

ENG 521

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September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010

### Religion and Colonization in Blake's "The Little Black Boy"

In his article "Religion and Democratization in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa: Parallels in the Evolution of Religious and Political Governance Structures," Sheldon Gellar begins by introducing the idea of belonging to a nation-state or belonging to a religious congregation as forms of citizenship. He also links this novel conception of citizenship to the situation of Africans during colonial rule by asserting that "Under colonialism, it was much easier for Africans to convert to a different religion than it was for them to become a naturalized citizen of the colonial power" (2). In my view, Gellar's statement opens up a myriad of possibilities for analyzing British Romantic literature that attempts to deal with the subject of slavery during the eighteenth century. One of the best-known poems of the time on this topic is William Blake's "The Little Black Boy." Although this poem has been traditionally thought to be a critique against slavery, it could also be argued that Blake's use of religious imagery is meant to offer a more "civilized" and, therefore, more acceptable view of African slaves. In other words, it is Blake's attempt to "naturalize" black slaves and offer them some semblance of citizenship through their conversion to Christianity.

Central to this idea of conversion and how it invests the little black boy with more "civilized" qualities is the role of the mother in transmitting Christianity to her child. In fact, in the poem, the child states, "My mother taught me underneath a tree" (5). This idea of "teaching" immediately conjures up images of civilization through its associations to studiousness and the pursuit of knowledge. Thus, Christianity is not merely something imposed on him by the White colonizer; it is something passed down from generation to generation and worthy of teaching. In addition, all the images conjured up by the mother to explain to her son where God dwells and how he behaves towards humans are extremely positive and beautiful and, therefore, succeed in erasing colonial practices of evangelization and, instead, present Christianity as something almost intrinsic to the little black boy and his mother. This, historically, would have never been the case.

In addition to presenting religion as part of the little black boy's character and heritage, Blake also presents religion as a way for the black boy to distance himself from his black roots by coming closer to God and, thus, gaining the white man's acceptance. For instance, an analysis of the following lines reveals an emphasis on stepping away from darkness, which could also be associated to blackness:

And that we are put on earth a little space  
That we may learn to bear the beams of love;  
And these black bodies and this sunburnt face  
Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.

For when our souls have learned the heat to bear  
The cloud will vanish; we shall hear his voice  
Saying, "Come out from the grove, my love and care,  
And around my golden tent like lambs rejoice. (12-19)

Here it is important to notice the references to the “black bodies” and “sunburnt face” as transient elements, nothing but clouds that can be blown away by the wind. It is also not until this cloud vanishes that they will be able to “come out from the grove” and “rejoice.” In other words, by stepping away from their black roots (the shady grove), slaves will gain acceptance and, hopefully, know happiness.

The last lines of the poem also use religious imagery to further reinforce the idea of assimilating into the colonizer’s religion as a way of gaining acceptance and equality:

I’ll shade him from the heat till he can bear  
To lean in joy upon our Father’s knee;  
And then I’ll stand and stroke his silver hair,  
And be like him, and he will then love me.

It is clear from these verses that the little black boy wants to be like God, who represents the colonizers culture and religion rather than his own. However, it is important to remark that this spiritual equality will not be possible until the white and black boys are equal, or until the white boy can bear to sit alongside the black boy. This is perhaps the most redeeming quality of the poem because it implies that the black boy will wait patiently until the white boy can accept him as his equal.

To conclude, in spite of this reading of the poem, Blake’s intentions when writing “The Little Black Boy” can still be thought of as noble since he was, in a sense, trying to present an idealistic situation where black and whites could be equal through their common interest in embracing Christian ideals of brotherhood and common understanding. However, as a product of the British Empire and its brutal colonizing practices, Blake probably found it hard to envision a partnership between blacks and whites where black slaves did not have to forsake their roots, religion, and practices in order to be able to fit in and appear as “civilized” to the White majority.

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### Mysticism and Romanticism in John Clare's "Dawnings of Genius"

This poem encapsulates many of the core ideas and themes of Romantic writing: a communion with nature, a valuing of the rural and common, and a mystical, idealist epistemology. In "Dawnings of Genius," Clare presents us with a "lowly shepherd" who cultivates a visionary experience while contemplating the natural beauty that is his homeland.

Clare starts by defining exactly what he means by the term genius. The word has a range of meaning from ability or capacity to a supernatural being. But Clare here defines it as a "pleasing rapture of the mind" (1), a definition evocative of a visionary state of consciousness. Right off the bat he invokes the mystical experience, but this is not the kind of experience limited to shamans and holy men. It is a kind of profound state that is available to everyone, from "art's refinement to th' uncultur'd swain" (4). Clare's poem gives us an account of genius as found in the latter.

The poem moves on to find the shepherd roaming his "native fields and willow groves," reveling in the beauty that surrounds him (6). We get a common sort of pantheism in the personification and befriending of trees and bushes. Even the "rough rude ploughman" is touched by the profundity of this beauty, giving close examination to a daisy or contemplating a gurgling stream. Even the Poverty surrounding the area, and in which the ploughman presumably lives, cannot dim the pleasure imparted by the beauty of nature. It is a state beyond materiality, and idealized state of mind and soul.

At line 29, we get a shift in tone. From a celebration of beauty, we move to a consideration of the transience of that transcendent feeling that the beauty of nature imparts: "So while the present please, the past decay, / And in each other, losing, melt away" (29-30). Clare highlights the division between the feeling permeating the shepherd and the inability of the conscious mind to comprehend or quantify it. He is joyous and "enraptur'd," though he "knows not why" and he "can't explain" (31-4). The reason for this – at least partly – is the transience: "The bursts of thought with which his soul's perplex'd, / Are bred one moment, and are gone the next" (35-6). Though the heart and thoughts and "Fancy" strive to retain or regain that transcendence, it is in vain.

