



Anahid Nersessian

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The Calamity Form

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On Poetry and Social Life

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ON POETRY AND SOCIAL LIFE

Anahid Nersessian

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So settle for knowing the approximate time
Because think of the alternative

And once you are actually in
the future, | pretend it's the present

KEVIN DAVIES, *The Golden Age of Paraphernalia* (2008)

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Introduction

The life which surrounds us flows by from day to day in a familiar and accustomed channel. Even if it is broken, if its strongest dams are destroyed—our consciousness, our feelings invariably and inevitably lag behind in their development; they do not correspond to the new; we are still in the power of what has been before. Our eye is unable to discern, to make out what is being born amidst the rumble, in the flood, amidst all the change, or in the catastrophe.

ALEKSANDR KONSTANTINOVICH VORONSKIĬ,
“Art as the Cognition of Life,” trans. Frederick S. Choate (1923)

Nach der damaligen Geisteslage mußte notwendig lyrische Poesie der erste Vorwurf . . . sein.

[Given the spiritual circumstances lyric poetry was the first resort.]¹

KARL MARX, letter to Heinrich Marx dated 10 November [1837]

This book has two ambitions, one modest and the other more intricate. The first is to describe how four figures—parataxis, obscurity, catachresis, and apostrophe—work in a handful of well-known Romantic poems. The second is to spend some lightly ordered time thinking about the limits of historical materialism for literary study.

What these objectives have to do with one another is a question I’m unlikely to answer to the satisfaction of even the most sympathetic readers. That they are connected or least adjacent the biography of criticism proves. The book leans often on that biography. It does so not in any reactionary spirit, nor to claim any sort of superlative status for the humanities. It simply assumes literary criticism to be the best way to understand literature and is interested in how people have managed to do so in the past. This is a far cry from saying that close reading, structuralism, or scansion is the best or even a good way to understand other aspects of the world. My discussion is grounded by the belief that the world’s contents

are ontologically plural—that they have different, sometimes overlapping ways of being. It is grounded likewise by the belief that any programmatic confidence in materialism as the theoretical ground of anticapitalist practice must also acknowledge that some things cannot be properly grasped and need not be contained by rigid or conventional projections of its reach.

This brief preface gives an overview of the book's themes and guiding principles. The themes are poetry, social life, and criticism. One guiding principle is the relative autonomy of aesthetic objects from the obligation to make sense of the world and, by extension, the relative autonomy of criticism from the obligation to explain its objects in evidentiary terms. To put it simply, art doesn't have to be about real things, and criticism doesn't have to pretend that it is. That sounds straightforward, but it's a claim backed, as we'll see, by complicated ideas about the nature and structure of reality.

Another guiding principle is that getting a grip on what is real is made harder by the historical emergence of capital, which renders the relation between nature and structure inaccessible, in excess of any synoptic perception. When the ambiguity and imprecision of the aesthetic object meet capital's phantasmagoria, strange things happen. They get even stranger in an era rattled by the runaway surrealism of climate change, which is both the progeny and the partner of industrialization and which finds its inflection point the same place this book does. That point is located close to the end of the eighteenth century; it is defined by "the separation of Nature from the facts of the labour that is now creating it, and then the breaking of Nature, in altered and now intolerable relations between men."²

The Calamity Form is interested not in what art writ large can and cannot do but in the peculiar position Romantic literature takes up vis-à-vis history conceived as a mode of explanation—that is, as a narrative form linking effects to their causes. My argument, which concerns poetry, is this: at the same exact moment in time when the ecological and human costs of industry were becoming palpable, some poets began actively staging their own works' competence, or rather its lack thereof, to the representation and analysis of the train of consequences set in motion by contemporary economic shifts. They did this, moreover, in the thick of an intensifying preoccupation with the difference between knowledge and imagination, facts and figures, the sciences and the arts—a preoccupation that cannot be written off as mere ideology or self-service. There are, it turns out, good philosophical reasons to believe a poem is unresponsive to the kinds of explanatory models proffered by biologists, statisticians, sociologists, and historians. And there are good philosophical reasons

to believe that literary criticism might have something important to say about a poem that cannot be reduced to or clarified by the standards of other disciplines, particularly those driven by questions of *why* and *how*.

The phrase “the calamity form” plays on Marx’s commodity form, the great prestidigitation by which capital disguises its logic. If the materialist conception of history tries to summarize the conditions that make up the basis of every transition between various modes of production, the commodity form—which causes “the definite social relation between men” to assume “the fantastic form of a relation between things”—sets a high hurdle between that effort and its chances for success.³ In the Romantic period, before Marx helped articulate that conception though well within the cultural and intellectual framework on which it would be built, such a summation is emphatically impossible. It is always the case that the “Ovidian transformation of bodies into shapes of a different kind that leads in an unbroken thread from the wage relation down to capitalist modernity” cannot be appreciated from some point of view outside its saturation of life: it operates at too large a scale and across too vast a domain of activity.⁴ This is plainly true in the dead midst of the Industrial Revolution, whose violent reorganizing of the world both depends upon and generates what I will call *nescience*, or unknowing, about it.

Geoffrey Hartman identifies this type of ignorance with trauma, the physiological disruption whose mental yield comes “as close to nescience as to knowledge.”⁵ He also views it as the informational output of literature, which, like traumatic experience, confounds rather than clarifies the world’s order. In the 1971 preface to *Wordsworth’s Poetry*, Hartman notes that both “the trauma of industrialization” and an “apocalyptic rate of change and nature-loss” are immanent to poems like those collected in *Lyrical Ballads* without being parsed or even really described by them.⁶ To be clear, there is nothing especially new about this idea. The notion that poetry or works of art more generally are nonreferential or resistant to denotation, that they pick out nothing in the world or, in Philip Sidney’s undying phrase, that they “nothing affirm . . . and therefore never lieth,” is timeworn to the point of being trite.⁷ It does not belong to 1971, nor to the Romantic period, nor to Sidney. It is, quite simply, a notion foundational to the history of Western aesthetics and to the history of Western philosophy. It also becomes newly salient in the context of industrialization’s trauma, which, like all traumas, is an experience of phenomenological discontinuity, of the everyday match between what is felt, what is known, and what is actually true gone to irretrievable pieces.

The calamity form, then, names a secondary distortion laid over the cockeyed perspective so much mainstream or canonical poetry likes to say it gives on reality. Like the commodity form, it names a disfigurement

that is at once sensual and cognitive: it effects changes in how we, as embodied beings, experience the material world, and it also makes those changes hard to grasp in explicative, let alone actionable, terms. What is to be done about a world whose complexity is so uncomprehendingly lived, whose harms are palpable and yet obscure, seeming to come upon us from everywhere and nowhere? Here “all things are full of labor” and yet “man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.”⁸ To feel but not to get, to undergo but not to understand: this is the etiology of trauma and of the traumatic historical event. Nescience captures not just its rational but also its affective dimension. It is, you might say, calamity’s unique structure of feeling.

Here is where it gets tricky. The calamity form, in this book, is *both* the Industrial Revolution and a poetics awkwardly responsive to or cooperative with it, working alongside though not necessarily in cahoots. It is a thing in the world with an objective character, and it is also an attempt to match up this thing in the world with a performance, habit, or style, an attempt to give the calamity a cultural expression. If “the Industrial Revolution” is shorthand for the total phenomenon of the transition to capitalism, which could not happen without the overturning of a certain set of social and metabolic relations, the poetry of this moment—tirelessly lyrical and telescopic—adopts formal strategies of abbreviation and foreclosure as it tries and fails to narrate that transition.

It goes without saying that industrial technologies move to increase productivity via the compression of time and space. Perhaps what we are used to seeing as Romanticism’s exemplary inwardness may actually be this same compression returned *as an attitude*, a short-circuiting that aims to repossess the occult character of the commodity and sets it not against but beside the inscrutabilities of its historical moment. From Wordsworth’s obsessive dismantling of stories into processes into things to Keats’s experiments with the ode as a genre that, being at once descriptively terse and psychologically diffuse, is suspended between surfeit and longing, stillness and forward momentum, the calamitous forms of Romanticism make their history present precisely in its retreat from assessment or accounting. They do not, however, make it present just as they please.

This is a caution against taking the heroic possibilities of literature too seriously. Romantic poets are as limited as any other cultural producers—and any other historical persons—in their ability to challenge or subvert the status quo. Wordsworth is onto something when he tells the Whig politician and future prime minister Charles Fox that his poems might “cooperate, however feebly,” with state-based welfare programs.⁹ The feeble is lamentable, weepy. It is also weak, in the structural as well as

the moral vein, and the poetry that interests me is likewise built to fray, twisted into a net that, sieve-like, sets loose more than it manages to hold.

There is no particular ethics to assign to this condition and no politics, especially if you believe that when it comes to emancipatory projects “culture itself” is nothing close to a silver bullet; as Huey P. Newton famously said, “We’re going to need some stronger stuff.”¹⁰ Moreover, the poetry of calamity is not only feeble with respect to its object; it also renders its object feeble in the sense of faint or insubstantial, so overwhelming in its magnitude that its opacity becomes the most telling evidence of its significance. The poetics of calamity, then, is directed not toward an encounter with what is real but toward an encounter with the inaccessibility of the real. What it cannot diagnose, it cannot abolish.

When it comes to reading the symptoms of capitalist modernity, we are more used to turning to the novel, and particularly the high-realist novel at the center of Fredric Jameson’s still-pivotal *The Political Unconscious* or his more recent extensions and refinements thereof. That book makes the case that realism, as a narrative mode, is in the best position to apprehend a “social order in the process of penetration and subversion, reorganization and rationalization” while also offering symbolically to resolve the social antagonisms that undergird and are provoked by that process.¹¹ Much has been said about this argument’s dependence on plot, character, and other novelistic features that don’t obtain or obtain differently in a poetic context. *The Calamity Form* might be said to invert the argument of *The Political Unconscious*, not because it concerns poetry instead of prose but because it does not believe that cultural artifacts treat symbolic phenomena in the absence of real phenomena—though life would certainly be easier if they did.

Rather, the book claims that the figurative, nonreferential, and anti-denotative properties of aesthetic objects—here, poems—are longstanding, highly developed competencies well suited to a historical era in which the means by which life is reproduced become spectral. This account of what it is poems do, or what they can describe, sidesteps the crypto-psychoanalytic distinction between “real” and “symbolic” altogether, making a place for the disaffirmations of poetry as ways of turning absence into a curious kind of presence. It is the kind of presence against which nothing can be proclaimed nor achieved, and to which no harm may be definitively attributed. Again: what evades diagnosis evades abolition.

On this same note novels, at least the kind that are written in the nineteenth century, are built for teleology: they imagine, fix, and map how effects follow from causes in what George Eliot terms “those invisible thoroughfares” of human life, whether that life is seen as essentially free

or tragically muted by its socioeconomic surround.¹² In this book, even the poetry that winks at narrative does away with forecasting. It does not estimate what is likely to happen based on what has already occurred; nor does it yoke what has already occurred to the outsize burden of the present instant. Still less does it claim to be able to assemble a causal network of actors and events capable of being translated into a predictive theory. This is a strike neither against poetry nor against theory. It is just a glance across the distance that exists between them, and a hint that criticism (whatever its aspirations) ought to be responsive and responsible to that distance.

Recent efforts to settle Romantic poetry within the crises of industrialization are bolstered by the proposal that the Anthropocene—a name for the geological era in which human activity is the dominant influence on the global mean temperature—has its point of origin around 1780, the same time James Watt’s steam engine was enjoying wider use in cotton mills and collieries.¹³ One might complain that this perspective assigns Romanticism a telos or trajectory that routes itself through the very visible thoroughfare of our own climate emergency. I would add that the shortcomings of this sort of presentism are not limited to the imposition of twenty-first-century ideas on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts. The issue, to begin, is that the social transformation we call the Industrial Revolution, and to which we compulsively assign dates coinciding with the invention of the steam engine, the power loom, the cotton gin, and so on, *is a version of Marx’s commodity fetish*: it is a structure of unknowing underwritten by the commodity form wherein (again) real relations between human beings assume the fantastic form of a relation between things. In other words, it is a perceptual derangement that makes things seem other than they are and so produces a dilemma for the empiricist paradigms of the Enlightenment, which is ill equipped to understand the phenomena sprung up within it.

When the political economists of the age move to understand their new situation, the results can be “dazzling,” but they are also fetishistic, for in their accounts value appears as a given even as the process through which value is generated while regulating social being “vanishes in its own result, leaving no trace behind” (*C* 1.187). We see the same logic subtending a great deal of scholarship that imagines Romantic-era literature as having privileged evidentiary access to the planetary conditions picked out by the word *Anthropocene*, which handily conceals the fact that capitalist enterprise, and not humankind, has caused climate change on the present scale. Even critics who dutifully point out that it is thanks to the social relations put in place *by* capitalist enterprise that we have a climate emergency at all nonetheless collapse those relations at once into

the name of their cause (the Industrial Revolution) and the name of their effect (the Anthropocene). A literary criticism that subpoenas literature to testify to the existence and the experience of this cause or this effect merely applies one cultural form to another, investing these minimally descriptive, maximally tendentious categories, along with literature itself, with all manner of “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (*C* 1.163). The messianic tenor of so much of this work gives some clue to how those subtleties and niceties make their way into something so tactile as style.

Throughout this book, I avoid reading texts as if to solve them; nor do I intend to pitch any part of its contents—from literature to my ideas about it—as an effective contribution to the global struggle against social and ecological catastrophe: “The purpose of literary commentary,” as Hartman puts it, “cannot be simply amplifying the clichés of our predicament.”¹⁴ The claim that we learn something about the etiology of climate disaster from poems—cultural artifacts whose protocols limit their explanatory reach—is an amplification of this kind. It is also a breathtakingly false recognition, for it mistakes the charisma of both the Anthropocene and the literary text for the magnitude and potency of what subsidizes them.

To put it in language far afield from the critique of political economy, consider Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s celebrated essay on paranoid and reparative reading. The essay opens with a conversation between Sedgwick and the activist Cindy Patton, about a particular conspiracy theory surrounding the HIV/AIDS crisis. Perhaps, offers Sedgwick, HIV is being deliberately spread among gay and African American communities by the United States government. This is Patton’s reply:

I just have trouble getting interested in that. I mean, even suppose we were sure of every element of a conspiracy: that the lives of Africans and African Americans are worthless in the eyes of the United States; that gay men and drug users are held cheap where they aren’t actively hated; that the military deliberately researches ways to kill noncombatants whom it sees as enemies; that people in power look calmly on the likelihood of catastrophic environmental and population changes. Supposing we were ever so sure of all those things—what would we know then that we don’t already know?¹⁵

The essay goes on to finesse Patton’s comment into a reparative program that rejects critique as politically disabling. Where the paranoid reader is wildly unpleasant, reactive, and blustering, the reparative one is a road wide open to wonder and, beyond wonder, epiphany. Rather than con-

firming what we already know—the world is a terrible place—she makes things bearable, gracing damaged life with a new plenitude in the hope that from this enrichment of our (to put it mildly) imperfect state of being, new ways to imagine life will make themselves available.

But is this what Patton has in mind? Do her remarks really clear room for moving from skepticism to hope, and is she really wondering, as Sedgwick is, how best to navigate the turbulence of information overload? Perhaps, on the contrary, Sedgwick's frequent return to the trope of movement betrays her will to dislodge Patton from her deflationary carriage, which is no better suited to conjuring plenitude than to the ambulance chasing of paranoid scrutiny.

Sedgwick is after kinesis, but Patton is embodying an impasse. To be impassive in this sense is to put oneself in a position from which to sublimate—to suspend, cancel, and move past—the hysterical form of political realism that views the status quo as impossibly diabolical and therefore impossible to beat. Patton's withdrawal of even the baseline commitment required by "getting interested" suggests anything but ambivalence or neutrality. Hers is a hot boredom, and it scorns those who need to believe in some Manichean melodrama before they can act to destroy a way of life whose evil is beyond dispute. The ethos of the shrug is not, as Sedgwick mistakenly suggests, pessimism but single-mindedness. The shrug says: it is neither paranoid nor poignant to struggle, it is simply necessary.

Here is the flip side of nescience understood as the cognitive and emotional imprint of the social experience of capital. Nescience can also be a recognition that all the knowledge we need is already behind us and that, when we act, we act in and across a void of uncertainty. What's the point of reading a poem as a record of verifiable social and historical processes? What will that tell you that you don't already know? To answer these questions by shrugging does not abnegate responsibility but exaggerates it. The shrug says: do more with less.

The poets and handful of visual artists I discuss in this book are fixated on the poorly representative and even misleading qualities of their work. This is true even when they advertise alertness to the world and its problems. Pulled between an eagerness to produce knowledge and a fear of devolving into abject mimesis or cliché, they organize their ambivalence around what we call tropes and figures: rhetorical devices that, while far from being the exclusive property of literary utterance, nonetheless anchor and exemplify the distance between it and ordinary communication.

It is a critical commonplace to say that figuration is always disfigurative, that it deflects language away from assertion. All the same, it is this evasive capability that specially allows Romantic poetics to recognize and

render the disfiguration of the social without interpreting it, much less drafting plans for its amendment. How such a poetics makes and manages its own epistemic and analytical constraints; how it presents those constraints as a mode of countercognition or alternative processing; how it variously valorizes, eroticizes, strains against, and surrenders to the decision to be poetry instead of another kind of practice, specifically one with a systematic and penetrating relationship to crisis—these are the questions that guide my discussion.

