Nominalism, Romanticism, Negative Dialectics

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Abstract

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This dissertation recovers a neglected dialectical tradition within British empiricism and its Romantic afterlife. Beginning with John Locke, I demonstrate how a dialectical tradition developed as a self-critical response to the political, philosophical, and aesthetic problem of nominalism, which holds that universals do not exist and that everything is particular. As contemporaries like Dugald Stewart and S.T. Coleridge observed, British empiricists had revived the medieval nominalist-realist debates and sided with the nominalists. I show that nominalism – what Karl Marx called the "first form" of materialism – was taken up and critiqued by Romantic poets as an impediment to the task of representing abstract social and historical forces. Romantic poets as distinct as Coleridge, William Blake, and Charlotte Smith suggest that, in questioning the validity of social abstractions, the nominalist bent of empiricism tended to disable critical interrogations of larger social structures that otherwise remain inaccessible to the senses. In diagnosing the abstracting force of historical conditions like the commodification of the literary marketplace, however, the texts I examine also respond by affirming particularity. That is, even as these Romantic texts articulate the need to transcend particulars, they also resist universalizing tendencies by affirming, in Blake's terms, "minute particularity." These responses to the problem of nominalism are best understood, I argue, as a series of negative dialectics at odds both with the transcendent, affirmative dialectic of high Romanticism and with the subsequent Romantic particularisms and localisms that accompanied deconstruction and new historicism. Against the deeply engrained view that the Anglo-American tradition is anti-dialectical, the texts I study thus maintain a critical relation to social abstractions while at the same time including them in a more capacious materialism not reducible to matter. In making the case for a negative dialectics that emerges out of a self-critical relation to nominalism and empiricism, this dissertation pushes against the fundamental opposition between dialectics and empiricism asserted by both dialectical and postcritical discourses. In doing so, it presents a tradition in which empiricism and critique are inextricably entwined rather than strictly opposed.

Contents

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Dialectic is not a form of nominalism, but nor again is it a form of realism. For these twin theses of traditional philosophy – the notion that the concept enjoys substantial being in relation to individuals which it grasps and includes, and the alternative notion that the individual is substantially real while the concept is merely a *flatus vocis*, or simply 'empty sound and smoke' – these two conceptions must both be subjected to dialectical criticism.
—Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to Dialectics*

Warning: not to be misused. – The dialectic stems from the sophists; it was a mode of discussion whereby dogmatic assertions were shaken and, as the public prosecutors and comic writers put it, the lesser word made the stronger. It subsequently developed, as against *philosophia perennis*, into a perennial method of criticism, a refuge for all the thoughts of the oppressed, even those unthought by them. But as a means of proving oneself right it was also from the first an instrument of domination, a formal technique of apologetics unconcerned with content, serviceable to those who could pay: the principle of constantly and successfully turning the tables. Its truth or untruth, therefore, is not inherent in the method itself, but in its intention in the historical process… Dialectical thought includes not only the Marxian doctrine that the proletariat as the absolute object of history is capable of becoming its first social subject, and realizing the conscious self-determination of mankind, but also the joke that Gustave Doré attributes to a parliamentary representative of the *ancient régime*: that without Louis XVI there would never have been a revolution, so that he is to be thanked for the rights of man. Negative philosophy, dissolving everything, dissolves even the dissolvent. But the new form in which it claims to suspend and preserve both, dissolved and dissolvent, can never emerge in a pure state from an antagonistic society. As long as domination reproduces itself, the old quality reappears unrefined in the dissolving of the dissolvent: in a radical sense no leap is made at all. That would happen only with the liberating event.
—Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

Introduction
Nominalism, Romanticism, Negative Dialectics

Striving with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems
—William Blake, *Jerusalem*

A genuinely critical philosophy's relation to nominalism is not invariant; it changes historically with the function of skepticism.
—Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

This dissertation seeks to restore the neglected problem of nominalism – a philosophical tendency that elevates traditionally subordinated particulars and relegates universals and abstractions to the status of mere words or concepts – to the study of British Romanticism. The Romantic poets I examine critique nominalism, especially as it appears in British empiricism, for its inability to account for abstract social forces that escape sense experience. Dramatizing the need to transcend particulars in order to account for social realities, while at the same time incorporating nominalism's investment in particularity, these poetic rejoinders to nominalism constitute a series of Romantic negative dialectics that maintain a critical relation to social abstractions while at the same time including them in a more capacious materialism.

In the final years of the eighteenth century, Dugald Stewart observed that while the terms "Nominalists and Realists" had fallen out of use, the crux of the medieval schoolmen's debate "coincides precisely" with the debate over universals and particulars "which has been agitated in our own times."[1] Not merely philosophical, the implications of nominalism, what Karl Marx called the "first form" of materialism, branched out into a remarkably fruitful set of problems at the intersection of poetics and politics.[2] By discounting the validity of supra-individual categories, nominalism tended to disable critical investigations of larger social or economic structures that otherwise remain inaccessible to sensory experience. Each chapter of my dissertation thus retrieves an aspect of a Romantic poetics that critiques nominalism's inability to account for new socio-historical realities—but in the service of the particulars associated with nominalism rather than as part of a regressive return to realist universals. This intricate negotiation, I argue, constitutes a strain of Romantic negative dialectics incompatible with both the older affirmative dialectic of high Romanticism – what M. H. Abrams identified as a dialectic of "unity, division, and unity regained" – and later Romantic particularisms and localisms associated with new historicism and deconstruction.[3] The alternative tradition traced here, in poets as varied as William Blake, S. T. Coleridge, and Charlotte Smith, can instead be understood as a negative dialectics of division, unity, and division regained. In challenging the false-equivalence that nominalism assumes between particulars and materiality, universals and products of the mind, the texts I study elaborate a more permissive form of materialism, anticipating later dialectical materialisms by bringing to bear the figural resources of poetry to represent abstractions that are social rather than merely mental.

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[1] Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, 1792, 117.
[2] Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, 150.
[3] Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 1973, 266.

If nominalism is more commonly associated with other historical periods, it has long been a defining problem for Romantic Studies, from the Lovejoy-Wellek debates to the new historicist and deconstructionist tendencies that Fredric Jameson identified as nominalist. Throughout, my dissertation draws on the strangely disjointed history of nominalism, at once ancient, with its provenance in the medieval nominalist-realist debates, and distinctly modern, with its reemergence in Modern aesthetics, especially as theorized by Theodor Adorno. It was Adorno's analysis of nominalist thought that Jameson extended to the theoretical movements that have dominated Romantic Studies in recent decades. But whereas the nominalist theoretical strains identified by Jameson tended to reimagine Romanticism in their own image as a period newly invested in radical particularity, I draw on a longer history of nominalism in order to trace a Romanticism already engaged with, and critical of, the aesthetic and political implications of empiricism's eschewal of universals and abstractions. Against the overwhelming tendency of both dialectical and postcritical discourses to strictly oppose empiricism and critique, then, this project recovers a poetic tradition in which empiricism and critique are intricately interwoven.

I. Nominalism and Dialectical Thought

In an understated moment about halfway through *England in 1819*, James Chandler remarks upon the peculiar omission of British Romanticism in Fredric Jameson's *Marxism and Form*.[4] When Jameson introduces the literary criticism of Georg Lukács, he describes the contributions of *The Historical Novel* in terms of the epochal break of the literature of Baudelaire and Flaubert—or "perhaps" earlier, "with the French Revolution and German Romanticism."[5] Of course, Lukács himself had famously identified Sir Walter Scott as the modern departure from a prior classical literature, with Scott's historical novels marking the transition from feudal to capitalist society through the formal innovation of characters that are no longer "typical." As Chandler points out, Jameson's account thus produces a surprisingly "complete elision" not only of British Romantic literature but also of the entire British national tradition. Jameson goes some way toward explaining the striking absence in the opening pages of *Marxism and Form*: discussing French and German literature, and the failure of Marxist criticism to take hold "in English," Jameson laments what he sees as the fundamentally anti-dialectical tendencies of that "third national tradition . . . I mean our own." With its "mixture of political liberalism, empiricism, and logical positivism," the Anglo-American tradition "is hostile at all points to the type of thinking outlined" in the pages that follow. Myopic and politically quietist, "the anti-speculative bias of that tradition," Jameson continues, places an "emphasis on the individual fact or item at the expense of the network of relationships in which that item may be embedded." As a result, the tradition has a tendency to "encourage submission to what is by preventing its followers from making connections, and in particular from drawing the otherwise unavoidable conclusions on the political level." After this sweeping diagnosis of Anglo-America's anti-dialectical affliction, Jameson poses a challenge: "It is therefore time for those of us in the Anglo-

[4] Chandler, *England in 1819*, 257.
[5] Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 2002, 199.

American tradition to learn to think dialectically, to acquire the rudiments of a dialectical culture and the essential critical weapons it provides."[6]

Regardless of the justice of Jameson's critique of "our" tradition, *Marxism and Form* did, no doubt, teach many to "think dialectically." Chandler, for his part, "endorse[s] the aspiration of this manifesto." At the same time, he objects to Jameson's egregious simplification of an entire tradition. Beyond raising the name of Raymond Williams to temper the overstated dismissal of British literary criticism, Chandler critiques Jameson's "caricature version of Anglo-American thought." Such an account of the Anglo-American tradition "rightly challeng[es] some tenets of its critical legacy," but it also, Chandler argues, "further occludes what that criticism itself occludes: a form of historical dialectic not reducible to Hegelianism."[7] Jameson too readily conflates dialectical thinking with a German tradition starting with Hegel and anti-dialectical thinking with British thought. *England in 1819* counters that conflation by tracing Romantic texts that "participate in a self-consciously historicist literary culture"—a culture, in other words, that gives us a non-Hegelian – and a British – historical dialectic.

Almost a half a century old, *Marxism and Form*'s lament surely seems outdated. (Not least because more recent scholarship has questioned the continued relevance of dialectical analysis and critique.)[8] And yet its general diagnosis of the anti-dialectical character of two national traditions persists in later books, including *Postmodernism* and *Late Marxism*. Where *Marxism and Form* admits its inability to engage the Anglo-American tradition, *Postmodernism* develops what is in some ways Jameson's most sustained engagement with "that third national tradition," even if only in its later forms. In the two more recent books, however, a new term emerges to structure Jameson's analysis: "ours is a time of nominalism in a variety of senses," he writes in *Postmodernism*, "(from culture to philosophical thought)." Jameson defines nominalism – a term that he takes from Adorno but that originates in medieval philosophical debates over the status of universals – as "the tendential repudiation of general or universals forms." When taken to extreme, if familiar, forms, nominalism ends up claiming "that social classes do not exist, or that, in literary history, concepts like 'modernism' are crude substitutes for that very different and qualitatively discriminate experience of reading an individual text."[9] It is no accident that *Postmodernism*'s most sustained critique of nominalism, the chapter titled "Immanence and Nominalism," begins with a caustic critique of an essay Jameson refers to as "peculiarly Anglo-American."[10]

Characteristic of postmodern theory, immanence ("or what Adorno called nominalism") stands opposed to "transcendence" and any supra-individual, "seemingly external, collective labels and identities" associated with it. Yet if postmodern

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[6] Jameson, x–xi.

[7] Chandler, *England in 1819*, 259.

[8] The status of dialectical critique in the context of the dominant postcritical scholarly trend (which, in addition to being characterized as a turn away from or against critique, has been described by Stephen Best as "anti-dialectical or post-dialectical") is the topic of a final coda. Best, "Well, That Was Obvious," np.

[9] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 152, 185.

[10] Jameson, 182. The essay is, of course, "Against Theory" by Walter Benn Michaels and Stephen Knapp. Chandler notes that, "Although Jameson discusses new historicism under the philosophical rubrics 'immanence and nominalism,' it becomes clear as he proceeds that the latter category subsumes the former: he considers new historicism as part of a 'general movement toward immanence or what Theodore [sic] Adorno called nominalism.'" Chandler, *England in 1819*, 54.

nominalism seems comparatively new, a feature of both new historicism and Paul de Man's breed of post-structuralism, it also points us back to *Marxism and Form*'s earlier diagnosis: as Jameson writes in *Postmodernism*, twentieth century nominalism's "prehistories" include "the age-old tradition of Anglo-American empiricism."[11] As with *Marxism and Form*, so with *Postmodernism*: from British empiricism to American literary critics, Anglo-American nominalism is the illness for which dialectical method is the remedy.[12]

Though nominalism arguably originates with the French nominalists Roscelinus and Abelard, and the historiography of nominalism in Britain is closely bound up with German writings on nominalism, Jameson is certainly not alone in positing a close historical relation between nominalism and Britain. Marx himself, as Jameson would say, presumed a historical relation between nominalism and Britain: "Materialism is the *natural-born* son of Great Britain," Marx wrote in *The Holy Family*, and "Nominalism, the *first form of materialism*, is chiefly found among the *English* schoolmen."[13] Neither is the identification of nominalism with Britain limited to the Marxist tradition. C. S. Peirce, for example, wrote that British philosophers "have shown strong nominalistic tendencies since the time of Edward I, or even earlier." Though almost "entirely forgotten," Peirce writes, the nominalist-realist controversy has an intimate "historic connection with modern English philosophy."[14]

Yet if the special historical relation between nominalism and Britain is well-established, Jameson's insistence on the anti-dialectical nature of nominalism merits further consideration. In contrast with Jameson, Adorno theorizes a far more complex relation between dialectical thought and the history of nominalism. In Adorno's remarkable reading of Immanuel Kant, for example, it is the confrontation between nominalism and realism staged by the *Critique of Pure Reason* that produces the neglected dialectical aspect of Kant's critical philosophy.[15] While Hegel ridicules the later seventeenth-century British developments of nominalism in his lectures on the history of philosophy, C. D. Blanton notes that Hegel credits medieval nominalism with the emergence of "the formal poles of the dialectic itself . . . the question, as Hegel puts it, of 'the manner of passing from the universal to the particular.'"[16] Similarly, Marx's

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[11] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 403.

[12] Cf. *Late Marxism*'s reference to, "the various Anglo-American influences, which are all decidedly hostile to dialectical thought." Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 1990, 7–8. Notably, however, if the history of postmodern nominalism can be traced back to British empiricism, then the influence runs in the opposite direction as well. Earlier forms of nominalism develop into postmodern nominalism, but postmodern nominalism also revises previous ways of understanding the nominalist past. Thus Chandler's book in part responds to the ways in which "new historicism retroactively seems to make earlier forms and outcomes of classification practices—genres, periods, 'isms' themselves—seem nominalistically suspect, mere names in a discourse." In other words, more recent nominalisms seem to render the past ever more nominalist. Chandler, *England in 1819*, 55.

[13] Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, 150.

[14] Peirce, *The Essential Peirce Vol. 2*, 85.

[15] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1959)*, 2001, 124–26. See chapter 1 for a discussion of Adorno's reading.

[16] Blanton, "Medieval Currencies: Nominalism and Art," 195. See Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 172. There Hegel mocks Bacon as the "special leader and representative of what is in England called Philosophy, and beyond which the English have not yet advanced. For they appear to constitute that people in Europe which, limited to the understanding of actuality, is destined, like the class of shopkeepers

claim that nominalism is "the first form of materialism" suggests, at minimum, an equivocal relation to historical materialism. Even Jameson, in spite of himself, suggests a more complex relation between nominalism and dialectical thought in *Late Marxism*'s account of Adorno's relation to nominalism.

Anglo-American thought may be indelibly stamped with the character of nominalism, but is it accurate to equate nominalism with anti-dialectical thought? If, as I'm suggesting, the relation between nominalism and dialectical thought is more complex than Jameson has allowed, then how might an examination of British nominalist thought help us reevaluate that relation? More specifically, how might the elided period of British Romanticism complicate our understanding of the relation between nominalism and dialectical thought? Given the privileged relation between nominalism and dialectics that both Adorno and Hegel seem to describe, we might ask if there is a way in which the history of British nominalism has developed its own dialectic. Like Chandler and others, my project explores a British dialectical tradition – even, in a sense, a British anti-nominalist tradition – but it does so, paradoxically, by way of a consideration of the history of nominalism in the Romantic period.

II. What is Nominalism?

Perhaps no concept can more justifiably resist the demand to define its essence than nominalism.
—Martin Jay, "Adorno and Musical Nominalism"

Nominalism has a peculiar propensity to slide and bend into unexpected contraries. As Blanton notes, "The ease with which the term warps, ready simultaneously to assimilate Occam with W. V. O. Quine, theological disputes over predestination with academic debates over deconstruction, the post-Thomist with the postmodern, seemingly divests it of meaning even as its evocative power increases."[17] Even nominalism's most basic claim contains a tension between two fundamental countertendencies—between an emphasis on language, on the one hand, and a concern for things, on the other. Manifest in the term's etymology, this central tension takes on different forms throughout the subsequent history of nominalism. Historically, the word *nominalist* precedes *nominalism*, the first appearance of which the *OED* gives as 1830.[18] The English "nominalist" most likely comes from the French *nominaliste*. *Nominaliste*, in turn, is from the Latin *nominalis*, the adjectival form of *nomen. Nomen* commonly signifies "name" or "noun," but it can also signify, especially in poetic usage, "a thing."[19] On the one hand, then, nominalism can be taken to be first and foremost a problem of names and language—of potentially problematic entities that "[exist] in name only; merely named (without reference to fact or reality)."[20] On the other hand, nominalism can be understood principally as a problem of the status of things, such that, as Coleridge puts it in an

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and workmen in the State, to live always immersed in matter, and to have actuality but not reason as object."

[17] Blanton, "Medieval Currencies: Nominalism and Art," 196.

[18] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "nominalism, n." At least one instance occurs decades earlier: Sir James Mackintosh uses the term *nominalism* in his 1808 journals. See Mackintosh, *Memoirs of the Life of the Right Honorable Sir James MacKintosh*, 1:402.

[19] *Harper's Latin Dictionary*, s.v. "nomen."

[20] *OED*, s.v. "nominal, adj. and n."

appendix to the *Statesman's Manual*, for the nominalist "not to be a *thing* is the same as *not to be at all*."[21] Similarly, William Hazlitt writes of Hobbes's nominalism that "what was not a solid, tangible, distinct, palpable object was to him nothing."[22] The *OED*'s definition of nominalism joins and separates the two tendencies with a semicolon: "The view that things denominated by the same term share nothing except that fact; the view that such terms are mere names without any corresponding reality."[23]

The distinction between the two tendencies may seem inconsequential, in part because the two sides would seem to imply one another, one following from the other. In this way, the nominalist principle of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* defines the status of things and words relative to one another: "general and universal belong not to the real existence of things . . . which are all of them particular"[24]; generals and universals "are the inventions and creatures of the understanding . . . and concern only signs, whether words or ideas."[25] Locke's nominalist account defines words ("general and universal") in relation to "things themselves" ("which are all of them particular"). As we will see, however, nominalists tend to emphasize either language or things, often without acknowledging implications for the overlooked term.

Alternatively, the nominalist principle of parsimony known as Occam's razor – usually articulated as "don't multiply entities beyond necessity" – would seem to offer a stable, defining principle of nominalism.[26] Yet this principle too can slip into contrary forms. On the one hand, Occam's razor entails the shaving away of superfluous entities and abstractions—a process of clearing, of simplification, of reduction to fewer entities. It is in this sense that W. J. T. Mitchell commends the critical potential of Nelson Goodman's nominalism to provide "just the sort of Occam's razor we need for cutting through the jungle of signs." The result of the nominalist razor's operation, Mitchell writes, is "that we may see just what sort of flora we are dealing with."[27] On the other hand, nominalism also entails a contrary tendency toward multiplication and disintegration; Occam's razor can be seen as a tool for breaking apart ostensible unities into smaller, more particular units. Thus, even if Locke deems it pragmatically impossible that "every particular Thing should have a distinct peculiar name," a name for each and every thing is nevertheless an ideal toward which it is possible to aspire.[28] The result of this tendency would be the proliferation of a new jungle of names that asymptotically approaches the irreducible particularity of things. Rather than imposing a principle of economy, this contrary movement pluralizes through a process of

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[21] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions, and Two Lay Sermons*, 356. Compare Adorno's claim that nominalism "has turned into ideology—into the ideology of an eye-blinking 'There isn't any such thing.'" Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 49n.
[22] Hazlitt, *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt: Fugitive Writings*, 1904, 11:29.
[23] *OED*, s.v. "nominalism, n."
[24] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.3.11.
[25] Locke, 3.2.8.
[26] While Occam's writings exhibit the principle throughout, they do not actually contain an explicit articulation of the principle in the form that we attribute to him.
[27] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 1986, 63. Mitchell's jungle metaphor breaks down upon closer examination, but it does so in a way that raises interesting questions about the process of nominalist critique: a razor hardly seems adequate in a context that usually requires a machete, and a machete seems like an inappropriate tool for nuanced critical discrimination; and if the point is to see the flora (not fauna) more clearly, then slashing away other flora hardly seems like the most effective – not to mention the least violent – way of doing so.
[28] See Simpson, *The Academic Postmodern*, 115.

differentiation. Thus, in a case that I return to below, A. O. Lovejoy's famous discrimination of Romanticisms takes a unified literary historical period and identifies multiple distinct Romantic strains.[29]

Originally, the nominalists constituted one side – the so-called *via moderna* – of a debate over the status of universals in Aristotle. The opposing side of the debate, the realists, followed the *via antiqua* more closely associated with Plato.[30] Famously, the early French nominalist Roscelinus was said to have dismissed universals as "flatus vocis"—the mere breath of voice.[31] Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* describe the debate as follows:

> The matter in question is the universal as such (*universale*), or the genus, the essence of things, what in Plato was called the Idea—for instance, Being, humanity, the animal. . . . The question now is whether such universals are something real in and for themselves, apart from the thinking subject, and independent of the individual existing thing, so that they exist in the individual things independently of the individuality of the things and of each other; *or whether the universal is only nominal, only in the subjective representation, a thing of thought*. Those who maintained that the universals had a real existence apart from the thinking subject and distinct from the individual thing, and that the Idea alone constitutes the essence of things, were termed Realists.[32]

Against the position of the Realists, the Nominalists "asserted that if generals or universals are formed, these are only names, matters of form, representations which we make to ourselves."[33] As Raymond Williams warns in *Keywords*, however, the remarkable historical inversion undergone by the term *realist* complicates discussions of the debate: "It is very striking, and very confusing, that this Realist doctrine is what we would now call extreme IDEALISM." To complicate matters further, the nominalists "themselves might in post-mC19 terms be classed as realists of an extreme kind."[34]

Not merely philosophical, the medieval nominalist-realist debates were also theological disputes over the extent of order in the universe, where nominalists like William of Ockham insisted that positing rationality in the universe amounted to a restriction of God's omnipotence. The nominalist God, then, was radically distant and unknowable, and the nominalist universe was chaotically void of rational laws. While this metaphysical shift privileged a theology with faith as the only access to God, it also paradoxically cleared the way for greater self-assertion by humanity and a more active

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[29] Of course, Lovejoy can be seen as wielding Occam's razor against the abstract and meaningless "Romanticism" in order to make visible the more particular Romanticisms, but the point is that the emphasis can be framed either in terms of reduction or proliferation.

[30] On nominalism as the *via moderna* see Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*; Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*.

[31] In the context of nominalism's contrary tendencies toward reduction and proliferation, it is notable that the phrase *flatus vocis* is itself somewhat redundant. Thus, as one critic has noted, it is frequently translated as the pleonasm, "'breath of voice'—thereby acquiring a pejorative sense that still prevails: 'empty speech,' 'mere word.'" Allen, *On Farting: Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages*, 160.

[32] Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 78. Notably, Hegel's lectures share source texts with Coleridge's *Philosophical Lectures.* See, for example, Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann's *Geschichte der Philosophie*.

[33] Hegel, 79.

[34] Williams, *Keywords*, 257–58.

human mastery of the foreign and unknowable world.[35] If there was no longer a theological basis for order and intelligibility, then the unintended consequence of nominalism was a partial transference of divine qualities to humanity. With the waning of the divine assurance of order in the world, humans became the architects and creators of rationality and meaning. So too the theological aspects of the debate implied a new relation to nature. With "this newborn gap between God and world," one critic writes, "nominalism paved the way for the early modern secular conception of nature as an autonomous object of human curiosity and empirical research."[36] Nominalism was thus closely allied with the enlightenment project of disenchanting the world.

Most histories of nominalism in Britain trace its influence into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from the first English nominalist, the "Invincible Doctor" Ockham, to Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Berkeley, and Tooke. Writing at the end of the eighteenth century, Dugald Stewart looked back at the recent history of British nominalists and noted:

> Of the advocates who have appeared for the doctrine of the Nominalists, since the revival of letters, the most distinguished, are Hobbes, Berkeley, and Hume. The first has, in various parts of his works, reprobated the hypothesis of the Realists; and has stated the opinions of their antagonists with that acuteness, simplicity, and precision, which distinguish all his writings. The second, considering (and, in my opinions, justly) the doctrines of the ancients concerning universals, in support of which so much ingenuity had been employed by the Realists, as the great source of mystery and error in the abstract sciences, was at pains to overthrow it completely, by some very ingenious and original speculations of his own. Mr. Hume's view of the subject, as he himself acknowledges, does not differ materially from that of Berkeley; whom, by the way, he seems to have regarded as the author of an opinion, of which he was only an expositor and defender, and which, since the days of Roscelinus and Abelard, has been familiarly known in all the universities of Europe.[37]

In Stewart's brief history of British nominalism, Hobbes rebuffed the Realists not least through his simple style, Berkeley identified the Realists with pre-Enlightenment mystery, and Hume mistakenly understood Berkeley to be the originator of nominalism. In broad strokes, Stewart's narrative mostly corresponds to Peirce's own historical account, written on the occasion of the publication of the Oxford *Works of George Berkeley* (1871). Writing almost eighty years after Stewart, Peirce links Hume and Hartley forward to mid-nineteenth-century British positivism, observing that "Hume's phenomenalism and Hartley's associationism were put forth almost contemporaneously about 1750," and they "contain the fundamental positions of the current English 'positivism'."[38] Peirce's sense of the historical link between nominalism and positivism anticipates Adorno's related analysis in the twentieth century.

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[35] For important accounts of the history of nominalism, see Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*; Jay, "Magical Nominalism."

[36] Hammer, *Adorno's Modernism: Art, Experience, and Catastrophe*, 86n.

[37] Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, 1792, 184–86. Thomas Reid makes a similar claim about Hume's misidentification of Berkeley's originality, arguing that what Hume saw in Bishop Berkeley as "one of the greatest and most valuable discoveries that has been made of late years in the republic of letters," was really "no other than the opinion of the Nominalists," a position "afterwards supported by Mr Hobbes." Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 1785, 488.

[38] Peirce, *The Essential Peirce Vol. 2*, 103. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Peirce writes extensively on the problem of nominalism, positioning his own work as an attempt to develop an

When Peirce's account arrives at the historical moment in which Stewart is writing, however, something strange happens. For Peirce, what we think of roughly as the British Romantic period coincides with a curious lull in the development of nominalism: "but in the period "[f]rom 1750 down to 1830—eighty years—nothing of particular importance was added to the nominalistic doctrine."[39] Where Peirce describes a suspension or gap in the development of nominalism, Adorno suggests a more transitional and pivotal status for the Romantic period when he argues that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) constitutes a kind of dialectical eddying point in the history of nominalism: "Kant stands on the threshold of a development in which the considerations that led to a radical nominalism begin to turn against themselves."[40] Can Adorno's analysis of Kant tell us anything about the strange status of British Romanticism in the history of nominalism?

III. Salvaging Nominalism: Adorno and Negative Dialectics

Nominalism, or the denial of the existence of universals, is the complete sum of all that is negative and skeptical in philosophy.
—W. T. Harris, "Kant and Hegel in the History of Philosophy"

In order to understand the implications of Adorno's comment, we first need to examine the critical theorist's ambivalent treatment of nominalism. In many ways, Adorno is our most shrewd and relentless critic of nominalism. It is a concern that appears as early as Adorno's 1931 inaugural lecture at the University of Frankfurt, and it threads through most of his work, all the way to *Negative Dialectics* and the posthumous

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alternative to the choice between nominalism and realism. (While Peirce identified as a nominalist early on, he later called himself a "three-category realist" and critiqued what he saw as William James' nominalist adaptation of Peirce's own pragmatism.) In the twentieth century, Nelson Goodman is perhaps the most famous self-proclaimed nominalist. Goodman's "Steps Toward a Constructive Nominalism" (1947) co-authored with Quine opens: "We do not believe in abstract entities. No one supposes that abstract entities—classes, relations, properties, etc.—exist in space-time; but we mean more than this. We renounce them altogether." Goodman and Quine, "Steps Toward a Constructive Nominalism," 105. Despite Jameson's suggestion to the contrary, Anglo-Americans were not the only figures to advocate nominalism in the twentieth century. Repeatedly citing Marx's claim that nominalism is "the first form of materialism," Louis Althusser came to identify his aleatory work with an idiosyncratic Spinozist nominalism, a nominalism that he saw as the "only conceivable materialism." Warren Montag notes the fascinating shifts in Althusser's translation of Marx's claim that nominalism is "the first form of materialism." Althusser alternately translates Marx's claim as: nominalism is the "ante-chamber of materialism," and nominalism is the "royal road to materialism." Near the end of his life, Althusser went even further and claimed that "nominalism is not the only road to materialism but *the only conceivable materialism in the world*." See Montag, "Althusser's Nominalism," 66–67. Following his student Paul Veyne, who argued that "Nothing is more reasonable than a nominalist conception of history," Michel Foucault eventually endorsed historical nominalism. Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*, 43. See also Flynn, "Foucault and Historical Nominalism." Balibar, "Foucault and Marx: The Question of Nominalism." Drawing on Foucault's work, Ian Hacking has written extensively on conventional nominalism, and more recently he has made the case for what he calls "dynamic nominalism." Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, 106. Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*

[39] Peirce, *The Essential Peirce Vol. 2*, 103.

[40] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1959)*, 2001, 125. Notably Martin Jay argues that Adorno positions Hegel as "[c]rossing that threshold." Jay, "Adorno and Musical Nominalism," 9.

Aesthetic Theory.[41] His analysis of nominalism frequently invokes the closely related and more familiar term, positivism—a historical tendency of which Adorno is even more unremittingly critical.[42] At the same time, Adorno repeatedly intimates a far more sympathetic relation to nominalism. Notably, Adorno describes Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* ("a text of supreme importance for Adorno") as "a metaphysical rescue of nominalism."[43] And in a formulation reminiscent of his account of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book, Adorno characterizes his own negative dialectics as a "salvaging of empiricism, albeit in a somewhat convoluted, dialectical fashion."[44] Why would Benjamin or Adorno want to "rescue" nominalism—and from what historical fate does nominalism need rescuing? More specifically, how should we understand the relation between negative dialectics and nominalism?

Adorno's primary critique of nominalism, one that he returned to again and again, was that it disables the use of concepts. By treating concepts as no more than abstract, inaccurate approximations of particular empirical instances, as "mere abbreviation[s] for the particularities [they] cove[r]," and as arbitrary constructions that do more to obscure than to illuminate the particulars they can only approach, nominalism suggests that general concepts might simply be dispensed with.[45] As Adorno put it in his inaugural lecture, "The Actuality of Philosophy":

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[41] In the realm of literature, Adorno describes the novel, the genre that resists genre classification, as a fundamentally nominalist development: "the rise of the novel in the bourgeois age" is "the rise of the nominalistic and thus paradoxical form par excellence." Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 201. In aesthetics, Adorno credits Benedetto Croce's work with having "rais[ed] the history of "nominalism's advance" to "the level of theoretical aesthetics." Rejecting the use of aesthetic categories in assessing works of art, Croce insists that "every work be judged, as the English say, *on its own merits*." Adorno's analysis appears in the context of a discussion of "the decline of aesthetic genres as such": "Art has been caught up in the total process of nominalism's advance ever since the medieval *ordo* was broken up. The universal is no longer granted art through types, and older types are being drawn into the whirlpool. Croce's art-critical reflection that every work be judged, as the English say, *on its own merits* raised this historical tendency to the level of theoretical aesthetics. Probably no important artwork ever corresponded completely to its genre." Adorno, 199. Yet for Adorno as well as for contemporary critics, Modernism remains the primary case of nominalism in art. Schönberg and Beckett appear in Adorno's analysis, and beyond Adorno the relation between Marcel Duchamp and nominalism has received some attention. Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism*; Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 185. J. M. Bernstein discusses the nominalism of 'readymades' while also arguing that, "the project of a *painterly nominalism* was in fact achieved in Abstract Expressionism." Martin Jay has theorized the "magical nominalism" of Duchamp's photography and Walter Benjamin's theory of Adamic naming and more recently has written on "Adorno and Musical Nominalism." Jay, "Magical Nominalism"; Jay, "Adorno and Musical Nominalism."

[42] As Rei Terada defines it, "'positivism' stands for one pole of fact/value conflation, in which value emanates unidirectionally from a parsimoniously empirical construction of fact." Lest one think Adorno treats positivism undialectically, Terada usefully notes that, "To live up to Adorno's meticulous analysis of experience, everyone, *including the positivist*, has to pay more, not less, attention to facts and values alike." Terada, *Looking Away*, 2009, 157–58.

[43] Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 1990, 20. The first seminar Adorno taught at the University of Frankfurt was on the *Trauerspiel* book. The claim regarding the *Trauerspiel* study's importance for Adorno is Jameson's. Implicitly linking nominalism with empiricism, Adorno notes of the *Trauerspiel*'s "rescue" project that, "Paradoxically Benjamin's speculative method converges with the empirical method. . . . [H]e does not draw conclusions from above to below, so to speak, but rather, in an eccentric fashion, 'inductively.'" Adorno, *Notes to literature. Vol. 2*, 222.

[44] Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 82.

[45] Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, 113.

> A great number of sociologists carry nominalism so far that the concepts become too small to align the others with themselves, to enter with them into a constellation. What remains is a vast, inconsistent connection of simple this-here determinations, which scoffs at every cognitive ordering and in no way provides a critical criterion. Thus, for example, the concept of class is nullified and replaced by countless descriptions of separate groups so that they can no longer be arranged into overlapping unities, although they in fact appear as such in empirical reality.[46]

Such nominalism, Adorno suggests, takes the critique of order and unity to such an extreme that only a very attenuated form of relation ("inconsistent connection") unites the "simple" pointing of "this-here determinations." Elsewhere, Adorno suggests that what was once the critical strength of nominalism has since undergone a historical reversal. That is, what was once nominalism's critical power for demystifying concepts eventually invalidates critical concepts altogether, thereby "depriv[ing] others of the use of whatever true, substantive elements are contained in concepts, of the essential structured aspects of phenomena that lie within concepts."[47] When taken to a quantitative extreme, nominalism's critical function qualitatively inverts into a regressive tendency.

Adorno's favorite examples of concepts that nominalism threatens to do away with include 'society', 'classes', and 'freedom'. The political implications of the dismissal of the concept of society are perhaps most obviously illustrated by Margaret Thatcher's famous claim that "there is no such thing as society, only individual men and women."[48] Chandler writes that "what is politically at stake" in Adorno's critique of nominalism is the "pointedly . . . anti-Marxian [inflection]" of the nominalist critique of the concept of "classes."[49] As for the concept of freedom, Adorno explains his favored retort to those who nominalistically "demand to know exactly what freedom is, or progress" (and who, in that demand, imply the fictional or useless status of concepts): he responds to the nominalists that "they know precisely what these things are, and that, however vague the general notions about such concepts are, that they contain a great deal more truth than attempts to [nominalistically] evade the concepts and to deny their validity."[50]

The dialectical inversion of nominalism (from critical to regressive or quietist) also appears as a historical narrative in Adorno's writings. As histories of the medieval controversy attest, early nominalists were considered radical heretics, a threat to the religious and political hierarchy. Adorno similarly claims that early nominalism was emancipatory: "In the early days of nominalism, and even for early bourgeois society, Bacon's empiricism implied the emancipation of experience from the *ordo* of pre-given concepts—the 'open' as liberation from the hierarchical structure of bourgeois society."[51] From a wider historical lens, however, nominalism undergoes the same dialectic as the enlightenment tradition of which it is a part. Or rather, as Adorno claims with breathtaking scope, "Nominalism is tied to the tradition of enlightenment and the history

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[46] Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," Spring 1977, 130–31.
[47] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 139.
[48] Quoted in Brown, "The End of Educated Democracy," 23.
[49] Chandler, *England in 1819*, 54.
[50] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 140.
[51] Adorno, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, 59. Adorno makes a similar claim in *Hegel: Three Studies*: "Nominalism is part of the bourgeois bedrock. . . . Nominalism helps to free consciousness from the pressure of the authority of the concept that has established itself as universality" (113).

of enlightenment since the Middle Ages is identical with nominalism."[52] Writing of the relation between nominalism and the enlightenment, Jay explains:

> In their critique of the reduction of the Enlightenment to instrumental reason in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Adorno accused nominalism of going too far in its denigration of conceptual realism and the metaphysical tradition of substantive rationalism. "Enlightenment finally devoured not only symbols but also their successors, universal concepts, and left nothing of the metaphysics except the abstract fear of the collective from which it had sprung." As a result, the critical impulse in the rationalist tradition had been undermined. But then they added, "Enlightenment as a nominalist tendency stops short before the *nomen*, the non-extensive, restricted concept, the proper name."[53]

Like the dialectic of enlightenment, then, nominalism has both liberatory and oppressive aspects. If the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ultimately suggests that we need more, not less, enlightenment, then we might ask whether Adorno's claim that enlightenment is "identical" with nominalism implies that we need more, not less, nominalism.

In order to understand what that might look like, we must first consider nominalism's role in Adorno's negative dialectics. More specifically, we need to understand the close relationship between nominalism and non-identity. While Adorno's critique of nominalism might seem to position him as some form of conceptual realist defending the independent reality of concepts over and against empirical particulars, Adorno also tirelessly defends particulars against the identity claim of the "baleful concept." For Adorno, predication, the most basic employment of concepts, entails a violent imposition on things. As he argues in his *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, predication entails a forceful and categorical claim to identity: "Any such predicative judgment that A is B, that A = B, contains a highly emphatic claim."[54] However, the identity claim in predication is always false, always contradicted, because things always exceed the abstract or general concept. Concepts are always inadequate to the things with which they are equated: "The concept is always less than what is subsumed under it. When a B is defined as an A, it is always also *different from* and *more than* the A, the concept under which it is subsumed by way of a predicative judgment."[55] Voicing the nominalist insistence that universals are mere approximations of existing particulars, Adorno's claim that abstract concepts are inadequate to things thus embeds nominalism in the very logic of predication.[56] That is, nominalism negates the identity claim of the copula by implying the non-identity of thing and concept.

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[52] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 139. Blanton notes of a similar formulation that it is unusual "for the philosopher of non-identity to assert an identity in such fashion, so insistently and without apparent qualification."

[53] Jay, "Adorno and Musical Nominalism," 9.

[54] Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 8.

[55] Adorno, 7.

[56] Brian O'Connor is useful here: "Adorno notes: 'Intentionally or not, every judgment . . . carries with it the claim to predicate something that is not simply identical with the mere concept of the subject' (*ND* 78/71). The idea here is not unobvious. Adorno wants to claim that meaningful judgments, by their very nature, express both the identity and nonidentity of object and concept. The nonidentity is a product of meaning itself, not a mystical alternative to predication. Adorno holds that the nonidentical element of an object-concept judgment has semantic force in that it is 'the more,' as he puts it, implied by the inherent limitation of concepts. That is, the very employment of a concept implies something which is to be conceptualized—'the more'—and that element is part of the meaning structure of judgment: 'With this

Because predication makes an "emphatic" identity claim, however, the result is a contradiction between identity and non-identity—a contradiction that inheres in predication. At the same time, Adorno insists upon the non-identity of thing and concept in a second, anti-nominalist sense: "in a sense every concept is at the same time more than the characteristics that are subsumed under it." Adorno's favorite example for such a claim is the concept of freedom:

> If, for example, I think and speak of 'freedom', this concept is not simply the unity of the characteristics of all the individuals who can be defined as free on the basis of a formal freedom within a given constitution. Rather, in a situation in which people are guaranteed the freedom to exercise a profession or to enjoy their basic rights or whatever, the concept of freedom contains a pointer to something that goes well beyond those specific freedoms, without our necessarily realizing what this additional element amounts to.[57]

In exceeding the thing – and whatever exists at any given moment – the concept maintains a kernel of negativity—the negativity of thought that contains possibility. The concept is thus non-identical to the thing in two senses: the thing is always more than the concept and the concept is always more than the thing.

As Adorno crystalizes the relation of nominalism and negative dialectics in the volume of lectures titled *Introduction to Dialectics*, "Dialectic is not a form of nominalism, but nor again is it a form of realism. For these twin theses of traditional philosophy – the notion that the concept enjoys substantial being in relation to individuals which it grasps and includes, and the alternative notion that the individual is substantially real while the concept is merely a *flatus vocis*, or simply 'empty sound and smoke' – these two conceptions must both be subjected to dialectical criticism."[58] Dialectical thinking thus contains both nominalist and realist moments, even as Adorno prioritizes the nominalist moment in his insistence on a negative dialectics. His critical theory is concerned with what was previously ignored: "nonconceptuality, individuality, and particularity—things which ever since Plato used to be dismissed as transitory and insignificant."[59]

In contrast with the Hegelian dialectic, negative dialectics entails a "logic of disintegration" and "sets out to be a dialectics not of identity but of *non-identity*."[60] Negative dialectics "does not presuppose the identity of being and thought, nor does it culminate in that identity." Rather, it "attempt[s] to articulate the very opposite, namely the divergence of concept and thing, subject and object, and their unreconciled state."[61] Whereas Hegel's dialectic posits the identity of identity and non-identity, negative dialectics insists upon the non-identity of identity and non-identity.

Yet the contradiction of the concept described above is only part of the scope of

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anti-positivist insight we do justice to the concept's surplus over factuality. No concept would be thinkable, indeed none would be possible without the 'more' that makes a language of language' (*ND* 112/106) (the object being 'the more' in that it is not merely a case of the concept.); 'What is, is more than it is. This 'more' is not imposed upon it but remains immanent to it, as that which has been pushed out of it' (*ND* 164/161)." O'Connor, *Adorno's Negative Dialectics*, 68.

[57] Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 7.

[58] Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, 205.

[59] Adorno*, Negative Dialectics*, 8.

[60] Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 6.

[61] Adorno, 6.

negative dialectics. Adorno insists that his negative dialectics also entails a corresponding objective or social contradiction that can be understood in terms of the way in which society simultaneously "reproduces" and "potentially tears [itself] apart." Together, these two aspects amount to a "dual character of contradiction, the fact that on the one hand we have a contradiction in the realm of ideas and concepts, and on the other that the world itself is antagonistic in its objective form."[62] As Adorno puts it elsewhere, negative dialectics, like the Marxian dialectic, understands the world as "internally contradictory."[63]

If the relationship between the conceptual contradiction outlined above and an objectively contradictory society seems tenuous, Adorno makes a strong claim for the way in which the abstraction of the concept corresponds to a crucial social dynamic. The critical theorist argues that "something like a 'concept' is implicit in society in its objective form." In the lectures published as *Introduction to Sociology*, Adorno provides one of the clearest formulations of the relevance of the conceptual model for society:

> [T]he [social] abstraction we are concerned with is not one that first came into being in the head of a sociological theoretician who then offered the somewhat flimsy definition of society which states that everything relates to everything else. The abstraction in question here is really the specific form of the exchange process itself, the underlying social fact through which socialization first comes about. . . . [In exchange] the specific forms of the objects to be exchanged are necessarily disregarded; instead they are reduced to a universal unit. The abstraction, therefore, lies not in the abstracting mode of thought of the sociologist, but in society itself. Or, if you will permit me to use this term once again, something like a 'concept' is implicit in society in its objective form. *And I believe that the decisive difference between a positivist and a dialectical theory of society lies in this objectivity of the concept inherent in the subject matter itself; positivist sociology denies this process of abstraction, or at least relegates it to the background; its concepts are formed solely within the subject which observes, classifies, and draws conclusion.*[64]

Adorno's analysis of real abstraction, a key test case for positivism and nominalism alike, is closely related to that of Marx and Adorno's contemporary, Alfred Sohn-Rethel. Upon receiving a letter from Sohn-Rethel that described the thesis that would eventually become the Marxist economist's book *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, Adorno responded with almost unparalleled enthusiasm. His reply credited Sohn-Rethel with having "triggered the greatest mental upheaval that I have experienced in philosophy since my first encounter with Benjamin's work – and that was in 1923! This upheaval reflects the magnitude and power of your ideas – but also the depth of an agreement that goes much further than you could have suspected."[65] For both Sohn-Rethel and Adorno, Marx's

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[62] Adorno, 9.
[63] Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, 85.
[64] Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, 31–32.
[65] Letter quoted in Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, 220–21. Peter Osborne argues that what distinguishes Adorno's account of real abstraction from Sohn-Rethel's is the way in which Adorno connects the identity of the "exchange-relationship" with "Nietzschean roots in the idea that the impulse to identity inherent in thought is an expression of a *will to self-preservation*. The connection of the Marxian critique of exchange-value to the philosophical concept of identity, which Jameson highlights as Adorno's great achievement, is made on the ground of a Nietzschean anthropology." Osborne, "A Marxism for the Postmodern? Jameson's Adorno," 180.

analysis of the commodity form marks a decisive turning point in the history of nominalism.

