REARRANGING AN INFINITE UNIVERSE: LITERARY MISPRISION AND MANIPULATIONS OF SPACE AND TIME, 1750-1850

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This project explores the intersection of literature and science from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century in the context of this shift in conceptions of space and time. Confronted with the rapid and immense expansion of space and time, eighteenth and nineteenth-century philosophers and authors sought to locate humans' relative position in the vast void. Furthermore, their attempts to spatially and temporally map the universe led to changes in perceptions of the relationship between the exterior world and the interior self. In this dissertation I focus on a few important textual monuments that serve as landmarks on this journey. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the intersection of literary and scientific texts transformed perceptions of space and time. These transformations then led to further advancements in the way scientific knowledge was articulated. Imagination became central to scientific writing at the same time it came to dominate literary writing. My project explores these intersecting influences among literature, astronomy, cosmology, and geology, on the perceptions of expanding space and time.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The concepts of space and time prove essential to understanding the human experience: humans make sense of experience by situating it within the framework of these two concepts. Until the seventeenth century, within British society, these two concepts were fairly simply defined and relatively concrete. The space inhabited by humans reached into the observable heavens; beyond that lay a heaven that was unknowable to humans until after death. Time was generally accepted to include an approximately 6,000-year-old history and a future that would be defined by the Christian apocalypse. In the eighteenth century, the removal of these spatial and temporal boundaries would bring anxiety even as they unleashed the imagination.

Isaac Newton’s *Principia Mathematica* (1687) demonstrates that the physical laws that governed motion on earth also reign throughout the observable universe. This discovery erased the spatial boundary between the earth and the heavens. By the middle of the eighteenth century, perceptions of the universe’s scope expanded from the visually observable sky to a universe infinite in size, and by the end of that century, philosophers studying the history of the earth began to realize that the age of the earth was millions of years older than previously believed. In 1812, Georges Cuvier would remark in *Researches on Fossil Bones*,

We admire the power by which the human mind has measured the movements of the globes, which nature seemed to have concealed forever from our view; genius and science have burst the limits of space, and observations interpreted by reason have unveiled the mechanism of the world. Would there not also be some glory for man to know how to burst the limits of time, and, by observations,
to recover the history of this world, and the succession of events that preceded the birth of the human species?¹

In this passage, Cuvier shifts the focus of scientific research from space to time. He seeks to extend the use of science and the imagination from understanding the reaches of space to unveiling the events of the distant past. Despite being unable to physically travel beyond the earth, humanity had already demonstrated the ability to understand the motion of planetary bodies; Cuvier implores his readers to utilize this same power to understand the history of the earth before "the birth of the human species." Soon after, the study of geohistory would indeed burst the limits of time, moving far beyond the 6,000-year-old barrier to an understanding of deep time, a history of the earth composed of millions of years.²

The incredible expansion of space and time in the eighteenth century created an even larger crisis in understanding the human experience than the shift from a geocentric to heliocentric conception of the solar system that had taken place a century before with Galileo Galilei. In this previous shift, the sun replaced the earth as the center of the universe; this new framework removed the sun’s reign as the universe’s central physical body. Like an empire that has lost its king, the universe now stretched seemingly into infinity with no physical central body. Temporally, humans now appeared to be only the latest in a long succession of species to claim dominion over the earth.

² In Bursting the Limits of Time, Martin Rudwick defines the term geohistory as "the immensely long and complex history of the earth, including the life on its surface (biohistory), as distinct from the extremely brief recent history that can be based on human records, or even the somewhat longer preliterate "prehistory" of our species. (Page 2.)
Furthermore, this period of human domination was now understood to be remarkably brief.

This project explores the intersection of literature and science from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century in the context of this shift in conceptions of space and time. Confronted with the rapid and immense expansion of space and time, eighteenth and nineteenth-century philosophers and authors sought to locate humans’ relative position in the vast void. Furthermore, their attempts to spatially and temporally map the universe led to changes in perceptions of the relationship between the exterior world and the interior self. In this dissertation I focus on a few important textual monuments that serve as landmarks on this journey. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the intersection of literary and scientific texts transformed perceptions of space and time. These transformations then led to further advancements in the way scientific knowledge was articulated. Imagination became central to scientific writing at the same time it came to dominate literary writing.

Recently, literary scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have increasingly turned their attention to studies of space. As Alice Jenkins comments in *Space and the 'March of the Mind'* (2007), “Until fairly recently space and time as objects of critical inquiry were to some extent polarized: attention to one seemed to preclude attention to the other.”³ Specifically, many critics have devoted their efforts to the study of time and the expense of space. This concern has been shared by critics such as David Harvey and Michel Foucault. While an increasing number of critics have

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turned to studying space in recent decades, much of the focus has been directed to geographical and political issues. Jenkins attempts to broaden the scope of these studies to include space as "an ideal realm free from the taint of political concerns and human identity." In so doing, she turns away from studies about urban landscapes or geography to focus on conceptual space. Jenkins's description of this conceptualized space differs from previous scholars who often label it “transcendental” or study it purely as an isolated abstract construct. Instead, she connects nineteenth-century authors' use of space with aspects of everyday life. This leads to a discussion of space as a way of arranging collections of information, whether they be “a drawerful of socks, and encyclopaedia full of facts or a novel full of characters.” Most interesting for the purpose of this project though is her attention to the nineteenth-century commonplace that the structure of the landscape is analogous to the organization of knowledge within the mind.

In this project I show that while this analogy was quite common, geologic explorations and discoveries in the early nineteenth century led authors such as Percy Shelley and Alfred Tennyson to challenge the analogy's strength. Jenkins contends that during the early nineteenth century, the hard sciences maintained the importance of descriptions of the universe as immaterial; she asserts, “To equate the physical sciences in this period with an unambiguously materialist outlook is to gravely misread the evidence.” Further, she explores the exchange of knowledge between science and

4 Jenkins, 3.
5 Jenkins, 4.
6 Jenkins, 6.
literature and the similar methods used to convey this knowledge during the expansion of what Coleridge named “the reading public.” In a similar way, I focus on the exchange of literary and scientific ideas and the methods used to transmit knowledge throughout this project. In Chapter 4, I broaden the temporal scope of her discussion as I analyze the incorporation of serialized texts as a strategy to make the reader an active participant in the production of scientific knowledge and in working to connect disparate pieces of information in Dickens’s *Bleak House*. This proves useful in understanding the connection between publication methods in fictional and scientific literature as well as the influence of technological innovations such as the panorama on narrative structures.

While Jenkins turns away from geography, other scholars such as Rosa Mucignat center their research on its importance. In *Realism and Space in the Novel, 1795–1869: Imagined Geographies* (2013), Mucignat explores how detailed descriptions of space help create a sense of realism within novels. She argues that “the rise of the realist novel between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the crucial element of space, which, in its role as an organizing framework, has a significant impact on all the other aspects of style, character, time and engagement with the social context.”7 To analyze these spaces, Mucignat investigates three specific qualities: visibility, depth, and movement. She defines visibility as the “close observation and material consistency that allows space to become an active force in the plot,” depth as the combination of “plot lines and stratified social structures,” and movement as the “increased

heterogeneity of locales.” In this discussion, she proves less concerned with abstract notions of space among novel characters and more interested in the way that novels mobilize representations of space to propel the plot and create a sense of realism for the reader. She asserts that while isolated previous texts exhibited these qualities, during the nineteenth-century novels more actively attempted to describe and utilize space in “the creation of a progression of events” and to influence the plot. While Mucignat’s text provides a foundation for understanding space within nineteenth-century novels, this dissertation extends her work to include nineteenth-century poetry such as Shelley’s *Mont Blanc* and Wordsworth’s “spots of time” passage within *The Prelude*.

Several scholars of literature and science have lately shown interest in Wordsworth’s poetry and geology. In *Wordsworth and the Geologists* (1995), John Wyatt reconciles William Wordsworth’s fascination with geology and his poetic works. He notes that “some modern critics have continued to endorse the distinction between an inner life and the outer material realms, linking imaginative literature with the first and science with the second.” Wyatt points out that much of the polarization between Wordsworth’s literary accomplishments and scientific interests can be accounted for by the changing definition of science; during Wordsworth’s time, science was often used to denote a “system of knowledge” rather than a distinct field or method of study. This separation further stems from Wordsworth’s 1802 revised ‘Preface’ to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in which he famously differentiates between the Poet and the ‘Man of Science.’ Wyatt explains that Wordsworth’s footnote indicates that his true

8 Mucignat, 2.
intention is to distinguish between science’s reliance on “‘fact’ in opposition to affairs of poetic or imaginative activity.”\textsuperscript{10} He further asserts that “Wordsworth’s intention is to identify the Poet as a figure distinct from, yet inextricably also in membership of a social category, ‘Man in general’. Because of his concentration and narrowness, the (non-Poet) specialist can possess neither ‘fidelity’, nor ‘utility’, and, most important, he is separated from ‘the image’ of reality.”\textsuperscript{11} Wyatt goes on to explain that this distinction derives from attempts by a group of ‘Men of Science’ to describe the reality using “numeric formulae.” While this explanation helps elucidate Wordsworth’s perception of science within the passage, it implies that Wordsworth does not believe that scientists engage in the same level of imaginative activity as poets. It remains impossible to determine Wordsworth’s intention for such a statement, but this dissertation asserts that imagination plays an essential role in both the production of literary works and scientific knowledge.

Noah Heringman defuses the apparent dichotomy between literary and scientific authors discussed by Wyatt by focusing on the shared language between both groups. In \textit{Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology} (2004), Heringman investigates the way that geology’s transformation from the subject of wild speculation to a distinct scientific discipline “provides a model for discipline-formation in the sciences” and “contributes to the redefinition of ‘literature’ that recent critics have seen as central to Romanticism.”\textsuperscript{12} Heringman asserts that during the Romantic period poets and geologists displayed a

\textsuperscript{10} Wyatt, 7.
\textsuperscript{11} Wyatt, 7.
“growing recognition that the earth evolves according to a previously unsuspected internal logic,” and he draws connections between scientific and literary descriptions of geologic features of the landscape.\footnote{Heringman, 1.} It is important to note that studies of Wordsworth’s \textit{Prelude} have long been interested in time because of his famous “spots of time” passage, while recent books like those above have isolated the importance of geology to Wordsworth and his contemporaries; my approach is distinct because it combines the focus on space and time.

This work also differs from the many of critics of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature that have focused on “clock-time.” In “Literature and Time in the Eighteenth Century and the Romantic Period” (2016), Marcus Tomalin provides a brief history of scientific and philosophic perspectives of time as well as the influences of clock time in the novels of Laurence Sterne and Samuel Richardson. He argues that literature also influenced perceptions of time, and more specifically, that “widely read descriptions of time-telling sounds influenced the way readers heard and responded to them, whether perceived aurally or silently (re)imagined.”\footnote{Marcus, Tomalin, "Literature and Time in the Eighteenth Century and the Romantic Period," \textit{Oxford Handbooks Online}: 2016. http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935338-e-131.} Similarly, in \textit{Time and the Moment in Victorian Literature and Society} (2011), Sue Zemka argues that literary fiction influenced readers’ perceptions of time. Finally, the essays collected in \textit{Victorian Time: Technologies, Standardizations, Catastrophes} (2013) investigate the ways that modern time affected multiple aspects of Victorian society and how these changes were reflected in literature. These studies are limited in their exclusive focus on time, while
my project seeks to uncover the relationship between changing concepts of space and time.

Many of these cultural shifts were influenced by advancements in the study of geohistory and the emerging concept of deep time, the long geologic history which predates human existence. In Bursting the Limits of Time (2005), Martin Rudwick examines how the narrative of deep time was pieced together. As Rudwick explains, “The story leads eventually to the casual use of millions and even billions of years in the everyday work of modern scientists: the literally inconceivable expanses of the astronomers’ ‘deep space’ are matched by what John McPhee has aptly called the ‘deep time’ of the geologists.” Rudwick comments that during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the idea that the earth’s pre-human history could be reliably understood was uncertain. In order to provide an exhaustive account of how this narrative was constructed, the scope of Rudwick’s work extends beyond national and linguistic boundaries. This broad perspective emphasizes the fact that construction of a story that includes deep time involved numerous actors working on distinct projects across the globe and cannot be attributed to a linear path of advancement. In this way, his text becomes an exploration of the construction of scientific knowledge that has served as a model for path the investigation within this dissertation. Rudwick avoids simplifying his narrative into a debate between science and religion, arguing instead “that what was involved in the reconstruction of geohistory, far more importantly than any occasional and local conflict with religious beliefs, was a new and surprising

conception of the natural world.”\textsuperscript{16} The earth’s history turns out to be unpredictable and surprising, and Rudwick devotes much of his exploration to the human reaction of this narrative as he emphasizes “that this was a radically new feature on the conceptual landscape of the natural sciences: understanding and explaining the natural world began to be seen to entail its contingent past history as much as its directly observable present.”\textsuperscript{17} Rudwick’s work presents an exhaustive scientific history of the narrative surrounding deep time, while this dissertation investigates literary and scientific explorations connected to the conjunction of space and time. This work broadens the critical landscape to include both disciplines and to incorporate these two elements that prove essential to understanding the human experience.

Organized studies in the convergence between science and literature can be traced back to the creation of the “Literature and Science” division in the Modern Language Association in the 1950s, and scholars often identify the field’s foundations in texts such as C. P. Snow’s \textit{The Two Cultures} (1959), Thomas Kuhn’s \textit{The Structure of Scientific Revolutions} (1962) and Michel Foucault’s \textit{The Order of Things} (1968). In 1978, George Rousseau argued that the relationship between literature and science studies was asymmetrical:

\begin{quote}
Literary scholars are understandably far more concerned about literature than about science, and most applied scientists as well as historians of science have not seriously considered the possibility that literature has shaped or can shape scientific developments. The latter is an unexplored territory, probably the one in greatest need of cultivation right now and also the one requiring learning so vast that it is hard to imagine it in a single scholar.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} Rudwick, 6.
\textsuperscript{17} Rudwick, 6.
Scholars approaching the study of these combined fields from a literary background often look to Gillian Beer’s *Darwin’s Plots* (1983) as a successful attempt to provide a balanced view of the bi-directional influences between literature and science. Beer’s study focuses on novels and effectively explores the intersections of scientific and literary attempts to construct and convey knowledge and the transference of the knowledge between across both disciplines. Soon after, George Levine published a similar study entitled *Darwin and the Novelists* (1988). As Devin Griffiths comments in “Romantic Planet: Science and Literature within the Anthropocene,” “Together, Beer and Levine insisted that literature did more than allegorize scientific discoveries, arguing that comparative study should consider science and literature as analogous and mutually influential fields of inquiry… At the same time, these two studies marked a shift in focus, from emphasizing the influence of ideas to the interrelation of literary forms and the protocols of scientific writing.”

In 1990, scholars shifted their focus from the Victorian era to the Romantic era with Andrew Cunningham and Nicholas Jardine’s collection, *Romanticism and the Sciences*. The attempt during this era to define distinct disciplines creates an interesting situation for today’s scholars. In the early romantic period, the connections between the fields of literature and science were viewed as natural, and writers openly acknowledged interdisciplinary influences. However, the modern division of disciplines and the overwhelming amount of expertise necessary to properly discuss science and literature has created more of a prism than a lens, in that many of today’s scholars tend

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to connect specific scientific disciplines to specific literary works. Thus, many scholars tend to focus on more narrow fields such as literature and geology or literature and botany. This can be seen in more recent works such as Heringman’s *Romantic Rocks* and Theresa Kelley’s *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (2012). Other scholars are working to sharpen discussion in interconnections of technique as Robert Mitchell does with his exploration of the related forms of experimentation in Romantic poetry and science in *Experimental Life* (2014), and still others are widening the temporal scope to examine works in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.

My project intervenes in this larger conversation concerning the relationship between scientific and literary history by exploring the intersecting influences among literature, astronomy, cosmology, and geology, on the perceptions of expanding space and time. This project combines the approach of scholars such as Beer and Levine who discuss the resonance between literary and scientific works over an extended period with the approach of scholars such as Heringman and Kelley who focus on connections between literature and specific scientific disciplines in a specific period. The result is a work which incorporates multiple disciplines and literary works from the mid-eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century.

The primary exploration of this project spans from 1742-1853. In addition to combining space and time, I consciously ignore the boundaries of traditional literary periods (The Restoration and Eighteenth Century, 1660-1800; The Romantic Period, 1790-1830; The Victorian Period, 1837-1901). Widening the scope to resist these arbitrary boundaries provides the opportunity to better examine the dynamic nature of spatial and temporal perception and its influence on literature. Likewise, this dissertation
consciously crosses genre boundaries as it includes poetry, philosophical treatises, autobiography, and novels. This breadth displays the multiple forms of writing that influenced and were influenced by the changing perceptions of space and time. This project begins with Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* (1742-1745), a text that considerably influences future investigations of space, time, and religion. The dissertation ends with an exploration of Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1852-53), a text that utilizes the nineteenth-century panoramic theatre of spectacle as a model for its framework construction. Dickens’s novel emphasizes the role of an observer’s position in limiting the scope of his or her perspective and explores the process necessary to construct a complete mental image. It forces the reader to construct multiple sections of space and time into a complete whole. The use of this text to conclude the dissertation is not intended to imply that it provides an ultimate conclusion to the investigation of these elements. Instead, *Bleak House* may be viewed as a piece that transitions between the period when texts explore the implications of Newtonian physics on human experience and the period when texts begin to engage with the scientific roots of Albert Einstein’s theories of relativity.

This project intervenes in the larger debate concerning the relationship between scientific and literary history. While studies of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century literature and science have proliferated over the past few decades, scholars rightly continue to tread carefully in discussing influence across these fields. For instance, like Adelene Buckland in *Novel Science*, I attempt to avoid assertions that “‘science’ furnishes facts and ideas that ‘literature’ reflects, reproduces, or contests.” I agree that literature and science should be “considered in active and multivalent relation, sharing
‘one culture’ rather than divided into two, . . . and equally capable of directing and contesting the patterns, interests, conclusions, and attitudes of the other.”20 Hence, while texts such as Thomas Wright’s *An Original Theory* or Charles Lyell’s *Principles on Geology* would now commonly be classified as scientific texts, I investigate them by examining the commonality of their shared concepts with those texts that would now usually be classified as literary. This approach closely aligns with that of Gillian Beer’s *Darwin’s Plots* in which she states, “the shared discourse not only ideas but metaphors, myths, and narrative patterns could move rapidly and freely to and fro between scientists and non-scientists: though not without creative misprision.”21 Indeed, this project highlights several examples of ‘creative misprision’ in an effort to focus on instances where texts respond directly or indirectly to instability created or discussed in other texts. At other times, texts are brought into the conversation not to imply intentional or direct influence but to demonstrate the impact of a broader cultural theme.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 2, “The Path to an Infinite and Gendered Universe through Young, Wright, and Barbauld,” examines Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*, Thomas Wright’s *An Original Theory or New Hypothesis of the Universe, Founded Upon the Laws of Nature*, and Anna Barbauld’s “A Summer Evening’s Meditation.” These works explore the nature of the universe — especially space and time — in order to understand the self,


and they serve as a lens through which to view the texts comprising the remainder of the dissertation.

In Night IX of *Night Thoughts* (1745), theologian and poet Edward Young poses a series of questions as a challenge to readers and future scholars:

Say, at what point of space Jehovah dropp’d
His slacken’d line, and laid his balance by;
Weigh’d worlds, and measured infinite, no more?
Where, rears His terminating pillar high
Its extra-mundane head? and says, to gods,
In characters illustrious as the sun, —

“I stand, the plan’s proud period; I pronounce
The work accomplish’d; the creation closed;
Shout, all ye gods! nor shout ye gods alone;
Of all that lives, or, if devoid of life,
That rest, or rolls, ye heights, and depths, resound!
Resound! resound! ye depths, and heights, resound!”

Hard are those questions! — answer harder still. (lines 1523-35)

In these questions, Young interrogates the composition of an infinite universe. His inquiries imply a bound universe containing infinite space; God uses a slackened line to measure infinity. This ‘slackened’ line indicates that God’s realm extends beyond an infinite length. The passage questions the location of God, whether he is to be found within the space or outside of it. The end of the passage suggests a relationship between the gods, the living, and the devoid of life as all three are commanded to resound. Each text within the chapter either responds to these questions or extends the questions even further.

For instance, in 1750 astronomer Thomas Wright builds directly on Young’s work as he hypothesizes on the infinite nature of the universe. He places God at its center and suggests that there may well be life forms more advanced than humans living on other planets. In a key passage that locates God’s position at the center of the universe,
Wright conceptualizes the universe as the product and input of the Eye of Providence. In so doing, he explores the relationship between God’s imagination and his own. His description of the universe as the actualization of every imagined possibility destabilizes traditional perceptions of the universe and its hierarchy. This destabilization presents an opportunity for female writers such as Anna Barbauld. In 1773, Barbauld quotes Young in an epigraph to begin “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” before revisioning the traditional patriarchal understanding of the universe with a decidedly feminine construction. Anna Barbauld locates an embryo God within herself as she launches herself into a feminized universe. Her work explores the relationship between God, nature, and the self, and it provides insight into the influence of the observer’s self-perception on their perception of the exterior world.

Chapter 3, “The Growing Fissure between Humans and the Nature,” begins with an exploration of early nineteenth-century England’s cemetery crisis and the perceived connection between the soil and its inhabitants. The chapter begins by providing descriptions of the cemetery crisis and its implications from three works — Edward Hasted’s *The Topological Survey of Kent*, William Godwin’s “Essay on Sepulchres,” and Georges Cuvier’s *A Discourse on the Revolutions of the Surface of the Globe, and the Changes Thereby Produced in the Animal Kingdom*. These descriptions then serve as a lens to examine William Wordsworth’s passage on the “spots of time” within *The Prelude*, Percy Shelley’s *Mont Blanc*, and Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*. This exploration reveals erosion in belief of a close relationship between the external natural world and the self. While Young, Wright, and Barbauld all perceived the natural world and the self as intimately related, the works in chapter 3 display movement away from
understanding nature as the mirror of the mind and toward a view that separates nature from the self.

Near the end of the eighteenth century, technological advancements allowed miners to dig deeper into the earth which led to an increased interest in geohistory. In literature, the authors I have included here focused their attention on the earth and its relationship to the self. Wordsworth’s interest in geology has been well documented, as has been his belief that Nature serves as a reflection for the self. In Book XII of The Prelude, Wordsworth introduces “spots of time,” moments which retain virtue through time. Through this book, he investigates connections between natural processes of restoration in the earth and in the mind.

In Mont Blanc, Shelley’s portrayal of the mountain’s unorganized structure and perilous landscape complicates Wordsworth’s assertion of the intimate relationship between humans and nature. In this work, Mont Blanc ultimately resists comprehension and retains its mysterious nature. Straying from the usual reading that investigates Mont Blanc as a response to Samuel Coleridge’s “Hymn Before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni,” I explore the contrast between Shelley’s and Wordsworth’s connections between geologic formation and the mind. This exploration reveals the influence of contemporary investigations into the complex structures of the earth’s surface and the brain. Mont Blanc struggles to make sense of these complex structures and concludes with a statement emphasizing the separation between the self and the exterior world.

In In Memoriam, Tennyson extends this separation from the present into the future. After the death of his friend Arthur Henry Hallam, Tennyson displays nature and humans as moving along two opposing arrows of time. He portrays nature in consistent
decay against the constant progression of the soul. Tennyson concludes his work with a vision of spiritual lineage as A.H.H.’s spirit is transferred into the family line of Tennyson’s sister and her husband. The separation between the physical and spiritual worlds leads to an exploration in the following chapter of attempts to create textual monuments to reshape common perceptions of the abstract concepts of space and time.

Chapter 4, “Mary Shelley and Thomas De Quincey’s Attempts to Colonize Virtual Empires of Infinite Space and Time,” examines Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* and Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* in light of the numerous crises confronting England at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Concerns about a perceived decline of the British Empire, extreme climatological events resulting from the eruption of Mount Tambora, geohistorical discoveries that expanded the historical age of the earth from 6,000 years to millions of years, and revelations that numerous species had suffered from extinction, all created a sense of temporal, spatial, and epistemological instability. Against this backdrop, the texts within this chapter imagine alternate expansive versions of the external world through time and space.

In this chapter, I read the *The Last Man* as a feminist textual monument which reimagines the past and the future against specifically masculine conceptions of space and time. In this way, the text works in a similar way to Barbauld’s feminist reading of the universe in “A Summer Evening’s Meditation.” However, whereas Barbauld’s description of “embryo Gods” places hope in an unknown future, *The Last Man* predicts the failure of patriarchal society to prevent extinction of the human species. Placing Shelley’s text in conversation with Cuvier’s attempts to read the earth as historical text
highlights connections to catastrophism — the belief that the earth’s surface has been and will continue to be shaped through a series of catastrophic events — and heightens the urgency of the novel’s warning. In an unusual preface, Shelley describes the work as the product an incomplete prophetic text found on Sybilline leaves which she has edited by attempting to fill numerous gaps. This framing narrative, combined with the text’s numerous references to mythological character of Janus, helps position the work as an attempt to create a textual monument that extends a feminine empire into both the past and future.

Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* also represents an attempt to gain temporal control through the act of writing. In this work, De Quincey displays the inability to construct a coherent narrative of his experience after having ingested large amounts of opium over the course of several years. His work draws on the philosophical ideas espoused in *A Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant. Kant’s philosophy designates space and time as the two elements essential to understanding the human experience, but De Quincey’s use of opium has fundamentally altered his perception of space and time. As a result, *Confessions* represents an attempt to restore sense to De Quincey’s experience. Placing this text in conversation with Shelley’s *The Last Man* highlights the use of writing to exert control in the face of instability created by variable perceptions of space and time.

Chapter 5, “Conceptualizing Dickens’s *Bleak House* as a Literary Panorama,” explores connections between geologic uniformitarianism and the serialization of novels and geologic writings, and it examines the way that new perspectives available from hot air balloons and inside panoramas influenced the narrative structures of Charles Lyell’s
Principles of Geology and Charles Dickens’s Bleak House. These texts perform similar tasks to Wright’s Original Theory in that they attempt to describe spatial and temporal realms that extend beyond the limited spatial and temporal scopes available to humans. However, these texts utilize narrative structures similar to the architectural space of panoramic theatres in efforts to overcome these limited scopes. In each text, the narrative consists of sectional views that must be mentally sewn together by the reader in order to form a complete image of the encompassing whole.

Taken together, the chapters of this dissertation reveal a complex relationship between the evolution of ideas about space and time and the records of human experience. Understanding this relationship can help future scholars re-evaluate the formation of modern conceptions of space and time and development of narrative forms through a scientific, philosophic, and literary collective lens.
CHAPTER 2

THE PATH TO AN INFINITE AND GENDERED UNIVERSE THROUGH YOUNG, WRIGHT, AND BARBAULD

In 1745, Edward Young, writing about the universe, asks

Say, at what point of space Jehovah dropp’d  
His slacken’d line, and laid his balance by;  
Weigh’d worlds, and measured infinite, no more?22

This chapter traces Young’s path to this question and the surprising responses of astronomer Thomas Wright and poet Anna Barbauld, both of whom cite Young in their works. During the eighteenth century, the perception of the universe as infinite in both the physical and abstract sense created both anxiety and hope. The infinite space of the unknown forced philosophers and authors like Wright and Barbauld to reimagine man’s place in the universe. For example, Wright relies heavily on geometry as he attempts to describe the universe in an orderly fashion; however, his understanding of the infinite expanse of physical space makes this task difficult. At the same time, the ability to comprehend elements of space beyond the confines of earth leads both writers to imagine new possibilities of life and order that challenge conventional cultural beliefs and assumptions. Wright imagines higher lifeforms inhabiting other planets, and Barbauld presents the universe as a female gendered space.

Much of the recent literary criticism regarding space in the eighteenth century focuses on architecture and interior spaces. This type of exploration can be seen in Simon Varey’s Space and the Eighteenth-Century English Novel (2006), Cynthia Wall’s

22 James Thomson, “A Poem Sacred to the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton,” lines 57-67 (1727), Eighteenth Century Collections Online Text Creation Partnership.
The Prose of Things (2006), Karen Lipsedge’s Domestic Space in Eighteenth-Century British Novels (2012), Monika Fludernik’s “Perspective and Focalization in Eighteenth-Century Descriptions” (2017). In this chapter, I move outside these studies of domestic interior spaces in novels to investigate the eighteenth-century perception of the universe as an infinite space. Broadening the scope of genre and how scholars traditionally examine space to include scientific definitions better addresses the interdisciplinary nature of eighteenth-century methods used to construct knowledge.

This use of wider lens proves similar to the technique Anna Henchman employs in The Starry Sky Within: Astronomy and the Reach of the Mind in Victorian Literature. In this work, she contends that “In the nineteenth century a universe with many centers became the prevailing astronomical model” and that this model led to the dominance of “polycentric” multiplot novel. She further asserts,

Seeking a vantage point from which to see and know the world, Victorian writers move restlessly back and forth between self and universe, part and whole. While the mind’s expansion and contraction in such movement unsettles a secure placement of the self, it also heightens one’s awareness of the theoretical and moral gain in our knowledge of the world that result from changing one’s position.

I agree with Henchman’s claims about the Victorian period, but in this chapter, I examine the astronomical and literary explorations that led to the situation she describes. The search for “a vantage point from which to see and know the world” was influencing literature long before the Victorian era, and I argue that it was exacerbated by the eighteenth-century descriptions of the universe as an infinite space.


24 Henchman, 3.
The importance of the vantage point and understanding man’s place within the universe is an essential element of Thomas Wright’s *An Original Theory or New Hypothesis of The Universe, Founded Upon the Laws of Nature* (1750). In “Thomas Wright’s Theological Cosmology,” Harry Woolf notes that, “Wright emphasizes the importance of the observer’s position in reaching conclusions about the disposition of the heavens, beginning first with the relativity of observations within the solar system.”\(^{25}\) While this statement highlights in the scientific implications of Wright’s work, in this chapter, I discuss the theological and philosophical outcomes of this observation. As Woolf later states, “Wright’s entire cosmological undertaking… is nothing less than the complete integration of the physical and moral universe.”\(^{26}\) Within *Original Theory*, Wright cites Young’s *Night Thoughts* to substantiate this claim, and because Wright attempts to integrate the physical and moral universe, his concern about the relative nature of observations opens a line of inquiry about man’s physical and hierarchical place within the universe and within God’s creation.

I conclude this chapter by placing Anna Barbauld’s “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” in conversation with both Young’s *Night Thoughts* and Wright’s *Original Theory*. Barbauld begins her poem with an epigraph from *Night Thoughts*, and her poem imagines the universe from a feminist vantage point, which leads to a completely new understanding of the universe unseen in Young or Wright. Moreover, her poem shifts on a passage that echoes James Thomson’s poem memorializing Sir Isaac Newton in ““A Poem Sacred to the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton”:

\(^{26}\) Woolf, 237.
THEN breaking hence, he took his ardent Flight
Thro' the blue Infinite; and every Star,
... at his approach
Blazed into Suns, the living Centre each
Of an harmonious System: all combined,
And rul'd unerring by that single Power,
Which draws the Stone projected to the ground.27

For Thomson, Newton's cosmological insight unified perceptions of motion in the heavens and on earth, bringing them into a combined harmonious system. Thomson arranges this system under the rule of God, “that single Power,” and thus his lines emphasize the overlap between the theological, scientific, and literary culture of the period. Barbauld echoes this passage within her poem by taking her own flight into the universe, placing herself on equal footing with Newton. This constitutes a radical departure from the work of her male contemporaries.

During the eighteenth century, texts that scholars would now commonly divide into theological, scientific, and literary genres often simultaneously functioned across multiple realms. In this chapter, I examine the thread of three related texts — Young's *Night Thoughts*, Wright's *Original Theory or New Hypothesis of the Universe*, and Barbauld’s “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” — to explore the cross-influence between eighteenth century literary ideas and scientific studies. In examining the common thread of these works, I argue that there are shifts in the perception of God from a figure outside of the universe, to the central figure within it, and finally within humankind. At the same time, the universe shifts from a mirror of God to a mirror of the self, paving the way for the Romanticists such as Wordsworth to see nature as a mirror of the mind.

27 James Thomson, “A Poem Sacred to the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton,” lines 57-67 (1727), Eighteenth Century Collections Online Text Creation Partnership. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004864236.0001.000/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext
Night Thoughts: Viewing the Universe through a Theological Lens

I begin with *Night IX* of Young’s *Night Thoughts*. Only a small amount of critical work has been published on Young’s *Night Thoughts*. These include Isabelle St. John Bliss’s “Young’s Night Thoughts in Relation to Contemporary Christian Apologetics” (1934) and Daniel Odell’s “Young's *Night Thoughts* as an Answer to Pope's Essay on Man” (1972), which both focus on Young’s Christian faith. Young’s influence on William Blake is discussed *William Blake’s Designs for Edward Young's Night Thoughts: A Complete Edition* (1982), edited by David Erdman. My work differs from the approach of these texts by looking at the ways *Night Thoughts* directly influenced revolutionary cosmological ideas in Wright’s *New Theory or Original Hypothesis* and Barbauld’s “A Summer Evening’s Meditation.” Connecting these works allows scholars to provide a foundation for viewing the intersection of theology, cosmology, and feminism in the eighteenth century.

Young viewed himself as a theologian rather than a scientist, and, as a result, his work in this text seeks to utilize science to prove his theological claims rather than to extend scientific thought. However, by using contemporary scientific theories to prove the omniscient power of God, he opens the door for future scholars such as Wright to employ his work to extend scientific ideas. Barbauld then uses both works as a foundation to launch herself into a gendered cosmological space. This exploration demonstrates that questions posed by literary works, especially by those of underrepresented members of society, led to scientific hypotheses that altered the perception of space and time.
Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* achieved incredible popular success. Louise Guerber notes that “This poem . . . had an immense popularity in its day and was to be found side by side with the Holy Book in almost every pious household.” After the deaths of his step-daughter, her husband, and Young’s wife; Young, a pastor and poet, began writing *Night Thoughts*, with the first part providing perspective on life, death, and immortality. In “The Life and Poetic Genius of Edward Young,” George Gilfillan notes the influence of Young’s work on subsequent poems about the night. He remarks, “Night had never before found a worthy laureate.” After detailing numerous earthly and astronomical phenomena, he continues:

— all these elements of interest and grandeur had existed from the beginning of the world in Night, and yet had never, till Young arose, awakened any consecutive and lofty strain of poetic adoration. Many beautiful and many sublime sentiments had been uttered by poets about particular features of Night, but there had been no attempt to represent it as a whole.