When I had written about half of this preface, I asked a friend what he thought about the claim that literary objects aren't fully available to materialist methodologies. Maybe, I said, it's not that helpful to use a poem or a novel to take the measure of a theory of causation pertinent to social relations as a provisional totality. "None of this," I added, "would pose a challenge to a basic explanatory framework according to which the mode of production of material existence at any point in time is understood to direct the processes of social, political, and intellectual life. We know that just because the methods of biology aren't generative for theoretical physics doesn't mean biology is wrong or physics doesn't exist. Couldn't you say the same thing about literary criticism—that it might respond to the sort of data a Marxist theory of history isn't designed to handle, without that being a strike against either literary criticism or Marxism?" I wanted to know: Was I in error?

"I don't think it's an error or a nonerror," he replied. "It is a thought experiment with a potentially interesting yield."

This book is my version of that experiment.

* * *

In his 1993 book *The Disorder of Things*, John Dupré draws on numerous examples from the philosophy of science to argue that "there are many equally legitimate ways of dividing the world into kinds," and that "only a privileged and restricted set of entities and kinds could make it plausible that everything could occur in accordance with a unified and universally applicable set of principles."¹⁶ This is a doctrine of ontological pluralism or, as Dupré sometimes puts it, promiscuous realism. The idea is that different kinds of things have different modes of being: the existence of a person isn't like the existence of an algorithm; the "form" in "formal semantics" isn't the same form operated on by evolutionary processes. And yet persons and algorithms both exist, and linguistics and the theory of evolution both produce legitimate knowledge in comparatively legitimate ways. Not only do these disunities have consequences for the way we study the world; they are *borne out* by the way we study the world. In

other words, different fields or disciplines attend to distinct kinds of objects in distinct kinds of domains, and are no less cogent or persuasive for doing so. To want all these objects to boil down to one kind of substance, or to yearn for one single disciplinary framework to contain them all, is unreasonable. Such desires simply defy the evidence at hand. (Whether or not that is the nature of desire is another conversation entirely.)

No matter what the word *pluralism* might suggest, this view doesn't entail any kind of political affiliation. Still, it is nonetheless the case that people who would like all the world's objects unified under a single umbrella often claim a politics. John Dewey thought that the unification of the sciences was the best defense against fascism; E. O. Wilson and Steven Pinker have recently made similar pronouncements, while Bruno Latour intimates that a holistic ontology might be the cure for climate change. We might think, too, of the so-called new materialism, a broad church of critical movements that invert Dupré's "metaphysics of disorder" to say that everything in the world is made up of a single substance, and that all methods of inquiry might consolidate themselves in its elucidation. The new materialists often tag their work as radical and yet, much like the conspicuously anti-Marxist Latour, they leave aside the obvious similarities between that work and an older materialism whose revolutionary character is without a doubt better defined.

That would be dialectical materialism, which (contrary to popular belief) is neither Marx's coinage nor his idea. As the geneticist and evolutionary biologist J. B. S. Haldane wrote in his preface to the 1939 edition of Friedrich Engels's *Dialectics of Nature*, "Dialectical materialism is not merely a philosophy of history, but a philosophy which illuminates all events whatever from the falling of a stone to a poet's imaginings"; published one year after Joseph Stalin's policy-setting *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, Haldane's preface hews to its rule that all of nature is "a connected and integral whole" and represents an only slightly fanciful boosting of the claim that, as Engels put it, dialectics is "the science of the general laws of motion and development of nature, human society and thought."¹⁷ It comprehends, that is, not just social relations, not just their economic basis and their cultural forms, but—in its broadest application—the deep, daedal laws of the physical universe.

You might say that the new materialism, along with other trends in the humanities, leverages a slipshod version of dialectical materialism in order to reject the power of a specifically historical application of dialectics, and with it the baggage carried by communism's specter. For me, the challenge lies not in trying to restore diamat (to invoke its Soviet exemplum) to its rightful place in literary theory or cultural criticism. Far from it, since, as I've said, this book aligns with the ontological prem-

ise that the world's contents are plural, and so does not at all agree that the falling of a stone is anything like the poet's imaginings. Rather, *The Calamity Form* keeps time with the nonreferential effects of figurative language, and thus with the notion that works of art have an ontology distinct if not wholly divided from other kinds of things in the world. This relieves them of having either to prove or be rationalized by the soundness of large-scale explanatory models. It also gives them a peculiar kind of hold over categories like *explanation* or even just *aboutness*, in a way that is doubly vexed when the work in question claims to be thinking hard and important thoughts about history or, to use Engels's term, human society.

If an aesthetic object, like a poem, can talk about real people and real life, if it can make use of the resources of narrative and exposition, if it can represent historical events or versions of them, all without disclosing anything in particular or being held to standards like "true" or "false," what is it doing in the world? Sidney will tell you that the poem "labors not to tell you what is or is not, but what should or should not be"—a secular rewrite of a founding principle of early Christian and medieval hermeneutics, namely that the richly figurative discourse of Scripture has both historical and prophetic content, revealing both what *has* been and what *will* be.¹⁸ By the eighteenth century, a nascent philosophical pragmatism is trying to ground a sentiment like Sidney's in the nuts and bolts of language itself. The imaginative expression of poetry, David Hume explains, corresponds to no "geometrical truth and exactness" and so "can never submit to exact truth"; the point is not really what poetry does but how it does it by virtue of the kind of thing it is, out of mimetic or descriptive alignment with the rest of the world.¹⁹ This is of a piece with Alexander Baumgarten's Leibnizian account of poetic representations as "clear and confused," lacking the intensive clarity of concepts but considerably less muddy than mere perception.

While Hume emphasizes poetry's semantic idiosyncrasies and Baumgarten its impact on the reader—the poem, he writes, is "a perfect sensate discourse," "more perfect the more its parts favor the awakening of sensate representations"—both are part of a historical trend toward thinking of works of art as things that *do* but do not *denote*.²⁰ It's easy to define this doing in purely affective terms: the poem makes you feel something, think something, be pleased or disgusted. It's easy in part thanks to the long shadow Kant's *Critique of Judgment* casts backward over the earlier part of the eighteenth century, making it seem as though the philosophy of this period always centers the subject of aesthetic experience and not the object that produces it. And yet, as Tzvetan Todorov argued more than forty years ago, the most influential thinking about

aesthetic representation during the Enlightenment was happening not in the rarefied atmosphere of transcendental idealism but in the workaday realm of the how-to manual. From well-known treatises like Hogarth's *The Analysis of Beauty* to an enormous, disaggregated body of books intended for use in schools, a consensus emerges that "all rhetoric, or nearly all, boils down . . . to a theory of figures," and that it is to the figure and not its audience that any philosophy of art—and, for that matter, of language—ought to attend.²¹

Eighteenth-century rhetorical theory is heavily indebted to classical models of figuration, for which the figure is always an instrument of divergence from some more precise or perspicuous meaning; this is what Hume means when he suggests that poetic language is not geometrical, that it swerves away from the body against which we would want to measure or compare it. Figures are intransitive, and their organizing presence in a work of literary or visual art corrals that work into their own oblique mode of representation—and yes, there lies behind all this a hypermetonymic understanding of the work of art itself such that, as John Guillory somewhat derisively puts it, "literature = literary language = rhetoric = trope."²² Throw a rock anywhere into the emerging discipline of criticism during this period and you will find versions of Hume's statement, but the most memorable ones are those that freight indirection with the melancholy air of dissemblance.

Take, for instance, César Chesneau Du Marsais, in his influential 1730 volume *Des tropes ou des diférens sens*, on figurative expression as "the exterior form of a body" that borrows a costume not natural to it, or Denis Diderot (in his *Encyclopédie* entry for *encyclopédie*) suggesting that the relation the work of art bears to the world is like the relation the portrait of his mistress bears, for the lover, to his description of her.²³ Unable, for unspecified reasons, to show (*montrer*) the mistress to any painter, the lover wrote down

the exact proportions of her head as whole; he then moved on to the dimensions of her forehead, her eyes, her nose, her mouth, her chin, her neck; then he went back over all these different features and spared no effort to make sure that his words would engrave on the mind of the painter the same image he had before his eyes. . . . When his description seemed to him complete, he made a hundred copies that he sent to a hundred painters, enjoining each one of them to execute exactly on the canvas what they read on his paper. The painters went to work, and after a while our lover received a hundred portraits, all of which rigorously resembled his description, and not one of which resembled another, nor his mistress.²⁴

This is no praise for word over image but a sympathetic suturing of the problem of representation to the plight of love, which, like writing, clasps experience in vain and prolifically falsifies what it imagines to be true.

It's common enough to characterize this view of figurative representation as one that privileges absence over presence, but this irons out the theoretical complexity of eighteenth-century rhetorical theory. More useful are the tropes of debt, demurral, and even avoidance whose downbeat energies suffuse this passage from Diderot and anchor even the most mundane discussions. In Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, the language of poetry is said to correspond to "no precise expression" and to refuse to be "appropriated to the purpose" of denotation; rather, it is made up of "substituted forms of Speech" like metaphor and other devices that pad out the identity of a thing by giving it another name.²⁵ This padding neither belongs to what is being described nor has any richly meaningful association with it. It is, Pierre Fontanier writes in his *Figures du discours*, "loaned for the moment" to its object, "nothing more than borrowed."²⁶

Like debt itself, the figure has an objective existence obscured by the indifferent relation it constructs between some thing and what is taken to be that thing's value—between, as Annie McClanahan puts it, "our vital needs and our economic capacities," and it's worth pointing out that, for Blair, figuration is exactly the mode of speech that allows human beings to economize by overextending, to use "one name for many" and thus to communicate over and above their actual semantic capacity.²⁷ This way of conceiving aesthetic representation as perpetual deferral may seem to belong to or terminate in poststructuralism and especially in the work of Paul de Man, whose readings of Romantic poems rely so heavily on eighteenth-century ideas about rhetoric and grammar. Without casting that work aside, I would suggest that an equally and perhaps more relevant genealogy in which to situate those ideas is the analytic tradition that grows directly out of Hume and Locke but owes much—and much undiscovered—to the Enlightenment rhetoricians. Here, we find good grist for the view that some representations are nonreferential without being nonreal, and that what such representations teach may lie outside the domain of epistemic evaluation without being devoid of epistemic significance.

By way of an example, take Donald Davidson's essay "What Metaphors Mean," published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1978. In a series of elliptical paragraphs, "What Metaphors Mean" identifies nonreferentiality as the essential attribute of metaphor, which, Davidson insists, "has [no] content or meaning (except, of course, its literal meaning)" and "convey[s] [neither] truths or falsehoods about the world"; the notion that it might

convey one or the other is simply a “mistake” with a prestigious history. In fact,

when we try to say what a metaphor “means,” we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention. If someone draws his finger along a coastline on a map, or mentions the beauty and deftness of a line in a Picasso etching, how many things are drawn to your attention? You might list a great many, but you could not finish since the idea of finishing would have no clear application. How many facts or propositions are conveyed by a photograph? None, an infinity, or one great unstatable fact? Bad question. A picture is not worth a thousand words, or any other number. Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture.²⁸

Notice, again, the language of an incomplete transaction, where the bond between the figurative object and what it might plausibly pick out is always one of indebtedness or liability. With Davidson, there is also the ghost of an impasse: the metaphor, the map, the etching—these simply exist outside ordinary communication and can’t be made to flow through its channels. The figurative relation is insoluble, stuck. Whatever it carries it does not convey, much as the debt does not actually facilitate, let alone entail, its clearance.

Davidson uses the language of propositions—of statements capable of being either true or false or, more loosely, of statements that offer to organize the real world in ways responsive to alethic assessment. It is a morally neutral language, but it maintains the temporizing logic of the figure, which is always attached to something whose name it can’t supply. Davidson’s map may not be Diderot’s mistress, but when it comes to propositional payoff they model the same kind of deficit. More to the point, however, they also model *attention* to this deficit, so that if the figure or the object replete with figures does not provide any good data about the world, it also makes clear that this is what it is doing—if, that is, we read it correctly.

To be clear, not all genres, schools, movements, or tendencies in the history of art operate like this, not even in the context of Romanticism. The poetry of Thomas Spence or even (in some complicated cases) John Clare can be nakedly referential. Nor for that matter is a figurative representation good or interesting only when it does an end run around explanation, giving little to no account of the world but rather flaunting the standoff between our belief that representations represent something and the simple fact that not all utterances, gestures, pictures, sounds, or signs work that way. The argument I want to make about mainstream

Romantic poetry, in particular, is that it is self-consciously trained on the difference, which it has learned from rhetorical theory, between propositional and nonpropositional forms of speaking and writing—the difference, in other words, between language that makes a claim about how things are, and why, and language that insists on its own estrangement from positive knowledge.

To bring this discussion full circle, figures are structural devices that create disorder in Dupré's sense: they are and they also generate distinctive objects, along with distinctive modes of thought by which to apprehend them. As Dupré tells us, there are many equally legitimate ways of dividing the world into kinds. Propositional and nonpropositional forms of speaking and writing may be divided from one another in just this way; they each *belong* to different parts of the world and have different sorts of obligations to the contents of those parts. A newspaper article reports, or ought to report, on aspects of reality and is, or ought to be, subject to evaluations like "true" or "false." A poem has no such responsibilities. This is partly what d'Alembert, in an early version of Dupré's hypothesis, means when he says criticism inquires into "the reasons of things that have none," which is to say, into aesthetic objects that, by definition, have no fact of the matter to justify, explain, induce, antecede, or prove by their existence.²⁹ This is in contrast, he insists, to both the sciences and theology: the former squares causes with effects, the latter deals in pure speculation, but criticism, given the curious nature of its objects, is something else altogether. It is not a midway point between a discipline that explains reality and a discipline that supersedes or invalidates it. It has instead the special challenge of elucidating entities that obviously exist but whose figurative elements make them impossible to construe in evidentiary terms.

After all, what do you know if you know a poem? The question drives Plato's *Ion*, in which Socrates gets the titular rhapsode to admit that even if he knows Homer backward and forward, he doesn't know how to do any of the things Homer's poetry talks about—nor, for that matter, does Homer, because it turns out that writing a poem that includes chariot-building does not necessitate knowing how to build a chariot. "Art," Socrates concludes, is therefore not knowledge but a "divine dispensation [to] say many fine things."³⁰ For Plato this is an ethical as much as a metaphysical claim: if art is not knowledge, it is beyond the domain of truth and falsehood and thus likely to cause people confusion about which is which. By the eighteenth century, it is a philosophically promising platform on which to experiment with new ways of divvying up the world in a way that reflects that world's complexity. By the Romantic

period, it is additionally a testing ground for art's and especially poetry's changing relationship to its historical circumstances.

If Plato thought the poets should be banished from his republic because of the threat they posed to rational order, the poets of this age have another problem entirely. Their skillset is defined by its inadequacy to an exegesis of the present; what they make is defined by a skeptical and beleaguered relationship to information. Now, in the rising heat of capital's disfiguration of the social, the figure finds its mirror and meets its match. If it is, as I've said, a condition of capital's flourishing that its own socially regulative and organizational processes remain obscure, how does a poetics that understands itself as constitutively cryptic and unable to scrutinize or spell out its own conditions, let alone the conditions by which modern life is reproduced, live with itself—which is to say, live, and not only with itself?

Despite its reputation for inwardness, Romantic poetry wants very much to live with others. To put a finer point on it, it wants very much to account for the uninhabitability of modern life—for the circumstances that make it impossible and yet mandatory to endure. This desire tends to be treated with suspicion in the poems themselves. “What benefit canst thou do, or all thy tribe,/To the great world?” Moneta, the goddess of memory, sneers at the poet-speaker of Keats's *Fall of Hyperion*; only those “to whom the miseries of the world/Are misery” are granted access to perfect historical knowledge, and without perfect historical knowledge there is, or so she implies, no hope for an end to immiseration.³¹ Both *Hyperion* poems, with their postclimactic structure, insist that poetry and perfect historical knowledge do not mix. That is why, despite promising to tell the story of the Titans' overthrow by the Olympian gods, they're set in the doleful aftermath of this particular revolution. It is why Wordsworth, whenever he winds himself up to deliver a parcel of narrative about his childhood, political events like the French Revolution, or social-economic transitions like enclosure and urbanization inevitably bears out his own fuzzy axiom that “we see but darkly/Even when we look behind us.”³²

These are poems in which big moments get lost; just think of Wordsworth's oblivious crossing of the Alps. And yet this tendency toward aversion or avoidance proves something of a red herring. The problem here is that the miseries of the world Keats, Wordsworth, and others have in mind—“the increasing disproportion between the price of labour and that of the necessaries of life,” for example, or “torched mines and noisy factories,” or “A thousand men in troubles wide and dark”—aren't the result of a single cataclysmic incident but the inevitable upshot of manifold protean transformations of social existence, driven or enabled on mul-

multiple levels by technological advances, political legislation, and metabolic contingencies.³³ If these are poems in which big moments get lost, they are also poems using those losses as stand-ins for the unrecognizability of much larger processes, as well as for the frustration of the idea that poetry could ever account for any of this in the first place, much less make it better. Again we see the utility of Hartman's association of Romanticism, negative knowledge, and trauma, which likewise involves mistaking a situation for an event, a childhood for a day.

