"Something Fouler than the Earth": Death and the Dying Body in British Romantic Literature

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“SOMETHING FOULER THAN THE EARTH”: DEATH AND THE DYING BODY IN
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To my family.

To friends old and new.

To my husband.

In Memory of Charlotte M. Lattimer
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the intersection between the body as a physical object and nature; the place where this intersection is most unstable is the dying or dead body. Building on Timothy Morton’s work in *Ecology without Nature*, I concentrate on the historical practices surrounding the dead body as it attempts to find a place within nature. Morton’s work does not consider important sites of conflict which I take up in my dissertation: the movement of the corpse from intramural churchyards to extramural cemeteries, the body as natural artifact, and memorialization. Ruth Richardson’s *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* does consider these historical practices and facts in detail, but she does not apply an ecocritical lens, a tool which I use to explore this subject. Medical scholars like Roy Porter, Christopher Lawrence, and James Robert Allard all bring historical context to bear on the body and the place of the doctor in relation to the body; I enter into this conversation by insisting on the inclusion of nature in this topic. I argue that relegating the dead body to a part of nature allows the living to treat it as if it were a natural object, such as a tree or a mountain. That is, making the dead body a natural element allows the living to use the body and dispose of it when it ceases to be useful. As Adam Smith observed, the living cannot pay the debt the dead demand and so the living wish to be rid of the dead and the debt they necessitate. Making the dead just another natural item, as so concretely happens in the Romantic period, is a way to be relieved of this debt. I pursue this topic in readings of texts by Austen, Hazlitt, De Quincey, and Wordsworth.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the intersection in Romantic culture between the body as a physical object and nature, and specifically the place where this intersection is most unstable: the dying or dead body. Because a new relationship between the living and the dead was emerging during the Romantic period, literature took on new functions. I explore these new functions in texts by Jane Austen, William Hazlitt, Thomas De Quincey, and William Wordsworth. Before the chapters that focus on these writers, this introduction offers three preliminaries. The first section covers early nineteenth-century burial culture including general reactions to burial, the cemetery movement, and the Resurrectionists. The second section introduces Timothy Morton’s concept of “dark ecology” as a lens which is particularly helpful to my project. The final section is a preview of chapters devoted to Austen (the ill body), Hazlitt (the imagined dead body), De Quincey (the corpse), and Wordsworth (the remembered body).

The Cultural History of Romantic-Period Death

Due to the limited legal supply of bodies to medical schools in the mid eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century, grave-robbing by Resurrectionists was a lucrative trade. Because of the widespread theft of the dead, the living could never be absolutely certain if the remains of their loved ones would be left undisturbed. This trade continued until a new supply of bodies was made available by the Anatomy Act of 1832. During the same period churchyards and church vault interment were in many places no longer a viable option because of public health concerns. Extramural cemeteries were built by private cemetery companies further from the center of towns and landscaped to look like gardens. This removal of the dead from the churchyard to the idyllic cemetery brought the dead closer to nature but took them further from their survivors. Literature during this time increasingly assumes the important task of bringing the dead back into the homes and minds of the reading public. Literature acts as a problematic vessel for the dead, taking over the role of the epitaph which is now situated further away from the reader. Identifying the body with nature also serves to allow the survivors a certain amount of
control over the relationship between themselves and the departed, which contemporaries like Adam Smith believed was necessary.

Phillipe Ariès’s *The Hour of Our Death* (1977) follows the Western cultural history of death over about a thousand years, detailing how burial began outside of the city and gradually moved inside first with martyrs and then with people wanting to be buried near those martyrs who they believed would protect and intercede for them (29-33). From there it came to be understood that a martyr need not be present for a place to be holy; instead wherever the dead were buried came to be viewed as sacred, and this inverted the original idea that the dead must be kept separate from the living (41). Ariès’s book, though useful for its broad brushstrokes, deals with the West generally and most of his specific examples come from France. Ruth Richardson’s *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (2000) deals specifically with Britain, primarily England, and the Romantic period. For this reason I rely on Richardson for much of my cultural and social history of death in England. *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* covers cultural negotiations with death including body preparation and funerals; what dissection and body snatching meant psychologically; and how the poor were exploited for the gains of the medical community. She follows some of the fears created by “dying on the parish” into present times and shows the lasting impact anatomizing has created.

Anatomizing and body snatching and the fear of both are key topics in this history. Medical schools needed bodies to dissect. Dissecting stolen bodies was the only way to learn about the body without having to practice on a living, screaming individual. Surgeons were allowed a set number of bodies to practice on; Henry VIII passed a law to allow four and Charles II allowed an additional two. This allowance changed in 1752 when an Act of Parliament allowed judges to choose dissection for a murderer rather than gibbeting in chains (Richardson 35-36). However, this new influx of bodies was still not enough. It is easy to understand why when one realizes that not only were the bodies used for lectures but individual students would all want their own body to practice on and (because they did not stay fresh long) they would each be in need of several throughout the year. Consequently, through the mid eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries Grave robbers (Resurrectionists) would dig up freshly buried bodies (or steal them before they even had a chance of burial) and sell them to the medical schools or to the
students themselves.¹ The body trade was a lucrative business and the fear of being dug up was legitimate, particularly for the poor.

The fear of bodysnatching was extremely pervasive, most noticeably in metropolitan and urban areas, but also in suburban and rural districts. A strong and deeply held antipathy to the violation of the grave was evident at all levels of society. Many expedients were devised to prevent, thwart, or at the very least to hinder the bodysnatchers. There were furious and often physically violent attacks upon grave-robbers when they or their handiwork were revealed. On some occasions the violence was so ferocious as to result in death. More restrained riots are recorded which occasioned the demolition of entire anatomy schools. (Richardson “Victorian” 108)

Public hatred of Resurrectionists and the doctors who purchased their wares was high. The reasons for this are obvious – no one wants their loved ones cut up unnecessarily and without consent. Nor does anyone want to be reminded that it could happen to them. The whole process was so distasteful to the general public that in 1832 when a woman named Charlotte Baune died and willed her body to be dissected her brother was arrested for murder, because it was assumed no one would consent to this (Burch 239). However, there were three other issues at work besides distaste with the process of being unearthed and dissected.

The first is bodily resurrection. People still believed in bodily (also called physical) resurrection at this time.² This was not one of the main complaints voiced in print by lay people criticizing the practice. It was more often voiced by people in the medical profession to show how ludicrous the protests against the body trade were. However, argues Richardson, “[t]heir ridicule has all the characteristics of defensiveness about it, and suggests that the anatomists were acutely aware of public disquiet on this score” (Richardson 93). The second issue is sexual violation of the corpse. What might doctors who would stoop to disinterring corpses do once they were alone with those corpses in their anatomy theaters? One of the women smothered by Burke and Hare (Mary Paterson) had been displayed in Edinburgh for all the students to see and for men to come in and draw her. Furthermore one of the doctors (Robert Knox) had her preserved in spirits so he could continue to have her on hand (Richardson 96). Another example

¹Students sometimes took the procurement of corpses into their own hands. For the financially strapped student, in Edinburgh a student could apparently pay their school fees in corpses (Richardson 54).
²Obviously, some people still do though it is not a widespread belief. Even the most devout find it is difficult to square with the many bodies absolutely annihilated at no fault of their own.
of this concern is a cartoon set at a London Anatomy School on the Day of Resurrection. In the cartoon a woman demands her virginity back which she lost while there (Richardson 96). General mistreatment of corpses is the third issue. Bodies were packed into impossibly small spaces to transport. When discovered, officials remarked their surprise that a body could fit in such a space (Richardson 96). A further example is that Joshua Brookes (an anatomist) let fall in conversation that he had kicked a sack containing a recently acquired corpse down a flight of stairs as if this were the normal practice (Richardson 95). Before the body could be mishandled in any of these ways the teeth of the corpse were ratcheted out of the head to sell to denture makers so that if the body was lost or had to be abandoned in transport the body snatcher would at least turn a profit on those (Richardson 67).

The heyday of body snatching was between 1750 and 1832 (Richardson “Victorian” 108). The reason the practice fell off so sharply and suddenly in 1832 is because the Anatomy Act passed. This Act allowed for the body of any person who was “unclaimed” at a workhouse or hospital to be offered up for dissection. It seems benign on the surface; if no one is there to grieve over the body then why not let the insensible benefit mankind? However, this idea does not take into account the fear and unhappiness that would mark any poor person’s final hours. Nor does it actually appreciate the full range of what was entailed by this act. By “unclaimed” the act did not simply mean that those people who did not have relatives would be dissected. It actually meant that those people who did not have relatives or friends who could afford to pay for the funeral and burial would be dissected (Richardson 125). The Anatomy Act did not actually solve the problem of people being anatomized who did not wish to be and of relatives and friends upset over the prospect of this. All it did was ensure that the only people subject to dissection were the poor.3

Layered over the cultural milieu that Richardson supplies is the understanding that Romantic negotiations with dead bodies by their very nature were different from our own. For hundreds of years in Britain people had been buried in the church and the churchyard adjoining it. The recent population explosion had rendered continuing this tradition impossible (Rugg “Reason” 216-219). In this dissertation, I also examine the emergent cemetery culture of extramural burial which was fighting to assert itself against the dominant cemetery culture of

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3 Understandably poor people had many apprehensions about what exactly was going on with all of these bodies. One man brought a case that the workhouse was serving “Nattomy soup.” The case was investigated and when no evidence was discovered the man was sentenced to serve several days in jail (Richardson 221).
intramural churchyard burial. During the first four decades of the nineteenth century, the extramural cemetery movement sought to bury people away from the traditional churchyard because of the unhealthy situation ground overuse had created.⁴ Furthermore, before the body reached the churchyard death diverged importantly from our current experience, because it was literally closer to home. People largely died at home rather than in hospitals and the preparation of the body to be buried, called “laying-out,” “streeking,” or “rendering the last offices,” happened at home rather than in a funeral home (a business which did not yet exist) (Richardson 18). There are some contemporary models (such as Hospice) that are closer to the older traditions which help allow an ill person to return home to die; also of note is the new trend of green burials, which often include washing and preparing the body for burial in the home by family members and friends. Despite these examples, in the West we are largely flustered and uncomfortable in the presence of a corpse, even one we did not know in life, which seems to be the result of passing the handling of death off to the medical community and having little to do with the dead.

Historically, one event which deeply affected the nation and is a crucial touchstone to Romantic conceptions of death is the death of Princess Charlotte in 1817. Stephen Behrendt’s book *Royal Mourning and Regency Culture: Elegies and Memorials of Princess Charlotte* (1997) examines in depth the effect Princess Charlotte’s death had on the British public and the different ways the public responded. The country was consumed with grief for the young royal who was a stand in for Britannia and liberty and had on her shoulders the possibility of redeeming the royal family (Behrendt 194; 234-236). Her image was commodified for the grieving public in plates, cups, tea services, and jewelry (Behrendt 189). Our own equivalent would be Princess Diana’s death, which caused an inundation of coffee cups and t-shirts displaying her face in British tourist shops.

The need not only to mourn the dead but to purchase a memorial has long historical precedent. The dead themselves demand a certain level of patronage. Adam Smith discusses the dead as currency for the living. He is best interpreted in light of the Romantic period by Esther Schor in her book *Bearing the Dead: The British Culture of Mourning from the Enlightenment to Victoria* (1994):

The dead necessitate mourning because it is the only exchange available to the living.

⁴ Articles and books by Julia Rugg, Harold Mytum and Clare Gittings set up this important historical context.
Smith, while analyzing the process of identification that evokes an individual’s sympathy with the dead, designates the corporate dead as the moral capital of a culture: because the dead cannot be compensated for their privations, they warrant more sympathy than the immediate circle of mourners can supply. By means of a system of sympathetic exchanges – exchanges of sympathy for considering – moral affections circulate throughout a society. By implication, a society may be defined as those who share a common dead. (Schor 77-78)

This idea of the dead as cultural capital bears out in relation to Wordsworth, for example. In *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment*, Alan Bewell aligns Wordsworth with the words Gabriel García Márquez gives to José Arcadio Buendia in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* who says “A person does not even belong to a place until there is someone dead under the ground” (213). Kurt Fosso agrees with this sentiment in *Buried Communities: Wordsworth and the Bonds of Mourning*. Fosso argues that in Wordsworth’s poetry “it is not community that leads to a connection to the dead so much as it is the dead, and more specifically the relationship of the living to them, that leads to community” (7). Mourning is a communal activity which not only creates an activity the living can perform for the dead but also unites the community.

One cannot discuss death without also discussing the body and the medical profession. Therefore, throughout my dissertation I rely on Roy Porter, the late historian of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British medicine. I also turn to Paul Younquist’s *Monstrosities: Bodies and British Romanticism* (2003) which is particularly important for his work on the traditional body including what constituted a “normal” body (xxv). Christopher Lawrence’s book *Medicine in the Making of Modern Britain* (1994) also informs my work, particularly his discussion of the difference between eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century treatment of the body and understanding disease (45).

My study draws on historical and cultural information but does not end there. Rather, I read my chosen texts through an ecocritical lens, teasing out Green Gothic readings of the bodies these texts contain.

**Ecocriticism**

A quick look at the debate between Alan Liu and Jonathan Bate in the late nineteen-eighties and early nineteen-nineties, on the dividing line between new historicist and ecocritical
practices, makes it clear that nature remains a hotly contested critical term. In this dissertation works on the attitudes towards death and dying during the Romantic period are examined by way of the arguments ecocritics like Morton have recently put forward. Morton’s work on dark ecology is an essential new piece of ecocriticism.

Today, few people would admit to participating in the Cornucopia Tradition: the belief that nature will continue to provide for people come what may and that people will in good time figure out how to help nature through her challenges (Garrard 16). We take along our reusable bags to the grocery store and we tote along our stainless steel, BPA-free water bottles if only because they are trendy. We have stopped eating as much meat and started to check labels and buy local produce when possible, sometimes even buying produce in season; we are doing our part after all. We like to think we allow nature to disclose itself to us, that is, we allow it to “be” in the Heideggerian tradition, rather than seeing the world as little more than “standing reserve” (Garrard 31). However, many of us do our best to forget about the dirty and dying world that surrounds us by putting up backyard bird calendars in our offices or the like. Morton confronts why we cannot immerse ourselves in a jade tower.

We should be finding ways to stick around with the sticky mess that we’re in and that we are, making thinking dirtier, identifying with ugliness, practicing “hauntology” (Derrida’s phrase) rather than ontology. (Morton 188)

Our actions (or inactions) have altered nature for the worse and we can no longer ignore it. Perhaps John Muir said it best: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe” (Garrard 68). That is, those darling, snow-covered birds on a twig bejeweled with berries are hitched to the fertilizer running off your lawn, the city dump, and the industrial meat packaging plants. We should not construct a worldview that centers on a dichotomy with nature on one side and modernity on the other. As Ursula Heise points out in her article “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism”:

In earlier types of environmental scholarship, nature tended to be envisioned as a victim of modernization but also as its opposite and alternative; nature is now more often viewed as inextricably entwined with modernity—both as a concept and in the material shape in which we experience it today. More than that, environmentalists and ecocritics have begun to see how their search for a more authentic relation to nature is itself a product of modernization. (508)
While Heise’s statement is true, it is important not to take it too far—that is, not to remove our own culpability. As Morton might say, we cannot remove our own involvement from the equation.

In his article “John Clare’s Dark Ecology,” Morton says that rather than trying to bridge the gap between the self and the external world we should be doing something else. That is, asking this question: “What if globalization, via an ironic negative path, revealed that place was never very coherent in the first place?” (179-180). Nature is “the background caught in relationship with a foreground” and we often try to deal with it as a list, but a list that cannot be completed: it is, in fact, the “what is it?” (185-186). Writing down a list that begins with bunnies and trees and ends with ellipses is not the way to begin (186). It would seem the place to begin is with grief.

Now is a time for grief to persist, to ring throughout the world. Modern culture has not yet known what to do with grief. Environmentalisms have both stoked and assuaged the crushing feelings that come from a sense of total catastrophe, whether from nuclear bombs and radiation, or events such as climate change and mass extinction. (Morton “Without” 185)

Grief is the reason why Morton turns so often to John Clare’s poetry. Clare, a peasant-poet similar to Burns, situates his poetry in the country and village and takes an honest look at what is becoming of his world. In the poem “The Lamentations of Round-Oak Waters” the river speaks to a youth to express the sorrowful destruction of its ecosystem. “The Lament of Swordy Well” is even more depressing. The Well does not have a youth to talk to or try to move, it talks to all that would hear it, that is, no one.

Im swordy well a piece of land
Thats fell upon the town
Who worked me till I couldnt stand
And crush me now Im down. (21-24)

This melancholic sentiment is precisely what Morton says is necessary: “Why did we think the deepest ecological experience would be full of love and life?” (“Clare” 189). Essentially, we ought to stay down in the mud where John Clare puts us.

There are many correlations between my project and this form of ecocriticism. The earth which we still in many ways believe to be a receiving and purifying space was not acting as such
in the nineteenth-century, which is why extramural cemeteries had to be created. Of course, this delusion about the earth as a purifying space plays out in slightly different ways today. However, there is one fairly recent direct correlation. In Sarpozenx France, the mayor recently forbid citizens who did not already own a plot at the parish cemetery from dying within the parish because the cemetery was full (Dobbie 5 Mar 2008). Cemetery overcrowding is not the problem most communities are faced with. Instead, today we think about other ways the ground has been corrupted. The contemporary belief that the earth can consume the amount of garbage that we produce is akin to the belief that the earth could decompose the amount of bodies that were buried in the overcrowded churchyards in the nineteenth-century. In addition to garbage dumps there are also substances dumped accidentally or illegally as well as other hazardous substances like fertilizers that are used each day with the full knowledge and blessing of our government. The delusion that our own garbage and poor choices do not contribute to bigger ecological problems and the initial refusal of a British early nineteenth-century public to deal with their dead in a more responsible way correlates significantly. These two situations do not have the same solution, but rather than the earth turning into a putrid mass in a plot of land here and a plot of land there scattered throughout major cities we run the risk today of destroying the entire planet.

Chapter Outline

In each of the subsequent chapters, I focus on a central writer and a main text, but these chapters also incorporate additional authors and texts. Chapter Two, Ars Moriendi, focuses on Jane Austen’s doctoring of the sick body in her unfinished novel Sanditon, but also places this work among some of her other finished novels: Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, and particularly Persuasion. Chapter Three, Danse Macabre, looks at the dead body in William Hazlitt’s Liber Amoris and also takes into account Austen’s Sense and Sensibility, Keats’s “Lamia,” as well as Coleridge’s “Christabel.” Chapter Four, Transi, focuses on Thomas De Quincey’s “Suspiria de Profundis” in examining the dead body before burial and also takes into

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5 The *ars moriendi* was a genre that emerged in the fifteenth century and was an instructional manual of how to die well (McClure 96).
6 The *danse macabre* is a literary and artistic motif that was especially popular in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-centuries but seems to have begun in the thirteenth-century. In it death is portrayed as coming for people in all walks of life and economical brackets (Mc Clure 97-99).

**Chapter Two: Ars Moriendi: The Ill Body in Austen**

In this chapter, I look at the sick body in the context of Jane Austen’s fiction. I argue that Austen is doing something new with the character of Charlotte Heywood in her unfinished novel *Sanditon*; she is setting up Charlotte as a female doctor and a woman who did not need to be “schooled” by a Mr. Knightley or a Mr. Darcy. I then look at the sick body as attended to by multiple other women in Austen’s fiction: Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*; Elinor Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*; and particularly Anne Elliot and Nurse Rooke in *Persuasion*. I argue Austen was creating a protagonist in *Sanditon* who was different from her former ones. In Charlotte we find a heroine who does not need to be schooled like Emma or humiliated like Elizabeth. She may be more like Fanny Price who despite being mousey at least knew her own mind when put on the spot. Charlotte is in possession of a healthy amount of self-awareness and knows how to govern herself in social situations. She seems a heroine beyond reproach and, one might almost feel, beyond the need of a narrator. Furthermore, it is the doctoring role that Austen creates for Charlotte that makes this new dimension of her character possible. Porter and Lawrence are of particular importance to this chapter as it relates directly to the body. One further important element illustrates the anxiety already present about the body as possible anatomical medical school prop. The Parkers try to recapture control over their own bodies, control that the doctors threatened to remove. No one can be certain in their final hours whether they will rest in peace under the soil.

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7 The *transi* was an image of a decomposing body popular from the fourteenth- through the sixteenth-centuries. It was not common in places that exhibited the body after death (France, Italy, Spain) but it was common in countries that covered the body after death (England) (Ariés 113- 114).

8 A *memento mori* is a souvenir of a loved one. It does not have to be a physical remain of the deceased, like a lock of hair, but can also be simply a picture of the departed (Ariés 257).

9 In fact, there does not seem to be more distance between the narrator and Charlotte. It is almost as if the narrator is in danger of being erased, if not in this novel then perhaps in what might have been Austen’s next novel.
Chapter Three: *Danse Macabre*: Imagining the Dead Body in Hazlitt

In chapter three I move from a sick body that might be made well to the imagined sick and even dead body. I argue that William Hazlitt in *Liber Amoris* (1823) is participating in the burial culture debate by imagining the woman he loves as dead. The relationship between the living and the dead is a site of division extending back to the overturning of purgatory at the Reformation; the desire to remain in contact with the dead still surfaces in the texts I choose to analyze for this chapter (Llewellyn 27). Because *Liber Amoris* is a little-known text I have chosen to situate it alongside better known texts from the same period: *Sense and Sensibility*, “Lamia,” “Christabel.” The choice we now have over the preferred method of disposal of our own corpse sets us at a historical distance from this time period and I investigate this difference to close that gap. Texts in the early eighteen-twenties and beyond are also charged with the unique task of bringing the dead back to the living at a time when the dead were being buried further away from the center of town and thus further away from the friends and family of the corpse. Hazlitt uses the text as a space where he can have access to not only the dead but also the living. Additionally, I argue that the state of churchyards at the end of the eighteenth-century and beginning of the nineteenth-century has important ecocritical echoes within our own time.

Chapter Four: *Transi*: The Dead Body in De Quincey

In chapter four I move to the actual dead body before it is buried. The main text my argument centers on is Thomas De Quincey’s memories of his sister in “Suspiria de Profundis” (1845). In this text De Quincey talks about those memories that haunt him, especially his sister’s death. After she died he sneaked up to the room she was laid out in to see her body and to give her a guilty kiss. The treatment of her body and the gift stolen rather than given resonates with other famous Romantic death scenes, especially the burning of Percy Shelley’s body on the beach as recalled by both Leigh Hunt and Edward Trelawny. These instances are important because they demonstrate how a living person changes into a death object. The person becomes a dead body and in that change becomes a thing. William Hazlitt imagined his love as dead because he knew it was the only way he could possess her; however, when confronted with actual death the corpse is something other than another natural object. It is not the same as a rock or even a dead animal, though this is of course all it really is, but it seems a wholly other object. It becomes something unnatural. Once that body changes into a corpse the living inherit a certain
amount of freedom in their treatment of it. I also bring my readings to bear on “The Boy of Winander” from Book Five of *The Prelude*. “Suspiria de Profundis” is also charged with bringing the dead back to the survivors. De Quincey uses the text of “Suspiria” as a place he can remember his sister where he is in control. The memory is one of many that forces itself onto him unbidden, but in the physical artifact of the text De Quincey can connect with his sister’s corpse while being the one in charge of the situation. She is, in a sense, embalmed in the text.

