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Ashley Szanter
Editor-in-Chief

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Editor’s Note

While coming from myriad backgrounds and geographic locations, the one uniting factor for this journal’s staff and contributors is simple:
we are all graduate students. In a culture that consistently de-values what we do in the humanities, it seems as though our experiences are often defined by never-ending justification in our relentless pursuit to further our education.

*Aelurus*’s mission is to seek out, develop, and showcase the work that graduate students produce. Amidst a sea of conflicting responsibilities, graduate students time and again show an undeniable devotion to our research and writing that can only be explained by our passion for learning and dedication to scholarly discourse.

It is because of this that I dedicate our 2015 issue to graduate students everywhere. While most us still have a long road ahead, I urge you all to continue in your passions. While we will experience a distinct resistance from those who perceive our work as trivial, we know that time and energy committed to our academic interests is rarely wasted. After all, we must have an unwavering academic dedication -- heaven knows we aren’t in it for the money.

Ashley Szanter
Editor-in-Chief

James Fitz Gerald

*De-structured Histories in Fowles’ Fiction: Foucault’s*
Genealogical Discourse and a Rethinking of the Neo-Victorian Metanarrative

Michel Foucault’s “Nietzsche, Genaeology, History” provides a cogent, interrogative excavation of Western discourse—a discourse, he asserts, which is burdened by a “monotonous finality” (“NGH” 76). What Foucault focuses on in his excavation, channeling Nietzsche, is the traditional historian’s obdurate, unwavering search for origins. Origins are lofted, metaphysical expansions implemented by the traditional historian. They are sought after and preceded by their conclusions, and are thus founded upon untruthful, preconceived constructs. In short, origins form specious foundations, and they serve historians not as openings to be challenged or examined, but as metaphysical points of departure to arbitrarily connect one past event to another. They are framed by the guise of a true knowledge or an absolute reason—panoptically oriented ideals to which the traditional historian clings.

With Foucault’s focus on origins in mind, this essay approaches John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) as a text that effects fictionally what Foucault, through his challenging of origins, theorizes historically. The novel, I assert, is a genealogical excavation (to use Foucault’s terminology), and Fowles’ writing calls into question the adherence to origins,
linear teleology, and transcendental finitude found within Western discourse. And while many critics have pointed towards Fowles’ work as an innovative neo-Victorian, postmodern historical fiction, even those who have linked *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* with Foucault’s work have yet to identify the text as anything other than historical fiction. Though I am especially indebted to scholars who have connected Foucault and Fowles before, such as Robert Siegle and Jonathan Loesberg,¹ as well as M. Keith Booker, part of my work’s intent is to observe Fowles’ novel as going beyond historical fiction, and working on a much more interrogative, genealogical level. From a genealogical perspective, Fowles’ text can be understood as a fundamental criticism of the Western tradition’s means/ends logic, and by reading the novel through the lens of Foucault’s “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”—and, to some extent, *The History of Sexuality*—one can recognize the novel as integrating the past, not to use it for its own ends but instead to question modernity’s conception of the past and more closely examine the entrenched discourses of the present.

II. A Genealogy Distinct from History and Fowles’ Interrogation of *Ursprung*

I first want to establish genealogical discourse as integrally divergent from the historical tradition, thus approaching Fowles’ novel not as a historical metafiction but rather as a genealogical excavation of Victorian, and subsequently our own, society. In Foucault’s words, the delineation between genealogy and history is clear, as he notes genealogy “demands relentless erudition” and always questions the “metahistorical deployment” (“NGH” 77). This deployment, according to Foucault, forces “ideal significations and indefinite

teleologies” (“NGH” 77) into a narrative framework, and the tradition consequently annuls and covers that which does not seem to fit within its preordained telos. To distance himself from this strict teleology, Foucault—waxing Heideggerian—effects an “irruption” that “break[s] open” Western analytical thought in order to “show what [beings] are and how they are” (Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?” 95). Foucault breaks open discourse by allowing for the historical tradition to reveal what Martin Heidegger describes as its own de-struction, thereby using the logic of the entrenched discourse against itself. This de-struction (Destruktion), as Heideggerian scholar David Farrell Krell notes, “does not mean ‘destruction’ in the usual sense” (63) for Heidegger, and nor does it for Foucault. Krell points to a term like “destructuring” as reflecting de-struction’s “neutral, ultimately constructive, sense” (63; emphasis mine). Thus, Foucault is de-structuring and breaking open discourse, not to destroy it but, carrying on from Heidegger, to reveal and excavate embedded, rooted Western narratives.

With this Heideggerian framework in mind, it is not surprising that Foucault’s opening of and departure from traditional history is so effectively, violently recounted, even from the beginning of his work: “Genealogy is gray, meticulous,” Foucault writes, “It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times” (“NGH” 76). This opening paragraph sets the stage for a discourse which will interrogate the dangerously dyadic, fraudulently untangled, and so-called translucent history that has dominated the Western tradition. When we are discussing a genealogy, thus, we are not considering an offshoot of traditional history or a new method of approaching an already structured framework. In Foucault’s words, when one thinks genealogically, one is “rejecting” the traditional historical deployment, and directly opposing “the search for ‘origins’” on which Western discourse is unbendingly reliant (“NGH” 77).
An opposition towards this search for origins is found throughout *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, and it is necessary to note that the three particular origins Foucault outlines in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”—*Ursprung*, *Entstehung*, and *Herkunft*—are notably distinct, and yet are all de-structured by Foucault—as well as Fowles, I argue—in order to break open the discourse that relies on them. Remarking on the disparate nature of these origins, scholar Douglas Thomas notes: *Herkunft* refers to family descent or physical stock…*Ursprung* conforms to more traditional notions of origin or source, suggesting a starting point [and thus an ending point]…*Entstehung* denotes still a different source of beginning in terms of arising or development…These three terms…should not be interchangeable. (105)

Foucault takes his readers through each of these origins, and, using the “cutting” language he asserts is necessary to break open ossified Western discourse (“NGH” 88), he de-structs these origins in order to offer an alternative method, free from the discourse Heidegger claims is “ensnared by the tradition” (*Being and Time* 65), and with which one can approach the past. Likewise, Fowles’ novel compellingly reflects Foucault’s de-struction, and reading the fiction through the lens of a Foucauldian genealogy allows for the potential to question not only the historical discourse surrounding Victorian society, economics, and sexuality, but to also interrogate the traditions of the present, which are, no doubt, thoroughly informed by preconceived notions of the past.

Fowles’ novel challenges the preconceived notions of not only the past, but the teleological linearity of Western discourse altogether. Reflective of *Ursprung*, Fowles’ questioning of a discourse’s starting point—which necessitates a beginning/middle/end structure—is apparent from the first pages of his text. Indeed, the author opens his novel with a long, winding sentence, part of which reads: “a person of curiosity could at once have deduced several strong probabilities about the pair who began to walk down the quay at Lyme Regis…” (3). Concluding the opening by telling readers the month and date—March of 1867—Fowles’ ambiguity is a direct interruption of *Ursprung*’s starting point and, consequently, Western discourse’s expected teleology of beginning/middle/end. His
first lines, that is, make it difficult to put faces, names, or purpose to any of what is being described, especially regarding the nebulous pair walking down the quay on whom the description nonetheless focuses.

Moreover, Fowles ends the chapter never mentioning who it is we “persons of curiosity,” in the narrator’s words, are supposed to be “deducing” (3). The opening as a whole is characteristic of Fowles’ sportive and yet caustically interrogative discourse. He is problematizing, from the novel’s very first words, the “concrete body” of historical discourse, as Foucault puts it (“NGH” 80), by implementing vague description and abstract language. A history in the traditional sense, such as a Victorian historical novel, needs this concrete body, this firm origin and beginning, to use as a starting point towards its predetermined end. Fowles’ starting point, however, is more reflective of Foucault’s gray and entangled genealogy—and as the novel continues, it becomes clear the paragraph is far from the only indication that Fowles is writing from a fundamentally genealogical, disruptive perspective.

Indeed, throughout The French Lieutenant’s Woman, Fowles includes one teleological disruption after another. These disruptions come in several forms, as with the narrator’s blocking off entire chapters to talk about 1967; the use of language which forces readers to question the role of the narrator altogether (“Now what could I do with you?” (405) the narrator remarks about the main character, Charles); and finally, the narrator’s de-struction of temporality by transposing himself from the lofted position of contemporaneity to the nineteenth century train car sitting across from Charles. This final interruption is one which necessitates further discussion, for as the narrator describes himself as a “prophet-bearded” (404) man holding a coin in one hand and the fate of his main character in the other, the novel’s genealogical disposition becomes explicit.