The rise of capital was never just one thing. The specific cognitive challenge that defines the poetry of this period is how to represent the experience of not understanding the present when the present is the very thing the poem wants to understand. Of course, this isn't only the case for poetry: as Mary Favret has shown, Jane Austen's fiction is decisively formed by the experience of war at a distance and the globalization of military-imperial campaigns. What Romantic poetry has that the Romantic novel does not is a long institutionalized tradition of thinking about figures—about the building blocks and grinding gears of the poem—as elements anchored to a world that is adjacent to, at times embedded in, and yet nonidentical to the social world whose violent transformations that poetry would, in theory, like to explain. When William Cowper begins *The Task* with “a historical deduction of seats” before launching into a dizzying survey of the movement of global capital, he is counting on an uneven fit between what his pocket-size epic can plausibly relate and the moral urgency of his effort.³⁴ This imperfect calibration is part of the poem: it is the very thing it has to offer to a new but rapidly developing vocabulary for representing capital—or rather for representing its capacity to evade representation, to enforce its presence through a set of behavioral compulsions that both require and produce nescience about them.

It has lately become fashionable to argue that disciplinary divisions did not exist before the nineteenth century, and that the absence of such divisions reflects a broadly monist picture of the world as ontologically indivisible and flat. I recently heard a historian suggest that because John Goodsir used a passage from Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* as the epigraph to his 1845 book about cellular metabolism, we should think that the people of this period understood biochemistry and poetry to be univocal pursuits, trained on the same kind of phenomena (never mind that Coleridge's *Aids* is in prose). This is an especially unsophisticated version of a complex argument, but it's not quite a *reductio ad absurdum*. In its most benign form, what it reveals, in Christopher Nealon's adroit diagnosis, is the longing for a “wide-open, ontologically pure poem-world” in which organic life and literary text are seamlessly conjoined.³⁵

At the institutional level, the end of this otherwise starry-eyed rhetoric is a well-funded turn to interdisciplinarity—something I've written at length about elsewhere.

Now, the fact that a poem might lay claim to scientific subjects, or a treatise on chemistry make use of figures, tropes, or literary quotation, does not entail that literature is science and science literature. There is not ontology. For the purposes of this discussion, I am concerned by the ways in which a dogmatism grounded in the idea that disciplinary divisions are in violation of some subatomic concord bypasses the hard problem so much Romantic poetry sets out for itself: how to balance a belief in the partial autonomy of figurative representations from other parts of the world with a commitment to explaining the parts of the world that contain the greatest misery for the greatest number. Jameson famously tells us that history is what hurts; the specific ache Romanticism nurses comes from the sensation of its own disengagement from that hurt and the attempt, which always fails, to correct it. To be clear, this is not a moral failing; it is a metaphysical consequence. That doesn't make it any easier to bear.

The following chapters of this book, with the exception of the epilogue, are each organized around a specific figure: parataxis, obscurity, catachresis, and apostrophe. That is because, as my brief but I hope persuasive survey of eighteenth-century rhetorical theory and its afterlives has shown, it is the figure that holds the poem back from referential extension into the world or, at the very least, slows down their interchange. Each of the figures I've chosen does so in a unique and, in some cases—especially the case of apostrophe—a well-established way. The chapters do not represent wholesale renovations of existing ways of thinking about how these figures work and what they do but attempt to follow their logic in a way that opens up the poem at hand. You might ask, opens it to what; the answer is, to a recognition of its own insufficiency. You might ask, its insufficiency to what; the answer is, to the analytical task it sets out for itself, namely to explain why things are the way they are in the historical moment to which the poem belongs. You might ask, finally, who says poems want to explain anything about their historical moment; the answer is, not all poems do, but these poems do, desperately, and reading them uncovers a lot about other poems knuckling under to the same unanswerable passion.

The figure, in this book, is always a site of misalignment—not just with the world but, more locally, with the prospect of serving as *evidence* for something. One of the challenges in writing the book has been to evolve and inhabit a criticism capable of remaining faithful to this moment in the history of poetics. The style of reading and interpretation I

offer is at best agnostic: it does not massage facts out of objects that don't contain any but tries to flesh out a suspended mode of intellection sensitive to the uncertain content of the literary text. Like the figure itself, it aims not for naïveté but to capture the active and in-depth knowing of nothing, and the peculiar achievement of being on close terms with incomprehension. Always in the background of my argument is the claim that Romantic poetry is at once attracted and allergic to historical analysis in a manner that breaks with earlier, more conventionally humanist ideals about poetry's exemption from telling the truth. If, in the sixteenth century, Sidney could assure us that the poet "citeth not," that slantwise relation to the world has new meaning when the world itself undergoes a drastic diremption from its own social-ontological ground.³⁶

The Calamity Form, too, is attracted and allergic to historical analysis. I'm extremely wary of any attempts, including my own, to say that a poem is *about* something, or capable of giving information on it. Obviously there's a contradiction here: on the one hand, I want to say these poems tell you nothing; on the other, I want to say that they tell you what it is to know nothing, under social conditions where the knowing of nothing becomes instrumental to the reproduction of unlivable life. But contradictions, as we know, are not sinkholes. When we investigate them more deeply, when we walk around their borders and extend their edges, we find that they hold the only way forward.

Each chapter of the book undertakes this kind of investigation, where the social conditions at issue are in the main those of early industrial capitalism and the mushrooming sum of its harms. Some chapters distribute their focus across multiple authors or works of art—mostly poems, other times examples from visual media—while others tarry largely with a single writer. That said, because I'm less interested in authors than in figures, I end up looking for the latter across a good number of cases. Readers may notice that a sizeable number of these cases hail from the domain of postmodern and often conceptually driven art. Like Davidson, who collaborated with Robert Morris, I find the art traditions of the mid- to late twentieth and the twenty-first centuries helpful in thinking through questions of denotation from the perspective of poetics—often more helpful, incidentally, than any poetics that labels itself "conceptual." Thus in these pages Helen Mirra and Robert Barry as well as the avant-garde filmmaker Derek Jarman crop up alongside the Romantics, pulse points in the body of the figure as it is put to work across historical and cultural contexts.

The first chapter is called "Parataxis; or, Modern Gardens." It takes the idea that, in Susan Stewart's nimble phrase, "a garden is the wresting of form from nature" as a point of departure for asking how an eighteenth-

century poet might judge the activity of capital, which wrests in much the same way from the same source.³⁷ After outlining the rise of paratactical or disjunctive syntax and considering how it plays out—and has been said to play out—in the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin, I turn to the less illustrious pages of Cowper's *The Task* and his short lyric "The Rose." Completing the triad is Jarman, the filmmaker, poet, and gardener in whom I find an heir to Cowper's melancholy noncoordination between poetic thinking and social critique. Framed by an understanding of parataxis as a Pindaric leap over a pit, my discussion finds in this figure a poetic rehearsal (of sorts) of what Marx calls "the commodity's *salto mortale*" and ends by speculating about some alternative situations in which this kind of incautious exertion might find itself cut loose (C 1.200).

The next two chapters represent something of a compare-and-contrast, or, in less banal terms, an opposition elemental as the one between Blake's Los and his fearsome Spectre. First, in "Wordsworth's Obscurity," I find a poetics that is spectral in both the idiomatic sense and in Blake's: elliptical and indefinite and ballasted by "stern despair."³⁸ The historical argument here is that Wordsworth—in "Michael" and *The Prelude*—marries classical to modern views of *obscuritas* to show how it is impossible for poetry to make arguments about history. The more literary claim is embedded in a personal, perhaps idiosyncratic reading of Wordsworth as a poet estranged from life, stuck in a relation of incremental access to it that, paradoxically, never adds up to a whole. The connection between these two parts of the chapter lies in a claim about poetics: there is, I think, a clear and consistent set of things Wordsworth does with language in order to make totality, both historical and existential, look impossible and life at best intermittently worth living.

The movement from "Wordsworth's Obscurity" to my third chapter, "Keats and Catachresis," is diacritical. It is meant to bring into relief a set of differences between himself and the elder poet that Keats was extremely keen to uphold but never managed to phrase convincingly. This isn't about a familiar stone-throwing distinction between what Keats called Wordsworth's egotistical sublime and his own Negative Capability but rather about what separates a poetry of half measures and ragged, unsought possibilities from a poetry distinguished—and often damaged—by its excesses. If a catachresis is, etymologically speaking, a *down-use*, Keats's catachreses try to find the upside of degradation, the material potency of being a thing that lives in, is hurt by, and passes defiantly out from the world. Collating catachresis from poems including *Isabella*, "Ode to Psyche," and the two *Hyperions*, this chapter considers Keats's oft-derided sensuousness as an elective affliction, a way of making language strain past its breaking point. The result is a full-blooded

weakness set against the program of embodied inexhaustibility that Keats, in *Isabella* especially, associates with factory and enslaved labor.

In my final chapter, “Apostrophe: Clouds,” I use the colloquial expression “under climate change” as a prompt for thinking about Romantic renderings of aerial phenomena, and particularly of clouds, as a form of apostrophe—as, that is, an address to a nature in the process of disappearing. This is, I suggest, one way of defining the action of Romantic lyric, which thrives on making attenuated moments or regimes of existence hyperbolically intense. Picking up my discussion of the *Hyperion* poems from the previous chapter or, rather, turning the poems to hit a different light, I move from Keats to the cloud studies of John Constable, and to their own apostrophic features. The chapter ends with Helen Mirra’s 2001 installation *Sky-wreck*, and the encounter between real and ideal forms on which its imagination of an ecologically devastated but still open future rests. A brief epilogue follows.

This is a book about, and not in praise, of vanishing. We all have to go back to the world sometime, especially to its disappearances. Courting the forms of loss and bewilderment that inhere in a poem does not teach us anything about what is to be done; nor does it let us off the hook for doing it. What else, then, is the poem good for? What does it tell us that we don’t already know? These aren’t enigmas with answers; for those, we will have to look elsewhere.

1

Parataxis; or, Modern Gardens

Now there, said he, pointing his finger, I make a comma, and there, pointing to another spot where a more decided turn is proper, I make a colon: at another part (where an interruption is desirable to break the view) a parenthesis—now a full stop, and then I begin another subject.

HANNAH MORE, journal entry for December 1782

Hic Rhodus, hic saltus. . . Hier ist die Rose, hier tanze!
[Here is Rhodes, here the leap. . . Here is the Rose, dance here!]

G. W. F. HEGEL, Preface to *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 1821

Parataxis, like history, is one damn thing after another. “Somewhere, some there, disorder out, entangled in language.” It is a figure of insubordination with no respect for dependency or the logic of causes. “I was reading several books at once, usually three. If faster, then more.” You expect syntax to explain things to you, to say how one thing follows upon or comes out of the thing that came before it, to build a thought upward as the sentence moves onward. A paratactical sentence, however, tells no stories and makes no arguments. “The typewriter at night was classical.” The size of things stops mattering: no sequence, no rank. This makes it hard to divine the expository purchase of the words sitting side by side. What comes first; what is more basic, primal, effective, or co-efficient; which event sets off the others; which others could not have happened without it? “As the storm approached it was as if the blue slowly evaporated from the sky, leaving the sky merely a pale shadow of itself.” Where in a parataxis should we stand to see the whole picture? “Why isn’t the reflection in the mirror flat, since the mirror itself is flat.”¹

This chapter takes parataxis as a variation on what John Dixon Hunt calls garden syntax, the winding, seemingly hodgepodge arrangement of discrete particulars in a designated space. Like the paratactical sentence, the garden’s syntax is neither casual nor conjunctive. Every element has

been chosen and thoughtfully arranged, and yet none obviously follows from, is attendant upon, or is regulated by any other: what goes on in a garden is, as Marvell's Mower puts it, uncertain and adulterate, strange and unauthorized. If there is some significance to be retrieved from the insistent procession of one thing after another, it lies in the formal technique of disjunction itself. Over the course of the eighteenth century, modern poetry learned from modern gardens habits of looking and thinking trained on the experience of the present as a regime of juxtaposition, the leftovers from the demise of a more integrated social order. In the midst of economic stratification and imperial metastasis, writing paratactically becomes a means of exploring both this mosaic condition and poetry's inadequacy to it. It becomes, that is, an expression of life uprooted and transposed, a dark inverse of the garden as "heaven's centre, Nature's lap,/And Paradise's only map."²

Not all the poems I discuss here are about gardens, but they are all by *gardenists*, Dixon Hunt's word for writers who adapt the garden's form and phenomenology to their own purposes. For them, the garden is the flip side of an everyday chaos felt as perceptual derangement or lapse. Capability Brown, the grammatical gardener in my first epigraph, punctuates his landscapes with breaks and cutoffs, not joints. Alexander Pope, writing about his day traipsing through the backyard of Sherborne, drifts through "sudden Rises, Falls, and Turns of Ground" of which "'tis very hard to give an exact idea"; a hill leads to a grove followed by an arbor, after which erupts "a natural Cascade . . . from whence you lose your eyes upon the glimmering of the Waters under the wood, and your ears in the constant dashing of the waves."³ As "an increasingly prominent and crucial feature of the century's aesthetic patterns," the garden sets the standard for cognitive as well as syntactical incohesion.⁴ Often pitched as the antithesis of the turmoil of the world outside its walls, it is nonetheless the proving ground of an emergent set of compositional techniques, a dialect of fracture that will come to be called Romantic.

The analogy between gardens and parataxis is useful in making headway from the gardens of Marvell and his Mower to William Cowper's late eighteenth-century greenhouse to Derek Jarman's late Romantic pots of "sempervivums . . . with the nuclear power station as a backdrop."⁵ We might play at framing this sequence in terms similar to those offered by Joshua Clover, who identifies riot, strike, and riot prime as forms of class struggle corresponding to different phases in capital's development. Without mapping the early modern *hortus conclusus*, the greenhouse, and the nuclear garden onto the historical forms of mercantile, industrial, and finance capitalism, I would nonetheless like to experiment with asking

how a gardenist poetics confronts the collective immiseration erupting just within its sightline and yet never (or so it would seem) in full view.

To be specific, I'm interested in the capricious nonalignment between poetic thinking and social critique that parataxis brings to the fore. My claim is that by understanding parataxis as a trope of disruption—specifically, of orthodox modes of explanation, where events follow sequentially from the events that precede them—we may begin to see its simple besideness or underexplained contiguity as a proposition, an attempt to make a plan for “mediat[ing] between is and ought.”⁶ This would be in keeping with the well-known account of parataxis given by Theodor Adorno, who claims it as an invocation and working-through of dialectics, by which Adorno means the assertion that concepts coproduce with the forms of physical things.

Because it rejects the linear norms of discursive thought, parataxis is able to effect a “constitutive dissociation” within language such that language can “evade the logical hierarchy of a subordinating syntax.”⁷ In suspending hierarchy at the level of the sentence, parataxis—or so Adorno has it—figures the possibility of its real-life abolition. More to the point, it renders the transcendence of what Marx describes as the historical contradiction between essence (what it is possible for a human being to be) and existence (what a human being is forced to be) on the page, with ought and is brought suddenly, enigmatically together. This is a tall order and, for Adorno, nothing less than the task of poetry. What we are looking for in parataxis is “the qualitative leap that in responding to fate leads out of it,” for the momentum of a poetics capable of projecting thought and language beyond their own historical limitations (“P,” 113).

You could call this a Pindaric leap, the *saltus dithyrambus* that moves from one topic to another in response to some higher logic. The term *Pindaric leap* alludes to two things: to the fact that the Greek poet Pindar was known for his parataxes, which is to say his rocketing from clause to clause without the use of grammatical connectives, and to a line in one of his poems that reads like a compressed ars poetica in defense of that method. “Dig a long pit for my jump from here,” he writes in the fifth of his Nemean odes; “I have a light spring in my knees.” Pindar has just been saying a few words in praise of Pytheas, the young victor of the athletic games at Nemea, when suddenly he decides he's got something else on his mind, namely “wealth or strength of hands or iron-clad war.” It's a sudden shift in focus and a long way to go: he'll have to jump.⁸

Why does the jump, the Pindaric leap, require a pit? In *Nemean 5*, the pit measures the distance between where the poet stands and where he wants to end up. It appears as a promise of success and as a threat of

failure: imagine falling into the trench meant to gauge the magnitude of your achievement. It's the same threat faced by William Cowper when he, like Pindar, sets his mind to speak of wealth, war, and power. In his highly paratactic poem *The Task*, power means not the "strength of hands" but their products—it means, in a word, commodities. To sing the sofa, as Cowper says he will, comes to demand a terrifying leap of its own, a replication of the commodity's *salto mortale* that can only end either in apocalyptic fantasies or in the airless retreat of the greenhouse.

