

MORBID STRAINS IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE  
FROM 1850 TO THE *FIN DE SIÈCLE*

By

Elizabeth Meadows

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Approved:

Professor Carolyn Dever

Professor Jay Clayton

Professor Paul Young

Professor James Epstein

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## Chapter I

### Introduction: Defining Morbidity in Victorian Literature and Culture

In Victorian Britain, a fascination with death was an ever present background to the social, industrial, and scientific changes that mark the era. Queen Victoria wore full mourning for her dead husband for forty years; people wore jet mourning brooches containing the hair of their beloved dead; gravestones, monuments, and funeral ceremonies became incredibly elaborate and expensive.<sup>1</sup> In the twenty-first century, the visual evidence of Victorians' preoccupation with death remains on display at Highgate Cemetery, one of the most popular tourist destinations in London.<sup>2</sup> If you go to Highgate Cemetery today, you can either wander around Highgate East on your own, or join a guided tour around the older section, Highgate West. The guided tour begins in the cobbled courtyard just beyond what used to be the Anglican chapel, in front of a curved colonnade of brickwork. Once past the colonnade, the paths within the cemetery twist and curve, designed so that there are no clear prospects; you can never see very far ahead of you or be sure exactly where you will end up. All around the tombstones cluster in their variegated forms—some marble, others pink granite; some sunken and cracked, others rearing crosses elevated on triple plinths inscribed with the names and dates of the dead. The iconography of grave markers includes marble urns swathed with carved cloth, an empty

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<sup>1</sup> For details on Victorian mourning and burial practices, see *The Victorian Celebration of Death*, by James Stevens Curl, *Death in the Victorian Family*, by Pat Jalland, and *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, by John Morley. For a broader historical and geographical context, see Philippe Ariès *The Hour of Our Death* and Julian Litten's *The English Way of Death*.

<sup>2</sup> The official website for Highgate Cemetery advises potential visitors to arrive early if they want to go on a guided tour and warns people that "Sundays are particularly popular and it is sometimes not possible to accommodate everyone wishing to visit" ([highgate-cemetery.org](http://highgate-cemetery.org)). Clearly, the Victorians' preoccupation with death has become an object of fascination in itself.

seat draped with a carved shroud, broken columns—some adorned with stone wreaths. On one tombstone an angel rests, chiseled out of marble, sleeping forever on a bed of stony clouds. On another there is a bas relief of a mother pelican with her young, offering them her breast for nourishment; our tour guide informs us that the mother pelican embodies an ideal of motherhood that yields her own flesh and blood as food and drink for her children, an ideal that also symbolizes Christ's sacrifice. The mother pelican as funerary ornament provides us with an almost literally concrete image of an ideal of motherhood that insists upon female self-sacrifice in the interests of future generations. The fascination with death and mourning manifests itself aesthetically, transforming a cultural ideal into a material form.

The Victorians' interest in death and mourning manifests itself in literary form as well, along with an equally powerful preoccupation with lingering disease. Protracted deathbeds and sudden fatalities, brain fevers and mysterious wasting diseases, madness and obsession—such events, scenes, and states of mind proliferate in Victorian novels and poetry. Death and disease are the raw materials that Victorian writers shape into narrative and poetic form. Thus Victorian literature and culture are both marked by a preoccupation with death, disease, and other disturbing subjects—a preoccupation that is undeniably morbid, “characterized by excessive gloom or apprehension, or (in later use) by an unhealthy preoccupation with disease, death, or other disturbing subject; given to unwholesome brooding” (OED).

The term “morbid” is originally a medical one, referring to disease or conditions that tend to cause disease, as in books entitled *An Inquiry into the Morbid Effects of a Deficiency of Food* and *On Deafness from Morbid Conditions of the Mucous Membrane of the Stomach, Throat and Ear*.<sup>3</sup> Thus to call someone or something morbid is to accuse it of being diseased or tending to

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<sup>3</sup> Reviewed in *The Monthly Magazine, or, British Register* 3:14 (1840: Feb.), p. 226 and *The Monthly Magazine* 95:543 (1842: Mar.), p.325.

cause disease. In Victorian literary circles, however, the accusation of morbidity was leveled at works ranging from sonnets to sensation fiction, from literary biography to lyric poetry.

Inveighing against the new and best-selling trend of sensation novels, one critic wrote that the “morbid phenomena of literature” are “indications of a widespread corruption” that threatened English literature itself (Mansel 483).

Hence we are confronted with a central paradox within Victorian literature and culture. A culture that to all appearances is more preoccupied with death and disease than any before or since nonetheless uses the charge of morbidity to index literary value—or the lack thereof. Although Victorians reveled in and celebrated morbidity in their daily lives, they simultaneously condemned morbidity as literary anathema. In the Victorian press, vitriolic accusations of morbidity became one of the most potent weapons in debates about literary and aesthetic value, and such charges were not always leveled at works that dealt with the topics of death or disease. Why did writers, artists, critics, and journalists call anything and everything they found distasteful *morbid*, and what did they mean by it? Morbidity in Victorian literature is not just about death, disease, and a horrified fascination with the pleasures and pains of the flesh. Although these are the raw material for many Victorian novels and poems, literary morbidity is, I will show, a fascination with literary form as well as flesh.

In order to define morbidity in Victorian literature, let us return for a moment to Highgate Cemetery, a site where fleshly and literary fascinations merge in the story of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddall. Here, along a narrow, winding track overgrown with brambles, lies the plot of the Rossetti family, which contains the body of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s wife Elizabeth Siddall, as well as those of Rossetti’s parents, his sister Christina, and his brother William Michael. The plot looks barely large enough to bury one person, never mind so many.

Despite the resurgence of scholarly interest in the poetry and aesthetic philosophy of D.G. Rossetti, the tour guide tells us that she does not remember much about Rossetti except a tale of love and death, betrayal and remorse. After briefly noting D.G. Rossetti's role in originating the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the guide narrates the familiar tale of how Rossetti loved and eventually married Elizabeth Siddall, the lovely model he had painted so often shrouded in her cloud of red-gold hair. But, she says, he was not the type of man to remain faithful to one woman, despite marrying her.<sup>4</sup> Less than two years after the marriage, following the birth of a stillborn child and a long struggle with depression and addiction, Siddall died of a massive overdose of laudanum. Heartbroken and guiltstricken at the loss of the woman he had loved so long and betrayed so often, Rossetti decided to bury with her his only manuscript of the volume of poetry he had been working on intermittently for years. But time marches on; ardor cools; even grief fades. Years passed, and Rossetti began to fear that he was going blind, which would end his career as a painter. Rossetti wanted to restart his poetic career, but to do so he needed to retrieve his poems from the grave. Rossetti's eagerness to return to poetry overcame his revulsion at the idea of disturbing Siddall's corpse. He obtained an exhumation order, and his close friend Charles Augustus Howell, accompanied by a lawyer, dug up Elizabeth Siddall's coffin to retrieve the volume of poems Rossetti had sacrificed. According to the tour guide, when they opened the grave, they found that Elizabeth's hair had continued growing after her death, so that Howell had to unearth the volume from the mass of beautiful red-gold hair that filled the coffin. Revised, augmented, and reordered, this manuscript became Rossetti's 1870 volume, *Poems*—a work of art sprung from the grave.

Initially, Rossetti's poems received glowing reviews in the Victorian periodical press. But a dissenting voice arose to spearhead a charge against Rossetti's work and the work of his

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<sup>4</sup> In her biography of Rossetti, Jan Marsh challenges this version of the story.

fellow poets and painters. In 1871, Robert Buchanan published “The Fleshly School of Poetry,” an article in which he excoriated Rossetti’s poetry and painting, calling them “morbid,” “epicene,” and “nasty,” not on the basis of the self-evidently morbid episode I have just related, but on the grounds that Rossetti’s work—and that of his associates, was too “fleshly.” Buchanan’s scathing attack on Rossetti’s poetry suggests that morbidity—manifested in the “fleshliness” Buchanan condemned—endangered the privileged place of literature in Victorian culture—that is, as a repository for transcendent human value and a testament to individual genius.

Buchanan’s accusation of morbidity draws on an already-existing discourse of literary morbidity. Before Buchanan leveled the charge of morbidity at Rossetti, other critics had accused Alfred Tennyson’s *Maud*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, and sensation novels of morbidity. The cultural reception of these works illuminates the emergence of morbidity as a formal and thematic concern in Victorian literature. These aesthetic and formal implications of morbidity become explicit in Buchanan’s attack on D.G. Rossetti’s poems. In this introduction, I begin with these works and their cultural reception to place Buchanan’s accusation within a broader literary context and to outline the characteristics of literary morbidity. I will then return to “The Fleshly School of Poetry,” which most clearly reveals that when critics charged literary works with morbidity they were attacking the form of these works as much as the content. Finally, I will show that the morbid forms Buchanan condemned eroded formal distinctions between literary production and other, more industrialized modes of production.

At around the same time that the meaning of “morbid” expanded from physical pathology to include states of mind characterized by an obsessive preoccupation with unpleasant topics, morbidity becomes a contested term in literary criticism. In an 1855 essay about Tennyson’s

poetry, George Brimley objects to the fact that “morbid” “has acquired a perfectly new meaning of late years, and is made to include all works of art, and all views of life that are coloured by other than comfortable feelings” (62). Morbid works of art and literature inspire or portray discomfort. In a review of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, an anonymous reviewer similarly challenges the use of morbidity in literary criticism, writing:

“We have heard it said of this biography, as is frequently said of the writings of its subject, that the interest which it excites is ‘morbid,’ an epithet used with effect against much of the most vital and poignant literature of the day, to which it is only applicable in a sense much too wide for the purposes of those who use it, and one which ought in consistency to lead to the conclusion that ‘mind is nothing but disease, and natural health is ignorance.’ It may be so; but if so, ... let us get up a medical standard and judge genius by a diagnosis of its nerves and its digestion.” (*Gaskell: The Critical Heritage* 395)

This reviewer uses the literal meaning of morbid—diseased—to take the critical meaning of morbidity to its absurd extreme. In doing so, he or she lampoons a common Victorian assumption that the artistic impulse is always potentially pathological, and that the aim of literary criticism is to diagnose the health (or otherwise) of writers, as well as to judge the likely effects texts might have on their readers’ health.<sup>5</sup> Taken together, Brimley’s essay and this review indicate that “the most vital and poignant literature of the day” are the works that evoke or portray discomfort. The power to move readers, to evoke response, paradoxically testifies to both the vitality and the morbidity of literary works.

As the anonymous reviewer points out, Brontë’s novels were often characterized as morbid, and her final novel, *Villette*, published in 1853, certainly evokes discomfort. Written in the first person, *Villette* is the fictional autobiography of Lucy Snowe, a poor and plain young lady who must struggle to make a living and find some love in the world. Unlike the engaging

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<sup>5</sup> See Bruce Haley’s *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture*; in his chapter on health and Victorian literary criticism, Haley says that the “Victorian critic believed that he should diagnose a work, looking for signs of disease or soundness, then looking further for causes of the disclosed condition” (46). Haley makes it clear that the critical discourse of morbidity was in service of normativity, suggesting why morbidity is a contested term at the time.

narrators of other fictional autobiographies such as *Jane Eyre*, Lucy is so unreliable a narrator as to appear almost hostile to her readers, withholding vital information at several important turning points. For example, Lucy ends the novel with a refusal of closure; she insists that she will not tell the reader whether her story closes with a happy marriage, a desolate spinsterhood, or—even more disturbing—a happy spinsterhood! The uncertainty and resistance to closure at the end of Brontë’s final novel resemble the subjective experience of disease. The sick body exists in a liminal state between life and death, precariously balanced between a potential return to health and a descent into death. In a similar fashion, Brontë’s novel offers readers two or more possible endings, even as it hovers between ending and closure: the novel stops, but readers do not know how the story ends. Both thematically and formally, *Villette* resists closure, and this resistance becomes one of the defining characteristics of morbidity as literary form.

When Brontë sent *Villette* to her publishers, they warned her that the novel and its narrator would be perceived as morbid, as Brontë’s reply makes clear. In her response, Brontë declares that Lucy’s morbidity is not only related to her hypochondriac suffering, but is the inevitable result of circumstance: “You say that she may be thought morbid and weak, unless the history of her life be more fully given. I consider that she *is* both morbid and weak; her character sets up no pretensions to unmixed strength, and anybody living her life would necessarily become morbid” (392). In the novel, Brontë reveals the suffocating power of the socioeconomic and gender relations that shape Lucy’s circumstances in a passage that renders Lucy’s interiority almost palpable to her reader:

I did long, achingly, then and for four-and-twenty hours afterwards ... This longing, and all of a similar kind, it was necessary to knock on the head; which I did, figuratively, after the manner of Jael to Sisera, driving a nail through their temples. Unlike Sisera, they did not die: they were but transiently stunned, and at intervals would turn on the nail with a rebellious wrench; then did the temples bleed, and the brain thrill to its core. (121)

In this passage, the longings that Lucy must “knock on the head” are her desire for love and marriage. Brontë invokes and deconstructs the gender ideology of her time, which dictates that Lucy’s desire is the norm, yet also dictates that the open expression of this desire makes women unfeminine, not to mention potentially diseased and immoral. Brontë shows that Lucy’s normative feminine desire must be silenced; it can only speak by its silences, and Lucy reveals that such speaking silence is a protracted torture. The unreliability and unaccountable silences of Lucy’s narrative are the formal traces of the Victorian imperative for women to suffer and be still, and the discomfort they evoke testifies to their morbidity. Simultaneously, by metaphorically nailing sexual desire down, Brontë makes the morbidity of this passage painfully fleshly. Brontë’s final novel makes morbidity a central thematic concern through Lucy’s hypochondria, physical frailty, and her nervous breakdown. At the same time, *Villette* expresses morbidity as literary form in Lucy’s unreliable and withholding narration, which formally replicates the silencing of feminine desire even as it represents such silencing as torture.

Tennyson’s *Maud*, like Brontë’s *Villette*, is a fictional autobiography, albeit one in poetry and with an even more unreliable narrator. In it, the poetic speaker narrates his life story in hundreds of stanzas of wildly varying length and meter in which he falls in love, loses his beloved, goes briefly mad, and then joins the army headed for the Crimean War. The poem is subtitled, “A Monodrama,” and Tennyson claimed that the disruptions in verse form and meter were dramatizations of his speaker’s multiple moods and states of being. Tennyson uses form to make the morbidity that characterizes his poetic speaker uncomfortable for his readers, notably in this passage from the speaker’s period of madness, when he imagines he is dead and buried, listening to the footsteps of the living passing his grave:

O me, why have they not buried me deep enough?  
Is it kind to have made me a grave so rough,

Me, that was never a quiet sleeper?  
Maybe still I am but half-dead;  
Then I cannot be wholly dumb;  
I will cry to the steps above my head  
And somebody, surely, some kind heart will come  
To bury me, bury me  
Deeper, ever so little deeper. (II: 334-342)

The self-evidently morbid subject-matter is here almost eclipsed by the metrical difficulty of the passage. As Scott Dransfield demonstrates in a recent article in *Victorian Poetry*, the morbidity of *Maud*'s content is reflected in its form—specifically its meter. Dransfield writes, “some lines are quite difficult to scan, indeed quite difficult simply to utter aloud with any degree of rhythmic proportion” (282). Dransfield locates the metrical morbidity of *Maud* within the context of Victorian medical discourses about nerves and health; the poem's wildly irregular and variable meter both enacts the speaker's “ungoverned subjectivity” and has powerful effects on the nerves of its readers, bringing them into a similar state of heightened nervous excitement.

The relation between form and content in Tennyson's poem brings out another aspect of literary morbidity. Victorian notions of health make it clear that morbidity was a mental state related to physical pathology. Bruce Haley quotes Charles Kingsley, declaring that “[o]ne of the rewards of bodily health is that ...it ‘makes one unconscious of one's own body’” (5). Disease, on the other hand, made one uncomfortably conscious of one's body, leading to an obsessive concern with the self. Haley also quotes Ruskin to show that Victorians place self-reflexivity and isolation in opposition to health: “‘All the diseases of the mind leading to the fatalest [*sic*] ruin consist primarily in ... isolation. They are the concentration of man upon himself’” (48). Disease makes the individual self-conscious, and this focus on the self leads to isolation and unhealthy mental states. In Tennyson's poem, the speaker's relentless focus on himself as both subject and object in the passage above, manifested in the repetitions of “me” and “I,” evokes a

morbid mental state even as it contributes to the metrical morbidity of the passage.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, the poem itself becomes self-reflexive as its form replicates its content. This self-reflexive concern with form and its relation to content will become one of the hallmarks of literary morbidity.

Although critics panned *Maud*, not least for its morbid effects on its readers' nerves, it remained Tennyson's favorite poem for public performance till the end of his life. In defense of his poem, Tennyson wrote that the poem dramatizes "the blighting influence of a recklessly speculative age," and that his speaker, originally "constitutionally diseased," is "dipt . . . into the circumstances of the time" (qtd. Dransfield 279-80). His comments about *Maud* suggest that the morbidity of his poem and its speaker are both products of the social conditions of the times, especially, as the ending of the poem makes clear, the jingoistic and bloody excitement surrounding the Crimean War. Both the cultural concern with nervous disorders and the hysteria surrounding the Crimean War were products of a new experience of modern life as a series of shocks to the system: the daily encounter with hordes of strangers, the repeated jolting of railway travel, and the accelerated pace of life itself evident in the immediacy of the wartime reporting from the Crimea. In *Maud*, Tennyson reveals the morbid effects of social change on his speaker and simultaneously uses form—rhythm and meter—to create those same effects in his readers.

The poetic effusions of the Poet Laureate, however poorly received by Victorian critics, may seem a far cry from the trashy literary subgenre of the sensation novel, but the critical accusation of morbidity leveled at both reveals hidden similarities between Tennyson's poetry and sensation novels. In the 1860s, the sensation novel took the Victorian literary world by storm. As the name suggests, novels of this genre were marked by moments of sensation. Like

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<sup>6</sup> Although "me" and "I" appear multiple times in this passage, the metrical position and emphasis of each repetition changes. Tennyson's use of stress-shift merely within this brief passage is exemplary of how he deploys poetic form to achieve his effects, in this case to destabilize the "I" of the poem.

Tennyson's *Maud*, these novels excited physical responses in their readers, creating nervous excitations that could lead to illness. These physical responses were the embodied reaction to a newly sensational experience of modernity created by, among other things, the transition to an industrial economy and the proliferation of factories, the concomitant movement of large numbers of people to major cities, the advent of an extensive network of railways, and the accelerating circulation of newspapers depicting lurid or criminal incidents in word and image.<sup>7</sup> As Jenny Bourne Taylor points out, "When critics self-consciously referred to the 1860s as the 'age of sensation,' they meant . . . that the word encapsulated the experience of modernity itself—the sense of continuous and rapid change, of shocks, thrills, intensity, excitement" (3). The shocking events that characterize sensation plots—murder, bigamy, the return of the living dead—were a formal requirement of the genre that offered readers a distilled and displaced version of their own experience as uneasy inhabitants of a newly modern world. Although the sensation novel lacks the cultural cachet of poetry, it also engages in the self-reflexive and thus morbid interrogation of form's relation to content.

The novel that started the craze for sensation was Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*, published in 1860. The cultural reception of this novel, as well as of sensation novels in general, reveals that the Victorian literary establishment associated morbidity with uncanny forms of production and reproduction. One critic damned Collins with faint praise, writing, "Mechanical talent is what every great artist ought to possess. Mechanical talent, however, is not enough to entitle a man to rank as a great artist" (249). The reviewer acknowledges Collins' ability in terms reminiscent of the factory: "whatever the machinery of Mr. Collins be worth, he works it

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<sup>7</sup> See Georg Simmel's "The Metropolis and Mental Life" for an analysis of the effects of the shift to urban living; see Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey* for information on the physical and cultural effects of the railways; for an entertaining overview of the sensational press, see Thomas Boyle's *Black Swine in the Sewers of Hampstead*.

on the whole well. The last twenty or thirty pages in the second volume are a capital specimen of his best mechanical mannerism” (250). The novel is a machine, Collins is the worker using that machine, and the product is sensation; the end of the second volume of *The Woman in White* is the most sensationally morbid moment of the novel, when Walter Hartright encounters his beloved Laura standing over her own grave.

Collins’ plots are machines, and they produce and reproduce characters and readers that become mechanized as well. Collins’ characters, as well as those in other sensation novels, reproduce mechanically within their texts through the plot device of doubling. Characters are substituted for one another because of their external resemblance, and their lack of interiority suggests that they are merely mechanical reproductions engineered by the author to move the mechanism of the plot. Like the doubled characters in sensation novels, readers were subject to the erosion of individual identity through the process of consuming sensation novels that played directly on their nerves, evoking identical physical responses from each and every reader. Commentators worried that the widespread appeal of sensation novels could have the effect of making readers into identical products of the machine. Readers were further mechanized by the modes of production and consumption associated with sensation novels. Most of them, like *The Woman in White*, appeared in serial form first, and were cheap enough to be widely available to people who could not afford three-volume novels or a subscription to a circulating library. One of the most common venues for the sale of sensation novels was actually the railway stall. Readers could buy the latest number, board the train, and enjoy shocking sensations from both their reading material and the vibrations of the train. Imprinted by the serial parts of sensation novels—themselves associated with processes of mechanization and the circulation of commodities—readers’ bodies became mechanical reproductions of the characters that populate

the genre—or so it seemed to Collins’ critics, who condemned such effects on readers in terms of disease, corruption, and morbidity.

However, it was not just the shocking content of sensation novels that drew critical fire. Dean Henry Mansel’s scathing attack on the genre suggests that the genre’s formal aspects were as dangerous as its usual subject matter; he writes:

excitement alone seems to be the great end at which they aim ... And as excitement ... cannot be continually produced without becoming morbid ... works of this class manifest themselves as belonging ... to the morbid phenomena of literature—indications of a wide-spread corruption, of which they are in part both the effect and the cause; called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply. (482-3)

Mansel explicitly links the morbidity of the sensation novel to the formal requirements of the genre. The repetition of sensational scenes demanded by the serial form of publication turns readers’ interest in the plot into “cravings of a diseased appetite.” Sensational moments deprive readers of choice, making them into embodied creatures driven by somatic responses rather than conscious will. The critique of sensation novels epitomized by Mansel’s review shows that literary morbidity becomes apparent in a set of formal characteristics and effects, but most of all in the uncanny reproduction of sensation in characters and readers alike.

According to Mansel—and others—this uncanny reproduction of sensation endangered the cultural status of literature. Mansel writes that sensation novels are inspired by “the market-law of demand and supply,” not the “divine influence” of genius or creativity, so that “a commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop. The public want novels, and novels must be made—so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season” (483). Mansel’s metaphor makes sensation novels into Britain’s most typical industrial commodity—cotton, betraying a fear that literature is no different from any industrial commodity.

To sum up, the morbidity that critics deplore in the 1850s and 60s has both a thematic and a formal register. In Brontë's novel, large and small scale formal aspects like Lucy's unreliable narration and Brontë's use of disturbingly fleshly metaphors render social pathology into literary form. In *Maud*, Tennyson uses variations in verse form and disruptions in meter to dramatize both his speaker's madness and the social circumstances that cause it, as well as to create physical effects on his readers. Sensation novels similarly evoke physical sensations in their readers, and the rapid spread of these sensations is both cause and effect of the industrialization and commodification of literature.

All of these aspects of morbidity come to a head in Buchanan's article "The Fleshly School of Poetry," his response to the praise lavished on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1870 volume, *Poems*. At the very midpoint of the period covered by this dissertation, Buchanan excoriated Rossetti's poetry and painting, calling them "morbid," "epicene," and "nasty" on the grounds that Rossetti's work was too "fleshly." In both the article and the pamphlet version he published later, Buchanan writes, "the fleshly gentlemen have bound themselves by solemn league and covenant to extol fleshliness as the distinct and supreme end of poetic and pictorial art; to aver that poetic expression is greater than poetic thought, and by inference that the body is greater than the soul, and sound superior to sense" (335). Buchanan accuses Rossetti's works (and those of his associates) of "fleshliness" because their formal properties—"poetic expression"—appeal to their readers' senses—"sound is superior to sense." Were this a fault limited to the select coterie that Buchanan names, it would be unimportant, he says, "because sooner or later all literature finds its own level." However, the fleshly gentlemen's poetic deployment of sensuous effects—"sound over sense"—is dangerous because "they are diligently spreading the seeds of disease broadcast wherever they are read and understood. Their complaint is too catching, and

carries off many young persons” (336). Rossetti’s mode of “poetic expression,” like the shocking events in sensation novels, spreads through and infects readers through their physical reactions.

Buchanan insists that “fleshliness,” a fascination with the physical and sensuous effects of poetry, is morbid, declaring that Rossetti’s poetry and painting equally testify to a “morbid deviation from healthy forms of life,” a “delight in beautiful forms, hues, and tints, and a deep-seated indifference to ... all the thunderous stress of life” (337). This suggests that it is a “morbid deviation from healthy forms” to “delight in beautiful forms” because such delight is concurrent with a withdrawal from the “thunderous stress of life”—the struggles and upheavals that mark the period from 1848, when Rossetti began working on some of the poems in his volume, to 1870, the year of its publication.<sup>8</sup> While Buchanan is correct that none of these events appears in Rossetti’s *Poems*, his focus on the way Rossetti uses rhyme and meter bears remarkable similarities to earlier critiques of the sensation novel, which were overtly concerned with the industrialization and commodification of literature. Buchanan worries that the “delight in beautiful forms,” self-reflexivity, and resistance to narrative evident in Rossetti’s work have the potential to degrade poetry to a decorative and reproductive product. Buchanan is identifying something here in Rossetti’s work that is closely tied to “all the thunderous stress of life” even as it withdraws from it. To put it another way, the content of Rossetti’s work may be divorced from cultural concerns, but the form replicates larger cultural shifts, among them the move to industrial production of literature itself.

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<sup>8</sup> These upheavals include the revolutions in Europe in 1848, the Great Exhibition in 1851, the Crimean War (1853-56), the Sepoy Rebellion in India (1857), the turmoil surrounding the passage of the second Reform Bill (1860-67), the debates over divorce and married women’s right to own property (1850s through 1880s), the Franco-Prussian War (1870).

In the later pamphlet version, the formal aspect of the charge of morbidity becomes clearer. Buchanan writes that “the morbid habit penetrates into the writer’s treatment even when, as very seldom happens, he chooses a subject by no means morbid in itself” (68). In drawing this distinction between Rossetti’s treatment and his subject-matter, Buchanan emphasizes the formal nature of his critique. For example, Buchanan calls attention to the metrical oddities of Rossetti’s poems, noting a “habit of accenting the last syllable in words which in ordinary speech are accented on the penultimate.” This is, he says, one of the “tricks and affectations” that make the fleshly school’s poems easily imitable and indicate their lack of artistry. He declares, “it is easy to reproduce sound when it has no strict connection with sense, and simple enough to cull phraseology not hopelessly interwoven with thought and spirit. The fact that these gentlemen are so easily imitated is the most damning proof of their inferiority. What merits they have lie with their faults on the surface, and can be caught by any young gentleman as easily as the measles, only they are rather more difficult to get rid of” (347). The formal disruptions of meter are “morbid habits” that enable the disease of “fleshliness” to spread like the measles.

Unlike earlier reactions to *Maud*, which were concerned about the readers’ health, Buchanan’s reaction to Rossetti’s *Poems* reveals a concern for the future of poetry itself. The spread of morbid and fleshly forms endangers the status of poetry, since “Ideas too bald for prose, too trivial to stand unadorned, appear unique enough when subjected to the euphuistic process, and robed in all the wordy glitter of rhyme” (Pamphlet version 88). What then does Buchanan think poetry should be? Great poets, in Buchanan’s estimation, tell stories—narratives. He writes: “Tell *Paradise Lost*, the *Divine Comedy*, in naked prose; do the same by *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear*; . . . take up the *Excursion*, a great poem, though its speech is nearly prose already; turn the *Guinevere* into a mere story; reproduce *Pompilia*’s last dying speech

without a line of rhythm. Reduced to bald English, all these poems, and all great poems, lose much; but how much do they not retain?" (347-8). The narrative element is what makes these poems translatable into prose, and Buchanan links the narrative with the antithesis of fleshliness: "A poem is a poem, first as to the soul, next as to the form" (348). Form is fleshly, while narratives are soulful. Works of literature in which formal characteristics frustrate narrative drive are morbid.

We can understand the morbidity of challenges to narrative drive by looking at the experience of disease in the Victorian period. While there were many diseases that were short, sharp, and shockingly terminal (cholera)<sup>9</sup> and more or less long-drawn-out preludes to death (tuberculosis),<sup>10</sup> chronic diseases were also endemic in the Victorian period, and a matter for public concern (for example, venereal disease). The chronically sick body is subject to a recursive temporality, in which symptoms of disease can appear, resolve, recur, and transform in cycles that gesture toward but never achieve termination in either renewed health or the finality of death. In the cyclical temporality of disease, progress becomes a return to a previous condition. Thus the morbid body, constantly changing yet never getting better, undermines linear and teleological understandings of temporality. Chronic illness thus literally embodies an alternative to Victorian faith in progress conceived as purposeful change and as continual

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<sup>9</sup> Haley describes the symptoms and course of cholera as follows: "The progress of the illness in a cholera victim was a frightening spectacle: two or three days of diarrhea which increased in intensity and became accompanied by a painful retching; thirst and dehydration; severe pain in the limbs, stomach, and abdominal muscles; a change in skin hue to a sort of bluish gray" (6). Cholera's rapid and visible effects, its foreignness, the ineffectuality of treatment, made it particularly terrifying.

<sup>10</sup> Emily and Anne Brontë both died of tuberculosis. Their first symptoms appeared shortly after the funeral of their brother, Patrick Branwell Brontë, in October of 1848. Emily died on December 19, 1848; Anne lingered till May 28, 1849 (Barker 570, 576, 594). After the lung hemorrhage that marked the onset of the final stages of tuberculosis, John Keats lingered for a year (Stillinger xiv, xxx).

improvement.<sup>11</sup> Henry Maudsley, the noted Victorian physician and psychologist, describes the progress of morbidity as a nightmarish inversion of Victorian ideals of progress: ““To ask that the morbid mind should stay at a certain level of degeneracy and cease to display new morbid functions would be very much like asking that a morbid growth amid healthy structures should increase and undergo its changes independently of them”” (qtd. in Haley 21). Morbidity expresses itself in literary form as recursivity, fragmentation, and a resistance to closure, while it appears thematically as a concern with characters and states of mind that exist on the borders of cultural norms.

Buchanan lost. Rossetti is now commonly taken to be a precursor to the aesthetes of the *fin-de-siècle*, and the subsequent turn to modernism (although the modernists despised him). The qualities Buchanan condemned became the hallmarks of the autotelic art object that modernists prized: form over content, self-reflexivity, resistance to narrative, and the divorce from social concerns. But Buchanan’s attack on Rossetti reveals that the distinction between art and life on which the aesthetes and then modernists predicated their aesthetic projects cannot stand. In the introductory sonnet of *The House of Life*, Rossetti declares that a sonnet must be “Of its own arduous fulness reverent” (5). The highly formalized sonnet is a container that is, so to speak, full of itself. But that very fullness is always at risk of becoming emptiness—a matter of form only. This evacuation of content makes poetic expression into a series of hollow forms, yet simultaneously marks the failure of form to escape from social concerns.

In this dissertation I track the evolution of morbidity through the interplay of literary form and social concerns in lyric poetry, biography, novels, and life-writing from 1850 through

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<sup>11</sup> See Maria H. Frawley’s *Invalidism and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, in which she claims that the figure of the invalid “apotheosized stasis,” and thus “expresses the cultures profound skepticism not simply about the inability of scientific medicine to cure, but also about other social movements, institutions, and ideologies premised on the notion of progress” (12, 13). The figure of the invalid is the embodiment of morbidity.

the 1890s. I begin with Tennyson's *In Memoriam, A.H.H.* (1850), in which Tennyson's confrontation with empty form in the corpse of his beloved Arthur Henry Hallam leads to a crisis of poetic authority that the poet resolves through an image of marriage founded on death. I then turn to Elizabeth Gaskell's biography of her friend and fellow writer, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). Gaskell uses the life and death of her friend to develop a model of morbid authorship that can enable women writers to claim literary authority and evade the strictures of Victorian gender ideology. In the third chapter, I address Collins's *The Woman in White* and Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, arguing that in these novels both writers respond to the spectacular appeal of the corpse, evident in the gravitational pull the Paris Morgue exerted on British tourists in Paris. Collins exploits the morbid appeal of the corpse to develop a narrative that consists of the depletion of energy and will through sexuality. Dickens attempts to counter the morbid plotting of Collins's novel, yet in doing so makes the corpse equally central, though invisible, in his novel. In my final chapter I turn to the late-Victorian poet, Michael Field, the literary avatar shared by Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper. In their journals and poetry, the Fields effect the separation of morbidity from art by elevating the formal aspects of morbidity into aesthetic principles that structure the joint narrative of their lives and their 1892 volume of ekphrastic poetry, *Sight and Song*.

The evolution of literary morbidity over the second half of the nineteenth century reveals a domestic lineage for British aestheticism and decadence. Critics have noted the important influence of French authors such as Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, and Gustave Flaubert on the aesthetic and literary movements of the *fin de siècle*. This study of morbid forms in narrative and poetic genres demonstrates that British aestheticism and decadence are not solely imports from France. They have a British lineage both in high culture texts celebrated as

uniquely British and in popular works that seemed to threaten the status of British literature as an art form.

Although I argue that morbidity manifests itself as form in the works I discuss, it also appears in every chapter through the concern with death, the dead body, or states resembling death. Tennyson, Gaskell, Collins, Dickens, and Field all seize on death as a spur to formal interrogations of authorship and its function in Victorian culture. Thanatological literary studies have noted the importance of death and dying in Victorian literature, doing impressive work on the function of death in literature. Elisabeth Bronfen argues that the representation of death, especially the death of a woman, is the text or image looking at its own “process of composition,” or condition of representation, a “*mise en abyme*” (71). Garrett Stewart’s tour-de-force close readings of the moment of death in *Death Sentences* reveal the rhetorical demands that death places on language; Stewart analyzes how the formal aspects of language within the death scene “compact and so dramatize the very premises of representation that permit and condition it” (7). Both Bronfen and Stewart reveal that death is central to literary modes of representation, yet do not address the cultural context of Victorian concerns with death.

During the period I cover, the representational importance of death is amplified by the spread of cultural concerns about the corpse and its effect on the living. In the 1830s, the Anatomy Acts made the corpses of the poor into anatomical specimens. Social reformers of the middle of the century, among their other sanitary preoccupations, believed that the overflowing graveyards of London contributed to both moral and physical disease. The laws regarding who could be buried where were in the process of changing, contributing to the rise to the secular cemetery. Funeral ceremonies became more elaborate and expensive, while the simple gravestone gave way to highly decorated grave monuments bearing, among other things, statues

of angels or cherubs, weeping maidens with eyes upraised to heaven, and sculpted urns of drooping ferns. In the latter part of the century, the debate around what to do with the dead body shifted its focus as cremation became an option. Critics have addressed these topics in a number of excellent studies of death and disease in Victorian literature and culture. I add to this existing critical conversation through my focus on the rhetorical texture and function of depictions of death and disease, as I argue that morbidity is an important formal aspect of Victorian literature.<sup>12</sup>

Disease and its formal effects on Victorian novels have been theorized in works such as Miriam Bailin's *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction* and Athena Vrettos's *Somatic Fictions*.<sup>13</sup> Rather than focusing on disease as such, I shift my attention to morbidity as an aesthetic judgment and argue that we can identify a morbid narrative even in texts that do not portray the physical condition of disease. Furthermore, I argue that the narrative of morbidity becomes salient in lyric poetry and prose non-fiction as well as the realist novels that Bailin and Vrettos discuss. While I deal with death and disease in my analyses of morbid forms and situate them in their particularly Victorian context, my approach to death in literature is more formalist than those of critics addressing the literary manifestations of Victorian culture's obsession with death and disease.

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<sup>12</sup> Ruth Richardson's *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute* is essential reading for its analysis of how the Anatomy Acts of the 1830s criminalized poverty. In *Literary Remains*, Elizabeth Hotz details the shifts in burial practices in Victorian England and their representation in literature. Pamela K. Gilbert has written a number of excellent studies of disease and its effects within the social and literary fields in Victorian culture; these include *The Citizen's Body*, *Mapping the Victorian Social Body*, and *Disease, desire and the body in Victorian women's popular novels*. In *Making a Social Body*, Mary Poovey offers an analysis of the sanitary debates and social reform movements of the mid-Victorian period and their relation to the constitution of a social field.

<sup>13</sup> Other books in this vein include Peter Melville Logan's *Nerves and Narratives*, which deals with how the nervous disorder of hysteria both produced, justified, and undermined narratives. Books that deal with the intersection of medicine or science and literature more broadly include J.A.V. Chapple's *Science and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* and *Literature and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Britain*.

Since I argue that morbidity manifests in form as well as content, my approach to the texts I discuss is a formalist one. I use the tools of close-reading to bring out how the authors I discuss create morbid effects. In charting the narrative of morbidity, I engage with narrative theory, most particularly Peter Brooks because his model for narrative and closure is also closely intertwined with death. Like Brooks, I also draw on the work of Sigmund Freud, in particular the narratives of normative and pathological grief in “Mourning and Melancholia” and the theory of the death drive he articulates in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. I also draw on Lee Edelman, not as a queer theorist, but as a theorist of futurity and its discontents. I argue that Michael Field deploy the formal traits of morbidity in such a way as to evacuate morbidity itself from the aesthetic product, and in doing so envision a futurity not bound to the fantasy of symbolic meaning through the reproductive order. Even though Edelman notes that the nineteenth century sees the figure of “the Child” emerge in literature as the token demanding allegiance to “the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism,” I read morbidity as a tactic through which authors can challenge such a teleology and offer alternative futurities.

The authors in this study engage with death and the corpse in multiple ways, but in all cases as an authorizing strategy, asserting the importance of their work in their various social and historical contexts. Thus I place these writers and their works within their larger field of cultural production, noting how contemporaries react to their works and what social value or function they ascribe to the texts I engage. For Tennyson, Gaskell, Collins, Dickens, and Field, the historical context includes the challenge to faith in God mounted by the increasing importance of empiricist epistemology. Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* was written over a period of seventeen years, almost exactly coinciding with the time between the Reform Bill of 1832 and the Great Exhibition of 1851. Published not long after the defeat of Chartism and the 1848 revolutions in

Europe, the time seemed ripe for taking stock of recent changes and looking to the future. Gaskell, writing in the mid-1850s, situates her subject at the center of the woman question and its relation to female authorship. In the 1860s, both Collins and Dickens respond to the spread of spectacular print media and a revolution in the idea of identity as grounded in the corporeal substance of the body. I end my narrative of morbidity with Michael Field's journal, *Works and Days*, and their ekphrastic transformation of the scene of death in *Sight and Song*. Elevating morbidity to an aesthetic principle, the Fields show how *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism redefines morbidity. No longer present as theme, morbidity becomes pure form in the Fields' poem "Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*."

All of the above writers were profoundly influenced by the development of a revolutionary concept of subjectivity and its relation to embodiment. According to this model, individuals are made up of a momentary assemblage of elements, while their apprehension of the external world is a subjective phenomenon produced by the soma itself. Right after the decade of the sensation novel, Pater sums up this view in 1870, in his famous Conclusion to *The Renaissance*:

What is the whole physical life...but a combination of natural elements to which science gives their names? But those elements, phosphorus and lime and delicate fibres, are present not in the human body alone: we detect them in places most remote from it. Our physical life is a perpetual motion of them—the passage of the blood, the waste and repairing of the lenses of the eye, the modification of the tissues of the brain under every ray of light and sound.... This at least of flame-like our life has, that it is but the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways.

Or if we begin with the inward world of thought and feeling, the whirlpool is still more rapid, the flame more eager and devouring.... the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind. Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. (150, 151)

The radical subjectivity of Pater's *Conclusion* is the summation of a series of changes in how people thought about the conditions of embodiment and its relationship to identity and the subject.<sup>14</sup> Pater points out that a state of endless flux is the condition of existence, and such a state undermines the stability of notions of fixed identity and subjectivity grounded in the body. A fixed and unchanging body and subject are therefore only possible with the moment of death that ends the eternal flux that makes subjects unknowable to themselves as well as to others. The importance of death as a moment that paradoxically unites the impossibility of representation with the potential for true knowledge undergirds the approach to death employed by all the writers I discuss.

The morbid strain I trace in Victorian literature reveals a tension in how Victorians saw the role of literature in society. Morbidity in Victorian literature threatens ideals of progress, highlights unease with the rapid changes of social and industrial forms and practices, and suggests that the rapid changes of the period are actually pathological. If canonical and representative works of literature like *In Memoriam*, popular forms like the sensation novel, didactic forms like the literary biography, and aestheticist forms like the Fields' poetry were all morbid in one way or another, it would seem that morbidity is part and parcel of literary production in a variety of forms. It would erode the status of literary works to suggest that they were merely the products of sick or weak minds, yet if such works were representative of their culture, they testified to a pathological state of society. Either society was diseased, or literature itself was diseased. However, morbidity itself offers a way out of this double bind. The final transformation of morbidity into form allows morbidity's resistance to closure to open the classic

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<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Crary's analysis of the nineteenth-century reorganization of vision in *Techniques of the Observer* offers an excellent example of this shift.

realist novel up to multiple futures not necessarily queer or heteronormative, diseased or healthy,  
but full of aesthetic potential.

## Chapter II

### Morbid Forms in Tennyson's *In Memoriam, A.H.H.*

“I thought I could describe a *state*; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process. It needs not a map but a history, and if I don't stop writing that history at some quite arbitrary point, there's no reason why I should ever stop.”

C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

In 1833, Alfred Tennyson received word that Arthur Henry Hallam, his beloved friend and *de facto* literary agent, had died suddenly in Vienna. Overwhelmed by grief, Tennyson began writing a disconnected series of elegiac lyrics, in which the speaker memorializes his dead friend, seeks consolation for his loss, expresses despair that such consolation could exist, and finally comes to a resolution in which Arthur's brief life and sudden death serve as a guarantee of “one far-off divine event, / To which the whole creation moves” (Epilogue: 143-4).<sup>1</sup> For more than a decade, Tennyson continued adding to his collection of lyrics, each composed of a varying number of four-line stanzas in an *abba* rhyme scheme. Sixteen years after Arthur's death, Tennyson rearranged the order of these lyrics and wrote another poem that he placed at the beginning of the poem as a prologue.<sup>2</sup> In 1850, Tennyson circulated the poem he had

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<sup>1</sup> Like Alan Sinfield, I use “Arthur” to refer to Tennyson's friend instead of Hallam. As Sinfield astutely points out, the poet calls him by that name in the poem, and we would never think of calling Dante's Beatrice or Petrarch's Laura by their last names when discussing the works in which they appear. In addition, I will be quoting from the memoir written by Tennyson's son Hallam Tennyson and wish to avoid confusion between Arthur Hallam and Hallam Tennyson.

