

Ecological Prosodies:  
Rhythmic Environments and Experimental Meters in British Romantic Poetry

By

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines the metrical experiments of the Romantic poets, William Blake, Charlotte Smith, and John Clare, arguing that these poets saw meter and rhythm not merely as poetic operations but as agents of revelation, markers of linguistic evolution, and confirmations of our environmental enmeshment. These poetic experiments provide a pressure point at which to interrogate the nebulous category of form while reimagining the explanatory power of sound patterning within different sites of inquiry such as ecocriticism, new materialism, and biosemiotics. Investigating Romantic prosody in these contexts widens prosody's theoretical scope and articulates more clearly the relationship these poets saw between word and world. My analysis articulates what I call an eco-prosody that de-centers poet and reader, positioning them as only two components in what Jane Bennett calls a distributive agency that also includes environment, sound, biology, and multiple temporalities. What Romantic poetry allows us to see is that meter and rhythm connect patterns of thought to patterns in physical nature.

Following my introduction, chapter 2 argues that Blake's epic, *Milton*, uses meter to articulate the profound links between poetic, evolutionary, bodily, and historical temporalities. Meter functions as a poetic subsystem in *Milton*'s larger mental system, and, ultimately, Blake posits meter as a pathway that links the internal and external worlds. Chapter 3 challenges a common genealogy that traces nondramatic blank verse from Milton to Wordsworth without acknowledging the innovations of Charlotte Smith, who influenced Wordsworth (and, thus, the Victorians) with her conversational rhythms and exploited blank verse's plasticity by illuminating the relationship between versification, natural history, and imperial expansion. My fourth chapter shows how John Clare radically reconfigures the heroic couplet to reflect the temporalities of rural labor and ecological rhythms. Clare uses natural and poetic rhythms to

dissolve the lyric subject into its environment, revealing a more accurate picture of our ecological entanglements. I conclude by discussing the contemporary relevance of these poetic experiments, suggesting that literary studies can look to other cultural forms that value and innovate with verbal rhythm, especially rap music, to rethink and refresh its own critical frameworks.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

We feel that the ideas rhyme. Then we perceive that thoughts and phrases are also rhythms, calls, echoes. To think is to sound the right note, to vibrate as soon as the light wave touches us. Anger, enthusiasm, indignation, everything that takes us out of ourselves has the same liberating virtue. Unexpected phrases, possessing an electric force, appear.  
—Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre*

This dissertation examines the Romantic revival of and experimentations with older verse forms and argues that metrical experiments during this period used meter and rhythm not merely as poetic operations but as a metalanguage that registered the radically shifting views about the natural world in both science and aesthetics while also indexing our connection to that world. My research examines a range of verse forms, including epic, narrative, lyric, and ballad, focusing on the metrical experiments of John Clare, Charlotte Smith, and William Blake. I contextualize the work of these poets with the metrical experimentation of other Romantic poetry and with the often-conflicting poetic theories put forward in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, especially those of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Percy Shelley. I illustrate how these prosodic experiments must be understood in the context of two of the Romantic period's most significant cultural shifts: one, the explosion of new scientific fields, especially geology, evolution, and physiology; secondly, the radically changing view of nature as a savage wasteland that needed to be tamed and made productive to the proto-ecological view of nature as a source of spiritual rejuvenation.

Scholarship on prosody over the last twenty years has largely been the province of Victorianists. The topic has produced less scholarly output in Romantic studies, which has focused more on historicism, rhetoric, and ecocriticism, discussions of which, I suggest, can be

enriched with increased attention to prosody. Consequently, there remains much to be said not only about the Romantic flourishing of prosodic innovation but also about the foundations it laid for the subsequent groundswell of Victorian verse experiments and the rich discourse of prosodic theories they catalyzed, including those of Coventry Patmore, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and John Addington Symonds, among others. To this end, my dissertation has two primary objectives: first, to investigate the relationship between prosody and the natural world in Romantic poetry and, second, to make a case for what prosody can do for Romantic studies and, more broadly, ecocriticism.

Yopie Prins' pivotal work in the 2000s on historical poetics and subsequent anthologies such as *Meter Matters* (2011), *On Rhyme* (2017), and *Critical Rhythm* (2019), have theorized prosody as a means of historical, political, and bodily understanding and not merely a reading practice. Building on these important works, this dissertation turns to the Romantic archive to present prosody as a pressure point at which we can interrogate the nebulous category of form while reimagining the explanatory power of sound patterning in Romantic poetry and relevant sites of inquiry such as ecocriticism, new materialism, and biosemiotics. An investigation of prosody in these critical contexts promises to expand our understanding of its theoretical scope while articulating more clearly the relationship Romantic poets saw between rhythm and environment, meter and body, word and world.

The Environmental Humanities focuses more on place than time, and its convergence with the study of poetry seldom produces sustained discussions about poetic time: meter, rhythm, and other forms of sound patterning that unfold temporally. However, it can lend renewed energy to some perennial questions about sound patterning: Why does rhythm make us tap our feet involuntarily, help us learn and remember things, and call forth words we may or may not be

asking for? These are ecological questions because they speak to the way sound patterns connect us physically and epistemologically to an external world. As I argue, Romantic poets track this connection by treating meter and rhythm as agents of revelation, markers of linguistic evolution, and confirmation of our environmental enmeshment in a world that is simultaneously inside and outside.

But while we often acknowledge the involuntary somatic effects meter and rhythm have on us, we seldom scrutinize the implications of those effects when examining the many moving parts involved in writing and reading poetry. My analyses of Romantic metrical innovations articulate what I call an eco-prosody that de-centers poet and reader, positioning them as only two parts—or, as poet-critic Octavio Paz puts it, “two existential moments”—in what Jane Bennett calls a distributive agency that also includes environment, sound, biology, and multiple temporalities: the past patterns, present events, and future expectations made legible by meter and rhythm (Paz *Children* 72; Bennett ix).

While we easily see natural environments following measurable rhythms (tides, seasons, migration patterns, planetary orbits), this dissertation asks us to consider the reverse: to see poetic rhythms as environmental phenomena—not abstractions, but concrete things that, like Bennett’s agentic matter, affect how we feel, what we pay attention to, and what we remember, all of which are essential for learning, growth, and evolution. What Romantic poetry allows us to see is that meter and rhythm connect patterns of thought to patterns in physical nature.

In her influential book *Vibrant Meter* (2010), Bennett argues that matter is neither passive, mechanistic, nor divinely interfused; rather, vitality inheres in matter, which is agentic. However, this agency does not belong to specific material objects. Rather, the agency is distributed because any vital or acting being—human or nonhuman—is always already

enmeshed in a web of previous actions, consequences, and contexts. The agency of natural bodies and technological artifacts such as electricity, garbage, metals, stem cells, and worms, for example, participate in a “distributive agency” deriving from their relations and their ability to influence human moods (vii–xvi). Bennett writes,

I believe in one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen. I believe that this pluriverse is traversed by heterogeneities that are continually *doing things*. I believe it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms, and that a careful course of anthropomorphization can help reveal that vitality, even though it resists full translation and exceeds my comprehensive grasp. I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests (122).

If garbage, food, electricity, metal, animals, and other nonhuman objects are vibrant, as Bennett asserts, and if they affect our moods and behaviors through a distributive agency, then how do rhythmic patterns participate in such a distributive agency? How do meter and rhythm qualify as agentic, vibrant forces if they, too, affect our moods through the sound-energy they produce and the physical responses they induce? Rhythm and meter, I suggest, fall under Bennett’s definition as forces and forms, if not bodies. Moreover, since rhythms and meters have the capacity (through music, incantation, breathing, and poetry) to efface the self, at least temporarily, then as forces and forms, they can help reduce our sense of human mastery. In these ways, I suggest rhythm belongs to a distributive agency that, for Bennett, also includes food, metal, electricity, and living organisms. In my chapter on Blake, I use the term “vibrant meter” as a more expanded notion of meter that focuses on meter’s existence as pattern, as a way for humans, and especially

poets, to comprehend the universe (or “pluriverse”) that, for Paz, takes rhythm as its primary substrate whose analogical force shows us how the language of the universe turns itself into a poem (*Children* 63).

Bennett, however, marginalizes language because she deems it exemplary of human mastery. She seeks to “emphasize, even overemphasize, the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces....in an attempt to counter the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought” (xvi). This method assumes language to be the exclusive domain of humans and, thus, overlooks how nonhuman environments teem with meaningful and intentional communications, as biosemiotic theory persuasively argues.<sup>1</sup> Human language may be more sophisticated than other language, but it is only one iteration of it in a universe that is, in the words of Charles Sanders Peirce, “perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs” (*Essential* 2: 394). John Thelwall, in his essay *Towards a Definition of Animal Vitality*, claimed that humans “differ...from other animals rather in the extent than in the nature of his powers” (12). Clare, Smith, and Blake are important case studies for the question of nonhuman agency because, instead of seeing language as human narcissism, they are alert to the myriad ways in which poetic, rhythmic, and semiotic capacities are precisely what gives nonhuman agency its agency. Language is not exclusive to humans but threads its way through nature itself. And we might say that poetic language threads through nature as it contains the rhythms and tropes that allow environmental processes to function and evolve.

Thus, Bennett throws the semiotic baby out with the bathwater of human mastery. But, as I argue, we can maintain the importance of language, lost in Bennett’s formulation, without

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<sup>1</sup> For more on biosemiotic theory, see Thomas Sebeok’s *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics* (1994), Jesper Hoffmeyer’s *Biosemiotics: An Examination into the Signs of Life and the Life of Signs* (2008), and Wendy Wheeler’s *Expecting the Earth: Life, Culture, Biosemiotics* (2016).

discarding our mutually agentic interactions with the more-than-human universe nor placing the human at the center. According to Paz,

The true author of the poem is neither the poet nor the reader, but language. I don't mean that language eliminates the reality of the poet and the reader, but that it includes and engulfs them. Poet and reader are two existential moments...of language. If it is true that they use language to speak, it is also true that language speaks through them. The idea of the world as a moving text ends...in the plurality of texts; the idea of the poet as translator or decipherer leads to the disappearance of the author. (*Children* 72)

The writing and reading of poetry are ecological engagements with the rhythms and objects that pass between individuals and the physical environments that produce and support them. Meter and rhythm affect us physically psychologically. They make us tap our feet, impact our moods, please us, helps us remember things, and function as learning aids. They move us emotionally and physically, inducing feelings or compelling us to dance. The rhythms of breathing aid in meditation, a practice which often aims to lose the self and integrate it with the external world. Yet, as numerous prosodists and literary scholars have acknowledged, we have no concrete idea as to why rhythm works on us in this way. Human invention and artifice cannot account for why rhythms move us, or why a particular pattern of beats is catchy; or, in Timothy Morton's words, "why one disco tune is funkier than another" ("Of Matter and Meter" 329). Meter impacts us from the external world. Paul Valéry gives a vivid account of this phenomenon:

I was suddenly *gripped* by a rhythm which took possession of me and soon gave me the impression of some force outside myself. It was as though someone else were making use of my *living-machine*. Then another rhythm overtook and combined with the first, and certain strange *transverse* relations were set up.... They combined movement of my

walking legs and some kind of song I was murmuring, or rather which was being murmured *through me*.... here I was, prey to a development in several parts more complicated than any poet could dream. (216).

Valéry minimizes the role of the poet as a passive conduit through which the moving parts of poetry pass, seizing him physically and creating set of relations that form a distributive agency, acknowledging the creative power that emerges from an interaction between external forces, the walking body, and a sense of song that is in the making but not yet tangible.

## II. Texts and Contexts

We typically do not see rhythm (or time, for that matter) as an environmental phenomena like wind or temperature, but, as I argue in this dissertation, its autonomy and ability to have such a direct impact on a person's thoughts and body demands that we should. As Paz suggests, Poetry helps us see the analogical nature of the universe:

The Romantic vision of the universe and of man was inspired by analogy. And analogy fused with prosody: it was a vision more felt than thought, and more heard than felt.

Analogy conceives of the world as rhythm: everything corresponds because everything fits together and rhymes. It is not only a cosmic syntax, it is also prosody. If the universe is a script, a text, or a web of signs, the rotation of these signs is governed by rhythms.

Correspondences and analogy are but names for universal rhythm. (*Children* 63)

The passage emits subtle echoes of Shelley's final stanza in "Ode to the West Wind":

Be thou, Spirit Fierce,

My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
 Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!  
 And, by the incantation of this verse

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth” (lines 61–66; 300).

Shelley rhymes “verse” with “universe,” suggesting how one is part of—or partly identical with—the other. One cannot spell universe without verse, as if to suggest that the universe is constructed of verse, that poetry naturally inheres in it. The interlocking rhyme in the previous terza rima stanza is “Spirit fierce,” suggesting the rhythms of respiration and inspiration. His use of terza rima to build a series of five sonnets suggests interconnectedness, hybridity, and a constant attention to both future and past. Similarly, in “Mont Blanc,” Shelley rhymes “The secret strength of things” with “the human mind’s imaginings” (139, 143), suggesting an interfusion between poetic thought and the external world. Shelley, however, sets up a different prosodic framework by constructing a rhyme scheme which seems random. Throughout the five stanzas, some lines rhyme while many don’t. It’s as if Mont Blanc creates a sense of randomness, a sense that things do not fit together, yet offering recurring, albeit unpredictable, moments of order. It leaves the reader with a sense that order is trying to emerge from chaos.

The Romantic period’s revival of and experimentation with older forms after a long eighteenth century during which the heroic couplet dominated is well-trodden ground; however, questions remain about why this prosodic revolution occurred when it did and how approaches to rhythm and sound reflected changing views about nature. I suggest that the metrical precision favored by Augustan poets corresponds to the eighteenth-century view of nature as a savage place that needed to be tamed and cultivated. Likewise, the nineteenth-century shift to a culture

in which nature warranted reverence and deeper investigation corresponds to the metrical experimentation that propelled a new poetic openness to nature's otherness. In his influential essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness," William Cronon notes this shift from nature as a barren wasteland to nature as a new religion: "this sense of the wilderness as a landscape where the supernatural lay just beneath the surface was expressed in the doctrine of the sublime...God was on the mountaintop, in the chasm, in the waterfall, in the thundercloud, in the rainbow, in the sunset" (73).

God, whether divine or material, was also in the meter that had to carry and move these ideas from page to reader. As Julia Carlson argues, Wordsworth creates a formal association between blank verse and the contours of nature "by closing the conceptual distance" between the two, adding that Romantic culture "reveal[ed] the finer linear graphics of both English blank verse and English water-, air-, and land-scapes" (233, 235). Similarly, Charlotte Smith's ever-expanding *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784) registers links between word, world, and subject through her metrical experiments such that subjectivity and form cannot be disentangled from the landscapes and skyscapes she hopes will supplant her own consciousness. Smith creates an animated landscape of vitalized matter that is both aesthetic and anesthetic in that Smith repeatedly apostrophizes it, transforming it into opiates that may dull her pain. In "To the Moon," Smith writes,

The sufferers of the earth perhaps may go,  
Released by death—to thy benignant sphere;  
And the sad children of Despair and Woe  
Forget, in thee, their cup of sorrow here. (9-12)

And in "To the South Downs," the speaker asks the River Arun,

Can you one kind Lethean cup bestow,  
 To drink a long oblivion to my care?  
 Ah! No!—when all, e'en Hope's last ray is gone,  
 There's no oblivion—but in death alone" (11-14).

To illustrate the complexity of apostrophe, Barbara Johnson cites Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," suggesting that apostrophe is not simply a unidirectional dynamic in which a speaker bestows life and presence on an absent, dead, or inanimate object; apostrophe also gives life to an object so that the *object* can give life and animation *back* to the speaker. This gives the speaker relief, who has often suffered a loss. Johnson suggests it is the *speaker* who needs animation, not the object of address. As Johnson observes, Shelley's demands of "be thou me" and "make me thy lyre" are in effect saying, "I will animate you so that you will animate, or reanimate, me" (221). In *Elegiac Sonnets*, Smith is doing the same, although she desires the opposite outcome. By apostrophizing opiates and the oblivion they promise, she is in effect saying "I will animate *you* so that you can *de-animate* me." Thus, apostrophe enables Smith to close the conceptual distance between form and world as she exploits the sonnet's sense of solipsistic closure and its paradoxical openness to endless expansion into longer sequences.

Shelley's experiment with terza rima sonnets in "Ode to the West Wind" also creates an uneasy tension with lyric solipsism and formal openness and interconnectedness, underscoring, as I have suggested, the links between verse and universe. *Lyrical Ballads* followed Smith's model of hybrid form by conflating the physical voice of ballad with the thoughts of the lyric subject. Blake grappled with the limitations of conventional meter, especially the "Monotonous Cadence like that used by Milton & Shakespeare & all writers of English Blank Verse, when it

came to capturing the natural rhythms of oratory, leading him to experiment with the long lines—especially in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*—that were unusual hybrids of prose and verse.

But the role of meter in poetry was debated by Romantic poets, most notably by Wordsworth and Coleridge. In the 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth asserts that there is no difference between prose and poetry:

Is there then, it will be asked, no essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition? I answer that there neither is nor can be any essential difference.... They both speak by and to the same organs; the bodies in which both of them are clothed may be said to be of the same substance, their affections are kindred and almost identical, not necessarily differing even in degree.... the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both. (179, 180)

While Wordsworth notes in the preface that his and Coleridge's "opinions on the subject of poetry do almost entirely coincide," Coleridge actually objected to several of Wordsworth's claim (171):

With many parts of this preface in the sense attributed to them and which the words undoubtedly seem to authorize, I never concurred; but on the contrary objected to them as erroneous in principle, and as contradictory...both to other parts of the same preface, and to the author's own practice in the greater number of the poems themselves (492).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The same inconsistency between theory and practice could be said of Coleridge himself. According to Kevis Goodman, "Nor is it Coleridge's vision of organic life as 'the power which unites a given all into a whole that is presupposed by its parts'—although one would have to add that this was a power Coleridge preached in his theoretical prose more than he practiced in his poetry" (998).

A major objection of Coleridge's was the assertion that the language of poetry and prose can have no *essential* difference except that we "superadd the charm" of meter to increase the pleasure of reading poetry and to regulate and passions it expresses (*Lyrical* 181). But, as Coleridge asserts, "Metre in itself is simply a stimulant of the attention, and therefore excites the question: Why is the attention to be thus stimulated?" a question that "cannot be answered by the pleasure of the metre itself." Coleridge's answer to his own question is, "I write in metre, because I am about to use a language different from that of prose" (511). In other words, one writes in meter not to increase pleasure (although it does have that effect) but because it is the appropriate, perhaps only, medium through which particular kinds of thoughts and feelings can be expressed. Coleridge adds that "*metre* must, though it be not itself *essentially* poetic, have nevertheless some property in common with poetry, as an inter-medium of affinity, a sort...of *mordant*" (512).<sup>3</sup> The assertion that poetry (the passions expressed) and meter (the means through which those passions are expressed) share a property that deeply connects them suggests a sort of inherent metricality residing or latent in the passions, that they cannot achieve full and accurate expression in a non-metrical form, and that the absence of meter vitiates—or renders inexpressible—the substance of the thought. Paz takes this even further, refusing any distinction between rhythm and a poetic idea, including the sequence in which they emerge:

Again, it becomes evident that, far from being empty and abstract measure, rhythm is inseparable from a specific content. It is the same with verbal rhythm: the phrase or 'poetic idea' does not precede the rhythm, nor does the latter precede the former. They are one and the same. The phrase and the possible meaning are already latent in the verse.

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<sup>3</sup> *Mordant*: "An instrument that bites or holds fast \*\*\*. A substance used for fixing' colors in dyeing (*OED*)" (512n1).

That is why there are heroic and light, dancing and solemn, gay and funereal meters.”

(*Bow* 47)

For Paz, “Rhythm is meaning and it says ‘something’” (*Bow* 46). In an 1818 lecture, Coleridge asserts that art is “the reconciliator of Man and Nature” (*Lectures* 217). For Coleridge,

by excitement of the Associative Power Passion itself imitates Order, and the *order* resulting produces a pleasurable *Passion* (whence *Metre*) and thus elevates the Mind by making its feelings the Objects of its reflection and how recalling the Sights and Sounds that had accompanied the occasions of the original passion it impregnates them with an interest not their own by means of the Passions... (*Lectures* 218).

The passions, or the poetic idea, itself imitates Order, which is meter. The resultant meter produces passion. It is a circular, self-nourishing process, but one that moves forward with resistance. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge suggests that the reader is carried forward but pauses and recedes; however, from this retrogressive movement gains force to move forward (like a bow and arrow or rubber band). This is not unlike a sentiment about the natural world expressed in Herman Melville’s poem, “The Conflict of Convictions”:

The Ancient of Days forever is young,  
 Forever the scheme of Nature thrives;  
 I know a wind in purpose strong—  
 It spins against the way it drives. (61–64)

Poetry can be said to embody the dynamic Melville ascribes to nature’s schemes. Rhyme, meter, rhythm, alliteration—any sound patterning—is always looking back to an established pattern, a pattern that creates the expectation of repetition that gives language and rhythm its forward

momentum. As Blake famously declares, “Without contraries is no progression” and this applies to progression itself, which requires its contrary, resistance (*MHH* 3; E 34).<sup>4</sup>

### III. Theoretical Orientation

Romanticism experienced the revival of multiple forms and meters, especially the sonnet, the ode, the Spenserian stanza, and blank verse. As these forms emerged from over a century of dormancy, other changes were taking place regarding the questions of life, vitality, and our relationship with the nonhuman world, such as the view of nature as rejuvenating rather than savage. The inward turn that emphasized subjectivity was fertile ground for the less collective and bodily sounds of pentameter, especially in blank verse. Prosodic experiments in Romantic poetry developed as poets grappled with questions primarily of life and vitality. And as this dissertation seeks to show, Romantic poets saw meter as an ecological entity rather than a mere poetic operation, and their poetic experiments and revivals cannot be decoupled from their proto-ecological concerns. Rhythm has as much permanence as the natural phenomena that produce it. Meter and rhythm provide what Gregory Bateson calls “the pattern which connects,” a grounding principle for cognitive, physical, and aesthetic organization. Patterns make the universe legible to us and, as poets organized a world they saw with new eyes, their revelations were expressed poetically—through the temporal patterns of meter.

It is obvious to say that environmental objects have rhythms (crops, ocean tides, plants, the planet) have rhythms. We might even say they have meter, too, as counting, dividing, or measuring time is, by definition, an act of metering. They are naturally rhythmic, but they

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<sup>4</sup> All references to Blake refer to the newly revised edition, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. Standard abbreviations of Blake’s work will be used.

become legible only through a metrical lens, however informal. It is less obvious to say that rhythm and meter are environmental phenomena, not abstractions but concrete things that, like Bennett's agentic matter, affect how we feel, what we pay attention to, and what we remember—all of which are essential for learning, growth, and evolution. Oral forms used alliteration and rhyme (both rhythmic components that contribute to the regularity of meter) to connect one generation to the next, functioning as aids in cultural inheritances such as stories and morals that define how a culture physically behaves and organizes itself, or bonds readers to poems.

Working from the premise that meter and rhythm are neither identical nor entirely discrete, this dissertation avoids describing them through binaries that have traditionally defined their relationship such as abstract vs. concrete, mechanical vs. vibrant, and cultural vs. natural. Like Derek Attridge, I believe meter and rhythm interact in a push-and-pull dynamic in which both are heard and felt physically. Prosodists and poets have always grappled with the definitions of meter and rhythm. Paul Valéry admitted to reading or inventing more than twenty definitions of rhythm and adopting none of them" (*Collected* 7:112). Indeed, most attempts to define rhythm typically lead to the conclusion that we have no way of accounting for the power it exerts on us. In *The Rise and Fall of Meter* (2012), Meredith Martin questions the assumption of meter as a stable category, recounting the long nineteenth-century debates about what meter meant in historical, political, and educational contexts. Defining the relationship between rhythm and meter introduces additional problems: is it simply a binary relationship of abstract/concrete, culture/nature, regularity/variation, spatial/temporal? There have been many studies devoted to addressing these questions, and my purpose here is not to attempt to do the same. However, before beginning a discussion devoted to the subject of meter and rhythm in Romantic poetry, it makes sense to begin with a brief account of some of the more influential and compelling

theories of rhythm and meter followed by my own explanation of how I define and use the terms. More detailed accounts will appear throughout the subsequent chapters.

Is meter abstract and rhythm concrete? New Critics tended to deem meter an abstraction, a non-physical pulse that moved forward with absolute regularity, ticking metronomically in one's head but not being audibly or orally expressed. According to W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "We hold that [meter] inheres in aspects of language that can be abstracted with considerable precision, isolated, and even preserved in the appearance of an essence—mummified or dummified" (590). Audible expression was provided by the rhythms of natural speech overlaid onto that meter such that a verse's vibrancy emerged from rhythm's variation from an expected metrical foot as when a trochee replaces an expected iamb. For Paz, "Rhythm is not measure, but original time. And measure is not time, but a way to calculate it" (*Bow* 46). In other words, Paz posits meter as more of an instrument that calculates the real time of rhythm. For Richard D. Cureton, meter possesses both abstract and physical qualities, suggesting that meter and rhythm stand in "oblique relation": meter's "structural uniformity" makes it "relatively 'abstract'" while having an "inherent physicality" so that "[i]ronically, meter combines the most abstract and the most concrete aspects of rhythmic response" as when a meter elicits toe-tapping or finger-snapping (129, 128). Isobel Armstrong rejects the notion of meter as an abstraction, describing it instead as a pressure "felt somatically" on the body; however, this somatic pressure gets "abstracted by the mind, and returned to language and the body when the poem is read in real time" (26, 27). Thus, the abstract and concrete mingle in the cognitive and bodily act of reading a poem.

Derek Attridge critiques this view, which is still common today, in the introduction to *Moving Words* (2013), tersely titled "Against Abstraction": "What we experience, I would argue,

is not two levels, abstract and concrete...but a real physical push toward temporal regularity and an equally real pull towards the more varied rhythms of the specific example of English speech.” While metrical scansion marks may seem abstract, they are, on the contrary, “both heard and felt” (*Moving* 12). As Attridge argues, the reason meter is not abstract is because we feel it physically; we feel unrealized offbeats even when an audible sound doesn’t land on that offbeat (*Moving* 106). In other words, offbeats have an absent presence—we hear catalexis, the absence of a line-ending syllable. In *Moving Words*, Attridge is careful not to associate rhythm with “vibrant life” and meter with “dead mechanism”; he also wants to avoid the binary of rhythm as physical sound and meter as Platonic ideal (122). He offers a broad, provisional distinction between the two in which meter is a cultural system that has the “power to elicit and finesse” the basic human inclination toward rhythm, which is an act of alternation—tension and relaxation, push and pull, rise and fall, just like breathing or walking (122). Attridge’s distinction allows enough difference to afford explanatory nuance while resisting the absolute.

But to complicate this slightly, I argue that meter does not necessarily have to be confined to a cultural system but is rather a cognitive response. Meter, I suggest, is not completely cultural and rhythm is not completely natural. Of course, meter is a cultural creation, developed by poets and prosodists to understand the operations and nuances of poetry and music. But when we hear a rhythmic pattern, we instantly establish an expectation, an internal meter that allows us to discern regularity and variations in rhythm—variation and syncopation requires two things to operate. Meter is a system that allows us to understand rhythm more deeply and to exploit its possibilities. At the most basic level, acknowledging that a rhythm has four beats is to think a metrical thought, even though it is basic and naturally tied to physiological and psychological responses.

Attridge does, however, caution against making too sharp a distinction between rhythm and meter. The relation has been articulated in so many ways (*Moving* 122–23). In fact, in her essay “Meter and Meaning,” Armstrong acknowledges that the distinction is important in some contexts, although that distinction is not relevant for her essay (27). Some distinctions between rhythm and meter are useful and make logical sense. For example, meter pushes toward regularity and rhythm pulls toward variation—a tension with rhetorical and meaning-making potential. Meter can be seen as a system and rhythm as a naturally occurring phenomenon that can be understood with the aid of that system. We see meter on the page while rhythm is heard. But at some point, dwelling on this distinction risks succumbing to arbitrariness and unproductive, irresolvable disagreement. We hear and feel rhythms in nature. According to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, “rhythm is ubiquitous in natural processes (the diurnal and seasonal cycles of light and weather), in the behavior of plants and animals (the cycles of sleep, growth, and reproduction), and in human physiology (the systolic [rhythms] of heart and breath) and activity (lang., dance, music, song, poetry)” (1067 [1993]). But the moment one recognizes that natural rhythm, the moment one notices it as a pattern, requires the mind to overlay some kind of measure. Thus, the very cognition of rhythm brings meter into existence. Meter always implies rhythm and rhythm cannot be recognized as a pattern without some—however subtle, informal, or instinctive—metrical framework. One does not need to study poetics or music theory to recognize variation, to sense unheard offbeats, or to tap one’s foot.

Meter and rhythm are deeply implicated in one another and cannot be easily disentangled. Meter is a metalanguage of rhythm, and the distinction between meter and rhythm is important when meter functions as an explanatory tool for rhythm. Yet, at some level, one produces the existence of the other. While meter technically means measure, the rhythmic measure of a line of

poetry, it is more illuminating (and less restricting) to define meter as pattern—patterned words, patterned beats, patterned sounds. Attridge asserts that even rhetorical emphasis has its own “rhythmic agenda” (*Moving* 11–12). The push and pull between regularity and variation is, as I argue in this dissertation, the most like life itself.

Broadly speaking, life evolves as environmental expectations undergo deviation, propelled by the interplay between variation and regularity. For Lucretius (and Epicurus), atoms settle into regularity but trope and turn due to chance events, potentially causing significant change.<sup>5</sup> Roman Jakobson bases poetry on equivalences that either repeat expectedly or deviate from expectation (96–7). This is a logic of life, which is taken to a universal level by Paz, who posits rhythm as the basis of everything. As I argue, Romantic poets were attuned to how the logic of meter follows the logic of life—alternation, the play of similarity and difference, the movement of one entity toward another in a way that registers both similitude and variation.

The dynamics of meter and rhythm operate differently in different meters and forms. This dissertation will show this through examinations of heroic couplets and ballad meters (Clare), blank verse that blends narrative and lyric elements (Smith), and long, unrhymed lines (Blake). While this dissertation is interested in the physicality of meter and rhythm, it broadens the perspective from the body to the environment. How these elements interact in Romantic poetry is a central concern of this dissertation.

