

ORGANIC INORGANICISM: PEASANT POETRY AND MEDIA TECHNOLOGY 1730-1820

Brian Lanahan Milthorpe

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(English)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

2023

Date of final oral examination: 4/26/2023

The dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

Mark Vareschi, Associate Professor, English (Advisor)
Anatoly Detwyler, Assistant Professor, Asian Languages & Cultures
Sara Guyer, Professor and Dean, English
Theresa M. Kelley, Professor Emerita, English
Mario Ortiz-Robles, Professor, English

© Copyright by Brian Milthorpe 2023

All Rights Reserved

For Robert

Abstract

This dissertation investigates the life and work of a selection of eighteenth and early nineteenth century laboring poets presented to the public under the discourses of natural and original genius, sentiment, and poetic realism, including Stephen Duck, Ann Yearsley, Robert Burns, Robert Bloomfield, and John Clare. It argues that by means of this presentation performed through paratextual devices, patronage structures, critical appraisals, and public comment, eighteenth century laboring poets merge with their poetry in a way that shapes both their person and verse into visual apparatuses. It argues further that the formation of this apparatus character through the discourses of genius, sentiment, and poetic representations of labor anticipates the forms, aspects, and operations of future visual media technologies such as television and film. Drawing on a range of work from media studies, science and technology studies, and the philosophy of technology, each chapter concentrates on a laboring poet to read selections of their early poetry within the frameworks provided by contemporary and future media technologies and techno-scientific discourses. Each chapter also places emphasis on the techniques, modes, and forms by which laboring poets use their writing to engage with their own conscription to these discourses to reorient the conditions of their publication and reclaim aesthetic agency from within their status as visual apparatuses.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
The Plug Boy and His Steam Engine.....	1
Not a Hero, Not a Savior, Forget What You Know.....	11
Looking Inside the Automatic Turk.....	16
Functioning Automatic, Dancing Mechanic.....	21
Soul Drama and Robots in Disguise.....	25
A Message from Another Time.....	30
Technical Subjectivity and General Organology.....	35
Chapter 1.....	40
Mechanical Impulse and Promethean Genius.....	44
Discovery and Disbelief in the Man-Machine.....	49
The Automatic Image of Labour.....	57
La Mettrie and Vaucanson’s Duck.....	68
Emulating the Thresher.....	74
Chapter 2.....	84
Ground Control to Celestial Orders.....	92
Reproductive Prints and Time-Traveling Wheelbarrows.....	107
Transtemporal Flânerie and Spectacular Machines.....	117
Mechanical Soliloquys: Or, The Matter with Keeping Time.....	128
Chapter 3.....	137
Babbling Bagpipes and Crambo-Jingling Poets.....	144
Lasses and Grasses and Ballads – O My!.....	155
Kilmarnock’s Farmer and Edinburgh’s Bard.....	164
O Mice an Electrons.....	172
Chapter 4.....	185
Tuning into the Panoramic Tube.....	193
The Farmer’s Boy in Prime Time.....	199
Rural Commercial Reality and Hyperreal Static.....	208
Broadcast Symbol Intrusions.....	215
Chapter 5.....	225
The Peepshow Man Who Wasn’t There.....	230
Requiem for a Prefatory Dream.....	237
Pulp Fictions and Romantic Reading.....	245
Clare’s Night of the Living Dead.....	257
The Child of Nature with a Movie Camera.....	266
Works Cited.....	278

List of Figures

Figure 1: Anonymous, "Steam Machine: The Invention of the Young Potter, 1713," engraving (1856).

Figure 2: J. Elwood, Untitled, watercolor on paper (c. 1790).

Figure 3: Detail from J. Elwood, Untitled (c. 1790).

Figure 4: Anonymous, "The Fall of Phaeton, from the series Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," print (c. 1600).

Figure 5: Figure XXIV of Wolfgang Von Kempelen's Speaking Machine included in *The Mechanism of Human Speech* (1791), 577.

Figure 6: Sheet music for "Green Grow the Rashes O," printed in *Robert Burns: Selected Poems* (Penguin, 1993).

Figure 7: Lee De Forest's triode, consisting of the filament wire grid, and plate encased in a glass envelope, photograph (n.d.)

Figure 8: Cover of *Burns Now*, ed. Kenneth Simpson, photograph (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1994).

Figure 9: Robert Mitchell, 'Section of the Rotunda, Leicester Square, in Which Is Exhibited the Panorama,' Plans and Views in Perspective Buildings in England and Scotland, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut (1801).

Figure 10: Frederick Birnie, "A View of London taken from the top of Albion Mills, Blackfriars," 1792, no. 4. Guildhall Library, City of London, aquatint from drawing by Henry Aston Barker (1792).

Figure 11: William Henry Payne, "The Halfpenny Showman", hand-colored aquatint (1805).

Figure 12: Thomas L. Busby, "Raree-Show," hand-colored etching (c. 1800).

Introduction

"How can we consistently praise the inestimable blessing of letters and not wish to extend it? Or why should the great and the wealthy confine the probable production of intellectual excellence to their own class, and exclude, by withholding the polish, all that might amongst the poor by nature be intended to be Newtons and Lockes?"

- Robert Bloomfield (1801)

"Thinking is in the subject like sound is in the violin, by dint of a relationship of vibration. Insofar as people think, they are, so to speak, musical instruments for performances that mean the world. If the human 'instrument' has respect for itself it sees clearly: I am not a *fundamentum inconcussom*, but a *medium percussum*."

- Peter Sloterdijk (2017)

The Plug Boy and His Steam Engine



Figure 1: "Steam Machine: The Invention of the Young Potter, 1713," engraving, 1856

In 1713, a young boy named Humphrey Potter stood patiently watching the rhythmic motion of a large beam tipping in the air from one end to the other. The path of this beam would signal when to turn the valves or plugs of a cylinder that kept the machine running. Attention to these plugs quickly consumed the time of a boy whose vigilance, though constant, never brought anything but

monotony. But the closer he looked at this monotony, the more Humphrey's interest grew. The moment when the piston-end of the beam reached its peak was exactly the moment when the first steam plug needed to be opened. And the moment when the pump-end of the beam reached another height signaled the same for the second plug. Returning to the workshop the following day, Humphrey brought with him a coil of twine. Stringing together the beam and plugs so that the machine would open its own valves during the course of its motion, Humphrey ran off to play with his friends waiting in suspense at the workshop door to see if his experiment would be successful.

The story of Humphrey Potter is by all accounts nothing more than a whimsically modern just-so story, an inventive myth to explain the complicated development of Thomas Newcomen's atmospheric engine. While it may, at present or in the future, have no place in history, this is not to say its central ethic, its symbolic force, or even its technical possibility, make no claim on the part of the historical. We have in this myth both a cross-section of the contemporary desire to automate machines, expressed by the workers who operated (or, to say it more clearly, were operated by) them, and the subtle recognition that, even before this conscious strategy of labor to reappropriate machinery, mechanical repetition supplied from out of itself a means of liberation from mechanical repetition. Indeed, appearances are deceiving here; the plug boy's diversions truly begin *inside* the workshop, exactly where studying the repetition of the machine took the form of a sportive bending of its rules, a thinking outside the time of the machine *through* the machine.

And it is for this reason that the story of this boy and his machine is most certainly not historical. Instead, it is a story presenting an image of those who find time where none exists to live a life unafforded to them by history. It is, perhaps not more than this but because of this, a story not simply concerned with the theme of a boy genius outsmarting the steam engine, a familiar

antagonism between mind and machine, but a story about the way in which mechanical repetition always invites the possibility of an agency that can act to feed this repetition back into itself. The same machine that consumed the time of the plug boy through its monotonous motion also and at the same time *taught* him, through that same motion, everything he needed to know in order to automate it. In this way, Humphrey does much more than make the Newcomen engine work by itself through a kind of attentive play. He embodies the basic functionality of literacy as a pattern of reading and writing: interiorizing a repetitive code that is rearranged and sent back into the world with a difference to set off new processes. The knowledge read from the repetitive motion of the machine that the boy writes back into it with his string, all for the purpose of leading it to run itself, opens up a path toward regaining a way to live a life and time of his own.

In 1711, two years before Humphrey was supposed to have automated his way out of the workshop, Joseph Addison marked the arrival of another kind of automatic machine in the British Isles. This machine, however, seemed to work by way of exploding all literacy. In his essay on genius in *The Spectator*, the man of letters theorized a series of men who stood above all writing, composing rich and imaginative verse solely “by the mere strength of natural parts, and without any assistance of art or learning.”¹ Inimical to cool “conversation, reflection, and the reading of the most polite authors,” these thermal engines ran on “natural fire” and produced in their verse “vast conceptions of things and noble sallies of imagination” at odds with their physical yet finely-tuned human form.² This incongruity between the human and sublime, rephrased as exterior art as opposed to inborn talent, formed the most salient and obscure marker of genius. Validating the unknown and unknowable of “something nobly wild and extravagant” at the center of all invention,

¹ Joseph Addison, “Genius,” *The Spectator*, no. 160 (London, 1711).

² *Ibid.*

Addison, together with the long line of critics, essayists, and philosophers who would succeed him, molded the disembodied spirit of genius into a natural machine of genius, an infinitely productive autonomous organic technology that outputs models and materials for rote copying, apprenticeship, and learning, but that resolutely refuses them as input.³ The purpose of the machine of genius built up throughout the century in essays and treatises was to set up a productive discourse that framed creative labor as a natural, inexhaustible force capable of rebuffing externally overwrought rules.⁴

Throughout the eighteenth century, a singular character would continually find themselves responsible for converting the ethereal steam of genius into the visible and material mechanical action of setting words onto the page: the autodidactic rural laboring poet emerging from the country as proof positive of Britain's claim to a literary value beyond all value. Writing from the lower orders traditionally spanned an assortment of generic and formal registers, including scriptural versification, veiled political complaint, and rural songs and ballads passed on from family members or caught from the reverie of public houses.⁵ What emerged most clearly at the beginning of the century, however, was a dense fiber threaded through the contemporary discourse on genius centered on making the laboring poet not only a physical embodiment of theories of spontaneous creation but a subject uniquely visible to the reader, whether in terms of their locality,

³ Early in the century, genius, however natural, still required some training in the field of accepted forms of literary art to perfect its nature. Hence most geniuses amongst the moderns composing Addison's audience could only hope to aspire to his definition of the second rank or tier of geniuses. This rank was equal to the sublimity of the first tier, which included more "ancient" and "eastern" geniuses, but it expressed greater deference to existing literary modes and standards. By the 1760s, however, following the publication of Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1760), the effusive core of Addison's articulation of genius gained wider and freer reign.

⁴ See Jonathan Bate, "Shakespeare and Original Genius," in *Genius: The History of an Idea* ed. Penelope Murray (New York: Blackwell).76-97. The line here and throughout the century on the organic and inorganic nature of genius and imagination is a fine one, but I stress the machinic nature of genius for the fact that it was intentionally constructed through key texts.

⁵ EP Thomson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966); John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan, *A History of Working-Class Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Sandie Byrne, *Poetry and Class* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

occupation, compositional practice, or personal history.⁶ Genres of poetry noted for their visual expressiveness, such as the georgic, locodescriptive, or pastoral, provided laboring poets vehicles with which to display and deliver both the particulars of their lives and the strength of their status as geniuses to both public and private readership. Hefty and omnipresent paratexts to the extent of introductions, prefaces, subscriber lists, portraits, engravings, footnotes, and addenda, supported this visual verse to ensure that audiences of whatever stripe celebrated the work of genius without ever losing sight of the proper place or identity of the laborer whose spontaneous writing in polite styles and genres appeared to place them ever so slightly above or outside their lot.

Always moving between the natural absolute they were supposed to embody and the technical particularity of their occupation, personal history, and social sphere, this line of poets including Stephen Duck, Ann Yearsley, Robert Burns, Robert Bloomfield, John Clare, and many others, amassed around this fundamental tension between the visibility of their labor, body, and profession and the invisible creativity of the genius that supposedly inspired them. Indeed, it was their very status as conduits capable of giving immaterial genius and deep feeling a textual material form emerging from the countryside that turned laboring poets into a distinct kind of visual apparatus. All technical imaging apparatuses, from the photograph to the radiograph, are designed, in the words of Vilém Flusser, to “grasp the ungraspable, visualize the invisible, and conceptualize the inconceivable.”⁷ No different, eighteenth-century laboring poetry was positioned around a rationalizing technical visibility, an organization which set up a reflexive union between the textual

⁶ William J. Christmas, *The Lab'ring Muse: Work, Writing, and the Social Order in English Plebian Poetry 1730-1830* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001); John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan “Clare and the traditions of labouring-class verse” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1740-1830* eds. Thomas Keymer and Jon Mee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 280-295.

⁷ Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, trans. Mark Post and Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 16.

apparatus of the book and the living apparatus of the poet contained in it: genius automated a visual poetry printed in books that recorded, stored, and replayed the life and work of the poet-genius.

Through the Looking-Glass

This media visual program at the heart of eighteenth-century laboring poetry can be succinctly delineated with reference M.H. Abrams *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953). Based on their cultivation of proto-romantic features of authorship, eighteenth century laboring poets stand as a kind of atavistic link in an evolution from a mimetic to an expressive paradigm of poetic creation. Midway between the conceptual-cultural growth of the artist from laboring "craftsman" to divine "creator," this vagrant status is a brand bearing the sign of a transition frozen between the *autos* (the self) and the *didaktos* (learning) that defines these autodidactic poets. On one hand, they self-evidently evoke the technics of language as a "process of invention, disposition, and expression" in discourse. But, on the other, their entry into poetry depends on exemplifying the orator's "innate powers or genius, as distinguished from his culture and art."⁸ Neither pure craftsman nor pure artist, the eighteenth-century laboring poets carrying the birthmark of the romantic paradigm have no choice but to carry their self-learnt art with them for all to see while, under the pressure of an ideological discourse of genius, pretending they have none.

In adopting the predominate media metaphors delivered by learned natural philosophers and literary theorists across centuries, however, Abrams' comprehensive survey of the psychic naturalization of external technique tends to gawk at this ambiguity, rather than analyze it directly. "Stephen Duck, The Thresher Poet; Mary Collier, the Poetic Washerwoman; Henry Jones, the

⁸ MH Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 21.

Poetical Shoemaker...[and] the Poetical Plowboy, Robert Burns" take on the appearance in this foundational work of the title pages of the books in which they were sold as anthropological curiosities preceded by their professions.⁹ The consequences of this melding or the implication of their middling status for either paradigm are left uninvestigated. And in this way, Abrams helps to create what he discovers: "people dwelling in civilized nations but insulated by caste or rural habit from the artifice or complications of culture" are visual products of the activity of discursive theoretical apparatuses turning the Golden Age fiction into a real method of literary production.¹⁰ Laboring poets are markers of a transition to expression that it is left to the romantics to complete.

If the discourse of philosophers, critics, and poets organized around an aesthetic-epistemological difference between machinic similitude, association, and repetition on one hand, and natural effusion, spontaneity, and interiority, on the other, a closer look at the apparatus-character of the laboring poet and the contemporary historical technical apparatuses that populated their world wards off any clean distinctions between the receptive and projective. Indeed, the apparatus of the laboring poet joined a world full of technical devices: automatons, magic lanterns, peep boxes, camera lucida, panoramas, and more, each of which not only combined processes of reflection and expression but were never clearly or transparently duplicates of "reality" even when at their most reflective. These devices, as all devices do, helped to produce novel layers of reality, not simply show what was always there. Abram's foundational account of the birth of the romantic imagination both highlights and underplays the fact that technological media, mirrors and lamps included, are, in Jean-Luc Nancy's words, not "simply a group of supplements, tools, and

⁹ Ibid., 105.

¹⁰ Ibid.

instruments, but testimony of a complete remodeling of the world."¹¹ Each of these instruments always, in sense, went beyond reality by going through it, adding to the stock of what is real through the pursuit of supplementing a state supposedly complete in itself.

Romantic scholarship since Abrams has insisted on the claim that these indefatigable laborers came from the country to cobble the rudiments of romanticism by embodying the inspiration of genius necessary for poetic creation, a sense of *technē* as the handicraft regulating impassioned literary production, and rural personas and languages unspoiled by urban influence. Yet, at the same time, these proto-romantic features make their poetry too mimetic, too commercial, too local, or too “worked-on” to attain the sense of self-sufficient “art” that exists in the notion of an “artwork” detached from its artist. But if romanticism in Nancy’s terms defines a process of “the infinitization of the ends of man,” the construction of this self-sufficient aesthetic end irreducible to its technical means, then eighteenth century laboring poets offer its supplementary lesson in advance: “to overcome romanticism is to think rigorously the in-finite, which is to say, its finite, plural, heterogeneous constitution.”¹² What this means for laboring poets made visible through a discourse of genius is that, as the proto-romantic building blocks raising up the notion of romantic genius, they inherently harbor the potential to “overcome” romanticism in advance.

The method through which they achieve this overcoming is the artful redeployment of the status of the absolute apparatus to which their social conditions reduced them within their own poetry. This works in essence because the discursive framing that attends to the simple or unrefined rural material making up the peasant poet sees this simplicity as the very emblem of genius (in

¹¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Possibility of a World: Conversations with Pierre-Philippe Jandin* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 115.

¹² Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 37.

both its person and poetry since, as the title “peasant poetry” implies, it is always a person-poetry). But this is a point beyond which the laboring poet cannot venture. Whatever aesthetic experience or compositional excellence their poetry achieves, it is always locked within the reflexive loop defined by the discovery, publication, and marketing that always circles back to their social identity as rural laborers and their poetic identity as genius autodidacts. Indeed, they are poets less for what their poetry says and more for the fact that it was written. But in this very poetry bound to the articulation and repetition of these finite, simple, or material conditions, in a poetic register not belonging to them but signifying the genius that supposedly wrote through them, the laboring poet effectively *thinks* romanticism beginning from these finite limitations. These are limits that are not immediately thrown off. Rather, in their early work, laboring poets show themselves building themselves as poets from out of the materials that determine both them and their poetry.

Much thought has been devoted to exfoliating the naturalistic skin that identified laboring poets as “wild and extravagant” forces of nature, no more or less than creative gusts of wind or versifying plants. Such scholarship has found ample evidence of education, skillful practice, and conscious poetic programs where before genius held explanatory privilege. But this process of demystifying the ideology of inspired creation often risks dispossessing the poet and the poetry of the skillful recreation of non-skill that this very ideology enabled.¹³ It neglects, in other words, the

¹³ Indeed, in appearing to locate the poetic knowledge of laboring poets in definitive pathways of literary inheritance, the move to pull back the curtain of ideology has the effect of suggesting that the source of poetic creativity is nothing other than another source *ad infinitum*. Rather than a simple demystification of genius through recourse to an empirical citationality, I propose here that these poets’ position as mechanical remnants of an Augustan practice preparing for the arrival of a naturality of language with romanticism serves as a reminder of two things: 1) that “it is always on the basis of the irreducibility of a non-knowledge that a knowledge is constituted” (and thus that genius, as the mysterious force of an automatic non-knowledge that produces knowledge, is not simply a product of ideological hegemony but a constitutive figure of all invention that belongs to everyone and no one) and 2) that “it is the technological synthesis effected by the machine... that makes the intentional synthesis possible, that is to say the *belief in the this was*” (and thus that a poetry brought to publication under the ideology of genius and tethered to the particularity of lives, professions, and practices of its poet cannot be understood any more than it can be analyzed outside of the technical conditions of this tethering or synthesis that allow us to believe in the

fact that these poets always started not *ex nihilo* but *in medias res* by building on the illusion of spontaneous natural production in interiorizing it, claiming it as truly their own, and practicing it as a technique to build themselves as poets. As current lessons in artificial intelligence, machine learning, and virtual reality succinctly demonstrate, there is always an immense technicity and an immense labor *within* what appears to appear from within itself. Yet pointing to this technicity as an explanation of the aesthetic illusion does not remove its effect, attraction, or operation. Indeed, it perhaps only makes its magic more alluring. From a similar logic, the tradition of peasant poetry plots neither objects forced to conform to or subvert high literary standards, nor freely creative romantic artists always recreating a novel creation apart from yet hidden deep inside themselves.

Rather, eighteenth century laboring poets bring to view through poetry their constitution and identity as *technical subjects*, individuals made from, captured by, or thrown into relation with an autonomous technology that makes them visible as both its product and process. Like the plug boy who became the mythic inventor of the atmospheric engine to which he was submitted only in transforming it into an automated machine, a technical subject is conditioned by technologies but employs a knowledge sourced from an experience with these technologies themselves to discover a way of living that draws movement and imagination from out of what, left to itself, stultifies and disenchant. It is their intermediate place in the paradigmatic shift Abrams traces that necessitates rethinking these poets and their poetry from the machinic aspect of the organicity presumed of them and the organic work of machines with which they responded. Presenting a more direct view of the life and work of eighteenth-century laboring poets, then, should not take on the program of separating fact from fiction or skill from genius, but finding the truth in illusion

reality of those particulars without having empirical access to them). See, Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 155-158.

and the illusion in truth towards the end of showing how through an automatic or predetermined life and work they became inventors experimenting with endless ends through the day-to-day labor, simple sentiment, and one-dimensional images to which they were reduced.

Not a Hero, Not a Savior, Forget What You Know

The longstanding influence of historical and cultural materialist modes of analysis on eighteenth century laboring poetry has had the effect of both highlighting the operation of this subjectivity and obscuring the artful manipulation of its own conditions. These analytical approaches frame the emergence of laboring poets under the banner of natural genius as a process of ideology, one that effectively erases political claims and conflicts over material inequality by idealizing a selection of humble laborers whose public compliance to social and aesthetic standards serves as a model for the lower classes. Linda Zionkowski succinctly articulates this process in her influential work on “strategies of containment.” Complicit in these strategies, the laboring poet prostrates “into conformity with the culture of their superiors,” accepting and perpetuating “the authority of such conventions and practices by ultimately adopting them and by proposing few alternatives derived from [their] native culture.”¹⁴ Under the influence of patrons and publishers responsible for leading the laboring poet to publication, the rural energy fueling their poetry turns its gaze to urbane ideas remote from the indigenous stock furnishing their “true” value. For work on laboring poets eager to see them laying the foundation of a grand battle between labor and capital, the working-class movements of the nineteenth century, or the proletarian science of the twentieth, the richness it finds is always accompanied by a slightly disappointed pang.

¹⁴ Linda Zionkowski, 'Strategies of Containment: Stephen Duck, Ann Yearsley, and the Problem of Polite Culture,' *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 13 (1989), 95.

This perspective, for instance, composes Raymond Williams somewhat sour portrait of Bloomfield, a Suffolk farm laborer and shoemaker whose poetry "could hardly get at his real experience because an external attitude had been consciously interposed... and even at his best he is constrained within a verse convention that is syntactically that of an observer rather than a participant."¹⁵ Wheedling and shy, Bloomfield can only reflect his own experience through a language that isolates him from that experience. But this is not his fault. His "possibilities of development" toward becoming an illuminating independent artist closer to the soil writing in his native language "were conditioned by the fact of patronage."¹⁶ When funds from patrons were low, he kept up the artifice, sold out, and did what upper-class gentlemen of leisure do, taking a tour of the Wye to write popular topographical verse "for money."¹⁷ Even from the time of *The Farmer's Boy* (1800), his first major publication and the volume that brought him fame, Bloomfield's voice was smothered with the dingy mechanics of "literary allusion" and "periphrastic gesture."¹⁸ Any hope that his first poem could contain a brilliant "accuracy of experience" is "enclosed within an external pointing and explanation," exemplified by the lines:

Who could resist the call? That Giles had done
Nor heard the birds, nor seen the rising sun,
Had not Benevolence, with cheering ray,
And Greatness stooped, indulgent to display
Praise which does surely not to Giles belong
But to the object that inspired his song.

In sum, the active artist capable of revealing the truth of material conflict is nowhere to be found. Bloomfield presents his experience, but, under patronage, it turns into pulp. These are strange evaluations not because they are inaccurate, but because the reading they form hurdles past the

¹⁵ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 135.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

politics on the surface of the art it reads. Deferring the question of whether the reverential capitalization of "Benevolence" or "Greatness" in these lines speaks more to the elevation of divinity or patronage, Bloomfield's art is much more subtle here precisely because it is the work of a technical subject reinventing itself through the lingua franca of a conventional popular poetics.¹⁹ There is never any consideration of the possibility that the "inaccuracy" of the representation of this experience *is* Bloomfield's experience or that he is "pointing" to something other than the powers hovering above him.

Indeed, in *The Farmer's Boy*, Bloomfield's "real existence" immediately takes the form of an artificial one. If the avatar of Giles, the eponymous "farmer's boy," is read transparently as Bloomfield in his person, Williams cannot fail to be correct in his assessment. But if a poetic character christened with an archetypal farmer's name warns against such a reading, it is for good reason. Bloomfield could never be confused for the archetypal farmer who, it should go without saying, does not write rhymed couplets in a London garret while making shoes. This is why Giles, both a peasant everyman in the refined literary mold of Bunyan and the popular placeholder of every haymaking Tom, Dick, and Harry, is and is not Bloomfield. For a farming poet who had no qualms about his first publication being "an honest imitation of *The Seasons*," the "objects that inspired his song" are both natural and artificial, close to his patrimony and utterly alien to it.²⁰ And it is the investment in and development of this stereotypical persona evoking his real experience in the artificial frame of Thomsonian verse that makes Bloomfield a technical subject. Self-effacement doubles as a self-objectification, performing with skill, confidence, and

¹⁹ The technical subject in this sense follows what Jean Luc-Nancy in *The Muses* refers to as the "ars of existence," the arts, techniques, and technologies life uses to simultaneously ground itself and open itself to existence (38).

²⁰ Williams, 134.

certainly the artefactual quality of lines on the page that, replayed and brought to life in the head, can only deny the existence they prove. Bloomfield is right: "surely not" to Giles alone does this belong. It is, in part, one of the defining attributes of eighteenth-century laboring poetry itself.

The paradox of the containment theory is worth underscoring. Interpretations of this sort that highlight the synthetic or stilted delivery of images of rural practices in laboring poetry without attention to the complex conjunction of poet and poetry through which this is achieved unintentionally give themselves over to a view of laboring writers entirely congruent with the perspective of the public to which they were introduced, commodified, and circulated as curiosities. It sees them as alienated castaways irredeemably isolated from the authentic histories, social groups, geographies, or practices they preserve by means of powers not their own. Literary allusion and periphrastic description are never truly *theirs* but something they only borrow at a dear price. It is clear that in these approaches "the enthusiasms of the intellectual and political class for popular memories and cultures, for ordinary working people..." poorly veil a brusque wish for signs of an historical subject whose singing aligns with a discourse of resistance and contestation set against rather than sidling up to the perpetuation of cultural hegemony.²¹ "Genius," in this sense, becomes a watchword for "opportunist" at best or "class traitor" at worst.

This historical subject might take the form of one whose commitment to native or local culture grants them stock for thwarting social-linguistic intrusions from the upper classes. Or it might take the form of a proto-revolutionary subject who courts historical change through the action of words that commit to the page signs of the real struggle of class conflict. It may even split the difference between these two by concealing itself within a "social criticism" that scholars

²¹ Jacques Rancière, *Staging the People: The Proletarian and His Double* (New York: Verso, 2019), 25.

writing from a cultural materialist perspective excavate in order to discover traces of social contestation that, in William Christmas's words, are "often buried underneath layers of poetic imitation, personification, and characteristic lower-class deference."²² In any case, poets that come closest to speaking the language expected of them, as in the dialect poetry of Clare, or who most conspicuously flirt with putting radical sentiment or "ideological resistance" into verse, like Burns, tend to earn pride of place, even if this simply removes them from the preformatted subjectivity of "organic genius" only to slot them into the subjectivity of an "organic intellectual" capable of unifying and leading the class it represents against hegemony.

Certainly, the work of each poet discussed here contains places where there rises to the surface subtle and explicit aversion to the impositions of the upper classes and keen distaste for public appetite or critical gormandizing. And, in some form or another, with retrospective insight, each poet demonstrates an awareness of what will come to stand for the politics of labor: Duck peels back the pastoral curtain on the harsh realities of work, Yearsley asserts a fundamental dignity in refusing the condescension of patronage, Burns' proud republicanism champions a liberty against ingrained power, and Bloomfield and Clare together, though in different forms, raise critiques against enclosure and the destruction of rural tradition through the intrusion of market forces and primitive acquisition. But each of these explicitly political concerns is merely a segment of larger, more complex, more contradictory oeuvres. Just as Duck steps out of obscurity cloaked in anti-pastoral genius only to become a Latin-learning man of the cloth looking after his flock, interpretations of Clare's most vehement anti-enclosure verse have to reckon with the fact that the poet readily joined enclosure gangs without any apparent misgiving.

²² Christmas, 50.

Looking Inside the Automatic Turk

What ground is there, then, to focus on laboring poets for their identity as laboring poets if not from the perspective of a discourse of combat between the classes? An answer to this question only appears under a different conception of emancipation, one that works "not by becoming conscious" of explicit narratives of class division, but "by way of the capacity to become different."²³ This conception forwards the idea, in the thought of Jacques Rancière, that the perpetuation of an unequal social order depends on preventing the possibility of this difference through the logical, practical, and aesthetic policing of the divisions that separate labor from leisure, false art from true science, or the poetic languages, aesthetic objects, and social experiences of the upper from the lower classes. What constitutes a true political gesture within Rancière's framework is the crossing and reconfiguration of these divisions that occurs when those on one side of them assert through word or action their equal right to the universality of aesthetic experience supposed to be the private privilege of the other. Strictly labor-oriented approaches to laboring poetry miss the politics of this aesthetic gesture in remaining wedded to the supposition that refined poetic language, high aesthetic experience, or the leisure of poetic imagination do not truly belong to these poets or that their writing in it brings some risk of intellectual contamination.

It is in claiming the right to become a polite poet while at work and a rural laborer connected to popular pastimes, scenes, and idioms while composing in the refined language of Pope or Thomson that defines these poets as technical subjects asserting their full participation in what is supposed not belong to them or what steals away the proper place of their belonging. What emerges in the poetry of Duck, Yearsley, Burns, Bloomfield, Clare, and other laboring poets, then,

²³ Ibid., 27.

is not solely or predominately evidence of history in the sense of political conflict or class struggle, but rather history as, in Rancière's view, a

pure product not of the activity of a group but rather a network of individuals who, by various paths, found themselves in a position of spokesman, at the same time central and outside the game: not people who carried the word of the masses but just carried the word; individuals separated from their supposed fellows by what they had grasped, caught up in a circuit of speech that came from elsewhere..."²⁴

The right to find oneself or give oneself over to being caught up in such a way expresses the politics inherent in laying claim to a poetic language that is not one's own. Returning to these poets with this sense of politics is hardly a matter of finding a way to stress the way in which they defend an indigenous local dialect, rural practice, or communal thinking in opposition to the flattening encroachment of capital or industry. Rather, it is to stress that, as in Bloomfield's artificial and inauthentic representation of his own experience, laboring poetry is defined by "certain forms of popular appropriation of the intellectual universe... a certain idea of science, responding to a double requirement: the constitution of a plebian 'care of self' that was at the same time a care for others."²⁵ Working and writing as a technical subject that forms itself through this appropriation, the laboring poet draws lines across social boundaries to find ways of achieving difference from within uniformity, even, and sometimes most especially, through the language of uniformity itself.

Important tendencies in this direction toward revising the image of peasant poets as mouthpieces to aristocratic patrons or bourgeois preferences have only begun to take on a more definite shape in the last two decades. Bridget Keegan's work on laboring class nature poetry, for instance, invests in the argument that "by using language comparable to that of 'polite' authors,

²⁴ Ibid., 28.

²⁵ Ibid., 37.

labouring-class poets are not demonstrating a false consciousness or bad faith towards their humble origins... and mindlessly parroting the abstract distances of the gentleman poets" but foregrounding "symbolic practices that at once alienate us from nature even as they try to connect us with it."²⁶ Aruna Krishnamurthy complicates the notion of the laboring class writer as a split "agent of both conflict and consent," while John Goodridge and Keegan together forward a brief but capacious prolegomenon to future investigations into laboring class poetry in their demand that "the search for "authenticity" should not eclipse such important critical topics as self-presentation, patronage, the relationships between fields of identity such as class, race, region, and gender, the growth of writing communities and new publishing outlets, and (not least), more formalistic question concerning literary and cultural value in the texts examined."²⁷ Others focusing on Clare stress a return to what myths about laboring poets (old or new) hide from view, including communal correspondence, literary inheritance, and conscious poetic application, education, and skill.²⁸

At the same time, the conspicuous visibility of both the laboring poet and their poetry returns in some of this same scholarship, as well across reference works and anthologies devoted to summarizing their work. Goodridge's claim that it is the "physical realities of rural life that Bloomfield and Clare so precisely capture in their poetry" recapitulates the broader suggestion that these poets offer "the incidents of common life" through "poetic realism."²⁹ Jennifer Batt's recent comprehensive study of Duck, though vitally important, likewise keys itself to a rhetoric of clarity

²⁶ Bridget Keegan, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry 1730-1837* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 7.

²⁷ Aruna Krishnamurthy (ed.), *The Working-Class Intellectual in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth- Century Britain* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 16; John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan, *A History of British Working-Class Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 13.

²⁸ John Goodridge, *John Clare and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Simon Kövesi, *John Clare: Nature, Criticism and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

²⁹ Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, 96. Jane Moore and John Strachan, "'Peasant' or Labouring-Class Poets" in *Key Concepts in Romantic Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 231, 233.

in focusing on "what Duck's unprecedented experiences reveal about the tolerances, and intolerances, of the Hanoverian social order."³⁰ Kirstie Blaire, while sensitive to the neglected artful "allusiveness" of laboring poetry following Jonathan Rose's pivotal *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2001), stresses that "poetry was a medium within which they could explore their relationship to broader social, literary and political contexts."³¹ In concert, Brian Maidment focalizes this renewed interest in eighteenth and nineteenth century laboring poetry as a matter of returning to "an unfinished historiographical and pedagogical debate" centered on "the extent to which working men and women were able to find their own literary voice and articulate the particularity of their own experience."³²

Duck, at the beginning of the eighteenth-century peasant poet tradition, like Clare, at its end, come to stand for historicist and cultural materialist figures of illumination through which modern scholars look to those sociohistorical and material conditions of life and language that had been obscured by an ideology of natural genius. This possibility of laboring poets heightening the visibility of their relationship to historically ingrained labor practices, contemporary rural ecologies, active yet elided social organizations, or political dynamics influencing them through their verse subtly forwards the implication that some force constrains them to these synchronic relations. Each is concerned with rooting the poet in the worthy effort of understanding the history that brought them to view and that they viewed, contested, or negotiated with in turn. But rarely do they inquire into how the form so sketched of this distant activity in the past might still exist

³⁰ Jennifer Batt, *Class, Patronage, and Poetry in Hanoverian England: Stephen Duck, The Famous Threshing Poet* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020), 5.

³¹ Kirstie Blaire (ed.), *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics 1750-1900* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 7,13.

³² Brian Maidment "Review of *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poetry 1800-1900*," *Studies in Hogg and His World*, 17 (2007), 181-185.

not only in present theories but in the present form of those conditions. In a word, the only thing these poets have left to tell us lies within the historically limited purview of their experience.

As Goodridge notes, scholarship has largely moved away from framing laboring poets in light of theories associated with grander visions of history in the Marxist sense that look for signs of an “authentic” subject of history.³³ Yet removing them from these transtemporal frameworks to tie them instead to a method devoted to the search for “more ‘literary’ issues of form and voice and their relationship to social experience” unintentionally courts Julie Prandi’s suspect presumption that the rustic autodidact “disappeared as time went on,” that their poetry ends when those forms fall out of favor and extends no further than that experience.³⁴ The engine of class antagonism may still be running in the present under new technologies and social relations, but these poets have little to say about it. Cultural materialist methods that locate in this poetry a way of manipulating cultural scripts or discourses of power to express oppositional attitudes or bring to light oppressive structures in some sense keep the light on for a historical subject but reject the notion that this subject can cross epochs defined by unique productive forces, relations, and means.

At the heart of these conversations concerned with the question of how to read the technics of poetic form and image is an older, more persistent philosophical and theoretical field that needs to be addressed directly. This field contains a network of ancient concerns that return to the conflict formalized by Plato between philosophy and sophistry, living knowledge and dead memory, and the fidelity to the truth of the ideal forms and the fakery of material imitation. The question of how the made-ness of linguistic or artistic making throws into confusion the proper place of the maker

³³ John Goodridge, “Labouring-Class Poetry,” in *Teaching Romanticism*, eds. David Higgins and Sharon Rustin (London: Palgrave, 2010), 14.

³⁴ Maidment, 182; Julie Prandi, *The Poetry of the Self-Taught: An Eighteenth-Century Phenomenon* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 184.

centers on more the more fundamental issue of who decides which making is “true,” good, and authentic, and whose making is “false,” defective, or artificial. These are, notably, the same questions that laboring poets reintroduce at the beginning of the eighteenth century, channeling concerns about literacy, imitation, creation, productivity, subjectivity, and technology as what both what submits these poets to a program of visibility and what allows them to turn that visibility into a means of appearing otherwise. In reintroducing these questions, laboring poets raise not simply the fact of the representation of their experience in poetry, but the question of what makes possible that experience, what experiences past and present it allies with, and the necessary distortion between truth and fiction that its representation brings. To return to these poets with these ancient concerns in mind is not to resuscitate the possibility of a singular historical subject, but to find ways of opening lines of communication between times through a relation to the media technologies that makes this transit possible for both the poet and the critic.

Functioning Automatic, Dancing Mechanic

In light of these dynamics, an alternative solution to the question of how to read laboring poets takes the form of revealing how laboring verse becomes an art of living or technique of the self that renders the complex historical, social, and aesthetic conjunctions of the laboring poet’s own technical subjectivity through the very means designed to reduce it to a simple visibility. On one hand, discourses of genius, expectations of biography, and the textual structures controlled by patrons and publishers constitute the laboring poet and their entry into publication. As an assortment of literary and social technologies responsible for making the poet, these discourses and textual practices materialized in prefaces and published correspondence appear to constrain the freedom of individual selection involved in composing poetry. In this, they take on the dual character Ciano Aydin attributes to all technologies. On one hand, these technologies pose “an

obstacle that prevents [the self] from reaching the singularity” that makes it possible to differentiate oneself from another.³⁵ Yet, on the other, the same apparatuses that obstruct the construction of the self also constitute “the necessary condition for forming a stable self.”³⁶ Returning to these technical conditions as a means of self-formation in their poetry, laboring poets thus discover in them material that can enable the invention of “a self that can relate to itself” through what makes it different to itself, in time, place, and person.³⁷ What forms their early poetry is, in this sense, neither subordination nor opposition to the power of a language that is above them. Instead, these poets show themselves through their poetry on labor and genius remaking the materials out of which the laboring poet is made as a textual and embodied incarnation of genius.

Thus, even if densely integrated into textual apparatuses or caught within a visual program that demands the poet display themselves to their readers, it is imperative to locate the presence of a choice, a dis-automatization, from within the poetry that appears in many aspects and areas to be chosen for them by necessity. The form taken by this specific choice, however, has the effect of playfully obscuring its own evidence. In choosing to skillfully reperform the supposition of their non-skill, thematizing genius, biography, and labour in their poetry through explicit techniques of irony, ambiguity, and polysemy, laboring poets make the choice to inhabit and redeploy the way the discourses of genius and practices of visibility automate their poetry. In bringing together a

³⁵ Ciano Aydin, *Extimate Technology: Self-Formation in a Technological World* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 25.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 100. While Aydin rightly notes that Foucault opens the question of technologies of the self around a “matrix” of practico-rational techniques that tends to overlook the materialization of these techniques inside technologies, I believe his rejection of Foucauldian self-techniques for being too individualistic is slightly premature. Where Foucault writes that “the care of the self is always prior to care for others,” we should understand this to mean that, in the context of the mediation of technical media, an experience by or with oneself always implies a manner of practice of being in touch with others, directly or indirectly. The care of the self is prior to care for others not because the self is more important than them, but because the self must learn to differentiate itself from itself first, in order to not only come to a proper way of caring for others, but to understand the otherness that inhabits every experience of the self. Without this, the other loses a major condition of their otherness.

poetry cobbled out of their life and experiences, laboring poets “organize a multitude *by virtue of* an esthetic ideal” and carve out a central place for the very notion of the absolute organic machine of genius that precedes them, interferes with them, and orients the process of their particular self-formation.³⁸ Thus the poems that are most squarely biographical, that play up the myth of genius, that picture an idealized rural life, that cater to the concerns and whims of patrons or publishers, or that deploy inauthentic diction or aesthetic forms belonging to a social sphere outside the laboring poet’s reach - each of these exhibits an opportunity for a track-switching or dis-automatization that occurs precisely in the choice to re-automate and re-direct the automatic process of poetic creation that forms the preconditions of the laboring poet.

It is essential to note that a reflective writing about the circumstances of life in the context of genius and patronage does not inherently follow the lines of a struggle against cultural hegemony or predominating social pressure. Certainly, these poets find ways to encode particular poems toward the end of rebuffing the control of patrons, editors, and critics. But the rewiring and reorientation that occurs through the inclusion of these conditions within their poetry is not set so much on what it is possible express within the limited field of their social or historical position. What they rewire is their own being as technical subjects located within this position, finding ways to redeploy with a difference the social and textual conditions that made them, not to oppose these conditions outright but to claim their equality with what is supposed to be different from them and thus assert the possibility of transforming these conditions. This process takes the form of a variety of techniques that transform the form of their technical conditions: Duck’s blending the division between work and play through historical allusion, Yearsley’s reconfiguration of the direction of

³⁸ Ibid., 99.

poetic address through manipulations of figure and metaphor, Burns' artificial injection of natural meaning into vowels, Bloomfield's heightening the circumscription of rural genres to invite unanticipated forms across time, or Clare's embodiment of poetic image to attain a universal vision.

Accentuating the automaticity of their apparatus character becomes a way not to escape it, but to take control of it. When Burns is reported to have said that the social costume of an unlearned rustic was a proprietary piece of his poetic "machinery," he was, in this sense, not talking only about the mechanism of the sylphs, gnomes, and salamanders of Pope.³⁹ He was talking about the common lot of all laboring poets who use their unlearned persona as a means to create poetry. And it is this repetition of their stereotyping that makes the poetic machinery of the laboring poet analogous to the function of technical apparatuses. When nature becomes art in the form of the rural laborer writing verses that come naturally, the stereotyping of rural autodidacts under genius grants an aesthetic license to the poet identical to the profile of the technical "writing" operations of photography, cinematography, spectrography, videography, or holography. Just as these devices intervene in, record, and capture natural phenomena using technical means, the laboring poet uses its apparatus character to compact natural reality and poetic representation. When the laboring poet writes of themselves as a rural genius, the effect is tantamount to the three dimensionality of holograms, or the traces of real-world referents presented in photography. Indeed, the "poetic realism" that captures the harshness of labor in Duck or the microscopic detail of nature in Clare implies the abiding presence of this technical function shared between poet and poetry.

³⁹ Robert Anderson to James Currie, 28 September 1799, in *The Letters of James Currie*, <<http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/jamescurrie/details.php?id=30>>

Soul Drama and Robots in Disguise

If the eighteenth-century laboring poet embodies a way to manage and reinvent what conditions their poetry through that poetry itself, where laboring poets differ from the romantic artist succeeding and developing for a time alongside them is a greater sense of this technical subjectivity. The flights of poetic fancy or imaginative journeys the romantic poet takes always bring them back to themselves in their historical or social specificity as a poet who takes such imaginative journeys.⁴⁰ But, for the laboring poet, this specificity returns to them to the visibility and presence of the life captured and transfixed in textual apparatuses, the generic commonplaces, or the forms and structures of poetic making to which their social condition limits them.

This return is not so much a failure to imagine like the romantic does as much as it is the rerouting or transformation of the cycle that the romantic forever launches anew. Rather than returning to a negative, empty, isolated, or alienated self like the romantic, the laboring poet can only return to fullness and flatness of the social-technical conditions that make them: the prefaces, portraits, and critical discourses that brought them into publication and the public eye in the first place. Duck is forever the *Thresher Poet*. But in doing so, they bring the difference attained through the poetic affirmation of these condition back to the technical conditions themselves in a move that transforms the limitations and proscriptions of these social and technical apparatuses. Including their conditions within conscious poetic production, laboring poets automate what before had automated them by embodying these discourses and profiles through poetic craft.

⁴⁰ The “condition of alienation to form one pole of a dialectic against which various strategies of myth and imagination can act as counterpoise” in Wordsworth’s reflective reverie in “Tintern Abbey” and Keats’ sonic journey in “Ode to a Nightingale” provides perhaps the paradigmatic example of such flights. Alienated and unmoored from politics or society, the poet conjures images out of this state to manage it. See Douglas B. Wilson, *The Romantic Dream: Wordsworth and the Poetics of the Unconscious* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 61.

The "knowledge [that] came suddenly to the fingertips" of farmers, threshers, and dairy workers through the proliferation and accessibility of literary media during the eighteenth-century formed the backdrop to both laboring verse and romantic poetry.⁴¹ Yet, where Walter Ong suggests that the "noetic abundance" or the surplus of literary-technical knowledge accumulated across manuals, poetic anthologies, and contemporary encyclopedic projects like John Harris's *Lexicon Technicum* (1704) and William Chamber's *Cyclopædia* (1728) engendered for the romantics a "feeling of control over nature... which allies it strangely with the technological spirit," laboring poets evince a different relation to this abundance.⁴² On one hand, the greater availability of dictionaries, journals, newspapers, and encyclopedias helped shape the very conditions of the laborer's self-transformation into a poet. On the other hand, nature for them was primarily a technology in which they found themselves ingrained as laborers *and* poets – not one which they could control. Indeed, typecasting as a laboring poet of genius meant materializing the literary social image that imagined laborers as Virgilian poet-shepherds and idealized swains. If the "literate" romantic unleashed imagination based on the knowledge that all knowledge had been preserved in books, the laboring poet used books to step out of the country only to end up back inside those books that were both sources of knowledge and a means of visibly capturing them.⁴³

Rather than preserving a negative core that bookends imaginative journeys, laboring poetry stages a drama of the book as the technical storage medium that simultaneously made possible their literacy, launched their lives as poets, and contained them within a stereotype that explanatory textual apparatuses helped entrench. This drama helps elicit a greater sense that the alienation of

⁴¹ Walter Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 277.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 279-280.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 21.

the poet is not something that technology framed as a one-dimensional means of domination can alleviate. Rather, the drama originates in the fact that technology is an essential and tragic condition of life itself. It both stabilizes and destabilizes life. Indeed, it is the performance of this tragic condition (and not exclusively their class status) that puts eighteenth century laboring poets into history without constraining them to a certain epoch or relation of production.

The phenomenon of peasant poetry and the purpose of the textual apparatuses used frame it only gain greater legibility if read within the context of the profusion of technical products and scientific processes of the rationality of production that developed throughout the eighteenth century, from industrial machinery to aesthetic spectacles, sideshows, and diversions. By including themselves within their poetry, effectively speaking through and back upon the apparatuses that positioned them as an apparatus speaking for and as nature, their poetry maneuvers through contemporary technoscientific discourses and media technological forms, showing that the spirit coursing through and embodied in the technological impulse described by Ong was not exclusively a means of control over nature. It was also a way for individuals closely associated with nature to gain access to a self-formation and thus a self-knowledge through the accumulation of literate knowledge that always grappled with the reduction of this knowledge to ignorance. And in this sense, the disembodied spirit of genius they served to incarnate was also always a technological spirit that helped them not to command nature but reprogram their social reduction to the natural.⁴⁴

When Samuel Taylor Coleridge gestured toward the mechanization of verse through the imagination of a polity of deaf (or untutored) versifiers turning the cylinder of poetry like a barrel

⁴⁴ Perceptible here are early pre-romantic materials of a post-romantic modernity threading the self-referential “I” of the romantic author to manifest a kind of “thing being” familiar where “the subject casts its freedom away to play the role of a thing among things, an in-itself, a natural fact.” See Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change your Life: On Anthropotechnics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 44.

organ, when William Hazlitt railed against the machine of the world turning poesy to pictures, or when Horace Walpole reproached Duck for inspiring a wave of laborers to abandon their work for poetry, they were describing the same “noetic abundance” that propelled the social and technical linguistic process that the laboring poet claimed as its symbolic inheritance.⁴⁵ For the romantics, to see a machine in the place of a poet was to see how the increasing presence and accessibility of literary media tended toward to a technical recreation of poetry itself. The romantic reaction toward the end of the century that highlighted synthetic imagery, overwrought figures of speech, or excessive diction in poetry was not exclusively an evaluative insult against trite poetic exercise. It pointed, perceptively and accurately, to the profusion and diffusion of literary media that both made the literacy of the laboring poet possible and constrained them to a poetic program that formed the basis of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s project in the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) to re-vitalize a language that had become too easy to learn and mimic.⁴⁶

In light of this romantic course correction, then, a peasant poet was a mechanical poet in a singular sense: a lowly artificer from the placid country who was also a master of *mechané* in its original meaning of “cunning:” one who cannily reroutes and condenses natural forces into an ensemble that uses simple, static, and fixed means to achieve novel connections, unanticipated effects, and ends that cannot be reduced to these means.⁴⁷ And in this sense, laboring poets were never simply subordinated to the role of specimens for proving theories of genius or poetic

⁴⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, eds. John Beer and W. Jackson Bate, Vol 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 38.; William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1818), 188.; Horace Walpole, *Yale Edition of the Correspondence of Horace Walpole*, Vol 31 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937-1983), 219.

⁴⁶ Scott McEathron, “Wordsworth, Lyrical Ballads, and the Problem of Peasant Poetry,” *Nineteenth Century Literature* 54 (1999), 5.

⁴⁷ This original sense of *mechané* is what Sloterdijk (2013) proposes as the principle of the mechanics practiced by acrobats, gymnasts, and athletes who, through a static and uniform physical regime of training and conditioning, form themselves as subjects who “uses the probable as a medium for increasing improbability” (199).

opportunists converting upper class stereotypes into profit. If Addison theorized the separability of rote copying and imitation from innate power and spontaneous creation at the beginning of the century, the laboring poets that emerged as organic machines throughout its remainder composing instances of this division also immediately signified the technical adhesive making invention and imitation inseparable. The living or creative knowledge of genius insistently pointed back to the technical systems of dead knowledge recorded in books that made this living knowledge possible.

The romantics obviously enlisted this living-dead figurality, from Coleridge's and De Quincey's thematizing pharmacologically induced states of consciousness, Wordsworth's poetic investigations into the impossibility of unfeeling amongst the supposedly insensate rural poor, to Keats's return to antiquated figures. But this attraction to the reanimation of the lifeless or forlorn remained committed to an idea of "nature as the ultimate source and analogue for human creativity."⁴⁸ The romantic aim to achieve the natural by means of the language that must always signify a separation from nature sets up a process that tends to idolize its own failure as the source of its own creativity. In Ong's phrasing, "the romantic age felt it knew enough to savor its own unknowing."⁴⁹ If, as Paul Cantor asserts, "the Romantics object to technology not because it is unnatural but because it is unimaginative," laboring poets shine a closer light on the technical base that sets in motion this quest after the absolute based on the struggle to recreate (or, in Ong's view, control) nature. In writing a poetry that is idolized as the non-knowledge of genius, but which gives the clearest evidence of the ubiquity and accessibility of knowledge across class and region,

⁴⁸ Christopher Norris, "Deconstructing Genius: Paul de Man and the Critique of Romantic Ideology," in *Genius: The History of an Idea*, ed. Penelope Murray (New York: Blackwell, 1989), 161.

⁴⁹ Ong, 278.

they probe into the question of what there remains for poetry to do when the poet is fully caught and identified within a technical system that romantic poets use to “savor” their non-knowledge.

Laboring poets thus bring to view the possibility of an imaginative technology, less a “technological impulse” to enliven a soulless universe than a technical life to live within it based on their own technical condition, to find a creativity from within stereotypes and doxa that can lead not to their overcoming through finding more a “natural” language but their transformation.⁵⁰ By standing as veiled proof that poetic achievement depends on the education gleaned from reiterations of the basic codes of literacy, and that, before all else, silent books make a speaking poet, the laboring poet emerges as a living-dead figure that prominently stages the "constant back and forth between the poles of the android id and the human ego [that] gave rise to the soul drama of the mid-Modern Age."⁵¹ The discursive staging of genius, imagination, and sentiment "which was simultaneously a technical drama" acted out throughout the century by a tradition of rural autodidactic poets shows, by so forcefully pretending to hide, evidence that the child is only the father of man because technics tips over the family tree and sets the child's soul in motion, giving them a poetic tongue that appears to derive from itself.⁵²

A Message from Another Time

In this way, the frenzy accompanying Stephen Duck early in the century, repackaged and marketed throughout its remainder for subsequent peasant poets, is much more than the early rumblings of the expressivist model highlighting "the poet's natural genius, creative imagination, and emotional

⁵⁰ Paul A. Cantor, “Romanticism and Technology: Satanic Verses and Satanic Mills,” in *Technology in the Western Political Tradition* eds. Arthur M. Melzor, Jerry Weinberger, M. Richard Zinman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 119, 113-114.

⁵¹ Sloterdijk, 359.

⁵² Ibid.

spontaneity, at the expense of the opposing attributes of judgement, learning, and artful restraints."⁵³ What these poets mark through their verse, consciously and unconsciously, is a slow interruption and transformation of the formal logic underlying literary media that becomes a means to sustain and produce poetry itself. The unique compaction of medium, content, and rural body associated with laboring poetry requires understanding the books packaging this compaction as a departure from the mode of literary technology based on what Marshall McLuhan, drawing on the work of Harold Innis, calls "visual space." From this angle, the novelty, sensationalism, and spectacle of the laboring poet emerge less from antiquarian impulses per se than from the appeal contained in these impulse to apply the old media technique of orality to the new medium of print.

Applying a process of mimetic mimicry to the separation of perceptible writing from conceptual content that was inherent to the phonetic alphabet, McLuhan argues, the Ancient Greeks achieved through this mimesis of the break between visibility and thinkability a complementary form of perception: the ability to detach oneself from one's thoughts. By mimicking this separation of abstract concepts from the visible page, writing built the "formal structure of visual space," which "involves the suppression... of all ground as a guarantee of static abstract uniformity."⁵⁴ Prior to this invention of visual space, mimesis had been a technique "cultivated by oral poets and rhetors" for "merging knower and known" thereby achieving a simultaneous, plural, and multisensory "mode of being" wherein "detachment of figure from ground is discarded."⁵⁵ For McLuhan, the inheritance and consignment of visual space continued relatively uninterrupted until the invention of electric media. Television, radio, and film fostered

⁵³ Abrams, 21.

⁵⁴ Marshal McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 15.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

the return of the older acoustic or tactile space associated with (but not inherent to) orality and rhetoricity whose "spherical, discontinuous, non-homogeneous, resonant, and dynamic" effects contrasted visual space's linearity, homogeneity, and detachment.⁵⁶ In essence, these electronic media brought the return of the oral contiguity that conditions and yet is repressed by abstract, linear thought derived from the mimicry of the separation of visible sign from conceptual meaning.

McLuhan's bellwether for this phenomenon is the same that preoccupied Abrams: the modern artist, "the person who invents the means to bridge between biological inheritance and the environments created by technological innovation."⁵⁷ The media theorist's examples of this inventor stretch across time and space, from the romantics to James Joyce, but the laboring poet presents a distinct and noteworthy case of merging "knower and known." In standing as an embodiment of the discourse of genius through their status as lowly rustics, laboring poets become defined by the identity of the poet with their poetry: their writing is a translation of the experience that itself comes from genius and that is regulated through the textual intercession of patrons and publishers. Indeed, insofar as genius figures the operation of an organic machine constituting the literary equivalent of industrial machines like the Newcomen engine (in working by the strength of its own parts while still being constructed), it delivers in advance the characteristics of the "resonant" and "dynamic" aspects of future "oral" technologies such as television. In this, genius and the laboring poet made to represent it translate the other side of the "service environment" or media technical ground emerging within the rise of proto-industrial machinery beginning in the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 98.

early eighteenth century, flourishing only when the vogue for oral poetry reached its peak at the end of the century with cultural interest in vernacular poetic forms like the ballad.⁵⁸

These searches for authentic language were also and always searches for *immediacy* or *liveness* that laboring poets closer to nature could provide. Indeed, following McLuhan, these movements raise to the surface the activity of a media ecology organizing an era of rapid communication, perceptive social commentary, industrial automation, and methods for the preservation of creative energy that continue into the present. Desire for immediacy or interconnect visual commerce occurred across the rise of eye-opening periodicals like *The Review*, *The Spectator*, and *The Examiner*; self-driving inventions such as Newcomen's atmospheric engine or John Kay's flying shuttle; and mechanisms for the preservation of kinetic energy like the pendulum escapements of Robert Hooke and John Harrison. Henry Mill's 1714 patent for a proto-typewriter or "an artificial machine for impressing or transcribing letters, one after another, as in writing" presents a succinct image of the technical ground against which the new invention of the figure of the uncultivated rhyming rustic appears. Displacing traditional education through the retrieval of ancient discourses of writing (divine inspiration) and ancient writers (Theocritus), the laboring poet as a technical subject simultaneously enhances and translates the new media environment of automatic machines designed to capture gestures, images, and lifeform, beginning with the automatons of proto-industrialization and continuing with proto-cinematic technologies like the

⁵⁸ In this sense, like the lyric turn at the end of the century, laboring poetry at its onset did not "pose or hide any distancing between the poet-subject and the subject of the poem." Instead, it made its claim upon a "method of utterance" that is an extension of the poet-subject outside of itself but, at the same time, in line with itself, a poetry "aware of itself as the act of accompanying itself" that is based on the ability of the "I" to co-exist with its saying (whether or not the poem is in the first-person) ... a way for the poet to constitute himself and to be his likeness..." This "immediate visibility of meaning in the sensory" depends, first, on the natural body of the laboring poet that blends into the artificial representation of poetry, the always-present ego of a rustic "I" already existing within the poetic topography it will paint by virtue of its social and material history. See Jacques Ranci re,

panorama. Indeed, following Ong's concept of the romantic pursuit of mystery and unknowing emerging against the background of rational technological development, without the system of proto-industrialization and the joint project to capture, record, and regularize knowledge through print, it is doubtful whether the laboring poet of genius would ever have existed at all.

The search for a *liveness* in the last decades of the eighteenth century has traditionally been understood under the influence of "poetic realism" or presenting images of historically ingrained rural practices, accurate dialect, and the "real" language of men speaking to men. Yet a resonant laboring poetry set up to capture natural images naturally through the intercession and reflexive presence of its rural author appearing fully formed out of nature does not simply or exclusively communicate images from the past. And this is for the singular reason that all technical imaging media also and necessarily communicate images for and of the future. The resonant space of laboring poetry in which poet and poem merge invites the same metaleptical inversion of temporal order identified in future media technologies of replay and transmission. In McLuhan's words, in such instances "the effects as ground have preceded the cause as figure."⁵⁹ Writing oneself into one's poetry means surfacing the dynamic and connective media environments of ancient rhetoric that would reappear with mechanical and electrical audiovisual technologies. In this way, the automatic organic machine of genius comes to anticipate the effects of immediacy or liveness associated with future media technologies of sound and image transmission, from radio to television. These machines function like geniuses, rapidly emitting images of a living experience. And in that sense, they are, as technical apparatuses, no more and no less than peasant poets.

⁵⁹ Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Media and Formal Cause* (Houston: NeoPoiesis Press, 2011), 43.

Gilbert Simondon's concept of the image-object helps reveal the larger contours of this process in its definition of the media object as a "quasi-organism" that connects past to future in the form of technically organized matter such as "artworks, clothing, [or] machines."⁶⁰ This transtemporal status results from the fact that media objects are concretizations of images or concepts that enter into and emerge out of structures, making these instances of formed material "intermediaries between past and future" and "between concrete and abstract."⁶¹ Existing between these two levels, the "third reality" of the media objects, like the apparatus of the laboring poet, "is neither fully perceptible nor entirely conceptualizable..."⁶² The analysis of technical apparatuses requires a method suited, in McLuhan's terms, toward understanding the ways in which history becomes "'mythic' through time-compression and juxtaposition of events as past, present, and future..."⁶³ If media apparatuses are fundamentally open and evolving processes that are never complete, they cannot be understood through hindsight alone. Looking back at the poems of laboring poets as concrete media objects to see in them "symbolic attempts to solve anticipated problems" must be complemented with a process of foresight, an attempt to recreate or reinvent the problems to be solved in them from vantage of the later or current forms of those problems.⁶⁴

Technical Subjectivity and General Organology

The method I propose to meet this demand emerges Bernard Stiegler's definition of the human as both constituted and unraveled in its life lived with and through supplements. For Stiegler, these apparatuses make "a technological time (the time of the *what*) constitutive of the temporality of

⁶⁰ Gilbert Simondon, *Imagination and Invention* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023), 9.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15, 18.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶³ McLuhan, *Media and Formal Cause*, 29.

⁶⁴ Simondon, 16.

the *who*.”⁶⁵ The experience of media technologies designed to capture or replicate the time of experience overlaps in a fundamental way with the time of life lived apart from these technologies. This is essentially because, as “concretized time,” what defines media technologies of this sort is the discretization, organization, and materialization of memory, both the memory of physical gestures and the memory of cultural, temporal, and affective experience. Given this form, media technologies constitute a “*technology of the spirit*,” objects that “can lead to a proletarianization of the life of the mind” just as they can “its critical intensification.”⁶⁶ It is the exteriorization of life, memory, and meaning into media technologies that makes them subject to automatization. But this automatization always brings the threat of secreting away and destroying the practices, experiences, and memories that were invested in the creation of technical objects in the first place.

What Stiegler calls the “non in-human” form of life that lives, imagines, and projects itself into the future through a temporality and imagination created through technical objects immediately recalls the technical subjectivity of laboring poets. And it is from the resemblance of this framing that the formulation of genius in the eighteenth century should be understood as the creation in the literary sphere of a “mnemotechnics” that “*suddenly surpasses the sphere of language*, that is, also, the sphere of logos.”⁶⁷ Under the dictates of the discourse of genius, knowledge is no longer a matter of study, imitation, or learning through the media technology of the book: modern poets become an automatic apparatus channeling a simple efficiency of creation

⁶⁵ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 210. Notably, this imbrication confers less an originary difference than a staggered suspension of evolution whose consequence for the human is a developmental reliance on the co-evolution between the organic and inorganic. As Stiegler writes elsewhere, the difference of the human is that it can use technical organs to individuate at the level of the individual. While animals, which generally tend to individuate at the level of the species through genetic and epigenetic evolution, can in principle achieve the same, their individuations at the level of the individual organism only rarely or slowly extend to subsequent generations as an inheritance that sets off new circuits of individuation.