Positioning himself as an omnipotent figure aboard the train car, the narrator questions the transcendental foundations upon which Western discourse relies. For, just as he begins the
novel by interrogating *Ursprung*, the starting point of his work, so too does he initiate the conclusion of the novel by challenging the culmination this starting point necessitates. Through Foucault’s—and also Heidegger’s—work, readers can understand the starting point as preexisted by its ending point: an origin can only be designated in relation to “the Fall,” as Foucault puts it (“NGH” 79). Analogously, readers find in Heidegger that the question, which “has today been forgotten” (*Being and Time* 41), is preexisted by the answer, and thus foundational origins and questions are intrinsically flawed by being predated by and necessitating their conclusions. Fowles’ narrator, however, does not want to accept the necessity of the conclusion, the answer, or the Fall. In fact, as he sits across from Charles, wondering where to take the novel, he notes, “I have already thought … of leaving him for eternity on his way to London,” concluding, “But the conventions of … fiction allow … no place for the open, the inconclusive ending” (405).

The narrator here is forced to acknowledge his confinement to the structure of the novel, the tangible pieces of paper that cannot continue indefinitely. Still, he manages to circumscribe this limitation through two narrative methods. Firstly, he leaves the fate of his characters to a coin flip—possibly allowing for the “minute deviations” (“NGH” 86), as Foucault calls them—and secondly, instead of relating only the outcome flipped on, he includes both in his text. And yet it must be considered that even the coin flip is not enough for the narrator, as it only allows for two deviations. In other words, a single flip instates a binary, a framework to which the narrator is vehemently opposed. Indeed, if he could have it his way, he would flip an infinite amount of coins, and he would relate the infinite possible endings, and the very idea of having to write one ending before another seems too linearly dependent and structured for the author. In the narrator’s words, his solution leaves him “with only one problem: I cannot give both versions at once, yet whichever is the second will seem, so strong is the tyranny of the last chapter, the final, the “real” version” (406). Here the narrator uncannily reflects Foucault as he bears witness to the “tyranny” of finitudes, the domination of a culminated teleology, and the fraud of so-called resolution.
Thus, though the novel is relegated to two endings, forcing a dyadic entrapment, no true resolution is reached in either conclusion. Whether readers take the first ending in which Charles is told by Sarah of their child, or the latter ending in which a child never exists and any chance for reunion is unlikely, the state of Charles and Sarah’s relationship is in both conclusions inconclusive. As M. Keith Booker notes in his work on Fowles and Foucault, “What We Have Instead of God,” just as “Charles can never reach a final interpretation of Sarah, so can we as readers never reach a final interpretation of the text in which she appears and to which she gives the title” (187). Here, the starting point of Ursprung and the necessitation of its conclusion are abandoned by Fowles. Furthermore, I suggest the (non)existence of Charles and Sarah’s child is indicative of Fowles’ initial questioning of his own novel’s starting point. The beginning of a life—in this case that of the child—and thus similarly the beginning of a discourse, a text, relies on such varied circumstances (minute deviations) that to render an origin to a single, linear starting point connected directly to a transcendentally appropriated end is constricting and, considering the narrator’s frustration with the necessity to provide an ending at all (405), it is absurd.

III. Entstehung, Herkunft, and Reinterpreting Preconceived Origins

Fowles’ recognition of this absurdity can be witnessed even further when readers take into account an interrogation of the “more exact” (Foucault, “NGH” 80) origins recorded through Entstehung and Herkunft. Indeed, through approaching and questioning the origins of emergence and of bloodline, Fowles’ novel becomes more clearly informed by Foucault’s genealogical discourse, and transcends the confines of its placement within traditional historical fiction. Beginning with Entstehung, Fowles’ complication of sexuality and of the lofted position appropriated by contemporaneity are characteristic of
Foucault’s own castigation of *Entstehung*’s privileged “moment of arising” (Foucault, “NGH” 83).

Fowles’ text directly challenges this moment of arising through calling into question modern preconceptions of Victorian sexuality, and the novel is greatly informed by the Victorian era’s influence upon present sexual discourse. As dominant historical discourse privileges contemporaneity’s transcendentally oriented position—looking back to see how far it has come—Fowles’ work cuts through this privilege by complicating the very notion of “Victorian.” As the traditional historian has already answered what it means to be Victorian—repressive, decadent, patriarchal—contemporaneity appropriates the label of ‘Victorian’ as a blanketed digression from the present’s open sexuality, resistance to ostentation, and so-called gender equality. These notions of the present, of course, are false, and Fowles’ novel questions the present’s preconceptions through placing “Victorian” as, in M. Keith Booker’s words, “not so much a property of the late nineteenth century” but rather “as a way in which the twentieth century views its predecessor” (181). As Booker concludes:

Fowles both problematizes and utilizes various stereotypes of Victorianism to construct his novel … which is not about the Victorian era per se, but about how we view that era and how we construct the past in general … That the actual Victorian era was *far more complex* than many of our notions of it is recognized by Fowles and indicated at several points in his text. (181, emphasis mine)

Booker’s words here are imperative to understanding Fowles’ novel within the scope of Foucault’s work—and given Booker’s assessment, it appears that one way in which Fowles’ novel allows for the incomprehensibility of the past is through accepting its complexities. Furthermore, through implementing an interrupting, involved narrator, Fowles calls into question the concept of a disinterested history. He renders the issues of the Victorian era not as problems we have since emerged from and dealt with, but as intricacies which necessitate further inquiry, and in their complexity reflect our own present.

The narrator problematizes the contemporary conception of Victorian sexuality directly, wondering “if this [conception]
does not lead us into the error of supposing the Victorians were not in fact highly sexed. But they were quite as highly sexed as our own century” (267). Here, Fowles moves beyond “NGH” to the interrogation Foucault sets forth in *The History of Sexuality (HoS)*. In consulting both of Foucault’s works and opening the discourse on sexuality, one finds that both Foucault and Fowles examine *Entstehung* and the point of emergence that the contemporary world assumes it has reached, positioning itself as sexually superior to the Victorian era and thus concealing its own imperfections. Briefly focusing on Foucault’s “We Other Victorians” chapter, it is apparent that Foucault seeks not merely to prove the repressive hypothesis is “mistaken”—rather, Foucault’s genealogical excavation puts “it back within a general economy of discourses” (*HoS* 11). In the same manner, Fowles revisits the Victorian era not to show readers that they may have been wrong about the era or to provide them with solutions, but rather to reinvestigate dominant preconceptions about the period. In other words, these authors are not providing readers with answers, for answers would provide structural, discursive ends to the questions which should always be asked; Foucault and Fowles rather intend their interrogation to break open contemporary discourse regarding the era, constantly pushing for a reevaluation not only of the past but of the present.

This reevaluation is marked by Fowles’ narrator’s mid-novel intrusion, as he asks, “What are we faced with in the nineteenth century?” (266). What readers come to know through many disconcerting realities of nineteenth century England—for instance, “Where more churches were built than in the whole previous history of the country; and where one in sixty houses in London was a brothel” (266)—is that the Victorian era was, not surprisingly, as complex, entangled, and varied as the present. Thus, Fowles is asking what we are faced with not to give us an answer—indeed the entire chapter is inconclusive about how even the narrator views the nineteenth century—but to open up the era within a general economy of discourses. By opening these discourses, Fowles disrupts the present’s own perceptions of
itself. Whereas the traditional historian is preoccupied with the past, ignoring the present only until it can be used as a means towards her objective of connecting it linearly to moments of the past, the genealogist is constantly aware of the present not to arbitrarily link it to the past, but to re-interrogate the structure of its preconceptions, its misconceptions. Fowles indeed interrogates the present through de-structuring notions of the nineteenth century, which compel a startling charge:

So it seems very far from sure that the Victorian’s did not experience a much keener, because less frequent, sexual pleasure than we do … In a way, by transferring to the public imagination what they left to the private, we are the more Victorian…since we have…destroyed also a great deal of the pleasure. (269)

Fowles is critically lampooning the preconceived notion of sexual freedom that the present assumes for itself, and he uses a flippant tone throughout the chapter to humorously—though effectively—question and open further discourse on Victorian and contemporary sexuality. He is, much like Foucault in HoS, interrogating the absurdity of structuring sexuality as a mode of repression from which to historically emerge, as if it is a concept which can be ranked and placed on a hierarchy where the present celebrates a so-called liberated sexuality and pities the teleologically and ontologically distanced Victorians. The narrator himself hints at this deductive notion on nineteenth century sexuality, admitting “Of course we cannot measure” a rate of pleasure, concluding facetiously, “but it may be luckier for us than for the Victorians that we cannot” (269).

