

Virtual Realities: Literary Change and Fantasies of Social-Material Community in
British Poetry and Criticism, 1725-1785

by

John F. Rowland

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Doctoral Committee:

Professor Clement C. Hawes, Co-Chair
Associate Professor Silke-Maria Weineck, Co-Chair
Professor Marjorie Levinson
Professor David L. Porter
Assistant Professor Christina J. Lupton

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INTRODUCTION

Virtual-Real Community

This dissertation tells two stories simultaneously: one about literary change in British poetry and criticism from 1725-85, and one about eighteenth-century writers' intense investment in fantasies of merging with or becoming part of environments. The dissertation proposes that the most essential motive force behind changes in the forms and values of eighteenth-century British poetry and criticism from the 1720-80s was the desire to participate in a 'true' or authentic environment, an environment perceived to be both inscrutably real and inclusive or communal. As the dissertation argues, in the middle two-thirds of the eighteenth century, the poetic realm came to be redefined as the place in which the individual feels, comes into contact with, and *experiences* an environment larger than him- or herself and providing an incomparably complete sense of satisfaction.

The well-known features of poetry and criticism of the period all turn on the desire to have such satisfying interactions with environments. The best known innovative poems of the period show how this desire was both social and directed to the non-human object world, associating socially meaningful experiences with those of a solitary individual surrounded by human-less landscapes. On almost any page of the two most popular eighteenth-century British works of poetry, James Thomson's *The Seasons* and

Ossian's *Fingal*, one finds passages like the following two, dense with both distant personified natural forces and the material beings and objects of a specific location:

sober *Evening* takes
Her wonted Station in the middle Air;
A thousand *Shadows* at her Beck....
A fresher Gale Begins to wave the Wood, and stir the Stream,
Sweeping with shadowy Gust the Fields of Corn;
While the Quail clamours for his running Mate.
Wide o'er the thistly Lawn, as swells the Breeze,
A whitening Shower of vegetable Down
Amusive floats.¹

THE clouds of night came rolling down and rest on Cromla's dark-brown steep. The stars of the north arise over the rolling of the waves of Ullin -they flew their heads of fire through the flying mist of heaven. A distant wind roars in the wood; but silent and dark is the plain of death... Cromla, with its cloudy steeps, answered to his voice. The ghosts of those he sung came in their rusling blasts. They were seen to bend with joy towards the sound of their praise.²

This sort of description, perched between description of local, quotidian nature and invocation of sublime figures, was new to eighteenth-century literature, and it arose extraordinarily quickly to become an aesthetic end-in-itself during the 1720s. Unlike previous versions of pastoral or landscape poetry, these new descriptions draw the reader into the world they describe and present interaction with these worlds as pleasing because real. The notion that a material environment was a living place that called out to and interacted with the viewer (literally in the Ossian example) demonstrated a strikingly new use of nature and environment, one in which the material world was integral to and totally intertwined with the social or human one, and one in which the human's attentions and intentions were fundamentally routed through the external, material world.

As my dissertation argues, various poetic innovations—the nature poetry of Thomsons and Stephen Duck in the late 1720s, the Pindaric ode in the 1740-50s, the pseudo-primitive poems of Ossian, and the localist poems of Cowper and Burns in the

1 Thomson, *Works*, 129.

2 Ossian, *Fingal*. 34.

1780s—offered different ways of dramatizing the pleasures and pains of this new way of thinking and being. Innovative criticism of the period—the literary historicism of Thomas Blackwell and William Warburton and his followers, the discourse based on the genius of Joseph Warton and others, the social reform-minded review magazines during the Seven Years' War—shows how this new sense of being beholden to a social-material environment brought a new sense of purpose and *satisfaction* that other, more directly human or exclusively interpersonal forms of interaction could not.

Critics and poets speaking of the inspiration and gratification that comes from feeling and thinking the social through external material environments constantly refer to the sort of *truth* that the material provides. The first treatise on Ossian's *Fingal*, Hugh Blair's *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763), argued that Ossian's epic conveyed a sense of interaction with the real world that no reader could deny the power of: 'the foundation which those facts and characters (in *Fingal*) had in truth...must be considered as no small advantage to (Ossian's) work. *For truth makes an Impression on the mind far beyond any fiction; and no man, let his imagination be ever so strong, relates any events so feelingly as those...which he has personally known.*'³ In Blair's phrasing, the peculiar feeling of experiencing and being compelled by unknown forces and things brings the highest sort of aesthetic Truth; the imagination, no matter how sublime and heady, is not as powerful as the world of experience, and no pleasure of the imagination could compare with the feeling of the heft and density of the real world. The truest sensations a human could feel thus came from poetic or virtual experience that captured how reality felt and how direct interaction with the material.

3 Blair, 29 (emphasis added).

This type of thought was not limited only to so-called 'primitivist' poetry (and criticism about it) but rather took a wide variety of forms and encompassed a wide range of values. In the 1780s, for instance, John Moir notes that whatever 'the Genius of Poetry...creates or fabricates, is so far excellent only as it bears this resemblance (to) nature and truth, otherwise her fables were monsters without a likeness, were images without an original!'⁴ A few years later, William Cowper's 'The Task' would declare that interaction with the particulars of nature brought an undeniable (and deeply pleasing) sensation of truth:

trees, and rivulets whose rapid course
Defies the check of winter, haunts of deer,
And sheepwalks populous with bleating lambs,
And lanes in which the primrose ere her time
Peeps through the moss that clothes the hawthorn root,
Deceive no student. Wisdom there, and truth,
Not shy, as in the world, and to be won
By slow solicitation, seize at once
The roving thought, and fix it on themselves.

The immediately compelling reality of nature commands 'the roving thought' and leaps right out of the environment to both shake the reader and give it a sense of 'wisdom' and security. As with Blair's *Ossian*, no mere work of imagination could produce this sense of forceful, undeniable truth and, by implication, no human could settle for anything less real and moving than it.

This dissertation demonstrates that this sort of fantasy of fulfilling and truthful experience with the external world lies at the heart of the most important innovations in mid-eighteenth-century British poetry and criticism. Though few critics have written specifically about it, this fantasy gives various works their impetus and value and redefining the role of the aesthetic or virtual in the process.⁵ I refer to this desire as a

4 Moir, *Gleanings*, 34.

5 Most recent critics have failed to deal properly with the material medium of eighteenth-century poetic

fantasy of virtual reality, a phrase which recurs so frequently that it merits some careful unpacking here. I intend each of the three parts of the phrase to be understood in precise and delimited senses, ones carrying connotations specific to the eighteenth-century situation.

To begin with, 'reality' refers to an object—namely the empirical or material natural world—but I mean for it to convey a sense of irreproachable truth or presence that eighteenth-century Britons attributed to nature. Following the brand of empiricism pushed by numerous writers, scientists, and courtiers (most notably Bacon and the members of the Royal Society) during the seventeenth century, eighteenth-century writers increasingly assumed that material nature was God's material Creation, and thus the only true object of human attention ⁶ This British form of empiricism maintained that God had created the material world and intended humanity to study and know Him

desires and the peculiar fantasies of materiality and opacity, but there are some notable exceptions. Bogel's *Literature and Insubstantiality* as well as various works by Jonathan Lamb and Peter de Bolla make frequent reference to materiality and the inter-mixture of ideal and material in eighteenth-century aesthetics, and Marshall Brown's *Preromanticism* makes some gestures towards it. However, Bogel's and Brown's work refuse to treat poetry in social or political terms and favor a strict psychological approach, and Lamb and de Bolla have only made occasional comments and never presented a complete argument about what I'm calling virtual reality. The closest they come is in their respective works on the English garden; see Lamb, 'The Medium of Publicity and the Garden at Stowe' (1996) and de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye* (2003), especially chapter three.

- 6 The argument for embracing empirical nature as one's ultimate object was not new with the eighteenth century. As Christian Thorne observes, the scientific pursuit of reality as a patriotic and humanitarian effort was a cornerstone of the early Enlightenment, encompassing such different thinkers as Bacon, Hobbes, Glanvill, and Cudworth in Great Britain and Mersenne and Descartes in France (Thorne, *Dialectic of counter-Enlightenment*, ch 4). Thorne notes, succinctly, that it's 'hard to find a natural philosopher in the (seventeenth century) whose writing is not demonstrably pious' (195). Dedicating oneself to reality was a 'safe' pursuit that would inevitably produce positive contributions, as opposed to those more enthusiastic and divisive religious pursuits that had caused so much chaos in the first half of the seventeenth century. In Britain, this tenet intensified with the growth of natural religion in the last third of the seventeenth century, as thinkers like Boyle and Thomas Burnet and More, Cudworth, and Whichcote (the Cambridge Platonists) argued that the human's rational understanding of the order of the universe was evidence of both God's existence and of the individual's own autonomous moral essence. Understanding the natural world was thus an imperative of God and the individual soul, and the natural world—not Scholastic doctrine or abstract moral precepts—was the only real and proper object of attention.

through it. The belief was used to bash both Scholastic natural philosophy, which, as myriad Britons noted, projected a priori categories onto the natural world, and a hierarchical and 'slavish' form of government based on arbitrary authority. By the eighteenth century, British writers routinely advertised that their method of interaction with reality, by contrast, attended to the true and real matter of nature, acknowledging that God's Creation was infinitely complex and not immediately transparent to the inquiring human. In Bacon's concise words, 'the human understanding is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolors the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it...we cannot command nature except by obeying her.'⁷ As my first chapter recounts, fantasies of virtual reality sprung directly from this form of empiricism and its valuation of studying real nature. More importantly, successive fantasies of virtual reality continued to underscore that nature was the only true substrate for the human to interact with; anything else produced phantoms of the imagination and was associated with superstition or false passions. Without exception, each fantasy this dissertation details advertises the 'reality' and authenticity of the natural objects it celebrates over and against the 'artificial' objects found in other forms of aesthetics (notably those of French courtly culture). The claim to 'truth' or authenticity of poetry and criticism from the 1720s-80s stems directly from this claim to follow nature directly and truthfully.

The other two words of the phrase modify and qualify the way poets and critics court or pursue this reality. I use the word 'virtual' not in the colloquial sense involving computer-generated worlds or artificial simulations but rather in the early modern sense,

⁷ *Novum Organum*, Aphorism 28, 41.

referring to something whose presence is taken as self-evident but which cannot be fully intuited or felt. The virtual in this sense is always acknowledged to be present but remains somewhat elusive and beyond the grasp of the individual. I use 'virtual' instead of 'aesthetic' to refer to eighteenth-century British literary fantasies because the latter, in discussions of beauty from Plato to Baumgarten, implies something like the opposite of the virtual: a truth that is intuited by the senses but not considered quite real or rational. The virtual is, by contrast, known to be real and is sought after as such. Eighteenth-century poetry and criticism assumes that virtual reality is the *most* real thing, a reality that is out there and that compels human attention. For eighteenth-century writers, virtual reality lies out there, waiting for the subject or the individual, and the individual thus *desires* it and the sense of full presence that it would bring. The logic of a reality that was out there led to many of the key assumptions of poetry and criticism of the period, including the idea that nature was a 'home' for the human and that virtual constructs like history or tradition called out to and interpellated the individual.

I refer to '*fantasies*' of virtual reality for two reasons. First, eighteenth-century writers always carefully kept experiences of virtual reality at a distance: only other people could experience them, whether they be geniuses, figures from ancient civilizations, divinely mad people, etc. They are thus fantasies in the colloquial sense, imagined experiences that the individual has invested psychic or affective energy in but that the individual has, by definition, not actually undergone. My second intention in referring to fantasies is to convey the basic Lacanian idea of the subject as the sum total of its relations to fantasies. I thus do not consider fantasies as false alternatives to realities

or as imaginary compensations for better or more authentic forms of interaction with the real natural world that were perceived to have been lost. In my view, the fantasy of merging with environments or coming into contact with nature became prominent in the eighteenth century because of the status of nature as 'truth,' and, as I explain shortly, the desire for a communal environment was new and encoded in numerous eighteenth-century political, ethical, and aesthetic discourses. 'Reality' in this precise sense is available only through such fantasies, which make reality a kind of perpetually elusive but deeply seductive object of desire.

Virtue and the Social-Material Environment

The new fantasies of virtual reality in the eighteenth century create new objects of desire and consequently new affects or feelings. The desires for reality or a real environments took quite different forms, however. For instance, the boisterous, optimistic embrace of the present world that readers found in Thomson's verse offered a substantially different set of relations to 'reality' or true objects than those odes of Collins which seek out abstract environments found only in the imagination. The specific feeling of interacting with undeniably truthful that fantasies of virtual reality convey—regardless of whether these feelings produced ecstasy, repose, or claustrophobia—was the terminus and reward for many of the most important new poetic genres, styles, and values that arise throughout the century, and I will now offer a brief account of why this fantasy and this new 'real' object-world became so important at the precise moment it did.

At root, the desire to get in touch with a 'true' reality derives from a larger and

older problem with the philosophical ethics of virtue that eighteenth-century Britain inherited from Renaissance Italian sources. The word 'virtual' is cognate with 'virtue,' and virtue as an ethical system required the subject to devote him or herself to a deeply felt but never present or intuited ideal, that of the common good. I will discuss the impact of philosophical virtue on fantasies of virtual reality below but for now will simply note that all fantasies of virtual reality present moments in which a subject feels the sensation of consenting to or succumbing to the truth they know is out there. Since the virtual realm alone could supply this sense of the irreproachable reality and truth of an experience, it became the only place to feel the satisfaction or happiness of commitment that virtue sought.

The framework of virtue means that fantasies of virtual reality always ballast the material environments they describe with social and ethical freight, portraying them as more authentic and worthy than the modern gauds of fashion, formality, and wit, which in turn made them worthy of the subject's passion and devotion (as opposed to what Thomson calls 'that blind Affection' of the 'low World'). At the same time, these environments remain starkly material and incomprehensibly real, larger than the human and resistant to attempts to domesticate or master them. Making such environments the key to social satisfaction often produces strange situations in which materiality literally and directly produces political and ethical *judgments*—as when rocks tell soldiers how to fight (in Ossian) or imaginary gardens bring moral reform to Great Britain (in the criticism of the 1760s)—and more frequently makes aspirations to political and ethical community terminate in awe before landscapes and fantasies of submitting to them. In all

cases, innovative eighteenth-century poets and critics continually interrelate submission to the virtual and the unity of the social.

Before laying out the framework of virtue that gave such fantasies their moral and political impetus, two brief examples, both from writers who were not politically active and whose ethics are difficult to parse, will be useful to illustrate the intermingling of social passion and virtual nature within the eighteenth century poetic. The heart of Thomas Blackwell's *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735), the first major work of British historicism, is its vision of a completely fulfilling personal relationship with the immediate environment. The book attributes this relationship to Homer but also persistently and eloquently presents it as a state of 'perfection' that is universally compelling: 'the Purity and Benignity of the Air, the Varieties of the Fruits and Fields, the Beauty and Number of the Rivers, and the constant Gales from the happy Isles of the western Sea, all conspire to bring its Productions of every kind to the highest Perfection...(and) give *the finest Conceptions of Nature and Truth*.'⁸ Blackwell's book does not celebrate this proper attunement to nature for its own sake, however, and instead uses it to argue that a sort of honest and enthusiastic character is necessary for any successful political community: 'So long as a Nation continues simple and sincere, whatever they say receives a Weight from (this) Truth.'⁹ Only this feeling of and for material Truth, and not any moral commandment or any Stoic sense of duty, could inspire the sufficient 'Weight' necessary for a nation to flourish. The same idea is evident in Joseph Warton's 'The Enthusiast' (1744), one of the eighteenth century's strongest (but

8 Blackwell 7-8

9 Ibid, 55.

also most private) expressions of desire for a natural environment:

Lead me from Gardens deckt with Art's vain Pomps...
(To) the Thrush-haunted Copse, where lightly leaps
The fearful Fawn the rustling Leaves along,
And the brisk Squirrel sports from Bough to Bough...
As to a secret Grot Ægeria stole
With Patriot Numa, and in silent Night
Whisper'd him sacred Laws, he list'ning sat
Rapt with her virtuous Voice, old Tyber leant
Attentive on his Urn, and husht his Waves.¹⁰

While the passage expresses its desires in sensuous and highly aestheticized terms, asking for a kind of lulling and vaguely erotic union with nature, it also couches this desire in unmistakably political terminology and imagery. Informed by a rant against the 'vain Pomps' of French art, the passage implies that a mystical union with nature will produce a sublime political wisdom. Through the example of the Roman law-giver Numa, it argues that the secrets of natural law ('the moral Strains...to mend Mankind') derive directly from a proper attunement between individual and environment.¹¹

The overdetermined nature of these fantasies meant that they could be taken as ethical, political, or purely aesthetic ('delightful'), depending on the situation and reader. For example, early responses to Thomson are uniformly ethical, responding largely to his re-structuring of individual virtue, while later readers refer almost exclusively to his poetic style and technique. The most important responses to Blackwell's work, on the other hand, were staunchly political and nationalistic, despite the *Enquiry's* lack of strong political statements, and odes of Collins and Warton, read as a-politically aestheticist at

¹⁰ Warton, *The Enthusiast; or the Lover of Nature*, 1.

¹¹ The more famous 'Ode on the Poetical Character' of Warton's friend, William Collins, is also based on a fantasy of absorption in the truth of a virtualized environment. As always with Collins, nature is a living and moving realm, and his narrator approaches it from the outside, an acolyte hoping to draw a kind of authentic inspiration from it:

I view that Oak, the fancied Glades among,
By which as Milton lay, His Ev'ning Ear,
From many a Cloud that drop'd ethereal Dew,
Nigh spher'd in Heaven its native Strains could hear.

the time of their publication, were central to certain forms of stridently political criticism of the 1750-60s. These works were always understood in terms of the longing for virtual-true objects, but attempts to read them only added more loops and knuckles to the knot of ethics, politics, and aesthetics that fantasies of virtue produced during the century.

Happiness and the Virtual

Many of the core ideas of eighteenth-century British aesthetics derived from the revival of the discourse of political virtue following the Glorious Revolution, during which political parties and distinct partisan ideologies were formed.¹² This story has been well-documented by critics and historians and I here only want to point out the basic ethics of political virtue that I argued had a shaping role in eighteenth-century poetry and criticism. The most important part of philosophical virtue for poetic writers was the core belief that 'the ego knew and loved itself in its relation to a *patria*, a *res publica*, or common good,' and that 'there was in the human animal something planted there by God, which required fulfillment in the practice of active self-rule (and) devotion to the public good.'¹³ This belief, originally the property of radical republicans and

12 Cf Pocock, Dana Harrington, JCD Clark, and Julie Ellison. Pocock, Israel, and others have observed that the political philosophy of virtue experienced a major revival in the 1680s and was a part of popular or cultural politics throughout the eighteenth century, variously contending with and allying with philosophies of commerce, sensibility, and moral sense. Many of the important forerunners of eighteenth-century poetry and criticism, including Lord Shaftesbury, John Dennis, and a young Joseph Addison, were strong devotees of virtue, which became closely attached to Whiggism in the 1690s, and the characteristic rhetoric of virtue became familiar if contested in the literary world of the early eighteenth century. Shaftesbury's writings are notably governed by the philosophy of virtue. To give one example among many from his work: 'To love the Public, to study universal Good, and to promote the Interest of the whole World, as far as lies within our power, is surely the Height of Goodness, and makes that Temper which we call Divine.' John Dennis speaks in similar terms about the role of the poet, painter, and critic, arguing that all great art must create moments of 'publick Virtue and publick Spirit' that will inspire the individual with 'the love of his Country, and with a burning Zeal to imitate what he admires.' On the political stance behind Dennis' virtue aesthetics, cf John Morillo.

13 Pocock, Machiavellian Moment, 485. As Pocock continues, the citizen who was driven by personal

Commonwealthmen, was de-radicalized by the 1730s and became a tacit assumption of innovative writing by the 1730s and spread from there to many different genres.¹⁴

Underneath this belief lay a philosophy of the passions which maintained that only the individual who could serve the common good could feel properly fulfilled or 'happy.' As John Trenchard, whose *Cato's Letters* (written with Thomas Gordon) played an indispensable role in the popularization of virtue in the early 1720s, wrote: 'There is scarce any one of the passions but what is truly laudable when it centers in the publick, and makes that its object.'¹⁵ Political virtue splits here from virtual reality on the point regarding how happiness or the community could be experienced. Within the philosophy of virtue itself, selfless service to the common good was simply a duty that the 'free-man' assumed which provided a general orientation for his or her moral and political activity.¹⁶ The community or common good was thus not so much a place as an ethical horizon; virtue simply meant that the individual had to reflect on every one of his thoughts and actions to see how it fit in with the common good of his tribe, city, or nation.¹⁷ Happiness within this framework was not an affective state of being but rather a *judgment* made by others about how well the individual had served the common good.¹⁸

Fantasies of virtual reality, by contrast, started with the belief that a communal

interests and not by disinterested love of the good was 'a creature of passion, not of virtue, and by definition lacked the quality necessary to resist further degeneration.' (Ibid)

14 On the important role played by Restoration-era literary nationalism in this period, see Yadav in particular. On the controversy about literary virtue in the early years of the eighteenth century, cf Brean Hammond and James Noggle.

15 Trenchard and Gordon, II, 48-9.

16 Cf Pocock as well as Soni.

17 Klein's *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness* gives an excellent account of the process of self-examination required by men of virtue. See especially the final two chapters.

18 Cf Vivasvan Soni's *Mourning Happiness*: 'Prior to the eighteenth century, happiness in its various guises referred to the highest good...it named that toward which all practical activity was directed and served as the guiding idea for ethical and political thought.' Soni's book narrates the loss of this active and practical sense of happiness in favor of a private and affective form of happiness.

environment could be fully experienced and that a state of complete community could be acquired. Poetic writers often say as much throughout the century; in 1728, Thomson opines that happiness is a certain way of being, 'the life which those who fret in guilt,/ And guilty cities, never knew,' while, in 1785, Cowper notes that happiness comes from sharing warm, caring feelings with other beings:

The Heart is...dead alike
To love and friendship both, that is not pleased
With sight of animals enjoying life,
Nor feels their happiness augment his own.

Both these are quite positive expressions of communal happiness, but poets and critics often favor a bleaker (if more sublime) model of participating in and feeling communal unity. In Gray's 'The Bard,' for instance, the eponymous narrator hurls himself off a cliff after the landscape presents him with a vision of the vengeance his people will reek on his tormentors. Bishop Robert Lowth, meanwhile, notes that the ancient Hebrews were united by frequent collective experiences of terror:

Chaos and the Creation...are constantly alluded to, as expressive of any remarkable change, whether prosperous or adverse, in the public affairs—of the overthrow or restoration of kingdoms and nations; and are consequently very common in the prophetic poetry, particularly when any unusual degree of boldness is attempted. If the subject be the destruction of the Jewish empire by the Chaldeans, or a strong denunciation of ruin against the enemies of Israel, it is depicted in exactly the same colours as if universal nature were about to relapse into the primeval chaos.

The 'happiness' of virtual reality, if it can be so called, is thus the sensation of *feeling* the public in material form, no matter what sort of affective response—terrifying or elating—it brings. As poetry and criticism of the eighteenth century maintains, only this particular sensation can produce that sense of dedication to true objects that the philosophy of virtue, exemplified in the above quote by Trenchard, refers to.

Happiness Without Beauty

Looking closely at virtual reality thus presents a different picture of the role of aesthetics in mediating national unity than the most influential works on the eighteenth-century aesthetic. Terry Eagleton, Howard Caygill, Luc Ferry, and others have shown how eighteenth-century philosophical aesthetics allowed writers to posit moments or visions in which the subject experienced a kind of moral and social Truth through works of art and experiential moments of beauty.¹⁹ These visions in turn redefined the subject in terms of its voluntary and free wish to serve the cause of Truth and to a free, autonomous subject who needed no authoritarian goad to make him or her moral and virtuous. For Caygill and Eagleton, eighteenth-century aesthetic experience is essentially the 'beautiful' vision of a happy higher order, or else the appreciation of the *je ne sais quoi* that brings a graceful unity to a diverse scene.²⁰ Such visions were indeed quite important for certain schools of thought in eighteenth-century Britain, but they were also not as widespread or pervasive as Eagleton and others imply.²¹ Moral sense philosophy, neo-Platonic

19 Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Caygill *The Art of Judgment*, Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus*.

20 Cf Eagleton's elaborate description of the objects worthy of aesthetic attention: 'Within the dense welter of our material life, with all its amorphous flux, certain objects stand out in a sort of perfection dimly akin to reason, and these are known as the beautiful. A kind of ideality seems to inform their sensuous existence from within...because these are objects which we can agree to be beautiful, not by arguing or analysing but just by looking and seeing, a spontaneous consensus is brought to birth within our creaturely life, bringing with it the promise that such a life, for all its apparent arbitrariness and obscurity, might indeed work in some sense like a rational law.' (17) Later, with regard to the beauty of 'moral sense': 'The beautiful is just political order lived out on the body,' 32.

21 This fact highlights how selective both Caygill's and Eagleton's accounts of aesthetics and literary criticism are. For Eagleton in particular, visions of order or perfect Truth are one of the bourgeoisie's sharpest tools for piercing aristocratic hegemony, presenting their commercial-utilitarian version of political philosophy as more rational and humane than authoritarian ones. Eagleton's concise account of the period maintains that the nascent bourgeoisie combined the allure of aesthetic beauty with the discourse of moral autonomy in order to argue that the subject was naturally moral and free and thus needed no system or hierarchy imposed on it in order to flourish. Eagleton argues that eighteenth-century aesthetic fantasies produced a simultaneously inspiring and alienating effect; on one hand, it made the bourgeoisie believe that its ideal could revive and reform the nation but, on the other hand, it made them desire an impossible utopian community that could never appear in the real world. Eagleton thus assumes that aesthetics is utopian and polite by definition, and his canon of eighteenth-century aesthetics is quite narrow; his key examples are a German rationalist (Baumgarten), two British critics of politeness (Addison and Shaftesbury), and two critics of moral sense theory (Hutcheson and Smith).

philosophies, and various Shaftesburyean philosophies of virtue in particular made use of such ideals of order and presented such utopian visions of beauty, but, as this dissertation argues, they are not present in many key works of eighteenth-century poetry nor in many influential works of criticism.²²

While I borrow much from theories of the ideology of the aesthetic, this dissertation argues that looking at fantasies of virtual reality instead of visions of beauty tells a more accurate story of how and why poets and critics invested so heavily in fantasies of powerful passive social experience in the middle of the eighteenth century. Fantasies of virtual reality were present across a wider range of poetry and criticism in the century and were in some measure responsible for many of the most important poetic and critical innovations in the eighteenth century. Much of the dissertation shows how these fantasies were responsible for new forms of poetry such as the long descriptive nature poem, the imaginative Pindaric ode, and the pseudo-ancient epic as well as forms of criticism including literary historicism and the discourse of the genius. Unlike beauty, the desire for real experience often produced feelings that were notably negative—the melancholy claustrophobia of Ossian, the compulsion of Gray's 'Bard, the mania of John Brown's religious poets—and complicated rather than simplified the relationship between individual and community.

22 Examples of the continuing appeal of a utopianist vision of order can be seen throughout the eighteenth century. For instance, James Beattie's *Essays on Truth* (1771) maintains that 'virtue and truth are of the highest importance...the human mind, unless when debased by passion and prejudice, never fails to take the side of truth and virtue,' while the essayist John Gilbert Cooper writes in 1754 that 'the Almighty has..so *attun'd* our Minds to Truth, that all Beauty from without would make a responsive Harmony vibrate within...a natural Taste for Truth....(prevails alongside) a noble and natural Regard of every Species of Virtue.' (Beattie, 7 Cooper 54). As the dissertation notes, these views represented an often important minority, but a minority nonetheless.

The dissertation tracks these different feelings and shows how a wide variety of social affects were shaped by the same desire to feel an absorbing social-material experience. Each of the chapters shows how a particular literary innovation channels the desire for the happiness of virtue into a fantasy of virtual reality. The chapters move forward chronologically, starting with poets in the 1720-30s who introduced the idea that happiness could be achieved through interacting with environments and ending with poets and critics of the 1780s who offer a much more hedged, partial, and regretful version of this sort of happiness.

As my first chapter relates, the development of an aesthetic of virtual reality started with the idea that interacting with real, local environment could bring satisfaction. Interest in the real world as a poetic subject was on the rise since the late Restoration, when science and the empirical method became a key part of post-Civil War English identity, but most poetic work on 'reality' before the 1720s was Lucretian in character and assumed that humanity was radically alienated from material nature. The philosophy of physico-theology, the most dominant school of natural and moral thought in early eighteenth-century Britain, was the best known proponent of this neo-Lucretianism, but even the famous rhapsodies about nature in Shaftesbury's *Moralists* (1711) implied that the grand order of nature was meant to be admired from afar and never considered part of the human's ethical or social world. Philosophically speaking, the work that introduced a kind of virtuous devotion to the real world and the literal, James Thomson's *Seasons* (first edition 1726-30), was a fairly conventional mixture of Latitudinarian admiration for God's 'Creation' and Shaftesburyean polite ethics. However, via the sort of

misreading or partial reading that characterized many shifts in fantasies of virtual reality, the new style and technique of Thomson's poem suggested to readers that nature could provide a happy and satisfying community for the virtuous soul.

This belief in happy social-material interactions happened because of a change in the sensibility or character of the virtuous poet as much in the objects or settings. Responses to the *Seasons* portrayed Thomson as a sensibility so in touch with the harmonious order of nature that he became part of it, and his poetic world became indistinguishable from the real natural world. Thomson's rise to fame in the 1730s was mirrored by the other great nature poet of the decade, the 'peasant-poet' Stephen Duck, perhaps the best-selling and most talked-about poet of the 1730s. The chapter posits that Duck achieved his success precisely because he represented a sensibility totally embedded in the natural environment of the present. Duck's characteristic mixture of self-effacing piety and 'naïve' absorption in the details of everyday life made it appear that he had achieved a kind of satisfying rapport with the present world that was timely and exciting for the literary public of the 1730s.

Following these two poets' roughly coincident success, writers across a broad spectrum of forms and genres increasingly intermingled natural interaction, selfless ethics, and political patriotism in the 1730-40s. One of the places this idea of experiential happiness spread to was the work of the Scottish critic, Thomas Blackwell, the major pioneer of the form of historicist criticism that my second chapter discusses. Starting with Blackwell, all works of this form of historicism were based on the assumption that certain aesthetic experiences of the past were so sublime, powerful, or otherwise

important that the critic must reconstruct the contexts of the past to allow a modern reader to feel them, if only in a vicarious and second-hand manner. The premise of Blackwell's first book, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735), was that Homer's poetry was inimitably glorious because he had an inimitably close and unmediated relationship with nature, and that the reader could vicariously feel the splendor of this relationship by imaginatively putting him- or herself in Homer's shoes. Following closely the Thomsonian vision of nature, Blackwell argued that the specific circumstances of Homer's life—his physical setting, the social system in which he lived, his class position, etc—conspired to allow him to experience nature with a fullness and sense of contentment that no great writer has since felt. His writing captures and expresses this free and happy relationship with nature, and Blackwell's text insinuates that channeling it could save a morally challenged, direction-less modern Britain.

Blackwell's work was the first mature expression of British literary historicism, and it introduced to a wide audience the genre's characteristic mixture of erudite reconstructions of context and theorizations about poetic and aesthetic truth. However, while Blackwell's text was somewhat evasive about its ethical message or political take-away, William Warburton's weighty, immensely learned *Divine Legation of Moses demonstrated on the Principles of a Religious Deist* (1737-41) used Blackwell's historicist methods to make a literary-aesthetic argument that was directly and explicitly political. Warburton's book stridently argued that poetry's true role was to bind the individuals in a nation together via aestheticized initiations into collective Mysteries. The book maintained that all great nations of antiquity had relied on initiation Mysteries to

secure devotion to the nation, and that only such rituals could make the nation feel like full or complete object of devotion. This idea was taken up by a group of Warburton's students and charges at Oxford in the 1750s, who applied it mostly to the rituals and religious poetry of medieval Britain. The masterpiece of the genre, Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1754) focused closely on nature as the key to national poetry. Lowth's book portrayed the Hebrew prophets' use of natural imagery borrowed from the immediate environment allowed their works to speak more forcefully to the Hebrews and gave them the sense of unity and purpose that allowed them to thrive throughout centuries of warfare and exile.

Warburtonian historicism argued that the individual came to understand his or her political role through powerful aesthetic experiences, but it also placed these experiences at the distant origins of nations and denied that such experiences could (or should) be felt in the present. My third chapter treats the imaginative Pindaric ode of the 1740-50s, a genre that worked with this same split between sublime originary experience and a sober, disenchanted modernity. The mid-century Pindaric, however, showed subjects from the *present* experiencing moments of rapport with sublime natural-national objects. The prototypical imaginative Pindaric ode dramatized an isolated subject's pursuit of or confrontation with a sublime abstraction (Liberty, Nature, Poetry) that had granted a mystical unifying power to great figures and societies of the past. The subject in the ode was thus as focused on the past as the historicist critic was, but the ode insinuated that history directly spoke to and called out to the individual in the present in order to remind him or her of the sublime call to virtue.

Though the ode returned material experiences of community to the present, the confrontations with sublime natural-national objects it portrayed were strictly *private*. The ode-writers (who by contrast with the Anglican historicists all had Whig sympathies) insinuated that feelings of true community could only be felt in the imagination, even as they posited that communal experiences happened in the real world of nature and had happened many times throughout history. The ode thus worked to redefine the subject in terms of a private commitment to virtue; the ecstatic, completely fulfilling experiences of community could be felt only in the imagination, and the individual who felt such moments was bound to be interpellated into the virtuous cause of the common good.

Chapter three ends with an account of Thomas Gray's great historical ode, 'The Bard,' which portrays a sublime historical personage who believes that the forces of nature support his nation's cause. The interlude that follows chapter three, on the epics of Ossian that were forged by the Scottish writer James Macpherson, takes up the same theme. The epics, written from 1758-62 but presented as products of a third-century Caledonian tribe in the Scottish Highlands, represented the culmination of fantasies of virtual reality developed in historicism and the ode. Specifically, their portrayal of humans who derive their social and moral meanings not from laws or codes but from direct material encounters. Like Lowth's historicism, the epics shows a human whose relationship with nature was the same as its relationship with the social world, and whose interactions with nature were equally social and material. For Ossianic personages, nature was human, while humans too were as mysterious and incomprehensible as objects of nature. I argue that the Ossian poems were valued for their depiction of a human

sensibility completely *embedded* in its immediate material environment, whose consciousness experienced life as an endless string of deeply moving social-material encounters, each of which imposed new social duties or responsibilities on the individual. This produced a claustrophobic model of community, in which the individual had no privacy or independent agency. Accordingly, readers responded to it with various innovative forms of repetition—imitation, trance-like reverie, fragmentary expressive poems, etc—that re-enact the compulsion to 'surrender' to the material-social environment.

Criticism about genius and 'pure poetry' from 1755-62, the topic of my fourth chapter, aggressively re-politicizes imaginative poetry. Critics during the tense period surrounding the Seven Years War (1757-63) employ the same understanding of poetry as the ode-writers, associating it with imaginative journeys to truth and displays of devotion to virtue, but they make the more presentist argument that this sort of experience alone can repair a fractured, morally lagging modern Britain. Critics of the period focus on the 'genius,' a figure who has full private access to truth as well as a kind of open and inspiring relationship with the present world. In the view of these critics, the genius's works are so powerful that they re-shape the world and make it seem more vibrant and more compelling. Academic critics like Joseph Warton and Edward Young, as well as new professionals of the literary market like Tobias Smollett and Oliver Goldsmith, adopt the language of genius and implicitly re-define true poetry as the revelation of private inspiring truths to the public. In their eyes, the role of the critic is merely to encourage works of genius in the present world and hail those works which show the fearless

'originality' and moral certainty that are the hallmarks of genius.

In making this argument, criticism of the period implicitly redefines poetry in terms of its expressions of feeling and being-in-the-world. Critics reserve their strongest praise for poems heavily invested in fantasies of virtual reality, notably the odes of Collins and Gray, Ossian's epics, Thomson's poetry, and the work of great geniuses of the Hebraic and ancient Greek world (whose connection to the immediate environment historicist criticism had celebrated). One of this criticism's most innovative and under-explored beliefs, namely that recent poetry such as Collins', Gray's, and Akenside's is equal to that of any great poet of the past precisely because it strives after Truth in a free and original manner.

This stance put too heavy a social and political burden on imaginative experience, a situation which in short order produced a partitioning of the experience of sublime genius from social reform projects. After the Seven Years' War ended, critics continued to use the basic language and concepts of genius, but they separated the discourse of genius from that of moral and political virtue. The genius was no longer seen as a key to reforming the present nation but rather a preternaturally strong sensibility (always from the distant past) who felt more and more truthfully than others. The period of 1760-75, often considered the locus classicus for criticism on the genius and the sublime, thus witnessed a step away from fantasies of virtue and virtual reality and a step toward a de-politicized version of authentic poetic experience.

Consequently, when robust fantasies of virtual reality returned in the 1780s, they did so via a very different model of poetic sensibility. Instead of projecting experiences of

imaginative Truth onto the genius, poets and essayists began working with the assumption that rural and natural environments in the present were already satisfying worlds unto themselves. Essayists implied that the rural and natural worlds was a happy community, which the individual must awaken to in moments of quiet reflection. Poets who followed them—especially Robert Burns and William Cowper—built on a larger revival of the rhetoric of virtue spurred by the new Dissenting and middle class movements of the 1770s and emphasized the moral and affective desire to devote oneself to a social whole.

At the same time, this poetry increasingly rejected the prospect of national community. Cowper and Burns sought not the morally inspiring private experiences of original or genius poetry but rather the modest, peaceful regularity of the countryside. As a result, the key stylistic innovations of their poetry facilitated a reinvention of the 'simple' sensibility, who could experience a kind of absorbing bond with the local natural and social environment. In the poetry of Cowper and Burns, however, simple sensibilities do not have the Schillerian 'naivete' that critics attributed to Stephen Duck or primitive geniuses but rather are aware of the moral and social problems plaguing the British empire and use the bonds with local environments as a way of escaping the perfidies of national life. Their happy local world thus stood as a contrast with the unhappy nation and the corrupt, amoral state, which signaled less a satisfying conclusion to the problem of virtue than a continuation of it.

Fantasy and the Individual

Though each of these innovations is presented as a discrete unit with its own logic and its own structure of desire, the dissertation narrates several overall transformations of subjectivity and self-understanding created, or at least facilitated, by poetic innovations. In particular, the dissertation narrates the increase in belief that the individual is defined by an internal call to community or participation in a larger external environment. Paradoxically, this internalized sense of participation coincides with the separation of imaginative community from political or even ethical community; just as more attention, energy, and hope is put into the internal experience of community, writers think of it less and less as having a direct social or political impact.

The idea of nature as an ecological 'home' is a telling instance of this simultaneously internal and communal call. As ecocriticism has reminded us, ecological and conservationist movements grew drastically from about the 1780s on, coinciding closely with the turn away from the demise of political arguments for virtual reality.²³ As noted at the start of the introduction, the narrator of Cowper's 'The Task' can, by the 1780s, confidently opine that nature is the home he seeks, and that viewing the details of the landscape are a moral end in itself:

trees, and rivulets whose rapid course
Defies the check of winter, haunts of deer,
And sheepwalks populous with bleating lambs,
And lanes in which the primrose ere her time
Peeps through the moss that clothes the hawthorn root,
Deceive no student. Wisdom there, and truth,
Not shy, as in the world, and to be won
By slow solicitation, seize at once
The roving thought, and fix it on themselves.

Cowper's narrator, however, feels this 'truth' only in private meditation, and his community of sheepwalks and primrose lanes is more opaquely and inhumanly material

23 Cf. Hitt, Bate, Oerlmans, and Fry.

than transparently social, and it brings a private sense of *sharing* an environment rather than a more public one of *participating* in one. The private nature of later eighteenth-century virtual community, and the fact that it could only be *felt* rather than engaged with, meant that it fed into a logic of an endlessly yearning individualism. This transformation of virtue into longing helped enact what Vivasvan Soni has recently identified as the 'privatization of happiness' during the eighteenth century, in which happiness was 'wrested from community' and reduced to 'a privatized affect...which has no bearing on the well-being of others.'²⁴

The dissertation also suggests, however, that fantasies of virtue could only remain alive by turning private and moving into the private aesthetic realm. The cynicism about government that dominated the 1770-80s made political virtue obsolete, but poets and critics continued to insist that the subject could only find happiness via devotion to community. The ecological fantasies in Cowper's verse, the sentimentalizations of the local in Burns', or the visions of merging with nationalized nature in Ossian's or Gray's poems were still grounded in the framework of virtue and the dream of living in and for a common good, and still urged the subject to resist greed and superficiality in favor of more difficult and more gratifying social feelings of virtue. Focusing on the material aspects of fantasies of virtue helps us see that most eighteenth century writers pursued not 'nature' or 'truth' as such but rather an amalgam of feelings and desires for security, community, and immediacy (which were themselves amalgams and constructs stemming from other problems and which in fact did not promise to untangle ethical paradoxes of

²⁴ Soni, 'The Tragedies of Sentimentalism: Privatizing Happiness in the Eighteenth Century,' 140. For a more substantial account of the privatization of happiness during the eighteenth century, see Soni, *Mourning Happiness*, especially chapters eight and ten.

self and community).²⁵ This dissertation thus maintains that the process of 'privatizing' virtue was never complete in eighteenth-century poetry and criticism, which continued to derive impetus from the original philosophy of political-ethical virtue and continued to return to the same feelings and compulsions for community that drove philosophers and ideologues of virtue during the early years of the eighteenth century.

25 Elizabeth Bohls and Christopher Hitt have argued that eighteenth-century writing about natural environments always maintains a certain distance from them that enables them to be framed and aestheticized. Hitt speaks of 'a double gesture of both deference and mastery before nature' as the 'characteristic feature of eighteenth-century nature writing,' while Bohls refers to a strategy of willed distance from particular objects in the world and the needs and desires that connect or cathect individuals to them." Hitt, 'Ecocriticism and the Long Eighteenth Century' and Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818*, 67.

CHAPTER ONE

THE HAPPY COMMUNITY: THOMSON, DUCK, AND THE VIRTUE OF NATURE POETRY, 1725-31

This chapter outlines the changes in the structure of political-ethical virtue wrought by the nature poetry of James Thomson and Stephen Duck from 1725-3. The chapter posits that these poets both worked within the philosophical framework of virtue, which maintained that selfless human beings could only find fulfillment through putting the good of the 'public' or common good before that of their own; their poetry, however, made it seem as though the common good could be felt and experienced in interactions with material environments. The two key innovations of this poetry— its assumption that the nature it referred to was *real*, and its adoption of 'simple' narrators capable of being absorbed by real natural environments—implied that a subject could achieve a fulfilling relationship if only it fully dedicated and 'opened' itself to the external world. This move

both helped to de-politicize virtue and amplify the importance of nature and the imagination for personal as well as national morality.

Political Virtue and Poetic Happiness

Before outlining the poetic innovations of the new nature poetry from 1725-35, I will briefly define this chapter's key terms, 'virtue' and 'simplicity,' and gave a short sketch of how Thomson and Duck understood their poetry in terms of these two key words. In 1726, Thomson just after moving to London from the Scottish Lowlands, wrote a letter of praise to the Whig poet Aaron Hill, celebrating that 'Social Love of which you are so bright an Example' and referring to it as 'the distinguishing Ornament of Humanity.' As Thomson writes, Hill in particular embodies this 'Social Love' because he has resisted the 'Selfishness, Degeneracy, and Cruelty' of the world and can thus 'think, imagine, and write, with a diviner Warmth, superior to the Rest of Mankind.' Praising someone's ability to love mankind while standing apart from them was a relatively new form of flattery in the 1720s, one that closely suited Hill's ideological affiliations. As a Patriot Whig, Hill had made a living since the early 1700s as cultural 'Projector' who proposed various ways of improving the national morality and cultural acumen of Great Britain, and his poems and proposals centered on a devotion to public spirit that the Whigs had been using to leverage political capital since the Exclusion Crisis.¹ Like many Whigs of the period, Hill was also closely associated with Dissenting causes, and his moral philosophy was

¹ Gerrard, *Aaron Hill: The Muses' Projector*. On the Whig appeal to cultural patriotism and civic spirit, see Abigail Williams, *The Making of a Whig Literary Culture*, and Julie Ellison, *Cato's Tears*, chapter one.

roundly Latitudinarian and anti-Anglican, emphasizing ethical autonomy and a natural, non-dogmatic morality.

This background helps explain why Thomson, a Scottish Presbyterian steeped in Dissenting philosophy, wrote to Hill in the first place, but it cannot quite account for his portrayal of Hill as someone who lives and breathes patriotism and moral sense philosophy. Indeed, instead of merely flattering Hill as a great poet or a great patriot, Thomson acts out his own joy in participating in 'Social Love'; he salutes Hill 'with a Soul awaken'd all to Joy, Gratitude, and Ambition' and repeats back familiar arguments for selfless virtue:

'The excellent ones of the Earth, in the Exercise of Social Love, feel it as much to be an original Impulse, as the low World that blind Affection, they bear themselves...how many deathless Heroes, Patriots, and Martyrs, have been so gloriously concern'd for the Good of Mankind, and so strongly actuated by Social Love, as frequently to act in direct Contradiction to that of Self.'²

Dramatizing his own selfless devotion, Thomson shows how he too is already converted to that difficult battle Hill has undertaken of heeding that 'original Impulse' to virtue and fighting off 'that blind Affection' of the 'low World.'

Stephen Duck, the 'peasant-poet' who was discovered in 1728 by the poet and literary promoter Joseph Spence, also introduced himself to the literary world of London via demonstrations of his own selfless virtue. Since Duck was supposed to be a rustic with a certain outsider aura, Spence spoke for his discovery, portraying him as a pious soul who lived a deeply philosophic life within the small plot of land he lived and worked

2 Thomson to Hill, April 18, 1726, *Letters* 56-8. In a follow-up letter, Thomson repeats the same statements about Hill's sublime warmth: 'There is in your Conversation, such a Beauty, Truth, Force, and Elegance of Thought, and Expression; such animated, fine Sense, and chastis'd Fancy... Your Smiles have all the encouraging Power of Humanity in them...gives one a secret, and more ravishing Pleasure...there is downright Inspiration in your Society: It enlarges and exalts all the Powers of the Soul, chases every low Thought, throws all the Passions into the most agreeable Agitations, and gives the Heart the most affecting Sentiments--'Tis moral Harmony!... There is none that renders human Nature more amiable than you' (April 27, *Letters* 68).

in. Learning to write through the Bible and Milton, Duck loved only 'the Moral, the Passionate, or the Sublime' in literature and devoted himself wholly to the elevated feelings this type of poetry inspired.³ According to Spence's report, Duck resisted with great difficulty the temptation to laziness and uncouthness in peasant life in order to find a kind of virtuous happiness with the landscape. Hence, of his own accord and without reference to the hemming and hawing about virtue in London, he had become a simple and genuine man of virtue, 'better than a Philosopher, a good honest-hearted Man.'⁴

Both Thomson and Duck thus advertise themselves as fully formed simple beings before they began writing the poems that would bring them fame. As this chapter argues, the thoroughness and earnestness of their dedication to selfless morality both followed closely from a relatively new theory of virtuous sensibility and informed the poetic innovations that made their works so notable and successful for the rest of the century. Indeed, their subtle modifications of the philosophy of virtue were responsible for giving a new ethical importance to poetry, and also for allowing the feelings associated with virtue—earnestness, sincerity, affirmation, gratitude—to become accepted as essential to great poetry.

The poets' modifications of virtue can only be understood in light of the larger post-Lockean philosophy of virtue that arose in the 1710s and gave birth to both moral sense theory and the Patriot Opposition.⁵ The history of virtue is of course a lengthy and complex topic, but, for reasons that will shortly be clear, I will now focus only on the

3 'An Account of the Author,' affixed to Duck's *Poems on Several Subjects* (1730), xxxv-xxxvii.

4 Ibid.

5 Cf among many others, Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* and *The Machiavellian Moment*, Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, Kivy, *The Seventh Sense*, and Nicholas Phillipson 'Politeness and Politics in the Reigns of Anne and the early Hanoverians' in Pocock, ed.

subtle shift from a specifically political philosophy of virtue to one based on happiness in the 1720s. As Pocock and Jonathan Lamb have emphasized, the early eighteenth-century discourse of virtue was founded on a Lockean theory of the self as a bundle of impressions and feelings, and at its core was the idea that sympathy naturally directs the human to good and worthwhile objects, which he or she then naturally commits to.⁶ Francis Hutcheson, the Latitudinarian opponent of Mandeville and devotee of Shaftesbury, produced what is now the most well-known theory of sympathy, the moral sense theory, which concluded that humans naturally love benevolent action and that 'Virtue is the cause of our Greatest Happiness.'⁷ Though contemporaries associated Hutcheson's with a relatively extreme Dissenting ideology, his moral sense version of emotional bonding was still less politically contentious than most others of the time.⁸ More radical political theorists of virtue in the 1720s maintained that a spontaneous desire for satisfying social unity naturally arose in all healthy and free humans. The engine of the Patriot Opposition, Lord Bolingbroke, wrote in 1727 of the natural predisposition to unity, 'a sort of intellectual sympathy, better felt than expressed, in characters, by which particular men are sometimes united sooner, and more intimately, than could be by mere esteem, by expectations of good offices, or even by gratitude.' Perhaps the most important book of the virtue movement, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon's *Cato's Letters* (1720-3), also maintained that a desire for unity with external orders was a natural part of the human: 'All innocent men, throughout the world, find a private blessing in the general felicity of the publick...There is scarce any one of the

6 Pocock, op cit. Lamb, *Preserving the Self in the South Seas and The Evolution of Sympathy in the Long Eighteenth Century*.

7 *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), 104.

8 On Hutcheson's reception as a Dissenter, cf Phillipson, op cit.

passions but what is truly laudable when it centers in the publick, and makes that its object.'

These views portrayed virtuous social pleasure as more lasting and true than the cheaper and more limited pleasures of greed and self-satisfaction, which had recently (in the form of the South Seas' Bubble) brought so much misery to Great Britain. *Cato's Letters'* philosophy of natural sociability is explicitly a strike against the 'stock-jobbers' and governmental officials who entertained them: 'a multitude of families are ruined, and suddenly sunk from plentiful circumstances to abject poverty...I have before my eyes a brave and honest people, lovers of trade and industry, free of their money, and well-deserving of the legislature, passionate for liberty, and haters of chains; but deluded, drained of their money, and abused beyond patience, beyond expression, by mean sharpers, that swagger in the plunder of their country.' In the face of all this crass disunity, the authors posit that real happiness comes from the opposite of the stock-jobber's greed, viz. thorough dedication to the public: 'There is scarce any one of the passions but what is truly laudable when it centers in the publick, and makes that its object.'⁹ Bolingbroke echoes these sentiments, rallying against the greed and faction of modern British government and arguing that only a disciplined commitment to virtue can bring Britain out of its corrupted state: 'It is difficult, indeed, to bring men, from strong habits of corruption, to prefer honor to profit, and liberty to luxury; as it is hard to teach princes the great art of governing all by all, or to prevail on them to practise it.' However, as Bolingbroke notes, devotion to the public good brings the most lasting and rewarding

⁹ *Cato's Letters* repeats this sentiment frequently throughout its pages. 'if he be a benevolent neighbour, a useful member of society, perfectly disinterested, and justly esteemed; if he have served and saved great numbers; if he be daily protecting the innocent, daily watching and restraining the guilty; his happiness must be complete, and all his reflections pleasing.'

satisfaction possible:

'Neither Montaigne in writing his essays, nor Des Cartes in building new worlds, nor Burnet in framing an antediluvian earth, no, nor Newton in discovering and establishing the true laws of nature on experiment and a sublimer geometry, felt more intellectual joys than he feels who is a real patriot, who bends all the force of his understanding, and directs all his thoughts and actions, to the good of his country. When such a man forms a political scheme, and adjusts various and seemingly independent parts in it to one great and good design, he is transported by imagination, or absorbed in meditation, as much and as agreeably as they; and the satisfaction that arises from the different importance of these objects, in every step of the work, is vastly in his favor.'¹⁰

In the 1720s, this argument became increasingly deployed by a broad coalition of

Whigs, Scots, and Latitudinarians who sought to accrue political and moral capital by opposing the alliance of church and state and rallied against luxury and corruption in the name of liberty.¹¹ At this point, the young Thomson and Duck enter, as the new, broader appeal to virtue offered new opportunities to writers from outside of established power structures; earnestness of feeling was a major part of the virtue narrative, and young writers whose characters and histories was unknown could present themselves as perfectly virtuous spirits. Thus the young Thomson portrays himself as a being completely given over to the desire for the true happiness of virtue, connected by a chain of sympathy with other great virtuous writers: 'there is downright Inspiration in your Society: It enlarges and exalts all the Powers of the Soul, chases every low Thought, throws all the Passions into the most agreeable Agitations, and gives the Heart the most affecting Sentiments--'Tis moral Harmony!...There is none that renders human Nature more amiable than you.'¹²

10 'On the Spirit of Patriotism.' Though not published until 1736, the letter was probably written a decade before and in any case repeated sentiments that Bolingbroke had been aggressively pushing since c.1725.

11 Cf Pocock op cit and Nicholas Phillipson. The role of mainstream, non-Walpolean Whigs centered on the argument for patriotic reform and improvement. The following quote from Welsted's 1724 *A Dissertation concerning the Perfection of the English Language* demonstrates its emphasis on creative force: 'to imitate is purely mechanical, whereas to write is a Work of Nature... the Result of a Man's own Force, and of the first Cast of Soul...draws it out of himself, as the Silk-Worm spins o/ her own Bowels that soft ductile Substance, which is wrought into so great a Variety of Ornaments.'

12 To Hill, April 27 1726.

As Thomson's works show, this vaguely classical Stoic idea of giving one's own interests up to that of the common and losing oneself in service to the good of the whole brought with it a new model of satisfaction. At times, Thomson seems to be simply echoing Trenchard and Gordon's arguments for virtue, as the first edition of the *Seasons* (1730) shows in speaking about 'my country's love':

in the radiant forefront, superior shines
That first paternal Virtue, *public zeal*,
Who casts o'er all an equal, wide survey,
And ever musing on the common weal,
Still labours glorious with some brave design

However, slight changes in Thomson's portrayal of social pleasures presented a new model of how virtue and happiness could be experienced. In the above passage, virtue is simply the love of the common good and the faith in the orderly nature of the universe that writers of virtue from Shaftesbury to Bolingbroke had emphasized, but the young Thomson also spoke of virtue as a sort of *communal* experience. The *Seasons* in particular develops this idea of happiness as a kind of experience:

happiness and true philosophy
Are of the social still, and smiling kind.
This is the life which those who fret in guilt,
And guilty cities, never knew; the life,
Led by primeval ages, uncorrupt,
When angels dwelt, and GOD himself, with Man!¹³

In this brief passage, wedged between descriptions of a torridly hot summer day, the narrator imagines happiness as a way of '*life*,' an innocent attunement with the angels that brought a constant state of satisfaction and security to people in 'primeval ages.'

Complete social satisfaction is thus imagined as a place that one arrives at, and Truth is seen not as a principle of morality but rather a state of being; hence in reading Hill, Thomson imagines himself joining in a happy community of 'more exalted beings': 'for a

13 'Summer,' ll1346-51.

while, I forget the Selfishness, Degeneracy, and Cruelty of Men, and seem to be associated with better and more exalted Beings.¹⁴

This idea of an existence suffused with contented participation would soon become Thomson's calling-card. Thomson, apparently intent from the start on imagining scenes of virtuous happiness, implied in the *Seasons* that natural environments could be places of happiness, and that interactions with material locations could bring a sense of experiential happiness. Hutcheson had in fact been explicitly opposed to this idea, maintaining that ideal happiness came from practicing a sort of Aristotelean good judgment and moderation, but the rhetoric of Opposition encouraged the idea that community was a real place that could be experienced.¹⁵ As I will argue, this idea of being content within nature and happy within experience would come to be Thomson's legacy, and it also opened up a new aspect of virtue that poetry and criticism was to work with closely for the next seventy years.

Virtuous Innovations: Real Nature and the Simple Poet

My intention in this chapter is to show that nature poetry from 1725-35 worked within the ethical or subjective logic of virtue but also insinuated that social happiness could be *experienced in full* rather than simply intuited as a moral instinct. The nature poets

14 Another example comes in Thomson's letter to the Scottish Whig poet David Mallett in 1726: 'You every Day converse with the Sages, and the Heroes, of Antiquity...your Bosom swells with the same divine Ambition, and would, if in the same Circumstances display the same Heroic Vertues, that lye glowing at your Heart.' (June 13, 1726)

15 Hutcheson, *Inquiry* chapters 3-4. Cf Hont, 'The early Enlightenment Debate on Commerce and Luxury.' As Hont argues, the anti-luxury movement headed up by Fenelon in France proposed a utopian agrarianism as an alternative to corrupt capitalist nationalism. This sort of agrarianism seems to me much more suggestive of a temporal experience of happiness than British moral sense theories, but it was never seriously picked up in Britain.

assumed the argument of Bolingbroke and Trenchard and Gordon that the human's truest desire was to be a servant and contributing member of a good community ('all men are directed, by the general constitution of human nature, to submit to government'), but the poet's version of community was not directly political. Instead of seeing service to the nation as the source of happiness, poets insinuated that a certain type of interaction with nature or the local environment could bring a similarly lasting and true sense of happiness. At the same time, their works present this dedication to the local environment as an allegory of political virtue; like political virtue, it resisted base desires in the name of the pleasures of selfless community, and its repeated dramatizations of virtual unity showed how thinking of oneself in communal terms had a profoundly satisfying affective payoff.