Cowper is my primary case study here, although the chapter touches, first, on the Pindaric experiments of Friedrich Hölderlin and eighteenth-century parataxis more broadly. Following that discussion, I turn to pulling parataxes out of Cowper's *Task* and showing, simply, how they work—how they upend the expository procedures of epic and push toward a turbulent view of a dissociated present. In this poem, the comforts of suburbia are tucked inside a larger frame of planetary suffering, and as Cowper shuttles between detailed scenes of domestic happiness and the murkier, grimier panoramas of world history, it becomes harder to say what is central to *The Task* and what peripheral to it. Is this a poem about the quiet life or about its toxicity? Do its experimental energies inhere in its cheeky, chatty blank verse or in its sprawl, its distension of the line across well-organized entropy?

Cowper's parataxis accommodates all these investments while refusing to present itself as a triumph of world-making or realist inclusivity: *Paradise Lost* or *Middlemarch* his poem is not. Compelled to make both plain and poetic the saturation of consciousness by what Cowper would call *trade*, *The Task* takes linearity off the table to sketch moods of unstructured anguish that cannot be gotten past, not even by Pindaric leap or escalation. Similar in this regard are the syntactical experiments of Derek Jarman, the filmmaker, diarist, and poet for whom the antagonisms of the present literally concretize in the nuclear power plant whose shadow looms over his Dungeness garden, a parataxis made possible only by a "capitalism . . . on its last legs" (*MN*, 234). In the wild collision of images that propels both these gardenists' work, various forms of life appear at once far-flung and brutally consolidated. Their poetry, in particular, beats out a crucible of apprehension in two senses of the word: it coughs up unities where none could previously be recognized, and it is exceptionally nervous, anxious and indefinite and unquiet.

To some degree, what *The Task* longs for is a bird's-eye view of the present, an Archimedean vantage on capital's global structure. The awkward and abrupt shifts between topics, between tones, and between lyric and epic registers that make *The Task* such difficult reading express the pathos of this longing, and how it feels to receive the agony of others as

news we cannot grasp but cannot help absorb. For Cowper, the capacity to take in pain on the edges of his own existence is precisely what the greenhouse, with its exotic plants and illusion of sanctuary, tests. Inside this most artificial of gardens, there is a retreat from the call to understand everything, to find meaning in it all. And yet it is also here that the possibility of an unexpected convergence between private consciousness, social totality, and moral judgment startles into view, whatever good it does Cowper, his poem, or us.

Two centuries later, Jarman uses his garden as an extension of his filmmaking and its pop-punk ethos—a middle finger to the nuclear power plant that “hiccoughs” fewer than two miles from his home, and to the erratic weather patterns that alternately nurture and spoil his flowers from one day to the next (*MN*, 302). The garden is an act of persistence and grieving, for the countryside, for the seasons, for an unthinkable number of friends lost, along with Jarman’s own eyesight, to the AIDS epidemic. The asyndetic list of prescription drugs that ends *Modern Nature*, a collection of his journal entries from 1989–90, plainly echoes the catalogs of flowers strung beside accounts of gallery openings, fundraisers, visits and phone calls and frustrations with his film *The Garden*. Each inventory marks an effort to render the concatenation of crises we now tend to herd under the awkward aegis of neoliberalism: crises of health, of energy, of the planet, and what Jarman would unapologetically call culture. From his vantage point at “the end of the globe,” in a house fittingly named Prospect Cottage, Jarman follows Cowper in offering a locodescription of capital as a poison in the bodies of living things. It’s a project that is upfront about its informal reworking of Romantic genres “almost 200 years,” as Jarman says, “since Dorothy Wordsworth wrote her journal in Alfoxden” (*MN*, 68).

Jarman’s work is highly digressive, in a way that can sometimes approach an accidental parody of art-house sensibilities. In what follows, I’ll argue that his paratactical drifts are, in fact, polemical; more specifically, that they rehearse the supersession or overriding of evidence by insistence. In this, they imagine a pose like that of Cindy Patton’s agnostic militancy, an impassioned indifference regarding the causal logic of harm. For Jarman, the power plant on the front lawn is literally, figuratively, and politically adjacent to the man dying of AIDS inside the house when the weather in England in November is already much too hot. Someone is responsible, or something: Thatcher, capital, the cops. It’s not all one, but it is beside the point. Parataxis is the figure matching this pose because it simply does not care *how* things happen; it cares merely that they are happening and about the obligation that they be stopped.

What does wild mint have to do with AZT? What do canaries have to

do with “Ritafer, Pyroxidine, Methamine, Folinic Acid, Triludan, Sulphadiazine, Carbamazepine” (*MN*, 313)? The linkages are inconvenient and also inexplicable. They emerge from Jarman’s own position of depleted vitality, his anger a deathbed charge to no one in particular. This perhaps undermines its effectiveness, and it is an interesting feature of parataxis that the expansive, hyperbolically omniscient poetics it enables tends to insist upon the extreme isolation of the poet, who stands amid a world of things but not among them. We shouldn’t forget that the pathos of being unable to understand the present in a serious way, to discern it as a consequence of the past and not just a prophecy of the apocalyptic future, is also the despair of the bourgeois subject. Cowper represents its early fortunes, Jarman its latter-day. This is not a complaint but an observation about the performance of social self-discovery that their work represents. That performance is not really born of the consciousness of class. It is born, instead, of a desire to translate an economic bearing into an emotional one.

* * *

In Adorno’s “Parataxis: Zur späten Lyrik Hölderlins,” parataxis is defined in opposition to “the syntactic periodicity à la Cicero” of logical argument. It is typified by the curveballs Hölderlin throws to his reader, who is led up close to one conclusion only to be sideswiped by something that does not follow—unless it does, but only according to the highly unorthodox, not at all ratiocinative logic of dialectical thinking (“P,” 135).⁹ This seems intuitively right to me. It is not, however, supported by Adorno’s readings of Hölderlin’s poems. If Adorno succeeds in producing a definitive analysis of the poet as “the master of the intermittent linguistic gesture,” he tenders little in the way of a discussion of rhetoric (“P,” 113). Here, statements like “All poetry protests the domination of nature with its own devices” are often followed by block quotes that have at best a logogrammatic relationship to argument (“P,” 140). Funnily enough, Adorno is most attentive to Hölderlin’s language when he’s exploding Heidegger’s claims about it, a task that takes up a good chunk of the essay’s first half and reaps its best rewards, as when Adorno confronts a racist gloss on the brown women of “Andenken”; philology, he intimates, is a tool of white supremacy, a dull gadget used by a “right-wing German cult” to turn Hölderlin’s poetry against its anti-identitarian ambitions (“P,” 119).

Perhaps Adorno thinks the implications of lines like the following are so clear they don’t need to be stated, in which case I hope my own reader will humor me as I try to tease them out. Or perhaps Adorno knows that parataxis—an undoing of the expectation that subordinate clauses will

always lie in rhetorical as well as grammatical servitude to main ones—is after something less obvious than giving dialectics a home in poetic form. Take this sequence from “Andenken”:

Wo aber sind die Freunde? Bellarmin	<i>But where are the friends? Bellarmin</i>
Mit dem Gefährten? Mancher	<i>With his companions? Many of them</i>
Trägt Scheue, an die Quelle zu gehen;	<i>bear shyness, to go to the spring;</i>
Es beginnet nämlich der Reichtum	<i>Riches, that is, begin</i>
Im Meere.	<i>In the sea.¹⁰</i>

Adorno’s brief gloss on this passage is that it reflects the “historico-philosophical conception that spirit can only attain itself through distance and detachment” (“P,” 119). Maybe so. But that’s not an insight derived from any parataxis; it’s just an inference based on the poem’s genre: our lyric speaker is alone, and from this solitude something meaningful (and also this poem) will come.

But the essay gives us these lines as an example of parataxis, so let’s find one in them. The semicolon points us to the lines “Mancher/Trägt Scheue, an die Quelle zu gehen” and “Es beginnet nämlich der Reichtum/Im Meere” and suggests that the latter clause is subordinate to the former. But parataxis isn’t just a matter of grammar; it’s also a matter of sense. As Adorno says, parataxis has to put words together in a manner that draws out their latent strangeness. If these lines have a totally straightforward relationship to each other, we can’t consider them paratactical. Indeed, the presence of *nämlich*—which means namely, that is, or viz.—seems to insist that they’re not, because *nämlich* is a connective and parataxes, by definition, don’t use connectives. So what is going on?

Adorno is onto something; he just doesn’t follow it through. The key to what’s paratactical about these lines lies in “Mancher/Trägt Scheue, an die Quelle zu gehen,” an ambiguous phrase whose opacity arises from its unusual use of the verb *tragen*, to wear, carry, bear, yield, or even to be pregnant. Depending on how you take the verb, the meaning of the line varies to the point of suggesting two entirely incommensurate things. Richard Sieburth’s stately translation gives “There are those/Who shy from the source”: some people are not going to the source; in fact, they’re avoiding it.¹¹ However, and as Katrin Pahl suggests in her meditation on shyness as a “speculative transport that draws lovers together by pulling them apart,” the more literal “bear shyness” not only conserves the haziness of the line but also perfectly renders the dialectical synthesis they compose but don’t actually complete.¹² On this reading, we can see resistance (shying away) tussle with endurance (bearing, putting up with), but neither is able to pass into free movement. Where we might expect

synthesis we get a non sequitur: “Es beginnet nämlich der Reichtum/Im Meere,” or “viz., riches begin in the sea.”

So here is our parataxis—or is it? Again, *nämlich* trips us up, for it invites these lines (“es beginnet nämlich der Reichtum/Im Meere”) to clarify what’s been said in the main clause. Sieburth’s translation obeys precisely this logic: Some people shy away from the source since, after all, wealth has its origin in the sea, so why look elsewhere? Actually, what it obeys is not just logic but logical fallacy, the connective figment of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* that assumes causation where there may be only coincidence.

Let’s be clear about what’s happening, since it is by no means self-evident. There are two ways to read the pairing “Mancher/Trägt Scheue, an die Quelle zu gehen” and “Es beginnet nämlich der Reichtum/Im Meere.” Each of these ways has its little cues or alibis. On one reading, *nämlich* suggests an explanatory relation, and it requires shaving the two meanings of *tragen* down to one: no one goes to the fount because riches begin in the sea. On another, *nämlich* is a red herring, the subordinate clause as a whole is matter out of place, and the relation at issue between the subordinate clause and the main one, which itself comprises two rival meanings, is parataxis. This second reading is not so easily paraphrased, because the paratactical framing of the first and second clause prevents the meaning of the former from terminating in the latter. If there is, as I’ve said, a sneak preview or teasing of transcendence here, of an abolition of the antipodes of turning bashfully away and moving reluctantly toward, it remains strictly hypothetical. The last line does not bear it out, either in form or in content, but floats free as an isolated proposition. The conditions for dialectics have been set up, but they are not cashed out.

This may seem like a minor footnote to Adorno, for whom parataxis must mime the dynamism of dialectical thought. But on my reading of these four lines by Hölderlin, parataxis lays out the path of a dialectical progression only to leave it dangling in the air, subject to the petty dictatorship of conjunctions. If *tragen* only has one meaning (to shy away from), the lines are not paratactical and the brute strength of normative logic wins the day. If *tragen* has at least two meanings, the lines are paratactical and normative logic must coexist with a more speculative hypothesis, acting as a significant drag on speculation’s momentum but unable to stymie it completely.

Words, of course, can have more than one meaning in everyday speech, but it matters that this second interpretation depends on being aware of the poetic frame of Hölderlin’s sentences, of the fact that they are poetry and more likely to be ambiguous than not. One of the things these lines do is identify poetry as a form of reasoning that is *more than fallacious*,

not the opposite of causal reasoning but evidence of its limits, as well as a procedure for jumping to conclusions that might be visionary instead of just false. Parataxis localizes that jump, clips it to a specific moment in the text or a specific leap from line to line, clause to clause, thought to thought. As “Andenken” indicates, parataxis will always contain the possibility of true randomness, the threat of the non sequitur that can’t be overcome even through the most creative close reading.

I’ve spent this time with Adorno’s famous essay in order to lay out some essential premises for my discussion. Among these are that parataxis is a dialectical provocation and not a dialectical achievement: even as it creates a space inside of which seemingly discrete terms become mutually intelligible as contradictions, it nonetheless constrains the scope of their movement, so that the paratactical poem is never quite able to synthesize a new perspective or concept from the ones it has already laid out. This suggests another premise, namely that parataxis is a location of bourgeois tragedy, which is to say that it sustains—even grimly celebrates—a certain paralysis of both thought and action. In “Andenken,” the poet may merely “establish what remains” (“Was bleibet aber, stiften die Dichter”), a phrase that suggests ingenuity exhausted in the task of cultural curation. To this I’d add Bob Perelman’s claim that parataxis generates an “unresolved pressure for [social] narrative,” an account of how things are that parataxis, insofar as it resists the linear precepts of narrative while also failing to complete a dialectical jump from here to there, will never really supply.¹³

For Perelman, this aggressively indecisive poetics is specifically post-industrial. It belongs to a world of thundering randomness and dissonance, where our brains are constantly assaulted by “bursts of narrative-effect” that are, at best, “local totalities,” never gathering themselves into “more permanent, meaningful” analyses of our condition. A paratactical poetics does not escape this state of affairs; nor does it simply copy it: rather, “the tension between symptom and critique is constant.”¹⁴ Without overstating the affinity between Perelman’s view of the late twentieth century and Cowper’s view of his own, I want to suggest that if *postindustrial* flags the heterogenous background of global militarism and multinational capital, consumer culture and its throttling of existence, the eighteenth century is as good a place to start as any. The new sentence, it turns out, is not quite so new.

* * *

The word *parataxis* wasn’t used for a grammatical form until the late 1820s, when the classicist Friedrich Thiersch worked it into his third edi-

tion of *Griechische Grammatik*. Before then, a sentence lacking conjunctions would, in Europe and in the Anglophone world, have been tagged as an example of style coupé, the nimbler alternative to the ponderous style periodique. “The Style Periodique,” explains Hugh Blair, “is, where the sentences are composed of several members linked together . . . so that the sense of the whole is not brought out till the close.” In “Style Coupé,” by contrast, “the sense is formed into short independent propositions, each complete within itself.” What Blair could not anticipate in the 1780s, when his *Lectures on Rhetoric* was first published, is that his association of style coupé with “the French method of writing, [which] always suits gay and easy subjects,” would soon take on a political charge.¹⁵ In the wake of the Revolution, style coupé became the format of democracy, the syntax of Diderot and Voltaire set against the formality of seventeenth-century prose and court culture. By 1810, a coursebook put out by the École Polytechnique is positing sentence structure as social allegory: with the widespread adoption of style coupé, we learn, the French “language has become more clear . . . though perhaps it’s lost some of its nobility.”¹⁶

Coleridge, in the midst of his conservative turn, seals this pact between style and the spirit of the age. Having defended the “entortillage” of his own prose, he goes on to sneer at “the present illogical age, which has, in imitation of the French, rejected all the cements of language, so that a popular book is now a mere bag of marbles.”¹⁷ It’s an image he’ll use years later, in a complaint about “modern books, [in which] for the most part, the sentences in a page have the same connection with each other that marbles have in a bag”: “They touch without adhering.”¹⁸ That a historical age could model its atomization on a corresponding form in literature, that it could come loose from a linguistic heritage that stabilizes the culture as a whole, that the popular presents a threat of chaotic kinetic unrest—the French word for marbles is *meubles*, “movables”—these are sentiments Coleridge imbibes from Burke, who, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, likewise uses metaphors of “cementing” to criticize revolutionary departures from convention; these, he predicts, will condemn the French republic “infinitely to dissociation, distraction, and confusion” as a whole and “with relation . . . to the several parts within.”¹⁹

This peek at the context of Romantic parataxis suggests, I hope, that there is or at least once was something compelling about the idea that abandoning transitions has the capacity to stylize historical crisis. If a poet like Hölderlin adapts style coupé for his own purposes, he also exploits in order to rebuff its association with a canting storyline in which stuffiness gives way to lucidity and kingdoms give way to republics. His method is one of scarification, an exorbitant cutting into the pseudo-egalitarian

promise of the shorter sentence. The result is a poetic line that gives the appearance of having been grievously wounded, the syntactic equivalent of Wordsworth's Discharged Solider, "Forlorn and desolate, a man cut off/From all his kind, and more than half detached/From his own nature."²⁰ These lines—later abandoned by Wordsworth—vividly document the human wages of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. They too belong to the Romantic critique of modernity, and to the rhetorical stratagems of annihilation and decay that, as Hölderlin says, encode and console a world that "never looked so motley as now," dyed in "a huge plurality of contradictions and contrasts" ("die Welt noch nie so bunt aussah, wie jetzt"; "eine ungeheure Mannigfaltigkeit von Widersprüchen und Kontrasten").²¹

The other model for parataxis in this moment is more obvious, if less politically freighted. It is the Pindaric or irregular ode, the principal motor for the development of the greater Romantic lyric. There have been countless discussions of Pindar's influence on the poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and on writers like Shelley, Keats, and Hopkins. And yet it's seldom observed that, as Susan Bernofsky points out, the Pindar to which these poets had access was a Pindar in paratactic overdrive. Not until 1821 (a few years before Thiersch put parataxis in the critical vocabulary) was Pindar's much-haggled-over colometry understood to have been sorted into periods at all. The edition of Pindar Hölderlin used for his experimental word-for-word translations maintained "the faulty division of Pindar's lines into short, often choppy lines[,] based on the failure to recognize the system by which his odes were organized." As a result, those translations place an outsized onus on each word in a line, where the idea of the line is already "pared down to a stark minimum of elements," "massively compressed" in the way Hölderlin's own verse would become. And, as a result, Hölderlin learns to find "in the Greek language[,] with its freedom of syntax," a poetics that is "inherently paratactic" even when it may originally have operated according to a different standard.²²

Adorno is terse when it comes to Pindar, probably because he wants to emphasize Hölderlin's spiritual allegiance to Hegel's prose, with its expressive as well as philosophical fondness for the leap.²³ It's a connection that's meant to lend historical credibility to the picture of Hölderlin as dialectician, for whom parataxis can serve as a critique of what Adorno jarringly calls "the division of labor" ("P," 113). And yet, just as Hölderlin's work is unthinkable outside the aesthetic and ideological development of style coupé, so too is it significantly engaged in using classical texts to hone a technique for those contradictions and contrasts that make the post-Revolutionary present: "Old and new! Culture and barbarity!