**Chapter Five: Memento Mori: Remembering the Body in Wordsworth**

In chapter five I move to the representation of the dead body. The main text I focus on is William Wordsworth’s poem “The Thorn.” I argue Wordsworth sets up a triumvirate in “Essays Upon Epitaphs” of body, marker, and epitaph; thus we should assume that if we have a body and a marker in “The Thorn,” then we have an epitaph as well. I assert the epitaph is the wail of Martha Ray and argue that the reason she is bound to return to that location is not only because her baby is buried there but because she must return to speak the epitaph for the dead because it is not written there. In context I also turn to other poems by Wordsworth such as “The Brothers.” Additionally, I demonstrate how “The Drowned Man” episode in Book Five of *The Prelude* is relevant to my argument. In this chapter I will also bring to bear the more insidious cultural context of grave robbing. Astley Cooper, an important surgeon of the period, told the Select Committee which was investigating body snatching that “[t]here is no-one, let his situation in life be what it may, whom, if I were disposed to dissect, I could not obtain” (Richardson “Victorian” 110). What was worse, as the dirt over the grave would be loose because the grave had just been filled anyway, there was no way real way of knowing whether the body of your loved one was still resting peacefully without digging it up. What this uncertainty meant is that a similar anxiety was already present at the time extramural cemeteries began to be built. When these cemeteries were built the anxiety would now encroach from two directions. This anxiety is

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10 In fact Astley Cooper was the attendant surgeon of George IV, William IV, and (early in her reign) Queen Victoria (231-233). Cooper died in 1841.

11 The patent coffin was introduced in 1818. It was made of wrought iron and designed to prevent levering the lid off or forcing the side of the coffin apart (Richardson 81). Some parishes had mortsafes which were huge pieces of stone placed on newly dug graves. One from Aberdeen “was seven feet three inches in length, two and a half feet wide at the shoulders, and was one and a half feet in depth.” One would need a block and tackle to lift it (Richardson 83). People without access to these methods might place a rock or a stick on the corpse itself so that if the body was taken then that rock or stick would be found outside of the grave. Grave robbers became adept at spotting these tokens though (Richardson 63).
present in the way Martha Ray is bound to the grave of her child. The ground literally shakes when the villagers approach to dig up the infant.

**Conclusion**

The arguments here are clearly relevant to other texts, such as *Frankenstein*. Victor is essentially a resurrectionist who anatomizes corpses and sews them together. *Frankenstein* refuses to allow the dead to be forgotten or relegated to pretty cemeteries away from town. The novel literally fashions the dead into a new body and brings these pieces back to life. So, too, Walter Scott’s novel *The Bride of Lammermoor*, suffused with death culture, is structured around a series of funerals. The novel begins with the funeral of Lord Ravenswood, in the middle is propped up by the funeral arrangements for Blind Alice, and concludes with the burial of Lucy Ashton.

These romantic texts are an important historical context for modern negotiations with the dead body. Mark Harris’ *Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial* (2007) tells us that in a typical ten-acre cemetery there is “enough coffin wood to construct more than forty houses, nine hundred-plus tons of casket steel, and another twenty thousand tons of vault concrete” (38). There is also enough formalin\(^{12}\) to fill a backyard swimming pool (Harris 38). Moreover, there are still public health concerns at play in the modern cemetery. Arsenic, a common preservative before it was banned by the government from use in embalming practices in 1910, has been found in ground water near cemeteries (Harris 39). Copper, lead, zinc, and iron (coffin metals) are now found in cemetery soils (Harris 40). To top it off there are plenty of cases of liquefied remains seeping out of above ground mausoleums (Harris 37). Harris also takes issue with the cost of the average funeral which is generally around ten thousand dollars and will account for one of the “single most expensive purchases a family will make in its lifetime” (10). As this cost goes to show, our modern funeral industry is the child of the ostentatious nineteenth-century funeral industry. Rather than buying coffins with rows of black upholstery nails and lined with lead we buy heavily varnished wooden or bronze coffins and bury them in cement vaults to keep the earth from reaching the remains of our dead. We no

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\(^{12}\) A type of formaldehyde.
longer employ mutes\textsuperscript{13} or decorate with ostrich feathers but we have our own brand of pomp, composed of white carnations and rented Cadillacs. One of the most striking differences is, as Harris points out, rather than holding the viewing in our own parlors we now pay someone else (the funeral home) for the privilege of conducting it in theirs (46). Embalming is another particularly gruesome issue which I choose not to relate here beyond mentioning the potential problems of burying formaldehyde in the ground and dumping the embalming effluent, untreated, into the sewer system.\textsuperscript{14}

Harris offers seven “natural” alternatives to what many assume is the only option available. He is one voice of a growing movement insisting on green (or at least greener) burials. Our contemporary cemetery problems are different from those of the nineteenth-century, but the answer is actually fairly similar. The British nineteenth-century cemetery movement fought to move the dead closer to nature by locating them in cemeteries away from the overused ones in the center of town. The green burial movement wishes to do much the same thing. They are trying to raise public support for the building of cemeteries that will not insist on concrete vaults in the ground to prevent the mingling of the corpse with the elements and that will forbid the use of embalming fluids. The burial grounds the green burial movement wants to establish will not be as neat as the ones which are common today. Without those concrete vaults, as the corpse decays and a coffin (if used) collapses, the earth will sink giving the ground a pocked appearance. This appearance while marred would only surprise those who expected to find perfection in nature; that is, a manicured golf course in the middle of the forest. To the rest of us a green cemetery will look like very much what it is – a field.

\textsuperscript{13} Mutes were men that were hired for the funeral. They dressed in black and did not speak. Before the funeral they flanked the door of the house where the body rested. Once the funeral commenced the mutes were then also part of the funeral procession.

\textsuperscript{14} Harris amply covers embalming and what happens to the byproducts thereof in the first two chapters of his book in enough detail to make anyone swear to never subject any friend or family member to the process.
CHAPTER TWO

ARS MORIENDI: THE ILL BODY IN AUSTEN

It should seem that they must either be very busy for the Good of others, or else extremely ill themselves. Some natural delicacy of Constitution in fact, with an unfortunate turn for Medecine, especially quack Medecine, had given them an early tendency at various times, to various disorders;—the rest of their sufferings was from Fancy, the love of Distinction and the love of the Wonderful. [sic] (Austen 334)

_Sanditon_ exists only in manuscript form; Jane Austen died before she could finish the first volume. While suffering through her final illness she begins writing a story about a young woman, Charlotte Heywood, who meets a group of hypochondriacs in a seaside resort who seem to hope _not_ to be cured. Perhaps at no other time in her life was Austen more ready to write a novel that commented on the medical system of early nineteenth-century Britain. Because there are no doctors present in the novel (though many references to them) Charlotte assumes the role of physician. I argue that Austen uses Charlotte as a representation of the medical profession and that reading _Sanditon_ through this lens gives us an insight into the world of the ill body (imagined or otherwise). In later chapters I will examine the imagined dead body, the corpse, and the epitaph, but for the present I will focus on the ill body because this is the body just before it is dead. Dead and alive seem as if they are two binary opposites, but current medical doctors tell another story. They typically refer to death as a process. The ill body, though, is as close as we can get to a liminal space between life and death. It is, essentially, the body in transition.

This chapter has two main sections. The first reviews how doctors were perceived both from inside and outside the medical profession. The section then examines the history of hypochondria and concludes with a brief contextual history of the role of women healers in Britain. Within the first section I draw upon James Robert Allards’s _Romanticism, Medicine, and the Poet’s Body_ (2007) as well as George C. Grinnel’s _The Age of Hypochondria Interpreting Romantic Health and Illness_ (2010). I also reference other scholars of nineteenth-century medicine such as Christopher Lawrence and Roy Porter. The second section focuses on _Sanditon_. I demonstrate how Charlotte takes on the role of doctor as she studies the Parker siblings. I also argue that Charlotte as a doctor is categorically different from the other women
Setting “the Doctor” in Context

“I beseech you, Mr. Parker, no Doctors here”: Problem Doctors

Those who require (or believe they require) a doctor in *Sanditon* are primarily the Parker family. Mr. Parker sprains his ankle and his two sisters and brother Arthur are all committed hypochondriacs. The members of this group of hypochondriacs were probably based on people in Austen’s acquaintance. As Deirdre Le Faye points out Diana was probably drawn from Mrs. Edward Bridges. Austen calls her “. . . a poor Honey-the sort of woman who gives me the idea of being determined never to be well-& who likes her spasms & nervousness & the consequence they give her, better than anything else” (59). Susan can be assumed to be Lady Sondes who Austen wished would “now leave off having bad headaches and being pathetic . . .” (59). Arthur Parker was likely based on Robert Mascall who, like Arthur, “eats a great deal of butter” (59). It does not seem useful to spend time belaboring the details of who these people were or the extent of their relationship with Austen. What is useful in pointing out is that Austen drew these characters from life is that they were very real types of people that she came across on a regular basis; these were not mere inventions. In choosing to write a novel that focuses on people like this it enables her to poke fun at as well as sympathize with these characters and take on the medical institution.

In early nineteenth-century Britain, there was a three-tier hierarchical system of medical practitioners. The physician who diagnosed the patient was at the top, followed by the surgeon who worked with his hands to treat the patient and so occupied a lower position, followed by the apothecary who prescribed medicine. There was no body or organization that insured each person in each position was only doing the work entailed by his position. Apothecaries and surgeons would often do the work of the other or of physicians.15 Roy Porter points out that it is, in fact, important *not* to think of this as a rigid hierarchy because there was quite a bit of slippage among the three (“Bodies Politic” 171). It is useful to understand the three as part of a

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15 The Apothecary Act of 1815 established what schooling and apprenticeship was required to receive a license from the Society of Apothecaries. This was meant to give educated Apothecaries, who were effectively acting as general practitioners, a recognizable form of departure from common druggists (Porter 254).
hierarchical class-like system though, because this is how they would have been perceived by their patients even if in practice there was less distance between them. To avoid confusion, and because all three occupations were denied to women, throughout the essay I use the word “doctor” as a placeholder for the whole profession.

James Robert Allard points out that there were often calls for reform in medical practice especially for apothecaries and surgeons (33). It is the physician Thomas Beddoes who says (partially in jest) that physicians should get sick every so often because they will be more likely to pursue cures for maladies they are subject to, and suffering from a disease would attune them to the sufferings of their patients (Allard 33-34). This is a far cry from the Hunter brothers who, “… often encouraged [students] to visit slaughterhouses and perform vivisections on animals not only to develop a better understanding of how to maintain the vitality of a living being during an operation but also to become accustomed to hearing and seeing the pain and anguish experienced by surgical patients” (Allard 40). There is no doubt a certain practicality to recommending that students partake in vivisections. There was no anesthetic outside of alcohol in use at the time and operations were performed on patients who were completely awake. These patients had to be restrained during the procedure and would often beg the surgeon to let them die rather than continue the operation. It was important for a surgeon to be able to continue operating under these conditions; however without a healthy amount of compassion in place operating on patients risked sadism.

The amount of schooling a doctor received was also questionable. Beddoes was distrustful of a little knowledge in the hands of medical students:

Any lad will enter on the practice of physic as soon as he can but scrawl the cabalistic sign for ounce, dram, and scruple, and knows about how much jalap is to be given to purge, how much chalk to bind, or laudanum to compose; and whatever it may cost the sick, he will take the chance for the benefit of the proverb — practice makes perfect (Letter 21). (Allard 4)

Beddoes believed it should take six years of training during which time students should read between 500 and 800 medical texts as well as attending dissections (Allard 35). This call for reform does not paint an encouraging picture of the doctor one would call to the home to attend an ill loved one. From some corners people were calling doctors distracted and disinterested—even callous—and the amount of schooling they received was not considered adequate. Austen
often talks favorably of local family doctors who had been vetted by the whole community as someone to turn to in times of need. However, in the event that the village had a new, poorly trained doctor or one who was simply not good at his job there was no one else to turn to. No one, that is, except for the women in the family.

Women Doctors

It may seem odd to label a woman as a doctor in this era at all. Yet, Porter says: “In truth, however, [women] were intimately involved in medical practice throughout the early modern era, being greatly in demand for treating children, servants, family, friends, and neighbours alike” (“Bodies Politic” 194). Women were indeed important to the health of any town or village, from the early modern period onward as evidenced by Austen’s novels. Elinor is at Marianne’s side and looks after her with a doctor’s help in Sense and Sensibility as does Elizabeth with Jane in Pride and Prejudice. A woman like Charlotte or her mother, Mrs. Heywood, might be useful helping neighbors and friends in times of illness, and it is certain they were available to members of their own family in this way. Women had long been a piece of the medical system. For instance, in the seventeenth-century:

women were also called upon to search for and interpret ‘tokens’ of the inner condition which were visibly manifested on the surface of the physical body and through gestures the dying process. The roles of ‘looker’, ‘nurse’, ‘attendant’ or constant observer of the deathbed was particularly important as they actively engaged women in an interpretive process which mediated the deathbed and wider social relations. (Hallam 115)

It was not unusual for female family members to watch by the bedside of a sick relative, especially if the patient was expected to die. This process extended into the later nineteenth-century as evidenced by the importance Victorians placed on deathbed scenes generally and deathbed confessions specifically.

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16 The first women to achieve a degree in medicine was Elizabeth Blackwell from Geneva Medical School in New York in 1857. The first woman to be granted a medical degree in Britain was Elizabeth Garrett in 1865 who got the diploma of the Society of Apothecaries using a series of loopholes (Porter “Greatest” 357).

17 There are several mentions of older women assisting younger women to learn how to care for the sick throughout Austen’s novels. Sense and Sensibility has two examples of women helping Elinor during Marianne’s illness. Of Mrs. Jennings Elinor believes she was “a most willing and active helpmate, desirous to share in all her fatigues, and often by her better experience in nursing, of material use” (III.vii. 232). A further example is: “[due to Elinor’s] mother’s presence in aid, [Marianne’s recovery] proceeded so smoothly as to enable her to remove, within four days after the arrival of the latter, into Mrs. Palmer’s dressing room.” (III. X. 257). Here her mother’s superior abilities allowed Marianne to get better quicker than if she had not been there.
Thomas Beddoes had a quarrel with women doctoring their families. He would not have bothered taking issue with the practice had it not been widespread. One of the problems he identified is that women were sometimes wrong and by practicing physic would occasionally kill their family and friends by accident (43). There were, of course, accidental deaths brought on by physicians as well. Rather than distributing medicine to the sick Beddoes wanted women to be in charge of the diets of their families and steer them away from the French cuisine that had been popular in the early eighteenth-century in favor of good, sturdy English foods (Grinnell 43-44). What women were supposed to do, he believed, was to be the eyes and ears of the physician so they could tell him what was happening and recount the symptoms of the patient. Beddoes wished to employ these women much in the same way women had been expected to read the body in the seventeenth-century for signs of approaching death.

In Beddoes’ version of a healthy home, the wife will be a handmaiden to the professional physician rather than the one who aggravates domestic worries. Affording women the role of informant, able to act for the doctor so long as they do not act as the doctor, Beddoes sees wives as the domestic prosthesis of the doctor’s gaze into the household. In other words, whereas domestic medical manuals could be turned to by a wife looking to treat a husband or child, or so Beddoes imagines, his texts reverses this relationship by casting the wife in the role of a repository of useful information for the physician.

(Grinnell 45)

Beddoes wanted to take women out of the role of doctor and subjugate them to a secondary role of telling the doctor what had happened so that the doctor could make the decisions. Keeping women from being active participants in the sick room may call to mind the image of the male midwife (accoucheurs) who replaced the midwife as the go-to professional for the job of delivering babies. There was fighting between male and female midwives in the eighteenth-century as male midwives sought to supplant female midwives. The men argued they had science (and the use of forceps) on their side while the women claimed they had nature on theirs (Porter “Bodies Politic” 225). Male doctors promoted themselves over midwives making them out to be drunken, know-nothing hags who were incapable of doing their jobs rather than the capable practitioners many were. In Thomas Rowlandson’s depiction the female midwife is a large,
unattractive woman toting a bottle.\textsuperscript{18} Porter says “Her repulsive physique suggests . . . the less than savoury connotations of traditional childbirth” (“Bodies Politic” 195). My focus here though is not women trying to make a profession of their services, but rather women simply trying to care for their families. Beddoes does not take into consideration that the wives he is talking about may be:

- gathering knowledge from his medicine that can be incorporated into an alternative discourse network of care and which forms the basis of therapies that regular medicine cannot or does not offer. Instead of recognizing the home as the site of an alternative knowledge that comes from women’s experience tending to the sick, Beddoes prioritizes the ostensible authority of manuals of domestic medicine. (Grinnell 45)

It seems Austen is setting up Charlotte with this tradition in sight, as educated by her mother, to become a woman in a long line of women who would be capable of caring for her family members when a doctor was not yet needed or when one was unable to attend the patient. Hypochondria, the health issue foregrounded in Sanditon, would be a specifically difficult illness to treat in the home, because by its very nature (because there is nothing wrong with the patient in the first place) it is incurable. Hypochondriacs seem to vacillate between either wanting excessive attention from doctors or wanting none at all. Those who were seeking professional attention would have had little trouble finding it.

**Hypochondria is a disease of “non-specific pains and their relation to the ever-fecund imagination”**:\textsuperscript{19} Why Hypochondria?

While in the town of Sanditon, Charlotte’s first contact with the Parker sisters is in a letter Miss Diana Parker sends to Mr. Parker. In it she says she was glad to receive Mr. Parker’s letter, “though it found me suffering under a more severe attack than usual of my old greivance [sic], Spasmodic Bile and hardly able to crawl from my Bed to the Sofa” (313). Of poor sister Susan she says:

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\textsuperscript{18} There is a tendency now to say that in past times women were in more control over the birth of their children than they are today. This is not true. It is true that hospitals now have rigid procedural codes that govern how they react to certain situations, but midwives in days of yore were not the kind, earth-mothers that they are sometimes presented as (Shorter 68). For one they were very impatient, often instructing women to begin to push after their first contractions began meaning women were exhausted at the point when pushing would be useful (Shorter 60). It was also not uncommon for midwives to try to force the cervix further open with their fingers often causing damage to the mother and dangerous infection (Shorter 61).
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\textsuperscript{19} Roy Porter summarizing George Cheyne (Grinnell 91).
\end{flushleft}
I doubt whether Susan’s nerves would be equal to the effort [of visiting them in Sanditon]. She has been suffering from the Headache and Six Leaches a day for ten days together releived [sic] her so little that we thought it right to change our methods—and being convinced on examination that much of the Evil lay in her Gum, I persuaded her to attack the disorder there. She has accordingly had three Teeth drawn, and is decidedly better, but her Nerves are a good deal deranged. (313-314)

This letter is the first time the Parker sisters present themselves in the novel. Heretofore all mention of them has been funneled through Mr. Parker. The letter serves to show the image the Parker sisters choose to show the world; they are ill people and unfit for any sort of exertion at all. It is best they stay put and out of harm’s way.

In his article on Sanditon “The Late Jane Austen” D. A. Miller dismisses the Parker clan as simple hypochondriacs and seems to view them with disdain and distrust (or at best) amused condescension. Being attended by a doctor, as Jane Austen was while she was writing Sanditon, puts Austen in a unique position to comment on the medical profession. Choosing to talk about patients who elect to be ill shines light not only on the patients but also on the doctors who took them on as patients even when some doctors did not believe they were actually ill. Austen’s choice to display hyper-patient-patients rather than an ill Marianne Dashwood or Jane Bennett speaks to her different intentions for this novel.

It has already been shown that some doctors, like Thomas Beddoes, had hopes of reforming the British medical profession. However, this sort of reform would no doubt take time, and it is not surprising that in this environment a trend of self-doctoring cropped up. Michel Foucault observed that the doctor rather than asking “What is the matter with you?” in the eighteenth century had moved to asking “Where does it hurt?” This change of question fundamentally changed the power dynamic in the doctor/patient relationship (Allard 7). It placed the doctor in the position of knowing what is best for the patient while the patient was relegated to simply pointing. Christopher Lawrence observes that while eighteenth century medicine involved identifying the body’s natural state and attempting to return the ill body to its own personal natural state, nineteenth century medicine was concerned with identifying where a body deviated from what was normal and encouraging that body to conform (Lawrence 45). This places patients under more pressure; they not only have to get well, but they also have to achieve a goal that perhaps they did not meet when in top condition. To follow this to its logical
conclusion this means that some patients were over-medicated and over-treated in a time when, while medicine was advancing, Wordsworth was still writing about leech-gatherers and leeches were still used as a treatment for all sorts of ailments.\textsuperscript{20}

Later, the Victorians had a largely positive image of the doctor, but these were images put forward by the medical profession itself. In contrast, Porter observers, “[the] rendering[s] of physicians by outsiders were overwhelmingly negative, underwriting the distrust expressed in popular proverbs: ‘one doctor makes work for another.’ Practitioners were pilloried in Georgian novels as ‘Dr Slop’ or ‘Dr Smelfungus’” (“Bodies Politic” 32). One opinion we get about doctors in \textit{Sanditon} is from Lady Denham, who tells Mr. Parker that she does not want a doctor coming to practice at Sanditon. “I verily believe that if my poor dear Sir Harry had never seen one neither, he would have been alive now. – Ten fees, one after another, did the man take who sent him out of the World. – I beseech you, Mr. Parker, no Doctors here” (324). We can be sure her Ladyship is just as unhappy about parting with her money as parting with her husband, but nonetheless she believes the blame for her husband’s death falls on the doctor who treated him. Not that this is an unusual belief; as the cost of malpractice insurance indicates, even today bereaved relatives and friends blame even the most exact and well intentioned doctors for the deaths of their loved ones.\textsuperscript{21} In this vein, William Buchan advised in 1796 in his \textit{Domestic Medicine; or, A Treatise on the Prevention and Cure of Disease by Regimen and Simple Medicine} for people to take care of themselves and avoid medical practitioners (Allard 37).\textsuperscript{22}

Self-doctoring using a book like Buchan’s \textit{Domestic Medicine} is not something limited only to hypochondriacs. In fact what I have been calling “self-doctoring” was so common it should be compared to the list of things any one of us today would try before heading off to see a doctor: resting, eating chicken soup, and drinking lots of fluids. Buchan’s book was so popular that although it was published in 1769 it was still in print in the nineteenth-century (Grinnell 34). Though I have not seen any direct evidence to support this, it would not be an errant assumption

\textsuperscript{20} Using leeches is actually still a treatment in modern medicine. However, today it is used for very specific purposes rather than the catch-all it was used for in the nineteenth-century.

