long labour that I had finished” with his brother’s actual death, “heavy thoughts” of which “hung upon me” like those “Little matters” of composition he cannot shake off. The letter’s sentiment naturally finds its way into the poem: “...every effort, every motion gone, / The scene before him stands in perfect view / Exposed, and lifeless as a written book!”²⁷¹. The idea of the final work as motionless suggests then that the “growths and fructifications” of revision are part of a text’s “natural course”, or “natural movement”. As Hazlitt remarks, “Poetry puts a spirit of life and motion into the universe. It describes the flowing, not the fixed”²⁷², and revision, as we saw in the last section, is a way of guarding against fixity; it is *half*-organic, at least.

²⁶⁸ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), XII.210.

²⁶⁹ William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), quoted in Lindenberger, *Wordsworth’s Prelude*, p.299.

²⁷⁰ Wordsworth to Sir George Beaumont (3 June 1805), *Letters*, i.594-5.

²⁷¹ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), VIII.574-6.

²⁷² Hazlitt, ‘On Poetry in General’, *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818), *Complete Works*, v, pp.1-18, p.3.

But this does not mean that the freedom and fluidity of motion in (re)composing always marks a consistent development – a ‘moving on’ – of the mind’s capacities. The question “Whither shall I turn, / By road or pathway, or through open field”(I.29-30) in the 1805 *Prelude* is ‘corrected’ to “trackless field”(I.28) in 1850, emphasising a lack of purposeful direction rather than boundless potential. Indeed, the frequent imagery of flowing water as guiding and shaping the course of Wordsworth’s thoughts and the structure of his texts – especially the *Prelude*²⁷³ – “appear to summarize the turns and counter-turns of his aesthetics”²⁷⁴, recalling Chapter One’s Malthusian model of regression. This counter-turning is made explicit at the opening of Book IX, when Wordsworth compares the shape of the work to a meandering river:

Even as a river, - partly (it might seem)
Yielding to old remembrances, and swayed
In part by fear to shape a way direct,
That would engulph him soon in the ravenous sea –
Turns, and will measure back his course, far back,
Seeking the very regions which he crossed
In his first outset; so have we, my Friend!
Turned and returned with intricate delay.

(1850, IX.1-8).

The line breaks enact the turning and returning tendencies of Wordsworth’s swaying mind, reinforced by the self-retracting adverb “partly” and parenthetical modality “it might seem”. There is a compounded ambivalence in the half-fear of going on and half-nostalgia of looking back being expressed through a metaphor that only “seems” fitting. The addition of another metaphor in 1832 – that of a traveller standing on the brow of a hill, surveying “The region left behind him”(I.12) as “breathing-time”(I.11) before proceeding – is testament to this situational “infirmity”. In a meta-commentary on revision, Wordsworth explains how he has “lingered”(I.17) because he is eager to

²⁷³ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1799) I.8-12; (1805) IV.40-55; (1850) III.13-14, VI.674-5, VI.744-53, VIII.466-7, XIII.172-84, XIV.70-4, XIV.146.

²⁷⁴ Theresa M. Kelley, *Wordsworth’s Revisionary Aesthetics* (Cambridge, 1988), p.170.

ascertain if things “Deserving notice have escaped regard, / Or been regarded with too careless eye”(l.13-4), and if so “to make the best amends he may”(l.16). After such an outpouring of doubt, Wordsworth is keen to conclude with a positive embrace of the “open” or “trackless” path: “Fair greetings to this shapeless eagerness, / Whene’er it comes! Needful in work so long...”(l.19-20). He declares “How unlike the past!”(l.22), and when we return to the first version of this passage we see a more overtly troubled poet making “motions retrograde, in like pursuit / Detained”(1805, IX.8-9), suggesting a greater sense of frustration at a resistant force than the more leisurely “lingered”. But the simple “impulse to precipitate my verse”(IX.10) in 1805 becomes by 1850 a more self-consciously ennobled “courage, and new hope risen on our toil”(IX.18), hinting at the traces of anxiousness he had originally written and subsequently erased: in 1805 he feared his theme “will be found / Ere far we shall advance, ungenial, hard / To treat of, and forbidding...”(1805, IX.15-17). This pointed suppression of doubt appears more to affirm Wordsworth’s insecurity about his direction of travel than diminish it.

The tension above between imagery of the contained river and the “ravenous” sea invokes ambivalence about the scope of Wordsworth’s poetry that is reinforced by Coleridge’s descriptions of it. In a letter to Thomas Poole, Coleridge expresses his vast hopes for *The Recluse*, “A Great Work, in which he [Wordsworth] will sail; on an open Ocean...unfretted by short tacks, reefing, & hawling & disentangling the ropes”²⁷⁵. Recalling the “receptacle without bounds or dimensions” in ‘Epitaphs’, the ocean provides the only metaphor expansive enough for Wordsworth’s “great objects & elevated Conceptions”²⁷⁶, which are “his natural Element”(ibid). Coleridge believes his friend is better suited to more thematically and materially substantial work after being “detained”(ibid) composing shorter pieces, but in an immediate Wordsworthian

²⁷⁵ Coleridge to Thomas Poole (14 October 1803), *Collected Letters*, ii.1013.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

counterturn says that doing so “may prove to have been a great Benefit”, concluding with another expression of balance: “He will steer...the middle course”(ibid). Ernst Robert Curtius talks of how “The epic poet voyages over the ocean and sea in a great ship, the lyric poet on a river in a small boat”²⁷⁷, and Wordsworth is stuck in the “middle” between these two grandiose and humble identities. Lindenberger notes: the “modesty with which Wordsworth chooses his bodies of water, combined with the Miltonic elaborateness of his similes, indicates...how *The Prelude* hovers between the poet’s epic conception and its less traditionally epic subject matter”²⁷⁸. Coleridge himself even does this in the 1807 ode ‘To William Wordsworth’, written after hearing the *Prelude* in full, where he moves between “tides” and “currents self-determined”(l.15-16), and the “secret mountain-streams” that are “The guides and the companions of thy way!”(26-7) leading to a soul like “a tranquil sea, / Outspread”(104-5). The opening to *Prelude* Book IX reveals a concern about the potential “shapelessness” of a text that is as imaginatively boundless as the sea, in contrast to a river’s narrower and more controlled – if circumlocutory – course. Having “a theme / Single and of determined bounds”(1850, l.641-2) might better reflect how “tones of Nature smoothed by learned Art / May flow in lasting current”(1850, VI.674-5), rather than the stasis implied by a directionless body of water. It is a tension that naturally exacerbates concerns over revision as unpredictable expansion. The young Wordsworth longed for the “river” of his “scholastic studies” to “have an ampler range / And freer pace”(1805, III.508-10), but De Quincey provides a useful perspective on the perils of “Some great intellectual project to which all intellectual pursuits may be made tributary”²⁷⁹ when applying the analogy to the development of ‘The English Language’:

²⁷⁷ Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948), quoted in Lindenberger, *Wordsworth’s Prelude*, p.306.

²⁷⁸ Lindenberger, *Wordsworth’s Prelude*, p.306.

²⁷⁹ De Quincey, ‘Constituents of Happiness’, *Works*, i.72; cf Wordsworth to De Quincey (6 March 1804): “[The *Prelude*] will not be published...till I have finished a larger and more important work to which it is tributary”, *Letters*, i.454.

Great rivers, as they advance and receive vast tributary influxes, change their direction, their character, their very name; and the pompous inland sea bearing navies...has had leisure through a thousand leagues of meandering utterly to forget and disown the rocky mountain bed and the violent rapids which made its infant state unfitted to bear even the light canoe.²⁸⁰

To “forget and disown” is part of the mind’s “natural course”, and is necessary if one is to cultivate the ambition and momentum to “start afresh, with new hope risen”(*Prelude*). But this organic momentum oppressively entails the risk of dilution, and losing “the violent rapids” that first spurred the growth of the poet’s mind. This half-belief in the task of amending-extending, then, is itself entirely natural – one of “the many movements of my mind”²⁸¹ – if undesirable.

Because of the ease with which ‘organic’ (re)composition can become uncontrollable, there arises a contrary recourse to architectural metaphors that will anchor one’s sense of self: with a “pile of second thoughts” the “Intellect can raise, / From airy words alone, a Pile that ne’er decays”²⁸². The Christian Socialist F.D. Maurice deemed the *Prelude* “the expression...of all that self-building process in which...Byron, Goethe, Wordsworth, the Evangelicals...were all engaged”²⁸³, and Coleridge himself admired how Wordsworth “dared to tell” of “the foundations and building up / Of a Human Spirit”²⁸⁴. They have appropriated Wordsworth’s own imagery: his “guiding object from the first” is “building up a Work that shall endure”(1850, XIV.306, 311) and “Though reared upon the base of outward things / Structures like these the excited spirit mainly / Builds for herself”(1850, VII.650-2). As much as the “growth of a poet’s mind”, the *Prelude* mimetically depicts what Dorothy called Wordsworth’s “peculiar structure of intellect”²⁸⁵ through its complex history of construction over fifty years. For example, Bennett writes

²⁸⁰ De Quincey, ‘The English Language’, *Works*, xi.324.

²⁸¹ Wordsworth, ‘Sonnet No.17’(1807), l.13.

²⁸² Wordsworth, *Inscriptions*, No.VI: ‘Inscription for a Seat in the Groves of Coleorton’(1815), l.19-20.

²⁸³ F.D. Maurice, letter to Charles Kingsley, quoted in Lindenberger, *Wordsworth’s Prelude*, p.276.

²⁸⁴ Coleridge, ‘To William Wordsworth’(comp.1807, pub.1817), l.5-6.

²⁸⁵ Dorothy Wordsworth to William Rowan Hamilton (April 1943), *Letters*, vii.438.

of the coda to the ‘drowned man of Esthwaite’ episode originally in Part One of the 1799 *Prelude*²⁸⁶, which was omitted when the incident was incorporated into Book V of the 1805 version²⁸⁷: “it acts as a kind of scaffold in the process of composition, later to be dismantled and removed or elided as the achieved structures of the poem become self-sustaining”²⁸⁸, calling to mind Wordsworth’s metaphor of the self’s “building” standing “as if sustained / By its own spirit!” after his parents’ death. This is what is meant, perhaps, by Wordsworth’s dualistic phrase “constructing and composing”²⁸⁹ a poem: the mind and the text are both a “current” and a “structure”, an unconscious outpouring and a determined effort.

Recalling Coleridge and his “middle course” ideal, Heinzelman discusses how “the poet’s labor...sustains that delicate balance between opposing and appropriating [external] nature”²⁹⁰. Although the poet-labourer’s ultimate ends, being “internal and cognitive, a transformation of consciousness by means of consciousness” seems a highly-wrought construction that undermines the spontaneous power of external stimuli, it can also be said that he “acts as one of nature’s own forces, for his acts of imaginative appropriation...and intellectual adaptation merely imitate and recapitulate the natural process of...biological evolution”(ibid). The persistent sense of a half-organic, half-mechanic conception of one’s work and working is even mimetically enacted in the two distinct *types* of revision that both Wordsworth and De Quincey perform: crudely inserting large sections of wholly new material, and more insidiously making “intricate” amendments to individual words and lines. Lindop uses an architectural metaphor to describe the heavy-handed nature of most of De Quincey’s additions to *Confessions*: “the

²⁸⁶ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1799), l.279-87: discussing “images to which in following years / Far other feelings were attached – with forms / That yet exist with independent life”.

²⁸⁷ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1805), V.458-75.

²⁸⁸ Bennett, *Wordsworth Writing*, p.157.

²⁸⁹ Wordsworth, *Fenwick Notes*, p.30.

²⁹⁰ Heinzelman, *Economics*, p.203.

expansion is made chiefly by inserting new blocks of text between passages that are only lightly revised”²⁹¹. These building-blocks of anecdotal digressions and page-long footnotes make the work both more substantial and less so, building a conventionally autobiographical superstructure of the self yet weakening the pervasive sense of unremitting suffering in the original with some jarring tonal transitions. Wordsworth writes of “the dead letter...Whose truth is not a motion or a shape / Instinct with vital functions, but a block / Or waxen image which yourselves have made”²⁹², and it is notable that the most fruitful revisions in the *Prelude* are to be found in those easily-missable alterations at a very local level – every “if”, “yet”, “almost” and “some” – which subtly accumulate to create “something”/“some thing” quite distinct from the text’s previous incarnations. It’s a more organic and sinewy method of portraying the alterations and fluctuations of an author’s mind, but just as vital in conveying the wants and excesses of an ever-expanding consciousness, or two. In the slightest of verbal changes the seed of a major shift in self-perception is planted; as Wordsworth himself writes to John Edwards, “if they [his poems] have any merit it is certainly of that kind which makes itself felt by little and little”²⁹³.

These contrary characteristics of organic and constructed revision evince what Wolfson describes as “the play of an imagination in which floating and fixing compete for priority”²⁹⁴. This “play” is encapsulated in the mixed lexes Wordsworth employs when expressing “the hope of being enabled to construct a literary Work that might live”²⁹⁵ – not just “endure”²⁹⁶ – in *The Recluse*; the equivocating “might” remains true to Wordsworth’s “self-haunting spirit” of uncertainty about this balance. Registering his

²⁹¹ Lindop (ed.), *Works*, ii.94.

²⁹² Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), VIII.297-300.

²⁹³ Wordsworth to John Edwards (27 March 1827), *Letters*, ii.471.

²⁹⁴ Wolfson, *Formal Charges*, p.101.

²⁹⁵ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’, *The Excursion, Prose Works*, iii.5.

²⁹⁶ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), XIV.311.

opposition to a posthumous memorial for Byron – in a similar manner to Tennyson’s judgement of Wordsworth’s memorial twelve years later – he explains that “eminent Writers...stand the least in need of such local testimonials” because “their books, if they survive, are their living, moving, and speaking monument — and if they do not, the cause must lie in their want of the vital principle of genius or truth”²⁹⁷. The present participles here are alive with the sense of “vital” growth that keeps a monument moving, rather than stolidly static, recapitulating the Wanderer’s pronouncement that “Moral truth / Is no mechanic structure, built by rule” that “retains a steadfast shape / And undisturbed proportions; but a thing / Subject...to vital accidents”²⁹⁸. These “accidents” include the unforeseen and “half known” effects of revision, which confessedly disturb the “proportions” of Wordsworth’s and De Quincey’s major works. It is hoped this moving “Moral truth” textually reflects nature’s “speaking monuments”²⁹⁹, whereby “the rocks / Immutable and everflowing streams”(170-1) are testament to “the tragedies of former times, / Hazards and strange escapes”(169-70) as much as past and future glories. Wordsworth wants his epic to be like the “living stone”³⁰⁰ on which he carves Joanna’s name in ‘Poems on the Naming of Places’, and in a sense his wish materialised when Ernest De Selincourt described the *Prelude* as “the essential living document for the interpretation of Wordsworth’s life and poetry”³⁰¹.

The problem is that for a work to “grow” it must lose its structural stability – must become “infirm”. Thus the ‘living monument’ is as much a marker of pragmatic compromise as expansive idealism; Wordsworth and De Quincey may believe in the power of revision, but in truth they also have no choice *but* to believe, given their shared

²⁹⁷ Wordsworth to Henry Austen Driver (18 February 1839), *Letters*, vi.661-2.

²⁹⁸ Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, V.563-7.

²⁹⁹ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), VIII.172.

³⁰⁰ Wordsworth, *Poems on the Naming of Places*, II: ‘To Joanna’(1800), l.83.

³⁰¹ De Selincourt (ed.), *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet’s Mind*, rev. Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p.ix.

pathology of “deficiency”. Hence the “natural” self-effacement about their statements of purpose – out comes the indeterminate “might” and “some” again when Wordsworth asserts, “...I might leave / Some monument behind me which pure hearts / Should reverence”(1850, VI.55-7). When he adds another mention of the idea in 1850 he can only bring himself to posit “monumental hints”(XIII.352), rather than the “Grand” totality Coleridge had in mind – “Immortality” can only be intimated, after all. Devlin similarly asserts the purpose of De Quincey’s “fluid prose” to “catch and make real” only “the hints and ‘hieroglyphic suggestion’ of dreams”³⁰². J.R. Macgillivray argues that, although readers may “lose their way” in the *Prelude*’s “massive and complex structure”, they can “enjoy a harmless pleasure in discovering how the whole edifice was put together”³⁰³. But as we saw in Part IV, excavating the *how* of revision is anything but a “harmless pleasure” for Wordsworth, De Quincey and their readers, instead unearthing the destructive, delaying and self-thwarting tendencies that revision-as-process was intended to overcome, but instead exacerbates. Bennett’s conclusion that Wordsworth’s most characteristic poems “are built around the...making and unmaking of the self”³⁰⁴ is echoed in De Quincey’s admission of the damage inherent in revision: “...these changes, which may possibly strike you as sometimes mere caprices, pulling down in order to rebuild”³⁰⁵. Wordsworth hints at this awareness, too, when describing “human nature” as “a spirit / Diffused through time and space” aided by “evidence from monuments, erect, / Prostrate, or leaning”³⁰⁶ – Romantic monuments are always “half-ruined”, to recall De Quincey. Sackville-West accordingly figures De Quincey’s revisions as acts of resignation rather than optimism: “he resigned himself consciously to making what he

³⁰² Devlin, *Art of Prose*, p.121.

³⁰³ Macgillivray, ‘Three Forms of *The Prelude*’, *Prelude Casebook*, p.114.

³⁰⁴ Bennett, *Wordsworth Writing*, p.6-7.

³⁰⁵ De Quincey, ‘Letter...to the American Editor of his Works’(1853), *Works*, xx.5.

³⁰⁶ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), VIII.610-13.

could out of the wreckage of his former building”³⁰⁷. The “living monument”, then, incorporates the idea of living with an after-life, or half-life, of failure.

We feel all these disjunctions keenly because we are invested in the lives of Wordsworth and De Quincey, independent from – even as they are ‘played out’ in – their texts. A.C. Bradley remarks that “the passions [Wordsworth] loved to depict are not those that storm themselves out or rush to a catastrophe, but those that hold the soul in a vice for long years”³⁰⁸. Crabb Robinson demonstrates how this effect is transferred to a reader when he writes, “All poetry...requires an effort to get on with...[A] poem is worth nothing that is not a companion for years, and this is what distinguishes Wordsworth from the herd...He lasts”³⁰⁹. Similarly, Coleridge’s response to hearing the *Prelude* reflects just the “wavering” mindset of Wordsworth as he extends his living building under the influence of “Two consciousnesses”:

Scarce conscious, yet conscious of its close
I sate, my being blended in one thought
(Thought was it? or aspiration? or resolve?)
Absorbed, yet hanging still upon the sound.³¹⁰

This is the fraught result of wanting to be “Here, nowhere, there, and everywhere at once”³¹¹, as the present simultaneously seeks affirmation and progression from the past through acts of revision that alternate – or hang – somewhere between “aspiration” and “resolve”, half-consciousness and over-conscientiousness. Wordsworth describes how the memories of old men “have into phantoms passed / Of texture midway betwixt life and books”³¹², and this is a useful way of evaluating the success of his and De Quincey’s amending: their respective ‘sort-of epics’ end up working less well as self-contained

³⁰⁷ Sackville-West, *Flame in Sunlight*, p.204.

³⁰⁸ Bradley, ‘Wordsworth’, p.117.

³⁰⁹ Crabb Robinson to James Mottram, Jr. (12 September 1857), *Correspondence of Crabb Robinson*, ii.818.

³¹⁰ Coleridge, ‘To William Wordsworth’, l.112-15.

³¹¹ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), V.533.

³¹² *Ibid*, III.580-1.

aesthetic constructs – as *narratives* in books – but are ultimately more truthful as *lives*, with all the inconsistency and uncertainty that brings. Walter Pater noted just this feature in relation to Romanticism in general: “it cries out against every formula less living and less flexible than life itself”³¹³. Yes, *Confessions* loses the tatty fragmentary structure of the two magazine articles that seemed to more authentically and intensely bespeak a tortured mind suffering under opium. But De Quincey was much more than an addict, and by allowing into the text a new anecdotal element of the ambling-shambling raconteur-scholar, the expanded *Confessions* displays the more complete and representative De Quinceyan character. As for Wordsworth, revision exposes the conflicting palimpsest-layers of his innate and chronic compensatory mind – “Along this intricate and difficult path, / Whate’er was wanting, something had I gained”³¹⁴ – paradoxically bringing to life a heroic temper weakened by time, fate and too many “somethings”.

The unpredictable consequences of revision reveal the self as only ever “half known”, for good and ill: Wordsworth’s and De Quincey’s “Two consciousnesses” envisage their developing texts as expansive explorations and concentrated retreats, organic effusions and arduous constructions, acts of self-sympathy and self-estrangement that reach for fixity and infinity. Both writers produced and reproduced their great autobiographical works as an avoidance of and substitution for larger intellectual projects that were abstracted out of existence. But in another sense, De Quincey *did* produce *De Emendatione Humani Intellectus* – it just happened to be spread over the hundreds of articles across forty years that now comprise twenty-one volumes of his complete works. A review of *Autobiographic Sketches* bears this out: “It is as the history of a mind that this

³¹³ Pater, ‘Coleridge’, p.105.

³¹⁴ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), XIV.332-33.

work is valuable”³¹⁵. Likewise, everything about “Nature, Man, and Society” that Wordsworth hoped to express in *The Recluse* can be found in all those collections and re-collections of his poems and prose over more than half a century. Page’s words on De Quincey apply perfectly to both writers:

...if he had written differently, we are not sure that he would have written better...The interest of a life lies in the difficulties that disturbed its even tenor, in the efforts made to conquer defects, inherited or induced, habits long-formed and persistent...If he thus fell over and over again, he did not to the end cease the struggle; and as the result, we have a body of literature that is now classic; so subtle, graceful, and full of characteristic touches.³¹⁶

The anguish comes in the disjunction between a modern reader’s assessment of the pair’s achievements, evidenced in the determined effort of revision, and their own perceptions of “infirmity” and incapacity born of trying too hard and not “Enough”. To return to De Quincey’s self-flagellating lament on the “locked up...Spanish bridge”, in whatever way his completed works build – or grow – up and may yet be insufficient, they *do* still remain as monuments “of **wishes** at least, and **aspirations**, and a life of **labour**”(my emphases). As Wordsworth states in the *Prelude*, with one of those characteristically half-convinced double negatives: “the history of a poet’s mind is labour not unworthy of regard”³¹⁷.

³¹⁵ Anonymous, *Autobiographic Sketches* review (*The Christian Remembrancer*, XXIX, 1855, pp.155-91), quoted in *Works*, xix.xvii.

³¹⁶ Page, *Thomas De Quincey*, i.8, 13.

³¹⁷ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), XIV.414-5.

CHAPTER FOUR

“The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom”(Marriage): Word and/or Image in William Blake

I

“my Spectre art divided against me”(Jerusalem): Systematic Ambivalence

While Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey intermittently dramatise their ambivalence about the purpose and practice of authorship through over-writing, Blakean self-consciousness does something more: it *systematises* ambivalence as the mind's primal state. *The First Book of Urizen* (1794) is a creation myth in which Urizen's hope of “a joy without pain...a solid without fluctuation”¹ must yield to the realisation that “no flesh nor spirit could keep / His iron laws one moment”(24.24-6), pre-empting the obsession of Blake's successors with the mind's “flux and reflux”. Wordsworth's description of “the subtle progress by which...qualities pass insensibly into their contraries, and things revolve upon each other”² echoes Blake's most famous axiom: “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction / and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and / Hate, are necessary to Human existence”³. Seizing on that word “necessary”, Crabb Robinson recalls of first meeting Blake: “Though he spoke of his happiness, he also alluded to...suffering as necessary”, even in Heaven, “for where there is the capacity of enjoyment, there is also the capacity of pain”⁴. As we have seen, when the principle of “flux and reflux” is manifested in Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey it so often

¹ Blake, *The First Book of Urizen* (1794), 6.12-13.

² Wordsworth, ‘Essays Upon Epitaphs’ I, *Prose Works*, ii.53.

³ Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy B (1790) throughout, unless otherwise stated, 3.7-9.

⁴ Crabb Robinson, Diary (10 December 1825), *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson*, ed. Thomas Sadler, 3 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1869), p.305.

results in and from a sense of paralysing uncertainty. But for Blake Contrariness is a state of forceful, dynamic movement between equal and opposing forces – “Good is the passive that obeys Reason / Evil is the active springing from Energy”⁵ – and indeed provides the foundation for his artistic practices. As W.J.T. Mitchell explains, “Vision does not travel in a straight line but oscillates between contrary forces, converging on a moment of illumination”⁶. Being uniquely in control of every aspect of his texts’ production and publication – and thus more urgently burdened by the strains of author-ity – Blake’s theory of “Contraries” is enacted in a considered, all-consuming *aesthetic* of ambivalence, born out of the sensory excess of word coupled with image. Blake’s visual art both offers a counterpoint to his verbal content and in itself illustrates contrary impulses of “Reason and Energy, Love and Hate”, restraint and release: “Blake’s pictorial style, like his poetic form and the total form of his composite art, is organized as a dramatic, dialectical interaction between contrary elements”⁷. Blake’s “pictorial style” encapsulates “the style of his mind” – to borrow that wonderful phrase from De Quincey – as inherently and progressively dualistic.

A philosophy of positive opposition seemingly accords with Coleridge’s belief that “Extremes meet”, a concept from which he derives much “pleasure”⁸ – interestingly the same term he uses when meticulously rating the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in 1818⁹. One of *Marriage*’s ‘Proverbs of Hell’ verbalises the meeting, or revolving, of polarities: “Excess of sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps”(8.8). *The Friend*’s pronouncement that “EVERY POWER IN NATURE AND IN SPIRIT must evolve an opposite, as the sole means...of its manifestation” arguably recapitulates *Marriage*’s core

⁵ Blake, *Marriage*, 3.11-12.

⁶ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Blake’s Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p.72.

⁷ Ibid, p.74.

⁸ Coleridge (1821), *Notebooks*, iv.4830.

⁹ Coleridge to C.A. Tulk (12 February 1818), *Collected Letters*, iv.836-8.

principle. This ideal of the unifying “law of Balance”(Coleridge) is one that critics frequently appeal to when assessing Blake’s idiosyncratic ‘illuminated printing’, with the divergent media of word and image being mutually reinforcing. Alexander Gilchrist’s influential biography, *The Life of William Blake* (1863), describes how “Poems” and “Design” succeed in “forming warp and woof in one texture”¹⁰; if Wordsworth’s achievement was a “textualization of consciousness”(Kneale), Blake’s was a synthesising – even literal – ‘texturisation’ of it. Hence Swinburne’s descriptions of *Marriage*: “every shred of his work has some life, some blood, infused or woven into it” and “Over every page...fibres and flickering threads of colour weave a net of intricate design”¹¹. In an assessment that endorses Coleridge’s tenet that “all opposition is a tendency to re-union”(The Friend), Mitchell states: “the illuminated poems constitute a composite art, a single, unified aesthetic phenomenon in which neither form dominates...yet in which each is incomplete without the other”¹². Blake himself attests to the “incomplete” nature of the *Large* and *Small Book of Designs* (1796) he produced for Ozias Humphrey because illustrations “without the Writing” mean “the Loss of some of the best things. For they when Printed perfect accompany Poetical Personifications & Acts, without which...they never could have been Executed”¹³.

But we must identify the “difference”, not only “sameness”, between Blakean and Coleridgean conceptions of duality – not least Blake’s own assertion, when refuting Joshua Reynolds’ discussion of Correggio, that “There is No Such Thing as A Composite Style”¹⁴. He is objecting here to the seamless blurring of elements implied by

¹⁰ Alexander Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1863), i.70.

¹¹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1868), p.5, 226.

¹² W.J.T. Mitchell, ‘Blake’s Composite Art’, *Blake’s Visionary Forms Dramatic*, ed. David V. Erdman and John E. Grant (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp.57-81, p.57.

¹³ Letter to Dawson Turner (9 June 1818), *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: OUP, 1966), p.867.

¹⁴ Blake, Annotations to Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses IV* (1769-1790), c.1808, *Complete Writings*, p.465.

“composite”, and indeed to the attendant sense that unity should be the overall aim of artistic production: “Unity & Morality, are secondary considerations & belong to Philosophy & not to Poetry”¹⁵. There is something “Self-clos’d, all-repelling”¹⁶ about the ideal unity that Coleridge and Wordsworth strive for in principle and struggle to enact in practice, via the poetry/prose dialectic. Blake’s conception of dualistic thought and action, as embodied in the “Contraries” of word and image, is not so much one of “balance” as irreconcilable division. Notably Urizen’s “self-balanc’d” state, “stretch’d o’er the void”(3.19), at the outset of creation is unsustainable in *The Book of Urizen*; instead he must accommodate the poet-prophet analogue, Los, “begetting his likeness, / On his own divided image”(19.19-20). While Coleridge and Wordsworth anxiously aspire to reconcile – and reconcile themselves to – internal opposition and its implication of inconsistency, Blake does not fear or fight typical authorial ambivalence about powers of conception and execution. Rather, he embraces and *exploits* such ambivalence as an honest reflection of a truly “capacious mind”(Excursion) – one that admits its own self-thwarting tendencies. Despite the disapproval Blake would have had for Mitchell’s phrase “composite art”, the latter acknowledges that “the vigorous independence” of the illuminated works’ “component parts” amounts to a confrontational “energetic rivalry”¹⁷. Erdman more confidently pinpoints the divergent straining of word and image, alerting us to the paradoxically *unilluminating* nature of many of Blake’s illustrations: “the text is not there to help us follow the pictures, nor the pictures to help us visualize the text; both lead us to an imaginative leap in the dark”¹⁸. Saree Makdisi similarly observes: “the words and images seem to operate more or less autonomously...pulling away from each other and

¹⁵ Blake, *On Homers Poetry* (1822), Copy B, l.17-19.

¹⁶ Blake, *Urizen*, 5.4.