Two closely related formal innovations were necessary to capture this sense of experiential happiness. First, poets needed to alter the intentional structure of their poems so that the nature their poems referred to was *real*—not the idyllic imaginary place of neoclassical pastoral. Without this alteration, the experience of nature could not satisfy the affective logic of virtue, which held that the subject could only feel satisfied if it devoted itself to a larger, real realm or entity (the city in Machiavelli's terms, the nation in Trenchard and Gordon's case). The second alteration involved a shift in the poetic or narratorial persona, erasing the irony, wit, and elaborate craftsmanship of satire and neoclassical verse in favor of naïve, 'simple' personas. For poetry to imply that experience was satisfying, its narrators had to be fully absorbed in the descriptions and narratives that comprised the poem. As a result, the poems abjured the figurative in favor

of what I will be calling the virtual-literal, a technique that made poetry seem to refer fully to a real external world and revised the narrator's role to involve simply responding to the virtual-literal world described.

The First Change: From Neoclassical to Real Nature

In order to make nature a real object of affective experience, poets of the 1720-30s needed to reject much of the critical apparatuses of neoclassical and polite criticism. Nature poetry was of course a major part of neoclassical France and the Restoration period in England, but seventeenth-century poetic nature was definitively utopian and thus necessarily non-real. In fact, a surprisingly fierce debate about pastoral poetry between Pope and a group of Whig critics shows how strict neoclassicism was about the utopian aspect of poetic nature. In 1704, Pope, following Rapin and Fontenelle, had confidently noted that pastoral must perforce be set in an idealized locale:

If we would copy Nature, it may be useful to take this Idea along with us, that pastoral is an image of what they call the Golden age. So that we are not to describe our shepherds as shepherds at this day really are, but as they may be conceiv'd then to have been...we must therefore use some illusion to render a Pastoral delightful; and thus consists in exposing the best side only of a shepherd's life, and in concealing its miseries.¹⁶

In 1709, however, Ambrose Phillips published a series of pastorals which were set in contemporary England and which used names, flowers, and animals familiar from the English landscape. Pope quickly argued that poetic nature was by definition *ideal* and that the Golden Age, not the ugly modern life of shepherds, is truly 'natural.'¹⁷ The Whigs

16 Pope, 'A discourse on pastoral poetry,' originally 1704, quoted text from 1717 edition.)

17 Frye succinctly explains Pope's mature model of nature: 'In (Pope's) view there are two levels in nature. The lower one is the ordinary physical world, which is theologically 'fallen'; the upper one is a divinely sanctioned order, existing in Eden before the Fall, and mirrored in the Classical and Boethian myth of the Golden Age.' (Frye, 'Nature and Homer,' 255 in *Educated imagination and other writings on critical theory, 1933-1962*.) On Fontenelle's key role in the neoclassical pastoral debate, see Annabelle Patterson, 201-6.

who rushed to Phillips' defense extravagantly praised Phillips' poems for capturing nature 'more simply and factually' than previous classically-inclined writers of pastoral had.¹⁸ Addison, Tickell, and Welsted all noted that removing the factitious from pastoral increased the pleasure and made the poems feel more *real*. Tickell argued that 'the country life with which we are most familiar would please us most,' while Addison argued that Phillips had 'given new Life, and a more natural Beauty to this way of Writing, by Substituting in the Place of Antiquated Fables, the superstitious Mythology which prevails among the Shepherds of our Country.'¹⁹ In defending Phillips' version of pastoral nature and arguing that more real meant more *pleasurable* (in addition to truer), these Whigs were introducing a new criterion of value; the familiar was better than the imaginary, and the real was better than the ideal.²⁰

At this time, however, 'polite' Whig critics still argued that poetic nature must be idealized and set off from the messy world of experience if it was to give delight.

Addison's early essay on Vergil's *Georgics* maintains that 'we receive more strong and

18 Tickell, *Guardian* #30 (1713)

19 Tickell, *Ibid*, Addison, *Spectator* 523 (1712)

20 This new value category derived from the old Whig tenet of 'publick' enthusiasm, but it still remained essentially neoclassical. It did not matter that Phillips' actual poems were deeply formal and were not themselves realistic; it was only important that they oppose the idea of utopia and imaginative retreat that Rapin, Pope, and Gay subscribed to. The pro-Hanoverian Whigs during Anne's and George's reign, including Tickell and Addison as well as Hill and Mallet, continued to maintain the value of earnest public poetry and the sort of enthusiastic passion that inspired and carried people away. However, despite their authorization of present themes, details, and settings in pastoral, Tickell and Addison remain conventional in ultimately agreeing with Pope that, in order for any pastoral to be legitimate, it must refer back to unquestioned *classical* literary authorities and precedents: Tickell's pastorals are authorized only as imitations of Moschus' and Bion's originals, and Addison's georgic is strictly Vergilian. They thus keep the neoclassical aesthetic, with the ancients as its great practitioners, and allow contemporary/local details only within the larger classical apparatus. Nevertheless, they opened the door for the group of writers in the 1720s and 1730s—Addison especially was a persistent influence on the poets of simplicity—who would make the announcement and celebration of the present into a new, non-neoclassical idea of aesthetic value and aesthetic truth. Elioseff notes this was uneasy compromise, despite showing step forward for real, empirical nature: 'The proponents of the newer divinely oriented empirical order were not fully aware of the implications of their reasoning from below, from the subjective response rather than from the objective work of art or genre.' (Op cit.)

lively ideas of things from (Vergil's) words, *than we could have done for the objects themselves...*(or) by the very sight of what he describes.²¹ The *Spectator's* famous 'pleasures of the imagination' essays systematize the same point, noting that, via the faculty of 'imagination,' an individual can experience far more moving and fascinating scenes through virtual than actual experience: 'things would make but a poor appearance to the eye, if we saw them only in their proper figures and motions.'²² For Addison, nature is valuable because it provides a wide and pleasing *variety* of imagery, but it is beautiful and pleasing precisely because it is framed and presented as a disinterested art object. Hence 'a man in a dungeon is capable of entertaining himself with scenes and landscapes more beautiful than any that can be found in the whole compass of nature.'²³ The pleasure that arises from this comes from the retirement from the problems of the world: 'it draws Mens Minds off from the Bitterness of Party, and furnishes them with Subjects of Discourse that may be treated without Warmth or Passion.'²⁴ In keeping with French neoclassicism, Addison's argument thus protects virtualized nature and makes it aesthetically inscrutable (it is after all aligned with God) only on the condition that it remain distant and content-less, known and understood only as a compelling and fascinating thing that tells us nothing about the social or natural worlds.²⁵

21 'Essay on the Georgics' (1697)

22 *Spectator* 413.

23 Ibid, 411. Cf also 414, 'in the wide fields of nature the sight wanders up and down without confinement, and is fed with an infinite variety of images without any certain stint or number.'

24 *Spectator* 262. This particular quote is from Steele.

25 The ideology behind this move of course has much to say about the social and natural worlds. Habermas' reading (and Eagleton's, which follows from it) is more or less accurate in seeing the purpose of the Addisonian aesthetic as the creation of a common object for the nascent 'polite' class, which was essentially an amalgam of upwardly-mobile merchant/trading members of the middle class and commercially active aristocrats. More recent readings supplement Habermas by adding that the Addisonian aesthetic was something like an intentionally displaced ethical and religious enthusiasm, whose public functionality it was supposed to once-for-all dull and disable, and that it participated in the much larger project of re-defining the British subject as passionate but skeptical and withdrawn. In

By contrast with neoclassicism and politeness, the new nature poetry after 1725 advertised that aesthetic Truth came out of real and immediate interaction with nature. Unlike previous nature poetry, it dramatized direct confrontations between individual and landscape, and it referred to the real material world of experience instead of to an idealized poetic world or a sensibility from the Golden Age. In the following passage from 1731, Stephen Duck declares that his entire mission is simply to announce the present world and give a sort of incantatory praise to it:

When e're I view the Grain in Barn or Field,
Or see a Farm that does God's Blessing veild;
The Prospect will such Contemplation raise,
As must begin in Joy, and end in Praise.
No Meadow green, or Stack or Cock of Hay,
But where I view will furnish an Essay.²⁶

In the following passage from Thomson's *Seasons*, descriptions of real natural processes are presented as ends in themselves:

Successive floating, sits the general fog
Unbounded o'er the world; and mingling thick,
A formless, grey confusion covers all....
These roving mists that constant now begin
To smooke along the hilly country, these,
With mighty rains, the skilled in nature fay,
The mountain-cisterns sill, those grand reserves
Of water, scoop'd among the hollow rocks;
Whence gush the streams, the ceaseless fountains play,
And their unfailing stores the rivers draw.²⁷

Though the *Seasons* doesn't declare its purpose as clearly as Duck's poem does, the narrator assumes that a poem simply announces an already-existent natural world, an

a key passage, Addison acknowledges this by noting that his essays on literature serve much the same purpose as the Royal Society: diverting excess passion 'is said to have been the first Design of those Gentlemen who set on Foot the Royal Society; and had then a very good Effect, as it turned many of the greatest Genius's of that Age to the Disquisitions of natural Knowledge, who, if they had engaged in Politicks with the same Parts and Application, might have set their Country in a Flame. The Air-Pump, the Barometer, the Quadrant, and the like Inventions, were thrown out to those busy Spirits, as Tubs and Barrels are to a Whale, that he may let the Ship sail on without Disturbance, while he diverts himself with those innocent Amusements.' (*Spectator* 262)

26 Duck, 'On Royal Benevolence,' Poems on several subjects, 1730.

27 'Autumn,' ll 1729-41

infinitely complex world of items, details, and processes that brings pleasure in and of itself.²⁸

The Second Change: Passivity and Simplicity in the New Nature Poetry

The new nature poetry also had to make its acts of description (and the passive experience of watching natural scenes) an ethically worthy act in and of itself. Hence, while the *Seasons* is mostly comprised of descriptions of real nature (though philosophical musings are interspersed), these descriptions also give a sort of existential value to the items and actions they animate. Here is a quite typical passage from the first edition of the *Seasons* (1730):

Gradual sinks the Breeze
Into a perfect Calm; that not a Breath
Is heard to quiver thro' the closing Woods,
Or rustling turn the many-twinkling Leaves
Of Aspin tall. Th' uncurling Floods, diffus'd

28 The poetry and criticism of Allan Ramsay, Duck's and Thomson's contemporary, showed how referring to real, literal nature was possible and indeed promising for writers in the 1720s in a way not possible for previous poets. Ramsay carefully avoided political overtones in his work, yet he worked within the general logic of virtue and argued that commitment to real nature could produce a sort of happiness. The 'Dedication' to a collection of Scots songs he edited in 1724 contrasts the sickly reader of the present who can only enjoy 'what is either new or foreign' with the virtuous 'Lover of his Country' who loves the 'Spirit of Freedom that shines thro' (the) Performances of our old Poets (and) appears of a Piece with that Love of Liberty that our antient Heroes contended for, and maintained Sword in Hand.' (*The Ever Green*, iv.) The 'Preface' to the work again contrasts the French-ified modern taste and the directness of modern writers, before explaining that the virtuous style of art derives from a free and direct communion with art: 'When these good old Bards wrote, we had not yet made Use of imported Trimming upon our Cloaths, nor of foreign Embroidery in our Writings. *Their Poetry is the Product of their own Country*, not pilfered and spoiled in the transportation from abroad: *their Images are native, and their landskips domestick; copied from those Fields and Meadows we every Day behold.* The Morning rises (In the Poets Description) as she does in the Scottish Horizon.' (Ibid, vii (emphasis added).) Unlike neoclassical and Addisonian praise of the simple aesthetic, Ramsay's version implies that moderns can have channel this same spirit if they could embrace nature in the same way: 'We are not carried to Greece or Italy for a Shade, a Stream or a Breeze. The Groves rise in our own Valleys; the Rivers flow from our own Fountains, and the Winds blow upon our own Hills.' (Ibid, viii) As in the *Seasons*, aesthetic simplicity is the celebration of those environments and experiences that people already feel, and poetry simply makes these things public. Ramsay's work does not give any particular political or ethical value to this experience of nature, but his free use of it demonstrates how the ideal of simplicity was becoming viable during the mid-1720s.

In glassy Breadth, seem thro' delusive Lapse
Forgetful of their Course. 'Tis silence all,
And pleasing Expectation. Herds and Flocks
Drop the dry Sprig, and mute-imploring eye
The falling Verdure. Hush'd in short Suspense
The plummy People streak their Wings with Oil,
And wait th' approaching Sign to strike at once
Into the general Choir.²⁹

The nature described here is obviously 'real,' but the effect of the passage derives from the narrator's ability to feel connected to the scene he describes, to be struck with a spontaneous and innocent appreciation of each of its elements. The passage seems to be both describing processes and performing its own satisfaction of them. Like other Thomsonian descriptive passages, it implies a new, outward-directed intentionality that finds immediate value in observation of the material world.

This emphasis on external affective relations reversed the inward-directed nature aesthetic of British physico-theology, of which Thomson's primary mentors, Hill and David Mallett, were devoted practitioners. Following from the Dissenting Cambridge Platonists of the 1660-90s, physico-theology was both warm to natural science and devoted to an austere moral autonomy, and it became Britain's most popular ethical and natural philosophy from c.1680-1730.³⁰ Unlike Continental scholasticism, physico-

29 'Spring,' 156-168.

30 The argument for embracing empirical nature as one's ultimate object was not new with the eighteenth century, though the eighteenth century does sever it increasingly from larger philosophical and ideological issues. As Christian Thorne observes, the scientific pursuit of reality as a patriotic and humanitarian effort was a cornerstone of the early Enlightenment, encompassing such different thinkers as Bacon, Hobbes, Glanvill, and Cudworth in Great Britain and Mersenne and Descartes in France (Thorne, *Dialectic of counter-Enlightenment*, ch 4). Thorne notes, succinctly, that it's 'hard to find a natural philosopher in the (seventeenth century) whose writing is not demonstrably pious' (195) Dedicating oneself to reality was a 'safe' pursuit that would inevitably produce positive contributions, as opposed to those more enthusiastic and divisive religious pursuits that had caused so much chaos in the first half of the seventeenth century. In Britain, this tenet intensified with the growth of natural religion in the last third of the seventeenth century, as thinkers like Boyle and Thomas Burnet and More, Cudworth, and Whichcote (the Cambridge Platonists) argued that the human's rational understanding of the order of the universe was evidence of both God's existence and of the individual's own moral essence. Understanding the natural world was thus an imperative of God and the individual soul, and the natural world—not Scholastic doctrine or abstract moral precepts—was the only real and proper object of attention.

theology maintained that nature was an infinitely complex system that revealed the grandeur of God and the smallness of humanity but also produced those great sensations of wonder and awe that made the human divine. As Hutcheson maintained, observing nature in its full extent makes the human appreciate the beauty of the natural world but also experience its alien-ness or alterity: God has put us in this infinitely complex world not to understand it but to admire its beauty and order and to ourselves seek to imitate its orderly nature. The philosophy inspired a surprisingly popular and long-lasting genre of poetry—essentially a Christianized Lucretian descriptive poetry—that emphasized the subject's radical *independence* from the vertiginous external world. The following example from Blackmore's quite successful *Creation* (1715) typifies the genre's approach:

The mind employ'd in search of secret things,
To find out motion's cause and hidden springs,
Through all th' etherial regions mounts on high,
Views all the spheres, and ranges all the sky :
Searches the orbs, and penetrates the air
With unsuccessful toil, and fruitless care :
Till stopp'd by awful heights, and gulphs immense
Of wisdom, and of vast omnipotence,
She trembling stands and does in wonder gaze,
Lost in the wild inextricable maze.
Philosophers may spare their toil, in vain
They form new schemes, and rack their thoughtful brain
The cause of heavenly motions to explain:
After their various unsuccessful ways,
Their fruitless labour, and inept essays,
No cause of those appearances they'll find,
But power exerted by th' eternal mind.³¹

31 *Creation*, 50-1. Addison noted the Blackmore's poem 'deserves to be looked upon as one of the most useful and noble Productions in our English Verse,' and his review of it underscores the interrelation of natural complexity and moral autonomy. 'The Work was undertaken with so good an Intention, and is executed with so great a Mastery, that it deserves to be looked upon as one of the most useful and noble Productions in our English Verse. The Reader cannot but be pleased to find the Depths of Philosophy enlivened with all the Charms of Poetry, and to see so great a Strength of Reason, amidst so beautiful a Redundancy of the Imagination. The Author has shewn us that Design in all the Works of Nature, which necessarily leads us to the Knowledge of its first Cause. In short, he has illustrated, by numberless and incontestable Instances, that Divine Wisdom, which the Son of Sirach has so nobly

The natural descriptions of popular poetic essays like Burnet's *Sacred theory of the earth* (1681) and John Ray's *The wisdom of God manifested in the works of the Creation* (1691), as well as those in closely related Christian neo-Lucretian poems like David Mallet's *Excursion* (1728), were determined by this same didactic end.³² Readers could enjoy the dizzying naturalistic descriptions of the function of the universe, but only so long as they understood that the world was a work of ineffable complexity that the human could never comprehend or feel at home in.

Like his letters to Hill and Mallett, Thomson's poem chose to neglect moral austerities and emphasize feelings of fullness and interaction. The *Seasons* re-enacts the individual's feeling for individual scenes and things: the sublime joy of watching a thunderstorm, the pride of watching a harvest, or the gentle affection that comes from hearing birdsong. Thomson's virtual nature is taken as a real presence that the body immediately responds to, a life-world whose individual parts (birds, storms, etc) the individual interacts directly with. This aspect of Thomson is available on nearly every page of the *Seasons*:

Thus the glad Skies,
The wide-rejoycing Earth, the Woods, the Streams,
With every Life they hold, down to the Flower
That paints the lowly Vale, or Insect-Wing
Wav'd o'er the Shepherd's Slumber, touch the Mind

ascribed to the Supreme Being in his Formation of the World, when he tells us, that He created her, and saw her, and numbered her, and poured her out upon all his Works.' (Spectator 339)

32 As Thomson and Duck were making their poetic innovations, many works in the 1720s echoed the older and by then quite respectable philosophy of physico-theology. In particular, popular essays by Henry Needler, Hildebrand Jacob, and Tamworth Resesby celebrate the fullness of nature and its infinite ability to please and delight. Needler, 1724: 'The Beauty of the Universe plainly shows that (the Creator) provided not only for the Necessity but even for the innocent Delight and Entertainment of all his sensible Creatures.' Jacob, 1725: 'All the vast, and wonderful Scenes, either of Delight, or Horror, which the Universe affords, have (a sublime) Effect upon the Imagination, such as unbounded Prospects, particularly that of the Ocean, in its different Situations of Agitation, or Repose; the rising and setting Sun; the Solemnity of Moon Light; all the Phanomena in the Heavens, and Objects of Astronomy.'

To Nature tun'd, with a light-flying Hand,
Invisible; quick-urging, thro' the Nerves,
The glittering Spirits, in a Flood of Day.³³

The use of definite articles (*the* glad skies, *the* lowly Vale, *the* Nerves) makes the objects described seem to have specific external referents. Each thing has a distinct role in the scene and each is given a sort of equal dignity in the ceaseless panoply of nature, as the 'Insect-Wing' receive as much attention as 'the Woods' or the 'Shepherd.' Hence, while the poem is clearly creating an artful and pleasing picture of natural unity, it implies that the objects it leads forth are literal and empirical.³⁴ The resulting literal-virtual means that nature itself can seem to be a fully pleasing and fully captivating work of art.

Simplicity and Happiness in Thomson and Duck

The wording of the *Seasons* insinuates that the literal-virtual is an ethical way of being and not merely a form of polite aesthetic reception. It frequently dramatizes the moments of happiness of 'simple' humans who live closely and intimately connected to the natural world. These are not merely figures of Schillerian naivete but rather virtuous

33 'Spring,' ll 892-905.

34 This sensibility is usually considered the 'Shaftesburyean' aspect of the *Seasons*, the part that takes the rapturous mode of Theocles in Shaftesbury's *Moralists* and extends its enthusiasm to all of nature. Inglesfield (2001) has shown the clear influence of Shaftesbury on Thomson, but it should be noted that Theocles' brief enthusiastic effusion in the *Moralists* is the culmination of a long and wide-reaching philosophical argument, and its acts as a chip in a larger political-ethical argument for natural religion (within a book with all sorts of arguments for 'polite' thought). By contrast, such reveries *are* the argument of the *Seasons*, attuning to nature is the means by which the subject feels a sense of happiness

This fact allowed Thomson's contemporaries to read the idea of pure experience with nature into the poem. Shaftesbury supplied Thomson with the idea that rapturous identification with nature as philosophically and ethically useful, but the weight of Shaftesbury's classically-influenced skepticism and self-examination, and his insistent defense of 'raillery' and satire throughout the *Characteristicks* precluded him from being associated with the kind of simplicity and purity of feeling that the relative anonymity of Thomson allowed. In other words, while readers first confronting the raptures of the *Moralists* could not ignore Shaftesbury as an intensely skeptical patriot aristocrat heavily invested in the idea of natural religion, readers first confronting the reveries in the *Seasons* knew nothing of Thomson or the system that supported his nature-philosophy, and thus could see its author as a graceful poetic spirit completely dominated by his feeling for nature. Thomson and the poem *was* simply interaction with nature, the pure embrace and poeticization of a waiting natural world.

philosophers as sublime as Thomson's great model of 'Social Love,' Hill. The following passage dramatizes the immediate connection between landscape and virtue that a simple shepherd feels, showing how keeping his consciousness tied close to the land produces the moment of happiness that he had attributed to Hill and Mallett:

When *Autumn's* yellow lustre gilds the world,
And tempts the sickled swain into the field,
Seiz'd by the general joy...
Even *Winter* wild to him is full of bliss.
The mighty tempest, and the hoary waste,
Abrupt, and deep, stretch'd o'er the bury 'dearth,
Awake to solemn thought...With swift wing,
O'er land, and sea, imagination roams;
Or *truth, divinely breaking on his mind,*
Sates his being, and unfolds his powers;
*Or in his breast heroic virtue burns.*³⁵

In another passage toward the end of the poem, however, the narrator implies that interactions with nature itself can yield a non-transcendent sort of happiness. The narrator begins by fretting that 'feverish vanity' and the 'sleep of the sensual' makes the subject miss out on the 'fleeting moments of too short a life' that bring happiness. The passage then goes on to show how moments of happiness come from dwelling fully in natural environments:

Rous'd by the cock, the soon-clad shepherd leaves
His mossy cottage, where with *Peace* he dwells;
And from the crowded fold in order drives
His flock, to taste the verdure of the morn.
Falsely luxurious, will not man awake,
And, starting from the bed of sloth, enjoy
The cool, the fragrant, and the silent hour.³⁶

The simple shepherd alone can dwell fully with Peace and feel the virtuous happiness that communion with the external world brings.

The narrator of the *Seasons* is portrayed as 'devoted to...better themes' and concerned about 'virtue struggling on the brink of vice,' but he never claims to have

35 'Autumn,' ll 1325-38.

36 'Summer,' ll 62-8.

reached the state of perfect contentment that these simple shepherds do. Indeed, considering his poems' obvious learning, its ambitions, and its frequent gestures at scientific and ethical philosophy, Thomson himself could not appear to be a simple sensibility. His contemporary Stephen Duck, on the other hand, appears to have risen to popularity precisely because he could be such a simple being. Duck is best-known as the century's first great 'peasant-poet,' a supposedly self-taught poet who achieved fame and a royal commission from Queen Caroline in 1730 shortly after he was discovered by the well-connected man of letters, Joseph Spence.³⁷ As a rural laborer, Duck stood as a clear alternative to the artificially simple characters of neoclassical pastoral, and to the educated Whiggish philosopher-poets like Mallet and Hill, who were obviously neither in touch with the land nor free from the taint of ambition. Duck was able to serve as the ultimate figure of pious submission to the whole, and his immense popularity in the early 1730s shows how important his version of aestheticized virtue was for the period.

Duck's popularity reveals how the virtuous sensibility was becoming more important for cultural patriotism in the 1730s. After Spence introduced him to the London court, Queen Caroline quickly gave him a sinecure so that he could continue writing. Betty Rizzo has shown how this gesture was a key part of Caroline's own efforts to appear a virtuous, 'patriot queen' who valued populist simplicity over an affected, Tory elitism.³⁸ Indeed, Duck's very topics and themes—the countryside, piety, poverty, labour

37 At the time when he met Duck, Spence was Professor of Poetry at Oxford, a post which his friendship with Alexander Pope was largely responsible for. He was also friendly with Robert and Lowth, Edward Young, and a host of publishers and literary aristocrats, which relationships allowed him to promote Duck rapidly and effectively in 1730.

38 Betty Rizzo sees Caroline's patronage of Stephen Duck as the Queen's way of getting back at Alexander Pope and the Scriblerians, who would've liked to see the patronage go elsewhere and who in turn harshly mock Duck and his suckling at the teat of the queen. Samuel Johnson, then a very young man, noted that Caroline 'incited a competition among those who attend the court, who should most

and the lower classes—were supplied by the aristocrats and literati who first encountered him. By the time Caroline came into contact with him, Duck had already written the poems that would comprise his first volume and launch his career, and each was written at the explicit suggestion of a patron. The poem for which Duck is best known today, the 'Thresher's Labour' (in addition to the short poem 'On Poverty') was suggested by Duck's first patron, Dr. Alured Clarke, and the topic and moral of the other long poem in his first collection, 'The Shunamite,' was suggested by another early patron. By making Duck into a pious and earnest 'simple' poet, these patrons were showing how the new sense of experiential virtue was becoming increasingly important and timely.

A group of long-neglected poems he wrote just after receiving patronage from Caroline show how he positioned himself as a simple sensibility in touch with nature.³⁹ The first of the poems, 'On Providence,' notes that the narrator formerly 'laboured...like the industrious Bees...for a trifling Sum' but comments that his hard labor allowed him to come into close contact with humble things and develop a simple appreciation of them:

The Wife would say, How can you be content?
I know not how to pay your Quarter's Rent.
I bid her look on Birds in Bushes there,
And see the little silly Insect here;
Behold the Order of the Universe,
And ask the Hen and Chickens for a Purse.⁴⁰

The lines express a sort of complete satisfaction with the 'Birds in the Bushes' and the 'little sill Insect,' advertising how simple observation of surrounding things produce contentment. As in Duck's other poems, the simple sensibility 'On Providence' portrays

promote (Duck's) interest.'

39 As William Christmas notes, Duck advertised his piety and obedience *ad nauseam*, continually thanking Caroline and voicing his unworthiness for her attention but, as I argue, the two poems of 1731 show him not simply reaffirming the ideological righteousness of class structure but rather demonstrating Duck's authentic dwelling with humble things and simple settings.

40 Duck, 'On Providence,' *op cit*.

cannot transcend its environment and finds contentment in relationships with things around it.

The other poem from the 1731 collection, 'On Royal Benevolence,' relates Duck's argument specifically to the topic of virtue, arguing that this simple contentment with the local was necessary for national well-being. The narrator begins by calling himself a 'reptile' and 'muck-worm' unworthy of the queen's attention before announcing his awareness that the queen has called on him because of his simplicity⁴¹. The narrator declares that he will make create inspiring verse out of everything he passes in his day-to-day life:

When e're I view the Grain in Barn or Field,
Or see a Farm that does God's Blessing veild;
The Prospect will such Contemplation raise,
As must begin in Joy, and end in Praise.
No Meadow green, or Stack or Cock of Hay,
But where I view will furnish an Essay.⁴²

The poem is thus more explicit than the *Seasons* in arguing that the simple poet has the obligation to draw forth local nature and announce the dignity of each natural object and each living thing.⁴³

41 'On Poverty' also underscores how the Queen herself uses virtuous happiness as her guide in making decisions. Caroline has the same pious love of nature that Duck has, though Caroline, free of the limitations of a 'simple' consciousness, can range over the whole of the universe and appreciate God's order within it:

...the Objects of my Praise will be,
The mighty Lord, and her great Majesty...
He saw her Majesty made up of Love,
And often heard her Orrisons above.
To know his Will, and knowing it to do
His Work, is all She aims at here below.

As in nearly every other poem he writes, Duck advertises his piety, obedience to higher powers, and his gratitude for all things, but also implies that the queen has this same piety on a larger scale, which allows her to follow the dictates of God and reason more fully.

42 'On Royal Benevolence,' op cit.

43 I must disagree with Christmas' thesis that 'Duck provides an example of rightly-tuned plebeian submission to the social order that is useful to polite society ideologically because it reinforces their claim to social superiority'(Christmas 79). Duck's patrons go well out of their way to portray Duck's piety and his commitment to public service; the essay by Spence that introduced Duck to the literate world repeatedly insists that he wrote not for love of money or lust for fame but simply to be useful

The first poem in the collection, 'The Shunamite,' is a simple story of virtue rewarded: a pious woman living in a pious land grieves publicly over her son's death, and her earnest acceptance of God's mysterious ways is rewarded by a mysterious prophet-figure who resurrects her son. The poem thus appears to be a simple story of virtue rewarded, but the message is convoluted by the poem's attention to landscape and its persistent praise of interacting with local environments. The poem is full of Thomsonian passages pushing virtue, liberty, and 'simple' morality over affected and arbitrary pomp ('this we prefer to Pomp, and formal Show...Refulgent Ornaments, which dress the Proud/ Objects of Wonder to the gazing Crowd'), and it argues resolutely that being content in a small section of land alone can bring a moral *happiness*: 'let us in our Native Soil remain/ Nor barter Happiness for sordid Gain.' As the following passage makes clear, such piety requires the belief that nature gives back to the human for its piety and that God speaks his gratitude through nature:

All nature is subservient to thy Word...
 All things obey thy Divine Command,
 Thou mak'st a fruitful Field of barren Land:
 Th' obdurate Rock a fertile Glebe shall be,
 And brige forth copious Crops, if bid by Thee;
 Arabia's Desert shall with Plenty smile,
 And fruitful Vines adorn the uncultivated Soil

In keeping with this, the poem closes with a Thomsonian celebration of the rational

ecstasy that comes from the pious contemplation of the harmony of God's works,

and elevating, observing that Duck worshiped the Bible and Milton far above any other work (with Addison a distant third) and always preferred such elevating works over those mere productions of wit like *Hudibras*. Duck's first patron, Clarke, also expressed concern that he be separated from and given protection against 'the Wits': 'it would be prudent not to expose (Duck) to the malice of the Dunciad Club.' (Clarke 1730, quoted in Christmas 78) The fact that Duck's first poems written for the queen are more or less ostentatious pronouncements of his piety and simplicity indicate that Duck too was aware that he had to be a pious and simple poet—a different kind of poet from the elite London set—in order to promote a certain image of him, as much as he himself needed to be 'simple' to write the sort of poems he did. At the very least, polite society *needs* Duck to exist, needs a simple and authentic sensibility to exist so it can have an authentic object to rally around and celebrate without skepticism, hesitation, or self-awareness.

enumerating the glorious Sun, the Moon, the Orbs, the Terrestrial Globe, liquid Seas that all speak God's glory:

Ye wandering Rivers, and each purling Stream,
As ye pursue your Course, his praise proclaim:
Ye Dews, and Mists, and humid Vapours, all
Praise when ye rise, and praise him when ye fall.

Duck's poem makes clear that virtue is rewarded not with a sense of the order of the universe (as moral sense theories and physico-theology of the time maintain) place in heaven (as Methodists of the time emphasize), but with a happy and ecstatic union with the landscape.

The 'Shunamite' was Duck's most popular and most praised poem during the 1730s, but by the poem his readers of the last century have focused on, 'The Thresher's Labour,' also participates in this logic of harmonious unity with the environment. The poem is often seen as a profoundly and shockingly realistic description of the horrors of rural wage-laborers, but, in light of Duck's poems from the same period, it can more accurately be seen as a celebration of a being completely given over to interactions with the immediate rural environment. The poem begins with an echo of Thomson, announcing that it will 'sing the Toils of each revolving Year,' changing out his 'toils' for Thomson's 'natural scenes,' and much of the early part of poem is comprised of patient description of the quotidian processes of nature and work, for example: 'Soon as the Harvest hath laid bare the Plains,/ And Barns well fill'd reward the Farmer's Pains;/ What Corn each Sheaf will yield, intent to hear,/ And guess from thence the Profits of the Year.' However, as it goes on, the poem's rhetorical structure is characterized by new beginnings giving way to painful realizations:

How beauteous all things in the Morn appear,

There Villages, and pleasing Cots are here;
So many pleasing Objects meet the Sight,
The ravish'd Eye could willing gaze 'till Night:
But long e'er then, where-e'er their Troops have past,
Those pleasant Prospects lie a gloomy Waste.

In this and several other passage, work is made to seem a cycle of Thomsonian excitement followed by a descent into barrenness. A feast the master gives to celebrate a successful harvest receives = only six lines before the narrator announces that 'the next Morning soon reveals the Cheat,/ When the same Toils we must again repeat.'⁴⁴ The narrator clearly wants the untranscendable repetition of rural work—its endless cycle of tasks that the worker can never say no to—to dominate the poem, a point that the poem ensures won't be missed: 'Hard Fate! Our Labours ev'n in Sleep don't cease,/ Scarce *Hercules* e'er felt such Toils as these.'⁴⁵

Yet the poem's grimness also demonstrates that the narrator is no fictional character but rather a real worker who has lived with all of the scenes, objects, and people he writes about. The technical aspects of Duck's poem—both the Thomsonian descriptions of work and the changing landscape (Winter hides his hoary Head,/ And Nature's Face is with new Beauty spread;/ The Spring appears, and kind Refreshing

44 The 'Thresher's Labour' is told from the point of view of a collective voice, a generalized 'we' that differs from Duck's other poems of the same time. This use of 'we' generalizes the narrator's point of view and his suffering, attributing a similar attitude to his fellow peasants—at least those who strive to transcend the misery of their immediate surroundings—and making its observations implicitly apply to all rural workers and all of the British countryside. The sensibility of this 'we' is furthermore less meditative and more caught up in the routine forward motion of life than Duck's usual poetic persona; it doesn't have the resources of politeness, the Addisonian ability to transcend miserable, isolated situations through reflection on beauty and the totality of nature (cf. *Spectator* 411: 'a man in a dungeon is capable of entertaining himself with scenes and landscapes more beautiful than any that can be found in the whole compass of nature.'). But there is also a virtue in dwelling in this dungeon of a rural world, since the poetic persona of the 'Thresher's Labour' is tied to the landscape and embedded within it more fully and immediately than Duck's usual Addisonian polite sensibility could be.

45 Goodridge and Christmas call the poem 'anti-pastoral,' a judgment Duck has his narrator underscore: 'No fountains murmur here, no Lambkins play,/ No linets warble, and no Fields look gay;/ 'Tis a dull and melancholy Scene,/ Fit only to provoke the Muses Spleen' (and elsewhere, 'can we, like Shepherds, tell a merry Tale?/ The Voice is lost, drown'd to the noisy Flail').

Showers/ New clothe the Field with Grass, and deck with Flowers) and the more Zolaesque details of rural life ('no kind Barns with friendly Shades are nigh,/ Our weary Scythes entangle in the Grass,/ And Streams of Sweat run trickling down a-pace')—help authenticate that the narrator truly has been embedded and surrounded in the local world. In other words, the poem's grimness makes this world come to life, and the pathos behind the narration refuses to let the narrator see them as yet another instance of factitious neoclassical nature. The narrator uses this grim, anti-pastoral realism to capture a sensibility totally consumed by the local and incapable of thinking or feeling anything outside of it. Thus, though far from the Potemkin villages we may associate with aristocratic fantasies of poverty, the poem's fantasy of feeling fully a part of the environment presumably brought a certain pleasure of materiality to the readers that made Duck's first volume the best-selling poetic work of 1730.

The Demise of Shaftesburyean Natural Ethics

The larger ethical and political importance of this new sort of virtue can be seen by contrasting the new nature poets with the natural ethics of Shaftesbury, a figure long acknowledged as a major source for the philosophy of virtue and nature behind the new nature poems. Shaftesbury was the most popular moral philosopher of the entire eighteenth century (Locke was the only philosophical author printed more frequently during the century) and was at the peak of influence during the 1720-30s when the nature poets were active. Shaftesbury's complicated oeuvre straddles many positions, but it is firmly grounded in the logic of virtue, which he borrowed from the Whig

Commonwealthmen of the 1680-90s and which he was most responsible for bringing to a wide audience in the 1710-30s. For Shaftesbury, the love of country is an absolute command that no honest human could refuse: 'Of all human Affections, the noblest and most becoming human nature, is that of love to one's country.' Like Bolingbroke and Trenchard and Gordon, Shaftesbury stresses how this love of the common good follows from a set of natural feeling that monarchical or otherwise hierarchical societies suppress: 'A PUBLICK Spirit can come only from a social Feeling or Sense of Partnership with Human Kind. Now there are none so far from being Partners in this Sense, or Sharers in this *common affection* as they who scarcely know an Equal, nor consider themselves as subject to any Laws of Fellowship or Community...(no) Community subsisted amongst Courtiers...(nor) Public between an Absolute Prince and his Slave-Subjects'⁴⁶ For Shaftesbury, authentic happiness comes only from community and from a sense of active and equal participation in national well-being.

However, Shaftesbury is also clear that what he calls 'Community' must be thought of only as an abstraction, never as something to be experienced. In fact, in a famous passage he rails against 'blind' patriots who love their country simply because it is theirs, and who follows the boorish instinct to love and protect its soil: "Tis a wretched aspect of humanity which we figure to ourselves when we would endeavour to resolve the very essence and foundation of this generous passion into a relation to mere clay and dust...(or) to such a relation as that of a mere fungus or common excrescence, to its parent-mould, or nursing dunghill."⁴⁷ In other words, a patriotism from the instinctive

46 *Sensus Communis*, III, i, I

47 *Miscellaneous Reflections*, Ch 1, part 3.

love of soil, rather than from higher rational feelings, remains a base desire and can never bring true happiness. A famous opponent of 'enthusiasm,' Shaftesbury cannot affirm any particular object or environment as good in and of itself, not even nature.

Shaftesbury's philosophy of art further contravenes the model of natural community that readers found in Duck and Thomson. For Shaftesbury, art's primary role is training a taste for free interaction and a disdain for luxury and hierarchy,⁴⁸ but it was only supposed to train the reader or viewer to love *political* or *ethical* freedom and not seek a kind of experiential happiness. The greatest artwork thus captures at 'the *appearance* of the greatest Ease and Negligence' and conveys a natural alacrity that signifies courage as well as grace.⁴⁹ Such art trains people in a free society to rule and participate in a nation—in viewing it, one learns how to comport oneself with others, how to be autonomous and free of the slavishness that stripped the dignity from so much Continental work.⁵⁰

The feeling of participation found in the new nature poetry thus promised a very different sort of 'natural' virtue than that of the Commonwealth tradition of political

48 Crucial to this task was warding off the taste for 'Opulence, Splendour, and Affectation of Magnificence' that was perceived to be overrunning the country. Shaftesbury argues that Continental art, sublime though much of it is, served only to flatter and bolster the authority of monarchs and absolutist rulers. Courtly, ruling-class art represented a system of arbitrary power and submission, embodied most fully by the French monarchy (which threatened 'the World with a Universal Monarchy, and a new Abyss of Ignorance and Superstition'). Powerful and 'elevating' art could indeed come out of this system but such elevation was not to be trusted, and the rational subject must not indulge it too much. Hence Shaftesbury acknowledges that Vergil and Horace were absolute artistic masters but notes that their works offered the 'corrupting sweets' that prepared its readers to 'see without regret its Chain of Bondage' and 'bear with patience those natural and genuine Tyrants who succeeded to this specious Machine of Arbitrary and Universal Power.'

49 Ibid

50 Klein summarizes the function of art within Shaftesbury's 'regime of politeness' in the last chapter of *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, especially pp. 201-6. Klein points out that Shaftesbury often rails against having faith in science's ability to understand the *actual* or factual order of the universe. Such pursuits result in 'the Comparison and Compounding of Ideas...and all that Dinn and Noise of Metaphysicks.' The beauty or perfection of the universe must remain a hypothesis or intuition for Shaftesbury rather than a carefully constructed scientific fact.

ethics. The latter was founded on the human's natural will to dedicate himself to the common good, but it denied that the common good could ever be felt or experienced—and also that the common good should even be thought of as an entity. As responses to Duck and Thomson showed, the new idea of a community that one felt and found happiness in modified the structure of virtue in important ways.

Simplicity and Virtuous Resistance in Responses to Duck and Thomson

As the examples of Duck's and Thomson's 'simple' figures show, the new nature poetry required a passive persona capable of having his or her consciousness totally consumed by external objects. By repeatedly dramatizing the satisfaction of 'simple' dwelling with nature, these poems offered what I call *allegories* of political happiness, showing how giving oneself up to the environment could bring full satisfaction. Like the happiness of Trenchard and Gordon, theirs was hard-fought; it could only be achieved by giving up easy pleasures and committing to the difficult relationship with local nature that opposed a vicious, greedy majority, and its payoff was more satisfying than any base, sensory pleasure.

Contemporary responses to each poet showed how readers identified commitment to difficult virtue and a sense of nature as a community as the primary accomplishments of the poets' works. Because of Duck's meteoric rise to celebrity, he received more immediate attention from the public (in particular from other would-be laborer-poets), which insisted that Duck's verse came out of direct contact with 'the soil.' A 1737 poem by 'A gentleman of Oxford' praises Duck as a simple persona ('O happy Swain!') and

notes that his works were seamlessly elegant ('How graceful is thy Song!'), a fact which testifies to the greatness of British culture: '(we) humbly own that these unpolish'd Strains/ Flow from the meanest of the British Swains.' The poem observes that Milton himself would be moved by such 'strains' and concludes calling Duck a 'matchless Bard' who rose on his own merits. Another anonymous poem from the mid-1730s ('To Mr Stephen Duck') compares Duck to Milton and Homer in his simple and pure poetic spirit, while a poem of 1731 notes Duck a 'most abundant Crop of Golden Grain' from his native soil. A poem from 1737 by 'A person in obscure life' shows how Duck's verse brought local happiness to his area and that, since he has left the countryside for London, his 'fellow swains' (sic) have grown depressed, the fields and barns are deserted, and 'the feather'd Choir neglect their warbled Lays.' When Duck was present, by contrast, they sang 'serene and fair' songs and united the whole landscape. In the end, Duck is seen as a spirit capable of uniting any scene he came in contact with: 'as the changing Seasons roll along,/ What flowing Pleasures meet thy various Song!/ Each Vale, or Stream, green Covert, Shade, or Grove,/ Hill, Field, or Law; a pleasing Subject prove.'⁵¹

Some lengthier tributes by fellow worker-poets note how Duck's 'simple' proximity to the soil let him make 'perfect,' fully satisfying poet. The 'Brick-layers Miscellany' of 1735 notes that Duck's spirit appeals to all ('all admire the beauties of thy Strain') and that his subjects can't help but stir up all free citizens: 'the Theme be modest, smooth and free,/ Pleasing to all, by all accepted be.' The future bookseller Robert Dodsley's lengthier 'An epistle from a footman in London' (1731) celebrates the 'Learning, Judgment, and a Taste refin'd' of natural poets over the false polish of refined

51 *The Artless Muse: being six poetical essays on various subjects*, 8-12.

ones, but looks forward to the time when all poets of talent and feeling can 'reach Perfection.' Dodsley's poem is part tribute to Duck and part argument for Dodsley's own merit as an untutored genius, and its key passage is a long conceit portraying the two poets as fledgling birds. After an introductory Thomsonian passage ('oft you must have seen/ When vernal Suns adorn the Woods with green,/ And genial Warmth, enkindling wanton Love,/ Fills with a various Progeny the Grove'), the poem argues that worker-poets, like birds in spring, must be given encouragement to make their voices from rude chirps into glorious hymns worthy of fame:

So You (i.e. Duck) and I, just naked from the Shell,
 In chirping Note our future Singing tell;
 Unfeather'd ye in Judgment, Thought, or Skill,
 Hop round the Basis of Parnassus Hill...
 fledg'd and strengthened with a kindly Spring,
 We'll mount the Summit, and melodious sing⁵²

These 'unfeather'd' poets have the necessary simplicity to create august works of the imagination, which are precisely what the nation needs right now.

Early poetic responses to the *Seasons* (there is little in prose until the 1750s) portrayed Thomson similarly as a figure of completeness, but the figure that emerges in them is a near-heroic personage who resisted venal corruption and achieved a lasting communion with nature. An early response by Rev Moses Browne, for instance, writes of Thomson's commitment to nature as an act of heroic moral resistance:

doubly hail!
 Restorer of the poets sinking name!
 Not thee the sons of vanity engage
 Skill'd in the trifling mode, affected mien,
 And empty elegance of dress and form.
 Thou better know'st t' employ the amusive hour
 Contemplative of nature's ample page
 While with the various scenes you deck your song...
 O Britain's happier Orpheus! born to charm
 A senseless iron offspring: timely born

⁵² *An epistle from a footman in London to the celebrated Stephen Duck*, 3-8.

To rouse her genius and redeem her fame.⁵³
 Browne hails Thomson as a complete poet worthy of veneration (if not worship) because of his special relationship with the 'nature's ample page.' Resisting the easier pleasures of wit and the 'empty elegance' of courtly forms, Thomson appears as a sort of hero for having directed his poetry to nature, a savior 'timely born/ to rouse (Britain's) genius and redeem her fame.' Thomson's will to suffer in order to overcome the 'senseless iron offspring' of the corrupt Walpolean age can be seen in a slightly later tribute to the *Seasons*:

Teach me,
 Like thee, to stand unmov'd 'gainst Rage of States
 And Crush of Nations; from the World escap'd
 In still Retreats of Nations; from the World escap'd
 Teach me, like thee, *with such a Master-hand*
 To...*touch each Thought*
 To *swell into Perfection* — Oh! teach me (!)⁵⁴

In this poet's account, Thomson stands apart from the social world and creates a small, private, world of moral perfection.⁵⁵ This private world is notably positioned as an alternative to the 'Rage of Nations' but it appears as a kind of capstone or payoff for the commitment to virtue that the author hopes Thomson can inspire him to assume. The earliest verse-tribute to Thomson (1734) underscores this same sense of heroic creation of 'a little new world' of happiness that Thomson created by calling forth nature:

Blest Bard! with what new lustre dost thou rise,
 Soft as the season o'er the summer skies;
 Thy works a little world new found appear,
 And thou the Phoebus of a heaven so fair;
 Thee their bright sov'reign all the signs allow,
 And Thomson is another name for nature now.⁵⁶

53 Browne, 'To the Author of the Seasons.' (1736)

54 'Thirsis' 1748

55 This particular passage is governed by the ideology of apostrophe and hero-worship—prevalent in the 1740s—that I will discuss at length in chapter three. William Collins' much better-known poem on Thomson's death make a similar claim for Thomson's completeness and special relationship with nature in identifying him as a 'Druid.'

56 Anonymous 1730 in *Edinburgh Weekly*.

Thomson here is a figure arising from nowhere to announce the 'heaven' of nature and offer it to others as a 'little world' of happiness and virtuous perfection.

Poetic responses from the 1740-50s also tended to emphasize Thomson as a 'perfect' sensibility, but they portrayed him as prophet who used his almost esoteric knowledge of nature to inspire a lethargic public. Readers in particular tended to see Thomson as 'Britain's Orpheus,' a figure who could not only give poetic shape to nature (as, say, pastoralists could) but was given an Adamic ability to *intuit* it.⁵⁷ The following cento of quotes from various poetic responses to the *Seasons* shows the re-imagining of Thomson as a spirit of nature directly inspired by it:

Hail, Nature's poet! *whom she taught alone*
To sing her works in number's like her own,
Sweet as the Thrush, that warbles in the vale,
And soft as Philomela's tender tale⁵⁸

Thompson! *enamour'd Nature's darling care,*
Who bade him all her noblest talents share;
With him to streams, and groves, and vales retir'd,
Inform'd his judgment, and his fancy fir'd,
Consign'd her faithful pencil to his hand,
And taught him all her wonders to expand.
So strong his colours, so divine his art,
Such beauty forms, such life inspires each part,
With keener transports scarce our eyes pursue
The great original, from which he drew.⁵⁹

With charms improv'd all nature seem'd to glow,
When her own Thomson climb'd the mountains brow.
"O thou the child of blooming fancy born,
Bright as the noon, and beaut'ous as the morn,
Who stray'st with rapture thro' the flow'ry plain,
And to creation's wonders tune the strain..."⁶⁰

57 Blackwell speaks to the second aspect of Orpheus in his 1735 *Enquiry into the life and writings of Homer*:

'Orpheus' Misstress was *Musick*. The Powers of it are enchanting. It lulls the Reason, and raises the Fancy in so agreeable a manner, that *we forget ourselves* while it lasts: The Mind turns dissolute and gay; and hugs itself in all the deluding Prospects and fond Wishes of a *golden Dream*.'

58 William Thomson, 1763

59 Anonymous ('G.G.') 1758

60 Anonymous 1757

When *Nature first inspir'd thy early Strain,*
To paint the Beauties of the flow'ry Plain,
Th' enchanting Page I read with fond Delight,
And every lively Landskip charm'd my Sight⁶¹

Nature in his hand
A pencil, dip'd in her own colours, plac'd,
With which the ever-faithful copyist drew
Each feature in proportion just.⁶²

chapter three of the current work discusses how poets in the 1740-50s moved virtue into the imagination, but for now I would only like to point how Thomson's reader made him into a kind of seer who could penetrate the veil of Isis at will.⁶³ Nature itself inspired Thomson, not the sociable feelings and inclination to virtue that the *Seasons* itself celebrates, and Thomson has become a part of Nature that is as truthful and reliable as the sun itself.

Duck and Thomson were thus portrayed as poets who suffered to bring nature to the public and thereby reform its wayward morality. These responses show, however, how Nature had come to be thought of as a place of fullness, a realm of plenitude that could bring a sensation of complete satisfaction and happiness. Unlike the 'delight' of neoclassical pastoral, the new nature poetry's happiness was still closely tied to the logic of virtue. Neoclassical delight in nature was simply pleasurable, a leisure-activity meant to relax and please, while the new happiness was thought of as the deepest fulfillment that a human being could have. This transformation of nature brought with it a hiccup in the logic of virtue which reshuffled its parts. On one hand, this gave the the subject was taught a more earnest love of community and a more concrete goal for virtue than the

61 Anonymous 1730 in *Edinburgh Weekly*

62 William Hayward Roberts, 1773

63 John Barrell and Harriet Guest's Gramscian argument that the *Seasons* gives a sense of unity only through sheer exhaustion of contraries and repetition of opposed viewpoints captures the confusion of the philosophical, social and ethical argument of the *Seasons* but de-emphasizes the degree to which the poem was read as an unprecedentedly complete and self-sufficient work. See Barrell and Guest (1996).

mere ideas or principles of moral sense theory, but, on the other hand, it meant this object was no longer a pure ideal.

Conclusion: Life after Simplicity

The idea of nature as a refuge and place of happiness became increasingly reified in the 1730-40s. Though Duck and Thomson apparently only wished to communicate that feeling nature could train one to have the sort of piety necessary to produce virtuous political happiness, their work suggested that dwelling with nature could produce happiness by itself. As a result, their poetry put a much larger value on *passivity* than the Shaftesburyean or Bolingbrokean theory of virtue had, implying that passive experience could produce happiness and serve as an end in itself.

However, the works and careers of the two poets after they gained fame quickly revealed problems with this passive and aestheticized model of virtue. Once granted a sinecure as the Queen's gardener, Duck continued to write poetry but ceased to identify himself as a naïve rustic. His verse from the later 1730s was broadly patriotic, musing about the glories of British history and national events rather than the soil or the details of everyday life, and it failed to achieve anything close to the popularity of his books of verse published from 1729-31. Critics and fellow poets continued to write about him as the virtuous peasant poet—the first figure in the great tradition of peasant poets that lasted throughout the century—but Duck himself placed little value on the ideal of ignorance that he was associated with, especially after Caroline died. Following her death, Duck became a minister and, by the 1740s, he ceased to write poetry altogether

before committing suicide in 1756.

Thomson was the far greater poetic talent but his later career was also fraught with disappointment and resistance to his early poetic persona. His output from 1730, when the first version of the *Seasons* was complete, until his death in 1744 was largely political, and his works from the 1730s in particular were as polemic as any works of poetry of the decade. Like many other literary figures in the 1730s, Thomson joined the cause of the Patriot Opposition, and his two major works of the decade, *Liberty* (1734) and *Alfred* (1740), were vehemently supportive of the Opposition's chief figures and its underlying ideologies. The works sold poorly, however, and Thomson's reputation continued to rest on the *Seasons*. Thomson's letters show him continually emphasizing the need to use art to rage against laziness, corruption, and venality, and not to engage in reveries with nature.⁶⁴

Indeed, though later versions of the *Seasons* were increasingly politicized and increasingly critical of Britain under Walpole, Thomson's later readers showed that his value came from the *Seasons*' feelings and techniques, and his politics merely got in the way of his descriptive genius. The ambivalence about Thomson's achievement in Johnson's 'Life of Thomson' reveals this clearly. On one hand Johnson echoes Thomson's contemporaries in seeing him as the poet who opened up nature: 'he looks round on Nature and on Life with the eye which Nature bestows only on a poet, the eye that

⁶⁴ For example, a letter to Hill from 1736 complains about the 'Corruption and Luxury' sweeping the nation: from 'that continual Tides of Riches, pour'd in upon this Nation by Commerce, have been lost again in the Gulph of ungraceful, inelegant, inglorious Luxury' (note the complaint here is about *bad taste*) 'But whence this want of Taste? Whence this sordid Turn to cautious Time-serving, Money-making, sneaking Prudence, instead of regardless, unfetter'd Virtue? To private Jobs, instead of public Works? To profitable, instead of fine Arts? To gain, instead of Glory?...It must be own'd however, that the better Genius of this Nation has often nobly exerted itself, and will struggle hard before it expire'

distinguishes in every thing presented to its view whatever there is on which imagination can delight to be detained, and with a mind that at once comprehends the vast, and attends to the minute. The reader of *The Seasons* wonders that he never saw before what Thomson shews him, and that he never yet has felt what Thomson impresses.' On the other hand, Johnson notes that the poem has the poem's unavoidable 'great defect' was a 'want of method'; the *Seasons*' form meant that it could only be an endlessly repeated string of natural description giving no guidance for the moral or political individual and engaging seriously with none of the issues of the day. Johnson clearly implies that the sort of reforming passion that underlay Thomson's poetry was ineffective and perhaps delusional prop for his poetry. Johnson thus concludes his life of Thomson with an abrupt dismissal of his long, zealous *Liberty*: 'Liberty, when it first appeared, I tried to read, and soon desisted. I have never tried again, and therefore will not hazard either praise or censure.' In perhaps the most telling criticism of Thomson's political ardor, John Aikin acknowledges the *Seasons*' 'genuine patriotism and zeal in the cause of liberty,' but only to complain that it got in the way of the unity and focus on nature that made the poem so great: 'just and important as his thoughts on these topics may be, there may remain a doubt in the breast of the critic, whether their introduction on a piece like this do not break in upon that unity of character which every work of art should support.'

65 Aikin, 'An essay on the plan and character of the *Seasons*' (1778), lix-lx. Aikin is probably most eager of all eighteenth century critics to canonize Thomson as the pathbreaking 'poet of Nature,' and his review often notes that Thomson, despite all his topical and political remarks, 'strictly adheres to the character of the Poet of Nature.' The fundamental importance of Thomson as founding figure is unmistakable in Aikin's critical review of the *Seasons*: 'founded as it is upon the unfading beauties of Nature, (the *Seasons*) will live as long as the language in which it is written shall be read.' (lxiii) He considered Thomson the greatest poet of 'genuine' nature—while Vergil and Milton had some good descriptions, 'it is in that truly excellent and original poem, Thomson's *Seasons*, that we are to look for the greatest variety of genuine observations in natural history.' (Aikin, *An Essay in the Application of Natural History to Poetry*, 1777) See chapter five for more on Aikin's critical ideology.

In the several hundred pages that Aikin devotes to Thomson's poem, there is consequently no mention of his politics or of the complicated ideological position his poems took, while discussions of his technique and careful attention to nature take up the entire book.