IV. Marx: Nominalism and Materialism

The concept of a capitalist society is not a *flatus voci*.[66]
—Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

As we saw above, *The Holy Family* (1845), a polemical text jointly authored by Marx and Engels, contains Marx's claim that "Materialism is the *natural-born* son of Great Britain," and that "Nominalism, the *first form* [alternately translated as "the first expression"] *of materialism*, is chiefly found among the *English* schoolmen."[67] James Miller has characterized *The Holy Family*'s early account of nominalism as "sympathetic," suggesting that it corresponds to the influence of Ludwig Feuerbach's nominalist tendencies.[68] While some critics dispute the extent of Feuerbach's influence on Marx's early critique of Hegel, one such critique occurs earlier in *The Holy Family*, where Marx mocks "the speculative philosopher's" insistence on the priority of general and abstract ideas over real and perceptible existence. Passing over conventional philosophical examples like animal species or the essence of the metal gold, Marx employs the somewhat more irreverent case of fruit:

> If from real apples, pears, strawberries and almonds I form the general idea "*Fruit,*" if I go further and *imagine* that my abstract idea "*Fruit,*" derived from the real fruit, is an entity existing outside me, is indeed the *true* essence of the pear, the apple, etc. then—in the *language of speculative* philosophy—I am declaring that the "*Fruit*" is the "*Substance*" of the pear, the apple, the almond, etc. I am saying, therefore, that to be an apple is not essential to the apple; that what is essential to these things is not their real existence, perceptible to the senses, but the essence I have abstracted from them and then foisted on them, the essence of my idea—"*Fruit*."[69]

The bathos of the quotidian comestibles, with their sensuous, inescapable materiality, deflates the claims of the "*speculative . . . Hegelian construction*," inverting the Hegelian priority of the general and abstract over particular, sensory fruits. Standing the hierarchy

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[66] Adorno echoes this sentence, which appears in a footnote to the introduction of *Negative Dialectics*, in *Aesthetic Theory*: "Art's genres, however repressive they became, are not simply *flatus vocis*." The passage reads: "As a protest against abstracting and classifying procedures, aesthetics all the same requires abstractions and indeed has as its object the classificatory genres. Art's genres, however repressive they became, are not simply *flatus vocis*, even though the opposition to universal conceptuality is fundamental to art. Every artwork, even if it presents itself as a work of perfect harmony, is in itself the nexus of a problem. As such it participates in history and thus oversteps its own uniqueness. . . . It is in the dimension of history that the individual aesthetic object and its concept communicate." Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 358.

[67] Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, 150. As Allen Wood understands it, "the claim is obviously that scholastic nominalism was the first form of materialism to appear in modern Europe," and not "that there were no materialists in the ancient world or in non-European cultures before that time." Wood, *Karl Marx*, 258.

[68] Miller, *History and Human Existence*, 1979, 44. Miller argues that Marx "followed Feuerbach in endorsing a form of *social* nominalism—the view that social groups and institutions have no existence apart from the individuals comprising them" as well as "in offering nominalist arguments to criticize Hegel's use of concepts."

[69] Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, 68.

of entities back on its feet, in other words, Marx raises "real ordinary fruits," empirically "perceptible to the senses," over the "general idea Fruit."

Marx's comical inversion of the speculative philosopher's own upending of reality reappears later in an account of Hobbes' nominalism. *The Holy Family'*s narrative of the modern history of materialism begins with British medieval nominalism and then briefly runs through a few centuries of British materialism (which, for Marx, includes Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke), before the torch of materialism travels across the channel and is taken up by the French Socialists and Utopians. In Marx's account, Hobbes argues that "our concepts, notions, and ideas, are but the phantoms of the real world, more or less divested of its sensual form." It is not the "real ordinary" entities that are "semblances" of ideas, but rather the ideas that are the "phantoms of the real world." For Hobbes, Marx writes, "Philosophy can but give names to these phantoms." With a consummate gesture of nominalist demystification that rejects the reality of general entities, Marx's Hobbes claims that "it would imply a contradiction if . . . besides the beings known to us by our senses, beings which are one and all individuals, there existed also beings of a general, not individual nature."[70]

In part, *The Holy Family*'s narrative of the history of materialism suggests a salutary demystification and disavowal of materialism's theological origins. At the same time, however, it suggests a vexed historical trajectory in which more and more is shut out of what counts as material. Though problematically bound up with theology, earlier forms of materialism nevertheless appear to maintain a capaciousness lost to later "one-sided" and "ascetic" materialisms:

> In Bacon, its first creator, materialism still holds back within itself in a naïve way the germs of a many-sided development. On the one hand, matter, surrounded by a sensuous, poetic glamour, seems to attract man's whole entity by winning smiles. On the other, the aphoristically formulated doctrine pullulates with inconsistencies imported from theology.
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> In its further evolution, materialism becomes one-sided. Hobbes is the man who systematizes Baconian materialism. Knowledge based upon the senses loses its poetic blossom, it passes into the abstract experience of the geometrician. . . . Materialism takes to misanthropy. If it is to overcome its opponent, misanthropic, fleshless spiritualism, and that on the latter's own ground, materialism has to chastise its own flesh and turn ascetic.[71]

As in the nominalist principle of parsimony codified in Occam's razor, the history of materialism ascetically reduces what counts as material, progressively shaving away abstractions. Yet Marx implies that this form of materialism locks too much out of what counts as material: the sociable "smiles" become misanthropic, inimical to or unable to account for social relations; poetry newly falls under the purview of spiritualism. Just two years later, Marx would write in his "Theses on Feuerbach" that the "chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of* contemplation, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice,* not subjectively." Materialism cedes human activity to idealism, "which, of course, does not know real sensuous activity as such."[72] In contrast, early materialisms like that of Bacon (which "seems to attract man's whole entity")

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[70] Marx and Engels, 151.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Marx, *Early Writings*, 421.

would seem to contain some of the activity and agency that constitutes the enduring strength and appeal of idealism. That is, while early forms of materialism are limited by their "pullulating" theological baggage, later materialisms begin to shut out the kind of "poetic" permissiveness necessary for giving an account human sensual activity.

Equally important for a history of nominalism, the "one-sided" development of nominalism and materialism likewise evacuates materialism of any capacity to account for what Marx would later refer to as the "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" of the commodity.[73] Beyond the concept of fetishism, drawn from theology, the metaphysical subtleties of the commodity are also bound up with the old nominalist-realist controversy, with the commodity posing a crucial test case for the history of nominalism. As we will see below, Marx and later Marxist theorists emphasize the commodity form's status as "real abstraction." Neither the timeless universals of realism nor the diminished mental abstractions of nominalism can account for the "real abstraction" of the commodity form, which constitutes a third category.

As Miller sees it, the mature Marx turns against the nominalism of *The Holy Family*, precisely because it cannot account for the real abstraction of the commodity form. Linking *The Holy Family's* fruit passage to a corresponding passage in the first edition of *Capital*, Miller argues that "Marx now implied that the real abstractness and complexity of a phenomenon like the commodity refuted any strictly nominalist perspective. In the first edition of *Capital*, Hegel's logic, for all its absurd inversions, was implicitly vindicated as the method appropriate to an absurdly inverted social reality."[74] Remarking on the universal equivalent of a commodity in exchange, Marx writes:

> [I]t is as if, above and beyond lions, tigers, hares and all other actual animals which group to form the various kinds, species, subspecies, families, etc., of the animal kingdom, there also existed *the animal*, the individual incarnation of the entire animal kingdom. Such an individual, which includes within itself all actually existing species as the same thing, is a *universal*, like *animal*, *god*, etc.[75]

Running together political economy's conception of the universal equivalent of a commodity in exchange with the philosophical problem of universals, traceable back to the nominalist-realist debate (and prior to it), Marx's ironic tone confirms that while there is in fact no "universal" *animal*, the speculative model nevertheless seems to fit in the case of the historical case of the commodity form.[76] As Miller suggests in passing, the real abstraction of the commodity form thus constitutes an elemental problem for nominalism. Ultimately, real abstraction controverts both nominalism and realism.

Alberto Toscano has made a similar claim more recently, writing that, "Marx is able to delineate *the reality of (concrete) universals* in a manner that breaks radically with the history of the philosophical disputes between nominalists and realists."[77] Toscano's

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[73] Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, 163.
[74] Miller, *History and Human Existence*, 1979, 49.
[75] Quoted in Miller, *History and Human Existence*, 1979, 49.
[76] Miller argues further that, "Marx still preserved a critical distance from Hegel. That he makes his point sarcastically confirms his continuing commitment to demystify apparently abstract social relations, and, ultimately, to return control of society to the individual agency of the associated producers: after all, for Marx in 1867 as in 1845, it was the individual producers who actually created the social wealth abstractly expressed by money." Miller, 49.
[77] Toscano, "The Open Secret of Real Abstraction," 276.

work returns to Marx in the context of the recent wave of "new materialisms" in order to call for a "materialism of social forms"—a "materialism without matter." Toscano makes the case for a critical materialism that includes the very class of entities whose reality is denied by new materialism and nominalism; that is, he makes the case for a materialism that includes social abstractions.

In giving his account of a materialism with social abstractions, Toscano draws especially on the work of Sohn-Rethel. As Sohn-Rethel notes, "The view that abstraction was not the exclusive property of the mind, but arises in commodity exchange was first expressed in the beginning of *Capital* and earlier in the *Critique of Political Economy* of 1859, where [Marx] speaks of abstraction other than that of thought."[78] While Sohn-Rethel never explicitly discusses nominalism, the philosophical tendency to insist that abstraction is *merely* a mental process is a central tenet of nominalism.[79] Marx's great insight, as Sohn-Rethel sees it, is that "real abstraction" is social rather than mental:

> The essence of commodity abstraction, however, is that it is not thought-induced; it does not originate in men's minds but in their actions. And yet this does not give 'abstraction' a merely metaphorical meaning. It is abstraction in its precise, literal sense. The economic concept of value resulting from it is characterized by a complete absence of quality, a differentiation purely by quantity and by applicability to every kind of commodity and service which can occur on the market. . . . While the concepts of natural science are thought abstraction, the economic concept of value is a real one. It exists nowhere other than in the human mind but it does not spring from it. Rather it is purely social in character, arising in the spatio-temporal sphere of human interrelations. It is not people who originate these abstractions but their actions. 'They do this without being aware of it.'[80]

Characterizing the most radical historical implications of Sohn-Rethel's argument, Slavoj Zizek writes that, "Before thought could arrive at *pure* abstraction, the abstraction was already at work in the social effectivity of the market. . . . [I]n the act of exchange, the distinct, particular qualitative determination of a commodity is not taken into account; a commodity is reduced to an abstract entity which – irrespective of its particular nature, of its 'use-value' – possesses 'the same value' as another commodity for which is it is being exchanged."[81]

For Toscano, "a *materialism of real abstractions*" matters because it is critical: that is, it allows us to attend to relations of domination and, in particular, to the "specific ways in which [bodies and objects] are dominated by abstraction."[82] In order to make his case for this "Materialism Without Matter," Toscano draws on Etienne Balibar's claim that "Marx's materialism has nothing to do with a reference to *matter*."[83] Balibar likewise draws on the history of nominalism and realism to situate Marx's analysis of social

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[78] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 1977, 19.

[79] Of course, extreme nominalists can also argue, as Berkeley does, that we cannot even form general or abstract ideas, i.e., that all ideas are themselves particular.

[80] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 1977, 20. Sohn-Rethel quotes Marx: "by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do this without being aware of it." Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, 166–67.

[81] Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 17.

[82] Toscano, "Materialism Without Matter: Abstraction, Absense, and Social Form," 1223.

[83] Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 23. Amanda Goldstein has recently complicated Balibar's marginalization of "matter" in Marx. Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life*, 2017.

relations. "Marx was developing a notion of social relation which, at least in principle," Balibar writes, "rejected both nominalism and essentialism":[84]

> At bottom, the words 'ensemble', 'social' and 'relations' all say the same thing. The point is to reject both of the positions (the *realist* and the *nominalist*) between which philosophers have generally been divided: the one arguing that the genus or essence precedes the existence of individuals; the other that individuals are the primary reality, from which universals are 'abstracted'. For, amazingly, neither of these two positions is capable of thinking precisely what is essential in human existence: the multiple and active *relations* which individuals establish with each other (whether of language, labour, love, reproduction, domination, conflict etc.), and the fact that it is these relations which define what they have in common, the 'genus'. They define this because they constitute it at each moment in multiple forms. They thus provide the only 'effective' content of the notion of essence applied to the human being (i.e. to human beings).[85]

Thus, whereas Sohn-Rethel and Toscano emphasize the real abstraction of the commodity, which constitutes the very fabric of social relations (or what Sohn-Rethel calls the "social synthesis"), and they identify real abstraction with the historically specific development of capitalism, Balibar suggests much more broadly that all of "the real sensuous activity" of the "Theses on Feuerbach" cannot be accounted for by nominalism or realism. In other words, Balibar's adumbration of a broader range of social relations, including those of "language, labour, love, reproduction," in addition to those of "domination, conflict etc.," highlighted by Toscano, suggest that the implications of a materialism that is irreducible to matter also extend to concerns more recently associated with postcritique. (*Love*, cited above by Balibar, is one obvious example; as Rita Felski writes in *The Limits of Critique*, "Perhaps it is time to start asking different questions: 'But what about love?'"[86]) Of course, Marx himself implies the broader need for an alternative to nominalism and realism—not just as a way of giving an account of the real abstraction of capitalism, but also of sensuous human activity more broadly.

V. Why Romanticism?

> The controversy of the Nominalists and Realists was one of the greatest and most important that ever occupied the human mind. They were both right, and both wrong.
> —S. T. Coleridge, *Table Talk*

As we've seen, British Romanticism occupies a peculiar position in relation to the development of nominalism. Though writers like David Simpson have claimed that "Romantic [period] theory is predominantly nominalist," a recent collection of essays on *Nominalism and Literary Discourse* makes almost no reference to Romanticism or Romantic period writers.[87] How, then, should we understand the relationship between nominalism and British Romanticism?

Nominalism has long been a central problem for modern Romantic studies, dating back at least as far as the famous exchange between Arthur O. Lovejoy and René Wellek—an exchange in which, as Frances Ferguson puts it, the critics "set out to

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[84] Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 34.
[85] Balibar, 30–31.
[86] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 18.
[87] Simpson, *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry*, 1979, 59. Keiper, Bode, and Utz, *Nominalism and Literary Discourse*.

determine whether the kinds of generalizations made about the literary historical field of Romanticism had any use at all."[88] Lovejoy's "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms" was published in the pages of *PMLA* in 1924, and Wellek's rejoinder appeared twenty-five years later. Surveying the contemporary critical climate, Wellek observed that, "especially among American scholars," Lovejoy's "thesis has been established securely." Lovejoy's piece had argued that we cannot meaningfully speak of a single "Romanticism" and insisted that we must instead refer to a plurality of Romanticisms: "There is no hope of clear thinking on the part of the student of modern literature," writes Lovejoy, if "[he] starts with the presumption that 'Romanticism' is the heaven-appointed designation of some single real entity, or type of entities, to be found in nature."[89] Wellek objected to the "unwarranted nominalism" of Lovejoy and other critics, and his rejoinder made the contrary case for a unified and coherent Romanticism. "[P]ropos[ing] to show that there is no basis for [Lovejoy's] extreme nominalism," Wellek sought to demonstrate that "the major romantic movements form a unity of theories, philosophies, and style, and that these, in turn, form a coherent group of ideas each of which implicates the other."[90] Romantic critics continued to take sides for decades. Over half a century after its original publication, Lovejoy's essay continued to incite strong responses: Thomas McFarland adamantly maintained that "every informed commentator—or at least every informed commentator capable of thought—must, it seems to me, reject the perverse nominalism of Lovejoy's unseeing denial of such a general entity as Romanticism."[91]

Lovejoy's side of the debate was subsequently revived in earnest by Jerome McGann in the opening pages *The Romantic Ideology*. And without explicitly taking Wellek's side, Frances Ferguson responded with a series of scathing rebuttals. Yet absent especially from the later incarnation of the debate in the context of new historicism was a sense of the history of nominalist thought. Notably, Lovejoy's teachers at Harvard had included William James and Josiah Royce, both of whom took from Peirce an investment in the problem of nominalism and realism as a key philosophical framework. Later, reflecting on his old teacher in an account of the history of nominalism that mirrors Peirce's, Lovejoy gestured at a genealogy for his own nominalism:

> One of the things that the pragmatism of James is, certainly, is a modern expression of the motive which in certain other expressions is known as nominalism or positivism. In his original volume of lectures on the subject, James showed very plainly that he was in the line of the great nominalistic tradition of English thought, a successor of William of Ockham, of Hobbes, of Locke and Hume and Berkeley. The problems of philosophy, even the aspirations of religion, were to be simplified by confining thought to its proper objects of reference, by explaining to the mind the real limits of the meaning of every proposition it could frame. And the secret of this simplification was to lie in reducing all meaning and all verifiable truth to a "pointing" to "particulars in concrete experience." Enumerate those particulars and you have the whole meaning of any proposition; discover the smoothness and satisfactoriness of the transition from the particular concrete experience to which it pointed, and you have verified truth. The doctrine was, indeed, in a sense the last and completing word of the whole secular movement of nominalistic empiricism; where the medieval nominalists had applied the demand for the reduction of the meaning of abstractions to concrete and empirically verifiable particulars, chiefly to the miscellaneous hypostases of Platonic realism; where Hume had applied the same demand to the notion of cause, and Berkeley

[88] Ferguson, "Romantic Studies," 101.
[89] Lovejoy, "On the Discriminations of Romanticisms," 236.
[90] Wellek, "The Concept of 'Romanticism' in Literary History," 2.
[91] McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin*, 49.

> to that of material substance; James applied it, in a still more fundamental manner, to the notion of truth itself. The truth was to be reduced to truths; and each truth must be statable in its "cash value."[92]

The "cash value" of truth notwithstanding, the kinship between James' pragmatic approach to meaning and Lovejoy's discrimination of Romanticisms is clear, and Lovejoy's later companion essay, "The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas," uses even more explicitly pragmatic language. Whether or not James held a consistently nominalist position, Lovejoy's own nominalism can be placed in the same tradition that he sketches for James.[93] McGann's appropriation of Lovejoy's literary critical nominalism should thus likewise be understood as part of a longer history and tradition of nominalism.

Whereas Wellek concluded that Lovejoy's nominalist treatment of Romanticism was dominating the critical field by the middle of the century, McGann, writing in 1983, suggests that Wellek's realism had since won out. *The Romantic Ideology* bemoans "the present scholarly situation" that "often appears so ignorant or forgetful" of Lovejoy's critique.[94] But while McGann's remedy for the realist critical climate in which he finds himself is that "general analytic of differentiations—which Lovejoy pursued in his classic essay on Romanticism(s),"[95] as Ferguson remarks, "not even A. O. Lovejoy identified enough different Romanticisms to suit McGann."[96] Carrying his nominalism well beyond Lovejoy's, McGann pursues "any form of abstraction in which the terms of similarity (homogeneity) are allowed to obscure the differences among the individual works that have been grouped together." And, Ferguson continues, whereas "generalizations about Romanticism rely on a process of abstraction from a collection of individual literary works, McGann would demonstrate the inadequacy of the generalizations to any individual case."[97] (Ironically, in a continuation of his persistent omission of the Romantic, Jameson makes no mention of the Romantic critic most closely associated with new historicism; McGann's self-described nominalism is far more explicit than *Postmodernism*'s examples of new historicist nominalism.)[98]

Indeed, McGann's nominalist program for Romantic studies called for critics to identify ever more minute Romanticisms, perhaps as many as there are individual authors or even works. While *The Romantic Ideology* ends up reproducing a canonical cast of poets, other works of Romantic criticism did undertake the project of identifying formerly neglected Romanticisms: especially minor Romanticisms, feminine

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[92] Lovejoy, *The Thirteen Pragmatisms, and Other Essays*, 1963, 34.

[93] The following passage suggests that James was in fact far more dialectical about nominalism than Lovejoy allows:

> Now *the truth is that each side favors its own pet abstraction*. If conception abstracts from Reality's fullness by cutting out one character, and ignoring the others that coexist with it in a particular present fact of sense, no less does pure perception abstract from Reality's fullness by cutting out that particular fact of sense from the rest of the world, and by ignoring the past, future, and distant facts of sense with which it really is continuous. (James, *Manuscript Lectures*, 387.)

[94] McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, 18.

[95] McGann, 20.

[96] Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*, 1992, 151.

[97] Ferguson, 150.

[98] On McGann's vexed relation to new historicism, see Simpson, "New Historicism"; Klancher, "English Romanticism and Cultural Production."

Romanticisms, and Romanticisms that valued historically gendered and subordinated particulars (particulars that were said to resist the abstraction of both enlightenment concepts and the high Romantic imagination).[99] If Romanticism was defined as transhistorical and apolitical – as attempting to transcend the particulars of everyday historical pressures – then these nominalist Romanticisms were by definition counter-Romanticisms. Theresa Kelley, for example, argued that the poetic use of botanical details "carve a space for [the poet John] Clare (and for the local and the particular) inside Romanticism, with its vaunted preference for the grand scheme, sublime idea, and the monumental."[100] The quotidian "counter-vision" of minor poets and women writers countered the "visionary" high Romanticism – the blindness of Keats' "viewless wings of Poesy" – for the empirical "actual vision" of "women poets, whose fine eyes," Stuart Curran wrote, "are occupied continually in discriminating minute objects or assembling a world out of its disjointed particulars."[101] Romanticism was thus radically revised and revalued as a period that newly valued and gave poetic form to particularity.

In retrospect, then, we can see that the nominalism McGann advocated as a critical principle was subsequently discovered within the Romantic period. But while McGann only goes as far back as Lovejoy when tracing his own nominalist precedent, we have already seen that nominalism has a much longer history, including within the Romantic period itself (even if, as Stewart points out, the term *nominalist* may be largely absent). We might say then that, failing to acknowledge the history behind his own call for a renewed nominalism, McGann is himself guilty of "an uncritical absorption" in a Romantic tradition of nominalism. In other words, nominalism cannot be a critical method for breaking Romantic Ideology's "uncritical absorption" in Romanticism, because nominalism itself structured a set of critical debates in the period.[102] More importantly, in the chapters that follow I argue that Romantic poetics were already critical of a certain version of nominalism, especially as it was exemplified – if reductively and inaccurately – in the figure of Locke.

As a contemporary commentator, Stewart saw the medieval controversy of the nominalists and realists as current and vital at the end of the eighteenth century. He did not, however, view the battle as evenly matched. As Stewart saw it, nominalism was less ascendant than it was triumphant. He claimed that, "As for the Realists, they may, I apprehend, be fairly considered, in the present state of science, as having been already forced to lay down their arms."[103] Citing Leibniz's statement that the nominalists were the most profound of the scholastics, Stewart concluded that nominalism "is a theory, indeed, much more congenial to the spirit of the eighteenth than of the eleventh century." But while Stewart insisted on the superiority of philosophical nominalism, the more ambivalent position of the Romantic poets treated in the following chapters might be summed up by Coleridge's conclusion that the nominalists and realists were "both right,

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[99] These works include McGann's own work. See McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility*.
[100] Kelley, "Romantic Interiority and Cultural Objects."
[101] Curran, "The I Altered," 185. See chapter 3 for a discussion of Curran's account.
[102] McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, 1. The phrase "uncritical absorption" comes from McGann's definition of "the Romantic Ideology": "The ground thesis of this study is that the scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and its works are dominated by a Romantic Ideology, by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations."
[103] Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, 1792, 412.

and both wrong."[104] Each of my chapters thus examines a central figure whose response to nominalism, simultaneously critical and sympathetic, generates a negative dialectics in which the limitations of nominalism are critiqued, but the nominalist investment in particularity is maintained.

VI. The case of Blake

Neither the unifying and synthesizing operation of the high Romantic imagination nor the irreducible particulars of the more recent minor romanticisms, neither a visionary system nor a strict dwelling in the detail or the local, the Romantic negative dialectic I trace in this project is exemplified by a line from Blake's *Jerusalem*: "Striving with Systems to deliver Individuals from those Systems."[105] While critics most often cite *Jerusalem*'s line on "Creat[ing] a System, or be[ing] enslav'd by another Mans," or its lines on "minute particulars," this line more fully articulates the dialectical treatment of universals and particulars traced by my project. Blake's critique implies opposition to social abstractions (striving against systems) for the purpose of liberating ("delivering") minute particulars. Yet it also suggests that those supra-individual social systems are formidable: not just that opposition must work through systematic means (the second sense of "with") but also that individuals are the product or progeny (in the second sense of "deliver" as birthing) of systems. Recognizing the power of those systems does not correspond with an acceptance of their inevitability.

Understanding Blake's illuminated works in terms of a negative dialectics also explains the tension between Blake's apparent commitment to particularist principles – stated most explicitly in his marginalia – and his poetic practice, with its overwhelming tendency to represent general laws and structures. In the marginalia, when Joshua Reynolds writes, "There is a rule, obtained out of general nature," Blake responds: "What is General Nature is there Such a Thing / what is General Knowledge is there such a Thing [*Strictly Speaking*] All Knowledge is Particular" (E648). The "strict nominalism," as Hazard Adams terms it, of Blake's comment upends the hierarchy of general and particular that Blake despised in Locke and Reynolds.[106] If there is no such thing as "General Nature," however—if everything is a 'minute particular'—then why does Blake's poetry pour so much of its rousing energy into the representation of general structures? If there are no generals existing in nature, then why are Blake's illuminated worlds so thickly crowded with laws and systems?

In *The Book of Urizen*, for instance, Urizen, with his "dividing rule," "massy weights," and "brazen quadrant," famously embodies the opposite of particularity as enlightenment rationality and the old testament God (E80). In a rewriting of Genesis, Urizen responds to mythic chaos with the ultimate reductiveness of "One Law," codified in his "Book / Of eternal brass, written in [his] solitude" (E72). The response to Urizen's

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[104] Coleridge, *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 14.1:95.

[105] Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, E154. Unless otherwise noted, all references to works by Blake are to this edition, edited by David Erdman (New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1988), identified by the letter *E* preceding the page number.

[106] Adams, "Revisiting Reynolds' Discourses and Blake's Annotations," 130. Blake echoes and expands the annotation in his later *Catalogue* for *The Last Judgment*: "General Knowledge is Remote Knowledge it is in Particulars that Wisdom consists & Happiness too" (E 550). See chapter 1 for more discussion of Blake in relation to Locke.

pounding proclamation of his "One King[.] One God[.] One Law[.]" is a wave of reactionary rage, and the law produces a cascade of colossal rendings, the violent literalizations of Urizen's later "dividing rule." Urizen's attempts to impose his law is at the same time the attempt to impose abstract categories that do not correspond to lived reality; eventually, he sees "That no flesh nor spirit could keep / His iron laws one moment." If, in one instance, his laws attempt to strictly separate life and death, as in their seemingly opposed and separate abstract categories, then he nevertheless finds that the world fails to conform to his general laws: "For he saw that life liv'd upon death" (E81). The very word "liv'd," combining the first half of "life" with the beginning "d" of "death," embodies the inextricability of the two categories.

Yet the consequences continue to unfold, and the problem is not only that the general law does not correspond with the world. The anguish that flows from Urizen's realization about the failure of his law and the reality that death will always attend life forms the "cold shadow" that is, "Like a spiders web, moist, cold, & dim," called "The Net of Religion." That "Web" divides the "dungeon-like heaven," linking the failed abstract categories to the oppression of religion. The laws and the image of the net-like web proliferate through the end of *The Book of Urizen* to the final lettered plate.[107] (This is the second "Chapter IX," as if Urizen were at last successfully imposing uniformity on the book that bears his name.) In the final lettered plate, a new set of laws is formed, but it appears curiously indistinguishable from Urizen's previous law:

> And their children wept, & built
> Tombs in the desolate places,
> And form'd laws of prudence, and call'd them
> The eternal laws of God
> . . .
> The remaining sons of Urizen
> Beheld their brethren shrink together
> Beneath the Net of Urizen;
> Perswasion was in vain;
> For the ears of the inhabitants,
> Were wither'd, & deafen'd, & cold:
> And their eyes could not discern,
> Their brethren of other cities. (E83)

The children form the "laws of prudence" but then "[call]" them "The eternal laws of God." These laws may appear "eternal," but in narrating the process of their formation, the lines emphasize their social and historical genesis. The universal laws begin as products of the mind, and indeed "The Net of Religion" on the previous plate resembles the brain: "So twisted the cords, & so knotted / The meshes: twisted like to the human brain" (E82). Crucially, however, the social formations quickly take on an external, "eternal," and inevitable appearance—something outside the power of social agency. And if the lines suggest that the laws are social and historical, then they also present the laws as natural, the spinning of a spider's web and the twistings not of the mind but of the brain. The laws may be constructed by individuals, but they take the form of natural, divine, universal laws over the heads of individuals; they may be social, but they appear

[107] In a work that Blake famously bound with different page orderings, the second "Chapter IX" plate always served as the final lettered plate.

as immutable as natural laws. A passage from Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* serves as a strikingly fitting account of the lines:

> The more relentlessly socialization commands all moments of human and interhuman immediacy, the smaller the capacity of men to recall that this web has evolved, and the more irresistible its natural appearance. The appearance is reinforced as the distance between history and nature keeps growing: nature turns into an irresistible parable of imprisonment.[108]

Moreover, the "form'd" laws themselves begin to exert their own forming power. They become something else: something that weighs on the body and ossifies the senses—something that, in turn, remakes its maker. If the nominalist suggests that there are no real general laws, then Blake presents forms of general laws that are neither natural nor unreal. And if Blake later imagines mental liberation from oppressive general laws, then the systems in *The Book of Urizen* seem far more intractable. The heavy ropes of a grid-like net weigh down Urizen in the image on the final lettered plate. In offering no liberation from oppressive social systems, *Urizen* suggests that such social abstractions cannot merely be dismissed as aery mental constructs.[109]

It is worth noting that some critics have explicitly rejected the characterization of Blake's poetry as dialectical. While my reading shares with Steven Shaviro's "'Striving With Systems': Blake and the Politics of Difference" a similar reading of the key line from *Jerusalem*, Shaviro argues that Blake's contraries are, in general, "not dialectical," because, for Shaviro, dialectics necessarily entails sublation and "furthering resolution." Certainly, Blake does not present a reconciliation of the contraries of general and particular. *The Book of Urizen* suggests, rather, that reconciliation would entail a more complete submission or conformity to the abstract law. At the same time, if we apply Shaviro's account to *Urizen*, then we might say that the book presents the inverse of "furthering resolution." The relation between Urizen's laws and the world does not remain unchanged, because the world does not remain unchanged by the laws, and it is in part for that reason I argue we should instead understand *Urizen* as a negative dialectic. As in the famous motto to the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression," the result of the relation between the law and the world that cannot keep it "is Oppression" (E44). In other words, the relation between general law and particular world is not, in Shaviro's terms, "a refusal of dialectics," but rather a violent incompatibility expressed as suffering and a narrowing of experience.[110]

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[108] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 357.

[109] Some critics locate *Urizen*'s response to the problem of general law in the material particulars of the text. The resistance is embedded in the material fact that each object is a "specific and non-generalizable [event]" rather than a variation on an ideal general text, as Paul Mann puts it. Mann, "Apocalypse and Recuperation," 3. As Stephen Leo Carr writes, "Each 'copy' of a work" of Blake's illuminated printing "differs from all others," and "[t]his radical variability is embedded in the material processes of producing illuminated prints." Carr, "Illuminated Printing: Toward a Logic of Difference," 182. Or at least that is what many critics continue to take for granted. As Haggarty and Mee have written recently, that position remains tenacious: "the idea of the uniqueness of the various copies has been a stubborn one to shake in criticism of *Songs* and the illuminated books more generally." Haggarty and Mee, *William Blake*, 160.

[110] In Adorno's account of negative dialectics, while Hegel discovers the identity of identity and non-identity, Adorno insists that the result of identity (here the law) and non-identity (here the particularity of the world) is non-identity (here the incompatibility of the two in the form of oppression).

For Shaviro, turning to the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake's "refusal of dialectics marks [his] rejection of the intellectualizing and conceptualizing procedures of rationalistic philosophy," and that refusal "paradoxically presents itself in the form of a conceptual or cognitive moment within Blake's own text." Shaviro points us to the tension between the "differential and anti-discursive" content of Blake's doctrine of Contraries, on the one hand, and its "universalizing, conceptual, and systematic" form, on the other.[111] We see just such a tension in the motto to the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "One Law for the Lion & the Ox is Oppression" (E44). Of course, some critics have read the motto as the political or ethical version of Blake's nominalism. The "One Law" imposes oppressive uniformity on the two particular animals, and in violating the animals' unique natures, the "One Law" cannot, as in the marginalia, exist in nature. As Nelson Hilton writes, the motto is "an assertion of necessary difference." Kevin Hutchings argues similarly that "Blake's disdain for homogeneous rule ('One Law') suggests that the law's main problem is its inability to acknowledge and respect the particular otherness of individual creatures."[112]

Other critics, however, have noted the law-like form of the motto, which appears in strangely Urizenic isolation at the bottom of the page. As Claire Colbrook asks incisively of the motto, "is [it] the *one* law that will free us from the tyranny of law?"[113] More pointedly, Nicholas M. Williams maintains that it is precisely the general form of the motto, its peculiar oneness, that opens the motto up to critique and that suggests the motto violates its own insistence on minute particularity. For Williams, in other words, the line produces a surprising closure, especially when read in the context of the *Marriage*'s modeling of vigorous disagreement: "the victory over the "One Law," if it is conceived as such, takes the form of an unsettling singleness."[114] Thus whereas Williams suggests that the universal form of the motto resolves the contraries of universal and particular by problematically subsuming the content of the motto under its form, for Shaviro the axiomatic form of the motto remains in tension with its nominalist content: "No dialectical reconciliation of the Contraries is permitted, and yet it is in an authoritative statement, one which would have to transcend the contradiction, that the Contraries are maintained *as* Contraries, as states defined in opposition to and by means of struggle with one another." The result, for Shaviro is that the two poles "incessantly refer back to one another, taking one another's place without ever achieving any [dialectical] reconciliation or teleological subsumption, in that movement of endless circularity."[115]

We might also read a different, and more meaningful, kind of movement in the motto, however. While clearly sympathetic to a nominalist particularism, Blake suggests that simply doing away with the universal law – or treating its removal as a simple task – may serve to further obscure existing general structures of oppression. Sonically and graphically, at the level of the material letter, the motto suggests additional, independent forms of oppressive generality. Capital letters connect the "L" of "Law" to the "L" of

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[111] Shaviro, 231–32.
[112] Hilton and Eaves, "Blake's Early Works," 204. Hutchings, *Imagining Nature*, 59. For Hutchings Blake produces an "environmental ethic" in which "the best strategy for respecting the rights of non-human creatures might involve merely letting such creatures 'be'."
[113] Colebrook, *Irony*, 60.
[114] Williams, *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake*, 217.
[115] Shaviro, "'Striving With Systems': Blake and the Politics of Difference," 235.

"Lion" and the "O" of "Ox" with the "O" of "Oppression," so that the motto's "L" links law (and its claim to universality) with the rampant lion of the monarchy, and the "O" implicitly yokes oppression to the beast of burden associated with manual labor and the working class. This inequality would seem to exist outside or independently of the "One Law," even as it may also serve as the latter's pretext. The material particulars of the motto thus suggest that in addition to more blatantly oppressive claims to universal law, we can begin to see other, more subtly embedded forms of general social oppression. In the nominalist utopian absence of universal law, the motto suggests, bias toward the more powerful lion remains. Put differently, Blake suggests that general social forces would remain even after the extirpation of the "One Law," just as "Oppression" would not end with the removal of the "One Law": quite literally, "Lion & Ox is Oppression" would remain after the erasure or obliteration of the words "One Law."

VII. Chapters

I begin my analysis with John Locke, a figure whose touchstone *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* clearly articulates a nominalist position on universals and particulars: "general and universal belong not to the real existence of things . . . which are all of them particular."[116] As later chapters demonstrate, the subsequent Romantic critique of Locke was in large part a response to his perceived nominalism. And yet, as Stewart and Coleridge both acknowledged, Locke's own stance on the nominalist-realist debates was curiously contradictory. As Stewart wrote:

> On the whole, it is evident, that Mr. Locke was neither completely satisfied with the doctrine of the Nominalists, nor with that of the Realists. . . . Indeed, Mr. Locke has put this matter beyond all doubt himself; for, in explaining the manner in which we conceive universals, he has stated his opinion in the strongest and most paradoxical and most contradictory terms. The ridicule bestowed on this part of his philosophy by the author of Martinus Scriblerus, although censured for unfairness by [his editor] Dr. Warburton, is almost justified by some of his expressions.[117]

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[116] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.3.11.

[117] Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, 1792, 561. Decades before Stewart, Alexander Pope and the Scriblerus Club had mercilessly parodied the debate. *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* lampoons the high seriousness of philosophical universals with the scatological humor of "clysters" (that is, enemas):

> Martin supposed an universal man to be like a knight of the shire, or a burgess of a corporation, that represented a great many individuals. His father asked him, if he could not frame the idea of a universal Lord Mayor? Martin told him, that, never having seen but one Lord Mayor, the idea of that Lord Mayor always returned to his mind; that he had great difficulty to abstract a Lord Mayor from his own fur gown, and gold chain; nay, that the horse he saw the Lord Mayor ride upon, not a little disturbed his imagination. On the other hand Crambe, to shew himself of a more penetrating genius, swore that he could frame a conception of a Lord Mayor, not only without his horse, gown, and gold chain, but even without stature, feature, colour, hands, head, feet, or any body; which he supposed was the abstract of a Lord Mayor. Cornelius told him, that he was a lying rascal; that an universal was not the object of imagination, and that there was no such thing in reality, or *a parte Rei*. But I can prove (quoth Crambe) that there are clysters *a parte Rei*. (Pope, *The Works of Alexander Pope*, 309–10.)

The young Martin Scriblerus' inability to form an abstract universal idea of a Lord Mayor pokes fun at the realists; those stubborn particulars like the Lord Mayor's gold chain keep impinging on the idea. The supercilious Crambe responds by claiming to be able to form an abstraction so abstract as to remove even the idea of the "body." In this case too, the realists are the butt of the joke. When Cornelius finally weighs

If the puzzling contradictions of the *Essay* have been overlooked—or, in the case of John Horne Tooke, explained and revised away—then here I propose to take them seriously.

In my first chapter, titled "'To call a constellation a complex star": the *Essay*'s contradictions, dialectical empiricism, and the 'two sides of enlightenment,'" I argue that what Coleridge derides as the "eddying" form of the *Essay* – a form made legible by the problem of nominalism – at the same time makes visible a dramatic and surprisingly neglected opposition that runs through Locke's reception. From Northrop Frye and Paul de Man to Hans Aarsleff and William Keach, Romantic literary criticism follows John Horne Tooke, Blake, and Coleridge in polarizing Locke into either a "copy" theory of thought and language or a proto-Saussurean arbitrary semiotics. I demonstrate the origins of subsequent Romantic misreadings of Locke, while also showing how the *Essay's* internal critique of its own nominalist principles paradoxically brings Locke closer to the Romantic poets treated in later chapters. That is, Locke's recursive self-revision actually anticipates Blake and Coleridge's subsequent critiques of a reductive, thoroughly nominalist portrait of the empiricist. Finally, I argue that we begin to see the *Essay's* critical potential when we understand the affinities between, on the one hand, Adorno's negative dialectical treatment of concepts as both violent and necessary, and, on the other, the *Essay's* eddying affirmation and denial of the nominalist gap between thing and sign.

My second chapter, "To Read a Bull: Nominalism, Commodification, and Negative Dialectics in the *Biographia Literaria,*" shows how the "real abstraction" of the commodity form's logic of equivalence appears as the shadowy double to the synthesizing operation of the imagination. I revisit the *Biographia's* seemingly marginal footnote on the so-called "bull" and its "antithesis," two types of contradictory statements that involve a simultaneous apprehension of connection and disconnection. The form of the bull, I argue, recurs in key passages on reading and the production of literary texts, including well-known passages on the newly developed stereotype method of printing and the *camera obscura*. I argue that such passages register poetic "connections" forged by the impersonal forces of a commodified literary marketplace and mass print production—connections disturbingly similar to those produced by the imagination. If the bull allows Coleridge to represent connections generated by the abstract equivalence of the commodity form, the bull's contradictory form also allows for the contrary assertion of a lack of connection between poetic elements. That is, the bull asserts the particularity of poetic parts that are otherwise rendered equivalent by the commodity form. Implying a negative dialectics that decomposes (false) connections through a temporal and self-correcting model of reading, the bull departs from Coleridge's increasingly conservative politics and stands as a critical counterpoint to the unifying operation of the imagination.

Taking up the previous chapters' problem of nominalism in a temporal register, chapter 3, "Charlotte Smith and Transience," explores Smith's interest in transience as a problem of particularity in and across time. Tracing the problem of transience from the melancholy loss of the early *Elegiac Sonnets* to the natural-historical scale of change

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in with the authority of Latin, we get yet a third caricature of the realists. In a footnote to the passage above, Pope's editor Warburton objects to the passage's supposed parody of Locke: "This is not a fair representation of what is said in the *Essay on Human Understanding,* concerning *general and abstract ideas.*"

figured in the posthumous *Beachy Head*, I show how Smith's poetry critiques the consolation promised by various strategies for redressing decay and deterioration: through the generic conventions of elegiac consolation, the eternity of divine afterlife, the material cycles of seasonal nature, and the "visionary" power of imagination. While Smith's poetry relentlessly corrodes different forms of consolation that would arrest transience, it also dramatizes the transformation of loss into a mythic or naturalized form of permanent transience. Neither particulars that inherently resist enlightenment concepts and Romantic aesthetic categories, nor a vibrant materiality embraced by recent new materialists, Smith's natural historical transience cuts across divisions between the human and the natural, insisting on the particularity of loss as well as the memory that makes loss legible.

Finally, a coda considers the relation between the late enlightenment negative dialectics traced in this project and the recent postcritical trend in literary studies. What does a Romantic tradition clearly situated in a longer history of critique contribute in a postcritical moment? What does the recovery of a prehistory of negative dialectics suggest in a moment that has also been called "anti-dialectical or post-dialectical"?[118]

[118] Best, "Well, That Was Obvious," np.