\textsuperscript{21} This is not to suggest that justified malpractice suits do not occur.

\textsuperscript{22} A further example to illustrate the callousness of some within the profession relates to dissection. Less that fifteen years after \textit{Sanditon} was published the medical profession arranged to be allowed to dissect any unclaimed bodies from hospitals and workhouses. “Unclaimed” does not mean those who have no family; it means those whose families are unable to show they have sufficient funds for burial of the corpse. This is still a time of belief in bodily resurrection; a time when murderers were dissected as a further punishment not on their bodies but on their souls. It is little wonder then that rather than deal with doctors, who could send you out of this world as quickly as anchor you to it, some legitimately chose to turn to self-doctoring.
to think that Austen’s family kept a copy of it. “Domestic Medicine proved hugely popular,” explains Porter, “the two books every Scottish croft housed [for instance], they said, were Buchan and the Bible” (“Bodies Politic” 17). People commonly then, as now, served as their own doctor when possible. This connects to hypochondria because if it is the case that most people would try to heal themselves before applying to an actual doctor, then it is also the case that people who are not actually sick but pretending to be sick would self-doctor more than the average person.

It should be stated clearly that Austen firmly believes that people who have hypochondria are electing to be ill and they thus serve as comic objects in her novel. However, this is not the belief held by everyone at the time.

Prior to the Romantic period, a nervous sensibility referred most consistently to an individual’s experience of life through his or her senses—literally the functioning of the senses. English writers such as Adam Smith and David Hume recognized sensitivity as the capacity to feel and feel for another. What was new by the end of the eighteenth century, however, was the nervousness increasingly also denoted a pathological condition of the altogether too-sensitive body. To be nervous remained potentially salutary, especially for poets and writers, yet sensibility was not always easy to turn off and it could produce paralyzing states of introspection and attention to the body that prompted calls for treatment and correction. (Grinnell 5)

Hypochondria was recognized by some as an actual physiological condition, not just a state of mind for people with too much time and money on their hands. There is an element of the belief that boredom caused hypochondria even for those who believed Hypochondria to be an actual physical disease like the flu. Beddoes, for example, also wrote Hygëia: or Essays Moral and Medical, on the Causes of Affecting the Personal State of our Middling and Affluent Classes which was published in 1802. In it he praises the laboring classes believing their health is related to their doing a moderate level of work on a regular basis (Grinnell 36). To this end, he also believed the middling classes were becoming more and more like the aristocracy; becoming like an aristocrat was a problem because he believed (due to their lack of labor) the aristocracy was the unhealthiest class of people in the British cultural hierarchy (Grinnell 39).

George Cheyne, most famous for diagnosing melancholy as the English malady in The English Malady in 1733, had different ideas about hypochondria and believed the disease served
a purpose (Grinnell 91). He believed that “the importance of hypochondria lay in the implied presence of some underlying condition, the contours of which could begin to become intelligible only if the individual’s experience of ill health was recognized to be imaginary” (95). Cheyne’s belief was that the importance of hypochondria was that it suggested another illness at work in the individual. The role of the doctor in this situation was to discover that the patient was suffering from hypochondria and realize that the symptoms manifesting in the patient actually told of another underlying condition. “Paradoxically,” Grinnell points out, “this tendency of the English Malady to reference an underlying infirmity transforms the malady into a sign of health, or an expression of a robust body that refuses to suffer unseen disease silently” (96).

Hypochondria could actually be seen as a desire within the body to regain health. Furthermore, hypochondria (because it marked someone as especially sensitive) was linked to melancholy and “was a valued marker of sensibility in the period” as well as “a symptom of English civilization” (Grinnell 99; 92). This view of hypochondria is sharply distinct from Austen’s representations. She clearly finds the antics of hypochondriacs ridiculous, though as I argue, she is still sympathetic to them.

Although hypochondriacs like Mr. Woodhouse in Emma do emerge in Austen’s other works, in Sanditon, says Miller, “the bathing place offers hypochondria as a ‘support system’ in social organization” (Miller 69). The Parkers are in a place where they are supported no longer just by themselves but by the whole social system. By banding together, the Parker siblings with the rest of the languishing crowd at Sanditon, Miller believes they serve to create a “culture of morbidity.” Mr. Parker’s sisters “...though spinsters, nonetheless take on the quasi-reproductive task of multiplying the species” or recruiting new members to the culture of morbidity (Miller 69). The “culture of morbidity” is Miller’s term to signify a culture that fixates on the body as a morbid object which will one day die. This culture both requires and refuses a doctor. “Morbidity culture is thus founded in precise relation to the doctor figure, who it first negates, or at least sets at a distance, and then sublates in the ‘habit of self-doctoring’ required to produce a morbid subject” (Miller 72). If the Parkers allowed themselves to be examined a doctor might tell Diana Parker to relax or tell Arthur to stop eating so much. If a doctor is let in, he just might cure them, and that is the last thing they want. As Miller puts it:

Dear and despised, felt now to facilitate, now to foil the habit of self-doctoring and the ensuing formation of the doctoring self, the medical man haunts morbidity culture as the
great phantom of its operation: wherein he is at once nowhere, all desire for him frustrated or repudiated, and everywhere, his expertise usurped and exceeded … undislodgeably ground into the whole social fabric … The desire for the doctor, in other words, is eventually explicated as a desire to be one – one’s own. (Miller 72)

We can see this desire to be one’s own doctor in the microcosm of the tea tray on the fine English summer day when Charlotte meets the Parkers, where each patient has requested their own herb tea (or cocoa in Arthur’s case) meant to cure what ails them (337). What Miller fails to take into consideration is that self-doctoring grants power and self-knowledge to patients which are attributes denied them by the medical establishment. In this situation Susan Parker can decide that her headaches should be treated with leeches and tooth extractions. At least Susan Parker is allowed to do more than just lie on a couch and point to her head. This self-doctoring fosters agency. Self-doctoring is obviously problematic, and it would be impossible to ignore the narrator’s annoyance with these hypochondriacal characters. Charlotte, the one with the clear head, is obviously not fooled by them either. The novel clearly sets up Charlotte as the one the reader is supposed to believe. When she meets the whole Parker family while she stays within the bounds of social grace she both diagnoses what is wrong with them and offers prescriptions. Miller’s vanished doctor is in fact present in the person of Charlotte.

In his book Jane Austen or The Secret of Style, Miller sees in Sanditon the unraveling of the author and the death of the stylothete. He points to Mr. Hollis’ hollies and the Hilliers that live at the bottom of the hill—unstable phonemes all—as evidence of this unraveling (86-89). This may not be the damning evidence he believes it to be. Austen was still revising, and the simple reason that she had revised these sections once already is not enough of a reason to believe she would not revise again (or again). There is no reason to suspect that the Hilliers would not become the Sibleys at some later point in the revision process much in the same way as Mr. Hollis’ hollies were uprooted. Furthermore, beyond the level of the signifier Miller is concerned about the tension between the conjugal imperative and the fact that the whole story revolves around “disaster and death” and that those deaths can never be realized in an Austen novel (“style” 77; 80). He claims that it is not as if one of the Parker sisters is actually going to die, which is precisely what the novel needs: “And only the antiphrasis of death could let us

23 My own limited experience with writing fiction is full of characters like the Hilliers who do not really matter anyway, are only there as a placeholder, and I toss in a name that describes the function of the character and come back and change it later.
grasp the grain of truth that, in among its salts and vials, hypochondria nonetheless contains: that we are indeed always suffering from something that will be ‘the death of us’ – life” (“style” 79). Here Miller fails to see the hypochondriacs as fulfilling some function beyond their role as Mr. Parker’s family. Here they serve to allow Austen to comment on the medical system she was subject to.

**The Case for Charlotte Heywood in *Sanditon***

The first time we meet Charlotte Heywood is in the capacity of healer. *Sanditon* begins with Mr. Parker looking for a surgeon he wants to ask to become Sanditon’s resident surgeon. He mistakenly believes a surgeon to live nearby and in his search he twists his ankle outside of the Heywood family home. Mr. Heywood tells Mr. and Mrs. Parker that there is not a surgeon nearby but promises his own family can attend to Mr. Parker’s injury: “‘We are always well stocked,’ said he, ‘with all the common remedies for Sprains and Bruises – and I will answer for the pleasure it will give my Wife and daughters to be of service to you and this Lady in every way in their power’” (298). Consequently, Mr. and Mrs. Parker stays with the Heywoods for two weeks where “[h]e was waited on and nursed” (300). When they are preparing to leave, the Parkers want the whole family to come visit them in Sanditon as soon as can be arranged, but settle on having the eldest daughter accompany them immediately. This is when the reader is told that it was Charlotte who had acted as nurse to Mr. Parker. “The invitation was to Miss Charlotte Heywood, … the one, who under her Mother’s directions had been particularly useful and obliging to them; who had attended them most, and knew them best” (303). While Mr. Parker does not bring a surgeon to Sanditon he returns with Charlotte Heywood, a young woman who has already proven her skills as a healer.

Although scholars have not called Charlotte a doctor, they have called her an excellent reader. This is important to my case, because doctors are readers of the body. Melissa Sodeman in “Domestic Mobility in *Persuasion* and *Sanditon*” considers both how Charlotte reads people and novels. Leaving her home at Willingden provides her, says Sodeman, “with an opportunity to learn and adjudicate value in the larger world. Once she leaves Willingden, her domestic life

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24 Roy Porter tells us that it was “The surgeon’s job … to treat external complaints (skin conditions, boils, wounds and injuries), to set bones, and to perform simple operations. It was also he who was largely responsible for treating venereal infections” (Porter 173). In the vein of Jill Heydt-Stevenson this may be a veiled reference to Mr. Parker’s real reason for wanting a town full of vulnerable young women.
consists of assessing values in social and commercial arenas” (802). Charlotte’s mind is quick and she is ready to pass judgment on those she meets, but not in the calculating way of an Emma Woodhouse. There is no matchmaking (or any other) motive to Charlotte making up her mind about the people she meets other than to decide how much they can or cannot be trusted. When she diagnoses the character, the flaws, and occasionally the medical conditions of those she meets it serves to show the reader how far they are worthy of respect. Furthermore this is a heroine the reader can trust. Charlotte is the picture of what one would want in a doctor: someone who is honest and provides the facts to the patient. To that end, the narrator does not follow along behind Charlotte and correct her observations. Instead we find the opinion of narrator and heroine in general agreement.

Where Charlotte acquires this ability to read well is telling. It is not from a conduct book but rather from a novel that she learns, for instance, to spend cautiously (Sodeman 804). While Austen has weighed in on novel reading famously in Northanger Abbey, when Charlotte goes to visit the library we find a further elaboration of her earlier points:

The Library of course, afforded every thing; all the useless things in the World that could not be done without, and among so many pretty Temptations, and with so much good will from Mr. P. to encourage Expenditure, Charlotte began to feel that she must check herself – or rather she reflected that at two and Twenty there could be no excuse for her doing otherwise – and that it would not do for her to be spending all her Money the very first Evening. She took up a book; it happened to be a volume of Camilla. She had not Camilla’s Youth, and had no intention of having her Distress, – so, she turned from the Drawers of rings and Broches [sic] repressed farther solicitation and paid for what she bought. (316)

Charlotte finds herself in a situation which reminds her of a character in a novel, and remembering what went awry in the book she adjusts her behavior accordingly. She is sure enough of herself to resist the encouragement of Mr. Parker and prescribes conservative spending practice for herself. Learning from novels is very different from the common medical opinion of novel reading, as articulated by Roy Porter:

Anxieties were voiced that readers would so far lose themselves in their characters and

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25 There is another Heywood in literature which Austen would no doubt have been aware of. Eliza Haywood’s (with an “a”) eighteenth-century novels often revolved around a heroine falling prey to bad decisions.
plots that they would end up confusing romance with reality, trapped in the morbid fantasies peddled by pulp fiction. If empty heads thus filled up with idle thoughts, might not hypochondria and hysteria – rather than salutary home healing and self-improvements – prove the progeny of the print revolution. (“Bodies Politic” 28)

Porter shows the connection between novel reading and hypochondria; empty minds could be filled with all sorts of nonsense from unrealistic plots and weak characters to the idea that the reader is much sicker than she really is. Charlotte is above such mishaps and shows that the novel reader cannot only be positively guided in her daily life by a novel but can be instructed by novels how to adjudicate those she meets.

“[T]he Grandeur of her own Conceptions”: Charlotte’s Diagnosis of the Parkers

I will now turn to the scene where Charlotte diagnoses Susan and Arthur Parker. She has already met Diana Parker and found that the woman who is supposedly so ill she can barely move from bed to sofa is well enough to flit all over Sanditon trying to secure lodging for others. When Charlotte says she is glad to see Diana well enough to undertake these exertions Diana responds that “…we are sent into this World to be as extensively useful as possible, and where some degree of Strength of Mind is given, it is not a feeble body which will excuse us…” (332). In other words, if she is not bored then she is as equal to a task as anyone else. When Charlotte later meets Susan and Arthur she is quick to perceive their situation.

It was impossible for Charlotte not to suspect a good deal of fancy in such an extraordinary state of health. – Disorders and Recoveries so very much out of the common way, seemed more like the amusement of eager Minds in want of employment than of actual afflictions and relief. (334)

Due to Austen’s use of Free Indirect Discourse it can be tricky to decipher exactly who is speaking outside of direct quotations. In the two sentences above, the narrator begins the first sentence saying what Charlotte suspects, but as we move into the second sentence the thoughts appear to come from Charlotte’s own able perception of the situation. The examining room where Charlotte meets the new arrivals is:

in a small neat Drawing room, with a view of the Sea if they had chosen it, – but though it had been a very fair English Summer-day, – not only was there no open window, but the Sopha and the Table, and the Establishment in general was all at the other end of the
room by a brisk fire. (335)

As soon as Charlotte walks into the room before the patients can even announce their symptoms she is already reading the situation and taking account of their habits and arrangement. While she has her suspicions about the Parker family she still conscientiously listens to the patient (an unusual luxury in the doctor/patient relationship) before passing judgment. The first thing she does is speak to the youngest Parker sister, in Austen’s words, “with a peculiar degree of respectful compassion” because Charlotte remembers that she had had three teeth extracted in one day (335). However, Charlotte quickly realizes that she needn’t pay this sort of attention to Susan Parker who “more thin and worn by Illness and Medecine” [sic] was just like the older sister Diana (335). Neither of the Miss Parkers are as sick as they would have others believe. The narrator goes on to explain Charlotte’s diagnosis of Susan Parker’s situation:

Charlotte could perceive no symptoms of illness which she, in the boldness of her own health, would not have undertaken to cure, by putting out the fire, opening the Window, and disposing of the Drops and the salts [which Miss Susan Parker takes throughout the evening] by means of one or the other. (335)

Charlotte has the good sense to be able to take care of herself; she seems to have learned this both from her mother and from reading novels. While she is able to ensure she does not become ill herself, in the drawing room she both diagnoses and prescribes for these patients, though at the moment she keeps her prescriptions to herself.

It is for Arthur Parker that she is unable to resist issuing a prescription. After listening to his fears of damp, sea air and his rheumatism and nervousness, and his belief that the best thing for his problems is to drink wine, she cannot help but say: “As far as I can understand what nervous complaints are, I have a great idea of the efficacy of air and exercise for them: – daily, regular Exercise; – and I should recommend rather more of it to you than I suspect you are in the habit of taking” (337). Charlotte cannot be sure of Arthur’s rheumatism, his nerves, or that he is bilious as his sisters believe, but what she can be sure of is he is overweight and could do with getting outside to exercise. He counters that he does exercise taking turns on the terrace and walking to Trafalgar House. Charlotte balks and recommends a change in dosage: “But you do not call a walk to Trafalgar House much exercise?” (337). However, she sees there is no getting anywhere with this patient, as he counters with how steep the hill is and how much he perspires.
When Arthur goes on to explain what happens to him when he drinks green tea it is more than Charlotte can suffer. Arthur observes Charlotte is drinking green tea and asks her what she thinks would happen if he were to do the same. “‘Keep you awake perhaps all the night’ – replied Charlotte, meaning to overthrow his attempts at Surprise, by the Grandeur of her own Conceptions” (339). Arthur then launches into a first-hand account of the paralytic properties green tea has on the right side of his body. After he is finished, “‘It sounds rather odd to be sure’ – answered Charlotte coolly – ‘but I dare say it would be proved to be the simplest thing in the World, by those who have studied right sides and Green Tea scientifically and thoroughly understand all the possibilities of their action on the other” (339). In other words, Charlotte knows that if ever there was someone who had studied such a thing it would be clear to them the reason why green tea has this effect on Arthur—he is a hypochondriac. She thus judiciously, without letting him know her meaning, manages to say exactly what his problem is. The one thing Charlotte cannot prescribe is a method to make Arthur Parker shut up.

“[A] shrewd, intelligent, sensible woman”: Charlotte as compared to other agents of doctoring in Austen

Charlotte is not the only woman in Austen’s fiction who acts as an agent of healing. The one who makes a profession of it is Nurse Rooke in Persuasion. The best description comes from Mrs. Smith who says:

[Nurse Rooke] is a shrewd, intelligent, sensible woman. Hers is a line for seeing human nature; and she has a fund of good sense and observation which, as a companion, make her infinitely superior to thousands of those who having only received “the best education in the world,” know nothing worth attending to. (126 II.v)

In Nurse Rooke we find another woman who is good at reading people and good at forming judgments, but we also find a hardened gossip, someone who has not read enough novels to know the dangers of gossiping or if she has cannot prescribe censure for herself. She is self-serving, though the reader can hardly blame her given her circumstances. However, part of the medicine she gives is the local town gossip which is an important palliative for a patient unable to leave her room. In Nurse Rooke one might glimpse a proto-Charlotte because of their similar abilities to read people, but the two diverge importantly. For one Nurse Rooke is a widow, while Charlotte is still of marriageable age and unmarried. Perhaps more importantly are their two
names (names which ought never be over-looked in Austen). A rook is a member of the crow family that the OED describes as “raucous-voiced” bird and the word “rook” was use derisively in one form during Austen’s time to mean a swindler or a cheat (OED). We also should not forget the rook is carnivorous.26 Heywood on the other hand has connotations of the forest, country, and farming; Austen who hated the time she spent in the larger city of Bath, is perhaps aligning Charlotte with what was the substance of England, the earth.27 I suggest a possible bridge between the two as Charlotte might be the still young, not yet embittered woman who might become Nurse Rooke (if she somehow failed to live happily ever after), in a word in common usage when Austen was writing—a ruck. The British pronunciation is not as hard as the American pronunciation is, and while I will not suggest one word might be confused for the other, there is some slippage between the two. A ruck is a stack of hay (OED).

Another important element of Nurse Rooke’s character is her storytelling. According to Charles Rzepka:

Nurse Rooke’s ‘fund’ of good sense is what makes her story-telling not only ‘entertaining’ but ‘profitable’ in the most literal sense. It is an essential part of her professional investment as any other medical professional’s ‘best education in the world.’ Clearly, a good part – indeed, perhaps most – of the comfort Nurse Rooke has to ‘sell’ consists in precisely the ‘gossip’ by which she makes her healing ministries so much more welcome than anyone else’s. (“Making it”111)

Storytelling is evidently an important part of the art of Nurse Rooke’s healing, but we do not see any evidence of Charlotte engaging in storytelling or gossiping in the world of the text. Since it is considered a truism that good readers make good writers, establishing Charlotte as a good reader, as Austen does, might mean that the possibility of Charlotte being a good storyteller is at least present.

Pausing for a moment in the same novel, Anne Elliot’s position as a healer is also worth mentioning. Anne is quite the nurse herself: from tending to her sister’s son after he falls out of the tree, to being the only one with a clear head to manage the problem when Louisa falls, she is ready to address what situations she finds herself in with a cool head and able hands. Rzepka goes so far as to say that “Anne, in the language of the apothecary, recommends that the grieving

26 Nor should we forget about the chess piece and the conniving and strategizing that this implies for her character.
27 The surnames Dashwood and Woodhouse accomplish similar goals.
Captain Benwick make ‘a large allowance of prose in his daily study’” (“Making it” 111). While she prescribes books for Benwick she is not quite at Charlotte’s level of ability (or is it precociousness) to prescribe actual changes of physical regimen or to abandon certain medicines as Charlotte does with Arthur and Susan Parker respectively. In fact, Charlotte seems to have characteristics of both Nurse Rooke and Anne. Charlotte has both Nurse Rooke’s ability to actually doctor her patients and Anne’s good head, but without Nurse Rooke’s bitterness or Anne’s initial willingness to accept a fate decided for her by others. Charlotte arrives on the scene with an education and the ability to make up her own mind about the world she finds herself in.

While Anne certainly uses her good nature to soothe those around her who suffer, Charlotte goes out of her way to diagnose the faults of others. It is in this way that she quickly comes to decide that Lady Denham is “mean” and uses this information to diagnose Mr. Parker; who (the reader should remember) she has already treated once.

She is thoroughly mean. I had not expected anything so bad. – Mr. P. spoke too mildly of her. His Judgement [sic] is evidently not to be trusted. – His own Goodnature [sic] misleads him. He is too kind hearted to see clearly. – I must judge for myself. (326)

Charlotte recognizes Lady Denham’s faults and understands that anyone who could gloss over them (like Mr. Collins does with Lady Catherine de Bough from Pride and Prejudice) is not in a position to judge clearly, while Charlotte is. There might be a spark of Emma Woodhouse here, too sure of her own judgment, but Emma was forced to attend the Jane Austen school of knuckle rapping and there does not appear to be enough distance here for the narrator to subject Charlotte to the same treatment. The narrator and Charlotte seem to be too close to one another, too alike, for Austen to be setting up Charlotte to fall. It is impossible to know what Austen intended for Charlotte, but there are hints that this might be a character who does not need to be educated, who can diagnose on her own without the guidance or approval of the narrator or a Mr. Knightley. If anything I would predict the action of the novel would lie in Charlotte falling ill, by no fault of her own of course, and having to allow herself to be taken care of by someone else.

On that point, there is no hero in sight although the reader is given the majority of the first volume. We can only assume if a hero is going to appear it will have to be the sober, absent brother, Sidney Parker. As for the pretended hero, Sir Edward Denham, Charlotte soon makes short work of him. The narrator says that “Sir Edward’s great object in life was to be seductive”
and he believed himself to be “quite in the line of the Lovelaces” (328). This is a level of lampooning that Charlotte will not approach, but several pages before the narrator passes judgment on him Charlotte has already done so. From their first meeting, “She liked him. – Sober-minded as she was, she thought him agreeable, and did not quarrel with the suspicion of his finding her equally so” (320). The narrator says that while Charlotte has a cool head she is still subject to a “Heroine’s vanity” and the suspicion that Sir Edward is attracted to her temporarily gets the best of her better judgment (320). “Perhaps there was a good deal in his Airs and Address; And his Title did him no harm” [sic] (320). This resembles the scene when Jane asked Elizabeth when she first began to have feelings for Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth confesses it was probably when she saw Pemberley. To turn to the language itself, do not brush past the “perhaps” that begins the sentence as unmentionable as it may appear. There is nothing of the carefree Marianne in this word, Charlotte merely allows herself to entertain the possibility that Edward is someone worth considering.