In effect, both Foucault’s HoS and Fowles’ The French Lieutenant’s bring forth a similar question: is the contemporary world really in a position to privilege its view of sexuality to that of the Victorian’s? Though neither gives an answer, of course, both are no doubt highly skeptical. Indeed, because both are working genealogically, the notion

“In the same manner, Fowles revisits the Victorian era not to show readers that they may have been wrong about the era or to provide them with solutions, but rather to reinvestigate dominant preconceptions about the period.”
of this kind of metaphysical, teleological positioning, where one views from above and beyond all that was wrong or different in the past so as to link it to the present’s superiority, is a notion about which both authors hold reservations. Indeed it is here where contemporary theorist Judith Butler’s recent work *Frames of War* (2009) lends itself to questions regarding the present’s perceived superiority in terms of sexual progress—reflecting, that is, the work of Foucault. Though Butler’s project in *Frames of War* expands much further than sexuality and modern preconceptions of the past, her chapter “Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time” recovers the Foucauldian discourse on genealogy, suggesting continuity between the two authors. In Butler’s words, “It is my view that sexual politics … and … claims to new or radical sexual freedoms are appropriated precisely … within state power” (102). As Butler concludes, these purported “freedoms” are rooted in “the sphere of modernity as the privileged site” (102). The “hegemonic conceptions” (102) of progressive modernity Butler is challenging correlate directly to the traditional preconceptions Foucault—and, given this essay, Fowles—are excavating. Butler’s words inform a sexualized bio-politicization existing within the power of the state, the power of a dominating discourse. This discourse, bearing in mind both Foucault and Fowles’ terminology, appropriates an evolution which progresses and can be viewed as advancement when viewed against the past. It is evident, however, that through approaching Foucault, Fowles, and now Butler’s consideration of the “privileged site[s]” (102) of modernity, readers are being warned to, in Butler’s words, not define ourselves “over and against a pre-modern temporality” (102). Alternatively put, readers are being cautioned against assuming that evolutionary or ontological progression is a mode at which the present has arrived.

This cautioning necessitates further inquiry, and, returning to Foucault’s “NGH,” I want to remark upon Fowles’ implementation of evolution as a reflection of Foucault’s—and
more recently, Butler’s—criticisms of historical discourse’s appropriation of an evolutionary, advancing process. By doing so, I hope to further strengthen the relationship between the authors and their questioning of an emerging, ontologically privileged origin. Indeed Charles, an amateur evolutionary scientist, embodies the “typically Victorian misreading of evolution as [a] teleological process obeying strictly predictable laws of cause-and effect” (Booker 183). His misappropriation of evolution as a progression instead of as an unpredictable, incomprehensibly random process, is reminiscent of Foucault’s own cautioning for those thinking genealogically, as he notes a genealogy “does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people” (“NGH” 81). The appropriation of the evolutionary process by the Victorian era, leading to such theories as social Darwinism, is being challenged by Fowles as a reflection of a present discourse’s own elevated appreciation for itself as a culmination, a time emerging from the past and learning from it. If one spatializes time into a beginning, middle, and end structure—which Fowles questions through metanarrational techniques—then the present will already assume a closer association to the end, and thus will privilege itself as nearest to the transcendental apex of its telos.

This telos is sought by Charles, who acts as the supposedly disinterested scientist and archivist, connecting species in a linear progression from the past to the present. As Foucault warns, though, readers must “not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things” (“NGH” 81). By parodying Charles’ disposition towards restoring this very continuity, going back in time as a historian does to show how the “past actively exists in the present” (Foucault, “NGH” 81), Fowles calls into question the same weaknesses endemic to traditional Western discourse that Foucault challenges. In Booker’s words, “through the many highly explicit metafictional devices” implemented by Fowles, he is able to provide “some extremely effective questioning of the assumptions upon which [a Western] narrative is constructed and interpreted” (183).

Fowles’ questioning of these assumptions can be further observed in his critique of the relationship between power and knowledge. Charles, for instance, is persistently condescending
and views others as beneath him not only because of his aristocratic position but also because he is so well read—intelligence made possible, no doubt, by his privileged, noble standing and upbringing (Booker 184). The author here is proleptic of Foucault’s own criticism of power/knowledge, and this criticism is intricately connected to the explication of Entstehung itself. In Foucault’s words, a discourse of domination, rooted in the pursuit of an absolute knowledge, “estabishes marks of its power and engraves memories on things and even within bodies” (‘NGH’ 85). This biopoliticization is found time and again in Fowles’ text, with Charles studying Sarah as he would a fossil, and the knowledge production within the text is observed as characters, especially Charles, assign worth to others based not on who they are or how they act, but on whether or not they are well-read. Charles’ preoccupation with evolution ultimately provides a direct representation “of the drive toward classification and categorization”—in this case, of human beings—that often characterizes the Victorian era (Booker 183).

From the lofted position of the amateur evolutionist, Charles can structure beings into roles in no different a manner than the metaphysically oriented historian, who structures the past to inform the present. The shortcoming for this structuration is that it dismisses that which does not fit within its teleologically oriented borders. If it does not serve as a point in the linear progression, then it is not accounted for. Similarly, Sarah is, for Charles, a point of progress, an evolutionary marvel in her independent, sexually mysterious nature, and he obsesses over her history and her future—he is expectedly distraught, thus, when he comes to learn Sarah was actually a virgin before their copulation, for this disrupts his fixed understanding of her past. Readers can even observe Ernestina, the non-gentry young

2 An example is Dr. Grogan, whose deep interest in Darwin and the sciences brings praise from the comparatively under-read Charles. Dr. Grogan is perhaps the only character in the book to whom Charles is able to admit he is intellectually beneath, and thus the doctor is a touchstone for Charles, similar to a priest for a person of faith. Indeed, Charles seeks guidance in the Irish doctor, and their sessions most often reflect religious confessions.
woman who is hesitantly proposed to by Charles early in the novel, as embodying the exclusionary effects of Charles’ metaphysical adherence to a misappropriated conceptualization of evolutionary progression. He views Ernestina, for instance, as “so very nearly” (25) a perfect, “prim little [moppet]” and, conversely, “yet not quite” (26). She is, for Charles, emotionally and intellectually disposable to the budding scientist because she does not fit into his search for evolutionary, sexual, and, given this essay’s discussion of social Darwinism and Ernestina’s status as non-gentry, socio-economic progression. Moreover, these progressions, especially those pertaining to the social and economic order, can be more closely examined through investigating Foucault’s third origin, that of Herkunft.

Indeed, Herkunft, an origin founded upon lineage, linearity, and bloodlines—and its excavation in Fowles’ work—is crucial for approaching the novel as a genealogical discourse. In Foucault’s understanding, Herkunft is the “equivalent of stock or descent; it is the ancient affiliation to a group, sustained by the bonds of blood, tradition, or social class” (“NGH” 81). The origin’s analysis, Foucault concludes, “often involves a consideration of race or social type” (“NGH” 81), and it is the social class and type relied upon by this origin, which is located throughout The French Lieutenant’s Woman, especially in the case of Charles, who is bound by his bloodline and his hereditary stock. With this understanding in mind, Fowles’ excavation of Charles’ own bloodline is an embodiment of Foucault’s examination of Herkunft, an examination which permits an uncovering, a revealing, a discovery.

To approach such a discovery surrounding Herkunft, Fowles offers a rethinking through the superficial whom will (s)he marry? predicament, a trope endemically linked to the construct of Victorian literature. Much of the novel’s plot, in fact, is informed by Charles’ (in)decision to marry, and Fowles is revisiting the Victorian cliché in much the same way Foucault is revisiting origins and, later in his essay, the Platonic modes of historical discourse: both authors are using the tools of tradition against themselves, and letting them effect their own destruction. In this manner, Fowles’ nuanced incorporation of a troubled male deciding whom he loves is to question the foundation of the trope itself. For, regardless of which ending
one considers, no course offers Charles the chance to make the decision—in both conclusions, he is ostracized and condemned by Ernestina’s family, and it is Sarah, not Charles, who judges whether or not their relationship will continue. Thus by stripping Charles’ agency over his own romantic fate, Fowles is interrogating the traditional gender and social politics of Victorian literature and historical fictions, where a preordained, so-called true love, is viewed as the natural culmination of the narrative’s telos.