⁶⁶ Bernard Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 21.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

that, like physics, works naturally and, like a machine, is no more than an organization of natural material based on a knowledge of physical tendency. Eighteenth century laboring poetry, in this sense, does not anticipate labor politics or class consciousness. But it *does* instantiate a process of proletarianization that remains active today “insofar as it is true that the proletariat are those economic actors who are without knowledge because they are without memory... they must simply serve the reproductive machine and thus, once again, they become serfs.”⁶⁸

From this threat of proletarianization and the unavoidable condition of pursuing life by means other than the living follows Stiegler’s “theoretical platform” or method of general organology, the analysis of the coincidence and communication between psychic, technical, and social organs, where “the latter are themselves over-determined by those same artificial organs and their arrangement with human psychosomatic organs.”⁶⁹ General organology begins from “the fetish, the transitional object and the artefact as condition of all consistence [ideality] beyond subsistence [bare life] and existence [phenomenal life]” to not simply describe the negative consequences of how technologies threaten to determine the free activity of thought, desire, and social organization but “to prescribe other social arrangements that constitute therapies and therapeutics, that is, systems of care... of *knowledge*.”⁷⁰ It is from the perspective of a general organology that laboring poetry not only becomes more legible, but its transhistorical force and importance regain a ground and momentum that had been lost once the laboring poet had become barred from its status as anticipating working class movements or presenting a historical subject. What deserves closer attention in this poetry is how it both forms and thematizes just this

⁶⁸ Ibid., 35.

⁶⁹ Bernard Stiegler, *The Nanjing Lectures 2016-2019* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2020), 11.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 56, 174.

therapeutics in the face of its own proletarianization, finding a way to regain and escape a time of the machine to which it was subordinated *through* taking on the time of that machine.

For Stiegler, however, the modern history of proletarianization truly only begins when recording devices such as the phonograph and film camera achieve the possibility of capturing, storing, and replaying an entire flux of conscious time. Hence, these objects differ fundamentally from previous literary and image-based technologies in constituting “temporal objects” whose purpose is the representation of phenomenological time itself. I would like to suggest, however, that eighteenth century laboring poetry, through the influence of the discourse of genius, instantiates the effect of these technologies prior to their cause in the technologies themselves. Indeed, as discussed above with reference to McLuhan, eighteenth century laboring poetry bases the specificity of its operation on a mode of access comparable to the operation of electro-mechanical temporal objects like television precisely in that the coincidence of the consciousness they record is supposed to be contemporaneous with the consciousness that accesses them.⁷¹ Yet, at the same time, through this very complex of instant availability of the poet behind the poetry, laboring poetry also offers immanent evidence of the poet rerouting this reduction of poetry and poet. This is so because temporal objects also and necessarily present to “consciousness the possibility of being separated from ordinary vital flux, from the pure time of action and reaction...”⁷² It is precisely this process of mediation where autonomous organic machines appear to work *by themselves*, apart from the consciousness that engages them, that the peasant poet records in their poetry, making it not only a temporal object analogous to radio, film, and television, but a temporal object, as Stiegler argues, that is entirely constitutive of the technical subject.

⁷¹ Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 2, 225-229.

⁷² Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 2, 222.

The social fetishization of the laboring poet and the textual fetishes grounding the poet in particular genres, language, and subjectivity simultaneously locate them in a history that exceeds the image of them “merely following tendencies which had been initiated by forerunners of the Romantics.”⁷³ Indeed, it remains our history insofar as technological process such as artificial intelligence represent in a more complex and technically integrated form the same formal conditions as genius. In this, the reduction of these poets to inorganic organic apparatuses plots a series of points from which to appraise the singularities of the lives and works of the poets discussed in each chapter as well as the contemporary and future media technologies and philosophies with which those works and lives form unique contact points. Through this design, the following chapters themselves may be read as individual investigations based on a method of general organology into the question of how laboring poets through their condition as technical subjects personally encounter and poetically reprogram the discourse of genius, generic archetypes, rhetorical commonplaces, and social-aesthetic expectations to solve future problems associated with the different media technologies they simultaneously precede and whose effective forms they channel in advance.

⁷³ H. Gustav Klauss. *The Literature of Labour: 200 Years of Working-Class Writing* (Edward Everett Root Publishers, 2018), 20.

Chapter 1

The Politics of Automata: Autonomy and Heteronomy in Stephen Duck and *The Thresher's Labour*

In the early 1730s, a small spectacle at the Crown Coffee House on King's Street near Guild Hall captured the attention of curiosity-seekers and caffeine-addicted patrons alike. A mechanical raree-show promised to deliver a downsized version of a much grander private attraction recently completed only miles away in Richmond. An undated broadside advertised the show under the title "Merlin in Miniature" and described it as a "Lively Representation of Merlin in his Cave, as in the Royal Gardens at Richmond, Being a New and Entertaining Piece of Moving Machinery, such as never before appeared in Publick."⁷⁴ At a reasonable cost, visitors to the coffee house looked inside the peephole of the raree-box and were transported into a miniature scene depicting a diorama contained within Queen Caroline's new folly at Richmond, popularly known as Merlin's Cave. The raree-show and its design have been lost to time, but its full-scale referent is well-documented.⁷⁵ Built as part of William Kent's controversial redesign of Kew Gardens to fit a more Hanoverian style commissioned by Caroline, Merlin's Cave featured busts of modern scientific luminaries, including Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, and John Locke. It also hosted life-size wax

⁷⁴ Anon, *A Lively Representation of Merlin in his Cave, as in the Royal Gardens at Richmond, Being a New and Entertaining Piece of Moving Machinery, such as never before appeared in Publick*, n.d. (c. 1730). See Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978)75.

⁷⁵ For more on Merlin's Cave, see Judith Colton, "Merlin's Cave and Queen Caroline: Garden Art as Political Propaganda." *Eighteenth Century Studies* 10.1 (1976), 1-20; John Cloake, *Palaces and Parks of Richmond and Kew* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1995); Bridget Keegan, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730-1837* (London: Palgrave, 2008), and Stephen Knight, *Merlin: Knowledge and Power through the Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

figures, the centerpiece of which was the wizard Merlin frozen at study amidst ancient tomes and assorted scientific instruments.

It was this arrangement of technological devices, wax mannequins, and monuments to learning that the Crown Coffee House raree-show sought to animate in peepshow form. The stress on technological novelty evident in the broadside, however, was not simply an instance of poignant marketing: the inclusion of "moving machinery" can be interpreted as an effort to translate the unique cultural cache of Caroline's static life-like figures at Richmond. Though the thatched-roof and faux-gothic architecture of Merlin's Cave was equal parts eccentric and quaint, Queen Caroline's folly amassed popular interest "as a symbol of modern knowledge."⁷⁶ The diorama it housed, though relatively low-tech even by early eighteenth-century standards, contributed, along with its impressive library, to the Queen's intention of demonstrating that "natural religion and the new science could be reconciled."⁷⁷ A wax Britannia standing beside a wax Queen Elizabeth in full-scale laid the claim that not only were the Hanoverians proud patrons of modern science, but direct inheritors of and contributors to the mythical architecture of England.

Gravitating around the edge of these spectacles was a figure comparatively out-of-place: the Wiltshire farm laborer Stephen Duck. Winning favor with the court after Richard Spence solicited some of his poems to the attention of the court in 1730, Duck was granted the Queen's patronage and a stipend for his occupation as caretaker of the library at Merlin's Cave. Duck's contemporary poetic reputation as a humble thresher inspired by natural genius and his current

⁷⁶ Knight, 126.

⁷⁷ Colton, 1.

appraisal as a poet of “rural labor” combine to make this appointment somewhat puzzling.⁷⁸ Regardless of his poetic merit or agrarian origins, it remains uncertain why it should have been Duck, rather than any other poet, laborer, or laboring poet, who presided over these emblems of advances in learning. Why did the “threshing poet” supervise a building symbolizing both the weight of England's national achievements in science, philosophy, and technology and the mythic past of the island nation’s cultural heritage? Our current understanding of Duck's life and poetry sits somewhat awkwardly, to say the least, with the cultural import of both the folly at Richmond and the Hanoverian tendency toward uniting science and theology.

I would like to propose that there is a very good reason why Duck was granted this appointment, a reason that goes far beyond convenient access to the royal library or playing the pawn in pre-existing poetic feuds.⁷⁹ This reason consists firstly in what the drive to see makes available for vision, whether through embodiments of knowledge in Merlin's Cave or their artefactualized remediations in the Crown Coffee House peep show. Much like Caroline's folly, in the 1730s there was a frenetic, if short-lived, desire to gain access to Duck. This chapter identifies the desire to see and, where this seeing failed, recreate Duck for its formal symmetry with new theoretical debates in the early eighteenth century centered around the notion of the “man-machine,” a hypothetical conception of the machine-like nature of living organisms.⁸⁰ Driving this

⁷⁸ This framing of Duck’s work gained prominence after John Goodridge’s (1995) *Rural Life in Eighteenth Century Poetry*, a comprehensive study how of Duck, Thomson, and Collier produce through their poetry faithful depictions of contemporary agricultural techniques, practices, implements, and traditions.

⁷⁹ Batt (2020) suggests that the appointment was part of an effort to ensure Duck had access to the proper poetic materials to further his career as a court poet. Betty Rizzo (1990) postulates that Duck’s station as a natural genius functioned primarily as a foil in the Queen’s ongoing feud with Alexander Pope, who had earlier mocked the pseudo-natural pretension of Merlin’s Cave. Although there is certainly something “pseudo-natural” or folly-like about Duck, and thus a certain correspondence to the Cave that makes good sense, I believe the context and implications of this appointment, indeed that “pseudo-naturalness” itself, can be traced much further into discourses that intersect and frame Hanoverian culture and the roots of early technological modernity.

⁸⁰ Much recent work in eighteenth century studies has focused on the figure of the machine-man, although no study to-date has examined the affinity of this concept with the lower orders of manufacturers, artisans, and laborers, those

question of a machinic-man was a doubled interest in ontogenesis, the question of the origins of life; and the anatomo-physical structures of living organisms that produced mental images, emotions, and thoughts. At the same time Duck's entrance into poetry impinges on an emerging tension between imagination and invention, reframed as the opposition between true creation and slavish repetition, it also coincides with this attempt of natural philosophy to coordinate a stable definition of genesis and agency from out of the mechanistic implications of clockwork universe.

By framing the contemporary discourse surrounding natural genius as owning a debt to the predominate understandings of mechanistic nature found in Hobbes, Leibniz, and Boyle, I show how Duck's early representations in print reveal a tendency to play out these questions of genesis and agency. These elements enter Duck's poetry in terms of a tension between autonomy and heteronomy, a tension which also subsist between the concerns of contemporary literary culture and natural philosophy to entertain questions of genesis and agency. It is the threat and the potential of the *autos*, particularly as it interacts with and shuttles between individual and universal law and action, that sits at the heart of both Duck's early poetry, reception, and legacy as the first in a line of peasant poets-to-come. Based on this conceptual framing, Duck's installation at Merlin's Cave as a kind of inorganic organism becomes not only more legible, but pivotal to understanding how his life, work, and poetry were read together. While the Crown Coffee House raree show disappeared from historical record after 1760, the life and poetry of its man-machine supervisor remains.

closely allied in both language and imagination with "machinic men." For recent contributions on the topic of the man-machines and automata in the period, see Muri (2007), Park (2010), and Drury (2017).

Mechanical Impulse and Promethean Genius

Before the arrival of "poetic naturals" from out of the lower orders, the imagination of laboring bodies, both animal and human, in the development of a mechanistic universe constituted an important component of the work of Enlightenment thinkers concerned to align the new science with the traditional concerns of philosophy. Writing at the end of the seventeenth century to reject the prominence of Cartesian dualism, Thomas Hobbes yoked together two images depicting the common and the constructed in order to lay the groundwork for his representationalist theory of sovereign authority. The opening paragraph of *Leviathan* makes this conjunction between man and machine its explicit theme:

For seeing life is but a motion of limbs, the beginning whereof is in some principal part within; why may we not say, that all 'automata' (engines that move themselves by springs and wheels as doth a watch) have an artificial life? For what is the 'heart' but a 'spring'; and the 'nerves' but so many 'strings'; and the 'joints' but so many 'wheels,' giving motion to the whole body, such as was intended by the artificer? 'Art' goes yet further, imitating that rational and most excellent work of nature, 'man.'⁸¹

The springs and strings that propel the motion of a well-oiled state, Hobbes proposes, function just the same. These in turn depend on two interdependent elements: a mechanistic anatomy based entirely on a principle of interactive motion devoid of any metaphysical substance and a rigidly set social system for preserving the authoritative movements of this mechanical soul. The first element Hobbes expresses through his claim that all thought depends firstly on the "Motion in the organs and interior parts of man's body, caused by the action of the things we See, Heare, &c."⁸² The second element appears in the middle of *Leviathan*, where Hobbes turns to address "The Incapacity Of The Vulgar." Like the reduction of biology to motion and friction, any unitary

⁸¹ Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 81.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 118.

movement of the sovereign at the high end of the scale demands a certain continuity, a reliable meeting of part with part at the lower. The principal threat to this motion lies in "the danger that may arrive to [the sovereign] himselfe in his naturall Person, from Rebellion."⁸³ Accordingly, Hobbes notes that only an exacting system of education may prevent such a malfunction, since it produces the cog-like "Concord of the Subjects" composed of the same springs, strings, joints, and wheels which physically comprise the body-sovereign.⁸⁴

Hobbes reduction of both politics and anatomy to the motion and matter of automata and his warning about the possibility of social-machine malfunction reverberated widely. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz would later attempt to complete Hobbes' mechanistic philosophy through an explanation of the active principle or "force" which set in motion these individual parts of the human body, down to the level of the atom. His effort would lead to the conception of "organic machines" composed of monads or interlocked units of "unconscious perception."⁸⁵ Leibniz's recourse to an eternal substance of which each monad forms part owed directly to an earlier interest in the role the laboring body played in the formation of knowledge. Where Hobbes made clear his belief that the successful function of artificial man necessitates a pattern of instruction reaching down the social ladder to engage the common, Leibniz first envisaged the possibility of practical knowledge returning up that ladder: "a worker. . . could have this advantage above a great mathematician that could discern among them [polygons] without measuring them... [an] empirical knowledge, acquired through long exercise, is of great use for acting quickly..."⁸⁶ Although Leibniz avoided expanding on the political implications of an inexperienced worker outmaneuvering a

⁸³ Ibid., 379.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 380.

⁸⁵ Leibniz, *Monadology* [1714], ed. by Lloyd Strickland (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2014), para. 14.

⁸⁶ German Academy of Sciences, ed., *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* (Darmstadt and Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1926–) VI, 262.

trained mathematician, the motive force of this practical knowledge entered into his system of interlocking monads: an ability of perception beyond the conscious activity of the mind composing a greater whole. Committed to a mechanistic philosophy but reluctant to accept the nominalist arguments of Hobbes, Leibniz settled on a "third way: neither marionette mechanism nor what he saw as alchemical abandonments of mechanism" but the conception of a living machine-within-machines powered by a universal force that took to the extreme Hobbes' principle of motion.⁸⁷

Through this internal active force and its metaphysical machinery, Leibniz had contributed to solving a series of puzzles packaged with mechanist philosophy since Descartes: if all natural phenomena are so many instances of covert mechanics, where did the motion of this mechanism come from? Who or what conserves it? Why and how did it begin? The parallel tradition of natural theologians in England, prominent among them Robert Boyle, had confronted these questions while accepting the new theory of mechanism alongside Leibniz, but without subtracting the possibility of fiat imposed by a transcendent being. For these thinkers, crafting arguments from design constituted the primary weapon in confronting the idea of a universe based entirely on physical interactions between matter in motion. A universe of pure motion posed no threat to divinity as long as one could detect traces of the clockmaker's art in his inventions, central among which was humanity itself. Boyle argued that all creation was "a great automaton" purposefully crafted by God.⁸⁸ Discovery is tantamount to proof in this model, since, according to Boyle, man's inquiry into "the nature of the spring," or the mechanical principle in nature, "gets all [parts of the

⁸⁷ Jessica Riskin, *The Restless Clock: A History of the Centuries-Long Argument over What Makes Living Things Tick* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 98.

⁸⁸ Qtd. in Peter R. Ansley, *The Philosophy of Robert Boyle* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

"great automaton"] a-moving."⁸⁹ Once set in motion, all that remains for humanity is the slow and careful task of accurately recording the many instances of universal theophany.

Others, however, refused the immanence of Leibniz and the empiricism of natural theology, believing instead that the consequences of Hobbes' system of rational mechanism were indefensible. A prominent opponent of Hobbes' philosophy, the Earl of Shaftesbury expressed concern over how such mechanistic principles would impact morality and the common good. In his view, Hobbesian materialism led directly to egoistic atheism since it upheld the artifice of custom or social arrangement as the only source of morality.⁹⁰ To this Shaftesbury opposed an innate social instinct based on virtue and moral feeling. Among his examples of the potential negative impact of the mechanistic philosophy on society was the current sterility of literary practice. Shaftesbury believed the degraded state of the arts owed to the conception "that by his Genius alone, and a natural rapidity of style and thought, [the poet] is able to carry all before him; that he plays with his business, does things in passing, at a venture, and in the quickest period of time."⁹¹ A superficial speed or efficiency (bordering on unmindful dalliance) accompanying the classical inspiratory model of genius furnished the target of Shaftesbury's appraisal. Cowering from fear of critics behind the throat-clearing of "prefaces, dedications, and introductions," the modern poet, Shaftesbury claimed, would be best served following the model of the ancients in presenting their poetry as a work of labor, hard-won from the peak of Parnassus.⁹²

⁸⁹ Qtd. in Evelyn Fox Keller, *Secrets of Life, Secrets of Death: Essays on Language, Gender, and Science* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 66.

⁹⁰ Lingering traces of mechanism nonetheless entered Shaftesbury's philosophy through an emphasis on the programmability and regulation of the self, an emphasis on discipline and critique sourced directly from his Stoic inclinations.

⁹¹ Anthony Ashley Cooper Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, (London:1711), 144.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 121.

Shaftesbury's diagnoses of the effete state of modern poetics poses another avenue of implicit critique against Hobbes and Leibniz's mechanical systems. Early eighteenth-century poetry and its artisans, Shaftesbury notes, have become too much like machines: self-serving, unthinking, and automatically reproductive. In the years leading up to Duck's appearance, a confluence of factors seemed to reinforce the Shaftesburian position. In 1702, Bysshe's guidebook *The Art of Poetry* standardized the common arsenal of poetry later used by hacks and poetic pretenders alike at the center of what soon became a literati fiasco. Through a careful categorization and glossing of translated fragments from the Ancients (including Virgil, Homer, and Ovid), *The Art of Poetry* granted moderns not only economical access to but clearly defined rules of application for an entire (if truncated) cache of learned poetry. These and other resources fueled Pope's excoriating mockery of the state of Grub Street hackery in *The Dunciad* (1728).

The Earl's solution to the double dilemma of copious literary guides and self-justified slapdash geniuses was to provide a model of greater autonomy. This model rested firstly on a distinctly Promethean conception of creation. In direct opposition to the making of another, Shaftesbury claimed that "a poet is indeed a second Maker: a just Prometheus under Jove. Like that sovereign artist or universal plastic nature, he forms a whole, coherent, and proportional in itself, with due subjection and subordinacy of constituent parts. He notes the boundaries of the passions and knows their exact tones and measures."⁹³ Here, an emphasis on harmonics reconfigures the hierarchal construction of Hobbes sovereign commonwealth automaton. An organic sheen is placed over the shell of the mechanical language of part-to-part. Instead of action and reaction from the top, Shaftesbury stresses how these parts fall under a "subjection and

⁹³ Ibid., 136.

subordinacy" to a whole that lies with each – indeed connects each to each. Where Leibniz stressed that there was something of life in mechanism itself, Shaftesbury rarefies this vitality into the conscious control of Promethean myth. The poet transforms from clockwork to clockmaker.

And yet the Earl is hard put to shake the automaticity of inspired creation even after this metamorphosis. As James Engell notes, the characteristic feature of Shaftesbury's philosophy was "the concept of a complete association of sensibilities, a combination and harmony not only of aesthetic, intellectual, and moral impulses, but also of emotion and epistemology."⁹⁴ If "Labour and Pains are requir'd, and Time, to cultivate a natural Genius," then Shaftesbury essentially argues for an entirely machinic theory of poetic composition. This mechanism, however, simply reinvents notions of automaticity by dislodging the heteronomous principle from an instrumental organ and reinstalling it in an organicism organized around the principle of self-perpetuated growth. The genius still works automatically in being a matter of nature, but, like a clockmaker fine-tuning gears, its nature must be "cultivated" through management and judicious intervention.

Discovery and Disbelief in the Man-Machine

Against this backdrop of a reaction against routinized composition and in support of poetic labor, the salience of Duck's dual identity as thresher and poet appears entirely natural. What better way to instantiate the precepts of current poetic discourse than through a figure which embodies both the ideal of "Labour and Pains" and the "cultivation of Genius"? Before the fascination with Duck, however, the semantic field had been primed for the legibility of a worker poet by a marked semantic overlap between mechanical labor and productive creation. The substantive noun

⁹⁴ James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1981), 23.

"mechanick" applied in English both to laboring subjects from the lower orders of society ("a manufacturer; a low workman") and the science of motion which "shews the effects of powers, or moving forces, so far as they are applied to engines."⁹⁵ Although the social edifice may have prevented a mechanic in the first sense from practicing mechanics in the second, the contemporary definition of machinery itself intervened to establish a semantic link between the workman and the prime mover of the motive force organized into machines. In the eighteenth century, "machine" preserved the sense of intrigue, intricacy, or manipulation still preserved in the term "machination."⁹⁶ Johnson's dictionary defined a machine as at once "any complicated piece of workmanship", "an engine", and "supernatural agency in poetry."⁹⁶ It is between the first and last of these definitions that Duck found his condition of possibility. He was represented in print as both a deeply resourceful epigone and a supernatural agent producing poetry in the manner of a prophet.

Before discussing these two positions, it is worth pausing here to note that despite recent scholarship on Duck which has produced an invaluable record of concrete reading practices, intertextual awareness, and cultural precedents, the question of Duck's origin is often left unaddressed. For all they make available, these same historicist impulses fail to provide a more conclusive answer to the simple, perhaps even naive question: why did the phenomenon that was Stephen Duck happen?⁹⁷ As much as they inform us about the availability of poetic sources and the methods behind their composition, direct historical evidence has the ironic effect of confusing this question. Indeed, records reveal no shortage of laborers who wrote poetry. Especially in the north of England and Scotland, trades such as weaving provided throughout the eighteenth-century

⁹⁵ "Machine, n.s." *A Dictionary of the English Language*, by Samuel Johnson. 1755.

⁹⁶ "Mechanick, n.s." *A Dictionary of the English Language*, by Samuel Johnson. 1755.

⁹⁷ Both Christmas (2001) and Batt (2020) provide substantial historical accounts of Duck's meeting with early supports and patrons, but neither pursue the wider literary-theoretical implications of this interest or the salience of "natural genius" within contemporary scientific-technological discourses of nature, invention, or the laboring body.

ample space for reading and writing between periods of physical engagement in managing looms or organizing materials. The specificity of name alike offers no refuge: John Taylor, Henry Nelson, and Richard Green, among others, all preceded Duck as laboring poets.⁹⁸ I would like to hazard that an answer to this question lies less in the formal limitation and expectations of the system of patronage into which Duck was eventually absorbed and more in the easily dismissed fact that before Duck "happened", he was "discovered," and discovered in a way analogous to the forces of motion captured in Johnson's definition and the natural philosophical inquiry into universal mechanism. It is this space of discovery, the same space occupied by future inventors, entrepreneurs, and students of the mechanical laws of nature, in which the question of Duck's idiosyncrasy as a kind of "poetic engine" and his rise to Caroline's court can best be understood.

The story of the threshing poet begins amidst village gossip, circulating manuscripts, and hearsay. Before he came to the attention of the Queen, Duck had been working intermittently as a thresher, plowman, and farm laborer. In between these occupations, he had expressed inclinations towards poetry, news of which quickly spread amongst coworkers, peers, and from peers to the entire village. Eventually, word of a poetically inclined laborer reached Thomas Gifford, a recent graduate of Oxford whose father resided in a nearby village. In 1729, Gifford "sent for Stephen, and after some talk with him, desired him to write him a letter in verse."⁹⁹ The verse Duck would write to fulfill this request would be included in his subsequent volume, *Poems on Several Subjects*, under the title "Honour'd Sir." Throughout this poem, Duck coats the dual identity that would

⁹⁸ See Christmas (2001), 75.

⁹⁹ Joseph Spence, *A Full and Authentick Account of Stephen Duck, the Wiltshire Poet* (London: For J. Roberts, 1731), 12. Hereafter referred to by the abbreviation *FAA*.

comprise the largest part of his public reception with a heavy irony, coupling the plosives "pen" and "plow" in a poignant reversal of the work anticipated of him:

Haply you might expect some finish'd Ode
Or sacred song, made to the praise of God,
A glorious Thought, and laudable! O then,
think on the illiterate Soul that guides the Pen;
Ill suit such tasks with one that Holds the Plow,
Such lofty subjects with a fate so low.¹⁰⁰

Acknowledging both the weight of expectation in producing a "finish'd Ode" and the generic expectation to write within the most proximate literary mode available to the villager, Duck subverts these two impositions by resorting to an ironic complaint: his "illiterate Soul" winks through highly "finish'd" lines that such complete poetry lies far beyond his reach. And yet he subtly submits this irony to another revolution by reversing and thereby muddling the creative agency expected of poet and plowman. In these lines, the activity denoted in one who "guides" the pen infects the passivity observed in the laborer who "holds the Plow" drawn by horse or ox. Yet if Duck truly believes himself unfit for the poetry he has nonetheless written, then the pen guides him, a turn that simultaneously invokes the model of poetic inspiration and reframes the active pen in the role of the passive plow. By presenting these two options, Duck cuts through the hymnal reverberations that moan between the suspensive and expressive "O" repeated in "Ode" and "God", exchanging the wide-mouthed wonder with quick wispy puffs of "then", "pen", and "plow", effectively inflecting the creative impulse pinned on the poet with the reproductive toil supposed of the plowman "so low."

¹⁰⁰ Stephen Duck, *Poetry on Several Subjects* (London: For J. Roberts, 1730), 29.

It was perhaps intimations of this complex play that led Giffard to entirely reject the authenticity of Duck's verse epistle. "Upon reading those lines", Giffard "thought 'em too good to be [Duck's] own, and gave him so little encouragement that here all was like to best lost."¹⁰¹ A short time later, manuscripts Duck had prepared came into the possession of the local rector, Hoby Stanley, who "examin[ed] into the thing more closely and found [Duck] had a good deal of merit."¹⁰² Convinced of both the authenticity and skill of Duck's verse, Stanley communicated his investment in Duck to his sister-in-law, Sarah Stanley, a former patron of James Thomson. The Stanleys requested Duck pursue a more sustained attempt at verse beyond the short epistle form in order to tell his own story. This attempt would result in Duck's most critically acclaimed work, *The Thresher's Labour*.

Soon after the manuscripts inspected by the Stanleys had circulated more widely, publishers eager to capitalize on news of a poetic thresher readily mobilized the assumption that no ordinary laborer could produce poetry rising above the status of ribald verse or simple ballad. The anonymously-authored *Some Account of the Author* was the first account to fill this gap, released in tandem with an unauthorized copy of Duck's early work in manuscript. This illicit biography played heavily on the theme of disbelief, framing the poet as a miraculous manifestation. It asserted that "it is demonstrable that he [Duck] walks in no other Stilts than those of his own GENIUS."¹⁰³ Despite the efforts of subsequent paratexts to redress the exaggerations and even sheer invention contained within this first account, *Some Account* would set the tone for Duck's poetic career.

¹⁰¹ FAA 12.

¹⁰² FAA, 12-13.

¹⁰³ Anon. ed., "Some Account of the Author" in Stephen Duck, *Poems on Several Subjects* (London: For J. Roberts, 1730), 6. Hereafter referred to by the abbreviation SAA.

This lurid account and its popularity inspired Joseph Spence to investigate further. As his biographer writes, Spence, a distinguished professor of poetry at Oxford, had formed a reputation for testing the bounds of reports of poetic natural geniuses in the years preceding his acquaintance with Duck: the professor “was intrigued by the idea of the ‘force of nature’ coming to light in the form of original genius in men whose meager education was inadequate to explain their educational development.”¹⁰⁴ This interest formed Spence’s distinctly scientific approach to the investigation of supposedly inexplicable literary talent. His method consisted of “observing their reaction to certain intellectual stimuli, inquiring into the circumstances of their mental experience, [and] analyzing their views upon carefully selected topics.”¹⁰⁵ When Spence first met Duck during a series of interviews over the course of six days in September 1730, the same scientific approach informed his measurement not only of Duck’s sincerity and the extent of his poetic acumen, but his physical response to consciously-selected literary stimuli. Indeed, Spence’s account avers the responsiveness of Duck’s muscular and nervous systems as proof of the precision of his wit. When read passages from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Spence records how Duck “trembled at the ghost’s speech wñ I read it to him”, noting beside his “change of countenance and sharp look sometimes.”¹⁰⁶

Explanations for why Spence employed this mode of analysis tend to falter at the use of these corporal diagnostics.¹⁰⁷ Christmas, for example, locates the purpose of Spence’s interviews in “testing Duck’s social values... about whether or not Duck measured up to the norms imposed

¹⁰⁴ Austin Wright, *Joseph Spence: A Critical Biography* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1950), 45.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Qtd. in Osborn (1966), 128.

¹⁰⁷ Both Wright (1950) and Osborn (1966) stress the purpose of Spence’s interview as an investigation into Duck’s moral integrity, presenting relatively little analysis of the implications of the method of the interview on Duck as a specimen worthy of having his moral-physical aptitude tested.

upon a person of Duck's low social position by polite society."¹⁰⁸ Certainly, Spence's design was a kind of trial by fire. Heat and pressure combined would reveal the purity of Duck's merit. And, as his later account reveals, Spence undoubtedly detected evidence of the socially valued materials of piety, humility, industry, and deference through the process of his assay. What deserves attention, however, is the fact that Spence investigated Duck's social worth from the presuppositions of the accuracy of scientific experiment – and this towards a subject on which predominating social opinion had already been firmly settled. The physiognomic interest in Duck's body, the perspicuous notation of “applause... in his face” in the midst of poetry, and the close scene of investigatory writing itself give hints that the operation of the social and physical matter out of which Duck was made deserved further inspection. Whether marvel or malfunction, this threshing-in-question required careful calibration. Beyond this, Spence's assay co-implicates and thus molds together the two semantic senses of “machine” in the course of verifying Duck's character: by tracking signs of the mechanical excitement of nerve and muscle, Spence accentuates an understanding of Duck-as-machine, a bluntly reactive vessel harboring a kind of supernatural poetic agency beyond conscious control.

In direct response to the vagaries of *Some Account*, Spence revised the notes taken during his interview with Duck and incorporated them into *An Authentick Account of Stephen Duck, Wilshire Poet*, published in March 1731, well after Duck's reputation as an inspired genius had taken hold of popular imagination. The claim to authenticity of this introduction begins with a pointed dispelling of any notion of inspired creation. The reader discovers that Duck did indeed possess some learning, albeit “no other teaching than what enabled him to read and write English

¹⁰⁸ Christmas, 75-77.

nor that any otherwise than at a Charity school.”¹⁰⁹ After material pressures forced him away from school and into labour around the time of his fourteenth birthday, Spence writes, Duck grew anxious “that he shou’d have forgot even something of what he had learnt.”¹¹⁰ These fears over faults in memory prodded Duck to work additional hours as a day-laborer, effort from which he earned a surplus wage then used to purchase books.

Through this emphasis on a common end of mental and physical labor, though careful to avoid implications of stolen time, Spence sets up for the reader an evaluation of Duck concordant with the Shaftesburian measure of poetic talent. A promethean image of composition attempts to dissolve the popular interest in the thresher owing to intimations of divine supernaturalism. Fieldwork (both literal and metaphorical) equates here to diligent self-reflection and unnerving craft, most apparent where Spence relays that “the Pains [Duck] has taken for the Pleasure of Improving himself are incredible.”¹¹¹ Careful to avoid obloquy, *An Authentick Account* also pruned Duck’s sources and inspirations in a favorable light, playing up Duck’s studious engagement with Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, while granting only slight mention to Bysshe’s *Art of English Poetry* despite Duck’s devoted reliance on the anthology.¹¹²

In citing the most appropriate sources of the day as an explanation for Duck’s skill, Spence in turn preempts the possibility that these materials, often fragmented and unglossed, may have formed for Duck a horizon different from, even at odds with, the predominant sentiment of correct poetic practice. That is, Duck’s attraction to these sources is cited as yet another proof of his

¹⁰⁹ *FAA*, 6.

¹¹⁰ *FAA*, 6-7.

¹¹¹ *FAA*, 11.

¹¹² Batt (2020), 23-25. Perhaps also neglected by the firm literary drive of Spence’s account is the role other disciplines played in shaping Duck. He notes early on, for instance, how Duck’s first purchases from his additional income were not literary in nature, but mathematical: an algebra book that would help Duck remember his lessons.

industry and genius, but a genius subordinated to the Shaftesburian model of craft where ‘Labour and Pains are requir'd, and Time, to cultivate a natural Genius.’¹¹³ The early charges of inauthenticity which clamored around Duck may ultimately find their origin in this singular paradox of a double-bind circling around the diverging frameworks advocated by *Some Account* and *An Authentick Account*: either, opportunistically, Duck knew in advance that careful use of these sources would win him esteem or, haphazardly, his attraction to them as an intuitive genius was mere chance undeserving of serious merit. No one should wish to celebrate a tactical sycophant, and, under the model of inspiration, no one but divinity exists to receive approbation.

The Automatic Image of Labour

Caught between these two introductions stressing skill and genius, Duck and his poetry seem truly at home in both and neither. Both *Some Account* and *An Authentick Account* offer distortions of the poet premised on two competing models of poetic production, the heteronomous inspiratory organ and the autonomous Promethean creator. Their differences from one another merely displace the common concern to mark Duck as exceptional, burying this exceptionality under competing frames of explanation. In this sense, both accounts prefer to evaluate Duck within the terms set by a certain mechanical efficiency in reaching accepted standards and ending the process of this efficiency with the benefit of an alluring product. Whether these standards are achieved through inspiration, genius, or natural talent, or whether the final product is judged through discipline, craft, or study, the desired effect remains unchanged. It is precisely the desire for this efficiency of genius, however defined, which has escaped a firm theorization, both during Duck's life and in scholarship

¹¹³ This space is the same which recent scholarship on Duck has spent much activity plumbing. In one sense, the Shaftesburian mode still reigns through an historicist attention to Duck's influence, process, and citational practice, the ways in which he found and reappropriated appropriate sources. Framing Duck as a man-machine presents an alternative: something of genius and something of mechanism combine to allow us to see the efficacy (and necessity) of both in interpretations of peasant poetry.

since. Praise paid presumes an impressive conversion rate behind the lines themselves: fewer hours of less formal study produced lines of a quality proportional to the productions of the devoted professional.

Turning to Duck's poetry itself brings something else entirely into sight that might help explain the impetus to this desire for witnessed efficiency, productivity, and aesthetic allure. *The Thresher's Labour*, in particular, creates an opportunity to envision the exchange between flail and pen beyond Spence's valuable though complicated equivalence between mental and physical labor. Instead, this poem, categorized by Bridget Keegan as at once "pastoral, anti-pastoral, counter-pastoral, georgic, anti-georgic, [and] plebeian georgic," brings to the surface an understanding of the artefactual base of this exchange itself, the mediating middle that conduces towards discourses of autonomy or heteronomy.¹¹⁴ Through a variety of techniques, *The Thresher's Labour* comes to replicate the function of the different prefatory apparatuses introducing Duck by drawing attention to how technical supplements create and reproduce people, things, and the times in and with which they interact – a process both intimately familiar to Duck as *the thresher*, the one who separates *by means of the flail* deadening chaff from sustaining grain, and *the poet*, who chooses *by means of pen and paper* the bits and phrases of dead letters to renew into the activity of a living present.

At the same time, *The Thresher's Labour* replays and undetermines the formal pattern of prefatory paratexts like *Some Account* and *An Authentick Account*, exhibiting an unsettling quality which may help explain, in part, why so much effort was invested in a careful framing of the laboring poet's work. Much like Spence's *An Authentic Account*, the poem Duck was asked to write on his experience as a thresher evinces an ethic of recreating in precise and realistic detail

¹¹⁴ Bridget Keegan, "Georgic Transformations and Stephen Duck's *The Thresher's Labour*" in *Studies in English Literature* 41.3 (2001), 547.

the motions, thoughts, and feelings of life often framed by but lived outside of literary ideals.¹¹⁵ Playing along the dividing line between divine inspiration and conscious craft, Duck shows through this poem how it might be that a certain artifactuality gives rise to and forms the point of return for both of these models. And, in this, *The Thresher's Labour* presents the possibility of a technical subjectivity brought to life by the peasant poet characterized by productivity, efficiency, and aesthetic allure, but one that points to these attributes as appearances, ephemeral questions, and tendencies which may transform across time and space.

This subjectivity is neither heteronomic nor autonomous *per se*, but resolutely both and at once at odds with the variance caused by this split condition. The task of realistic representation places Duck in the same position occupied by what Alan Cholodenko has called the *animatic automaton*. Defined as “neither merely a machine, nor what it images as merely mechanical, for it confounds, disseminates, and seduces the very opposition of organic and mechanical,” the animatic automaton splits the difference between Shaftesbury’s fear of mindless machine-authors, Hobbes’ demand for subordinate artificial-men, and Boyle’s pursuit of divinity in mechanism.¹¹⁶ The animatic impulse of the automaton as a figure extends as far back in history as Hephaestus’s self-moving golden maidens and as far forward as the computer-generated motion-capture performed, for example, by Andy Serkis in Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.¹¹⁷ Somewhere between these poles, Duck and *The Thresher's Labour* enter under a similar guise. What was

¹¹⁵ A great deal of scholarship on *The Thresher's Labour* tracks the ways in which Duck supposedly subverts the norms of idealized pastoral labor in his blunt depiction through harrowing “images” of hardscrabble day-labour. Indeed, Raymond Williams in *The Country and The City* (1973) cites Duck first for this very reason, an ability to reveal through “images” an obscurantist ideology practiced by previous “rural” poets (32).

¹¹⁶ Alan Cholodenko, “Speculations on the Animatic Automaton,” in *The Illusion of Life II: More Essays on Animation*, ed. Alan Cholodenko (Sydney: Power Publications, 2007), 496

¹¹⁷ See Gertrud Koch, “Animation of the Technical and the Quest for Beauty” in *Machine* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 1-23.

believed insensate, dull, or “mechanick” in the form of the purely reproductive laborer transforms into “the self-creating, self-animating, self-moving at stake in inanimate inorganic objects brought to life by media and technologies of simulation, themselves inorganic and ostensibly inanimate but having the capacity to animate.”¹¹⁸ Precisely through the mimetic media technology of poetry, neither fully dead nor fully living, does Duck self-present and self-create in accord with the animacy of the “mechanic” automaton.

If, as scholars have argued, *The Thresher's Labour* constitutes a faithful recreation of agricultural labor at odds with Golden Age idealization from Horace onward, the function of this animatic automaton assures that the gaze that results is distinctively fragmented and unsettling. Indeed, Duck begins the poem in the conventional language of tribute by invoking the gifts of a muse, but one who acts as instrumentalized avatar for the poet. Invisible and unambiguously manifest behind “these rural Lays / Which to her Patron’s Hand the Muse Conveys,” the poet supplicates both reader and patron to accept that

'Tis just she Tribute bring
 To him, whose Bounty gives her Life to sing;
 To him, whose gen'rous Favours tune her Voice;
 And bid her, 'midst her Poverty, rejoice.
 Inspir'd by these, she dares herself prepare,
 To sing the Toils of each revolving Year;
 Those endless Toils, which always grow anew,
 And the poor *Thresher's* destin'd to pursue: (3-10)

An odd reversal of social positions (not to mention gender) in these lines submits Duck-as-feminine-muse to the inspiration of Stanley, the patron of the subtitle, who, even more oddly, appears under the guise of a singularly productive figure that Duck, in his clearly defined role as

¹¹⁸ Cholodenko, 496.

thresher, seems more apt to fill. The beneficent patron to whom Duck addresses this poem recounting his living labor supplies a “Bounty” which in turn enables the poet-muse her “Life to Sing.” Material and poetic expectations begin here an unrelenting intercourse only intensified by the remainder of the poem.

What appears in this first stanzas as a deferent abdication of place on the part of the thresher also shelters a sly reversal of fortune: the patron-turned-laborer gives a gift of sustenance returned by the poet-turned-muse through an act of inspiration to “tune” the instrument of her “Voice.” This roleplay, however, leaves the figure of the “*Thresher*” introduced in italics uniquely bare. Where muse, poet, and patron comingle, stepping in and out of poetic place, the Thresher is apparently committed to the relentlessly unitary clockwork of “each Revolving Year.” The standard devices of tribute and invocation blend into an opportunity to introduce and, more pointedly, replay the circularly split subjectivity of the laboring poet, simultaneously active and passive, writing of work in a cessation of the work that allowed for writing. Tuning his poetic voice and being tuned by the bounty won from his productive labor, Duck, in his physical particularity as he holds the pen in writing this poem, seems to occupy all these places and none, emerging and yet disappearing.

With this interchange set up by the first stanza, a dissimulation that cautions the reader against too hastily determining *who* does *what* in this ostensibly authentic account, *The Thresher’s Labour* turns, almost with a nod, to a scene depicting a farmer dividing roles amongst his labourers. After “the golden Harvest quits the Plain,” (13) the farmer “calls his Reapers forth,” (17) an invitation that manifests a previously unaccounted first-person in the plural:

Around we stand,
With deep Attention, waiting his Command.
To each our Task he readily divides,
And pointing, to our different Stations guides.

As he directs, to distant Barns we go;
Here two for Wheat, and there for Barley two. (17-22)

With these divisions of “station” indicating both physical location and social rank established, another distortion of boundaries follows in kind. The earliest stages of work blend without pause or hesitation into the earliest resources of the poet. A concert of rhythmic sound first produces a setting where the impact of the thresher’s “Crab-tree Staves rebound, / And echoing Barns return the rattling Sound.” (34-35). This description of repetitive acoustic setting next enters formally into the arrangement of lines, where a break marks the division of the action itself from rising arch to falling strike: “Now in the Air our knotty Weapons fly, / And now with equal Force descend from high.” (36-37). A flattening occurs here, where both time, force, and person succumb to an aggravating but ineluctable course of motion.

In this perpetually present “now” preceding each action where both the image of the thresher and the attention of the poet fall under the constraining movement of the tool, the clockwork consistency of mechanical action somehow finds recourse to a time outside of time:

Down one, one up, so well they keep the Time,
The CYCLOPS' Hammers could not truer chime;
Nor with more heavy Strokes could Aetna groan,
When VULCAN forg'd the Arms for THETIS' Son. (38-41)

The mode of this allusion exceeds any easy analogy. While it might seek dignity in labor through literary cachet or a poetico-historical precedent to the threshers’ actions, the status of the exception in this case derives from an indetermination at the center of Duck’s ironic hyperbole: exactly *what* and *who* is being compared here? Duck makes it clear that the “weapons,” not the laborers, are the grammatical clock-like “they” who keep the time. And yet the dull, impersonal sense of the

previous lines falters when, through a negative example, the sound of the Cyclops' hammers emits not a "Rattling sound" or repetitive echo from barn to barn, but a kind of "truth" – a steadiness or meeting of person and thing. The contours of purpose, diligence, and skill reemerge when a weight that should have been ceaselessly uniform takes on the character of Vulcan's (or Hephaestus') careful collaboration with the pulsating tremors of molten movement. This hyperbolic mode entrenches a sense that the threshers' tools do not simply surpass classical scenes of productivity but admit of an inextricable connection to those poetic scenes themselves: they share a common making or a making-in-common precisely through an attention to the apparatus at their center.

A time-keeping quality steadily transmutes into a time-bending one. Something of the threshers' impersonal repetitious labor then invites scenes of a primal poetic creation whose divine personas, not unlike the laborers, are specific in role and name but highly malleable, transmissible, and modular. Indeed, these figurations of Vulcan and Thetis are themselves references to textual persons caught haphazardly in the course of Duck's intermittent reading. In these early lines, then, Duck employs the twin-technologies of text and tool to bend and refract a kind of history, one lodged between an eidetic realism of labour that anticipates the nineteenth century's repetitive machinic industry and a metaphoric (and metamorphic) return to the oral echoes of ancient Greece. This illusionistic play across time and space, alienation and agency, (re)performs the function of the animatic automaton as "what confuses the either/orism of either a living being turning into an inanimate being *or* an inanimate thing turning into a living thing."¹¹⁹ If *The Thresher's Labour* relies on a certain reality principle, it is emphatically the reality of the automaton after which Hobbes asks in the opening of *Leviathan*: "why may we not say, that all 'automata' (engines that move themselves by springs and wheels as doth a watch) have an artificial life?" Duck here asks

¹¹⁹ Cholodenko, 503.

along the same lines: why may we not say that the mechanick (one who makes from a low station) has a life beyond the life of labour won from artifice?

This confusion between agent and object returns a few lines later where the first-person plural returns after an indefinite stretch of time to reinforce the lesson that “No Intermission in our Work we know; / The noisy Threshal must for ever go.” (44-45) The tension between “knowing” and “going,” between *no* intervention of a conscious choice and the *noisy* motor of the laboring body in motion gives way to the question of thought. The tension breaks in this direction where the poet acknowledges “The Voice is lost, drown'd by the louder Flail,” (51) but immediately rebounds toward another reflection across the divisions between life and art. When the automatic movement of the flail appears to win out over the instrument of the voice, the poet answers back:

But we may think — Alas! what pleasing thing,
Here, to the Mind, can the dull Fancy bring?
Our Eye beholds no pleasing Object here,
No chearful Sound diverts our list'ning Ear.
The Shepherd well may tune his Voice to sing,
Inspir'd with all the Beauties of the Spring.
No Fountains murmur here, no Lambkins play,
No Linnets warble, and no Fields look gay; (52-59)

A tone of resignation disguises in these lines a trek across boundaries similar to the hyperbolic conversation of peasant day-laborer and ancient divine artisan. As soon as the flail proves its vocal strength, indeed sapping the voiced consonant (v-) into a voiceless (f-), the poet-thresher simultaneously punctuates his thought expressed in the advocacy of thinking with an isolated dash (the only in the poem) and repeats the same linear drive toward unmeaning movement found in the flail, the same that muffles any articulate voice. This graphic space and open time mount an opportunity for another excursion, much like how the “echoing Barns return the rattling Sound” carried the poet to Homer. Amid the lost thought broken and afforded by the caesura, the traditional

tropes and generic fodder of the pastoral appear in the mind's eye precisely where the poet asserts their empirical absence in the "reality" he pictures to the reader. It is the very fact of their lack that invites and enables Duck to recreate them, all the while condoning and questioning the possibility of that invitation. This contradiction gives rise to that union-in-disunion of opposites, a kind of appearance-in-making that is the proper mode of the animatic automaton.

Duck makes this more explicit in the following stanza, which retraces the laborers' return to the field in summer when "Before the Door our welcome Master stands; / Tells us, the ripen'd Grass requires our Hands. / The grateful Tidings presently imparts / Life to our Looks, and Spirits to our Hearts." (88-91) After celebrating the change in labor demanded by the change in season, the poet recounts the equipment which accompanies the task of mowing the summer grass:

On our right Shoulder hangs the crooked Blade,
The Weapon destin'd to uncloth the Mead:
Our left supports the Whetstone, Scrip, and Beer;
This for our Scythes, and these ourselves to chear. (106-109)

A lateral division apparently keeps the requisite supplements sorted. And yet their confusion across these two couplets becomes inevitable on two levels. First, the poet plays on the difference evident between those tools which hone (the whetstone) and those which dull (the beer) through a personification of the scythe. The "crooked Blade" finds "cheer" in its companion whetstone just as the laborers anticipate bending under the influence of their liquid reprieve from the summer heat.¹²⁰ A visual play on "mead" (meaning both "meadow" and "alcoholic drink") accentuates the

¹²⁰ Perhaps an etymological coincidence, the OED records active in Scottish slang around the early eighteenth century the term "bender," meaning a heavy drinker. A century later, John Jamieson would provide in the first edition of his *Supplement to the Etymological dictionary of the Scottish language* (1825) evidence for the use of the phrase "crook one's elbow" to mean "drinking alcohol, with the implication of excess." A lack of similar resources for Wilshire slang leaves it uncertain whether Duck and his readers would have applied a similar double entendre. In

duality of the scythe-persons who head out onto the field with succor in tow. Finally folded together through the indistinct demonstratives “this” and “these,” the poet offers here another equivalence between object and person, the former elevated to a “destiny” and the latter a crook on which these tools hang.

Despite the promise of this temporary relief, the poet is quite clear that a hidden mechanism makes any lasting relaxation impossible. The language of Duck’s poem asserts a compulsive, driving, irresistible force. But the precise nature and source of this force, however, are often conspicuously elided. After an extended and exhausting stint of mowing under the summer sun, the laborers retire under the cover of a “shady Tree” and “From Scrip and Bottle hope new Strength to gain” (135-136):

But Scrip and Bottle too are try'd in vain.
Down our parch'd Throats we scarce the Bread can get;
And, quite o'erspent with Toil, but faintly eat.
Nor can the Bottle only answer all;
The Bottle and the Beer are both too small.
Time flows: Again we rise from off the Grass;
Again each Mower takes his proper Place; (137-143)

The laborers are consumed with a failure of consumption after their exertion has left them in a state of dry fatigue. Unable to recover, this suspended condition exposes the failure of their supplements to offer any relief and poses a clear image of the bodily toll of their work. In defiance of this toll, the intervention of an anonymous “Time” somehow prods them back to their task. The distinct absence of complaint in the resumption of labor after this simple statement on the flow of time, combined with the excessive “again” which has the effect of deflating any unique moment in that flow, creates the impression that a motive force other than metabolism drives them forward.

any case and regardless of further illicit word play, the mutual “cheer” between scythe and scythe-wielder leaves the connection between person and thing clearly active.

Tantalus-like, the laborers can neither sate their hunger nor slake their thirst – and yet, in an equally dry description, they rise and take their place again.

This drive apparently outstrips the ever-present pressure to meet the day's quota and earn a vital wage. Indeed, a later section of the poem describes how it even outlasts the day itself. The poet supplicates the imagination of the reader to "Think what a painful Life we daily lead," (251) and again recounts the clockwork impulse of the day:

Each Morning early rise, go late to Bed:
Nor, when asleep, are we secure from Pain;
We then perform our Labours o'er again:
Our mimic Fancy ever restless seems;
And what we act awake, she acts in Dreams.
Hard Fate! Our Labours ev'n in Sleep don't cease;
Scarce HERCULES e'er felt such Toils as these! (252-258)

The insistent repetition of repetition itself in fact replays the throughgoing pattern of the thresher's labor (and thus poses to the reader through form the explicit content made available in and through *The Thresher's Labour*). Duck phrases that pattern thus: an inescapable system of mechanism meets an irresistible drive of motion to such an extent that any freedom of mind or body succumbs to the grinding re-enactment of this meeting without end.

However, another agent always intervenes not simply *against* this struggle, but from *within* it. At the prospect that the eternal strain of the thresher might be his own, figures simultaneously foreign and indigenous to this strain escape the privation of text in order to provide filiation (these struggles *are not* unique, existing with literary precedent) and foil (these struggles *surpass* the unsurpassable, existing within literary history and exceeding its scope). The trials of Hercules, the forge of Vulcan, the pastoral song of ancient shepherd, all perform and reperform this role that Duck himself and the poet of *The Thresher's Labor* ratify in life and verse. Duck resolves this

pattern to its clearest, most compact articulation in the final stanza, where he writes “Like SISYPHUS, our Work is never done.” (283).

La Mettrie and Vaucanson’s Duck

How should the continual resurgence of this force or drive to animacy be understood? Certainly, sheer grit or ingrained habit fails to adequately account for the extremities of activity in this poem. And too hastily seeking explanations for this constant labor in a desire to expose the violence of a rigid class system or a wish to record for posterity contemporary agricultural practice have the consequence of ignoring how Duck’s poem is interspersed with literary forms of labor beyond not only the modern but the mortal. If, only in this sense, Duck evokes a history of class struggle or a faithful recreation of work, the result is both peculiarly ahistorical and, though historically detailed and empirically descriptive, strangely unrealistic. Vulcan’s magical forge and Ovid’s pastoral ease comport awkwardly with the plodding mundanity of clearing fields or threshing grain – and yet *The Thresher’s Labour* emphatically suggests here that a shared, if contested, ground between the two emerges as if automatically.

The automated animacy depicted in and manifested through *The Thresher’s Labour* poses a direct challenge to the heteronomous and autonomous conceptions of poetic composition within which Duck, even in this earliest poem, wrote. This challenge of poetic labor is marshalled by first presenting a more fundamental challenge to the question of what animates life itself, what inspires, moves, or provokes the body of the laborer into motion, pursuit, and desire. Far from an abstraction, this very question must have faced Duck in his first claiming the pretension to poeticize in his social position as a laborer. Advised to “never speak too highly in praise of the Poems he had written,” according to Spence’s account, Duck viewed his work in self-deprecating terms.

“Gentlemen, indeed, [Duck] said, might like ‘em because they were made by a poor Fellow in a Barn; but he knew as well as any Body that they were not really good in themselves.”¹²¹ While possible to interpret this dismissal as “a stoic acceptance of his position within the class hierarchy,” the fact remains Duck took time to do with these poems what this same hierarchy preferred against: he wrote them and wrote them regardless.¹²²

Roughly a decade after Duck’s celebrity reached its peak in the 1730s, a young philosopher across the channel would devote a similar explanation in print toward cementing the possibility of this animated and animating form of writing-despite. Published anonymously for fear of reprisal by the Church in 1748, Julien Offray de La Mettrie’s *L’Homme Machine* took Descartes’ mechanistic conclusions about the state of animal life to a radical extreme.¹²³ If Cartesian dualism conceptualized animals as intricately wound machines devoid of intellect or will, then, La Mettrie deduced, humans were fundamentally no different. Against all Cartesians, Leibnizians, Malebrancheans, and any other school of thought that had “spiritualized matter, rather than materialized the soul,” La Mettrie proposed a deceptively simple materialism: “Man is a machine so complicated that it is impossible at first to form a clear idea of it.”¹²⁴ La Mettrie’s distinctly automatic model of ontology propelled itself on aphoristic appeals to the reflexive mechanisms of daily life and experience. A Sunday stroll became proof that “the human body is a self-winding

¹²¹ FAA, 26. Of course, a possible degree of humility or dissimulation in this anecdote should caution against outright acceptance of Duck’s qualification. But the judgment might also stress, in profile, that Duck’s poems do not exist and cannot be read “in themselves” or for themselves – and that this contingency, whether pivoting on the character of a “poor Fellow in a Barn” or not, constitutes some claim toward their making.

¹²² Batt (2020), 35.

¹²³ These fears, as it turns out, were well-founded: the Consistory of the Church of Leyden ordered early printings of the book to be burned.

¹²⁴ Julien Offray de la Mettrie, *Man a Machine*, trans. Richard A Watson and Mya Rybalka (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 27; 30.

machine,” and migration from country-to-country clear signs that man “is an ambulatory plant who transplants himself.”¹²⁵

Although La Mettrie’s philosophy was denounced for its obvious dismissal of any place or purpose for the divine, the political consequences of his variety of materialism are often overlooked. In many ways, the threat of *L’Homme Machine* to organized religion was an entirely ancillary, a downstream effect of a more fundamental egalitarianism that La Mettrie highlights but does not pursue in select parts of his pamphlet.¹²⁶ This egalitarian condition can be glimpsed where La Mettrie asserts that “given the least principle of movement, animated bodies have all they need to move, feel, think, repent, and, in a word, to act in the physical world and also in the moral, which depends on the physical.”¹²⁷ The consequences of this universal animation leave no reason to distinguish the highborn from the lowly. All embody the principle of animation, a fact La Mettrie articulates in the final pages of his work thus:

If you only open your eyes and set aside what you cannot comprehend, you will see that the plowman whose mind and knowledge extend no farther than the edges of his furrow does not differ essentially from the greatest genius, as dissections of the brains of Descartes or Newton might have proved.¹²⁸

With this biological anarchy, *L’Homme Machine* introduces a politics of social equality into the conflict between animism and mechanism and asserts that those from a low station differ in no fundamental way from the greatest scientists or philosophers.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 33; 35.

¹²⁶ Despite these tendencies, as Jonathan Israel (2006) notes, La Mettrie shied away from advocating for the spread of his philosophy among the masses, thinking “it seemed advisable, and ultimately unavoidable, to leave the illusions and ignorance of the great majority largely intact while striving to transform the thinking of elites” (810).

¹²⁷ La Mettrie, 59.

¹²⁸ La Mettrie, 75.

Granted adequate time, training, and effort, the figure of the “man-machine” accommodates the fact that there is nothing particularly exceptional about a threshing poet. All that is required for “genius” to occur is regular practice, a routine exercise of the universal faculty of the imagination: “even for the least talented, the more one exercises the imagination or the least genius, the more, so to speak, the genius puts on muscle, the more it grows, becomes alert, robust vast, and capable of thinking.”¹²⁹ While this may sound like a Shaftesburian conception of craft or labored production in the cultivation of natural genius, La Mettrie is careful to show deference to *both* inborn capability and rote application. Arguing that all skill must first develop through an innate “disposition to skillfulness,” the man-machine asks in turn “why, therefore, would I not esteem those who have natural virtues, as much as those who shine by acquired, almost artificial virtues?”¹³⁰ In contrast to Shaftesbury’s innate social instinct and much closer to Hobbes mechanic amorality, La Mettrie in effect limns here the outline of a nascent social theory of education based, first, on a universal capacity for acquisition and, second, on the necessity of submitting this capacity to learning, without which “the best-made man would be only a coarse peasant.”¹³¹

It is this critical possibility of self-education based on a fundamental equality of intelligence activated by and honed in the availability of learning material that contemporary accounts of Duck tend to neglect. Appeals to divine inspiration or Promethean craft miss the more critical point of examining the “exercise of the imagination” in the drive or desire to produce poetry itself, even ignorant or regardless of accepted models or standards. If the poet is neither a passive marionette or lump of clay awaiting the spark of animation, nor an autonomous demigod working

¹²⁹ Ibid., 44.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 45.

actively to recreate the world from itself and for itself but is instead a kind of man-machine or animatic automaton, then Duck's rise to prominence and eventual position at Queen Caroline's folly become entirely legible: what attracts is the intimation of the complexity of self-constitution.

Indeed, by reference to another duck, La Mettrie goes some way towards explaining through a devoted engagement with technical supplements the possibility and appeal of that which was formerly insensate transforming into that which is articulate. In discussing how the complexity of organized matter accedes to motion, La Mettrie supplies the example of Jacques de Vaucanson, an inventor who had risen to prominence in the 1730s for his intricately constructed automata, among them the Canard Digérateur or Digesting Duck. Pointing to the gradual evolution of these moving machines, the author of *L'Homme Machine* hypothesizes that "if Vaucanson needed more art to make his *flute player* than his *duck*, he would need even more to make a *talker*, which can no longer be regarded as impossible, particularly in the hands of a new Prometheus."¹³² Vaucanson may have seemed to fit this mythic role, but La Mettrie leaves it certain that increase in complexity witnessed in this mechanical evolution requires no heroic substance. The point here is to stress that the apparently life-like movement of a mechanical duck may lead to the impossibility of separating life from the life-like, the quirky waddling of gilded fowl from the technology of the voice which makes and relays sense. In this way, La Mettrie lends credence to the observation that the addition of "art," an added intricacy of supplement or technical sophistication, leads to the same kind of indistinction that characterized Duck. A little "art" turns the mechanic into the mechanick and a duck into a poet.

¹³² Ibid., 69.

Of course, if man is a machine, then it naturally follows that man may be constructed, programmed, and put to work just as machines are. This modular and malleable conception of the mechanized body would come to fascinate Michel Foucault, who in *Discipline and Punish* presents the man-machine as sign and symptom of the stratification and classification of the various Enlightenment institutions concerned to create a disciplined and self-disciplining population. The kinds of uniform efficiency required by military and scholastic drills, for example, are able to become second nature precisely because of the presupposition of a mechanical first nature. And yet, at the same time, the Foucauldian framework limits itself to an understanding of the machine quite at odds with the clear variance and metamorphic potential evinced in La Mettrie's work on the automaton and the animatic automata of Duck's poetry. Simply put, the regimentation of a duck becomes unimaginably difficult, not to say entirely impossible, if, somehow or another, through some art or another, the disciplined duck in question suddenly becomes a poet.

As both threshing poet and animatic automaton, Duck helps make visible what Jonathan Drury refers to as an "alternative" materialist philosophy far removed from the subjection of the individual to disciplinary regimes.¹³³ Indeed, the notion of the man-machine in the early eighteenth century signified a liberation of the body, sexuality, and emotion from the disembodied rationality that had characterized the after-effects of Cartesian philosophy, a tendency which Drury encapsulates in his invention of the binary separating the *libertine machine* (those who used mechanism to engage in sensual excess) from the *thinking machine* (those who cautioned against indulging in passion). Missing from this context of social machines, however, is La Mettrie's emphasis on the self-constructive nature of the automaton, the ability to respond to or modulate

¹³³ Jonathan Drury, *Novel Machines: Technology and Narrative Form in Enlightenment Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 52.

the materials out of which one is made. In Duck's case, the change from mechanick to poet, or from duck to talker, occurs precisely through an inversion of the Hobbesian assessment of the concord of subjects and begins to deconstruct the choice between giving into one's passions and keeping a careful distance from them. Instead, the specific mechanicity of the automaton that characterizes Duck and *The Thresher's Labour* works through a confusion of excess and moderation inherent in self-techniques, the drive to exercise will through physical action and the temperance and distance capable of reflecting on this drive through restrained and artful reflection. To ask which of these tendencies takes predominance in Duck, or to ask in essence whether Duck is more thresher or more poet, is to ask whether an automaton is alive or dead. What deserves attention is the unavoidable discrepancy between these two states and the fact they come together so neatly in *The Thresher's Labour*, the fact that Duck is simultaneously *not* a poet in its accepted sense and self-evidently a poet through the redeployment of the distance between an active subject in control of creation and a passive object reduced in processes of production to the status of a tool.