¹⁷ Mitchell, *Composite Art*, p.34, p.112.

¹⁸ David V. Erdman, ‘America: New Expanses’, *Visionary Forms Dramatic*, pp.92-114, p.93.

tracing different trajectories”¹⁹. Critics persistently demonstrate a desire to privilege one medium over the other, at general or local levels. Morris Eaves, Robert Essick and Joseph Viscomi argue that the designs “do not counteract the textual farrago” because they were often determined “by the space left after writing the text on the copper”²⁰; Gilchrist likewise subordinates the “mere ornamental part”²¹ of the plate to the verbal content. But G.E. Bentley Jr. cites the heavy colour printing that can obscure text as evidence that “many of Blake’s early readers were more interested in the designs than in the poems”²², and Blake was primarily thought of as an engraver and visual artist in his lifetime. Northrop Frye perceives fluxing and refluxing priorities from work to work: in *Marriage* “The text predominates too much”²³, whereas in *Urizen* the prominence of major designs and ten full-plate images indicate Blake is “trying to forget about the poem, which with its short lines sits awkwardly on the plate in double columns”(122). In the early illuminated works, such as *The Book of Thel* (1789) and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), “text and design approach one another rather tentatively”, before Blake progresses to “the free interpenetration of the two”(121-2) in his “mature” work. The antagonism between word and image, where neither satisfactorily explicates the other, indicates how Blakean self-consciousness is, literally, more constructive and productive than that of other Romantic writers. Straining against the self is a veritable *principle* for Blake, not just an unfortunate side-effect of artistic practice, as so often in Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey.

¹⁹ Saree Makdisi, ‘The political aesthetic of Blake’s images’, *Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, ed. Morris Eaves (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), pp.110-32, p.111.

²⁰ Morris Eaves, Robert Essick and Joseph Viscomi (eds), *William Blake: The Early Illuminated Books* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.130.

²¹ Gilchrist, *William Blake*, p.77.

²² G.E. Bentley Jr., *William Blake: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2005), p.xxxiii.

²³ Northrop Frye, ‘Poetry and Design in William Blake’, *Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Frye (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp.119-26, p.122.

Intellectual and aesthetic self-division is imperative if Blake is to avoid the damning charge of Urizenic hypocrisy. Blake's overarching mission – the advocacy of imaginative and moral freedom for the inspired autonomous individual – is imperilled by his possessing complete control over the form as well as content of his prophecies. Gilchrist explains how he did “everything except manufacturing the paper...Never before surely was a man so literally the author of his own book”²⁴. Los, as ever, articulates the poet's predicament: “I must Create a System. or be enslav'd by another Mans”²⁵, suggesting that he will therefore have to enslave others as a necessary consequence of self-expression. Los insists that “I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create”(10.21), but in that denial he necessarily invokes the Spectral presence of dictatorial Urizen, the representative of reductively absolutist moral law in Blake's personal mythology. Blake must grapple with the overarching paradox that his highly-wrought “System” vehemently imposes an opposition to didacticism and indoctrination; Satan voices the tension when he creates the Seven Deadly Sins in *Milton*: “let all obey my principles of moral individuality”²⁶. Blake's images repeatedly depict the uncomfortable “flux and reflux” of his contrary identity as spirited Los and calculating Urizen, both embodying attributes that are integral to acts of creation, however much he might want to abandon Urizenic (de)limitation. Most obviously, the pattern of doubling on the title page to *Urizen* (FIG.5) invites us precisely to “Compare” the two Mosaic headstone-tablets, and the two hands scribing in stone – possibly with a burin and a quill – which suggest several “Contraries”: of writing and drawing, etching and painting, and the forwards/backwards motion of Blake's reverse-writing on the back of the copperplate. Erdman asserts that the electrotpe of the title page reveals several ‘W’s on the right page

²⁴ Gilchrist, *William Blake*, p.70-1.

²⁵ Blake, *Jerusalem*, 10.20.

²⁶ Blake, *Milton a Poem*, Copy D (1818) throughout, 9.26.

of the open book in front of Urizen²⁷; meanwhile his writing/reading/copying foot – with which, like a print-maker, he “stamp’d the nether Abyss”(12.16) – directs us to the signature “Printed by Will Blake”.

A caption for this plate in *A Small Book of Designs* asks “Which is the Way The Right or the Left”²⁸, and in the division of text into two columns throughout we envisage Blake in two minds, writing two books: the Urizenic Bible of traditional doctrine and the alternative “Bible of Hell”²⁹, combined in one “Book of brass”³⁰. Urizen’s “Book / Of eternal brass, written in my solitude”³¹ – glossed in *Europe a Prophecy* (1794) as “his brazen Book, / That Kings & Priests had copied on Earth”³² – uncomfortably intersects (or “interpenetrates”) with Blake’s copperplate etching technique, which is self-reflexively referenced in Los’ beating Urizen into shape: “[He] heated his furnaces & pour’d / Iron sodor and sodor of brass”³³. The same materials comprise Urizen’s “Books of brass iron & gold”, which “Melted over the land as he flew”³⁴ in *The Song of Los* (1795). Here the pluralised “Books” that become fluid point to Blake’s multiple copies of multiple books that constitute his “Bible of Hell”, and to the use of acid that ‘bites’ the copperplate, “melting apparent surfaces away, and / displaying the infinite which was hid”³⁵. The consciously self-referential line break in Urizen’s speech “Here alone I in books formd of me-/tals / Have written the secrets of wisdom”³⁶ counterpoints *Marriage*’s praise for the “salutary and me-/dicinal” properties of “printing in the infernal method”(14.13-15). Urizen’s speech ascribes “wisdom” to “dark contemplation / By fightings and conflicts dire. / With terrible monsters Sin-bred”(6.29-31), the just-perceptible gap between that

²⁷ Erdman, *The Illuminated Blake* (London: OUP, 1975), p.183.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Blake, *Marriage*, 24.9.

³⁰ Blake, *Urizen*, 6.49.

³¹ Ibid, 6.36.

³² Blake, *Europe* (1794), 12.3-4.

³³ Blake, *Urizen*, 12.33-5.

³⁴ Blake, *The Song of Los* (1795), 7.14-5.

³⁵ Blake, *Marriage*, 14.15-16.

³⁶ Blake, *Urizen*, 6.26-8.

capital 'S' and the rest of word drawing attention to a shadow-sense of 'in-bred' "conflicts dire".

The book's pattern of paralleling and juxtaposing depictions of Los and Urizen pictorially plays out Blake's sense of self as terrifyingly divided, and thereby paradoxically *united* to a part of himself he would prefer to eradicate. This agonising 'Contrariness' is encapsulated in Los' eventual "pity" for Urizen. Pity is an archetypal form of ambivalence for Blake because it aligns one to an other by a bond of sympathy, yet finds that sympathy reliant on a definite power distinction between bestower and 'beneficiary'. Its double-edged nature is discussed, for example, in *The Four Zoas*³⁷, 'Holy Thursday'³⁸, 'The Human Abstract' – "Pity would be no more, / If we did not make somebody Poor"³⁹ – and *America*: "...pity is become a trade...That men get rich by"(13.12-13). In *Jerusalem* it unites – "Pity must join together those whom wrath has torn in sunder"(7.62) – while in *Milton* it "divides the soul / And man, unmans"(8.19-20). In forging Urizen as a separate and discrete body, Los forges an inextricable bond with him, exhibiting the "necessary" Contraries of "Attraction and Repulsion". There is a pointed ambiguity to the possessive adjective in *The Book of Los*' phrase "the Prophet / Of Eternity beat on his iron links", which are not only made by him for Urizen, but in turn enchain him. So on Plate 10 of *Urizen* (FIG.6) fleshy Los tightly enfolds himself, hunched and howling, echoed on Plate 12 (FIG.7) by the skeletal Urizen pulling his head down between his knees; both are postures of oppressed constriction, though distinguished by Los' eyes staring out at the reader against Urizen's downturned eye-sockets, and the former's envelopment in flames rather than the latter's inky-blue cavernous void. In Copies D (1794) and G (c.1818), these designs are placed side-by-side – as (literal) opposites and alignments both could be captioned "A self-contemplating Shadow, / In

³⁷ Blake, *The Four Zoas* (1797-1807, unpublished), Night VII, l.109-29.

³⁸ Blake, *Songs of Innocence* (1789), l.13.

³⁹ Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794), l.1-2.

enormous labours occupied”(3.21-2). This is reinforced on Plate 14 (FIG.8), which depicts them next to each other, knees bent up and heads back looking despairingly at the text above; in Copies A-D and F (1794) Blake swaps the background to each figure, so that the skeletal Urizen is now consumed by fire and Los is trapped in the “vast petrific...womb”(8.32-3) of a dark cave. Likewise, the image of a chained Urizen (FIG.9), knees almost reaching his face and arms restrained beside his manacled ankles, accords with and opposes a compressed Los (FIG.10) whose elbows are out and hands behind his head. In Copy G Urizen’s closed eyes have large tears that match Los’, pictorially uniting them at the moment the text begins “dividing & dividing” them once Los pitied and “wept obscur’d with mourning”(15.6). Intriguingly, in Copy A (FIG.11) the figure of Los has his usual brown curly hair but it is flecked with white, leading the eye down to the long wholly-white beard typically associated with Urizen – here we see the ultimate hybrid, “in-bred”, Blake. The tension between common and contrary visual details bespeaks the impossibility of Urizen’s aim for singular existence – “One command, one joy, one desire, / One curse, one weight, one measure / One King, one God, one Law”(4.39-41) – while acknowledging such impossibility is horrifying as well as liberating. Sometimes it would be nice to know, definitively, where one stands.

But having recognised the dangerous Urizenic elements inherent in his role as systematiser, Blake must now use the very idea of self-division and inconsistency to his advantage. The emphasis on the “Spectre” that develops over the course of the Illuminated Books creates a narrative not just of double-mindedness, but specifically of self-*thwarting*. The Spectre – both an estranged and essential part of the self – impedes; it intervenes between man and God to jeopardise divinely-inspired vision:

The Spectre is the Reasoning Power in Man; & when separated
From Imagination and closing itself as in steel, in a Ratio
Of the Things of Memory. It thence frames Laws & Moralities
To destroy Imagination, the Divine Body...⁴⁰.

In the abstract, the Spectre is synonymous with Urizen, but is visually distinct, most memorably looming over Los in *Jerusalem* Plate 6 (FIG.12) as a giant black bat-like form. Los' almost casual stance, resting on his hammer and looking up at the Spectre undaunted, suggests a familiarity with his oppressor that is subtly distinct from the more dramatically antagonistic images of Los and Urizen. The Spectre, then, is Blake's more explicit acknowledgement that Urizenic impulses are internally, as much as externally, imposed: "Thou art my Pride & Self-righteousness; I have found thee out"⁴¹. Therefore, built into Blake's "System" is some inevitable degree of failure, or at least of imperfection – it cannot be hermetically fool-proof. Hence the ever-lurking presence of "Negation", a concept Blake distinguishes from Contrariety – "Contraries are Positives / A Negation is not a Contrary"⁴² – whilst realising Negation is, on a meta-level, a "necessary" Contrary to the idea of positive opposition. The "Spectre of Man" is described in *Jerusalem* as "a Negation...A murderer of its own Body...An Abstract objecting power, that Negatives every thing"(10.10-14), drawing attention to the abyssal distance between ideology and its material manifestation for the prophet-artist. So in *Jerusalem* there appears a specific reference to reverse writing on the copperplate as a form of self-negation when Los vows to his female "Emanation" Enitharmon: "never! shalt thou be Organized / But as a distorted & reversed Reflexion in the Darkness / And in the Non Entity"(17.41-3). To represent a "distorted" or *compromised* absolutism – an absolutist ambivalence that allows for fervent and sincere conviction without being tyrannical – Blake's aesthetic is

⁴⁰ Blake, *Jerusalem*, 74.10-13.

⁴¹ Ibid, 8.30-31.

⁴² Blake, *Milton*, 30.3-4.

purposefully self-destructive, exemplified in his various disjunctions between word and image.

The unique copies of each book, with marked variations in colour, compositional detail and even verbal content, indicate his desire to efface the singular voice of “transcendent authority”⁴³. Such self-effacement is compounded by the thematic and material distancing of text and design, the persistent sense that the images constitute an independent – even oppositional – narrative outside of the text, and ambivalently-ambiguous visual tropes that present two entirely oppositional meanings at once. Hence Los’ declaration “my Spectre art divided against me”: the typically Blakean pun notably allows for both active and passive readings of “art” as noun and verb, and “divided” as adjective and verb. Similarly the Spectre that would seek to compromise and pacify Los/Blake is made to work for him instead: “I will compell thee to assist me in my terrible labours. To beat / These hypocritic Selfhoods on the Anvils of bitter Death”⁴⁴. This is the process dramatised in *Milton*, where the poet must “cleanse the Face of my Spirit by Self-examination”(47.37) and thereby achieve redemption through “Self-annihilation & the grandeur of Inspiration”(48.3). The poem’s dramatic climax presents a typically self-negating assertion of authority, as Milton speaks “in terrible majesty”(46.28) – demanding we “Obey...the Words of the Inspired Man”(1.29) – to advocate self-destruction: “All that can be annihilated must be annihilated / That the Children of Jerusalem may be saved from slavery”(1.30-1).

The self-undoing Los/Urizen (re)flux is fascinatingly played out at a critical level, too, as attempts to either impose or escape from order when treating Blake reveal “the subtle progress by which...contraries...revolve upon each other”. Frye points out the frustrating convolutions that result from the critic’s enduring desire to systematise Blake,

⁴³ Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, p.12.

⁴⁴ Blake, *Jerusalem*, 8.15-16.

as exemplified in S. Foster Damon's *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (1924) and *A Blake Dictionary* (1965): "like other difficult poets, [he] has been wrapped in a Laocoön tangle of encyclopaedias, concordances, indexes, charts and diagrams"⁴⁵, which seem to lead us away from the text and into the realm of conjecture. The editor Max Plowman articulates the paradox: "the farther he is pursued along the line of deductive reasoning, the farther he leads the misguided reader into the bog of complexity"⁴⁶. Ironically, however, those critics who seemingly eschew the Urizenic implication of binding Blake to fixed definitions – instead championing his commitment to unleashed energy above all – often end up falling into the trap of reductive didacticism. The thrust of much historicist analysis in particular, including Erdman's *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (1954) and Jacob Bronowski's *William Blake and the Age of Revolution* (1972) over-simplifies Blake's attitude to energy as an indiscriminately absolute panacea, so that all Revolutionary activity is unquestioningly exalted and the thrust of violent narrative action is always towards reflecting and inculcating Revolutionary zeal. Such readings seek to suppress the fact that Blake admits in(to) his narratives warnings about misguided and misapplied effusions of energy within oneself, most obviously in Los' forging of Urizen that leaves them both mentally shackled. Thus either angle of approach to Blake – as the creator or destroyer of systematic reasoning – is too single-minded, occluding the ways in which he works against himself, by working with his Spectral "negation", to depict the ultimate truth of inescapable ambivalence. A truth unwittingly demonstrated in the self-undercutting efforts of his critics.

The ultimate purpose of such a self-dismantling aesthetic is to force the reader into an active – and *reciprocal* – engagement with Blake, who condemns passive obedience above all else. The adversarial relationship between word and image – wherein the

⁴⁵ Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, p.9.

⁴⁶ Max Plowman, 'Note', *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell Facsimile* (London, 1927), p.16.

illustrations (im)pose more problems than they (re)solve – necessitates a mutual “energetic exertion”⁴⁷ to make meaning. Blake determinedly bombards the reader with competing media so that we are forced to make interpretive and evaluative choices, having to organise and prioritise the content of each plate when confronted with “Too much” stimulation; “Excess” in art, to paraphrase Blake, is “Necessary to Life”⁴⁸. We see this encapsulated in one of Blake’s final engravings, *Laocoön* (1826-7, FIG.13), where he has converted – and inverted – the Classical tale of Laocoön and his sons ensnared by sea snakes into his personalised mythology of Jehovah and his necessarily rebellious, Contrary sons Satan and Adam. The hectic plate presents competing claims for attention from the monolithic central image and the flighty textual fragments that both envelop and are “distorted” by the statue’s flailing limbs. The tight curve of words round Laocoön’s thrusting right arm emphasising how “Practise is Art” seems to co-operatively accentuate the illustration’s dynamism, and conversely operates as an antagonistic force that is hammered out of shape by the fist. More insidiously, like the coiling serpents whose inseparable forms enact Blake’s necessity of “Good & Evil” tightly bound, compressed words infiltrate the image, slipping underneath Satan’s right arm, “propagating Generation & Death”. *Laocoön* illustratively literalises Los’ words in *Jerusalem*: “Reasonings like vast serpents / Infold around my limbs, bruising my minute articulations”(15.12-3). The eye is overwhelmed by the seemingly spontaneous and unselfconsciously arbitrary arrangement of phrases crammed at every conceivable angle on a plate that is large – measuring 26.6x21.6cm – yet not large enough to contain his abundant religious-aesthetic axioms. It is almost a reworking – or unleashing – of the seventy ‘Proverbs of Hell’ in *Marriage*, whose excessiveness of rhetoric and number parody the proscriptive Decalogue of Urizen’s Old Testament. Here the principles explode across the page in a cacophony of

⁴⁷ Blake, *Jerusalem*, 3.20.

⁴⁸ Blake, Annotations to Francis Bacon, *Essays Moral, Economical, and Political* (1798), c.1798, *Complete Writings*, p.408.

inconsistent sizing, boldness and line breaks that defies attempts to categorically order the semantic content and/or to standardise the work with conventional typesetting. The cross-fertilising phrases enact Mitchell's aforementioned observation that Blakean "Vision does not travel in a straight line".

In a rainbow-like arc following Laocoön's head and left arm we find *a* – it is impossible to say *the* – vital tenet:

All that we See is Vision
from Generated Organs gone as soon as come
Permanent in The Imagination...

Laocoön mimetically places reader-viewers' "Generated Organs" under strain, its overcrowded axioms too often "gone as soon as come" in a disorientating chaos. We need to constantly look again, meditating upon and weighing each phrase in order to prevent Blake's words going in one eye and out the other; this careful compartmentalisation will thereby allow Blake's principles to become "Permanent in The Imagination". The irony is that the statue-image provides a securing anchor for the eye, yet also bends the text out of shape. The inability to order and number the lines prevents their hierarchical structuring, enacting Blake's similarly transgressive marginalia to Reynolds: "Identities or Things are Neither Cause nor Effect. They are Eternal"⁴⁹. The smallest phrase in *Laocoön* is squeezed on the vertical axis towards the right side of the plate, and ironically reads "No Secre/sy in Art"; the playful trick tests how much the eye sees, the addition of Hebrew and Greek likewise challenging us to view everything that is offered, with the implication that there will always be something beyond our stunted sight. As the title page to *The Daughters of Albion* famously explains, "The Eye sees more than the Heart knows".

⁴⁹ Blake, Annotations to Reynolds' *Discourses* VI, *Complete Writings*, p.470.

This last line is literalised for the reader, coming at the end of the plate with an elaborate tendril leading from “Void” and directing us to turn the page in a visual-visionary “leap” – the “indefinite and expansive gap” suspends itself across the page-break as much as the word/image gulf. Blake then relates how Los “compell’d the invisible Spectre / To labours mighty”(10.65) as he “ladles the Ore...pouring it into the clay ground prepar’d with art”, again analogous to Blake’s acid wash on the copperplate, “Striving with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems”(11.5).

Here we hit upon Blake’s desire to break down ‘the reader’ or ‘readership’ as monolithic identity into plural readers, “Individuals” who will deploy and trust their own imaginations to prevent passive ‘enslavement’ to Blake and/or his mythology. *Marriage* explains how the “System” of Priesthood that “enslav’d the vulgar” was so oppressive because “men forgot that All Deities reside / in the Human Breast”(11.9, 15-16). The more complex and abstruse the interactions between word and image across Blake’s oeuvre the greater the likelihood of wholly unique, non-standardised – ultimately unauthorised – interpretations. Los’ words to Satan can therefore be proven: “Every Man’s Wisdom is peculiar to his own Individuality”⁵³, echoing the vital annotation to Reynolds, “Every Eye Sees differently. As the Eye, Such the Object”⁵⁴. For example, the frontispiece to *The Gates of Paradise* (c.1825, FIG.14) depicting a caterpillar crawling down a leaf, next to a child swaddled in/as a chrysalis, presents Contrary conceptions of humanity depending on the individual eye. The caption “What is Man!” reads as both statement and question, implying the stunted grubbiness of fallen mortality with one eye, or the joyful anticipation of man’s emergence as a butterfly with the other. The subheading, “The Suns Light when he unfolds it / Depends on the Organ that beholds it” foregrounds this sense of sight divided amongst divergent “Individuals”. In the same

⁵³ Blake, *Milton*, 4.8.

⁵⁴ Blake, Annotations to Reynolds’ *Discourses* II, *Complete Writings*, p.456.

way, the image on Plate 3 (FIG.15) of a woman picking a mandrake-child might be a premature uprooting from Edenic earth or a salvation from the state of soiled worm. We must take a flying jump and make some interpretative decisions ourselves.

However, with the inescapable “reflux” of Contrariness, Blake makes clear that “Every Eye” and “Every Man’s Wisdom” is not equal. In a 1799 letter to the literary compiler John Trusler he exalts his artistic idiosyncrasy by making a firm distinction between his perception of the world as “all One continued Vision of Fancy or Imagination” and those who lack divine (in)sight: “I see Every thing I paint In This World, but Every body does not see alike. To the Eyes of a Miser a Guinea is more beautiful than the Sun”⁵⁵. One’s aesthetic sensibility is a direct result of spiritual integrity: “As a man is, So he Sees. As the Eye is formed, such are its Powers”(ibid). As Erdman states, “fools perish” in the word/image void, and like Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey Blake is preoccupied with attracting and fashioning discerning readers who will appreciate the substance and expression of his visions: “A Fool’s Eye is Not to be a Criterion”⁵⁶. The sheer difficulty of reading dense ‘hand-written’ lines produces the “tension necessary to the sublime experience”⁵⁷ of autonomous revelation; Blake’s formidable “architecture” constantly tests the worth of his reader in the hope of generating the reciprocal “energetic exertion” required to comprehend and share his epic “Enthusiasm”. So *Laocoön* repeatedly asserts the importance of *activity* as a prerequisite of faithful worship: “Prayer is the study of Art. / Praise is the practice of Art”, meaning “The unproductive Man is not a Christian”. With characteristic rhetorical abandon, he furthermore stipulates: “A Poet, a Painter, a Musician, an Architect; the man or woman who is not one of these is not a Christian”. Blake’s deliberately obfuscatory excess thus

⁵⁵ Blake, letter to Dr. Trusler (23 August 1799), ibid, p.793.

⁵⁶ Blake, Annotations to Reynolds’ *Discourses* II, ibid, p.448.

⁵⁷ Vincent Arthur De Luca, *Words of Eternity: Blake and the Poetics of the Sublime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p.90.

enables the reader to help construct, or reconstruct, his purposes – to become an architect of sorts. The letter to Dr. Trusler fully articulates this *modus operandi*:

You say that I want somebody to Elucidate my Ideas. But...What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients considered what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouses the faculties to act.⁵⁸

Hence liberating readers involves making demands on them to sift the wise man from the “Weak...Idiot”; the only excessiveness that worries Blake is being “too Explicit” rather than too “obscure”. Coleridge and De Quincey could perhaps most readily relate to the impulse of being openly demanding and thereby hoping for reciprocal sympathy with a reader, but Blake is distinct for being entirely *unapologetic* about burdening readers with the “style of his mind”. In fact, the greater the burden, the greater a reader’s imaginative vigour, emanating from the kind of concentrated rigour De Quincey longed for but did not expect from his audience. Interestingly, the unhierarchised sentences that were so damaging to De Quincey’s attempts to communicate find their Contrary in Blake’s productively unhierarchised plates, inveigling the reader into his universe via confident elusiveness. Blake notably critiques Reynolds’ statement that “The principles of art...such as novelty, variety and contrast...in their excess become defects” with the ‘correction’: “Principles, according to Sr Joshua, become defects”⁵⁹. Blake’s condensing Reynolds’ words creates a telling dual sense that artistic “principles” by their very nature can never be ‘excessive’, and/or that “excess” is in itself one of the crucial “Principles” of art.

The fundamental tenet of desirable “Self-annihilation” through visual-verbal excess distinguishes Blake from Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey. The latter trio

⁵⁸ Blake, letter to Trusler (23 August 1799), *Complete Writings*, p.793.

⁵⁹ Blake, Annotations to Reynolds’ *Discourses* VIII, *ibid*, p.477.

clearly share the experience Blake describes of being thwarted by their own over-enthusiastic and over-rationalistic desire to communicate more, but this is something they are only half-aware of. Therefore, although they intermittently exploit the drama of uncontrolled authorship – such as De Quincey revelling in his loquacity – it is not a consistent principle of artistic production, a “firm perswasion [sic]”⁶⁰, as with Blake. Because Blake seems to more readily anticipate the “nets & gins & traps”⁶¹ of authorship he ensures the manifestation of his vision “accommodates, ironizes, and outflanks”⁶² the ambivalent uncertainty that results from/in mental and material excess. ‘The Voice of the Ancient Bard’ in *Songs of Innocence* pronounces, “Folly is an endless maze, / Tangled roots perplex her ways, / How many have fallen there!”(13.8-10), mimetically tripping the reader up on a tricky off-rhyme: “Doubt is fled & clouds of reason. / Dark disputes & artful teasing”(1.6-7). The vagueness of “They” who “stumble all night over bones of the dead” and “wish to lead others when they should be led”(1.9-11) accommodates an implication of fluxing and refluxing authority, between self-effacing writer and individuated reader. Ronald Paulson adopts Blake’s metaphor of the “maze” when arguing that *Songs of Experience* encourages readerly self-consciousness, “trapping us in the labyrinth of its possible meanings”⁶³. But unlike the Piranesian prisons of De Quincey’s “tangled” sentences, in which we may be lost forever aimlessly pursuing a moral, Blake’s “readiness to confront contradiction arguably shows [his] trust that to enter a labyrinth is ultimately to find a way out”⁶⁴.

⁶⁰ Blake, *Marriage*, 12.13.

⁶¹ Blake, *Song of Los*, 4.2.

⁶² O’Neill, *Self-Conscious Poem*, p.8.

⁶³ Ronald Paulson, ‘Blake’s Revolutionary Tiger’, *Articulate Images*, pp.169-183, 181.

⁶⁴ O’Neill, *Self-Conscious Poem*, p.8.

II

“I defy any Man to Cut Cleaner Strokes than I do, or rougher where I please”(‘Public Address’): The Bounding Line

Blake’s punning “bounding line” – the “great and golden rule of art, as well as of life”⁶⁵ – encapsulates the strain between precision and enthusiastic abandon, material containment and imaginative expansiveness, in his work. These tensions characterise not only the strokes of visual art, but broader concerns such as the drawn/written line Contrary and the ultimate value of the book as an effective medium for communicating prophetic vision. Blake famously declares in *A Descriptive Catalogue*:

...the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art; and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism, and bungling...The want of this determinate and bounding form evidences the want of idea in the artist’s mind...How do we distinguish one face or countenance from another, but by the bounding line and its infinite inflections and movements? Leave out this line, and you leave out life itself; all is chaos again...

(ibid).

The “sharp” clarity of the line that provides organised form for thought manifests the strength of an artist’s inspiration and conviction, the “determinate” mark reflecting a determined mind. Notably in the essay ‘Public Address’(1810), Blake attributes the “fumble & Bungle which cannot draw a Line” to infirm purpose: “That is not a Line which doubts & Hesitates in the Midst of its Course”⁶⁶. The “bounding outline”⁶⁷ is also the means of “distinguishing” individual identity, preventing subsumption in – or enslavement to – the “System”. This is what Blake has in mind when writing to George Cumberland about the state of the nation in 1827, “I know too well that a great majority of

⁶⁵ Blake, *A Descriptive Catalogue* (1809), *Complete Writings*, pp.563-86, p.585.

⁶⁶ Blake, ‘Public Address’(c.1810, unpublished), *ibid*, pp.591-603, p.608.

⁶⁷ Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, *ibid*, p.585.

Englishmen are fond of The Indefinite”⁶⁸. Again stressing the wholly “distinct” character of the “wirey line”, Blake announces: “a Line is a Line in its Minutest Subdivisions: Strait or Crooked It is Itself & Not Intermeasurable with or by any Thing Else”(ibid). This sharply contrasts with the homogenised society he exempts himself from, which is now pacified and passive after the tumult of the previous century: “since the French Revolution Englishmen are all Intermeasurable One by Another, Certainly a happy state of Agreement to which I for One do not Agree”(ibid). In a dramatic narrativising of the “bounding line”, the Sons of Los in *Milton* “surround the Passions with porches of iron & silver...Giving to airy nothing a name and a habitation”(27.2-4). Their “incessant” toil produces “bounds to the Infinite putting off the Indefinite / Into most holy forms of Thought”(27.5-6), combating the kind of abstracted generality represented in *Jerusalem* by “the Spectre of Albion, destroyer of Definite Form”(56.17). The “bounding line” is, then, a moral as well as artistic imperative – its clarity delineates integrity: “What is it that distinguishes honesty from knavery, but the hard and wirey line of rectitude and certainty in the actions and intentions?”⁶⁹. As *The Book of Los* states: “Truth has bounds. Error none”(4.34).

In the 1827 letter to Cumberland Blake affirms, “a Line or Lineament is not formed by Chance”⁷⁰. Because “Man’s Execution is as his Conception & No Better”⁷¹, Blake repeatedly asserts the importance of meticulous technical skill as reflecting – and conversely validating – his claim to pure, “perfect” imagination: “A Facility in Composing is the Greatest Power of Art, & Belongs to None but the Greatest Artists and the Most Minutely Discriminating & Determinate”⁷². With typical declamatory concision he summarises, “Execution is the Chariot of Genius”(454). So in ‘A Vision of the Last

⁶⁸ Blake, letter to George Cumberland (12 April 1827), ibid, p.878.