Chapter 1
"To call a constellation a complex star": the contradictions of Locke's *Essay* and the "two sides of enlightenment"

[Locke] curiously enough has the greatest similarity to Kant of all the great philosophers, even though Kant would turn in his grave at the mere thought.
—Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*

The means employed in negative dialectics for the penetration of its hardened objects is possibility. . . . But no matter how hard we try for linguistic expression of such a history congealed in things, the words we use will remain concepts. Their precision substitutes for the thing itself, without quite bringing its selfhood to mind; there is a gap between words and the thing they conjure.
—Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

I. Introduction: nominalism and empiricism from Locke to Adorno

There is none of [Locke's] wavering and perplexity in the minds of his French commentators, none of this suspicion of error, and anxious desire to correct it; no unforeseen objections arise to stagger their natural confidence in themselves; it is all the same light, airy, self-complacency, not a speck is seen to sully the clear sky of their philosophy, not a wrinkle disturbs the smooth and sailing current of their thoughts.
—William Hazlitt, "Madame de Staël's Account of German Philosophy"

In a February 1801 letter to Josiah Wedgewood, Coleridge complained of John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that the "arrangement" of the text "is so defective that I at least seem always in an *eddy*, when I read him / round & round, & never a step forward."[119] The figure of the eddy is an ambiguous one in Coleridge's writings, at turns suggesting the motion of quiet contemplation, the generative interchange of mind and world, or the stagnation of solipsism and madness.[120] It was a metaphor that Coleridge used often in the opening years of the nineteenth century. In the same month that he penned his letter on Locke's *Essay,* and with the presence of smallpox nearby, Coleridge wrote to Dorothy Wordsworth of being "anxious, and eddy-minded about" the health of his son Derwent.[121] A year and a half later, he wrote of a very different kind of eddying, this time a joyful, almost rapturous turning:

> It is in very truth a sunny, misty, cloudy, dazzling, howling omniform, Day / & I have been looking at as pretty a sight as a Father's eyes could well see – Hartley & little Derwent running in the Green, where the Gusts blow most madly – both with their Hair floating & tossing, a miniature of the agitated Trees below which they were playing / inebriate both with the pleasure – Hartley whirling round for joy – Derwent eddying half willingly, half by the force of the Gust – driven backward, struggling forward, & shouting his little hymn of Joy.[122]

These lines on the unstable, "half [willing]" and "half" buffeted, eddying Derwent came just months after the first draft of Coleridge's *Dejection* ode. Sent as a letter to Sarah Hutchinson, the draft poem contains the famous instance of eddying that M. H. Abrams

[119] Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, 2:381.
[120] For a reading of Coleridge's different uses of the eddy metaphor, see Kessler, *Coleridge's Metaphors of Being*, 15–37. See also Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary*, 222–23.
[121] Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, 2:379.
[122] Coleridge, 2:462.

once referred to as the "crowning metaphor" of the poem: the figure of the eddy, Abrams writes, "implies a ceaseless and circular interchange of life between soul and nature in which it is impossible to distinguish what is given from what received."[123] For the figure's "conspicuous example of a balance of forces," I. A. Richards called it "one of Coleridge's greatest imaginative triumphs."[124] In contrast, Coleridge's account of the *Essay*'s "round"-ing motion, far from *Dejection*'s "eddying of her living soul" or the whirling of his youngest son, aims to criticize what he takes to be Locke's error and confusion. The poet wields the metaphor in his effort, as Wedgewood wrote of Coleridge's letters on the *Essay*, to "[pluck] the principal feathers out of Locke's wings."[125]

It is ironic that Coleridge should figure the ostensibly anti-Romantic *Essay* in terms of a metaphor so closely associated with the work of the Romantic imagination and the circular odic return of the Greater Romantic Lyric.[126] Inhabiting that irony, this chapter argues that Coleridge's frustrated reading experience captures the neglected repetitions and recursive self-contradictions that characterize the *Essay*'s form. Why these aspects of the *Essay*'s form should matter can be answered in part by the way in which they structure, and make legible, the surprisingly overlooked oppositions that shape Locke's reception. More importantly, I show how both the *Essay*'s eddying form and its polarized reception can be traced to Locke's complex and ambivalent engagement with nominalism. Like the opposing forces that produce the deviations of an eddy, the *Essay* alternately makes two incompatible claims: (1) that there is an irreducible gap between particular things and general signs (a nominalist relation that Locke sometimes characterizes as "perfectly arbitrary"); and (2) that there is a perfect correspondence or "conformity" between particular and general, thing and sign. That is, while Locke's nominalism prevents him from accepting the view that general signs are identical with "Things as they are," he also refuses to settle on the opposite view that takes words as "perfect cheats," wholly inadequate to things.[127] The nominalist tendency of the *Essay* challenges one of the more tenaciously reductive commonplaces of empiricism, so that general signs, including those authoritative words of the "Father or Schoolmaster, the Parson of the Parish, or such a Reverend Doctor" cannot be reduced to sense experience[128]—and may not even name something that exists. Yet the *Essay* does not reconcile this nominalist critique with its opposing tendencies in a manner that Coleridge might have recognized as "step[ping] forward."

I show how Locke's treatment of nominalism should instead be understood as dialectical, and, more broadly, how the critical possibilities of the *Essay*'s contradictions come into focus when read in relation to Theodor Adorno's account of Immanuel Kant's contradictory interweaving of the "two sides of enlightenment." If, as Adorno argues,

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[123] Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 68. The famous lines read: "To her may all things live, from pole to pole, / Their life the eddying of her living soul!" Coleridge, *The Major Works*, 118.
[124] Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination*, 152.
[125] Josiah Wedgewood writing to Thomas Poole, quoted in editor's note to Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, 2:381.
[126] In a further irony, Coleridge's account of Locke's eddying closely resembles his characterization in the *Biographia Literaria* of William Wordsworth's poetic defects as "occasional prolixity, repetition, and an eddying instead of a progression of thought*."* Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, II:136.
[127] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.9.34.
[128] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.10.16.

Kant's contradiction produces a dialectical treatment of the split tendencies of enlightenment, then Locke contains a strikingly similar but inverted contradiction. The *Essay*'s eddying, I argue, should be understood in the longer history of nominalism leading to Adorno's negative dialectics: reading Locke alongside Adorno illuminates the critical aspects of the *Essay'*s nominalism at the same time that it highlights the neglected empiricist legacy in Adorno's negative dialectics.

If it seems absurd to link the *Essay* to the author of "The Essay as Form," then it is worth remembering not only that Adorno saw an "extraordinarily profound similarity between Kant's epistemology and Locke's" (a connection between empiricism and the critical tradition to which I return below) but also that the Frankfurt School critical theorist characterized his own negative dialectics as a "salvaging of empiricism."[129] Of course, Adorno addresses the history of empiricism directly in "The Essay as Form": empiricism would seem to be allied with the anti-systematic essay form, in that it "give[s] priority to experience that is open-ended and cannot be anticipated." Yet historically, for Adorno, empiricism forecloses on that possibility by excluding what cannot be reduced to the concept in the drive for philosophical system and consistency.[130] In tension with this assessment, Coleridge and others (and, as we will see, even Adorno himself) understood the *Essay* to be defined by contradictions that were antithetical to system—and that turn out to have a significant bearing on the role of nominalism in Adorno's distinctive form of critical theory. Indeed, to William Hazlitt, Locke's "reasoning" on particulars and generals is "very loose, uncertain, and wavering"; as Dugald Stewart noted, the *Essay's* treatment of nominalism was put in "most paradoxical and most contradictory terms."[131] Reading the *Essay* as form, then, and restoring our sense of its status as trial or attempt, makes visible a nominalist dialectic that should be understood as part of an important prehistory to Adorno's negative dialectics.

In the context of our post-critical moment, when empiricism and critique are increasingly viewed as irreconcilable alternatives, revisiting the longer history of nominalism reclaims a dialectical tradition within empiricism while at the same time revealing a tradition in which empiricism and critique are inextricably intertwined. As later chapters demonstrate, outlining the nominalist dialectic of Locke's empiricism opens up revised understandings of the Romantic poets that follow, revealing a negative dialectical strain within a British Romantic tradition that is more commonly understood in terms of a positive or unifying dialectic. Identifying the nominalist dialectic within empiricism has the effect of bringing the Romantic poets I take up in later chapters closer

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[129] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1959)*, 2001, 215; Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 82.

[130] The complete passage from "Essay as Form" reads: "Even empiricist theories, which give priority to experience that is open-ended and cannot be anticipated, as opposed to fixed conceptual ordering, remain systematic in that they deal with preconditions for knowledge that are conceived as more or less constant and develop them in as homogeneous a context as possible. Since Bacon—himself an essayist—empiricism has been as much a 'method' as rationalism . . . The essay allows for the consciousness of nonidentity, without expressing it directly; it is radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character." Adorno, *Notes to Literature Vol 1*, 9.

[131] The quote comes from Hazlitt's commentary on the John Horne Tooke's assessment of Locke, which I address below. Hazlitt, *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt: Fugitive Writings*, 1904, 11:127.

to Locke, even as these poets expand the more limited epistemological and linguistic scope of the *Essay* to address broader social and historical concerns.

II. The *Essay* "round & round"

Nominalism is tied to the tradition of enlightenment and the history of enlightenment since the Middle Ages is identical with nominalism.
—Adorno, *History and Freedom*

While Coleridge neglects to note any specific cases of eddying in the Essay, instances abound. One of the many moments that might have frustrated Coleridge is a passage perhaps most familiar to scholars of Romanticism from its prominence in Paul de Man's reading of Locke. In the passage in question, Locke gives what de Man refers to as the *Essay*'s "taxonomy of words."[132] As we might expect, the passage appears in Book III "*On the Nature, Use, and Signification of Language*." Curiously, however, the taxonomy has less to do with language, the stated topic of Book III, than with a range of relations between ideas and things, ostensibly the topic of Book II—so that, despite its appearance in Book III, the taxonomy circles back to Book II. The tripartite taxonomy of words reiterates Locke's taxonomy of ideas, which consists of simple ideas (like the taste of a Pineapple), complex ideas of substance (for example, the general essence or species of "gold"), and mixed modes (general social or moral concepts like "patricide").[133] In doing so, the taxonomy oddly repeats and revises Book II's distinction between "*Adequate and Inadequate* Ideas," this time with a different set of terms:[134]

> The Names of simple *Ideas*, Substances, and mixed Modes, have also this difference; That those *of mixed Modes* stand for *Ideas* perfectly *arbitrary*: Those of *Substances*, are not perfectly so; but *referr* [sic] *to a pattern, though with some latitude: and those of simple* Ideas *are* perfectly taken from the existence of things, and are *not arbitrary at all*.[135]

Here, in Book III, ideas are classified by their degree of arbitrariness rather than their degree of "inadequacy" (Book II). While critics like Hans Aarsleff and William Keach remind us that the *Essay* insists on an arbitrary relation between words and ideas, Locke's taxonomy of words attempts to address a different problem. At stake in the taxonomy are differing degrees of arbitrariness in the relationship not between ideas and words but between ideas and things, even as Locke tenuously links the latter relation to corresponding words or "Names." In this chapter I show how the *Essay*'s repetitions and contradictions are a product of what, in his Kant lectures, Adorno calls "the question of *nominalism* and *realism* – in other words, the question of whether concepts are merely

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[132] De Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," 16.
[133] Simple ideas, like the color Scarlet, "[stand] only for one simple Perception" and "can only be got by Experience" (3.4.14); complex ideas of Substances (sometimes "natural Substances") include species of plants, animals, and minerals; and, finally, mixed Modes include mostly "moral" ideas like Justice—man-made ideas that "are the Creatures of the Understanding, rather than the Works of Nature" (3.5.12).
[134] Locke's distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas is the topic of 2.31. Simple ideas are adequate copies, substances are inadequate copies, and mixed modes are adequate because, as their own "originals," they are necessarily adequate to themselves.
[135] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.4.17.

the [arbitrary] addition of thought or whether something in the concepts corresponds to something in the things, whether concepts have a basis in the thing itself."[136]

We are used to thinking of Locke's epistemology in terms of the histories of empiricism and associationism.[137] While numerous critics have pointed to the *Essay*'s nominalism, most characterize Locke's relation to the tradition either as an unremarkably strict adherence or as a muddled approximation. Thomas Pfau, for example, has written recently that Locke's commitment to "nominalism is so complete and, to him, self-evident that he can no longer engage competing traditions of inquiry, most eminently that of realism."[138] As David Simpson notes, "Locke had determined, in his important distinction between nominal and real essences, that the orthodoxy of his followers should be nominalist or conceptualist rather than realist."[139] As we have already seen, however, the attempt to characterize Locke's nominalism produced far more ambivalent results around the turn of the eighteenth century. Classing Locke somewhere between the nominalists and realists, Thomas Reid noted that Locke's novel distinction between 'nominal' and 'real' essences succeeded in "[bringing] to an issue" the age-old "controversy between the nominalists and realists."[140] Stewart claimed that "Mr. Locke was neither completely satisfied with the doctrine of the Nominalists, nor with that of the Realists."[141] While, like Pfau and Simpson, my reading underscores Locke's nominalism, I depart from their conclusions in emphasizing the wavering contradictions identified by some of Locke's early readers.

In order to understand how the *Essay* contradicts itself, we must first understand how Locke articulates a nominalist position. Leaving aside the taxonomy for now, Book III explicitly states the *Essay*'s nominalist principle: "general and universal belong not to the real existence of things . . . which are all of them particular."[142] For Locke, generals and universals "are the inventions and creatures of the understanding . . . and concern only signs, whether words or ideas," and of words, Locke writes that their "signification . . . is limited to [one's] *Ideas*, and they can be Signs of nothing else."[143] In articulating a

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[136] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1959)*, 2001, 124.

[137] For a reading that complicates Locke's relationship to the traditions he founded, see Caruth, *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions*.

[138] Pfau writes dismissively of the "nominalism to which Locke was unquestionably committed, so much so that he appears quite oblivious to the fact that nominalism, too, amounted to a complex intellectual tradition in its own right" (226). Pfau, *Minding the Modern*, 227. For more extensive accounts, see Hudson, "John Locke and the Tradition of Nominalism"; Milton, "John Locke and the Nominalist Tradition."

[139] Simpson, *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry*, 1979, 58. Locke distinguishes between "nominal" and "real" essence as follows: "This, though it be all the essence of natural substances that we know, or by which we distinguish them into sorts; yet I call it by a peculiar name, the nominal essence, to distinguish it from that real constitution of substances, upon which depends this nominal essence, and all the properties of that sort, which, therefore, as has been said, may be called the real essence: *v.g.* the nominal essence of gold, is that complex idea the word gold stands for, let it be, for instance, a body yellow, of a certain weight, malleable, fusible, and fixed. But the real essence, is the constitution of the insensible parts of that body, on which those qualities, and all the other properties of gold, depend." *Essay*, 3.6.2.

[140] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, 1785, II:146.

[141] Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, 1792, 561.

[142] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.3.11.

[143] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.2.8. Throughout, I use "universals," "generals," "essences," "species," and "general signs" somewhat interchangeably, in part because Locke himself does so. See for example, the following uses: "universals, whether ideas or terms" (2.2.9); "making

nominalist understanding of ideas and words, the *Essay* generates the problem of correspondence noted in Adorno's Kant lectures, suggesting, in other words, that general signs thereby bear no relation to particular things. Yet Locke cannot be termed a straightforward nominalist, and it is the dialectic that the *Essay* generates in response to the implications of its own nominalism, rather than nominalism itself, that principally interests me here. The *Essay* repeatedly counters the nominalist non-correspondence of particular and general with an assertion of the perfect correspondence between idea and thing; Locke both emphatically denies the "agreement" of general signs with particular things and repeatedly reverses that claim.

The *Essay* contradicts its own nominalism in two ways: first, Locke vacillates within each of the three categories of ideas, shifting the extent of their correspondence with things at different moments in the sprawling and repetitive *Essay*. Simple ideas, for example, start out with the famous distinction between ideas of primary and secondary qualities, where ideas of primary qualities exactly resemble their objects and simple ideas of secondary qualities bear no resemblance. This split is often cited in relation to one common view of the *Essay* (one version of the nominalist arbitrariness articulated by Adorno) as expressed, for example, in Mary Poovey's question: "Once we admit that the subjective ideas of objects are separable from the objects themselves, as Locke insisted we do, how can we know that our ideas correspond to matters of fact?"[144] By the time we get to Book III, however, the suggestion that simple ideas are "separable" from objects has disappeared, and the definition of simple ideas that de Man relies on from the taxonomy of words entails an exact correspondence with things: they "*are* perfectly taken from the existence of things, and are *not arbitrary at all*."[145] At different points in the *Essay* then, the same category of ideas both does and does not correspond "perfectly" to things.[146] Second, while many critics ignore the *Essay*'s distinction between different classes of ideas and words, the taxonomies effectively split Locke's treatment of the nominalist problem of correspondence into three responses. As we saw in the taxonomy, the three types of ideas range from "perfect" correspondence (simple ideas) to "perfect" arbitrariness (mixed modes). The middle category of complex ideas of substances sustains, without reconciling, a tension between the correspondence and non-correspondence of thing and idea, condensing the *Essay*'s overall dialectic.

Such a dialectical portrait of Locke, which I elaborate below, can only seem strange, if not absurd. We overwhelmingly oppose British empiricism and the dialectical tradition of German idealism—two traditions ostensibly as unalike as "Tea and Totality," to use Geoffrey Hartman's memorable formulation.[147] In this context, the remarkably polarized pattern of the *Essay*'s critical reception (glimpsed in the example of simple ideas above) should begin to put pressure on our critical commonplaces about the *Essay*. Across his reception, we find Locke theorizing, on the one hand, a proto-Saussurean arbitrary language and abstract enlightenment concepts that remain out of touch with messy, everyday particulars, and, on the other hand, a "sensibilist" theory, bound to

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use of general signs for universal ideas" (2.2.10); "*General and universal are creatures of the understanding"* (3.3.11).

[144] Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact*, 199.

[145] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.4.17.

[146] Or, put differently, the split between simple ideas of primary and secondary qualities migrates and spreads across the *Essay*.

[147] See Hartman, "Tea and Totality."

sensory experience and unable to transcend it, where both ideas and words can ultimately be traced back to originary sensory encounters with the material world. Because most critics of Locke have tended to emphasize either the correspondence or the non-correspondence of Locke's general signs with particular things, neither critical camp does justice to the *Essay*'s curious practice of circling back into irreconcilable currents of thought.

III. The Case(s) Against Locke: Ideas and Things

If nominalism is defined as a rejection of universals and abstract entities and as a prioritization of the category of the particular, then students of British Romanticism might understandably hesitate to call Locke a nominalist. Following William Blake, we associate Locke with Urizen, the abstract god whose indifference to particularity results in horribly oppressive legislation.[148] As one critic writes, "Blake's system respects the integrity of the minute particulars; it does not celebrate the general terms that Locke says are so essential to human thought."[149] In his annotations to Sir Joshua Reynolds, Blake fumed that "Lockes Opinions of Words & their Fallaciousness are Artful Opinions & Fallacious also," and his curt rhetorical questions defending particularity are said to apply to Locke as well as Reynolds: "What is General Nature? is there Such a Thing? what is General Knowledge? is there such a thing? Strictly Speaking All Knowledge is Particular."[150] For Romantic criticism that itself overwhelmingly values particularity, immanence, and the local, Blake's memorable censures, along with those of Coleridge, have given us one of the paradigmatic Romantic portraits of Locke—an abstract and generalizing Locke; Locke the archenemy of "Minute Particulars" and the "Little Ones."[151]

Without discounting Blake's critique of Locke, we must also acknowledge the strong – and strangely Blakean – nominalist tendency within the *Essay*. As we saw, Locke unambiguously takes for granted a nominalist starting point for Book III, assuming that "All Things, that exist, [are] Particulars." We might easily mistake Locke's words for Blake's own when Locke writes that "there is no such thing as one and the same common nature in several individuals: for all, that in truth is in them, is particular, and can be nothing but particular."[152] In the *Essay*, simple ideas tend to have greater epistemological certainty than general ideas, and Locke repeatedly warns of the limited adequacy of general ideas. In his discussion of "General Terms," for example, Locke writes that:

> To return to general words: it is plain, by what has been said, that general and universal belong not to the real existence of things; but are the inventions and creatures of the understanding, made by it for its own use, and concern only signs, whether words or ideas. . . . [U]niversality belongs not to things themselves, which are all of them particular in their existence, even those words and

[148] One critic claims that Locke was the "model" for Urizen. Glausser, *Locke and Blake*, 2.
[149] Yoder, "Unlocking Language: Self-Similarity in Blake's Jerusalem," para. 21.
[150] E659. Blake links his (now lost) Locke marginalia to his responses to Reynolds, as well as to Bacon, Newton, and Burke: "I read Burke's Treatise when very Young at the same time I read Locke on Human Understanding & Bacons Advancement of Learning on Every one of these Books I wrote my Opinions & on looking them over find that my Notes on Reynolds in this Book are exactly Similar" (E660-661).
[151] E205.
[152] "Mr. Locke's reply to the Bishop of Worcester's Answer to his Letter." Quoted in Milton, "John Locke and the Nominalist Tradition," 134.

> ideas which in their signification are general. When therefore we quit particulars, the generals that rest are only creatures of our own making.[153]

As Coleridge noted, Locke and Plato's notions of an idea were no more similar than "a Syllogism & an Apple-dumpling";[154] unlike the independent and primary existence of Plato's universal *eidos*, Locke's nominalist words and ideas have no "real existence" and are "only creatures of our own making." (Ironically, the phrase Locke repeated uses to describe that creative process, the "workmanship of the mind," recalls Blake's artisan labors.)[155] Thus while Blake protests Lockean general ideas and abstraction, critiquing their violent inadequacy to exuberant particulars, we might equally emphasize Locke's insistence on the epistemological shortcomings of general ideas with respect to particular things.

Curiously, even Blake scholars who are in perfect agreement about the resolutely antithetical relation between Locke and Blake can produce diametrically opposed readings of Locke. The oddity of such profound disagreement, even among Blakeans, over what makes Locke a primary critical target and foil, is surpassed only by the fact of its being so consistently overlooked. Exemplary of the extreme polarization in the wider reception of the *Essay*, the Blake scholars I consider below read the *Essay's* relation of idea and thing either as a radical split or, alternatively, as a perfect identity or equivalence.

Citing the separation of "the 'secondary qualities' of perception from the 'primary qualities' which Locke assigns to a 'substratum' of substance," *Fearful Symmetry*'s "The Case Against Locke" famously scorns the subject-object split of Locke's epistemology.[156] Like Poovey after him, Northrop Frye refers to Locke's bifurcation of simple ideas in Book II of the *Essay*; simple ideas of primary qualities (including "*Solidity, Extension, Figure,* and *Mobility*") perfectly resemble the corresponding qualities in the objects, whereas "the *Ideas, produced* in us *by* . . . *Secondary Qualities, have no resemblance* of them at all." In the latter case of secondary qualities, then, "There is nothing like our *Ideas*, existing in the Bodies themselves."[157]

As an alternative to the nominalist split of Locke's secondary ideas, Frye (and Frye's Blake) advocates instead the identity of subject and object codified in Bishop Berkeley's principle of *esse est percipi*, "to be is to be perceived." For Frye, Locke's abstract ideas encourage lazy and misguided sketches that fall deplorably short of their objects. Recalling Adorno's critique of empiricism, where empiricism paradoxically ends up shutting out what cannot be reduced to concepts, Frye suggests that Locke's theorization of abstract ideas actually makes him the lesser, inferior empiricist when compared to Blake:

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[153] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.3.11.
[154] Quoted in Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 98n. In one of the countless oppositions of Locke's reception, compare A. O. Lovejoy's claim that "the historians of philosophy have in great part missed . . . that in his epistemology [Locke] was essentially a Platonist." Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 362.
[155] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 4.7.3. Compare Locke's metaphor of the Fancy as painter: "Whence comes [the mind as white Paper] by that vast store, which the busy and boundless Fancy of Man has painted on it" (2.1.2).
[156] Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, 17. Frye also cites the *Essay*'s split between "sensation" and "reflection."
[157] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 2.8.15.

> Sensation is always in the plural: when we see a tree we see a multitude of particular facts about the tree, and the more intently we look the more there are to see. . . . But the abstract idea of "tree" ranks far below this. We have now sunk to the mental level of the dull-witted Philistine who in the first place saw "just a tree," without noticing whether it was an oak or a poplar.[158]

Berkeley delivered his "killing blow" to Locke's general triangle by arguing that all ideas are particular and hence that Locke's general triangle was in fact a particular triangle, whether isosceles or scalene, etc. Invoking Berkeley, Frye suggests that we can simply dispense with the pathetically abstract "tree," a reductive general entity that obstructs rather than aids precise perception, and instead just see alders and cedars in all their unique particularity.

More recently, Saree Makdisi's *The Impossible History of the 1790s* follows Frye in assuming the absolute irreconcilability of Locke and Blake. "As Frye pointed out," Makdisi writes, "if we attempt to frame Blake's aesthetic principles with Lockean political or philosophical principles we will never be able to account for them, and they will appear to us (as they have to so many others) as sheer insanity, pure unintelligibility."[159] Like Frye before him, Makdisi echoes Blake's admonishments of Locke's lack of imagination. Yet Makdisi's subsequent reading of the *Essay* effectively inverts Frye's case against Locke.[160] Justifying his critique of Locke with a rationale the polar opposite of Frye's, Makdisi argues that Locke first and foremost contains a "copy" theory of cognition that assumes the identity of subject and object, idea and thing. According to Makdisi, "idea reception for Locke is limited by its formal affinity to image printing, and specifically to the exactly mimetic printing of images as identical copies of already-created external objects (or, in the case of higher-order reflection, of images produced in the mind itself as a result of accumulating and reflecting on images already 'imprinted' through sensation)."[161] It is the absolute perfection of the *Essay*'s cognitive copying ("exactly mimetic"), its scrupulous lack of play ("identical copies"), and ultimately the presumed identity of the object with its corresponding idea in the subject that Makdisi identifies in Locke and to which he objects on Blake's behalf. Thus, whereas Frye laments the way in which Locke's ideas of secondary qualities fail utterly to copy things because, according to Locke, "There is nothing like our *Ideas*, existing in the Bodies themselves," Makdisi finds the opposite problem: Lockean ideas fail to register their difference from objects.

IV. Locke's Linguistic Critics: Words and Things

The peculiar polarization that we see among Blake scholars, claiming both the absolute difference and the perfect identity of Locke's ideas and things, repeats across the reception of Locke's theory of language. While Frye and Makdisi focus on Lockean ideas, for the most part Locke does not treat ideas and things in isolation, and the status

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[158] Frye, *Fearful Symmetry*, [15].
[159] Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s*, 275.
[160] In another notable opposition in the reception of the *Essay*, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* claimed that Locke's philosophy "opened the gates wide to enthusiasm" (226), whereas Makdisi's Blakean perspective critiques Locke for attempting to limit and contain dangerous enthusiasm ("unrestrainedly affirmative and creative" enthusiasm) (276-7). Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.
[161] Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s*, 276.

of words repeatedly rears its head in Book II on ideas despite the fact that Locke famously admitted his original intent of completing the *Essay* without a discussion of words.[162] With the problem of the relation of ideas and things recurring in Locke's treatment of words (Locke's other "general signs"), it is no wonder the *Essay* made Coleridge's head spin.

Much as in Frye's reading of Locke's subject/object split, Hans Aarsleff's influential *From Locke to Saussure* (1982) finds in the *Essay* a radical split between language and world. Unlike the idealist Frye, however, Aarsleff sees the split as a theoretical strength and reads the *Essay* as an anticipation of Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology. Aarsleff, and the extension of Aarsleff's work in William Keach's more recent *Arbitrary Power* (2004), highlights Locke's insistence on the arbitrary relation between words and the ideas they "immediately" signify. "*Words*," Locke writes, "come to be made use of by Men, as *the Signs of* their *Ideas*; not by any natural connexion . . . but by a voluntary Imposition, whereby such a Word is made arbitrarily the Mark of such an *Idea*."[163] As we will see, Aarsleff's reading identifies one key tendency of the *Essay*, yet his concern with Locke's claim that words are "immediately the Signs of Mens *Ideas*" ultimately magnifies and distorts the *Essay*'s suggestion that words and ideas thereby have no significant relation to things.

At the center of Aarsleff's account of the *Essay*'s theory of language is his reading of Locke's refutation of the "double conformity thesis." According to Locke, the misconceived notion of "double conformity" holds that ideas "agree" on the one hand with "the Things existing without them, to which they are referr'd" and, on the other hand, to "the Names they give them" in accordance with the "Use and Propriety of that Language." That is, ideas conform both to things and to words.[164] The "double conformity" passage appears in a chapter titled "Of True and False Ideas" in Book II, and the passage primarily concerns ideas. In Aarsleff's treatment, however, Locke's concern with discrediting the notion of the dual conformity of ideas warps almost imperceptibly into the twentieth-century critic's concern with what we might term the "double conformity of words." According to Aarsleff:

> Locke said that speakers habitually believe that words are as good as things, 'as if the name carried with it the knowledge of the species or the essence of it,' thus assuming that language is a safe and simple nomenclature to the inventory of the world. This belief is a serious mistake, however. Words are about ideas, not about things; but the mistake is tenacious, 'for without this *double conformity* of their *ideas*, they find they should both think amiss of things themselves, and talk of them unintelligibly to others.' Locke's rejection of the double conformity gathers the basic features of his philosophy of language, which forms an integral part of the epistemological argument of the *Essay*.[165]

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[162] Locke writes that, "upon a nearer approach, I find, that there is so close a connexion between *Ideas* and Words; and our abstract *Ideas*, and general Words, have so constant a relation one to another, that it is impossible to speak clearly and distinctly of our Knowledge, which all consists in Propositions, without considering, first, the Nature, Use, and Signification of Language; which therefor must be the business of the next Book" (2.33.19).

[163] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.2.1.

[164] Locke, 2.32.8.

[165] Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure*, 24.

While Locke's original concern with ideas remains visible in Aarsleff's citation ("the *double conformity* of their *ideas*"), Aarsleff instead takes up the problem of the conformity between words/things and words/ideas. Even as Aarsleff fails to acknowledge that the problem of correspondence precedes and exceeds the question of language in the *Essay*, the ease with which Aarsleff transposes the problem of conformity from Book II to Book III underscores the way in which the *Essay* repeats and reiterates the problem of nominalism.

For Aarsleff, Locke denies the conformity of words and ideas by asserting the arbitrariness of words; he denies the conformity of words and things both by refuting what he takes to be the common misconception that words unproblematically name things, and by discounting a specific version of this latter error in the doctrine of Adamic language.[166] Aarsleff's reading thus easily assimilates the *Essay*'s suggestion that words remain radically separate from things to a linguistic structuralism: like Saussure after him, Locke's signs refer not to things but to other signs in an autonomous system of signs whose meaning is relational rather than located "outside" of language. Yet the extended passage in question, only partially cited by Aarsleff as evidence of Adam's arbitrary language, instead clearly manifests the contradiction within Locke's ostensibly straightforward rejection of "the double conformity of ideas." As Aarsleff points out, Locke's Adam – the rather mundane, everyman Adam that refutes the doctrine of a privileged, primordial language in which names apprehend the essences of things – uses arbitrary words just like us: "The same liberty also that *Adam* had of affixing any new name to any *idea*, the same has anyone still," writes Locke. Aarsleff neglects to add, however, that we also share with Locke's Adam the "necessity" of conforming ideas to things: "The same necessity of conforming his ideas of substances to things without him, as to *archetypes* made by nature, that *Adam* was under" writes Locke, "the same are all men ever since under, too."[167] So while Locke's rejection of "double conformity" denies the conformity not just of words and things, as Aarsleff would have it, but also of ideas and things, conformity nevertheless appears as an imperative of thought. Across the *Essay*, the problem of "conformity" multiplies and turns back on itself.

William Keach's subsequent elaboration of Aarsleff's influential reading of the *Essay* reiterates the implication that Lockean language does not "conform" in any way to the real world and thus that language and world are radically separate. Keach writes that "Saussure—and Locke before him" relied on "two debilitating restrictions": "the strategic severing of the connection between words and material things" and "the bracketing of social reality into a deferred formal abstraction."[168] Drawing on the conclusions of Raymond Williams' *Marxism and Literature*, Keach argues that the isolation of an autonomous system of signs at the expense of its relations and dependencies has the pernicious effect of abstracting language from history and the material world. Though Keach's critique of linguistic abstraction marks a departure from the politics of Aarsleff's

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[166] Aarsleff notes in his introduction: "I am convinced that Locke's argument about the cheat of words was aimed not so much against the common thing-word habit, which all of us tend to follow in a pragmatic way, but against its much more serious embodiment in the Adamic language doctrine. If there were any truth in it, the word for gold, for instance, might by suitable means be made to reveal the nature and essence of gold, whereas for Locke it was impossible to know more than what he defiantly called the 'nominal essence'" (26).

[167] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.6.51.

[168] Keach, *Arbitrary Power*, 9.

account, both critics conclude that Locke's system of language is autonomous—a prefiguration, for better or for worse, of Saussure's semiotics and its twentieth-century popularization.

In sharp contrast, the other prominent strain of linguistic reception reads the *Essay* as a "sensibilist" theory of language that, as Robert Essick puts it, "limit[s] words to object-reference."[169] (One critic at the extreme of the sensibilist camp carries the characterization even further, calling the *Essay*'s theory of linguistic signification an "atomistic object-reference language."[170]) Even de Man's reading of Locke, which in some ways complicates more reductive sensibilist readings of the *Essay*, takes for granted that Locke assumes the perfect correspondence between words and things. Like Aarsleff and Keach, de Man's "Epistemology of Metaphor" concludes that "Locke's theory of language is remarkably free of what is now referred to as 'cratylic' delusions" and that "[t]he arbitrariness of the sign as signifier is clearly established by him."[171] But whereas Keach, following Aarsleff, implicates Locke in "Saussure's insistence on thinking about language as an autonomous system of signs," de Man rejects any sense of the autonomy of Lockean language. In other words, while Keach argues that both Locke and Saussure end up "severing" language and world, de Man suggests the reverse when he argues that Locke's "notion of language is frankly semantic rather than semiotic, a theory of signification as a substitution of words for 'ideas' . . . and not of the linguistic sign as an autonomous structure."[172] That is, de Man's Locke presumes that proper (and properly philosophical) words should function as equivalent substitutes for ideas and things, leaving no semantic remainder.

De Man goes on to show how the substitution of Lockean words slides uncontrollably into errant significations, producing aberrant entities that escape Locke's attempts to cordon off and control figural language. The slippages of figuration end up confirming de Man's insistence on the delusional status of our belief that we can access anything outside of language. Prior to his act of reading, however, de Man characterizes the *Essay*'s normative theory of language as one that presumes that words should allow us to (as de Man repeatedly quotes from the *Essay*) "speak of things as they are." De Man portrays a Locke at ease only in the undeconstructed case of simple ideas, where "there seem to be no semantic or epistemological problems since the nominal and the real essence of the species designated by the word coincide." The case of simple ideas appears to substantiate de Man's initial portrait of Locke's normative theory of language: "since the idea is simple and undivided" for Locke, de Man writes, "there can in principle be no room for play or ambivalence between the word and the entity, or between property and essence."[173] Not surprisingly, Locke's epistemological comfort proves to be fleeting in de Man's hands. But we need only turn back to Book II's split between primary and secondary qualities (and to Frye and Poovey's readings) to note that Locke himself

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[169] Robert N. Essick, *William Blake and the Language of Adam* (Oxford : New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1989), 46.
[170] Yoder, "Unlocking Language: Self-Similarity in Blake's Jerusalem," para. 21.
[171] De Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," 16.
[172] Ibid.
[173] De Man, 17.

problematizes the status and correspondence of simple ideas.[174] Indeed, Locke's repeated assertion of the lack of correspondence between general signs and particular things would seem to deny the possibility of linguistic substitution to begin with.

De Man concludes his essay with a similarly one-sided account of Locke. The discussion in question concerns mixed modes, Locke's category of moral, social, and pragmatic ideas that are, according to Locke, "the Creatures of the Understanding . . . made by the Understanding."[175] While de Man rightly characterizes mixed modes' ability to "produce of and by itself the entity it signifies," he also slips into his discussion a passage on a very different category of ideas in order to catch Locke out in a contradiction:

> [Locke] concludes with the catachresis of mixed modes in which the word can be said to produce of and by itself the entity it signifies and that has no equivalence in nature. Locke condemns catachresis severely: "he that hath ideas of substances disagreeing with the real existence of things, so far wants the materials of true knowledge in his understanding, and hath instead thereof chimeras. . . . He that thinks the name centaur stands for some real being, imposes on himself and mistakes words for things."[176]

Rather than citing a passage on mixed modes, de Man quotes a passage on complex ideas of substances in which Locke condemns the lack of correspondence between ideas and things. For Locke, complex ideas of substances must correspond to "the real existence of things" (though, of course, Locke complicates this definition, in that complex ideas of substances correspond to "nominal" rather than "real" essences). However, mixed modes have no such responsibility for correspondence because, as de Man himself notes, they have "no equivalence in nature." Substituting one category for another, de Man's analysis of catachresis produces its own catachresis.[177]

More importantly, de Man obscures the *Essay*'s own theorization of the problem of nominalism. In constructing his initial portrait of Locke, de Man conspicuously avoids Locke's explicitly nominalist declarations of the split between general signs and particular things. Ostensibly taking up the *Essay*'s own frictions and aporias, de Man instead reiterates the commonplace of a Lockean empiricism for which normative language unproblematically conforms to and is grounded in things. As in each of the irreconcilable readings above, the *Essay* itself generates the possibility of de Man's

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[174] Again, whereas simple ideas of primary qualities resemble their objects, "the *Ideas, produced* in us *by* . . . *Secondary Qualities, have no resemblance* of them at all. . . . There is nothing like our *Ideas*, existing in the Bodies themselves." Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 2.8.15.

[175] Locke, 3.5.2-5.

[176] De Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," 21.

[177] De Man might instead have noted the troubling resemblance between mixed modes and Locke's famous chapter on "*the Association of Ideas*." As Cathy Caruth has noted, while Locke is treated as the founder of "the school known as associationism," Locke's use of the phrase "referred to a thought process subversive of normal reasoning and described as 'madness'" rather than the later "use of *association* to name a central principle of rational thought." Caruth reminds us that, "Locke assumed . . . that reason normally operates by combining simple ideas according to their 'natural connections'." Of course, not all ideas *do* combine simple ideas "according to their 'natural connections', and mixed modes, with their "perfect" arbitrariness, are the most clear example of this. Caruth, *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions*, 1. De Man's case for the impossibility of maintaining the boundary between figural and philosophical language would be even more powerful with respect to the fine line between "madness" and the "perfectly arbitrary" (that is, the in no way "natural") connection of mixed modes.

reading. Yet de Man obscures the *Essay*'s nominalist countertendency, its persistent assertion of the radical disjunction of things and language, in order to ultimately reach a similar conclusion. Perhaps de Man's curious catachresis can be explained by the nominalist strain in his own thinking (Fredric Jameson and Frances Ferguson are among those who have noted de Man's nominalism).[178] In other words, it may be that only by eliding the *Essay*'s nominalist current can de Man find in Locke a suitable critical foil.

V. "[A]midst nominalism and against it": Locke, Kant, and the "two sides of enlightenment"

[T]he middle road is the only road that does not lead to Rome.
—Arnold Schoenberg, *Schoenberg's Program Notes and Musical Analyses*

What happens if we instead take into account both of the *Essay*'s opposing tendencies? Rather than discounting the antinomies of Locke's reception, I have been arguing that these rival readings help illuminate the *Essay*'s unresolved tensions. But beyond just contradictory, the *Essay* can be understood as dialectical in a sense that will become clear in relation to Locke's affinities with Kant. Even though we might say that, as Adorno writes of Kant, "a dialectical way of seeing is quite foreign to him," Locke's contradictory treatment of nominalism produces a dialectical relation of universal and particular that at the same time can be understood, in the most expansive terms, as incorporating the two contrary tendencies of enlightenment. Before turning to Kant, however, I first want to demonstrate how fundamental those tensions are to the *Essay* and to indicate their scope beyond the more famous passages taken up by influential readings of Locke. As in de Man, my analysis of the *Essay* begins with simple ideas and moves through Locke's categories of mixed modes and complex ideas of substances. As I have noted, Locke's response to the *Essay*'s nominalist question (again in Adorno's words on Kant) of "whether something in the concepts corresponds to something in the things," of "whether concepts are merely the [arbitrary] addition of thought," ultimately splits into three distinct answers. After Locke's significant vacillation within each category of ideas – wavering that is especially prominent in Book II – we find that Book III's simple ideas correspond perfectly to things, mixed modes are "perfectly *arbitrary*," and complex ideas of substances are arbitrary but nevertheless correspond to things.

Early on in the *Essay*, in a moment perhaps even more telling than the passages on simple ideas of primary and secondary qualities, Locke draws an alarming comparison between ideas and arbitrary language. Indeed, even before the split between primary and secondary qualities, Locke suggests that ideas and sensations may be far more like arbitrary words than the simple correspondence of his initial metaphors of impressions or images would initially suggest:

> To discover the nature of our *Ideas* the better, and to discourse of them intelligibly, it will be convenient to distinguish them, as they are *Ideas* or Perceptions in our Minds; and as they are modifications of matter in the Bodies that cause such Perceptions in us: that so we *may not* think (as perhaps usually is done) that they are exactly the Images and *Resemblances* of something inherent in the subject [i.e., the object]; most of those of Sensation being in the Mind no more the

[178] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 262; Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*, 1992, 155, 160, 168, 170.

> likeness of something existing without us, than the Names, that stand for them, are the likeness of our *Ideas*, which yet upon hearing, they are apt to excite in us.[179]

Given the persistence of reductive portraits of Lockean empiricism, Locke's comment is shocking, in part because of its crisp clarity—neither iconic resemblance nor indexical impression, sensory experience of material objects may actually be more like the mental productions of language.[180] In a similarly fundamental way, the *Essay* goes on to undercut the initial relation of perfect correspondence between simple idea and thing by suggesting that all ideas involve relations. At first, Locke distinguishes between simple ideas (which, at this point in the *Essay*, correspond to objects) and ideas of relations. Unlike simple ideas, relations are "not contained in the real existence of Things." Relations are "something extraneous, and superinduced."[181] The two categories, simple ideas and relations, are unambiguously distinct and opposed: "all names that are more than empty sounds, must signify some *Idea*, which is either in the thing to which the name is applied . . . or else it arises from the respect the Mind finds in it, to something distinct from it, with which it considers it; and then it includes a Relation."[182] In a surprising reversal, however, Locke collapses his distinction and concedes that *all* ideas may contain relations—even as some relations remain latent or "secret":

> I confess *Power includes in it some kind of relation,* (a relation to Action or Change,) as indeed which of our *Ideas*, of what kind soever, when attentively considered, does not? For our *Ideas* of Extension, Duration, and Number, do they not all contain in them a secret relation of the Parts? Figure and Motion have something relative in them much more visibly: And sensible Qualities, as Bodies, in relation to our Perception, *etc.* And if considered in the things themselves, do they not depend on the Bulk, Figure, Texture, and Motion of the Parts? All which include some kind of relation in them.[183]

Even "Extension," which elsewhere Locke classifies as a primary quality, here contains a "secret relation."[184] Because relations are "not contained in the real existence of Things," Locke ends up circling around to a position one step further than Hume's. In *A Treatise of Human Nature* Hume admits to the impasse of "two principles" that he is unable to "render consistent" or "renounce . . . viz. *that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences,* and *that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences*."[185] By concluding that all ideas are relations, Locke raises the possibility that we perceive nothing of "the real existence of Things." That is, all ideas may be

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[179] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 2.8.7.
[180] Of course, part of what is at stake in the passage is the "confusion" that Raymond Williams has noted with the development of the term *arbitrary*: "The term was developed in distinction from the 'iconic', to indicate, correctly, that most verbal signs are not 'images' of things." Here, similarly, the comparison between ideas and words is used to suggest that the relation of ideas and things (like the relation of words and ideas) is not one of iconic likeness or resemblance. As the proliferation of the *Essay*'s terms ("adequate," "conformity," "correspondence," "arbitrary," etc.) for describing non-iconic relations indicates, one version of the nominalist problem of correspondence is the problem of the inadequacy of the alternatives, of resemblance and "perfect arbitrariness." Williams, *Marxism and Literature*.
[181] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 2.25.7.
[182] Locke, 2.25.2.
[183] Locke, 2.21.3.
[184] Locke, 3.8.9.
[185] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 421.

"something extraneous, and superinduced," added to real things rather than resembling things or being caused by them.

By Book III, however, simple ideas have undergone a radical epistemological reversal. Like the initial account of simple ideas of primary qualities, all simple ideas are now "perfectly taken from the existence of things" and thus purport to offer undistorted knowledge of things. Simple ideas "*are generally less doubtful and uncertain, than those of mixed Modes and Substances*," because unlike ideas of Substances they do not have a "supposed, but an unknown real Essence."[186] Whereas the "*the Names of natural Substances,*" which "*signify* rarely, if ever, any thing but *barely the nominal Essences* of those Species" the "*Names of simple* Ideas *and* [mixed] *Modes, signify always the real, as well as the nominal Essence of their Species*."[187] The split between simple ideas of primary and secondary qualities effectively migrates to the split between real and nominal essences in complex ideas of Substances.[188]

Moving from simple ideas to mixed modes, we encounter an inverted response to the nominalist problem of correspondence. As we have seen, Locke introduces a split between "real" and "nominal" essences in order to maintain that our complex ideas (and words) of natural substances (like "gold" or "Man") fail to apprehend their "real essence." In contrast, for mixed modes, as for simple ideas, the "Real and nominal essence [are] the same." Real and nominal essences coincide in mixed modes because the nominal essence refers to itself—mixed modes are, as Locke notes, their own "original." In making mixed modes – moral, social, and cultural concepts that include, for example, 'murder', 'patricide', and 'incest' – "the Mind searches not its Patterns in Nature, nor refers the *Ideas* it makes to the real existence of Things."[189] Whereas Book II repeatedly claims that mixed modes are comprised of and maintain a link to simple ideas and thus to a foundation in experience, Locke goes on to sever that connection.[190] In Book III, while

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[186] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.4.15.

[187] Locke, 3.4.3.William Uzgalis notes the disagreement among scholars on the point of Locke's nominal essences: "There is debate over whether Locke's view is that this lack of fixed boundaries is true on both the level of appearances and nominal essences, and atomic constitutions and real essences, or on the level of nominal essences alone. The first view is that Locke holds that there are no Aristotelian natural kinds on either the level of appearance or atomic reality. The second view holds that Locke thinks there are Aristotelian natural kinds on the atomic level, it is simply that we cannot get at them or know what they are. On either of these interpretations, the real essence cannot provide the meaning to names of substances. A.O. Lovejoy in the *Great Chain of Being*, and David Wiggins are proponents of the second interpretation while Michael Ayers and William Uzgalis argue for the first." Uzgalis, "John Locke."