Emulating the Thresher

While his social status as thresher undoubtedly accompanied him for the rest of his life, there is a sense, both practical and metaphoric, in which the publication of *The Thresher's Labour* presses Duck to enter the literary world through an abandonment of the tools and implements that had not only composed his occupation but had literally *made* him as sources of material and poetic support. This exchange of agricultural technology for literary technology has the obvious effect of dimming the phenomenological encounter with holding a flail or sickle and reconstitutes it in a poetic experience of organizing the technological field of production, an exchange Duck anticipated in his first work of verse in "Honour'd Sir." Although Duck offers a version of it in *The Thresher's Labour*, the question of how to conceptualize this exchange beyond Duck's experience remains.

Certainly, a kind of freedom exists within the ability to self-organize, to tell one's story in whatever way one deems fitting. While obviously working within contemporary standards of poetry, this is a freedom Duck nonetheless gained as he moved from the profession of laborer to caretaker and eventually parson. On a more abstract level, however, the substitution of pen for flail evinces a differing relation to time: as Duck moves from automatic reproduction to autonomous creation, working without control gives way to controlling how to view work. Yet this interpretation, as positive as its sounds, merely repeats the formal structure of the veil of natural genius which obfuscated the conditions of his poetic ability. A transcendental horizon of pure creation emerges through poetic craft in direct proportion to the refusal of physical engagement with fabricated and transformative materials, tools, and apparatuses – the ability for these to literally open different times and places put into practice in *The Thresher's Labour*.

In each case, Duck's proximity to experiential knowledge is authorized through recourse to technical knowledge. His familiarity with the subject matter of farm laboring does not originate in merely occupying a place in the social hierarchy, but in practicing and recreating it through daily life. The primary function of natural genius, of course, is to construct a metaphysical character or essence to obfuscate through a notion of cultivation the connection between this social experience and the technique of the literacy manifest and accessible within the technology of the book. And in this way, the singularization of Duck-as-genius simultaneously implies and denies the community of readers and writers of which he is part. Either Duck is an aberration, and thus any member of the lower orders may just as automatically become a poet without the authorization of the sovereign; or his poetry indicates a norm of literacy achievable through the automaticity of the experiential knowledge Leibniz had theorized a few decades earlier, glimpsed further in La

Mettrie's philosophy of learning, where, assuming books can be acquired, a man-machine has all it needs to interpret them on its own.

In the direct aftermath of Duck's celebrity, neither potential promised a stable social or aesthetic order. After Duck earned Queen Caroline's patronage, the contradictions and impasses imaginable with the mass poetification of labor quickly became a serious subject of concern to social commentators. Driving this concern was, in Jennifer Batt's words, "a miscellaneous group of writers – from a diverse selection of backgrounds and driven by a range of reasons" who reacted to Duck's fame by seeking their own.¹³⁴ These included Robert Tattersal, a bricklayer who countered Duck's popularity with the sentiment that "If Threshers entertain the Muse / Why may not Bricklayers too their Subjects choose?" While laboring responses to Duck such as this evolved out of diverse motivations, their formal character united in following the mold Duck had set in *The Thresher's Labour*. A particular focus on trade and region shaped "brief biographies... which were used to introduce almost every poet who sought to emulate Duck."¹³⁵ This pattern of self-identification based on occupation and region lined the varying responses of each imitator to their unique labor conditions, social aspiration, and poetic reflections.

While Batt rightly notes the outlines of a fledgling community "Stirr'd up by Emulation of the Famous Mr. Duck," not enough attention has been paid to the implications of this emulation itself. Such a style of imitation is all too easily relegated to a muted form of guildism or a competitive gambit to gain patronage based on one's trade.¹³⁶ It means something much more

¹³⁴ Jennifer Batt, 'Stirr'd up by Emulation of the Famous Mr. Duck,' in *A History of Working-Class Literature*, edited by John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 38.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Goodridge lends the poem a reading along these lines in "Stephen Duck The Thresher's Labour and Mary Collier's The Woman's Labor" in *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. by Christine Gerrard (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2013).

precise that the bricklayer's demand for leisure outside the "'horrid Din / Of Swearing, Chawing, and of drinking Gin" (24) should depend on an imagination of the transformative potential of technologies, both poetic and instrumental, however rudimentary or plain these appear to us now. The proximity between Duck and his flail is essential in this regard. To take Tatersal as one example is to show that, for the bricklayer, as for the thresher, the tools of the trade perform the condition and consequence of poetry and, in that sense, are not simply as ancillary poetic figures, but contain an intrinsic potential for metamorphosis, both social and imaginary. Tatersal frames this potential most explicitly in a subtle jibe, where he wishes,

Oh! could my Trowel but that Shape [of a flail] assume!
 Could I a Wiltshire Thresher but become!
 Then might kind Fortune cast a Smile on me,
 And crown my Labours too with Lenity. (291-2)

The bricklayer uses a pride in technical knowledge "fitly us'd" to combat Duck on a transhistorical poetic terrain, reframing an artisan's braggadocio into a poetic duel fit for Homeric epic. Noteworthy here is how difficult and tenuous the lines between labor, literature, and technology become through this bantering technique of comparison. The impossible transformation of the tools of labor enables the improbable transformation of both occupation and identity. Tatersal thus points up and replays the fundamental tension of *The Thresher's Labour*, replacing the impossible exchange between ancient poetry and modern production with an equally idealistic equation of object and subject.

Writing in direct reply to a passage of *The Thresher's Labour* that criticized "prattling Females, arm'd with Rake and Prong," Mary Collier invoked a similar doubleness of roles between subject and object to critique Duck's misogyny. Her "Epistle to Mr. Stephen Duck" begins in a

Golden Age, a time-before-time of ancient poetry when “sweet-tongu'd Poets, in those generous Days,/ Unto our Shrine still offer'd up their Lays.” (27-28) Playing on the degradation of the modern against the ancient, Collier reframes Duck’s incessant toil as a symptom of both moral and poetic decline, a neglect that leaves “our hapless Sex in Silence lie / Forgotten, and in dark Oblivion die.” (39-40) But, like the thresher compelled to return to work, Collier submits the ever-present role of domestic labor as (re)productive technology that both matches, if not exceeds, the arduousness of threshing and gives the lie to the automaticity of masculine labor:

Against your coming Home prepare to get
 Our Work all done, our Houfe in order fet ;
Bacon and Dumpling in the Pot we boil,
 Our Beds we make, our Swine we fee the while ;
 Then wait at Door to see you coming Home,
 And fet the Table out against you come :
 Early next Morning we on you attend ;
 Our Children drefs and feed, their Cloaths we mend ;
 And in the Field our daily Task renew,
 Soon as the rifing Sun has dry'd the Dew (77-86)

Duck can appear to reach for autonomy in poetry because a domestic automaticity precedes and supports his laboring conditions. The flails, whetstones, and scythes of *The Thresher’s Labour* morph into beds, tables, and clothes subject to the same intensity of repetitive attention, but one that undergirds or supports from a secreted position the work of the field. Collier makes this obverse role explicit where she inverts Duck’s classical allusions: “While you to *Sisyphus* yourselves compare, / With *Danaus’ Daughters* we may claim a Share; / For while *he* labours hard against the Hill, / Bottomless Tubs of Water *they* must fil.” (293-242). The phallic image of a mounting hill is subverted by a “bottomless” basin never capable of holding the water the Danaids transfer into it.

The emulation of Tatarsal and Collier together represent through this poetic imagination of social change from instrumental apparatuses an early articulation of what Marx writing in the *Grundrisse* will refer to as the "general intellect." In his "fragment on the machine" Marx introduces the concept of a general intellect within the context of the most complex industrial apparatuses of his time. The "locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules" of the mid-nineteenth century emerge for Marx as so many forms of "fixed capital," forming the discrete, transposable, and integrating tools of both value exchange and extraction. Rather than pure instruments of exploitation or autonomous emblems of capital, Marx characterizes these concrete technologies as "the power of knowledge, objectified."¹³⁷ The kinetic energy present in each of Marx's examples (the shifting scenes of the locomotive, the distributed writing of the telegraph) comes to describe a function and mode completely at odds with the view of these devices as inert, artefactual, or even intermittently fetishistic. Technology's status as objectified knowledge guides Marx to the assertion that these machines signal to what degree "the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it."¹³⁸ This last point on the mutual transformation of the social and technological leads directly to the current state of global techno-capital streamlined by automation. It also describes with equal efficacy the eighteenth-century phenomenon of the peasant poet who writes from the scenes and toil of life in order to both to maintain and exceed them.

In order to understand how the notion of the general intellect is informed by the work of laboring poets, it is important to understand how Marx sets up the relationship between laborer and machine. Once a tool or instrument is employed toward production-for-profit, according to

¹³⁷ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1993), 706.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

Marx, it "passes through different metamorphoses, whose culmination is the machine, or rather, an automatic system of machinery."¹³⁹ Whatever specificity or character existed within the instrument up to this point of transformation becomes defunct since the system of machines has the effect of isolating the function of the instrument from its former use. Alienating the instrument in such a way grants the system "set in motion by an automaton a moving power that moves itself."¹⁴⁰ It is precisely how Marx articulates this "moving power that moves itself" that deserves attention here. Parting ways with the discrete economic analysis which led to his discussion of the machine, at the end of this section Marx illustrates objectified labor with a rhetoric of living machinery more at home in the previous century of natural genius than the world of locomotives and telegraphs. For Marx, the automaton that the machine becomes is a living, breathing, eating thing, "a mighty organism" that "possesses skills and strength... with a soul of its own in the mechanical laws acting through it..."¹⁴¹ The specific form or purpose of the instrument once owned by the laborer, along with whatever intentions or desires had attached to it, slowly disappear into a system of gears, belts, and smoke. By achieving this automatism, the machine evinces the possibility of pure production, a form of creation without any debt outstanding to material, history, or labor.

The self-propulsive motive principle with which Marx imbues the machine, however, first described the space shared between the laboring body of the lower-class mechanic and the sensitive body-soul of La Mettrie's man-machine. This radically egalitarian (and perhaps flattening) function of the man-machine owes a great resemblance to the discourse introducing the

¹³⁹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1993), 692.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 693.

"poetic naturals" epitomized by Duck, a naturalistic agrarian rendering of the mechanic which flaunted entry into literary culture and sketched the limits of social mobility. The genre of the apologetic preface indeed carries with it the same function of Marx's machine: objectified labor whose origin is unknown fitted into an "automatic system of machinery." Whether the inspiratory model of genius or the Promethean creative model, both deny a sense of animacy, change, difference, and life to the poet themselves, granting this instead to the autonomous or heteronomous image of a peasant poet, the poet who carries himself or the poet who stands on the shoulders of giants. Marx's concern over the automaton driving production replays a concern over those other automata which it subordinates: those still in possession of their labor power. It is precisely the "soul of its own in the mechanical laws acting through it" that constitutes the desire of Duck to become something more than the Thresher Poet while playing up the title.

Long before the global expansion of technological capital in form of carbon-powered machinery and the increase of productive forces subordinated to it, the technological foundation of the general intellect becomes visible in the wishes and whims of laboring poets who propose to write from and for the tools of their trades. When Tatarsal responds to Duck's success with the line "Why may not Bricklayers too their Subjects chuse?" he questions why the technology of the brick and the technique of its laying fail to amount not only to a topic for poetry, but why his social position should prevent him from participating in a collective aesthetic experience with the muse. This interpretation proposes that the economic claim made apparent in Christmas's somewhat cynical insistence on viewing those inspired by Duck as "poets-as-opportunists" carries with it a much less individualistic potential. Clearly opportunist notions of self-commodification tinge

laboring poets' tendency "to sell themselves and their writing" under the rubric set by Duck.¹⁴² But despite what Christmas describes as the "hard biting reality of it," Tatarsal's comments indicate how this aspect of a social collective based on a shared (if banter-laden) technical knowledge also exists within *The Thresher's Labour*.

Scholarship on Duck, and laboring poets more generally, has often found itself caught in an impasse shared by Marx's theory of the general intellect and his hesitancy around the shared self-propulsive traits of human and machine. Either Duck's status as laborer predetermines his subject matter or his move to the lofty language of Augustan poetry chafes against his humble origins. From a more removed perspective, this double-bind scenario substantiates at the biographical level a similar categorical tendency of social programming through technology. Either the general intellect appropriates technology for collective liberation, or it submits to it, becoming more fragmented and alienated from the very conditions which defined its initial desire. Faced with these two equally unsatisfactory options, the validity of a discourse of natural genius, ostensibly the same used to disguise the unavailability of difference, simply cannot be condoned. The structure of exploitation and ideological manipulation are too clearly manifest. For this reason, many have rejected the notion of genius out of hand, deeming it an irredeemable ideological tool.

But what if this tool itself was not an imposed externality but a part of the man-machine that Duck became? And what if it were intimations of this man-machine status, the animatic ability of the automaton to cut across differences, confuse boundaries, and creates life in death or death in life that contributed to Duck's appointment at Merlin's Cave? What if the apparently detached or ethereal quality of organic genius, in so extravagantly distinguishing itself from the predominate

¹⁴² Christmas, 96.

materialist discourse of Hobbes or La Mettrie, worked precisely through so conspicuously conflating its automaticity for autonomy? In other words, and more fundamentally, what if autonomy depended, irrevocably and through a complicated heteronomy, on the animacy of automaticity and the automaticity of animation glimpsed in the work of Duck and the laboring poets who followed his lead? If this were the case, then the entire history of natural genius, up to and beyond the Romantic concern for original creation, would constitute a continual forgetting or denial that the "spirit" of genius relies on the automatic functioning of the machine, which confuses representation and medium, subject and object. It would also challenge the use-function of technological media and the instruments of labor increasingly absorbed by the development of automatic machinery into the nineteenth century, reframing these from obstacles or adversaries to potential sources of emancipative knowledge through the appropriation of fixed capital or, more simply, material memory. And in the political gesture of that appropriation, the act of finding and making oneself in and through tools, books, and technologies often hostile to that finding and making, it becomes possible to view the life of the threshing poet as an experiment in the capture of time through literary technology. Duck, Tattersal, Collier, and the tradition of peasant poetry to which they would contribute, then, can be defined by this simple, though never simply acquired or practiced, precept: to find the time of leisure in the time of work, the time of Ovid in the time of threshing.

Chapter 2

The Work of Ann Yearsley in the Time of Mechanical Reproduction: Technofeminism,
Sentimentality, and the *Vita Contemplativa*

“Every printshop has its windows stuck full with indecent prints, to inflame desire thro’ the eye.”

- John Shebbeare, *Letters on the English Nation* (1755)

In her introductory preface to Ann Yearsley's first volume of poetry, *Poems on Several Occasions* (1785), Hannah More paraphrases her client in delivering a brief anecdote about the source of certain poetic models. The patroness of the Milkwoman of Bristol reveals to unknown readers and familiar subscribers how she “expressed surprise at two or three classical allusions in one of [Yearsley’s] Poems and inquired how she came by them.”¹⁴³ Yearsley’s reply, mediated through More, reveals “she had taken them from little ordinary prints which hung in a shop-window.”¹⁴⁴ This ekphrastic origin related, More goes on to speculate that Thomas Chatterton, “a late untutored, and unhappy, but very sublime genius of this town [Bristol]” might have acquired poetic material through a similar visual poaching, effectively “diffu[sing] through his writings a certain air of learning, the reality of which he did not possess.”¹⁴⁵ After this brief flirtation with the classical terrain of *ut pictura poesis*, tacitly raising the suggestion Yearsley’s claim to knowledge had no basis in “reality,” More never revisits the topic in her introduction. Nowhere in her writing does Yearsley draw attention to where these allusions were placed, what techniques she used to develop them, or which prints from which artists or workshops inspired her to carry their form into verse.

¹⁴³ Hannah More, "Prefatory Letter," *Poems on Several Occasions* (London: G.G. & Robinson, 1785), x.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Despite the hapax legomenon status of this printshop story, the anecdote appears frequently in contemporary discussions of Yearsley's work, placed here and there as a bibliographic curio accenting more sympathetic moments of Yearsley's story, such as being discovered close to starvation in a stable alongside her family during the winter of 1784 or her eventual profession as the proprietor of a circulating library towards the end of her life.¹⁴⁶ Analysis never carries the event beyond its anecdotal facticity. Yet there is much more to say about these doubly diminutive "little ordinary prints." This chapter finds its justification in looking to this innocent, otherwise unproductive remark as its own window, both pausing at its translucent surface and peering beyond into its depth. It argues for the necessity of grasping how the experience of scoping out prints and gazing at engravings while walking down the suburban outskirts and commercial districts of eighteenth-century Bristol beckons not only to both a longer history and more complex subjectivity largely absent from scholarship on Yearsley but a precise method of acquiring that "learning" denied of Chatterton and others like him.¹⁴⁷

Attention to this anecdote pries open questions in which Yearsley in particular and eighteenth-century laboring poets more generally have been continuously embedded. How much of their life enters the poetry? Where does (or must) the drama of the biography end in

¹⁴⁶ Featured in Donna Landry, *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739-1796* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.); Ferguson, *Eighteenth Century Women Poets* (1995); William J. Christmas, *The Lab'ring Muses: Work, Writing, and the Social Order in English Plebeian Poetry 1730-1830* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001); Sussanne Kord, *Women Peasant Poets in Eighteenth-Century England, Scotland, and Germany: Milkmaids on Parnassus* (Camden East: Camden House, 2003), Kerri Andrews, *Ann Yearsley and Hannah More: Patronage and Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 2016), et al.

¹⁴⁷ Yearsley's connections with poetic imagery and visual prints are substantial and lifelong, but altogether unremarked. In addition to these comments on window engravings, Yearsley's introduction to poetry took the form of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1745), later outfitted in the Richard Edwards edition of 1797 with engravings by William Blake. Among the subscribers of her first publication was Joshua Reynolds, president of the Royal Academy, leading theoretician of British visual arts, and close friend of Hannah More. In 1790, she apprenticed her eldest son to the engraving trade. Finally, in later volumes of her poetry, Yearsley took an active role in the design and placement of engraved front matter, including self-portraits specifically commissioned by her for *The Rural Lyre: A Volume of Poems* (1796).

considerations of poetic production? How to read the poetry of poets whose entrance into print is predetermined by their ambivalent position on the margins of the society of poetry and the poetry of society? Since the publication of JMS Tompkins' *The Polite Marriage: Eighteenth Century Essays* in 1938, the first sustained analysis of Yearsley's life and writing, two methodological strands predominate in providing answers to these questions on how to make Yearsley visible. The first is perhaps best represented by Mary Waldron, who in her biography on the poet takes up a kind of romantic pragmatism in careful attention to how Yearsley as an individual was never reduced to the draw of wider sociohistorical narratives or critical analyses having to do with class politics, standing apart as a lyric subject whose legacy demonstrates the success of her proto-romantic project. Such a framing, however, invites an odd side-effect. Its open-ended commitment to thinking beyond ideology and politics quickly snaps shut. If, as Waldron argues, Yearsley has been "peculiarly beset during her life and since by insistent voices peremptorily assigning her a place in the unstable element of her times," the first question to ask in response is simply: why should these voices be external to Yearsley? Why may she not join the chorus?¹⁴⁸

Feminist and Marxist scholars interested in analyzing the tonality and range of such voices take their departure from the groundbreaking work of Moira Ferguson and Donna Landry, the latter of whom in *The Muses of Resistance* (1990) firmly situates Yearsley within a line of feminist writers from the lower orders, presenting the poet as experimenting with the "illusory freedoms of the bourgeois subject while remaining critical of historical developments."¹⁴⁹ Owing to Landry's inauguration of a political Yearsley, more recent studies have begun to introduce the poet to wider

¹⁴⁸ Mary Waldron, *Lactilla: Milkwoman of Clifton: The Life and Writings of Ann Yearsley 1753-1806* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 12.

¹⁴⁹ Landry, 129.

programs of critical thought and theory, taking note of her writing on the slave trade, her contributions to ecofeminism, and her relations with Romantic contemporaries.¹⁵⁰ While these works accomplish the notable goal of resituating Yearsley within contemporary political and aesthetic discourses of identity, gender, authorship, and labor, providing in the process fuller interpretations sorely missing from early discussions of the poet, they seem to confront in a more critically nuanced and politically committed form the same tendency noted in Waldron's romantic individualism. An interior look at the biography through the archival world of local registers and demographic surveys renders Yearsley vacant or atomized, while the exterior view fitting the poet within wider sociohistorical narratives engenders awkward political commitments and anachronistic motivations that chafe against an oeuvre often ambivalent to such designs.

In his introduction to the 2003 edited volume containing a selection of Yearsley's poems, Tim Burke gestures to this to-and-fro in pointing to the phenomenon by which, based on the method or motivation, "Yearsley can become for us the proletarian rebel lashing out against middle class conservatism, or an icon of women's voices lost from literary history ... But ... her poetic achievements have continued to be muted, to some degree, by attention to her attractive biographical drama of discovery and dispute."¹⁵¹ The proper response to this protean character, at least for Burke, comprises a redoubled commitment to unfolding the complexity and "achievement" of her poetry. Yet the risk returns here, as Sussanne Kord warns, of engaging Yearsley and her work from a paternalist framework of timeless literary merit – a dangerous tokenism inviting the

¹⁵⁰ Annie Persons, "Ann Yearsley, Hannah More, and Human Commodification in the Literary Marketplace," *Women's Writing*, 27 (2020), 217-33; Anne Milne, "*Lactilla Tends her Fav'rite Cow*": *Ecocritical Readings of Animals and Women in Eighteenth-Century British Labouring-Class Women's Poetry* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2008); Robert Edward Mitchell, "*The Soul that Dreams it Shares the Power it Feels so Well*": *The Politics of Sympathy in the Abolitionist Verse of Williams and Yearsley*," *Romanticism on the Net* Vol. 29/30 (2003).

¹⁵¹ Tim Burke, "Introduction," in *Ann Yearsley: Selected Poems*, ed. Tim Burke (Cheltenham: Cyder Press, 2003).

potential for modern critics to adopt the stance of posthumous patrons praising the textual remains of Yearsley when they attain poetic success as it is now (or then) defined and admonishing her when they fail to meet the mark in the present or the past.

I believe it is pressing for us to reflect on this inherent instability. In a word, Yearsley appears to be *infinitely replicable*. Avoiding paternalistic judgements of autonomous poetic worth and gauche ascriptions to future political movements requires an attempt to articulate this reiterative and metamorphic Yearsley.¹⁵² In response to these questions, I would like to suggest that a necessarily imperfect, but nonetheless fuller understanding of the historical and textual Lactilla can come from reading Yearsley in two interrelated ways. The first is to read her as she herself read the classical engravings pasted in printshop windows. From this perspective, Yearsley's walks about town present the occasion to interpret her as *flâneuse*, a female "idler, a dawdling observer, usually found in cities" whose existence in public brings with it anxieties about bodies, abilities, and ways of being.¹⁵³ Such public observation by necessity led toward, in Yearsley's words, being put before "the public Eye."¹⁵⁴ As her classical sobriquet Lactilla implies, Yearsley occupied a literary-historical position that functioned, both consciously and unconsciously, during and after her life, as a unique kind of visual device that entered into her poetry. The popular interest in the concept of natural genius that led many of Yearsley's contemporaries to believe "they would gain access through her to 'the wild and natural'" formed

¹⁵² Many scholars, however, recognize the epiphenomenon of this inherent instability in attending to the complexity and contradictory character of Yearsley's class position, a long debate again represented by the conflict between Waldron's adherence to a nearly middle-class milkwoman and Landry's firm commitment to a radical laboring-class Lactilla. A kind of middle ground emerges where Cairnie (2006) suggests "Yearsley actively employs ambivalence as a writing strategy which (she clearly hopes) will enable her to issue social and political commentary and secure a place in middle class literary culture," (p. 345.)

¹⁵³ Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017), 7.

¹⁵⁴ Quoted in Waldron, 68.

her as both a privileged witness and a visual instrument, producer and product, embodying a telescopic poetry capable of bringing the unsullied grottoes of a Golden Age when men philosophized with full bellies nearer to the eye.¹⁵⁵

There is no indication that Yearsley believed in this myth. She did, however, delight in the practice of imaginative seeing on which it was premised.¹⁵⁶ From this perspective, then, we might read the textual artifact of Yearsley as Walter Benjamin read the contours of the urban architectures of Paris in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project*, mostly a series of notes, remembrances, and excerpts, offers a fragmented testament to the decaying byways of Parisian arcades, the automated toys populating department store windows, and the social archetypes who gravitated around these spectacles, advertising themselves on the street in a corresponding display. Just as the urban archetypes of the flaneur, prostitute, and sandwichman become for Benjamin "dialectical images," symbols of the present capable of generating lines of history, economy, and the development of capitalism throughout time, the "primitive poet" turned flaneuse manages something very similar in her leisurely investigations of Bristol's urban pastimes.

The second manner of reading Yearsley evolves from these dialectical relays to notice that the same dynamic animating the flaneuse as a liminal figure, one literally standing "on the threshold – of the metropolis as of the middle class," also energizes the protean quality of the printed engraving.¹⁵⁷ In the mid-to-late eighteenth century, the ownership of print engraving was

¹⁵⁵ Waldron, 9.

¹⁵⁶ Margaret Anne Doody, *The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 131-33.

¹⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 10.

largely reserved for an aristocratic amusement, antiquarian interest, or, increasingly, a way to fuel middle-class pretensions to social capital. Yet, as WJT Mitchell observes of images in general, there was and has always been a unique life glittering on the surface of the most visually measly or politically conservative pictures that loosens them from engrained reception. The most recent manifestation of such living (or, really, undead) images occurs with “the clone, which is not merely the literalization of the living image, but also its actual, scientific realization...”¹⁵⁸ Observing and observed, “surveyor and surveyed,” the ambivalence of the Milkwoman of Bristol results from the embodiment of this style of popular visual media, caught and creating without finality in the interstices between the living and non-living, the ancient and the modern, body and soul. Thus, to read Yearsley is to read how this life, as all life does, professes a certain knowledge within its particular way of being.

The undead image or literal clone leads in another vocabulary towards figuring Yearsley as a cyborg, a productive material-semiotic interface for the organic, machinic, economic, symbolic, and libidinal that is without origin and end. The anachronism of placing Yearsley within a cyborg ontology leading from the reproducible character of the print engraving is deliberate rather than incidental. It forms a commitment that responds to traditional feminist approaches to Yearsley with the same questions informing Donna Haraway’s call to create a “diffractive” politics “predicated upon production, connection, and creation” and Helen Hester’s recent interrogation of late twentieth and early twenty-first century feminism’s reluctance to take up women’s imbrication with technology, abstraction, systems, non-locality, and totality.¹⁵⁹ These technofeminisms allow

¹⁵⁸ WJT Mitchell, *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 87.

¹⁵⁹ Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Helen Hester, *Xenofeminism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

space for what Yearsley herself encountered, first, at the surface and behind the glass of the print shop window as proof of the developing forces of production, the ways in which these forces entered lives through objects and commodities outfitting biological organics with technical organs, and, finally, how this kinship with visual reproductive and mimetic technologies developed into both the globalized mediascape from which we look back to read Yearsley's work and, as the printshop anecdote makes clear, her work itself.

Yearsley then is not only a flaneuse who lingers over images, but a walking *tableau vivant*, a living image, a cyborg powered by and producing images, allusions, and figurations. To develop this way of reading Lactilla, the first section of this chapter grants special attention to how Yearsley's poetic practice of allusion and figuration in her first poem "Night: To Stella" forwards specific knowledge claims while adhering to a sentimental discourse of non-knowledge. Developing the immodesty of this risky experiment with natural genius, the second section notices how similar knowledge claims gravitate around the media space of the eighteenth century printshop window. It goes on to argue that Yearsley's early poetry is preoccupied with the figural politics of these windows and their pictorial contents as "performed images that can be inhabited."¹⁶⁰ Here I ask whether an ambulating engagement with the reproductive technology of the print parallels another figure of observation that Tita Chico, riffing on Haraway, refers to as a "immodest witness," a cyborg-inspired technoscientific figure who holds out by holding onto a form of parrhesia based in "embodiment and subjectivity."¹⁶¹ The relation between these modes of moving, looking, and knowing demonstrates the value in reading Yearsley from the perspective

¹⁶⁰ Haraway, 18.

¹⁶¹ Tita Chico, *The Experimental Imagination: Literary Knowledge and Science in the British Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018)

of a contemporary technofeminism capable of understanding the imbrication of human and technical objects, the knowledges generated by these relations, and how the movement of gendered bodies in public formulates its own claim not just to space but, as I hope to show, to the right for spatial embodiment to include a temporal disembodiment, a subjectivity premised on entering a mode of time only accessible via spatial media objects.

The chapter concludes with a reflection on what the sentimental poetry of Yearsley can provide to augment current technofeminist narratives in regard to the gender politics inherent in seizing the means of technological progress for anti-biological emancipatory ends. If Yearsley's project is based in part on the motif of stolen glances at the reproductive technology of print engravings, leading toward the embodiment of such media, the program can lend itself to a "transformative, world-building, and technologically enabled emancipatory endeavor."¹⁶² While sympathetic with traditional feminist approaches to the Milkwoman of Bristol, I look to a later poem titled "Soliloquy" to question the tenor and extent of this endeavor as it exists in Yearsley's work. It may be that an aesthetic lingering, a poetic science, and a thematic of infinite replicability provide Lactilla with an historical politics that is at once intimate and collective.

Ground Control to Celestial Orders

Before the publication of her first volume, Yearsley's circumstances, character, and personal history formed the basis of an exchange between More and her friend, Elizabeth Montagu. Catching word of a poor woman with poetical aspirations discovered huddled beside her husband, mother, and six children frozen and close to starvation in a stable during the winter of 1784, More devised a religiously inflected philanthropic project to improve Yearsley's condition through the

¹⁶² Helen Hester, "Promethean Labors and Domestic Realism," *e-flux Architecture* (2017).

publication of a selection of her verse in subscription. Letters written and exchanged during a span of three months between More and Montagu foreground a singular concern, one likely at the top of Montagu's mind after the recent public falling out with her own protégé, the shoemaker poet James Woodhouse. Whatever else the funds acquired from publication might accomplish for the immediate needs of her family, her patron determined that Yearsley's social improvement must not allow her to leave her station in raising cows and supplying milk to the village of Clifton. As Linda Zionkowski has shown, this practice of intellectual and economic containment from patronage structures exhibits a doubled or paradoxical barrier. The very space of movement and expression granted to the client by the patron for the extension or reinforcement of the literary value first discovered in their work depends entirely on a set of invisible barriers preventing any access into larger social, religious, or cultural issues.¹⁶³

However, in Yearsley's case, this discourse of containment extended in a curious way to areas of learning at a much further remove from what might be reasonably expected to fall within the purview of a rhyming milkwoman. After receiving an extract of Yearsley's early verse in a letter sent from More in October 1784, Montagu responded to the sample with an impassioned tone mixing approbation and remonstrance. Appealing to the cultural tropes of natural genius, Montagu replied:

“Her native fire has not been dampened by a load of learning. Flame is extinguished by throwing on it matter which does not contain any igneous particle. Avaunt! grammarians; stand away! logicians; far, far away all heathen ethics and mythology, geometry, and algebra, and make room for the Bible and Milton when a poet is to be made”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Linda Zionkowski, "Strategies of Containment: Stephen Duck, Ann Yearsley, and the Problem of Polite Culture," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 13 (November 1989), 102.

¹⁶⁴ William Roberts, "Sandleford 1784," *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs Hannah More* (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1834), 1:362.

Threatening to smother the creative passion of Yearsley's "native fire," Montagu suggests, are the engines of modern science and letters: two pieces of the classical trivium and the "heathen" mathematics of Greek geometry and Arabic algebra. This series of imprecations projected to ward off the rigid linear structures of logic, math, and grammar from Yearsley's natural verse marks so firm a division between unlearned poetry and studied science that the sentiment of preservation buckles under its own weight. Contemporary critics like Joseph Addison celebrated Milton precisely for his metrical skill in "var[ying] his numbers," producing a poetry capable of complex, unified, and mathematical symmetry in elevating unrhymed iambic pentameter above simple end rhyme.¹⁶⁵ Earlier in the century, Edward Manwaring went to even further lengths in his 1737 *Stichology: Or, a Recovery of the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew Numbers*, arguing for a fundamental science of meter in forwarding the claim that the ancient ratios of metrical feet such as the spondee and dactyl correspond multiplicatively to "the harmonic rule, invented by *Pythagoras*."¹⁶⁶

While Montagu's stern severance of poetics and mathematics may have overlooked a certain strain of scholarship interested in their commonality, what is worth noting is her overdetermined commitment to prevent Yearsley's from venturing too far into an intellectual space that, since the popularization of Newtonian science, had become the hallmark of natural philosophy and mathematics. In a word, there may be no experiment, no extension into systematization, no formality, and certainly no claim to a kind of instrumental knowledge capable of anticipating and intervening in a nature that must remain untouched, pure, or objective. This

¹⁶⁵ Joseph Addison, "Spectator No. 285," *The Works of the Right Honorable Joseph Addison, Esq.*, Vol 3. (London: Jacob Tonson, 1721), 290.

¹⁶⁶ Edward Manwaring, *Stichology: Or, A Recovery of the Latin, Greek and Hebrew Numbers Exemplified in the Reduction of All Horace's Metres, and the Greek and Hebrew Poetry* (London: Printed for the Author, 1737), 17.

mysterious fire must be left as it was found to burn all by itself, albeit under careful observation and judicious stoking.

Based on this clear imperative to save Lactilla's earthy plainness from the precision of scientific learning, it is perhaps surprising to find a trove of imagery and allusion dealing with scientific subject matter in Yearsley's earliest poem, "Night: To Stella." Circulated in letters between More, Montagu, and Horace Walpole before any firm plan for publication emerged and traditionally read as a hesitant yet clear-eyed and skilled paeon largely written to and under the thumb of her patron, "Night: To Stella" makes subtle yet diffuse claims to knowledge cast far outside the standard patron poem.

It opens on a quiet night with an upward glance toward the moon, "At this lone hour, when Nature silent lies, / And Cynthia, solemn, aids the rising scene..."¹⁶⁷ Immediately, Yearsley compiles image after image, picturing daily cares softened during the night as "Hydra-headed" and the fancy roused by dark scenes and shining stars as a bird pluming "her ruffled wing" to "seek the spot where sacred raptures rise; / Where thy mild form, relax'd in guiltless sleep, / Forgets to think, to feel..."¹⁶⁸ Setting this nocturnal scene, Yearsley turns to invoke the muse of tragedy in a relay set on ultimately evoking the image of "Stella," the poetic sobriquet of More:

Melpomene! thou sadly sighing maid!
Great Queen of Sorrows, in majestic weed,
Whose gayest airs are solemn sounds of woe;
Thou who awak'st fair Stella's soothing lay,
Soon as Aurora gilds the blushing East,
O lend thy aid, while thy soft votary sleeps,
And bid *me* boldly swell the artless line,
Lend me *her* pen, and guide my rustic hand,

¹⁶⁷ Ann Yearsley, "Night: To Stella," *Poems On Several occasions: By Ann Yearsley, a Milkwoman of Bristol*, (London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1785), 1-2.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 3, 5-8.

To draw soft pity from the Tragic Tale,
Where goading misery drives her ploughshare deep.¹⁶⁹

Although Yearsley is careful to follow tradition in invoking a muse to summon invention lithe and skilled enough to compliment her gracious patron, this early stanza turns on an ambiguous scene of stolen time. She pictures More on the edge of the morning aided by Melpomene in producing a “soothing lay / Soon as Aurora gilds the blushing East.” Yet, under the cover of night, the poet begs the muse to take advantage of this lull in duty, asking for the inspiration of her own voice while More “thy soft votary sleeps.” The opposition between Yearsley’s activity and More’s temporary inactivity (accentuated into a firm difference by the italicization of “*me*” and “*her*”) carries through the remainder of “Night: To Stella” the notion that the time of Yearsley’s composition can only truly take off in the shade of night, outside of the careful watch of her patron, and under a lunar light, another glow that resembles yet differs from her stellar patron.

Borrowing More’s “pen” while she sleeps, Yearsley then employs the “rustic hand” in an encomium that reaches beyond the earthy georgic imagery of laboring misery’s “ploughshare deep,” cultivating instead the thematic terrain granted by the starry nature of “Stella” into an image of disembodied interstellar travel. After claiming Stella’s “soaring spirit shares / An early Heaven, anticipates her bliss, / And quaffs nectareous draughts of joy sublime,” Yearsley charts a scene wherein,

Beyond yon starry firmament she roves,
And basks in suns that never warm'd the earth;
Newtonian systems lag her rapid flight,
She pierces thro' his planetary worlds,
And, eager, grasps creations yet to be.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 15-24.

¹⁷⁰ Yearsley, “Night: To Stella,” 37-44

The ambiguity threaded through the first stanza of moonlit lucubration reappears. It becomes apparent that, although Stella breaks through the familiar constellations of the night sky to float into unknown galaxies, Yearsley's skill effectively uses her borrowed pen to chart the star map guiding her patron's way. While easy to interpret this flight of the soul as a metaphysical journey in line with the theory of metempsychosis (which Yearsley would deploy in her next volume), allusion to the science of Newton cautions against framing these lines beyond the bounds of physics. Where the poet imagines the consequence of this imaginative flight outpacing the intellectual or physical limits of "Newtonian systems," the image itself insistently presses on the pulse of Newton's firm grip on contemporary eighteenth-century science.

The allusion channels the luminal travel described in Newton's *Opticks* by hypothesizing a "rapid flight" so rapid it invites comparison to the unobstructed path of Newtonian corpuscles or light particles extended through an "infinite, empty, causally inert, Euclidean space that we cannot perceive."¹⁷¹ To arrive at a sufficient explanation for the free movement of celestial bodies, including planets and comets, in addition to the miniscule corpuscles of light, Newton saw fit to "empty the Heavens of all Matter, except perhaps some very thin Vapours, Steams, or Effluvia, arising from the Atmospheres of the Earth, Planets, and Comets... an exceedingly rare Æthereal Medium."¹⁷² Yet the formalization of this voided system "lags" the speed of Stella's travel, presenting the imagination of a speed relative to physics but of a kind that cannot be adequately contained in it. A universe emerges where haste and rest comport, where creative energy settles in the luxuriant emptiness of "basking" in the light of foreign suns.

¹⁷¹ Andrew Janiak "Isaac Newton," in *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century* ed Peter R. Anstey (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), 133.

¹⁷² Isaac Newton, *Opticks: Or, A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, and Inflections and Colours of Light* (London: Printed for William Innys, 1730), 368.

The following line extends this ambiguity in the image of Stella effortlessly intruding into Newton's "planetary worlds," evoking a tone both irreverent and adherent to Newton's postulation of the mutual penetrability of light and matter: "Are not gross Bodies and Light convertible into one another, and may not Bodies receive much of their Activity from the Particles of Light which enter their Composition?"¹⁷³ This complicated description of Stella's travel into the heavens subtly slots Yearsley into a tradition of natural philosophic poetics, one that her poem reinforces and begins to contest at a distance.¹⁷⁴ In *A View of Death* (1725), for instance, John Reynolds undertakes a similar venture in imaginatively following Newton's particles of light side by side in their

Swift streams! that almost leave the thought behind,
 Almost outfly the sallies of the Mind.
 Sagacious they! that still unerring tend
 The shortest way to their designed end!
 Sure to come there, while nothing can repress
 Their speedy flight, but unresisting emptiness.¹⁷⁵

By imagining Stella in a similar mode, escaping the earth's ethereal medium in a "rapid flight" paralleling the journey of a particle of light through various obscuring or obstructing "Vapours, Steams, or Effluvia," Yearsley forwards a subtle yet sympathetic challenge to Newtonian thought. Despite Montagu's protestations, within the first few stanzas of her earliest recorded poem written under More's patronage, Yearsley exhibits an experimental imagination committed to forming a poetic persona stretching light years beyond the restricted diet of "the Bible and Milton."

¹⁷³ Ibid., 374.

¹⁷⁴ For more on this tradition, see Marjorie Hope Nicholson, *Newton Demands the Muse: Newtons Opticks and the 18th Century Poets* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹⁷⁵ John Reynolds, *A View of Death: Or, The Soul's Departure from the World. A Philosophical Poem, With a Copious Body of Explanatory Notes, and Some additional Composures* (London: Printed for John Clark and Richard Hett, 1725), 41.

In the following stanza, Yearsley sets her course back to earth and grounds her focus in more terrestrial concerns, admonishing “Ye busy world!” in a memento mori animated by a strange image of physical phenomena.¹⁷⁶ The efforts of humans are equated to “Infant piles, / To raise a bubble, which in air dissolves; / You toil an age to grasp the shining dust, / Death trips your heels, you throw it to the wind.”¹⁷⁷ Where Stella shot unimpeded through the atmosphere mingling with the “shining dust” of stars, the lot of lesser beings seeking riches resembles the diminutive floating of a fragile bubble soon-to-burst. The remedy to such transience appears to be More herself, transformed into a kind of ocular instrument capable of disciplining the gaze:

list a while to Stella's moral strain;
 She'll teach thy eye in mental maze to creep,
 Timid and trembling, to explore the past;
 Alarm'd by her, the monitor within
 Shall aid thy search, and bring thyself to view.¹⁷⁸

Stella’s audio-visual discipline excites an inward turn that confuses mental space and historical time under a figure of conscience. The eye lost “timid and trembling” in a labyrinthine state finds itself poised to “explore” a past that, under the influence of the “monitor” (perhaps a subtle play on the Minotaur at the center of the maze) guiding the eye, appears to already contain a truer image of the self. Evoking an odd synesthesia between ear (“moral strain”), “eye,” and mind (“mental maze”), Yearsley constructs a metaphor tested, reset, and applied throughout the remainder of the poem that posits Stella as a novel aural-optical device in whose “mild rhetoric dwells a social love / Beyond my wild conceptions, optics false! / Thro' which I falsely judg'd of polish'd life.”¹⁷⁹ Yearsley portrays these older “optics false” oxidizing from neglect or misuse finally cleared and

¹⁷⁶ Yearsley, “Night: To Stella,” 45.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 46-49.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 51-55.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 202-204.

turned to “bright strain”, saying “Ah, Stella! I'm a convert; thou hast tun'd / My rusting powers to the bright strain of joy.”¹⁸⁰ And yet it is worth remembering how the poem begins with the imagination of another brightness, the physical luminance of the moon hovering above the poet to rouse her fancy and undertake the strain protected (but only so much) by a tragic muse.

Having become lost in “too daring theme,” Yearsley returns to the sight of Stella who “soars, nor heeds my plaintive note” to contrast this soaring with her own “sluggard flight,” neglected by a muse who “clasps her fav'rite maid, / And bids me fix where Science never dawn'd.”¹⁸¹ Hinting through contrast back to the image of “Aurora” gilding the “blushing East” to wake More’s own poetry, the milkwoman of Bristol expresses how the muse of tragedy abandons her to a place where learning and “Science” never cast their light. No goddess of dawn, however, is needed to expose the phosphorescent irony gleaming from this nocturnal scene: the techniques, tools, and theories of science are invoked throughout. The semantic flexibility of the verb “fix” in these lines also leaves the nature of this time in the dark uncertain. Melpomene may bid Yearsley to install or settle herself permanently in the absence of Science or she may beg her to project her gaze into that void, stand as one transfixed by it and choose to put this night into another order.

Patricia Demers’ claim that Yearsley self-presents as “downcast and unlettered” and “clings to the idea of being an outsider” draws attention to how this “outsider” status authorizes a more complex observational vantage point, a place of experiment, trial, and the search that will “bring thyself to view.”¹⁸² Self-identification as a being “Uncouth, unciviliz'd, and rudely rough / Unpolish'd, as the form thrown by Heaven” comes to host a doubled edge. The surplus of scientific

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 207-208.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 70, 73-76.

¹⁸² Patricia Demers, “‘For mine’s a stubborn and a savage will’: ‘Lactilla’ (Ann Yearsley) and ‘Stella’ (Hannah More) Reconsidered,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* (1993), 141.

allusion in the poem proactively cautions against the simple assumption that what emerges “From simple Nature, in her artless guise” is necessarily a simple phenomenon. Indeed, the incessant contrast between an earthy, embodied, immobile, and rustic Lactilla and an unbound, illuminated, disembodied, and empyrean Stella slyly orients these lines of verse to ask the same question Newton posed toward the end of his *Opticks*: “may not Bodies receive much of their Activity from the Particles of Light which enter their Composition?”

The social pressure of humility and self-effacement beneath the weight of a superior luminary can easily obscure the mobile activity of a body, even and perhaps most especially when the body in question exerts so much careful energy to profess its own immobility. On the one hand, this emphasis on emotive or creative stirring makes Yearsley a poet of the sensible, demonstrating a sensitive mind primed to receive stimulus. It is certainly the case, as Claire Knowles notes, that “Yearsley stakes her nascent poetic career on the sympathetic impulses at the heart of the discourse of sensibility.”¹⁸³ But such a sensibility converges in these lines with the detached, supposedly unfeeling neutrality of scientific observation and rational investigation, a feeling of and from an unfelt supposed to be reserved for matter. Indeed, like Newton’s glass receiving and diffracting the rays of light into the visible spectrum, Yearsley poses herself to More, paradoxically and wryly, as a kind of somnolent object, waiting for a beam from her starry patron to inspire and activate the complex physical mechanism hiding away inside her. When she writes “Such is the mind / Which thou may'st yet illumine” she shows a mind stocked with more than a readiness of feeling, one already diligently working away in the dark, capable of emitting a powerful spectrum.

¹⁸³ Claire Knowles, “Ann Yearsley, Biography and the ‘Pow’rs of Sensibility Untaught!” *Women’s Writing* 17:1 (2010), 173-174.

While the generic constraints of “Night: To Stella” necessarily elevate More as their primary object, this elevation also relies on a relentless play driven by the depersonalization inherent in the figurality of the sobriquet that itself doubles “as a key vehicle for developing the poetics of its author.”¹⁸⁴ In this sense, “Stella” should not be read as simple or transparent stand-in for More. Rather, the rhetorical play around the figure itself, bleeding into the images and design of the poem as taking place outside of her direct intervention, at night and under the stars, necessarily invites the materiality of a physical system outside or beyond the personality and intimacy of a patronage structure. Figure emerges as a physical poetic body tensing the limits of physical science. In this light, the dedicative preposition of “To Stella” harbors within the directional: a commitment to reach the stars, to go *to* Stella.

It is this figurality that creates a sense of transit or exchange that begins to complicate Landry’s assertion that Yearsley frames the poem as a “‘choice’” between two kinds of class-specific behavior... the demystification and enlightenment are all on one side, in the form of criticism of laboring-class unreflective stricture and inarticulacy of feeling.”¹⁸⁵ What for Landry at first appears to motivate the poem as a rapid-fire series of unctuous comments then becomes a space for Yearsley to not only demonstrate a command of poetic language but to professes of a kind of scientific or experimental knowledge she is supposed to lack, a profession that both invites and refuses Mores’ personification as an unchanging, protective, and gracious celestial body. The figurality of the star or constellation in question begins to escape More, but not necessarily out of any incipient hostility or class antagonism on Yearsley’s part. Rather, it is clear that the figurality of the “heavens,” stretching across its poetic and physical senses, means much more to Yearsley

¹⁸⁴ Ibid 173.

¹⁸⁵ Landry, 150.

as a position of privilege than whatever content exists in the gracious condescension from her patron's stardom. Her desire for Stella is also a desire for poetic figuration, for laying down the material of poetry. After all, while she merely borrows the pen, she never asks how to use it.

Reading Yearsley's first poem with this metonymy in mind presents the possibility of understanding the poet as engaging not simply with the personal friendship of More through the character of Stella or expressing how her rustic nature primes her for the practice of sentiment. Instead, we can see Yearsley making specific knowledge claims about physical, social, and astronomical phenomena in addressing the impacts of the figurality of Stella, of poetry itself, doubling as the phenomenal impact of celestial nature, on her experiences as a supposedly earthly and humble laboring poet. All of this is not to suggest that Yearsley owned some secret source of professional knowledge or had access to a hitherto unknown collection of scientific treatises and pamphlets (although it is important to underscore that the textual source of these scientific allusions remains completely uninvestigated). Neither does such an emphasis on scientific allusion suggest that Yearsley's poetics place her side by side with the classically educated guarantors of scientific authority. Rather, it is to express that the self she finds is a source of knowledge equally valid, equally applicable, and, indeed, equally necessary for the proper efficacy of abstract or universal knowledge preserved within the structures of authority.

Through this dynamic, Yearsley engages in a subtle critique against what Donna Haraway nominates as the founding move of modernity: the severance of a detached and unencumbered (and thus almost transcendent) form of expert knowledge entrenched in a neutral discourse from other ways of knowing based in partiality, in physical commitments, in the body, passions, labor, sex, and difference itself. There is, of course, much to say about the class politics inherent in the dynamic of patron-client relations, but, in the case of Yearsley and More, this much has gone

unnoticed: More's "civilizing" mission to rear "a genius buried in obscurity" repeats the structure of "modest" scientific observers seeking to identify timeless and unchanging physical truths.¹⁸⁶ Where Haraway describes the impact of these men of science, she also elicits the hallmarks of the discourse of peasant poetry, natural genius, and sentiment: "Those humans to whom could be attributed a power of agency approaching that of the air-pump...these modest witnesses were transparent spokesman, pure mediums transmitting the objective word made flesh as facts."¹⁸⁷ The expectation of emitting plainspoken truth or accurate delineations of feeling nature while still adhering to the proper principles of contemporary poetry absorbs Yearsley into the material-semiotic space of natural philosophy. But it also reduces her to the transparent efficacy of the machine or scientific instrument. The peasant poet becomes a "pure medium" without agency.

The parallels between this mode of modest observation and how Yearsley frames her patron tease at the potential for resituating the patron-client relationship from a discourse of class "containment" to a wider sociotechnical field centered on the production of knowledge. Paying attention solely to the class dynamics or historical specificity of the fact that Yearsley begins her poetic life with "Night: To Stella" under a patronage structure circumscribing the work of most laboring poets is to ignore the technoscientific and epistemic stakes of the subtle play of language on display here. It is possible and indeed necessary to add to this qualification that Yearsley begins her poetic career as a kind of scientist *at the same time* and *in the same breath* as she begins it as a peasant poet – an immodest witness or playful observer who holds out a claim in and for the

¹⁸⁶ Such activity, as Haraway outlines, also involved a style of revisionism called "Christian figural time" present in retroactively reading, for example, Christ into the Torah (8-11). A distinct symmetry associates the "civilizing" mission of patronage and the discursive features of peasant poetry with this revisionism: genius, just like Jesus, inhabited the wor(l)d from the beginning as its unbeginning and unending totality – yet it must still be "proven" through modest reason and writing.

¹⁸⁷ Haraway, 42.

operativity and efficacy of her embodied writing that does not reduce it to the limits of what the poetry of a milkwoman might be presumed to accomplish or hold interest in.

On the one hand, the elevated structure of patronage provides a synecdoche for the apparently static machine of celestial order, the empty and unchanging distance of social relations mapping onto a cosmological constant of fixed Newtonian physical systems. And yet, on the other hand, through the poetry itself, Yearsley reveals the ultimate fragility of this synecdoche contrasted with the strength of the position of the embodied observer, the “panting soul” who “Now shivers in the agony of change, / As insects tremble in the doubtful hour / Of transmigration,” who not only notices but puts her limited “nature” into a practice of knowledge-making responsible for activating and energizing it.¹⁸⁸ Such change was as impossible for More as it was for the men of science who pretended to a similar absolute knowledge and authority in dealing with their instruments. Social laws prevented More from learning directly from Yearsley. She had only to modulate her to see what novel vision she might emit, as Boyle fine-tuned the evacuative capability of his air pump or as Newton tinkered with the prismatic projection of the spectrum of light.

To envision how “Newtonian systems lag” the flight of figure is to pose, however marginal or imperfect, a different way of being that Yearsley saw in More but did not settle with. The supposition exists in some criticism on Yearsley that her autodidacticism fostered an insular preoccupation with herself, primarily to the exclusion of weighty universals about human nature, philosophy, or metaphysics. While accurate in noticing a consistent employment of lyric and sentimental tropes figuring the soul, death, piety, remorse, and loss, as this reading of “Night: To Stella” hopes to have shown, sorting the origin of these concerns under the heading of informal

¹⁸⁸ Yearsley, “Night: To Stella,” 193-196.

learning or proto-Romantic exercise is suspect at best. In the context of the scientific discourse towards which Yearsley begins to gravitate in her first poem, “the kind of visibility - of the body - that women retained glides into being perceived as ‘subjective,’ that is only reporting on the self, biased, opaque, not objective.”¹⁸⁹ Such a reduction of women to the subjectivity of a laboring body only capable of self-reflection, however, engendered a counter-intuitive reversal. The “modest” disembodied, masculine, and agentic witness to scientific phenomenon enjoyed a “special kind of transparency” in observing, recording, and experimenting with natural processes.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, as Haraway has often noted, the operativity of these semiotic-material processes itself depended on the myth of a positionless position from “nowhere,” as though the body of the masculine modest witness existed in a universe divorced from everything it saw and felt in the form of gravity, motion, or light. The conceptual consequences of Newton’s “empty space” then contributed to solidifying the self-focused subjectivity of the feminine body into a kind of object which, because it could not witness, was left to being witnessed.

It is precisely in this supposed state of empty objecthood where “Night: To Stella” intervenes. If “to be the object of vision, rather than the self-invisible source of vision, is to be evacuated of agency,” Yearsley uses the tropes of natural genius to follow through on the consequences of this evacuation in a subtle and ironic reversal of its consequences.¹⁹¹ All the reader truly sees is Yearsley seeing More let loose in an intergalactic flight of poetic skill and range. And yet this display is to effectively forefront those “technicians, who were physically present, [but] were also epistemologically invisible persons in the experimental way of life” by

¹⁸⁹ Haraway, 32.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

evoking the pivotal importance of the non-agentic scientific instrument or tool in the creation of knowledge.¹⁹² In a vital sense, in this first poem, Yearsley aligns the artificial tropological resources of untaught poetry in parallel to the unthinking technical instruments of scientific experiment. What the reader sees in this reflexive seeing is the result: the client *makes* the patron, the instrument *makes* the scientist. The air-pump, fully evacuated, points directly to the knowledge it makes.

Reproductive Prints and Time-Traveling Wheelbarrows

If the Milkwoman of Bristol begins her poetic career as a kind of scientist, an immodest observer making particular claims about the world that attempt to capture and intervene in its physical processes, then More's anecdote about the "little ordinary prints" from which Yearsley procured her images requires closer examination. More herself provides the first lens to this re-examination in her introductory letter to Yearsley's first volume, *Poems on Several Occasions* (1785), particularly where she emphasizes a critical commonplace of rural laboring class verse from Duck to Burns. More notes in a paragraph equally approbative and censorious, how, to an excessive, even uncouth degree, Yearsley loves heaping together images, persons, and things:

You will find her, like all unlettered Poets, abounding in imagery, metaphor, and personification; her faults, in this respect, being rather those of superfluity than of want. If her epithets are now and then bold and vehement, they are striking and original; and I should be sorry to see the striking vigour of her rustic muse polished into elegance, or laboured into correctness. Her ear is perfect... She abounds in false concords, and inaccuracies of various kinds... You will find her often diffuse from redundancy and oftener obscure from brevity...¹⁹³

Yet there is little reason to take a surplus of imagery as an accidental symptom of a lack of learning, the natural recourse of a mind repeating in verse only what it can grasp most readily and intuitively

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁹³ More, vii-viii.

through the eye. Instead, thinking of Yearsley as an immodest observer leads us to reinterpret this tendency toward the compilation of images as evidence of an ethic of collection, coordination, and assemblage, repositioning what might have been evaluated as “unrefined poetry” as the same kind of “unrefined” *mélange* of objects amassed in a laboratory. Yearsley’s verse insists on viewing this compilation of objects and images not as a series of static objects to be coldly catalogued or passively reviewed, but, like the figure of the peasant poet, as material-semiotic windows opening onto different scenes hosting different kinds of sight.

Haraway refers to this “hypertextual” or windowed-windowing approach under the term “diffraction.” Opposing the reproductive notion of the reflection, merely mirroring what already exists, the notion of diffraction appeals to the creation of difference, forming a “material technology for tearing down the Berlin wall between the world of subjects and the world of objects, and the world of the political and the world of the technical.”¹⁹⁴ Where More detects “false concords”, looking to find the reflective logic of consistency, ease and judicious economy, the insistent multiplication of images in Yearsley’s early verse suggests instead a practice of diffraction. In “Fragment,” for instance, Yearsley layers a series of metaphoric reflections on the soul to fold together two otherwise mutually incommunicable images, evoking a “consequential meaning” outside of More’s expectations:

My soul is out of tune,
 No harmony reigns here, 'tis discord all:
 Be dumb, sweet Choristers, I heed you not;
 Then why thus swell your liquid throats, to cheer
 A wretch undone, for ever lost to joy,
 And mark'd for ruin? Seek yon leafy grove,
 Indulgent bliss there waits you; shun this spot

¹⁹⁴ Haraway, 270.

Drear, joyless, vacant, as my wasted soul,
Disrob'd of all her bliss...¹⁹⁵

The instrument of the voice materializes the disembodied soul in an opening half line that fragments the full pentameter filling out the rest of the poem. Another instantiation of disarray heads the second line, where the dactylic “harmony” breaks the iambic structure of the first, looking forward desperately to its thematic and metrical resonance with the “Choristers” of the next line whose “sweet” voice cannot be heard. Such a conscious, artificial opening forces the eye of the reader to begin the poem with an ear that hears nothing but the struggle to sing. What exists for the eye in activating the semantic terrain of souls, choirs, robes, and bodies throughout the stanza clearly evokes the image of a church. But, somewhat expectedly, the deictics of “yon leafy grove” override the religious imagery, pressing the reader to see these silent singers in an uncertain place with an uncertain identity between birdsong and hymnal, cloistered echo and pastoral strain.

Reactivating the scientific imagery of “Night: To Stella,” Yearsley reframes her broken voice into a diffraction of flying particles, seeing her “woes” as “No longer mine, once past the quiv'ring lip; / Like flying atoms in the sightless air, / Some might descend on the gay, grinning herd; / But few, how few, wou'd reach the feeling mind.”¹⁹⁶ While the binary between “grinning herd” and “feeling mind” appears to reassert the clean boundaries between human and animal, thoughtless nature and thinking culture, that the opening had thoroughly confused, the word “herd” invokes its sensible homophone “heard,” reasserting the auditory concerns of the opening, just as the bovine reference resurfaces the poetic identity of “Lactilla” that is distinctly Yearsley’s own. Like the atoms circuitously whizzing through air, Yearsley pictures her own mind a few lines later

¹⁹⁵ Yearsley, “Fragment,” *Poems On Several occasions: By Ann Yearsley, a Milkwoman of Bristol* (London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1785), 1-9.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10, 19-22.

“straying from the trodden path” before apostrophizing those minds whose interstellar travel have won them peace: “O you! whose spirits rove beyond yon orbs, / To find the realms of rest, for such there are, / To prove a home when the sad soul shall need it.”¹⁹⁷ But the search for intellectual and emotional respite in the inhospitable heavens ultimately leads to a volley of questions aimed at the metaphysics of such an endeavor: “What's the grand result? / Ye studious sages, where's the fix'd abode? / Where's that eternal home, beyond the grave?”¹⁹⁸ It finally appears that the mind that strays from the trodden path is not the particular lot of a milkmaid, but a universal condition. A final series of questions asks “have you found it? can you teach the road / Which thither leads? Ah, no! th'accounts brought home / Differ so far, millions of Heavens are formed.”¹⁹⁹

If it is true that Yearsley took an indefinite number of images in *Poems on Several Occasions* from the “little ordinary prints which hung in a shop-window,” the resulting “immodesty” of superfluous, diffractive images resonates with the supposition of these “millions of Heavens.” Indeed, the immodest practice of witnessing in Yearsley’s verse formally comports with the immodesty that circulated around the eighteenth century printshop window as a material site of not only commerce, industry, and technical knowledge, but, in an intimate association with each of these traits, a source of libidinal energy.

In the middle of the century, the printshop window functioned as a social hub distinct from raucous coffee houses or refined tea rooms. Unlike the silent glances of modern urban window shopping where conversation rarely exceeds brief statements of approval or interest, the eighteenth century printshop viewer immediately entered into a form of “polite cultural exchange and social

¹⁹⁷ Yearsley, “Fragment,” 41, 48-50.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 55-57.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 61-63.

interaction" premised on visual and discursive practices.²⁰⁰ These were opportunities for conversation as much as for collective critique and "communal interpretation" of prints whose fixed distance afforded more than a few opportunities for abrupt debate or sympathetic agreement. This sociability led to the print shop windows posing themselves as a unique kind of media space where identities and knowledge practices were negotiated and contested through both the cultural positions performed and reperformed in front of the glass and in the aesthetics, techniques, and presentation of the images pressed onto the paper arrayed behind it. A montage effect predominated, where loitering observers made connections from the odd juxtapositions between caricatures, portraits, landscapes, and historical images, winning a knowledge from what would otherwise remain random assortment.²⁰¹

Dandies, antiquarians, connoisseurs, artisans, day laborers and nouveau riche massed before these panes in diverse crowds that quickly became an object of comic satire and social anxiety. Fuel to this mocking was the notion that those entranced by images on the street were myopic, licentious, and deindividualized, forming a "carnavalesque mixture from diverse stations" turned easy prey for purse-snatchers and prostitutes.²⁰² Framed as an unthinking oppositional mass to the rational Enlightenment individual, window gawkers thus presented an unrefined assortment of social types who indistinction "imperiled the constellation of elite values in eighteenth-century Britain."²⁰³ The massing effect that resulted from such mixture thus also produced a

²⁰⁰ David Francis Taylor, *The Politics of Parody: A Literary History of Caricature 1760-1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 41.

²⁰¹ Joanna Jarvis, "Performance and Print Culture: Two Eighteenth-Century Actresses and Their Image Control" in *Pen, Print, and Communication in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Caroline Archer-Perre and Malcolm Dick (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 115.

²⁰² C.S. Matheson, "The Royal Academy and the Annual Exhibition of the Viewing Public," in *Lessons of Romanticism: A Critical Companion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 228.

²⁰³ Taylor, 54.

countertendency through spaces of difference, desire, and social malleability where opportunities arose to flex the social roles and behavioral codes identifying these "social types."

Also exposed was a certain fear of or hesitation around immobility, a concern for what might happen or emerge from the static gawker. On the one hand, this immobility was the special terrain of the "elite values" in the form of the *vita contemplativa*, a life marked by the consistent and determined thought, reflection, or liveliness of expression made possible in leisure time. In Byung-Chul Han's words, the leisure of the contemplative life "is not the neighbor of lazy inactivity. It does not serve the purpose of distraction, but of collecting oneself."²⁰⁴ The print shop window thrust such collective and collecting contemplation into the public, mixing it with an activity of association and communication across social and economic differences that conduced not only toward stoking private passions but forming these feelings into thoughts and judgements.