And this brings us to another shift in tone, this time to a conclusion that is decidedly darker in tone. The final six lines concede defeat and admit the transience of the moment. Though the spark of the vision lives within us, we cannot recapture it, and eventually, "The Memory fails, and Fancy takes her flight" (48). We return to normal consciousness, but after the transcendence, that everyday waking consciousness is bound to be unsatisfying. Hence, the loss of transcendence is mourned: "The wick confined within its socket dies, / Borne down and smother'd in a thousand sighs" (49-50).

This stanza presents us with a few hallmarks of the mystical experience. The first is that it is ineffable; hence the ploughman experiences "joys . . . which he cannot name" and "for which his language can no utterance find" (24-6). The experience is not communicable to others, and here Clare is showing that it is hardly comprehensible even to the subject. Another is that the state is transient, and the loss of that state is often regretted and longed after. Mystical traditions within organized religions often cultivate techniques and methods to help the mystic achieve that transcendence. But even these practiced techniques are unreliable, and certainly a ploughman

would not be aware of them. He would simply be at the mercy of his own transient emotions. Communion with nature would be about his only means to transcendence. The last hallmark of the transcendent experience is the noetic quality. This is treated less explicitly here, but it is evident in Clare's description of the experience involving "bursts of thought" (35), "Increasing beauties" (27), and "new charms" (28). This depiction indicates that the subject is apprehending things not perceived by his usual waking consciousness. He is gaining knowledge intuitively; this is the noetic quality.

The mysticism of much Romantic poetry is why I am drawn to it. It is prominent in Clare, Wordsworth, Shelley, and some Keats. I used to think that the Sublime and the mystical experience were closely related, but now I'm not so sure. Surely as poem such as Shelley's "Mont Blanc" seems to recall some sort of transcendent experience, but it is certainly a far cry from the quiet contemplation of a bucolic rural scene, which involves no danger or threat whatsoever. Perhaps experiencing the sublime is one type of mystical experience? But Burke's description of the Sublime doesn't seem to indulge any mysticism at all, instead treating the subject as a scientific categorization of an aesthetic experience. But maybe that has as much to do with context/audience as anything, Burke being the good Enlightenment logician. Anyway, I better stop now. I can go on and on about his.

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Lord Byron's "When we two parted" from *Poems* (1816)

Lord Byron's "When we two parted" first caught my eye due to the succinct lines and strict rhyme scheme. The poem is visually narrow and the end of each line follows an *ABABCD* rhyme scheme within each stanza. Even though the rhymes are simple and the lines are short, I found that Byron is able to capture the intense pain he feels at the loss or betrayal of his beloved. The text's footnote explains that the woman Byron refers to in this poem is "Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster, with whom Byron had a brief, 'platonic' affair late in 1813" (Wu 849). The impetus for the poem is also explained in the footnote as stemming from "gossip about her affair with the Duke of Wellington in Paris in 1815," and from perusing websites it appears that she was one of several mistresses (including his half-sister, Augusta Leigh) but seemed to be his muse for poetic invention in several works including *The Corsair* (Wu 849).

What is even more intriguing than Byron's scandalous life is the fact that "When we two parted" is only published with four of the five stanzas. The original fourth stanza, which is left out of the published version (but appears in the footnote), serves to identify the narrative of the poem as being caused by Frances Webster, "Fanny" (Wu 849). This excluded stanza also adds the specificity and railing of someone who is bitter. Without the context of the footnotes and extra stanza this poem would read similarly in tone, but still maintain an air of ambiguity which would be revealed by supplemental information. I believe, however, that the poem became much more interesting with the addition of background and the original lines.

The poem begins by explaining a separation and subsequent heart break when he writes "When we two parted / In silence and tears, / Half broken-hearted, / To sever for years, / Pale grew thy cheek and cold, / Colder thy kiss— Truly that hour foretold / Sorrow to this" (ll. 1-8). Byron word choice enables him to pack a lot of emotion into just a few words, and he also uses short phrases like "half broken-hearted" and "To sever for years" which can be unpacked to explain how his separation from her will have a long-lasting effect on him. Byron's words are so captivating to me because of their intensity. This man has a wife, a child, a career, but in this poem it appears that he lives and dies by her, Lady Webster.

The next stanza provides imagery by equating "The dew of the morning" to the "chill on my brow" (ll. 9-10). He also reveals that something has occurred on this day that now makes him think of her name with "shame" (l. 16). It could be concluded that either this is the day that she has left him for the before mentioned Duke of Wellington, or she has already been gone and he has just now found out about them. Either way, Lord Byron expresses devastation at her apparent loss of purity and virtue that according to him, she previously possessed.

The third stanza continues by explaining how now, he "shudder[s]" when he hears her name and he questions "Why wert thou so dear?" (l. 20). He wants to know why she had to be so wonderful to make him love her, if she was only going to leave him and cause herself disgrace. From this point of indignation, the poem as published continues into a concluding stanza that is more peaceful and ponders an occasion where they might meet again.

The missing stanza, which would make it stanza four of five, contains the trope of railing against women that often appears in English Renaissance Literature, but I have seen it other

places as well. Usually there is a reference to Eve or Helen and then an explanation about how all women have the potential to bring down man. This trope is obviously misogynistic (anachronistically), but it is used fairly often when women are licentious or cause trouble. In this stanza, Byron specifically names “Fanny” calling her “doubly undone, / To prove false unto many / As faithless to one,” and then he ends the stanza with “For the woman once falling / Forever must fall” (Wu 849). I think this is reminiscent of the trope of railing against women, and this would have been something his readers would recognize. The fact that he left this stanza out of the published version suggests he decided to tone back his condemnation of women.

Also, the repetition of the word “silence” throughout the poem could stand for the powerless position, like that of silence, which he feels in being the one abandoned, “In silence and tears” (l. 2).