Notably, Sarah plays a pivotal role in the departure and break from this telos, and further consideration should be given to her character, especially in her reflection of and bearing on Herkuft. It seems, that is, that the only aspect limiting Charles from pursuing Sarah as something more than an evolutionary curiosity or emotional project is her social class and tainted bloodline—particularly given his understanding of and reaction to her lost virginity. Regarding this (mis)understanding, readers can witness how fundamentally dependent Charles is on his origins, his stock, and that not only is he unable to view Sarah as an individual, but his dependence on titles (legal or social) destroys him when he realizes that Sarah’s own title—the French Lieutenant’s woman, or whore—is based upon a false construct. For Sarah never gave herself to the dubious French Lieutenant, and yet because Charles understood her as doing just that, depending on her origin as a sexually promiscuous and emotionally fragile woman, he is struck speechless when he realizes, after making love to her, that she was a virgin. He “perceive[s] a red stain on the front tails of his shirt,” and feels as though a “thunderbolt struck him” (354). Charles’ world, dictated by titles, labels, and structures, has come crashing down when he realizes Sarah’s own origin is not what it had seemed, concluding she must be a “loathsome succubi” who plans on blackmailing him (354). Sarah, in not necessarily inventing her past with the French Lieutenant but certainly not arguing against it either—she decidedly accepts her designation as the French Lieutenant’s whore, regardless of its veracity—embodies the
disrupted narrative of a teleological origin to which the novel’s characters cling so firmly. Her mysteriousness, her perceived treachery to Charles’ trust, forcing him to plead “Why? Why? Why?” (354), is imperative to understanding the character not as a liar or fabricator but as a direct challenge to the discourse dominating her society. Sarah is effecting questioning, making even the most stubborn of Victorian men (Charles) reevaluate his values and his dependencies. Indeed, by the end of the scene, Charles is begging to marry the girl beneath his social standing, but her ultimate denial of the man—“I beseech you. Leave!” (356), she says—is a clear indication that Sarah is the hammer Fowles is implementing to break open the social constructs dominating not only the Victorian era but his own time. For the narrator himself never gives an answer to Charles’ “Why? Why? Why?” and readers are left to deduce that Sarah is not simply a New Woman in the Victorian sense of the word, but is an independent being existing unto herself without the dependency on a bloodline—she has no family, she has no origin. In fact, as Charles pleads he simply wants to “be allowed to understand” Sarah (356), the former’s dismissal and the lack of conclusion given to the scene makes it clear readers are not supposed to understand, comprehend, take hold of Sarah’s true nature. We are simply there to bear witness.

Fowles’ parodying of Herkunft, evident through Charles’ inability to grasp why Sarah does not want to marry him—he is of noble birth, after all—is reflected also through the relationship between Charles and Ernestina. As the two walk early in the story, for instance, the reader is told, “[Ernestina’s] father was a very rich man; but her grandfather had been a draper” (7), while Charles’ “had been a baronet” (8). Here one observes the dependence Charles has on his stock and his noble bloodline, which is so obdurate that it brings him to the point of dismissing Ernestina based on what her grandfather did for a living. In Charles’ world, respect, honor, and nobility are decided not by one’s character but by one’s bloodline. Indeed, the irony of Charles’ view of Ernestina’s family becomes manifest as Charles’ late grandfather is described in the next chapter:

His grandfather the baronet had fallen into the second of the two great categories of English country squires: claret-swilling fox hunters and scholarly collectors of everything
under the sun. He had collected books principally; but in his latter years had devoted a deal of his money and much more of his family’s patience to the excavation of the harmless hummocks of earth that pimpled his three thousand Wiltshire acres. (12-13)

While Charles cannot get past Ernestina’s lowly bloodline, he seems to take no issue with the fact that his own grandfather, whom he esteems over Ernestina’s, did absolutely nothing except collect books and dig up his massive estate. Fowles is thus problematizing the notion of power and elite—the gentry are chosen and ordained, and thus do not have to trouble themselves with work—and as the author reveals Charles’ financial predicament in the form of his uncle’s untimely marriage, readers are given yet another parodying and poignant conceptualization by the author of Herkunft.

Readers come to learn that Charles may lose his inheritance. Such a loss is entirely contingent on Charles’ uncle, who was given the family estate when Charles’ father died whether or not he has a baby boy with his new wife. Thus, while Charles is chastising Ernestina’s lowly born yet industrious and hardworking family—who are now extremely wealthy—he himself is neglecting the fact that he may soon be bankrupt. This reassertion of his own privileged position is reflected in Fowles’ epigraph for chapter thirty, which comes from Marx’s The German Ideology: “But the more these conscious illusions of the ruling classes are shown to be false and the less they satisfy common sense, the more dogmatically they are asserted” (243). Likewise, the more tenuous Charles’ position of nobility becomes, the more he asserts his position as a higher class citizen; the more his wealth comes under scrutiny, the more he treats his faithful servant Sam as disposable—at one point it is remarked, “But Sam [for Charles] was like all servants, dismissable [sic]” (372). This “distortion of reality” (270), as Fowles calls it, is, in Foucault’s words, Charles “maintain[ing] the absolute truth of [the] fictions” which sustain his bloodline (82). It is the ruling class reaffirming its own legitimacy through
falsities—Charles’ wealth is founded upon nothing but the blood running through his veins—and Sarah’s neglecting of these reaffirmations through her dismissal of Charles is an utter de-structuring of the origins relied upon by the ruling class and traditional discourse.

It is evident, then, that origins in Western discourse, in all their metaphysical, teleological trappings, are challenged in Fowles’ novel in ways resembling what Foucault outlines as Ursprung, Entstehung, and Herkuft. By viewing Fowles’ text through the lens of a Foucauldian genealogy, the novel can be understood not as a metafiction working historically to point out the faults of the Victorian era, but as a genealogical discourse digging through entrenched, linear developments so as to de-struct and reopen the traditions of both the past and the present. Reconsidering the novel genealogically, and as not necessarily outside of but constellated with the neo-Victorian genre, mobilizes the narrative as an interested, interrogative text that resists pursuits of structured and ostensibly definitive answers. Thus Fowles’ work potentializes an ongoing (re)consideration of how we approach the past, and in rethinking the novel’s own place in literary discourse—in its acting as more than (despite most scholars placing it restrictively within) neo-Victorian historical fiction—we can track the work, even in its reception, as indicative of a genealogy’s refusal to be neatly stratified, categorized, and delineated.
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Maria Alberto

“Surely, man had never before so terribly altered”: Reading the Posthuman Gothic in Two of Poe’s Short Stories

Although Edgar Allan Poe is credited with introducing general American audiences to genres as varied as detective fiction, science fiction, and travel satire, the term now most commonly associated with his work is undoubtedly that of “the Gothic.” In his _Literature of Terror_, a brief introductory overview of the Gothic as first a tradition and then a genre, David Punter credits Poe with being the earliest remembered practitioner of the Gothic short story, despite his multiple predecessors (Punter 173). Poe’s novelty as a sensational author during the nineteenth century, however, cannot fully account for his enduring
popularity among contemporary audiences. Rather than ignore John Barrell’s famous warning against assuming that a text has “universal content” and thus a single meaning to fit all needs and eras of readership (Barrell 42), though, contemporary scholarship can admit that Poe’s Gothic short stories remain appealing because they offer new challenges to the different social and critical atmospheres in which they are presented and consumed. For instance, both a Transcendentalist reading from the nineteenth century and a posthumanist reading from the twenty-first can note and examine common themes of human transience, identity, and uncertainty: here the same elements of Poe’s Gothic remain relevant, interesting, and challenging across a remarkable span of time and to two noticeably different schools of criticism. Poe’s particular embodiment of the Gothic, though, also offers the critical opportunity of combining or comparing traditions. For instance, while fears concerning impermanence and agency can be found through any critical reading of Poe’s 1839 “Fall of the House of Usher” and his 1842 “Masque of the Red Death,” these stories’ relationships to “dark” themes such as horror, death, and the dead can also be read as forerunners to or precursors of a posthuman Gothic tradition and aesthetic. From a contemporary retrospect, “Fall” and “Masque” present an interesting opportunity to be read as at once posthuman (for their sensibility of becoming something other than human if divinity, or anything more than human, is impossible) and Gothic (for the sensational, emotionally-charged method through which they make this attempt).

Punter helpfully situates Poe within the Gothic tradition by placing his work at the crossroads between the original intention and its more sensationalized second wave, and then by outlining three of his major contributions to this tradition. He places the debut of Poe’s most well-known short stories during the Gothic’s pivot away from the anti-Augustinian and toward the purely sensational (Punter 38-40), a change during which characters – and their bodies – became focal points rather than protagonists, and are depicted in order to recount their horrific experiences or doings rather than for personal heroism. Punter also notes that Poe contributed some of its most enduring themes to this second-wave of the Gothic tradition, including the split personality, the live burial, and the structure of “symbolist terror” in which the
text is moved forward by emotional “spiraling intensification” rather than by narrative (Punter 176-77).

Each of these three themes assume a foundation in human identity and individuality that, when withdrawn, generates the repulsion and horror that audiences have come to expect from the Gothic. Within Poe’s idea of the split personality, for instance, the human is splintered into normal/acceptable and abnormal/unacceptable, or what Wayne Pounds calls the manifestly Gothic “divided self” (Pounds 425). Similarly, the horror of Poe’s live burial theme stems from characters’ mistaken or intentional ignorance of other humans as individuals, and his “spiraling intensification” (Punter 177) derives from a lack of narrative value on human agency. Critics such as Pounds assert that “It is not certain that Poe fully understood, at least in a way he could clearly articulate, the significance of the horrors [that] he so carefully and consciously contrived” (Pounds 426), but others still credit Poe with introducing what later became “our great subject, the disintegration of personality” (Tate 241). In emphasizing a fairly obvious point, then – that Poe was writing his Gothic short stories long before Ihab Hassan introduced the term “posthuman” in 1977 – critics like Pounds and Tate simultaneously trace a more useful connection. Poe’s work certainly precedes the historic advent of a specific term, but the “disintegration of personality” (Tate 241) that he continually referenced and developed undeniably precedes and prefigures many of the aims Hassan’s term would later accrue.