<sup>2</sup> Tennyson dated the Prologue 1849, ensuring that its position at the beginning of the poem was obviously anomalous with the order of events portrayed and the order of composition. Timothy Peltason writes that Tennyson “clearly meant to set them [the stanzas that constitute the Prologue] apart from the numbered sequence of lyrics that composes the rest of the poem. Placed even before the title in the trial edition of the poem and marked off in all subsequent editions by the subscribed date ‘1849,’ these stanzas offer their secure and rounded assertions from some fixed point outside...the poet's experience within the poem” (19). I do not find the prologue as “secure and rounded” as Peltason does, since the poet describes the poem to come as “wild and wandering cries / Confusions of

stitched together among his friends and, encouraged by their response, published it as *In Memoriam, A.H.H.* The other titles Tennyson considered were “The Way of the Soul” and “Fragments of an Elegy”; the title Tennyson finally chose makes the poem itself into a gravestone, calling attention to Arthur’s dead body, the invisible and generative corpse that lies beneath the text.<sup>3</sup>

Although the title of the poem attests to its morbid status as a memorial—a textual marker of a grave or an absent dead body—*In Memoriam* was the subject of a critical debate over whether it was morbid or “healthy.” While the review in *The Britannia*, John Forster’s review in *The Examiner*, and Charles Kingsley’s review in *Fraser’s Magazine* praise the poem as “healthy,”<sup>4</sup> George Brimley’s 1855 essay, “Tennyson’s Poems,” suggests that an opposing camp had emerged since the publication of the poem. Brimley does not agree that the poem is “healthy,” but nonetheless defends it against the charge of morbidity, neatly summarizing and critiquing the charge and then presenting his own position:

We should be guilty of treason against our deepest convictions were we to pass without a protest the notion that *In Memoriam* is a morbid mistake,—the unhealthy product of a man of genius in an unhealthy mood, degrading his genius by employing it in the delineation of a sorrow that is unmanly and exaggerated,—a spasmodic utterance of a weak mind, that can only affect other weak minds with hysterical emotion, and incapacitate all who subject themselves to its influence for their duties to their fellow men and their reliance upon the goodness of God ....

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a wasted youth” (Prologue:41-2). In describing his verses as “wild and wandering...Confusions,” the poet implies that there is no end or purpose to his poem, nor any binding narrative logic that could constitute or attest to a unified self or a univocal meaning. Thus I read the Prologue as undercutting any “assertions” it might make even as it suggests that the poem to follow goes nowhere.

<sup>3</sup> Tennyson never actually saw Arthur’s corpse, though he imagines seeing it more than once. However, no lyric deals with the visual encounter with the dead body as such, although, as we will see, the poet does portray the corpse as an animated figure.

<sup>4</sup> See Edgar Finley Shannon, Jr.’s “The Pinnacle of Success: *In Memoriam*.” Shannon quotes Forster’s review: “It is the record of a healthy and vigorous mind working its way, through suffering, up to settled equipoise and hopeful resignation” (112). The *Britannia*’s reviewer praises section 106, “Ring out, wild bells,” by calling it “suggestive, healthy, full of generous aspirations, poetical, sympathetic, Christian”; the reviewer, however, regrets that Tennyson’s consolation was not more specifically Christian throughout the poem (117). For Kingsley’s review, see *Tennyson: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John D. Jump.

*In Memoriam* traverses the widest circuit of thought and feeling ... and represents the night-side of the soul as rich in objects and as various in hues, as the side illuminated by love and joy... There is as much variety and beauty in this aspect of life, as in the other... If all life but enjoyment and action is morbid and unhealthy, the world has been strangely misconstrued. (87-8, 90)

In the twentieth century, Harold Nicolson and Martin Dodsworth specifically address Tennyson's morbidity. Nicolson claims that Tennyson's morbidity is the most important aspect of his personality, and that the manifestations of this morbidity in his poetry are the best of Tennyson's work.<sup>5</sup> Although Dodsworth takes an opposite viewpoint—that Tennyson's poetry is best when he manages to distance himself from the morbidity of his characters, he agrees that morbidity is central to Tennyson himself as well as some of his poetic protagonists.<sup>6</sup> Both critics insist on morbidity as central to Tennyson's poetry as its origin, if not its end.

More recently, Herbert Tucker has discussed the “therapeutic structure” of *In Memoriam*, demonstrating an enduring critical preoccupation with *In Memoriam*'s curative potential (118). Tucker sums up this “therapeutic structure” as follows: the poetic speaker begins in a state of despair, and then “seek[s] ... to heal an initially alienated grief by generalizing it,” and then, through an act of “cultural commemoration publicly shared” comes to terms with grief,

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<sup>5</sup> Nicolson writes, “For me, the essential Tennyson is a morbid and unhappy mystic,” and his best poetry occurs at “sudden panting moments when the frightened soul of the man cries out to one like some wild animal caught in the fens at night-time—moments when he lies moaning in the half-light in an agony of fear. And at such moments the mystical genius of Tennyson comes upon one in a flash, and there is no question of the reality of his emotion and his impulse” (27). In his biography of Tennyson, Christopher Ricks tries to refute Nicolson, yet he agrees that the best parts of *In Memoriam* are “the poems of most intense feeling, and these tend to be the darkest. Tennyson was not simply ‘a morbid and unhappy mystic’ (in Harold Nicolson’s words), since he was many things, but such is here the profoundest of his writing” (225)

<sup>6</sup> Dodsworth writes, “Tennyson’s poetry *is* morbid, at least in the sense that it grows from morbid feelings in the poet himself. And yet it is surely not great *because* it is morbid, but because at its best it allows us to feel at once the poet’s intense involvement with his subject-matter and at the same time his control over it .... The extent to which repetition is more than incidental to the success of a given poem may be indicative of the extent to which Tennyson has succeeded in distancing himself from his morbidity” (22). Dodsworth interestingly places morbidity (as theme) in a hydraulic relationship with the formal aspect of repetition; repetition apparently drains off morbidity in the poems where it succeeds as a rhetorical device.

mortality, and the social context that conditions him (386, 405, 376). Interestingly, Tucker's argument suggests that the poem's therapy consists in "generalizing" a personal grief, as if the speaker's despair is cured by spreading it like a disease. In claiming that *In Memoriam* has a "therapeutic structure," Tucker implicitly refutes the charge of morbidity. Nonetheless, his analysis of *In Memoriam* suggests that the poem's curative potential is paradoxically predicated on expanding morbidity from a personal condition to a cultural phenomenon.

As an elegy, Tennyson's poem is centrally concerned with death and its relationship to the poet's voice.<sup>7</sup> The expansion of morbidity from an individual problem to a cultural phenomenon indicates why *In Memoriam*'s morbidity is nonetheless such a vexed and vexing question for so many critics. A month before the publication of *In Memoriam*, William Wordsworth died, leaving vacant the position of Britain's Poet Laureate. Tennyson, along with Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Leigh Hunt, was in the running for the next laureateship. *In Memoriam* secured Tennyson's claim to the position, establishing Tennyson as the central and most representative poet of Victorian culture and making *In Memoriam* the exemplary poem of Victorian literature. But if Tennyson and *In Memoriam* are morbid, then morbidity expressed in literary form is central to Victorian literature. The debate about the morbidity of the poem and its author indicates a larger debate about the role of morbidity in Victorian literature and culture.

As the opposing views of *In Memoriam* demonstrate, the poem is both morbid in that it portrays the "night-side of the soul," and healthy, or therapeutic (a term that notably credits speech itself with curative potential) in that it offers a possible way out of the "night-side" to

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<sup>7</sup> In elegy, the death of beloved becomes the occasion for speaker's accession to poetic authority: "the task of elegy, the poem that habitually begins in silence or confusion, is to produce the elegist's own coherent self" (Kennedy 24). Milton's "Lycidas" is the prime example of how elegy performs this task.

“the side illuminated by love and joy.”<sup>8</sup> The poem’s (and the poet’s) morbidity is evident in its prolonged mode of production, its form, and its content. Tennyson spent seventeen years working on the poem, returning repeatedly to the subject of Arthur’s death.<sup>9</sup> Within the poem, the poet imagines other graves and anonymous corpses, his own death numerous times, and the millions of dead bodies that litter the geological record. The speaker and author are thus characterized by the “extreme gloom or apprehension ... [the] unhealthy preoccupation with disease, death, or other disturbing subjects” that define morbidity (OED). By the end of the poem, however, the speaker has found consolation in the certainty that Arthur still exists as “some diffusive power,” “mix’d with God and Nature” (130:7, 11), which enables him to “move from the summary alienation of the opening stanza to a conclusion that joins him to ‘men’ in general” (Tucker 404). The poem ends with an epilogue in the form of an epithalamion celebrating the marriage of the poet’s sister. Thus Tennyson uses marriage to emblemize his poetic speaker’s return to social concerns and his certainty of the “far-off divine event” that compensates for his loss. In closing his poem with a wedding, Tennyson chooses the traditional comic ending that constitutes and reinvigorates a community and gestures toward its future. So the morbid grief of the poet is finally cured through an image of sexual and social communion and potential rebirth.

However, the overtly morbid themes of the poem merely go underground in the epilogue, in which the dead body returns anonymously and invisibly. The poet brings his sister to the altar and describes her as she stands “waiting to be made a wife, / Her feet, my darling, on the dead; / Their pensive tablets round her head” (Epilogue: 49-51). Nor is this the only way that the poet

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<sup>8</sup> In *Studies in Hysteria*, Josef Breuer’s patient Fraulein Anna O. names the process of “removing her phantasms” by talking about them while under hypnosis “the talking cure,” a phrase later taken up by Sigmund Freud to describe how psychoanalysis works (30).

<sup>9</sup> Tennyson also returned to the subject of Arthur’s death in other poems, including “Ulysses” and “Morte d’Arthur.”

returns to death at the end of *In Memoriam*. The wedded couple, he writes, leaves the church to “pass the grave / That has today its sunny side” (71-2). As the celebration continues, the poet “Conjecture[s] of a stiller guest, / Perchance, perchance, among the rest, / And tho’ in silence, wishing joy” (86-88). The unnamed corpse, the “sunny” grave, and the imagined ghostly presence that haunt the marriage Tennyson uses both to close his poem and to gesture toward a future of progress, also return the poet and reader to the instigating problem of *In Memoriam*: how to make meaning out of death. In a poem obsessively concerned with finding meaning in the death of one particular man, what is the meaning of the dead body that recurs anonymously and briefly at the end?

The corpse that lies under the marriage ceremony is an empty shell, a body evacuated of its animating spirit. As such, it is both pure content—dead matter—and simultaneously an empty form marking an absence. In this chapter, I argue that for Tennyson the corpse becomes a figure for poetry itself—a hollow form. Hence morbid theme and form merge in the dead body, which is both material fact and a figure for a historically situated crisis of poetic voice.

Tennyson’s poetic expression of his grief and doubt evacuates poetic forms of their meaning, just as Arthur’s body has been emptied of life. Tennyson’s language of grief is a series of empty forms, and his poetic expression of grief reveals that form is all that is left of poetry. Over the course of the poem, Tennyson attempts to revivify poetic speech, and he grapples with the question of how poetic form can have meaning and a meaningful social role. Finally, the poet turns to marriage as a social form that offers the possibility of future meaning. However, the corpse remains as the token of an inescapable morbidity manifested in and through form.

Since *In Memoriam* is a long and complicated poem, for the benefit of the reader who cannot hold the entirety of the poem in memory, I offer a summary of its narrative and structure

to contextualize the readings of individual lyrics in the following pages. For this summary, I draw on A.C. Bradley's account of *In Memoriam*, in "The Structure and Effect of *In Memoriam*."<sup>10</sup> According to Bradley, who bases his claims on one of Tennyson's many summaries of the narrative of *In Memoriam*, the poem is divided into four major movements, each of which contains linked groups of lyrics. The first movement consists of sections 1-27, up to the first Christmas after Arthur's death. Within this movement, the "tone" is of "absorption in grief," and the most notable grouping consists of sections 9-17, also known as the "Fair ship" lyrics, on the ship carrying Arthur's body back to England (Bradley 127). The second movement covers sections 28-57, up to the second Christmas. The "idea of the continued life of the dead" is central to this movement, as the poet yearns for certainty that Arthur still exists as an individual consciousness and still loves him (Bradley 127). This movement contains the "evolutionary" group of lyrics, in which the poet attempts to reconcile the evidence of geology and the fossil record with belief in a caring God. The third movement brings us to the third Christmas, in sections 58-103. A group of lyrics (90-95) deal with "possible contact of the living and the dead"; the last section in this group contains the poet's mystic and momentary reunion with Arthur—a climactic moment in the poem (Bradley 128). The other major grouping deals with the poet moving to a new house and leaving memories of Arthur behind. The final

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<sup>10</sup> Other critics offer their own versions of the movement of the poem from grief to consolation. I select Bradley's because I find it the most useful for a large-scale overview of the poem, yet it is far from definitive. In his magisterial *Tennyson and the Doom of Romanticism*, Herbert Tucker lays out a brilliant and compelling reading of the poem as a whole and in its component parts as a movement from isolated grief to a reengagement with his community, but it is far too long and detailed to lend itself to summary. Timothy Peltason also offers a useful reading of the trajectory of the poem in *Reading In Memoriam*; his account is focused the ambivalence of Tennyson's poem as it "describes not just the mingled desire and reluctance of doubt to yield to faith, but also of the part to yield to the whole, of the unique self to become the voice of England, and of the moment to surrender its significance to some far-off divine event" (18). Alan Sinfield's analysis of the poem points out how "Tennyson manages, almost, to install his dead friend in the space reserved for the Nameless, as the transcendental signified which would finally guarantee the fulness of all our mundane signs" (113). In Sinfield's reading, Arthur also guarantees the rightness of the social order and the assurance of positive progress. Isobel Armstrong demonstrates how Tennyson uses Lyell's geological model to "reconstruct continuities out of rupture itself," so that what is "destroy[ed] in one place" is "repair[ed] with the residues of a former age in another" (*Victorian Poetry* 254).

movement consists of four groups, the first describing the third Christmas, the second demonstrating a determination to turn away from the past, the third about “the character of the dead friend, and incidentally the dangers of the progress of mankind,” and the fourth expressing “faith in the future both of the individual and of humanity” (Bradley 129).

### **Forms of grief**

In the opening sections of *In Memoriam*, Tennyson creates a series of empty forms: living bodies, dead bodies, and grief itself. As the poem continues, Tennyson empties out rhetorical figures as well, making them into hollow forms whose very emptiness makes them formal representations of his grief. In the opening stanzas, the speaker clings to grief as the only constant in a world disrupted by loss, rejecting the possibility of change over time. He writes that he “held it truth . . . . That men may rise on stepping stones / Of their dead selves to higher things (1:1-4). According to the past belief, indicated by the past tense “I *held*,” the present self is predicated on the “dead selves” of the past. The use of the past tense shows that the poet no longer holds this belief; he denies the inevitability of change over time. However, by claiming that he once “held” this truth and implying that he does so no longer, the poet contradictorily proves the assertion he wishes to deny: he has changed. Although he wishes to refute the idea of multiple “dead selves” that underlie the present self and its beliefs, the very syntax of the speaker’s denial reveals its truth. In the final stanza of the first lyric, the poet reveals his fear that if he stops grieving, the “Victor hours” will boast, “Behold the man that loved and lost, / But all he was is overworn” (13, 15-16). The wearing process of time links the past self, what “he was,” to what he now “is,” yet it does so by destroying or wearing away that past self. The body endures, but the self within is repeatedly “overworn” by time, becoming a dead self left behind

from moment to moment. The syntax of the line demonstrates that the continuity of the self contradictorily depends on the continual wearing away of that self, as if even living bodies repeatedly leave “dead selves” behind, becoming empty forms.

In order to forestall the repeated production of “dead selves” that wear away and leave the present self an empty form, the poet commands, “Let Love clasp Grief lest both be drown’d” (9). In this imperative, the poet insists that the intertwining of these two emotions can preserve the self from the wearing effects of time. Without the loss of the love object and the resulting grief, love and the self would both be lost, but by remaining in an eternal “dance with death,” the speaker snatches a form of triumph from time, preserving both love and identity from the “Victor hours” (11, 12). In the following stanza, the poet elaborates on this way of stopping time through holding on to the lost love object. He addresses an “Old yew, which graspest at the stones / That name the underlying dead” and declares that he “grow[s] incorporate to thee” (2:1-2, 16). By describing the yew tree as clasping a gravestone, the poet emphasizes the kinship between himself and the tree: the tree holds the gravestone, the poet holds on to grief by memorializing his dead friend in the poem that serves as his gravestone. Just as the tree’s “fibres net the dreamless head” of the corpse beneath the gravestone, the poet holds on to grief, hoping for the permanence of the tree that “changest not in any gale” (3, 10). However, the emptiness of the “dreamless head” suggests that the grief the poet clasps for contrary comfort may be hollow as well. As the poem continues, the poet gives form to the emptiness of grief through his use of rhetorical figures that fail to express the content of his grief even as they replicate its form.

In section three, racked by the first throes of bereavement, the speaker addresses Sorrow herself, beginning with the apostrophe “O Sorrow” (3: 1).<sup>11</sup> He then asks her, “What whispers

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<sup>11</sup> I am not saying that Tennyson was in the first throes of bereavement when he composed this lyric. The order in which the lyrics appear in the completed poem is not the order of composition. By situating this lyric at the

from thy lying lip?” (4). Tennyson can speak his silent grief by personifying Sorrow, but all she says is a lie; she cannot speak his grief but only a more general despair about the “dying sun” (8).<sup>12</sup> In her lying and despairing speech, the rhetorical figure of Sorrow creates another rhetorical figure that can only echo Sorrow itself:

‘And all the phantom, Nature, stands—  
With all the music in her tone,  
A hollow echo of my own,—  
A hollow form with empty hands.’ (9-12).

In this response Sorrow personifies Nature and mobilizes the pathetic fallacy to show that all Nature is indeed a “hollow echo” of human emotion, of Sorrow herself. However, Tennyson’s use of assonance in this sequence of clauses suggests that both Nature and Sorrow become “hollow forms”—or rhetorical figures without any real meaning. Sorrow declares that Nature’s music is “a hollow echo of my own,—” (11). But “hollow” itself is an aural echo of “Sorrow,” suggesting that Nature’s “echo” is “hollow” because it replicates the hollowness at the heart of Sorrow. Although the final line, “A hollow form with empty hands,” refers back to “Nature” in the first line, the appositive phrase in the middle two lines introduces an ambiguity. While “my own” refers back to the “music in her tone” of the previous line, the dash, which sets off the appositive phrase, also creates a stalled parallelism: All Nature’s music is a hollow echo of my own—what? The dash replaces the expected noun and visually draws the reader forward to the next line so that the final line seems to modify “my own” in the previous line, meaning Sorrow’s “music” or “tone.” In this last reading, Nature becomes a hollow echo of the hollow form that is the personification of Sorrow. The dash marks the empty space, functioning as the trace of

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beginning of his long poem, Tennyson takes advantage of the narrative structure readers see in the poem to represent his poetic speaker here as in the early stages of grief. The first lyric Tennyson wrote was probably the “Fair ship” lyric, section 9.

<sup>12</sup> As Barri Gold points out in “The Consolation of Physics: Tennyson’s Thermodynamic Solution,” this line is the most explicit expression of the entropic nature of the universe.

hollowness at the heart of the figure of personification. The poet's attempt to give words to sorrow reveals that the content of grief is emptiness, a series of hollow echoes, or an aural *mise en abyme*.

The emptiness at the heart of grief must be yet cannot be expressed in language, and in section five Tennyson makes the problem of expressing grief explicit, declaring the insufficiency of words that, "like Nature, half reveal / And half conceal the Soul within" (5: 3-4). Despite this insufficiency, the poet declares that "A use in measured language lies; / The sad mechanic exercise, / Like dull narcotics, numbing pain" (6-8). The formal qualities of language, not its content, can dull the pain of grief, though they cannot express it. Here Tennyson is clearly referring back to William Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in which Wordsworth declares that the pleasure of meter and rhyme can dampen the effects of emotional excitement. However, Tennyson revises Wordsworth by removing the pleasurable component and emphasizing the "mechanic" effects of form and its power to dull consciousness. The expression of grief is baffled, and the emotion itself is numbed by the narcotic powers of language. At this moment, "measured language" becomes like Time in its power to wear away emotion, as it deadens the pain not only through formal qualities such as monotone sound but also by an ongoing "mechanic exercise" of production. This "mechanic exercise" over time makes the poet another hollow form, "overworn" by language and emptied of emotion.

Despite the inability of language to "reveal ... the Soul within," the poet decides that "In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er" (5:9). In comparing words to "weeds" the poet explicitly likens language to the carefully formalized set of rules governing the social forms of mourning. However, this system is a matter of surfaces only, and cannot really express the content of the poet's grief: "that large grief which these [words/weeds] enfold, / Is given in outline and no

more” (11-12). Although it seems ridiculous to say that a poem that details the poet’s grief in 131 separate lyrics is a mere “outline” of grief, Tennyson’s claim makes the entire poem into an empty form. Like mourning “weeds,” language remains on the surface, outside the body; like the personifications of “Sorrow” and “Nature,” words can only be hollow forms that clothe further emptiness. Tennyson’s speaker makes the poem into the formal analogue of his unspeakable grief by showing how the empty forms of language replicate the emptiness at the heart of grief.

### **The “holy urn”: poetry and the corpse**

In the sections dealing with the return of the “Fair ship” bearing Arthur’s body, the poet begins to blur the distinctions between two hollow forms: language and the dead body itself. In section nine, known as the “Fair ship” lyric, the poet addresses the ship, enjoining it to bring Arthur’s corpse back “to those that mourn / In vain; a favourable speed / Ruffle thy mirror’d mast, and lead / Thro’ prosperous floods his holy urn” (9: 5-8).<sup>13</sup> In describing the dead body as “his holy urn,” the poet creates an image of the body as a container that gives form to empty space. The body itself is empty because the spirit that once inhabited it has gone, and it is this very emptiness that makes it a “holy urn”: valued for the sake of what it once contained and hallowed by its hollowness. Tennyson endows the empty form with sacramental meaning.

At the same time, Tennyson uses slant rhyme to undermine the sacramental meaning that makes the corpse into a “holy urn.” The half-rhyme of “mourn/urn” links the verb and noun, suggesting that the act of mourning is a form as empty of meaning as the “holy urn” is empty of the spirit that once made the body a person. As a system of conventionalized and external signs,

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<sup>13</sup> The “holy urn” is *not* an urn containing Arthur’s ashes; it is the corpse itself. See *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson*, vol. 1, p. 105.

mourning gives shape or form to absence, but only in “outline.” The enjambment of the first two lines of this stanza emphasizes the potential meaninglessness of mourning. The poet tells the ship to bring the body back to “those that mourn,” and the reader is tempted to pause at the end of the line as if it were the end of the clause. However, the next line begins “In vain,” which modifies “those that mourn.” The effect of the line-break and enjambment is to suggest two categories of mourners: those who mourn, and those who mourn in vain. Thus over the line-break Tennyson invokes and then undermines the distinction between an end-stopped expression of grief, what Freud will later call the “normal affect of mourning,” and an endless process of grieving (MM 243). The plot of successful mourning, as Freud later codifies it in “Mourning and Melancholia,” has a definite end: the withdrawal of all libidinal cathexes from the lost love object, so that “the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (245). Thus to “mourn / In vain” is to reveal the insufficiency of the available narrative of mourning; mourning continues just as the clause carries over into the next line. In calling attention to mourning in vain, the poet suggests that mourning is also in some sense hollow, or meaningless. The poet plays with the idea of mourning as a purposeful activity to accentuate how mourning lacks a purpose or an end. For the poet, at this first stage of grief, all mourning is in vain, and his expression of grief is as hollow as the corpse that returns to him. Although he takes momentary comfort in making Arthur’s body into a “holy urn,” he also realizes that, like the mourning weeds of words, the sacramental meaning that seems to infuse the corpse may be a matter of form only. *In Memoriam* itself is a protracted form of mourning that is potentially as hollow as the “holy urn” that replaces Arthur’s body; it is grief “given in outline and no more.” To mourn is to become like the urn of the dead body, a hollow form that indicates emptiness within.

The poet tries and fails to fill the hollow form in the second lyric addressed to the ship. He attempts to imaginatively inhabit the corpse, as if to reanimate it. The first two stanzas are a paratactic list, first of what the poet sees and hears on the ship, second of what the ship brings to port. In the first stanza, the poet claims, “I hear the noise about thy keel; / I hear the bell struck in the night: / I see the cabin-window bright,” and so on (10:1-3). Each of these nuggets of sense data places the poet on the ship, which carries not the poet but the object of his mourning, Arthur’s corpse. For these four lines, the poet imaginatively occupies the space of the corpse, hearing and seeing what Arthur’s body can no longer see or hear.<sup>14</sup> The poet uses language to fill Arthur’s place, projecting meaning into the empty form. Thus the poet reverses the dynamic of melancholia that Freud describes, in which the melancholic introjects and identifies with the lost love object (249). Instead, the empty space of the “holy urn” is filled momentarily with the imagination of the poet projected outward in an aesthetic and creative reversal of melancholic attachment. However, this reanimation of the corpse is only temporary; the poet’s ability to inhabit the corpse is a reminder of the absence within it. The burden of absence thus reappears in the second stanza, which reads like a bill of lading or a passenger list:

Thou bring’st the sailor to his wife,  
And travell’d men from foreign lands;  
And letters unto trembling hands;  
And, thy dark freight, a vanish’d life. (10: 5-8)

The effect of parataxis here is to give equal weight to all the objects in the list. However, the last in the list is differentiated from the others by its syntax. The first three lines are about relationship, indicated by the prepositions; the sailor comes home “*to* his wife”; the travelers are “*from* foreign lands”; the ship brings “letters *unto* trembling hands.” In the third line, the poet evokes emotion in the “trembling hands” waiting to receive letters, establishing the affective

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<sup>14</sup> This reading of the stanza is inspired by Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, in which Mina Harker can access Count Dracula’s senses through her telepathic union with him.

charge of the relationships the ship facilitates. In the final line, instead of using prepositions to establish relationships between those on the ship and the shore, the poet uses apposition to equate the “dark freight” with “a vanish’d life.” The “dark freight” contains an absence, something “vanish’d,” which can no longer exist in relationship to things or people outside itself. Despite the poet’s attempt to fill the “holy urn” with his words describing the sounds and sights the corpse can no longer sense, the ship brings another hollow form home to the waiting poet.<sup>15</sup> The melancholic projection of poetic meaning into the empty form of the corpse cannot fill the absence that reduces all poetic expression to empty and morbid forms.

Tennyson’s evacuation of poetic forms reaches a climax in one of the loveliest lyrics in the whole poem. Tennyson deploys the pathetic fallacy only to empty it of all comfort, making it into another hollow form like the corpse. Through four and a half stanzas, the poet deploys images of nature at rest, as if a reflection or projection of his own state of mind. For example:

Calm is the morn without a sound,  
Calm as to suit a calmer grief,  
And only thro’ the faded leaf  
The chestnut pattering to the ground;

Calm and deep peace on this high wold,  
And these dews that drench the furze,  
And all the silvery gossamers  
That twinkle into green and gold: (11: 1-8)

The simile in the second line makes explicit the connection between the calmness of the natural world and a “calmer grief.” The beauty of the lines seduces us into reading the “calmer grief” as if it were a moment of plenitude, when self and world are in harmony, and thus a moment of comfort. However, the meaning of “calm” changes suddenly in the middle of the fourth stanza, which begins with a repetition of the beginning of the second stanza: “Calm and deep peace in

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<sup>15</sup> Arthur’s corpse becomes “a vehicle empty of its tenor, the vanished life,” according to Tucker (380). In my reading, Tennyson’s figuration of corpse as empty metaphor extends to the all poetic figures, and to poetic production itself.

this wide air” (13). At the third line of this stanza, the poet reveals that the calmness is not “deep peace” for him, whatever it might be in the natural world: “And in my heart, if calm at all, / If any calm, a calm despair” (15-6). The calm and beauty of the scene and the words have no relation to the type of calm that the poet might be experiencing. The comforting oneness of nature and self is emptied of meaning, just as the repetition of “calm” begins to empty the sense out of the sound. In the final stanza, the full horror of nature’s calmness breaks into the poem:

Calm on the seas, and silver sleep,  
And waves that sway themselves in rest,  
And dead calm in that noble breast  
Which heaves but with the heaving deep. (17-20)

The soothing power of being calm taken to its extreme is death. While the “waves that sway themselves in rest” retain the power of autonomous motion, Arthur’s “noble breast” can only be moved by the external and inanimate motion of the waves.<sup>16</sup> All of the beauty and calmness of the world is reduced to “dead calm,” so that Nature once again, as in section three, echoes a hollow form—not Sorrow this time, but the empty corpse of Arthur.

As poetic devices and rhetorical forms such as personification and the pathetic fallacy are evacuated of content, the hollowness of form infiltrates the poet himself. The poet figures the emptiness of grief in his own body as well as in Arthur’s corpse. As he waits for the ship to reach the shore, he experiences a division within himself that mimics death: “I leave this mortal ark behind, / A weight of nerves without a mind” (12: 6-7).<sup>17</sup> In leaving his body behind, the

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<sup>16</sup> Tucker also notes how Tennyson deploys the “barrenness of the pathetic fallacy” in this section, calling attention to how Tennyson resurrects dead metaphors in the horrifying calm of the corpse (383).

<sup>17</sup> The trance is echoed later in the poem, when the poet finally makes contact with Arthur in section 95, and critics have discussed the ways both these trances are related to Tennyson’s experience of leaving his body behind. The poet is speaking figuratively here, but Tennyson did have trance experiences in which he felt himself leaving his body. In the *Memoir*, Hallam quotes from the autobiographical notes Tennyson left him: “A kind of waking trance I have frequently had, quite up from boyhood, when I have been all alone. This has generally come upon me thro’ repeating my own name two or three times to myself silently, till all at once, as it were, out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, the individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being”;

poet accomplishes his union with Arthur by becoming like him. The “weight of nerves” he leaves behind is another burden of absence, like the “dark freight” of Arthur’s “vanish’d life.” The poet’s “I,” meanwhile, figures both the absent spirit and the grief it feels, as it “circle[s] moaning in the air: / ‘Is this the end? Is this the end?’” (15-16). The spirit gives voice and form to morbid grief. It circles endlessly back on itself, around the corpse, and fruitlessly looks for “the end,” which is purpose, meaning, and closure all in one.<sup>18</sup> In order to find an “end,” the poet must find a way to fill the empty space of form, the poetic corpse, with meaning and life.

### **Reanimating the corpse**

In his attempt to fill the corpse with meaning, the poet adopts a poetic posture in which the revivification of poetic speech is a reanimation of the dead. In section fourteen, the poet engages in an odd fantasy about Arthur walking off the ship that bears his body home. The oddness of the fantasy lies not in imagining Arthur living, but in imagining Arthur as a dead man walking. Tennyson begins with a conditional, couched in a direct address to the “fair ship” he previously spoke to in sections nine and ten: “If one should bring me this report, / That thou hadst touch’d the land today” (14:1-2). Then he proceeds to defer the resolution of the condition he has set up by amplifying it through seventeen more lines, eleven of which begin with “And.” In those lines the poet imagines watching the passengers disembark, and seeing Arthur, “the man

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Tennyson goes on to quote St. Paul, “Whether in the body I cannot tell, or whether out of the body I cannot tell” (320).

<sup>18</sup> Ricks adduces this passage in his claim that *In Memoriam* is a poem that “both yearns for and fears an end,” combining a teleological desire with a “moaning fear . . . that the end (*finis*) may be something quite other than an end as a purpose or goal” (227). Tucker also notes that the poem repeatedly reaches provisional endings, only to restart again. For Tucker, the most important provisional ending occurs within section 58, after which the poet moves to “connecting the silent, ‘deep self’ to the self that speaks and reacts with the world” (389).

I held as half-divine,” walking “along with these” (10, 9). In the following six lines he elaborates his fantasy of how Arthur

Should strike a sudden hand in mine,  
And ask a thousand things of home;

And I should tell him all my pain,  
And how my life had droop'd of late,  
And he should sorrow o'er my state  
And marvel what possess'd my brain[.] (11-16)

Thus far the fantasy seems relatively normal; the poet is imagining that Arthur's death and his ensuing grief have all been a dream. The syntax contributes to the dreamlike feeling, with the expansion of the sentence with the repetition of “And...And...And” mimicking the way events in dreams seem to follow without a binding narrative logic. The semicolons at the end of each stanza suggest connection between the clauses/stanzas, but do not make the nature of that connection clear, intensifying the dream-like effect of the lyric. However, the final “And” introduces a shocking contradiction: the poet has been imagining this happening *with Arthur still dead*. He writes:

And I perceived no hint of change,  
No hint of death in all his frame,  
But found him all in all the same,  
I should not feel it to be strange. (17-20)

This is not merely the denial that is one of the stages of mourning. The poet is well aware that he *should* “feel it to be strange,” and looks for the “hint of change” and “hint of death” that he fails to find. In his awareness of time, change, and death with his simultaneous rejection of the logic they dictate, the poet happily elides the difference between the living and the dead, finding the idea of a dead man walking off the ship that brings his corpse home not strange at all. The poet's expectation of the “hint of death” makes it clear that in this stanza the poet does not simply reverse time and imagine Hallam still alive. Instead, the poet remains in a present in which

Hallam is dead, but nonetheless shows “no hint of change.” The morbid fantasy of a corpse that walks and talks signals the co-presence of the past and the present. Just as love clasps grief in the opening sections, the present retains an animation of the dead past. This morbid temporality allows “dead selves” to live as more than just traces of the past such as the fossils the poet alludes to in the “scarped cliff and quarried stone” (56:2). Although the poet succeeds in bringing Arthur back to some sort of life, his demand for the animated presence of the dead disrupts all causal logic and stalls the forward movement of time.

The specifically poetic nature of the poet’s reanimation of Arthur becomes clear in another lyric in which the poet imagines giving Arthur the kiss of life. He writes:

Ah yet, ev’n yet, if this might be,  
    I, falling on his faithful heart,  
    Would breathing thro’ his lips impart  
The life that almost dies in me;

That dies not, but endures with pain,  
    And slowly forms the firmer mind,  
    Treasuring the look it cannot find,  
The words that are not heard again. (18: 13-20)

This passage has garnered critical attention for homoerotic overtones in the image of the speaker “breathing thro’” the lips of his beloved. I am equally interested in how this image claims an immense power for poetry, as the “breath” is also inspiration; the poet breathes life into Arthur through the power of his poetic gift. I also want to call attention to the odd disruption of the conditional statement that never reaches a conclusion. The conditional begins with “if this might be”; the “if” points forward, as if imagining a future possible state in which the speaker could resurrect his lost friend. At the same time, “this” sends the reader back to look for its antecedent. Not until the next line do we realize that “this” refers to the imagined scene of resurrection/respiration/inspiration, rather than the condition that would enable the poet to do

what he imagines. Then the use of “would” emphasizes the subjunctive nature of this whole scene: none of this can take place, but if it could—what? The poet never finishes his conditional, but instead veers off to elaborate on the “life that almost dies in” him. In leaving the conditional statement hanging, the poet turns away from the movement towards death in “the life that almost dies” as well as from the imagined resurrection and its consequences. Instead, he tells us about the consequences, not of resurrecting Arthur, but of “endur[ing] with pain” his death. So the if/then statement sets up one condition, and then imagines the results of another. The scene of poetic inspiration and resurrection cannot even be fully imagined nor completed.

In both of these lyrics, the moment of resurrection does not lead forward to an end, but stalls forward progress: in section fourteen by establishing a morbid temporality in which the past remains active in the present; in section eighteen by leaving the conditional hanging without a consequence. Therefore, this first attempt to fill hollowness with meaning baffles the move to an end by stopping the movement of time. The figuration of poetic speech as a reanimation of the dead effectively isolates poetry in the realm outside of time, beyond history and social relations, a problem Tennyson makes explicit in yet another lyric about raising the dead—in this case the second-most canonical example of resurrection, Lazarus. In section 31 the poet uses the biblical story to show the effects of the poetic posture he had previously adopted:

When Lazarus left his charnel-cave,  
And home to Mary's house return'd,  
Was this demanded—if he yearn'd  
To hear her weeping by his grave?

‘Where wert thou, brother, those four days?’  
There lives no record of reply,  
Which telling what it is to die,  
Had surely added praise to praise.

From every house the neighbours met,  
The streets were fill'd with joyful sound,

A solemn gladness even crown'd  
The purple brows of Olivet.

Behold a man raised up by Christ!  
The rest remaineth unreveal'd;  
He told it not, or something seal'd  
The lips of that Evangelist. (31:1-16)

The resurrected man cannot articulate his experience, or if he can, there “lives no record” of his speech. The reanimated corpse of poetry can only testify to the miraculous power that has animated him, but anything else Lazarus might have said is “seal’d” off from the written history of the event.

In this Lazarus lyric, Tennyson addresses a crisis of poetic voice that goes beyond readings of death and the corpse as the ultimate trope, or figure for figuration and language itself.<sup>19</sup> Although Tennyson does point out that death has no referent, since the dead cannot speak of their experience, or, if they can, no record of such speech is possible, he lays more emphasis on how the resurrection of the dead signifies only one thing: the presence of a greater power—if Lazarus could speak his experience it would only “add praise to praise.” Thus the reanimated corpse of poetry only testifies to a realm that exists outside of history, leaving poetic speech evacuated of social import. As Isobel Armstrong and Sinfield point out, this is a historically situated crisis of poetic authority. Armstrong writes that “Victorian modernism, as it emerges in its poetics, describes itself as belonging to a condition of crisis which has emerged directly from economic and cultural change” (3). Coming after the revolutionary turmoil and the Romantics of the turn of the century, as well as the industrial revolution, Victorian poets were, Armstrong declares, also

post-Kantian. This meant, in the first place, that the category of art (and for the Victorians this was almost always poetry) was becoming ‘pure’. Art occupied its own

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<sup>19</sup> See Elisabeth Bronfen’s *Over Her Dead Body: death, femininity and the aesthetic* and the collection *Death and Representation*, eds. Sarah Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen, for examples of this approach.

area, a self-sufficing aesthetic realm over and against practical experience. It was outside the economy of instrumental energies.... So the Victorian poets were the first group of writers to feel that what they were doing was simply unnecessary and redundant. For the very category of art itself created this redundancy. (3-4)

While this “matrix of problems” is common throughout the nineteenth century, Armstrong writes, “Victorian poets lived with these problems in an acute and morbid form because they intensified” over the course of the century (6). In Tennyson’s morbid focus on corpses that walk and talk through the power of poetry, he expresses his sense of an “acute and morbid” crisis of authority endemic to Victorian poetry.

This crisis is personal for Tennyson as well as historical. Sinfield describes the separation of the aesthetic from the “economy of instrumental energies” as part of a “utilitarian” strategy of “marginalization,” in which poetry is assigned the task of depicting, analyzing, and aestheticizing “particular states of mind” (18). Poetry, in this model, has transcendent value because it functions to indicate the existence of a numinous realm distinct from the normal day-to-day concerns of the Victorian middle-class, what Wordsworth calls the world of “getting and spending” (“The world is too much with us” 2). Importantly for my argument, this role for poetry was the basis of Arthur Hallam’s claims for the greatness of Tennyson’s poetry in his review of Tennyson’s 1830 volume *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*. By dubbing Tennyson the “poet of sensation,” Arthur Hallam “sought to privilege poetry by claiming for it a status far beyond ordinary human experience, but ... succeeded only in quarantining it from the main concerns of economic and political life” (Sinfield 20). In discovering the hollowness of poetic form and the isolation of a poetic speech that animates the dead, Tennyson realized the insufficiency of the model of poetic authority prescribed for him by the beloved friend whose loss he mourned. Armstrong casually points out that “Hallam’s death seems to have made necessary a memorial poem which would transgress all his propositions by dealing with love, friendship, religion (and

perhaps even ambition)” (253). Grieving for Arthur, Tennyson evolved a language of grief that made it necessary for him to move beyond Arthur’s prescriptions for poetry in order to reach “the end” and an achieved meaning.

Tennyson gestures toward the poetic necessity for Arthur’s death in the lyric that closes the first movement of the poem (according to Bradley’s division of its narrative), in a passage which has often been read as the poet reaching a temporary consolation.<sup>20</sup> He writes that he “env[ies] not” a slew of people who lack the power of feeling (1, 5), the special power of sensation Arthur Hallam saw as fundamental to the poet; the speaker apparently prefers the pangs of grief to the loss of painful sensations. The final stanza of the lyric contains what may be the most over-quoted lines in all of English poetry:

I hold it true, whate’er befall;  
I feel it when I sorrow most;  
'Tis better to have loved and lost  
Than never to have loved at all. (27:13-16)

The final two lines of the stanza offer proof that grief, even if it is emptiness, assures us that we are not empty forms because we feel deeply, and the familiarity of this formulation about love and loss obscures the aural ambiguity within it. Tennyson, who “had the finest ear, perhaps, of any English poet,” could not have been unaware that the identical “n” sound that closes “than” and begins “never” produces the possibility of another reading, enabling the reader to elide the space between the two words (Auden x).<sup>21</sup> Read aloud, or sounded out within the reading mind,

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<sup>20</sup> Peltason writes of section 27, “Quoted by now into meaninglessness, these lines evidence an important new understanding. The end of experience is not the sum of experience or the only source of meaning. The poet has loved and lost, but the second of these has not canceled out the first” (61).

<sup>21</sup> To be fair to Auden, the rest of his sentence reads, “he was also undoubtedly the stupidest; there was little about melancholia that he didn’t know; there was little else that he did” (x). Like Nicolson, Auden associates the best of Tennyson with his expertise in “melancholia”; interestingly he also links it with Tennyson’s aural sensitivity, as if an ear for the formal patterning of sound were inherently melancholic, or morbid, just as Buchanan condemns the Pre-Raphaelite poets’ gift for “sound over sense” as morbid (see Introduction).

“Than never to have loved” is aurally identical to “Than ever to have loved.”<sup>22</sup> The very sound of the poet’s momentary resolution contains its contradiction, so that the poet declares both that the loss of love is better than the lack of it, and that the loss of love is better than love itself.<sup>23</sup>

The double meaning of this line indicates the necessity of killing Arthur off in some way for poetry to move beyond sensation and the poetic role Arthur Hallam had prescribed for Tennyson. Arthur’s necessary absence remains at the center of the poet’s move to wider concerns, and thus becomes the structuring principle that enables *In Memoriam* to be representative of its age.<sup>24</sup>

### **Social themes, morbid forms**

Tennyson turns away from the attempt to reanimate the corpse through poetic inspiration, and instead his concern circles outward from his individual trauma to include civil strife and parliamentary debate (sections 109-13), evolution (sections 55-6), the possibility of individual survival after death (sections 43-7), and the existence of God. Each outward movement ends with the poet circling back to the physical loss of contact with his beloved Arthur. This outward

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<sup>22</sup> See Garrett Stewart’s *Reading Voices*, in which he also cites Auden’s praise of Tennyson’s ear for poetry as an argument for paying attention to the aural ambiguities of Tennyson’s verse. Stewart writes that Tennyson apparently had “an inner ear for the phonic ingenuities—and ambiguities—of his own silent (because) textual phrasing.” Stewart uses another example from *In Memoriam* (section 95), noting that “a segmental (and hyphenated) scriptive border between the dental and sibilant of ‘silent-speaking words’ might allow for another audition”; Tennyson’s “silent-speaking” might also be “silence-speaking” (6).

<sup>23</sup> Certainly for Tennyson, professionally speaking, loving and losing were better than ever loving, since *In Memoriam* was the deciding factor that earned him the title of Poet Laureate.

<sup>24</sup> In *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*, D.A. Miller writes, “death is doubled when after the decease of someone I love, I suddenly comprehend that the person to whom in my grief I have thought of turning (he will know how to console me, remember with me) is the very person who has just died” (53). For Tennyson, the realization that he had to extinguish the poetic ideal Arthur Hallam had created for him must have meant more than “death . . . doubled,” but death multiplied in each successive stanza. This may account for the sense of guilt manifested in sections 7, 26, 27, 51, and 71; his guilt lies not in his potentially homoerotic attachment to Arthur, but in the need to move beyond it. See Jeff Nunokawa’s “*In Memoriam* and the Extinction of the Homosexual,” in which Jeff Nunokawa argues that the poem “proposes a developmental model of male sexuality which establishes the homoerotic as an early phase that enables and defines the heterosexual” and thus “helps to construct” “the nineteenth-century conception of the homosexual” (428, 43). The processes of psychosexual and poetic development *In Memoriam* charts in parallel require the extinction of a love object, which remains as a trace as the “dead selves” in the opening lyric or the fossils in the “scarp’d cliff and quarried stone” that undermine the poet’s faith in a loving God (56:2).

thematic movement and the return to Arthur's death makes *In Memoriam* a spiral around the central absence embodied in the corpse.