Malice and passion! Egotism in sheep's clothing, egotism in wolf's clothing! Superstitions and unbeliefs. Bondage and despotism! unreasoning wisdom—unwise reason! mindless feeling—unfeeling minds! History, experience, heritage without philosophy, philosophy without experience!"²⁴ Through an adoption of paratactical extremes, Hölderlin finds a way to tug these unruly antagonists "resonantly together," "absolutely," as he renders the elliptical lines of Pindar's second Olympian, "though that which interpreters requires."²⁵ So much for Hegelian prose.

The case of Hölderlin is instructive because it brings the flashpoints of eighteenth-century literary culture together with a burgeoning approach to composition curious about the possibility of a dialectical poetics, at a time when dialectics is just beginning to bud off of Enlightenment materialism. Recent studies have shown the significance of the Lucretian revival on that philosophical constellation, which receives the Latin poet's atomist metaphysics with excitement, or at least good cheer. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century turn to Pindar is as important and, when it comes to manifest changes in poetic form, of considerably more consequence. To understand parataxis, we need to hold in mind the Pindar whose irregular and overlacerated odes offer what looks to the postclassical reader like a phenomenology of fissure. The preoccupation with ruins, fragments, and other crumbs from the ancient world marking so much of the literature of this time becomes, in the neo-Pindaric mode cultivated by Cowley, Congreve, Dyer, and Gray among others, a prismatic material through which to filter the present as the long futurity of the antique past. Since that past comprises so many moments of civilizational collapse, it is thematically well suited to imagining the "ferment and dissolution" ("Gärung und Auflösung") out of which a "new organization" ("ein neuer Organisation") of the world must necessarily be born.²⁶

Like style coupé, the Pindaric ode had a mixed reputation. Both meant syntactic aberration, and both attracted notice for the ways in which their disjunctive structure produced the effect of words being, in Samuel Johnson's phrase, "shaken together." In his "Life of Cowley," Johnson offers a rundown of flaws—thriving on "uncertainty and looseness," the ode is "lax and lawless," contagious and juvenile ("all the boys and girls [have] caught" the Pindar bug), and unfit for "the highest kind of writing in verse"—before grudgingly allowing that "the Pindaric Odes have so long enjoyed the highest degree of poetical reputation, that [he is] not willing to dismiss them with unabated censure." Nonetheless, the point stands: in neo-Pindaric, "the greatness of one part is disgraced by the littleness of another; and total negligence of language gives the noblest conceptions the appearance of a fabric august in the plan, but mean in the materials."²⁷

These are defects of scale, propriety, and medium, and they are defects of sense. By mixing together long lines with short ones, serious intention with impoverished execution, Pindar's followers transgress the formal and generic conventions that allow poetry to be read, as Johnson thinks it must be, for its argument.

Johnson's complaint comes at a transitional moment for English poetry, between the assumption that good writing can be easily understood and the emergent experimental principle that it has to be difficult—difficult to read, grasp, and like. Interestingly, and as Johnson suggests, some of the strangeness of modern Pindaric comes from its affinity to prose, which is also metrically irregular, and from its roots in speaking into the air (Ancient Greek poetry being, of course, a performance art). Recounting the rise of paratactical constructions in eighteenth-century writing, Sylvia Adamson notes that the "speech-based model of literature" favoring an absence of conjunctions and herky-jerky relationship to rhetorical order suffers from "an information deficit" not present in spoken language. "When parataxis occurs in speech," she writes, "intonation normally tells us where the links are," but on the page these inroads are blocked.²⁸ The result is an ambiguity that wrests form from content; the poem becomes graphically visible as a physical object, a fabric (to use Johnson's word) behind which little to no referential significance may be discovered.

From Johnson's ode-as-fabric to Hölderlin's construction of the poetic sentence as a thing the poet breaks with his own two hands, the eighteenth-century Pindaric ode lures forth the critical intuition that the most provocative poetry asserts its continuity with a world of things. Because the irregularly abbreviated line is hard to understand, and because the poem's paratactical arrangement makes its rationale hard to retrieve, the poem affronts the reader with its own substance, which, far from inert, threatens to take flight. As George Woodward has it in his 1730 satire "The English Pindarick," the form's short lines are "like Dwarf[s] behind a Giant-Man," each of its "long-tailed" ones a "Thing/ . . . that swells, and foames with Rage" before it "leaps beyond the scanty Page," "thund'ring on in frantick strain."²⁹ In his magisterial study of Pindar, John Hamilton will say that the insistent carnality of the ode forestalls the ideological passage of thought into common sense. By the time we get to Hölderlin, he writes, that preemption may be explained by an appeal to "the transit between two thoughts . . . infinitely hanging on to a third, which may be the poetry to come," an "unheard melody" that belongs to the future more than to any one language or tradition.³⁰

In the historical absence of that possibility, parataxis might register mere midstness, as being in the thick of discontinuous experience. This

is what Joseph Addison seems to have in mind when, in a 1712 issue of the *Spectator*, he jokes that his personal “Compositions in Gardening are altogether after the Pindarick Manner”—a phrase that seesaws pleasantly between poetic and horticultural idioms. “I think,” he opines, “there are as many kinds of Gardening as of Poetry: Your Makers of Parterres and Flower-Gardens, are Epigrammatists and Sonneteers in this Art: Contrivers of Bowers and Grotto’s, Treillages and Cascades, are Romance Writers.” The Pindaric gardener, for his part, strives for “a Confusion of Kitchen and Parterre, Orchard and Flower-Garden, . . . so mixt and interwoven with one another, that if a Foreigner who had seen nothing of our Country should be convey’d into my Garden at his first landing, he would look upon it as a natural Wilderness.” This is tongue in cheek, since even an ornamental hedge overgrown with herbs or an orchard in a field of flowers will never be taken for “an uncultivated Part . . . of [the] Country”—something Addison’s identification of types of gardens with genres of poetry makes clear.³¹ More sincere is the hint that the Pindaric garden is a place of social isolation, a hinterland in which one can neither comprehend nor be comprehended.

This passage from Addison returns us to the garden, and to its syntax. Dixon Hunt writes that the informality of the eighteenth-century English garden, which lets plants and buildings encounter one another free from the symbolic strictures of the *jardin à la française*, trains an entire generation of middle-class writers to see the world differently: as a collection of objects and experiences threaded through the couplet of art and nature. There is no prospect poem without Addison’s Pindaric garden coming before it, nor any Wordsworthian gaze that moves through the green everything, green to the very door.

What happens in a garden, writes Thomas Whately in his *Observations on Modern Gardening*, should seem to have “irresistibly occurred,” should “have the force of a metaphor, free from the detail” and narrative sequencing of allegory.³² A garden, that is, should have a sense without having a story, even if that sense might be turned toward a more analytic reflection on historical existence. This is partly what Dixon Hunt means when he says that the “Pindarick manner” of the eighteenth-century garden helps refine a poetry built on a disjunctive series of impressions that arrive with a unified *bang*. It is a poetry corkscrewing away from any fixed subjective center even when the speaker’s voice is, if anything, overamplified, for that voice too is absorbed into a world whose defining feature is that it is loud.

A parataxis is not a metaphor, but it has metaphoric heft: because it comes in pieces that fail to add up logically to some whole, and because this failure prompts an alternative means of deriving sense from sense-

data, it tropes the belief that creative thought has power even in a moment of hyperattenuated *Erfahrung*. To borrow Miriam Hansen's gloss on gardening and other arts of "bewildering and hidden correspondence," parataxis wrings the sentence from its "ostensibly linear, instrumental destination and reconfigure[s] [it] according to a different logic—not unrelated," crucially, "to the aesthetics of collage, bricolage, and montage." These are also the aesthetics of parataxis, whose classical heritage allows it to represent, like the garden, "the return of archaic, cyclical, mythic time in an accelerated succession of the new."³³ Dragged into a very different modernity, it becomes "multidimensional, contradictory, simultaneous, contrapuntal, stereoscopic."³⁴

Cowper never joined his contemporaries in the full flush of the Pindaric revival, but he nonetheless strives for and achieves a poetics of "boundless contiguity," openly indentured to capital and struggling to escape from its various pollutants.³⁵ In the next section, I cull parataxes from *The Task* in order to limn what Coleridge called its divine chitchat as an experimental excavation of a self-consciously middle-class *dispositif* from that most highborn of genres, the epic. Cowper's parataxis is a corridor along which the contradictions of late eighteenth-century society rattle and pulse, their sound that of "a world that seems/To toll the death-bell of its own decease" (*T* 2.50–51). I do, however, have two cautions before proceeding. The first is simply to note that my focus will be on the first two books of *The Task*, for it is here—and not in book 3, temptingly called "The Garden"—that Cowper elaborates his paratactical method. The second is to warn that my reading of the poem cannot be called eco-critical, at least not dogmatically.

There has been much comment lately on *The Task* as an environmentalist poem, and on Cowper as a poet who understands before others can that eighteenth-century capitalism, the plantation economy, and a sudden uptick in the frequency and severity of natural disasters are the conditions for one another's calamitous reproduction. These discussions are welcome, but they force connections where Cowper is at pains to assemble adjacencies, to string topics along his poem's semi-mock-epic wire in such a way that they are obviously related and troublingly discrete. Troubling, because the moral ambition of *The Task* is—as Kevis Goodman has impeccably argued—to indict a present it can't really see, to unify phenomena whose crowded interconstitution it can suspect though never name. This is the positional pathos of its desire and parataxis is its figure, the technology by which a history "beyond lived experience and sense perception" appears both absent and immanent.³⁶

* * *

The first line of *The Task* is so memorable it's easy to forget that the poem doesn't really begin with "I sing the Sofa" but with a prose synopsis that announces its first subject as a "historical deduction of seats" (*T* 1.1, p. 129). The phrase chimes with the poem's Advertisement, which offers "the history of the following production" as a digressive pursuit through "train[s] of thought" and "turn[s] of mind" (*T*, 128). Remember that Coleridge saw this sort of tangent-driven writing as "marbles in a bag," a collection of *meubles* or moving parts with no logic or order to them. Of course, *meubles* is not only the French word for marbles; it is also the French word for furniture. In *The Task*, furniture moves or launches the poem; it is the tracer the poem pins on capital, which Cowper identifies with the evolution of commodity culture and the circuit of trade around the globe. Insofar as it is movable, moreover, furniture—the sofa, the seat, the armchair, even the rabbit pen—is also an unexpected emblem of the poem's style, which is crafted to match capital's drama of high-speed perpetual displacement of one thing by another.

From poetic production to the commodity's deduction, these twin histories, like Cowper's title, expressly characterize *The Task* as an effort and as an artifact. Compare some other celebrated poems of the so-called Graveyard poets, among whose number Cowper is generally counted: *The Seasons*, *Night-Thoughts*, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, *The Deserted Village*, *The Hop-Garden*. The list isn't complete, but it is representative. These are poems about places and times and their imagination is topographical, even when the lay of the land concerns the shape of a feeling. They promise an experience of *presence*, as though by reading Gray or Goldsmith we are brought close to a gravestone or empty house, pulled toward ruins and twilight fields.

Cowper's poetic undertaking is of quite another order, and the world it paints is marked, first and foremost, by the poet's estrangement from what happens there. By estrangement I mean a specific psychic and structural pattern by which Cowper knows himself to be in collusion with crimes against humanity and against the natural world, crimes to which he vociferously objects. That objection, repeatedly associated with the figure of retreat or suburban quasi-hermitage, pitches itself as ethical, even a bit saintly, but Cowper also seems aware that it functions as a denial of what is, in a word, objective: "the pangs/And agonies of human and of brute/Multitudes" whose suffering is so distant from and yet so much a part of his own (*T* 2.105)

Coleridge's oft-quoted description of Cowper's poetry as chitchat is a good gateway to thinking about the older poet's style, or rather about the appearance of its absence. According to Hazlitt, Coleridge nominated Cowper as the best modern poet, and in the *Biographia Literaria*

he makes the offhand remark that Cowper “combined natural thoughts with natural diction” in a manner that substantially altered the generic expectations of English poetry, which henceforth would be judged by its capacity to “reconcile . . . the heart with the head.”³⁷ It’s a surprising scaffold on which to build Cowper up, since the remarks on *Lyrical Ballads* that follow a few chapters later might lead one to believe that if there’s one thing Coleridge doesn’t like in poetry, it’s the sound of people talking, in a cadence unmoored by prosodic discipline.

It’s surprising, too, given Coleridge’s distaste for the “intercourse” of “uneducated men,” marked as it is by a “disjunction and separation in the component parts of that, whatever it be, they wish to communicate.” This arbitrary progression, this suspension of “order,” betrays “a want of that prospectiveness of mind, that surviue, which enables a man to foresee the whole of what he is to convey . . . [and] so to subordinate and arrange the different parts according to their relative importance, as to convey it at once, and as an organized whole.”³⁸ Chitchat seems to be evidence of precisely this want, even if the people chatting are as erudite as Cowper.

In order for Cowper to make his chitchat divine, he needs to make it metrical, which is to say, stressed. And stressed it is, for despite Coleridge’s picture of Cowper as a mild country moralizer, his poetry, including but not limited to *The Task*, adopts disconnected discourse for the purpose of jeremiad. The most obvious target of Cowper’s wrath is the Atlantic slave trade, which the seemingly innocuous opening of *The Task* rivets to the history of class society as a history of the social relations of production. A more general target is the paralytic condition of wrong life, about as natural as the greenhouse Cowper, with not a little irony, calls his “blest seclusion from a jarring world” (*T* 3.675). Blank verse has a lot to do with the elaboration of these concerns. Once fireside chat billows into the meter of epic, the effect is not merely “mock”; it is also critical, an invitation to consider why the apparent triviality of bourgeois life might be significant to a poem whose very title tropes work.

More significant, however, is the poem’s management of images. I’ve implied that this management is essentially paratactical, since it relies on the juxtaposition of disparate elements. Coleridge helps us see, too, that Cowper’s inability to subordinate is enmeshed in his development of an explicitly political poetics, for which being modern means feeling ourselves to be “agonizingly self-divided” in relation to “present reality,” in which we “can only find . . . the grave of [our] life.”³⁹ A syntax that divides and digresses brings that self-division to the page; it also gestures at the possibility of organizing what can seem like a random assortment of topics and themes, disquisitions and digressions into an actually exist-

ing social totality, even if there is no point from which that totality might become available to Coleridgean surview.

Suspending hierarchies of significance at the level of the page may not deliver “the concrete unity of interacting contradictions.”⁴⁰ Nonetheless, there is something about packing things closely together that hints at the wish to grasp *some* unity as a whole dominant over its parts, even if the deep structure of that domination remains obscure. Cowper’s coy defense of his poem as an accident of running on, of moving so quickly from one thing to the next that his “trifle” soon piles up into “a serious affair—a Volume!,” belies the poem’s central surmise, woven into its ungainly shifts of register and many muddled perspectives: the present is so flat it might press you to death (*T*, 128). The muddle is also the substance of history, seen from the perspective of a body that passes through and is helpless before it. By inlaying a carefully crafted figurative register within a poem whose topicality flirts with mere reportage, Cowper holds *The Task* back from simple documentation. And yet there is no heroism here, no triumph of the aesthetic. What speaks most loudly is the style of historical experience washed over historical fact.

To sing the sofa is to give its biography as a consumer object. The poem spends its first hundred lines mapping the sofa’s family tree, from rocks to stools with three legs and to stools with four legs and soft, embroidered cushions to chairs of “cane from India” to settees, chaises, and finally the sofa itself. “So slow/The growth of what is excellent!” Cowper crows: “[N]ecessity invented stools,/Convenience next suggested elbow-chairs,/And luxury th’ accomplished SOFA last” (*T* 1.86–88). If, by even the most optimistic standards, the paradigm of exchange governing political economy in the eighteenth century turns human beings into “product[s] of multiplying relationships . . . between things and persons,” it likewise allows Cowper to present his sofa as a historical actor, or to suggest that commodities have thickened into agents like the persons with which they are also interchangeable.⁴¹ And yet, and as the poem’s first four words suggest, the epic protagonist of consumer culture is disjoined from even a prosthetic relationship to other forms of life. The poet sings not of arms and a man but of the products of men’s hands, loosed from the social body of which they are the most bona fide remnant. Not for nothing does this history of seats proceed either in the passive voice—“joint-stools were then created,” “the frame was form’d”—or by attributing their manufacture to abstract causes (*T* 1.19, 1.56).