Young’s holistic portrayal of night stems from his religious perspective. While many viewed the nighttime sky visually through telescopes, *Night Thoughts* records the view of a man looking at the nighttime sky from his soul. Young shows no interest in transforming the universe; instead he hopes to rearrange and align his own image with God’s imagination. Young’s perspective combines the grandeur of the stars and planets with the sublime experience of contemplating the infinite and the eternal. For Young, the nighttime sky serves as God’s scripture writ large, and as a way to experience the joy of


30 Gilfillan, xx.
the afterlife when the soul has been freed from dealing with mortal struggles. Night, as a metaphor for death, serves as a time when the blinding curtain of light is removed, and one can view God’s creation in the infinitude of space and time. While reading *Night Thoughts*, one very well may declare as Young once did, “It is a very fine night; the Lord is abroad.”

In this chapter, I focus on the *Night IX* – “The Consolation,” as this is the portion of the work later quoted by both Wright and Barbauld. In this text, Young encourages the infidel Lorenzo by exclaiming that he has found consolation while gazing into the nighttime sky and realizing that the miraculous universe portrays God’s nature and omnipotence. The title page specifically notes that the work contains two parts: “A Moral Survey of the Nocturnal Heavens” and “A Night Address to the Deity.” These descriptions emphasize Young’s belief that the nocturnal heavens serve as a physical scriptural text to teach humans about the nature of God.

Young looks to the nighttime sky through a theological lens to find both instruction and solitude. He begins this text by comparing himself to “a traveller, a long day past, / In painful search of what he cannot find.” (lines 1-2) As night serves as a metaphor for death throughout *Night Thoughts*, it immediately becomes clear that the day also serves as the metaphor for a lifetime. The nighttime sky allows the poet to see both into the nature of God and the experience of the afterlife. Young concludes the stanza by emphasizing this relationship even more clearly as he states, “And waiting,

According to Gilfillan, xiv.

All quotations from this work have been produced as they appear in: Edward Young, *Young’s Night Thoughts: With Life, Critical Dissertation and Explanatory Notes*, pcby the Rev. George Gilfillian. (Edinburgh, 1853).
patient, the sweet hour of rest, / I chase the moments with a serious song. / Song
soothes our pains; and age has pains to soothe” (lines 14–16). The reference to age
reinforces the day as a metaphor for the struggles faced during life on earth, and the
poet’s patient waiting juxtaposed against his chasing the moments places him in a sort
of twilight where his physical motion has been completely transferred into spiritual
motion. He physically rests even as he “chases the moments with a serious song.” This
serves not only as a symbol for the transition from life to the afterlife, but also to
demonstrate how Young views the nighttime sky — through a spiritual rather than a
physical lens.

Young’s perspective of the earth is shaped by this spiritual lens, and in contrast
to the nighttime sky, he describes it as a landscape of death:

But needless monuments to wake the thought;
Life’s gayest scenes speak man’s mortality;
Though in a style more florid, full as plain,
As mausoleums, pyramids, and tombs.
What are our noblest ornaments, but deaths
Turn’d flatterers of life, in paint, or marble,
The well-stain’d canvas, or the featured stone?
Our fathers grace, or rather haunt, the scene.
Joy peoples her pavilion from the dead. (lines 64-72)

For Young, the monuments populating the earth create a space filled with reminders of
man’s mortality. His spiritual lens transforms celebrated works of art into reminders of
death. These ornaments only serve as flatterers of life. Young views the earth as an
accumulation of dead corpses. He soon remarks:

What is the world itself? Thy world — a grave.
Where is the dust that has not been alive?
The spade, the plough, disturb our ancestors;
From human mould we reap our daily bread.
The globe around earth’s hollow surface shakes,
And is the ceiling of her sleeping sons. (lines 91-96)
Young describes the earth in its unique relation to the human experience. Furthermore, he specifically correlates the world with death, setting it in opposition to the celestial sphere, which Young will describe as the realm of immortal souls that abide with God. He discusses the world’s natural events through a spiritual lens as he speaks of the “deluge” before providing a list of natural disasters in an apocalyptic battle scene:

At the destined hour,  
By the loud trumpet summon’d to the charge,  
See, all the formidable sons of fire,  
Eruptions, earthquakes, comets, lightnings, play  
Their various engines; all at once disgorge  
Their blazing magazines; and take, by storm,  
This poor terrestrial citadel of man. (lines 157-63)

Through these lines, Young uses imagination to place the earth in direct opposition to mankind. His apocalyptic view brings the earth to life, and it consciously attacks mankind. Comets and lightning act in concert with the terrestrial surface to reclaim man’s fortress. The earth is not only the scene of this battle but a conscious actor in it. However, while this mighty display of force proves overwhelming to man, Young portrays a yet unseen firmament full of stars as the embodiment of God’s army, coming to provide salvation. He exclaims, “Far other firmament than e’er was seen, / Than e’er was thought by man! Far other stars! / Stars animate, that govern these of fire” (lines 170-72). The scale is important: Young expands the universe to include heavenly bodies that man cannot see. Furthermore, because these bodies which lie beyond humans’ power of vision represent the omniscient power of God, their number and expanse is inferred to be infinite.

In Night IX, night becomes the time when this sublime contrast between the particular locality of a hellish earth and the infinite expanse of space can be most clearly
witnessed. Young brings the expanses of time and space together into the present
where he suggests that the reader use thought to launch his soul into the outer reaches
of space.

    Thy soul, till now, contracted, wither'd, shrunk,
    Blighted by blasts of earth's unwholesome air,
    Will blossom here; spread all her faculties
    To these bright ardours; every power unfold,
    And rise into sublimities of thought. (lines 631-35)

During this evening's meditation, the soul blossoms within mankind, spreading to all
faculties and allowing the reader to rise into the space that God inhabits. This also
further contrasts the spaces of earth with the rest of the universe. While the earth blights
and shrinks the soul with blasts of unwholesome air, the nighttime sky provides a space
for the soul to blossom.

    Young's praise for the nighttime sky signals his position in theological and
scientific debates of his time; for him, the nighttime sky is more authentic than the Bible.
He declares, "'Tis elder Scripture, writ by God's own hand: / Scripture authentic!
uncorrupt by man" (lines 646-47). This also works as a rhetorical shortcut to make the
same argument as earlier Christian scholars such as William Derham in Astro-
Theology. In this text, Derham devotes a chapter to addressing claims that the Bible
contradicts contemporary cosmological understandings. Derham specifically quotes
several Biblical verses before he argues, "THUS having answered the particular Texts,
it doth not appear that the Scriptures oppose the Copernican Systeme, but that those
passages which seem to do so, are spoken more according as things appear than as
really they are.” Instead of responding to each individual contradiction, Young elevates his source — the nighttime sky — to hold more authority than the Bible, asserting that man has corrupted the Biblical text. This move provides Young a stronger defense against atheists who question aspects of the biblical account. Young can claim that the true explanations can be found in the nighttime sky.

Young then instructs the reader to follow as he leads an exploration of God’s true nature. He implores the reader to gaze at the sky and learn the ways of God, stating, “That nature is the glass reflecting God, / As by the sea, reflected is the sun, / Too glorious to be gazed on in his sphere” (lines 1008–09). Again he highlights God’s infinitude in discussing God’s ability to transform the soul:

That, mind immortal loves immortal aims:  
That, boundless mind affects a boundless space:  
That vast surveys, and the sublime of things,  
The soul assimilate, and make her great:  
That, therefore, heaven her glories, as a fund  
Of inspiration, thus spreads out to man.  
Such are their doctrines; such the Night inspired. (lines 1010–16)

The immortal nature of God’s mind causes it to focus on immortal aims, and its boundless nature affects boundless space. For Young, the universe serves as a projection of God’s mind through time and space it is the embodiment of God’s imagination. By assimilating this sublimity into the soul, man draws heavenly inspiration. Young is fascinated with the role of God’s infinite nature in creating this sublimity. He soon returns to this theme of infinitude as he inquires:

Say, at what point of space Jehovah dropp’d  
His slacken’d line, and laid his balance by;  
Weigh’d worlds, and measured infinite, no more?

33 Derham, Astro-Theology, xix.
Where, rears His terminating pillar high
Its extra-mundane head? and says, to gods,
In characters illustrious as the sun, —

"I stand, the plan’s proud period; I pronounce
The work accomplish’d; the creation closed;
Shout, all ye gods! nor shout ye gods alone;
Of all that lives, or, if devoid of life,
That rest, or rolls, ye heights, and depths, resound!
Resound! resound! ye depths, and heights, resound!"

Hard are those questions! — answer harder still. (lines 1523-35)

Through this passage, Young tries to reconcile the paradox of the infinite expanse of space being bound and measured by God; space is infinite and yet smaller than God. In this passage, God creates the infinite universe with precision, using scientific instruments to measure its distance and to weigh the worlds. God is so pleased with creation that he repeatedly calls on its heights and depths to resound. Young’s words prompt the reader to gaze at the nighttime sky and contemplate the grandeur of God’s creation.

Soon after, Young anthropomorphizes the universe and suggests the possibility of new spaces being created:

Is this the sole exploit, the single birth,
The solitary son of power divine?
Or has th’ Almighty Father, with a breath,
Impregnated the womb of distant space? (lines 1536-1539)

This passage echoes Derham’s thoughts in *Astro-Theology* in which he muses, “And as myriads of Systems are more for the Glory of God and more demonstrate his Attributes than one, so it is no less probable than possible, there may be many besides this which
For Derham and for Young, the plurality of universes provides evidence of God’s omnipotence; without the universes subject to God’s laws, chaos would reign. Instead, God’s power reaches everywhere, even to universes which have not yet been discovered by mankind.

Near the end of his work, Young reflects on the scope of his exploration into the vast expanse of the unknown:

Thus, darkness aiding intellectual light,  
And sacred silence whispering truths divine,  
And truths divine converting pain to peace,  
My song the midnight raven has outwing’d,  
And shot, ambitious of unbounded scenes,  
Beyond the flaming limits of the world,  
Her gloomy flight. (lines 2411–2417)

The darkness has forced him to seek knowledge outside of the earthly matter that surrounds him and in so doing, has brought him peace. He has thus transcended the “limits” of the world, both its physical limits, and the limits on his perception. He continues,

But what avails the flight  
Of fancy, when our hearts remain below?  
Virtue abounds in flatterers, and foes;  
’Tis pride, to praise her; penance, to perform. (lines 2417-2420)

Young justifies his flight by proclaiming its virtue and declaring it an act of penance. For Young this flight of fancy serves as penance, because he has explored the realm of God’s imagination, and God has converted his pain into peace. He has not attempted to transform God’s creation through imagination but has allowed God’s imagination to transform him.

34 Derham, xxviii.
Finally, Young implores the reader one last time to move her attention from earthly things to the nighttime sky:

Awake, then; thy Philander calls: awake!
Thou, who shalt wake, when the creation sleeps;
When, like a taper, all these suns expire;
When Time, like him of Gaza in his wrath,
Plucking the pillars that support the world,
In Nature’s ample ruins lies entomb’d;
And Midnight, universal Midnight! reigns. (lines 2428 – 2434)

In this final passage, Young awakes the reader at midnight when time has stopped. The passage compares Time to Samson, who while physically blind, pulled down the pillars to kill the Philistines and become a martyr. For Young, experiencing the physical blindness of darkness and placing all of one’s faith in God is the one way to achieve immortality.

While Young views the universe as God’s scripture writ large, Wright views it as the embodiment of God’s infinite imagination. In this way, Wright extends Young’s work applying it to astronomy and cosmology. In Original Theory, Wright views the universe through a lens that privileges scientific exploration over religious certainty. His text shows that Wright believes in God, but it also displays an excitement about what God’s omniscient power means for the infinite possibilities of the universe. However, this excitement is accompanied by self-doubt as Wright attempts to imagine the universe from the God’s vantage point but exhibits concern that his speculation may not align properly with theology. Wright bookends his text with Young, citing Night Thoughts in the opening and concluding passages of Original Theory to justify his exploration into the nature of the universe. Wright builds his work on Young’s assertion that God created
an infinite universe and utilizes this assertion to speculate about the infinite possibilities that such a universe holds.

Wright’s Hypothesis: Restructuring the Hierarchy within an Infinite Universe

In 1750, the academic boundary between poetic philosophical discourse and astronomy was not yet drawn. Thomas Wright’s Original Theory contends that the universe is infinite in scope and cites Young’s work as proof. Wright himself was somewhat of a misfit in his time, and his own works were nearly lost to the world. Wright’s claims relied heavily on geometry; yet, as Judy Preston explains in “A Polymath in Arcadia: Thomas Wright (1711-86),” “Wright was living through a period that witnessed a paradigm shift towards a new experimental science where geometric axioms were replaced by empirical observations.”35 Perhaps it was Wright’s freedom to operate using the more abstract framework of geometry as opposed to empirical observations, or maybe it was his interaction with poets such as Stephen Duck, that led him to use imagination to transform understandings of the universe; either way, Wright’s work displays the power of the imagination to cast the universe as infinite in terms of space, time, and possibility. Like Young, Wright perceives the universe as the physical embodiment of God’s imagination, and because God’s imagination is infinite, the universe must be infinite too. In the first letter of Original Theory, Wright argues:

It follows then that, Creation must be not only extensively, but intensively indefinite, and beyond the Reach of the human Understanding to comprehend; and that the one is as necessary as the other, i.e. and infinite Expanse is as reconciliable to our Reason, as infinite Parts are to our Senses. All the Attributes

of the Divine Being are, as any of them, incommisible to his Creatures; why should our Imagination then be supposed to extend beyond the divine Activity.\textsuperscript{36}

Wright claims that God’s imaginative power to create the universe must be greater than human imagination. Because God’s imaginative power is infinite, Wright reasons that space must also be an “infinite expanse.” Wright uses this first letter to argue that the universe is infinite in nature and extends this claim to assert that creation must also be infinite and beyond the powers of man’s understanding. This assertion aligns with Young’s argument in lines 1523-35 of the \textit{Night IX of Night Thoughts} when he implores the reader to contemplate the implications of God’s ability to measure the infinite universe within an enclosed space.\textsuperscript{37} In a similar way, Wright’s work entreats the reader to imagine the infinite worlds and possibilities of worlds within the universe. Wright begins this task by rearranging the contemporary heliocentric conception of the universe.

For instance, in Letter the Seventh, Wright works to dislodge the sun, the earth, and ultimately humans from the center of the universe. For Wright, the center of the universe should not be the sun, but God, projecting matter from an all-seeing/all-creating eye. Wright explains, “Now, as we have no Reason to suppose, that the Nature of our Sun is different from that of the rest of the Stars; and since we can no way prove him superior even to the least of those surprising Bodies, how can we, with any Shew of Reason, imagine him to be the general Center of the whole, \textit{i. e.} of the visible Creation,

\textsuperscript{36} Thomas Wright, \textit{An Original Theory or New Hypothesis of the Universe, Founded Upon the Laws of Nature}, (New York: Cambridge University Press), 4.

\textsuperscript{37} Edward Young, 284.
and seated in the Center of the mundane Space?"\textsuperscript{38} And a little later, “The Earth indeed has long possessed the chief Seat of our System, and peaceably reigned there, as in the Center of the Universe for many Ages past; but it was human Ignorance, and not divine Wisdom, that placed it there.”\textsuperscript{39} Extending knowledge without a proper understanding of God can lead to serious errors. According to Wright, ignorance has led humans to incorrectly arrange the universe in a heliocentric fashion and such an error amounts to reducing God’s proper role in the universe. When he asks how one can imagine that the sun reigns at the center of the universe, Wright is arguing that men have transformed the universe into a lower arrangement than reality. The sun, being one of innumerable stars, is too lowly to occupy this seat of prominence. In a similar way, he makes the same statement about the earth.

Instead, Wright places God at the center of the universe because he views the universe as the embodiment of God’s imagination. After removing the sun and the earth from the center of the universe, he presents Plate XXV, which he states, “Is a centenal [sic] Section of the same, with the Eye of Providence seated in the Center, as in the virtual Agent of Creation.”\textsuperscript{40} (Figure 2.1) In this image, the viewer sees a single eye in the center of a star which radiate rays out into a circular universe. These rays claim more than half of the circle’s area, suggesting that they emanate from an incredibly powerful source. The rays are surrounded by a circle of darkness surrounded by what

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{38} Wright, 59.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Wright, 59.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Wright, 64.
\end{itemize}
appear to be numerous galaxies. In this way, the central Eye of Providence, and its rays push the visible galaxies of the universe to the edge.

Figure 2.1– Plate XXV from Wright’s *An Original Hypothesis*, which displays the universe with the Eye of Providence at its center.

It is as though the Eye of Providence imagines creation and then sees what it has created. Wright returns to this image later stating, “Here the to-all extending Eye of Providence, within the Sphere of its Activity, and as omnipresently presiding, seated in the Center of Infinity, I would imagine views all the Objects of his Power at once, and
every Thing immediately direct, dispensing instantaneously its enlivening Influence, to
the remotest Regions every where all round."41 Wright aligns his own imagination with
God’s imagination as he substitutes “I” for “eye.”

For Wright, engaging in this type of activity then is a sort of religious endeavor: by
imagining the universe, the astronomer is following in the footsteps of God. As Wright
states at the end of this letter, “I shall content myself with observing that Nature never
leaves us without a sufficient Guide to conduct us through all the necessary Paths of
Knowledge; and it is far from absurd to suppose Providence may have every where
throughout the whole Universe, interspersed Modules of every Creation, as our Divines
tell us, Man is the Image of God himself.”42 Wright’s phrasing reveals continued anxiety
about his conjecture that a multitude of unearthly beings inhabit the universe. He has
made a claim that strays far outside what would have been dared by others such as
Young. Wright carefully explains that he is using Nature as a guide through “all the
necessary Paths of Knowledge.” Furthermore, Wright bookends the possibility of
“throughout the whole Universe, interspersed Modules of every Creation,” with his use
of “I” and a reminder that “Man is the Image of God himself.” Wright’s use of this
language shows an attempt to position his imaginative speculation safely within the
bounds of God’s wisdom.

However, Wright soon extends speculation to include a space in which man is
inferior to other beings. The infinite nature of God’s imagination results in a universe
that is not only spatially infinite but also includes infinite possibility. Wright muses:

41 Wright, 78.
42 Wright, 66.
Round some perhaps, so dense an Atmosphere, that the Inhabitants may fly from Place to Place, or be drawn through the Air in winged Chariots, and even sleep upon the Waves with Safety; round others possibly, so thin a fluid, that the Arts of Navigation may be totally unknown to it, and look’d upon as impracticable and absurd, as Chariot flying may be here with us; and some where not improbably, superior Beings to the human, may reside, and Man may be of a very inferior Class; the second, third, or fourth perhaps, and scarce allow’d to be a rational Creature.  

This moment resonates throughout Wright’s work; he repeatedly hedges his vision – using words such as perhaps, may, possibly, and not improbably – as he attempts to provide the possibility a new universal social structure. These words indicate Wright’s anxiety about whether this new social construct is indeed aligned with God’s imagination, or simply another flawed product of fancy. Wright displays more anxiety in this text than Young did in Night Thoughts. Young’s work required him to remain firmly within accepted religious grounds as he sought to defend his beliefs against contrasting ideas. Wright, on the other hand, is writing a text that attempts to extend knowledge past that which was already accepted. The infinite nature of the universe simultaneously opens the door for infinite possibilities and doubt in both the current social construct and in his own imaginative ability. Wright first discusses “superior Beings to the human” but then relegates Man to the “very inferior Class.” In doing so, he rearranges the social structure of the universe in line with his new understanding of the universe brought about by imagination. Such a move notably dislodges man from the apex and center of the universe and places him uncomfortably at its edge.

Soon after, Wright places his argument back on more theologically acceptable footing as he asserts the immaterial nature of souls. Bliss notes that, “The atheists were

\[43\] Wright, 81.
also supposed to deny the reality of anything but matter.”\textsuperscript{44} In arguing that souls are immaterial, Wright is positioning himself in direct opposition to contemporary atheists. He asserts:

I think it naturally follows, had we no other Way to prove it, or any other Reason to believe it, that the Soul must of Necessity be immaterial; for as this Space seems so impassible to Matter, as not to be undertaken and performed without the Loss of Ages, in a State only of Transmigration, we may well imagine, that Change of Place is not effected this Way, but by some other Vertue or Property, more immediate, if not instantaneous.\textsuperscript{45}

In this way, Wright suggests that his earlier hypothesis leads to the Christian belief of an immaterial soul and thus aligns his argument more closely with Young’s. Wright’s assertion of an immaterial soul aligns with contemporary theological beliefs and places him in firm opposition to atheists who believe that everything must be made of matter.

Wright draws his final quotations from Young’s \textit{Night Thoughts}. These quotes ground his belief of the transmigration of souls in Young’s earlier work. Wright quotes:

\begin{quote}
O, what a Root! O what a Branch is here!  
O what a Father! what a Family!  
Worlds! Systems! and Creations!
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
And in Consequence of this  
In an Eternity, what Scenes shall strike? 
Adventures thicken? Novelties surprize? 
What Webs of Wonder shall unravel there?\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

Here, Wright borrows from two passages of \textit{Night Thoughts}: the first passage comes from \textit{Night IX}, and the second passage comes from \textit{Night VI}. In the second passage, from \textit{Night VI}, Young provides hope for Lorenzo by encouraging him to focus on the

\textsuperscript{44} Wright, 39.  
\textsuperscript{45} Wright, 82.  
\textsuperscript{46} Wright, 84. Quoted from Young’s \textit{Night Thoughts} 296, 126.
afterlife, which Young conflates with the universe. Closer examination of the Night IX passage in particular demonstrates that Wright sees Young’s anxiety about proclaiming the existence of multiple worlds and wants to clearly insist that his imaginative ideas are “rooted” in divine wisdom. Just before this passage in Night IX, Young writes,

Opening the solemn sources of my soul,
Since I have pour’d, like feign’d Eridanus,
My flowing numbers o’er the flaming skies,
Nor see, of fancy, or of fact, what more
Invites the Muse.—Here turn we, and review (lines 1901-05). 47

After speculating about multiple worlds and beings, Young compares his actions to Eridanus who was famous for his fall from the chariot of the sun. This comparison reveals his anxiety about making these conjectures as he does not want to suggest the existence of a universe based on “fancy” as opposed to divine wisdom. Young then turns and reviews his discussion, “rooting” it in God’s plan. By inverting the order of the quoted passages, Wright begins by emphasizing the divine roots of his imaginative hypothesis before moving to its extensive range of possibilities. The juxtaposition of these two passages illuminates the nature of responses by future authors. Whether they read these particular passages or not, the ideas expressed in each reveal fundamental anxieties and hopes of the Romantic age. The first passage dislodges humans’ central place in the universe. Roots are no longer found by travelling back through a linear history, but by spreading out across the expanse of infinite space in a way similar to the erasure of a central truth that would later create fear in those living in the postmodern era. The second passage, on the other hand, presents the questions that arise when

47 Young, Night Thoughts, 295.
one looks to the future for answers, opening an infinite number of possibilities to be achieved through imagination. For writers such as Barbauld, this passage provides hope that in an eternal future, some space might exist which allows for female equality. It is this future space that Barbauld explores in “A Summer Evening’s Meditation.”

Barbauld’s Gendered Universe in “A Summer Evening’s Meditation”

The number of women who were interested in scientific exploration increased exponentially during the eighteenth century. For instance, the first scientific journal for women, *The Ladies’ Diary*, was first published in 1704 and ran for over a century. Originally, the journal included domestic issues as well, but readers complained until in 1709, the editor focused solely on science. By the second half of the century, numerous textbooks such as James Ferguson’s *An Easy Introduction to Astronomy, for Young Gentlemen and Ladies* (1768) and Benjamin Martin’s *The Young Gentleman and Lady’s Philosophy* (1772) were marketed to both boys and girls interested in learning science.

Barbauld’s close friend Joseph Priestley also argued that women should engage in scientific discourse. In *An Essay on a Course of Liberal Education* (1765), Priestley writes that both men and women should familiarize themselves with “the general topics of all sensible conversation,” including scientific topics.48 But this democratization of knowledge was not well received by all. Barbauld used her poetry to question contemporary scientific and political practices, and this questioning made her the target

of searing commentary. In "‘The Mouse’s Petition’: Anna Laetitia Barbauld and the Scientific Revolution," Julia Saunders points out:

She was savaged by Richard Polwhele in *The Unsex’d Females* (1798)—a poem now remembered for its cruel stab at the posthumous reputation of Wollstonecraft—as among those given over to ‘Gallic freaks or Gallic faith’. Polwhele exploits the association of radical women with science—in particular botany—as a metaphor for their sexual and intellectual licentiousness. 49

Polwhele’s attack displays the perception of women as a threat to the male dominated scientific community and points to the large number of women who were engaging scientific topics in various ways, including writing educational books focused on scientific topics and integrating scientific concepts and language into literary works. As my reading of “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” will demonstrate, Barbauld did attempt to preempt this criticism by connecting her poem with the popular work of Young, but the revolutionary power of the poem eclipses these attempts at modesty.

Literary critics have long debated the presence of feminist themes in Barbauld’s poetry, and some modern scholars such as William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft even argue that Barbauld’s poetry transcends gender conflicts. However, such a reading misrepresents the importance of Barbauld’s attempt to establish a gendered space within her writing. While the social perception of difference between male and female brains continued to survive in the late eighteenth century, some were beginning to concede that women possessed equal and possibly even superior intellectual abilities. In the introduction to *Anna Letitia Barbauld Selected Poetry and Verse*, McCarthy and Kraft write:

When Barbauld’s contemporaries praised her “masculine” head and “feminine” heart, they were acknowledging, in the only terms they seem to have had available, that her writings appeared to them to transcend—or better, to unite—qualities which they were accustomed to assigning exclusively to one or the other sex. They were saying that, contrary to custom, the fact of her being a woman did not seem to bear upon her performance as a writer—that her writings manifested, rather, something like a completed humanity.50

Barbauld’s contemporaries, while they utilized the same gender biased language, realized that Barbauld was exceeding the poetic prowess of her male contemporaries. A teacher herself, Barbauld did not see danger in participating in “the education, and the libertie of conversation,” which were previously viewed as exclusive to male circles. 51 Instead, she used her education and liberal discussion to insert herself into the conversation of male and female intellectuals.

McCarthy and Kraft however, reach too far in their attempt to “understand Barbauld as a “trans-gendered writer,” diminishing the value of feminist readings of her work while noting that “in her own life, she had no particular investment in being socially female.”52 They go on to state:

Her early achievement of a lifelong authority over her brother gave her mediated access to the public sphere and confidence in managing younger men and boys, and thus, as we have seen, opportunity to intervene in public culture. Important as the social role of Mother was to her educational project, it was not her sole writing guise: when she intervened directly in politics, she did so as an apparently ungendered “Dissenter” and “Volunteer.” In her capacity as a middle-class spokesperson she behaves simply as a “citizen” in the 1790s Revolutionary sense, and her contemporaries do no always perceive her as female.53

These claims, though, look back through a modern lens that unnecessarily constrains

50 William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft, Introduction to Anna Letitia Barbauld Selected Poetry and Verse, ed. William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft, (Peterborough, Broadview, 2002), 24-5.
52 McCarthy and Kraft, Introduction, 25.
Barbauld and strips her of her feminist power. While Barbauld did not always point out that she was writing as a woman, it is more probable that she knew when, and when not, to strategically emphasize her gender. By acting as an “ungendered ‘dissenter’ and ‘volunteer’,” Barbauld was able to infiltrate political discussions commonly exclusive to men and strengthen not only her own position, but the position of her female contemporaries. For instance, even McCarthy and Kraft note that William Keate “was horrified to learn that the Address to the Opposers was the work of a ‘female pen’.” By not revealing the author as female in the text itself, Barbauld was able influence the opinion of Keate before he realized that he had found the work of a female pen to be equal or superior to the work of a male author; conversely, if text had revealed itself to be the work of a woman, Keate may have never read it with an open mind.

Scholars continue to struggle in attempts to measure the strength of Barbauld’s feminist and political views in her writing. For example, Barbauld’s opening poem, “Corsica,” in her 1773 collection is often read as an encomium for the citizens of Corsica who fought for their independence from France. But the final lines of the poem complicate that reading. The citizens of Corsica were unable to succeed in their fight for independence, and the poem concludes ambiguously:

Not with the purple colouring of success
Is virtue best adorn’d: th’attempt is praise.
There yet remains a freedom, nobler far
Than kings or senates can destroy or give;
Beyond the proud oppressor’s cruel grasp
Seated secure; uninjur’d; undestroy’d;
Worthy of Gods: The freedom of the mind. (lines 195-201)

54 McCarthy and Kraft, 26.
Some scholars, such as Patricia Meyer Spacks, argue that this represents retreat. Spacks asserts, “Coming at the end of a long poem that celebrates the fight for literal national freedom, the glorification of internal freedom (however worthy of gods) seems lame.” While physical and mental freedom are unequivocal, this passage can also be read as a template for Barbauld’s strategy to surrender the battle in order to win the war. The other poems in the collection, and especially the concluding poem, “A Summer Evening’s Meditation,” revolve around a theme of feminist revolution. Barbauld's strategy relies on her belief that God will ultimately reward her for her faith. Thus for Barbauld, this revolution will not be won by securing geographical space but by using literature to occupy temporal space. In this work, Barbauld places the universe of infinite possibilities described by Young and Wright in a womb. This metaphor emphasizes the role of women in the present and the possibility of future feminine power.

Barbauld begins “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” with an epigraph from Edward Young’s Night Thoughts, and thereby provides a lens through which to read her poem. She quotes Young stating, “One sun by day, by night ten thousand shine.” However, Barbauld is a dissenter. As Daniel White explains in “The Joineria: Anna Barbauld, The Aikin Family Circle, and the Dissenting Public Sphere,” “during the mid-eighteenth century, provincial Dissent allied Presbyterian and Arian religion with middle-class commercialism, libertarian politics, and intellectual ideals of reason and free enquiry.” As opposed to Young, who was a member of the Anglican clergy, dissenters idealized

free enquiry. Furthermore, Barbauld appears to have been less affected by the threat of eternal damnation for her inquiry or dissenting beliefs. In her response to Gilbert Wakefield’s *Enquiry into the Expediency and Propriety of Public or Social Worship*, Barbauld writes,

Above all, it would be desirable to separate from religion that idea of gloom which in this country has but too generally accompanied it...No one who embraces the common idea of future torments, together with the doctrine of election and reprobation, the insufficiency of virtue to escape the wrath of God, and the strange absurdity which, it should seem, through similarity of sound alone has been admitted as an axiom, that sins committed against an Infinite Being do therefore deserve infinite punishment—no one, I will venture to assert, can believe such tenets, and have them often in his thoughts, and yet be cheerful.  

If Barbauld sins by inquiring the true nature of God within “A Summer Evening’s Meditation,” she expresses confidence that her virtue will prove sufficient to escape the wrath of God. Barbauld refuses to live in gloom and fear that she will be infinitely punished. This is revealed when readers compare Barbauld’s assertion with the following passage from Night VII of *Night Thoughts*:

Who would be born to such a phantom world,  
Where nought substantial but our misery?  
Where joy (if joy) but heightens our distress,  
So soon to perish, and revive no more?  
The greater such a joy, the more it pains. (lines 954-58)

In this passage, Young questions whether joy even exists and asserts that it only “heightens our distress” and “pains.” Young’s focus on the negative aspects of life appears to be exactly the gloom and melancholy against which Barbauld contends.

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Instead of using the epigraph in support of Young's overall ideas, Barbauld uses it to highlight the contrast between the feminist motives of her text and the traditional views represented in *Night Thoughts*. Continuing the spirit of revolution she began in “Corsica,” the quotation of Young serves as a Trojan horse for Barbauld to insert her imaginative meditation into the infinite and eternal universe described in Young's *Night Thoughts*. By using this epigraph, Barbauld seemingly places her poem safely in line with Young’s intellectually accepted and less controversial theological perspective before providing a feminist counter reading of the nighttime sky. Young’s line appears to be a reference to David Mallet’s “The Excursion” in which he writes,

Ten thousand Suns blaze forth; each with his Train  
Of Worlds full-peopled; all beneath the Eye,  
And sovereign rule of one eternal Lord. (*Night II*, lines 4-6)

In this passage, Mallet places the focus on the sovereignty of the “one eternal Lord.” Similarly, *Night Thoughts* expands the universe spatially to display God’s omnipotence. Wright then extends this element of *Night Thoughts* to reaffirm God’s place as the eye of Providence at the center of the universe, moving mankind toward its edge. In “A Summer Evening's Meditation,” Barbauld exploits the instabilities in Young’s and Wright’s texts sharpens this movement to illuminate feminine bodies in the scripture of the nighttime sky and eclipse lofty masculine markers such as the sun. If the space of the universe can be both bounded and infinite, it is both accessible to the human imagination and beyond our comprehension. In Barbauld’s poem, the nighttime sky serves as a holy feminine space. The line first announces a shift from day to night, a move that she later claims parallels the acquisition of knowledge and thought. At the same time, the line announces the absence of the sun, and its replacement with
numerous other guiding points of focus. Moreover, these shifts are not random occurrences of nature but represent the aftermath of a female revolution. Through much of the text, Barbauld highlights the traditional gender of cosmic bodies. This allows Barbauld to place female characters in a position of power in a manner that contemporary male readers would have found less threatening.

The poem proper begins with the narration of the moments of a revolution as the poet exclaims, “‘Tis Past! The sultry tyrant of the south / Has spent his short-liv’d rage; more grateful hours / Move silent on” (lines 1-2). The patriarchal era marked by rage and war is moving swiftly to an end as power is transferred to feminine figures of contemplation: the poem portrays Dian as a hunter who has brought about this transference of power as she “seems to push / Her brother down the sky” (lines 7-10). The sun is replaced by Venus, who the poet notes “shines / E’en in the eye of day” (lines 10-11). Wright had shifted the sun from the center of the universe and replaced it with the Eye of Providence, aligning his views more closely with commonly accepted theological views. Here, however, Barbauld replaces the sun with the Venus, asserting the universe as a space dominated by feminine values. This move simultaneously reflects Barbauld’s position as one who questions the monarchy and divine right. The Eye of Providence suggests an external authority with which rulers can align themselves. Instead, Venus is able to release a “trembling flood” that disperses the light as “The shadows spread apace;” before Eve appears and “shuts the gates of day” (lines 12-17). These feminine mythological characters replace their male counterparts,

59 All references from this poem are quoted from Anna Letitia Barbauld. “A Summer Evening’s Meditation” in Anna Letitia Barbauld Selected Poetry and Verse, ed. William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft, (Peterborough: Broadview, 2002), 98-102.
creating an abstract feminine space. The use of these characters also helps extend this space into history. At this point, the coup is complete; Dian, Venus, and Eve have succeeded in pushing the sun below the horizon and now reign. The poem then extends this temporal space into a new era, proclaiming, “’Tis now the hour / When Contemplation…Moves forward” (lines 17 – 23). Young had stated that the soul can be great by assimilating with the God’s “boundless mind [that] affects a boundless space.” It is this space that Barbauld contemplates in an attempt to assimilate God’s creation and strengthen her soul. However, Barbauld views this space as feminine.