The poem is also a spiral in the way it follows the cycles of the seasons; despite the fact that it was composed over the course of at least nine years, the action of the poem is compressed into about four years, marked by the return of the seasons, the anniversary of Arthur's death, Christmas, and Arthur's birthday. On a smaller scale, the stanza form also spirals outward, as Sarah Gates shows in her masterly analysis of how the *abba* rhyme works:

The fourth line does gesture back to the first, but it does not enact a complete return, for it can only do so after the reader has passed through the two middle lines... The second 'a' 'returns,' but it also leads beyond because it is different from the middle couplets and only faintly recollects its partner. The movement, then, is one of vacillation (a to bb, and back to a), of gesturing backward (a ← a), and of leading beyond (bb → a). Rather than characterize this movement as a circle, I would call it a spiral, a figure that includes the backward forward gesturing of vacillation, the repetition risking stasis (the central concentration), but also the outer diffusion, the movement beyond. (232)

The individual sections work in a similar fashion. Sinfield uses section thirty as an example, showing how Tennyson begins with a statement of feeling that coincides with the state of the landscape, using form (syntax, rhyme, line breaks) to also suggest the emotional state, then repeating elements with different effects, so that “repetition with difference in the primary strategy in the incremental structure” of the whole poem (115). We can sum up this “incremental strategy” as recursivity: applying a process to an initial term, and then repeating the same procedure on the terms generated by the previous application. The large structure of *In Memoriam*, whether we think of it as a spiral or a series of recursive operations, lacks telos. There is no reason why a spiral should ever stop, nor any limit to a recursive sequence unless such a limit is imposed from the outside.

Through this recursivity and lack of telos, *In Memoriam* participates in a morbid formal aesthetic. Transposing disease into literary form, the narrative of morbidity consists of recursive

and non-teleological change over time; formally speaking, recursivity and the lack of telos are manifestations of morbidity. In an 1855 review of a number of Tennyson's works, including *In Memoriam* and *Maud*, the *National Review* stated that "It is he [Tennyson] who, more than any other, echoes back the complexities, the subtleties, the difficulties of the more advanced stages of the world's history,—not as they appear on the broad historic ground, however, but as they spring from, and affect individual minds" (383). In becoming the most representative poet of his time and adopting themes of the broadest social relevance, Tennyson gave morbidity form in the recursivity of *In Memoriam*, a poem that seeks for its end, yet can never reach it.<sup>25</sup>

The widening spiral of *In Memoriam* also becomes morbid in its almost-mechanical reproduction of verses. Without the focus on Arthur—dead, alive, or both at once—the emptiness that centers the poem makes it possible that the sequence of lyrics—all in the same verse form—are not only empty forms, but empty forms mechanically reproducing themselves without end. The "mechanic exercise" of poetic language, which the poet uses to dull his pain in section five, runs the risk of tipping over into a mechanized mode of production mimicking the repetitive rhythms of the factory floor. The metaphors some of Tennyson's contemporaries chose to characterize his verse form associate it with mechanism and a deadening regularity. While Charlotte Brontë disparaged its measured and monotonous qualities, Edward Fitzgerald declared that these qualities gave the poem the "air of being evolved by a Poetical Machine of the highest order" (Ricks 224).<sup>26</sup> The poem's monotonous multiplication of the same verse form replicates the thematic concerns with industrial production that arise in the latter part of the

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<sup>25</sup> Or one might say that it reaches an ending 131 times, yet each ending is only provisional, since the poem starts again.

<sup>26</sup> In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell includes a letter in which Brontë writes of *In Memoriam*: "It is beautiful; it is mournful; it is monotonous. Many of the feelings expressed bear, in their utterance, the stamp of truth; yet, if Arthur Hallam had been somewhat nearer Alfred Tennyson,—his brother instead of his friend,—I should have distrusted this rhymed, and measured, and printed monument of grief" (337).

poem. As Tucker's reading of sections 117, 118, and 120 demonstrates, the potentialities and dangers of technology were both seductive and terrifying to Tennyson. Tucker writes that in section 118, the poet's vision of an cultural and scientific evolution that "culminates in that master technology of the Industrial Revolution, steel manufacture" is a "progressive, technocultural Eden" that also "harbors a serpent: the unexorcised spirit of reductive materialism that haunt[s]" the poet's meditations on evolution and the destructive power of nature (400-401). The specter of "reductive materialism" that haunts the poem returns us again to the problem of the dead body, which is both pure matter and empty form.

For Tennyson, this specter haunts scenes of sexual reproduction as well, as is evident in section 35, in which the poet declares that "If Death were seen / At first as Death, Love had not been, / Or been in narrowest working shut" (35:18-20). If death were indeed the end of everything, if human life were only the life of the body, if there were no soul, then for Tennyson love could only be "Mere fellowship of sluggish moods," or manifest in "his coarsest Satyr-shape" of pure lust (21-22). According to Sylvia Manning, for Tennyson the death of the soul reveals that "Heterosexuality is brutal generation" (206). Tennyson's unease with reproduction as endlessly multiplied generation is part and parcel of his fear that there may be no God; in the *Memoir*, Hallam Tennyson quotes his father saying, "'An Omnipotent Creator Who could make such a painful world is to me *sometimes* as hard to believe in as to believe in blind matter behind everything. The lavish profusion too in the natural world appals me, from the growths of the tropical forest to the capacity of man to multiply, the torrent of babies" (314). For this reason, even after the poet successfully abstracts Arthur's dead body into "some diffusive power" that somehow grounds his faith, he must turn to marriage and its promise of rebirth to stem the "torrent of babies" and find an ending for his poem (130:7).

## The broken marriages of *In Memoriam*

Before turning to the marriage that closes *In Memoriam*, I show how Tennyson uses other marriages in the poem to position morbidity in opposition to narrative closure, and to emphasize fragmentation as a formal characteristic of morbidity. The poet thematizes the formal aspects of fragmentation and lack of telos through multiple narratives of marriage that never reach a resolution as they are disrupted by death. As I mention above, in reference to section eighteen, the disrupted conditional statement fragments the causal logic narrative depends upon, as does the morbid temporality of section fourteen, in which the dead past walks and talks in the present. This fragmentation is another formal manifestation of morbidity, resembling the fragmentation imposed on the sick body as an object of analysis constituted of a congeries of localized symptoms.<sup>27</sup> *In Memoriam* is a famously fragmented text, and its fragmentation or unity has been a topic of some critical debate.<sup>28</sup> Tennyson composed the poem as a series of fragments, and claimed he did not think about making them into a unified poem until he realized that he had written so many. While this claim might seem dubious, given that he composed all the lyrics in the same stanza, in its finished form the division of the poem into sections reminds readers that *In Memoriam* is made up of self-contained lyrics. The individual lyrics were composed at different times and places, not in the order in which they appear in the poem; Tennyson later

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<sup>27</sup> For a summary of how perceptions of disease shifted from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see Michel Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic*. According to Foucault, 18<sup>th</sup>-century nosology and nosography deployed a formalist classification of disease according to the similarity of symptoms visible on the surface of the body; the body was merely the incidental surface for the manifestation of disease (7). In 19<sup>th</sup>-century medicine, disease was localized within the disparate tissues of the body and revealed in the symptoms that signaled lesions in those tissues. The body became a text of symptoms (91). See also Maria Frawley's *Invalidism and Identity*, on how the use of devices such the stethoscope "helped physicians localize the sources of pain," while the gradual shift to "laboratory medicine" transformed the patient "from 'person' to 'case' to 'cell-complex'" (55).

<sup>28</sup> In his biography of Tennyson, Ricks writes that the "most important critical question about *In Memoriam* remains the first and most obvious one: in what sense do the 133 separate sections, ranging in length from 12 lines to 144 lines, constitute a whole, a poetic unity, a poem?" (212). See also Bradley, Sinfield, Peltason, Willey.

declared that “the general way of its being written was so queer that if there were a blank space I would put in a poem” (Ricks 212). Tennyson’s “queer” method of composition was the creation, arrangement, and reordering of fragments, and he continued adding to and editing the poem at intervals through the 1870s. Thus Tennyson’s method was as recursive and lacking in telos as the poem itself. The fragmentary and non-teleological nature of the poem manifests itself in the self-contained nature of the individual lyrics, the internal chronology of the poem, which is out of phase with the chronology of the events it depicts, and the way the poem seems to come to a full stop at a number of points, while the tell-tale expanse of pages yet to come indicates that it is not over yet. In this large-scale fragmentation and its attendant pull away from the teleological narrative the poet seeks in and through writing, *In Memoriam* records the process of Tennyson subliming his morbid grief into poetic form as the poet seeks for a plot for mourning that would enable him to bring the process of grief, and with it the poem, to an end.

Beyond this formal fragmentation, however, the poet creates narratives of union only to repeatedly disrupt the unions he projects. Most often, the image he chooses to illustrate the broken union is marriage. In section six, the speaker introduces an analogy between himself and a young girl who has lost her lover to death. In later sections, the poet more specifically uses the metaphor of marriage or heterosexual love to describe his relationship to Arthur. In section seven, he is like a “happy lover” coming to “look on her that loves him well,” but is then disappointed (7: 1, 2). In the next lyric, the poet sees the expanse of life without Arthur stretching before him a “widow’d race [to] be run” (9:18); the poet returns to this image and phrasing in section seventeen. In section thirteen, his tears are like “Tears of the widower” (13: 1). Later in the poem, after the turning point of the first Christmas and the poet’s despairing

meditations on God, Nature, and extinction,<sup>29</sup> the poet declares that his “spirit loved and love him yet; / Like some poor girl whose heart is set / On one whose rank exceeds her own” (60: 2-4). After the brief yet timeless moment of transcendence in section 95, in which the “dead man touch’d me from the past” (34), the poet once more returns to marriage as the most compelling metaphor for his relation to Arthur, writing

Two partners of a married life—  
I look’d on these and thought of thee  
In vastness and in mystery,  
And of my spirit as of a wife. (97: 5-8)

In fact, the metaphor of marriage so dominates the poem that an early reviewer (perhaps as a joke?) speculated that the poem was written by the grieving widow of a military man.<sup>30</sup>

In this section, I show how Tennyson places morbidity in opposition to closure, as death terminates yet cannot resolve the poet’s mini-narratives of marriage.

In section six, we see the poet trying out other figures for broken unions as he places his own experience in relation to other people’s losses. He writes, “Never morning wore / To evening but some heart did break” and then goes on to list examples of loss that are “common to the race” in compact mini-narratives that activate schema appropriate to another genre, the novel (6: 7-8, 2). In the first of these scenarios the poet addresses a father, “Who pledgest now [his] gallant son” (10). At the moment the pledge is spoken, “A shot, ere half thy draught be done, / Hath still’d the life that beat from thee” (11-12). The first two lines of the stanza take place “now,” yet the eternal present evoked by the word “now” gives way to the inexorable movement

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<sup>29</sup> Tucker reads section 58 as the turn after the sections on evolution. He writes, “From this midpoint Tennyson will prolong his testament, with the aim of transforming plaintive anthem or earthly song inot more godly speech.... This, the first section in all of *In Memoriam* cast entirely in the past tense, completes the valedictory pivot begun in section lvii and contains an explicit promise of highter things to come” (388-9).

<sup>30</sup> In his *Memoir* of his father, Hallam Tennyson writes of the critics’ responses to *In Memoriam*: “Another [critic] referred to the poem as follows: ‘These touching lines evidently come from the full heart of the widow of a military man’” (298). Hallam does not specify where this review appeared.

of time and loss in the past tense of “Hath still’d.” In the following stanza, the poet apostrophizes a “mother, praying God will save / Thy sailor” even as “His heavy-shotted hammock-shroud / Drops in his vast and wandering grave” (13-16). In both cases the poet dramatizes the uselessness of language in the face of time and change. While the father drinks to his son’s health, the son has died. While the mother prays, her already-dead son’s corpse slips into the sea. The temporal disjunction in both stanzas mirrors the disjunction between a personal temporality and the measured and inexorable temporality of progress. Oddly, death moves the narratives from an eternal present into the time of narrative, yet these narratives go nowhere. Time progresses, but the march of generations ceases as parents mourn their children in a reversal of the natural order of things. The ruptured familial bond coincides with a rupture of narrative and generational progression.

In the next scenario, death similarly disrupts and stalls the temporality of the social order. Tennyson’s speaker expands on the next example he gives, more explicitly analogizing his own experience to that of a young woman awaiting her lover. The compact story Tennyson includes here is worth quoting in full; the poet writes that he

...mused on all I had to tell,  
And something written, something thought;

Expecting still his advent home;  
And ever met him on his way  
With wishes, thinking, ‘here to-day,’  
Or ‘here to-morrow will he come.’

O somewhere, meek, unconscious dove,  
That sittest ranging golden hair;  
And glad to find thyself so fair,  
Poor child, that waitest for thy love!

For now her father’s chimney glows  
In expectation of a guest;  
And thinking ‘this will please him best,’

She takes a riband or a rose;  
  
 For he will see them on to-night;  
     And with the thought her colour burns;  
     And, having left the glass, she turns  
 Once more to set a ringlet right;  
  
 And, even when she turn'd, the curse  
     Had fallen, and her future Lord  
     Was drown'd in passing thro' the ford,  
 Or kill'd in falling from his horse.  
  
 O what to her shall be the end?  
     And what to me remains of good?  
     To her, perpetual maidenhood,  
 And unto me no second friend. (6:19-44)

The poet's experience of waiting for his friend is similar to the young girl's; they both imagine the return and plan how to please the returning beloved. The girl decks herself with "a riband or a rose," and makes sure her hair is pretty, while the poet writes and thinks, as if this is his method for decking himself out. In the previous lyric, the poet chooses to "wrap" himself in "words, like weeds," yet in this succeeding lyric the poet is using words like bridal finery, a curiously retrogressive temporality in which the widow becomes a bride again.

The poet also represents the forward movement of time as a backward movement of tense. First, the poet uses the future tense in the ribbon that the lover "will see"; then the stanza shifts to the present, as the girl "turns" once more to fix her hair. In the next stanza, the same moment slides into the past and then, over the enjambed line break, further into the pluperfect: "even when she turn'd, the curse / Had fallen." To highlight the effects of the shifting tenses in Tennyson's lyric, compare it to Wordsworth's "Strange fits of passion have I known," in which a young man, on his way to see his beloved, suddenly and apparently without reason imagines, "'If Lucy should be dead!'" (28). Tennyson's lyric reverses the plot of Wordsworth's poem, telling the story from the point of view of the girl waiting for her lover, who imagines him alive, only to

later find out that he has already died. Wordsworth's poem is written mostly in the preterite, so that the events take place securely in the past and the speaker stands outside or beyond them; he knows the ending. Tennyson employs multiple tense shifts in the four stanzas that comprise the story of the young girl: from present tense ("sittest"), to an imagined future ("he will see them"), back to the present ("she turns"), then to the pluperfect ("had fallen"), and back to the simple past. As the events of the narrative move forward, the tenses move back and forth, retarding time. At the climactic moment when "she turns," time collapses into a single moment; in "even when she turn'd, the curse / Had fallen, and her future Lord / Was drowned" the past and the pluperfect are the same moment. Again, the temporality of morbidity recurs in the co-presence of past in the present.

The result of the moment of collapsed time—when present, past, and past perfect meet—is the loss of the end. The narrative of the death of the lover lacks any certain closure, since he "was drown'd in passing thro' the ford, / Or kill'd in falling from his horse." In the final stanza the poet asks, "O what to her shall be the end?" There can be no end for a woman who has lost her "future Lord"; without the chance of a husband, she has lost her purpose in life, which is providing a "link" between the generations.<sup>31</sup> She has also lost her end in that her narrative has been diverted from its proper termination in marriage or death, the principal closural options for heroines in nineteenth-century novels. The structure of the stanza makes endings essential yet impossible for both the poet and the young girl he describes. The first two lines establish a parallelism: "what to her shall be the end? / And what to me remains of good?" The last two lines also work through parallelism: to her, "perpetual maidenhood," while to the poet, "no

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<sup>31</sup> See section forty, in which the poet attempts to soothe himself for the loss of Hallam by trying to "look on Spirits breathed away / As on a maiden in the day / When first she wears her orange-flower"; the poet tries to think of Hallam as a bride whose "office" is a "link among the days, to knit / The generations each with each" (40:2-4, 15-16).

second friend.” Thus “ends” and “goods” are connected so that any ending, whether death or love, is good. The parallelism also suggests that in order to be good, one must have an end, or purpose. This again speaks to the problem of mourning in vain, which has no purpose and is therefore no good. For the poet of *In Memoriam*, the endless grief he desires and enjoins upon himself is the negation of all good endings—in this example the good ending of marriage, the building-block of Victorian bourgeois hegemony.

Within this final stanza, however, the rhyme scheme pulls against the parallelisms established by the syntax, linking “end” to “second friend,” and “good” to “perpetual maidenhood.” The model of grief in which the “end” is a “second friend” is that described by Freud in “Mourning and Melancholia,” where the process of grieving involves decathecting from the lost love object, withdrawing the libido hitherto involved in that cathexis back into the ego, and then successfully redirecting it outward at another love object. Thus the purpose, or end, of mourning is to enable the mourner to reattach his libido to the next object, in a potentially endless series of substitutions. Thus the “end” of grief is also the beginning of a sequence, and Tennyson’s choice of “second” rather than “other” to modify “friend” also indicates this possibility for an endless metonymic movement. The end is no ending at all. Similarly, the “perpetual maidenhood” that rhymes with “good” is a state of endless deferral. While the poet and the poem may seek an ending, the very terms in which they imagine that end negate its closural potential. In the mini-narratives of marriage the poet deploys as analogies for his experience of loss, death stops the story, yet simultaneously makes closure impossible by casting the end into infinite deferral.

## Epithalamion as epitaph

The fragmentation and lack of closure characteristic of morbidity mar the marriages of *In Memoriam*, all figures for the ruptured union between Arthur and the poet. The poet's choice of metaphor to describe his relation to Arthur has attracted a number of readings that focus on the poem's portrayal of an erotic attachment between men. However, few critics have addressed how the poem uses the powerful meanings of marriage itself in this period, as a social institution necessary for the orderly devolution of property, the basis of bourgeois hegemony, and as a narrative device that enables closure and a retrospective production of meaning. Peter Brooks asserts that the moment of closure, whether death or marriage, makes meaning out of what has gone before. Searching for a plot for mourning and a meaning for his loss, the poet inevitably leans toward marriage as a signifier of both futurity and closure. In *No Future*, Lee Edelman insists that "the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order" (11). As Rachel Blau du Plessis points out, marriage functions as closure in many Victorian novels because it offers the assurance of the reproduction of a stable social order (282-4). Thus marriage implicitly gestures forward to "the Child" even as it promises narrative closure. As the token of both futurity and closure, marriage offers the poet of *In Memoriam* a way out of the morbid temporality that dominates the poem. Through marriage, the poet imagines a future implicit in the present, instead of a present eternally grappling with the past. The poet's repeated representations of marriage are his attempt to reach the stability and promise of future meaning. As the multiple failed marriages in the body of the poem show, marriage itself does not enable closure in the lyric mode, and Tennyson's lyric appropriation of the trope of marriage as closure reveals a morbid resistance to marriage as closure.

Although Brooks' and Du Plessis' models of narrative closure are novelistic models, I suggest that they apply to *In Memoriam* because the poem takes its ending from poetry's rival genre, the novel, more specifically the novel of marriage. The novel's rise to dominance is in part accounted for by its ability to engage a larger frame of reference than the poem, especially the lyric poem, or even the domestic idylls Tennyson also wrote. The novel's realism, its range, and its social content/meaning were all part of why poetry was increasingly pushed to the side as the Victorian era progressed. In the mid-1840s through the mid-1850s, Tennyson wrote three book-length poems: *The Princess: A Medley* (1847), *In Memoriam*, and *Maud*. These long poems are Tennyson's response to the novel. Tucker claims that these book-length poems are a pivot point in Tennyson's career, and that they "call attention to questions that the long poem especially, but usually just implicitly, poses. Are its episodic units fitly joined? Is it over now? Are its personages consistent with themselves and with their environment? Does that environment represent a credible world?" (348). These questions are those we ask of novels—especially in the era of the serial novel made so popular by Dickens. Not only do Tennyson's long poems engage novelistic questions, but all three of them are also centrally concerned with marriage. Marriage is possibly the most important social institution in Victorian fiction, mediating between the individual and the broader social and political world. Within the conventions of comic literature, marriage serves as closure; in the marriage plot in Victorian fiction, the reproduction of a stable social order takes place through the marriage that resolves the personal, political, or social conflicts that drive the plot.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> For example, in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, the marriage of Margaret Hale to John Thornton apparently unites the industrial ethos Thornton represents to the more compassionate one that Margaret advocates. As the title of the novel suggests, their marriage bridges regional differences within the nation as well as differences of class and political belief.

In the Epilogue, the marriage does serve to symbolize the reproduction of the social order and replace (or displace) the other failed marriages of the text. But the hollow form of the anonymous corpse rests beneath the feet of the poet's sister, and the poet himself becomes like a corpse at the wedding, reminding readers that the poetic voice and the work of art remain problematically outside the reproduction of the social order in marriage. The opening stanzas of the epilogue are addressed to the groom who is about to wed the poet's sister—not the same sister that was affianced to Arthur, but another one. The groom is also the “second friend” that the poet has occasionally addressed in the body of *In Memoriam*, most notably when he asks his second friend to accept his second-best affection in section 85. Thus this wedding represents a double displacement of what might have been. It is in some ways an enactment of and substitute for all the subjunctive futures the poet has imagined for Arthur: family man, great statesman, bulwark for the social order. The poet no longer wants to engage in preserving the dead and staying the march of time. He writes:

Tho' I since then have number'd o'er  
    Some thrice three years: they went and came,  
    Remade the blood and changed the frame,  
And yet is love not less, but more;

No longer caring to embalm  
    In dying songs a dead regret,  
    But like a statue solid-set,  
And moulded in colossal calm. (Epilogue: 9-16)

Though he declares love is greater, it is also dead, since the subject of the second stanza could be either the poet himself or the most recent noun—love. In fact, the absence of a subject in the second stanza quoted leaves the place of agency curiously empty, so that the “dying songs,” the “dead regret,” and the colossally calm statue all collapse into the emptiness at the heart of the hollow forms from the beginning of the poem. The invocation of “calm” cannot help but return

the reader to the horrors of being calm in section eleven, and the uncertainty of agency leaves open the possibility that the poet himself is now “like a statue solid-set / And moulded in colossal calm.” To embalm a body is to preserve the past in the present, making flesh into permanent form. Although the poet declares that he “No longer car[es] to embalm” his “dead regret” in verse, he suggests that he himself is now embalmed, having become a “statue,” a permanent form like the embalmed corpse. The price of marriage as closure is the loss of poetic energy and the ossification of the poetic cry of love and grief into the form of statuary.

Tennyson also makes marriage work against closure in the poet’s fantasy of the “far-off divine event” in the penultimate line of the poem (not the final line, because that would be too closural; Tennyson ends with the prepositional clause “To which the whole creation moves”) (143-4). Although *In Memoriam* is an elegy, Tennyson’s claims for it also position it as a comedy; he said that in ending the poem with marriage, he crafted *In Memoriam* to allude to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (Peltason 165). However, instead of the divine union with God that ends Dante’s epic, the human marriage that ends *In Memoriam* acts, like death, to cast the possibility of an achieved meaning into infinite deferral. The poet imagines that the consummation of the wedding will result in pregnancy:

A soul shall draw from out the vast  
And strike his being into bounds  
  
And, moved thro’ life of lower phase,  
Result in man, be born and think  
And act and love, a closer link  
Betwixt us and the crowning race [.] (Epilogue:123-128)

The child embodies a promise for a future, but no sense of certainty in that future other than that generated by the poem itself. As Timothy Peltason points out, at the ending of *In Memoriam*, “imaginative energy is invested not in portraying the future, but in evoking the present-tense

satisfaction of a state of aroused expectation” (167). This state of “aroused expectation” is, in Brooks’ model, the beginning of “narrative desire,” and its return with the marriage that ends the poem undermines the closural power of marriage (103).

The poet’s invocation of the promise of the future in the form of a baby at first seems to smack of what Edelman calls “reproductive futurism,” in which the promise of “the Child” as future meaning compensates for the impossibility of meaning within the symbolic order of language. Edelman writes: “we’re held in thrall by a future continually deferred by time itself, constrained to dream of a day when today and tomorrow are one. That future is nothing but kid stuff, reborn each day to screen out the grave that gapes from within the lifeless letter, luring us into, ensnaring us in, reality’s gossamer web” (30). In Tennyson’s epithalamion as epitaph, he exposes the price of reproductive futurism’s attempt to “screen out the grave.” Acknowledging that meaning is impossible in the present, the poet projects the possibility of meaning into the future and the form of the hoped-for baby that will “strike his being into bounds.” However, in linking marriage to the end of his own grief, he must split his beloved Arthur into “the dead” beneath the marriage and the “diffusive power” that will someday “strike his being into bounds.” Thus Tennyson’s closing marriage emphasizes rather than conceals the split between form and content, signifier and signified, that reproductive futurism works to conceal. Future meaning, in the body of the putative baby, becomes possible when the marriage plot coincides with a burial plot.

According to Brooks, “in narrative, death provides the very ‘authority’ of the tale, since as readers we seek in narrative fictions the knowledge of death which in our own lives is denied to us”; death offers readers “the promise of a significant retrospect, a summing-up, the coming to

completion of a fully predicated and readable sentence” (95, 96).<sup>33</sup> However, Tennyson’s poem revises Brooks’ model, making the dead body rather than the deathbed the end of narrative—not a moment of transition or transmission, but a full stop. The promise of meaning is instead embodied in the hoped-for child, who will “strike his being into bounds” on the wedding night, in a startling violent image of the formal constraints and self-limitations that poet has imposed on himself through his verse form throughout the poem. “Being struck into bounds” describes the act of making poetry, revealing that the “bounds” enable “being” to come into existence. The empty form of Arthur’s corpse is transmuted here into a “being” that exists through form, as form, as “bounds,” yet still has meaning. Unfortunately the foundation of this promise of future meaning is another corpse lying beneath the marriage ceremony. While marriage as a social form promises future meaning, in the moment of closure, the corpse underneath the ceremony calls attention to the hollowness of marriage as a substitute for absence and as a means of closure. Tennyson’s elegy imagines a future which does not “screen out the grave that gapes for us,” but is explicitly founded upon death. His epithalamion is an epitaph for both the dead body that lies beneath the promise of futurity and the closural power of marriage.

Faced with Arthur’s corpse and the problem of an object that is at once pure content—inert matter—and pure form—body drained of spirit—the poet’s final solution is to split the object into form and content. The unborn child is pure form, while the anonymous corpse—completely unknown—is pure content, yet signifies nothing. In placing the corpse underneath the marriage at the end of his poem, Tennyson makes the dead body and its negation of all meaning the end of narrative desire. As we shall see, the buried corpse as the true object of narrative desire reappears in spectacular form in two of the major novels of the 1860s, Wilkie

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<sup>33</sup> I was too stunned by the last sentence of the poem to notice this, but Peltason points out that the sentence is *eleven stanzas long*; “fully predicated,” perhaps—“fully readable,” I think not (166).

Collins' *The Woman in White* and Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*. In 1850, Tennyson's *In Memoriam* makes the corpse central to the resolution of the exemplary poem of the Victorian era, and thus makes morbidity central to Victorian literature, while simultaneously making marriage, the central institution of Victorian culture, into another hollow form.

### Chapter III

#### Literary Reproduction in Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*

“You know, marriage doesn’t guarantee a happy ending—just an ending.”  
Samantha Jones, *Sex and the City*,  
season 3, episode 12

Four days after Charlotte Brontë died, Elizabeth Gaskell wrote to John Greenwood, the local stationer in Haworth, asking for every detail he could remember about the death: “I want to know EVERY particular. Has she been long ill? What was her illness? You would oblige me *extremely* if you would, at your earliest leisure, send me every detail” (*Letters* 336). A little more than a week later, Gaskell’s interest has expanded from the particulars of Brontë’s death to general information about her life: “Anything else you can ever remember to tell me about her will be most valuable” (337). Shortly afterward, Gaskell again insists on the value of Greenwood’s recollections of Brontë: “Every [thing] you can tell me about her & her sisters—of *her* especially is most valuable” (343). As Gaskell herself realized, she was fascinated with the story of Brontë’s life and death; she declares, “I could never be tired of hearing about my dear friend, and her early days; indeed all about her” (343).<sup>1</sup>

The life story that Gaskell found “most valuable” is self-evidently morbid in that it is shaped by death and disease. Charlotte Brontë grew up in a house surrounded by dead bodies; sudden death intruded on her childhood three times before she was nine years old; almost twenty years later, her three remaining siblings died in a span of nine months; Brontë herself was

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<sup>1</sup> See June Foley’s article, “*The Life of Charlotte Brontë* and Some Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell,” in which Foley argues that Gaskell intended to write a biography of Brontë as soon as she heard of her death, and that Gaskell used the biography to settle scores with her own father while simultaneously positioning herself as a domestic saint.

frequently ill and, not surprisingly, somewhat hypochondriacal. Gaskell's fascination with these aspects of Brontë's life came to fruition in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, in which Gaskell uses such details about Brontë's life to defend Brontë's work from the charge of coarseness. It seems that Gaskell defends Brontë from one charge, only to label her as the epitome of the morbid woman writer.<sup>2</sup> My reading of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* disinters the morbid fascination with death of Brontë's biographer, Elizabeth Gaskell, who has more often been read as a novelist proffering the cure of domesticity for the ills of industrialism. Gaskell's textual recreation of Brontë is itself morbid—it is a form of mutual possession, in which she claims to speak for Brontë, while using Brontë to authorize her own speech and writing. Gaskell's morbidity lies in her own desire to reanimate the dead, to reincarnate Brontë in words. Gaskell uses the story of Brontë's life and death to challenge strictures on women's writing by advocating a form of morbid literary realism based on the reproduction and reanimation of the dead.

In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* Gaskell explores the relationship between women's writing and morbidity by depicting Brontë's negotiation of the conflicting duties of authorship and family. Even before meeting Brontë, this conflict between women's domestic duties and their artistic ambitions preoccupied Gaskell, and with good reason: she was a minister's wife, with parish duties; the mother of four daughters; and ran a household including several servants, all while working as a professional writer. In Gaskell's eyes, the never ending round of domestic duties was potentially dangerous to women. She writes to her friend, the artist Eliza Fox, that she is “sure it is healthy for [women] to have the refuge of the hidden world of Art to shelter

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<sup>2</sup> In *Dissembling Fictions*, Deirdre D'Alberis argues that Gaskell constructs Brontë as a morbid writer, whose creativity springs from her physical frailty, hypochondria, and isolation. In creating this image of Brontë, Gaskell draws on and perpetuates what Alison Booth, in “Biographical Criticism and the ‘Great’ Woman of Letters: The Example of George Eliot and Virginia Woolf,” deftly describes as a biographical model for women writers based on “a division between the art and the life in terms of an ideal of feminine self-sacrifice” (90). In “Elizabeth Gaskell's Ethnographic Imagination in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*,” Maria Frawley points out that Gaskell's construction of Brontë merely adopts the terms Brontë herself established in her biographical notices in posthumous editions of her sisters' works.

themselves in when too much pressed upon by daily small Lilliputian arrows of peddling cares; it keeps them from being morbid” (*Letters* 106). Writing and “the hidden world of Art” enable women to stave off the morbidity associated with household duties. By providing an escape route from morbidity, writing becomes a necessary adjunct to domesticity by negating its ill effects on women.

Years later, after meeting and befriending Brontë, Gaskell again comments on how writing functions as a cure for morbidity. Shortly after Charlotte Brontë published *Villette*, Gaskell writes to a mutual friend: “The difference between Miss Brontë and me is that she puts all her naughtiness into her books, and I put all my goodness. I am sure she works off a great deal that is morbid *into* her writing, and *out* of her life; and my books are so far better than I am that I often feel ashamed of having written them and as if I were a hypocrite” (*Letters* 228). In summing up the difference between Brontë and herself in this fashion, Gaskell suggests two modes of authorship; Brontë’s mode is therapeutic, while Gaskell’s is didactic. Furthermore, the implication of this passage is that Brontë’s writing provides a way for her to discharge her morbidity, while Gaskell’s does not. Although Gaskell does not say this hydraulic relation between writing and morbidity is unique to women writers, the examples she chooses—herself and Brontë—indicate that she is thinking about morbidity in relation to women’s writing. Despite the difference she sees between her own writing and Brontë’s, Gaskell’s underlying assumption is that writers run the risk of being morbid in either their writing or their lives.

This problem is aggravated for women writers because Victorians believed that women’s reproductive capacities meant their bodies were always potentially, if not actually, ill. The physical changes associated with the menstrual cycle meant that women’s bodies were “perceived to be continuously internally unstable” and thus “quasi-pathological” (Poovey 36,

37). Menstruation itself was considered a nearly pathological state, yet any form of amenorrhea was pathological as well. According to the science of the time, pregnancy, a state primarily marked by the cessation of menstruation, was also dangerously close to illness. The other potential cause of amenorrhea was any form of intellectual activity, which endangered both women's sanity and their reproductive capacity.<sup>3</sup> Thus women, whether they fulfilled their most important and characteristic function of motherhood or not, could be described as morbid. While accepting that women are morbid, Gaskell posits another cause and cure for morbid women by suggesting a causal relation between domesticity and morbidity.

Gaskell repositions morbidity as the inevitable result of the “daily small arrows Lilliputian arrows of peddling cares”—the endless daily routine of running a household. In linking morbidity with this type of labor, Gaskell moves morbidity out of the realm of physical debility based on sexual difference and into the realm of labor shaped by certain formal characteristics. As anyone who has tried to keep a house clean knows, domestic labor is repetitive, fragmented, and endless. Each task is subject to interruption by other tasks—the housewife is the original multitasker—and is completed only to be done again the following hour, day, week, season, or year. These characteristics align with those of morbidity: fragmentation, lack of telos, repetition, recursivity. The morbidity of domestic labor is discharged into the aesthetic product, according to Gaskell's letter to Fox, freeing the woman writer by reproducing the morbid in the text.

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<sup>3</sup> See Mary Poovey's *Uneven Developments* and Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* for accounts of how women's bodies were pathologized by medical discourses of the day. See also William Acton's and H. Pye Chavasse's treatises on reproductive health for contemporary accounts of the relationship between the brain and the female reproductive organs. For further analyses of how women's bodies have been pathologized through their maternal function, see Cristina Mazzoni's *Maternal Impressions: Pregnancy and Childbirth in Literature and Theory*.

Despite placing writing in opposition to women's morbidity, Gaskell portrays writing as placing women in a double bind similar to that imposed by Victorian reproductive ideology, which dictated that choosing or rejecting maternity made women equally unhealthy. For Gaskell, writing and other forms of artistic production are the cure for the morbid woman. However, according to both domestic ideology and the science of the period, such labor made women sickly. Although intellectual labor made women ill, abstaining from such labor in favor of the real job of a woman—motherhood, that is—was equally unhealthy, since pregnancy was conceptualized as a diseased state, and motherhood was predicated on the erasure of the identity, desire, and life of the mother.<sup>4</sup> Writing and domestic labor—especially sexual reproduction, the epitome of female domestic labor—are simultaneously sickening and therapeutic for women, both dangerous and necessary. Gaskell illuminates this duality when she writes that Brontë's "strongest and most characteristic" faculty was her imagination, and that exercising it made her ill, while repressing it made her even more ill (*LCB* 149). Gaskell's description of Brontë's trials as a teacher and governess place her neatly into a cleft stick that both necessitates and forbids writing, in a dialectical relationship which makes writing and domestic labor mutually constitutive of and destructive to women writers.

In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell finds a solution to this double bind for women writers by refiguring female authorship as a form of reproduction not related to maternity, exchanging sexual reproduction for a form of literary reproduction that is not deadly. Although she often praises Brontë's powerful imagination, Gaskell repeatedly figures Brontë's writing as a form of reproduction similar to new forms of industrial production, reproduction and circulation. Gaskell's Brontë is both a Romantic creative genius and a machine that reproduces past events and reanimates the dead in her fiction. In Gaskell's portrayal of Brontë, this reproductive model

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<sup>4</sup> See Margaret Homans' *Bearing the Word* and Carolyn Dever's *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud*.

of writing engages the temporality of morbidity by recreating the past in the present as both Brontë and Gaskell ventriloquize their beloved dead. In Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, the poet tries to ventriloquize and reanimate his lost Arthur and abandons this attempt because it would evacuate his poetry of all social content. In contrast, the model of morbid authorship that Gaskell uses Brontë to create enables both writers to address social concerns in their writing under cover of reproducing actual events as fiction.

Gaskell's recreation of Brontë first establishes the inevitable link between women's writing and disease. Gaskell makes Brontë the embodiment of Victorian gender ideology in that she is sick and suffering whether she chooses art or domesticity, literary or sexual reproduction. Gaskell then uses Brontë to critique this ideology and its replication in the marriage plot. Gaskell's portrayal of Brontë's life is morbid in that it focuses on unwholesome or disturbing subjects and the deathliness of authorship. However, Gaskell's portrayal of Brontë's writing as reproduction and reanimation rather than representation suggests that such a morbid form of authorship can enable women writers to broaden the scope of literary realism. Thus Brontë works as a figure for Gaskell herself, as Gaskell ventriloquizes Brontë to answer criticisms of her own early novels, and to carve out a space for women writers in a literary marketplace increasingly dominated by—in both content and production—new forms of reproduction and circulation.

### **Women writers and the marriage plot**

Gaskell begins by suggesting that Brontë is inherently deathly by inscribing her death at the outset of her biography, but then goes on to show how that deathliness is the result of the dominant narratives that shape women's lives. The opening chapter of the biography begins

with a long description of the road from Keighley to Haworth, as Gaskell shows her readers the main points of interest in the village: the parsonage and its surroundings.<sup>5</sup> She mentions in passing that the front of the parsonage looks out upon a “crowded churchyard,” and describes the exterior of the house in which the Brontës lived, wrote, and died (13). Gaskell then turns aside from this comfortingly clean façade and brings her readers into the church proper, and the guided tour becomes a memorial service as Gaskell leads her readers up the nave and to “a mural tablet on the right-hand side of the communion table” (15). The first chapter of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* ends with a typographical imitation of the inscriptions marking the deaths of Charlotte Brontë’s mother, her siblings Maria, Elizabeth, Branwell, Emily, and Anne, and finally—on a separate tablet—herself. While ostensibly introducing her readers to the Brontës’ origins, Gaskell looks forward to the end of her narrative and the death of her subject, making the grave the alpha and omega of both Brontë’s life-story and literary career. Replacing a narrative of Brontë’s birth with the tablet that memorializes her death, Gaskell makes Brontë into a ghost that haunts her own biography. In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, the story of a woman writer is the story of a dead woman walking.

Gaskell also implies that Brontë’s morbidity—her physical frailty and hypochondria—were results of her imaginative power and her writing. She writes that in her childhood, Brontë was able “to go through long and deep histories of feeling and imagination... This made it inevitable that—later on, in her too short career—the intensity of her feeling should wear out her physical health” (149). Although here Gaskell is trying to explain that working as a governess made Brontë ill because it forced her to suppress her “strongest and most characteristic faculty,”

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<sup>5</sup> Frawley points out how Gaskell begins her biography as a tour guide to establish the primitive quality of Yorkshire, making her biography an ethnography of the North of England and an expression of nostalgia for Brontë as part of an extinct tribe.

she reveals that the “intensity of her feeling” makes the expression of her “faculty” equally debilitating (149). Thus whether Brontë writes or not, she becomes ill.

Gaskell’s emphasis on Brontë’s psychological and physical debility did not go unnoticed; one reviewer wrote of *The Life*, “as it discusses sick minds almost without admitting that they are unsound, it is itself likely to be regarded by the inconsiderate as an unhealthy book” (*GCH* 381-2). This assessment of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* is similar to contemporary responses to Brontë’s last novel, *Villette*, and its protagonist, Lucy Snowe. The morbidity that reviewers discerned and condemned in both the biography and the novel is related not only to Brontë’s hypochondria and suffering, which Gaskell depicted so minutely, but also to the socioeconomic and gender relations that forced her into conflict with the dominant narratives available for women. Gaskell uses Brontë to show that a state of death in life is the inevitable result of economic circumstances and social conventions that made it necessary for women to get married, yet made it unfeminine for them to pursue that aim. Gaskell’s biography of Brontë shows how Victorian gender ideology and its replication in the realist novel make women sick, obsessive, and deathly.

Gaskell’s selection from letters by and about Brontë makes explicit the ways cultural norms regarding femininity impose morbidity upon women. When Gaskell added material to the third edition in order to make up for material excised to avoid a libel suit, she used Mary Taylor’s biographical letter about Brontë to reveal Brontë’s fears about spinsterhood, which were aggravated by watching one of the teachers at the Pensionnat Héger. According to Taylor’s letter, “She...mentioned one who was very anxious to marry, ‘she was getting so old’...Charlotte naturally looked with curiosity to people of her own condition. This woman almost frightened her. ‘She declares there is nothing she can turn to and laughs at the idea of delicacy,--and she is

only ten years older than I am!” Brontë’s awareness of the financial necessity for marriage appears as fear of a living death: “At such times she seemed to think that most human beings were destined by the pressure of worldly interests to lose one faculty and feeling after another ‘till they went dead altogether. I hope I shall be put into my grave as soon as I’m dead; I don’t want to walk about so” (Appendix 445-6). Gaskell makes it clear that Brontë is also aware of the impossibility of attempting to escape from the pressure of “worldly interests” when she quotes from a letter Brontë wrote to Nussey declaring that “if women wish to escape the stigma of husband-seeking, they must act and look like marble or clay—cold, expressionless, bloodless; for every appearance of feeling, joy, sorrow, friendliness, antipathy, admiration, disgust, are alike construed by the world into the attempt to hook a husband” (209). If one rejects the mode of husband-hunting employed by the spinster teacher in Brussels, one must engage in another form of death in life. To be a woman, it seems, is to be morbid, since the proper behavior for a woman necessitates becoming “cold, expressionless, bloodless,” while improper behavior, whether husband-hunting or working for a living, equally leads to a deadening of the faculties.

Gaskell uses one of Brontë’s letters to W.S. Williams to reinforce the connection between women’s morbidity, their socioeconomic status, and their gender. Brontë writes in response to Williams’ criticism of Lucy Snowe: “You say that she may be thought morbid and weak, unless the history of her life be more fully given. I consider that she *is* both morbid and weak; her character sets up no pretensions to unmixed strength, and anybody living her life would necessarily become morbid” (392). Brontë denies a request for more details about Lucy’s past, defending the withholding quality of her narrator, the same way Lucy refuses to offer the conventional exposition in the opening chapters of *Villette*. This refusal is part of what makes both Brontë and her character seem morbid. However, Brontë turns this into a critique of how

the individual condition of physical and mental pathology—the “semi-delirium of solitary grief and sickness”—becomes morbid. Lucy’s weakness becomes morbid because of the external circumstances of her life. The social and financial necessity for women to marry, coupled with the insistence that women should not actively pursue marriage, and the belief that any other pursuit is inherently unfeminine and unhealthy, makes women like Lucy morbid.