[188] Whatever simple ideas gain in certainty, they remain a limited form of knowledge—a "particular matter of Fact," as Locke puts it, rather than general knowledge. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 4.3.25. Indeed, because simple ideas refer directly to experience, words for simple ideas cannot be defined. At times Locke suggests that simple ideas are actually particular—how else could they correspond so perfectly to a thoroughly particular world? If they are instead general, then Locke gives us the perfect identity of particular thing and general idea. But it would be more accurate to say that the *Essay* wavers between these multiple possibilities, depending on the passage we might want to cite. More importantly, the implications of the perfection of simple ideas cut two ways: any idea or form of knowledge that reaches beyond them becomes factitious, "inadequate" or at least partially "arbitrary"; at the same time, simple ideas approach a one-to-one correspondence with things that carries with it a constrained epistemological scope. By stopping short of the status of general ideas, simple ideas collapse the irreconcilability of particular and universal presupposed by the basic nominalist thesis ("All Things, that exist, being Particulars"; "general and universal belong not to the real existence of things") (3.3.1, 3.3.11).

[189] Locke, 3.5.6.

[190] Locke, 2.22.12.

"the names of simple ideas and substances, with the abstract ideas in the mind which they immediately signify, intimate also some real existence, from which was derived their original pattern," the names of mixed modes "terminate in the idea that is in the mind." The constructed status of mixed modes means that they have no requirement to conform to the existence of things. As Locke writes, the "essences of the species of mixed modes are the workmanship of the mind; and, consequently . . . the species themselves are of men's making."[191] Unlike simple ideas, which are "perfectly taken from existence," mixed modes do not refer to existence at all: the "*Essences of the Species of mixed Modes, are* not only *made* by the Mind, but made *very* arbitrarily, made without Patterns, or reference to any real Existence."[192] If mixed modes are, in Book II, initially tethered to experience by way of their constituent simple ideas, here Locke suggests that mixed modes detach themselves completely from a foundation in existence, thus allowing one critic, for example, to censure mixed modes as "imaginary existences" that are "hopelessly alienated from any identifiable material origins or substantial proofs."[193] Because mixed modes have "no reference to any real Existence," even though their real and nominal essences coincide, they remain nominalist in essence.

Between simple ideas and mixed modes, however, Locke gives us a third possibility. The real and nominal essences of complex ideas of substances are "always quite different." Locke is at pains to note the way in which boundaries of species are arbitrarily drawn by humans: "Wherein then, would I gladly know," Locke asks, "consists the precise and *unmovable Boundaries of* that *Species?* 'Tis plain, if we examine, there is *no* such thing *made by Nature*."[194] Complex ideas of substances fail to achieve the perfect correspondence of simple ideas because, for Locke, we impose general concepts and classes on Nature's prolific particularity. Complex ideas of substances (that is, their nominal essences) "are *made by the Mind*, and not by Nature: For were they Nature's Workmanship, they could not be as various and different in several Men, as experience tells us they are." What we think of as natural classes or essences are always arbitrarily constructed by the mind.

Thus far, complex ideas of substances resemble mixed modes in their constructivism. However, what distinguishes substances from mixed modes is the imperative that substances must be "[conformed] to Things without . . . as to *Archetypes* made by Nature."[195] While the names of substances "immediately signify" the complex idea (the constructed nominal essence), they "*intimate* also *some real Existence*, from which was derived their original pattern." It is no wonder that, as one Locke scholar writes, "[t]here is debate over whether Locke's view is that this lack of fixed boundaries is true on both the level of appearances and nominal essences, and atomic constitutions and real essences, or on the level of nominal essences alone."[196] Ideas of substances both conform and construct; they strive for identity in conformity even as they retain a radical

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[191] Locke, 3.5.4.
[192] Locke, 3.5.3.
[193] Manly, *Language, Custom, and Nation in the 1790s*, 51. Elsewhere Manly glosses "a classic mixed mode" as "distant from the substance that guarantees its validity" (33). Keach's critique of Locke's theory of language as finally "severing . . . the connection between words and material things" could be stated of mixed modes.
[194] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.6.27.
[195] Locke, 3.7.51.
[196] Uzgalis, "John Locke," np.

disjunction between nominal and real essences. Locke's complex ideas of Substances thus crystallize and internalize the *Essay*'s overall tension: the concept of nominal essences formalizes the nominalist thesis of the inadequacy of general ideas, but complex ideas of Substances must nevertheless conform with existing things.[197]

In order to demonstrate the implications of the *Essay*'s contradictions for our understanding of Locke's relation to the history of enlightenment, I turn now to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. With good reason, we think of Kant's transcendental idealism – with its categories of the understanding, wholly independent of experience – in opposition to Lockean empiricism, which sets out to demystify the very different doctrine of innate ideas and to instead understand the mind as a receptive and pliable *tabula rasa* impressed upon by experience. How is it, then, that in spite of these differences, Adorno suggests that Kant's philosophy is "startlingly similar" to Locke's? How is it that Adorno can claim Locke "curiously enough has the greatest similarity to Kant of all the great philosophers, even though Kant would turn in his grave at the mere thought"?[198] Adorno explains that the "extraordinarily profound similarity between Kant's epistemology and Locke's . . . is to be seen in the fact that both have an analysis of consciousness while retaining the idea of an underlying thing-in-itself that is not completely coextensive with consciousness."[199] These surprising statements are the extent of Adorno's explicit commentary on the affinities between Kant and Locke, but when put in the context of the critical theorist's other writings, they suggest that the Sage of Königsburg and the Father of Liberalism share two intimately related features: a profound contradiction and their treatment of the problem of nominalism.[200]

Adorno would later write that Kant's contradictory *Critique of Pure Reason* works "amidst nominalism and against it."[201] Instead of seeking a resolution to the fissure that runs through the first critique, however, "Kant prefers to accept the contradiction contained in asserting, on the one hand, that we know absolutely nothing about things-in-themselves; things are something that we constitute, that we bring into existence with the aid of the categories. On the other, it is claimed that our affections arise from things-in-

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[197] Locke's taxonomy thus highlights nominalism's dual tendency, on the one hand to disable concepts by fragmenting them into indexical pseudo-concepts (simple ideas) or, on the other hand, to produce a newly ambivalent man-made general idea that has lost its status as a real universal or essence and acquired a "peculiar" autonomy from existing things (mixed modes) (3.5.1). Complex ideas of substances avoid these extremes by holding together both extremes.

[198] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1959)*, 2001, 210. Even on the differences between psychological and transcendental analyses, Adorno finds common elements: "it has turned out again and again that so-called transcendental analyses – that is to say, analyses of the mechanism by means of which our knowledge comes into existence – orientate themselves towards the canon of psychology, in other words towards the canon of the interconnections between the elements of consciousness in the empirical consciousness and the elements abstracted from it. Looking in one direction, transcendental analysis is always the abstraction from something psychological – accompanied by declarations to the effect that it has nothing at all in common with psychology. It is nevertheless a remarkable state of affairs that, overtly or tacitly, all philosophers from Kant to Husserl have assumed a kind of parallelism between psychological and transcendental analysis."

[199] Adorno, 215.

[200] While the connection between nominalism and Kant may seem strange, Adorno frequently discusses the longer history of nominalism in relation to the history of empiricism; while not equivalent to nominalism, empiricism is a particularly important moment in the history of nominalism.

[201] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 385.

themselves."[202] That is, Kant claims there is an unbridgeable gap between concepts and things-in-themselves, even as he also makes the contrary claim that our cognition somehow is caused by things-in-themselves. Kant gives us tautological concepts that do not refer beyond themselves, while nevertheless insisting (again in the words of Adorno's characterization of the problem of nominalism and realism) that concepts "[correspond] to something in the things," that they "have a basis in the thing itself."[203] It is through the latter claim that, in Adorno's reading, Kant's "theory of knowledge [can] introduce the notion of the non-identical – that is, the element that is more than just mind or reason."

Yet even as Adorno suggests that "having a basis in the thing itself" introduces the element of non-identity, he also suggests that non-identity is preserved in Kant's nominalist split between noumena and phenomena. In other words, for Adorno, despite its other problematic implications, "the idea of an underlying thing-in-itself that is not completely coextensive with consciousness" prevents the subject from fully mastering the object.[204] Of course, the *Ding an sich* also suggests that the object is unknowable, "over there"—with the gloomy implication that we only have knowledge of ourselves: "Thus the problem of knowledge as a single tautology survives intact: to oversimplify grossly, it is the problem that at bottom the subject can only know itself."[205] And yet Adorno's reading of Kant is at its best when he makes the case for the necessity of the ultimate non-identity of subject and object; in this reading, the idea of the thing-in-itself stands as a slender barricade against the domination of the subject and the "identity" that for Adorno is always inseparable from the abstract equivalence of the capitalist exchange principle and the principle of the domination of nature.[206] While Adorno's writings contain our most extensive and developed critique of nominalism (for its tendency to disable concepts and to prematurely do away with the very universals that require critique and change through social praxis) the alternative to realism must paradoxically be preserved for its underlying assumption of non-identity.[207] Ultimately, however, for Adorno, it is the contradiction, the "clash" of the "two motifs" of identity and non-identity," that constitutes the true "greatness of the *Critique of Pure Reason*": it "contains an identity philosophy – that is, a philosophy that attempts to ground being in the subject – and also a non-identity philosophy – one that attempts to restrict that claim to identity

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[202] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1959)*, 2001. See also: "[O]n the one hand, Kant insists that his starting-point is always what is immediately present to me, what is 'given', and he wishes to preclude all transcendent premises. At the same time however, he speaks of the 'affections', that is, of the fact that what is immediately given to me, my sense data, originates in the external world that affects me."

[203] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1959)*, 2001, 124.

[204] Adorno, 215.

[205] Adorno, 129.

[206] Compare to the section titled "The Object's Preponderance" in *Negative Dialectics*: "Kant still refused to be talked out of the moment of objective preponderance . . . and he stubbornly defended the transcendent thing-in-itself. . . . Without otherness, cognition would deteriorate into tautology." Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 183–86.

[207] As Jay writes, Critical Theory "stress[ed] nonidentity in a way that precluded the reduction of subject to object and vice versa." At the same time, both identity and non-identity philosophies were understood to be complicit with capitalism. Jay writes that "The stress on nonidentity in Critical Theory never meant the absolute separation of subject and object. Such a separation, the Frankfurt School held, was connected to the needs of the rising capitalist order." Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 267, 258.

by insisting on the obstacles, the *block*, encountered by the subject in its search for knowledge."[208]

For Adorno, what is at stake in the first critique's treatment of nominalism reaches beyond what might appear to be more narrow philosophical questions to a substantially revised understanding of Kant's relationship to the Enlightenment, defined in the broad sense familiar to us from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as "the general trend of Western demythologization."[209] Adorno suggests that the effect of his reading of the first critique is "to demolish" the commonplace view of Kant as both completing and overcoming the Enlightenment.[210] Adorno instead concludes that the first critique's main "contradiction, this apparent lapse of thought in the *Critique of Pure Reason*" not only "contains the entire question of the *dialectic*" but also that its "relation of identity and non-identity is mapped onto the two sides of Enlightenment"—rather than overcoming the Enlightenment, Kant's critique contains both of its twin tendencies:[211]

> On the one hand, we think of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a kind of identity-thinking. This means that it wishes to reduce the synthetic *a priori* judgements and ultimately all organized experience, all objectively valid experience, to an analysis of the consciousness of the subject. It wishes to do this because – to use the language of the later idealists – there is nothing in the world that is not mediated. This means that we have no knowledge apart from what we know through the medium of our reason, apart from what we know as knowing beings. On the other hand, however, this way of thinking desires to rid itself of mythology, of the illusion that man can make certain ideas absolute and hold them to be the whole truth simply because he happens to have them within himself. In this sense Kantian philosophy is one that enshrines the validity of the *non-identical* in the most emphatic way possible. It is a mode of thought that is not satisfied by reducing everything that exists to itself. Instead, it regards the idea that all knowledge is contained in mankind as a superstition and, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, it wishes to criticize it as it would criticize any superstition.[212]

The first side of enlightenment, identity-thinking that involves the mastery of nature by reducing it to the concepts of enlightenment rationality, coexists in the first critique with the enlightenment critique of identity. The latter side of enlightenment, the side most frequently associated with nominalism, involves the demystification of those concepts along with any other human projections deemed "superstition." With the two aspects of the first critique mapping onto the history of enlightenment, we can see that "Kant's philosophy is ambivalent in its attitude towards the Enlightenment."[213]

It should be clear by now that the *Essay* likewise contains the two sides of enlightenment, albeit with an inverted emphasis. Indeed the latter side, the demythologizing tendency of enlightenment, is in many ways the *Essay*'s most well-known contribution: famously, Locke opens the *Essay* with an enlightenment critique of the superstition of innate ideas—ideas, as Adorno would put it, ostensibly "contained in mankind." As Coleridge framed the issue in even more dramatic terms, "Locke's Fame rests on the common Belief, that in overthrowing the Doctrine of Innate Ideas he had overthrown some ancient, general, & uncouth Superstition, which had been as a pillar to

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[208] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1959)*, 2001, 66.
[209] Adorno, 65.
[210] Adorno, 58.
[211] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1959)*, 2001, 67.
[212] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1959)*, 2001, 66.
[213] Adorno, 67–68.

all other Superstitions."[214] Similarly, Locke goes on to introduce his famous split between real and nominal essences, maintaining (if waveringly) that we know only the latter. And yet the *Essay* contains an analysis of ideas and the understanding that, most prominently in the cases of relations and mixed modes, reduces experience to what Adorno would call "consciousness"; to return to Adorno's comparison between Locke and Kant, "both have an analysis of consciousness while retaining the idea of an underlying thing-in-itself that is not completely coextensive with consciousness."[215] In this sense, we can say that Locke and Kant do not separately present the two contrary "sides of enlightenment"; rather, we discover both sides of enlightenment when we attend to the inverse contradictions running through both the *Essay* and the first critique.

VI. Constellations: Horne Tooke, Adorno, and Benjamin

If Locke's empiricism contains both sides of enlightenment, then what might the implications of that duality look like, more specifically? In order to highlight the possible critical value of the *Essay*'s dialectic, I turn now to one prominent (and very explicit) attempt to resolve the *Essay*'s inconsistencies. One of Locke's influential early commentators, John Horne Tooke was a rare reader to recognize the relationship between the *Essay*'s convoluted form and its treatment of generals. As James McKusick characterizes Tooke, he was "the first English philologist to apply Locke's philosophy to the study of language."[216] More than simply "apply[ing]" Locke's epistemology to philology, however, the second section of Tooke's 1786 *Epea Pteroenta: Or the Diversions of Purley*, modestly titled "Some Considerations of Mr. Locke's Essay," proposes fundamental corrections to Locke's account of ideas and language.

In a reading that most likely influenced Coleridge's letter on the *Essay*'s maddening eddies, Tooke explains that his theory of language boasts a radical simplification of Locke's recursive and repetitive text.[217] So far, this reading has treated general ideas and words somewhat interchangeably due to the *Essay*'s own classification of both entities as "general signs." For Tooke, that ambiguous doubling was the chief error and cause of redundancy in the *Essay*; Locke had mistakenly generated the general entity of abstract ideas, along with a whole slew of mental processes that, in Locke's account, produce general ideas. Using the term "composition" to encompass all of Locke's numerous terms for processes that generalize or abstract, Tooke maintains that the errors of Locke's account of the "Composition of Ideas" might easily be corrected by

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[214] Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, 2:382.

[215] Relations are independent of external experience, but of course Locke's definition of experience is double in that he describes the dual origins of ideas in both sensation and reflection. The duality of Lockean experience prefigures the contradiction that runs through the rest of the *Essay*. See Caruth on the double form of experience. Caruth, *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions*, 7.

[216] McKusick, "Coleridge and Horne Tooke," 85.

[217] Coleridge's claim in the letter to Wedgewood cited above bears suspicious resemblance to Tooke's reading: "Mr Locke's third Book is *on* Words; and under this head [he] should have arranged the greater number of Chapters in his second Book." Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, 2:384. As McKusick notes, "Coleridge was personally acquainted with Tooke; the two men occasionally encountered each other in radical political circles. . . . Coleridge's early enthusiasm was practically unlimited; and although he later expressed reservations concerning Tooke's empiricist premises, he continued to incorporate many of Tooke's specific etymologies in his own, more idealistic speculations on the nature of language." McKusick, "Coleridge and Horne Tooke," 85.

replacing it with a more properly linguistic – and more consistently materialist – "composition of terms." (In contrast, Hazlitt would later write that, due to Locke's "wavering," he was left "quite at a loss to determine, from Mr. Locke's various statements, whether he really supposed the abstraction to be in the ideas, or merely in the terms.")[218] For Tooke, "the greatest part of Mr. Locke's Essay, that is, which relates to what he calls the composition, abstraction, complexity, generalization, relation, &c. of Ideas, does indeed merely concern *Language*."[219] The emendations recommended by Tooke involve a surprisingly simple process of substitution: "I only desire you to read the Essay over again with attention, and see whether all that its immortal author has justly concluded will not hold equally true and clear, if you substitute the composition, &c. of *terms* wherever he has supposed a composition, &c. of *ideas*," a revision that "does likewise clear up many difficulties in which the supposed composition of Ideas necessarily involves us."[220] As if subjecting the *Essay* to Ockham's razor, the nominalist principle of parsimony, Tooke proposes the excision of all spurious general entities that, for him, impede proper understanding.

But if Tooke achieves logical consistency and epistemological economy with his revisions of the *Essay*, he also explicitly attempts to eliminate the contradictions that interest me here and that were consistently minimized by later critics. In Tooke's theory, there are no general or abstract ideas—the understanding has no capacity to generalize. In Book III of the *Essay* (on language), Locke "has really done little else but enlarge upon what he had said before, when he thought he was treating only of *Ideas:* that is, he has continued to treat of the composition of *Terms*."[221] For Tooke, then, Book II (on ideas) is a misguided attempt to address a strictly linguistic problem such that Book II might be omitted altogether:

> And amongst many other things, I think [Locke] would not have talked of the *composition* of *ideas*; but would have seen that it was merely a contrivance of Language: and that the only composition was in the *terms*; and consequently it was as improper to speak of a *complex idea*, as it would be to call a constellation a complex star: That they are not ideas, but merely *terms*, which are *general* and *abstract*.[222]

In a materialist version of Berkeley's attack on Locke's general triangle, Tooke insists that only words are general and hence that all ideas are particular, including the ideas Locke erroneously terms "complex." What Locke calls "complex ideas" are, for Tooke, merely loose collections of discrete particulars, without any "composition," unity, or discernible relations of their own prior to the "contrivance of Language."

Tooke's revision of Locke suggests that, just as a constellation names a collection of individual stars rather than a unified and general "complex star," so a linguistic term names a collection of particular ideas that lack any unity prior to language. (As Hazlitt rather lamely glosses Tooke's analogy, "our ideas are as perfectly distinct from, and have as little to do with one another, as the stars that compose a constellation."[223])

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[218] Hazlitt, *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt: Fugitive Writings*, 1904, 11:181.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Tooke, 38.
[221] Tooke, 39.
[222] Tooke, 36–37.
[223] Hazlitt, *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt: Fugitive Writings*, 1904, 11:84.

Paradoxically, however, the result of Tooke's constellation is a seamless movement from particular to general. If Locke's general ideas, made in the workshop of the mind with an active process too little acknowledged by his Romantic successors, entail one sense of the word "contrivance" as intentional "design" or "[t]he action of inventing or making with thought and skill," then Tooke's substitution ("merely a contrivance of language") shifts the status of generals to the more involuntary sense of the term contrivance as "[a] mechanical device or arrangement" (or even, one could add, "an artifice, a trick.")[224] While Locke's contradictions make the movement from particular to general problematic, suggesting that the movement entails, at turns, significant loss or perfect transference, Tooke's metaphor elides Locke's persistent ambivalence and renders the movement unproblematic—even automatic. Responding to the implicit problem with Tooke's blithe solution to Locke's inconsistencies, Hazlitt grumbled that "general terms necessarily imply a [general] class of things and ideas" and that "[l]anguage without this would be reduced to a heap of proper names."[225] Hazlitt right observes that Tooke's "general terms" would have to be particular. By jettisoning any form of abstraction, Tooke streamlined the *Essay* and minimized the gap between language and world; yet his rewriting of the *Essay* does away with the problematic of the particular and the general by simply claiming the identity of a general term with the particulars that comprise it.

In other words, by simply omitting any account of the movement from particular to general, suggesting it is merely an automatic "contrivance" of language, Tooke suggests that general terms merely name, or are equivalent to, a constellation of particulars. Of course, the *Essay* itself occasionally suggests that complex ideas are collections of simple ideas rather than abstract synthesized unities. But Locke's vacillation between general ideas either as abstract unities or as concrete collections of particulars meant that – as with most of Locke's critics – Tooke could revise the *Essay* by choosing the Lockean collection rather than the Lockean abstraction. In doing so, Tooke also conveniently dispenses with Locke's convoluted distinctions between simple ideas, complex ideas of Substances, and mixed modes, because for Tooke there are no intervening processes of thought (whether "abstraction" or the "making" of mixed modes).[226] Similarly, Tooke need not explain the status of the individual constituent stars in his analogy (are they simple ideas exactly?) because the advantage of the constellation analogy is that the stars remain effectively undistorted, with full epistemological integrity, even after their linguistic "composition." In the image of the constellation, Tooke's composition of terms – as opposed to Locke's "composition, abstraction, complexity, generalization, relation &c. of Ideas" – neither subtracts from nor distorts its elements. Whereas Tooke's constellation reconciles particulars and generals, then, Locke's contradictions maintain disjunctions and differences between concept and thing.

Tooke's reading of Locke may recall a later use of the term 'constellation' in the work of Adorno and Adorno's source for the term, Walter Benjamin. Benjamin

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[224] *OED*, s.v. "contrivance, n."

[225] Hazlitt, *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt: Fugitive Writings*, 1904, 11:128.

[226] As Robert Essick points out, according to Tooke, "the business of mind, as far as it concerns Language . . . extends no farther than to receive Impressions, that is to have Sensations or Feelings." McKusick rightly notes that, whereas "Locke had allowed ample room for the faculty of Reason in his account of mental process," in Tooke's materialist system "[t]he passivity of the mind is the dominant feature of [Tooke's] system, and is perhaps even more dogmatically asserted by Tooke than by any of his forebears in the English empiricist school." McKusick, "Coleridge and Horne Tooke," 92.

introduces the astronomical metaphor in the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" to his *Origin of the German Mourning-Play*. And while the connection to Locke and Tooke may appear tenuous, Benjamin presents the figure in the context of the problem of nominalism and realism as it plays out in aesthetic debates over literary-philosophical and historical methodology. Benjamin's model of the idea-constellation offers an alternative to the shortcomings of both realism and nominalism—it is, as Robert Hullot-Kentor puts it, a "critique" of nominalism "that incorporated it."[227] In other words, it is a critique of pure particularism that nevertheless attempts to preserve genuine particularity. Benjamin rehearses nominalist arguments against the use of general concepts of genre or historical periodization, which involve "inventing an abstract concept in order to help us come to grips with an infinite series" of different phenomena. "To do so," writes the nominalist, "is to proceed in the manner of the so-called Realists of medieval scholasticism, who attributed reality to general concepts, or 'universals'."[228] Benjamin, like the nominalists, worried that transhistorical concepts "incorporate" particular phenomena, sacrificing outlying phenomena or "extremes" in the service of reductively generalized conclusions. The *Trauerspiel* book's prologue thus affirms the "attitude" of the skeptical nominalist, "inasmuch as it is opposed to the hypostatization of general concepts," and it "is concerned to demonstrate variety."[229]

Against the nominalists, however, Benjamin insists that abstract concepts are not the only form of "universals." As an alternative to both the nominalist's irreducible particularity and the realist's generals and universals, Benjamin's theorization of the redeemed "idea"-constellation offers a third model: "Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars," where the "idea is best explained as the representation of the context within which the unique and extreme stands alongside its counterpart."[230] Differentiating rather than uniting phenomena, Benjamin's constellation preserves the "unique and extreme":

> For ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of those elements . . . Ideas are timeless constellations, and by virtue of the elements' being seen as points in such constellations, phenomena are subdivided and at the same time redeemed. . . . It is the function of concepts to group phenomena together, and the division which is brought about within them thanks to the distinguishing power of the intellect is all the more significant in that it brings about two things at a single stroke: the salvation of phenomena and the representation of ideas.[231]

Benjamin's idea is a universal that, unlike the concept, avoids "averaging" particularity. The *Trauerspiel* book's constellation brings about the "salvation" of particularity in a double sense: first the particularity of diverse phenomena, which are divided and then averaged in concepts, reappear in the universal of the idea, their particularity redeemed through the configuration of concepts that allows for contiguity and juxtaposition rather than continuity; second, unlike most forms of knowledge production which assume they can shed the particularity of their own mode or form of presentation (imagined as a kind of transparent or neutral medium for content) ideas only appear in a specific, concrete

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[227] Hullot-Kentor, "The Problem of Natural History in the Philosophy of Theodor W. Adorno," 97.
[228] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 2009, 40.
[229] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 2009, 38.
[230] Benjamin, 34.
[231] Benjamin, 34–35.

"representation," so that part of the point of the constellation metaphor is to restore the importance of form alongside content.

Here, however, I am less interested in the theory of the constellation than in the point of disagreement between Adorno and Benjamin. Although Adorno appropriated the theory of the constellation from Benjamin, he repeatedly insisted that Benjamin's constellation prematurely purported to achieve redemption and that in doing so it occluded the disjunctions between particular and general. Benjamin's constellation, Adorno suggests, attempted to circumvent the abstract concept and turn the conceptual word into an Adamic name:

> But even where every effort is made to express the non-conceptual in language, the words remain concepts. Their precision substitutes for the thing itself, without quite grasping their selfhood; a gap opens up between them and the here and now. This corresponds to a residue of arbitrariness and relativity, both in the choice of words and in presentation as a whole. The only remedy for this is a critical reflection upon concepts, especially concrete ones. Even in Benjamin they have a propensity to conceal their conceptuality in an authoritarian manner. Only concepts can achieve what the concept prevents, namely the τρώσας ἰάσεται [cure for the wound]. In their judgment on the content they claim to represent all concepts enter a protest. As universals they are never identical with what they refer to and with which they wish to be identical. This becomes their definable flaw. This flaw leads to their correction by other concepts; this is the source of the constellation in which alone something of the hope of the name is perpetuated. The language of philosophy approaches this name by negating it. What it criticizes in the words, in particular their claim that they possess the immediate truth, is almost always the ideology of the positive, existing identity of word and thing.[232]

Whereas Benjamin imagines the idea-constellation as an alternative to concepts, as an unfallen general idea that preserves particularity, Adorno claims that we have only concepts at our disposal. Adorno insists upon remedying the failure of concepts by way of flawed and always-inadequate concepts, "to reach beyond the concept by means of the concept," as he notes in his lectures on *Negative Dialectics*.[233] Of course, Adorno's quarrel with Benjamin can seem very minor indeed when he claims that his own cleaving to concepts nevertheless retains some of the "hope of the name." As Adorno later echoes himself, "The determinable flaw in every concept makes it necessary to cite others; this is the font of the only constellations which inherited some of the hope of the name."[234]

Adorno instead understood the constellation as a model that sustains the tension between particular and universal without disabling the use of concepts. Rather than producing a synthesis or redemption of the concrete elements that make up the astral formation, the constellation "preserves" the particularity of the constitutive elements for a later moment. The particularity of the object, which always exceeds its concept, persists as something more for a later moment of analysis:

> Of a particular, nothing can be predicated without definition and thus without universality, and yet this does not submerge the moment of something particular, something opaque, which that predication refers to and is based upon. It is maintained within the constellation, else dialectics

[232] Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 206–7. Compare Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 52–53.
[233] Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 88.
[234] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 53.

would end up hypostatizing mediation without preserving the moments of immediacy.[235]

First critiquing nominalist attempts to do away with concepts and universals altogether ("nothing can be predicated [of a particular] . . . without universality"), Adorno then shifts to a defense of the nominalist non-identity of particular and universal: the universal is not equivalent to the particular and does not exhaust its particularity ("the moment of something particular . . . does not perish therein").

In order to function according to Adorno's theory, the model of the constellation requires the sustained non-identity of the elements and their mediation, but for Adorno, Benjamin's constellation fails to preserve non-identity. Adorno articulates his divergence from Benjamin as a prioritizing of the non-identity of the abstract concept over the identity of the name ("the words we use will remain concepts"). As Susan Buck-Morss describes it, "Where Benjamin had lamented the inadequacy of human language compared with the paradisical name," Adorno argued instead "that the nonidentity implied in that inadequacy was necessary to maintain the critical tension between subject and object upon which the hope for utopia depended."[236]

Similarly, by reducing the "composing" function of the constellation to an absolute minimum, Tooke's "composition of terms" collapses one pole of the dynamic tension of Adorno's constellation. What gets obscured in Tooke's account is precisely a space in the constellation that would register more fundamental disjunctions, including ones that cannot be reduced to pure language. For Tooke's constellation, as in Adorno's account of the montage, the "negation of synthesis becomes a principle of form." Tooke's constellation, like the montage, "unconsciously takes its lead from a nominalistic utopia: one in which the pure facts are mediated by neither form nor concept and irremediably divest themselves of their facticity."[237] In contrast, Locke's contradictory theorization of complex ideas of substances maintain a gap between word and thing without attempting to do away with concepts. Tooke's constellation preserves the integrity of its elements in line with the logic of the montage, but his account also loses the critical potential of Locke's contradictions.

VII. Conclusion: Negative dialectics and "the words [of the] Father"

Adorno refuses to circumvent or theorize away the Lockean abstract ideas to which Tooke objected. For Adorno, as for Locke, the concept is always inadequate to the thing. Yet despite its violence – or rather, in the face of its violence – Adorno defends a nominalist understanding of the concept that rejects the ideology of the "existing identity of word and thing." It is not by avoiding the inadequacy of concepts, but rather through,

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[235] Adorno, 328.

[236] Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 90. For Benjamin, the 'idea' constellation is linguistic and retains the hope of redemption the model of which is Adamic naming. As Jay has noted, to the extent that its particular names "paradoxically [come] from the world and not the naming subject," Benjamin's theory of Adamic naming may be termed a "magical nominalism." Jay, "Magical Nominalism," 181. In general, Martin Jay notes, Adorno was more invested in non-identity than Benjamin, and the constellation was one instance in which that disagreement was articulated. In contrast, Adorno and Horkheimer's "mode of thinking was always more explanatory than his, more concerned with uncovering the discontinuities and mediations among various social phenomena." Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 203.

[237] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 135.

and only through, the subsequent mobilization of concepts that such violence can be addressed: such a process entails "reach[ing] beyond the concept by means of the concept."[238] In a Greek phrase that refers to Wagner's *Parsifal* and *The Iliad*, Adorno urges us to think of conceptual thought as a kind of "wounded healing." Alternately translated as "a remedy for an injury," the phrase suggests that only the implement that inflicts violence can be used to heal the wound.[239] In this view, the two alternatives to imperfect and reductive concepts are ultimately wishful thinking: on the one hand, attempts to avoid or do away with the mediation of concepts by turning to an extreme particularism (a radical nominalism approached by Tooke), or, on the other hand, theorizations of a non-violent reconciliation of particular and universal, thing and concept (of which Adorno accused Benjamin).

Adorno's concept is, then, an unredeemed concept; the concept is necessary but insufficient. It has no special ability to preserve particularity as we saw in Tooke and Benjamin's accounts of the constellation. Adorno's definition of the concept effectively, in this sense, inherits Locke's definition of the understanding's operation of abstraction. In his lectures on negative dialectics, Adorno describes the concept's process of abstraction as follows:

> If I subsume a series of characteristics, a series of elements, under a concept, what normally happens is that I abstract a particular characteristic from these elements, one that they have in common: and this characteristic will then be the concept, it will represent the unity of all the elements that possess this characteristic. Thus by subsuming them all under this concept, by saying that A is everything that is comprehended in this unity, I necessarily include countless characteristics that are *not* integrated into the individual elements contained in this concept. The concept is always less than what is subsumed under it. When a B is defined as an A, it is always also *different from and more than* the A, the concept under which it is subsumed by way of a predicative judgment.[240]

The concept necessarily leaves out characteristics of the object of which it is predicated. (As Locke puts it, general ideas are "partial": they leave out particulars; they leave out "what is peculiar to each individual.")[241] In Adorno's lexicon, concepts are thus non-identical to the object of predication.[242]

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[238] Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 88. Compare: "But whatever truth concepts identify over and above their abstract scope can be found only in a theatre that the concepts disparage, suppress, and repudiate. The utopia of cognition would be to use concepts to unlock the non-conceptual, without reducing it to them" (Ibid., 186).

[239] Rodney Livingstone notes that the phrase refers to "an episode in the *Iliad* . . . in which Telephos is wounded by Achilles' spear and his injury is healed only after rust from the spear is rubbed into the wound." Adorno, 255.

[240] Adorno, 7.

[241] See Locke: "And he that thinks general natures or notions are anything else but such abstract and partial ideas of more complex ones, taken at first from particular existences, will, I fear, be at a loss where to find them. For let any one effect, and then tell me, wherein does his idea of man differ from that of Peter and Paul, or his idea of horse from that of Bucephalus, but in the leaving out of something that is peculiar to each individual, and retaining so much of those particular complex ideas of several particulars wherein they differ, and retaining only those wherein they agree, and of those making a new distinct complex idea, and giving the name animal to it, one has a more general term, that comprehends with man several other creatures." Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.3.9.

[242] This is, of course, an oversimplification. As I note in my introduction, concept and thing are non-identical in a second sense: the concept is always also more than the thing in that, as in Adorno's favorite

Crucially, however, in Adorno's dialectical logic the predication of a concept contains an "emphatic" claim to identity. Even though it "is always less than what is subsumed under it," the concept nevertheless asserts its perfect equivalence with its object; the copula makes an unequivocal and forceful claim to equivalence. A ≠ B, but A = B: both different from and equal to its object, the concept thus entails an immanent contradiction between the nonidentity and the identity of A and B:

> Any such predicative judgment that A is B, that A = B, contains a highly emphatic claim. It is implied, firstly, that A and B are truly identical. Their non-identity not only does not become manifest; if it does manifest itself, then according to the traditional rules of logic, predicative logic, that identity is disputed. Or else we say: the proposition A = B is self-contradictory because our experience and our perception tell us that B is not A. Thus because the forms of our logic practice this coercion on identity, whatever resists this coercion necessarily assumes the character of a contradiction.[243]

Adorno's dialectical logic thus rehearses an immanent confrontation of nominalism and realism such that the very contradiction that runs throughout the *Essay* – that general signs both correspond and do not correspond to things – appears within the logic of predication. The eddying contradiction that plays out over the pages of the *Essay* is, in Adorno's negative dialectics, a tension that is immanent to the concept as it is employed in elementary predication. We can now see why, as Adorno notes in his lectures, "Dialectic is not a form of nominalism, but nor again is it a form of realism." Instead, "these twin theses of traditional philosophy . . . must both be subjected to dialectical criticism"—and indeed Adorno discovers both theses at work within the most fundamental conceptual and linguistic operations.[244]

Understanding this basic dialectical contradiction likewise helps explain why Adorno argues that the *Critique of Pure Reason* contains a dialectical relation of universal and particular that can be mapped onto the two sides of enlightenment. As Adorno readily qualifies, "a dialectical way of seeing is quite foreign to [Kant]." The same should undoubtedly be said of Locke. Yet, according to Adorno, the first critique's relation of universal and particular is "objectively" dialectical, because it contains the very contradiction between identity and non-identity that Adorno identifies within predication. Though Kant "himself does not perceive it in that light," Adorno writes, "[w]e may say that a dialectical approach establishes itself in the *Critique of Pure Reason* against Kant's will or behind his back."[245] As I have attempted to show, the same can be

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example of 'freedom', which cannot be reduced to the common elements of actual instances of freedom; "this concept is not simply the unity of the characteristics of all the individuals who can be defined as free." The concept of freedom exceeds the empirically available instances of freedom in that it "contains a pointer to something that goes well beyond those specific freedoms, without our necessarily realizing what this additional element amounts to." Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 7.

[243] Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 8.

[244] Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, 205. One wonders why Adorno never analyzed what he saw as the immanent contradiction of the concept/predication in relation to the use of metaphor. Of course, he likely understood the concept and the metaphor as sharing the same form of dialectical contradiction, where the use of metaphor similarly involves the claim of identity between the tenor and the vehicle even as we know the two parts of the metaphor are quite distinct. At the same time, the metaphor, less authoritarian than the enlightenment concept, wears its non-identity on its sleeve. Put differently, Adorno's negative dialectics urges us to think of all concepts as metaphors.

[245] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1959)*, 2001, 125.

said of Locke's *Essay*, though with an important difference. Given the inverted status of Locke's contradiction, with its greater emphasis on the experience of the non-identical, Locke's dialectic is, perhaps even more than Kant, an important prehistory of Adorno's negative dialectics. If Adorno called his negative dialectics a "salvaging of empiricism, albeit in a somewhat convoluted, dialectical fashion," then I have attempted to demonstrate that Locke's *Essay* contains its own somewhat convoluted empiricist dialectic.[246]

In the midst of his lecture on Kant's "ambivalent" relation to the history of enlightenment, Adorno includes a warning to his students. The enlightenment tendency associated with nominalism and the critique of identity contains a tendency to flip over into a self-cannibalizing movement: "[t]his second element, this criticism that enlightenment directs at identity, that is, at the assertion that everything which exists is absorbed into reason, contains the possibility of an intellectual somersault that turns against the Enlightenment and against reason."[247] Writing in the final quarter of the eighteenth century, Kant "stands on the threshold of a development in which the considerations that led to a radical nominalism begin to turn against themselves."[248] As Adorno elaborates elsewhere, nominalism's emancipatory, critical potential corrodes even its own critical tools, so that nominalism flips over into its later, regressive historical form of positivism. While nominalism, which "[denies] that concepts have a natural existence," historically contains the emancipatory potential to free us from the superstition of inherited or innate ideas, it also contains the possibility of carrying that potential too far, to break up concepts and thus to disable our ability to critically account for abstract social forces that remain irreducible to empirical particulars or sense experience.[249]

The *Essay* still contains the emancipatory element of nominalism. We see it, for instance, when Locke notes that demystifying the authority of inherited general signs, something we perhaps now take for granted, is no small task. "It would be a hard matter to persuade any one," Locke notes of the radical implications of the *Essay*, "that the Words which his Father or Schoolmaster, the Parson of the Parish, or such a Reverend Doctor used, signified nothing that really existed in Nature."[250] These implications follow from the *Essay*'s thesis that "general and universal belong not to the real existence of things . . . which are all of them particular," and Locke's nominalist treatment of "general and universal" levels its enlightenment critique through recourse to sense particulars.[251] As we have seen, however, the *Essay* cannot be reduced to sensibilist commonplaces of empiricism, and in contradicting of its own nominalism, the *Essay* circles away from later positivist developments of nominalism. In doing so, the *Essay*'s self-critical relation to nominalism prefigures later Romantic critiques of nominalism's inability to account for social abstractions that remain inaccessible to sense experience.

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[246] Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 82.
[247] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1959)*, 2001, 66. Cf. "Nominalism is tied to the tradition of enlightenment and the history of enlightenment since the Middle Ages is identical with nominalism." Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 139.
[248] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1959)*, 2001, 125.
[249] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 139.
[250] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.10.16.
[251] Locke, 3.3.11.

Chapter 2
To Read a Bull: Nominalism, Commodification, and Negative Dialectics in the *Biographia Literaria*[252]

The controversy of the Nominalists and Realists was one of the greatest and most important that ever occupied the human mind. They were both right, and both wrong.
—S. T. Coleridge, *Table Talk*, vol. I

It is both instructive and amusing to notice how easily this description of faults could be turned into an account of imaginative excellence.
—I. A. Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination*

I. The Politics of Nominalism

This chapter reconsiders the *Biographia Literaria*'s footnote on "*mak*[*ing*] *a bull*" through S. T. Coleridge's treatment of the problem of nominalism. Coleridge critiques nominalism as a philosophical, political, and aesthetic problem of disunity exemplified in the work of John Locke. Yet a series of passages linked to the (false) unity of the bull, which "consists in the bringing together two incompatible thoughts, with the *sensation*, but without the *sense*, of their connection," suggests that Coleridge also worries about the contrary problem of undesired poetic and social unities.[253] Even as the bull's feeling of connection makes it troublingly analogous to the imagination, I argue, the form of the bull also implies a model of critical reading that decomposes false connections. Such a process of reading a bull, the implications of which become most clear when read alongside the work of Theodor Adorno, entails a negative dialectics that stages the dialectical inversion of the imagination's own synthesizing power. Recurring in passages that dramatize the *Biographia*'s persistent anxieties regarding mass print production and the commodification of poetry, the form of the bull thus suggests a desynonymizing materialist dialectic that departs from the increasingly conservative implications of Coleridge's idealism.

Before I turn to the *Biographia*, however, I want to begin with a letter Coleridge addressed to Lord Liverpool in July 1817. The letter contains the following endorsement by its recipient: "From Mr. Coleridge, stating that the object of his writings has been to rescue speculative philosophy from false principles of reasoning, and to place it on that basis, or give it that tendency, which would make it best suited to the interests of religion as well as those of the State." The note concludes with a qualification: "at least I believe this is Mr. Coleridge's meaning, but I cannot well understand him."[254] Following an opening complaint about the two-year delay of the publication of his *Biographia*, Coleridge's letter makes a lively case for the intimate relation of philosophy and politics. "[T]he Taste and Character, the whole tone of Manners and Feeling, and above all the Religious (at least the Theological) and the Political tendencies of the public mind," writes Coleridge, "have ever borne such a close correspondence . . . to the predominant

[252] **Acknowledgement:** This chapter is derived in part from an article published in *European Romantic Review* (2018) copyright Taylor & Francis, available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/10509585.2018.1534685
[253] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 1: 72n.
[254] Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1959, 4:757.

system of speculative Philosophy." The relationship between politics and philosophy, Coleridge explains to Liverpool, is one "not only [of] a reaction and interdependence on both sides, but [of] a powerful, tho' most often indirect influence of the latter on all the former."[255] While Coleridge grants philosophy an idealist precedence over politics, philosophy is far from a purely theoretical enterprise devoid of practical effects. Just as the imagination, Forest Pyle has written of the *Biographia*, "is indeed [for Coleridge] tied to the fate of a nation and is thus understood to have very real political consequences,"[256] so too does philosophy shape the "Political tendencies of the public mind."

Coleridge's letter thus moves seamlessly back and forth between accounts of the political plight of the nation and his favorite philosophical targets, materialism and "that meretricious Philosophy" finally "drilled and dressed up with matronly decorum by Mr. Locke." The "Demiurgic atoms, indivisible and yet space-comprehending minims" of materialism, Coleridge grumbles, correspond to a political vision of a radically attenuated state comprised of chaotically disjointed individuals.[257] The letter emphasizes three overlapping implications of the philosophy Coleridge associates with Locke and the French revolutionaries: it nominalistically reduces the nation to a name, it treats the state as a collection of isolated individuals, and it produces a form of presentism that denies the diachronic operation of history. As Coleridge explains it, the "meretricious Philosophy" implies "that the name of country is a mere sound, if it be not true that the Flux of Individuals in any one moment of existence is there for the sake of the state, far more than the state for them."[258] This knotted sentence evokes the most extreme form of nominalism, in which universals are a mere *flatus vocis*—literally a "breath of voice" but often translated as "empty sound."[259] The nominalist vision of the nation that Coleridge attributes to Locke and his followers has as its corollary the privileging of "the Flux of Individuals" over the state. Against the implication that individuals might spontaneously construct the state from below—a view he links to the "divulsion and insulation of the sensual Present" and a contempt for the past and future—Coleridge argues "that states and kingdoms *grow*, and are not to be *made*."[260] In the same vein, he indignantly insists that "we are not like a Herd of Americans, a people without a *History*."[261] As mere name, stripped of any higher supra-individual unity, collective identity, or diachronic historical continuity, the state is reduced to the transient collection of individuals that make it up at any given moment.

There are, I think, two important points to be made about the letter's critical response to nominalism and its implications regarding the dominant philosophy of its time. First, Coleridge's sweeping indictment is less a rigorous analysis of Locke's philosophy than it is a diagnosis of a general historical condition, and the expansiveness of the diagnosis itself stages a counterpoint to what he suggests is the nominalist

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[255] Coleridge, 4:759.
[256] Pyle, *The Ideology of Imagination*, 29.
[257] Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1959, 4:758.
[258] Coleridge, 4:762.
[259] As Dugald Stewart wrote in 1792, "[t]he names, indeed, of Nominalists and Realists exist no longer; but the point in dispute between these two celebrated sects," the dispute over the status of generals or universals, "coincides precisely with a question which has been agitated in our own times." Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, 1792, 117.
[260] Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1959, 4:762.
[261] Coleridge, 4:761.

reduction of all entities to the individual and the particular. The broad scope no less than the content of Coleridge's analysis of Locke resemble Theodor Adorno's own sweeping use of the term *nominalism*. As Fredric Jameson has proposed of the related term, *positivism*, we should understand Adorno's use of *nominalism* "in as generalized a cultural and intellectual fashion as possible." *Nominalism* is "in general to be taken to mean a commitment to empirical facts and worldly phenomena in which the abstract—interpretation fully as much as general ideas, larger synchronic collective units fully as much as diachronic narratives or genealogies—is increasingly constricted."[262] Coleridge's letter thus contains the key elements of Adorno's analysis of the problem of nominalism: the broad scope, the attenuation of "larger synchronic collective units," as well as the denial of the diachronic process of history.