We need to reinvigorate the study prosody in Romantic literature, ecocriticism, and the Environmental Humanities because it gives us a very concrete sense of how we are connected at a psychological and physiological level to the external world. Rhythm and meter permeate author, reader, environments, nonhuman organisms, and history. They affect our ways of

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<sup>5</sup> See Book 2, “Dance of the Atoms” in Lucretius’s *The Nature of Things*.

understanding and organizing the world, which are based on established patterns and expectations. Understanding meter and rhythm in this way allows us to see ourselves less as atomized individual actors and more as part of an ecosystem or a network of actants. Rhythm is physical; we can feel it, and for that reason it is a more convincing marker of our ecological enmeshment in the world. Poetry speaks richly to this phenomenon, yet rhythm, meter, rhyme, and other modes of sound patterning are too often marginalized in scholarship and teaching.

Actor Network Theory, New Materialism, and ecocriticism have offered models that promote ecological thinking, including political ecology, the agency of nonhuman actants, and the relationship between word and world. But metricality, rhythm, and other forms of sound patterning seldom enter these conversations. Biosemiotic theory has come closer than most theories in linking ecological processes with poetic structures. However, biosemiotic theory focuses primarily on figuration, metaphor, and narrative but rarely rhythm. Directing our attention to these concerns would make our conversations in the Environmental Humanities more dynamic, layered, and robust.

There have been excellent anthologies in recent years that, despite an interest in temporality and form, have ignored metrical language. The Cambridge anthology, *Time and Literature* (2018) does not acknowledge meter as a temporal mode, and the words meter and rhythm appear neither in the table of contents nor the index. *Ecological Form* (2019) addresses the topic of form without mentioning the formal elements of prosody. This is by no means a failing of either anthology, but it underscores a scholarly tendency to marginalize poetry's most defining elements when literature begins speaking to broader existential, temporal, and environmental concerns.

Another reason more robust theories of prosody are needed for ecological thinking is because prosody is, first and foremost, grounded in relationality. A focus on prosody foregrounds relations, that is, the equivalences of sound patterns, repetitions, variations (Jakobson 96–7). A focus on relation might also, to draw on Bennett, chasten our inclination toward human mastery.

Martin opens *The Rise and Fall of Meter* with the provocative declaration, “I don’t believe in iambs” (1), suggesting that metrical feet are something closer to a Platonic ideal than an actual reality. Not only are classical foot structures arbitrary, but to view meter as a mere “measure of the line” incorrectly posits meter as a stable category and ignores the serious metrical discourse that influenced national identity and education in the long nineteenth century. Martin points to the rhetorical treatises and grammar books from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that repeatedly support the view of meter as a force that “could civilize the masses,” an idea that emulated the “prestige- and character-building discipline of the classical languages” (7). But, as Martin observes, this treatment of meter as a patriotic edification tool that cultivated discipline from the outside evolved into a belief in an interior sense of Englishness—“an increasing insistence on the naturalness of the English language and meter” (7). In other words, “instill[ing] a kind of English national character in the pupil” from the outside in was inverted, becoming instead a project that pulled natural Englishness out of the student by connecting with the metrical mechanics innate to all English people, leading to an emphasis on the “corporeal and phenomenological aspects of English meter” (7). Meter in nineteenth-century England was considered a power that, with its ordering function, could cultivate both an ordered nation and subjects with ordered minds. Martin’s account sheds light on how the natural, physical world was exploited for political aims—Clare, Smith, and Blake all address this issue. England’s machinations to cultivate its masses were artificial and forced. But they exploited the fact that

meter feels natural and bodily—we feel it enter us from the outside, but we respond with internal rhythmic competence. Thus, nationalizing meter functions to naturalize empire, the same way scientific metaphors of the “organic state” naturalize political power, or as social Darwinism “naturalized social hierarchies.

The desire for a national meter derived from the idea that a nation could coalesce around a meter due to its natural Englishness. Meter had both an intrinsic and an extrinsic quality (Martin 4). This rise of interest in a “national meter” coincided with the rise of empire and the working class. It was widely thought in nineteenth-century England that a “natural English rhythm” brings out the “Englishness inherent in a person’s body, suggesting a certain innateness to meter (Martin Intro). In this “metrical-industrial-complex,” “the beat makes you part of a culture and a nation (Newbolt, qtd. in Martin 131).

Martin’s study focuses on national and educational matters in which meter was used as an instrument of control, even coercion. But the belief that meter could edify and patriotize a rising working class has real ecological implications because it assumes meter’s power to elicit submission and de-center the self while working as a connective tissue able to hold together physical bodies, literature, and ideas. While we can “invent” rhythms and track them with meters, we don’t control the effect rhythm and meter have on us. We can craft it, but we are not masters of it. This is troubling because we want to master the environment without being reminded of how it masters us. Amittai Aviram discusses Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and rhythm as the loss of the subject. He discusses Émile Benveniste’s etymology of rhythm, too, and notes how “catacoustic,” from the Greek, meant both “to listen to” and “obey.” It suggests that rhythm forces or compels us to listen: “One must always hear and follow the behest of rhythm, the

musical voice from beyond the self” (Aviram 217). Thus, rhythm has the power to interrupt the subject (a point I elaborate on in my chapter on John Clare).

As Culler and other scholars have noted, meter and rhythm take hold of us from the outside rather than emerging from the inside; they are more aptly characterized as external forces exerting a pressure on us. Perhaps paradoxically, we invent meters but the audible rhythms they produce control us. The emergence of rhythm and meter is ambiguous. In a formulation that de-centers the role of poet in the process of invention, T. S. Eliot writes, “a poem may tend to realize itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches expression in words, and that this rhythm may bring to life the idea and the image” (*Poets* 28). A poem realizes itself, rather than being actively written, although the poet is necessary for this realization. Maurice Blanchot’s account of writing bears a remarkable similarity to Eliot’s account of rhythm. Apostrophizing his pen, Blanchot writes, “you write on and on, disclosing to me what I dictate to you, revealing to me what I know” (300). A writer paradoxically cannot write until he has some idea of what to write; yet he does not know what he is writing until it is written—the page talks back to him, dictates to him, just as rhythm dictates to Eliot. Authorial agency, for both Eliot and Blanchot, is elusive. And, as I argue, it is elusive because it resides in an ecological mesh of distributive agency.

Meter is vibrant and ecological in many significant ways. It interacts with semantics and textuality to produce rhetorical effects. It creates tension with the cadences of spoken language, produces somatic effects, makes time more present and corporeal, and creates temporal patterns that connect our patterns of thought to patterns in physical nature and our bodies. It seems to seize us from outside world, eliciting bodily reactions through intrinsic rhythmic competencies, thus connecting the inside and outside worlds.

#### IV. Chapter Summaries

In the following pages, my second chapter, “Vibrant Meter: Periods, Pulsations, and Prosody in Blake’s *Milton*,” argues that, while critics have written extensively on the unorthodox treatment of time in Blake’s epic, they have largely overlooked a temporality of central importance to the poem and its poet: meter. Blake’s late-career experiments with sounds and syllables make it difficult to scan his meter or to enlist it as an interpretive aid, and this may partly account for the dearth of metrical analyses of *Milton* (and, for that matter, *Jerusalem*). But meter plays a critical role in weaving together a temporal ecology that includes biological time, evolutionary time, the time of poetic labor, and history. What Blake shows us in *Milton* is that meter and ecology both follow a logic based on the interplay between relation and variation, regularity and contingency, expectation, and deviation. Meter patterns words, sound, and time, and Blake deploys it in *Milton* to demonstrate a world that organizes itself by rhythmic patterns, casting meter as an ultimately ecological force. Meter functions as a poetic subsystem in *Milton*’s larger mental system, and, ultimately, Blake posits meter as a pathway that links the internal and external worlds.

In Chapter 3, “Metrical Evolution: Nature, Empire, and Blank Verse in Charlotte Smith’s *Beachy Head*,” I challenge a common genealogy that traces non-dramatic blank verse from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) to Thomson’s *The Seasons* (1730) to Cowper’s *The Task* (1785) before arriving at Coleridge and Wordsworth. This genealogy overlooks the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup>-century blank verse innovations of Smith. This chapter demonstrates how Smith’s *Beachy Head* (1807) greatly expanded upon Smith’s blank verse experiments in *The Emigrants* (1793) to develop a form that could accommodate a staggeringly wide array of genres, voices, and subject

matter. In addition to her influential sonnet revival in 1784, Smith's blank verse experiments also had a considerable influence of Wordsworth and Coleridge, not only by pushing the boundaries of sound patterning but also by developing a lyric and conversational dimension to the form. Through Wordsworth and Coleridge, Smith's influence reached the Victorians, although they had written her out of the canon. As I argue, Smith exploits blank verse to exemplify how evolution, a nascent field at the time, unfolds at formal, natural, and historical levels.

When we think of the peasant poet, John Clare, we think more often of place than of time, and even less so of metrical time. This critical gap motivates my fourth chapter, "'A Language Meet': Taste, Rhythm, and John Clare's Earthy Heroic Couplet." Instead of abandoning the heroic couplet that dominated the 18<sup>th</sup> century (as most Romantics did), Clare embraced it; however, he radically reconfigured it to stress how metered language is the most fitting medium for conveying the rhythms of natural environments in which regularity is in constant tension with infinite particularities, random accidents, and unpredictable profusions of life. Clare renders the couplet earthier, faster, denser, and more enjambed, bringing the form into closer alignment with how we actually experience our environments—as a rapid chain of vivid sensory stimuli. Ultimately, Clare uses natural and poetic rhythms to dissolve the lyric subject into its environment, revealing a more accurate picture of our ecological entanglement.

In the coda, I stress the need to reinvigorate the study of prosody in Romantic literature and to insist on its relevance to the Environmental Humanities because, more than any aspect of poetry, sound patterning provides a concrete sense of how we are connected to the external object world, physically and psychically. Meter and rhythm are both vibrant, physical, and felt forces that permeate author, reader, environment, and history. They affect our ways of understanding and organizing the world, which is based on established pattern, expectation, and

variation. Understanding meter and rhythm in this way allows us to see ourselves less as atomized actors and more enmeshed in an ecosystem. Ultimately, the academic study of poetry should look to other cultural forms that value and innovate with verbal rhythm, especially rap music, to rethink and refresh its own critical frameworks.

## Chapter 2

### Vibrant Meter: Periods, Pulsations, and Prosody in Blake's Milton

He believed in an infinite series of times, in a dizzily growing, ever spreading network of diverging, converging and parallel times. This web of time—the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore each other through the centuries—embraces every possibility.  
— Jorge Luis Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths”

#### Introduction

Blake once told the diarist Henry Crabb Robinson that John Milton visited him in a vision. In Robinson's transcription of the conversation, Blake reported, “[Milton] came lately as an old man—he said he came to ask a favour of me. He said he had committed an error in his *Paradise Lost*, which he wanted me to correct, in a poem or picture; but I declined. I said I had my own duties to perform.” Robinson then asked what Milton's error could have been, to which Blake's replied, “He wished me to expose the falsehood of his doctrine, taught in the *Paradise Lost*, that sexual intercourse arose out of the Fall. Now that cannot be, for no good can spring out of evil.” This was not the only time Milton visited Blake. As Robinson notes, Milton “often begged Blake to confute” the errors in Milton's masterpiece. But despite Blake's initial refusal, and his apparently busy schedule, he eventually acquiesced to Milton's request (qtd. in Symons 295–96, 264). The result was *Milton: A Poem in 2 Books*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All references to the text of *Milton* and other works by Blake refer to the newly revised edition of *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (2008), edited by David V. Erdman, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. Standard abbreviations of Blake's work are given where necessary.

Blake's anecdote serves as a useful heuristic because it describes history not as a static repository of knowledge but, rather, as a living past that converses with the present and is susceptible to its influence. Such a view deviates considerably from late eighteenth-century notions of time, which tended to be fixed: the religious doctrine of predestination, the clock time of industrial labor, and scientific theories of mechanical time, such as that posited by Isaac Newton in *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687), in which Newton claims, "[a]bsolute, true, and mathematical time, of itself, and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external, and by another name is called duration" (I:9). In *Milton*, Blake repudiates these notions of time through radical reconfigurations of it, conflating vastly different scales of time and rendering it woven, malleable, self-multiplying, and constructed.

The many investigations into *Milton's* unorthodox treatment of time have mostly avoided a temporality of central importance to *Milton* and its poet—meter. I attribute this neglect partly to *Milton's* lack of a conventionally recognizable meter that responds adequately to traditional scansion methods. Its long lines resemble fourteeners but only in syllable count, not in the rhythms, caesuras, or rhymes characteristic of the fourteener. At times *Milton* feels like prose simply overlaid onto fourteen (and sometimes sixteen or seventeen) syllable lines. Moreover, polysyllabic words and unusual punctuation, such as unnecessary periods, disrupt the metrical flow.

Excepting the iambic tetrameter hymn that follows the prose preface, meter's purpose remains ambiguous in *Milton*, and its relevance seems marginal. However, from pulsations, to heart beats, to Los's hammering, to the recurring images of feet, the poem's preoccupation with prosody is difficult to deny. If *Milton's* meter feels too perfunctory, inconsistent, or strange to warrant sustained analysis, that feeling may derive from the poet's experimentations with sound,

syllable, punctuation, and foot construction. Blake also privileges the duple or triple foot as the irreducible unit of measure rather than the singular syllable or stress, experimenting with feet to give more attention to unstressed syllables with the aim of conveying the patterns of oratory and natural speech. Moreover, this prosodic innovation, coupled with polysyllabic words and odd punctuation, enact the experience of time as contextual, manipulable, and made.

Meter may not appear to be among *Milton*'s central concerns, but on the contrary, it plays a critical role in weaving together a temporal ecology that includes biological time, the time of poetic labor, evolution (of biological life and words), and a history that allows the seventeenth-century Milton to unite with the nineteenth-century Blake through the figure of the anatomical and metrical foot. *Milton*'s primary concerns are poetry, time, and physiology, and the poem casts meter as the intersection where these three entities converge, a nodal point often expressed as feet, nerve impulses, heart beats, or pulsations. Time is not only biological for Blake, but also ecological, and meter is the operation that demonstrates this.<sup>2</sup>

But why do we need ecology to understand time in *Milton*? First, the poem presents time as an environmental entity or force, a necessary element of any lifeform that grows or undergoes change, which is to say all lifeforms. Moreover, the very premise of the poem places the past, present, and future in an ecological relationship of mutual influence and interdependence: causation does not necessarily occur in linear succession in which one event follows another. On the contrary, *Milton* insists on a mutual causality between past and present. Blake revises *Paradise Lost* to correct and counter the impact its imaginative errors have on our ways of

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<sup>2</sup> The term "ecology" would not have been available to Blake as its modern sense is first seen in Thoreau in 1858. The term isn't firmly established until Ernst Haeckel used it in the 1870s to describe relations between plants and animals in a habitat (Williams, *Keywords*, 110–11).

knowing and experiencing the world. Aside from equating sexual intercourse with the fall, these errors tend to involve temporal problems: valorizing memory over present inspiration, reinforcing the absurdity of predestination, and allowing the literature of antiquity to trammel the contemporary English imagination. Broadly speaking, Blake seeks to mitigate the slow epistemological violence that past texts exert on the present as a way to open up possible futures. This ecological sense of time anticipates to some degree what biologists in recent decades have called “downward causation,” in which something that occurred in the past is understood or made to operate in a new way as the result of a present event; this includes epigenetics, in which a change in present environmental conditions can alter the genetic history of a species (Wheeler 187).

Meter exemplifies the simultaneous existence of past, present, and future. Just as a seed contains a genetic past and a potential future harvest, a measure of poetry is made legible through previously established patterns and future expectation, the axes on which evolution and ecological growth turn. Meter and ecology both follow a logic based on the interplay between relation and variation, regularity and contingency, expectation and deviation. We feel meter’s external pressure physically and can react to it because our internal rhythmic competence derives from a natural preference for correspondences and patterns (Armstrong 138; Cureton 120). In this regard, meter functions as a pathway that links internal and external worlds.

The anthropologist Gregory Bateson, author of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972), was an avid Blake reader drawn to the poet’s vision of a de-mechanized natural world. Stifled by what he considered the rigid protocols and disciplinary boundaries in the sciences, Bateson often referenced Blake’s works as illustrative examples for his cross-disciplinary and heterodox

theories.<sup>3</sup> Like Blake, Bateson had his own revisionary project: to revise our understanding of mind. Bateson maintains that the division between mind and nature is false, as is the split between mind and body. Mind, argues Bateson, is not a singular entity contained within a singular being but exists instead as a larger system of “information processing”—an ever-shifting network of perceptual channels, sensory relays, and diversely coded pathways moving between organisms and their environments. Mind is immanent, not transcendent. It stretches beyond the limits a singular body, extending beyond the skin (*Steps* 470, 460). The possibility of cognition depends on sensory input from the external world; thus, it makes no sense to reduce mind to a singular, bounded entity that cannot produce thought on its own. Yet, sense-making, cognitive organization, and communication between entities requires divisions, and for this reason Blake asserts the necessity of the bounding line (*DC*, E 550) as Bateson asserts the necessity of the threshold (*Mind and Nature* 219).

Bateson and Blake are widely regarded as system thinkers. However, they are also wary of systems, which can become oppressive and institutionally rigid. It is more accurate to ground their affinity in being ecological thinkers who privilege pattern over substance as a primary framework for understanding our relationship with the external world. Meter patterns words, sound, and time, and Blake deploys it in *Milton* to demonstrate a world that organizes itself by rhythmic patterns, casting meter as an ultimately ecological force. In the four sections of this article, I will first explain the central importance of Blake’s metrical experiments in *Milton*.

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<sup>3</sup> Bateson’s father, William Bateson, a prominent English scientist who coined the term genetics, read Shakespeare and Blake to his sons (Nora Bateson, *An Ecology of Mind*). For Bateson’s allusions to Blake, see *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972), pp. 27–29, 49, 188, 265, 303, 306, 469, 470; *Mind and Nature* (1979), pp. 103–4, 122, 219; and *Angels Fear* (1980), pp. 18, 36.

Second, I will discuss how multiple temporalities including biological time, poetic time, and eternity—all of which fall under the rubric of “periods”—interact with meter. Third, I will discuss evolutionary time and, finally, historical time.

### I. And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time

In *Milton*'s opening hymn, “Jerusalem,” Blake calls attention to meter through the image of walking feet:

And did those feet in ancient time  
 Walk upon England's mountain green  
 And was the holy Lamb of God,  
 On Englands pleasant pastures seen! (1–4)

Walking feet partake in the larger metaphor of rhythmic, biological time expressed as pulsating arteries, nerve impulses, and the hammers of anatomical construction. The medium of the foot unites the nineteenth-century Blake and the seventeenth-century Milton, who enters Blake's foot, descending like Satan and becoming part of Blake's present:

...so Miltons shadow fell  
 Precipitant loud thundering into the Sea of Time & Space.  
 Then first I saw him in the Zenith as a falling star,  
 Descending perpendicular, swift as the swallow or swift;  
 And on my left foot falling on the tarsus, entered there  
 But from my left foot a black cloud redounding spread over Europe. (15: 45-50)

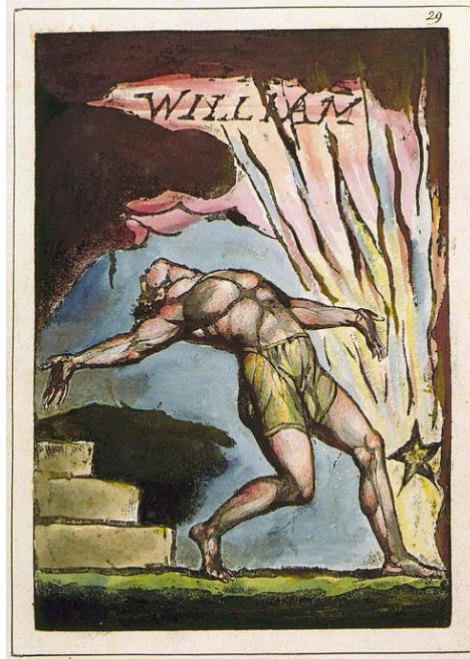


Figure 1. Plate 31 (Erdman not numbered)<sup>4</sup>

As the walking Jesus plays on the metrical foot, so does Milton's descent into Blake's tarsus, a verbal and visual pun in which metrical time supersedes the calendar time separating the two poets. Steps appear behind Blake, suggesting walking, stepping, and the rise and fall of stress patterns. The foot is the ground on which Blake and Milton converge in a nexus of poetry, anatomy, and time.

Blake tropes on the metrical and anatomical foot in several images. The frontispiece (Figure 2) shows Milton's foot pointing at his own line from *Paradise Lost*, "To Justify the Ways of God to Man," although Blake alters Milton's original line, which was "And justify the Ways of God to Man" (my emphasis), a repetition with difference underscoring *Milton's* purpose

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<sup>4</sup> All images are from *Milton Copy C*, from *The William Blake Archive* and use the Erdman plate numbers.

as a revisionary work while suggesting a sense of plural authorship. Plate 18 (Figure 3) depicts Urizen baptizing Milton while the latter constructs the former out of clay, “Beginning at the feet” (19:12, E 112). Milton’s right foot splits the word “Self-“ and “hood,” gesturing toward his own self-annihilation and the fiction of the singular self, a theme emphasized throughout Blake’s later work by the prevalence of specters and emanations (including Milton’s three wives and three daughters) that pluralize his characters. Plate 36 shows Blake’s deceased brother, Robert, with a falling star entering his foot, with steps behind him. This mirror image of plate 33 suggests a visual rhythm or rhyme.

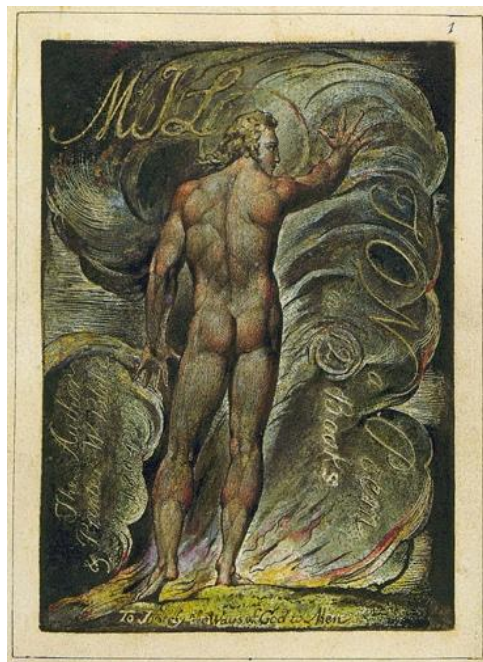


Figure 2. Frontispiece, plate 1

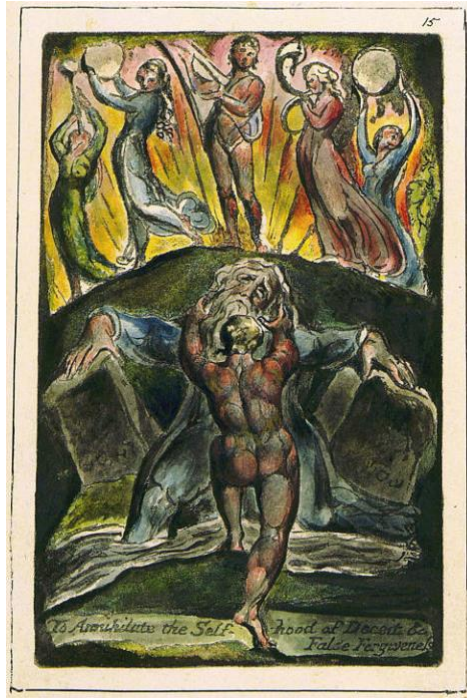


Figure 3. Plate 16 [18]

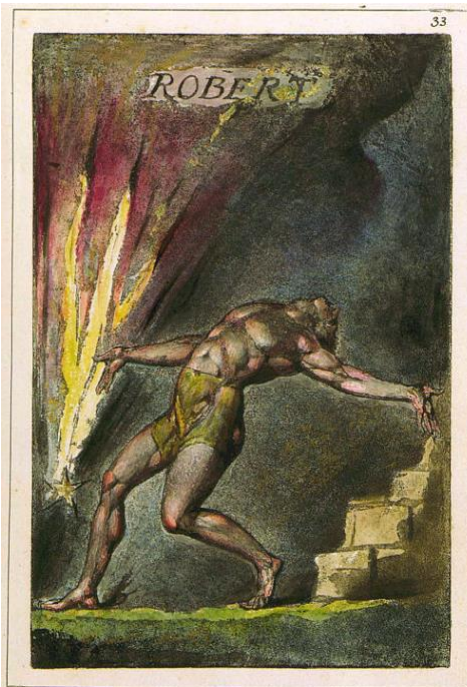


Figure 4. Plate 36 (Erdman not numbered)

Los, Blake's exemplar for poetic imagination, also meets the poet through a foot-based encounter—Los “stoop'd down / And bound my sandals [...] And I became One Man with him” (22: 8–9, 12; E 117)—and then appears through the same metrical trope of walking feet used in *Milton's* opening hymn:

Six Thousand Years

Are finishd. I return! both Time & Space obey my will.

I in Six Thousand Years walk up and down: for not one Moment

Of Time is lost, nor one event of space unpermanent

But all remain: every fabric of Six Thousand Years

Remains permanent: (22:16–21; E 117)

Like Jesus, Los “walk[s] up and down,” suggesting poetic feet, rhythms, and the alternating of stressed and unstressed syllables, moving through a great expanse of time (the six thousand years of fallen existence) while embodying metrical time.

*Milton's* prose preface and opening hymn give way to the long line used in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793) and his other epics, *Jerusalem* (1804) and *The Four Zoas* (1797).

This verse form tends to elude metrical classification, although the most obvious relative, to the eye if not the ear, is the fourteenner. But this is not the rhymed Elizabethan fourteenner of George Chapman's translation of Homer's *Iliad* (1598) and *Odyssey* (1616) nor Thomas Phaer's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* (1558). In his exhaustive three-volume study, *A History of English Prosody from the Twelfth Century to the Present Day* (1906–10), George Saintsbury notes the resemblance between Blake's long lines and the fourteenner; however, he suggests that the meter in Blake's later work, especially *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, is more aptly classed as “bastard rhythm”—not a criticism but rather an effort to characterize a meter that is “neither pure verse

nor pure though rhythmically prose, but a hybrid between them” (3: 26). Derek Attridge calls the lines “oracular long-lines free verse” (*Poetic Rhythm* 169) and “efficient prose” (“Rhythm” 127), a form drawn principally from the Bible and *Ossian* (Attridge, “Rhythm” 125; Saintsbury 3: 21). But as a professed revision of *Paradise Lost*, *Milton* compels us to ask why Blake abandoned the former’s blank verse. Composed around the same time as *Milton* (c. 1800–1804), *Jerusalem*’s first preface, “To the Public,” not only offers an answer to this question, but it also invites metrical analyses of his experimental verse, an invitation not many critics have accepted:

When this Verse was first dictated to me I consider’d a Monotonous Cadence like that used by Milton & Shakespeare & all writers of English Blank Verse, derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming; to be a necessary and indispensable part of Verse. But I soon found that in the mouth of a true Orator such monotony was not only awkward but as much a bondage as rhyme itself. I therefore have produced a variety of every line, both of cadences & number of syllables. Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place: the terrific numbers are reserved for the terrific parts—the mild & gentle, for the mild & gentle parts, and the prosaic, for inferior parts: all are necessary to each other.

Poetry Fetter’d, Fetters the Human Race! (*J* 3, E 143–44)

While I may be taking liberties in applying *Jerusalem*’s preface to *Milton*, the former nevertheless provides some insight into Blake’s metrical choices for the latter. As Blake writes in *Milton*, “O how can I with my gross tongue that cleaveth to the dust, / Tell of the Four-fold Man, in starry numbers fitly ordered” (20:15–16, E 114). Moreover, *Jerusalem*’s preface makes it difficult to downplay the importance of *Milton*’s meter. Finally, the preface suggests a temporal ecology in which word, foot, stress, and syllable produce a variety of rhythms, meanings, moods, and oratorical effects through mutual dependence rather than conforming to a dominant scheme.

As English poets moved away from a Latin verse that subordinated stresses to syllables and toward a versification that subordinated syllables to stresses (Paz, *Children* 64–65), the stresses dominated the logic of line construction in a way that marginalized unaccented syllables. As Saintsbury points out, Blake felt that the neglect of unstressed syllables limited poetry’s possibilities:

Take it on the accent or stress system, neglecting the unaccented or unstressed syllables in their exact combination with the others, and you lose more than half its beauty and almost all comprehension of that beauty’s source. Take the *feet*, and the delicacy, the unerringness, and at the same time the freedom and variety of their interchange, compose a marvel for ever. (3: 13)

In other words, privileging stressed syllables at the expense of the unstressed vitiated the overall character and rhetorical potential of the foot, leaving us mired in what Saintsbury calls a “syllabic or accentual Golgonooza” (3: 29). For Attridge, Blake’s late-period experiments allowed him to choose words “not because they conform to a pre-existing scheme but because they best say and do what he wants them to say and do” (126). Attridge’s insight, however, does not fully capture all of the moving parts here, for Blake’s long lines feature an interplay in which meter cedes control to the natural rhythms of language at the foot level while rhythm cedes control to meter at the line level. This dynamic is not unlike a measure or line of music—especially in rap—that establishes a consistent repetition of beats yet allows great rhythmic variety within those parameters. *Milton*’s lines tend toward fourteen syllables and seven accents, although he varies this pattern, as in the excerpt above. The lines “Precipitant loud thundering into the Sea of Time & Space. / Then first I saw him in the Zenith as a falling star, / Descending perpendicular, swift as the swallow or swift” take sixteen, fourteen, and fifteen syllables

respectively, exemplifying how the lines “expand and contract,” to use Attridge’s apt phrase (“Rhythm” 126). But lines also expand and contract within themselves. The relative consistency of syllables and stresses afford regularity, but—as I discuss in the following section in more detail—Blake stretches and contracts lines and alters their speed through enjambments, punctuation, polysyllabic words, and the clustering of stressed or unstressed syllables. This metrical dynamic keeps in view the manipulability of time Blake emphasizes throughout *Milton*.

But experimentation does not render Blake’s meter anomalous or irregular. According to Saintsbury,

[Blake] can be *really* ‘regular’—that is to say, can substitute feet, or within limits increase and diminish length of line, at no danger to the general prosodic scheme. In direct and glaring contrast to almost the whole poetic habit of the eighteenth century, mere mechanical regularity finds in him somebody who does not want it, does not care for it, will not have it, and who yet never misses the regularity that is beyond and above mechanism. (3: 19)

Saintsbury’s distinction between regularity and mechanism not only illuminates Blake’s metrical scheme but also his broader cosmology. Blake did not equate regularity with mechanism, unlike many Enlightenment scientists, for whom mechanism was the logical explanation for regularity. While Newton’s absolute time and Urizen’s one law exemplify a mechanism unreceptive to variation, regularity offers sense, shape, and legibility without surrendering to the absolute.