The poet notes a shift in the transmission of natural knowledge. The feminine mythical characters serve as lamps in the night sky, and the poet argues that they are filled by God. Meanwhile, traditional masculine knowledge has been subdued. The poet writes:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nature's self is hush'd,} \\
\text{And, but a scatter'd leaf, which rustles thro’} \\
\text{The thick-wove foliage, not a sound is heard} \\
\text{To break the midnight air; tho' the rais'd ear,} \\
\text{Intensely listening, drinks in every breath.} \\
\text{How deep the silence, yet how loud the praise!} \\
\text{But are they silent all? (lines 42 – 48)}
\end{align*}
\]

Wright had claimed that Nature provides a guide, but here it is “hush’d.” Only “a scatter’d leaf, which rustles thro’ / The thick-wove foliage” is able “To break the midnight air.” Within the context of the Barbauld’s poem, Nature is feminine and though thickly woven, has been hushed. While men’s voices have been louder, the poet claims that women are the source of their knowledge. The feminized stars with their “maiden beams” talk to men on earth and woo them to be wise. In fact, the poem presents wisdom as a female character and the counterpart to the masculine and “sultry tyrant”
sun stating, “This dead of midnight is the the noon of thought, / And wisdom mounts her
zenith with the stars” (lines 51 – 52). Barbauld’s use of the word “wisdom” is important
here, as she aligns this new knowledge to God’s plan in the same manner of Young and
Wright. However, whereas Wright replaced the sun with the eye of Providence,
Barbauld replaces the sun with feminine wisdom.

Next, Barbauld transforms herself into the universe with images that closely
resemble the Wright’s portrayal of the universe’s construct. She reflects,

At this still hour the self-collected soul
Turns inward, and beholds a stranger there
Of high descent, and more than mortal rank;
An embryo GOD; a spark of fire divine,
Which must burn on for ages, when the sun,
(Fair transitory creature of a day!)
Has clos’d his golden eye, and wrapt in shades
Forgets his wonted journey thro’ the east. (lines 54-60)

Instead of looking outward, Barbauld turns inward to view the universe. Her description
of the “golden eye” proves similar to Wright’s portrayal of the eye of Providence at the
center of the universe, but here Barbauld replaces that eye with “an embryo GOD.”
Wright had conflated himself with the eye, realizing that he was performing an act of
creation, and this had led him to self-doubt. By contrast, Barbauld proudly places the
embryo God within herself as “a spark of fire divine.” This marks as an important
difference not only because the image is feminized, but also because instead of
Barbauld aligning her eye with God, she is providing her body as a place to house and
support the embryo God, which creates from inside her. This move suggests that God
can be found within individual people rather than existing as an external authority.

The embryo God also serves as the divine spark that allows Barbauld to launch
herself into the farthest regions of space “on fancy’s wild and roving wing.” Barbauld’s
reference to fancy here echoes Young’s reference at the end of Night Thoughts. The poet travels on a journey that quickly takes her across vast stretches of space:

From the green borders of the peopled earth,
And the pale moon, her duteous fair attendant;
From solitary Mars; from the vast orb
Of Jupiter, whose huge gigantic bulk
Dances in ether like the lightest leaf;
To the dim verge, the suburbs of the system,
Where cheerless Saturn ‘midst her watry moons
Girt with a lucid zone, majestic sits
In gloomy grandeur; like an exil’d queen
Amongst her weeping handmaids: fearless thence
I launch into the trackless deeps of space, (lines 73 – 82)

Continuing her feminist theme of carrying an embryo God, Barbauld perceives the solar system as feminine. Rather than a god of thunder, Jupiter “dances in ether like the lightest leaf.” She refers to Saturn as female with “her watry moons;” the publisher would revert Saturn back to male in subsequent publications of the poem to avoid controversy. In this way, Barbauld echoes Thomson’s “A Poem Sacred to the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton,” but launches herself into a decidedly feminine space.

While Young contemplates God’s creation in the nighttime sky, God allows Young’s song to rise into sublime thought. It is by focusing on God that Young receives revelation. Wright aligns himself with the use “I” with the God’s eye of Providence at the center of the universe but then experiences self-doubt, concerned about his ambition.

60 Barbauld’s reference to Saturn as a female planet also aligns with some astrological understandings of the planet’s gender. Many future astrologers would embrace Barbauld’s free exploration of belief, as demonstrated by a citation and astrological reading of an excerpt from “A Summer’s Evening Meditation” in Raphael, Karl Friedrich Kahlert, Walter Scott, Henry Fuseli, and Merlinus Anglicus, The Astrologer of the Nineteenth Century; Or, The Master Key of Futurity and Guide to Ancient Mysteries, Being a Complete System of Occult Philosophy (1825).
Here though, Barbauld fearlessly launches herself “into the trackless deeps of space.”

As she travels, she feels impelled by a “hand unseen”:

   What hand unseen
   Impels me onward thro' the glowing orbs
   Of inhabitable nature; far remote,
   To the dread confines of eternal night,
   To solitudes of vast unpeopled space,
   The desarts of creation, wide and wild;
   Where embryo systems and unkindled suns
   Sleep in the womb of chaos (lines 91 – 97)

Barbauld’s vision includes the space beyond that which Young can see in the nighttime sky. Furthermore, while Wright supposes that it is not improbable that perhaps there are other civilizations in the universe, Barbauld views a space of future possibility. Her stance exhibits more confidence than Wright’s position, and the assertion that the systems and suns are asleep in the womb suggests that they are waiting for the appropriate time to be born and realized. Barbauld maintains confidence in this future as she decides to wait, stating:

   Let me here
   Content and grateful, wait th’ appointed time
   And ripen for the skies: the hour will come
   When all these splendours bursting on my sight
   Shall stand unveil'd, and to my ravished sense
   Unlock the glories of the world unknown. (lines 117-22)

While this conclusion is commonly read as a moment of defeat, Barbauld’s confidence in stating that “the hour will come” indicates that she has not lost hope – she is waiting for the appropriate hour. Through waiting, Barbauld demonstrates that she comprehends the current situation but also uses imagination to project a better future.

Placing these works in conversation with each other reveals the tension in perceiving space and time as both bound and infinite and the implications of this
perception during the eighteenth century. The infinite expansion of space is directly connected to the unlimited possibilities for imagining the structure of the universe. Young’s connection between God and the infinite size of the universe leads Wright to explore the physical, theological, and social implications of such a space; Wright imagines God at the center of an infinite universe inhabited by an infinite number of possible life forms and social structures. For Barbauld, the infinite nature of the universe presents possibility of viewing it through a feminine lens. Through these works, one can see three different perspectives as Young, Wright, and Barbauld imagine the universe in ways that reflect their individual values. For Young, the universe provides theological confirmation of his faith. Wright attempts to reconcile the advancement of his hypothesis with contemporary theological ideas. Finally, Barbauld imagines the universe as a feminine space where her values will one day flourish. Scientific thought is shaped by each of these varying values and produces new opportunities for unique perspectives of space and time.

These works also display the universe as anthropocentric: Young views the universe as God’s message to mankind; Wright replaces the Eye of Providence and God’s imagination with his own speculations on the nature of the universe; and Barbauld envisions the universe as feminine like herself. These perspectives have been influenced by the infinite expansion of space and time and the infinite possibilities created to fill that void, leading to further explorations into the relationship between Nature and the self. Moreover, the hybridity of poetry, theology, and the cosmos allows the space for writers and thinkers to contemplate and create their own theology unbound by the limits of the traditional system.
CHAPTER 3

THE GROWING FISSION BETWEEN HUMANS AND NATURE ACROSS

WORDSWORTH, SHELLEY, AND TENNYSON

In this chapter, I examine connections between Nature and the self in William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, Percy Shelley’s *Mont Blanc*, and Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*. These specific works are useful because they all explore similar connections between the physical and ethereal worlds but different perspectives of the relationship between earth’s landscape and the mind. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth compares the stratified layers of the earth’s surface to layers of experience which work to restore the mind. In *Mont Blanc*, Shelley explores the relationship between the famous mountain’s mysterious, inhospitable landscape and human collective intelligence. His perspective of the mountain as an unorganized geologic structure complicates Wordsworth’s analogies between the restorative processes of the earth and the mind. Finally, in *In Memoriam*, Tennyson extends Shelley’s separation between the natural and spiritual worlds. Tennyson views physical geologic processes as signs of earth’s decay and instead asserts that man must use God as a guide for restoration. Tennyson explores the possibility to disperse a soul’s power across space and time after death. His perspective displays a lack of trust in contemporary geologic theories as he presents a spiritual, rather than physical, theory of evolution.

Through these three works, writers perceive a growing separation between nature and the mind. Wordsworth views the mind as a mirror of nature, but for Shelley this relationship is more tenuous. In *Mont Blanc*, Shelley examines the workings of Mont Blanc in attempt to understand the mountain and its relationship to humankind.
However, the poem ultimately presents the mountain as mysterious, uninhabitable, and in many ways unknowable. As one cannot look at a brain and thereby see the thoughts than run through it, Shelley finds that many of Mont Blanc’s secrets are safely hidden. Tennyson extends this separation even further to divide the physical and spiritual worlds in such a way that they are working to opposing ends. Understanding this increasing fissure between nature and the mind provides helpful context for exploring works that challenge common fundamental conceptions of space and time such as Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* and Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* in the next chapter.

During the late eighteenth century, a public outcry developed in England regarding the state of cemeteries. The concern was twofold: citizens were concerned about the denigration of burial sites, and healthcare officials were frightened by the health hazards posed by the close proximity of burial places to living spaces.61 In 1794, one subscriber wrote to *Gentleman’s Magazine* to assert that “In our town, the venerable remains of the dead ‘hearsed in the earth’ have ‘burst their cerements,’ and been exposed to every insult and indignity which the unprotected can experience.”62 In *The History and topographical survey of the county of Kent*, Edward Hasted describes the sad state of affairs at the Ville of Christ Church stating, “Many of [the MONUMENTS and GRAVESTONES throughout this church] in nave and martyrdom had been

61 In *Gatherings from Graveyards, Particularly those of London, with a Concise History of the Modes of Interment among Different Nations from the Earliest Periods, and a Detail of Dangerous and Fatal Results Produced by the Unwise and Revolting Custom of Inhuming the Dead in the Midst of the Living*, (London: 1838), 3, George Walker, surgeon, asserts, “Burial places in the neighborhood of the living are, in my opinion, a national evil—the harbingers, if not the originators of pestilence; the cause direct or indirect of inhumanity, immorality and irreligion.”

curiously and richly inlaid with ornaments and inscriptions on brass, but all of them have been long since defaced and the brasses purloined from them." Hasted’s inclusion of this discussion within a topographical survey including a collection of maps emphasizes the connection between the monuments and gravestones and their physical location within the soil. The markers of these locations have been heavily ornamented, demonstrating a powerful connection between the physical location and the solemn nature of its purpose. Hasted demonstrates concern that the markers of these locations have been defaced. He brings this connection further into focus as he continues: “Mention has been made before, that on the new paving of the nave a few years ago, the several gravestones and tombs in it were removed elsewhere; the antient ones, especially of the archbishops and the prior, to make good the pavement of the sermon-house...”63 Here the focus remains on the space of the original gravesites. Hasted’s use of the ambiguous “elsewhere” to describe where the gravestones and tombs have been relocated maintains the emphasis on the present space which now serves as the “pavement of the sermon-house.” The erection of the sermon-house also preserves the function of that space, indicating that the ground itself is designated as a space for spiritual renovation.

In the early nineteenth century, the belief that physical location and human improvement are connected was common. In “Decomposing: Wordsworth’s Poetry of Epitaph and English Burial Reform,” Karen Sánchez-Eppler notes that “John Claudius

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63 Edward Hasted, The history and topographical survey of the county of Kent. Containing the antient and present state of it, civil and ecclesiastical; Collected From Public Records, And Other Authorities: Illustrated with maps, views, antiquities, &c. The second edition, improved, corrected, and continued to the present time. Volume I. (Canterbury: W. Bristow, 1797), 383-84.
Loudon, who designed Abney Park Cemetery to be both burying ground and public garden, understood the implication of his work: ‘a secondary object’ of all burial places, he notes, ‘is, or ought to be, the improvement of the moral sentiments and general taste of all classes.’ Burial sites serve as spaces to improve the living. Considering William Godwin’s discussion of improvement in *Political Justice*, it makes sense that these sites would serve as a focal point for Godwin in his *Essay on Sepulchres*. In this work, Godwin builds on this understanding of grave sites as a way to improve mankind. He designates a system for marking and documenting the locations of famous battles, monuments, and the burial sites of eminent men as a method for securing the progress of civilization. He explains,

One observation more. If it should be thought that such a scheme as is here suggested, would, from the mere fluctuation and uncertainty of human affairs, be too precarious in its operation, one further security might be employed. I spoke a while ago of maps, in which the scenes of famous battles were distinguished with a peculiar mark. Why might not something of this kind be introduced in the subject before us? It might be called, the Atlas of those who Have Lived, for the Use of Men Hereafter to be Born. It might be plentifully marked with meridian lines and circles of latitude, “with centric and eccentric scribbled o’er,” so as to ascertain with incredible minuteness where the monuments of eminent men had been, and where their ashes continue to repose. If this were done, nothing more would be necessary in times of the greatest calamity and devastation, than to preserve one copy of this precious depository of populous streets, and the soil they once occupied were “sown with salt,” the materials would thus be preserved, by means of which, at the greatest distance of time, every thing that was most sacred might be restored, and the calamity which had swallowed up whole generations of men, might be obliterated as if it had never been.

In this passage, Godwin connects physical locations on the earth with the achievements

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of mankind. The sites serve as ways to preserve knowledge across generations. Furthermore, his passage asserts that by maintaining a record of these locations, mankind can erase periods of time which include calamitous events to restore civilization to its previous state. The power of these physical locations is extended temporally. Godwin’s proposal emphasizes the importance of the connection between a physical location and the improvement of society. However, when viewed against contemporary understandings of the earth’s surface, Godwin’s plan for social preservation and improvement highlights a fissure between the perspectives of moral philosophers and their contemporaries those who study earth science. While Godwin focuses on the way that landscape functions to overcome temporal disjunction, scientists such as George Cuvier were focusing on the way that landscape changes over time.

Cuvier’s *A Discourse on the Revolutions of the Surface of the Globe, and the Changes Thereby Produced in the Animal Kingdom* describes the surface of the earth as a substance that is constantly changing. For instance, in a passage that discusses the land of Egypt, a once great civilization, Cuvier explains:

> The height of the soil of Egypt is produced at the same time as the extension of its surface; and the bottom of the bed of the river is elevated in proportion to the adjacent plains, whence the inundation of every succeeding century much exceeds the height of the marks it left of its preceding ones. According to Herodotus, a lapse of nine hundred years was enough to establish a difference in the level of seven or eight cubits (ten or twelve feet; (1) at Elephantia, the inundation now reaches seven feet higher than during the reign of septimus Severus, at the beginning of the third century. At Cairo, before it is deemed sufficient for the purpose of irrigating the lands, it must attain a height of three feet and a half more than was requisite in the ninth century. The ancient monuments of this country are all more or less enveloped in the soil. The mud left by the river even covers the small artificial hills on which the ancient cities
were founded, to a depth of several feet.\textsuperscript{66} The soil covering the surface of the earth is moving and enveloping ancient monuments. Such dramatic changes to the globe demonstrate problems with Godwin’s approach; Godwin connects the success of civilizations with their physical locations on the globe, and he emphasizes the ability to “ascertain with incredible minuteness where the monuments of eminent men had been.” But Cuvier’s assertion shows that this endeavor would be complicated as the land itself will have shifted.

As Hasted displays in \textit{The Topological Survey of Kent}, the power of the location of burial sites is connected to the soil in which they inhabit. That soil retains power even when the human remains are removed and relocated elsewhere. However, from the perspective gained by geologists such as Cuvier, the soil is understood to be constantly shifting and moving to new spots or being covered by soil from elsewhere. The development of the New World had increased interest and debate into the value of soil to instill greatness in its inhabitants.\textsuperscript{67} Moreover, fossils began to be classified and arranged according to the type of rock in which they were discovered. For example, in \textit{A Discourse on the Revolutions of the Surface of the Globe}, Cuvier declares, “I shall now commence with the most ancient formations, and mention the animals found in them, and passing from epoch to epoch, point out those which successively present themselves, in proportion as they approach more nearly to the present age.”\textsuperscript{68} In his

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\textsuperscript{66} Georges Cuvier, \textit{A Discourse on the Revolutions of the Surface of the Globe: And the Changes There by Produced in the Animal Kingdom}, (Philadelphia: Carey and Lea, 1831), 89.
\textsuperscript{68} Cuvier, \textit{Revolutions}, 190.
\end{flushright}
Godwin’s passage foregrounds the soil’s influence on the success of its human inhabitants. According to Godwin, humans are products of the soil they inhabit, not only physically, but in morality and thoughts as well. This connection between the landscape and the mind is vital for understanding Wordsworth’s “spots of time.”

Wordsworth’s “Spots of Time” and the Stratification of Experience

Young had viewed nature as “the glass reflecting God”; for Wordsworth, nature serves as a mirror for the mind and as a guide for restoration. In his preface to the 1802 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, he explains,

[The Poet] considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature, and thus the Poet, prompted by this feeling of pleasure, which accompanies him through the whole course of his studies, converses with general nature, with affections akin to those, which, through labour and length of time, the Man of science has raised up in himself, by conversing with those particular parts of nature which are the objects of his studies.70

Wordsworth views “the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature.” Thus, as he writes about nature, he also writes about