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9-16-10

### Lord Byron, *Manfred*

When I flipped through my Romanticism anthology and randomly landed on a page from the first scene of Byron's *Manfred*, I could tell within a few seconds that Goethe's *Faust I* had been Byron's inspiration for Manfred's encounter with the spirits of "Earth, ocean, air, night, mountains, winds, [and] thy star" (131). My quick recognition was mostly due to the fact that *Faust* is my all-time favorite book and Goethe my favorite author – "favorite" in the sense of neurotic obsession here. *Faust* has provided me with endless inspiring ideas about an individual's potential for greatness and the power of human striving, so naturally I was pleased to discover Byron's version of the Faustian character.

Part of my/Goethe's/Byron's Faustian ideal is the notion of the human as divine, possessing a creative energy equal to that of any imagined god. In response to the Seven Spirits Manfred declares,

Ye mock me – but the power which brought ye here  
Hath made you mine. Slaves, scoff not at my will!  
The mind, the spirit, the Promethean spark,  
The lightning of my being, is as bright,  
Pervading, and far-darting as your own –  
And shall not yield to yours, though cooped in clay! (152-157)

The reasoning by which I justify the idea of humans as gods runs thus: if there is no god, if what exists is just us and the universe, then we are the gods because we are the ones who have created the ideas of god in the first place; we are the creating agents who give meaning to the universe around us in our words and our art. Manfred's "Promethean spark" is that creative ability that makes us human. Our ability to fashion physical objects to our liking is but secondary here: the importance lies in "the mind, the spirit, . . . the lightning of [our] being," that *thing* in our brains, whatever it is, that interprets the world, adds meaning, myth, and story.

I am much like Manfred in wanting to make my own powerful vision of the human place in the universe, taking my inspiration not only from Byron and Goethe but also from 21<sup>st</sup>-century science. For instance, we now know that our bodies are made of "stardust," or in other words, that all of heavy metals that exist in the universe, such as those found in our bodies, were made in the centers of stars as the stars' gravities compressed lighter elements like hydrogen and helium (Joel Primack and Nancy Abrams, *The View from the Center of the Universe*). Knowing this, and appreciating how evolution spun our extraordinary complexity from these basic materials, I would even say to Manfred that it is not all bad to be "cooped in clay."

Of course, as the Seven Spirits point out to Manfred (135), humans are not immortal like our imagined gods. Maybe we could say in response that our power to create, to love, to make art does not have to prove itself a miracle by lasting forever; the Promethean fire may flame out but while it lasts it is the most remarkable thing in the universe. This attempted solution to the problem of mortality is similar to Nietzsche's in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that even though a life with no God and no afterlife feels like tragedy to us, the performance of human life against the void of space is itself an act of creation, transforming our experience of the universe into art. As art, Nietzsche says, it is bearable.

But still a doubt remains, even in my atheist, humanist, life-affirming mind. Is it just an illusion that we can make the elements of the universe our "slaves," as Manfred claims, by

means of the creative forces of our minds? Though the spirits tell Manfred they are at his “beck and bidding” (i.e. Manfred has the creative power of forming ideas and attaching meaning to the universe), they also address him as “child of clay” (132). He is the one whose body is made out of the elements, not the other way around. Although he can summon them and shape them in his mind, he didn’t really create them. Human minds wield a kind of divine/creative power, but we still don’t understand what it is in the universe that allows thought and consciousness to be possible. There is still the question of the Seven Spirits: “What wouldst thou with us?” We can have all the science we want and still be unable to confront the mystery of the universe and of our own minds.

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Annotation 3

### Everything Between Sea and Land and Sky

Continuing with Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*, and consequently still freezing, I find myself more and more unwilling to return landside just yet. Conceptually, I still feel at home in the Antarctic (and Arctic) seas, still interested in the terror and wonder and promise they generate. When thumbing through her sonnets after *XII. Written on the Seashore*, I find that Smith is still perfectly caught up in the promising notion of "beyond": a term I'll abusively bandy about for the purposes of this annotation, meaning "not here" essentially. While I'm tempted to read her poems autobiographically/allegorically—her family life seems downright oppressive—I think that there are broader implications concerning travel in what she's saying here. The breadth of those implications aren't manifestly clear to me, but it seems that the essentialist worldview brought about by still-relevant (to the period) medieval notions of the Great Chain of Being are being seriously challenged as England gets to know it's world better. The sea, as I keep repeating, represents both the tempestuousness of these changes—uneven waves rolling and colliding, refusing stability—and the promise of a changed worldview.

Smith's Sonnet *XXIII (To the North Star)* reflects anxiety of promise and despair, but also possibly madness brought about by the inability to rationalize. At the outset of the poem, she turns her "swimming eyes" (1) toward the North Star, which reminds her of hopes from "happier days" (3). The North Star's rays, which she describes as "propitious" in the face of her "passion", seem to exude forgiveness, or at least the craving for it (4). Precisely *why* she's guilty remains somewhat unclear, though she does refer to her hopes as "faithless" (3), and goes on to describe her nightly wanderings (5). She conducts those wanderings amidst "the tempests drear/That howl in the woods and rocky steeps among (5-6). The first indications of madness appear here in the poem. While howling tempests are not manifestly representative of madness, woods in many respects are (to pun on the term "wode"; and "wood" meaning "mad"). Furthermore, she's wandering at night, and loves "to see thy [the North Star's] sudden light appear/Through the swift clouds driv'n by the wind along;/Or in the turbid water, rude and dark,/O'er whose wild stream the gust of winter raves" (7-10). Here, the North Star shares possible descriptions of the moon—which is also commonly associated with madness (lunacy)—juxtaposing consistency with turbulence. The murky water, though casting the star's/moon's reflection, seems unreliable and base, indicative of the subject's mental state. Confusingly, the "turbid" water, which should indicate a stagnant pond, is actually a "wild stream," compares starkly with the fast-moving clouds. The image of stability is undermined by fast, inconsistent movement. This inconsistency is at its apex when Smith describes, at the end of the poem, the light's "Gleam in faint radiance on the foaming waves" (13). It's somewhat ambiguous whether she's referring to "streams" on the ocean, or if the stream led her to the ocean. Regardless, she has approached the border between land and sea, led on by light through the woods to reason.