As I argue throughout this essay, the metrical foot operates as a pathway linking two poets, two poems, and two centuries. In Bateson’s ecology of mind, the mind is a larger cybernetic system of information pathways that includes both the internal and external world:

Individual mind is immanent but not only in the body. It is immanent also in pathways and messages outside the body; and there is a larger Mind of which the individual body is only a subsystem. This larger Mind is comparable to God and is perhaps what some people mean by “God,” but it is still immanent in the total interconnected social system and planetary ecology. (*Steps* 467)

Bateson believes that poets and artists attune themselves to these bridges between mind and body, or interior and exterior worlds, even quoting Blake’s line “a tear is an intellectual thing” to illustrate the point (*Steps* 470; *J* 52:25, E 202). In *Milton*, Blake’s ideas traverse these bridges through variously coded pathways: text, inter-textuality, image, and non-semantic yet rhetorically productive rhythms, all of which travel through temporal and media ecologies guided by the metrical foot. Meter is a poetic subsystem in *Milton*’s larger mental system. It is useful to think of *Milton*, and Blake’s body of work more broadly, as a sort of mind-text.

Independently of Bateson, Nelson Hilton creates a remarkably similar formulation to explain Blake’s work as a system of words that evolves within a larger cultural mind:

The point is that each word signifies so amply that even so skeletal a structure begins to bear (bare) meaning as each word finds relation to another. While this relational process occurs initially in the mind of the perceiver, it can develop through and toward structures in the “mind” of the text, and then further to relations in the “mind,” or *episteme*, of English and collective imagination. (4)

Like words, the meter that carries those words functions in an expanding relational process. Meter mediates between text and image as we see in Blake’s many visual puns on the foot; it connects poetry to biology as “the Poets Work is Done” in “a pulsation of the artery” (29:1, 28:62; E 127). Meter also expresses a non-teleological evolution and a future orientation in its

non-Urizenic readiness for the variation and unforeseeable change built into its regulating function. And it forges a planetary pathway, as the walking and hammering Los, Blake's metrical avatar, figures not only as poet and time, but as "a terrible flaming Sun" (22: 6). Meter connects the internal and the external world and resides in planetary, biological, and poetic spheres.

## II. Pulsations and Periods

A significant element of Blake's ecology of time, and a crucial deviation from Newton's relation-less time, emerges through the gendering and marrying of time and space in Los and Enitharmon, respectively: "Los is by mortals nam'd time Enitharmon is nam'd Space" (24:68, E 121). Los and Enitharmon's union not only critiques Newton's absolute, relation-less time, but it also anticipates Einstein's theory of relativity in which the experience of time is contingent upon space (Einstein 25–26). Los's name in reverse is *sol*, Latin for sun, our source for measuring time in terms of space: "The red Globule is the unwearied Sun by Los created / To measure Time and Space" (29:23–4). The union of space and time manifests itself through rhythm and weaving: "Loud sounds the Hammer of Los, loud turn the Wheels of Enitharmon / Her Looms vibrate with soft affections, weaving the Web of life" (6:27–28, E 100). Through Los and Enitharmon's labor, "The Web of Life is woven: & the tender sinews of life created" (6:34, E 100). Through corporeal space and rhythmic time, they create the connective fibers of the felt body, the tendrils that hold together the body's ecology. Through them, Blake weds the metricality of poetry and the rhythms of organic life. *Milton's* invocation of the muses, satirizing the classical convention borrowed by Milton, establishes these connections early on:

Daughters of Beulah! Muses who inspire the Poets Song

Record the journey of immortal Milton thro' your Realms

Of terror & mild moony lustre, in soft sexual delusions  
 Of varied beauty, to delight the wanderer and repose  
 His burning thirst & freezing hunger! Come into my hand  
 By your mild power; descending down the nerves of my right arm  
 From out the Portals of my Brain, where by your ministry  
 The Eternal Great Humanity Divine. planted his Paradise (2:1–8, E 96)

Blake emphasizes the physicality of inspiration through anatomy (nerves, brain, hand, arm), corporeal appetites (sexual desire, burning thirst, freezing hunger), and alliteration that calls attention to orality (immortal Milton, mild moony, soft sexual, descending down). Nerve fibers, like arteries, branch throughout the body, transmitting sensory stimuli and sending messages rhythmically, like pulses and poetic meter. The fibers of the nervous system and those of vegetation weave together as the text of *Paradise Lost* is “planted” not in an immaterial mind but in a physical brain, suggesting a Batesonian mental process that is physical rather than transcendental.

Blake calls on the daughters of Beulah to “Record the journey of Immortal Milton.” “Record” means to document, or to make a textual record of. It also contains “cord,” which underscores the textile trope that weaves its way through *Milton* in images of fibers, looms, and fabric, images that trope on themselves, creating a weaving effect in which multiple words and themes evolve and become increasingly intertwined (Hilton 110–123). Invoking the muses to record Milton’s journey is to ask them to *write down* and to *re-thread* it, which is to say re-textualize it, reconfiguring its existing cords in order to remediate (in the sense of both remedy and to run through a new medium) and revise it (in the sense of both rewrite and re-envision). *Cord* is also the Latin root for heart. Thus, in addition to its textile role, *cord* connects meter and

temporality to biological life in the form of heart beats and pulsations. A fibrous organ and the source of pulsating arteries, the image of the heart fuses the textile cords with the recurring image of circulating blood:

Every Time less than a pulsation of the artery  
 Is equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years  
 For in this Period the Poets Work is Done: and all the Great  
 Events of Time start forth & are conceived in such a Period  
 Within a Moment: a Pulsation of the Artery (28:62–29:3, E 127).

Blake's metrical experiments make the unaccented beats more noticeable. At multiple points, the cadence features three consecutive unstressed syllables (*EQ-ual-in-its, PE-ri-od-&, PE-ri-od-the, and-are-con-CEIVED*). The line "Every Time less than a pulsation of the artery" begins slowly with a trochee and spondee but then accelerates with three consecutive unstressed syllables leading into "pulsation" (*than a pul-SA-tion*), a word whose long middle vowel then slows down the meter. Blake follows this with three more consecutive unstressed syllables (*pul-SA-tion-of-the-AR-ter-y*). The acceleration and deceleration suggest the elasticity of time, which the passage presents as contractable and expandable. Blake can prolong the moment, stretching the pulsation into a longer duration. The line "Is equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years" is prosaic in syntax yet elevated in content. With its sixteen syllables and inconsistent choice of feet, the sense of meter nearly disappears; however, as suggested in *Jerusalem's* first preface, Blake deploys the greater numbers for the more "terrible" parts. While the passage appears to have a metrical breakdown, a fairer characterization would acknowledge two prosodic elements at play. First, Blake rejects a dominant (and monotonous) foot in favor of varied feet that reflect the natural rhythms or human speech and oratory; secondly, numbers cede control to the repetition

of sounds: the sounds of specific words (time, artery) and especially the alliterative “p” sounds—pulsation, poet, period—the three cardinal terms Blake weaves together throughout *Milton* in a nexus of anatomy, poetry, and time.

The above excerpt exemplifies the importance of image in Blake’s media ecology by visually enacting a pause between the final two lines of the passage between plates 28 and 29. Blake fashions both a metrical and visual caesura that gives appropriate emphasis to the thematically central and lyrical line, “For in this Period the Poets Work is Done.”



Figure 5. Plate 29 (Erdman 28 [30])

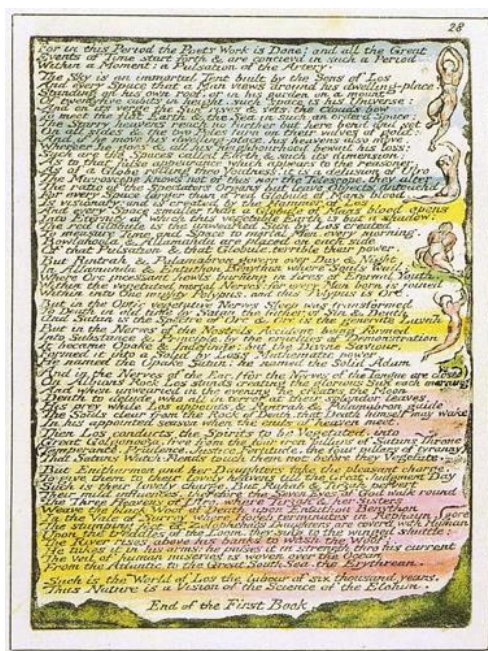


Figure 6. Plate 30 (Erdman 29 [31])

This passage brings into relief time, textuality, poetic labor, and biological life, all of which are absorbed by the polysemous figure of the period. And despite its scansion-resistant strangeness, this refrain remains one of *Milton's* most memorable passages, partly because of the provocative illogic of equating an instant with six millennia, a mathematically “impossible” statement probably aimed at Newton.

In *Milton*, a period can signify a full stop, a pause, an instant, six millennia, and the time of poetic labor. Unlike the specificity of seconds, minutes, or months, the period is plastic, a measure of time that can contract to an instant or expand to a vast era.

Blake's “period” disorients us because equating six millennia with an instant strains our rational comprehension of time. Examining what it means to labor in a moment that can contract to the point of near disappearance and stretch beyond measure, Steven Goldsmith suggests that the logic of this illogical equation lies in that the minute and the vast “share the quality of being

before and beyond narratable time. They share what Blake calls ‘Eternity’” (232). Like most critics, Goldsmith defines Blake’s eternity not as endless duration but as extratemporal. But eternity and time have a strange economy, which the following two lines help clarify: “Periods of Space & Time / Reveal the secrets of Eternity” (21:9–10, E 115) and “Time is the mercy of eternity; without Times swiftness / Which is the swiftest of all things: all were eternal torment” (24:72–73, E 121). Mark Lussier reads this dynamic as complementary (273). Expanding on Lussier’s reading, Kevin Hutchings characterizes the eternity-time relationship as interdependent and mutually redemptive, one acting as gateway to the other (133–34). Illuminating as these readings are, they do not account for the reciprocal productivity of these two realms. Here, it is helpful to draw on Alfred North Whitehead’s concept of “eternal objects,” which the philosopher defines as “pure potentials,” the domain of feelings, relations, or qualities with the potential to be actualized in the material world of time and space. Following Whitehead’s distinction between real and actual, we can treat time as actual, eternity as potential, and both as real. Eternity provides time with potentiality, and time’s acceptance of eternity’s secrets relieves the latter of the affliction of having its contents go unexpressed, caught in a stasis where objects, events, and processes neither appear nor unfold. No creative act can occur in material time and space without potential for it to happen; inversely, this potential finds no release except through time and space. Whitehead’s eternal objects and Blake’s eternity characterize the possible while Whitehead’s actual (a “stubborn matter of fact”; 366) and Blake’s permanent (“every fabric of Six Thousand Years / Remains permanent”; 22:20–21, E 117)—indicate what has actually happened (Whitehead 32, 38, 445, 34, 366, 44).

The very premise of *Milton* articulates this eternity-time ecology, allegorized by the eternal Milton and the time-bound Blake, who form a mutually productive union. The

actualization of *Paradise Lost* creates the potential for *Milton*, the actualization of which frees us from the former's errors, thus creating new and unforeseen potentials. Eternity and time continually remake each other, and this ecology helps explain one of Blake's more opaque proverbs of hell: "Eternity is in love with the productions of time" (*MHH* 5:10, E 36).

*Milton* abounds with productions of time. Los produces time by creating the sun; Los's hammering and Enitharmon's vibrating looms produce the rhythms of life. "Events of Time start forth & are conceived" in the period of poetic labor (29:1–2), and that poetic labor produces metrical time. *Milton* threads together multiple temporalities, or periods, including meter, biological pulsations, the "fabric of Six Thousand Years" (22:20), and eternity, which, while extratemporal, enables the productive energies of Blake's temporal ecology. But humans too often remain mired in mundane time, failing to see the full splendor of eternity:

Thou seest the gorgeous clothed Flies that dance & sport in summer  
 Upon the sunny brooks & meadows: every one the dance  
 Knows in its intricate mazes of delight artful to weave:  
 Each one to sound his instruments of music in the dance,  
 To touch each other & recede; to cross & change & return  
 These are the Children of Los; thou seest the Trees on mountains  
 The wind blows heavy, loud they thunder thro' the darkroom sky  
 Uttering prophecies & speaking instructive words to the sons  
 Of men: These are the Sons of Los. These the Visions of Eternity  
 But we see only as it were the hem of their garments  
 When with our vegetable eyes we view these wondrous Visions (26:2–12).

Flies, mountains, and wind are “the Children of Los,” offspring of Los and Enitharmon’s eternal imagination and labor, imaginative potential actualized in time and space. But these actualized figures are also “Visions of Eternity”; we would see eternity in them if only we could see beyond the hem of their garments.

“To touch each other & recede; to cross & change & return” suggests not only the production of garments but also patterned movement. Like meter, the language evokes interconnectedness, variation, and repetition. But since humans lack the attentiveness to read beyond the hem of its garments (text/iles), we miss the larger patterns of a rhythmic and textured world, what Bateson would call “the pattern which connects”: patterns of body and mind that bare (and bear) our aesthetic and organic kinship with the external world. According to Bateson, “The pattern which connects is a meta-pattern. It is a pattern of patterns” (*Mind and Nature* 12, 5). *Milton*, like much of Blake’s work, produces meta-patterns. The textile conceit is a pattern made of other patterns such as word systems, intertextual linkages, biological assemblages, and clothed flies weaving and dancing through intricate mazes, all but the hem of their garments unreadable by our vegetable eyes. *Milton*’s crowning meta-pattern is meter—patterned words and rhythms in which the poetic, the biological, and the temporal converge and speak.

Bateson offers an observation reflected in the passage above: that nature does not reflect the “lower” characteristics of humans: the primitive, animalistic, and instinctual; rather, it reflects “the roots of human symmetry, beauty and ugliness, aesthetics, the human being’s very aliveness....His wisdom, his bodily grace, and even his habit of making beautiful objects are just as ‘animal’ as his cruelty. After all, the very word ‘animal’ means ‘endowed with mind or spirit (*animus*)” (*Mind and Nature* 5). The implication here is that humans derive their aesthetic sense from nature rather than inventing it, just as rhythms seize us from the outside and compel us to

write poetry. Read in this context, saying that trees utter instructive words seems empirical rather than anthropomorphic. Bateson's ecology of mind aims to see beyond the hem of nature's garments, beyond epistemological frameworks that refuse to acknowledge natural phenomena as part of an irreducibly plural mental system. Bateson, like Blake, laments "the little we seem to know about living things" (*Mind and Nature* 5).

### III. Evolving Time

Like Blake's equation of an instant with six millennia, the following description of time as a self-multiplying and self-renovating entity eludes representation, but it has implications for our understanding of evolution:

There is a Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find

Nor can his Watch Fiends find it, but the Industrious find

This Moment & it multiply & when it once is found

It renovates every Moment of the Day if rightly placed [.] (35:42–5, E 136)

What does it mean for time to renovate or multiply itself and for the industrious to find it? Industriousness suggests creativity. Multiplying and renovating suggest growth and renewal. For a moment to renovate another moment in time aptly describes *Milton*'s larger revisionary aim. As we learned from Crabb Robinson's diary, Blake considers *Milton* a renovation project that sets out to revise our understanding of *Paradise Lost*. According to Wendy Wheeler, what poets and semioticians understood before scientists was that a "semiotic loop, whereby subsequent stages of development can alter antecedent ones, is a strong indication of the semiotic nature of reality. What *has* been done can be made to mean, or function, differently as a result of subsequent developments—a truth now regularly observed in studies of epigenetic change and

heritability” (186–87).<sup>5</sup> *Milton* performs a semiotic loop with the goal of reforming our presenting understanding of *Paradise Lost*. Wheeler’s allusion to epigenetics suggests an important link between the operations of language, nature, and time. Epigenetics views genes as only one of many factors in determining heritability; environmental conditions and learned behaviors can also have significant impacts (Hoffmeyer 118–19).<sup>6</sup> Blake treats literary history not as a series of aesthetic objects whose ideas should be inherited by subsequent generations of readers—indeed, he intends to prevent this; rather, literary history for Blake mutates. Past, present, and future texts speak to each other, changing through continuous interpretation, reinterpretation, and even renovation. The same holds for words: what is etymology but a record of how present contexts have modified our former understanding of words? Likewise, *Milton* seeks to transform our understanding of *Paradise Lost*, and in so doing, transport us away from a genetic and toward an epigenetic understanding of language and literary history.

But what does it mean for time to multiply? To multiply suggests growth or evolution—an expanding multiplicity of genes, variants, or possible combinations. It connotes accumulation and formation. In *Creative Evolution*, Henri Bergson explains evolution’s irreconcilability with mathematical time, arguing that the development of living beings only makes sense as a process of invention, without which the very existence of time would be useless. Life, rather than existing independently of time, actually consists in time, which Bergson calls duration. The

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<sup>5</sup> Wheeler cites several examples of this phenomenon: T.S. Eliot’s claim that new art reconstitutes our understanding of previous works; Freud’s concept, *Nachträglichkeit*, sometimes translated as “afterwardness”; the recent biological concept, “downward causation”; and epigenetics are all examples of the “interference of the present in the past.”

<sup>6</sup> Jesper Hoffmeyer notes that “what was not too long ago characterized as the *self-replicating* and deterministic *entity* of the genome has increasingly become understood to be a changeable and flexible point in an ongoing process” (122).

nature of life is that it endures, with every moment an accretion of preceding moments. Blake sees the past as a pulse; Bergson views it as an “impulse.” Time “swells” for Bergson the way it multiplies for Blake. Newton also defines time as duration—the continuous forward movement of discrete temporal units. But for Bergson, “Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances”; it necessarily entails “invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the new.” Such a process is antithetical to a mathematical understanding of time, which, according to Bergson, posits “*a world that dies and is reborn at every instant*,” thus precluding the accretion of past moments that shape the present. Bergson adds, “in time thus conceived, how could evolution, which is the very essence of life, ever take place? Evolution implies a real persistence of the past in the present, a duration which is, as it were, a hyphen, a connecting link,” and Blake composes *Milton* on this very premise (Bergson 7, 11, 39, 22–23).

The hyphen, or the connecting link, figures prominently in *Milton*. We notice this in its use of connective punctuation such as colons and dashes rather than full stops. Moreover, Blake’s periods do not always signal full stops but instead function as rhetorically strategic pauses. By marking moments of non-grammatical pause, these periods have a metrical impact outside the structures of accent, syllable, or foot. Blake enacts these hyphen-connections visually as well: the stanzas of one plate often spill over to the next one. Moreover, *Milton*’s long lines and lengthy sentences engender a sense of the swelling of words, a deferral of such long duration that the sheer volume of a sentence’s content can obscure its grammatical and metrical logic. Similarly, Bergson’s problem with mathematical time is that it treats each segment of time as a discrete yet identical unit. In contrast, Bergson insists on the unique character of each moment as a composite of a past that continuously grows, a past that differs for every being. By privileging

the foot over the accent and the syllable, Blake expands and highlights the ways in which meter pushes and pulls against the rhythms of spoken language, underscoring how rhythm's conformity or deviation from meter is legible only in the context of established patterns (the past) and expectations (the future). The interplay between meter and the rhythms of language reveals the simultaneity of past and future, which are entirely operative in the present. As Blake writes in *Jerusalem*, "I see the Past, Present & Future, existing all at once" (*J* 15:8).

For Bergson and Blake, creativity and time define existence. Blake seeks to convey that change and duration constitute life and poetry, as in the pulsating artery. Instead of positing God as an external creator, Blake enmeshes God in the progression of what Bergson calls creative evolution. God often feels more like a process than a singular, omnipotent entity in Blake's work ("God becomes like we are, that we may be as he is" E 3). In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake offers the cryptic proverb, "to create a little flower is the labor of ages" (9, E 37). Some of Blake's contemporaries would deem it heretical not to attribute the creation of a flower explicitly to God; however, the agent of this creation remains ambiguous. Creation belongs not only to the flower but to the "labor of ages." Time submits neither to the absolute nor the relation-less; rather, Blake casts time as an integral part of the flower, as physically real as a stem or petal. Blake acknowledges both the time of labor and the labor of time. In other words, the duration of the flower's evolutionary labor *and* the labor performed by time itself are indispensable actors in the flower's growth just like the sun, rain, and soil. The flower is both process and thing, and the flower asserts itself as individual plant and developing form. Moreover, the flower experiences its own life and its own evolution creatively. In *Milton*, we see a similar creative evolution in the fly:

Seest thou the little winged fly, smaller than a grain of sand?

It has a heart like thee; a brain open to heaven & hell,  
 Withinside wondrous & expansive; its gates are not clos'd,  
 I hope thine are not: hence it clothes itself in rich array;  
 Hence thou art cloth'd with human beauty O thou mortal man.

Seek not thy heavenly father then beyond the skies: (20:27–32, E 114)

The clothed fly is part of nature's garment, only the hem of which humans perceive with their vegetable eyes. The language ("It has a heart like thee") is descriptive rather than figurative, which undercuts the trope of personification. And the openness of its brain to heaven and hell places the fly in a moral and cognitive domain. It owns an expansive interior life whose gates open to the external world, and it possesses its own aesthetic as an autonomous yet ecologically enmeshed organism who richly adorns itself.

This passage is reminiscent of Blake's song "The Fly," which also troubles the trope of personification in the sense that it animalizes the human at the same moment it seemingly anthropomorphizes the fly: "Am not I / A fly like thee? / Or art not thou / A man like me?" (4–8, E 23). Like Clare and Smith, Blake sees anthropomorphism as a denial of the creative capacities plants and animals actually have. The speaker then wonders about the source of life: "If thought is life / And strength & breath: / And the want / Of thought is death; / Then am I / A happy fly, / If I live, / Or if I die" (13–20, E 24). The speaker is less interested in the categorical differences between man and fly and more interested in their sameness. They both dance, sing, and drink, all of which requires thought and breath. The poem emphasizes vitality rather than species. In Saintsbury's reading of the poem, form mimics content: "the linelets flit and cross like flies themselves" (3: 16). However, the more important rhythm belongs to the fly—its breathing.

Wheeler provides a compelling example of evolutionary creativity with an account of how fish jawbones evolved into the “hammer and anvil” of the mammalian inner ear. While the jawbone evolved for eating, fish and reptiles likely discovered that they could place the jawbone against rocks and plant trunks to detect predators and prey (127–28). Environmental rhythms in the form of vibrations, along with the organisms’ creative response to them, played a central role in the ear’s evolution. If outward forms of all things are derived from the poetic genius, as Blake famously wrote (E1), then poetic genius—or what Wheeler might call “the self-reading body” (127)—produced the ear.

Blake also offers a scene of autonomous and creative evolution in “The Tyger.” This poem is often read as a rhapsodic homage to a divine creator: “what immortal hand or eye / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” (3–4, E 24) or “Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?” (24, E 25). However, if we consider the subjunctive “could” and the incredulous “dare,” as well as the persistent questioning (“Did he who made the Lamb make thee?”; 20, E25), the poem does not simply register awe of a creature and its creator; on the contrary, it registers skepticism—or at least uncertainty—about the possibility of an external and singular creator, suggesting that perhaps the tiger’s burning bright form derives not from an omnipotent creator but from itself—and its environment, as the speaker stresses the role not only that hammers and furnaces play in its creation but also light, water, and sky. Perhaps the “immortal hand or eye” that frames the tiger’s symmetrical form is, in fact, the environment.

Bateson’s ecology of mind posits the tenet that the basic unit of survival is not the species but rather the species *plus* its environment (*Steps* 491). If we can treat time as biological and environmental, then we can do the same with a particular form of time—rhythm. Jonathan Culler suggests that “The Tyger” exemplifies the power of rhythms to “inscribe themselves in

mechanical memory independently of any attempt to remember them” (142). He also notes more generally how lyric poems tend to foreground their own phonological and rhythmic play independently of any author. In fact, Paul Valéry often felt “*seized* by a rhythm that imposed itself on me” like “an outside force” (qtd. in Culler 136). Culler wonders how children can memorize nursery rhymes before knowing how to pronounce the words (153). The ecological implications of Culler’s (and Valéry’s) observations are clear: they deny agency to both reader and author and suggest more of a distributive agency (to use Jane Bennett’s term) between author, reader, body, involuntary memory, and a rhythmic, material environment that allows organisms to experience and physically respond to sounds and vibrations, perceiving them semiotically and using them as evolutionary (and mnemonic) aids.

In general, the connections Bateson makes between anatomy and rhythm have more to do with the visual rhythms of bilateral symmetry rather than sound (*Mind* 10), but his ecology of mind illuminates the irreducibility of rhythm and meter to author or reader. Rhythm and meter participate in Bateson’s mental system, a larger mind that includes sound, memory, and our natural receptivity to patterns (i.e., “patterns which connect”). Bateson deems it “monstrous” to separate internal mind from external mind (*Steps* 470). While we have an internal sense of rhythm—what Richard D. Cureton calls rhythmic competence (119)—rhythm also grips us from the outside and, as Isobel Armstrong suggests, its cadences are “felt somatically as a metrical pressure on the body” (26). Poetic meter renders the strange otherness and interconnective power of rhythm manifest. Poetry shows us that rhythm cannot be owned by anyone, as the hammer, chain, and anvil in “The Tyger” lack an owner, even though we might presume some kind of blacksmith-creator-God. Instead, these objects operate in uncertain and agent-less ways, as suggested by the strange and grammatically ambiguous phrases, “What the hammer? what the

chain ...What the anvil?” Thus, if neither reader nor author controls the influence of rhythm, then it makes more sense to situate author, reader, rhythm, meter, and environment in an ecological system—an ecology of mind and an ecology of time—with each component acting as a dependent variable in the experience of rhythm. As Octavio Paz suggests, poets and readers are merely “two existential moments” in the process of language turning itself into a poem (72)—or, drawing on Valéry, we might say the process of rhythm turning itself into metrical language in an existential moment of seizure.

Blake’s treatment of nonhumans (tigers, flies, trees, flowers) as creative actors addresses two temporal problems. The first is religious: if we believe that only humans are endowed with a creative mind and that we are made in the image of a God who separates himself from his creations, then we will not only set ourselves apart from the nonhuman world, but we will also excuse ourselves from moral obligations to it (Bateson, *Steps* 468). Thus, *Milton* admonishes the reader to “Seek not thy heavenly father then beyond the skies,” for God resides not beyond the skies but in the organisms’ physical, aesthetic, and moral evolution (and in our recognition of it). The second problem is scientific: species fixity or instantaneous creation makes evolution—which is to say change over time—impossible and, for Blake, precludes any notion of imaginative existence. Growth is a creative process and cannot exist without time.

Biosemiotician, Jesper Hoffmeyer, deems it an error to think that animals—“environmentally situated organisms of blood, flesh, and brain”—are not active and creative participants in their own lived experience (xiii). *Milton* avoids investing all of life’s agency in a single planner and instead invests it in organisms and the environments that produce and sustain them. Blake rejected certain biological theories on these grounds. For example, *The Book of Urizen* satirizes embryological theories that posited “linear and inexorable fetal development,”

suggesting instead that human life never ceases to be embryonic, always developing with no predetermined point of completion (Engelstein 85–86). Blake also challenges theories of epigenesis that posit a strictly serial formation in which God (or the organism itself) functions as the sole cause of that formation, adhering to a genetic script without relation to environmental factors (Goldstein 40–46).

These theories have the same monotony as the Dark Satanic Mills of industrial labor, which partly explains Blake’s fusion of biological and industrial language:

The Bellows are the Animal Lungs: the Hammers the Animal Heart

The Furnaces the Stomach for digestion. terrible their fury

Thousands & thousands labour. thousands play on instruments

Stringed or fluted to ameliorate the sorrows of slavery (24:58–61; E 121)

The number of syllables—all but the third line have seventeen—suggests the endless tedium of the labor. Slaves play musical instruments to soothe their own instrumentalization. Blake equates the reality of industrial labor with what he deems the misguided theories of biological development. But Blake’s concern moves beyond this comparison; he is, as Saree Makdisi suggests, discovering a core principle that organizes (or organ-izes) social, political, religious life (11). Like Blake’s other prophetic works, *Milton* reflects an episteme that has long preoccupied scientists and science historians. Hoffmeyer suggests that the separation of planning and execution links the mechanism of industrial labor to the modern science of genetics:

Since the execution of work in the industrial production is supposed to follow deterministically from the prescribed plan, there is left little or no space for interpretation at the level of execution. In traditional industrial production, all creativity was delegated

to the planners, and workers were not supposed to add anything innovative to the process.

The element of creativity was not part of work on the floor. (79)

This industrial dichotomy of planning and execution mutually informs our understanding of biology, which posits DNA as the master whose plans are carried out by the obedient cytoplasm (79). What Hoffmeyer calls creativity, interpretation, and innovation corresponds easily to Blake's poetic character. In its absence, "the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things & stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again" (*NNRb*, E 3). In this context, "experimental" refers to experience or the experiential (Williams 116). Experience is impossible without creative evolution. Duration, as Bergson suggests, "is the foundation of our being...the very substance of the world in which we live. It is of no use to hold up before our eyes the dazzling prospect of a universal mathematic; we cannot sacrifice experience to the requirements of a system. That is why we reject radical mechanism" (39). A loss of creative evolution becomes static time, a grinding Urizenic wheel without change.

Urizen, the Newtonian "primeval priest," represents the antithesis of creative evolution: his name puns on "horizon" and "your eyes in"; the former suggests limits or boundaries while the latter suggests blindness to the external world (Hilton 254–55). As Goldsmith notes, "Urizen's error has been to turn his back on the present moment, facing forward on a timeline always aimed at future achievement (teleology, acquisition, the afterlife). That is, he faces a future he is determined to make happen, by willing it into existence" (241). This is the future of closure and foreseeable ends, not the future of possibility, change, and metrical variation that Blake is advocating in *Milton*. As much of Blake's work argues, Newton, Locke, Calvin, and the Deists are, like Urizen, willing a static future into existence, one that cannot accommodate the changes and creativity that necessarily drive a living, feeling, and evolving world.

#### IV. History's Architecture

In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin responds to the problem of linear progress, seeking to create a new conception of discontinuous history, one that rejects a history that causally proceeds through "homogenous empty time," in which a seamless continuum of past, present, and future forms a vacuous repository that is continuously filled with historical data. What Benjamin calls "cultural treasures" owe their existence not only to their authors but to a barbarism that has allowed them to endure in the service of a ruling class, which is why every era must renew the effort "to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it." Our ability to do this, according to Benjamin, derives from a "*weak* Messianic power" (261–63, 254–56). This power is messianic because it marks a beginning—it is a rupture in time that creates something new or reveals something lost to history. It is like the first day of a calendar, as Christ's birth marks the first day of the Western calendar. And as Hannah Arendt suggests, the Western world frames its most defining event as a new beginning: "A child has been born unto us" (247).