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the mind. Wordsworth presents the ability to read geologic signs as a way to be a better informed and more productive member of society. This proves especially important when reading works such as “The Brothers.” In this poem, the Priest of Ennerdale states:

```plaintext
In our churchyard
Is neither epitaph nor monument
Tombstone nor name—only the turf we tread
And a few natural graves. (lines 12-16)71
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The Priest’s churchyard, much like the churchyard in Kent, no longer contains monuments and tombstones to mark the names and locations of the dead. Furthermore, as Paul Magnuson notes in *Coleridge and Wordsworth: A Lyrical Dialogue*, “In the Grasmere poems in the second volume, the signs in the landscape are the relics of human life lived there. In ‘The Brothers,’ dialogue fails because Leonard cannot read those signs. From the very outset of the volume, Wordsworth identifies the problem in his accommodation to the valley as the decay of the signs in landscape.”72 The lack of signs in the churchyard and the inability of Leonard to read signs in the landscape lead to the breakdown of the dialogue. For Wordsworth, the inability to properly mark locations and read signs in the landscape causes a failure of human community and memory as the poem turns on the fact that the Priest fails to recognize Leonard and tells him the story of his brother’s death without knowing it.

The problem Wordsworth recognizes is that these signs deteriorate over time.

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and change as a result of experience. In response, Wordsworth anchors his signs in *The Prelude* not in the earth, but in time. This represents a dramatic shift from Godwin’s approach which called for an atlas that would portray a static vision of the earth. Instead, Wordsworth marks spots in time and then records the physical changes of the spatial location across time. In so doing, his reading of the sign changes as stratified layers of experience begin to cover the landscape. This allows him to return to the spot multiple times for rejuvenation even as it becomes layered with new experiences.

Wordsworth’s interest in spots of time is similar to an earlier discussion in Godwin’s *Essay on Sepulchres*, when Godwin writes:

> Let us mark the spot, whenever it can be ascertained, hallowed by the reception of all that was mortal of these glorious beings; let us erect a shrine to their memory; let us visit their tombs; let us indulge all the reality we can now have, of a sort of conference with these men, by repairing to the scene which, as far as they are at all on earth, *they still inhabit!*\(^{73}\)

Godwin begins with a spatial location, but then seeks to extend the power of the spot temporally as it is used to “erect a shrine to their memory” and then is moved into the present through the emphasized phrase, “*they still inhabit!*” Godwin aspires to create an atlas marking the spatial spots of great men so that they may be connected to the spot after life. Godwin proposes,

> It might be called the Atlas of those who Have Lived for the Use of Men Hereafter to be Born. It might be plentifully marked with meridian lines and circles of latitude, “with centric and eccentric scribbled o’er, so as to ascertain with incredible minuteness where the monuments of eminent men had been, and where their ashes continue to repose.”\(^{74}\)

Godwin’s plan emphasizes the importance of the physical location of “eminent men” and


\(^{74}\) Godwin, 112.
the retained power of that location to restore lost monuments. Godwin focuses his attention on geographic markers of civilization’s greatness; Wordsworth shifts this exterior geographic plan to one within an individual’s mind.

For Wordsworth, the mental construction he has organized combines to form a spatial and temporal palimpsest. This is Wordsworth’s “twofold frame of body and mind” in line 126 of Book XII.\textsuperscript{75} The spot works as a controlled factor in a scientific experiment, offering a stable point against which to measure change through both its own temporal existence and within the temporal mind. When Wordsworth famously declares, “There are in our existence spots of time,” he utilizes the word “spot” to resonate both temporally and spatially. Furthermore, this spot lies on the intersection of two spatial dimensions. When he locates a spot of time, Wordsworth is working as a natural philosopher to uncover a fossilized memory in a specific region of his consciousness. Wordsworth extends this to mark the location of his own memories. Furthermore, Wordsworth complicates Godwin’s plan by describing the spot as part of a dynamic geologic and philosophic system that acknowledges change. If, as geologists had begun to discover and Cuvier articulates, the earth is constantly changing and the soil is constantly being displaced, does the physical spot retain its influence over time? Moreover, can one use the mind to return to and investigate the original spatial and temporal spot, or do time and the imagination work to create a “gulph” or chasm between the poet and the original spot? Such questions weigh heavily within The

Wordsworth connects the state of the human mind with the landscape, and his description of the current landscape echoes Godwin’s reference to “barren soil.” However, Wordsworth incorporates time’s effect on the landscape and its ability to be restored and then connects this with restoration of the mind. For instance, Wordsworth begins Book XII of *The Prelude*, “Imagination and Taste, How Impaired and Restored,” with a description of humankind’s current state:

Long time have human ignorance and guilt  
Detained us, on what spectacles of woe  
Compelled to look, and inwardly oppressed  
With sorrow, disappointment, vexing thoughts,  
Confusion of the judgement, zeal decayed,  
And, lastly, utter loss of hope itself  
And things to hope for! Not with these began  
Our song, and not with these our song must end. – (lines 1-8)

Wordsworth opens the book by referencing the “long time” that humans have been detained by ignorance and guilt and connects these with surrounding spectacles of woe. This language brings time, location, and feeling together as the poet compares his surroundings with inward thoughts. The passage of time looking at sad spectacles causes the decay of zeal and loss of hope, but Wordsworth asserts that it has not always been this way and that through time the situation will change for the better. In the next lines he connects the exterior betterment of the landscape with improvement of the mind:

Ye motions of delight, that haunt the sides  
Of the green hills; ye breezes and soft airs,  
Whose subtle intercourse with breathing flowers,  
Feelingly watched, might teach Man’s haughty race  
How without injury to take, to give
Without offence; (lines 9-14)

Wordsworth’s description of this scene focuses on the wind, the “breezes and soft airs,” which interact with the breathing flowers and might teach humans to give and take without offence. This language echoes Cuvier’s descriptions of the wind’s effects on sand near the beach and on the Egyptian landscape; Cuvier credits the wind with helping create dunes extending the Nile delta. Wordsworth’s words also portray nature as being in a peaceful balance that might teach humans. For Wordsworth, humans should form their thoughts according to the example presented by nature. The morning and the spring offer examples for restoring the mind as the poet exclaims,

Oh! That I had a music and a voice
Harmonious as your own, that I might tell
What ye have done for me. The morning shines,
Nor heedeth Man’s perverseness; Spring returns, – (lines 29-32)

Through *The Prelude*, Wordsworth hopes to write a poem harmonious with nature so that he may restore poetry. His intent to “tell what ye have done for me” indicates an intimate and unique relationship with nature; through this line and Wordsworth’s reference to “Man’s perverseness,” he sets himself apart from his contemporaries as one who has been given the unique privilege to transform Nature’s restorative power into poetry.

Wordsworth views himself within the lineage of great poets and wishes to separate himself from his contemporaries. For Wordsworth, man has degenerated into a prejudiced race; he wants to breathe life into the perceived nobility of past generations and project them into the future. The poet states:

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76 Cuvier, *Discourse on Revolutions*, 85.
Dare I avow that wish was mine to see,
And hope that future times would surely see,
The man to come, parted, as by a gulph,
From him who had been; that I could no more
Trust the elevation which had made me one
With the great family that still survives
To illuminate the abyss of ages past,
Sage, warrior, patriot, hero; (lines 57-64)

Wordsworth aspires to separate himself the behavior of his contemporaries by a “gulph,” both temporally and spiritually. “The elevation” summons thoughts of stratification, of being on the same ground with his contemporaries. Wordsworth no longer wishes to be a part of that stratified layer. As new soil covers the landscape to restore the earth, Wordsworth hopes to find himself on new poetic ground that elevates himself above his contemporaries, viewing his poetry as part of the restorative process of poetry. He analogizes the result of this process with the earth creating a new stratified layer on top of old, and his reference to “the abyss of ages past,” alludes to the new understanding of deep time. Echoing Godwin’s plan to restore “everything that was most sacred,” Wordsworth places himself in the great family of “sage, warrior, patriot, hero,” but his vision aligns his hopeful poetic ascension with an elevation of the earth’s surface.

Rather than rooting himself in a particular spatial location, Wordsworth’s language emphasizes the importance of a location that has been elevated by stratification over time. The passage of time is important, because while Wordsworth acknowledges the changes in landscape, in Book XII he considers spots of time. He also claims that these spots “with distinct pre-eminence retain/A renovating virtue.” This language leaves open the possibility that this virtue is retained despite the changing of the spot itself. Considering Wordsworth’s language closely, it is the temporal constant of
the original spot that allows the virtue to remain even as the ground shifts beneath it. I contend that Wordsworth enters into this investigation precisely because he wants to find out what allows the virtue to remain.

Wordsworth’s description of the spots of time emphasizes their power to resist decay. He provides a detailed explanation as he writes:

There are in our existence spots of time,
That with distinct pre-eminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
By false opinion and contentious thought,
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,
In trivial occupations, and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired; (Book 12, lines 208-15)

For Wordsworth, the spots of time are memories to which the mind can return to nourish and repair itself. Again, one is reminded of the site of the graveyard in Kent which has been paved for the sermon-house or of Godwin’s spots retaining the ashes of eminent men that can be used to reestablish the greatness of past societies. Here, however, Wordsworth asserts that these spots contain a virtue that enhance pleasure:

A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
That penetrates, enables us to mount,
When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen,
Among those passages of life that give
Profoundest knowledge to what point, and how,
The mind is lord and master — outward sense
The obedient servant of her will. (Book 12, lines 216-23)

Wordsworth is looking for spots of time that fall on the exact edge of sublimity that allow the poet to ascend higher. These spots push the mind to its limit of self-control. Wordsworth’s use of “point” indicates a high level of precision, and the parameters he sets up demonstrate that his interest lies specifically in the way that the mind actively works to retain mastery over outward sense. This is why so many of the spots are
memories of horrific events; Wordsworth is seeking to understand how the mind recovers from these traumatic moments.

Wordsworth notes that “Such moments / Are scattered everywhere, taking their date / From our first childhood,” before he begins detailing the first spot by narrating:

....down the rough and stony moor
I led my horse, and, stumbling on, at length
Came to a bottom, where in former times
A murderer had been hung in iron chains. (Book 12, lines 233-36)

For Wordsworth, “the rough and stony moor” are analogous to the layers of memory he descends as he approaches his memory at the bottom of his mental construction. There he finds that a murderer had literally been chained to the spot, emphasizing the connection between man and his physical location. Furthermore, the reference to a now deceased murderer edges the mind toward a sublime state. The presence of a live murderer could bring terror, while the absence of such a reference would fail to excite the mind to the point that Wordsworth wants to investigate.

However, Wordsworth’s mind maintains its power by examining the spatial and temporal details of the location:

The gibbet-mast was mouldered down, the bones
And iron case were gone; but, on the turf,
Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought,
Some unknown hand had carved the murderer’s name. (Book 12, lines 237-40)

Notice the similarities between Wordsworth’s description of the scene and the scene at the graveyard in Kent. The monuments have decayed over time, and the bones and tomb are now gone, but the physical location and the temporal spot retain their power as someone has “carved the murderer’s name” to provide a sign for future visitors. Wordsworth describes the scene:
The monumental writing was inscribed
In times long past; but still, from year to year,
By superstition of the neighbourhood,
The grass is cleared away, and to that hour
The characters were fresh and visible. (Book 12, lines 241-45)

Wordsworth echoes Godwin when he refers to the “monumental writing.” Yet here,
instead of describing a monument to mark the existence of an eminent man,
Wordsworth points to a monument warning the neighborhood of the cursed nature of
the ground. Furthermore, nearby residents regularly clear the grass away and preserve
the sign so the importance of the spot is comprehensible. The growing grass works in a
similar way to the earth’s soil as it builds up and threatens to overtake the monument
marking the spot, but its clearing away is what allows Wordsworth, unlike Leonard in
“The Brothers,” to maintain mental control over the situation and use it as a spot to
mindfully return to and find new meaning.

The static image memorializing a ghostly enchainment does not hold a virtue
within itself, forcing the author to move through the landscape until he sees a girl in
motion against the wind that would compel her to remain still. He takes in this image,
which he will begin to layer over the first image by employing the imagination:

Then, reascending the bare common, saw
A naked pool that lay beneath the hills,
The beacon on the summit, and, more near,
A girl who bore a pitcher on her head,
And seemed with difficult steps to force her way
Against the blowing wind. (Book 12, lines 248-53)

In this scene, the woman is rearranging the earth as she takes water from the lake and
carries it in a pitcher on her head. She is carrying water, a physical embodiment of a
spot of time, to later nourish herself in a manner analogous to Wordsworth’s carrying of
the spot of time in his memory. Moreover, Wordsworth focuses on the movement of the
woman in contrast to the still “naked pool” and “the beacon.” Wordsworth then returns to this image as he uses the imagination to begin washing it over the first image like a wave carries grains of sand. He foregrounds the motion of the woman more strongly a few lines later when he states:

Which, while I looked all round for my lost guide,
Invested moorland waste, and naked pool,
The beacon crowning the lone eminence,
The female and her garments vexed and tossed
By the strong wind. (Book 12, lines 257-61)

The physicality of the woman has decayed in this image. In this way, the image can be viewed as a thinner layer washed on top of the previous one. In the previous passage she was forcing her way, while here the passive grammatical structure removes her agency as she and her garments are vexed and tossed. This echoes Cuvier’s description of the power of wind to reshape the Egyptian landscape. By the next time Wordsworth returns to the scene, she only left “A spirit of pleasure and youth’s golden gleam” (266). At this point the original scene of the memorial, left at the bottom, has been covered by three stratified layers of images, each decreasing in physicality and thickness. In this way, the mind is restored and repaired by an operation analogous to the mechanisms of the earth. The original vexed image is layer over, allowing the mind to be repaired and restored.

In the next spot, Wordsworth again discusses witnessing a “crag,” invoking geologic features to present his experience. He also recalls that the day was “Tempestuous, dark and wild” (line 298). Again, this description brings dynamism to the scene, as he will soon present a depressing image that is covered over by images that are blown in. The poet goes on to relate his and his two brothers’ journey to his father’s
grave. His lines present his father’s body and ultimately the spot of the grave with a sort of gravity as he relates, “And I and my three brothers, orphans then, / Followed his body to the grave” (lines 308-09). This is the spot over which Wordsworth will use the imagination to begin layering images. He writes:

    And, afterwards, the wind and sleety rain,
    And all the business of the elements,
    The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,
    And the bleak music of that old stone wall,
    The noise of wood and water, and the mist
    That on the line of each of those two roads
    Advanced in such indisputable shapes; (Book 12, lines 317-23)

In this passage, the weather acts as an embodiment of the imagination, advancing multiple elements over the original image. As these elements advance, they are rearranged in a haphazard fashion — a “single sheep,” “one blasted tree,” and the cacophony of sound created by an old stone wall, wood, and water — much like features on the earth are rearranged and scattered through geologic transformation. Furthermore, similar to the process described in the first spot of time example, the images lose physicality as the layering proceeds, moving from physical objects to music and noise, and finally to mist.

    The poet then closes Book XII by replacing the woman carrying the pitcher of water with himself, demonstrating a unity with her and with nature:

    All these were kindred spectacles and sounds
    To which I oft repaired, and thence would drink,
    As at a fountain; and on winter nights,
    Down to this very time, when storm and rain
    Beat on my roof, or, haply, at noon-day,
    While in a grove I walk, whose lofty trees,
    Laden with summer’s thickest foliage, rock
    In a strong wind, some working of the spirit,
    Some inward agitations thence are brought,
    Whate’er their office, whether to beguile

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Thoughts over busy in the course they took,
Or animate an hour of vacant ease. (Book 12, lines 324-35)

The poet’s reinvigorating thoughts are brought by forces of nature — the storm and rain, and the strong wind — and as they do the poet’s actions are reduced from walking in a grove to vacant ease. These natural forces parallel the inward agitations, beguilement, and animation that all take place within the poet’s mind. In this way, the poet replaces the actions of the exterior world with the workings and reparations of the internal mind. Just as the world is constantly evolving and repairing itself, Wordsworth believes that the mind repairs itself. Godwin’s improvement is lodged in physical spots that create continuity with the past, while Wordsworth creates spots that serve as guides to restore the mind through imaginative layering of images. Wordsworth’s poetry focuses on the landscape’s restorative potential when transformed by the mind, but as Percy Shelley finds, the earth also contains spots that tend to teach destruction.

Disorganization Nature and Resistance to Mental Reparation

As Shelley’s Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni echoes the title of Samuel Coleridge’s “Hymn Before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni,” modern scholars often read Mont Blanc with a focus on comparisons between those two works. In Poetic Form and British Romanticism, Stuart Curran asserts that “with Coleridge’s ‘Hymn’ so sharply in mind,” Mont Blanc appears “a direct refutation of his theistic inferences to the mountain.” Such readings can also be found in Nigel Leask’s Mont Blanc’s Mysterious Voice: Shelley and Huttonian Earth Science,” in which Leask argues

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that “geological theory... underpins Shelley’s critique of Christian sublimity, as exemplified in Coleridge’s ‘Hymn Before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni.’”\(^78\) While these comparisons are useful, I want to explore the differences between the relationship of the mind and nature, in geologic terms, in Book XII of *The Prelude* and in *Mont Blanc*. I assert that the *Mont Blanc*’s portrayal of the ravine as a life-giving force springs from discontent with the view that the mind and the earth mirror each other in their restorative process. Comparisons between the unorganized structure of the mountain and the labyrinthine surface of the brain complicate Wordsworth’s view of an orderly restorative process of stratification. Instead, *Mont Blanc* focuses on the ability of the mind to thrive in spite of destructive surroundings. This ability arises from a separation between the mind and the physical body as thoughts flow through a brain that physically resembles the surface of Mont Blanc rather than organized layers of stratification.

Whereas Wordsworth locates spots of time within memory and focuses on how the mind uses processes akin to those geologic in nature to repair itself, Percy Shelley finds a gap in these two processes. In *Mont Blanc*, Shelley examines a mountain which he views not only as awe inspiring, but as incredibly destructive. In *A Six Weeks Tour*, Shelley describes the scene: “The immensity of these aerial summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of extatic wonder, not unallied to madness.”\(^79\) And later,

Do you, who assert the supremacy of Ahriman, imagine him throned among these desolating snow, among these palaces of death and frost, so sculptured in


this their terrible magnificence by the adamantine hand of necessity, and that he
casts around him, as the first essays of his final usurpation, avalanches, torrents,
rocks, and thunders, and above all these deadly glaciers, at once the proof and
symbols of his reign;—add to this, the degradation of the human species—who in
these regions are half deformed or idiotic, and most of whom are deprived of any
thing that can excite interest or admiration.80

Shelley portrays the earth not as an organism healing itself over time but as a
destructive force wreaking havoc on itself and humanity. Unlike Wordsworth, who
envisions a system in which virtue emerges from the layering action of mirrored nature
and mind, Shelley finds a spot of earth that while awe-inspiring can only be viewed as
destructive and life threatening. Moreover, Mont Blanc is composed of granite, the only
rock that does not contain organic material, emphasizing the separation between the
mind and the exterior world. Furthermore, unlike the sedimentary rock layers from which
Wordsworth draws his metaphors of mind, granite is formed by volcanic activity, aligning
its formation with the catastrophic and revolutionary upheavals discussed by Cuvier.
This rock is formed by the expulsion of material from deep inside the earth, emphasizing
the mysteriousness of natural processes invisible to the human senses. Wordsworth
analogizes memory to geologic locations that have been restored over time, but the
rock forming Mont Blanc comes from a location within the earth — a location that
evades analogies to individual or even generational memory. Mont Blanc explores the
temporal and physical disconnect between the mind and the exterior world.

Through Mont Blanc, Shelly asserts the necessity of the poet in providing
meaning for his or her environment. This assertion retains the importance of the self
and further highlights the separation between the processes of the mind and the earth.

80 Shelley, 162-63.
The poem’s title and subtitle emphasize the importance of separation. Shelley’s subtitle to *Mont Blanc*, “LINES WRITTEN IN THE VALE OF CHAMOUNI” reflects his emphasis the perception of the scene as a product rather than a source. The poem serves as an apparatus to study the workings of the mind *against* the processes of the earth, rather than through them. *Mont Blanc* emphasizes the importance of what Siskin describes as the “personal, subjective feeling — the *I* expressing itself.”

Shelley highlights the importance of the lines of the poem themselves, placing them equal to the poem’s subject. In Shelley’s earlier draft of the poem, written in the Scrope Davies Notebook, the subtitle reads “Scene — Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox.” This original subtitle places the scene as the poem’s subject. The new subtitle, on the other hand, foregrounds the lines of the poem—“written”— against the background of the scene, placing the produced poem in the state of prominence. Furthermore, the original publication of the poem begins with a title page that omits the title *Mont Blanc*, and only reads: “LINES / WRITTEN IN THE VALE OF CHAMOUNI.” Just as importantly, this subtitle transforms the poem into living lines working to bring life to the reader. Mont Blanc was known to be made of granite, the one type of rock absent of organic material. This is important, because it highlights the separation between the mountain and the life-giving ravine which flows upon it. Thus the relationship between the mountain and the ravine serves as comparison to the brain and the thoughts that flow through it. When the subtitle is printed below *Mont Blanc*, it


effectively cuts into Mont Blanc, forming a textual ravine between the title and the poem proper. The poet writes,

   The everlasting universe of things
   Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,
   Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—
   Now lending splendour, (lines 1-4)

The first line creates a palimpsest of meaning. “The everlasting universe of things” serves as an infinite collection of the universe channeling down the side of the mountain, but here it is also understood to be channeling through the mind of the reader through the lines of the poem. In this way, the reader’s brain and physical body are portrayed as lifeless matter in themselves, but capable of being invigorated by this flowing of “the everlasting universe of things” through the lines of the poem. The sound is created as this initial infinite source cuts into the mind of the poet, like a river loosening and transporting sediment as it flows and digs into the earth. It is this river that brings life into a dangerous environment.

   The eternal linear time portrayed by the consistent flow of the river serves as a distinct difference with the importance of cyclical time presented in The Prelude. Wordsworth emphasizes that in nature and thus in the mind, spring always returns. The Prelude portrays the mind as sometimes “depressed by false opinion and contentious thought, or aught of heavier or more deadly weight, in trivial occupations,” before virtue restores the mind to its natural higher state as the wind works across the landscape to bring restoration. Shelley views the mind as a much more disorderly figure, and he questions the promise of restoration as he portrays thoughts running through the mind in an energetic and haphazard fashion:

   The source of human thought its tribute brings
Of waters,—with a sound but half its own
Such as a feeble brook will oft assumes
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,
Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,
Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river
Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves. (lines 5-11)

Shelley zooms out to view the mind as a mountainous wilderness filled with woods and winds. This broad view contrasts with Wordsworth’s passages concerning the “spots of time,” which focus on localized spots within the mind and analyze the way they are transformed through time by the layering of sedimentary deposits. Rather than the harmonious landscape of *The Prelude*, here the woods and winds *contend* as the river of thought leaps, bursts, and raves. This is not a peaceful scene that teaches one to give and take without offence, but a scene of wild and opposing forces.

Instead of viewing the way that a spot is vertically covered by stratified layers over time, Shelley examines the way that the Ravine of Arve brings water across the landscape from a secret location.

Thus thou, Ravine of Arve—dark, deep Ravine—
Thou many-coloured, many-voiced vale,
Over whose pines, and crags, and caverns sail
Fast cloud shadows and sunbeams: awful scene,
Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down
From the ice gulphs that gird his secret throne,
Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame
Of lightning through the tempest;—   (lines 12-19)

In these lines thought is described as a dark and deep Ravine which pours through a sort of collective human intelligence. The “many-coloured, many-voiced vales” are the valleys created as thought sails over the pines and crags of human minds, which are perceived through both shadows and sunbeams. The poet then discusses the transfer from this original source of truth into the human mind. As he does so, Shelley
distinguishes his source of truth from that of writers such as Young, Wright, Barbauld. Shelley's truth travels through nature, but its source is hidden and not attributed to God. Instead, Shelley refers to it only as “Power” that travels similar to a ravine “from a secret throne.” The power contained in this reservoir is infinite as was indicated in the poem's opening line. While Young, Wright, and Barbauld perceive the infinitude of God in the nighttime sky, Shelley bounds its place of origin in this basin which then flows through every mind.

Mont Blanc offers a different perspective of humans' relationship with the past and the present than The Prelude. For Wordsworth, the mind is restored by working in harmony with nature to cover the original spot of time with multiple layers through time. For Shelley, the mind clings to the past in opposition of time as the power of thought continues to bring life. The poet directly addresses the power of thought symbolized by the Arve ravine:

—thou dost lie,
Thy giant brood of pines around thee clinging,
Children of elder time, in whose devotion
The chainless winds still come and ever came
To drink their odours, and their mighty swinging
To hear—an old and solemn harmony; (lines 19-24)

The “giant brood of pines” represents the collective human consciousness composed of “children of elder time.” This portrayal locates these minds in the past. Shelley's replacement of the word “charmed” in the Scrope Davies Notebook with the word “chainless” in the published edition removes the connotation of a supernatural deity associated with “charmed.” Donald Reiman and Neil Fraistat note that “Shelley uses the pine tree in several poems to symbolize the persistence of human values in the face of
obstacles.” Their use of the word “persistence” reinforces the idea of a mind that is suspended by clinging to human values. Human consciousness is chained to and arrested by the past, and it is again placed in contrast to “the chainless winds” that echo the winds portrayed in *The Prelude*. Here though, the poet highlights the eternal nature of the winds while noting that the pines attempt to hear “an old and solemn harmony.” For Shelley, nature has evolved to threaten life rather than to preserve it. The mind is nourished by simultaneously clinging to the past and the present.

This shift aligns Shelley’s portrayal of time more closely with that of Edward Young. Young argues that the nighttime sky represents God’s “Scripture authentic! uncorrupt by man,” indicating a desire to return to the truth of the past. Wright and Barbauld look to the future for unrevealed truths, and Wordsworth focuses on time’s cyclical nature — the return of spring and of morning. Shelley, like Young, portrays two separate entities moving along different strands of time. One strand, that represented by the ravine and the wind, is eternal truth; the other, represented by Mont Blanc, represents the present threatening force in nature. For Shelley, one is always bound by both these past and present rooted strands: the pines must cling to mountain even as they drink from the ravine and listen for an old and solemn harmony.

The poet continues to explore the relationship between these two temporal strands as he combines earthly images with the ethereal:

> Thine earthly rainbows stretched across the sweep
> Of the ethereal waterfall, whose veil
> Robes some unsculptured image; the strange sleep
> Which when the voices of the desart fail

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Wraps all in its own deep eternity;— (lines 25-29)

The unsculptured image of Mont Blanc is robed by the ethereal waterfall, creating a scene of supernatural majesty. The poet then combines this present image with the sense of deep eternity in a description of the temporal sublime. The poem’s movement of description from the physical landscape to an ethereal one echoes Wordsworth’s shift in description away from the woman to the power of the wind.

In *Mont Blanc*, however, the poet maintains a focus on the separation between the mind and the exterior world as he returns to the image of the ravine to create a sublime chasm between the mind and the surrounding universe. The poet continues:

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Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee
I seem as in a trance sublime and strange
To muse on my own separate phantasy,
My own, my human mind, which passively
Now renders and receives fast influencings,
Holding an unremitting interchange
With the clear universe of things around; (lines 34-40)
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The competing thoughts of the eternal truth emanating from the ravine and the poet’s awareness of his present environment bring the poet into a trancelike state. Similar to Barbauld’s use of fancy to launch into the universe, Shelley refers to his own “phantasy,” the etymological ancestor of fancy, as he envisions “the clear universe of things around."

While Young, Wright, and Barbauld imagine multiple universes teeming with the souls of those yet to be born and those who have passed away, Shelley returns his image to the earthly mountain itself. In this way, rather than searching for truth in the infinite nature of the cosmos, Shelley locates the mysterious natures of life and death in Mont Blanc.
Some say that gleams of a remoter world
Visit the soul in sleep,—that death is slumber,
And that its shapes the busy thoughts outnumber
Of those who wake and live.—I look on high; (lines 49-53)

The poet contrasts his own vision with those who imagine the shapes of death in “a remoter world.” This is important because Tennyson will also focus on death as the point where the spiritual self is fully released from the physical confines of the body. Here, the poet looks at Mont Blanc, and in so doing, begins to describe the mountain in a way that echoes Wright’s positioning of the Eye of Providence:

Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,
Mont Blanc appears,—still, snowy, and serene—
Its subject mountains their unearthly forms
Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between
Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,
Blue as the overhanging heaven, that spread
And wind among the accumulated steeps; (lines 60-66)

The poet foregrounds the image of Mont Blanc as he envisions it “piercing the infinite sky.” Wright replaces the sun at the center of the universe with the Eye of Providence on hierarchical grounds, but here Shelley notes the hierarchy of the scene, depicting Mont Blanc as a supreme figure. Instead of imagining the universe as the wonderful embodiment of God’s imagination, this scene is disorganized as the subject mountains “pile around it” in “unearthly forms.” The passage accentuates its grand scale, noting that it contains “broad vales” and “unfathomable deeps, blue as the overhanging heaven.” Whereas the authors of the previous century examined the depth of God’s mystery in the nighttime sky, Shelley locates that depth in the scene of Mont Blanc. Unlike Young, Wright, or Barbauld, however, Shelley’s scene is not one of a universe inhabited by a loving God, but of a still and serene inhabitable place. And while Wordsworth looks to the earth as a living model for the mind, Shelley envisions a scene
almost devoid of life altogether:

A desart peopled by the storms alone,
Save when the eagle brings some hunter’s bone,
And the wolf tracks her there—how hideously
Its shapes are heaped around! Rude, bare, and high,
Ghastly, and scarred, and riven.— (lines 67-71)

Again Shelley’s description complicates Wordsworth’s image of an earth slowly healing itself through geologic processes. Here the land is nearly uninhabitable, and its landscape is not lush with grass, but “ghastly, and scarred, and riven.” This landscape bears all the signs of destruction and none of healing.

As the landscape is more desolate, the lesson taught by nature is more difficult to comprehend. While Wordsworth lauds the wind’s ability to teach humans, Shelley complicates this relationship by casting doubt on the lessons taught by nature:

The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
So solemn, so serene, that man may be
But for such faith with nature reconciled; (lines 76-79)

In this passage, the wilderness brings only a mild faith. Man is not mirrored by nature but is reminded of his separation from it. Shelley finds power in the superiority of Mont Blanc:

Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood
By all, but which the wise, and great, and good
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.
The fields, the lakes, the forests, and the streams,
Ocean, and all the living things that dwell
Within the ðædal earth; (lines 80-86)

“The wilderness” creates doubt in the mind of man, but the poet is “wise, and great, and good” and can interpret the voice of truth to the rest of mankind. The “ðædal earth” recalls images of the folded surface of the human brain with its ridges and grooves such
as those displayed in Johann Spurzheim and Franz Joseph Gall’s *Atlas*, the first two volumes of which were published one year before Shelley composed “Mont Blanc” (Figure 3.1).84

Figure 3.1– Drawings of the human brain from Johann Spurzheim and Franz Joseph Gall’s *Atlas*

This image portrays the brain in a much more complex fashion than the stratified layers of earth that serve as a metaphor for the mind within Wordsworth. Instead of focusing on a specific spot that retains virtue, Shelley appears interested in the mysteriousness of the complex and powerful whole comprised of grooves and declivities that mirror the valleys and peaks of the landscape. The poet further emphasizes this mystery by connecting the image to lightning, as experiments in vitalism demonstrated that electricity could seemingly bring animals back to life. The poet’s use of “dædal” suggests purposeful but complex structures of the brain and the earth.

For Shelley, the unorganized terrain of Mont Blanc proves more analogous to the complex structure of brain and is thereby useful to understanding the human condition. The overwhelming complexity of this inorganic mountainous landscape serves to teach the mind:

The works and ways of man, their death and birth,
And that of him and all that his may be;
All things that move and breathe with toil and sound
Power dwells apart in its tranquility
Remote, serene, and inaccessible:
And this, the naked countenance of earth
On which I gaze, even these primæval mountains
Teach the adverting mind. (lines 92-100)

In this passage “power dwells apart” from man; the remoteness and inaccessibility of the mountain provides it with the power to teach. Thus, the lesson taught is not dependent on understanding the landscape, but on accepting its inaccessible complexity.

The poet highlights this inaccessibility by returning to the mountain’s otherness:

Mont Blanc yet gleams on high:—the power is there,
The still and solemn power of many sights,
And many sounds, and much of life and death.
In the calm darkness of the moonless nights,
In the lone glaze of day, the snows descend
Upon the Mountain; none beholds them there,
Nor when the flakes burn in the sinking sun,
Or the star-beams dart through them:—Winds contend
Rapid and strong, but silently! Its home
The voiceless lightning in these solitudes
Keeps innocently and like vapour broods
Over the snow. (lines 127-39)

The poet places the power *there* – on Mont Blanc – before reminding the reader that “none beholds” the actions that occur there. Mont Blanc, still serving as a metaphor for the brain, continues to inspire awe in its otherness. It holds the collective power of “many sights, / And many sounds, and much of life and death.” Poetry descends into the brain as snow falls on the mountain. Shelley has removed the stars and moon which lit up Young’s nighttime sky, and he has revised line 133 to remove the power of the sun. The Scrope Davies Notebook records the original line as “sunset wraps their flakes in fire,” but the revision removes the emphasis on the sun’s agency. The original line suggests a god-like sun, but the revision highlights its sinking motion and their equivalence with star-beams, the light from other stars. Instead, echoing Wordsworth, the “winds” silently move across, suggesting life, and the lightning and vapour recall the poet’s focus on poetry as a revitalizing force. The poet concludes:

The secret strength of things
Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind’s imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy? (lines 139-44)

This poetry, “the secret strength of things / Which governs thought,” simultaneously inhabits Mont Blanc and reader’s mind. The “earth, and stars, and sea” no longer serve as the embodiment of God’s imagination, but of the human mind’s imagination. For
Shelley, the mind’s power is best illustrated in its ability to create meaning in the chasm that separates the interior mind from the external world. The bifurcation of the interior mind and the exterior world leads future authors like Lord Alfred Tennyson to examine other possibilities for restoration.

The Separate Paths of Nature and Man in In Memoriam

Unlike *The Prelude*, Tennyson portrays a moment in life when the mind resists healing in accordance with geologic processes. In *In Memoriam*, he focuses on the use of poetry to take in and transmit God’s truth, mending the separation between his recently deceased friend Arthur Henry Hallam (A. H. H.) and himself. Layers of memories covering the point of his deceased friend only bury him further in the past. In opposition to Wordsworth’s view of stratification as a method of restoration in *The Prelude*, Tennyson describes stratified layers as a pile of God’s rubbish: “That not one life shall be destroy’d, / Or cast as rubbish to the void, / When God hath made the pile complete” (Book 54, lines 6-9). Tennyson’s account of the relationship between the mind and the exterior world reads closer to Shelley’s *Mont Blanc*; the exterior world proves out of sync with the poet after the loss of his friend. The death of A. H. H. represents for Tennyson a schism that does not easily heal. He resolves this problem by attaching the earth’s landscape and humans to separate temporal strands moving toward opposite goals. Tennyson emphasizes the power of time to reshape and dissolve all geologic figures of the landscape while conversely working to the benefit of mankind; the earth’s surface decays while mankind moves toward God’s perfection.

While *The Prelude* and *Mont Blanc* highlight the effect of the past on the present, *In
Memoriam captures the present moment and emphasizes its ability to draw on the past while moving toward the future. In focusing on the future, Tennyson asserts that A. H. H.’s spiritual self has been freed from his physical body and will live on through future generations. Like Shelley, Tennyson accepts Cuvier’s geological vision. However, Tennyson strives for a kind of restoration similar to what Wordsworth finds in layered strata of memory.

After the death of A. H. H., Tennyson finds hope in a spiritual connection to his friend rather than a purely physical one. He states:

Since we deserved the name of friends,
And thine effect so lives in me,
A part of mine may live in thee
And move thee on to noble ends. (Verse 65, lines 9-12)

In this passage, Tennyson asserts that his friend's “effect” lives on in Tennyson and that a part of Tennyson’s effect may live on in A. H. H. In this way, both Tennyson and his friend straddle the chasm of life and death similar to Shelley’s view of Mont Blanc. Tennyson, though, focuses on the future as he finishes the verse with a move to “nobler ends.”

Tennyson’s view of the future reveals the separation between the passage of time experienced associated with seasons and the passage of time for A. H. H. In a response to The Prelude’s imagery of stratification and the claim that spring always returns, Tennyson refutes Wordsworth’s claim and shifts his focus to the afterlife:

Is it, then, regret for buried time
That keenlier in sweet April wakes,
And meets the year, and gives and takes
The colours of the crescent prime?

Not all: the songs, the stirring air,
The life re-orient out of dust,
Cry thro’ the sense to hearten trust
In that which made the world so fair. (Verse 116, lines 1-8)

Tennyson argues that spring does not return for all. A. H. H. lies buried like Wordsworth’s spots of time, but “the crescent prime” will not return for his friend. Tennyson’s use of the phrase “gives and takes” strengthens his echo of Wordsworth, but here nature has taken his friend and will not give him back. The wind – “the stirring air” – that taught Wordsworth here reminds Tennyson of his life with A. H. H. He has abandoned hope of restoration in the present and instead finds solace in the future.

Tennyson further contrasts his perspective of time with Wordsworth’s as he continues. Instead of returning to a previous spot of time to find restoration in the present, Tennyson indicates that current spots of time hold him temporally in place. He asserts,

O days and hours, your work is this
To hold me from my proper place,
A little while from this embrace,
For fuller gain of after bliss: (Verse 117, lines 1-4)

In this passage, the poet connects time and place, but his restoration does not coincide with nature; it is delayed until after death. The “days and hours” serve as spots of time, but they hold the poet from his “proper place.”

As the poem nears conclusion, Tennyson extends this discussion of time as he describes human and Nature as moving toward opposite ends:

Contemplate all this work of Time,
The giant labouring in his youth;
Nor dream of human love and truth,
As dying Nature’s earth and lime,

But trust that those we call the dead
Are breathers of an ampler day
For even nobler ends. (Verse 118, lines 1-7)
In this passage, the poet personifies Time, providing it agency as it works toward earth’s decay while moving humans toward nobler ends. The reference to “dying Nature’s earth and lime,” portrays the earth’s geologic processes as ultimately destructive, in a reference to the famous passage in stanzas 64-66, which portray Nature as ‘red in tooth and claw’. In contrast, the poet predicts the resurrection of the dead and as they “breathers of an ampler day.” This separation of the living and the dead echoes the passage in Mont Blanc where Shelley discusses those who contend that the dead visit the world of the living during sleep. Shelley notes that he looks “on high” at Mont Blanc and finds it to be ethereal, but instead of focusing on nature’s eternal nature, Tennyson portrays nature as dying while he connects humans to eternity through the afterlife.