Still, the sofa soon drops out of the book to which it gives its name, making its last appearance in line 137 just as Cowper begins to reminisce about his boyhood, when “No SOFA then awaited [his] return” from school, “Nor SOFA then [he] needed” (*T* 1.126–27). In its place is the tree,

since, like his contemporary Oliver Goldsmith and John Clare after him, Cowper sees in the fate of the English tree proof of the dispossession of life by trade. In his unfinished “Yardley Oak,” Cowper looks backwards at “those thriftier days,” when “Oaks fell not, hewn by thousands, to supply/ The bottomless demands” of politicians and profiteers, making hay off the imperial wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.⁴² *The Task*, having hinted at a “fear” of “want of timber . . . /in Albion’s happy isle,” is likewise incensed by the deforestation that has turned England into “an Indian waste without a tree” (*T* 1.57–58, 1.261). Of course, we already know where some of India’s trees have gone, namely into those cane chairs “smooth and bright/With Nature’s varnish; sever’d into stripes/That interlace . . . each other” (*T* 1.39–41). And we know where the “fallen avenues” closer to home are headed: toward whichever newly discovered place lies beyond the “boundless oceans,” waiting to be “plough’d perhaps by British bark again” (*T* 1.338, 1.629, 1.631).

Like the fibers of a cane chair, these and other figures of ecological devastation and colonial adventure interlard the reveries of book 1, without winding into an explanatory convergence of trees, sofas, boats, and islands. What develops is a motif of the present likewise severed into stripes, a striation that may well echo Phillis Wheatley’s grisly pun on “Cain” in her “On Being Brought from Africa to America.”⁴³ The stripes are parataxes, ways of “transcoding an orchestra of spatial, cultural, and political developments,” including the emergence of London’s poetry “mart,/So rich, so throng’d, so drain’d, and so supplied . . . opulent, enlarg’d, and still/Increasing[.]” (*T* 1.719–22).⁴⁴ They are also “nice incision[s]” “plough[ed] [into] a brazen field” of poetry itself, for which there is no “soil/So sterile” that it can’t be catachrestically “clothe[d]” in “the richest scenery and the loveliest forms” (*T* 1.708–11). These lines of partial or abandoned commentary build in excoriating energy until they collapse, in the last line of this first book, on the seat of “empire[’s] . . . mutilated structure, soon,” Cowper adds in a superlatively ominous pitch, “to fall” (*T* 1.773–74). If the modernist parataxis, as Ruth Jennison proposes, makes room for those “deep, spatialized histories, the knowledge of which is . . . part of any truly emancipatory trespass,” Cowper’s use of the figure is less directed.⁴⁵ At the end of book 1, parataxis sags under its own burden, part of an imperial quantum it cannot shift nor squeeze past.

The sofa, it turns out, never went away. It simply dispersed into the poem’s hidden correspondences: felled trees, urban centers, tropical islands, Indian wastes, “a serving maid” and the “one who left her, went to sea, and died,” “vagabond and useless tribe[s]” of gypsies, gout, Bacon and Reynolds, and all of the fine and mechanical arts, to name a few (*T* 1.537–38, 1.559). This is a theory of global economic and social

complexity so expressive and yet so compact that Jane Austen, in her *Mansfield Park*, summons it to weld the proximate threat of Mr. Rushworth cutting down the trees at Sotherton to the distant horrors of Sir Thomas's plantation at Antigua. "Cut down an avenue!" mutters Fanny Price. "What a pity! Does it not make you think of Cowper? 'Ye fallen avenues, once more I mourn your fate unmerited.'"⁴⁶ Edward Said famously argued that Antigua is just Mansfield on a larger scale; still, for Austen the instinct to "think of Cowper" points at the suspicion that synecdoche or allegory of this sort hardly absolves the novel of its wrongs, namely the nurturing of local and intimate concerns at the expense of the world-historical ones it raises only to swaddle in "a dead silence."⁴⁷ This offhand nod to *The Task*, in other words, doesn't invite an imaginative laddering up and down magnitudes. It merges empire and home in the shape of a generic intrusion, a poetic jut into a narrative whose instinct is to draw down to the head of a pin.

Back to mutilated structure. Those two words end the poem's first book, and "boundless contiguity" begins its second. The longer you sit with them, the more synonymous those turns of phrase become, especially since Cowper, in an intervening prose text that gives the argument of book 2, tells the reader directly that this part of *The Task* "opens with reflections suggested by the conclusion" of book 1. This is an unusually overmanaged direction to the reader, and what it implies is a sequential logic that is, etymologically speaking, brought up from below—the literal meaning of *suggested*. Hauled like a broken body from the bottom of book 1 to the top of book 2, an image of structural impairment reconstitutes itself in an image of infinite expansion that is also a snare. This sequence is long, but its protraction is doing real rhetorical work:

OH for a lodge in some vast wilderness,
 Some boundless contiguity of shade,
 Where rumour of oppression and deceit,
 Of unsuccessful or successful war,
 Might never reach me more. My ear is paine',
 My soul is sick with ev'ry day's report
 Of wrong and outrage with which earth is fill'd.
 There is no flesh in man's obdurate heart,
 It does not feel for man; The nat'ral bond
 Of brotherhood is sever'd as the flax
 That falls asunder at the touch of fire.
 He finds his fellow guilty of a skin
 Not colour'd like his own; and, having pow'r
 T' enforce the wrong, for such a worthy cause

Dooms and devotes him as his lawful prey.
 Lands intersected by a narrow frith
 Abhor each other. Mountains interpos'd
 Make enemies of nations, who had else
 Like kindred drops, been mingled into one.
 Thus man devotes his brother, and destroys;
 And, worse than all, and most to be deplor'd,
 As human nature's broadest, foulest blot,
 Chains him, and tasks him, and exacts his sweat
 With stripes, that mercy, with a bleeding heart,
 Weeps when she sees inflicted on a beast. (*T* 2.1–25)

Boundless contiguity of shade. Consider how odd a figure this is, this whorl of adjacencies, a chain looped into a logarithmic spiral. I make the comparison because book 2 wants me to, because, in its explicit attack on the Atlantic slave trade, it takes the chain as a sort of objective correlative both for the abolitionist movement and for the formal ambitions of *The Task* as a whole. In its long first verse paragraph, book 2 is littered with chains or versions of them, from the real “chains” and “bonds” and “shackles” “fasten[ed]” on “the slave” to metonymic “sinews bought and sold” to more fanciful pictures of empire’s “veins” and the “flax” that is “the nat’ral bond/Of brotherhood,” so easily severed. By the time Cowper attacks the trade explicitly in lines 12–15, it’s impossible not to see his boundless contiguity of shade as a transposition of black bodies—with “skin/Not colour’d like his own”—into the poet’s opening exclamation. Even as he announces his wish for the life beyond the “reach” of “report/Of wrong and outrage with which earth is fill’d,” densely philological and free-associative urges get the better of him, dragging into the light the foundation of that dream and the conditions of having it.

It is therefore not quite right to call *The Task* an instance of sensibility discourse, a satiating, lightly penitent, and highly self-satisfied performance of moral compunction. As the introductory argument to book 2 makes clear, Cowper is writing this poem as an exercise in subliminality, and in its politicization. *The Task* is hyperconductive, designed to effect an irregular and arrhythmic transit within and between images, “threading . . . the[ir] conflict through a whole system of planes” until this “chain of bifurcations [is] gathered into a new unity.”⁴⁸ That is Eisenstein on the work of montage, and Cowper’s chain is also his chain, an organizational principle whose name and form make it absolutely clear that the poem’s unity belongs to a social horror whose full outline it can never quite make out: not just slavery, but slavery as a source of the surplus population whose labor produces the various modern miseries Cowper tallies and

the means by which those miseries are forgotten or made light of, the sofa and its song. Like the figure of the wake, furrow, or disturbance upon the water in which Christina Sharpe discerns “a dysgraphia of disaster” trailing “slavery’s continued unfolding” in the twenty-first century, Cowper’s chain tows nearly to the text’s surface the knowledge that rural retirement is not an escape from the world but a spatial “dimension . . . of Black non/being.”⁴⁹ The wish for a boundless contiguity of shade is a wish to manacle one body to the next in perpetuity and almost in secret; the instruments of captivity are poetry’s instruments too.

Perhaps the idea that *The Task* is reaching for a dialectic of reprise and expansion, one that allows single words (*cane, stripe, task, plough*) and undercover synonyms to elaborate a partial critique of a “world that seems/To toll the death-bell of its own decease” assumes a diagnostic acuity the poem cannot sustain. And that’s true: the poem cannot sustain it. Wherever *The Task* seems to build toward a historically particular indictment, it tends to dissipate into tone, to solubilize contradiction as affect. This is nowhere more obvious than in the passage that picks up immediately after Cowper’s abolitionist plea, unequivocally apocalyptic in its tenor and promise. “Sure there is need of social intercourse,/ Benevolence, and peace, and mutual aid,” Cowper pleads, when “the props/And pillars of our planet seem to fail,/and Nature with a dim and sickly eye/To wait the close of all” (*T* 2.48–49, 2.62–65). For the next 150 lines *The Task* unspools a list of recent natural disasters, among them the Calabrian earthquakes of 1783, the giant ash cloud that sprang up after the eruption of the Laki volcano that same year, and the Atlantic hurricanes of the 1780 season, the deadliest ever recorded. All this peaks with a bizarre wheedling of the *beatus ille* topos: “Happy the man who sees a God employ’d/In all the good and ill that chequer life,” and who may thus discern that such convulsions of the earth and its weather systems are “furious inquest[s] . . . /On God’s behalf” into the cruelty of his children (*T* 2.161–62, 2.135–6).

Like the paratactical title of J. M. W. Turner’s painting *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On*, this passage moves from slavery to ecological disaster without quite saying one is the consequence of the other.⁵⁰ To be sure, both Turner and *The Task* are working overtime to imply precisely this kind of consequential relationship between human evil and divine reprimand. For Cowper, natural disasters mean that God is smiting the wicked. For Turner, the gray blotch rising steadily up the left-hand side of the canvas, toward which the slave ship is beelining with full force, seems to promise that punishment will follow crime. And yet both Cowper’s poem and Turner’s canvas defeat the providential commentaries they invite. Like the absence of gram-

matical suture between Cowper's first verse paragraph and his second, the composition of *Slavers* repeals any attempt to turn the painting into explanation or allegory. Turner's audience reads left to right, but the ship is sailing right to left, into a storm whose full body lies beyond the frame. If this is a moral it is illegible, or at the least what it teaches is unavailable to conventional interpretive means, which seize upon the appearance of linear conjunction only to realize this story is moving into its future backward. That Turner exhibited *Slavers* with an excerpt from his poem "The Fallacies of Hope" gives grist to this mill, for the pairing arrays the progressive movement of the English poetic line against the inverted pathway of the ship on its way out of sight.

I am aware that this take on book 2 could seem to pass up a golden opportunity to make plain just how serious and smart Cowper is about eighteenth-century capitalism and its ecological fallout. *The Task* would seem, after all, to have it exactly right. When carbon dioxide and methane begin to saturate the atmosphere, as they did near the end of the eighteenth century, "crazy earth" does get crazier, though it will take a bit longer for "the waters of the deep [to] rise" and "make [man's] house a grave"; at the very least, Cowper guesses correctly that meteorological disruption will be a regular feature of our times as well as his, which are not not-ours (*T*, 2.60, 2.143, 2.147). Verses like these could be an irresistible provocation, and many scholars have received them as an evidentiary object, an up-to-the-minute narration of sea-level rise, fracking-induced earthquakes, and turbocharged hurricanes (Katrina, Irene, Harvey, Maria . . .).

Still, I hesitate over the prospect of reading *The Task* as a poem about the weather, to say nothing of climate change. For one thing, Cowper has no inkling of climate change in any scientifically meaningful purport of the term—no inkling, that is, of an anthropogenic rise in global mean temperature and its runaway consequences. For another, his disasters have absolutely nothing to do with anthropogenic climate change; at best, they are of the Anthropocene, but not about it in any natural or denotative sense. Finally, it's worth noting that the section on natural disasters in book 2 never invokes temperature nor any kind of natural periodicity; Cowper even mocks "the spruce philosopher" who goes on about cause and effect and claims to have "found/The source of the disease that Nature feels" (*T* 2.189, 2.193–94). God, not gas, is Cowper's "genuine cause of all" (*T* 2.205).

To read *The Task* prophetically is to impose what we know now onto a text whose preoccupations are quite distinct. More troublingly, it is also to make too-quick recourse to the interpretive protocols of "the end of the world and the end of history," which are, as Christopher Fan says,

“two of our most familiar tropes for thinking through the impassés standing between late capitalism’s crises and its uncertain futures.”⁵¹ “A stalling out between two positions,” Fan’s impasse nicely addresses what’s happening in *The Task* at the level of figuration, which is where Cowper is trying to make capital present as a problem for the world and as a problem for poetry. The parataxes driving the poem’s sideways rundown of the barbaric relation between human surplus and the sofa’s surfeit cannot have prophecy as their horizon. Instead, they make a demand for social narrative that the turn to apocalypticism, like the sentimentalist’s recourse to tone, can defuse but never satisfy.

Of course, it’s not as though parataxis satisfies that demand either. As a figure of dim concurrence, its duty is to advocate for and then to surrender the possibility of pinpointing the specific dynamic that fuels at once the insipidities of bourgeois convenience and the transnational traffic in people and things. As Cowper guesses, no extant eighteenth-century rubric of causality is a match for the field of baroque overdeterminations in which he finds himself, and in which his poem finds him. “What solid was,” he writes, “by transformation strange/Grows fluid”—or, as others have put it, “all that is solid melts into air,” a phase change by which all “train[s] of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions,” including the surety of providential annihilation, “are swept away,” where “all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life” even if he can’t quite see them, yet (*T* 2.98–100).⁵²

Another way to put this would be to say that Cowper leans on parataxis because he doesn’t have a more fine-grained technical vocabulary in his arsenal, a vocabulary that might match the seething complexity of how things happen. This seems unfair; it also voids the work of parataxis in calling for something outside it to integrate its disjunctions, to make them part of an unpredictable but undeniable unity no parataxis, and no poetic text, could ever get just right. Poetry will inevitably stutter and stumble when faced with the question of how to get there from here, of how to grasp at the lineaments of a future that must be nascent in the present and that the present almost utterly conceals. And yet, to abandon the desire for poetry to be better at history might be to unlock a frightening prospect: the necessity of action against a background of ignorance.

* * *

On the day the Laki volcano blew, Cowper sent his friend William Unwin a poem in the mail. It would be a few weeks before the toxic cloud of ash released by Laki would cover England and Europe in a red haze, a few months before Cowper would tell Unwin of “such multitudes [be-

ing] indisposed by fevers . . . that farmers have difficulty gathering their harvest, the labourers having been almost every day carried out of the field incapable of work, many” of them to die.⁵³ It would, meanwhile, be centuries before anyone would venture to read Cowper’s report as a glimpse into an anthropocenic future.

“The Rose” rests at a crossroads. An easygoing ballad about incaution and its consequences, the poem dilates a moment in time when the idea that such consequences might be planetary and permanent is just on the cusp of being available:

The rose had been wash’d, just wash’d in a shower,
Which Mary to Anna convey’d.
The plentiful moisture incumber’d the flower,
And weigh’d down its beautiful head.

The cup was all fill’d, and the leaves were all wet,
And it seem’d to a fanciful view,
To weep for the buds it had left with regret
On the nourishing bush where it grew.

I hastily seiz’d it, unfit as it was,
For a nosegay, so dripping and drown’d,
And swinging it rudely, too rudely, alas!
I snapp’d it, it fell to the ground.

And such, I exclaim’d, is the pitiless part
Some act by the delicate mind,
Regardless of wringing and breaking a heart
Already to sorrow resign’d.

This elegant rose, had I shaken it less,
Might have bloom’d with its owner awhile,
And the tear that is wip’d with a little address,
May be follow’d perhaps by a smile.⁵⁴

These five pithy quatrains are not of the same order of achievement as *The Task*; nor do they engage thematically the “portentous, unexampled, unexplain’d” phenomena that make that poem so, well, portentous (*T* 2.58). Instead, “The Rose” tells a story about upset and adjustment so minor as to embarrass the poet who would write as searingly as Cowper of a world on fire. The world of this ballad is still green, but the rose, once cut, won’t bloom for long. It begins to die when Mary plucks it; the speaker

just finishes the job. The poem shifts incrementally to accommodate this modest act of destruction, letting the barely audible half-rhyme between “was” and “alas” imply something both awry and all right. It’s a light sonic comment on the narrative of lost time and alternative futurity, in which one might have done something different but only to trivial effect. Hence the weak aphorism that closes the last stanza, wrapping the episode up with an aggressively banal remark on how best to persuade a woman to smile.