However, she soon discovers differently by diagnosing his looks and speech:
She began to think him downright silly. – His chusing [sic] to walk with her, she had learnt to understand. It was done to pique Miss Brereton. She had read it, in an anxious glance or two on his side – but why he should talk so much Nonsense, unless he could do no better, was un-intelligible. – He seemed very sentimental, very full of Feelings or other, and very much addicted to all the newest-fashioned hard words – had not a very clear Brain she presumed, and talked a great deal by rote. (323)
Simply put, she did not simply read a glance or two—she read all of him. She read his looks, his idle chatter, and diagnosed him as someone incapable of having a single thought of his own with a muddled brain. There is no prescription for him because she either does not care enough to treat him or (more likely) recognizes that he is incurable. While in a careless moment she had thought him interesting, once she gave him a thorough examination she realized he was silly and rather than pining or falling to pieces, as other Austen heroines might have, she simply moves on to talk to someone else.

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28 I cannot help but suspect that the name Bre-re-ton has something to do with Lady Denham’s obsession with her Milch asses.
Conclusion

Austen clearly sets up Charlotte as an agent of healing. Charlotte has both the physical skills to treat everyday mishaps and the ability to read a character and diagnose their character faults. The appearance of such a character as Charlotte in a world of hypochondriacs serves multiple functions. First it illustrates that Austen did not believe hypochondriacs to be ill and believed that they could be cured by good-old-fashioned home remedies and level-headed thinking. Second, it shows how a patient might choose these home remedies and level-headed thinking over a doctor who does not allow a patient a say in their remedy and might over-prescribe to begin with. Self-doctoring was a means of empowering patients and even granting them agency juxtaposed with the power granted doctors which silenced patients and removed them from having any say in what was wrong with them. Charlotte is a different sort of doctor, the sort Austen (or any nineteenth-century patient) might wish for, one who evaluates and listens. While a reader should not overlook the annoyance that the narrator and Charlotte obviously feel toward the Parkers, these hypochondriacs are specific cultural markers who may be exerting what little power they have – particularly the Parker sisters. The problem of bodysnatching, as outlined in the introduction, illuminates this assertion of power. The Parkers are subject to the same dangers as anyone from their economic class when it comes to bodysnatching. That is, it is less likely than the danger to the poor but still possible, and as the public generally feared could happen to most anyone. This fear over what will happen to one’s body after death makes asserting control over one’s body while alive and able to have some say extremely important. Irrationally the Parkers (or others like them) could entertain the belief that their actions in the present could keep their corpses away from the scalpels of doctors. What we do motivated by fear is rarely rational. For this reason, it makes sense that the Parkers treat Charlotte in the same dismissive way they would treat any medical professional. After all, she’s just another doctor.
CHAPTER THREE

DANSE MACABRE: IMAGINING THE DEAD BODY

IN HAZLITT

The mayor of a village in southwest France has threatened residents with severe punishment if they die, because there is no room left in the overcrowded cemetery to bury them. In an ordinance posted in the council offices, Mayor Gerard Lalanne told the 260 residents of the village of Sarpourenx that “all persons not having a plot in the cemetery and wishing to be buried in Sarpourenx are forbidden from dying in the parish.” (Dobbie 5 Mar 2008)

In William Hazlitt’s Liber Amoris (1823), an obsessive account of Hazlitt’s enthrallment with his landlady’s daughter, Hazlitt engages in a waking dream. Holding hands with the woman he loves, he says, “All this time she was standing just outside the door, my hand in hers (would they could have grown together!” (Hazlitt 204). This hyperbolic image expresses a wish that their two hands could literally grow together like tangled vines. In the entire book, the entwining of their hands gets twisted by Hazlitt’s insistence on imagining his lover as dead. He hopes to entwine himself with a corpse – joining the earth in a viscerally physical way.

Liber Amoris marks a time when the way the living interacted with their dead was changing. The living were being reminded of their dead too overtly and people responded by altering the way they disposed of the dead. Hazlitt offers a view of the world where the dead and living commingle on and in the earth. Timothy Morton has recently called for a renewed ecocritical interest in a dying world, in remaining with it, and living with it. Morton’s argument resonates in important ways with the burial question nineteenth-century British culture was confronting. When Hazlitt looks at the world he sees the dead mixed up with the living and is forced to express a new relationship between the living and dead. Liber Amoris is an example of the important task literature was charged with in this particular place and time: bringing the dead back into the homes and minds of the living.

In this chapter, I explore connections among three bodies of material. The first is burial culture in early nineteenth century Britain, where the earth was failing to decompose the dead
and the earth was instead decomposing along with the dead. I take into consideration the proponents for and against extramural interment as well as the inherent public health issues. The second body of material is Liber Amoris which I examine as a text that brings to focus the problematic nineteenth-century boundaries between the living and the dead. In order to engage a text off the beaten path, I situate Liber Amoris alongside several high canonical nineteenth-century texts: “Christabel,” “Lamia,” and Sense and Sensibility. The final topic is Morton’s concept of dark ecology from his recent book Ecology without Nature (2007), which questions the normative use of “nature.” Dark Ecology recognizes the current dire ecological situation, but rather than glossing over this inevitability looks at it full in the face. Liber Amoris acts as a green space where the dark ecological elements of burial culture can be brought to light.

**Funeral and Sentiment**

Death is a transformation that removes the dead but, in some strange way, gives the living access to the dead in a new and more intimate way. The Romantics had a difficult space to negotiate in their conversations with the dead. At this time not only do they no longer have access to their dead via purgatory but the dead are also beginning to be interred in cemeteries separate from the traditional churchyard which would have been closer in proximity to family and friends. There were many vestiges of the old way of dealing with the dead, and one example is that funeral jewelry was still popular. However, there were new ways of dealing with death other than the creation of cemeteries. For instance, the elaborate funerals we associate with the Victorians actually began amongst the wealthy in the Georgian period (Richardson “Victorian” 106).

The desire for elaborate funerals, though spurred on by consumerism in the Victorian period, seems to have begun for different reasons. Esther Schor’s Bearing the Dead: The British Culture of Mourning From the Enlightenment to Victoria (1994) examines the dead as cultural currency using Adam Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments as a lens:

Smith’s theory suggests that the dead became, as it were, the gold standard for the circulation of sympathies within a society; at a single stroke, Smith both provides a theoretical account of the relation between private morals and public morality and suggests a role for mourning in remediating anxieties attending the proliferation of paper money in the British economy. (Schor 20)
Smith’s explanation for the outpouring of grief at funerals hinges on the idea that there was an impossible debt to pay which the living paid as best they could. As we saw in the first chapter, Smith believed that the living as a collective group remembered the dead as a way of paying this debt. “By means of a system of sympathetic exchanges – exchanges of sympathy for considering – moral affections circulate throughout a society. By implication, a society may be defined as those who share a common dead” (Schor 77-78). This debt which cannot be paid unites a society; to be included is to mourn. To apply Smith’s idea of mourning as socially inclusive to a specific writer, Alan Bewell argues in Wordsworth and the Enlightenment that ‘for Wordsworth a person does not even “belong to a place until there is someone dead under the ground”’ (Fosso 5). This idea makes that ground very important and would give rise to anxiety if that specific ground were no longer available to use for burials.

The Cemetery Movement and British Burial Culture

Part of the reason burials and funerals were so important to an early nineteenth-century audience was because attitudes towards death were shifting. As Phillipe Ariès points out in The Hour of Our Death, “[the nineteenth-century] saw a movement away from concerns with the death of the self, and towards a stress on loss, and death of the ‘other.’ At a time when ‘feeling’ was paramount, the almost wild expression of grief at the loss of a member of the family was considered to be appropriate and laudable” (Jupp 210). This grief was negotiated most publically by the individuality conferred via funerals and burial. Harold Mytum discusses the tradition of the church graveyard in his 1989 article “Public Health and Private Sentiment.” Although Dissenters had sought separate burial since 1666 (after the Great Fire provided an excuse for rebuilding), churchyard burial was deeply ingrained into English culture as the expected method to lay the dead to rest. Churchyard interment was a mutually sustaining practice expected and agreed upon by the church and its parishioners. The church took income from the burials and the families of the deceased took solace in the tradition (286-87). Even

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29 Which is situating Wordsworth alongside the words Gabriel García Márquez gives to José Arcadio Buendia in One Hundred Years of Solitude.

30 It should be mentioned that some Dissenters were able to have separate cemeteries created though they were not exactly like the cemeteries that the cemetery movement created. They “were able to develop cemeteries like the one still surviving at Bunhill Fields near Moorgate which, though not beyond the city, was at least separate from a church” (Mytum 286).
some Dissenters were buried inside the churchyard, including Hazlitt who was laid to rest at St. Anne’s Parish Church of Soho (Ezard).

With this tradition in place, extending back centuries, the cemetery movement, which campaigned for interment separate from the church (extramural cemeteries), understandably met with resistance. The emotional reaction may seem strange today; cemeteries abound and they are gentle places with memory walks and shade trees. The step of removing the dead from the shadow of the church thickens the line already in place between the dead and the living. The dead are out of sight and out of mind in a different way than simply burying them next to a building that (even if you did not worship at) you would pass daily. However, to better understand this rending it may be wise to visit a much earlier splintering – the overturning of Purgatory at the Reformation. In the words of Nigel Llewellyn,

> The traditional belief about Purgatory had created a popular image of the afterlife as a place where the souls of the dead might be imagined residing after the decease of their natural bodies, but before the Last Judgment. Purgatory also allowed the living a sense of contact with the dead through prayer, perhaps chanted by priests specially retained for the purpose, in chantry chapels. One of the Reformers’ main grievances was against the whole corrupt practice of indulgences, an industry built on the idea of Purgatory. Inscriptions on countless monuments which beseeched passers-by to pray for the dead – ‘orate pro nobis…’ – encouraged this sense of contact, but such wordings were expressly forbidden by reformist statute. The ending of Purgatory thus caused grievous psychological damage: from that point forward the living were, in effect, distanced from the dead. (Llewellyn 27).

This distance, while perceived, was mitigated by the idea that the church was still doing its job of overseeing the dead until the second coming. A further correlation between the old Catholic tradition and nineteenth-century public practice was funereal jewelry, reminiscent of religious relics:

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31 Stephen Greenblatt discusses this as well in the context of Hamlet. “Henry VIII’s and his successors’ actions in fact has destroyed Englishmen’s traditional means of ‘negotiating with the dead.’ … the ghost of Hamlet testifies to the endurance of this desire for the kind of negotiating with the dead that the banished doctrine of Purgatory, and the ritual collectivity of Catholicism itself, had once provided” (Fosso 15).

32 Belief in the literal second coming was still a widespread belief held into the reign of Queen Victoria (Wheeler 227).
Many examples survive of black enameled rings bearing the name of the dead, as do rings and brooches containing locks of hair or even swatches of material, almost in the manner of religious relics – which indeed they are in this secular variant of the Christian reliquary tradition. (Behrendt 189)

These examples demonstrate that the nineteenth-century British public both removed the dead from their sight (in the creation of extramural cemeteries) and sought ways to cling to their departed. Necessarily a certain amount of tension would have been created between these two desires.

People were still lamenting the changing face of burial even decades after the first extramural cemetery had been created (1821). In 1845, after several extramural cemeteries had been well established by private companies, Joseph Snow wrote an anti-extramural treatise, *Lyra Memorialis: Original Epitaphs and Churchyard Thoughts*. *Lyra* “represents the Anglican backlash against dissenting, secularizing, and commercializing cemeteries, which deprived parish priests of burial service fees, weakened authority over parishioners, and gave the bereaved more freedom of choice” (Matthews 160).

Although it is clear the public preferred churchyard burial, by the early nineteenth century churchyard overuse had made this no longer feasible from a public health standpoint (Mytum 286-287). The general problem was that there were just too many bodies and not enough fresh ground. “Between 1741 and 1850 the population of England and Wales rose from 6 to 8.9 million, and the following half century saw the growth accelerating to 17.9 million” (Jupp 216). Dwelling on the details of what happened when too many bodies are buried in too little ground is probably not necessary. However, one point should be included that explains how the problem was compounded. “Indeed, once the density of bodies within the graveyard soil reached a certain point, further decomposition was impossible because the bacteria necessary for this process could not survive. The graveyard then became an embalming matrix, a foul-smelling, slimy mass of putrefaction; the burial ground was itself dead.” (Mytum 291). There were several attempts at getting around the problem of overcrowding while still burying the dead on church grounds. One easy way around this was vault burial, but these too became full (Mytum 288).\(^{33}\)

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\(^{33}\) The wealthy had been doing this since the seventeenth-century, but now it took on new importance for them (Mytum 288).
Some churches tried to circumvent the issue allowing people (largely the middle classes) to be buried in the parochial vaults under the church. In Spitalfields (in London), the church vaults were consecrated for this purpose in 1729 and used until 1867, accumulating over 1,000 coffins “piled up and packed together, in places right to the barrel roofs and with little regard to liturgically correct [east-west] alignment” (Mytum 288). Even before the churches literally ran out of room in the vaults there was the issue of odor. The method to get around this problem was to seal the bodies in airtight coffins, place those coffins in lead, then fix another wooden box to the outside of the lead to affix the “fabric covering and coffin furniture” (Mytum 288). These options were only open to those who could afford them and did nothing to alleviate the problem of the pit burials for the poor which had to be accommodated in the cemetery. So while somewhat useful as short term solutions to keep the dead within or near the church they were not sufficient in the end. The English cemetery movement formed to take up these issues.

The English cemetery movement was not an organized movement; it was not made up of designated leaders with supporters carrying placards. Instead it was comprised of individuals who united their voices against the overuse of burial grounds from a public health standpoint and who sought extramural burial to alleviate these health concerns. Private cemetery joint stock companies were also part of the movement who sought to establish extramural cemeteries either for profit or as a response to a public need. The English cemetery movement marked its first success in 1821, two years before Liber Amoris was published, “with the opening of the Rosary cemetery at Norwich [Norfolk]” (Mytum 291). More than a decade later Kensal Green opened in 1833 (Matthews 190) and Norwood and Highgate followed in 1837 and 1839 respectively, set up by private companies (Mytum 291). Frighteningly enough, twenty years after Highgate cemetery was opened it was already in danger of “replicating the same dubious conditions” (Matthews 35).

The public health concerns people were worried about included: contaminated drinking water; bones rising to the surface with flesh still attached; and a sign posted in one cemetery declaring “tread carefully when you leave the path, or your foot may sink into something fouler

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34 See Julie Rugg’s “The Origins and Progress of Cemetery Establishment in Britain” for a complete discussion of cemetery companies and their motivations.
35 I am inclined to believe Mytum, but websites such as literarynorfolk.co.uk and norfolkchurches.co.uk list the date the cemetery was created even earlier at 1819.
than the earth” (Mytum 292). Also, this was a time period when people gave credence to miasma theories of disease, meaning they believed those who smelled any unsavory odors were in danger of infection. All of these issues and theories forced the British public to live with their dead in a way which few would choose. These also make evident the reasons people were willing to forego tradition for public health. Burying the dead necessitates a certain amount of forgetting; however, if remains resurface there is no way to know which of the many bodies buried in that area those remains were from. Bones working their way to the surface may just as easily be from a relative as from someone else—there are elements of haunting at work. If a dead person was buried in the same double or triple coffins (one being lead) as were used in vault burial, then survivors could be fairly sure nothing would resurface, but double and triple coffins were expensive and only required for vault burial. The only way to be relatively certain that the dead would remain in their intended repose (vaults under churches largely being full) was to bury them in fresh ground. If that fresh ground were further away and landscaped to look like a peaceful garden then so much the better.

One major proponent of the English cemetery movement propelling the consequences of these issues into public consciousness was Dr. John Anderson. He was a respected authority on fevers, and his conclusions that illness was linked to putrid graveyards were widely accepted (Rugg “origins” 114). The movement lost some momentum with Anderson’s death in 1829. Yet, interest was renewed after George Alfred Walker published Gatherings from Graveyards in 1839—a gruesome depiction of the ghastliest conditions; in 1850 The Times credits the first legislation on burials “to [Walker’s] exertions” (Rugg “origins” 114). Cemetery companies (privately owned companies that sold shares) began cropping up in the 1820s and were largely supported by Dissenters until 1840s when “a typical nineteenth-century approach to finance” and “Walker’s purple prose” persuaded communities to begin securing for “themselves adequate burial space in which sanitary principles could be applied” (Jupp 220). By 1850 with the implementation of the Burial Acts it can be said that extramural burial succeeded:

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36 In 1850, two decades after extramural cemeteries were beginning to be established, in Hull (in Eastern Yorkshire) the Holy Trinity Churchyard which had been in use since 1300 was “well above the surface of the street” (Jupp 219).

37 In fact when the excavation at Spitalfields was conducted not only were those in lead coffins still in their coffins they were in varying stages of decay some still fairly, if somewhat gruesomely, intact. The nineteenth-century public would have no way of knowing this though.

38 Even though they were mandated people did not always choose to use them. At Spitalfields 15 % (27 coffins) did not use them (Cox 101)
A series of Burial Acts … built on the success of the cemetery companies by permitting Burial Boards. These new local agencies had the powers to raise funds through the rates to finance cemeteries and, crucially, to apply for the closure of insalubrious churchyards. The Church’s virtual monopoly on provision for the dead had been irredeemably shattered. (Jupp 221)

Just because the tide had turned against churchyard burial did not mean people were happy about it.

Despite the obvious public health concerns and the successful establishment of extramural cemeteries, people still disapproved of burying their dead in cemeteries rather than churchyards. Even as late as 1858 Elizabeth Stone voiced such concerns in God’s acre; Or, Historical Notes Relating to Churchyards, after visiting Kensal Green:

It is a strange fashion, a strange fancy, which can induce persons to prefer to be laid in a gay lounge, the feet of careless, frivolous, and thoughtless promenaders and pleasure seekers all but treading on your grave, rather than to lie in the holy quiet of the churchyard. (Matthews 194)

This juxtaposition of views between those who knew that the dead had to be buried elsewhere and those who nostalgically longed to continue using churchyards is important. It speaks to anxiety about the treatment of the dead. People may also wish to continue using churchyards because the churchyards were generally closer to the center of town than the cemeteries and thus closer to the people who used them. Keeping the dead in the churchyards means the dead can be visited whenever the survivors attend church and whenever else they choose. Putting the dead at a location that is further off, though admittedly not at all unreachable, physically removes the dead from the survivors as they were psychologically removed by the overturning of the doctrine of Purgatory. The task of bringing the dead back into the minds and homes of the living is left to literature.

**Hazlitt and Liber Amoris**

William Hazlitt weighed in on burial customs and burial culture in essays and in his quasi-autobiographical novel Liber Amoris. When Liber Amoris (which is part epistle, part first person narration) was published, the Register ensured it would fail by reprinting so much of it that anyone who wanted to read the new anonymously published novel did not need to buy it
(Jones 338). A short plot summary is that Hazlitt (called H in the text) falls madly in love with his landlord’s daughter, Sarah (called S). There is some flirting and mild physical contact but no intercourse. He decides he wants to marry her; she does not give him any promises, and in fact is spontaneously cold then warm towards him in their conversations, sometimes avoiding him all together. To try and win her, H goes to Edinburgh so he can be granted a divorce from his wife (also named Sarah) by the Scottish courts since England will not grant divorces without an action in the House of Lords. He attains the divorce and comes back to find that S will not marry him, and has been seeing another man the whole time.

At its core this is a novel about a man’s obsession with a woman. He vacillates between extreme highs and lows depending on whether he believes he is in or out of her favor. In two connected sentences alone he refers to her as serpent, woman, divine, and witch (Hazlitt 164). He devotes pages upon pages to saying that she is killing or will kill him and wishing he had the courage to end his life. The unusual way his obsessions manifest is that in between bemoaning his situation or describing her as part-goddess part-sorceress he imagines that she is ill, dead, or spectral. He writes near the end,

I had embraced the false Florimel instead of the true; or was like the man in the Arabian Nights who had married a ghoul . . . I saw her pale, cold form glide silent by me, dead to shame as to pity. Still I seemed to clasp this piece of witchcraft to my bosom; this lifeless image, which was all that was left of my love, was the only thing to which my sad heart clung. Were she dead, should I not wish to gaze once more upon her pallid features? She is dead to me; but what she once was to me, can never die! (246-247)

In this passage he says she is both dead and a ghost. These are odd fantasies to confess even in an anonymous work. These fantasies and imaginings, and the fact that his obsession fixates on corpses rather than the myriad other forms it could take, speak to a preoccupation with death that pervades the culture.

“S,” “Christabel,” “Lamia,” and Sense and Sensibility

Before turning to the full text of Liber Amoris itself, it may be useful to situate Hazlitt’s text alongside other canonical texts concerned with male obsession to bring this off-the-beaten-path-book into focus. In his introduction to Liber Amoris, Gerald Lahey points out the similarities between Hazlitt’s landlady’s daughter Sarah and Coleridge’s Christabel as well as
Sarah and Keats’s Lamia and notes the “conspicuous preoccupation” in Romantic poetry with the “double-natured lady” (10). Sarah represents for Hazlitt both Coleridge’s Christabel/Geraldine dichotomy and Keats’s Lamia. The following selection in the second section of Liber Amoris is printed on a page headed with the words “Written in a Blank Leaf of Endymion” (Hazlitt 109):

… but by her dove’s eyes and serpent-shape, I think she does not hate me; by her smooth forehead and her crested hair, I own I love her; by her soft looks and queen-like grace (which men might fall down and worship) I swear to live and die for her! (109)

This passage recalls Christabel’s dream: “I stoop’d, methough the dove to take / When lo! I saw a bright green snake / Coil’d around its wings and neck” (Coleridge 176 536-538). Hazlitt sees Sarah as both a Christabel and a Geraldine; she is the dove and the serpent; she is the innocent and the sorceress.

Sarah is also reminiscent of Keats’s Lamia, but Hazlitt does not ascribe Lamía’s attributes to Sarah alone: instead he splits them between Sarah and himself. Firstly he describes Sarah as a serpent which Lamia is literally. Hazlitt also often describes Sarah as a Goddess. Concurrently, Lycius recognizes that Lamia is not human. The first time Lamia tries to ensnare him as a goddess she overwhelms his earthly senses. After Lycius proclaims he cannot live if she vanished, she says she cannot live with him because she does not want to give up the lifestyle of an immortal for the roughness of the earth. When she turns to leave he swoons. She goes to him and realizes that she needs to pursue him more gently:

Thus gentle Lamia judg’d, and judg’d aright,
That Lycius could not love in half a fright,
So threw the goddess off, and won his heart
More pleasantly by playing woman’s part. (350 I 334-37)

Lycius, poor mortal, cannot handle a goddess. Yet, despite her subterfuge he still suspects she is not mortal (353 II 85-89). The obsession that both Lamia and Lycius feel for one another is Hazlitt’s alone. Sarah, even when he believes she loves him, is never described as being obsessed.