The final lines of the poem tie together these borders of land and water; reason and madness; despair and promise. As Smith stands at the border between land and water, she concludes "So o'er my soul short rays of reason fly,/Then fade—and leave me to despair and die!" (13-14). While on one hand the effect of those "short rays is ambiguous"—does Smith

mean that their absence causes her to despair in that she lacks reason; do the rays reveal to her a crushing, unavoidable truth through reason; or in losing the capacity to reason she can do nothing else but despair and die—they regardless signal the end of hope and reason. In one respect, the promises afforded by the “beyond” aren’t rational—there’s little rational basis for letting the imagination run mad, and the reason provided by the rays could dash these hopes. However, the rays themselves, ambiguously casted as moonlight or starlight, could be a source of irrationality and madness. At least the waves are consistently inconsistent—the hope of what lies beyond seem far more intangible. Smith stands at the veritable edge of these borders, and for whatever cause, falls.

Smith, Charlotte. Sonnet XXIII from *Elegiac Sonnets*. Ed. Duncan Wu. Malden: Blackwell, 2006. 94.

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Blake's *The Book of Thel*

Written simultaneously with the *Songs of Innocence* and some of the *Songs of Experience*, William Blake's *The Book of Thel* is deeply concerned with questions of morality, especially in terms of sexuality. Traditionally, scholars view *The Book of Thel* as Blake's critique of cowards; it reflects Blake's own mythology regarding the failure of some to meet life's challenges due to timidity. After all, Blake's only formal education was in art and he taught himself to read over the course of seven years, reading widely and trying his hand at poetry, demonstrating not only perseverance but also courage and determination. But, despite the traditional readings that view Thel as a coward, I disagree. Instead, I contend that Thel demonstrates these same characteristics as Blake himself, as she flees not because she is afraid but as an act of defiance and perseverance; Thel is empowered by her decision to leave because she refuses to sacrifice her virginity in the pursuit of experience and knowledge.

Much is made of the fact that Thel is a virgin. To an extent, it is her role as a virgin that seems to define her, as her name is often revoked in favor of her title, "the virgin" (2.1). As Thel asks for advice regarding the meaning of life and how she should live in the world, she receives advice that enforces patriarchal ideologies. When she first encounters the Cloud he asks her if she is familiar with Luvah, the mythical embodiment of the passionate and sexual aspect of humankind. Thel questions the Cloud, asking him if she "only live[s] to be at death the food of worms" (2.23). Noting Blake's sexual imagery throughout the entirety of *The Book of Thel* as well as the reference to Luvah and the phallic shape of worms, I interpret Blake as using worms to represent the phallus; when Thel asks if she can "only live to be at death the food of worms," she references the notion that women become "the food of worms" when they give their bodies to men. These worms are the harbingers of death, literally and intellectually, as women must sacrifice their minds and bodies to men. Patriarchal ideology is enforced by the Cloud, who responds, stating, "Then if thou art the food of worms, O virgin of the skies,/How great thy use, how great thy blessing!" (2.25-6). Thel remains unconvinced; this is particularly interesting because the Cloud is gendered. Blake blatantly uses masculine pronouns when describing "his airy throne" (2.24). Thus, when the Cloud departs, he is soon replaced with the Clod of Clay, a woman who also actively promotes patriarchal heteronormativity. The Clod of Clay advises Thel, "We live not for ourselves;/... My bosom of itself is cold, and of itself is dark" (3.10,12). In this advice, the Clod of Clay insinuates that the very existence of women is contingent upon the pleasure of men; it is without a male partner that she describes herself as "cold" and "dark."

The conclusion of Blake's *The Book of Thel* relies upon the Worm. He asks Thel, "Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?" (4.20). Thel is shocked at the reference and threat to her hymen. In an effort to protect her mind and body from becoming "the food of worms," "the virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek/ Fled back unhindered till she came into the vales of Har" (4.21-2). Because Thel refuses to

submit to patriarchal ideologies regarding the subordination of women and the trafficking of their bodies, her return to the vales of Har must be viewed as a triumph instead of as a failure; she is empowered, not diminished, through her preservation and determination.

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Annotation #3

### The Fusion of Christabel and Geraldine

Coleridge's narrative fragment *Christabel* is a long narrative poem that seems to defy interpretation. According to Anya Taylor, "Each interpretation seems to work as well as the next, even if the interpretations are contradictory. Some see the heroine Christabel initiated into love; some see her as a more or less innocent Eve falling into the snares of a demon from preternatural realms or from Satan" (707). Although some critics may see Christabel "initiated into love," Woodring argues that most critics discuss the poem in terminology that supports that idea that "The poem show[s] the inability of innocence to defeat evil." Yet the poem remains enigmatic because its two main characters, Christabel and Geraldine, are described in such complex ways. In fact, although the poem seems to contrast these two characters, they are very closely related. Even the seemingly contrasting imagery used to describe the two women unites them more than it distinguishes them.

When Christabel first finds Geraldine in the woods, the poem describes them as being physically distant. Christabel is praying beneath an oak tree (36-37) and hears a sound on "the other side" (43). Once Christabel has closed this distance—she "stole to the other side of the oak" (58)—she and Geraldine become united both physically and in imagery.

Upon hearing Geraldine's kidnapping tale, Christabel "stretched forth her hand," (102) comforting Geraldine with a touch. When Geraldine collapses at the gate surrounding the castle, in language fraught with sexual imagery, Christabel "[takes] the key that fitted well-- / A little door she [opens] straight" (118-19) and, with imagery describing a marriage, carries Geraldine "Over the threshold of the gate" (127). However, the main description of the union between these two women comes as they lie in bed. Geraldine takes Christabel into her arms and "In the touch of [her] bosom there worketh a spell" (255). Although Geraldine says the spell literally constrains Christabel's speech, more importantly, it shows how the two are physically and psychologically united.