Second, the distinction Jameson draws between Adorno's critique of nominalism and related conservative critiques helps elucidate the political implications of Coleridge's letter to Liverpool. Jameson warns that Adorno's critique of nominalism "must be sharply distinguished from the (undoubtedly affiliated) conservative or reactionary laments about the disappearance of values, moral and otherwise" and "the breakdown of collective identities" like the "Nation." What separates conservative responses from Adorno's left critique is the case made by the former that the crisis of universals can "simply be resolved by reinvigorating the older collective institutions" and by "weeding out the agents and propagators of a bad 'nominalism' and antinomianism."[263] Thus, while the letter to Liverpool anticipates elements of Adorno's critique of nominalism, it nevertheless articulates a conservative desire to restore universals. In contrast, Adorno recognizes that the afterlife of medieval nominalism in empiricism and positivism broadens its corrosive critique to a modern class of abstractions, including the social abstraction of the commodity form. As he writes in *Negative Dialectics*, "The concept of a capitalist society is not a *flatus voci*."[264] Adorno thus critiques nominalism's denial of universals as the surest way to bring about their end: without universals there can be no critical interrogation of oppressive social structures that otherwise remain inaccessible to our senses. Indeed, Adorno's negative dialectics can be understood as a critique of nominalism that incorporates the nominalist critique of universals: nominalism is wrong to treat universals and social abstractions as easily demystified metaphysical "soap bubbles" (an approach that merely makes them unavailable for critique) but it is right to privilege material particulars over universals.[265]

I present the letter to Liverpool here, first, in order to demonstrate the broader scope of Coleridge's engagement with nominalism, which extends beyond the more complex and varied treatment of the problem of nominalist connections that we find in the *Biographia* and that is the main concern of this essay. While, as in the letter, the *Biographia* critiques the attenuated nominalist connections of empiricist and associationist philosophies, it also contains a contrary strain of thought that threads through a series of passages related to the *Biographia*'s footnote on the bull. Second, I want to pose the letter's largely conservative response as a counterpoint to what we find in the *Biographia*, which brings Coleridge closer to Adorno's critique of both

[262] Jameson, *Late Marxism*, 1990, 89.
[263] Jameson, 90.
[264] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 50n.
[265] Adorno, 199.

nominalism and realism. Whereas the letter to Liverpool accuses Locke and his materialist followers of nominalistically breaking down the unity of the nation, passages in the *Biographia* that echo the language and form of the bull dramatize Coleridge's concern for the inverse problem of undesired unity. Where the letter to Liverpool responds with the nostalgic desire for past unity, passages related to the bull suggest an inverse approach of diagnosing and breaking down (false) connections, in a way that partially appropriates the nominalist position. The critical reading practice implied by the form of the bull thus takes a potentially radical form that exceeds the increasingly conservative content of Coleridge's thought. For a critical reading of the bull that both gives an account of and decomposes unities, as for Adorno, (in the words of Coleridge's elliptical statement) the "Nominalists and Realists . . . were both right and both wrong."[266]

In the *Biographia*, politics, philosophy, and the imagination are primarily bound up with the question of connections, not among the individuals that make up (but do not make, according to Coleridge) the political state, but among the ideas and phrases that comprise a poem. Most obviously, the *Biographia*'s well-known passages on the genuinely synthetic connections produced by the imagination—as opposed to the merely associative and mechanical fancy—parallel the letter's treatment of the nation. Rather than revisiting the familiar passages on the imagination, however, I am interested instead in tracing the relatively neglected treatment of contradictory (dis)connections figured by the discussion of the bull in the long note to chapter four. Put simply, the bull is a type of blunder whose constituent elements have the feeling of unity or connection but that in fact contain a logical contradiction. As Coleridge puts it, "*The bull* namely consists in bringing together two incompatible thoughts, with the *sensation*, but without the *sense*, of their connection."[267] I argue that the bull's feeling of connection presents a disturbing double of the imagination, and, further, that the critical reading practice implied by the footnote on the bull can be understood as the dialectical inversion of the imagination's unifying operation.

At the same time, Coleridge links the (false) connections that he finds in contemporary poetry to historical developments in the literary marketplace. In passages that evoke William Wordsworth's concern for the "deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse,"[268] the *Biographia* suggests that impersonal forces tied to the commodification of poetry and the explosion of mass print produce the connections that are supposed to join the thoughts and phrases comprising contemporary poems. Because, for Coleridge, the connections produced by these social forces prove indifferent to the *sense* of the particulars they yoke together, the *Biographia* manifests an acute anxiety over the ways in which these historical trends at once render words and phrases interchangeable and make works of the imagination indistinguishable from nonsense. The absurd connections figured by the bull thus register Coleridge's alarm over historical developments at the

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[266] Coleridge, *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 14.1:95. Compare Adorno: "Dialectic is not a form of nominalism, but nor again is it a form of realism. For these twin theses of traditional philosophy – the notion that the concept enjoys substantial being in relation to individuals which it grasps and includes, and the alternative notion that the individual is substantially real while the concept is merely a *flatus vocis*, or simply 'empty sound and smoke' – these two conceptions must both be subjected to dialectical criticism." Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, 205.

[267] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 1: 72n.

[268] Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, 599.

turn of the nineteenth century, "a world," David Simpson has written, "in which anything can be exchanged or substituted for anything else, and in which what connects things up is *not* the human imagination. This is a world governed by the unconstrained metaphorization that comes with commodity form."[269]

Even as he links the connections that constitute contemporary poetry to a historical crisis, Coleridge also, of course, insists that the connections that yoke ideas, words, or phrases in commodified poetry are false or illegitimate. In the passages that echo the language and form of the bull, connections at once appear to displace the disturbingly similar connecting work of the imagination and, Coleridge wants to insist, are no connections at all: they are, in the terms of the bull, merely the sensation of connection without genuine sense of connection. The contradictory form of the bull allows Coleridge to acknowledge the force or operation of the connections, forged by the commodity form, that increasingly supplant imaginative synthesis, while also critically denying the sense and legitimacy of commodified connections.

The footnote on the bull thus establishes key links between different concerns of the *Biographia*, including the imagination and fancy, poetic diction and desynonymization, mass print production and original literary composition. A seemingly inconsequential verbal gaffe, the bull becomes, in Coleridge's use, a Trojan horse for the intersection of far-reaching literary, philosophical, and historical problems. At the same time that it echoes the *Biographia*'s anxiety over the historical development of mass print and the commodification of poetry, dramatizing the effects of those developments on poetry and reading practices alike, the footnote on the bull also responds to the historical crisis with a critical mode of reading.

II. Nominalist Relations and Reading Bulls

The types of connections at stake in the footnote on the bull should be understood in the context of Coleridge's critique of nominalist relations. As Coleridge knew quite well, Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* contains the nominalist premise that "General and Universal, belong not to the real existence of things . . . which are all of them particular."[270] The *Essay* also extends that nominalist account of the "general and universal" to relations between things, stating that relations are "not contained in the real existence of Things" but are instead "something extraneous, and superinduced."[271] While the *Essay* goes on to contradict its own nominalist principles in surprisingly neglected and fruitful ways, Locke suggests that relations between particulars occupy the same nominalist status as generals or universals. *Relations*, in other words, are all general and thus "belong not to the real existence of things." In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume similarly describes the impasse of "two principles" that he can neither "render consistent" nor "renounce," namely "*that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences,* and *that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences*."[272] Though relations that obtain between "*distinct existences*" operate according to recognizable and relatively reliable principles, the relations added to

[269] Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern*, 160.
[270] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.3.11, 414.
[271] Locke, 2.25.8, 322.
[272] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 421.

"*distinct existences*" by the Humean subject are nevertheless demoted from the status of "*real connexion*s."

Coleridge's theory of imagination claims to forge more substantial connections than those of the attenuated nominalist connections of Locke and Hume, and the *Biographia* attempts to establish the imagination's power to produce synthetic connections over and against the mere juxtaposition of the fancy. Like the theory of association of ideas that Coleridge primarily attributes to Locke and David Hartley, the fancy "brings together images which have no connection natural or moral, but are yoked together by the poet by some accidental coincidence."[273] (That Coleridge had Locke in particular in mind in the bull footnote is evident in the his usage of an (unattributed) anecdote from the notorious chapter "Of the Association of Ideas.")[274] Though akin to the fancy, the seemingly marginal figure of the bull is distinguished from the more familiar associative force by Coleridge's emphasis on the bull's feeling of connection and its characteristic contradiction between simultaneous connection and *lack* of connection.[275]

Bulls circulated in contemporary parlance as a type of humorous absurdity often referred to as "making a bull" (frequently an "*Irish* bull," with pejorative connotations). In simplest terms, a bull is a logical absurdity that typically goes unnoticed by the speaker of the blunder. When apprehended by an interlocutor, the bull becomes an outrageous joke. As the *OED* explains, a bull is a "self-contradictory proposition; in mod. use, an expression containing a manifest contradiction in terms or involving a ludicrous inconsistency unperceived by the speaker."[276] We find in Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth's *An Essay on Irish Bulls* (1802), a source for Coleridge's thinking on the bull, the following examples: "that the defendant beat his client with a certain *wooden instrument* called an *iron pestle*," or "*that the greatest economy is necessary in the consumption of all species of grain . . . especially in the consumption of potatoes.*"[277] The authors, wryly mocking the latter example, note the bull's effect of catachresis, its insinuation of a false identity of general and particular. "This is the first time we have been informed, by authority, that potatoes are a species of grain," they write, "but we

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[273] Coleridge, *Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 14.1:489–90.

[274] Specifically, the account of the association between a patient's physician and pain comes straight from a passage in Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 2.33.14. See below for additional discussion.

[275] Coleridge's theorization of the bull emphasizes a feeling of connection that is absent from his theorization of the normal operation of the fancy as merely "mechanical" and "aggregative." To be sure, the fancy sometimes produces ludicrous juxtapositions. But, for instance, when Coleridge gives the example of Otway's "Lutes, lobsters, seas of milk, and ships of amber," he does not relate the absurd juxtaposition to an experience or sensation of connection. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 1:84. It is because of such a feeling that the language Coleridge uses to describe the bull threatens to make it sound more like the imagination than the fancy. For example, in one case Coleridge describes the "curious modification of Ideas by each other, which is the Element of *Bulls*." Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2002, 1:1620. Compare the imagination as "shaping and modifying power." Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 1:293. In another case, he compares a mob to the state of a bull, where "passions, like a fused metal, fill up the wide interstices of thought." *A Lay Sermon* (*CC*) 153. Compare the "*fusing* power of Imagination and Passion." Coleridge, 2:150.

[276] "Bull, n."

[277] Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Essay on Irish Bulls*, 23. In a letter that I return to below, Coleridge writes: "Miss Edgeworth has published a long Essay on *Bulls*—without understanding the precise meaning of the word which she makes synonimous [sic] with *Blunders*. But tho' all Bulls are Blunders, every Blunder is not a Bull." Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2000, 6:632.

must accede to this new botanical arrangement, when published under such splendid auspices."[278]

References to the bull occur throughout Coleridge's notebooks and publications, but the figure appears only twice in the *Biographia*, first in a lengthy footnote to chapter four and then, famously, in the letter from the fictional friend that interrupts chapter thirteen on the imagination. In both cases, as I examine further below, Coleridge introduces the bull and its antithesis in the context of problems of readership, money, and the book as a commodity. Coleridge presents the initial footnote as an explanation of the uncomfortable feeling of intellectual upending, of "standing on [one's] head," that readers were supposed to have experienced upon reading Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.[279] This disorienting feeling, which Coleridge describes as the antithesis of the bull, and which I return to later in this chapter, is what provides the occasion for the presentation of the bull. With the antithesis of the bull subsequently reappearing as the stated reason for the (anti-)climactic withholding of the ostensibly complete chapter on the imagination, it is no wonder that the antithesis of the bull has received more critical attention. Just as the footnote can only account for anti-bull in terms of the bull, however, I want to suggest that the implications of the anti-bull must be understood through a reading of the bull.

While Coleridge draws on the commonplace definition of the bull, he simultaneously narrows its definition and expands its implications. Not just any logical inconsistency or linguistic error, Coleridge's bull specifically involves a sensation of connection (as Coleridge explains in a letter, "a *feeling* as if there was a connection") without the sense of connection ("[t]he thoughts being incompatible, there cannot of course be any *sense* of—i.e. insight into—their connection or compatibility").[280] The feeling of connection "may exist, from various causes," and there are even, Coleridge writes in a notebook entry, "*Bulls* of action equally as of Thought."[281] In the *Biographia*'s footnote, Coleridge gives the following explanation:

> Thus in the well known bull, "*I was a fine child, but they changed me*;" the first conception expressed in the word "*I*," is that of personal identity—*Ego contemplans*: the second expressed in the word "*me*," is the visual image or object by which the mind represents to itself its past condition, or rather, its personal identity under the form in which it imagined itself previously to have existed.—Ego contemplatus. Now the change of one visual image for another involves in itself no absurdity, and becomes absurd only by its immediate juxta-position with the first thought, which is rendered possible by the whole attention being successively absorbed in each singly, so as not to notice the interjacent notion, "changed" which by its incongruity with the first thought, "*I*," constitutes the bull.[282]

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[278] Edgeworth and Edgeworth, *Essay on Irish Bulls*, 23.

[279] Coleridge identifies the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as the primary "origin" of the negative reception of Wordsworth's poetry. The footnote thus presents the antithesis of the bull, elaborated via the presentation of the bull, as an account of the reader's feeling of "wondering at the perverseness of the man, who had written a long and argumentative essay to persuade them that [Fair is foul, and foul is fair;] in other words, that they had been all their lives admiring without judgment, and were now about to censure without reason." Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 1:71-72.

[280] Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2000, 6:632.

[281] Coleridge, 6:632; Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1980, 2:2630.

[282] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 1:72n.

In the footnote's example, the bull is constituted by the presumed identity of "I" and "me." As in the operation of the fancy, the footnote's bull involves a relation of "juxta-position." The juxtaposition of the bull, however, is caused by a failure of attention such that the apposition of the two thoughts "is rendered possible," Coleridge explains, "by the whole attention being successfully absorbed singly, so as not to notice the interjacent notion." The resulting contiguity of "I" and "me" in turn suggests a relation of equivalence; failing to account for the inevitable alterations of intervening time, the bull assumes the correspondence of the present "I" and the past "me" of childhood.[283]

As in the commonplace notion of the bull, which goes "unperceived by the speaker," the maker of the footnote's bull appears to experience a positive feeling of connection while remaining unaware of the bull's underlying absurdity. However, the identification of a bull *as a bull* implies a second position, whether in the form of a knowing interlocutor or of a more self-conscious future self. Other examples, however, emphasize that the maker of the bull experiences a state of self-contradiction, feeling one thing while understanding another. For example, Coleridge notes the case of his son Derwent pleading for others not to eat an already-consumed cake: "Derwent (Nov[ember] 6. Tea time) came in, & all the *Cake* was eat up. . . . He saw that it was done; & yet he passionately entreated you not to do it. . . . This Mem. for the effect of the Passions on the reasoning power imprimis in producing *Bulls*."[284] Derwent simultaneously errs and is aware of the error: his passions make him experience a state prior to the loss of the cake, even as he sees that his entreaties are absurd.

Whether as a naïve state of error or as a state of self-contradiction, Coleridge's theorization of the bull also implies a process of reading bulls critically. Coleridge explores just such a process of revision and reevaluation in the closely related discussion of poetic diction preceding the footnote on the bull. His criticism of Alexander Pope and Wordsworth reinforce the sense that what is at stake in the bull is the question of how we should read false unities or syntheses. Commenting on the audience of one of his lectures, Coleridge notes that, "they [had] been accustomed, in reading poetry, to receive pleasure from separate images and phrases successively, without asking themselves whether the collective meaning was sense or nonsense."[285] Anticipating the exact language of the bull, the audience attends to images "successively," without apprehending the lack of "sense." Upon analyzing a couplet from Pope's translation of the *Iliad*, Coleridge concludes that "it is difficult to determine whether . . . the sense, or the diction be the more absurd." After informing his audience of the lack of sense in Pope's translation, Coleridge notes that "[t]he impression on the audience in general was sudden and

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[283] The Edgeworths cite a very similar bull in their *Essay on Irish Bulls*: "I hate that woman, for she changed me at nurse." Coleridge appears to want to elide any suggestion of the speaker's status as a changeling, however, (not to mention any humor) in order to allow for much broader implications regarding the (false) unity or identity of past and present selves, as well as of any elements that might be brought together in the process of making a bull. The Edgeworths' *Essay* gives the "well known bull" as follows:

> "I hate that woman," said a gentleman looking at one who had been his nurse,
> "I hate that woman, for she changed me at nurse."

"[I]n the confusion of the blunderer's ideas," another notes, "he is not even clear of his personal identity." (16)

[284] Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2002, 1:1643.

[285] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 1:40n.

evident." Admitting "I had yet experienced the same sensations myself," Coleridge writes, "I felt almost as if I had been newly couched, when by Mr. Wordsworth's conversation, I had been induced to re-examine with impartial strictness Gray's celebrated elegy."[286] If these poetic lines make bulls—just as readings that admire false unities of poetic diction constitute the pyschological state of the bull—then Coleridge also narrates a process by which the reader might come to a critical awareness, identifying the contradiction and tracing the disjunctive elements that make up the previously unapprehended false synthesis.

When taken up by critics at all, the bull has been treated primarily in the context of critical debates over the formal coherence of the *Biographia,* cited as evidence either for the unity of the *Biographia* or for its essentially fragmentary form. In *Sources, Processes, and Methods in Coleridge's Biographia Literaria*, Kathleen Wheeler reads the bull as a figure for the difficulty as well as the promise of the *Biographia*'s latent wholeness. Citing Coleridge's famous injunction to "read the whole connectedly," Wheeler suggests that the form and method of the *Biographia* challenge the reader to create a unified whole out of fragmentary parts .[287] For Wheeler, then, the footnote on the bull "is an ingenious description of what [Coleridge] was trying to help his readers to accomplish by showing the indispensable participation by the reader."[288] In other words, the footnote on the bull prepares the reader to read "connectedly" and even models the difficulty of doing so through its own obscurity.

While Wheeler's case remains limited by her minimization of the bull's characteristic self-contradiction, other critics have likewise read the bull as a kind of synecdoche for the formal challenges of unifying the *Biographia.* Though he does so with far greater skepticism, Steven Vine finds a similar link between the bull and the text as a whole, arguing that "the entire drift of the *Biographia*'s conceptual project is, in fact, to construct a kind of grand philosophical 'bull.' Moreover, as the principle which coheres the contradictory, the 'Imagination' is the grandest 'bull' of them all."[289] Drawing a strikingly similar yet inverted conclusion in "Coleridge's Ventriloquy: The Abduction from the 'Biographia,'" David Ferris makes a case for "the extent to which Coleridge's whole philosophical argument turns upon a connection of 'I' to 'me' that *would not* involve its author in an absurdity, a bull."[290] Unlike Wheeler and Vine, however, Ferris rightly emphasizes that the characteristic nonsense of the bull marks it as a failed connection—a failed claim to identity. Far from modelling a salutary higher synthesis through the reader's experience of self-contradiction, the bull's disjunctive form cannot be reduced to the more familiar kind of imaginative connection that Coleridge desires both in theory and in poetic practice.

While Coleridge transforms the bull from a humorous verbal blunder to a synchronic state of error, the identification of the error *as error* at the same time implies a diachronic process of critical revision, whether by an interlocutor or in the form of a revised understanding by the blunderer. The implied process may recall the *Biographia's*

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[286] Coleridge, 1:40n.
[287] Coleridge, 1:233-234.
[288] Wheeler, *Sources, Processes, and Methods in Coleridge's Biographia Literaria*, 100.
[289] Vine, "To 'Make a Bull': Autobiography, Idealism and Writing in Coleridge's Biographia Literaria," 113.
[290] Ferris, "Coleridge's Ventriloquy," 70n. Emphasis added.

famous account of the secondary imagination—"[i]t dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create"[291]—suggesting that a critical reading of the bull might be folded into discussions of the imagination. Indeed, some critics have attempted to highlight the disjunctive moment of the imagination's unifying process, as when Pyle argues that the imagination is, for Coleridge, an "agent of [social] linkage" even as it simultaneously discloses the "formidable resistances to all such linkages."[292] Yet the alternative dialectic of reading the bull should be distinguished from accounts that emphasize disunity within the operation of the imagination. Whereas the dissolving action of the secondary imagination always strives to "re-create" and reunify, to put together what it has teased apart, reading a bull results not in a new unity but in a new difference. If the imagination takes two opposing terms and produces a third, then the bull produces a unity, only, when read critically, to demonstrate the falsity of that synthesis, while retaining an awareness of the false connection. The form of the bull is dialectical, "a form in time" (to use Jameson's characterization) that entails a process of revision.[293] Yet the form of the bull, which discovers rather than resolves contradiction, figures the dialectical inversion of the imagination's famous "tertium aliquid" or "inter-penetration" of opposites.[294] Like Adorno's negative dialectic, termed "negative" in order to distinguish it from Hegel's unifying dialectic, reading the bull critically implies a "logic of disintegration" and a "suspicion" of equivalence or "identity."[295] Put in slightly different terms, if M. H. Abrams once characterized Coleridge's thought in terms of a dialectical "metaphysic of unity, division, and unity regained," then reading the bull can be understood as a process of division, unity, and division regained.[296]

III. The Bull, Commodification, and Mass Print

In addition to presenting a negative dialectical form that inverts the imagination's own synthesizing dialectic, the problem of the bull recurs in passages that address the historical developments of mass print production and the commodification of poetry. Coleridge critiques the explosion of print early in the *Biographia*, where, he laments, "alas! the multitude of books, and the general diffusion of literature, have produced other, and more lamentable effects in the world of letters."[297] This complaint opens a paragraph in which Coleridge indicts the contemporary state of the literary marketplace, "the situation," Robert Maniquis writes of the passage, "caused by the levelling down of literature to a commodity attainable by the many."[298] Coleridge provides two metaphors for those "lamentable effects in the world of letters" caused by the "general diffusion of literature" and by the "more artificial state of society and social intercourse."[299] In a

[291] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 1:304.
[292] Pyle, *The Ideology of Imagination*, 10.
[293] Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 2002, 307.
[294] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 1:300.
[295] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 145. As Adorno puts it, "in the Hegelian dialectic this concept of negativity does not have the last word but . . . [Hegel's dialectic] is, if I may use the cliché, a positive dialectics." Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 14.
[296] Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 1973, 266.
[297] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 1:38.
[298] Maniquis, "Poetry and Barrel-Organs: The Text in the Book of the Biographia Literaria," 258.
[299] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 1:38.

comically literal way, the vehicle of the second metaphor is itself a key technological development contributing to the commodification of print. Coleridge figures literary production in terms of the recently invented "stereotype" method of printing—a technical innovation that circumvented the most time-consuming aspect of the printer's labor—making possible the rapid reprinting of texts. Like the discussion of poetic diction, the passage similarly anticipates the bull's contradiction between sensation and sense. Coleridge writes:

> I have attempted to illustrate the present state of our language, in its relation to literature, by a press-room of larger and smaller stereotype pieces, which, in the present anglo-gallican fashion of unconnected, epigrammatic periods, it requires but an ordinary portion of ingenuity to vary indefinitely, and yet still produce something which, *if* not *sense, will be so like it, as to do as well.* Perhaps better: for it spares the reader the trouble of thinking; prevents vacancy, while it indulges indolence; and secures the memory from all danger of an intellectual plethora. . . . The difference indeed between these and the works of genius, is not less than between an egg, and an egg-shell; yet at a distance they both look alike.[300]

Not surprisingly, the stereotype method was used for the reproduction of texts that sold well enough to require rapid reprinting. After the initial setting of type, stereotypes were made from molds of composed type, thereby obviating the need to reset the type for reprinting at a later date. Decades before the OED's first recorded instance of the figurative use of the term 'stereotype' as "stereotyped diction or usage," Coleridge figures the linguistic effects of the commodification of literature through one of the technologies of mass print.[301] Like the bull, the stereotype pieces "still produce something which, if not sense, will be so like it, as to do as well," staging in the production of texts what the bull frames in terms of reading. The unity of the stereotype piece—a larger block of type that previously would have been composed of many individual blocks of type—functions "as well" as a text that makes sense, and the lack of sense remains unperceived by the inattentive reader who is allowed to continue the habit of reading "indolen[tly]." Mass print production thus produces bulls as well as reading on the model of the bull, where the reader fails to apprehend the contradiction within the false unity of the stereotype.

In a related passage later in the *Biographia*, Coleridge likens the mode of reading produced by mass print to the passive observation of the projections of "a sort of mental *camera obscura* manufactured at the printing office." Lamenting the contemporary state of reading, Coleridge writes:

> [A]s to the devotees of the circulating libraries, I dare not compliment their *pass-time*, or rather *kill-time*, with the name of *reading*. Call it rather a sort of beggarly daydreaming, during which the mind of the dreamer furnishes for itself nothing but laziness and a little mawkish sensibility; while the whole *materiel* and imagery of the doze is supplied *ab extra* [from without] by a sort of mental *camera obscura* manufactured at the printing office, which *pro tempore* [temporarily / for the time being] fixes, reflects, and transmits the moving phantasms of one man's delirium so as to people

[300] Coleridge, 1:39. Emphasis added.

[301] The later figurative use of *stereotype*, like its French translation, *cliché*, can be traced to the print technology that was invented in 1798. The *OED* cites the first figurative usage of "stereotype" as 1850, well after the publication of the *Biographia* (1817). *OED*, s.v. "stereotype, n. and adj."

> the barrenness of a hundred other brains afflicted with the same trance or suspension of all common sense and all definite purpose.[302]

In Jerome Christensen's reading of the passage, Coleridge anticipates Marx's figuring of ideology as a camera obscura that inverts reality. Even further, Christensen suggests, Coleridge unites Marx's figure for ideology, the camera obscura, with his figure for commodity fetishism, a process of stamping or printing. Here, Christensen looks back to W. J. T. Mitchell's claim that Marx's two seemingly separate concepts of ideology and commodity (with their respective metaphors of camera obscura and printing process) are implicitly bound together in an inverse but dialectically complementary relation. For Christensen, while "both Marx and Coleridge use the camera obscura to illustrate the mechanical projection of inverted images of reality, it is the so-called romantic idealist who connects the mechanism with a system of commodity production."[303] That is, Christensen maintains that Coleridge connects a process of ideological inversion with the production of books as commodities—bringing together in a single figure the two metaphors that Mitchell argued were only implicitly linked by Marx. Thus for Coleridge's two-in-one figure (the *printing* camera obscura) as for Mitchell, "[i]deology and commodity . . . are not separable abstractions, but mutually sustaining aspects of a single dialectical process."[304]

As Mitchell reminds us, Locke and Marx use the camera obscura metaphor "in exactly the opposite way," with Marx using the metaphor to figure the illusions of ideology rather than the origin of ideas in experience.[305] Locke himself uses the figure to overturn the theory of innate ideas by claiming that ideas come from without—through experience rather than preexisting it: "the Understanding is not much unlike a Closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible Resemblances, or Ideas of things without."[306] In a general sense, Coleridge inverts Locke's empiricism by asserting the priority of the creative mind over the passive reception of impressions from without. Yet, Coleridge's use of the camera obscura metaphor underscores something quite different: the "phantasms" of the device are the product of a "delirium," a state that, like the bull, produces absurdities and incoherent verbal utterances. In other words, the passage highlights the camera obscura's lack of sense and coherence (lacking in "common sense" as well as "definite purpose") rather than its process of inversion or the origin of its projections.[307]

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[302] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 1:48n.
[303] Christensen, *Romanticism at the End of History*, 15.
[304] Mitchell, *Iconology*, 1986, 190.
[305] Mitchell, 169.
[306] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 2.11.17, 163.
[307] The negative dialectics of the bull I propose here can likewise be distinguished from Christensen's reading of the chiasmic form of the footnote on the bull (that is, of the bull and the anti-bull, presented in succession). While Christensen makes no mention of the bull in *Coleridge's Blessed Machine of Language*, the bull's appearance in his later work, *Romanticism at the End of History*, both gestures at the earlier work and links the bull to Christensen's reading of the camera obscura passage discussed above. Christensen analyses the footnote on the bull in terms of the formal device that structures much of his earlier book on Coleridge, writing that, "[c]haracteristically, Coleridge has shaped his [topsy-turvy] footnote [on the bull] as a chiasmus (sensation: sense:: sense: sensation), a figure indifferent to the cause of truth but well designed to work like a camera lens to invert perception" (20). Notably, Christensen's early account of the chiasmus, that "lapse of dialectic," with its characteristic appearance or "jingle" of sense, itself echoes the

The nonsense of *this* camera obscura is most clearly demonstrated by way of contrast with another key use of the apparatus in the *Biographia*. Unlike the false synthesis produced by mass print, the camera obscura that Coleridge associates with that unifying "*creation*" of Milton's exemplary imagination in Volume 2 of the *Biographia* involves a state in which "such a co-presence of the whole picture flash[es] at once upon the eye, as the sun paints in a camera obscura."[308] The unity of the imagination's "whole picture" contrasts sharply with the false coherence produced by the metaphor of the camera obscura manufactured at the printing office. Unlike the camera obscura of the imagination, then, the camera obscura of mass print transfers Locke's figure for the general operation of the understanding to the historically specific case of mass print production, in this case in relation to circulating libraries. What Coleridge sees as the passivity and attenuated connectivity of Locke's nominalism become a figure for a historically specific problem. In other words, Coleridge transforms the empiricist's metaphor for the normal operation of the understanding into a description of a vexing historical development. In doing so, the passage has the surprising effect of presenting reading and literary production as functions of historical and material developments in the print shop and literary marketplace, rather than the other way around.

Drawing Coleridge's disdain and not a little dose of anxiety, the "suspension of common sense" produced in the camera obscura metaphor suggests that the device, like the bull and the stereotype passage, may "produce something which, *if* not *sense, will be so like it, as to do as well*."[309] Even as Coleridge laments the lack of connection produced by the camera obscura, crucial to an understanding of the passage is the sense that other (pseudo-) connective forces rival the work of the imagination. In other words, the problem is that the products of the camera obscura do pass for sense. The passage can thus be understood to register the way in which, as Simpson writes, "[commodities] seem to take over the figurative faculties that have traditionally been located in the human imagination." As Simpson writes further:

> The agency of commodity form, with its hidden springs and secret operations, takes over the acts of comparing and contrasting that have been thought of as the province of poetry. Here it is not the crucible of the imagination but the abstract relations of value and the general equivalent that compare things together, or take parts from wholes and attach them to other parts. Rhetorical theory at least since Aristotle had concerned itself with the tendency of all metaphoric language toward catachresis and a threatened collapse of intelligibility: limits had thus to be set and observed. In the modern economy of around 1800, the capacity of individuals to place limits on acts of comparison and exchange threatens to be taken over or overpowered by abstractions that are not under human control even as humans have enabled their creation.[310]

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language of the bull: "the chiasmus," writes Christensen, "is the almost artless art by which the dead weight of tautology is minted into the charm of allegory, given the cymbalic jingle of sense" (*Blessed Machine* 255). Yet if the footnote on the bull can be characterized as a chiasmus, then it should be distinguished from Christensen's elegant elaboration of the "tautegorical chiasmus" as "identity doubled and spaced" (255). (Christensen refers to Coleridge's neologism, "*tau*tegorical (i.e. expressing the *same* subject but with a difference) in contra-distinction from metaphors and similitudes, that are always *alle*gorical.") Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, 206. Because the bull and its antithesis both contain contradictions between sense and sensation, the footnote on the bull would be more properly described as '*contradiction* doubled and spaced' (sense ≠ sensation [≠] sensation ≠ sense).

[308] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 2:128.

[309] Coleridge, 1:39. Emphasis added.

[310] Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern*, 151.

If British society at the turn of the century, characterized by the commodity form, determined the connections of persons and things independent of the operation of the imagination, then the specific nature of that connection was one of exchangeability. As the stereotype passage suggests, the works of the imagination and those produced by the impersonal forces of an "artificial state of society" have been made interchangeable, irrespective of use value or any other differences, as indistinguishable as egg and eggshell.

The imagination and the commodity form prove hauntingly similar in other ways as well. For Coleridge, the imagination involves the synthesis of real but non-contradictory opposites. As Coleridge explains in the *Biographia*'s chapter on the imagination, there are two types of opposites: in addition to "logical" opposites, "i.e. such as are absolutely incompatible" and "the connexion of which produces nonsense," there exist opposites that are "real without being contradictory." Coleridge's example for the latter type of opposite comes from physics: "But a motory force of a body in one direction, and an equal force of the same body in an opposite direction is not incompatible, and the result namely, rest, is real and representable."[311] The two forces are opposite, but their combination has a real outcome that is no mere logical contradiction. The imagination may involve "indestructible" forces that take us beyond the realm of physics, with a result that is far more dynamic than the mere "rest" of his example, but its "tertium aliquid" likewise avoids contradiction and "can be no other than an inter-penetration of the counteracting powers, partaking of both": both resolve the opposition in a new form.[312] Marx's account of the commodity uses a strikingly similar analogy—one whose result is, ironically, far more active than Coleridge's:

> The further development of the commodity does not abolish these contradictions, but rather provides the form within which they have room to move. This is, in general, the way in which real contradictions are resolved. For instance, it is a contradiction to depict one body as constantly falling toward another and at the same time consistently flying away from it. The ellipse is a form of motion within which this contradiction is both realized and resolved.[313]

Setting aside the suggestion that the ellipse might provide a better analog for the active power of the imagination, the two analogies share forms that, in Coleridge's words are not just "representable" but "real." At the same time, the differences are telling. Coleridge seeks a combinatory force that does not result in contradiction, while Marx's commodity form articulates a real contradiction: more like the bull than the imagination, which posits a more complete synthesis, Marx emphasizes that the commodity "does not abolish" contradiction.

While the letter to Liverpool insists upon an idealist priority of philosophy over politics, the passages related to the bull trouble that priority by presenting the effects of material social processes on poetic production and reception. Thus, in addition to presenting a dialectic that generates difference instead of synthesis, the form of the bull can now be seen as a negative dialectics in a second sense. Adorno wanted his own

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[311] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, I:298. In contrast, a logical contradiction is "at most, air articulated into nonsense."
[312] Coleridge, I:300.
[313] Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, 198.

materialist *negative dialectics* to be distinguished not just from Hegel's idealism, but also from the "dogmatically institutionalized" versions of Marx's materialist dialectic.[314] In other words, he theorized a materialism capacious enough to include social abstractions like the commodity form, which cannot be reduced to matter. Much as Adorno's friend Alfred Sohn-Rethel argued that the "real abstraction" of the commodity form "spring[s]" from social relations rather than the mind, passages that echo the form of the bull similarly raise the specter of undesired connections produced by commodification rather than by the imagination of the Romantic genius.[315] The constellation of passages related to the bull, which dramatizes an anxiety regarding unities that are primarily social and material rather than mental or philosophical, thus has the effect of turning the idealist subordination of politics right side up again. Though Coleridge certainly would not have thought of the *Biographia* in these terms, the passages related to the bull disclose a materiality of social connections that cannot be accounted for either by nominalist "minims" or by a conservative attempt to revive the universals of realism. The negative dialectics of both Adorno and a critical reading of the bull can thus be said to incorporate the nominalist critique of connections while retaining an analysis of commodification.

IV. The Bull's Antithesis

Now we are in the position to read the antithesis of the bull, which, as mentioned earlier, reappears in the fictional friend's letter in chapter thirteen. It is the "*antithesis to that in which a man is, when he makes a* bull" that the "friend" (Coleridge) famously experiences upon reading the *Biographia*'s omitted "*Chapter on the Imagination*." Referencing the moment in chapter four where Coleridge suggests that readers of *Lyrical Ballads*' unfamiliar poetics felt as if they were being perversely convinced that "Fair is foul, and foul is fair," the fictional friend writes to Coleridge, "*In your own words*, *I should have felt as if I had been standing on my head*."[316] As the chapter four footnote explains, the antithesis of the bull involves the understanding of connection without a feeling of connection, "a distinct sense of the connection between two conceptions, without that *sensation* of such connection which is supplied by habit."[317] Not surprisingly, the anti-bull is uncomfortable, involving the "painful sensation" of a disorienting upending, even as the subject of the anti-bull "cannot but *see*, that he is truly standing on his feet."[318] Both "*so* new" and "*so directly the reverse*" of the "friend's" views, the supposedly complete theory of imagination causes him to experience the anti-bull's characteristic feeling of vertigo, a feeling ostensibly painful enough to convince Coleridge to withhold the extended theory of imagination and to put in its place the brief but famous account of the primary and secondary imagination.

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[314] Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 50.
[315] Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 1977, 19.
[316] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 1:301.
[317] Coleridge, 1:72n.
[318] Coleridge, 1:72n-73n.The feeling of imposition and "involuntary dislike" is underscored in the footnote's description of the anti-bull, which opens: "In opinions of long continuance, and in which we had never before been molested by a single doubt, to be suddenly *convinced* of an *error*, is almost like being *convicted* of a fault." By the end of the footnote, Coleridge suggests further that the pain of the anti-bull "will of course have a tendency to associate itself with the person who occasions it" (*BL* 1:72n).

Here we should also recall that the footnote on the bull's initial account of the pain associated with the strangeness of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* appears in the form of an anecdote drawn from the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Presenting the initial sensation that he identifies as an anti-bull, Coleridge writes: "This, as a painful sensation, will of course have a tendency to associate itself with him who occasions it; even as persons, who have been by painful means restored from derangement, are known to feel an involuntary dislike towards their physician."[319] Coleridge takes the anecdote straight from the infamous chapter "Of the Association of Ideas," where Locke writes:

> A friend of mine knew one perfectly cured of madness by a very harsh and offensive operation. The gentleman, who was thus recovered, with great sense of gratitude and acknowledgement, owned the cure all his life after, as the greatest obligation he could have received; but whatever gratitude and reason suggested to him, he could never bear the sight of the operator: that image brought back with it the idea of that agony which he suffered from his hands, which was too mighty and intolerable for him to endure.[320]

The friend of Locke's friend has a "sense" of gratitude for his physician but he nevertheless continues to associate him with "agony"; both Locke and Coleridge emphasize the anecdote's contradiction between the patient's sense of gratitude and his sensation of agony. In the presentation of the theory of imagination, then, Coleridge turns back to the anti-bull, which in turn contains its own allusion to what Coleridge perceived as the attenuated connections of Locke's *Essay*. Indeed the anecdote, with its Lockean resonance, more than any other aspect of Coleridge's discussion of the anti-bull, emphasizes the subject's inability to overcome the contradiction between sensation and sense—even suggesting that the sensation of the lack of connection wins out. Not only does the anti-bull's painful feeling of upending serve as a rationale for withholding the complete theory of imagination, but also the very form of the anti-bull suggests that disunity wins out over the imagination's stated purpose of synthesizing apparent oppositions.

But why should the "friend's" insistence on the omission of the ostensibly complete chapter take the particular form of the anti-bull, and how should we understand the relationship between the bull and its antithesis? Of course, setting aside the Lockean anecdote, invoking the antithesis of the bull should serve to confirm that the "*Chapter on the Imagination*," despite the fictional friend's feeling of intellectual upending, involves a more fundamental sense of connection. In this way, Paul Hamilton concludes that while the "friend's" reading experience indicts Coleridge of the same perversity of which he famously accuses a number of Wordsworth's poems, it does so in order to barely avert the larger crisis in what is for Hamilton the chief challenge of the *Biographia*: to produce a unity of poetic theory and practice. For Hamilton, the letter thus amounts to the "self-abasement" of the fictional friend, who sacrifices his reputation as a reader in the service of the greater unity of the *Biographia*.[321] That is, the uncomfortable feeling is nevertheless supposed to coincide with a confirmation of the fundamental logical consistency of the omitted chapter.

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[319] Coleridge, 1:72n.
[320] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 2.33.14.
[321] Hamilton, *Coleridge's Poetics*, 22–23.

It is tempting to conclude, then, that the anti-bull's feeling of inversion aligns it with a type of salutary intellectual defamiliarization. Indeed, Coleridge explicitly advocates just such a use of the anti-bull in a letter to the young James Gillman, Jr. dated the 22nd of October, 1826. In order to prepare the eighteen-year-old to encounter the strange and difficult material of a liberal arts education, Coleridge explains that he has recommended an introductory dose of Greek study "rather for the purpose of breaking down the *chevaux de frize* [barriers], which the *newness* & strangeness of the Subject throws round it, than in the expectation of leaving any distinct impression of the particular truths."[322] Coleridge goes on to give an almost verbatim account of the bull and its antithesis, writing, "For there is a state of mind the direct opposite to that which takes place in making an Irish *Bull*." That is, "You understand" or "have the sense of the connection between any given series of Thoughts," he explains, "& yet have the feeling of not understanding."[323] Writing in 1826, nearly a decade after the publication of the *Biographia*, Coleridge sees the antithesis of the bull as an experience of productive disorientation that will prepare the young Gillman for future intellectual challenges; like the modernist value of difficulty, the antithesis of the bull will familiarize the student with the unfamiliar in order to facilitate the acquisition of future knowledge.

When read through Coleridge's more optimistic later characterization, we might go further and associate the anti-bull with the embodied "intellectual motion sickness," as Steven Goldsmith has characterized it, with which Jameson famously confirms the successful operation of the dialectic.[324] In this reading, the antithesis of the bull, like the bull, implies a temporal process of critical revision, just as, in Jameson's account, the feeling of "shock" corroborates the critical overcoming of "an older, more naïve position," without which "there can be no question of any genuinely dialectical coming to consciousness."[325] Appearing as it does just before the famous passage on the primary and secondary imagination, the antithesis of the bull would thus appear to link the theory of imagination with a critical process of learning or intellectual development. Unlike the negation of connection that occurs in the desynonymizing reading practice of the bull and the passage on poetic diction, the anti-bull would seem to articulate a process of acquiring positive knowledge.

And yet, the "friend" presents the antithesis of the bull as a barrier rather than an aid to the reading process. Indeed, as Hamilton's reading suggests, the painful sensation associated with the antithesis of the bull is strikingly at odds with Coleridge's model of an ideal reading experience. As Kevis Goodman has demonstrated recently in "Reading Motion: Coleridge's 'Free Spirit' and Its Medical Background," Coleridge desired a poetic form that would produce a free and pleasurable reading experience. Goodman notes that Coleridge wanted poetic form to produce steady attention and "motions of reading" like that of "the pleasingly even-keeled undulations of a salubrious journey."[326] Defining his own normative theory against the painful jolts that he associated with some of Wordsworth's poetry, Coleridge characterizes his ideal reading experience as, Goodman writes, a "'*liber* spiritus' – his reader as free spirit, 'carried forward . . . by the

[322] Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2000, 6:632.
[323] Coleridge, 6:632.
[324] Goldsmith, *Blake's Agitation*, 2.
[325] Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 2002, 308.
[326] Goodman, "Reading Motion," 350.

pleasurable activity of the mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself,' progressing, receding, and progressing again 'like the motion of a serpent'."[327] Steady attention and pleasing motion: in the terms of Coleridge's ideal model of reading, both the naïve bull, with its characteristic inattention, and the anti-bull, with its feeling of uncomfortable upending and coercion, appear problematic. And while the form in question with the anti-bull is philosophical and theoretical rather than poetic, it is nevertheless troubling that "friend's" experience of reading the theory of imagination is painful.

While Hamilton is right that the fictional friend's letter points to a problem of unity, I want to suggest that the anti-bull's feeling of disorientation is even more troubling. As Goodman shows, "what is at stake in" Coleridge's ideal reading experience "of free motion and the 'more equal and continuous attention' that he associates with freedom is precisely" the "[precarious relationship] *between physiology and historicity*."[328] We have already seen how the inattention of bullish reading registers a historical imbalance, where social forces threaten to supplant the connecting operation of the imagination. Ironically, whereas the letter to Liverpool rightly critiques extreme nominalism for being unable to account for historical change, it is in the passages related to the bull, passages more aligned with a nominalist critique of connections, that Coleridge himself best accounts for the historical developments of the moment. We can see now that the coercive discomfort of the antithesis of the bull figures that historical anxiety in a different sense: when the inattentive reading of bulls and reading the theory of imagination are equally problematic experiences, then the imagination appears even more indistinguishable from false forms of unity. While the older Coleridge had a more optimistic sense of the pedagogical application of readerly discomfort, the *Biographia*'s anti-bull only serves to reiterate Coleridge's concern about the reception of genuinely imaginative works in a commodified society, with all of the negative effects on readers that it entails. The *Biographia* raises the troubling possibility that the anti-bull's feeling of pain and imposition might well hinder the possibility of overcoming previous error; far from removing barriers, the anti-bull's feeling of disorientation is an obstacle for the reader.