But this messianic power is weak because the past has a claim on it (Benjamin 254). *Milton's* prose preface acknowledges the claim "cultural treasures" have on us, such as "The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid: of Plato & Cicero which all Men ought to contemn" (1, E 95). Thus, *Milton's* preface declares the start of a new era, a wresting of tradition from conformity:

Shakespeare & Milton were both curbd by the general malady & infection from the silly Greek & Latin slaves of the Sword.

Rouze up O Young Men of the New Age! [...] We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just & true to our own Imagination, those Worlds of Eternity [...] (1, E 95)

The sword is an anagram for “words,” which will oppress as much as swords if we let them enslave us, and this includes the meter that patterns and carries those words—the Greco-Roman quantitative verse that Blake supplants, along with English accentual verse, by freeing the irreducibly plural foot with his long line. While we are burdened by its weight, we cannot discard history. We must carry it with us, for it is delusional to think we can sever ourselves from history or abandon its actors. Even Satan and Newton must come with us because they are part of history, and for this reason Blake never vanquishes them in his work; they remain present as adversaries but also as contraries necessary for progression.

To challenge the assumption that Blake seeks to destroy the empirical thought exemplified by Newton, W. J. T. Mitchell argues that Urizen and Newton are more aptly characterized as figures of “heroic or sublime error: they may be mistaken, but they cannot be ignored or dispensed with, and the clarifying power of their mistakes can serve as a catalyst for the progress of vision” (56). Indeed, the very impetus for writing *Milton* was to revise *Paradise Lost* and correct its imaginative—perhaps sublime—errors. Thus, we should see Newton and Urizen as catalysts for beginnings rather than forces to be destroyed. By this account, Blake extends more generosity to his adversaries than his cantankerous indictments suggest. It is consistent with Mitchell’s account to point out the error of reading Urizen’s polysemous name as purely pejorative as is often the case. It is commonly read as a play on “your reason,” “your eyes in,” or “horizon” (Hilton 254–55). “Your eyes in” may suggest blindness, but it also suggests insight (as in a penetrating observation or the in-sight of self-reflection). Urizen also puns on

“you risen,” invoking the prophetic power of Jesus and “the Sublime of the Bible” (1, E 95). And while “horizon” certainly denotes limit or boundary, it also signifies what Blake calls “the bounding line.” In his *Descriptive Sketches*, Blake asks, “How would we distinguish one face or countenance from another, but by the bounding line and its infinite inflections and movements? . . . Leave out this [i]ne and you leave out life itself; all is chaos again” (*DC*; E 550). Horizons can restrict but they are necessary to give birth to form. Paradoxically, delimitation does not constrain the infinite but, rather, produces it.

Bateson finds another occasion to quote Blake when he explains how mental process requires psychological boundaries: “Wise men see outlines and therefore they draw them” (*Steps* 188). Cognition, Bateson asserts, needs delimitation: “A world of sense, organization, and communication is not conceivable without discontinuity, without threshold” (*Mind and Nature* 219). Meter matters to Blake because it creates a temporal bounding line, a frame for establishing regularity and expectations, deviations from which produce rhetorical effects, where “the terrific numbers are reserved for the terrific parts—the mild & gentle, for the mild & gentle parts, and the prosaic, for inferior parts; all are necessary to each other” (*J* 3, E 146). Blake shows how the natural cadences of oratory push and pull against meter in heard and felt ways. A rhythmic deviation from a metrical—or ecological—expectation is, to use Bateson’s phrase, “*a difference which makes a difference*” (*Steps* 459).

Both Blake and Benjamin view historical time ecologically. Benjamin wants historians to escape sequential models of history and embrace “the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one.” History is untimely, belated: causes are placed in the historical register posthumously “through events that may be separated from it by a thousand years” (263). Benjamin seeks to blast open the continuum of history (261) as Blake does through

the “breach of Milton’s descent” (21:7, E 115; 34:42, E 134). Even Blake himself blasted through history’s continuum when mid-twentieth-century literary criticism formed a constellation with his own era to suddenly propel the poet, after 150 years of marginality, to the highest canonical status. It is the same epigenetic logic of reverse causation that structures *Milton*. Echoing the marriage between Los and Enitharmon, the following passage not only renders time and space dynamically and inextricably united, but also makes it virtually impossible to conceive of history as a continuum, presenting time according to what Benjamin calls a “constructive principle” (262).

the Sons of Los build Moments & Minutes & Hours

And Days & Months & Years & Ages & Periods; wondrous buildings

And every minute has an azure Tent with silken Veils.

And every Hour has a bright golden Gate carved with skill.

And every Day & Night, has Walls of brass & Gates of adamant,

Shining like precious stones & ornamented with appropriate signs:

And every Month, a silver paved Terrace builded high:

And every Year, invulnerable Barriers with high Towers.

And every Age is Moated deep with Bridges of silver & gold.

Every Time less than a pulsation of the artery

Is equal in its period & value to Six Thousand Years.

For in this Period the Poets Work is Done: and all the Great

Events of Time start forth & are conceived in such a Period

Within a Moment: a Pulsation of the Artery. (28:44–45, 28:50–56, 28:62–29:3; E 126–27)

Unlike the continuous forward movement of Newton’s mathematical time, *Milton’s* time is not a given but a built environment (Dimock 166). While its walls, barriers, and guards suggest rigidity, time is also malleable with multiple interconnected levels. It can be taken down like a tent or opened and closed like a gate. Its veils can be lifted, and moments circulate like blood. Time is “Moated deep” but has bridges that connect distant ages, like the temporal bridge connecting the seventeenth-century Milton with the nineteenth-century Blake. Some units are specifically measured (minutes, hours, days) while others are general, stretchable, and contractable (moments, ages, and, of course, periods). The Sons of Los are architects of time, the categories of which resist comprehension in any conventional sense. In words that could have been written by Blake, Benjamin tells us, “every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter” (264).

The passage is also an epic catalogue, and Blake constructs it brick by brick and foot by foot with each architectonic item on the list, rendering anaphora and polysyndeton the metrical ground, a rhythm of construction. It is noteworthy that Newton, the materialist, formulates a theory of time that is in and of itself immaterial, despite being bound to intransigent natural laws. On the matter of time—whether historical, evolutionary, or metrical—it is Blake, not Newton, who is the materialist, despite, as Saree Makdisi argues, his longstanding reputation as an idealist, a reputation that has been widely overstated.<sup>7</sup> After the caesura between plates 28 and

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<sup>7</sup> According to Saree Makdisi, “Art for Blake is, in other words, a creative and an *ontological* activity, rather than simply a representational or epistemological one (which unfortunately is the rather more limited sense in which Blake’s art is often understood by his students and critics,

29, Blake uses the language of beginnings, birth, and possibility (“Events of time start forth & are conceived”), exemplifying eternity’s love for the production of time. The poetic act of imagination starts time, produces it, puts it in motion. Metrical time catalyzes event time. In *A Defense of Poetry*, Percy Shelley defines poetry as “vitally metaphorical” (512). He should have added “vitally metrical.”

As a constructed entity, time bears the imprint of its builder. Blake tells us that “The generations of men run on in the tide of Time / But leave their destined lineaments permanent for ever & ever” (22: 24–5, E 117). Nothing is permanently lost, although it may be excluded, and *Milton* shares Benjamin’s belief that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (254). But what about the lineaments? Lineaments may signify something like Bateson’s difference that makes a difference or Blake’s bounding lines that articulate faces and forms. Humans leave their imprint on time, as if time and the experience of living cannot be decoupled or, in Newtonian terms, cannot be “without relation to anything external” (1:9). The traces are made permanent through the tidal rhythms of generations. According to Peirce, “Time with its continuity logically involves some other kind of continuity than its own. Time, as the universal form of change, cannot exist unless there is something to undergo change and to undergo a change continuous in time there must be a continuity of changeable qualities” (*Philosophical* 344). Like Blake, Peirce speaks to the reciprocity between organisms and time. Blake’s ecology of time refrains from splitting time from the organisms and events that inhabit it, or rather, create it.

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many of whom have gone so far as to think of Blake—that most comprehensively materialist artist—as a free-floating idealist, simply because they cannot recognize Blake’s form of materialism for what it is, in sharp distinction from that other kind of materialism, which Blake associated with Bacon, Newton, and Locke)” (263).

## Conclusion

Readers often call Blake's world a mythology, but it is more appropriately treated as an ecology, not only because Blake explicitly rejects classical models but also because his characters and temporalities are elegantly interconnected. Blake's characters are constellations, figures attached to Emanations, specters, and geographies as they move through evolving states: "We are not Individuals but States: Combinations of Individuals" (32:10, E131). They resist singularity as they carry their environments with them, existing as plural individuals.

Bateson's ecology of mind and Blake's ecology of time inform each other through the process of evolution. As I've discussed, Bateson's basic survival unit is neither the species nor the family line, as Charles Darwin supposed, but rather, the flexible species *plus* its environment (*Steps* 491). An organism needs its environment to survive, and therefore survival cannot be reduced to the organism itself. And since an organism's capacity for thought depends on an external environment, we cannot reduce mind to a single organism. Likewise, a moment in time—an accumulation of previous moments—cannot be reduced to itself, as Bergson suggests; it belongs to a temporal ecology, a series of events made legible by established patterns and future expectation. Bateson notes that "potentiality and readiness for change is already built into the survival unit" (*Steps* 456–57). Similarly, potentiality and readiness for change are built into prosody, as variation wrestles and plays with expectation, as meter and rhythm push and pull against each other, moving forward expectantly but non-teleologically, enabling the present to alter our understanding of the past. As I have shown, Blake sees this built-in potential—this future possibility—in poetry: in its meter, its rhythms, and the other temporalities (or periods) it speaks to—bodily and evolutionary time; literary, biblical, and natural history; and even

diachrony, as Blake's polysemous language continuously expands its semiotic capacity over time, words unfolding like emergent plots (Hilton 10, 4).

*Milton* is considered a prophecy. Critics and readers understand that Blake's prophecy is not about predicting a future. Indeed, Blake denounces this modern meaning of prediction as tyrannical: "Prophets in the modern sense of the world have never existed....A prophet is a seer not an Arbitrary Dictator" (E 617).<sup>8</sup> Instead, prophesy for Blake means "melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid" (*MHH* 14, E 39). Prophecy in *Milton* is the opposite of prediction—it is revision, and the differences between their respective modes of untimeliness matter a great deal in the poem. Revision writes what has already been written with the aim of creating future possibilities. Prediction forecasts events that are yet to take place, and when a predicted event unfolds, it looks back to an anterior prognostication. In this sense prediction is a retrograde activity more than a forward looking one. In other words, prediction looks forward to look back while revision looks backward to look forward. Belatedness, not foresight, characterizes prophecy for Blake, as prophesy gives us language to explain the previously obscured. In prophesy, the future is not a thing to be predicted but a thing to be oriented toward. In the final two plates of *Milton*, Blake writes,

Rintrah & Palamabron view the Human Harvest beneath  
 Their Wine-presses & Barns stand open; the Ovens are prepare'd  
 The Waggon ready: terrific Lions & Tygers sport & play  
 All Animals upon the Earth, are prepared in all their strength

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<sup>8</sup> From Blake's annotations to Bishop Watson's *Apology for the Bible*.

To go forth to the Great Harvest & Vintage of the Nations (42:36–43:1, E 144).

The last two lines of this passage correspond to a break between *Milton's* final two plates.

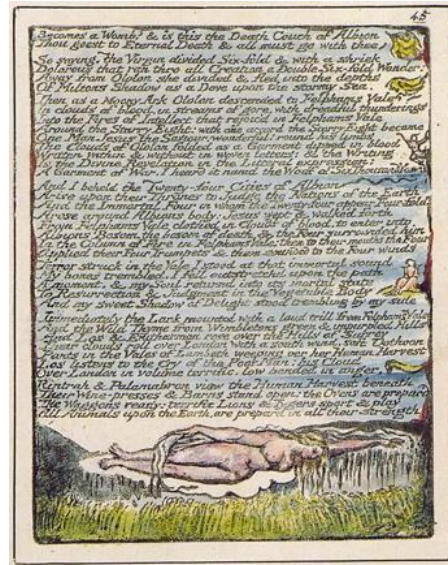


Figure 7. Plate 42 [49]



Figure 8. plate 43 [50]

This visual caesura performs the rupture of a telos. Moreover, the language in these passages insists on openness rather than closure, on possibility rather than completion, on beginnings rather than ends: barns are “open,” wagons are “ready,” ovens are “prepar’d.” In other words, *Milton* ends with a beginning. The wine press might betoken fruitfulness, but its association with exploited labor (and the pun on oppress) offers a darker possibility: it conveys both hope and caution. The ambiguity is intentional because an unambiguous ending would be Urizenic—a completion, a foreclosure on further potential. Instead, the ending leaves us with incompleteness, with purposeful uncertainty. This is not the culmination of a telos but the interruption of one. This is not an arrival, although it creates the conditions of possibility for one. Simply put, Blake offers an opportunity to “go forth.”

### Chapter 3

#### Metrical Evolution: Nature, Empire, and Blank Verse in Charlotte Smith's *Beach Head*

[T]he structure of blank verse depends upon the nature  
of the thought which it is meant to clothe.  
—John Addington Symonds, *Blank Verse*

In his explanation of “The Verse” that prefaces *Paradise Lost* (1667), John Milton famously declares rhyme “the Invention of a barbarous Age, to set off wretched matter and lame Meter.” His choice to write in blank verse is, he declares, an “esteem’d example set, the first in *English*, of ancient liberty recover’d to Heroic Poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of Riming.” Placing himself in the tradition of the English tragedians and the Italian and Spanish poets who wrote rhyme-less verse, Milton asserts that the musicality of poetry “consists only in apt Numbers, fit quantity of Syllables, and the sense variously drawn out from one Verse into another, not in the jingling sound of like endings” (210). Milton associates rhyme with tyranny and deformity while creating an aesthetic and political link between blank verse and freedom. Indeed, his use of the word “jingling” may suggest the sound of chains as much as rhyme.

While Milton significantly influenced Restoration and eighteenth-century poetry, that influence did not manifest itself in the use of blank verse. John Dryden and Samuel Johnson assailed the form as prose masquerading as poetry: Dryden called it “measured prose” while Johnson cites “an ingenious critick” who called blank verse “poetry only to the eye” (Dryden n. pag; S. Johnson 294). Despite *Paradise Lost*’s substantial influence, the rhymed and end-stopped heroic couplet became the dominant form in its wake. Victorian prosodists considered this trend a return to bondage. In his essay, *Blank Verse* (1895), John Addington Symonds decried the

eighteenth-century “despotism of the heroic couplet” while George Saintsbury, in his prodigious *A History of English Prosody from the Twelfth Century to the Present Day* (1906–10), condemns “the buckram prison of eighteenth-century metre and diction” (Symonds 77; Saintsbury 2: 496). Poets used blank verse infrequently during the century and a quarter following the publication of *Paradise Lost*. James Thomson’s *The Seasons* (1730) and William Cowper’s *The Task* (1785) remain the most commonly noted exceptions. *The Season*’s loco-descriptive celebrations of nature and *The Task*’s meditative style were influential precursors of the Romantic poets who later adopted the form, especially Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Less commonly acknowledged in discussions of non-dramatic blank verse are the poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld and Charlotte Smith, especially the latter’s *The Emigrants* (1793) and *Beachy Head*, written in 1805–6 and posthumously published in 1807<sup>1</sup>. Tracing a line from Milton to Thomson to Cowper before arriving at Coleridge and Wordsworth, as do Symonds and *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ignores the innovations of Smith and Barbauld. Saintsbury’s *A History of English Prosody* and Robert B. Shaw’s *Blank Verse: A Guide to Its History and Use* (2007) trace similar lines that emphasize Thomson and Cowper; and while they acknowledge some minor eighteenth-century poets who employed the form, they overlook Barbauld and Smith, both of whom fell into obscurity in the latter nineteenth century as Victorians increasingly masculinized the Romantic canon (Kelley, “Histories” 281).<sup>2</sup> In fact, Wordsworth anticipated this fate for Smith in 1833, when described Smith as “a lady to whom

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<sup>1</sup> Barbauld’s blank verse poems include “Corsica” and “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” (both published in 1773) and “Inscription for an Ice-House” (1775).

<sup>2</sup> See “Blank Verse After Milton” in *A History of English Prosody*, volume 1, book 8, chapter 2.

English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered” (*Poetical* 403).<sup>3</sup>

This chapter focuses on Smith’s blank verse, primarily in *Beachy Head*. While Barbauld’s blank verse poems are rich and innovative, Smith more fully explores the expansive potential of a traditionally strange meter that in the nineteenth century became, partly through Smith’s influence on Wordsworth and Coleridge, England’s most dominant verse form. Of course, Cowper’s lengthy masterpiece (over 5000 lines) was quite influential, and indeed Smith acknowledges her debt to its author in the dedicatory preface to *The Emigrants*. But stylistically, *The Task* retained much of the Shakespearean imprint of dramatic blank verse.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as Stuart Curran suggests, “Cowper’s long meditative poem in blank verse was a major influence on a characteristic mode of Romantic poetry, usually exemplified by Wordsworth’s epic of self-development, *The Prelude*. The first work actually to establish this vein of self-conscious filtering of reality in a conversational style is Smith’s *Emigrants*” (132n). *Beachy Head*, as I show in this chapter, further develops the conversational style introduced in *The Emigrants* while significantly exploiting blank verse’s plasticity and versatility, broadening its emotional and psychological scope and its ability to accommodate an exceptionally wide range of styles, modes, and subject matter.

Blank verse has always been associated with the naturalization of the foreign. According to the *The Princeton Encyclopedia*, “[n]either originally nor exclusively Eng[lish, blank verse] is nevertheless the distinctive poetic form of our language” (78 [2012]). As Symonds notes,

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<sup>3</sup> This quotation appears in a footnote to Wordsworth’s “Stanzas Suggested in a Steamboat off St. Bees’ Heads” (1833), in which Wordsworth acknowledges that the poem’s versification owes some debt to Smith’s poem, “St. Monica.”

<sup>4</sup> See Jayne Hildebrand, “Cowper’s Theatrical Blank Verse: Shakespeare, Garrick, and ‘The Task.’”

“attempts to naturalize Greek and Roman rhythms in our language were then fashionable” (18). Blank verse first appeared in England with Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey’s translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (1557). Surrey called his verse form “straunge meter”—in Surrey’s day “strange” meant foreign (*OED*).<sup>5</sup> Coventry Patmore begins his seminal *Essay on English Metrical Law* (1857) with the statement, “The adoption, by Surrey and his immediate successors, of certain foreign metres into our poetry, and the unprecedented attempt of that accomplished writer to establish ‘blank verse’ as a narrative vehicle, first aroused conscious and scientific interest in the subject of the mechanism of English verse” (3). Cornelia Pearsall suggests—in language that could have been culled from *Beachy Head*—that since Surrey drew from multiple Italian sources and, “his translation may have served less as a direct influence on future usage than as a naturalizing force, the making native of a strange or foreign form” (218). While blank verse was naturalized in drama by the Elizabethans, primarily Marlowe and Shakespeare, nondramatic blank verse did not achieve widespread popularity; that is, it was not “naturalized” until the early Romantic period when it developed deeper associations with landscape art and British nationalism. As Julia Carlson suggests, “Short blank-verse passages were naturalized and nationalized by their appearance on the new kinds of printed page found in the tour and guidebook,” an “implicitly patriotic genre” because it “invited readers to delight in specifically English landscapes” (228). Thus, blank verse was from the very beginning suffused with the idea of naturalizing the foreign, an uneasy tension, registered throughout *Beachy Head*, that both

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<sup>5</sup> Surrey only translated books 2 and 4 of the *Aeneid*, and they were published posthumously. Book 4 was published in 1554, and an edition featuring both books followed in 1557. Surrey was executed for treason in 1547. Scholars estimate that Surrey completed the manuscript around 1540. The title of the 1554 edition was *The Fourth Book of Virgil, Intreating of the Love between Aeneas and Dido, Translated into English and Drawn into Strange Meter* by Henry late Earl of Surrey. In the sixteenth century, “strange” would have meant foreign or unfamiliar. (Shaw 34).

affirms and denies the idea of nativeness. Like layers of geological sediment, *Beachy Head* absorbs blank verse's aesthetic and political history. While Smith's poem features a radical hybridity, it is neither a vague experiment nor a generic patchwork of narrative, lyric, ballad, epic, myth, and prose notes; rather, *Beachy Head* is a poetic assertion that naturalization in political and natural history spheres are deeply implicated in one another. Natural history and human history necessarily involve the naturalization of the foreign. Aesthetically, natural landscape affirms class, empire, patriarchy, and an agrarian social order (Fulford 2–3).

Naturalization is a process that makes visible the similarities between and the often co-evolution of politics and nature. The meditative and conversational voice facilitates the expansive reflections and cognitive excursions required to do this. *Beachy Head*'s concerns with imperial expansion, political freedom, and the changing views about the natural world are inextricably tied up with the history and evolution of prosody: what blank verse allows, reveals, and synthesizes. *Beachy Head*, through its use of blank verse, exemplifies ecological thinking, incorporating naturalization and mimicry while operating in the space between freedom and rules, expectation and chance, intention and non-intention.

Formally and aesthetically, Smith expands the form. The story of Romantic and Victorian blank verse, for Shaw, begins with Wordsworth and Coleridge and is about “multiplying applications, broadening scope” (65). However, an adequate prosodic history cannot take us to the blank verse of Wordsworth and Coleridge (and, by extension, the Victorians) without examining the innovations in Smith's *Emigrants* and *Beachy Head*, which indeed multiplied applications and broadened scope. It is precisely this formal and aesthetic expansion that unfolds through an interrogation of various forms of expansion in both early evolutionary and imperial contexts. It is no accident that the beginning of the lyricization and popularization of non-

dramatic blank verse, of which Smith was at the vanguard, coincided not only with the nascency of geology and evolution as scientific fields but also with the dawn of a second wave of British imperialism that, following the loss of the American colonies, pushed the nation's commercial interest eastward (R. Johnson 13). *Beachy Head* is very attuned to these cultural shifts: geology and proto-evolutionary theories (primarily those of Erasmus Darwin and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck) broadened our views of time and natural history; imperialism expanded Britain's global reach. It is the expansiveness of blank verse that allows Smith to accommodate reflections on these new ideas about scientific and political expansion.

What Smith exploits most skillfully is blank verse's elasticity and its ability to manipulate tension. Several Smith scholars have identified some of these tensions. Kevis Goodman notes the push and pull between global space and local ground; Theresa Kelley notes how Smith "rocks" between grand historical narratives and local histories; Jacqueline Labbe and Lily Gurton-Wachter have discussed *Beachy Head's* competing subjectivities and modes of attention, respectively.<sup>6</sup> These perspectival expansions and contractions register formally in blank verse. Despite the formal definition of blank verse—unrhymed iambic pentameter—*Beachy Head* produces tensions between iambs and anapests, tetrameter and pentameter, internal rhyme and the absence of end-rhyme, order and contingency. *Beachy Head* deftly navigates the space between rules and freedom, which have always provoked questions about whether blank verse succumbs to rules or is free from them (Pearsall 228).

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<sup>6</sup> See Goodman's "Conjectures on Beachy Head: Charlotte Smith's Geological Poetics and the Ground of the Present."; Kelley's "Romantic Histories: Charlotte Smith and *Beachy Head*"; Jacqueline Labbe's "Locating the Poet in *Beachy Head*" from *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry, and the Culture of Gender*; and Lily Gurton-Wachter's "'That Something Living Is Abroad': Missing the Point in *Beachy Head*" from *Watchwords: Romanticism and the Poetics of Attention*.

Smith is alert to the positive and negative possibilities of expansion. She uses blank verse's sense of freedom not to extol British liberty but to excoriate the freedom Britain denies others. In an imperial context, expansion violates freedom; in an evolutionary context, it broadens our knowledge of natural history. Smith meditates on these topics through a meter that affords the same elastic movement. She uses blank verse to advance an ecological poetics in which she employs narrative while also trying to escape it, creating lyrical tensions and torsions that expand the limits of the form. All the prosodic elements in *Beachy Head* point to a poetic sensibility trying to break out of narrative form yet managing to adapt, mutate, and evolve within it, just as the earth evolves through sudden geological events, interspecies mimicry, and continuous chains of variation.

Much of the scholarship on *Beachy Head* has, for good reasons, focused on gender, subjectivity, and history—natural, political, and military. Less attention has been placed on the prosodic elements of this compelling poetic experiment, a text by a poet who entered the literary world announcing a spirit of prosodic innovation with the formally hybrid, gender role-reversing, and ever-expanding *Elegiac Sonnets*. This chapter will demonstrate how these prosodic elements help us understand *Beachy Head*'s aesthetic, political, and scientific critiques—both explicit and implicit.

## II

As I discussed in the previous chapter, Blake rejected blank verse for the same reason Milton rejected rhyme: it was tyrannical and limiting and its five iambic feet per line could not capture the dynamics of oratory. Blake's solution, of course, was the long line used in *Milton* and

*Jerusalem*.<sup>7</sup> Smith, too, sought a form of poetic expression that could accommodate her stream of consciousness and her scientific and political interrogations in a conversational style. But unlike Blake, Smith fully embraced blank verse for its plasticity and pushed its possibilities further than they had yet been pushed through her experiments with formal hybridity and alternative modes of sound patterning, allowing lyric and balladic moments to assert themselves through a formally narrative surface.

*Beachy Head* is interested in form—poetic forms, rock and land formations, shapeshifting organisms, and celestial orbs. But, as Kevis Goodman suggests, Smith’s sense of form “differs significantly from more canonical accounts of organic form frequently associated with Romanticism, although increasingly undergoing reconsideration in recent scholarship” (987). Goodman describes Smith’s formal deviation from the teleology and seamless wholes of canonical organicism as “an unabashedly heterogenous assembly, mixing lyric song and narrative verse, myths and histories of Britain with details from botany and other sciences” (996). Smith, Goodman suggests, employs a “geological poetics” in which embedded “semi-quotations, echolalia, and related fossil forms of literary history” pervade the poem (997–98). Goodman’s very useful formulation is based, like blank verse itself, on mimicry in that these literary fossils (allusions to Milton, for example) parallel the objects found in the landmass known as Beachy Head. However, another poetic archaeology manifests itself prosodically as well, in various sound patterns such as internal rhyme, alliteration, assonance, found tetrameter

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<sup>7</sup> Forms of this long line appeared in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and *The Four Zoas*, but, according to Saintsbury, fully materialized in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. During the years of about 1804–1806, Blake was critiquing and abandoning blank verse while Smith was broadening its scope. Blake was in Felpham during this time, not far from Beachy Head near the southern shores of Sussex. Both poets were supported by Hayley. In fact, Smith complained about Blake in letters, saying he was getting most of the attention from Hayley. Both poets were thinking about blank verse at the time and its relation to freedom.

couplets, and poems within poems, creating interpretive possibilities within the broader blank verse structure, which, as numerous scholars including Goodman have noted, includes narrative, epic, lyric, ballad, myth, and prose notes. And it would not be too much of a stretch to add painting to this list of genres as Lorraine Fletcher notes a J. M. W. Turner-like chiaroscuro technique in Smith's poetic style (331), and indeed Smith compares the noonday cliffs to a painting in progress: "The sloop, her angular canvas shifting still, Catches the light" (lines 33–34).<sup>8</sup> But Smith's idea of mimicry does not entail art mimicking nature but rather the art of humans mimicking—but failing to fully capture—the art of nature, not just its static images but the process of poiesis.

Smith asserts, like John Clare, that genuine aesthetic taste understands that human-made art pales in comparison to the natural blending of sounds and images, stressing the point through alliteration:

Or sound of seas upon the stony strands,  
 Or inland, the gay harmony of birds,  
 And winds that wander in the leafy woods;  
 Are to the unadulterated taste more worth  
 Than the elaborate harmony, brought out  
 From fretted stop, or modulated airs  
 Of vocal science. (62–68)

The "sounds of seas upon the stony strands" and the "winds that wander in the leafy woods" are lines that sing with melody while the lines describing man-made music ("From fretted stops, or

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<sup>8</sup> All quotations from *Beachy Head* are from *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, edited by Stuart Curran. Line numbers appear in parentheses after the quotation.

modulated airs / Of vocal science”) are decidedly unmusical, although there is a hint of Smith’s abundant use of alliteration. Smith makes the same argument about colors:

So the brightest gems,  
 Glancing resplendent on the regal crown,  
 Or trembling in the high born beauty’s ear,  
 Are poor and paltry, to the lively light  
 Of the fair star (68–72)

The alliteration emphasizes the paucity of the high born in contrast to the lively light of the sun, emphasized by the spondee on “fair star.” These depictions of natural art—“Nature through her works” (83)—begin to segue here into a stunning sunset scene that establishes Smith’s interest in natural rhythms by completing a diurnal cycle that began with dawn’s “Emerging, brilliant rays of arrowy light” (15).

as the day declines

Attendant on her queen, the crescent moon,  
 Bathes her bright tresses in the eastern wave.  
 For now the sun is verging to the sea,  
 And as he westward sinks, the floating clouds  
 Suspended, move upon the evening gale,  
 And gathering round his orb, as if to shade  
 The insufferable brightness, they resign  
 Their gauzy whiteness; and more warm’d, assume  
 All hues of purple. (72–81)

As one's attention naturally gravitates toward a sunset, Smith subtly but decisively calls the reader's attention to this scene using alliteration, assonance, word repetition, and internal rhymes. The repetition of *d*, *c/q*, *b*, *s*, and *g* sounds draw our attention to the image. Sound indexes sight. The assonance of "more warm'd, assume / All hues" emphasizes the interplay between moving clouds and crepuscular light. The two adjacent *t* sounds in "bright tresses" cause a natural caesura between the words, emphasizing the play of light that Fletcher likens to chiaroscuro. The internal rhyme of "brightness" and "whiteness" in lines 79 and 80 emerge as end-rhymes in a found tetrameter rhyming couplet if we use the punctuation to mark the beginning of the line, the line break, and the line's end: "...as if to shade / The insufferable brightness, [break] they resign / Their gauzy whiteness..." It is as if tetrameter seeks to push through the pentameter ground.