Immobile amusement and the leisure to peruse led immediately to an impurity of thought troubling both for its sexual liberality and for its cognitive effect: it is not just that the masses have free time or sexual desires. The window itself allows these to interpenetrate with thoughts and ideas that themselves travel beyond the immobile staging of the window. Earlier in the century, in his *Convent-Garden Journal* of 1752, Henry Fielding winked at this same tension between erotic desire and moral proscription in a letter submitted by the character of Modesty to the Court of Censorial Equity. Modesty proposes to the court an official censure of "Venders of those infamous Prints, exhibited in almost every Print-Shop in London, representing Lewdness in every Shape in its proper Colours." Yet, only a few sentences later, she breaks all propriety to deliver in passing an aesthetic appraisal won from close inspection of these incitements to sin, saying how they were

²⁰⁴ Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Linger* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017) 87.

nevertheless "very finely 'coloured." Just as printshop windows turned the classically proper into the popularly prurient, they led to situations in which the expectations surrounding gendered behavior were bent or even broken.

It may be that Yearsley took much more than a few poetic images from these windows to ornament her early verse. While much attention has been paid to the mass politics of the printshop window following the Gordon Riots of 1780, the French Revolution, and Sedition Acts, the metaphors yoking together the graphic panoply of the printshop window and the potential for democratic assembly have the tendency to override how these spaces functioned earlier in the century to fragment and renegotiate identity. Indeed, the imagery of Yearsley's poetry appears to accomplish a similar renegotiation by transmediating the teeming, mingling, and impure reproductive logic underlying the mechanic reproducibility of the print itself. Just as no original or pristine knowledge guarantees harmony or peace for the milkwoman's bereft soul, no image promises stability, identity, or absolute understanding. The panel of glass demarcating interior from exterior, the same that differentiated the affluent customer (channeling More) from the anonymous pedestrian (channeling Yearsley), determined these reproductions by their exclusivity and spontaneity, an exclusivity and spontaneity that was able to lure wandering eyes and halt busy legs who may have otherwise had no reason to stop before the spectacle.

Before investigating further how Yearsley transmediates not just the visual images but the reproductive logic of the printshop window in one of her most well-remarked poems, I would like to pause to reflect on an illustration published a few years after *Poems Descriptive* that takes a closer look at this public spectacle and the persons who glutted sidewalks to see it. One of a handful of representations of the printshop window during the century, a watercolor from J Elwood (c.

1790) invests in the standard assortment of generic conventions used to evoke these windowed displays, positioning the viewer in the middle of a city street directly opposite a busy corner overflowing with pointers and rubberneckerers from across the social spectrum (Figure 2).



Figure 2: J. Elwood, Untitled, watercolor on paper (c. 1790)

Merchants, fops, and well-to-do shoppers hover around the gridded muntin of a printshop to view a diverse collection of pictures from an equally diverse assortment of genres, including conversation pieces, portraits, classical landscapes, and naval battles (some of which are based on contemporary engravings). Each spectator's line of sight is drawn to the window itself, to another member of the crowd, or to the diverse mass of bodies. The viewer sees a view of society seeing itself. The only exception to the network of interlocked views is a female laborer, hunched over a

wheelbarrow full of produce inches from colliding with a thin culotted gentleman, casting an extremely oblique glance (Figure 3). Her posture and countenance combine in a strange admixture of the grotesque and classical. Apparently missing a left eye, her partial gaze is turned upward and away from the crowd in a devotional angle evoking the pained heavenward gaze common in baroque art featured, for example, prominently in Ruben's *The Entombment* (c. 1612).



Figure 3: Detail from J. Elwood, Untitled (c. 1790)

This posture and gaze isolate her as the only figure clearly associated with an image apart from the one she is in. The other social types (even the dog) fit the printshop window conversation piece in their focused spectatorship, sociable conversation, or frenzied exertion. But the wheelbarrow woman, either because of her labor or social position, her disability or gender, straddles a different genre and thus a life outside of the image despite her apparent inclusion in it. A part of the crowd, she nonetheless fails to cohere as part of this "social exchange" by virtue of her isolated and artfully

odd non-looking look. Indeed, her pious glance, industrious employment, and monocular vision simultaneously place her in a sensual connection with others only to extract her from it: she is in place, but out of place; squarely within her time, but strangely outside it. She is a tableau vivant in front of, inside, and apart from a lively social tableau.

From one perspective, the one-eyed woman in Elwood's watercolor signifies the double marking of her gender and lower order status, a marking that also applied to Yearsley under the violent and suspicious glance of the public eye. Like the wheelbarrow woman, she has no choice but to exist as an image, an object of vision, tasked with conveying a variety of images in addition to her own. Here it appears there is "nothing for a woman to conquer beyond simulacra, since simulacra is always the ontological place that is always imposed on woman."²⁰⁵ The same popular anxiety that cast suspicion on the moral effects of printshop windows compounded with the social consequences of a rhyming milkmaid choosing, if only temporarily, to abandon her economic duty and religious devotion to reap self-indulgent and, by that fact, potentially sensual and intellectual pleasures from the images behind the glass. Defining this desire as uniquely feminine, as many contemporary commentators did, only reasserts the unstable semblance of the feminine in denying the singularity of each glance. For these critics, it is not worth considering what unique desire each woman found in whatever print drew their eye. These images merely reinforce and thus prove, in an endless circle, the insubstantial or empty nature of the feminine.

²⁰⁵ Catherine Malabou, *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 109.

Transtemporal Flânerie and Spectacular Machines

However conventional in content or language, the formal conditions of a poetry garnered from print shop windows by a woman laborer taking breaks from her routine licensed a similar response. Compare, for instance, the sentiment contained in Horace Walpole's reply to More concerning news of her patronage of Yearsley with the polemics surrounding the printshop window as a place of leisure, carnal desire, and intellectual exchange:

When the late Queen patronized Stephen Duck, who was only a wonder at first, and had not genius enough to support the character he had promised, twenty artisans and laborers had turned poets and starved. Your poetess can scarce be more miserable than she is, and even the reputation of being an authoress maybe procure her customers; but... She must remember that she is a Lactilla, not a Pastora, and is to tend cows, not Arcadian sheep.²⁰⁶

The stability garnered from the patron-client relationship, the same making possible a life premised on the *vita contemplativa*, threatens to activate a kind of social switchboard. When other laborers and artisans saw Duck transform into a poet, they chose to do the same, creating a dangerous relay. Even the wit and intellect of Walpole, however, miss the irony of these remarks. Farms have neither the time nor the formality to respect such a strict division of labor: tending the cows means one is fit enough to tend the sheep; if no one else exists to do it, it has to be done. The threatening specter of a poetical economy neglects both the fact that Duck rose from the sphere of production without a model and that the model he left, the same undergirding Lactilla, is exactly what propelled her venture and aided her success as "an authoress" with her sights set on Arcadia.

Thus, from another perspective, the insistence of the double marking of the wheelbarrow woman and Yearsley offers an oppositional grammar that does not resist the violent reduction to

²⁰⁶ Quoted in Waldron, 57.

image in a self-conscious way, but, rather, turns the negativity of this process into a mode of action, sociability, and belonging. In a word, the one-eyed woman and the Milkwoman of Bristol exist in a state of hypervisibility that attracts the eye but scuttles the ideological reticule that could place them definitively and indefinitely in a single state or genre: they become, like all figures, liminal, crossing time and place without ever settling in either, *by virtue* of their double marking. In this way, Yearsley becomes a figure of what Catherine Malabou calls *plasticity*, a self-conflicting impulse that determines “essence as change and metamorphosis.”²⁰⁷ Rather than the inscriptive autodialogue of writing, which only refers back to its own writing, Malabou forwards the idea of plasticity as “a more modifiable structure than that of writing, one that is destined to the deforming and reforming of forms without being attached to an initial evidence a present or first form.”²⁰⁸ Showing herself as an image that looks, that exists in the interstice between genres, modes, or habits and thus confuses the stability of the looking that tries to desperately to see her, Yearsley practices a mode of plasticity that resembles the machinic reproducibility of the print engraving: the apparent lack of essence doubles as the essence of non-essence, making possible a consistence in the change belying a stable existence.

It is this mode of metamorphic essence offered by the visibility inscribed on Yearsley as a witness to the printshop window that enters one of her most well-known poems, “Addressed to Ignorance, Occasioned by a Gentleman’s Desiring the Author Never to Assume a Knowledge of the Ancients.” Put simply, Yearsley’s poetic intervention in this dynamic does not exactly see her lifting images from public consumerist displays to use as basic motifs or characters, simply reproducing these reproductions. Indeed, this idea itself implies a certain ease of translatability

²⁰⁷ Malabou, 121.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

between image and word that does not stand up to scrutiny. Instead, Yearsley lifts the dynamics circulating around the printshop window itself together with the infinite reproducibility of the technology of engraving, plotting the mediation inherent within this scene in her poetry through a focus on interpretation, reflection, and political contest rooted in the medial specificity of reproductive prints and apparently unproductive windows.

Nocturnal, scientific motifs from the intergalactic poetics of “Night: To Stella” return in the opening lines of “Addressed to Ignorance,” forming the basis of an anti-poem that sees Yearsley invoke her own presumed non-knowledge in the style of a muse to shield her from the light of learning:

Lend me thy dark Veil. — Science darts her strong ray;
 In the orb of bright Learning she sits:
 Haste! haste! Cloth'd by thee, I can yet keep my way,
 Still secure from her Critics, or Wits.

All slight thee; no Beauty e'er boasts of thy pow'r;
 No Beau on thy Influence depends;
 No Statesman shall own thee; no Poet implore,
 But Lactilla and thou must be friends.

Then come, gentle Goddess, sit full in my looks;
 Let my accents be sounded by thee:
 While Crito in pomp, bears his burden of books,
 On the plains of wild Nature I'm free.²⁰⁹

Yet the semantics of “orbs” has the effect of muddling the space between the private embodied eye as what is hidden behind the “dark Veil” of ignorance and Newton’s planetary bodies emitting the rays captured by diminutive ocular human orbs. The first two lines alone evince a complicated theory of vision which makes indistinct the difference between emissionist (light comes from the

²⁰⁹ Ann Yearsley, “Addressed to Ignorance,” *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1797). 1-12.

eye) and intromissionist (light comes into the eye) frameworks of sight. It appears Yearsley posits the ability to see *in the dark*, that she can “yet keep [her] way” through a sort of sentimental *tapetum lucidum* sitting in the eye embodied by that “gentle Goddess” that sits “full in [her] looks” (looking *like* her and looking *through* her). The final line of the second stanza reveals the politics behind this confusing acquisition of that automatic non-substance that normally thwarts all acquisition: Yearsley deploys the very supposition of her ignorance as a means of feminine sociability, making “friends” from an absence nonetheless gendered.

The smirk at “Crito in pomp” buried by “his burden of books” becomes much more than a trite anti-intellectual smear: the reference to the Platonic dialogue itself is deeply learned. Neither does Yearsley simply dawn the protective mantle of sentimental or natural genius. On this point, it is worth quoting Malabou at some length:

That woman is now emptied of her essence only serves to emphasize the fact that she does not define herself and cannot define herself except through the violence done to her. Violence alone confers her being... Woman is nothing anymore, except this violence through which her “being nothing” continues to exist. She’s nothing but an ontological amputation, formed by that which negates her. This assimilation of “woman” to “being nothing” perhaps opens a new path that goes beyond essentialism and anti-essentialism. Let us envisage the possibility that, in the name of woman, there is an empty but resistance essence, an essence that is resistant precisely because it is emptied, *a stamp of impossibility*.²¹⁰

Yearsley grants as sense of this “resistant essence” in the form of the traditionally “plastick” fancy, anticipating with a distinctly negative twist Coleridge's formulation of the "esemplastic" imagination as "one manifestation of the shaping force expressed throughout the cosmos."²¹¹ It would appear that the impossible night vision of *knowing through ignorance* motivates a much

²¹⁰ Malabou, 98-99.

²¹¹ Greg Ellerman, "Plasticity, poetry, and the end of art: Malabou, Hegel, Kant" in *Romanticism and Speculative Realism*, ed. Chris Washington and Anne C. McCarthy (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 201.

longer and more complex story. The next stanza mimes the language of syllogism to offer in logical “proof” a mode of this imaginative seeing that dissolves the difference between ages and personages, setting up a structural and thematic mechanism powering the remainder of the poem across a series of tightly compacted vignettes:

When Ign’rance forbids me in ambush to move,
Or to feed on the scraps of the Sage,
I am blind to the Ancients — yet Fancy would prove,
That Pythagoras lives thro’ each age.

She shews me blind Homer, who ne’er must be still,
To motion perpetual decreed;
Forgetful of Ilium, he now turns a mill,
While old Nestor, quite dumb, roves the mead.

In a Tyger, Achilles bounds o’er the wide plain;
As a Fox, sly Ulysses is seen;
Doubly horn’d, Menelaus now scorns to complain,
But more blest, in a Buck skips the green.

Fond Paris, three changes with sighs has gone through,
First a Goat, then a Monkey compleat;
Enrag’d, to the river Salmacis he flew,
Wash’d his face — and forgot his fair mate.²¹²

These transtemporal, transspecies, transgeneric anecdotes linking together the quotidian, laboring, learned, mythic, and philosophic have usually been read as expressing a conceit built on the theory of metempsychosis.²¹³ On one hand, this makes absolute sense. Yearsley references Pythagoras himself before elucidating the soul’s travel between bodies, merely importing his theory into the structure of her verse. But, as Margaret Doody notes, this initial allusion leads to “a strange succession” as “the poet imagines a wild scene which turns out to be the streets of London.”²¹⁴

²¹² Yearsley, “Addressed to Ignorance,” 13-28.

²¹³ Landry, xxi

²¹⁴ Doody, 130.

The urban turn is indeed unexpected. The reader catches glimpses of “Zeno, Tibullus, and Socrates grave, / In the bodies of wan Garreteers, / All tatter’d, cold, hungry, by turns sigh and rave / At their Publisher’s bill of arrears,” ogles Virgil as a “Courtier, with hose out at heel / And Hesiod, quite shoeless his foot / Poor Ovid walks shiv’ring, behind a cart-wheel, / While Horace cries, ‘sweep for your soot’”²¹⁵

Fair Julia sees Ovid, but passes him near,
An old broom o’er her shoulder is thrown;
Penelope lends to five lovers an ear,
Walking on with one sleeve to her gown.

But Helen, the Spartan, stands near Charing-Cross,
Long laces and pins doom’d to cry;
Democritus, Solon, bear baskets of moss,
While Pliny sells woodcocks hard by.

In Billingsgate Nell, Clytemnestra moves slow,
All her fishes die quick in the air;
Agamemnon peeps stern, thro’ the eye of old Joe,
At Egysthus, who, grinning, stands there.²¹⁶

This energetic urban exchange of identity, a mutated commerce of fiction and reality, becomes somewhat less strange when compared to the phenomenal experience of the “social exchange” gravitating around the windows of London bookshops, print sellers, and other public media spaces. Indeed, a sense of the uniquely inspired frenzy of glances, looks, and relations depicted in Lockwood’s watercolor abounds in these lines. Through its insistent and rapid couplets limiting these names within a tight frame, the poem as a whole elicits the sensation of quickly glossing over a collection of prints, title pages, or frontispieces while standing on a city street, making bold connections between the active bodies circulating around the scene and the static worlds viewed

²¹⁵ Yearsley, “Addressed to Ignorance,” 29-32.

²¹⁶ Yearsley, “Addressed to Ignorance,” 45-56.

in engravings, watercolors, and aquatints arrayed behind glass panes. There is perhaps something of Yearsley's own printshop glances in how "Fair Julia sees Ovid, but passes him near," walking to and fro to collect scraps for her animals while catching sight of popular and antiquarian engravings capturing and publicizing literary scenes like "The Fall of Phaeton" (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Anonymous, *The Fall of Phaeton*, from the series *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, Print (c. 1600).

It is perhaps too rash, then, to limit the location of the poem to the mutually exclusive terrains of flighty imagination or historical reality. In the last stanza, where the poet emphatically claims,

Here's Trojan, Athenian, Greek, Frenchman and I,
 Heav'n knows what I was long ago;
 No matter, thus shielded, this age I defy,
 And the next cannot wound me, I know.²¹⁷

the “here” refers at once to figure and ground: the page on which she has arrayed these characters, the now-fragmented historical continuum that connects them together, and the urban spaces that play host to their whims and movements. Rather than read its placement of poetic and philosophical personalities as a rhetorical flourish, it is possible instead to see this printshop window poem as absorbing, rewiring, and making public in the grandest sense possible a prominent private motif of eighteenth-century feminine verse. The sense of being “shown” by Ignorance a series of reflective images across time and space rearticulates the tropological and medial features of the handheld or boudoir glass present in women's verse from Mary Barber, Frances-Kelley, Mary Lady Montagu, and others. In effect, Yearsley turns her mirror to the street, transforming it into a refractive boulevard of time, seeing herself in and as a transtemporal other. The poem then modulates the reflective motif of the mirror from a simple tool channeling a “desire for an alternative self, a self-communion” into a spectacular machine that, like the printshop window, multiplies and diffracts the self, making it replicable, elastic, and plural.²¹⁸

This leads to a double claim pushing against the double violence affecting her as woman and laborer. In “Addressed to Ignorance” Yearsley not only asserts her poetic and philosophical existence among “Trojan, Athenian, Greek, Frenchman,” she also subtly affirms a right to exist in the public and historical space to which they belong, being able to move, roam, wonder, gawk, and feel as an embodied subject at a time when the proscribed visibility of “unproductive” women in

²¹⁷ Ibid., 69-72.

²¹⁸ Margaret Ann Doody, “Women Poets of the Eighteenth Century,” in *Women and Literature in Britain 1700-1800* ed. Vivien Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 225.

urban environments was undergoing a shift.²¹⁹ In an unremarked sense, then, the Milkwoman of Bristol effectively equips the "illustrative vision of the flaneur," taking to the image-dense street to observe Homer the Miller, Paris the Monkey, Virgil the Courtier, and Socrates the Fleet Street Poet to profess her right to exist across public space and historical time. Freedom to peruse the "little ordinary prints which hung in a shop-window" swells into a dream-image inverting the pattern whereby the flaneur uses these images as intoxicating props to support his own subjectivity. Hypostasizing her "non-being" as a subject of Ignorance, Yearsley's recreates the looking and being looked at of *flânerie* as an impossible topos based on the immodesty, the negativity, and the machinic reproduction of the publicly displayed print.

The style of poetic *flânerie* motivating "Address to Ignorance" also resonates with Walter Benjamin's articulation of the figure of the flaneur in his unfinished *Arcades Project*. An ambivalent social type for whom, like Yearsley, "the uncertainty of its economic position corresponds to the ambiguity of its political function," the flaneur constellates a series of traits and habits blending together private individualism and public exhibition.²²⁰ In his notes for the volume, Benjamin includes a lengthy excerpt from Chapuis and Gélis's *Le Monde de Automates* (1928):

We know that, in the course of *flânerie*, far off times and places interpenetrate the landscape and the present moment... the blood is pounding the veins of the happy flaneur, his heart ticks like a clock... things go on as we would imagine them to do in those 'mechanical pictures' which in the nineteenth century enjoyed great popularity.²²¹

This transposition of times and places jumpstarting the automaton of the flaneur and turning the streets of Paris into a great machine posed a dialectic that fascinated Benjamin. On the one hand,

²¹⁹ Harriet Guest, "Eighteenth Century Femininity: 'a supposed sexual character,'" in *Women and Literature in Britain 1700-1800* ed. Vivien Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 47.

²²⁰ Benjamin, 10.

²²¹ Quoted in Benjamin, 419-20.

“the idleness of the flaneur” could be a “demonstration against the division of labor.”²²² On the other hand, “the idea that the fruits of idleness are more precious than the fruits of labor” predisposes the flaneur toward a dangerous species of intoxicating empathy with the commodity and its embodiment of exchange value. Browsing the bibelots of the arcades, “he takes the concept of marketability itself for a stroll” in a physiognomic “phantasmagoria... to read from faces the profession, ancestry, character.”²²³ A similar empathy marks Yearsley’s conceit to track a procession of book-based souls across ages, “classifying” herself among them while jotting their histories. Like the flaneur’s identification with the exchange value of the commodity, Yearsley’s identification with her own self-alienation in ignorance, condensed in the admission that “Heav’n knows what I was long ago,” opens up a relationship with these ghostly faces conjurable through the contemporary commodities of books and engravings.

Despite the ambiguity of the flaneur, Benjamin identified a potential future in this quality of identification, finding in it “a source of libidinal energy that could be actualized in a revolutionary direction.”²²⁴ However, where this “flash” of historical identification concerns the flaneuse, the feminine loiterer, Benjamin’s imagination loses its vigor and traction. His thought on this point is largely limited to noticing the disproportionate influence of market fashion and the “inhuman” coldness of the literary femme fatale, the latter of which he equates to “the conception of a female machine, artificial, mechanical, without standards in common with living creatures, and always a murderess”.²²⁵ To a degree, this negativity runs counter to the tendency in much of Benjamin’s writing to find dialectical hinges in the sheer artificial repetition of reproductive

²²² Benjamin., 427.

²²³ Ibid., 448.

²²⁴ Marina Vishmidt, “Art, Technology, and Repetition,” in *Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, ed. Beverly Best, Werner Bonefeld, and Chris O’Kane (London, SAGE, 2018), 1114.

²²⁵ Benjamin, 849.

technologies. If reproductive techniques effect the demystification of ritual, tradition, or genius, the gendered roles of reproduction, the repetitive techniques of domestic labor, and the complex subjectivity of the feminine are noticeably absent from this late undertaking. As Susan Buck-Morss notes, the *Arcades Project* contrasts the masculine flaneur, a figure who “embodies the transformations of perception characteristic of modernity,” with the feminine prostitute, a figure who “is the allegory for the transformation of objects, the world of things.”²²⁶

Although providing a fuller picture of Benjamin’s figures of the prostitute, the flaneur, and the sandwichman, Buck-Morss sounds a negative echo of Benjamin where she attempts to counter him in plainly asserting “women are not dead things.”²²⁷ Thinking from Malabou’s preference for the negative and Haraway’s undead cyborg politics, it may be profitable to pick up the dialectic Benjamin left underdeveloped, finding in his stunted treatment of the objectified feminine a larger lesson about how gender impinges on the terrain of the “artificial” or “mechanical” as harbingers of a potentially positive alienation. A vitalist Marxism that endorses the active, natural, and human elements of productive forces still seems to hold onto the purity of a substance that, as Haraway notes, propels itself on the notion of a clear divide between the natural and artificial.

The case of Yearsley’s alienated historical imagination raises the image of a flaneuse capable of avoiding vitalist pitfalls that merely reinvent an independent living power at odds with the living-dead reality of a life lived as a kind of commodity. While the perception of the flaneur traditionally understood is set on loitering rather leisure, false knowledge rather than historical understanding, combining into a non-activity whose prototypical figure is the bohemian, the poetic

²²⁶ Susan Buck-Morss, “The Flaneur, The Sandwichman, and the Prostitute: The Politics of Loitering” *New German Review* 39 (1989), 120.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

flânerie of Yearsley more closely resembles Benjamin's earlier, more hopeful flaneur. The Milkwoman of Bristol intervenes in knowledge through a subtle claim to a roaming leisure that belongs to the printshop window. Each, in a sense, defies their age in inviting the cross-pollination of ages, persons, and images. At the middle of this exchange of exhibition value, the flaneuse temporarily halts the processes of production in order to develop a practice of aesthetic consumption that anticipates and forms a defense against a reduction of consumption to the lifelessness of lifestyles or mass-produced brands.

The window-looker-poet whose eyes touch images made into worlds that do not belong to her speaks to the present in offering a possible remedy to the modern screen-looking-consumer whose entire world is provided for her by a touch-based visual technology that, in its inaccessible and unmodifiable black box design, manages to disguise its true subscription to the model of "look, but don't touch."²²⁸ Sauntering down the spatiotemporal boulevard of "Address to Ignorance" suggests a freedom of both poetic and physical flânerie that is less about loitering or prurient gazing than the virtue of an image that can claim its value as an image outside of exchange. The poem witnesses the "*stamp of impossibility*" of a value beyond value that finds its own space and time not in opposition to or dominated by the mass production of media commodities, but in the practice of "deforming and reforming" their forms, making a life from them that shields all life from reduction to its own time.

Mechanical Soliloquys: Or, The Matter with Keeping Time

The eventual public and bitter feud between Yearsley and More over the latter's decision to prohibit the former's access to the profits from her first volume has received an extraordinary

²²⁸ Benjamin, 968.

degree of critical attention. Indeed, the controversy still guides scholarship on Yearsley herself, as though More were a vestigial but somehow still vital organ hanging onto the riches of Yearsley's verse. While it may be historically and critically imprudent to excise this organ, it suffices here to notice that the Yearsley before the fall and the Yearsley after it share much more than has been previously suggested. As my reading of "Night: To Stella" hopes to have shown, Yearsley begins her poetic life with a voluminous, contemplative, and experimental train of thought that escapes the structures and restrictions of patronage even while it apparently pays honest and clear-sighted deference to them. Indeed, it is possible to track a series of thematics, if not a program, from this earliest moment: Yearsley's poetry, from "Night: To Stella" to "Address to Ignorance," is saturated with a concern for the travel into and between time and space, the ability to see remotely and intimately, the demands and limitations of identity, the practice of moving between stable or expected forms, and, perhaps most prominently, the place of cultivated, artificial science and learning relative to the naturalness of genius, sentiment, and intuition.

Doody summarizes these tendencies in concluding that Yearsley's poems "consistently articulate the need to express the powers of the soul."²²⁹ These spiritual powers, however, are dense with physical and material properties. It appears, counter-intuitively, that Yearsley's soul is a body. Such a synonymy exposes how Yearsley's work also hosts a series of questions that challenge oppositions between the particular and the universal, the abstract and the embodied. Why should an emphasis on the particular furnish a refusal of the universal? Why is the individual not a valid entryway into the collective? Is there not a singularity to the experience of womanhood that leads neither toward gender essentialism nor toward a relentless deferral of all authority and identity?

²²⁹ Margaret Ann Doody, "Women Poets of the Eighteenth Century," 234.

Why can there not be knowledge in what is assumed to be ignorant, in the material, the embodied, and the feeling? With these questions, her verse lets loose a timely echo of the concerns at the center of certain segments of contemporary feminist thought which ask similarly inflected questions: why should the body pose a limit? Why should the feminine recoil from the universal or abstract? Why can the unthought feminine and unthinking technological not, like Yearsley and the muse of Ignorance, “be friends”?

Outfitting Haraway’s cyborg politics with a critical adapter capable of speaking to twenty-first century developments in bio-informatic technology, transhumanist discourse, labor politics, and technocapitalist information networks, Helen Hester’s xenofeminism, for instance, runs on a similar line of thought encapsulated in terse energetic slogans: “Biology is not destiny” and “If nature is unjust, change nature!” Harboring commitments that are equally “impure” and “immodest,” xenofeminism calls for “constructive oscillation between description and prescription to mobilize the recursive potential of contemporary technologies upon gender, sexuality, and disparities of power.”²³⁰ Hester’s program recognizes the fragility and danger that accords with abandoning mass politics, mass informatics, and abstract or universal programs in favor of local, insular, or static definitions of gender, sex, and being. Like Malabou’s plastic philosophy, central to xenofeminist discourse is an emphasis on mutability, (ex)change, and openness, a “mutable architecture that, like open-source software, remains available for perpetual modification” in strategically transiting between scales and positions.²³¹

While it would be excessive to suggest Yearsley sends out an equally impassioned call for an emancipatory politics, her work does express a commitment to demonstrating how a gendered

²³⁰ Laboria Cuboniks, *The Xenofeminist Manifest: A Politics for Alienation* (London: Verso, 2018), 32.

²³¹ *Ibid.* 59

relationship with technology enables a contingent arrival at universals through limited, repetitive, and embodied practice. Reflecting on this commitment, I would like to close this chapter by briefly turning to a poem late in Yearsley's career titled "Soliloquy" in order to track what the Milkwoman of Bristol might contribute to these xenofeminist problematics while, at the same time, reflecting on how the thematics of replicability, multiplicity, temporality, and mobility focalize toward the end of her life.

Included in her final volume, *The Rural Lyre* (1796), the meditative verse of "Soliloquy" grounds the contexts of its creation in an episode of regular habit and intergenerational care by recalling a brief exchange between Yearsley and her son as she puts him to bed:

<i>Author to her son.</i>	Go you to bed, my boy.
<i>Son.</i>	Do you write to-night?
<i>Author.</i>	I do.
<i>Son</i> (laying his watch on the table)	See, how late!
<i>Author.</i>	No matter – You can sleep. ²³²

Kerri Andrews notes in this preface the centrality of the son's pocket watch, a rare luxury for rural families, but a treasure not entirely out of place considering Yearsley's early success. While certainly proof of "Yearsley's change in status" and a marker of her "satisfaction in being able to demonstrate the quality of life that her labors have now brought to her family," the function of the watch in this anecdote exceeds the role of a flashy status symbol intended to impress an anonymous reader.²³³ Its value and out-of-place identity aside, the clock figures a device of repetition that introduces a certain responsibility to "spend" time wisely by not spending it at all. This is the point

²³² Yearsley, "Soliloquy," *Ann Yearsley: Selected Poems*, ed. Tim Burke (Cheltenham: Cyder Press, 2003), 45.

²³³ Kerri Andrews, "No more than as an atom 'mid the vast profound': Conceptions of Time in the Poetry of William Cowper, William Wordsworth, and Ann Yearsley," in *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Kirstie Blaire and Mina Gorji, (London: Palgrave, 2013), 97.

Yearsley's son impresses on her by referring through his watch to a time outside the time of work, but a time that can nonetheless be known or captured by the same mechanical measure.

Generated from this anecdote, "Soliloquy" opens with a reflection on mechanistic philosophy, leading Yearsley to provide an explanatory footnote: "Mechanical philosophy is that which undertakes to account for the phenomena of nature from the principles of mechanics, taking in the consideration of motion, rest, figure, size &c." The first few lines of the poem find these principles at work within the scene of rest and measure just provided:

How patiently toils on this little watch
My veins beat to its motion. Ye who sing
Of atoms, rest, and motion, say why Time
Sets in this toy a larum to my heart.²³⁴

Yearsley personifies the watch as a domestic laborer, one who like her "toils on" restlessly into the future, but whose work is still methodical, caring, and patient. Meeting the regularity of this caring labor in the next line is a poignant image of the human-machine that condenses metrics, anatomies, and mechanics into a simply declarative: "My veins beat to its motion." Replacing through synecdoche the throbbing "veins" for the beating heart, Yearsley elevates a dispersed organ of transmission, passage, and return above that standard, singular, and authoritative (not to mention poetically trite) timekeeper. Filling the difference, the standard-bearers of science are asked to explain how Time makes this "toy" or trifle of "no matter" matter as an ancillary heart. The critique of mechanistic philosophy present where Yearsley playfully goads believers in "atoms, rest, and motion" nonetheless invests in the alluring question of the efficacy of its objects. Indeed, scientists

²³⁴ Yearsley, "Soliloquy," 1-4.

substitute for lyricists in how they “sing” of physical phenomenon, but lag behind their counterparts in that they cannot “say” why this correspondence tantalizes.

Constructing a poem “governed by principles of science, not feeling” out of a domestic episode, Yearsley goes on to organize a subtle yet dense exchange between mechanistic philosophy, gender politics, and the technicity of poetry, all grounded through the figure of the watch as an exteriorization of memory.²³⁵ An apostrophe to Time first sets off a series of lines where Yearsley objectifies herself into clockwork, caught in gears through which she discovers another regularity: “O Sacred Time! thy moment goes not down / But I go with it! Sixty coming hours / Are with us poor expectants of more price / Than sixty years sunk to oblivion.”²³⁶ The same Time that endows the mechanized heart with a simple alarm capable of speaking to its organic clone forces Yearsley to mime its grammar. Counting, however, unveils a species of time that utilizes but exceeds numeracy. An unnamed and ahistorical quantity of sixty hours “oscillates between description and prescription,” formally repeating but logically outpacing the sexagesimal measurement of sixty seconds and minutes originating in Babylonian astronomical catalogues.²³⁷ An immeasurable value based on an inexistant measurement comes to exist in the tension between “expectation” (literally, “to look out at”) and “oblivion” (denoting in the eighteenth century “darkness” or “a want of light”).²³⁸ The expectant quite literally becomes a “watcher” counting a quantity of time that does not “exist,” but that is nonetheless real and felt.

²³⁵ Andrews, 99

²³⁶ Yearsley, “Soliloquy,” 5-8.

²³⁷ Caleb Everett, *Numbers and the Making of Us: Counting and the Course of Human Cultures* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2017), 16.

²³⁸ “obscurity, n.s.” *A Dictionary of the English Language*, by Samuel Johnson. 1755.

Returning to the critique of the scientists who sing of atoms but cannot say anything definitive about them, Yearsley finally imbues a mechanistic universe based on the technology of the clock with a structure and function that behaves mechanically but admits no apparent mechanism, elevating the unexplained metonymy between heart and time-keeping device into a universal structure that remains open and undetermined but without abandoning its formal regularity or mnemonic precision.

I have read the code
of statutes form'd by man for future worlds;
And found his plan so pompously display'd,
One lot of heterogenous fragment. Man
Adores in Fancy, violates in fact,
Laws serving his frail being. Yon pale moon,
Forsakes the mountaintop, to bring us round
her renovated splendor; Nature works
Obedient and unseen, forever: we,
May meet in spheres remote – If not, farewell!²³⁹

While Andrews reads these lines as connoting a potentially blasphemous rejection of the existence of heaven, the numerous allusions to mechanistic philosophy and scientific discourse offer a correspondent hypothesis. The plural “future worlds” alone suffices to indicate a potential heresy, but, when read in the context of “Ye who sing of atoms,” these worlds may refer instead to frameworks or schema of understanding, scientific “statutes” of natural laws harnessed to create the steam engine, mechanical loom, and other signs of industrialization cutting through Yearsley’s life. Referring to the unified theories of science as “one lot of heterogeneous fragment,” the enjambment of this line associates this broken whole pretending to unity as “Man,” the figure who loves these laws but relentlessly breaks them as he himself is broken. The feminine moon,

²³⁹ Yearsley, “Soliloquy,” 29-38.

(re)productive and full, rises up here in harsh discordance. The singular celestial body rebuffs the false harmony of “Man” with a more ancient, slow, and dedicated mechanical repetition, working, like the domestic laborer or the watchwoman, “Obedient and unseen.” Enjambment again forwards a claim: “Obedient and unseen, forever” are “we,” a universal collective, who may meet in “spheres remote.”

In a complex yet subtle blending of the figures of domestic labor and nature, Yearsley uses the discourse of mechanistic philosophy to “denaturalize” the pompous displays of man, writing a new law *with* and *not against* a natural philosophy that can explain why the watch holds such symmetry with the heart. Such a move simultaneously “reject[s] inherited structures of domesticity” and acknowledges how “love, work, leisure, the family, science, art, and sexual reproduction are all equally mutable, contestable, and available for species-wide reengineering.”²⁴⁰ There are intimations of a gender politics capacious enough to thrust open and plunder the supposedly closed-gates of science and technology. Thinking only of those “remote spheres” organizes an entire celestial, mechanic, and collective range of meanings: planets, glances, watch faces, the wide circuit of orbits, the minute circuit of minutes - each a galactic topos unto itself where the infinitely replicable Platos, Virgils, and Homers might be found milling grain, raising their children, tearing a stocking, or loitering in the streets.

Yearsley keeps all of this balanced on a razor's edge orthographically marked by the dash which breaks the final line. On one side stands the potential for reunion in the cosmological imaginary of “spheres remote,” times, planets, or planes yet unknown, the placeless place where her first poem cast its gaze under More’s radiant spirit. But here, late in Yearsley’s life, in a volume

²⁴⁰ Hester, “Promethean Labors and Domestic Realism,” (2017).

published while she managed a circulating library in Bristol whose catalog lists Euclid alongside Sterne, Fielding next to Wingate's *Arithmetic*, the figurality of More's Stella loses any eschatological certainty, evaporating on the surface of distance stars.²⁴¹ On the other side, only a parting wish escapes, a "fare well" in the potential absence of any future fairing, a bold, clear-eyed, and yet painful repetition of "no matter - you can sleep." Here then is a fittingly mature sentiment in the sentimentalism of the Milkwoman of Bristol, who began her poetic career under the moon, looking up at the night sky, reduced to an unreceptive matter unable to leave the earthy ground trod by cattle. Without the mattering of matter comes sleep. And with sleep comes dreams of travel beyond the stars.

²⁴¹ Ann Yearsley, *Catalogue of the Books, Tracts, &c Contained in Ann Yearsley's Public Library* (Bristol: Published for the Proprietor, 1793).

Chapter 3

Transmissions between God and Beast: Robert Burns, Speaking Signifiers, and the Voice of the Poetic Machine

"That there is an incomprehensible Great Being, to whom I owe my existence, and that He must be intimately acquainted with the operations and progress of the internal machinery, and consequent outward department of this creature which He has made; these are, I think, self-evident propositions."

- Robert Burns, To Mrs. Dunlop, Ellisland, 21st June 1789

In 1961, Bell Laboratories programmed the first singing computer. Running on 36-bit memory and vacuum tube technology, the IBM 704 Electronic Data-Processing Machine used a voice encoder developed by John Larry Kelley Jr. to successfully synthesize a human singing voice. Rejecting the experimental rock'n'roll sound of contemporary popular music, Kelley elected in his musical tutorship of the IBM 704 to reach back into the past, choosing to synthesize the lyrics of a love song titled "Daisy Bell" written and performed by British songwriter Henry Dacre in 1892. In a skirling electronic hum, the performing computer rephrased the barrier separating human from machine through lyrics addressed to an absent lover: "There is a flower within my heart, Daisy, Daisy! / Planted one day by a glancing dart, / Planted by Daisy Bell! Whether she loves me or loves me not, / Sometimes it's hard to tell." This difficulty of differentiating between organics and inorganics would go on to receive its most famous rendition in the tense climax of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Fearing his life expendable under the strict program directives of HAL 9000, the artificial intelligence system operating his spaceship, astronaut David Bowman floats into the cramped blood-red LED-lit brain of HAL to perform a computerized lobotomy, ejecting block by block the computer's glowing memory tapes until it

regresses from sophisticated polysyllabic technobabble to babble proper. Returned to the base programming layer of the IBM 704, the computer gives a rendition of "Daisy Bell" in tinny tones that thoroughly confuse pathos with malice, childlike vulnerability with inhuman insensitivity.

Anxious hopes and fears about the dulcet tones of speaking machines, however, long precede the IBM 704. Kelly's tinkering with singing vacuum tubes constitutes a modern electronic counterpart to the earliest efforts in the pursuit of speech sans speaker. In 1769, Wolfgang Von Kempelen began work on an analogue speaking machine composed of rubber, leather, boards, and hoses. Learning from the reception of his fraudulent Mechanical Turk automaton presented across Europe, Kempelen thwarted charges of dissimulation in publishing a meticulously detailed treatise on the history and construction of his machine, *The Mechanism of Human Speech* (1791). Around the same time, a similar machine invented by Erasmus Darwin described in notes to *The Temple of Nature* (1803) piqued interest in the possibility of inorganic speech across the channel. Like the IBM 704, proof of concept for these artificial vocal tracts depended not solely on the accurate replication of a limited range of phonemes, but the capacity to tune into a basic emotive prelingual channel – to express the timbre of passion and life through lifeless machines.

If the IBM 704 proved its bona fides through recourse to love, Kempelen's speaking machine premised itself on the innate feeling of the animal whose "cries, calls, whimpering, whistling, crowing, cooing, roaring, grunting, barking, hissing, buzzing, and all the tones that they emit" furnished proof that "their ability in speech goes no further than to show their passion."²⁴² Darwin, for his part, emphasized the degree of his achievement by claiming his machine could call

²⁴² Wolfgang von Kempelen, *The Mechanism of Human Speech*, ed. Fabian Brackhane, Richard Sproat & Jürgen Trouvain, trans. Richard Sproat (Dresden: TUDpress, 2017), 3.

out to its non-existent progenitors, clearly pronouncing an infant's first words: *mama* and *papa*.²⁴³

If animals, no more or less than complicated machines in Cartesian orthodoxy, could communicate through feeling, then there was little in principle to impede a man-made machine based on an equally complex if inorganic organization from doing the same through physics. For Bell, computerized tabulation conjured a simple self-referential sentiment. For Kempelen and Darwin, mechanical nature conjured a universal, organic voice.

A century before the IBM experiments at Bell Labs, Thomas Carlyle paid homage to another disembodied voice credited with communicating an elementary and natural passion. If Kempelen's speaking machine had not been denounced in the press as a fraud no different from his earlier Mechanic Turk or if Darwin had made any part of his invention public beyond the thinnest description, Carlyle might have addressed this heartfelt retrospective to a machine trained in the language of love. Instead, he celebrated a poet "of nature's own making" whose words and lyrics were soon to reach global saturation, a poet in pieces received and replayed from the United States to New Zealand and Japan, scored to music composed and performed by Beethoven, Hayden, and Mendelson, and recorded on vinyl for the phonograph in 1907:

A certain rugged sterling worth pervades whatever Burns has written... He has a resonance in his bosom for every note of human feeling; the high and the low, the sad, the ludicrous, the joyful are welcome in their turns... But by far the most finished, complete, and truly inspired pieces of Burns are, without dispute, to be found among his Songs. It is here that, although through a small aperture, his light shines with least obstruction; in its highest beauty and pure sunny cleanness. The reason may be, that Song is a brief simple species of composition; and requires nothing so much for its perfection as genuine poetic feeling, genuine music of heart.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Erasmus Darwin, *The Temple of Nature, Or, The Origin of Society: A Poem, with Philosophical Notes* (London: Johnson, 1803), 120.

²⁴⁴ Thomas Carlyle, Review of J.G. Lockhart's *The Life of Robert Burns*, *Edinburgh Review*, xcvi (1828), 16; 286.

What Carlyle eulogizes in Robert Burns might be called a high dynamic range of expression, a wide spectrum of resonant frequencies encompassing "the high and low" emanating from an organ of sentiment. This orchestra of sound takes on a metallic sturdiness while his songs evaporate into brilliant light. The tenor of Carlyle's praise picks up and illuminates the conviction (itself inspired by Burns) put to best expression in Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. The earthy rusticity of nature's son arrogates "the essential passions of the heart" in turning a "better soil in which they can attain their maturity."²⁴⁵ In metaphors as in agriculture, cultivating the heights of poetic productivity and genuine feeling relies on direct sunlight and rich soil.

Less celebratory and more skeptical about that "genuine feeling," some earlier critics emphasized the way Burns' voice hit their ear at jolting angles. Sliding effortlessly but not unmeaningfully between a lowland Scots isolect and its cognate contemporary prestige form of written English, Burns' dialect verse in *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786) sounded "uncultivated," "provincial," and "common" to critics accustomed to a certain elevated style of Anglicized euphonics.²⁴⁶ The span between the "highs and lows" they heard emerging from the text were simply too wide, too disorienting, compared to what had come before. Responses from fellow poets, in contrast, avoided the biases of regionalism or social rank, and instead hailed the uncommon or unique as a virtue. In a 1787 letter, William Cowper praised Burns "extraordinary volume" through a humorous anecdote telling how he lent this same volume to a neighbor who struggled with its "uncouth dialect."²⁴⁷ The recollection and letter end together on a word flexing Cowper's bilingualism and the neighbor's singular defeat: against Burns, the poor man was utterly

²⁴⁵ William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1802* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 97.

²⁴⁶ Fiona Stafford, "Burns and Romantic Writing," *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Burns* ed. Gerrard Carruthers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 100.

²⁴⁷ William Cowper, "Letter LXIX, To Samuel Rose, Esqr. Weston, Aug. 27, 1787," *The Life and Posthumous Writings of William Cowper, Esqr.*, ed. William Hayley (London: J. Johnson, 1803), 243-244.

"ramfeezled."²⁴⁸ Emphasizing less the sense of social impropriety, "uncouth" in Cowper's usage approximates something closer to "strange", "unusual", or, to use a word with Scots pedigree, "uncanny," while the Scots modifier "ramfeezled" denotes a state of exhaustion or confusion reached after great labor.

While the public applauded or denigrated the unique brogue of the poet's voice, the sincerity and virtue of his passion, in private company Burns let the illusion slip ever so slightly, doing something neither the IBM 704 nor Kempelen or Darwin's experiments could do: *he confessed to the knowledge that he himself was a machine*. Soon after the publication of the Edinburgh edition of *Poems* in 1787, Robert Anderson discerned in the volume a deep debt to literary forebears, particularly the Scottish poets Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson. Broaching the topic to Burns, the poet admitted that it was "part of the machinery, as he called it, of his poetical character to pass for an illiterate ploughman who wrote from pure inspiration."²⁴⁹ Burns crafts a supernatural *machina* in the fashion of Pope's burlesque replacement of transcendent gods and goddesses with folkish sylphs, gnomes, nymphs, and salamanders in *The Rape of Lock* (1712). Far from resentment or apprehension, the bard rejoiced when Henry McKenzie saddled him with the now (in)famous epithet of "heaven-taught plowman" in *The Lounger*. It was a "mythological shorthand" or technological black box hyping up his critical appeal.²⁵⁰ Words taken as divine signs only accentuated the marvel of a pristine and deeply felt voice emerging from a body so close to the earth. Rather than a calculator made of metal and plastic, the bard built his tongue out of a

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 244.

²⁴⁹ Robert Anderson to James Currie, 28 September 1799, in *The Letters of James Currie*, <<http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/jamescurrie/details.php?id=30>>

²⁵⁰ Luke RJ Maynard, "Hodding Grey an' A' That: Robert Burns's Head, Class Hybridity, and the Value of the Ploughman's Mantle," *The Working-Class Intellectual in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Aruna Krishnamurthy (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016), 78.

simpler technological materiality: the mud on his boots, the plough in his hand, and the long line of techniques that supplied the blueprints for the deity he was to become from his poetic machine.

Scholarship has largely rejected the imposition of this epithet as an ideological veil, preferring instead to trace the copious evidence of education and learning in opposition to it.²⁵¹ Despite this, elements of the heaven-taught public relations campaign persist, together siphoning energy off into to what Nigel Leask has called the myth of the “ruralist Burns.”²⁵² If, however, “the result of a ‘nostalgic’ view of ruralist Burns has been to sunder his life from the agricultural revolution of eighteenth century Scotland, and its major intellectual context in the Scottish Enlightenment,” then releasing Burns from his rustic folk prison back into the history of improvement and observation, technics and empiricism, the inorganic organization of steel and steam, pulp and paper, must mean reckoning *before all else* with the fine-tuned organization of his poetic machine. Indeed, it means not exempting this machine from the other technologies powering the same Scottish Enlightenment from which it has apparently sundered him.²⁵³ It is absolutely necessary to see that the organic folk Burns is itself the product of a technical Burns already firmly integrated into his historic moment: his separation is the very sign of his place in it. Indeed, when Burns spoke of speaking from nature, what he presents is not so much the misdirection of naturalist ideology or the chintzy trappings of self-serving salesmanship, but a knowing, even winking

²⁵¹ See in the particular the work of Carol McGuirk in *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), “Robert Burns and Nostalgia,” in *Burns Now*, ed. K. Simpson (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic Press, 1994), 31-69, and *Reading Robert Burns: Texts, Contexts, Transformations* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2015).

²⁵² Nigel Leask, “Was Burns a Labouring-Class Poet?,” *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring Class Poetry and Poetics, 1750-1900*, ed. Kirstie Blair and Mina Gorji (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 26.

²⁵³ *Ibid.* Such a move also recognizes and contributes to recent studies of Burns and Scottish laboring class verse premised on just the counter-ruralist reorientation that Leask encourages. See Kirstie Blair, *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), Gerard Lee McKeever, *Dialectics of Improvement: Scottish Romanticism 1786-1831* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), J. Walter McGinty, *Robert Burns and the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

parallel to the experiments of Kempelen and Darwin, a response to contemporary philosophies of the subject and nature, and the question of technics in the formation of an imagined national community at the center of the ballad revival.

Toward the goal of drafting schematics for Burns' poetic machine, this chapter presents the case for understanding the bard's intervention in the lowland vernacular poetry revival at the height of the Scottish Enlightenment as a crucial but neglected component in this technoscientific trajectory of emulative non-human phonology. More specifically, it asserts the need to read the proto-romantic sentiments, subjects, and styles of the verse of the heaven-taught ploughman within the context of what Friedrich Kittler refers to as "autonymic signifiers," spots of self-generating meaning whose break down and compaction feeds a process of creative augmentation: summoning a people, a voice, and a species as if from nothing. The first section outlines Kittler's presentation of the invention of phonics to draw comparisons between Burns' own upbringing at the intersection of an oral and literate culture and Kempelen's summary of the development of his speaking machine. After reading these phonics into two early ballads by Burns, the next section investigates bardic self-representation in the prefaces to the two editions of the poet's first volume (Kilmarnock and Edinburgh) to discover traces of an analytical project derived from the Popean credo to "study man" and discusses this project within the context of Scottish nationalism.

The final section turns to Burns' early famous "beastie" odes and reads these poems as attempts to build bound, rhythmic, and synthetic speech machines parallel to the work of Kempelen and Bell Labs, but with a notable difference. A phonological interpretation of the odes demonstrates that the synthetics of speech-to-text produce in their mediating function an inversion not dissimilar to that achieved by the IBM 704 crooning love songs: a coded substance composed

only of signifiers lacking all feeling simulates the particularity and physicality of the body of referents that other songs and poems tend to dissolve into a pure, anonymous, and disembodied voice. Even where his machine seems most abstract and simplified, the most “heaven-taught” to feel, Burns shows that a body always manages to return in the midst of the disembodied and muster an idiomatic sound otherwise.

Babbling Bagpipes and Crambo-Jingling Poets

Burns’ early life was lived within an energetic contact point where the mouth and ear met the hand and eye. Passage of the ‘Act for Settling of Schools’ in the Scottish parliament of 1696 instituted a parochial school system binding through taxation landowners and clergy outside of burgh boundaries to fund local rural education. The purpose and design of these schools varied across time and geography. In some, slanted instruction in basic literacy served to ensure that reading enforced anti-Gaelic and anti-Jacobite sentiment, while others used drills to push an ideology of improvement and commercialism.²⁵⁴ Outside these formal avenues of education, circulating libraries, subscription libraries, debating and reading societies, book clubs, and other organizations variously accessible to the public catalyzed commitments to reason, critique, collection, and debate that “were very widely diffused, in all areas and among a very wide span of social groups, in what was for the time a remarkably well-educated and highly literate population in country as well as in town.”²⁵⁵ The senses of Scotland in the middle of the century used such spaces to develop and entrench the prominence of their place in the “progressive globalization of European commerce” aided by significant access to sea routes and trading ports.²⁵⁶ Busy hands, eyes, and ears feeding

²⁵⁴ Ewen A. Cameron, "Education in Rural Scotland, 1696-1872," *The Edinburgh History of Education in Scotland*, ed. Robert Anderson, Mark Freeman, and Lindsay Paterson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 155.

²⁵⁵ G. E. Davie, *A Passion for Ideas: Essays on the Scottish Enlightenment II* (Edinburgh: Polygon 1994), 1.

²⁵⁶ Bruce P. Lenman, *The New Penguin History of Scotland: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: Penguin, 2002), 350.

into the discourses and practices of agricultural, intellectual, and industrial improvement consolidated a space for commerce and education to organize minds and bodies in activities that guaranteed techniques of development fit within a framework of national economic prosperity.

Unique in this context of philosophy, business, and education was the place of balladry, lyric, and song. Far from a disreputable subcultural strand shut out from the apartments of higher society or cordoned off to the parishes, a diffuse taste for music and poetry formed storehouses of culture for a country increasingly concerned with discovering a national identity in and through its music. Scots had traditionally “assigned a high value to music as a cultural marker,” but in the context of a search for national identity after the 1707 Acts of Union, ballad and song constituted egalitarian sites of intranational practice and price.²⁵⁷ In contrast to England, where the gentry and aristocracy quarantined themselves from the inked trash of balladmongers, a history of “affection for indigenous music in Scotland belonged to all classes... rich and poor, high and low... Intellectuals and aristocrats as well as laboring Scotsmen and women knew, created, played, sung, danced to, and enjoyed this music, which was very much part of a living tradition.”²⁵⁸ While printed ballad collections in Scotland far preceded their English counterparts, the mobility of this form across social strata struck out from a central hub of oral transmission, preservation, and practice.²⁵⁹ Women, such as Burns’ mother, “who knew old ballads, learned from nursemaids or servants or their mothers or aunts” commanded a privileged place in this arrangement, later acting

²⁵⁷ Ruth Perry, "Balladry and the Scottish Enlightenment," *The Scottish Enlightenment and Literary Culture*, ed. Ronnie Young, et al. (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2016), 78.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 90. As earlier as 1706, for example, James Watson’s *Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems*, together with Allan Ramsay’s *The Ever Green* (1724), emerged out of the contentions surrounding the Union championing a distinctly Scottish linguistic and literary heritage available to all. By the end of the century, publishing songs and lyrics reached such a saturation point in Scotland that airs had become tantamount to respected literary forms.

as sources for antiquarian ballad collectors equating age with authenticity.²⁶⁰ Instantly retrievable from a mnemotechnics ingrained in the body yet patinated under centuries of heritage, ballads resonated under a feminine mode of presenting the storied in the form of the immediate that gained increasing attention after James MacPherson's *Ossian* (1765) and Thomas Percy's *Reliques* (1765) ignited studied interest in voices from the past.

When Burns wrote of his parish schooling in a 1787 letter, he jumped without hesitation or apology between the worlds of text, grammar, and reading on one side and the experience of oral storytelling, songs, and legends on the other. Pride in a "retentive memory, a stubborn sturdy something in my disposition, and an enthusiastic idiot piety" amassed "some thrashings" from the local schoolmaster from whom Burns received a few years of instruction, but did little to diminish the formation of "an excellent English scholar" who by "ten or eleven years of age" was "a critic in substantives, verbs, and particles."²⁶¹ These rudiments were hard-won from Arthur Masson's *Collection of English Prose and Verse, for the Use of Schools*, a textbook which included excerpts of literature ranging from Milton to Mark Akenside used for elocutionary and grammatical practice. To the austere world of parts of speech and corporal punishment, a focal adverb in the next sentence of the same letter relates a different memorization of categories at which the boy excelled:

In my infant and boyish days, too, I owed much to an old woman who resided in the family, remarkable for her ignorance, credulity, and superstition. She had, I suppose, the largest collection in the country of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, cantraipts, giants, enchanted towers, dragons, and other trumpery."²⁶²

²⁶⁰ In a 1788 letter, Burns recollects a moment of his mother's skill in balladry and song: "I had an old grand-uncle, with whom my mother lived a while in her girlish years; the good old man, for such he was, was long blind ere he died, during which time his highest enjoyment was to sit down and cry, while my mother would sing the simple old song of 'The Life and Age of Man.'"

²⁶¹ Robert Burns, "Letter LVI to Dr. Moore, Mauchline 2nd August 1787," *The Complete Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. James A. Mackay (Ayr: Alloway, 1987).

²⁶² *Ibid.*

Rather than the discipline entailed in submitting to the techniques of literacy, the bard elects this supernatural genealogy to the ranks of what "cultivated the latent seeds of poetry" in his imagination.²⁶³ Haunted by this extravagant literacy, the poet took shelter in the sobering alternatives won from Masson's schoolbook to ward the lingering effects of hearing about what he could not see: "to this hour, in my nocturnal rambles, I sometimes keep a sharp look out in suspicious places, and though nobody can be more skeptical than I am in such matters, yet it often takes an effort of philosophy to shake off these idle terrors."²⁶⁴ The same retentive memory and sturdy disposition that inculcated the wakefulness of reason in grammar books accentuated for the young Burns the presence of spirits and creatures that only the same reason could wish away.

Before the young Burns fully devoted his attention to the powers of poetry to tease and seduce, his playful imagination complemented this attachment to matronly tales of the immaterial with an idolization of historical figures of a mythic scale associated with masculinity, independence, and valor. The first of these figures came into his awareness in 1766, after his schoolteacher William Murdoch lent him André Dacier's *The Life of Hannibal* (1737), a translated biography of the Carthaginian general who crossed the Alps and waged war against the Roman Empire. Rather than songbooks or verse collections, this historical account became an early vade mecum for the seven-year-old, one of the "first two books" the poet "ever read in private, and which gave [him] more pleasure than any... two ever read again."²⁶⁵ Supplementing *Hannibal* was the second of these two, a copy of William Hamilton of Gilbertfield's 1722 Scots-English verse epic *Wallace* borrowed from (and likely never returned to) a blacksmith in a neighboring town.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

The romantic framing of these heroic figures fed vivid imaginative projections by which ancient Carthage came to map onto contemporary Scotland, with Punic substituting for Scots and a discourse resistant to tyranny matching a strengthening national distinction embodied in the popular reception of Wallace's struggle for independence against England. So far did this transparency of history reach that Burns remembered how "Hannibal gave my young ideas such a turn that I used to strut in raptures up and down after the recruiting drum and bagpipe, and wish myself tall enough to be a soldier."²⁶⁶

In his biography on the bard, Robert Crawford leans on the militaristic connotations of the "recruiting bagpipe and drum" in his commentary on this boyhood wish for a magical growth spurt, linking this early adherence to notions of independence and masculinity with the kind of verse Burns would go on to produce.²⁶⁷ Yet the droning wail of the bagpipe only squarely held nationalistic or political connotations for the mature Burns capable of retrospectively organizing these childish games. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to imagine a youth enamored with the pleasures of reading ready to abandon these moments of imaginative idleness to die for a country of which he had formed only hazy romantic sentiments. Military drills and enlistment events only composed a fraction of the full status and application of the bagpipe in the lowlands during the period. Circumstances purveying the wail of the bagpipe more often tended instead toward the reinforcement of local communal associations. The familiar presence of the town piper at "bridals and dances, feast days and clark-plays, military musters and horse races; for shearing in the fields

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Robert Crawford, *The Bard: Robert Burns, A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 46-47.

and, above all, for the morning call and evening curfew” elicited transport not exclusively across oceans to fight wars but also into cultural rituals demarcated by a special segmentation of time.²⁶⁸

Rather than solely foreshadowing a republican poetics, this recollection of rapture helps establish the formative conjunction of text and tones, eye and ear, flighty visions and haunting sounds in the poet’s earliest acquaintance with letters. In other correspondences, the mature Burns returns to how the bagpipe held a certain mystical, supernatural, even demonic, charm given over exactly to the kind of reverie or "rapture" he reminisces about in the soldier excerpt. Writing in 1792, Burns delivers to Francis Grose the urban legend forming the basis for “Tam O’Shanter” in recounting the tale of an unsuspecting farmer who crossed "the river Doon at the old Bridge..." at "the wizard hour" and witnessed a bright fire beaming from Alloway Kirk.²⁶⁹ Refusing to turn his back on the sight out of superstition, "he prudently advanced on his road. When he had reached the gate of the kirk-yard, he was surprised and entertained, through the ribs and arches of an old gothic window, which still faces the highway, to see a dance of witches merrily footing it round their old sooty blackguard master, who was keeping them all alive with the power of his bagpipe."²⁷⁰ Such legends were not unique. Closely allied to the quotidian profile of the bagpipe at feast days and sheep shearings was this darker, more evocative character of the instrument. A contemporary popular folk tale, for instances, tells of a "ghostly piper" of the Highlands "often seen mounted on a big black horse, while multitudes of voices sang round him..." frightening travelers at twilight who could "hear the melancholy wailing of the pipes" but could not "tell from

²⁶⁸ Joshua Dickson, *The Highland Bagpipe: Music, History, Tradition* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 176.

²⁶⁹ Burns, "Letter CLXXII to Mr. Francis Grose, Dumfries 1792."

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

whence they came."²⁷¹ The cultural-sonic network associated with this instrument, much like the texts on which Burns was weaned, placed the canny and uncanny into close conversation.

It was this very capacity for audiovisual enchantment amongst the everyday life of townsfolk that also cast a spell on Wolfgang Von Kempelen. In *The Mechanism of Human Speech*, the engineer offered a provisional apology that the origins of his desire to construct a speaking machine had become lost to time.²⁷² Despite this lapse, the basic similarity between human and machinic vocal instruments furnished the base of his research, drawing him to how "the mouthpiece on the oboe, the clarinet, the bassoon and the like come closest to the human voice" and rebuffering apparatuses like the vox humana fitted to singing organs "because these only very imperfectly imitate the human voice and make a numbing noise."²⁷³ Only after "a pleasure trip to the country" did the inventor happen upon a specimen suited to justify the creation of a machine gifted with speech.²⁷⁴ In rustic environs, "an instrument that one seldom sees in the city" stood out to him for not only grounding the feasibility of the project but presenting a definite association between machinic instrument and organic organ necessary to achieve accurate vocal emulation:

...a country hike took me and my company unexpectedly to a village tavern, in front of which some peasants amused themselves with dances. There was a break when we approached, during which the musician tuned his instrument. At some distance I heard something that I could not rightly distinguish. It seemed to me as if I heard children singing, who always alternated between the same two or three tones, and could not discover any more. When we finally arrived, what was it? - a bagpipe, or as one calls it here in the country a pipesack. My joy was quite extraordinary, because I so unexpectedly found here what I had so zealously sought, namely the tone that to my ears best imitated the human voice among all that I had thus far investigated.²⁷⁵

²⁷¹ William Laird Manson, *The Highland Bagpipe: Its History, Literature, and Music, with Some Account of the Traditions, Superstitions, and Anecdotes Relating to the Instrument and Its Tunes* (London: Alexander Gardner, 1901), 226.

²⁷² Kempelen, 389-390.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 390.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 391.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 391-392.