Another canonical text that Liber Amoris echoes is Austen’s Sense and Sensibility. Hazlitt’s outpouring of feeling sounds like a morbid version of Willoughby’s (which is itself arresting morbid) reaction to Marianne’s illness:
I had seen Marianne’s sweet face as white as death. … It was a horrid sight! – Yet when I thought of her to-day as really dying, it was a kind of comfort to me to imagine that I knew exactly how she would appear to those, who saw her last in this world. She was before me, constantly before me, as I traveled, in the same look and hue. (Austen 191)

It has already been shown that Hazlitt knew he would wish to look on S after she was dead. To further the comparison, like Willoughby, Hazlitt saw S when she was ill and had a similar, though even stranger, reaction:

She was once ill, pale, and had lost all her freshness. I only adored her the more for it, and fell in love with the decay of her beauty. I could devour the little witch. If she had a plague-spot on her, I could touch the infection: if she was in a burning fever, I could kiss her, and drink death as I have drank life from her lips. (248 III.viii)

Death was synonymous with infection; not only did the dead often die from illness the nineteenth-century public believed corpses spread illness to the living via the unsanitary conditions of the burial ground. In Hazlitt’s disturbing statement he claims not only that he would continue to be amorous towards S when she was sick but even after she was dead.

Cemetery Culture and Liber Amoris

Hazlitt’s obsession could have manifested in many different forms. The form it took (imagining S as ill, dead, or a ghost) is resonant with the social issues related to the burial of the dead. This context suggests that Hazlitt’s reading of the city of Edinburgh is telling. For Hazlitt, the cemetery leaks into the city turning the city into a cemetery as if now that the cemeteries are not anchored by a church they risk infecting everything. This blurring of the city and the cemetery happens when H is in Edinburgh biding his time until his divorce is final. While looking at the streets of Edinburgh he compares it to London:

City of palaces, or of tombs – a quarry, rather than the habitation of men! Art thou like London, that populous hive, with its sunburnt, well-baked, brick-built houses – its public edifice, its theaters, its bridges, its squares, its ladies, and its pomp, its throng of wealth, its outstretched magnitude, and its mighty heart that never lies still? Thy cold grey walls reflect back the leaden melancholy of the

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And they sometimes did.
soul. The square, hard edged, unyielding faces of thy inhabitants have no sympathy to impart. What is it to me that I look along the level line of thy tenantless streets, and meet perhaps a lawyer like a grasshopper chirping and skipping …? (Hazlitt 145-146).

It is apparent that H is comparing both Edinburgh and London to a tomb. The “populous hive” becomes the over-populated vaults and tombs, as do the “well-baked, brick-built houses.” The “cold grey walls” are like tombs and graves and the “leaden melancholy” resembles the lead lining of coffins intended for burial inside a church vault. Of course, “[t]he square, hard edged, unyielding faces of thy inhabitants have no sympathy to impart.” They wouldn’t because he is either comparing them to the dead themselves or to the death heads, angels, and statues that appear in graveyards and on funerary spousal monuments. Following this logic, of course the streets are “tenantless” because all the tenants are buried. In this odd passage Hazlitt compares someone he might expect to find on a city street, “a lawyer,” with something he might expect to find in a graveyard, “a grasshopper.” In H’s mind the streets of Edinburgh blur and morph into a graveyard and the people become statues and corpses. He seems to be passing in and out of a waking dream conflating the living and the dead. This action gives him access to the dead in a unique way.

The idea that cemeteries constitute cities is well established today. Julie Rugg says when a cemetery is built it will be “divided by roads and paths: each grave will have an established ‘address,’ registered as such in the site’s documentation and so giving each family a sense of ownership of and control over a particular plot” (“cemetery” 261). This was not the case for early nineteenth-century churchyard burials. Because they were dealing with limited space the same ground would be reused for multiple people throughout the time the churchyard was in use – the wealthy, of course, had other options. There obviously were mausoleums and tombstones present in the churchyards Hazlitt was familiar with, and as the nineteenth-century progressed cemeteries, sometimes called necropolises, would look more and more like cities.

Of the time H spends in Edinburgh, he spends a fair amount of it fantasizing that S is dead. He dreams of waking in bed with the “corpse of his love”:

    . . . I am now enclosed in a dungeon of despair. The sky is marble to my thoughts; nature is dead around me, as hope is within me; no object can give me one gleam of satisfaction now, nor the prospect of it in time to come. I wander by the sea-side; and the eternal
ocean and lasting despair and her face are before me. Slighted by her, on whom my heart
by its last fibre hung, where shall I turn? I wake with her by my side, not as my sweet
bedfellow, but as the corpse of my love without a heart in her bosom, cold, insensible, or
struggling with me; and the worm gnaws me, and the sting of unrequited love, and the
canker of a hopeless, endless sorrow. I have lost the taste of my food by feverish anxiety;
and my favourite beverage, which used to refresh me when I got up, has no moisture in it.
Oh! Cold, solitary, sepulchral breakfasts, compared with those which I promised myself
with her. (143)

Imagining himself eating breakfast in the graveyard situates him in a perpetual state of grief;
waking or sleeping his days begin and end with mourning. This puts Hazlitt in a unique position
relative to the dead and gives him privileged access, because he is only imagining that Sarah is
dead. Thus, throughout much of the story he has the option of waking himself up from his
fantasy and being with her. So he has the option available of being with “the dead.”

However, since he is recounting their story after she has already turned him down, the
entire story is tinged with melancholy. The melancholy he is feeling, however, is for the death of
the relationship not the death of the actual woman. For Wordsworth, mourning tends to be the
verb form of grief; where grief is the sorrow and pain the bereaved experience, mourning is grief
in action (Fosso 7). Freud focused on the action of grief, and Hazlitt’s obsessive nature would
probably have led Freud to posit that Hazlitt is suffering from Melancholia rather than
experiencing cathartic mourning:

Mourning as we know, however painful it may be, comes to a spontaneous end.
When it has renounced everything that has been lost, then it has consumed itself,
and our libido is once more free (in so far as we are still young and active) to
replace the lost objects by fresh ones equally or still more precious. (Freud “transience”
307)

Freud’s definition of mourning does not really seem to be appropriate for Hazlitt. However
Freud’s description of melancholia suits Hazlitt well:

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful
dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love,

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40 Even when in Edinburgh where he cannot physically be with her he is still there because he believes she will unite
herself with him once he has obtained a divorce.
inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree
that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a
delusional expectation of punishment. (“melancholy” 244)
The diagnosis is evident from the above definition: as the novel progresses Hazlitt’s obsession
mounts and he will no longer be satisfied crying over his toast at her grave side. In fact, H
anticipates Emily Brontë’s gothic hero Heathcliff (published twenty four years later) when H
says:

As I trod the green mountain turf, oh! how I wished to be laid beneath it – in one
grave with her – that I might sleep with her in that cold bed, my hand in hers, and
my heart for ever still – while worms should taste her sweet body, that I had never
tasted! (160)

In Hazlitt’s mind, since he cannot have Sarah, she is dead to him. He is using his text to bring her
back and be with her as they could not be in life, and as they will not be in death. The text acts as
a space to bring her back to him. It serves as its own burial plot of sorts where they can both be
laid together. The text provides a space to bring the living and the dead together.

In Hazlitt’s disturbing statement he claims that he would continue to be amorous towards S after she was dead. While this sounds like necrophilia, and maybe it is, in actuality Hazlitt’s
fantasies in Liber Amoris seem to imply he wants to be buried with her as a fellow corpse.
Additionally, the burial Hazlitt envisions for him and S does not take place in a church
graveyard, but outside of the city on a mountain, a natural place with fresh ground. It really is not
clear whether Hazlitt is envisaging a place for only he and Sarah to be buried or if he believes the
reader will assume he means an extramural cemetery. Either way Hazlitt is rejecting the inherent
problems of churchyard burial. Another way to get away from the issues of city churchyard
burial was village churchyard burial, which Wordsworth supports in his Essay upon Epitaphs:

A village church-yard, lying as it does in the lap of nature, may indeed be most
favorably contrasted with that of a town of crowded population, and sepulture
therein combines many of the best tendencies which belong to the mode practiced
by the Ancients, … a parish-church, in the stillness of the country, is a visible
centre of a community of the living and the dead; a point to which are habitually
referred the nearest concerns of both. (330)\(^{41}\)

One reason Hazlitt wishes to be buried on a mountaintop rather than a picturesque village churchyard is because he was not a member of a village parish (as Wordsworth was) and would have been refused burial there. The dead were generally interred in the churchyard of the parish where they lived (Phillimore 650). Besides Hazlitt did not like country graves and speaks out against the “pathetic exhortation of country tombstones” (“death” 463).\(^{42}\) It was much more plausible for Hazlitt to imagine being buried in an extramural cemetery when one only has to pay to be buried there than in a village churchyard. It may have even seemed more plausible to Hazlitt that he could have been buried in unconsecrated ground on the side of a mountain in Scotland than to be buried in an English village churchyard. In going to Scotland to obtain a divorce Hazlitt already identifies Scotland as a place one could escape English social constrictions. There were those who requested “deviant burial” on their own land or in some other prearranged place, but these people generally either owned land or had money to back up their requests, neither of which Hazlitt possessed (Gittings 322).

Nature’s purpose in a graveyard, according to Wordsworth, “is its ‘strong appeals to visible appearances’ and ‘affecting analogies,’ ‘admonitions and heart-stirring remembrances, like a refreshing breeze that comes without warning, or the taste of the waters of an unexpected fountain’” (Matthews 161). This appeal to the effect nature has on an observer describes the very nature writing Timothy Morton speaks so strongly against, as will be discussed shortly. Morton points out that an author’s “attempt to break the spell of language [by painting a realistic natural image] results in a further involvement in that very spell” (30). Morton’s judgment aside, Wordsworth distrusted urban burial (Matthews 161). Part of this distrust had to do with the community made up of the dead and the living as evidenced by Wordsworth’s poem “We Are Seven.” “Here to live as a social being is to exist in close physical and psychological relation to the dead: to count them among one’s loves, to feel them as part of one’s activities” (Fosso 5).

\(^{41}\) To be clear, Wordsworth’s conception of an idyllic village churchyard aside, churchyards other than those in the big cities often ran into trouble as well. “The evidence from York shows that burial problems were not restricted to the large cities. The numerous medieval parish churches had relatively small graveyards which had been further reduced in area by road widening schemes and other development. In many of the most crowded graveyards it was difficult to find suitable locations for burial. Hargrove (1847) notes that iron borers were used in attempts to find unused spaces, but this led to the rupture of buried, sealed coffins and the escape of gasses. With the disturbance of earlier burials, human bones could be left on the surface, even with flesh still attached, and on one occasion Hargrove witnessed a dog running off with such a bone” (Mytum 291-292).

\(^{42}\) He thought it useless to be told “Grieve not for me, my wife & children dear” because the dead man’s wife and children will get over his death quicker than the dying would like to believe (463).
By removing the dead from the village churchyard this community is threatened. To further confirm the anomaly of finding a beautiful English burial (or at least one in the city), when Keats was buried at Rome in 1821 (the same year the first extramural cemetery was created), his friend Joseph Severn wrote of the daisy-covered, pretty graveyard, “you cannot have any such place in England” (Matthew 123). Although Hazlitt’s text seeks a path away from the putrid church graveyard, he is still confronted with the reality of decay wherever he wants to be laid to rest. By joining S in the grave Hazlitt is, as Morton proposes, “identifying with ugliness” (Morton 188).

**Dark Ecology**

There are important connections between nineteenth-century burial concerns and contemporary ecological concerns. *Dark ecology* simply stated is “a ‘goth’ assertion of the contingent and necessarily queer idea that we want to stay with a dying world” (Morton 185). While we are toting reusable shopping bags, Morton says we should also accept the inevitable. The world is dying; moreover, we have to “stick around” not only because we brought this ecological disaster on ourselves but because we are part of the world. As we have already seen in the first chapter, we should be “making thinking dirtier, identifying with ugliness, practicing ‘hauntology’ (Derrida’s phrase) rather than ontology” (Morton 188). For Morton we are defined by the lingering, remaining, pre-death-rattle world. This decay makes grief essential to our involvement and entanglement with the world:

> Now is a time for grief to persist, to ring throughout the world. Modern culture has not yet known what to do with grief. Environmentalisms have both stoked and assuaged the crushing feelings that come from a sense of total catastrophe, whether from nuclear bombs and radiation, or events such as climate change and mass extinction. (185)

Morton’s theory goes to show there is a function to the goth scene, made up of people who try their hardest to look dead. Morton’s *dark ecology* does precisely that; rather than talking about nature as something that rejuvenates, he recognizes the end is in sight.

The solutions are, of course, different and this difference is telling. In the nineteenth-century it was possible to simply choose new pieces of land to bury the dead. We have few new places to turn. We must come up with new solutions to deal with our waste. A nineteenth-century
mindset, where people reused not just paper for multiple purposes but even scraps of cloth, would not be unhelpful. We have to come up with solutions beyond recycling, though, that keep us from creating so much waste to begin with. This solution-based approach to the environment is the positive take, and I hope these ideas are taken to heart and acted upon. However, this approach is what we tell school children to encourage them to support the school’s recycling program, and is not really what Morton is talking about.

We must also take into consideration the very real possibility that our actions have already done irreparable damage to the planet. That is, we must realize the possibility that recycling programs and electric cars are good things but may simply be buying time rather than solving the problem. We must identify with the ugliness that surrounds us because it is not going anywhere. Hazlitt imagined joining S in a grave, and we must see the world as it is.

**Conclusion**

Like the saturated ground, *Liber Amoris* exposes a site of conflict where the reality surrounding burial culture rises to the surface. Burial customs went through many changes in the nineteenth-century. Not only did extramural suburban burial replace intramural churchyard burial, but by the end of the century even cremation was an option (Matthews 7). As an early nineteenth century intellectual, Hazlitt grapples with the challenge of negotiating the widening gap between the living and the dead. Choosing to tell a version of his own story, he imagines the woman he loves as already dead and underground, the only place Hazlitt can truly possess her. While imagining them together in the grave, he is able to focus on the beauty of being buried together rather than the cold reality of decomposition; Hazlitt “creates” access to a real and unsettling way of closing the gap between the living and the dead, of getting close to the “dead”—snapping out of his day dream. In a time when the dead were moved further away from their survivors, literature acted as a means to bring the dead back into the minds and homes of the living.
CHAPTER FOUR

TRANSI: THE DEAD BODY IN DE QUINCEY

Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God, of his great mercy, to take unto himself the soul of our dear sister here departed, we therefore commit her body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life. (De Quincey 121-122)\(^{43}\)

Thomas De Quincey deals in liminal spaces, especially the border between the conscious and the unconscious, and it should thus come as no surprise that he is also an author concerned with death. Death and the corpse are a particular focus in his essay “Suspiria De Profundis.” Written in 1845, “Suspiria” was a sequel to “Confessions of an English Opium-Eater.” It is less coherent and rambles even more than “Confessions,” recalling De Quincey’s description in “Confessions” of wandering through London after a concert needing a “pole star” to make his way through the “knotty problems of alleys” and “such sphynx ’s riddles of streets” until he thought he was “the first discoverer of some of these terræ incognitæ” (“confessions” 53). In this chapter, I focus on “Part I: The Affliction of Childhood,” where De Quincey relates the death of his sister Elizabeth and his visit to her corpse. The encounter De Quincey writes about correlates in significant ways with Leigh Hunt’s and Edward Trelawny’s encounters with the body of Percy Shelley on the beach of Livorno.\(^{44}\) All three writers experience some level of disordered senses

\(^{43}\) Part of the Anglican funeral service which, if we are to believe De Quincey, he remembers whole passages of because it was so imprinted on his mind at his sister’s funeral.

\(^{44}\) The three accounts are all autobiographical which present interpretive problems. Hunt and Trelawny generally tried to outdo one another in print in their love for Shelley and furthermore Trelawny fabricated his early life as he told it to his literary friends making himself sound Byronic and interesting, quite the opposite of his actual life (Crane viii). De Quincey presents other problems which Charles Rzepka sums up:

We should also remember that De Quincey’s memory was much celebrated by his circle of acquaintances, testimony which suggests that, barring contradictory evidence or suspicion of a motive to suppress or alter them, we should accept most of his autobiographical ‘involutes’ as possessing a kernel of historical truth. At the other extreme, however, some of the opium-eater’s putative memories of these events, particularly from early childhood, must be viewed as highly ‘factive’ reconstructions. (105)

His childhood memories are precisely what we are examining. The take away is this; historical truth is not the issue I am concerned with. I am interested in how these men write about death and how they remember it touching their lives. Their own omissions and additions are just as interesting as the truth. When possible I will point out departures from fact, but the narratives they weave are just that--woven and constructed. In this essay I do not trust what the writers say as fact, but I do accept it as their way of relating to the corpse.
when they hear of the death, or impending death, of their loved one. In all three accounts, nature intervenes to change the corpse from the shell of their family or friend into a separate artifact.

In the first section I focus on De Quincey and “Suspiria,” first treating his experience of disordered senses and then moving on to the way his understanding of the corpse of his sister changes as influenced by nature. I also argue that “Suspiria” is a space where he can have access to his sister’s corpse and control the experience. In the second section, I turn to Hunt’s and Trelawny’s disordered senses as well as their own understanding of Shelley’s corpse after both Hunt and Trelawny pause to reflect on nature before the corpse is cremated. The essay concludes by comparing the experiences of these three writers with William Wordsworth’s “Boy of Winander” as a test case for how to read the scene of the encounter with a dead body as a scene of sensory deprivation.

**The Death of Another Facilitates Losing Connection with the World**

Charles Rzepka points out that De Quincey did not write about his sister’s death in “Suspiria” until fifty-four years after the event, which leads Rzepka to believe that De Quincey was not aware of the impact of her death until much later in life (“Sacramental” 112). In understanding the text it is useful to first summarize De Quincey’s relationship with his sister Elizabeth as he gives it in “Suspiria de Profundis.” When De Quincey lost his sister Elizabeth in 1792 he has already lost one sister. When he was two-and-a-half his three-and-a-half year old sister Jane died. He did not have a concrete understanding of what death was at this point.

So passed away from earth one of . . . my nursery playmates; and so did my acquaintance (if such it could be called) commence with mortality. Yet, in fact, I knew little more of mortality than that Jane had disappeared. She had gone away; but, perhaps, she could come back. Happy interval of heaven-born ignorance! . . . I was sad for Jane’s absence. But still in my heart I trusted that she would come again. Summer and winter came again—crocuses and roses; why not little Jane? Thus easily was healed, then the first wound in my infant heart. Not so the second. (102)

When Elizabeth died he was almost seven years old (she was nearly nine) and he had a better grasp of what it meant when someone died.\(^4\) In “Suspiria” he imagines her with a “tiara of

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\(^4\) Suspiria actually says he was almost six and she was eight (105). The relative ages are as recorded above though, him six almost seven and she eight almost nine (Barrell 26).
light” and calls her a “pillar of fire” that went before him as a guide as well as a “pillar of darkness” that “shed the shadow of death over [his] young heart” (De Quincey 102-103).

Comparing himself and Elizabeth with the Adam and Eve figures in *Paradise Lost*, De Quincey says he would rather carry the pain of losing her than have lived without her (105). By comparing the sibling pair with Adam and Eve he may be picturing them as a perfect couple unmarred by the emotional baggage of adulthood and sexuality. It is also possible he is expressing sexual feelings for his sister. As ambiguous relationships between male and female siblings go in the Romantic period, referring to you and your sister as Adam and Eve is hardly scandalous. However, in an 1803 diary entry he said he saw “no harm in sexual intercourse between a brother and sister (commonly termed *incest*)” (Rzepka “Sacramental” 122). Rzepka goes on to assert that because De Quincey’s mother was cold and quick to judge both himself and Elizabeth that Elizabeth was a mother-surrogate for him. Additionally, Elizabeth also had the same name as his mother (“Sacramental” 110). In this pattern, Rzepka sees God as the Father who creates an Oedipal relationship where Elizabeth is a mother-surrogate for De Quincey who God takes away from him (“Sacramental” 116). John Barrell sees Elizabeth and her death replicated through the many other girls and young women that appear in De Quincey’s autobiographical writings (1830s-1850s): “[T]he death of Elizabeth is represented as the most important psychic event of his life, the event which effectively originates the myth of his own childhood” (26). Thus he rewrites this myth time and again with other young women standing in for Elizabeth (26).

When De Quincey’s sister Elizabeth became ill he did not immediately understand how serious her illness was. He was eventually told of his sister’s impending death by a nurse. This information had a profound impact on him.

Deaf and blind I was, as I reeled under the revelation. I wish not to recall the circumstances of that time when *my* agony was at its height, and hers in another sense was approaching. Enough to say – that all was soon over; and the morning of that day had at last arrived which looked down upon her innocent face, sleeping the sleep from which there is no awaking, and upon my sorrowing the sorrow for which there is no consolation. (106)

The first question a reader would have upon reading the above paragraph is this: was De Quincey actually deaf and blind or is this a hyperbolic statement meant to accentuate the perceived impact?
of the news? It is impossible to say for sure, but De Quincey’s style tends toward serious confession. His pathetic story of the way he cried when his kitten was killed by the family hunting dog\textsuperscript{46} or how he would campaign for the life of a spider the housemaid was about to dispose of seem to be intended as serious examples of his hyper-sensitive nature.\textsuperscript{47} These stories appear in the same section as the section on his sister’s death meant to convey De Quincey’s innate sensitive nature, and one can assume his mood throughout the section is consistent. How overwhelmed he is by his sister’s death was probably also intended to convey the same message about his sensitivity. Nevertheless it is impossible for the reader to know whether the recording of his disordered senses is hyperbolic or plainly factual. In essence, it does not matter whether his disordered senses are a metaphor or not, they are still powerful. Below I will treat his disordered senses as factual—“deaf and blind I was”—because that was certainly how he intended them to be read. Furthermore, his disordered senses are important because they were a reaction he believed an early nineteenth-century audience would have believed and related to.

De Quincey’s claim to have lost the ability to see and hear upon hearing of his sister’s impending death is an important symptom of his reaction to death. Senses are the way information about the world is received. The loss of one’s senses is a loss of connection with the world. In this case by losing vision and hearing De Quincey loses his ability to connect with the world and by retaining taste, smell, and touch he keeps his ability to exist within the closed world of his body. He is cut off from outside stimuli and experiences a type of miniature death in that moment. If one were buried alive, sight and to a large extent sound would be removed. The only senses which would be left would be the ability to touch one’s immediate surroundings, to taste and to smell the recently upturned dirt. Thus, in losing these specific senses De Quincey enters the grave and experiences a metaphorical death along with his sister.