⁶⁹ Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, ibid, p.585.

⁷⁰ Blake, letter to Cumberland, ibid, p.898.

⁷¹ Blake, Annotations to Reynolds’ *Discourses* IV, ibid, p.461.

⁷² Blake, Annotations to *Discourses* I, ibid, p.453.

Judgment'(1810), describing his large-scale engraving of the same name, Blake requests the viewer "attend to the Hands & Feet, to the Lineaments of the Countenances" because "they are all descriptive of Character, & not a line is drawn without intention, & that most discriminate & particular"⁷³. Explicitly drawing the parallel between visual and verbal precision, he concludes: "As Poetry admits not a Letter that is Insignificant, so Painting admits not a Grain of Sand...Insignificant – much less an Insignificant Blur or Mark"(ibid). The 'Public Address' reiterates: "Ideas cannot be Given but in their minutely Appropriate Words, nor Can a Design be made without its minutely Appropriate Execution"⁷⁴. That word "minutely" echoes the 'Descriptive Catalogue', which emphasises that "A Spirit and a Vision are not...a cloudy vapour...they are organised and minutely articulated beyond all that the mortal and perishing nature can produce"⁷⁵. This is the tenet of "Minute Particulars", fully "articulated" in *Jerusalem*:

He who would do good to another, must do it in Minute Particulars...
For Art & Science cannot exist but in minutely organized Particulars
And not in generalizing Demonstrations of the Rational Power,
The Infinite alone resides in Definite & Determinate Identity.

(55.60-4).

"Minute Particulars" fend off "cloudy" Urizenic abstraction, comprising as they do the "bounding line" and its delineation of autonomous "Definite & Determinate Identity"; Los thunders in *Jerusalem*: "General Forms have their vitality in Particulars: & every / Particular is a Man; a Divine Member of the Divine Jesus"(91.27-31). Indeed, hazy "General Forms" are demonised, in language reminiscent of De Quincey's scorn for "monster" sentences "bloated with decomplex intercalations"('Style'): "Swell'd & bloated General Forms. repugnant to the Divine"⁷⁶. The annotations to Reynolds constantly

⁷³ Blake, 'A Vision of the Last Judgment'(1810, unpublished), ibid, pp.604-16, p.611.

⁷⁴ Blake, 'Public Address', ibid, p.596.

⁷⁵ Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, ibid, p.576.

⁷⁶ Blake, *Jerusalem*, 43.12.

recapitulate the point: “what is General Knowledge? Strictly Speaking All Knowledge is Particular”⁷⁷, so that “To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit”⁷⁸ intellectually, imaginatively and aesthetically.

Thus minute particularity is a condition of the divinely-inspired Sublime: “Singular & Particular Detail is the Foundation of the Sublime”⁷⁹ because “Without Minute Neatness of Execution The Sublime cannot Exist! Grandeur of Ideas is founded on Precision of Ideas”⁸⁰. And precision of brushwork. Blake vehemently opposed Reynolds’ style for what he perceived as a deceptive indeterminacy of form, indicating a lack of imaginative power; as he expounds in *Descriptive Catalogue*: “He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light than his perishing and mortal eye can see, does not imagine at all”⁸¹. ‘The Ghost of Abel’ affirms: “Nature has no Outline, / but Imagination has”⁸². On *Discourses II* Blake writes: “The Man who asserts that there is no Such Thing as Softness in Art, & that every thing in Art is Definite & Determinate, has not been told this by Practise, but by Inspiration & Vision, because Vision is Determinate & Perfect”⁸³. He attributes “Softness” to “Weakness in the Marking out of the Forms”(ibid). Hence the intricate watercolour technique in Blake’s art enables the “bounding outline” of his figures to dominate; we are told at the outset of the *Descriptive Catalogue*: “Clearness and precision have been my chief objects in painting these Pictures. Clear colours unmuddled by oil, and firm and determinate lineaments unbroken by shadows, which ought to display and not to hide form”⁸⁴. The ethos of Blake’s work, then, is that meticulous technical control, through concentration on

⁷⁷ Blake, Annotations to *Discourses III*, *Complete Writings*, p.459.

⁷⁸ Ibid II, ibid, p.451.

⁷⁹ Ibid III, ibid, p.459.

⁸⁰ Ibid II, ibid, p.457.

⁸¹ Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, ibid, p.576.

⁸² Blake, ‘The Ghost of Abel’ (1822), 1.6-7.

⁸³ Blake, Annotations to *Discourses II*, *Complete Writings*, p.457.

⁸⁴ Blake, *Descriptive Catalogue*, ibid, p.564.

“minutely organized Particulars”, marks a “sharp” mind inspired by “Definite & Determinate” vision.

But this degree of self-conscious “precision” contends with Blake’s lauding of energy and enthusiasm as the ultimate forces behind acts of creation; for a reader-viewer of the Illuminated Books the visual and verbal “bounding line” is one that leaps, as well as binds, with its “infinite inflections and movements”. This is what painter and etcher Samuel Palmer praised in “the Maker, the Inventor” Blake: “He was energy itself, and shed around him a kindling influence; an atmosphere of life, full of the ideal”⁸⁵. Such fit-to-burst idealism is displayed in Blake’s annotation, “I always thought that the Human Mind was the most Prolific of All Things & Inexhaustible...He who can be bound down is No Genius. Genius cannot be Bound”⁸⁶. The constraining Urizenic associations of the “bounding line” are most explicit in *Marriage*: “Energy is the only life...Reason is the bound or outward circumference / of Energy”(4.17-19). There is, then, a worrying blurriness to the “bounding line” as not only preventing “chaos”, but paradoxically inculcating it: “Restraint for Blake is a mode of indecision, and proceeds from a mind in chaos”⁸⁷. Blake “fluxes and refluxes” in the alternate privileging of “bounding” enthusiasm and “bounding” discipline when discussing artistic production. In his annotations to Reynolds, he declares that “Enthusiasm is the All in All!”⁸⁸, a statement of abandon – dare we say generalising – that contends with his equally bold pronouncement only twenty-one pages away that “Mechanical Excellence is the Only Vehicle of Genius”(453). The latter phrase is itself somewhat compromised by Blake’s fervent

⁸⁵ Samuel Palmer, letter to Alexander Gilchrist (23 August 1835), *William Blake: Critical Heritage*, ed. G.E. Bentley Jr. (1975; repr. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p.31.

⁸⁶ Blake, Annotations to *Discourses VI*, *Complete Writings*, p.471-2.

⁸⁷ Harold Bloom, *Blake’s Apocalypse* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), p.85.

⁸⁸ Blake, Annotations to *Discourses II*, *Complete Writings*, p.456.

opposition to “Mechanical” processes in the ‘Public Address’: “A Machine is not a Man nor a Work of Art; it is destructive of Humanity & of Art; the word Machination”⁸⁹.

This constant self-haunting sense of restriction fuels the compensatory desire to rhetorically assert the importance of energy as liberation, so that the “bounding line” might not be too binding. Hence Jon Mee’s comment on *The Book of Los* and *The Four Zoas* usefully informs Blake’s whole canon: “The story...is one of the continual reapplication of prophetic energy to redeem itself from becoming what it struggles against”⁹⁰. Counteracting his talk of “precision” and determination, Blake cultivates an aesthetic of inspired spontaneity, befitting the fitful visionariness of a bard-prophet. He asserts that “First thoughts are best in art”⁹¹, and assures Thomas Butts that his pictures “are what I intended them...I never shall do better; for, if I were to do them over again, they would lose as much as they gain’d, because they were done in the heat of My Spirits”⁹². Kindled by this “heat”, Gilchrist lauds Blake’s “visible spontaneity”⁹³, arguing that the *Songs* are “*unfinished* poems” but therefore possess a “bold and careless freedom” that would have been “brushed away”(ibid) by the kind of strenuous revision Wordsworth and De Quincey undertook. His repeated trope of “immediate Dictation” from a higher authority “without Premeditation & even against my Will”⁹⁴ practically abdicates responsibility for his prophetic books, producing work “without Labour or Study”(ibid). This improvisatory, ad hoc quality is memorably described by T.S. Eliot, who compares Blake’s philosophy to “an ingenious piece of home-made furniture” assembled “out of the odds and ends about the house”⁹⁵. Literally so, given that *Songs of Experience*, *Europe*

⁸⁹ Blake, ‘Public Address’, ibid, p.603.

⁹⁰ Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm*, p.204.

⁹¹ Quoted in Gilchrist, *William Blake*, p.415.

⁹² Blake, letter to Thomas Butts (22 November 1802), *Complete Writings*, p.813.

⁹³ Gilchrist, *William Blake*, p.71.

⁹⁴ Blake, letter to Butts about *Milton* (25 April 1803), *Complete Writings*, p.823. See also *Europe* (pl.3) and *Jerusalem* (pl.3).

⁹⁵ Eliot, ‘Blake’, *Sacred Wood*, p.156.

and *Urizen* were etched on the back of plates for *Innocence*, *America* and *Marriage*⁹⁶ that were conveniently to hand.

America a Prophecy (1793), when left uncoloured, demonstrates the fluxing and refluxing tension between expansive and restrictive “bounding lines”; the enlarged scale of the work magnifies the designs so that we are presented not only with stabilising outline but quivering internal lines. The frontispiece (FIG.16) trembles with barely-contained energy, as the eye perceives a brewing tension between the “bounding” lines that delineate the giant Orc, the colossal stone slabs and the overbearing clouds, and the mass of marks moving inside them. Undulating lines slither into a pattern of scalloped cobblestones, vertical waves climb the face of the brick wall and turbulently coil in its cross-section, gently curving fine horizontal strokes move the clouds, and tight semicircular curves give Orc’s wings a sense of iridescence. Labyrinthine scrawls mark out broken stones, and the vigorous, thick hatching that shades Orc’s body conveys a strained incipient energy waiting to be unleashed – which it duly is on Plate 11 (Copy E, FIG.17), as Orc’s manacles melt and tempestuously lengthy lines erupt, stirred by the text’s rallying cry for war. The grains of wheat consisting of large swirling semicircular marks swoop across the plate and envelop the prone infant, while the cross-hatching that scales the left-hand margin suggests the texture of serpent skin. The varying depth and thickness of the strokes create wave-like streaks that evoke tumultuous clouds, winds and flames. A similar effect is achieved in the depiction of God’s “Poetic Genius” as a “whirlwind” in *The Book of Job* (1826) Plate 13 (FIG.18), the expansive lines curling back on themselves like *America*’s grain. The description of the furious creative process in *Urizen* comes to the mind’s eye: “whirlwinds of sulphurous smoke: / And enormous forms of energy...living creations”(6.53-4, 8.1). It is ironic, and compellingly dramatic,

⁹⁶ Joseph Viscomi, ‘Illuminated Printing’, *Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, pp.37-62, p.42.

that Blake's larger – more “enormous” – plates frequently struggle to withstand the Los-like barrage of in-scything lines.

The Contrary critical perceptions of Blake as inspired and/or insane both stem from the overriding impression that his mind and art are out of control. While Robert Hunt saw “a farrago of nonsense, unintelligibleness...the wild effusions of a distempered brain” resulting from “unmeaning and distorted conceptions”⁹⁷, Gilchrist admits a possible “excess of the element of the indefinite”⁹⁸ in defending *Thel*. Wordsworth judged the “poor man...mad”, though “there is something in the madness of this man which interests me more than the Sanity of Lord Byron & Walter Scott!”⁹⁹. Coleridge shared that perfectly ambivalent response of ‘interest’, deeming *Songs* “a strange publication – viz. Poems with very wild and interesting pictures”¹⁰⁰. But he was more confident in Blake as revealing “emphatically a man of Genius”, a diffusely profuse “apo – or rather ana – calyptic Poet, and Painter!”, compared with whom “I am in the very mire of common-place common-sense”(ibid). Allan Cunningham, in *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters* (1829), argued that “with much freedom of composition and boldness of posture, he was unmeaning...his original mode of working out his conceptions was little better than a brilliant way of animating absurdity”¹⁰¹. Whereas Wordsworth's “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” made him famous, Blake's “overflow of imagination”¹⁰² was his downfall, according to Cunningham: he possessed “this precious gift in excess. His fancy overmastered him...[he] confounded ‘the mind's eye’ with the corporeal organ, and dreamed himself out of the sympathies of actual life”(ibid). And possibly out of the “sympathies” of his audience – as De Quincey found,

⁹⁷ Robert Hunt, ‘Mr Blake's Exhibition’(*The Examiner*, no.90, 17 September 1809), *Blake Records*, p.283.

⁹⁸ Gilchrist, *William Blake*, p.77.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Crabb Robinson, ‘Reminiscences’(MS, 1852), *Blake Records*, pp.692-706, p.693.

¹⁰⁰ Coleridge, letter to H.F. Cary (6 February 1818), *Collected Letters*, iv.833.

¹⁰¹ Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 6 vols.

(2nd ed., London, 1830-33), ii.181.

¹⁰² Ibid.

readers can easily “confound” a writer being “overmastered” by excess of vision and being “overmastered” by lack of technical discipline.

Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s review of Edward Young’s illustrated *Night Thoughts* (1797) expresses well the precarious, pivoting balance of Blake’s extreme and often incoherent enthusiasm: the designs are

...at once so grotesque, so sublime – now by so literal an interpretation, now by so vague and disconnected a train of invention, that the whole makes one of the most astonishing and curious productions which ever balanced between the conception of genius and the raving of insanity¹⁰³.

Blake himself was alert to the fine line between passion that is engrossing and estranging, “sublime” and “grotesque”. Writing to Butts in 1803, he proclaims his intention to “go on in the Strength of the Lord; through Hell will I sing forth his Praises, that the Dragons of the Deep may praise him”, before checking himself with an uncharacteristically Wordsworthian “perhaps”: “Excuse my, perhaps, too great Enthusiasm”¹⁰⁴. This hint of tentativeness becomes more pronounced in the ‘Preface’ to *Jerusalem*, where Blake strenuously defends the “Enthusiasm of the following Poem”, which he “hopes no Reader will think presumptuousness or arrogance when he is reminded that the Ancients entrusted their love to their Writing...as Enthusiastically as I have who Acknowledge mine for my Saviour”(ibid). He argues he is ingenuously and “wholly absorb’d”(ibid) in his acts of worship and creation, aware this could be perceived as merely self-absorption. Ultimately he appeals to the virtue of *effort* as a generous channelling of energy: “[forgive] what you do not approve, & / [love] me for this energetic exertion of my talent”(3.20-1).

¹⁰³ Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Review of Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* (*New Monthly Magazine*, December 1830), *Blake Records*, p.80.

¹⁰⁴ Blake, letter to Butts (25 April 1803), *Complete Writings*, p.823.

But critical readers are repeatedly concerned that the abandon associated with “energetic exertion” risks “the horror of *formlessness*”¹⁰⁵; notably, in a chapter of Gilchrist’s biography entitled ‘Mad or Not Mad?’ he answers ‘yes’, “If for *insane* we read *undisciplined*, or ill-balanced”¹⁰⁶. T.S. Eliot contends that Blake was “inclined to formlessness”¹⁰⁷, and Benjamin Heath Malkin expresses concern over the “unrestrained measure” of Blake’s blank verse, “which should warn the poet to restrain himself”¹⁰⁸. The lack of rhyme and regular rhythm, Malkin argues, often suggests technical deficiency rather than “Meer Enthusiasm”, having “betrayed him into so wild a pursuit of fancy, as to leave harmony unregarded, and to pass the line prescribed by criticism to the career of imagination”(ibid). Similarly, noting the Contrary effects of the “bounding line” as fixing and (over)flowing, Coleridge vividly remarks that Blake’s “irregular unmodified Lines” sometimes have “the effect of rigidity and sometimes of exossation – like a wet tendon”¹⁰⁹. We certainly find an inclination to “exossation” in the marginal figures that are frequently ‘sketched’ with such fluid strokes that their exact activity is unclear, and the drapery of clothing so easily dissipates into tendrils, and tendrils into flames. Textually, the extended hypermetric lines of the later Illuminated Books likewise risk structural fragility. Blake is “capable of such faults and such beauties”(ibid) because the compounded Contrariness of the “bounding line” as definite and diffuse, measured and inspired, makes drawing and writing an embodiment of ordered or restrained energy *and* of over-enthusiastic abandon bordering on “chaos”. Unleashed “chaos” and restrained order are both disavowed and desired at once.

¹⁰⁵ Janet A. Warner, *Blake and the Language of Art* (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1984), p.29.

¹⁰⁶ Gilchrist, *William Blake*, p.372.

¹⁰⁷ Eliot, ‘Blake’, *Sacred Wood*, p.155.

¹⁰⁸ Benjamin Heath Malkin, *A Father’s Memoirs of His Child* (London, 1806), p.xl.

¹⁰⁹ Coleridge to Tulk (12 February 1818), *Collected Letters*, iv.836.

Hence Blake's fundamental ambivalence about engraving and the literal "bounding" of verbal and visual lines in a book. Lines etched in metal have an appealing indelibility, as self-reflexively asserted in *Milton*: "The generations of men run on in the tide of Time / But leave their destined lineaments permanent for ever & ever"(20.25-6). Job expresses the wish "that my words / were printed in a Book that they were graven with an iron pen & lead in the rock for ever"¹¹⁰. Fixity of material form is important in capturing something of the eternal mental power Blake extols: "Vision or Imagination is a Representation of what Eternally Exists, Really & Unchangeably"¹¹¹. But permanence can also be associated with too rigid a fixity that must be resisted, literally flattening the words that "fly about the room in all directions" when Blake is "commanded by the Spirits"¹¹². Erin's lament in *Jerusalem* articulates the possibility for spiritual oppression through literal impression: "The Visions of Eternity by reason of narrowed perceptions, / Are become weak Visions of Time & Space, fix'd into furrows of death"(49.21-2). In *Marriage* there is a notably cautious tone to the description of how infernally-printed individual plates become rigidly and reductively published: "[they] took the forms of books & / were arranged in libraries"(15.20-1). Blake therefore tries to fashion etching as freely fluid to combat the Urizenic rigidity of the copperplate and "Book of brass": "Painting is drawing on canvas, and engraving is drawing on copper"¹¹³. Gilchrist revels in and warns of the teeming life and movement in the plate's illustrations – not "a mortal life, but...a life indestructible, whether for good or evil":

The ever-fluctuating colour, the spectral pigmies rolling, flying, leaping among the letters...the living light and burst of flame, the spires and tongues of fire vibrating...make the page seem to move and quiver within

¹¹⁰ Blake, *The Book of Job* (1826), pl.17.

¹¹¹ Blake, 'Vision of the Last Judgment', *Complete Writings*, p.604, 605.

¹¹² Crabb Robinson, letter to Dorothy Wordsworth (19 February 1826), *Blake Records*, p.437.

¹¹³ Blake, 'Public Address', *Complete Writings*, p.602.

its boundaries, and you lay the book down tenderly, as if you had been handling something sentient.¹¹⁴

Here is a Wordsworthian “something”, struggling for precise definition as the works elude genre “boundaries”. Paradoxically the plate’s life can “burst” forth only by being literally contained “within...boundaries”, and Gilchrist notes the “ever-fluctuating...vibrating” – fluxing and refluxing – implication of such wildness for readers in search of secure meaning. Swinburne unapologetically affirms they will never find it, in an analysis similarly brimming with verbs. He writes of the “sentient” *Marriage*: “The book swarms with heresies and eccentricities; every sentence bristles with some paradox, every page seethes with blind foam and surf of stormy doctrine...it is huge, swift, inexplicable”¹¹⁵.

Ackroyd astutely observes, though, that the act of imprinting is anything but “tender” or “swift” or emancipating: there is “a sense of weight and compression, which is heightened by the thick textures of the applied paint; the figures seem to be struggling to liberate themselves from the confines in which they are crushed by paint, and metal, and print”¹¹⁶. The “flying, leaping” forms Gilchrist describes are not so autonomously freewheeling once we consider the method by which Blake “pushed and pummelled his images into shape”(ibid). The ‘Preludium’ to *Europe* voices an anxiety over such pushing and pummelling that quells the independent energy of its images: “Stamp not with solid form this vig’rous progeny of fires”(2.8), forcing the question, “who shall bind the Infinite with an eternal band / To compass it with swaddling bands?”(2.13-14). The agony of cohering the “Unorganiz’d” Urizen¹¹⁷ in *The Book of Los* and *Urizen* includes a shadow narrative of book production, wherein Los “the vast Spine of Urizen seiz’d / And bound

¹¹⁴ Gilchrist, *William Blake*, p.87-8.

¹¹⁵ Swinburne, *William Blake*, p.205.

¹¹⁶ Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), p.177.

¹¹⁷ Blake, *Urizen*, 6.9.

down to the glowing illusion”¹¹⁸, before he “bound every change / With rivets of iron & brass”¹¹⁹. In *The Book of Los* especially the creator-prophet cannot bear the sense of “hard bondage” and “rent; rent. the vast Solid” so that it was “Crack’d across into numberless frag-/ments”(4.18-22), as the line does. This “stormy” action points to the basic strain between the book as a whole and the autonomous life of each page, the overarching “bounding” narrative breaking down into “Minute Particulars” of sense on every plate. In *Los*, with typical Contrariness, the violent “stamping” of printing vigorously *fights against* repressive binding just as it *enforces* the book’s deadening flatness: Los’ “Prophetic wrath, strug’ling for vent, / Hurls apart. stamping furious to dust”(4.23-4). Jason Allen Snart observes how the competing impulses to bind and rend the book are encapsulated in one of Blake’s illustrations to Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*, where a bat-like Spectral figure ambiguously appears to rip the book in two and/or to unite its separate halves. The image accompanies a powerful exhortation that would have resonated with Blake’s divided loyalties to the collected book and the individual plate: “many an ample *Volume*, mighty *Tome*, / Must die...O Thou minute, / Devoted *Page!* go forth”, to “die a double death” in the “martyrdom for Truth”¹²⁰. It is pertinent to note Wordsworth’s and De Quincey’s equivalent, equivocating, concern with maintaining the integrity of their respective *magnum opuses* while poring over individual sections of “minute articulation” in revision. We also perceive potentially perilous fragmentation resulting from excessiveness as an aggressively urgent concern for Blake, which is exploited by Coleridge with a more disarming – and possibly disingenuous – veil of humour. Mitchell’s comment on *Urizen*’s title page can thus be applied to the work of

¹¹⁸ Blake, *Book of Los*, 5.51-2.

¹¹⁹ Blake, *Urizen*, 9.10-11.

¹²⁰ Edward Young, *Night Thoughts*, 2 vols. (1797), Night VIII: ‘Virtue’s Apology’, ii.69, quoted in Jason Allen Snart, *The Torn Book: Unreading William Blake’s Marginalia* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2006), p.19.

all four writers in this study: “[it] presents a unity which is ready to fly apart at the seams”,¹²¹.

The book and its constituent plates, then, are sites of resistance between two necessary and conflicting types of “bounding line”. Blake’s highly self-conscious line breaks perhaps best demonstrate this struggle to express and harness energy constructively. Swinburne argues that “To measure the exact space of safety, to lay down the precise limits of offence, was an office neither to [Blake’s] taste nor within his power”,¹²² but Blake had to literally measure the exact limits of the copperplate on which his expansive lines of prose and poetry were laid down; the plate presents his desire and struggle to exceed all-too-“precise limits”. We are reminded of how De Quincey’s syntactical excess was exacerbated rather than controlled by the confines of the periodical column. Anne K. Mellor contends that textually Blake’s extended lines counterbalance “the bounding line of reason” in his images: “Blake’s fear of overly limiting or ‘framing’ Energy permits him to use only the most open and fluid of rhetorical syntaxes”¹²³. But *There Is No Natural Religion* (c.1788) fragments “open and fluid” sentences within its tiny 5x3.7cm plates, as individual words are both broken up and extended over the line break by hyphens akin to the disjointing De Quinceyan dash:

Mans percepti-
-ons are not bound
-ed by organs of
perception, he per-
-ceives more than
sense (tho’ ever
so acute) can
discover

(9.2-9).

¹²¹ Mitchell, *Composite Art*, p.142.

¹²² Swinburne, *William Blake*, p.206.

¹²³ Anne K. Mellor, *Blake’s Human Form Divine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p.66.

The divided words mimetically enact the expansive “percepti-ons” of he who “per-ceives more”, as even “bound” extends to “bound-ed” by overleaping the margin. But the very fracturing of these vital terms indicates the ever-present possibility of being distorted and contorted by all-too-rigid bounds, as words teeter Oothoon-like “on the margin of non-entity”¹²⁴. It is a fragile balance between “limiting” and overflowing – and semantic content betrayed by form – as the eye fluxes and refluxes from margin to margin:

The bounded is
loathed by its pos-
-sessor

(5.2-4)

and

The desire of
Man being Infi-
-nite the possession
is Infinite & him-
-self Infinite

(8.2-6).

Similarly, in *Marriage* the “Contraries” of “Attraction / and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and / Hate” are mimetically placed at opposite sides of the plate’s span.

Blake also frequently writes single and partial words that exceed the limit of the right hand margin above and below the line of text. For example, an important *Marriage* ‘Proverb’(FIG.19) espousing the primacy of energetic vigour over didactic reason is written thus:

The tygers of wrath are greater than the horses of in-
-struction

(9.7-8).

¹²⁴ Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), 9.16.

Notably, “-struction” is level with and thereby thematically linked to the succeeding ‘Proverb’ “Expect poison from the standing water”(1.9) – another rejection of the passivity Blake associates with entrenched points of view, and with formal neatness, as confirmed by another ‘Proverb’: “The man who never alters his / opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles / of the mind”(19.7-9). The curve of the interlinear decoration around “-struction” emphasises the line’s invigorating disturbance, preventing stagnantly easy reading. A further ‘Proverb’ offers a useful commentary on this visual twist, complete with a spontaneous spelling error: “Improvent makes strait roads, but the crooked roads / without Improvement, are roads of Genius”(10.10-11), calling to mind the “road of excess” leading to “the palace of wisdom”(7.8). The “vibrating” tension between a plate’s bounds and the “infinite inflections and movements” of the “bounding line” demonstrates Mellor’s valuable point about the precarious possibilities that come from resistance: “Blake recognizes that if his potentially infinite force, the creative activity of Energy, is to be kept in constant expansion it must be constantly opposed”¹²⁵.

Blake’s practice of producing unique copies of his Illuminated Books offers some attempt at reconciling fluidity and fixity in his materials and methods, above all recognising the artist’s conflicting conceptions of overmastering authority and independent energy engendered by the “bounding line”. Varying details of composition, colour, plate order and even text guard against tyrannical Urizenic didacticism by ensuring there can be no singular, or systematic, reading of a work – hence the plural phrasing in *Marriage*, “All Bibles or sacred codes”(4.3). Such alterations, being typically the result of painting on the printed page, counteract the inflexibility of etched lines on a copperplate. They also ensure individual readers make interpretative choices about the copy before them, aware that theirs is only one version and one “portion” of Blake’s

¹²⁵ Mellor, *Human Form Divine*, p.46.

mythology; as *Marriage* attests, “Every thing possible to be believ’d is **an** image of truth”(8.27, my emphasis). A typically self-contradictory ‘Principle’ in *All Religions are One* encapsulates the nature of Blake’s unique copies as “sameness, with difference”: “As all men are alike in / outward form, So (and / with the same infinite / variety) all are alike in / the Poetic Genius”(5.2-6). All his books, and copies of each book, are “alike” in possessing “infinite variety”.

The most obvious variations are in colour technique: delicate watercolour allows for more visible detail in designs’ “bounding lines”, while colour printing creates a bolder, heavier and less nuanced effect that conveys the violence of Revolutionary energy. Colouring is therefore another ambivalent undertaking that can intensify and diminish illustrations in equal measure. There is a certain flattening effect, for example, to the deep pink and crimson flames in Plate 3 of *Marriage* Copy E (1794, FIG.20) that obscure the vigour of the many ‘internal’ etched lines visible in Copy C (1790, FIG.21); yet the very diluted violet-pink and red tint in Copy C might have too much benign beauty and not enough ferocious Sublimity when compared with the thick mottled texture of Copy F’s (1794, FIG.22) colour printing in deep ochre, red and brown. Such fluxing and refluxing effects explain why there is no clear chronological or thematic pattern to Blake’s various colourisation – and non-colourisation – techniques. However, later copies of most Illuminated Books, printed in the 1810s and 1820s, indicate a movement towards a ‘compromise’ method of heavy watercolour that retains the incipient movement of all those “bounding lines” while still conveying the vehement conviction of colour printing that “stamps” vision on paper. Blake arguably alludes to the power of watercolour that can be ‘seen through’ when Los denounces Albion in *Jerusalem*: “There is a limit of Opakeness, and a limit of Contraction: / In every Individual Man...But there is no Limit of Expansion! there is no Limit of Translucence”(42.29-30, 35). “Translucence” creates

an open and limitless field of vision, preventing deceptive or distancing obstruction; hence Los in *Jerusalem* perceives “Every one” of his children as “a translucent Wonder: a Universe within”(14.17). This theory resonates with Blake’s famous pronouncement that the “Corporeal or Vegetative Eye” is like a “Window...I look thro it & not with it”¹²⁶. Similarly, when Los condemns Satan for dividing the nations in *Milton*, he distinguishes divinely transcendent translucence from debased opaqueness: “Every thing in Eternity shines by its own Internal light: but thou / Darkenest every Internal light...every thing is fixd Opake without Internal light”(11.17-23). *Jerusalem* avows, “What is Above is Within. for every-thing in Eternity is translucent!”(71.6), and in this sense Blake’s penchant for watercoloured figures and washes over text ‘materialises’ “Eternity”, ensuring his words and mythological characters endure in the mind’s eye by their “own Internal light”.