In using Brontë’s own words about her character, Gaskell also mounts a defense of Brontë’s morbidity. The very qualities that are condemned as morbid in Lucy are those that critics then and now point out in Brontë. In *Dissembling Fictions*, Deirdre D’Albertis notes how Gaskell emphasizes Brontë’s obsessive concern with her own health and that of her dwindling family. According to D’Albertis, Gaskell’s attention to these sanitary details serves to undermine Brontë’s mode of authorship, one based on the autonomous male romantic genius, while simultaneously underwriting Gaskell’s own more healthy mode of female authorship, one grounded in women’s mission to cure the ills of society. D’Albertis asserts that Gaskell’s biography makes Brontë’s morbidity the wellspring of her creativity.<sup>6</sup> However, Gaskell reveals the social conditions that necessitate Brontë’s morbid authorship, making morbid authorship a problem for women writers more generally, not just for Brontë.

Gaskell demonstrates how the deadliness of Victorian gender ideology is amplified for women writers, who are caught in the intersection of the dominant plots of Victorian realist fiction: the marriage plot and the plot of ambition. As Rachel Blau Du Plessis points out, the intertwining of these two plots characterizes the male bildungsroman, in which the hero finds both a proper vocation and wife. However, in the female bildungsroman, the two plots do not reinforce each other in reaching a simultaneous resolution. Instead, the heroine must sacrifice

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<sup>6</sup> See ““Bookmaking out of the Remains of the Dead”: *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*,” the first chapter of D’Albertis’s monograph on Gaskell.

her vocation, should she be so unfortunate as to have one, for her marriage, should she be lucky enough to find someone to marry her (Du Plessis 284-7). In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell deploys the generic conventions of the female bildungsroman in emplotting Brontë's life to critique Victorian gender ideology and its literary representative, the marriage plot.

In her review of *Villette*, Harriet Martineau complained that “[a]ll the female characters, in all their thoughts and lives, are full of one thing, or are regarded by the reader in the light of that one thought—love.... so dominant is this idea—so incessant is the writer’s tendency to describe the need of being loved, that the heroine...leaves the reader at last under the uncomfortable impression of her having either entertained a double love, or allowed one to supersede another without notification of the transition” (*BCH* 172-3). Martineau’s critique misses the point, which is that the overwhelming and constant desire for love and marriage is imposed by society and deadly to women. Gaskell’s biography of Brontë uses the fictional conventions of the marriage plot, and more specifically the governess plot, to demonstrate this dynamic.<sup>7</sup> In Gaskell’s account of Brontë’s time in Brussels, we see the damaging effects of the conflict between the antagonistically intertwined plots of ambition and eros.

One of Gaskell’s most pressing problems in writing her friend’s biography was the need to conceal Brontë’s adulterous passion for Constantin Heger, a problem which she herself exacerbated by her insistence on Brontë’s reproduction of fact in her fiction. For example, when Gaskell describes Brontë’s return to Brussels, after the death of her aunt, she says her trip “was pretty much as she has since described it in *Villette*,” ignoring the fact that Lucy, the fictional character, has no idea where she is going, while Brontë is returning to a place and people she knows and loves. Gaskell thus attempts to conceal Brontë’s eagerness to return by suggesting that her journey is, like Lucy’s, without a definite end. This strategy backfires however, as any

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<sup>7</sup> Brontë herself, of course, wrote the most famous and canonical example of the governess plot in *Jane Eyre*.

suggestion that Lucy and Brontë's experiences were the same makes *Villette* into a *roman à clef*, in which the disguise of fictionality only barely conceals the truth of actual events.

Gaskell tries to solve this problem in a long passage opposing Brontë's homesickness, which urges her to leave Brussels, to her duty, which insists she continue her studies to make herself a more marketable schoolmistress: "The strong yearning to go home came upon her; the stronger self-denying will forbade. There was a great internal struggle; every fiber of her heart quivered in the strain to master her will; and when she conquered herself, she remained, not like a victor calm and supreme upon the throne, but like a panting, torn, suffering victim" (192). At first, the heart is associated with the desire to go home, while the will insists on remaining in Brussels. In the next sentence, Gaskell implies that the heart, which "quivered in the strain to master her will," wins the "great internal struggle." However, since Brontë remains in Brussels, heart and will have exchanged associations between the first and second sentences. The heart that masters the will wants to stay in Brussels, while the "self-denying will," despite its strength, urges flight in vain. This chiasmic structure, in which the desires of heart and will switch places, marks the moment when the topic invisibly changes from homesickness to lovesickness.

As lovesickness and homesickness intersect, so do the two conventional plots of the realist novel: the plot of ambition and the plot of desire. For the female protagonist of a Victorian realist novel, the "heart" must always defeat the "stronger, self-denying will." Gaskell's narration of Brontë's struggle ends in defeat for the woman; whether heart or will wins, the conquest of self, rather than making the woman stronger, leaves her "a panting, torn, suffering victim." Gaskell's choice of words to describe Brontë after the great struggle insists upon the physical and embodied nature of the damage. It also bears close resemblance to Brontë's words about the death of another woman writer: her sister Emily. According to Brontë,

Emily was “torn, conscious, panting, reluctant, though resolute, out of a happy life” (276). By echoing Brontë’s words in her representation of Brontë’s internal contest of heart and will, Gaskell links the fictional form of the marriage plot, in which the plot of eros must extinguish the plot of ambition, to the actual death of a woman writer.

Gaskell’s biography comments on the conventions of the marriage plot in its structure as well. Brontë’s life, as Gaskell emplots it, is a governess plot: Brontë grows up and has to seek her own living as a governess; while pursuing her vocation she falls in love with the wrong man; she almost succumbs to her own passion but eventually recovers and turns to a career in writing. Finally, she realizes that true love has been waiting for her all along, in the person of Arthur Nicholls, her father’s curate: “In silence he had watched her, and loved her long. The love of such a man—a daily spectator of her manner of life for years—is a great testimony to her character as a woman” (396). Brontë’s father, like all fathers in romance, stands in the way of her wedded bliss, and Brontë, the ever-dutiful daughter, “thoughtfully for her father, and unselfishly for herself, put aside all consideration of how she should reply, excepting as [her father] wished” (397). Of course, the ogreish father is finally appeased, and Brontë and Nicholls are able to wed. Leah Price calls attention to the generic schema this story employs, saying that *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* is the only governess plot Gaskell ever wrote, and it “contains all the elements (except fictionality) that characterize novels about governesses” (761).

While it does lack fictionality, it contains a compensating excess in its extension of the governess plot beyond marriage to death. Gaskell calls attention to the way her story about Brontë exceeds the bounds of the marriage plot when she writes that marriage removes Brontë from narrative as well as from the circle of her friends: “Henceforward the sacred doors of home are closed upon her married life” (422). Thus she indicates the traditional ending of the marriage

plot, even as she slips beyond its bounds. She invites her reader to “[h]ear some of the low murmurs of happiness we, who listened, heard,” yet the letters she quotes detail how Brontë’s life has been subsumed in her husband’s, so that she no longer has time for writing. Gaskell portrays Brontë’s marriage as the death of the woman writer’s subjectivity--narratively, creatively, and, finally, factually.

As Brontë’s literary labor ends with her marriage, the labor of sexual reproduction begins, and, in Gaskell’s account, finally kills her off. Although she merely hints at pregnancy as the cause of Brontë’s sickness, saying that the doctor “assigned a natural cause” for Brontë’s “perpetual nausea, and ever-recurring faintness,” one of her letters to the local stationer at Haworth is slightly more explicit: “I do fancy that if I had come, I could have induced her,—even though they had all felt angry with me at first,—to do what was so absolutely necessary, for her very life” (*Letters* 337). Elisabeth Jay states that this letter is commonly taken to mean that “Gaskell would have attempted to persuade Charlotte to terminate her pregnancy: instead Gaskell was to jettison her friend’s literary offspring in her attempt to recuperate the life” (xiv).<sup>8</sup> I suggest that Gaskell does not “jettison” Brontë’s “literary offspring,” but instead emphasizes how Victorian gender ideology demands the sacrifice of such offspring as the price of marriage.

Furthermore, in writing beyond the end of the marriage plot, Gaskell reveals that conventional novelistic endings deny the telos of women’s lives. Traditionally, the options for female heroines of novels, particularly in Victorian fiction, are marriage or death. As Gaskell reveals in her life of Brontë, marriage is the death of the writer and leads to the death of the woman. Gaskell uses Brontë’s life as the basis for a marriage plot and then writes beyond the

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<sup>8</sup> There is some debate as to the actual cause of death. The death certificate lists “phthisis” as the cause of death and makes no mention of pregnancy. See John Maynard’s *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality* for a strong argument against pregnancy as the reason for Brontë’s illness. Gérin and Barker adduce household servants’ claims that Brontë was pregnant when she died.

ending, not to suggest an expansion of possibilities for the female protagonist, but to show how the marriage plot refuses to portray its actual end by stopping short at the point of marriage. The lack of telos is one of the main formal features of morbid narratives, which either circle back on themselves in the endless cycles characteristic of obsessive states of mind, or resist the endings dictated by generic schema, as in Brontë's *Villette*. Gaskell's biography makes explicit the price exacted from women writers when the plot of ambition is terminated by the plot of eros, and in doing so she reveals that the realist novel of marriage is itself a morbid form that resists the very ending that the ideals of domesticity and maternity dictate for women.

### **When is a woman writer like a graveyard?**

Gaskell shows that the intersection of the plots of ambition and eros leads to death for the woman writer; her biography of Brontë is her attempt to raise Brontë from the grave. Gaskell suggests that Brontë's writing, like her own, engages in the task of raising the dead. In doing so, Gaskell moves toward a model of female authorship that, although it draws on death, is less deadly for the woman writer and broadens the scope of literary realism.

The standard two-volume format of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* provided Gaskell with a means to split Brontë's life into two separate narratives. In the first volume, Gaskell traces the narrative of individual growth: Brontë's background; how her parents met and married; the manners and customs of her childhood home and its surroundings; her education and development. The second volume begins by telling the story of how Brontë began her first published novel, the madly successful *Jane Eyre*, in an atmosphere of disappointment and gloom. The rest of the volume covers Brontë's literary career: her growing celebrity, her trips to London, the critical responses to her work, how she tries to address them, and her struggle to

reconcile the duties of home and authorship. Gaskell draws a sharp distinction between Brontë's life as the dutiful daughter of Haworth Parsonage and as the celebrated Currer Bell when she declares that after the success of *Jane Eyre*, "Charlotte Brontë's existence becomes divided into two parallel currents—her life as Currer Bell, the author; her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman" (*LCB* 258-59). In dividing her biography into two volumes, Gaskell formally replicates the division into "two parallel currents" that she ascribes to Brontë's experience as a woman writer.

The images Gaskell chose to appear at the beginning of each volume epitomize the distinction between the two narratives of individual and artistic development. The frontispiece of Volume I is a copy of Richmond's portrait of Brontë (done after her fame), and that of Volume II is a drawing of Haworth Parsonage and the church, in which the churchyard with its staggered ranks of leaning tombstones occupies the entire foreground of the picture. The first part of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* is about the growth of personhood, represented in the portrait that is supposed to simultaneously be an idealized and mimetic representation of the individual. The second part of Gaskell's version of Brontë's life is about her literary success, yet the image of the churchyard overshadows the entire second portion of the biography. While this image reminds readers of the tragic deaths of all the Brontë children and hints at the importance of the deaths of Branwell, Emily, and Anne Brontë in Charlotte's literary career, the graveyard at the beginning of Volume II suggests that the culmination of Brontë's literary development is death. The juxtaposition of Richmond's portrait of Brontë with the sketch of the Haworth churchyard presents a riddling analogy between the graveyard and the woman writer—an analogy that asks, "When is a woman writer like a graveyard?"

For both Gaskell and Brontë, the answer is “Always.” Gaskell’s biography evinces a fascination with the graveyard as the matrix of both Brontë’s writing and the biography itself. The graveyard outside of Haworth Parsonage and the resulting “unhealthy” atmosphere recur in almost every chapter of Gaskell’s biography of her fellow-writer, even when they have no causal relation to the incidents Gaskell is describing. When Gaskell added material to the biography to make up for the excision of libelous material in the third edition, she embroidered further on the theme of the Parsonage as a house of death, and the Brontës as inhabitants of a burial ground. The recurrence of the graveyard in Gaskell’s biography makes mortal remains the basis of art—her own and her subject’s.

In chapter seven of the first volume, Gaskell interrupts the story of Ellen Nussey’s first visit to Brontë’s home with a paragraph about the graveyard, which begins “Haworth is built with an utter disregard of all sanitary conditions: the great old churchyard lies above all the houses, and it is terrible to think how the very water-springs of the pumps below must be poisoned.” She goes on to say that the year of Nussey’s visit was “particularly wet and rainy, and there were an unusual number of deaths in the village.”<sup>9</sup> The wet weather made walking difficult, and confined the Brontës within their house, listening to the “passing and funeral bells so frequently tolling” and the sound of the stonemason chipping out the inscriptions on the new gravestones (95). Despite “living, as it were, in a churchyard—for the parsonage is surrounded by it on three sides—and with all the sights and sounds connected with the last offices to the dead things of every-day occurrence,” Brontë remained extremely sensitive about the subject of

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<sup>9</sup> If Gaskell is correct in this, it would mean a truly astounding mortality rate, as Haworth’s overall mortality rate was high at the best of times. Barker notes that “the mortality rates in Haworth rivalled those in the worst districts in London...over forty-one per cent of children died before reaching their sixth birthday and the average age of death was twenty-five” (96). When an official study was finally completed, it revealed that “the mortality rate was ten and a half per cent higher than that laid down in law as being so unhealthy as to require special remedies” (635).

death. Gaskell quotes an unnamed friend who says, ““I have seen her turn pale and feel faint when, in Hartshead church, some one accidentally remarked that we were walking over graves”” (96). In the material added for the third edition, Gaskell elaborates on Brontë’s fear of death, using more material from the unnamed friend as follows: ““Charlotte was certainly afraid of death. Not only of dead bodies, or of dying people, she dreaded it as something horrible. She thought we did not know how long the ‘moment of dissolution’ might really be, or how terrible. This was just such a terror as only hypochondriacs can provide for themselves”” (Appendix 442).<sup>10</sup> The following paragraph goes back to tracing the growing intimacy between Ellen and Charlotte evinced in Charlotte’s letters to her, so that the description of the graveyard neither forwards the action nor explains anything about Ellen or her visit.

Although Gaskell’s interpolation of the graveyard serves no narrative purpose, it establishes Brontë’s status as both otherworldly and somewhat deathly herself, since she grew up ““living, as it were, in a churchyard,”” while simultaneously linking Brontë to her most popular fictional heroine. Gaskell’s choice of words harks back to Brontë’s first published novel, the wildly successful *Jane Eyre*, in which Jane leaves Thornfield during Mr. Rochester’s unconventional courtship to go to Gateshead and see her dying aunt. After her aunt dies and the estate is settled, Jane returns, meeting Mr. Rochester in the lanes as she walks from Millcote to Thornfield. When Rochester asks her where she has been, Jane replies ““I have been with my aunt, sir, who is dead.”” Rochester picks up on Jane’s uncanny reply and exclaims, ““She comes from the other world—from the abode of people who are dead”” (245). Both Brontë and Jane’s childhood homes are populated by dead people, it seems. By disrupting her narrative about

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<sup>10</sup> Although Gaskell does not name her as the source for this anecdote, it comes from Brontë’s friend Mary Taylor, whose long letter about Brontë appears in excerpts throughout the biography, most notably in the second-to-last paragraph.

Brontë's growing intimacy with Ellen with this association between Brontë and Jane, Gaskell hints that Brontë and the subject of the fictional autobiography are one and the same.

Gaskell's use of the subjunctive adverbial modifier, "as it were," complicates the connection she draws between fact and fiction here. While the subjunctive indicates that the Brontës do not actually live in the graveyard, Gaskell's comments make it clear that they are literally surrounded by it, as well as by the "sights and sounds connected with the last offices to the dead." Gaskell calls attention to the metaphorical nature of the connection between the graveyard and the Parsonage even as her commentary literalizes the metaphor. The fictional character of Jane already exists as metaphor in Brontë's life long before she writes *Jane Eyre*. Furthermore, the link between Brontë and her character springs from their common ground of origin—the grave, so that the burial ground is the metaphorical link between Brontë and Jane Eyre.

The graveyard is also the metaphorical link between Gaskell and Brontë. By beginning her biography with Brontë's memorial tablet, Gaskell makes the Brontë who appears within its pages into a ghost, a revenant returned from the grave to haunt her own biography. Like Jane Eyre, Brontë appears in Gaskell's text as an uncanny being who "comes from the other world—from the abode of people who are dead." Since Gaskell's biography is predicated on Brontë's death, Gaskell's text, like Brontë and Jane Eyre, springs from the graveyard with which it begins, and to which it returns.

In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, author and biographical subject become entwined, so that Brontë appears as a literary creation that, like Jane Eyre, is a version of the author, in this case Gaskell. Gaskell self-consciously ventriloquizes the dead author, declaring that she "put[s] into words what Charlotte Brontë put into actions" (LCB 259). As Gaskell claims to make Brontë's

actions into words, she usurps the dead writer's space in a mutual possession that works as an authorizing strategy for her own writing. Although Gaskell had already published three novels and numerous short stories and was at no particular pains to conceal her authorship, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* was the first work in which Gaskell's name appeared on the title page. Just as Jane's fictional autobiography marks the birth of Currer Bell, Gaskell's biography of Brontë (perhaps as fictional as *Jane Eyre*) marks the establishment of Elizabeth Gaskell's authorial identity.

While the buried reference to Jane Eyre in the graveyard passage quoted above suggests that Brontë's work metaphorically reanimates the dead, Gaskell's discussions of Brontë's novels make them into a series of explicit attempts to bring her lost siblings back from the dead. Gaskell declares that Brontë's work literally repeats experience and reproduces people as characters. In the description of Brontë's experience at Cowan Bridge School, Gaskell insists on the veracity of Brontë's fictional representation of the school as Lowood in *Jane Eyre*. In doing so, Gaskell suggests an origin for Brontë's writing that authorizes women writers purveying unpalatable truths in their fictions—a strategy that serves to underwrite her own work as well.

In narrating the Cowan Bridge episode, Gaskell violates the linearity of her developmental narrative of Brontë's youth. She jumps from describing the deaths of Brontë's elder sisters Maria and Elizabeth to discussing Brontë's representation of Maria in Brontë's fiction, with the result that the historical event and the fictional reproduction of it become almost indistinguishable. When Brontë was eight years old, she joined Maria and Elizabeth at Cowan Bridge School, the real-life model for Lowood in *Jane Eyre*; deprived of sufficient nourishment, warmth, and nurture, Maria and Elizabeth sickened, were taken home, and died shortly thereafter. Linking the death of Brontë's sisters to one of the more famous moments in Brontë's

fiction reinforces the connection between writing and death for Brontë, while suggesting a more positive aspect to this connection.<sup>11</sup>

At the outset of her narration of the Cowan Bridge episode, Gaskell emphasizes how the factual events are reproduced in Brontë's fiction. Rather than saying that Maria and Elizabeth's suffering and death provided the material for the figure of Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre*, Gaskell describes Helen Burns as the textual incarnation of Maria Brontë: "Helen Burns is as exact a transcript of Maria as Charlotte's wonderful power of reproducing character could give." Thus the fictional character becomes a means for Brontë to reanimate her lost sister. Although Helen Burns dies in *Jane Eyre*, as Maria did, the marker that Jane later has placed over her grave reads "Resurgam," suggesting that part of Jane's new power as the writer of her own autobiography is to bring the dead back to life.

Gaskell describes a somewhat different dynamic in *Shirley*, in which Brontë reanimates Emily, her recently dead sister, and her close friend Martha Taylor, who died in Brussels while Brontë was at the Pensionnat Héger. Shirley Keeldar, who is oddly enough not the main character of the novel that bears her name, "is Charlotte's representation of Emily," not as she was, but "as what Emily Brontë would have been, had she been placed in health and prosperity" (299).<sup>12</sup> Shirley is rich, beautiful, affectionate, and commanding. She is also a writer; Brontë

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<sup>11</sup> Gaskell also links Brontë's experience at school to her writing through the way she structures her narrative. In the chapter immediately following the Cowan Bridge episode, Gaskell details Brontë's literary output during the years following her return home, taking from "an immense amount of manuscript" Brontë's own list, entitled "Catalogue of My Books, with the Period of Their Completion up to August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1830" (64). As Roland Barthes says, "the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes *after* being read in narratives as what is *caused by*" (94, emphasis in original). Thus by placing this chapter, almost completely made up of excerpts from Brontë's juvenilia, immediately after the chapter about Maria and Elizabeth's deaths, Gaskell uses the logic of narrative causality to create link between the "wound" done to Brontë at school and her literary output.

<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact the novel's title is *Shirley*, most of the action is focalized through the viewpoint of Caroline Helstone, while Shirley's consciousness remains stubbornly unavailable to the reader, as to many of the other characters.

includes one of Shirley's compositions, written for her tutor, Louis Moore, in which Shirley develops a creation myth for the birth of creative genius. At the end of the novel, however, she is captured and tamed into marriage by her ex-tutor. According to Gaskell, Brontë deliberately uses her writing to restore her losses and to imagine a less deadly though still silencing outcome for a woman writer—one which does not end in death but in domesticity.

Gaskell also calls attention to how Brontë resurrects her beloved dead in the character of Jessie Yorke in *Shirley*. Two of Brontë's friends from her schooldays at Roe Head, Mary and Martha Taylor, were in Brussels at the same time as Brontë, and Brontë was in the habit of seeing them reasonably often. Martha died suddenly of cholera during Brontë's first year there, and Gaskell reminds her readers that they have already read about this in *Shirley*: "Who that has read 'Shirley' does not remember the few lines—perhaps half a page—of sad recollections?" She goes on to quote from the text of *Shirley* for about a page, one of the very rare moments when Gaskell uses excerpts from Brontë's novels in the biography. The excerpts Gaskell quotes are anomalous both within her biography and in the novel they come from. In *Shirley*, Brontë uses an omniscient third person narrator. However, unlike most third person narrators, *Shirley*'s narrator is also a personal acquaintance of the characters he describes.<sup>13</sup> He interrupts the main narrative twice to address the characters within the narrative, telling them about the death that waits for Jessy Yorke, one of the minor characters, long after the action of the novel has concluded. In one of the three extended passages Gaskell quotes, the narrator addresses Jessy, the character in the novel, to describe his memories of her grave and funeral, which took place "some years" before the moment of narration. In addressing the character, alive in the novel, yet dead by the time of narration, Brontë again brings her back to life, even as the narrator writes,

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<sup>13</sup> I choose the masculine pronoun in speaking of *Shirley*'s narrator, since Brontë, in the Preface to the book, which she wrote but did not publish on the advice of her publishers, is at pains to emphasize the gender of her writing persona when she refers to Curren Bell as "an old bachelor" (*Shirley* Appendix, 612).

“Jessy, I will write about you no more” (*Shirley* 385, *LCB* 179). Gaskell’s only extended quotations from Brontë’s fiction highlight a moment when Brontë resurrects a real person as a fictional character, only to kill her off again in a narrative aside that is inessential to the plot of the novel, yet that collapses distinctions between fact and fiction while reanimating the character as an addressee of the narrative.

Gaskell hints that this reanimation of the dead is healthier for Brontë than the exercise of her imagination, which had a tendency to make her ill. Gaskell writes that when Brontë wrote, “the characters were her companions...The interests of the persons in her novels supplied the lack of interest in her own life; and Memory and Imagination found their appropriate work, and ceased to prey on her vitals” (378-9). Fictional reanimations give Brontë “interest,” and thereby forestall the consuming power of “Memory and Imagination,” which would otherwise “prey on her vitals.” Fiction which reanimates the dead prevents imagination from consuming the woman writer from within; fiction based on death helps the woman writer escape the deathliness imposed on her by domesticity.<sup>14</sup>

Gaskell makes it clear that Brontë’s reanimations of her beloved dead were the result of an urgent desire that is also at the heart of her biography of Brontë. After the phenomenal success of *Jane Eyre*, with the resulting hasty publication of Emily and Anne Brontë’s first novels, tragedy struck the Brontë family. Branwell, Emily, and Anne all died of consumption within a span of nine months. In Gaskell’s version of events, the deaths of her siblings left Brontë alone in a house that she wished to populate with ghosts. Gaskell writes that Brontë stayed up late, “striving to beguile the lonely night with some employment, till her weak eyes failed to read or to sew, and could only weep in solitude over the dead that were not” (318). In

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<sup>14</sup> The context of this passage makes it clear that Gaskell ascribes Brontë’s debility to her domestic duties. After the deaths of her siblings, Brontë was reluctant to leave her father, even though the circumstances at Haworth made her miserable

this state, the “grim superstitions” of ghosts that Gaskell earlier noted in her ethnography of the North, “recurred to her now,—with no shrinking from the spirits of the Dead, but with such an intense longing once more to stand face to face with the souls of her sisters, as no one but she could have felt” (318). Gaskell’s use of the odd formulation, “the dead that were not,” is a formal representation of the suspended desire that she goes on to describe in Brontë. The desire to add a predicate to the negated verb—for example “the dead that were not there”—links the reader to Brontë in the yearning for some representation of the “souls” of the dead. At the same time, the construction of the clause, in which the adjective “dead” is used as a noun, also suggests a reflexive negation—as if the “not” negates “dead” instead of “were.” The temptation is to read the clause as “the dead that were not dead,” a temptation that is amplified when Gaskell writes that “[o]n windy nights, cries, and sobs, and wailings seemed to go round the house, as of the dearly-beloved striving to force their way to her” (319). Once again, Gaskell’s diction reminds readers of a Brontë novel—this time Emily’s *Wuthering Heights*, in which Catherine Earnshaw’s ghost struggles to return to her childhood home. Charlotte Brontë’s life, it seems, reenacts her sister’s fiction, as Gaskell blurs the lines between fact and fiction.

The moving (or hilarious) scene of Charlotte pacing the floors and yearning to see the souls of her lost sisters (*not* Branwell) is a fictive collaboration between Emily Brontë and Gaskell that has taken on the status of mythic truth. While Brontë did mention to her publisher, George Smith, and one of his readers, W.S. Williams, how difficult it was to finish *Shirley* and compose *Villette* without the presence of her sisters, the melodramatic and gothic tone of Brontë’s grief is Gaskell’s construction.<sup>15</sup> Gaskell represents Brontë’s grief as a desire to “stand

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<sup>15</sup> Brontë’s tone when writing about her desire for her sisters’ presence suggests that she misses them more for the sake of their feedback than their company. In a letter to Smith that Gaskell includes in *The Life*, Brontë writes that she “sometimes desponded, and almost despaired, because there was no one to whom to read a line, or of whom to ask a counsel. ‘Jane Eyre’ was not written under such circumstances, nor were two-thirds of ‘Shirley’” (389).

face to face with the souls of her sisters” and claims that Brontë’s novels are the artistic representation and fulfillment of that desire. However, Gaskell’s choice of words suggests the problem of recreating the dead that she herself, as Brontë’s biographer, encounters in her biography. Standing “face to face” with the “souls” of the dead is impossible, since souls lack both bodies and faces. Thus the “intense longing” that Gaskell attributes to the embodied and grieving Brontë is the impossible desire to bridge the incommensurable realms of body and soul. Further, this desire is the same desire that drives Gaskell herself, both as novelist and as biographer. The impulse of the realist novel is to bring the reader face to face with the soul—or in other words to create the illusion of interiority from the external materials of embodiment.<sup>16</sup> The biographer’s impulse is also to recreate an interior life from the external circumstances of and the textual detritus of that life; Leon Edel writes that “the biographer seeks to restore the very sense of life to the inert materials that survive an individual’s passage on this earth...to recapture some part of what was once tissue and brain, and above all feeling, and to shape a likeness of the vanished figure” (1). Gaskell’s description of Brontë’s grief functions as a synecdoche for the entire biography, in which she tries to link the incommensurable realms of public and private, soul and body, writer and woman, by bridging the gap between life and death.

This linkage is essential to the genre of biography, which combines fact and fiction in an attempt to give new life to the dead. According to Nigel Hamilton, biography originated as a form of memorialization of the dead (8). Nineteenth-century literary biography combined the practices of criticism and biography, and, as Tricia Lootens points out, both of these practices were ways of raising the dead. Although biography could be didactic, as the multitude of

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<sup>16</sup> See William Cohen’s *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses*.

collections of exemplary lives of men of industry and women of virtue demonstrate,<sup>17</sup> the biographer also appears as a “literary resurrection man” (qtd. in Lootens 24). Lootens quotes from Walter Raleigh (the professor, not the courtier) on the task of criticism: “The main business of Criticism, after all is not to legislate, not to classify, but to raise the dead. Graves, at its command, have waked their sleepers, oped, and let them forth. It is by the creative power of this art that the living man is reconstructed from the litter of blurred and fragmentary paper documents that he has left to posterity” (qtd. Lootens 23). The biographer brings scattered fragments into a semblance of unity and then brings them alive through the power of fictionalization.<sup>18</sup> Ira Bruce Nadel writes: “In the composition of biography, fictive form rather than historical content dominates as the events of a life become the elements of a story...fictive power directs the composition and reading of biography, explaining how biography translates fact into literary event” (9). Both Gaskell and her subject engage in a morbid form of authorship as they bring their dead back to life by making “the events of a life” into “the elements of a story.”

### **Literary reproduction**

According to a reviewer for the *Saturday Times*, the anticipation surrounding the publication of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* was the result of people’s intense curiosity about how Brontë made the “events of a life” into “the elements of a fiction”: “those who admired her writings wished to know whether the cause of their admiration was reflected in her life” (*GCH*

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<sup>17</sup> See Richard D. Altick, *Lives and Letters*, on the predominance of the collection of short lives of important figures, and Alison Booth, *How to Make it as a Woman*, on the large number of collective biographies of women both historical and fictional.

<sup>18</sup> If this sounds like Frankenstein’s monster, it’s meant to. Gaskell uses Frankenstein’s monster as an image for the working class she claims to speak for in *Mary Barton*, and the image is equally appropriate for the way Gaskell uses a patchwork of letters, anecdotes, and narrative to reanimate and ventriloquize Brontë in her biography.

376-7). Apparently the reviewer found Gaskell's biography satisfying in this respect, since the review reads "we have ample materials in the history of [Brontë's] earlier life to inform us how she used, as all writers of fiction must use, the facts of experience" (378). In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell does use the details of Brontë's life to explain and justify Brontë's works, which had drawn considerable critical fire for their coarseness—outspokenness on sexual misbehavior (*Jane Eyre*), the portrayal of unidealized characters such as the curates in *Shirley*, and the representation of female desire (*Villette*). Elizabeth Rigby, later Lady Eastlake, provides the prime example of this critique of Brontë's work; in her scathing review of *Jane Eyre*, she declares that the novel displayed "such coarseness of taste" that the mysterious Currer Bell must be a man, or a woman so unfortunate as to have "long ago forfeited the society of her own sex" (BCH 111). However, in creating this connection between Brontë's fiction and her life, Gaskell goes beyond defending Brontë's work to support a form of writing that blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction—which Gaskell herself had been criticized for doing early in her career. Furthermore, as Gaskell forges explicit connections between Brontë's life and work, she also creates implicit connections between herself and the subject of her biography, so that Brontë functions for Gaskell much as *Jane Eyre*, for instance, does for Brontë. For both Gaskell and Brontë, ventriloquizing another woman's voice serves to authorize their own writing. In giving voice to a dead woman, Gaskell develops a more positive model of morbid female authorship than the one dictated by the rules of gender. Gaskell justifies the representation of potentially scandalous incidents in both her own and Brontë's fiction by showing that they are reproductions of actual events from the author's past.

While Gaskell does not refer to her biography of Brontë as a reanimation of the dead, she does populate the early chapters with ghosts of the past. In the long introduction to *Haworth*,

which brings the reader on the road from Keighley to Haworth, Gaskell emphasizes the sense of historical flux, noting that Keighley is a collection of buildings caught in the “process of transformation from a populous, old-fashioned village, into a still more populous and flourishing town.” This transformation entails new forms of production, reproduction, and circulation, which Gaskell also notes in her opening chapter. She writes that the “quaint and narrow shop-windows of fifty years ago, are giving way to large panes and plate-glass” and calls attention to Keighley’s status as a “new manufacturing place” (11). In mentioning the new “plate-glass” windows, Gaskell introduces the idea of new modes of circulation based on forms of spectacle.<sup>19</sup> Gaskell’s interest in plate-glass dates from her first novel, *Mary Barton*, in which the dynamics of display in shop-windows play a crucial part at four separate moments in the novel. As she continues leading her reader through the countryside, Gaskell highlights the way new modes of production and forms of labor embodied in the factories change the landscape. In Gaskell’s discussions of Brontë’s novelistic practice in general, and her reanimation of the dead more particularly, Gaskell suggests an analogy between these new modes of production and female authorship.

Just as Gaskell identifies Helen Burns as an example of “Charlotte’s wonderful power of reproducing character,” Gaskell asserts that the scenes between Miss Scatcherd and Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre* are “a literal repetition of scenes between the pupil [Maria] and the teacher” (56). Gaskell suggests that Brontë’s “wonderful power” is both a reproductive and mechanical one, stemming from the trauma of watching her sister suffer, sicken, and finally die. Although Gaskell writes of Brontë’s experience at Cowan Bridge as a trauma that leads to her writing, the

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<sup>19</sup> See Rachel Bowlby’s *Just Looking*, Anne Friedberg’s *Window Shopping*, Isobel Armstrong’s *Victorian Glassworlds*, and Andrew Miller’s *Novels Behind Glass*, on glass as both a barrier and medium of desire essential to the proliferation of a consumer culture based on spectacle.

wound that does permanent damage to Brontë is actually inflicted on her sister, and Gaskell's narrative, mediated through multiple layers of displacement, deserves to be quoted at length:

One of these fellow-pupils of Charlotte and Maria Brontë's... gives me the following:... One morning, after [Maria] had become so seriously unwell as to have had a blister applied to her side (the sore from which was not perfectly healed), when the getting-up bell was heard, poor Maria moaned out that she was so ill, so very ill, she wished she might stop in bed; and some of the girls urged her to do so, and said they would explain it all to Miss Temple... But Miss Scatcherd was close at hand, and her anger would have to be faced... so the sick child began to dress, shivering with cold, as, without leaving her bed, she slowly put on her black worsted stockings over her thin white legs (my informant spoke as if she saw it yet, and her whole face flashed out undying indignation). Just then Miss Scatcherd issued from her room, and, without asking for a word of explanation from the sick and frightened girl, she took her by the arm, on the side to which the blister had been applied, and by one vigorous movement whirled her out into the middle of the floor, abusing her all the time for dirty and untidy habits. (56-7)

As she introduces the incident, Gaskell implies that "the following" is direct testimony given to her by an unnamed pupil. However, in her narration, Gaskell mingles fact and fiction, using Maria's name in conjunction with the fictional names of Misses Temple and Scatcherd. As the incident progresses, Maria's name drops out, to be replaced with "the sick child," and the "the sick and frightened girl." The specific historical person, Maria Brontë, disappears, as does the identity of the informant, and both girls are collapsed into the figure of Charlotte Brontë herself, the sick and suffering subject of the "biography," whose "undying indignation" is reproduced in and circulated by her first novel.

Gaskell opens the next paragraph by remarking, "Anyone may fancy how such an event would rankle in Charlotte's mind," making Brontë into both the witness and the victim of the wound on her sister's blistered side (57). The disclaimer in "Anyone may fancy" turns Brontë's long-held resentment into an imaginative construct on the part of both narrator and reader. This imaginative construct becomes, according to Gaskell, the founding trauma that underlies Brontë's future frailty and all of her writing. At the time, Brontë was eight years old, and the

deaths of the sisters she idolized created a “painful impression” made uniquely lasting by Brontë’s own debility: “Painful impressions sink deeply into the hearts of delicate and sickly children. What the healthy suffer from but momentarily, and then forget, those who are ailing brood over involuntarily, and remember long--perhaps with no resentment, but simply as a piece of suffering that has been stamped into their very life” (58). Gaskell writes that the “pictures, ideas, and conceptions of character received into the mind of the child of eight years old, were destined to be reproduced in fiery words a quarter of a century afterwards” (59). The power of Brontë’s pen to move her readers to indignation and sorrow for Helen Burns lacks any agency on Brontë’s part, as Brontë becomes multiply passive in the passage above. The “conceptions... received into [her] mind” are “reproduced” without transformation. The “suffering that is stamped” in Brontë’s character makes her into a machine that reproduces emotions as “fiery words,” like a printing press that uses heat to stamp out images and words over and over again.

After Maria and Elizabeth’s deaths, Rev. Brontë removed Brontë from Cowan Bridge, assuaging both her loneliness and homesickness. Gaskell’s imagery suggests that Brontë benefits from her sisters’ deaths in a more literal fashion. In addition to suggesting a printing-press, the references to “reproducing character” in “fiery words” brings up the image of a coin press. Transforming affect into print and circulating it in novel form makes the private both public and profitable for the woman writer. Gaskell here draws on anxieties about women writing their way into the public sphere of exchange, while also adumbrating anxieties that become more salient with the advent of sensation fiction and its physiological and affective powers. The implication that Brontë used her sisters deaths as fodder for her profitable fictions is neutralized by Gaskell’s insistence that Brontë was “unconsciously avenging” the wrongs done

to her sister (56). Thus Gaskell justifies women's writing and their consequent entry into the public sphere as an involuntary response to the suffering of another.

My final point about this incident and its relation to women's writing lies in Gaskell's account of Brontë's fellow-pupils response to the incidents at Cowan Bridge and Brontë's "literal repetition" of them twenty-five years later, in which Gaskell suggests a feminine and cloistered epistemology that the novel attempts to make public. According to Gaskell, while the storm of curiosity about the identity of Currer Bell raged in London, a limited community of Yorkshire women knew Bell's secret identity as soon as *Jane Eyre* came out. Brontë's schoolmates "had...recognised the description of the sweet dignity and benevolence of Miss Temple...[and] when Miss Scatcherd was held up to opprobrium they also recognised in the writer of 'Jane Eyre' an unconsciously avenging sister of the sufferer" (56). Gaskell's report of the testimony of one of these "fellow-pupils," quoted above, includes a parenthetical statement that "my informant spoke as if she saw it yet, and her whole face flashed out undying indignation." While Gaskell's narration suggests that one would have had to be there to know and understand the feelings, it also testifies to the power of Brontë's fictional reproduction to evoke the affective power of the past. Gaskell's narration is another reproduction of the incident and also attempts to repeat the affective charge of both the original and fictional events. Gaskell's biographical practice here is like Brontë's novelistic one, using writing as a form of reproduction to take a gendered and affective past experience and make it both public and present.

Gaskell brings reproduction and mechanization to the fore again when she writes about how Brontë transforms fact into fiction in *Shirley*. Gaskell writes that Brontë "took the idea of most of her characters from life" in her second published novel, although "the incidents and

situations were, of course, fictitious” (298). Brontë’s fictional characters were almost immediately recognized, because Brontë made them too real. According to Gaskell, Brontë’s vivid power of characterization derived from an almost scientific method of analysis and reconstitution: “Miss Brontë was struck by the force or peculiarity of the character of some one whom she knew; she studied it, and analysed it with subtle power; and having traced it to its germ, she took that germ as the nucleus of an imaginary character, and worked outwards;--thus reversing the process of analysis, and unconsciously reproducing the same external development” (298). At the risk of incurring the charge of anachronistic reading, this sounds like nothing so much as the process of cloning, as if Brontë’s “subtle power” of analysis is a form of mechanical reproduction as she “unconsciously reproduc[es]” real people as fictional characters. Gaskell also writes that, in *Shirley*, the “whole family of the Yorkes were, I have been assured, almost daguerrotypes” (299). Brontë’s realistic characters are the product of mechanical forms of reproduction.

Gaskell’s insistence on the reproductive quality of Brontë’s work is paralleled by contemporary reviewers’ insistence on the same quality in Gaskell’s biography and in her first novel, *Mary Barton*. While Brontë’s characters are daguerrotypes, Gaskell’s Brontë is, according to one reviewer of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, a photograph of the original (*GCH* 389). While some reviewers praised the photographic quality of Gaskell’s reproduction of Brontë, others condemned it as violating the boundary between public and private spheres. In the most notable (and entertaining) example of such reviews, E.S. Dallas condemns Gaskell’s biography for retailing all the old bits of scandal and rumor around Haworth and Roe Head, portraying Rev. Brontë as a “cassocked savage,”<sup>20</sup> and “quietly forc[ing]” readers to the

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<sup>20</sup> Gaskell’s account of Rev. Brontë’s “eccentricities” includes his habit of shooting off firearms when angered, cutting one of his wife’s dresses to ribbons because he didn’t like its style, color, or material, and burning a number

inevitable “conclusion that the novelist finally accepted as her husband the curate whom, in *Shirley*, she had written down as the greatest ass imaginable” (*GCH* 407, 405). For reviewers like Dallas and Elizabeth Rigby (author of the scathing review of *Jane Eyre* mentioned above), Gaskell and Brontë violated the conventions about what could or could not be allowed into realistic fiction about the middle classes. The resources and characteristics of realism—interiority, a causal chain of events, vivid and particularized settings—were not to be deployed in the revelation of scandal, such as the starvation and mistreatment of poor clergymen’s daughters at charity schools, or the exposure of inherently unfair social and economic conditions that forced middle-class women into marriage.<sup>21</sup> Although poverty and unfair social and economic conditions were represented in novels-of-purpose, or the Condition of England novels, they generally appeared in a working-class or otherwise not-bourgeois context. Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, like Brontë’s novels, revealed that the Condition of England was as horrifying for middle-class women as it was for oppressed mill-workers.

Even though Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, her first novel, fits firmly into the category of Condition of England novel, and was thus supposed to cleave close to reality, it nonetheless drew comment on the way it blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction—reproducing the sordid circumstances of the lives of the working class in damaging detail. Even in the service of a social cause, the detailed and realistic portrayal of poverty’s effects on the family disturbed Gaskell’s contemporaries. Early reviewers praised Gaskell’s portrayal of Manchester in terms

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of colored boots someone had given his children because they would instill a dangerous love of finery. Gaskell declares that she only gives such details “because I hold the knowledge of them to be necessary for a right understanding of his daughter” (43, 44).

<sup>21</sup> A contrary example would be Charles Dickens, who had no problem critiquing social institutions in his fiction. However, Dickens’ critiques are usually couched in a style all his own, which hardly conforms to the canons of realism. For example, Dickens’ extended use of metaphor and imagery to condemn the machinery of Utilitarianism in *Hard Times* can hardly be called realistic, while his victims of starvation and mistreatment are often so angelic as to hardly qualify as characters at all.

that are remarkably similar to Gaskell's terms in describing Brontë's work. In the *Athenaeum*, Henry Fothergill Chorley writes, "The accessory characters are touched with the fidelity of a Daguerrotype" (*GCH* 63). An anonymous reviewer for the *Literary Gazette* hammered home the fidelity of Gaskell's depiction, mentioning it three times: "It is the true picture of the condition of all ranks in the manufacturing capital, Manchester, from the life and to the life" (64-65); "[t]here is no invention in these volumes, though circumstances may have been connected together for the sake of a story to bring out the characters" (65); "[i]n all, we have a capital panorama of Manchester; and Asmodeus himself could not give us a more perfect insight into the homes and habits of its busy population" (65). The reviewer for the Unitarian weekly the *Inquirer* declared that "[t]he great beauty of this 'Tale of Manchester Life,' consists in its self-evident truthfulness" (74), and the *Economist's* reviewer claimed that "[t]he impress of truth is not to be mistaken" (78). Thus we can see that in emphasizing the ways in which Brontë's work is reproductive rather than either prescriptive or descriptive, Gaskell also references her own early work and its reception.