To find restoration in a bleak and uncaring nature, Tennyson attempts to extract the memory of his friend’s death from the progression of geologic processes and instead place it in eternal time. He uses the contrasting effects of time to differentiate physical geologic processes from human spiritual growth. The process he describes is harsher than Wordsworth’s process of restoration. It also describes a closer relationship between man and Nature than Mont Blanc. Tennyson explains,

They say,
The solid earth whereon we tread

In tracts of fluent heat began,
   And grew to seeming-random forms,
   The seeming prey of cyclic storms,
Till at the last arose the man;

Who throve and branch’d from clime to clime,
   The herald of a higher race,
   And of himself in higher place,
If so he type this work of time
Within himself, from more to more,
    Or, crown’d with attributes of woe
Like glories, move his course, and show
That life is not as idle ore,

But iron dug from central gloom,
    And heated hot with burning fears,
    And dipt in baths of hissing tears,
And batter’d with the shocks of doom

To shape and use. Arise and fly
    The reeling Faun, the sensual feast;
    Move upward, working out the beast,
And let the ape and tiger die. (Verse 118, lines 7-28)

This verse demonstrates the poet’s attempt to reconcile Christian theology with the contemporary geologic theories of Lyell, Lamarck, and Chambers. Tennyson’s repetition of “seeming” displays distrust in theories that reject belief in a directed evolutionary plan of God. Meanwhile, he describes man as the ultimate end of evolutionary progress. The poet ascribes this progression with evolution of humans’ souls to a well-defined “shape and use” through hardship. In this way, Tennyson, similar to Shelley, describes two distinct motions of progression, the “seeming-random” progression of the earth and the purposeful progression of the human soul. Tennyson compares the effect of life’s fear, sadness, and doom on humans to the forging of iron. In these ways, the poet argues that man will get rid of beastly nature and rise toward perfection.

Tennyson’s description of the landscape in the present focuses on its ever-changing form and its movement from solid masses into a misty haze:

The hills are shadow, and they flow
   From form to form, and nothing stands;
   They melt like mist, the solid lands,
Like clouds they shape themselves and go. (Verse 123, lines 5-9)

The poet quickly moves from material “hills” to “shadow” and from “form” to nothingness. The solid hills and lands melt and become as ethereal as clouds. In this passage, Tennyson views nature in a different manner than Wordsworth or Shelley. The focus is not on stratification nor on the permanence of a mountain like Mont Blanc, but on the movement of earth from a solid form to mist. For Tennyson, as opposed to Wordsworth, geology does not follow a progression toward higher ends, but time does.

The poem’s dissolving landscape signals a shift from physical to spiritual thoughts. The poet reflects:

And what I am beheld again
   What is, and no man understands;
   And out of darkness came the hands
That reach thro’ nature, moulding men....

And if the song were full of care,
   He breathed the spirit of the song;
   And if the words were sweet and strong
He set his royal signet there; (Verse 124, lines 21-24; Verse 125 lines 9-12)

In this passage, man’s restoration is not mirrored by geologic processes; instead Tennyson portrays God’s hands reaching against nature to “mould” the poet. Tennyson also replaces Wordsworth’s image of the wind as a teacher with God’s song. In this way, Tennyson divorces man’s restoration from physical forces and focuses on its spiritual nature.

This shift from A. H. H.’s physical presence to his spiritual presence allows Tennyson to find hope in the dream that A. H. H.’s spiritual self can be spread
throughout the earth. As Tennyson separates Alfred’s soul from the spot where he lies in the earth, he notes that his friend now occupies all of space and time.

Strange friend, past, present, and to be;  
Loved deeplier, darklier understood;  
Behold, I dream a dream of good,  
And mingle all the world with thee. (Verse 129, lines 9-12)

Tennyson describes the memory of his friend as temporally persistent and strengthening. Tennyson extricates the power of his friend’s soul from the spot of burial and actively spreads his friend’s power through time and space.

As Tennyson closes the poem proper, he emphasizes the importance of looking to God for restoration rather than to nature. This shift is founded of a separation between the spiritual and physical world. He writes,

O living will that shalt endure  
Where all that seems shall suffer shock,  
Rise in the spiritual rock,  
Flow thro’ our deeds and make them pure

That we may lift from out of dust  
A voice as unto him that hears,  
A cry above the conquer’d years  
To one that with us works, and trust,

With faith that comes of self-control,  
The truths that never can be proved  
Until we close with all we loved,  
And all we flow from, soul in soul. (Book 131, lines 1 -12)

In this passage the poet displays a lack of confidence in current geologic studies — “where all that seems shall suffer shock” — and their usefulness as a guide for man’s restoration. Instead, he implores the reader to “rise in the spiritual rock.” The poet asserts that pure deeds will extract not a physical body, but God’s voice from the dust. The “truths that never can be proved” suggests that the poet does not believe that
geologists will ever be able to prove the earth’s history. He ends by replacing evolutionary theories of physical traits with a theory of spiritual evolution as he references “all we flow from, soul in soul.”

In the epilogue, Tennyson provides an example of how this spiritual evolution works. A. H. H.’s memory also lives on through Tennyson’s sister Cecilia. Tennyson describes Cecilia’s wedding scene and indicates how his friend’s power will be transferred into the future:

Now waiting to be made a wife,
    Her feet, my darling, on the dead;
Their pensive tablets round her head,
And the most living words of life

Breathed in her ear. The ring is on,
    The ‘wilt thou’ ask’d, answer’d, and again
The ‘wilt thou’ ask’d, till out of twain
Her sweet ‘I will’ has made you one. (Epilogue, lines 49-56)

In this passage, Tennyson attends the marriage of his sister Cecilia to his friend Edmund Lushington. A.H.H. had been engaged to Tennyson’s sister Emily before his death. Here, Cecilia stands on the graves of those buried in the church. Like the cemetery at the Ville of Christ Church, the spatial location of A. H. H.’s body retains value for Tennyson, but the description of this spot in the poem places Cecilia simultaneously standing at the center of the scene — her feet are on the dead while their tables are round her head — and circumscribing the dead as she is mentioned in the lines just before and just after them. In this way, the dead lie buried in the verse, but A. H. H.’s spiritual power continues as the line overflows to the next verse and the words of life are “breathed in her ear.” Finally, the poet’s use of “you” in line 56 creates a palimpsest of meaning. The poet can be seen to address husband and wife, but also
to address A. H. H. whose effect will transfer into the marriage of Cecilia and Lushington and be carried into the future.

Examining these three works together highlights the growing fissure between man and nature. Much of this relationship between man and nature is based on conceptions of space and time; as space and time are stretched to infinity they also grow in complexity, leading to a more complicated relationship between nature and man. These texts display growing awareness of the inability to make sense of the infinite universe in relation to personal experience. Wordsworth sees nature as a mirror of the mind and reads the layers of stratification in attempt to understand the earth’s ability to heal over time as a guide to understand the mind’s ability to heal through layers of experience. Shelley finds the physical structure of Mont Blanc and its seeming eternal nature to be irreconcilable with human experience and thus incapable of providing a guide for restoration. Tennyson, in his poetic meditation on the death of A. H. H., views nature’s progression as decay that moves in opposition to humans’ spiritual growth. Together, these explorations elucidate the fragmented relationship between Nature and the self. Nature appears spatially and temporally infinite while the human experience is limited.
CHAPTER 4
MARY SHELLEY AND THOMAS DE QUINCEY’S ATTEMPTS TO COLONIZE VIRTUAL EMPIRES OF INFINITE SPACE AND TIME

In this chapter, I examine a nexus of interconnected literary, historical, scientific, and climatological events and developments to argue that the works of romantic writers such as Mary Shelley and Thomas De Quincey can be read as attempts to create virtual empires immune to the catastrophes of the perceived world. These writers witnessed the fault lines created by a disintegrating empire and used their writing to explore the infinite regions of space and time that remained accessible only to the mind. However, in both cases, they found that the fissures of society provoked by climatological, political, and scientific shifts extended even into these new imaginative regions.

To understand the epistemological fault lines exposed by geologic discoveries and the ensuing attempts to suture them, I extend my discussion of the work of geologist Georges Cuvier begun in the previous chapter. Geologists such as Cuvier utilized their new vantage point to physically observe the historical record and challenge previous assumptions of history. In so doing, a new sense of time emerged. The earth’s history had seemed almost static up to the end of the eighteenth century; in the early nineteenth century, 6,000 years appeared to be only a brief time in a much longer history that involved periods of rapid and extreme changes. Cuvier documented this new perspective of geological history and time in *Recherches sur les ossemens fossiles des quadrupèdes [Research on the Fossil Bones of Quadrupeds]*, first published in

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86 Georges Cuvier, “Discourse on the Revolutionary Upheavals on the Surface of the Globe and and on the Changes Which They have Produced in the Animal Kingdom” in *Recherches sur les ossemens fossiles*

> Geology within this year or two has assumed a different mien. Observation has superseded useless speculation, and the classification of the different formations of the earth's surface, the distinction and description of different individuals in a series, the analysis of minerals and the investigation of their properties, have taken the place of useless cavils about remoter causes. It is by such gradual means that *we may hope to penetrate the secrets of time*; — step by step to unravel the long series of past events; — to harmonize philosophy with divinity. (emphasis mine)\(^8^7\)

Cuvier’s work radiated across disciplines and influenced the literary community in particular.\(^8^8\) Cuvier’s work was delivered to Percy and Mary Shelley’s home in April 1822.\(^8^9\) Within two years of this delivery, Mary Shelley began working on *The Last Man*, where she incorporated many of the implications of Cuvier’s findings into her work. Among these findings was the discovery that the earth was thousands of years older than previously thought and that during the earth’s history numerous species had suffered extinction. Cuvier built on the work of Buffon, Hunter, and most scientists at the time asserting that the age of the earth was much older than traditional understandings of the Biblical account, and he shared a belief in geologic upheavals, though he thought they worked on a slower scale.

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\(^8^8\) Other critics have mentioned Cuvier’s influence on Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, and others in their literary circle; for my purposes here, I would like to focus on his understanding of fossil remains as “historical documents.”

The late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century gave rise to great upheavals in philosophy, science, and politics. While philosophers such as Emmanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer were struggling to understand the true nature of space and time, technological innovations allowed scientists to begin digging deeper into the earth. As they did, the relationship between space and time changed from previous biblical understandings. Geologists such as James Hutton and Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon began to read and speculate about the fossil record buried in the earth’s strata, where they could read the history of the earth, revealing two distinct crises. The first was that the age of the earth was much older than the 6,000 years biblical scholars had suggested. The relatively short span of human history was now understood to have been preceded by a much longer history previously unwitnessed or even imagined by the Western scholars. The second crisis was that this ancient history recorded the possible catastrophic extinctions of several species prior to man, a discovery that created anxiety and debate about its implications. While the biblical account of the flood preserved two animals from each species to protect against absolute extinction, the fossils found in the strata appeared to be from species that no longer existed. Suddenly, epistemological foundations were eroding beneath people’s feet, giving way to a new terrain of uncertainty.

At the same time, political institutions within the British Empire were viewing the past and becoming increasingly anxious about the Empire’s survival. Between 1776 and 1788, Edward Gibbon published his six-volume work, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. As Christopher Kelly notes in "A Grand Tour: Reading Gibbon’s ‘Decline and Fall,’" Gibbon invited “his readers to contemplate ‘from that
commanding spot the wide and various prospect of desolation’ with a contemporary gaze; to view in their mind's-eye both the present and the past combined."\textsuperscript{90} This meant that the work could be read as a warning that Britain was on the path to an analogous decline. The British Empire was dealing with severe interior and exterior political crises in this period. For instance, as the Empire expanded, the abolitionist movement was rapidly gaining strength and challenging the economic principles supporting the backbone of the colonial economy in the West Indies, plantation slavery. Meanwhile, the Empire was still recovering from the shockwaves of the American and French Revolutions. While some such as Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft sought reforms in Britain, others such as Edmund Burke feared the horrors of the French Revolution would spread into Britain itself.

Geologic catastrophe occurred on April 5, of 1815, as Mt. Tambora erupted in Indonesia. The energy was 100 times larger than Mount St. Helens in 1980 and 1,000 times bigger than the eruption of Icelandic Eyjafjallajökull volcano in 2010. Mt. Tambora ejected 175 cubic km of pumice and ash into the sky and the explosion was heard 1,500 miles away in Sumatra. At the same time, the volcano ejected huge amounts of sulfur into the stratosphere. Being in the stratosphere, above the weather systems, the sulfur “effectively form[ed] a veil over the whole planet” for five to six years.\textsuperscript{91} By the summer of 1816, the skies of England and most of Europe had turned gloomy and dropped massive amounts of rainfall. The air turned cold and frosts were frequent, even during


\textsuperscript{91} Clive Oppenheimer, interviewed by Melvyn Bragg, \textit{1816, the Year Without a Summer}, BBC Radio 4 – In Our Time, podcast audio, April 21, 2016, \url{http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b077j4yv}
the summer. This weather led Mary Shelley and her circle of friends to leave London and head to Geneva in search of a better summer climate, but there they met awful conditions leading them to stay indoors and write ghost stories, famously leading to the creation of Byron’s poem “Darkness” and Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein*.92 Byron wrote in his journal the same day that he wrote “Darkness,” “at Geneva, when there was a celebrated dark day, on which the fowls went to roost at noon, and the candles were lighted as at midnight.”93

As Byron and the Shelleys were writing, famine swept across Europe (though England was largely spared due to transatlantic shipments of grain from less effected portions of America), wars and riots raged, and people prophesied the end of the world.94 While people in America and Europe were aware of Mt. Tambora’s eruption by 1816, they did not see it as a catalyst for the inclement weather, famines, and pestilence, but as another example of disaster.95 Finally, it is important to note that some scholars have asserted that the volcanic eruption played a role in the failing of

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92 Mary Shelley recounts the situation that led to her writing *Frankenstein* in the 1831 edition. That introduction can be found at https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/frankenstein/1831v1/intro.


rice crops in parts of China. As a result of successive crop failures, some switched their crops produce opium and sell it to the west. The political, geological, and climatological turmoil of the early nineteenth century provides a lens through which to view Shelley’s *The Last Man* and De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*.

To understand how Shelley took up these new perspectives on the age of the earth and attempted to suture ecological, geological, imperial, and social conditions together, it is also important to establish an understanding of Cuvier’s view of *revolutionary upheavals*. These global upheavals are Cuvier’s explanation for the findings of fossils of species that are now extinct. He states, “I am of the opinion, with Deluc and Dolomieu, that if there is something confirmed by geology, it is that the surface of our world has been the victim of a great and sudden upheaval, whose date cannot go back much beyond five or six thousand years.”\(^{96}\) In this statement, Cuvier attempts to reconcile the biblical timeline with the revolutions of the globe that have wrought catastrophic upheavals on various species, distinguishing his theory from the gradualism espoused by geologists such as Hutton and Buffon. In so doing, he compresses the timeline of these events, increasing their intensity and bringing fear that another upheaval may be imminent. Moreover, Cuvier is one of the few scientists at the time to claim that, “the lost species are not varieties of living species.”\(^{97}\) In other words, some species have suffered extinction. Even stranger to the 19th century reader, the record of extinct species has been preserved in the earth’s strata. Cuvier lists numerous fossils of extinct species that have been found in the caves of England; he also used

\(^{96}\) Cuvier, *Revolutionary Upheavals*.

\(^{97}\) Cuvier, *Revolutionary Upheavals*. 

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written texts to establish a history of major civilizations. He even disputes the excessive antiquity of the Indians, Chaldeans, and Egyptians, asserting:

The truth is that such a history does not exist at all. In the midst of this infinity of books of mystical theology or of abstract metaphysics[,] which the Brahmins possess, of which the ingenious perseverance of the English has provided an understanding, there is nothing which could instruct us coherently about the origin of their nation and the vicissitudes of their society. They even maintain that their religion forbids them from preserving the memory of what is happening in the present age, the age of misfortune.98

In this passage, Cuvier argues that a reading of history must be based on historical rather than metaphysical evidence. The Brahmins’ record, while infinite, is constructed of “mystical theology or of abstract metaphysics.” Cuvier asserts that this abstraction results in incoherence. Against this, his empirical reading of the geologic record suggests that the current human empire fits within a pattern of eras in which species dominated the planet before suffering massive loss of life. Within The Last Man, Shelley draws on Cuvier’s theories to imagine that humans will suffer this same fate.

Shelley’s narrative utilizes nature to both understand and control the past, present, and future. The novel questions the layers of history, presenting them and the future as unstable and uncertain. This uncertainty provides Shelley the opportunity to present a feminist counter reading to the prevailing patriarchal history. Shelley’s work is informed by Cuvier’s understanding of time in his Discourse on the Revolutionary Upheavals of the Globe. In Revolutionary Upheavals, he asserts that his unique literary perspective differentiates himself from his contemporary fellow scientists:

Certainly other scholars have studied the fossil remains of these organic bodies. They have collected them and drawn copies of them by the thousands. Their works will be valuable collections of materials. But more occupied with animals or

98 Cuvier, Revolutionary Upheavals.
with plants, considered in themselves, than with the theory of the earth, or looking upon these petrified remains or fossils as curiosities rather than as historical documents or, finally, contenting themselves with partial explanations for the deposit of each piece, they have almost always neglected to seek out general laws concerning the position or the relationship of the fossils with the strata." (emphasis mine)99

Cuvier distinguishes himself from his contemporaries by his attempts to look upon geological findings as historical documents. Rather than looking at the fossils as individual curiosities, Cuvier attempts to place them in an organized structure so that they can be read as a narrative of the earth’s historical record. His work focuses on reading nature as a historical document in order to ascertain the present and future of the earth. Cuvier is trying to prove his theory of catastrophism, which he would characterize as a geologic principle that applies not only to the past but to the future.

Similarly, Shelley begins her novel with the narrator embarking on an expedition into a previously unexplored cavern within a cave complex and finding leaves of manuscript. She then reads these leaves and serves as an editor, filling in the gaps and making sense of them, much as geologists were reading the strata of the earth and attempting to fill in the gaps. But unlike the gradualists on which Wordsworth drew, her history, like Cuvier’s, is driven by and to catastrophe.

Establishing a Temporal Empire through *The Last Man*

In 1826 Mary Shelley published *The Last Man*, a novel with many autobiographical elements that ultimately predicts the downfall of the British Empire and the extinction of mankind. Scholars such as Anne K. Mellor, Alan Richardson, Alan

99 Cuvier, *Revolutionary Upheavals.*
Bewell, Kari E. Lokke, and Peter Melville have read *The Last Man* as a novel concerned with specific British internal political conflicts or with the epidemiological consequences of colonialism. By contrast, in this chapter I investigate the novel as Shelley’s attempt to create and colonize a virtual empire. In *The Last Man*, Shelley uses a female framing editor and a male narrator to rewrite the past through a troubling prophetic narrative in order to warn of the dangers of continuing to exclude female voices from social and political discourse. This narrative stands as modern Janus figure, gazing upon and rewriting both the past and the future from the Sybil’s perspective.

Reading the future of the earth is important as both Cuvier and Shelley describe the earth as constantly changing and alive. In “Romantic Temporality, Contigency, and Mary Shelley,” Theresa M. Kelley explains,

> Romanticism inherits an unsteady modern legacy of thinking about historical time as riddled by chance, the best reading of which was probability, while the worst was sheer hazard. The channels of this inheritance are philosophical, mathematical, and, as it were, event driven. As Hacking and Lorraine Daston have observed, from the onset of the plague in medieval Europe to its recurrence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from the 1660 Lisbon earthquake to pre-revolutionary anxieties about the revolution that finally reached France in 1789, the pressure of the aleatory and unbidden became more insistently identified with the course of events.¹⁰⁰

This fear is exhibited within *The Last Man* in scenes where the earth seems to be alive:

> “Suddenly I heard a piercing shriek; a form seemed to rise from the earth; it flew swiftly towards me, sinking to the ground again as it drew near,” or later “But an earthquake had changed the scene--under our very feet the earth yawned--deep and precipitous the gulph below opened to receive us, while the hours charioted us towards the

The people of Europe were anxiously awaiting the next catastrophic event of nature, and their growing distrust in the ability to maintain strength of the British Empire heightened this anxiety. I argue that Shelley’s *The Last Man* reveals a deep anxiety regarding the sustainability of Britain’s spatial imperialism and instead represents the first textual monument in a matriarchal, temporally eternal empire. In so doing, I posit that Shelley constructs *The Last Man* as an act of temporal colonization that allows her to simultaneously reimagine the past and the future in a virtual empire. Shelley enacts this colonization by simultaneously reimagining the past and writing the future.

I am employing the term *temporal empire* to describe an empire that stretches across time – as opposed to a spatial or geographical empire where various lands and peoples are under the reign of a singular sovereignty. It also differs from a spatial or geographical empire in that the sovereign attempts to retain this power even as time moves forward, projecting their power into the past and future simultaneously. Understanding Shelley’s use of time in her subversive narrative opens room for greater insights into her critique of the patriarchal British Empire. Furthermore, it helps the reader appreciate the magnitude of power Shelley assigned to literature. *The Last Man* serves as a textual monument that resonates throughout time, warning readers of her time and today of the dangers of unfettered imperialism. In an age where society is again facing the threat of mass extinction from catastrophic forces of nature, *The Last Man* testifies to the power of the imagination to find a solution.

As Shelley reimagines the past, she also exerts control over the future. She

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accomplishes this task through the use of a prophetic female framing narrator, similar to the Sibyl. In the preface to the novel, this character reads the history and future on fossilized leaves, much like Cuvier reads fossils as parts of a historical document. The narrator remarks,

“This is the Sibyl’s cave; these are Sibylline leaves.” On examination, we found that all the leaves, bark, and other substances, were traced with written characters. What appeared to us more astonishing, was that these writings were expressed in various languages: some unknown to my companion, ancient Chaldee, and Egyptian hieroglyphics, as old as the Pyramids. Stranger still, some were in modern dialects, English and Italian. We could make out little by the dim light, but they seemed to contain prophecies, detailed relations of events but lately passed; names, now well known, but of modern date; and often exclamations of exultation or woe, of victory or defeat, were traced on their thin scant pages.102

The connection between the text and “the leaves, bark, and other substances” highlights the importance of reading nature as text, and as Anne McWhir points out in a footnote, ancient Chaldee refers to the language of Chaldea, “an ancient land in southern Babylonia (modern Iraq) famous for astronomical and astrological knowledge.”103 Thus even this language serves as a human translation of the language of the stars as read by the ancients. In stating that the writing contains “prophecies, detailed relations of events but lately passed”, the narrator implies that by reading nature, humans can know both the past and the future.

As the narrator continues, her language incorporates geologic terms similar to those utilized by Cuvier and later by De Quincey. She further explains,

This was the Sybil’s Cave; not indeed exactly as Virgil describes it; but the whole of this land had been so convulsed by earthquake and volcano, that the change was not wonderful, though the traces of ruin were effaced by time; and we

102 Shelley, 3.
103 Shelley, 3.
probably owed the preservation of these leaves, to the accident which had closed
the mouth of the cavern, and the swift-growing vegetation which had rendered its
sole opening impervious to the storm.  

In this passage, the narrator focuses on the geologic convulsions of earthquakes and
volcanos that play a key role in Cuvier’s catastrophism. However, here the earth has
worked, even if by accident, to preserve the leaves by closing the mouth of the cavern
and hiding it with swift-growing vegetation. In this way, the narrator is acting as a
geologist, exploring caverns for preserved and hidden fossils that can be read as texts
to learn the history and future of the earth. Moreover, the image of the cavern which
produces vegetation serves as a metaphor for a womb, providing a feminine space to
hold the text which will serve as the primary source of the novel. This metaphor is vital
to Shelley’s attempt to provide a reading of history and the future counter to the
common patriarchal perspective.

In “Time and the Sibyl in Mary Shelley’s The Last Man,” Timothy Ruppert
discusses the importance of the Introduction’s use of the Sibyl to overthrow the current
patriarchal historical perspective. He argues:

In her late Romantic prophecy, Shelley explores the subversive potential of the
visionary imagination, thus carrying forward the spirit of her literary coterie as that
spirit manifest itself in such works as Percy Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound
(1820) and Byron’s The Vision of Judgment (1822). At the same time, in the first
of her novels to appear after the deaths of her husband and Byron (in 1822 and
1824, respectively), Shelley surpasses her contemporaries by restoring the Sibyl,
a prophetic female voice from Western antiquity, as a principal vatic authority.
Through this reconfiguration, she suggests that visionary poetics originates not in
patriarchal scriptural history (particularly as Milton interpreted it) but in a distinctly
matriarchal pagan past.  

104 Shelley, 3.
105 Timothy Ruppert, “Time and the Sibyl in Mary Shelley’s The Last Man,” Studies in the Novel. 41, no. 2
As Ruppert implies, through the novel Shelley is positing the end of the patriarchal empire and establishing herself as the empress of a matriarchal temporal empire. From her position as the sovereign Sybil, she is reshaping history in order to shape the future.

In *Discourse on the Revolutionary Upheavals of the Globe*, Cuvier repeatedly discusses fossils that have been found in the caves of England. Like Cuvier, who looks into the earth to find out history’s secrets, the narrator travels into the Cumaean Sibyl’s cave. Time effaces the past, and Shelley uses that effacement to rewrite her own version of the past.106

Shelley’s revision of time can be seen clearly in her use of the balloon within the novel. Shelley utilizes this balloon early in the text as a symbol of the power of imagination. This use of an already discarded popular technological fantasy demonstrates her willingness to subvert the prevailing perceptions of technological progress.107 In the second chapter, the narrator completely disrupts the sense of time by discussing the year 2073 in past tense, (to modern readers the text’s description of the world in 2073 is obviously, almost laughably, false). Most interestingly, it appears Shelley is not attempting to present a coherent vision of the technological future. Many of the early events in the text take place in a world that can only be described as pastoral, with no sense of modern industrialization. For instance, despite the openings

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107 For more on this, see Lauren Cameron, “Mary Shelley’s Malthusian Objections in *The Last Man*” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 67, No. 2, (September 2012): 177-203.
of railways in Britain and America prior to the writing of the novel, the text contains no images of trains, railways, or even steam engines. When characters in the novel decide to travel long distances quickly, they utilize a hot air balloon with feathered wings. Shelley’s dismissal of technological innovation, and why the novel does not attempt to present a vision of future technologies, can be understood through her inclusion of ballooning.

In “The Progress of Knowledge in the Regions of Air?: Divisions and Disciplines in Early Ballooning,”108 Clare Brant contends that balloon travel initially inspired utopian fantasies of future interplanetary travel: “Balloons enabled utopian thinking about [outer] space: hard-core fantasists and futurists wondered if balloons would lead to interplanetary exploration, although the usefulness of such travels was minimal.”109 Interestingly, while these utopian ideas include the allure interplanetary travel, they are also linked to mental travel into a future utopian state. Brant explains how the inability to steer balloons led people to quickly dismiss them as a practical means for geographical travel, instead focusing on possible uses for tethered balloons. Even when these ideas failed to reach fruition, ballooning remained attached to utopian dreams. Brant explains, “Balloons rose in eighteenth-century thought in contradictory ways: they soared; they sagged, stalled, and crashed; but they also stayed aloft imaginatively.”110 As this suggests, by the time Shelley writes The Last Man in the 1820s, the balloon no longer

109 Brant, 74.
110 Brant, 84.
operates as symbol of practical geographical transportation, but instead carries utopian dreams.

Severing the ties between ballooning and geographical transportation while maintaining the connection to utopianism proves vital for understanding its use in the novel’s transition from geographical imperialism to temporal imperialism. In “Cultural Origins and Environmental Implications of Large Technological Systems,” Rosalind Williams writes, “In the eighteenth century, it is said over and over, utopia ceased being defined as another place (the distant island, the lost valley) and instead became another time - the future.” While the novel’s characters use the winged balloon in the novel for geographical travel, the balloon is the instrument through which the novel attempts to transport historical utopian ideas into the future. However, the novel ultimately portrays this as an impossible endeavor; Shelley may be able to rewrite certain aspects of the past, but both the past and the future remain irreconcilable with a utopian reality.

The narrator Verney’s experience provides a cautionary tale of using the past or even the present to predict the future. He begins with full faith in the ability of the balloon to transform his situation. “And I go to-day,” I cried; “this very hour I will engage a sailing balloon; I shall be there in forty-eight hours at furthest, perhaps in less if the wind is fair.” Verney’s optimism appears reasonable in the short term; he successfully alights in Perth and soon after successfully reaches Adrian. However, when Raymond later places his hope in a balloon, the optimism has faded. Verney states, “He would

[112] Shelley, The Last Man, 55.
embark in a balloon; he would sail for a distant quarter of the world, where his name and humiliation were unknown. But this was useless; his attempt was registered; his purpose published to the world; his shame could never be erased from the memories of men."113 These statements are especially useful in understanding Shelley’s use of *The Last Man* to rewrite the past. “Registered,” “published,” and “erased” all operate as stages within the writing process. Here they serve as weights that restrict the usefulness of the balloon to transport Raymond to a utopian place. Furthermore, by locating that place as somewhere “where his name and humiliation were unknown,” Shelley suggests that the act of writing precludes the existence of a utopian space. Thus the novel does not serve as an attempt to create perfection within the past and the future, but rather to control the narrative of both in a way that will be unable to be erased. This control of the past and the future is best seen in the role of Janus within the novel.

Romans believed the two-faced god Janus would simultaneously gaze into the past and future. Far from a casual observer, Janus presided over periods of transition, ushering in change when he saw fit. Verney refers directly to Janus four times in the text. Reading these passages in succession reveals a systematic dethroning of Janus, leaving room for the Sybil, the temporal empress, to take his place. In the first passage, the narrator clearly recalls a sense of complete optimism:

Delight awoke in every heart, delight and exultation; for there was peace through all the world; the temple of Universal Janus was shut, and man died not that year by the hand of man.

"Let this last but twelve months," said Adrian; "and earth will become a Paradise. The energies of man were before directed to the destruction of his species: they now aim at its liberation and preservation. Man cannot repose, and his restless aspirations will now bring forth good instead of evil. The favoured countries of the

113 Shelley, 76.
south will throw off the iron yoke of servitude; poverty will quit us, and with that, sickness. What may not the forces, never before united, of liberty and peace achieve in this dwelling of man?"\textsuperscript{114}

The reference to the shutting of Janus’s temple recalls when the Romans would close the temple of Janus during peacetime. Adrian’s reading is similar to that of Janus in its symmetrical nature. As there has been one year of peace, an ultimate timeless paradise will be achieved in twelve months. This speaks to man’s temporal shortsightedness, which Ryland points out.

However, when Ryland refutes this reading, an astronomer comes to his aid, stating,

"Not so far as you may suppose," observed a little old astronomer, by name Merrival, “the poles precede slowly, but securely; in an hundred thousand years —"

“We shall all be underground,” said Ryland.

“The pole of the earth will coincide with the pole of the ecliptic,” continued the astronomer, “an universal spring will be produced, and earth become a paradise.”\textsuperscript{115}

The proposed one year is turned into a hundred thousand years by the astronomer’s reading of nature. The use of science to read the future has caused an enormous amount of time to emerge. In this reading, the long year of peacetime, a cause for celebration, is now reduced to a speck in the vast expanse of natural time. The flaws in man’s earlier perspective are now being exposed.

This concern is brought forth more directly with the text’s next reference to Janus. “‘It is too late to be ambitious,’ says Sir Thomas Browne. ‘We cannot hope to live

\textsuperscript{114} Shelley, 172.

\textsuperscript{115} Shelley, 172.
so long in our names as some have done in their persons; one face of Janus holds no proportion to the other.’”116 Again, the use of the past as a text to read the future brings danger. For Shelley, the prominent reading of the past has largely excluded feminine contributions; however, the strange nature of her prophecy – maintaining the sense of possibility rather than certainty – provides hope that the future can be altered. Furthermore, while the historical narrative is dominated by a patriarchal perspective, this line serves as a warning that this dominance will not extend into the future. Soon after, Verney himself takes the role of Janus. “Time and experience have placed me on an height from which I can comprehend the past as a whole; and in this way I must describe it, bringing forward the leading incidents, and disposing light and shade so as to form a picture in whose very darkness there will be harmony.”117 Verney becomes active in choosing which leading incidents from the past to bring forward and manipulating the events through the disposal of light. But as the novel progresses, the power of Verney as Janus continues to be subverted. Late in the novel Verney states, “We consigned her to the oblivious tomb with reluctance; and when I turned from her grave, Janus veiled his retrospective face; that which gazed on future generations had long lost its faculty.”118 Verney’s mistrust of Janus after the death of the Countess of Windsor mirrors the mistrust of patriarchal historicism and predicts the fall of patriarchal dominance. In this way, Verney’s perspective of Janus mirrors that of the Sybil – a misreading of the past can result in misreading the future, and the future is not bound by

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116 Shelley, 205.
117 Shelley, 209.
118 Shelley, 325.
the past. For Shelley, the current reading of the historical record has excluded the feminist voice; discarding the great knowledge of this voice, as revealed through the Sybil, has led to path of destruction. By again listening to the Sybil, and thus the feminist voice, mankind can avoid an awful fate. The novel then moves to a more local example of this problem through Raymond’s plan to erect a national gallery.

Within the novel, the details in the plans to build the national gallery reveal a deep historical concern for the purity of the British Empire, revealing one of Shelley’s primary concerns with imperialism. As the national Protector, Raymond serves as the patriarch of the Empire within the novel. The narrator speaks specifically about Raymond’s great consideration in planning the construction of the monument: “Among the other works of art in which he was engaged, he had projected the erection of a national gallery for statues and pictures. He possessed many himself, which he designed to present to the Republic; and, as the edifice was to the great ornament of his Protectorship, he was very fastidious in his choice of the plan on which it would be built.”119 The terms national, Republic, and Protectorship emphasize the representation of this construction as a physical symbol at the heart of the British Empire.

However, the text exhibits a concern for lack of British, and more broadly Western, originality. The narrator continues, “Hundreds [of plans] were brought to him and rejected. He sent even to Italy and Greece for drawings; but, as the design was to be characterized by originality as well as by perfect beauty, his endeavors were to no avail.”120 Raymond’s embrace of Italian and Greco architectural designers help solidify

119 Shelley, 83.
120 Shelley, 83.
this proposed monument as a representation of patriarchal western culture. The accepted plan, one of eastern influence, reveals Raymond’s mixed feelings about the east. Furthermore, as the plan has been created by a woman, his resistance to it also displays Raymond’s distrust of women. Raymond’s patriarchal eye finds flaws in the plans that have been drawn by the gallery’s designer Evadne. On the surface, Evadne represents Eastern otherness in the novel; however, on a deeper level, she represents a subversive female artist, who eventually punishes and destroys her patriarchal rival and mankind. Verney reveals deep anxiety about the state of the empire when he remarks, “Thus, while Raymond had been wrapt in visions of power and fame, while he looked forward to entire dominion over the elements and the mind of man, the territory of his own heart escaped his notice; and from that unthought of source arose the mighty torrent that overwhelmed his will, and carried to the oblivious sea, fame, hope, and happiness.”

Raymond’s heart has become a zone of hybridization, first held by a woman of the west and now infiltrated by a woman of the east. It does not take long for his marriage to fail, and he soon falls victim to Evadne’s power.

As critics have noted, Evadne’s prophecy clearly shows her opposition to the current patriarchal empire, but as I suggest, it also references the ascendance of the temporal empire that replaces the spatial empire in the novel. She declares, “Time is no more, for I have stepped within the threshold of eternity; each man I meet appears a corse, which will soon be deserted of its animating spark on the eve of decay and corruption.” With this statement, Evadne now reigns across all temporal regions

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121 Shelley, 90.
122 Shelley, 147.
through her power to destroy life and will use her power to destroy the temporary patriarchal empire. Her next lines recall Godwin’s plans for a temporal empire in his *Essays on Sepulchres*, discussed in the previous chapter. Evadne states,

Cada piedra un piramide levanta,
y cada flor costruye un monument,
cada edificio es un sepulcro alto,
cada soldado un esqueleto vivo.\textsuperscript{123}

These lines from Calderón de la Barca can be translated as: “Each stone raises a pyramid and each flower builds a monument; each building is a proud sepulcher and each soldier a living skeleton.” Evadne has risen from the dead and now is a soldier for the temporal empire. Soon after, her prophecy is fulfilled as Raymond dies while rushing into the center of the war between the Turks and the Greeks. Just before this, the words used by the Turks in the final stages of war again place the war in gendered terms. The narrator relates,

The [Turks] disdainfully repelled the idea of having deserted the defence of their city; and one, the youngest among them, in answer to the taunt of a sailor, exclaimed, “Take it, Christian dogs! take the palaces, the gardens, the mosques, the abode of our fathers—take plague with them; pestilence is the enemy we fly; if she be your friend, hug her to your bosoms. The curse of Allah is on Stamboul, share ye her fate.”\textsuperscript{124}

The Turks surrender the abode of their fathers — “the palaces, the gardens, and the mosques” — and refer to the plague as feminine, telling the invading force to “hug her to your bosoms.” The geographical empire is about to fall, and a new feminist temporal empire of death will begin.

\textsuperscript{123} Shelley, 147. McWhir provides the following footnote and translation: Calderón de la Barca [MWS’s note]; the passage is from *La Vida es Sueno* 3 [scene 6]: “Each stone raises a pyramid and each flower builds a monument; each building is a proud sepulcher and each soldier a living skeleton” (2472-75).

\textsuperscript{124} Shelley, 150.
As Britain’s patriarchal geographic empire fails, Verney and his friends escape in search of a safer climate:

It was not for the rose of Persia thou wert famous, nor the banana of the east; not for the spicy gales of India, nor the sugar groves of America; not for thy vines nor thy double harvests, nor for thy vernal airs, nor solsticial sun—but for thy children, their unwearied industry and lofty aspiration. They are gone, and thou goest with them the oft trodden path that leads to oblivion,—

Farewell, sad Isle, farewell, thy fatal glory
Is summed, cast up, and cancelled in this story.125

In this passage, Verney laments the fall of Britain in terms of its failed spatial imperialism. The greatest of the British Empire lies not in its colonized lands of Persia, India, and America, but in the people who have now perished. As Alan Bewell correctly argues in *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*, “The disappearance of England might seem to pale in comparison with the subsequent extinction of the human race, but it remains an extraordinary moment in the literature of empire.”126 As they leave, Verney’s concern turns from spatial permanence to temporal matters. His comments indicate a feeling of smallness in the span of eternity:

Hours passed—centuries. Could I give words to the many thoughts which occupied me in endless succession during this interval, I should fill volumes. The air was dank, the dungeon-floor mildewed and icy cold’ hunger came upon me too and no sound reached me from without. To-morrow the ruffian had declared that I should die. When would to-morrow come? Was it not already here?127

In this passage, time expands and Verney finds himself incapable of finding a structure that sutures experience to eternity. He feels the full force of mortality as he is threatened by impending death. Time continues to command his thoughts as he later exclaims, “As

125 Shelley, 256.
126 Shelley, 305.
127 Shelley, 306.
the evening star shone out, and the orange sunset, far in the west, marked the position of the dear land we had for ever left, talk, thought enchaining, made the hours fly—O that we had lived thus for ever and for ever!” Verney’s triple repetition of “for ever” reveals his concern with temporality. As the novel progresses, Verney struggles to grasp some permanence of the human race in the face of vast expanding and contracting swaths of time. However, Verney’s writing, his inscription and his dedication, are made ironic in the context of the ultimate narrative control of the novel and the suturing together of the narrative out of leaves found in Sibyl’s cave.

As Verney gains awareness of his fate, he looks for some way to preserve a record of man’s empire. This struggle recalls the work of Cuvier. In *Revolutionary Upheavals*, Cuvier is very careful in his work to assert that there are no human fossils that have been found. He explains,

> But in the layers which contain the ancient races, among the palaeotheriums and even among the elephants and the rhinoceroses, no one has ever discovered the least remnant of human bone. Around Paris, there are scarcely any workers who do not believe that the bones with which our gypsum quarries teem are in large part bones of human beings. But as I have seen several thousands of these bones, I am in a good position to state that there has never been a single one from our species. I have examined at Pavia the groups of bones brought there by Spallanziani, from the island of Cerigo. And in spite of this well known observer’s assertion, I affirm equally that it is impossible to claim that any of them comes from a human being.

Cuvier remains convinced that no human fossils have been found among the ancient species discovered in the deep layers of the earth. In Shelley’s novel, this absence of human fossils serves as a metaphor for the lack of records of women within the

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128 Shelley, 335.

129 Cuvier, *Revolutionary Upheavals*.
prevailing patriarchal historical record. As Verney becomes concerned about providing evidence of man’s legacy, the novel suggests that Shelley is concerned with providing the text as a monument to preserve women’s legacy. The importance of the monuments is seen as Verney visits Rome.

The novel presents Roman monuments as cultural fossils. Verney points out numerous monuments in his travels across Rome. He remarks, “I sat at the foot of these vast columns. The Coliseum, whose naked ruin is robed by nature in a verdurous and glowing veil, lay in the sunlight on my right.”130 As Anne McWhir points out in her footnote, Byron had adapted a previous quotation when he stated, “As long as the Coliseum stands, Rome shall stand; when the Coliseum falls, Rome will fall; when Rome falls, the world will fall.”131 When Verney describes the Coliseum as a “naked ruin,” it is as if the Coliseum has been stripped of its flesh, remaining only as a giant fossilized skeleton. However, its stands as the physical record of the great Roman Empire. He further states,

Triumphal arches, the falling walls of many temples, strewed the ground at my feet. I strove, I resolved, to force myself to see the Plebeian multitude and lofty Patrician forms congregated around; and, as the Diorama of ages passed across my subdued fancy, they were replaced by the modern Roman; the Pope, in his white stole, distributing benedictions to the kneeling worshipper; the friar in his cowl; the dark-eyed girl, veiled by her mezzera; the noisy, sun-burnt rustic, leading his herd of buffaloes and oxen to the Campo Vaccino.132

Humanity’s past comes to life before Verney as he looks at the architectural remains of the city. As Cuvier reads the fossil filled strata of earth as historical documents, Verney

130 Shelley, Last Man, 360.
131 Shelley, 360.
132 Shelley, 360.
reads the decaying monuments of the city of Rome. But again, the magnificence of these monuments falls away as time collapses on Verney. He reflects, “I was long wrapt by such ideas; but the soul wearies of a pauseless flight; and, stooping from its wheeling circuits round and round this spot, suddenly it fell ten thousand fathom deep, into the abyss of the present—into self-knowledge—into tenfold sadness.”

Surrounded by the fossilized monuments of empire, Verney is left still striving to find a way to leave a record of himself for the future. He finally finds this hope in writing.

After wandering the streets of Rome, Verney settles in the library. As he does, he speaks of transforming his material presence into text. He remarks,

Ah! While I streak this paper with the tale of what my so named occupations were—while I shape the skeleton of my days—my hand trembles—my heart pants, and my brain refuses to lend expression, or phrase, or idea, by which to image forth the veil of unutterable woe that clothed these bare realities. O, worn and beating heart, may I dissect thy fibres, and tell how in each unmitigable misery, sadness dire, repinings, and despair, existed?

Through the act of writing, Verney attempts to transfer his material body and his immaterial soul into a text that will serve as a fossilized remain. This fossil will serve as a temporal monument in the heart of the world’s greatest empire. Verney declares, “I will write and leave in this most ancient city, this ‘world’s sole monument,’ a record of these things. I will leave a monument of the existence of Verney, the Last Man.”

Verney’s desire to birth this text in the heart of world’s greatest empire makes sense as he wishes to use it to colonize the future by documenting the past. He even explicitly states this as he writes the title:

133 Shelley, 361.
134 Shelley, 363.
135 Shelley, 364.
DEDICATION
TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD.
SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL!
BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE LAST MAN.\textsuperscript{136}

Reading these lines in Shelley’s subversive context presents a new understanding of their gravity. By the end of the novel, there is no mention of Janus looking into the past or future. “In the old out-worn age, the Sovereign Pontiff was used to go in solemn pomp, and mark the renewal of the year by driving a nail in the gate of the temple of Janus. On that day I ascended St. Peter’s, and carved on its topmost stone the aera 2100, last year of the world!”\textsuperscript{137} At this point, the patriarchal empire has fallen, and Sybil may take her throne as temporal empress. Verney is the last man, the final remnant of the patriarchal empire, and with his fall Shelley can now assume her place as empress. She now maintains control as the editor of leaves, and the novel stands as a textual monument in her temporal empire.

While scholars have not previously discussed Shelley’s temporal imperialism within this novel, Anne McWhir has argued that Verney’s inscription near the end of the novel references William Godwin’s plans for what can only be viewed as temporal imperialism. She observes in her footnote that, “The phrase ‘Illustrious Dead’ ironically echoes Godwin’s scheme to immortalize the dead in \textit{Essay on Sepulchres: or, a Proposal for Erecting Some Memorial of the Illustrious Dead in All Ages on the Spot where their Remains have been Interred} (1809).”\textsuperscript{138} Viewing Godwin’s work emphasizes

\begin{footnotes}
\item[136] Shelley, 364.
\item[137] Shelley, 365.
\item[138] Shelley, 364.
\end{footnotes}
the temporal colonizing motive of Verney’s work. As discussed in the previous chapter, Godwin’s text makes a clear transition from spatial to temporal imperialism. He proposes what “might be called, the Atlas of those who Have Lived, for the Use of Men Hereafter to be Born. It might be plentifully marked with meridian lines and circles of latitude, ‘with centric and eccentric scribbled o’er’.” These lines indicate a spatial map of the past that will be preserved for the future. Godwin’s explains that the reason for this “atlas” will be to preserve and resurrect past civilizations, extending their empiric reach into the future. He declares,

If this were done, nothing more would be necessary in times of the greatest calamity and devastation, than to preserve one copy of this precious depository of the records of past ages. Though cities were demolished, and empires overthrown, though the ploughshares were passed over the site of populous streets, and the soil they once occupied were “sown with salt,” the materials would thus be preserved, by means of which, at the greatest distance of time, every thing that was most sacred might be restored, and the calamity which had swallowed up whole generations of men, might be obliterated as if it had never been.

Godwin’s citation of Paradise Lost appears to be a direct attack against Milton’s belief in a Creator laughing at man’s inability to discover the secrets of creation. Also, notice that Godwin specifically makes the case for providing a means to bring back records that have been overthrown even at the greatest distance of time. However, by placing Verney’s inscription of Godwin’s work at the end of the novel when the end of mankind appears certain, Shelley demonstrates that Godwin’s attempt to guard against the destruction of mankind has proven futile.

139 William Godwin, Essay on Sepulchres: or, a Proposal for Erecting Some Memorial of the Illustrious Dead in All Ages on the Spot where their Remains have been Interred (1809) in Shelley, The Last Man, 403.

140 Godwin, in Shelley, The Last Man, 404.
At the same time, Verney’s “DEDICATION TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD” and his command “SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ ABOUT YOUR FALL” helps explain the type of virtual empire I am discussing. The novel places Verney in Rome at the time of his writing this inscription, and he asks himself who will read his book before writing the inscription. The semi-autobiographical nature of The Last Man indicates that in some ways Shelley is writing it for her circle of friends who have died before her. These are the “illustrious dead.” The virtual empire then, is the world Shelley now writes into existence and inhabits. This world consists of Shelley’s reimagination of the physical world, her past, and her future. Whereas Thomas Wright replaced God’s creating eye with himself to envision an infinite spatial and physical universe, Shelley uses The Last Man to place herself on the boundary between the living and dead to colonize both worlds. Verney pronounces, “I will write and leave in the most ancient city, this ‘world’s sole monument,’ a record of these things.” And yet Verney quickly realizes again that he is alone. McWhir notes that Verney’s use of “the world’s sole monument” refers to Spenser’s line from Ruines of Rome, “Rome living, was the world’s sole ornament, / And dead, is now the world’s sole monument” (stanza 29). In a similar way, The Last Man serves as a textual monument, a colonization of both the physical world of the living and virtual empire of the dead writers within Shelley’s circle.

In The Last Man, Shelley interrogates the sustainability of the British empire and destabilizes the prevailing patriarchal perspective of history. To do this, the novel’s Sybil-like framing editor uses a new perspective to read history. This reading serves as

141 Shelley, The Last Man, 364.
142 Shelley, 364.
a textual monument to mark a feminine temporal empire that extends into the past and future. However, even as this textual monument was being crafted, other writers and philosophers were questioning the nature of space and time. A debate between empirical and rational approaches to obtain knowledge was escalating not just in natural history but also in philosophy, and Kant would soon enter the discussion to argue for a new understanding of the way knowledge is constructed. Immanuel Kant documents his discovery of a new epistemological paradigm in terms of colonizing a new land. In his dedication preceding *Natural Science*, Kant discusses finding and exploring previously undiscovered metaphysical territory:

I have chosen a project which, from the aspect both of its inherent difficulty and in relation to religion, is capable of influencing the reader to adopt an unfavourable prejudice from the very beginning. To discover the system that connects the great parts of creation in the whole extent of infinity, to derive the formation of the celestial bodies themselves and the origin of their motion out of the first state of nature through mechanical laws: insights such as these would appear to go well beyond the powers of human reason. From the other side, religion threatens us with a solemn accusation for the audacity with which one might make so bold as to ascribe to nature, which is left to itself, such consequences in which one can rightly become aware of the immediate hand of the highest being, and is concerned to find protection for the atheist in the forwardness of such observations. I see all these difficulties clearly, and yet am not faint of heart. I feel all the power of the obstacles in my way and do not despair. I have dared to undertake a dangerous journey on the basis of a slight supposition and already see the foothills of new lands. Those who have the courage to pursue the exploration, will step onto those lands and have the pleasure of bestowing their own name upon them.143

In this opening, Kant discusses the problem with a metaphysical approach, namely that it influences “the reader to adopt an unfavourable prejudice from the very beginning.”

However, the empirical method does not work here either, as Kant wishes to

understand the infinite depth of space and time — the extent of infinity and the formation of celestial bodies — two elements which are so vast that they cannot be explored purely through empirical methods. Kant adopts the language of a colonizer as he sets out to discover a new system, claims that he “already see[s] the foothills of new lands,” and promises those who join him “the pleasure of bestowing their own name upon them.” Similar to the way Shelley crafted The Last Man as a textual monument of a feminist temporal empire, Kant presents his followers with the opportunity to create a temporal legacy by colonizing the new virtual empire he has discovered. In Confessions of an English Opium Eater, Thomas De Quincey amplifies the fissures in geographic empire awhile also pointing to the dangers of imagining a temporal empire to replace the spatial.

The Chaotic Nature of Infinite Space and Time in Confessions of an English Opium Eater

De Quincey was also aware, though not a fan or a scholar, of Cuvier’s work. In De Quincey’s writings on Coleridge and opium eating, he recalls,

As to Cuvier, Coleridge’s hatred of him was more to our taste; for (though quite unreasonable, we fear) it took the shape of patriotism. He insisted on it that our British John Hunter was the genuine article, and that Cuvier was a humbug.144

De Quincey later admits that he did not know “one-tenth” of Cuvier’s work, but the idea of an ever-changing world was shared by John Hunter. Kant and Cuvier both describe virtual empires, empires that cannot be physical accessed and examined, but can only be perceived in the mind.

The temporal fissure created by the passage of time forces Cuvier to mentally reconstruct previous epochs and upheavals, and the infinite nature of space and time leads Kant to seek a new way of understanding human experience “beyond the powers of human reason.” Reading Cuvier and Kant together reveals the consonance between issues in the field of geology and those undergirding Kant’s transcendental idealism. Both scholars are attempting to fill in gaps in current knowledge within their respective fields, gaps that cannot be directly observed or explained by traditional rational methods but must be reconstructed and analyzed using new perspectives – reading the fossils as a historical document for Cuvier and viewing space and time as merely formal features through which we make observations for Kant.

To further examine how these perspectives played out in British Romanticism, I will now turn to an analysis of how De Quincey applies Kant’s approach to his own experience, aided by opium, but finds that the infinite nature of the space and time that he perceives while ingesting opium creates a fissure between his new sense of reality and his experience. In *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, De Quincey claims to have been influenced by Kant and aided by opium in his exploration of boundless time and space. One could even argue that *Confessions* represents De Quincey’s attempt to “bestow his name” upon the new land opium has helped him discover. However, he finds it much more difficult to gain control over this virtual land. Being spatially and temporally infinite, De Quincey’s new-found territory resists comprehension, and as he attempts to mark its borders, De Quincey suffers “pains of opium.” He begins this section with a quotation from Percy Shelley’s *Revolt of Islam*: “—————as when some great painter dips / His pencil in the gloom of earthquake and eclipse.” In De
Quincey’s “Introductory Notice” to *Suspiria De Profundis*, he uses similar geologic terms: “Great convulsions, from whatever cause, from conscience, from fear, from grief, from struggles of the will, – sometimes, in passing away themselves, do not carry off the changes which they have worked. All the agitations of this magnitude which a man may have threaded in his life, he neither ought to report, nor could report.” De Quincey’s use of geologic terms to discuss his mental state emphasize the connection he perceives between geology and the mind. And while De Quincey notes that some convulsions “do not carry off the changes which they have worked,” his report records those convulsions which appear to have caused irreparable damage.

De Quincey’s convulsions within *Confessions* read like Wordsworth’s “spots of time.” However, while Wordsworth returns to these spots to view how they have been layered and restored in accordance with building up his mind, De Quincey’s spots resist restoration or control. Instead of viewing specific spots as scenes that evolve and repair themselves over time, De Quincey frames temporal spaces of the past like a dramatist frames scenes or acts within a play. This is not surprising, as while De Quincey never published a successful drama, his diary entries indicate his perception of narratives as dramatic works and his desire to compose plays for the stage. His entry for May 26, 1803 states:

The following is a list of the works which I have, at some time or other, seriously intended to execute:-

1. *Ethelfrid*, a drama (poetic and pathetic)
2. *Yermack, the rebel*, a drama; (poetic and pathetic)
3. *Paul* a drama;  

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While De Quincey goes on to provide the plans for numerous other works, it is striking that the first three are all dramas. In fact, in many places within *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, De Quincey uses theatrical terms, such as when he implores the reader to “draw up the curtain and . . . . see me in a new character” or when he describes his dreams: “a theatre seemed suddenly opened and lighted within my brain.”\(^{147}\) By portraying his narrative as a sequence of scenes, De Quincey then frames his memories as vignettes to revisit within his mind’s eye. These scenes are not explicitly marked within the text, but often end with a focus on finality created by temporal and spatial separation from the past. Unlike Wordsworth, De Quincey leaves these experiences little room for growth or repair.

Instead, De Quincey uses the act of writing to organize previous stages of his life. Roger J. Porter writes in “The Demon Past: De Quincey and the Autobiographer’s Dilemma,”

> The earliest impressions are the foundations and the sources for all that follow, and De Quincey gets back to these sources by working his mind against time, in opposition to the outside forces which determine his world. Dreams and autobiography are ‘convulsions of the system’ that ‘wheels back into its earliest elementary stage’ (*Suspiria de Profundis*, p. 512); they are instruments to defeat linear time by reworking the past. Autobiography is a process of deciphering, of taking “phantoms” from his vast “dream theater” of symbols and characters, and directing them into an artistic order.\(^{148}\)

In this passage, Porter describes De Quincey’s past as puzzles to work out. As De Quincey recalls and attempts to make sense of his past, he treats previous stages of his

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life as materials to craft into artistically ordered dramatic scenes. However, in contrast to Wordsworth’s relatively organized layering of time, De Quincey’s layers of the past have been disrupted in a great opium-induced upheaval. Here, I want to extend this idea to demonstrate that De Quincey’s dramatic restructuring of his past serves as part of a larger project to conscript the reader into his investigation of the philosophical and geologic temporalities he gains access to while taking opium.

De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* places him in an isolated role, a situation where he longs to reconnect with the general society. He speaks to this in his introduction:

> Guilt and misery shrink, by a natural instinct, from public notice: they court privacy and solitude: and, even in their choice of a grave, will sometimes sequester themselves from the general population of the church-yard, as if declining to claim fellowship with the great family of man, and wishing (in the affecting language of Mr Wordsworth)

> ——Humbly to express
> A potential loneliness.149

While admitting separation from mankind in general, De Quincey quickly qualifies that he does not acknowledge guilt about his opium taking, and he associates himself with the “numerous class” of opium-eaters. This class is placed in opposition to the class of non-opium-eaters, presumably many of his readers. The work then can be viewed as an attempt to gain understanding from these readers and be welcomed back into general society. In order to do this, De Quincey presents his theatrical account, often placing himself in the alternating roles of director, central actor, and alongside the reader as a member of the audience. At one point, he even employs the reader as a painter to

149 Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions*, 51.
complete the set. While this alternating of roles sometimes leads to abrupt shifts in the
narration, I argue that it also reveals De Quincey’s overall philosophical or metaphysical
purpose — to enlist the non-opium-eating reader in assisting him make sense of the
infinite spans of space and time he observed while eating opium.

De Quincey’s *Confessions* was originally published in two installments, the 1821
September and October editions of the *London Magazine*. Within each of these scenes,
De Quincey emphasizes temporal fissures — moments which forever divide the present
from the past and prevent physical return. These moments are akin to the closing of a
curtain. Moreover, one can imagine these stages as points along a fault line, beginning
in the distant past, far away from the epicenter and moving forward through space and
time to focus of an opium-induced mental convulsion. As the reader moves closer to this
epicenter of disaster, the fissures of space and time are magnified until in the fifth and
final act they are stretched to an infinitely vast space of eternal chaos. This is where the
play fails for De Quincey — and perhaps why he chose to draft the work as an
autobiographical narrative rather than an actual theatrical performance — it ultimately
proves impossible to fit all of space and time onto a single stage.

De Quincey’s narration reads as a series of theatrical acts. Each act provides
scenes of smaller mental earthquakes, similar to the geological revolutions Cuvier
presents as catastrophic moments which will forever separate the past from the present.
Furthermore, space and time grow from scene to scene. De Quincey provides a precise
setting for the first fissure. After a brief introduction imploring the reader to read De
Quincey’s narrative without judgment and brief history of his time at school, the reader
finds De Quincey at school in his room just before four o’clock. Soon his scholarship will
collide with the old world-view, forever separating him from his current society. In taking a moment to reflect on his past, De Quincey looks back with nostalgia, and he connects this feeling directly with a sense of finality: “I could not fail to have enjoyed may happy hours in the midst of general dejection. I wept as I looked round on the chair, hearth, writing-table, and other familiar objects, knowing too certainly, that I looked upon them for the last time.”\(^{150}\) This finality is important and De Quincey repeats it even more strongly as he continues:

Whilst I write this, it is eighteen years ago: and yet, at this moment, I see distinctly as if it were yesterday, the lineaments and expression of the object on which I fixed my parting gaze: it was a picture of the lovely ———, which hung over the mantle-piece; the eyes and mouth of which were so beautiful, and the whole countenance so radiant with benignity, and divine tranquillity, that I had a thousand times laid down my pen, or my book, to gather consolation from it, as a devotee from his patron saint. Whilst I was yet gazing upon it, the deep tones of ——— clock proclaimed that it was four o’clock. I went up to the picture, kissed it, and then gently walked out, and closed the door forever!  

\(^{151}\)

De Quincey’s act of writing, of documenting the moment works to constrict time as he almost brings this image to the present; he writes in present tense but sees the image “distinctly as if it were yesterday.” However, his attempt to suture the temporal fissure ultimately fails — while the picture once held the power to make him lay down his pen or his book, it appears to have only held that power within that space. He makes no allusion to putting down his pen in the present moment. This omission shows De Quincey’s inability to fully inhabit this moment of the past. Then, the clock proclaims it is four o’clock and De Quincey leaves the space “for ever!” The dashes separating this

\(^{150}\) De Quincey, 59.  
\(^{151}\) De Quincey, 59-60.
paragraph from the remainder of the text further emphasize this finality. This space of the past cannot be brought forward as a sense of comfort as it was for Wordsworth. Rather than viewing the further evolution of the space after De Quincey’s departure, it appears to remain closed, trapping the time he experienced within those walls. However, by writing about the past from the present moment, De Quincey is in effect raising the stratified layer. This understanding of space aligns much more closely with Cuvier’s views regarding the earth than Wordsworth’s spots of time. Cuvier asserts, “The inclined strata are therefore older than the horizontal strata; and as they must necessarily, at least the greater number of them, have been formed in a horizontal position, it is evident that they have been raised [2], and that this change in their direction has been effected before the others were superimposed upon them [3].”

De Quincey’s exit marks a catastrophic revolution that will serve as a line between future and past events. In attempting to suture the past with the present, he has changed the position of the past as is viewed in his nostalgia connected to it, but he is unable to bring it fully to the surface.

At the same time, De Quincey marks this scene with humor rather with the levity he will later display when discussing his opium induced earthquake. Being temporally distant from the event, De Quincey uses humor to soften the blow. Examining De Quincey’s use of humor in this scene reveals an attempt to trace the strata back through time to earlier literary works. He explores the stratified layer through religious and mythological views of the past, exposing Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Greek mythology,

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152 Cuvier, *Revolutionary Upheavals*.
Dante’s *Inferno*, and the legend of the seven sleepers as he connects them to a much more secular future. De Quincey humorously describes his exit from the school by quoting Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to describe the head-master’s groom. Likening the groom to Beelzebub, he writes:

> .... the groom was a man—
> Of Atlantean shoulders, fit to bear
> The weight of mightiest monarchies.153

Through this quotation, De Quincey simultaneously compares the head-master’s groom to Beelzebub ready to assist in the revolution and Atlas bearing earth on his shoulders. However, the groom soon stumbles as the weight of De Quincey’s books, an embodiment of his education, proves too heavy for the groom’s old worldview as De Quincey narrates:

> For some time I heard him descending with slow and firm steps: but, unfortunately, from his trepidation, as he drew near the dangerous quarter, within a few steps of the gallery, his foot slipped; and the mighty burden falling from his shoulders, gained such increase of impetus at each step of the descent, that, on reaching the bottom, it trundled, or rather leaped, right across, with the noise of twenty devils, against the very bedroom door of the archididascalus.154

The groom’s descent, complete with “the noise of twenty devils,” echoes Dante’s descent in the *Inferno*, and his stumbling demonstrates the incompatibility of the two spheres of knowledge. The line between these spheres of knowledge operates as a fault line, and De Quincey traces it using Kantian methods. The groom is unable to properly navigate space, one of Kant’s *a priori* elements of knowledge. A few lines later, De Quincey expands the groom’s intellectual deficiency to include Kant’s other *a priori*

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153 De Quincey, *Confessions*, 60.
154 De Quincey, 60-61.
element of knowledge — time:

The groom was in the utmost alarm, both on his own account and on mine: but in spite of this, so irresistibly had the sense of the ludicrous, in this unhappy contretemps, taken possession of his fancy, that he sang out a long, loud, and canorous peal of laughter, that might have wakened the Seven Sleepers.  

Here, contretemps literally means “against the time.” The groom’s worldview remains in the stratified layer of the past and is out of synch with the present. De Quincey highlights this difference and again presents an attempt to suture the two layers tighter with an allusion to the seven sleepers. This allusion refers to a story in which “the Roman emperor Decius (c. AD 201-51) persecuted seven Christian soldiers, who concealed themselves in a cave and fell into a miraculous sleep. They awoke 230 years later.” This story appears in several Christian and Islamic forms, but in all of them the sleepers have lost their sense of time, many thinking that they have slept for only a day. This mistaken constriction of time emphasizes De Quincey’s focus in this passage: the present moment of time must be contextualized in the stratified layer and traced back through time to obtain greater understanding. Tracing this stratified layer then serves as a method to view other stratified layers that have been forced out of position through time.

For instance, as the narrative continues, De Quincey emphasizes the spatial separation caused by the progression of time. In the next act, De Quincey’s space expands from a room to a mansion. Furthermore, time expands to include both the past and the present. Consider the following passage:

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155 De Quincey, 61.
I had as large a choice of apartments in a London mansion as I could possibly
desire. Except the Blue-beard room, which the poor child believed to be haunted,
all others, from the attics to the cellars, were at our service; ‘the world was all
before us;’ and we pitched our tent for the night in any spot we chose. This house
I have already described as a large one; it stands in a conspicuous situation, and
in a well-known part of London. Many of my readers will have passed it, I doubt
not, within a few hours of reading this. For myself, I never fail to visit it when
business draws me to London; about ten o’clock, this very night, August 15,
1821, being my birth-day—I turned aside from my evening walk, down Oxford-
street, purposely to take a glance at it: it is now occupied by a respectable family;
and, by the lights from the drawing-room, I observed a domestic party,
assembled perhaps at tea, and apparently cheerful and gay. Marvellous contrast
in my eyes to the darkness—cold—silence—and desolation of that same house
eighteen years ago, when its nightly occupants were one famishing scholar, and
a neglected child.157

In this account, De Quincey locates another fissure and highlights it by shifting his
narrative to the present tense and addressing his readers directly. He notes that he
once moved freely across space within the apartment. Indeed, he states, “The world
was all before us.” This statement echoes the imperial nature of Kant’s introduction.
However, De Quincey then breaks from past tense to present tense as he addresses
his readers. The passage of time has removed his access to space; the spot he once
claimed is now inhabited by others. De Quincey places himself outside of the house,
which has now become home to “cheerful and gay” family. Time has led to De
Quincey’s spatial separation from the house and to its change in function. By noting his
commonality with the rats before discussing the family that now inhabits this space, De
Quincey emphasizes the evolution that has taken place there. In this way, the memory
serves as a metaphor for another geologic revolution like those described by Cuvier.
The past is separated by a physical barrier, in this case the exterior walls, much like the

157 De Quincey, Confessions, 69-70.
separation between layers of strata created by catastrophic geologic events. This absolute division reveals the futile nature of De Quincey's attempt to suture the past and the present.

Similar to the way Cuvier describes these events in relation to the extinction of previous species, forever preventing humans from being able to associate with them, De Quincey focuses on the catastrophic events that led to his inability to associate with his companions. At the closing of this act, De Quincey is separated forever from Anne. This fracture in space and time from his companion marks the end of Part I and the beginning of Part II of his narrative—probably a convention produced on account of the serialization of the text—and De Quincey begins Part II by reminding the reader of the end of Part I. The scene here has broadened to include all of London as De Quincey exclaims:

"If she lived, doubtless we must have been sometimes in search of each other, at the very same moment, through the mighty labyrinths of London; perhaps, even within a few feet of each other—a barrier no wider in a London street, often amounting in the end to a separation for eternity!"¹⁵⁸

Here the vertical stratification of experience is turned sideways to describe "the mighty labyrinths of London." However, the result is the same: the barrier—in this case a London street—creates an eternal separation between De Quincey and his friend just as in the previous scene time has created an eternal barrier between De Quincey and the interior of his previous home. His failure to find Anne in London again highlights his inability bridge the space and time of the past with the present moment of writing.

¹⁵⁸ De Quincey, 83.
Near the end of Part I, De Quincey continues to focus on separation as he emphasizes his spatial and temporal isolation in terms similar to Coleridge’s “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” and later to Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey.” In Coleridge’s poem, the poet mourns his separation from his friends and ends the poem stating:

My gentle-hearted Charles! when the last rook
Beat its straight path along the dusky air
Homewards, I blest it! deeming its black wing
(Now a dim speck, now vanishing in light)
Had cross'd the mighty Orb's dilated glory,
While thou stood'st gazing; or, when all was still,
Flew creeking o'er thy head, and had a charm
For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom
No sound is dissonant which tells of Life. (lines 68-76)\(^{159}\)

Coleridge uses the rook to connect himself and Charles. In a similar way, De Quincey wishes he could embody a dove to connect himself and his friend. He writes:

And herein I notice an instance of the short-sightedness of human desires, that oftentimes on moonlight nights, during my first mournful abode in London, my consolation was (if such it could be thought) to gaze from Oxford-street up every avenue in succession which pierces through the heart of Marylebone to the fields and the woods; for that, said I, travelling with my eyes up the long vistas which lay part in light and part in shade, “that is the road to the North, and therefore to ——, and if I had the wings of a dove, that way I would fly for comfort.”\(^ {160}\)

De Quincey finds some consolation in knowing the direction of his previous friend, Ann(e), but his wish fails; he will be separated from his past and from his friend forever.\(^ {161}\) De Quincey emphasizes the fissure by abruptly shifting to the present tense and directly addressing the reader. This move serves both as a plea to the reader to


\(^{160}\) De Quincey, *Confessions*, 85.

\(^{161}\) De Quincey spells Ann both with and without the “e” in his original *Confessions*. 138
empathize with De Quincey and as a hope that Anne will read the text and find him. As a result, the reader finds that the size of the fracture has expanded.

As De Quincey continues, he repeats much of the passage, now relating it to "Tintern Abbey," but noting a spatial distance of three hundred miles and a temporal distance of "three dreary months." Whereas Wordsworth found comfort in returning both mentally and physically to the location which has brought him comfort, De Quincey finds himself unable to "allow myself to descend again to the impotent wishes of childhood."

De Quincey remains temporally and spatially separated from comfort:

But these troubles are past: and thou wilt read these records of a period so dolorous to us both as the legend of some hideous dream that can return no more. Meantime, I am again in London: and again I pace the terraces of Oxford-street by night: and oftentimes, when I am oppressed by anxieties that demand all my philosophy and the comfort of thy presence to support, and yet remember that I am separated from thee by three hundred miles, and the length of three dreary months,—I look up the streets that run northwards from Oxford-street, upon moonlight nights, and recollect my youthful ejaculation of anguish;—and remembering that thou art sitting alone in that same valley, and mistress of that very house to which my heart turned in its blindness nineteen years ago, I think that, though blind indeed, and scattered to the winds of late, the promptings of my heart may yet have had reference to a remoter time, and may be justified if read in another meaning:—and, if I could allow myself to descend again to the impotent wishes of childhood, I should again say to myself, as I look to the north, 'Oh, that I had the wings of a dove—' and with how just a confidence in thy good and gracious nature might I add the other half of my early ejaculation—'And that way I would fly for comfort.'

This passage reveals the difference between De Quincey’s view of the past, which focuses on eternal separation from the present, and Wordsworth’s spots of time. De Quincey remains unable to revisit the scene that once brought him comfort; he is unable find restoration by returning to the place of former trauma. De Quincey emphasizes his

162 De Quincey, Confessions, 87.
separation of “three hundred miles, and the length of three dreary months” before expanding this separation to “nineteen years” and finally to “a remoter time.” De Quincey’s mental return to his past resists restoration and instead only heightens his sense of separation. His repetition of the lines “Oh, that I had the wings of a dove” and “And that way I would fly to comfort” from the previous paragraph, emphasizes the barrier between the present and the past. De Quincey remains barred from spatial movement by temporal disjunction, and his attempt to find solace in the past again fails.

De Quincey’s spatial and temporal disjunctions continue to increase as the narrative progresses. As he begins to discuss the pains of opium, the fibers of space and time are ripped apart so that nothing connects them. The scene would become unmanageable on a stage; instead of sequential events in a series of defined sets or spaces, De Quincey’s narrative abruptly jumps through time and space. In fact, De Quincey emphasizes his movement through time so pervasively in his “Introduction to the Pains of Opium,” creating a series of moments that are expanded into years, that his movement through space is almost unnoticed. The time within each place expands, replacing the spatial transition from place to place. Furthermore, rather than moving from year to year in past tense, De Quincey brings the reader through his succession of temporal leaps in present tense. For instance, he writes:

Courteous, and, I hope, indulgent reader (for all my readers must be indulgent ones, or else, I fear, I shall shock them too much to count on their courtesy), having accompanied me thus far, now let me request you to move onwards, for about eight years; that is to say, from 1804 (when I have said that my acquaintance with opium first began) to 1812.163

163 De Quincey, 101.
When De Quincey says, “thus far,” he means that the reader has followed him on his journey through space and time, but they moved simultaneously. Here he jumps ahead eight years, asking the reader to join him on this temporal leap. Even more disconcerting, he stays in a previous spatial location for a moment before jumping to a new place as well. In this way, the reader is abruptly pushed from one place to the next without experiencing the transition between. De Quincey declares:

The persecutions of the chapel-bell, sounding its unwelcome summons to six o’clock matins, interrupts my slumbers no longer: the porter who rang it, upon whose beautiful nose (bronze, inlaid with copper) I wrote, in retaliation, so many Greek epigrams, whilst I was dressing, is dead, and has ceased to disturb any body: and I, and many others, who suffered much from his tintinnabulous propensities, have now agreed to overlook his errors, and have forgiven him. Even with the bell I am now in charity: it rings, I suppose, as formerly, thrice a-day: and cruelly annoys, I doubt not, many worthy gentlemen, and disturbs their peace of mind: but as to me, in this year 1812, I regard its treacherous voice no longer (treacherous, I call it, for, by some refinement of malice, it spoke in as sweet and silvery tones as if it had been inviting one to a party): its tones have no longer, indeed, power to reach me, let the wind sit as favourable as the malice of the bell itself could wish: for I am 250 miles away from it, and buried in the depth of the mountains.164

De Quincey is even more verbose than usual here, as he crams numerous phrases into these two sentences, elongating the tension of a single moment swollen with action. The passage abruptly shifts tense six times – from present (sounding) to past (rang) to present (is dead) to past (suffered) to present (am now) to past (spoke) to present (have) – demonstrating the narrator’s temporal confusion and creating the same effect within the reader. Furthermore, De Quincey stretches the passage by repeating the phrase “no longer” three times, effectively creating an eternal image even as he works to demonstrate its separation from the present. Furthermore, he destroys the entire

164 De Quincey, 101-02.
former setting with the short phrase, “for I am 250 miles away from it.” By bookending the past episode with the bell ringing in present tense and then jumping to a new location of the present, De Quincey demonstrates the difficulty of portraying the complexity of time and space in a sequential narrative structure. This highlights the over-filled preceding lines, which pile up detail, until De Quincey’s use of the present tense forces the reader to feel uncomfortably dislodged and in a new place without any transition between.

In this way, De Quincey emphasizes the difference between his journey to 1812 and the reader’s journey to this same year within his narrative. He continues:

And what am I doing amongst the mountains? Taking opium. Yes, but what else? Why, reader, in 1812, the year we are now arrived at, as well as for some years previous, I have been chiefly studying German metaphysics, in the writings of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, &c. And how, and in what manner do I live? in short, what class or description of men do I belong to? I am at this period, viz. in 1812, living in a cottage; and with a single female servant (honi soit qui mal y pense), who, amongst my neighbours, passes by the name of my ‘house-keeper.’

Here De Quincey heavily complicates the reader’s sense of time. He asks rhetorical questions about his own activities and twice responds with the fact that he is in 1812. He speaks in present tense though the year he inhabits, 1812, is nine years in the past of the reader’s present. At the same time, he includes the reader in this time stating that it is “the year we are now arrived at.” This phrasing casts time as a location that can be moved to at will. Soon after, De Quincey repeats this strategy as he implores:

Now then, reader, from 1813, where all this time we have been sitting down and loitering — rise up, if you please, and walk forward about three years more. Now draw up the curtain, and you shall see me in a new character.

165 De Quincey, 102.
166 De Quincey, 105.
With this rhetorical move, De Quincey emphasizes the reader’s role as an active audience member. He directs the reader to “rise up,” “walk forward,” and “draw up the curtain,” signaling that the reader is not to be passive, but to take an active role in forming the narrative. Simultaneously, De Quincey conflates space and time. He speaks of the various years as differentiated spaces between which the reader can traverse, scenes that begin with the drawing up of a curtain and end with the reader getting up and moving on to the next stage. However, these stages appear to exist in an eternal state.

This prepares the reader for the crux of De Quincey’s temporal dilemma. Before “The Pains of Opium,” De Quincey emphasized finality at the end of each scene and his inability to inhabit the past; now he appears to be unable to find a closing to any scene. The reader is asked to “draw up the curtain,” but is never asked to close it. Instead the direction is to simply walk forward to the next stage that De Quincey wishes to display. In this way then, the scenes resist finality, and at first this proves advantageous to De Quincey as he instructs the reader on how to understand happiness. In this exercise, the reader is enlisted as a set builder, constructing and painting a set that encompass eternity. Through this exercise, the reader comes to understand the temporal experience of opium, a prerequisite for helping De Quincey make sense of the infinite vastness of space and the sense of eternity that have created the rupture within his intellectual faculties. To truly understand happiness — as an opium-eater — De Quincey implores the reader:

Let there be a cottage, standing in a valley, 18 miles from any town—no spacious valley, but about two miles long, by three quarters of a mile in average width; the benefit of which provision is, that all the families resident within its circuit will
compose, as it were, one larger household personally familiar to your eye, and more or less interesting to your affections.\textsuperscript{167}