\textsuperscript{46} “It is impossible to describe my grief… [I] burst into a passion of tears. The man, struck with my tumultuous grief, hurried into the house; and from the lower regions deployed instantly the women of the laundry and kitchen. … The cook, not only kissed me, but wept so audibly, from some suggestion doubtless of grief personal to herself” (127). This is not to not suggest that kittens are not creatures to be cried over, but the image of the cook kissing young De Quincey and crying over him is so over the top it is almost comical. I have no doubt that De Quincey meant this scene to be taken literally.

\textsuperscript{47} “…my policy was—to draw off the housemaid on the pretence of showing her a picture, until the spider, already \textit{en route}, should have had time to escape. Very soon, however, the shrewd housemaid, marking the coincidence of these picture exhibitions with the agonies of fugitive spiders, detected my stratagem; so that, if the reader will pardon an expression borrowed from the street, henceforward the picture was ‘no go’” (130). The reader finds this scene comical and sweet, but De Quincey’s apparent intention (as he outlines earlier in the paragraph) is to illustrate that his sensitive nature can be traced back to his childhood.
He would later try to recreate this experience of shock after Elizabeth had already been buried by seeking out deserted spaces to think about her.

All day long, when it was not impossible for me to do so, I sought the most silent and sequestered nooks in the grounds about the house or in the neighbouring fields. The awful stillness occasionally of the summer noons, when no winds were abroad, the appealing silence of grey or misty afternoons – these were fascinations as of witchcraft.

(115)

He is doing his best to find places like the grave that are small and silent. His initial reaction to her impending death was emotional and created a deathlike state. Now, without the same emotional pitch he has to seek out physical changes in the outside world to create the same changes he initially experienced in his body. He seems to believe that this is the appropriate reaction to her death, to try to create a death-like state for himself. In so doing he is also returning to the initial experience of hearing that she was going to die which would be returning to the strongest memory he had before her death; in some sense, bringing her back.

We are not told how long after De Quincey has his experience of disordered senses that his sister dies. What the reader is told is “Enough to say – that all was soon over; and the morning of that day had at last arrived” (106). Without any other indication of time it would seem her death occurs a few days after he is told it will happen. After Elizabeth dies De Quincey sneaks up to her room to see her. De Quincey is participating in the tradition of viewing the corpse—a tradition still observed today. During the nineteenth-century it was not uncommon for not only the family but the town in general to visit the corpse (Richardson 24). According to Ruth Richardson, “Like waking, it served a double function—part visit of condolence to close mourners and part a last respectful visit to the dead. Perhaps because of its high incidence and general acceptability, folklorists tended not to collect or solicit reasons for the observance” (24). De Quincey says he goes alone because “grief even in a child hates the light, and shrinks from human eyes” (106). The reader might immediately question these seemingly odd motives. The grief he later expresses for his sister is quite public and he even continues to openly grieve

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48 This in itself is interesting because it means that the body was not being watched. Watching the body was very popular until the mid-seventeenth century but then it began to fall off in popularity. However, folklorists recorded people following the tradition in the early nineteenth century (Richardson 22). This tradition was clearly not followed in the De Quincey household.

49 In fact, it was so common that it was not until the period between the two world wars that etiquette writers began to suggest that the body should be protected from display (Richardson 24). Today when one goes to sort out the details of a funeral the funeral director will still ask if the family would like to include a viewing prior to the funeral.
when he is mocked for his behavior. It seems more likely that he simply wanted to be alone with her than not want others to notice he was upset.

After sneaking up the back staircase the first thing he does when entering the room is look for his sister’s face, but the bed has been turned around and he cannot see her. The window is open and summer sunlight fills the room (106). He turns from the sunshine to look at his sister:

There lay the sweet childish figure, there the angel face: and, as people usually fancy, it was said in the house that no features had suffered any change. Had they not? The forehead indeed, the serene and noble forehead, that might be the same; but the frozen eyelids, the darkness seemed to steal from beneath them, the marble lips, the stiffening hands, laid palm to palm, as if repeating the supplications of closing anguish, could these be mistaken for life? (108-109)

A change had altered the body of his sister. Even as a young child he recognized that she was not the same as she had been. The most arresting image is that of the darkness stealing out from beneath her eyes, as if rays like shadows shot downwards from her eyes, so that one might wonder if her eyes were opened whether darkness might fill the room. She is laid out like a funerary monument one might see in a parish church. The hands in a position of prayer and the features are already like stone. Because he uses words like frozen, stiffening, and marble we can assume his sister was in rigor mortis. This gives us some idea of when he saw her. Rigor mortis is generally complete ten hours after death and will remain for approximately thirty-six hours (Richardson 19). This means he was probably kept from her for a minimum of ten hours before he was able to see her: a long time for a six-year-old. As he stands over her he remembers how in moments past he had kissed those now cold lips but he “stood checked for a moment; awe not fear, fell upon [him]” (109). Confrontation with a corpse is sobering for anyone, but especially a child.

50 De Quincey says he believes summer is the worst time to lose someone because all of nature is alive and cheerful which starkly contrasts with the feelings of the bereaved (106-107).
51 I was eleven when I went to the funeral for my maternal grandmother. My aunts encouraged me to kiss my grandmother’s forehead and touch her face as a way of saying goodbye. Perhaps it goes without saying, but I refused to do so. I believe touching the corpse in this way is more common in the American South where the funeral was held.
After looking at his sister for awhile the wind catches his attention. Where the sunlight had first distracted him from his sister now the wind begins to blow through the window bringing about a new experience of mourning:

a solemn wind began to blow – the most mournful that ear ever heard. Mournful! that is saying nothing. It was a wind that had swept the fields of mortality for a hundred centuries. Many times since, upon a summer day, when the sun is about the hottest, I have remarked the same wind arising and uttering the same hollow, solemn, Memnonian, but saintly swell: it is in this world the one sole audible symbol of eternity. (109)

This mournful wind propels him into an altered state. “Instantly when my ear caught this vast Eolian intonation, when my eye filled with the golden fulness [sic] of life, the pomp and glory of the heavens outside, and turning when it settled upon the frost which overspread my sister’s face, instantly a trance fell upon me” (109). He insists on two things in this last short sentence. The first is that he entered an actual trance, not a trance-like-state. The second is he entered into this altered state instantly. He wants to be sure the reader does not think this was something he imagined or conjured up but rather an experience that happened to him. He recounts the trance thusly:

A vault seemed to open up in the zenith of the far blue sky, a shaft which ran up for ever. I in spirit rose as if on billows that also ran up the shaft for ever; and the billows seemed to pursue the throne of God; but that also ran before us and fled away continually. The flight and the pursuit seemed to go on for ever and ever. Frost, gathering frost, some Sarsar wind of death, seemed to repel me; I slept—for how long I cannot say; slowly I recovered my self-possession, and found myself standing, as before, close to my sister’s bed. (109)

He sees a shaft open up in the sky which “ran up for ever” and he follows the shaft upwards which goes to God’s throne and is continually withheld from sight by a frosty wind of death that keeps him from approaching. In Rzepka’s reading of this remarkable scene De Quincey is accompanied by the body of his sister: “the mysterious first-person plural pronoun in the phrase ‘ran away before us and fled away continually’ suggests that, in his vision, at least, De Quincey has not left the dead body of Elizabeth behind. Rather, he and Elizabeth’s corpse seem to be carried aloft together on the rising ‘billows,’ and it is they, not De Quincey alone, that ‘seemed to pursue’ the throne” (Rzepka “Sacramental” 113). Who the “us” is in the passage is ambiguous, it
is almost certainly himself “in spirit” and a form of Elizabeth but it seems more likely that it is Elizabeth’s spirit or soul. I argue this because in the very next line he says: “Oh flight of the solitary child to the solitary God – flight from the ruined corpse to the throne that could not be ruined” (109). Why would he talk about flying from the corpse if he had flown with the corpse? It is important to note the shift in his language after his vision. He has described his sister as like an angel, then as one who looks changed, and after the vision conjured by nature as a corpse to be flown from.

The power of the moment also appears in the blatantly bad writing contained in this passage. It seems strange that someone as verbose as De Quincey could be at such a loss for words that he could not come up with anything other than “for ever,” “for ever,” and “for ever and ever.” The only reason to acquit him of bad writing would be to say that the experience was so powerful that he was unable to put it into words. He seems to have no problem explaining his opium dreams at length, meaning this memory of visiting his sister’s corpse was an experience which left him reeling.

After this he thinks he hears someone on the stairs and is afraid if they see him there they would “prevent [him] coming again” (110). This fear indicates a more plausible reason to wish to make the visit alone than the one he gives initially. Now he takes the kiss which awe had prevented him from taking before. “Hastily, therefore, I kissed the lips that I should kiss no more, and slunk like a guilty thing with stealthy steps from the room” (110). He previously claimed the reason he did not want anyone else to know he was going to visit Elizabeth was because he did not want people to observe his grief. Now the reason is different. Now he says it is because he wants to return to her and does not want anyone to stop him. He calls himself a guilty thing and slinks stealthily from the room. It does not seem that the thing he is hiding is his grief, but rather the kiss he stole from his sister. Whether she would have given it freely in life or not, in death she is unable to consent. And note the double meaning of “should” in the phrase “I should kiss no more.” First, that he would not be able to do this again because the door was later locked after her autopsy was performed; second, as something that he ought not to be doing. Furthermore, touching and kissing the corpse was not common as evidenced by folklorists who took pains to explain the reasons why different groups of people might kiss or touch the

52 John Barrell points out the different levels a guilty slinking thing speaks to. When Hamlet’s father’s ghost hears the cock crow he “started like a guilty thing Upon a fearful summons” and it also echoes a line from Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode”: “Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised” (Barrell 28).
corpse (Richardson 25). Additionally the touching of the corpse corresponds to the removal of saint’s relics which had taken place by the twelfth century from where pilgrims could touch them to where they could only see them. Touch had initially been the only way for those seeking healing to experience those effects, but the church decided seeing the relics was enough (Hallam 78). De Quincey needs to touch his sister; looking at her will not suffice. She is actually quite like a relic. She is an item, but one imbued with specialness that is hard to describe. He wants to see her as more than the object she has become.

For De Quincey nature enables him to see his sister move from an angel, to a thing that has changed, to a corpse. Where he had initially been in awe and unable to kiss her when he entered the room, after his vision brought on by the wind the body has been changed to a corpse and is now a thing he can do with as he wishes. It is no more his sister. While it is still like his sister, an element of his sister, it is now reduced to an artifact, something he can rule over. This distance would presumably result in healing. Furthermore the text itself is a space where De Quincey has access to her corpse. As has already been asserted both bodysnatching and extramural cemeteries now entered into the way people dealt with their dead. By the time “Suspiria” was published in 1845 Kensal Green, Norwood, and Highgate cemeteries had all been established (Mytum 291). Bodysnatching sharply declined in 1832 with the passage of the Anatomy Act, but dissection still loomed as a further punishment for the poor, and was still in the public consciousness. De Quincey was well in range for these historical and social events to weigh on his mind.

His sister’s death was one of those memories that haunted him by coming unbidden into his mind. By enclosing her in the text it gives him a space to get near her corpse and to be in control of the memory. Here is a place where he has the final say on each word and can slant the

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53 The reasons which folklorists saw as unusual enough to document were both positive and negative. Some people believed that touching the corpse prevented bad dreams and that the act removed the fear of death. In Cornwall it was believed that touching the corpse conferred the strength of the recently deceased to the living. Negatively some believed that if someone accidentally touched the corpse then the dead would haunt that person. If touching the corpse was a common occurrence, like the order of the funeral service, folklorists would not have felt compelled to record it. (Richardson 25).

54 De Quincey’s financial situation was often problematic and while it is difficult to imagine him ever ending up in a workhouse, this does not mean he did not fear as much.
retelling in any way he chooses. In a sense she remains embalmed for him in the text. In the closed world of the text he can always return to her.

The Body Becomes Object

A juxtaposition of disordered senses with a body made object via a natural experience also occurs in both Leigh Hunt’s and Edward Trelawny’s separate recounts of the burning of Percy Shelley’s body. Shelley’s drowning and cremation amount to one of the major (if not the major) Romantic biographic myths. The facts of the event are well known; Percy Shelley’s and Edward Williams’ boat the Don Juan sank in the Gulf of Spezia on 7 July 1822. Both bodies were washed up on shore in different places and promptly buried to prevent the spread of disease. When Trelawny heard of this he ordered them dug up, identified them, and then arranged for them both to be cremated on the beach and the ashes buried. The burning was witnessed by Byron, Hunt, Trelawny and officials.

Hunt and Trelawny were both intimate friends of Shelley, but it was Hunt and Shelley who were particularly close. Initially, Hunt had planned to follow the Shelles to Italy with his family immediately but was prevented by his dire financial situation. Shelley’s letters to Hunt beg him time and again to join them. Hunt did arrive a short time before Shelley’s death, and was able to spend some time with him before he was gone. Hunt’s Autobiography discusses Shelley’s death and was published in 1850, twenty-eight years after Shelley’s death. It mined material from the earlier Byron and Some of his Contemporaries published in 1828, but Hunt admitted in the preface to the Autobiography that that book [Byron and Some of his Contemporaries] had been written for money and this book [Autobiography ] was composed more thoughtfully

55 Embalming was not an unpracticed art in nineteenth-century Britain though it was an avenue only open to the rich and royal. We have the details of how Astley Cooper embalmed William IV. Including which pieces were removed and interred in an urn, what Cooper rubbed into the deep gashes he cut into William’s legs (“a mixture of herbs, fruit and flowers – roses, marjoram, and lemon”) and how Cooper boiled fourteen yards of green cloth with “beeswax, resin, sheep fat and verdigris” for the initial wrapping of the body. Followed by a layer of purple and another layer of white silk (Burch 232).

56 The connection between De Quincey and Percy Shelley’s death is not necessarily tenuous. As John Barrell explains, De Quincey wrote a “transparent roman à clef” titled The Stranger’s Grave (31). In the novel “Edward Stanley (S----ley, as it might have been written by the satirists of the previous century) stands for Percy Shelley and Emily Gordon (G oo----n) for Mary Godwin. It was written in 1823, the year after Shelley had died, and is composed in the monitory spirit of Adeline Mowbray, Amelia Opie’s novel about the life and death of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Godwin’s mother. Shelley could be thought of as having allowed one woman to drown in order to conduct a relationship with another, who, like Emily, was the daughter of an impoverished freethinker; and like Edward, Shelley had been forced to conduct the affair abroad” (Barrell 31).
(Holden 282). The *Autobiography* was well received, popular, and garnered “lavish praise” (Holden 284).

Trelawny was forever defined not by his own works but by his relationships with Shelley and Byron. Trelawny was the one who designed the *Don Juan* and he was also the one who arranged for Shelley’s body to be dug up and then burned on the beach (Crane ix). No one can be sure why he emerged from life as a farmer in Usk to publish his account of the last days of Byron and Shelley in 1858 a full thirty-six years after Shelley’s death (Crane xi). Perhaps he did not want to let Hunt have the last word on Shelley. Either way, Shelley’s popularity bolstered by the support of Tennyson made the market ready for such a book and Trelawny ready for the fame he was to receive as “authority and relic rolled into one” (Crane xi-xii).

In their accounts of their reactions to Shelley’s death, Hunt and Trelawny both experience disordered senses. Hunt loses the ability to speak which Trelawny also loses, as well as having auditory hallucinations. One of the functions of epitaph is to confer speech on the dead, so Hunt and Trelawny’s reverse epitaphic experience is note-worthy. Hunt says in his *Autobiography* that when he heard of Shelley’s death he “underwent one of the sensations which we read of in books, but seldom experience; I was tongue-tied with horror” (130). This loss of the ability to speak is another sort of metaphoric death. By entering into a temporary state of aphasia Hunt aligns himself with his dead friend who can no longer speak. Jonathan Rée points out in *I See a Voice* that “vocality has had to bear some very heavy symbolic freight. The fact that our voice is carried by our breath means that it is easily taken as a kind of messenger dispatched from the soul, a metaphorical or even literal exhalation of some original inwardness hidden away in our head or breast” (Rée 8). There is an idea that the voice represents some essence of ourselves. It is propelled by our breath or pneuma in Greek, also meaning spirit. To be without breath is to be without life. The early nineteenth-century is still a time that the absence of breath (such as failing to fog a mirror) was sufficient to pronounce death (Richardson 15). Silence is synonymous with death as the phrase “Silent as the Grave” illustrates. As Dewey Hall says in his article “Signs of the Dead” referring specifically to Wordsworth:

The epitaphic model reveals how the funeral biographer actually ventriloquizes his own voice to impersonate the figure resting beneath the tombstone in a tender fiction of

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57 The best way to be certain someone was dead was to wait for *rigor mortis* to set in or for the body to begin to decay. Imagine the problems that would incur from a body that failed to enter *rigor mortis* which occasionally happens (Richardson 15).
representation—a cathartic act of self-purgation for the sake of the survivors. The poet as ventriloquist bears the dead, at once, by giving them imaginative life from beyond the grave and eulogizing them in an act of communal sympathy and self-consolation. (660)

When someone assumes the function of funeral biographer, one who writes epitaphs, they are both assuming the voice of the dead as well as casting their own voice forward into a place of death. When someone is relieved of his voice upon receiving news of the death of a friend they are also losing their own voice (if only temporarily) to the dead.

Trelawny has a similar experience of temporary aphasia. He saw Shelley and Williams off on that fateful day, and when they did not reach their destination he hoped the ship had simply been blown off course. When he hears the descriptions of the bodies which had washed up on the beach he is convinced they are the bodies of Shelley and Williams.\(^58\) He wants to make sure he is the one to tell their wives rather than a less sympathetic source and so he rides to the house the two families were sharing:

As I stood on the threshold of their house, the bearer, or rather confirmer, of news which would rack every fibre of their quivering frames to the utmost, I paused, and looking at the sea, my memory reverted to our joyous parting only a few days before. The two families, then, had all been in the verandah . . . Shelley’s shrill laugh—I heard it still—rang in my ears with William’s friendly hail (83).

This is the first experience Trelawny has with disordered senses. He has something which is a memory, but is hedged in the language of an auditory hallucination. Like De Quincey going blind and deaf, it is impossible to know how much of Trelawny’s story is strictly factual and how much hyperbolic.

My reverie was broken by a shriek from the nurse Caterina, as, crossing the hall, she saw me in the doorway. After asking her a few questions, I went up stairs, and, unannounced, entered the room. I neither spoke, nor did they question me. Mrs. Shelley’s large grey eyes were fixed on my face. I turned away. Unable to bear this horrid silence, with a convulsive effort she exclaimed—

“Is there not hope?”

I did not answer, but left the room, and sent the servant with the children to them. (84)

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\(^{58}\) Their “boat boy” Charles Vivian, who no one ever mentions, is discovered several weeks later. He is entirely unrecognizable (Holden 164).
Trelawny, who is in a trance-like state\textsuperscript{59} when he hears the voices of Shelley and Williams, is brought back to reality by the nurse. When he goes to Mary Shelley and Jane Williams he cannot bear the horrid silence in the room or even respond to a direct question. Instead he responds by leaving the room and sending the servant with the children into them: presumably so the children can comfort their mothers or be told of the death of their fathers (84). He had expressly gone there to \textit{tell} them what had happened, but finds himself unable to do so.

Hunt and Trelawny’s inability to speak aligns them with the dead. The dead are eventually given epitaphs so that they may continue to speak to the living because they are unable to do so themselves. Hunt and Trelawny are experiencing a not unusual reaction to death by wanting to join the departed. De Quincey does the same by ensconcing himself in nooks around his parent’s home. By affecting death through the loss of sensory input and output these survivors attempt to follow the departed. However, this initial wish to join them passes off as quickly as \textit{rigor mortis}.

Nature also intervenes to change the way Hunt and Trelawny relate to Shelley’s corpse. Hunt does not have a mystical experience in the same way De Quincey did. He does not rise up in a shaft of light towards God or believe the universe is communing with his own sorrow via the wind. Instead as Shelley burns on the beach Hunt watches the sea.

The Mediterranean, now soft and lucid, kissed the shore as if to make peace with it. The yellow sand and blue sky were intensely contrasted with one another: marble mountains touched the air with coolness; and the flame of the fire bore away towards heaven in vigorous amplitude, waving and quivering with a brightness of inconceivable beauty. It seemed as though it contained a glassy essence of vitality. You might have expected a seraphic countenance to look out of it, turning once more before it departed, to thank the friends that had done their duty. (Hunt 131)

He sees the water trying to make peace with the land, trying to atone for the life it had taken. He also seems to see some sort of life force in the hazy air over the fire and in the fire itself. It seems, to Hunt, that if Shelley were to try to communicate with them it would be through this medium. This is a much more sober account than De Quincey’s. Hunt does not say he sees Shelley in the flames, he says “[y]ou might have expected” an encounter of this sort, but he does not say it actually happened. Some people become superstitious when dealing with the death of a

\textsuperscript{59} Rather than the actual trance which De Quincey claims to be in.
loved one and imagine their presence in the wind or the creaking of a house. Hunt may have searched the flames for something that looked like a face, but he would have had a difficult time of actually picking one out since he remained in the carriage throughout the cremation. He said that while Byron got out of the carriage he himself remained within “now looking on, now drawing back with feelings that were not to be witnessed” (130). To be close to a corpse is as close as one can get to the hereafter. There is a material change that happens to the body. Anyone who has seen a body that has been dead for a little while instantly knows life has left it. It simply looks different and unnatural. There is something unsettling about witnessing this change from a person to a corpse. As Richardson illuminates:

A corpse has a presence of its own. It resembles the dead person, yet it is not that person. Death transforms the body of a known individual into something else – removing them from the realm of the ordinary in which survivors continue to have their being. It impresses survivors with the power of death, of its arbitrary effects; it is a menace to the living, a reminder of their own mortality, a threat of further death. (17)

However, for one who believes in some kind of God, as Hunt did, evidence of the absence there certainly must mean presence elsewhere.

Hunt had a problematic relationship with Christianity. He wrote two books to try to reconcile himself to the faith: *Christianism* and *The Religion of the Heart*, a book which reprints sections of *Christianism* but with actual meditations, rules, and services. Essentially he believed in an omni-benevolent God, similar to the Christian God, but rejected most of the mythos surrounding Christianity (Edgecombe 198; 204). Searching for a box to place him in, one might label him a Deist. Importantly he believed that some sort of essence like a soul outlasted the body as he says in a letter after William Shelley died:

I cannot conceive, that the young intellectual spirit which sat thinking out of his eye, & seemed to comprehend so much in his smile, can perish like the house it inhabited. I do not know that a soul is born with us; but we seem, to me, to attain a soul, some later, some earlier; & when we have got that, there is a look in our eye, a sympathy in our cheerfulness, & a yearning & grave beauty in our thoughtfulness, that seems to say – our mortal dress may fall off when it will: – our trunk & and our leaves may go: – we have

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60 A similar reaction to De Quincey’s wish to be unseen in his grief for his sister.