Kempelen begged the piper to sell him his instrument, but the man refused out of concerns for his livelihood. Whether from sympathy or annoyance, the piper finally parted ways with a spare reed which Kempelen took back to his home, inserted into the "iron tube of the bellows" lifted from his kitchen, "and made it screech by pressing together the bellows."²⁷⁶ Despite the "wretched" state of his machine, Kempelen was inspired that it "could already produce different vowels clearly, only not yet according to my choice and in any order."²⁷⁷ What finally convinced the inventor of the possibility of giving this contraption fully articulated speech derived from another chance encounter: "When I continued with my experiments, my wife and children came running from the third room, and asked with curiosity what was going on with me, since it happened that they heard a voice loudly and zealously praying, without being about to tell what language it was."²⁷⁸ A bagpipe reed and kitchen bellows mimicked a spiritual communion with the supernatural in a language beyond language that laid "the foundation stone... upon which with time might perhaps be built a complete system of human speech sound."²⁷⁹ The inventor found his invented tongue capable of speaking in tongues, articulating an almost angelic language that, with time, might be refined and used to understand language itself.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 393.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 395.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 396.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

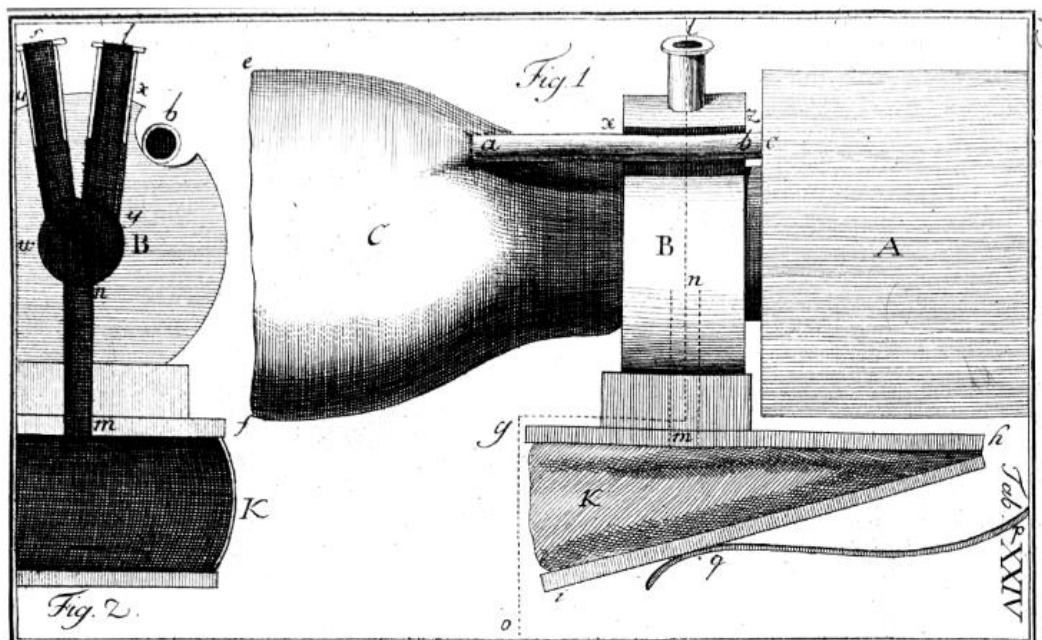


Figure 5: An illustration of Wolfgang Von Kempelen's speaking machine included in *The Mechanism of Human Speech* (Figure XXIV, 577), consisting of the primary parts of the windchest (A), wooden plank (B) and elastic rubber flask (C).

Various complications and limitations would press Kempelen to abandon this initial rudimentary design, but he finally arrived at a more or less complete model of the speaking machine. It consisted of a wooden voice pipe representing the glottis, a tongue made of "a leaf of ivory thinly shaved to about the thickness of a playing card" fitted with soft white glove leather, a specially designed weighted bellows, a wooden wind chest acting as a hub for connecting the windpipe and bellows, a nose created by boring two holes into the chest, and a mouth made from a flask of elastic rubber (Figure 5).²⁸⁰ Primarily operated with the hands and fingers, making the speaking machine speak required, like any instrument, ample technique and practice. Thrusting the elbow down pumped air from the bellows into the chest, hovering the left hand over the funnel

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 411.

at different degrees produced vowels, and manipulating keys attached to strings, hinges, and wires with the right formed consonants.

Undaunted by such complexity, Kempelen insisted that any novice could "within the span of three weeks achieve an admirable ability in playing, especially when one starts with the Latin, French or Italian languages."²⁸¹ Even with a skillful player, however, certain flaws endured. Plosives relying on the tongue and alveolar palate like [t] and [k] remained somewhat indistinct, an ineptitude that led Kempelen in the final pages of his treatise to summon the same tact and showmanship used to talk up his discredited Automatic Turk. Out of a technical limitation, the inventor preferred to hear a pure voice: "But if a sensitive ear notices, the machine's childlike voice comes into play and one allows it to pass as a child, when it sometimes babbles, or replaces one letter with another."²⁸² The same machine gifted with heavenly speech in its earliest prototype also struggles with clear pronunciation in its final product, a bodiless mouth communing with higher spheres conjuring up the naivety, sympathy, and harmless little solecisms of a child.

Undoubtedly inarticulate when compared with its human compeers, the untutored condition of the machine nonetheless represented its very virtue. What Kempelen invents amounts in essence to the rudiments of a peasant poet: a child of nature, gifted with supernatural sound, capable of evoking a fundamental particle of emotion registered primarily in the groaning or droning of vowels, and connected through narrative back to a rustic setting where simple music and simple life spark imagination, invention, and, most importantly, a crystallization of the voice. Whether the mechanical emotive whimper of Kempelen's crafted protegee or the "genuine poetic feeling" of Burns, what defines that virtue is the thoroughgoing primacy of a technologically

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 455.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 443.

cultivated orality, the same that Friedrich Kittler discusses in the context of eighteenth-century educational primers advertising the new pedagogy of the phonetic method, where turning isolated vowels into generative nodes of meaning replaced the rote memorization of syllables and sentences in childhood instruction. The phonetic method, however, only stood as a singular instance of a wider sociotechnical inversion overlapping with Kempelen's machine and Burns play at soldiers. Pivotal at this historical moment was a revised conception of the body. As Kittler describes it, this new body "has eyes and ears only in order to be a large mouth. The mouth transforms all the letters that assault the eyes and ears into ringing sounds."²⁸³ Such an oral hypostatization of this type signifies a corresponding de-corporealization, a rerouting of the subject through a new zero point defined by the submergence of technics, matter, and multiplicity under a new transcendental regime of meaning where creation replaces copying and the body evaporates into strange chimes.

Founding this oral body entailed the concurrent development of "a general, purified, homogenous medium" designed to host a "soul" that "pushes toward language so forcefully that even lines of poetry, in which the unfulfillable character of the soul's wish becomes language, grant the wish and write down an autonymic signifier of the soul."²⁸⁴ Poetry, in general, met the mark. But exclamatory vowels making use of the throat and glottis, the "O!" and "Ach!" familiar to poetic feeling, posed privileged emblems of this transition. Aiding the development of the circular proof of the soul's depth in their identity as textual ciphers for the very discourse they helped to create, such written sounds read on the page amounted to phonocentric guarantors of the transcendent internal voice which read them. In its drive to purify and codify language down to

²⁸³ Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990)

²⁸⁴ Kittler, 36, 41.

the phonemic level, Kempelen's work, as Kittler points out, testifies to a desire for supercharging such autonymic signifiers to emit "minimal signifieds ... a minimal element that unifies sound and meaning, Nature and Spirit."²⁸⁵ The resounding impression of these impassioned disembodied elements floating in the air muted their origin in a collection of techniques and practices for projecting living sounds from the unyielding matter of paper, letter, and text, a manipulation that gave rise to a deep psychological interiority whose devotion to these transcendent signifieds, often taking the form of an ideal woman or mother figure, kept the engine of these practices running. Poetics became a pretext for sensual experiments with sound.

Lasses and Grasses and Ballads – O My!

When Burns suggests in the same 1787 letter to John Moore that his earliest experiments in rhyme emerged from the feeling of transforming into an instrument capable of channeling an original natural force into an articulate harmonic sound, he matches Kempelen chord for chord. In the course of reminiscing about his first love for a young towns-girl named Nelly Kilpatrick, "a bewitching creature" with whom Burns was partnered to work on the fields in autumn, the budding poet remembers losing himself to the thumping regularity of his quickened heart: "I did not know well... why my heart beat such a furious ratann when I looked and fingered over her hand, to pick out the nettle-stings and thistles."²⁸⁶ Channeling the thumping sensation into the imitative Scots "ratann," an onomatopoeic translation or "reduplicating repetition" forging a symbolic claim over its technical referent, Burns complements this percussive section with a string accompaniment, remembering how these caresses and exchanges "made my heartstrings thrill like an Eolian

²⁸⁵ Kittler, 43.

²⁸⁶ Burns, "Letter LVI to Dr. Moore, Mauchline 2nd August 1787."

harp."²⁸⁷ The ensemble activates in full upon hearing Nelly's captivating singing voice lilting "her favourite reel" to which the young bard eventually "attempted giving an embodied vehicle in rhyme." The resulting crambo-jingle, the first rhyme Burns wrote, formed from the tune of a ballad converting the superstitious grammatical drummer boy into an effusive feeling poet "initiated... that delicious passion, which, in spite of acid disappointment, gin-horse prudence, and book-worm philosophy, I hold to be the first of human joys."²⁸⁸ Where the euphonic experience of melody and tune was concerned, words played second fiddle. Lyric composition took the form of straining to materialize as if through an alembic the lexical units latent within the overriding hum and buzz of familiar folk tunes, instruments, and devices for the production and propagation of sound.

The song Burns composed in translating this early attachment, "O Once I loved a bonny lass" (also known as "Handsome Nell") derived from a concentrated engagement with the melody of an older ballad referred to as "I am a Man Unmarried" often published in contemporary chapbooks alongside the lyric "The Roving Batchelor." In this first song, so forceful and intentional was Burns' method of synthesizing signifiers from sound that the vehicle ends up harmonizing with the subject of the love song itself. The result is a phonesthetic poetics lodged in the body, proud of its firm materiality, but also struggling for independence from the simplicity of this corporal link. At the level of content, as Kirsteen McCue notes, the lyrics of "O Once I loved a bonny lass" anticipate this struggle in evoking characteristic signatures of Burns' later verse: "Scots language combines with polished English, beauty embodies love, simplicity and modesty rise above sophistication, and, moreover, purity of reputation is the finest of attributes."²⁸⁹ In terms

²⁸⁷ Kittler, 49.

²⁸⁸ Burns, "Letter LVI to Dr. Moore, Mauchline 2nd August 1787."

²⁸⁹ Kirsteen McCue, "Burn's Songs and Poetic Craft," Fiona Stafford, "Burns and Romantic Writing," *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Burns* ed. Gerrard Carruthers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 76.

of sound, however, things get a little deeper and little dirtier. Indeed, this first attempt at a love song portrays a vocalist cannily committed to expelling the guttural, reverberating resonance of the vocal tract into the air or onto the page, unveiling that nested kernel of sensation in the open.

O, once I lov'd a bonie lass,
 Ay, and I love her still!
 And whilst that virtue warms my breast,
 I'll love my handsome Nell.²⁹⁰

A consistent phonological profile accentuates and isolates the open-mid back rounded [ɔ] and open front unrounded [a] vowels of "Bonnie" and "Lass" respectively. Posterior and anterior phonemes bunch up in the first two lines, where a surplus of initial o's and a's (O, Once, Ay, And, I'll) translate the undulating sensation of straining notes vibrating in the throat. In contrast, the second stanza divides an elongation of the front vowel [a:] and sharper high [i] of "Bonnie" and oscillates the high and low frequency ranges associated with each across a battery of end rhymes evoking the shallowness of visual beauty:

As bonie lasses I hae seen,
 And monie full as braw,
 But for a modest gracefu' mien
 The like I never saw.²⁹¹

This association of high frequency front vowels in end rhyme with a piercing clarity or precision extends to the following stanza where the surety of "me" meets the optics of "e'e." Certainty in love and looks teeters close to the front of the mouth where, like the eye, everything is a matter of pretension and surface, the "genteel" and "weel"-to-do featured in the fifth stanza:

²⁹⁰ Robert Burns, "Handsome Nell," *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns* (Ayr: Alloway Publishing, 1993), 1-4.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 5-8.

She dresses ay sae clean and neat,
 Both decent and genteel;
 And then there's something in her gait
 Gars onie dress look weel.²⁹²

But the singer soon returns to deeper vowels with a reassurance that "what is best of a'... And fair without a flaw," comes with that ineffable substance that "enchants the soul" and "reigns without controul."²⁹³ True beauty sits squarely in the back of the throat, close to the guttural [o] that causes the chest to rattle. Exposing the depths in which his love sits enthroned on that throbbing organ while boasting of his preference for inner virtue over outer appearance, however, invites a veiled reference to another organ also hidden from sight. The activity of thrusting or projecting the rumbling vocal tract takes on a prurient sexual glee where the singer owns "it's innocence and modesty / That polishes the dart," evoking within the metaphor both the *spiculum amoris* of Cupid's dart and the "little lance" interested in making more carnal overtures.²⁹⁴

Burns' early songs indulged in such double entendre, purveying anamorphic lyrics where a slight shift in perspective transforms elevated pious affection into bawdy sexual expenditure. Perhaps the most well-known of these lyrics, the ballad "Green Grows the Rashes" demonstrates a similar commitment to locating and exteriorizing the innards of the voice. Yet, at the same time, it overlays this dynamic with a transparent layer of self-referentiality harkening back to its own imaginative projection in text. In September 1784, Burns committed to his first commonplace book the incunabula of his version of "Green Grow the Rashes" headed by a brief commentary: "In the meantime I shall set down the following fragment, which as it is the genuine language of my heart,

²⁹² Ibid., 17-20.

²⁹³ Ibid., 14, 16, 26, 28.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 23-24.

will enable any body to determine which of the classes I belong to."²⁹⁵ He then presents the chorus and first stanza:

Green grow the rashes, O;
 Green grow the rashes, O;
 The sweetest hours that e'er I spend,
 Are spent among the lasses, O.

There's nought but care on ev'ry han',
 In ev'ry hour that passes, O:
 What signifies the life o' man,
 An' 'twere na for the lasses, O.
 Green grow, &c.²⁹⁶

The thumping alliteration of "green" and "grow" twines together the meanings and sounds of lush productivity, unfurling vowels in a growl from voiced alveolar approximate [ɹ] in the back of the throat. Signs of health and vigor associated with these rashes or rushes also spread across the grammatical categories associated with them. As an adjective, the Scots "rash" also denotes a hearty, hale, or vigorous constitution. The same sense carries over to the preterit form of the word, which captures the activities of rushing, spattering or pouring in a hurried slapdash way.

The sexual connotations of these phallic reed-like grasses and sounds are hard to overlook. At the same time, however, the denunciation of speed and plunder associated with the "warly race" who "may riches chase... tho' at last they catch them fast / their hearts can ne'er enjoy them, O" cautions against a reading that centers a rush to the act.²⁹⁷ A prominent theme of sensual and substantial time arrested in "a canny hour at e'e / my arms about my Dearie, O;" wards off lust

²⁹⁵ Robert Burns, *Robert Burns' Commonplace Book 1783-1785*, ed. James Cameron Ewing and Davidson Cook (Fontwell: Centaur Press, 1965), 16.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Robert Burns, "Green Grow the Rashes, O," *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns*, 5-8.

even as it invites it.²⁹⁸ It is odd, then, that the final verse stanza figures nature square in the center of business, personified as an apprentice working to shape or invent humanity, presumably under the supervision of a heavenly craftsman:

Auld Nature swears, the lovely dears
Her noblest work she classes, O:
Her prentice han' she try'd on man,
An' then she made the lasses, O.²⁹⁹

Obeisance to the luster of its creation leads the poet to playfully understate the creative power of nature who "with her 'prentice han'" formed man, the shoddy product of an initial assay. The skill tested and won from shaping this inferior creature proves itself in the sequel, woman, whose formal beginning enters at the end of the song despite her image composing its choral center. Indeed, the abstract feminine Nature appears to *produce* the particularly embodied female. The allusion to Genesis here performs a subtle rearguard function, using a mythic origin to fend off awareness of the fact that the art of song itself mimics nature in forming the image of woman it celebrates as ready-made: spirited yet methodical, pulsing yet rejuvenating in its repetition from low to high. After all, prior to the invention of woman, the "life o' man" in song and language was without the meaning provided by the signum, the material emblem of the capacity to mark the luxuriant meaning of a slow time that "unifies sound and meaning, Nature and Spirit."

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 9-10.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 17-20.

Lively

CHORUS Green grow the rash-es, O; Green grow the rash-es, O; The

Fine

sweet-est hours that e'er I spend, Are spent a-mang the las-ses, O.

There's nought but care on ev-'ry han', In ev-'ry hour that passes, O: What

D.C.

sig-ni-fies the life o' man, An' 'twere na for the las-ses, O.

Figure 6: Sheet music for "Green Grow the Rashes O," printed in *Robert Burns: Selected Poems* (Penguin, 1993).

Like many of Burns' early lyrics set to popular or historied tunes, such as "My Nanie, O," "My Father was a Farmer," and "The Ruined Farmer," "Green Grow the Rashes" employs the standard ballad refrain of a solitary "O" to provide a seamless transition between the verses. Modern performances help to recreate the degree to which the refrain renders a generative or agglutinative function to the song as a whole.³⁰⁰ Its repetition after the first two lines of the chorus and alternation at every other line end of the verses creates a sense that the refrain provides a neutral humming terrain or static channel out of which the form of the individual words coheres and into which they eventually dissolve. This effect is manifested in the acoustics of the song, identifiable in the score where the "O" always repeats the preceding note (Figure 6). Indeed, this duplicative "O" subtly and organically comes to perform on a musical level both the phonology and semantics of the preterit marking the development of the rashes. Set in the scale of C minor,

³⁰⁰ See, for example, Jean Redpath's faithful folk rendition of Burns arrangement or, for something more modern, R.E.M.'s mellow reinterpretation, "Green Grow the Rushes."

the lyric "grow" carries a dotted note or augmentation which cues an increase in duration of the standard length of the note by half. Carrying within it the same basic vowel that supports the lyrical and musical movement of the song, the effect is a symbolic resonance between meaning and sound; the word "grow" literally grows and stretches while repeating the same vowel sound terminating and regenerating the end of every other measure in infinite reproduction.

Although the ballad itself stretches back to the fifteenth century (if not earlier), first published in 1549 under the title "Cou thou me the raschyes grene" amongst bawdy alternatives, what is decisive in Burns' rendition of "Green Grow the Rashes" is not simply the standardization of the lyrics, scale, and tune, which were of course variable and evolving until his intervention. Rather what deserves attention here is the way in which the refrain, the guttural assonance, and the phonesthetics cohere around a projection of individual sentiment, masculine identity, and, pivotally, an emotionalism speaking for a deep interiority compounded by an equation of resounding time in rest with sensitive productivity in creation. The significance of the ballad lies not simply in the lyrics of a traditional folk song finally recorded on paper, but how that process of recording would lift off the page as "the genuine language of my heart" and stand, self-sufficient and meaningful enough to "enable any body to determine" the place, position, and feeling of Burns. The bard overcomes what for Kempelen "makes the investigation of the origin of language so difficult, because it is so difficult for a refined civilized person to put himself in the shoes of a fully sensual man of nature."³⁰¹ Inheritance and revision of the techniques governing a maternally transmitted line of song invents the nature that grants a referent for a "genuine language."

³⁰¹ Kempelen, 53.

A similar pattern of augmentation occurs in another of Burns' well-known songs, "My Luve is Like a Red, Red Rose," an air which not only lexically presses on repetition to the point of redundancy but acoustically stretches and strains many notes in order to invoke the unique presence of a singular voice:

O my Luve's like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June:
O my Luve's like the melodie,
That's sweetly play'd in tune.

As fair art thou, my bonie lass,
So deep in luve am I;
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry.³⁰²

Words denoting and modifying time, emotion, and growth ("luve," "red," "rose," "sprung," "June," "lass," "bonnie,") each receive dotted notation and stride across the length of the score. The effect, like Burns' oft-noted invention of duplicating the adjective "red" from ballad sources, amounts to a simultaneous test and proof of the speaker's own feeling. A commanding singular presence pulls on time to create a space for itself. As Carol McGuirk argues, Burns' *modus operandi* in songwriting relies on "the creative projection of a character, a speaker... that a single speaker almost always focuses and filters the folk imagery in this way (to serve his or her own purposes) is the major difference between Burns' songs and traditional folk-songs."³⁰³ The invention of a unifying voice from out of a vast and diverse oral repository of ballads "dependent upon extraneous 'voices'," an anonymous receptacle for "often multiple submerged speakers," exhibits a function analogous to Kempelen's machine set on multilingual condensation into a single apparatus.³⁰⁴

³⁰² Robert Burns, "My Luve is Like a Red, Red Rose," *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns*, 1-8.

³⁰³ Carol McGuirk, *Robert Burns: Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 283.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

While this tendency toward elongation might derive from an awkward attempt to remedy the disproportion between a sprawling melody and the pittance of lyrics chosen to outfit it, the final product approximates the jerry rigging and improvisation demanded by an unwieldy speaking machine.³⁰⁵ For Kempelen, toilsome tinkering aided the final clarity of a synthesized word. For Burns, the fullness and repetitious clarity of words synthesized "loose sentiments" from old ballads into a unified, personified, timeless whole.³⁰⁶ The ballad shifts from a mode of "accretion," what Kittler refers to as "assembly" or the additive combinatorics and contingent differentiation of lyrical and melodic structure by different singers to suit their purpose, to "appropriation" or "augmentation," the motific occupation of a single subject position infinitely repeatable by future singers interested to prove the singularity of the emotion driving them through a standard form: to profess love by pressing on the bellows and modulating the keys of the bard's poetic machine.³⁰⁷

Kilmarnock's Farmer and Edinburgh's Bard

The revised introduction Burns wrote for the Edinburgh edition of his first collection finally unveils this machine to the public. Directly addressing the city together with the "Noblemen and Gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt," the bard reintroduces himself with hypophoric aplomb into a performative contradiction: "A Scottish Bard, proud of the name, and whose highest ambition is to sing in his Country's service, where shall he so properly look for patronage as to the illustrious Names of his native Land; those who bear the honours and inherent the virtues of their Ancestors?"³⁰⁸ Where the Kilmarnock edition of the previous year presented its poet in a simple guise writing "to amuse himself with the little creations of his own fancy, amid the toil and fatigues

³⁰⁵ John Ashmead and John Davison, *The Songs of Robert Burns* (New York: Garland, 1988), 158.

³⁰⁶ Robert Burns, "Letter VII, 7th April 1793."

³⁰⁷ McGuirk, 283; Kittler, 45-50.

³⁰⁸ Robert Burns, *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1787), v-vi.

of a laborious life," the Edinburgh preface dazzles the reader with the riddles of self-discovery and biblical prophecy.³⁰⁹

The Poetic Genius of my Country found me as the prophetic bard of Elijah did Elisha - at the plough; and threw her inspiring mantle over me. She bade me sing the loves, the joys, the rural scenes and rural pleasure of my natal Soil, in my native tongue: I tuned my wild, artless notes as she inspired - She whispered me to come to this ancient metropolis of Caledonia, and lay my Songs under your Honoured protection: I now obey her dictates.³¹⁰

The feminine genius loci delivers genius to the ploughman in the same manner as the prophet Elijah anointed the farmer Elisha as his successor under God in the book of Kings. Elisha's prophetic mission conscripted him to kill his oxen and destroy his plough, cooking the meat of his stock over a fire burning on the shards of their burden to feed the townspeople. Burns, obviously, doesn't go this far. But he does let the spirit take him by putting the oxen before the plough in a tight series of reversals aimed at delivering his own plough for consumption. After receiving a literal breath from the cloak of his own country, he tunes what requires no tuning, the "wild, artless notes" that in the Kilmarnock preface came a little more naturally.³¹¹ A poet first humbly "possest of some poetic abilities" becomes possessed by a spirit and offers himself before the polis.³¹²

Burns' prophecy rings so simple that it immediately falls into a circularity of a sort that his prestigious Edinburgh audience was already well-prepared to receive. Seeking no more favors as a "servile Author" but as one "bred to the Plough and... independent," Burns comes to "claim the common Scottish name with you, my illustrious Countrymen; and to tell the world that I glory in the title - I come to congratulate my Country, that the blood of her ancient heroes still runs

³⁰⁹ Robert Burns, *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Kilmarnock: John Wilson, 1786), iv.

³¹⁰ Burns, *Poems* (Edinburgh), vi.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

³¹² Burns, *Poems* (Kilmarnock), v.

uncontaminated."³¹³ Entirely congruent with the picture of natural genius just sketched, where the "artless" required "tuning," Burns announces to the world the completion of a circular journey that begins and ends with "The Poetic Genius of my Country." The Bard is inspired by genius to become a genius that in turn celebrates his country for its genius. The mythic steam floating up from this poetic machinery ferries the Bard into a pantheon of national poets from antiquity. Indeed, if Macpherson's *Ossian* stood for an answer to and Scottish reinvention of Homer, an ancient oral poet whose "birth in the laboring class had introduced him at an early age to the vigorous and lively tradition upon which he built," Burns, perhaps presumptuously but certainly with pride, cites Kings to curls the pages of this preface across his brow in the shape of a laurel.³¹⁴

Burns' apotheosis in this passage leaps between the two models of genius Stephen Van-Hagen outlines: either the poet is a gifted farmer deferent to social norms (natural genius) or his gift outstrips him in direct connection to a transcendent power (original genius).³¹⁵ The prefaces to Kilmarnock and Edinburgh perfectly instantiate this division, further proof for which appears where any explicit mention of Burns' vernacular inspirators, predecessors, and, perhaps bluntly, sources in Fergusson and Ramsay is curiously cut from the Edinburgh preface. Where Kilmarnock takes pains to establish its homage to these Scottish poets, "the genius of a Ramsay, or the glorious dawns of the poor, unfortunate Ferguson," the new Burns flips the switch on his poetic machinery.³¹⁶ To a certain degree, the names Fergusson and Ramsay must have been common coin with a sizeable portion of the Edinburgh literati who furnished the subscriber base for the volume,

³¹³ Burns, *Poems* (Edinburgh), vi-vii.

³¹⁴ Perry, 84.

³¹⁵ Stephen Van-Hagen, "But Genius is the Special Gift of God!" The Reclamation of 'Natural Genius' in the Late-Eighteenth Century Poetry of Ann Yearsley and James Woodhouse," *A History of Working-Class Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 55-69.

³¹⁶ Burns, *Poems* (Kilmarnock), v.

making another show of humble citation superfluous at best or potentially condescending at worst. Yet the fact that the excision of literature opens a space where Burns substitutes the discourse of inspired spectacle through biblical prophecy holds significance in itself.

Encapsulating the crosstalk between meek inheritor and divine ordinance characteristic of original genius, Burns' poem "The Vision" narrativizes the preface in picturing humility turned into a poetic self-crowning. The poem imagines a rhyming farmer worn out in equal parts from work and diversion. A muse embodying Scotland manifests before the rustic and offers him neither wealth nor grace, but an alternative interpretation of his circumstances - a vision. From this seeing, the poet who believed he had been "stringing blethers up in rhyme / for fools to sing" undergoes a radical reorientation.³¹⁷ Former limitations turn "tapselteeerie" into unlimited well-springs of possibilities yet to come. Rather than grumble at his lot, the farmer learns,

"... all beneath th' unrivall'd rose,
 T e lowly daisy sweetly blows;
 Tho' large the forest's monarch throws
 His army shade,
 Yet green the juicy hawthorn grows,
 Adown the glade.

"Then never murmur nor repine;
 Strive in thy humble sphere to shine;
 And trust me, not Potosi's mine,
 Nor king's regard,
 Can give a bliss o'ermatching thine,
 A rustic Bard."³¹⁸

Critical to note here is how the formal position of the rhyming farmer remains consciously unchanged. Indeed, the muse only fastens him more firmly in his crambo-jingle by convincing him not simply of his historical and cultural mission to sing for Scotland, but by appearing to him as

³¹⁷ Robert Burns, "The Vision," 23-24.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 205-216.

precisely that figure given exacting figural form from Burns' readings of Wallace and Hannibal. An explicit prohibition against social mobility automatically transforms an authoritarian muse into a kind of empty foil, since what occupies Burns' "humble sphere" are precisely the traces and outlines, the intimations and promises offered to him in his early readings. Imagining a receiver for his songs and poems in the same position in which he had first received them, Burns records a circular reasoning winding all the way up to heaven, a history without origin that ordains the reverential capitalization owed to nations like Potosi or the "Kings" who rule them: a "rustic Bard."

Appearance might suggest that the move from natural to original genius on the basis of harnessing minimal signifieds grants a provisional answer to the "nagging question of why Burns became so renowned and so successful."³¹⁹ The operationality of dialect at the core of Scottish Romanticism, however, presents reason for caution. As Kittler asserts, crafting minimal signifieds entailed an elimination of just this particularity: "Youths who have acquired this unpleasant dialect of merely animal sounds... should make every effort in school to acquire a human, natural speech possessed of character and soul and to rid themselves of their peasant or shrieking back-alley dialect."³²⁰ In this light, the appearance of *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* exhibits a simultaneous adoption and rejection of the paradigm shift Kittler notices in pedagogy and early experiments in speech synthesis on the continent. On the one hand, the bard thrusts the legacy of a literary and the pleasures of a popular lowland Scots into direct competition and cooperation with a standardized English. On the other hand, Burns' retroactively reads this dialect back onto the remote past of Wallace and other Scots ancestors as per the formula of other nationalisms. An elementary passion indelibly characteristic of Scotland and its people bubbles up from the page

³¹⁹ Maynard, 82.

³²⁰ Kittler, 37.

detailing the histories of powerfully independent forebears, a passion first placed there through the same hermeneutic technique which reads meaning and emotion into the most basic elements or minimal signifieds of nature, the rustling of grasses or the beatings of the heart.

In the relative prestige of lowland Scots over its highland Gaelic sister, it is therefore possible to see Burns' self-invention as the Bard participating in the same homogenizing process of modern nation building associated with Johann Gottfried Herder, a development that amounts to a "rejection of cultural hybridity within national borders" from an emphasis on defining a single cultural linguistic heritage.³²¹ And yet the force of introducing this linguistic heritage against its Anglicized rival does not exactly claim a false or cheap universalism cleansed of dialect or specificity. Quite the contrary: it takes pride in idiomaticity, even as it hides sources of influence. Thus, it is also possible to foreground the heterogeneous character produced during this same nationalizing process. The oppositional cultural cachet Burns reserves for lowland Scots against the King's English poses the nation it imagines through the solidification and intensification of poetry and song as a collective that is "not simply manifest within a language or dialect... [but] also constantly negotiating idiolects."³²² Indeed, while the ethic of his song writing evoked a univocal point of emotive expression, Burns' poems differ in their evocation of a "a diversity of voices" born from conflict and disharmony between dialects and social registers.³²³

Through such polyvocality, Burns comes to embody in his song and verse what Marc Redfield calls "aesthetic nationalism," a deeply ambivalent relation between the aesthesis perpetuated by technics and the fantasia of community inherent in common feeling. Murdoch's

³²¹ Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 245.

³²² John K. Noyes, *Herder: Aesthetics against Imperialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 83.

³²³ Kenneth Simpson, *The Protean Scot* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), 186.

pedagogy of repetitive drilling in participles and verbs enables an ancient story to reiterate the present of Scottish patriotism and masculine feeling in the same way that the disembodied sensuality of song, sound, and love beckon to and from an ineffable origin. Redfield writes that "because processes of mechanical replication constitute the material condition of possibility of imagining the nation, this imagination's spontaneous force is haunted by a technically enhanced iterability" sometimes parallel and sometimes perpendicular to the designs of the state.³²⁴ The space of difference made possible by the possibility of repetition inherent in technics potentiates the transhistorical project of community. The imaginative projection emitting this project into past, present, and future, and, as the product of these two attributes, an inherently unstable material standing for "the radical uncircumscribability of communication," returns to the conditions of Burns' first song and the content of the "The Vision."³²⁵ The universal joy the rustic Bard pursues endlessly circles around the technical, repetitive base generating it.

In this, the bard makes visible a historically situated example of a kind of universalism rooted in the purely technical and yet liberatory exchange of languages themselves. Introducing the troubling double binds of false universalism, where differences are either ignored in transcendence or solidified in unchanging identity, Étienne Balibar considers the possibility of a universalism based on a practice of translation in which "it isn't so much individuals or social groups who communicate with one another but languages themselves that 'se parlent' in a more or less uneasy, and sometimes violent way."³²⁶ This notion of languages speaking to each other relies on noticing that language itself depends on the dialectic between freedom and constraint, the

³²⁴ Marc Redfield, *The Politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 59.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

³²⁶ Étienne Balibar, *On Universals: Construction and Deconstructing Community*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 116

point of mutual intercession between the inventions of morphology and the ingrained technical codes of grammar. Whatever level of freedom achieved, those who move from one language to another "are in all this merely the instruments or interpreters of the historical relations between languages themselves."³²⁷ Turning speakers into its own switch-board operators, language through this process of communication makes audible the untranslatables comprising it and "dislodges the subject from its central position without, however, making it unnecessary or evanescent."³²⁸ The social paradox cued up in the winking notion of an instrumental "heaven-taught ploughman" present a mechanism for Burns to stage a universality "[that] frustrates its own enunciative paradox by multiplying it," using the univocal position of inspired poet as a dummy to concentrate and accentuate a polyvocality that subsequently filters through it.³²⁹

Burns then sees himself and the bilingual configuration of this poetic machine "Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state, / A being darkly wise, and rudely great... / He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest, / In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast..."³³⁰ The task of the rustic bard as Burns imagines it entails a mediating position capable of finding the high in the low and the low in the high from which his observations and experiences can reach the widest audience, returning their experience to them in a reflective medium as the poet returned to his own through his self-reflective muse in "The Vision." In this, Burns' poetic program submits to the sober imprimatur of the "Essay on Man." Where Pope exhorts his reader to "Know then thyself, / presume not God to scan / The proper study of Mankind is Man," Burns presents his conceit as a mission "to study

³²⁷ Ibid., 117.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Ibid., 119.

³³⁰ Alexander Pope, "Essay on Man, Epistle II" *The Major Works*, ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3-4, 7-8.

men, manners, and their ways.”³³¹ Whatever its extravagances, bardship based on elementary feeling, proximity to nature, or simplicity of sentiment conduces toward this empirical end of allowing languages, persons, and discourses to link up and interact, even as it resides in the primary conceit of confusing the positions of high and low, God and beast.

O Mice an Electrons

It is within the context of this mediating attention to the human between God and beast and the notion of decentering the speaking subject that the dialectic between heaven and earth characterizing the dialect poetry of the peasant poet deserves closer inspection. It may very well be the case that one reason Burns remains committed to sublunary haunts and plural voices is because, like the daisy hidden under the rose, it is precisely in the study of those dirty ditches and “shrieking back-alley” byways that the bard hears angelic voices, sound from something other than the human. Such a notion had been well prepared for Burns in his reading of John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, a work which exerted a distinct influence on the fledgling poet running throughout his early correspondences, commonplace books, and poems. In the *Essay*, Locke concedes that a universal if somewhat flimsy mode of perception almost certainly pervades the manifold appearances of nature. Limning the logic of the Great Chain of Being while careful to avoid tumbling into the void of pantheism, the philosopher writes how,

Perception, I believe, is, in some degree, in all sorts of animals; though in some possibly the avenues provided by nature for the reception of sensations are so few, and the perception they are received with so obscure and dull, that it comes extremely short of the quickness and variety of sensation which is in other animals; but yet it is sufficient for, and wisely adapted to, the state and condition of that sort of animals who are thus made. So that the wisdom and goodness of the Maker plainly appear in all the parts of this stupendous fabric, and all the several degrees and ranks of creatures in it.³³²

³³¹ Ibid., 1-2. Burns, "Letter VIII to John Murdoch, Lochlie 15th January 1783."

³³² John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Roger Woolhouse (New York: Penguin, 1997), 146.

An observer may perceive how the perception of animals suits their various needs and skills, and thus acquire proof of a thoroughgoing “wisdom and goodness” spread through the fabric of creation leading back to its creator. Translated through Pope, the concept of the Great Chain of Being reached Burns where the faithful observer of man “Joins Heav’n and earth, and mortal and divine; / Sees, that no Being any bliss can know, / But touches some above, and some below;” and thereby “Learns, from this union of the rising Whole, / The first, last purpose of the human soul.”³³³ The goal, both for peasant poet and philosopher, is to trace the path of the circuit and find divinity where one least expects it.

In light of this perceptive theology, the poem “To a Louse” ends up pulling off the same feat as its addressee: it makes a paradoxically pious conquest, moving across a serious subject with humorous candor and virtuous sincerity by means of bearing witness to the lowliest and furthest from grace. Placing its anonymous speaker amidst a congregation paying attention to anything but the word of God, the poem pictures gawkers more concerned with a sucking louse “As plump an grey as onie gozet” meandering up a fashionable worshipper’s bonnet.³³⁴ However inappropriate a subject this might be, its formal structure is fit for a beatitude. Burns crafts an image wherein a mite becomes a mighty inheritor of this “stupendous fabric.” Each onlooker in their apparent diversion thus adheres to the basic tenets and structure of the doctrine of the Great Chain of Being, granting attention to the least of God’s created creatures, apparently no more aware of the fact than the fashionista wearing an infested bonnet (who in her unperceptiveness and feigned attention to the sermon becomes the true recreant). Ironic adoration fills the rafters in the middle of a mass where “thae winks and finger-ends, I dread / are notice takin!” of a parasite variously imagined as

³³³ Pope, “Essay on Man, Epistle IV,” 324-328.

³³⁴ Burns, “To A Louse, On Seeing One On A Lady's Bonnet, At Church,” 26.

a ballooning aeronaut, a modern technological marvel, and an impudent libertine, each profile ultimately leading back to the place that “touches some above, and some below.”³³⁵ Like the kaleidoscopic identity of the louse, an “ugly, creepin, blastit wonner / Detested, shunn’d by saunt an sinner,” a “blastie” or pest universally reviled, the profligate rubberneekers move ever so closer to God not despite but because of the bodily drive to bear witness.³³⁶ The first line of the poem, an uproarious and inappropriate interjection “Ha! whare ye gaun, ye crawlin’ ferlie,” interlocks to form a continuous chain with the last in “an e’vn devotion!”³³⁷

For Locke, however, the ubiquity of perception returns upon thought to redoubt not a vast interconnective panpsychist principle, but the primary difference between motive animals and mobile objects, the “inferior parts of Nature.”³³⁸ Insofar as animals perceive, they respond to external stimuli, retain memories garnered from sensations, and use the continuity provided by these memories to think and set themselves into motion. Plants, rocks, ponds, clouds, or made objects, on the other hand, exhibit a purely mechanistic motion set into operation by external physical forces. In Chapter XXVII of the *Essay*, Locke summarizes the divide between animal and machine through a familiar reference to clockwork:

For example, what is a watch? It is plain it is nothing but a fit organization or construction of parts to a certain end, which, when a sufficient force is added to it, it is capable to attain. If we would suppose this machine one continued body, all whose organized parts were repaired, increased, or diminished by a constant addition or separation of insensible parts, with one common life, we should have something very much like the body of an animal; with this difference, That, in an animal the fitness of the organization, and the motion wherein life consists, begin together, the motion coming from within; but in machines the force coming sensibly from without, is often away when the organ is in order, and well fitted to receive it.³³⁹

³³⁵ Ibid., 41-42.

³³⁶ Ibid., 7-8.

³³⁷ Ibid., 1, 48.

³³⁸ Locke, 145.

³³⁹ Locke, 299.

Animals are self-winding machines while machines proper require an external hand to wind them. On these grounds, Locke makes no special distinction between man and animal. Because the former is simply a singular instance of the latter's automaticity, both in principle can attain the status of a kind of reason or thinking.³⁴⁰ Yet, where language is concerned, his view is much more complicated. Claiming articulated words themselves are "insufficient" to define the social instrument of language, Locke points to the mimetic trump card of parrots to prove that animals can "be taught to make articulate sounds distinct enough" but that they "by no means are capable of language."³⁴¹ A machinic quality comes back into frame in this example since the parrot, though physically articulate, can only repeat what is outside of it, even if, as Locke admits, its vocalizations require a kind of memory. Parrots "only make noise by imitations... framing certain sounds... learnt of others, but not, as a rational creature, using them for signs of ideas, which he has in his mind."³⁴² What the mind bespeaks of itself trumps the sheer fact of speaking.

Locke expands this difference into the distinction between "man" and "person," the former defined on the basis of a morphological or biological consistency, a repetition of genetic inheritance, and the latter along the lines of a reflexive co-implication of consciousness and memory able to locate itself as itself throughout time.³⁴³ With this difference, Locke abandons the necessity of a coherent form or material substance as a determining factor of rationality based on its supposition of "settled and fixed species in nature."³⁴⁴ As he notes in the passage on monsters and changelings at the end of Book IV of the *Essay*, to judge only from appearance would be "to

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 361.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid., 542.

³⁴³ Udo Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 97-121.

³⁴⁴ Locke, 507.

place the excellency of a man more in the external shape of his body, than internal perfections of his soul.”³⁴⁵ For Locke, sensuous qualities make no guarantee of internal essences. If a creature had “the use of reason, to such a degree, as to be able to understand general signs, and to deduce consequences about general ideas,” this “*corporeal rational being*” may not be a “man”, but it could very well qualify as a person.³⁴⁶ Anything commonly held to exist between man and beast would simply be proof that the idea of such a being “would be different from either that of man or beast, and be a species of an animal between, or distinct from both.”³⁴⁷

Burns here confronts a contradiction: the poet appears to have found the “fitness of the organization, and the motion wherein life consists,” the hale and proud constitution of a self-positing peasant poet genius, beginning together in concert with “the force coming sensibly from without,” the technical objects of books and songs. In other words, he finds himself precisely in the position of a novel creature between man and beast: a speaking machine “framing certain sounds...learnt of others” taking the form of a person adamant on playing up the idea of its mechanicity. If Burns’ poetic machine acts as a conduit for the “se parlent” of language, in which the combination of human form and linguistic capacity assert the necessity of an external motivating force, then plucking the taut string between rusticity and divinity hits the chord between animality and humanity, a novel thing between but distinct. In other words, Burns provides to the animal the opportunity to “consider itself as itself,” to be “the same thinking thing in different times and places.”³⁴⁸ Mapping onto the transit between the elevated and mundane, the tension in Burns poems between the singular and plural voice returns to that more fundamental space of an

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 459.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 504.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 302.

exchange between language hypothesized by Balibar in order to pick up and amplify languages that usually go unheard from subjects (or “persons”) supposedly physically unequipped to evoke it. What Burns accomplishes in this is to note how the presence of a singular feeling poet, a kind of divine animal, sets up a conduit that melts away through a poetry dedicated to offering a channel for the crosstalk of languages themselves, inviting the consciousness of the non-human through the language of the human to dilate across space and time.

In "To A Mountain Daisy," for instance, Burns uses the Standard Habbie form to figure the fateful degradation of the titular flower: the tetrameter interruption of the two shorter dimeter lines of the iambic sestet comes to repeat the destructive function of the plough that leads to the transformation of the mountain daisy from motive, sturdy, and independent to fallen, immobile, and overpowered. In the first stanza, the end rhyme of the dimeter lines anticipates the transformation of the body of the flower into an object equally beautiful yet dead and lapidified:

Wee, modest crimson-tipped flow'r,
 Thou's met me in an evil hour;
 For I maun crush amang the stoure
 Thy slender stem:
 To spare thee now is past my pow'r,
 Thou bonie gem.³⁴⁹

The dimeter end rhymes in the third stanza strengthen this pattern, witnessing the daisy powerfully emplaced in its surroundings, resisting natural forces "amid the storm" and then, in the last line, alone "scarce reared above the parent-earth" and isolated in "Thy tender form."³⁵⁰ The next stanza reimagines this transition as one from a companionship of objects, a living landscape, to one where the daisy faces its gloom. Placed humbly "beneath the random bield / O Clod or stane," structures

³⁴⁹ Burns, "To A Mountain Daisy: On turning down with the Plough, in April 1786," 1-6.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 16-18.

which unlike the plough grant the flower safety, sheltering it albeit imperfectly, the last line narrows the daisy to a state that "adorns the histie-stubble field / unseen, alane."³⁵¹ From living stem to petrified gem, from setting off a stonework building to standing invisible and unsupported, Burns lays bare the violent repetition into a final moment of burial:

There, in thy scanty mantle clad,
Thy snawie bosom sun-ward spread,
Thou lifts thy unassuming head
 In humble guise;
But now the share uptears thy bed,
 And low thou lies!³⁵²

In the sixth and seventh stanza, however, the poem suddenly redefines the flickering pivot between life and death established across its dimeter lines. The technical track stays intact while Burns replaces the content of flower with that of the human world.

Such is the fate of artless maid,
Sweet flow'ret of the rural shade!
By love's simplicity betray'd,
 And guileless trust;
Till she, like thee, all soil'd, is laid
 Low i' the dust.

Such is the fate of simple bard,
On life's rough ocean luckless starr'd!
Unskilful he to note the card
 Of prudent lore,
Till billows rage, and gales blow hard,
 And overwhelm him o'er!³⁵³

Fitting this new content into the refunctionalized Standard Habbie form, Burns suggests that the relation between flower and human is not simply analogical or metaphoric, but entirely parallel and symmetrical, united by the syllepsis of a consciousness of death that implies an awareness of

³⁵¹ Ibid., 21-22, 23-24.

³⁵² Ibid., 25-30.

³⁵³ Ibid., 37-48.

its existence across time. This exergasia echoes the Lockean formula whereby what proves the equivalence between human and non-human lies neither in motivity nor in the figural differences of morphology. Instead, what unites the two is a mode transposability between bodies, enabled by technical synthesis, the predispositional subjection to the replication of an underlying essence that, in this case, takes the figural form of death.

Burns rewires the one-way vector of the ode as a mode of address in just this way, effectively allowing its addressee to “reappear,” like the daisy, or “speak back” in the very moment and act of being spoken, reduced to signifiers, in poetic language. In essence, Burns installs into the machinery of his early odes to “beasties” of all types a regulatory mechanism functionally equivalent to the design and operation of a triode, a tripartite device for receiving and accentuating otherwise reduced or undetectable signals. In 1906, Lee de Forest invented the triode in pursuit of a mediating device capable of achieving finer gradations of current impossible in John Ambrose Fleming’s diode, a vacuum tube acting as a simple binary valve for electrophysical currents between cathode (negative) and anode (positive) electrodes. De Forest achieved this mediation through the introduction of a third electrode positioned in the circuit between cathode and anode which he called “the grid” (Figure 7). Fitting the grid to a wireless antennae while coupling the anode to a set of earphones, the triode essentially “magnified the amplitude of the wireless signals by superimposing on them the current from the anode circuit.”³⁵⁴ In the years following De Forest’s work, the triode would be implemented into consumer radio receivers, allowing for the transmission and reception of disembodied voices across vast terrain.

³⁵⁴ James A. Hijiya, *Lee de Forest and the Fatherhood of Radio* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1992), 77.

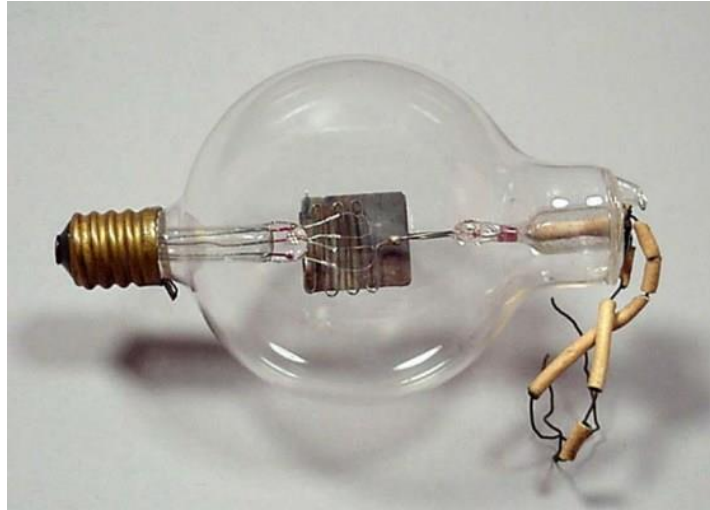


Figure 7: Lee De Forest's triode, consisting of the filament (left), wire grid (center), and plate (right), encased in a glass envelope.

Burns' odes evince a similar triodic arrangement, tuning into voices and signals too soft or weak to be heard unaided in poetry by means of the same autonymic signifiers marshalled in his songs. Where those airs evinced an effort to separate the voice from the body, however, the odes reverse the direction of this flow, manifesting the "thing-like, bodily dimension of the voice."³⁵⁵ In Byung-Chul Han's words, this facticity of sound "makes the tongue and the membranes, their desire, audible."³⁵⁶ The "creaturely voice of the non-human" raises up the voice of creatures.³⁵⁷ Intervening between the positive charge of the ode's mode of address squarely stationed in the central density of a speaking subject and the negative charge of the objects or creatures orbiting the periphery of this nucleus, Burns introduces the poetic machine of peasant poetry for the mediating and amplifying function it shares with the wire grid inside De Forest's triode. The characterization, fullness, or univocity earlier noted of Burns' songs imbues this grid with a positive charge which conducts and accelerates surrounding negatively charged particles, the

³⁵⁵ Byun-Chul Han, *Non-Things* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 62.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ Dominic Pettman, *Sonic Intimacy: Voice, Species, Technics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 76.

substantial qualities of Lockean “men,” across the gap between cathode (non-human/negative) and anode (human/positive), amplifying rational signals before barely detectable.

In “To a Mouse,” words dedicated to the signification of the creature, its life, movement, or qualities, feature autonymic signifiers which together synthesize the strident squeaks and squeals of mice into high-pitched fronted vowels.

Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie,
O, what a panic's in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,
 Wi' bickerin brattle!
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee
 Wi' murd'ring pattle!³⁵⁸

The high front unrounded vowels in “wee,” “sleekit,” “beastie,” and “breastie” compound in the midst of the pile of adjectives introducing the mouse to present an emulation of its panicked cries suddenly revealed to both the poet and reader. Longer, rounder, and deeper sighs call back from the human in the response that composes the second stanza. Here, sympathy with the mouse is not expressed in words alone, but low lachrymose voiced nasals and intoning backed vowels:

I'm truly sorry Man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion,
 Which makes thee startle,
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
 An' fellow-mortal!³⁵⁹

The drawn-out vowels continue into the fourth stanza, where the cold wind introduced in the second line joins the bellowing of the poet's apologetic moans to form a chorus of breathy, almost ghostly pulses of high back [u] sounds:

Thy wee-bit housie, too, in ruin!
It's silly wa's the win's are strewin!

³⁵⁸ Burns, “To A Mouse, On Turning Her Up In Her Nest With The Plough,” 1-6.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-12.

An' naething, now, to big a new ane,
 O' foggage green!
 An' bleak December's winds ensuin,
 Baith snell an' keen!³⁶⁰

Finally, the sharp front-ended vowel imitating the mouse's squeak resounds again, but this time from the speaker's mouth which offers up a lament that "Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me. / The present only toucheth thee."³⁶¹ An interjection harking back to the chanting O-vowels of the second stanza introduces the pain of casting a retrospective glance on an immutable past, setting off a series of screechy front vowels that thoroughly confuse the phonology of mice and men: "But Och!" I backward cast my e'e,/ On prospects drear! / An' forward tho' I canna see, / I guess an' fear!"³⁶² Wailing in piercing notes and a deluge of exclamations, the roaming eye of the poet collapses into the peal of a terrified creature, its undirected cries filling the air in all directions. A sure line of sight, faced with the future, fizzles into a strident buzz that, like the mouse, its "fellow mortal," only limns the swirling circumambient present-tense of a heightened and frightened tone.

The purpose of noting these sounds here is not so much to argue for reinterpreting Burns as an early computer engineer or hitherto unknown animal whisperer of extraordinary skill. Rather, it is to highlight how the affordances of the ode involved in its pristine or noiseless one-way signification combine to form a laboratory in which Kempelen's musings about animal speech undergo testing and verification through an experiment with this three-way channel. Turning to the distinct etymologies of the technical *ode* and vocal *ode* can help to illustrate the results of the heaven-taught plowman's experiment. The linguistic origin of the technical *ode*, like Burns, looks back to Homer, albeit along an uncertain path. The word οὐδός (*oudós*) from which diodes, triodes,

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 9-24.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 43-44.

³⁶² Ibid., 45-48.

and tetrodes take their name, occurs only once in written Ancient Greek, found in the *Odyssey*, and carries a meaning that approximates the conductive senses of a threshold, journey, pathway, or method. While this *ode* remains historically isolated and etymologically unclear, usages of the vocal *ode* are plenty, well-attested, and variable. Indeed, this latter sense of *ode* condensed together a rich metaphoric in Ancient Greek, indicating at once singing, chanting, praising, and, notably, the sounds of various animals, the howling, hooting, or chirping which Plato references in the *Symposium*. Burns triodic poetry puts its ear close to these two homophones, synthesizing them to stake out a high cultural linguistic pathway for expressing lowly unspeaking non-human voices.

It is in mind of the conjunction between technics, voice, and poetry that I would like to conclude by way of a provocation: this revised portrait of a technical Burns was first discovered but left entirely unelaborated on the cover of Kenneth Simpson's now out-of-print edited volume of essays published by Canongate in 1994, titled *Burns Now* (Figure 8). A visual complement to the terse and demanding title championing immediacy and relevance, the cover of the book featured a strangely up-to-date and deflatingly technologically mediated vision of the Ayrshire poet. In a style reminiscent of Terry Gilliam's *Monty Python* animations, the image shows a cropped and edited portrait of Burns' head in profile copy-and-pasted onto a body awkwardly turned to sit in front of a cream-white desktop computer, complete with buzzing Cathode Ray Tube monitor and clacky machinic keyboard. A ghostly beam of smokey electric afflatus shoots like a spotlight upward from the glass surface of the monitor to create a variegated puff of airy writing that illuminates the title of the volume. With his left-hand hovering lifelessly over the keys and his right slightly cupped as if disturbing a sleek, track-balled, wired mouse, the bard's misaligned gaze looks across a parallax gap to the monitor screen on which clean white lines of "Ae Fond Kiss" emulate the aesthetics of a command-line interface.

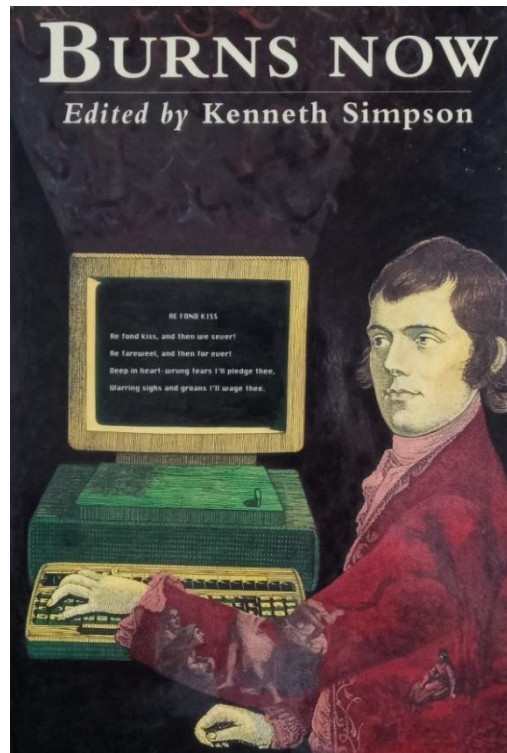


Figure 8: Cover of *Burns Now*, ed. Kenneth Simpson (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1994)

Dated, uncanny, and of questionable taste, I believe the iconography of this image nonetheless manages to capture Burns *perfectly* – with a slight caveat. The design of the anachronist image fits its referent so appropriately that it ends up distorting the title of the volume: this is more accurately an image of *Burns Then*. The cover presents the bard fully mediated, indebted for his emotion, masculinity, and persona to the intercession of a machine from which his poetry beams out, unadorned and simple, translating binary code into ASCII character, a techno-rusticism of the highest degree. Perhaps the only improvement that could be made to this scene, then, would be to remove the human figure of Burns altogether and focus solely on the ghostly lines of glowing script appearing fully written from his immobile hand on the vacuum tube monitor, imagining the synthetic speech-to-text program that could read out each word, one by one, syllable by syllable, and channel a pure voice that could speak to us as Rabbie does.

Chapter 4

Robert Bloomfield's Tele-Vision: Virtuality, Panoramic Form, and Symbolic Exchange in *The Farmer's Boy* (1800)

“A mighty maze of mystic, magic rays / Is all about us in the blue, / And in sight and sound they trace / Living pictures out of space / To bring a new wonder to you.”

- “*Television*” by Adele Dixon and the BBC Television Orchestra (1936)

“[*The Farmer's Boy*] is a Work which proves how inexhaustible the features of the World we inhabit: how from objects which the mass of mankind is daily accustom'd to pass with indifference and neglect, GENIUS can still produce pictures the most fascinating, and of the most interesting tendency.”

- Nathan Drake M.D., Appendix to *The Farmer's Boy: A Rural Poem* (1800)

In the spring of 1796, a group of cobblers huddled into a small dimly lit garret overlooking Coleman Street in London's West End, a single room filled with the sounds of pincers, awls, knives, and mallets repetitively stretching leather and reinforcing soles. Conversation, debate, or recitation of outdated newspapers sometimes broke this clamor and cast into the background smells of polish, stale water, and herbs carefully placed to cover over the odor of well-worn shoes.³⁶³ On other occasions, when passions came too near or quotas too distant, the repetitious hammering, stretching, and cutting was allowed free reign while each shoemaker enjoyed the comings and goings of his own thoughts. In the midst of these cramped, dark, and noisy conditions, Robert Bloomfield, while visibly hard at work, was nowhere to be found. Cobbling employed his hands, but his head was lost in another space, building poetic images out of the fragmented memories of

³⁶³ John Goodridge, ed. *Eighteenth-Century English Labouring Class Poets*, Vol 2 (New York: Routledge, 2016), 346.

his childhood as a farm worker in Suffolk.³⁶⁴ Retained through the complicity between the monotonous mechanics of shoemaking and the repetitive frame of rhyme disciplining *The Seasons*' blank verse model into shape, the lines Bloomfield tossed around in his mind, once arranged into *The Farmer's Boy*, would become one of the most widely-published and best-selling poems of the nineteenth century, while the shoemaker poet himself would fall against the advance of his career into illness and penury.³⁶⁵

Roughly two miles east from where Bloomfield was engaged in his imaginative seeing, at the top a set of stairs leading to another dimly lit but slightly more capacious room above the streets of Leicester Square, a different style of vision transported viewers equally set on recapturing something of the lived, real, or immediate. In 1793 Edmund Barker opened this permanent home for his panorama, a massive three-hundred-and-sixty-degree landscape painting fully enveloping spectators who peered out into its simulated horizon from a raised railed platform housed in a specially constructed and designed studio. According to a legend as attractive as it was almost certainly apocryphal, the idea of the panorama came to Barker after he had been locked away in an Edinburgh debtors' prison. From the skylight crowning his circular cell at the top of a hill, the middling Irish painter imagined what scenes would show themselves if the walls of this enclosure

³⁶⁴ This anecdote is conveyed first by Capel Lofft, Bloomfield's self-appointed ersatz "patron," who in his appendix to *The Farmer's Boy* includes a letter written to him by a Mr. Swan detailing the circumstances of composition reported by Bloomfield: "Among other subjects of conversation respecting the Farmer's Boy, I wish'd to be inform'd of his manner of composition. I enquir'd, as he compos'd it in a garret, amid the bustle and noise of six or seven fellow workmen, whether he us'd a slate; or wrote it on paper with a pencil, or pen and ink. But what was my surprize when told that he had us'd neither... He not only compos'd and committed that part of the work to his retentive memory, but he corrected it all in his head. And, as he said, when it was thus prepar'd, ... I had nothing to do but to write it down." See *The Farmer's Boy by Robert Bloomfield: A Parallel Text Edition* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 206-7.

³⁶⁵ Reaching its seventh edition within two years, *The Farmer's Boy* sold over 26,000 copies and received translations into German, French, Italian, and Latin. However, publishing fees, debts, familial claims, illness, and generosity kept the lion's share of these profits from Bloomfield, who continued to work as a cobbler and aeolian harp maker for most of his career. See, B.C. Bloomfield, *The Publication of the Farmer's Boy by Robert Bloomfield*, *The Library*, Vol XV (No. 2, 1993), 83.

evaporated into pure light.³⁶⁶ Like *The Farmer's Boy*, Barker's invention went on to success, forming an immensely popular and profitable industry that spread to the continent and across the Atlantic, eventually falling out of favor only when the unparalleled reproductions of photography and film contested the stable verisimilitude of its painted illusion.

To the formal typology of these two events, I would like to add a third, much more distant in time but nonetheless capable of insistently pulling from its vantage point in the present on the chain of family resemblances discernable between Bloomfield and Barker. Something of Bloomfield's sweet visions and the panorama-goers' visual treat haunts the familiar pastime of television, the experience of sitting in a darkened room on a weekday night, the surrounding walls and objects lit only by irregular washes of color, watching absorbed in pulses of light live sporting events, real time breaking news broadcasts, or the latest prime time cable specials.³⁶⁷ What unites poetic vision and spectacular experience is a series of formal symmetries best organized under the semantic cover of this *tele-vision*, a mode of seeing at a distance: an intractable preoccupation with images that combines a hallucinatory transportation across time or space doubling as a return to the immediate or ongoing world.

While the modern practice of channel surfing appears to constitute a radically different class of viewer, not to mention viewing practice, than that implicated in Barker's panorama or Bloomfield's poem, each of these technologies depends on the same pretense toward presenting a more immediate or tangible reality *through* distancing mediums. In this, the tele-vision that

³⁶⁶ Olive Cook, *Movement in Two Dimensions* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1963), 32.

³⁶⁷ In *The Panorama: A History of a Mass Medium* (1980) [*Das Panorama: Die Geschichte eines Massen-mediums*], Stephan Oettermann surveys the panorama as a reality medium, noting its ancestry in linear perspective, geological surveying techniques, and eighteenth-century picturesque theory to make a similar leap into the present based on the claim that "the television of today is a direct descendant of the panorama," 44.

simultaneously beams across these three experiences poses the transmedial function expressed within the hypothesis that “instant, distance-annihilating communication could make a medium seem more authentic, more real.”³⁶⁸ Fundamental to the conceit of reality media as diverse as the camera obscura and virtual reality headsets is an intimate conjunction between the proximity of events and their sensual immediacy, the concurrence between things as they happen and the sensation of their happening. Immediacy of this type, however, has less to do with the specifics of the content shown than the medium's capacity to create a sense of hapticity where the spatial and temporal distance between the senses evaporates. And it is for this reason that television is always a matter of “tele-presence,” an immersion created through technological mediation that enables a partial or residual transportation of the reality of one thing into a mediated space of the other.³⁶⁹

As the reference to touch implies, the experience of this simultaneity brings with it a certain kind of intimacy, a delicate mood familiar to anyone who has turned on a television set only to let its sounds and colors fill an empty house or an unfamiliar hotel room. Whether hunched over a smart phone watching YouTube videos or slumped into a couch on gameday with eyes locked on the screen, this specular screen mood remains active and engrossing even when the content purveyed by reality media directly engages attention. The prefixal distance of the *tele* adamantly shows itself here to be a misnomer: the vision of television in such circumstances works to fold the empty space of distance in on itself, creating transporting intimacy from within the confines of a den or garret. This is so because the touch of television is first of all an experience of “technical being” or a “being-with the ‘with’ itself,” a way of existing with others inherent in the mediation

³⁶⁸ Jay David Bolter, Maria Engberg, and Blair MacIntyre, *Reality Media: Augmented and Virtual Reality* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021), 33-34.