From this point, the poem seems to show the conflicts between Christabel and Geraldine and culminates in Bard Bracy's disturbing dream about the dove and the snake. Traditionally, most critics see Christabel as the dove whose neck is wrung by the "bright green snake" (537). However by this time it's Christabel who makes a "hissing sound" (579) and "has shrunken serpent eyes" (590). More importantly, the images of the dove and the snake are more complex than we usually think. Although the dove is traditionally a symbol of peace in Western Christianity, it's also a symbol of loss. In the Old Testament, God sends the dove to show Noah that the flood has ended (Genesis 8.8), but it's also a signal that the rest of the world has been destroyed. Similarly in the New Testament, after Jesus' baptism, a dove descends to signify the Holy Spirit—a sign that God is pleased (Matthew 3.16-17). However the Holy Spirit returns permanently on the day of Pentecost, which occurs only because of Jesus' crucifixion (Acts 2). In other words, although the dove is a gift from God and a symbol of peace, it's also a symbol of loss. Similarly, the snake is a symbol with dual meaning. On one hand, the serpent is a symbol of deceit and betrayal since it is the serpent that convinces Eve to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). However, it's also a symbol of healing. As Moses and the Israelites wandered in the wilderness they were attacked by "fiery serpents." In response God told Moses to put one of the snakes on his staff and hold it up, stating that "he that looketh up it, shall live" (Numbers 21.6-8). In other words, whether Christabel is the dove and Geraldine the

snake or whether the opposite is true, the symbolism remains ambiguous. Like these symbols, the two main female characters also remain ambiguous and enigmatically intertwined.

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### Lewis's Supernatural Sublimity in *The Monk*

In *The Monk*, first published in 1796, Matthew Lewis invokes supernatural forces and austere landscapes to generate and locate culminating and transformational experiences designed to create a sense of the sublime specific to 18<sup>th</sup> century interpretations of an aesthetic concept originally associated with Longinus' *On The Sublime*. Perhaps the most profound representation of this strategy occurs at the novel's conclusion, where, after receiving the inquisition's sentence and signing Lucifer's contract, Ambrosio is transplanted by the devil from his prison cell to a dramatic wilderness landscape that serves as the outward reflection of his spiritual damnation. In this austere mountainous setting, Lucifer explains to him that he has unwittingly killed his mother and then raped and murdered his sister. The devil further reveals that gaining Ambrosio's soul had been a calculated effort made successful by the servant Matilda, his cross-dressing lover, whose physical beauty had been the catalyst for his original corruption. After clarifying circumstances for Ambrosio, Lucifer lifts him into the sky and releases him onto the rocks below, where he suffers terribly for six days before dying in the full awareness of what he has done.

The coupling of physical anguish endured in a rocky landscape with inner torment enhances the effect of sublime horror that Lewis above all strives to convey, a torment that generally precedes any physical suffering. In this instance, Ambrosio's recognition of what he has done incubates as he flies through the air with Lucifer and laments his crimes. "The damning contract," Lewis writes, "weighted heavy upon his mind; and the scenes in which He had been a principal actor, had left behind them such impressions, as rendered his heart the seat of anarchy and confusion" (Lewis 438). Recognizing at last the magnitude of his terrible crimes, having been reduced to a state of fear and panic, Ambrosio is psychologically delivered up to his fate.

His emotion is both heightened and put into context as Ambrosio then witnesses the harsh natural scene beneath him. "The disorder of his imagination," Lewis writes, "was increased by the wilderness of the surrounding scenery; By the gloomy Caverns and steep rocks, rising above each other, and dividing the passing clouds" (439). In this same breath, he also recollects the mournful sighs of clustered trees, "the shrill cry of mountain eagles, who had built their nests among these lonely Desarts," and the violent waters, "which faintly reflected the moon-beams, and bathed the Rock's base on which Ambrosio stood" (439). In this profound moment, Ambrosio experiences not only physical but also emotional terror, in a scene reminiscent of Lucifer's own recognition of his circumstances in Book I of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The horrors he feels consequent upon his actions are met and matched by the awesome gravity and power of the natural landscape, which confirms his interior landscape and certifies the sense of ineffable awesomeness that constituted the sublime for early romanticism.

The horror of this scene provides Ambrosio true awareness of his condition: that of a man condemned to death and damnation. While experiencing the emotional terror

induced by this scene, Ambrosio receives his sentence from Lucifer: “I saw your artifice, knew its falsity, and rejoiced in deceiving the deceiver! You are mine beyond reprieve: I burn to possess my right, and alive you quit not these mountains” (441). This sentencing of Ambrosio for mortal crimes is inextricably linked to the physical landscape, which serves as an outward projection of the monk’s torments and the backdrop against which both Ambrosio and the reader can experience the severe gravity of his circumstances, further reinforced as the harsh sun scorches his skin and eagles peck at his eyeballs. Like his contemporaries, Lewis fully recognizes the importance of an austere natural landscape in expressing horrific experience associated by his contemporaries with the sublime.

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[On Slavery] from *The Task* (1785) (Book II) by William Cowper

Trying to tie in my annotation with this week's readings on slavery, I came across Cowper's poem, [On Slavery,] taken from his larger work *The Task*, and I found that this short poem accurately expresses the sorrow and disdain that much of the British population felt toward the ongoing slavery issue. *The Task* initially began as a sort of mock-heroic poem that was to consist of Cowper's everyday affairs and thoughts on insignificant subjects of the home and his life. However, as Cowper began to produce the poems, it turned out to be "an extended blank verse meditation on all manner of subjects close to Cowper's heart" (Wu 17). [On Slavery] is one such topic that greatly preoccupied Cowper, and it represents the wider issues that Cowper and many other poets could not ignore. It is as much a reflection of the Romantic poets' desire to turn inward and explore the self that shows how deeply affected they were by the issues concerning their country and all mankind.