Coventry Patmore wrote that "blank verse...has little or no rhythm of its own, and therefore the poet has to create the rhythm as he writes" (48–49). Some would say "weak rhythm" rather than "no rhythm," but the point is that, in lieu of strong rhythms and rhyme (rhyme being a form of rhythm), Smith enlists alliteration, assonance, and internal rhyme as the vehicles for sound organization. But it is a loosely organized organization. Richard D. Cureton calls pentameter a "relatively 'effaced' meter," his scare quotes suggesting a kind of absent/present rhythm. But this effacement "free[s] the poet to use a wide range of phrasal shaping" (134). Blank verse's "effaced" meter lacks obvious sound patterns, but Smith establishes a pattern in which the recursivity of like sounds—alliteration, assonance, internal rhymes—can be expected in the future; we just don't know exactly when. It is a diffuse expectation. But when the verse satisfies that diffuse expectation, it heightens the sound on the page, stimulating our senses and, thus, attention. Smith's blank verse builds in a stochastic

element that follows and evolutionary model in which regularity lives in tension with randomness, catalyzing intermittent shifts that produce change, adaptation, and meaning.

As *Beachy Head*'s third verse paragraph pulls us closer to the finality of the sunset, Smith raises the intensity of the various types of repetitions she uses throughout the poem:

Thither aspiring Fancy fondly soars,  
 Wandering sublime thro' visionary vales,  
 Where bright pavilions rise, and trophies, fann'd  
 By airs celestial; and adorn'd with wreaths  
 Of flowers that bloom amid elysian bowers.  
 Now bright, and brighter still the colours glow,  
 Till half the lustrous orb within the flood  
 Seems to retire: the flood reflecting still  
 Its splendor, and the mimic glory doest;  
 Till the last ray shot upward, fires the clouds  
 With blazing crimson; then in paler light,  
 Long lines of tenderer radiance, lingering yield  
 To partial darkness; and on the opposing side  
 The early moon distinctly rising, throws  
 Her pearly brilliance on the trembling tide. (85–99)

The repetition of sounds—specifically *f/ph*, *v*, *w*, and *b* sounds in lines 85–90—now occur in closer proximity, heightening the alliterative intensity. Again, sound registers sight, as in “visionary vales,” which is a literary fossil (to use Goodman’s term) from Thomson’s *The*

*Seasons*.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the line “Wandering sublime thro’ visionary vales” is a four rather than five-stress line, although the line retains its ten syllables—again tetrameter asserts itself within the pentameter. Like the many hues of purple mingling within cloud and sun, alliteration appears in gradations of intensity the clusters of *f*, *ph*, and *v* sounds, while not identical, are phonetically similar, creating a softer alliteration. The poet also repeats actual words: “flood” appears twice and “brighter” follows “bright.” The internal rhyme of *still/till* appears twice and suggests prolongation, reinforcing the theme of waiting and watching that pervades the poem. In *Beachy Head*, the future is always present in the form of anticipation: waiting and watching for an enemy, a lost lover, an endangered sailor. or contraband. Smith preserves a persistent sense of yet-to-be-ness, that something is more likely to happen than not. This trope works at level of form as we wait for sounds that may or may not come.

Line 89 internally rhymes “bowers” and “flowers.” As in the previous excerpt, this passage features another found tetrameter couplet embedded in the soil of Smith’s blank verse. The bold text extracts the rhymed tetrameter couplet from the blank verse. I have inserted a slash to indicate the found line break:

fann’d

By airs celestial; and adorn’d with wreaths

Of flowers / that bloom amid elysian bowers. (88–89)

Another instance of this occurs at the beginning of the third verse paragraph:

Afar off,

And just emerging from the arch immense /

Where seem to part the elements, a fleet

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<sup>9</sup> See Thomson’s *The Seasons*, “Autumn,” line 1031.

Of fishing vessels stretch their lesser sails; (36–39)

Smith's deft use of enjambment allows found tetrameter couplets to emerge, as does her phrasal shaping.

At the close of this 99-line diurnal cycle, the once "resplendent orb" (17) that produced "brilliant rays of arrowy light" (15) at dawn dims to a "tenderer radiance." This latter phrase blends together *r* sounds, almost fusing the two words into one, suggesting the blurring and softening of colors as sun verges with sea. The assonance of "lingering yield / To partial darkness" recalls the internal *still/till* rhymes in that the words *lingering*, *yield*, and *partial* protract the scene of fading light that seems reluctant to fade. But the reluctant sun finally relents, and the rising moon achieves its ascendancy on "the opposing side" as she "throws / Her pearly brilliance on the trembling tide." Smith ends this opening diurnal cycle with lines tantamount to a balladic *abcb* quatrain, the only end rhymes she uses in the poem (except for the stranger's ballads, which are poems within a poem), end rhyme underscoring the finality of the day, a finality somewhat unsettled by the "trembling tide."

The light reflecting off the tide is the "mimic glory" (93) of the sun just as the poetic use of repetition is the mimic glory of sound. Sound patterning distinguishes poetry from other forms of verbal expression. Mimicry, the repetition of likeness, is a central theme in *Beachy Head* regarding the evolution and the survival of plant and animal life; it is the play of similarity and difference that sparks tension, response, growth, and revelation.

The question of intentionality seems to hover over the above analysis. As I've explained, *Beachy Head* uses internal rhyme as a loose form of sound organization. However, one cannot determine with any certainty if Smith intends to embed rhymed tetrameter couplets into the blank verse, or four-stress lines for that matter. The series of objects the speaker finds embedded in the

earth suggests a compelling parallel, but this would be mere conjecture. But what *Beachy Head* shows is that intention and non-intention, while different, are not entirely distinct. We might say that intention and non-intention are in tension. Lily Gurton-Wachter has written about the poetics of attention and, in her reading of *Beachy Head*, identifies a “dispersed, atmospheric watchfulness” (119). If we consider the shared etymology of intention and attention (*tendere*, meaning to stretch), Gurton-Wachter’s insight aptly describes Smith’s sound patterning, which seems to unfold with a dispersed, atmospheric intention. Like the watchfulness Gurton-Wachter describes, intention and non-intention have a sort of ambient presence in which unintentional effects result from untraceable causes that mingle and disperse themselves throughout the poem.

In his essay, “Of Matter and Meter: Environmental Form in Coleridge’s ‘Effusion 35’ and ‘The Eolian Harp’” (2008), Timothy Morton reads the Eolian harp as an environmental instrument that operates according to a principle of “un-intention” in the sense that it does not intend sound itself but nevertheless produces it by interacting with the wind and registering the wind’s intensity. Smith uses blank verse’s plasticity just as we might set an eolian harp on our windowsill so that it may passively yet actively respond to the wind (313). In this sense, Morton suggests, the eolian harp parallels the “found sounds” in today’s avant-garde music (323). For Morton, Coleridge was compelled to create a formal experiment that mimics the eolian harp, such that ideas flow discursively, one after another, variously drawn out (to use Milton’s term), and mingling with the external environment. In other words, Coleridge’s poem does with words, ideas, and meter what a harp does with sound.

Curiously, except for his essay’s title, Morton never mentions the word meter (or, for that matter, measure or rhythm). Instead, he uses terms like automation, contiguity, lineation, machinery, and sequaciousness (Coleridge’s word) that seem at once to stand in for meter while

underscoring its absence. That is, the harp and Coleridge's verse follow a mechanical, if loose and fluid, pattern; yet things blend so seamlessly that one loses his sense of meter, as is the case with the eolian harp, an instrument that produces a succession of sounds without meter. As Morton notes, "'Effusion 35,' then, aside from the obvious blank verse form as arrhythmic as the notes from the eolian harp itself, is constructed precisely to be open to otherness" (328). Morton uses Coleridge's harp to propose an "ambient poetics" (312), posing the question, "If what we inadequately call *the environment* entails a radical openness, how does this appear, if at all, in art forms?" (311). I suggest that the formal emergence of this radical, environmental openness appears as the environmental interplay between intention and un-intention. It is the movement of stretching—of difference stretching (or tending) toward likeness, content stretching to be form, or sounds stretching to resemble other sounds, including the blank verse form itself mimicking, as it is known to do, natural speech.

Morton only casually mentions "The Eolian Harp"'s meter—blank verse—once; it seems of mere tangential importance. However, his formulation of an ambient poetics shaped by un-intention, found sounds, and arrhythmic rhythms open to otherness aptly characterizes blank verse, which functions as a productive ground (or poetic environment) that can facilitate *Beachy Head*'s conversational yet musical experiments with sound. Smith is highly attuned to how the play of intention and non-intention engender the found sounds in poetry, just as she is attentive to the found objects that constitute the geographical site of Beachy Head. The speaker's stream of consciousness flows like the eolian harp that can (and does) shift suddenly like the wind. The speaker is radically open to otherness, an otherness that lies within herself (or selves) and beneath the ground upon which she walks, for England is made out of things that are not England—foreign forms such as shell fossils, African elephant bones, Roman relics, and the

ethnically mixed remains of past invaders. It is a place where the terrestrial produces the aquatic, where the “native” produces the foreign, and where the local produces the global.

My aim is not to make an argument about authorial intention; rather, I am suggesting that Smith’s blank verse offers a different way to think about formal intention and non-intention—as two entities, neither distinct nor identical, that poetry (and especially blank verse) exploits. Mimicry, naturalization, and evolution all involve stretching: mimicry stretches one entity to resemble another, naturalization stretches the foreign into the native. Evolution stretches previous lifeforms into new ones when they adapt to change. Evolution involves intentions having unintended outcomes; it involves exaptation, in which something becomes useful for that which it was not intended.

In a literary fossil from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, *Beachy Head* opens with an act of stretching:

I would recline; while Fancy should go forth,  
 And represent the strange and awful hour  
 Of vast concussion; when the Omnipotent  
 Stretch’d forth his arm and rent the hills  
 Bidding the impetuous main flood rush between  
 The rifted shores, and from the continent  
 Eternally divided this green isle. (6–10)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In Robert Fagles’s modern translation, the lines Smith alludes to are “These lands, they say, were once an immense unbroken mass / but long ago—such is the power of time to work great change / as the ages pass—some vast convulsion sprang them apart, a surge of the sea burst in between them, cleaving / Sicily clear of Hesperia’s banks, dividing lands / and towns into two coasts, rushing between them down a narrow tide rip” (3: 490–96). However, Smith would not have been referencing Surrey’s blank verse version, as Surrey only translated books 2 and 4.

This defining evolutionary event, which created what we now call England, was an act of stretching. “Bidding” the rush of water suggests intention, but the “impetuous” rush suggests an uncontrollable torrent, beyond the control even of the omnipotent, riven from its intention. As Fletcher notes, “Speculation as to whether the Sussex cliffs split off from their opposite Normandy shores posits a gradual evolution of Europe’s landmass rather than a once-and-for-all Creation, though she ascribes such changes to the Omnipotent” (332). Thus, Smith creates a tension between evolution and creation, depicting them simultaneously; however, the generic “Omnipotent” refers not to a Christian God and may be subtly coded to signify the powerful natural forces that lie beyond human understanding. In one sense, Smith rifts the biblical account of creation away from the shores of an origin discourse increasingly leaning toward an evolutionary explanation of natural history.

We know that authors have intention, otherwise texts do not get written. We just can’t quantify and pinpoint all the intention. The idea of stretching is truly poetic; it captures poetry at the formal and thematic level: metaphor and simile stretch difference into some semblance of likeness; sound patterns such as meter, rhythm, and rhyme entails one sound stretching to be like—but not quite succeeding—another sound. As Derek Attridge asserts (as does the composer, John Cage, in a musical context), there is no such thing as actual repetition: “We cannot, after all, draw an absolute line between repetition and non-repetition; every apparently new appearance, if it appears, is constituted or mediated by the familiar; every repetition, repeating itself in a specific here and now, freshly contextualized, is different” (48). Thus, stretching never quite attains identity, although it establishes a regularity vulnerable to unpredictable departures.

Internal rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and other sound patternings increase the likelihood of found-sounds emerging, especially when a poem abounds with enjambment, as *Beachy Head* does. In *Beachy Head*, the intentional continually bumps up against the unintentional. In a flexible blank verse sea that absorbs alliteration, internal rhyme, assonance, word repetition, and enjambment to the degree seen (and heard and felt) in *Beachy Head*—to say nothing of genre—increases the possibility for poetic moments, foreseen or unforeseen. While the moments may not be specifically planned, the combination of blank verse with semi-organized sound patterns is a poetic orientation that allows for the unplanned to evolve in striking and beautiful ways, allowing the poem to emerge, like life, through a combination of deliberate placement and productive responses to accident. The choice to use and exploit a meter like blank verse, with its openness to sound, otherness, and formal plasticity, is itself a foresight that knowingly invites the unforeseen; that is, Smith intentionally exploits blank verse's flexibility as a form with the capacity to accommodate the internal tensions and torsions of prosodic and generic stretching. But, of course, moments in which intention slips into "unintention" produce unpredictable results that produce and reveal new formal capacities in blank verse. By engaging in this poetic experiment, Smith expands our sense of what the blank verse form can do in terms of synthesizing multiple genres, histories, and sound patterns with questions about science, empire, and subjectivity. In this way, blank verse demonstrates how the living poem behaves like a living organism.

### III

Blank verse evolved, as it were, alongside evolutionary theory, which, at the time of *Beachy Head*'s composition, existed in an embryonic state. Outside the work of Erasmus Darwin and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, mainstream scientists at the turn of the nineteenth century did not

consider evolution a serious theory. Most life science at the time focused on the comparative anatomy and the classification of species (Young and Largent 2). The focus on classification (a form of containment) over evolution (a form of expansion) may correlate to the neoclassical poetic preference for poetic containment—strict meter, end-rhymes, and “a distinct system of sounds,” to use Samuel Johnson’s phrase (294). Like biological evolution, blank verse at that time was marginal. Few poets used it and even fewer used it successfully. While Wordsworth and Coleridge popularized the conversational-lyric iteration of blank verse introduced by Smith in *The Emigrants*, it did not achieve dominance in English poetry until the Victorian period, not long before Erasmus Darwin’s more famous grandson, Charles, published *On the Origin of Species* (1859). And it should be noted that, while Romanticism’s definitive work—Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*—was written in blank verse, it was not published until 1850. In a broad sense, history aligns the trajectories of blank verse and evolutionary theory.

*Beachy Head* registers the beginning of the nineteenth-century shift from taxonomy-driven science toward the beginnings of an evolutionary science concerned with a broader natural history that stressed survival and adaptation. Not only does *Beachy Head* greatly expand the temporality of natural history, but it also addresses the particularities of survival and adaptation that push that history forward. Smith observes the survival methods of birds:

from her nest, among the swamps

Where the gemm’d sun-dew grows, or fringe buck-bean,

They scare the plover, that with plaintive cries

Flutters, as sorely wounded, down the wind (203–06)

The bird, with its cries and movements, pretends to be wounded in order to divert attention from her nest. The bird acts out a false scenario, most likely to protect her nested young from a predator.<sup>11</sup> Another passage observes adaptation through imitation:

let us turn

To where a more attractive study courts  
 The wanderer of the hills; while shepherd girls  
 Will from among the fescue bring him flowers,  
 Of wondrous mockery; some resembling bees  
 In velvet vest, intent on their sweet toil,  
 While others mimic flies, that lightly sport  
 In the green shade (440–47)

The Beachy Head environment exemplifies the diffuse, atmospheric intention discussed in the previous section. Here, the object of the “attractive study”—nature—actively courts the wanderer, as opposed to the wanderer actively pursuing her object. Moreover, like the will-o-the-wisp (256n), the bird and the flowers are imitators and willful deceivers. In Smith’s rendering, birds and plants send messages of mimicry inextricably tied to navigating the conditions and contingencies of their environments, vis-à-vis survival, adaptation, and reproduction. The nonhuman behavior is rhetorical in that it involves persuasion and requires (mis)interpretation; it is rhythmic in that it involves repetition as mimicry. The speaker understands these organisms as creative imitators, conflating the aesthetic with the biological, artfully dissembling for their own

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<sup>11</sup> Feigning injury to distract predators is common among many bird species. Jesper Hoffmeyer calls this type of scenario—where a bird lures a predator from her nest by pretending to be injured—a *semethic interaction*. It is when the habit (*ethic*) of a species is read as a sign by another individual. In this case, wounded bird signifies an easy catch for a predator (188-9). Also see Curran’s note for line 206 (*Poems* 226).

survival. Erasmus Darwin also acknowledges the role of mimicry in evolution, and he depicts similar scenes in *The Botanic Garden* (1789), such as a flower that resembles a spider, which he calls “the mimic warrior.” According to Darwin’s footnote, “The similitude of this flower to this great spider seems to be a vegetable contrivance to prevent the humming-bird from plundering its honey” (202).<sup>12</sup> These are performative acts of poiesis, half perceiving and half creating.

Smith and Darwin insinuate a correlation between art and biology by likening acts of survival to dance, drama, and poetry, aestheticizing them through attention to form, figuration, and repetition. Smith renders the behavior of nonhuman organisms aesthetically meaningful, not only by highlighting the artful and interpretive behavior integral to their biological preservation, but also by showing a creative exchange of signs: plants and birds in *Beachy Head* read the behavior of organisms in their environment and then send interpretations of that behavior back into the environment as mimicry, messages that are themselves meant to be interpreted (or misinterpreted).

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari sketch the same evolutionary process using the same example—a flower mimicking an insect:

It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, reproducing its image in a signifying fashion (mimesis, mimicry, lure, etc.). But this is only true at the level of strata—a parallelism between two strata such that a plant organization on one imitates an animal organization on the other. At the same time, something else entirely is going on: not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the

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<sup>12</sup> See *The Botanic Garden*, Part 1, “The Economy of Vegetation,” line 509 plus note (202).

wasp....the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities...

(*Thousand* 10)

Mimicry occurs in the sense that an organism at the plant kingdom level imitates an organism at the animal kingdom level. But the code capture exceeds mimicry, which is to say it goes beyond the ephemera of mere acting, like the bird that merely pretends to be wounded until it successfully deflects the predator. The flower and the insect example has an added layer: their code capture leads to an ontological, physical transformation such that each organism moves ever closer to the semiotic structures of the other.

Deleuze and Guattari describe a semiotic and rhythmic process that, in a cultural context, is the process by which blank verse became naturalized. The putative attraction of blank verse is that it mimics natural speech. It is a meter engaged in a “becoming speech,” specifically conversational speech. Neither Surrey’s, Milton’s, nor Thomson’s use of blank verse captured a sense of ordinary speech.<sup>13</sup> Cowper’s and Barbauld’s blank verse came closer with their meditative styles. But, as Curran has suggested, blank verse first achieved a conversational style in Smith’s *The Emigrants* and was refined, as I suggest, in *Beachy Head*—with the addition of more lyric and balladic elements. During the eighteenth-century, blank verse was a process of relays between poetry and a reading and speaking public that increasingly saw the conversational, meditative, and lyric potential of blank verse, while at the same time developing an increasing need for introspection. Octavio Paz notes how the ancient rhetoricians called rhythm the father of meter (*Bow* 58). This is true in the sense that scansion follows rhythm; however, blank verse gradually demonstrated its susceptibility to natural speech patterns and

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<sup>13</sup> According to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Milton “deliberately distorted the normal syntax and sound-patterns of Eng. speech” and that Thomson’s *Seasons* “did not attain the easy colloquial mode of Dryden and Pope’s couplets” (79 [2012]).

introspection over time, something not evident until the late eighteenth century. Thus, to achieve its speech-like patterns, blank verse took a century of evolutionary relays of speech-becoming-meter and meter-becoming-speech.

The previous excerpt about “flowers of wonderful mockery” contains a footnote that criticizes the Swedish botanist, Carl Linnaeus, for failing to notice the sheer variety of plants that mimic insects (*Poems* 236). The footnote claims that Linnaeus had been “misled by the variations to which some of this tribe are really subject, has perhaps too rashly esteemed all those which resemble insects, as forming only one species, which he terms *Ophrys insectifera*” (*Poems* 238). Importantly, the footnote does not identify the plant species as possessing fixed traits. Variety consists not in static distinctions discernible across an array of variants; rather, they are *subject to variations*, “subject” suggesting that they are continuously susceptible to change and evolution.

Flowers engage in deliberate mimicry resulting from “intent” (444-6) and which renders the taxonomic table, useful as it is, inadequate for truly understanding the proliferation of these plant species. These *ophrys insectifera*, like hawkweeds and Fern Owls, exemplify what Theresa Kelley calls “kingdom-crossed names” that index *Beachy Head*’s “errant figurality that moves on, slivering through names and identities that will not allow the speaker or reader a resting place or conventional sense of arrival.” Kelley links this errant figurality to what she characterizes as an impasse, or a lack of generic resources that helps explain the poem’s narrative indirection, its “unease with the work of argument and closure that genres help to encode,” and the “truncated ending lines, which offer an inscription for a hermit found dead that may as likely be an epitaph for the reach of epic and other genres (pastoral, ballad, and so on) as an epitaph for Smith herself” (*Clandestine* 121, 124–25). One might take away from Kelley’s analysis that *Beachy*

*Head* is haunted by a sense that no available genre can adequately perform the task at hand, which involves synthesizing the botanical, historical, political, geological, and subjective threads—not by jumping from topic to topic like Cowper’s *The Task*, but in a way that articulates an evolutionary through-line that runs through all those concerns yet without any claim to a tidy, unified whole.

This is another attraction of blank verse: that it lacks built-in closure. That is, arrival can always be, and typically is in *Beachy Head*, deferred. Blank verse is not an empty receptacle awaiting Smith’s “heterogenous assembly” of topics and genres, to use Goodman’s term; rather, the poet is evolving the form through her poetic experiment. Symonds calls blank verse a “protean metre” (68). Not only is it natural, but it is, naturally, able to shift according to the formation of the poet’s ideas: “It seems adapted specially for thought in evolution; it requires progression and sustained effort,” especially suited for “continuity and development of thought, than for the setting forth of some one perfect and full-formed idea” (70). Symonds seems to use the term evolution in a general sense, as in growth or development; but it is entirely apt scientific or even Darwinian idiom when we consider theories of embryology popular in the late eighteenth century, such as preformation and epigenesis, that posit a teleology uninfluenced by environmental factors.

*Beachy Head*’s prose footnotes (originally published as endnotes) present an interesting formal case with respect to blank verse’s plasticity and its ability to evolve. As her letters show, Smith’s choice to use notes was not entirely for informative purposes. Arguably, the choice was defensive: it was driven, in large part, to preempt criticisms of inadequate knowledge. In a letter to Thomas Cadell, Jr. and William Davies, dated July 26<sup>th</sup>, 1805, Smith asks for some books on natural history as a resource for her notes: “A Poem of considerable length is on a local subject. I

have made very great progress in it, having had it in hand some years, but I wish to be very correct & to leave nothing for Criticism to carp at, & therefore it is that I am desirous in a last revision of going over the books Mr. Dunster has named to me” (*Letters* 696). Erasmus Darwin once criticized Smith for publishing a poem that demonstrated gaps in her knowledge of natural history; and while she used notes in previous works, her extensive use of them in *Beachy Head* was part of a sustained effort to practice scientific particularity (Fletcher 261, 331).

But despite the informative and preemptive nature of the notes, they nevertheless impose themselves aesthetically and formally on the reading experience of the poem. While the notes disrupt the rhythm of the poetry, they become part of a back-and-forth rhythm itself, a toggling between poem and notes, between common and scientific names. Erasmus Darwin’s *The Loves of Plants* (1789), one of Smith’s favorite poems, explains science through verse (specifically heroic couplets) and features extensive “philosophical notes” (Fletcher 233). Despite using endnotes originally (Darwin used footnotes), *Beachy Head* adheres to this model of extensive explanatory notes. A key difference is that Darwin’s heroic couplets in *The Loves of Plants* make the notes a more jarring departure from the meter while the conversational style of Smith’s blank verse makes the back-and-forth shift less abrupt. Kelley notes the rhythmic quality of these two different but related reading experiences, characterizing Darwin’s rhythm as a “spinning” between verse and notes while Smith’s is more of a “muted dance of verse and notes” (*Clandestine* 122).

Prose notes are arguably foreign forms lying beneath the poetic blank verse landscape. As Donelle Ruwe suggests,

Smith’s own endnotes (today printed as footnotes) force readers to have a specific reading action that mirrors one of the poem’s structural patterns, in which descriptions of

Beachy Head move constantly from the surface of the cliff to its interior life of fossils, buried bodies, and ancient history, and then back to the surface. Readers of the footnotes must move from text to subtext and back again.” (305)

This compels the reader to assimilate, or naturalize, the notes into the experience of reading the poem, which involves the centrifugal force of going outside the body of the poem to read the notes and, inversely, the centripetal force of assimilating those notes into the poem. *Beachy Head* persistently demonstrates a preoccupation with scientific explanation, subterranean objects, and invisible causes. These features of the poem, when read alongside the formal evolution of blank verse and the development of geological and evolutionary theories, reveal, at the level of form and content, the shift from the classical to the modern episteme as outlined by Foucault in *The Order of Things*, in which the metric for understanding life shifted from visible characteristic (taxonomy) to systems and functions invisible to the eye. [citation] As Kevis Goodman suggests, the coastal gaze pervading *Beachy Head* “captures the emergent recognition...of a complex historical present, one that exists beyond sense perception” and underscored by Smith’s interest in geology, a discipline about “absent causes” such that “‘here’ bears traces of ‘there’ and that the contours of ‘now’ are shaped by events ‘then’” (984, 986, 994). *Beachy Head* registers skepticism toward classificatory systems based on visible traits and makes concerted efforts to deduce or infer invisible systems and causal relationships between the seen and the unseen. As Bruno Latour argues,

So, it is perfectly true to say that any given interaction seems to *overflow* with elements which are already in the situation coming from some other *time*, some other *place*, and generated by some other *agency*....As I have said earlier, action is always dislocated, articulated, delegated, translated. Thus, if any observer is faithful to the direction

suggested by this *overflow*, she will be led *away* from any given interaction to some *other places, other times, and other agencies* that appear to have molded them into shape. It is as if a strong wind forbade anyone to stick to the local site and blew bystanders away; as if a strong current was always forcing us to abandon the local scene.” (166)

This interest in subterranean and unseen causes emerges in *Beachy Head*'s opening passage that recounts the geological event that ripped England away from the European continent and in one of the poem's more striking (and analyzed) passages, in which the speaker encounters shell fossils in the hills, far from the sea:

And still, observing objects more minute,  
 Wondering remark the strange and foreign forms  
 Of sea-shells; with the pale calcareous soil  
 Mingled, and seeming of resembling substance (372–75)

This passage contains the following footnote:

Among the crumbling chalk I have often found shells, some quite in a fossil state and hardly distinguishable from chalk. Others appeared more recent: cockles, muscles, and periwinkles, I well remember, were among the number; and some whose names I do not know. A great number were like those of small land snails. It is now many years since I made those observations. The appearance of seashells so far from the sea excited my surprise, though I then know nothing of natural history. I have never read any of the late theories of the earth. Nor was I ever satisfied with the attempts to explain many of the phenomena which call forth conjecture in those books I happen to have had access to on this subject. (232)

The speaker goes on to explain three theories that attempt to account for the existence of aquatic fossils on terrestrial soil. While the speaker (or what Jacqueline Labbe calls the “note-speaker”) remains unsatisfied with some explanations and admittedly unfamiliar with others, and while she ultimately concludes, “from whence / These fossil forms are seen, is but conjecture, / Food for vague theories, or vain dispute” (392–94), the fact that she considers three audacious theories suggests the influence of the recently deceased Erasmus Darwin, whose heterodox theories Smith sought to keep alive (Fletcher 332). First, the theory that Beachy Head once was hit by a tidal wave:

Tho’ surely the blue Ocean (from the heights  
Where the downs westward trend, but dimly seen)  
Here never roll’d its surge. (376–78)

Discarding this possibility, the speaker entertains a second explanation:

Does Nature then  
Mimic, in wanton mood, fantastic shapes  
Of bivalves, and enwreathed volutes, that cling  
To the dark sea-rock of the watery world? (378–381)

This second theory suggests nature’s own mimicking, shape-shifting ability, a theory stemming from doubts about whether these fossils were shells at all; some scientists called the fossils *lusus naturae*—“sports or tricks of nature” (Goodman 991, 1003n30). The speaker then offers a third theory: that Beachy Head once existed below sea level but then heaved upward, reaching above sea level:

Or did this range of chalky mountains once  
Form a vast basin, where the Ocean waves

Swell'd fathomless? What time these fossil shells,  
 Buoy'd on their native element, were thrown  
 Among the imbedding calx: when the huge hill  
 Its giant bulk heaved, and in strange ferment  
 Grew up a guardian barrier, twixt the sea  
 And the green level of the sylvan weald (382-89)

The second theory—that nature mimics other forms in wonton mood—seems the least plausible. But given *Beachy Head*'s persistent interest in mimicry, it warrants further analysis. Regardless of the theory's validity, it notably invests nature with a capacity for creatively avoiding undesirable outcomes (like the bird that pretends to be wounded to draw predators from its nested young) and achieving more desirable outcomes (like the flowers that mimic insects to induce pollination). These sorts of “tricks” of nature constitute the creative adaptation driving evolution. Wendy Wheeler calls this “tinkering,” a capacity for inventiveness that pervades nature and culture (136). This is a figural process that, according to Wheeler,

is on the way to metaphor: a need for expression arises, and, in order for us to give it form, we must find something *like* it. If it is a very productive, i.e., creative, resemblance, it will not only perform the task to hand, it will also expand our thoughts about the task, how we think about it, and even force some principle upon us about this and related tasks. In other words, the needful similarity will also produce differences, and these two moves of similarity and difference will launch us on the path of knowledge, first about this particular part of the universe and then about other ones. (136).

*Beachy Head* illuminates such a similarity. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century witnessed a broadening definition of the term evolution, which went from meaning the

development of single organisms to a more expansive notion of natural history (Williams, *Keywords* 121). This linguistic and scientific change correlates to a meter that allows for the same expansive movements. Evolution and blank verse not only run parallel, but—to draw on Wheeler’s explanation—blank verse is the tool Smith needs to perform that task at hand, which is to synthesize a vast array of culturally evolving ideas and articulate an expanded sense of temporality that exceeds common notions of local history, human history, and even biblical time.<sup>14</sup>

In recent decades, the emerging field of biosemiotics has emphasized the structural similarities between the processes of biological evolution and the structures of poetry. Wheeler suggests that evolutionary processes follow the structure of metaphor: “Abduction, the carrying of something or someone from one place to another, is another way of talking about the movement which humans call metaphor but which is common to all life” (125). She shares this belief with Gregory Bateson, who suggests, “metaphor is not just pretty poetry, it is not either good or bad logic, but is in fact the logic upon which the biological world has been built” (*Angels* 30). Bateson and Wheeler claim that metaphor—the play between similarity and difference through abduction—follows the same logic as biological development. The logical and formal connections they draw between biological evolution and poetry focus on figuration rather than rhythm or meter. But rhythm and meter follow Bateson’s and Wheeler’s logic in terms of this play between similarity and difference: rhythm moves forward legibly because of a previously established metrical pattern; for a meter to be recognizable, a line or foot is expected to be like a previous one. Second, difference emerges through the tension between an established

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<sup>14</sup> Blank verse was suitable to such a subject. Coleridge considered rewriting, in blank verse, Thomas Burnet’s *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1684–90), which tells the story of earth’s fate after the flood (*Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose* 494n9).

metrical pattern and the natural rhythms of language that deviate from that pattern—such differences produce rhetorical effects and emphasize meaning. We often think of meter and rhythm as non-discursive and metaphor as discursive. But while it is easier to imagine the latter with content and the former two without, all are structures on which language moves and repeats, structures based on the play of similarity and difference. The similarity affords legibility while the difference produces meaning and rhetorical effects. Similarity is repetition; difference is deviation.