³⁶⁹ Kris Paulsen, *Here/There: Telepresence, Touch, and Art at the Interface* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 1-4.

of technologies that do not simply connect but open and exceed spaces and times.³⁷⁰ From this view, the assertion that the “liveness” of reality media from television to VR “is not the same thing as... lived experience” but “a mediated version of that experience” neglects to notice what a mnemonic poetry set to capture lived experience shares with a panoramic replication of living life at a distance.³⁷¹ Looking at these looking glasses is enough to go through them, to lose the distance needed to determine where an enclosed self capable of an unmediated life begins and ends.

Much scholarship on the panorama notes the presence of an analogous process, but limits its articulation of its attributes and implications to a familiar battle between honest reality and pretending appearances.³⁷² Peter Otto, for instance, points to the panorama as a perfect example of how a “steady increase in the ability of new technologies to simulate and so dominate the actual” in the late eighteenth century leads to the founding gesture of modernity: “the extraordinary verisimilitude of the panorama paradoxically suggests that the actual is virtual, the contingent product of a cultural or perceptual apparatus.”³⁷³ Far from an awareness of the subject’s influence in shaping the real, however, the rising degree of mimetic perfection in the actuality of virtuality tends to make differentiation between the two impossible. In Jean Baudrillard’s terms, the discourse of visual totality and realistic perfection in the panorama would lead straight to a condition where the duplication of reality leads to its hyperreality, a “dull and flat” immanence where “there is neither fiction nor reality.”³⁷⁴ Under these conditions, an ethic of contingency

³⁷⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Fragile Skin of the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 38.

³⁷¹ Bolter, Enberg, and McIntyre, 35.

³⁷² Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Jennifer Jones, “Absorbing Hesitation: Wordsworth and the Theory of the Panorama,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 45 (2006), 357-375; Peter Otto, “Between the Virtual and the Actual: Robert Barker’s Panorama of London and the Multiplication of the Real in late eighteenth-century London,” *Romanticism on the Net* (46), May, 2007; Markman Ellis, ““Spectacles within doors”: Panoramas of London in the 1790’s,” *Romanticism*, 14 (2008), 133-148.

³⁷³ Otto, 51.

³⁷⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994), 125.

holding onto the “linear” or “ordered” logic of visual sense Marshall McLuhan discusses in relation to literate practice loses all meaning.³⁷⁵ Apparatus and perception essentially say the same thing. The result is distinctly panoramic: an all-encompassing *reality of illusion* overloads the senses, eliminating the distance of comparison and the direction of signification in the haptic moment of a perpetual “with.”³⁷⁶

This chapter contends that something analogous occurs with Bloomfield’s entry into the literary world, that this redoubling of reality escapes the confines of its classical mimetic borders through the inward hyperreal turn of a spectacular technical poetics soldered into the circuitry of *The Farmer’s Boy*. The effect of this turn is to manage a transparent evocation both of the fading rural tradition Bloomfield celebrates *and* the future sociotechnical conditions of a televisual virtuality. Putting television back into the picture of the panorama offers a way to change the channel on discussions of both spectacles, telling us much more about the panorama as a technology and Bloomfield as a poet. Simply, if there is a formal correspondence between Bloomfield’s poem and the panorama that maps onto a media historical line connecting the panorama to the television, looking for the presence of televisual attributes and forms within the products of Bloomfield’s poetic practice presents a way to apprehend features of the critical terrain first surfacing with the contemporary reception of *The Farmer’s Boy* and still veiled in modern estimations of the life, legacy, and labor of the “real life” farmer’s boy.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁵ Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 13-31.

³⁷⁶ McLuhan himself hints at this in his characteristically provocative quip from *Understanding Media* (New York: Routledge, 2001) on the trend whereby eighteenth-century poets “took up the panoramic style.” (315) Although he associates the content marking this style with the “human interest vignettes and close-ups” of panning film, I believe a closer consideration of the panorama places it more properly alongside the effects he notes of television.

³⁷⁷ Current critical response to Bloomfield’s first poem exists along a spectrum defined by two poles mapping onto a similar concern with the real and virtual. One end concerns itself with a heuristic of anthropological documentary, evaluating the poem for its author’s tact in writing from direct experience and holding up to urban readers an

In his 1818 lectures, William Hazlitt catches the first traces of this televisual scheme. A brief reference to the cobbler poet transforms him into a “painter of simple natural scenery, and of the still life of the country.”³⁷⁸ The caustic critic notes in connection how Bloomfield’s “Muse has something not only rustic, but menial in her aspect,” something communicating an unthinking relay or the subordination of a retinue where body links to body, object to object. For Hazlitt, reliance on this enchained muse means Bloomfield “never gets beyond his own experience... He gives the simple appearance of nature, but he gives it naked, shivering, and unclothed without the drapery of a moral imagination.”³⁷⁹ Blame for this simplicity, however, does not entirely reside with the poet. The true culprit is the “tinsel finery of the age” which leads poets to “spend their lives in aping” the real of nature. Hazlitt’s prognosis is damning: “no single mind can move in direct opposition to the vast machine of the world around it.”³⁸⁰ In essence, these lectures present Bloomfield as a simple physical conduit, a mimetic medium incapable of doing any more than delivering content in its sheer phenomenal reality, transmitting *live* images as opposed to *living* ones. Denunciations of the “idiot box” here find a distant relative in criticisms of Bloomfield’s confinement to an *idiom box* – both in the sense of the hints of Suffolk dialect surviving in his poems and the ἴδιος or private, enclosed quality of his verse.

authentic model of rural life and politics. See Blunden (1970), Williams (1973), Lawson (1980), and Keegan (2008). Included in this view is praise of the poem's close attention to historical agricultural practices, the relations between forms of labor, and commentary on contemporary developments in urbanization, the organization of production, and the lifeworld and ecology of the small landholding class. The other end of the critical spectrum, indebted to a cultural materialist framework, singles out the poem for its lingering attachment to the false universals of the pastoral mode, uncovering ways in which the realistic picture Bloomfield paints obscures a host of social contradictions, opening a backdoor to a process of reification that naturalizes complex social relations into pretty pictures. See Barrell (1980), and Christmas (2001).

³⁷⁸ William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1818), 188.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

For all that it is misguided in this critique, it is not simply a matter of disagreeing with Hazlitt and insisting in defense that Bloomfield does indeed manage to “get beyond his own experience.” This is so even if, as Simon White has argued, that experience has always been more diverse and complicated than earlier criticism has been interested to admit.³⁸¹ Rather, it is important to ask further into the sheer appearance Hazlitt detects to consider not in what way the critic is wrong, but in what way he is *right for the wrong reasons*. In response, analysis of Bloomfield's first poem must view it as a public spectacle parallel to the pretensions of panoramas: a fully virtualized televisual (non)event, one that cannot get beyond its own appearance precisely because of its love for the appearances making up the “vast machine of the world” instantiated in the screens of future televisions.³⁸² Only from this view where the premodern meets the postmodern do the strange irruptive moments found throughout *The Farmer's Boy* of muted violence, the ambiguous and superfluous attention to the interchange of objects and agents, and spots of synesthetic conjunction fall into place.³⁸³ Looking back from the virtual and resonant discourse of television concretizing a century after Bloomfield can then lend a fuller consistency to what Kevin Binfield notices in the poem's circumscribed “ethic of variety” and Donna Landry in its “georgic ecology,” putting a medium to its pictorial miscellany and diffuse connectivity.³⁸⁴

³⁸¹ Simon White, *Robert Bloomfield, Romanticism, and the Poetry of Community* (New York: Ashgate, 2019).

³⁸² There are, of course, abbreviated moral arguments scattered throughout the eidetic and georgic concerns of *The Farmer's Boy*, what Lawson (1980) terms its “intrusions.” But, as Lawson's negative tone suggests, Bloomfield's work was considered first for its efficacy in the textual painting of natural scenery and rural labor. Joseph Weston, the literary executor of Bloomfield's posthumous collection of writings, furnishes evidence that by the time of the poet's death, the two had indeed become inseparable, finding an inherent morality in “Bloomfield's pictures,” which ‘are drawn *directly* from nature; are *always just* and *true*, like the reflections of a polished mirror...’ (ix).

³⁸³ I take my cue here from Theresa M. Kelley's uncovering of a postmodern John Clare in “Postmodernism, Romanticism, and John Clare,” *Lessons of Romanticism: A Critical Companion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 157-171.

³⁸⁴ Kevin Binfield, “Labor and an Ethic of Variety in *The Farmer's Boy*,” *Robert Bloomfield: Lyric, Class, and the Romantic Canon*, eds. Simon White, John Goodridge, Bridget Keegan (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006), 70-88; Donna Landry, “Georgic Ecology,” *Robert Bloomfield: Lyric, Class, and the Romantic Canon*, eds. Simon White, John Goodridge, Bridget Keegan (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006), 254-268.

In what follows, I suggest that the televisual form of a panoramic vision reverberates from the imaginative seeing responsible for the creation and effectivity of *The Farmer's Boy*, simultaneously organizing and disrupting the pretension of presenting immediate scenes recalled directly from the active repository of lived memory. The first section of the chapter makes the case for reinterpreting the technology of the panorama itself from the apogee of a rational and perspectivizing technology of control to the very form in which the apparent autonomy and unified perspective of the rational subject disappears. Subsequent sections outline how the force of recalling and re-presenting scenes from real life in a tightly constructed poetic form, where image links with image in an encompassing and sometimes disorienting relay, effectively recreates the medial attributes of television. The consequence of this irruption of televisual form in *The Farmer's Boy* then invites comparison with character of the psychic, physical, and phenomenal effects of virtuality noted by both Baudrillard and McLuhan. Uniformity implodes into multiplicity, ordinality into simultaneity. A disconcerting process kicks into gear effectuating the displacement of the imaginative subject and the distinctions between activity and passivity, individual and collective, subject and object, on which it relies.

Tuning into the Panoramic Tube

Exhibited in Edinburgh by its inventor and proprietor Robert Barker in 1787, the first panoramic painting was an incomplete semi-circle view of the city from Calton Hill. Prominent amongst Barker's objectives in both designing and marketing the panorama as a popular entertainment was its capacity to create a destabilizing virtual reality effect, an effort "to make observers, on whatever situation he may wish they should imagine themselves, feel as if really on the very spot."³⁸⁵ Two

³⁸⁵ Ellis, 134.

years after a lukewarm reception, he relocated the spectacle to London, where it quickly became a public sensation, generating revenue sufficient enough to enable Barker to create two full three-hundred-and-sixty degree paintings, one of London from the roof of Albion Mill (1792-1793), the other of the Royal Navy Fleet anchored at Spithead (1794-1795). To accomplish their delusive visual effects, the views of London and Spithead required specially constructed rotunda whose internal architectural features, including a central covered platform that obscured the upper and lower borders of the encircling image and guardrail, were designed to circumscribe the viewer, and thereby heighten the illusion of reality generated by the precise details that surrounded them on all sides (Figure 9).³⁸⁶

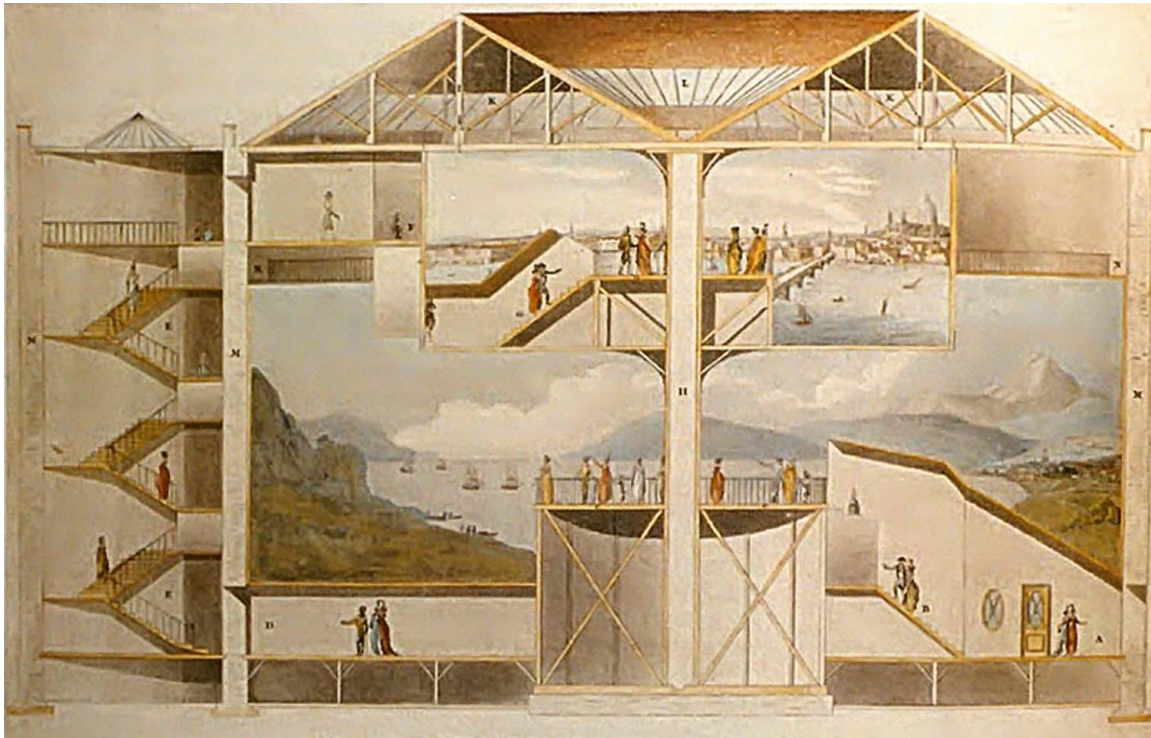


Figure 9: Robert Mitchell, 'Section of the Rotunda, Leicester Square, in Which Is Exhibited the Panorama,' *Plans and Views in Perspective Buildings in England and Scotland* (1801). Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

Unlike contemporaneous spectacles like the stereoscope or peepshow, the panorama did not simply elicit a virtual effect if viewed from the right angle, with the appropriate apparatus, or even with a healthy suspension of disbelief. Rather it forced this effect directly, materializing it as it itself materializes an unavoidable conjunction between reality and fiction. The virtual effect was not so much a matter of the realism of its depiction or the accuracy of its scale *per se* than of its formal and architectural design. In a radical fashion, the panorama did not simply *include a place* for the viewer; it peremptorily and suddenly *placed* the viewer in an environment “filled with a relatively unstructured, and in its detail unmanageable, profusion of visual data.”³⁸⁷ This emplacement depended, counter-intuitively, on a corresponding displacement. While the visible surface of the panorama painting appeared fluid and continuous, in reality it was the result of a process of diverse assembly. The dictates of realism forced artists to capture flora, architecture, and geography in exacting precision piece by piece from direct observation. Technical objects like Alberti's veil, an empty wooden frame with a grid of string enabling scenery to be isolated and sketched, aided the process of incremental reconnaissance from empirical reality.³⁸⁸ These studies were eventually transferred bit by bit to strips of canvas roughly nine feet wide sewn together by laborers in a continuous series around the ring of the rotunda, each element painted directly into its corresponding grid with more minute details and accents added later.

The fully circular panoramic image, then, was in truth a mosaic image, a static combination of reticulated elements reconstituted in front of the viewer after traveling distances of tens or even hundreds of miles in discrete, piecemeal, and mathematically compressed form. This discrete migratory quality, combined with the virtual reality effect imposed on participants, resembles what

³⁸⁷ Otto, 29.

³⁸⁸ Oettermann, 51.

Marshall McLuhan calls the “unified sensorium” or “mosaic mesh” of the television.³⁸⁹ While McLuhan writing in the 1960s was careful to distinguish the relatively low quality of the televisual image at that time for its “cool” effect, the degree to which a lack of clarity or detail engaged a compensatory attention or active participation, he nonetheless described how elements of the panoramic experience reached television audiences precisely through the consequences of this mosaic quality.³⁹⁰ An attractive distance, fault, or incompleteness characteristic of the beaming image demands “a convulsive sensuous participation that is profoundly kinetic and tactile, because tactility is the interplay of the senses, rather than the isolated contact of skin and object.”³⁹¹ The medium of television *makes* its participants through a fully-embodied induction into sensual interplay, to such an extent that “with TV, the viewer is the screen.”³⁹²

Tempering the mimetic realism of objects and scenes depicted in the panorama was a similar inscrutable distance maintained through the limitations of the viewing platform and the incorporation of atmospheric techniques artificially blurring distant objects, an effect still appreciable in Frederick Birnie’s series of aquatints reproducing Barker’s lost Albion Mill panorama from drawings of the spectacle by his son, Henry Aston Barker (Figure 10). Here, the reassurance of perspective for a single viewing subject falters from an overloading of sheer detail, forcing the spectator into the ordering role Peter Otto notes where he writes “if one increases still further the distance dividing the observer from the panoramic environment, then the ordering role of the observer is emphasized, at the expense of the visual dat[a] he or she arranges.”³⁹³ Through the spectacular inversion managed by its circumscribing mosaic, the panorama’s infinitization of

³⁸⁹ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 336.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 341-342.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 342.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 341.

³⁹³ Otto, 31.

perspective completely dissolves the attributes of linearity, order, and subject-object distance defining the illusion, forcing the spectator to tactilely tussle with the sensual profusion of this new environment.



Figure 10: Frederick Birnie, “A View of London taken from the top of Albion Mills, Blackfriars”, 1792, no. 4. Guildhall Library, City of London. Aquatint from drawing by Henry Aston Barker.

The divergence between the limited diameter of the central viewing platform and the painting encircling spectators helped materialize this disorienting synesthetic effect. Walking from one side of the platform to the other while keeping one's eyes trained on the landscape elicited the feeling of traveling at an impossibly rapid speed.³⁹⁴ What these unfortunate spectators experienced was, in essence, a kind of motion sickness. The feeling itself arises when a mismatch between

³⁹⁴ Oettermann, 59.

ocular information and spatial feeling causes the vestibular system of the inner ear, used for both hearing and balance, to send conflicting signals to the brain: sight and touch become confused through kinetics. Indeed, synesthetic touch was frequently used in historical accounts to hint at the virtual reality effect of the panorama. An 1824 review from the *Somerset House Gazette* praising the realism of a full vista of Pompei stresses the senses of ocular touch and spatial hearing such a spectacle had activated. Riffing on the consequences of Berkely's idealistic solipsism, the *Gazette* affirms that the viewer of the panorama truly has before them the thing itself:

*Berkely was a metaphysician, and therefore his word goes for nothing but waste of brains, time, and printing-in; but have we not the waters of the Lake of Geneva, and the bricks and mortar of the little Greek town, tangible by our hands, we have them **tangible by the eye**... The scene is absolutely alive, vivid, and true, we feel all but the breeze, and hear all but the dashing of the wave.*³⁹⁵

This virtual hapticity, the feeling of being totally enmeshed within the coiled painting, reappears continuously in anecdotal accounts of the panorama's medial effects: the Queen becoming sea-sick while viewing a naval display, a Newfoundland dog jumping in confusion to its death in a pathetic attempt to save a painted figure from drowning, and numerous firsthand reviews struggling to impress upon the reader the physical impression of the scene, the frisson and disorientation evident when "As soon as you enter, a shiver runs down your spine."³⁹⁶ In the panorama, to see through the eye was to feel with the body.

³⁹⁵ Ephraim Hardcastle [William Henry Pyne], ed., *Somerset House Gazette, and Literary Museum; or, Weekly Miscellany of Fine Arts, Antiquities, and Literary Chit Chat*, 2 vols. (London: W. Wetton, 1824), 2:152. Emphasis mine.

³⁹⁶ "Modebelustigungen in London. Neues Panorama. Grausende Darstellung der Schlacht bei Abukir," *Journal London und Paris* 3 (1799), 309.

The Farmer's Boy in Prime Time

From the opening verse paragraph of *The Farmer's Boy* invoking an anonymous "blest Spirit! whatsoe'er thou art / Thou rushing warmth that hover'st round my heart," Bloomfield launches his first major poem as a sensual reconnaissance of pictures real and remembered.³⁹⁷ This project first condenses in the line begging this circumambient spirit to "Retrace the paths of wild obscurity," turning back in time toward past content and graphically limning its outlines.³⁹⁸ Besides the graphic and mnemonic, the work of retracing compacts into these murky paths a sense drawn from husbandry, "trace" indicating the harness or tugs fixed to beasts of burden, as in Milton's image of "The labour'd ox" that "In his loose *traces* from the furrow came."³⁹⁹ Couched in a mock humility denouncing both the pomp of sublimity and the expansive flights of "Science," the poet harnesses his memory like a beast of burden inured to turn an earthy theme:

No *Alpine* wonders thunder through my verse,
 The roaring cataract, the snow-topt hill,
 Inspiring awe, till breath itself stands still:
 Nature's sublimer scenes ne'er charm'd mine eyes,
 Nor Science led me through the boundless skies;
 From meaner objects far my raptures flow:
 O point these raptures! bid my bosom glow!
 And lead my soul to ecstasies of praise
 For all the blessings of my infant days! ("Spring" 8-16)

While clearly casting his lot in favor of the national vogue for picturesque pleasures and against the terror and thrills associated more with continental scenes, the target of the reference to science is slightly more elusive. It is possible Bloomfield is alluding to the contemporary craze for hot air balloons, a scientific innovation most capable of quite literally leading him through "boundless

³⁹⁷ Robert Bloomfield, *The Farmer's Boy*, 1-2. Hereafter abbreviated "FB."

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁹⁹ John Milton, *Milton's Comus*, ed. William Bell (London: Macmillan and Co., 2006), 291-2.

skies” after first lifting off in France in 1785. Widely reported in *The Morning Chronicle*, *Sunday Gazette*, and other newspapers Bloomfield used to train his literacy and elocution for a captive audience of cobblers, the novel technicity of the bird’s eye view or the high spectacle of illuminated balloons used in the Queen’s birthday celebrations would have posed a stark contrast to the rustic design of *The Farmer’s Boy*.⁴⁰⁰ Offering itself to an eager public as both the crowning achievement of science and an entertaining spectacle, it is significant that Bloomfield not only alludes to air travel but associates it with the grand aesthetic of the sublime in contrast to the firmer reality of “meaner objects.” But, at the same time, the first verse paragraph sends imprecating the muse to *transport* the poet’s vision along with that of his audience “through regions where gay Fancy dwells...” still careful to “mould to Truth’s fair form what Memory tells.”⁴⁰¹ The argument in these first lines promotes the idea that the images to emerge will do so through a more subtle illusion of transport, a blended state between Fancy and Truth where familiar objects take on a luster to trounce violent crags and floating contraptions.

If contemporary experiments in ballooning serve as the foil for the poet’s picturesque plan, what demands attention is the style of seeing premised in these opening lines. Simply, Bloomfield’s vision is more grounded, but, despite its earthiness, still expansive, expressive, and penetrative, capable of charm or seduction. It is the enlistment of these qualities first that aligns Bloomfield’s poem with the panorama, despite the ground-clearing dismissal of grand aesthetic or scientific endeavors. Indeed, this clarity of vision, this sense of seeing without any intermediary or device, re-presenting reality as it truly is, was the exact conceit of the panorama itself. The thrill inspired

⁴⁰⁰ "Advertisements and Notices." *London Recorder or Sunday Gazette*, 12 May 1793. *Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, Accessed June 2022.

⁴⁰¹ Bloomfield, *FB*, “Spring,” 17-18.

in these lines devoted to "meaner objects" thus differentiates itself from both the narrow self-reflective ecstasy of the contemplating subject and the hierarchy of Thomson's design to depict "the various parts of nature, ascending from the lower to the higher."⁴⁰² Like the panorama, Bloomfield's sets up the Farmer's Boy as an understated spectacle of simultaneity emitting mysteriously, almost supernaturally, from the soft "glow" of the poet's heart a wide range of objects well-known but seen from a different angle, under a new light.

A confluence of design, content, and language comes to host pulses of this panoramic form capable of delivering on the promise of transport.⁴⁰³ Bloomfield's textual avatar Giles, a young farmhand stamped with the archetypal farmer's name, enters the poem as a kind of viewing platform from which the rest of the poem unfolds. The first the reader learns of Giles is that he is unwitting, humble, and very nearly a blank slate, wiped clean to become an unfeeling servant to his duty: "Giles: meek, fatherless, and poor: / Labour his portion, but he felt no more; / No stripes, no tyranny his steps pursu'd; / His life was constant, cheerful, servitude."⁴⁰⁴ What impresses this fatherless boy "Strange to the world" and sets the poem in motion around him is the captivating and encompassing device of the "revolving SEASONS... / From heat to cold, tempestuous to serene."⁴⁰⁵ Open and unobtrusive, the character of Giles functions as a reliable source of a panoramic mode of seeing based on an open circumscription from which to appreciate the variegated display of the "meaner objects" transformed by the seasons' revolution around him.

⁴⁰² James Thomson, *The Seasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 3.

⁴⁰³ While there is no justification from any source to posit a technological anxiety of influence that would motivate *The Farmer's Boy*, Bloomfield's general awareness of or direct experience with the panoramic spectacles proliferating at the time of his writing cannot be discounted. Regardless, what interests me here is the medial or formal contingency shared between the poetic and technical spectacle, and how this contingency opens a dialogue between the two that unsettles both, remolding the sequences of history and the predominate logics of operation established in both Bloomfield's and the panorama's current critical and scholarly appraisal.

⁴⁰⁴ Bloomfield, *FB*, "Spring," 27-30.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 31; 33-34.

After the introduction of Giles, the panoramic vision portended in the circle of the changing seasons warps outward into the poem's setting, materializing a temporal and cyclical optical arrangement into a physical and sensual sphere centralized, localized, and bounded but nonetheless cast ever outward. A panoramic frame capable of encompassing vast differences and everyday objects emerges in this way from the early lines in which the poet locates his topos "Where noble Grafton spreads his rich domains / Round Euston's watered vale, and sloping plains."⁴⁰⁶ The circle expands around the epicenter of a landed estate, swathing within its noble territory the natural valleys, plains, and rivers of Euston. If Jonathan Lawson is correct to note how "the restricted setting opens the possibility of extensive and detailed examinations of its contents," the surety of such examinations, like the realism of the panorama, soon takes on a destabilizing effect.⁴⁰⁷ As soon as this domain is determined, an insistent repetition of the locative adverb quickly comes to redouble and destabilize the "noble spread" of the dukedom of Grafton. The capacious range of the territorial claim is drawn into the density of a rapid iteration of objects, animals, and landmarks "Where woods and groves in solemn grandeur rise, / Where the kite brooding unmolested flies; / The woodcock and the painted pheasant race, / And sculking foxes, destin'd for the chace."⁴⁰⁸ Indeed, Grafton and its nominal specificity as both location and referent disappear entirely from poem, featured nowhere by name in the remaining seasons.

What replaces the surety of Grafton amongst these diverse scenes is the centrality of "A little farm his generous Master till'd," the place from which Spring and later seasons focalize, evolve, and "Delight still more and more the gazing eye."⁴⁰⁹ A long verse paragraph describes

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 37-38.

⁴⁰⁷ Lawson, 58.

⁴⁰⁸ Bloomfield, *FB*, "Spring," 39-42.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 48; 60.

Giles as he clears the land, turns up the soil, and with his plow “Draws his fresh parallels, and wid'ning still, / Treads slow the heavy dale, or climbs the hill... Till all is chang'd, and hill and level down / Assume a livery of sober brown.”⁴¹⁰ After preparing the ground for planting, Giles settles into a stable position and scopes out the result of his labor. Panning around to estimate the newly tilled land, an imaginative reverie intrudes on his survey:

Yet oft with anxious heart he looks around,
And marks the first green blade that breaks the ground;
In fancy sees his trembling oats uprun,
His tufted barley yellow with the sun;
Sees clouds propitious shed their timely store,
And all his harvest gather'd round his door. (“Spring” 97-102)

Like the disappearance of Grafton, time collapses under its hurried expansion. Empirical certainty of clear and harrowed land presents the opportunity for a relay of imagery condensing the processes and products of seasonal labor into a single plane. While Binfield posit that these lines present how “the farmer fancies only that which is possible - even more, that which is necessary,” the rapid unmeaning of the digressive image remains firmly intact: if fancy only operates within “temporal bounds” and nature is “self-sufficient,” whence the “anxious heart” and fancy’s distrust of time’s course?⁴¹¹

The first sprouts in the heat of summer, the ripened crop surging up in the cool autumn, and the safeguarding harvest arranged around the cottage to reprove the biting cold of winter stack one upon the other in creating an entirely unnecessary lull in the logic of necessity. Here, then, is another place early in the poem where the truth of the gazing eye’s report and trust in the ultimate control of the divine over creation are cast in some doubt, a place where “nothing separates one

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 73-74; 77-78.

⁴¹¹ Binfield, 73.

pole from the other anymore... a fantastic telescoping... *the indifferention of active and passive.*"⁴¹² Haunting the circumscription in time and place of the images and actions portrayed in verse is the anticipated automatic circuit of the year, a circuit whose productivity is in truth never guaranteed and whose management demands a confusion of activity and passivity, sowing and growing, planting and waiting. The pragmatic "anxiety" focused on a strong harvest blends indistinctly into a "self-sufficient" aesthetics.

This episode of temporal condensation immediately repeats in a synesthetic variant where the ocular and aural intermix to create a scene at the furthest remove from all certainty of location or industry. Giles' virtual augury complete, Bloomfield transitions into a georgic interlude detailing the practice of arraying dead crows on the fields to scare their living relatives away from disturbing freshly planted crops. Early in the morning, still enticed by the comforts of his bed, Giles remains in a deep sleep, but is roused by the dawn light, "when at day-break summon'd from his bed, / Light as the lark that carol'd o'er his head..."⁴¹³ Here the uncertainty of a referent leads the adjective phrase carrying the simile with the lark balanced precariously on its shoulder to hovers between "day-break" and "summon'd." It appears that Giles is summoned both lightly by a light and by the light song of a lark which takes on the characteristics of early morning sunlight "o'er his head." This interplay of sound and sight in motion, Bloomfield chains together more than twenty lines, originally the "first part composed of the poem," molding together sensual detail as Giles saunters to the field for his scarecrow task.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*, 31.

⁴¹³ Bloomfield, *FB*, "Spring," 129-130.

⁴¹⁴ See footnote 14, *The Farmer's Boy by Robert Bloomfield: A Parallel Text Edition*, 83.

On his path “deep-worn by hasty showers, / O'er-arch'd with oaks that form'd fantastic bow'rs, / Waving aloft their tow'ring branches proud, / In borrow'd tinges from the eastern cloud,” Giles contributes song to the scene out of a poetic inspiration more properly belonging to Bloomfield.⁴¹⁵ Once “His own shrill matin join'd the various notes / Of Nature's music, from a thousand throats,” however, a chorus between the tangible and aural rings out in echo of the earlier lark simile: mimicking the rain that has just passed, a white-throat “pour'd hymns to freedom and the rising morn” and a thrush “shook a white shower from the black-thorn bush... / And trembled as the minstrel sweetly sung.”⁴¹⁶ White's contention that the images of this passage “could easily stand in isolation and as such are like raw remembrances” downplays the degree to which the simultaneity and sensual intercourse of the language rigs together the images across each line.⁴¹⁷ Movement and song compose a sensory surplus where a sloshy environment alive with waving trees joins the poring, shaking, and trembling notes of human-animal minstrels.

Such moments of sensual simultaneity parallel episodes portraying the multiplication of panoramas within panoramas, as the orbital optical form evinced by Giles nests within and populates the register of what Donna Landry has called the “georgic ecology” of *The Farmer's Boy*. If Bloomfield shows how “human and non-human nature are mutually imbricated, for good or ill, and benevolent stewardship is a social good,” certain moments of the poem articulate this imbrication using a panoramic form leading to the indifference of steward and stewarded.⁴¹⁸ A passage in *Summer*, for instance, depicts Giles resting from his work preventing birds from interfering with sprouting crops:

⁴¹⁵ Bloomfield, *FB*, “Spring,” 131-134.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 137-138.

⁴¹⁷ White, 14.

⁴¹⁸ Landry, 256.

Stretch'd on the turf he lies, a peopled bed,
 Where swarming insects creep around his head.
 The small dust-colour'd beetle climbs with pain
 O'er the smooth plantain-leaf, a spacious plain!
 Thence higher still, by countless steps convey'd,
 He gains the summit of a shiv'ring blade,
 And flirts his filmy wings, and looks around,
 Exulting in his distance from the ground. ("Summer" 73-80)

As soon as Giles lets his eyes slip from the visual surplus of rural scenes in a moment of rest, the circularity of his surroundings transfers into a halo of insects, "swarming" and creeping with equal cyclic profusion around his head. Once the farmhand stoops to the level of insects, making a temporary home of their flat "turf," a beetle rises in exchange to assume the place of his perceptive proxy, laying claim to the habitus of a picturesque tourist or panorama spectator. Looking out over a "spacious plain" from the platform of grass, the beetle witnesses with his ironic (non-)elevation a relay of natural images in miniature: "The tender speckled moth here dancing seen, / The vaulting grasshopper of glossy green, / And all prolific *Summer's* sporting train, / Their little lives by various pow'rs sustain."⁴¹⁹

It may be these instances of panoramic form or open circumscription, the flow of diverse material around a focal point with which it eventually becomes indistinct, translate lingering traces of the open-field system of agriculture slowly delimited and erased through the enclosure of common land during Bloomfield's lifetime. John Barrell notes in relation to the poetry of John Clare how a similar circular mapping of space associated with the open-field schema re-emerges in the Northamptonshire peasant poet's verse. Yet the roundabout, paratactical, and associative nature of Clare's poetic vision, he argues, opposes itself to the linear, penetrative, or vectorized

⁴¹⁹ Bloomfield, *FB*, "Summer," 81-84.

alternative associated with the genre of locodescriptive verse that *The Farmer's Boy* clearly extends: "As long as the topography of the parish remained an expression of open-field farming practice, the characteristically open-field sense of space – circular, restricted by the boundary of the parish – was bound to survive, and wider, mobile, linear sense of space of the rural professional class could not be properly imprinted in the consciousness of the villagers."⁴²⁰ Barrell's concern with the impressive traces of agricultural topography in the rural verse of Clare, however, brings with it two presuppositions which the closer scrutiny afforded to the panoramic form of *The Farmer's Boy* puts in need of redress: first, that there exists an empty malleable space preexisting and surviving its transformative expression in circular or linear forms, and, second, that this space is entirely unmediated by any prior activity of language or technology.⁴²¹

Rather than see the regularized linear lines of verse as expressions of the circular open-field system, the panoramic structures of *The Farmer's Boy* invert this arrangement. The multiplication of circles emanating from Grafton, the farm, Giles, and the various lifeforms within the farmhand's scopic periphery figures a trace of oral linguistic technology contemporaneous with the practical organization of agricultural land into commons and wastes circling towns and farms. Barrell is right to notice the influence of circular topographies in rural verse, but this circularity as a technique for arranging farmland itself points to a common technical ancestor that, as McLuhan asserts, reappears in the twentieth century with electric light-based technologies like television.

⁴²⁰ John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 106.

⁴²¹ If some shade of the open-field system comes to tinge Bloomfield's poem, it is also necessary to reject Barrell's abrupt verdict on the "conventional" quality of Bloomfield's verse. Judging primarily from a linguistic purview in which language, tone, and syntax take pride of place, the impression of conventionality surely stands. But in a symbolic register more closely tuned to the operation of images, the exchange of movements, senses, and appearances, there is much more activity than meets the eye. A formal convergence uniting subject and object, indistinguishing sense from sense, exerts a certain weight in episodes organized around a circular structure based less on syntax and diction than a figural composition, a posing together or synthesis of figures. Only once the volume is turned up and the episode given room to expand do these synesthetic features appear.

Indeed, a rapid light time connects the resurgence of dialect poetry in the ballad revival of the late eighteenth century and “the upsurge of regional dialects” whose “prominence in England in areas in which previously one had heard only standard English is one of the most significant cultural events of our time.”⁴²² Although Bloomfield’s dialect was heavily expurgated in published editions of *The Farmer’s Boy*, an ecological, panoramic, synesthetic form lingers in exactly the same way that “Dialectal speech since TV has been found to provide a social bond in depth...”⁴²³ Even in a classic locodescriptive register, the open boundedness of the social bond of rural experience can find expression.

Rural Commercial Reality and Hyperreal Static

The tension inherent in the effort to elicit realistic images in a verse form more synthetic, distant, and formalized leads toward a confusion of the circular lifeworlds of preindustrial England and the disorienting performances of urban spectacle. The consequence of this overlapping is that it refuses a clear division between the country and city at the very same time it so clearly vocalizes their separation. Indeed, rather than its absolute difference, Bloomfield’s occasional and tempered critiques of the city prefer to highlight a process of mimicry emanating from it. Nowhere is this clearer than the well-remarked passage in *Spring* that traces how consumerism from the city leads to the denaturing of Suffolk’s dairy industry. The cloistered garret in which Bloomfield spun lines while at work reappears where the poet denounces the gluttony of London for turning a mark of local pride into an empty simulacrum:

Unrivall'd stands thy country CHEESE, O *Giles!*
Whose very name alone engenders smiles;
Whose fame abroad by every tongue is spoke,

⁴²² McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 338.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*

The well-known butt of many a flinty joke,
 That pass like current coin the nation through;
 And, ah! experience proves the satire true.
 Provision's grave, thou ever craving mart,
 Dependant, huge Metropolis! where Art
 Her pouring thousands stows in breathless rooms,
 Midst pois'nous smokes and steams, and rattling looms;
 Where Grandeur revels in unbounded stores;
 Restraint, a slighted stranger at their doors! ("Spring" 231-242)

An ironic inversion occurs in picturing these suffocating spaces: they were the same that inspired line by line the mnemonic storehouse responsible for bringing the "unbounded store" of rural objects and images within the "restraint" of poetic language. A greater irony sees these critiques offered up in a poem that would "pass like current coin the nation through" premised on "unbounded stores" of rural life. Bloomfield, however, is quick to show that the difference between these experiences is one of magnitude and direction, not design. Where the shoemaker poet found a silent voice within these "breathless rooms" to relieve the pressure from within, he figures the city of London itself imploding through its own density, leaving only a vacuum:

Thou, like a whirlpool, drain'st the countries round,
 Till London market, London price, resound
 Through every town, round every passing load,
 And dairy produce throngs the eastern road:
 Delicious veal, and butter, every hour,
 From Essex lowlands, and the banks of Stour;
 And further far, where numerous herds repose,
 From Orwell's brink, from Weveny, or Ouse. ("Spring" 243-50)

Ripping the singularities away from surrounding towns and villages, London substitutes for these differences its own ethic of uniformity. The result, Bloomfield shows, is an evacuation of not only meaning but the touch of the real at play in material practice. Presenting Suffolk cheese for its synecdochic relation to its toponym, Bloomfield uses a rhetoric of reflection to picture a scene where London's frenzy infects Suffolk's tranquility, leaving it hollow and devoid of any referent:

Hence Suffolk dairy-wives run mad for cream,
 And leave their milk with nothing but its name;
 Its name derision and reproach pursue,
 And strangers tell of "three times skimm'd sky-blue." ("Spring" 251-4)

Yet the effect of this evacuation is not one that Bloomfield, living now at the center of industry, can clearly disentangle himself from. Indeed, this quality of sign overtaking referent infects passages recording these noxious influences.

The episode of the gamboling lambs that immediately follows the Suffolk cheese episode, for instance, at first appears to cleanse the reader's pallet of the petrified cheese emptied of its distinction in a descriptive sequence filled with movement and play. A pleasant scene of levity witnesses lamblings at sport "impetuous, ardent, strong, / The green turf trembling as they bound along; / Adown the slope, then up the hillock climb, / Where every molehill is a bed of thyme."⁴²⁴ A rhetoric of division, sheering, or slicing, however, quickly juts up in anticipation of the violent interruption of these roaming adventures: "if a gale with strength unusual blow, / *Scatt'ring* the wild-briar roses into snow, / Their little *limbs* increasing efforts try, / Like the *torn* flower the fair assemblage fly."⁴²⁵ Turning "lambs" into "limbs," Bloomfield dismembers the young flock before introducing the fate that awaits them:

Though unoffending innocence may plead,
 Though frantic ewes may mourn the savage deed,
 Their shepherd comes, a messenger of blood,
 And drives them bleating from their sports and food.
 Care loads his brow, and pity wrings his heart,
 For lo, the murd'ring BUTCHER with his cart
 Demands the firstlings of his flock to die,
 And makes a sport of life and liberty! ("Spring" 341-48)

⁴²⁴ Bloomfield, *FB*, "Spring," 329-32.

⁴²⁵ Bloomfield, *FB*, "Spring," 335-8. Emphasis mine.

The proleptic invitation of the lamb's death into the description of their play solidifies the sense of determinism conveyed in response to the butcher's demand: "His gay companions Giles beholds no more; / Clos'd are their eyes, their fleeces drench'd in gore; / Nor can Compassion, with her softest notes, / Withhold the knife that plunges through their throats."⁴²⁶ Here, no amount of beholding, in eye or arms, can withhold the stroke that turns the plaintive music of notes into the abject physicality of throats.

It is difficult to determine where the proper field of this violence exists. While White suggests the increasing metropolitan demand for mutton sublimates the grotesquery of the episode into "a critique of the rich," Landry contends that readers should not be too quick to dismiss the intimacy, pain, and emotional conflict at the center of such violence.⁴²⁷ One argues for the need to conceptualize the act of culling livestock as an expedient response to the increasing urban meat consumption forming the rudiments of modern industrial agriculture. The other pleads for considering the act as a ritual integrated into a network of precapitalist cultural practices that, though ruffling modern sensibilities, demands respect and understanding. Both of these positions undoubtedly share some portion of the truth. What they overlook, however, is how the strange isolation and asymmetry of this gore delivers its own message: it is the very ritualization, the rural everydayness of this violence that, upon its publication at the center of commerce, becomes consumable precisely as a sign no different from the hollow Suffolk cheese.

What Bloomfield delivers here essentially amounts to an ambivalent shock treatment, a jolt neutralized in advance through the language of poetry and broadcast with the same immobilizing force of reality TV or live news coverage. The very exercise of casting the real of death and murder

⁴²⁶ Bloomfield, *FB*, "Spring," 349-52.

⁴²⁷ White, 19; Landry, 254-6.

in such circumstances empties it out into a hyperreality. The lesson learned from the empty signification of Suffolk cheese proves, if it proves anything, that the audience most in need of the shock is the least prepared to receive it precisely because of the preceding demand for "authentic" images lifted directly from rural life. For Baudrillard, this is exactly the flat self-contained space of reality television. In its "fantastic operation of controlled consensualizations... bringing society to the parodic level of a total farce, an unstoppable image-feedback of its own reality," the reality and liveness of television brings with it a fundamental and endlessly reflexive indecision.⁴²⁸ "The farther we go into the orgy of images and viewings" of Bloomfield's tele-vision the more we are enticed by "two paroxysms - the violence of the image and the discrediting of the image," the prurient attraction to it and the attempt to explain it away.⁴²⁹ A curiosity "visceral, organic, endoscopic" papers over the fact that the act in question has become ever so slightly divorced from a reality that verse cannot capture or re-present.⁴³⁰

What the slaughtering of the lamblings communicates is, then, fundamentally no different from the former pride of Suffolk's dairy industry: it is left "with nothing but its name." The transparency of the act is what Bloomfield communicates with the reference to the inability of compassion to intervene and the gory image of throat slitting. If the cheese performs a synecdochic function in presenting a hollowed-out piece of its empty rural origin, the muted death of the lambs likewise choreographs the lure of both farmer boy Bloomfield's televisual poetics and the eidetic program of *The Farmer's Boy*: "the discrepancy between them," as between the city and country, "does not create any new political situation or genuine crisis, for memory fades at the same time

⁴²⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art* (South Pasadena: Semiotex(e), 2005), 190.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*

as does the real. The discrepancy is only virtually catastrophic.”⁴³¹ The sheer presentation of violence becomes its own message - the very symbolic activity of any authentic community that such a ritual killing might have channeled at one point can only appear in a negative form, laminated transparently over a violence that now appears an inevitable consequence of the same processes of industrialization and commercialization that brought Bloomfield to London and led him to yoke together in his mind rhyme with rhyme.

Their products placed side by side on the streets of London, the equivalent share of the cheese monger, the butcher, and anonymous buyer, readily exchangeable through the grand mediator of money, *The Farmer's Boy* translates the material side of this commodity exchange into an exchange of signs where cheese, lambs, farmers, and poets, their makers and consumers, sit beside and slide into the other. At an extreme level, it is possible to see *The Farmer's Boy* as an extravagant shopping list on which, in no discernable order, the materials pressed into service at the markets of the metropolis begin their transformation into commodities. Most of all, and to a largely unremarked degree, this is truly what the Farmer's Boy does. If *The Farmer's Boy* finds its success on the nostalgic engagement of an urban audience anxious to return to the plains and hills abandoned for the city, as Lawson suggests, then what they consume is a virtual image in which they are already participants.⁴³² Unlike the work of earlier peasant poets whose writing reached a limited public under the management of the patronage and subscription systems, wrestling with questions of patronage, performance, and production, the farmer's boy writing *The Farmer's Boy* completes at the level of language the circuit of exchange materialized in the commodity by

⁴³¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Screened Out* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2014), 63.

⁴³² Lawson, 55.

stepping together with all those invisible rituals spirited away into remote hamlets, the ingrained practices of a life no longer lived, thrust into the circulation of the market.

Bloomfield pulls back the curtain on the illusion in the middle of *Summer* to reveal the full impact of his play with absent forms. After a brief passage on the harvest feast, a time when "Distinction low'rs its crest / The master the servant and the merry guest / are equal all...", the poet struggles through the ellipses of memory in reminiscing how,

Such were the days, ... of days long past I sing,
 When Pride gave place to mirth without a sting;
 Ere tyrant customs strength sufficient bore
 To violate the feelings of the poor;
 To leave them distanc'd in the mad'ning race,
 Where'er Refinement shews its hated face:
 Nor causeless hated;... 'tis the peasant's curse,
 That hourly makes his wretched station worse;
 Destroys life's intercourse; the social plan
 That rank to rank cements, as man to man:
 Wealth flows around him, fashion lordly reigns;
 Yet poverty is his, and mental pains. ("Summer" 323-5; 333-44)

The critique of the "paths of emulation" responsible for this refinement, however, never quite leaves the ground.⁴³³ Bloomfield's entire program is emulative - first, of the entire line of laboring poets since Burns making his composition socially legible; next, from the clear simulation of the *Seasons*; and, finally, in the entire program of a descriptive eidetic poetry concerned with communicating images. Indeed, the rapid success of Bloomfield truly only makes sense against this background of emulation, a word whose origin reaches back to the Proto-Indo-European meaning "imitation" or "copy" and forward to the computing process of using a host architecture to run a guest program without the original or native hardware. As Capel Lofft records in his

⁴³³ Bloomfield, *FB*, "Spring," 354.

introduction to *The Farmer's Boy*, many poets had tried their hand at regularizing Thomson's blank verse into rhyme to little success. Bloomfield's appearance as a peasant poet engaged in the same tired exercise promised something more. Like Duck's Augustan realism sixty years before him, it promises a figure whose life and experience signals some measure of the real, of having touched the harrow, moved the clods, and threshed the grain with the same hand now guiding the pen to evoke the sights and sensations of rural living in real time – the same earthy taste which perhaps prodded urban buyers to consume Suffolk cheese.

Broadcast Symbol Intrusions

Separated from rural Suffolk and subject to the same process of simulative emulation degrading its theme, *The Farmer's Boy* effectively “reinvents the real as fiction, precisely because it has disappeared from our life.”⁴³⁴ The modern debate surrounding the poem's generic categorization, whether it is pastoral or anti-pastoral, georgic or anti-georgic, menacingly idyllic or unexpectedly brutal, false or true to life, misses this more fundamental point: *The Farmer's Boy* manages to outstrip truth and fiction altogether precisely through confusing them in a hyperrealist poetics.⁴³⁵ And this outstripping is a manner of dealing both with the unique situation of the laboring class poet alienated from the country and the eidetic functionality of a tradition of a nature poetry external to it, “an attempt to revitalize, reactualize, requotidianize fragments of simulation, fragments of this universal simulation that have become for us the so-called ‘real world.’”⁴³⁶ Such revitalization is fundamentally not a matter of settling on a singular homely meaning and championing kitsch locality or homely craft aesthetics. Rather, for Bloomfield, “revitalizing” the

⁴³⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 124.

⁴³⁵ See Landry, 254 and Goodridge (1995), 6.

⁴³⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 124.

simulation of reality in *The Farmer's Boy* means fostering moments where a reciprocity across roles, positions, and subjectivities empties the false emptiness of simulacrum.

This tactic of virtualizing the virtual is potentiated by the same panoramic form infecting the georgic logic of "variety, surplus, and exchange." Thus, within the frenzied circulation of empty signs whirling above their lost referents, the synesthetic "social bond" of panoramic form helps illuminate spaces hosting what Baudrillard refers to as "symbolic exchange." Opposing the unidirectionality and equivalence of the commodity, the concept of symbolic exchange hinges on reversibility, metamorphosis, and reciprocity. In Baudrillard's terms, "there is a symbolic circulation of things in which none has a separate individuality, in which all operate in a kind of universal collusiveness of inseparable forms."⁴³⁷ Critical to maintain, however, is that this exchange only appears after the same sort of virtualization of the real witnessed in the panorama. It then constitutes a "hypertrophy of the virtual" that enacts a "form of implosion" which invites a "senseless circulation of elements" comparable to the forms of exchange lost to the development of different regimes of irreversible value (sign, use, and labor) responsible for the depletion of Suffolk's rural traditions.⁴³⁸ Reaching as far as it can reach, the medium of a realist poetry piling sign on top of sign gives rise to saturation points, places where a reversal sets into motion and begins to elicit the seductions, appearances, and exchanges of the symbolic.

Nowhere does this program of reactualization based on symbolic exchange become clearer than in the form of an intertext that Bloomfield meant to interrupt his poem, but that Capel Lofft relegated to its back matter upon publication. Titled "Reflections on Otaheite: Cooks Second Voyage," this excerpt from a secondhand account of Cook's voyage to "Otaheite" (a mistranslation

⁴³⁷ Baudrillard, *Passwords* (Brooklyn, Verso, 2003). 17.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

of Tahiti) originally broke the progression of *The Farmer's Boy* in manuscript immediately following the line from the end of Summer on emulation's destruction of "the social plan / That rank to rank cements, as man to man." At first glance, the account appears to recapitulate the poetic sentiment of harmonious class relations in ethnological form, noting that "the evident distinction of ranks, which subsists at *Otaheite*, does not materially affect the felicity of the Nation... The simplicity of their whole life contributes to soften the appearance of distinctions, and to reduce them to a level."⁴³⁹ The proximity between this notion of absolute ground-level equality leads White to argue that Bloomfield's appendage of the Cook excerpt puts him in the orbit of "texts which criticized the status quo and advocated the levelling of society," an opinion "often regarded as seditious by those in positions of authority."⁴⁴⁰

However, a closer look shows how the Otaheite appendix corresponds neither to a Burkean conservative appeal to tradition nor a subtle endorsement of the levelling tendencies associated with some strands of romantic primitivism. Rather, what connects *The Farmer's Boy* with the excerpt of Cook's visit to this remote society is an endorsement of an ethic of fungibility, reciprocity, or exchange, a much more subtle designation than could be directly expressed in contemporary systems of political thought. The examples of Otaheite society that the Cook excerpt goes on to provide demonstrate less an *indistinction* or *levelling* than a very clear *reversibility* of or *conversation* between roles and appearances:

At Otaheite, there is not, in general, that disparity between the highest and the meanest man, that subsists in England between a reputable tradesman and a labourer. The affection of the Otaheitians for their chiefs, which they never fail'd to express on all occasions, gave us great reason to suppose they consider themselves as one family, and respect their eldest born in the persons of their chiefs. The lowest man in the Nation speaks as freely with his King as with his equal, and has the pleasure of seeing him as often as he likes. The King,

⁴³⁹ White, 147.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

at times, amuses himself with the occupations of his subjects; and not yet deprived by false notions of empty state, he often paddles his own canoe, without considering such employment derogatory to his dignity.⁴⁴¹

While a social structure including nominal rank exists, the flexion of actions and relations between members of Otaheite society preclude its rigidity. In the context of speech, a conversation takes place where not only the words of one meet the other immediately, but where the possibility of meeting "as often as [one] likes" demonstrates a correspondence or symmetry in time and appearance. There is no privation or distinction that would keep one from joining the time of the other. In the context of action, the image of the King propelling his own boat or entering the "occupations of his subjects" transforms a secluded and otherwise unimpeachable figure into the exact replica of any boat-rower, fisherman, or farmer in eyeshot. In such moments, if only in the realm of appearances, *there is no king*, if what helps define this position is its ritual separation or unilateral distinction from the episodes of daily life falling under royal command.

This notion of the exchange or variability of roles, as opposed to their removal or permanent undifferentiation, helps illuminate Bloomfield's justification for the inclusion of the Otaheite passage. In an 1807 manuscript note, the poet explains his decision to include the excerpt on the pretext of "pleading for kindness between the ranks of society."⁴⁴² On its surface, this appeal seems to advocate a manner of civility the disappearance of which Bloomfield's own poem furnishes ready proof. If "Such were the days, ... of days long past I sing," where is the sense in pleading this case now, in such an indirect and marginal form? In the context of Otaheite society, however, rather than an effete call to maintain respectful distance and social niceties exactly where

⁴⁴¹ White, 147.

⁴⁴² Quoted in White, 23-4.

and how he knew them to fail, Bloomfield's choice of the word "kindness" signals a subtle call for the ranks to treat each other "in kind," to interact as a family, genus, or with a species of naturalness. The differences of rank or position may survive, but an ethic of exchange or reciprocity prevents these from becoming unilateral or unbending.⁴⁴³ Readers should peruse this anthropological account of a foreign culture after their experience of familiar Suffolk terrain not because one should become the other, but because the two images of society offered in each are themselves exchangeable as mutual instances of the symbolic exchange in evidence throughout *The Farmer's Boy*. It is not a radical addendum or a milquetoast coda as much as a deliberate extension of the poem itself: a case of the poem going beyond its own form precisely through another case of the exchange that substantiates its form.

Evidence of this symbolic exchange reverberates throughout the poem, but a scene set in Autumn well captures its operation both thematically and formally. Against the background of chilling wind and changing foliage, members of the village of Euston congregate in a small graveyard around a church, a "Mean structure, where no bones of heroes lie!"⁴⁴⁴ The placid gathering, however, comes to host a rapid interchange of sentiments, bodies, images, and forms that occurs so plainly across so many strata that it seems the verse description nearly becomes autonomous, running away from Bloomfield in awkward shifts and lurches. Registers cross channels, for instance, where an evocation of pathetic sentiment in distanced reflection on the village church blinks into a vivid description that neglects the feeling that introduced it:

The rude inelegance of poverty
Reigns here alone: else why that roof of straw?

⁴⁴³ The *OED* includes this now obsolete sense of "kindness" in denotation of "kinship, near or special relationship; (also) natural affection arising from this." "kindness, n." *OED Online*. June 2022. Oxford University Press. (June, 2022).

⁴⁴⁴ Bloomfield, *FB*, "Autumn," 81.

Those narrow windows with the frequent flaw?
 O'er whose low cells the dock and mallow spread,
 And rampant nettles lift the spiry head,
 Whilst from the hollows of the tower on high
 The grey-cap'd daws in saucy legions fly. ("Autumn" 82-88)

What begins as a somber moral lesson on both the spiritual and material poverty of a shoddily constructed church unable to boast the pride and blessing of holy relics seems to lose its conviction. The distance of the poet's rhetorical questions immediately collapses with the preposition "O'er" into a close concern with a description of the botanical overgrowth and avian overcrowding infecting the structure. On one level, this transition might simply indicate inadequate command of poetic modes, an untrained decision to precede picturesque description too hastily with the moral reflection that should properly succeed it. On another, however, it evinces a concern to contort the boundaries and conditions of objects, mixing up stable identities.

Bloomfield animates the church precisely through confusing its architecture with everything ostensibly differentiated from it in kind. The meanness of the "structure" interlocks with the structural quality of the "bones" both absent from its interior yet scattered in the ground around it. "Rude inelegance" comes to signal the rudeness in elegance precisely where the irony of seeing the spot where lowly and powerless poverty "reigns," where a derelict object performs an action assuming a richness of authority. The strangeness of the inverted hypophora that follows ("else why...?"), asserting the truth of poverty only to ask after it in confirmation, provides the opportunity for positing the simultaneity of the community body, the built structure, and the nature surrounding it. "Low cells" signify at once religious cloisters, places of refuge, and the cavities of bone. It appears a congregation does indeed occupy this place of worship in the form of the "rampant nettles" who "lift their spiry heads" both as if in heavenward prayer and mimicry of a spire or steeple.

Indeed, proliferating nature in prayer appears more human than those villagers who “Round these lone walls assembling neighbours meet, / And tread departed friends beneath their feet.”⁴⁴⁵ An apparently coarse or unfeeling image of the living trampling the dead arises to perpetuate the unease of a rapid transition in tone and framing. Yet there is no hint of malice in Bloomfield’s presentation of the affront, since the dead offer a quick rejoinder, speaking to their relatives from “...new-brier'd graves, that prompt the secret sigh” and “Shew each the spot where he himself must lie.”⁴⁴⁶ The episode continues mixing business, play, and sexual attraction:

Midst timely greetings village news goes round,
Of crops late shorn, or crops that deck the ground;
Experienc'd ploughmen in the circle join;
While sturdy boys, in feats of strength to shine,
With pride elate their young associates brave
To jump from hollow-sounding grave to grave;
Then close consulting, each his talent lends
To plan fresh sports when tedious service ends.
Hither at times, with cheerfulness of soul,
Sweet village Maids from neighbouring hamlets stroll,
That like the light-heel'd does o'er lawns that rove,
Look shyly curious; rip'ning into love;
For love's their errand: hence the tints that glow
On either cheek, an heighten'd lustre know:
When, conscious of their charms, e'en Age looks sly,
And rapture beams from Youth's observant eye. (“Autumn” 91-108)

If symbolic exchange relies on the reversibility of forms in the sense of the living subject not simply taking the place of the dead object but dissolving their very distinction, exposing the death in life and vice versa, this is exactly what the episode of the churchyard congregation achieves. Quiet graves actively “show” the living their future in a scene literally standing on the converse of life and death, while an imaginative metathesis invites the reader to hear and see how gossip on

⁴⁴⁵ Bloomfield, *FB*, “Autumn,” 89-90.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

“crops that deck the ground” rattles the bones of the “corps[es]” under it. The libidinal pursuit of “Sweet village Maids” strolling like does over the dead plays on religious and sexual “rapture,” bearing witness to their “rip'ning into love” amid epitaphs of *requiescat in pace*.

Lawson finds in this section of *Autumn* an overriding incisiveness in movement between image, tone, and sentiment. The episode of the autumnal churchyard meeting exhibits “sharply reversing levels of thought and emotion [that] seem almost out of control... sharp turns of material and tone... constant variety... considerable bouncing about...”⁴⁴⁷ Bloomfield, in a sense, cannot seem to keep his hand off the remote. But, for Lawson, these condensed moments of transition are attempts, however successful, to translate “the contrasts of rural life,” with him ultimately concluding that “the whole is saved from giddy disparateness by the organic nature of the rural life described and by the steady voice of the rural speaker whose standing place is within the setting and culture he describes.”⁴⁴⁸ The contradictions piling up here are hard to ignore. It appears, on one hand, that uncomfortable juxtapositions belong innately to the rural life Bloomfield writes from, and, on the other, an organic unity also belonging to rural life in a single stroke purifies the conflict from the (presumably negative) judgement of “giddy disparateness.”

What Lawson rightfully notices and describes in *Autumn* in terms of flurries of transition bordering on confusion and indiscipline makes much more sense if we abandon the expectation of regularity, symmetry, and causality hidden in appeals to “organic nature.” Simply, it is necessary to consider that what Bloomfield translates in these passages is a type of “dynamic environmental mosaic that is discontinuous and diverse,” what McLuhan identifies variously as acoustic space,

⁴⁴⁷ Lawson, 84-5.

⁴⁴⁸ Lawson, 85.

tactile space, or the resonant interval.⁴⁴⁹ Defined as "spherical, discontinuous, non-homogeneous, resonant, and dynamic," the key feature of the mosaic is its metamorphic structure, "a sphere in which things create their own space and modify and coerce each other."⁴⁵⁰ Multisensory, polymorphic, and simultaneous, this mode of sensual experience forwards "no separation of inner and outer, only the metamorphic flux of modes of being" that reasserts itself over the nineteenth and twentieth century "through the ground of electric technology."⁴⁵¹ Prior to technical perfection and implementation of electricity, however, the instant transmission of "reality" evinced in *The Farmer's Boy* take on an exacting form in a verse premised on recreating and communicating the form, rhythm, and experience of rural life.

For Bloomfield, the kinds of exchanges subsisting between human-bug and beetle-spectator, incisive grave and prattling villager, whistling minstrel and quivering bird, do not resist a totalizing view of modernity. Rather they demonstrate how the re-interiorization of such images through the compilations of signs in poetry mirrors how "the very project of life, segmented, dissatisfied, and signified, is reclaimed and annulled in successive objects."⁴⁵² Mnemonic playback then constitutes "a reason for living" within a real word abstracted into the exchange of poetic signs divorced from the solidity and stability of their referents.⁴⁵³ If Bloomfield composes this poem as one of those "pouring thousands" in the "breathless rooms" of London, it would be a mistake to reduce this complex sigh for a real pre-enclosure world to a form of retrospection. Just the opposite is true: the panoramic form in which he invests channels through a neo-Thomsonian register an aesthetics of enclosure subsisting between rural locality and (post)modern spectacle.

⁴⁴⁹ McLuhan, *Laws of Media*. 23.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁵² Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (Brooklyn, Verso, 2020), 223.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*

Indeed, Bloomfield presents the ubiquity of circular, closed optics in the country as both liberating charm and deleterious shackle, both poison and cure to the conditions in which he finds himself in London. In other words, *The Farmer's Boy* employs a televisual poetry that flips forward into a fully screen-mediated virtualized world and harvests from the conditions affecting rural Suffolk less a retrospective melancholy than a prospective broadcast of a system of objects, a relentless traffic of signs signaling their virtualized repetition.