[On Slavery] begins with the initial impulse that Cowper had of getting away from the problems of society and secluding himself to his home in the rural environment. His desire was that "rumour of oppression and deceit,/Of unsuccessful or successful war/Might never reach me more!" (3-5). In his attempt to try and distance himself from society's horrible endeavors, Cowper, in the middle of solitude and seclusion, still finds himself to be deeply troubled by the issues. Cowper was concerned closely with the matters in Parliament in the movement towards abolition and had friends who were active in the abolitionist campaign (Wu 17). He writes how the powers at be did everything that could to maintain a legal handle over continuing slavery: "and having pow'r/ T' enforce the wrong, for such a worthy cause/ Dooms and devotes him as his lawful prey."

Cowper continues to emphasize the point that although there is essentially no more slavery in Britain, their continuing to allow it overseas is a logical and ethical flaw in the system. "We have no slaves at home—then why abroad?" He asserts that the steps toward abolishing slavery in England were thought to be advanced toward complete abolition, and states, "Slaves cannot breathe in England; if their lungs/ Receive our air, that moment they are free,/ They touch our country and their shackles fall." Cowper is stating that it was a proud moment in Britain's history to display freedom and justice to the rest of the world, but that they need to develop that pride beyond the borders of their country. He believes it is a more valuable exhibition of power and reasoning to fulfill Britain's claims of mercy and justice in the current events that were taking place abroad, and he declares, "Of all your Empire, that where Britain's power/ Is felt, mankind may feel her mercy too."

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### Anti-Slavery and Feminism

Due to this week's focus on slavery within travel narratives, I became interested in other metaphors and forms of slavery in the Romantic period. After reading Blake's poem, "Visions of the Daughters of Albion," and learning that the Daughters of Albion represent English women in the early Romantic period, I read the poem as a metaphor: the oppression of women as slavery. I found that Blake was pulling his vision of the "Daughters" from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which further prompted me to explore the slave metaphor in her work. In order to spare us some extensive reading, I focused only on her portion written "To M. Talleyrand-Perigord, Late Bishop of Autun," a man who had argued for the education of women in order to teach them to be "subservient to men" (Damsroch and Dettmar 281).

In this portion of her work addressed to this legislator, she uses reason and logic to argue that women need to be educated so that they may in turn possess reason and logic. She uses the metaphor of slavery to suggest that if women, like slaves, are not able to discover through reason their use in the household, village, country, or world, they will continue to act just as men treat them—like idiots.

Wollstonecraft holds English men responsible for the oppression of women just as English men are held responsible for owning slaves and therefore treating other members of the human race as inferior beings. She even maintains that men are responsible for the lack of chastity in women during this time, stating, "chastity will never be respected in the male world till the person of a woman is not, as it were, idolized..." (282). She uses the phrase "human race" quite often, asserting that men are trivializing half the human race, not just the members of a darker skin color. Judging by the guilt I have seen portrayed in our other readings for today, Wollstonecraft hopes that men will feel the same guilt they are currently feeling towards the slave-trade, and apply it towards the oppression of women.

Subsequently, Wollstonecraft calls for the fear of rebellion. English men are familiar with this fear of slave rebellion on the ships or plantations, but Wollstonecraft is arguing that they should feel this fear within their own households. Uneducated women cannot be blamed for their wrongs; how are they supposed to be held accountable for their rebellious actions when they are only retaliating against the same actions men are taking (ie—unfaithfulness, neglect of the family)? The language Wollstonecraft uses states that women cannot be held responsible when "they attempt to do themselves justice by retaliation" (282). This sounds eerily similar to the language of a slave-rebellion; seeking justice and equality by retaliating against their cruel masters. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft urges that "if women are not permitted to enjoy legitimate rights, they will render both men and themselves vicious, to obtain illicit privileges" (283). Wollstonecraft uses the rhetoric of anti-slave trade movements towards the fight for women's own freedom, though largely within the household. She proves her own ability to reason, and uses guilt and fear as weapons in her search for equality.

Damsroch, David and Kevin J.H. Dettmar. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature: The Romantics and Their Contemporaries*, Vol. 2A, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006.

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### Annotation 3: Keats' "To Autumn"

Autumn is often thought of as the season of harvest, ripening, and maturity. It is the same in Keats' poem "To Autumn." A reader, on first studying the poem, might find this an interesting and beautiful description of autumn and all its deliciousness. Indeed, the nature of autumn—the fruit, the full-grown lambs, the "seasons of mists and fellow fruitfulness" doubtfully conjure the most striking of autumn scenes in the human mind. However, this is less a poem of nature and beauty (although both themes are present), and more a poem of life, maturity, and the acceptance of death.

The words Keats uses to describe autumn are full of maturity. "To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees, / and fill all fruit with ripeness to the core" (5, 6). The word "mossed" suggests something about age, which is most likely not youth, while "ripeness" also brings feelings of maturity, doneness, and age. The first stanza acts as a sort of building up, or a description of the age of something (not necessarily autumn). Something, rather metaphorically, has reached its maturity and is full of ripeness, "mossed" with age, and developed close to death. After all, autumn is the last season before the death and cold of winter.

In the following stanza, Keats does a bit more to signal death. It should be noted here that Keats' description of coming death so far in the poem has been one tied closely to human nature. In fact, Keats talks to autumn as if she were some sort of human being, a goddess perhaps, as he does in previous odes. However, the feeling is light. The second stanza talks of a harvest. The lines read: "Or on a half-reaped furrow sound-asleep, / Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook / Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers; / And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep / Steady thy laden head across a brook; / Or a cider-press, with patient look, / Thou watchest the last ooziings hours by hours" (16-22). This scene is full of death. The speaker talks of fields that have been "half-reaped," of apples that have been crushed and pressed, and the "last ooziings" of the cider press. Here, Keats presents a sort of euphemism of death. Instead of writing a poem about death, he writes a poem about nature dying away with the last fruitful season.