“The apparent resignation to aphorism and parataxis,” writes Paul de Man, “is often an attempt to recuperate on the level of style what is lost on the level of history.” It is, in other words, a poetic refuge for a “dialectical summation” more conventional historical discourse cannot achieve, because unlike that discourse poetry has room for “breaks and interruptions.”⁵⁵ Although de Man doesn’t say so—and he wouldn’t—the implication is that there is a special capacity inherent in poetic language and the unassuming systematicity of style that doesn’t obtain for more linear modes of analysis. It’s a capacity to accommodate disruptions, deviations, or (to use this word again) impasses as part of the substance to which historical materialism applies itself.

Cowper’s closing aphorism, which considers hypothetical sequences and our desire to secure them in advance, is motivated by resignation of exactly this sort. As the last word of the penultimate stanza, “resign’d” suggests not simply forbearance or failure but the specter of a cancellation, of some mark being struck out by another. The word’s legacy is one of keeping accounts, of adding and subtracting and balancing sums: plus, minus, zero. In this poem, resignation sits between the poem’s digression and its loosening into a series of hypotheticals, themselves recuperated as the general constituency of a future cast in the optative mood. If something “may” happen, its conditions are already almost all present. This is the claim of the aphorism, and it is also its point of similarity with parataxis: both capture the space between fact and hypothesis, where things in the world unevenly graze the thinner stuff of speculation.

Another name for this space, or for its epistemic intension, is nescience. A standoff between experience and conjecture, nescience can never quite mend their split. Instead, it contemplates the impossibility of knowing how behaving differently in the past would have made a difference in the present, and receives this impossibility affectively, as a barbed uneasiness about what is still to come. Consider the *fait accompli* of being “already to sorrow resign’d” hovering over the notional optimism of the poem’s last four lines. The self-assurance of *already* and the doubtfulness of *had*, *might have*, *may be*, and *perhaps* place the poem in the otherwise uninhabitable time when the rose was still around and the equally

uninhabitable future when it might have bloomed a little longer. It is a poem about the concept of an aftermath, about how it outlives itself over and over again and so perturbs our faith in the very idea of a next step. This is what trauma does too, and nescience is, as we know, the cognitive output of trauma. In “The Rose,” the trauma at issue announces itself as the failure of poetry to capture history’s aftershocks, to conceive the grief that belongs to us long before we know how to name it.

Environmentalists often ask us to picture a world without people. In our inevitable failure to uphold this suspension of disbelief, we’re meant to confront the limits of our grossly flawed anthropocentric thinking and to balance what we cannot manage imaginatively with what we can grasp emotionally: a vertigo of dread that will always dissolve in the realization that we’re not there yet. Without sounding a single apocalyptic note, “The Rose” may be even less forgiving. Not an allegory but an example, the poem documents what it’s like when the compressed temporality of accelerating loss is forced to absorb alternative pasts and barely viable futures. By foregrounding the indeterminate link between actions and consequences, this minor poem produces a compelling argument about form in general: it is only through the “little address,” the subtle lift and thrust of linguistic devices and generic frames, that accidents seem significant or prophetic. Form exerts the contextual pressure that can turn an event into a signal, from an uninformative to an informative occurrence, from snapping the neck of a single flower to one of those countless, cumulative acts of destruction whose effects can’t and won’t be kicked down the road forever.

Sometimes events are signals only in hindsight. In an essay on disco and the AIDS crisis, Walter Hughes observes how certain lyrical motifs—“the ‘night fever,’ the ‘boogie fever,’ the ‘tainted love,’ and the ‘love hang-over’”—became “rife with proleptic ironies” after the epidemic began in earnest. Today, “The Rose” has a proleptic cast all its own, the result of a climatological rather than epidemiological state of affairs forcing its metaphors to “pass . . . into literalism.”⁵⁶ Interweaving these strains of crisis is Derek Jarman, whose devotion to parataxis or (to use his term) the cut-up discloses the morphological principles by which literal and figurative modes are made materially copresent. In his indispensable study of Jarman’s “lyric film,” Steven Dillon cites the cut-up as a technique of oblique association that disappoints “academic requirements of objectivity or argument,” and as a skill Jarman puts in service of his own experimental historiography.⁵⁷ If disco’s vehicles broach the tenors just beyond their periphery, Jarman’s films splice together moments in time from a distance of centuries, rendering English history a field of near-simultaneities. Thus the Elizabethan world of Edward II, in Jarman’s

retelling, gets gatecrashed by gay-rights activists holding signs that say “Liberté/Egalité/Homosex/ualité” and “No Prison for Flirting”; thus in his adaptation of *The Tempest*, the order of Shakespeare’s scenes is rearranged and its early modern iconography annexed by Disney, the oak in which Prospero threatens to imprison Ariel switched out for Snow White’s glass coffin.

Jarman’s ultimate cut-up, however, is his garden, from which the Dungeness B nuclear power station remains visible today. Here, the garden syntax of the eighteenth century finds new life, even at the verge of what will soon be known as nature’s death and in the distended middle of Jarman’s. “[I] came here,” he writes, “after the discovery of my seropositivity. . . . I water the roses and wonder whether I will see them bloom. I plant my herbal garden as a panacea, read up on all the aches and pains that plants will cure—and know they are not going to help. The garden as pharmacopoeia has failed” (*MN*, 179).

In this “dying sunlight,” the garden defines a weakening to which life implausibly continues to cling. Dungeness is sometimes referred to as England’s only desert, and Jarman regularly finds his plantings “scorched by the continuous wind” or battered by icy rain (*MN*, 179, 26). The garden is also up against the increasingly volatile climate and who knows what kind of poison seeping from Dungeness B. “Ministers attend a seminar on global warming,” Jarman snorts, and “say the answer is more nuclear power stations.” Meanwhile, a “menacing sunset” fills the sky with “livid yellows and inky blacks [and] a deep scarlet gash” (*MN*, 67). And yet Jarman is committed. “You’ve finally discovered nature, Derek,” a friend tells him, though when he demurs she changes tack: “Ah, I understand completely. You’ve discovered modern nature,” the kind always faced with some novel unpredictable threat (*MN*, 8).

In the diary by that same name, “modern nature” is contemplated in variously elliptical ways, and often by a disjointed collection of lineated verses that crop up across the volume. “Power hums along the lines/to keep the fish and chips a-frying,/ . . . I’ve brewed my nuclear tea”; “to whom it may concern/in the dead stones of a planet/no longer remembered as earth/. . . I have planted a stony garden”; “The garden is built for dear friends/Howard, Paul, Terence, David, Robert, and Ken,/And many others, each stone has a life to tell/I cannot invite you into this house” (*MN*, 13, 16, 178). I understand these poems in much the same way Dillon understands Jarman’s films: both exploit the referential indeterminacy of lyric to present “a subjectivity more broadly social and historical than any particular, individual self.”⁵⁸ This is a lyricism that rolls the most personal meditations outward, with an awkwardness that comes with the territory of being (in Jarman’s words) “passionately militant.”⁵⁹

Parataxis puts things together; it does not explain why they should be so organized, nor tell some tale to justify their contiguity. For Jarman, it models militancy as a commitment to building abrupt, seemingly irrational linkages between discrete objects of knowledge. The alchemical meeting of anger and inelegance defines his form as much as Cowper's. Jump-cutting between discrete temporal frames, the vaunted lyric subject plays the role of a collider. He flings disparate particles at one another and as close as they can come, often with effects that border on the ridiculous. There are many things in Jarman's films that make you want to avert your eyes, not because they are obscene but because they are so self-serious, and thus often absurd. Still, the films earn their shambolic coordination of high art, pop culture, pornography, camp, punk, and sober invocations of heritage figures like Shakespeare, Milton, and Blake in a way the poems don't, quite. Perhaps that's why Jarman is so invested in Dorothy Wordsworth, whose journals, like his own, find that the disruption of the solitary subject by the historical present regularly expresses itself in the maladroitness.

We've seen this in Cowper as well, in the yo-yo effect of his tonal gyrations and topical shifts, but for Jarman it is more obviously an avant-garde routine. In Jarman's diary entry for April 27, 1989, a bit of Dorothy's Grasmere journal prefaces a ballad of Jarman's making. Wordsworth's passage records a glittering stretch of parataxis, an outdoor document of near but impossible conjunctions: "I never saw such a union of earth, sea, and sky: the clouds beneath our feet spread themselves to the water, and the clouds of the sky almost joined them." Jarman seizes on this image of a dissolving margin between figuration and description and adds this to it:

I walk in this garden
 Holding the hands of dead friends
 Old age came quickly for my frosted generation
 Cold, cold, cold they died so silently
 Did the forgotten generations scream?
 Or go full of resignation
 Quietly protesting innocence
 Cold, cold, cold they died so silently
 Linked hands at four AM
 Deep under the city you slept on

Never heard the sweet flesh song
 Cold, cold, cold they died so silently
 I have no words
 My shaking hand

Cannot express my fury
 Sadness is all I have,
 Cold, cold, cold they died so silently

Matthew fucked Mark fucked Luke fucked John
 Who lay in the bed that I lie on
 Touch fingers again as you sing this song
 Cold, cold, cold they died so silently
 My gilly flowers, roses, violets blue
 Sweet garden of vanished pleasures
 Please come back next year
 Cold, cold, cold I die so silently

Goodnight boys,
 Goodnight Johnny,
 Goodnight,
 Goodnight. (*MN*, 69–70)

There are many Romantic echoes to hear in “I Walk in This Garden”—of “To Autumn,” “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” “Ode to the West Wind,” “The Masque of Anarchy” and, of course, “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” with its host of golden daffodils. Together they sound Jarman’s attempt to improvise a poetics for the comorbid but categorically distinct calamities of AIDS and global warming, and the fate of the earth beneath glowering skies. Romanticism of this horticultural stripe, with its nearly rote images of flowers as humans and humans as flowers, feels a heightened obligation to use poetry to body forth the invisible (a project strongly simpatico, by the by, with the critique of political economy). The labored artificiality and inconstant rhyme of Jarman’s poem cue us into its struggle to generate ontological presence by means of its figurative extension, to bring men and seasons back from the dead and so to ring the alarm of several crises lurching into others, “linked hands” whose affinity is mysterious but obstinate, impossible to shake off.

“I Walk in This Garden” is a ballad of victimhood rather than victimization, its shaking hand not the seizing, swinging, snapping hand of “The Rose” but the palsied limb of a sick man for whom death is first and foremost a muzzling. Jarman may be thinking of the SILENCE = DEATH poster campaign that began in New York City in 1987, his rhyme of *cold* with *old* sifting somatic through temporal screens to hint that the poem’s narrative drive is essentially entropic. The body cools, the world cools, and time tilts everything forward unto its last. We can now add yet another caveat to the idea that lyric postures are necessarily antinarrative,

a claim that doesn't quite accommodate the macroscopic awareness, in a poem like this one, of the headlong march of thermodynamics or contagious disease.

At the same time, however, Jarman is careful to fold a refrain of disruptions into the future-oriented movement of energy and illness. "Cold, cold, cold" is the slogan of decline but also an impasse of its own, a drag on death's momentum. It is the motto, too, of Jarman's own resignation, which joins Cowper's as an anxious pose of inhabiting the no-man's-land between knowledge and conjecture, between the certainty that people have died and the savage question of how many more will too.

The status of what has and has not happened is vividly questioned in Jarman's fourth stanza. Did Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John lie in Jarman's bed for certain, or does he mean to ask "who lay" there before him? The query concerns status in a very specialized sense. Depending on how we read these lines, the bed is either a voluptuous memento or the figure for a history of transmission, a pandemic in miniature, and, of course, it is both. The Four Evangelists pass on a deadly virus as they pass on the good news. HIV seems to come to rest in the speaker's body, but it surely has passed beyond the barrier of the poem, handed down along innumerable bloodlines. The logic of contagion ensures that the sentence beginning in the past (lay) and ending in the present (lie) will resolve in the future tense of terminal illness, with the speaker's body lying low, prone and stiff. Jarman's lines dramatize the impossibility of separating the homophobic rhetoric of so-called risk groups from the anecdotal reality that everyone you know is dying, of slipping free from "the statistics which hedge the modern world about like the briar that walled in the sleeping princess" (*MN*, 151).

The John who closes the first line of the fourth stanza and the Johnny who closes the poem represent these two modes of knowing: the episteme of public health and the episteme of sociability, perhaps of solidarity, and don't forget that *Johnny* is slang for condom. When these meet, pull apart, and meet again, they generate what the poem encodes as political paralysis, a condition in which silence and death collude. The epidemiological perspective is also the forensic one, divulging in the circuit of male bodies a trail of infection and transmission. It is well-meaning and it is also mean, mistrustful, and prurient; it asks, "Who else lay in this bed? It was these four people, wasn't it?" Meanwhile, the speaker's sexual history limns an experience so distant it seems positively biblical. The fourth stanza also rewrites the prayer known as the White Paternoster, while the fifth turns to nursery rhymes: "The rose is red, the violet is blue/The gillyflower is sweet, and so are you." This is the only stanza where the subject of Jarman's refrain changes from *they* to *I*, as members

of the speaker's frosted generation undergo a transmigration of souls into "gilly flowers, roses, violets blue" even as the declarative confidence of the child's rhyme vanishes into the plea of "come back next year."

From "this bed" to flower beds, from a tangle of bodies to a tangle of roots, "I Walk in This Garden" uses metaphor and metonymy to create a confusion of knowledges in a manner similar to "The Rose," with its hard past tense sidling up to its melancholy might-have-been. The fragility of form in the midst of calamity is expressed by doubt cast on something that should be indubitable: the seasonal, cyclical return of flowers from the frozen ground. The erotically charged myths of Hyacinth and Adonis (clearly in the poem's ether) suggest that people, like flowers, live on in one form or another, but amid the environmental peril of Jarman's moment he can't count on metempsychosis. Disease should be the poem's weft and nature its warp; people cannot come back from death, but gardens can. These assumptions, the postulates of long and varied traditions, are suddenly, startlingly tentative.

This state of unknowing crossed with statistical near-surety creates a deadlock in which the blighted present is held right against the undiscoverable future. To occupy that present is to face down the leap for which Pindar prepares himself, toward an action and endpoint on the other side of some elongated abyss. If we wanted to discover an ethics here, it would quickly focalize around the nature of the obligation existing persons bear to future ones. As the late Derek Parfit argued in his 1984 opus *Reasons and Persons*, existence cannot be what matters when it comes to determining the scope of ethical behavior, because our actions today constrain the actions and identities of people yet unborn. Tasked, for example, with making good environmental policy, we need to understand the necessity of that action as underwritten neither by the assumption of who future persons will be nor by our present self-interest. Ethics, in other words, requires a negative epistemology. It should address itself to the hypothetical being over and above the actual one, to the form of a life and not to a reference point tethered to some specific living thing. What we call ethics is just an exaltation aimed at preserving the future as a *there* for someone else.

This last formulation holds special interest in the context of this chapter and this book. Jarman's dead friends are available to him only through a poetic superscription, a springing upward in an attempt to cross the ultimate distance. The same is true of his garden, exhorted apostrophically to return next year. These gestures create closeness between the speaker and his absent intimates, as kinds of beings rather than concrete ones. Names—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John; gilly flowers, roses, violets blue—become types, and types become a lifeline to a future held open by

generality or abstraction. More wish than command, Jarman's attempt to communicate with what we might call *de dicto* beings models an ethics grounded in rhetorical desire. It takes the customary, sad reflection on the might-have-been and distills from it an unexpected optimism about our collective prospects, even if they exist in words alone. "Tragen muß er, zuvor; nun aber nennt er sein Liebstes,/Nun, nun, müssen dafür Worte, wie Blumen, entstehn," writes Hölderlin. "First he has to bear it, now name his most beloved,/Now, now he must find words for it that, like flowers, can grow."⁶⁰

* * *

In the post-Fordist allegory of Plato's cave tucked into his *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* (translated into English as *The Revolution of Everyday Life*), Raoul Vaneigem begins not with a handful of men chained to a rock wall but with "a few million people liv[ing] in a huge building with neither doors nor windows," where "the feeble light of countless oil lamps vies with the shadows" that permanently hold sway. The lamps are tended by the poor until a rebellion breaks out. A dispute arises: perhaps the lamps should be considered a public utility; perhaps the building itself, "unhealthy and unfit for communal living," should be torn down. The conflict turns violent, and a stray projectile—"un boulet mal dirigé"—hits the building, making a hole into which light from outside streams:

After an initial moment of stupefaction, this flood of light was hailed with cries of victory. The solution had been found: it would be enough simply to make more holes. The lamps were tossed aside or tucked away in museums, and all power fell to the window-makers [*perceurs de fenêtre*]. Those who had been on the side of [the building's] total destruction were forgotten and so was their discreet liquidation, which went almost, or so it seemed, unnoticed. (Everyone was too busy arguing about the number and placement of the windows.) Their names were remembered a century or two later, when, having grown accustomed to seeing large bay windows, the people, that perpetual malcontent, took to asking extravagant questions: "Dragging out your days in an air-conditioned greenhouse," they said, "what kind of life is that?"⁶¹

Philosophy, on Plato's account, only goes one way: forward. It can never stall out, or miss its exit; nor is it duped even when power opens a safety valve to lower the pressure ("Dès que le pouvoir risque d'éclater, il fait jouer la soupape de sûreté, il diminue la pression interne"). It forges

ahead, magnificently undeluded. Not so revolutionary consciousness, which, insofar as it is collective, is vulnerable to the schisms and obstructions, the failures of nerve and the misdirected energies that always beset people in groups. Still, there's hope. The greenhouse—air-conditioned and bright but no less a remand—teaches its inhabitants to want what is outside of it. “Who loves a garden,” writes Cowper, in the third book of *The Task*, “loves a green-house too,” but in Vaneigem's parable Cowper's pathway of reciprocal desire is bent beautifully out of shape (*T* 3.566). Love for the greenhouse must mutate into an appetite for its destruction, gratitude for stopgap comforts be expunged in the undoing of any structure of obligation to what is not enough. This is a Pindaric leap too.