Though these two remarks are from much later in the century, and though many important changes to the aesthetics of virtue lay between the *Seasons* and these comments, they nevertheless show the erasure of political ethics from Thomson's ideal of natural community. This perhaps inevitably followed from the passive model of community that the *Seasons* presented, which likely looked especially non-political by contrast with the increasingly demonstrative and agitating political culture of the later 1730s. However, the model of passive community would remain important for poets of virtue looking to make their poetry speak to national morality. Thomson's poetry would be celebrated by every major poet and critic of virtue and virtual reality who followed him, and his ideal of using 'happy' passive experience to inspire love of social Truth and reward virtue would be taken up by later poets from Collins to Cowper.

CHAPTER TWO

'EARTH-BOUND SENSIBILITY': MATERIAL-COMMUNAL EXPERIENCE IN LITERARY HISTORICISM, 1735-60

This chapter's topic is the new way of envisioning social unity developed by historicist literary criticism in Britain from c.1735-60. As this chapter shows, the innovative and unique aspects of historicist work—its reconstruction of the material contexts of premodern cultures and its habit of dramatizing profound collective aesthetic experiences—presented a new image of collective unity and a new way of understanding how virtual experiences produce social harmony and happiness.¹ As the chapter shows, the writers

1 Historicism has often been treated as a key part of the rise of imagination and the genius in mid-century critical and aesthetic theory, but critics have generally overlooked the unique features of this work and consequently failed to understand its specific contributions. Many twentieth-century critics noted mid-eighteenth century criticism's celebration of premodern cultures just as British national self-identities had moved beyond ideas of divine right, feudal class hierarchy, and religious unity, but none have offered a satisfactory explanation of why early mid-eighteenth century writers pursued this paradox so intensely and made it the subject of so much innovative literary and historical work. Samuel Monk for instance sees the historicist criticism of Warburton, Blackwell, Lowth, and others in the 1730-50s as 'a cultural counterweight to the modernization and rationalization of society presented by the Enlightenment,' and Murray Pittock has more recently argued that such criticism's 'sentimental attitude towards the past' was 'one of the luxuries permitted by Enlightenment and Improvement.' Lovejoy too notes that 'primitivism' stands as a daydream that allows readers to temporarily escape the realities of modern life: 'partly because the very growth of an industrial civilization, with its complexity, its laboriousness, its aesthetic ugliness, and its further intensification of economic inequalities, lent at times a heightened appeal to the primitivist's picture of the life of the child of nature.' (quoted in Whitney, *Primitivism and the idea of progress*, xviii). These interpretations, it seems to me, imply nineteenth- and twentieth-century perspectives on the value of the 'simple' and 'innocent,' perspectives which are governed by ideas of leisure and diversion from the real (political) business of

responsible for historicism were all engaged in ideological battles about what political virtue was and how humans could naturally and freely form social collectives. In particular, the first great figure of literary historicism, Thomas Blackwell, argued that a certain type of attunement with nature produced the warm, enthusiastic social feelings necessary for 'happiness,' while subsequent Anglican critics argued that a rational religion based on moral principles and rituals was responsible for great nation-states of the past. No matter their ideology, all historicists argued that social unity derived from collective experiences of 'Truth' in which individuals felt a kind of social enthusiasm and committed themselves fully to the morals and missions of particular tribes, nations, or societies.

The chapter will argue that, despite the obvious ideological motives informing historicist criticism, the historicists' recreations of collective aesthetic experiences formed a new fantasy-image of social unity that could not be applied to the present and thus outstripped their ideological motives. Though these critics were ostensibly arguing about the origins of society and the origins of poetry, their repeated dramatizations of moments of spontaneous and voluntary unity ended up making a *de facto* universal argument about the nature of political harmony and social happiness. Indeed this criticism was responsible for reifying the idea that societies were united by a common *aesthetic sensibility*, and they were responsible for the belief that tribal or national 'spirit' came

life. Pre-modernist critics, however, did not think of their work as a diversion or a 'luxury,' since their re-imaginings of premodern societies were motivated by what they saw as their own society's most important values and pressing concerns: the necessity of having un-questioned common values or truths, the importance of passionate patriotism and public-minded virtue in a modern nation, and the need to affirm the essential 'Liberty' and 'Naturalness' of Great Britain. All of premodernist criticism is underwritten by the irreproachable value of such essential national objects as Nature, Truth, God, and Liberty, which the free-born Briton must voluntarily and freely approve of if the modern nation is to become a great, virtuous, flourishing place.

from a direct relationship with the land or soil. Hence this chapter will lay out the various contradictions between premodern and modern, political and aesthetic, that pervade historicist works, before arguing that it produced a new fantasy of collective aesthetic experiences as moments of absorbing happiness.

Since the seminal works of British literary historicism are not well known to twenty-first-century readers contemporary readers, I begin this chapter with a basic summary of its assumptions and innovations. All historicist criticism from 1735-60 centered on the imaginative recreation of the immediate and *material* contexts of great works of art. In particular, two related innovations—a philosophical belief that art and aesthetic experience lay at the heart of human society and a methodological commitment to recreating contexts in order to let readers *feel* the power of premodern works of art—set this work apart from its neighbors in criticism, literary history, and more directly political writing (such as polemic and pamphleteering). The first innovation is the magnification of the role of passive experiences in forging social and moral unity. Historicist critics continually argue or insinuate that aesthetic experiences infused collective spirit into great premodern nations and kept them unified on a day-to-day basis. As William Warburton, the figure most responsible for justifying and popularizing the genre, writes of Vergil, '(Vergil) wrote (the *Aeneid*), not to amuse old Women and Children, in a Winter's Evening...but for Men and Citizens, to instruct them in the Devoirs of Humanity and Society.' Richard Hurd, a close disciple of Warburton, updated this same point of view to late medieval England, arguing that 'Chivalry was no absurd or freakish

institution, but the natural and even sober effect of the feudal policy....the love of God and of the Ladies went hand in hand, in the duties and rituals of Chivalry.' All historicism critics this chapter treats share similar beliefs about the centrality of art in social units, be they tribes, nations, or empires.

The second, closely related innovation of historicism was that it intended to make readers *feel* the power of these works with the affective fullness that the original audience for them did. Robert Lowth, a relative latecomer to the genre, makes this methodological assumption clear while speaking of Hebrew poetry: 'He who would perceive the particular and interior elegances of the Hebrew poetry, must imagine himself exactly situated as the persons for whom it was written, or even as the writers themselves; he is to *feel them as a Hebrew*.² Lowth's colleague at Oxford, Thomas Warton, underscores the difficulty of the historicist critic's task: ' In reading the works of a poet who lived in a remote age, it is necessary that we should look back upon the customs and manners which prevailed in that age. We should endeavour to place ourselves in the writer's situation and circumstances... to discover how his turn of thinking, and manner of composing, were influenced by familiar appearances and established objects, which are utterly different from those with which we are at present surrounded.' As Warton's and Lowth's phrasing makes clear, the historicist critic, if his work is to succeed, must let his

2 Many more examples are available in Lowth's *Lectures*. For example: 'It is the first duty of a critic, therefore, to remark, as far as possible, the situation and habits of the author, the natural history of his country, and the scene of the poem. Unless we continually attend to these points, we shall scarcely be able to judge with any degree of certainty concerning the elegance or propriety of the sentiments: the plainest will sometimes escape our observation; the peculiar and interior excellences will remain totally concealed.' (118) 'Not only the antiquity of these writings forms a principal obstruction in many respects; but the manner of living, of speaking, of thinking, which prevailed in those times, will be found altogether different from our customs and habits. There is, therefore, great danger, lest, viewing them from an improper situation, and rashly estimating all things by our own standard, we form an erroneous judgment.' (55)

readers feel the appropriate type of passivity or receptivity, the right kind of aesthetic attunement that was the precondition for the powerful aesthetic receptions of the past.

This specific type of historicism goes much further than previous criticism in its attention to aesthetic receptivity and its insistence on conveying the specific manner in which individuals experience the collective through works of art. As a result, it continually proposes theories of aesthetic response and repeatedly *dramatizes* strong and deeply moving aesthetic experiences. For example, Thomas Blackwell, the undisputed pioneer of historicism, remarks that 'the original Cause of (literary) Passion must be some wondrous sublime thing, since it produces such admired Effects; Its Dictates, in many places, are received with profound Submission, and the Persons touched with it are held in high veneration.'³ Lowth's work speaks of the sublime as an experience conjoining of ethics, politics, and aesthetics:

reason speaks literally, the passions poetically. The mind, with whatever passion it be agitated, *remains fixed upon the object that excited it*... not satisfied with a plain and exact description, but adopts one agreeable to its own sensations, splendid or gloomy, jocund or unpleasant...I speak not merely of that sublimity which exhibits great objects with a magnificent display of imagery and diction; but that force of composition, whatever it be, which strikes and overpowers the mind, which excites the passions, and which expresses ideas at once with perspicuity and elevation... instead of disguising the secret feelings of the author, it lays them quite open to public view.⁴

Less theoretically inclined historicist critics also made bold statements about the irresistible and immediately compelling power of sublime imaginative writing, as Hurd does in his comments on Spenser: 'Spenser wrote rapidly from his own feelings...his graces please, because they are situated beyond the reach of art...unassisted and unrestrained by...deliberative judgment. In reading Spenser, if the critic is not satisfied, yet the reader is transported.' These and many other comments served to highlight the

3 Thomas Blackwell, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer*, 161

4 Lowth, *Lectures of the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, 192.

interaction of subject and art-object, body and imagination which I will argue was the source of this work's unique and lasting contributions.

With the exception of the overbearing Anglican ideologue, William Warburton, the key critics of historicism from 1735-60 were all explicitly *literary* and not political critics; indeed figures like Thomas Blackwell, Robert Lowth, and Thomas Warton represent some of the first expressly literary academics in Britain. Their innovations in historicist criticism thus provide insight into the nexus of nationalism, abstract aesthetic experience, and the professional study of history out of which the profession of the literary critic and the idea of a materialist aesthetic 'truth' arose.

Historicism from 1660 to 1735

Historicism borrowed much from previous critical systems, but its substantial innovations allowed it to focus more closely on actual aesthetic experiences. An obvious but ultimately superficial influence was the seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century view that each nation and each epoch had its own 'spirit' or character. French neoclassical critics like St. Evremond and Bouhours, as well as British critics who followed them like Dryden, Temple, and Oldmixon, frequently noted as much in theorizing about the nature and function of poetry.⁵ Shaftesbury also famously emphasized the 'unique Genius' of each people, while Addison frequently made similar comments (e.g. 'A Composer should fit his Musick to the Genius of the People') and

5 Bouhours for instance noted with scandal that 'every nation has its own peculiar relish in Wit, as well as in Beauty, in Clothes, and in every thing else.' Alok Yadav argues authoritatively that neoclassicism assumed relativism, noting that the climatological perspective on national cultural was assumed by Milton, Temple, Blackmore, Addison, du Bos, and other literary critics before Montesquieu and thus was 'hardly a modern development of the age of Enlightenment.'

even noted that great artists can spontaneously make their own rules and thus define poetic 'Truth' for a particular place and time.⁶ However, the historicist viewpoint was easily subsumed by the more primary rules and values of French neoclassicism and British politeness, though, and became merely a way of preserving distance and a sort of frame for a universalized aesthetic realm that both forms of criticism assumed.⁷

A closer and more significant jumping-off point for the new contextualizing critics was the writing of the 1720-30s that employed politically-charged mythic history, especially those involved with the Patriot Opposition. The Opposition's use of history was initially modeled on the practice of Civil War-era radicals and 'Old Whigs' who referred to a previous tradition of Gothic Liberty or British independence to support their present political claims.⁸ The Opposition's chief ideologue, Lord Bolingbroke, famously valued the study of history for political and moral purposes, following the Commonwealth tradition of Harrington, Milton, Sidney, Toland, and others in seeking historical examples of a patriotism based not on 'the slavish principles of passive obedience and non-resistance' but on free and voluntary service to a virtuous government.

6 Cf Addison's comparison between the 'geniuses' of Homer and Virgil.

7 A less direct but perhaps deeper influence came from the most thorough use of contextualizing historicist methods in the seventeenth century, that of Biblical critics like Spinoza and La Peyrere, whose argument that the Old Testament's language and sentiments could only be understood in light of their social purposes was a major influence on British Deists like Toland and Collins. (Cf Popkin as well as Jonathan Israel.) Coming from such affirmed radicals as Spinoza and Deists as Toland, however, such criticism was badly stigmatized and appears to have had little direct influence on literary criticism from 1660-1740.

8 Within early modern Britain alone, English historians of the Renaissance and seventeenth-century political philosophers from Milton to the Ranter Abezier Coppe made their political arguments via reference to ancient Biblical and Greek/Roman history. Cf David Armitage's *Ideological Origins of the British Empire* on the importance of ancient history for English self-definitions from the Revolution forward. Cf also Caroline Robbins and Pocock on the role of Dissenting and 'Commonwealthmen' on the practice of ancient history for political reasons.

9 There is still some debate on how 'nostalgic' Bolingbroke's politics were. Kramnick considers them rooted in unrealistic nostalgia, while others have seen him as quite engaged with discourses of the time and point to his influence on the politics of 'patriotism' during George III's early reign and towards the 1750-70s as a whole.

Bolingbroke and his supporters consequently sought to tie their own cause, the anti-Walpole Opposition, to the great native tradition of Saxon or Gothic liberty, while opponents of the Opposition sought to discredit their opponents' claims through creating historical narratives of their own. Poets, historians, and pamphlet-writers invoked King Alfred, Edward III, and Queen Elizabeth as predecessors for their cause, using narratives of these premodern models of virtue as transparent allegorical accounts of contemporary events.¹⁰ In the following typical poem of the Opposition, the narrator, having enumerated some recent causes of Britain's moral decline and patriotic decay (warfare, greed, selfishness of aristocrats), refers back with longing to an classical world of greater social and moral unity:

When careful statesmen for their country reign'd
 And men to serve each other was ordain'd
 When Caesars fought, and Cato bled for Rome,
 And soldiers strove for glory to o'ercom;
 No thoughts of plunder dar'd their courage on,
 They us'd their captives as they'd use their son.
 But now, in chains, for liberty we treat.
 Now man for riches, not for honours priz'd,
 And vertuous souls, with poverty, despis'd.

Dozens, if not hundreds, of similar invocations of pre-modern virtue could be found from the 1720-30s, as the moralizing campaign against Walpole's ministry made the vocabulary of virtue, liberty, and patriotism ubiquitous.¹¹

10 Cf Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole*, as well as Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle*. Gerrard's excellent history of the movement outlines in detail the Opposition's use of myths of pre-modern liberty; detailing how the Opposition tirelessly mythologized great premodern British patriot orators and statesmen, tapping into the standing Whig tradition that celebrated Britain's 'Gothick' heritage while underscoring the imminent need for a new, virtuous Patriotism in a fractured and morally troubled modern Britain.

11 Another aspect of the period's mixture of ancient and modern Patriot sentiment can be seen in the most successful poetic product of the Opposition period, Thomson's *Seasons*. Though later editions of the *Seasons* are more explicitly and fervently political, the earliest installment of the poem, 1726's 'Winter,' steadily works with the mixture of Whiggish love of liberty and classical erudition that the Opposition (especially Bolingbroke and the great ideologues of Virtue, Trenchard and Gordon) displayed in the mid-1720s. A visionary passage from 'Winter' shows the narrator listing a number of diverse models of virtue from the classical world, creating an image of the universal true Patriot that's strikingly close to the values Shaftesbury, Bolingbroke, Trenchard, and Gordon expressed in their historical-political

This classic Opposition use of pre-modern myths of virtue and liberty was, however, much more directly political and polemic than historicism, which (perhaps paradoxically) limited the degree to which it could idealize collective aesthetic experience. While the Opposition writers want the virtuous past to speak directly to the fallen present, most historicist critics and writers allowed for a greater distance between past and present, ideal ancient community and fractured modern nation.¹² The two

works:

The sacred *Shades*, that, slowly-rising, pass
 Before my wondering Eyes — First, *Socrates*,
 Truth's early Champion, Martyr for his God:
Solon, the next, who built his Commonweal,
 On Equity's firm Base: *Lycurgus*, then,
 Severely good, and him of rugged *Rome*,
Numa, who soften'd *her* rapacious *Sons*.
Cimon sweet-soul'd, and *Aristides* just.
 Unconquer'd *Cato*, virtuous in Extreme;
 With that attemper'd Heroe, mild, and firm,
 Who wept the Brother, while the Tyrant bled.
Scipio, the humane Warriour, gently brave,
 Fair Learning's Friend; who early sought the Shade,
 To dwell, with *Innocence*, and *Truth*, retir'd.
 And, equal to the best, the *Theban*, *He*
 Who, *single*, rais'd his Country into Fame.
 Thousands behind, the Boast of *Greece* and *Rome*,
 Whom *Vertue* owns, the Tribute of a Verse
 Demand, but who can count the Stars of Heaven?

This catalogue of great classical patriots implies that the whole of the classical world is a sort of reservoir of pure virtue, overflowing its walls as it calls to the present to share the commitments to liberty, truth, and virtue that the great heroes of the ancient world displayed. Though a passage like this wouldn't seem to fit in with the surrounding descriptions of natural scenes and disasters of the original versions of 'Winter,' its historical character reflects the close link between the *Seasons'* nature-imagery and the myths of national community of his later, more unmistakably political (and much less successful) works like *Liberty* (1734). *Liberty* in particular is fraught with Opposition-inspired passages looking back to ancient models of virtue like the following:

The Great republic see! That glowed sublime
 With the mixed freedom of a thousand states...
 For nature then smiled on her free-born sons
 And Poured the plenty that belongs to men

Cf in particular Thomson's late lyric, 'On Aelous' Harp,' which shows a clear example of the mature premodernist fantasy he came to support in the 1740s.

- 12 The cultural significance of pre-modernist myths quickly went beyond the Opposition movement. Margaret Mary Fitzgerald's history of poetic myth during the period between 1725-40, *First Follow Nature*, captures the fully pervasive impact of myths of natural and free society during the period. To give two of Fitzgerald's examples: 'Thomas Cooke: 'Treasures immense, rais'd on the people's woe/ A peaceful army, and a fleet for show/ A nation's debt unpay'd a hireling band, the station'd locusts of a

figures at the start of historicism, Thomas Blackwell and William Warburton, both look to make the power of ancient natural poetry speak to the modern nation-state, but the application of past to present is less simple or direct in their works than in those of Opposition-era writers. Blackwell follows directly from the fantasy-regime of 'simplicity,' conjuring up an image of a society of pious, 'natural' people bound together freely by their experience of material nature. Like the poetic adherents of simplicity (Thomson, Duck, Ramsay), Blackwell is a Shaftesburyean Whig and devotee of 'politeness' who wants to argue for the allure of nature and the power of liberty. Warburton, as a spokesman for the Church of England, has a very different and much more direct political motive, namely making religious mystery the basis of all authentic political poetry. Warburton celebrates a social poetry centered sacred *mystery* rather than the heady grandeur of nature, emphasizing the necessity of obedience and submission rather than that of liberty and self-determination. Both critics actively merge powerful aesthetic experience and national unity but also reinforce the split between the natural/poetic and the actual/political that the Opposition had sought to eradicate. As a result, their works end up giving a greater ethical and social importance to powerful and authentic aesthetic experience than the Opposition writers, which proved both problematic and productive for later writers.

Ancient Nature and Modern Virtue in Blackwell's *Enquiry*

The first seminal work of experiential historicism, Thomas Blackwell's *An Enquiry into*

groaning land'; Whitehead: even 'the knowing and the virtuous few,/ Who noblest ends by noblest means pursue/ Forget the poet's use.'

the Life and Writings of Homer (1735), was as methodologically innovative as it was ideologically hackneyed.¹³ The work, published when Blackwell was an unknown, thirty-four year-old professor of Greek at Marischal College in Scotland, was the first mature expression of a thick historicist method, beginning clearly enough with the proposal that Homer could only have written his works at the exact time and in the exact environment that he did: 'a Concourse of natural Causes conspired to produce and cultivate that mighty Genius, and gave him the noblest field to exercise it in, that ever fell to the share of a Poet.'¹⁴ No long work of literary criticism had ever proposed the imaginative reconstruction of an entire culture in order to understand the feelings and experiences that led to great poetry, and Blackwell's work would quickly prove popular in many contexts.

At the same time, the book's values and its view of the role of poetry in society were somewhat behind their time, invoking the same enthusiasm for Shaftesburyan virtue, nature, and immediate experience that Thomson's and Duck's poetry invoked during the late 1720s and early 1730s. 'Nature' is ubiquitous in the *Enquiry*, constituting both the source of poetic greatness and its value: 'A poet describes nothing so happily, as

13 There have been few satisfactory arguments about why Blackwell's book was written when it was. My reading agrees most with Kirsti Simonsuuri's perceptive and careful chapter on the genesis of the *Enquiry*, which traces it to Blackwell's anti-authoritarian views that derived from his Presbyterianism and opposition to the Church of England's chauvinism. Lois Whitney, author of the standard history of primitivism in British thought, traced Blackwell's book back to Shaftesbury but, while Blackwell certainly referred to Shaftesbury and prized his Whiggish patriotism, he would not have found much relevant philosophy of culture or literary history in the *Characteristicks*. Wellek briefly proposed Vico as a major influence but, while Vico proposed the same reading of literature as the expression of 'culture' around the same time as Blackwell, Wellek himself subsequently argued that Blackwell could not have read him before writing his *Enquiry*. Recent scholars have proposed a handful of other influences while acknowledging that they could offer only speculative evidence. Lionel Hollingshead's cogent article proposing Blackwell's friend Bishop Berkeley as a major source for the *Enquiry's* basic ideas argues that Blackwell's valorizations of simplicity, empirical nature, and cohesive culture come from his conversations with Berkeley in the 1730s. As Hollingshead makes clear, the bishop by this time had changed out his ontological preoccupations (and his related and famous epistemological theses) in favor of mainstream Enlightenment views.

14 Blackwell, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer*, 4

what he has seen...the best Poets copy from Nature, and give it such as they find it. When once they lose Sight of this, they write false.' Homer is Blackwell's key example of an individual so attuned to the 'truth' of nature that his works have an irresistible aesthetic allure, and the book implies that modern Britain must somehow harness this Homeric sensibility if it is to achieve the level of virtue that would allow it to be truly glorious.¹⁵

As the *Enquiry* explains, Homer's unparalleled natural sensibility was the result of a 'Concourse' of several *material* circumstances. The first concerned the sheer beauty of Homer's natural environment; in Homer's maritime Greece, 'the Purity and Benignity of the Air, the Varieties of the Fruits and Fields, the Beauty and Number of the Rivers, and the constant Gales from the happy Isles of the western Sea, all conspire to bring its Productions of every kind to the highest Perfection.' The *Enquiry* thus attributes Homer's special attunement to the natural environment of coastal Greece that inspires 'that Mildness of Temper, and Flow of Fancy, which favor the most extensive views and give the finest Conceptions of Nature and Truth.' Because of this environment, Homer was predisposed to absorb the life and activity around him in this fashion; his 'first Happiness' was that 'he took his plain natural Images from Life: He saw Warriors, and Shepherds, and Peasants, such as he drew; and was daily conversant among such People as he

15 Writers of the 1720-30s probably adapted the idea of the 'simple' sensibility from neoclassicism by way of Pope, Addison, and British writers of pastoral verse. Rapin for instance notes how, 'in those good primitive Days, Virtue was courted for her Native Charms, without those external Ornaments with which Fortune is pleas'd sometimes to have invested her.' (I b2) Pope, in the preface to his own translation of the *Iliad*, notes that Homer's greatness comes from following nature and displaying simplicity opposed to luxury: 'he writes...*of the most animated nature imaginable; every thing moves, every thing lives, and is put in action.*..There is a pleasure in taking a view of that simplicity, in opposition to the luxury of succeeding ages: in beholding monarchs without their guards; princes tending their flocks, and princesses drawing water from the springs.' However, though such nature and simplicity make Homer a great poetic spirit and an utmost 'master of invention,' Pope doesn't long for a return to such fiery spirits; rather, he wants to enjoy him from afar and appreciate, from the comfortable position of the London man of letters, the fire and invention of less civilized times.

intended to represent.¹⁶ As Blackwell argues, every page of Homer's epics speak to this special sensibility: 'Homer must have known...the Fields of Action, the Plains of Troy' for his works to have 'the Air of Veracity... He had them, not by reading or Speculation, but from the *Places themselves*.'¹⁷

The *Enquiry* begins to give value to this Homeric attunement by noting that it constituted a sort of 'Piety' born of poverty and a life of itinerant beggary. Adopting the Whiggish literary values of the 1730s, Blackwell notes that a pious disposition was 'indeed the chief part of a Bard's Profession' and repeatedly underscores Homer's respect for and appreciation of religious Truths and other indisputably great things. As the *Enquiry* argues, Homer's pervasive piety before nature was possible only because he did not know a trade or inherit a family business and was thus allowed to develop a deeply passive sensibility, ranging over the whole of creation and standing appreciative and amazed at everything. 'Whoever confines his Thinking to any one Subject, who bestows all his Care and Study upon one Employment or Vocation, may excel in that; But cannot be qualified for a Province that requires the freest and widest, as well as the most simple disinterested Views of Nature.'¹⁸ Poverty alone facilitates this passive piety, which Homer fed via a lifetime of constant wandering, free of 'exhausting Labours to stiffen their Bodies and depress their Minds.'¹⁹ Indeed, the book argues that such a life is 'the likeliest to the plentiful State of the Golden Age; without Care or Ambition, full of Variety and Change, and constantly giving and receiving the most natural and elegant Pleasures.'²⁰

16 Blackwell, 17, 34

17 Blackwell's italics

18 Blackwell, 116.

19 Ibid, 124.

20 Ibid, 124.

Finally, the *Enquiry* maintains that Homeric *society* (and not just Homer the sublime individual) was infused with this same admirable attunement to the immediate world and disdain for artifice or subterfuge. In Homer's Greece, 'wealth was...unknown...the Folds and Windings of the human Breast lay open to the Eye; nor were people ashamed to avow Passions and Inclinations, which were entirely void of Art and Design.'²¹ As a result, people acted in a totally natural manner, a point the *Enquiry* repeatedly underscores: 'Nature was obstructed in none of her Operations; and no Rule or Prescription gave a check to Rapture and Enthusiasm.'²² The *Enquiry* thus presents a Thomsonian picture of Homer as a mild, benign sensibility, given to a pious 'Rapture' and a benevolent 'Enthusiasm.' Much like the fantasy of simple experience, this construction of a Whiggish Homer required Blackwell to ignore the political and ethical aspects of the culture it deals with; just as readers looking to make Thomson into 'nature's child' persistently ignored his topical commentary and his political positions, Blackwell ignores the warrior *ethos* that dominates the Homeric poems—with its brutality, misogyny, social stratification, and preoccupation with honor—in order to produce an image of Homer as a totally natural, vigorous, and simple sensibility.

In keeping with this emphasis on virtuous simplicity, the *Enquiry* frequently encases natural experience in the trimmings of modern British virtue. Though British society lacked the environmental advantages that Homeric Greece enjoyed, the book implies that its natural and free sensibility and its disdain for artifice meant that Britain had been approaching a truly natural way of life, at least since the Glorious Revolution (if

21 Ibid, 34-35.

22 Ibid, 106.

not the Elizabethan Age). The *Enquiry*, like so much eighteenth-century criticism, is inconsistent about how and why Britain is 'natural,' and there is substantial slippage between the various, often contradictory uses of the 'nature' in the work, but it uses two main points of overlap between modern and ancient naturalness to make the case that modern Britain and Homeric Greece were both grounded in a virtuous natural sensibility.

23

The first key element of overlap between Homeric freedom and British claims to naturalness is their mutual commitment to material, physical nature. In the *Enquiry* and throughout his career, Blackwell praised post-Baconian Britain's commitment to the empirical study of God's creation; like Blackmore, Edward Young, and the physico-theologians from Burnet and Boyle forward, the *Enquiry* makes a claim for British liberty on the grounds that it refuses all artificial mediators between the human and nature, despite the difficulties and great effort involved in such a disciplined study of nature. Thus the book goes out of its way to denigrate Scholasticism and other *a priori*, non-empirical approaches to nature in order to defend the British empirical-scientific approach. For instance, a passage in the middle of the book argues that Homer's power and his semi-divine status derives from his vigor, which in turn derives from his immediate observation of nature:

'In this respect, the TALENT of their Poets was truly natural, and had a much better title to Inspiration than their learned Successors...the Scholastick Turn, Technical Terms, imaginary Relations, and wire-drawn Sciences, spoil the natural Faculties, and marr the Expression. But the Ancients of early Times, as Nature gave Powers and a Genius, so they fought, or plowed, or merchandized, or sung; Wars, or Loves, or Morals, just as their Muse or Genius gave Permission... HOMER's blind Bard sings by meer Inspiration, and celebrates things he had no access to know but in that way'²⁴

23 On the inconsistency of eighteenth-century writers use of the term, 'nature,' see Willey, *The Eighteenth Century Background*, in addition to the better-known account of Lovejoy.

24 Blackwell, 129-130

While the passage assumes the all-too-common point that the early 'Ancients' were more passionate than their Athenian and, later, Roman predecessors, it also maintains that their great naturalness *comes from their earth-bound sensibility*, their ability to observe things directly and without prejudicial ideas or abstractions. The passage's knock on the 'wire-drawn Sciences' that 'learned Successors' (presumably those after Aristotle) possessed clearly recalls the attack on Aristotlean Scholasticism propounded most famously by Bacon. The passionate immediacy of the ancients is equated with the empirical study of nature of modern Brits through what Jonathan Lamb calls 'conceptual litotes': the only connection between the two is negative as both are *not* artificial, *not* imposed on reality.²⁵

The second, related commonality between premodern Homeric naturalness and the modern British in Blackwell's scheme comes in the two culture's mutual commitment to liberty and moral virtue. The spirit of liberty and the drive to simplicity and natural experience go hand in hand, both of which follow from a moral character built on 'those manly Sentiments which do justice to Virtue and Vice.' The *Enquiry* highlights the pernicious influence that government not founded on liberty has on morality and the art, frequently critiquing monarchy and the effects it has. The book constantly digresses to critique *modern* autocracy, leading forth familiar complaints about everything from arbitrary censorship to France's imitative culture, all of which index the sapping away of liberty's virtuous primal energy.²⁶ In a key example, it expresses dissatisfaction with the

25 Lamb, *Preserving the Self in the South Seas*, ch 4. In a further leap of association, the passage maintains that Homer's simplicity and piety before nature lets him receive *inspiration* directly and in an un-affected way that Scholastics (and presumably Catholics) never could. As the *Enquiry* later explains, while inspired Homer would communicate the passions he had stored up in a wild 'Fit,' and then return back to being the 'same cool unadmiring Person he was before.' Cf pp 275-9.

26 For example, the book digresses to curse the 'lamentable Sight' of the cultures of great Catholic countries. 'How barren now in real Literature!...Instead of those manly Sentiments which do justice to Virtue and Vice...those bold pictures of Men and Things of the present Age...(only have monkish

French author, *philosophe*, and theologian, François Fénelon, whom it portrays a naturally virtuous person unable to make lasting contributions to humanity because he lived under absolutist rule of Louis XIV. The *Enquiry* notes that Fénelon possessed ‘every amiable Quality’ a human could have but was unable to contribute any great works or translate his qualities into great actions because the monarchy he lived under a priori discouraged ‘Spirit’ and deprived intellectuals of the spur of freedom. The book maintains that, if Fénelon would have been born in a place that respected liberty, his genius would have been inspired by and directed to the improvement of the social whole, and he would have been able to translate his great spirit into a contemporary idiom. Instead, under Louis XIV and Colbert, his works were simply a confused jumble of ancient and modern attitudes, especially ridiculous on the occasions when (as in the *Telemaque*) ‘he wou’d reconcile *old Heroism* with *Politicks*, and make Poetry preach *Reason of State*.²⁷ Fénelon, in other words, tried to apply archaic manly virtue to the present, a task that the French monarchical system made ludicrous.²⁸ The *Enquiry* is unclear about how the ‘old Heroism’ could teach modern free and virtuous places like Britain, but its repeated flattering of manly British virtue alongside its repeated

legends and) distant Facts and general Principles, remote from their own Times’ (67-9).

27 Blackwell, 61.

28 An implied (Whig) philosophy of natural government and natural ethics is chiefly responsible for Blackwell making Homeric naturalness and immediacy into universal values. The book echoes the typical Whig/latitudinarian thesis that societies and political entities are naturally bonded by each individual's naturally occurring respect for and piety before great collective objects. Blackwell adapts the primitivist hypothesis to this end, maintaining that the original priests of humanity were poets who had ‘the Service of Mankind for the End of their Song’ and composed ‘many a Strain of true Poetry and Imitation’ by speaking their passions for sublime objects and teaching others to share the same powerful passions. The gods of Egyptian and Grecian antiquity derived from the same process of priests teaching moral philosophy to their societies—an important fact since, Blackwell writes, Homer himself ‘is an *Egyptian Mythologist*.’ All natural religion, as well as natural morality and sociability, centers on priests and primal poets expressing this ‘Admiration and Wonder’ for natural things and making it the basis for a natural society.

celebration of Homeric immediacy imply that the same 'Spirit so generous and free' can alone bring about a happy social world and 'give the truest Proof of the Happiness of our Constitution.'²⁹

The similarity and difference of ancient and modern naturalness is developed in the book's remarks on the only modern British poet it praises, James Thomson. The book argues that Thomson's verse is sublime because of his piety and self-effacement before nature, but he is also less heroic and more purely passive than Homer: 'the Man (like Thomson) who lives plain, and at times steps aside from the *Din of Life*, enjoys a more genuine Pleasure: He obtains ravishing Views of *silent Nature*, and undisturbed contemplates her solitary Scenes.' Nature here does not fire Thomson to ecstasy but rather produces simple scenes of quiet contemplation fitting a modern temperament. Nevertheless the ends of Thomsonian natural poetry and Homeric epic poetry are the same; they both provide the attachment to the immediate world that makes people free and virtuous subjects. The innate human love of nature inspires poetry in the same way it raises natural religion and original government into being, and all three have the effect of transforming 'Men from Brutes and Savages into civilized Creatures...and of Lions and Wolves (make) Social Men.' The *Enquiry* consequently argues that the spirit and 'disinterested Love of Mankind and our Country' animates the natural poet as well as the natural priest or patriot; *virtue* and patriotism are alike necessary, and 'we find that

29 Given this evaluation of Thomson's *Seasons*, I again part ways with John Barrell's reading of the eighteenth century 'prospect view,' from which I have learned so much. While Barrell sees the prospect view as the occasion for exercises of disinterested judgment, performed by the elite aristocrats whom Patriots hoped would save the nation, I believe that the fantasy of directly communing with nature lies behind such passages in Blackwell, Thomson, and others. Such a fantasy is political in that it alone gives citizens of a 'free' country a direct relationship to collective sublime objects that both undergird national identity and exceed it.

without virtue there can be no *true Poetry*: it depends upon the Manners of a Nation, which form their Characters, and animate their Language.’³⁰

The *Enquiry*'s contributions to criticism thus center on its philosophy of experience and the belief that a pleasurable material connection with nature serves as the substratum for all natural social-political behavior. Its vaguely Shaftesburyean notions of natural society and morality are by no means original, but the notion that primal natural *experience* lies at the core of all social spirit is, if not novel with the *Enquiry*, at the very least articulated with unprecedented clarity and confidence in its pages. By inserting a kernel of material experience into the loftiest theories of sociability, the book became an example for later historicists.

Warburton and the Politics of Mystery

Blackwell's certitude about the self-evident value of natural experience allowed him to become an obvious target for ideological opponents. Shortly after its release, one of the chief ideologues of Anglicanism, William Warburton, used the *Enquiry*'s method in order to prove quite different conclusions about aesthetic experience and national unity, in the process diverting the course of historicist criticism for the next twenty years. Hence, before discussing the overall function of the historicism of experience, it is necessary to give a brief account of the work responsible for removing it from the service of Whiggish Shaftesburyean virtue and transferring it to that of Anglican nationalized religion, whose service it would be loosely tied to throughout the 1750s. In large part because he was a polemicist of considerable force, Warburton was less interested in (and less skillful at)

³⁰ Blackwell, 58.

dramatizations of aesthetic experience than other historicist critics are, but his key historicist work shows the wide appeal of the idea that intense aesthetic experience was the key to a mythic national unity and collective harmony of the past.

Warburton's massive historical-critical work, *The Divine Legation of Moses demonstrated* (1738-41), was by any measure the most influential work in the 1730-40s to use history to address issues of cultural nationalism. Conceived as a polemic response to Blackwell, Warburton's book both takes off from the *Enquiry's* assumption of a natural poetry that the premodern world was in touch with, and argues resolutely against Blackwell's interpretation of it. Like Blackwell's book, the *Enquiry* posits a theory of 'natural' premodern society and argues for its application to modern Britain, but, unlike his Scottish predecessor, Warburton wanted nothing to do with Shaftesburyean natural benevolence. Instead his book's version of natural society follows Hobbes' view about the natural morality of humanity and argues that social cohesion can only be achieved through formal and institutionalized systems of morality. From the perspective of the *Legation*, the state should physically protect and organize people, but religion, ritual, poetry, and other practices give them meaning and inspire commitment. As a result, the models of natural and effective interpellation it speaks of are not Homeric or primitivist confrontations with nature, but rather *initiations* into collective religious 'mysteries.'

These arguments take their most complete form in the *Divine Legation*, but they derive from Warburton's first major work, *The alliance between church and state: or, The necessity and equity of an established religion and a test act* (1736). As the title indicates, its author's vision of an ideally unified nation involves, without equivocation, the

preservation of a national religion.³¹ The *Alliance* situates itself as a defense of nationalized religion against 'free-thinking' contemporary threats to it—Deists like Toland and Collins as well Oppositionist radicals like Bolingbroke, both of whom believed that natural morality makes institutionalized religion superfluous, a relic of a less enlightened, more superstitious and coercive time.³² Like his fellow anti-Deist Anglican, Joseph Butler, (whose extremely influential *The Analogy of Religion* was also published in 1736), the *Alliance* argues that British government should perform only two basic Lockean tasks—protecting property and maintaining the safety and security in the nation—and leave the task of giving public spirit and moral and spiritual unity to the separate but protected entity of a nationalized church.³³ In support of Hobbes and in opposition to Whiggish ideologues of natural virtue, the *Alliance* argues that the citizen's sheer attraction to the political common good is not sufficiently compelling to prevent conflicts between personal interest and the common good, and that a more concrete system of rewards and punishments is required as an inspiring spiritual *supplement* to good, natural government—a role for which Warburton volunteers a state-sponsored Christian religion.

31 The thesis of that book was that all recently proposed reforms to both church and state—from Hobbes-influenced monarchical arguments to Toland's and Collins' radical deism to religious enthusiasts who wanted the church to rule all—misunderstood the reasons behind Britain's current power-share of Parliament, (Protestant) monarchy, and Church of England. In explaining these reasons, he wanted to 'furnish every Lover of his country with reasonable principles, to oppose to the destructive Fancies of the Enemies of our happy Establishment. Not to reform the fundamental Constitutions of the State, but to show they needed no reforming.'

32 Evans informs us that Warburton wrote to the young Brown upon seeing the poem, imploring him to write an extended essay on the matter and arranging for the publication of what would later become the *Essay on the Characteristics of Lord Shaftesbury*. Cf Evans, pp 199-200. Templeman points out that Warburton was forever on the lookout for promising young writers whom he could snatch up for the cause of virtue and (his version of) patriotism. Cf Templeman pp 25-28.

33 Robert Sorkin explains that for Warburton, the state's power 'extends only to men's bodies' and can punish transgressions physically, but it has no purchase on morality or opinions.

Like the *Alliance*, the bulky, ostentatiously learned *Legation* (running to some 1800 pages in its final form) is explicitly a theory of nationalism. It engages with all available enemies of the marriage of church and state, from Deists to relativizing classicists to skeptical Dissenters, in producing its historical theory of political virtue. The book's stated goal is to 'shew the Necessity of Religion in general, and of the Doctrine of a future State in particular, to Civil Society,'³⁴ and its stated premise is that 'the sublimity of Truth and the Sanctity of Religion' are the two building blocks that alone can produce a coherent social ethics based in 'clear unquestioned Virtues.' It argues philosophically and systematically at times, but most of the book argues via historical example, adducing ancient Athens under Lycurgus, the Egypt of the pharaohs, Biblical Israel and many other places to demonstrate its political and religious conclusions. Hence, despite its official purpose as a work of religious philosophy, it is in fact one of the most thorough visions of the ideal of a 'natural' and authentic nation that the eighteenth century produced.

The *Legation* argues that the original lawgivers or statesmen of the past had to pretend to secret access to divinity, starting with the Druids and pagans priest who claimed to harness nature's power, and including Moses, Solon, and the other great lawgivers of human history. The argument begins by appropriating the Deist belief that each great law-giver pushed civil laws on people by inventing supernatural myths that exploited (albeit in a natural and necessary way) people's natural fear of death and desire for an afterlife. Though it agrees with this premise, it also argues that the mythic and superstitious aspects of this belief weren't superfluous or accidental things piled on top of

³⁴ William Warburton, *Divine legation of Moses Demonstrated*, 107.

and perverting a natural social impulse. Rather, the numinous quality of religious mysteries were themselves integral to their political utility, as they helped make the legitimate and rational dictates of religion more appealing to early civilizations. Hence lawgivers (even the much-maligned Druids) weren't hoodwinking people so much as groping, either through religious reforms or purely pragmatic effort to forge political unity, towards the universal form of a natural or authentic religious-political society.³⁵

In order to prove its thesis, the *Legation* turns to historicist criticism to show how religion creates social unity via cultural actions, most notably rituals. The book must first argue that every great ancient society, from Egypt to Persia to Athens, employed 'mysteries' or initiation rituals that gave them the unity required for them to flourish. Somewhat unexpectedly, the *Legation* makes this point by turning to the *Aeneid*, a poem his readers would acknowledge as a central part of a great society but one that they would not likely consider a religious masterpiece. The book singles out the *Aeneid* for explication of this thesis, despite acknowledging that it may not appear to be a particularly religious work (like the prophetic book of the Old Testament), and despite acknowledging that it remains much less aesthetically moving and 'perfect' than Homer's works, on the grounds that Vergil was far more politically enlightened and socially responsible than his sublimer predecessors. Aware of the natural necessities of a state religion, Vergil intended his great epic not as a gratifying aesthetic performance but as a philosophical 'System of Politics' built on the necessity and pleasure of *obedience*: 'he wrote it, not to amuse old Women and Children, in a Winter's Evening...but for Men and

³⁵ For Warburton, removing the the Christian aspects of the law would deprive it of all force. Within his definition of pure 'nature,' everyone is a Hobbesian savage by instinct, so natural civil society is a contradiction, and the only natural social impulse derives from a kind of Kantian rational morality, with Christian rewards and punishments as its premises.

Citizens, to instruct them in the Devoirs of Humanity and Society.' His great hero, pious Aeneas, is designed to be a model for the acceptance of political necessity, and an example of the glory that comes from selflessly serving collective over the individual interest.

Though this was not a revolutionary interpretation of the *Aeneid*, the *Legation's* argument for the religiosity of Aeneas' political commitments were extraordinarily innovative and idiosyncratic. Over the course of more than a hundred pages, the *Legation* explicates a handful of short passage from the sixth book of the *Aeneid* in order to argue that the rituals presented in the sixth book of the *Aeneid* are versions of the same 'natural' rituals of initiation that allowed great ancient civilizations from Egypt to Persia to Greece to achieve their stature. Warburton's book patiently lays out how the 'Omens' and 'Allegories' in Aeneas' experiences in the underworld were the sort of universally compelling, auratic mysteries that attached the lone individual to a collective enterprise. The *Legation* argues that the sixth book was thus 'the Master-piece of the *Aeneis*,' constituting 'nothing else but' the translation of the Greek Eleusinian Mysteries from direct experiences into the virtual experiences of literature. In keeping with the book's larger thesis, Warburton boldly declares that these Eleusinian Mysteries, and the various adaptations of them spread through the ancient Mediterranean and near Eastern world, were simultaneously political and religious, instructing the initiatee about 'the Rise and Establishment of Civil Society,' the necessity of a 'Doctrine of a future State of Rewards and Punishments,' and the 'Detection of the Error of Polytheism, and the Principle of the Unity.'³⁶ Though these are recognizably seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious

³⁶ Warburton, 110, 112, 210.

principles, the *Legation* argues that Vergil self-consciously used them to promote a natural religion of mystery which alone could supplement natural government.³⁷

In arguing that the great Mediterranean and near Eastern societies of antiquity were unified by their devotion to sacred mysteries, the *Legation* notes that, even though most pagan societies had not yet realized that 'Truth and general Utility do coincide,' and often confused the poetic, philosophical, and political senses of 'Truth,' they still naturally and instinctively came to make religious mysteries and initiations central to their political life.³⁸ *The Legation* thus refers to external models—those of the great ancient societies—to preserve an image of a completely unified, virtuous nation. The book notes that modern Britain, racked as it is with Dissent and defined by a long history of bloody religious battles (which continued in Ireland and elsewhere in the eighteenth century), has never realized its potential for ideal political-religious unity. The book maintains that, *if* Britain could achieve full unity under a state-supported church, then it could make an

37 The *Legation* bluntly states that 'the *Aeneis* is in the Stile of ancient Legislation,' and, as such, 'it is hard to think so great a Master in his Art (as Vergil is), would overlook a Doctrine, that, we have shewn, to be the Foundation and Support of ancient Politics.' Vergil's portrayal of Aeneas is heroically innovative and worth the highest praise precisely because the *Aeneid* made the mysteries *literary* and *virtual*. Every aspect of Vergil's epic—from its imitations of Homeric scenes to its fashioning of Aeneas as a distinctively Roman hero—was designed to set up book six as precisely such a set of Mysteries for the Roman people. The bulk of the epic makes Aeneas an inscrutable hero—a noble leader, sublime warrior, and 'perfect Legislator'—but also notes that the 'Initiation into the Mysteries was what *sanctified his Character and Function*.' Through the mysteries, Aeneas learns to dedicate himself fully to Rome, and the audience comes to see such dedication as the highest possible virtue for the hero. The great political-religious mysteries had fallen out of favor in the days of the Empire during which Vergil wrote, so he had to re-introduce them in a way that could appeal to the whole empire, turning to literature to do so.

38 The Truths that Vergil records, Warburton argues, are universal, as is the sense of reverence and love of the spirit of God that flows through all (thus the *Aeneid* still moves us and stirs us as political and moral subjects), but the objects and images, plots and characters, etc, of the poems themselves speak to the individuals of the specific times much more than they can to us. Thus each ancient Egyptian region loved not nature and Truth but rather *its* rituals, *its* temples, and *its* sacred grounds (232-3). A reader can only make sense of or find the unity in an individual work through identifying these ends or purposes. Thus we 'moderns' have to put in some critical and historical work to perceive them, while the original readers of them would have immediately *felt* such unity.

absolutely natural and rational state a reality, outdoing even the ancients in completeness and satisfaction.³⁹ However, as we saw with Blackwell, the very notion of a seamlessly unified nation is only possible via the spectre of these ancient nations, given an almost involuntary unity by the revelation of collective religious mysteries.

Warburton's Influence in the 1750s

Due in large part to the status that the *Alliance* and *Legation* brought him, Warburton became a doyen of literary criticism during the 1740-50s, recruiting a number of young writers (mostly from provincial backgrounds) to promote his literary-political values as well as the historicist method of his early works.⁴⁰ Warburton's followers took major roles first in re-defining poetry as the servant of rational religion before turning to literary historicism as a way of imagining the social uses of religious practices. Most of the important works of the historicism of experience from the 1750s came from colleagues of Warburton's at Oxford, including key works on chivalry and late 'Gothick' Britain as well as the finest work of the genre, Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*. In the brief look at these works that follows, I will highlight how these writers softened Warburton's hardline ideology (likely because a new alliance of Church and Hanoverian state in the 1750s allowed their historicism to focus more on the sorts of intense aesthetic experiences that Blackwell's work laid out). Indeed, as Anglican historicist work became notably more literary and less ideological, its attention turned more and more to

39 In the *Legation's* most succinct formulation, 'if Truth and public Utility coincide, the nearer any Religion approaches to the Truth of Things, the fitter is that Religion for serving Civil Society.'

40 Cf Evans, *Warburton and the Warburtonians*, ch 1 and 4-5, as well as Simon During's recent chapter on Warburton's group. During notes that Warburton barred his proteges from creative writing, arguing that the critical profession was a 'sacred one' and that its business 'lay elsewhere' than literature' (19).

dramatizing aesthetic experience.

Two of Warburton's closest charges, Richard Hurd and John 'Estimate' Brown, began their critical careers arguing Warbuton's point that religious poetry was truer and more gratifying than Shaftesburyean, natural poetry. John Brown's first critical work, *Essays on the Characteristics of Lord Shaftesbury* (1751) was the most thorough argument for religious poetry and against 'natural' aesthetic experience of the whole eighteenth century.⁴¹ As the title indicates, the work engages specifically with the Shaftesburyean philosophy of nature that had informed the works of Thomson and Blackwell, arguing that Shaftesburyean ideals of natural disinterest are both overly optimistic and philosophically impoverished, the 'vain' product of 'a Mind taken up in Vision.' The *Essays* argues that Shaftesbury's assumption that all people will feel an endless sense of gratitude and awe for nature and the deity behind it is socially naive—only 'those who are capable of the most exalted Degrees of Virtue' feel that way—and fails to give a concrete motivation for most people to be moral beings and good citizens. It consequently agrees with Mandeville, the Shaftesburyeans' arch-enemy during the 1720-30s, that moralists cannot oblige people to be selfless ethical individuals, but also proposes instead that systems of rewards and punishments must be put in place to ensure basic order. The *Essays* thus maintains that good religion is as rational as good government; neither should be the work of authorities taking 'Monkies under the Discipline of the Whip,' since both should contribute to the happiness of society by helping people respect laws and value the well-being of our neighbors and fellow

41 Cf Evans, ch 4. Brown was perhaps the author Warburton most thoroughly groomed, and his projects were roundly Warburtonian from the time Warburton discovered him in the late 1740s until Warburton lost control of him around 1755. This work is even more explicit about the moral and political superiority of religious over natural art than the *Divine Legation* had been.

citizens.⁴²

Brown's *Essays* conclude that rational religion was the only suitable subject for socially responsible art and poetry, a position that Hurd's essays from the mid-1750s more clearly support. In particular, Hurd's essay, 'On the Idea of Universal Poetry,' argues systematically that *devotion* is the essence of poetry, and rational religion is the only true thing to devote oneself to. The features of poetry, unlike those of prose or any other forms of language, are designed to 'please and excite' the passions; poetry by definition includes exciting imagery, rhythmic and musical language, and, above all, figurative expressions. As a result, the products and feelings it produces are different from the strict truths of reason and empiricism. This may sound like Baumgarten *redux*, but Hurd's point is that poetry's purpose is to reveal truths that nature cannot, a truth more sublime than anything within nature: '(poetry's purpose) is not to delineate truth simply but to present it in the most taking forms...to *outstrip* nature, and to address itself to our wildest fancy, rather than to our judgment and cooler sense.'⁴³ Arguing against Blackwellian natural virtue—which Brown mocks for its view that poets had civilized Greece 'literally by Taste and a Fiddle'—Hurd's essay posits that the human consciousness naturally responds to sublime religious ideas over purely celebratory ones: 'the care of the good, and aversion to the wicked...every one feels from his own consciousness, how necessary such reflexions are to human nature...(they alone) push the mind forward into enthusiastic raptures.'⁴⁴ Hence, while we may feel drawn to bizarre pagan or primitive

42 For Hurd such a move would involve a clear system of just laws while, on a spiritual level, requiring the adoption of a rational Christianity. The latter is more important since it alone inculcates expectations of eternal reward for virtuous action and eternal punishment for socially detrimental action.

43 Richard Hurd, *A Dissertation on the Ideas of Universal Poetry*, 9.

44 *Ibid*, 26. Hurd argues only sparingly for the truth of religion, though he frequently claims hard-won

ceremonies on some level, the truth of religious principles will always make them a stronger and more lasting source of inspiration and enthusiasm than mere nature or experience:

The relation of man to the deity, being as essential to his nature, as that which he bears to his fellow citizens, *religion* becomes as necessary a part of a serious and sublime narration of human life, as *civil actions*. And as the sublime nature of it requires even *virtues and vices* to be personified, much more is it necessary, that *supernatural agency* should bear a part in it. For, whatever some *sects*, may think of religion's being a divine philosophy in the mind, the *poet* must exhibit man's addresses to Heaven in *ceremonies*, and Heaven's intervention by *visible agency*....It may be concluded then, universally, that religion is the proper object of poetry, which wants no prompter of a preceding model to give it an introduction; and that the forms, under which it presents itself, are too manifest and glaring to observation, to escape any writer.⁴⁵

Thus Brown can conclude that something so apparently wild and enthusiastic as the prophecies of St. John or the 'gift of tongues' are rational because they encode and express the truth of rational religion and have the noble and rational end of 'conveying and dispersing the glad Tidings of the Gospel, to every Nation under Heaven!'⁴⁶

I gloss these two relatively minor Warburtonian essays from the early 1750s for two reasons. First, they show the increasing attention given by Anglican ideologues to questions of poetry and aesthetic experience and show the basic Warburtonian philosophy that sutures wild poetic imagination to the truth of rational religion. Second, they stand as a useful point of comparison for Anglican historicist works from 1754-62, showing their basic views of the function and value of literary aesthetic experience but doing so in straightforward, confident, and prosaic manner. By contrast, the works of historicism that

conclusions. For example, 'religious sentiments being, universally, either the obvious deductions of human reason, in the easiest exercise of its powers, or the plain matter of simple observation, regarding what passes before us in real life'

45 Hurd, *Works*, 168.

46 Though I will argue below that Lowth's historicist work is far different in tenor and purpose than Brown's treatise, it is worth noting that he makes the same case for apparently barbaric expressions of religious joy: 'the poetry of the Hebrews abounds with phrases and idioms totally unsuited to prose composition, and which frequently appear to us harsh and unusual, I had almost said unnatural and barbarous; which, however, are destitute neither of meaning nor of force, were we but sufficiently informed to judge of their true application.'

followed them argued only obliquely for the social use of poetry, indulged fantasies about powerful material experience, and focused more on the paradoxes of an aesthetic political ethics than their polemic counterparts. Three key works in particular by writers based in Oxford explore these issues in celebrations the glory of a past culture unified by religious enthusiasm and ritual, Richard Hurd's essays on chivalry, Thomas Warton's *Observations on the Faerie Queene*, and especially Robert Lowth's *Praelectiones Academicæ de Sacra Poesi Hebraeorum* (*Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*). The first two works celebrate a version of medieval Britain that the rituals and codes of Christianity made as morally and socially cohesive as classical Athens or Sparta (a move which helped authorize the serious study of British instead of classical texts), while the third offers a more detached but paradoxically more passionate and vivid portrait of an ancient Hebraic society united by religion *and* natural experience.⁴⁷

Thomas Warton's *Observations on the Faery Queen* (1754, second edition 1762) is baldly a work of religious historicism, perhaps written expressly to flatter Warburton. The long piece of criticism, composed while Warton was seeking a post at Oxford, focuses exclusively on reconstructing the contexts of Spenser's epic. Warton considers the Elizabethan Age 'Gothick,' despite its awareness of classical and Renaissance thought, and his work looks back to the moral and social unity given by Christianity to the late middle ages and early Renaissance. The book proposes that chivalry gave material form the set of tacit social, moral, and political rules that united and civilized England:

⁴⁷ Jonathan Kramnick's account of the mid-century disputes about how to evaluate Spenser and Shakespeare is an excellent summary of the critical ideologies at play in reading canonical works in terms of sublimity or imaginative power in the 1750s. Kramnick argues that Warton and Hurd were instrumental in defining a native English canon that sought a kind of specifically British premodernism over and above a classical one. Cf pp 139-60

'Chivalry is commonly looked upon as a barbarous sport, or extravagant amusement, of the dark ages. It had however no small influence on the manners, policies, and constitutions of antient times, and served many public and important purposes. It was the school of fortitude, honour and affability....inspired the noblest sentiments of heroism...taught gallantry and civility to a savage and ignorant people, and humanised the native ferocity of the northern nations.'⁴⁸ Warton, like Warburton, chastises the Gothic period for being insufficiently rational but still praises the age's moral unity and cultivation of the imagination, and his book presents the Gothic as a great moment in the development of modern Britain that the contemporary world could learn from.

Hurd's work from 1755-62 also focused increasingly on the late Elizabethan Gothic period. Following the relative lack of interest in his essays on religion and poetry, Hurd was encouraged by Warburton to write about premodern British culture from a religious angle from the mid-1750s.⁴⁹ While much nationalist work of the time was celebrating the Elizabethan age as the apex of British freedom and fortitude, Hurd's *Moral and political dialogues, being the substance of several conversations between divers eminent persons of the past and present age* (1759) took the controversial stance that the liberalizing age of Elizabeth was morally inferior to what came before it.⁵⁰ At its

48 *Observations*, 267. (Note this passage comes from the second edition of the *Observations*). The rest of the paragraph enumerates further virtues that chivalry taught: '(chivalry) conduced to refine the manners of the combatants, exciting an emulation in the devices and accoutrements, the splendour and parade, of their tilts and tournaments: while its magnificent festivals, thronged with noble dames and courteous knights, produced the first efforts of wit and fancy.'