In the last stanza, Keats poses the question of "Where are the songs of spring?" to autumn, asking her if she wouldn't like to go back to a younger time (23). Keats then presents the beautiful "soft-dying day," and talks of the "stubble-plains" to suggest that autumn, the harvest, and the beauty of the season are giving way to winter. He talks of mourning gnats and "full-grown lambs" to suggest a death that is near at hand.

This poem is an interesting take on death, since Romanticism was very much concerned with the nature of life and mortality. Perhaps Keats is suggesting that this maturity and death is indeed a vital part of mortality. Or perhaps Keats knows he is going to die young, so he needs to address the issue. Whatever the case, it is obvious that this poem is less about a season of nature, and more about a season of human life.

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### Shelley's Politics Continued....

We are all familiar with the many layers of situational irony that emerge from Ozymandias' words on the pedestal in the context of the "decay / Of that colossal wreck" and the "lone and level sands [that] stretch far away" (ln 12-14). It is, indeed, a critique on power. The artist's work lasted longer than the kingdom, but even the sculpture is eroding away. Ozymandias' arrogant confidence is reduced to a laughable jest, for the sands of time get the last word. The other irony is that Ozymandias spoke more truth than he knew. If we think we are powerful due to the many works we have collected, we should truly despair. One day, such a collection will be a colossal wreck as well.

Shelley has a political impulse, though, that is sometimes overshadowed (in undergraduate courses) by an emphasis upon "Mont Blanc" and the sublime. This political impulse is perhaps just as strong as his love for nature. "A Vindication of Natural Diet" and "The Mask of Anarchy" (which wasn't published till well after Shelley's death due to its political content (1049)) are two works that address social justice issues. "Ozymandias" is another work that can be seen as intensely political (1079-80). Sir Joseph Banks is not unlike Ozymandias. Both created or collected "works" in order to bolster the empire's power. From this angle, the poem becomes less a general indictment of power and a more local and pointed argument against another *spirit of the age*--a spirit that embraces exploitation creates an Ozymandias-esque kingdom--an illusion of eternal power.

Other observations strengthen this read. In Duncan Wu's footnote (1079), he reveals that Shelley wrote the poem as part of a sonnet competition with Horace Smith, but it is the context of the competition that gives both sonnets a political edge. They had visited the British Museum, "and their admiration of the newly acquired statue of Rameses II...in 1917 prompted" the competition. The British Museum is one place that housed countless works--works that bolstered Britain's presence and imperialistic power within the national consciousness. Both sonnets serve, therefore, as a warning. Shelley's word choice also strengthens the political edge of the poem. As mentioned, he uses the resonant word "works" (ln 11) which encapsulates not only Ozymandias' "works" but also the artifacts in the museum. The words "traveller" and "antique" resonate with and critique the age's zeal for the exotic. As voyage after voyage took travelers around the globe and as ship after ship returned with antiques and works, a sense of domination crept into Britain's national consciousness. It is this sense of domination Shelley calls into question.

As mentioned, "Ozymandias" was part of a contest. Smith, the other contender, explores the same idea but much more explicitly (1079). After telling the reader that "The [Babylonian] city's gone" (ln 6), he conspicuously addresses London's fragility in the sestet:

We wonder, and some hunter may express  
Wonder like ours, when through the wilderness  
Where London stood, holding the wolf in chase,  
He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess

What powerful but unrecorded race  
Once dwelt in that annihilated place. (ln 9-14)

Though a solid sonnet, Shelley's triumphs over it precisely because Smith leaves little room for the reader to discover the irony and its political import.

"Names of ideas and external objects": Poetic Understanding in Shelley's "On Life"

To contest the habituation to involvement in worldly experience, in addition to the omnipresent fear of the end of life, Percy Bysshe Shelley advocates a form of enhanced perception in "On Life." This perception is at odds with the dualistic separation of mental and physical objects, attentive to detail in a way that lends vitality and meaning to experience, and accommodating to the possibility of correspondences that are not immediately visible to the senses. In the following study I intend to work toward a comprehension of how Shelley's meditation on perception—which composes the majority of "On Life"—might lead him to ask his closing questions, which deal with the source of life. I believe that Shelley concludes with a seemingly indeterminate inquiry because his exposition deals so centrally with the notion of wonder at the mysteries of the world, and so "On Life" serves as both a philosophical digression and a kind of case-in-point.

Shelley appears to conclude his essay in a state of befuddlement. After asking, "What is the cause of life," he infers that neither "religion," nor "mind," which "can only perceive," could have originated experience, or the minds whose impressions constitute experience (Shelley 1180). Rather than offering any suggestion of an answer to the question, Shelley closes with doubt: "It is infinitely improbable that the cause of mind—that is, of existence—is similar to mind" (Ibid). On the surface, the ambiguity of this statement may appear perplexing, and even upsetting, for in tying existence to thought and then denying the origin of existence in thought, Shelley submits a somewhat trying puzzle for further thought. Before the final paragraph, the poet's affirmations appear to work toward a common point. Shelley observes that to be "conscious of" the "scenery of this earth" is a blessing reserved only for the "refined and extraordinary person," and pits "materialism"—the notion that the physical world falls beyond the purview of thought and impression—against the "enmity with nothingness and delusion" that characterizes the extraordinary person (1178, 1179). Consciousness of the sort that Shelley describes—an "admiration" for life, which incorporates sense impression and conscious interpretation—seems to function as a tool of resistance in the struggle with "nothingness" (Ibid). Shelley appears to argue for a different kind of engagement with the world, for a different form of life, as a materialist sentiment heralds a kind of surrender to the destructive forces of material existence.