The reproductive quality of Gaskell's fiction is a quality associated with women writers, as demonstrated in a letter from Maria Edgeworth, another woman writer, to Mary Holland, in which Edgeworth says, "I opine that it is a *she* – From the great abilities, and from the power of drawing *from* the life and *to* the life so as to give the impression and strong interest of reality" (*GCH* 89). This "impression and strong interest" attracted condemnation from other critics who suggest that such feminine and reproductive detail is not appropriate when writing about affairs of national and industrial importance. As the novel became more popular, reviews became more negative, condemning the work because "[s]ome of those representations of factory life... have passed current as authentic representations of fact, and ... have extensively influenced opinion of

the subject” (*GCH* 103). One reviewer went so far as to quote statistics and cite fact-finding missions into the heart of working-class Manchester to refute Gaskell’s portrayal of the circumstances and emotions of mill-workers (*GCH* 119-128).<sup>22</sup> These late reviews condemned Gaskell’s fiction for posing as fact, yet could only contradict it by citing further facts, thus supporting rather than undermining *Mary Barton*’s status as fact. The reviewer from the *British Quarterly Review*, quoted above, goes so far as to nearly accuse Gaskell of being a rabble-rouser, declaring that her “representations of factory life” were “based upon representations and fabrications obtained in the most disreputable manner through paid agents” (103).<sup>23</sup> The implication here is that Gaskell either has unknowingly reproduced deliberately incendiary material, or that she herself is like the agitators she portrays in *Mary Barton*, intentionally fomenting discontent for the sake of profit. As a woman writer, Gaskell is either unfit to discriminate “fabrications” from the facts, or inappropriately engaging in the profitable business of circulating her “representations” as facts in the disguise of fiction.

The other aspect of *Mary Barton* that many contemporaries found unsettling was the omnipresence of death. In another letter, Edgeworth complains that “[t]here are about a dozen too many deaths,” and the *British Quarterly Review*’s writer notes that “[b]esides the murder, there are no fewer than eight deaths introduced in the course of the tale, including a couple of unfortunate twins, who might just as well have been left out” (112). Gaskell herself acknowledged the gloominess of the novel, writing to Lady Kay-Shuttleworth, “no one feels more keenly than I do, the great fault of the gloominess of M B. It is the fault of the choice of

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<sup>22</sup> The newspaper (the *Manchester Guardian*) printed a reply to this review that pointed out the logical flaw in the reviewer’s argument: “Your correspondent, the reviewer of ‘Mary Barton: a Tale of Manchester Life,’ has made a wonderful discovery; nothing less than passages in a work of fiction which are not literally true” (*GCH* 128).

<sup>23</sup> Even though *Mary Barton* is one of the mid-century Condition of England novels, it shows no “representations of factory life”; there is no scene in the novel that shows workers laboring in the factories. Gaskell instead focuses on the way factory work and the lack of it affect the lives of both workers and owners outside the factory.

the subject; which yet I did not *choose*, but which was as it were impressed upon me” (87).

Gaskell’s use of the metaphor of “impression” calls attention to the way in which her writing, like Brontë’s in the biography, emerges from an almost mechanical process of reproduction; she receives an “impression” and then, like a mold or press, stamps that impression on her work.

For Gaskell, commonly read as a critic of the mechanical quality of industrial production and its attendant social relations, figuring women’s writing as a form of mechanical reproduction enables her to claim a role for writers like herself in the literary marketplace as it started engaging a mass market of readers in the 1840s and 50s. Using Brontë as a figure for herself and for women writers more generally, Gaskell authorizes her own fictions and makes claims for the intervention of women’s writing in the realm of social action outside the home. Because it is *like* reproduction—not sexual but mechanical reproduction, that is—women’s writing is uniquely fitted to portray and engage with the problems caused by the increasing importance of mechanized forms of production. A morbid literary realism that reproduces reality can show a broader scope of experience than literary realism that focuses on the marriage plot usually allows. Gaskell thus turns what critics see as a weakness of women’s writing into a claim for its greater range, power, and appeal.

### **Morbid biography and women writers**

The formal characteristics of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* also abandon the tenets of literary realism in favor of a morbid realism that resists the totalizing power of closure. The morbid realism of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* manifests itself in its circularity and fragmentation as well as in its reanimation and reproduction of the dead. The biography is circular because Brontë’s death is inscribed at the beginning of the biography, so that the entire

narrative leads back to the beginning--the death that has been there all along because women are doomed to reproduce, not represent, and fragmented because, like Tennyson's elegy for Hallam, it consists of fragments linked together into a narrative structure.<sup>24</sup> In addition to using oral and written testimony from Brontë's friends and acquaintances, anecdotes about Haworth and its environs from unnamed sources, and selections from Brontë's novels in the biography, Gaskell uses Brontë's extensive correspondence with Ellen Nussey, W.S. Williams, and George Smith to such a degree that large sections of the biography consist of excerpts from Brontë's letters stitched together with brief introductions or glosses from Gaskell. In the first volume, Chapter 8 consists of letters from Brontë to Nussey, Branwell's letter to William Wordsworth, Brontë's brief correspondence with Robert Southey, and an excerpt from Mary Taylor's letter to Gaskell describing Brontë. Out of 32 pages, less than half are Gaskell's narrative; most of Gaskell's interpolations are brief paragraphs giving contextual information about the letters themselves. There are only six passages of Gaskell's narrative that are longer than one page, and even then Gaskell includes in one a story about "an event [that] happened in the neighborhood of Leeds" and in another a "characteristic little incident" told her by a "good neighbour of the Brontës" (105, 123). In the second volume, Chapter 9 is a composite of Brontë's letters to Nussey and to the literary community in London, interspersed with a total of 115 lines of Gaskell's narrative framing. The chapter is only ten pages long, and each page contains 37 lines of text; thus Gaskell's narrative makes up approximately one third of the entire chapter.

Gaskell calls attention to her own reticence early in the biography. She writes, "I do not pretend to be able to harmonize points of character, and account for them, and bring them all into

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<sup>24</sup> See Homans, *Bearing the Word*. Homans uses the term "reproduction" in a different sense than I do—referring to the reproduction of patriarchal codes in women's writing. However, I am drawing on her argument in claiming that women's writing has a particularly reproductive character to it that is related to what Homans calls the "literal" nature of women's writing.

one consistent and intelligible whole. The family with whom I have now to do shot their roots down deeper than I can penetrate. I cannot measure them, much less is it for me to judge them” (43-4). What Gaskell says she cannot do with the Brontës is exactly what the author of a fiction ought to do, according to the tenets of literary realism. In Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, she not only declares her inability to form a whole out of its parts, she maintains this fragmented aspect in the form of the biography itself, which, rather than being a “consistent and intelligible whole,” is made up of letters, testimonials, and gossip. By refusing to “harmonize,” Gaskell refuses to bring her text to an end that would seem to account for everything that has gone before and suggests that, because it does so, literary realism is inadequate to the demands of an increasingly fragmented and unharmonic culture; it cannot “harmonize” the necessarily fragmented subjects of such a culture into “consistent and intelligible wholes.”<sup>25</sup> Gaskell’s more uneven method, morbid in form and content, is better suited to the demands of reproducing culture in literature.

The fragmented and polyvocal texture of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* is also essential to Gaskell’s reanimation of Brontë, in that it allows her subject to speak for herself: “Acting on the conviction, which I have all along entertained, that where Charlotte Brontë’s own words could be used, no others ought to take their place, I shall make extracts from this series [of letters], according to their dates” (218). By making her text a vehicle through which Brontë can speak for herself after her death while eliding her own role in selecting, arranging, and conflating her sources, Gaskell suggests that female authorship is grounded in the reproduction of other dead

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<sup>25</sup> Gaskell’s tendency toward generic cross-pollination is, I would argue, another aspect of her challenge to the bounds of literary realism. For analyses of how Gaskell adapts and revises multiple genres in her work, see Hilary Schor’s excellent *Scheherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992). Schor focuses on Gaskell’s “struggle ... with the literary plots she has inherited,” arguing that Gaskell’s generic retrofitting enables her to create plots and heroines that challenge culturally dominant narratives and the ideologies they support (p. 3).

women writers. Just as Brontë herself reproduces her dead sisters in her work, Gaskell's biography is a textual reproduction of Brontë. The importance of writing through another woman is marked by the fact that *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* represents a new beginning for Gaskell: for the first time, Gaskell's name appeared on the title-page as the author of her own work, so that her authorship *in propria persona* is part and parcel of the reanimation of her lost friend.

Gaskell makes this reanimation permanent through her refusal of the conventional telos of biography—another example of the formal morbidity of this text. Even though “the deathbed was, in fact, the one obligatory scene in nineteenth-century biography,” Gaskell refuses to portray Brontë's death (Altick 210). Instead, Gaskell skips from describing the sentimental and novelistic scene where Brontë whispers to her new husband, “I am not going to die am I? [God] will not separate us, we have been so happy,” to the immediate aftermath of Brontë's death, which occurs a few days later: “Early on Saturday morning, March 31<sup>st</sup>, the solemn tolling of the Haworth church-bell spoke forth the fact of her death to the villagers who had known her from a child, and whose hearts shivered within them as they thought of the two [Arthur Nicholls and Rev. Brontë] sitting desolate and alone in the old grey house” (427). Although Brontë's death has been there since the first chapter of the biography, Gaskell manages to evade representing or reproducing it, so that she resurrects Brontë without having to kill her off. Instead, she transposes Brontë's death into the repeated tolling of the bell. The almost-mechanical reproduction of sound marking the end of Brontë's life is reminiscent of the almost-mechanical reproduction of Brontë herself in Gaskell's photographically accurate biography as well as the processes of mass reproduction that help to circulate literary reproductions. Gaskell's use of Brontë as the invisible yet generative corpse that enables her own authorship suggests a model

for women's writing that exchanges the mortality associated with sexual reproduction and the pathological morbidity dictated for women writers by Victorian gender ideology for a new kind of morbidity, associated with a too-exact textual reproduction of reality, the mechanical reproduction and circulation of such textual reproductions, and the disruption or elision of conventional forms of closure. While Gaskell's emphasis on women's writing as reproduction serves to answer criticism of her own early work, her reanimation of Brontë also serves to engender a feminine literary tradition in which the figure of the female writer can return to rewrite her own story, or, more tantalizing and more challenging, leave it unfinished.

## Chapter IV

### Marrying the Dead in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*

On a damp day during the winter of 1862-1863, Charles Dickens found himself wandering the Île de la Cité in Paris and “beheld an airy procession coming round in front of Notre-Dame...dancing round the cathedral in the liveliest manner” (*Dickens' Journalism* 4 220). Imagining that the procession heralded “a marriage ... or a Christening, or some other domestic festivity,” Dickens “found, from the talk of a quick rush of Blouses past me, that it was a Body coming to the Morgue” (220). Although the Morgue was an “old acquaintance” of Dickens’s, he had “never before chanced upon this initiation,” and so he joined the crowd, eager to see the newest arrival. In Dickens’s narrative of this visit to the Paris Morgue, published in the May 1863 issue of *All The Year Round* as “Some Recollections of Mortality,”<sup>1</sup> he gives a brief and restrained description of the corpse itself, and then depicts the rest of the crowd:

There was a little pity, but not much, and that mostly with a selfish touch in it ... There was more of a secretly brooding contemplation and curiosity ... There was a wolfish stare at the object ... And there was a much more general, purposeless, vacant staring at it – like looking at a waxwork, without a catalogue, and not knowing what to make of it. But all these expressions concurred in possessing the one under-lying expression of *looking at something that could not return a look.*” (223, emphasis in original)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The title alludes to William Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” (DJ4 219).

<sup>2</sup> In “Returning the Look: Victorian Writers and the Paris Morgue,” Paul Vita points out that even though Dickens implicitly condemns the “wolfish stare” of the crowd, his portrayal of the crowd “objectifies them in the same way they are objectifying the morgue’s display” (251).

In Dickens's buildup to this moment and in his other journalistic writings about the Paris Morgue, as well as in a tradition of English travel writing about the Morgue, the gaze of the crowd feeds on the display of almost-naked dead bodies in a barely concealed sexual perversity.<sup>3</sup>

This perverse desire manifests itself in the penultimate scene of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, when Walter Hartright, hero and master-narrator of the story, enters the Paris Morgue and trains his gaze upon the monstrous corpse of Count Fosco, villain and master-plotter of the story. Like Dickens, Walter turns aside from a planned excursion to the Cathedral of Notre Dame when he overhears three people leaving the Morgue describing "the corpse of a man – a man of immense size, with a strange mark on his left arm" (623).<sup>4</sup> At that moment, Walter claims, "the truth itself was revealed to me – revealed, in the chance words that had just reached my ears" (623). Although Walter distinguishes his gaze from that of the typical Parisian crowd by claiming already to know the story behind the "unowned, unknown" corpse thus "exposed to the flippant curiosity of a French mob," he nonetheless *must* see the corpse (623). Known or unknown, the corpse excites a desire—but for what? What does it say about Victorian culture that tourists were eager to crane their necks at nearly-naked corpses? And why does this desire—by no means unique to the 1860s—assume literary importance in novels of the 1860s such as Collins's *The Woman in White* and Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*?

For Collins and Dickens, the corpses on display embody the problem of empty form—the same problem Tennyson confronts in his elegy for Arthur. The corpse, a body emptied of all that once made it a person, epitomizes the emptiness of multiple forms: life drained of meaning,

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<sup>3</sup> In this tradition, British writers, including Frances Trollope and Robert Browning, condemn the French practice of looking at the dead even as they recreate and circulate the experience in text. In addition to Vita's article, cited above, see Britta Martens' "Death as Spectacle: The Paris Morgue in Dickens and Browning."

<sup>4</sup> Collins also visited the Morgue when he had the opportunity. See his *Letters*, pp. 23, 32. See Vanessa Schwartz's *Spectacular Realities*, chapter 2, for information on visiting the Paris Morgue as a common pastime in Paris for residents and visitors alike. Schwartz notes that "the morgue even merited a stop on the Thomas Cook tour of the city" (46).

people drained of will, the body itself as an assemblage of physical responses. For Tennyson, the problem of empty form begins with his personal grief and circles outward to include larger cultural phenomena such as the loss of faith and the rise of reductive materialism. Both Collins and Dickens recognize that the problem of empty form is endemic to the culture around them, and they both respond to it by writing novels that were not only recognized as morbid, but were about morbidity itself.<sup>5</sup>

Henry Mansel, a professor at Oxford who wrote for the *Quarterly Review*, recognized and condemned the morbidity of sensation novels. According to Mansel, the subgenre of the sensation novel created and sated perverse desires, and his wholesale condemnation of the genre diagnoses it as a symptom of a cultural disease. In his oft-quoted article “Sensation Novels” (1863), Mansel writes:

excitement, and excitement alone seems to be the great end at which they [sensation novels] aim ... And as excitement, even when harmless in kind, cannot be continually produced without becoming morbid in degree, works of this class manifest themselves as belonging, some more, some less, but all to some extent, to the morbid phenomena of literature—indications of a wide-spread corruption, of which they are in part both the effect and the cause; called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply. (482-3)<sup>6</sup>

In *The Woman in White*, the exemplary sensation novel, the excitement Mansel condemns reaches its apotheosis in Walter’s encounter with Fosco’s spectacular corpse. The voyeurism of “*looking at something that could not return a look*” underlies the plot and structure of the novel,

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<sup>5</sup> *Our Mutual Friend* is not typically included in discussions of the sensation novel; *Great Expectations* is usually considered Dickens’s version of the sensation novel. Although *Our Mutual Friend* is not usually juxtaposed with *The Woman in White* or sensation novels more generally, we will see that in this novel Dickens responds to Collins’s *The Woman in White*, drawing on and adapting its central dynamic of marrying the dead.

<sup>6</sup> Mansel’s review, though frequently cited in criticism on Collins’s *The Woman in White*, deals with sensation novels in general, only briefly mentioning Collins’s *No Name* and ignoring *The Woman in White*. However, most critics agree that *The Woman in White* not only started the sensation craze of the 1860s, but remains the exemplary novel of the genre, so that Mansel’s fulminating review is applicable to the novel, though he does not mention it by name.

in which characters and readers, themselves unobserved, repeatedly watch others who cannot look back. The excitement provoked by sensation novels and the desire excited by the spectacular corpses in the Paris Morgue both testify to the morbid state of Victorian culture in the 1860s.

Surrounded by morbidity and the cultural concern about morbidity evident in Mansel's review, Collins and Dickens approach the problem of empty form in different ways: Collins exploits it, while Dickens counters it. Collins seizes on the centripetal power of empty forms as an opportunity to devise a new kind of plot that is morbid because the repetition of sensational thrills paradoxically leads to a state of reduced energy. Not only is the sensation plot he popularizes in *The Woman in White* commercially successful, it also leverages empty form to drive a narrative that reverses the energetic model of plot that dominated the nineteenth-century novel. Dickens takes the opposite approach and attempts to infuse the empty form with meaning, making the transformative and regenerative potential of the corpse the motor for the plot of his final novel, *Our Mutual Friend*. This chapter is primarily about Collins's *The Woman in White*, but placing Collins's use of the spectacular corpse against the oppositional approach taken by Dickens, Collins's close friend and literary collaborator, dramatizes the cultural spread of morbidity and the importance of the genre Collins made so popular.

In this chapter, I show how Collins makes a riveting plot out of a sexuality that is deathly without being deadly: morbid sexuality is, for Collins, the evacuation of energy and volition. In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks offers a narrative model in which plot begins when "quiescence" is "stimulated" into "a state of narratability, into a tension, a kind of irritation"; "arousal ... creates the narratable as a condition of tumescence, appetency, ambition, quest" (103). *The Woman in White* offers another model of plot, in which the "narratable" inheres in a

morbid sexuality that—rather than evoking “appetency” or “ambition”—paradoxically excites lethargy instead of energy as it moves toward its consummation in deathly images of marriage. *The Woman in White* epitomizes a form of entropic plotting, in which the repetition of excitation becomes morbid as it drains characters and readers of will. In his use of sensation, Collins figures sexuality as an erosion of volition, making agents subject to their physical responses and thereby “instruments” of external forces. Nor is the effect limited to characters within the novels. The entropic quality of Collins’s sensational plot also affects readers, so that Collins makes readerly desire like sexuality in the novel: a depletion of will created by physical stimulation. Mansel’s use of metaphors of ingestion to describe reading sensation novels reveals that readers are subjected to uncontrollable physical desires, “cravings of a diseased appetite,” that drain readers of agency just as Walter is drained of will.<sup>7</sup> The widespread circulation of sensation novels propagated the effects Mansel deplored, infecting the entire culture with the disease, not of depleted desire, but of depletion through desire.

I use the term “entropy” to characterize Collins’s plotting *not* because I am arguing that *The Woman in White* participates in the cultural formation of thermodynamic principles.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Mansel is not alone in his choice of images. Kate Flint points out that women’s reading in the nineteenth century was often figured as a form of consumption analogous to eating, and novels were potentially “impure mental foods” (53). Reviewers “especially, though not exclusively” portrayed sensation novels “as being devoured by women” (274).

<sup>8</sup> Barri Gold convincingly makes this argument about Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, in “The Consolation of Physics: Tennyson’s Thermodynamic Solution.” Gold points out that Tennyson’s elegy for Arthur is “saturated with the language of energy physics,” and evinces a concern with entropy more than fourteen years before the term was coined by Rudolph Clausius in 1864 (450). *In Memoriam* “becomes exemplary of poetic discovery simultaneous with—even prior to—scientific discovery,” demonstrating that “poetry and science draw on the same language and wrestle with the same worrying contradictions as each develops the principles physics will call the laws of thermodynamics” (451). Gold argues that “the nascent principles of thermodynamics” provided Tennyson with “a mechanism . . . for finding transformation where the senses perceive loss and waste” (462). Thus Tennyson moves from a second-law sensibility based on entropy to a more hopeful first-law sensibility based on the conservation of energy. I submit that Collins and Dickens represent the two thermodynamic sensibilities manifested in Tennyson’s elegy. Collins’s novel draws on the second law of thermodynamics, the law of entropy, while Dickens counters Collins with a narrative grounded in the first law that dictates the conservation of energy.

Rather, I use the term because the concept of entropy itself marks a transition from an earlier “idea of vital energy abstracted from all form” to an idea of energy embodied and depleted in concrete forms (Underwood 8). Entropy signifies the loss of energy through the transformation of energies into disorderly forms that cannot be used. As Bruce Clarke notes in *Energy Forms*, energy was a “common literary and philosophical term” denoting “emotional and textual as well as physical intensity, intellectual as well as bodily vigor, and in particular, rhetorical force” (21). Entropy is equally literary a term, “[b]orrowing the root of the term *trope*—the linguistic torsion that transforms literal into figurative usages” (25). The loss of energy, will, volition in readers and characters over the course of the novel is entropic because all “emotional and textual as well as physical intensity,” all the “rhetorical force” is transformed—troped—into the narrative energy of the sensation plot and then dissipated into unusable forms at the end of the novel.<sup>9</sup>

I begin with images of marriage in *The Woman in White*, arguing that Collins depicts sexuality as a depletion of energy and abdication of agency consummated, not in death, but in marriage. I then turn to emblematic moments of sensation in the novel, in which Collins reveals

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<sup>9</sup> In *Amnesiac Selves*, Nicholas Dames claims that Collins’s “plots seem to lose energy as their conclusions approach ... because the nervous energy of forgetting is being transmuted back into its original value and function ... and the resultant loss of affect, or relaxation of the nerves, reads like nothing so much as exhaustion (the exhaustion, perhaps, of the overexcited reader, finally numb to further sensation” (190). In *The Secret Theatre of Home*, Jenny Bourne Taylor astutely points out that “*The Woman in White* depends on transforming particular patterns of suspense into the means of closure” (130). The transformations of “nervous energy” and “patterns of suspense” is entropic because they make these energies unavailable for further use, and the novel ends in a state of greater disorder than it began. Rather than reinstating a new order through marriage (the comic plot), or casting retrospective meaning back at an entire life summed up at death (the tragic plot; see Brooks on the moment of death as the moment of narratability, “when life becomes *transmissible*” [28]; see also Garrett Stewart’s *Death Sentences*), the final moment of *The Woman in White* is one of undecidability, as the debate over the ending of the novel reveals. The question of whether the ending of *The Woman in White* subverts Victorian patriarchal ideologies of class and gender, works to contain the threat of that subversion, or both is a longstanding critical preoccupation. While both D.A. Miller and Ann Cvetkovich claim that *The Woman in White* finally shuts the door on challenges to Victorian norms, other critics, including U.C. Knoepfelmacher, Tamar Heller, and Eleanor Salotto see subversive potential in the ending of the novel. For a more nuanced reading of how the ending of the novel works both ways, see chapter 4 of Carolyn Dever’s *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud*. Dever shows that *The Woman in White*’s narrative investment in producing a “virtuous mother who secures legacy by securing paternity” reveals the instability at the heart of the stable order maternal virtue supposedly guarantees (138). I would add that the narrative energy expended on the creation of this ideal exhausts itself within the text; the empty space of the dead mother absorbs all the energies of characters and readers, leaving none for the creation or maintenance of the stable order maternity should underwrite.

that sensation, like sexuality, erodes characters' volition and interiority, subjecting them to the demands of the plot. *The Woman in White* also subjects readers to a similar process, as I show in the following section. In charting these effects on readers and characters, I also note how Collins thematizes these formal effects in his novel. This thematization of form is another example of the morbidity of *The Woman in White*. Reflecting on the relationship between form and content, Collins's novel participates in the turn to the formal preoccupations that Buchanan will condemn as evidence of morbidity in Rossetti's poetry ten years later. I then return to the Morgue to show how the ending of *The Woman in White* links the marriage plot to consuming the spectacular display of dead bodies. Collins effects the final transformation of readerly energy and characters' desires into the "diseased appetite" Mansel condemns. Finally, I bring the chapter back to Dickens, who attempts to reverse the entropic effects of the "morbid phenomena" Collins deploys in his novel.

### **Morbid marriages and the entropic plot**

In the runaway bestseller that made Collins's name a household word, morbidity manifests itself in multiple scenes that link sensation and sexuality to a deathly erosion of volition. This evacuation of will reaches its apotheosis in images of marriage. The protagonist, Walter Hartright, marries the dead three times. Astounding as this proposition may sound, it is one of the basic features of the novel. Collins represents Walter marrying a "corpse" first in Marian Halcombe's hypnagogic vision, then when he meets Marian and Laura Glyde (*née* Fairlie) at the gravestone that bears Laura's name, and finally when he marries Laura after she is "socially, morally, legally – dead" (413).

The first two of these marriages figure marriage as a union between a deathly woman and a man drained of volition. At the climax of Marian's prophetic vision, she sees Walter "kneeling by a tomb of white marble; and the shadow of a veiled woman rose out of the grave beneath and waited by his side" (274). As the dream-Walter kneels and is joined by the "veiled woman," the scene is an image of marriage, but one in which the bride rises "out of the grave." Walter, as we shall see, becomes an "instrument" of some other will and marries the woman risen from the grave in a morbid marriage that unites the living dead to a body possessed by an unknown power. This scene is the culmination of several in the vision that portray Walter as vulnerable, passive, and threatened by death himself. Earlier in Marian's trance, she sees him threatened by disease and calls out to warn him. Still in her waking dream, she sees him turn and say,

'Wait...I shall come back. The night, when I met the lost Woman on the highway, was the night which set my life apart to be the instrument of a design that is yet unseen...I am still walking on the dark road which leads me, and you, and the sister of your love and mine, to the unknown Retribution and the inevitable End. Wait and look. The Pestilence which touches the rest, will pass *me.*' (273-4)

As Walter, the "instrument of a design that is yet unseen," kneels by the grave with his corpse-bride, he tells Marian, "'Darker and darker...farther and farther yet. Death takes the good, the beautiful, and the young – and spares me. The Pestilence that wastes, the Arrow that strikes, the Sea that drowns, the Grave that closes over Love and Hope are steps to my journey and take me nearer and nearer to the End'" (274). The words Walter speaks in the dream indicate that "Love and Hope" must be entombed to be fulfilled. As in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, the marriage plot comes to fruition in a burial plot, but while Tennyson keeps his corpse underground, Collins makes the morbidity of marriage explicit in the figure of the bride risen from the dead.

Walter's second marriage to the dead comes to pass at the end of "The Second Epoch," in Walter's horrifying and uncanny reunion with Laura at her graveside. Walter, believing Laura is

dead, visits her grave, and sees two women walking toward him. The scene of a man waiting while two veiled women walk toward him, as in a solemn procession, figuratively recapitulates the marriage ceremony. When one woman raises her veil and reveals herself to be Marian, Walter steps forward. The other woman, still veiled, cries out, and Walter declares, “The springs of my life fell low; and the shuddering of an unutterable dread crept over me from head to foot” (410). Marian apparently appreciates how horrifying this moment is for Walter, falling on her knees and praying ““Father! strengthen him. Father! help him, in his hour of need”” (410). While Marian prays, the veiled woman comes closer, and Walter writes that “the veiled woman had possession of [him], body and soul” (410). Just as Marian shrieks ““Oh, for God’s sake spare him!—”” the veil drops, and Laura stands before Walter, alive and breathing (411). Walter’s rhetoric suggests that the apparition of Laura alive somehow makes him less so: “the springs of [his] life fell low” at the sound of the veiled woman’s voice; as she moves toward him she has “possession of [his] body and soul.” Walter represents his meeting with the woman he loves as deathliness and possession, as if his vital energies are sapped in this second image of marrying the dead.

The images of marriage Collins deploys in Marian’s prophetic vision and its fulfillment are morbid not only because Walter marries the living dead, but, more importantly, because both Walter’s “journey” and its “inevitable End” in his reunion with his beloved Laura drain him of volition and energy. While the legal doctrine of coverture meant that women sacrificed their legal identities upon marriage, Collins portrays marriage draining Walter of will. Rather than critiquing Victorian marriage law on the basis of its unfair gender politics, Collins expands the critique of marriage, implying that marriage makes sexuality deathly. Marriage is the normative telos for sexual desire in Victorian novels, and it is an institution bound to the production of

legitimate heirs and securing the orderly devolution of property. Within this ossified and ossifying institution and the social order it supports, sex becomes the necessary death of the individual, placing the body in a chain of reproduction to ensure the stability and continuation of the social order.<sup>10</sup> The institution of marriage as the reproduction of the social order makes sexuality morbid, depleting both men and women of volition, reducing individuals to links in a reproductive chain as powerfully binding as the causal chain of events that traps both characters and readers in *The Woman in White*.

### **Eros and the abdication of agency**

Of all the characters, the one that suffers the most complete depletion of will and individuality is Laura Fairlie, Anne's double and half sister. Because of her uncanny resemblance to Anne, Count Fosco is able to substitute the two women's bodies for each other: Anne's body substitutes for Laura's in the grave, while Laura's body takes Anne's place in the mental asylum. Many other critics have noted how the theft of Laura's identity, her incarceration in the asylum, and her ensuing state of near-imbecility literalize the legal erasure of her identity in marriage (Ablow 169-70) and take the "norm of the submissive Victorian wife" to its logical extreme (Miller 172). While Laura's dire situation is indeed the result of legal and cultural constraints on women, it is also the result of her own choice, but her choice is to abdicate her own power to choose. After Walter has left Limmeridge and Sir Percival has arrived to set

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<sup>10</sup> See Edelman's critique of Jean Baudrillard's "The Final Solution"; Edelman quotes Baudrillard: "'There is a shift from pure and simple reproduction to procreation: the first two will die for the first time, and the *third* for the first time will be born'" (62). Asexual reproduction, like the replication of bacteria or viruses, guarantees individual immortality at the price of change. Sexual reproduction, according to Baudrillard, implies mortality on an individual level yet guarantees a form of immortality in the form of the child. Edelman points out that "death, the corollary of [sexual] difference, can function as a value for Baudrillard in the context of individual identities alone (because this, after all, allows for the Couple's dialectical survival in the '*third*')" (62-3). See also Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which he speculates on the immortality of the "germ-plasm," i.e. genetic material.

the date for his marriage to Laura, she repeatedly refuses to act, saying, “I can never claim my release from my engagement” (163). Instead, she says she will “tell Sir Percival the truth, with my own lips ... and ... let him release me, if he will, not because I ask him, but because he knows all” (163). This is the only independent choice Laura makes in the entire novel, and it consists of avowing her love in order to subject herself to someone else’s decision.

Marian, shocked at Laura’s determination to relinquish her right to choose, writes, “Through all the years of our close intimacy, this passive force in her character had been hidden from me – hidden even from herself, till love found it, and suffering called it forth” (167). Laura’s “passive force” is an abdication of agency that is both the product of her erotic awakening, and her only means of erotic expression. Laura “acknowledge[s]” that she loves another man, yet reassures Sir Percival that this love can never be expressed in any other way: “If you leave me, Sir Percival, after what you have heard, you do not leave me to marry another man .... No word has passed ... between myself and the person to whom I am now referring for the first and last time in your presence, of my feelings toward him, or of his feelings toward me – no word ever can pass” (170). Not surprisingly, Laura’s strategy fails; Sir Percival exclaims that her simultaneous avowal of sexual desire and disavowal of agency show that she is “the noblest of her sex” (171). After this, Laura refuses to exercise any agency in the matter of her marriage and tells Marian to allow Sir Percival to set the date. Marian writes in her journal: “She used to be pliability itself; but she was now inflexibly passive in her resignation .... it was so shockingly unlike her natural character to see her as cold and insensible as I saw her now” (176). Collins’s choice of adjectives—“inflexibly passive,” “cold and insensible”—shows that Laura’s sexuality renders her corpse-like, calling forth a “passive force” that enables her to avow her erotic

response at the same moment that she renounces its fulfillment. When Laura marries Sir Percival, she is already a dead woman walking down the aisle.

While she is figuratively dead at the moment of her first marriage, Laura's second marriage takes place when she is "socially, morally, legally – dead," and it is her status as a dead woman that both necessitates and enables that marriage (413). The erasure of Laura's identity eliminates the class divide between her and Walter, the "poor drawing-master," so that he can claim her as his own: "In the right of her calamity, in the right of her friendlessness she was mine at last!" (413, 414). Despite Walter's masterful claims here, his marriage to Laura marks his final turning away from sexuality as erotic energy and his subjection to the sensational plot's demands. After Sir Percival's death, Walter hints to Marian that he will have to marry Laura, saying "My position, Marian, towards you and towards Laura, ought to be a stronger one than it is now, before I try our last chance" (550). When he judges that enough time has passed, Walter again speaks, not to Laura, but to Marian. The fact that Walter routes his proposal through Marian is significant here, given that his response to Marian is the only energetic sexual response in the novel. When he narrates seeing Marian for the first time, we can almost feel his eyes popping out of his head; ogling her figure, he goes so far as to speculate about her undergarments: "The instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck by the rare beauty of her form...Her figure was tall, yet not too tall...her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays" (34). The erotic energy Marian evokes in him is transferred, in Walter's representation, to the moment when he sees her face: "She approached nearer – and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly!" (34).<sup>11</sup> Walter's rejection of the erotic energy

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<sup>11</sup> For a *tour de force* reading of this moment, see D.A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police*, ch. 5.

Marian evokes (in him, in Fosco, and in readers as well) is revealed in his eagerness to meet Laura and his reaction when he finally does. Before he meets Laura, Marian primes him to see her as lacking in sexuality and energy by telling him that she is an ““angel,”” albeit a sickly one. Furthermore, Marian herself is a powerful agent in both Walter’s first narrative and in her own: she informs Walter of Laura’s engagement and banishes him from Limmeridge House in the “First Epoch,” and she spends most of the “Second Epoch” devising counterplots against Fosco and Sir Percival at Blackwater House. Rather than choose the independent woman who evokes sexual energy instead of lethargy, who espouses agency instead of “passive force,” Walter makes that woman into a channel for his deathly desire for Laura.

Just as Walter makes Marian a channel for his desire, Collins suggests that Walter’s desire to marry Laura at this juncture is a channel essential to the workings of the sensation plot. When he speaks with Marian, Walter represents the marriage as necessary for restoring Laura’s identity: ““If I am to fight our cause with the Count, strong in the consciousness of Laura’s safety, I must fight it for my Wife”” (559). This is nonsense; his marriage to Laura is immaterial to his ability to blackmail Fosco into an admission of the plot against Laura. Other critics have pointed out how Walter’s disingenuous narration masks his upward social mobility,<sup>12</sup> but what I find interesting here is Walter’s refusal to ““appeal to the love which has survived all changes and all shocks”” as a justification for marriage (559). Instead, the need to undo the plot Fosco

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<sup>12</sup> See Ann Cvetkovich’s *Mixed Feelings*, ch. 3; also Matthew Sweet’s Introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Woman in White*. Walter’s violation of class boundaries would be perceived as threatening for Victorians who, despite the self-help, hard work ethic of pulling oneself by one’s bootstraps, maintained a belief in the necessity for a clearly demarcated class and gender hierarchy. Walter’s disruption of class boundaries begs the question of whether gendered boundaries are maintained or subverted at the end of this novel. In “Good Sensations,” Rachel Ablow makes a strong case that Collins’s *The Woman in White* offered readers a “fantasy of male, middle-class identity . . . that, unlike those offered in later sensation novels, revolves around the power of the middle-class man to define himself in highly profitable yet ideologically unproblematic ways”—a fantasy not available to women (160). I think that Walter’s self-definition is less “ideologically unproblematic” than Ablow does. After all, Laura, Walter, and Marian take for granted that he cannot marry Laura. Although Marian says that it is because of Laura’s engagement, not because of Walter’s class, the fact that she mentions the class difference at all registers its importance.

has orchestrated governs Walter's decision. Although the marriage apparently empowers Walter, it is also "Another step on the journey," foreseen in Marian's vision, that takes Walter "nearer and nearer to the End." In marrying Laura, Walter again becomes the "instrument" of the external force of the plot, and Walter's erotic fulfillment is an institutionalized union with the dead.

This deathly marriage is foreshadowed in Marian's vision of Walter—the first image of his marriage to the dead. Although her vision is quite accurate, there is one detail that rings false. In the dream-Walter's summary at the end, he describes the "Pestilence that wastes, the Arrow that strikes," and so on, in accordance with what Marian has already seen in her vision. The final part of Marian's vision shows the grave opening to release the "shadow of a veiled woman," but Walter's words describe the opposite, "the Grave that closes over Love and Hope" (274). The curious disjunction between prophetic vision and speech suggests that the opening of the grave is somehow equivalent to the closing of the grave, that the resurrection of the "shadow of the veiled woman" is the "Grave ... clos[ing] over Love and Hope." Walter's marriage to Laura is both the attempt to resurrect her and the grave closing over his own agency and desire. It is important to note here that, although Laura marries twice in the novel, neither marriage is represented in the narrative. Instead, Collins represents marriage through Marian's vision of morbid marriage and the graveside marriage at the end of the Second Epoch. Images of marrying the dead thus stand in for representations of the actual marriages that take place in the text. By the time that Walter and Laura marry, they are both the living dead, so that the marriage plot is, as Marian's vision suggests, a burial plot.

Collins places sexuality in a causal relation with the morbid state of deathliness characterized by diminution of volition. This causal relation draws on yet differs from the

typical Victorian “dialectic of sex and death,” which Regina Barreca calls “one of the most influential patterns in Victorian poetry and prose” (7). Eroticism is deathly, but not deadly for the characters in *The Woman in White*. Unlike the moralizing narrative, in which death is the punishment for or result of sexuality outside the bounds of marriage, or the transcendent narrative, in which union in death figures or replaces sexual union in this world, Collins’s narrative shows sexuality leading to a diminished agency and individuality that ends, not in death, but in marriage.<sup>13</sup> As Collins collapses the metaphorical distance that enables death to stand in for sexuality, he populates the Victorian marriages with the living dead.

### **Sensational effects on characters**

In *The Maniac in the Cellar*, Winifred Hughes points out that the living dead are, like the examples of mistaken identity and bigamy, “plot devices” that “can actually be reduced to the generic principle of doubling,” through which sensation novels “reveal a recurrent preoccupation with the loss or duplication of identity” (20, 21). I argue something different: the living dead that appear in sensation novels are a thematic expression of the formal effects of sensation on characters and readers. In this section, I show how the repetition of sensational moments necessitated by the formal constraints of the genre results in characters drained of agency and will.

Walter is the first narrator in the novel, and his description of himself at the outset suggests that this story will chart the decline of his vital powers: “the small pulse of the life within me and the great heart of the city around me seemed to be sinking in unison, languidly

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<sup>13</sup> For an excellent summary of and challenge to the transcendent narrative, see Jay Clayton’s chapter on Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, in *Romantic Vision and the Novel*. Clayton challenges Denis Donoghue’s reading of death as “*liebestod*, sexual union transfigured” (211, fn.19) and reads death as one of the multiple figures for transcendence that Brontë “deploys” even as she “challenges the very structure of their deployment”—part of Brontë’s “radical or apocalyptic project” in *Wuthering Heights* (97).

and more languidly, with the sinking sun” (10). Collins reinforces this suggestion in Walter’s anecdote about saving his friend Professor Pesca from drowning. Walter declares:

If I had not dived for Professor Pesca, when he lay under water on his shingle bed, I should, in all human probability, never have been connected with the story which these pages will relate – I should never, perhaps, have heard even the name of the woman, who has lived in all my thoughts, who has possessed herself of all my energies, who has become the one guiding influence that now directs the purpose of my life. (13)

Walter’s syntax indicates the loss of his agency. The active verb “dived” is weakened by its inclusion in a negative conditional statement; he is passively “connected” to the story that he will relate, just as he passively “hears” the name of the woman who actively “lives” in, “possesses,” and “directs” him. By withholding the woman’s name, Collins hints at a nightmare of sexual subjection and female power reducing the man to a deathly lack of agency through bleeding off his sexual energy.<sup>14</sup> Even before Walter meets either the Woman in White or the woman who will become his wife, this passage evinces a morbid and deathly eroticism as Collins figures the anonymous woman lurking in Walter’s future as a succubus taking over the thoughts of a helpless and hapless young man, draining him as she “possess[es] herself of all [his] energies.” The adverb “now” in the final clause indicates that at the time of narration, presumably after all the events of the story have occurred, Walter is still this woman’s tool. Thus we discover before the story begins that it ends with Walter possessed, directed, and guided by an external power.

The story also begins with Walter directed and guided by an external power that forces him out of his lethargy. When Pesca tells him that he (Pesca) has found Walter a lucrative job as

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<sup>14</sup> Regina Barreca notes that “[t]here have been a number of discussions dealing with the Victorians’ widely accepted equation of sexual activity with a shortened lifespan. Men’s sexual release was regarded as a kind of ‘expenditure’ that depleted his physical strength as well as his moral resolve, bringing him closer to death with every orgasm” (4). Mary Poovey declares that this idea of a “spermatic economy” is “anchored” in a “model of the human body” as a “closed system containing a fixed quantity of energy” (36). The morbid sexuality Collins portrays in *The Woman in White* enlarges this Victorian notion of a spermatic economy; the deathliness of sexuality inheres, not in ejaculation, but in the very experience of sexuality itself.

a drawing tutor for Mr. Frederick Fairlie's two nieces, Walter's sluggish resistance to his own advancement suggests a lack of will:

The prospect which this offer of an engagement held out was certainly an attractive one. The employment was likely to be both easy and agreeable ... the terms ... were surprisingly liberal. I knew this; I knew that I ought to consider myself very fortunate if I succeeded in securing the offered employment – and yet ... I felt an inexplicable unwillingness within me to stir in the matter. I had never in the whole of my previous existence found my duty and my inclination so painfully and unaccountably at variance as I found them now. (19-20)

Walter's "inexplicable unwillingness ... to stir" omits the possibility of an active desire in the matter, as does the conflict between "duty and inclination." An obligation imposed from without, "duty" hampers the will, but in Walter's formulation he can only oppose "inclination" to duty. Walter also describes his "unwillingness" as an "unreasonable disinclination" and an "unaccountable perversity" (20, 21). Collins slides from "unwillingness," to "disinclination," to "perversity," so that, as in Brooks' model, Walter begins in a state of "quiescence," yet the spur that triggers the plot perversely saps his energies further, rather than evoking the dynamic and questing energy that characterizes plot in many nineteenth-century novels.<sup>15</sup>

The sensational moments that punctuate the novel repeatedly evoke a physical response in the characters that overpowers their capacity to act as they choose. The first sensational moment in *The Woman in White* occurs when Walter, after saying goodbye to his family on the eve of his departure for his new job at Limmeridge House, walks home from his mother's cottage late at night. Walter's "fanciful visions" as he wanders home "idly wondering ... what the Cumberland young ladies would look like" are erotic visions, brought on by Pesca enjoining him to marry one of his future pupils. This erotic reverie is shockingly terminated "when, in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid

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<sup>15</sup> Think of *Jane Eyre*, or novels by Balzac (which Brooks considers), or the entire genre of the *bildungsroman*. These all focus on characters who desire energetically, even if occasionally destructively.

lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me” (23). The touch that stops the circulation of the blood is a deathly one, yet also a highly sexualized one, as Walter responds by “tightening [his fingers] round the handle of [his] stick.”<sup>16</sup> The erotic nature of his response manifests itself in his denial of the sexual subtext of the scene, when he declares that the “one thing of which I felt certain was that the grossest of mankind could not have misconstrued her motive in speaking, even at that suspiciously late hour and in that suspiciously lonely place” (24). The “solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments” is bride, corpse, and ghost all at once. First her touch stops Walter’s blood, and then she asks him to promise to “not interfere” with her (26). Walter narrates how the Woman in White compels his promise by repeating her deathly yet sexualized touch: “she came close to me, and laid her hand, with a sudden gentle stealthiness, on my bosom – a thin hand; a cold hand (when I removed it with mine) even on that sultry night” (26). As justification for his giving in to her request, Walter writes, “Remember that I was young; remember that the hand which touched me was a woman’s” (26). The sexual charge in the deathly touch of the Woman in White’s “thin ... cold hand” robs him of his own will, so that he gives her the promise she seeks against his own better judgment. Walter’s volition is subjected to his physical response; by touching him, the Woman in White reduces Walter to an automaton.<sup>17</sup>

Walter’s claim that the Woman in White’s touch compelled his consent draws on and reverses the myth of male sexuality as an uncontrollable force that is its own justification. At one moment, Walter’s description of his encounter with the anonymous woman brings to mind a

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<sup>16</sup> D.A. Miller reads Walter’s gesture as an attempted “reaffirmation” of a “violated ... gender identification” (152). I suggest that it is simultaneously an erotic response and a response to a violation, not just of his “gender identification,” but also of his agency represented in his fantasy of marriage and upward class mobility.