Claims that Poe’s work predates or reflects a posthuman Gothic can also be muddied by the proliferation of definitions for the terms “posthuman” and “posthumanism,” especially as such definitions often seem at odds with one another: Veronique Voruz, in particular, notes that “there is a huge diversity between the different positions that rally around the label of ‘posthumanism’” (Voruz 428). For instance, Donna Haraway’s pioneering stance that “My focus is the figure of a broken and suffering humanity, signifying—in ambiguity, contradiction, stolen symbolism, and unending chains of non-innocent
translation—a possible hope” (Haraway 87) has somehow led to or resulted in Rosi Braidotti’s more measured statement that:

Far from being the nth variation in a sequence of prefixes that may appear both endless and somehow arbitrary, the posthuman condition introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species. (Braidotti 2-3)

Ultimately, Andrew Miah contends that the most common denominators among posthumanism definitions best characterize its values as “an ongoing undecidability over the value of transgressing boundaries” (Miah 18). Thus Haraway and Braidotti at least begin from the same place: their posthumanist interrogations stem from similar questions about human identity, its constitution, and its objective value.

Posthumanism’s common question of identification and individuality speaks to similar sensibilities in Poe’s “Fall of the House of Usher” and later in “Masque of the Red Death.” While both stories already carry inarguable themes of impermanence and loss, both are also notable for two further similarities with one another and with the lines of questioning proposed by Haraway, Braidotti, and Miah. Initially, both “Fall” and “Masque” feature narratives and narrators that seem at once conscious of and dependent on horror as a means of driving Punter’s “spiraling intensification” (Punter 177), and subsequently, both stories also orchestrate a similar overarching treatment of human death and the human dead as distinctly-detached events or realities.

Arguably, such features are already characteristic of the sensational, second-wave Gothic movement Punter describes. A closer consideration, though, can also show that both “Fall” and “Masque” complicate horror and death beyond the sensational pathos of that particular Gothic tradition, and instead develop these themes into what would be more accurately labeled a posthuman Gothic. Here, in fact, the terms “human horror” and “human death” might be better applied, as the posthuman Gothic merges the Gothic dependence on horror with the posthuman’s questionings about what in fact constitutes or negates humanity; similarly, it also joins the Gothic preoccupation with viscerally or atmospherically shocking death to the posthuman’s acute
sensibility that binaries such as human/in-subhuman and alive/dead are more fluid than traditionally accepted.

This merging movement toward a combined posthuman Gothic is perhaps most easily visible in “Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe’s short story in which an unnamed narrator visits an ailing boyhood friend and witnesses that friend’s descent into mania under a combination of his illness, a strange guilt, and the death of his twin sister. With his premonitory introduction and his melancholy descriptions of an ominous landscape, Poe has the unnamed narrator of “Fall” relate a setting and a character sketch whose sensational Gothic potential readers would have immediately recognized: language such as that encapsulating this narrator’s “utter depression of soul” (“Fall” 88) and the “contemplation of the House of Usher [that] was a mystery all insoluble” (“Fall” 88) can be instantly categorized as examples of that unmistakable “connection between sublimity and terror” (Punter 39). Further into “Fall,” though, a recognizably-sensational Gothic narrative and use of language slowly develop into something more indefinable – a development that the narrator is already previewing when he calls his inexplicable depression “the hideous dropping off of the veil” (“Fall” 88). Though this phrase can be understood as simply a sensational figure of speech, it also serves as a first indicator of imminent questions and transgressions concerning human-centric horror.

As Poe explicitly connects this “hideous” removal of a comforting, blanket untruth to a depression his narrator associates with the unequivocally Gothic “combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us” (“Fall” 88), it is fairly easy to overlook this narrator’s subsequent observation that “still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth” (“Fall” 88). This tacit acknowledgement of abilities or even modes of consciousness beyond the narrator’s very human and already flawed “depth” marks a first move toward the posthuman Gothic, Poe already laying the groundwork for a narratorial declaration that complements Braidotti’s anti-Renaissance/humanism leanings.
Poe’s narrator confides in readers that “Surely, man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher!” (“Fall” 90) after seeing his friend in person for the first time in years. Roderick Usher’s countenance, expression, and overall appearance have altered so much that the narrator declares “I could not, even with effort, connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity” (“Fall” 91).

Though Poe uses the term “simple humanity” only once in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the ideas encapsulated in this term saturate the text thematically. For Roderick Usher, and later by extension for his unnamed narrator friend, humanity – their own, or others – is not simple. Rather than being a default state of narrative or actual existence, humanity for the two central characters of “Fall” is a fraught concept of identity. Considered from a purely physiological standpoint, for instance, Usher’s humanity is fragile because it consists of several centuries’ inbreeding “in the direct line of descent” (“Fall” 89). Also, but less tangibly, Usher’s humanity is contested by the way his individual/human identity is compared with and dictated by the family manse “in the minds of the peasantry who used it [the appellation ‘House of Usher’]” (“Fall” 89). In both instances, Poe subtly re-positions Usher just outside common definitions of the human. Considering the narrator’s descriptions of and interactions with Usher, it seems clear that this main character is intended to be understood as a tragic human hero, but his situation within a crumbling line of human succession and alongside, even as, a decaying symbol of former human grandeur are also immediately apparent. James Berkeley defends this apparent contradiction as characteristic of what he calls Poe’s “vision of transcendent posthumanism” (Berkeley 358), which he notes “entail[s] a relationship between self and alterity that, like the post-human, offer the possibility of transcending the conventional limits of the individualized human subject” (Berkeley 358). Though inarguably human himself, and moreover human in a purely physical sense, Usher is also simultaneously positioned as non- or sub-human.

Poe’s denial of Usher’s “simple humanity” is further emphasized by the peripheral presence of the man’s sister Madeline, though this character’s case complicates the question of a posthuman Gothic aesthetic within “Fall” still further.
Though Usher’s inbred heritage and conflation with a distinctly non-human, distinctly decaying structure can be presumed to apply to his twin sister as well, Poe’s portrayal of Madeline also begins to deal with questions of thanatology and its definitions rather than solely human identity. The tie between these concepts – a value on human identity beaten down by external impressions and a horror of the additional damage that the sundering of death would inflict – is presaged even as Usher describes his sister’s ailment. Madeline’s illness, Poe has Usher declare, consists of “a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character” (“Fall” 92) – a description that offers support for the critical “disintegration of personality” argument (Tate 241) in the way it emphasizes the decline of Madeline’s self. Not only does Poe have Usher emphasize that his sister is “wasting away,” but he also underscores this horror by showing the woman’s utter “apathy” concerning her own decline. Jonathan Cook contends that “Fall” is notable for such “iconographic depiction[s] of the terrors of death” (Cook 4) more so than even the canonical incest readings, arguably because the thanatological emphasis of Madeline’s combined decline and unconcern offers a much closer brush with personal human violation than even the sexual taboo. If Usher’s situation is horrifying in a way beyond the traditionally-understood Gothic for the way it functions to reduce human identity, then Madeline’s situation is the more appalling for the way it surpasses traditionally-Gothic depictions of death. Instead of portraying a gruesome, unexpected death as a horrific experience for both characters and readers, Poe makes Madeline’s impending death all the more affective for her full consciousness of and apathy despite it.

In spite of such considerable narrative development, Poe continues to extract effect from Madeline as “Fall” progresses. Rather than use her actual death halfway through the story (“Fall” 94) to simply end the character’s combined helplessness and detachment in the face of her fading identity and impending death, Poe instead transfers this potent combination to her
surviving brother, and Usher is then depicted experiencing all the helpless, hopeless horror of his sister’s previous situation in addition to his own. While Cook argues that Usher’s “main” purpose is to try and “transcend mortality in an idealized realm given over to the creation and enjoyment of art” (Cook 4), Poe ratifies this by specifying that Usher is of “a peculiar sensibility of temperament” (“Fall” 91) that makes him melancholy, easily upset, and prone to imaginative flights of fancy. As a result of this temperament, Usher initially copes with his sister’s death by retreating into his books (“Fall” 95-6), whose dramatic stories eventually help drive him still further into confusion and horror (“Fall” 96-7) before the apparition of his sister (“Fall” 98).

Poe’s treatment of Madeline’s apparent return from the dead to kill her somehow-guilty brother is perhaps the most striking example of the posthuman Gothic vein to be found in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” if only for the very brevity of this encounter. Rather than set the entirety of “Fall” after Madeline’s death and thus offer readers a traditional story of grief, madness, haunting, and retribution, Poe’s location of this story forces readers to consider recognizably sensational Gothic themes from a closer, more subjective level. Despite its thematic effectiveness as a story that continues to move and disturb twenty-first century readers for a time-spanning variety of human horror, though, “Fall” is not his only story that can be read as a type of the posthuman Gothic. Instead, Poe’s 1842 “Masque of the Red Death” can even be said to improve on the modus operandi of “Fall” in its increasingly-close and subjective utilization of “dark” themes such as horror, death, and the dead.