Repetitions—or mimicry—in meter and rhythm are similar to other types of semantic repetitions. Derek Attridge insists on the similarity between language and the meters and rhythms upon which it rides:

repetitions in literature resist many of our strategies of interpretation and constitute irreducible moments of otherness, but this is not...because they mark an absolute difference from the way language in the literary text usually goes about its business. On the contrary, the trouble we have with repetitions—pleasurable and perhaps profound trouble, I should add—is not ultimately distinct from the trouble we have with the cultural practice we call literature, whose statements are not quite statements, whose references do not quite refer, and whose variously drawn-out movements never allow themselves to be fully and finally mapped. (49)

In other words, the non-signifying elements of poetry make us grapple with the same problems as signifying elements do. The implication here is that non-verbal repetition does not differ from rhetorical statements in their undecidability: they are always both doing and not doing something simultaneously—referencing and not referencing, stating and not stating, repeating and not repeating. Attridge notably alludes to Milton's description of blank verse ("variously drawn

out”) in relation to otherness—Morton, as I pointed out in the previous section, did the same in an environmental context, although neither author makes the point explicitly. What we might conclude from the oblique correlations Attridge and Morton make between repetition, otherness, and blank verse is that blank verse creates a poetic space that renders the otherness of repetition increasingly visible. The seriality involved in evolution and the adaptations required after environmental disruptions—such as *Beachy Head*’s mutating flowers and the “vast concussion” that divides England from France—variously draw out, by necessity, the otherness that resides within the self. Survival entails the preservation of self, but that preservation requires adaptation, which necessitates a new capacity, an otherness, to emerge from that same self. Adaptation produces a new self within an old, still recognizable self. Both prosodists and evolutionary scientists use the term variation to describe this often-indefinable otherness.

Prosodists generally understand rhythm as bodily, and the more pronounced the rhythm the more intense our physiological and psychological responses are to it—rhymed tetrameter, common meter, and ballad rhythms tend to have stronger effects.<sup>15</sup> Pentameter rhythms have the weakest rhythm and are, thus, the least bodily. This is true in terms of immediate physiological and psychological responses, such as the response one would have listening to a particularly strong three or four-beat rhythm in real time. But there is a sense in which blank verse is extremely bodily, although its effects may be less immediate. As Wheeler discusses, scientific studies show that human learning begins before birth. In the last trimester, fetuses begin to memorize sounds detected from the outside the womb: “They show a marked sensitivity to the melody patterns of the tongue they have heard while in the womb, and their own cry melodies

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<sup>15</sup> For more on metrical beats, see chapter 5, “Rhythm in English Poetry: Beat Prosody,” in Attridge’s *Moving Words*.

imitate the melody patterns of that tongue. Infants show a preference for listening to their native language rather than to unfamiliar languages with different rhythms” (208). This provides strong evidence for claims that our affinity for certain rhythms derives from the muscularity of speech patterns rather than any correlation between heart beats and certain rhythms. As Attridge notes, “Phonological studies over the past thirty years have shown a much closer link than had been suspected between the traditional forms of English verse and the complex rules that govern English pronunciation; it’s appropriate that this work goes under the name ‘metrical phonology’” (*Moving Words* 125). Thus, our sense of rhythm begins at birth, before speech, and is essential to growth. The rhythms of natural speech, which blank verse approximates more than other meters, are inextricably linked to biological growth, evolution, and learning.

Blank verse not only evolves formally in Smith’s hands, but the poet also renders the poem itself an exemplar of how evolution, a nascent biological field, works at formal, ecological, and historical levels. *Beachy Head* conveys the sense that it cannot contain its own formal evolution and mutations. *Beachy Head* articulates, in form and content—although it also troubles that distinction—a particular kind of evolution attuned to nature’s contingencies, adaptations, and expansive outward growth. It is a vision of evolution that accords with Erasmus Darwin and Lamarck while anticipating Charles Sanders Peirce’s claim that “There is no conceivable fulfillment of any rational life except progress towards further fulfillment” (*Contributions* 124). Smith treats the poem as a living organism just as living organisms like birds, flowers, and insects have a decidedly aesthetic nature, to say nothing of the interplay of celestial bodies that produce an art that humans can only emulate but invariably fall short of. Form and rhythms mutate, shift, and evolve as the poem’s content unfolds, adapting to the speaker’s streams of consciousness to which we, as readers, must also adapt.

## IV

Blank verse, as I discussed earlier, has traditionally been associated with naturalization. The word *naturalization* derives from the middle French and has two primary definitions: it took on the meaning “to make native” in the late fifteenth century while assuming the sense of “adopt into language” in the mid-sixteenth century (*OED*), around the time Surrey translated *The Aeneid* into English blank verse.

I suggest two other types of naturalization that I characterize as centripetal and centrifugal. First, centripetal naturalization moves the foreign toward a center (e.g., England) where it becomes assimilated. The most common example of this is an immigrant who becomes naturalized as a citizen of a new country but would also apply to how Pearsall, Patmore, and *The Princeton Encyclopedia* describe blank verse as a foreign form entering the English vocabulary and becoming the most natural—and naturally English—form, with Surrey’s translation of *The Aeneid* exemplifying this process. In centrifugal naturalization, the center expands outward and assimilates the foreign, absorbing the periphery into its central sphere, drawing otherness into its domain. Centrifugal naturalization, I suggest, takes the form of imperial expansion and colonization. Pearsall suggests a political and historical correlation between blank verse’s expanding popularity and the expansion of the British empire in the nineteenth century—both required measurement and both were considered natural as well as national matters to Victorian readers, educators, and prosodists (220–21).

*Beachy Head*, however, subverts both types of naturalization by de-naturalizing England itself. Smith subverts centripetal naturalization by constructing the landscape out of foreign and non-terrestrial objects in a way that not only problematizes the physical prospect of a

quintessentially “English landscape” but that also undermines the national unity and natural order that eighteenth-century prospect poetry sought to affirm (Fulford 2–3). Instead of foreign objects being naturalized, they instead foreign-ize the native. In other words, Smith defamiliarizes England in a way that questions the idea national unity or native Britishness and the idea of both political and ecological nativeness, conveying the sense that England is constructed of foreign forms that long precede her modern contemporary moment and even biblical time—fossils, African elephant bones, Roman relics, and the remains of people with mixed ancestry as a result of invasions and ethnic mixing.

Smith also subverts the traditional political associations of blank verse that celebrate England and its expanding empire: liberty (*Paradise Lost*, *The Task*), religion (Young’s *Night Thoughts*), British empire (*The Seasons*). Said poems are by no means unqualified celebrations of actual Britain; *The Task*, for example, critiques slavery and *The Seasons* urges landowning classes to recognize rural laborers as producers of wealth (Williams, *Country* 70). Smith focuses attention of the freedom England denies to others rather than its own freedom, as Milton does; she excoriates empire and challenges British identity, rather than affirming them, like Thomson before her and many Victorians after her, including Tennyson (Pearsall 231).

Blank verse is known for its ability to evolve and expand, and this expansion is not unrelated to the expansion of empire and a deeply rooted sense of British identity. Pearsall notes that when Milton characterized blank verse as free from the bondage of modern rhyming, he set a precedent that politicized the verse form (219). The form was used for explicitly political purposes in Anna Barbauld’s “Corsica” (1773) and Smith’s *The Emigrants* (1793), the latter of which places itself in this tradition not only by alluding to *Paradise Lost* in its preface but also by calling Cowper’s *The Task* “The exquisite Poem, indeed, in which you have honored Liberty”

(134). Through the nineteenth century, the form became increasingly associated not just with liberty but with the national identity of Great Britain. Symonds called blank verse a “style peculiarly national,” and indeed blank verse was widely regarded as both natural and national (77).

Poets of blank verse, according to Henry Weinfield, were “linked by a series of complex inter-textual relations anchored by a form” that allowed them to freely contemplate the crises of modernity (3). While Smith continues the themes of politics, liberty, and British identity associated with blank verse, she sits uneasily within the traditions that preceded her and the Victorian developments that followed her by expanding the idea of liberty beyond Britain to its enemies and colonies: *The Emigrants* sympathizes with the lost freedoms of the French clergy who emigrated to Britain during the French Revolution while *Beachy Head* excoriates British empire for denying liberty to colonized slaves.

In stanzas five, six, and seven of *Beachy Head*, Smith offers an invasion history of Western Europe that ultimately questions national identities as very arbitrary and un-natural things. At a second remove that may suggest a limit to the reliability of historical knowledge, the speaker asks “Contemplation” to in turn ask history (“recording memory”) to unfold the story of European conquests beginning with the Norse invasion of France:

Contemplation here,  
 High on her throne of rock, aloof may sit,  
 And bid recording Memory unfold  
 Her scroll voluminous—bid her retrace  
 The period, when from Nuestria’s hostile shore  
 The Norman launch’d his galleys, and the bay

O'er which that mass of ruin frowns even now  
 In vain and sullen menace, then received  
 The new invaders, a proud martial race  
 Of Scandinavia (118–126)

Unfolding a voluminous historical scroll suggests that Smith is thinking within the meter she employs. As an unrhymed verse form, blank verse unfolds with the formal returns engendered in rhymed verse. Blank verse's nature is to move forward, continuously unscrolling. Symonds's equation of blank verse with evolution is also relevant here because evolution derives from the Latin *volvere*, meaning to unroll or roll out "in the sense of unrolling a book" (Williams, *Keywords* 120). It is a metrical *evolution* rather than a metrical *revolution*—time's arrow rather than time's cycle.

While Smith's account (above and elsewhere) identifies specific races, nations, and territories, the poem simultaneously undermines their integrity through images and footnotes that strongly suggest ethnic mixing. For example, a lengthy footnote tells of how the "North-men" visited the coasts of England, Spain, and France, and jointly plundered the latter with the Sicilians. She describes these series of conquests and migrations as bodies in motions: "other bodies of Normans passed into Sicily (anciently called Trinacria); and many of them entered into the service of the emperor of the East, others of the Pope." She also notes that "The Danes and Franks produced a race of men celebrated for their valour" (*Poems* 222). Notably, the Danes and Franks produced *a* race (i.e., one race), which suggests ethnic mixture. The stanza and the footnote destabilize the notion of Britishness by suggesting that the "martial race" of Normans that seized England was already a mixed race of Danes and Franks. And the Norman invasion that ended the Saxon heptarchy transformed an old England into a new one (*Poems* 233).

Smith uses procreative language to describe the various conquests. The Scandinavians not only “penetrated” Paris but

Trinacria to their power  
Yielded her wheaten garland; and when thou  
Parthenope! within thy fertile bay  
Receiv’d the victors (128–131)

The implication of reproduction occurs at the level of populations and individuals as the note mentions how Charles the Simple offered Rollo his daughter in marriage, along with some of his English territories. The poem also uses antiquated names of geographical regions (Scandinavia, Parthenope, Trinacria, Gallia, Iberia, Neustria), offering their modern designations in the notes. Juxtaposing antiquated and modern names again shows Smith thinking within her metrical framework, suggesting the fluidity, evolution, and lack of ethnic closure of Europe’s political geography (*Poems* 233). As Fletcher notes, Smith’s histories convey “the fragility of successive human communities” (331). To underscore this fragility and the general porousness of ethnicity, Smith colors her invasion history with the open language of acquiescence while eschewing the closed language of defense: “received / The new invaders” (124–25), “Receiv’d the victors” (131), “crouch to foreign arms” (145), “The enervate sons of Italy may yield” (146), “gavest to France / One day of triumph” (158–59). This language speaks to Gurton-Wachter’s claim that “Smith tends to replace the prospect poem’s convention of authority and power with porousness, vulnerability, and a multiplication of viewers and views” (115). Instead of stressing defense, borders, and fixed identities, Smith’s invasion history stresses reception, yielding, and an openness to otherness.

While the invasion history may seem categorically distinct from natural history, Smith draws subtle similarities between the two. According to Goodman's "geological poetics," in which various poetic forms are thrown together in a "heterogenous assembly," literary allusions are found embedded in the text in the same way fossils and bones are thrown together and embedded in the earth around Beachy Head (995–98). In other words, the poem is an archeological site with literary allusions embedded in the sprawling blank verse ground, just as the titular landmass is an archeological site containing geological and historical objects. Notably, Smith gives attribution to some literary allusions (Oliver Goldsmith, John Aikin) while most allusions remain unattributed, as if to render the intertextuality more of an archeological dig, especially with regard to her many allusions to works written in blank verse: Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Thomson's *The Seasons*, Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," and Shakespeare's *King John*.<sup>16</sup>

As I discussed in the previous section, the speaker remains skeptical of available theories that attempt to explain fossils: "from whence / These fossil forms are seen, is but conjecture" (392–93). Goodman puts some pressure on the significance of the word "conjecture"—used three times by Smith<sup>17</sup>—noting that the word derives from the Latin, *conjectus*, meaning "thrown together" (996). As Goodman observes, "The mixed and aggregated layers making up the rock formation called Beachy Head constitutes a giant *conjectus* of physical nature," a "composite quality of the earth" that correlates to a generically "heterogenous assembly, mixing lyric song

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<sup>16</sup> *Beachy Head* alludes to several blank verse works. The ship of commerce in *Beachy Head*'s third stanza alludes to Milton's portrayal of Satan in book 2 of *Paradise Lost*, lines 636–43. The "visionary vales" mentioned in line 86 references Thomson's *The Seasons*, "Autumn," line 1031. The lines "An early worshipper at Nature's shrine" (346) and "hedge rows, bordering unfrequented lanes" (349) from *Beachy Head* echo Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey": "A worshipper of nature, hither came / Unwearied in that service" (153–154) and "hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines / Of sportive wood run wild" (16–17). Lines 145–53 allude to the words of the Bastard in the final stanza in Shakespeare's *King John*, Act 5, scene 7.

<sup>17</sup> See lines 393, 375n, and 412n.

and narrative verse, myths and histories of Britain with details from botany and other sciences” (996). In many ways, it is the blank verse meter that allows the literary conjecture of genre, form, and allusion.

This idea of conjecture has significant political implications because, as Smith’s invasion history insists, the identity of Great Britain is also a matter of conjecture in both its typical sense as speculation and in the thrown-together sense described by Goodman: various ethnicities that appear thrown together throughout British military history (Scandinavians, Sicilians, Saxons, Gauls, Normans, Romans, savages, “original natives”) make national identity a matter of speculation. Indeed, some of the foreign forms that constitute the hills are “the remains of men” (*Poems* 233). Humans are thrown together in multiple geographical locations and in the earth like fossils and bones. Smith’s footnote mentions how “These Downs are not only marked with traces of encampments” but also the burial mounds of the Roman and Danish warriors who invaded and even inhabited England long ago (*Poems* 233).

But invasion constitutes more than just history. The Napoleonic Wars, in full swing when Smith composed her final poem, made invasion a very present and palpable concern to Smith’s contemporaries. *Beachy Head* deconstructs and reconstructs Britain, finding the heterogeneity and the ethnic fragmentation that upsets the nationalism facilitating empire and war, and there exists a geological correlation to this as well. This geological correlation is found in the opening stanza, in which a “vast concussion ... rent the hills” and “Eternally divided this green isle” from the French coast, with which it once was united (6, 7, 10). As Gurton-Wachter suggests, this violent geological event “subverts the division between England and France altogether” because nature itself tells a story that belies that popular notion of France being Britain’s “natural enemy”

(122–123). In other words, in Smith’s view, the physical division undoes rather than reinforces the political division.

Science and politics collide here. Smith’s attitude toward scientific and historical conjecture shifts the emphasis of the questions being raised in *Beachy Head*: instead of theorizing about the origins of fossils and elephant bones, perhaps the more relevant question is “what is England?” if it is made out of so many things that are not England, or even terrestrial? The ground being investigated by the speaker continuously contradicts our knowledge of Britain as a unified nation comprised of a unified people—Britain was once connected to France, it may once have been under water, and its military history suggests that its people are the product of multiple ethnic backgrounds. Each finding and each observation weakens the justification for nationalism and subverts the idea of naturalization as the poem tends to destabilize the very “nature” of Britishness.

Blank verse is also associated with a sense of expansion because it lacks any formal sense of closure. To use Milton’s phrase, it can be “variously drawn out.” Pearsall elaborates on the association between blank verse and imperial expansion during the Victorian period, an association widely affirmed and accepted among poets and prosodists alike (221–227). While that association was not as strong in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, a second wave of imperial expansion that shifted the economic emphasis to Asia after the loss of the American colonies in 1783 was well under way, as is well documented in *Beachy Head*’s verse and notes (R. Johnson 13). However, far from affirming British expansion, as Tennyson and other Victorians did (Pearsall 221, 227), Smith condemns it as denying, not preserving, the liberty associated with blank verse:

the round pearl

Enchased in rugged covering; which the slave,  
 With perilous and breathless toil, tears off  
 From the rough sea-rock, deep beneath the waves.  
 These are the toys of Nature; and her sport  
 Of little estimate in Reason's eye:  
 And they who reason, with abhorrence see  
 Man, for such gaudes and baubles, violate  
 The sacred freedom of his fellow man—  
 Erroneous estimate! (52–60)

The passage expresses a sentiment in stark contrast to the outward (centrifugal) naturalization—  
 with which empire and blank verse came to be associated. As the speaker suggests, the liberty  
 associated with blank verse since Milton's preface to *Paradise Lost* is here being denied. The  
 blank verse that allowed poets to work through what Weinhold characterized as an  
 Enlightenment crisis in modernity instead critiques reason, which, in some corrupted manner has  
 been used to justify slavery. The play on the word "estimate," first to mean value and then to  
 mean approximate judgement, suggests that reason itself—the Enlightenment's greatest  
 faculty—has made a tragically poor judgment by undervaluing human life. Moreover, that reason  
 leads to slavery registers some skepticism about the value of reason, or at least a blind, positivist  
 faith in it. *Beachy Head* takes us from the subterranean to the subaqueous, which is where the  
 true history unfolds its voluminous scroll. Smith underscores her point about imperial expansion  
 with another literary fossil: likening a commercial freighter to Milton's depiction of Satan in  
*Paradise Lost*. Here is Milton's passage:

As when far off at Sea a Fleet descried

Hangs in the Clouds, by *Equinoctial* Winds  
 Close sailing from *Bengala*, or the Isles  
 Of *Ternate* and *Tidore*, whence Merchants bring  
 Their spicy Drugs: they on the Trading Flood  
 Through the wide *Ethiopian* to the Cape  
 Ply stemming nightly toward the Pole. So seem'd  
 Far off the flying Fiend (*PL* 2: 636–43)

*Beachy Head*'s Miltonic echo underscores the evil of Britain's imperial enterprise:

a fleet

Of fishing vessels stretch their lesser sails;  
 While more remote, and like a dubious spot  
 Just hanging in the horizon, laden deep,  
 The ship of commerce richly freighted, makes  
 Her slower progress, on her distant voyage,  
 Bound to the orient climates, where the sun  
 Matures the spice within its odorous shell (38–45)

The above excerpts contain several references that evoke imperial networks: the orient, the spice trade, and slave labor. The Oriental silkworm (“the gray worm’s filmy toil”) is rivaled in the nineteenth century by Britain’s imported “vegetable down” (cotton from America), which is used to make turbans for “Asia’s countless casts,” calling our attention to Britain’s increasing commercial dominance and the Asian hierarchy subsumed by Britain’s colonial hierarchy. The language describing the ship suggests a tension or a weighing down (“hanging,” “laden,” “richly freighted”). Given the allusions to slavery and exploitation, this language seems to describe more

than just heavy cargo, but also the moral heaviness and the weight of human suffering necessary to produce (and therefore inextricable from) commodities. Indeed, Smith conflates human life and commodities through the image of slaves as “toys of Nature” and “gaudes and baubles.”

Smith models *Beachy Head* on the prospect poem. The speaker stands on a cliff in an elevated position, looking down on a landscape. Prospect poetry inscribes the affirmation of empire, a poetic convention in which an observer—usually a landed patriarch—can obtain a comprehensive view of a landscape from a fixed and elevated point, an Archimedean point that treats the observer as independent and in perspectival control of a landscape whose “natural order” legitimized England’s natural social order. In the generic convention of prospect poetry, landscape is an expression of power and order: a celebration of political stability, an affirmation of national and imperial identity, and an assertion of dominance over a landscape that is productive of wealth. The landscape of a land-based economy was the literal and ideological ground on which noble power, natural order, and aesthetic taste were confirmed (Fulford 2–3). In *Beachy Head*, however, landscape works against these poetic and ideological aims. Far from confirming the natural and social order, the landscape in *Beachy Head* throws British identity into doubt, critiques the imperial social order that relies on slave labor.

*Beachy Head* does not articulate the “natural” progression of imperial expansion with which blank verse would come to be associated with during the reign of Queen Victoria. The influence of Smith’s conversational and lyric blank verse on Victorian poets was neither direct nor widely recognized, but it reached the Victorians by passing through the voices of Wordsworth and Coleridge. While popular in her day, Smith’s popularity (and that of several other female poets popular during their own lifetimes, such as Mary Robinson and Felicia Hemans) diminished significantly after her death, and by the mid nineteenth century, she had

fallen into obscurity. As Kelley notes, “Smith’s virtual disappearance from print culture after the mid nineteenth century derives in some measure from the Victorian formation of a Romantic canon that largely omitted Romantic women authors” (“Histories” 281). I would add that a shift toward nationalism after the Napoleonic wars played a considerable role as well, as a dominant national feeling emerged that had no place for *Beachy Head*’s critique of empire, nationalism, and war; nor could it accommodate the French sympathies espoused in *The Emigrants*.

## V

Blank verse is an apt vehicle for Smith to describe a radically changing world—science, empire, evolution, revolution, and a radical shift in eighteenth-century notions of nature as savage to the familiar Romantic notion of nature as secular religion—an entity to be worshipped. *Beachy Head*’s blank verse occupies past, present, and future. While Smith’s experiments bear the traces of blank verse’s past, she also uses the form to articulate the aesthetic, scientific, and imperial expansion of her contemporary moment. Yet she anticipates the Victorian prosody debates about meter’s role in British imperialism and national identity as well as the metrical experiments of Tennyson and Robert Browning. Her influence on Victorian poets was neither direct nor widely recognized, but it reached the Victorians by passing through Wordsworth and Coleridge. *Beachy Head* demonstrates a resistance to completion that renders it suited for blank verse. It ties together poetic, scientific, and political concerns about the “tyranny” of closure, which is not unlike Blake’s rejection of blank verse. Smith was mixing forms, embedding smaller components within larger, creating patterns, drawing connections between meter and natural, scientific, and political worlds.

Smith's experiments with blank verse introduce new approaches to sound patterning and reflect a need to poetically capture the intersecting problems of new discourses: evolutionary and geological science, Britain's second wave of imperialism, and national identity. But, under the influence of Cowper, she was instrumental in developing the lyric and conversational iterations of blank verse that would dominate the Romantic and Victorian periods. Blank verse seems to be the appropriate meter for telling the story that Smith's wants to tell, which is not necessarily a story about Beachy Head, but a story that uses Beachy Head as an anchoring point to tie together the rich fabric of relations between biological, geological, and geopolitical evolution with those of an emergent yet unsteady sense of time and subjectivity.

Prior to Smith's *Emigrants*, Barbauld's "A Summer Evening's Meditation," and Cowper's *The Task*, blank verse was primarily used for dramatic and epic poetry. But blank verse was also the appropriate form as we moved into an age focused not just on expanding notions of natural history and British empire, but it was also suitable for an age that witnessed an expanding sense of interiority. But to discuss interiority, it was necessary to have a meter that could mimic not only the more subdued rhythms of natural speech, but also those of thought. The meter of interiority needed to be less rhythmic and bodily, something more cerebral that allowed us to escape the explicit reminders of the physical pulses imposed upon us by tetrameter and trimeter lines. As Cureton observes, "iambic pentameter might be the most extreme effacement that a poetic meter with a regular grid alignment can endure without being totally eliminated" (133–34). Giving up (or mitigating) rhythm creates more room for the lyric I. Meters like the heroic couplet, iambic tetrameter, and common rhyme clashed with the development of the transcendental subject in the Romantic era. Thus, poetry needed a rhythm to be considered poetry but also needed a less rhythmic rhythm to accommodate this emergent subject, to prevent

strong four-beat lines associated with ballad and collectivity from interfering with the tranquil reflections of the subject.

But if iambic pentameter, especially in its blank verse form, was meant to reduce the bodily and become more cerebral, are there also ways in which it fails to do this? Rhythm allows us to escape discursivity and non-rhythmic temporalities. In this sense, as Aviram suggests, rhythm is a suspension of the “I,” a lyric dislocation that I explore in more detail in my chapter on John Clare. While blank verse is a suitable vehicle for the reflective lyric subject, Smith complicates the position of the subject with either multiple selves or an attempt to efface the self. Curran says of *Beachy Head*, “in no poem of the period can one find so powerful an impulse to resolve the self into nature” (*Poems* xxvii). And as Jacqueline Labbe argues, by the poem’s conclusion the speaker is less an agent of Smith the author than a feature of the landscape (144). As I discuss in the following chapter, Clare demonstrates a similar impulse. But can we even identify “a self” in *Beachy Head*? Or do we see a subject that disperses and fractures human interiority. As Labbe suggests, the speaker evokes a present absence: she is both there and not there. But Labbe also reads a “multivocality,” in which the speaker has multiple proxies (like *Contemplation*, memory, a “note-speaker”) and moves between feminine, masculine, and gender-neutral voices, eventually abandoning the first-person speaker and devolving into an amalgam of constructed selves (143, 147, 153). Thus, just as *Beachy Head* is a composite of geological layers of earth, fossils, and bones from various historical moments, the eponymous poem features a composite of selves, fractured, dispersed, and diffuse. I suggest that Smith uses blank verse to develop an ecology of the self, something more like a plural self rather than a series of distinct selves. Similarly, Blake creates plural selves with *Specters and Emanations* while Clare also creates a subject that subsumes the actions of the self and its environment.

For Kelley, the speaker competes with the historian's voice and an "array of other speakers," signaling the Romantic failures to forge a coherent self; this lack of self-closure leads to a long narrative stretch toward an abyss ("Histories" 297). For Labbe, Smith's own death finishes the poem, which was posthumously published as a fragment. Lorraine Fletcher speculates that the unfinished "close of the local poem," as Smith referred to it, was to be an elegy for the deceased hermit at the poem's conclusion:

I would guess that a short elegy, to which "these mournful lines, Memorials" refers, was to be added at the end....She had five months left to add the elegy that would make it more rational, but was too ill, or simply decided the broken ending was more effective. Storm, sea, images of dysfunctional female physiology and folk legend combine to make a stoic and mysterious close. With the drive to self-presentation that had become second nature to her, she imagines and iconizes her own death in the last verse-paragraph. (335-6)

Fletcher suggests that the unfinished section of the poem consists of the "mournful lines" alluded to in *Beachy Head*'s final stanza. But Fletcher offers a second explanation: that Smith may have chosen to leave out the elegy, intentionally rendering the poem "incomplete," which is to say that incompleteness was paradoxically "written" into the poem, suggesting a present absence. But perhaps blank verse is the quintessential form of the fragment precisely because there is no closure: the poem always remains open, as 200 years of speculation has left *Beachy Head* open.

## Chapter 4

### “A Language Meet”: Taste, Rhythm, and John Clare’s Earthy Heroic Couplet

“What we speak of as nature is a poem lying pent in a mysterious and wonderful script”  
— F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*

#### I

There is a measure of irony in the fact that the physical sensation of taste evolved into a metaphor for aesthetic taste in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Of the five senses, taste is perhaps the most corporeal: it is concentrated in a single area of the body (the mouth), and it is the only sense in which the perceived object must be inside the body. Taste lost its corporeality, however, when it was abstracted from its bodily meaning and metaphorically transferred to the ideational realm of aesthetic discrimination associated with the rules, manners, and etiquette of polite society (Williams, *Keywords* 313–15).<sup>1</sup> This chapter will show how Clare sought to revise standard definitions of aesthetic taste by restoring some of the corporeality from which it derives and drawing our attention to the relationship between poetic and natural rhythms. He reimagines taste in a way that liberates it from the abstracted sense it acquired in the eighteenth century and imbues it with a physical and ecological significance.

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<sup>1</sup> Williams offers an etymology of “taste” from the thirteenth through the twentieth century, citing Shaftesbury’s *Miscellaneous Reflections*, III (1714), Joseph Addison’s *Spectator*, No. 409 (1712), and William Wordsworth’s preface to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. For other major contributions to the eighteenth-century discourse on taste, see Francis Hutcheson, *An inquiry into the original of our ideas of beauty and virtue* (1725); Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757); David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste” (1757), Archibald Alison, *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (1790); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790). For an account of taste as it pertains specifically to landscape, see John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and a Sense of Place, 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (1972).

Taste was a serious concern for Clare. The poems, essays, letters, and autobiographical sketches that address taste express a real commitment to rethinking taste not as aesthetic refinement or as a human faculty of judgment that affirms preexisting standards, but rather as the way living beings choose to experience, understand, and interact with their environments. Through multiple texts, especially the poem “Shadows of Taste”<sup>2</sup> which is the primary focus of this chapter, Clare develops his theory of taste by subverting three of the most accepted and entrenched ways of thinking about taste in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. First, Clare grants taste to nonhumans, including birds, flowers, and insects—organisms Clare insists are sentient and act with creative intent rather than by mechanical instinct. Second, he subverts the aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime, the latter by replacing the criteria of terror and grandiosity with the criteria of ordinariness and minutiae, the former by assigning beauty to what are commonly regarded as ugly, invasive, and undesirable things such as weeds, wastelands, and decaying tree stumps. Third, in contrast to eighteenth-century notions of taste that valued order, form, rules, and concepts that needed to be learned (Barrell 6),<sup>3</sup> Clare offers a version of taste decidedly opposed to these values, one that valorizes disorder, excess, and contingency and is more attuned to nature’s infinite particularities, its messy profusions, and its random accidents. In other words, Clare puts taste in closer alignment with how we actually experience our environmental surround, which is a rapid chain of rhythmic sensory stimuli.