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shot up our blossom into an immortal air. (Edgecombe 204)\textsuperscript{61}

Hunt’s musings about the countenance of Shelley appearing in the flames can easily be
dismissed as a hopeful imagining, but it would seem that finding his friend in the smoke is not
entirely incongruent with his views on death and the hereafter. Hunt describes a natural scene
where the sea apologizes for the death of his friend and confirms for him the possible presence of
a spirit or soul now released from the body. This affirmation allows Hunt to accept the item
Trelawny will soon hand him.

Trelawny also describes a natural scene in connection with Shelley’s body. The body had
been buried where it was found on the beach. Trelawny arranged for it to be dug up, burned, and
for the ashes and bone fragments to be buried in the same cemetery where Shelley and Mary’s
son was interred, as well as Keats. While waiting for the body to be unearthed Trelawny mused:
The lonely and grand scenery that surrounded us so exactly harmonised with
Shelley’s genius, that I could imagine his spirit soaring over us. The sea, with the islands
of Gorgona, Caraji, and Elba, was before us; old battlemented watch-towers stretched
along the coast, backed by the marble-crested Apennines glistening in the sun,
picturesque from their diversified outlines, and not a human dwelling in sight. As I
thought of the delight Shelley felt in such scenes of loneliness and grandeur while living,
I felt we were no better than a herd of wolves or a pack of wild dogs, in tearing out his
battered and naked body from the pure yellow sand that lay so lightly over it, to drag him
back to the light of day; but the dead have no voice . . . (91).

Trelawny also imagines that Shelley’s spirit is nearby; in his mind Shelley is flying above them
and it is nature and the ruins (buildings taken over again by nature) that provokes Trelawny to
imagine this spirit as present. Of course, it is not nature for itself that makes Trelawny think of
Shelley, but seeing this natural scene reminds him of the way Shelley might have responded to it.
Also note the last phrase, “the dead have no voice.” This cements Shelley’s death for Trelawny:
he might imagine a spirit soaring above them, but the truth is that there is no one there but
several friends and officials on a beach. That Trelawny says the corpse has no voice is a fact that
should resonate with him since he had so recently lost his own voice in response to Shelley’s
death.

\textsuperscript{61} This passage sounds like a more cheerful version of Keats’s Vale of Soulmaking.
As De Quincey stole a kiss from his sister who could not consent, Trelawny steals the heart from Shelley who could no longer give it. Shelley’s body was not in a good state when the burning began. It had been buried with lime and was an indigo color when they started to burn it. It was still essentially in one piece though, which was different from Williams’ body whose limbs had detached when his body was moved from the sand to the furnace⁶² (91). As Shelley’s body burned it fell open to expose the heart, and the section of a skull that had been struck by a shovel in exhuming the body fell off. The fire continued to burn until nothing but ash, bone fragments, the jaw, and the skull were left: these and the heart. They were surprised to find it unconsumed and Trelawny burned his hand badly by retrieving the heart and was lucky no one saw him do it or he would have been quarantined (92).

What he does not say in the text is that he gave the heart to Hunt who intended to keep it for himself. After bitterly arguing with Mary over it Hunt eventually gave it to her but thought he had more right to it than she because Shelley told him that she and he had grown apart (Holden 166). When Hunt eventually gave it to her he kept for himself a piece of Shelley’s jawbone which remained in the family until 1913 when a descendant gave it to the Keats-Shelley Memorial in Rome (Holden 160). Another important part to this story is what Trelawny did not take from the flame. Byron had asked Trelawny to get Shelley’s skull for him, but Trelawny had seen the young Lord use another skull as a drinking vessel. He wished that Shelley’s skull “should not be so profaned” (91). This particular refusal registers a tension and anxiety located in the corpse. If Trelawny felt he could steal fragments of Shelley’s body to hand out to friends and relic seekers he should have had no qualm about what function those people used the remains for. It would seem that there is a tension here though, because Trelawny is content to have Shelley’s body scattered and held by many different people if the purpose of attaining the body part is memorial. However, if the purpose is other than that (as with Byron) he is unwilling to facilitate this.⁶³ It seems to be the function that concerns him. There is some decorum intact. As De Quincey was limited in the liberties he was willing to take with his sister, so is Trelawny

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⁶² Furnace is Trelawny’s word for the contraption he had built to burn the bodies. He also uses the word “apparatus” (91).

⁶³This means that while he did not want Byron to drink out of the skull he facilitated Hunt carrying the heart on what turned out to be a very drunken, riotous carriage ride which has now become part of Shelleyian legend. In Hunt’s account in *The Autobiography*, as Holden points out, Hunt never mentions that while he and Byron were carrying on he was also clutching the heart (166).
limited in allowing the corpse to be used in ways other than a memorial object. All three men though were ready to step in and violate the corpse after their “natural” experience.

**Conclusion**

If one were to seek a high-canonical text that combines the loss of the senses with death one would only have to look to Wordsworth’s “The Boy of Winander.” Although the “Drowned Man Episode” of *The Prelude* offers the most vivid corpse in the poem, I want to look at a different place where aphasia meets the liminal space of consciousness. In this short, well-known excerpt from Book Five of *The Prelude* a boy calls to owls and they answer back to him. However, they do not call back to him every time.

. . . And when it chanced
That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill,
Then sometimes, in that silence, when he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents, or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain Heaven, receiv’d
Into the bosom of the steady Lake. (404-413)

As long recognized, it is not in the moments when nature answers back, seeming to communicate with him, that the importance of this episode resides. Instead it is the moments of seeming disconnection with nature that resonate. In these moments the boy is taken into his mind and surprised to find nature even there. The words Wordsworth uses to describe this occurrence are “shock,” “surprise,” “solemn,” and “uncertain.” These words describe the serious emotions of the boy and his strong consciousness, rather than the earlier focus on his body, when he would:

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64 It may be useful to include a publication history of his poem. Rather than reinvent the wheel, I here include Nigel Alderman’s summary. “It began as a poem about Wordsworth, then became a poem about another boy, and then a poem about the boy and Wordsworth’s reflections upon him. First published as a separate poem in the 1800 two-volume edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, it became incorporated within the larger structure of the *Prelude* in 1805; it was reinstated, however, as a separate lyric in the 1815 collected *Poems*, where it opened the ‘Poems of the Imagination’ and was highlighted in the ‘Preface.’ It remained there in all the subsequent editions of Wordsworth’s poetry published during his lifetime (Alderman 22).
stand alone, . . .
. . . with fingers interwoven, both hands
Press’d closely, palm to palm, and to his mouth
Uplifted, eh, as through an instrument,
Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls
That they might answer him. (393; 395-399)

It is in the silence of nature that the boy is moved from body to mind. The boy, in a sense, is deaf to the external world of the hooting owls, and experiencing instead the mountain torrents in his mind. As Paul H. Fry argues in his article “Green to the Very Door?”:

Vision of nature, sensation of spirit: whatever it is, it is what remains when the owls fall silent, suspending the Boy of Winander’s belief that there is a natural channel of communication (“responsive to his call”), a fit, between human beliefs about nature and nature itself. As the pathetic fallacy hangs in the balance, a new vision of the “visible scene” possesses him, a vision not of life, as all modern critics who have been fascinated by this narrative agree, but of a silent being in nature which, somatically signalled, is also a being toward his own imminent death. (542)

As Fry implies, Death closely follows this image of the boy speaking to owls. In Wordsworth’s telling, the boy died before he was ten and was buried in the village churchyard.

And there, along that bank, when I have pass’d
At evening, I believe that oftentimes
A full half-hour together I have stood
Mute—looking at the Grave in which he lies. (419-422)

He is held speechless by the death of the boy, as Hunt and Trelawny were held speechless by Shelley’s death. It is different here, though, because he is held mute (forced not to speak) after the body has already been buried rather than when the news of the death is received. “Mute” is a pregnant word in a section of a poem about a churchyard. In this specific situation it is the living visitor to the grave held mute rather than the dead as in Gray’s poem: “Some mute, inglorious Milton here may rest” (59). Just like Hunt and Trelawny reduced to death by their inability to speak and De Quincey who is unable to hear or see, the speaker in The Prelude too becomes one of the dead. Though the speaker does not physically interact with the corpse, he now uses the boy as a point of meditation to facilitate the expansion of his own mind.
For the other writers we have looked at, the dead create a temporary death for their survivors. A reminder that all will eventually succumb: after this reminder, though, the survivors triumph over the dead. The living reassert themselves now that they are certain that the dead are merely that—dead. Now the survivors can rule over the corpse as they rule over nature.

The realization of their power over the corpse is brought on by nature and so it allows De Quincey, Hunt, and Trelawny to relegate the corpse to the same status as just another rock ready to be used as they will. Entailed in this power, though, is the tension that maybe it is not really so, or maybe they find that abusing the power is not the way things ought to be. The registration of this anxiety emerges in De Quincey’s knowledge that although he uses his sister as an object, he would be prevented from doing so if his family knew. Again it also manifests in Trelawny’s refusal to give Shelley’s skull over to be made into a cup. The corpse is just a thing, like a seed to be returned to nature and planted in the ground. Perhaps the corpse is just a thing, but nature is not so simple. As enclosure and industrialization illustrate, the nagging thought that there is something more to the corpse haunts these authors; maybe the corpse is more than just the sum of its dead parts.
CHAPTER FIVE

MEMENTO MORI: REMEMBERING THE BODY

IN WORDSWORTH

“I’m careless of a grave:—Nature her dead will save”65 — William Camden

In this chapter I argue that Wordsworth buries an epitaph for Martha Ray’s infant in “The Thorn” and leads the reader to experience the epitaph, thus revivifying and connecting with the dead infant, at a moment when British society was attempting to repress the reality of infanticide. Critics have long argued the question of what this poem is about, whether, for example, it is about a communal hallucination or a bereaved mother.66 I argue that the center rests on a crucial hiddenness where the thorn itself supplies a burial monument and entails a hidden epitaph. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler argues, the tree acts as the monument for the infant: “described as ‘like a stone,’ . . . [it] is a living marker, and therefore perfectly combines the organic and memorial functions of the grave” (426). Because it is not a traditional tombstone, this thorn-as-marker is hidden in plain sight. I argue that the poem also offers a hidden epitaph. The epitaph is hidden because it is an oral epitaph spoken by Martha Ray rather than inscribed, and the epitaph is only present when Martha Ray is on the mountain ridge to speak it. In this perspective, Wordsworth’s poem, instead of centering on Martha Ray or the thorn, rotates around what Wordsworth saw as the primary link between the dead and the living—the epitaph. The scenario Wordsworth creates in “The Thorn” is further complicated by the fear of bodysnatching. The idea that what has been consigned to the ground ought to remain there is evident in the poem.

65 From John Weever’s Ancient Funerall Mounments Within the United Monarchie of Great Britaine quoted by Wordsworth in Essays Upon Epitaphs. The original that Weever cites is William Camden’s Remains of Greater Work Concerning Britain (Hayden “Essays Penguin” 497). Wordsworth seems to only be familiar with Camden through Weever (Owen “Essays Oxford” 100).
66 James O’Rourke carefully considers the cultural and social background of infanticide in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain in his article “The Failure of Philanthropy,” which treats both “The Thorn” and “Goody Blake and Harry Gill.” O’Rourke refutes Stephen Parrish’s claim that Martha Ray was just a hallucination, yet O’Rourke’s focus on Martha Ray as the poem’s center is too limiting. By saying, “the emotionally fraught narrative of ‘The Thorn’ centers on a harrowing question that has nothing to do with a tree: what do we think of this woman who has almost certainly taken the life of her infant child?” O’Rourke sidesteps one of the crucial elements of the poem (114). His question is an important one, which also figures in my reading of “The Thorn,” but pushing aside the tree goes too far.
The chapter unfolds in five sections. The first argues that Martha Ray’s wail is the epitaph for the dead infant in “The Thorn”; a second section examines The Drowned Man Episode from The Prelude, looking at the similarities between the drowned man and the infant in “The Thorn” and the witnesses in both poems. The third section distills the ways the child is hidden in “The Thorn” and demonstrates how this hiddenness is crucial to haunting the place where the child is buried. A fourth section focuses on the epitaph itself; first how Wordsworth uses oral epitaphs in another poem, “The Brothers,” and then how epitaph functions in “The Thorn.” The last section focuses on ecocriticism. I first demonstrate how Morton’s concept of dark ecology provides a way to deal with nature that takes death and the desire to forget into consideration and then show how this benefits reading “The Thorn.” This last section ends by linking nature with mourning and melancholia. These readings culminate in a discussion of the desire to forget those who have died and how this unspoken desire alters our understanding of Wordsworth’s poetry.

**Epitaph: Martha Ray’s Wail**

Wordsworth outlines the function and appropriateness of epitaphs, and by extension poetry, in his *Essays upon Epitaphs*:

. . . an Epitaph presupposes a Monument, upon which it is to be engraven. . . . Among savage tribes unacquainted with letters this has mostly been done either by rude stones placed near the graves, or by mounds of earth raised over them. This custom proceeded obviously from a twofold desire; first, to guard the remains of the deceased from irreverent approach or from savage violation: and, secondly, to preserve their memory.

(49 “Essays Oxford”)

Wordsworth’s formula works backwards here; since the epitaph presupposes a monument, then if the reader is given a monument she should cast around for an epitaph. In “The Thorn” it seems that the reader is not supplied with an epitaph, since the tree is only a “mass of knotted joints . . . [covered in] lichen” without any words or lettering to be found (8-11). In this section, I argue that the missing epitaph is the refrain spoken by Martha Ray—“Oh misery, oh misery/ Oh woe is me, oh misery” (76-77)—and I explain why the epitaph is hidden as an oral text.

“The Thorn” is an odd poem narrated by an old sea captain. It begins by describing the thorn, small pond (more like a puddle), and small hill of moss which are all located on a
mountain ridge. Then he begins to describe the woman who frequents this area to cry out “Oh misery! oh misery! / Oh woe is me! Oh misery!” (76-77). It is the wailing specifically that provokes an unnamed person, who might be supposed to be a stand-in for the reader, to ask about this woman’s story. “Oh wherefore? wherefore? tell me why / Does she repeat that doleful cry?” (87-88). The narrator says he will tell what he can tell, but he is unsure about the facts himself. The woman’s name is Martha Ray and she swore herself to Stephen Hill, but he married another woman. Her grief and pregnancy induced insanity; one manifestation of this insanity is her repeated visit to the mountain ridge. The narrator himself, before he became acquainted with the habits of the community, once accidentally came across her while seeking shelter during a storm; this so unsettled him that he avoids the area because he does not want to come across her again. The narrator says many suspect Martha Ray murdered her baby and buried it at that spot on the mountain ridge; however, he is quick to say that no one knows the details. Perhaps the baby was stillborn, or perhaps (somehow) no baby was born at all. The narrator undermines himself eventually, however, by saying that many want Martha Ray to be brought to justice and “…all do still aver / The little babe is buried there, / Beneath that hill of moss so fair” (240-242). However, when it was suggested that the corpse be disinterred the very ground around the hill of moss began to shake, and this event keeps the community quiet. As has been discussed in previous chapters, the fear of bodysnatching was prevalent in the late eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century. In the world of the poem those who might dig up a body are punished for even thinking of committing the act. Martha Ray’s words of misery function as a refrain in the poem and also anchor the poem as the last two lines. They cannot be attached to the dead baby in any other way but to have them repeated, and this is the job Martha Ray undertakes.

Kurt Fosso supports reading the wail as an epitaph in his Buried Communities: Wordsworth and the Bonds of Mourning. “The last words of the poem are Martha Ray’s (narrated) words of grief, concluding the narrative with sentiments that loom between the genre of elegiac lamentation and, in the proximity to the dead, that of epitaph” (155). On first glance it may appear that because the words Martha Ray speaks do not have an inscripted form, then they cannot be an epitaph; yet, this oral epitaph can still be an epitaph because of its effect on the living. Lorna Clymer, in her article “Graved in Tropes: The Figural Logic of Epitaphs and

67 At least one community member, Old Farmer Simpson, claims she had come back to her senses by the time she gave birth.
Elegies,” shows how in *The Excursion* Wordsworth locates the memorial function of epitaph in living bodies and words:

Affirming rather than denying the mortal, Wordsworth places the site of enduring record in the body of those who can remember and give epitaphic accounts of the dead. Because immortality is literally the site of community, the alterity of anyone who dies, revealing himself as a separated other severed from the group is denied. The dead are thus personified in the very persons of those who survive them. (376-377)

Martha Ray (as a member of the community) is able to repeat the epitaph of the infant, even if it is not engraved on a tombstone. She is a link to the dead as any other member of the community would be—unlike the narrator. Fosso elaborates: “This type of community can be schematized as a process originating in a loss that, as the object of memorialization, forges a bond of grief between mourners and between the living and the dead” (7). Yet, this specific situation is more complicated than simple communal memory; since Martha Ray is the bereaved, then the task of writing an epitaph would fall to her. Additionally, since her situation as a probable perpetrator of infanticide dictates that everything must be hidden—her pregnancy, the birth, the murder, the grave—then the epitaph must also be hidden. The implication here is that anyone who hears and understands the epitaph is as culpable and as much of a participant as she. This knowledge ties together this community in a way beyond just sharing a common dead, because here they are all implicated.

**The Drowned Man Episode**

The Drowned Man episode from Book Five of *The Prelude* is an important touchstone for the representation of an encounter with the dead in the world of Wordsworth’s poetry.68 Wordsworth says he was wandering in a valley near Esthwaite Lake when he came across a heap of garments. He assumed they were left there by someone who went swimming and so he waited for the person to come back. No one appears and the lake grows dark only disturbed by a jumping fish. The next day people come with grappling hooks and free the drowned man so that he rose quickly to the surface, his “ghastly face” rising up through the water (472). Even though Wordsworth uses words like ghastly and spectre he says he was not afraid because he had already come across scenes like this in the books he read. There are two items that are

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68 I will be looking at the *Thirteen Book Prelude* unless otherwise noted.
noteworthy for understanding “The Thorn”: the first is Wordsworth’s wish to repress death and the second is his use of a non-traditional marker for a gravestone.

Repressing death or wishing to forget about a specific dead person is bound up with the desire to remember. Memorialization both commemorates the dead and separates them from the living. Forgetting the dead is part of healing; while one may not forget about a loved one entirely one cannot function if remembering the dead is the chief activity. However, we do still want to remember them. Installing a grave marker of some kind is a reminder to hold off this forgetting process. As I will demonstrate, a marker other than a stone marker seems to provide more immediacy for Wordsworth than a traditional gravestone. The reasons to forget the dead in “The Thorn” and in The Drowned Man episode are different. The community in “The Thorn” desires to forget a death which implicates them all in allowing a murderer to remain unpunished as one of them. The desire to forget in The Drowned Man episode is because Wordsworth is not yet ready to deal with the death of the drowned man.

Susan Wolfson has examined The Drowned Man episode through the lens of revision. In her essay “The Illusion of Mastery” she unpacks the changes Wordsworth made to the episode across twenty manuscripts showing how “no one frame seems to have satisfied his hope of mastering the matter of imagination in the fixed and visible shape of a poem” (917). The truth of the matter, argues Wolfson, is the episode needs to remain in flux because it allows Wordsworth to suspend the death of the drowned man.

Once a specter shape can be given a definite form, as if stabilized into a literary artifact, the life of the imagination, which works with motion, mystery, and ferment, dies: mastery is death. But as the play of Wordsworth’s revision shows, mastery is an illusion that dissolves inevitably into the mystery that is life. Revision is synonymous with the energy that postpones death. (932)

This flux maintains imagination; giving the memory of the drowned man a final form would create a second death for the drowned man. In continuing to revise Wordsworth is reviving the drowned man and giving him a second life. Wordsworth’s relationship to composition in “The Thorn” is similar. He jots down some lines about an old thorn on March 19, 1798 and Dorothy Wordsworth is able to quote from it in her own journal by April 20, 1798. This leads critics to believe the poem was finished by that date (Butler 352). Sometime after 1800 Wordsworth also copies out a section from “The Cruel Mother” “about a mother, a thorn, and a dead baby from
Herd’s *Ancient and Modern Scottish Song,*” but the poem could have been read before he copied it out (Butler 352). Wordsworth “revises” the poem by commenting on it in his Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 saying that the poem is not to be read as if the author were the narrator, rather “The Thorn” and “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” are written in “the spirit of the elder poets” (Wordsworth “Prose” 117). Still unable to leave the poem alone he supplies an end-of-volume note in 1800 (Butler 350). In this note he describes the narrator in detail who is a bored and superstitious, retired sea captain. He also explains that repetition of words in a poem, like Martha Ray’s epitaphic wail, is pleasurable for a reader (Butler 351). Unlike in The Drowned Man episode, there is no death that Wordsworth is trying to repress in “The Thorn” that he had a personal connection to. ⁶⁹ Rather here the repression is made by the community of the poem which is a illustration of other communities throughout Great Britain who were engaged in similar repression.

Wolfson also demonstrates how the deaths of Wordsworth’s mother and father leave traces in the different manuscripts of *The Prelude.* These traces, argues Wolfson, show Wordsworth’s pattern in *The Prelude:* a natural inclination to contain and hold off death where it affected him personally. It is not at all unusual to want to forget those who have passed on even when the departed were close to the survivors, although Wordsworth was not close to the drowned man. This inclination is also seen in the community of “The Thorn.” This community is made up of those who live in the village and, as Fosso claimed, share a common dead. Using this definition, Old Farmer Simpson is part of this community because he remembers Martha Ray before she was pregnant and noticed, as they all did, that Martha Ray did not bring a baby into the village after she ceased to be pregnant. The sea captain is not part of this community; he is an outsider who was not born in the village and he did not know Martha Ray when she was pregnant. ⁷⁰ The reader is also not part of this community; otherwise, she would not have to ask questions, because she would know, as they all do, that the baby is buried under the hill of moss.

The second point of comparative interest is Wordsworth’s use of an unusual grave marker—the clothes—in The Drowned Man episode. Wordsworth saw a pile of clothes by Esthwaite Lake that no one claims. The reason people come the next day to dredge the lake and bring the dead man up from the water is because “[t]hose unclaimed garments drew an anxious

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⁶⁹ If there is anything Wordsworth is personally trying to repress in this poem it is a life rather than a death. O’Rourke reminds us that Wordsworth played the role of Stephen Hill to Annette and Caroline Vallon (114).