This image, seemingly created in the reader's mind from a perspective hovering far above the earth, highlights the separation between the cottage and the outside world. Its dimensions – 18 miles from any town" in a valley “two miles long, by three quarters of a mile in average width” – are almost ridiculous in their specificity and size to attempt to actually create an image in the mind’s eye. Furthermore, the lack of specificity regarding the nearby towns, the valley, or even the actual site of the cottage work to designate this location as a virtual location for the reader – one that he or she has never seen nor can visit physically. De Quincey furthers this task for the reader as he calls for a painter — the reader — to paint an image of the scene:

But here, to save myself the trouble of too much verbal description, I will introduce a painter; and give him directions for the rest of the picture.... Paint me, then, a room seventeen feet by twelve, and not more than seven and a half feet high.\textsuperscript{168}

De Quincey first announces that he will introduce a painter; however, within a few sentences, he addresses the reader directly, instructing him or her to paint the scene. This painting is purely mental, and the act of painting provides the sense that the scene is timeless, being preserved as a still life image that will last into the future. De Quincey highlights this timelessness as he continues instructing the painter/reader:

And, near the fire, paint me a tea-table; and (as it is clear that no creature can come to see one such a stormy night,) place only two cups and saucers on the tea-tray: and, if you know how to paint such a thing symbolically, or otherwise, paint me an eternal tea-pot—eternal à parte ante, and à parte post; for I usually drink tea from eight o’clock at night to four o’clock in the morning.\textsuperscript{169}

\textsuperscript{167} De Quincey, 109.
\textsuperscript{168} De Quincey, 111.
\textsuperscript{169} De Quincey, 111.
By requesting the painter/reader to paint an “eternal tea-pot—eternal à parte ante, and 
à parte post,” De Quincey places the tea-pot at a temporal location of contradiction. The 
teapot should have existed eternally in the past and should continue to exist eternally in 
the future, but the act of painting the tea-pot indicates that it must first be painted and 
perceived in the present. This virtual empire then, extends beyond temporal separations 
of the past and future. In this way, these experiences cannot be perceived as stratified 
layers or even as individual serialized scenes, but as experiences that always have 
ocurred and always will occur. De Quincey even extends his own life into eternity as he 
later asks the reader/painter to paint the author within the scene, effectively 
imortalizing himself.

However, this exercise in understanding true happiness occurs within a space of 
the text that does end and is followed by “The Pains of Opium.” De Quincey begins this 
by quoting Percy Shelley’s Revolt of Islam to connect earthquakes to his De Quincey’s 
own mental disruption. He writes:

THE PAINS OF OPIUM

_________ as when some great painter dips
His pencil in the gloom of earthquake and eclipse.

Shelley’s Revolt of Islam

1. For several reasons, I have not been able to compose the notes for this part 
of my narrative into any regular and connected shape. I give the notes disjointed 
as I find them, or have now drawn them up from memory. Some of them point to 
their own date; some I have dated: and some are undated. Whenever it could 
answer my purpose to transplant them from the natural or chronological order, I 
have not scrupled to do so. Sometimes I speak in the present, sometimes in the 
past tense. Few of the notes, perhaps, were written exactly at the period of time 
to which they relate; but this can little affect their accuracy; as the impressions 
were such that they can never fade from my mind. Much has been omitted. I 
could not, without effort, constrain myself to the task of either recalling, or
constructing into a regular narrative, the whole burthen of horrors which lies upon my brain.\textsuperscript{170}

Importantly, De Quincey uses an earthquake to describe the event that led to temporal disruption within his mind. This earthquake recalls the differences in using geologic strata to analogize experience. As I argued in the previous chapter, instead of viewing experience as organized layers of strata like Wordsworth, Shelley uses the chaotic layers of Mont Blanc to demonstrate the limits to this analogy. Within \textit{Mont Blanc}, Shelley emphasizes the difference between the mind and the uninhabitable, destructive, landscape atop Mont Blanc. Likewise, the quote from Shelley on earthquake as creative process indicates that, at this stage in the \textit{Confessions}, De Quincey is pointing to his failure to reconcile the individual scenes of Part I of his narrative, which contains elements of finality within his mind, with the concurring eternal scenes of happiness and of pain.

This becomes even more important when the reader remembers that time was one of Kant’s \textit{a priori} sets of data needed to comprehend experience. Opium has destroyed De Quincey’s ability to understand his experience. What follows, then, is the disconnected narrative of a man who has lost the ability to spatially and temporally organize his experiences. In many ways, the narrative that follows serves as a way for De Quincey to struggle to piece that experience back together into a cohesive and coherent story, a struggle that ultimately proves unsuccessful. De Quincey refers to Kant and specifically to his set of \textit{a priori} elements of space and time when describing his proposed book, \textit{Prolegomena to all Future Systems of Political Economy}, a title he

\textsuperscript{170} De Quincey, 113.
borrows from Kant’s *Prolegomena to all Future Systems of Metaphysics*. While discussing his inspiration for this work De Quincey remarks:

> All other writers had been crushed and overlaid by the enormous weight of facts and documents; Mr. Ricardo had deduced, *à priori*, from the understanding itself, laws which first gave a ray of light into the unwieldy chaos of materials, and had constructed what had been but a collection of tentative discussions into a science of regular proportions, now first standing on an eternal basis.\(^{171}\)

Notice that De Quincey portrays the knowledge of political economy in geologic terms. The facts and documents act as layers of stratification bearing enormous weight on the writers. Mr. Ricardo had used the ray of light to understand that the universe may be infinite, but for him, this brought about organization and understanding – for De Quincey, the attempt to serially organize the palimpsest of eternal experiences within his mind becomes impossible. In the final portion of the work, eternity and infinity produce a crushing weight on the author’s mind. De Quincey discusses the manifestation of this effect as he describes the mental changes he has experienced.

De Quincey’s list begins with a transformation akin to Wright’s illustration of the universe in his *Original Theory*, discussed in the first chapter. Wright represents the center of the universe being inhabited by the all-seeing and all-creating eye of God; here the center of the universe is De Quincey’s eye, but with the same power. Furthermore, De Quincey’s eye remains active both during his wakeful hours and his sleep. He recalls,

> That, as the creative state of the eye increased, a sympathy seemed to arise between the waking and dreaming states of the brain in one point—that whatsoever I happened to call up and to trace by a voluntary act upon the darkness was very apt to transfer itself to my dreams;\(^{172}\)

\(^{171}\) De Quincey, 117.

\(^{172}\) De Quincey, 119.
Here, De Quincey’s eye works like the eye of God in both its creative and receptive abilities. Whatever De Quincey sees or imagines appears both during waking and dreaming states. This blurring of states increases the obscurity and horrors resulting from the breakdown of clear demarcations of space and time in the final part of the narrative. Moreover, the quantity of varying images produced has increased to an infinite number, and the time during which he sees these images no longer ceases during sleep but continues ceaselessly. Meanwhile space and time infinitely expand:

Space swelled, and was amplified to an extent of unutterable infinity. This, however, did not disturb me so much as the vast expansion of time; I sometimes seemed to have lived for 70 or 100 years in one night; nay, sometimes bad feelings representative of a millenium passed in that time, or, however, of a duration far beyond the limits of any human experience.173

Here, De Quincey draws out space and time to infinity. It should be remembered then, that in his preface to A Critique of Pure Reason, Kant asserts, “To discover the system that connects the great parts of creation in the whole extent of infinity, to derive the formation of the celestial bodies themselves and the origin of their motion out of the first state of nature through mechanical laws: insights such as these would appear to go well beyond the powers of human reason.”174 De Quincey asserts he now experiences infinite space and time, but instead of being joyous of this, he is “disturbed” because this is beyond the power of his reason. De Quincey ultimately finds it impossible to reconcile the infinite nature of his virtual empire with the spatial and temporal boundaries of common experience. Like Kant, he has identified a vast new region of metaphysical knowledge to be explored, but ultimately his attempt to control it remains unsustainable.

173 De Quincey, 119.
174 Kant, Natural Science, I:221.
Reading the works of De Quincey and Kant alongside the works of Shelley and Cuvier brings a greater understanding of how writers, philosophers, and geologists reconceptualized time and space during the early nineteenth century in efforts to better comprehend the events of the past and future. Each text rearranges the space and time. By reading the fossil record as a historical document, Cuvier gains new knowledge about the earth’s past, present, and future. Shelley critiques current readings of history and the future in *The Last Man*. Kant questions the nature of space and time themselves, and De Quincey struggles to reconcile his new understanding of the infinite nature of space and time with the finite nature of human experience.

In the early nineteenth century, technological innovations such as the balloon and the panorama presented the world in ways that led participants to rearrange the universe from new perspectives. These innovations offered visual and physical experiences that transformed the way people arranged the surrounding world.
CHAPTER 5

CONCEPTUALIZING DICKENS’S BLEAK HOUSE AS A LITERARY PANORAMA

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, several new technological innovations allowed people to view the world in new ways. The first of these was the “Montgolfier” or hot air balloon with its first manned flight in 1783. Allowing riders to ascend to new heights, those lucky enough to ride in these marvels enjoyed a view of the earth from high above its surface. In 1788, Robert Barker exhibited the first panorama, which provided a view of Edinburgh from atop Calton Hill, to the public. Thousands of visitors flocked to panoramic exhibitions throughout England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, where they climbed towers and surveyed all-encompassing worlds from dizzying heights. Because the interior walls were covered in painted canvases, artists could virtually transport visitors across time and space like they did with the exhibitions at the Strand and Leicester Square in 1823-24, where people viewed the ruins of Pompeii. Meanwhile, technological innovations in mining were allowing miners to travel deeper into the earth’s surface than ever before. Once there, they would read the strata of the rocks as the secrets of deep time were revealed. The miners would then recreate two-dimensional images of their surroundings and return with numerous drawings that another person on the surface would then use to construct a three-dimensional mental image of the rock’s forms. The new understanding of stratified layers led geologists such as Charles Lyell to understand the earth’s history as primarily uniform rather than catastrophic — the world had changed gradually in much the same way for millions of years rather than through short bursts of catastrophic
behavior. This new perspective became popular across disciplines including literature.

In *The Victorian Serial*, Linda Hughes and Michael Lund state,

> Uniformitarianism was also a feature of serial literature, especially serials published at regular intervals. But in any case the serial confuted the "catastrophic" notion of artistic inspiration, a kind of gigantic creative shudder that results in a single aesthetic product. The serial occurred gradually, not suddenly, and it was premised on such uniform principles that a month's hiatus in the plot was not fatal to the work's underlying coherence or continuous growth.¹⁷⁵

This passage presents a new perspective toward both writing and reading literature. Authors of serialized works approached writing with the knowledge that their creation would be digested slowly with breaks over a long period of time. Readers had time to pause and reflect within the work. Whether people were ascending to great heights in balloons, viewing the world from atop towers within panoramas, travelling to the depths of the earth in mines, contemplating the age and history of the earth, or reading serialized literature, they were accessing the world from new perspectives that changed their experience of it. In the mid-seventeenth century, the microscope and the telescope had allowed people to view the very small and the very far away; in the nineteenth-century these innovations expanded the scope of what people could see through space and time. This broadened scope led to new approaches in scientific and literary fields.

In this chapter, I examine the influence of these technological advancements on literature to argue that Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* can be read as a literary form of the panoramic structure. This reading allows one to better understand the relationship between the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce and Dickens's use of geology, the interplay

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between the third-person omniscient narrative and Esther's narrative, and the obscured perceptions of the novel's characters.

To understand the origin and popularity of the new perspective afforded by the panorama, I first discuss connections between the hot air balloon and the exhibition spaces which came to be known as panoramas. These inventions popularized the panoramic view. I then explore Charles Lyell's use of this broadened perspective scope to understand the history of the earth and to advance his compelling narrative in *Principles of Geology*. Lyell's strategy is similar to Charles Dickens's attempt to incorporate deep time and uniformitarianism in *Bleak House* using the contrasting perceptions of everyday people and the panoramic view. Through this combination, Dickens creates a work that investigates life in London from multiple angles and from contrary temporalities.

Technical Innovations and Broadened Perspectives

With the invention of the balloon, thousands of people became fascinated with the ability to view the world from high above. Goethe writes,

> Those of us who have witnessed the discovery of air balloons will be able to testify how the whole world was affected, how much interest the balloonists aroused, what longing arose in the hearts of so many thousands of people to share in these long-predicted and unbelievably dangerous voyages.\(^\text{176}\)

These voyages may have been “unbelievably dangerous,” but they provided riders with a spectacular view. As Stephan Oetterman recounts in *The Panorama: History of a

Mass Medium, Jacques Alexandre-César Charles described an ascent on December 1, 1783, in the following terms:

We grew impatient on the ground. . . . Nothing will ever be able to compare with the happiness that filled my being at the moment I realized I was leaving the earth behind; it was not pleasure, it was bliss. Escaping from the foul torments of persecution and calumny, I felt I was answering all my enemies by rising above them. This moral sense was soon followed by an even livelier sensation: admiration for the majestic scene which now presented itself to us. Looking downward, we could see nothing but the heads of the crowd; above we saw a cloudless sky and in the distance the most delightful views. “Oh, my friend,” I exclaimed to Monsieur Robert, “how fortunate we are! I don’t know how the earth down below may feel about us, but heaven is on our side! How clear the air is! How delightful the view! If only I could have our most determined opponent here right now and say to him, ‘You miserable wretch, just look at what you lose when you try to block the progress of science.’”

Charles’s account emphasizes the blissful feeling brought about by his change in perception. He answers his enemies by rising above them. He notes the magnificent sights he gains looking down, above, and in the distance. He feels that heaven is on his side. These changes in perspective would delight and inspire the masses, even those who did not experience the balloon first hand. The identification of the change of perspective as the primary purpose of ballooning would later be depicted in Odilon Redon’s The Eye Like a Strange Balloon Mounts Towards Infinity. (Figure 5.1)

For those unable or too frightened to ascend in a hot air balloon, a new technology would quickly emerge — the panorama. This invention at its core was created to offer visitors a new perspective akin to that afforded in a balloon. As Oetterman explains,

In brief, the modern usage of the word panorama developed when the technical term coined to denote a new type of round painting came to be applied generally to mean “circular vista, overview (from an elevated point)” of a real landscape or cityscape; this was very soon followed by metaphorical uses to mean a “survey” or “overview” of a particular field of knowledge, such as art, literature, or history.\footnote{Oetterman, Panorama, 7.}

Figure 5.1 – Odilon Redon’s *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon Mounts Towards Infinity.*
Notice that this definition highlights the perspective “from an elevated point.” One of the first panoramas used actually combined this circular view with the ascent of a balloon, and descriptions of the first panoramas continue to emphasize this elevated perspective.\(^{180}\) In “‘Unlimiting the Bounds’: the Panorama and the Balloon View,” Lily Ford writes,

> the panorama undoubtedly schooled its visitors in a mode of viewing that was compatible with ballooning. And though the balloon was five years older than the panorama, far fewer people directly experienced balloon travel than the tens of thousands who visited a panorama. Before 1836, a total of 313 people had ascended in a balloon in England by one contemporary compiler’s reckoning; in contrast, as an example, the Colosseum’s Panorama of London received more than that number in a single day during its 1829 season. In the first fifty years of these two technologies, the idea of the “panoramic” view was far more widely disseminated than the idea of the balloon view.\(^{181}\)

In this passage, the panorama is viewed as a form of technology utilized to “school its visitors in a mode of viewing,” highlighting the change in perspective made available by these new technologies. Furthermore, while ballooning had caused great excitement, the accessibility of panoramas led them to be the primary way that people experienced this elevated perspective.

The new perspective and particularly its scope in these spectacular theatres proved powerful. In the Victorian era, everyday people could use their eyes to see the history of civilization across the globe, all while remaining in the city of London. The

\(^{180}\) In “‘Unlimiting the Bounds’: the Panorama and the Balloon View,” Lily Ford writes, “Theatre-goers in 1824 at the Theatre Royal watched Grimaldi the clown “ascend” in a balloon against a scrolling vertical panorama backdrop designed by Thomas Grieve. A different kind of movement was achieved by the ‘diorama’, invented in 1823, which worked by moving audiences between two different ‘sets’ showing scenes from nature in changing time and seasons, the transitions effected by lighting.” The Public Domain Review. https://publicdomainreview.org/2016/08/03/unlimiting-the-bounds-the-panorama-and-the-balloon-view/

panorama packaged huge swaths of time and space into buildings where thousands of visitors could experience them. These visitors were often immersed in the sights, smells, and sounds of these faraway lands and times. In “The Spectacle of the Panorama,” Markman Ellis explains,

The panorama was among the most astonishing and popular of visual spectacles from the early 1790s through most of the next century. A panorama was a painting – a very big painting – hung on the inside of a specially built circular building. Viewers paid an entrance fee to see it, entering by way of a tunnel and staircase into the very centre of the circle, where they could see a painting that surrounded them on all sides, around 360 degrees. A fence or barrier prevented viewers from getting close to the massive painting, whose top and base were also obscured from view. Depicting landscapes, city views, and battle scenes, the panorama had a distinctive, unprecedented, and utterly unusual effect: it made the viewer feel like they were really there.182 (Figure 5.2)

Figure 5.2 – Cross Section of the rotunda in the panorama at London’s Leicester Square.

The specificity of placing the viewer inside “the very centre of the circle,” the fence or barrier used to hold viewers back from the painting, and the obscuration of the top and base of the painting all point to the importance of helping the viewer maintain a new perspective that presents the viewer with a feeling of omniscience.

Viewing Rudolph Ackermann’s “Bird's Eye View from the Staircase & the Upper Part of the Pavilion in the Colosseum, Regent's Park” (1829) reveals how large, immersive, and realistic these panoramas were. (Figure 5.3) In the engraving, one can see the incredibly tall central tower on the left. Some viewers stand within the tower while others stand far below near the base of the painting. The painting itself contains extraordinary detail and creates the illusion that the viewers are standing hundreds of feet above the city of London.

Figure 5.3 – Detail from Rudolph Ackermann’s “Bird's Eye View from the Staircase & the Upper Part of the Pavilion in the Colosseum, Regent's Park” (1829).
To further immerse visitors in this experience, artists created the feeling that the viewers were also being viewed. In 1784, architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux created an engraving entitled, “Coup d’oeil du théâtre de Besançon.” (Figure 5.4) This engraving shares similarities with Thomas Wright’s image of God as an all-seeing/creating eye at the center of the universe. In fact, as Louise Pelletier explains in Architecture in Words: Theatre, Language and the Sensuous Space of Architecture, the title of Ledoux’s work can be translated both as “a glance at the stage,” or “a glance from the stage.” The reversibility of the French expression places the audience simultaneously in two positions: observing the place of performance (in “a glance at the stage”) and being observed by the actors (in “a glance from the stage”). Dickens emphasizes this interplay of roles as observer and the observed in Bleak House.

Figure 5.4 – Claude-Nicolas Ledoux’s “Coup d’oeil du théâtre de Besançon.” (1784).

Panoramic Narrative Structures in Literature and Science

In *Novel Science*, Adelene Buckland notes that “Work on Dickens and science has proliferated since George Levine’s work in *Darwin and the Novelists*, but its central problem has been the opinion that Dickens’s scientific reading was ‘nugatory.’ As Ben Winyard and Holly Furneaux state in “Dickens, Science and the Victorian Literary Imagination,” this view stems from George Henry Lewes:

Visiting Dickens at his home in Doughty Street in 1839, George Henry Lewes was dismayed to find no major philosophical, literary or scientific texts in the author’s library. To Lewes, Dickens appeared mystifyingly indifferent to the latest scientific discoveries and their multiple implications for the writing of fiction, and he was also consistently unhelpful in assisting Lewes’s research into the psychology of literary production. Despite a new ‘seriousness which […] became more and more prominent in his conversation and his writings’, the author nevertheless ‘remained completely outside philosophy, science, and the higher literature’. Lewes’s damning verdict quickly became part of the critical consensus and Dickens was long considered ignorant of, unresponsive to, or even antagonistic towards the scientific endeavours, findings and insights of his era.

While many scholars are still entrenched in the assertions of critics from long ago, the scholarly perspective is gradually changing. Recently, scholars such as Alexander Welsh have reconsidered the influence of popular science on Dickens’s works. While Dickens may not have been interested in the details of scientific theories, Welsh warns that scholars should not “underestimate the degree to which Dickens was aware of the intellectual ferment of his time.” Likewise, George Levine writes in “Dickens and Darwin, Science, and Narrative Form,” “Our unwillingness to think of Dickens in relation

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to the extraordinary activities in physical science going on during his lifetime is mistaken.  

Levine later claims,

. . . Darwin needed, above all, the large infusion of time that Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* gave him; and Dickens was not retrograde in accepting it, as we can see in his comfortable allusions in *Bleak House* to geological time. The essay, “The World of Water,” talks about the “thousand, thousand years ago” in which fossil creatures lived. It casually refers to man as a latecomer into the world, and it suggests the ultimate extinction of man himself (245). There was nothing avant garde about such conceptions, but they do reflect a willingness to stay abreast of the attitudes that contemporary geology and paleontology were developing.  

In this chapter, though I do note parallels between ideas in Dickens’s and Lyell’s works, I do not claim that Dickens read *Principles*; instead I assert that he was aware of and appreciated Lyell’s perspective on the earth’s history. Both men adapted perspectives created by new technologies like the balloon and the panorama to explain the world, whether it be the earth’s natural processes in *Principles* or the actions of individuals across social networks in *Bleak House*. Reading them together highlights the similar strategies scientists and novelists use to construct a coherent narrative from multiple spatial and temporal perspectives.

Harnessing a panoramic narrative structure would have proved useful to both Lyell and Dickens, but it is important to first define the term *panoramic* within this chapter. In *Novel Science*, Buckland notes that “by the 1860s the term “panoramic” denoted comprehensiveness in general, and did not necessarily refer to the panorama as a technology of display.”  

In this chapter, I use *panoramic* to describe narrative

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188 Levine, 257-58.

structures based on the three-dimensional technologies of display. Specifically, these narratives present detailed sections of the story while emphasizing their fragmented nature in relation to the whole. The success of the illusion created by entering the immersive space of a physical panorama rests on the painter's ability to portray details and landmarks that convince the viewer of their accuracy. At the same time, the structure of the space highlights the sense that the viewer's field of vision is always less than the full display; the viewer never sees the borders between the painting and the rest of the world. The viewer must mentally stitch these images together to mentally construct the entire possible view. In a similar way, both *Principles* and *Bleak House* bring attention to the fact that the reader is repeatedly presented with views which are highly detailed and yet incomplete. The reader is then encouraged to piece the various views together to comprehend the full narrative.

For instance, in Lyell's first chapter of *Principles*, he explains,

Geology is intimately related to almost all the physical sciences, as is history to the moral. An historian should, if possible, be at once profoundly acquainted with ethics, politics, jurisprudence, the military art, theology; in a word, with all branches of knowledge, whereby any insight into human affairs, or into the moral and intellectual nature of man, can be obtained. It would be no less desirable that a geologist should be well versed in chemistry, natural philosophy, mineralogy, zoology, comparative anatomy, botany; in short, in every science relating to organic and inorganic nature. With these accomplishments the historian and geologist would rarely fail to draw correct and philosophical conclusions from the various monuments transmitted to them of former occurrences. They would know to what combination of causes analogous effects were referrible, and they would often be enabled to supply by inference, information concerning many events unrecorded in the defective archives of former ages. But the brief duration of human life, and our limited powers, are so far from permitting us to aspire to such extensive acquisitions, that excellence even in one department is within the reach of few, and those individuals most effectually promote the general
progress, who concentrate their thoughts on a limited portion of the field of inquiry.\textsuperscript{190}

Through \textit{Principles}, Lyell attempts to combine multiple fields of study to craft a system of understanding the earth’s geologic processes. At the same time, in this passage he notes that “the brief duration of human life, and our limited powers,” restrict any one person from ever being able to amass the encyclopedic knowledge necessary to expertly describe any singular event, much less the system as a whole. Instead, his work provides an architecture — like a panorama — that places the reader in a position to view numerous detailed sections or portions of the entire picture. Within this narrative structure the reader is transported to across vast swaths of space and time. For example, later in the work Lyell moves from Mount Vesuvius in 1822 to Mount Etna in 396 B.C. to the Niagara Falls in his present day, all within a few pages.\textsuperscript{191} In other places he moves across fields, such as when he transitions from zoology to philosophy to botany and then to theology within a couple of pages.\textsuperscript{192} Like a visitor to a panorama, the reader examines details in these multiple sections and then must mentally piece them together to construct an encompassing image of the whole.

The influence between geology and panoramic views was two directional. Technological advancements led innovators to create panoramas that could move viewers across time and space, but they also often relied on geological and expository writing. In \textit{Novel Science}, Adelene Buckland further explains,

\begin{quote}
Panoramas required spectators to observe the canvas from the inside, usually ascending ladders or stairs to a platform to view it, and verbal recreations of
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
panoramic scenes from deep time abounded in geological writing, from textbooks to expository pamphlets. Such scenes might also employ shifts like the “double-effect” diorama, a related visual form that overlaid two scenes and, by a trick of the light, made one mutate into the other. It is important to note that the words “panorama” and “diorama” were used very flexibly in the period: other forms of vast or shifting displays were often referred to a “panoramic” or “dioramic,” and the term “panorama” came to denote any painting of vast size.\textsuperscript{193}

As Buckland notes, panoramas were often connected to geology and deep time, and lighting tricks were sometimes used to create a sense of the passing of time. As spectacular performances became incredibly popular they took on even more innovative forms. At the same time these scenes were filled with writing to explain and provide a historical narrative. Growing in number and popularity, these scenes continued to display connections to the natural world. Buckland notes that,

\begin{quote}
In London representations of the natural world often formed part of the exciting, spectacular performances. At just one venue, the Surrey Zoological and Botanical Institution, near central London, volcano panoramas, with sound effects and fireworks, were displayed in 1837-1838 (Vesuvius), 1839 (Mount Hecla), 1846 (Vesuvius), and 1852 (Etna).\textsuperscript{194}
\end{quote}

This list demonstrates the popularity of geologic displays within panoramas. In the mid-1850s, the Egyptian Hall staged \textit{The Ascent of Mont Blanc}. Mont Blanc had long served as an important site of geologic research and for the imaginative expansion of geologic time. Indeed, Rudwick begins his text, \textit{Bursting the Limits of Time}, with an account of Horace-Bénédict de Saussure’s expedition to the top of the famous mountain, and Shelley’s \textit{Mont Blanc}, discussed in chapter 2, describes the mountain’s geologic structure as “ghastly, and scarr’d, and riven.” The Egyptian Hall panorama’s title maintains the importance of bringing this new perspective to visitors. While most visitors

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{193} Buckland, \textit{Novel Science}, 248-49.
\textsuperscript{194} Buckland, 255.
\end{footnotes}
would not be able to ascend Mont Blanc in reality, the panorama allowed them to perceive views as though they were ascending the mountain. This staging also captured the attention of Dickens, who writes, “So many travellers have been going up Mont Blanc lately, both in fiction and in fact, that I have heard recently of a proposal for the establishment of a Company to employ Sir Joseph Paxton [architect of the Crystal Palace] to take it down.” Given the huge popularity of the panorama, its connections to geology, and its incorporation of vast amounts of literature, it is not surprising that Dickens used these elements to experiment with form within his fiction writing.

Dickens’s Early Experimentation with Panoramic Narratives

Most of the discussion around the influence of the panorama on Dickens’s writing thus far has focused on three specific works, The Sketches by Boz, Illustrative of Every-day Life and Every-day People; “Some Account of an Extraordinary Traveller;” and Pictures of Italy. In The Sketches by Boz, Dickens presents detailed scenes of various aspects of London life. Its full title recalls the pictures within the panoramas that were read by visitors. Furthermore, in “Technologies of Travel and the Victorian Novel,” Alison Byerly asserts that “The frontispiece to Dickens’ Sketches by Boz (1836), which depicts a balloon ascending into the air while the crowd below looks up in admiration, suggests that the author intends to present a kind of panoramic overview of the London scene.” This panoramic view draws attention to the varying perspectives of the text.

195 Charles Dickens, Speeches Literary and Social (1870), 123.
On one hand, the reader can view the text as a whole from far away to see a broad swath of life within London. On the other, the reader can closely analyze the individual lives of those “every-day people” to view the details of London life.

In “Some Account of an Extraordinary Traveller,” Dickens presents a visitor, Mr. Booley, to the panorama. He writes, “It is only in his eye that the adventurous character of Mr. Booley is seen to shine. It is a moist, bright eye, of a cheerful expression, and indicative of keen and eager curiosity.” This focus on Mr. Booley’s eye emphasizes the importance of perspective within the story, specifically his “keen and eager curiosity.” Dickens goes on to discuss how the panorama enhances this trait and in turn strengthens human relationships:

It is a delightful character characteristic of these times, that new and cheap means continually being devised, for conveying the results of actual experience, to those who are unable to obtain such experiences for themselves; and to bring them within the reach of the people – emphatically of the people; for it is they at large who are addressed in these endeavours, and not exclusive audiences . . . Some of the best results of actual travel are suggested by such means to those whose lot it is to stay at home. New worlds open to them, beyond their little worlds, and widen their range of reflection, information, sympathy, and interest. The more man knows of man, the better for the common brotherhood among us all.

Dickens’s use of the word *widen* signals a parallel between the broadened physical view afforded by the panorama and the broadened social view of the visitors. While people explore and learn more other people’s worlds, they learn more about each other and form a sense of brotherhood. In this way, Dickens argues that experiencing the

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197 Charles Dickens, “Some Account of an Extraordinary Traveller” (1850) http://vsf.missouri.edu/wiki/?page_id=566#Full%20Text
198 Dickens, “Extraordinary Traveller”
panoramas brings people together to create a social network around shared experience.

At the same time, the panoramas staged within “Extraordinary Traveller,” such as Banvard’s Mississippi panorama, move the viewer through an extended history and thereby expand their scope of temporal perception:

... he closed the door of his house behind him at one o'clock in the afternoon of a certain day, and immediately proceeded to New Orleans, in the United States of America.

His intention was to ascend the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, to the base of the Rocky Mountains. Taking his passage in a steamboat without loss of time, he was soon upon the bosom of the Father of Waters, as the Indians call the might stream which, night and day, is always carrying huge instalments of the vast continent of the New World, down into the sea.

Mr. Booley found it singularly interesting to observe the various stages of civilisation obtaining on the banks of these mighty rivers. Leaving the luxury and brightness of New Orleans—a somewhat feverish luxury and brightness, he observed, as if the swampy soil were too much enriched in the hot sun with the bodies of dead slaves—and passing various towns in every stage of progress, it was very curious to observe the changes of civilisation and of vegetation too.199

The panorama affords Mr. Booley the opportunity to traverse great distances “without the loss of time.” Meanwhile, he can see several temporal stages at once as he passes “various towns in every stage of progress” and “observe[s] the changes of civilisation and of vegetation too.” The structure of the panorama expands Mr. Booley’s perception of space and time, both human and natural, and in so doing brings a common understanding of other cultures.

Influence between the serialized novel and geologic writing was also bi-directional. Dickens’s utilization and continual improvement of the serialized form led

199 Dickens, “Extraordinary Traveller”
directly led to its use in science. As Gowan Dawson argues in “Paleontology in Parts: Richard Owen, William John Broderip, and the Serialization of Science in Early Victorian Britain,”

Nature, in the long-established metaphor, was, of course, a book. In 1818 the anatomist Anthony Carlisle confidently asserted that traditional “physiological induction,” which involved “studying the connexion between function and structure,” was the “true method of reading the book of Nature.” By the mid-1850s, however, the young James Clerk Maxwell would begin speculating that nature might actually be “not a ‘book’ at all, but a magazine,” with no necessary connections between its miscellaneous components.200 If nature still remained a book in early Victorian Britain, then, as Owen’s and Broderip’s sequentially issued contributions to the Proceeding of the Zoological Society, the Penny Cyclopaedia, and British Fossil Mammals have all shown, it was most likely a serialized one.201

The early nineteenth century is often rightly viewed as a period where disciplines began to be divided, but this influence of the serialized form in fiction on scientific writing shows that differing disciplines still overlapped in many ways, especially in form. Furthermore, Dickens played an active role in directing this influence through his friendship with Richard Owen. As Dawson recounts,

In fact, in British Mammals Owen actually began to deploy several of the compositional techniques for effective serialization developed by Dickens, with whom he began a close friendship after they met in May 1844. Three months later Caroline recorded that while in the pit of the Lyceum Theatre waiting to “see ‘Martin Chuzzlewit’ dramatized . . . R. corrected a proof: of the forthcoming installment of British Fossil Mammals and that he “did some more before the curtain went up.” In correcting proof in the interval before the dramatization of Dickens’s only recently completed serial novel, Owen appears to have adopted an approach very similar to that of his new friend, who preferred the text of each


of his numbers to end well down on the final page, annotating the proofs of the fifteenth installment of *David Copperfield*.202

This account shows that Owen had an interest in Dickens’s formal innovation, and Dickens, through his friendship with Owen, may have been aware of the relationship between serial form and developments in geologic theory and writing.

Serialization, Geology, and the Temporal Framework Provided by Jarndyce and Jarndyce

Through a geologic lens, *Bleak House*’s serialized structure can be read in two ways. First, it can be read as levels of stratification, each issue layering on top of the preceding one. This structure produces a sense of abrupt change from chapter to chapter, as the reader is transported from location to location and from one character or group of characters to another, often with no transition between. Some plot lines transcend these layers; others are terminated within a part. In this way, the novel sometimes appears disjointed and broken by textual barriers that suggest a fragmentation and series of upheavals. Yet from a second point of perception, across the entire novel lies the backdrop of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case. Individual character and familial actions are recorded with detail, and at times the action seems to move at an accelerated pace, but by the end of the novel, the reader gains the sense that life will continue at gradual pace against the backdrop of history.

Scholars such as Mark Turner, Linda Hughes, and Michael Lund have discussed

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the influence of serialization on eighteenth-century novels and specifically its role in providing Dickens the ability to explore new narrative forms. Serialization was integral to Dickens’s creation of his novels’ forms. In “The Material Culture of the Victorian Novel,” Turner notes, “Although *Pickwick* was unplanned and accidental, Dickens’s fiction after it was carefully organized as he kept the serial to the fore when devising its overall structure and plots. He thought about his novels through the serial form.”203 He goes on to state, “Dickens, the great innovator of serialization, continued to experiment with the form, exploring new ideas about how best to write a narrative in parts intended to be read over an extended period of time.”204 In *The Victorian Serial*, Linda Hughes and Michael Lund connect the serial form with geology, uniformitarianism, and stratification. They state, “Victorian historicism as well as the increasingly prominent work in geology and biology embraced . . . uniformitarian rather than catastrophic principles, models of steady, continuous, consistent development rather than abrupt, cataclysmic, revolutionary change,” and “the serial also had a layering effect over time, putting down first on layer of story, then another as part succeeded part.”205 Hughes and Lund demonstrate the advantages of the serialized form to display uniformitarian geologic processes that arises from their correlation.

Because the uniformitarian view rejects abrupt, revolutionary changes, it demands a broadened scope of time. Both Lyell and Dickens used the ruins near


204 Mark Turner, 120.

Vesuvius to discuss this expanded temporal scope. In *Principles*, Lyell discusses how an antiquary might incorrectly discover stratified remains of buried cities and reason that the language spoken in the area may have abruptly changed multiple times. Instead, he argues that the passage from language may have been much more gradual and complex.206

This broadened scope of time is represented by the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case in *Bleak House*. While serialization of the novel expands its temporality in a linear sense, the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case serves as a framework much like uniformity with Lyell’s *Principles*. In discussing Lyell’s narrative strategy in *Principles of Geology*, Martin Rudwick explains,

> Lyell . . . not only conflates uniformity of kind and uniformity of degree, but also asserts that such uniformity “necessarily” entails a definite “system.” The detailed geology in the *Principles* is to be used not merely to illustrate and justify an extreme form of actualistic method, but also to substantiate a major theoretical framework. The word “system” should be given the full weight of its contemporary meaning in geology; Lyell intends to provide an explanatory framework of the broadest possible scope. . . . If processes observable at present are representative, in degree as well as in kind, of all those that have acted in the past, there cannot have been any overall directional trend in the history of the earth, which must therefore be in a “steady-state” condition. . . . Lyell’s contemporaries rightly saw the *Principles* primarily as the work of a system builder, for they recognized that his uniformitarian interpretation of earth history aimed at being an explanation as comprehensive as the directional synthesis it was designed to supplant.207

In *Principles*, Lyell attempts to describe a system to describe geologic processes in a uniform way. This motivation places the work in direct opposition to works such as Cuvier’s *Revolutionary Upheavals of the Globe*, which focused on the effects of distinct

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major geologic events in earth’s history. This shift broadens the scope as it creates the need to describe the earth in a three-dimensional rather than two-dimensional spatial system. Furthermore, whereas geologists such as Cuvier primarily investigate the past in their works, Lyell examines the past and the present simultaneously in an effort to demonstrate that the geologic processes that have occurred historically are still operating in the same way at the present. In this way the reader is implored to negotiate particular geologic events of the past with geologic events of the present.

A brief example from Lyell’s *Principles* may prove useful to explain this shift. For instance, for many years it was assumed that the top layer of the earth’s crust is the newest, and that as one looks deeper into the layers of the earth’s surface he or she will view older layers of rocks. However, in *Principles* Vol. III. Chapter 2 “Materials Composing the Earth’s Crust,” Lyell demonstrates the problem with this simplistic view. He states,

*Order of succession of stratified masses. —* All the subaqueous strata which we before alluded to as overlying the primary, were at first called secondary; and when they had been found divisible into different groups, characterized by certain organic remains and mineral peculiarities, the relative position of these groups became a matter of high interest. It was soon found that the order of succession was never inverted, although the different formations were not coextensively distributed; so that, if there be four different formations, as *a, b, c, d*, in the annexed diagram [Figure 5.5], which, in certain localities, may be seen in vertical superposition, the uppermost or newest of them, *a*, will in other places be in contact with *c*, or with the lowest of the whole series, *d*, all the intermediate formations being absent.208