49 Ryley notes that 'the kind of criticism' that sees great works within and as central enunciations of their cultural context 'appeared for perhaps the first time in the essays of the *Divine Legation*,' and from there directly to Warton, Hurd, et al. Hurd was very close with Warburton, who served as a sort of patron to him, and derived a great deal of professional benefit from their friendship. Warburton strongly approved of Hurd's literary efforts: 'I have now seen the whole of the letters on Chivalry, and am wonderfully taken with them. They should be published forthwith.' (15 May 1762; in *Letters of a Late eminent Prelate* (1808) 248)

50 As the title indicates, the work employs British men of letters from the past (Henry More, Cowley,

core was a heated debate between Arbuthnot and Addison about the legacy of the Elizabethan age, a debate continued in the now better-known *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762).⁵¹ Focusing on late medieval/early modern romance and reading chivalry as the complex but coherent code of virtue that literary romance articulated for 'these Gothic times,' the *Letters* argue that the great works of Spenser and Shakespeare were less modern and Elizabethan than they were Christian and 'Gothic.' Gothic culture in Britain was a time of unimaginable religious unity, motivated by a genuine commitment to the 'duties and rituals' of the moral and political code of chivalry: 'Chivalry was no absurd or freakish institution, but the natural and even sober effect of the feudal policy....the love of God and of the Ladies went hand in hand, in the duties and rituals of Chivalry.'⁵² Nations at the time, like the city-states of Homeric Greece, were fragmented and constantly in danger and thus needed collective objects and principles to secure loyalty and unity. The chief characteristics of chivalry—an excessive zeal for religion, garish displays of devotion, a mixture of politeness and savagery or superstition—could all be explained by the political situation of the late middle ages, and Hurd argues repeatedly that the intensity of their political commitment made the late middle

Addison, etc) to speak about pressing religious, political, and moral matters. The *Letters* is in fact a concise recap of its discoveries, as well as a continuation of its interest in the Elizabethan era, which it sees as both politically and aesthetically insuperable.

- 51 The *Moral and political dialogues* expresses explicitly how the fractured present must learn from the virtuous past. Arbuthnot voices an unqualified approval of it as a time of unbroken spiritual and political unity people with a citizenry 'now emerging out of ignorance; uncorrupted by wealth, and therefore undebauched by luxury; trained to obedience, and nurtured in simplicity.' Though Arbuthnot's adversary, Addison, impugns the character of Elizabeth and the political system under her, the strongest rhetoric in the *Dialogues* comes from the eulogies to 'that sense of honour, that conscience of duty, in a word, that gracious simplicity of manners, which renders the age of Elizabeth truly GOLDEN...the fairest picture of humanity that is to be met with in the accounts of any people.' (*Dialogues*, 140) Through the skeptical Whiggish figure of Addison, the *Dialogues* must undercut the dream of an absolute unity as it is announced, aligning the work with Blackwell and the premodernist project in general. Just as critics became aware of the fantasy of premodern community as a viable justification for criticism, they had to limit and hedge against its claims for immediate public utility.
- 52 Richard Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, 10.

ages morally superior to Homeric times (as well as being 'the more poetic for being Gothic'). Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton were deeply enriched by chivalry and the Gothic tradition, outdoing their Greek and Italian predecessors because of the passions that a deeply religious culture creates. He singles out the *Faery Queene* for close analysis of the Gothic aesthetic, arguing that its loose unity allows it to be both more moral and more noble than a traditional Aristotelean aesthetic (which it still often agrees with).⁵³ Like Warton's work, the *Letters* emphasize how there is no exact form of 'natural' poetry, and the fact that great works primarily serve *moral* ends means that there are many possible routes to great poetry—though the keen and un-prejudiced critic can always identify and excavate them.⁵⁴

Lowth's *Lectures* (1754) were undoubtedly the most important work of historicism from the 1750s, far outstripping Warton's and Hurd's work in influence and ultimately rivaling the fame of Blackwell's and Warburton's own works in Britain and the Continent. Lowth worked within the deeply Anglican milieu of mid-century Oxford that Warburton lorded over, and his *Lectures* (originally published as a doctoral dissertation) show the overriding influence of Warburton's brand of historicism. Lowth was, however, not a direct follower of Warburton—they in fact bitterly and publicly quarrelled over the *Lectures*—and was not beholden to his dogma about the inherent truth of religious

53 'The question is not, which of the two (viz. Gothic or Grecian) is conducted in the simplest or truest taste: but whether there be not sense and design in both, when scrutinized by the laws on which each is projected.' (61) 'It is agreed, every work of art must be one, the very idea of a work requiring it...we readily agree to call them *natural* and even take a fond pleasure in the survey of them.' (110)

54 Cf Letter VIII: 'The same observation holds of the two sorts of poetry. Judge of the Faery Queen by the classic models, and you are shocked with its disorder: consider it with an eye to its Gothic original, and you find it regular. The unity and simplicity of the former are more complete: but the latter has that sort of unity and simplicity, which results from its nature.' The 'success of (epic) fictions will not be great, when they have no longer any footing the popular belief.' (Ibid, 103)

principles. Perhaps because of his secure position in the church, Lowth was able to step outside Warburton's shadow and create a more visionary work of historicism than his fellow Oxfordites, following the paradoxes of the genre through to their end and focusing most intensively on the material aesthetic experiences that the genre could alone address.

The *Lectures*' interest in Hebraic poetry was by no means novel, but its treatment of them is indisputably innovative, blending the approach of Blackwell with the nationalist and cultural assumptions of the Warburtonians.⁵⁵ The book frequently accounts for Hebraic poetry in terms similar to those in which Blackwell praises Homer, arguing that it derived from a Hebraic freedom and simplicity that produced a primal embeddness in nature: *'The prophet seems to have depicted the face of nature exactly as it appeared to him, and to have adapted it to the figurative description of his own situation.'*⁵⁶ As a result, it always already has an object and a mission and can thus invent

55 Cf. Weinbrot's illuminating if under-theorized chapter on the revival of Hebrew studies by nationalist-minded critics of the eighteenth century. Though interest in Hebrew culture was as old as the early Church Fathers, a more strictly literary interest in Hebrew texts began with Revolution- and Restoration-era critics, and such interest brought with it all the trappings of neoclassical literary criticism. Whigs from the 1710s on became deeply interested in the idea of passionate public morality that they believed the simple style of ancient Hebrew poetic texts created. Weinbrot traces this sentiment back to Samuel Woodford in the 1660s: '(the Bible is) an excellent Soil, and of such kindly nature, that if it were cultivated either as it ought, or only as the barren sand of Antiquity, and all the tedious fables of Heathenish superstition...it would produce the greatest and most rich increase' *A Paraphrase upon the Psalms of David*. The central Whig ideologue of the time, Aaron Hill, wrote that God 'taught Poetry first to the Hebrews, and the Hebrews to Mankind in general...the oldest, and I think, the sublimest Poem in the World, is of Hebrew Original, and was made immediately after passing the Red-Sea, at a Time, when the Author had neither Leisure, nor Possibility, to invent a new Art.' (Preface to *The Creation*, 1720, quoted Weinbrot, 410) His close associate, Richard Blackmore—perhaps the most widely read poet in Britain from about 1700-1715—wrote that 'the World has as much reason to be governed by this Example (of the Hebrews) as by that of Pagan Writers.' This sentiment had, however, largely lain dormant during the 1730s, as the Opposition writers focused on Roman and Gothic/Saxon examples of ancient virtue and undercut the importance of Christian religion for national or patriotic virtue. Interest in Hebraic society re-surfaced with the development of professional premodernist criticism in the 1740s, as critics began again to voice the opinion that 'the Hebrew Bible has every beauty and excellency that can be found in all the *Greek* and *Roman* Authors.' (*An Essay on the Usefulness of Oriental Learning*, 1739 'Philolottus')

56 Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, 83.

its own forms, meters, and imagery rather than borrowing them from convention.⁵⁷

Lowth's work also echoes Warburton's and Blackwell's point that poetry was the most effective and inspiring political oratory for great pre-modern culture, repeatedly noting that both had the power to inspire a kind of magically immediate and overwhelming spirit of assent that no listener could resist. For instance, he describes how a poem of Solon's inspires the dejected Greek populace to passionate action:

as if pronounced by a prophet instinct with divine enthusiasm, the people, propelled by a kind of celestial inspiration, flew immediately to arms, became clamorous for war, and sought the field of battle with such incredible ardour, that by the violence of their onset, after a great slaughter of the enemy, they achieved a most decisive victory.⁵⁸

The *Lectures* argues that this response to oral literature was even more central to the Hebrews than it was to the Greeks. Religion was at the center of all of their institutions, and religious ideas held together their culture by interpellating each subject into reverence and love for Yahweh in prophecies, psalms, etc, which in turn interpellated them into tribal institutions:

The religion of the Hebrews embraced a very extensive circle of divine and human economy... it extended even to the regulation of the commonwealth, the ratification of the laws, the forms and administration of justice, and nearly all the relations of civil and domestic life. With them, *almost*

57 The first quote is from *Lectures*, 65. 'should some officious grammarian take in hand the passage, (for this is a very diligent race of beings, and sometimes more than sufficiently exact and scrupulous,) and attempt to restore it to its primitive purity and perfection, the whole grace and excellence of that beautiful exordium would be immediately annihilated, all the impetuosity and ardour would in a moment be extinguished.'

58 The general remarks on lyric poetry that follow this passage elucidate Lowth's theory of poetry as the divine link between individual and society at a more theoretical level: 'The amazing power of Lyric poetry, in directing the passions, in forming the manners, in maintaining civil life, and particularly in exciting and cherishing that generous elevation of sentiment on which the very existence of public virtue seems to depend, will be sufficiently apparent by only contemplating those monuments of genius which Greece has bequeathed to posterity. If we examine the poems of Pindar, (which though by no means accounted the most excellent of their kind, by some strange fatality are almost the only specimens that remain,) how exquisite must have been the pleasure, how vivid the sensation to the Greek, whose ordinary amusement it was to sing, or hear them sung! For, this kind of entertainment was not confined to persons of taste and learning, but had grown into general use. When he heard his gods, his heroes, his ancestors received into the number of the gods, celebrated in a manner so glorious, so divine, would not his bosom glow with the desire of fame, *with the most fervid emulation of virtue, with a patriotism, immoderate perhaps, but honourable and useful in the highest degree?*'

*every point of conduct was connected, either directly or indirectly, with their religion.*⁵⁹
As the *Lectures* explain, a combination of complete Blackwellian attunement to nature and complete Warburtonian religious faith made the Hebrews into a perfect marriage of both nature and society and church.

Experience and Ideology

So far I have laid out the basic novel features and emphases behind innovative historicist work from 1735-60 while illuminating their ideological backgrounds and motivations. As I have been arguing, the works' dramatizations of profound collective aesthetic experience often imply that the present nation can learn a sort of universally true virtue through the study of the aesthetics of the past. However, in order to focus on the unique contribution of this criticism, I would like to observe now how these works frequently and explicitly undercut this apparently nationalistic mission. As with the imaginative Pindaric ode I describe in the following chapter, historicist works generally wanted to split their aesthetic mission from the nationalist or ideological values they work within. Thus they highlight the almost instinctual glory of aesthetic experience, the physiological necessity of submitting to great imaginative objects as well as the meaningfulness and *truth* of such experiences. Indeed, the interest of historicism in materiality and concrete actions and objects of the past worlds it studies seems to promote the truth of aesthetic experience over and above national experience; the national common good is the moral and social pretext for authorizing aesthetic experience, but the focus on aesthetic moments shows the aesthetic splitting off from its base in the former.

⁵⁹ Lowth, 105.

The works this chapter has discussed carefully separate the past from the present, frequently highlighting not just the impossibility of reviving past cultures but also the *undesirability* of doing so. Intellectually speaking, the work floundered on the paradox that nationalist principles must be specific to specific national interests while poetic values must be universal, but none of the work points out this problem and instead prefers to leave the paradox bare. Blackwell's *Enquiry* gives the most confused account of the value of past aesthetic work. The work often undercuts its argument that 'nature' and simple experience offer an antidote to the modern ills of luxury and corruption, it resolutely denies that premodern cultures are preferable to modern ones. In the following quotes, observe the difference between the first passage's calm, smiling acceptance that modern 'felicity' precludes the full experience of Homeric aesthetic immediacy, and the bile of the second passage complaining about the unnaturalness of modern life, which comes only a few pages before the first:

--'(A) peoples Felicity clips the Wings of their Verse...yet I am persuaded that you will join in the Wish, That we may never be a proper Subject of an Heroic poem.'⁶⁰

--'so far are we (moderns) from enriching Poetry with *new* Images drawn from Nature, that we find it difficult to understand the *old*. We live within Doors, cover'd, as it were, from *Nature's Face*; and passing our Days supinely ignorant of her Beauties... (moderns) exclude themselves from the pleasantest and most natural Images that adorned the old Poetry. *State* and *Form* disguise Man; and Wealth and Luxury disguise Nature...It has been an old Complaint, that we love to disguise every thing and most of all *Ourselves*. All our Titles and Distinctions have been represented as Coverings, and Additions of Grandeur to what Nature gave us: Happy indeed for the best of Ends, I mean the publick Tranquillity and good Order; but incapable of giving delight in Fiction or Poetry.'⁶¹

The disarming manner of the first passage contrasts with the acerbic, even outraged one of the latter. In the latter, civilization and politeness 'disguise' and hide nature, and no authentic experience with nature seems possible, where one can only think and act within

60 Blackwell, 28.

61 Blackwell, 25-26.

artificial or conventional categories removed from immediate experience. The fact that this is tragic, if not traumatic, is conveyed frequently throughout the book, for example through the hint that 'Truth' and the immediacy of morals and social identity were lost with the move from simple to complex society:

The Man who had bravely defended his City, enlarged its dominion, or died in its Cause, was revered *like a God*: Love of Liberty, Contempt of Death, Honour, Probity, and Temperance were *Realities*. There was, as I said, a Necessity for those Virtues...while a Nation continues simple and sincere, whatever they say has a *Weight* from *Truth*.

Nevertheless, Blackwell's commitment to modern British principles means that one can find a passage like this scarcely five pages later in the *Enquiry*:

Here he might see, What the utmost Stretch of *Human Policy* is able to perform: He might see *Riches, Pleasures, and Magnificence*, reconciled (as far as the Nature of things will allow) with *Safety and good Order*: Here was the noblest *Contract*, and most instructive Opposition, that *any Conjuncture* can offer to our View: He came from a Country where *Nature* governed; and went to another, where from the highest Achievement to the smallest Action in Life, every thing was directed by *settled Rules, and a digested Policy*.⁶²

The former invites a passionate return to natural morality and natural experience, while the latter maintains that nobility and truth comes from calculated commerce and honestly-acquired wealth. Indeed, the latter passage is a veritable paean to the pillars of the modern, British way, and it implies that little is lost in the transition from Homer's 'Country where Nature governed' and the 'Riches, Pleasures, and Magnificence' combined with the 'Safety and good Order' of the more civilized trading cultures.

Hurd presents the loss of the passion and religious faith that medieval society had in a more tragic light. The *Letters* famously lament the fact that modernity has gained 'a great deal of sense' from moving out of chivalry but has also 'lost...a world of fine fabling,' and the book underscores how empirical truth does not compensate adequately for a loss in aesthetic truth.⁶³ The work has frequently been seen to undercut the very idea

62 Thomas Blackwell, *Enquiry*, 146.

63 The strongest rhetoric in the *Dialogues* comes from the eulogies to 'that sense of honour, that conscience of duty, in a word, that gracious simplicity of manners, which renders the age of *Elizabeth*

of reconstructing the past even as it predicates it, offering a sort of radical historical skepticism, and the hesitant language of the *Letters* often implies as much, especially its paradoxes about the truth that the imagination brings.⁶⁴ Whether or not Hurd was ironic about his ability to recreate the past, the *Letters* clearly are both very concerned with underlining the social unity that chivalry's rituals brought while also advertising the inability of the moderns to reattain such a level of unity.

The position of Lowth's *Lectures* shows the extent to which the critic's celebration of passive experience worked within nationalist terms but was not quite ideological work. Lowth's work is far less self-conscious or coy about its mission than Hurd's *Letters*, advertising itself as something like a naturalist's or anthropologist's field guide to Hebrew culture.⁶⁵ Given its status as polite guide through the wild lands of ancient poetry, however, the *Lectures'* passionate and earnest defenses of religion and poetry complicate its scholarly position. Scarcely a paragraph goes by in the work without some praise of David's 'excellence' or Ezekiel's 'astounding sublimity' or the 'real majesty' and

truly GOLDEN...the fairest picture of humanity that is to be met with in the accounts of any people.' (*Dialogues*, 140) Yet the dialogues conclude with the skeptical Addison, who impugns the character of Elizabeth and the political system under her winning the day.

- 64 Katherine Haugen notes that, for Hurd, 'the whole value of Spenser's poem consisted just in its alienness, its real and uncompromising medievality,' which results from Hurd's will to maintain the 'awesome otherness' of the middle ages even while insisting 'that it is necessary to have direct contact with the past.' (54-5) Haugen reads Hurd as a key figure of a criticism of 'extreme skepticism,' arguing that Hurd believed Spenser's text would have been 'aesthetic' only if unintelligible to his own audience and was in fact quite transparent to them because it was . While I don't disagree with the view that Hurd was a radical skeptic, I believe he is more in sympathy with Warburton's earlier project of attributing full cultural unity to a previous society, and that his skepticism serves the ends of the premodernist fantasy rather than radically undercutting it. Haugen's argument is also extremely valuable in pointing out the vicissitudes that can exist within a fantasy structure; the fantasy accommodates and justifies the work of both the skeptical Hurd, more or less indifferent to historical research, and the professional and meticulous Warton. (As Stephen Curry notes, Hurd's skepticism is likely the reason for his lack of influence on later writers.)
- 65 Lowth clearly borrows a distanced perspective from skeptical Biblical critics like Spinoza and LaPeyrere, reclaiming such a perspective from radical Deists like Toland and Collins who had used it extensively in the early 1700-20s.

‘dignity’ of Hebraic expression, etc. To give just one example out of many:

Let those who affect to despise the Muses cease to attempt, for the vices of a few who may abuse the best of things, to bring into disrepute a most laudable talent. Let them cease to speak of that art as light or trifling in itself, to accuse it as profane or impious; that art which has been conceded to man by the favour of his Creator, and for the most sacred purposes; that art consecrated by the authority of God himself, and by his example in his most august ministrations.⁶⁶

Declarations of the a priori aesthetic and moral supremacy of religious verse might seem out of place in the context of Lowth's scholarly method, but they reveal the underlying fantasy of a perfect marriage of nature and society, church and state that motivates the *Lectures* even as they refuse to fully authorize them or make them directly applicable to the present. The *Lectures* show the split between past and present as clearly as Blackwell's work had, defining the unity of Hebrew culture over and against ‘modern’ culture which, with its complexity and specialization, inevitably contains all manner of inequalities and contradictions:

There existed not that variety of studies and pursuits, of arts, conditions, and employments, which may be observed among other nations who boast of superior civilisation; and rightly, indeed, if luxury, levity, and pride, be the criterions of it. All enjoyed the same equal liberty; all of them, as being the offspring of the same ancient stock, boasted an equality of lineage and rank: there were no empty titles, no ensigns of false glory; scarcely any distinction or precedence but that which resulted from superior virtue or conduct, from the dignity of age and experience, or from services rendered to their country. Separated from the rest of mankind by their religion and laws, and not at all addicted to commerce, they were contented with those arts which were necessary to a simple and uncultivated (or rather uncorrupted) state of life.⁶⁷

This description of idealized, egalitarian community is merely supposed to explain why the Hebrews used so many agricultural metaphors, but there are unmistakable and, given the context, unnecessary critiques of modern society within it (‘there were no *empty* titles,’ no ‘*false* glory,’ the Hebrews led an ‘uncorrupted’ life, etc). The passage appears not merely to glorify Hebrew poetry but also to claim that Hebrew society had a certain fullness and immediacy of purpose that moderns now lack, that by definition could never be created in the present.

⁶⁶ Lowth, 34.

⁶⁷ Lowth, 89.

If they are not meant to be directly political, what purpose did these dramatizations of aesthetic reception and these imaginative rehearsals of immediate experience serve? Most critics have lumped historicism in with the growth of literary history in the 1750s and thus associated it with a larger cultural patriotism that developed in that decade.⁶⁸ The few critics who have noted mid-century criticism's recreations of aesthetic experiences alongside their careful distancing past and present have tended to see it as nostalgic, a compensation for a rational or commercialized modernity.⁶⁹ However, this latter view seems to skip a step, assuming that nostalgia is a natural and universal sentiment that could be deployed by writers and received by audiences without prior preparation. It seems to me that the very notion of authentic experience and full dwelling with one's immediate environment, and the very act of looking to one's environment and non-interpersonal experience, needed to be inculcated or taught before

68 During the same time the Warburtonians were writing their historicist works, literary history about native, British works exploded in popularity. Riding the wave of the broadened and de-politicized cultural patriotism in the 1750s, the genre produced continuous new commentaries on great imaginative poets like Spenser and myriad essays on the Elizabethan era. A number of excellent critical works from the past twenty years have documented the rise of this more general historicist criticism during the 1750s, narrating the expansion of historicism as a result of the growth of the commercial literary market and the increasing confidence in building a 'nativist' British canon. (Cf especially Weinbrot, Fairer, Kramnick, and Terry.) The type of professional curation of the great works of the native British tradition practiced by critics like Thomas Warton, John Upton, and Thomas Percy (in medieval and Renaissance criticism), as well as the editions of Shakespeare by Theobald (1730) Warburton (1747), Johnson (1765), and others, testifies to the growing valorization of British history as a 'common' object in John Guillory's sense: shared by and accessible to readers of both middle class and elite backgrounds—but also topically empty, without intelligible content. David Fairer and Alok Yadav have finely observed that, just as soon as it became a topic of universal attention and fascination, great national literature became detached from cultural and moral politics, accommodating every kind of value and viewpoint that mid-century writers brought to the table—neoclassical, religious fundamentalist, proto-romantic nationalist—and presenting them all by way of strengthening the greatness and solidity of British tradition.

69 Trevor Ross has offered the most subtle views of the compensation for commercialism that nostalgia offers, arguing that critics had to make the aesthetic separate from the historical in order to preserve the uniqueness and moral cache of literary criticism. Ross's and Kramnick's arguments revise the more simplistic view of many important twentieth-century critics. Cf fn 1 above.

collective elegy or communal nostalgia could take place (as in, say, the German lyric from 1790-1820). Historicism did precisely this, requiring the reader to long for an experience both imaginative and concrete, the product of solitary reading but fundamentally social (indeed national) in character, and thus to see its deepest private desires as public, and vice versa. Because of its focus on intense aesthetic experiences, historicist work was able to train its reader for this sort of passive feeling, using the lures of nationalism and tradition as a means to brush aside the formal concerns of neoclassical criticism and the polite ethical imperatives of Addisonian criticism.

Looking closely at works of historicism shows us how paradox lay at the heart of these new forms of desire. Paradoxes of aesthetic reality lie at the heart of Hurd's *Letters*, which ostensibly want to argue why the inventive Gothic aesthetic was 'true' and the 'absurd' 'Frenchified' aesthetic false.⁷⁰ Thus the *Letters* write about a world in which 'all is marvelous and extraordinary, yet not *unnatural*,' and can only talk about this world via paradox: 'they who deceive, are honester than they who do not deceive; and they, who are deceived, wiser than they who are not deceived.'⁷¹ Lowth's work, however, indexes these paradoxes and their pleasures most clearly. His *Lectures* make the argument that the literal and concrete can only be made *real* and *true* by being lost in the figurative. One must forget the 'literal' and affirm the figurative, overlook the actual facts of a situation and relish in the air of the divine or supernatural that clouds or colors it: 'the figurative sense is found to beam forth with so much perspicuity and lustre, *that the literal sense is quite cast into a shade, or becomes indiscernible*' (emphasis added). The historian who

⁷⁰ Hurd's disdain for a French-inspired aesthetic is palpable. He mocks the cliched sentiments that 'filled the flimsy essays and rambling prefaces' and shames 'our obsequious and over-modest critics' for following the French.

⁷¹ Hurd, *Letters*, 144.

looks at situations objectively and attends only to the literal misses the ‘greatness and sublimity’ of events entirely:

(These techniques) suggest ideas still greater than when described as plain facts by the pen of the historian, in however magnificent terms: for to the greatness and sublimity of the images which are alluded to, is added the pleasure and admiration which result from the comparison between them and the objects which they are brought to illustrate...neither history nor fable afforded to the profane writers a sufficiently important store of this kind of imagery.

In this passage, perhaps mostly meant as a dig at the mainstream literary history that exploded in the 1750s, the passage notes that the true moral sublime requires a confusion of local and universal, literal and figurative that the Hebrews were predisposed to feel because of their aestheticized culture.

In Lowth's figuration, what is real and present in ancient culture but conspicuously absent in modern culture is the predisposition to collective *overstatement*. The local was so vibrant and real for Hebrew culture because it was constantly confused with an elusive and passing universal that poets imposed on it. Thus the *Lectures* notes that the prophets function by portraying every slight to the Hebrew people as an apocalypse:

Chaos and the Creation...are constantly alluded to, as expressive of any remarkable change, whether prosperous or adverse, in the public affairs—of the overthrow or restoration of kingdoms and nations; and are consequently very common in the prophetic poetry, particularly when any unusual degree of boldness is attempted. If the subject be the destruction of the Jewish empire by the Chaldeans, or a strong denunciation of ruin against the enemies of Israel, it is depicted in exactly the same colours as if universal nature were about to relapse into the primeval chaos.⁷²

The *Enquiry* maintains this technique was necessary to create both collective pleasure (of the blessings and strength of God) or pain (of annihilation or destruction). In any case, in order to make the present world great and meaningful, it must have an imaginative, figurative supplement that is itself totally false, imposed on from the outside.⁷³ The

⁷² Lowth, 117.

⁷³ Lowth notes that beauty is 'false' a phenomenological sense: 'It also sometimes happens, that those beauties which may be easily conceived, are very difficult to be explained: while we simply contemplate them, they appear sufficiently manifest; if we approach nearer, and attempt to touch and handle them, they vanish and escape.'

aesthetic alone thus gives truth to the material world, not merely enlivening it or making it less drab, but in effect making it *real*.

Conclusion: the Materialist Fantasy in Herder and Hamann

In historicist work, the nationalist framework created a remainder of materiality that has little to do with the British nation and yet seems to be integral to social life or community. This new need for materiality speaks to what Lacanians call surplus objects—looming fantasmic things ‘which no interpellated subject can ever quite place in the fabric of his/her usual phenomenological self-experience, and yet which are taken by them to be what give meaning and unity to this entire field’—but also appears to mark a split between the fantasy of nationalism and the real nation that can never be overcome.⁷⁴ The fantasy nevertheless remains firmly in place and would shape aesthetic thought about politics, especially in Germany, through to the end of the century.

The aesthetic essays of Hamann and Herder, influenced as they are by Blackwell, Warburton, and Lowth, show the powerful effect of this fantasy and stand as a bridge between it and the theories of Schiller and the Schlegels. The last paragraph of the ‘Aesthetica in Nuce’ (1762), Hamann’s elaborate prose expression of the ecstasy found in embracing the random details and objects of God’s Creation (‘every impression of Nature in man is not only a memorial, but also a warrant of fundamental truth’), marks the beginning of the German version of this fantasy. The essay concludes with an anecdote about the author’s recent trip to the countryside of Lithuania, where he was struck by the

⁷⁴ As Matthew Sharpe explains such objects, they are ‘at once avowed by the (national) ideology and necessary to it, they simultaneously intimate to subjects a beyond to what is usually publically avowed and exchanged.’

peculiarly musical speech of a group of peasants there ('a single cadence of only a few notes'). The narrator writes that he was led to the sudden revelation that the cadence communicates not just a form of genial interpersonal communication but the expression of an always-already formed affective attachment to the land. All art presupposes this attachment and tries to bring these myriad interactions with the environment together into an expression of the human bond with the landscape, a coherent whole that reveals the immanence of the mysterious Truth of God in the immediate world.

Herder's essay on Ossian (1773) makes a small but important change to Hamann's theory, eliding Hamann's strict theocentrism and making 'Creation' refer not to the world qua God's work but to the natural-phenomenological world seen as a whole.⁷⁵ The narrator continually asserts that modern poetry can and must reclaim such immediacy—praising the savage American Indians as well as modern Highlanders for never having lost it—and furthermore assumes that *all* nations have this true, natural experience of community buried in their past. 'All the songs of these savage peoples move around objects, actions, events, around a living world! How rich and various are the details, incidents, immediate features!... There is the same connection between the sections of the song as there is between the trees and bushes of the forest; the same between the cliffs and grottoes of the wilderness as there is between the scenes of the event itself... the living presence of the images on a hundred things that belong to the living world, to the gnomic song of the nation, and vanish with it.' The essay initially advocates simple cultural his-

⁷⁵ Herder of course knew Hamann's 'Aesthetica' extremely well, quoting from it more frequently than from any other work of Hamann's. HB Nisbet argues that the principle influence Hamann had on Herder regarded his embrace of the immediate sense world for poetic and nationalistic purposes. 'Herder shares with Bacon the conviction that all poetry is or out to be ultimately rooted in our experience, through the senses, of the natural world.' Cf. Nisbet, 'Herder and Francis Bacon.'

tory as a way of at least partially recovering it (writing of the narrator's desire to go to England to study up on their ancient institutions and 'the finer points of her national character'), announcing the Lowthian desire 'to hear a living performance of a living people's songs, see them in all their effectiveness to become for a while an ancient Caledonian myself.' However, Herder's work also implies that the glorious attachment to the immediate (*Festigkeit*) and its 'rich and various' details is available to every nation now, Germans as well as Indians, if only it can remain 'always with a sharp, vivid eye on the thing they want to say, using their senses, feeling their purpose immediately and exactly, not distracted by shadowy concepts, half-ideas, and symbolic letter understanding.' Herder's fantasy, so clearly influenced by Blackwell's and Lowth's work, is based not merely on powerful, completely unifying poetry but on the dizzying complexity of *embedded existence* itself, a dream of fully feeling the material environment of the present. As he succinctly puts it his late Kalligone (in reply to Kant): 'we belong to nature, we can know no sublime beyond her.'⁷⁶

76 *Kalligone*, 898.

CHAPTER THREE

'TRUTH SEEN COMPLEAT': INTERNALIZING VIRTUE IN THE IMAGINATIVE ODE, 1742-57

This chapter's topic is internalization of virtue in the imaginative Pindaric ode from 1740-1757. The chapter focuses specifically on the reasons for the ode's preoccupation with moments of powerful aesthetic reception. The chapter argues that dramatizations of such moments allowed the ode to present a new *private* model of virtue based on the individual's unshakeable private commitment to abstract collective ideals (Liberty, Nature, as well as history and tradition). The ode continually rehearses a lone individual's encounter with virtual environments completely suffused with and unified by these abstract ideals, dramatizing the individual's desire to be a part of such purposeful and 'real' communities and thereby directing political and social aspirations into private encounters. By removing virtue and the striving for a natural, free community from political contexts, the imaginative Pindaric ode pursued a less directly ideological purpose than odes that came before it but created a new form of moral subjectivity based

on a self-inspired longing for internal Truths. Despite its constant use of nationalistic rhetoric and terminology, the imaginative ode's unique contribution to ethical and political literature came in its new way of theorizing what the virtuous individual desired. As I will argue, this new form of desire was predicated on a belief in what I call virtual-material Nature (or simply 'virtual reality'), an aesthetic environment that yields phenomenological truths of existence and is consequently more 'real' in a moral sense than the empirical world. The chapter also differentiates the ode's form of interpellation into private Truth from more popular nationalized fantasies of the same period. In particular, the fantasy that the individual's experienced his or her true home *in the imagination* set it definitively apart from more functional and direct forms of cultural patriotism of the period and helped create a form of aesthetic or poetic ethics that was nominally political but deeply personal or individualistic.

Passive Virtue in the Imaginative Pindaric Ode

The particular type of imaginative ode the chapter addresses was practiced by a group of young and ambitious poets from c.1742-57, many of whom were well acquainted with one another. William Collins, Joseph Warton, Thomas Gray, Mark Akenside, and William Mason all wrote 'high' (i.e. political) odes modeled after Pindar in this decade and-a-half borrowing features of older Pindarics but creating a new style. Like previous Pindaric odes, the new Pindarics took the conjunction of the poetic and political as their subject, but the mid-century version centered entirely on a certain type of imaginative encounter that earlier Pindarics had included only as a moment in their arguments (if they included

it at all). The most common plot in the mid-century ode features a solitary narrator confronting a great abstract principle or entity in an imaginative setting, sometimes a recognizable place but always a liminal spot blurring boundaries between past and present or imaginary and real. By contrast with odes before the 1740s, the narrator of the ode doesn't seek to share these entities (e.g. Nature or Poetry) with other people but rather seems to see their pursuit as an end in itself, often one promising some form of prophetic and enthusiastic but still private state of being.¹ For instance, the narrator of Collins' 'Ode on the Poetical Character'—now probably the best-known ode from the period from 1740-57—sets up the overwhelming power of poetic spirit, figured in the metonymy of a 'magic girdle,' before dramatizing a solitary pursuit of it:

To few the god-like gift assigns,
 To gird their blest prophetic loins,
 And gaze her visions wild, and feel unmix'd her flame!

...

With many a vow from Hope's aspiring tongue,
 My trembling feet (its) guiding steps pursue.

William Mason 'Ode to Independency' is less well-known but provides an equally clear example of the pursuit of an overwhelmingly powerful abstract entity:

HERE, on my native shore reclin'd,
 While Silence rules this midnight hour,
 I woo thee, GODDESS. On my musing mind
 Descend, propitious Power!
 And bid these ruffling gales of grief subside...
 Come to thy Vot'ry's ardent prayer,
 In all thy graceful plainness drest

Unlike earlier Pindarics, Mason's ode is occasioned not a major public event like a coronation, public feast day, or military battle but by a private moment of longing for the 'Goddess,' and the poem's ambitions are to achieve a fuller private union with

¹ This aspects of the mid-century ode has led John Sitter to identify the entire genre with a generalized 'retreat into feminine security.' I will be agreeing with the basic parameters of Sitter's wide-ranging reading of mid-eighteenth century poetry, but I believe that it fails to account for the public and moral accomplishments the ode-writers hoped to achieve with their works. Cf sections two and three below.

Independency and not to raise a public profile of a figure. Like Collins' ode, the private pursuit of great abstractions is allowed to take precedence over all else and made to seem an event of pressing importance.

The extreme *passivity* of this plot, and its peculiar emphasis on the individual's desire for it, means that the imaginative Pindaric ode gives an unprecedented importance to secular aesthetic-imaginative *experience* and the great odes of Collins, Warton, Akenside, Gray, and others document vicarious virtual experiences so powerful that they border on the apocalyptic. Collins' 'Ode to Fear,' for example, is premised on Fear being understood as a charismatic entity that unites all listeners in a way that the poem implies is broadly political. The poem begins with a characteristic dramatization of a powerful aesthetic experience:

In earliest Greece to thee with partial choice
The grief-full Muse addressed her infant tongue;
The maids and matrons on her awful voice,
Silent and pale, in wild amazement hung.

Instead of treating the Muse's speech as a dramatic performance, with requisite suspension of disbelief and aesthetic distance, the poem figures it as a sort of prophetic revelation in which the Muse announces a truth with real and immediate consequences: the 'maids and matrons' hang on the Muse's 'infant tongue' with a 'wild amazement.'

When the narrator directly addresses Fear, it hints at an approaching primal scene and reinforce the ode's exaggeration of aesthetic response:

Thou, to whom the world unknown
With all its shadowy shapes is shown;
Who see'st appalled the unreal scene,
While Fancy lifts the veil between

Fear, the addressee here, harbors the hidden truth of 'the world unknown', which Fancy creates a *précis* of—giving just enough to expose the human to and make her aware of its

presence without revealing much of its contents.² The concluding lines to the ode express a quasi-mystical longing for full communion with with Fear ('Teach me but once like him to feel... And I, O Fear, will dwell with thee!'), hinting again that an earth-altering prophetic power would come from this union:

O Thou whose Spirit most possest
The sacred Seat of Shakespear's Breast!
By all that from thy Prophet broke,
In thy Divine Emotions spoke,
Hither again thy Fury deal,
Teach me but once like Him to feel:
His Cypress Wreath my Meed decree,
And I, O Fear, will dwell with Thee!

The poems concludes with the narrator's committing to worshipping Fear in the expectation of a fullness, plenitude, or general end to the desire that dominates him now.

Since they are self-consciously Pindaric poems, most mid-century odes insinuate that this sort of private devotion to imaginative principles is necessary for the political stability, cultural coherence, and moral reformation of the nation. Even works about obviously non-political entities—such as Collins 'Ode on the Poetical Character' or the 'Ode to Fear' itself—gesture towards the role of poetic experience in bringing a glorious unity to the nation and the present. For instance, the companion piece to the 'Ode to Fear,'

2 The poem's companion piece, the 'Ode to Pity,' also centers on a 'world unknown' that the audience is compelled to uncover, though it is a place of comfort and aesthetic pleasure:

Its Southern Site, its Truth compleat
Shall raise a wild Enthusiast Heat,
In all who view the Shrine.

This 'Truth compleat' in effect seems to be a telekinetic cinema, in which an audience repeatedly undergoes the most powerful aesthetic experiences of (strictly Aristotlean) pity:

There Picture's Toils shall well relate
How Chance, or hard involving Fate,
O'er mortal Bliss prevail:
The Buskin'd Muse shall near her stand,
And sighing prompt her tender Hand
With each disastrous Tale.

As in the 'Ode to Fear,' it is implied that a completely absorbing aesthetic experience is possible if when could 'break the veil' and understand the secret truth that unites all audiences members of a political-aesthetic community.

the 'Ode to Pity,' underscores the political stakes behind the ever-deferred aesthetic revelation outlined above:

There let me oft, retir'd by Day,
In Dreams of Passion melt away,
Allow'd with Thee (i.e. Pity) to dwell:
There waste the mournful Lamp of Night,
Till, Virgin, thou again delight
To hear a British Shell!

The narrator here implores Pity to grant him the pacifying, narcotic effects he imagines it having, but only so that he may pass the time until a hero-poet reawakens the 'British Shell' by fully harnessing the power of poetry. In this future time, Pity will presumably infuse all of the British populace with its force, uniting it all under the spell of heroic poetry.³

Other odes of the 1740s are far less cautious or coy about linking imaginative vision and political spirit. To take perhaps the most extreme example from the decade, Mark Akenside's 'On Lyric Poetry' argues that the true poet must infuse spirit into the public by continually communicating inspiring visions of abstract, imaginative Liberty:

When to throw incense on the vestal flame
Of Liberty my genius gives command,
Nor Theban voice nor Lesbian lyre
From thee, O Muse, do I require;
While my presaging mind,
Conscious of powers she never knew,
Astonish'd, grasps at things beyond her view,
Nor by another's fate submits to be confined.

In this passage, the poet's vaguely Platonic 'genius' directly inspires it to praise Liberty,

3 Focusing on the retreat of these abstractions, and the apparent failure of Collins to achieve the active poetic power they promise, misses the argument of his odes and the purpose of their passivity. Many readings of Collins' odes from the 1950-70s focus on Collins as a poet of anxiety, seeing his poems as indicative of a larger mid-century 'poetry of absence' (David Morris' phrase). Thomas Weiskel's influential reading, for instance, notes that Collins was motivated by 'boredom,' which 'increased so astonishingly throughout the 18th c. . . intense boredom exhibits the signs of the most basic of modern anxieties, the anxiety of nothingness, or absence.' These readings neglect to ask, however, how Collins—by all accounts an ambitious poet eager to court an audience—could have considered these poems successful or how such themes and strategies were worth writing about, a question which this chapter takes as fundamental. See section four below on Collins' conventional, neoclassical ambitions.

and the poet needs none of the trappings of conventional poetry to announce its glory and spread it to his waiting audience. The overwhelming allure of abstract Liberty could hardly be more strongly stated in Akenside's ode, but Mason's 'Ode to Independency' again shows a more modest and typical combination of literary vision and political welfare. After the incantatory opening quoted above, the pensive narrator of the poem reveals that he seeks the security of Independency to fend off the 'vain Corruption' and 'vain Oppression' of the modern world. The 'unsullied Honor' of Independency must inspire the 'honest Muse' to sing the song of Liberty and shame those who have ignored or disgraced its spirit, riding 'vindictive thro' a venal land' in deep need of an infusion of the spirit of Liberty.

Many other new Pindaric odes could be quoted to the same effect, each showing the poet as a devoted spirit who awaits the inspiration of Liberty and pursues a union with it in the imagination. This new type of ode springs up quite suddenly between 1744 and 1757, when many of the most promising and ambitious young British poets suddenly turned their attention to a relatively uniform type of Pindaric ode at approximately the same time. Joseph Warton wrote and published fourteen such odes, Mark Akenside thirty-two, William Collins thirteen, and Thomas Gray nine, while scores of other poets (including James Thomson, the Biblical scholar Robert Lowth and the Whig moralist Edward Young), wrote odes with similar features during this decade-and-a-half. Indeed, few major young poets failed to practice the Pindaric ode in some form or another during the time, and no other poetic form saw such intense cultivation and development during it.⁴ Why, then, did poets so suddenly take up this peculiarly interior form of political

4 Another crucial aspect of the imaginative Pindaric ode was the obvious craftsmanship that went into it.

poetry at the same time?

Cultural Patriotism and the Imaginative Pindaric

To begin with, we should note how the difference between the loose definition of earlier Pindaric ode and the formally consistent mid-century Pindarics both follows from and differentiates itself from larger shifts in the theory and practice of political or nationalist poetry. Before the 1740s, the ode as a form was associated squarely with verse-tributes to national heroes and celebrations of national holidays. Cowley tirelessly and successfully advocated for the Pindaric ode in the 1650-60s, eulogizing it as the noblest form of tribute and the 'highest kind of writing in Verse.' The ode subsequently thrived from c.1660-1760, in large part because it allowed for a form of enthusiastic national celebration that still stayed firmly grounded in neoclassical doctrine.⁵ Many if not most major poets from c. 1660 to 1760 wrote influential public-themes odes and many lesser figures turned to the form when giving tribute to great public figures. Unlike its ancient predecessor, the modern Pindaric was specifically nationalistic, standing as the genre in which great public figures could be honored and made to stand for and embody the nation or its dearest and most essential qualities.⁶ The late-seventeenth and early-

Its elaborate rhyme schemes and meters, as well as its dense webs of allusion, make the call to moral reform far more artful, indirect, and hedged than it need be and, indeed, the mid-century ode seems to advertise its craftsmanship and the delicacy of its energy in a way that political or reformist poetry before it did not. Cf section three below.

- 5 High-profile debates about the ode from c.1700-40 were primarily about what a truly 'Pindaric' form looks like and how much liberty a poet could take in adapting the Pindaric to his or her own time. Cf Dennis' comments of the ancient ode, Congreve's *Discourse on the Pindarique Ode*, and Gray's remarks on both in Mason (1778).
- 6 As Koehler writes, the ode paid 'tribute to a wider community—most often, Britain as a nation—through profuse praise of a figure who embodied that nation.' Basil Kennett had argued fifty years before the 1740s that Pindar manifested that 'veneration for that heroic spirit shewn by the people of Athens in defence of common liberty, which his fellow citizens had shamefully betrayed' and by the 1740s Pindar had long been seen as the successor of Alcaeus and Tyrtaeus, the greatest poet-patriots for

eighteenth century patriotic Pindaric had no set form, though, as poets tended to call anything that spoke of public figures an 'ode' regardless of form or appearance. Dryden's famous 'Ode on St Cecilia's Day' (1687), for instance, featured short stanzas and line-lengths and a festive message of political hope, while Edward Young's 'Ocean: An Ode' (1725) was a spastic tribute to Britain's military strength in rambling blank verse. Hence, though the public ode—often referred to as the 'high' ode to distinguish it from the more modest poems addressing figures or ideas that weren't emblems of nation—was a recognized form that was frequently practiced from c.1700-40, it seemed to be less a genre a general attitude of praise.

Looking strictly at the above-quoted plea for national reform, one might be tempted to assume that the the mid-century ode was closely related to the patriotic poems that came before them, despite their imaginative settings. The pleas for a more inspired and moral Britain would also seem to support the conclusion (which many critics have made) that the poems are sputtering and confused efforts to continue the directly political poetry of their predecessors.⁷ This view is accurate to an extent but needs careful qualification so that the function of specific features of the Pindaric can be properly treated. The mid-century Pindaric obviously participated in the development of a de-radicalized, mainstream cultural patriotism in the 1740-50s, about the context of cultural

early modern British eyes. Even a young Samuel Johnson could, in the spirit of the 1740s, write fondly of Pindar's time, '(when) Poetry and Publick Spirit were the same...when the People caught the generous Flame from the Poet, when it spread from the People to the Prince, and united the Efforts of all against the common Enemy.'

7 Cf Griffin, Weinbrot, and Gerrard. William Levine's articles look more closely at the nationalism of Collins and Gray. Levine's subtle articles were written in the mid-1990s and consequently emphasize the horizon of nation-building behind poetic works of the 1740-50s, maintaining that the period produces 'poetry that emanates from a solitary persona but nonetheless has the character of a public pronouncement...(such poems) do not indicate that the poet seeks privacy simply to renounce and divorce himself from the corruptions of public power, but rather suggest some tentative paths by which poetry can better recuperate its traditional lyric powers and purify moral or civic life'

patriotism alone cannot explain the innovations and effects of the ode.

As recent work of cultural historians has documented, a de-radicalized, broadly Whiggish cultural patriotism rapidly developed during the 1740s and 1750s. The decade-and-a-half between the fall of the Opposition and the chaos leading up to the Seven Years War saw the re-deployment of ideas of selfless virtue and heroic dedication to the principles of Liberty that had previously been the hallmark of Radical groups.⁸ Much of the innovative and inspired work of the 1720-30s was the product of Dissenters or members of the Patriot Opposition rallying around principles to critique a government perceived to be insufficiently devoted to liberty and virtue, but this critique's rallying cries soon spread beyond these narrow circles and, when the Patriot Opposition lost its political impetus in the late 1730s and early 1740s, writers continued to freely use its characteristic rhetoric of Liberty, Nature, and Virtue.⁹ The appeal to a national essence, and the call to stand up for liberty, proved successful when denuded of its radical support as an active nationalist culture and 'patriotism industry' adapted such rhetoric in a variety

8 See Kathleen Wilson and Bob Harris as well as works from the 1990s by Linda Colley, Gerrard, and Gerard Newman.

9 Walpole's anti-climactic fall from power in 1742 provided little hope that the sort of patronage politics he stood for would be replaced, and the Opposition and the Patriot philosophy that fired many of the best British writers during the 1730s seemed effectively dead. Gerrard, Wilson, and numerous other critics write frankly of the 'widespread political cynicism' that followed Walpole's removal from power, a mood especially current among reform-minded Whigs who saw the Opposition collapse and its leaders either drift into obscurity or ally themselves with the conventional forces in power. The phrase is Gerrard's, but many other historians echo the same sentiments. Thomas Cleary explains the public climate of the time as follows: 'English political life remained unreformed, Walpole went unpunished for his supposed crimes in office, and (the Opposition's) patrons won none of the political spoils they had expected at his fall...it became clear there would be no grand alteration in the policies of the new government, regardless of its precise membership.' Dykstal notes that even a revisionist like JCD Clark notices a distinct drop-off in the frequency and power of political agitation, observing that the 'minds of leading Whigs were dominated not by a canon of Whig doctrine drawn from the great seventeenth-century tradition—Harrington, Tyrell, Trenchard, Toland, and Sidney, and the rest—but by the practical details and daily techniques of their trades as politicians.' Cf also Kathleen Wilson and Keith Langford on the deflated political climate following the mutual fall from popularity of Walpole and the Opposition.

of commercial mediums. In newspapers, pamphlets, dramas, as well as a host of more quotidian events, a broader class of 'public' class consisting of merchants, professionals, craftsmen, as well as members of the gentry and aristocracy, were taught to invoke august ideals and criticize a morally compromised government.¹⁰ As Kathleen Wilson in particular has emphasized, rhetoric about reforming the nation and embracing its essential greatness enabled the avid *consumption* of nationalist culture for the first time, as the new, de-radicalized appeal to liberty and virtue made its way into everything from public feasts to the patriotic medallions, toys, and trinkets that found a market during the period.¹¹

Within this burgeoning nationalism industry, new positions naturally opened up for writers beyond the small circuit of patronage that controlled literary production in the 1710-30s, with the result that literature became perhaps even more closely associated with the rhetoric of liberty and self-sacrificing virtue than it had been in the Opposition era. Hence, despite the period's lack of political agitation, ardent expressions of patriotism at many levels and arenas of culture are ubiquitous in the period, even if the

10 This class 'argued about and examined (political matters)...in coffeehouses and news rooms, dramatic productions and novels, and in a proliferation of printed and graphic propaganda that displayed their marketing to and consumption by those out-of-doors.' (Wilson, 147.)

11 The number and range of products promoting Opposition-style patriotism increased substantially from the late 1730s through the 1750s, as more people and groups began to perform their identification with an ideal Britain in a variety of ways. Kathleen Wilson, Bob Harris, and others have argued that images of British glory and debates about the nature of Britain's national mandate became the the subject of untold numbers of pamphlets, newspapers, plays, and other printed and performed products that brought pressing political matters to doorsteps and town-squares of Manchester and Leeds as well as London. The period also saw a growth in less clearly literary types of products celebrating an inherent British grandeur, as self-styled patriots greeted a great national event like the naval victory at Porto Bello by ordering medallions featuring Admiral Vernon's likeness, purchasing poem's describing his ascent to the pantheon of heroic Britons, and even holding public parties dedicated to 'drinking the Health of Him who cannot but be the darling of every free born British soul.' Cf Harris on the spread of anti-corruption patriotism beyond the Opposition in the 1740-50s: 'the twin perceptions of the pervasiveness of corruption and the need for a restoration of virtue united many of those who sought political change in mid-eighteenth-century Britain.'

political purposes of such writing is less clear than it had been for politically charged writing of the 1720-30s.¹²

Samuel Johnson's recreations of Parliamentary proceedings in the early 1740s, for instance, were eloquent expressions of nationalist pride whose political stance was nevertheless broad and non-committal.¹³ Published as *The Debates in the Senate of Lilliput* in Edward Cave's *The Gentleman's Magazine*, the recreations show both sides of the Walpole debate fiercely rallying around appeals to liberty. The young Johnson either liberally doctored or else outright invented most speeches in order to make each side as moving and convincing as possible. The following passages show eloquent defenses of Liberty from both pro- and anti-Walpolean figures:

The true interest, my lords, of every monarch, is *to please the people, and. the only way of pleasing Britons, is to preserve their liberties, their reputation, and their commerce.* Every attempt to extend the power of the crown beyond the limits prescribed by our laws, must in effect make it weaker, by diverting the only source of its strength, the affection of his subjects.

The MP here defines a monarch in familiar Whig terms as the servant of a 'people' who are free to revolt against him if he no longer serves their collective best interests.

However, on the very next page, an equally strong and equally coherent case is made for another appeal to liberty:

By liberty, my lords, can never be meant the privilege of doing wrong without being accountable, because liberty is always spoken of as happiness, or one of the means to happiness, and happiness and virtue cannot be separated. The great use of liberty must, therefore, be to preserve justice from violation ; justice, the great publick virtue, by which a kind of equality is diffused over the whole society, by which wealth is restrained from oppression, and inferiority preserved from servitude...Liberty, general liberty, must imply general justice; for wherever any part of a state can be unjust with impunity, the rest are slaves. That to condemn any man unheard is oppressive and unjust, is beyond controversy demonstrable, and that no such power is claimed by your lordships will, I hope, appear from your resolutions.¹⁴

12 Dykstal sums up the frank decline of radicalism during the 1740s: 'during this time, the sense of possibility about ideological change and faith in the speculation that sustained it receded.'

13 Cave, a famously savvy businessman, first assigned Johnson to cover the debates about Walpole's policies and counting on Johnson's rhetorical skill to capture the famously inspired Opposition speakers. See Arthur Murphy on Cave and his motives in publishing the *Gentleman's Magazine*.

14 *The Gentleman's Magazine*, August 1741.

Neither side comes out the clear winner (the article concludes with Parliament disbanding for the day without making any decisions), but both sides display a sort of eloquent ideological conviction that had not been seen before in British politics. This eloquence was no doubt due to Johnson's skill as a speech-writer, but Johnson effaces himself while voicing each claim to liberty with equal passion and indignation; indeed, Johnson's job seems to depend on his ability to remove himself and dramatize the people, ideas, and passions that are the key figures and cornerstones of national life. In short, he gives voice to the public, but only by effacing his own thoughts and sentiments.

Ode-writers too turned towards brasher articulations of patriotism and celebrations of liberty, though it also separated rhetorical conviction from partisan polemic. To take an unusual example, Mason, a close friend of both Thomas Gray and William Warburton, published an adaptation of the Book of Isaiah entitled, 'On the Fate of Tyranny.' The poem envisions the decimation of Babylon into a heap of dust and celebrates both Babylon's destruction and the deliverance of the Jews from their enslavement ('from Judah's neck the galling yoke/ Spontaneous falls'). The poem's aggressive rhetoric and imagery sharply contradict a supposed 'feminization' of the ode during the mid-century. The following two quotes show the poem reaching a *ne plus ultra* of patriotic conviction, calling for bloody destruction of the national enemy:

--'Tyrant! they cry, since thy fell force is broke./ Our proud heads pierce the skies...Hell, from her gulph profound, Rouses at thine approach; and, all around,/ Her dreadful notes of preparation found'

--'Rise, purple Slaughter! Furious rise./ Unfold the terror of thine eyes;/ Dart thy vindictive shafts around'¹⁵

The Shakespearean phrasing of these passages conveys a far more aggressive patriotism than the 'Ode to Independency,' voicing an aggressive patriotism whose sense of

15 Mason, *Odes*, 23, 25. (1756)

righteousness would be difficult to outdo. Similarly, Gray's 'Bard' (which I discuss more fully below) is full of confident and violent assertions of its narrator's righteousness: 'Now, brothers, bending o'er the accursed loom/ Stamp we our vengeance deep, and ratify (Edward's) doom.'

Both of these poems, however, put their aggressive righteousness into the mouths of narrators from the distant past, reflecting the need for expressions of political conviction alongside a reluctance to make them on behalf of any political figure or viewpoint. Indeed, it would be inconceivable for a poet like Mason or Gray to write of Pitt or Admiral Vernon with such fury, and the ode's pervasive turn to the past and the great moments of classical and British history suggests the need to maintain a sense of conviction without being overly topical or present-ist.

'On deep foundations may thy freedom stand:' Warton's Virtual Reality

In moving to the imaginative ode itself, we should make note of how thoroughly the young men who came to write the imaginative Pindaric thought of their role as poets. The important ode-writers came from well-off (and largely provincial) families of the middling rank and appear to have thought of their work in conventional neoclassical terms, so it is not surprising that many of them adopted elements of this new-found depersonalized patriotic confidence (in particular its quasi-religious devotion to history). Collins was the son of a well-off haberdasher who at one point was mayor of Chichester, Akenside was a physician who came from a line of butchers in Newcastle, Gray came from a London merchant family, and Joseph Warton's father was a Vicar and professor of

literature. As Wendorf, Dix, and others have noted, each poet saw patriotic verse as a means by which a young poet made name for himself.¹⁶ However, the ode-writers also saw themselves as 'elite' writers, catering to an erudite audience and not to a commercial market that was debasing the supposed moral authority of literature.¹⁷ Due to this mix of conventional ambition and elitist sensibility, the new imaginative Pindaric was more carefully crafted and elaborately structured than its predecessors, features which allowed it to focus on graceful expressions of private virtue rather than garish public displays of it.¹⁸

However, enthusiasm for certain collective objects was a requirement for any ode

16 Collins' most authoritative critic of the past 30 years, Richard Wendorf, portrays Collins as extremely conventional in his approach and his selection of content, showing him as a disciple of Pope in the late 1730s who came to the imaginative ode as a way of mixing Popean-Horatian elitism with the popular cultural patriotism of the 1740s. Cf also Griffin and Howard Weinbrot. Akenside's biographer, Robin Dix, also argues that Akenside merely wanted to be a respectable patriot poet continuing neoclassical conventions. Unlike the young poets of the 1720s, the ode-writers are more frequently preoccupied with advertising their erudition and solid grounding in classical education; they don't have to differentiate themselves from the elite satirists that dominated poetry in the 1720s and can thus align themselves with an elitist neoclassicism .