“Unconscious of a less propitious clime,/There blooms exotic beauty, warm and snug” (*T* 3.567–68). And now we're treated to another performance of Cowper's leitmotif, in a roll call of Portuguese and Indian fruit trees, Italian and Levantine flowers, Azorean and South African jasmine; “foreigners from many lands/they form one social shade, as if conven'd” by Orpheus's lyre (*T* 585–87). True to form, Cowper comments on his parataxis and notes its fitness as a statement of poetic intent, praising the “just arrangement, rarely brought to pass/But by a master's hand, disposing well/The gay diversities of leaf and flow'r” (*T* 3.588–90). At this point in the poem, lines like these are supercharged with more ominous meaning, and it's hard not to hear echoes of the first two books in these pointed recurrences to their central theme: the perversion of social relations by lordship (“a master's hand”) and bondage as well as poetry's compulsory involvement therein.

That this greenhouse too should or will fall is signaled with arresting bluntness, as Cowper caps off a litany of plants set in its “regular yet various scene” by comparing them to “the sons of ancient Rome,” “once rang'd” in similar fashion (*T* 3.592, 3.596). The poem elaborates no further; nor does it need to, since in the eighteenth century there was no readier shorthand for civilizational decline than Rome, whose name is coincident with its fall. The suggestion, here as throughout *The Task*, is that the intimate entanglement of ordinariness—of hobbies, letters, books, and walks—in vast economic networks is at once the only subject for modern poetry and the one subject modern poetry cannot rationalize or redeem. In these conditions, the poem is at best the breaker of glass for those it can reach, which isn't many. Its language is one of hints and propositions, most effective when it appears least engaged in conventional practices of expository reasoning. Isolated and indirect, it is ultimately no more than a badly aimed bullet someone, on one side of the barricade or the other, let fly: going the wrong way fast, askance, a small thing with sudden consequences.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Or had to be, more literally, the first pitch, with the sense of a first recourse or port of call.

2. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 141.

3. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 165. Hereafter cited in the text as *C*, followed by volume and page numbers.

4. Joshua Clover, "Value | Theory | Crisis," *PMLA* 127.1 (2012): 107–14; 108.

5. Geoffrey Hartman, "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies," *New Literary History* 26.3 (1995): 537–63; 537.

6. Hartman, "Retrospect 1971," in *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787–1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), xvi.

7. Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry (or The Defence of Poesy)*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd and R. W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 103.

8. Ecclesiastes 1:8, KJV.

9. William Wordsworth, letter to Charles James Fox, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, vol. 1, *The Early Years, 1787–1805*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Chester Shaver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 312–15; 312.

10. Huey P. Newton, "Huey Newton Speaks from Jail," *Motive* 29 (October 1968): 8–16; 8.

11. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 148.

12. The reference is to Tertius Lydgate's ill-formed and ill-fated ambition "to pierce the obscurity of those minute processes which prepare human misery and joy, those invisible thoroughfares which are the first lurking-places of anguish, mania, and crime, that delicate poise and transition which determine the growth of happy or unhappy consciousness." George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 162. Eliot's reference to the happy or unhappy consciousness likely alludes to Hegel's use of the same categories in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

13. As Andreas Malm points out, the hostile takeover of the steam engine is not nearly as precipitous as we might assume. See his *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016), 56.

14. Geoffrey Hartman, “Tea and Totality,” in *Minor Prophecies: The Literary Essay in the Culture Wars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 67, 58.

15. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51; 123.

16. John Dupré, *The Disorder of Things: Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) 6–7.

17. J. B. S. Haldane, preface to Friedrich Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, trans. C. P. Dutt (London: International Publishers, 1940), xv. Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1947), 12. For a lively account of Haldane’s career and the fortunes of dialectical materialism among mid-twentieth-century scientists, see Helena Sheehan, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science: A Critical History* (London: Verso, 2018).

18. Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, 96.

19. David Hume, “Of the Standard of Taste,” in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2006), 236, 246.

20. Alexander Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954), 39. The full Latin title of Baumgarten’s 1735 text is *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*, with the word *nonnullis*—not nothing—suggesting that the kinds of philosophical remuneration afforded by poetry can only be paid out in small bills.

21. Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 109.

22. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 221.

23. César Chesneau Du Marsais, *Des tropes ou des diférens sens dans lesquels on peut prendre un même mot dans une même langue*, 2nd ed. (Paris: David, 1757), 6–7.

24. Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot*, ed. J. Assézat [and Maurice Tourneux], 20 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1875–77), 14.444. My translation.

25. Hugh Blair, lecture 6, “Rise and Progress of Language,” in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. Linda Ferreira-Buckley and S. Michael Halloran (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 61.

26. Pierre Fontanier, *Les figures du discours*, with an introduction by Gerard Genette (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), 66. Fontanier’s treatise was originally published between 1821 and 1830. My translation.

27. Annie McClanahan, *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 94; Blair, “Rise and Progress of Language,” 61. For Blair the capacity to use metaphor is, at least for early humans, a matter of basic survival:

Mankind never employed so many Figures of Speech, as when they had hardly any words for expressing their meaning. . . . For, first, the want of proper names for every object, obliged them to use one name for many; and, of course, to express themselves by comparisons, metaphors, allusions, and all those substituted forms of Speech which render Language figurative. Next, as the objects with which they were the most conversant, were the sensible, material objects around them, names would be given to those objects long before words were invented for signifying the dispositions of the mind, or any sort of moral or intellectual ideas. Hence, the early Language of men being entirely made up of words descriptive of sensible objects, it became, of necessity, extremely metaphorical.

28. Donald Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” *Critical Inquiry* 5.1 (1978): 31–47; 46–47.

29. Jean-Baptiste le Rond d’Alembert, *Oeuvres complètes de D’Alembert*, 5 vols. (London: Martin Bossange and Co., 1822), 4.1.326–27. My translation.

30. Plato, *Ion*, trans. Penelope Murray and T. S. Dorsch, in *Classical Literary Criticism*, ed. Murray (New York: Penguin, 2000), 1–14; 5 [534].

31. John Keats, *The Fall of Hyperion*, in *Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 1.167–68, 1.148–49.

32. William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed, 2 vols. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 1.3.492–93.

33. Wordsworth, letter to Fox, 313; Keats, *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*, in *Complete Poems*, 118.

34. William Cowper, *The Task*, in *Poetical Works*, ed. H. S. Milford (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 129.

35. Christopher Nealon, “Infinity for Marxists,” *Mediations* 28.2 (2015): 47–64; 54.

36. Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, 103.

37. Susan Stewart, “Garden Agon,” *Representations* 62 (1998): 111–43, 111.

38. William Blake, *Jerusalem; or, The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Books), 1.10.24, 153.

CHAPTER ONE

1. Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* (Copenhagen and Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2002), 96.

2. Andrew Marvell, “Upon Appleton House,” in *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith (London: Routledge, 2006), 761–62, 767–68.

3. Alexander Pope, letter to Martha Blount dated 22 June 1724, in *The Major Works*, ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 179–83; 181.

4. John Dixon Hunt, *The Figure in the Landscape: Poetry, Painting, and Gardening during the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 67. Without forcing the analogy beyond advantage, there are intriguing similarities between Dixon Hunt’s line on gardens and Jonathan Crary’s celebrated story about fin-de-siècle visual technologies and early modernist art, which likewise evolves

from a historically specific transformation in the physiological capacities of the spectator and artist. As a particular “organization of the visible,” the garden arrays experience digressively, at once mimicking and enhancing the perturbations of a “modernity . . . [that] coincides with the collapse” of extant models of thought and sensation. In moving through the garden, the body is subject to an environment whose immediacy and instantaneity create the feeling that whatever lies around the bend is almost utterly concealed, even as we wander right through it. See Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 23–24.

5. Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature* (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 1994), 35. Hereafter cited in the text as *MN*, followed by page numbers.

6. Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2016), 175.

7. Adorno, “Parataxis: On Hölderlin’s Late Poetry,” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 109–49; 128, 131. Hereafter cited in the text as “P,” followed by page numbers.

8. Pindar, Nemean V, in *The Odes of Pindar*, trans. C. M. Bowra (New York: Penguin, 2015), 2.18–21.

9. Incidentally Hölderlin himself seems to have connected Ciceronian cadences with an undesirable emotional lability, writing to a friend, “If only Man were not so periodic! Or at least that I weren’t among the worst in this regard!” (“Wenn nur der Mensch nicht so periodisch wäre! oder ich wenigstens nicht unter die ärgsten gehörte in diesem Punkt!”) See Hölderlin, letter to Christian Ludwig Neuffer dated October 1793, in *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe 1: Gedichte*, ed. Jochen Schmidt, 3 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1992), 3.112. My translation.

10. Friedrich Hölderlin, “Andenken,” in *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, ed. Eric Santner (New York: Continuum, 1994), 266. My translation.

11. Hölderlin, “Andenken,” 267.

12. Katrin Pahl, *Tropes of Transport: Hegel and Emotion* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 127, 136. Thanks to Daniel Hoffman-Schwartz for this citation and also for wonderfully generous and helpful discussion on the point of translation here.

13. Bob Perelman, “Parataxis and Narrative: The New Sentence in Theory and Practice,” in *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 59–78; 70. In the version of this essay originally published in the journal *American Literature*, Perlman does in fact use the phrase “unresolved pressure for social narrative” in his discussion of the poetry of Ron Silliman; the version of the essay collected in *The Marginalization of Poetry* mysteriously leaves out “social,” though the rest of the sentence is unchanged. See Perelman, “Parataxis and Narrative: The New Sentence in Theory and Practice,” *American Literature* 65.2 (1993): 313–24; 321.

14. Perelman, “Parataxis and Narrative,” 60–61.

15. Hugh Blair, lecture 11, “Structure of Sentences,” in *Lectures on Rhetoric and*

Belles Lettres, ed. Linda Ferreira-Buckley and S. Michael Halloran (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 110–20; 111.

16. François Guillaume Jean Stanislaus Andrieux, *Cours de grammaire et de belles-lettres*, in *Journal de l'École polytechnique* 10.4 (November 1810): 69–279; 107. On the democratic or (minimally) collaborative possibilities of style coupé, see Julie Candler Hayes's discussion of Diderot and parataxis in *Reading the French Enlightenment: System and Subversion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 145.

17. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, letter to Thomas Poole dated 9 October 1809, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956–71), 3.234. Coleridge goes on to say that Bacon modeled his prose on Seneca's. This is curious, since the accusation that the French have “rejected all the cements of language” is likely invoking Caligula's reported remark that Seneca's writing was “harena sine calce,” sand without lime, i.e., bad cement. This is one of many instances in the *Biographia* where Coleridge seems perched somewhere between irony and inattention.

18. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 14, pt. 2, *Table Talk*, 233. Cf. Aristotle's characterization of parataxis as λέξις εἰρομένη, literally “words strung like beads” in his *Art of Rhetoric*, ed. and trans. J. H. Freese, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 1409a24.

19. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 191.

20. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1798–1799*, ed. Stephen Maxfield Parrish (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 58–60.

21. Hölderlin, letter to Johann Gottfried Ebel dated 10 January 1797, in *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe 1: Gedichte* 3.253–55; 254. My translation.

22. Susan Bernofsky, *Foreign Words: Translator-Authors in the Age of Goethe* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 125.

23. See Hegel's “remark” at the end of the discussion of real measure in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 320–23.

24. Hölderlin, letter to Ebel, 3.254.

25. Friedrich Hölderlin, translation of Pindar's second Olympian, quot. and trans. with lines from the original Greek, in Bernofsky, *Foreign Words*, 126.

26. Hölderlin, letter to Ebel, 3.254.

27. Samuel Johnson, “Life of Cowley,” in *Lives of the Poets: A Selection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5–53; 40.

28. Sylvia Adamson, “The Breaking of Hypotaxis,” entry 7.4 in the section “Literary Language,” in *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, vol. 4, 1776–1997, ed. Suzanne Romaine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 630–46; 639.

29. George Woodward, “The English Pindarick,” in *Poems on Several Occasions* (Oxford: Clarendon Printing-House, 1730), 24.

30. John Hamilton, *Soliciting Darkness: Pindar, Obscurity, and the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 306.

31. Joseph Addison, *Spectator* 477, Saturday, September 6, 1712, in *The Works of the Right Honourable Joseph Addison, Esq.*, 4 vols. (London: Jacob Tonson, 1721), 3.588–91; 589.
32. Thomas Whatley, *Observations on Modern Gardening, Illustrated by Descriptions* (London: T. Payne, 1770), 151.
33. Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 150.
34. Hannah Frank, *Frame by Frame: A Materialist Aesthetics of Animated Cartoons*, ed. Daniel Morgan (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2019), 28.
35. William Cowper, *The Task*, in *Poetical Works*, ed. H. S. Milford (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 2.2. Hereafter cited in the text as *T*, followed by book and line numbers. Where the reference is to the prose sections of the poem, such as its Advertisement or Arguments, I've given page numbers instead.
36. See Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
37. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 1.16. See also William Hazlitt, *My First Acquaintance with Poets*, in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London: J. M. Dent, 1930–34), 17.120.
38. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 2.72.
39. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 131.
40. György Lukács, “The Tasks of Marxist Philosophy in the New Democracy,” speech delivered to the Congress of Marxist Philosophers in Milan, Italy, December 20th 1947, and quoted in István Mészáros, *Lukács' Concept of Dialectic* (London: Merlin Press, 1972), 63–64.
41. J. G. A. Pocock, “Virtues, Rights, and Manners: A Model for Historians of Political Thought,” in *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 37–40; 49.
42. Cowper, “Yardley Oak,” in *Poetical Works*, 101–2; For the Romantic period as an era of world war, see Mary Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
43. Phillis Wheatley, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” in *Complete Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 2001), 13 (lines 6–7). See my essay “Romantic Difficulty” for a discussion of Wheatley's “mirthless play on the biblical Cain and the husking, peeling, grinding, boiling, and drying of sugarcane until its blackness is diabolically ‘refin'd.’” Anahid Nersessian, “Romantic Difficulty,” *New Literary History* 49.4 (2018): 451–466; 463.
44. Ruth Jennison, *The Zukofsky Era: Modernity, Margins, and the Avant-Garde* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 31–2.
45. Jennison, *The Zukofsky Era*, 32.
46. Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 53.

47. Austen, *Mansfield Park*, 184. See also Edward Said, “Jane Austen and Empire,” in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 80–96.

48. Sergei Eisenstein, “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today,” in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, 1949), 195–255; 236.

49. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 20–21.

50. Both Cowper and Turner are thinking, among other things, about the Zong massacre of 1781. *The Task* also makes an explicitly topical reference to *Somerset v. Stewart* (98 ER 499), often referred to as Somerset’s Case, the 1772 judgment known for birthing the avoidant maxim that, in Cowper’s words, “Slaves cannot breathe in England; if their lungs/Receive our air, that moment they are free./ They touch our country and their shackles fall” (2.40–42). For a thorough unfolding of this trope, see Anthony John Harding, “Commerce, Sentiment, and Free Air: Contradictions of Abolitionist Rhetoric,” in *Affect and Abolition in the Anglo-Atlantic, 1770–1830*, ed. Steven Ahern (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 71–88; for recent, fascinating work on other examples of Cowper’s abolitionist poetics, see Ivan Ortiz, “Lyric Possession in the Abolition Ballad,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 51.2 (2018): 197–218.

51. Christopher T. Fan, “Animacy at the End of History in Changrae Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea*,” *American Quarterly* 69.3 (2017): 675–96; 680.

52. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 5.

53. Cowper, letter to the Rev. William Unwin dated 7 September 1783, in *William Cowper: Selected Letters*, ed. James King and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

54. Cowper, “The Rose,” in *Poetical Works*.

55. Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), ix.

56. Walter Hughes, “In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco,” in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (London: Routledge, 1994), 147–57; 154–55.

57. Steven Dillon, *Derek Jarman and Lyric Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 229. Brion Gysin is another important influence here. See especially the account of Jarman’s involvement in The Final Academy project by Genesis Breyer P-Orridge (then Genesis P-Orridge) in “Thee Cinema,” quoted in Jack Sargeant, *Naked Lens: Beat Cinema* (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2008), 181–89; 186.

58. Dillon, *Derek Jarman and Lyric Film*, 230.

59. Jarman, *At Your Own Risk: A Saint’s Testament* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 125.

60. Hölderlin, “Brod un Wein,” in *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, 182. My translation.

61. Raoul Vaneigem, *Traité de Savoir-Vivre à l’Usage des Jeunes Générations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), published online at <http://arikel.free.fr/aides/vaneigem/traite-6.html> (accessed October 14, 2018). My translation.