Yet Blake often exploits the visual power of uncoloured copies to represent a less mediated vision. The bold black-and-white of *Jerusalem* Copies A (c.1820, FIG.23), D (c.1820) and F (1827), for example, enhances the theme of ‘illumination’ established on the frontispiece as Los steps through the “door of perception” into the unknown beyond, holding a lantern-globe emitting starkly white rays against enveloping black ink. Conversely the *lack* of clarity that can result from uncoloured copies thanks to the thickness of Blake’s “bounding lines” is aesthetically useful, because it forces greater concentration and interpretative autonomy from the reader to discern what exactly is being depicted. This is evidenced in *Jerusalem* Plate 25 (Copy D, FIG.24), where without the aid of colour we struggle to ascertain if it is chains, strands of rope and/or viscera binding the tortured male figure of Albion, and thereby come to realise that it is all three: Blake’s illustrations consistently connect these internal and external forms of “bounding” mind

¹²⁶ Blake, ‘Vision of the Last Judgment’, *Complete Writings*, p.617.

and body. Such interpretative nuances can only be generated by the denial of ‘total’ vision to the individual reader, who must not only contemplate what is presented on the plate in front them but also speculate on what is *not* present in their specific copy and may be in another.

As for compositional detail, *Marriage* Plate 21 exemplifies the potential of spontaneous watercolour work on the printed page to defy the plate’s fixed lineaments. The varied backgrounds to the naked male reclining and looking upwards in exultant mood, while the text criticises Swedenborg and angelic arrogance, convey very distinct atmospheres and associations. The uncoloured Copies B and K (1790, FIG.25) reveal an expanse of blank space behind the figure, which then fluctuates between a serene warm yellow wash in Copy C (1790, FIG.26) and a stormy grey-blue and black sky illuminated by the gold rays of a rising or setting sun in Copy H (1790, FIG.27). The heavily colour-printed Copies E and F of 1794 suggest greater interiority despite remaining a vacant space, the man enveloped by a shadowy ochre and brown cavern (FIG.28); this claustrophobic sense is heightened by the trace of an enclosing pyramid, which is fully developed in Copy D (1795, FIG.29). Here we are presented with a clean, bright image of the figure contained in a yellow pyramid against a vivid blue sky fluxing between dusk and dawn, which starkly contrasts with the muddy purple, brown and black of Leviathan on the preceding plate. It is a visual conflict between the murky suspiric depths of infernal creativity and the seeming clarity but ultimate deadening flatness of “a confident insolence sprouting from systema-/-tic reasoning”(21.3-4). Recalling Urizen’s triangular compasses in the frontispiece to *Europe*, the pyramid imprisons the man, so that when he looks up he can see only limits rather than the infinite sky beyond. But this implication of boundedness is also counteracted by the bathetically disproportionate scale of the human inside the pyramid, suggesting the potential for the individual to outgrow, or transcend,

the systems that seek to “enslave” him. This reading of man’s ultimate triumph is reinforced by the primary image’s repetition in *America* Plate 8, this time with a fixed engraved cloudy background, accompanying text suffused with Revolutionary fervour: “The grave is burst...Reviving shake, inspiring move, breathing! awakening! / Spring like redeemed captives when their bonds & bars are burst”(8.3-6). This strain between expansiveness and limitation recurs more subtly in Copy I (1827, FIG.30), where the figure’s glowing white and yellow aura is framed by an arch of thick blue-mauve clouds obstructing his upward gaze.

On a more minutely particular level, facial expressions are also subject to tantalising change. Most famously, Blake’s “Tyger” smiles in its original engraved state¹²⁷, playfully framing and undercutting the “fearful symmetry” of the awesome creature the poem describes (FIG.31); but in Copies E (1789-c.1832), L (1795, FIG.32), T (1790-1818) and AA (1826), the mouth becomes impassively and enigmatically straight, as though indifferent to the text’s questions or defiantly refusing to yield up answers. In Copies N (1795, FIG.33) and Z (1826) it is slightly downturned which, coupled with the tiger’s wide eyes, conveys perturbation rather than serene pride, alerting us to the Contrary active and passive senses of “fearful” as causing and experiencing fear. To “Dare frame”(l.24) the tyger, like Los binding Urizen or employing the Spectre, is an act of both appropriative aggression and self-interrogative defensiveness, in which authority “fluxes and refluxes” between the artist and his visionary subject – and between his readers and the book. *The Song of Los* directly implicates its protagonist in this authorial ambivalence, as the full-plate image of him resting on his anvil having forged the sun – reminiscent of the “round globe of blood / Trembling upon the Void” in *Jerusalem* – features subtle but significant facial variations. In Copies A and B (1795, FIG.34) the

¹²⁷ Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Copy B (1789, 1784), pl.35.

heavy-lidded Los appears to be staring contemplatively and somewhat wearily beyond the orb itself, while in Copy C (1795, FIG.35) he is more directly looking down on his creation with an almost imperceptible crease of the cheek that preludes a smile, hinting at a satisfied sense of dominion. But darker colouring round the eye sockets and more pronounced downturned eyebrows in Copy D (1795, FIG.36) convey a mournful, almost tearful, fragility when confronted by an other that is subject to the estranging attachment of pity. Conveying this confused uncertainty of how to respond to the orb, Copy E (1795, FIG.37) paints clear furrows in grey onto Los' forehead, his thinking being more of an active exertion here. As with 'The Tyger', we see how minutely precise alterations can produce quite sharp distinctions in tone regarding the productive expenditure of energy across multiple copies of the Illuminated Books.

If all these differences result from adding to the plate's design, others involve removing words. Blake fights against the "fix'd furrows" of etched text, both by painting over printed phrases and scratching away the relief surface of the copperplate to ensure some lines cannot be printed at all. The passage about the "stern Bard" ceasing his song in *America* Plate 4 was more often than not masked before printing¹²⁸. Erasing these five lines enacts the very activity they describe, as the narrative of Orc's bursting free from captivity is self-reflexively interrupted by the Bard breaking the harp lovingly illustrated in *Songs*: "asham'd of his own song; enrag'd" he "swung / His harp aloft sounding, then dash'd its shining frame...in glittering fragments"(4.18-20). Blake's rare expression of self-doubt is itself second-guessed and omitted, ironically compounding the Wordsworthian "infirmity of purpose" he tries to obscure. From "infirmity of purpose" to deliberate obfuscation of purpose, the most 'telling' deletions are of the five blocks of text on the aforementioned frontispiece to *Jerusalem*, which appear in proof but are then

¹²⁸ Printed in Copies A, N-Q; omitted in Copies B-F, H-M, R and a.

erased from the copperplate. They offer an explanatory commentary – or at least, as explanatory as Blake will ever get – on the image of Los stepping through the door: “Half Friendship is the bitterest Enmity said Los As he enterd the Door of Death for Albions sake Inspired The long sufferings of God are not for ever there is a Judgment” runs down the right-hand side. The mention of “Judgment” foreshadows the separation of “the Public” into “Sheep” and “Goats” on Plate 3. In reverse writing on the left of the title page is an explicit statement that the “Spectre” is each individual’s self-estranged enemy: “Every Thing has its Vermin O Spectre of the Sleeping Dead!”. Above the arch of the door we have the gloss, “His [Albion’s] Reason his Spectrous Power” which, alongside Albion’s “Emanation” Jerusalem, constitutes the “Two Rocks fixd in the Earth” embodying “His Sublime & Pathos”. Perhaps the most important, and elusive, of the lost phrases runs across the top of the plate, informing us of what lies beyond “the Door of Death”: “There is a Void, outside of Existence, which if enterd into Englobes itself & becomes a Womb, such was Albions Couch A pleasant Shadow of Repose calld Albions lovely Land”. We perceive here the motif of apocalyptic “Self-annihilation” and regeneration, a time – and space – of cleansed perceptions and clear “Judgment” by God and his people. Hence the ultimate form of mimetic self-annihilation by deleting all these passages, which might be too expository and helpful to readers who must instead be forced to enter the “Void” themselves – the “Abyss of Idealism” that they must fill and actively interpret. With Contrary “progression”, removing the ‘captions’ to the image makes the plate and book both more challenging *and* more inviting, inserting us into the role of Los as we step through this dark portal-plate to be “Englobed” by the unknown. This desire to avoid being “too Explicit” might also lie behind Blake’s painting over the

‘caption’ to the illustration of Leviathan in *Marriage* – “Opposition is True Friendship” – in seven of the twelve extant copies¹²⁹.

The overarching question generated by Blake’s unique copies is how deliberate or arbitrary all these variations, and types of variation, are. Readers’ underlying awareness that many inconsistencies – in colouring especially – might just be due to economy, whim and/or chance reinforces Blake’s claim to anti-systematic art. The strong association of excess with spontaneity most closely aligns with De Quincey, but unlike De Quincey Blake’s excess demonstrates that *genuinely* lacking control over one’s medium and *affecting* lack of control are both equally useful in communicating his anti-authoritarian philosophy. The perpetual contest between determination and indecision in the literal production of this philosophy reveals the proliferating potential of the bounding line to be “something” much more than we – and possibly even Blake himself – initially realised.

III

“my double sight”(‘To Thomas Butts’): Reading Images and Viewing Text

The excessiveness of word combined with image is due to a tension between different ways of seeing. Like Wordsworth and Coleridge’s recourse to prose, perhaps the ultimate paradox in Blake is his reliance on illustrations to communicate his visions, when he is contemptuous of limited bodily senses. He repeatedly disdains the corporeal eye as stunted and untrustworthy, asking in *Marriage*, “How do you know but ev’ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, clos’d by your senses five?”(7.4), and observing in *The Song of Los* that “All the vast of Nature shrunk / Before their shrunken eyes”(4.12). An annotation to George Berkeley’s *Siris* (1744) declares: “The Natural

¹²⁹ Painted over in Copies A, C-I.

Body is an Obstruction to the Soul or Spiritual Body”¹³⁰. As mentioned previously, Blake expresses his determination to overcome this “Obstruction” by figuring his “Corporeal or Vegetative Eye” as a mere “Window” that he must look beyond to perceive things worth seeing. Therefore, the word/image strain is something even more fundamental than Mellor identifies in Blake’s lovingly exultant depictions of people: “The conflict...between his philosophical rejection of the human body and his aesthetic glorification of the human figure, posed a profound problem”¹³¹. Regardless of human, animal or vegetative subject matter, the inclusion of images in itself reveals a “conflict” between philosophy and practice. We recognise Blake’s illustrations attest to the palpable reality of his visions, but arguably using text alone to describe these (in)sights would better encourage readers to exert themselves, cultivating the transcendent “inward eye”¹³² and reinforcing his philosophy that imaginative autonomy enables intellectual freedom. Readers in theory ought to ‘look through’ the window-plate of words with their “Spiritual” eye. Indeed, this does increasingly happen in the later, larger prophecies *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, where the weight of words betrays an epic visionariness that cannot be visually expressed – or rather, contained. There is a literal pulling-apart of the two media in these books, as the number of full-page images increases and we find fewer interactions between the text’s body and the encroaching border’s foliage, flames and figures.

Whether it be too crowded a proximity or too great a distance, Blake’s struggle between word and image is played out on the single plate and across the entirety of a book, ‘illustrating’ the distinct Contrariety of being a prophet with the one hand, and an author with the other. The divide between looking and reading is temporal as well as spatial: an image’s “bounding lines” are perceived simultaneously, as opposed to the

¹³⁰ Blake, Annotations to George Berkeley, *Siris* (1744), *Complete Writings*, p.775.

¹³¹ Mellor, *Human Form Divine*, p.xvii.

¹³² Blake, ‘To Thomas Butts’ (l.29), from a letter to Butts (22 November 1802), *Complete Writings*, p.817.

linear development of poetry and prose. This tension mimetically demonstrates the separation of vision as apocalyptic epiphany that is momentaneous and timeless, from the desire to *communicate* that vision which is necessarily more protracted and obstructed. The word/image Contrary aims to draw our attention to this conflict between immediate and mediated imagination, and thereby encourage self-consciousness about how, and not just what, we see with “double sight”. To prevent pictures inculcating passivity, Blake habitually presents thematic and material disjunctions between word and image that force readers to rethink and retrain their (re)fluxing corporeal eye. In one sense, thrusting “Too much” at us so that the eye cannot simultaneously contain all of Blake’s visual tropes and competing meanings demonstrates the fallen state of mortal sight. Contrarily, the “problem” of words’ dependence on and dissociation from pictures forces us into new methods of seeing and/or perceiving. Hence we must ‘read’, and reread, an image over the course of a plate and book – “The picture actually changes for us as we learn what it is about”¹³³ – whilst looking at a block of text as a visual unit on the page, a design of sorts. Authorship might then be able to accurately depict an individual’s vision and engender equally-powerful vision in others through an elusiveness that is at once proprietorial and magnanimous. In this way, illustration becomes ‘illumination’.

Blake frequently exploits dissonance between word and image to provide an implicit wry commentary on the narrative action; thus the reader can constantly hold two “necessary” Contraries in mind even as individual characters expound their entrenched, singular philosophies. This is best exemplified in *America* Plate 9 (FIG.38), which juxtaposes Urizen’s accusatory speech condemning the “serpent form’d” Orc as a “Blasphemous Demon, Antichrist...Lover of wild rebellion. and transgressor of Gods Law”(l.5-6) who “Stands at the gate of Enitharmon to devour her children”(l.4), with the

¹³³ Beer, *Blake’s Visionary Universe*, p.297.

blissfully benignant image of sleeping children leaning on and lying beside a huge ram. Exotic birds rest on a protective overarching willow, the paradisiacal mood enhanced by the soft rainbow hues of yellow, pink and blue in Copies A, M and O; rays of light also appear to emanate from the 'Ram of God' symbol in Copies M and O. The plate's design echoes *Songs*' 'Spring', in which a child happily plays with lambs, converting Urizen's chastisement of Orc's "terrific form"(l.7) into a paragon of innocent benevolence that also manages to be sardonically scathing. This humorous overturning – or undermining – of Urizen's words continues on Plate 13 (FIG.39), where the supposedly evil "serpent" embodying Orc is being ridden by children who are anything but afraid; the serpent smiles, rather than "devour[s]", them beneath the cry of "Bostons Angel"(l.3): "no more I follow, no more obedience pay"(l.17). Plate 9 is itself set against the facing image of Urizen with proprietorial outstretched arms, kneeling atop Orc's denouncement of him and assertion of "The fiery joy, that Urizen perverted to ten commands"(10.3). Mitchell states of the plate, "We are invited...to see Urizen through Orc's eyes by his presence as an invisible narrator-commentator on the image before us"¹³⁴, an image of oppressiveness reinforced by the murky blue, grey, purple and black clouds in Copies A, M and O that are so heavily painted their profuse internal "bounding lines" are practically obliterated.

Text and image being in direct conflict not only mimetically dramatises the battles between Blake's mythological characters, but more generally enacts his principle of self-thwarting art that prevents the hypocrisy of didacticism. In *Jerusalem* Plate 59 (FIG.40) the text enthuses about Los' daughters spinning and how "the intoxicating delight that they take in their work / Obliterates every other evil"(l.34-5), so that "They are mock'd [sic], by every one that passes by" but "they regard not"(l.39). Yet the illustration of this passage suggests quite the opposite, with the three daughters anxiously looking outside of

¹³⁴ Mitchell, *Composite Art*, p.115.

the plate and the two at right almost cowering, as though retreating from some fearful sight; even if we read mere curiosity in their faces they certainly “regard”, rather than “Obliterate”, their surroundings. There is a similar ambivalence in the final plate of *Europe* (FIG.41), which ostensibly presents the triumph of Los as he “reard in snaky thunders clad”(l.9) and “Call’d all his sons to the strife of blood”(l.11). But the large illustration of a young man carrying an unconscious female over his shoulder and hauling a child behind him amidst raging flames seems to present the dangerous and desperate consequences of Revolutionary destruction, particularly for all those daughters who can only passively respond to the “energetic exertion” of warring “sons”. Hence the plate offers a tonal precariousness befitting the unpredictable vicissitudes of the French Revolution which, unlike its American counterpart, was characterised by a persistent “flux and reflux” between various factions, particularly the Girondins and Jacobins. 1794, the year *Europe* was printed, was infamous for the Revolution’s “strife of blood”; the ‘Reign of Terror’ might have been a rare example for Blake of enthusiastic excessiveness going too far.

Speaking of ‘far’, Blake also has a strategy of creating literal as well as thematic distance between narrative events and their illustrations for immersive dramatic effect. Frye terms this “syncopation”¹³⁵, and argues that it ensures synthesis across the whole book as our eyes “flux and reflux” backwards and forwards for visual and textual reference-points in a way that defies or even overcomes linear temporality. Thus *Jerusalem* especially necessitates an ‘all-overish’ reading experience to comprehend, and indeed mimic, the astoundingly complex narrative that seems to tell the same essential story in several ways, manipulating time and space. But it is an overall coalescence that requires the constant sense of rupture, or dis-location, at a local level to prevent any ease

¹³⁵ Frye, ‘Poetry and Design’, *Critical Essays*, pp.119-26, p.124, 122.

or assuredness in our (re)reading. Repeatedly in *Jerusalem* intricate and monumental designs appear before their textual explanation, equally discouraging us and enticing us to pursue Blake along his “crooked winding ways”¹³⁶ – he is confident that “my friends...forgive my wanderings” because “I rest not from my great task!”(5.17). On Plate 50 (FIG.42), for example, we are presented with an astonishing three-headed crowned male figure kneeling before cliffs on an island, somewhere between a lightning-storm and a sunburst, with three spirits flying overhead. It takes twenty more plates to receive some clarification, as Blake describes the “form of mighty Hand sitting on Albions cliffs”(70.2) with “Three strong sinewy Necks & Three awful & terrible Heads”(1.5) that symbolise “Bacon & Newton & Locke”(1.16). His means of defeating their reductionist Rationalism is to render them mere objects of imaginative conjecture for a fifth of the book. Contrarily, in *Marriage* Blake withholds the illustration to his apocalyptic sight of Leviathan as he stands “suspended” over “the infinite Abyss”(18.3). Leviathan is initially vividly envisaged in densely-packed text – “black tempest...blood mixed with fire...the scaly fold of a monstrous serpent...a fiery crest above the waves”(18.17-23) – but it is not until Plate 20 (FIG.43) that the creature is shown, with its huge coils, protruding hissing tongue, bared teeth and scaly body advancing through a choppy ocean. The delay allows our infinitely variable eyes to imagine their worst, enabling us to share in some degree the experience of Blake’s vision. His pictorial ‘signature’ – a miniature self-portrait sitting on the “twisted / root of an oak”(17.30-18.1), upon which he alighted in Plate 17 – is almost imperceptibly inserted above the top right hand corner of the Leviathan design. With ever-present Contrariness, this signature both asserts authorial control and, by marking the illustration as specifically Blake’s,

¹³⁶ George Herbert, ‘A Wreath’(1633), l.4.

emphasises the principle of individual visionary capacity, in which we should paradoxically all be “alike”¹³⁷.

Blake’s imposition of imaginative autonomy reaches its apotheosis in the complete absence of illustration, which ironically is intellectually and sensorially overwhelming. Although Leviathan is shown in *Marriage*, the equally lurid visions of a sky “composed” of “vast / spiders”(18.10, 6-7) and a prison of “chaind”[sic] monkeys cannibalistically “plucking”(20.2, 7) at and devouring each other remain undrawn. Similarly, we cannot see how Blake “flung myself...direct-/ly into the body of the sun...leap’d into the void, between Saturn [sic] & the / fixed stars”(19.20-21, 25-6), facing an “eternal lot...between the black & white spiders”(18.13). Recalling Erdman’s phrase of the “imaginative leap in the dark”, this lack of illustration is clearly a mimetic leap into the void for readers, who must each envisage the “Particulars” of these scenes. In a typical meta-commentary, the accompanying Angel chastises Blake for showing him the vision of the monkeys – “thy phantasy has imposed / upon me & thou oughtest to be ashamed”(20.15-16) – but Blake retorts: “we impose on one another”(1.17), alerting us to the “necessary” mutuality between artist and audience in his progressive aesthetic. Conversely (of course), the absence of design is also useful when Blake wants readers to experience his characters’ horror of voidness as “Negation”. So *Jerusalem* Plate 56, describing Albion as the “destroyer of Definite Form”(17), is almost entirely devoid of illustration – i.e. of palpable and “definite form”. In *The Book of Los* Plate 4 the artist’s agonised efforts are described in terms of cavernous emptiness, reflected in the uninspiringly unillustrated and uncoloured barrenness of the page: “no light from the fires! all was / Darkness round Los: heat was not”(3.52-4.1). There is, then, an ironic excess of possible purposes and effects

¹³⁷ Blake, *All Religions are One* (c.1788), 5.2.

in the discordance, delay and denial of images that, to the uninitiated eye, evince a want of intellectual coherence and/or emotional sincerity.

But Blake's designs also have distinct narratives independent of text, whereby visual tropes operate and 'illuminate' across his catalogue of books with a life of their own. Gilchrist's description of *Europe* applies generally: "the designs seldom directly embody the subjects of the poem, but are independent though kindred conceptions – the right method perhaps"¹³⁸. This "perhaps" hints at the reader's constant state of uncertainty, alertness and inquiry as they try to trace the progress, or "trajectories"¹³⁹, of repeated visual tropes. One such prominent motif is the tension between postures of enclosure and expansion, stasis and motion, as characters either resign themselves to the confined plate or strive for liberation from it. There is a verbal/visual conflict in the constant exhortation to "turn your eyes inward" in order to "expand thy ever lovely Gates"¹⁴⁰ of perception, and the depiction of despairing or defeated figures in interiorised postures, especially kneeling or with legs drawn up, as exemplified in *Urizen*. Blake expresses the paradox of the "Ever expanding" inner world in *Jerusalem*: "To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes / Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought: into Eternity"(5.18, 16-17). Conversely, in *The Four Zoas* when Albion calls on Urizen he is described as "Turning his Eyes outward to Self, losing the Divine Vision"(Night II, l.1) as he becomes more concerned with his social status than spiritual development. Yet in *Jerusalem* we are assured that "God is within & without!"(12.15), further complicating our interpretation of the prominent visual motif of compression and liberation. Blake repeatedly depicts figures pushing against the limits of the plate: Urizen, Los and Milton are all united in their depictions from behind reaching and stepping 'through' the back of

¹³⁸ Gilchrist, *William Blake*, p.131.

¹³⁹ Makdisi, 'The political aesthetic', *Cambridge Companion to Blake*, p.111.

¹⁴⁰ Blake, *Jerusalem*, 44.41-2.

the page into inky abysses¹⁴¹. But ironically this pushing frequently emphasises constriction and self-consciousness about the artist's material limitations.

In *Milton* Plate 11 (FIG.46), for example, Enitharmon “raving along the Streets”(l.4) stretches her arms out straight and takes a long stride; her bent right leg and raised left foot, accompanied by the flowing drapery of her dress and hair, indicate she is running. She turns her head with an anxious expression and slightly upward gaze, suggesting she is fleeing from a source of terror. Erdman points out¹⁴² that on closer inspection, though, her right foot is tethered to an unseen anchor, halting her – and the reader's – progress onto the next page; her extreme cowering or lunging suggests a vertical compression that means she must either stay still or fall, compounded by the doorway that frames and contains her. The text weighing down on her offers some commentary on these Contrary visual effects of extension and containment: “The nature of a Female Space is this: it shrinks the Organs / Of Life till they become Finite & Itself seems Infinite”(l.6-7) – we have an illusion of space and movement that runs up against the immovable “bounding lines” of the plate's borders. Similar poses to Enitharmon's appear in several works, including *The Song of Los* Plate 4 where Har and Heva escape “War & Lust”(l.6), and *Jerusalem* Plate 87 illustrating a hunched-over Enion searching for Los and Enitharmon through the Four Zoas' “Mundane Shell”. In *All Religions are One* Plate 9 a tiny figure strides to the right of a cavernous shaded rectangle with arms out, but his curved back and bowed head show the strain of the dominant text overhead, which discusses “the confined natu/re of bodily sensation”(l.7-8). *Jerusalem* Plate 15 (FIG.47) combines the trope of pushing against boundaries with vegetative overgrowth, as Abraham haltingly “flees from Chaldea”(l.28) with Reuben taking “refuge”(l.27) in his loins during the “deadly sleep”(l.6) of Albion and Humanity. The text talks of the time

¹⁴¹ Respectively: *Urizen*, pl.28 (FIG.44); *Jerusalem* frontispiece (FIG.23); *Milton* frontispiece (FIG.45).

¹⁴² Erdman, *Illuminated Blake*, p.227.

“From the Limit Noah to the Limit Abram”(1.26), a restriction spatially represented in the design. Abraham’s vast size, his arms spanning the plate from the Limit left to the Limit right, commands our attention and suggests his dominion, but like Enitharmon he is obstructed by the plate’s edge – held in place. This repeated pose dramatises the tension – even competition – between “Eternal” internal visionariness and material execution looking “outward to Self” as constituents of artistic “Genius”. Like his overflowing lines of text, Blake’s characters literally struggle to be contained materially, but their intensity and resonance relies precisely in the “particular” and “definite” demarcation of imagination on the etched copperplate, organised into books. The concentrated size of the plate requires one to look “within” its boundaries to ensure “Ever expanding” revelation.

In keeping with Blake’s ethos of necessary self-destruction and renewal, and his wariness of the book as a means of encapsulating that ethos, figures are often presented as being under so much pressure that the plate must be rent pictorially. In the title page of *The Book of Los* (FIG.48) we see the back of a male figure – possibly the poet-prophet himself – who is severely compressed in a rocky cave that calls to mind crumpled paper, his arms bent and knees jammed up to his squeezed head and shoulders. The image strongly echoes *Urizen* Plate 23 (FIG.49) depicting Urizen crouching in a cave with sorrowfully furrowed brow and slanted eyebrows, his right knee pushed up to the chin and his head and neck crushed into his shoulders by the boulder-arch bearing down on him. In the crudely colour-printed versions of the plate (Copies A, C, D and F) even Urizen’s eyes seem to have been pummelled to a dark vacant line; the compression-oppression is emphasised by the heaviness of the mottled colour printing in dark ochre, green, blue, brown and even black. The caption to this picture in *A Small Book of Designs* reads: “Eternally I labour on”¹⁴³, in a recapitulation of Blake’s concern that creative endeavours

¹⁴³ Erdman, *Illuminated Blake*, p.191.

risk “enslavement”. But on Plate 13 of *Urizen* (FIG.50) the cave is ripped open by a muscular figure taking a giant stride forwards, his arms outstretched and elbows bent as though bracing himself to further push back the huge stone slabs. It is a gesture of liberation, tearing through the copperplate and wove paper in a motion famously replicated in *Milton* Plate 18 (FIG.51), where the eponymous hero likewise steps forward with his left foot and pulls Urizen and his two stone slabs apart “To annihilate the Self-hood of Deceit”. We remember Orc’s declaration about the “torn book” in *America*, where he also expresses the determination “to renew the fiery joy, and burst the stony roof”(10.9) and tells Urthona, “chaind [*sic*] beneath I rend these caverns”(3.18). *Urizen* Plate 13 is a bolder, more fulfilled, rendering of *The Gates of Paradise* Plate 5 (FIG.52) depicting a personification of “Earth” who “struggles into Life”, tightly encased by hefty stones but making an attempt to step upwards and find more “ample elbow-room”(Woolf) in the cave. Notably, the rock-face in almost every copy of *Urizen* Plate 13 is coloured in a very similar fashion to Urizen’s “Book of brass” on Plate 5 – referred to in *America* as his “stony law”(10.5). In Copy A the jagged markings on the cave in orangey-ochre and brown recall the scrawls of dirty yellow and brown on Urizen’s open pages; in Copy F the two plates share a muddy green, black-brown and yellow-flecked colour scheme; in the *Small Book* both are deep blue and black, with tinges of red (FIGS.53-4); and in Copy D there are traces of Urizen’s highly-coloured pages of yellow, blue, pink, red and black-brown daubs in cavern’s varied colours. The colour parallels between the plates strongly imply the defiant tearing of the prescriptive Urizenic book.

In these self-rending illustrations we perceive that images not only undercut and ‘thwart’ each other but also themselves, enacting Blake’s belief in the “necessary” Spectre within that seeks “to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve”(Wordsworth) our intellectual and imaginative efforts. Another indication of this is the “self-haunting”

presence of Urizen encoded in so many of Blake's illustrations. We become accustomed to the 'Urizenic eye' staring out of the page, usually in the form of an orbed sun or moon. In *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793, FIG.55), we find one eye – emblematic of “perverted & single vision”¹⁴⁴ – on the frontispiece, guarding over the imprisoned Oothoon, Bromion and Theotormon. Oppressively opaque clouds clear just enough to reveal a sun-pupil glaring through, an association the text makes explicit in describing Oothoon's cave-bound sight: “Instead of morn arises a bright shadow, like an eye / In the eastern cloud”(3.36-7). This motif is magnified in the famous *Europe* frontispiece (FIG.56), with the “self-inclos'd” Urizen encased in the giant red orb representing “Reason...the bound or outward circumference / of Energy”(Marriage). In *The Book of Job* Plate 2 (FIG.57) the moon watches over the scene of Job and his family prostrate before the book of doctrinal law, intimating the Urizenic sense of slavish submission to authority – “The Letter Killeth / The Spirit giveth Life”(pl.2) – and the perversely single-minded absolutism that meant Job “feared God & eschewed Evil”(ibid) with deadening passivity. In *The Gates of Paradise* (FIG.58) the Spectre flying over a supine man, entitled ‘To the Accuser who is / The God of This World’(pl.21), features two pale orbs resembling eyes on its outspread wings. This kind of insidious Urizenic reference is echoed on the title page to *Jerusalem* (FIG.59), where the long feathered wings of the outstretched sleeping fairy – possibly embodying Jerusalem herself – suggest not only two ever-watchful eyes but also a flowing beard, the terrifying face's Spectral presence causing the surrounding spirits to mournfully bow their heads and weep. The persistence of the encoded Urizenic eye affects our reading of globes/orbs in general across Blake's books, so that the “globe of fire” Los bravely uses to “search the interiors of Albions / Bosom”(31.3-4) in *Jerusalem* – illustrated on the frontispiece – cannot escape its Contrary

¹⁴⁴ Blake, *Jerusalem*, 53.13.

association with Urizen's "globe of fire lighting his journey"(22.54) illustrated in *Urizen* (FIG.60). The rays emitting from Urizen's deep red lamp echo the visceral image of "The globe of life blood...Branching out into roots; / Fib'rous, writhing"(17.2-4) that is Los' embryonic female Contrary, Enitharmon, struggling into existence (FIG.61). Her bloody emergence as 'other' is therefore visually connected with, or infiltrated by, the shadowy presence of Urizen, emphasising the inextricably constructive and destructive nature of Los' self-dividing "pity" in "direful strugglings"¹⁴⁵. It is a link verbally traced in the description of Urizen's forging by Los, his nervous system "Conglobing, Trembling / Shooting out ten thousand branches / Around his solid bones"(14.6-8).