17 Cf Linda Zionkowski's excellent account of Gray's circle, as well as Sitter, Griffin, Levine, and Wendorf.

18 A typical ode of Collins', for example, uses a complex three-part structure (ode, epode, antistrophe structure), with a different rhyme scheme and line-length in each part. Collins advertises the structure's adherence to ancient (Pindaric) tradition in a way that no previous ode appears to have done. Collins' rhyme schemes and line-lengths—again modeled vaguely after Pindar—are more varied than eighteenth-century patriotic odes that came before them; the rhyme structure changes are less straightforward and the lines are also often shorter than almost any previous Pindaric ode, frequently using only six measures. Compare, for instance, Lowth's Horatian 'Ode to the People of Great Britain,' published in the same year as Collins' collection of odes. Each of its stanzas have the same rhyme scheme (save the shortened twelfth and final one), and the poem features no variation of line-length or meter. The poems also contain a certain careful visual form that sets them apart from previous Pindarics, including those of Pindar himself; the final stanzas of his odes almost always tapers down to six- to ten-beat lines, and many of the poems have a visual symmetry achieved by giving the antistrophe sections longer and more uniform lines. This pattern holds for the 'Ode to Fear' and the 'Passions,' and to a lesser extent to the 'Ode to Liberty.' The ode as a whole is notably shorter and more artfully composed than the greater ode from the 1690-1730s. Edward Young's 1729 *Imperium Pelagi*, for instance, advertises itself as a Pindaric poem but contains hundreds and hundreds of lines without any consistent form and a simple AABCCB rhyme scheme throughout. The difficulty and irregularity of Collins' syntax also contrasts greatly with the clarity of the best known neoclassical odes (such as those of Dryden or Swift) as well as the studied simplicity of Stephen Duck or the rhetorical repetitions of Thomson's *Seasons*.

(or any nationalistic poem), and the key innovation of the mid-century ode derived simply from the way it shifted the nature of this desire. The mid-century ode desires nothing less than full participation in a social community that is both real and imaginative, and the most striking innovation common to Warton's, Collins', and Gray's odes is the emphasis on *being fully part of* the 'song' of Liberty or settling fully into the harmonious landscapes of Nature. Instead of a fiery, bold Lycurgus giving laws and liberty where there was once only chaos and self-interest, the poet is a spirit defined by its desire to participate in already-existent virtual communities, which are held together by the sublime power of these sublime imaginative principles. The odes that Warton and his friend Collins wrote consequently yearn after environments or realms that are imaginative but true, virtual according to empirical reason but real according to the logic of desire.¹⁹

The above examples from Collins' work show that his ode's characteristic form of desire involved being enthralled and unified by a great aesthetic object, but Warton's poems from the mid-1740s present the philosophical importance and allure of the virtual even more clearly. Like Collins' works, they assume that nature and liberty are self-evidently real and present entities and repeatedly articulate the desire to participate more fully in them. The two poets were close friends, having corresponded at length before

19 Trevor Ross' outstanding reading of the cultural capital of mid-century poetry and criticism captures this importance of authenticity in the ode: 'unlike their predecessors, who had to establish their moral autonomy from powerful political interests, these modern poets (of the 1740-50s) had to devote much of their poetry to asserting the special nature and authenticity of their poetic compulsion.' Ross, however, reads the poems in terms of a supposed loss in the political centrality of poetry, which I believe overlooks the thoroughness of the period's poets' devotion to the 'public.' In my reading, authenticity of poetic compulsion is a way to redefine the virtuous individual in terms of an all-consuming commitment to the common good, a commitment that suffuses the soul and passions and not merely the mind.

meeting in 1746, and both turned to the ode and to the glorification of pre-modern community at roughly the same time (c.1744) while looking to make their marks in the literary world.

There is some debate about their influence on one another, but at the very least the two reinforced in one another a nascent interest in the well-crafted Pindaric ode as a viable form of public verse.²⁰ When the poets met in 1746, both were working on poems that established a firm and unshakeable link between the individual and collective. Their common mentality showed in the fact that each poet was writing poems based on the idea that an individual could fit in with true nature by becoming 'simple.' The trope of simplicity was borrowed from Old Whig politics but the two poets greatly altered it, taking what was formerly a negative critical tool—used to smear what was artificial, luxurious, and hierarchical—and altering it to offer a positive vision of what being fully in harmony with one's environment would look and feel like.²¹

Collins was working on what would become his 'Ode to Simplicity,' which makes Simplicity the spirit of fullness and content and allows an individual to feel attached to and secure in a local environment. Within the poem, nature acts as the bedrock of Truth, directly instructing Simplicity ('thou by Nature taught/ To breathe her genuine Thought') so that she becomes the 'Sister meek of Truth.' The poem records how Simplicity has infused different scenes and peoples throughout history and allowed various bards in turn

20 At the time of their meeting, Collins' odes were (perhaps surprisingly) more conventional verse-tributes to great British heroes, while Warton was composing more imaginative odes to abstractions like 'Poetry' and 'Fancy.' Warton was the more established of the two and seems to have led Collins to focus on imagination and poetry itself in his odes. Cf Wendorf, chapter 1-2.

21 Fénelon's philosophical poem, *Les Aventures de Télémaque* was then in vogue and was perhaps an influence on the two poets. Fénelon's poem attacks luxury and extols simplicity as a way of living a harmonious and moral life. It also has clear if somewhat abortive political overtones criticizing Parisian nobles and the king's court.

to infuse the populace with a harmonious transparency that ensured a total devotion to liberty and to the collective: 'While Rome could none esteem/ But Virtue's Patriot Theme,/ You lov'd her Hills and led her Laureate Band.' In a commonplace of Whiggish historiography, Simplicity was forced to abandon these places as violence, faction, and luxury overtook them, until it finally left the modern world altogether. The poem consequently expresses the hortatory hope that 'our Britain hear (the) Grecian Song' and invites modern British subjects should devote themselves to Simplicity in the hopes she might return:

Tho' Taste, tho' Genius bless
To some divine Excess,
Faints the cold Work till Thou inspire the whole;
What each, what all supply
May court, may charm our Eye,
Thou, only Thou can'st raise the meeting Soul!

Hence while the poem laments the loss of Simplicity and the free harmony that it allows, it also shows the solitary poet keeping alive the hope that a wayward, empire-building modern nation could be guided by honest Truth and achieve an honest and natural end.

During this same time, Warton had just published his first long poem, 'The Enthusiast; or the Lover of Nature,' which explores at much greater length the same interrelation of poetic simplicity, the 'truth' of nature, and political liberty. Warton's poem is not exactly a Pindaric ode and is less sophisticated and original than many of Collins' odes, but it is worth exploring as a complement to his Pindarics because of its dramatization of the passive desire for a virtualized real community. The poem's explicit theme is the opposition of real and artificial aesthetic experience, and its argument is simply that real/natural experience brings not only truer pleasure but also virtue and

rational moral righteousness.²² The poem begins with the narrator secluding himself from society in order to observe the contrast—familiar from Shaftesbury, and crucial for many writers from about 1700 forward—between ‘Art’s vain pomp’ and the unadorned natural world, the simplicity and truth of which the narrator would like to recover. The poem’s constant contrast of artificial and real always finds in favor of the natural, no matter how great or accomplished the artificial is: Versailles’ finest fountains are merely ‘tortured waters’ compared to a graceful tiny stream in nature, Titian and Raphael fail before the original landscapes and subjects they paint from, the ‘artful sounds’ of the trumpet and the lute can’t match birdsong and the human voice, and, in (a dig at the chauvinist nationalist ode of Young and others) the shepherd ‘idly strecht on the rude Rock’ feels more in observing nature than the admiral surveying his victorious ships loaded with imperial plunder.

Like Warton’s odes, ‘The Enthusiast’ repeatedly makes the hackneyed argument that nature contrasts with the artificial unions based on hierarchy, superstition, or propaganda of modern political life. As Warton’s contemporary ‘Ode to Superstition’ argues, warding off Superstition and calling for the modern British light of reason to reveal a community of truth:

Malignant fiend, bear from this isle away,
Nor dare in Error’s setters bind
One active, freeborn, British mind...
how swiftly art thou fled,
When REASON lifts his radiant head;
When his resounding, awful voice they hear,
Blind IGNORANCE, thy doating sire,
Thy daughter, trembling FEAR, retire;

22 Warton’s ode ‘To Fancy’ is also replete with the vocabulary of simplicity and artlessness. For instance, it locates imagination close to simple, unadorned nature: ‘Where never human art appear’d....Where Nature seems to sit alone/ Majestic on a craggy throne.’ The poem also closes with the poet’s hope that ‘Britannia rival Greece.’

And all thy ghastly train of terrors disappear.
 Unlike the nature-poetry of Thomson or Pope—or the natural law theory of Diderot and the authors of the *Encyclopedie*—Warton's poetry makes nature itself an anchor of truth and rationality rather than simply an analogue for harmonious social life. To underscore this difference, 'The Enthusiast' repeatedly returns to the origins of authentic and rational government in 'Bards of old,/ Fair Nature's Friends' who were given the ability to forge social cohesion by Nature itself. Such figures are famously important for Warton, Collins, Gray, and others in the 1740-50s, and Warton's poem shows clearly how their power is strictly passive, or rather an activation of wisdom *taught* to them by Nature. This is especially evident in the ultimate myth of nature directly instructing a poet-lawgiver, the story of Aegeria and Numa:

As to a secret Grot Ægeria stole
 With Patriot Numa, and in silent Night
 Whisper'd him sacred Laws, he list'ning sat
 Rapt with her virtuous Voice, old Tyber leant
 Attentive on his Urn, and husht his Waves.

Numa here departs from his small villages to commune with nature and learn 'the moral Strains...to mend Mankind.' The poem thus imagines what experiencing such direct interaction with Nature would look like, figuring Numa's acquisition of political wisdom as an aesthetic intuition, uncannily close to a seduction and unmistakably a *passive* act:

Ægeria took him to a secluded place and '*Whisper'd* him sacred Laws' as he '*list'ning sat/ Rapt* with her virtuous Voice.'²³

Despite the repeated mention of the truth of nature, the poem underscores the virtuality of these scenes and these feelings in many ways, emphasizing that true nature

²³ Numa was the legendary leader of Rome right after Romulus. Livy writes that he met nightly with the wild nymph Aegyria, learning during these sessions the secrets and natural truths on which the legal and moral foundation of Rome was built.

and real wisdom can only be found in solitude and via imaginative and not real experience. The poem highlights the virtual character of nature in its longest and last contrast between rude and artful nature:

And great Aeneas gaz'd with more Delight
On the rough Mountain shagg'd with horrid Shades,
(Where Cloud-compelling *Jove*, as Fancy dream'd,
Descending shook his direful *Ægis* black)
Than if he enter'd the high Capitol
On golden Columns rear'd, a conquer'd World
Contributing to deck its stately Head:
More pleas'd he slept in poor *Evander's* Cott
On shaggy Skins, lull'd by sweet Nightingales,
Than if a *Nero*, in an Age refin'd,
Beneath a gorgeous Canopy had plac'd
His royal Guest, and bade his Minstrels sound
Soft slumb'rous *Lydian* Airs to sooth his Rest.

Aeneas' founding of Rome was not considered historical fact in the mid-eighteenth century and readers furthermore would have known Aeneas from reading Vergil's obviously fictional epic, facts which would make Aeneas' experiences gazing on mountains even less empirically real than Numa's communion with Aegyria. The next stanza notes the strangely virtual status of truth and reality in addressing the *historical* time of the Golden Age. Living in eroticized locales ('warm caves' and 'deep-sunk vallies') without 'coyness' or 'wiles,' humanity had no concept of shame, and the subsequent traumatic loss of this state ('when Doors and Walls were not') causes humans to seek for happiness in 'baneful Drugs.' This supposed historical reality is clearly an aesthetic creation, and the poem seems intent on foregrounding the gap between the inscrutable reality that Warton's version of rational and true community needs and the virtual/fictive nature that the poem presents.

Indeed, for Warton's poem the virtual *must be* real, the only real thing for the poet—and nation—to put its trust in. The example of Shakespeare is perhaps the poem's

clearest one of a necessary social truth deriving from obviously fictive experience. As the poem argues, Shakespeare took instruction directly from 'the winding Avon's willow'd Banks,' where nature 'sooth'd his wandering Ears, with deep Delight/ On her soft Lap he sat, and caught the sounds,' hence his poetry can be taken as the true representation of nature rather than a fanciful distortion or re-ordering of it (as in French art).²⁴ This poetry in turn can alone halt the decline of the fallen contemporary world, where 'Vice' and 'narrow-hearted Avarice' reign, where 'Luxury and Pomp' thrive and 'Excess and endless Riot doom to die,' can consequently trust in Shakespeare's poetry as though it were reality.

It should be clear that the greater imaginative ode, *pace* John Sitter, thus doesn't advocate a 'retreat' into aestheticism or mysticism, but rather argues that the 'mystic' experience of a true or virtual reality is necessary in order for empirical reality to have some semblance of a moral purpose. The simple argument of Warton's poems is that all the woes of Britain woe that the Opposition and other dissenting groups documented in the 1720-30s—factionalism, corruption, confusions about war and empire—are the result of Britain not having a firm enough foundation in truth, and Warton's odes look to provide this foundation in a virtualized nature. Warton's 'Ode to Liberty' expresses this hope for Britain:

May ne'er thy oak-crown'd hills, rich meads and downs,
(Fame, virtue, courage, property, forgot)
Thy peaceful villages, and busy towns,
Be doom'd some death-dispensing tyrant's lot;
On deep foundations may thy freedom stand.

24 The poem's conclusion, which features a naïve 'Thetis' dwelling in eternal simplicity and bliss in a place where neither 'rude whirlwinds' nor 'sinking Sailors Cries' disturb their peaceful singing, is meant not as an evasion of history but as an indication that the picture of eternal and peaceful communion is meant as an ideal composed by art, not as a reality.

Longing for such foundations assumes that they are already out there—that Truth exists and can guide the virtuous modern nation—and that the modern nation must direct its energies to longing for them, with the poet as guide and exemplar.²⁵ Warton's 'Ode to Fancy' reinforces this same point. The poem begins with a deeply reclusive 'Fancy' dwelling in rough, remote locations 'where Nature seems to sit alone,' who imparts to the pensive poet visions of the bliss of 'Venus,' the terror of 'Melancholy,' and the 'sudden heat' of war poetry (his example being Caesar's *de Bello Gallico*). The poem argues that these 'artless songs...that breathe an energy divine' and can 'o'erwhelm our souls with joy and pain' alone can channel the spirit of nature and simplicity (in contrast with the Catholic, absolutist, and vacuously elegant French works fostered only by superstition, artifice, and 'cold critic's studied laws'). Doing so produces, as the 'Ode to Liberty' recounts, true communal feelings of *joy* that contrast with other merely human passions:

When heav'n to all thy joys bestows,
 And graves upon our hearts — BE FREE—
 Shall coward man *those joys resign*,
 And dare reverse this great decree?
 Submit him to some idol-king,
 Some *selfish, passion-guided thing*,
 Abhorring man, by man abhorr'd.

Warton accordingly invokes the great historical examples of Athens, Sparta, and Rome as examples not of great courage and heroism but of a nationalized *natural aesthetic*.²⁶ It was spirit, and not law, that made these places august communities, and that spirit came from the virtual reality of nature.

25 Warton's 'Ode to Liberty' makes this point explicit arguing that Liberty brings the greatest blessings (Plenty, Peace, Health, Joy, Science) and its absence causes the palpable suffering of 'the pining pris'ner,' the 'pale slaves to galleys chained,' plus weeping Orientalist harems and Oronooko-like slaves.

26 As Paul Fry notes, the will to naturalness is the lynchpin of the entire Whig ideology: 'Temperance and Simplicity...are the qualities that encode, merely by being mentioned, the immense ideological variety of the Whig aesthetic. In politics, in morals, and in poetics, they represent *the difficulty of liberty without license*.' Fry, 117, emphasis added.

Collins' Song of Liberty

Collins' virtual reality differs subtly from Warton's, emphasizing the ecstasy of participating in virtual environments rather than simply the desire for the Truth of nature. This difference is perhaps most evident in Collins' most directly political ode, the 'Ode to Liberty.' The ode uses a musical motif throughout, portraying Liberty as the origin and end-point of a great song that all great communities of the past have shared in and consequently virtualizing ecstatic participation in a free and authentic society. Beginning at a time when the 'Spartan fife' roused liberty and conjured up 'the youths' (mythical-historical agents of the personified power typical of Collins' odes), the poem imagines the joyous and spontaneous spread of the spirit of liberty throughout the world. The narrator expresses his wish for a 'new Alcaeus' to arise and '*sing* the sword' that will give a kind of spontaneous unity to all hearers and unite them under one (military) cause. When the poem launches into its catalog of great people and places fired by liberty—a *de rigueur* feature of eighteenth-century poems of liberty—the catalog is itself portrayed as a *song*, punctuated with periodic requests to maintain the pitch while intensifying the volume: 'Strike, louder strike th' ennobling strings,' 'Ne'er let me change this Lydian measure.' By the end of the epode, everything that is worth emulating and remembering in human history coheres under this song of liberty, and the poem invites the present reader to fall into line with the song: 'The magic works, thou feel'st the strains.'

Shifting its focus to Great Britain, the poem's second half focuses its vision on the desire to return to participation in the esoteric universal community of Liberty. The poem

focuses on a secluded British 'shrine' (an hoary pile,/ Midst the green navel of our Isle') in which a chanting, dancing group of ancient Britons had once conjured up the Platonic 'form celestial' of Liberty that inspired their brave and free societies. The narrator notes that modern sensibilities can't intuit the song but also declares that the poet who lets 'truth' be his guide can be whisked to the imaginative sanctuary of Imagination—a place 'Beyond yon braided clouds...Paving the light-embroider'd sky:/ Amidst the bright pavilion'd plains,' in which the great heroes of Britain's past sit and listen to 'Druids' sing a constant song of liberty. Asking how he could communicate the vision before him, the narrator describes the elaborate dance between ancient and modern spirits and agents that constructed the woof of British liberty:

How may the Poet now unfold
What never Tongue or Numbers told?
How learn delighted, and amaz'd,
What Hands unknown that Fabric rais'd?
Even now before his favoured Eyes,
In Gothic Pride it seems to rise!
Yet Graecia's graceful Orders join,
Majestic through the mix'd Design.

Such a vision mixes the imaginary and real, showing how the 'mix'd Design' of Liberty requires the material support of so many mysterious 'hands unknown' emanating from ideal forms of Liberty. The poem closes, in typical fashion for Collins, with the hope that this spirit will come to the 'youths' and 'sires and matrons' of a troubled and riven Britain and unite them all in the harmonious song of Liberty:

Her let our Sires and Matrons hoar
Welcome to Britain's ravag'd Shore,
Our Youths, enamour'd of the Fair,
Play with the Tangles of her Hair;
Till in one loud applauding Sound,
The Nations shout to Her around:
O how supremely art thou blest,
Thou, Lady, Thou shalt rule the West!

The 'Ode to Liberty' thus appears to celebrate an almost instinctive, involuntary

interpellation into the song of liberty. Unlike Warton's poems, Collins' ode does not need to repeat that nature is true and natural art is authentic, opting instead to simply dramatize the joy of being caught up in its environment. Though Collins' odes generally take place within a fully imaginative setting, they also show how unquestionably true and real imaginary entities (Liberty, Poesy, Nature) give truth and meaning to the real world.²⁷ By expressing the utmost delight and gratitude for glimpses of these truths, the narrator advertises a personal attunement and private devotion to Nature, History, and Liberty that need not be proved by garish public display.²⁸ Internal vision is thus the source of the

27 The premodern aspects of Collins' and Warton's odes allow 'tradition' and heritage part of the imaginative ideal of nature and freedom and also work to make the ideal more attractive and compelling. Even in Akenside's work, the love of the abstract ideal is not sufficient to attract the modern individual, so the poet must call on the world of mythic history to make the ideal more appealing and more real. By insisting that the best societies, and the periods that have defined British and Western history (Greece, Rome, Renaissance Italy, Elizabethan England) were fully fired by love of virtue and the ideal, the ode makes history itself into something like a community that calls to the individual and makes demands on him or her as it promises a sense of purpose and place to the otherwise lone individual. Unlike a neoclassical pastoral, a physico-theological ode, or a Benjaminian *trauerspiel*, the ode looks to motivate its readers toward the common good via things that are *internal* to modern British society, though they serve more virtuous ends than the modern British world: the appeal of nature, the pride in liberty, the attention to history and past cultures, the love of science and commercial wealth. Unlike a pastoral or religious ode, Warton's poems offer no pat or pre-ordained moral for how to respond to this desire and to the problems it highlights; rather they leave the reader feeling such passion is necessary to avoid the corruption and alienation of un-free societies, and they provide the premodern world as a model for a totally free and natural society. The constant references to 'fancy' and imagination, plus to great and ecstatically moving writers of tradition from Homer to Shakespeare, are there to underscore that the virtual, poetic realm is the only place to access this historical transcendent and bask in its immediate appeal, and the poet's role is consequently to remind readers of it and to allow virtual access to it. A *poetic* premodernism allows the ideal to be *felt*; making a utopia totally realistic would threaten the ideal's numinousness, but surrounding it with the fantasy of premodern community gives it just enough reality that it can still be experienced virtually while keeping intact the luster of the ideal.

28 To return to the 'Ode to Fear' and the question of retreat, we should note that the retreat of Fear is necessary to create a lasting community of people defined by their private commitments to common principles/Events:

Dark power, with shuddering meek submitted thought
 Be mine to read the visions old,
 Which thy awakening bards have told:
 And, lest thou meet my blasted view,
 Hold each strange tale devoutly true

Like the bards at the 'inmost altar' of the 'Ode to Liberty,' the 'awakening bards' of antiquity were in direct contact with Fear (or at least with the Muses that mediated it) and thus could 'read the visions old' and create 'devoutly *true*' works that every member of the public/audience would react to with the strongest possible response. It is clear that a certain vision of poetry's role in society is at the heart of

moral imperative as well as the ecstatic reward that comes from obeying it, and the love of virtual truth is a sufficient reward unto itself.²⁹

Akenside's Untimely Confidence

Deliberate and self-conscious about their work as they were, the ode-writers often indicate why they dramatized virtual, interior experiences of virtue instead of simply making the more direct patriotic proclamations of their predecessors. The reactions of two of the key ode-writers, Joseph Warton and Thomas Gray, to the work of Mark Akenside reveal their awareness of shifting from public displays of virtuous intent to quiet demonstrations of private fidelity. Akenside, the first writer of the new Pindaric ode to achieve fame, learned to write poetry in the mid-1730s during the height of the Opposition, and his poetry unsurprisingly shows a mixture of the radical sentiments of the 1730s and the intense but non-partisan patriotism of the 1740s. Akenside created a modest literary sensation in the late 1730s because of his combination of youth (he was eighteen years old when his first book was published), erudition, and passion, and he was likely a key example for predecessors like Collins and Gray looking to make a career out of public verse.³⁰ Yet, by the time of his death in 1770, Akenside was also the least

Collins' poem, but we should note that Collins' odes don't want to *be* the poetic spirit at the heart of British society so much as they want to redefine an ideal Britain as a collection of fully virtuous individuals, versed in the great figures and feelings of the virtuous classical-British tradition and thus inexorably committed to liberty.

29 Marshall Brown's reading of Collins in *Preromanticism* argues that Collins wishes to become part of an inclusive realm that his abstractions (fear, evening, etc) promise and that Brown sees as musical rather than visual. This realm remains as elusive as the abstractions, but the desire for it that the poem shows reveals a new-found sense of a distant but sensed inclusive realm that Brown identifies as 'pure space.' Brown sees this as a kind of Kantian sense-structure, but I think it can be better explained and accounted for as the articulation of a vanishing, worldly-material horizon.

30 Akenside's biographer Robin Dix argues that Akenside's odes were an obvious and pervasive influence on the work of Collins, Warton, and Gray (152-3).

respected of the major writers of imaginative odes, just as the other ode-writers were being given a firm place in British literary history, a transformation that shows much about the increasing value of *private* virtual experience between the 1730s and 1760s.

If his fellow ode-writers can be trusted, Akenside's fall from grace began shortly after his career started. Joseph Warton and Thomas Gray both wrote unfavorable responses to his early works that reveal their rejection of his poetic persona. Warton's response to Akenside's first book of odes, written in 1744 just as Warton was developing his own version of the ode, notes that the poems fail aesthetically as well as philosophically:

The Odes you speak of I suppose by this you know are Akinsides (sic), and some of 'em are extremely insipid and flat. Collins sent them to me.... Which of Akinsides Odes are most approved, or are any of 'em approved? The thoughts to me are generally trite & common. You see by his Advertisement that he thinks to set up for the first correct English poet

Warton seems worried that Akenside's swagger will be enough to mask his hackneyed philosophy and his flat, one-note expressions of them and his review in particular rejects the usefulness and *timeliness* of Akenside's philosophical stance.

Akenside's political ethics were indeed old news by that time. Much of his poetry prominently features the Old Whig ideas of selfless virtue as the cornerstone of a great nation, the People's right to overthrow unjust government, and an aggressive naval and colonial policy.³¹ Akenside's ostentatious moral independence and his consistent reference to the union of liberty and poetry were thus the first part of his work that critics responded to. The oft-quoted 'On the use of poetry,' for instance, addresses the great 'Muse' of ideal Patriotism (who 'rescued nations from the rage/ Of partial factious

31 Dustin Griffin has persuasively argued that Akenside's fiery stance was the unsurprising result of his coming of age in the mid-to late-1730s during the height of Opposition, whose models would have been Gilbert West, the later politicized Pope, and Thomson, all of whom presented unshakably moralistic poetic voices.

power') and argues that the poet's role is as a spiritual supplement to the 'hero' and the 'legislator':

Not far beneath the hero's feet,
Nor from the legislator's seat
Stands far remote the bard.
Though not with public terrors crown'd,
Yet wider shall his rule be found,
More lasting his award.

According to Akenside's philosophy of moral-political poetry, the great poet introduces the spirit of freedom to the populace and causes them to devote themselves to liberty, which then guarantees they shall forever be free: 'Tyrants shall bow before his laws; / And Freedom's, Glory's, Virtue's cause, / Their dread assertor own.' The poet is in fact more important than the legislator and leader because of his charismatic ability to both unify and liberate. with 'powerful art/ O'er every passion, every heart/ (he) Confirm(s) his awful throne'. Liberty is here less a set of basic rights and protections (as in Locke's formulation) than kind of instantly compelling truth communicable only through aesthetic performance which creates a unified and virtuous collective out of selfish individuals ruled by passions. Akenside's ode to Great Britain celebrates the day (presumably the apex of the Glorious Revolution) when that nation gave in to 'Truth' and became a free society dominated by natural law and natural religion:

While Truth, diffusing from on high
A lustre unconfined as day,
Fills and commands the public eye;
Till, pierced and sinking by her powerful ray,
Tame Faith and monkish Awe, like nightly demons,
Hence the whole land the patriot's ardour shares.

Hence the individual poet's job is to wait around for this Truth/Liberty to inspire him and then to act as a conduit for It:

But when from envy and from death to claim
A hero bleeding for his native land;

When to throw incense on the vestal flame
Of Liberty my genius gives command,
Nor Theban voice nor Lesbian lyre
From thee, O Muse, do I require;
While my presaging mind,
Conscious of powers she never knew,
Astonish'd, grasps at things beyond her view,
Nor by another's fate submits to be confined.

In this politicized version of Plato's *Phaedrus*, creative freedom comes directly from the love of Truth/Liberty. More importantly, the poet is fully independent and ethically secure because he listens only to Liberty and follows only Its commands, and not those of either a venal patron (or other self-interested group) or else the multitude.

Warton is thus right to point out that the lack of originality in these sentiments and the aggressive exposition of them—they would have seemed untimely during and after the fall of the Opposition—but his own works show how the ode-writers learned to modify their poetic personas from Akenside's example. By contrast with other ode-writers, Akenside's narrators are both impassioned and *embodied* speakers;³² his poems

32 Critics of Akenside's political poetry tend to overlook these aspects of his verse or else see them as the flipside of his passion, i.e. his dejection at the destruction of virtue (which creates 'social ease and public passions meet') by corruption, his longing for a new patriot who will 'Rise with the same unconquer'd zeal / For our Britannia's injured weal.' But many of Akenside's feelings are specifically concerned with private emotions and situations, and the fact that Akenside starts his great poems of irreproachable independence needs to be accounted for. For Akenside, dejection and confusion often leads to a Horatian retreat from the chaos of modern life, as in the following two odes from his 1746 collection:

Let others spread the daring sail,
On Fortune's faithless sea;
While undeluded, happier I
From the vain tumult timely fly,
And sit in peace with Thee. ('Hymn to science,' 1739)
--Is there in nature no kind power
To soothe affliction's lonely hour?
To blunt the edge of dire disease,
And teach these wintry shades to please?
Come, Cheerfulness, triumphant fair,
Shine through the hovering cloud of care:
O sweet of language, mild of mien,
O Virtue's friend and Pleasure's queen,
Assuage the flames that burn my breast,
Compose my jarring thoughts to rest (Ode IV 'To Cheerfulness,' 1744)

are often presented as responses to real, particular situations (e.g. on a return trip from Holland to Britain or at a particular nobleman's estate in the country) and the speaker presents himself with the Bolingbrokean air of being a man speaking to other men. As a result, his narrators aim at being real political forces dwelling in a real world, drawing ethical sustenance from communing with nature but never losing themselves in the desire for it. By contrast, Collins' and Warton's narrators, dwelling with ideologically 'real' but phenomenologically virtual environments, appear to be notably *disembodied* voices, flitting from imaginative scene to imaginative scene without referencing the world of the present or indicating any relationship with things outside the imagination.

Gray's comments on Akenside's poetry are, characteristically, both more charitable and more self-pitying. Rather than worrying that Akenside's verse will be a

This familiarly Augustan, anti-worldly sentiment sets up a more novel, utopian purpose for retreat that follows from Thomson and situates Akenside firmly within the 1740s. In this vaguely neo-Shaftesburyean view, retreat is the place to 'learn the timely hour/ To trace the world's benignant laws,' a place in which the poet can affirm that he is at home in the world, that the impassioned social being has his or her passion reciprocated by the external world. As Akenside's ode on 'The Winter Solstice' explains at greater length:

But let not man's unequal views
 Presume on nature and her laws;
 'Tis his with grateful joy to use
 Th' indulgence of the sov'reign cause;
 Secure that health and beauty springs
 Thro' this majestic frame of things
 Beyond what he can reach to know,
 And that *heav'n's all-subduing will,*
With good the progeny of ill,
Attempers every state below.

The individual here feels the world-soul that assures the distraught individual that the earth is an inclusive, reciprocating environment. The mysterious presence of quiet, privately-experienced nature directly communicates enthusiasm for selfless virtue to the poet: 'What Genius smiles on every flood?/ What GOD, in whispers from the wood,/ Bids every heart be kind?' Akenside's odes thus argue that the patriotic project depends on the individual being grounded in a communion with nature that inspires and sustains the passion for virtue, and alone gives the human being confirmation that care for the community is the natural way of being.

Sitter's study of 'literary loneliness' in the mid-eighteenth century naturally emphasizes this aspect of Akenside's work: 'Although the theme of patriotic ambition recurs often in Akenside's poetry, he is probably most persuasive when he sounds less assured...Akenside implies that the poet is a poet because everything else has disappointed him and he has no one else to talk to but us.' (Sitter 117-9.)

popular success, his response to Akenside's *Pleasure of the Imagination* (published in 1744, the same year as his book of odes) makes his own opinions largely irrelevant:

'I have rather turned it over than read it (but no matter; no more have they (i.e. the public)), it seems to me above the middling; and now and then, for a little while, rises even to the best, particularly in description. It is often obscure, and even unintelligible, and too much infected with the Hutchinson jargon. In short, its great fault is, that it was published at least nine years too early. While Gray offers his opinion that the poem is capable if uneven, most of this remark narrates his own alienation from the public literary world. Even if Akenside's work was great—which, Gray implies, it isn't—the public would not be able to understand or appreciate it. This sense of having given up on a superficial and fickle public, which Gray frequently articulates in his letters, was no small part of the turn towards a deep and secure inner virtue.³³ The quote implies that Akenside's stance is hopeless in a time such as the present, that his insistence on inspiring a public beyond reformation simply seems mis-timed.

It is perhaps surprising, then, that Gray's own odes would return to embodied narrators situated in a real time and place. As I will now argue, however, his odes represent the strongest statement of the fantasy of dwelling with virtual nature and voice the ode's most complete commitment to the dream of merging with national History and virtual Nature.

Gray's Uncanny Nature

Gray's two Pindaric odes, written in the early years of the 1750s but not published until 1757, are remarkably robust patriotic statements that trouble the image of Gray as an

³³ Dowling's article on mid-century poetry 's 'flight from history' outlines this aspect of Gray's works. Linda Zionkowski's *Men's Work* offers an excellent reading of Gray's rejection of the public in order to cultivate a circle of intensely loyal friends around him.

anxious frustrated man of letters uncertain of his moral purpose or political loyalties.³⁴ As I will briefly argue now, though, the robust fantasy of belonging to nature and liberty and deriving one's purpose from communing with them helps explain the air of aloofness and diffidence that Gray cultivated. Since the mid-century Pindaric ode works to redefine the poet as the protector of the private, imaginative bond between individual and collective ideal, the 'public' world is by necessity outside of his ken; in order to show his full dedication to virtual Nature and Liberty, Gray must accept the sense of distance from active life and the constant disappointment at the public's failure to live up to his high ideal as part and parcel of the new office of the poet. Nevertheless, more than any other literary figure of the period, Gray shows the pleasures of the new aesthetic and showcases the rewards of the new virtual communion with real nature.

Gray's Pindaric odes manifest the same general philosophy of poetry as that of Warton, Akenside, and Collins and his odes dramatize the same deep longing for a secure, participatory community.³⁵ Gray was, like his contemporary ode-writers, born into a rising class family and sought to make a career as a man of letters from a young age. His Pindarics unsurprisingly share with Collins' and Warton's careful attention to form, effacement of the poet's opinions and personality, and ostentatious shows of learning about classical and British history. His finest ode, 'The Bard,' features an impassioned prophetic poet (quite reminiscent of Lowth's Hebrew prophets) who declares the unity of nature, the British past and the rise of modern, free Great Britain.

34 See Weinbrot on the genesis of Gray's Pindarics.

35 Several critics have emphasized just how thoroughly Gray identified with the mission of the public patriotic poet. Griffin, as usual, gives the most thorough account of Gray's patriotism, arguing like Kaul that, although Gray wasn't capable of 'full-hearted admiration or patriotism,' he often emulated political poets and judged himself by the standards of great public verse. Cf also Levine, Gerrard, and Weinbrot on Gray's desire to write public verse in praise of liberty.

The companion-piece to the 'Bard,' the 'Progress of Poetry,' is a more confident and less ambivalent progress-piece than Thomson's *Liberty* or Collins' 'Ode to Liberty,' which shows the premodernist elision of the line between poetry and liberty. In this sense, these poems represents the culmination of the imaginative ode of the 1740s, though they also reveal a more thorough retreat into the past and the virtual, as well as an increased vagueness about the relationship of past and present, virtual and real, than Warton's, Collins', and Akenside's works had.³⁶ Indeed, the 1752 odes have been overwhelmingly read as problematically strong declarations of the marriage of poetry and liberty, Gray's last-ditch effort to create the heroic place for poetry that Akenside and others had claimed for it.³⁷ As we have seen, though, Gray rejected the persona and message of Akenside, and it makes more sense to see his odes as participants in the fantasy of virtual reality that his peers articulated.³⁸

Many of Gray's early odes take reluctance, or hesitation as a theme.³⁹ His two famous works of harsh self-denial harsh, the 'Ode on the Spring' and the 'Eton' ode (both

36 As Weinbrot and Kramnick have usefully pointed out, Gray's Bard, and the heroes in the 'Progress of Poesy' are native British poet-prophets, and the poems mark a shift away from a classical and towards a specifically British premodernism that was common in the 1750s. As they observe, this 'domesticates' premodernism in two ways—bringing it close enough to him that the poet can dispense with mediators and speak directly in a prophet's voice, but also taking premodernism's usefulness for granted.

37 Zionkowski argues that the works reflect Gray's effort 'to reclaim a cultural position for poets that would render them not marginal but central, not mercantile but heroic.' Kaul notes that the odes reflect a typical Gray-esque pattern of 'surging towards affirmations of poetic, even prophetic power, eddying away into moments of self-reflexive doubt that stem from a lack of a constituency to authorize such a powerful presence' (202)

38 As Yoder bluntly states, for Gray 'the cost of visionary experience...is marginality or death.' (325)

39 See Zionkowski for the long tradition of shaming Gray for failing to produce great and useful works. In addition to the older works of Sitter and Dowling, excellent studies by Suvir Kaul and Zionkowski have focused on Gray's struggle with his position as a would-be elite poet in an increasingly commercialized literary world of the 1740-50s, noting his reluctance to identify with any defined role for poetry or any public audience for his work and his subsequent retreat to a small circle of literary friends. This version of Gray is certainly accurate and probing, but it fails to capture how Gray's privacy and retreat were precisely what the ode-writer was called to as a way of preserving elite public emotion in the 1740-50s.

written in 1742 and published in 1747) turn on a narrator refusing a hasty, too-easy identification with a larger social environment. In the 'Eton' ode, the narrator initially longs for the 'happy hills' and 'fields below'd in vain,/ Where once my careless childhood stray'd,/ A stranger yet to pain!' as well as for a sort of utopian camaraderie with his youthful friends, 'The thoughtless day, the easy night,/The spirits pure, the slumbers light,/That fly th' approach of morn;,' while in the 'Spring' ode, the narrator celebrates a Thomsonian vision of the 'untaught harmony of Spring' with birds interacting freely with trees and 'cool Zephyrs.' In both poems, the narrator denies naïve identifications because he is all too aware of the ills of modern human life—death, madness, jealousy, greed, despair, and so forth—that prevent simple happiness. There is, however, no poetic precedent for the notion that the individual should be able to join seamlessly into the affective life of a local environment; the idea would have been laughably naïve for Pope or Gay, and even Addison's pastoral and Thomson's *Seasons* considered virtual nature a stepping stone to a more reflective and self-aware morality. It is thus possible to read their diffidence against the grain, less as a *block* on the heroic function of poetry than a constitutive element of the mid-century re-formation of virtue and the aesthetic; the mixture of pathos and self-control that arises out of the failure to unite with the harmonious local world is a political feeling new to the 1740s, marking the poet as the sole conduit and protector of the fantasy of union with the local.⁴⁰

A similar vacillation between national-moral idealism and icy despair can be

40 Kaul for instance writes that these odes show a poet who 'refuses to act on his insights (and) chooses the way of isolation and non-communication,' and they ultimately deny the poet the public role he sought and that Collins, Warton, Akenside, Mason, and others were actively pursuing through the ode at the exact same time. (Kaul, 82)

found in Gray's personal letters from the 1740-50s. To give a brief example, the following quip to Mason, probably the most frequently quoted of Gray's remark in the past thirty years of Gray criticism, denies the importance of heroic literary work in the modern world: 'Literature (to take it in its most comprehensive Sense, & include every Thing that requires Invention, or Judgment, or barely Application & Industry) seems indeed to be drawing apace to its Dissolution.' This comment is overwhelmingly understood as a sign of Gray's pessimism about the utility and importance of poetry in an increasingly commercialized modern world. The sentiment, however, was quite common during the 1740-50s and was in fact a standard refrain made by hundreds of patriotic-minded complaints about the state of modern Britain from 1745-60.⁴¹ Indeed, as Gray continues, he notes in his characteristically self-deprecating way that the decline of Literature has advanced 'remarkably since the Beginning of the War. I should be glad to know why, if any one will tell me, for I believe there may be natural reasons discoverable enough with having Recourse to St John, or St Alexander's Revelations.' Gray is likely making a dig at the large number of tracts written by clergymen and scholars from the late 1730s (when Britain entered into outright war with Spain) on the decline of Britain's morals as a sign of a vengeful and upset Providence,⁴² but he also authorizes a *Dunciad*-like notion of a steep decline in true poetry and genius (the letter is occasioned by a reading of Colley Cibber's newest book), and voices the pathos of modern Britain's

41 Cf Sekora's *Luxury* and Bob Harris' work on the British 1750s, as well as the fourth chapter of the present work.

42 One of the classics of this genre, James Burgh's *Britain's Remembrance*, was published a few months before Gray's letter was written in 1746. Bob Harris summarizes the genre as the work of surveying clergymen who 'studied the alarming signs of the times—such as wars, crises, epidemics—which unfolded continually in the life of the nation. They interpreted them forcefully as manifestations of divine judgment on a guilty people.' I will discuss this movement in greater length in my chapter on criticism from 1755-70.

cultural failure as strongly as an Estimate Brown or a James Burgh. Like these writers, he assumes that something is wrong in Britain and that something must be done about, even as he laments the way that more venal populist writers have gone about it. Gray's reluctance to trumpet his complaints about British culture is the only thing that sets his sentiments apart from the clergymen, Oppositionalists, cultural critics, and other writers who took part in the patriotism industry of the 1740s. Gray's attempts at grounding these sentiments in his own personal feelings, as well as his attempts to take the edge off them and make them seem more reasonable human feelings, show how much the professional necessity of virtuous patriotism—which was very real for poets in the 1740-50s—slid into the authenticity of private virtuous sentiments that the new Pindaric poems assumed.

The Pindaric odes Gray produced in the early 1750s share key features with those of Warton and Collins. They affirm what Warton called the 'deep foundations' of liberty and imagine the union of individual and virtual environment with an intensity that outstrips even Collins' odes. Nature in the 'Progress of Poesy' is not superficial harmony like in the 'Ode to Spring' but rather a torrid, sweeping panopoly that joins together in a joyous dance reminiscent of Collins' odes:

A thousand rills their mazy progress take:
The laughing flowers, that round them blow,
Drink life and fragrance as they flow.
Now the rich stream of music winds along,
Deep, majestic, smooth, and strong,
Through verdant vales and Ceres' golden reign:
Now rowling down the steep amain,
Headlong, impetuous, see it pour:
The rocks and nodding groves rebellow to the roar.

The narrator, a disembodied, flitting spirit like the personas of Collins' and Warton's odes, begins by longing for a time of such sublime simplicity and union with nature:

Where each old poetic mountain
Inspiration breathed around:
Every shade and hallowed fountain
Murmured deep a solemn sound⁴³

In typical progress-piece manner, Gray's 'Progress' then condemns Greece and Rome for having slipped away from such simple unity and having 'her lofty spirit lost' by excessive indulgence of luxury and vice. The poem then celebrates British poets' efforts to create 'thoughts that breathe and words that burn' and return modern Britain to such primeval simplicity, a sentiment completed with the customary knock on 'the pomp of tyrant power' and 'coward Vice that revels in her chains' and a celebration of 'the unconquerable Mind, and Freedom's holy flame' that British spirit burns on. The poets it celebrates from the British tradition—Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden—all appear as prophets as well as poets since their poems brought back pure vision of the imagination to a world blinded from Truth: 'Yet oft before his infant eyes would run/ Such forms, as glitter in the Muse's ray/ With orient hues, unborrowed of the sun.'

The 'Progress' seals its faith in the imagination by having its narrator *join* the imagination, drifting off into the union of Liberty, tradition, and the imagination that the poem has created. Indeed, the movement of the 'Progress' relies so thoroughly on the relationship between the individual and the imagination that it erases all other affective relations with the present. Its passion consequently applies only to tradition and mythic

43 As in Thomson's landscapes, the environment here is a single harmonious order, whose musical, almost improvisatory unity the next few stanzas emphasize in describing isolated natural objects and details making free and orderly formations as the Muse lights upon them: 'With antic Sports and blue-eyed Pleasures,/ Frisking light in frolic measures;/ Now pursuing, now retreating,/ Now in circling troops they meet:/ To brisk notes in cadence beating/ Glance their many-twinkling feet.' Despite the presence of such graceful dances and insouciant musical actions, the poem's form and rhyme scheme set it far apart from Thomson's *Seasons*. Thomson's rough, incantatory blank verse is designed to announce a wide variety of more or less unrelated scenes and landscape as objects to share with readers, while Gray's elaborate structure and rhyme scheme reflects the focus of the 'Progress' on one object and one continuous, effortless action.

premodern harmony, realities revealed only by the imagination. This was perhaps an inevitable result of the imaginative Pindaric ode, a built-in limitation of the form and its underlying tenet that virtue required on an active, intense imaginative life. In this sense, suturing oneself to the imagination, and to abstract community, meant that passion was disconnected from the external world.

Gray's other Pindaric ode of 1757, 'The Bard,' asserts a similarly boundless confidence in the triumph of liberty and the restoration of unity between nature and humanity, though in a more direct and uncanny way than any eighteenth-century British poem that preceded it. In contrast with the narrator in the 'Progress,' the eponymous thirteenth-century Welsh bard himself narrates most of the poem, a tactic which allowed Gray to create the sort of prophet-figure Akenside could only gesture at. Gray's Bard witnesses and experiences (though at one remove) the union of liberty, history, and nature firsthand, and represents a voice so assured that nature and tradition are on his side that his vision allows him to leap into immediate action. By the end of the poem, the bard has a veritably maniacal belief that nature supports his cause, and his final act is to literally sacrifice himself to nature.

The 'Bard' manifests a strong sense of material detail as well as a sense of larger, uncanny forces speaking and acting through the material and local. The poem begins by describing the bard himself as something like an uncanny or liminal natural object himself—his 'haggard eye' looks gravely into the distance, his 'hoary hair' streams 'like a meteor' in the 'troubled' wind—and the poem situates him on a craggy mountain top in the midst of a 'foaming flood.' This setting is a liminal place where the human can contact

those imaginary and fantasmatic Things—nature, history, liberty—without which patriotism and political conviction are impossible.⁴⁴ Upon reaching the cliff-side, the Bard assumes the stance of the prophet, declaring that the environment before him ‘sighs’ before an obscure ‘aweful voice’ and calls out for revenge against the wrongs done to it by King Edward:

Hark, how each giant-oak, and desert cave,
Sighs to the torrent's aweful voice beneath!
O'er thee, oh King! their hundred arms they wave,
Revenge on thee in hoarser murmurs breath

Nature from the start is *in on the prophecy*, showing by its very violence that it supports the fury of the bard and his people and seethes with the desire for vengeance against Edward.⁴⁵ In the lines that follow, the poem makes perhaps the most remarkable eighteenth-century statement about the uncanny blend of nature and tradition that underlay Whig activism. The bard invokes a series of Welsh poet-heroes (‘lost companions of my tuneful art’) who are embedded in nature and subsequently join in it in calling out for revenge:

On yonder cliffs, a grisly band,

44 Onno Oerlmans has noted that the eponymous bard is a textbook case of liminality, standing as a mediating figure between wild but absolutely authoritative nature and the fragile and scattered world of history and the present. The bard is described as something like an uncanny natural object himself—his ‘haggard eye’ looks gravely into the distance, his ‘hoary hair’ streams ‘like a meteor’ in the ‘troubled’ wind—and the poem situates him on a craggy mountain top in the midst of a ‘foaming flood.’ Critics often simply call the setting ‘sublime’ and move on, but we should note how the setting is a place where the human can get into contact with those imaginary and fantasmatic Things—nature, history, liberty—without which patriotism and political conviction are impossible. James Mulholland’s useful recent article on the ‘Bard’ and Gray’s later poems focuses on the ways that Gray imagines and simulates a pre-modern oral culture, in which poets provided moral identity and purpose to a nation and individuals accepted and intuited the poet/bard’s words without any sense of mediation: Gray ‘attempts to offer readers versions of medieval bardic voice unencumbered by interlocutors and mediation, at least within the body of the poem, thereby more effectively conjuring its oral cultural context.’ Mulholland’s article is, however, not as strong in theorizing why Gray came to revive this notion of oral public poetry in the specific way evident in ‘The Bard.’

45 Lucretius is a useful counter-example to criticize the attitude that nature supports one’s culture. A wind howling in *De Rerum Natura* would suggest yet another instance of the cruel indifference of nature, but, in Gray’s poem, the wind is assumed to be on the bard’s side, giving a voice to his righteous fury that comes straight from the (imagined) *jouissance* of nature.

I see them sit, they linger yet,
Avengers of their native land:
With me in dreadful harmony they join,
And weave with bloody hands the tissue of thy line.

These poet-heroes, along with many other bearers of liberty who will suffer at the corrupt hands of Norman monarchs in the future, form a 'dreadful harmony' with wild, sublime nature itself. Tradition and nature are thus linked together as the environment that authorizes and authenticates the bard's sense of righteousness and his belief that nature will ensure that history will be rectified and reversed: 'Now, brothers, bending o'er the accursed loom/ Stamp we our vengeance deep, and ratify (Edward's) doom.'

In a reversal of the form of the 'Progress of Poesy,' nature takes center stage in the second part of the poem. As the vision of future triumph fades away, the bard notes that, since the authentic, free spirit of Britain will someday be restored, viewing the beauty and glory of the Welsh mountains that surround him and support him. Unexpectedly, the vision brings him pain:

But oh! What solemn scenes on Snowdon's height
Descending slow their glittering skirts unroll?
Visions of glory, spare my aching sight,
Ye unborn ages, crowd not on my soul!

Again Nature, through its 'visions of glory' and 'solemn scenes on Snowdon's height,' is communicating the righteousness of the bard's cause (and not, as in Thomson's *Seasons* or Pope's *Essay on Man* merely serving to inspire a sense of harmony that the social or human world can emulate). The poem invokes the future rulers of Britain as an 'awe-commanding...form divine' that is as sublime and secure as nature itself. The lines that follow dramatize the merger of the present poet with the unifying *song* of nature and tradition that Collins' narrators only gesture at:

What strings symphonious tremble in the air

What strains of vocal transport round her play!
Hear from the grave, great Taliessin, hear;
They breathe a soul to animate thy clay.
Bright Rapture calls, and soaring, as she sings,
Waves in the eye of heaven her many-coloured wings

This may seem a silly portrait of a great future monarch (in this case, Elizabeth), but its exaggerated imagery is justified by the poem's casual link between nature, tradition, and the spirit of virtue and liberty that sustains the present. Since nature is on Elizabeth's side and celebrates her triumph, nature, history, and nation form together to create a virtual union that the bard figures in musical terms and considers real and operative in the present world.

The poem presents this uncanny vision as though everyone sees the same thing—the triumph of a British form of government—within nature. The bard notes that the sun itself ('the orb of day') will forever stand as a beacon to liberty, and that the natural world will put forth a 'voice' ('as of the cherub-choir') to call the honest individual to its side. It assumes that the beauties of both music and nature will *always* draw people to a specific political affiliation and a specific moral stance; for the virtuous and properly attuned viewer, the sun will not be an orb in the sky or a ball of gas but rather a figure of recognition, confirming the righteousness of his or her conviction.

Virtue After the Pindaric

The Pindaric odes of Gray thus go further than Collins' or Warton's in imagining how the virtual could directly produce inspired action. With these odes, the fantasy that nature, history, or abstract liberty itself could tell the individual what to do, and guide it to righteous action, appears to have reached a limit. One might expect that the poets could

go no further, perhaps even realizing that their philosophy had reached an aesthetic impasse. However, in looking at the poets' output after they published their imaginative Pindarics, it becomes clear that the fantasy of joining with history and nature sustained the poets' efforts long after their great odes were completed.

By no coincidence, all of the major ode-writers moved on to projects involving British literary and political history during or after the publications of their collections of odes. Joseph Warton would spend most of the 1750-70s arguing about the English literary tradition, performing a great deal of antiquarian work in the process, and Mason became best known for his patriotic tragedies set, respectively, in Alfred's time and a vaguely Druidic ancient time. Collins planned an ambitious history of the dawn of the Renaissance, tracking the rise of liberty and the liberal arts.⁴⁶ Gray, meanwhile, made elaborate plans for an most ambitious poetic-historical project, 'The Alliance of Education and Government' (1748-9), which survives now only as fragments and notes. Influenced by Montesquieu and the mania for climatological history that followed from the *Spirit of the laws* (1747, English translation 1748), the fragmentary work champions the Whig virtues of Liberty and Industry, praises Britain's accomplishments in commerce and industry, and outlines the history of world civilizations that have led up to and contributed to Britain's glorious, politically perfect present. After abandoning that work, Gray studied European history in the 1750s while a gentleman-scholar at Cambridge, where he would eventually become the Regius Professor of History in 1768. During this time his letters to Horace Walpole show the two writers steadily feeding each others' fascination with medieval style and décor, and many of his journals of the same period are

46 Cf Wendorf, ch 3.

given to the study of medieval aesthetics; he wrote frequently about the Gothic style of architecture, argued for the sublimity of the Saxon taste for vertiginous decoration, and constantly ranted against French style in favor of a rough British-Germanic aesthetic.⁴⁷

The idea that virtue acted through the imagination lay behind all of these histories of liberty. As literary historicists had shown, history could portray moments of glorious national harmony through imaginative recreations of the past. The Opposition-era writers had revived interest in British, Gothic, or Germanic pre-modern for its supposedly spontaneous embrace of Liberty, an idea that proved politically controversial and intellectually dubious.⁴⁸ The climate of the 1740-50s, however, favored broadened fantasies of unity and communal experience, and the Pindaric ode's philosophy of the imagination made the question of whether or not premodern tribes or nations were actually unified moot if not irrelevant. Pursuing history allowed poets to demonstrate their selfless commitment to virtue and gave them virtuous *work* to do; the good historian was spreading virtue merely by scrounging the archives, seeking new sources, and making the past come alive vividly.⁴⁹ Unlike the Opposition-era historians, including Bolingbroke himself, the poetic historian of the 1740-50s could skip debates about the consequences of history for modern policy and simply make the past into an imaginary conglomerate celebrating liberty and Britain.

47 Cf Barrett Kalter's excellent article on Gray's and Walpole's obsession with Gothic decoration. Walpole and Gray rekindled an old friendship in the late 1740s and over the next decade became the two strongest members of the Gothic revival in Great Britain.

48 Cf Gerrard and Pocock, as well as Kliger for an older and partially outdated view of British Liberty and Gothicism.

49 Barrett Kalter's important article on Gray's interest in Gothicism speaks to this point, noting Gray's persistent tendency to drift into a self-conscious aestheticism when discussing premodern subjects, chastising his friends for making morality out of Gothic wildness or vituperatively dismissing those who got the Gothic wrong. Kalter concludes that, for Gray, 'antiquarianism had social and personal value. It helped promote an awareness of the national heritage, and it kept him from the listlessness to which he was disposed.'

The endless, open-ended task of history-writing also brought to the surface the mid-century tension between expectation and disappointment, virtual and real. Dissatisfaction with the modern world and commitment to higher collective ideals of the imagination were part of a feedback loop that produced expressions of boredom and frustration alongside expressions of the desires of the imagination. Gray in particular was self-deprecating about the usefulness of his work as an antiquarian, noting that his study habits precluded him from directing his energy from more properly 'public' engagements.

⁵⁰ Gray made frequent comments about the sad idleness of his historical endeavors: 'It is indeed for want of spirits . . . that my studies lie among the Cathedrals, and the Tombs, and the Ruins. To think, though to little purpose, has been the chief amusement of my days; and when I would not, or cannot think, I dream.'⁵¹

However, as this chapter and the one previous have been arguing, exercising the imagination without immediate purpose is precisely the *most* virtuous and productive task for writers of the mid-century. Somewhat paradoxically, then, Gray should be seen not so much venting personal frustration as demonstrating the depth of his commitment to strengthening the imagination. This sense of the dullness and stasis was perhaps a necessary symptom of the move to an abstract moral lifeworld or horizon.⁵²

50 Cf Kalter as well as Zionkowski.

51 To Thomas Wharton, 1756, quoted in Kalter 646. Elsewhere, he connects his listlessness with an inability to write more Pindaric poems: 'Though I allow abundance for your kindness and partiality to me, I am yet much pleased with the good opinion you seem to have of the Bard: I have not, however, done a word more than the little you have seen, having been in a very listless, unpleasant, and *inutile* state of mind for this long time.' (Letter XXIII, *June* 14, 1756.)