Of course, the chapter on the imagination's great ironies only continue to escalate, and after narrating his reading experience in terms of the anti-bull, the "friend" suddenly and explicitly raises the issue of monetary concerns. While critics have noted this peculiar insertion—as Maniquis puts it, of "the book as commodity"—it is actually the second such moment in the *Biographia*.[329] Notably, both moments follow immediately after the two passages on the bull: the fictional friend's sudden rendering of the *Biographia* in terms of money echoes an earlier moment, where Coleridge figures *Lyrical Ballads* as a "roleau of gold."[330] Monetary concerns serve as one more reason in the

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[327] Goodman, 353. Quoting Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, 2:14.
[328] Goodman, "Reading Motion," 353.
[329] Maniquis, "Poetry and Barrel-Organs: The Text in the Book of the Biographia Literaria," 263. For example, Gayatri Spivak writes of "[t]hat curious detail in the 'friend's' letter that suddenly describes the missing chapter in terms of money and number of pages," claiming that the moment "reduces the great thought on thought to a massy thing." Spivak, "The Letter as Cutting Edge," 220.
[330] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1984, I: 74. Coleridge writes of certain poems in *Lyrical Ballads* that "the poems therefore, at the worst, could only be regarded as so many light or inferior coins in a roleau of gold, not as so much alloy in a weight of bullion." Coleridge, 1:74.

"friend's" case for the omission of the ostensibly complete theory of imagination. In this moment, Simpson's claim about the historical period of Romanticism could be stated with almost comical literalness of the *Biographia*, or at least of its thirteenth chapter: "Here it is not the crucible of the imagination but . . . [money,] the general equivalent that compare[s] things together, or take[s] parts from wholes and attach[es] them to other parts." Whether or not we believe that monetary concerns "take" out the "*Chapter on the Imagination*," Coleridge puts such historical tensions on full ironic display.

V. From Real Abstraction to Natural History

In the same year Coleridge wrote his letter to Liverpool—the year of the final Luddite uprising, two years after the end of the Napoleonic Wars—the forty-five year old poet meditated on the human implications of the contemporary "System" of commerce in his second "Lay Sermon." There Coleridge observed "that the power and circumstantial prosperity of the Nation has been increasing . . . with an accelerated force unprecedented in any country," and that modern free trade has brought "into activity a multitude of enterprizing Individuals and a variety of Talent that would otherwise have lain dormant."[331] As Dror Wahrman and Jonathan Sheehan describe the passage in their book *Invisible Hands*, "Coleridge repeated the standard account of the expansion of English trade and industry since the second half of the eighteenth century, and assured his readers that he was no enemy to commerce."[332] After giving commerce its due, however, Coleridge's account takes on a critical edge: "We shall perhaps be told too, that the very Evils of this System, even the periodical *crash* itself, are to be regarded but as so much superfluous steam ejected by the Escape Pipes and Safety Valves of a self-regulating Machine: and lastly, that in a free and trading country *all things find their level*."[333] In Coleridge's assessment, we may be told that events like economic crashes are part of the normal operation of the economy, but the system appears to have its "Evils" along with its contributions to prosperity.

For Wahrman and Sheehan, Coleridge's representation of the economy clearly follows the familiar eighteenth-century model of the self-regulating system, "the notion that complex systems, left to their own devices, generated order immanently, without external direction, through *self-organization*."[334] As *Invisible Hands* describes it, the language of self-organization emerged after the enlightenment period disenchanted the world of providential design. A product of the eighteenth century, self-organization provided a non-providential, non-mechanistic model that accounted for both order and contingency in the world. In Coleridge's account in the "Lay Sermon," "[t]he logic, the language, the images [of self-organization] are all taken for granted," Wahrman and Sheehan write.[335] Coleridge's self-regulating steam machine accounts for both order and chaos, both the operation of the "System" of commerce and the only apparently aberrant phenomenon of the economic "crash."

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[331] Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, 206–7. Quoted in Sheehan and Wahrman, *Invisible Hands*, 292.
[332] Sheehan and Wahrman, *Invisible Hands*, 292.
[333] Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, 205.
[334] Sheehan and Wahrman, *Invisible Hands*, xi. The authors caution that the "language of self-organization" is varied rather than constituting a single, uniform model.
[335] Sheehan and Wahrman, 292.

But if from the perspective of the system—from a descriptive standpoint—the crash is part of the normal operation of the system, then it nevertheless looks quite different from the perspective of human beings. As Coleridge goes on to demonstrate, it is from the perspective of the individual person that the "Evils" of the system come into view:

> But there is surely no inconsistency in yielding all due honor to the spirit of Trade, and yet charging sundry evils, that weaken or reverse its blessings, on the over-balance of that spirit, taken as the paramount principle of action in the nation at large. . . . Thus instead of the position, that all things *find*, it would be less equivocal and far more descriptive of the fact to say, that Things are always *finding*, their level: which might be taken as the paraphrase or ironical definition of a storm, but would still be more appropriate to the Mosaic Chaos, ere its brute tendencies had been enlightened by the WORD. . . . But Persons are not *Things*—but Man does not find his level. Neither in body nor in soul does the Man find his level.[336]

Coleridge may preface his critique by professing his own consistency, but the contrast he paints is sharp indeed: if in one sense "the spirit of Trade" is laudable, too much of that spirit produces "sundry evils." In moral terms, the self-balancing political economy can and has become destructively "over-balance[d]" and thus decidedly immoral. In order to bring those consequences into focus, the end of the passage shifts from the scale of system to "Persons," to abstract "Man," and then, finally, to the individual human being ("the Man"), his individuality underscored by the use of the definite article. Though Coleridge insists upon his own self-consistency, clearly the self-regulating system of economy is incompatible with a human scale: "Neither in body nor soul does the Man find his level." In another moment cited by Sheehan and Wahrman, Coleridge laments the human toll of the process even more explicitly: "Water will come to a level without pain or pleasure, and provisions and money will come to a level likewise; but, O God! What scenes of anguish must take place while they are coming to a *level*!"[337]

In addition to demonstrating the incommensurability of free trade with a flourishing human "body" and "soul," Coleridge figures the system as a "storm" in the passage above; the storm, he suggests, is a system operating according to its own natural laws—a system inhospitable to humans and which, in human terms, appears more chaotic than orderly.[338] Like fluid dynamics and violent weather patterns, the system of commerce operates independently of human control. Notably, this chapter opened with another instance in which Coleridge articulates the supra-individual operation of history and society as a natural process. As we saw in the letter to Liverpool, Coleridge maintains, as both necessary and desirable, "that states and kingdoms *grow*, and are not to be *made*."[339] There Coleridge insisted that history reveals the natural growth of states

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[336] Coleridge, *Lay Sermons*, 206.
[337] Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 3, pts. 1–3, pt. 1:255. Coleridge refers to Adam Smith's "*level*" here. See Sheehan and Wahrman, *Invisible Hands*, 293.
[338] Warhman and Sheehan write: "Self-organizing order, celebrated as it was by the champions of the system of trade, is analogous to the brute natural order of pre-biblical chaos, untouched by human rationality and divine logos. It is a primitive form. There is no contesting that it *works*, but it is appropriate only for soulless things, not for sentient persons." Sheehan and Wahrman, *Invisible Hands*, 293.
[339] Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1959, 4:762. Wahrman and Sheehan cite a different counter-instance of Coleridge "celebrating the quasi-magical formation of public opinion from multiple individual ones." Sheehan and Wahrman, *Invisible Hands*, 293.

rather than their construction by conscious individuals (those "Demiurgic" social atoms with their self-deluded sense of historical freedom and agency and a view he associated with nominalism, Locke, and the French revolutionaries). Coleridge's account quite explicitly articulates the understanding that a state made by a conscious, willing process can also be radically unmade or made anew: "The independent atoms of the state of nature cluster round a common centre and *make* a convention," he writes mockingly, "and that convention *makes* a constitution of Government; then the makers and the made make a contract, which ensures the former a right of breaking it whenever it shall seem good to them."[340] Coleridge's tone, full of contempt, would be humorous if the stakes were not so high.

As we will see further in the following chapter, Coleridge's insistence upon the natural growth of the state follows Edmund Burke and anticipates an almost identical conclusion that Adorno identifies in Hegel. For Hegel, it is "utterly essential that the constitution should not be regarded as something made, even if it does have an origin in time."[341] Or, as Adorno puts it, Hegel's view is that "[s]tate constitutions should not arise from the conscious acts of individuals." In more general terms that equally account for Coleridge's vision of the state, "Hegel presents as *physei* [existing nature] something that is *thesei* [has been posited]; he defines the constitution of the historical world as something belonging to the world of nature."[342] If, for Adorno, Hegel's—and, we can add, Coleridge's—shortcoming is that he "fails to expose" the natural historical view of history "as illusion," then "[w]hat Marx adds as a philosopher is the consciousness of this illusion."[343] In other words, both Marx and Adorno want to retain the insight into the natural historical aspect of history, while also exposing it as illusion.

Wahrman and Sheehan usefully trace a direct line from eighteenth-century self-organization, through Coleridge's leveling system, to a pivotal passage in Marx's writings. Yet the problem of human agency and the presentation of history as natural history draws an equally powerful connection between Marx and Coleridge. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes:

> As much as the individual moments of this movement arise from the conscious will and particular purposes of individuals, so much does the totality of the process appear as an objective interrelation, which arises spontaneously from nature; arising, it is true, from the mutual influence of conscious individuals on one another; but neither located in their consciousness, nor subsumed under them as a whole. Their own collisions with another produce an *alien* social power standing above them, produce their mutual interaction as a process and power independent of them.[344]

Like Coleridge, Marx suggests that the exchange economy operates like a natural, self-organizing process. In doing so, Marx emphasizes the strange incommensurability between the level of "conscious" individual action, on the one hand, and the individual's unthinking, seemingly random "collisions" in the social process, on the other; "conscious individuals" nevertheless end up "produ[cing] their mutual interactions as a process and

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[340] Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1959, 4:761.
[341] Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 312. Quoted in Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 119.
[342] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 119.
[343] Adorno, 119.
[344] Marx, *Grundrisse*, 196–97. The paragraph begins: "To have *circulation*, what is essential is that exchange appear as a process, a fluid whole of purchases and sales."

power independent of them." In this way, the passage articulates that social process—abstracted, "alien," unrecognizable as their own—as a natural process following natural laws ("which arises spontaneously from nature").[345] Like Coleridge's storm, society viewed in such a way is incommensurate with human agency.

Both Coleridge's and Marx's formulations thus raise fundamental questions about history and human freedom. In the face of such an abstract "*alien* social power" that "[stands] above them"—in the face of Coleridge's storm—what possibilities of agency might the human body and soul retain? Adorno suggests one answer when he argues that Marx, unlike Hegel, critiques the illusion of natural history, and, as we will see, Adorno connects that insight with nominalism and the problem of universals. My next chapter develops the relationship between these questions and the problem of nominalism and materialism by examining Charlotte Smith's poetic treatment of transient particulars and dialectical natural history. Here, however, I have attempted to show that the *Biographia*'s constellation of passages related to the bull suggest a critical reading practice that likewise acknowledges the force of abstract social forces while simultaneously dismissing their operation and calling attention to the resulting contradiction. In contrast, the letter to Liverpool offers an answer that again appears in the figure of the storm. Inextricable from the claim that "states and kingdoms *grow*, and are not to be *made*," Coleridge writes "that in all political revolutions, whether for the weal or chastisement of a nation, the People are but the sprigs and boughs in a forest tossed against each other by an agency in which their own will has the least share."[346] For the conservative Coleridge, the answer is clear: mere "sprigs and boughs" quaking in a storm, individuals are helplessly subsumed under the general "People," subject to a more powerful agency and unable to construct their own history.

[345] Compare the famous passage in *Capital*, where Marx explains that the "standpoint [in *Capital*], from which the development of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, socially speaking." Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, 92.

[346] Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1959, 4:762.

Chapter 3
Charlotte Smith, transience, and 'the idea of natural history'

The point at which nature and history meet is in the fact of transience.
—Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom*

I. "All Things, that exist . . . are liable to Change"

[Nominalism] denied that concepts have a natural existence.
—Adorno, *History and Freedom*

I have been arguing that the thread of Romantic negative dialectics traced in this project comprises a dialectic of ideas and things as well as of broader social and historical concerns. In the previous chapter, I argued that Coleridge develops such a dialectic specifically in the correspondence between the contradictory relation of the bull and the commodification of the literary marketplace. In this chapter I argue that Charlotte Smith's poetics of transience elaborates the temporal implications of the nominalist dialectic that I identified in Locke's empiricism. Taking up the problem of impermanence at the intersection of empiricism and elegy, Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* work against, and with, a poetic tradition that tended to reinforce the opposition between ephemeral existence and timeless language or ideas. Smith rejected poetic attempts to redress the problem of transience through the consolation of an eternal memorialization in language, suggesting instead that poetry and her melancholic poetic speakers are themselves impermanent. At the same time, Smith suggests that the alternative of total transience, what I identify as the temporal version of an extreme nominalism, paradoxically cannot account for the loss of particular things. Her poetry thus invokes a second sense of the word *transient* as "[p]assing out or operating beyond itself," "transitive" as "opposed to immanent," producing a dialectic of passing away, on the one hand, and of transient persistence in memory and material form, on the other.[347] In this way, transient things belie the desire for eternal real essences, safe from material loss, while also manifesting a history of loss that points beyond the momentary particular.

Beginning with the transitory phenomena and much-noted gloominess of the early *Elegiac Sonnets*, and concluding with *Beachy Head*'s exploration of transience in terms of entwined natural and human history, I trace the development of Smith's treatment of transience from an early repudiation of elegiac consolation to a later, more expansive account of dialectical natural history. The *Elegiac Sonnets*' ephemeral natural phenomena include eroding sea cliffs, human bones that slowly bleach and mingle with shells in the tide, and the brief flight of a spider floating tenuously on a thread of web. Human happiness is likewise marked by transience in the sense that the *OED* gives us as "Passing by or away with time; not durable or permanent . . . brief, momentary, fleeting."[348] In denying the possibility of transcending or overcoming transience, however, Smith's melancholy figures of natural and human decay dramatize the way in which their own emphasis on inexorable transience risks taking on a mythic form. That is, though the sonnets set transience against delusions of immortality and eternity, they also become troubled by the sense that their insistence on transience slips easily into an

[347] *OED*, s.v. "transient, adj. and n."
[348] Ibid.

alternative eternity of loss and destruction without change, a despairing assessment of transience as an insurmountable fact of nature.

In addition to its dialogue with the generic conventions of elegy, Smith's poetry engages the problem of transience that troubles Locke's empiricism. The temporal aspect of the nominalist problem of correspondence has remained latent in this project so far, but Locke's *Essay* repeatedly raises the issues of change and impermanence in the context of its wavering nominalism.[349] In the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the problem of mutability appears as one aspect of the problem of particulars and universals: if particular things pass away but universals transcend time and history, and if mutability is characteristic of existence but not of atemporal general signs, then the problem of transience raises the temporal version of the nominalist split between things and signs ("whether words or ideas").[350] For Locke, that is, the nominalist thesis that "All Things, that exist, [are] Particulars" is inextricable from his view that "All Things, that exist, besides their Author, are liable to Change."[351] Indeed, the former nominalist principle, and the latter, its temporal corollary, appear as the opening and closing bookends to the *Essay*'s chapter titled "*Of General Terms*." According to Locke's nominalism, generals merely approximate particulars, not least because all things are constantly changing.

Perhaps most famously, the problem posed by the transitory nature of things appears in the *Essay*'s section on personal identity. It is not only the notorious problem of sleep that vexes the possibility of a stable and enduring identity, however, but also the fact that our bodies are made of "successively fleeting particles of matter." (In what sense can we understand an "embryo" and a man "of years" as "the same man"?)[352] Yet the problem of transience is addressed most explicitly in the context of Locke's novel nominalist distinction between real and nominal essences. As we saw in chapter 1, Locke maintains that what realists might have thought of as eternal "real essences" are merely the general signs in the mind he calls "nominal essences." Real essences must be changing constantly, Locke explains, and thus they cannot coincide with nominal essences:

> All Things, that exist, besides their Author, are liable to Change; especially those Things we are acquainted with, and have ranked into Bands, under distinct Names or Ensigns. Thus that, which was Grass to Day, is to Morrow the Flesh of a Sheep; and within few days after, becomes part of a Man; In all which, and the like Changes, 'tis evident, their real *Essence*, *i.e.* that Constitution whereon the Properties of these several things depended, is destroy'd, and perishes with them. But *Essences* being taken for *Ideas*, established in the Mind, with Names annexed to them, they are supposed to remain steadily the same, whatever mutations the particular Substances are liable to . . . [and] the *Essences* of those Species are preserved whole and undestroy'd, whatever Changes happen to any, or all of the Individuals of those *Species*. By this means the *Essence* of a *Species* rests safe and entire, without the existence of so much as one Individual of that kind.[353]

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[349] Noel Jackson reminds us that "in proposing to analyze the mind by means of the 'historical, plain method,'" Locke's *Essay* "signaled a departure from" ahistorical "Cartesian metaphysics." Jackson, *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry*, 69–70.
[350] Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1979, 3.2.8.
[351] Locke, 3.3.1, 3.3.19.
[352] Locke, 2.27.6.
[353] Locke, 3.3.19.

Conceived as the "Constitution" of things, (real) essences perish; conceived as general ideas, (nominal) essences persist. Even as Locke demotes essences from real to nominal status, he preserves the "safe and entire" stability of generals by locating them in the mind and severing them from their connection to a sensible world of mutable things. Of course, as in the moments foregrounded in my first chapter, Locke's nominalist account also exacerbates the problem of how general signs might correspond to things. (What is the relation between mutable things that pass away with time – never self-identical from one moment to the next – and nominal essences that remain "steadily the same"?) Precisely because of the problematic implications of its own nominalism, the *Essay's* dialectical wavering goes on to suggest that some nominal essences, here wholly abstracted from and independent of transient matter, do nevertheless correspond to "real Existence, from which was derived their original pattern."[354]

Locke's nominalist insistence on the split between particulars and generals reproduces the dualist equation of particularity with perishing matter and nature, generality with atemporal abstraction and the human mind. In the *Essay'*s characteristically eddying fashion, however, Locke also takes seriously the inverse possibility. Whereas in Book III nominal essences are ideas in the mind that are "preserved whole and undestroy'd," Locke is at his most eloquent in the previous Book when he suggests that ideas themselves may be even more transient than the "Grass [of] to Day." Indeed, though we might expect otherwise, Locke does not limit the problem of transience to material existence. The contents of one's memory, too, fade inexorably, subject to surprisingly swift erasure with the passage of time: "ideas in the mind quickly fade," Locke writes, "and often vanish quite out of the understanding, leaving no more footsteps, or remaining characters of themselves, than shadows do flying over fields of corn; and the mind is as void of them, as if they had never been there."[355] Slipping into a surprisingly melancholy assessment of general signs – where thoughts appear even less susceptible to persistence than things, and where even transitory things leave a more lasting mark on the world – the *Essay* briefly intimates a world of endless transience: even the mental abstractions of nominal essences, Locke suggests, "are liable to Change." A means of preserving fleeting phenomena, ideas are themselves ephemeral. In the context of these earlier moments, then, the *Essay*'s contradictions undo the dualist account of perishing natural particulars and enduring human generals, while also suggesting that the distinction between real and nominal essences attempts to craft a wavering alternative to both eternal essences and the opposite extreme of complete transience.

In Smith's poetry, this chapter demonstrates, we see a similarly twofold critique of attempts to transcend the transitory world of things and resignation to a world of total transience. In order to highlight the distinctiveness of Smith's dialectic and to elaborate its implications for contemporary theory, I first situate her poetry in relation to postmodern nominalism and more recent new materialisms. Recognizing the temporal aspect of Smith's particulars reveals the ways in which her poetry was already critical of the postmodern nominalism that shaped her reception. Undermining canonical readings of Smith's natural particularity as radically other or independent, transience comes to define both the natural and the human in the later *Elegiac Sonnets*, just as it cuts across

[354] Locke, 3.4.2.
[355] Locke, 2.10.4. Thanks to Esther Yu for directing me to this passage.

human and natural history in *Beachy Head*. Smith's transience thus appears to share with new materialism a rejection of the separation between subject and object, human and nature. Notwithstanding this shared investment, I suggest that Smith's dialectical transience presents a critical counterpoint to both discourses: first, to their utopian inability to account for loss; and, second, to their implicit treatment of nature and history, on the one hand as radically separate and on the other as indistinguishable. In doing so, I take seriously the critical pressures posed by our contemporary moment after the "end of Nature."

Distinguishing Smith's dialectical transience from postmodern nominalism and monist new materialisms also makes visible the ways in which her poetry anticipates Theodor Adorno's idea of natural history. While in large part drawing his account of natural history from Walter Benjamin's work on German baroque drama, Adorno associated his own account of the melancholy program of interpretation with Romantic nature and ruins (and the poetry of Hölderlin in particular). For Adorno, transience becomes a necessary critical corrective to nominalism's normative ahistorical vision of utopian particulars; it shifts interpretation from static particulars to particulars that have become and upon which historical abstractions have acted.[356] At the same time, I suggest that contemporary debates over climate change literalize or externalize what Adorno, and Marx before him, treated more strictly as a question of human history and the historical agency of the individual. Finally, while I am interested in the ways in which melancholy transience might act as a corrective to consolatory alternatives, I conclude by addressing the widespread view that melancholy produces forbearance and resignation in the face of disaster (twin problems that animate both Smith's poetry and Adorno's critical theory). For his part, Adorno mitigates total political paralysis by linking the melancholy idea of natural history with the surprisingly sublime "joys of interpretation."[357] I juxtapose the implications of Adorno's "joys of interpretation" with Smith's Parson Darby, who, though intimately acquainted with death and likewise holding a despairing view of the world, nevertheless acts in the face of sublime "total transience." More akin, then, to T. J. Clark's recent call for a left politics in the key of tragedy, the hermit suggests the desire for an alternative sublime in which facing loss neither symbolically transmutes suffering nor immobilizes action.

II. Postmodern nominalism and new materialisms after the end of nature

In 1990, Romantic critic Alan Liu commented on the ubiquity of cultural criticism's obsession with particularity. The commitment to a rejection of totalization, universal categories, and transcendence that spanned different sub-fields of academic theory and literary criticism itself verged on the universal. The following year, Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism* identified the broad theoretical tendency as a new nominalism. Liu, David Simpson, and other Romantic literary critics highlighted the limitations of the particularist tendency of postmodern theory in part by noting the Romantic origins of its rhetoric of the local and the "minute particular." Indeed for Liu, the richly detailed

[356] Adorno, *Notes to literature. Vol. 2*, 222.
[357] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 137.

particulars of postmodern "context" had become a new Romantic Nature.[358] Of course localism was, at the end of the eighteenth century as at the end of the twentieth, a reaction against destructive delocalizing processes of modernization – of industrial capitalism and globalization – and today the enthusiastic celebration of irreducible particulars appears naïve and outmoded—a utopian nominalism.

When Liu argued that cultural criticism's enthusiastic investment in the local and the detail could find its historical precedent in Romantic poetry, he relied on a later 20th century reevaluation of Romanticism that was marked by postmodernism's own nominalist tendencies. This revisionary assessment of Romanticism had newly defined the Romantic period in terms of its particularity—defined it as, according to one critic, "that cultural and psychic moment when difference, particulars, and dissent become the troublesome baggage of representation—literary as well as political."[359] Though ostensibly representative of the period, in practice the new genealogy often involved the emergence of a "counter-romanticism" that opposed the high Romanticism of the transcendent imagination. Theresa Kelley, for example, argued that the poetic use of botanical details "carve a space for Clare (and for the local and the particular) inside Romanticism, with its vaunted preference for the grand scheme, sublime idea, and the monumental."[360] The nominalist Romantic alternative to Romanticism had to be staked out within and against the old Romanticism.

While not always explicitly feminist, the recovery of the historically subordinated particular, traditionally gendered feminine along with the local and the beautiful, emerged during a wave of feminist criticism. Postmodern feminists tended to embrace the subordinated terms over and against their masculine counterparts of the sublime, abstract, or universal, and those values inflected the still very recent and much needed canonization of Romantic women writers. The new Romanticism celebrated, for example, the quotidian "counter-vision" of minor poets and women writers. The canonical "visionary" Romanticism – the empirical blindness of Keats' "viewless wings of Poesy" – was exchanged for the "actual vision" of "women poets, whose fine eyes," Stuart Curran wrote, "are occupied continually in discriminating minute objects or assembling a world out of its disjointed particulars."[361]

It is in the context of this feminized and particularized counter-Romanticism that we can understand readings that celebrated the particularity of nature in Charlotte Smith's 1807 *Beachy Head.* In Anne Mellor's account, *Beachy Head* poses a "challenge to the 'egotistical sublime' of Wordsworth's *Prelude* in its insistence on the stubborn otherness and minute particularity of the natural world."[362] Curran's introduction to *The Poems of Charlotte Smith* (1993) gives a similar account of Smith's original contribution to

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[358] Liu, "Local Transcendence," 91. See also Simpson, *The Academic Postmodern*; Chandler, *England in 1819*; Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*, 1992.
[359] Kelley, "Romantic Interiority and Cultural Objects," para. 10.
[360] Kelley, para. 10.
[361] Curran, "The I Altered," 185. "Fine eyes" aside, we might apply David Simpson's incisive critique of Romantic and postmodern localism to Curran's reading of the feminine counter-Romanticism: Simpson writes that "the rhetoric of localism can look very much like making virtue of necessity." Simpson, *The Academic Postmodern*, 112. At the same time, given the recent postcritical calls for a new empiricism, it is worth remembering that feminist criticism already articulated an alternative to the masculine transcendence of empirical particulars.
[362] Mellor and Matlak, *British Literature, 1780-1830*, 226.

Romanticism: "[i]n its multitudinous, uncanny particularity, nature in *Beachy Head* represents a counter reality to that of human society and history."[363] Of the famous botanical passage in *Beachy Head*, Curran later wrote: "There are eight botanical notes to this passage, reminding us that nature's particularity is the essential fact of its life . . . without hierarchy or the imposition of human aesthetic considerations." And while, "It is, perhaps, no distinct accomplishment simply to state that nature is self-fulfilling," Curran continues, "it is certainly one to create a world of such microscopically exact beauty in which no human, even the observer honoring it, can participate.[364] For Curran, Smith's nature "testifies to an alternative Romanticism that seeks not to transcend or to absorb nature but to contemplate and honor its irreducible alterity."[365] Likewise, the "stubbornness" Mellor encounters in the poem's botanical details suggests a form of inherent (implicitly gendered and political) resistance somehow attached to the particularity of Smith's nature. Curran's particulars rebuff even the most sympathetic observer, at once defying (in their "irreducible alterity") the general concepts of enlightenment instrumental reason, the imposition of Romantic aesthetic categories, and incorporation into human history. The scale itself of the "microscopically exact" botanical minutiae, which form a proximate but inaccessible utopia at the speaker's feet, appears incompatible with larger, human magnitudes.

More fundamentally, these minute particulars presuppose nominalism's basic coordinates: according to nominalism, there are no real universals, everything is particular, and thus "universals" are mere general concepts, approximations of or abstractions from particulars, rough (imprecise but also violent) human constructions. In the enlightenment tradition documented by Hans Blumenberg, nominalism went hand-in-hand with the expedient self-assertion of the enlightenment subject.[366] Yet this narrative of the subject's self-assertion by means of the imposition of general categories upon pliant particulars also makes possible its utopian inversion: Curran finds in Smith an alternative to the violence of self-assertion – the non-violent "honoring" and "contemplating" of noncompliant particulars – and an implicit condemnation of the manipulation that nominalism's division of the world into minute particulars supported in the first place. Postmodern utopian particulars invert the narrative of nominalist self-assertion while maintaining nominalism's basic assumptions.

In the critical accounts that helped canonize Smith, the new emphasis on particularity was, then, inextricable from a newly reassessed conception of Romantic nature—one to be taken on its own terms, and containing its own agency, rather than simply serving as figurative material for the shaping power of human imagination or concepts. Today, however, celebrating the "stubborn otherness" and "irreducible alterity" of Smith's botanical details seems hopelessly dated in two main ways: first, more recent new materialisms have explicitly rejected the epistemological framework of postmodern nominalism (the agency of Smith's botanical particulars, for instance, is limited to their inherent resistance to the human observer's attempt to know or classify) in favor of ontological monism and the more lively agency of matter; second, the celebration of nature's radical non-human otherness has been largely superseded by a contemporary

[363] Smith, *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, xxvii.
[364] Curran, "Charlotte Smith and British Romanticism," 77.
[365] Smith, *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, xxviii.
[366] Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.

awareness of the fundamental ways in which human agency has shaped even the most seemingly independent natural entities and agencies.

Since the nineties our increasing awareness of the human effects of climate change and environmental destruction has revealed a more radical imbrication of human and natural forces, and a growing consensus has emerged regarding, as Bill McKibben's 1989 book termed it, *The End of Nature*.[367] Even before the end of nature, and related calls for an "ecology without nature" popularized by Timothy Morton, Raymond Williams' prescient and still relevant commentary from 1980 warned of the ideological consequences of separating history and nature.[add citation for Moron] The ostensible otherness of "natural" objects, Williams observed, merely obscures the mark of human labor and the history of capitalism. At the same time, as Williams noted with such clarity, it becomes more difficult to see ecological effects on what is deemed the space of "non-nature":

> For it is a mark of the success of the new idea of nature—of nature as separated from man—that the real errors, the real consequences [of industrial capitalism], could be described at first only in marginal terms. Nature in any other sense than that of the [capitalist] improvers indeed fled to the margins: to the remote, the inaccessible, the relatively barren areas. Nature was where industry was not, and then in that real but limited sense had very little to say about the operations on nature that were proceeding elsewhere.[368]

More recently, scientists like McKibben argue that we have passed a historical threshold such that by now the modification (and destruction) of non-human Nature by humans has become so fundamental as to nullify its status as an independent entity or force. These theorists "declare [Nature's] wholesale extinction as salient material entity," writes Margaret Ronda, such that, "[s]tripped of independent empirical parameters or causal agency, nature becomes the *absent* cause, disappearing into human history—in fact, already 'gone for good'."[369] Or, as Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests, the human causality of climate change "Spell[s] the Collapse of the Age-Old Human Distinction between Natural History and Human History."[370] (Ironically, such a collapse suggests a historical rationale for the monism of contemporary new materialisms.)

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[367] Ecological destruction exerts considerable pressure on our conceptions of nature and history, even as it heightens our sense of the loss of particularity. Quite literally, every local particular, down to the molecular level, bears the marks of human fossil fuel consumption. The loss of particularity also ranges from the scrambling of local climates, to the massive displacement of peoples, the mass extinction of species, and the severe loss of biodiversity.

[368] Williams, "Ideas of Nature," 80.

[369] Ronda, "Mourning and Melancholia in the Anthropocene," np.

[370] Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 207. For Chakrabarty, this collapse comes about through the novel development that "[n]ow it is being claimed that humans are a force of nature in the geological sense." Notably, as far back as the mid 18th century, not long after the 1750 proposed beginning of the Anthropocene, we find recorded instances of the recognition that human development alters geography and climate. While deeply problematic to the extent that the recognition involved equating mellower climate with civilization and the "improvement" of nature, the insight and the early date of occurrence is surprising. Alan Bewell notes:

> [T]he discovery, little known nowadays, that the climate of America had actually changed markedly in the years immediately following its settlement by the Europeans. Hugh Williamson, in a paper read before the American Philosophical Society in 1770, first noted this "very observable change of climate," as the winters in Pennsylvania had become warmer and the summers more temperate. He concluded that this alteration had been brought about by the settlers,

It is thus striking that Timothy Morton – proponent of an "ecology without nature," and critic of an independent, other nature – nevertheless reiterates verbatim the "uncanny" and "irreducible" qualities of Curran's particulars in his reading of the same botanical passage in *Beachy Head*.[371] And in another echo of the earlier postmodern nominalism, Morton reads Smith's flowers as an instance of a "counter-Romantic" tendency with close affinities to Object-Oriented Ontology; the litany form popularized by Latour, he writes, is "counter-Romantic: compare the endless-seeming list of flowers in the 'unfrequented lanes' passage" in 'Beachy Head'. . . . The more objects tumble forth, the more they fall under the spell of an atmosphere, a melancholic mood in which things churn undigested."[372] Morton insists on the radically horizontal status of all objects as fundamentally "withdrawn," with the effect that Smith's flowers (no less than, according to Morton, the man-made "promontories" in the post-apocalyptic imaginary of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*) are irreducibly other. Much like the earlier particularist account of the "self-fulfilling" quality of nature, Morton's account "talks about objects encountering one another without people." The precise "eight botanical details" of Curran's reading become the fuzzier "endless-seeming list of flowers" in Morton's reading, and irreducible particularity becomes irreducible and inaccessible strangeness: Kelley cited "undigested bits . . . akin to . . . Romanticism's wayward botanical figures"; Curran's flowers were unabsorbed; Morton's are "undigested."[373] For Morton, both natural and historical objects have the irreducible strangeness, the precious reserve of that which is indominable by humans, previously reserved for nature. If Williams demonstrated how the concept of nature estranges the marks of human labor, erasing them from objects, then Morton's brand of postcritique pushes all objects – promontories no less than flowers – back behind a veil of ontological strangeness.

At the same time, by replacing the nature/history dichotomy with an all-encompassing materialism, new materialists implicitly offer a response to Liu's incisive recognition that postmodern particularity tended to rely on an obsolete science of materiality. Late twentieth-century particulars and details, Liu suggested, uncritically relied on an archaic theory of the atom as a stable, indivisible unit of matter. Cultural criticism's "elementary particularism [was] innocent of the fuzzy probabilities of current particle science," recalling "in the detail something like Democritan atomism," where "[t]he atom of detail is a classically hard, discrete unit. Or put *neo*classically: the unit-detail analytic indicates the residual hold of Newtonian physics."[374] New materialisms,

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> as they cleared woods, drained marshes, channeled river courses, and increased the amount of cultivated land. What was happening in America was little short of astonishing: not only had a relatively small number of ill-equipped human beings radically transformed a landscape, but they had also begun to change its climate. . . . As Horace Bushnell put the issue, "Not all the winds, and storms, and earthquakes, and seas, and seasons of the world, have done as much to revolutionize the earth as he [man], the power of an endless life, has done since the day he came forth upon it, and received, as he is most truly declared to have done, dominion over it."

See Bewell, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment*, 244.

[371] Morton, "Here Comes Everything," 2011, 165. For Morton, "*Strange stranger* names an uncanny, radically unpredictable quality of life-forms" and "nonliving entities"; such "strangeness is irreducible."

[372] Morton, "Here Comes Everything," 2011, 174.

[373] Kelley, "Romantic Nature Bites Back," 202.

[374] Liu, "Local Transcendence," 84. The recent interest in Epicurean/Lucretian atomism can be understood as a response to the problem Liu identifies. See Jane Bennett's work, discussed below, as well as, Goldstein, "Growing Old Together."

in contrast, are interested in thinking with contemporary models of matter that include the "fuzzy probabilities" of particle physics. While the static, indivisible atom remains squarely within the long tradition of the dualist classification of matter as dead or inert in relation to lively and animating mind, new materialisms reject dualism and explore the lively power of materiality. Transferring to objects all of the agential dynamism once reserved for subjects, "New materialists stubbornly insist on the generativity and resilience" of matter, its self-organizing capacity, its liveliness and "productive contingencies."[375]

The link that Liu noted between postmodern particularity and its implicit theory of materiality also suggests that the resistance of particularity (to universals or general concepts) rests in no small part on the presumption of the resistance of matter to mind. Implicitly, particulars resist because they are literally, or by figurative extension, matter. As T.J. Clark has asked, however, "Why, after all, *should* matter be 'resistant'?" Indeed, for Clark, the "resistance of matter" is merely "a modernist piety with a fairly dim ontology appended," and matter not only may fail to resist but also may facilitate the opposite.[376] As Marjorie Levinson notes, Clark's question "raises the possibility that the seemingly axiomatic resistance of matter to mind and by extension, nature to culture . . . may, instead of restricting the human endowment, in fact prop it up."[377]

Jane Bennett makes a similar point when she suggests that even older theorists who attended to forms of "recalcitrance" tended to give "priority to humans as knowing bodies, while tending to overlook things and what *they* can do." If postmodern nominalism tended to unthinkingly rely on an account of particulars as resistant matter, new materialisms have attempted to animate that passive resistance. Bennett seeks to shed light on the older "dim ontology" by "shift[ing] . . . from a focus on an elusive recalcitrance . . . to an active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness (vibrant matter)"; her "notion of thing-power aims instead to attend to [things] as actant[s]." For Bennett, matter is radiant with thing-power.

Of course, it is telling that Bennett continues to rely on a rhetoric of radical particularity (the *most* radical particularity, singularity) using repeated deictics to index *these* particular objects: "I also felt . . . a nameless awareness of the impossible singularity of *that* rat, *that* configuration of pollen, *that* otherwise utterly banal, mass produced plastic water bottle cap," she writes.[378] Even as new materialisms help us see how the earlier investment in particularity implicitly relied on a theory of materiality, such rhetoric suggests that Bennett's narration of things, and the ontological turn more broadly, continues to presuppose the resistance of matter.

At the same time, it is possible, I think, to turn Levinson's critique back on her own and other new materialisms in order to suggest that consolatory visions of matter as lively, generative, and resilient may prop up "the human endowment" even further. In

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[375] Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," 26, 7. The static particular described by Liu remains implicitly spatialized, in part because understanding a particular in terms of a temporal process would reduce or dilute the more potent particularity of singular point in time. New materialisms' emphasis on the "generativity" and becoming of matter gains a temporal dimension over the more strictly spatial sense of particularity though at some loss of radical particularity.

[376] Quoted in Levinson, "Pre- and Post-Dialectical Materialisms," October 1, 1995, 112. For original, see Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," 152–53.

[377] Levinson, "Pre- and Post-Dialectical Materialisms," October 1, 1995, 112–13.

[378] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 4.

other words, if matter just *is* self-organizing and resilient, then histories of loss and destruction tend to become illegible: new materialisms tend to present a vision of a material world that doesn't need humans—but in doing so they envision a material world that doesn't need humans to change.

If we can identify an afterlife of postmodern nominalism within new materialisms, then the latter's tangled relation to nominalism becomes even more complex when we remember that early on Bennett framed her project as a response to the history of nominalist disenchantment of the world. In a chapter titled "Disenchantment Tales" in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Bennett rehearses Hans Blumenberg's narrative of nominalism's disenchantment.[379] As Martin Jay describes the history, "[e]ver since William of Ockham's critique of scholastic realism, the nominalist impulse in philosophy has been understood to undercut the inherent intelligibility of the world and abet its disenchantment. As a result it has often been tied to . . . human subjects who construct a world through self-assertion."[380] For Blumenberg, Epicureanism assists nominalism by functioning, Bennett puts it, "as a series of techniques for becoming *indifferent* toward the natural world" rendered meaningless and manipulable by nominalism, and thereby facilitating an extension of nominalism's constructivist corollary of "self-assertion."[381] Rejecting Blumenberg's account of Epicureanism, Bennett argues instead that Epicurean atomism, "entails the active affirmation of a world that swerves; it calls for us to work diligently to cultivate a cheerful, chagrined, or stoic (as the particulars require) acceptance of a world unsusceptible to human mastery."[382] In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett further elaborates – and further reenchants – the resistance of the world as a Lucretian materialist "thing-power": "deep within is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of *independence from and resistance to* us and other bodies."[383]

Bennett's vibrant materialism can thus be usefully compared to what Jay has identified as a "magical nominalist" impulse in Benjamin's theory of Adamic naming. In Benjamin's linguistic form of this "alternative version of nominalism," "the re-enchantment of the world [is fostered]" by theorizing the "counter-assertion of the world" in the form of "proper names that paradoxically [come] from the world and not the naming subject."[384] Magical nominalism "steps back" from the "radical constructivism" of conventional nominalism "without retreating into an earlier faith in the rational intelligibility of a world containing real universals":

> Whereas conventionalist nominalism accorded the bestower of generic and proper names, whether divine or human, creative priority, magical nominalism restored some of the power of the world to respond, indeed to intervene, even before the act of naming. The world that responded, however, was not composed of intelligible forms or universal essences, but rather of particular objects, discrete entities that defied reduction both to inherent universal categories and to the human imposition of nominal categories on them.[385]

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[379] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.
[380] Jay, "Magical Nominalism," 165.
[381] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 73.
[382] Bennett, 73.
[383] Emphasis added. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 18.
[384] Jay, "Magical Nominalism," 174, 166. Jay also identifies magical nominalism in Siegfried Kracauer's theory of film, and Marcel Duchamp's theory of photography.
[385] Jay, "Afterward: Kracauer, The Magical Nominalist," 228.

If conventionalist nominalism disenchants the world by crediting human construction with the order and intelligibility of the world, both magical nominalism and Bennett's thing-power re-enchant the world by "restor[ing] some of the power of the world to respond."[386] And while postmodern nominalism more fully respects the epistemological limit of our access to particulars (the demurring observer does not fully represent, speak for, or "participate" in Smith's botanical particulars) postmodern nominalism similarly foregrounds the "counter-assertion" of particulars.

Unlike postmodern nominalists, Bennett has no qualms speaking for things, referring to herself as "me, the narrator of their vitality." In magical nominalism's Edenic vision, things speak for themselves; postmodern nominalists decline to speak for things; but in Bennett's ontological turn, the vital materialist "give[s] voice" to things and their thing-power:

> I will try, impossibly, to name the moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things, a moment that must be there. . . . I will shift from the language of epistemology to that of ontology from a focus on an elusive recalcitrance . . . to an active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness (vibrant matter). I will try to give voice to a vitality intrinsic to materiality, in the process absolving matter from its long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism.[387]

At once continuing to acknowledge epistemological limits ("I will try, impossibly, to name") and brushing the barrier aside, Bennett's turn to ontology dismisses things' relation to less vibrant forms that include transience, decay, and death. In doing so, Bennett's absolution of history, while most immediately referring to the history of dualist philosophy that subordinated matter to mind, may prematurely wave away history itself.

Put in slightly different terms, we can extend to new materialism one of Simpson's observations regarding postmodern theory. Simpson argued that "the rhetoric of localization that runs through so much of academic (and other) postmodernism often reflects a category confusion between ethics and epistemology, between questions about what we ought to do and questions about what we can know." That is, Simpson critiques a confusion between the descriptive claim that we cannot fully speak for others and the normative claim that we shouldn't speak for others (including non-human others) "who are supposed to speak for themselves." The latter ethical claim is in turn "troubled by its very comfortable location within an ideology of equal opportunity," in effect ignoring the actual inequality produced by histories of exclusion and oppression.[388] Setting the epistemological question aside, Bennett's readiness to voice vibrant matter retains some of the older entanglement with normative assumptions, albeit in a peculiarly inverted fashion. The vibrant materialist's readiness to voice things and their power is in part underpinned by her insistence on the ontological basis of the normative assumption that haunted postmodern particularity: Bennett discovers that things are already our equals. In other words, new materialisms may produce a related confusion with the ethical, where, for example, the ontological claim that the material world is "unsusceptible to human mastery," may reflect less an ontological certainty than a normative vision.

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[386] Cf. Adorno on the "[unconscious] nominalistic utopia" of montage: "The facts themselves are to be demonstrated in deictical fashion, as epistemology calls it. The artwork wants to make the facts eloquent by letting them speak for themselves." Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 155.
[387] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 3.
[388] Simpson, *The Academic Postmodern*, 131.

Simpson's point is closely related to Adorno's critique of nominalism as a veiled utopian vision that, because it has not yet been realized, obscures actually existing domination by universals. Likewise, identifying the afterlife of postmodern nominalism within new materialisms allows us to see the implications of Adorno's critique of nominalism for contemporary thought. Adorno warns of nominalism:

> A true preponderance of the particular would not be attainable except by changing the universal. Installing it as purely and simply extant is a complementary ideology. It hides how much of the particular has come to be a function of the universal--something which in its logical form it has always been. What nominalism clings to as its most assured possession is utopian.[389]

Nominalism's "preponderance of the particular" is for Adorno a normative vision that remains utopian, a future possibility contingent upon "changing the universal" insofar as particulars remain subordinated to universals in the present. What nominalism rejects as violent, universalizing philosophy, Adorno embraces as a more accurate account of historical domination. Realism gives an account of larger forces that act upon the particular, but it errs in essentializing or naturalizing the dominance of the universal; nominalism gives an account of the freedom of particulars and individuals, but its emancipatory force becomes a naïve utopianism. ("Dialectic is not a form of nominalism, but nor again is it a form of realism.")[390] Much as the concept of nature hides the effects of capitalism and industry, nominalism hides the effects of universals—of the extent to which the individual, the local, and the particular are shaped by larger abstract forces that are not immediately, empirically available.