⁷⁰ Knowing Martha Ray when she was pregnant is as close to knowing the child that someone could come.
crowd,” in the 1805 *Thirteen Book Prelude* (Reed 5.460). Significantly, in the *Fourteen Book Prelude* it is because “[t]hose unclaimed garments [told] a plain Tale” (Owen 5.445). The garments here act as the monument for the drowned man, one created by himself which tell a story as plainly (which is to say; not plainly at all) as the story told by the thorn, pond, and hill of moss. There are two key differences between The Drowned Man episode and “The Thorn.” The first is while the clothes might have been “ignored,” instead they rouse the community to action: the clothes cause the man to be sought for and remembered. In “The Thorn” though some want to hold Martha Ray accountable, the community decides to remain silent on the matter—a refusal to act. The second difference is the lack of an epitaph to the drowned man. There is no iconic form to the epitaph in “The Thorn” either but an epitaph is performed as Martha Ray’s wail. The Drowned Man episode demonstrated that an artifact which is clearly not a grave acts as a grave marker. Even though Wordsworth (according to Wolfson) resists finalizing the account and resigning to commit the drowned man to a further death he goes so far as to bestow a kind of monument for him. However, the dead man’s monument is not hidden as is the monument in “The Thorn.” The thorn, the hill of moss, the pond, and the epitaph are not hidden from perception. Rather, it is their purpose assigned by Martha Ray that is hidden.

**Hidden and Haunted**

Bodies that are interred in the ground are hidden. Burial is an act of hiding whether you are a squirrel with a nut, a pirate with plundered booty, or the bereaved with a loved one. Burial in itself is hiding, but burial in “The Thorn” is more hidden than most because the elements that memorialize the child are hidden also.

The hiddenness of the child and all of the elements that memorialize it do more than just state the obviousness of Martha Ray’s situation and the tools available to her to memorialize her infant—it also serves to haunt the area. Wordsworth himself says *he* did not even see the thorn until a storm brought the tree to his attention. The poem “[a]rose out of my observing, on the ridge of Quantock Hill, on a stormy day a thorn which I had often past in calm and bright weather without noticing it” (Butler 350). In the world of the poem, the thorn is a natural object serving as a monument which has been present so long that it can easily be overlooked, and as

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71 The area is haunted in a more immediate way as well. When the community threatens to bring Martha Ray to justice the ground itself shakes suggesting a supernatural presence, who the reader guesses is the infant, who does not want to be unearthed and have his or her mother tried.
such is hidden. The infant’s epitaph (which floats on the wind and is only heard when Martha Ray is present) is transitory. It is probable that the reader may turn from the poem with these lines echoing in her ears, but there is no physicality of these words in the world of the poem to look to—only the words on the page. This epitaph and monument are brought together at the grave of a child only in the physical recording of the poem. All three items (infant/hill of moss, monument/thorn, and epitaph/wail) are hidden yet easily perceptible. As a unit they serve as a reminder of the cultural position desperate mothers were in, which, as O’Rourke argues, neighbors across the country turned a blind eye to, characterized by a “pattern of systematic social neglect” (118). The child is as easy to erase as the words on the wind, as is a tree that served no purpose before the child was buried beneath it; its purpose as memorial may well be forgotten when the world forgets Martha Ray. As places anchor memory in Wordsworth’s poetry, however, the mountain ridge where the thorn grows may be haunted long after anyone can remember what deeds supposedly took place there, similar to Wordsworth’s conflation of events at Penrith Beacon. Nearby the area where Wordsworth saw the thorn was a hollow called Dead Boy. The local story behind the name is that this is where a woman abandoned her child, and local tradition may well have informed Wordsworth’s poem (Butler 350). In short, there is already a type of haunting present which Wordsworth expands on. Through the poem “The Thorn” the actual child who was killed nearby received the closest thing possible to a memorial.

One objection to this reading that might be raised is that reading Martha Ray’s wail as an epitaph will not work because her oral epitaph will not persist indefinitely. But other epitaphs carved into stone, as Wordsworth knew from being a walker of churchyards, did not persist forever either. They could be rendered illegible by the elements or the tombstone itself might be broken, reused, or lost. To repeat a truism that as “Ozymandias” demonstrates was true for the Romantic audience, all attempts to memorialize will eventually pass away. Wordsworth would be very familiar with the impermanent nature of epitaphs generally. It is even possible that the memory of Martha Ray retold within the community for a handful of generations might persist longer than an epitaph carved into a tombstone.

The hiddenness of the grave may also speak to the impossibility of expressing death in general and Martha Ray’s position specifically. These would both be difficult topics to talk about and one might wish to find another way to relate the information. However, there is no way to step outside the system to relate something, by trying to speak or write one is already using the
system. Ignoring for a moment how impossible it would be for Martha Ray to afford a tombstone or use one even if she could afford it, by trying to provide a natural symbol rather than a traditional tombstone and an oral epitaph rather than a written one, Wordsworth may be trying to skirt the problems of language. Using a natural thing makes it feel more immediate and real than a slab of stone. Stone, while it is natural, is a building material and so is intuitively identified with what is not nature. It is also hewn from its natural shape into one that serves people and so becomes a means to an end rather than an end in itself. By using a small tree, which can also be a building material but here is not altered from its natural shape, Wordsworth tries to conjure up an immediacy not available from a tombstone. As Morton says:

The ‘thing’ we call nature becomes, in the Romantic period and afterward, a way of healing what modern society had damaged. Nature is like that other Romantic-period invention the aesthetic. The damage done, goes the argument, has sundered subjects from objects, so that human beings are forlornly alienated from their world. Contact with nature, and with the aesthetic, will mend the bridge between subject and object. . . . This all depends upon whether subject and object ever had a relationship in the first place.

(Morton 22-23)

Wordsworth’s intention is understandable, and one may even feel like it ought to be true, but today we understand its impossibility. In the same way that speech is just as dead as writing, the tree is just as divorced from its purpose as a tombstone would be. However, unlike a tombstone which is understood culturally as a marker for where a dead body has been buried, the thorn is a hidden monument only linked to the child by a series of other elements: the pond, hill of moss, and Martha Ray’s voice. Her voice is perhaps the most hidden of all the elements that memorialize the infant, but as will be discussed below, it is by no means so hidden that it cannot be connected to the child.

**Oral Epitaphs: “The Brothers” and de Man**

Before moving on to the function of epitaphs, it bears mentioning that “The Thorn” is not the only time in Wordsworth’s poetry an epitaph is delivered orally. As Kurt Fosso points out there is also an “oral epitaph” in “The Brothers.” In this poem a brother, Leonard, returns from sea to visit the churchyard to see if his brother, James, is buried there or still living. There Leonard meets a priest who does not recognize him, but tells him how James died (Fosso 152).
The priest also tells Leonard, “We have no need of names and epitaphs, / We talk about the dead by our firesides” (Wordsworth 176-177). This is a different oral epitaph from the one the reader finds in “The Thorn.” In the community of “The Brothers,” rather than a forlorn woman the community avoids, this community is so tightly knit that speaking of the dead is as common as speaking of the living; thus, at the fireside one might recount someone who has passed on as easily as recount bumping into a neighbor on the road. This friendly remembrance by the community calls to mind “We are Seven,” another poem that cements the communal relationship between dead and living.

Although in “The Thorn” the community might wish to ignore Martha Ray and her crime, they are still connected by communal bonds and unable to repress this situation altogether. Fosso shows how

. . . in Wordsworth[‘s works] it is not community that leads to a connection to the dead so much as it is the dead, and more specifically the relationship of the living to them, that leads to community. The relationships produced are in this way more than friendships, for they are forged by a problem of mourning that binds the living to one another via the dead. . . . A degree of pathos, loneliness, and insufficiency attends all of Wordsworth’s depicted. Communities—communities raised in the shadows of social instability, poverty, failed fraternity, and war. (7)

The members of the community in “The Thorn,” those who share a common dead and who are implicated in the murder of the child by not prosecuting the mother, are bound by their refusal to act. Although they have suspicions and feelings about what Martha Ray probably did, they are careful to refrain from voicing judgment like the narrator: “I cannot tell; I wish I could,” “No more I know, I wish I did” and, “I cannot tell how this may be” (89; 155; 243). O’Rourke points out the gap between what laws dictated and what society chose to do with the mothers who committed infanticide. Although the laws were fairly straightforward jury after jury failed to convict the mothers for their crimes (113-114). The epitaph is known by the community and what it means is also known even though there is an attempt by Martha Ray to keep it a secret.

The secretive element of the situation (of refusing to say aloud what they believe) dictates the form the monument and epitaph must take for the infant. All must be as hidden as the child’s body. Additionally, this gives the community a way out, a chance to ignore their role in this crime, which all the elements of memorialization would call to mind. Thus, this epitaph
necessitates oral remembrance rather than a written remembrance on a stone, which ensures that the truth, while apparent, is just opaque enough to be ignored. This hiddenness means the sun cannot shine on a monument to illuminate the words, as Paul de Man suggests in his discussion of *Essays Upon Epitaphs* where a traveler happens upon a grave:

> The system passes from sun to eye to language as name and as voice. We can identify the figure that completes the central metaphor of the sun and thus completes the tropological spectrum that the sun engenders: it is the figure of prosopopeia, the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the power of speech. Voice assumes mouth, eye, and finally face, a chain that is manifest in the etymology of the trope’s name, *prosopon poien*, to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*). (75-76)

Rather than the old attempts requesting prayers for the deceased, there is nothing in “The Thorn” for the reader or traveler to read aloud and thus give voice to the dead. Instead the traveler, in this case the retired sea captain narrator, must wait for a specific collision of events for this epitaph to be revealed and the dead to once more attain the power of speech. It is actually impossible for the traveler to give speech to the dead infant in this situation, because he must wait for Martha Ray. In the world of the poem no one ever assumes to speak the epitaph but Martha Ray, although “all the country know, / She shudders and you hear her cry, / ‘Oh misery! oh misery!’” (207-209). In de Man’s reading it initially seems the event of speaking for the dead cannot happen in “The Thorn,” because the sun cannot shine on the words, the traveler cannot speak them, and thus the whole chain which facilitates remembrance of the dead cannot occur. Thus, the appearance of an epitaph with its monument in “The Thorn” is, instead, some other event than reanimating the dead. According to de Man, there is a certain intimacy invoked by speaking the epitaph that cannot be had from merely reading or remembering the epitaph silently. However, since Martha Ray is present often enough to provide the epitaph and the voice then the whole country is able to know the situation. Thus, de Man’s chain of events is still present even if the narrator is not the one speaking the epitaph. For de Man, without that voice the child cannot have a true presence, but the voice is so present that “all the country know” (207).

The apparent problem that this epitaph is transmitted orally is not a problem for Wordsworth, which he takes up in other poems like “The Brothers.” Martha Ray’s community is
a community, as Fosso explains, of “voyeurs and gossips” but a community all the same, even if it does not uphold the common, positive connotations of the word (154). The remembrance implied by the debt the dead demand of the living insures this community exists, and this community does not have to be made up of many (it often only consists of a few) which adds to the impossibility of ever repaying this debt (Fosso 7). This remembrance and debt are what binds the community together, and what necessitates the general community’s willingness to ignore Martha Ray’s crime. More than addressing the desire to remember the dead and be separated from them in an attempt to dodge this debt, “The Thorn” goes further in addressing the complex network of reactions to death. It attempts, though fails, to bring the reader close to the dead by using natural objects to create a sense of immediacy. While the attempt to create intimacy with natural objects fails, Wordsworth succeeds in causing the reader to read the epitaph of the infant (sometimes reading aloud) thus giving voice to the dead and revivifying the child.72

Debt, Dark Ecology, and Burial Reform

The two-fold desire to have a monument that Wordsworth cites (to remember and protect), as interpreted by Sanchez-Eppler, both “aids and hinders access to the dead” (422). “The Thorn” brings this problematic relationship to light. Where most burial monuments both seek to remember and separate, the monument in “The Thorn” recognizes the desire to forget. Once again, Adam Smith’s notion that the living wished to forget the dead to be relieved of the unrelenting burden they were under is relevant here. This tension between wanting to forget and striving to remember, between Thanatos and Eros, today rings truer than perhaps ever before, and in more arenas than the relationship between dead and living.

In fact, according to Timothy Morton, the separation between remembering and forgetting no longer exists. Morton outlines a new way of dealing with, perhaps erasing, this gap—dark ecology. Dark ecology, simply stated, is “a ‘goth’ assertion of the contingent and

72 Jeremy Bentham would agree that neither a gravestone marker nor a natural marker like the thorn were the appropriate marker for the dead. Bentham believed that the truest and best monument for a dead person was the body itself and he relates in detail why he chose to have his own remains preserved in this way and why he thinks all people should be memorialized like him (Bentham 1-21). Bentham’s auto-icon, it should be pointed out, sits in a glass box at University College London. What is actually on display are his clothes which have been stuffed and inside of which is his skeleton. His head was also preserved but is kept in the University vaults because students kept stealing it. For a complete discussion of Bentham’s auto-icon and the text Auto-Icon see Bentham’s Auto-Icon and Related Writings (2002) edited by James E. Crimmins. For a discussion of how the text and body figure in their connection to the dissection/burial debate see Monstrous Society (2009) by David Collings.
necessarily queer idea that we want to stay with a dying world” (Morton 185). Morton says there is no way around our desire to remain with our world or any way around the world we have created. We may wish to forget the ecological realities we have brought upon ourselves, but the very fact we wish to remain with this world makes this forgetting impossible. Like “The Thorn” where a monument symbolizes the desire to forget, naïve nature writing and naïve ecocriticism long to forget that nature is not an omni-benevolent other. Rather, “[nature] has more in common with the undead than with life. Nature is what keeps on coming back, an inert, horrifying presence and a mechanical repetition” (Morton 201). It is much darker than we often expect and when we attempt, as nature writing often does, to break this spell, (as Morton does in his first chapter) we often end up further entrenched.

As I write this, I am sitting on the seashore . . . [just kidding] . . . As I write this, a western scrub jay is chattering outside my window . . . [still kidding] . . . What’s really happening as I write this: . . . The sound of Ligeti fills the headphones, chiming with the signal from the dishwashing machine. (Morton 29)

By trying to get around language and call up nature to fill the gap many nature writers and ecocritical theorists sometimes just step further into the proverbial hole. Morton sums this up: “My attempt to break the spell of language results in a further involvement in that very spell” (Morton 30). In other words, Wordsworth’s attempt to connect the child to the thorn as a way of attaining a closer relationship to the dead falls short in the same way that a gravestone or even a simple wooden cross would fall short, because all are signifiers for the sign and all three are equally distant. Nature is not a magical fix-all that can go before us and prepare a path, it is just as faulty, just as broken. Nature cannot cure, it can only haunt.

If the child’s gravesite in “The Thorn” seems haunted so is the earth in general. Morton’s idea that we “should be finding ways to stick around with the sticky mess that we’re in and that we are” is again relevant here (Morton 188). For Morton, the reality of our dying planet is what haunts ecocriticism. When dealing with the literal dead as Wordsworth does in “The Thorn,” Morton’s call gives the reader a chance to get her hands dirty. The dead, as a layer of the earth only several feet removed from the ground we all trod, contribute a haunted aura to nature. Let us not forget that we are commending our dead to the earth.\footnote{This planting, for many in the Romantic audience, would mean until the resurrection. For a discussion of the prevalent belief of the resurrection amongst the general population during the Romantic period and extending into}
bury cannot remain hidden. The problem of infanticide will haunt her, her village, and all of Great Britain. Nature cannot be relied on to act as a purifying agent; instead it is a constant reminder of her shame and death in general. Every natural item present at that site—the tree, the ludicrously-rhymed pond, the moss, the very spot itself (which no one will visit while she is there)—is haunted by the baby and by shame. This truth rises to the surface like the bodies that burial reformers fought to return to the ground and reorder in ornamental garden cemeteries: as if they could cut the tie between the living and the dead and release the survivors from the guilt of remembrance.

Nature is tricky because it exists whether meaning is applied to it or not. It is just there. By using natural objects like trees and ponds Wordsworth ensures that the reader participates before she knows what is happening. In “The Thorn” participating means to connect with the infant. Connecting to the infant rather than simply being appalled by the mother’s actions would further the intent O’Rourke argues for where Wordsworth was using “The Thorn” to draw attention to the situation of unwed mothers and the failure of philanthropy and social systems to support them. Nature seems to be permanent, for example while a particular tree might not always be here it seems as though there will always be trees. This is an assumption which we can no longer afford to make. “Living beings do not form a solid prehistorical, or nonhistorical, ground upon which human history plays. But nature is often wheeled out to adjudicate between what is fleeting and what is substantial and permanent” (Morton 21). Nature is not permanent while people are fleeting, it cannot be used to connect people to some distant spiritual realm. Nature can die as we can.

Nature, especially when dealing with the Romantics, seems like an easy thing to talk about deictically. It is this lichen, and that tree, and also the enclosure that Clare fought against. It is certainly the hillside on which much of the poem takes place; maybe it is also the thatched building Martha Ray inhabits; and it seems it must also be Martha Ray herself. In trying to define nature by what it is, we are confronted by trying to define nature by what it is not, and often end up going in circles and adding more things to the list than crossing off. Morton puts a stop to this list-making altogether: “Instead of lumping together a list of things and dubbing it ‘nature,’ the aim is to slow down and take the list apart—and to put into question the idea of making a list at

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all” (Morton 12). It seems counterintuitive to contemplate ecology without nature, because once the reader stops worrying about what is or is not nature she must still deal with something that looks an awful lot like nature in this poem. To negotiate this green space is where Morton’s theory of dark ecology becomes useful. Morton’s theory hinges on the idea that the world is dying, and he says we get tied up with this death because we are part of this world and have no choice but to stick around. Morton’s dark ecology does precisely that; rather than talking about nature as something that rejuvenates, he recognizes the end is in sight.

The end, whether appearing in the melting of polar ice caps or in a new ice age, might seem misplaced when discussing a poem from the very late 18th century. However, for a poet like Wordsworth who tangles up death, grief, and nature in many of his poems, Morton’s theory provides a new lens.

Nature writing partly militates against ecology rather than for it. By setting up nature as an object “over there”—a pristine wilderness beyond all trace of human contact—it re-established the very separation it seeks to abolish. We could address this problem by considering the role of subjectivity in nature writing. What kinds of subject position does nature writing evoke? Instead of looking at the trees, look at the person who looks at the trees. (Morton 125)

To follow up Morton’s question, who sees the tree in “The Thorn?” Wordsworth, Martha Ray, the village community, the narrator, and (by approaching the poem) the reader. Rather than seeing the thorn as a tree, just another natural object which in this case happens to symbolize the grave, this plant does more than a typical tree or even a typical grave, because it represents not only the need to remember, but also the desire to forget.

As we have already seen in the third chapter, Freud recognized this desire to forget in his dichotomy of mourning and melancholia. Mourning is what many survivors do, it is healthy, and it rests on forgetting. It eventually passes off and the libido is free to once more attach itself to other people who may be even more precious that the person who died (Freud “transience” 307). Once it has run its course it comes to an end. Adam Smith would recognize an attempt to cast off debt in the conclusion of mourning. What is different in melancholia is clinging to the debt the living owe the dead and the servitude in trying to pay it off.

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love,
inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. (“melancholy” 244)

These are the feelings that Morton recognizes in the way we must now deal with nature. It is not that we need to carry placards stating “The End is Nigh” or black umbrellas, but we have backed ourselves into a corner here and the placards are not far from the truth. The forgetting we might wish to do, and might succeed in doing between morning cups of coffee, becomes impossible as days march on. In a similar way, in “The Thorn” the villagers are unable to forget their role in a murder plot due to the nagging voice of the narrator—an outsider—who wants to know all the details.

**Conclusion**

In understanding the scope of what Wordsworth is attempting to do in “The Thorn,” it is important to remember the mimetic form of the poem. It is titled “The Thorn” and so the poem is what the reader approaches to *read* the epitaph of the infant, just as in the world of the poem the thorn is what the narrator approaches to *hear* the epitaph of the infant spoken by Martha Ray. Further, since Wordsworth’s poetry was often read aloud, it also creates a space for the epitaph to be spoken, as de Man necessitates for reanimating the dead. The reader can approach the poem as one might approach a grave in a churchyard; as Wordsworth once approached a little grave.

In an obscure corner of a Country Church-yard I once espied, half-overgrown with Hemlock and Nettles, a very small Stone laid upon the ground, bearing nothing more than the name of the Deceased with the date of birth and death, importing that it was an Infant which had been born one day and died the following. I know not how far the Reader may be in sympathy with me, but more awful thoughts of rights conferred, of hopes awakened, of remembrances stealing away or vanishing were imparted to my mind by that Inscription there before my eyes than by any other that it has ever been my lot to meet with upon a Tomb-stone. (“Essays Oxford” 93)

The fact that the tombstone appears in the country churchyard suggests that the infant presumably died of natural causes rather than from infanticide; still, here the monument is a small, simple thing—like a small tree. It creates a space for the infant to be remembered as the thorn creates a space for the truth of infanticide to be more than whispered but also written
down. There is much that is hidden in the poem: the child (of course), the monument, and the epitaph—but, one thing that is not hidden is the desire to forget. The thorn represents and dares to speak aloud this desire to forget and be done with the dead, and both Martha Ray and all the village experience it. In fact, the only ones not attempting to forget (who actually have a desire to put the pieces together) are the narrator and the reader. For them Martha Ray’s wail rings in their ears as the narrator leaves the village and as the reader closes the book. They are also both outsiders, because neither the narrator nor the reader share a common dead with the villagers.

The desire to forget something, as we have all experienced, often results in remembering the very thing we wish to put out of our minds.74 For the village community in “The Thorn” Martha Ray, her hut, her voice on the wind, the hill of moss, the pond, and the thorn are all elements which make it difficult for the community to forget Martha Ray is a murderer living unpunished among them. Wordsworth too, tries to forget by relegating the drowned man to just another story but ends up obsessing over him to the point that he returns to the passage over and again to rewrite, rework, and so to allow himself to put the thought to rest. Yet, he will return to work on it time and again. Our own involvement with forced forgetting works in a similar way. We try to create nature as that which is good and that which heals, focusing on the shade trees, trout-filled-lakes, and songbirds. However, in spite of ourselves we are reminded nature is also poisoned, dead, and dying.

“The Thorn,” as O’Rourke argues, insists on bringing the social reality of infanticide to the foreground. The reality of this situation will keep rising to the surface until it is properly addressed as will the recurrence of grief. The attempt to hide the baby in the earth is an appeal to nature to fix and purify the situation, but it will not work. The child will haunt the area through local memory long after Martha Ray is dead, infanticide will continue to be a problem, and for today nature will represent death, decay, and our ultimate end. We will not be able to forget this reality try as we might. We cannot bury this problem in the ground, it cannot fix itself.

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74 As Daniel M. Wegner argues in “When the Antidote is the Poison: Ironic Mental Control Processes” in *Psychological Science*. He looks at the two processes at play when someone consciously attempts to forget something: the Intentional Operating Process, which tries to think about something else, and the Ironic Monitoring Process, which scans to find things that will remind us of what we want to forget and then reintroduces the thought into the conscious mind (148-149).
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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