Instead, Poe’s 1842 “Masque of the Red Death” can even be said to improve on the modus operandi of “Fall.” The very premise of “Masque” already indicates the presence of a more developed posthuman Gothic in its tale of a prince who hides his court away from a deadly plague and throws lavish revels to distract everyone from the threat of death beyond their castle walls. Where the nouveau-horror of “Fall” functions by scrutinizing subjective experiences of “dark” themes, “Masque” further complicates posthuman Gothic themes involving human identity and individuality under siege by horror, death, and the dead. This difference can be distilled to a question of distance and dissociation. For both Usher and the narrator through the
majority of “Fall,” human horror consists of identity in danger of being subsumed and human death is a problematic yet artistically/abstractly framed concept. In “Masque,” though, Poe presents two utterly different central characters with far more inexorable iterations of these two themes: human identity is not subsumed, but instead completely unimportant, and death is not a frightening possibility, but instead a horrifyingly inescapable certainty.

The narrative of “Masque” pivots on the experience of two extreme counterparts: a suppressed narrator whose existence in the text is only hinted at by a few unquestionably self-aware first-person references, and then the Prince Prospero, a third-person persona whose textual presence is maintained by constant descriptions of his excessiveness. Though most critics offer different explanations of the narrative consequences these disparate voices offer “Masque,” many also contend that neither the narrator nor Prospero is quite what Poe explicitly asks readers to believe of them – that is, in those cases where Poe provides unequivocal explanations about “Masque”’s central characters at all.

David R. Dudley, for instance, refutes the claim that the narrator is an anthropomorphized Death, and instead claims the ambiguity of “whatever this narrator is, he is [just] not a normal human being” (Dudley 170); in a similar way, Lauren Delli Santi claims that Prospero is best understood as the deliberate antithesis of the positive/glorified view of death prevalent in Poe’s experience of mid-1800s American culture (Delli Santi 98-9). While both Dudley and Delli Santi understandably claim the relative safety of neutral ground rather than attempt strict definitions of either the narrator or the most visible character of
“Masque,” one categorical similarity is the way both characters elude comfortable definitions. The narrator is never actually identified, despite common critical claims of his being Death, and in fact rarely surfaces beyond almost unconscious sentences such as “But first let me tell of the rooms in which it was held” (“Masque” 461) – while even aside from his callous quarantine, Prospero and his plans are “bold and fiery, and . . . glowed with barbaric lustre” (“Masque” 462). Poe presumably intends audiences to see and read these two characters as men, in every historical sense of the word, yet at the same time thwarts such a simple reading. Though readers can easily and perhaps accurately assume that these characters as men qua men, the issue of humanity in either a literal or a socio-cultural sense is harder to settle as definitively. In that literal sense, there is no proof of the narrator’s physiological humanity, while in the socio-cultural sense, the language with which Poe presents Prospero paints that character more in the Augustinian definition of a sub-human barbarian than an enlightened, conscious man.

This return to the ‘human horror’ question concerning the substance and value of identity simultaneously underscores a more chilling development to the related question of human death. “Fall” features human death more as a failure – whether specifically a failure of art (Cook 4), or more generally as the actual failure of life and lineage – but Poe takes a more chilling stance in “Masque” by depicting human death as an inevitability, and furthermore an accepted one. This difference can most strongly be seen in comparisons of the two stories’ non-narrator protagonists: where Usher continually worries about Madeline’s forthcoming death, for instance, Prospero is “happy and dauntless and sagacious” even as “his dominions were half depopulated” (“Masque” 461) and the prince himself is fully conscious that most of his subjects are actively dying outside his castle walls. Moreover, where Usher tries to hide from the reality of his sister’s death and seems to think himself guilty of her live burial (“Fall” 95-7), Prospero acts so dismissively that the narrator easily recounts the impression that “the external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think. The prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure. . . All these and security were within” (“Masque” 461).
The nature or character of Prospero’s “security within,” though, calls the strict definition of his apparent humanity into further question. In describing the lavish rooms that house the prince’s “great fête,” Poe leaves readers in no doubt that “it was his [Prospero’s] own guiding taste which had given character to the masqueraders” before having the story’s narrator assure readers “Be sure they were grotesque” (“Masque” 463). And although the term “grotesque” might initially seem most suited for recognizably Gothic descriptions, the precise type of grotesqueries that the narrator goes on to describe instead seems designed to provoke a more particular reaction:

There were arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There were much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust. (“Masque” 463)

Although perceptions of the human body predominate in this jumble of terms, sensations, and images from the narrator of “Masque,” the intended impression can also be difficult to sort out. In particular, the conflation of conflicting terms such as “beautiful,” “wanton,” and “disgust” points partially toward a confused vision of sexuality, but also toward what James Clifton terms the horror of the body (Clifton 377). Put differently, Poe’s use of language to describe Prospero’s already-horrific celebration of death – of apparently escaping it – at once invites readers to focus on the “beautiful” portrayal of the human alongside or as much as on the madman’s delirium and the unnamed figures’ “unsuited” deformities. The narrator’s convolution of both Gothic terminology and reader expectation thus works to engender a similarly mixed response – especially when considering that Prospero is holding this masquerade as a means of celebrating his court’s survival in a land both literally and figuratively stricken by death. Poe’s use of recognizably Gothic themes thus morphs into something more complicated: the present mixture of bodily beauty and mutation can also be
imagined mirrored in the way death is similarly claiming bodies beyond the abbey walls.

The grand collision of personal human horror and inescapable human death peaks during the final confrontation of “Masque,” when Prospero’s already absurd and monstrous “appliances of pleasure” go so finally and horribly awry. This sequence begins when Prospero believes that he is being mocked by a reveler costumed as the plague, and so chases the offending “guest” across the multicolored rooms of his palace (“Masque” 464). In offering this response to this specific perception of threat, Poe presents Prospero as being affronted by a perceived slight to his position of authority over human death. His question to his courtiers, asking “who dares insult us with this blasphemous mockery? Seize him and unmask him—that we may know whom we have to hang, at sunrise, from the battlements!” (“Masque” 464), shows two ways Prospero takes the apparent insult to heart. From his vantage as a “bold and fiery” prince characterized by “barbaric lustre” (“Masque” 462), he does not appreciate being outdone by someone he deems a lesser/less noble man: more importantly, though, from his vantage as apparent master of the human death around him, Prospero cannot countenance a challenge to this position. A noble dressed as the Red Death during this particular masquerade would undercut Prospero’s apparent mastery of human death by bringing the plague inside the abbey figuratively when Prospero had used his own authority to sequester his court beyond the disease literally. Prospero not only seizes upon this inference, but also meets it in the same way by terming the challenge “blasphemous” and threatening to hang the offender on the battlements beyond the abbey, and thus beyond his supposed protection from the plague outside (“Masque” 464). However, since the robed figure is not in fact a cockily-costumed nobleman but the Red Death personified (“Masque” 464), Prospero’s design to re-assert his mastery over human death fails utterly. In trying to avenge this apparent slight, the prince both literally and figuratively pursues Death, to his own end and the ruin of everyone around him.

Throughout any close reading of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Masque of the Red Death,” then critics of any school would be hard-pressed to ignore clear characteristics
of the Gothic tradition, especially the sensational foci on horror, death, and the dead – but audiences’ takeaway from Poe’s use of such elements can be also be deepened by looking beyond their easy, automatic classification as “Gothic.” A closer consideration of the mechanics behind Poe’s dark sensationalism in both “Fall” and “Masque,” for instance, reveals that typical fears concerning horror and death are combined and complicated in a particular way – and the term “posthuman Gothic” thus becomes a particularly apt description when considering how these two short stories present settings, characters, and narratives in which horror stems from specific concerns about the loss or lack of humanity and its attendance agency. Poe’s particular interest in human horror/identity and human death seems to attempt more for his readers than a sensational chill based on superficial scares. Instead, as both “Fall” and “Masque” combine notably Gothic reliances on horror and preoccupations concerning death with recognizably posthuman lines of questioning about traditional conceptions, Poe has created an arrangement that may seem as if intended to leave audiences with questions about human agency and identity as well – a potential aspiration that lends his Gothic short stories their true chill if they succeed in planting such questions beyond the text.
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Nataliya Shpylova-Saeed

Mapping Roads to the Self: Mary Rowlandson’s *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*
The Sovereignty and Goodness of God is a document that encodes a painful experience of captivity. Narrated by Mary Rowlandson (c.1637-1711), who was captured by Native Americans during King Philip’s War (1675-1678) and ransomed after being held for eleven weeks, the story creates space where the trajectories of victimization and liberation combine, reflecting the ever-becoming spirit. During her captivity, Rowlandson finds physical and psychological strength to live through the ordeal, aggravated by the separation with her children, who were also captured by Indians and kept away from their mother. Rowlandson witnesses one of her children dying from the wounds and fever—this tragedy deepens traumatic experience of the captivity. The Bible and strong Puritan beliefs help Rowlandson maintain her journey to the survival and revival, which she articulates in her narrative.