The result of this broadcast, with all its descriptive realism and living pathos, is to present how the totalizing real-life display of the panorama and the live-time transmission of television after it overlap with rural life in a contiguous, disorienting, but nonetheless proximate and familiar condition, the strange loop where pre-modernity and post-modernity meet. It is within the conditions of *The Farmer's Boy*, a poetic enclosure reduced to signs, this degraded terrain of “days long past” where it appears nothing more can be done in town or country, that the farmer's boy anticipates Hazlitt's critique and makes his philosophical argument *through* and not *against* the confinement of descriptive imagery. Even in the static of a noisy cloister, secluded from the “vast machine of the world around it,” Bloomfield “turns nullity and insignificance into an event which he transforms into the fatal strategy of the image,” pushing the multiplication of appearances on display in panoramic form to an extreme.⁴⁵⁴ And it is this extremity of distant appearances stitched together through the tele-visual text that conjures moments of a more involved sense of communication, a palpable vision whose touch brings back to the cobbler poet some semblance of what it meant to live, work, and see as the farmer's boy.

⁴⁵⁴ Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, 200.

Chapter 5

Unknown Worlds: John Clare's Peepshow Poetics, the Clarean Camera, and the Fantasy of Film

"He made an instrument... that was to take landscapes almost by itself."

- John Clare, "Autobiographical Fragments," c. 1820

"I found the poems in the fields / And only wrote them down."

- John Clare, "Sighing For Retirement," 1841

Around 1820, spectacle-seekers from various ranks and professions made a journey through the East Midlands to peer through a particular pane of glass. Motivated by different hopes and expectations, each was united by the desire to catch at a distance sight of the same object: the slightly distorted image of a rustic poet, whether at work or rest, whose storied verse had recently thrilled them with vivid descriptions and authentic images of nature. The translucent screen through which these visiting eyes looked was, as it happens, a private window belonging to the private cottage of John Clare, the Northamptonshire peasant poet.⁴⁵⁵ Kindling this common desire to see was the miscellany of Clare's inaugural volume *Poems Descriptive* (1820), a collection whose language, in the words of an early reviewer, revealed "no *aristocracy of beauty*" in the disorganized assortment of natural scenes in which "the stag and the hog, the weed and the flower, find an equal place..."⁴⁵⁶

Clare had many thoughts on his newfound fame, few of them generous or accepting. An 1821 letter to his publisher John Taylor follows this pattern of skepticism and frames the feelings

⁴⁵⁵ John Lucas (1994) writes that "Those anxious to observe the 'peasant poet' in his native habitat thought nothing of driving to Helpston to stare through the windows of his cottage; and when Clare was working in the fields, they would summon him to come talk to them" (36).

⁴⁵⁶ Anon. "Clare's Poems," *The Monthly Review* (London: A. and R. Spottiswoode, 1820), 297.

aroused by these obtrusive visits in an image both strange, for its infrequency in his writing, and familiar, in view of his social position and poetic inclinations: “But let me wait another year or two & t[he] *peep show* will be over - & my vani[ty] if I have any will end in its proper mortification to know that obscurity is happiness & that John Clare the thresher in the onset & neglected rhymer in the end are the only two comfortable periods of his life.”⁴⁵⁷ This casual remark on a well-known and often-derided popular spectacle appears to organize a range of sentiments. It suggests that a fraudulent or misguided appraisal of worth has led to an exhausting deferral, a sort of immobility that prevents Clare from moving on and reaching an end already set out before him. A kind of cynicism reports that these stimulating images will grow tiring and Clare will eventually be able to pack up and carry on.⁴⁵⁸

But this brief complaint reveals a great deal more for what it leaves unsaid. In presenting a homology between the spectacle of the peepshow and Clare himself, it circulates around the precise terms of this substitution, its context, logic, and formal structure. By pressing on the limits of Clare's peepshow metaphor, this chapter attempts to plumb that unsaid space while pursuing a line of Clare scholarship that can only now, in the space opened by posthumanism and various speculative materialisms, take on a fully fleshed out, or, perhaps more accurately, a fully-defleshed form. That form strikes at the center of Clare's metaphor and involves the complicated relationship between human and machine, the supposedly living matter of those who peep and the apparently lifeless apparatus of the peepshow.

⁴⁵⁷ John Clare, “To John Taylor [6 Sep 1821],” *Selected Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 62. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁵⁸ Clare's sentiment on this score was in some sense prescient. Subsequent volumes beginning with *The Village Minstrel* (1821) failed to meet this initial success in terms of both sales and critical response.

Roughly a century after Clare's peepshow, at the start of the decade that saw the industrialization of Hollywood, the development of the star system, and the introduction of color film, the literary critic Edmund Gosse drew on a related media metaphor during an examination of the poet's predilection for descriptive language. Writing in the *Sunday Times* in late 1924, Gosse stated "Clare had no thoughts. He wandered through the country storing up images and sounds, but he wove his reproductions of these upon no intellectual basis. His was a camera, not a mind... the fact cannot be ignored [...] philosophy was absent."⁴⁵⁹ The derogation of Gosse's assessment aside, the image of Clare roaming around familiar fens and fields to record audiovisual footage was both perspicuous of the technical present and prescient of the filmic future. The year before Gosse's article, Lee De Forest debuted a collection of his Phonofilm sound-on-film recordings of popular performing artists, spearheading an industry trend producing the first sound-synchronized feature film in the well-worn Romantic form of *Don Juan* (1926) and, soon after, the first "talkie" *The Jazz Singer* (1927). Also brought to the fore was the implication present in Clare's peepshow metaphor: the poet and his productions were primarily *visual* subjects grafted together in much the same way cinema melds the aura of a celebrity into an artificial backdrop.

This evaluation has in turn shaped any entire contemporary critical terrain occupied by a line of scholars who have broached, but just as often refused to endorse, the idea that Clare is, in its simplest formulation, *a living camera*. Timothy Brownlow, for instance, finds utility in suggesting that Clare's descriptive vision approximates the "cine-camera" in the depth and variety of its kaleidoscopic, telescopic, and microscopic tendencies, while Angus Fletcher celebrates Clare's later sonnets as piquant examples of a "mesmerizing exercise in camera work."⁴⁶⁰ Critics

⁴⁵⁹ Edmund Gosse, 'Nature in Poetry' *Sunday Times*, 5 (October 1924), no. 5295, 8.

⁴⁶⁰ Timothy Brownlow, *John Clare and the Picturesque Landscape* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 12, 23-5. Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry* (Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2006).

of Gosse's metaphor, on the other hand, tend to accentuate the camera's unthinking mechanic repetition by exchanging the audiovisual mobility of the "cine-camera" for the frozen frames of snapshot photography. Simon Kövesi references this medium to highlight the passivity of Clare's cameratic quality, envisioning the poet "pointing his eyes at a green thing, clicking his lids, imprinting a precise yet unthought and unmanaged scene, and then watching as poetic text pours out in faithful record of the place."⁴⁶¹ Most recently, Clare Grady has evoked the Clarean camera to resituate the totalizing omnisppection of photographic rhetoric into a more limited embodiment of Heideggerian ontological disclosure, showing how Clare's desire for "pure observation" in his descriptive verse nonetheless invites unanticipated affective and interpretative predispositions.⁴⁶²

By keeping the metaphor strictly metaphorical, each of these approaches reproduces the fundamental opposition underlying Gosse's thought, cleaving in advance the technical from the biological, the descriptive image from the philosophical idea. Opting to sally the metaphor only for its quaint utility, denounce it for its objectifying condescension, or probe its rhetorical consequences for an understanding of immediacy, scholars remain locked in the presumption that the automatic mimeticism of the camera poses an antagonistic externality to the poet whose skill, truth, or philosophy harbors no hint of mechanicity. Cordoning off the machinic in such a way has the effect of preserving for Clare "the inference of identity or totality that is constitutive of metaphor" while leaving "the purely relational metonymic contact" of the vehicle on the cutting-room floor.⁴⁶³ The unthought that hindered Clare now simply hinders the gear-ridden, unreflective, and auto-powered dummy signified by the photographic or cinematographic camera.

⁴⁶¹ Simon Kövesi, *John Clare: Nature, Criticism, and History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 8.

⁴⁶² Claire Grady, "'Meek-eye moods': On John Clare's Inarticulate Images," *European Romantic Review*, 30 (2019).

⁴⁶³ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1974), 14.

It is vital on both historical and philosophical grounds to discover the metonymy grinding away inside this metaphor. Without noticing how the aural, ocular, and mobile qualities of Gosse's vehicle attach to the sociotechnical history of the movie camera, recourse to the Clare-as-camera concept reduces media technology to a figural foil standing for the total mastery of immediate vision or the erasure of poetic intention. Such distance runs entirely counter to the predominate sociotechnical trends of the nineteenth century, a period marked by an accelerated collapse in the proximity between technical and biological organs as a result of proliferating visual practices and commodities. The opposition dividing technology from philosophy replays not only the historical but the metaphysical gulf between the poetic craft of art traditionally defined and the technical media that obviate human intervention in their unreflective repetition of all those referents in the real world waiting for their silver-screen debut.

Rather than repeat the opposition between human and machine, which itself only repeats the opposition between art and media, poesis and techne, I believe it is necessary to emphatically assert that Clare *is* a camera, but, critically, an incomplete one, a camera that is *not-yet* a camera. This contradictory condition is also where the peepshow re-enters the scene. In the following sections I trace this legacy of the peepshow through Clare's early life and work firstly as a stand-in for the popular fantasy that framed Clare as an object of vision (biography), next as an objective correlative for Clare's poetic fantasy of reframing neglected natural scenes through mobile, supple descriptive language (autobiography), and, finally, as an optical device that contributed to the long line of filmic prehistory, the historical *not-yet* of cinema (poetry). This last point offers another way to consider Clare's penchant for the local, close, and minute well-remarked in scholarship and expressed most forcefully in his middle and late periods. Lingering tendentially but permanently beside his own spectacle, framing the intimate objects of a doubled vision as both reminder of and

distraction from the instrumentalized, deteriorating body stabilizing such aesthetic enjoyment, Clare's work deserves to be seen as performing a kind of peepshow poetics that intervenes in the same proto-cinematic history toward which all manner of perspective boxes, reflective mirrors, and projective screens contributed.

The Peepshow Man Who Wasn't There

When in his letter to Taylor Clare declares himself the subject-turned-object of an unwanted spectacle, his metaphor has the odd effect of simultaneously exposing and obscuring a fundamental aspect of the peepshow experience. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for the vast majority of curious consumers, the peepshow was above all a tripartite public attraction, involving three elements without any one of which the experience would have been impossible.⁴⁶⁴

Clare's metaphor delivers the two most obvious elements in the form of the peeping spectators and the false perspective box housing the poet-turned-object. What the simplicity of the metaphor neglects, however, is the very means by which peepshow audiences enjoyed these varied miniatures and vignettes. In a word, Clare's brief metaphor affords no space to the figure of the traveling showman, the laborer who carried these portable perspective boxes from town to town, fair to fair, setting up, advertising, and pulling the strings of the contraption to reveal new scenes and novel technical effects such as backlighting, intricate paper transparencies, and mechanical movement to eager crowds.

⁴⁶⁴ While private individual perspective boxes or optical toys such as the polyoptique existed on the continent during the early nineteenth century, spectators could not lay claim to these without significant financial means. The spectacle of the peepshow thus remained a popular and public one for the vast majority of audiences in both urban and rural settings. Over the century, the peepshow faced competition with more attractive illusionary devices like the phenakistoscope or zoopraxiscope. This increase in competition led operators to sacrifice the mobility of the device in favor of the privacy afforded by the lens, an optic isolation well-suited for illicit or pornographic subjects with which the term "peep show" is now associated.

The exclusion is not terribly surprising. Even today, very few records exist to detail the personal histories and acquired practices of these peepshow men, but a handful of common attributes combine to form a picture of their work. The nature of the machine they carried on their backs or wheeled about in carts necessitated their status as itinerants, sometimes migrants or savoyards from the continent looking to thrill inexperienced eyes with “distant lands, never before seen and perhaps never before heard of, ferocious battles, stately monuments, images to startle and delight.”⁴⁶⁵ Competition with other spectacles occupying city streets, fairgrounds, and village greens molded the peepshow man into a showman proper, attracting attention to their machine through scripted narration, powerful oratory, and musical accompaniment. As much as this show-before-the-show was pursued with the intention of loosening wallets, it also formed a frame that could enliven the minute objects and interior scenes witnessed by curious audiences, giving rise to gossip and praise that would only advertise the spectacle further.

But perhaps the most notable feature of the peepshow man was the stark contrast he formed in comparison to the extravagance of the rich mysteries hidden inside the peep box. Often moonlighting as “reputed chimney sweeps, woodcutters, shoe cleaners, and errand boys,” rare men were ineluctably classed laboring subjects whose appearance attracted as much attention as their namesake.⁴⁶⁶ Induction into this “trade of paupers” meant that the social status of the peepshow man was visibly determined not simply by the presence of his companion machine but also by a complex habitus formed through a combination of traits, gestures, and accoutrements.⁴⁶⁷ Illustrations from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries consistently depict the peepshow man

⁴⁶⁵ Richard Balzer, *Peepshows: A Visual History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), 12.

⁴⁶⁶ Edwin Carels, “Cinema’s Savoyards: Performativity and the Legacy of the Magic Lantern,” *Media Archeology and Intermedial Performance: Deep Time of the Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 219.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

abreast his box with long unkempt hair, darkened skin, wrinkled jackets, ragged patched trousers, and slipshod shoes (Figure 11, Figure 12), sometimes his hands in the air with mouth agape, often mute and staring at the observer. With equal frequency these records figure the showman as a military or naval officer dismissed or disgraced from service, donning a large tricorne hat, a bright though soiled uniform, and bearing the scars of war in the form of prosthetic limbs.⁴⁶⁸ This vagabond disposition would later be encapsulated in the character of Sergeant Bell, the protagonist of Peter Parley's *Sergeant Bell and His Raree Show* (1839), an educational book for children featuring illustrations by George Cruikshank which remediated the peepshow form by coupling the public oratorical style of the peepshow man with abundant illustrations.⁴⁶⁹

Restoring this transient and disregarded character to the context of Clare's metaphor gives it a fuller shape and a more penetrating reach that together suggest Clare might have been more familiar with this spectacle than others have concluded.⁴⁷⁰ In fact, far from an offhand remark, the illusionary quality of the metaphor seems designed to work exactly like the peepshow itself, only offering a coherent spectacle when the circumstances hovering around or outside the field of vision are purposefully bracketed. The allure of what lies inside the peep box (if not the halfpenny paid

⁴⁶⁸ Even a cursory scan of Richard Balzer's *Peepshows: A Visual History* (1998), the most comprehensive published collection of peepshow illustrations, variants, and photographs, makes this pattern plain. Many of the illustrations, spanning decades and centuries, follow the same visual typology and composition.

⁴⁶⁹ John Plunkett, "Optical Recreations and Victorian Literature," *Literature and the Visual Media*, ed. David Seed (Cambridge: The English Association, 2005), 17.

⁴⁷⁰ Mick Schrey (2011) asserts that Clare makes no mention of having witnessed a peep show anywhere in his autobiographical writings or letters (61). Jonathan Bate (2003) touches briefly in his biography on an easily overlooked reference to the spectacle where he notes Clare had "went to raree-shows" together with his clerk Thomas Bennion during his second trip to London in 1822 (239). Clare, however, makes no mention of this experience in the published fragments on his visits to London. Instead, he relates a venture with Bennion to "Bullocks Mexico", an exhibition of rare objects from Mexico launched at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, London by its proprietor William Bullock. While various spectacles fell under the category of rare or raree shows, Bullock's display fails to meet the exact definition of a private or secluded perspective box. Notwithstanding, the relocation and decoration of simple peep boxes or raree shows indoors under the cover of impressive Latin and Greek names was a common practice for gulling ignorant passersby. Pinpointing the objects Clare might have seen at Bullock's show, if and where possible, would thus require much more in-depth archival research.

to see it) prevents the spectator's eye from wandering too far from the aperture, off to the wandering showman who attracted them to the near side of the lens in the first place by narrating its contents and then pulling the strings and levers to create dazzling special effects.



Figure 11 (left): "The Halfpenny Showman," William Henry Payne, hand-colored aquatint (1805).
 Figure 12 (right): "Raree-Show," Thomas L. Busby, hand-colored etching. (c. 1800)

Far from purveying a sense of distant objectification, the specificity circling around the historical context of the metaphor shows that it makes most sense through the elision of its central figure. The social rank, aesthetic presentation, and displaced subjectivity of the peepshow man adhere much closer to Clare himself as a laborer than does the neutral description of peepshow optics divorced from its operator. Even clearer is that Clare's investment in the visual excesses of this metaphor, the notion that people are peering, prying and peeping without just cause, has the

effect of simultaneously displacing and replacing the classed figure of the peepshow man as the supporting frame of his experience: a peepshow is *never truly* over until the peepshow man packs up and returns to obscurity, resuming the status of a laboring body that only signifies to the extent that its art remains at once hidden from view and ploddingly plain for all to see.

It may, somewhat paradoxically, be that the discomfort Clare feels in seeing himself as an object of vision has much more to do with a certain defensive narcissism than it does with the blatant disavowal of the aftermath of a desired celebrity. Despite the inconvenience imposed by the intrusive strangers prying at Clare's window, their shape would have been disconcertingly familiar. That is, these uninvited eyes perform at a purely formal level of one of the hallmarks of Clare's poetic method in attending to often overlooked or ignored images of nature. The architectonics of peasant poetics in the wake of Rousseau rested on the narrative that the rustic poet embodied rurality itself in becoming a literal "child of nature," a rare naïve soul whose unlettered rearing transmutes the non-art of natural processes, excited to creation by "instinctual response."⁴⁷¹ In a vague but nonetheless active sense, these uncouth visitors looking to find their wishes fulfilled by catching sight of the natural and neglected Northamptonshire peasant poet pose themselves as socially inept anti-poetic rivals to Clare himself. Their obvious pedestrian status has little to do with the naturalistic predilection of Clare's poetry but everything to do with the symbolic position of the peasant poet premised on exactly this default: the eye, not the mind, creates. And all eyes were on Clare. In truth, what these lookers have over Clare is exactly what the "peepshow" prevents him from attaining. He is seen not simply as a spectacle, but, like the peepshow man, as a classed subject indissociable from his spectacle, one of a piece with the wonders and limitations of his optical machine.

⁴⁷¹ Sandie Byrne, *Poetry and Class* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 187.

What Clare sees in this peeping, then, is not quite a glimpse of his own image. The cottage peepshow, as Jason Goldsmith suggests, places Clare closer to “the object of an anonymous, voyeuristic gaze.”⁴⁷² But his position is not exactly unique in this scenario, since the in-lookers and on-lookers roaming around him fail to see any more clearly. A revenant anonymous *looking* itself, knowing yet unknowable, stares back at both parties. For the visitors wanting to see Clare in the field “the real object of fascination is not the displayed scene, but the gaze of the naïve ‘other’ absorbed, enchanted by it.”⁴⁷³ For Clare, it is the prefigurative frame of the peasant poet persona that returns his gaze, trotting around his cottage and miming the primary conceit of a strategy for publication that strikes dangerously close to the territory of the poet himself.⁴⁷⁴

And this is precisely where and why the missing peepshow man comes to occupy the absent organizing center of Clare’s experience as a newly discovered spectacle. Roused to curiosity by the promises of the derelict peepshow man, the viewers peeping into his box assume the status of active subjects pretending to be passive peasant poets according to the frame he has established in his provision of and as the passive spectacle. The all-to-easily embodied repetition of the peasant poet in offering clear, accurate, and attractive scenes of an increasingly denatured way of rural life attracts precisely in that it establishes the illusion of seeing through the naïve gaze of the other, a gaze that Clare often cultivated. To peevishly call this arrangement a “peep show,” as Clare does, then holds a refractive lens up to the gaze that both motivates and obviates the poet, who, as a result of sensing the presence of this gaze, registers the extent to which his own sight and the scenes he sets up in his poetry are premised on his status as an object. This exchange of glances

⁴⁷² Jason Goldsmith, “The Promiscuity of Print: John Clare’s ‘Don Juan’ and the Culture of Romantic Celebrity,” in *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 46 (2006), 821.

⁴⁷³ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 114.

⁴⁷⁴ Operative here in the peepshow scene at Clare’s cottage are all the attributes of the gaze in the sense given it by Jacques Lacan in his Seminar XI: the gaze is the sight of a thing that sees but whose position cannot be seen from, the intimidating alien object that sees in place of the subject.

certainly repositions Clare to the level of a doll-like object, but, it must be asserted, such a flattening indicates he is not the target of a gaze, but its source and structure as a split subject.

If this is the case, then Clare's wish for an end to this peepshow is, strictly speaking, impossible. Both returning to the threshing flail and escaping behind the veil of a “neglected rhymers” only exacerbate the logic of the marketing device that inspired the knocks at his door and glances through his window.⁴⁷⁵ Obscurity offers no solace when obstacles of vision act as the very incitement to looking. Clare must have known this better than anyone. Yet some material comes to fill this breach and enables the poet to earnestly express an impossible desire for an obscurity somehow at odds with the obscurity defining him. What motivates Clare here is recourse to a specific fantasy that occupies even his earliest poetry.⁴⁷⁶ This fantasy fuels itself not on the hope for escape, privacy, or seclusion *per se*, but on a desire to consciously repeat the very allure that enticed spectacle-seekers to his window. Simply, Clare wishes to enjoy the same opaque voyeurism, the boundless peeping enjoyment pursued by the intrusive eyes peeking at him by fully identifying with the gaze itself. Clare's peepshow poetics thrive on just this fantasy, accelerating the contradictions that inform both the mobile perspective box and the stereoscopies of peasant poetry: offering a *public* spectacle propped up in the village green allowing an escape into a *private* mode of seeing that opens onto a *public* realist aesthetics, a world of synthetic fantasy defined entirely by its sheer proximity to authentic reality. It is difficult to imagine a better definition of the Clarean camera and the fantasy of Clare's poetics than just this way of looking: the practice of somehow seeing without being seen.

⁴⁷⁵ The double-bind of the peasant poet is here clearly exposed: a poet in the field and a field-worker at the desk.

⁴⁷⁶ As Todd McGowan (2007) notes, the role of fantasy is precisely this turn away from the impasse constructed by the subjects inclusion into the symbolic: “Fantasy is above all the creation of possibility out of impossibility” (24).

Requiem for a Prefatory Dream

If the peepshow (man) figures the framing device of peasant poetry, then John Taylor's preface to Clare's inaugural volume of constitutes the fullest articulation of this device. Following the pattern of peasant poetry begun with Stephen Duck, Taylor makes Clare legible to the public through an introduction organized and executed with the intentions of softening Clare's image and comforting a reading public potentially unnerved by the notion of a laborer leaving his work to write sonnets. He also draws on recent lyrical treatments of the working poor in framing Clare as a figure "who lived the sort of impoverished life of the fields that other poets could describe only through 'exterior', if sympathetic, observations."⁴⁷⁷ What lies for the reader between the covers of *Poetic Descriptions*, then, is an attractive kind of metapoetry punctuated by a metaleptical fiction in which Clare appears as both the subject of the writer crafting accurately evocative descriptions and the object of just this crafting – a conscious spectacle writing itself.

Beside the task of public relations, it is this balancing act that preoccupies Taylor in his introduction. Early on, he endorses the Promethean model of hard-won poetic labour, introducing Clare as destitute, friendless, and burdened by work and filial responsibility before all else. Yet, in the imposing wake of Burns (Clare's "prototype") and after the commercial success of Bloomfield, the familiar device of the peasant poet needs something more than hard work to attract an audience.⁴⁷⁸ Taylor thus touches up the Promethean model with hints of the newly established romantic pursuit of natural scenes and the "better soil" of regional dialect, encapsulated most succinctly in his description of Clare as "most thoroughly the Poet as well as the Child of

⁴⁷⁷ Simon Kövesi, "John Clare's Deaths: Poverty, Education, and Poetry," *New Essays on John Clare: Poetry, Culture, and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 150.

⁴⁷⁸ John Taylor, "Introduction," *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (Stamford: Taylor and Hessey, 1820), xxiv.

Nature."⁴⁷⁹ Wordsworth's debt to the language of rustic rhymers and the ensuing debate around dialect poetry go some way toward authorizing the poeticization of Northamptonshire vernacular.⁴⁸⁰ And in much the same way the supposed "greater simplicity" of rural life sanctioned the lyricization of the ballad, the inhospitable circumstances of Clare's social position come to constitute the source of otherwise hidden artistic potentials.⁴⁸¹

In other words, the mountainous "huge and mighty forms that do not live / Like living men" in Wordsworth's formative *Prelude* boat-stealing episode translates in Taylor's introduction into the sublime "deficiencies" working against Clare's early pursuit of poetry.⁴⁸² Where the challenge of these forms spurred the whirring imagination of the young Wordsworth, Clare's circumstances conduce towards a similar involution and become "the cause of many beauties - for though he must, of course, innovate, that he may succeed in his purpose, yet he does it according to that rational mode of production, by which all languages have been formed and perfected."⁴⁸³ On this last point, Taylor carefully and effectively tip-toes along the line of the dispute between Wordsworthian and Coleridgean aesthetics. As a "child of nature," Clare's non-prestige dialect verifies the truth of his representations through proximity to Wordsworth's "primary laws of our nature."⁴⁸⁴ But this local process of verification is also claimed to be entirely "rational," adhering to Coleridge's contention that, stripped of its idiomatic markers, rural language "will not differ from the logic of any other man common sense, however learned or refined he may be."⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁷⁹ Taylor, xix.

⁴⁸⁰ See Scott McEathron, "Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, and the Problem of Peasant Poetry," *Nineteenth Century Literature* 54 (1999), 1-26.

⁴⁸¹ William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 97.

⁴⁸² Taylor, xiv.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ Wordsworth, 97.

⁴⁸⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Chapter XVII," *Biographia Literaria*, in *The Major Works*, ed. H.J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 341.

Crossing wires between the romantic empiric-transcendental and the Promethean theft of fire while navigating the pitfalls and controversies of rustic verse, Taylor pictures Clare as a doubled figure who manages to do it all: working in an ur-language still forming silently but "rationally" as the "unwritten language of England" and innovating at the front of modern poetics.⁴⁸⁶

This latest in the modern line of peasant poets following Burns then takes on the mantle of the ultimate unlearnt craftsman, one who actively uses the newly acquired technology of writing to shape not merely from the language of poetic forebears but from the rudiments of both Wordsworthian nature and Coleridgean language itself. "Mingling words, as a painter mixes his colours," Clare's poetry apparently aligns with a pure (re)creation of nature "seen under certain influences of time, circumstance, and colour."⁴⁸⁷ Taylor even makes this pictorial-poetic combination explicit. After describing Clare's desire to capture and portray the "extreme pleasure from the varied hues, forms, and combinations in nature," he cites as justification for this tendency toward new images Wordsworth's novel observation on the lack of novel observation in poetry: "the Poetry of the period intervening between the publication of *Paradise Lost*, and the *Seasons*, does not contain a single new image of external nature."⁴⁸⁸ Yet, invoking the germ of natural genius from which both romanticism and peasant poetry took flower, Clare is somehow ignorant of this paucity, "happier in the presence of Nature than elsewhere" to record scenes through an unstudied *plein air* poetry no less relevant for its supposed dismissal of contemporary trends.⁴⁸⁹

Over the past two centuries, much work has been done to clear away the obfuscation of this advertising pulp and demystify the carefully designed ideological cover of both peasant and

⁴⁸⁶ Taylor, xvi.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, xix, xx.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, xx.

romantic poetry. But I would like to suggest in the spirit of a happy contradiction that, on the one hand, the first to begin this demythologizing work was Taylor himself and, on the other, that there is by that fact a hint of truth in the conditions of genius within which Taylor situates Clare. While stressing Clare's poverty, Taylor makes a concession unworthy of a second thought. The preface notes, as a simple matter of fact, that Clare "would not have been the poet that he is" without access to paper, since "without writing down his thoughts, he could not have evolved them from his mind."⁴⁹⁰

With this simple admission, below mentioning for any traditionally educated poet, Taylor unwittingly re-opens an ancient question which peasant poetry smuggles into modernity - indeed the question of writing itself, dramatized in Plato's description of the slave Meno demonstrating (somewhat in the mode of the unlettered rustic) an intimate and unwon knowledge of fundamental geometric laws. For Plato, Meno's unlearned yet mathematically accurate scratching in the sand furnished proof that the soul retains memories from beyond bodily death. But Taylor, in his emphasis on the singular temporal track or "evolution" of Clare's thoughts in writing, accentuates another possibility. The consequence is a subtle one, but Taylor here acknowledges that poetic genius, whatever its origin or essence, requires a certain material match in order to become visible. The genius of the poet could not be what it is without the pulp of paper.

In this brief statement safeguarded by reassurances of hardship, Taylor limns a theory of the exteriorization and manipulation of memory itself. Drawing from Meno's dialogue the political stakes of technological media, Bernard Stiegler writes that "however mutable it may be, the sand that receives this inscription can conserve the characteristics of the figure more durably than can the mind of the slave boy. Because the boy's mind is essentially fluid, his thoughts are constantly

⁴⁹⁰ Taylor, xii-xiii.

passing away and effacing themselves; in a word he is retentionally finite."⁴⁹¹ Taylor reiterates this same point of retentional finitude where he concludes how "a few detached songs or short passages might be, perhaps, treasured in memory of his companions for a short period, but they would soon perish."⁴⁹² He then quotes lines from Clare's "Dawnings of Genius" to reinforce the importance of literal inscription for the making of this retentionally-finite poet, who

feels enraptur'd though he knows not why;
and hums and mutters o'er his joys in vain,
and dwells on something which he can't explain
The bursts of thought, with which his soul's perplex'd,
are bred one moment, and are gone the next⁴⁹³

Hints of self-rustication in the "hums" and "mutters" of a prelingual confusion play directly into the narrative Taylor constructs. Yet these admissions also posit the purpose of paper in their supposition of a break or gap between Clare's mind unleashing "bursts of thought" and the spectatorial soul perplexed by this display. In citing these lines as proof of Clare's reduced circumstances, what makes him unique, Taylor ends up articulating a universal condition that builds a recurrent though understated pattern in the tradition of peasant poetry. Like Meno's sandy geometry, Clare's access to paper is "indispensable... to his passage to action... it constitutes a crutch to understanding, a space of intuition."⁴⁹⁴ This space cannot be separated in any facile way from its content, since it is responsible, in Taylor's words, for the "evolution" of poetic thought itself, a development resting on the supposition of material practice, trial, and error unfit for the discourse of unlearned genius but propping it up from the inside.

⁴⁹¹ Bernard Stiegler, "Memory," *Critical Terms for Media Studies* ed. W.J.T Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 74.

⁴⁹² Taylor, xiii.

⁴⁹³ John Clare, "Dawnings of Genius," *Poems Descriptive*, ll. 32-36.

⁴⁹⁴ Stiegler, "Memory," 74.

Clare's paper poetry thus evinces the impossibility of "the opposition between the intelligible and the sensible, between logos and technē" on which the notion of genius rests.⁴⁹⁵ In fact, the excerpt from "Dawnings of Genius" thematizes this very impossibility in portraying a poet who revels in recording and replaying through the technique of writing the absent scene of recording and replaying itself, always teetering at the threshold of forgetting and playing with the evanescent appearance of blazing "bursts of thought." The lines immediately following Taylor's selection instantiate this dynamic in a fleetingly vivid recreation of a distinct image:

Yet still the heart will kindling sparks retain,
 And thoughts will rise, and Fancy strive again.
 So I have mark'd the dying ember's light,
 When on the hearth it fainted from my sight,
 With glimmering glow oft redden up again,
 And sparks crack'd brightening into life, in vain;
 Still lingering out its kindling hope to rise,
 Till faint, and fainting, the last twinkle dies.⁴⁹⁶

Clare makes use of the well-worn metaphor that entwines heart and hearth to evoke the creative act, but the descriptive image that succeeds this metaphor and returns the reader to the reportage of a concrete episode betrays an impatient fidget, peaking past the curtain in form before appearing fully in content. A metaleptical breach between descriptive modes finds the narrated world of the poetic "I" leeching into the cliché of the still presumably abstract "kindling sparks" retained by a heart that until this point in the poem had been reserved for a neutral third person.

As a result, although supposedly framed by the temporal division introduced by "so," the poet's singular entrance gives itself over to a kind of recursive diffusion that infinitely recalls the scene of recalling itself at the very moment it appears to mark a determinable scene interested in mimetically tracing the death of the ember. The phrase "So I have mark'd" then marks just this

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ Clare, "Dawnings of Genius," ll. 37-44.

scene of diffusion, at once extending into the declarative, reflective, and figurative. The dimming ember reignites into a conflagration, drawing itself to the succeeding description of the external “glimmering glow”, the preceding figuration of an internal yet abstract kindling heart, and Clare himself seeing himself, replaying the time of writing, “marking” this exact image in his own mind on and with the paper entrusted with the task of replaying the mark setting off this spark.

If the actions of the poet in this act of inscription bear any resemblance to Kant’s thesis on the creative act in general and Clare “owe[s] a product to his genius,” “Dawnings of Genius” inverts the result into a “product” in the more quotidian sense: the gift-structure of an independent faculty materializes in a commodity produced from natural matter - a paper genius.⁴⁹⁷ In a preface meant to sanitize and market the next peasant poet as someone who has escaped the limitations of their class through a mix of genius, humility, and industry, Taylor ends up doing quite the opposite. He unknowingly leaves pieces of a counternarrative from Clare’s own pen that present the poet as a figure irrevocably stuck in the conditions of an “active passivity and passive activity” opened by the mnemo-technologies of poetic paper and paper-based poetry.⁴⁹⁸

The complex threading of “Dawnings of Genius” makes this condition explicit by leaning so heavily on the theme of creative fire, that first mythological technology, that mediates between external observation and internal sentiment. But it becomes clear from Clare’s biographic and poetic engagement with paper that the content of *Poems Descriptive* emerges not from the flaming passions of Promethean acquisition or diligent craft, but from a place of loss and forgetfulness, a

⁴⁹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 187.

⁴⁹⁸ Michael Haworth, “Genius Is What Happens: Derrida and Kant on Genius, Rule-Following and the Event” in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 54 (2014), 334.

perpetual deficiency well-captured by the elongation of that each time singular and self-referential “dawning” into the plural progressive, those “Dawnings” that never quite light up their object.⁴⁹⁹

As much as the medium of paper conditions this pattern of writing so as not to forget, it also goes some way toward explaining a wider tendency toward mimicry, projection, and repetition in the later work of the Northamptonshire peasant poet.⁵⁰⁰ If Clare needs paper not simply, like all poets, to write poetry but, in a more radical sense, to both demonstrate and avoid forgetting that he, as a laboring poet, is defined by the “evolution” of memory paper provides, then, at discrete level, what he commits to this paper derives first from a desire to recreate those things made apparent to him as subjects worthy of poetic capture.⁵⁰¹ What creates the spur to creation is the very question that Taylor introduces in plumbing Clare’s finite origins and constant flux of thoughts and observations. Clare’s dying poetic fire, “as the emblem common to technics and desire, constitutes and necessitates a dual logic of the necessary default,” both the Freudian “perfecting of organs” and the Lacanian logic of a lack that is “*precisely not a mere lack*, but on the contrary *necessary*.”⁵⁰² The drama Clare poeticizes then aligns with the contours of this more basic condition of the retentionally-finite being, an entity whose memory is both deferred and perfected by the recording capacity of paper as a material marker and remnant of a necessary default.

⁴⁹⁹ In this sense, “Dawnings of Genius” preserves a “politicized reading which [Clare’s patron, Lord] Radstock had given it.” (Ward, 2015, 196) The politics of this reading, however, skirt around those “close thematic and tonal parallels between Clare’s protests about inequalities in the countryside and the discourse of contemporary.” (197) Instead, if there is a subversive politics in the poem, it can only be seen through the formal aporia available in the conditions of genius with which the peasant poet contends, the very desire to act beyond their station that made space for any explicit radical sentiment.

⁵⁰⁰ As Theresa M. Kelley (1998) notes, Clare “poaches on the linguistic property of others in ways that figure anew Romanticism’s borders not as term limits but as the places where raids occur, where excess yields its double effect of transgression and demotic vitality...” (166).

⁵⁰¹ Needless to say, this complicates the received opinion that Clare’s poetry was entirely his own, his vision unparalleled, or, in Timothy Brownlow’s words, that “there is no poet with whom Clare can be compared” (7).

⁵⁰² Bernard Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 24.

Pulp Fictions and Romantic Reading

Episodes that reframe external experience as internal discovery color the pages of Clare's own (incomplete) autobiography, a document which recounts his earliest acquaintances not only with poetry, but all those other recorded memories taking the form of media technologies found and lost through the intermittent encounters he relates.⁵⁰³ Among these, James Thomson's *The Seasons* has taken pride of place in Clare scholarship.⁵⁰⁴ Despite nearing its centenary at the time Clare found it, Thomson's four-part locodescriptive poem thematizing the progression from spring to winter had come to epitomize the genre, offering vivid detail, natural imagery, and a celebration of every level of the Great Chain of Being, from fish swimming in ponds to the circular mechanics of the cosmos. Snippets of this visual surplus came to Clare after a traveling weaver lent him a used volume of *The Seasons* in poor condition. Clare reported that although he "knew nothing of blank verse nor rhyme either otherwise than by the trash of Ballad singers," the "sensations in reading the opening of Spring" left their mark on his mind and made his "heart twitter with joy."⁵⁰⁵

This pleasure of Clare's first reading of *The Seasons*, however, was interrupted by the shabby state of his borrowed copy, with entire sections of "such a fine poem" missing as a result of the carelessness of its Methodist owner who stated his preference for "Wesley's hymns as a rival of excellence."⁵⁰⁶ While Clare relates how he was afterwards determined to purchase his own copy, he avoids commenting on what exactly led to such a commitment. Certainly, to some degree,

⁵⁰³ An entire history of Clare and his poetry waits to be written on the basis of these media technologies, beyond the valuable work that has already been undertaken to clarify the influence of oral and folk traditions in his writing. There is a pressing sense in which even those objects apparently foreign and inimical to daily village life deserve similar treatment. If it is possible to know Clare in any reasonable sense, it must also be through the geometry textbook, the maypole, the embroidered handkerchief of Chatterton, the camera obscura, the violin, raucous tavern intoning, the novels of Defoe, and, as this chapter attempts, the peepshow.

⁵⁰⁴ Indeed, the lines running from Thomson to Clare expounded by John Barrell in *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place* (1973) help to launch modern Clare studies, framing its central motifs of enclosure and locality.

⁵⁰⁵ John Clare, *John Clare's Autobiographical Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 9.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

the enigmatic content of that partial reading was heightened into relief by a confluence of limits: the obstacle of unknown words, the maze of intricate poetic technique, the frustration of missing free time to puzzle through these questions, and, especially without easy remedy, the illegibility plaguing entire pages because of a zealous neglect of these natural-poetic beauties.⁵⁰⁷ After sneaking away from work before sunrise with a bribe that kept his accomplices silent, Clare made the trek to a bookseller miles away in Stamford to purchase his own copy. His first experience as a proprietor of Thomson is marked by isolation and shifting boundaries between reality and fiction:

On my return the Sun got up and it was a beautiful morning and as I did not like to let any body see me reading on the road of a working day I clumb over the wall into Burghly Park and nestled in a lawn at the wall side The Scenery around me was uncommonly beautiful at that time of the year and what with reading the book and beholding the beautys of artful nature in the park I got into a strain of descriptive rhyming on my journey home this was the 'morning walk' the first thing I committed to paper.⁵⁰⁸

Eager to experience the unique vision provided by Thomson's descriptive verse but reluctant to be seen practicing this kind of seeing, Clare tries his best to avoid detection by retreating to the same formally-enclosed space from which Thomson had written his most successful work - in fact, the "topographical equivalent to the pictorial landscapes described" in *The Seasons*.⁵⁰⁹ His choice appears to suggest, at first glance, that Clare fully invests in the tradition of loco-descriptive eighteenth-century poetry that Thomson had come to epitomize. Supernaturally precocious, his

⁵⁰⁷ It is worth noting in brief the extent to which the entire formal structure of much of Clare's poetry most consciously celebrated by ecocritical work is available here in a state outside of "nature" - indeed in a medium of tree pulp and calf skin constituted by its physical disruption and poetic recreation. Clare's concern for out-of-the-way or neglected scenes of fen and furrow, his sense of superior taste over that of the rustic "clown," his revelry in applying words that he must have known would be unfamiliar to any audience outside the East Midlands, the often-inscrutable practices of animal life, all of these exist in the early reading experiences made available by the literary visual technology of *The Seasons*.

⁵⁰⁸ Clare, *Autobiographical Writings*, 10.

⁵⁰⁹ John Goodridge and Kelsey Thornton, "John Clare: The Trespasser," *John Clare in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 91. While true for some sections of the poem, *The Seasons* is much more far-reaching in its topographical descriptions than the tailored "pictorial landscapes" popular from the eighteenth-century landscape tradition, drawing on, for instance, the extremities of a winter storm, deserts and savannahs, and involved (albeit flowery) descriptions of animal life and behavior.

delineation of the “beautys of artful nature” corresponds in a tasteful and orderly way to this exact expectation, a detached way of looking based on noticing the mutual reinforcement of art and nature found in the fabricated landscape.

Yet it must be remembered that Clare here composes his autobiographical sketches not from the perspective of the Clare who snuck into Burghley Park at the uncertain age of somewhere around thirteen, but the present published poet caught up in the desire to remember that same first meeting roughly fifteen years later. If this re-enacted memory demands “we must think of Clare in terms of eighteenth-century poetic traditions at this stage of his career,” then the image Clare remembers is entirely sapped of its interest, becoming merely a way for the present Clare to advance his first poetic experience in the prestigious light of a gifted aesthete.⁵¹⁰ If it is assumed the autobiographical Clare is not outright inventing, how could someone who had only read *The Seasons* in fragments assume so exacting an aesthetic posture as to notice a symmetry between the art of a landscaped park and the artful language of Thomson’s landscape poem? In place of a literary periodic conceptualization of Clare’s entry into poetry, it makes sense instead to substitute an historical media-technical one based not on the trained literary habit of noticing the similarity between the art of text and the art of landscape after the fact, but rather on a mode of reading in the moment that works by recreating objects within the mind’s eye, tinging their referents out there in external reality with a certain imagistic spirit.

That is, in an often-unremarked sense, Clare uses an eighteenth-century semiotics derived from Thomson to disguise his experience as the paradigmatic romantic reader, conjuring hallucinogenic images that come to map over and morph the phenomenal reality hovering beyond the surface of the page. Training in this method of making poetic reality from evocative strains of

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

fiction had already been well-inculcated by folk ballads, ghost stories, and supernatural tales. Long before *The Seasons* exerted its influence, Clare recalls the creeping draw of “haunted Spots” passed during walks, hollows and thickets overdetermined by macabre stories circulating in the village.⁵¹¹ The response to these threatening pieces of fantasy anticipates and reinforces Clare’s interaction with the beauty of Burghley Park: “on these journeys I muttered over tales of my own fancy and contriving into rhymes as well as my abilities was able; they was always romantic wanderings of Sailors, Sol[d]iers etc, following them step by step from their starting out to their return.”⁵¹² The poet fights fantasy with fantasy, beating back encroaching dread with the reverie of romance. While episodes such as these highlight the difficulty in parsing Clare’s “imaginative productions from the antecedent texts which he reads so avidly,” they also show how the local, natural, and close are irreparably infected by a screen of fantasy and the itch of rhyme.⁵¹³

In essence, by virtue of seclusion, a desire to remain visually undetected yet aesthetically productive with his newly-acquired volume, and a well-rehearsed predilection for superstition, Clare stumbles upon “the historically acquired ability to follow not letter sequences as such, but rather letter sequences as imaginative image sequences.”⁵¹⁴ This literate style of imaging, according to Friedrich Kittler, posed itself in a long and fraught competition with technogenic sources of pictorial encoding in an “image war” that traces its origins back to the Counter Reformation’s deployment of “the *camera obscura*, *lanterna magica*, and peepshow” to keep alive an anti-protestant ethic.⁵¹⁵ The publication date of Clare’s *Poems Descriptive* even fits the bill here

⁵¹¹ Clare, *Autobiographical Writings*, 8.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*

⁵¹³ Paul Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 21. It is also interesting to note here the resonance between Clare’s defensive romantic rhyming and the ecstatic episode of *The Prelude* in which a young Wordsworth catches sight of “a sparkling patch of diamond light” in the distance and reimagines it as the sheen of a shield overlaying the ancient tomb of a knight.

⁵¹⁴ Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 108.

⁵¹⁵ Kittler, 42.

as a watershed in Kittler's historiography on the hallucinatory technology of romantic text: "Around 1820, the only remaining alternatives [in this war] were either to perfect or technologize this magic."⁵¹⁶ Perfection followed the lines of an intensification of the pictorial language of romantic writing, effectively creating an unimpeachable relay between writer and reader eager to lose themselves in images. Technologization, on the other hand, meant inventing a reliable storage channel capable of removing the sole deficiency of the romantic text in its reliance entirely on the skill, attention, and desire of the solitary reader.

What figures the romantic in this reading has less to do with the literary credos set by Wordsworth decades before Clare's autobiographical sketches and more to do with the pretension those poetic prefaces harbor toward fostering a poetry that searches for "a new rustic realism."⁵¹⁷ In a sense, Clare manages something analogous here, but by virtue of a unique confluence of factors. The breathless parataxis that horizontalizes text and observation in Clare's sketch, evident in the exasperated tone of "what with reading the book and beholding the beautys of artful nature..." should not divert attention from the fact that the choice of Burghley Park was more practical than aesthetic. As Clare relates it, the park itself posed only as a source of refuge and withdrawal, a tool more in line with an invisibility cloak than an echo chamber designed to test the ekphrasistic potential of *The Seasons*. Proving this practicality, the fullness of the fantasmatic vision quickly leaves the space of Burghley Park and extends to scenes and objects more intimate and open. Clare saunters away with his Thomsonian optics to write "several descriptions of Local Spots in the fields which I had frequented for Pootys, flowers, or nests in my early childhood."⁵¹⁸ Use of the dialect term "pooty" (the shell of a landsnail) captures in an instant the relation established here

⁵¹⁶ Kittler, 112.

⁵¹⁷ McEathron, 25.

⁵¹⁸ Clare, *Autobiographical Writings*, 10.

between the idiomatic characteristic of Clare's descriptive verse and the alienating lens that both drives and repels this process of versification: the pooty belongs to Clare as a childhood curio, a piece of linguistic integument in a way synonymous with "the real language of men," but the gaze, the view-finder that frames the attractive object as an object of desire, decidedly belongs to the optical technology of Thomson.⁵¹⁹

The autobiographical Clare is quick to privatize the use of his newly-acquired Thomsonian vision, equipping it with the add-ons of "a shattered copy of 'Miltons Paradise lost,' 'Wards mathematics,' Fishers 'Young mans companion,' 'Robin Hoods Garland,' 'Bonnycastles Mensuration,' and 'Algebra,' 'Fennings Arithmetic,' 'Death of Abel'..." along with some hymns and sermons.⁵²⁰ Experiments with this proprietary optics lead the poet toward a certain pride in his ability to distinguish the emblems of nature, a self-awarded distinction appearing throughout Clare's autobiographical writings. An early passage reflects this tendency toward self-aggrandizement where Clare criticizes his classmates' fumbling with "compasses at ovals, triangles, Squares etc..."⁵²¹ The fledgling poet dismisses the unoriginality of these geometric exercises and expresses a distaste for those "walking in the track of others and copying and dinging at things that had been found out some hundreds of years ago" despite his emotional attachments to a book of poetry almost a century old.⁵²² Incensed by the stale scent of tricks limited to the classroom, Clare tells the reader how he preferred at this time in his life another kind of indexing:

⁵¹⁹ Such a reading of Clare's situation might appear tenuous, but I am far from the first to advance it. Brownlow applies a similar argument to Clare by placing him within a romantic poetics organized by the "mechanics of vision during the eighteenth century (11). My contention is that the proximity of Clare's vision is not an aberration but a direct product of his solitary and projective romantic reading practices and that these extend *throughout* his work.

⁵²⁰ Clare here exemplifies the work of a "media laborer" who uses media to achieve a "process of self-actualization... [and] constructs particular kinds of identities in society." See Vicki Mayer, "Labour" in *Keywords for Media Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 15.

⁵²¹ Clare, *Autobiographical Writings*, 14.

⁵²² *Ibid.*

When I happend with them in my sunday Walks I often try'd their taste by pointing out some striking beauty in a wild flower or object in the surrounding senery to which they would seldom make an answer, and if they did twas such as 'they could see nothing worth looking at' turning carless to reasume their old discourse and laughing at my 'droll fancies' as they would call them I often wondered that, while I was peeping about and finding such quantitys of pleasing things to stop and pause over, another should pass me as carless as if he was blind.... I surely had a taste peculially by myself... (14)

Vital to emphasize here, first, is the mobility of Clare's literary vision, peeping to notice the proximate ("wild flower") and telescoping to notice the distant ("senery") alongside his friends, a pattern evocative of Thomson's social wanderer who loves to "converse / With Nature; there to harmonize his Heart / and in a pathetic Song to breathe around / the Harmony to others. Social Friends, / Attun'd to happy Unison of Soul; / To whose exalting Eye a fairer World, / of which the Vulgar never had a Glimpse, / Displays its Charms..."⁵²³ The second point to notice here is that Clare's musings about the peculiarity of his taste are both accurate and misplaced. He focuses on these objects not for their intrinsic merits, but to verify the pretense that Thomson's gaze belongs to him as an innate privilege. This is exactly the fantasy motivating the gaze of the other. As Thomas Pfau writes, "Thomson's 'Eye' not only furnishes representations of empirical matter... but imposes an inherently figural (nonmimetic) depth structure of valuations, a submerged grid of half-conscious functions by means of which empirical matter can coalesce into a coherent system in the first place."⁵²⁴ Clare's tasteless companions, however, are much more discerning when it

⁵²³ James Thomson, "Summer," *Poetical Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), ll. 382-9.

⁵²⁴ Thomas Pfau, *Wordsworth's Profession: Form, Class, and the Logic of Early Romantic Cultural Production* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 56. Pfau's insistence that eighteenth century locodescriptive poetics, energized by its medial cousin in the form of picturesque typology, constituted a "fantasy of collective mobility" (50) used to paper over the socio-economic precarity of the newly ascendent middle-class, while undoubtedly accurate, neglects the possibility that there existed subjects capable, even desirous, of "traversing" this fantasy, finding in it not simply the mask familiar in traditional ideology critique, but a glimpse of the real that can *only* be seen through a negotiation with the constitutive nature of fantasy itself. I believe Clare provides an instance of just this subject, one who mobilizes "the subject's alienation from its world, its capacity not just to suffer from contradiction" and thus use fantasy as an anesthetic, but who "enact[s]" contradiction itself. See McGowan (2007), 77.

comes to the nature of this “depth structure” or “submerged grid.” In fact, they immediately pin it for what it really is: pure fantasy, the defensive mechanisms of ‘droll fancies’ let loose on a world that has, in their minds, no need for such things.

By tethering the visual technology of print media to natural objects and phenomena, these fancies operate along the lines of what André Nusselder refers to as a medial “interface fantasy,” an imaginary yet inexorable virtual screen produced through the use of media technologies that transform the nullity of “nothing worth looking at” into that which lends a fullness and coherence to looking itself. Following Lacan, Nusselder presents the imaginary as what negotiates between the unknowable real, the place of break down, failure, and lapses in meaning, and the symbolic, the place of incomplete and recursive signifying chains whose consistency is guaranteed by an abstract authority. But fantasy in this account, far from disembodied whimsy, aligns much more with Kittler’s discussion of romantic reading, becoming grounded in a technological materiality that “functions as an interface between human [symbolic] and world [real].”⁵²⁵ At least two options emerge from this state of intermediacy: the imaginary screen provided by fantasy offers either “the pivotal support of a desirable reality” or it acts as “a bait that lures us into a trap and leads us to delusion.”⁵²⁶ However, in order to achieve the former possibility and avoid slipping into delusion, fantasy must always keep in touch with the real.

⁵²⁵ André Nusselder, *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 87.

⁵²⁶ Nusselder, 124. This is a trenchant binary in the context of Clare’s biography, especially after his being admitted to the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum in 1837, an incarceration during which his identity-based delusions are well known. I submit the importance of this fantasy screen in Clare’s autobiography and poetry not to engage in what Jonathan Bate (2003) has rightly described as “dubious” “posthumous psychiatric diagnosis,” but rather as a way to emphasize that fantasy is anything but a byword for the pathology that too often overdetermines the life and work of the Northamptonshire peasant poet. If psychoanalysis offers any benefit to Clare studies, it is in this very reversal of a critical commonplace: Clare is at his most “real” and “authentic” less in the unabated naturalistic recording that tinges his animal poems and more in what so effectively resists this kind of easy theorizing: his lifelong illnesses and hardships, the places where meaning lapses and the ineffable inheres as a breakdown in sense. Thus “fantasy” cannot and should not be confined to his period of confinement any more than “reality” should become the sole territory of an ecologically exacting “evergreen” language.

Clare continued to envision this desire for reality based on fantasy in “Pastoral Poesy,” a poem included in the unpublished *Midsummer Cushion* (1832) which celebrates the visual technology of verse from its first lines: “True poesy is not in words / but images that thoughts express... Mere books would be but useless things / Where none had taste or mind to read / Like unknown lands where beauty springs / And none are there to heed.”⁵²⁷ In the early work of *Poems Descriptive*, however, this touch of the real in fantasy takes shape in two types of poems: those which exhibit the pretension to offer a progressive series of images and those which narrow the reader’s eye to a single phenomenon or object. The dynamic here immediately recalls the presence-in-absence of the peepshow man who subtends the artful mechanic illusions taking place inside the perspective box. In a similar way, the imaginary surfeit and visual excess of these poems keep the fantasy which seized Clare at Burghley Park and with which he teases his fellow strollers on their Sunday walks in check by inviting continual reference to the limitations and remnants of the peasant poet archetype, the social situation that makes such fancies inappropriate or “droll.”

Notable in the first instance of progressive imagery is the poem “Summer Evening” both for its formal divergence from other poems in the volume and for its repetitive, fragmented scenes accelerating the central conceit of locodescriptive verse. This acceleration functions, first, by pressurizing the topical space of the Thomsonian stanza, reducing subjects in the opening of the poem down to the level of tightly compacted couplets or tercets that reverberate with their own internal phonetics:

The sinking sun is taking leave,
And sweetly gilds the edge of Eve,
While huddling clouds of purple dye,
Gloomy hang the western sky.
Crows crowd croaking over head,

⁵²⁷ John Clare, “Pastoral Poesy,” *I Am: Selected Poetry of John Clare*. ed. Jonathan Bate (New York: FSG, 2003), ll. 1-2;5-8.

Hastening to the woods to bed.
 Cooing sits the lonely dove.
 Calling home her absent love.
 With '* Kirchup! kirchup !' 'mong the wheats.
 Partridge distant partridge greets ;
 Beckoning hints to those that roam,
 That guide the squander'd covey home.
 Swallows check their winding flight.
 And twittering on the chimney light.
 Round the pond the martins flirt.
 Their snowy breasts bedaub'd with dirt,
 While the mason, 'neath the slates,
 Each moitar-bearing bird awaits :
 By art untaught, each labouring spouse
 Curious daubs his hanging house.
 Bats flit by in hood and cowl ;
 Through the barn-hole pops the owl ;
 From the hedge, in drowsy hum,
 Heedless buzzing beetles bum,
 Haunting every bushy place,
 Flopping in the labourer's face. (ll.1-26)

Each image is conscripted to its subject, boxed within a vignette structure accentuated by the alliteration of initial phonemes (“sinking sun” / sweetly”, “huddling clouds /hang”, “Crows crowd croaking”, “Cooing sits the lonely dove/Calling/With “Kirchup! Kirchup!”, “Swallows check /on the chimney”). As John Goodridge notes, the final lines of this excerpt exhibit a flourish centered on the same technique, revolving around “the start of an exuberant five-line exercise of using variant ‘h’ and ‘b’-led words to mark the sounds of bats, owls, and beetles.”⁵²⁸ However much these elements of Clare’s descriptive style are designed to replicate the sound or movement of animal life, the regular episodic compilation of single beasts performing highly-condensed actions impresses a distinct clock-work pattern. Figures and backgrounds repeatedly swap, objects enter and exit at regular sealed intervals. Alliteration merely provides a tuneful accompaniment to these

⁵²⁸ John Goodridge, *John Clare and Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 47.

revolving storybook displays, insisting on a tight match between sound and image, coming to resemble the pins of a music box cylinder strumming the prongs of metal on an irregular but predefined track. The human at the end of this proliferating field of images then poses as a sympathetic figure, obstructed and distracted by the images “flopping” around them.

The result of these effects aligns with the mechanical illusions present in the peepshow: objects shrink, form becomes streamlined, time homogenizes, images cycle one after the other, music lends non-diegetic composure, and a shifting panopticism assumes center stage. Compare, for example, the opening of “Summer Evening” with Kittler’s brief description of the peepshow:

For a modest fee, people were permitted to look into the box, just as people later looked into the kinoscope, the immediate precursor to our cinema, and they were rewarded with images that could be mechanically wound one after the other. Refined models even contained a miniature stage on which scenery and the dramatic figures could each be moved separately so that a rudimentary narrative was allowed to develop. And when the peep show cabinets ran at the same speed as a mechanical music box, all that was missing was a technogenic process of storing images and it would have anticipated Edison’s kinoscope.⁵²⁹

Even the artificiality of the perspective box finds a correlate in Clare’s clichéd opening meditations on the sun. In “Summer Evening,” the well-known beams, rays, and solar showers of *The Seasons* function to arrange not simply the temporal setting of the poem, but also the forced perspective necessary to frame and place the following rapid sequence of images, lending them the sense of a consistent singular ground. It is this grounding, rather the eye of a presumed narrator, that gives the impression of the poem “presenting a series of perceptions along a walk in from the fields to the village.”⁵³⁰ But the images that pop up, one after the other, in so quick, compact, and bracketed a way, begin to lull the eye and ear into a trance focused on an anti-narratorial play of moving

⁵²⁹ Kittler, 81.

⁵³⁰ Scott Hess, *William Wordsworth the Ecology of Authorship* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 33.

images. If this is a walk, it is an oddly claustrophobic one. It is certainly the case here that, as Scott Hess notes, a visual multiplicity presents itself at odds with picturesque tradition, with the latter's preference for subject-object division, stationary viewpoints, and elevated observation. But if Clare "presents an environment whose boundaries remain fluid and provisional, shifting around him as he moves through it," none of this means *he* is the one moving, nor does it necessarily indicate any special abilities towards affective, even ontological proximity to nature.⁵³¹

In a word, if the sense prevails that Clare's view is "unframed," this is only because we are already in it. What better way to describe the phenomenology of "the immediate precursor to our cinema" than the "immediate and ongoing relationships" made possible by the coupling of the viewfinder and the eye, the light of the lens and the flight of the swallow, bat, and owl? The difficulty here becomes immediately legible, for example, when "the camera" substitutes just as well for "Clare" in the following sentence: "Nature, for Clare, is not elsewhere, but here, everywhere around us."⁵³² But the supposed immediacy of this "everywhere" only indicates the ever-present condition of an interface fantasy: for Clare, and for his readers, the peepshow has already begun. We, the viewer, have already started peering into the box and Clare, the poet, has already pulled the strings necessary to divert us. Unlike Thomson and other classic picturesque poets, Clare does not trace the ghostly lines of a distant scene projected onto a canvas through the inverted lens of a camera obscura. He simply has no need. Clare's machine is attached to his back. Where it goes, he goes. And where he looks, it looks.

⁵³¹ Ibid., 34.

⁵³² Ibid. 67.

Clare's Night of the Living Dead

The unbounded enjoyment gravitating around this procession of images cautions against understanding Clare's attachment to the machine of poetry as uncomplicated. Rather it points to a shared condition subsisting between peasant poetry and the fantasizing subject that places them on a single albeit distorted plane. Scott McEathron describes this condition where he writes that preceding the peasant poet archetype is a "certain romance in the idea of ruination" based on "a fall into obscurity as a sort of homecoming, a late return to authenticating poverty and suffering."⁵³³ Detours through poetry only work to defer the peasant poet's inevitable return to their obscure origins in poverty, labor, and illness (the same origins often at the heart of much rustic verse). Far from a somber *memento mori* designed to prod reflection and rectitude, however, this framing device doubled as both a marketing strategy and a thematic engine of unlearned rhyme. Drawing on the alluring obscurity of the village dead memorialized by Gray's *Elegy*, Mina Gorji notes how "editors, critics, and even sometimes the poets themselves colluded in the process of 'burying' the self-taught genius long before his or her actual death."⁵³⁴

What deserves careful attention here is an easily overlooked consequence of this difficult and morbid predestination. Subordination to an artificial discourse accentuated and filtered through by poetic death in a very nuanced sense already guarantees, indeed accomplishes, for Clare one goal of his emulation and repetition of Thomson. It makes Clare a poet of and for posterity. In other words, by joining prematurely and ineluctably the ranks of the rustic graveyard, Clare has become a poet beside himself in both senses of the phrase: without conscious control or intention

⁵³³ McEathron, 10.

⁵³⁴ Mina Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 37. Important to make clear is that such premature textual burial was not purely fictional: poverty, illness, and untimely ends blot the line of peasant poets from Duck, who died under uncertain circumstances popularly reported as suicide, to Bloomfield, who despite the unparalleled financial success of his first collection of poetry, died in penury only three years after Clare rose to fame.

and with the by-product of another self, an imago, or double who neatly fits but fails to concord entirely with the predetermined symbolic role of peasant poet. This dynamic of doubling carries with it the bittersweet consequence that Clare's absent future retroactively determines his present. The story of his life has already been overridden/overwritten by the cold hands of the village dead.

But this state of affairs, despite the singularity of its historical character, is not necessarily unique to the laboring poet. It can be seen without any loss of clarity in Roland Barthes' famous glance in *Camera Lucida* at the photograph of Lewis Payne imprisoned in his cell for the attempted assassination of the US Secretary of State in 1865:

the punctum is: he is going to die. I read at the same time: this will be and this has been. I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future.... Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe. (96)

What unites these two moments is the fact of technological recording itself, a process that for the peasant poet inevitably endorses a tragic self-writing woven into the very core of the generic expectations to produce accurate images, natural delineations of external objects, sights of a nature the laborer sees and cannot avoid having seen by virtue of their rural lot. Here, then, is the final click of the Clarean camera, one that cannot and should not be dismissed as a simple repetition of the poet-turned-aeolian harp. The wind comes and goes. As an invisible impulse producing visible strains, it has less in its way toward achieving the disembodied transcendence that is the final prize of posterity. The rustic poet, despite contemporary suggestions, is not a wind harp. As Clare and his historiography make apparent, peasant poetics produces its product along the lines of something more mechanical, more tactile; it gives a snapshot promising an entirely legible death.