<sup>17</sup> In his reading of this moment and its effects on Walter, Nicholas Dames declares that *The Woman in White* shows how “*bodily sensation implies the erasure of memory*” (192, emphasis in original). As memory is part of what constitutes a sense of self and a stable identity, the loss of memory caused by sensation is part of the loss of agency, volition, and interiority that I argue the sensationalized characters of the novel undergo.

fantasy of male power; he writes, “What could I do? Here was a stranger utterly and helplessly at my mercy – and that stranger a forlorn woman. No house was near; no one was passing” (26). Alone with a “forlorn woman” who is “utterly and helplessly at [his] mercy,” with his hand on his stick, Walter’s representation of this moment evokes a scenario in which men’s potential sexual aggression is warranted by women’s seductive power, intentional or otherwise. However, the passage that begins with a sense of total control facilitated by gender and circumstance, ends with Walter’s recognition that he has no power over her or himself: “no one was passing whom I could consult; and no earthly right existed on my part to give me a power of control over her, even if I had known how to exercise it” (26). Alone at night with a woman, Walter’s sexual response consists of a fantasy of power that almost immediately flips over into a recognition of his own lack of control and knowledge. While the Victorian theory of spermiac economy suggests that the fulfillment of male sexual desire leads to a loss of vital powers, here Walter’s erotic desire—not its fulfillment—diminishes his ability to determine the right course of action and his power to act independently.

Walter’s inability to act as he chooses, or even to know how to act at this moment, is symptomatic of the power of sensation plots to deprive characters of interiority and volition. An examination of the cultural reception of Collins’s novel reveals his contemporaries acknowledging his mastery of plot, yet lamenting the way characters’ interiority and individuality are sacrificed to the exigencies of the sensational plot. In *The Examiner*, one reviewer declares that Collins “has almost attained perfection” in “the effective telling of a certain kind of story,” and that the “cunning construction of a plot about some well-kept secret” is one of Collins’s strongest points (549). Collins’s powerful plotting, however, comes at the expense of characterization, as positive and negative reviews of *The Woman in White* unite to

condemn Collins for sacrificing character to plot. Mansel declares, “A sensation novel, as a matter of course, abounds in incident. . . . Deep knowledge of human nature, graphic delineations of individual character, vivid representations of the aspects of Nature or the workings of the soul—all the higher features of the creative art—would be a hindrance rather than a help to a work of this kind” (486). The reviewer for *The Literary Gazette* writes, “In his anxiety to weave a chain of events which should excite the reader’s curiosity, Mr. Collins has overlooked the equally important point of creating interest and sympathy for his characters” (58). The critic for *The Saturday Review* concurs, declaring that Collins “does not attempt to paint character or passion”; he only “draws” characters “not for the sake of illustrating human nature and life’s varied phases . . . but simply and solely with reference to the part it is necessary they should play in tangling or disentangling his argument” (249). Subjected to the constraints of the sensation plot, Collins’s characters lack a sense of interiority. What inner lives they possess, according to this review, manifest themselves only to further the plot.

Collins’s ability to create characters drained of interiority is something of an accomplishment, considering that the novel consists of a series of first person narratives. The instrumental nature of these narratives, however, is evident from the beginning of the novel, when Walter declares that the ensuing story is a substitute for, improvement on, and supplement to a case at law. He makes the multiple narratives that follow into a form of testimony, explaining that “the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness – with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its most direct and intelligible aspect” (9). Each narrator is a “witness” who will “present” part of “one complete series of events,” so that “the Reader shall hear” the case as “the Judge might once have heard it” (9). The critic in *The Saturday Review*

picks up on Collins's invocation of the courtroom metaphor and argues that it evacuates characters of interiority:

None of his characters are to be seen looking about them. They are not occupied in by-play. They are not staring at the spectators, or, if they are, they are staring listlessly and vacantly, like witnesses who are waiting to be called before the court, and have nothing to do until their turn arrives. There they stand, most of them, like ourselves, in rapt attention, on the stretch to take their share in the action of the central group—their eyes bent in one direction—their movement converging upon one centre—half-painted, sketchy figures, grouped with sole relation to the unknown mystery in the middle. (249)

I will return to this passage later in my discussion of *The Woman in White*'s effects on readers, and its relationship to the Paris Morgue; what I want to note here is how this reviewer uses listlessness and vacancy to characterize the “witnesses” that participate in and represent the events of the plot. In the courtroom, the knowledge and the power of representation that each narrator possesses, Walter above all, becomes the very means of subjecting characters and narrators to the needs of the plot.<sup>18</sup>

The power of plot and the accompanying diminution of interiority typical of the sensation novel's structure manifest themselves thematically in Walter's sense of being subjected to a pre-ordained series of events, which he first expresses by writing, “I trace these lines, self-distrustfully, with the shadows of after-events darkening the very paper I write on” (26).

Walter's sense of foreboding reappears at multiple moments in the narrative, all associated with the *Woman in White* and her sensational yet petrifying touch. When Walter recognizes the

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<sup>18</sup> The only characters who are not also narrators are Laura, Countess Fosco, and Mrs. Vesey. Even Anne gets to write a letter; and Sir Percival rescripts his own life by inserting the false record of his parents' marriage in the parish register. Mrs. Vesey is interesting in that, as Laura's chaperone, she is the representative of propriety and is also characterized as a human ameba, lacking in any power of choice and almost incapable of movement. The Countess is also interesting as an example of a woman whose entire character is transformed by her marriage. According to Marian, before her marriage Madame Fosco was “always talking” and “vain and foolish” (215); after her marriage to Count Fosco, she “sits for hours together without saying a word, frozen up in the strangest manner in herself” (216). She used to dress so that “everybody once saw . . . the structure of the female skeleton, in the upper regions of the collar-bones and the shoulder blades”; once married, she hides the skeleton, but has become like stone, with “dry white hands” that look “chalky,” and “cold as a statue, and as impenetrable as the stone out of which it is cut” (216). Marian attributes this difference to Fosco's dominance over his wife; she comments that the “rod of iron with which he rules [his wife] never appears in company – it is a private rod, and is always kept upstairs” (222).

resemblance between Laura Fairlie and the Woman in White, now identified as the slightly addled Anne Catherick, “A thrill of the same feeling which ran through [him] when the touch was laid upon [his] shoulder on the lonely high-road, chill[s him] again” (62). Immediately afterward, Walter expresses his dread about the future: ““To associate that forlorn, friendless, lost woman, even by an accidental likeness only, with Miss Fairlie, seems like casting a shadow on the future”” (62). When Marian tells Walter that his love for Laura is doomed ““not because [he is] a teacher of drawing .... but because Laura Fairlie is engaged to be married”” to Sir Percival Glyde, she mentions Anne repeatedly, so that Walter writes, “Again the chance reference to the woman in white! Was there no possibility of speaking of Miss Fairlie and me without raising the memory of Anne Catherick, and setting her between us like a fatality that it was helpless to avoid?” (74). The answer is “No”; it is impossible to speak of Walter and Laura without raising the specter of Anne, even though Walter knows how unreasonable it is. He answers his own question a few pages later:

Judging by the ordinary rules of evidence, I had not the shadow of a reason, thus far, for connecting Sir Percival Glyde with the suspicious words of inquiry that had been spoken to me by the woman in white. And yet, I did connect him with them. Was it because he had now become associated in my mind with Miss Fairlie; Miss Fairlie being, in her turn, associated with Anne Catherick, since the night when I had discovered the ominous likeness between them? .... The foreboding of some undiscoverable danger lying hid from us all in the darkness of the future, was strong on me. The doubt whether I was not linked already to a chain of events which even my approaching departure from Cumberland would be powerless to snap asunder – the doubt whether we any of us saw the end as the end would really be – gathered more and more darkly over my mind. Poignant as it was, the sense of suffering caused by the miserable end of my brief, presumptuous love, seemed to be blunted and deadened by the still stronger sense of something obscurely impending, something invisibly threatening, that Time was holding over our heads. (77-78)

Collins represents Walter’s sense of being “linked already to a chain of events” which he “powerless” to break as a result of his fascination with Anne Catherick and love for Laura Fairlie. By creating this causal link between Walter’s erotic response to the two women and his

“foreboding,” Collins again equates sexuality with the depletion of agency. Furthermore, Walter can only describe his own internal state as a “still stronger sense of something obscurely impending”; Walter’s interiority consists of an awareness of his own subjection to the demands of the sensational plot.

Later in the novel, Marian similarly expresses her feelings of being caught up in events beyond her control and also links that sensation to the Woman in White. After her prophetic vision of Walter in the wilderness of Central America, she awakens to find that Laura has finally met Anne Catherick, and she writes in her journal, “a growing conviction that the complications which had long threatened to gather about her, and to gather about me, had suddenly closed fast around us both, was now beginning to penetrate my mind. I could not express it in words – I could hardly even realise it dimly in my own thoughts. ‘Anne Catherick!’ I whispered to myself, with useless, helpless reiteration – ‘Anne Catherick!’” (275). Marian and Walter’s reflections on their helplessness also emphasize the power of formal constraints to dictate content. In Marian’s “useless, helpless reiteration,” “Anne Catherick,” the name of the Woman in White of the title, becomes the signifier for the sense of being trapped within the “complications” of the plot, and thus for the morbid depletion of volition that all the characters in the novel suffer.

### **Sensational effects on readers**

At the same time, Collins’s sensational plotting turned readers into creatures driven by bodily appetites and incapable of exercising their wills. D.A. Miller declares that the sensation novel “offers us one of the first instances of modern literature to address itself primarily to the sympathetic nervous system, where it grounds its characteristic adrenalin effects: accelerated heart rate and respiration, increased blood pressure, the pallor resulting from vasoconstriction,

and so on” (146). As a result, “the body is compelled to automatism . . . the rhythm of reading is frankly addictive” (146). Readers were compelled to read further by their physical responses to the text, and the early reviews of *The Woman in White* suggest that the aspect of the sensation novel critics deplored was its ability to stimulate physical response uncontextualized and unmoored by sentiment. In *The Critic*, an anonymous reviewer declares that “the feelings are excruciatingly worked up, but the floodgates of human kindness are not opened” (233). The distinction between “feelings” and “human kindness” is revealing. “Feelings” are physical responses, while “human kindness” is a moral and emotional response. As Jenny Bourne Taylor puts it in her study of Collins’s deployment of psychological discourses on identity and subjectivity, “unlike the quivering reaction generated by the very fantastic and exotic intensity of Gothic romance in which the finely tuned nerves operated as delicate moral mediators, the immediate nervous reaction elicited by sensation fiction apparently short-circuited morality, and thus became morbid by becoming more directly sensualized” (6). Sensation novels act directly on readers’ bodies, creating physical effects rather than emotional affects. The sensual effect without moral import or intellectual understanding is a hallmark of sensation; sensation fiction’s direct appeal to the body and the unmediated and uncontrolled physical response of its readers combine to emphasize an intransigent corporeality.

This corporeality is the corollary to the lack of interiority that Collins’s contemporaries noted in his characters. Just as the sensation plot drains characters of volition and agency, the power of Collins’s plotting subjects readers to the power of the machine. In *The Examiner*, the reviewer acknowledges Collins’s “enthraling” mastery of linear causality and his power over the minds of his readers: “Of every page the chief interest is made to depend entirely upon memory of what has gone before and expectation of what is to follow. Nothing whatever is allowed to

distract the mind from fixed attention to the telling of the story” (549). Willing or not, the reader’s attention is compelled and fixed, so that Collins’s plotting becomes a form of mind control. As I point out in my introduction, this mind control has the effect of mechanizing readers as well as characters. What I want to note here is that Collins thematizes this readerly effect within his text, just as he also thematizes the characters’ loss of interiority through Walter and Marian’s feelings of being caught up in an inescapable chain of events. While Marian and Laura are struggling against the machinations of Fosco and Sir Percival during their residence at Blackwater Park, Marian consults her journal to verify her memory of previous events. She then writes: “It was almost as great a relief to my mind as to Laura’s to find that my memory had served me, on this occasion, as faithfully as usual. In the perilous uncertainty of our present situation, it is hard to say what future interests may not depend on the regularity of the entries in my journal, and upon the reliability of my recollection at the time when I make them” (284). The “chief interest” that “depend[s] entirely upon memory of what has gone before and expectation of what is to follow” and the “future interests” that “depend on the regularity” of Marian’s journal entries combine to create the compulsion that subjects readers to the power of the mechanical plot.<sup>19</sup>

In noting the controlling power of Collins’s plotting, I am drawing on a critical history that deals with the disciplinary power of the sensation novel.<sup>20</sup> However, I want to add that by

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<sup>19</sup> In *Amnesiac Selves*, Dames points out that Marian’s journal entry stands in a supplementary relation to her memory; it both verifies the accuracy of her memory and simultaneously “evoke[s] an anxiety fundamental to the sensation novel” that memory should fail (183). The novel itself is a “tissue of memoranda” created by the characters to fend off the loss of memory (182). These “memoranda” also replace the readers’ memories: in each serial portion, the author must remind readers of what has occurred in previous sections; as Dames puts it, “reminding” was one of the formal techniques any serial novelist would have had to have learned” (184). Thus the text of *The Woman in White*, printed and circulated as a industrial commodity, also functions as a mechanically produced memory for its readers.

<sup>20</sup> In *The Novel and the Police*, D. A. Miller argues that the nineteenth-century novel performs a disciplinary function, moving policing into the private realm that supposedly constitutes the “very identity of the liberal subject”

thematizing the formal effects of the sensation novel Collins calls attention to how form replicates cultural concerns, in this case the problem of compelling attention despite the “regularity” associated with mechanical production. Factory labor required endless machine work executed repetitively yet without distraction. In a broader context, as Crary points out in *Suspensions of Perception*, the “cultural logic of capitalism” made attention necessary and problematic. Capitalism, factory work, the accelerating circulation of commodities, and the mediations of spectacular desire all “demanded attentiveness of a subject in a wide range of new productive and spectacular tasks” as a worker and consumer, yet were “continually eroding the basis of any disciplinary attentiveness” (29). The mind trained by Collins’s compelling narratives was one that operated—or was operated on by— a machine that repeated its effects in every serial portion, and this mind could never be distracted or lose focus. In “the machinery of Mr. Collins,” the factory had its analogue and training ground.

Collins’s thematization of the formal effects and requirements of the sensation novel in *The Woman in White* shows the chronic infiltration of form into content. By having his characters reflect upon the very forces that drive the narrative of the novel and subject them and readers to its power, Collins makes his sensation novel into a self-reflexive meditation on the power of form itself. While Rossetti demands that the sonnet be “Of its arduous fulness reverent,” Collins makes the sensation novel full of its own emptiness as it formally and thematically registers the morbid evacuation of interiority and the depletion of volition through sexuality and readerly desire.

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(ix). Within this context, he outlines how *The Woman in White* first opens up challenges to Victorian norms and then works to contain those challenges. Walter’s sensational first encounter with Anne Catherick infects him with the nervousness that should mark the female body; the same nervous sensation affects or infects the body of the (male) reader. The sensation that feminizes the male body causes a crisis in gender identification, a crisis Miller describes as “homosexual panic” (165). The second half of the novel contains this panic through “the dissolution of sensation in the achievement of decided meaning,” as Walter finds out the truth about Sir Percival, Count Fosco, Professor Pesca, and Anne Catherick, and finally returns Laura to her place (165).

## Empty secrets and spectacular corpses

Nowhere is the emptiness of *The Woman in White* more evident than in the central secret of Sir Percival's illegitimacy. Over the course of the novel, Collins introduces a plethora of secrets that drive the plot: Who is the Woman in White? What is her relationship to Laura Fairlie, and why do the two women resemble each other so much? What are Fosco and Sir Percival plotting to do with Laura? What happened to Laura in the asylum? Why is Count Fosco terrified of Professor Pesca?—to name only a few.<sup>21</sup> All of these secrets, however, boil down to one “Secret”—its centrality marked by its capitalization—introduced when Anne Catherick tells Laura that knowledge of the “Secret” is the key to power: “If *you* know [Sir Percival's] Secret, he will be afraid of you,” and “I once threatened him with the Secret, and frightened him. You shall threaten him with the Secret, and frighten him, too” (280). When Walter returns to England and resolves to restore Laura's identity, he tells Marian that the only way to reveal the conspiracy is through a ““weak place we both know of in Sir Percival's life””; he describes the “Secret” as the “only sure hold on him” to “force him from his position of security...[and] drag him and his villainy [*sic*] into the face of day” (450). When Walter finally discovers the “Secret” that Sir Percival has been hiding, it turns out to be an empty space in a copy of a church register. Searching for a record of the marriage of Sir Percival's parents Walter finds that

The marriage was not there. The entries on the copy occupied exactly the same places on the page as the entries in the original. The last entry on one page recorded the marriage

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<sup>21</sup> D.A. Miller points out how the existence of secrets makes characters suspicious and thus suspect in this novel, motivating most of the characters' actions, especially in the Second Epoch (161). Ann Cvetkovich also notes how the multiplication of secrets generates curiosity—activate the epistemophilic impulse—and “installs a hermeneutics of suspicion in which every fact that excites a sensation merits investigation” (72). Secrets are the motor that drives the sensation plot.

of the man with my Christian name. Below it, there was a blank space – a space evidently left because it was too narrow to contain the entry of the marriages of the two brothers, which in the copy, as in the original, occupied the top of the next page. That space told the whole story! (509)

Walter claims that the “space told the whole story,” and he fills in the empty space with the story of Sir Percival’s illegitimacy and forgery, an account later confirmed by Mrs. Catherick’s congratulatory letter to Walter. Although Walter successfully fills in the “whole story” of the empty space, the Secret remains empty in another sense; his discovery of Sir Percival’s illegitimacy does not matter to the plot of *The Woman in White*.<sup>22</sup> It leads to no action on Walter’s part, nor does it reveal anything necessary to proving Laura’s identity and continued existence in the land of the living.<sup>23</sup>

Instead, the insignificance of the secret—its irrelevance in the final workings of the plot—further signifies Walter’s lack of agency within the sensation plot. Sir Percival dies in a fire he himself starts in his attempt to hide his secret, so that Walter’s discovery is meaningless because of the ensuing events. Walter notes that, even had Sir Percival lived, he could not have used the Secret against him: “If Sir Percival had lived, the discovery, from which (in my ignorance of the true nature of the Secret) I had hoped so much, could not have been mine to suppress, or to make public, as I thought best, for the vindication of Laura’s rights” (527). His inability to use the Secret forces him to acknowledge his subjection to a narrative that he characterizes as a providential one. When he is forced to let Count Fosco escape his vengeance, Walter writes that his decision was made easier by his “remembrance of Sir Percival’s death. How awfully, at the last moment, had the working of the retribution, *there*, been snatched from

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<sup>22</sup> The Secret is also an empty secret in that Anne Catherick, who claims she exercised its power, never knew what the Secret was, only that it existed.

<sup>23</sup> The discovery of the Secret has no effect on the disposition of property either, since Sir Percival has already spent all of his personal property, and the real estate passes on to the heir who would have inherited anyway.

my feeble hands!” (591). However disingenuous Walter’s claims that “common honesty and common honour” would have compelled him to reveal the truth rather than blackmail Sir Percival with it (527), and that he allows Fosco to escape because he is “guided by the one higher motive of which [he] was certain, the motive of serving the cause of Laura and the cause of Truth” (591), Collins again makes the demands of the sensation plot trump the desires of the characters. The fulfillment of Walter’s epistemophilic impulse and readers’ desires further subjects them to the continuing plot.

What the Secret does give Walter is the power to create narratives; he fills in the empty space in the official copy of the marriage register with his newfound knowledge of Sir Percival’s illegitimacy. At that moment, however, Walter’s power of seeing emptiness and filling it with a narrative is as yet incomplete because it does not wrap up the plot of the novel. When Walter encounters Fosco’s corpse at the Morgue, he finally acquires the power to end the plot, and the moment bears a remarkable similarity to his discovery of the Secret and to a series of other moments when a character watches another character unobserved. The deathly eroticism of these moments is evident when Walter first sees Laura. He describes her, not as he sees her at the moment, but through a description of a “water-colour drawing that [he] made of Laura Fairlie, at an after period, in the place and attitude in which [he] first saw her” (51). At Walter’s first encounter with his beloved, he immobilizes her into art, “a translation or exchange that erases rather than preserves the body” by “deanimating the organic body” that is the basis of the aesthetic transformation (Bronfen 110, 112). While Walter’s multiply mediated representation of Laura is one way of killing her into art, he also suggests that the drawing itself is an image of someone loved and lost to death. Walter tells the reader to imagine Laura as “the first woman who quickened the pulses within you,” and then goes on to suggest that that woman is gone: “Let

her voice speak the music that you once loved best . . . Let her footstep, as she comes and goes, in these pages, be like that other footstep to whose airy fall your own heart once beat time” (52). In a similar fashion, when Walter leaves Limmeridge House and Laura, apparently forever, he writes, “One farewell look; and the door had closed upon her – the great gulf of separation had opened between us – the image of Laura Fairlie was a memory of the past already” (126). Laura exists for Walter always as an image; even when she is present she is an image, and that image, not the person, becomes doubly distant as a “memory of the past.” Laura’s body, alive or dead, is an image that memorializes the past—an image of the dead.<sup>24</sup>

Walter’s preference for Laura as a “memory of the past” brings out a hitherto unremarked connection between *The Woman in White* and Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*. Even before Marian informs him that Laura is engaged to another man, Walter feels that he “must lose her soon, and love her the more unchangeably for the loss” (69). Like Tennyson’s speaker, Walter loves and loses, and, also like the poetic speaker, eventually finds “the far-off interest of tears,” the recompense for his loss, in marriage (*In Memoriam* 1: 8). Walter’s consolation, however, is more material than the poet’s. Walter marries Laura in the end and becomes a member of the landed gentry. Walter’s love for, loss of, and eventual marriage to Laura enacts the productive aural ambiguity inherent in Tennyson’s famous line—“’Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all” (27: 15-16). For Walter, it is financially “better to have loved and lost / Than ever to have loved at all,” since his temporary loss of Laura to Sir Percival makes their eventual marriage possible (see chapter 1). Walter’s marriage to Laura also demonstrates how

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<sup>24</sup> Marian also makes Laura into a deathly object when she watches her on the eve of Laura’s wedding to Sir Percival. She writes that Laura “lay, unconscious that I was looking at her – quiet, more quiet than I had dared to hope, but not sleeping. The glimmer of the night-light showed me that her eyes were only partially closed: the traces of tears glistened between her eyelids.” Like Walter, Marian gazes on the “unconscious” Laura and claims to know how she feels from the visible trace of tears. Also like Walter, Marian writes of Laura as if she were already dead, declaring that “the frill on her night-dress never moved” with her breath (194).

morbidity has evolved from 1850 to 1860. Whereas Arthur is abstracted into “some diffusive power” by the end of the poem, and the marriage of the poet’s sister offers hope that this power could be embodied again, Walter’s marriage to Laura is the final stage in her transformation from deathly image to embodied absence; her living body is as empty of agency and will as the corpse that the “fair ship” brings back to Tennyson’s speaker. *In Memoriam* charts the diffusion of the lost love object into the surrounding world, and the poet takes comfort in an imagined future reembodiment, finally terminating his morbid preoccupation. *The Woman in White* tracks the evacuation of agency and energy from the living body, leaving it a living corpse, like Laura at both of her weddings. The wedding that ends *In Memoriam* takes place over a dead body; the wedding that does not end *The Woman in White* makes the corpse a member of the wedding party.

Although Walter repeatedly reduces Laura to a deathly image of loss and a figurative corpse, he also claims a special epistemological status because he knows the truth about her body. Despite the fact that everyone else who knows Laura believes her to be the mad Anne Catherick impersonating Laura Fairlie, Walter and Marian recognize who she truly is by virtue of some special sympathy.<sup>25</sup> Walter’s claim to special knowledge about Laura’s body, makes his recognition of her similar to his recognition of Fosco in the Paris Morgue and his apprehension of the “empty space” that tells the “whole story” of the Secret. Walter fills in the empty space of Laura’s body with the narrative that she herself cannot tell, because, as Ablow puts it, “there is no there there” after her stay in the asylum (170). Laura’s body—alive but incapable of telling its own story, the empty Secret, and Fosco’s massive corpse are all forms evacuated of content,

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<sup>25</sup> See Ablow’s “Good Vibrations,” in which she argues that although sympathy appears to ground Walter’s epistemological claim and justify the marriage between the lady and the drawing-master, the power to name and create sensation himself is the actual basis of his special knowledge.

which Walter fills with his knowledge. The similarity between Walter's claims to recognize Laura and Fosco reveals a structural similarity between the deathly eroticism institutionalized in Walter and Laura's marriage/burial plot and the morbid practice of looking at corpses in the Morgue.

The avid and ignorant gaze of the "French mob" at Fosco's body is the apotheosis of multiple previous moments in the novel when looking at Laura and claiming to know the truth about her both entails and depends upon her deathliness.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, Walter suggests that his knowledge about the story behind the anonymous corpse makes his desire to see Fosco's corpse qualitatively different from the desire of the crowd. Because he knows "the truth itself," he can derive a moral lesson from what is otherwise merely a morbid spectacle. However, the lesson he derives, like the hunger in the mob's gaze, also reduces the body distinguished by its "broad, firm, massive face and head [that] fronted us so grandly" into a thing—a piece of property.

Although Walter's gaze at Fosco seems recuperative, restoring the body to a comprehensible providential narrative, his choice of words suggests that his knowledge converts the corpse into property. Walter says that Fosco's body is "unowned, unknown"—does the comma put the two adjectives in apposition or in a relation of causality? Is being unowned the same thing as being unknown? In that case, the corollary would be that to be owned one must be known, and that to be known is to be "possessed," as Walter himself has so often been, and as

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<sup>26</sup> Of course, Fosco's body is male, and Laura's is female. But after D.A. Miller's reading of homosexual panic in this novel, it is impossible to ignore the homoerotic attachments between men and women that appear in the text: Pesca tells Walter that when "the thought of you . . . mounts like blood to my head – I start from my seat, as if a spike had grown up from the ground through the bottom of my chair" (17); Sir Percival is closer to Fosco than he is to his wife; before Laura's first marriage, Marian writes that she cannot believe that soon Laura "will be *his* Laura instead of mine!" and informs Laura she cannot go on the honeymoon with them because "no man tolerates a rival – not even a woman rival – in his wife's affections, when he first marries" (185). Furthermore, eroticism does not depend on the sex of the object in this novel, but on its deathliness; put crudely, it does not matter whether the body is a man's or a woman's, so long as it is, or appears to be, dead.

readers are by the narrative that compels their attention, their money, and their physical response.<sup>27</sup> The near-homonym of “unowned, unknown” suggests that the two are the same thing—to be unowned is to be unknown. The horrors of being displayed as an anonymous corpse are the result of being unknown, or unknowable. But this is the entire premise of the novel—that to be known is to be owned, to be recognized as who you are, to have one’s identity grounded in the body, but it is also to be property, appropriable by another, as Laura is in her marriage first to Sir Percival and later to Walter. It seems that to be known, as Laura is known, as Fosco is known, is *still* to be somehow “unowned, unknown,” because Collins suggests that the morbid practice of staring at the empty form (exemplified in scenes at the Morgue in Collins’s novel and Dickens’s journalism) is both deathly and erotic, like the entropic sexuality that drives the novel.

The penultimate scene of *The Woman in White* reveals that the unique and sympathetic knowledge that facilitates and justifies Walter’s marriage to Laura and his subsequent rise in class status is no different from being a visitor at the Morgue. The institutionalization of sexuality in marriage is either entering a burial plot, or staring at a corpse. More disturbing, it reveals that while reading *The Woman in White*, we also have become spectators at the Morgue. Worst of all, Walter’s final accession to narrative power through his knowing gaze at Fosco’s corpse suggests that reading *any* novel is “*looking at something that could not return a look.*” Even though the unknowability of the object of the gaze is in one way a guarantee of its interiority, it is also the possibility that—as in Laura’s case, as well as in Fosco’s case—there is nothing there but an empty form.

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<sup>27</sup> “So glad to possess you at Limmeridge” says Frederick Fairlie to Walter when he first meets him; for Walter’s other references to being “possessed” see above, pp. 109, 116.

The compelling power that this empty form exercises on readers of the text and characters within the text is an example of the “cravings of a diseased appetite” that Mansel condemns so strongly (482), and that Walter describes in the Morgue scene as “the popular appetite for horror” (623). Here I return to *The Saturday Review*’s critique of Collins’s characterization quoted above (p. 20); the review is worth quoting at length, not only for what it says about Collins’s characters, but also for its suggestive similarities to Dickens’s description of crowds in the Paris Morgue:

There they stand, most of them, like ourselves, in rapt attention, on the stretch to take their share in the action of the central group—their eyes bent in one direction—their movement converging upon one centre—half-painted, sketchy figures, grouped with sole relation to the unknown mystery in the middle. The link of interest that binds them is that they are all interested in the great secret. By the time the secret is disclosed, the bond of unity will have been broken—the action of the drama in which they figure will have been finished—and they will go their own ways in twos and threes, and never meet again. (249)

Characters and readers are all “on the stretch,” linked by their interest in “the great secret.” But this unity is provisional. Instead of ending *The Woman in White* with a marriage, Collins uses the spectacular display of Fosco’s corpse at the Morgue to end his novel with a final dispersal of readerly energies.<sup>28</sup> As the anonymous reviewer points out, the temporary unity created by the central secret ends, and characters and readers “go their own ways in twos and threes, and never meet again.” Collins’s entropic plot is a double bind. Readers and characters lose individuality, agency, and interiority as they are sensationalized, yet they constitute some sort of community as their energies are drained off into “rapt attention” on the central secret. Individual energy—

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<sup>28</sup> It is actually Frederick Fairlie’s death that enables the final move to closure in the novel; he dies offstage, which makes it possible for Walter, Laura, and Marian to move into Limmeridge House. However, I submit that the spectacular display of Fosco’s corpse at the Morgue substitutes for Mr. Fairlie’s death and takes on its closural power.

agency and volition—are converted into a motive force that drives the narrative.<sup>29</sup> But this state of order is only temporary, and when sensations end, all energy dissipates and disorder returns. The novel does not consolidate a community, but ends with the entropic atomization of a crowd of readers as “avid and ignorant” as the “French mob” within the text.

To return to Mansel’s fulminating review, the entropic power of *The Woman in White* accounts for the widespread perception of sensation novels as symptoms of a cultural disease at a moment of crisis. *The Woman in White*, the exemplary novel of the sensation genre, both represents and performs the dissolution of order. The entropic figuration of sexuality as the loss of volition ends with a marriage plot that coincides with a burial plot and enables the poor drawing master to violate the boundaries between classes. The equally entropic transformation of readerly desire into an “appetite for horror” reveals that communities can only be briefly constituted through “rapt attention” at empty forms. Sensation, spectacular corpses, and other empty forms first exercise and then exhaust the energy necessary to make a crowd into a community.

### **Coda: Invisible corpses in Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend***

Written shortly after *The Woman in White* and at the height of the sensation craze, Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1864) also focuses on marrying the dead and the relation between knowing and owning bodies and people. Although Dickens’s novel shares these elements with *The Woman in White*, Dickens uses them differently, attempting to reverse the entropic effects of Collins’s novel. Dickens transforms the spectacular corpse that absorbs erotic and readerly

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<sup>29</sup> Gold notes that in the earliest statement of the second law of thermodynamics, the concept of energy was denoted by the term “motive power,” or “*puissant motrice*” (450, 453).

energy into an invisible and generative corpse, but his novel cannot escape the morbid preoccupation with the corpse and its centrality to narrative.

*Our Mutual Friend* begins where *The Woman in White* leaves off—with a dead body and a disquisition on the unknown body's relationship to property. In the opening scene, Gaffer Hexam and his daughter Lizzie trawl the Thames in search of a corpse—not a particular corpse, but any corpse. Gaffer makes his living from corpses dredged from the river; he appropriates the money in their pockets and receives payment for delivering the anonymous corpses to the authorities for identification and inquests.<sup>30</sup> After finding a corpse and making it fast to their boat, Lizzie and Gaffer encounter another dredger, a one-time associate of Gaffer's named Rogue Riderhood. Gaffer repudiates Riderhood on the grounds that Riderhood has robbed a live man: ““You've got off with a short time of it for putting your hand in the pocket of a sailor, a live sailor ... don't think after that to come over *me* with your pardners. We have worked together in time past, but we work together no more in time present nor future”” (47). He defends his practice of taking money from the pockets of the corpses he dredges from the Thames by suggesting that the corpse's relation to property defines the boundary between the living and the dead: ““Has a dead man any use for money? Is it possible for a dead man to have money? What world does a dead man belong to? 'Tother world. What world does money belong to? This world. How can money be a corpse's? Can a corpse own it, want it, spend it, claim it, miss it?”” (47). Gaffer's disquisition on the rights of the dead *vis à vis* those of the living suggests that the

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<sup>30</sup> This occupation was not unusual for the river folk of London or particular to the Victorian era. Henry Mayhew notes that finding corpses was a profitable subset of a dredger's usual enterprise of finding any other commodity lost in the river, such as coal. Mayhew writes, “dredgers ... are the men who find almost all the bodies of persons drowned. If there be a reward offered for the recovery of a body, numbers of the dredgers will at once endeavour to obtain it, while if there be no reward, there is at least the inquest money to be had—beside other chances. What these chances are may be inferred from the well-known fact, that no body recovered by a dredgerman ever happens to have any money about it.... The dredgers cannot b any reasoning or argument be made to comprehend that there is anything like dishonesty in emptying the pockets of a dead man” (149). Mayhew also makes the point that although dredgers are averse to formal education and reading, on the grounds that they are useless to their occupation, they are nonetheless “to an extraordinary degree, laborious, persevering, and patient” (148).

difference between life and death is the ability to own property; to “own it, want it, spend it, claim it, miss it” comprise all the possible property relations among living bodies and things that Gaffer can conceive. Because the dead body cannot own property, it can be made into property, converted into the cash Gaffer filches from its pockets and the reward the authorities give him for finding it. The unknown corpse can indeed be owned.

Unlike Count Fosco’s spectacular corpse, however, the corpses in Dickens’s final completed novel cannot be seen. When Mortimer Lightwood, Eugene Wrayburn, and the mysterious Julius Handford congregate first at Gaffer’s riverside residence and then at the police station to view the body, Dickens insistently covers the corpse over with text. When Mortimer asks Gaffer if the body is in his house, Gaffer draws his attention to a wall covered with handbills, saying “‘Tain’t not to say here, but it’s close by. I do everything reg’lar. I’ve giv’ notice of the circumstance to the police, and the police have took possession of it . . . . The police have put into print already, and here’s what the print says of it’” (64). Gaffer’s syntax enacts a textual transformation on the bodies he finds, as the unnamed object, the corpse, appears and disappears in Gaffer’s speech. First, it hides under the “circumstance” that Gaffer “giv’ notice of” to the police. Then the “circumstance” transforms to an indefinite pronoun when the police “have took possession of it.” Then “it” disappears altogether, as the “police have put into print” the identifying details. The body itself has been erased in favor of “what the print says of it.”

Although the corpse is invisible, a textual stand-in for it is identified before our eyes, instead of the corpse itself. Gaffer Hexam identifies the handbill advertising the body and requesting information about it, even though he cannot read the text. He picks it out from among his collection of such handbills, which serves as a sort of wallpaper for his rough dwelling. Each handbill has the description of an anonymous corpse Gaffer has pulled from the river, and Gaffer

identifies each of them correctly, with details as to what they were wearing and enough information to enable us to guess their stories. Gaffer Hexam declares, ““I can’t read, nor I don’t want to it, for I know ’em by their places on the wall”” (64). Despite his illiteracy, he is able to correctly identify each of the handbills on the wall, summarizing them and then challenging his audience ““Look and see if he warn’t,”” to which Lightwood replies each time, ““Quite right”” (65). Gaffer’s grotesque home décor replaces the Paris Morgue, displaying written representations instead of actual bodies.

In the next scene, once again Dickens hides the corpse from the reader, though not from the characters. Gaffer leads his guests to the police station so that they can see the body in a scene that the narrator leads up to and then avoids. After describing the impassive Night-Inspector and the office of the police station, the narrator shows the Night-Inspector taking up his keys and saying, ““Now, gentlemen,”” as if about to lead the reader as well as the characters with him. The ensuing paragraph, however, defeats the narrative expectation, eliding the moment of morbid spectacle: ““With one of his keys, he opened a cool grot at the end of the yard, and they all went in. They quickly came out again”” (67). Up until this point, it seems that Lightwood has gone down to the waterside station to identify the corpse. However, the Night-Inspector reveals that the body’s identity has already been established; he informs Lightwood that the “[s]teward of ship in which gentleman came home passenger, had been round to view, and could swear to identity” (67). There is no necessity for Lightwood, much less Wrayburn, to view the corpse, other than just the impulse of curiosity, indicated by the narrator’s aside that the normal business of the police station continues while the men “looked at the silent sight they came to see” (67). The trip down to the dockside is a sightseeing trip, yet the denouement is hidden from the reader first by Gaffer’s syntactic shell game with the corpse, “circumstance,” and “it,” and then by the

narrative's elision of the moment of viewing, which is nearly simultaneous with the revelation that the whole point of the visit is to see the corpse without even the pretence of the purpose of identification used to justify the display at the Morgue.

The invisible corpse in the first few chapters of *Our Mutual Friend* is emblematic of Dickens's attempts throughout the novel to offer an alternative to the spectacular and morbid model of marriage and literary consumption that Collins creates in *The Woman in White*. Most discussions of the relationship between Collins and Dickens focus on Dickens's influence on Collins, but in *Our Mutual Friend*'s appropriation and revision of sensational tropes and structures we see the master responding to the work of the acolyte. Not only does Dickens present a mirror image of Collins's scene at the Morgue in the opening chapters of his novel; he also uses and revises the components of the sensation novel in general and Collins's bestselling hit in particular.

Instead of displaying the corpse at the end of the novel, Dickens hides it at the beginning of his. Placing the corpse at the beginning of his novel, Dickens makes the hidden display of the corpse serve a narrative function; it motivates the dual plots of *Our Mutual Friend*. In the river plot, Gaffer's discovery brings Eugene into his first contact with Lizzie. Riderhood's quarrel with Gaffer over the dead body leads to Eugene's second encounter with her, which sets in motion their love-plot, with its dark underside, which we can summarize as the Hexam/Headstone/Wrayburn plot. The corpse is also the juncture of the river plot with the dust plot, or the inheritance plot that dominates the other half of the novel. The corpse is misidentified as the body of John Harmon, returning home to claim the inheritance left him by his miserly and cruel father. Under the terms of his father's (apparently) only existing will, Harmon inherits the fortune his father garnered from the lucrative dust of London only if he

marries Bella Wilfer, who took his father's fancy when a willful child.<sup>31</sup> If Harmon forfeits the inheritance, the entire sum goes to his father's employee Noddy Boffin. The misidentification of the corpse as John Harmon enables the real John Harmon to assume the name of John Rokesmith and, thus disguised, enter Boffin's household as a secretary and the Wilfer domicile as a lodger, where he meets and falls in love with Bella, now a willful young woman. Rokesmith's masquerade enables him to prove the Boffins's true worth and to assay Bella's feminine value accurately. At the end of the novel, John Harmon accedes to his father's fortune, which is now purified and redeemed by the Boffins's, his own, and Bella's willingness to forfeit money for the sake of love. The anonymous corpse at the beginning of *Our Mutual Friend* enables the transformative powers of make-believe to redeem the dust, turning filth and filthy lucre alike into the true golden gold of love and charity. While corpses and other empty forms absorb and then dissipate narrative energy and readerly desire in Collins's novel, Dickens makes the corpse a powerful narrative force. Dickens restores the energy lost in the entropic plotting and penultimate scene of *The Woman in White* with the regenerative potential of the invisible corpse.

Dickens attempts to unravel the knot Collins ties between "unowned" and "unknown" as well. Can bodies be known and yet unowned—recognized yet not turned to property or cash? Can you own flesh and blood, or sell it? Wegg, after buying his shinbone back from Venus, the articulator of bones who assembles skeletons out of miscellaneous parts, suggests that he could have got it back from him by legal action rather than purchase; Venus replies, "I bought you in open contract." Wegg rejoins with, "You can't buy human flesh and blood in this country, sir;

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<sup>31</sup> Dustmen, who sifted the refuse of London for items that could be sold for profit, were part of a larger class, which Mayhew categorizes as "Street-finders or Collectors"—bone-grubbers, rag-gatherers, pure-finders, cigar-end and old wood collectors, mud-larks, sewer-hunters, dustmen, nightmen, sweeps, and scavengers—all of whom made a living by reclaiming value from waste (138). There has been a critical debate about the contents of the dustheaps in *Our Mutual Friend*; some have suggested that we should read them as dungheaps. However, Mayhew draws a distinction between dustmen and nightmen, who collected nightsoil, or human excrement. The expanded edition of Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* came out merely two years before Dickens' novel, which suggests that the distinction between dustmen and nightmen was current when Dickens wrote the novel.

not alive, you can't...Then query, bone?" (351). Wegg is able to buy back his shinbone because it is utterly unique; Venus tells him that he "can't work it into a miscellaneous one [skeleton], no how. Do what I will, you can't be got to fit. Anybody with a passable knowledge would pick you out at a look" (124). Wegg's leg is one of a kind, known and recognized by its singularity, and because it can be known, Wegg can own it again. Buying his leg back from Venus, Wegg establishes a form of ownership not based on the integrity of the body but on treating his own body as alienable property. Whether unknown, like the misidentified corpse that begins the novel, or known, bodies in *Our Mutual Friend* can be owned, so that Wegg is wrong when he says that "You can't buy flesh and blood in this country...not alive." Nor is Wegg's leg the only example of flesh and blood traded on the market. Dickens offers multiple incidents that suggest that it is a reasonably simple and common transaction and the most common example is marriage: the Lammles' marriage; Charley Hexam's attempt to marry Lizzie off to Bradley Headstone for his sake; Bella's initial determination to marry the richest suitor she can find.<sup>32</sup> John Harmon's projected marriage for his son, as laid out in his will, would be the prime example of living flesh and blood being bought and sold, and they would be sold to the dead—neither John nor Bella would be the buyer of the other, but both would be selling themselves to the mortifying power of money, leveraged by a dead man.