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all excerpts will be from “Shadows of Taste” in *Poems of the Middle Period, 1822-1837*, volume 3 (303–10). Line numbers for all poetry quotations will be indicated parenthetically following the quotation.

<sup>3</sup> According to Barrell, “The contemplation of landscape was not, then, a passive activity: it involved reconstructing the landscape in the imagination, according to principles of composition that had to be learned, and were indeed learned so thoroughly that in the later eighteenth century it became impossible for anyone with an aesthetic interest in landscape to look at the countryside without applying them, whether he knew he was doing so or not.”

By letting nonhumans speak and by grounding taste in real experience rather than formal principles, the texts I discuss in this essay ask us to reconsider two pillars upon which human exceptionalism rests: language and abstract reason. This is not to say that human speech isn't exceptional in its level of sophistication but rather that it is only one mode of speech in a semiotic—or biosemiotic—universe that includes all living things.<sup>4</sup> This is also not to say that nonhumans share our capacity for abstract reason, nor that abstraction is a pernicious thing, but rather that abstractions can potentially alienate us from our environment by unmooring us from, and even replacing, the material particularities of real experience (Rigby 27).

Clare's unorthodox sense of taste is deeply entangled with his sense of time—daily and seasonal rhythms as well as poetic meter. But when we think of John Clare, we think chiefly of place rather than time. Place defines much of Clare's poetry and life, first as a Helpston native, then as a Northborough resident, and later as an inmate at the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum. Indeed, readers and critics tend to divide his career into periods named after these locations. His most famous poems are named for places: "The Lament of Swordy Well," "The Mores," "The Lamentations of Round-Oak Waters," and "Langley Bush," to name a few. We imagine the poet roaming Emmonsales Heath, navigating the spatial barriers of enclosure or dwelling in an asylum. But time also plays a central role in shaping the man and the poet. As Jonathan Bate notes, "The spatial horizon of the young Clare was fixed by the boundaries of the Soke of Peterborough. His temporal horizon was determined by the rhythms of the working day and the agricultural year" (59). As is well understood by Clare readers, weekly rhythms shaped the poet's development as Sunday's meant a day of walking and observing the flora and fauna

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<sup>4</sup> Jesper Hoffmeyer defines biosemiotics as "*living nature...understood as essentially driven by, or actually consisting of, semiosis, that is to say, processes of sign relations and their signification—or function—in the biological processes of life.*" (4, author's emphasis).

that populated the Helpston landscape; temporal restraints forced Clare to hide his reading and writing from the public on workdays, and Clare often escaped to the woods or to vacant barns to read or quickly scribble down poems. Idleness provoked the ire of Helpston's laboring community, not only because it meant laziness and lack of productivity but also because it drew one outside of the temporal rhythms of laboring life, one reason people hated the gypsies that Clare admired. Idleness was not just wasted time; it was non-time.

But while Clare's relationship with the temporal rhythms of labor is well understood, critical questions about time tend fade into the background, forming an incidental backdrop to a life more deeply rooted in questions of place and displacement. As Hugh Haughton and Adam Phillips note, "Clare still speaks to us with something of the exemplary perplexity of the displaced person, of an exile within his own country" (1). And as a poem like "The Fate of Genius" tells us, Clare was often an exile in his own community, a situation not unrelated to Clare's disruption of and escape from the temporal rhythms of rural existence. But what Clare's laboring community would consider the non-time of idleness was taken over by the time of poetry—rhythm and meter. Clare's sense of rhythm reflected his relationship with past poetic traditions as well as the natural history he conveyed through a medium that, while highly appropriate for landscapes governed by environmental rhythms, nevertheless failed to adequately express its subject, an inexorable reality consistently inflected in his metrical experiments and his sense of taste. Clare attuned himself to the rhythms of nature and of laboring life. Time and poetry are deeply implicated in one another in terms of seasonal, circadian, biological, and metrical rhythms.

This chapter argues that a key element of Clare's unorthodox sense of taste is how environmental temporalities get inflected through his metrical experiments, expressing natural

rhythms through poetic meter. Clare's crowded, fast-moving heroic couplets, unlike their orderly Augustan predecessors, overflow with imagery trying to burst out of its metrical constraints, reflecting the mind's limited ability to control this world of flux. Ultimately, meter itself becomes a metaphor for, or enactment of, the connection between poetry and nature. As Clare writes in "Pastoral Poesy," "poesy is a language meet" (line 9), meaning that poetry a fitting, becoming, and appropriate vehicle for conveying the processes of the natural world. But "meet" (a word Clare uses four times in the poem, once rhyming it with "feet") not only puns on meter but also suggests an intersection where nature and language meet. As we see in "Shadows of Taste," Clare grounds his sense of taste in the rhythms of the natural world.

While Clare uses the orderly heroic couplet popular in the eighteenth-century, the century whose definition of the sublime and beautiful he seeks to subvert, he nevertheless performs a remarkable amount of experimentation within this form, refashioning it so it corresponds with the tension between nature's regular rhythms and the overwhelming load of sensory perceptions it throws at us. Clare, instead of abandoning the heroic couplet, as many Romantic poets did, radically reconfigures it and uses it as a vehicle for demonstrating the relationship between natural processes and the structures of poetry.

Jonathan Culler suggests that mind cannot understand everything it wants to, but rhyme and other repetition give us a kind of understanding (185). Clare, significantly, did not use blank verse, which is regarded as more suitable to the reflections of a lyric subject due to its resemblance to natural speech. He frequently used ballad forms and heroic couplets. While iambic pentameter is more speech like, the heroic couplet lends it more rhythmic focus with its rhymes. It is less subjective and more collective; it is more "out there" than "in here," which reinforces Clare's aim to decenter the lyric I and push the focus toward exterior nature. The

external force of rhythm helps us understand what we cannot fully understand (the true sublime, immeasurable time) and, as Aviram suggests, makes rhythm sublime. Rhythm is a component of nature for Clare, an environmental object like the trees that constitute “the true sublime” in Clare’s cosmology. Clare takes the heroic couplet from the Augustan tradition and makes it earthier, less stately, using enjambments to disrupt end stops. He grounds it in natural external stimuli and the rapidity with which we perceive that stimuli. Thus, the speech-like component of pentameter is combined with the less speech-like rhythms induced by rhyme. Clare’s rapid, overflowing, crowded lines suggest an awareness of and desire to escape the confines of pentameter.

Culler to Derek Attridge have remarked on the irony that contemporary poetry (most commonly written in free verse), contemporary scholarship on poetry, and the contemporary teaching of poetry consistently neglect meter and rhythm, despite being poetry’s definitive features, the thing that distinguishes poetry from all other forms of writing (Culler 140; Attridge, *Moving* 126). As Clare writes in “Shadows of Taste,” meter is what sends us into “poesys spells” (line 57).<sup>5</sup> This neglect goes back arguably 40 years. In *Telling Rhythm* (1994), Amittai Aviram, despite his poststructuralist orientation, levies a similar critique at the deconstructionists of the 1970s and 80s, especially Paul de Man, for privileging rhetoric to the exclusion of rhythm and having little to say about what makes poetry poetry (18).

Scholarship on Clare’s metrical experiments and his unorthodox theory of taste has been relatively scarce, as have sustained analyses of “Shadows of Taste,” a poem whose richness and

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<sup>5</sup> All references to Clare’s poetry will be from *Poems of the Middle Period* unless otherwise noted. Line numbers appear in parentheses after quotations.

depth, I suggest, has not been matched by the amount of critical attention it has received.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, “Shadows of Taste” deserves greater consideration because it exemplifies the scientific prescience of Clare’s poetry, which anticipates several developments in contemporary science on plant sentience, embodied cognition, and biosemiotics.

## II

In stanza two of “Shadows of Taste,” Clare offers a micro history of poetic taste. Clare means to distinguish this characterization of taste from his own definition proffered in the poem—that taste should be defined not as fashion but in empirical terms, grounded in the corporeal, sensory experience of successfully navigating one’s own environment. Significantly, the micro history of taste offered by Clare focuses on meter:

Styles may with fashions vary—tawdry chaste  
 Have had their votaries which each fancied taste  
 From Donns old homely gold whose broken feet  
 Jostles the readers patience from its seat  
 To Popes smooth rhymes that regularly play  
 In musics stated periods all the way  
 That starts & closes starts again & times  
 Its tuning gamut true as minster chimes  
 From these old fashions stranger metres flow  
 Half prose half verse that stagger as they go

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<sup>6</sup> See Adam White’s “John Clare: ‘The Man of Taste’” and Sarah Weiger’s “‘Shadows of Taste’: John Clare’s Tasteful Natural History.”

One line starts smooth & then for room perplext  
 Elbows along & knocks against the next  
 & Half its neighbour where a pause marks time  
 There the clause ends what follows is for rhyme  
 Yet truth to nature will in all remain  
 As grass in winter glorifies the plain  
 & Over fashions foils rise proud & high  
 As lights bright fountain in a cloudy sky (79–96)

The stanza defines poetic taste in terms of meter. Clare's brief profile of poetic masters from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries nuances the question of meter and rhythm more than it might at first appear. He critiques Donne's "broken feet," an issue George Saintsbury called "the problem of Donne" (2: 159). Ben Johnson even remarked that "Donne, *for not keeping of accent*, deserved hanging" (qtd. in Saintsbury 2: 159). Clare's somewhat mixed account of Pope's meter (to which I return later) is significant in that the heroic couplet was the form most frequently used by both poets. But despite his frequent use of the heroic couplet, Clare accomplishes a remarkable amount of innovation within its constraints. And while not attributed to a person, the strange "Half prose half verse" that the old fashions of Donne and Pope suggests the conversational styles of Coleridge and Wordsworth. Moreover, that these "stranger meters flow" from previous styles suggests some kind of generative linkage between Romanticism and the eighteenth century rather than a break, a popular but questionable characterization.

Clare describes historical time in terms of metrical time; that is, meter characterizes the time of fleeting fashions. This is all to say that these meters—whether broken, smooth, or strange, and despite being associated with reputable poets—move through the cycles of

ephemeral taste. But a distinction must be made between metrical fashions and meter *as* meter. Clare aims his critique of conventional taste at fashionable trends and not necessarily at the meters themselves. Metrical trends are “fancied taste” but are not taste in the sense Clare offers in this poem. In the context of this passage, the antecedent of “all” (93) is the meters discussed in the previous fourteen lines—a found sonnet with Donne and Pope occupying the octave and the Romantics comprising the sextet. While meters may come and go as fashions do, what lies beneath these meters is a “truth to nature” that rises over “fashions foils,” just as eternal grass lies beneath the seasonal winter snow which will return next year along with next year’s fashions.

The metrical through-line from fleeting fashion to eternal nature is rhythm. This is implied more than stated, but it seems that Clare’s version of the distinction between meter and rhythm is that meter changes while rhythm is natural and eternal (“nature will outlive them all”). In other words, popular presentations of rhythm in the form of meter change over time while rhythm itself remains a ceaseless, unquantifiable force—in poetry and nature.

In the sonnet, “On Taste,” Clare casts taste as a rhythmic and physical force “That throbs the bosom when the curious eye / Glances on beauteous things that give delight” (6-7). But Clare expresses his own sense of marginality regarding taste in an 1821 autobiographical sketch: “I thought sometimes that I surely had a taste peculiarly by myself and that nobody else thought or saw things as I did” (*Himself* 17). He articulates this same feeling again in a letter written roughly ten years later, most likely to John Taylor, shortly before “Shadows of Taste” was published in 1831 (*Letters* 539n).<sup>7</sup> It is worth quoting at length as it gives a trenchant critique of

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<sup>7</sup> According to Storey, Clare seems to be responding to Taylor’s invitation to assess the beautiful and the sublime in recent anthologies of poetry, one edited—poorly in Clare’s opinion—by Robert Southey.

the artificial sensibilities that Clare associates with established notions of the beautiful and the sublime:

...I so seldom see other peoples judgments who are considered not only men of taste but men of unerring criticism coinciding with mine that I feel I am only an individual indulging in an erroneous fancy what other people often bring forward as specimens of the sublime appear to me nothing more then a series of bomb bursting images taggd together by big sounding words to represent shadows or creations of the terrible but having no more effect on the mind as terrible then the unmeaning rant of a maniac—& what many consider beautiful is nothing more to me then an affected string of unnatural images cloathed in the pomp of illused words sounding musical to the ear & nothing but empty sound to the sense...& they who deviate from such taste are considered by fashions as so far removed from the standard of excellence as to be either unworthy of notice or deserving of nothing but ridicule—yet however the vagaries of false taste & idle fashions may predominate tis but for a season—nature will be herself again & nature will out live them all (*Letters* 539).

To Clare, popular notions of the sublime seem little more than sound and fury signifying nothing while the standard for beauty seems to be artificiality clothed in yet more artificiality. Such are the “false taste & idle fashions” Clare sets against the “true sublime” and the un-beautiful objects that populate the Helpston landscape, such as the “ugly weed,” the “worthless waste,” the “desolate neglected spot,” or the “common blades of grass” (77, 154, 108, 141, 127).

The declaration that “nature will be herself again & nature will out live them all” has a versified echo in the following passage:

Where meads & brooks & forrests basking lie

Lasting as truth & the eternal sky

Thus truth to nature as the true sublime

Stands a mount atlas overpeering time (75-8)

The sublime, embodied in these common objects, looks down upon time and the fashions that are subject to it. Clare's "true sublime," however, does not dispense with the ideas of immensity and awe usually associated with the sublime; rather he draws our attention to different kinds of immensity and awe, such as the vast duration of nature and the enormous quantity of its minute particulars. Clare does not refer to a transcendental eternal, but rather to the immanent durability of material objects that will "out live them all." Meadows, streams, and forests may lack the grandiose or terror-inducing character of a Mont Blanc, but they have temporal immensity—the capacity to endure so long that they surpass the constraints of human time, like Mount Atlas. Clare shares Blake's gift for seeing the infinitely vast in the minute particulars of the ordinary. If Blake sees "a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower" then Clare sees the same in a common blade of grass and a weed.<sup>8</sup> In Clare's empirical aesthetic, it is the immensity of duration and the inexhaustible variety of particulars that defines sublimity, not the immensity of size, quantity, or power.

We lose our sense of time in imagining a duration as vast as nature's, a temporality that is sublime in its boundlessness. While time may be part of the "true sublime" by virtue of its immeasurability, measurable time can also be sublime—this is rhythm. In a metrical line which is, by definition, measurable, we can nevertheless lose our sense of time. Succumbing to an audible rhythm removes us from the constraints of clock time.

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<sup>8</sup> From "Auguries of Innocence," lines 1-2, E 490.

Rhythm also takes us beyond the constraints of language. In a provocative formulation of rhythm and the sublime quite relevant to Clare, Aviram argues, “Poems are allegories of the sublime power of their rhythm” (223). Since rhythm is “a power without rational meaning,” it lies beyond our understanding, beyond interpretation and representation and is, thus, sublime, just as the sublime for Burke and Kant constitute things that lie beyond our grasp. Thus, in a rhythmic context, the measurable paradoxically leads us to infinitude: “For me, the sublime is a sense of infinitude, or excess, specifically in relation to language—that which exceeds one’s ability to put it into words and thus fills one with a sense of speechless wonder.” (Aviram 19). As Clare writes in “Pastoral Poesy,” “True poesy is not in words / But images that thoughts express” (1–2). Clare sees the nature of poetry as supra-semantic, a matter of thought expressing images. In the same poem Clare writes,

But poesy is a language meet  
 And fields are everyone’s employ  
 The wildflower ‘neath the shepherds feet  
 Looks up and gives him joy (9–12)

Clare casts poetry as “meet,” a fitting vehicle for expressing the natural world that is also, as I suggested earlier, metered, which Clare emphasizes in stanza two above. The wildflower, is the active agent and the joy giver who, with her gaze, compels the shepherd to transpose that image into “feet.” If poetry at its essence lies beyond words (as it does for Clare and Aviram), then meter and feet must partly constitute that essence.

## III

Using disorder as a heuristic is not new in Clare criticism. In his influential book, *The Idea of Landscape and a Sense of Place* (1972), John Barrell describes what he calls Clare's "aesthetic of disorder" (152). More recently, Mina Gorji has discussed Clare's "poetics of mess" (1–11). Clare expresses his fondness for disorder in numerous poems and essays through phrases like "sweet disorder," "rich disorder," "disorderly divine," and "beautifully disordered."<sup>9</sup> Barrell suggests that, while Clare placed himself in an eighteenth-century pastoral tradition, he was also at odds with it:

his idea of landscape did not satisfy any of the principles of eighteenth-century taste. The desire to represent the multiplicity of things in a landscape he understood also as a tendency toward disorder, and out of these two desires he developed a whole aesthetic of disorder, in which landscape was praised on account of its formlessness, its failure to accommodate itself to correct taste. (152)

For Clare, imposing order and form harms beauty and obstructs the expressions of taste that notice and engage with the fluxes and flows of nature: "arts strong impulse mars the truth of taste" (160). Here, as in the rest of the poem, Clare seeks to preserve disorder as a more truthful expression of the disorganized welter of actual experience, reflected in lines such as "beauty flings" (59), "joys run riot" (113), "taste runs riot" (48), and "Minds spring as various as the leaves of trees" (54). So, how do we explain Clare's preference for the heroic couplet? Why does Clare choose the heroic couplet for "Shadows of Taste" and so many other poems that celebrate disorder? The heroic couplet's association with Augustan poetry, eighteenth-century

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<sup>9</sup> From "The Sycamore" (13; *Middle Period* 4: 188); "The Beans in a Blossom" (8; *Middle Period* 4: 191); "Autumn" (Syren of sullen moods) (104; *Middle Period* 3: 267); and "The Dream," (*Prose* 232).

taste, and the form's most famous practitioner, Alexander Pope, makes it a curious choice for such an aesthetic. But Clare experiments with the form, although those experiments may be less noticeable in this eighteenth-century meter. Clare celebrates disorder within the order of the heroic couplet. The poet creates a tension between the heroic couplet and the sensory cargo it is asked to carry. Clare's poetry demonstrates the necessity and the limitations of meter. As I discussed in the previous section, "Shadows of Taste," like many of Clare's poems, loudly expresses an interest in the immeasurable but, more specifically, an interest in the limits of measure in the face of immeasurability. Clare often seeks to cross the markers of measure and roam into the immeasurable or the not-yet-measured. He is eager to "wander a pathless way" (*Natural History* 285), explore "scenes, where man hath never trod" (*Major* 361),<sup>10</sup> and ramble beyond the horizon until he gets "out of my knowledge" (*Himself* 40). He wants to move beyond the measured and the known.

For Seamus Heaney, much of Clare's poetry reflects "the pell-mell succession of vividly accurate impressions" and "a totally alert love for the one-thing-after-anotherness of the world" (70). However, the chapter in which Heaney offers this cogent observation critiques "Shadows of Taste" for being too tethered to the "prescribed styles" of the eighteenth century, even "projecting the voice of Alexander Pope" (69):

The kind of excellence I have been praising in "The Mouse's Nest" was not quite allowed for by the critical language Clare inherited from the eighteenth century.... There is an eerie distance between the materiality of what I have just been discussing and the abstract primness of ["Shadows of Taste."] (68)

Heaney seems to read the following lines as unqualified praise:

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<sup>10</sup> From the poem "I Am" (13; *Major* 361).

To Popes smooth rhymes that regularly play  
 In musics stated periods all the way  
 That starts & closes starts again & times  
 Its tuning gamut true as minster chimes (83–86)

However, the lines can just as easily (and more convincingly) be read as an ironic critique of the orderliness of Pope's verse, just as Clare critiques the orderliness of scientific classification and formal aesthetic conventions elsewhere in the poem. But Clare takes a mixed view of Pope's verse. He had a generally favorable opinion of Pope and defended him from "the false position of criticism and taste" levied against him by some critics. However, he was critical of the smoothness of Pope's verse. In a journal entry from 26 October 1824, Clare writes, "I cannot take [Pope] up often or read him long together the uninterrupted flow of the verses wearies the ear" (*Prose* 222; *Himself* 189). Moreover, the lack of punctuation in Clare's couplets (compared with Pope's meticulously punctuated couplets) increases the rapidity of the scansion and escalates the sense of one-thing-after-another-ness that Heaney describes. And this helps characterize what I call empirical taste, and it reflects the affinity between Clare's meter and Hume's empiricism: it exemplifies what Hume describes as the "inconceivable rapidity" and the "perpetual flux and movement" of our perceptions as we actually experience them (*Treatise* 1.4.6). For example, the rapid, punctuation-free lines blend objects even as they are individuated. For example,

In wild disorder various routs they run  
 In water earth still shade & busy sun (41–42)

Some descriptions are quite crowded, as if the meter can barely contain its contents:

The man of science in discoverys moods

Roams the furze clad heath leaf buried woods (97–98)

Even Clare's enjambments eschew the conventional pause of punctuation:

His joys run riot mid each juicy blade

Of grass where insects revel in the shade (113–14)

Combining enjambments with the heroic couplet is itself a bold choice because the eighteenth-century emergence of this “most constrained form” inhibited enjambment almost by definition as it was designed to maintain closed end rhymes (*Princeton* 359–60 [1993]). Thus, Clare gestures back to the eighteenth century while deviating from it with enjambment, a formal tension produced by enjambment itself as the line end indicates a pause (especially when rhymed) while the syntax indicates forward momentum. It is a “dialectics of closure and flow” (*Princeton* 360 [1993]). Clare refers to this tension in his description of enjambment:

One line starts smooth & then for room perplext

Elbows along and knocks against the next (89–90)

Clare uses meter to convey lived experience, or life. His enjambments are not the Elizabethan or Miltonic enjambments of blank verse, nor do they reflect the conversational, meditative syntax of Wordsworth or Coleridge. Rather, Clare's enjambments evoke nature's plenitude spilling out of one line and bleeding into the next. As Caroline Levine has suggested about what she calls Clare's “verse-thinking,” the poet's use of the Spenserian stanza in “Morning Harvest” reflects a Romantic affinity for its expansiveness and freedom, adding one line (the alexandrine) to an octave and a sixth foot to that line (74). Clare pushes on the restrictions of form frequently. In “The Rural Muse,” he uses ten-line stanzas, or decimas, with the tenth line being an alexandrine, as if an octave isn't quite enough space and the final line needs just one more foot, always

pushing at the edges of the meter. Heroic couplet enjambments, alexandrines, and decimas suggest metrical excess.

Clare also strings together objects with multiple ands and ampersands instead of commas: “meads & brooks & forests” (75) and “Natures wild Eden wood & field & heath” (126). This also suggests a sort of overflow. Simon Kövesi remarks on this one-after-anotherness, arguing that Clare’s frequent use of ands and ampersands follows the conjunctive “&...&...&...” logic of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s “rhizome,” a figure that reflects the “co-coordinated, levelled, planar, and anti-hierarchical shape” of Clare’s polysyndeton (111–14). For Clare, polysyndeton serves not merely a syntactical purpose but a metrical one, as the ampersands emerges momentarily to dominate the reader’s rhythmic attention. Moreover, the marker that links the rapid succession of sensory stimuli is the rhythm. The rhizome is a particularly apt figure with which to describe Clare’s sense of taste and rhythm because it resists what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the categories that have organized Western thought for centuries: hierarchy, origin, foundation, universality, unity, and binary logic. They call these categories “arborescent” because they follow the stable logic of the tree, for which origins can be traced and ends predicted. Alternatively, the rhizome offers a mode of thought that privileges flows instead of rootedness, interconnected lines instead of fixed points, middles instead of origins or ends, multiplicities instead of unity, relationality instead of hierarchy, perpetual becoming instead of being. Unlike the rigid structure of the tree, the rhizome consists of a collection of entry ways and exits that are endlessly interconnectible, detachable, re-attachable, modifiable (*Thousand* 3–25).

Remarkably, the physical objects that exemplify the rhizome for Deleuze and Guattari are the same objects Clare celebrates in his poetry: weeds, common grass, insects, and swarms

(*Thousand* 6–11). In “Shadows of Taste,” Clare’s fondness for the tension between order and disorder emerges most fully through the insect, a rhizomatic lifeform in that it exists in swarms and illustrates formlessness. A swarm of insects has form insofar as we recognize it as a collection of insects, but it is nevertheless formless, like wastelands, swamps, or a “wilderness of thorns” (155). Clare writes of insects that “In wild disorder various routs they run” (41). The polysemy of the word “routs” informs many of the ideas in “Shadows of Taste” and in Clare’s poetry more broadly. Rout can mean a crowd of people, a military defeat in which an army breaks through an enemy line, or a pathway, a homophone typically spelled “route” but sharing the same Latin root, *rompere*, meaning “to break” (*OED*).

Meter itself is a route, a path through which poetic language moves. The rhetorical power of meter depends on creating a route and then routing that route to create a rhetorical effect, however fleeting, as Clare does by using the traditionally “closed” heroic couplet and breaking it open with enjambment. As with meter, the word *rout* underscores the tension between order and disorder. To rout is to break through some kind of order, creating disorder but also creating a new path where there was no previous path. An old order (heroic couplet) is broken, and a new one emerges from the disorder of that brokenness. Like the insects who run their “various routs” in “wild disorder,” “taste runs riot” and “joys run riot.” “Rout”’s multiplicity of meaning and its sound association with “riot” suggest a signifying web of disarray. To engage with taste is to navigate a welter of perceptions and to interact with “as many hues [...] / As leaves & flowers do upon natures page” (1-2), to encounter.

There nature oer the soul her beauty flings

In all the sweets & essences of things

A face of beauty in a city crowd

Met—passed—& vanished like a summer cloud (59–62)

Any attempt to wrestle the relentless rhythms of life and its endless streams of sensory impressions can only sit uneasily within the confines of meter, and Clare conveys this fact in much of his poetry—“Shadows of Taste,” “The Rural Muse,” and “Harvest Morning” exemplify this metrical aesthetic.

Poetry’s condensed language can contain sensory stimuli that is so abundant that it wants to break out of (or rout) the meter, which is itself the route on which language moves. Just as the meet (fitting, connecting, and metered) language of poetry unites the rationality of signifying words with the irrationality of non-semantic rhythm, the man of taste’s “heart overflows with swarms of thought” (129). The beating heart overflows with swarms of thought like a poetic message emerging from a feeling that initially manifests as rhythm, for the language is meet and suggests what T. S. Eliot describes as the “auditory imagination”: “What I call the ‘auditory imagination’ is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word, sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end” (*Use* 111).

The poet does not try to control this excess by capturing images through loco-description but allows it to proliferate. Clare critiques what he regards as the hubristic systems that attempt to “tame the wild profusion of existing things” (Foucault xv). In his journal, Clare decries the classification systems that try to contain this wild profusion: “the hard nicknamy sy[s]tem of unuterable words now in vogue only overloads it in mystery till it makes darkness visable” (*Himself* 189). Clare’s meter reflects this desire not to tame but to promote proliferation within the controlled structures of meter. Clare’s interest in excess bears the mark of James Thomson,

who extols the “growth luxuriant,” “inexhaustive flow,” and the “innumerable-coloured scene of things” in *The Seasons* (16, 18).<sup>11</sup> However, Clare takes this Thomsonian imagery further by enacting nature’s profusion not only linguistically but rhythmically.

Culler suggests that Aviram's theory (that poetry as an allegory of its rhythm), while important for its attention to the neglected power of rhythm, has not been embraced by critics due to its lack of a hermeneutic objective, that is, its inability to reveal hidden meanings or produce new ones (Culler 164–68). But perhaps Clare’s poetry is responsive to Aviram's theory in ways that can further reveal its usefulness. Clare’s sense of metrical excess seems allegorized, or at least reflected, by his use of signifying language. He does this through what could be described as an excess of signification, or what Nelson Hilton (describing the “multidimensionality” of Blake’s language) calls an “expanding field of reference” (10). Clare’s use of polysemy through puns, homophones, and word associations engenders an overflow of meanings that produce the sense that words are constantly trying to exceed themselves, to move beyond their semantic and grammatical limits, creating a rhetorical ecology in which meaning proliferates.

This begins with the title, “Shadows of Taste.” The word “taste” has multiple meanings and grammatical functions. It is used as a noun and indirect object (“the truth of taste” 160); a possessive noun (“Tastes rainbow visions” 119); a verb with corporeal overtones (“All ... taste of joy” 37–38); and a noun with a subject position (“Taste reads oerjoyed” 64). As a thing with “vision” that “reads,” taste is endowed with perceptual capacities. In one couplet, taste is given a perspectival subject position that itself possesses taste: “Tastes rainbow visions own unnumbered hues / & every shade its sense of taste pursues” (119-20). The line is chiasmatic in that taste

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<sup>11</sup> Excerpted from “Spring,” lines 497, 479, and 571, respectively.

possesses color and color possesses taste. Both taste and color (hue, shade) occupy the position of subject and object simultaneously. Subject and object cannot be parsed because taste possesses what also possesses it. As a word, taste is restless, mutating so that it cannot be pinned down grammatically or semantically. The word is in constant flux. As Clare pushes meter beyond its constraints, the meaning and grammatical use of the word taste proliferates.

“Shadow,” too, performs the same linguist work, gradually expanding. It can denote literal or figurative darkness, a dark shape caused by the blockage of sun rays, or lack of vitality, which befalls the displaced birds who, because of enclosure, resemble developmental refugees and, like Clare himself, become “homeless at home” (*Himself* 264): “They are but shadows of the things they seem” (150). It is phonetically and semantically associated with “shade,” with which it shares its etymology. “Shade” provides protection from the sun and is associated with trees, leaves, and foliage. “Shade” also signifies a gradient of color, as in “unnumbered hues / & every shade” (119-20). When Clare writes, “Associations sweet each object breeds” (133), he refers to words as well as natural objects, and “shade” creates—or breeds—associations with a series of interrelated words:

A pleasing image to its page conferred  
 In living character & breathing word  
 Becomes a landscape heard & felt & seen  
 Sunshine & shade one harmonizing green  
 Where meads & brooks & forrests basking lie (71-75)

Shade and sunshine blend into a green. But, in a moment of synesthesia, the green is seen as a color but also heard (and perhaps felt) as a harmony. Green denotes a shade of color and a mead, the latter being an object covered in grass, foliage, and the “leaves and flowers [...] upon natures

page” (2). Mead is a drink associated with sweetness and intoxication, two meanings that link to the phrase “poesys spells” (57), which suggests the sweetness of poetry and its enchanting, intoxicating power, a power attributable not just to words but to rhythm—the organization of words, which cannot be entirely separated from grammar. As Wheeler points out, grammar shares its etymology with the French *grimoire*, meaning a book of spells; thus, in German and English the verb “‘to spell’ leads us back to enchantment, singing, and incantation” (Wheeler 197). And as Culler notes, “it is rhythm above all that makes lyric attractive” (137).