52 Elsewhere Gray defends his dedication to antiquarian work as a productive and morally useful pursuit, despite its appearance of idleness, and frequently argued with great energy about matters of national heritage: 'Some people, who hold me cheap for this (antiquarian work) are doing perhaps what is not half so well worth while.' (C, 2:566) Barrett Kalter's important article on Gray's interest in Gothicism speaks to this point, noting Gray's persistent tendency to drift into a self-conscious aestheticism when discussing premodern subjects, chastising his friends for making morality out of Gothic wildness or vituperatively dismissing those who got the Gothic wrong. Kalter concludes that, for Gray,

The other ode-writers also appear to have maintained the belief that strengthening one's virtue meant strengthening one's imagination, though it played out in different ways in their post-ode-writing careers. Warton became the great spokesman for genius in the 1750s, reclaiming the pejorative term 'pure poetry' from the Warburtonian moralist critics and setting up imaginative experience as an ethically useful act in itself. I discuss Warton's critical works at much greater length in the following chapter, and for now would only like to observe how Warton like Gray remained within the thought-patterns of the imaginative ode and its models of imagination and virtue. Warton's *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1756) maintained the ode-writers' commitment to Nature and Liberty as well as their reluctance to discuss candidates, parties, or policies. The work aggressively champions 'pure poetry' over didactic, philosophical, or otherwise idea-driven poetry, setting up Shakespeare and Milton as the best because most aesthetically powerful poets of the British tradition. For a work published in 1757—the first year of the Seven Years' War and a period of vicious cultural politics—Warton's *Essay* is remarkably reticent about politics despite its strongly self-righteous critical stance. The obvious reason is that Warton still saw the merits of the ode-writers' philosophy of imagination and virtue and considered it worthy of a complete critical

'antiquarianism had social and personal value. It helped promote an awareness of the national heritage, and it kept him from the listlessness to which he was disposed.' Commenting on a draft of Mason's tragedy set in ancient Britain, Gray voiced his disdain for moralizing pictures of premodern culture: I shall not be easily reconciled to Mador's *own* song. I must not have my fancy raised to that agreeable pitch of heathenism, & wild magical enthusiasm, & then have you let me drop into moral philosophy, & cold good sense. I remember you insulted me, when I saw you last, & affected to call, that w^{ch} delighted my imagination, *Nonsense*: now I insist, that Sense is nothing in poetry, but according to the dress she wears, & the scene she appears in. [I]f you should lead me into a superb Gothic building with a thousand cluster'd pillars, each of them half a mile high, the walls all cover'd with fretwork, & the windows full of red & blue Saints, that had neither head, nor tail; and I should find the Venus of Medici in person perk'd up in a long nich over the high altar, as naked as ever she was born, do you think it would raise, or damp my devotions? (*C*, 2:593-94)

summation. Warton's success as a critic appears to have proved him partially right, as critics used his categories to create a decidedly new model of the relationship between virtue and the virtual.⁵³

Collins' career was of course cut short by the poorly-treated mental and physical illnesses he suffered beginning in the 1740s, but, as my next chapter documents, he became something of a *cause celebre* in the 1760s and an example of the sort of pure imaginative poet that Warton's *Essay* helped articulate. Furthermore, the one major work he did produce after his book of odes, the 'An Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands' (c.1750-2) was perhaps the most complete poetic account of the 'truth' of aestheticized environments and virtual nature. The long poem abandons the studied Pindaric form of his early poems and takes a more dialectical approach to the aesthetic, pitting virtual against empirical truth. Superstition is of course a bad word for the poets of virtue, one associated with French Catholicism and arbitrary hierarchy, but the poem argues that superstition which arises naturally out of the local (in this case Scottish) environment is so powerfully real that it must be believed. Though they 'depart from sober truth,' they 'are still to nature true' and gives 'fresh delight,' making the imagination 'glow' and filling 'th'impassioned heart.'⁵⁴

I hope to have shown that critics who have focused on a retreat from politics or flight from history in the mid-century Pindaric have accounted only for formal aspects of the

53 See chapter four of the current work. The *Essay on Pope* also brought about renewed interest in Warton's poetry, which had been largely ignored after about 1750.

54 The poem also lays bare the contradiction between empirical and imaginative truth (which I have argued the ode-writers did not see as a true contradiction), celebrating that Tasso's 'undoubting mind/ Believ'd the magic wonders which he sung,' though they were obviously superstitions.

ode, and have not laid bare the moral and political assumptions that informed and necessitated them. As I have argued, the imaginative Pindaric ode worked to redefine what political virtue was, showing how grounding collective truths could only be experienced through devotion to the imagination. By making the experience of these truths deeply pleasurable, the ode-writers helped create forms of ethics which made individual aesthetic or poetic experience indispensable parts of social and national morality. The poetic fantasy of experiencing full community with nature, or being fully absorbed into the universal song of liberty, allowed poets to redefine the 'common good' as abstract utopia rather than a real group or situation, a virtual environment promising to be real but linked to reality only through the imagination.

After the *floreat* of the ode, claims to the selfless devotion to the public were no longer partisan grabs at political capital; 'Virtue' was no longer the property of radical Whigs or anti-establishment Dissenting groups but was instead merely the marker of any devoted servant of the public, dedicated to the common good for better or worse. Instead of the withdrawal of politics and the 'flight from history,' then, the ode shows the encroachment of self-sacrificing nationalist ethics (which I have been calling 'virtue') into the private and non-political realm.

The period of the imaginative ode and the fantasy of virtual reality was a brief moment. Criticism and poetry would return to more expressly political purposes during the Seven Years War and the calls to Liberty and Virtue were re-worked and re-deployed by later groups including the Priestleyan Dissenters and the Wilkesites. The belief in imaginative experience as an end in itself and the Truth of Nature and Liberty would,

however, remain a crucial part of the mutual development of poetry and an ethics of virtue throughout the rest of the century, and writers would continue to return to the poetic realm to present their desires for political and social reform.

INTERLUDE:

OSSIAN AND THE LURE OF MATERIALITY

I argued in the previous chapter that the mid-century imaginative Pindaric ode reformulated virtue and political ethics around the desire to merge with a real and true environment. I also argued that this fantasy, when pushed in Gray's 'The Bard,' turned on the desire for Nature or the virtual community to *compel* the individual to act. In the following pages, I will argue that the desire for the individual to give up his or her agency to collective abstract objects was carried to a further extreme in the Ossian poems forged by James Macpherson in the late 1750s and early 1760s. Recent critics have found the popularity of the turgid, plot-less Ossian poems confounding, but I will argue here that the new desires formed by the mid-century Pindaric ode, as laid out in the previous chapter, account for the poem's ethical as well as affective appeal. I will argue that the Ossian poems carry these desires beyond their limit and create a new object of desire—a reality that is seen as a 'terrible truth' or the 'void of life,' a sort of unconscious world of repetition that virtual experience alone can reveal.

The Ossian poems are notoriously difficult reading. The text of the first and most popular Ossian epic, *Fingal*, is essentially a series of fragmentary descriptions, anecdotes, and speeches, all narrated with a uniformity which prevents any sense of narrative momentum to develop. Events unfold one after another, narrated in the same staccato manner and in the same vexed tone, as the narrative aimlessly drives forward. Observe for instance the repetitive rhythm and structure of the following paragraph:

Before the halls of Starno the sons of the chace convened. The king's dark brows were like clouds. His eyes like meteors of night, Bring hither, he cries, Agandecca to her lovely king of Morven... She came with the red eye of tears. She came with her loose raven locks. Her white breast heaved with sighs, like the foam of the streamy Lubar. Staino pierced her side with steel. She fell like a wreath of snow, that Aides from the rocks of Ronan; when the woods are still, and the eccho deepens in the vale.

The passage is dominated by nouns and short declarative statements, and its inconsistent, vaguely iambic meter strongly favors one-syllable words. The content of the paragraph begins with action before falling into one of the most salient features of the Ossianic aesthetic, namely descriptions of mortified, de-humanized natural landscapes. This sense of repetition, and repeated resets or falls into stasis, is certainly novel, owing little to the great ancient or modern examples available to mid-century British writers, and its appeal must be seen to follow closely from this novelty.

As the immediate reception of *Fingal* makes clear, the initial appeal of the poem centered on its heightening of the sensation of material natural experience that Lowth and Gray had celebrated in the 1750s. One of the first reviews of the poem, in Dodsley's *Register* (1761), argued that *Fingal* was sublimely successful because of its naïve immediacy, the 'native simplicity, wild luxuriance, that romantic air, so striking, so descriptive' which 'retains the majestic air and native simplicity of a sublime original.'¹

1 *The Annual Register* (1761), 276.

The key phrase in the review is 'simplicity,' and the reviewer seems to admire the sense of real experience and real interaction with nature that the poem captures. A review from the *Critical Review* of the same year makes the same points more clearly: 'an air of barbarous wildness...runs thro' the whole; the images are romantic and local, and the landscape is generally sketched with justice and propriety. The grey mist, the howling wind, the wavy heath, the solitary tree, and the frowning mountain, are images which naturally arise to a northern bard, and such are here introduced, marked with the strokes of a fine imagination.'² The language of this review underscores how the poem's spirit of 'barbarous wildness' derives from the poem's sense of the *local*, its narrator's attunement to the natural environment.

The first extended critical response to Ossian, Hugh Blair's *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763), is also shot through with references to the Ossian poems' 'awful sublimity,' 'grave solemnity,' and 'joy of grief' and argues that the poem allows readers to feel the real experience of human emotions, rather than artificial representations of them.³ The book's argument initially appears to repeat the basic ideas of 'primitivism' that united the works of such diverse authors as Blackwell, Lowth, and Mondobbo; its opening pages note that early cultures lived 'scattered and dispersed in the midst of solitary rural scenes, where the beauties of nature are their chief entertainment,' and were thus constantly bombarded with 'objects to them new and strange,' which in turn meant that they dwelled in a kind of constant 'wonder and surprise.' The primitive consciousness was condemned, but also blessed, to live in the immediate world, without

2 *Critical Review* #10 (1760), 28

3 *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763). See below for more on Blair's argument for material, opaque nature as truth in Ossian.

thought or abstraction to interfere with his *Dasein*: ‘the ideas of men, at first, were all particular.’ Blair’s text initially appears ambivalent about how the reader should feel about this state—on one hand, it alone is the source of immediate external truth, but on the other it is a product of ignorance and a pitiable Schillerian naivety. The text is, however, uninterested in choosing sides and repeatedly declares that this state of constant aesthetic appreciation is natural, makes people authentic and ‘without disguise...in the uncovered simplicity of nature.’⁴

The *Dissertation* uses this form of imaginative experience to build up a universal theory of poetry and social life that Blair uses to explain the appeal of the Ossian poems. Perhaps borrowing from Lowth, it argues that figurative language is more real than literal language: ‘Figures are commonly considered as artificial modes of speech, devised by orators and poets after the world had advanced to a refined state. The contrary of this is the truth.’⁵ Blair’s argument differs in one key particular from Lowth’s *Lectures*, however, since it is clear that the exaggeration is indeed, in his words, the *truth*, not merely the natural way of *organizing a community*. We must consider, he writes, ‘the foundation which those facts and characters had in truth...For truth makes an Impression on the mind far beyond any fiction; and no man, let his imagination be ever so strong, relates any events so feelingly as those...which he has personally known.’⁶ Indeed, the Ossianic poet has no sense of Lowthian utility or social practicality in mind, since he or she is so absorbed in the immediate that he’s not capable of doing anything but

4 Blair, 2, 3, 13, 2.

5 Ibid, 2. Blair shows his debt to Lowth, noting that Ossianic ‘language has all that figurative cast which, as I before showed, partly a glowing and undisciplined imagination, partly the sterility of language and the want of proper terms, have always introduced into the early speech of nations (and carries a remarkable resemblance to the style of the Old Testament.’ (19)

6 Ibid 29

responding to a series of particulars: ‘A public, a community, the universe, were conceptions beyond his sphere. Even a mountain, a sea, or a lake, which he has occasion to mention, though only in a simile, are for the most part particularized; it is the hill of Cromla, the storm of the sea of Malmor, or the reeds of the lake of Lego.’⁷ As Blair’s reading makes clear, the Ossianic, primitive individual is stuck in a claustrophobic world, fated to undergo endless ‘truthful’ experiences he or she has no choice but to respond and submit to. For Blair, then, ‘being Ossianic’ means letting everything claim you, having no will or ability to remove oneself from any situation, an experience pleasing because affirmative, capturing the truth of human ways of interacting.

Nearly every page of *Fingal* backs up Blair's reading. Like Gray's bard, the Ossianic individual responds to natural objects and settings as though they were in direct relationship with humanity: ‘See their swords like lightning above them. The little hills are troubled around, and the rocks tremble with all their moss.’ The personification of ‘troubled’ hills and rocks that ‘tremble’ shows how nature's cares are the same as those of humans. Indeed, there is no differentiation between nature and human in Ossian; each object appears to be both natural and human at the same time:

--‘The lake is troubled before thee, and dark are the clouds of the sky. But thou art like snow on the heath; and thy hair like the mist of Cromla; when it curls on the rocks, and shines to the beam of the west. Thy breasts are like two smooth rocks from Branno of the streams. Thy arms like two white pillars in the halls of the mighty Fingal.’

--‘pleasant is the noise of arms: pleasant as the thunder of heaven before the shower of Spring... bright as the sun-shine before a storm; when the weft wind collects the clouds, and the oaks of Morven echo along the shore.’

Ossianic nature itself is simply particular objects (a hill, a rock) and local forces or movements (a gust of wind, a trickle of rain) rather than grand abstracted forces, and there is nothing like a unified peaceful ‘Nature’ (especially not one of the Spinozan

7 Ibid 19

variety) in the Ossianic consciousness. The individual only knows discreet, particular forces, and these things are the only means he or she has of understanding the world.⁸

As in the odes of the 1740s, the immediate affective relationship between natural objects and humans serves as the means of linking lone individual to the collective life of the tribe or nation. Unlike in the poetic myths of Collins, Warton, and Gray, however, the Ossianic individual does not confront collective truth virtually but rather materially, through and in the scattered objects he or she comes across. Everything in nature recalls and speaks to the individual's homeland, tribe, family, etc; no object is simply an object—indeed no category of an 'object' having an existence outside of consciousness exists—but rather an involuntary reminder of the individual's attachment to his tribal or social identity. As the following example shows, Ossianic nature is notably uncanny, urging the speaker on to a kind of impassioned death wish (Lacanian would refer to the landscape's perceived *jouissance*):

'Pleasant to my ear is Lochlin's wind. It rushes over my ears. It speaks aloft in all my shrouds, and brings my green forests to my mind; the green forests of Gormal that often echoed to my winds, when my spear was red in the chace of the boar. Let dark Cuchullin yield to me the ancient throne of Cormac, or Erin's torrents shall shew from their hills the red foam of the blood of his pride.'

The seeming gap in this passage between the naturalistic description of Lochlin's winds and the protagonist's conviction to slaughter anyone that stands in his way of defeating his tribal enemy indicates the inseparability of passive aesthetic appreciation and active

8 In many ways, this aesthetic conception of the world is like Thomson's personified, experiential nature (the 'winds of winter' that bring the storms that transform the landscape, 'Spring' itself as it enlivens and fructifies all the individual parts of the scene, etc) but it also does not treat natural forces as unifying and totalizing entities, as groupings or categories under which to subsume every particular in the landscape. Rather the natural entities here are closer to Lucretian than Deistic: each thing is meant to be singular ('the west wind,' 'the clouds of the sky,' 'the beam of the west'), but all these natural entities are singular experiences or glimpses that aren't understood or contained by any intellectual system (e.g. Thomson's and Young's Newtonian Deism). They are individual and specific entities, not existing in any meaningful larger 'Nature,' certainly not any abstracted and intellectually totalized one: they are confined to their localities, and they soon pass, one after another, into oblivion.

personal conviction in Ossian. The Ossianic individual's interaction with anything always affirms his or her side and his or her cause, and no interaction falls outside of the tribal thoughts or affects. Hence the most private aesthetic experiences are also social imperatives.⁹

The Ossianic individual also interacts directly with history and tradition in the same uncanny manner, being moved to action by the ghosts and relics from the past that drift without purpose or direction through Ossianic landscapes. Ghosts are ubiquitous in Ossian, but it must be noted that ghosts are made of the same opaque and incomprehensible ontological substance as natural objects, appearing momentarily and then retreating into the chaotic background, leaving only their content-less, captivating voices:

‘The wind and the rain are past, calm is the noon of day. The clouds are divided in heaven. Over the green hills flies the inconstant sun. Red through the stony vale comes down the stream of the hill. Sweet are thy murmurs, O stream! but more sweet is the voice I hear. It is the voice of Alpin, the son of song, mourning for the dead! Bent is his head of age: red his tearful eye. Alpin, thou son of song, why alone on the silent hill? why complainest thou, as a blast in the wood as a wave on the lonely shore?’

In this passage, the narrator looks first to nature for direction and then addresses an absent ghost, present only as a remembered voice, whom the nature can only fruitlessly interrogate. In practice Ossianic ghosts represent the return of guilt, like Banquo in *Macbeth*, or the need to rectify some un-avenged wrong, like King Hamlet in *Hamlet*, but in Ossian ghosts also never communicate the motives or desires behind their appearances. The flatness of the Ossianic, in which nothing is a figure or symbol of anything even as everything compels action, means that the human can never think of a

⁹ To give another example: ‘Arise, winds of autumn, arise: blow along the heath. Streams of the mountains, roar; roar, tempests in the groves of my oaks! Walk through broken clouds, O moon! show thy pale face at intervals; bring to my mind the night when all my children fell, when Arindal the mighty fell’

life beyond the object-world. Thus Ossianic individuals often understand themselves and their roles through projecting into the future and imagining themselves as content-less, haunting ghostly presences that people will 'fear, but love': 'Here shall I rest with my friends, by the stream of the sounding rock. When night comes on the hill when the loud winds arise my ghost shall stand in the blast, and mourn the death of my friends. The hunter shall hear from his booth; he shall fear, but love my voice!'

As this quote indicates, ghosts excite the same mixture of desire and incomprehensibility that nature does. By the same token, spirits from the past sometimes seem to be no more than rain storms or strong winds themselves, and rocks and trees can conversely have the same haunting effect as ghosts do.

Narrow is thy dwelling now! dark the place of thine abode! With three steps I compass thy grave,
O thou who wast so great before! Four stones, with their heads of moss, are the only memorial of thee. A tree with scarce a leaf, long grass which whistles in the wind, mark to the hunter's eye the grave of the mighty Moran. Moran!

The 'four stones, with their heads of moss' and 'the 'tree with scarce a leaf' are no more or less present than the ghostly voices in the above passages, and their message is not any clearer. Like the ghosts, however, these stones clearly impose a sense of duty in the speaker; Moran, a scout killed while in enemy territory, must be remembered by the individual and the tribe must take vengeance for him. Every rock, spear, or ghost is a reminder of social duty or a new obligation. Unlike in nationalist myth-making, tradition and nature completely dominate the individual's psyche even as their motives remain unknown and their demands unclear. They all compel the individual to act but they all remain partial, promising no eventual totality of history or nature but merely an endless cycle of obligation and a picture of nature as always beyond one's grasp and always compelling action.

This brief excursus into the 'Ossian phenomenon' is meant to show how rapidly and thoroughly certain features of one fantasy can lend themselves to different ones. In this case, the ode's fantasy of being embedded in a virtual environment became the Ossianic repetition-compulsion, the desire of submitting to an imaginative or virtual nature beyond one's grasp. Ossianic fantasy was based on alienation from nature and the denial of rational liberty, two features directly contradictory to the logic of the imaginative Pindaric ode. Nevertheless, the Ossianic reveals the alienation inherent in making the empirical world virtual, bringing to light the contradiction between the ode's desire to be part of virtual nature and its desire to anchor reality in abstract truths. As Ossian's reception from 1760-85 makes clear, readers responded precisely to this sense of grim compulsion and this desire to submit one's agency to the environment, even as they tried to keep it contained within the language of virtue or social ethics.

A review of *Fingal* in the *Monthly Review* (perhaps written by Burke) shows a tellingly confused attempt to use the traditional critical language of imaginative virtue to describe the effect of the Ossianic poems. The review first establishes that Ossian had an authentic imagination, since his 'noble flights of true genius' went beyond critical rules and created their own, and then argues that his independence of spirit will serve as an inspiration to present poets, quashing the impulse to be a 'servile echo of the leading voices of the times,' and giving 'encouragement for every rising genius to indulge the luxuriance of his imagination.'¹⁰ Despite its confidence in Ossian's utility to the present, and despite its exaggerated enthusiasm for *Fingal*, the review cannot quite call the poem

¹⁰ *Monthly Review*, 26 (1761), 41.

moral or virtuous. Its seductive sense of truth and true experience still presents no virtue *objects* or principles and the reviewer limits his comments to an aesthetic 'truth' and propriety detached from the political or moral world.

In less formal, more off-handed comments, different critics gave tellingly different values to claustrophobic, repetitive experience Ossianic poetry captured. The most notorious opponent of the poems' literary merit and historical authenticity, Dr. Johnson, notes the repetition compulsion operative in them, dismissing them as 'a mere unconnected rhapsody, tiresome repetition of the same images.' Johnson clearly picks up on the hypnotic materiality of the poem, and notes how it demands a sort of surrender: 'a man might write such stuff for ever, if he would *abandon his mind* to it.'¹¹ Johnson would of course consider it a grievous error to abandon one's mind to anything for any reason, and his decade-long defamation of Ossian reflects the disdain for both the language of aesthetic Truth and the sort of pure imaginative experience that had informed the imaginative Pindaric ode.¹² Gray's well-known reaction to Macpherson's earliest Ossian works, on the other hand, reflects the thrill of surrendering to the hypnosis of virtual nature: 'I am gone mad about them; I was so struck, so extasié with their infinite beauty.' The phrase 'I am gone made' wasn't a colloquialism of the time and certainly wasn't familiar critical language at the time, and Gray appears to be arguing that the poems stand at the precipice between real and virtual, order and the abyss.¹³ Gray's remarks

11 (Emphasis added) Quoted in James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 1207.

12 Two excellent recent readings detail Johnson's disdain for pre-modernist and nationalist myths through his criticisms of Ossian and the nationalist arguments for him, Clement Hawes' *The British Eighteenth Century and Global Critique* and Ian Duncan's 'The pathos of abstraction.' Both showcase Johnson's subtle attitudes and anxieties about 'peripheral' areas. See also Katie Trumpener's provocative reading of Johnson's colonizing sympathy in *Journey to the Hebrides*.

13 Gray, Correspondence II, 678.

differs from most reviews of the Ossian epics from 1760-70 that value the epics' documentation of 'savage' simplicity,¹⁴ and his comments anticipate Hazlitt in making the Ossian an emblem of the seductive nature of aesthetic absorption.¹⁵

This sense of absorption and submission would play a larger role in the reception of Ossian, as readers from about 1770 forward change out Wartonian ideas of aesthetic truth for those of something like an aesthetic unconscious that virtual experience reveals. The beginning of the shift in reception can be seen in Goethe's immensely influential *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). In the novel, Werther pays more and more attention to Ossian as his desperation and preoccupation with the 'dreadful void of life' increase. He specifically points to the sense of disconnection that the Ossianic aesthetic inspires:

Ossian has superseded Homer in my heart. To what a world does the illustrious bard carry me! To wander over pathless wilds, surrounded by impetuous whirlwinds, where, by the feeble light of the moon, we see the spirits of our ancestors; to hear from the mountain-tops, mid the roar of torrents, their plaintive sounds issuing from deep caverns, and the sorrowful lamentations of a maiden who sighs and expires on the mossy tomb of the warrior by whom she was adored.¹⁶

Homer here (as elsewhere with the young Goethe) represents coherence and clarity of intent, and Ossian by contrast stands for incoherence, depthlessness, and uncertain boundaries that Werther yet considers a 'terrible' truth.¹⁷

14 For example, the anonymous 1761 review in Dodsley's Register uses mostly the language of the sublime and Blackwellian natural simplicity in praising the poem: (these) 'inestimable relics of the genuine spirit of poetry...retains the majestic air and native simplicity of a sublime original...(note) the native simplicity, wild luxuriance, that romantic air, so striking, so descriptive, and so happily adapted to the sublime species of writing.'

15 On the fetishization of aestheticized history, cf. Ruth Mack, *Literary Historicity* chapter 4, Sean Silver's 'Visiting Strawberry Hill: Horace Walpole's Gothic Historiography,' and Barret Kalter's 'DIY Gothic: Thomas Gray and the Medieval Revival.' As Barret Kalter notes, Gray frequently spoke of Gothic art in terms of 'perfection' ('I am glad you enter into the Spirit of Strawberry-Castle. [I]t has a purity & propriety of Gothicism in it . . . that I have not seen elsewhere'), while protesting against making the experience of absorption in its perfect 'enthusiasm': 'I must not have my fancy raised to that agreeable pitch of heathenism, & wild magical enthusiasm, & then have you let me drop into moral philosophy, & cold good sense.' *C*, 1:406-7) (*C*, 2:593-94), quoted in Kalter, 997-8

16 Goethe, 316-7.

17 It should be noted that, in numerous remarks outside of the novel, Goethe was eager to portray this surrender to Ossianic gloom as a hallmark of Werther's approaching insanity, an indulgence which, in differentiating himself clearly from his novel's protagonist, Goethe associated with fragile, mistaken youth.

As Werther implies, this fluid, disjointed world without boundaries was experienced as a kind of surrender. Consequently, the most common response to Ossian in the 1770s was an innovative form of reception: imitation. As recent critics have chronicled, the craze for imitating and re-writing Ossianic poems began as soon as the epics were released and continued unabated well into the nineteenth century.¹⁸ Some imitations were full-scale epics, some were fragments, and many more were brief reveries like Hazlitt's or loose adaptations of Macpherson's rhythmic prose and object-laden imagery.¹⁹ Dafydd Moore helps explain the obsession with the 'raw' experience Ossian offered by adding that any translation and adaptation of *Fingal* and *Temora* that attempted to moralize or bowdlerize the epics was greeted with fierce disdain, as readers preferred to keep what Moore calls the 'genuine rawness' of the original intact.²⁰ Corinna Laughlin's excellent reading of imitations of Ossian specifically sees the appeal of Ossian's style in its 'hypnotic' materiality: the broken, repetitive, object-heavy Ossianic language effectively communicates a jumbled materiality, 'a world on the verge, a world of emotion without any moral code to keep it under control... the Ossianic landscape is one which threatens any moment either to dissolve, or to explode.' Though Laughlin fails to note the attachment to virtual experience that made this experience morally and aesthetically permissible, we can see in her remarks the same sensation of being absorbed in a virtual continuum that Collins, Warton, and Gray had established.²¹

18 Cf. Laughlin.

19 The recent collection of essays on the reception of Ossian throughout Europe edited by Gaskell details how the many tortured devotees of Ossian (including Napoleon) from the 1760s to the 1840s elaborately displayed their hopelessly idealistic, alienated sensibilities through imitations of Ossianic gloom. In the volume there are relevant essays by Moore, Meek, Constantine, Smethurst, Jung, O Docharthaigh, Graves, Porter, Bar, Terlecka, France, and Smith.

20 Moore, 83.

21 Laughlin, *passim*.

In time, writers would assume the abyss of the aesthetic, making the virtual a separate entity that was 'true' and real but not moral. A few remarks will have to serve as representative of the way the reception of Ossian greatly contributed to this sense of aesthetic truth. Hazlitt's comments in 1812 note the the highly personal nature of the disconnection and doom that Ossian communicates: 'more entirely than all other poets... (Ossian conveys) the decay of life and the lag end of the world...the sense of privation, the loss of all things, of friends, of good name, of country.' Ossian thus represent is 'a feeling and a name that can never be destroyed in the minds of his readers,' standing for a truth that one can't talk about and yet one privately feels as the truth of one's relation to the world; hence, in Ossian's work, 'the feeling of cheerless desolation, of the loss of the pith and sap of existence, of the annihilation of the substance, and the incorporating the shadow of all things as in a mock embrace, is perfect.' Hazlitt seals his reading of grim Ossianic truth by noting that he himself is completely indifferent to the authenticity of Ossian's poems. If the poems are fakes, that makes their communication of the truth of life that much more powerful: 'If it were indeed possible to shew that this writer was nothing, it would only be another instance of mutability, another blank made, another void left in the heart, another confirmation of that feeling which makes him so often chide his lingering fate, "Roll on, ye dark brown years, ye bring no joy on your wing to Ossian!"'²²

The anterior or a priori nature of this repetitive truth can be seen in Walter Scott's comments on his youthful reading of Ossian's poems. Like many romantic readers, Scott recalls *having experienced* Ossian even though he can't appreciate it now, recalling the

22 Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English poets: delivered at the Surrey Institution*, 37-8

hypnotic pleasure of repetition that he gave way to while reading him as a child:

I devoured rather than perused (Ossian's books). These tales were for a long time so much my delight, that I could repeat, without remorse, whole duans...woe to the unlucky wight who undertook to be my auditor, for, in the height of my enthusiasm, I was apt to disregard all hints that my recitations became tedious. It was a natural consequence of progress in taste, that my fondness for these authors should experience some abatement. Ossian's poems, in particular, have more charms for youth than for a more advanced stage. The *eternal repetition of the same ideas and imagery*, however beautiful in themselves, is apt to pall upon a reader whose taste has become somewhat fastidious...and *what is perhaps more natural, it destroys that feeling of reality...*²³

The passage shows a characteristically romantic species of childhood, in which

experience was happy and full, but Scott's phrasing shows the nature of the 'enthusiasm' that Ossian produced. In the italicized phrases, Ossianic reception was made to be an enveloping and endless passion, destroying empirical reality since it captures that repetition that is 'more natural' than reality yet is forgotten by those 'of a more advanced stage.'

In this brief reading, I have been presenting the 'Ossian phenomenon' as the creation of an aesthetic unconscious that resulted from carrying the fantasy of natural experience to its limit. Wanting to be part of nature or feel nature completely meant submitting to the control of objects, people, and other things beyond comprehension, which in turn meant surrendering to a world of repetition. This would appear to be a problem for language of virtue that had based itself in nature—repetition can only beget repetition, and Ossianic truth was only felt as a private sense of 'realness' that could not be shared. However, as my next chapter argues, the Ossian poems fit perfectly into the new critical language of moral reform that arose around the Seven Years War. This language only needed to *celebrate* authentic experience, not re-enact or dramatize it for the reader as the mid-

23 Letter to Anna Seward, quoted in Lockhart, *Memoirs of the life of Sir Walter Scott*, Vol 1, 270-1.

century ode and historicism had. Ossian can be hailed as a 'genius' representing a perfectly immediate connection with his environment and could thus be held up as an inspiring and morally edifying example, even if moderns should have no desire to repeat him or imitate either his poetry or feelings.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE REFORMING GENIUS: IMAGINATION, CRISIS, AND MORAL CONVICTION IN LITERARY CRITICISM, 1754-65

This chapter relates how and why critics re-purposed poetry into a force of moral and cultural reform from 1755-65. Criticism of this period, energized by the chaotic climate of public opinion surrounding the Seven Years War (1756-63), took a more active role in social matters, reversing the inward turn of the ode-writers as well as the a-political nature of antiquarian critics while maintaining their conception of poetic reception as an essentially private experience. Invoking the ideas of imaginative poetic genius and 'pure poetry,' critics claimed that the advancement and cultivation of poetry was necessary for national welfare and indispensable for shaking Britain out of the moral torpor it was thought to be sunk in. Criticism thus began to judge poetry primarily on its ability to *inspire*, and one of the period's fundamental tenets was that morally inspiring works of the highest quality could be written by living writers (and often had been written by living or recently deceased British poets).

Experiences of virtuous contentment thus became *obligatory* for every would-be

patriot, literary or political. Poets were re-defined as having a direct line to the realm of imaginative virtue, while political candidates were lionized if they could appear to be wholly dedicated to the common good. Critics reified the notion that the 'secret bliss' of aesthetic happiness was prerequisite to good social morality, and their celebrations of genius as well as their encouragements of new genius assumed that poetry could readily provide such experiences and convert people from the path of base luxury to the high road of virtue. Ultimately this criticism helped establish the idea of the 'genius' who has access to a form of glorious and happy natural experience, but it also carried the claim to the political utility of virtuous aesthetic experiences too far, resulting in a significantly de-politicized criticism in the years that followed the Seven Years' War.

The Genius and the Present

Criticism about poetic genius from 1755-70 triangulates privacy, moral truth, and aesthetic experience. Like the ode-writers, critics from the period define great poetry in Longinian fashion, that is, as powerful private flights beyond the worldly or immediate. As Joseph Warton defines it, 'the fire of genius raises the mind above itself and by the natural influence of imagination actuates it as if it were supernaturally inspired.'¹ As in the philosophy of the mid-century ode-writers, the imaginative realm that the genius created is a sort of virtual-material world in which the individual finds its real home. The Whig moralist Edward Young is clearest on this score: 'The mind of a man of Genius is a fertile and pleasant field, pleasant as *Elysium*, and fertile as *Tempe*; it enjoys a perpetual Spring..It opens a back-door out of the Bustle of this busy, and idle world, into a

¹ Warton, *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*, 23.

delicious Garden of Moral and Intellectual fruits and flower.¹² As the mention of 'Moral and Intellectual fruits' indicates, these solitary flights do not offer an *escape* from the world but rather the opportunity to confront and *feel* the rational moral Truths that are more real than the empirical world.

These views are all familiar from the ode-writers of the mid-century, but critics from 1755-70 put them in the service of active, immediate moral and social reform. By contrast with the ode-writers, critics of the 1750-60s do not find it morally sufficient to experience virtual-material truths in private; rather they increasingly assume that the nation must value such experiences if moral decline is to be halted. The change may seem small, but it allowed critics to re-define what poetry is. For poetry to be able to enact moral reform, it must be understood as moral, essentially the power of making people feel morally edifying feelings and not mere aesthetic delight (as Addison or Bouhours, for instance, had understood it to be). As a result, critics of genius are less and less inclined to fetishize the great figures of the ancient world (Homer, Pindar, Horace) or even those from the native British tradition (Shakespeare, Spencer, Milton) and instead focus increasingly on *living* or recently deceased writers, arguing that these writers are themselves lofty and virtuous geniuses as valuable—since as morally inspiring—as the august poets of the past.

Writers in many different mediums stress that great poetry had been produced recently and that criticism's task was to encourage more of it. The very first edition of the *Critical Review* announces its commitment to the work of recent imaginative poets:

Nothing is more unjust, than the common observation that genius no longer blooms in this

2 Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, 18-9.

degenerate age; that science expired with Newton, and poetry perished with Pope. We could enumerate many living authors, whose works, we apprehend, are not inferior to those of Pope himself, and who might have vied with him in reputation, had they been as properly introduced into the temple of Fame. We can boast a Young, an Armstrong, an Akenside, a Gray, a Mason, a Warton, and a Whitehead, with many others who possess *the true spirit of poetry*.³

Thomas Wilkes' commentary on modern theater, *A General View of the Stage*, makes the stronger statement, worthy of Akenside himself, that British drama needs to write with the virtuous freedom that inspired the great living British poets:

when a Gray, an Armstrong, a Mason, and an Akenside, shall write with all the fire of Apollo, and the inspiration of Parnassus, without one of those lavish favourites of fortune shewing either munificence or taste enough to honour themselves with patronizing those ornaments of Britain, nay of the world. *Where the genius of a nation preserves its sublimity of character, inspires valour and liberality* the Stage will maintain its first influence, and promote the happiness of society; the scene will glow with greatness, and reflect the spirit of the auditors (*A General View of the Stage*, 1759)⁴

Even Warton's famous *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1756), often read as a largely apolitical work, makes similar remarks against a narrative of poetic decline:

I am not persuaded that all true genius died with Pope: and presume that the Seasons of Thomson, the Pleasures of Imagination, and Odes, of Akenside, the Night-thoughts of Young, the Leonidas of Glover, the Elegy of Gray, together with many pieces in Dodsley's Miscellanies, were not published when Dr. Warburton delivered (his) insinuation of a failure of poetical abilities.⁵

In light of the previous chapter, it is worth noting that Warton was willing to alter his prior evaluation of contemporary poets greatly in order to affirm the grandeur of recent poetry: after greeting Akenside's odes as 'extremely insipid and flat' when they came out in 1744, he here elevates them to the highest level of poetic achievement, evaluating them in terms of their character and passion rather than their taste or technical skill.

3 *Critical Review* Vol 1 (1756), 23.

4 Wilkes, 68. The passage continues in what amounts to an updating of John Dennis merged with Oppositionalism and Warton: 'Where the genius of a nation preserves its sublimity of character, inspires valour and liberality the Stage will maintain its first influence, and promote the happiness of society; the scene will glow with greatness, and reflect the spirit of the auditors; the happiness resulting from the practice of virtue, the miseries arising from a continuance in vice, will engage the attention, and speak to the heart through the ear, which will neither enjoy nor pardon the exhibition that is void of instruction or animation: on the contrary, when a nation draws towards a period of glory, where vice infects every rank, and depravity makes dullness impudent; where the men dismiss shame, the women forget modesty, the Stage will first be touched with, and sink under the infection ; the Music will be loose and enervate, the Theatre will be no more considered as the school of wisdom, but both tragic and comic energy dwindle into lightness and buffoonery.' (68-9)

5 *An essay on the writings and genius of Pope*, 141.

As Warton's change of opinion shows, the criticism of genius was willing to adjust the way it evaluated works in light of its new reformist, presentist mandate.

Contexts: Magazines, Sermons, and the Revival of Patriotism

Two particular contexts help account for the turn to genius and its emphasis on the present and reveal much about the stakes of these new critical values. The first relates to cultural politics, specifically the tense battle for public opinion during, just before, and after the Seven Years War (1757-63). The second has to do with the new means of literary production in the period, specifically the growth of for-profit critical magazines, histories, and treatises on national moral and social welfare.

The two are closely related, since the new magazines and tracts justified their work as cultivating educated and elevated public opinion and often identified immediate moral and cultural reform as their mandate and mission. It seems likely that, without the new means of production of the magazine and review essay, the discourse of the genius would never have gained the caché it did. The new critical mediums, usually practiced by young critics intent on advertising their independence from structures of power, needed to adopt a stance of public utility and did so by claiming that they were a guide through what they portrayed as a chaotic and commercialized public sphere.⁶ If poetry is

6 The 'Fast Day' sermons delivered during the Seven Years War are an illustrative if extreme indicator of the intellectual climate of the 1750-60s. In these sermons, ministers were obliged (by decree of the King) to rant about the selfishness, taste for luxury and abundance, and general immorality of the populace, as well as the corruption of politicians, in order to create a kind of national shaming that would rouse enthusiasm for both religious and national/political causes. George III called for the Fast Day sermons during the War, and thousands were delivered during its tenure, a large number of which were printed during the time. (A 1758 edition of the *Monthly Review* lists nineteen sermons released that month.) A typical example from 1758 laments the nation's fallen state of morality: 'Vanity, Pride, Luxury, Gaming, Diversions, and childish Amusements, employ our Thoughts. This is what embarrasses our Understanding; this is what hardens our Hearts, and clouds our Reason.' In another sermon from 1758, Thomas Bedford identifies all politicians as 'the servants of corruption, and slaves

seen to be the conduit to social spirit and national well-being, the critic's role is secure; he or she alone can ensure that the right kind of poetry (and the right way of reading it) are being cultivated so that Britain may avoid the slings and arrows of luxury, corruption, and Gallic effeminacy that surround and threaten it. Their claims to 'independence,' and the constant air of polemic and radical re-thinking of poetry that permeates their works, were thus partially defensive gestures meant to secure criticism's role as the screening, policing arbiters of taste and cultural welfare.

The larger revival of aggressive public reform in the public sphere was the result of several political circumstances. First, Britain lacked a dominant minister and party of the sort that Walpole and his group of Whigs had been for the 1730s, with the result that the period saw a near constant turnover of ministers and ministries. The continual change of ministries meant that the fight for public opinion was, politically speaking, always relevant; in the popular mind, a well-written speech or article could potentially change the makeup of the Cabinet and thus the fate of the nation.⁷ At the same time, he

to every vice under heaven' and looks to the populace to reform them from below. Dozens more sermons from were printed every year, each castigating the character of the present nation and calling for the renewed political-religious commitment that Thomas Wilkins, in a later 'Poem on the Fast' articulates:

'The high and mighty pleasure's paths pursue.
Many their vices, but their virtues few;
Their wealth to vilest purposes they use,
Thus blast their honour, and their pow'r abuse...
Are perfect strangers to their Saviour-God...
See all our foes besetting us around
Distress our commerce and our country wound...
Britons arise! Go bear your sails away
Just is the cause, nor fear to win the day!...
The Cause is God's, for him you brave the field'

In these and many other works, writers of little to no prestige in the period avidly and boldly addressed pressing national matters—the economy, colonies, warfare and international relations—but strictly in terms of a simultaneously religious, political, and moral commitment.

7 Cf Bob Harris, *Politics and the nation: Britain in the mid-eighteenth century*, and Kathleen Wilson, *The sense of the people*.

increasing hegemony of the idea that Britain's military and economic (and thus imperial) might was by far the most important, if not *only*, task of the state and the public sphere. As Bob Harris plainly states, the notion that 'Britain's destiny was as a maritime power with global interest and influences came into much sharper focus in the 1750s,' bringing with it a new way of doing politics which *always* protected commercial and imperial interests.⁸ Parliament itself began to spend more and more of its time debating various nationalized economic reforms (the most famous being canal building, calendar reform, and a new wave of enclosures), all of which were supported by the sense of the government's mission as the 'wider concern with expediting trade and manufacturing and the sinews of national power.'⁹ The belief that the nation's well-being and progress was tied to its commercial/mercantile prowess underlay both sides of political debate¹⁰ as did the acknowledgment that the nation must actively fight to defend its markets and territories abroad, which sharply limited the options for political policy or activity.¹¹ Theorists of the day increasingly took for granted the ideas of Hume, Tucker, and Montesquieu (and later Smith) on trade, liberty, and economic self-interest, with the result the basic structure and organization of government and empire were rarely

8 Harris, 7. Discussions of political ethics increasingly centered on how to maximize trade and wealth, and 'the pursuit of profit' was treated in the press, Parliament, and at the pulpit as 'a patriotic act' and as Hume's pro-trade, anti-virtue essays (1752) becoming something like the *piece de resistance* of the time.

9 Harris, 248

10 'The new regime of George III 'placed much emphasis on the extinction of ancient animosities. For the first time Tory country gentlemen were welcomed at court, not grudgingly, but with open arms.' (Langford 342) Older historiography, including that of Catherine Macaulay herself, painted the early reign of George III as a period of Tory resurgence, but scholars of the last fifty years have shown that a common Whiggism was behind all of the dizzying array of alliances and ministries that pass in and out of power in the 1750-60s. Many *ad hominem* attacks concern decisions regarding war, as there is near constant discontent with the government's handling of colonial and international matters, especially those involving France (both before and after the Seven Years War).

11 As Harris states, 'Enthusiasm for projects which sought, among other things, to reverse moral decline, to restore order and stability to society, to promote commercial and military strength, cut across partisan allegiances.' (316)

questioned in the way they were in the 1710-20s .¹²

As a result of this shift, political debate turned less on political ideas and more on the character and authenticity of individual figures. The discourse of 'Patriotism' experienced a major revival in the mid-1750s, as candidates from all ideological backgrounds staked their claims to truly virtuous dedication to the nation.¹³ The biggest beneficiary of the revival was William Pitt, a former member of the Patriot Opposition and the chief political figure of Britain in the later 1750s, who rose to power due to his uncanny ability to *seem* 'to put principle in front of interest, the good of the nation before the good of party, the body of the people before his own body.'¹⁴ Various cults of personality dominated the political life of the period—punctuated by the Wilkes affair of 1763-5, with its battle-cry of 'Wilkes and Liberty!'— as each group demonstrated their own commitment to virtue and impugned the other's lack of patriotism (portrayed as corruption, luxury, effeminacy, moral sloth, etc).¹⁵ However, since all writers and

12 The influence of Hume and Montesquieu during the period is well known. Walter Clark argues that, while Tucker's stature was not as great as those two, he was 'the leading pamphleteer in favor of (economic) freedom' in the 1750s and 'had direct influence upon practical legislation' as well as a great deal of influence on the general ideology of economic liberalism (Clark, *Josiah Tucker*, 221-9). Present-ist arguments for the necessity of aesthetic ethics and aesthetic culture were formed alongside and in partial opposition to these liberal-minded philosophies of ethics and society. Hume and Smith in particular invent new systems of ethics predicated on aesthetic experience during the period, and they also focus their ethical and political works increasingly on the importance of the immediate *situation* and the present context, but the contrast of their ethics with those of present-ist writers is decisive. Hume and Smith argue that the human comes to understand its through the passion of *sympathy*, which forms bonds between individuals and creates a community with shared values. Sympathy and individual affect play a large part in determining the specifics of the laws and the severity of punishments, but, once formed, these laws and *not* passionate attachments are for Smith what truly binds a community: 'if the (threat of legal retribution) is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society ... must in a moment crumble into atoms.' (Smith, *Theory of moral sentiments*, 86. Pfau discusses this in 'Beyond liberal utopia.) Thus Smith's and Hume's attention to the present and the everyday intends to de-mystify the question of social community and argue simply that people will a) always naturally bond with those they encounter and b) avoid the pain and humiliation that comes with breaking laws.

13 Peter de Bolla's *The discourse of the sublime* as well as Jonathan Lamb's *The rhetoric of suffering* both offer excellent theorizations of the moment of patriotism in the later 1750s.

14 De Bolla, *The discourse of the sublime*, 143-5.

15 The discussion on the national debt economy from 1757-70 by Pocock and de Bolla is a case in point.

politicians (even Wilkes himself) agreed that the nation's essential task was the maintenance of its commercial power and accepted the credit system, patronage politics, and a national bank,¹⁶ 'patriotism' comes to refer to the inner life of a politician and the authenticity of his moral commitment to the nation.¹⁷ Within this environment, literary criticism thus not only attempted to present its own version of virtuous taste and virtuous poetry, but also rallied around individual figures and projected national hope onto isolated moral geniuses. These geniuses, and not the poet or critic him- or herself, were the ones who experienced the authentic interaction with nature that underlay 'real,' legitimate poetry.

John Gilbert Cooper: Patriotism and the Present

The works of John Gilbert Cooper from the mid-1750s are perhaps the best example of how the new aggressive, moralistic patriotism altered and informed aesthetic values. Generally known to historians of ideas as an early theorist of aesthetic taste, Cooper was a Latitudinarian moralist and avid supporter whose poetry and criticism melded enthusiasm for British tradition and Shaftesburyean theory of beauty with explicit political support for Pitt and other Patriot candidates. Borrowing elements of previous fantasies this dissertation has looked at—simplicity, national tradition, premodern social harmony—Cooper participated in the new, activist mode of criticism that made powerful passive experience the precondition for national reform.

Both Tory and Whig claim they are taking the most patriotic stance, doing the strong thing on behalf of the nation, and both tar the other side as feminine, naïve, etc. Despite recourse to such language, politicians and writers of the period all agree on basic structures of government and functionings of economy (aside from in the most radical anti-debt writers).

16 Langford, *A polite and commercial people*, ch 5 and 8.

17 De Bolla, ch 3-4.

Cooper's ode from 1756, 'The Genius of Britain,' traces the history of British military success from the time of Alfred to the present where, under Pitt, it will return to its essential values. The work is dedicated to Pitt, whom it represents as the savior of a Britain that has lost its once-glorious path:

O THOU, ordain'd at length by pitying Fate
To save from ruin a declining State;
Adorn'd with all the scientific stores
Which bloom'd on ROMAN or ATHENIAN shores.

After introducing the historical importance of Pitt's regime, the poem argues that Pitt's greatness as a leader comes from his irreproachable commitment to virtue. His 'breast...Glow's ardent with the Patriot's sacred fire,' and he stands as a sublime figure, much like Collins' great supernatural forces. Hence the poet waits at *Pitt's* feet rather than at the temple of the Muse in the hopes of catching the inspiration of free and honest poetry:

Obedient to the magic of thy call...
Attend the Bard, who scorns the venal lays,
Which servile Flatt'ry spurious Greatness pays;
Whose BRITISH Spirit emulating thine,
Could ne'er burn incense at CORRUPTION'S shrine...
A Friend to all mankind, but Slave to none.
Above temptation, and unaw'd by pow'r

This move overturns the patriotic poetics of Akenside and others, who understood that the poet carries Liberty and Truth back to the populace; here Pitt *has* Liberty and Virtue and the poet simply hopes that his leadership will be respected. The poem thus concludes recommending a humble sense of service and respect for Pitt's commitment to virtue:

Pleas'd with his present lot, nor wishes more,
Save that kind Heaven would give his warm desire,
What Kings can't grant, nor Courtiers oft require,
From each low view of selfish faction free,
To think, to speak, to live, O Pitt, like thee.¹⁸

The ode obviously outlines the fetishization of Pitt and the figuration of the patriot as a

18 Cooper, 'The Genius of Britain: An Iambic Ode,' 3,8.

salve for the wounds of the present, but it also makes the ultimate aesthetic object a figure from the present (Pitt) whose own gaze and intentionality is that of a leader turned towards the historical future rather than the interior world.

Cooper's greatest success, the treatise *Letters concerning Taste* (1755), contains a similar but more complex argument about aesthetic experience's ability can redirect and the present. The basic Latitudinarian argument of the *Letters* is that 'taste' allows the individual to rise above narrow self-interest by making the pursuit of virtue, justice, the arts and sciences 'enchanting' ('the Almighty has...so *attun'd* our Minds to Truth, that all Beauty from without would make a responsive Harmony vibrate within'). The work, however, turns on the belief in simplicity, direct observation of nature, and the 'free and unfeigned' interaction of 'happy' humans with nature and one another. Its models of great works of art are those ancient and modern works that have captured this sort of true sensibility, from Homer to Longinus to Shakespeare to Pope, but it argues that these are valuable only insofar as they lead the nation to greater unity in the present. Unlike professional literary historians of the 1750s, Cooper emphasizes that the past is only there to inspire the present and stand as a beacon of authenticity within the debased contemporary world. The book thus rails against that 'wretched Taste...which prevails about London' and complains about the pernicious influence of the flashy, insubstantial French and Italian styles that dominate British art, architecture, and theater. Most modern Britons are ruled by 'those implacable Tyrants...Contumely, Injustice, and Impudence' and see art as nothing more than 'tasteless wonders built for the Gratification of human Vanity,' and a reformation of taste is necessary to avoid a complete fall into servility.

Despite its stridency, the *Letters* is far more confident about the prospects for reform than, say the Fast-Day sermons of the 1750s (see fn 6 above), opining that a new spirit truly committed to virtue seems to be on the ascendent in Britain. The books detects a renewed commitment to nature that promises Britain could return to its 'original state,' in which 'a natural Taste for Truth and Propriety' prevails alongside 'a noble and natural Regard of every Species of Virtue.' Cooper anticipates many works of criticism from 1755-65 in defending the purity and authenticity of much recent British work: 'I have been as often enraged, Euphemius, as yourself, at the trite, dull, and false Observation, often made by the half-witted Pretenders to Learning, that we have no poetical Genius left among us.' To counter this '*tasteless* Prejudice against our own Times,' the *Letters* argues that some recent writers are superior to all modern and even ancient writers: 'we have others now living, who, in their respective Compositions, leave not only all our deceased Poets, and those of FRANCE and ITALY far behind them, but even bear the Palm away from any of their Competitors of ancient ROME.' It favorably compares Collins' and Warton's odes to those of Horace and William Mason's tragedies to Seneca's, before proposing that 'there is now living a Poet of the most genuine Genius this Kingdom ever produced, SHAKESPEAR alone excepted'—namely Akenside, who it portrays as superior to Milton in both the lyric and epic (!).

Cooper's work thus shows how the present, and the future that it is leading to, is the only thing a critic should be concerned with. His narrator admits that his claims are bold but argues they are justified on the grounds that inspiring virtue is poetry's purpose, and that works should be evaluated solely on their ability to bring about reform. Grace,

wit, and beauty are all empty qualities without it, and all the harmony, judgment, and skill of Horace and Vergil mean little to the modern reader since they can't inspire moral passion. A passage from the middle of the 'Letter' makes the point explicitly: 'By poetical Genius, I don't mean the meer talent of *making Verses*, but that glorious Enthusiasm of Soul, that *fine Frenzy* as Shakespear calls it, *rolling from Heaven to Earth, from Earth to Heaven*, which, like an able Magician, can bring every Object of the Creation in any Shape whatever before the Reader's Eyes.' Only this ability to make the present cohere into a single inspired message is worthy of the name 'poetry,' while 'aught else is a mechanical Art of putting Syllables harmoniously together.'¹⁹

The Re-invigoration of Imaginative Virtue: Warton and Young

Cooper's works display the moralism and sense of urgency that would characterize most criticism about genius and pure poetry in the mid-1750s. Two key works from the later 1750s by two writers who figured prominently in my last two chapters—Joseph Warton and John 'Estimate' Brown—showcase how this same renewed urgency motivated criticism of the 1750s with quite divergent ideological interests. Warton's *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1756) concerned itself solely with literature, firmly and elegantly arguing the superiority of imaginative poetry over satirical and witty poetry. Brown's *Estimate of the manners and principles of the times* (1757), meanwhile, was a scathing attack on the diseased morality of contemporary Britain and an argument for religion and strong, naturally great leaders as its cures. Despite their differences, both

¹⁹ Cooper's most famous poem, 'On Shakespeare's Tomb' (1754), was a mixture of Gray's 'Elegy' and Collins' imaginative odes, mixing meditation with dramatizations of Shakespeare's imaginative and fantastic scenes. The work was included in Dodsley's Anthology for most of the 1750-80s

works were motivated by a distinct commitment to radical reform of a lost natural and virtuous sensibility.

Warton's criticism has long been associated with the 'genius' and 'pure poetry,' but it has been less often noted that Brown in fact originated the term in order to re-purpose poetry to moral and religious causes. As noted in chapter two, he used the phrase in his *Essays on the Characteristics of Lord Shaftesbury* (1751) to signify the unique, non-rational effects poetry could create in order to subordinate both poetry and reason to the transcendent truths of religion (which his mentor William Warburton had given him the task of defending). Brown considered Christian poetry—including speaking in tongues—to be the only authentic poetry since it revealed visions of God's grandeur and thus communicated the moral truths of rational religion to the social world.²⁰

This early work of Brown's was not widely read, but in the late 1750s Brown emerged from relative obscurity to national fame with a very different but still related project, coming out from underneath Warburton's imposing wing by lambasting modern Britain's addiction to luxury, vice, corruption, and effeminacy with unparalleled rigidity and efficiency. His tautly argued *Estimate* merged the rhetoric of luxury, a staple of republican doctrine and Bolingbrokean Patriotism, with familiar Warburtonian beliefs about the necessity of national morality. Though just one of hundreds of attacks on luxury and effeminacy between 1755-70, the work proved controversial and extremely popular, going through eleven editions within two years of its first publication, in large part

²⁰ Brown's earlier work is more deeply religious than critics have noted, and in fact repeats the same fundamental fideist tenets found in Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1744). The concluding pages of Brown's text, for example, include rhapsodies like the following: 'Let us wait the happier Hour, when *'we shall know even as we are known* : when we shall be raised to a more enlarged Comprehension of our Creator's immense Designs; and the whole intelligent Creation shall joyn, in confessing and adoring the unerring Rectitude of all his Dispensations.'

because of the efficiency and completeness of its argument, the first volume of which detailed the causes and cures for decline of every aspect of national life in little more than a hundred pages.²¹ The work thus created a sense of great urgency and counseled that the nation establish virtuous masculine characters from the upper ranks as its leaders: 'the internal strength of a Nation most essentially depends...(on) the Capacity, Valour, and Union, of those who lead the People.'²² Like Cooper, it argues that only those elite men of natural and authentic virtue should be trusted with the nation, while the rest should simply be happy and grateful followers: 'A Man of great natural Talents...is self-taught... the common Run of Men, whom Nature hath destined to travel on to Improvement by the beaten Track of Industry, through a blind and ill-understood Imitation of his superior

21 For a less well-known and much less demonstrative example, observe John Ramsay McCulloch's 1757 commentary on national wealth: 'A nation skilful in arts, abounding in products, untainted in its morals; where public spirit prevails, above local and personal interests; and under a wise and righteous government, duly tempered, so as to be secure itself, and all under it secure; a nation, I say, under these circumstances, must needs within itself, be rich, flourishing and happy. But power, grandeur, and influence abroad, depend chiefly on the numbers of industrious inhabitants at home.' Warburton also got into the act, passing gloomy judgment on national culture in a letter to Hurd written in 1759 as the first major battles of the Seven Years War began: 'This as you truly say, is an age of real darkness; or at least of *false lights*. For what else are all the national advantages gained by spreading slaughter and desolation round the world. However it is much better to win, by this bad means, than, as in former bad administrations, to lost...though I begin to think with Bolingbroke, *this earth may be the bedlam of the universe*, yet I think the great genius who presides in our counsels, may be called the sage master of this mad-house, who directs their unmeaning extravagances to useful and salutary purposes' (Warburton 1759 to Hurd, quoted in During 18)

22 Estimate Brown, *Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times*, 78-82. Almost any page of Brown's long jeremiad could be quoted to the same effect. To give a few more examples: 'Principles, therefore, we have none; for show and pleasure are the main objects of pursuit...as the general spirit of religion, honour, and public love are weakened or vanished...we may with truth and candour conclude, that the ruling character of the present times is that of a 'vain luxurious, and selfish effeminacy'. 'The character of a state altogether commercial in the highest degree, is that of industry and avarice...in a nation of extended territory, where commerce is in its highest period, while its trading members retain their habits of industry and avarice...the excess of trade and wealth naturally tends to weaken or destroy the principle of honour...turn(s) all the attention of individuals on selfish gratification.' Reviewers tended to see it as something like a Wesleyan sermon, full of righteous rage but also amounting to so much harping on irrelevant imperfection. Brown's rhetoric certainly pushes the line sometimes but it clearly would have been taken in stride by readers of the 1690s or even 1720s, who would have greeted the work as another eloquent testament to virtue but David Erskine Baker, only seven years after the publication of the *Estimate*, that the work had been made irrelevant ('it was soon run down by popular clamour').