Rowlandson did not write her captivity narrative right after she was captured by the Indians; moreover, it took a few years before her story was published. Aside from time and distance, which can be a litmus for determining the emotional significance of an event, retrospection reconstitutes emotions that turned out to be overwhelming for Rowlandson and captivating for the reader. By looking back, Rowlandson confronts her traumatic past, while dealing with its consequences, and traces the miraculous presence of God in her life, which turns out to be of crucial importance for her spiritual and existential traveling.

An ongoing interest in The Sovereignty and Goodness of God marks textual sensibility, which captures Rowlandson’s attempt not only to survive but also to employ her traumatizing experience in order to produce new existential maps. Describing pre-captivity and captivity events, Rowlandson demonstrate the strength of the spirit that perseveres in spite of traumas and hardships—physical, emotional, spiritual. When balancing between her different experiences, Rowlandson travels across multiple dimensions of being. Navigation across the boundaries of experiences suggests the flexibility of identity, even when restrictions and limitations seem to prevail. In The Sovereignty
and Goodness of God, the mix of captivity and survival experiences gestures toward existential flexibility and mobility, which is revealed through the desire to reconsider, reconstruct, and remap one’s own existence. Through the physical, material component that Rowlandson’s captivity story includes, movement—inner and outer—reflects flexibility of the self, responding to the changing environments. Captivated by the Indians, Rowlandson is forced to travel across the geographical wilderness; at the same time, she also confronts spiritual wilderness of distress and despondency, which appears to be terrifying and paralyzing. Nonetheless, Rowlandson obtains energy to overcome the constraints of the captivity—physical and spiritual—and to reassemble and redefine her own life and her own self.

Rowlandson’s story seems to be structured as a journey with a final destination—from the utmost despondency, distress, and fear to the happy reunion with her husband and remaining children and from a weakening faith to the light of a complete recognition of God’s almightiness. Nonetheless, the retrospective component disturbs the smoothness of the linear narrative introducing some blending of different experiences, emotions, and narrating voices of both victim and survivor.

While narrating her captivity experience, Rowlandson acquires the roles of an active participant and insightful observer, which keeps the narrative space open to various tones. On the one hand, Rowlandson minutely describes the routine life of Indians. From this perspective, her narrative is a valuable historical and cultural document. On the other hand, Rowlandson closely observes her own feelings and emotions and attempts to deal with her fears, discomforts, and anxieties. In both cases, she responds to the environments, which marks her changeability.

In this essay, I will focus on Rowlandson’s narrative as a territory for the interaction of both geographical and imaginary/spiritual journeys, upholding the spirit of quest with its immanent inclination for a constant movement that reflects
changeability and flexibility. Interactive space, produced by the overlapping of experiences, includes Puritan edifice that inspires Rowlandson throughout her ordeals, while sustaining her spiritual journeying. This interaction maintains the Bakhtinian dialogism which, paraphrasing Bakhtin, uncovers fresh aspects of contact-zones that reflect the dialogical thinking. Dialogism keeps volatility and vitality of interacting maps, nourishing their transformations and metamorphoses. By accentuating the boundary blurring between geography, imagination, spirituality and personal, national and universal experiences, I will demonstrate how the hybrid nature of Rowlandson’s narrative, where captivity and traveling combine, reflects the encounter with chaos and disorder as well as the life, shaped and structured according to Puritan beliefs and virtues.

Although many scholars recognize the fact that Rowlandson undergoes some transformations as a result of her traumatic experience, her narrative, however, is traditionally defined as a captivity story, located in the Puritan context, which hinders the uncovering of complex personal metamorphoses. For instance, Teresa A. Toulouse brings attention to the image of “a passive female body that is miraculously left untouched” and argues that, among other factors, it points “to her own need to be reintegrated into the community as the same body (mentally and physically) that was wrenched from it—that went out into the wilderness but remained the same” (655-656). The similar idea is articulated by Dawn Henwood: “Mary Rowlandson is, however, above all a survivor, and it is her rhetorical resourcefulness as much as her bartering and sewing skills that enables her to come out of her wilderness ordeal with her self and sanity preserved” (172). Toulouse and Henwood point out that Rowlandson appears to be caught up in her past, while underestimating her attempts to cross the boundaries of her traumatizing experiences and to re-assemble her own self. This perspective may reveal discreet flexibility of Puritan principles, reflecting the individual’s traveling spirit.

Rowlandson’s spiritual ordeal that mirrors the endured physical traveling hardships is integrated into existential and epistemological experience which is rooted, on the one hand, in an adamant belief in God’s virtues and, on the other hand, quite paradoxically in the self-reliant potency manifested through free
will. The latter constituent foreshadows the idea of self-creation implying individual transformation and mutability that replenishes Puritanism throughout generations. Analyzing Rowlandson’s text in terms of map interactions where the physical/geographical overlaps with the mental/spiritual makes it possible to put Puritanism in the context of adaptability and changeability, dissolving the rigidity of seemingly dogmatic closed principles. This aspect also highlights travel writing component, integrated in Rowlandson’s captivity story. Considering the overlapping of captivity and travel narratives, I view Rowlandson’s story as a multilayered narrative, whose “fuzzy” boundaries gesture toward fluid identity.

While the travel writing component of Rowlandson’s captivity story is pointed out by scholars such as Philip Gould, Alfred Bendixen and Judith Hamera, Susan L. Roberson, Marilyn Wesley, to name but a few, it is worth emphasizing the transformative connotations, which a painful account of spiritual and geographical journey reveals. In this context, inherent flexibility of Puritan dogmas, although it may sound as a paradox, establishes multiple bridges between the individual and changing environments. In her Indian capture, Rowlandson confronts the experience of Others that induces her to remap her inner world while remaining a strong Puritan adherent. This rather puzzling position signals the ambivalence and ambiguity immanent in Puritanism. Thus, geographical dislocation and change is closely associated with a mental and spiritual shift within the same paradigm. Rowlandson’s narrative that travels along a “fuzzy” boundary between despair and hope reflects ambiguity of Puritan edifice, where dogma and freedom subtly combine.

*The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* is densely charged with intimate emotional turbulence causing traumatic experience; it is also deployed to illustrate the omnipresence and divine power of God thus delivering didactic messages to the audience. A dynamic, violent, and aggressive beginning of the story is rather illustrative in terms of a shattered world of order...
and stability. In the opening section, an extensively deployed locus of house, to some extent, functions as a vehicle to represent a violated space that correlates with a brutalized self and shattered wholeness. When her house is attacked by the Indians, Rowlandson’s horror and anguish seem to increase: “At length they came and beset our own house, and quickly it was the dolefullest day that ever mine eyes saw.” The ordered world that the house represents undergoes destruction after the Indians burnt down the dwelling:

About two hours (according to my observation, in that amazing time) they had been about the house before they prevailed to fire it (which they did with flax and hemp, which they brought out of the barn, and there being no defense about the house, only two flankers at two opposite corners and one of them not finished); they fired it once and one ventured out and quenched it, but they quickly fired it again, and that took.

The destruction of the house evokes fear, anxiety, and anger. The repetition of the word “fire” underscores strong emotions, brought forth by the Indians’ violence. Although signaling the despondency, the devastation of the house and the collapse of the structured world also mark the beginning of Rowlandson’s journey towards her “restored” self, which I would rather describe in terms of a “new self.” Changeability is shaped at the very beginning of the trial when instead of death Rowlandson chooses capture: “. . . [B]ut when it came to the trial my mind changed; their glittering weapons so daunted my spirit, that I chose rather to go along with those (as I may say) ravenous beasts, than that moment to end my days.” She seems to make a conscious choice that marks not only her fear but also her inner flexibility.

The capture brings confrontation with the wilderness—geographical, cultural, mental, and spiritual—that Rowlandson conquers and inhabits with the Book in her hands. The Word becomes a tool and a vehicle for survival. Inheriting the Puritans’ reputation of being “people of the Book,” Rowlandson creates and recreates her life through her narrative, combining the individual and universal. Rowlandson’s opening of the narrative can be interpreted as a beginning of her trial that involves dislocation, movement, and adaptability, emphasizing her
traveling through space, both geographical and mental. Rowlandson’s choice “to go with those ravenous beasts” signals her willingness to continue her life journey.