Blake's strategy to "rouze" the reader by exploiting rather than suppressing ambivalence is encapsulated in his deployment of dualistically ambiguous illustrations that depict and allow for two Contrary meanings simultaneously. Readers are thus required to "dare" decide how to prioritise and interpret the action of an image. Janet Warner discusses the delicate balance of Blake's "conviction that the [bounding] line must be made to work *for* man, as well as delineating his fallen form", so that he uses "the same visual image with either a regenerate or a fallen meaning, depending on the context of his writing"¹⁴⁶. But as we have seen, the immediate verbal context of Blake's illustrations is not usually so obliging in directing us to a definite "regenerate" or "fallen" signification – his is an aesthetic of "and" as much as "or". This is demonstrated in the indeterminacy of flames and tendrils – hybrid "flame-flowers"¹⁴⁷, as Mitchell terms them – which both oscillate between embodying fecund energy and suffocating oppression when this energy is misapplied. While the ambiguity is particularly pronounced in uncoloured copies, there are also occasions when colour will not clarify the matter, as in 'The Divine Image' from *Songs* Copies B, F, L and V (1789-1821, FIG.62) which combines inflammatory yellow

¹⁴⁵ Blake, *Jerusalem*, 17.58.

¹⁴⁶ Warner, *Language of Art*, p.21.

¹⁴⁷ Mitchell, *Composite Art*, p.70.

and vegetative green in the thick vine curling up the plate, as does ‘The Blossom’ in Copies E (1789-c.1832) and R (1795-c.1808). Likewise, the title page to *Marriage*’s elaborate Copy H features expansive diagonal strokes that merge infernal flames licking upwards with tree roots burrowing down. In *Urizen* Copy B (1795) the ‘Preludium’ is similarly framed by half-yellow, half-green flickering swirls. The next plate appears to show a naked figure striding at full stretch through consuming flames, but in Copy F (1794, FIG.63) the strong green tinge to the ochre and brown colour-printing suggest “Prolific”¹⁴⁸ – or even “fructifying” – foliage; this could be an exultant Los or Orc dancing in the flames of creative fervour, or alternatively a white-haired Urizen who either “fought with the fire; consum’d / Inwards”(4.16-17) or walked exultantly among “his vast forests”(3.25) as he shaped the world. Rather than guiding us, the text multiplies the hermeneutic possibilities of images in a continual state of “suspended” animation.

Probably the most important ambivalent image is that of falling and rising. In Plate 5 of *Marriage* (FIG.64) a man and his horse hurtle headfirst into richly-coloured red flames, his arms bent and palms spread as though bracing himself for the landing. To a different eye, however, the outspread arms imply exultation and dominion, as the splayed legs recalling Urizen’s triangular compass will be destroyed and transformed in the all-consuming fire of creative vigour. Furthermore, the flat palms make it appear as though he has already landed and is about to propel himself back up again, or is even cartwheeling, much like the insouciant child somersaulting in *Urizen* Plate 22 (FIG.65) emitting yellow-orange flames rather than falling into them. These pivoting poses are repeated in *Urizen* Plate 9 (FIG.66), in which three figures descend head-first into ravaging flames tightly bound by serpents. Exploiting the ambivalence of the serpent in Blake’s oeuvre, the image could represent Los overpowered by Urizenic constraint –

¹⁴⁸ Blake, *Marriage*, 16.8, 13, 16.

reinforced by the background figures' contorted and constricted postures – or Los diving enthusiastically, entwined with the serpent as a dynamic Contrary from which creativity arises. The opening to *Milton's* second Book (Plate 33, FIG.67) features a similar, though smaller, counterpointing of two falling/jumping figures with excitedly outstretched arms and with arms self-protectively touching the head. A third figure to their right looking and reaching upwards to the text overhead seems to assure that every type of fall anticipates an eventual ascension.

The most obvious depiction of this ambivalence is contained in *Urizen*, which presents two full-plate images of the tyrant in water that is either subsuming or supporting him. In one full-page design (FIG.68) the partially-immersed Urizen appears to be both passively sinking into the murky water and actively fighting to emerge from it. Curators at the Morgan Library, which houses *Urizen* Copy B, catalogue the plate as “Urizen swimming”, but he could just as easily be drowning, especially in relation to the illustration of a tormented figure seemingly trapped underwater in Copies A and B behind vertical wavy lines that suggest rain, flames and bars. His bent knees and limply extended arms, along with his reclined head and curiously impassive facial expression, suggest a resigned yielding to descent with almost child-like incapacity. Furthermore, as with the serpentine figures on Plate 9, the water could signify an imprisoning ocean-abyss or a “cleansing” baptismal salvation, compounding the uncertainty not only of whether Urizen is rising or falling, but whether falling is “evil” and rising “good”. Conversely Urizen is shown fully outstretched underwater and falling/diving headfirst towards some rocks or clouds (FIG.69), his arms extended to break his fall and/or to spring him back up to the surface, much like *Marriage* Plate 5. The Contrary implications of outstretched arms are evidenced in the famous image from *America* of Urizen kneeling and spreading his arms wide (FIG.70): to one eye it is a gesture of majesty, yet to the other, as Erdman points out,

the posture suggests deflated sinking, a movement emphasised by the downward curve of the clouds' internal lines¹⁴⁹. Erdman posits the convincing theory that Urizen is looking out of the plate at his counterpart Orc on Plate 12 (FIG.71), who reflects his pose with expansive arms and the opposite leg drawn up against his chest, yet appears to be on the rise as Urizen declines, finding energy in illuminating flames rather than cloudy obscurity.

The ambivalent ambiguity of all these poses bespeaks the fluxing and refluxing balance of power between Urizen and his adversaries Los and Orc that is the dramatic drive of the Illuminated Prophecies. This visual duality of “and” rather than “or” is verbally reinforced by fragments of Biblical text Blake interspersed with engravings for *The Book of Job*: “He bringeth down to the Grave & bringeth up”(pl.16) and “The Lord maketh Poor & maketh Rich / He bringeth Low & Lifteth Up”(pl.20). *The Book of Los* describes Los' continual “process from falling”(4.53), a richly slippery phrase that encapsulates the manifold irreverent questions posed by Blake's pivoting images of descent and ascent: is a fall reversible, is it a choice, does falling necessitate rising, is there an infinite number of falls, does one fall into uncontrolled dynamism or into restrictive reason, is there even such a thing as falling? After all, Job declares to God: “If I ascend up into Heaven thou art there / If I make my bed in Hell behold Thou / art there”¹⁵⁰. The inquiring reader's *attempt* to answer these questions is always “regenerate”, regardless of how ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ one is in accurately interpreting the specific meaning of any single enigmatic illustration. Indeed, the inescapable pervasiveness of doubt is what keeps us compelled, but never “enslav'd”.

If the literal and thematic detachment of image from text weren't challenging enough, Blake's blurring of the two media through his (in)cursive “flame-flowers” is equally disorientating and demanding. The reader-viewer struggles to determine where

¹⁴⁹ Erdman, *Illuminated Blake*, p.146.

¹⁵⁰ Blake, *Book of Job*, pl.21.

one medium ends and the other begins in this “visual rhetoric”¹⁵¹, especially when the organic forms that seem to spontaneously interweave with words frequently fulfil the typographic role of underlining. This is evident from his earliest books: the sparse foliage-forms of ‘The Argument’ in *No Natural Religion* appear to place deliberate emphasis on pertinent words: “Naturally he is only a natu-/ral organ subject to Sense”(2.4-5), as the curve of the ‘y’ on both words extends along the base of the letters with insidious intent. On Plate 11, the word “may” is subtly stressed as a pivot-point in the sentence “God becomes as / we are, that we / may be as he / is”(1.2-5, FIG.72), playing on the tentative ambivalence of the modal verb – Blake might only perceive the *potential* godliness in man that can so easily be thwarted or diverted. It is the same kind of dubious “may” that infiltrates the ‘Introduction’ to the pathos-laden *Songs of Innocence*, where the “rural pen” that “stain’d the water clear” produces “happy songs / Every child may joy to hear”(3.19-21). Viny underlining often mimics the modulations of the spoken voice, as befits a “stern Bard”; in *Marriage*, for example, Blake offers a withering dismissal to the ‘good’ angel: “it is / but lost time to converse with you whose works / are only Analytics”(20.17-19, FIG.43). *America* Plate 17, meanwhile, is packed with thick tendrils that underscore furiously dramatic action: “Leprosy Londons Spirit”(1.4) is “smote” by “plagues” that “creep on the burning winds driven by flames of Orc.../ Driven o’er the Guardians of Ireland”(1.13-15, FIG.73). The “fires of hell”, emphasised by an abrasive jagged line, “deform their ancient heavens with shame & woe”(1.17). The “fires of Orc” notably “play...in wreaths of fierce desire” which leave “women naked and glowing with the lusts of youth”(1.22-4); although hard to discern, the substantial shape below “lusts” appears to be a fecund grain, while “glowing” rests on the expansive wingspan of a bird in flight. As these examples show, the plate swarms with innumerable half-underlinings emanating

¹⁵¹ Mitchell, *Composite Art*, p.124.

from serifs below, which demand readers' concentration to distinguish "definite and determinate" marks from spontaneous and non-semantic effusions of energetic abandon. Making such distinctions confidently and categorically is, as Blake fully intends, a virtually impossible task.

As well as underlining, the colouring of text performs an important 'highlighting' function; Blake often delicately overpainted whole plates of printed text for greater clarity, but he also exploited specific variations in colour to throw vital themes into relief. In Copy Z of *Innocence and Experience* (1826), for example, the weak orange base ink is overwritten with heavy black in 'London' except for the first words "I wander" accented in gold, as though Blake is drawing attention to the divide between his privileged roaming mind and the mass gripped by "mind-forg'd manacles"(46.10). Attention to such "Minute Particulars" is demonstrated as early as 1790 in *Marriage* Copy H, where text is both printed and overpainted in multiple vivid colours. Like tendril-underlining, it directs us to thematic anchors, such as the green base ink of plate 11 overwritten in blue for the phrases "Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales" and "Thus men forgot"(1.13-16). On Plate 8, discussing "portions of eternity too great for the eye of man"(1.12), "eternity" stands out in orange against the rest of the 'Proverb' in green. Blake repeatedly exploits the juxtaposition of warm and cool colour "Contraries" to reiterate the infernal/angelic dichotomy: 'The Voice of the Devil' expounding the theory of "Contraries" on Plate 4 is half-blue and half-orange, while the blue ink of Plate 12 is dramatically ruptured by the central passage in orange about prophetic conviction, "Then I asked: does a firm perswasion that a / thing is so, make it so?"(14-5). On Plate 3 (FIG.74), "heaven" and "Swedenborg" are painted in soft blue over an orange ink base, and the word "Contraries" dominates the plate in a very strong navy; "Human existence", at odds with heavenly conformity, is also prominent in forest green. At the introduction of "Devils...called

Powers / of the air”(18.12-13) green text gives way to a bright red-tinged orange, which continues through the plate with the exception of “Leviathan” in heavy navy, signposting the dramatic illustration of the vision on Plate 20. This effect echoes the outstandingly dark “Printing House” on Plate 15 amidst a sea of orange ink, and anticipates ‘A Song of Liberty’, where the command to “Look up! Look up!”(26.5) is emblazoned in black over the original orange. It is a visual reversal and remembrance of ‘The Argument’ on Plate 2, where the refrain “Rintrah roars” bursts forth in orange against the surrounding overpainted navy-black text. What seems mere decoration, then, arguably becomes an integral form of punctuation, especially when Blake delimits paragraphs and groups ‘Proverbs’ together by colour into almost stanzaic units. On Plate 7 of *Marriage Copy H* (FIG.75), for example, three ‘Proverbs’ concerned with artistic productivity as a paradoxical means of overcoming temporal constraints are grouped together in soft lilac ink: “Eternity is in love with the productions of time. / The busy bee has no time for sorrow. / The hours of folly are measur’d by the clock, but of wis-/dom: no clock can measure”(15-18). Similarly, a grey-blue ink connects the idea of overabundance – “The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom”(7.8) – with transformative destruction: “Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead”(1.7). In Copy I Plate 9 this kind of subtle demarcation is performed by clouds surrounding the text, in lieu of colour variation.

We perceive the paradox that interlinear organic forms and strong colour variation imbue text with a pulsating life and energy, yet also impose a kind of order on how we read, organising and compartmentalising important units of thought. As with the ‘revisions’ to each copy of a book, readers’ constant uncertainty as to how spontaneous Blake’s choices are when visualising the verbal allows him to avoid Urizenic dictation while demanding vigilant self-awareness from his audience. Scrupulous readers have to

constantly check – even chastise – themselves for overthinking, but cannot resist the appeal of a potentially-ingenious aberrance, as when the text shifts in *Marriage Copy H* from green ink to deep orange at the line break “systema-/tic reasoning”(21.3-4, FIG.76), in a possible mimetic act of defiance. Although Blake stressed the individual autonomy of every reader, we are nevertheless universally confounded by the “Contraries” involved in his capricious use of self-consciousness and conscious inclusion of arbitrariness, this “flux and reflux” systematically reinforcing a philosophy of anti-systematisation. When it comes to the artist’s and the audience’s “double sight” of word and image, proximity and distance, intention and accident, the possibilities – and therefore the paradoxes – are endless.

IV

“Half Friendship is the bitterest Enmity”(Jerusalem): The Worthy Reader

Every Romantic wanted a worthy audience, but Blake demanded one with the confrontational absolutism that Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey never dared articulate. Gilchrist writes that Blake “had not the faculty to make himself popular”¹⁵², as though he ever wanted to be. Blake preferred an openly combative stance, his enthusiasm figured as embattled when the demands of God conflict with those of society; he writes to Butts, with Biblical wrath, “I do not wish to irritate by seeming too obstinate in Poetic pursuits...But if all the world should set their faces against This, I have Orders to set my face like a flint against their faces”¹⁵³. He expresses a determination to defend “My Just Right as an Artist & as a Man” who is wholly independent intellectually and artistically: “I am inflexible & will relinquish any engagement of Designing at all, unless altogether

¹⁵² Gilchrist, *William Blake*, p.110.

¹⁵³ Blake, letter to Butts (6 July 1803), *Complete Writings*, p.825.

left to my own Judgment”(825-6). Frye summarises this intransigence in the face of critical readers: “The sources of art are enthusiasm and inspiration: if society...derides these, it is society that is mad, not the artist, no matter what excesses the latter may commit”¹⁵⁴. Unconcerned with endearing himself to anyone, Blake consistently makes an “inflexible” distinction between the receptive faculties of the “wise man” and the “fool”: “The Style that Strikes the Eye is the True Style, But A Fool’s Eye is Not to be a Criterion”¹⁵⁵. Los pronounces in *Jerusalem*: “I care not whether a Man is Good or Evil; all that I care / Is whether he is a Wise Man or a Fool”(91.55-6). His material excess – “a solid wall of words over which the eye slips, unable to find fastening”¹⁵⁶ – must be estranging as well as immersive to test his readers’ powers of Minute Particularity: they must “be impressed by the architecture of the wall and checked by its daunting resistance”(89). We are certainly daunted by a writer who declares, “The man who does not know what Object to Pursue is an Idiot”¹⁵⁷. The irony, then, is that Blake hopes his discriminating conviction will in turn encourage confident discernment in his readers – we will begin thinking in equally, and autonomously, strident terms. Alfred Kazin emphasises: “His drive is always toward creative self-assertion, toward man as a free creator”¹⁵⁸. Blake’s statement that “Severity of judgment is a great virtue”¹⁵⁹ is seemingly self-justifying, but a letter to *The Monthly Magazine*’s proprietor Richard Philips reveals his desire that strong “judgment” be a universal “virtue”: lamenting how “our countrymen are easily brow-beat on the subject of painting” due to the popularity of Continental art, he implores, “O Englishmen! know that every man ought to be a judge of pictures”¹⁶⁰. This letter evinces Blake’s belief in assertive independent thought: merely having a view of

¹⁵⁴ Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, p.13.

¹⁵⁵ Blake, Annotations to Reynolds’ *Discourses* II, *Complete Writings*, p.448.

¹⁵⁶ De Luca, *Words of Eternity*, p.90.

¹⁵⁷ Blake, Annotations to Reynolds’ *Discourses* III, *Complete Writings*, p.458.

¹⁵⁸ Alfred Kazin, *The Essential Blake* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), p.25.

¹⁵⁹ Blake, Annotations to Johann Lavater, *Aphorisms on Man* (1788), c.1788, *Complete Writings*, p.67.

¹⁶⁰ Blake, letter to Richard Philips (June 1806), *ibid*, p.864.

one's own, more than the substance of that view, is the most vital kind of "energetic exertion". This is why "No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings"¹⁶¹.

Blake's absolutism is antithetical to the cautious, fluxing and refluxing attitude Wordsworth, De Quincey and Coleridge have towards their readers. There is a grudging admiration for Blake's indifference to outside approval and demand for a degree of commitment, effort, time and patience from the reader that his successors hope for but cannot so self-assuredly request or expect. Instead they try to tease this kind of investment out of us through various passive-aggressive methods – coaxing and cajoling, appealing and instructing, confessing and withholding, ingratiating and attacking. Wordsworth and De Quincey in particular are scared of *imposing* on the reader in the way Blake unrepentantly does, because such forcefulness requires a mutual *trust* between author and audience that the pair always lacks; this is what Blake means by the 'Proverb of Hell', "He who has suffer'd you to impose on him, knows you"¹⁶². Eliot succinctly observes, "Blake's poetry has the unpleasantness of great poetry"¹⁶³; such "unpleasantness" is feared by Wordsworth and De Quincey because affection is important in their conception of "sympathy" with the reader – they want to be liked by being accessible, and their textual excess stems from this impulse. Coleridge was less concerned with accessibility because he primarily wanted to be intellectually admired – more than he wanted to be understood, even – but all three share a self-consciousness that calls for the visionary to be appreciated as much as the vision. Due to his inflammatory vociferousness and total control over production, one could argue Blake is similarly self-preoccupied – he does, after all, announce very self-referentially in *Jerusalem*: "the Worship of God, is honouring his gifts / In other men: & loving the greatest men best. each according / To his Genius"(91.8-10). But he goes on to define this "Genius" as "the

¹⁶¹ Blake, *Marriage*, 7.13-15.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 9.3.

¹⁶³ Eliot, 'Blake', *Sacred Wood*, p.151.

Holy Ghost in Man”(ibid), and the constant effacement of authority through strained excess reveals a man more preoccupied with communicating his divine vision than himself. *Jerusalem* stresses that “He who despises & mocks a Mental Gift in another; calling / it pride & selfishness & sin; mocks Jesus the giver of every Mental Gift”(77.42-3). In *Milton* Blake commands the reader to “Mark well my words!” but in the ‘Preface’ those words are a quotation from Numbers XI:29 that expresses a hope for everyone’s “Mental Gifts”: “Would to God that all the Lords people / were Prophets”(2.45-6). Blake’s combative absolutism is more ‘accommodating’ – to recall O’Neill’s term – because it reveals a whole-hearted sincerity and asks so much of us that, if we are with Blake, we are with him all the way. “Nothing can make the way clear and smooth to those who are not at once drawn into it by a sincere instinct of sympathy”¹⁶⁴, Swinburne warns, and for the initiated “Blakean identity attenuates itself until it becomes an identification of each of us with all, and we walk together as one”¹⁶⁵.

This starkly contrasts with the kind of self-checking, “half-pleased”(Prelude) Wordsworth and De Quincey: if Blake demands readers elevate themselves to his level, Wordsworth and De Quincey want to meet them half-way. And unfortunately they often end up tonally caught between a lofty rock and a lowly place, appealing to the reader to identify with them and so excuse their faults, yet relying on their claims of superior insight in order to merit a readership at all. Blake repeatedly expresses his contempt for the hazy space between “Contraries” that is particularly Wordsworth’s domain, rhetorically populated by many an “almost” and “perhaps”. Blake’s denial of the “Line which doubts & Hesitates in the Midst of its Course”(‘Public Address’) is anticipated in an 1803 letter to Butts discussing the necessary polarities of friendship and animosity: “Doubts are always pernicious, Especially when we Doubt our Friends. Christ is very

¹⁶⁴ Swinburne, *William Blake*, p.5-6.

¹⁶⁵ De Luca, *Words of Eternity*, p.229.

decided on this Point: “He who is Not With Me is Against Me”. There is no Medium or Middle state”¹⁶⁶. The original phrase on *Jerusalem*’s frontispiece, “Half Friendship is the bitterest Enmity”, reveals traces of Lavater’s theory that “The qualities of your friends will be those of your enemies: cold friends, cold enemies – half friends, half enemies – fervid enemies, warm friends”. Blake wrote that this philosophy made him “Very Uneasy”, but expressed “*truth*”¹⁶⁷. Thus the sympathetic reader admires Blake all the more for having “fervid enemies” with whom he will not compromise, because it demonstrates the strength of his “firm perswasion”, as discussed by Isaiah in *Marriage*: “in ages of imagination this firm perswasion remo/-ved mountains; but many are not capable of a / firm perswasion of any thing”(12.16-18).

As we saw in the previous chapter, Wordsworth makes an involving and endearing poetics out of not being “capable of a firm perswasion of anything”, but in comparison with Blake what seems ingenuously confessional is also self-defensive – only half-trusting of the reader. Vincent De Luca offers an extremely useful analysis of how “Blake’s more radical and absolute ‘egotism’...is ultimately more altruistic, more yielding to others” than the “Wordsworthian ‘I’” because, by groping for common ground with his readers, Wordsworth “minimizes the risks of alienation and rejection – risks inherent in any genuine attempt to present something so fundamentally disturbing as the access of the sublime”¹⁶⁸. De Luca rightly conjectures that “if Blake could have read *The Prelude*, he probably would have seen it as an example of self-protective impulses in *conflict* with genuine vision”(229). By contrast, Blake’s offering “the whole of himself in his art” is selflessly brave because he is in danger of the reader’s “humiliating total rejection”(229). We recall Coleridge’s “severe judgment” of Wordsworth’s “terms at once too large and too exclusive”(Biographia) in the *Lyrical Ballads* ‘Preface’: paradoxically, the desire for

¹⁶⁶ Blake, letter to Butts (25 April 1803), *Complete Writings*, p.822.

¹⁶⁷ Blake, Annotations to Lavater’s *Aphorisms*, ibid, p.80.

¹⁶⁸ De Luca, *Words of Eternity*, p.228.

appealing accessibility results from and exposes a self-conscious guardedness towards the reader. This is the precarious tone of self-aggrandisement and self-deprecation that suffuses De Quincey's essays, where the reader is half-friend, half-foe. Both De Quincey and Wordsworth long for a thoughtful reader's organic sympathy, but cannot resist attempting to dictate the "exclusive" terms of that sympathy, resulting in their saying a bit too much.

Blake can never say "too much", because his aesthetic ideal is a spiritually redemptive reciprocity between reader and writer that relies on the self-negating vacancy created by visual-verbal excess. In 'A Vision of the Last Judgment' he argues that "Men are admitted into Heaven not because they have curbed & govern'd their Passions or have No Passions, but because they have Cultivated their Understandings"¹⁶⁹, suggesting one's receptive faculties must always grow and change in order to be 'worthy'. Hence the constantly transformative nature of Blake's designs that force us to revisit and reinterpret both images and text across his books, thereby literally and figuratively expanding our field of vision: "The imaginative mind...is the one which has...understood that perception is self-development"¹⁷⁰. His 'progressive' overloading of the reader aims to cultivate a secure "firm perswasion" that "accommodates" rather than suppresses "infinite inflections and movements" working in Contrary and self-undermining ways. This is "the liberty of both body & mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination"¹⁷¹ that characterises Blake's brand of Christianity. The introduction to the fourth chapter of *Jerusalem* invokes both artist and audience in its assertion that "Mental Studies & Performances" are the sole "Treasures of Heaven which we...lay up for / ourselves"(77.25-6); immersive obscurity allows us "to Labour in Knowledge" and thereby "Build up Jerusa-/-lem"(77.40-1). Gilchrist has a good phrase for this enveloping method when justifying Blake's rhetoric as

¹⁶⁹ Blake, 'Vision of the Last Judgment', *Complete Writings*, p.615.

¹⁷⁰ Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, p.23.

¹⁷¹ Blake, *Jerusalem*, 77.18.

“anything but extravagant to him, or to those who have read themselves into Blake’s writing and design”¹⁷². We can certainly read ourselves into the final image of *The Book of Job* (Plate 22, FIG.77), depicting the enlightened Job and his family playing the instruments that on Plate 2 were distantly placed in the tree overhead, contemplated but never used. These characters are now active participants in, rather than passive adherents to, the ‘Letter of the Law’, encapsulated in the replacement of the rigid book Job pored over “Continually”(pl.2) by the more expansively ‘fluid’ scroll his daughter loosely holds. The design embodies the ‘Proverbs of Hell’ that celebrate the mutual effort of imparting and interpreting vision: “Exuberance is Beauty” and “The thankful receiver bears a plentiful harvest”¹⁷³. It is ironic that the textual excess of Wordsworth, De Quincey and Coleridge – born out of a desire to explain, to make accessible, to establish bonds of “sympathy” or admiration – can ultimately be less generous and liberating in its motivations and effects than Blake’s deliberately obstructive, obfuscatory, estranging superabundance. What is maddeningly unfathomable at first can, once Minutely Particularized, become enabling and ennobling: “The most sublime act is to set another before you”¹⁷⁴.

¹⁷² Gilchrist, *William Blake*, p.149.

¹⁷³ Blake, *Marriage*, 10.4, 9.12.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 7.17.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that while it may be the case for Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey that “Great faults...may grow out of great virtues in excess”, Blake believes that excess is itself a “great virtue” in one’s imaginative, intellectual and aesthetic endeavours. This does not mean that excessiveness always aids or intensifies artistic expression – quite the opposite, frequently proving obstructive, obfuscatory, limiting, self-contradictory, exhausting, and even estranging. But Blake’s confidently absolute assertion of entrenched ambivalence as a fundamental aspect of “Selfhood” as well as authorship reveals how great virtues may grow out of great faults in excess, because the struggle between visionary capacity and its verbal communication is one of the defining features of Romantic writing. Ambiguity, self-doubt, the strain for sympathy “within & without”, intentional and inadvertent experimenting with form, in the fight to overcome material finitude, are all crucial components of Romantic “Genius”. This is the drama of the textual Sublime, emanating from a dualistic truth that “Fear & Hope are – Vision”¹. Samuel Palmer commented to Alexander Gilchrist that Blake “was one of the few to be met with in our passage through life, who are not in some way or other, ‘double-minded’ and inconsistent with themselves”², a statement that is – fittingly – both right and wrong: Blake’s philosophy and practice is wholly “double-minded”, but with a decisiveness and consistency that allows him to harness the unpredictable effects of mental and material excess in a systematic way that eludes his successors. For Blake, the problem is not being at odds with oneself, but not realising it. This is the source of his frustration with Wordsworth when he judges the Prefaces as “very mischievous & direct contrary to

¹ Blake, *For Children: The Gates Of Paradise*, Copy D (1793), pl.13.

² Blake, letter to Alexander Gilchrist (23 August 1855), quoted in Gilchrist, *William Blake*, p.347.

Wordsworth's own Practise"³; as with Blake's images, the very existence of prose to shore up poetry is self-negating. Crabb Robinson averred that "there is an affinity" between the two writers "as there is between the regulated imagination of a wise poet and the incoherent dreams of a poet"⁴, as though combining one's wildness and the other's reason would have made an ideal Contrary writer. But Blake realises that Wordsworth's excessiveness in prose reveals how the ingenuous attempt to regulate the imagination can actually exacerbate incoherence – as a 'Proverb of Hell' states: "Prudence is a rich, ugly old maid courted by Incapacity"⁵. He and we find in Wordsworth's style a profusion of self-undercutting "Minute Particulars" that belie a terribly *infirm* "perwasion". Wordsworth becomes more aware of – and/or ready to acknowledge – this strain of authorial "Incapacity" over time, which he aestheticises with varying degrees of success in acts of revision. De Quincey and Coleridge were always more alert to the paradox of "Too much" not yielding "Enough", and the compelling nature of their (over)writing lies in the "flux and reflux" between moments of extreme self-consciousness and obliviousness, of playful indulgence and poignant embarrassment, as they dramatise and ironise the state of being imaginatively and formally 'unbalanced'.

Blake presaged the ambivalent motivations and effects of excess that Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey would struggle with, and offered a resolution by avowing the need to recognise and fully exploit the unavoidable "Contraries" of authorship, rather than suppress them: imagination and reason, inspiration and execution, organic and mechanic form, the roles of artist and critic, seeking sympathy with and deference from an audience that one wants to communicate with and defend oneself from. Ironically, not heeding Blake's example and being confused about one's efforts exacerbates these tensions and thereby creates moving and engrossing work, though Wordsworth et al do not apprehend

³ Blake, Annotations to Wordsworth, *Poems* (1815), *Complete Writings*, p.783.