Conduct.'

Unlike the forward-looking visions of Cooper, Brown's vision was conservative and backward-looking: the nation was sick, and the cure was simply a return to those simple moral principles of religion, hierarchy, and obedience that honest 'reason' always favored. By contrast Warton's great work of the late 1750s, *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*, is less directly political (indeed its politics seem intentionally obscured) but it presents a vision of poetry as a force in national life that reveal its participation in a new politics of conviction and reform. Warton's *Essay* has long been seen as a seminal work in the discourse of genius and 'pure poetry,' but few critics have noted how the work's original critical stance both followed from and revised the philosophy of virtue found in Warton's earlier creative work.²³ Like the earlier works of Warton and his friend, Collins, the *Essay* makes aesthetic experience the only means of putting the individual in direct relation to the transcendent truths of the imagination. However, Warton's critical philosophy had changed with the times, and his *Essay* intensified its critical language and adopted a new-found sense of conviction bordering on the polemic. Its arguments for 'pure' genius made the critic an aggressive *promoter* of authentic experience whose main task was to rouse a lagging public out of their stupor and into the future.

The *Essay* is ostensibly a commentary on Pope's early works, which it in fact effusively praises, but the bulk of its argument concerns Pope's inability to compose great, sublime works of imaginative poetry. This stance on Pope went against the grain of approaches from Warburton's moralizing criticism to the nationalist canonizing of Warton's own patron, Lyttleton, and it focused closely on critiquing the moral philosophy

23 Cf the critical histories of Abrams, Brown, Mason, Ross, and Wellek.

behind satire.²⁴ Warton's critique comes within the context of a long debate about satire from c.1730-60 which, at one time or another, involved nearly all of the major figures of the period, from Pope himself to Warburton to Johnson to Kames.²⁵ The root of the uncertainty about satire was the question of 'Truth,' specifically whether ridicule (which satire functions through) debases Truth and discourages respect for Truth, or whether it helps bolster Truth (since Truth alone can stand up to and survive ridicule). Nobody wanted to argue that such Truths didn't exist, and the debate was about whether or not Truth could be captured actively or positively in aesthetic experience—in a forward-looking vision—or whether It could only be represented negatively, in terms of what It was not (i.e. through ridicule).²⁶

24 Both Warburton and Lyttleton portrayed Pope as the greatest figure in recent British poetry and one of the writers most responsible for Britain's current literary grandeur. Cf David Fairer's and Joan Pittock's articles on the reception of the *Essay on Pope* and Warton's revisions of the work over twenty-five years. Pittock argues that Warton backed off his planned second volume of the *Essay* in order not to offend Lyttleton, whose *Dialogues of the Dead* prominently features Pope as a spokesman for the supremacy of British style (which has the 'utmost degree of Correctness, yet without losing their Fire').

25 Many writers of the period between 1755-70 begin to make imagination a response to situational thought, portraying imagination as that which can go beyond the immediate and particular and envision the transcendent, shaping powers such as Liberty, Genius, and Truth, and put the individual into direct relationships with them. As Herder, following directly on the heels of Warton and Hurd (in addition to Lowth and Blackwell) puts it: 'poetry does not describe truth, it *gives truth*, represents truth, but not in a pinched, naked and loveless manner, instead it produces a sweet inclination towards truth, just as the poet himself felt sweetly inclined to it.' Lest we think such sentiments are limited to 'organic' nationalists hungering after dreamy social cohesion, the self-proclaimed conservative ideologue of art, Joshua Reynolds, also clearly wrestles with the same paradoxes inherent in such formulations as much as anyone else in the period; he insists on the necessity of ideal, ravishing beauty for social cohesion and 'security' while also needing to deny it any specific or empirical meaning:

'As the senses, in the lowest state of nature, are necessary to direct us to our support, when that support is once secure there is danger in following them further . . . it is therefore necessary to the happiness of individuals, and still more necessary to the security of society, that the mind should be elevated to the idea of general beauty, and the contemplation of general truth . . . The beauty of which we are in quest is general and intellectual; it is an idea that subsists only in the mind; the sight never beheld it, nor has the hand expressed it. (Reynolds, IX, 170-1)

The strained language of Reynolds, Warton, Collins, and Herder, balancing abstract with concrete and presence with elusiveness, works according to the old Shaftesburyean method of fashioning national/collective objects. Both require that citizens believe they are in direct relationships with something a priori invisible and unattainable and that the welfare and coherence of the community relies on the continual affirmation of this belief. Barrell argues this point extensively in his *Political Theory of Painting*. See also Mo Dodson.

26 For example, James Beattie: 'the human mind, unless when debased by passion and prejudice, never

Pope was at the center of this debate, since he was the most revered poet of the eighteenth-century but was generally thought of as a satirist. Arguably his most famous works, the *Rape of the Lock* and *Peri Bathous*, were satiric masterpieces, while his last great works, the last version of the *Dunciad* and the Horatian moral epistles, were clearly built on the negativist view of Truth, which maintained that straining after truth led simply to enthusiastic excess, and sordid motives lay behind moralistic claims.²⁷ Pope's literary executor, William Warburton, was consequently put in a difficult position in the debate on satire in the 1740s. Warburton needed to defend Pope's literary superiority, and Warburton himself also had built his career on arguing for literature's ability to capture Truth positively.²⁸ Furthermore, satire had fallen out of critical favor since the later 1730s so much that, in 1742, the future poet laureate William Whitehead published a verse essay, 'On Ridicule,' which argued that satire was damaging to the public good since it didn't clearly show the reasons for moral action and, in practice, simply taught people to enjoy mockery and exclusiveness. In the same year, Warburton's soon-to-be charge, John Brown, attempted to change the perception of Pope by publishing his poetic 'Essay on Satire' (1742), a poem which shows a contradiction within the satire debate that Warton was soon to exploit.

Ironically, the *Essay on satire* doesn't resemble a satire in its overall form or argument, as its introduction argues that 'the love of Glory' is a 'passion implanted in man as a Spur to Virtue,' and argues that 'the work of Satire (is) to rectify this passion, to

fails to take the side of truth and virtue'

27 Cf Noggle's *Skeptical Sublime* on the negativity of Pope's ethics. The book considers Pope the chief figure of the tradition of the negative sublime, a tradition that also included Rochester and Swift.

28 See chapter two of the present work.

reduce it to its proper channel, and convert it into an incentive to Wisdom and Virtue.²⁹

The poem consequently understands satire's sole aim to be the defense of Virtue, and a markedly more political and nationalist virtue than most of Pope's work had dealt with: 'thro' ages hath SATIRE greatly shin'd,/ The friend to truth, to virtue, and mankind.' The poem is full of statements making satire a Cato-like defender of truth and virtue, stepping up when 'Vice strutted in the plumes of freedom dress'd,/ Or publick spirit was the publick jest' and restoring 'the glory of the nation.' Much of the poem is, consequently, anecdotes about famous, heroic poets preceding Pope, who used satire to noble ends and 'with dauntless warmth in virtue's cause engag'd.' The poem gives satire the characteristically British values of simplicity, humility, and liberty ('Free the expression, humble be the stile') but also pushes the patriotic ardor of satire to a pitch of enthusiasm well beyond any recognizable Popean or Swiftian. Several times the poem approaches an Akenside-like swelling of imagination as it records the heroic exploits of Satire:

When fell Corruption dark and deep as fate,
Saps the foundation of a tottering state;
When Giant-Vice and Irreligion rise
On mountains falsehoods to invade the skies: - -
Then warmer numbers glow thro' SATIRE'S page,
And all her smiles are darken'd into rage

Satire is here a quite active defender of Truth, not merely mocking those things which falsely claim Truth but soaring to its own heights with all the force and ardor of epic:

On eagle wing me gains Parnassus' height,
Not lofty Epic soars a nobler flight;
The conscious mountain trembles at her nod,
And ev'ry, awful gesture speaks the God:
Then keener indignation fires her eye,
Then flam her light'nings, and her thunders fly
Wide and more wide the flaming bolts are hurl'd,
Till all her wrath involves the guilty world.

The claim that satire is equivalent to epic in its capacity to induce Longinean transport is

29 Brown, *Satire*, iii.

firmly anti-neoclassical and creates a strangely sublime view of satire.³⁰ Brown in fact seems to be reversing the reign of Dullness that the final book of Pope's *Dunciad* announced; he gives Satire the same apocalyptic power to proliferate, self-generate, and dominate the land as Pope gave Dullness, though Satire brings the reign of *Truth* rather than that of ignorance and torpidity. Brown's Satire is an ode-object worthy of the same absolute veneration as the truth-objects in the ode.

Despite Brown's best efforts, many critics, most notably Warton, saw clearly that satire could only provide a negative form of truth. Warton had opposed the Warburtonian moralistic position from a young age, maintaining from his earliest works that Truth could not be revealed by peeling away layers of falseness but was instead a sort of *grace* conferred actively by the natural experience of virtual reality. This idea of the positive experience of aesthetic Truth informs his famous early remarks about moralistic poetry, contained in the 'Advertisement' to his 1746 collection of odes: 'The Public has been so much accustom'd of late to didactic Poetry alone, and Essays on moral Subjects, that any work where the imagination is much indulg'd, will perhaps not be relish'd or regard'd.' The note concludes by arguing that 'the fashion of moralizing in verse has been carried too far' and determining that poetry should properly be understood as more visionary and imaginative than a narrow view of its direct utility would allow.

Warton's *Essay on Pope* carries this same line of anti-didactic reasoning into an

30 In a manner recalling the odes of Akenside and Collins, Brown's poem paints the pursuit of satire as a perilous but sublimely honorable task. Truth, in his metaphor, is a distant, Alpine place of dangerous ascent, an 'enchanted ground/ Inclos'd by faithless precipices round' (note the similarity to the concluding stanza of Collins 'Ode on the poetical character'). The poem is clear, however, that if the would-be patriot acolyte follows Truth, he will find his way: 'Truth- be your guide : disdain ambition's call:/ And if you fall with Truth, you greatly fall.' Truth is thus in the present, calling out to the waiting public and promising sublime transformation to those who will dedicate themselves to it.

extended argument against satire. The book's argument is basically variations on the theme of artificial versus natural, much like his first published poem, 'The Enthusiast': most writing (including that of Pope) is artificial, follows false French rules, imitates ancient poets (who truly 'described what (they) saw and felt'), and doesn't capture the feeling of being in the world or the presence of real, present nature. Authentic writing writes directly through and alongside nature, while rule-bound writing has 'artificial recourse to those artificial assemblages of pleasing objects, which are not to be found in nature.' The *Essay thus* blames Pope's focus on manners and particulars for keeping him totally circumscribed within themes and manners that are, 'in their very nature, unfit for any lofty effort of the Muse.'

The *Essay* consequently relates Pope's lack of enthusiasm to his inability to feel real, material nature. The influence of Lowth on the argument is clear: the book cites Isaiah as 'the most perfect and unexampled model' and calls Lowth's *Lectures* the 'richest argumentation literature has lately received.' The *Essay* flaunts its dedication to Thomsonian nature, declaring that Thomson's works 'have a distinctness and truth' and are among 'the most captivating and amusing in our language,' noting that it provides a common grounding object for all readers. In another key example, the book presents Theocritus as a model of authentic poetry since his poetic objects 'were present and real' and his work 'described what he saw and felt; and had no need to invoke those artificial assemblages of pleasing objects which are not to be found in nature.'³¹

31 Warton unpacks the Thomsonian philosophy behind this stance in the 'Dissertation upon Pastoral Poetry' he was writing at the same time as the essay on Pope. As the 'Dissertation' argues, the real 'Works of Nature' are the only satisfying objects for the patriotic instinct, since it alone overcomes the 'differences of party' that scatter loyalty and the matters of business and state that intimate national division rather than unity. This echoes a well-known comment by his brother, Thomas, that Theocritus' pastorals 'were beautiful precisely because they preserved the unevenness of actual life. Quoted in Joan

While the *Essay's* belief in natural experience as the ground for aesthetic truth carries out what Blackwell and Lowth, as well as Warton's own poems, had said in the 1730-50s, it declares these beliefs with an unequivocal conviction that eluded Blackwell and Lowth and a sense of immediate relevance absent in most of Warton's own poems. The *Essay* makes frequent exhortations to writers to embrace their native landscapes and write about native themes: 'We have been too long attached to Grecian and Roman stories. In truth, the DOMESTICA FACTA, more interesting, as well as more useful...because the characters and manners, bid the fairest to be true and natural, when they are drawn from models with which we are exactly acquainted.'³² Doing so makes the present world come alive and stirs the instinct of virtue, 'so strong a Passion, that it can hardly be ever obliterated or overcome.' Next it argues that pursuing such real and natural Objects alone prevents the corruption, vice, and effeminacy that now threatens Britain. The following long quote displays the pernicious effects non-sublime, merely witty poetry wit has on cultures that cultivate it:

'Under the notion of laughing at the absurd austerities of the Puritans, it became the mode (during Charles' reign) to run into the contrary extreme, and to ridicule real religion and unaffected virtue. The King, during his exile, had seen and admired the splendor of the court of Louis XIV, and endeavoured to introduce the same luxury into the English court. The common opinion, that this was the Augustan age in England, is excessively false. A just taste was by no means yet formed. What was called Sheer Wit, was alone studied and applauded. Rochester, it is said, had no idea that there could be a better poet than Cowley. The King was perpetually quoting Hudibras. The neglect of such a poem as the Paradise Lost, will for ever remain a monument of the bad taste that prevailed.

Warton's text here does not go as far as Cooper's works, refusing to say that his philosophy can save Britain, but passages like this make the mid-century's strongest and

Pittock, 180.

32 As my next chapter details, this sentiment became common in the 1760-70s. It should be noted that the *Essay* also cautions against taking subjects that are too close to the present, arguing that myriad opinions and feelings would be associated with events too recent or topical. I address Warton's ambivalent embrace of the present at the conclusion of this section.

most thorough case for the 'justness' and morality of imaginative poetry. Imaginative poetry is not merely more gratifying, it is *real* while didactic poetry is not. As the concluding sentence of the second edition of the *Essay* makes clear, 'Wit and Satire are transitory and perishable, but Nature and Passion are eternal.' Warton often seems to rally around this truth for its own sake, as a sort of absolute value that needs no justification outside of the literary or aesthetic realm. This truth is anti-conservative, referring neither to an already-known principle (as Warburtonian ideas of rational religion had) nor to a fixed entity, but it was still *tautological*: nature is truth, truth is nature.

Aesthetic Truth and Young's Garden of Genius

This same sort of tautology underlay the late 1750s other major statement of aesthetic reform based on pure poetry, Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759). Often treated as a sort of companion-piece to Warton's *Essay on Pope*, Young's *Conjectures* was an equally strong statement on behalf of imaginative writing that particularly emphasized how the genius was permanently in touch with nature.³³ The milieu of the late 1750s was ideal for Young, a longtime patriotic moralist with a talent for overstatement, and the *Conjectures* is both more moralistic and more visionary than Warton's *Essay* (whose first edition was dedicated to Young). The high esteem for imagination, 'original' writing, natural experience, and native genius follow directly from Warton's remarks on the glowing glory of original genius, which carry us to 'a blooming

33 Abrams for instance gives pride of place to the *Conjectures* in the *Mirror and the Lamp* and places Young as one of the foremost innovators of the expressive, anti-neoclassical aesthetic that he sees culminating in Coleridge and the later German romantics, while Trevor Ross' reading of 'pure poetry' relies on Young more than any other writer and Clifford Siskin also treats the composition and reception of the *Conjectures* as seminal events in his account of the rise of romantic subjectivity.

spring...on the strong wing of his Imagination,' and rejects both 'rule-bound' poetry and poetry of mere wit as insufficient for boosting the moral and social well-being of humanity: 'Wit, however brilliant, should not be permitted to gaze self-enamour'd on its useless Charms...but...should sacrifice its most darling Offspring to the sacred interests of Virtue, and real Service of mankind.' The *Conjectures* also derogated Pope to a lower rung of achievement, chastising both him and Swift for failing to achieve true imaginative sublimity, preferring the bitter 'purgative of satire, which, tho' wholesome, was too painful in its operation' (adding that 'if the patient had any delicacy of taste, he threw up the remedy, instead of the disease').

Young's book also theorizes at length about how and why modern Britons could match the great Original writers of the past. Moderns are held back from being glorious originals by too much knowledge of Geniuses of the past, yet Nature is still out there waiting to be confronted directly and fully: 'Nature herself sets the Ladder, all that is wanting is our ambition to climb. For by the bounty of Nature we are as strong as our Predecessors.'³⁴ The *Conjectures* denies that modern British works have approached anything like the level of ancient Greek or Roman production, but encourages moderns to focus on Nature and try a bit harder: 'The modern powers are equal to those before them; modern performance in general is deplorably short. How great are the names just mentioned? Yet who will dare affirm, that as great may not rise up in some suture, or even in the present age?....It is Prudence to read, Genius to relish, *Glory to surpass*, antient authors.'

³⁴ Young in fact observes that moderns are better positioned to experience nature than the ancients, since 'by the favour of Time (which is but another Round in Nature's Scale,) we stand on higher ground.'

Despite his confidence in recovering natural experience, the *Conjectures* justify the glories of the imagination largely through reference to a higher, specifically religious Truth. Like Young's wildly popular blank verse meditation, *Night Thoughts* (1744-8), the *Conjectures* considers aesthetic truth a mere stepping stone to (and sometimes an analogy for) Christian moral truth. The only thing a human really needs to know is that all earthly things pass and the only lasting and true entity is the glorious afterlife that greets morally virtuous people, and aesthetic and intellectual truth are only supplements or perhaps companions to this more fundamental truth: 'as the moral world expects its glorious millennium, the world intellectual may hope, by rules of analogy, for some superior degrees of excellence to crown her later scenes...virtue assists genius.'

Warton meanwhile seemed comfortable within the cocoon of private imaginative virtue, content with the inner attachment to political and social truths that chapter three of this dissertation outlined. Despite his defiant stance, his critical persona avoids engagement with topical issues and limits its polemic to matters of literature taste and canonicity, ignoring the relevance of the social and moral philosophies that enabled these judgments. He would publish no other works during the torrid period of cultural crisis from 1755-70, during which he became the headmaster of Winchester College and limited his contact with other men and women of letters.

Neither work was the product of a new or young writer (Young was seventy-eight when the *Conjectures* was published) though both took strong, iconoclastic, and almost fundamentalist stances on aesthetic values. Their calls for reform were officially made on behalf of the public good and the national character, but little about them suggests their

senses of urgency applies to the social world. Nevertheless, Warton's and Young's self-evidently *polemical* stances, claiming moral and aesthetic high ground for the type of art and the aesthetic standard they defend, represents a new type of critical argument.

Grounded in principle as well as authentic sentiment, both drew their impetus from the need to rouse a somnolent literary culture to return to its essence, the imagination. In doing so, both works displayed the new confidence that the poetic realm could be trusted to guide the nation, and that those with zeal for improvement could find their desires confirmed in natural flights of the imagination.

The Publication of Genius: Review Magazines, 1756-60

In spite of the conservatism of Warton and Young, the philosophy of literary aesthetics and ethics laid out in their chief critical works played a prominent part in many of the new for-profit forms of writing that arose in the 1750-60s. Many of the new critical reviews of the time adopted Warton's and Young's stance wholesale, largely because they both made new literary works excitingly relevant to the present world and defended the role of the critic as mediator and arbiter of culture. The reviews greeted both works with enthusiasm and acknowledged that they drew inspiration from them. Smollett's review of Warton's *Essay*, for instance, claimed that it 'breathes the spirit of true criticism, unbiassed, by sordid prejudices or partiality,' while Goldsmith's review of the *Conjectures* praised the book in the highest terms: 'wherever (it) falls short of perfection, (its) faults are the errors of genius.' As Goldsmith's remark hints, the reviews treated Young's and Warton's works as themselves products of a genius in touch with nature and

straining to lead the nation into the future.

The critical reviews that were started in the 1750-60s gave a more directly political value to these reviews, promoting the value of works of genius for national culture.³⁵ The very format and concept of literary periodicals—reporting on the latest treatises and creative works and evaluating their moral and artistic quality—suggest the act of surveying the cultural landscape to declare an anchoring mark in the wildly proliferating present and give a semblance of order to it. The reviews were notably critical of the government and their pages often lamented the corrupt modern British state ('a nation absorbed in luxury,' as the *Monthly* puts it).³⁶ The founders and chief editors of the two magazines that were the first publications dedicated to literary reviews, the *Critical Review* and the *Monthly Review*, were both predisposed to oppositionalist viewpoints; Ralph Griffiths was a Dissenter and Smollett a Scottish Tory whose magazine work vehemently opposed the corrupt City Whigs and represented an idealistic reforming sentiment.³⁷ The fact that literary magazines grounded themselves so firmly in

35 Benedict and others have established that Dodsley's comments and editorial directions in the very popular anthology were consistently politically strategic/opportunistic and ethically vague. Benedict argues, though without offering much explanation, that Dodsley's anthology set a kind of critical precedent by including recent writers. Dodsley's anthology arrived a few years earlier than the magazines and included excerpts and short poems by Young, Gray, and Johnson—but we should note that all of these poems were themselves in the spirit of opposition, even if Dodsley took pains to ensure he himself wasn't seen to be so. Benedict, 'Reader, writers, reviewers, and the professionalization of literature,' 10-2.

36 *Monthly Review* 24, 1761. Frank Donoghue argues that the *Critical Review* in its first decade (1756-65) saw itself as the protector of true taste within the increasing reign of *Dunciad*-esque 'Dullness,' and the *Monthly* soon imitated this stance. As Smollett puts it in a demonstrative passage from 1758, the *Review* had sustained 'all the complicated assaults of dullness, whose name is Legion' and also 'the rage of jealousy, the fury of disappointment, the malevolence of envy, the heat of misapprehension, and the resentment of overweening merit.' Quoted in Donoghue, 17. Nevertheless, we should be careful to note that the *Critical's* protests of its critical elitism were extraordinarily patriotic and present-ist, not a retreat into empty and unassailable classical authority.

37 Smollett's stated political goals were to view an 'ordered England free from self-seeking, petty factions, of a rational commonwealth of generous souls ruled by a monarchy whose 'hand is liberally opened to every appearance of merit,' whose 'sole aim is to augment and secure the happiness of his people with the independence of his crown.' Smollett, the *Briton*, no. 1, quoted in OM Bracks' edition of *Poems*,

political and moral convictions made the new aesthetic of genius a natural fit for them. The *Critical* especially was a quite active promoter of new aesthetic ideas, rather than as a merely passive vessel following behind a vague sense of 'consumer demands' (or, for that matter, a non-existent critical standard).³⁸

Smollett was a lifelong reformer; he began his career in the 1750s by campaigning for a British Academy that would encourage and regulate the arts and moved on to magazine work shortly after the project failed. The first edition of the *Critical* announced its mission to review any book or topic with an independent spirit, in order 'to befriend Merit, dignify the Liberal Arts, and contribute toward the formation of a public Taste, which is the best Patron of Genius and Science.'³⁹ Smollett's magazine was directed at public sphere literati (encompassing the gentry, clergy, and the 'gentlemen of the universities' as well as the new bourgeois urban reader) and played to a fear that the dignified good taste of this literati was endangered by the 'mercenary hands' of a literary market indifferent to quality or morality: 'the man of taste must expend his labours in reforming the judgment and enlightening the understanding of these critical pretenders and novices of sensibility...This charitable task of improvement, the learned, who enjoy their ease, ought to undertake for the benefit of mankind.' His non-literary work in the *Critical Review* during those same years was, by no coincidence, incessantly political,

plays, and The Briton, 238. Basker remarks that Smollett's politics are 'difficult to fit into any neat predetermined pattern...rather than Tory or Whig they are best described as "independent"' (Basker 107)

38 Claude E Jones notes the similarities between Warton's views of poetry and those of the *Critical Review* ('Poetry and the *Critical Review*, 1756-1785'). Benedict also suggests this even as she notes the more directly political aspects of the magazines.

39 Letter from December, 1755, a few months before the first issue of the *Critical*. Samuel Johnson's short-lived review magazine announced a similar though more moralistic purpose a year later, though it also attacked the *Critical's* pretense to independence: 'the grand Aim of this Undertaking is to encourage all Works of Genius when they have a Tendency to Promote the Interests of Truth and Virtue, of solid and useful Learning, to instruct, entertain, and polish Mankind, and to discourage every Thing that is calculated to serve the Cause of Vice and Infidelity.'

railing against faction, corruption, and greed and stumping for the virtuous, self-less Patriotism he identified with Lord Bute, and more generally for 'our admired constitution, the freedom, the security of subject, the boasted humanity of the British nation.'⁴⁰

Given this mixture of patriot reform and elitist taste, Smollett was unsurprisingly interested in the sort of private, unshakeable virtue that the mid-century ode writers developed.⁴¹ Due largely to the influence of Smollett, the *Critical's* basic position on poetry was deeply Wartonian. It argued that 'every eminent poet is an original genius' and that 'the general character of every polished nation depends in great measure on its poetical productions,' two familiar ideas that it confidently conjoined. The *Critical* also argued that poetry was defined by 'that glorious enthusiasm of the soul' and derogated both satiric and 'witty' poetry. Smollett himself reviewed Warton's *Essay on Pope* with an affective intensity befitting Warton himself, and he consistently tried to praise contemporary works that were both critical of modern government and offered hope for a liberated poetry ('without shackles thrown upon (it)...by the ancients') that would usher in a glorious future Britain founded on patriotic virtue and the development of the arts and sciences.⁴² The magazine also enthusiastically greeted critical works, including treatises

40 Smollett's most well-known periodical endeavor was the *Briton*, a magazine from 1762 dedicated to Patriot causes and perspectives and especially interested in defending George III and Bute's ministry (it was famously skewered by Wilkes' periodical, the *North Briton*). Cf. Robin Fabel, 'The Patriotic Briton: Tobias Smollett and English Politics, 1756-1771,' for Smollett's political activity in the *Critical Review*. Fabel observes that in Smollett's political remarks, 'there is no quarrel with institutions as they existed...and there is great faith in the laws of England,' despite all of Smollett's raillery against those in power. The last quote is from Smollett's novel, *Launcelot Greaves*, written while Smollett was briefly imprisoned for some of his political comments in the *Critical Review*.

41 His earliest reviews in the *Critical* often articulate its love of 'that spirit of liberty and independence, which enables every man to pursue his own natural bias and turn of thinking, without fear of punishment or censure...we are not overawed in our politics, or restricted in our notions of religion; but at liberty to drink at every fountain of science, and give a loose to every flight of imagination' (m 56, 220).

42 Smollett reviewed many books of history, much of it about recent events. He paid extra attention to the sort of surveying histories that detailed the material, political, and moral characteristics of nations. At the time, Smollett himself was preparing to write what would become his massive *The present state of*

by Young, Hurd, and Duff, which expressed similar values. Indeed it showed its critical philosophy, as well as the review magazines' propensity for hyperbole and superlatives, in calling this work the truest and best criticism that has yet been written, arguing that, 'in the present times, criticism has attained to the *achme*, the summit, the zenith of its perfection.'

As this remark makes clear, the magazines valued the act of criticism highly and considered it the period's greatest and most pressing activity. In selecting works of poetry or criticism as themselves authentic, they were able to hold up certain models and separate true works out from the rising tide of mediocre or dull works. They argued that the genius in the cultural world, like the true patriot in politics, stood as a rock of independence and authenticity within the flood of faction, corruption, and venality that covered the nation. The elitism of the critical reviews and their effort to define their side, their taste, and the authors they approve of as truly edifying and productive, consequently had to greatly exaggerate the physical or physiological effects of works to make them seem authentic.⁴³

This aspect of the critical magazines is relatively well-known, but it should also be noted that the magazines considered works involving true or *natural experience* to be authentic and provide a true spirit of independence. The *Critical* praised Percy's *Reliques*

all nations, containing a geographical, natural, commercial, and political history of all the countries in the known world (1768). Cf Derek Roper for a list of the works of political and natural history Smollett reviewed in the *Critical Magazine*.

43 For Smollett and others, the politician or minister is *absolutely not* equivalent to the genius: the minister is a human while the genius points to a superhuman realm, and what is common to criticism and politics is the sense of authentic attachment to principles, and the faith that such attachment will yield social and moral clarity. The authentic politician or minister cannot deliver clarity and perfection through a magical, quasi-supernatural act (as the genius can), but he can show the authentic will to virtue that allows such clarity to be diligently pursued. This will to virtue and this indignation against faction can also be *shared* with his industrious constituents and followers.

for being natural and simple: 'The manners not only of their ages, but the provinces where they lived, are delineated by the truest pencil, that of Nature; and however homely her strokes may sometimes be, the resemblance is always just, and therefore pleasing.'⁴⁴ The *Monthly*, meanwhile, praised Home's tragedy, *Douglas* for its commitment to 'those parts of Nature, and that rural simplicity, with which the Author was, perhaps, best acquainted.'⁴⁵ The *Critical* also heaped Wartonian-tinged accolades on Ossian's *Fingal*, writing that it 'abounds with such poetical images, such flights of fancy, such interesting characters, pathetic touches, and sublime sentiments, as cannot fail to excite the admiration of taste, while they wake the soul of sensibility.' The magazines thus explicitly emphasize that interacting with real British nature was the key to creating authentic imaginative poetry.

Natural Genius of the Ode: Goldsmith's Gray and 'Poor Collins'

The effect of this new emphasis on natural poetry's effect on the present can be seen clearly in Gray's anonymously published 1757 review of Gray's 'Odes' in the *Monthly Review*. Goldsmith's roughly contemporary *Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe* (1759) is a major statement of the new activist values of literature, but his short review of Gray's odes concisely articulates the larger book's fissure between a literary nationalism founded on great examples of history and one founded on an affirmation of the immediate world. Goldsmith's review initially praises Gray as a singular genius and welcomes Gray's book of odes as a highly accomplished product,

44 *Critical* # 19, 1765.

45 *Monthly* # 16, 1757.

singling out the 'Bard' as by far its finest representative. The review goes so far as to claim that they 'will give as much pleasure to those who relish this species of composition, as anything that has hitherto appeared in our language, the Odes of Dryden himself not excepted.' This is high praise indeed, yet the rest of the review is an indictment of the backward-looking attention to *history* in Gray's odes. Gray's odes are set in the past and even seem to use archaic language at times, while real poetry should speak in 'living' language and direct itself to the spirit and temperament of the present. Goldsmith observes that Pindar, Gray's model for the collection's best odes, did precisely this with his original odes: 'Pindar adapted his works exactly to the dispositions of his countrymen. Irregular, enthusiastic, and quick in transition, he wrote for a people inconstant, of warm imaginations, and exquisite sensibility. He chose the most popular subjects, and all his allusions are to customs well known, in his days, to the meanest person.' The article then chastises Gray for not adjusting his poetry to his climate and nation: 'His English Imitator wants those advantages. He speaks to a people not easily impressed with new ideas; extremely tenacious of the old; with difficulty warmed; and as slowly cooling again. How unsuited then to our national character is that species of poetry which riles upon us with unexpected flights!'

After invoking this tepid, conservative 'national character,' however, the article changes course in order to urge ambitious poets to warmly 'cultivat(e)...natives of the soil' and taking on present subjects: 'we would only intimate, that an English Poet, one whom the Muse has *mark'd for her own* could produce a more luxuriant bloom of flowers, by cultivating such as are natives of the soil, than by endeavouring to force the

exotics of another climate: or, to speak without a metaphor, such a genius as Mr. Gray might give greater pleasure, and acquire a larger portion of fame, if, instead of being an imitator, he did justice to his talents, and ventured to be more an original.⁴⁶ The emphasis on originality is perhaps borrowed from Cooper or Young, while the remark that Gray's works fail because they don't cultivate 'natives of the soil' exemplifies the strident judgment of the review magazines. Goldsmith's review combines the two in order to demonstrate its conviction that a more original and more authentic poetry could transform the present, if only writers trusted in their inherent original energy.

In other critical works of the same period, Goldsmith speaks specifically about modern criticism's imperative to promote works of 'rising genius' and diminish the profile of those of 'established reputation' (and thus protect the 'literary honors of country').⁴⁷ In *An Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe* (1759), Goldsmith borrows older theories of the poetic origins of society, explaining how the imperative to embrace the present lay at the heart of the entire sphere of the humanities: 'It was the poet who harmonized the ungrateful accents of his native dialect, who lifted it above common conversation, and shaped its rude combinations into order. From him the orator formed a stile, and though poetry first rose out of prose, in turn, it gave birth to every prosaic excellence; he not only preceded, but formed the orator, philosopher, and historian.'⁴⁸ More than this, poetry provided the 'truths' necessary 'for uniting and strengthening civil society, or for promoting the views of ambition,' the truths which 'had kept the Grecian

46 *Monthly Review*, 1757. As we will see in the next chapter, Goldsmith's own efforts to cultivate 'the natives of the soil' produced poetic works defined by intentional ambivalence and contradiction, but here Goldsmith here clearly urges writers to make the present a vibrant place so that it may be worthy of aesthetic affirmation.

47 'The futility of criticism,' 23.

48 *Ibid*, 16

states cemented into one effective body, *more than any law for that purpose.*' The disdain for the Enlightenment bugbear of a society founded on law rather than virtue (evident in Montesquieu) is palpable here, and the *Enquiry* continually emphasizes the need for a present-based poetry to develop such a virtuous nation. Doing so would force 'all ranks... (to be) inspired with this passion for...all that ever was truly great and noble among us.'⁴⁹ With eyes firmly set on the future, Goldsmith's work envisions a nation in which the magical acts of a future genius will return the nation to the right path, if only the nation will reform their tastes to properly receive them.

Collins in the Review Magazines

The review magazines' treatment of William Collins shows a different evaluation of the mid-century which emphasizes the imaginative genius' ability to unite a scattered people. In its review of *Fingal*, the *Critical* praises 'wild and romantic' scenes for 'generating a silent attention in the mind and preparing the imagination for extraordinary events.' As I argued in chapter three of this dissertation, this sense of expectation of great events was the hallmark of authentic aesthetic experience in Collins' odes. It is thus not surprising that the magazines treated Collins as a consummate example of truly inspired imaginative poetry. Indeed, the magazines created a quite new version of Collins from that which

49 Goldsmith's consistent digs at antiquarians and pre-modernists in the *Enquiry* show his work straining after a new and more socially useful poetry in a way deeply characteristic of pre-modernism. '(From) a desire in the critic of grafting the spirit of ancient languages upon the English, has proceeded of late several disagreeable instances of pedantry.' His demand for more and better poetry goes so deep as to allow outright praise of the French for their attention to present writers and present circumstances: 'While we with a despondence characteristic of our nation, are for removing back British excellence to the reign of Queen Elizabeth, our more happy rivals of the continent, cry up the writers of the present times with rapture, and regard the age of Lewis XV. as the true Augustan age of France...by not being dazzled at the splendor of another's reputation, have sometimes had sagacity to mark out an unbeaten path to fame, for themselves.' (99-100)

existed in the 1740s, portraying him as an inspired, tragically enthusiastic geniuses rather than the conventional cultural patriot he likely saw himself as.⁵⁰

After Collins' death in 1759, critics created a caricature of him as 'Poor Collins,' a hopelessly 'poetic' writer who died because of the same unstable, enthusiastic constitution that allowed him to write great works. They overlooked or ignored the more conventional aspects of his verse—as well as the conventional nature of his mental illness (chronic but non-manic depression)—in order to make him a model of genius and a liminal figure on the cusp of authentic artistic divinity.⁵¹ Nearly every review of Collins' work and every account of his life in the decades after his death uses his premature death and his supposed madness to explain his poetry and portray him as a hopelessly deluded poet who had the sad misfortune of being a preternatural imaginative enthusiast. The *Monthly's* recap of Collin's achievement (by John Langhorne) cautions strongly against the sad fate of 'a poetry so extremely wild and exorbitant, that it seems to have been written wholly during the *tyranny* of the imagination' and concluding that 'the powers of his imagination were unfortunately so great, that he lost his reason.'⁵² The *Critical Review* is also clear about the dangers of high enthusiasm, making Collins into a case of a monomaniacal poetic idealism lost in a 'uniform obscurity' of disposition that inevitably resulted in alienation and misery.⁵³

50 Cf Wendorf, ch 1 as well as chapter three of the current work.

51 As Wendorf observes, Collins certainly suffered from depression but he was not a manic depressive or schizophrenic, and his poetry, far from being impulsive effusions of an inspired divine, squarely follows the rules of recognizable (though difficult) forms which required patient crafting. As we've seen, Collins' poetry is clearly defined by its dedication to one final object-entity that will restore communal inclusiveness and transparency to the present moment, and this tactic was a common poetic technique that I have argued responded to the discursive positioning of poets during the 1740s.

52 *Monthly Review* 30, 1764. Emphasis added.

53 Dr. Johnson's much later remarks express the same sentiments, though of course without the air of shared pity at Collins' idealist fate that was the point of the various remarks in the *Critical Review*. 'His poems are the productions of a mind not deficient in fire, nor unfurnished with knowledge either of

Langhorne, however, also makes Collins' excessive enthusiasm the proof of the authenticity of his imaginative visions and his poetic nature:

If a luxuriance of imagination, a wild sublimity of fancy, and a felicity of expression so extraordinary, that it might be supposed to be suggested by some superior power, rather than to be the effect of human judgment, or capacity — if these are allowed to constitute the excellence of lyric poetry, the Author of the Odes descriptive and allegorical, will indisputably bear away the palm from all his Competitors in that province of the Muse.

In a telling moment, another set of comments in the *Critical* rails against those figures of 'Dullness' who think such poetic enthusiasm is ludicrous, failing to understand how necessary it was to virtue: 'perfectly unconscious that they are indebted to their stupidity for the consistency of their conduct, they plume themselves on an imaginary virtue, which has its origin in what is really their disgrace.' Such dull thinkers have no sense of true imaginative glory and invent phony and insubstantial Truths ('imaginary virtue') so that they can mock those who strive after real and sublime ones. The essay drives the point home by noting that any virtuous person would respect Collins for his Daedalean excesses: 'if such dare approach the shrine of COLLINS, withdraw to a respectful distance, and, should they behold the ruins of genius, or the weakness of art-exalted mind, let them be taught to lament that nature has left the noblest of her works imperfect.' The fact that everyone and everything must fall short of this perfect dedication speaks to the dual nature of criticism of the time: the critic and reader must appreciate such straining after perfection even as it acknowledges its insane idealism.

A *Scots Magazine* of 1763 also eulogizes Collins as a unmatched poetic genius, while underscoring that the genius is valuable because he or she inspires a collective *appreciation* of perfection and supersensible truth. The review begins by heaping

books or life, but *somewhat obstructed in its progress by deviation in quest of mistaken beauties.*' 'Life of Collins,' 1779.

superlatives on Collins' work and insinuating that no virtuous person could fail to respond to it: 'we have seen no lyric performance superior to it in the English language,' 'there is no way of looking upon this picture without honor.' Lest this seem like an offhand comment, the review underscores how those of elite taste alone can appreciate the work of genius and share vicariously in its flight above the common: 'the poems, so entirely abstracted, can only be entertaining to the few; It is with peculiar pleasure that we do this justice to a poet who was too great to be popular, and whose genius was neglected, because it was above the common taste.'⁵⁴ The elitism of this stance could hardly be clearer, but it is an elitism that aligns the respect for great things of virtue-ethics with aesthetic taste, by way of a deep sense of tragic disappointment.

Conclusion: Conviction and Aesthetic Experience

To recap, a sense of urgency and desire for reform were the innovative measure common to the critical views of Cooper, Warton, Young, and many reviewers associated with the critical magazines during the Seven Years War. I will conclude by noting how this work's reliance on private moral experience brought about its failure, which in turn brought about the downfall of the idea of imaginative Truth and virtuous happiness.

The critical work I have been outlining assumes the social necessity of poetic spirit, especially given what Smollett called 'that vile complexion of the times, when those employ our most serious thoughts and separate us into parties, whose business is

54 At the end of this process, Hazlitt shows the complete transformation of a patriot poet into a Hegelian genius hopelessly at home only in his own mind, writing that his odes catch 'glimpses of the bowers of Paradise; a rich distilled perfume emanates from the Ode on the Poetical Character like a breath of genius: a golden cloud envelops it, a honeyed paste of diction encrusts it, like a candied coat of auricular.' Quoted in Casey Finch, 1987.

only to amuse our idlest hours.⁵⁵ This criticism's attention to the crisis of national morality allows it to undermine the Popean model of the detached, independent poet and formulate a new role for the cultural critic based on an earnest reformism. It also projects authentic aesthetic experiences onto the genius and denies such experience to the individual: the common folk don't feel it at all, while those of elite taste felt it only as an absence that works of genius make acute.

Eagleton's influential thesis captures the period's opposition to traditional elite privilege, its praise of moral integrity, and its emphasis on unpretentious hard work and determination appealed to a sense of industriousness and disillusionment with government that the rising classes increasingly identified with.⁵⁶ As cultural historians have emphasized, rising class citizens began to see how integral they were to British success in the 1750-60s, just as the idea of Britain as an imperial nation became hegemonic.⁵⁷ MP William Beckford makes this point clear in 1768 while paying tribute in Parliament to 'the Middling People of England, the Manufacturer, the Yeoman, the Merchant, the Country Gentleman, they who bear all the heat of the day, and pay all the Taxes to supply all the Court and Government.'⁵⁸ Such rhetoric cherishes the same sense of integrity and the same reformist spirit as Bolingbrokean Patriotism—but it also emphasizes that determination and faith, not radical political change, are the means of

55 Smollett, *ibid.*

56 *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, ch 1 and 2 *passim*.

57 Cf Harris, Newman, and Wilson. Wilson notes that the 1750s sees the beginnings of broad appeals to the 'people' as the source and heart of Britain's domestic success and its imperial might, remarks which soon 'became common currency in extra-parliamentary debates.' Wilson, 200. The popular riots in London and elsewhere during the 1750-60s of which, George Rudé notes, the 'ideas underlying or accompanying the violent actions were often those more decorously expressed by 'the middling sort' mark a political consciousness much more attuned to specific policies and to directly intervening in matters of state.

58 MS 38 in Beckford's Liverpool papers, p 334. Quoted in Kathleen Wilson, 199.

reforming and repairing the nation. Writing like Warton's and Goldsmith's could very well have allowed a way of feeling opposition and confident resistance to the modern nation while still benefiting from its policies and activities.

At the same time, the criticism of the period focused on *virtual* experience, and it placed a massive, ultimately fatal onus in the ideal of imaginative virtue. As I have been arguing, the period represents a crescendo of faith in private virtual experience, in which a group of critics believed that virtual, poetic experience could bring a sense of secular satisfaction that would convert people to social morality—no stronger claim could be made for that connection with nature or that community of virtuous beings that poetry makes one feel than Cooper's essays and Goldsmith's review articles did. But making the common good rely on virtual experience in fact underscored the irreducible split between a private world of virtuous happiness and the public world of a-moral politics; Cooper died young while still working on reformist projects (his final unfinished project was untitled *The Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce*), Smollett ended up an injured cynic and Goldsmith, as my next chapter details, turned to elegy and a dream of small-scale domesticity rather than national community.

After the early 1760s, then, the discourse of genius and natural poetry dealt almost exclusively to pre-modern poets, who enjoyed the dream of a happy communion with nature and other virtuous souls retreats. Criticism assumed the Blackwellian idea of a powerful experience of nature as well as Wartonian and Youngian ideas of originality but applied them only to the 'childhood of humanity.'⁵⁹ The *Critical Review* praises John Gordon's reading of Ossian as the best and most genuine poet, then and now, because he

59 Cf Whitney's comprehensive 'English Primitivistic Theories of Epic Origins.'

‘exactly copied nature in his descriptions.’⁶⁰ William Duff’s *An Essay on Original Genius* (1767), speaks at great length about the profoundly truthful interaction with nature that pre-modern geniuses experienced: ‘A Poet...who is possessed of original Genius, feels in the strongest manner every impression made upon the mind, by the influence of external objects in the senses...The first good Poet therefore, possessing those unrifled treasures, and contemplating these unsullied features, could not fail to present us with a draught so striking, as to deserve the name of a complete Original.’⁶¹ The anti-primitivist philosopher of taste, Alexander Gerard, makes the same point even while derogating poets of genius: ‘a poet of real genius...often distinguishes himself from imitators, who not having genius sufficient for observing the great original, Nature, the real appearance of things exhibited to themselves, describe them as they have been already described by other in situations totally different.’⁶²

This criticism makes the moment of virtual reality and imaginative happiness simply a *sensation*, a feeling that moderns regretfully can no longer have but that they don’t *need* for social or moral well-being. Sir William Jones highlights this change by arguing that the ‘happiness’ of being can only be expressed by primal poets of the past: The Orientalist Sir William Jones writes the following of the genius-sensibility of great ancient poetry in the East and West:

if we conceive a being, created with all his faculties and senses, to view for the first time the

60 Critical Review XIV, 44, reviewing Gordon, *Occasional thoughts on the study and character of classical authors: With some incidental comparisons between Homer and Ossian*. Quoted in Whitney, 362.

61 *Essay*, 263, 266. Duff repeatedly argues the same point: ‘While persons are yet children, we discover in their infantile pursuits the opening buds of Genius.’ His debts to Warton and others are obvious: ‘In the scale of Genius, however, we must assign (Swift) an inferior station ; since his Muse scarce ever rises to the region of the Sublime, which is the proper sphere of a great Genius ; but, on the contrary, delights to wallow in the offal and nastiness of a sty or a kennel.’

62 Gerard, *An Essay on Genius*, 12.

serenity of the sky, the splendour of the sun, the verdure of the fields and woods, the glowing colours of the flowers, we can hardly believe it possible, that he should refrain from bursting into an ecstasy of joy, and pouring his praises to the creator of those wonders, and the author of his happiness.⁶³

Duff's nearly three-hundred page celebration of genius thus ends with the strangely pat conclusion that, though it allowed humanity to make great advances in the past, 'the art of original Poetry, to an excellence in which the wild exuberance and plastic force of Genius are the only requisites, hath suffered, instead of having gained (in modernity); and will, for the most part, be displayed in its utmost perfection in the early and uncultivated periods of social life.' Estimate Brown, who tellingly turned to premodern cultural history in the 1760s, similarly maintained that 'no civilized modern could imbibe in their Strength' all of the 'the grand Simplicity of Imagery and Diction, the strong Draughts of rude Manners and uncultivated Scenes of Nature, which abound in all these (ancient) Poems.'⁶⁴

As the discourse of genius that had motivated so much new work in the 1750s faded into pre-modernism, the most important works from the Seven Years War period ended up opposing theories of natural virtue and arguing against the ideal of imaginative Truth or virtuous happiness. Two most influential works of the period, Edmund Burke's *Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757, 1759) and Lord Kames' *Elements of Criticism* (1762), were both products of university environments and altered or effaced the vocabulary of virtue in distinct ways.⁶⁵ Kames' *Elements of*

63 *Essay on the arts, commonly called imitative* (1772), 203-4.

64 Brown, *A dissertation on the rise, union and power, the progressions, separations and corruptions of poetry and music* (1763), 159. See also Ferguson's *Essay on Civil Society*, which acknowledges that Homer is aesthetically irresistible and commands appreciation since he 'appears to speak from inspiration, not from invention; and to be guided in the choice of his thought and expressions by a supernatural instinct, not by reflection.'

65 Gerard's books are some of the best British examples, but Condillac gives perhaps the clearest statement of the new cosmopolitan enquiry into the physiology and psychology of aesthetics: 'creativity' is 'the name of the mental process that combines the properties of various objects to create

Criticism (1762) sees art experience as a tool of governmental order rather than a moral end in itself, arguing that the arts are useful for 'moderating the selfish passions.' For Kames, 'the gentle peace of society' is the goals of all arts, and the goal of all citizens is a certain moral moderation: 'happiness depends on regularity and order.'⁶⁶ Burke's *Enquiry*, meanwhile, reduced collective experiences of aesthetic Truth to the physiological functions of the body and made virtually no commentary on the political or moral stakes of aesthetic experience.⁶⁷ Strangely enough, Burke's examples of the sublime are textbook cases of virtuous communal experience, no doubt due to the influence of Warburtonian philosophy in the early 1750s when Burke was writing the treatise. His examples of aesthetic 'grandeur' are allegories of the political sublime that Warburton's *Divine Legation* had documented, and all of his examples of sublimity focus on moments of overpowering virtual-material experience.⁶⁸ In the book's longest example, Burke quotes a scene from the apocryphal Book of Sirach in which a priest presents himself to the people and initiates a primal and collective awe quite similar to Warburton's description of the Mysteries of the ancient world:

How was he honoured in the midst of the people, in his coming out of the sanctuary! He was as the morning star in the midst of a cloud, and as the moon at the full; as the sun shining upon the temple of the Most High, and as the rainbow giving light in the bright clouds: and as the flower of roses in the spring of the year, as lilies by the rivers of waters, and as the frankincense tree in summer; as fire and incense in the censer, and as a vessel of gold set with precious stones; as a fair olive tree budding forth fruit, and as a cypress which groweth up to the clouds. When he put on the robe of honour, and was clothed with the perfection of glory, when he went up to the holy altar, he made the garment of holiness honourable. He himself stood by the hearth of the altar,

groups for which there are no models in nature. . . it provides pleasures which in certain respects are preferable to reality itself' (*Oeuvres philosophiques*, I, p. 271)

66 'Dedication' to *Elements of Criticism*. 7-8.

67 See de Bolla, *Discourse of the Sublime* on the effects of Burke's psychological reading of aesthetics (as well as on the small controversy that resulted from Burke's lack of religious commentary). See also Vanessa Ryan on Burke's 'physiological sublime.'

68 The text cites a passage from Shakespeare in which an onlooker exalts in seeing King Henry rise above the battlefield, 'like the feather'd Mercury...As if an angel dropped from the clouds/ To turn and wind a fiery Pegasus.'

compassed with his brethren round about; as a young cedar in Libanus, and as palm trees compassed they him about. So were all the sons of Aaron in their glory, and the oblations of the Lord in their hands.⁶⁹

Burke of course explained this in terms of a innate, bodily attraction to 'grandeur' and does not comment at all on the social functions of the passage or its vision of a union between nature and society. Like the rest of Burke's treatise, it seeks only the 'truth...of physical causes' and not that more exalted moment of Truth that comes from encounters with virtual reality.⁷⁰

Hence it makes more sense to the criticism of the period as a kind of *ne plus ultra* of the argument for virtue, rather than a strike on behalf of middle class reform. As the visionary moral-patriotic criticism of Cooper, Goldsmith, and Smollett lost out to the deductive and practical criticism of Kames and Burke, the fantasy of imaginative Truth and virtual reality lost all of its claim to public utility. A criticism of judgment and 'taste' takes over, perhaps embodied best in Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81), which emphasized craftsmanship and delight over genius and Truth. In the late 1770-80s, when activism in the provinces truly came into its own and widespread discontent with London again galvanized the language of virtue, poets could no longer look for the happiness of virtue in the imagination. As my next chapter shows, innovative poets and writers would return to the fantasy of virtual reality by replacing the fantasy of imaginative virtue with a domestic ideal of environmental happiness.

69 Third edition of the *Enquiry*, (1761), 142-3

70 Ibid, viii-ix.

CHAPTER FIVE

'TIS FREE TO ALL, TIS EVERYDAY DAY RENEWED': THE LOCALIZATION OF COMMUNITY, 1770-85

Rather than looking forward to a heady future that national reform would bring, poets in the 1780s posit that virtuous fulfillment can be found in the quiet corners of rural life. Cooking for one's family, walking through fields and forests, or viewing animals playing with one another are portrayed as happy actions that can be practiced in the present, for their own sakes and without any need to abstract beyond these scenes to consider the national or common good. Virtuous self-service thus becomes increasingly thought of as *domestic* activity as well as a studied closeness to what a reviewer of Burns calls 'the soil on which we tread.'

As noted at the end of the last chapter, politically and morally charged discourse about pure poetry and flights of genius became less common in the late 1760-70s, and writers divorced the moral purpose of the poet from that of the Patriot or the orator. The poetry from those two decades that celebrates 'true' environments and connections with nature is set almost exclusively in the *past* (most often the British past); poetic successes include Ossian's epics, Percy's *Reliques*, Chatterton's Rowley poems, and Beattie's

Minstrel, and numerous other works like Robert Holmes' *Alfred* and John Tait's *The Cave of Morar* set in the ancient British past are published between 1765-80 (in addition to adaptations of 'Oriental' sources by William Jones and Christopher Smart). Indeed, the mania for antiquarian works meant that poets were avidly encouraged by critics, publishers, and patrons to pursue native themes and native settings in the 1750-60s

While this poetry set itself increasingly in the past, it also put a new value on a sense of *place* and in particular a sense of environmental familiarity that presaged the new forms of local or domestic poetry that would arise in the 1780s. Among many other critics, Elizabeth Montagu notes that 'Our noble countryman, Percy, engages us much more than Achilles, or any Grecian hero,' while William Mason repeats the same idea with more specificity: 'Can we in truth be equally interested, for the fabulous exploded Gods of other Nations...as by the story of our own Edwards and Henry's, or allusions to it? Can a description, the most perfect language ever attained to, of the tyranny expelling the Muses from Parnassus, seize the mind equally with the horrors of Berkeley castle, with the apostrophe to the tower?'¹ Most of this writing stayed within the boundaries of the sort of nationalist literary history that Weinbrot, Kramnick, and others have documented, and its valuation of the local and familiar became a new critical norm or rule that didn't effect the outcomes or impacts of their works. Furthermore, as Fiona

1 Montagu, *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear* (1764), 43. Mason, *The poems of Mr. Gray: to which are prefixed memoirs of his life and writings* (1775), 88. Even the arch-conservative critic Vicesimus Knox got into the act, noting in 1778 that a British audience takes 'part with their Edwards and Henries as friends and fellow countrymen; they glory in their successes, and sympathize in their misfortunes.' (Knox, *Essays Moral and Literary*(1779), 181) Montagu's work is in the vein of the strong patriotic critic from the 1750-60s. She welcomes Shakespeare as the example of lively, daring, and natural poetry; his poetry comes 'not the cold and formal observations of a spectator, but come warm from the heart of the interest person.' The large nativist philosophy of the work can be summed up by the summons to never 'fetter the energy and enervate the noble powers of the British Muse and of a language fit to express sublimer sentiments.' (1769)

Stafford and Peter de Bolla have noted, the notion of 'local attachment' and close bonds with the immediate world was something of a slur in the 1760s, amounting to either a facile inability to abstract from the present or else a habit of short-sighted judgment that failed to give proper attention to the universal.² As John Scott, a defender of the ideals of Whiggish liberty, opined in 1775, 'Patriotism seems to have little claim to the appellation which is nothing more than a local attachment; a passion, which, for the advantage of one favourite nation, will not scruple to ravage and enslave all others.'³ Poets concerned with celebrating and affirming the commitment to virtue could thus not help but be aware of the problems associated with taking the new aesthetic norm too far or of blindly celebrating anything that happened to be British. The lure of immediacy was safe if situated in the past, and most poets and critics assumed it should stay there.

As a result, the new ideal of fulfilling interaction with the present world came to literature by way of a medium well outside of the poetic or philosophical—namely writing about scientific hobbies such as botany, specimen-gathering, and geology in the 1770-80s, in addition to the better-known discourses of gardening and landscaping.⁴ John Aikin, a natural scientist by profession, became perhaps the most popular critic of poetry of the 1770-80s, and his works endlessly celebrated the grand and beautiful objects which nature every where profusely throws around us' and evaluated poetry in terms of the

2 As Stafford summarizes, 'for many influential 18th c aestheticians of the mid-18th c...particular places, whether represented in art or literature, were a sign of narrowness, restricted interest, and impermanence' (74). She lists Kames and Smith as aestheticians and moralists opposed to the particular. De Bolla argues that there was a backlash against the local led by Reynolds, who fought against the 'spirit of luxury' that encouraged the sort of 'immediate judgment' that tourists enacted while viewing landscape gardens and parks. De Bolla notes that Reynolds' academy sought to oppose this localism in favor of an open-ended, Platonic idea of ideal beauty. (De Bolla, *Education of the Eye*, chapters one and two). Cf Barrell 1987 on the political aspects of Reynolds' ideal beauty.

3 John Scott, *Remarks on the Patriot*, 5. Quoted in Stafford.

4 On gardening and landscaping, see Tom Williamson, Edward Hyams, Peter de Bolla, Kate Flint, and John Dixon Hunt.

edifying relationship between human and nature that it inspired⁵. Unsurprisingly, Aikin's favorite poet was James Thomson, whom he wrote a several-hundred page commentary that helped spark a revival of interest in Thomson during the 1780-90s. The Thomson that Aikin and other created in the period was a figure of quiet, private contemplation rather than a livid patriot. Aikin elevates Thomson's verse because of the supposed link between human and environment that it manifests: 'founded as it is upon the unfading beauties of Nature, (the Seasons) will live as long as the language in which it is written shall be read.'⁶ In another work, he added that Thomson's sense of nature was superior to Vergil and Milton because of its genuine attention to nature: 'it is in that truly excellent and original poem, Thomson's Seasons, that we are to look for the greatest variety of genuine observations in natural history.'⁷ Another critic of the mid-1780s, Thomas Percival, invented biographical anecdotes in which Thomson (who was in fact living in London during the whole period in which the first version of the *Seasons* was written) drew inspiration from his endless walks through nature: 'Thomson was wont to wander whole days and nights in the country: and in such sequestered walks, he acquired, by the most minute attention, a knowledge of all the mysteries of nature.'⁸

Other critics write more specifically about the 'truth' found in observing the local and particular landscape. The naturalist John Moir wrote in 1777 that the 'original genius

5 William Jones notes that 'The critical ideas of Aikin that were novel in 1777 were taken for granted by the end of the century.'