The phrase “poesys spells” is part of the textuality conceit Clare constructs in “Shadows of Taste”: “leaves...upon natures page” (2), “living character and breathing word” (72), “Taste reads” (64), “Dashes of sunshine & a page of may” (65), “stated periods” (84). The phrase “stated periods,” suggests sound, meter, and literary history. Its overtones of voice, or utterance, present poetry as a thing to be read aloud; grammatical periods, which function metrically as spatial and temporal caesuras; and the fashions of literary periods, from Donne (81) to Pope (83) to the “half prose half verse” (88) we associate with Wordsworth and Coleridge. “Poesys spells” suggests the enchanting nature of both poetry and flowers as well as the “living character” that “spells” the “breathing word” that “taste reads.” These elements underscore the embodied-ness of poetry that comes with rhythm and meter.

In the same passage, character means both nature (as in the character of quality of something) and letter (as in alpha-numeric character). “Read” is a homophone” of reed. “Confer” suggests that the landscape is bestowed onto the page but also that there is a dialogue between the landscape and the page. The difference between the landscape and the poem—between nature, words, and rhythm—becomes negligible. The landscape is conferred *onto* the page as it confers *with* the page, which itself “Becomes a landscape.” Thus, Clare paints a scene in which

words do not name nature in a one-way relation; rather, nature and language are in a conversational relationship in which the movements of nature actively solicit our linguistic response. Culler offers a compelling insight that validates Aviram's theory, if it does not fully support it, which is that content *follows* rhythm. It is far less likely, Culler suggests, that a poet has a fully formed idea, after which he seeks a rhythm or meter that lends that idea optimal expressiveness; it is far more often the case that rhythm comes first, a process that aligns with Eliot's auditory imagination (137–38).

#### IV

But it seems insufficient to say that Clare merely compares nature and language in a conventional metaphor that likens the act of observing a landscape to the act of reading a text; or that he is simply suggesting that one medium (poetry) represents another (nature) with the adornment of meter and figural language. Clare has already rendered personification inoperative by declaring in the opening passage that nonhumans actually—not metaphorically—possess taste:

Taste with as many hues doth hearts engage  
 As leaves & flowers do upon natures page  
 Not mind alone the instinctive mood declares  
 But birds & flowers & insects are its heirs  
 Taste is their joyous heritage & they  
 All choose for joy in a peculiar way (1–6)

“Shadows of Taste” also tells us how “writing larks” make “learned marks” (14, 13) and how “Flowers in the wisdom of creative choice / Seem blest with feeling & a silent voice” (23-4). In

“Pastoral Poesy” nature is a “silence that discourses more / Then any tongue can do” (39-40) and “natures poesy” (74) is a “language that is ever green” (13) and “a language meet” (9).<sup>12</sup> For Clare, poetry is infused with the logics and structures of nature and is, thus, a fitting vehicle for it. Roman Jakobson calls poetry a series of equivalences (96–7). Meet, as I’ve suggested, puns on meter and suggests a site at which the equivalences of nature and poetry meet.

The persistent theme here is that the world of living objects not only has taste, but it is also metrical (marked by biological, circadian, and seasonal rhythms) and discursive, which is to say it communicates, learns, and reconfigures itself intentionally through the lyric means of voice and metaphor—the *carrying across* of one object or idea to another in a way that “breeds” new associations. Wendy Wheeler suggests that “[a]bduction, the carrying of something or someone from one place to another, is another way of talking about the movement which humans call metaphor but which is common to all life.” In metaphors involving sign relations, “the meaning is changed or made new by the difference it marks....The same thing happens in biological systems, and there, indeed, we call it evolution” (125). Of course, the process of abduction, or carrying-over, essential to metaphor is itself carried by meter. To return to Gregory Bateson, metaphor is not merely a rhetorical figure, but is the formal logic that structures the biological world (*Angels* 30). Bateson is interested in metaphor not as metaphor for life, but as a structural logic that links biology to poetic figure. But Bateson grounds the poetic nature of biological process not just in metaphor but also in rhythm. Using the crab as an example: “The anatomy of the crab is repetitive and rhythmical. It is, like music, repetitive with modulation. Indeed, the direction from head toward tail corresponds to a sequence in time. In embryology, the head is older than the tail. A flow of information is possible, from front to rear” (*Mind* 10).

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<sup>12</sup> From “Pastoral Poesy” (*Middle Period* 3: 581–84).

What is interesting here is that Bateson does not allow a clean distinction between the visual and temporal. The visual can only unfold in time.

In its aggregation, Clare's excessive paronomasia—"poesys spells," "living character," "breathing word," "natures page," "taste reads," "dashes of sunshine," "leaves"—fuses biological life and language so persistently as to suggest a relationship between poetry and landscape that goes beyond mimesis. Amanda Jo Goldstein takes up this question in her book, *Sweet Science*, which argues that Lucretian materialism, because it demonstrated how physical atoms and poetic language both create form and shape through the same movements of troping, turning, and chance collisions, gave Romantic poetry the means to make a stronger claim on the real than the scientific prose to which it was losing authoritative ground. At stake in Goldstein's argument is an understanding of poetry's importance and its appropriateness for communicating empirical knowledge of the natural world (2–9), knowledge that can be observed and, in Clare's case, run through a "meet" language. In many ways, Goldstein's book is about poetry as a meet language for empirical understandings of nature, although she focuses on the tropological rather than the metrical and rhythmic.

Let's consider the concept of *clinamen*, defined as an event in which atoms chance into contact, followed by a tendency to settle into a certain regularity of form and behavior. In turn, this regularity can, through chance, be destroyed, or become irregular (disfigured, monstrous). Or it can turn into a new kind of regularity, a regularity that may even emerge from something monstrous or irregular. The same is true of words. Words collide in unpredictable ways and this verbal contingency might create nonsense or legibility; or it might put two different ideas in contact through a metaphorical process that creates new meaning or a new individuation. Using Goldstein's Lucretian lens, we could posit habit as the settling in of a meter or rhythm,

something that can be measured and is thus reasonably predictable or habitual. Like *clinamen* (the unpredictable swerve of atoms), language causes unpredictable swerves from the regularity of meter, a routing of the metrical route.

Clare's line "poesy is a language meet," along with the persistent conflation of poetic inscription and organic life, suggests Clare's sensitivity to the deeper, formal logic that links material nature and literary language. Clare anticipates biosemiotics, an interdisciplinary science which understands life as inherently driven by the meaningful exchange of signs.<sup>13</sup> Clare treats poetry less as loco-description than as "an outgrowth of the autopoiesis of the living Earth" (Rigby 33), suggesting how the processes and patterns found in poetry are the same ones found in the landscape, with its visual pleasures but also its rhythmic and musical ones (such as dance and harmony). A "language meet" suggests what I have called elsewhere in this dissertation "vibrant meter." Metaphor and meter produce rhetorical effects through the same process of chance and deviation from expectation that catalyze change in nature. They engage in processes in which two conflicting entities, ideas, sounds (one in time, one in space) whose difference produces a rhetorical effect and a new idea. Despite their structural differences, meter and metaphor produce rhetorical effects, meaning, or syncopation through a similar combination of similarity and difference or expectation and variation. Poetry engages with the push and pull between meter and rhythm as well as the push and pull between similarity and difference that structures metaphor. Both perform the work of carrying across.

If we take seriously Clare's insistence on the logical and ontological relationship between the volatility of natural life and that of poetic language, we can see ecology as rhythmic and rhetorical while seeing rhythm and rhetorical figure as ecological. In Clare's version of taste—

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<sup>13</sup> See note 4.

empirical taste—an expression of taste involves the act of rhetorically reading nature: close reading its nuances, attentive to how it moves us, and receptive to the uncertainties that are immanent in its sublime rhythms, its unpredictable figurations, its excesses of meaning, and the bewildering array of stimuli it throws at us. In *Reading with John Clare*, the contingencies of lived experience and poetry’s relationship to them is framed by Sara Guyer as a question of “biopoetics,” which she defines in various ways, one being “a possibility of rhetorical (or romantic) reading” (also called deconstructive or close reading), increasingly important in a world whose preference for quantifiability has marginalized that kind of reading “and the uncertainties in which it forces us to live.” One implication here relevant to empirical taste is that rhetorical reading affords a real understanding of life because it allows us to experience the uncertainties and contradictions that truly characterize life (7). Clare’s empirical taste, grounded in the creative response to the vagaries of natural life, interacts with nature’s volatility rather than trying to control it. Rhythm is rife with these uncertainties. As many prosodists have acknowledged, we do not know why a catchy rhythm moves us, why it helps us learn, or why it makes us tap our feet. Rhythm tells us that we are part of something larger, that our body and mind are not necessarily our own; that we may have, to draw on Bateson, an ecological mind in which a distributed agency exists with author, body, environment. For Clare, taste and rhythm constitute creative interaction as well as an openness to what lies outside the self. Nature is what it is, but we create it as it creates us.

## V

I will conclude by citing a passage from Clare’s essay, “Taste,” which defines taste not abstractly but through a series of examples of what taste looks, feels, and sounds like in physical

nature, such as deriving happiness from lolling over a decaying tree stump. Another example is the desire “to wander a pathless way thro the intricacys of woods for a long while & at last burst unlooked for into the light of an extensive prospect at its side & there lye & muse on the lands cape to rest ones wanderings” (*Natural History* 285). Oddly, the speaker does not say “to rest” or “to rest oneself” but rather “to rest ones wanderings.” The action blends with the one who performs the action, as the wanderer becomes the wandering. There is no experiencer entirely distinct from the experience. The “I” dissolves into the experience.

Clare distinguishes the man of taste from the vulgar clown. The essay opens with the sentence, “Taste finds pleasure where the vulgar cannot even find amusement” (*Natural History* 283). Clare, again, gives taste a grammatical subject position distinct from the individual who possesses taste—although separating taste from the individual belies the notion of possession. Clare does not personify taste so much as situate it relationally within a web of actors that includes taste, the individual wanderer, and the objects and sounds that solicit that wanderer’s appreciation. The vulgar clown, however, lacks access to these pleasures: “he tramples thoughtlessly over the wooden brig that leads him on his path & never so much as glances on the stream that seems smoothing the little pebbles beneath him with its chafing gurgles he never heeds it or hears it but plods his way to the end of his intentions with a mechanic impulse of uninterrupted selfishness” (*Natural History* 284). This use of “selfishness” may mean being absorbed in one’s own concerns without regard for anything else. But it likely means something slightly different, something more akin to the state of self-absorption in Blake’s world that requires self-annihilation. But I suggest the word denotes something closer to Bateson’s ecology of mind, that is, selfishness is a state in which an individual does not notice the sensory pathways linking him to the external world (*Steps* 467).

While empirical taste is about living beings making unique and peculiar choices, that uniqueness is not the affirmation of a unified self but, rather, contributes to something we might call ecological individuation or is enmeshed in process of pluralization. We might even say, to draw on Bateson, that the peculiar choices that constitute the expressions of taste contribute to a larger, mental system, an ecology of mind. It is a process in which an organism and its creative choices cannot be separated from the environment in which those choices are made. As Bateson writes,

I suggest that the delimitation of an individual mind must always depend upon what phenomena we wish to understand or explain. Obviously there are lots of message pathways outside the skin, and these and the messages which they carry must be included as part of the mental system whenever they are relevant. (*Steps* 464).

Clare's conflation of the sensory experience with the one who experiences problematizes the lyric I and raises questions about subjectivity, questions that might be illuminated by a thinker not typically associated with Romanticism: the empiricist David Hume. While Clare would likely not have agreed with Hume's essay "Of the Standard of Taste," which seeks to standardize taste for an affluent and literate class, he would have found Hume's argument about personal identity and the illusion of self useful for his theory of taste and his sense of rhythm and meter. Hume famously claimed he could not locate a self in his mind or body, but only saw "a bundle or collection of perceptions"; indeed, Hume maintained that it is impossible to have any idea of what we would call *a self* (*Treatise* 1.4.6). Hume's argument is not particularly compatible with the sovereign Romantic subject and may invite the sorts of ethical critiques that an erasure of self engenders about moral accountability. But Hume has a naturalistic theory of moral sense

grounded not in reason but in sympathy, such that ethical judgments proceed from what he calls a “moral taste” located in the human body: in the passions and in the sensations of pleasure and pain. It is a moral theory that, I suggest, resonates deeply with Clare’s poetic project. Hume and Clare share an affective and ecological morality, driven by sensations and the transfer of sentiments between individual beings (*Treatise* 3.1.1, 3.3.1). A feeling of revulsion can be explained within a moral framework, but the response of revulsion to an immoral act is bodily and, like rhythm, not something we control consciously.

The ethical implication in both Hume and Clare is that the more one is affectively attuned to one’s environment, the more sympathetic one will be toward its inhabitants. The metaphysical, scientific, and aesthetic conventions that erect boundaries between the self and the non-self inhibit one’s corporeal sympathies and promote the human exceptionalism that alienates us from our environment. Conversely, Hume’s lack of self and Clare’s nebulous, unbounded “I” promote those sympathies, inclining one toward an ecological and ethical responsibility. As Clare’s lyric I recedes, the thinking and speaking subject integrates into a thinking and speaking environment. Clare’s empirical taste is experiential, corporeal, and affective. It is available to nonhumans and is “felt even by the poor shepherd boy” (*Natural History* 285). Taste is felt. It is bodily and ecological. It is also deeply musical and rhythmic. In his sonnet, “On Taste,” Clare defines taste as “that enchanting ‘thusiastic glow / That throbs the bosom” (5–6). His essay “Taste” acknowledges the “dancing” beetles, the “soothing music of distant bells,” “the call of the heavy bumble bee” who “sings out of the wood” and the clown who can never “harmonize” his feelings (*Natural History* 284–85).

But how does this loss of self, this decentering of the lyric I, relate to rhythm and meter? Returning to Aviram, we can consider rhythm as a way to lose the self. According to Aviram,

rhythm lies beyond our discursive understanding, exceeding our ability to translate it into language (19). Witnessing language's failure to communicate rhythm (or "tell" rhythm) "confers upon us a momentary felling of freedom from any particular, finite construction of the world. This freedom accounts for the exhilaration people feel when chanting, dancing, listening to music...and sometimes when they hear or read poetry" (21). We are also freed from the self: "Like Nietzsche, I consider the musical element of poetry a force that draws the listener or reader away from the ordinary world of separate objects with their individual meanings and values, and toward a state of being not-oneself" (224). Building on Nietzsche's allegory of Dionysus as rhythm (and Apollo as words), Aviram notes how Dionysus/rhythm "is a *negation* of the principle of individuation under whose control we normally live" (225). In other words, Dionysus represents a rhythmic non-self while Apollo represents a linguistic self. The loss of self through rhythms that many people experience through chanting, dancing, music, and poetry bears some similarity to the loss of meditation, which often relies on the rhythms of breathing.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche's Apollo-Dionysus dichotomy captures more than a loss of self, or what he calls "mystical self-abnegation, positing the Apollinian and its opposite, the Dionysian, as artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*—energies in which nature's art impulses are satisfied in the most immediate and direct way—first in the image world of dreams...then as intoxicated reality, which likewise does not heed the single unit, but even seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of oneness....every artist is an "imitator," that is to say, either an Apollinian artist in dreams, or a Dionysian artist in ecstasies... (38)

Self-abnegation involves a feeling of oneness, which Clare seeks by dissolving the boundaries between the self, its actions, and its environment. Moreover, the artistic energies that burst forth—what Clare would call the “true sublime—do not require the mediation of an artist, and this is both the frustration and celebration inscribed in Clare’s poetry and his metrical experiments. As poet, Clare is compelled to examine the often-inscrutable natural processes that fascinate yet tax his senses, a task destined for failure as nature is already the superior form of expression. The poet, for Clare, is more of an imitator, decipherer, or curator of nature, and therein lies the talent of the artist. Poetry’s language is “meet”: its metaphorical and rhythmic structures convey the processes of nature while its meter functions as a regulator necessary to make nature’s incessant messages legible within poetic language.

There is, I argue, a palpable relationship between rhythm and self that Romantic poetry makes visible. In Romantic poetry, iambic pentameter—especially blank verse—was a way to lose the rhythm and keep the self, but Clare does the contrary: in “Shadows of Taste” and the many sonnets that use heroic couplets, he employs iambic pentameter to keep the rhythm and lose the self. The heroic couplet is rhymed and, thus, rhythmic—it has the opposite effect of the iambic pentameter in blank verse. Clare uses iambic pentameter in the eighteenth-century manner (heroic couplets) but experiments with it as an earthier meter, more attuned to the fluxes and flows of nature’s sensory stimuli. He seldom uses unrhymed iambic pentameter in the blank verse form that became strongly associated with Romantic poetry. There is an irony in that rhythm, which is time, gets us out of time, or at least the ordinary clock time of daily life. We lose ourselves in rhythm, which frees us from other temporalities.

Culler argues that the mind cannot understand everything it wants to understand, but rhyme and other modes of repetition gives us a kind of understanding—not unlike the sublime

(Culler 180–85). Clare rarely used blank verse, which is the most subjective of verses in its subdued rhythm. He mostly used ballad rhyme and heroic couplets. While unrhymed pentameter is more speech-like, the heroic couplet gives the pentameter line more rhythmic focus. It is less subjective and more collective; it is more about the external than the internal. This is consistent with Clare's frequently decentered lyric I and the use his lyric eye to focus on the external object world. The external force of rhythm helps us understand what we cannot fully understand.

Rhythm is part of nature for Clare, as ontologically real as any weed or tree stump. Rhythm is an environmental object like the trees that constitute "the true sublime" in Clare's cosmology. Clare takes the heroic couplet from Augustan poetry and makes it earthier, less ordered and stately. He grounds the meter in natural, external stimuli as well as the rapidity with which we perceive that stimuli. Thus, the speech-like component of pentameter is combined with external or nonhuman component of rhythm in the form of rhyme.

Perhaps Clare focuses on rhythm and meter (and grounds his sense of taste in it) because it is bodily and the nature of his work as a rural laborer is far more bodily and rhythmic and far more attuned to biological, circadian, and seasonal rhythms—temporalities he cannot separate from work, nature, and his unusual understanding of taste as an empirical, lived phenomenon. Clare's sense of taste and rhythm are guided by an ecological ethic that enables us to reevaluate what the relationship between individuals and their environment could and should be. Indeed, through his rhythms and empirical sense of taste, Clare offers a way to attenuate the human desire to master the environment by allowing us to think of ourselves as part of it, rather than apart from it.

## Chapter 5

### Coda

As I researched this project, I began to see it as an opportunity to think about Romantic poetry as a way to address the reduced value of prosody in literary studies during an ecological crisis in which language and reading have been subordinated to algorithms and technology.<sup>1</sup> Even in the context of positive solutions to environmental degradation, we often subordinate language to techno-optimism. Poetic language is even more marginalized. It is a situation that brings to mind Hannah Arendt's cold war admonishments in *The Human Condition*:

Whenever the relevance of speech is at stake, matters become political by definition, for speech is what makes man a political being. If we would follow the advice, so frequently urged upon us, to adjust our cultural attitudes to the present status or scientific achievement, we would in all earnest adopt a way of life in which speech is no longer meaningful. For the sciences today have been forced to adopt a "language" of mathematical symbols which ... now contains statements that in no way can be translated back into speech.... they move in a world where speech has lost its power. And whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about....men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and themselves (3–4).

Arendt makes this statement in 1958 amidst the specter of nuclear war, stressing the central role speech must play in navigating a planetary crisis. Neither Arendt nor the Romantic poets I

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion of technologies diminishment of reading, see the introduction to Sara Guyer's *Reading with John Clare*.

discuss were anti-science; rather, they objected to its mechanization of the world and its irresponsible uses, the most famous avatar of these dangers being Victor Frankenstein. But in our current situation, as we face the specter of global warming, Arendt's warning about the marginalization of speech is as relevant to humans as ever. But it might also apply to how thinking about meter and rhythm as vibrant, as I have proposed in this dissertation, can help us understand that the rhythms and meters that bring words to life—sound patternings that catalyze revelation and drive linguistic evolution—register our enmeshment in our environments and make visible the correspondences that links the external world with our own interiorities.

This is not to advocate the “correctness” of the humanities over the “misguidedness” of science and technology but, on the contrary, to overcome the artificial barriers between them—barriers exemplified by terms such as STEM, a supposedly neutral term that has the dangerous rhetorical effect of cutting off conversations between science and the humanities. While there has been a rich tradition of literature and science in Romantic studies over the past quarter century, most of this scholarship has focused on the history of science, and I believe literary studies—and the Environmental Humanities more broadly—would greatly benefit from being more conversant with currently marginal scientific research on plant sentience, epigenesis, and biosemiotics.<sup>2</sup> These scientific sub-fields are well-attuned to the Romantic project of illuminating a natural world that many poets of the period saw as driven by the rhetorical, tropological, semiotic, and rhythmic structures of poetry. In this sense, these scientific

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<sup>2</sup> Amanda Jo Goldstein and Kate Rigby have been doing noteworthy work in these areas. See Goldstein's *Sweet Science* and Kate Rigby's “Art, Nature, and the Poesy of Plants in the *Goethezeit*: A Biosemiotic Perspective.”

orientations promise to elucidate the environmental and ecological elements of prosody and the relationships between word and world that I have discussed in this dissertation.

This dissertation has tried to demonstrate how sound patterning and metrical experiments in Romantic poetry mark the contingencies of nature—its biological temporalities, its patterns and its deviations from them, and its geological and evolutionary accidents. As I hope to have shown, this places us in a more harmonious register with nature and how we actually experience its fluxes and flows. Romantic experiments with meter offer a model for thinking about life and time on multiple scales and for understanding that events are not necessarily of their own moment—something that will give us more representational flexibility and stronger vocabularies for thinking about ecological degradation, as Rob Nixon has suggested in *Slow Violence*.<sup>3</sup> I have also argued that Romantic poets saw nature as a rhythmic organism as much as a biological one, and that they treated poetic language not as a demarcation between humans and a passive natural world, but as a medium that can cultivate an ethics based on sympathy with our environments.

It is a commonplace to say that Romantic poets are not simply interested in nature but are, broadly speaking, ecological thinkers. But, perhaps counterintuitively, they often privilege relationality over individuality—something we see in Clare’s insistently de-centered lyric “I,” Smith’s fragmented multiplicity of speakers, and Blake’s plural individualism, in which characters are attached to spectres and emanations and are, thus, never truly singular. These poets were attentive to what Timothy Morton calls “the ecological thought”—“the fullest and

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<sup>3</sup> Nixon stresses the urgency of thinking on multiple temporal scales in order to recognize the belatedness with which environmental harm often occurs. There is a paucity of language with which to discuss this problem, and Nixon notes the “temporal overspill that eludes rhetorical cleanup operations with their sanitary beginnings and ends” (8).

most rigorous thinking of the interconnectedness of beings” and a “radical openness” to the “strange stranger” (*Ecological Thought* 330).<sup>4</sup> One thing I hope to have conveyed is a sense of rhythmic ecology in which the strange strangeness of Romantic poetry, a strangeness that produces language and rhythms, might make our own familiar world strange again; or, as Shelley declares, “[make] familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” (517). A step toward this strangeness begins with a view of natural environments as logically and ontologically connected to structures of poetry, spurring us to embrace what Bateson calls “an ecology of mind.” But I stress the importance of placing rhythms, sounds, and vibrations at the center of such a mental-ecological complex because they function as connectors and correspondences between our internal and external worlds, something poetry demonstrates more clearly than other modes of expression. Blake’s equation of poetic meter with physiology and vast scales of time registers similar correspondences, as does Smith’s ability to think through a meter that can accommodate the movement of her expanding and shifting thoughts on deep time and natural history. Clare contrasts conventional notions of the sublime with what he calls “the true sublime,” which involves a “truth to nature,” an understanding of the world that acknowledges the infinite but very ordinary ways that nature holds dominion over us. These ordinary ways prove extraordinary when we imagine nature anew, as a poetic entity, something rhetorical and rhythmic, and whose appeals to our attention might persuade us to dissolve our human exceptionalism.

Since meter and rhythm assert somatic pressures and excite involuntary physical responses, prosody provides an inroad into examining how those often-mood-altering physical

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<sup>4</sup> Since the publication of this book in 2010, Morton has shifted his theoretical orientation to Object Oriented Ontology, emphasizing the integrity of objects over relationality.

responses link us to our environments in substantive ways. As I have argued, our bodies, the page, the reader, the author, literary history, and the sounds and rhythms of words all partake of what Jane Bennett calls distributive agency; all are necessary for the event of reading or hearing a poem. Focusing on rhythm attunes us to the ways in which our bodies connect to the external world, and this exemplifies the link between bodies and poetry. A focus on rhythm effaces the human exceptionalism that facilitates dominance over the planet. It illuminates our integration in our environments, which are equipped with biosemiotic and rhythmic capacities.

This project has suggested that Romantic poetry offers possibilities with which to discuss the environment in ways that do not reinforce (poetically, ecologically, politically) the modern desire for technological mastery of nature, a mastery that sets humans apart from the natural world and cultivates problematic understandings of the Anthropocene, such as those articulated by Jeremy Davies and Rob Nixon—reaffirming the same human mastery that lies at the root of the problem, and advocating technological solutions as the superior (or only) way to address climate crisis.<sup>5</sup>

Rhythm and meter are bodily, and scholars of poetics and prosody have stressed their physical nature. Armstrong emphasizes their somatic effects (26). Avarim argues that poetic meaning can be understood as an allegory of its rhythm, in which a poem's meaning allegorically represents the power of its rhythms to evoke a physical response, to engage a reader or listener's body (18). For Culler, bodily processes may be related to rhythm and meter in various ways, but one cannot posit a causal connection between them—there is too large a range of prosody and bodies in the world (Culler 170-71). What's more important than a causal link is our somatic participation in rhythm. For Attridge, to truly understand poetry we must attend to the

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<sup>5</sup> See Nixon's *Slow Violence* (2012) and Jeremy Davies's *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (2016).

“psychological and physiological reality of the sequences of rhythmic energy pulses perceived, and enjoyed, by reader and listener alike,” adding, “I don’t believe it’s possible to discuss rhythm without relating it to the movements of the human body” (104, 111). Language read aloud produces a rhythmic organization that encourages muscle movement because language requires us to use the body to produce sounds of differing qualities and duration. It relates to “the psychological and physiological *experience* or periodicity” (*Moving Words* 111–12).

According to Paz, Romanticism emerged in England and Germany because those nations broke away from the Greco-Roman aesthetic and because of spiritual link to Protestantism (the inward, personal nature of reading the Bible was similar to Romantic poetry). The poet’s ego replaced the impersonal aesthetic of Greek and Latin verse (*Children* 61). But how does blank verse figure into this transformation? It is less rhythmic than four-beat measures and, thus, less bodily. Its rhythmic quality lies less in insistent beats than in the natural rhythms of speech. Blank verse possesses the ability to develop introspective poetry that cultivates a lyric subject. This requires one to mitigate the attention to the body, redirecting it to the speaker’s thoughts. In this regard, it is not a surprise that blank verse—a rhythmically weak verse meant to mimic natural speech—experienced such a strong revival in the Romantic period, becoming the dominant form as we moved into the Victorian era.

Despite the decline of prosody in literary studies, it has enjoyed increased attention in the last fifteen years. While this attention has been mostly siloed in Victorian studies, Julia Carlson, Maureen McLane, Susan J. Wolfson, and Ewan Jones have brought it further into the Romantic conversation. I believe there is still much uncharted territory in Romantic prosody (and, for that matter, sound studies), and I have tried to cover some of this territory by illuminating connections between prosody and various theoretical orientations that stress our entanglements

with our environmental surroundings, especially ecocriticism, New Materialism, and biosemiotics. These are fruitful avenues to explore the implications of our inability to fully comprehend or control the effects rhythm and meter have on us, and this can contribute a new dimension to these critical conversations.

There is also a paradox that rhythm is one of the most ubiquitous aspects of our lives, yet we have little idea about why it moves us psychologically and somatically regardless of our will. The question of why rhythm moves us may be unanswerable, but much can still be learned from continuing the inquiry in scholarship and teaching. As Attridge argues, a study of rhythm in scholarship and teaching is “an unrivaled way of becoming intimate with the variety of rhythms and metres into which one’s language can be moulded” (126). I suggest that the language of “becoming intimate” with rhythms speaks directly to the idea of meter as vibrant and rhythm as a marker of our ecological embeddedness—rhythms and meters connect us to each other, to literary history, and to the environments that produce and sustain us.

Outside the academy, rhythm and meter thrive, but inside they remain quite low on the pecking order of literary concerns, below the historical and the rhetorical, to which it is typically in the service of. Culler suggest that scholars, rather than studying rhythm as rhythm, enlist rhythm for interpretive ends lest they succumb to “some jejune susceptibility to rhythm independent of meaning” (142). But to Attridge, we actually need an understanding of how rhythm operates in nursery rhymes, children’s verse, rap, advertisements, and ballads in order to understand its functions in the more rarefied world of poetic tradition (104). Both authors emphasize rap as a vital example of rhythmic innovation. Attridge notes the deft handling by a rap artist of the mechanisms and irregularities of language, rhythm, and meter (125). Culler calls rap “[o]ne of the most vital manifestations of the English verse tradition today,” a form that

exemplifies “the profound appeal of patterned language” (172–73). And David Caplan is one of few voices arguing that rap should be considered poetry.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps poetry can be rejuvenated by the influence of other cultural forms, such as rap, hip-hop, spoken word, and various strands of folk and rock that experiment with more adventurous sound patterns and cadences. Most poetry that is taken seriously as poetry in the academy, primarily free verse, lacks rhythm, and is, thus, not as bodily, although it employs other innovative forms of sound (and visual) patterning. I am in no way impugning free verse poetry, and contemporary free verse poets are producing vital, innovative, and exciting work. But, we have a mostly rhythm-less academy and a hip-hop culture full of remarkable rhythmic and verbal innovations. Perhaps the academy could turn to other cultural forms to reassess its own critical practices, conduct comparative studies, and—hopefully—revive an interest in poetry among scholars, students, and public audiences alike.

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<sup>6</sup> See Caplan’s *Rhyme’s Challenge: Poetry, Hip Hop, and Contemporary Rhyming Culture*.

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