⁴ Crabb Robinson, letter to Dorothy Wordsworth (19 February 1826), *Blake Records*, p.436.

⁵ Blake, *Marriage*, 7.8-9.

this: their textual excess is all the more powerful for being a hindrance than a help. But this is only the case for those readers who are willing and able to be attentive, patient and generous in the face of “Too much” that can easily perturb us. Paradoxically, the excess that inculcates this kind of reader is born out of the belief that there are very few such worthy readers: mistrust of oneself and mistrust of anyone but oneself is the source of so much Romantic authorial strife. One cannot help but think that Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey would have had a happier time of it had they trusted their audience to deal with obscurity and uncertainty in the first place. The fact that they did not have a happy time is of course why we admire and read them still.

George Wingfield Digby explains how “With a work of art, the essential thing is to experience” rather than “understand” it, averring that there is “much to be experienced in one of the simplest of Blake’s ineffable poems, or pictures, that overflows any attempt to interpret it”⁶. Comfortingly and unnervingly, there is “always something implied in the work of art which is beyond thought...beyond words”(ibid), no matter how many words are deployed. Essick similarly admits “perhaps we should decide that *Jerusalem* is a poem to be experienced, not understood, and allow Blake’s long...lines to wash over us”⁷. There is a Sublime potential in “overflow”, but the writers’ own specific terminology reveals subtle distinctions in their respective attitudes to this confounding excess. Wordsworth’s trope is the “eddy’s force”⁸, as used to describe Cambridge in the *Prelude*, echoing *The Excursion*’s “shrill-voiced whirlwind, round and round / Eddying within its vast circumference”⁹. It is picked up by Coleridge in *Biographia*’s critique of Wordsworth’s “eddy, instead of progression” when describing unworthy objects with

⁶ George Wingfield Digby, *Symbol and Image in William Blake* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p.94-5.

⁷ Essick, ‘*Jerusalem* and Blake’s Final Works’, *Cambridge Companion to William Blake*, pp.251-71, p.151-2.

⁸ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), III.14.

⁹ Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, III.150-1.

“disproportionate”¹⁰ feeling. The “eddy” appears to “suck us in”¹¹, but then traps reader and writer in a stymieing “round” of irreconcilable “flux and reflux”, between poetry and prose and between different versions of monumental texts. De Quincey’s version of the “eddy” is the more chaotic “*maelstrom*”, in which a stream “becomes a rush” with the “*agitation*” of “hurrying to and fro”¹². His verbosity is energetic and eager but fraught with anxiety, always on the verge of collapsing stylistically and semantically – there is a risk the text will not just go round in circles but fall into the abyss of unmeaning entirely. Blake’s metaphor is the “vortex”, an enveloping all-encompassing flurry of disparate elements that confronts us, but does not permanently impede our progress through the book: “The nature of infinity”, *Milton* tells us, is that “every thing, has its / Own Vortex; and when once a traveller thro Eternity, / Has passd that Vortex, he perceives it roll backward behind / His path”(14.22-5). Every plate is a “vortex” – a portal or “portion of the infinite”¹³ – that the reader is sucked into but ultimately moves through in pursuit of Blake’s vision, having been forced to take several imaginative and intellectual “leaps” in deciphering his verbal/visual interplay. Blake shares with Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey a prevailing frustration at the insufficiencies of one’s medium, but demonstrates how an author can use this fact to convey the essential and infinitely-proliferating “double-mindedness” of Romantic thought. Readers will appreciate the force of Blakean ‘Contrariety’ in Wordsworth, Coleridge and De Quincey if we invest in their flaws as much as their professed attributes and appreciate that, while excess may ostensibly weaken the concentration of a “capacious mind”, acknowledging such weakness makes one a more absorbing and “accommodating” writer. Therefore superfluity is paradoxically “necessary” in modes of Romantic expression. Blake provides the answer to his crucial

¹⁰ Coleridge, *Biographia*, ii.136.

¹¹ Wordsworth, *Prelude* (1850), III.14.

¹² De Quincey, ‘Sketches of Life and Manners’(March 1834), *Works*, x.29.

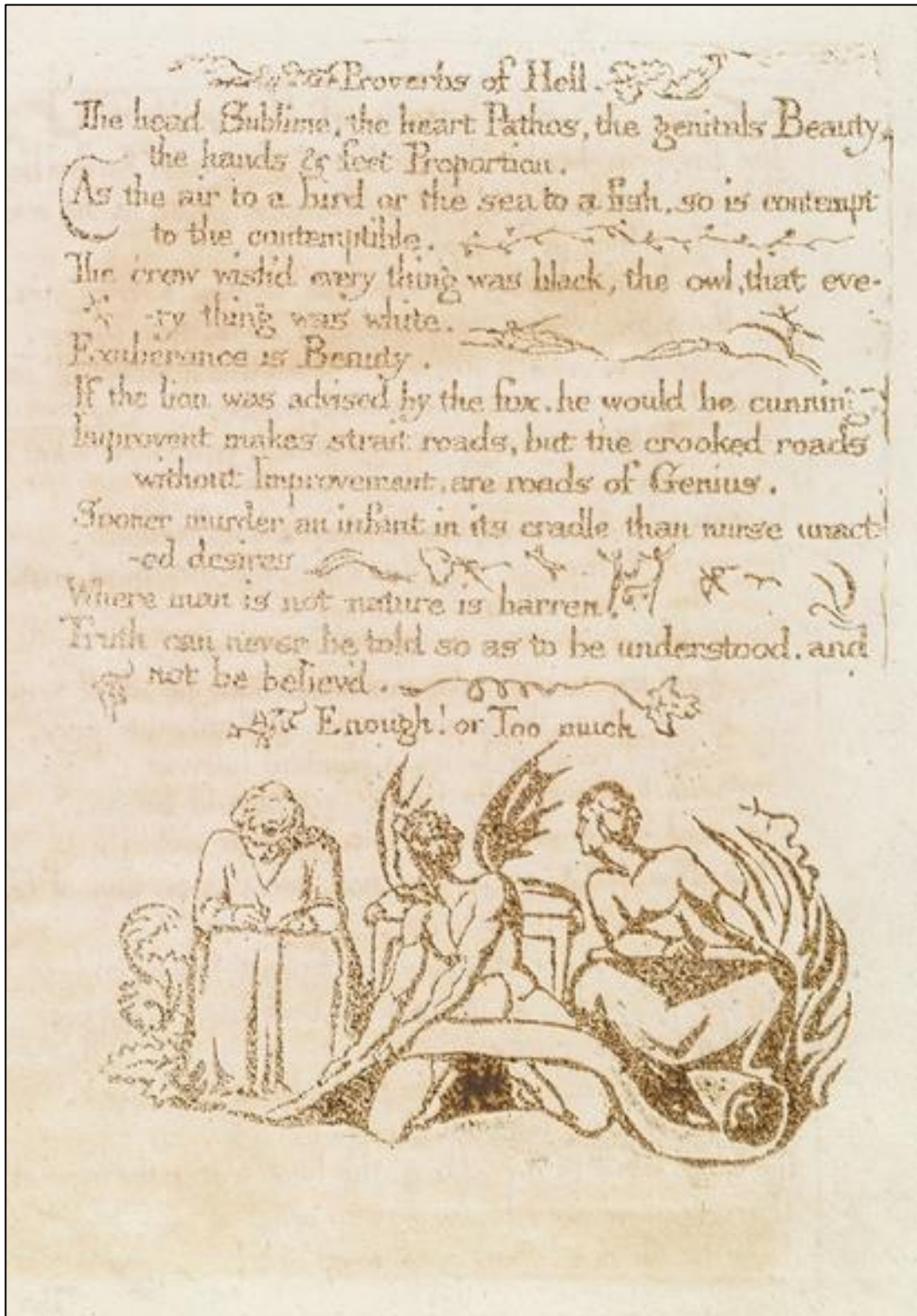
¹³ Blake, *America*, 16.18.

question “Enough! or Too much” when he pronounces, firmly and persuasively, “You never know what is enough unless you know what is / more than enough”¹⁴.

¹⁴ Blake, *Marriage*, 9.9-10.

APPENDIX

FIG.1



William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Copy B (1790), pl.10.

The William Blake Archive, 2010. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.b.illbk.10&java=no>>.

All Blake images from *The William Blake Archive*, ed. Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi <<http://www.blakearchive.org>>, unless otherwise stated.

FIG.2



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Carceri D'Invenzione* (1750, rev.1761), Plate VII.
Italian Ways. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.italianways.com/le-carceri-dinvenzione-di-piranesi/>>.

FIG.3



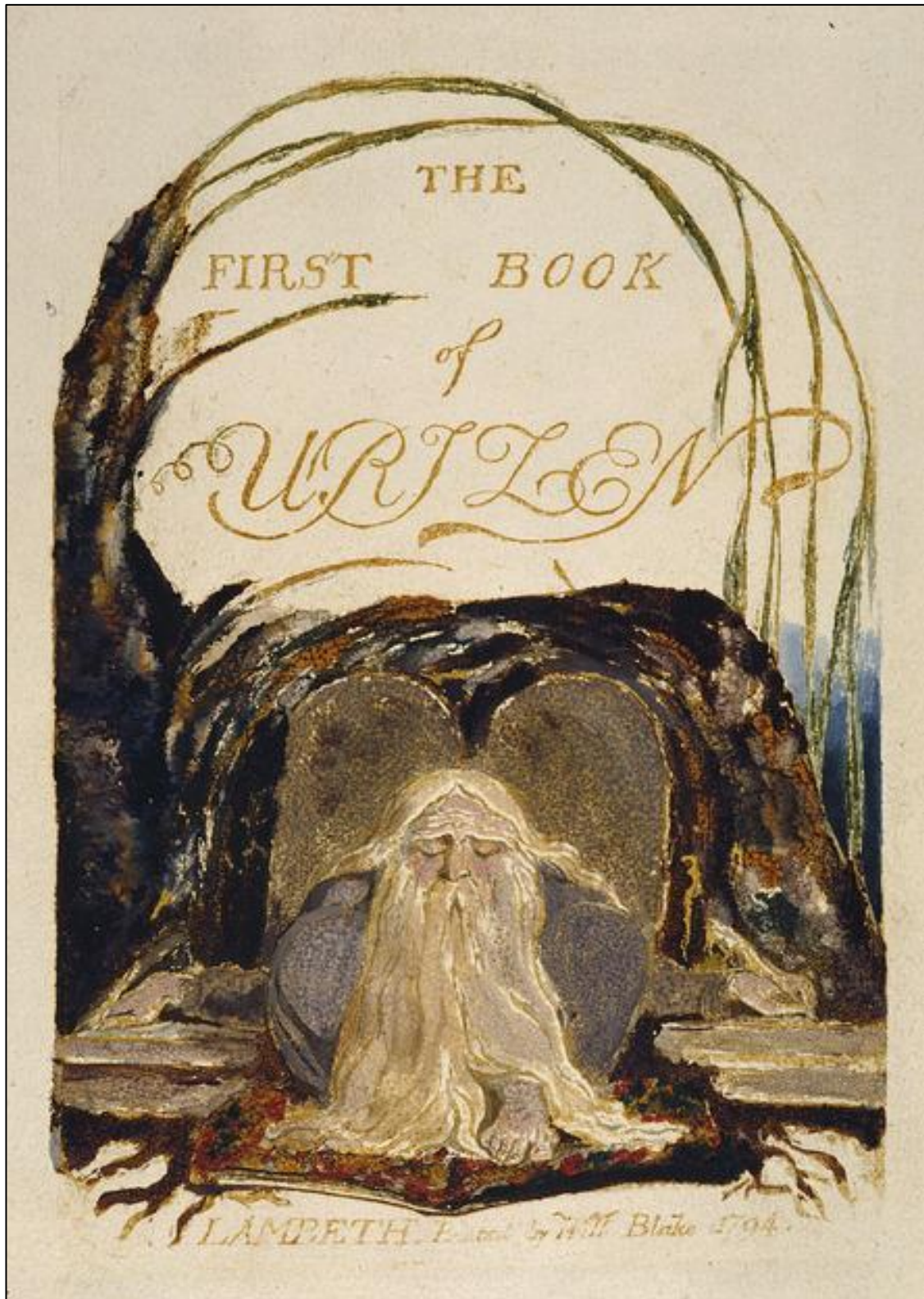
Carceri, Plate XIV. *Italian Ways*. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.italianways.com/le-carceri-dinvenzione-di-piranesi/>>.

FIG.4



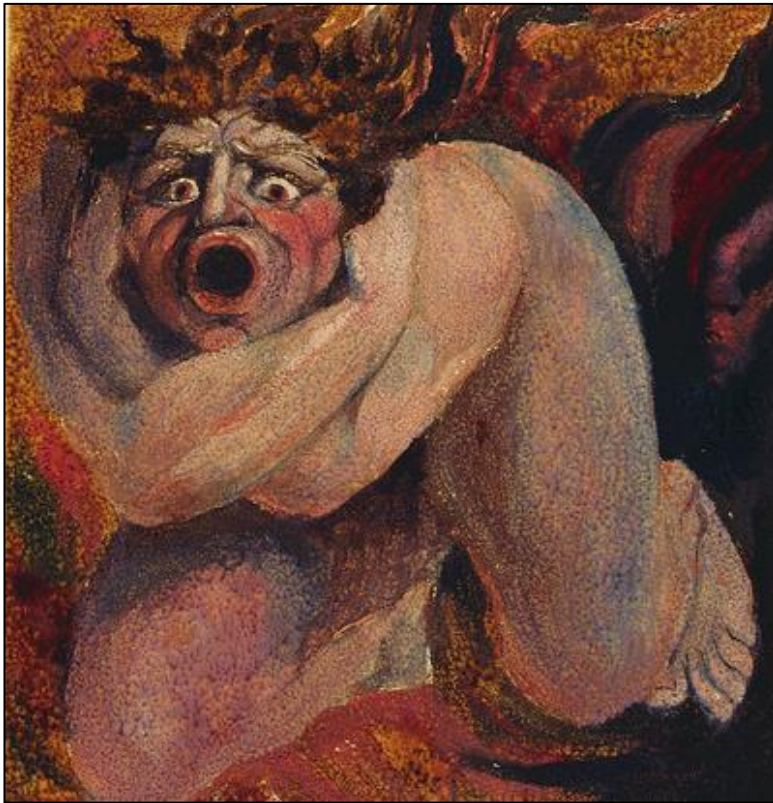
Carceri, Plate XI. *Italian Ways*. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.italianways.com/le-carceri-dinvenzione-di-piranesi/>>.

FIG.5



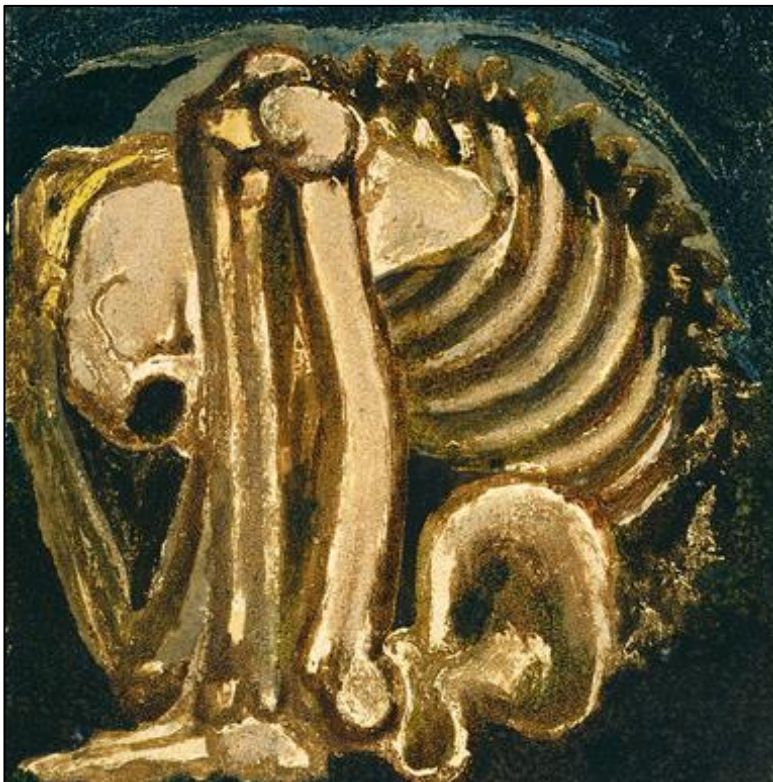
Blake, *The First Book of Urizen* title page, Copy A (1794), pl.1.
The William Blake Archive, 2002. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.a.illbk.01&java=no>>.

FIG.6



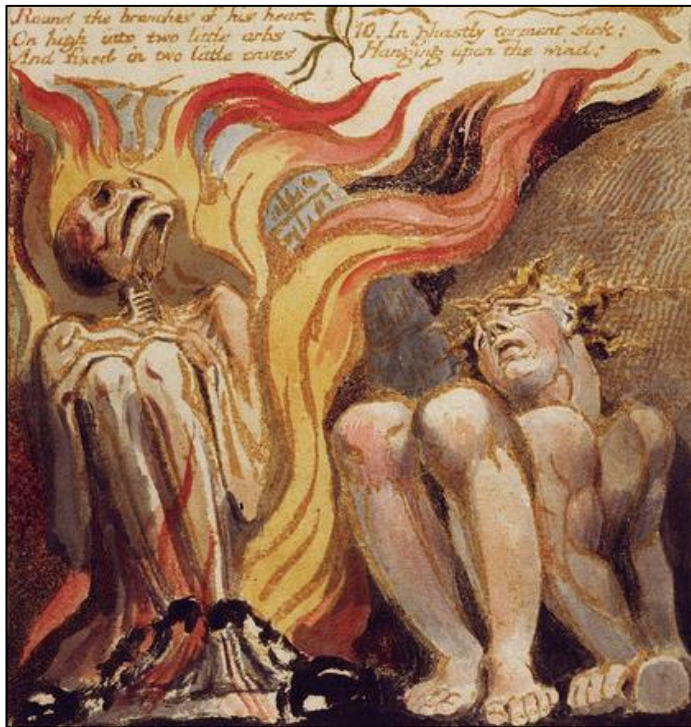
Urizen, Copy A, pl.10. The William Blake Archive, 2002. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.a.illbk.10&java=no>>.

FIG.7



Urizen, Copy A, pl.12. The William Blake Archive, 2002. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.a.illbk.12&java=no>>.

FIG.8



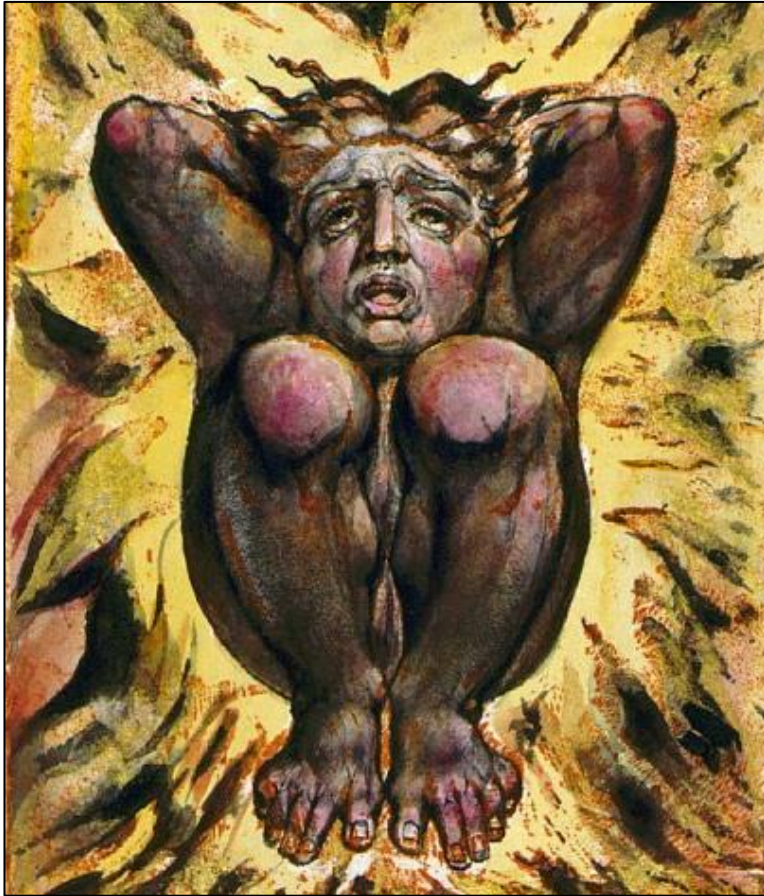
Urizen, Copy A, pl.14. *The William Blake Archive*, 2002. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.a.illbk.14&java=no>>.

FIG.9



Urizen, Copy G (1818), pl.11. *The William Blake Archive*, 1998. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.g.illbk.11&java=no>>.

FIG.10



Urizen, Copy G (1818), pl.14. The William Blake Archive, 1998. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.g.illbk.14&java=no>>.

FIG.11



Urizen, Copy A, pl.21. The William Blake Archive, 2002. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.a.illbk.21&java=no>>.

FIG.12



Blake, *Jerusalem The Emanation of The Giant Albion*, Copy E (c.1821), pl.6.

The William Blake Archive, 2003. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=jerusalem.e.illbk.06&java=no>>.

Where any view of Money exists Art cannot be carried on. but War only by pretences to the Two Impossibilities Chastity & Abstinence Gods of the Heathen

He repented that he had made Adam (of the Female, the Adamah) & it grieved him at his heart

The Angel of the Divine Presence מלאך יהוה

from Generated Organs gone as soon as come as Nothing by the Natural Man

What can be Created Can be Destroyed Adam is only Hebrew Art is Vision

Deriding And Denying Immediate Communion with God

The Spoilers say Where are his Works That he did in the Wilderness

Lo what are these Whence came they These are not the Works Of Egypt nor Babylon

Whose Gods are the Powers Of this World. Goddess Nature Who first spoil & then destroy

Imaginative Art For their Glory is War and Dominion

Empire against Art See Virgils Lucid Lib VI & 4

Stand Wife The Goddess Nature is War & Money & Heroism at Heart

For every Pleasure Money is Useless

There are States in which all Visionary Men are accounted Mad Men such are Greece & Rome

Such is Empire or Tax See Luke Ch 2

What we call Antique Coins are the Coins of Anons Breast Plate

Is not every Man possible to Man described in the Bible openly All is not Sin that Satan calls so all the Loves & Greeds of Eternity

Art can never exist without Naked Beauty displayed The Gods of Greece & Egypt were Mathematical Draughts See Plinys Works

The Old & New Testaments are the Great Code of Art Art is the whole Business of Man is The Arts of All Things Common No Secret No Mystery

Jesus & his Apostles & Disciples were all Artists Their Works were destroyed by the Seven Angels of the Seven Churches in Asia

Antichrist Science

The unproductive Man is not a Christian much less the Destroyer

Christianity is Art & not Money

Money is its Curse

Art Degraded Imagination Denies War Governed the Nations

Prayer is the Study of Art Praise is the Practice of Art The outward Ceremony is Antichrist

Fasting & all relate to Art

Members we are his

God himself (The Divine Body) is the Divine Vision

The Gods of Pity are the Cherubim of Moses & Solomon The Hosts of Heaven of Hosts

Practise nothing can be done Practise is Art

If you leave off you are Lost

Without Licentiousness

Good & Evil are & Poverty & Free of Misery

Evil

Propagated Generation of Death

It manifests itself in his Works of Art (In Eternity All is Vision)

The True Christian Charity not dependent on Money (the lifes blood of Poor families)

that is on Caesar or Empire or Natural Religion

Money which is The Great Satan or Reason

the Root of Good & Evil

In The Accusation of Sin

ARet a Painter a Musician an Architect the Man Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian You must leave families Wealths & Houses & Lands if they stand in the way of Art

The Eternal Body of Man is The Imagination

It is the Study of Art

Prayer is the Study of Art Praise is the Practice of Art The outward Ceremony is Antichrist

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The Gods of Pity are the Cherubim of Moses & Solomon The Hosts of Heaven of Hosts

Practise nothing can be done Practise is Art

If you leave off you are Lost

Without Licentiousness

Good & Evil are & Poverty & Free of Misery

Evil

Propagated Generation of Death

It manifests itself in his Works of Art (In Eternity All is Vision)

The True Christian Charity not dependent on Money (the lifes blood of Poor families)

that is on Caesar or Empire or Natural Religion

Money which is The Great Satan or Reason

the Root of Good & Evil

In The Accusation of Sin

ARet a Painter a Musician an Architect the Man Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian You must leave families Wealths & Houses & Lands if they stand in the way of Art

The Eternal Body of Man is The Imagination

It is the Study of Art

Prayer is the Study of Art Praise is the Practice of Art The outward Ceremony is Antichrist

Fasting & all relate to Art

Members we are his

God himself (The Divine Body) is the Divine Vision

The Gods of Pity are the Cherubim of Moses & Solomon The Hosts of Heaven of Hosts

Practise nothing can be done Practise is Art

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Propagated Generation of Death

It manifests itself in his Works of Art (In Eternity All is Vision)

The True Christian Charity not dependent on Money (the lifes blood of Poor families)

that is on Caesar or Empire or Natural Religion

 $\geq$

FIG.14



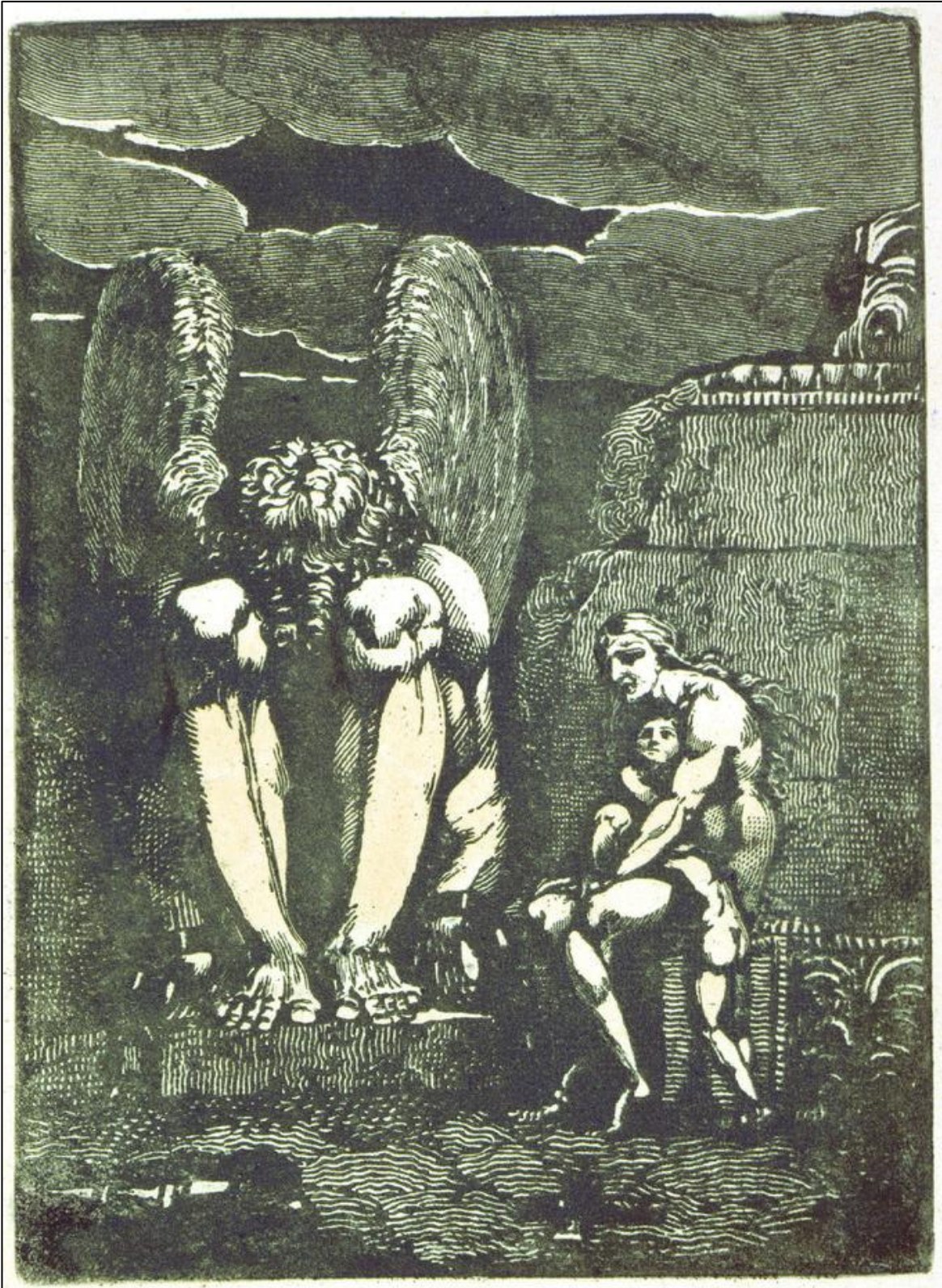
Blake, *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise*, Copy D (c.1825), pl.1.
The William Blake Archive, 2002. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=gates-sexes.d.illbk.01&java=no>>.