6 Aikin, 'An essay on the plan and character,' lxiii (1778). As noted in chapter one of the current work, Aikin's book stripped the *Seasons* of all of its political and topical content and spoke only about its descriptive aspects: 'just and important as his thoughts on these (political and moral) topics may be, there may remain a doubt in the breast of the critic, whether their introduction on a piece like this do not break in upon that unity of character which every work of art should support.'

7 Aikin, *An Essay in the Application of Natural History to Poetry*, 72 (1777). Percival also notes that 'Milton appears to have been no less familiar with nature than Thomson.'

8 *Observations on the alliance of natural history and philosophy, with poetry* (1784). Percival's book is premised on the notion that 'an inquisitive attention to every surrounding object is essential to the poet.'

never rests in generals...but gives, in vivid, glowing, and permanent characters, the identical impression it receives.' For Moir, the genius confronts objects and gives them all a kind of discrete existential dignity, 'perceiv(ing) every object through a medium peculiar to themselves.' Moir's essays thus eagerly defend the value of the small relationships we have with objects in our immediate environment: 'local attachments often constitute no small share of our happiness or misery. Like those shrubs which equally take root in every position and every soil, wherever we are, and wherever we go, our minds invariably cling to the objects all around us.'⁹ This semi-conscious relationship to the external world seems to provide a certain sense of variety within stability, a fullness of experience that we overlook but can more fully appreciate if we merely stop to pay attention to our overlooked attachments to the local world. Unlike Aikin, however, Moir is not a naturalist but a political and moral essayist, and his interest in attending to the immediate environment is designed to inspire 'the contagion of patriotism' which makes people 'cheerfully relinquish every object and interest which...clash with the welfare of the whole.'¹⁰ His work more than anyone other essayist's of the time hints at the possibilities for making the real world seem a satisfying place to direct the fire and energy of virtue.

One notable poem from the 1770s, William Mason's *English Garden*, suggests a similar interest in turning to those 'local attachments.' Originally a writer of antiquarian odes, histories, and plays in the 1740-50s, Mason achieved greater popular success in the 1770s with his patriotic nature poems, chief of which was the *English Garden*.¹¹ The

⁹ Moir, *Gleanings; or Fugitive Pieces*. (1785), 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 139.

¹¹ *The History of Modern Gardening* of Mason's good friend Horace Walpole (written in the 1760s, first printed 1771), is something of a manifesto for 'English' gardening and goes a great ways in explaining

long, four-part meditative essay in blank verse was one of a handful of works that worked hard to redefine the English garden and re-position it as a place to feel the sort of patriotic happiness that only men of selfless virtue could feel. The preface to Mason's poem establishes that 'divine Simplicity' guides the English garden and makes it resonate only with the 'freeborn...ingenuous few...heirs of competence, if not of wealth,' who alone can 'preserve that vestal purity of soul' that produces a high and 'genuine' taste.¹² Mason's poem is thus premised on the idea that, sitting in the garden and patiently dwelling with the landscape will bring a happiness or sense of fulfillment.

Mason, however, also borrows the reformist critics' habit of projecting profound experiences with environments onto others, and thus avoids the problems of feeling virtual reality that a more robust sense of interaction with the environment would entail. In order for his argument not to seem merely prescriptive, the *Garden* must posit that *someone else* truly and fully experienced the present landscape, which Mason the poet merely recorded and summarized the edifying conclusion of. Strange though it may seem, Mason's poem makes Thomas Gray, whose poetry could hardly have a more strained, anti-naive relationship with nature, its central mediating figure. Gray's absorption in and enthusiasm for nature allows for Mason to celebrate the power of

the fairly sudden emergence of the mania for such gardens among aristocrats and landowners of the 1750-70s. The English garden, which the coterie of Whigs around Walpole including Mason, Gray, and Burgh were all too eager to differentiate from the Italian, Chinese, or classically-influenced garden, authorized the private attachment to scenes of carefully cultivated wild nature as an important ethical and patriotic activity, a way of seeing that affirmed liberty, industriousness, and trade as the core of the natural British character.

12 Walpole put the Whig argument for English gardens in precise terms in his commentary on Mason's poem: 'the reason why Taste in Gardening was never discovered until the present Century, is that It was the result of all the happy combinations of an Empire of Freemen, an Empire of Trade...maintained by the valour of independent Property. (From a note by Walpole on Mason's poem, quoted in Bending, 220). Walpole's *History of modern gardening* contains many similar remarks, e.g.: 'let other countries mimic or corrupt our taste; but let it reign here (in Britain) on its verdant throne, original by its elegant simplicity.'

nature to sustain and ground the rootless individual:

Oft, ' smiling as in scorn,' oft would (Gray) cry,
"Why waste thy numbers on a trivial art, to
" That ill can mimic even the humblest charms
" Of all-majestic Nature ?" at the word His eye
Would glisten, and his accents glow
With all the Poet's frenzy, " Sov'reign Queen !
" Behold, and tremble, while thou view'st her state 25
" Thron'd on the heights of Skiddaw : call thy art
" To build her such a throne; that art will feel
How vain her best pretensions. Trace her march
"Amid the purple craggs of Borrowdale;
And try like those to pile thy range of rock
"In rude tumultuous chaos.¹³

The local landscape is the most powerful and profound object imaginable, but Gray here feels and communes with it so that Mason doesn't have to.¹⁴ The idea of an elite coterie of virtuous fellows feeling the bliss of virtue in private implicitly made nature an external entity that one celebrated but was not fully in touch with, a realm which could nevertheless be abstracted from and left at a distance.

Middling-Class Activism and the Domestic

Poets of the 1780s erased the distance between subject and landscape, making it seem less of an aesthetic scene presented to the viewer—replete with frame and proper viewing time—and more as a scene from real experience, felt rather than seen and lived rather than meditated on. A widespread anti-elitism was largely responsible for this shift; as cultural historians have emphasized, the 1770s saw a broad shift away from generic

13 *English Garden*, Book 3, 19-31. Note that the description of the majesty of the scene goes on for another twenty lines.

14 This projection of experience seems to have been built into the Whiggism that Mason practiced. This reversal of the old neoclassical argument that art makes nature better and more perfect may seem ironic in the mouth of Gray, since his work repeatedly shows its distance from nature in two distinct ways: a) in 'To Spring' or 'Eton' ode, both of which famously professes discontent with aestheticized Nature, and b) in 'The Bard' where he works via an impossibly distant mediating figure who communes with nature (the bard himself). Nevertheless, the anecdote is backed by Gray's intense attention to the English garden; his letters testify to a lifelong interest in English gardens and at his death he was himself building an elaborate one.

cultural patriotism and towards a more critical patriotism based on championing the industry and self-sufficiency of the people over the machinations and greed of the political and economic elite. The anti-government sentiment that had motivated much reformist work in the 1750-60s became entrenched and led to a widespread belief that government was a 'conspiracy of Nobles' who grew wealthy through nepotism and state-sponsored monopolies while the middling classes shouldered the nation's tax burden. The middle class portrayed itself as the heart and soul of Britain, those diligent and principled people 'who subsist by honest Industry' while the elites violently imposed their will on the poor and the terrorized indigenous populations of the British colonies.¹⁵ The moral integrity of the people, and the free acceptance of morality, was the core of patriot Britain and needed to be cultivated against the ever-encroaching machinery of elitism: 'in our time, the opposition is between a corrupt Court joined by an innumerable multitude of all ranks and stations bought with public money, and the independent part of the nation.'¹⁶ By the 1780s, a clear rift had been drawn between the moral and natural 'liberty' that formed Britain's essence and mandate, and the reality of government and empire that sought nothing more than its own continuous gorging.

Provincial Dissenters in particular began to take action based on this view. The remarkable swell of support for the American side in the Revolutionary War, as well as the growth of the abolitionist movement in the 1770s, showed this anti-government

15 Wilson, 273. Langford also notes that resistance to aristocrats was pandemic in the 1770-80s, as writers saw them as at best worthless and at worst cause of corruption and moral turpitude. At the time, the rhetoric of 'independence' was ubiquitous but meaningless, 'its object was to distance politicians from the very corruption which most of them employed but which was so offensive to the public morality of the age' (592). Nevertheless, movements to actually divest aristocrats of power or property 'attracted little interest and virtually no support' (593).

16 Quoted in Wilson, 274.

sentiment joining with an increasing emphasis on social conscience and what one critic has called a 'play at moral capital.'¹⁷ The meaning of 'virtue' unsurprisingly changed during this period: the pinnacle of virtue was no longer an individual's absolute dedication to national values (as it was with the ode-writers) but rather an individual's commitment to fairly and justly overseeing a small, domestic realm. As Nicholas Rogers summarizes, by the mid-1780s, 'political and social virtue...rested on men of character, whose domestic felicity, moral integrity, and forthright dealing made them the health and vigour of a state.'¹⁸ The newly moralized middle class clung proudly to the middle ground between the decadent, luxury-addicted rich and the 'anarchic' poor, and they advertised that their fairness and moral autonomy alone could lead the nation to 'independence,' peace, decency, and good order that served as both refrain and defense in sympathetic accounts of radical demonstrations.¹⁹

An analogue of this middle class activism was the development of domestic virtue, or the belief that home life could be a satisfying social community unto itself. The ideal of the domestic community appeared in many influential prose works of the 1760s, particularly Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) and Rousseau's *Julie* (1761). These works are often problematically identified as 'sentimental' premised on loss of national virtue and a certain disdain for the modern world, but they also work to celebrate local

17 Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital*, 5-6 and passim.

18 Rogers, 'The Middling Orders' in *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed Dickinson, (London: Blackwell, 2002) 173.

19 See Dana Harrington's reading of the importance of gendering morality in making this move: 'The emergence of a privatized, domestic view of virtue...served to legitimize middle-class concepts of citizenship by resolving the traditional antagonism between civic virtue and commerce that had long served as a means to limit participation in the political sphere...moralized the private sphere...and provided an ethical anchor for middle-class values and practices, including the pursuit of economic interests.'(53)

community in an unprecedented way. The second half of *Julie* is full of such celebrations, but I will quote a long passage from Goldsmith's *Vicar* to show both how the domestic ideal appears in literature through a thick description of the details and activities of local village environment and second how this life is portrayed in words and concepts familiar from ethical and political discourses of the mid-eighteenth century:

The little republic to which I gave laws, was regulated in the following manner: by sun-rise we assembled in our common apartment; the fire being previously kindled by the servant. After we had saluted each other with proper ceremony, or I always thought fit to keep up some mechanic forms of good-breeding, without which freedom ever destroys friendship, we all bent in gratitude to that Being, who gave us another day. This duty being performed, my son and I went to pursue our usual industry abroad, while my wife and daughters employed themselves in providing breakfast, which was always ready at a certain time. I allowed half an hour for this meal, and an hour for dinner; which time was token up in innocent mirth between my wife and daughters, and in philosophical arguments between my son and me.

As we rose with the sun, so we never pursued our labors after it was gone down, but returned home to the expecting family; where smiling looks, a neat hearth, and pleasant fire, were prepared for our reception. Nor were we without guests: sometimes Farmer Flamborough, our talkative neighbour, and often the blind piper, would pay us a visit, and taste our gooseberry-wine; for the making of which we had lost neither the receipt nor the reputation. These harmless people had several ways of being good company; while one played, the other would sing some soothing ballad, Johnny Armstrong's last good night, or the cruelty of Barbara Allen. The night was concluded in the manner we began the morning, my youngest boys being appointed to read the lessons of the day; and he that read loudest, distinctest, and best, was to have a halfpenny on Sunday to put in the poor's box.²⁰

The narrator of the novel sees this local, quotidian world as a 'little republic' that is happy and sufficient unto itself, a place of contented and mutual care, where everyone plays a role and enjoys each others' company. The novel need only describe these details and the harmony they produce to convey a sense of completeness and contentment. Nevertheless, within the novel, this world is portrayed as passing and tragically in danger, threatened by outside forces of aristocratic greed and luxury.

Goldsmith's most famous poem, 'The Deserted Village,' written ten years after the *Vicar of Wakefield*, presented a more robust but more hedged brand of localist celebration. The poem is equal parts elegaic remembrance of peaceful village life and

²⁰ *The Vicar of Wakefield*, ch 4.

screed against the capitalism that destroyed it. The domestic ideal of *The Vicar of Wakefield* is obviously at work in the poem, but 'The Deserted Village' focuses exclusively on the harmonious order of the village, reducing all of its characters and subjects to parts within the village's unified whole. At the same time, an undertone of anger runs throughout its idealizations, and the poem ultimately directs its attention and hope not to the village life itself but rather to abstract 'Truth' and 'Sweet Poetry.'

Goldsmith's poem presents village life as a living, aesthetic environment to an unprecedented degree.²¹ Unlike the pastoral of the 1720-40s—whether the satiric and playful ones of Gay or the more earnestly moral ones of Thomson—the 'Deserted Village' resists survey in favor of repetition and emphasizes rural regularity over rustic novelty. The first half of the poem communicates a sort of inclusive harmony in brief catalogs of the details, actions, and people of village life, which together imply a symbiotic, vaguely musical lifeworld in which everything interacts in a scripted, mutually beneficial order (one long 'blissful hour,' as the narrator puts it):

Sweet was the sound, when oft at evening's close
Up yonder hill the village murmur rose;
There, as I passed with careless steps and slow,
The mingling notes came softened from below ;
The swain responsive as the milkmaid sung,
The sober herd that lowed to meet her young;
The noisy geese that gabbled o'er the pool,
The playful children just let loose from school;
The watchdog's voice that bayed the whispering wind,
And the loud laugh that spoke the vacant mind;
These all in sweet confusion sought the shade,
And filled each pause the nightingale had made²²

The passage refers to a spontaneous musical harmony, with various small interactions

(swain and milkmaid, herd and her young, children with one another) united into an

21 Marshall Brown's reading of the poem centers on this point, arguing that the village, as a luminous presence that doesn't actually exist, represents 'what is properly called an aesthetic realm.' He sees Goldsmith overall as a marker of the 'birth of the aesthetic.' *Preromanticism*, 139.

22 Goldsmith, *Deserted Village*, 8.

overall image of a bustling but peaceful village. Indeed the harmony of the village extends beyond objects to small aspects or actions of things: the 'never-failing brook' which 'turns the busy mill' is part of the same order as the 'the matron's glance' as she turns away from her work for a minute. Hence not just every farmer, teacher, or barkeeper, and not just every cow, sheep, or goose but every look, every shade, and every tone of village life gave pleasure and reflects a sense of togetherness.

As most readings of the poem point out, harmonious village life is meant as a foil for the despirited, decaying present, and the poem appears to make loss and outrage its central affective takeaway. The poem makes clear that the harmony it describes is lost forever and the narrator, who was born and raised in the village, can only long for it nostalgically:

I still had hopes, for pride attends us still,
Amidst the swains to show my book-learn'd skill,
Around my fire an evening group to draw,
And tell of all I felt, and all I saw.²³

In manner typical of works of the 1760s, the poem blames the loss of this regular and peaceful community on greed, luxury, and the selfish, anti-communal values of capitalism, primarily imperial expansion and the continual demand for exportable goods ('Trade's unfeeling train' within which 'wealth accumulates, and men decay').²⁴ As the poem makes abundantly clear, the 'rural virtues' of 'Innocence and Health'—virtues which had once formed the core of England's greatness—have already given way to luxury, which the poem implies has recently taken over over the entire nation. Goldsmith's poem

²³ Ibid, 6.

²⁴ Raymond Williams' reading ends with this point, noting that Goldsmith can only see the rural in light of his own suffering as a modern man who longs to return to a more coherent society of the past: 'the crises of values which resulted from these changes is enacted in varying ways in 18th c lit. In poetry...the idealization of the happy tenant, and of the rural retreat, gave way to a deep and melancholy cs of change and loss, which eventually established, in a new way, a conventional structure of retrospect' (*The Country and the City*, 61).

focuses as much on the cause of the community's downfall (capitalism, enclosure, luxury) as it is on the idealization of the lost community, and spends nearly as much time lamenting the horrors of modern life (both at home and in the 'savage' colonial world) as it does on the joys of rural life. Indeed the 'Deserted Village' pulls no punches in narrating the 'rattling chariots' and 'poor houseless shivering female' of British urban life, as well as the 'poisonous fields' and 'rattling terrors' present in the colonies.²⁵

However, it is crucial to observe that the poem doesn't actually offer the living rural landscape as a solution to or escape from these problems, nor does it actively seek a return to them. Instead it uses the village in order to articulate a critique of modern life and form a simple binary of good rural honesty and bad commercial corruption and concludes with a weaker version of the reformist sentiments familiar from the Seven Years War period. The conclusion turns to the 'Truth' of 'sweet Poetry,' pinning its desires for a world free of luxury and corruption on the simple but forgotten spirit of Poetry:²⁶

And thou, sweet Poetry, thou loveliest maid
Still first to fly where sensual joys invade!
Unfit, in these degenerate times of shame,
To catch the heart, or strike for honest fame;
Dear charming nymph, neglected and decried,
My shame in crowds, my solitary pride...
That found'st me poor at first, and keep'st me so.²⁷

In calling Poetry the 'source of all my bliss and all my woe,' the poet implies he has long known 'sweet Poetry' and communed with it privately. Hence the poem seems to be more about the solace of poetry's truths than about the empirical world it had been describing:

25 Cf Rachel Crawford's insightful analysis of Goldsmith's 'agrarian ideal.' Crawford argues that the 'Deserted Village' reflects the beliefs current from the 1760s on that social problems associated with luxury and advancing national-agrarian capitalism could be remedied by ceasing enclosure and giving each peasant a small plot of land and thus giving them a sense of responsibility and ownership. Leask points out that this utopian project remained present throughout the eighteenth century but was never taken seriously at any level of government.

26 Williams' reading concludes with this point: 'the creation of a desert landscape is an imaginative rather than a social progress; it is what the new order does to the *poet*, not to the land.' 78-9

27 Goldsmith, *Deserted*, 22.

Still let thy voice, prevailing over time,
Redress the rigours of th' inclement clime;
Aid slighted Truth with thy persuasive strain;
Teach erring man to spurn the rage of gain;
Teach him that states of native strength possest,
Though very poor, may still be very blest.²⁸

'Poetry' and 'Truth' are here the means of hoping that solutions to modern problems can come from moral reform and playing on the best instincts of people.²⁹

While Goldsmith's poem is clear that the peace and vibrant harmony of poetry and community can only be registered as an absence that compels further allegiance to Poetry and Truth, it also records the dawning will to affirm such local harmony (and the virtues it represents) as a *solution* to national anxiety or un-ease. Hence Cowper and Burns in the 1780s make use of many of the 'Deserted Village's' techniques but elide the nostalgia and anger and come to portray the local world as sufficient and whole unto itself, something that brings joy rather than a sense of resignation. They present the local world as already unified and thus not a problem that needs a solution, and these poets don't want to show their own deep commitment to virtue so much as their own pleasure at participating in the local environment.

Burns and the Happiness of the Local Patriot

'no man can be reasonably thought a lover of his country, for roasting an ox, or burning a boot, or attending the meeting at Mile-end, or registering his name in the Lamber-troop. He may, among the drunkards, be a *hearty fellow*; and among sober handicraftmen, a *free spoken gentleman*; but he must have some better distinction before he is a *Patriot*.' (Samuel Johnson, 'The Patriot,' 1774)³⁰

Burns is generally portrayed as a figure quite close to what Johnson describes here, 'a

28 Ibid, 23.

29 The poem should thus not be seen as a 'Tory' work, despite Goldsmith's reputation. The poem's famous solution of resistance to 'trade's great empire' through simplicity and resistance to luxury should accordingly be seen as a claim to patriotism and moral high ground typical of the period between 1755-70, and not as a Tory belief that giving more power to the landed gentry or the Church of England would solve the problems voiced in the poem.

30 *The Patriot. Addressed to the Electors of Great Britain* (1774), 15.

hearty fellow' and 'a free spoken gentleman' whose patriotism was grounded in the simple activity and boisterous spirit of everyday rural life. As I will show, however, Burns did not aim at being a 'patriot' in Johnson's sense and developed a robust localist persona precisely to preempt the paradoxes of patriotism and affirm that the individual could find happiness and contentment in a small, local world. Burns resurrected the idea of the 'peasant-poet' in order to present a persona who cannot rise above the local and must live entirely within it. Robert Fergusson, Burns' immediate poetic model and predecessor in the poetic use of Scots dialectic, had adopted a witty and urbane persona, but Burns portrayed his work as the product of a 'simple Bard, unbroke by rules of art' who 'pours the wild effusions of the heart.'³¹ As the preface to his first collection maintains, this simple Burns wrote only as a respite from 'the toil and fatigue of a laborious life,' not to gain fame or indulge lofty ambition and not to inspire the moral majority to stand up and save the country.³² The preface to the second version of Burn's first collection (1787) notes that Burns writes only to sing those beauties of Scotland which he experiences all the time:

The poetic genius of my country found me, as the prophetic bard Elijah did Elisha--at the PLOUGH, and threw her inspiring mantle over me. She bade me sing the loves, the joys, the rural scenes and rural pleasures of my native soil, in my native tongue; I tuned my wild, artless notes as she inspired. She whispered me to come to this ancient metropolis of Caledonia, and lay my songs under your honoured protection: I now obey her dictates.³³

The preface insinuates that Burns' poems simply speak an already present Scotland, needing no other motive or ambition than simple sharing the feelings and scenes of

31 'Motto' to the Kilmarnock edition of Burns' *Songs*, op cit. On Burns' relation to Fergusson, see Robert Crawford (1995).

32 See the dedication to the Kilmarnock edition: 'To the genius of a Ramsay, or the glorious dawns of the poor, unfortunate Fergusson, he, with equal unaffected sincerity, declares, that even in his highest pulse of vanity, he has not the most distant pretensions.'

33 Preface to the Edinburgh edition of *Songs*, I.

Scotland's 'native soil.'³⁴

Though Burns is often lumped into a larger Scottish primitivist-nativist strain, his poetry is in fact far less nostalgic or elegaic than his fellow Scottish pseudo-rustics.³⁵ Most of this thought was governed by the framework of stadialism, which assumed that civilization advanced through a series of stages or epochs, progressively gaining order and complexity while losing passion and sentiment.³⁶ The key poetic example of nostalgic stadialist localism was James Beattie's very successful *The Minstrel* (1771), a long poem which imagines the growth and development of a young medieval poet in the bosom of nature. Much of the poem is dedicated to showing the close connection between childhood, natural/naïve sensibility, and poetic truth, arguing that poetic glory comes out of an innocent embrace of nature that one must fight for in a harsh world. Beattie's work was set in the distant past, though, and in fact concluded that the happy connection to the local world only brought a kind of sentimental bitterness at the follies of the real, political world. The modern should thus vicariously enjoy the simplicity and sense of wonder of the 'childhood' of humanity but never long to return to it.

Burns' works, by contrast, makes no such apologies or qualifications for its celebrations of the local, presenting them as modern and indeed fully efficacious exercises that bring happiness and truth. As an un-ambitious prophet ('nae Poet...just a

34 Ibid. 'To transcribe the various feelings—the loves, the griefs, the hopes, the fears—in his own breast; to find some kind of counterpoise to the struggles of a world, always an alien scene, a task uncouth to the poetical mind--these were his motives for courting the Muses, and in these he found poetry to be its own reward.'

35 Praise of the local and rustic can even be found in the rarely nostalgic Hume, who noted that Highland peasants lived like 'human nature in the Golden Age' and observed that he instinctively approved of William Wilkie's *Epigoniad*, a sprawling historical epic, on the grounds that its author lived close to the land in a rural environment.

36 On Scottish stadialism, see Colin Kidd (2003). Works on the development of the mind by Scots like Thomas Reid and Lord Monboddo furthermore suggested a connection between the Scottish peasantry and the natural truths of childhood and early civilizations.

Rhymer by chance'), Burns celebrates 'honest poverty' and argues that happiness comes from the simple sensibility found in rural life: 'Happiness must have her seat/ And center in the breast,' and all 'method' and 'art' pales in comparison with everything 'except the heart!'³⁷ The happiness of such simplicity is furthermore based on *selfless* devotion to present things. The poems in the first version of Burns' *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (subsequently referred to as the Kilmarnock edition) are always focused on one external figure or object or another—whether a humble object (mouse or daisy or poor cottager) or a sublime principle-giving entity—and never mention the poet's thoughts or feelings independent of his relation to these immediate things.³⁸ These persona famously sympathize with the most pathetic and humble of objects, affirming the dignity of a mountain daisy and a scared mouse as well as a simple peasant family, portraying them all as modest parts of a larger whole: the daisy is an 'artless Maid' who acts with simplicity 'and guileless Trust,' while the peasants (or 'cotters') in 'A Cotter's Saturday Night' are praised for 'The native feelings strong, the guileless ways.' 'Cotter's is the collection's clearest example, composed as it is mostly of scenes from quotidian peasant life, like the following description of a family dinner:

now the supper crowns their simple board,

37 Leask argues that Burns' political swagger was quite typical of urban Scottish gentlemen in the 1780s, and that his defense of the virtues of farmers and peasants was part of a larger sentiment of agricultural reform that 'had become an ideological obsession with the British ruling classes, as well as the professional and 'middling sort.' (Leask, 38) Leask also believes his persona was meant to court patrons from the urban professional classes who recognized a superior poetic talent as well as a kindred man of spirit: 'if, in the sentimental tradition, (Burns') epistles reject money-grubbing, worldly ambition and flattery, they quite openly admit to their poetic ambitions' (102)

38 Kidd writes that this aspect of Burns off was a by-product of sentimentality. His reading places it within a larger 'politics of sentiment, which included a quixotic identification with the underdog, whether a mouse, a louse, or a Jacobite' (71). The early poems were thus fully part of 'an age when clear ideological demarcation between political parties was in abeyance and, moreover, one when the literary world was in thrall to a philosophy which placed a premium on compassion, sincerity, reconciliation, and sociability.' (72)

The healsome parritch, chief o' Scotia's food;
 The soupe their only hawkie does afford,
 That, 'yont the hallan snugly chows her cood;
 The dame brings forth, in complimental mood,
 To grace the lad, her weel-hain'd kebbuck, fell;
 And aft he's prest, and aft he ca's it guid;
 The frugal wifie, garrulous, will tell,
 How 'twas a towmond auld, sin' lint was i' the bell.

Like many poems in the Kilmarnock edition, it announces objects and describes actions without any underlying motive but simple celebration, emphasizing a simple gratitude for such scenes that comes, by analogy, from the piety of the 'guileless' people and objects themselves. The after-dinner entertainment of the cotter family—reading the Bible and singing songs in an earnest, artless style—is thus an activity that displays both selfless piety and a will to unify or link parts to wholes:

They chant their artless notes in simple guise,
 They tune their hearts, by far the noblest aim;
 Perhaps Dundee's wild-warbling measures rise,
 Or plaintive Martyrs, worthy of the name;
 Or noble Elgin beets the heaven-ward flame,
 The sweetest far of Scotia's holy lays:
 Compar'd with these, Italian trills are tame;
 The tickl'd ears no heart-felt raptures raise;
 Nae unison hae they, with our Creator's praise.

In a rather different scene from the collection's long narrative poem, 'A Vision,' the goddess Coila advises a similar pious harmony, telling Scots to 'strive in thy humble sphere to shine' and resist the false lures of power and fame. Having such faith alone provides dignity to the humble:

'Preserve the dignity of Man,
 With Soul erect
 And trust the UNIVERSAL PLAN
 Will all protect'

As I have been hinting, the draw of *surrendering* to an underlying local order is behind Burns' appeal to the simple life. The peasants in 'A Cotters' Saturday Night' are content in the routines and rituals of 'life's sequestered scene,' but they are also caught up fully in their roles and responsibilities:

Belyve, the elder bairns come drapping in,
At service out, amang the farmers roun';
Some ca' the pleugh, some herd, some tentie rin
A cannie errand to a neebor town:
Their eldest hope, their Jenny, woman grown,
In youthfu' bloom, love sparkling in her e'e,
Comes hame; perhaps, to shew a braw new gown,
Or deposite her sair-won penny-fee,
To help her parents dear, if they in hardship be.

These poems thus want to make the reader *feel* the local and want to be part of it rather than simply idealizing them or nostalgically pining after them. As this passages makes clear, Scotland's greatness comes directly out of this pleasurable and consuming attachment to the 'native soil' itself: 'From scenes like these, old SCOTIA's grandeur springs....O SCOTIA! My dear, my native soil/ Long may thy hardy sons of rustic toil/ Be blest with health, and peace, and sweet content!' Scotland's greatness is already there, dwelling in the harmony between a mountain daisy and the environment or in the unbreakable bond between a cotter and his land, and the true poet simply announces it and lets it be public.

Claiming to be nothing more than an expression of the experience of real Scottish life and feelings, Burns' localism in practice required projecting an imaginary or virtual harmony and order onto someone or something else. The poet celebrates the peasants who feel the pleasure of participating in such order, or else the poet assumes that the daisy feels such pleasure. The poet himself is not part of this order, but localism requires believing the poet has experienced it and has a sort of insider knowledge of what it feels like. Hence Burns' readers in the 1780-90s treat him not as a scribe or guide who records local scenes but rather as a genius who is himself seamlessly melded into the native soil. The sentimental novelist, Henry Mackenzie, noted that the Kilmarnock edition 'delineates nature with the precision of intimacy' and praises the 'uncommon penetration and

sagacity of this heaven-taught ploughman.³⁹ An anonymous commentary in the *Monthly Review* notes the 'forcible accuracy' of descriptions in the poems and argues that they 'can only be fully relished by the natives of that part of the country where (they were) produced.'⁴⁰ When going over Burns' life and work, an early biographer of Burns turned to philosophical musings about the connection between local attachments and happiness: 'An attachment to the land of their birth is indeed common to all men' but is strengthened 'where the comforts and even necessities of life must be purchased by patient toil... (create a) 'goodwill' (from) 'the men with whom we live, to the soil on which we tread.'⁴¹ Burns thus invited critics to see him as a sort of embedded piece of real, material Scotland. Like a mountain daisy or guileless cotter, Burns as poet was fully absorbed by the routines and small orders of rural life. As a result, his critics were able to celebrate him as a piece of Scotland, a representation of the greatness of Scotland that was self-sufficient and fully present in itself.

The meaning or intention of Burns' localism has been more difficult to place. Recent critics have noted how difficult Burns is to place in a political spectrum: he was well-educated and up-to-date in political matters, took inconsistent positions on topical matters, and he was ultimately claimed by radical republicans as well as Tories.⁴² Kidd concludes that Burns was simply a sentimentalist who made identifying with the

39 *The Lounger* 9, December 1786.

40 *Monthly Review*, December 1786

41 Burns was also treated as a fully original, *sui generis* poet: A reviewer from the *Critical Review* happily bought into Burns' story and remarked that 'we do not recollect to have ever met with a more signal instance of true and uncultivated genius' (1787), while a letter by 'Allen Ramsay' considers Burns 'a man of great feeling' and celebrates him as a uniquely Scottish genius. *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, Dec 1786. Cowper's letter on Burns from 1787 paints Burns as the greatest *sui generis* poet since Shakespeare, though it also criticizes his use of Scots dialect and his low humor.

42 Cf Kidd, Leask, and Marilyn Butler on Burns' confused politics.

underdog a political statement.⁴³ The ruse of the peasant-poet seems to have allowed Burns to escape questions of politics in portraying a sensibility who needs no politics so long as he stays content in the local. As I have argued, Burns' persona was radically self-effacing, voicing the actions, objects, and beings of the local rural world without needing to give them a precise political or social meaning, sentimental or otherwise. By staying on the level of basic description or annunciation, his poetry created a subject for whom the local world was sufficient and contained a completeness presumably missing in other forms of social and political community. The work of Burns' contemporary, William Cowper, shows a similar commitment to the completeness of the local but, in refusing peasant-poet simplicity, it also brings out the problems with and stakes of affirming the local world.

Cowper's Quiet Virtue

'Can he love the whole
Who loves not part? He be a nation's friend
Who is, in truth, the friend of no man there?'

(Cowper, *The Task*, 136)

Burns' and Cowper's poetry invested heavily in rhetoric of moral reform, and their poems retain a certain unremitting confidence in a virtue attained via aesthetic experience even as they become more passive and evasive about how their poetry serves virtue's case. Tracking the developments of political-ethical virtue in the 1780s is difficult and few critics have attempted to do so. Recent literary historians have narrated a triumph of 'sentimentality' in the 1770-80s and argued that literature of the period reflects a tragic

43 Kidd glosses 'the politics of sentiment' as 'a quixotic identification with the underdog, whether a mouse, a louse, or a Jacobite,' identifying it as a product of 'an age when clear ideological demarcation between political parties was in abeyance and, moreover, one when the literary world was in thrall to a philosophy which placed a premium on compassion, sincerity, reconciliation, and sociability.' (71-2)

sense of disappointment with a corrupt modern world, but the poetry this chapter focuses on is dominated by an aggressive optimism that refuses such resignation.⁴⁴ For example, Burns' first volume of poems, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786), voices the patriot-bard's determination to protect Scotland's purity:

O Thou! who pour'd the patriotic tide,
That stream'd thro' Wallace's undaunted heart,
Who dar'd to, nobly, stem tyrannic pride,
Or nobly die, the second glorious part...
O never, never Scotia's realm desert;
But still the patriot, and the patriot-bard
In bright succession raise, her ornament and guard!⁴⁵

Cowper's poetry from the same period voices a similar devotion to making poetry serve the cause of liberty and virtue:

'Religion virtue, truth, what'er we call
A blessing—freedom is the pledge of all.
O Liberty! The pris'ner's pleasing dream,
The poet's muse, his passion, and his theme;
Genius is thine, and thou art Fancy's nurse;
Lost without thee th'ennobling pow'rs of verse;
Heroic song from thy free touch acquires
Its clearest tone, thy rapture it inspires...
I know the mind, that feels indeed the fire
The Muse imparts, and can command the lyre,
Acts with a force and kindles with a zeal,
Whate'er the theme, that others never feel!⁴⁶

These poets carry over from various other poets of virtue the idea that verse naturally defends and announces liberty and free morality. Both consider the poet an individual completely dedicated to collective or imaginary principles, and the shift to the local must be understood in light of this continuation of virtuous subjectivity. Despite the popularity

44 Recent critics have frequently seen sentimentality as a farewell to truly political literature. Harkin argues that Mackenzie's novels show a shift to a virtue based on 'aesthetic pleasure' and not 'ethical practice.' Manning argues that 'sensibility simultaneously subscribed to and resisted philosophical history, embodying in its characteristic forms loss and melancholy as the inevitable price of progress in the world of Civil Society...exulted in the particularity of sympathy in local and particular relations' 87. Sensibility and picturesque thus both 'respond to the pathos of the present, the way it constantly evanesces into pastness, and the difficulty of grasping it as it withdraws' (95)

45 'A Cotter's Saturday Night' in *Poems, chiefly in the Scottish dialect*. Unless otherwise noted, all references in this chapter are to the first version of the text (the Kilmarnock edition).

46 Cowper, 'Table-Talk' (1782), ll 321-38, 541-546

of Burns' work, Cowper is the chief figure of localism since his work shows precisely how a selfless devotion to an aestheticized local world could provide a sense of Truth even within a depressed nation.

Recent critics have portrayed Cowper as a figure of failure whose work registered the many contradictions and difficulties of the 1780s while failing to synthesize them in a satisfying, successful, or inspiring way. Thomas Simmons, Ted Underwood, Scott Hess, and Priscilla Gilman have read Cowper and his poetry as inextricably ambivalent: politically, he seems torn between his aristocratic lineage and his disdain for active politics; socially, he cannot support any specific reforms and generally observes only the negative consequences of modernity; and morally or personally, he is always in crisis and constantly on the brink of self-collapse; poetically, he mixes modes (e.g. mock heroic next to pastoral) and subject matter (a lady's sofa next to the American War, a primrose path next to a corrupt drunken London parson).⁴⁷ This version of Cowper thus finds its desire for conviction thwarted at every turn by the ambivalence of the political world and the difficulty of making moral or literary judgment within an imperial nation.

However, despite the ambivalence and crisis it highlights, Cowper's poetry of the 1780s has a self-consciously affirmative and edifying task. Cowper himself writes that

47 Underwood, *The work of the sun: literature, science, and political economy, 1760-1860* (2005), Gilman, 'William Cowper and the "Taste of Critic Appetite"' (2003), Hess, *Authoring the self: self-representation, authorship, and the print market in British poetry from Pope to Wordsworth* (2005), Simmons, *Imperial affliction: eighteenth-century British poets and their twentieth-century lives* (2010). Hess primarily follows the seminal articles of Vincent Newey. Simmons, whose reading is partially a compelling meditation on religion and colonialism, is more extreme in its insistence on Cowper's ambivalence and crisis. It reads Cowper as an exile within his native England, tortured by a demanding God and seeing the modern nation as 'a world of dislocation and vertiginous transformation.' This state of mind which prevents him from finding his identity within British culture. Hess' reading makes much of Cowper's famously depressed late letters ('I despair of everything') and thinks Cowper sees himself 'in that which cannot be the subject' (i.e. oblivion or death)—a seductive reading that I will be arguing does not explain either the logic or effect of Cowper's major poems.

his work from this period was driven by 'that patriotic Enthusiasm which is apt to break forth into poetry, or at least prompt a person if he has any inclination that way, to poetic endeavors.' During the early composition of his great meditative poem, the *Task*, he wrote that was not 'destitute of true patriotism,' despite many setbacks, and still constantly imagined 'how to save sinking Britain.'⁴⁸ The 'Task' itself, as I will argue momentarily, is littered with patriotic statements and homages to the virtuous essence of Britain, and its method assumes an unshakeable commitment to finding and affirming some kind of virtue via aesthetic experience, despite Britain's corrupted state. Furthermore, a glance at the reception of Cowper's poetry reveals that the *Task* was received by late eighteenth-century readers as socially inspiring, and its more troubled or contradictory elements were overlooked in favor of its more generally edifying mission.⁴⁹ Indeed, in comparison with other national-minded, political, or topical poetry of the same time—the satire of Peter Pindar, the sentimental didactic poems of Hannah More or Charlotte Smith—the 'Task' seems notably single-minded and stubborn in its commitment to an experience of what Cowper repeatedly calls 'Truth.' It is within this experience of truth that I would like to situate Cowper's affirmation of nature and the specifically localist fantasy of community that it presents.

Cowper's earlier works from the 1770-80s are notably committed to 'Liberty' and the 'British way' of civilization, taking up various topical themes and returning to the

48 Quoted in Griffin, 250. The letter notes that Cowper dearly enjoyed singing about military victories as a young man. Even in 1782, Cowper doesn't see himself as 'destitute of true Patriotism,' though he notes that 'the course of public events has of late afforded me no opportunity to exert it' and wonders how he might 'save sinking Britain'

49 James King notes that the *Task* 'remained the most widely read poetical text in England until about 1800' and Underwood observes that its 'popularity was especially high among the English middle classes, and lasted well into the next century.' The 'Task' also remained most-quoted poet in middle-class memoirs between 1780-1850 (90).

same faith in British good will and virtue to resolve all issues. The best historian of Cowper's politics, Vincent Newey, summarizes his patriotic works as an 'attempt to toughen the nation's sinews, to still faction, and to give guidance to the King—all on the basis of a consistent ideology that is at once political and ethical.'⁵⁰ This philosophy involves 'overt calls to honour, virtue, and piety' as well as moral 'values embedded in the rhetoric and conduct of the poem.' One of the shorter poems from his 1782 collection of poems, 'Heroism,' shows Cowper's typical defense of mixed British government as the most peaceful and just possible way of organizing society: chastising rulers of nations who seek glory or wealth over peace and inevitably create nations of 'destroyers,' it contrasts them with the 'land that distant tyrants hate in vain/ In Britain's isle, beneath a George's reign,' 'where peace and equity and freedom smile.' Like other reform-minded works of the 1760-70s, it quietly takes a particular side (for the king and implicitly against that of the Rockingham Whigs) while loudly trumpeting its unbiassed patriotism and explicitly praising liberty, justice, and virtue. Cowper's long and diffuse 'Table Talk,' from the same 1782 collection, frequently uses the same tactic, loudly celebrating freedom and justice and decrying 'effeminacy, folly, lust,' French subservience, and other long-familiar markers of false or artificial national community.⁵¹ Along the way the poem strongly sides with George III, portraying sees him as the great defender of liberty and good sense in the midst of such difficult situations as the Gordon Riots and the American

50 Newey, 'William Cowper and the Condition of England,' in *Literature and Nationalism* (1991), 126.

51 Kaul also notes Cowper's subterfuge; Cowper's poems tar tyranny and warfare so much that they can easily slip in liberty and 'sensible' commerce as alternatives, without having to acknowledge and explore the damage done by them. As Kaul notes, Cowper intends to 'communicate British ethics and culture to those parts of the world mapped by its ships, traders, and colonists... assert the continuing and future legitimacy and importance of the British empire' and British global trade, which can 'succour wasted regions and replace/ The smile of opulence in sorrow's face.' *Anthems of empire*, 236-7.

War, though the rhetoric of patriotism is so elegant and old-fashioned in the poem that it could scarcely have been read as a straightforwardly political piece.

Cowper's strategy is obviously different in the 'Task,' turning away from a confident celebration of British virtue and the corresponding philosophy of political poetry and affirming a quieter sort of virtue and liberty.⁵² The 'Task' is a thoroughly patriotic-communal poem, and it makes use of nearly every form of national fantasy this dissertation has outlined: Thomsonian 'nature' as the inspiration to virtue,⁵³ ancient Rome and premodern Britain as models of lost community,⁵⁴ reformist opposition to luxury and

52 The poem also ties this back to by including has a several hundred-line digression on ancient British bard-culture as a balance of Genius and 'wild Imagination' with austere religion, which modern Britain has just recently returned to. 'Table-talk' gives an extensive account of this theory, endorsing it and tying it to the poem's larger political theme:

'Religion virtue, truth, what'er we call
A blessing—freedom is the pledge of all.
O Liberty! The pris'ner's pleasing dream,
The poet's muse, his passion, and his theme;
Genius is thine, and thou art Fancy's nurse;
Lost without thee th'ennobling pow'rs of verse;
Heroic song from thy free touch acquires
Its clearest tone, thy rapture it inspires...
I know the mind, that feels indeed the fire
The Muse imparts, and can command the lyre,
Acts with a force and kidles with a zeal,
Whate'er the theme, that others never feel' (58 in Cowper, *Poetical Works*)

53 Nature, enchanting Nature, in whose form
And lineaments divine I trace a hand
That errs not, and finds raptures still renew'd,
Is free to all men—universal prize. (84)

Also note the poem's praise science as the direct study of nature:

...piety has found
Friends in the friends of science, and true prayer
Has flow'd from lips wet with Castalian dews.
Such was thy wisdom, Newton, child-like sage!
Sagacious reader of the works of God... (67)

54 Virtue and vice had boundaries in old time,
Not to be pass'd: and she, that had renounced
Her sex's honour, was renounced herself
By all that prized it; not for prudery's sake,
But dignity's, resentful of the wrong...
And taught the unblemish'd to preserve with care
That purity, whose loss was loss of all.
Men too were nice in honour in those days,

defense of Patriotism,⁵⁵ and a Warton-like denunciation of satire as harmful to virtue,⁵⁶ in addition to the straightforward celebration of British trade as the means of spreading liberty and happiness throughout the world⁵⁷ and the climatological 'progress' claim that Britain had recently become the new resting ground for Liberty. Taken together, these various strategies amount to the most persistent poetic commitment to a politics of virtue in the 1780s. They explore every possible means of positing virtuous community and inspiring readers to embrace virtue, and make virtue seem a desirable and even necessary part of social entity.

And judged offenders well. Then he that sharp'd,
 And pocketed a prize by fraud obtain'd,
 Was mark'd and shunn'd as odious. He that sold
 His country, or was slack when she required
 His every nerve in action and at stretch,
 Paid, with the blood that he had basely spared,
 The price of his default. But now..... (62-3)
 55 And we are deep in that of cold pretence.
 Patriots are grown too shrewd to be sincere,
 And we too wise to trust them. He that takes
 Deep in his soft credulity the stamp
 Design'd by loud declaimers on the part
 Of liberty, themselves the slaves of lust,
 Incurs derision for his easy faith
 And lack of knowledge, and with cause enough:
 For when was public virtue to be found
 Where private was not? Can he love the whole
 Who loves not part? He be a nation's friend
 Who is, in truth, the friend of no man there?
 Can he be strenuous in his country's cause
 Who slights the charities for whose dear sake
 That country, if at all, must be beloved? (136)
 56 Yet what can satire, whether grave or gay?
 It may correct a foible, may chastise
 The freaks of fashion, regulate the dress,
 Retrench a sword-blade, or displace a patch;
 But where are its sublimer trophies found?
 What vice has it subdued? whose heart reclaim'd
 By rigour? or whom laugh'd into reform?
 Alas! Leviathan is not so tamed:
 Laugh'd at, he laughs again; and, stricken hard,
 Turns to the stroke his adamantine scales,
 That fear no discipline of human hands. (40)
 57 Cf footnote 51 above on Kaul.

Yet despite its extensive use of these different communalist strategies, the 'Task' settles on no particular strategy and underscores its doubts about the viability of public poetry. Ambivalence and hesitation thoroughly suffuse the poem, as Hess, Simmons, et al have detailed, and the narrator always carefully undercuts each implicit solution or fantasy shortly after offering it. Like no other poem before it, the 'Task' takes the *critique* of modern nationhood of fantasies of community seriously: the government truly *is* corrupt, the nation *is* fueled by selfish luxury, empire *is* violent and destructive, the harmonious community of the past *is* gone and the spirit of liberty no longer informs the institutions of Britain. Newey and Griffin suggest that Cowper despaired that Britain had 'already sunk into a state of decrepitude' after the peace of Paris ended the American War in a way that Cowper saw as unprincipled and inconsistent with British liberty, and that the 'Task,' begun on the heels of the Peace, is in large part a response to this despair.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, the *Task* conveys a sense of hope and communal optimism, turning to local nature in order to preserve its commitment to selfless virtue. As Cowper himself noted in a letter written just before its publication: 'the whole (of the 'Task') has one tendency. To discountenance the modern enthusiasm of a London Life, and to recommend rural ease and leisure, as friendly to the cause of piety and virtue.'⁵⁹ The poem itself intermittently (and increasingly in the final two books) celebrates a quiet, private communion with nature reminiscent of Rousseau's late *Reveries*, but in a grand, oratorical style that shows no hesitation or ambivalence about its subject matter. I will

58 Cowper's long patriotic satire, 'Expostulation,' reflects the same struggle with Patriotic presentism while also employing an extensive premodernism far beyond anything in the 'Task.' The poem paints the modern British situation as direly as possible, using the example of Roman, Jewish, and British past to do so, and in the end sees 'Providence' as the source of Britain's splendor, thus opening the way for a kind of radical Christian patriotism.

59 Letters, 310 (10 Oct 1784).

give only two short, representative examples:

Lovely indeed the mimic works of Art
But Nature's works far lovelier...
...these all bespeak a power
Peculiar, and exclusively her own.
Beneath the open sky she spreads the feast;
'Tis free to all—'tis every day renew'd⁶⁰

trees, and rivulets whose rapid course
Defies the check of winter, haunts of deer,
And sheepwalks populous with bleating lambs,
And lanes in which the primrose ere her time
Peeps through the moss that clothes the hawthorn root,
Deceive no student. Wisdom there, and truth,
Not shy, as in the world, and to be won
By slow solicitation, seize at once
The roving thought, and fix it on themselves.⁶¹

The *Task's* makes realistic, quotidian nature a place of *truth*, where wisdom is felt and revealed in an almost instinctive manner if the solitary human has a properly attuned and humble mindset. The feelings inspired by interaction with local nature—patience, trust, calm—are the necessary preconditions for the new sense of virtue and community that Cowper looks to inspire. As the *Task* makes clear, nature is a domestic community where the individual can create and enjoy direct affective attachments with objects, animals, and people and feel one's affection and concern returned:

The Heart is...dead alike
To love and friendship both, that is not pleased
With sight of animals enjoying life,
Nor feels their happiness augment his own.⁶²

The *Task* thus makes the local world into the place of free, mutually supporting interaction—in which the 'happiness' or misfortune of one citizen redounds onto the others—that a virtuous and free nation should be.

The *Task* slowly builds up to this confident celebration of the domestic, achieving rhetorical conviction about 'Domestic Happiness' only in its final book. This book is clear

60 *Task*, 16.

61 *Ibid* 155.

62 *Ibid* 162.

that small-scale domestic communities provide the 'only bliss of Paradise' and 'nurse of Virtue' available to the present and underscores repeatedly that these communities may only be created via patient interaction with nature. The final book also makes the pleasures such local worlds inspire, and the way communing with them satisfies a deeply seated desire for aesthetic-material community:

'Tis born with all: the love of Nature's works
Is an ingredient in the compound man,
Infused at the creation of the kind.
... this obtains in all,
That all discern a beauty in his works,
And all can taste them: minds that have been form'd
And tutor'd, with a relish more exact,
But none without some relish, none unmoved.⁶³

...Not a flower
But shows some touch, in freckle, streak, or stain,
Of his unrivall'd pencil. He inspires
Their balmy odours, and imparts their hues,
And bathes their eyes with nectar, and includes,
In grains as countless as the seaside sands,
The forms with which he sprinkles all the earth.⁶⁴

The little local worlds of nature that delight humans—which can be as small as a foot-long garden in a window casement in the city—are all testaments to the 'burning instinct' and 'inborn inextinguishable/ Thirst of rural scenes,' which mean that the human is satisfied once it immerses itself in such material community. Cowper's narrator seems worried that this will seem a pale compensation for a lack of real political community, but maintains that the desire for community *must* be satisfied in one way or another. A natural-born 'freeman' must turn to the local environment that God himself directly created, satisfying an innate love of liberty as well as returning the affective joy of *participation* rather than domination that is its payoff:

He is the freeman whom the truth makes free,

63 Ibid, 114.

64 Ibid, 159.

And all are slaves beside. There's not a chain
 That hellish foes, confederate for his harm,
 Can wind around him, but he casts it off
 With as much ease as Samson his green withes.
 He looks abroad into the varied field
 Of nature, and, though poor perhaps, compared
 With those whose mansions glitter in his sight,
Calls the delightful scenery all his own.
His are the mountains, and the valleys his.
 And all the resplendent rivers. *His to enjoy*
*With a propriety that none can feel*⁶⁵

The pure joy of these scenes come from a willing submission to a community without rulers or owners, in which all are equal and 'filial' participants.

There are, however, clear problems making the affirmation of local microcosmic communities into ethically or socially meaningful experiences. By contrast with the fantasy-village of 'The Deserted Village,' Cowper's fantasy of local nature can only be experienced in *private*, non-social meditation. In the logic of the 'Task,' the garden brings 'blest seclusion from a jarring world,' and a life full of 'guiltless joys'; 'piety,' sacred 'truth' and 'virtue' arise monolith-like out of those scenes which God ordain'd/ Should best secure them and promote them most.' The tautology, nature=truth, is fully operative in the 'Task,' which in turn necessitates the concomitant syllogism: community must be formed by truth, nature contains truth, so community must be organized around nature. The difficulty, however, is that a citizen can't imagine playing a specific part in Cowper's natural/local community—say, being a parson or school-teacher, as in Goldsmith's imagined local community—and a citizen cannot learn any particular lessons or receive any particular message or object from nature; rather he or she must *assume* that nature is a good and true place that one enjoys at one remove:

O evenings worthy of the gods! exclaim'd
 The Sabine bard. O evenings, I reply,

65 Ibid, 152.

More to be prized and coveted than yours,
As more illumined, and with nobler truths,
That I, and mine, and those we love, enjoy.⁶⁶

The 'truths' that the 'Task' refers to are aestheticized scenes that the viewer watches. There is no real participation in this community, no activism that could help or hinder it, and the citizen of such a world is only bound to the rest of it via a shared passive experience.

The 'Task' seems aware of the compromise necessary in establishing its small scale communities in place of national ones. It argues with an air of tragedy that modern human is doomed 'to an obscure but tranquil state,' and compares him or her to a bird that struggles mightily without accomplishing anything tangible: 'his warfare is within...his fervent spirit labours' even as the world 'scarce deigns to notice him.' Indeed, the poem summarily dismisses the efficacy of political conviction in the 1780s, in which all claims to patriotism have been co-opted:

*The age of virtuous politics is past,
And we are deep in that of cold pretence.
Patriots are grown too shrewd to be sincere,
And we too wise to trust them. He that takes
Deep in his soft credulity the stamp
Design'd by loud declaimers on the part
Of liberty, themselves the slaves of lust,
Incurs derision for his easy faith
And lack of knowledge, and with cause enough.⁶⁷*

The poem also argues that the love of community must be inculcated on the small-scale or local level for virtue to be reformed on larger levels. One can't understand how social happiness and truth come out of selfless devotion to the whole unless one feels the love of 'parts' and individual objects that interacting with nature teaches us:

For when was public virtue to be found
Where private was not? Can he love the whole
Who loves not part? He be a nation's friend
Who is, in truth, the friend of no man there?
Can he be strenuous in his country's cause

66 Ibid 95.

67 Ibid, 136.

Who slights the charities for whose dear sake
That country, if at all, must be beloved?⁶⁸

The 'Task' argues that private sincerity, devotion, and selflessness is necessary for real Patriotism to make sense. As the narrator maintains, the contemporary political poet consequently must resist the celebratory work of the Pindaric ode and be 'contented with a humbler theme' that trains the reader to feel a deep affective attachment to and respect for community that is, in the end, simply an end in itself:

Encomium in old time was poets' work!...
The man, whose virtues are more felt than seen,
Must drop indeed the hope of public praise...
Not soon deceived; aware that what is base
No polish can make sterling...
So life glides smoothly and by stealth away,
More golden than that age of fabled gold
Renown'd in ancient song; not vex'd with care
Or stain'd with guilt, beneficent, approved
Of God and man, and peaceful in its end.
So glide my life away!⁶⁹

Cowper's work thus meditates longer and harder than any other poetic work of the century on the question of how to experience community and acquire communal happiness. Despite denying himself any social communion, the narrator of the 'Task' insinuates that he has already achieved happiness with the local. Indeed, as Hess points out, Cowper's works are all occasional and he was quick to note that they were all commissioned or written at a friend's behest. He thus worked to portray himself not as a great Bard or prophet-genius, but rather a quiet personage who had already found his own personal ethical grounding and wrote only when someone wanted him to share his happiness with others. All of his virtues and the qualities that give him moral confidence are always implicitly present and don't need to be brought out in writing. Within his own

68 Ibid, 144.

69 Ibid, 185.

logic of virtue, Cowper is not great because he writes great works that will create change, but rather because he has already accepted the love of community that means he will always be an anchored local patriot; the fact that he creates works which communicate this already-existent relationship with the local world is simply a bonus.

Conclusion: the Material Community

As moving as Cowper's descriptions are, Cowper's fantasy of virtual reality remains inadequate to its task. Hess, Gilman and others are right to observe that, while his innovations allow him to seem as though he had already achieved social happiness with the environment, contemporaries saw Cowper as a harried, Rousseauian figure forever precluded from fully inhabiting the happy home he announced. The small worlds that Cowper takes solace in are not true communities but rather places to focus on the problem of virtue. His work defines poetry as a ruminative, cursory activity rather than a rousing or declarative one, returning to the folly but necessity of ethical aspiration and the inability of the honest man to find community even as he feels the continual drive towards it. Cowper can put no faith in any object unless it lies outside social networks of power—like the family of deer who quietly play with one another—and even those things remind the reader of the inability to find that sort of true community that brings states of happiness:

In such a world so thorny, and where none
Finds happiness unblighted; or, if found,
Without some thistly sorrow at its side;
It seems the part of wisdom...to measure lots
With less distinguish'd than ourselves; that thus
We may with patience bear our moderate ills,

And sympathise with others suffering more.⁷⁰
Cowper's plaintive moralism is certainly an expression of the failure to achieve community, but we should also note that it does not give up the ethics of virtue so much as it makes them dialectical. Cowper's poetry, after all, does not find nothing to commune with but rather finds a temporary home in the world of small things that live on outside of the social world. Each new shock of national life sends Cowper's narrator to a crisis that the ruminations of poetry and the feeling for nature quells. Cowper's community is thus what remains after virtue's failure, as the subject finds an environment he can feel along with in the fragments of nature and crumbs of materiality that he turns to after being disappointed with the political or national worlds.

70 Ibid, 100.

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