In order to disentangle human bodies from the double bind of being known and owned subjects, or unknown and unowned objects, Dickens adopts Collins's image of marrying the dead. As in Collins's novel, marrying the dead occurs more than once in *Our Mutual Friend*. When Bella marries John, she is marrying a dead man, and when Lizzie marries Eugene, he is on his deathbed. However, Dickens reverses the trope of marrying the dead; in both cases a live

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<sup>32</sup> An example of a non-marital selling of self is Riah's willing subjection to Fascination Fledgeby. Riah tells Jenny he realizes that "in bending my neck to the yoke I was willing to wear, I bent the unwilling necks of the whole Jewish people," and his choice of metaphors acknowledges that his servitude to Fledgeby is slavery (795).

woman marries a dead man. John Harmon is dead—like Laura Fairlie before him, he is “socially, legally, morally – dead”; unlike Laura, he is freed by this death to fill the hollow form of marriage his father’s will dictated with real love between him and Bella (although one has to admit that Dickens fails in making it convincing). In his marriage to Bella, John Harmon follows the letter and violates the spirit of his father’s will. He marries her and gets the money, but does so for love, and she loves him in return. Bella’s marriage to the dead man reinvigorates the empty form of marriage. In *The Woman in White*, sensation and sexuality stimulate a deathly state of narratability; in *Our Mutual Friend*, death makes desire a possible narrative, which would otherwise be foreclosed by the will of John Harmon senior. Death enables the narrative of erotic desire instead of consumer or capital desire.

But at a price. As Catherine Gallagher has shown, Dickens’s use of the corpse as the source of regenerative potential makes the body itself disappear as a locus of value.<sup>33</sup> Dickens rejects the insistent embodiment Collins’s novel forces on characters and readers, but his insistence on the regenerative potential of dust and waste makes the corpse the linchpin of the domestic order Dickens attempts to create in *Our Mutual Friend*. Although Dickens fills up the forms that Collins empties of meaning and energy, he cannot escape a morbid preoccupation with dead bodies, so that his attempt to reverse the entropic power of Collins’s plot merely

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<sup>33</sup> See Catherine Gallagher’s chapter on *Our Mutual Friend* in *The Body Economic*. Gallagher reads the novel in light of the embodied economics of wealth and illth Ruskin advocates in *Unto This Last*, and she shows how John Harmon’s “apparent death” allows the tainted fortune he inherits to be sanitized and realized as life-enhancing wealth, not illth. However, Gallagher notes, this comes at a price: the erasure of the human body. The novel also demonstrates that “the humanitarian attempt to place and hold the human body at the center of inquiries into the nature of value [as Ruskin does] has a paradoxical result; it leaves the body suspended, apparently dead, while the newly valorized essence, Life, achieves ever more inorganic and even immaterial representations” (97). This abstraction of life, valuing it in its abeyance is the novel’s “vital morbidity” (98). Gallagher writes: “*Our Mutual Friend* incessantly requires bodily suspension as a condition of the valuable Life; illness unto death brings wealth. Locating both mortality and vitality, both fatality and regeneration, in decomposition makes us acutely aware that illth and wealth are alike abstractions from the body’s particularity. They are alike poised on the vanishing point of those ‘full-breathed, bright-eyed, and happy-hearted human creature’ that Ruskin had set out to vindicate” (110).

emphasizes the morbidity that literature mirrors back at culture through form and content. Like it or not, morbidity is here to stay—in “The Voice of Society,” in marrying the dead, and as a cultural concern in art and literature through the end of the nineteenth century.

## Chapter V

### “Field no more”: transcending morbid authorship in the works of Michael Field

“Whenever I am at Paris, I am dragged by invisible force into the Morgue.”  
Charles Dickens, “Travelling Abroad”

In 1892 Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who wrote together under the shared pseudonym Michael Field, traveled to Paris with their friends Bernhard Berenson and Mary Costelloe (*née* Smith, later Berenson). While they were there, the Fields visited the Paris Morgue on more than one occasion. Challenged by Berenson, who was appalled by what he saw as her morbid fascination with spectacular corpses, Cooper responds by claiming that art transcends morbidity. She recounts the argument with Berenson in the fifth volume of *Works and Days*, the journal she and Bradley shared for twenty-five years:

As Bernhard & I go down the staircase & cross the Courts of the Louvre, he reproaches me with ~~going~~<sup>^</sup>my visit<sup>^</sup> to the Morgue – it is not Greek, it is morbid & shocking. I defend myself – death is one of the facts of life, modernity reaches to all facts & includes them: classic antiquity ignored many; but the new art & literature is great enough to bear all truth. (W&D V, f.123v)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All references to *Works and Days* are to the journals held in the British Library, Add.MS 46776-46804. Volume V (BL Add.MS 46780) covers 1892. Further references to *Works and Days* will be by volume and page number. All page numbers will be given in recto and verso. Since the carefully crafted nature of these journals is important to my argument, I include words that Cooper and Bradley crossed out and use carets (^ ^) around words that they inserted in superscript, rather than give the final text after Bradley and Cooper’s revisions; ~~illeg~~ indicates that the crossed-out text is illegible. Uncertainty about my transcription is indicated by “(?)” after the word in question; text that is completely indecipherable, though not crossed out, will be denoted by “illeg.” The Fields were fond of using ellipses in their journal, so I will add brackets around ellipses that are not in the original text. I am trying to show—somewhat insufficiently—the texture of this unique document, in which both writers reworked their own and each other’s words, sometimes through adding their own accounts, sometimes by revising their own or their partner’s words. Both women used nicknames for each other in the journal. Bradley’s nicknames include Michael and Sim; Cooper’s include Field, Henry, Hennie, Heinrich, and P.

Cooper's defense aligns "modernity" with a "new art & literature" that has the capacity to deal with death without becoming morbid. Implicitly, Cooper declares her allegiance to this "new art & literature," and claims its authority for the creative work she and Bradley engage in as Michael Field.

In their quest for literary fame and recognition, Bradley and Cooper deploy tropes of morbid authorship that we have encountered in previous chapters, and retrofit them to their own purpose—to achieve renown as "Poets and lovers evermore" (W&D V, 77v).<sup>2</sup> I focus on the Fields' poetry and journal from 1889 through 1893, a particularly fertile period in the Fields' production of lyric verse. *Long Ago*, a series of lyrics based on surviving fragments of Sappho's poems, was published in 1889; *Sight and Song*, the Fields' volume of ekphrastic poems, came out in 1892; in 1893, the Fields published *Underneath the Bough*, inspired by the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (Thain 9).<sup>3</sup> During this period, Bradley and Cooper move from lyrically ventriloquizing the dead in *Long Ago*, to adapting elegy into prose, using the corpse as the regenerative matrix of their art, and converting the spectacular appeal of the displayed corpse into ekphrastic incarnations of Old Master paintings. In their literary responses to death in poetry and prose, the Fields elevate the formal characteristics of morbidity into an aesthetic principle that transforms life into art.

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<sup>2</sup> This line comes from a poem that the Fields included in *Underneath the Bough*, the volume of poetry they published in 1893. It appears in draft form in the 1892 volume of *Works and Days*, and I am citing this version instead of the published volume.

<sup>3</sup> The Fields also published three plays during this period, which are outside my ambit in this chapter: *The Tragic Mary* (1890) and *Stephania: A Trialogue* (1892) are historical verse dramas; *A Question of Memory* (1893) is the Fields' single attempt at a more contemporary play, dealing with events during the 1848 revolutions in Europe. Unlike all of the Fields' other plays, *A Question of Memory* was performed in public; in 1893 J.T. Grein of the Independent Theatre staged a production of the play that ran for one night. Bradley and Cooper were devastated by the scathing response to their best efforts to adopt a modern subject and idiom. For a complete list of Michael Field's *oeuvre*, see the recent edition of their selected works, *Michael Field, The Poet: Published and Manuscript Materials*, eds. Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo.

Like Tennyson, Gaskell, Collins, and Dickens, the Fields seize on death as an aesthetic opportunity. Tennyson's elegy inscribes his own poetic authority over the absence of Arthur. In the process, he makes morbidity central to Victorian literature and marriage. Gaskell ventriloquizes Brontë to challenge strictures on female authorship and expose the morbidity of the marriage plot that dominates Victorian fiction. Both Collins and Dickens make the dead body central to *The Woman in White* and *Our Mutual Friend* respectively. In Collins's novel, sexuality and narrative desire collapse into a fascination with the spectacular corpse. This morbid fascination bleeds away the volition and energy of readers and characters alike and results in an entropic fragmentation of community. Dickens uses the invisible corpse to set off his regenerative plot, in which he attempts to reverse the morbid erosion of energy and will that Collins reveals at the heart of narrative and erotic desire. Although the Fields' aesthetic response to death partakes of each of the methods above, it also transcends them. The Fields craft a poetics in which they use the spectacular fascination with the corpse as well as its regenerative potential to enact the aesthetic transformation of life into art. Through this transformation, the Fields situate morbidity *outside* the realm of aesthetic production.

The Fields sought to achieve this aesthetic transformation in both their journal and their poetry. As I will show, early in their career, Cooper and Bradley achieve their aesthetic goals in *Works and Days* with Cooper's representation of her mother's death. Thereafter, the Fields use their journal to record the process of shaping their lives into aesthetic form, establishing ritual patterns that structure the Fields' representation of each year. But it took them some time to work out this aesthetic resolution in their poetry, particularly because Cooper and Bradley were in conflict over the relationship between aesthetic production and the scene of death. In this

process of conflict and resolution, I identify three stages in the Fields' use of authorizing strategies based on an aesthetic response to death.

In the first stage, both Cooper and Bradley represent death as an accession to poetic authority and freedom, converting the melancholic introjection of the lost love object into poetic productivity. In the second stage, we see a conflict regarding the effects of death on their poetry emerge within Michael Field. This conflict is triggered by the Fields' visit to the Paris Morgue. During their trip to Paris shortly after the death of Cooper's mother, Bradley visits the Morgue three times, but Cooper is unable to enter the Morgue with her lover until the third and final visit. While Bradley maintains the regenerative aesthetic potential of death in her poems, draft versions of Cooper's poems reveal her sense that this model of morbid authorship threatens their poetic union. In the third stage, the Fields turn to ekphrasis to remake the scene of death, transforming the spectacular corpse into an aesthetic incarnation of form in their poem "Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*."

First, a quick biographical sketch of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper. Katharine Bradley was born in 1846 to a well-to-do though unconventional family.<sup>4</sup> When Bradley was around fourteen years old, her older sister Lissie married James Cooper, and two years later Edith Cooper was born. When the birth of a second child three years later made Lissie a permanent invalid, Bradley took over caring for the eldest child and "fostered Edith as a mother" (Sturgeon 17). Thus began a relationship that was to last nearly fifty years, till Cooper's death

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<sup>4</sup> Her parents, Charles Bradley and Emma Harris, were Dissenters, and "married themselves" by public vows, without benefit of clergy or any civic institution in 1834. Despite this untraditional and potentially scandalous union, they were otherwise a respectable middle-class couple; Charles Bradley owned a tobacco factory which generated the fortune that later enabled Michael Field to live on unearned increment and pursue their literary career (Donoghue 13).

from cancer in 1913. During those years, Bradley and Cooper's love for each other spanned the spectrum of relationships between women; as Marion Thain puts it, "Katharine became to Edith everything one woman can be to another: mother, aunt, sister, friend, and, eventually, lover" (3).

In addition to the familial and erotic relationship the two women shared, Bradley and Cooper were literary partners. Their literary partnership became public in 1881, when they published a verse drama entitled *Bellerophôn* under the pseudonyms "Arran and Isla Leigh." By 1884, they had decided on the joint pseudonym, Michael Field, under which they published their most successful works, *Callirrhoë* and *Fair Rosamund* (another pair of verse dramas).

According to Emma Donoghue's biography of Michael Field, "The unknown Mr. Field's first volume got rave reviews; he was compared to everyone from Shakespeare to Swinburne ... the *Spectator* had announced 'the ring of a new voice, which is likely to be heard far and wide among the English-speaking peoples'" (39).<sup>5</sup> Nor was the Fields' success limited to critical appreciation in contemporary reviews; both Marc-André Raffalovich and A. Mary F. Robinson wrote to the Fields under the misapprehension that they were addressing a young man (Thain 5). The secret of the dual and female authorship behind the pseudonym, however, did not remain secret for long. Robert Browning, the Fields' poetic mentor and friend, let slip that the "new voice" celebrated in the *Spectator* was that of two women united in one poetic persona. After this damaging truth became generally known, the Fields' work never again garnered the renown and praise Bradley and Cooper craved.<sup>6</sup> Mary Sturgeon, Michael Field's first biographer,

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<sup>5</sup> Donoghue's biography, published in 1998, is an early wave in the rising tide of Field studies. As interest in Michael Field has grown, scholars such Carolyn Dever, Jill Ehnenn, Hilary Fraser, Krista Lysack, Yopie Prins, Marion Thain, Ana Parejo Vadillo, and Martha Vicinus (to name a few) have published journal articles and book chapters on the Fields. With the publication of the first monograph on the Fields, by Thain, and the collection of selected works edited by Thain and Vadillo, the Fields have definitely entered the critical mainstream. The sheer size of their archive makes it likely that the Fields will offer a rich vein for critical mining for many years to come.

<sup>6</sup> The Fields' desire for recognition in their own time is evident in their journal. They read all their reviews, either pasted or transcribed copies of them into their journal, and commented gleefully on each positive response. They

suggests that “something in the fact of a collaboration was obscurely repellent; or even that their true sex was not revealed with tact to sensitive susceptibilities” (29). Nonetheless, the Fields went on to write an astonishing number of plays as well as a number of volumes of lyric poetry, most of which were self-published with painstaking attention to the physical beauty of the material book.<sup>7</sup>

Dating the beginning of Bradley and Cooper’s erotic partnership is less simple, but we can identify when the two women began to self-consciously craft their intertwined lives into a work of art. Donoghue writes, “by about 1878 – when Katherine [*sic*], at thirty-two, was exactly twice Edith’s age – they were behaving as a couple” (27). Thain claims that the Coopers, especially Lissie, were uneasy about the “intensity of [Bradley and Cooper’s] feelings for one another” and briefly tried to separate them in 1885 (48-9). By 1888, however, this conflict was resolved, and Bradley and Cooper began keeping a joint journal, entitled *Works and Days*.<sup>8</sup> For the rest of their lives, in addition to writing historical dramas in verse and lyric poems together, Bradley and Cooper shared this joint journal, which they used to record the daily events of their lives and as a space to speak to and argue with each other, to write and revise poetry, and to craft their lives into a dual work of art.

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were deeply saddened by the lack of enthusiastic response to *Sight and Song* in 1892, and even more hurt at the disastrous opening night of *A Question of Memory*.

<sup>7</sup> Thain counts twenty-eight published verse dramas, plus “evidence in the diaries of at least twenty-six further unpublished (and unfinished) dramas” (7). Donoghue’s bibliography of Michael Field’s works lists almost thirty projected works. Whatever the exact number, it is clear that the Fields were a prolific pair. The Fields’ independence from critical patronage and popular success was enabled by the income they derived from the tobacco fortune built up by Bradley’s father, demonstrating how the aesthetic credo of the 1890s—art for art’s sake—that divorces art from the market is predicated upon market relations. See Kathy Psomiades’ *Beauty’s Body* and Krista Lysack’s “Aesthetic Consumption and the Cultural Production of Michael Field’s *Sight and Song*.”

<sup>8</sup> *Works and Days* is also the title of a long poem by Hesiod, and since both Bradley and Cooper were well-versed in Greek, it is likely that the title of their journal is a nod to Hesiod’s poem.

The first volume of the Fields' shared journal is unique; unlike the other large cream-colored books, the volume covering the period from April 1888-December 1889 is a dark teal color, with a burgundy binding and is considerably slimmer than the other twenty-seven volumes.<sup>9</sup> The unique quality of the 1888-89 journal suggests that the Fields' decision to make their journal into a lifelong project occurred during this time. Every volume of the journal thereafter comes from the same shop, has the same binding, is the same size and color, and has the same number of pages. In the early sections of the 1888-89 journal, Bradley writes most of the entries, but by the end of May, 1888, Cooper is inserting her own entries, after which Bradley and Cooper alternate pretty equally. This first volume also contains far more poetry than later ones; until September, 1888, it almost seems more a workbook for poetry than a journal. In 1889, a large part of the joint journal is dedicated to recording the last illness and death of Lissie Cooper, Bradley's sister and Cooper's mother. Nor was this the only loss the Fields suffered in 1889; in December, their beloved mentor and friend, Robert Browning, also died. When they first hear of Browning's fatal illness, Cooper writes, "Is this year going to bereave us again—yet again, O God? ....It will half-kill our poetry, & make all the deep parts of our love memorial" (W&D II, f.120v). The deaths that mark the year 1889 are a turning point for the Fields. First, their poetic and erotic union is threatened by the deaths that "will half-kill [their] poetry" and make their love "memorial." Second, their journal takes shape as a means of memorializing their beloved dead through yearly rituals performed and recorded on the anniversaries of Lissie's birth and death, Easter, Cooper's birth, and the turn of the year; it will retain this shape till Bradley and Cooper die.

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<sup>9</sup> The first volume of *Works and Days* is Bradley's alone, written in 1868-69.

In this chapter, I read the Fields' journal in tandem with a selection of the poems of *Sight and Song* and *Underneath the Bough*; the poems I have selected are those that appear in draft form in the journal. In doing so, I am not attempting to find a biographical basis for the poetry in the poets' lives. Rather, I am treating both journal and poetry as carefully crafted formal experiments in which the Fields test-drive a number of different strategies for claiming poetic authority.<sup>10</sup> During the years when the Fields were involved in planning, drafting, and publishing *Sight and Song* and *Underneath the Bough*, they were responding to the deaths of Lissie Cooper, whom they name the "Beloved Mother-One" in their journal, and Robert Browning, whose nickname was "The Old." Thus the multiple strategies the Fields deploy all involve an aesthetic response to death and the dead body.

### **Revising elegy**

The traditional poetic response to the death of the beloved is the elegy, and Cooper adapts this poetic form in her journal entries about her mother's death. In Cooper's multiple narrations of her mother's final days and death, we can see her first attempts at making the moment of death into a moment of artistic transformation. Cooper adopts an elegiac strategy in which her authority is constituted through her aesthetic transformations of her mother's final hours.

Although Cooper begins by recording the transformative power of death, she ends by claiming

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<sup>10</sup> In her monograph on Michael Field (the first full-length book devoted to Michael Field), Thain also argues that *Works and Days* is not an "intimate outpouring" of the Fields' thoughts and feelings, but "crafted" work in which the Fields transform "unmediated raw reality" into interpreted "experience" through the "interpretive framework" of the shared poetic persona, Michael Field (20, 23). Like Thain, I see the Fields' lyric voice as the product of the difference within their poetic and erotic union, and I read their journal as one place where that difference is enacted, represented, and reproduced. See "*Long Ago*: the male pseudonym, fin-de-siècle sexualities, and Sappho's historical leap," chapter two of *'Michael Field': Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Fin de Siècle*, for Thain's reading of how the Fields' pseudonym "act[s] as a sign of unity and non-differentiation in the public domain" while simultaneously "inscrib[ing] the recognition of difference and desire between the lovers in the private and poetic domain" (57-8).

that power for herself in her revised narrative of Lissie Cooper's death. Cooper's entry on the eve of her mother's death reads:

August 19. The great Sculptor Death has been firming the lids & brows & nostrils—he takes each ~~illeg~~ beauty of form and solemnizes it in his great art. The eyes will never open full again—the ~~grave~~ ^patient^ necessity of being closed forever is beginning to press on them. The noble brows bend so dark, with another darkness under them – the hollowed gloom that ~~follows~~ ^repeats^ their lovely curves – the forehead is peerless and sacred – ~~it is~~ not thought, but ^its^ solution that lies between temple and temple. (W&D II, f.97r)

According to Cooper, the “Sculptor Death” creates art out of living matter, by “solemnizing” and eternalizing the “beauty of form.” However, it is Cooper herself who makes the dying body into a sculpture-in-process through her metaphor illustrating the physical changes of oncoming death. Cooper's narrative makes the process of dying into a process of aesthetic production, in which the final product, the corpse, is a perfect aesthetic form that contains, not “thought,” but its “solution” (dissolution, or perhaps, dissolved into a solution?) in the curves of the skull's frontal bone. As if in response to seeing this moment of aesthetic transition from living body to sculpted form, Cooper attempts a poem on the transition, inserting it above the rest of the entry about her mother: “There was a young flush on her cheeks – bridal in its welcome of Death. They coloured like peaches under the stimulating frost” (f.97r). Above the words, written in tiny letters, each syllable is marked off with a dot, as if Cooper is counting the syllables and scanning the meter. In describing her mother's “bridal ...welcome of Death” and comparing her cheeks to ripening peaches, Cooper transforms death into marriage, a potentially fruitful erotic union.

In the subsequent entries, it becomes evident that the product of this union is Cooper's accession to the aesthetic and transformative power of death. After Lissie says her final goodbyes to the family, Cooper writes, “I did not stay; I felt it blasphemy for my imagination to ^take^ an overwhelming impress of her mortal end” (f.99r). Declaring that seeing her mother's

death in the flesh would permanently mark her “imagination” with an “overwhelming impress,” Cooper’s phrasing suggests her creative imagination is like a woodblock or metal plate for etching, which reproduces images of the patterns carved or etched upon it.<sup>11</sup> Permanently stamped with the “overwhelming impress” of death, Cooper’s art would become the reproduction of that moment. In order to avoid this, she returns to her own room, where she exercises her own power over the moment of death. Cooper’s entry continues:

I read Corinthians XV where we read it last together on Easter Day & called her to me from the hindering body. Then she came – Just as I turned to the New City of Revelation where there shall ‘be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away’—I felt her press me against the heart of her being & fold me in the immortality we have fed in each other. (99r)<sup>12</sup>

By calling her mother to her “from the hindering body,” Cooper liberates Lissie’s spirit from her dying flesh and completes the process of aesthetic transformation begun by the “Sculptor Death.” Cooper’s narrative functions like death in its ability to create art out of living—and dying—matter. First she suggests that death is a process of making flesh into sculptural form; then she claims to complete the process by calling her mother’s spirit to her, leaving the “hindering body” an empty form. The “immortality” that Cooper and her mother “have fed in each other” is the paradoxical immortality conveyed by death as a moment of aestheticization, a process which Cooper’s entry both depicts and enacts. Cooper becomes the immortal artist by making her mother into immortal art. The aesthetic immortality Cooper confers on her mother, like spiritual immortality, depends on death.

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<sup>11</sup> The Fields insisted upon a meticulous process of production for all of their books. They were most certainly familiar with the use of woodblocks and etching in the reproduction of illustrations, as well as with later developments in printing technology.

<sup>12</sup> Although she mentions Corinthians, Cooper quotes from Revelations 21:4.

Cooper's representation of this transaction clearly draws on the schema of elegy, in which the poet achieves authority through the inscription of the loss of the love object. In order to see how Cooper's narrative of her mother's death deploys and revises the tropes of elegy, it necessary first to outline what those tropes are. Peter M. Sacks defines elegy as "a poem of mortal loss and consolation," in which "interruption and loss is followed by a figurative and aesthetic compensation" (3, 5). Sacks suggests that the elegist exemplifies the successful mourner of Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," who withdraws his (in Sacks' model, the elegist is definitely a man) cathexis from the beloved dead and redirects it onto a substitute (Sacks 6; Freud, MM 244-5). In this narrative of loss, acceptance, and substitution, mourning and elegy resemble the resolution of the Oedipus complex; through loss, the elegist, the mourner, and the child all come to accept "not just ... a substitute, but ... the very means and practice of substitution" (8). This practice is also at the heart of the *fort-da* game Freud describes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. According to Freud, his young grandson reconciles himself to his mother's absence by imaginatively replacing her with a wooden reel tied to a string that he would throw away and then retrieve (*Pleasure Principle* 15). In replacing the lost love object with a symbol, Sacks writes, the child "learns to *represent absence*, and to make the absent present, by means of a substitutive figure accompanied by an elementary language" (11). The representation of absence and the attempt "to make the absent present" through language is a central concern of elegy, and thus both mourning and elegy, for Sacks, "replay" the subject's entry into language (9).<sup>13</sup> Cooper's representation of absence in her account of her mother's

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<sup>13</sup> Sacks' larger project is to distinguish the unique sense of elegiac loss and language from the loss and absence that, according to psychoanalytic and deconstructionist theories, are necessary conditions for subjectivity and language. He writes, "I wish to view this relationship between the language of elegy and the experience of loss as an event or action: rather than finding absence or loss to be somehow already 'there' in the language, I am exploring how an elegist's language emerges from, and reacts upon, an originating sense of loss" (1). While acknowledging the compensatory nature of language itself and the textual construction of the subject, Sacks wishes to recover the struggle and pain that goes into that construction: "So thoroughly have we been told to regard the self as scarcely

death and her invocation of her mother at the moment of death indeed “replay” an entry into language, but, as we will see, with some crucial differences.

Feminist critics have challenged Sacks’ Freudian model of elegy, arguing for a “feminine elegiac more concerned with attachment than separation and a consolatory turn deriving more from recuperation than from compensatory substitution” (Kennedy 85). Quoting Celeste M. Schenck, David Kennedy writes, “Elegy is ‘a resolutely patriarchal genre’ which is better designated ‘masculine elegy’ because of its focus on male initiation and the writing of ‘vocational’ poems” (86). Feminine elegy is not predicated on the absence of the deceased, but on a “figuring of death as a transformation that allows a continuing relationship between deceased and survivors” (85). This continuing relationship often appears in feminine elegy through “tropes of bodily re-incorporation of the deceased” as well as through a return to the “domestic scene as the place where life with the deceased took place and where relationship with them must continue” (88). As we shall see, the “bodily re-incorporation of the deceased” is part of the Fields’ strategy for mourning the loss of the Beloved Mother-One, as is an emphasis on the “domestic scene.”

Cooper and Bradley’s narrative and poetic responses to the death of the Beloved Mother-One do not fit neatly into the category of masculine or feminine elegy, although they draw on both.<sup>14</sup> While Cooper’s first portrayal of her mother’s death enacts the transformation of life and loss into art, her second account emphasizes her own agency in creating the very loss that the

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different from yet another textual structure that we have retained little sense either of what that ‘scarcely different’ might mean or of the pain and resistance that go into the making of that structure” (xii).

<sup>14</sup> Cooper’s most obvious revision of elegiac conventions is her use of prose narrative in elegizing her mother. In *Elegy*, David Kennedy quotes a passage from Virginia Woolf’s 1925 diary in which the author wonders whether her new book could be best described as an elegy; Kennedy declares that Woolf’s idea of “elegy-as-novel” indicates “we have already traveled some distance from elegy as a sub-genre of poetry” (1). Thus Cooper’s elegiac narrative of her mother’s death is part of larger trend in which elegy becomes a mode of registering loss aesthetically rather than a specifically poetic genre.

aesthetic transformation supposedly compensates—a move not typical in either masculine or feminine elegy, though perhaps hinted at in both. Here I want to call attention to how the texture of the journal reveals Cooper’s authorial presence as she revises her original account. Although Cooper’s entry is dated August 19, it becomes clear that this is a retrospective narrative, created after the fact rather than written to the moment. The entry continues through the dawn of August 20, when Cooper “slipped out ... into the dawn & the rain” to pick a branch of laurel to place on Lissie’s corpse, and ends, “Then began the details of mourning, & my force departed” (99v).<sup>15</sup> Perhaps Cooper wrote her narrative some time after the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, yet chose to date the entry as if she were writing even as the events she records took place. Alternatively, she may have started the entry on the 19<sup>th</sup> and returned to, revised, and added to it afterward, without recording the date change. Either way, we can see that Cooper’s portrayal of her mother’s death is carefully crafted, and not just a record of events.

Adding to the layered texture of the entry, Cooper interpolates another version of the story of her mother’s death within her journal entry. The entry begins on f.97r, continues overleaf on f.97v, and then skips to f.99r. At some point, Cooper returned to the skipped page to insert a transcription of a letter to “The Old,” the Fields’ nickname for Robert Browning. In her letter, Cooper revises her first narrative, emphasizing her own agency in choosing the moment of her mother’s death:

After she became unconscious I went apart to read the grand half-chapter of Corinthians, and when I reached the words ‘For this corruptible must put on incorruption, & this mortal must put on immortality’ I cried out ‘O Mother, Mother, come to me, leave that

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<sup>15</sup> The ending of the entry calls attention to the waxing and waning of energy in this narrative. It begins with the stillness of Lissie’s body, as death sculpts her into art, then swells with energy and emotion at the moment when Cooper writes, “I am sure that she saw death ‘in a visible shape,’” a vision that apparently gives Lissie the energy to say goodbye to her family members (97v). Then as Lissie lapses back into unconsciousness, Cooper leaves the room and brings on the climactic moment of death and union, which gives her strength to make the corpse into a symbol by laying the laurel on her breast. This last effort exhausts the aesthetic and narrative energy that has been provoked by death, and the entry ends.

body, and come!’ She died on the instant—and kissed me in her arms—a glorious spirit. I felt her round me and at my lips in an embrace that was like Pentecostal flame. It made me stronger than death. (98r)

According to the page heading, this passage was “Written on Tuesday morning in a letter to ‘The Old,’” so this account must have been composed at roughly the same time as the journal entry, yet the two accounts differ significantly.<sup>16</sup> Here Cooper deletes the reference to the passages from Revelation that she quoted earlier, and quotes instead from Corinthians on the transformation of impermanent and mortal flesh into permanent and immortal “glorious spirit.” The moment of bridal union between Lissie and death imagined earlier in the journal entry here gives way to an image of the moment of death as a nexus of erotic, spiritual, and poetic power. Cooper feels her mother’s disembodied spirit physically “round” her and “at [her] lips” in a sensual embrace that is both maternal and sexualized, recalling the pre-Oedipal dyad when the infant lies within the mother’s arms, with lips to her breast. The moment of rupture, the final separation from the beloved mother, is simultaneously the moment of complete unity and presence. The nourishment that Cooper takes from her mother’s spirit is “like Pentecostal flame,” the gift of tongues that descended upon the apostles. Cooper discovers a power to speak beyond the bounds of ordinary language in her revised narrative of her mother’s death, deploying an aesthetic performativity that makes her “stronger than death” through the representation of death as the transformation from life into art.

In Cooper’s accounts of her mother’s death, she both enacts and reverses the *fort-da* game in which the child masters loss and grief. Rather than passively receive the “overwhelming impress” of her mother’s death, thereby being doomed to repeat and reproduce the impression

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<sup>16</sup> At the end of her transcription of the letter to Browning, Cooper appends another narrative under the heading, “Sim writes of the sacred end—” (f.98v). This interpolation adds to the multilayered texture of Cooper’s two accounts.

stamped upon her, Cooper leaves the room. Claiming that she does so to preserve her “imagination,” Cooper rejects a model of feminine authorship in which women writers reproduce experiences, characters, and events too literally, as Gaskell suggests Brontë does in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (see chapter 2).<sup>17</sup> In refusing this model she places her creative autonomy above the Victorian celebration of the deathbed as a moment of sentimental transcendence. Furthermore, Cooper exercises agency in a fashion that does not compensate for her loss, but actually causes it. Unlike the child in Freud’s story, Cooper chooses to leave, and when she calls her mother to her she also makes her mother permanently absent. Cooper’s demand for presence leads to a moment in which presence and absence collapse into one, as Cooper and her mother are momentarily joined in “an embrace like Pentecostal flame.” Cooper’s simile links the moment of death to the power of language, and thus this account of her mother’s death participates in the masculine elegiac tradition. However, it also makes explicit the aggression toward the deceased love object inherent in this tradition. Tennyson gestures toward the necessity of Arthur Hallam’s death in the aural ambiguity that makes his claim that “’Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all” sound identical to “’Tis better to have loved and lost / Than ever to have loved at all” (*In Memoriam* 27:15-6, see chapter 1). Cooper goes beyond the ambiguous gesture, and represents herself as causing her mother’s death through her use of language. Her mother “die[s] on the instant” when Cooper cries “O Mother, Mother, come to me.”<sup>18</sup> Far from critiquing this death-dealing use of language, Cooper celebrates it as a

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<sup>17</sup> This is also the model of representation that Freud’s grandson deploys in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. While the child may be able to master his grief and anger at his mother’s loss by repeatedly representing it, can he represent anything else? Not within Freud’s narrative, suggesting that the power of symbolic representation is not all that is necessary for the creative autonomy Cooper and Bradley seek.

<sup>18</sup> Cooper is using narrative causality to imply that her command *caused* her mother’s death “on the instant.” As Roland Barthes says, “the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes *after* being read in narratives as what is *caused by*” (94, emphasis in original).

moment of return to pre-Oedipal bliss.<sup>19</sup> Rather than turning away from the mother and embracing a symbolic logic of substitution in the successful resolution of the Oedipal conflict, Cooper suggests that the gift of speech—of “Pentecostal flame”—comes from a return to the mother that is nonetheless predicated on her absence, which is itself the result of a demand for her presence.

When Cooper writes this scene, she enacts the central trope of elegy—inscribing one’s artistic power over and through the portrayal of the absence of the lost love object. At the same time, she deploys one of the tropes central to lyric poetry in general as well as elegy in particular. When Cooper calls her mother to her, she makes the absent present through the figure of apostrophe. Her mother’s presence is a figural one, however; Cooper calls her spirit out of her body, the tenor out of the vehicle. Cooper’s use of apostrophe reverses the usual dynamic associated with this rhetorical figure. Invoking the absent to make it present, apostrophe usually functions to confer life on the inanimate; Cooper’s use of apostrophe instead calls out—evokes—the living spirit from her mother’s body, leaving it an inanimate figure. Cooper’s use of apostrophe enables her sidestep the law of the father that insists the child must turn away from her dyadic union with the mother in order to enter the realm of language. Through apostrophe, Cooper separates her mother into living spirit and inanimate form, tenor and vehicle, so that the poetic subject can have her cake and eat it too—or have her mother and kill her too. Cooper’s account of her mother’s death offers another way to read the Oedipal renunciation of the mother—as a paradoxical return to the mother that follows the letter of the law of the father (Cooper lets her mother go to death) even as it violates it in spirit (she reunites with her mother in that moment).

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<sup>19</sup> Cooper’s figural reunion with her mother enables her to return to pre-Oedipal bliss without being threatened by the “constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling”—the power of the mother and the *chora*, which must be abjected on the route to subjectivity (*Powers of Horror* 12-15).

In multiple ways, Cooper's narrative inverts the psychoanalytic Oedipal narrative in which the child renounces the mother in accordance with the law of the father. While Cooper does renounce her mother, it is not by accepting her absence, but by commanding it. Rather than submitting to the law of the father in her renunciation, Cooper usurps its power in her the command that results in her mother dying "on the instant." Yet her renunciation is simultaneous with a reunion with the mother, in which she receives the gift of tongues. In her representation of this simultaneous rupture and union with the Beloved Mother-One, Cooper uses the implication of causality inherent in narrative forms, suggesting that her command leads to her assumption of poetic power. Attributing this power to her own speech act, Cooper usurps the power of narrative causality for poetic utterance.

Cooper's story about her mother's death also revises the mythic Oedipal narrative, in which Oedipus kills his father, marries his mother, and thus sets in motion a train of events that leads to one of the most famous stories in the Western canon. Instead, Cooper both kills and unites with her mother. Her actions do not set in motion a train of events, but rather the cyclical narrative of the journal itself. While the journal does not begin with Lissie's death, her death is of crucial importance during the period when Bradley and Cooper decided to make their journal a joint, lifelong project, and her death shapes the form of all the following volumes of *Works and Days*.

Each year, Cooper and Bradley commemorate Lissie's final Easter, by decorating their house with the exact same flowers they brought to brighten her sickroom. On Easter 1890, Cooper writes

I read with her in the Blue Room—she was certainly with me... for as I sat in the old place & read her chapter out of Corinthians I (XV) to her, all my tears were wiped away, and a firm joy given to my being. I could no more cry than I did after she kissed me at the moment when she lived & was dead.... In the bamboo-case are the very flowers she

watched so fervidly last year – black poplar and lilac-shoots, the lemon-coloured frilled jonquil. the blue flash of Scylla, & even the wee curled fronds of hartstongue that won her special love... (W&D III, f. 25v)

On the day of rebirth in the Christian calendar, the Fields celebrate Lissie's birth into eternity and repeat the previous year's events. In addition to listing all the flowers—another repetition doubling the reenactment—Cooper then writes, “I must put down all I remember of her last Easter” and then does so (f.26r-v). The following Easter, Cooper again describes the flowers decorating her mother's portrait (W&D IV, f.27v), and in 1892 she records how she ventured out in the garden to gather flowers so that she can deck the Blue Room once more with “the very flowers & leaves that filled it on her last Easter-Day” (W&D V, f.74r). Reading Lissie's chapter from Corinthians aloud, decorating the Blue Room with Lissie's favorite flowers, and re-recording the events of the previous Easter, Cooper repeatedly creates an aesthetic reenactment that makes multiple past moments live again in the present.

In the Fields' commemorations of Lissie's death-day, the link between this aesthetic reenactment and their poetic authority and literary ambitions becomes more explicit. On the first anniversary of Lissie's death, Bradley writes in red ink, “‘the words now home-speech of the mouth of God' are hers now,” and then transcribes a favorable review of the Fields latest play, *The Tragic Mary* (W&D III, f.104v). Cooper continues the entry by speculating on the coincidence of the good review coming on that day: “George Moore wrote this—can it be that on the day when she rose again to life our art will ‘attain a new life,[’] will partake of Resurrection? Long have we been feeling the pressure of dissatisfaction with one form, long have we been smitten with the sorrow of indefinite aim. Now a light flashes with renewal through our spirits” (f.105r). Then Cooper *again* lists the flowers decorating her mother's portrait. Repeating the

mother's death seems to function as a ritual that leads to aesthetic transformation and the fulfillment of literary ambitions.

Cooper's representations of her mother's death enable the Fields to have it both ways; they can enjoy the bliss of the union with the mother, without suffering any of the constraints such identification could impose upon them. In their journal, the Fields create a narrative that is structured by the co-presence of the past in the present. We have encountered this structure before in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, where the poetic reanimation of the dead establishes a morbid temporality that stalls narratives and defers closure. In *Works and Days*, however, the Fields convert morbid temporality into ritual. Each year, they go through the forms of the previous year again. At Easter, they reread the poems and Bible verses they read with Lissie on her last Easter. On the anniversary of Lissie's death, they bring flowers to the parlor just as they did to decorate her coffin. At the close of every year, they each write a summary of their progress in the past year. The repetition of ritual makes every year a formal replication of the year before. Tennyson's poetic speaker wants to escape the morbidity of endless grief by filling up the hollow form with social meaning. The Fields instead make this morbid temporality a formal principle, so that their poetry and their journals exclude social meaning in favor of aesthetic patterning, shaping life and death into art.

### **“Praise of Thanatos” turns to “Grave Mould”**

The Fields also attempt to shape death into art in their poetry. Although a group of death paeans written shortly after Lissie's death show their agreement about the role of death in their poetry, later poems show Bradley and Cooper's responses to death diverging after their visits to the Paris Morgue in 1890. Cooper's confrontation with the material body—the corpses at the

Morgue—creates a difference between the Fields’ aesthetic responses to death in 1890 and 1891, visible in the draft versions of their poems. As we will see later, in *Sight and Song*, their 1892 volume of ekphrastic poetry, the Fields convert this threatening difference into a creative tension. At this point I need to justify the odd chronology I am using to read the Fields’ poetic progress. Although *Underneath the Bough* was published one year after *Sight and Song*, the journal makes it clear that the writing of the two volumes occurred in tandem. In fact, Bradley’s entry at the start of 1891 may indicate that at one point the Fields were considering publishing the two volumes as a single one.<sup>20</sup> References to the “song-book” occur earlier than any of the poems later included in *Sight and Song*, as do the draft versions of many of the death paeans that appear in *Underneath the Bough*. Thus I read “The Second Book of Songs” in *Underneath the Bough* as prior to *Sight and Song*, both in concept and, frequently, in execution.<sup>21</sup>

The apparent unity of the poems in “The Second Book of Songs” of *Underneath the Bough* masks the difference between Bradley and Cooper more evident in the journal. For this reason, I will be using both the final published versions of the poems I discuss in this section and the draft versions found in *Works and Days*. Additionally, I will ascribe authorship of the poems to one of the two women, rather than to “the Fields,” as is more usual. I am not trying to parse out who wrote which poems, or which parts. Rather, I am arguing for conflict within the persona Michael Field, a conflict that is easiest to write about using the two women’s names.

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<sup>20</sup> Bradley writes, “My Love has been reading to me the whole of the song-book [the Fields’ working title for the poems that would be published as *Underneath the Bough*]. And while she was reading grew up in our hearts, swift as a balsam, the hope of publishing in the autumn our song-book with the Italian poems as a section” (W&D IV, f.3v). While certainty is impossible, it seems most likely that the “Italian poems” refers to the poems on paintings by Botticelli that will be so prominent in *Sight and Song*; the Fields drafted these poems during their European tour of 1890.

<sup>21</sup> The first edition of *Underneath the Bough* consists of four “Books of Songs”; the “Second Book” is largely concerned with death. For details on the complex printing history of the volume, see Bristow’s “Michael Field’s Aestheticism: *Underneath the Bough*” in *Michael Field and Their World*, eds. Margaret D. Stetz and Cheryl A. Wilson.

Bradley and Cooper's initial responses to Lissie's death in *Underneath the Bough* and *Works and Days* are largely positive, drawing on some of the tropes of feminine elegy. For example, in one of the poems that Bradley wrote, the speaker declares, "To me it is delight to waken, / To find my Dead, to feel them fold / My heart, & for its dross give gold" (W&D III, f.14r).<sup>22</sup> In the Fields' poems on Lissie's death, the presence of the "feminine elegiac" is evident in both Bradley and Cooper's claims that they are closer to Lissie after her death than before. After the funeral, Cooper writes, "The dear Mother-One told us she would be closer to us after death than in her earthly days – she has fulfilled her promise, and she rules her home & our hearts so fully that we have scarcely felt what mourners call 'a void'" (f.103v).<sup>23</sup> In a letter Cooper transcribes in the journal, Bradley writes, "Ah, how good to have one's dear ones not outside one any more – but with one & of one's art & life!" (W&D II, f.106r, qtd. in Thain 119). Neither of the Fields experiences the hollowness at the heart of grief that threatens *In Memoriam*'s speaker with the loss of meaning. Instead both writers claim to be filled with the presence of the beloved dead, yet this introjection of the lost love object is not melancholic. In *Underneath the Bough*, the Fields convert the melancholic position into one of aesthetic productivity, only to discover that such production carries its own risks, potentially making their poetry into a morbid replication of experience rather than an aesthetic transformation of it.

For Bradley, her sister's death strengthens her faith in a future life rather than disturbing it, and furthermore makes the present life more valuable. In "Bring me life of fickle breath,"

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<sup>22</sup> At the foot of the poem, Bradley appends a note, "Written in bed, in the dark of Tuesday, Feb. 11<sup>th</sup>, 1890." The domestic quality of the poem as well as its assertion of a continued relationship with the dead place this poem firmly in the tradition of feminine elegy. I consider this poem as part of a sequence that appears in the journal in the two weeks following the anniversary of Lissie's birth.

<sup>23</sup> The Fields also adopted and revised funerary strategies we have seen before. Learning from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's mistake, they buried their poetry and plays with Lissie's body, but not in manuscript. Instead Bradley and Cooper used the printed copies given to Amy, Cooper's younger sister (W&D II, f.102r).

Bradley suggests that death transforms the living as well as the dead. Written in Bradley's hand, the poem appears in draft form in the journal entry dated February 1, 1890, Lissie's birthday; the Fields include it in "The Second Book of Songs" in *Underneath the Bough*:

Bring me life of fickle breath,  
Bring me death;  
Summon every hope's alloy;  
Gather round me what doth most  
Love to boast  
That it can our bliss deflower!  
There is now no mortal power  
That can feed upon my joy;  
Every terror is o'erthrown:  
I have found the magic stone,  
For a dead heart is my own. (33)<sup>24</sup>

In this first stanza, Bradley suggests that death leads to a transformation in the survivors that mimics the transformation of flesh into stone that Cooper's journal entry depicted. The "magic stone" transforms the living heart of the survivor into a dead heart, and the rhyme "stone/own" implies that the speaker's heart is a stone as well. The alchemy of death makes the survivor as impervious as stone to any "mortal power," converting transient and base materials into permanent and valuable forms.