FIG.15



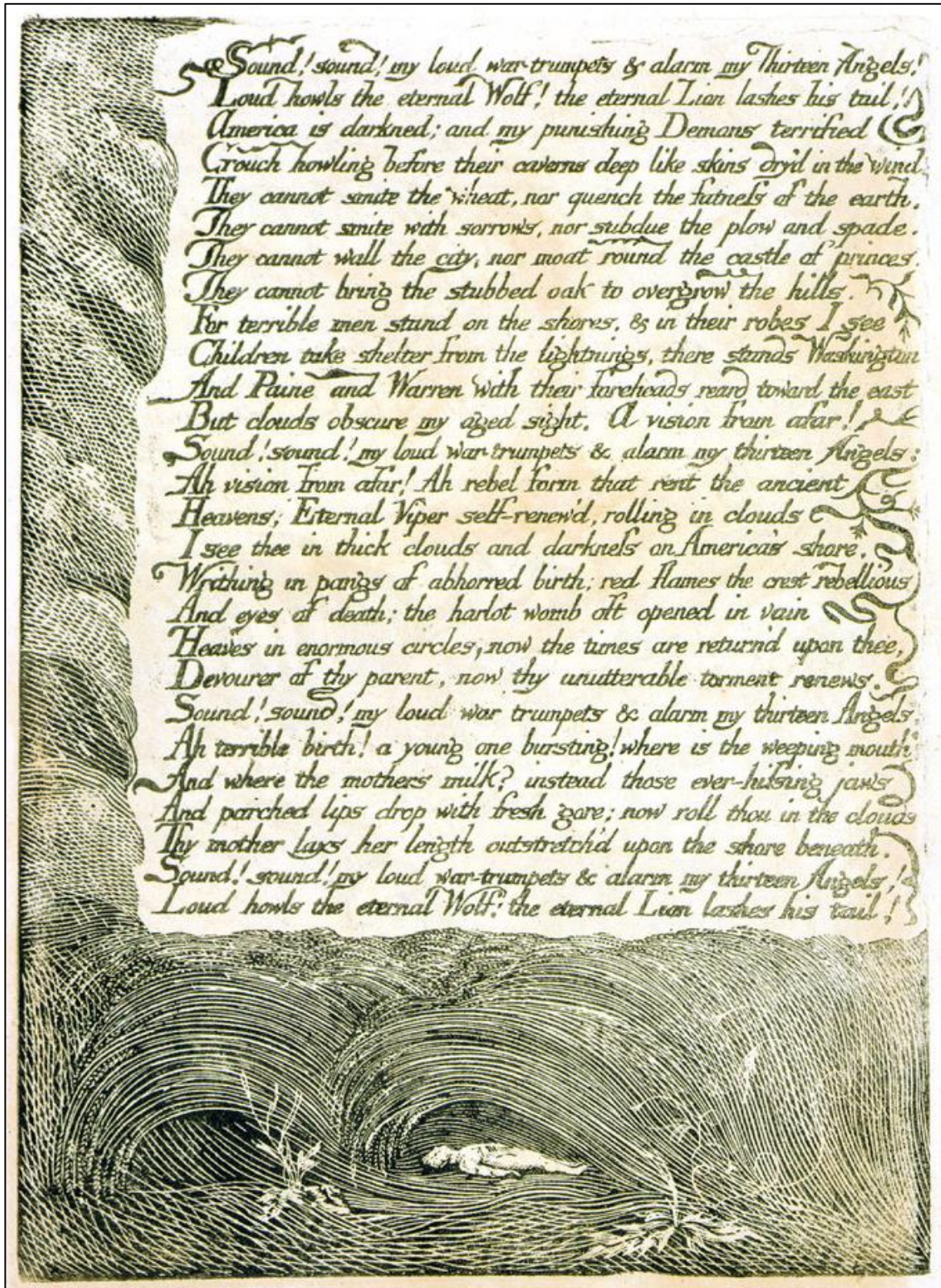
Gates of Paradise, Copy D, pl.3. *The William Blake Archive*, 2002. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=gates-sexes.d.illbk.03&java=no>>.

FIG.16



Blake, *America a Prophecy* frontispiece, Copy E (1793), pl.1.
The William Blake Archive, 2003. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=america.e.illbk.01&java=no>>.

FIG.17



America, Copy E, pl.11. The William Blake Archive, 2003. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=america.e.illbk.11&java=no>>

FIG.18

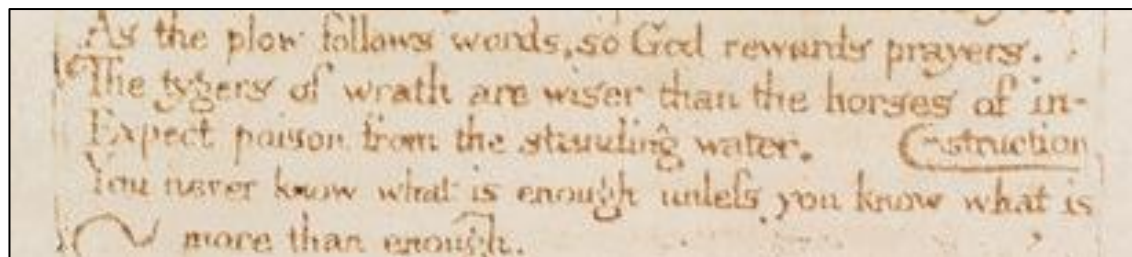


Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1826), pl.13.

The William Blake Archive, 2002. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=bb421.1.spb.15&java=no>>.

FIG.19



Marriage, Copy B, 9.7-8. *The William Blake Archive*, 2010. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.b.illbk.09&java=no>>.

FIG.20



Marriage, Copy E (1794), pl.3. The William Blake Archive, 2010. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.e.illbk.03&java=no>>.

FIG.21



Marriage, Copy C (1790), pl.3. The William Blake Archive, 1999. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.c.illbk.03&java=no>>.

FIG.22



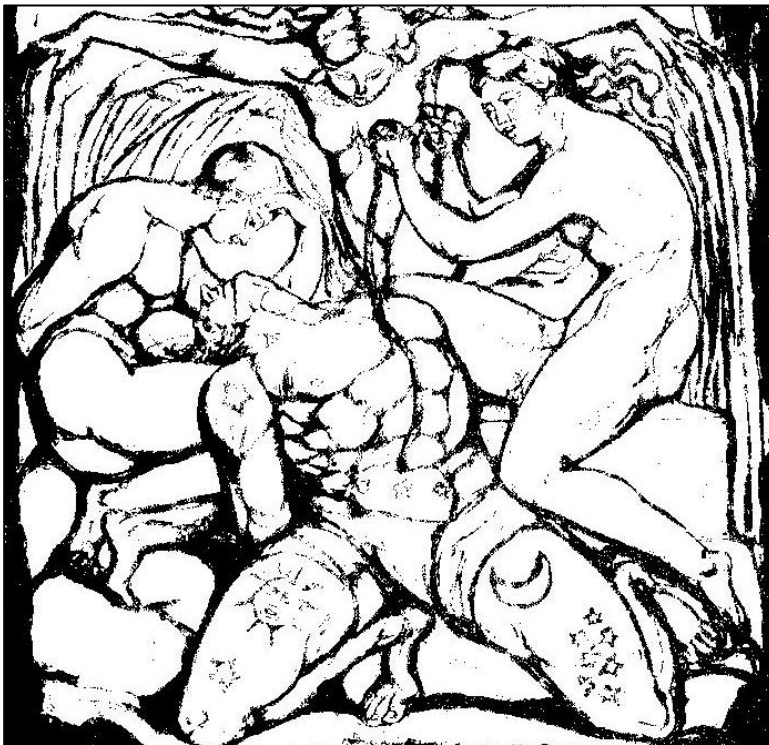
Marriage, Copy F (1794), pl.3. The William Blake Archive, 2010. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.f.illbk.03&java=no>>.

FIG.23



Jerusalem, Copy A (c.1820). William Blake: Golden String. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<http://woeandjoy.blogspot.co.uk/2013_10_01_archive.html>.

FIG.24



Jerusalem, Copy D (c.1820), pl.25. The Illuminated Blake, ed. David V. Erdman (London, 1975), p.304.

FIG.25



Marriage, Copy B, pl.21. *The William Blake Archive*, 2010. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.b.illbk.21&java=no>>.

FIG.26



Marriage, Copy C, pl.21. *The William Blake Archive*, 1999. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.c.illbk.21&java=no>>.

FIG.27



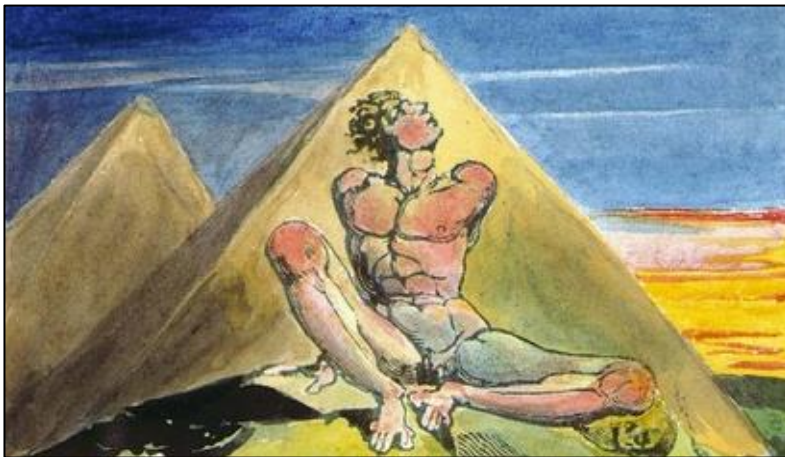
Marriage, Copy H (1790), pl.21. *The William Blake Archive*, 2000. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.h.illbk.21&java=no>>.

FIG.28



Marriage, Copy E (1794), pl.21. *The William Blake Archive*, 2010. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015. <<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.e.illbk.21&java=no>>.

FIG.29



Marriage, Copy D (1795), pl.21. *The William Blake Archive*, 1998. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015. <<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.d.illbk.21&java=no>>.

FIG.30



Marriage, Copy I (1827), pl.21. *The William Blake Archive*, 2000. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015. <<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.i.illbk.21&java=no>>.

FIG.31



Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Copy B (1789, 1794), pl.35.

The William Blake Archive, 2003. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=songsie.b.illbk.35&java=no>>.

FIG.32



Songs, Copy L (1795), pl.36. *The William Blake Archive*, 2003. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=songsie.l.illbk.36&java=no>>.

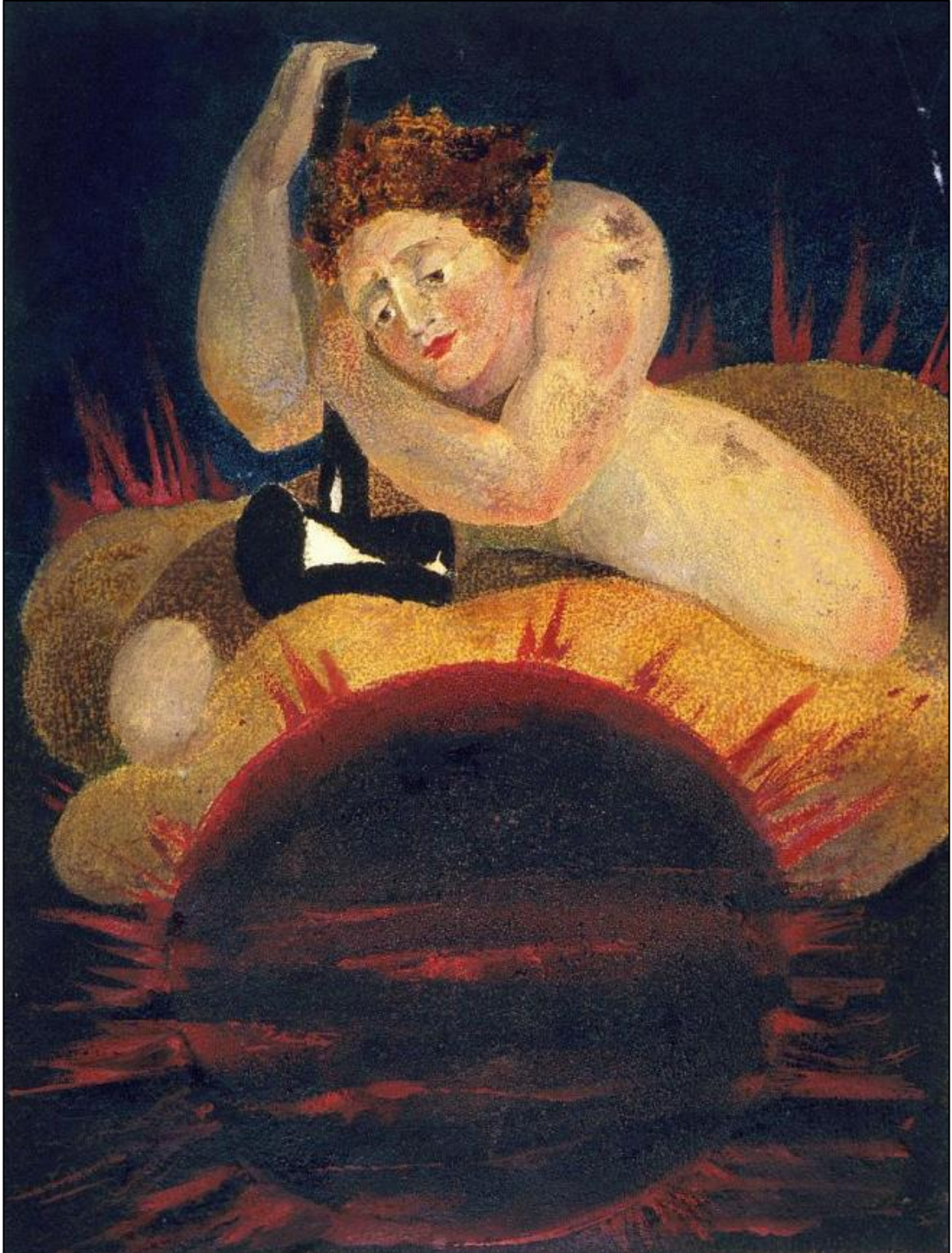
FIG.33



Songs, Copy N (1795), pl.8. *The William Blake Archive*, 2012. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=songsie.n.illbk.08&java=no>>.

FIG.34



Blake, *The Song of Los*, Copy A (1795), pl.8.

The William Blake Archive, 2004. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=s-los.a.illbk.08&java=no>>.

FIG.35



Song of Los, Copy C (1795), pl.2. *The William Blake Archive*, 2009. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=s-los.c.illbk.02&java=no>>.

FIG.36



Los, Copy D (1795), pl.8. *The William Blake Archive*, 2004. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=s-los.d.illbk.08&java=no>>.

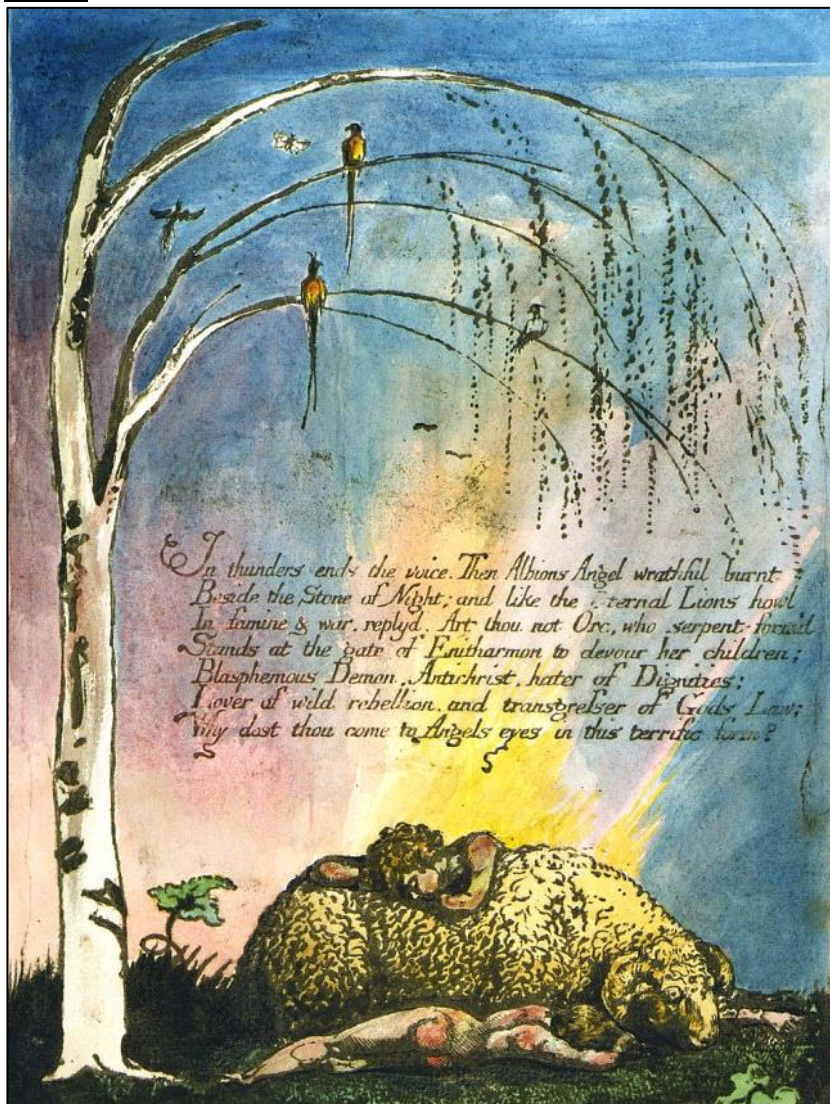
FIG.37



Los, Copy E (1795), pl.4. *The William Blake Archive*, 2009. Web. Accessed 15 April 2015

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=s-los.e.illbk.04&java=no>>.

FIG.38



America, Copy A (1795), pl.9. *The William Blake Archive*, 2003. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=america.a.illbk.09&java=no>>.

FIG.39



America, Copy A, (1795), pl.13. *The William Blake Archive*, 2003. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=america.a.illbk.13&java=no>>.

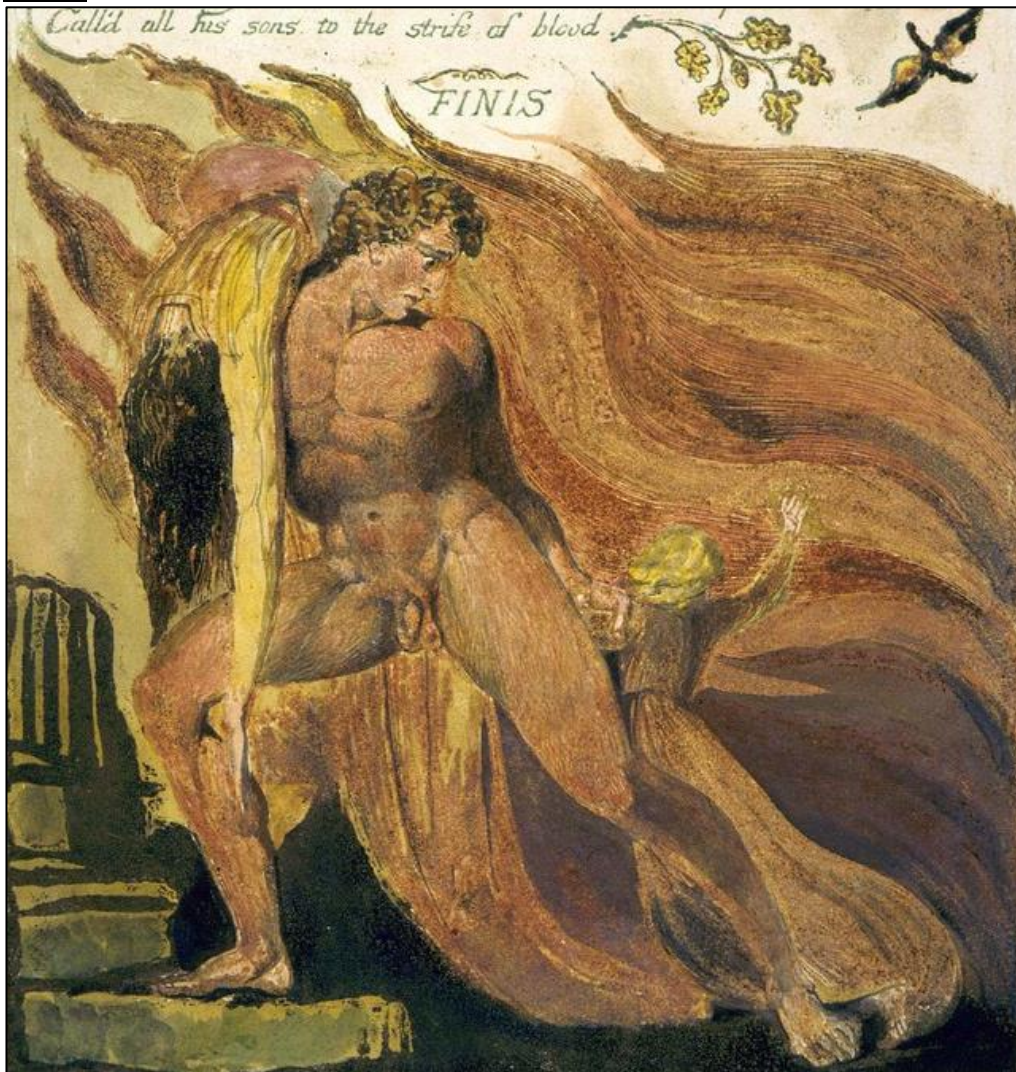
FIG.40



Jerusalem, Copy E (c.1821), pl.59. *The William Blake Archive*, 2003. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=jerusalem.e.illbk.59&java=no>>.

FIG.41



Blake, *Europe a Prophecy*, Copy B (1794), pl.17.

The William Blake Archive, 1998. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=europe.b.illbk.17&java=no>>.

FIG.42



Jerusalem, Copy E (c.1821), pl.50. *The William Blake Archive*, 2003. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=jerusalem.e.illbk.50&java=no>>.

FIG.43



Marriage, Copy F (1794), pl.20. *The William Blake Archive*, 1999. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.

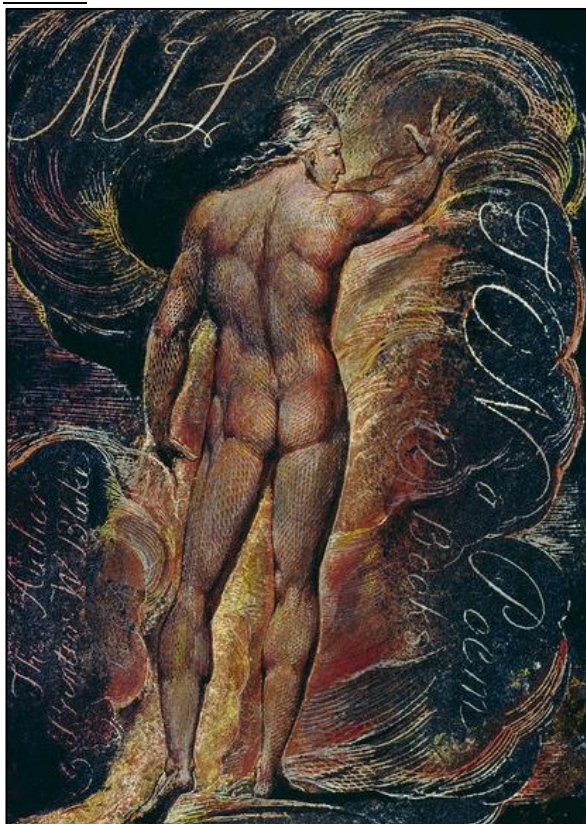
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.f.illbk.20&java=no>>.

FIG.44



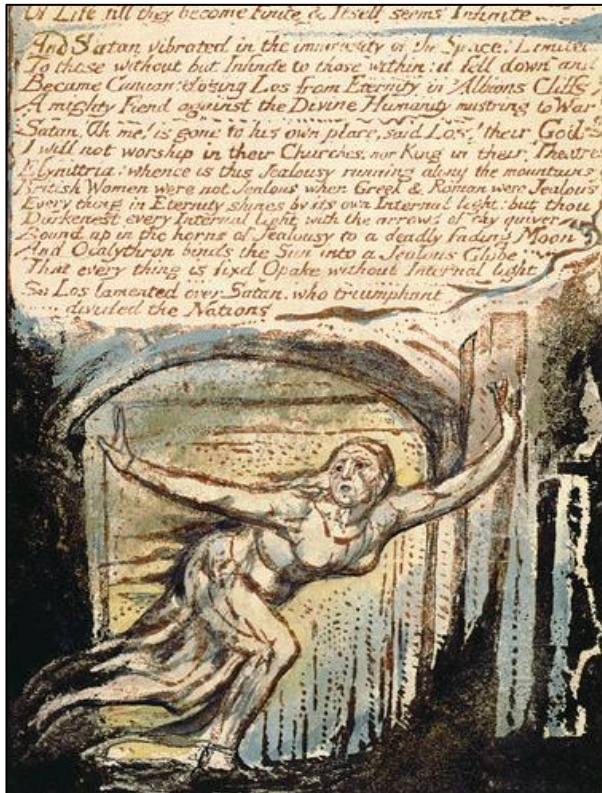
Urizen, Copy A (1794), pl.28. *The William Blake Archive*, 2002. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.a.illbk.28&java=no>>.

FIG.45



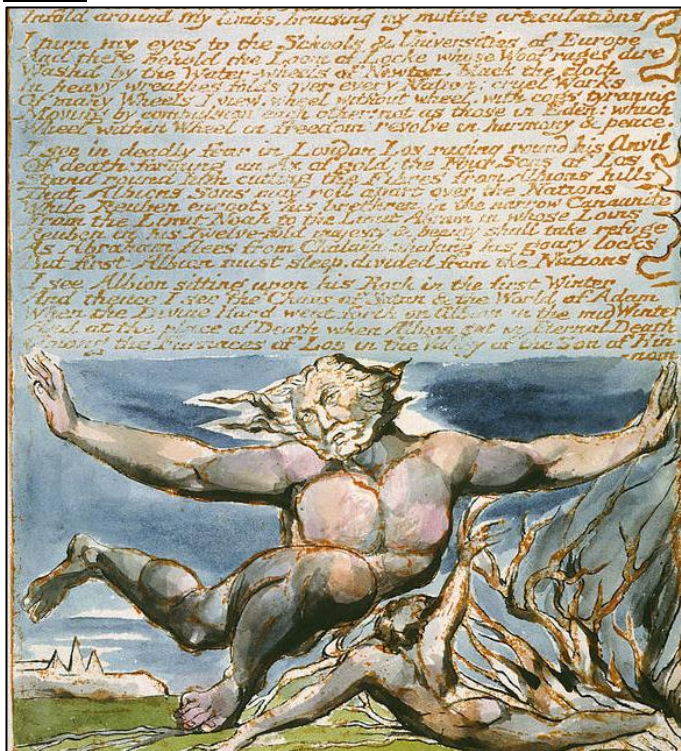
Blake, *Milton a Poem* frontispiece, Copy D (1818), pl.1.
The William Blake Archive, 2010. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=milton.d.illbk.01&java=no>>.

FIG.46



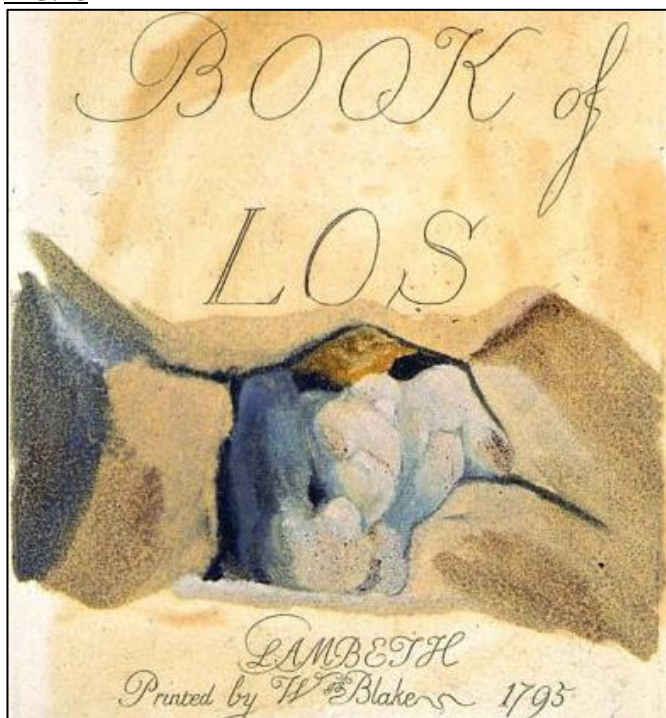
Milton, Copy D (1818), pl.11. *The William Blake Archive*, 2010. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=milton.d.illbk.11&java=no>.

FIG.47



Jerusalem, Copy E (c.1821), pl.15. *The William Blake Archive*, 2003. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=jerusalem.e.illbk.15&java=no>.

FIG.48

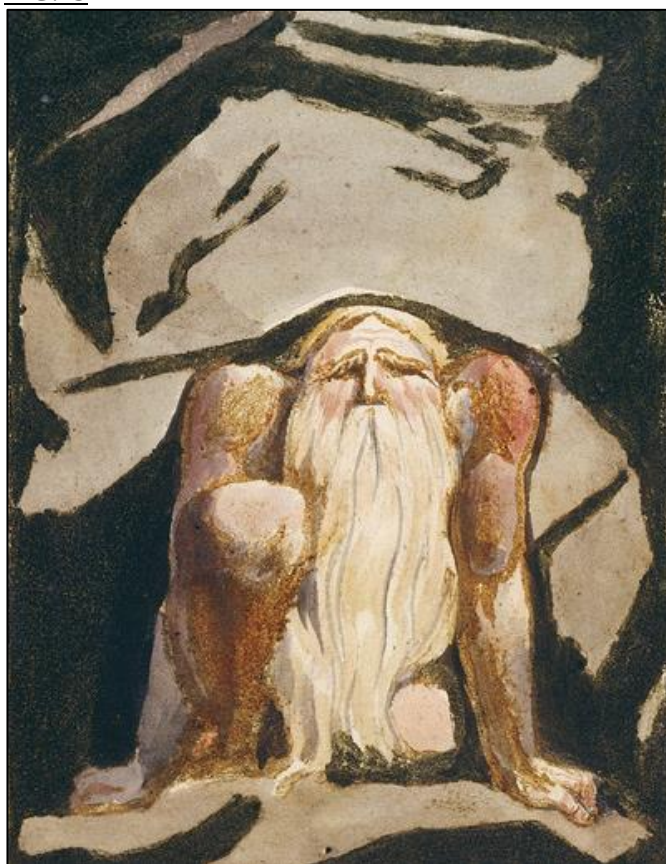


Blake, *The Book of Los* title page, Copy A (1795), pl.2.