The analogous leap made by the new materialists presents the preponderance of (non-human) materiality as "purely and simply extant" ontology and thus "hides how much" non-human materiality has historically become a function of the human. As in the case of nominalism's implicit utopia, where everything that exists is particular, new materialisms' exuberant accounts of the resilience of matter may be reassuringly consolatory in a historical moment characterized by the rapid destruction of human and non-human life forms alike. In sharp contrast, the end of nature, like the periodizing concept of the Anthropocene, suggests that history looks a great deal like human self-assertion and the manipulation of things; if our material world is vibrant, it is vibrant "with triumphant calamity."[391] That is, in a post-nature world characterized by the centrality of human agency, Bennett's reasonable insistence that "there is no necessity to describe . . . differences in a way that places humans at the ontological center or hierarchical apex" begins to look like a new obfuscation of history that may reproduce some of the problematic independence and wishful thinking of the old Nature.[392]

III. Transience and the decay of the "everlasting" in the *Elegiac Sonnets*

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[389] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 313.

[390] The passage, cited in my introduction to this project, continues: "For these twin theses of traditional philosophy – the notion that the concept enjoys substantial being in relation to individuals which it grasps and includes, and the alternative notion that the individual is substantially real while the concept is merely a *flatus vocis*, or simply 'empty sound and smoke' – these two conceptions must both be subjected to dialectical criticism." Adorno, *An Introduction to Dialectics*, 205.

[391] Compare: "Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity." Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1.

[392] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 11.

While Smith's poetry has been read according to the terms of postmodern particularity, a form of nominalism whose reassuring vision, I have suggested, anticipates the consolatory implications of some new materialisms, Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* critique consolation as a poetic and political strategy. Smith's sonnets oppose various forms of solace – generic, divine, natural, visionary, and material – and their alignment with the "everlasting," through countervailing forms of transience. Though aligned with particularity in its opposition to the "everlasting," the transience of the *Elegiac Sonnets* elaborates a dialectic that gets picked up by the later *Beachy Head* on a more expansive natural historical scale.

Smith's earliest critics frequently noted and reproached the *Elegiac Sonnets*' disconsolate mode. One contemporary reviewer asked if the poetess would ever vary her relentlessly melancholic tone: "Poor Charlotte! still weeping and wailing, and gnashing thy poetical teeth! Will thy most melancholy Muse never part with her sables? . . . Are there always to be clouds upon thy horizon? Not a beam of sunshine to break through the dismal gloom?"[393] Anna Seward similarly concluded that Smith's "muse is too constantly in the lamentable strain," her poems "everlasting lamentables."[394] Yet neither critic of the *Elegiac Sonnets'* invariability makes any mention of the sonnets' sustained interest in the *opposite* of the "everlasting"— transience and fleeting phenomena. There is, then, something ironically appropriate in the *Critical Review*'s use of transitory clouds and weather to figure Smith's intransigent melancholy. Though the review goes on to celebrate the perceived lightening in the tone of the then newly published second volume of Smith's sonnets, the tension between the oppressive persistence of gray skies and the changeable, fleeting phenomena of weather registers something of the *Elegiac Sonnets*' own persistent thematization of the relation between transience and the eternal.

The genre of elegy itself stages a conventional confrontation between transience and its transcendence or substitution. If the proper occasion and subject of elegy is mutability and loss, then elegy traditionally turns from the lamentation of loss to consolation; the completion of the process of mourning requires the replacement of the lost object with a compensation that traditionally stands outside the world of finite things. In Milton's "Lycidas" the process of mourning famously transforms the lost friend into an eternally present "Genius of the shore" ("Henceforth thou art the Genius of the shore, / In thy large recompense,") and in Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard" human sympathy transcends the grave. Of course, as Jahan Ramazani reminds us, in practice most elegiac poems are "torn between consolatory and anti-consolatory language," such that elegy contains a "perennial dialectic between 'successful' and melancholic mourning."[395]

Even acknowledging elegy's "perennial dialectic" of consolation and melancholy, Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* stand out for their repeated and insistent denial of consolation, whether in the form of a transfiguration of past suffering or in the form of the anticipation of future solace. The sonnets' melancholic refusal of consolation is especially vivid when read next to a poem Seward selected to illustrate what she deemed the failure of Smith's

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[393] *The Critical Review* (1797): 149.
[394] In addition to these comments, Seward deemed Smith's sonnets plagiarized. On the charge of plagiarism see Goodman, "Conjectures on Beachy Head." See also Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion*.
[395] Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 9.

sonnets. While Seward dismissed Smith's sonnets generally as "plagiarism, glaring and perpetual," she singled out the final line of Sonnet II "Written at the close of Spring" as an "injudicious imitation" of James Beattie's "The Hermit."[396] (Here, it would seem, Smith did not plagiarize *enough*.) Seward specifies that Smith's closing line "proves the mischiefs of injudicious imitation" by "asking the question of *happiness*" that "Beattie asks of *the spring*." The relevant stanza in Beattie's poem, part of the Hermit's song, reads:

> "Tis night, and the landscape is lovely no more;
> I mourn, but, ye woodlands, I mourn not for you;
> For morn is approaching, your charms to restore,
> Perfumed with fresh fragrance, with glittering dew,
> Nor yet for the ravage of winter I mourn;
> Kind Nature the embryo blossom will save.
> But when shall Spring visit the mouldering urn!
> O when shall it dawn on the night of the grave!" (24-31)

Beattie's punning of "mourn" with the coming light of the diurnal "morn" highlights mourning's incompatibility with cyclical nature. Indeed the transience of the delicate "embryo blossom" proves illusory, since Spring will renew and "save" its flowers after the "ravage of winter." In contrast with the regeneration of winter's natural decay by Spring's seasonal renewal, mortal humanity undergoes inevitable and irreversible decay ("the mouldering urn" and "the night of the grave"). From this initial contrast, the hermit's song stages a transition from human transience to a higher Christian framework in which eternal salvation admits of no decay. By transmuting the poem's natural coordinates into their Christian counterparts – the flowering of Spring becomes "Eden's first bloom!" – the last stanza at once transcends human existence and the cycles of worldly nature and confirms the compatibility of divine salvation with the earlier salvation of Spring. The poem and the hermit's song close with a resurrection of "Beauty Immortal."[397]

In contrast, Smith's Sonnet II "Written at the close of Spring" produces no consolation either from the cycles of natural seasons or from the divine counterpart of natural regeneration. The poem's opening lament mourns the end of Spring and the decay of flowers. Much like Beattie's hermit, the speaker goes on to remind herself that the cyclical nature of seasons ultimately subsumes the temporality of natural decay in the

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[396] *Letters of Anna Seward,* 2:224. Seward and Smith's modern editors seem to have missed Sonnet II's allusion to Thomas Gray's "Eton College Ode," which reads:

> My weary soul they seem to soothe,
> And redolent of joy and youth,
> To breathe a second spring. (18-20)

[397] The final stanza reads:

> And darkness and doubt are now flying away,
> No longer I roam in conjecture forlorn.
> So breaks on the traveller, faint, and astray,
> The bright and the balmy effulgence of morn.
> see Truth, Love, and Mercy, in triumph descending,
> And Nature all glowing in Eden's first bloom!
> On the cold cheek of Death smiles and roses are blending,
> And Beauty Immortal awakes from the tomb.

eternal return of Spring renewal. Concluding where Beattie begins, the sonnet ends with the opposition between seasonal renewal and moribund human happiness: "Another May new buds and flowers shall bring; / Ah! why has happiness—no second spring?"[398] The phrase "second spring" produces a mild shock; unlike nature, which goes through an infinite series of spring renewals, human life is singular and transient. Natural or cyclical loss is not really loss—it is not to be mourned. Without recourse to an eternal framework, and likewise declining to produce any consolation from nature's infinite rhythm of decay and regeneration, the cyclical nature in Smith's poem merely exacerbates the melancholy recognition of the speaker's transient happiness.

Whereas "Written at the close of Spring*"* sets up an opposition between the eternal return of natural seasons and the transience of human happiness, Sonnet XLII "Composed during a Walk on the Downs, Nov. 1787" self-consciously explores the inversion of human transience into a kind of eternal suffering. Sonnet XLII opens with natural decay similar to that of Sonnet II, this time with a more localized inscription of place and time. Set near the end of autumn and the closing of the calendar year, the sonnet introduces a dreary scene:

> The dark and pillowy cloud, the sallow trees,
> Seem o'er the ruins of the year to mourn;
> And, cold and hollow, the inconstant breeze
> Sobs through the fallen leaves and wither'd fern. (1-4)

Much as in Beatty's "The Hermit," the speaker soon corrects the scene's appearance of mourning by forecasting the coming spring: "Ah! yet a little—and propitious spring / Crown'd with fresh flowers shall wake the woodland strain" (9-10). And again, as in Sonnet II, the poem concludes by contrasting the anticipation of spring growth and cyclical renewal with the speaker's powerlessness to renew past happiness:

> But no gay change revolving seasons bring
> To call forth pleasure from the soul of pain;
> Bid Syren Hope resume her long-lost part,
> And chase the vulture Care—that feeds upon the heart. (11-14)

In one sense the "revolving seasons" present an unchanging cycle that revolves independently of the speaker, who feels none of its effects. Yet the final couplet also introduces the possibility of a mythic temporality in which eternity makes the revolving seasons look, by comparison, like genuine change. That is, the introduction of the mythic temporality of "vulture Care," with its hint of the endless repetition of Promethean suffering, effects a reversal in which the "gay change" of seasons once again takes on the quality of transience, and the transience of human happiness takes on the inevitable quality of fate in which human suffering and loss appears as natural, inevitable, or as unalterable as the decay of flowers.

The final couplet opens with an ambiguously addressed "Bid" for the return of hope and for the possibility of breaking the eternity of mythic suffering. Yet the bid's

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[398] Charlotte Smith, *Elegiac Sonnets*, lines 13-14, in Smith, *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*. All subsequent references to Smith's poetry refers to this volume unless otherwise noted and hereafter are cited in text by poem title and parenthetically by line number.

framing of hope is ambivalent: As "Syren Hope," does the sonnet dismiss hope from the outset as delusion and impossible desire? Or does "Syren Hope" really offer an escape from the mythic temporality of Care? If so, renewed hope – as the anticipation of future fulfillment – would nevertheless seem to fall short of a renewal of pleasure or happiness. The poem itself may instantiate some of the lyrical pleasure of the sirens' song, but the Homeric allusion to "Syren Hope" threatens to reinscribe the mythic temporality of human suffering—a reading that the resolute impersonality of the final lines would appear to reinforce. The subject of "the soul of pain" and "the heart" might be endlessly substituted, and while we might expect the possessive pronoun in both cases, the impersonal "soul of pain" stages a dispossessed subject—a soul now possessed by pain. The sonnet, then, moves from the appearance of transient nature, to the cyclical return and repetition of nature, to a final reversal in which nature again appears transient and human suffering threatens to mirror the mythic temporality of nature, this time defined by eternal despair rather than infinite renewal. While clearly skeptical of the possibilities of hope, the poem nevertheless offers hope as the only available resource that might break the eternal repetition of "Care." The poem's final line breaks the form of the sonnet with an extra metrical foot, at once suggesting the need to break free from mythic temporality and registering the artificiality and flimsiness of the couplet's bid for a renewal of hope.

In addition to her rejection of the generic consolations of elegy, Smith's sense of the cruel optimism of traditional representations of hope is also manifest in her recurring invocation of the first half of Proverb 13:12. Recited in a preface to the *Elegiac Sonnets*, in her novel *Desmond*, and in letters, Smith repeated, "hope delayed maketh the heart sick."[399] In the King James Bible, the proverb continues past Smith's dreary fragment, reading: "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when desire cometh, it is a tree of life." Proffering a heavenly reward that stands outside of time, the second half of the original proverb reinstates and redeems hope in the form of the promise of the eternal tree of life. By merely drawing out hope's temporality of expectation, however, Smith's partial proverb undoes hope from within. Extended long enough, the pleasurable expectation of future fulfillment reverses into a sickness that decays not just the feeling of pleasure but also the very capacity for feeling: it "maketh the heart sick." If hope anticipates fulfillment, Smith's half-erased proverb witnesses the inversion of anticipation into the temporality of deterioration, eschewing consolation and limiting the reader to a frame of finitude and decay.

Whether in its figurative form as immortal spirit or in its literal form as natural regeneration, the complete utopian fulfillment of a "tree of life" is unavailable to the speakers of Smith's sonnets. In their apparent disavowal of such fulfillment, the *Elegiac Sonnets* resemble Anahid Nersessian's recent work on Romantic limitation, where Nersessian "attends to the representation of things lost or, more often, in the process of disappearing" as a mode that "requires a move away from the conceptual regime of the

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[399] See, for instance, the Preface to the 6th edition of Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* (1792) and the Preface to *Desmond* (1792): "[I] feel every year more acutely, '*that hope delayed maketh the heart sick'*." Smith, Todd, and Blank, *Desmond*, 46. See also Smith's *Letters*: "[W]hen above seven years have pass'd in such circumstances, that sickness of the Soul which arises from Hope long delay'd will inevitably be felt. The worn out pen falls from the tired hand, and the real calamities of life press too heavily to allow of the power of evading them by fictitious detail." And later, again, "It is impossible I well know to communicate to another any notion of the suffering I have gone through on this subject nor that sickness of the soul which arises from hope long delay'd." Smith and Stanton, *The Collected Letters of Charlotte Smith*, 35.

all-or-nothing, the wholly privileged impossible or the wholly degraded possible."[400] Smith's poems frequently stage blunt contrasts between a speaker's bereft state and a poetic counterpoint, but rather than juxtaposing loss with visions of perfect fulfillment, the sonnets' antithetical terms tend to pose alternatives between degrees of loss: in addition to decaying plants, the speakers' melancholy foils include a shipwrecked mariner (Sonnet XII: "Written on the Sea Shore, Oct. 1784") and, most memorably, human bones rolled round in the ocean tide (Sonnet XLIV: "Written in the church-yard at Middleton in Sussex") and a "Lunatic" that frequents the speaker's preferred walking route (Sonnet LXX: "On being cautioned against walking over a headland overlooking the sea, because it was frequented by a Lunatic").

For Nersessian, the Romantic renunciation of an unqualified, perfect utopia – a "limited" utopian "doing-with-less" – models an ecological and anti-capitalist logic that repudiates capitalist visions of limitless production and consumption as well as the liberal aspiration for the uninhibited freedom of the individual.[401] Nersessian wrests an alternative minimalist mode of "self-abnegation" from its conflation with a neoliberal ideology of austerity. But while Smith's sonnets, like Nersessian's strain of pared down "Rcsm," do not offer a binary opposition between loss and total fulfillment, neither do they affirm loss in the way that Nersessian takes to be characteristic of Rcsm, with its "ability to reconceive loss as an ontologically positive entity integral to the material makeup of the world—to any world, including the better world called utopia."[402] Neither Nersessian nor Smith imagines a world without loss, but for Smith, loss does not become positive, and promises of future fulfillment ultimately deceive, chafe at, and intensify the apprehension of loss. In Smith's poetry, the minimal aesthetic pleasure to be had from the formalization of melancholy sentiment neither vindicates loss nor manifests an alternative utopia, limited or otherwise.

Of course, the sonnets repeatedly raise slender possibilities for reprieve from loss, and among those possibilities is that of an absorption in the devices of elegy. Though full elegy is unavailable to the sonnets, they nevertheless have recourse to its conventions. Sonnet LXXIX "To the goddess of botany" articulates the speaker's desire for a retreat from alienating society to the world of the "sweet Nymph" to which the poem is addressed. Offering an eternal rest away from the speaker's exposure to the abstract "Violence and Fraud" of human society, the modest pleasures of the mythic Nymph's "for ever" appear first in the form of a slightly revised citation of Milton's *Lycidas*.[403]

> Of folly weary, shrinking from the view
> Of Violence and Fraud, allow'd to take
> All peace from humble life; I would forsake
> *Their* haunts for ever, and, sweet Nymph! With you
> Find shelter; where my tired, and tear-swollen eyes
> Among your silent shades of soothing hue,
> Your "bells and florrets of unnumber'd dyes"

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[400] Nersessian, *Utopia, Limited*, 5.
[401] *Utopia, Limited* "abandons the imperative of . . . complete fulfillment, where fulfillment is catastrophically aligned with the unlimited use, deployment, and consumption of 'resources,' whatever their provenance." Nersessian, 19.
[402] Nersessian, 5.
[403] See Curran's note: *Lycidas* reads "bells and flowerets of a thousand hues." Smith, *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, 69.

Might rest—And learn the bright varieties (1-8)

The goddess of botany's "bells and florrets of unnumber'd dyes," first seen through "tear-swollen eyes," are not empirical particulars but elegiac flowers strewn as part of the conventional process of mourning in Milton's pastoral elegy, and the remainder of the poem presents the "bright varieties" whose study would occupy the speaker's new haunts:

> —And learn the bright varieties
> That from your lovely hands are fed with dew;
> And every veined leaf, that trembling sighs
> In mead or woodland; or in wilds remote,
> Or lurk with mosses in the humid caves,
> Mantle the cliffs, on dimpling rivers float,
> Or stream from coral rocks beneath the ocean's waves. (8-14)

It would seem that the eye, in its absorbing study of the botanical "varieties," rehearses the completion of the process of mourning by successfully trading its tears for the streaming of the ocean seaweed at the close of the sonnet.

Something peculiar happens at the end of the poem, however, where, following a semicolon, the phrase "or in wilds remote" dislodges the already jumbled syntax so that the twelfth line of the sonnet seems to pick up as a continuation of the speaker's proposed acts. Further enabled by the alliteration of "learn" and "lurk" ("my tired, and tear-swollen eyes . . . Might rest—And learn . . . Or lurk . . . Or stream") this (mis)reading allows the eye to read past the penultimate line to the final line, so that the speaker learns, lurks, and then appears to end up underwater, "stream[ing] from coral rocks beneath the ocean's waves." The suggestion is just strong enough to hint that the real substitution of the poem is not elegy's substitution of loss but the substitution of the speaker for Lycidas in his famously watery grave. That is, the once-streaming eye takes the place of the flowing underwater seaweed not as reprieve, but as watery death—or rather, of "rest" only in death that provides no satisfactory reprieve from loss. The excessiveness of such a reading is matched by the final line's extra metrical foot, which breaks both the sonnet form and the semblance of eternal "shelter." Despite the promise of refuge from society's "Violence and Fraud" offered by a retreat to the minimal pleasures of Botany, here made inseparable from elegy, the "unnumber'd dyes" of the elegiac flowers are revealed as painted artifice, and the sonnet's "for ever" is likewise subject to death and transience.

While the earlier sonnets counter consolatory visions of cyclical nature with a melancholy transience that breaks the assurance of mythic regeneration, a number of the later sonnets take up forms of natural decay that from the start offer no signs of renewal: a crumbling churchyard sea cliff, shells and human bones that slowly erode one another in ocean waves, and "evanescent" gossamer spider webs. Here transience defines both the natural and the human. Of course, as Sonnet XLII's "vulture Care" dramatizes, total transience threatens to flip over into a despair that mimics the mythic temporality of eternal nature and fulfills Anna Seward's characterization of the sonnets as "everlasting lamentables." Put in slightly different terms, "vulture Care" threatens to naturalize society's "Violence and Fraud" and, as a result, to erase any sense of human agency. For a poet so closely associated with Britain's radical circles, the poem's suggestion of resignation to fate is especially problematic.

One of the poems that suggests a response to that problem is Smith's sonnet "To the insect of the gossamer," which appeared in both the second volume of her *Elegiac Sonnets* (1800) and her *Conversations Introducing Poetry: Chiefly on Subjects of Natural History* (1804). The most immediately striking aspect of the poem on the tiny spider is the marked ephemerality of its subject matter. If Rei Terada has called the flickering film on the dying embers in Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" "one of the most indefinite and transient objects ever to be the focus of a poem," then the speck of an addressee in Smith's poem – the "Living Atom" with its almost ghostly threads – surely ranks close to it.[404] In its publication straddling the literary sonnets and the natural history poems for children, the sonnet likewise stands as a kind of hinge: between the relentless melancholy of the early *Elegiac Sonnets,* first published in 1784, and the later turn to a wide-reaching treatment of natural history with the posthumous *Beachy Head and other poems* (1807). The gossamer poem not only elucidates the relation between the early and late poetry but also usefully raises issues that intersect with the concerns of both postmodern nominalism and new materialisms.

The sonnet on the gossamer opens with the epistemological provocation posed by the inauspiciously "Small, viewless *Æ*ronaut."[405] Similarly, some lines later we hear of how the "form minute" of the spider "[Mocks] the eye," prompting questions rather than answers:

> Small, viewless *Æ*ronaut, that by the line
> Of Gossamer suspended, in mid air
> Float'st on a sun beam—Living Atom, where
> Ends thy breeze-guided voyage;—with what design
> In *Æ*ther dost thou launch thy form minute,
> Mocking the eye?—Alas! before the veil
> Of denser clouds shall hide thee, the pursuit
> Of the keen Swift may end thy fairy sail!— (1-8)

The tiny spider and its wondrous, inexplicable flight notably resist the speaker's attempts at apprehension; the looming clouds, presaging even less visual and conceptual access for the observer, bolster the sense that this minute particular evades human attempts to impose a purpose or understanding. While the imminent threat of the Swift raises the possibility of a definitive end for the "viewless *Æ*ronaut," intimations of its impending demise likewise heighten the sense that its fleeting "form minute" cannot be grasped by an observer. At the same time, in presenting the "denser cloud" as refuge from both the eye and the Swift, the poem hints that the pursuit of the eye may be(come) like the "pursuit / Of the keen Swift": both may threaten to terminate the delicate "fairy sail." And with the Swift's sharp beak recalling "keen" eyesight, the sonnet intimates the eye's potential to "murder to dissect." The poem thus suggests that this natural particular, with its lengthy footnote that rivals those of *Beachy Head*'s famous botanical notes, resists the imposition of design by the eye and the implied "I," whether in the form of enlightenment concepts or Romantic poetry.

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[404] Smith, *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, 66.

[405] "[V]iewless" here in the sense of "[t]hat cannot be perceived by the eye; invisible." *OED*, s.v. "viewless, adj."

Indeed, the poem goes on explicitly to critique self-assertion and distortions of reality with an abrupt volta that reveals the octet to be the vehicle of an epic simile. The shift is all the more surprising because the sonnet is titled after the gossamer rather than the poet, the vehicle rather than the tenor. Even as the sestet introduces the figure of the young poet as the epic simile's tenor, the poet in many ways appears to represent the gossamer's opposite. Fleeing rather than inviting (if also thwarting) empirical observation, the poet spins beautiful but hollow dreams:

> Thus on the golden thread that Fancy weaves
> Buoyant, as Hope's illusive flattery breathes,
> The young and visionary Poet leaves
> Life's dull realities, while sevenfold wreaths
> Of rainbow-light around his head revolve.
> Ah! soon at Sorrow's touch the radiant dreams dissolve! (9-14)

While the gossamer is an ephemeral reality and anything but "dull," the poet dreams up a new reality. Indulging in escapism and insulating himself from "dull realities" inside the self-enclosed circumference of his delusional visions, the young Poet appears to seek transcendent perfection (these are "*sevenfold*" rings that encircle his head). And with the "visionary Poet" explicitly gendered male, the sonnet seems to set its titular transient particular against the commonplace poet of high Romanticism, the male Romantic poet who seeks to transcend everyday particulars and the loss that attends them. In doing so, the sonnet invites the kind of celebration of Romantic particularism that canonized Smith in the context of a broader theoretical trend of postmodern nominalism.

At the same time, the poem's allusions to Lucretian materialism point to the possibility of a very different reading of the poem. Smith's "viewless Aeronaut," born aloft but buffeted by and subject to the whims of the wind, alludes to Claudius's speech imagining the horrors of death in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*: "To be imprison'd in the viewlesse windes / And blowne with restlesse violence round about / The pendant world."[406] As one early critic noted, Claudius's speech voices "the mental state of the man who, according to Lucretius, has failed to banish care because he cannot" bear the "thought of complete extinction" in a purely material universe devoid of the consolations of an eternal afterlife.[407] The allusion to Claudius conjures up a world that is as transient as the gossamer and foreshadows its possible death.

The poem also contains more direct allusions to Lucretius in the accounts of the gossamer thread and the atom suspended in the "sun beam." In Book IV of *De Rerum*

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[406] Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, III.i.124-126. Notably, Smith alludes to Shakespeare more than to any other poet.

[407] Martin, "Shakespeare, Lucretius, and the Commonplaces," 180. Martin glosses Lucretius' position as follows: "death should have no terrors for us because there is no existence beyond the grave." Claudius' despair at the implications of Lucretian materialism can be distinguished from the more recent strain of "*affirmative* materialism" Steven Goldmith has identified especially in "the Lucretian revival as popularized by Stephen Greenblatt." In Greenblatt's Lucretianism and other forms of vitalist new materialisms, Goldsmith writes, "material life persists, swerves, [and] becomes afterlife." Goldsmith notes that, while "not every reader of Lucretius would accept the conflation of atomism and vitalism that [Greenblatt's] book tends to promote," for Greenblatt "[r]econstituted, material life persists, swerves, [and] becomes afterlife," such that "[a]tomism keeps an afterlife alive even for atheists." Steven Goldsmith, "Almost Gone: Rembrandt and the Ends of Materialism," *New Literary History* 45, no. 3 (2014): 416–417.

Natura, "images of things" are said to "easily / Unite when they meet in the air, like spiders' webs."[408] Earlier, in Book III, Lucretius writes of the "[spiders] web's fine threads" that we "[s]ometimes . . . do not feel . . . when we move into them."[409] The latter passage on the almost imperceptible touch of the spider's web works to refute dualism by illustrating the intricate imbrications of "primal atoms of body and mind."[410] In the context of Amanda Goldstein's recent work on a neglected tradition of Romantic Lucretianism that refuses the distinction between empirical sciences and poetic figuration, it is telling that in Smith's poem the line of gossamer web is transformed into the poetic "line" of the sonnet.[411] The insect is suspended on the gossamer thread mid-air—and mid-line with repeated caesuras. Similarly, the connection between the web and the poetic line is reinforced by the sonnet's most prominent formal feature: the simile linking the gossamer thread with the "Fancy" of the "young and visionary Poet." Read with an eye for the poem's Lucretian allusions, then, perhaps the sonnet's interest is not in a tension between empirical particulars and the visionary transcendence of them, but rather in knitting together the material figuration of the gossamer's "fairy sail" and the similarly material figuration of the poet's "Fancy." Both, it would seem, weave with "golden thread," binding nature and human, science and poetry, just as the sonnet's footnote weaves together both empirical and poetic references to the insect.

But while the sonnet's simile asserts the likeness of the insect's flight and the poet's dreams, so that ideas and imagination are shown to be as transient as the insect, the poem is in many ways defined by the tension between its two unequal halves.[412] Enacting the poet's disappointment in the formal unfolding of the sonnet, the initial portrait of the gossamer's marvelous flight is rudely disrupted when it is yoked to the youthful poet's punctured dreams. While the poet's dreams seem sure to "dissolve," the insect's fate is more open. The epic simile, in other words, retroactively predicates the likeness of the gossamer's flight about the poet's dreams so that the gossamer becomes a deluded Icarus, the apparent excesses of its fairy flight something to be reined in or demystified rather than marveled at.

In both form and content, however, the poem ultimately counteracts the uniting force of the simile. Not only does the portrait of the gossamer resist the imposition of the simile (how can the spider be said to indulge in delusional escapism when, as the surprisingly lengthy footnote on the species suggests, it is the spider's distinctive nature to fly upon its webs) but also the sonnet's title ("To the insect of the gossamer") suggest

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[408] Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of the Universe*, IV.726-727.

[409] See Lucretius Carus, III.381-385. In an image repeated in the sonnet's footnote, the lines read:

> Sometimes we do not feel a speck of dust
> Clinging to the body, or chalk-powder whitening
> Our limbs, nor mist at night; nor spider's webs
> When we move into them, or the web's fine threads
> Falling upon our heads . . .

See also:

> You will see a multitude of tiny bodies
> All mingling in a multitude of ways
> Inside the sunbeam, moving in the void. (II.116-118)

[410] Lucretius Carus, III.372.

[411] Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life*, 2017.

[412] Compare Helen Vendler on the "double-exposure" of some of Shakespeare's sonnets, including the role that epic simile plays in Sonnets 33 and 143. Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 53–56, 602.

that the insect is the true subject of the sonnet after all. (The paratext assembles references to the insect that range from descriptions of human encounters with the ghostly materiality of the spider's gossamer threads to accounts of the insect's contingent aerial locomotion.) That is, even as the sonnet positions the minute spider in relation to the young poet, the form of the poem, with its outsize footnote on the spider, far in excess of the sonnet proper, indicates that the spider cannot be reduced to a monitory comparison with the young poet's imaginary escapism. More than just resisting human understanding, the insect contradicts and exceeds the other term equated to it by the simile. The difference between the two halves outweigh the simile's claim to unite them, and the simile appears forced in a way that reasserts the disunity of the two halves.

Finally, however, the two figures raise a number of historical resonances. Coming from the pen of a writer associated with Britain's radical circles, the final line on the young poet would have evoked the revolutionary disappointment of the age. The "visionary Poet" engages in escapism from what Smith referred to as the "melancholy truth" of the age. In the Preface to the Second Volume of *Elegiac Sonnets*, dated May 15th, 1797, Smith wrote:

> It is, indeed a melancholy truth, that at this time there is so much tragedy in real life, that those who have escaped private calamity, can withdraw their minds a moment from that which is general, very naturally prefer to melancholy books, or tragic representations, those lighter and gayer amusements, which exhilarate the senses, and throw a transient veil over the extensive and still threatening desolation, that overspreads this country, and in some degree, every quarter of the world.[413]

Smith's preface, like the sonnet's portrait of the dreamy young poet, suggests the commonplace of the Romantic turn inward, away from the "desolation" and disappointment of history and those texts that represent them. The destruction of the poet's dream likewise reveals that his poetic illusions are a mere "transient veil," and the larger forces in the vehicle of the epic simile—the wind and the looming predatory bird—suggest the poet is likewise subject to larger forces.

The figure of the gossamer contains its own historical reference, however. The opening line of the sonnet invokes Edmund Burke's use the figure of the aeronaut to describe the French Revolutionaries in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Alluding to the first flight of a hot air balloon in 1783 in France, Burke warned mockingly: "Standing on the firm ground of the British constitution, let us be satisfied to admire, rather than attempt to follow in their desperate flights the aëronauts of France."[414] Burke's rhetoric contrasts the self-evident and naturalized "firm ground" of the British constitution with the unnatural and groundless overreaching of the French revolutionaries and their British sympathizers. As he notes earlier in the same paragraph, Burke instead "recommends . . . the example of the British constitution" and God's lesson of "reward[ing] [men] for having in their conduct attended to their nature."[415]

Burke may feign gracious admiration of the aeronauts, but earlier in his *Reflections* he sees the artificial formation of government in much darker terms: "The very idea of the fabrication of a new government is enough to fill us with disgust and

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[413] Smith, *The Works of Charlotte Smith*, 14:68.
[414] Burke, *Reflections On The Revolution in France*, 210.
[415] Burke, 209.

horror," he writes. The British government, he argues, is passed down as a natural inheritance and is to be guarded from man-made "alien" interventions: "We wished at the period of the Revolution [of 1688], and do now wish, to derive all we possess as *an inheritance from our forefathers*. Upon that body and stock of inheritance we have taken care not to inoculate any scion alien to the nature of the original plant."[416] Much as Coleridge's insistence, almost three decades later, that states "*grow*, and are not to be *made*," Burke suggests that the inherited British constitution is a noble tree in relation to which historically new, man-made "fabrications" are necessarily unnatural and foreign grafts.[417]

Burke's account of the British constitution also bears striking resemblance to Hegel's own "flash of insight," written just a few years after Coleridge's 1817 letter to Liverpool.[418] Hegel writes that "it is at any rate utterly essential that the constitution should *not be regarded as something made,* even if it does have an origin in time. On the contrary, it is quite simply that which has being in and for itself, and should therefore be regarded as divine and enduring, and as exalted above the sphere of all manufactured things."[419] As Adorno describes the insight in the context of his idea of natural history (to which I return below), "Hegel presents as *physei* [existing in nature] something that is *thesei* [has been posited]." For Hegel, as for Burke and Coleridge, "State constitutions should not arise from the conscious acts of individuals."[420]

Kevis Goodman has already shown how Smith's "conjectural poetics" in *Beachy Head* responds to Dugald Stewart's similar presentation of history as nature in his theory of conjectural history. As Goodman writes, "Stewart's 'nature' . . . performs something of a sleight of hand, amalgamating empirical particulars into an assumption about the governing principles of human nature." In contrast, *Beachy Head* presents a conjecture as "'vain'—an adjective [Smith] repeats twice . . . and intends in both its sense (futile and arrogant)—when it presents a human construction as a natural phenomenon without marking or acknowledging its constructedness."[421] By explicitly marking a seemingly natural phenomenon as, in Burke's words, "fabricated," Smith inverts Stewart's own rhetorical transformation of history into nature.

What, then, are the implications of the sonnet's allusion to Burke? On first glance, the Burkean allusion would seem to suggest a denunciation of gossamer and poet as misguided figures with delusional senses of agency. And yet, Smith takes Burke's figure for unnatural action and transforms the aeronaut into a transient thing of nature—a creature that, strange as it might be, follows its own nature, so that the flight of the gossamer aeronaut does not finally resemble the flight of a dangerously "desperate" revolutionary. Burke's historical aberration, a violation of nature, becomes, in Smith's sonnet, nature. The sonnet's allusion to Burke's aeronaut thus would seem to invert *Beachy Head*'s conjectural poetics, presenting the aeronaut as nature, but as a remarkably ephemeral nature rather than as unchanging nature. If Burke presents history as a naturalized firm ground, then Smith presents it as transient nature in contingent,

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[416] Burke, 27.
[417] Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1959, 4:762.
[418] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 119. See previous chapter for discussion of the letter to Liverpool.
[419] Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 312.
[420] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 119.
[421] Goodman, "Conjectures on Beachy Head," 996.

precarious flight. But the poem also turns the allusion in a second direction. In addition to naturalizing the flight of Burke's revolutionary aeronaut, the sonnet emphasizes, throughout, the poetic constructedness of the insect. As we have seen, the gossamer is intimately linked with poetry, and in addition to the footnote's *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry on the species of spider, the footnote goes on to cite references from Erasmus Darwin and Shakespeare.[422]

The sonnet's footnote also comments on the implications for human agency of the allusion to Burke's aeronaut and the questions it raises about history and nature. Like Icarus, the allusion to the French *Æ*ronauts suggests a delusional sense of agency, where each figure remains powerless in the face of much larger natural forces: the sun, the wind, a swift. The footnote addresses the gossamer's agency in what is perhaps the most memorable image of the poem:

> The almost imperceptible threads floating in the air, towards the end of Summer or Autumn, in a still evening, sometimes are so numerous as to be felt on the face and hands. It is on these that a minute species of spider convey themselves from place to place; sometimes rising with the wind to a great height in the air. Dr. Lister, among other naturalists, remarked these insects. "To fly they cannot strictly be said, they being carried into the air by external force; but they can, in case the wind suffer them, steer their course, perhaps mount and descend at pleasure: and to the purpose of rowing themselves along in the air, it is observable that they ever take their flight backwards, that is, their head looking a contrary way like a sculler upon the Thames…" From the Encyclop. Brit.[423]

Much like the active and passive dialectical movement of Coleridge's skating "water-insect," but with head turned backwards like Benjamin's angel of history, the gossamer is at once "carried" by the wind and navigates upon it. Confronted on the one hand with the poet's vision of a comforting but delusional transformation of the world, and, on the other, with Burke's vision situating human agency as a dangerous and ineffectual historical meddling with the natural order of things, the "insect of the gossamer" charts a third path. In a dialectical negotiation that anticipates Smith's final poem *Beachy Head,* the insect is at once subject to the force of the wind and free to move upon its thermals.

IV. Melancholy transience and "the idea of natural history"

The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel*, is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay.
—Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*

As Smith and Adorno's overlapping concern with history, nature, and agency suggest, the critical theorist is a twentieth-century inheritor of closely related questions. From his early lecture "The Idea of Natural-History," to *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory,* Adorno revisited and reworked a constellation of issues that were

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[422] Compare a related passage, where Adorno writes: "Besides, it is not by chance that the sphere of *art* should be the sphere in which something that is most perfectly *thesei*, that is to say, something that has become or has been made, presents itself as *physei*, i.e., as natural." Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 137.

[423] Smith, *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, 66.

influenced especially by Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.[424] Like the theory of the constellation discussed in my chapter on Locke, transience and natural history were intimately linked to Adorno's treatment of particulars, universals, and his characterization of the *Trauerspiel* book as "a metaphysical rescue of nominalism."[425] Adorno found in Benjamin's work a materialist theory of allegorical history that at least partially achieved the prioritization of particularity and human freedom that Adorno himself was seeking. Implied by the ruin, which manifests a historical process of degradation in its material form, allegory interprets a static particular object in terms of its particular history; it understands the static object as caught up in a process of loss and destruction, viewing it in the critical context of "what the world has done to it."[426] Whereas Benjamin identified allegorical signification in the genre of the baroque mourning play, Adorno's favorite example came from Hölderlin's romantic poetry.[427]

For Benjamin, the role of allegory is most clear when it is distinguished from the historically privileged symbol. In a well-known passage, Benjamin writes: "Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape."[428] While the symbol takes its material and "idealize[s]" it, purifying it and raising it to the level of an idea or ideal, allegory preserves and yokes together two seemingly contradictory characteristics: allegory contains both history, which requires temporal alteration, and a frozen, static, "petrified" aspect. In contrast, the temporality of the symbol is doubly *a*temporal in both the "fleeting" instant and the eternity of the idea. The facial expression of the allegorical *facies hippocratica* is at once part of an archaic system of medical convention and a physical expression of death.[429] Whereas in allegory the facial expression is both independent of its meaning and in material relation to it, the symbol enacts the literal sense of "redemption" as substitution or payment, where the disposable vehicle is exchanged for the symbolized ideal. If the symbol "redeems" particularity by transmuting it into the eternity of a general idea, then allegory holds together a particular image and a particular history without generalizing or substituting—the two terms remain non-identical.[430] As Adorno suggests elsewhere, the goal is to invert the subordination of particular to general, to undo "the symbolic function, in which for a long time, at least in

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[424] Here I refer mostly to the *History and Freedom* lectures (lectures on material that was later published as *Negative Dialectics*), but see also Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 61–78; Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 354–65.

[425] Adorno, *Notes to literature. Vol. 2*, 222.

[426] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 134.

[427] Adorno, 135. In addition to the examples taken straight from Benjamin, Adorno repeatedly cited Hölderlin's "The Shelter at Hardt" as a paradigmatic instance of natural historical allegory. Elaborating on the Romantic context of the Hölderlin poem, Adorno argued further that the "interaction" of "natural and historical elements . . . in a musical and kaleidoscopically changing fashion" could be seen as "the locus of one dimension of romantic experience that has outlasted romantic philosophy and its mentality." See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 71.

[428] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 2009, 166.

[429] "For allegory is both: convention *and* expression." Benjamin, 175.

[430] Elsewhere Adorno writes that "the relationship of allegory to its meaning is not accidental signification, but the playing out of a particularity," such that "[w]hat is expressed in the allegorical sphere is nothing but a historical relationship." Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 262–63.

idealism, the particular appeared to represent the general."[431] Benjamin also opposed two modes of representing the loss and destruction of history. In the symbol, much as in the genre of elegy, "destruction is idealized" and transmuted into an eternal form; allegory instead leaves us facing loss and passing in a frozen image.

Benjamin's theory of allegory articulates a relation of nature and history in which nature and history are both indivisible and distinct. The natural – or "original," standing behind or before history, and thus without history – appears as a static, fossilized form or natural "landscape" that allegorically "signifies" its transient history, even as the image and its historical signification retain their non-identity. For Adorno, the aesthetic mode of allegorical natural-history pointed to a "program" of natural historical interpretation that perceived static objects with a "melancholic gaze"—a gaze under which things appear not as eternally present nature but as transient, passing things whose process of decay is registered as a particular history: "Nature, I say, reveals itself beneath [the profound gaze of allegory] as history, just as in all allegory the death's head owes its central importance to the fact that as a natural object its own expression reveals its historical nature."[432] The "death's head" is, in one sense, the hard materiality of the human skull, and thus an object that belongs to the natural world of pebbles and clay, but the skull's open sockets also hauntingly call forth the history of the individual and her death. Taken straight from the pages of the *Trauerspiel* book, Adorno's death's head implies an interpretive practice that sees nature as history.

Like Smith before him, however, Adorno also recognized that history and transience can themselves take on natural or mythically "permanent" forms, as when some new materialisms level all nature and history into a monist, material flux. Natural historical interpretation accordingly involved a dialectical inversion: "Conversely," Adorno continues, "beneath this gaze history stands revealed as nature in so far as it turns out to be *permanent* transience."[433] According to Adorno, for instance, when Heidegger turns history into "the basic ontological structure of things in being," history becomes mythic, "mutation as immutability, copied from the religion of inescapable nature."[434] Adorno's program thus involves a two-fold process of interpretation, articulated in compressed, aphoristic form as the attempt "to comprehend historical being in its most extreme historical determinacy, where it is most historical, as natural being" and "to comprehend nature as a historical being where it seems to rest most deeply in itself as nature."[435] The difficult and elliptical formulation is best understood in terms of a constellation of texts – including, in addition to Benjamin's theory of allegory, Marx, Hegel (on *physei* and *thesei*, quoted above), and Georg Lukács' concept of "second nature" from *The Theory of the Novel*. In Lukács, history becomes "second nature" through a process of reification. If reification occurs when, "[t]hrough a sleight of hand,

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[431] Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy," Spring 1977, 120.
[432] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 134.
[433] Adorno, 134. Emphasis added.
[434] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 358.
[435] While Robert Hullot-Kentor has suggested that Adorno never published his early lecture "The Idea of Natural-History" because he was dissatisfied with his early attempt, Adorno nevertheless approved of his early work enough to quote his early formulation directly in *Negative Dialectics* (quoted here). Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 260. Cf. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 359. See Hullot-Kentor's essay "Introduction to Adorno's 'The Idea of Natural-History'." Hullot-Kentor, *Things beyond Resemblance*, 234–51.

whatever is *thesei* is converted by history, which gave it birth, into *physis*, into nature, and in fact into second nature," then Adorno presents the idea of natural history as a program for representing and critiquing reification.[436]

As I have suggested, however, the critique of reification accounts for only one aspect of the 'idea of natural history', and, moreover, the critical program becomes even more complex when we realize that both nature and history can take on either mythic or transient forms. Both concepts have dual aspects: nature, in its mythic aspect, "referred to the world not yet incorporated into history, not yet penetrated by reason, hence outside of human control. In this sense, nature was 'the mythical . . . that which is eternally there . . . nature's static side, perpetuated by the unchanging rituals of the people who submitted to its domination."[437] Put in slightly different terms that Adorno took from Marx, (second) nature is the law-like form that real abstraction takes. The insight explains Marx's "standpoint" in *Capital* vol. 1, "from which the development of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history" – that is, history as nature – and that "can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, socially speaking."[438] If seeing history as nature can entail seeing history as second nature, it can also involve seeing (mythic) history as (transient) nature. As Buck-Morss sees it, in its "materialist pole," nature "referred to concrete, individual, existing being which was mortal and transitory."[439] Put in slight different terms, seeing (mythic) history as (transient) nature can involve seeing history as something mutable and open to change, as when Marx writes that: "the present society is no solid crystal, but an organism capable of change, and constantly engaged in a process of change."[440]

The same dialectical poles apply to Adorno's account of history. As Susan Buck-Morss usefully puts it, "Adorno *had* no concept of history in the sense of an ontological, positive definition of history's philosophical meaning."[441] It is in terms of change, however, that Adorno defines history in his original lecture on "The Idea of Natural History," history as "that mode of conduct established by tradition that is characterized primarily by the occurrence of the qualitatively new." In this sense history "is a movement that does not play itself out in mere identity, mere reproduction of what has always been, but rather one in which the new occurs, it is a movement that gains its true character through what appears in it as new."[442] Transient history can entail the refusal to accept human suffering as natural or inevitable, and it can, at the same time, point to the possibility of a radical break from suffering. In its mythic aspect, when taken to move according to laws, ontologized as a state of flux, or justified as progress, history takes on the character of fate operating on individuals.