This aesthetic transformation is a financial one as well, as we see in the metaphor Bradley chooses to open the second and final stanza:

Henceforth is it not pure gold  
To grow old?  
Let the hours of parting fleet!  
While to think of what befell  
Is to dwell  
At the mouth o' the honeycomb  
Where the soul-bee hath its home,  
Where the soul-bee hives its sweet.  
And the heaven to come at last!  
Bravely may I now forecast

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<sup>24</sup> References to poems in *Underneath the Bough* and *Sight and Song* are given by page number, following the practice of critics such as Ana Parejo Vadillo and Marion Thain.

Since I hold the loved one fast. (33-4)

Secure in the future reunion with the beloved dead, the speaker imagines the passage of time as the accrual of value instead of decreasing one's time left to live. Life becomes "pure gold" through the awareness of death. Although the Fields were ardent Paterians, it would be a mistake to read this in light of Pater's famous warning in the "Conclusion" of *The Renaissance*: "Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the very brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening" (152). Bradley's imagery of the bee, laying up capital in the form of sweet honey, contradicts the evanescence of all sensation on which Pater bases his command to "burn always with this hard, gem-like flame" (152). The bee converts sensation into "gold" stored for later, and contemplating death—"think[ing] of what befell"—is the anticipation of enjoying the stored sweetness of experience.<sup>25</sup> Death enforces the deferred gratification that makes capital accumulation possible, and thus enables productive investment; poetry becomes capital gain.<sup>26</sup>

Bradley's poem also responds to the first lyric of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, in which the speaker asks

But who shall so forecast the years  
And find loss a gain to match?  
Or reach a hand thro' time to catch

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<sup>25</sup> For a compelling reading of apian imagery in the Fields' work, see Thain's chapter on the Fields' *Wild Honey from Various Thyme*, in *Michael Field: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Fin de Siècle*.

<sup>26</sup> *Our Mutual Friend* offers an amusing example of how bees are associated with useful labor and self-denial. When Wrayburn complains that he does not like his job, Boffin tells him "there's nothing like hard work. Look at the bees" (138). Wrayburn responds, "I object to being required to model my proceedings according to the proceedings of the bee" (138). He goes on to criticize the work ethic associated with bees: "they work; but don't you think they overdo it? They work so much more than they need – they make so much more than they can eat – they are so incessantly boring and buzzing at their one idea till Death comes upon them – that don't you think they overdo it? And are human labourers to have no holidays, because of the bees? ...I protest against the tyrannical humbug of your friend the bee" (139).

The far-off interest of tears? (1:5-8)<sup>27</sup>

The declaration “Bravely may I now forecast / Since I hold the loved one fast” answers the question posed by Tennyson’s speaker, claiming the power to “forecast” the future and to “hold the loved one fast” in a grasp that reaches “thro’ time” and death. The final two lines of the draft version of the poem read, “Bravely may ~~one~~^I^ now forecast / ~~When one~~^Since I^ holds the loved one fast” W&D III, 13r). Bradley’s revision from the impersonal “one” to “I” makes her speaker’s claim more personal and direct and completely alters the meaning of her claim.

“When” implies that one can “forecast” only while holding the “loved one fast.” By substituting “Since,” Bradley asserts that she will always look to the future “Bravely” *because* she has held her beloved within herself. What Tennyson’s speaker envisages as the “far-off interest of tears,” Bradley’s speaker converts into golden honey, changing salt into sweet, the spontaneous overflow of emotion into the carefully hoarded product of communal labor—another alchemical transformation enabled by her possession of the “magic stone” that both is and creates a “dead heart.” Through this poem, Bradley associates death with transformation and productivity.

In another poem from *Underneath the Bough*, the draft version of which appears in Cooper’s hand in *Works and Days*, the Fields’ imagery continues to draw on the language of value and wealth, while also suggesting how death gives the artist greater creative freedom.

Cooper writes:

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<sup>27</sup> Thain also notes in *Underneath the Bough* the “resonances with the arch-elegy of the period, Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*” (110). She argues that the Fields revise Tennyson’s use of elegy, which “encodes the absence of its dead object by itself formally displacing and replacing the lost person”; instead, in the poems Thain discusses (“Already to mine eyelids’ shore” and the much later “I am thy charge, thy care!”), “elegy *turns into*, and is supplanted by the love lyric” (111). Through this strategy, the Fields evade some of the problems of female authorship in a tradition in which the feminine is the silent and absent object of lyric address (102), and in the process create a lyric based, not on absence, but on presence: “What appears to be a limbo of never meeting and never parting is actually the inscription of a new lyric subjecthood, based not on apostrophe but on the presence of the other. . . . Bradley and Cooper are not confined within the position of the poetess, who is constantly displaced, because they write not form of a mythology of loss, but from a construction of eternal presence” (113). I would add to this that the precondition for “eternal presence” is some form of absence.

Death, for all thy grasping stealth,  
    Thou dost convey  
Lands to us of broadest wealth,  
    That stretch away  
Where the sunshine hath no foil,  
Past the verge of our dark soil,  
Past the rim where clouds uncoil.

Mourners, whom thine avarice dooms,  
    Once given a space  
In thy kingdom past the tombs,  
    With open face  
See the smallness of our skies,  
Large, until a mortal dies  
And shrinks them to created size.

O the freedom, that doth spread,  
    When life is shown  
The great countries that the dead  
    Have open thrown;  
Where, at our best leisure, we  
With a spirit may walk free  
From terrestrial poverty. (35)

Although “Death” appears as a wealthy miser in this poem, it nonetheless enables the Fields to see beyond the horizon of the material world by “shrink[ing]” it to “created size.” The anti-materialist rhetoric of the central stanza, in which death is condemned for “avarice,” is bracketed by the financial and legal associations that litter the first and third stanzas in terms like “convey,” “wealth,” and “poverty.” The language of financial value is most powerfully present in the claim that death “convey[s]” landed property—still the most prestigious, if not actually the “broadest,” form of “wealth.” The first stanza suggests that the poets inherit land, but the final stanza suggests that they are merely visitors—tourists, perhaps—“shown” round the “great countries that the dead / Have open thrown,” much as the middle classes of Britain visited the great houses the landed classes threw open for public enjoyment. Thus in Cooper’s poem the sense of death leading to a proprietary and inherited form of aesthetic freedom jostles uneasily with a sense of

artistic endeavor as a temporary and allowable trespass in realms beyond the “created size” of the material world. This conflict within the poem suggests a potential conflict between Bradley’s productive and transformative view of death and Cooper’s growing unease with the role of death in the Fields’ poetry.

The potential conflict between the two halves of Michael Field becomes more evident in their differing accounts of their visits to the Paris Morgue. During the years when Bradley and Cooper were drafting the poems for *Sight and Song* and *Underneath the Bough*, they traveled extensively in Europe, visiting art galleries in Germany, France, and Italy. Whenever they were in Paris, they took the opportunity, like so many tourists before them, to visit the Paris Morgue. In 1890, they arrived in Paris on June 5<sup>th</sup> and departed on June 16<sup>th</sup>; in less than two weeks, they visit the Morgue at least three times.

Although Cooper later writes that the corpses at the Morgue are as memorable as the days surrounding her mother’s death, she almost didn’t see them at all. The entries on Paris in the main body of the volume for 1890 obscure the number of times that Bradley and Cooper visited the Morgue, how difficult it was for Cooper to enter the Morgue the first time, and Cooper’s first reaction to the spectacle of anonymous dead bodies. Bradley records that they arrive in Paris on June 5<sup>th</sup>, and the following entry, still in her hand, is headed “Sunday, June 8<sup>th</sup>. the Morgue”; it reads as follows:

To the Morgue this morning quite early in the glowing sunshine. It has been our worship; that temple of death to us the temple of the living God. Liberté, égalité, fraternité—true there—realised—the gray, marred faces within laid brother like - freed from the mesh of life, & equal at last in their destiny - bound all those voyageurs for God. I saw first an old man lying very calm – the whites of his eyes giving the appearance of spectacles, so that he looked like time lying dead in glasses – then a deeply bronzed face, full one would say of sin & experience, finally a rather kindly, commonplace fellow, gentle enough in his fixity. It is Michael’s church that little Morgue & he found it quite impossible to remain afterwards in Notre Dame, amid the mumbling & the lights. God has provided for worship in the facts of life. If we will but look deep into birth & death –

unflinchingly – accepting all the physical repulsion, & read on through the letter to the indwelling mystery, we shall know how to conduct ourselves[...] (W&D III, f.44v)

Bradley's reading of the corpses on display focuses on their futures—both the bodily corruption and the resulting “physical repulsion,” and the spiritual destination of the “voyageurs [bound] for God.” She finds a consoling equality in this focus, which elides any differences of social class or personal fortune and creates the illusion that the realization of the French Revolution's aims is as inevitable as death itself. Bradley neglects to note that achieving liberty, equality, and fraternity in death does not change the living conditions individuals must suffer to reach this vision of death as utopian reform. Nonetheless, her impulse to contrast the Morgue with the Cathedral of Notre Dame reveals an awareness that religion and the display of the corpse fulfill similar functions in offering a future that redresses the imbalances of the present. Just as Bradley's account elides possible differences among the dead and, by implication, the living, it also conceals the difference between her reaction to the Morgue and that of her lover and literary partner. Bradley does not mention Cooper at all in her entry, not even to note that she (Cooper) refused to enter the Morgue.

In fact, Cooper's responses to the Morgue (other than an entry after the anniversary of her mother's death) do not even appear in the main body of the journal text for that year. As I mentioned earlier, each volume of the journal ends with Cooper and Bradley's individual year-end assessments. In the 1890 volume, Cooper's appears on f.127r; she finds that “Flaubert has been the master-influence on” her. Bradley's is a few pages later, on f.129v; she declares, “Lately our verse is becoming a living thing – & of us – with our very impress upon it.”<sup>28</sup> Then, after midnight, Bradley writes, “It is 1891 now” and transcribes the quote from the Bible they

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<sup>28</sup> Note how contradictory Bradley's statement is; the poetry is a “living thing” that is nonetheless has their “very impress” stamped upon it, like a piece of nice Wedgwood.

have chosen to as the epigraph of the next year's volume. This is the general format of the year-end entries.

Unlike the other volumes, however, this one continues after sixteen blank and unnumbered leaves with a list in Cooper's hand of the books "Consulted at the British Museum," then after four more blank leaves a list of books read during the year (f.131v-133r). On the following leaf, there is a journal of the two weeks in Paris written in Cooper's hand. It appears that Cooper kept notes in the back of the volume, which she later amplified and revised into entries in the body of the journal proper.<sup>29</sup> These notes reveal that the Fields went to the Morgue no less than three times, and that Cooper refused to enter until their final visit on June 16<sup>th</sup>, their last day in Paris.

I will return to Cooper's accounts of the Morgue in the following section. Here, I want to call attention to draft versions of two poems that clarify the conflict within the Fields regarding the effects of death on their art. In 1891, on Cooper's birthday, Bradley writes, "This day brought word of Mrs. Fanshawe's death. [...] The first of my very own friends who has left me" (W&D III, f.3r). In response to this news, she writes a poem entitled "Praise of Thanatos," a rather trite plea for death to come before old age and "Take us at our best estate" (f.4r).<sup>30</sup> The

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<sup>29</sup> I think it likely that both women kept a separate journal as well as the shared one. The use of the back of this journal for Cooper's rather sketchy notes perhaps indicates that she traveled without it. The following year, the Fields traveled Europe again, and Cooper came down with scarlet fever while they were in Dresden. Nonetheless, most of the entries covering that period are in her hand, even though she was clearly too ill to write for much of the time. Cooper then revised these entries further, replacing the past tense with the present in an attempt to make the account seem more immediate. Furthermore, large sections of the journal consist of Cooper transcribing what Bradley has written—one must assume in a separate journal. The layering of voices becomes even more complex when Cooper transcribes Bradley's writing, in which Bradley takes dictation from Cooper (see W&D IV, f.113r). (To add to the recursive and multilayered effect of the journal, I noted that Cooper comes down with her dangerous illness close to the second anniversary of her mother's death. If she can't decorate the parlor with the flowers that bloomed for Lissie's death, she will wear the flushing flowers of fever on her cheeks.) Given the Fields' habit of preserving their work, the separate journals of Cooper and Bradley may well exist unnoticed in some archive. A search through the extant manuscript materials at the Bodleian revealed that indeed, both women kept separate travel journals.

<sup>30</sup> This poem appears in *Underneath the Bough* as the final poem in "The Second Book of Songs" (59-60).

final stanza shows how Bradley imagines the joyous afterlife of those who live fast and die young:

Come, and take us to the ^thy^ train  
Of dead maidens on the plain  
Where white lilies have no stain,  
Take us to the youths that thou  
Lovest to choose, of fervid brow,  
Unto whom thy dreaded name  
Hath been simply known as fame;-  
With these unpolluted things  
Be our endless revellings! (f.4r)

Bradley imagines an Elysian Fields populated by aesthetic celebrities—the “youths” of “fervid brow” that death makes famous. Her choice of words evokes both the languid youths typical of Edward Burne-Jones’ paintings and fervid Romantic figures like Chatterton, Keats, or Shelley. Bradley’s evocation, however, ignores the sexualized and pathological discourse surrounding the droopy youths of Burne-Jones’ work and the erotic charge the Romantic poets conveyed in their work or lives.<sup>31</sup> Instead, she dwells on “endless revellings” with “unpolluted things,” as if rejoicing in the freedom from the materiality and temporality of the body. However, below and to the left of the last line of the poem appears an alternative to the final two words of the poem: “unsexed revellings” (f.4r). Death erases the difference of sex, rendering the “endless revellings” sterile. As multiple passages in *Works and Days* demonstrate, the Fields imagine their poetic union in terms that recall sexual reproduction.<sup>32</sup> At one point, Bradley refers to their

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<sup>31</sup> For a summary and analysis of the virulent critical response to the morbid figures of Burne-Jones’ paintings, see chapter 4 of J.B. Bullen’s *The Pre-Raphaelite Body*.

<sup>32</sup> In “‘What Time We Kiss’: Michael Field’s Queer Temporalities,” Kate Thomas argues that the Fields “make the claim to creative immortality across the repudiated procreative body” (332). I submit that they do not “repudiate” the “procreative body,” but transcend it in their poetic and erotic union. Thomas also argues that the Fields did not care about fame in their own time. She claims that, for the Fields, being out of time is a guarantee of futurity, because being of one’s time condemns one to die with the passage of time: “Being of the time, expecting appreciation (of property or reputation) to be born in time, and thus subjecting oneself to the limitations of timeliness and its own expiration is deathly” (333). While Thomas’s readings of the Fields’ work, both poetry and

“new-born book” is the offspring of “our best brain-blood mixed with fire from on high” (W&D V, f.33v).<sup>33</sup> Cooper emphasizes the importance of the embodied difference between the two women, a difference analogous to sexual difference, when she writes that Bradley’s creativity springs from “blood-power” while her own (Cooper’s) “power is the nerves” (W&D V, 88v). The erasure of embodied difference caused by death thus endangers the Fields’ poetic production.

Ten days after Bradley’s poem appears in *Works and Days*, Cooper inserts a poem that seems to challenge the positive perspective of death she previously shared. The heading of the poem, “Grave Mould,” is in Bradley’s hand (in pencil), though the body of the poem is in Cooper’s. Here I give the third and fourth stanzas, plus Bradley’s revision of the ending:

Youth – ah, youth, it is a field  
We would never, never yield  
To intrusion of the grave;  
'Tis an acre we would save: -  
Till ^Yet^ one day a mound we see  
Breaking its stability,  
And the knowledge that is strange  
Has begun to spoil and change  
Sweetness that ~~was~~ is never bred  
By remembrance of the dead,  
But by nature had been sown,  
As are greeny banks unmown.

One by one the tombs are pressed  
In the boundaries of our breast;  
Every year the native charm

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prose, is brilliant, as is her larger claim that “it is time to pay attention to that queer sense of being out of sync” the Fields exhibit, she does not take account of the Fields’ absorbing desire for fame in their own time or their used of embodied and procreative metaphors in describing their work (330). Nonetheless, my argument about the Fields’ conversion of morbid temporality into aesthetic futurity is clearly in dialogue with Thomas’s claim that the Fields stake a claim to a queer futurity through “their embrace of a specifically broken, interrupted teleology” (331). Both Thomas and I see possibilities for futurity that elude the fantasy of futurity that Edelman rejects in *No Future*.

<sup>33</sup> Nor were the Fields alone in comparing their books to children. Their early biographer, Mary Sturgeon, used the same metaphor, declaring that the Fields’ correspondence with their publishers reveals a “concern for the physical beauty of their books. They desired their children to be lovely in body as well as in spirit” (qtd. Lysack 940).

Of our being suffers harm;  
What it had not held before  
It must cherish more and more,  
Till we scarcely breathe a breath  
That is ignorant of death,  
\*And our flowers as we grow old  
Saddened live on burial mould:  
Thus we learn that we shall be  
Field no more but cemetery.

Midnight - Jan 31

[KB:]

\*For our flowers as we grow old  
Saddened live on burial mould;  
And the earth in us is made  
Fruitful by the sexton's spade. (W&D IV, f.11v-12r)

In the third stanza, Cooper most directly challenges Bradley's plea for death in youth and specifically links youth to their artistic persona: "ah, youth, it is a field / We would never, never yield / To the intrusion of the grave." Cooper also responds to Bradley's imagery of sweetness and "hived" honey here, declaring that the awareness of death, "the knowledge that is strange," destroys "sweetness" rather than storing it. In the fourth stanza, the equation of the "sunny slope" and "field" with the poetic persona the two women share becomes more explicit and embodies, as the "tombs are pressed / In the boundaries of our breast." The trace of two poets remains in the plural possessive "our," but the singular "breast" maintains the fiction of a single lyric voice. The speaker here acknowledges the centrality of death to the plural poetic persona, as "our being" must "cherish [it] more and more." In his elegy for Arthur, Tennyson's speaker takes comfort in comparing his poetry to flowers whose roots feed on the dead; he writes that he will "plant" his "poor flower of poesy" on the grave of his lost love (8:22, 19). Although the speaker of "Grave-mould" recognizes this poetic mode of production in which "flowers" do "live on burial mould," she warns that nourishing their art on death threatens the poetic union

symbolized by the name Michael Field; if they continue, they will become “Field no more, but cemetery.” Because death is the mainspring of their art, these two women writers have become a graveyard, a model of authorship Cooper already rejected when she refused to watch her mother’s deathbed.

In the published version of the poem, the Fields replace Cooper’s final four lines with Bradley’s revision. This return to the regenerative aesthetic potential of death covers up the conflict that the journal makes evident. The metaphors of embodiment that Cooper uses in her poem as well as in the journal suggest that her problem with the regenerative poetic model has something to do with the effects death has on the bodies of the survivors. While Bradley rejoices in the possession of a “magic stone” that is also a “dead heart,” Cooper’s conception of what happens to the senses of those who mourn their beloved dead is very different. In a poem composed after Cooper and Bradley attended Robert Browning’s funeral, and largely drawn from Cooper’s description of the funeral in the first pages of the 1890 volume of *Works and Days*, Cooper declares that it is “Live senses that death dooms” (W&D III, f.7r).<sup>34</sup> Describing her reaction to the words of the burial service, Cooper writes, “I had never heard ‘Earth to Earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust’ said over a human body: the voice that so said dropped like sharp gravel, syllable by syllable, on my love—the suffering was torture” (f.1r). The words that remind her of the physical transformation lying in wait for the dead body bury her love, just as the coffin and its contents will be buried under the “sharp gravel” of the churchyard. Just as Tennyson occupies the place of the dead in the “Fair ship” lyrics of *In Memoriam*, Cooper imaginatively projects herself into the space of the dead, feeling the words of the burial service

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<sup>34</sup> This journal entry and the resulting poem are written *before* the trip to Paris. I submit that they prefigure the crisis that Cooper experiences when she finally *sees* the displayed corpses at the Morgue. At this point her engagement with the corpse is imaginative, and traumatic nonetheless.

as if she were being buried herself. As the entry continues, Cooper elaborates on this strange transposition, suggesting that the senses of the survivors decay just as the flesh of the corpse does. She wraps up her description with an odd apostrophe, in which she seems to be addressing herself: “O poor lips of those who stay behind; eyes that can behold no more with a frank outward vision—the senses shattered as organs of love” (1v). This use of apostrophe indicates Cooper’s alienation from her own senses, as if they are no longer her own. For herself and Bradley, the power of sensual apprehension is “shattered,” and this fracture also endangers love itself because the senses are, for the Fields, the medium of erotic and aesthetic exchange. In Cooper’s journal entry, we see how she reverses a Freudian model of melancholic attachment to the dead and critiques the feminine elegiac model; instead of introjecting or incorporating the lost love object, she takes his place. As a model of poetic authority, ventriloquizing the dead fails; it leads to a physical decay of the senses that mirrors the inevitable decay of the corpse.<sup>35</sup>

In the poem that Cooper draws from this narrative, she emphasizes how this model of authorship impoverishes the senses of the surviving poet and thus inhibits the poets’ access to the raw material of poetry—sensation—and to the medium of the erotic exchange that incarnates the Fields’ poetic partnership. She writes:

Ashes on ashes grind:  
O poor lips left behind!

Mortality turns round  
On Mortals in that sound:  
Ears are for the knell  
Of a lonely bell;  
Touch—for clods of Earth,  
Sight, for torture and dearth. (7r)

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<sup>35</sup> Ventriloquizing a dead poet is also the model for the Fields’ 1889 volume, *Long Ago*, in which they give voice to the long-dead Sappho. I submit that this model works well for them so long as their beloved dead are as temporally and personally removed from them as Sappho. It becomes more problematic when those closer to them die.

In this excerpt, four out of the five senses are affected: taste (the ashes that grind so near the “poor lips left behind” call to mind an image of consuming ash, gritty on the palate), hearing, touch, and vision. Each sense becomes dedicated to reproducing the sensory effects that the corpse would feel. The “live senses” of those who mourn are “doomed” to feel for the corpse, so that reversing the melancholic introjection of the love object dooms the erotic and literary partnership just as much as the incorporation of the dead does in “Grave-mould.” Whether drawing on tropes of masculine or feminine elegy, the poetic voice has been usurped by the dead, and Michael Field becomes “Field no more, but cemetery.”

### **Elegy and ekphrasis at the Paris Morgue**

Paradoxically, while the trip to the Morgue triggers the crisis that threatens to make Michael Field into a cemetery, the encounter with the corpses on display also leads Bradley and Cooper to a way out of the double bind of morbid authorship. In Cooper’s journal entries on the sights to be seen at the Morgue, we see her practicing the aesthetic perception the Fields later use in *Sight and Song*. In *Sight and Song*’s poems on Old Master paintings, the Fields turn elegy into ekphrasis and transform the act of staring at corpses in the Morgue to the aesthetic contemplation of paintings incarnated in poetry.

Ekphrasis and elegy are inherently similar poetic forms; both inscribe the poet’s authority over the absence of the beloved object. In ekphrasis, the Fields find an answer for their dilemma. They do not want to be the cemetery, bringing fruit out of dead matter, so instead of elegizing, they create ekphrastic representations of bodies that are incarnated in paintings. They will not be like the dead yew holding onto the hollow forms of their dead, as in section 2 of *In Memoriam*. Nor will they look to a future incarnation, as the speaker does at the end of Tennyson’s poem;

instead they make the past the form they elegize, fertilizing the present with the past, not with the dead. Instead of words as weeds that wrap around the hollowness of grief, the Fields insist that their poetic forms are incarnations, the bodying forth of form rather than the hollow forms we encountered in Tennyson's elegy for Arthur.

During their 1890 trip to Paris, the Fields were working on drafts of ekphrastic poems based on Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" and "Spring," and Watteau's "*L'Embarquement pour Cythère*," all of which feature Venus as the most important figure in the poem. After their return to England, Cooper writes in her entry for August 21<sup>st</sup> (two days after the anniversary of her mother's death), "As of all the objects I saw on my journey I retain with most singular sharpness the faces at the Morgue – so of all the days I have lived I remember these days last year with the most indelible & sensitive exactitude. I remember then as a transformation of agony – the shapes of that agony I recognise & again feel within me that change that wrought them into unimagined forms of gladness" (W&D III, f.106r). While this entry links the corpses at the Morgue to the Beloved Mother-One's death, in another one of Cooper's entries she metaphorically converts the corpses into artworks. After a visit to the British Museum to see some mummies, Cooper is horrified by their permanence. She writes, "The portraits of the Morgue are less shocking – they are printed from transient models: these from incorruptible (or perhaps I should say long-suffering) clay" (W&D IV, f.32r). The corpses are both "portraits" and the "transient models" for those portraits. The conjunction of the Morgue, paintings, the figure of Venus, and the death of the mother suggests that the ekphrastic project was from the beginning bound up with death, corpses, and desire—both aesthetic and erotic.

In the preface to *Sight and Song*, the Fields declare that the "aim" of their ekphrastic project is to "translate into verse what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in

themselves; to express not so much what these pictures are to the poet, but rather what poetry they objectively incarnate” (v). By claiming that paintings “objectively incarnate” poems, the Fields make the paintings into bodies. The “chosen pictures” the Fields “express” are bodies from the past, separated from the poets by more than a century as well as by the difference of medium. Nonetheless, these bodies are not dead bodies, but aesthetic bodies. They are at one and the same time representations of bodies that have long since crumbled into dust, and representations of mythic figures that transcend the bodies used to represent them. To clarify, in Botticelli’s paintings of Venus, for example, the woman at the center of the painting is a representation of the historical person whom Botticelli used as a model at the same time that she is a representation of the goddess Venus. The model’s body is the vehicle for the tenor, Venus. We have seen this distinction between vehicle and tenor before in Tennyson’s elegy for Arthur and in Cooper’s cry liberating her mother’s spirit from the “hindering flesh,” leaving the dead body an empty form, a “vehicle emptied of its tenor” (Tucker 380). In *Sight and Song*, the Fields reverse this dynamic and reinfuse the forms of the past with new meaning through the mode of perception they enact in their ekphrastic poems.

The Fields explain this mode of perception as the “method of art-study from which” the poems of *Sight and Song* “arose” (Preface v). The Fields’ method demands “the effort to see things from their own centre, by suppressing the habitual centralisation of the visible in ourselves” in order to “eliminate our idiosyncrasies and obtain an impression clearer, less passive, more intimate”; then “the inevitable force of individuality must still have play and a temperament mould the purified impression” (vi). Ana I. Parejo Vadillo describes this as a “two-phased aesthetic...in which objective enjoyment is followed by subjective *jouissance*” (24). This “two-phased aesthetic... allow[s] the autonomy of both the art object and of its gazer” (25).

In gazing at the corpses in the Morgue, Cooper employs the same “method of art-study” that acknowledges that autonomy of the object of the gaze. We can see her developing this method in her entry about her first trip to the Morgue, in which she reads the bodies as if they were texts:

The Morgue. I went in & was neither shocked nor haunted: one little worn body is beautiful to remember--a little workwoman lying so gratefully in her ultimate sleep. It was a monument(?) of work—that was the record & table of contents. One poor fellow, lusty, cut off in the blossom of his sins, lay under his hat as if he slumbered - his stick on the broad chest. The other man’s was a futile corse with no history upon it – save weakness & poverty – yet the eyes were open. (f.135v)

Unlike Bradley, Cooper focuses on the past inscribed on the anonymous corpses, a past that includes work and class, sin and pleasure. Although Cooper is, as Dickens puts it, “*looking at something that cannot return the look,*” she notes that the “futile corse with no history upon it” appears to look back at her: its “eyes were open” (DJ4 223). Cooper represents these corpses as more than just objects; these corpses have a history, can tell their own story, and return the look.

The “two-phased” aesthetic Vadillo identifies in the Fields’ ekphrastic poems is also evident in Cooper’s attention to the corpses in the Morgue, the narratives she reads in their silent figures, as we can see in the following entry about her visit to the Morgue two years later:

I have a wish to see the people of the Morgue, but I no longer feel that strain at my heart that nearly killed me in this place 2 years ago[....] Now I ~~was~~ am simply anxious to increase experience. My love comes & with her I go to the mortal den in which death is confined. One’s whole Nature seeks ~~illeg~~ ^to escape^ in what, if one were alone, would be a cry of surprise. Then all goes quiet in one, & the dead figures become as objective as wax-work. (W&D V, f.122v)

Cooper at first emphasizes her own objectivity in her desire to see the corpses. She then goes on to give a meticulously detailed description of the corpses, noting one’s “bent head, folded-in lips, & clenched hand,” another’s “unwrinkled alabaster features,” and the “fierce, pitiful brows & a mouth that has become triangular” of the third (ff.122v-123r). After anatomizing the “objective

...wax-work” corpses, Cooper suggests that stopping there is deadly to the viewer: “Yes, death is the smallest thing in the universe – ~~the thing in itself~~ with no beyond, no emanation! ^Thank goodness it breaks up!^ And in so far as we live shut up in bonds, without self-expression, mobility, freedom – we are ~~living~~ ^but^ corpses & ^are becoming every day more^ like these little models on their backs beyond the bars of the Morgue” (f.123r). From being “wax-work,” the corpses have become “models,” and in this transition we see Cooper beginning to apply the “two-phased aesthetic.” In this case, such an aesthetic involves recreating a past and a subjectivity in the dead bodies she sees: “The only poor escape from the fixedness of a corpse is through the psychology that traces a past in the forms” (f.123r). We could read the sentence as indicating that the subjectivity, the “psychology,” of the viewer imagines a narrative for the corpse, “trac[ing] a past in the forms” of the dead. This act of imaginative creation allows the viewing subject the “self-expression, mobility, freedom” that enables her to “escape from the fixedness of a corpse.” Alternatively, the viewed object can “escape the fixedness of a corpse” through the impress, or “trace,” of its “psychology” on the features Cooper has so painstakingly detailed. Thus, the fruitful ambiguity of this sentence allows the autonomy of the viewing subject and the viewed object to constitute each other through the imagined narratives of the corpse, destabilizing the subject-object relation in which one “*looks at something that cannot return the look.*”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> A number of other critics have analyzed how this destabilization of the gendered subject-object hierarchy in the operations of the gaze is essential to the Fields’ project in *Sight and Song*. See Vadillo’s “*Sight and Song: Transparent Translations and a Manifesto for the Observer*” (2000), in which Vadillo argues that in *Sight and Song* Michael Field “re-presents” and thus alters the “economy of the gaze. The achievement of this collection is not only that the subject, the observer, is given sexual agency, but that the object is given agency too” (32). In “Aesthetic Consumption and the Cultural Production of Michael Field’s *Sight and Song*” (2005), Krista Lysack focuses on the consumption as well as the production of images as text; she writes that “Michael Field evades and elides the power relations of a subject-object encounter, in which a collectible woman is gazed upon by a man” and “suggest[s] the transforming possibilities of an intersubjective model of nonobjectifying consumption” (946, 956). Hilary Fraser also concentrates on how the Fields alter the dynamics of the gaze in ““A Visual Field: Michael Field and the Gaze” (2006); she argues that the Fields’ “articulation of a dynamic stereoscopic gaze intersected by homoerotic desire, a

## Reading Venus in *Sight and Song*

In the Venus poems of *Sight and Song*, the Fields duplicate the representational procedure Cooper uses with the corpses at the Morgue. First they describe the paintings in meticulous detail, and then they imagine possible retrospective or prospective narratives for Venus, the central figure of the paintings. The narratives the Fields create about Venus are a means of converting the morbid practice of looking at corpses in the Morgue to an aesthetic principle that transcends morbidity (though retaining traces of the concern with death). Finally, in their poem on Giorgione's "Sleeping Venus," the Fields convert the spectacular corpse into a form that recasts morbid temporality as a projection forward into an aesthetic futurity.

In *Sight and Song*, Venus appears in eight poems; in this chapter I will focus on "Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*," "Botticelli's *Spring*," and "Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*."<sup>37</sup> These Venus poems are aesthetic transformations of the act of viewing corpses at the Morgue. The first Venus poem is "Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*," and the poem is a displaced representation of a scene at the Morgue. The poem begins by showing Venus being borne into the world on metaphor. After a description of the natural world that surrounds her birth, the Fields metaphorically transform nature into a man-made object: "Frills of brimming wavelets lap / Round a shell that is a boat" (13). The scallop shell that Venus stands upon becomes a poetic

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gaze of gays, a way of looking at art – collaboratively, and under a single assumed male name that they share ... enables a decentering of the observing subject and a radical destabilization of the gender binary" (554).

<sup>37</sup> The other Venus poems are "Coreggio's *Venus, Mercury, and Cupid*," "Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*," "A *Fête Champêtre*, by Watteau," "*The Venus* in Botticelli's *Spring*," and "Watteau's *L'Embarquement Pour Cythère*." While critics disagree as to which of the Venus poems are the most important, they agree that the figure of Venus is central to the collection. In giving the titles of the poems, I follow the "Table of Poems" at the beginning of the volume. The titles above the actual poems do not vary in form as they do in the "Table"; all titles above the poems give the title of the painting, the name of the painter, and the location of the painting. For a discussion of how this layout works to commodify the paintings, removing them from their conditions of production, see Krista Lysack's "Aesthetic Consumption," pp.945-946.

manufacture, in which the shell/Venus entity is an emblem for metaphor: the vehicle/shell bears the tenor/Venus into the world of the poem. Thus the poem restores meaning to empty form by aesthetically reversing the moment in which Cooper pulls her mother's spirit out of the body. The second stanza begins with Venus' "chilled, wan body sweet," which suggests that at the moment of birth the body of desire is already like a cold, pale corpse (13). The stanza continues with a description of the figure at the right of the painting, "Flora" who brings a "ruffled cloak of rose / Daisy-stitched" with which to cover the naked body (13-14). The corpse-like body arrayed in flowers is reminiscent of Bradley and Cooper heaping flowers on Lissie's coffin, and of their multiple yearly rituals of commemorating death and rebirth with floral decorations. The emphasis on the clothes Flora brings to her goddess also partakes of an element of the scene at the Morgue, in which the corpses are displayed with their clothes hanging nearby (Schwartz 53). Furthermore, the third stanza contains the viewers, "Boreas and Zephyrus," who "pass / One in wonder, one desire" as Boreas "blows the shell to land" (14). Like the viewers at the Morgue, the wind gods are united—they become "one in wonder" through their "one desire" focused on the "chilled, wan body sweet" that is the cynosure of all eyes. Finally, in the fourth stanza, the autonomy of the object—Venus—enters the poem, as the poet describes the

Tearful shadow in her eyes  
Of reluctant sympathies,  
On her mouth a pause, a spell,  
Candour far too lone to speak. (15).

Venus embodies subjectivity *in potentia*, unwilling to feel and refusing to speak. Nonetheless, the final line of the poem hints that she will: "She is Love that hath not loved" (15). By declaring that Venus "hath not loved" the speaker gestures toward a potential future moment when "Love" will "love." This potentiality is like the narrative potential Cooper reads in the

corpses at the Morgue, combined with the forward trajectory Bradley sees in them, though it is held in the timeless suspension of the poem and the painting.

In “Botticelli’s *Spring*,” the Fields reveal the danger inherent in the future hinted at in “Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*.” The poem demonstrates that the consummation of erotic desire is potentially deadly, moving from the representation of desire in action to the end of desire in desolation. The first stanza of the poem depicts desire in action, while the rest of the poem shows how desire leads to death. In the first stanza, “[T]he Breeze” pursues “Eôs, wind-inspired and mad,” while “Flora foots it near,” debating, as the last lines of the stanza suggest, whether to “toss her double-roses, or refrain” (22-3). The second stanza shows a state of grace, figured in the dance of the “Graces in their virgin youth,” before the intrusion of desire (24). Despite the fact that Venus is “their Deity,” the poem shows that she cannot protect them from the effects of desire, since “they must fade when Eros speeds his dart” (24).<sup>38</sup> Venus, we discover, is sad because she is no longer able to hold the narrative of desire in suspension. Her son, “Love, / blind and tyrannous above, / Shoots his childish flame to mar / Those without defect” with or without her approval (25). Hermes, in the third and fourth stanzas, is both the “leader of [Venus’] troop” and the “guide of ghosts / To the dead, Plutonian coasts”; by placing Hermes, who ushers souls to the underworld, at the head of Venus’ followers, the Fields map a trajectory of desire that ends in death (25). Unlike “Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*,” which ends with the possibility of unity even as it remains caught in the eternal present of the painting, this poem ends with a projection into the future beyond the moment represented in the painting: “Venus, looking on, / Beholds the mead with all the dancers gone” (26). The subtle metrical isolation of Venus in the first line becomes overt, as the figure of desire outlasts the desiring bodies that

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<sup>38</sup> In Jill Ehnenn’s reading of *Sight and Song* as a critique of Victorian ideologies of gender and the aesthetic, she claims that the Fields “re-readings of Botticelli...acknowledge how heterosexual desire disrupts bonds between women, especially in a heteronormative cultural context” (121).

surrounded her. Although Venus would stop the metonymic movement of the narrative of desire, from the group that “riots by [her] left,” to the Graces on her right, to Hermes as he stands ready to take her subjects to death, the march of desire toward death is as inevitable as the seasons (23). “The tumult and mystery of earth” are beyond Venus’ control (25). The final stanza is cut short, as Venus, alone in her silent singularity, contemplates emptiness. The union at the end of desire dissolves difference and silences the poem.

This union, with its threat of silence, hovers over Bradley and Cooper in their journal. Bradley writes, “Oh that we may be more & more together, closer, growing into one,” yet her demand for union is itself made possible and articulable in writing by the absence of Cooper (136v). Cooper equates her body with her poetic voice: “I will never . . . rend my own flesh and blood—my artistic personality,” implying that, just as the distinction between “flesh and blood” is a condition of her embodiment, a similar distinction is also necessary for her to write. The Fields use “Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*” and “Botticelli’s *Spring*” to lay out the terms of their problem: The singing voice of the poet depends on desire, difference, and deferral, yet the desire that generates the voice also potentially silences it, erasing the subject it constitutes. Furthermore, embodiment places the senses that help generate the poetry under sentence of death. Desire leads to death, but, as we have seen, poetry borne out of death threatens the poetic entity of Michael Field. Under such conditions, how can the Fields sustain their plurality and difference in the face of the silencing and binding power of embodied desire present in their erotic union? Furthermore, how can they represent desire, mediated through the senses and inherent in the body, in such a way as to avoid the objectifying gaze at “*something that cannot return the look*”?

The Fields find an answer in “Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus*,” and it is in this poem that they most powerfully recuperate the senses threatened by decay, convert elegy into ekphrasis, and recover the difference that enables their poetic production to transcend morbid forms of authorship. In the poem, Venus reclines on a landscape composed of curves that echo those of her body, in a place that the Fields present as the world of everyday experience: “Here is Venus by our homes” (98). She lies near the domestic space that is the field for feminine elegy, yet not contained within it. Her body and the earth she lies upon are metaphors for each other; they both have “the curves / The same extensive smoothness” visible in the ebb and flow of the lines on the page (99).<sup>39</sup> In Cooper’s poem about Browning’s funeral, the body is enclosed in earth; in “Grave-Mould,” the Fields’ “breast” contains a cemetery. In contrast, here the earth and the body rest with each other, not one within the other; they are congruent, but not identical. The senses that “death dooms” are reinvigorated in this poem that deploys vision, touch, sound, and even, in the mention of “herbage” and Venus’ “red lips,” the more primal senses of smell and taste.

Although a good deal of critical attention has been lavished on the interplay of word and image in *Sight and Song*, the title of the volume emphasizes the aural quality of the poems, and in this poem the haptic is as present as the optic,<sup>40</sup> most powerfully in the scene of female masturbation in the central stanza of the poem:

Her left arm remains beside  
The plastic body’s lower heaves,  
Controlled by them, as when a river-side  
With its sandy margins weaves  
Deflections in a lenient tide;  
Her hand the thigh’s tense surface leaves,

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<sup>39</sup> Lysack notes that the “sloping margins of the poem . . . suggestively reproduce the curves of Venus’s own body” (952).

<sup>40</sup> I would argue that touch is important in all of the poems, so that the volume as a whole is synaesthetic rather than just a study in word-image relations.

Falling inward. Not even sleep  
Dare invalidate the deep,  
Universal pleasure sex  
Must unto itself annex —  
Even the stillest sleep; at peace,  
More profound with rest's increase,  
She enjoys the good  
Of delicious womanhood. (101-2)

In what Ehnenn calls the “only positive contemporary description of female masturbation,” the Fields depict a moment of perfect peace that is paradoxically also a climactic moment (124). Eyes closed to better “enjoy the good / Of delicious womanhood,” Venus becomes “the perfect desiring and desired subject,” who “is in control of the game of the gaze” (Vadillo 30-1). In her utter self-possession and her utter abandonment, the Fields’ “Sleeping Venus” is the spectacular corpse aesthetically transformed. She unites Thanatos and Eros in her climactic rest; she offers herself to the gaze, enjoys her own desire, and *chooses* not to return the look even as she compels the gaze of the viewer.

The Fields use of tense in the final stanza expands this moment of autoerotic bliss into an eternity that collapses past, present, and future. The first eight stanzas are in the present tense; in the ninth and final stanza, the Fields look back to the past and ahead to the future:

And her resting is so strong  
That while we gaze it seems as though  
She had lain thus the solemn glebes among  
In the ages far ago  
And would continue, till the long,  
Last evening of Earth's summer glow  
    In communion with the sweet  
    Life that ripens at her feet:  
    We can never fear that she  
    From Italian fields will flee,  
    For she does not come from far,  
    She is of the things that are:  
    And she will not pass  
    While the sun strikes on the grass. (104-5)

Here the Fields emphasize the permanence of Venus' body as well as its fleshly rapture. It is "of the things that are," and "she will not pass" away. Venus exists in the eternal moment of the poem, and her power over the gaze of the readers of the poem and viewers of the painting wraps them—us—into the timeless moment "while we gaze." The possible gazers the Fields refer to in line 114 include the Fields themselves, the original painter, all the people who have seen it, the current reader of the poem, and indeed all of its potential readers. While Venus is beyond time and change, the temporal duration of the painting and poem guarantees the multiplication of difference within the readers and viewers the poem creates and references.

The aesthetic spectacle the Fields create in "Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*" takes the various forms of morbidity we have seen before and transforms them. The poem takes the morbid temporality in which the dead past animates the present, and collapses it into the moment of plenitude figured by Venus' erotic enjoyment, a moment that reaches forward and backward in time. The community the Fields' poem constitutes exists in the timeless moment of the poem/painting, and is thus not subject to the entropic fragmentation that is the result of spectacular desire (see chapter 3). Edelman writes that "we're held in thrall by a future continually deferred by time itself, constrained to pursue the dream of a day when today and tomorrow are one" (30). Tennyson's *In Memoriam* exposes the price of this reproductive dream of future meaning in the dead body that underlies the poem's resolution in marriage. In "Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*," Michael Field makes this daydream, based on the promise of meaning in sexual reproduction, irrelevant. Instead, their "*Sleeping Venus*" offers another dream of an aesthetic futurity, embodying in poetry a self-sufficient aesthetic bliss that multiplies and reproduces itself through form instead of sexual difference. Although the Fields' work in both *Sight and Song* and *Works and Days* uses morbid formal structures such as recursivity,

fragmentation, and a resistance to closure, in both texts they reveal the aesthetic potential of such forms. The Fields' attempt to produce a "new art & literature" that "is great enough to bear all truth" is based on a purely formal morbidity that transforms life and death into art, evacuating morbidity of the burden of deathliness and disease. In the aesthetic futurity the Fields lay claim to in "Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*," neither art nor artist is ever morbid, because they make morbidity itself into a hollow form that they fill with their own future as "Poets and lovers evermore."

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