The William Blake Archive, 1998. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=b-los.a.illbk.02&java=no>>.

FIG.49



Urizen, Copy A (1794), pl.23. *The William Blake Archive*, 2010. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.a.illbk.23&java=no>>.

FIG.50



Urizen, Copy A, pl.13. *The William Blake Archive*, 2002. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.a.illbk.13&java=no>>.

FIG.51



Milton, Copy D, pl.18. *The William Blake Archive*, 2010. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=milton.d.illbk.18&java=no>>.

FIG.52



Gate of Paradise, Copy D, pl.5. *The William Blake Archive*, 2002. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=gates-sexes.d.illbk.05&java=no>>.

FIG.53



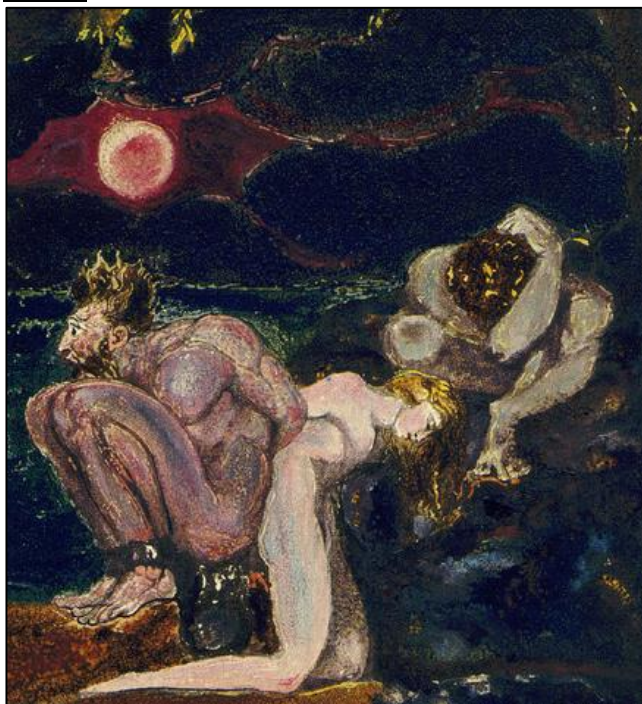
Urizen (pl.10), *A Small Book of Designs* (1796).
The William Blake Archive, 2012. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=bb136.a.spb.15&java=no>>.

FIG.54



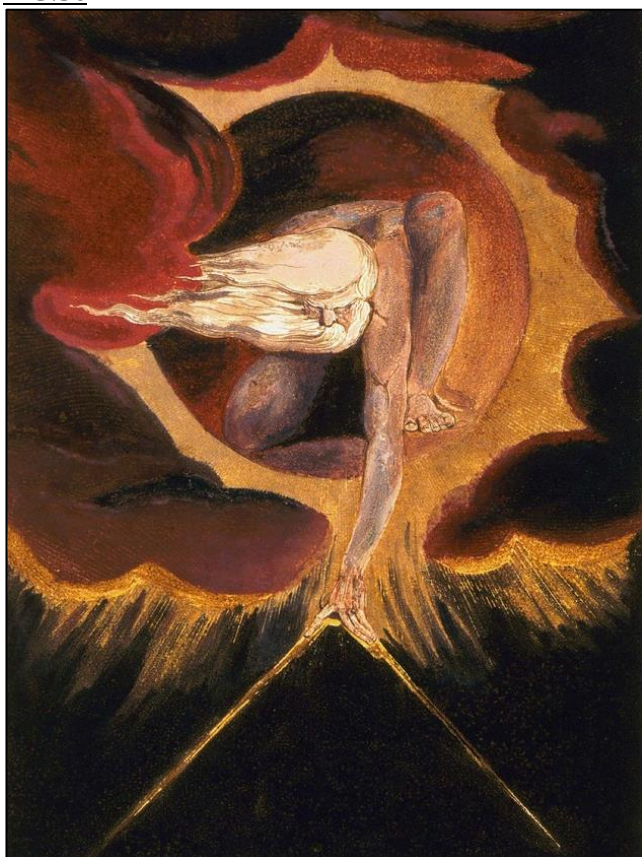
Urizen (pl.5), *A Small Book of Designs* (1796).
The William Blake Archive, 2012. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=bb136.a.spb.21&java=no>>.

FIG.55



Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Copy F (1794), pl.1.
The William Blake Archive, 2003. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=vda.f.illbk.01&java=no>>.

FIG.56



Europe frontispiece, Copy B (1794), pl.1.
The William Blake Archive, 1998. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=europe.b.illbk.01&java=no>>.

FIG.57



Job, pl.2. The William Blake Archive, 2002. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=bb421.1.spb.03&java=no>>.

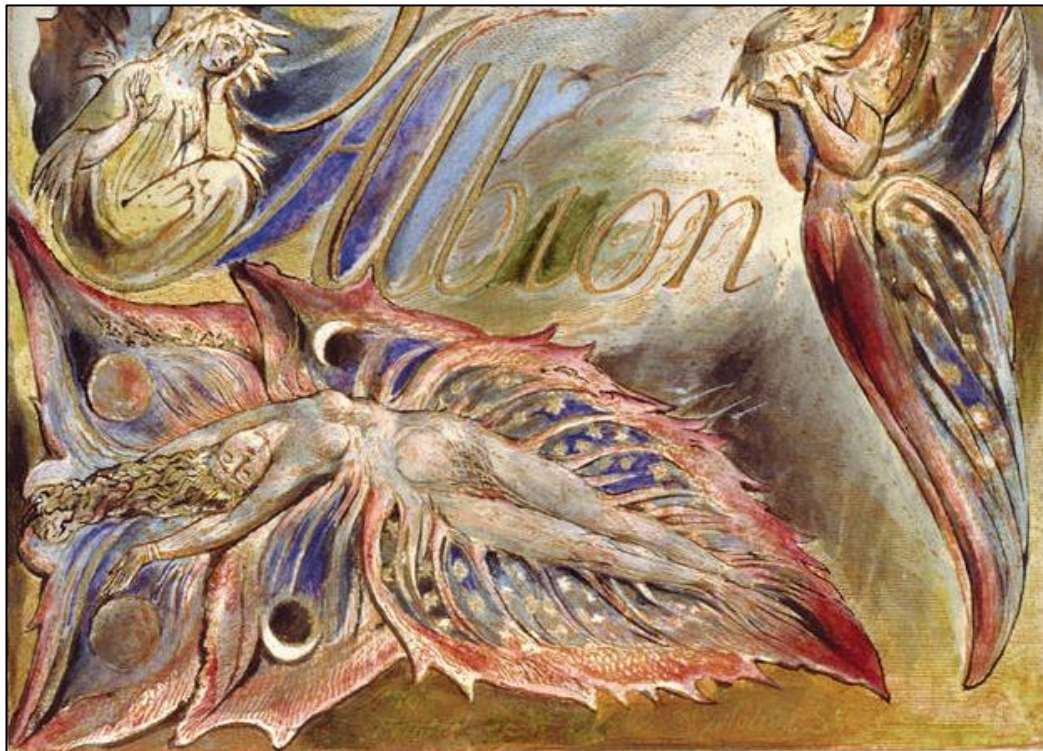
FIG.58



Gates of Paradise, Copy D, pl.21. The William Blake Archive, 2002. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=gates-sexes.d.illbk.21&java=no>>.

FIG.59



Jerusalem title page, Copy E, pl.2. The William Blake Archive, 2003. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.

<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=jerusalem.e.illbk.02&java=no>>.

FIG.60



Urizen, Copy D (1794), pl.21. The William Blake Archive, 2005. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.d.illbk.21&java=no>>.

FIG.61



Urizen, Copy D, pl.15. The William Blake Archive, 2005. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.d.illbk.15&java=no>>.

FIG.62



Songs, Copy V (1821), pl.21. *The William Blake Archive*, 2006. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=songsie.v.illbk.21&java=no>>.

FIG.63



Urizen, Copy B (1795), pl.3. *The William Blake Archive*, 2000. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.f.illbk.03&java=no>>.

FIG.64



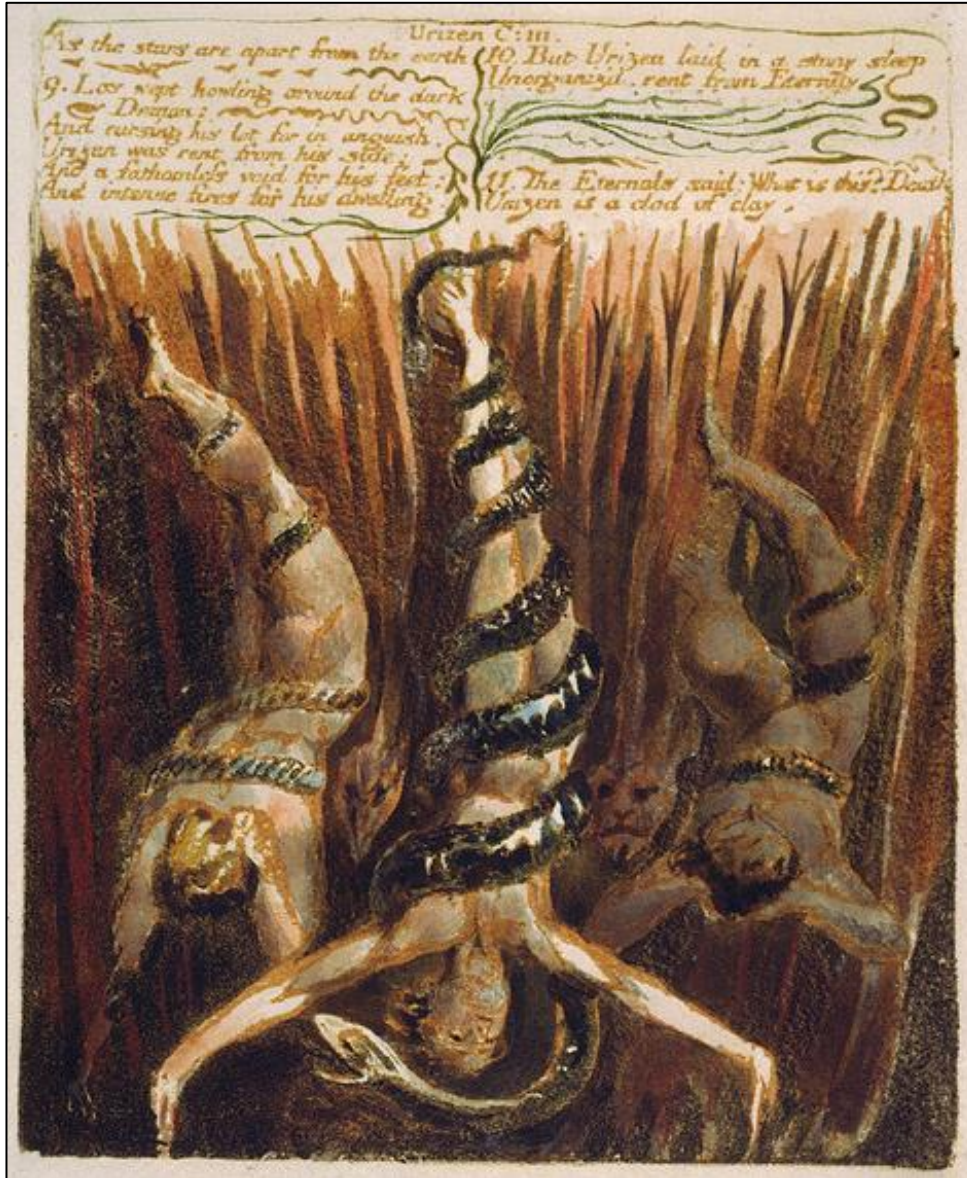
Marriage, Copy E (1794), pl.5. The William Blake Archive, 2000. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.e.illbk.05&java=no>>.

FIG.65



Europe, Copy A, pl.22. The William Blake Archive, 2002. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.a.illbk.22&java=no>>.

FIG.66



Urizen, Copy A, pl.9. *The William Blake Archive*, 2002. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.a.illbk.09&java=no>.

FIG.67



Milton, Copy D, pl.33. *The William Blake Archive*, 2010. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=milton.d.illbk.02&java=no>.

FIG.68



Urizen, Copy F (1794), pl.5. *The William Blake Archive*, 2001. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.f.illbk.05&java=no>>.

FIG.69



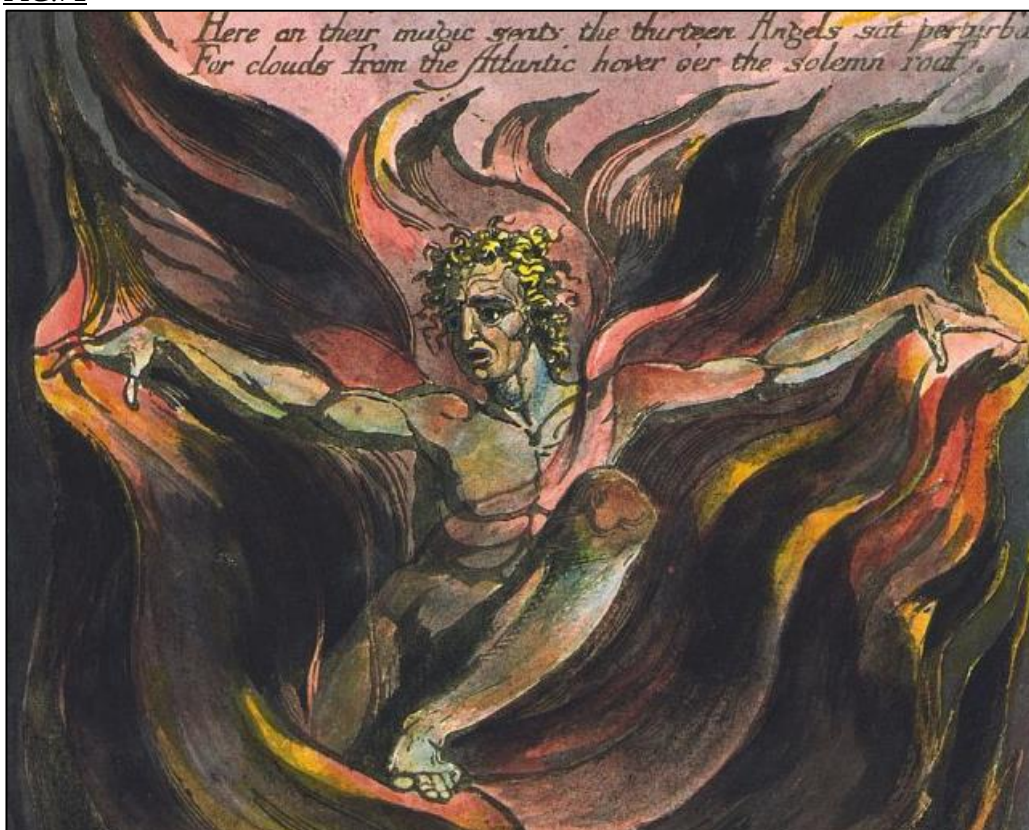
Urizen, Copy F, pl.8. *The William Blake Archive*, 2001. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=urizen.f.illbk.08&java=no>>.

FIG.70



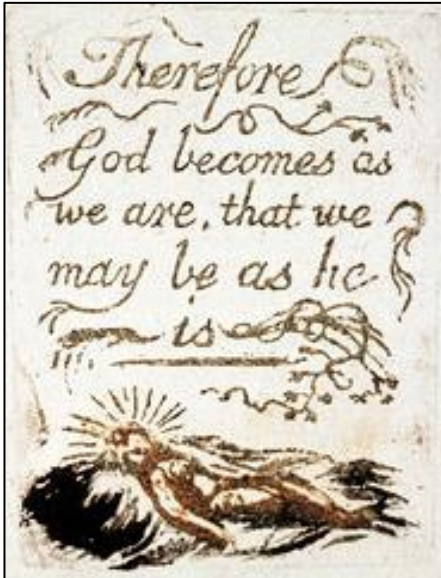
America, Copy A, pl.10. The William Blake Archive, 2000. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=america.a.illbk.10&java=no>
>.

FIG.71



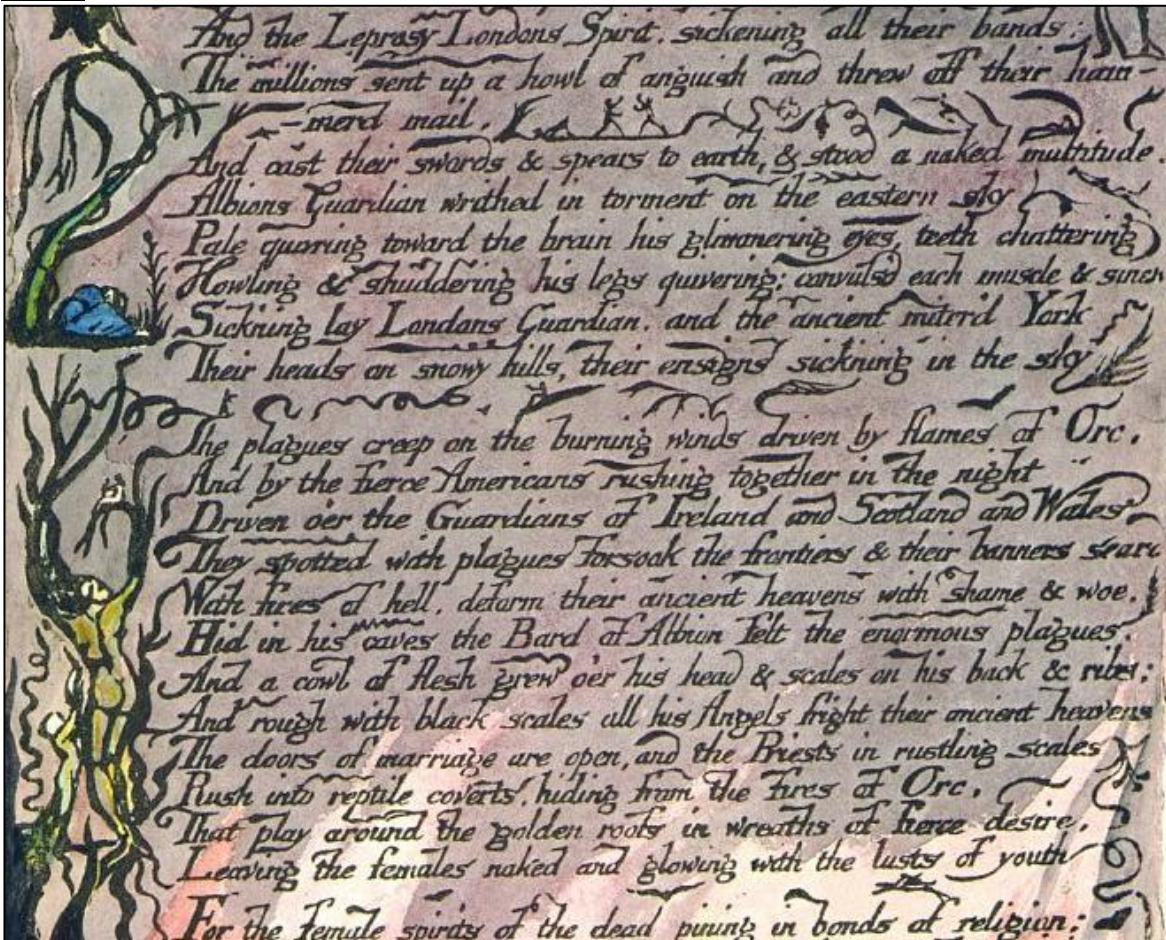
America, Copy A, pl.12. The William Blake Archive, 2003. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=america.a.illbk.12&java=no>
>.

FIG.72



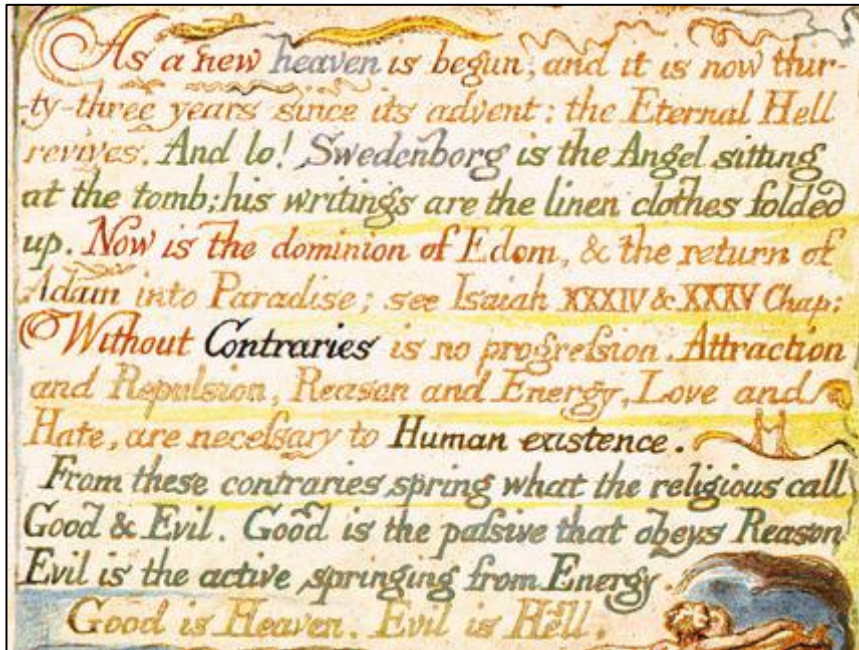
Blake, *There is No Natural Religion*, Copy A (1794), pl.11.
 The William Blake Archive, 1998. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
 <<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=nnr.b.illbk.11&java=no>>.

FIG.73



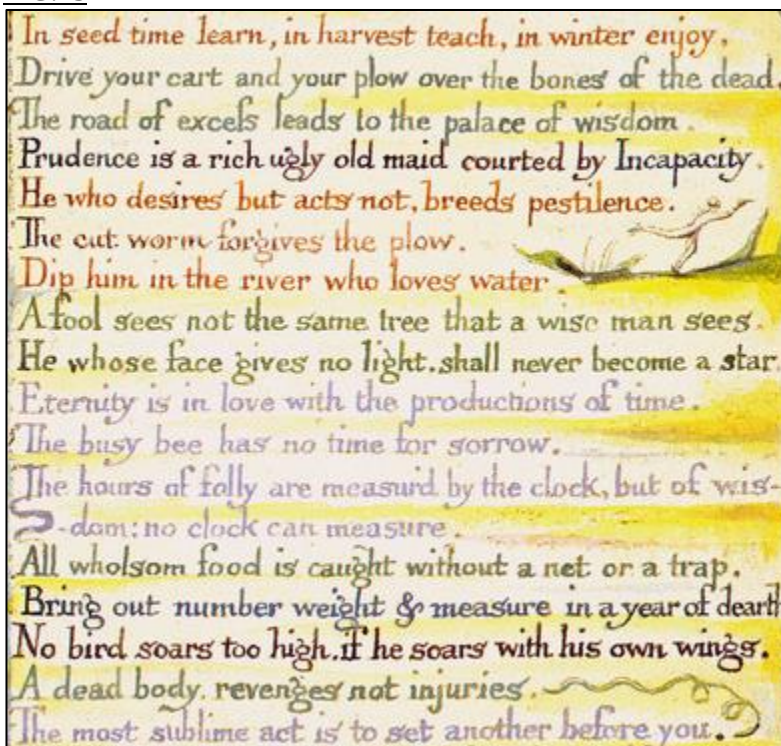
America, Copy A, pl.17. The William Blake Archive, 2003. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
 <<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=america.a.illbk.17&java=no>>.

FIG.74



Marriage, Copy H, pl.3. The William Blake Archive, 2000. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.h.illbk.03&java=no>.

FIG.75



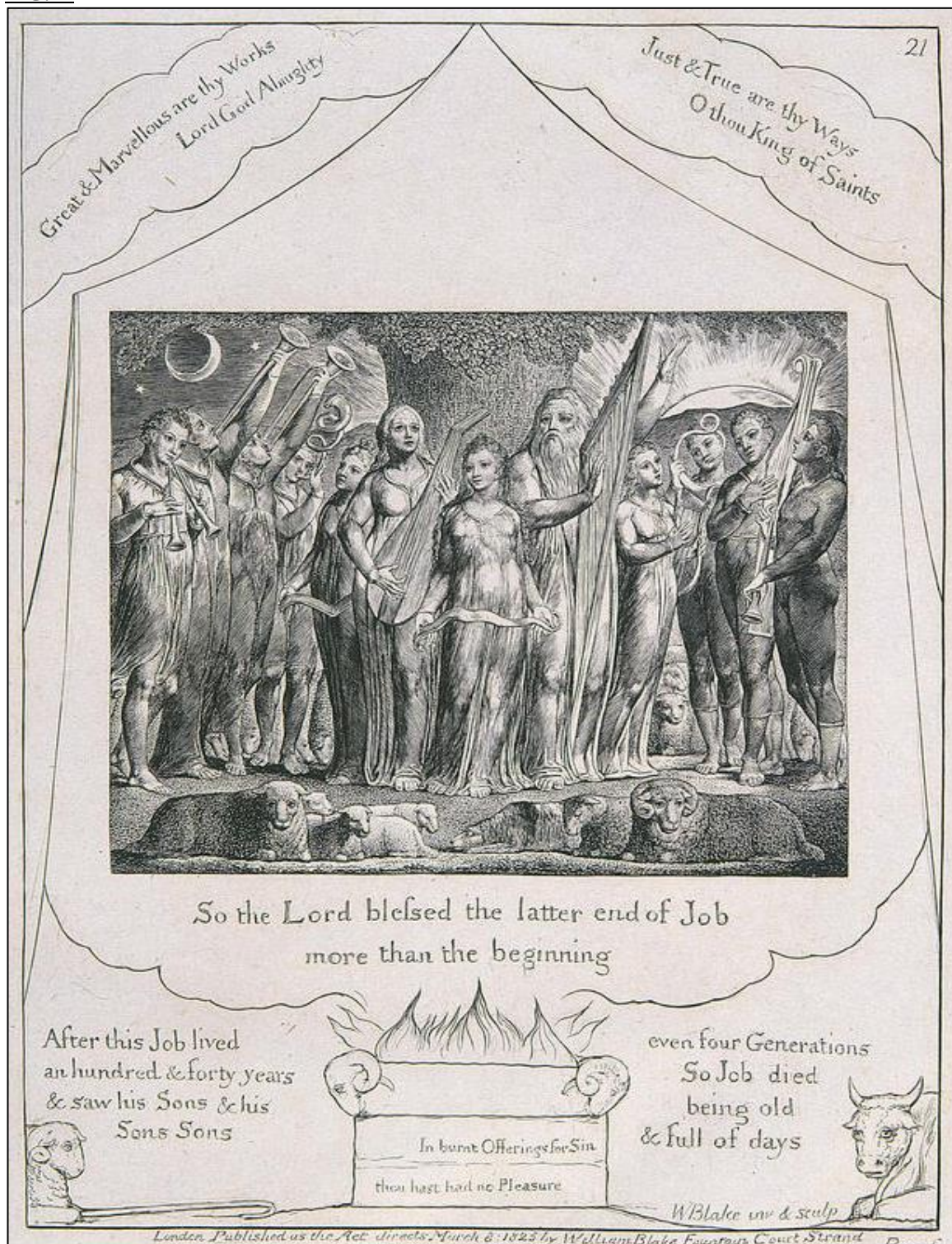
Marriage, Copy H, pl.7. The William Blake Archive, 2000. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.h.illbk.07&java=no>.

FIG.76



Marriage, Copy H, pl.21. The William Blake Archive, 2000. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=mhh.h.illbk.21&java=no>.

FIG.77



Job, Copy A (1794), pl.22. The William Blake Archive, 2002. Web. Accessed 16 April 2015.
<<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=bb421.1.spb.23&java=no>>.

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- 'Christ Trampling on Satan'. Original copperplate. Morgan Library.
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- *Edward I (or III)*.
- *A Figure Ascending in a Glory of Clouds*[?].
- *Five Illustrations to the Book of Enoch*.
- *The Infant Hercules Throttling the Serpents* (recto); manuscript of 'A Fairy leapt'.
- *Los Supporting the Sun* (recto); *A Crouching Figure with a Shield* (verso).
- *A Man Seen from Behind, Rising on Clouds*, possibly for *Urizen* pl.3.
- Possible sketch for *Jerusalem*, pl.25/9: *Time's Triple Bow* (recto); unidentifiable Sketch (verso).
- *Queen Katharine, Awakening from Her Dream*, after Fuseli (recto); sketch for *Jerusalem* pl.6: *Los and His Spectre* (verso).
- *A Resurrection Scene* (recto); *The Devil Outside a Church* (verso).
- Sketch for *The Descent of Peace* (recto); possible sketch for *Adam Naming the Beasts* (verso).
- Sketch for *Job and His Daughters*.
- Sketch for *St. Augustine Converting King Ethelbert of Kent*.
- *Two Legs*.
- *Two Sketches of a Swordsman Standing over his Defeated Opponent*. Recto and verso.
- *Warring Angel* (recto); *Man with Arms Upraised, perhaps the Resurrection* (verso).
- *Wat Tyler's Daughter*.

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- *The Last Judgment*.
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- *The Death of St. Joseph*.

- *The Ghost of Samuel Appearing to Saul.*
- *The Great Red Dragon and the Beast from the Sea.*
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