As we already saw in Coleridge's account of history as a forest swept by a storm, tossing individuals like fragile "sprigs and boughs," or in Blake's account of the web of

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[436] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 124.
[437] Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 54.
[438] Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, 92. See also: "Intrinsically, it is not a question of the higher or lower degree of development of the social antagonisms that spring from the natural laws of capitalist production. It is a question of these laws themselves, of these tendencies winning their way through and working themselves out with iron necessity" (90-91).
[439] Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 54.
[440] Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, 93.
[441] Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 49.
[442] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 253.

laws that grows streakily across the heavens, at stake in the question of natural history is the freedom of the individual: "The idea of natural laws governing history, the idea that social entanglements are the natural outgrowth of history, goes together with the unfreedom of the individual."[443] The passage Wahrman and Sheehan cite from the *Grundrisse* as a case of Marx's reliance on the language of self-organization, for Adorno articulates the link between the dialectic of nominalism and realism and dialectical natural history.[444] As Adorno writes of the passage in *Negative Dialectics*: "the universal that is realized over the subject's head" appears as "natural history."[445] As Adorno puts it elsewhere, "something like a 'concept' is implicit in society in its objective form."[446]

My reading thus inverts Theresa Kelley's analysis of Adorno's idea of natural history in "Romantic Nature Bites Back: Adorno and Romantic Natural History." Reading Adorno in light of a justified mistrust of nature, Kelley argues that with his "suspicion of claims derived from figures of natural or organic life, Adorno warns against seeing all history as nature; all nature as history."[447] For Kelley, "echoing Walter Benjamin's view of history and nature . . . Adorno observes that when nature is said to be history, the outcome is decay, ruin, passing, or already dead."[448] Of course, Adorno recognized the possibilities for mistaking his use of the term *nature*: "Certainly," he wrote, in "The Idea of Natural History," "the starting point of the problem's formulation, the natural character of history is disconcerting."[449] As Susan Buck-Morss reminds us in a slightly different context, however, "Adorno used terms of natural decay in his speech to describe idealist concepts and tenets of philosophy, treating them like material objects with a life and a death of their own, and thereby conveying their historical character, that is, their transitoriness."[450] In contrast with Kelley's account, here I argue that "seeing all history as nature" and "all nature as history" is precisely what Adorno outlines as the "program" of the idea of natural history. The melancholy gaze of natural historical

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[443] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 117.
[444] Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 355.
[445] Adorno, 355. See Marx, *Grundrisse*, 196-197.
[446] See Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, 31–32.
[447] Kelley, "Romantic Nature Bites Back," 194. Kelley immediately qualifies her claim by saying, "And yet, perhaps not." However, she qualifies her argument in relation to different aspects of Adorno's negative dialects, claiming that "what Adorno has to say about saving particulars from the maw of the universalizing world spirit touches repeatedly on key and irresolvable problems in Romantic natural history," that just as for Adorno "the concepts of the individual and the particular which Hegel sought to gather up into the world spirit (*Aufhebung*) might resist being so gathered up," the "seeming or apparent proliferation of natural species disturbs the desire for absolute knowledge of taxonomy in Romantic natural history" (194-195). I suggest here that the idea of natural history is compatible, not in tension with, the negative dialectic of particular and universal.
[448] Kelley, 194.
[449] Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," 267–68.
[450] Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 70. See also Jay on Adorno's analysis of nature:

> [Adorno] rejected the belief that subjective human praxis could completely denaturalize the social world. The assumption of an "absolute historicism," to use Gramsci's phrase that Adorno could not have yet known, was as mythicizing as the naturalization of human relations favored in certain right-wing circles. In the spirit of Benjamin's early work, Adorno insisted that history and nature were too intertwined to be completely separated. The passing away of nature, its own "historical" decay, was thus a part of human history. Mourning for its loss could not be overcome in the theodicy of an idealist Hegelian Marxist faith in history. As Horkheimer also pointed out in numerous places, the suffering of past generations, the pain inflicted on nature itself, could not be redeemed by any future totalizations. Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 261.

interpretation activates a critical perspective that perceives rather than produces the "decay, ruin, passing" of history.

At the same time, Kelley's suspicion of nature is not unwarrated, especially in our historical present after the "end of Nature," and we might ask if our contemporary moment renders Adorno's dialectical account of natural history obsolete. Indeed, the overwhelming trend of new materialisms and postcritique is to reject dialectical polarities like nature and history. (With a dark irony, "the end of Nature" suggests a historical rationale for the recent resurgence of ontological and epistemological monisms.)[451] Adorno's natural history runs against the grain of more recent theoretical trends by insisting that the division between nature and history is "both true and false": "It is true," he elaborates, "when it expresses what happens to nature; it is false when it simply reinforces conceptually history's own concealment of its own natural growth."[452] Moreover, as my account here makes clear, Adorno's "idea of natural history" did not refer to natural sciences, or to what he calls "external" nature "in the ordinary sense of nature in a landscape as contrasted with our urban, industrial civilization."[453] In other words, Adorno's account, as in Balibar's characterization of Marx's materialism, may have "nothing to do with a reference to *matter*" or nature in the conventional ("external") sense.[454]

Yet recent thinking on the new reality of climate crisis suggests that 'the idea of natural history' might usefully be extended to include matter and "external" nature. Adorno himself at times suggest this more capacious view.[455] In asking us to see the

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[451] See the coda to this project for an extended discussion of this trend.

[452] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 122. Cf. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 358.

[453] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 121.

[454] Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 23. Amanda Goldstein has recently complicated Balibar's marginalization of "matter" in Marx. Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life*.

[455] See the following passage on the domination of nature:

> In Marx the principle of the *domination of nature* is actually accepted quite naively. According to the Marxian way of seeing, there is something of a change in the relations of domination between people – they are supposed to come to an end, that is, such domination should disappear – but the unconditional domination of nature by human beings is not affected by this, so that we might say that the image of a classless society in Marx has something of the quality of a giant joint-stock company for the exploitation of nature, as Horkheimer once formulated it. . . . [I]t is not possible to criticize radically the principle of domination on the one hand, while unreservedly acquiescing in it in an undialectical manner on the other. If it is the case – as Marx and Engels taught, although I am by no means sure that it is the case – that domination over external nature called for societies in which domination prevailed through the millennia because things wouldn't have worked otherwise – and that this situation is supposed now to be radically transformed all of a sudden, then you need a very strong faith (to put it mildly) to imagine that the forms of the domination of nature should persist in accordance with idealism . . . *without* forms of domination making their appearance [in society]. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 58.

An avid visitor of the Frankfurt Zoo, Adorno clearly cared about "external" nature at a personal level, and he referenced conversations with the director of the Frankfurt Zoo in his lectures. In a letter to the director, Adorno went so far as to recommend acquisitions for the zoo:

> Would it not be wonderful if Frankfurt Zoo could acquire a pair of wombats? I have fond memories of these friendly and cuddly animals from my childhood and would love to be able to see them again. . . . And may I also remind you of the existence of the babirusa, or the horned hog as I suppose they call it in English, which was also one of my favourite animals during my childhood; a delightfully bizarre little pachyderm. I hope it hasn't become extinct in the Malaysian

world as a product of the non-human agency of matter, new materialisms ask us to see history as nature. In asking us to see human agency in even the most seemingly non-human workings of nature – from the molecular scale of chemical reactions, to the sublime scale of our species' new status as geological agency – the "end of Nature" and the concept of the Anthropocene challenge us to see nature as history. Whereas the new materialists dismiss the uncovering of human agency at every turn as excessive anthropocentrism, instead seeking to privilege non-human materiality, the very word *Anthropocene* aggressively insists that we come to terms with the fact of human agency in even the most mediated forms. Indeed, whereas the new materialists want to find material agency where it appears most human, the Anthropocene wants to find human agency where it appears most independent of the human. If these contemporary terms exceed Adorno's original account, then "the idea of natural history" nevertheless prompts us to think both directions at once.

V. Transience and melancholy agency in *Beachy Head*

This is the locus of one dimension of romantic experience that has outlasted romantic philosophy and its mentality. In natural beauty, natural and historical elements interact in a musical and kaleidoscopically changing fashion.
—Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

> Hither, Ambition come!
> Come and behold the nothingness of all
> For which you carry thro' the oppressed Earth,
> War, and its train of horrors—see where tread
> The innumerous hoofs of flocks above the works
> By which the warrior sought to register
> His glory, and immortalize his name—
> The pirate Dane, who from his circular camp
> Bore in destructive robbery, fire and sword
> Down thro' the vale, sleeps unremember'd here;
> And here, beneath the green sward, rests alike
> The savage native, who with his acorn meal
> Shar'd with the herds, that ranged the pathless woods;
> And the centurion, who on these wide hills
> Encamping, planted the Imperial Eagle.
> All, with the lapse of Time, have passed away,
> Even as the clouds, with dark and dragon shapes,
> Or like vast promontories crown'd with towers,
> Cast their broad shadows on the downs: then sail
> Far to the northward, and their transient gloom
> Is soon forgotten. (419-439)

The visible landscape in this stanza in *Beachy Head* is one of a "green sward" marked only by the "innumerous hoofs of [the] flocks" that traverse it. To the eye, the view is one of nothing but green grass and sheep. Yet *Beachy Head*'s speaker invites human "Ambition" to "behold" something quite different: under the speaker's

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archipelago? And lastly, what is the situation with the dwarf hippos that they used to have in Berlin? But I do not wish to bother you with too many questions. Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 121.

interpretive vision, it is a scene of layered history. Presenting a sedimented history embedded imperceptibly in the natural landscape, the speaker sees nature as history.

Of course, in another sense, the image of the "green sward" suggests a natural regeneration erasing human history—a pastoral renovation of a place once marked by destructive human society, as if the mere "lapse of Time" inevitably softens and erases the effects of "destructive robbery, fire and sword." As we have seen, however, Smith was highly skeptical of images of natural progression or regeneration, and her earlier long poem *The Emigrants* (1793) forcefully critiques of the romanticization of rural life. Presenting not just the sensational ruins of war and empire but also the everyday ruin of precarious rural poverty, the speaker of that poem asks "where happiness is found" and answers: "Alas! in rural life, where youthful dreams / See the Arcadia that Romance describes, / Not even Content Resides!"[456] In *Beachy Head*, nature's green "sward," the passage suggests, replaces the "sword" of human history. But if such an account sounds like it repeats the mythic natural renewal of which Smith was so suspicious, then the passage explicitly presents the process as a problematic form of forgetting. The "pirate Dane" rests "unremember'd." And, like the gloom of transient clouds, history "Is soon"—in the context of ongoing wars at the time of the poem's writing, too soon—"forgotten." Seeing history as eternal nature, the passage suggests, involves a blindness to history.

Yet in addition to its account of nature as a historical forgetting, the lines leave the landscape's history to transience at the end of the stanza in a way that presents history as nature in a second sense: as transience and change. In the lines, history too purports to be eternal. Earlier in the stanza, the warrior attempts to "immortalize" his name, to "register" or indelibly fix his "works" at once in official history and on the British landscape.[457] The staking of the Holy Roman Empire's "Imperial Eagle" likewise suggests an attempt to install a monumental historical entity. The very absence of the "Imperial Eagle," however, powerfully demonstrates the transience of a human history once considered indestructible. Indeed, Smith wrote *Beachy Head* in the very year the Holy Roman Empire's ten centuries of existence came to an end; she died just three months after it was dissolved on August 6th, 1806. So too, the sense of the centurion's "planting" of the heraldic form – as a staking but also as a sowing – suggests an attempt to present a human institution as incontestable nature. Against that attempt, then, the stanza presents the seemingly eternal human institution as transient nature. Human history is as transient as the gloom of passing clouds; even the Holy Roman Empire falls. Performing an act of memory that functions as a kind of historical *vanitas* – a reminder of human vanity not in relation to an afterlife but to the impermanent world – the transience of human history thus functions as a contemporary warning against militarism and empire. No matter the appearance of permanence, human history is as transient as the

[456] Smith, *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, 155.

[457] Lily Gurton-Wachter has shown the way in which *Beachy Head*'s presentation of "the geological history of Britain's prior union with France," operates as a "a natural history that subverts the idea that the two nations were ever naturally enemies." Here the passing of history into nature similarly functions as critical historical memory. Lily Gurton-Wachter, "'An Enemy, I Suppose, That Nature Has Made': Charlotte Smith and the Natural Enemy," *European Romantic Review* 20, no. 2 (2009): 197.

poem's opening image of the colossal, shifting landmasses that once joined Britain and France.[458]

In its shifting presentation of nature as history and history as nature, *Beachy Head* unfolds a dialectical natural history that undoes both mythic history and nature. History, as natural history, takes on forms that appear as permanent as landmasses; but as natural history – like both transient clouds and slow geological shifts – history is also transient. In addition to the scale of natural history, however *Beachy Head* revisits the dialect of transience at the level of the individual through the recurring query: "Ah! who *is* happy?" A melancholy response to the terms of the question seems immediately to negate the possibility of an affirmative answer:

> . . . Happiness! a word
> That like false fire, from marsh effluvia born,
> Misleads the wanderer, destin'd to contend
> In the world's wilderness, with want or woe— (255-258)

Immediately following her condemnation of linguistic deception, the speaker turns to a pair of innocent youths that appear to exemplify happiness. They appear to prevail as the exception to the rule of "want and woe": "Yet *they* are happy, who have never ask'd / What good or evil means" (259-260). Setting off to the "distant fair," a young "village girl" dreams of her lover, while at her side "little brother" drums merrily on his pretend drum. A different view of the scene of happy anticipation follows, however:

> Ah! yet a while, and half those oaths believ'd,
> Her happiness is vanish'd; and the boy
> While yet a stripling, finds the sound he lov'd
> Has led him on, till he has given up
> His freedom, and his happiness together. (277-281)

Initially appearing to challenge the opening characterization of happiness as an *ignis fatuus,* the figures of youthful optimism shift rapidly to an even more acute sense of bitter regret. Their gendered fates are gloomy: the girl is left as a ruined woman, or with an unfaithful and despotic husband like Smith's own; in the harsh prolepsis of his imaginary percussion on an imaginary drum, the brother is left to confront the dark reality of conscription and war. The melancholy lines, in other words, proceed to see the pair of youths in terms of their lost happiness. In doing so, the lines recall a similar moment in Adorno's early reading of "the allegorical character of Kierkegaard's melancholy":

> In the face of melancholy, nature becomes allegorical: "Who, unless it were a madman, has ever beheld a young girl without a certain sense of sadness, without being most poignantly reminded by her sweetness of the fragility of earthly life." So asks William, reminiscing perhaps on Matthias Claudius's allegory of death and the maiden. The image of the maiden in her youth signifies precisely transience.[459]

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[458] See *Beachy Head* lines (5-10). See also Lily Gurton-Wachter's important reading of the term "natural enemy": Gurton-Wachter, "'An Enemy, I Suppose, That Nature Has Made.'"
[459] Adorno, *Kierkegaard*, 62.

Like the *memento mori* and the *danse macabre*, the allegory of death and the maiden acts as a reminder of finitude and loss. Shorn of the promise of an eternal afterlife, however, the melancholy lines in *Beachy Head* present youth, ostensibly untouched by human society, in terms of the social violence around them and that will befall them. In interpreting the most innocent youth and happiness in the image of their destruction, the speaker's melancholy gaze warns the reader not to follow the "false fire" of illusory happiness. The present tense verbs of the speaker's melancholy interpretation insist that the happy appearance of the scene conceals the social and historical violence of the present.

Of course, in asking about the possibilities of happiness, the poem provides a qualification of sorts in the figure of the "visionary" that takes up the penultimate section of the poem. Unlike the melancholy youths, "The visionary, nursing dreams like these, / Is not indeed unhappy" (655-656):

> The visionary, nursing dreams like these,
> Is not indeed unhappy. Summer woods
> Wave over him, and whisper as they wave,
> Some future blessings he may yet enjoy.
> . . .
> Oh! let him cherish his ideal bliss—
> For what is life, when Hope has ceas'd to strew
> Her fragile flowers along its thorny way?
> And sad and gloomy are his days, who lives
> Of Hope abandon'd! (655-671)

The "visionary" suggests that in a society of "cold policy," the dreams and self-delusion that carry him far away to "distant climes" are the only favorable alternative (661). Yet the lines place the status of the visionary's happiness in the abeyance of a double negative—he is "not indeed unhappy." So too, the poem punctures the visionary's dreams of tropical paradise: a problematic footnote reveals that the "visionary delights of the newly discovered islands" of Polynesia, and in particular Tahiti, "where it was at first believed men lived in a state of simplicity and happiness," were actually, "as later enquiries have ascertained," home to "the grossest vices" and "corruption." Recalling the "young and visionary Poet" of the gossamer sonnet, the figure of *Beachy Head*'s visionary at once acknowledges the genuine appeal of illusion and underscores the hollowness of its vision.

The ambivalent lines on the visionary turn us to the final figure of the poem, a figure whose historical specificity contrasts with the curiously mythic status of the poet and visionary that precedes him. If the visionary exemplifies one alternative to "sad and gloomy days" and a life "Of Hope abandon'd!" then the hermit Parson Darby presents another alternative—if not to a life without hope then one that carves out a space within it. In turning to the final figure, *Beachy Head* concludes with another act of memory—this time of the almost forgotten Parson Darby. A footnote explains:

> In a cavern almost immediately under the cliff called Beachy Head, there lived, as the people of the country believed, a man of the name of Darby, who for many years had no other abode than this cave, and subsisted almost entirely on shell-fish. He had often administered assistance to ship-wrecked mariners; but venturing into the sea on this charitable mission during a violent equinoctial storm, he himself perished. (674n)

The speaker's note adds, "As it is above thirty years since I heard this tradition of Parson Darby (for so I think he was called): it may now perhaps be forgotten." Himself a kind of ruin, Darby "appear'd to suffer life / Rather than live" (675-676). Darby's isolation and melancholy outlook mark him with what Smith's sonnet refers to as the "Violence and Fraud" of society. The "hermit of the rock" is one for whom, as in the line from the *Elegiac Sonnet* that raises the threat of despair most forcefully, "no gay change revolving seasons bring / To call forth pleasure from the soul of pain." Indeed, one of the effects of Darby's self-incurred exile to a cave under Beachy Head is that he loses almost all perception of seasonal change and variation:

> . . . the soul-reviving gale,
> Fanning the bean-field, or the thymy heath,
> Had not for many summers breathed on him;
> And nothing mark'd to him the season's change, (676-679)

In place of the discernment of seasonal change – instead of waiting for natural renewal and regeneration – the hermit takes up a related but quite different task of reading the ocean for signs of storms in order to attempt to aid drowning sailors:

> When tempests were approaching . . .
> He listen'd to the wind; and as it drove
> The billows with o'erwhelming vehemence
> He starting from his rugged couch, went forth. (697-700)

Whereas the "visionary" figure hears the trees "whisper as they save, / Some future blessings," the hermit hears the "sullen murmurs of the hollow cliffs" as indications of the approach of violent tempests. Darby's existence under Beachy Head curiously skirts the line between hermitage and sociality, sublime withdrawal and engagement. But what does *Beachy Head* ask us to remember in remembering Darby, a figure Smith was actually revisiting a decade after he had first appeared in her 1795 novel *Montalbert*?

Another one of Smith's writings suggests an answer. Two of the poems in *Beachy Head: With Other Poems* were first published in the volume that also contained the gossamer sonnet, Smith's *Conversations Introducing Poetry; Chiefly on Subjects of Natural History for the Use of Children and Young Persons* (1804). The volume is a hybrid didactic book that imparts lessons through the figure of the mother, Mrs. Talbot. One of Mrs. Talbot's lessons, shared with her son George while seated in a "chalky cavity" by the seashore, warns of the limitations of absorption in the pleasures of the sublime. She cautions, "But sublime and magnificent as those sounds are, as well as the sight of the sea in a tempest, every sensation, when a storm is the object, must be lost in our recollection of the misery, to which its violence exposes numbers of our fellow creatures."[460] Mrs. Talbot's strange and melancholy pronouncement, notable especially for its communication to a young child, transforms the sublime view of the ocean into a scene of "misery" and watery death; her method of "recollection" checks aesthetic pleasure and detachment with a critical edge.

[460] Smith, *The Works of Charlotte Smith*, 13:215.

Dwelling in a chalky cave of his own, *Beachy Head's* Darby echoes and enacts the mother's lesson. Rather than indulging in the aesthetic pleasures of the sublime ocean tempest, Darby interprets the signs in terms of its human toll. In doing so, the hermit-pastor of *Beachy Head* fundamentally rewrites *Montalbert*'s earlier Darby. The earlier figure, who could not be more different, "patiently await[s] the surge that should overwhelm him," makes no attempt to save sailors, and, a true hermit, has no identifiable relation to others. For *Montalbert*'s character Walsingham, Darby presents a sublime "experiment" in aesthetic pleasure and "enjoy[ing] the horrors of a storm, in a cave under Beachy Head."[461] In other words, the Darby of *Montalbert*, safe from harm and "escap[ing] the tempest" by remaining within his cave until the storm has passed, figures a conventional sublime that mixes the horrors of the storm with aesthetic gratification. In contrast, the parson of *Beachy Head* dramatizes Mrs. Talbot's advice and goes beyond it, putting the knowledge of her recollection into practice by taking upon himself the task of helping drowning sailors. And while *Montalbert* gives its Darby no past leading up to his life in the cave under Beachy Head, the Darby of *Beachy Head* has a personal history that gives him a melancholic but also deeply social vision: "And outraged as he was, in sanguine youth, / By human crimes, he still acutely felt / For human misery" (689-691). Isolated as he is at the margins of society, Darby cannot be a model for political action, but his curious inclusion at the end of *Beachy Head* points to some implications for thinking about agency.

Much has been made of the inadequacy of melancholy as a political mode, and more recently theorists of our global ecological crisis have decried the tendency of melancholy to produce political paralysis.[462] But while the critical "interpretation" of transient natural history is melancholic, it does not despair, and for his part Adorno minimally affirms what he calls the "joys of interpretation." "These joys," he notes in his lectures, "consist in refusing to be blinded by the semblance of immediacy, and instead in uncovering the process by which the work became what it is so that we may transcend that semblance." Adorno goes on to characterize the joys of interpretation as a kind of (to borrow a phrase from a similar reading of the Kantian sublime) "standing firm" in "the face of total transience":[463]

> At the same time, [the joys of interpretation] refer to the power of the mind to retain its self-control in the face of the sorrow that is aroused by the contemplation of the past. Kant had noted, in one of the profoundest passages in the 'aesthetics of the sublime', that what a common-or-garden aesthetics customarily thinks of as aesthetic 'pleasure' is in reality a state in which the mind remains in control of itself in the face of the overwhelming power of nature, in the face of total transience. . . . [O]ur pleasure derives from the fact that the phenomena always mean *something* different from what they simply are. . . . [T]he negativity of natural history – which always discovers what phenomena used to be, what they have become, and at the same time, what they might have been – retains the *possible* life of phenomena as opposed to their actual existence. . . . Interpretation in fact means to become conscious of the traces of what points beyond mere

[461] Smith, *Montalbert, a Novel*, 3:160–61.
[462] See, in particular, Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy." On the topic of ecological melancholy, McKensie Wark writes that, "A theory for the Anthropocene can be about other things besides the melancholy paralysis that its contemplation too often produces." See Wark, *Molecular Red.*
[463] "Aesthetic hedonism is to be confronted with the passage from Kant's doctrine of the sublime, which he timidly excluded from art: Happiness in artworks would be the feeling they instill of standing firm." Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 40.

> existence – by dint of criticism, that is to say, by virtue of an insight into transience, and into the shortcomings and fallibility of mere existence.[464]

In attempting to avoid the paralysis of despair, Adorno's account threatens to fracture into two modes of interpretation. In the first, "standing firm" would imply confronting "sorrow" and "transience" with a critique of semblance – a resolution even in the face of despair, wholly lacking in the anticipation of transformative possibility but fully facing what things "have become."[465] In the second, Adorno shifts to a utopian mode of interpretation that discovers glimmers of utopian alternatives.[466]

It is worth noting that shortly after recommending the "joys of interpretation" in what he judged to be the total absence of any possibility of action in his historical moment, Adorno writes with an almost breathtaking optimism of the positive existence of the material conditions that would enable the immediate and total eradication of poverty, hunger, and material want in his time.[467] Translated into today's context of global climate crisis, the same material conditions simply no longer exist, putting new practical *and* theoretical pressures on Adorno's insistence on deferred action. Adorno's famous defense of critical thinking against the student movement's "blind primacy of action" notwithstanding, from the vantage of the twenty-first century, Adorno's commitment to pure theory in the interim, as he saw it, between moments of historical possibility may tip over into the kind of prophetic waiting of which T. J. Clark has recently accused the Left: of "expect[ing] something—something transfiguring to show up."[468]

But what of Parson Darby caught in the sublime storm? The account of the sublime echoed by Adorno appears in Kant's analysis of the dynamically sublime from §28 *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. There, Kant famously writes:

> Nature considered in aesthetic judgment as a power that has no dominion over us, is *dynamically sublime*. . . . We can, however, consider an object as fearful without being afraid of it, if, namely we judge it in such a way that we merely think of the case in which we might wish to resist it and think that in that case all resistance would be completely futile. . . . Bold, overhanging, as it were threatening cliffs, thunder clouds towering up into the heavens, bringing with them flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder . . . the boundless ocean set into a rage, a lofty waterfall on a mighty river, etc., make our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle in comparison with their power.[469]

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[464] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 137–38.

[465] This would comport with the earlier sense of interpretation: "[f]or since the process of understanding and interpreting entails negation, a consciousness of the immanent demise of a phenomenon is at one with the criticism of what the world has done to it." Adorno, 134. Cf. "The interpretation of given reality and its abolition are connected to each other, not, of course, in the sense that reality is negated in the concept, but that out of the construction of a configuration of reality the demand for its [reality's] real change always follows promptly." ("The Actuality of Philosophy")

[466] Clark's piece "For a Left With No Future" develops out an earlier coauthored book titled *Afflicted Powers,* in which the authors analyze post 9/11 global politics accompanied by Satan's words from *Paradise Lost*, repeated as a refrain throughout the book: "What reinforcement we may gain from hope; If not, what resolution from despair."

[467] On the eradication of "material want" see Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 144, 182–83.

[468] See the late radio address "Resignation" in Adorno, *Critical Models*. In the letters he exchanged with Herbert Marcuse at the end of his life, Adorno worried of the "danger of the student movement flipping over into fascism." Adorno and Marcuse, "Correspondence on the German Student Movement," 131, 132.

[469] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 143–44.

Kant's subject "wish[es] to offer some resistance" to the dynamically sublime, what Adorno characterizes as "total transience," where even the most immense forms that dwarf the human are in fearful and astonishing motion. But Kant's subject only offers resistance in the form of the purely aesthetic judgment that the sublime "has no dominion over us." Darby, too, inhabits a world of total transience, and the poem draws to a close with the fragmentation of the hermit's rocky home, robbing him of the earlier Darby's safety: "the bellowing cliffs were shook / Even to their stony base, and fragments fell / Flashing and thundering on the angry flood." Unlike Kant's subject, however, Darby obstinately does more than "wishing to offer some resistance to" the destruction of the sublime storm. Figuring an alternative sublime, Darby both "recollects the misery, to which [the storm's] violence exposes" his "fellow creatures" and acts upon that recollection, even as, like Kant's subject, Darby must "[recognize] that all . . . resistance [is] quite futile."

The sublime storms clearly dwarf Darby's agency, but he presents a rebuke to the mere "standing firm" of the conventional Romantic sublime. His response to the overwhelming transience of the sublime refuses its safe remove, or perhaps just suggests that safety of even the sturdiest cave proves illusory. So too, Darby collapses the distance crucial to the topos of the unmoved (and unmoving) Lucretian spectator looking out over a shipwreck and its victims.[470] *Beachy Head* figures the overwhelming power of natural historical forces that shape particulars while nevertheless affirming the possibility of human freedom—as minimal as Darby's action may be. *Beachy Head*, in other words, presents natural historical elements not to confirm the inevitability of human suffering or oppressive social orders; but, through the portrait of Darby as a figure of social ruin, of "what the world has done," the poem concludes with the memory of a historical person who nevertheless acts. If Darby's action itself bespeaks hope, then it is one that has become indistinguishable from his melancholy vision.

Beachy Head ends with a surprisingly commonplace consolation that appears to install the very form of solace relentlessly hollowed out by the *Elegiac Sonnets*. Yet the consolation of Darby's epitaph produces a denunciation of the existing world through a "mournful" memorialization, not of the local Parson's life and achievements but of his "sufferings":

> . . . Those who read
> Chisel'd within the rock, these mournful lines,
> Memorials of his sufferings, did not grieve,
> That dying in the cause of charity
> His spirit, from its earthly bondage freed,
> Had to some better region fled for ever. (726-731)

The "memorials of [Darby's] sufferings" would seem to immortalize Darby in verse and stone, marking Darby's life with a permanence that the warriors failed to register on the British landscape. And yet, the opening and closing lines of the poem frame the rock of Beachy Head – the stone into which the "mournful lines" of Darby's epitaph are carved – as a rock in motion, shifting, eroding, and breaking, both in a slower geological temporality and in the sudden violence of coastal tempests. Rather than purporting to

[470] For an analysis of the legacy of the Lucretian spectator, see Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*.

achieve a final permanence, the medium in which the epitaph is written reinscribes transience: “the bellowing cliffs were shook / Even to their stony base, and fragments fell / Flashing and thundering on the angry flood.”

Coda
Dialectics after critique; or, Latour, postcritique, and the fate of enlightenment

The responses to the problem of nominalism in the late enlightenment figures traced in this project are best understood, I have argued, as a series of negative dialectics at odds both with the transcendent, affirmative dialectic of high Romanticism and with the subsequent Romantic particularisms and localisms that accompanied deconstruction and new historicism. Against the deeply engrained view that the nominalist and empiricist Anglo-American tradition is anti-dialectical, I have argued that we find within that tradition a dialectical strain that anticipates Adorno's negative dialectics.

Stepping back to consider the project in the context of current scholarly trends, however, it is worth noting the extent to which the dialectical concerns of this project seem untimely and outdated. The current dominant theoretical trend – in addition to being characterized as a turn away from or against critique, as monist, as invested in description rather than interpretation – has been described as explicitly "anti-dialectical or post-dialectical."[471] Moreover, if the dialectics in *negative dialectics* is out of fashion, then so too is negativity; postcritique has likewise been characterized by a rejection of "the pessimism of academic thought" and "the chronic negativity of critique."[472] As Rita Felski writes in *The Limits of Critique*, "Lamenting the disheartening effects of a pervasive cynicism and negativity, some scholars are urging that we make more room for hope, optimism, and positive affect in intellectual life."[473] Whereas critique is said to deconstruct and destroy, Felski and Bruno Latour have called for more constructive alternative modes that include "generating, . . . assembling, gathering," (Latour), and "curating, conveying, . . . composing" in addition to "criticizing" (Felski).[474] Dialectics, critique, interpretation, and negativity, all central terms for this project, would appear to be things of the critical past. (One critic writing in the recent volume *Critique and Postcritique* has even argued that our current postcritical moment can "be understood as a fundamentally anti-Romantic turn.")[475]

Of course, within Romantic studies we have also seen explicitly post-dialectical criticism, perhaps most obviously in Marjorie Levinson's "Pre- and Post-Dialectical Materialisms" and her work on Spinoza, which articulates what she sees as Romanticism's own "post-dialectical perspective."[476] For Levinson, dialectics is synonymous with an anthropocentric prioritization of the subject. Whereas Hegel and Kant always end up subordinating the object to the subject, Levinson's Spinozan "double-aspect monism" levels the ontological playing field.[477] Levinson thus embraces

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[471] Best, "Well, That Was Obvious." See also Fleissner, "Romancing the Real: Bruno Latour, Ian McEwan, and Postcritical Monism," 105. Fleissner agrees that postcritique is monist in that "it has no use for the notion of two incommensurate poles of inquiry."
[472] Anker and Felski, *Critique and Postcritique*, 11.
[473] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 12.
[474] Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," 248; Felski, "Introduction," 216.
[475] Fleissner, "Romancing the Real: Bruno Latour, Ian McEwan, and Postcritical Monism," 102.
[476] Levinson, "Pre- and Post-Dialectical Materialisms," October 1, 1995, 119; Levinson, "A Motion and a Spirit"; Levinson, "Of Being Numerous."
[477] Spinoza's "double-aspect monism . . . differs from the Hegelian *aufhebung* which, like Kant's analytic, draws the objective term into the dialectic by rewriting it as a displaced, disguised, or undeveloped form of subjectivity." Levinson, "Pre- and Post-Dialectical Materialisms," October 1, 1995, 119.

Spinoza's monism as a model of non-dialectical representation that nullifies the dialectical prioritization of the human subject and finds continuity instead of disjunction and contradiction in the world.[478]

In the context of these recent trends, then, how might we understand the investments of this project? In order to begin to answer that question, I want to (re)turn now to the history of nominalism and its notable affinities with Bruno Latour's "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" (2004), one of the most influential postcritical texts to date.[479] In the introduction to this project, I noted Adorno's account of the relation between the histories of nominalism and enlightenment: the two histories are, in his words, "identical."[480] In Adorno's understanding, nominalism attacked medieval universals, demystifying real essences, and then, having dissolved those entities, continued its corrosive critique against enlightenment concepts. Once critical and emancipatory, nominalism underwent a historical inversion—eventually disabling concepts, the use of which Adorno finds indispensable for critique. The problem can be summed up by a line from *Minima Moralia*: "Negative philosophy, dissolving everything, dissolves even the dissolvent."[481]

Adorno's account of the historical dialectic of nominalism bears striking resemblance to Latour's diagnosis of the devolution of critique into an endless, self-defeating war. For Latour, critique has exercised its destructive power too effectively: in the twenty-first century, critique's demystifying operations have been turned against even those simple facts and objects we hold dear. In the hands of conspiracy theorists and climate change deniers, critique appears to be tearing apart the basic social fabric of our liberal democracy. As Latour writes, "While Enlightenment profited largely from the disposition of a very powerful descriptive tool, that of matters of fact, which were excellent for *debunking* quite a lot of beliefs, powers, and illusions, it found itself totally disarmed once matters of fact, in turn, were eaten up by the same debunking impetus."[482] The terms may be different, but here too the critical "dissolvent" ends up "dissolving everything," including itself. More dramatic still, the enlightenment tradition, so closely entwined with the history of critique, has itself finally been destroyed. As Latour writes with a flourish, "the lights of the Enlightenment were slowly turned off, and some sort of

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[478] In particular, Levinson finds in Spinoza "a mode of representation not based on rupture, scission, or negation." Levinson, 119. For example, Levinson's monist framework finds that, as Anahid Nersessian has recently summarized, "in Wordsworth we find . . . representations of spirit and matter as ontologically continuous." Nersessian, "Romantic Ecocriticism Lately," 6. Recovering a similarly monist Romantic materialism, Amanda Goldstein's work likewise emphasizes the ontological leveling of Romantic Lucretianism. On affinities with Levinson's post-dialectical project, see Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life*, 2017, 138, 266. However, Goldstein distinguishes between the "Spinozan plenist epiphany['s] . . . move toward totality, timelessness, and continuous space" and "the Lucretian atomist picture," which "remains constitutively shot through with the spatial and temporal discrepancies secured in the notion of 'void'" Goldstein, 274. For affinities with Latour's work see Goldstein, 27–28. On "leveling" implications of Lucretian materialism, see for example Goldstein, 27, 92, 103, 244.

[479] Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern."

[480] Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 2006, 139. Adorno states that "Nominalism is tied to the tradition of enlightenment and the history of enlightenment since the Middle Ages is identical with nominalism. That is to say, it is denied that concepts have a natural existence and this means that they are to be treated as no more than the summation of particular characteristics."

[481] Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 245.

[482] Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," 232.

darkness appears to have fallen on campuses."[483] Once the exalted tool of enlightenment, critique has now extinguished enlightenment.

Later in the piece, Latour explains that there are two separate models of critique, the separation of which constitutes no small part of the problem. Together, the two critical operations of "antifetishism" and "positivism" account for "90 percent of the contemporary critical scene."[484] In the first "Critical Gesture" of antifetishism, the critic demonstrates that humans project themselves onto objects and misrecognize their own power as belonging to or emanating from the fetishistic object. (To the extent that Latour includes his own earlier work in his critique of critique, the social construction of scientific facts, which "intended to *emancipate* the public from prematurely naturalized objectified facts," falls under the antifetishist category.)[485] In the second, positivist "Critical Gesture," the critic shows how human freedom is an illusion that conceals determination by "economic infrastructure, fields of discourse, social domination, race, class, and gender, . . . neurobiology, evolutionary psychology," etc.[486] The problem, as Latour sees it, is that the two separate models of critique are never united into one; the two inverse critical moves "are never put together in one single diagram." Instead, the practitioner of critique "alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism," thereby perpetuating an endless (and fruitless) process; indeed, "there is never any *crossover between the two lists of objects*" that are subject to the two forms of critique.[487] Divided in such a way, the two critical wheels spin independently, separately inflicting upon their objects the arrogant intellectual violence Latour calls "critical barbarity."

If Latour's essay marks the turn to "anti-dialectical" postcritique, then where do the dialectical traditions of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, or Western Marxist thought more broadly, fit in Latour's schema of the autonomous critical functions of "antifetishism" and "positivism"?[488] On the one hand, Marx's account of commodity fetishism seems like an obvious place to start. One of the most well-known accounts of fetishism, the commodity famously "abound[s] in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."[489] Though the commodity form involves the "definitely social relations between men themselves," it "assumes . . . the fantastic form of a relation between things." On the other hand, Marx also articulates how the actions and desires of individuals can be explained by social forces; his "standpoint" of natural history "can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains,

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[483] Latour, 232.
[484] Latour, 237.
[485] Latour, 227. In a postscript to the 1986 edition of *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*, Latour and Woolgar explain their omission of "Social" from the original 1979 subtitle, "the social construction of scientific facts." They suggest the term is meaningless when "we accept that *all* interactions are social." Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*, 281.
[486] Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," 238.
[487] Latour, 246.
[488] Latour's account of dialectical thought in *Reassembling the Social* does not provide much help. There he writes that "[d]ialectical thinkers have the knack to bury artifacts even deeper by claiming that contradictions have been 'overcome'—this being the magic word they use for 'covered up' or 'spirited away'." Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 170.
[489] Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, 163. Like the fetish, in which "the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own," the commodity form "is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (165).

socially speaking."[490] As in Latour's account of the "positivist" critical move (which cries, "You . . . believe you are free but, in reality, you are acted on by forces you are not conscious of") Marx's account describes the experience of what Adorno calls "the universal that is realized over the subjects' heads" as the experience of a natural law or alien force.[491]

Marx, like Latour, suggests that the two poles Latour calls "fairy" and "fact," "antifetishism" and "positivism," are both inadequate for giving an account of our complex world; both are required and neither is sufficient.[492] In other words, read in a slightly different light, Latour's schema of the two autonomous critical operations makes an excellent case for the value of dialectical thought as a tradition that precisely combines multiple critical moves at once. Dialectical criticism can include both models, such as when Smith and Adorno present nature as history and history as nature. Dialectical thinking is by no means, and should not be, the only fruitful form of thought. Yet the blind-spot in Latour's understanding of the tradition distorts his view of the legacy of critique, which is fundamentally concerned with (anticipating Latour) the inadequacy of the two poles.

As an alternative to what he sees as all-out critical warfare, Latour proposes a turn to realism, empiricism, and "matters of concern" (instead of the grossly reductive "matters of fact"). The empiricism Latour calls for is a "second empiricism" that corresponds to a "*stubbornly realist attitude*." He writes that:

> What I am going to argue is that the critical mind, if it is to renew itself and be relevant again, is to be found in the cultivation of a *stubbornly realist attitude*—to speak like William James—but a realism dealing with what I will call *matters of concern,* not *matters of fact*. The mistake we made, the mistake I made was to believe that there was no efficient way to criticize matters of fact except by moving *away* from them and directing one's attention *toward* the conditions that made them possible. But this meant accepting much too uncritically what matters of fact were. This was remaining faithful to the unfortunate solution inherited from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Critique has not been critical enough in spite of all its sore-scratching. Reality is not defined by matters of fact. Matters of fact are not all that is given in experience. Matters of fact are only very partial and, I would argue, very polemical, very political renderings of matters of concern and only a subset of what could also be called *states of affairs.* It is this second empiricism, this return to the realist attitude, that I'd like to offer as the next task for the critically minded.[493]

Reality, for Latour, is composed of "matters of concern" and "*states of affairs*"—entities, or perhaps non-entities, that cannot be reduced to what he identifies as the ubiquitous critical polarity of "fact" and "fairy." Certainly Latour is right to lament such reductive categories. Indeed, the primary problem for Latour turns out to be that our current models of critique shut too much out of what counts as "Reality" and "experience."

I will return to the question of our limited accounts of "Reality" and "experience," but first we should note that Latour attributes that limitation to what he identifies as the Kantian legacy of critique. In his call for a postcritical mode, in other words, Latour

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[490] Marx, 92. "My standpoint, from which the development of the economic function of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, socially speaking, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them."
[491] Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," 238; Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 354.
[492] Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," 243.
[493] Latour, 231–32.

reduces the tradition of critique to Kant's definition, which he paraphrases as "directing one's attention *toward* the conditions" of possibility of a given fact. Kant's definition of "critical," as opposed to "dogmatic" is indeed narrow: for Kant, one takes a critical view when one considers something "only in relation to our cognitive faculties, hence in relation to the subjective conditions for thinking it, without undertaking to decide anything about its object."[494] When we follow Kant in turning to conditions of possibility, Latour suggest, we neglect to ask if we have prematurely limited our account of the what counts as an object. Latour suggest that by looking away from the object, all of our critical nuance was directed at its conditions of possibility, leaving the object with the hopelessly clunky category of "fact."

In the first critique, Kant proposes to reduce all of "organized experience" to "an analysis of the consciousness of the subject." It is the ultimate antifetishist move, and the one to which Latour rightly traces the limitations of his own critique of facts. What happens, however, if we take a wider view of Kant's project, considering critique in relation to the rest of *The Critique of Pure Reason* rather than to Kant's narrower definition of the "critical" method? As I noted in my first chapter, we might instead follow Adorno in seeing how the productive tension of the first critique comes in the fact that Kant insists upon the role of the object: "Kant still refused to be talked out of the moment of objective preponderance."[495] What happens if we follow Adorno in recognizing that "Kantian philosophy is one that enshrines the validity of the *non-identical* in the most emphatic way possible. It is a mode of thought that is not satisfied by reducing everything that exists to itself."[496] Kant, that is, inverts his own seemingly anti-fetishist model of critique.

In this account, we might define the enlightenment tradition, including both Kant and Locke, precisely as a tradition that attempts to grapple critically with both the explanatory power and inadequacy of Latour's two poles. In one sense this is to say that Latour's call for a "second empiricism" looks more like a continuation of that tradition than a break from it. In another, it suggests that Latour's new empiricism has much to learn from old empiricisms, including that of Locke but also of Adorno's "salvaging of empiricism."[497] Here too we should recall that Adorno critiques empiricism for the very same reason Latour calls for a new one: for shutting too much out of experience. British Romanticism, I have attempted to demonstrate, is a historical moment in which the same problem becomes clear, such that figures from Locke to Smith reproduce a nominalist elevation of particulars while suggesting that extreme nominalism shuts too much out of what counts as reality. As Coleridge puts it, for the nominalist "not to be a *thing* is the same as *not to be at all*."[498] (For the realist, to be a thing is not to be either.) Writing of

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[494] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 266.
[495] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 184.
[496] Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1959)*, 2001, 66. Or, in slightly different terms, the tension at the heart of the first critique emerges from "the question of *nominalism* and *realism* – in other words, the question of whether concepts are merely the [arbitrary] addition of thought or whether something in the concepts corresponds to something in the things, whether concepts have a basis in the thing itself."[496] Do concepts below to the "fairy" pole or the fact pole? Adorno, 124.
[497] Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 2008, 82.
[498] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions, and Two Lay Sermons*, 356. Compare Adorno's claim that nominalism "has turned into ideology—into the ideology of an eye-blinking 'There isn't any such thing.'" Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1981, 49n.

the closely related fact-value problem in the history of empiricism, Rei Terada writes that, like nominalism, "Positivism locks too much out of the category of fact, yet self-servingly inclusive ontologies can elicit from Adorno statements of which any positivist would be proud." And again, "To live up to Adorno's meticulous analysis of experience, everyone, *including the positivist*, has to pay more, not less, attention to facts and values alike."[499]

This project opened with Fredric Jameson's call to think more dialectically as an antidote to the Anglo-American tendency toward empiricism, positivism, and what he would later call *nominalism*. But while Jameson defines dialectics against nominalism, I have traced a strain of Romantic critical nominalism that anticipates Adorno's negative dialectics from within, rather than strictly opposed to, those traditions of nominalism and empiricism. In making the case for a negative dialectics that emerges out of a self-critical relation to nominalism and empiricism, this project thus pushes against the strict opposition between dialectics and empiricism asserted by both Jameson and postcritique. Put in slightly different terms, this project presents a tradition in which empiricism and critique are inextricably entwined, not strictly opposed.

It is worth noting, finally, that Latour invokes William James as the guiding figure of his new empiricism. Of course, this project also began by noting James' relation to the father of nominalism in modern Romantic Studies. For Lovejoy, "James showed very plainly that he was in the line of the great nominalistic tradition of English thought."[500] We should remember, then, the limitations, articulated from within, of that tradition. And we should remember, too, how the negative dialectical tradition that emerges in critical relation to nominalism wanted—very much in agreement with the spirit of postcritique—to give precedence to what had been excluded from critical thought.

[499] Terada, *Looking Away*, 2009, 158.
[500] Lovejoy, *The Thirteen Pragmatisms, and Other Essays*, 1963, 34.

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