By the end, however, Shelley asks questions that appear to redirect his inquiry entirely. The impulse here might be to assume that Shelley has meandered from his course, or come to an unanswerable question in the completion of his argument. I decline to accept this sort of reduction, for in asking his closing question, Shelley reflects the very fascination that he describes at the beginning of his essay: at the limits of "familiarity," "astonishment" can easily "overawe the functions of that which is its object" (1178). Shelley's philosophical musings acquire the abstract, conceptual powers of poetry when the poet indulges in the mysteries of life, and permits true uncertainty—and true fascination—to compete with his logic.

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Annotation of A Letter from William Blake to the Revd Dr. Trusler, 23 August 1799 (Extract)

“nature is imagination itself”

Blake’s response to Dr. Trusler is anything but dim, and he eloquently and blatantly counters Trusler’s reasoning that attempts to disparage the world of the other, the world of the fantastic, and the world of the imaginative. After indicating that Trusler’s desire to distance himself from such worlds is indicative of his being “weak”, Blake makes the bold claim that the world of the fantastic, imaginative other is not discrete from the world of the real (240)<sup>1</sup>. In doing so, Blake erodes the imposed border between the fantastic with the rational, claiming that vision, it seems, is the root of sensation and sense.

The concept of “vision” takes multiple forms in this letter, and Blake plays upon these different faculties to make a sound argument that Trusler is the one with the dimmed vision himself—who cannot fully see, and therefore cannot fully express. The first instance of vision appears when Blake admonishes Trusler’s inability to comprehend “visions of eternity”, claiming that such visions have an implicit value that is sensory (240). Interestingly, Blake refers to Trusler’s logic in visual terms, rebuking them as “ill-proportioned” because he can only comprehend the quotidian and the temporal (240). What interests me here is Blake’s call for the imaginative to arouse the senses beyond the temporal—in both the spiritual and the time duration. This concept recurs towards the end of the excerpt when Blake represents the world as “one continued vision” that extends beyond the singular moment (241). I am interested in finding other works of Blake’s that expounds on this idea in further detail, and looking for residues of signification in his poems and works, to obtain a more complete dissemination of this idea. I find it an intriguing concept, but I feel like my own understanding of it is rather shallow and inferred. In this comprehension, I find it an interesting thought that the world as “one continued vision of fancy or imagination” is a world comprised of fragmentary construction and fabrication—of rhetoric and pictorial portrayals, of understanding and science—comprised of every individual’s vision of the world.

In this conceptualization, Blake would be interestingly far beyond his era, hinting at a construct that is indicative of the postmodern/modern era (if there is a distinct boundary between those two eras as well). He would be on the footsteps of Virginia Woolf, who significantly described reality through aesthetic pictures as well, noting that the world is much like a photograph: we all see a different vantage point, and this vision is not totalistic or absolute. There is always a room and a life beyond the doorway captured in the photograph. Similarly, Blake notes that “I see everything I paint in this world, but everybody does not see alike” (240). He is noting ideology and vision here, understanding that there is not absolute real to capture (at least in my understanding of it). This complicates and yet elucidates his ensuing statement, “But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself” (241). This seems to indicate that there is no absolute “nature” to view—that there is no way that man can view nature without the mediation of an individual eye that is a necessary lens of imagination and spiritual sensation. One thing this entails is a loss of singularity and boundaries in terms of comprehension and understanding. I have to wonder what this might truly entail in regard to scientific examination and experimentation. Although Blake does cite Lord Bacon in consideration of how the imagination lends itself to reason and resulting action, it seems that Blake is moving away from totalistic truth and reality in a time where people are searching for a way to categorize and totalize.

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<sup>1</sup> Blake, William. “Letter from William Blake to the Revd Dr. Trusler, 23 August 1799 (extract)” Ed. Wu, Duncan. *Romanticism: An Anthology*. 3rd ed. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006. 240-241. Print.

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### Spiritless Machine

#### Nature vs. Industry in Wordsworth's "The World is Too Much With Us"

When I first stumbled upon Wordsworth's "The World is Too Much With Us," I immediately saw a timeless and universal quality to it. Despite being written in 1806, just over two centuries ago, the sonnet still reaches out to me as someone from this time and place. Perhaps the reason for that is we, as modern people, are the results of the Industrial Revolution. Quite often we are separate from nature and "out of tune" (Wordsworth, "The World" 8) in our mechanized world. Just a few years after the publication of this poem, the Luddite protests occurred, resulting from fears that their jobs would be taken away if machines could replace them (Landow). Such worries are still relevant today, when the United States is outsourcing so many jobs to other countries willing to work for less, and task-oriented jobs have become self-service, such as cashiering or gas station attendant positions. With a fear of losing one's job, the connection with and enjoyment of nature is more difficult to obtain.

Despite the melancholic tone, Wordsworth's usual focus on nature is not absent from this piece, but rather, the poem is a lament of the changing times and the way man has begun to distance himself from nature. The mention of the "winds that will be howling at all hours" (6) is twofold – he brings to life the wildness of nature, but it is also symbolic of the awful howling he feels as man is distanced from nature. This is also in line with Wordsworth's tendency to celebrate what he called the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" ("Preface" 498), because this piece expresses his outrage at the changes to which he has been witness. He is full of anger at humanity's disconnection with nature as a result of industrial progress. In addition, he blames himself as one who had "given [their] hearts away" ("The World" 4).

Wordsworth equates nature to "everything" (8) acknowledging that without it, mankind is lost. He would "rather be/A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn" (9-10) than lose what he considers everything. In this, the natural world is more important to him than his religion, possibly because he has a spiritual connection with nature. That spirit is tainted with the "Getting and spending" (2) that has become so common in his day. Sadly, that is also still relevant today, but on a much grander scale. Rather than explore the wonders and beauty of nature, it is quite common for modern man to prefer to stay indoors with electronic gadgets and toys, or go shopping for more needless items that only drive us further from the connection that Wordsworth advocates. This sonnet is like a call to action to his readers, though indirect, because his meaning is clear. We lose a bit of ourselves as we drift further and further away from our living surroundings.

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