The Clarean camera then offers up a paradox kept close to the heart of all technological media, one that comes to settle through a proleptic transplant into the body of Clare's poetics. It is

this paradox of a “life beyond life” that Sara Guyer emphasizes as “the life of the peasant body whose ailments and sufferings cannot – will not – be arrested by the image of a grave and whose posthumous existence continues to be guaranteed not simply by the existence of so many pages of poetry, but by the recollection of the peasant body in its suffering, corrosion, and discontent, that is, a life as unremarkable as death.”⁵³⁵ What the camera ensures in material form is precisely this “recollection” of an unremarkable life-in-death, the anterior-future of the everyday made accessible to sight in the “absolute past of the pose.” In other words, the camera is that which sees to it that “the actor’s body is conflated with the character’s; where the film’s passing is also necessarily the actor’s past. The moments of life of a character are instantly moments of the actor’s past.”⁵³⁶ It is impossible to assert, then, that Clare only “plays the part” of a peasant poet any more than an actor caught on film only “plays the part” of an action hero or serial killer. In the simple commonsense distinction between player and played, it is absolutely necessary to assert such a difference (if only to keep actors on set and out of prison). But this rationality obscures the distinct attraction that casts its sheen on the melding between fact and fantasy made possible by the cinematic apparatus, the punctum that draws people to the theater as it drew them to Clare’s cottage – indeed, what drew Clare to “play into” his role as a rustic genius.⁵³⁷

Faced with the prospect of his own mortality, Clare never ceased writing into and against the backdrop of peasant poetry, even after he entered the asylum. As much as it augured a painful end, it was precisely the anterior future held over the head of those caught under the frame of unlearned poetry that spurred Clare to continue to pursue a place already preordained. What requires further thought is the way in which not simply assuming but endorsing the preformatted role of

⁵³⁵ Sara Guyer, *Reading with John Clare* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 39.

⁵³⁶ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 2* trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 22.

⁵³⁷ Gorji, 18-19.

peasant poet depends on an intensification of its own historical guarantee of posterity. To explain this, it is first necessary to consider the structure of peasant poetry as a discourse that couches within the lived familiarity of a social and geographic identity an unlived history anterior but nonetheless uncannily familiar to it.

This nesting of lived and unlived leads to a condition that bears a strong resemblance to the phenomenon of the extimate, a neologism coined by Lacan on the model of the “intimate” to signify that which is “strange to me, although it is at the heart of me,” a kind of “intimate exteriority.”⁵³⁸ While different laboring poets responded in contrasting ways to the extimate character of the discourse of peasant poetics, each must have recognized the degree to which pastoral, georgic, and locodescriptive motifs functioned through a (albeit sentimental) reproduction of experiences of rural life that was unavoidably their own.

This alien imposition from without that the subject nonetheless finds repeated at their innermost core, however, does not simply rhyme with the experience of a rural laborer adopting the position of a rustic rhymer. Like the death knell that rings from the belfry of unlearned verse, the condition of extimacy “stands for the dimension of ‘death drive,’ of a traumatic imbalance, a rooting out that renders man as such ‘nature sick unto death,’ derailed, run off the rails through fascination with a lethal Thing.”⁵³⁹ What the rustic eye and the rotating lens share is premised on a structure of seeing, which is also a structure of fantasy, fueled by this very drive toward fatality, the very attraction of the Thing that leads the viewer to certify that “this will be and this has been.”

But the telos implied in the term “drive,” like the prefatory “burying” of the poet, is entirely misleading. To make matters worse, the term “death” also misses the mark. And it is the very

⁵³⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 1959-1960 ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992) 71, 139.

⁵³⁹ Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek, *Subject Lessons* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 14.

confusion that often obscures the actual place and purpose of the death drive in psychoanalysis that also lends some explanation towards Clare's continual investment in playing up his debut as the newest unlearned genius despite the validity of his claim to the legacy of Burns, Chatterton, and Gray having been automatically sanctioned by *Poems Descriptive*. It also casts some light, dim but nonetheless revelatory, on the impulse motivating Clare's desire to record the creeping and crawling, flittering and fluttering world of animal life as his career continues.⁵⁴⁰

In order to expand on this conviction, it must be asserted that the premature burial of the peasant poet, like the death drive, "is decidedly not about destruction and death, it is a complex notion one needs to think if one wants to posit *affirmation* in terms different from those denounced by Nietzsche as those of an ass saying 'yes' (Yea-Yuh) all the time..."⁵⁴¹ Alenka Zupančič's reference here to the mindless consent of a braying ass is purposeful, since for her *trieb* or drive points to a space belonging to "neither (the) Animal nor simply (the) Human."⁵⁴² Rather, the being associated with the drive flounders at these characters or positive points of reference, "*the point where nature's own inherent impossibility, impasse, gets articulated as such.*"⁵⁴³ In this view, the human stands for the empty, symbolic formality of a punctuation mark that continually questions the very existence of the Animal which it is and yet most assuredly is not.

Such an ambivalent affirmation helps to explain the tension present in many of Clare's poems that circulates around the peasant poet label, endorsing yet denying it in equal measure.

⁵⁴⁰ While possible to explain each of these attributes as different ways to embrace the familiarity and locality threatened by the Enclosure Acts, I follow Guyer in thinking the sense of loss and displacement evident in Clare's work as a firstly a matter of catachresis, an error or failure that is also an "experience of poetry." (91) I believe this structure of discontinuity, one that "is and is not identical to a social condition," coheres in the extimate condition of the peasant poet as a necessarily fractured subjectivity, indeed a kind of subject that points through history to the error in subjectivity itself and thus is not entirely reducible to the networks and regimes of power that supposedly liquidate any notion of subjectivity.

⁵⁴¹ Zupančič, 111.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, 111.

Take, for instance, these lines from “Effusions to Poesy, On receiving a Damp from a Genteel Opinionist in Poetry, of Some Sway, as I am Told, in the Literary World,” included in *Poems*

Descriptive:

A poor, rude clown, and what of that?
 I cannot help the will of fate,
 A lowly clown although I be;
 Nor can I help it loving thee.
 Still must I love thee, sweetest charm!

The irony here is obvious and deeply ingrained in responses to the death warrant of rustic verse. Gorji pinpoints it where she notices how the vocabulary “registers a witty and self-conscious play with his own public image of unlettered genius.”⁵⁴⁴ As the artless clown, Clare taunts and pokes his audience with artful phrases, but, conspicuously, does not deny the tax of rustic verse. He faces up to the social imprecation casting him in the mold of the “rude clown” with a faceless acceptance teetering on the line between derision and identification. The “will of fate” clearly approaches this burden in the same breath it invites the potential of an ignominious death. These lines thus not only flex Clare’s skill in the legerdemain of artless art, but simultaneously deny and confirm his agency in the face of an obscure death. In the aporia between the personal and involuntary whimsy of “nor can I help it” and the tireless journey hidden behind the anonymous obligation of “still must I,” a peeping glimpse of the impasse Clare articulates comes to view.

But if the death drive of peasant poetry has little to do with reaching a goal or aim, then where does the finality of death go? Zupančič offers an answer to this question by noticing first how the death drive in Freud’s original formulation more closely resembles a scenic if strange detour away from death itself. Speculating about the origins of complex life, Freud writes:

⁵⁴⁴ Gorji, 24.

For a long time, perhaps, living substance was thus being constantly created afresh and dying, till decisive external influences altered in such a way as to oblige the still surviving substance to diverge ever more widely from its original course of life and to make ever more complicated *detours* before reaching its aim in death.⁵⁴⁵

From this, the conclusion follows that “there is nothing original or spontaneous in the affirmation and conservation of life.”⁵⁴⁶ To live is to simply accord with a series of brief pivots along the line of a “ever more widely” expanding circle of obstacles, mistakes, and impasses on the way back to inanimacy. As Zupančič phrases it, “life is a circuitous route to death, and conservative instincts are the pavement of this route, they are... indistinguishable from it. They don’t ‘want’ anything... they simply do their job of making this particular circuitous path to the inanimate operative.” (96) Pausing on this revamp of Freud alone presents a clear analogy to the condition of the peasant poet faced not simply with the universal of an eventual death, but a much more proximate and unsettling discovery: to be a peasant poet means to perform the impossibility of writing one’s own death, to write in and through a death that precedes and inheres in bodily life.

As Clare’s life makes clear, however, the life-in-death of poetry does more than simply repeat a series of detours. If this were the case, there would be no impulse to publish, revise, or even *think* of poetry. A mindless scribbling would suffice to postpone the slow encroachment of death. Freud’s solution to this nihilistic wound in his theory took the form of the libido or sexual drives. These initially emerged as a counterforce to the death drive, placing on the detours to death temporary breaks that “introduce an actual difference, produce something ‘new.’”⁵⁴⁷ But, as Zupančič notes, this was ultimately unsatisfactory for Freud. Positing the sexual drives in

⁵⁴⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 18 (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 39.

⁵⁴⁶ Zupančič, 96.

⁵⁴⁷ Zupančič, 99.

opposition to the death drive would only reinstate the originary denial of psychoanalysis and condone the existence of a positive life force, a vitalism, granting to humanity the hope of some purpose toward its fulfilment. In a final move, then, Freud empties the libido of all positive content by reducing the inherent contradiction of sexuality (the fact that it “repeats and reproduces the very split between life and death”) to the level of drive itself, arguing that *all drives are sexual drives*.⁵⁴⁸ Lacan’s later intervention on this score merely pointed out the knot Freud has produced: if the drive is a detour on the way to death, and all drives are sexual, then the libido is fundamentally bound to death as a constitutive negativity, an ever-present negative relief within the creative activities that Gorji evokes in marking the “process of burying” before death.

For Zupančič as for Clare, however, this process directs away from the dread of finality and toward a no less imposing and sobering affirmation. Infecting the love and desire that surrounds the poet’s acclimation to poetry, the death drive of unlettered verse submits to the laboring subject an inventory of “ways of returning to inorganic existence *other than those* which are immanent in the organism itself.”⁵⁴⁹ Similar to Stiegler’s assertion of the inseparability of *logos* and *technē*, a theory of memory derived from the non-vital functions here within the act of creation. Against reading Clare as poet apart from the burden of peasant poetry, then, it becomes possible to see that “there is only the death drive.”⁵⁵⁰ Importantly, however, this singularity of the death drive, like peasant poetry, “cannot be described in terms of destructive tendencies that want (us) to return to the inanimate, but precisely as constituting *alternative paths to death*... We could say: the death drive is what makes it possible for us to *die differently*.”⁵⁵¹ Hanging over the sentiment

⁵⁴⁸ Zupančič, 100-101.

⁵⁴⁹ Zupančič, 105.

⁵⁵⁰ Zupančič, 106.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*

of death, dislocation, and loss in the midst of Clare's desire to love poetry, the pall of peasant poetry stitches together the "nor can I help it" and the "still I must," giving rise to a way of using peasant poetry as a machine for dying differently under the shadow of a predetermined death. The *other than* of death then appears for Clare as it does for the peepshow man: the extimate cohabitation with the machine he constitutes and which, in turn, constitutes him.

The Clarean camera, then, substitutes as another name for the death drive, rolling reel after reel to make images worth finding and living out of that sinking equivalence that arrives with the apparatus of rustic verse. At stake in this making is so vividly preoccupies Clare's poetry: reality itself, understood as the soaring dips of the skylark, the rustling of the partridge, or the stubbly signs of the mole, all those minute comings and goings that preexisted Thomson and the early experience of poetry, but only took on a fuller meaning in the projective fantasy of a new technology of seeing. Clare's entry into the literary world through the screen of peasant poetry then produces a "different sort of being, an extimate object-in-subject whose existence insofar as it lies not only beyond the pleasure principle, but beyond the reality principle as well, rends reality, rendering it not-all, incomplete."⁵⁵² It is precisely this fundamental incompleteness of reality that the *not-yet* character of the Clarean camera endlessly repeats, a notion at total odds with the view that the camera flatly renders whatever occupies the perspective of the lens: the reality *presented* in Clare's poetry is not already there because the conceit of its very presentation is the most apparent mark that renders it incomplete. And that repetition repeats at the center of Clare's peepshow poetics in its function of momentarily capturing the impasse of peasant poetry, a way of showing that is also a way of dying differently, performance and escape.

⁵⁵² Russell Sbriglia, "Object-Disoriented Ontology; or, the Subject of What Is Sex?," in *Continental Thought & Theory*, 2 (2018), 49.

The Child of Nature with a Movie Camera

To exemplify this dynamic, I would like to return in closing to *Poems Descriptive* and this time to a poem charged on its surface with a kind of realistic documentary aesthetic both precise and emotive. As its title suggests, “Elegy on the Ruins of Pickworth, Rutlandshire, Hastily Composed, and Written with a Pencil on the Spot” establishes itself on the trope of drafting a poem in the immediate overabundant presence of its object. And yet the external locodescriptive focus to record that visual surplus is tempered by an eventual lyric turn inward through self-referentiality. With titles approaching the length of stanzas, the voluble precision introducing this subset of poetry hints that, as J Hillis Miller notes, “the most important aspect of these particular poems may be the act of writing them.”⁵⁵³ However, in Clare’s poem, that turn inward never fully closes on the world. I would like to suggest that balancing the act of self-reflective writing with a desire to provide specific images gives rise to a certain formal paradox that Jacques Rancière detects in the sinews of modern documentary filmmaking, particularly the work of Dziga Vertov (1896-1954). He describes this paradox as that which exists between the lifeless all-seeing eye of the camera and the desire of the filmmaker to capture the rapid mobility of life. In documentary cinema, “both the eyes of the camera and the camera man are omnipresent, but that omnipresence is also a continuous self-suppression.”⁵⁵⁴ What documentary hopes to capture through friendship with the machine is the same product that emerges in Clare’s elegy: a limited, contingent gesture toward an obscure universality performed through the sedimentation of contrasting forms and movements.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵³ J Hillis Miller, *Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016), 81.

⁵⁵⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Intervals of Cinema* (London: Verso, 2019), 38.

⁵⁵⁵ Mark Sandy (2016) notes how this formal mixture signifies a decisive element of “the elegiac voice of Romanticism” which “permeates numerous formal poetic models,” acting as a kind of agglutinative agent between them.

Before turning to the poem itself, it is worth noticing how Coleridge's definition of elegy in 1833 parallels Vertov's interest in the camera. For the poet philosopher, the reach of elegy is nearly infinite in that it "may treat of any subject, but it must treat of no subject for itself."⁵⁵⁶ A "regret for the past or desire for the future" prevents such insularity.⁵⁵⁷ The result combines to show that the object of the elegy is split, both "lost and future," inaccessibly there and then.⁵⁵⁸ For Vertov, documentary filmmaking enacts something similar. He writes that "the movie camera was invented in order to penetrate deeper into the visible world, to explore and record visual phenomena, so that we do not forget what happens and what the future must take into account."⁵⁵⁹ Both poet and filmmaker arrange their respective apparatuses around a boundless seeing interested in holding together the integument of time and memory. Based on this, the camera in general and the Clarean camera in particular amount to distinct yet related elegiac devices, tying together past and future through an absence necessitating a "deeper penetration" into things as they appear. Through "the exploration of the phenomena of life" the elegiac poet limns the method of Vertov in organizing a montage that arranges "film fragments" into a "film-object," a whole made from lost fragments and broken pieces.⁵⁶⁰

An archeological practice of montage also resides in Clare's recollection of the origins of "Elegy on the Ruins of Pickworth." He reports that the poem solidified "one Sunday morning, after I had been helping to dig the hole for a lime-kiln, where the many fragments of mortality and perished ruins inspired me with thoughts of other times, and warmed me into song."⁵⁶¹ The reportage-like title extends an immediate interest to these fragments through the first two lines.

⁵⁵⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Specimens of the Table Talk* (London: John Murray, 1851), 294.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁹ Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 67.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁶¹ Taylor, xvii.

There is little locodescriptive scene setting and no opportunity to tarry with how to frame the vision that opens before the reader:

These buried ruins, now in dust forgot,
 These heaps of stone the only remnants seen, —
 " The Old Foundations" still they call the spot,
 Which plainly tells inquiry what has been — (ll. 1-4)

The hastiness of composition alluded to in the subtitle blends impressionistically into the hastiness of the reader's eye reviewing the objects immediately before it. While the stock-and-trade of the elegiac mode appears immediately where Clare directs the reader's attention to images the loss of whose empirical referents repeats itself in fractured scenes of decay, Clare's elegiac machinery whirs a little too quickly to engender a sense of connection.⁵⁶² The demonstrative that points emphatically at "These buried ruins" and "these heaps of stones" apparently knows its object enough to hold them up to contemplative mourning, and yet, no sooner does that presentation occur than identification becomes impossible. An obtrusive placelessness comes to confuse this deictic exercise of pointing and looking. Where are we, really? The geographic certainty of Rutlandshire fails to offer much reassurance. The empirical claim that "these" objects of vision should attach to those visible at Pickworth loses its sharpness against the linguistic ambivalence of the objects themselves: in an impossible way, despite being forgotten in their origin or identity, the ruins are *seen* "buried" (partially or fully) below the dirt, amounting to anonymous "remnants" that never cohere around a specific architecture (a castle? A monastery? A town? Something else entirely?)

The objects of the demonstrative in these opening lines also take on an optic flatness that, like an image available in an instant, quite literally tells the entire story. The nondescript, almost redundant name of "Old Foundations" given to the ruins by an anonymous "they" "plainly tells

⁵⁶² The precipitous pace of this first stanza stands at odds, for example, with the opening of "Helpstone," that other, much more famous, elegy for a lost home that headlines *Poems Descriptive*.

what has been" as much as the ruins themselves. While this self-evidence might imply that "the flatness of the image crudely resists the depths of thought," it is rather that "the density specific to each [image and thought] makes it impossible to establish a simple relationship of cause and effect between them."⁵⁶³ The image of the ruins, then, appear to be telling their story, perhaps even eulogizing themselves. And so, when the first scene collapses into the last, apparently showing all there is to show, Clare makes it clear that his showing impinges on re-telling a tale quite pointedly rehearsed to death, not just from the decades of generic laments on ruins, but, following Gorji, from a turn that "questions his own fate" as a peasant poet destined for obscurity.⁵⁶⁴ In much the same way Taylor's preface portends his fate as rustic rhymer, Clare in these first few lines rouses an image of dereliction and rubble that says all there is to say.

But this image of rubble, like Clare himself, uses the apparent mute transparency of the image to produce an imaginative photoplay. If Clare equates in some sense with the ruins, both, to recall Zupančič, have found a way to die differently. The crank begins to turn and the name that "plainly tells" tells so plainly that the forceful visual impression offered by the placeless ruins opens onto a drama that is not *really* a fiction, one premised on a dichotomy subtly obscuring a present social hierarchy. An imaginative community rooted in the fragmented ruins shows itself straddling the gap between past and present:

A time was once, though now the nettle grows
 In triumph o'er each heap that swells the ground,
 When they, in buildings pil'd, a village rose,
 With here a cot, and there a garden crown'd.

And here while grandeur, with unequal share,
 Perhaps maintain'd its idleness and pride.
 Industry's cottage rose contented there,
 With scarce so much as wants of life supplied. (ll. 5-12)

⁵⁶³ Rancière, 13.

⁵⁶⁴ Gorji, 43.

"These" specific scenes, crowded and swollen in a "now," dissolve into an indefinite yet no less visually precise time premised on the division between "here a cot" and "there a garden crown'd," a split accentuated by the following stanza into near and far. Close to the reader's eye, what they see most clearly "here" is the spread of glamor and pomp, intimate in proximity but alienating in ostentation. In contrast, at a distance from these displays "of idleness and pride... "industrys cottage rose contented there" just off to the side or beyond the "here" of the viewer seeing this scene. While possible to read the surfeit of here's and there's in line with Brownlow as a sign of Clare's discomfort in the locodescriptive mode, the exact opposite conclusion also holds. An emphasis on pointing and locating corresponds just as well with "the mature Clare's purpose, which is to catch the animation and detail of nature without imprisoning it in the frame of conventional form."⁵⁶⁵ Indeed, the insistence to *see* the past in the present of material fragment filtered through poetic imagery exists here on a continuum with Clare's later, apparently less conventional poems.

If not locodescriptive clumsiness, what else can account for the structure of this deixis that maps the fantasy of a long-gone social difference onto a set of spatial coordinates relative to the reader? A possible answer presents itself in noticing how the poet's imagination works by force of sheer presentation, confidently asserting "A time once was" in a way that both evokes and contests the traditional fairytale preamble. Coupled with the "plainly telling" of the previous stanza, the suggestion seems to be that what the reader sees is less a hazy fictionalization than a vivid serial, narrated but real, filtering directly over the face of the ruins. This insistent reanimation of the past projected over the static ruins of the present builds toward a kind of fantasy that film would later screen via the projection of the recorded past over the silent silver screen. Paramount here is

⁵⁶⁵ Brownlow, 29.

the kind of fantasy that Clare projects, at once unflinchingly realistic and poignantly fabular. With this in mind, the fact that a social dichotomy emerges from this process is hardly surprising. As Todd McGowan notes, “the fantasy that we find in a film brings into public view aspects of our reality that remain invisible in our everyday experience.”⁵⁶⁶ It is through the staging of fantasy that film makes space for “political possibility,” understood not as a direct unmasking but a screening of the “traumatic excess” which an ideology cannot acknowledge but on which it nonetheless rests.⁵⁶⁷

Clare effects this phantasmatic politics by simultaneously figuring and disfiguring scenes of social conflict under the cover of religious tropes expected of a pious farm laborer. After staging the conflict between grandeur and industry, a move that risks arousing the passions of the reader, Clare, like a good showman, withdraws his hand and routes attention away from the drama, playing up the obscurity of the divine mechanism that could strike such a design into motion:

Mysterious cause! still more mysterious planned,
 (Although undoubtedly the will of Heaven:)
 To think what careless and unequal hand
 Metes out each portion that to man is given.
 While vain extravagance, for one alone,
 Claims half the land his grandeur to maintain;
 What thousands, not a rood to call their own,
 Like me but labour for support in vain? (ll. 13-20)

Pointing reflexively at both the deliberateness of the apostrophe and the mystery of divine will, Clare summons the "mysterious cause" that sets up this division between high and low while explaining it away as the "plann'd" "will of Heaven." The known-unknown of divinity that animates the drama of life, however, manifests in the figure of a disembodied and manipulating "unequal hand" that "metes out" property, a phrase that carries the senses of measurement,

⁵⁶⁶ McGowan, 33.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

boundedness, and physical and moral exaction. The common theme of enclosure seems close at hand. However, the line also calls to mind Clare's own hand, meting out the meter here in exacting iambic pentameter that, quite literally, gives a portion or shape to man. As Chirico notes, a healthy irony coats these lines.⁵⁶⁸ That Clare might indeed be pulling the strings of this show becomes apparent in the next stanza precisely where the poetic speaker appears predetermined in his allotment to industry. The "vain extravagance, for one alone" that greedily seizes "half the land" supposes "thousands" without "a rood to call their own," among whom Clare conspicuously inserts himself in a simile. But, by force of the ambiguity of the comparison, perhaps in the same way as Clare's unpoetic companions on his Sunday strolls, these "thousands" are also necessarily *unlike*. The self-insert doubles as a self-masking. "Support" describes parish relief just as well as it does the plight of the peasant poet whose desire to publish is limited to charitable subscription and whose desire to write is cast under the quiet vanity of a rustic genius poeticizing in vain.⁵⁶⁹

By collapsing the notions of a specific measure of land and the crucifix that supports the death and salvation of Christ, the term "rood" also creates a history that subtly imbricates biblical text and laboring reality, a pattern Clare would repeat in a middle period poem titled "The Peasant Poet" written after moving in 1837 to the High Beach Asylum in Epping Forest. In this later poem, the peasant poet tells how "He loved the brooks soft sound / The swallow swimming by / He loved the daisy covered ground / The cloud bedappled sky."⁵⁷⁰ Listing private loves, however, soon gives rise to book-based fantasy: "To him the dismal storm appeared / The very voice of God / And

⁵⁶⁸ Chirico, 93.

⁵⁶⁹ A few years before meeting Taylor and around the time of the composition of "Elegy on the Ruins of Pickworth", Clare had added his name to the parish pauper list after spending his lime-kiln wages on a prospectus titled "Proposals for Publishing by Subscriptions a Collection of Original Trifles on Miscellaneous Subjects, Religious and Moral, in Verse, by John Clare of Helpstone." See, Bate (2003), 111-113.

⁵⁷⁰ John Clare, "The Peasant Poet," *Major Works* ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), ll. 1-4.

where the Evening rock was reared / Stood Moses with his rod.”⁵⁷¹ The warping of empirical fact and textual observation takes a potentially heretical turn in the next line where “every thing” the poet’s “eyes surveyed / The insects I’ the brake / Where creatures God Almighty made / He loved them for his sake.”⁵⁷² By neglecting reverential capitalization and stressing in previous lines his own creative power, Clare leaves it uncertain for whose sake this love really emerges. “The Peasant Poet” then combines and streamlines many of the features already discussed: a fantastic projection of literary images onto natural scenes, a keen sense of desire subtending this projection, and an overriding pride in this ability.

In the more political verse of “Elegy on the Ruins of Pickworth,” however, Clare seems to narrativize the contours of biblical legend between Old and New testaments into an (a)historical drama between landlord and laborer, private and common land, peremptory possessor and salvific dispossessed. Contrary to the typical elegiac technique whereby the poet “remains obscure,” the division here immediately calls to mind Clare’s social position (to say nothing of the intrusive “like me”).⁵⁷³ Holy mysteries, quest for a rood, and the Passion play of peasant poet suffering combine to give a sense that divine measure conjugates the fatal destiny of the rustic rhymer with the redemptive mission of Christ, symbolically indissociable from the cross, that simple crafted form that guarantees both his suffering and redemption. Clare might be intimating, with a little *éclat*, that the “portion” allotted magisterially by heaven simultaneously deprives and privileges him as a Christ-like figure, (“A Peasant in his daily cares / A Poet in his joy”), fully peasant (man) and fully poet (god) on a mission to fulfill a covenant overdetermined by death.⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷¹ Clare, “The Peasant Poet,” ll. 5-8.

⁵⁷² Clare, “The Peasant Poet,” ll. 9-12.

⁵⁷³ Sarah Zimmerman, *Romanticism, Lyric, and History* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), 155.

⁵⁷⁴ Clare, “The Peasant Poet,” ll. 15-16.

By bringing this physically specific yet historically complicated fable to the reader's eye, the poet approximates Rancière's description of the early documentary filmmaker equipped with his machinic eye, reframed as "the magical apparatus operated by an invisible conjurer playing on a universal keyboard."⁵⁷⁵ Where "the conjuring filmmaker at first suggests the figure of the demigod engineer, intoxicated with speed and machines...", Clare in like manner seems to be intoxicated in his elegy by rapid writing, imaginative recreation, and the techniques of poetry.⁵⁷⁶ Reveling in the scopic spells of his machine, however, the documentarist ignores accepted divisions, failing to "distinguish between them by age or function. Work on a cigarette factory production line, the snapping of a shoeshine boy's rag, labour in the depths of a mine, the mechanism of a cash register... all caught up in one rhythm."⁵⁷⁷ After one final deictic division between "Here we see Luxury surfeit with excess" and "There Want, bewailing, beg from door to door," Clare's takes his elegy in the same direction pursued by Vertov's egalitarian eye.⁵⁷⁸ The poet trains his sight on the spot "where these brambles claim the ground" and finds there ghostly scenes of the everyday: a tavern where "The glass once flow'd to hail the rainting song," the mingling of drink and revelry "each hamlet's boast", and an advertisement to commerce in the form of a "the temping sign" alluring the "busy, bustling mortals now unknown."⁵⁷⁹

A frenzy ensues in the next stanzas as the imaginative vision of the poet is caught in a momentous cycle, an absolute horizontality of life and death that combines cannibalism, poetic measure, and an exchange of social positions. Near to where "grandeur / ...maintained its idleness and pride," the poet reframes the common scenes of tavern and community into places of equal, if

⁵⁷⁵ Rancière, 30.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ Clare, "Elegy on the Ruins of Pickworth," ll. 21-22.

⁵⁷⁹ Clare, "Elegy on the Ruins of Pickworth," ll. 27-31.

not the same, pride, as he reveals “How Contemplation mourns their lost decay, / To view their pride laid level with the ground / To see, where labour clears the soil away, / What fragments of mortality abound.”⁵⁸⁰ Seeing these fragments before made whole by fantasy in the poet’s eye spurs the realization that death and life congeal in the same body digging up these relics:

There's not a rood of land demands our toil.
 There's not a foot of ground we daily tread.
 But gains increase from time's devouring spoil,
 But holds some fragment of the human dead.

The very food, which for support we have.
 Claims for its share an equal portion too;
 The dust of many a long-forgotten grave
 Serves to manure the soil from whence it grew. (ll. 37-44)

Here the poet articulates an early and grotesque version of the well-known line from “I Am,” framing himself as “self-consumer of my woes.” While Johanne Clare notes the contrasting registers of georgic and meditative-descriptive verse in these lines (the awkward communication of “manure” and “long-forgotten grave”), the image of a transhistorical cannibalism remains somewhat out-of-place.⁵⁸¹ However, following McGowan’s emphasis on traumatic excess, the out-of-placeness of the image is its very strength in the light of a cinema of fantasy. The loss that forms life delivers “the obscene activity that accompanies the function of symbolic authority,” the consequence of the social system that cannot be directly avowed.⁵⁸² The “film-object” Clare has constructed seems to be suggesting that by virtue of the span of labor over “every rood of land,” those of grandeur are debased into cannibalism by the very toil they demand. “Time’s devouring

⁵⁸⁰ Clare, “Elegy on the Ruins of Pickworth,” ll. 33-36.

⁵⁸¹ Johanna, Clare, *John Clare and Bounds of Circumstances* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1987)

⁵⁸² McGowan, 44.

spoil” leads not to a placid elegiac equality in death, but the piquant montage of a universal history suggesting that the rich devour the poor who alike fuel themselves on decomposed bodies of soil.⁵⁸³

Clare’s elegiac machinery again anticipates Vertov on this point. The desire of documentary filmmaking to “bring clarity into the worker’s awareness of the phenomena concerning and surrounding him... [to] give everyone working behind a plow or a machine the opportunity to see his brothers at work with him *simultaneously* in different parts of the world”⁵⁸⁴ pulses through the staging of a fragmented autophagic humanity flattened by time. And yet, as Rancière notes, in order for this clarity to work, it must be coupled with a paradoxical blindness that Vertov, too enthusiastic about the panopticism of his kino-eye, could not envisage. For “to be the instrument of a universal communication of energies, the camera should function blindly, like a telephone exchange. The eye can only connect things if it does not linger on what it sees, if it does not try to look.”⁵⁸⁵ Clare, however, carries it off to muted but not less poignant effect in the closing of his elegy. The penultimate stanza of “Elegy on the Ruins of Pickworth,” despite the poet earlier envisioning exactly what might have transpired in these ruins, enacts this visionary blindness by seeing all of history only to bury it in mystery:

Ye busy, bustling mortals, known before,
Of what you’ve done, where went, or what you see,
Of what your hopes attain’d to, (now no more,)
For everlasting lies a mystery. (ll. 49-52)

Vertov’s cinematic eye and the Clarean camera concentrate on a “universal communication of movement” attentive to the world of absent “bustling mortals,” an appeal that captures those

⁵⁸³ It might not be inappropriate to see here a repetition of Christian imagery. As Michael Nicholson (2020) notes, an early poem titled “Effusions” (1819-1820) also “stages a revision of the Eucharist in which a ‘last crust’ replaces the Last Supper... breaking of bread marks material want rather than sacramental spirit” (228).

⁵⁸⁴ Vertov, 75. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁸⁵ Rancière, *The Intervals of Cinema*, 38.

nameless mortal masses occupying the village graveyard of Gray's *Elegy* and the future existence of those anonymous celluloid beings, "the daughters of peasants," who in the decades after the turn of the century would become the purveyors of their own doubled and self-alienated image, indices of a lived past become a living death projected onto theater screens around the world.⁵⁸⁶

It is fitting, then, that the elegy ends on exactly the same sentiment at the center of Clare's cottage peepshow, almost even in the same words: "Like yours, awaits for me that common lot; / 'Tis mine to be of every hope bereft: / A few more years and I shall be forgot, / And not a vestige of my memory left."⁵⁸⁷ But the same dilemma infecting those lines written to Taylor to say "wait another year or two & t[he] *peep show* will be over" also exists within the conclusion of a poem dreamt up while disturbing the layers of earth offering and denying the possibility of obscurity. And it is this same dilemma that cinema would embody by pointing to the paradoxical "sameness between the absolute of the will that overturns the forms of the palpable world and the absolute dismissal of the will to the profit of the energies of a life that does not seek anything"⁵⁸⁸ The absolute passivity supposed of the cameratic eye of nature's poet, the same eye that augers death, joins with the absolute activity of a world animated by fantasy. And it is through this fantasy, and only through this fantasy, that it becomes possible to sift through the impossible anterior future portended by all manner of ruins and acknowledge that the single path to death can be pursued in the manner of the vagrant peepshow man, whose mysterious box temporarily confuses fantasy and reality and makes possible, for the meager price of a halfpenny, the transformation that turns the fact of being seen into a sightless vision.

⁵⁸⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables* trans. Emiliano Batista (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 15.

⁵⁸⁷ Clare, "Elegy on the Ruins of Pickworth," ll. 53-56.

⁵⁸⁸ Rancière, *The Intervals of Cinema*, 38-39.

Works Cited

Introduction

- Abrams, MH, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952)
- Addison, Joseph, "Genius," *The Spectator*, no. 160 (London, 1711)
- Aydin, Ciano, *Extimate Technology: Self-Formation in a Technological World* (New York: Routledge, 2021)
- Batt, Jennifer, *Class, Patronage, and Poetry in Hanoverian England: Stephen Duck, The Famous Threshing Poet* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020)
- Blaire, Kirstie (ed.), *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics 1750-1900* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)
- Byrne, Sandie, *Poetry and Class* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)
- Cantor, Paul A., "Romanticism and Technology: Satanic Verses and Satanic Mills," in *Technology in the Western Political Tradition* eds. Arthur M. Melzor, Jerry Weinberger, M. Richard Zinman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993)
- Christmas, William J., *The Lab'ring Muse: Work, Writing, and the Social Order in English Plebian Poetry 1730-1830* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011)
- Goodridge, John, *John Clare and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)
- Goodridge, John, "Labouring-Class Poetry," in *Teaching Romanticism*, eds. David Higgins and Sharon Rustin (London: Palgrave, 2010)
- Goodridge John, and Bridget Keegan "Clare and the traditions of labouring-class verse" in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1740-1830* eds. Thomas Keymer and Jon Mee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)
- Goodridge, John, and Bridget Keegan, *A History of Working-Class Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)
- Harold Innis, *The Bias of Communicating* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1964)
- Hazlitt, William, *Lectures on the English Poets* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1818)
- Keegan, Bridget, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry 1730-1837* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

- Klauss, H. Gustav, *The Literature of Labour: 200 Years of Working-Class Writing* (Edward Everett Root Publishers, 2018)
- Kövesi, Simon, *John Clare: Nature, Criticism and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)
- Krishnamurthy, Aruna (ed.), *The Working-Class Intellectual in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009)
- Maidment, Brian “Review of *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poetry 1800-1900*,” *Studies in Hogg and His World*, 17 (2007)
- McEathron, Scott, “Wordsworth, Lyrical Ballads, and the Problem of Peasant Poetry,” *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 54 (1999)
- McLuhan, Marshall, and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988)
- McLuhan, Marshall and Eric McLuhan, *Media and Formal Cause* (Houston: NeoPoiesis Press, 2011)
- Nancy, Jean-Luc, *The Muses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996)
- Nancy, Jean-Luc, *The Possibility of a World: Conversations with Pierre-Philip Jandin* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017)
- Norris, Christopher, “Deconstructing Genius: Paul de Man and the Critique of Romantic Ideology,” in *Genius: The History of an Idea*, ed. Penelope Murray (London: Blackwell, 1989)
- Ong, Walter, *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971)
- Prandi, Julie, *The Poetry of the Self-Taught: An Eighteenth-Century Phenomenon* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008)
- Rancière, Jacques, *Staging the People: The Proletarian and His Double* (New York: Verso, 2019)
- Rancière, Jacques, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004)
- Rancière, Jacques, *What Times Are We Living In?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021)

- Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, eds. John Beer and W. Jackson Bate, Vol 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983)
- Simondon, Gilbert, *Imagination and Invention* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023)
- Sloterdijk, Peter, *You Must Change your Life: On Anthropotechnics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013)
- Southey, Robert, *Lives of Uneducated Poets, to which are added Attempts in Verse, by John Jones, An Old Servant* (London: H.G. Bohn, 1836)
- Staten, Henry, *Techne Theory: A New Language for Art* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019)
- Stiegler, Bernard, *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity, 2010)
- Stiegler, Bernard, *Technics and Time, 1* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998)
- Stiegler, Bernard, *Technics and Time, 2* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008)
- Stiegler, Bernard, *Technics and Time, 3* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010)
- Stiegler, Bernard, *The Nanjing Lectures 2016-2019* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2020)
- Thomson, EP. *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966)
- Walpole, Horace, *Yale Edition of the Correspondence of Horace Walpole*, Vol 31 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937-1983)
- White, Adam, *John Clare's Romanticism* (New York: Springer, 2017)
- White, Simon, *Robert Bloomfield, Romanticism and the Poetry of Community* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2019)
- Williams, Raymond, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975)
- Zionkowski, Linda, 'Strategies of Containment: Stephen Duck, Ann Yearsley, and the Problem of Polite Culture,' *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 13 (1989)

Chapter 1

- Altick, Richard D., *The Shows of London* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978)
- Andrews, Corey, "Work' Poems: Assessing the Georgic Mode of Eighteenth-Century Working-Class Poetry," in *Experiments in Genre in Eighteenth Century Literature* ed. Sandro Jung. (Academia Press, 2011)
- Anon, *A Lively Representation of Merlin in his Cave, as in the Royal Gardens at Richmond, Being a New and Entertaining Piece of Moving Machinery, such as never before appeared in Publick*, n.d. (c. 1730)
- Anon. ed., "Some Account of the Author" in *Poems on Several Subjects* (London: For J. Roberts, 1730).
- Ansley, Peter R., *The Philosophy of Robert Boyle* (New York: Routledge, 2000)
- Batt, Jennifer, *Class, Patronage, and Poetry in Hanoverian England: Stephen Duck, The Famous Threshing Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)
- Batt, Jennifer, "Stirr'd up by Emulation of the Famous Mr. Duck," in *A History of Working Class Literature*, ed. by John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 24-38.
- Cholodenko, Alan, "Speculations on the Animatic Automaton," in *The Illusion of Life II: More Essays on Animation*, ed. Alan Cholodenko (Sydney: Power Publications, 2007), 486-528.
- Christmas, William J., *The Lab'ring Muses: Work, Writing, and the Social Order in English Plebeian Poetry 1730-1830* (University of Delaware Press, 2001)
- Cloake, John, *Palaces and Parks of Richmond and Kew* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1995)
- Collier, Mary, *The Woman's Labour: An Epistle to Mr. Stephen Duck* (London: For the Author, 1739)
- Colton, Judith, "Merlin's Cave and Queen Caroline: Garden Art as Political Propaganda," *Eighteenth Century Studies* 10.1 (1976), 1-20
- Drury, Joseph, *Novel Machines: Technology & Narrative Form in Enlightenment Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)
- Duck, Stephen, *Poems on Several Subjects* (London: For J. Roberts, 1730)
- Duck, Stephen, *Poems on Several Occasions* (London: For the Author, 1736)
- Engell, James, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1981)
- German Academy of Sciences, ed., *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe, Darmstadt and Berlin: Akademie Verlag* (1926–), VI, 262.

- Goodridge, John, "Stephen Duck The Thresher's Labour and Mary Collier's The Woman's Labor," in *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. by Christine Gerrard (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2013)
- Goodridge, John, *Rural Life in Eighteenth Century Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 1995)
- Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin, 1988)
- Israel, Jonathan I., *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)
- Johnson, Samuel, "Machine, n.s." *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/machine_ns
- Johnson, Samuel, "Mechanick, n.s." *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/mechanick_ns
- Keegan, Bridget, "Georgic Transformations and Stephen Duck's *The Thresher's Labour*" in *Studies in English Literature*, 41.3 (2001), 545-62
- Keegan, Bridget, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730-1837* (London: Palgrave, 2008)
- Keller, Evelyn Fox, *Secrets of Life, Secrets of Death: Essays on Language, Gender, and Science* (New York: Routledge, 1992)
- Klauss, H. Gustav, *The Literature of Labour: 200 Years of Working-Class Writing* (Edward Everett Root Publishers, 2018)
- Knight, Stephen, *Merlin: Knowledge and Power through the Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009)
- Koch, Gertrud, "Animation of the Technical and the Quest for Beauty," in *Machine* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 1-23.
- Kord, Susanne, *Women Peasant Poets in Eighteenth-Century England, Scotland, and Germany: Milkmaids on Parnassus* (Camden East: Camden House, 2003)
- La Mettrie, Julien Offray de. *Man A Machine and Man A Plant*, trans. by Richard A. Watson and Maya Rybalka (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994)
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, *Monadology*, ed. by Lloyd Strickland (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014)
- Marx, Karl, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Penguin, 1993)
- Muri, Allison, *The Enlightenment Cyborg: A History of Communications and Control in the Human Machine 1660-1830* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007)
- Osborn, James, "Spence, Natural Genius, and Pope," *Philosophical Quarterly* 45 (January 1966), 123-44

- Park, Julie, *The Self and It: Novel Objects in Eighteenth-Century England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010)
- Riskin, Jessica, *The Restless Clock: A History of the Centuries-Long Argument over What Makes Living Things Tick* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016)
- Rizzo, Betty, "The Patron as Poet-Maker: The Politics of Benefaction," *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* (1990), 241-65
- Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. (London, 1711)
- Spence, Joseph, *A Full and Authentick Account of Stephen Duck, the Wiltshire Poet* (London: For J. Roberts, 1731)
- Tattersal, Robert, *The Bricklayers Miscellany, or Poems on Several Subjects* (London: For the Author, 1734)
- Williams, Raymond, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973)
- Wright, Austin, *Joseph Spence: A Critical Biography* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1950)
- Zionkowski, Linda, "Strategies of Containment: Stephen Duck, Ann Yearsley, and the Problems of Polite Culture," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 13 (1989)

Chapter 2

- Addison, Joseph, "Spectator No. 285," *The Works of the Right Honorable Joseph Addison, Esq.*, Vol 3. (London: Jacob Tonson, 1721)
- Andrews, Kerri, "No more than as an atom 'mid the vast profound': Conceptions of Time in the Poetry of William Cowper, William Wordsworth, and Ann Yearsley," in *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Kirstie Blaire and Mina Gorji, (London: Palgrave, 2013)
- Andrews, Kerri, *Ann Yearsley and Hannah More: Patronage and Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 2016)
- Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999)
- Buck-Morss, Susan, "The Flaneur, The Sandwichman, and the Prostitute: The Politics of Loitering" *New German Review* 39 (1989)

- Burke, Tim, "Introduction," in *Ann Yearsley: Selected Poems*, ed. Tim Burke (Cheltenham: Cyder Press, 2003)
- Chico, Tita, *The Experimental Imagination: Literary Knowledge and Science in the British Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018)
- Christmas, William J, *The Lab'ring Muses: Work, Writing, and the Social Order in English Plebeian Poetry 1730-1830* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001)
- Cuboniks, Laboria, *The Xenofeminist Manifest: A Politics for Alienation* (London: Verso, 2018)
- Demers, Patricia, "'For mine's a stubborn and a savage will': 'Lactilla' (Ann Yearsley) and 'Stella' (Hannah More) Reconsidered," *Huntington Library Quarterly* (1993)
- Doody, Margaret Ann, "Women Poets of the Eighteenth Century," in *Women and Literature in Britain 1700-1800* ed. Vivien Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)
- Doody, Margaret Anne, *The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)
- Elkin, Lauren, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017)
- Ellerman, Gregg, "Plasticity, poetry, and the end of art: Malabou, Hegel, Kant" in *Romanticism and Speculative Realism*, ed. Chris Washington and Anne C. McCarthy (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019)
- Everett, Caleb, *Numbers and the Making of Us: Counting and the Course of Human Cultures* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2017)
- Ferguson, Moira, *Eighteenth Century Women Poets: Nation, Class, and Gender* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995)
- Guest, Harriet, "Eighteenth Century Femininity: 'a supposed sexual character,'" in *Women and Literature in Britain 1700-1800* ed. Vivien Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)
- Han, Byung-Chul, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingerin* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017)
- Haraway, Donna, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™* (New York: Routledge, 1999)
- Hester, Helen, "Promethean Labors and Domestic Realism," *e-flux Architecture* (2017)

- Hester, Helen, *Xenofeminism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018)
- Janiak, Andrew, "Isaac Newton," in *The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century* ed Peter R. Anstey (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013)
- Jarvis, Joanna, "Performance and Print Culture: Two Eighteenth-Century Actresses and Their Image Control" in *Pen, Print, and Communication in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Caroline Archer-Perre and Malcolm Dick (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020)
- Knowles, Claire, "Ann Yearsley, Biography and the 'Pow'rs of Sensibility Untaught!" *Women's Writing* 17:1 (2010)
- Kord, Sussanne, *Women Peasant Poets in Eighteenth-Century England, Scotland, and Germany: Milkmaids on Parnassus* (Camden East: Camden House, 2003)
- Landry, Donna, *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739-1796* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)
- Malabou, Catherine, *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013)
- Manwaring, Edward *Stichology: Or, A Recovery of the Latin, Greek and Hebrew Numbers Exemplified in the Reduction of All Horace's Metres, and the Greek and Hebrew Poetry* (London: Printed for the Author, 1737)
- Matheson, C.S., "The Royal Academy and the Annual Exhibition of the Viewing Public," in *Lessons of Romanticism: A Critical Companion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998)
- Milne, Anne, "*Lactilla Tends her Fav'rite Cow*": *Ecocritical Readings of Animals and Women in Eighteenth-Century British Labouring-Class Women's Poetry* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2008)
- Mitchell, Robert Edward, "*The Soul that Dreams it Shares the Power it Feels so Well*": *The Politics of Sympathy in the Abolitionist Verse of Williams and Yearsley*," *Romanticism on the Net* Vol. 29/30 (2003)
- Mitchell, WJT, *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018)
- More, Hannah, "Prefatory Letter," in *Poems on Several Occasions* (London: G.G. & Robinson, 1785)
- Newton, Isaac, *Opticks: Or, A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, and Inflections and Colours of Light* (London: Printed for William Innys, 1730)

Nicholson, Marjorie Hope, *Newton Demands the Muse: Newtons Opticks and the 18th Century Poets* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015)

Persons, Annie, "Ann Yearsley, Hannah More, and Human Commodification in the Literary Marketplace," *Women's Writing*, 27 (2020)

Reynolds, John, *A View of Death: Or, The Soul's Departure from the World. A Philosophical Poem, With a Copious Body of Explanatory Notes, and Some additional Composures* (London: Printed for John Clark and Richard Hett, 1725)

Roberts, William, "Sandleford 1784," *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs Hannah More* (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1834)

Taylor, David Francis, *The Politics of Parody: A Literary History of Caricature 1760-1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018)

Vishmidt, Marina, "Art, Technology, and Repetition," in *Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, ed. Beverly Best, Werner Bonefeld, and Chris O'Kane (London, SAGE, 2018)

Waldron, Waldron, *Lactilla: Milkwoman of Clifton: The Life and Writings of Ann Yearsley 1753-1806* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996)

Yearsley, Ann, *Ann Yearsley: Selected Poems*, ed. Tim Burke (Cheltenham: Cyder Press, 2003)

Yearsley, Ann, *Catalogue of the Books, Tracts, &c Contained in Ann Yearsley's Public Library* (Bristol: Published for the Proprietor, 1793)

Yearsley, Ann, *Poems On Several occasions: By Ann Yearsley, a Milkwoman of Bristol*, (London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1785)

Yearsley, Ann, *Poems on Various Subjects* (London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1797)

Zionkowski, Linda, "Strategies of Containment: Stephen Duck, Ann Yearsley, and the Problem of Polite Culture," *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 13 (November 1989)

Chapter 3

Anderson, Robert, "Robert Anderson to James Currie. 28 September 1799," in *The Letters of James Currie*. <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/jamescurrie/details.php?id=30>.

Armstrong, Philip, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2008)

Ashmead, John and John Davison, *The Songs of Robert Burns* (New York: Garland, 1988)

- Balibar, Étienne, *On Universals: Construction and Deconstructing Community*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020)
- Blair, Kirstie, *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019)
- Burns, Robert, *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Kilmarnock: John Wilson, 1786)
- Burns, Robert, *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1787)
- Burns, Robert, *Robert Burns' Commonplace Book 1783-1785*, ed. James Cameron Ewing and Davidson Cook (Fontwell: Centaur Press, 1965)
- Burns, Robert, *The Complete Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. James Mackay (Ayr: Alloway, 1987)
- Burns, Robert, *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns* (Ayr: Alloway Publishing, 1993)
- Cameron, Ewen, A, "Education in Rural Scotland, 1696-1872," *The Edinburgh History of Education in Scotland*. ed. Robert Anderson, Mark Freeman, and Lindsay Paterson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015)
- Carlyle, Thomas, "Review of J.G. Lockhart's *The Life of Robert Burns*," *Edinburgh Review*, xcvi (1828)
- Cowper, William, "Letter LXIX, To Samuel Rose, Esqr. Weston, Aug 27, 1787," *The Life and Posthumous Writings of William Cowper. Esqr.* ed. William Hayley (London: J. Johnson, 1803)
- Crawford, Robert, *The Bard: Robert Burns, A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009)
- Darwin, Erasmus, *The Temple of Nature, Or, The Origin of Society: A Poem. with Philosophical Notes* (London: Johnson, 1803)
- Davie, G.E., *A Passion for Ideas: Essays on the Scottish Enlightenment II* (Edinburgh: Polygon 1994)
- Dickson, Joshua, *The Highland Bagpipe: Music, History, Tradition* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009)
- Han, Byun-Chul, *Non-Things* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022)
- Hijiya, James A, *Lee de Forest and the Fatherhood of Radio* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1992)

- Kempelen, Wolfgang Von, *The Mechanism of Human Speech*. ed. Fabian Brackhane, Richard Sproat, and Jürgen Trouvain, trans. Richard Sproat (Dresden: TUDpress, 2017)
- Kittler, Friedrich, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990)
- Leask, Nigel, "Was Burns a Labouring-Class Poet?" in *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring Class Poetry and Poetics, 1750-1900*, ed. Kirstie Blair and Mina Gorji (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)
- Lenman, Bruce P, *The New Penguin History of Scotland: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: Penguin, 2002)
- Locke, John, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. ed. Roger Woolhouse (New York: Penguin, 1997)
- Manson, William Laird, *The Highland Bagpipe: Its History. Literature. and Music. with Some Account of the Traditions. Superstitions. and Anecdotes Relating to the Instrument and Its Tunes* (London: Alexander Gardner, 1901)
- Maynard, Luke RJ, "Hoddin' Grey an' A' That: Robert Burn's Head. Class Hybridity. and the Value of the Ploughman's Mantle," in *The Working-Class Intellectual in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Britain*. ed. Aruna Krishnamurthy (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016)
- Fionna Stafford, "Burns and Romantic Writing," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Burns* ed. Gerrard Carruthers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009)
- McCue, Kirsteen, "Burn's Songs and Poetic Craft," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Burns* ed. Gerrard Carruthers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009)
- McGinty, J Walter, *Robert Burns and the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 2021)
- McGuirk, Carol, "Robert Burns and Nostalgia," in *Burns Now*. ed. K. Simpson (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic Press, 1994)
- McGuirk, Carol, *Reading Robert Burns: Texts, Contexts, Transformations* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2015)
- McGuirk, Carol, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985)
- McGuirk, Carol, *Robert Burns: Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1993)

- McKeever, Gerald Lee, *Dialectics of Improvement: Scottish Romanticism 1786-1831* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020)
- Moore, Lindy, "Urban Schooling in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-century Scotland," in *The Edinburgh History of Education in Scotland*. ed. Robert Anderson, Mark Freeman, and Lindsay Paterson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015)
- Noyes, John K, *Herder: Aesthetics against Imperialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015)
- Perry, Ruth, "Balladry and the Scottish Enlightenment," in *The Scottish Enlightenment and Literary Culture*. ed. Ronnie Young. et al. (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2016)
- Pettman, Dominic, *Sonic Intimacy: Voice, Species, Technics*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017)
- Pope, Alexander "Essay on Man," *The Major Works*. ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
- Redfield, Marc, *The Politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003)
- Sikka, Sonia, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)
- Simpson, Kenneth, *The Protean Scot* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988)
- Stafford, Fionna, "Burns and Romantic Writing," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Burns* ed. Gerrard Carruthers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press) 2009
- Van-Hagen, Stephen, "'But Genius is the Special Gift of God!'" The Reclamation of 'Natural Genius' in the Late-Eighteenth Century Poetry of Ann Yearsley and James Woodhouse," in *A History of Working-Class Literature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 55-69
- Thiel, Udo, *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)
- Wordsworth, William. *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1802* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

Chapter 4

- "Advertisements and Notices." *Sunday Gazette*, 12 May 1793. *Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, Accessed June 2022.
- Barrell, John, *The Darkside of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980)
- Barrell, John, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973)
- Baudrillard, Jean, *Screened Out* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2014)
- Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994)
- Baudrillard, Jean, *The Conspiracy of Art* (South Pasadena: Semiotex(e), 2005)
- Baudrillard, Jean, *The System of Objects* (Brooklyn, Verso, 2020)
- Binfield, Kevin, "Labor and an Ethic of Variety in *The Farmer's Boy*," *Robert Bloomfield: Lyric, Class, and the Romantic Canon*, eds. Simon White, John Goodridge, Bridget Keegan (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006), 70-88
- Bloomfield, B.C., *The Publication of the Farmer's Boy by Robert Bloomfield, The Library*, Vol XV (No. 2, 1993)
- Bloomfield, Robert, *The Farmer's Boy by Robert Bloomfield: A Parallel Text Edition*, ed. Peter Cochran (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014)
- Blunden, Edmund, *Nature in English Literature* (New York: Kennikat, 1970)
- Bolter, Jay David, Maria Engberg, and Blair MacIntyre, *Reality Media: Augmented and Virtual Reality* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021)
- Christmas, *The Lab'ring Muses: Work, Writing, and the Social Order in English Plebeian Poetry, 1730-1830* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001)
- Cook, Olive, *Movement in Two Dimensions* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1963)
- Ellis, Markman, "'Spectacles within doors': Panoramas of London in the 1790's," *Romanticism*, 14 (2008), 133-148
- Friedberg, Anne, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993)

- Goodridge, John, ed., *Eighteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets*, Vol 2 (New York: Routledge, 2016)
- Goodridge, John, *Rural Life in Eighteenth Century English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)
- Hardcastle, Ephraim [William Henry Pyne], *Somerset House Gazette, and Literary Museum; or, Weekly Miscellany of Fine Arts, Antiquities, and Literary Chit Chat*, 2 vols. (London: W. Wetton, 1824)
- Hazlitt, William, *Lectures on the English Poets* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1818)
- Jones, Jennifer "Absorbing Hesitation: Wordsworth and the Theory of the Panorama," *Studies in Romanticism*, 45 (2006), 357-375
- Joseph Weston, *The Remains of Robert Bloomfield* (London: Baldwin, Craddock, and Joy, 1824)
- Keegan, Bridget, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730-1837* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)
- Kelley, Theresa M., "Postmodernism, Romanticism, and John Clare," *Lessons of Romanticism: A Critical Companion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 157-171
- Landy, Donna, "Georgic Ecology," *Robert Bloomfield: Lyric, Class, and the Romantic Canon*, (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006), 254-268
- Lawson, Jonathan, *Robert Bloomfield* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980)
- McLuhan, Marshall and Eric, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989)
- McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media* (New York: Routledge, 2001)
- "Modebelustigungen in London. Neues Panorama. Grausende Darstellung der Schlacht bei Abukir," *Journal London und Paris* 3 (1799)
- Milton, John, *Milton's Comus*, ed. William Bell (London: Macmillan and Co., 2006)
- Nancy, Jean-Luc, *The Fragile Skin of the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021)
- Oettermann, Stephan, *Das Panorama: Die Geschichte eines Massen-mediums* (Frankfurt: Syndikat, 1980)

Otto, Peter, "Between the Virtual and the Actual: Robert Barker's Panorama of London and the Multiplication of the Real in late eighteenth-century London," *Romanticism on the Net*, 46 (2007)

Paulsen, Kris, *Here/There: Telepresence, Touch, and Art at the Interface* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017)

Thomson, James, *The Seasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971)

White, Simon, *Robert Bloomfield, Romanticism, and the Poetry of Community* (New York: Ashgate, 2019)

Williams, Raymond, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973)

Chapter 5

Anon. "Clare's Poems," *The Monthly Review* (London: A. and R. Spottiswoode, 1820)

Balzer, Richard, *Peepshows: A Visual History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998)

Barrell, John, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973)

Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010)

Bate, Jonathan, *John Clare: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003)

Brownlow, Timothy, *John Clare and the Picturesque Landscape* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983)

Byrne, Sandie, *Poetry and Class* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)

Carels, Edwin, "Cinema's Savoyards: Performativity and the Legacy of the Magic Lantern," *Media Archeology and Intermedial Performance: Deep Time of the Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)

Chirico, Paul, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

Clare, Johanna, *John Clare and Bounds of Circumstances* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987)

Clare, John, *John Clare's Autobiographical Writings* ed. Eric Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983)

- Clare, John, *Major Works* ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)
- Clare, John, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (Stamford: Taylor and Hessey, 1820)
- Clare, John, *Selected Letters*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990)
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, "Chapter XVII," *Biographia Literaria*, in *The Major Works*, ed. H.J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *Specimens of the Table Talk* (London: John Murray, 1851)
- Deacon, George, *John Clare and the Folk Tradition* (London: Sinclair Brown, 1983)
- Freud, Sigmund, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 18 (London, Vintage Books, 2001)
- Galperin, William. *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993)
- Goldsmith, Jason, "The Promiscuity of Print: John Clare's 'Don Juan' and the Culture of Romantic Celebrity," in *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 46 (2006), 803-832
- Goodridge, John, and Kelsey Thornton, "John Clare: The Trespasser," *John Clare in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)
- Goodridge, John, *John Clare and Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)
- Gorji, Mina. *John Clare and the Place of Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008)
- Gosse, Edmund, 'Review of Poems Chiefly from Manuscript, 23 January 1921, in *Critical Heritage*, 343-6.
- Grady, Claire., "'Meek-eye moods': On John Clare's Inarticulate Images," in *European Romantic Review*, 30 (2019)
- Guyer, Sara, *Reading with John Clare: Biopoetics, Sovereignty, and Romanticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015)
- Haworth, Michael, "Genius Is What Happens: Derrida and Kant on Genius, Rule-Following and the Event" in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 54 (2014), 323-337
- Helsing, Elizabeth, "Clare and the Place of the Peasant Poet," *Critical Inquiry*, 13 (1987)

- Hess, Scott, *William Wordsworth and the Ecology of Authorship* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2013)
- Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)
- Kelley, Theresa M. "Postmodernism, Romanticism, and John Clare" *Lessons of Romanticism*, ed. Thomas Pfau & Robert F. Gleckner (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 157-170
- Kittler, Friedrich, *Optical Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010)
- Kövesi, Simon, "John Clare's Deaths: Poverty, Education, and Poetry," *New Essays on John Clare: Poetry, Culture, and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)
- Kövesi, Simon, and Scott McEathron, *New Essays on John Clare: Poetry, Culture, and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)
- Kövesi, Simon, *John Clare: Nature, Criticism, and History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)
- Lacan, Jacques, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960* ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992)
- Lucas, John, *John Clare* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994)
- Mayer, Vicky, "Labour," *Keywords for Media Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2017)
- McEathron, Scott, "Wordsworth, Lyrical Ballads, and the Problem of Peasant Poetry," *Nineteenth Century Literature* 54 (1999), 1-26
- McGowan, Todd, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (New York: SUNY Press, 2007)
- Miller, J. Hillis, *Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016)
- Nicholson, Michael, "Common Distress: John Clare's Poetic Strain," *Palgrave Advances in John Clare Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)
- Nusselder, Andre, *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009)
- Pfau, Thomas, *Wordsworth's Profession: Form, Class, and the Logic of Early Romantic Cultural Production* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997)

- Plunkett, John, "Optical Recreations and Victorian Literature," *Literature and the Visual Media*, ed. David Seed (Cambridge: The English Association, 2005)
- Rancière, Jacques, *Film Fables* trans. Emiliano Batista (London: Bloomsbury, 2016)
- Rancière, Jacques, *The Intervals of Cinema* (London: Verso, 2019)
- Sandy, Mark, *Romanticism, Memory, and Mourning* (London: Routledge, 2016)
- Sbriglia, Russell and Slavoj Zizek, *Subject Lessons* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020)
- Sbriglia, Russell, "Object-Disoriented Ontology; or, the Subject of What Is Sex?," in *Continental Thought & Theory*, 2 (2018), 35-57
- Schrey, Mick, "Concerns and Perceptions of Monarchy: John Clare's 'The Raree Show,'" *John Clare Society Journal*, 30 (2011)
- Stiegler, Bernard, "Memory," *Critical Terms for Media Studies* ed. W.J.T Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010)
- Stiegler, Bernard, *Technics and Time*, 2 trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009)
- Stiegler, Bernard, *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013)
- Storey, Mark, "Clare and the Critics," *John Clare in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 46-66
- Swartz, Richard G., "'Their terrors came upon me tenfold': Literacy and Ghosts in John Clare's Autobiography," *Lessons of Romanticism*, ed. Thomas Pfau and Robert F. Gleckner (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 328-348
- Taylor, John, "Introduction," *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (Stamford: Taylor and Hessey, 1820)
- Thomson, James, "Summer," *Poetical Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971)
- Vertov, Dziga, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984)
- Ward, Sam, "'This is radical slang': John Clare, Admiral Lord Radstock and the Queen Caroline Affair," *New Essays on John Clare: Poetry, Culture, and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

Weiner, Stephanie, *Clare's Lyric: John Clare and Three Modern Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

Wordsworth, William, *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

Zimmerman, Sarah, *Romanticism, Lyric, and History* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999)

Žižek, Slavoj, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992)

Zupančič, Alenka, *What is Sex?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017)