By broadening the scope — in this case from a singular vertical dimension to a two-dimensional plane — Lyell shows that viewing the geologic processes of the earth in a

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linear historical fashion is inadequate; to gain true understanding, one must view
individual events represented by changes in the earth’s strata in coordination with the
entire geologic system. This system reduces the focus on individual events.

![Lyell's diagram displaying complex layering of subaqueous strata.](image)

Figure 5.5 – Lyell’s diagram displaying complex layering of subaqueous strata.

The Jarndyce and Jarndyce case serves as a similar framework within *Bleak House*, and his early description of the case’s effects expands time by focusing on
lineage while diminishing the importance of individuals. The legal system, like geology,
moves on without regard for individual lives.

Jarndyce and Jarndyce drones on. . . Innumerable children have been born into
the cause; innumerable young people have married into it; innumerable old
people have died out of it. Scores of persons have deliriously found themselves
made parties in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, without knowing how or why; whole
families have inherited legendary hatreds with the suit. The little plaintiff or
defendant, who was promised a new rocking-horse when Jarndyce and Jarndyce
should be settled, has grown up, possessed himself of a real horse, and trotted
away into the other world. Fair wards of court have faded into mothers and
grandmothers; a long procession of Chancellors has come in and gone out; the
legion of bills in the suit have been transformed into mere bills of mortality; there
are not three Jarndyces left upon the earth perhaps, since old Tom Jarndyce in
despair blew his brains out at a coffee-house in Chancery Lane; but Jarndyce
and Jarndyce still drags its dreary length before the Court, perennially
hopeless.209

The case “drones on” at a pace that is eternally slow compared to the lives of the poor
people drawn into it. This passage is similar to descriptions of the evolutionary process

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in scientific texts. Lineage is emphasized as “innumerable people” are born, married, and die, and as “fair wards of court” have faded into “mothers and grandmothers.” This emphasis is continued as “a long procession of Chancellors has come in and gone out.” The Jarndyces themselves face extinction as “there are not three left upon the earth perhaps.” The legal system, like geology, is largely an impersonal science — it pays attention to species rather than individuals. Within the quoted passage, numerous groups of people are listed: innumerable children, innumerable young people, fair wards, chancellors. Meanwhile, the one character listed by name, Tom Jarndyce, has committed suicide, but instead of ending the sentence with that fact, the sentence moves on imitating the way that the case swallows up individuals and their details in its gradual progression.

This lack of concern for individuals highlights a concern for Dickens regarding both the study of geology and the legal system. As George Levine asserts in “Dickens and Darwin, Science, and Narrative Form,” “Science, it needs to be reiterated, was for Dickens subservient to human need.” Bleak House shows Dickens’s displeasure for lawyers who devote themselves to the legal system without concern for its effect on individuals. In “Law, Literature and Morality in the Novels of Charles Dickens,” Larry Wertheim notes,

Charles Dickens’s Bleak House, regarded by many as Dickens’s greatest novel, is also Dickens’s most legal novel. The novel portrays typical Dickensian lawyers and hangers-on who are either mercenary or positively evil. In addition, the novel depicts the devastating effect of a lawsuit on the litigants.

210 George Levine, “Dickens and Darwin,” 258.
Dickens further displays that the legal system, like geology, provides false hope for immediately improving the lives of individuals. The novel presents this most clearly as Mr. Gridley complains about his lack of power to advocate for herself within the legal system:

“The system! I am told, on all hands, it’s the system. I mustn’t look to individuals. It’s the system. I mustn’t go into Court, and say, ‘My Lord, I beg to know this from you — is this right or wrong? Have you the face to tell me I have received justice, and therefore am dismissed? My Lord knows nothing of it. He sits there, to administer the system. I mustn’t go to Mr. Tulkinghorn, the solicitor in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, and say to him when he makes me furious, by being so cool and satisfied — as they all do; for I know they gain by it while I lose, don’t I? — I mustn’t say to him, I will have something out of some one for my ruin, by fair means or foul! He is not responsible. It’s the system. But, if I do no violence to any of them, here — I may! I don’t know what may happen if I am carried beyond myself at last! — I will accuse the individual workers of that system against me, face to face, before the great eternal bar!”

Mr. Gridley repeatedly claims that the system removes the individuality of those who work within its framework. He feels unable to insert his voice into the conversation or even to hold any individuals accountable as they are all working within the system.

The outcome of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case appears inevitable through this lens. By the conclusion of the case, the whole estate has been spent in paying for its legal costs. Such an outcome preserves the uniformitarian nature of the novel analogous to Lyell’s geologic view. Its failure to monetarily reward the winners of the case also maintains the novel’s assertion that the legal system often moves forward without rewarding moral individuals. A new world may be beginning, but in many ways, it promises to be similar to the old world; time moves on, but the framework remains the same.

Instead, improvement occurs in incredibly gradual increments over time, much like the uniformitarian view presented by Lyell in *Principles*. For example, in *Principles*, Lyell argues that the barrier between geologic ages is much less defined than the manner that had been proposed by catastrophism. He declares,

> It will appear, in the sequel, that such monuments [of an intervening period] are not wanting. . . Thus the line of demarcation between the actual period and that immediately antecedent, is quite evanescent, and the newest members of the tertiary series will be often found in blend with the formations of the historical era.213

Within *Bleak House*, the conclusion of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case is revealed in a chapter titled, “Beginning of the World.” This title seems to indicate a break between the previous events in the novel and the chapter’s new developments. The novel uses the same language as the above quotation from *Principles*, referring to the case as a “monument.” Mr. Kenge states, “Jarndyce and Jarndyce has been termed, not inaptly, a Monument of Chancery practice.”214 Yet the conclusion of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case occurs almost without notice as Esther arrives at the Court of Chancery after the case has been declared finished. Afterward, statements marking its conclusion are wrapped in confusion and repeated, creating the effect that temporal line between the case proceedings and the “beginning of the world” is smeared across time. For instance, when Esther recounts first learning of the case’s conclusion she writes:

> We asked [a gentleman] if he knew what was doing in it? He said, really no he did not, nobody ever did; but as well as he could make out, it was over. Over for the day? We asked him. No, he said; over for good.

> Over for good!215

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The gentleman does not know for sure that the case is over, before the reader is presented with echoes of his phrase pronouncing its end. A similar scene happens when Allan enquires about the case.

“Pray what has been done to-day?” asked Allan.
“I beg your pardon?” said Mr. Kenge, with excessive urbanity.
“What has been done to-day?”
“What has been done,” repeated Mr. Kenge. “Quite so. Yes. Why, not much has been done; not much. We have been checked — brought up suddenly, I would say — upon the — shall I term it threshold?”

In this case the phrase “what has been done” is repeated three times, and Mr. Kenge diminishes the magnitude of the event by stating that “not much has been done.” Then he expresses confusion as he seeks the proper term to describe his state. And finally, the novel produces this pattern one more time as Allan asks,

“Is this Will considered a genuine document, sir?” said Allan; “will you tell us that?”
“Most certainly, if I could,” said Mr. Kenge; “but we have not gone into that, we have not gone into that.”
“We have not gone into that,” repeated Mr. Vholes, as if his low inward voice were an echo.

Here the novel calls specific attention to the echoed phrase, and again there is confusion as Allan’s question goes unanswered. Like the geologic periods described in *Principles*, the transition between the end of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case and “the beginning of the world” proves to be much more gradual than expected.

This gradual movement is exacerbated by the novel’s serialization. At least one

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216 Dickens, 759.
217 Dickens, 759.
early critic noted the connection between the serialized form and panoramas, though the comments were not kind. In “Our Library table,” Sharpe’s London Magazine includes disparaging remarks about Dickens’s reliance on the serialized form:

> The serial form (bad at the best) is suicidal to that class of writing, at the head of which stands Bulwer Lytton. Thackeray and Dickens succeed mainly because they have no plot. Each monthly number, yellow or blue-green, presents its vivid pictures of character and life, amusing in themselves, apart from their connection with the number past and the number to come. Their fictions are like moving panoramas, intended to be seen bit by bit, with a striking effect of sunset or moonlight or storm at regular intervals.”

While Simms may not have appreciated the serialized form, his comparison between it and “moving panoramas” is important for this discussion. In many ways, Bleak House takes advantage of the serialized form. The chapters of the novel appear incredibly fragmentary, and yet the omniscient narrator and the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case serve like the tower at the center of a panorama. Characters within the painting have obstructed views, while the omniscient narrator helps the reader, like a viewer within a panorama, perceive connections across space and time. The stratified form of serialization and the arrow of time represented by the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case represent two-dimensional linear forms of representation. However, the novel’s connection to morality can best be viewed by understanding the novel as a three-dimensional literary panorama.

The Panoramic Narrative Structure of Bleak House

Despite Dickens’s fascination with the panorama, not enough work has been done to examine the connections between the form of Bleak House and the panorama.

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These connections include the novel’s serialization, the two distinct narrators, the novel’s social networks, its investigation of deep time, and its punishment for characters who fail to be able to view the world and time from a panoramic perspective. Once the novel is viewed from a perspective of one inside the panorama, the relationship of its narrative structure to understanding the human experience — specifically that each individual’s perspective scope is limited, thus restricting anyone from ever achieving a picture of the whole — can be seen. This is important, because it highlights Dickens’s view that the panorama improves understanding among people of different backgrounds. In this way, the narrative structure of *Bleak House* serves an important function in helping literature to achieve this goal.

*Bleak House*’s opening lines expand space and time on a grand scale:

London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill.  

The text begins with a sentence of a single word: “London.” This sentence is all encompassing; the numerous complex networks of life and the images of the city are all contained in this single word. In this way, the sentence places the reader in center of a panorama similar to “The Panorama of London” in the Colosseum. The view from here is vast and all encompassing. As John Timbs proudly details in *Curiosities of London*,

The painting of the picture was a marvel of art. It covers upwards of 46,000 square feet, or *more than an acre of canvass*; the dome on which the sky is painted is 30 feet more in diameter than the cupola of St Paul’s; and the circumference of the horizon from the point of view is nearly 130 miles. Excepting the dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral, there is no painted surface in Great Britain to

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compare with this magnitude or shape, and even that offers but a small extent in comparison.\textsuperscript{220} Timbs’s description of this painting is similar to the dizzying scope of \textit{Bleak House}. The novel portrays nooks and crannies across the entire city. The novel’s next lines, which portray the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall, speak to the detail allowed in such a large work while creating a static sense of time as portrayed in a painting. If the novel is viewed as the taking place from St. Paul’s cathedral — the same spot that serves as the center of “The Panorama of London” — then Lincoln’s Inn Hall is only about two kilometers away and the Lord Chancellor might very well be visible. The time described within these lines serves like the description of the time represented in a painting; the season and weather are known, but the exact time is not. As the paragraph continues, time is expanded to a geologic scale within the imagination while the details of flakes of soot, dogs, horses, and foot passengers are introduced. Furthermore, the reference to Holborn Hill strengthens the idea that the reader is situated at St. Paul’s Cathedral as it is one of the streets which is specifically included in the western view of the panorama within the Colosseum.

While the details of visual description are important to understanding the novel as a literary panorama, understanding the structure of the panorama allows the reader to better understand social networks between the characters of \textit{Bleak House}. In “Narrative Networks: Bleak House and the Affordances of Form,” Caroline Levine explains:

The first and most obvious [principle of interconnection] is the lawsuit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce itself. But there are other ways that characters are connected in the text. Disease is a prominent example: as Jo passes smallpox to Esther, the contagion itself becomes another point of contact that links social actors across

\textsuperscript{220} John Timbs, \textit{Curiosities of London} (London, 1867), 281.
groups. The network of philanthropies is a third organizing principle, bringing
Esther into contact with Caddy Jellyby and Mrs. Chadband into relation to Mr.
Guppy. There is the aristocratic social-political network, which links Lady Dedlock
to the world of fashion and Sir Leicester Dedlock to parliamentary debates about
social reform. There is “rumor,” which “persists in flitting and chattering about
town” (690). There is also the space of the city itself, which links characters like
Charley and Gridley by mere proximity. And crucially, there are systems of
kinship, the most important being the secret kinship that links Sir Leicester
Dedlock to Esther via Nemo and Lady Dedlock; but other kinship networks link
Trooper George to the Ironmaster and Mrs. Jellyby to Mr. Turveydrop.

In other words, linking characters in the novel are the law, disease, philanthropy,
the space of the city, class, gossip, and the family tree. I myself am struck by the
strangeness of this list, its puzzling incoherence: some of these are voluntary,
others coercive; some follow the procedures of state institutions, others thrive on
sheer proximity. Crucially, too, these principles of interconnection are not
omologous, so they actually have the potential to derail and subvert one another.
Mrs. Rouncewell, for example, is a point at which conflicting networks cross: loyal
to the Dedlocks, she commits herself willingly to serving an aristocratic social
order; and yet her own role in a kinship system links her to the bourgeois
Ironmaster, who is bent on replacing aristocratic hierarchy with wealth, merit, and
education, and to Trooper George, her favorite son, for whom she is willing to
sacrifice the Dedlock family name.221

This list of networks is dizzying in scope and complexity; as Levine admits, the list is
strange and puzzlingly incoherent. The networks appear to include all aspects of life.
However, understanding the novel as a panorama brings clarity to Dickens’s method.

Viewing *Bleak House* as a literary panorama, the networks appear within the
painting along the exterior wall. The omniscient narrator provides the view from the
center of the panorama. Within the novel, the omniscient narrator serves as a
complementary perspective to Esther’s narrative; both provide a limited scope of events
in sections along the exterior wall. In this way, the reader then is forced to analyze

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Esther’s two-dimensional narrative to form a more complete three-dimensional narrative with the assistance of the omniscient narrator.

The positions of Esther and the omniscient narrator within *Bleak House* combine an individualistic linear view with a panoramic one, forcing the reader to reconcile opposing perspectives. Differences in the narrations can be found throughout the novel, but it is useful to present two distinct examples here. The first example lies in the differing descriptions of the Dedlock estate Chesney Wold and demonstrates the importance of spatial perspectives. Although it is provided by the omniscient narrator, its perspective scope is limited. The omniscient narrator describes the estate in this way:

My Lady Dedlock has been down at what she calls, in familiar conversation, her “place” in Lincolnshire. The waters are out in Lincolnshire. An arch of the bridge in the park has been sapped and sopped away. The adjacent low-lying ground, for half a mile in breadth, is a stagnant river, with melancholy tress for islands in it, and a surface punctured all over, all day long, with falling rain. My Lady Dedlock’s “place” has been extremely dreary. . . The vases on the stone terrace in the foreground catch the rain all day; and the heavy drops fall, drip, drip, drip, upon the broad flagged pavement, called, from old time, the Ghost’s Walk, all night. On Sundays, the little church in the park is mouldy; the oaken pulpit breaks out into a cold sweat; and there is a general smell and taste of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves.222

While this passage provides a wide view of the estate, multiple words act like gravity to pull the perspective down along the ground. Lady Dedlock has been *down*. The ground is *low-lying*, and its *surface* is punctured by *falling* rain. *Drops fall*, and the ancient Dedlocks are *in their graves*. The omniscient narrator here presents a dreary description that from a perspective by darkness, rain, and time. An arch of the bridge is gone, rain

drops interrupt the scene’s description, the pavement is known as “the Ghost’s Walk,” and the ancient Dedlocks lie in their graves.

In contrast, Esther arrives and looks down from above, like a visitor atop a tower in a panorama. This view produces a quite different image:

Our coming to the ridge of a hill we had been ascending, enabled our friend to point out Chesney Wold itself to us, and diverted his attention from its master. It was a picturesque old house, in a fine park richly wooded. . . O, the solemn woods over which the light and shadow travelled swiftly, as if Heavenly wings were sweeping on benignant errands through the summer air; the smooth green slopes, the glittering water, the garden where the flowers were so symmetrically arranged in clusters of the richest colours, how beautiful they looked! The house, with gable and chimney, and tower, and turret, and dark doorway, and broad terrace-walk, twining among the balustrades of which, and lying heaped upon the vases, there was one giant flush of roses, seemed scarcely real in its light solidity, and in the serene and peaceful hush that rested on all around it. To Ada and to me, that, above all, appeared the pervading influence. On everything, house, garden, terrace, green slopes, water, old oaks, fern, moss, woods again, and far away across the opening in the prospect, to the distance lying wide before us with a purple bloom upon it, there seemed to be such undisturbed repose.\footnote{Dickens, 221.}

Esther specifically notes that she has ascended to the ridge of a hill. From this elevated viewpoint the trees appear to be lighted by “Heavenly wings” and the garden flowers are full of color. In contrast to the omniscient narrator’s lowly perspective, Esther notices the “chimney, and tower, and turret.” Even her comment about the peaceful hush places it above all other influence. These contrasting perspectives demonstrate that neither narrator displays the ability to provide a full view of the scene. Esther’s description does not erase that of the omniscient narrator. Her concluding remark of “undisturbed repose” provides a ghostly echo of the omniscient narrator’s notice of “a general smell and taste
of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves.” Instead, the reader is left to attempt to reconcile the tension in description provided by these two narrators.

The other primary difference between the two narratives resides in their temporality. Esther consistently speaks in past tense; the omniscient narrator speaks in present tense. This difference forces the reader to reconcile both temporalities. At the same time, Esther presents reasons to sometimes doubt her recollection. For instance, as she recalls a conversation with Mr. Bucket, she interrupts the dialogue to address the reader directly:

Although I remember this conversation now, my head was in confusion at the time, and my power of attention hardly did more than enable me to understand that he entered into these particulars to divert me. With the same kind intention, manifestly, he often spoke to me of indifferent things, while his face was busy with the one object that we had in view. He still pursued this subject, as we turned in at the gate.224

Esther’s account of this scene includes the admission that she was confused at the time and barely able to pay attention to the conversation. This admission causes the reader to question the details of conversation presented. Like the historical record presented in geologic writings within panoramas, the details of the past attract greater skepticism, especially when they are presented alongside a painting that appears to suspend a moment of the past in the present.

The omniscient narrator’s portrayal of the story operates like such a painting. This narrator speaks in the present tense even though the story presented happened in the past, creating a sense of temporal dissonance for the reader. For example, when

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224 Dickens, 680.
describing the setting for a conversation between Mr. Tulkinghorn and Snagsby, the omniscient narrator states,

In his lowering magazine of dust, the universal article into which his papers and himself, and all his clients, and all things of earth, animate and inanimate, are resolving, Mr. Tulkinghorn sits at one of the open windows enjoying a bottle of old port. Though a hard-grained man, close, dry, and silent, he can enjoy old wine with the best. He has a priceless bin of port in some artful cellar under the Fields, which is one of his many secrets. When he dines alone in chambers, as he has dined to-day, and has his bit of fish and his steak or chicken brought in from the coffee-house, he descends with a candle to the echoing regions below the deserted mansion, and heralded by a remote reverberation of thundering doors, comes gravely back encircled by an earthy atmosphere and carrying a bottle from which he pours a radiant nectar, two score and ten years old, that blushes in the glass to find itself so famous and fills the whole room with the fragrance of southern grapes.

This passage contains the past and the future in the present. The first statement emphasizes the dust as a material that encompasses the future of “all things of earth, animate and inanimate.” The description of Mr. Tulkinghorn’s dining habits simultaneously includes his past — “as he has dined today” — and foreshadows his future as he his “gravely. . . encircled by an earthy atmosphere.” Even his drink, the radiant nectar, contains a two score and ten-year history which fills the room in the form of fragrance. In this way, the omniscient narrator fills the present with the future and the past. Reading this passage against Esther’s narrative displays the task of temporal reconciliation demanded of the reader, a task which would have been required of any visitor to the panorama as they stepped into a full presentation of another time and had to square it with their present state.

At one point, the omniscient narrator even interrupts the presentation of the

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225 Dickens, 273.
narrative to articulate the reader’s role in making connections within the novel:

What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabout of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great guls, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!226

These questions display the omniscient narrator’s challenge to the reader, similar to the way De Quincey asks the reader to paint the scene. The questions move from location to location, but the narrator refuses to connect them all into a whole, leaving that task up to the reader. W. J. Harvey comments on this requirement of the reader:

. . . by intertwining the two narratives Dickens compels us to a double vision of the teeming fantastic world of Bleak House. We—and Esther—are within; we—and the omniscient author—are outside. This double perspective forces us as readers to make connections which as I have said, because we make them have more validity than if Dickens had made them for us. The most crucial instance is Esther’s ignorance of so much that surrounds her. What she sees she sees clearly; but she cannot see more than a fraction of the whole. . . . Esther is never seen by the omniscient eye, nor does Tulkinghorn ever appear personally in Esther’s narrative. (97-98)227

The presentation of fragmented narratives and the reader’s task of making connections across space and time proves strikingly similar to the Gowen Dawson’s view of the reader’s constitutive role of making science in the early Victorian period. Dawson asserts,

If, as Secord and others have proposed, textual meanings are made by readers rather than mandated by authors, and thus are never determinate or fully intrinsic, then attention to the processes of serialization affords an unparalleled perspective on early Victorian readers of science in situ, as well as precise instances of their constitutive role in the making of science in this period.228

226 Dickens, 197.
228 Gowan Dawson, “Paleontology in Parts,” 666. For more on Secord’s assertion, see J. Secord, Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the
During the early Victorian period, readers of scientific texts were placed in a position to participate in science by interacting with serialized texts. Geology focuses on the full picture; indeed, in Lyell’s *Principles*, it investigates time before human life, but it also incorporates the perceptions of and effects on individuals. Unable to understand history from an omniscient viewpoint, Esther struggles to see the whole picture. *Bleak House* forces the reader to reconcile these perspectives and thereby demonstrates the mutually dependent relationship between the broad view taken by geology and individual human lives.

The Influence of Geognosy on *Bleak House*’s Narrative Structure

The reader’s role of comprehending the individual effects and incorporating them into a broader view is most evident in the scientific process of studying geognosy, a process that was in use contemporaneous to the publication of *Bleak House*. Dickens may have been influenced to incorporate this narrative structure by his friend Thomas Carlyle. In “Thomas Carlyle’s Influence upon the Social Theory of Dickens,” Mildred Christian documents the profound influence Carlyle had on Dickens’s later novels, including *Bleak House*. She notes, “The novels of Dickens contain some strikingly Carlylean ideas on social questions.”\(^{229}\) In *Commissioned Spirits: The Shaping of Social Motion in Dickens*, Carlyle, Jonathan Arac briefly discusses Carlyle’s knowledge of geognosy and its influence on Dickens’s *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Dombey and Son*. He

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writes, “Carlyle, who had first learned German to study Werner’s ‘geognosy,’ found in German the whole linguistic complex that we have been charting, and he joined the holistic tradition of sociology, contributing to English the word environment.” I would like to extend Arac’s discussion to compare the practice of geognosy with the panoramic form of Bleak House.

Geognosy – literally earth knowledge – focused on understanding the earth in three dimensions.230 As Martin Rudwick discusses in Bursting the Limits of Time,

Geognosy had a . . . specific home, in the world of mining. Mining provided geognosy not only with empirical data on the dimension of depth in the earth’s crust, but also—far more importantly—a distinctive way of thinking and even of seeing. Anyone involved in the mining industry, from ordinary miners right up the social scale to those who managed and administered mines, worked in a three-dimensional world of rock structures.231

In other words, a miner standing in the middle of a cavern would not simply view the surrounding wall as a two-dimensional surface providing information of the strata but would instead properly recognize his position within a three-dimensional rock structure where information would be connected across alternating sides of the cavern. However, to transfer this information to others, two-dimensional visual representations known as sections would be created. Again Rudwick explains,

It was the responsibility of those who operated mines to understand as accurately as possible the three-dimensional structure of the rocks into which the mine was sunk, and of course in particular the veins of mineral ore or other economically valuable rocks that were the reason for the mine’s existence. As in mineralogy and physical geography, visual representations were central to the practice of both mining and geognosy. Maps were of course invaluable, but they were complemented by sections, which were of paramount importance. Sections

230 For comparisons between geognosy and Dickens’s Martin Chuzzlewit and Dombey and Son, see Jonathan Arac, Commissioned Spirits: The Shaping of Social Motion in Dickens, Carlyle (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 126.

231 Martin J. S. Rudwick, Bursting the Limits of Time: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Revolution (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 84.
came to be the most characteristic graphical tool in geognosy. They allowed solid structures to be depicted; they helped to make those structures convincing to others; and above all they facilitated the process of thinking in three dimensions (a talent that remains indispensable in the earth sciences and is far from being evenly distributed, as every teacher of undergraduate geology knows from experience).

Sections depicted what it was thought would be visible if it were possible to slice the ground open along a specific vertical plane: they were in effect “virtual” cliffs or quarry faces. If the rocks were “bedded”, or in the form of layers or “strata”, surface exposures were quite easy to extrapolate into three-dimensional structures, at least on a small and local scale.232

The challenge of transferring information about the layers of the earth’s surface to understand history lies in an accurate translation across dimensions between the initial observer and the analyst. The initial observer must first understand their place within the three-dimensional space of the cavern or mine. They must then translate that information onto several distinct two-dimensional surfaces known as sections. The analyst must then translate those sections into a “virtual” three-dimensional structure to accurately comprehend and interpret the data. However, Rudwick notes that this strategy works best “on a small and local scale.” The challenge then for Lyell was to incorporate these multiple slices across the globe to establish an encompassing geological theory. Furthermore, he had to connect the theories that these slices produced. Lyell discusses this approach in Principles:

But since in our attempt to solve geological problems, we shall be called upon to refer to the operation of aqueous and igneous causes, the geographical distribution of animals and plants, the real existence of species, their successive extinction, and so forth, we were under the necessity of collecting together a variety of facts, and of entering into long trains of reasoning, which could only be accomplished in preliminary treatises.

These topics we regard as constituting the alphabet and grammar of geology, not that we expect from such studies to obtain a key to the interpretation of all

232 Rudwick, 87.
geological phenomena, but because they form the groundwork from which we must rise to the contemplation of more general questions relating to the complicated results to which, in an indefinite lapse of ages, the existing causes of change may give to rise.\textsuperscript{233}

Lyell’s interplay of dimensions is vital to understanding his passage. His reference to “long trains of reasoning” implies linear textual arguments. Lyell suggests that the linear arguments create a new language that one must truly \textit{read} in an attempt to understand the earth. However, because they are two-dimensional, they fail to interpret “all geological phenomena.” Instead, they must be viewed as a groundwork from which a three-dimensional understanding \textit{rises} to contemplate more general questions. This understanding rises in the space between the panoptic viewer and the views along the exterior. Within geognosy the variety of facts are collected like the individual sections of the panorama and presented to the central viewer who poses broader questions and connects the facts into a three-dimensional whole. Analogously within the novel the characters present individual perspectives to the reader who must connect the narratives to form a full understanding of the novel.

\textbf{The Importance of Creating a Panoramic Perspective}

In order to fully understand Dickens’s use of the panoramic in \textit{Bleak House}, it is useful to look at the two detective characters within the novel, Mr. Tulkinghorn and Mr. Bucket. These characters exhibit extraordinary powers of perception and are largely successful in their endeavors — they are able to uncover multiple secrets about Lady Dedlock by constructing separate pieces of information into a narrative. However,

\textsuperscript{233} Lyell, \textit{Principles}, 356.
despite their use of the panoramic perspective, both ultimately fail — Mr. Tulkinghorn is unable to prevent his own murder, and Mr. Bucket fails to save Lady Dedlock. These failures work within the novel to show that ultimately, no one is rewarded with a full view of events. Just as a visitor within a panorama always has a view restricted by the direction in which they are facing, Mr. Tulkinghorn and Mr. Bucket are able to acquire a panoramic view but unable to achieve omniscience.

In many ways, Mr. Tulkinghorn and Mr. Bucket appear as visitors to a panoramic exhibition of Bleak House — an exhibition which they can visit and in which they can enter the exterior painting and interact with the novel’s characters before exiting and returning home. As Robyn Warhol asserts in “Describing the Unseen: The Visceral and Visual Construction of Spaces in Bleak House,” “Bucket cannot see everything, but his ability to see into remote spaces—like his and Tulkinghorn’s ability to move from place to place outside of time—destabilizes the usual ways in which vision and motion work to construct spaces.” Mr. Bucket and Mr. Tulkinghorn possess the ability to see the world within the exterior painting, but also to move back into their own worlds. The destabilization Warhol describes is created by this dissonance between the two times and spaces. As the omniscient narrator explains, “Time and place cannot bind Mr. Bucket. Like man in the abstract, he is here to-day and gone to-morrow—but, very unlike man indeed, he is here again the next day.” Like a consistent visitor to one of London’s panoramic exhibitions, Mr. Bucket arrives and examines the world within Bleak House day after day. The novel’s structure as literary panorama also provides a

possible solution to Mr. Tulkinghorn’s ability to move between two distinct places without traversing space. The omniscient narrator states:

From the verdant undulations and the spreading oaks of the Dedlock property, Mr. Tulkinghorn transfers himself to the stale heat and dust of London. His manner of coming and going between the two places is one of his impenetrabilities. He walks into Chesney Wold as if it were next door to his chambers and returns to his chambers as if he had never been out of Lincoln’s Inn Fields. He neither changes his dress before the journey nor talks of it afterwards. He melted out of this turret-room this morning, just as now, in the late twilight, he melts into his own square.235

If the action of Bleak House takes place along the exterior wall of a panorama, then Mr. Tulkinghorn can step out of the circular painting from his chambers and enter back into the painting at Chesney Wold. In this way he would move outside of the two-dimensional world of the characters into the third-dimension and then return.236

Mr. Tulkinghorn and Mr. Bucket’s perspectives within the novel demonstrate the importance of piecing together the various two-dimensional sections to construct a three-dimensional view. Within the novel, Mr. Tulkinghorn functions more as a miner practicing geognosy; he perceives detailed linear sections but remains unable to construct the three-dimensional image required by a successful analyst. The novel accomplishes this by providing him limited or obstructed linear views through windows that only allow him incomplete information. These linear views from windows contrast with the view of the omniscient narrator who opens the novel with a panoramic view and can see great swaths of time and space. The obscured views from the windows allow Mr. Tulkinghorn to create sections like the miners but prohibit them from creating

235 Dickens, Bleak House, 514.
236 For more on this type of movement between the second and third spatial dimensions, see Edwin A. Abbott, Flatland (London: 1884).
sections of multiple views. In this way, he is unable to individually create a full series of sections to provide a three-dimensional image of networks. The reader, on the other hand, is tasked with created a three-dimensional image of the networks based on a plurality of individualized sections. This contrast exhibits the possibility of increasing human relationships through technology such as the panorama.

For instance, in Chapter X, “Mr. Tulkinghorn glances through the little window at the back of Coavinses’, the sheriff’s officer’s, where lights shine in Coavinses’ windows.”237 As Alan Burke notes in “The Strategy and Theme of Urban Observation in Bleak House,”

Mr. Tulkinghorn’s glance into the sheriff’s officer’s back window reveals the chain of relationships he is mentally linking together—that Nemo, seeking employment, needs money and may be wanted for debt. While Mr. Tulkinghorn is glancing through the window, however, Mr. Snagsby, who had previously caught sight of his wife watching them from the shop door, takes this opportunity to communicate Mr. Tulkinghorn’s identity to her secretly by means of glances and silent movements.238

By glancing through the window, Mr. Tulkinghorn is able to perceive much information, but he misses other important events that are relayed to the reader from the perspective of the omniscient narrator. The narrator’s description of Mr. Tulkinghorn’s mental construction as a “chain of relationships” proves important here, as it refers to a two-dimensional relationship. Instead, the narrator provides the reader a three-dimensional image that reveals the information about Mr. Snagsby and his wife.

A similar instance appears in Chapter XVI when the narrator inquires, “Why

237 Dickens, Bleak House, 122.
should Mr. Tulkinghorn, for such no-reason, look out of window!" Burke answers, “If Mr. Tulkinghorn had looked out of the window as Allegory prompted him, he would have seen Lady Dedlock disguised in Hortenses’s clothes searching for Nemo’s burial place.” Mr. Tulkinghorn’s limited perspective in these instances causes him to miss vital information, but the most telling description of Mr. Tulkinghorn’s perspective is portrayed just before he encounters Lady Dedlock to reveal that knows her secret:

The time was once when men as knowing as Mr. Tulkinghorn would walk on turret-tops in the starlight and look up into the sky to read their fortunes there. Hosts of stars are visible to-night, though their brilliancy is eclipsed by the splendour of the moon. If he be seeking his own star as he methodically turns and turns upon the leads, it should be but a pale one to be so rustily represented below. If he be tracing out his destiny, that may be written in other characters nearer to his hand.

The narrator notes that knowledgeable men once looked to the nighttime sky to read their fortunes. (The reader of this dissertation may recall Edward Young’s attempt to seek theological instruction from the nighttime sky in Chapter 1.) The novel supports this connection between the stars and humans as it asserts that Mr. Tulkinghorn’s star must be a pale one. However, the narrator transfers the focus down to Mr. Tulkinghorn’s hand, lowering the perspective to an earthly one. As the narration continues, Mr. Tulkinghorn’s perspective continues to narrow:

As he paces the leads, with his eyes most probably as high above his thoughts as they are high above the earth, he is suddenly stopped in passing the window by two eyes that meet his own. The ceiling of his room is rather low; and the upper part of the door, which is opposite the window, is of glass. There is an
inner baize door, too, but the night being warm he did not close it when he came upstairs.  

In this passage, the narrator uses repetition of the word “high” to contrast Mr. Tulkinghorn’s lowly view. The passage moves from high above the earth suggesting the possibility of a panoramic image to a two-dimensional window and finally down to “two eyes.” Then the perspective becomes more limited between the low ceiling and the upper part of the door. Mr. Tulkinghorn’s limited perspective foretells the faultiness of his plans to maintain control over Lady Dedlock.

In contrast, Mr. Bucket consistently attempts to gain information by ascending as one would within a panorama. In Chapter XXIV Mr. Bucket declares, “George, I know where my man is, because I was on the roof last night, and saw him through the skylight, and you along with him.” Mr. Bucket has ascended to the roof to gain a panoramic to find Mr. Gridley. In Chapter LVI, Mr. Bucket constructs and climbs a mental tower to achieve a panoramic view:

There, he mounts a high tower in his mind, and looks out far and wide. Many solitary figures out on heaths, and roads, and lying under haystacks. But the figure that he seeks is not among them. Other solitaries he perceives, in nooks of bridges, looking over; and in shadowed places down by the river’s level; and a dark, dark, shapeless object drifting with the tide, more solitary than all, clings with a drowning hold on his attention.  

Mr. Bucket is able to search the city from his mentally constructed tower, similar to the tower within a panorama. His problem in this case is that Lady Dedlock has severed her connections to society. Within this passage, the narrator refers to the figures as

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242 Dickens, 507.

243 Dickens, 673.
“solitary” three times. Mr. Bucket is able to cast a broad view but unable to connect the details that will lead him to Lady Dedlock in time.

The power of the panoramic view lies in the observer’s ability to simultaneously maintain a broad perspective and attention to detail. In geology, this method leads Lyell to observe that the borders between strata are not well-defined; instead, strata often blend into one another. In *Bleak House*, Lady Dedlock’s death demonstrates the dangerous nature of misreading class boundaries in a strict manner. The lines between the aristocracy and common people are often blurred. On a broader level, both Lyell and Dickens recognize the limitations provided by individual perspective and work to overcome this by creating narrative structures similar to the panorama. In both cases, the reader must connect several images across space and time to construct a mental image of the whole.

Aligning *Bleak House* with the other texts in this dissertation highlights the complexity and difficulty of arranging information in the present. Combining multiple perspectives in the manner of Mr. Bucket or Mr. Tulkinghorn proves useful, but ultimately some information always escapes detection as views of the surrounding universe are always influenced and limited by the vantage point. Esther’s narrative represents an attempt to arrange the events of the past and make sense of them, but even then her perception is limited. The novel argues that one must constantly engage in rearranging the events of the past in order to create a system that explains the present.
CHAPTER 6

EPILOGUE

While this dissertation describes cross influences between science and literature from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, the strong interconnection between these disciplines would continue. In 1859, Charles Darwin would publish *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, a work that has influenced multiple literary texts and continues to serve as the cornerstone to modern evolutionary theory. In *Darwin’s Plots*, Gillian Beer demonstrates that *The Origin of Species* is also a product of literature, especially the works of Charles Dickens including *Hard Times* and *Dombey and Son*. While *Bleak House* can also be connected with *The Origin of Species*, it can also be read as a precursor to modernist literature and to Einstein’s theories of relativity — it highlights the fragmented nature of experience and demonstrates that spatial and temporal observations are always affected by the position of the observer. This perception of experience proves similar to that described in Albert Einstein’s theories of relativity.

Einstein’s insight expressed in these theories grew from his reconceptualization of space and time as elements that are sewn together to form the fabric of the cosmos. Suturing literary and scientific works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries broadens the perceived scope of their influence. Hopefully, this study will inform and inspire future scholars working to construct a system that elucidates the human experience in a universe unbound by space and time.


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