After a brutal attack, the Indians take Rowlandson and other captives to their territory. She is horrified and appalled at the Indians’ habits: “This was the dolefulest night that ever my eyes saw. Oh the roaring, and singing and dancing, and yelling of those black creatures in the night, which made the place a lively resemblance of hell” (The First Remove). The horror and suffering are intensified by a “sad bereaved condition”:

All was gone, my husband gone (at least separated from me, he being in the Bay; and to add to my grief, the Indians told me they would kill him as he came homeward), my children gone, my relations and friends gone, our house and home and all our comforts—within door and without—all was gone (except my life), and I knew not but the next moment that might go too. (The First Remove)

For Rowlandson, the geographical wilderness gradually turns into the cultural wilderness and spiritual desert. Physical displacement intensifies emotional and spiritual supplanting, where vital connections (home, family, community, etc.) dissolve, alienating Rowlandson from her environment and from her own self.

A crucial point of her ordeal takes place when Rowlandson confronts her current position and becomes open to the journey that God designed for her: “But now, the next morning, I must turn my back upon the town, and travel with them into the vast and desolate wilderness, I knew not whither” (The Second Remove). Her adamant trust in God never fails and it nourishes her energy and vitality: “But the Lord renewed my strength still, and carried me along, that I might see more of His power; yea, so much that I could never have thought of, had I not experienced it” (The Second Remove). The anguish over her injured child seems to be an ultimate representation of pain and sorrow. Of course, Rowlandson also mentions her own physical
wound but its description comes only after the depiction of a suffering child: “My own wound also growing so stiff that I could scarce sit down or rise up. . . .” (The Second Remove). Body in pain represents soul in pain, looking for hope and strength graciously provided by God: “Oh, I may see the wonderful power of God, that my Spirit did not utterly sink under my affliction: still the Lord upheld me with His gracious and merciful spirit, and we were both alive to see the light of the next morning” (The Second Remove). Suffering intensifies concentration on the self that promotes the introspection that was organically incorporated into the Puritan system.

Strong Puritan belief in God’s love, mercy, and forgiveness gives Rowlandson strength to survive in the geographical and spiritual wilderness. Devastated by her baby’s death Rowlandson, suffering from pain and anxiety, which are intensified by the separation from her other children, is on the verge of losing any hope for survival. At this moment, she is miraculously provided with the Bible: “I cannot but take notice of the wonderful mercy of God to me in those afflictions, in sending me a Bible” (The Third Remove). Referring to the Bible for spiritual support, Rowlandson turns her journey into martyrdom, thus presenting her life as a current mirroring of the sufferings narrated in the Scripture. This aspect also maintains Rowlandson’s intention to write her book, revealing the sanctity of soul. Thereby the captivity narrative expands its boundaries and grows into a story of geographical dislocation and spiritual traveling “from darkness to light.”

Survival in the wilderness involves its exploration and conquest. Rowlandson’s mapping of “the new territory” starts with counting—numbers become a vehicle to organize chaos—and mental journaling of the observations concerning Indians’ culture: “Four of them carried a great Indian upon a bier; but going through a thick wood with him, they were hindered, and could make no haste, whereupon they took him upon their backs, and carried him, one at a time, till they came to Banquaug river” (The Fourth Remove). However, as Molly Farrell points out, in spite of the fact that Rowlandson likes to enumerate her experiences (numbering removes, noting important days and length of traveling time, counting the English), “she can never pinpoint exactly how many Indians there are” but “it is not for
lack of trying” (59). Following the idea that “innumerability leads to terror” (67), Rowlandson’s inability to provide exact numbers when encountering the Indians testifies her utmost fear and horror. While relying on quantifications of various kind “to lend a sense of order to the chaos around her” (59), Rowlandson, in spite of strong Puritan beliefs, exercises at least to some extent, self-reliance and free will that will eventually secure her survival. Rowlandson’s inner resistance toward Indian suppression can be interpreted as a marker of an individual independence potential, which, when applied to the Puritan system, enables shifts and mutations of world perception. Farrell argues that numeracy for Rowlandson is one of the ways “to protect her English identity by turning numbers into anchors that tie her to a familiar system in the midst of traumatic events” (59). It should also be noted that numeracy enables Rowlandson to adapt and to change while interacting with Others and mapping out a new territory of the self.

In The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, a closer interaction with Others starts with accepting “foreign” food. At first, Rowlandson is disgusted by the Indians’ food; only her desire to survive helps her overcome aversion and nausea caused by the Indians’ gastronomic preferences.

Food, understood in terms of exploration and “devouring” of the world, creates a link, although very subtle, between different cultures, worlds, and world perceptions. As Itala Vivan contends, “Food is clearly a space where various suggestions and traces deriving from cultural imaginary converge; a space where the intermingling of, and contamination with, Other and different elements, is spontaneous and immediate” (8). Pointing out the transformative effect that the food may reveal, Vivan concludes:

Food unveils the conflict dynamics of the human conditions, becoming for instance a metaphor for the tragic tensions that rip the individual apart. Other than that, food sometimes insinuates itself in the interstices of the narrative, turning into an expression of the characters’
distress, needs, irony, ritualistic necessities, as well as resistance to oppressive powers, their unconscious drives and their struggle in the dramatic circumstances of life.

(8)
The acceptance of alien food appears to reveal the potential of boundary shifting for the Puritan Rowlandson.

In order to survive, Rowlandson accepts Indians’ food: “The first week of my being among them I hardly ate any thing; . . . but the third week, though . . . I could starve and die before I could eat such things, yet they were sweet and savory to my taste” (The Fifth Remove). This episode marks Rowlandson’s inclination to change, although slowly and reluctantly, and to remap her world perception without abandoning the Puritan maxims which are deeply rooted in her consciousness. The authors of *Food in Postcolonial and Migrant Literatures*, considering food as “an important factor in the formation/preservation of cultural identity,” argue that “what men eat reflects the history of a people, the stages of its development, the influences it has undergone and the memories it has retained” (Caperani and Passini 19). Rowlandson’s gastronomic experience, demonstrating its development from rejection to acceptance, exemplifies cultural interaction and the individual’s openness to the hypothetical dialogue with Others.

“Removing” into “a vast and howling wilderness” (The Sixth Remove), which intensifies structuring and organizing new existential maps, promotes the revision of one’s personal cartography, either directly or indirectly. When Rowlandson starts her dialogue with the Indians’ world, she combines the roles of a participant and observer. Without assimilating into the Indian culture, she makes an attempt to define its “contours” by registering the alien world as Other. She preserves her identity by resorting to God not only as a means to alleviate her hardship and suffering during her journey through wilderness, but also as a device to reconstruct her shattered world and to conquer the

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alien territory by exploring and structuring it: “If one looked before one there was nothing but Indians, and behind one, nothing but Indians, and so on either hand, I myself in the midst, and no Christian soul near me, and yet how hath the Lord preserved me in safety?” (The Sixth Remove). Dealing with her ruined world, Rowlandson contours a new map, while incorporating “the other” component that shapes the flexibility and plasticity of her worldview.

It is worth mentioning that the Indians’ world is not depicted solely from a negative perspective. While gaining more experience with the Indians, Rowlandson summarizes: “Sometimes I met with favor, and sometimes with nothing but frowns” (The Tenth Remove). The objectivity integrated in this phrase opens up a dialogical territory with Others, constituting a strong component for survival and spiritual restoration. When finding her way in the alien world and mapping out her experiences, Rowlandson starts making things for the Indians, primarily clothes. It is rather peculiar that she is paid for her services, which maintains both her inner independence and Puritan practicality. This experience activates the Bakhtian dialogism, which keeps the space open to interaction and further development.

With each “remove,” Rowlandson’s narrative, although centering on the darkness of her suffering and anxiety, takes a tack toward the light, which is marked by the geographical, cultural, and spiritual mapping of the territory. The opening of the majority of “the removes” indicates some geographical space. For instance, the first remove starts with the following displacement, movement: “Now away we must go with those barbarous creatures, with our bodies wounded and bleeding, and our hearts no less than our bodies. About a mile we went that night, up upon a hill within sight of the town, where they intended to lodge” (The First Remove). The following removes highlight the mapping of geographical space: “But now, the next morning, I must turn my back upon the town, and travel with them into the vast and desolate wilderness, I knew not whither”
(The Second Remove); “After a restless and hungry night there, we had a wearisome time of it the next day. The swamp by which we lay was, as it were, a deep dungeon, and an exceeding high and steep hill before it” (The seventh Remove); “But instead of going either to Albany or homeward, we must go five miles up the river, and then go over it” (The Ninth Remove) or “Instead of going toward the Bay, which was that I desired, I must go with them five or six miles down the river into a mighty thicket of brush; where we abode almost a fortnight” (The Thirteenth Remove). These examples, combined with other geographical information mentioned in *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, contribute to Rowlandson’s cartography, marking her familiarization with the physical wilderness. Mapping the wilderness organizes the unknown territory while entering the unknown territory is accompanied by fear and pain. By adding a sensual component to the text that targets the reader’s emotions, pain also defines new dimensions of world perception, which is being formed in the process of managing a new experience following a traumatic event.

When discussing Rowlandson’s spiritual remapping, it is worth mentioning the depiction of the Indians and English landscapes: “As we went along, I saw a place where English cattle had been. . . . That day, a little after noon, we came to Squakeag, where the Indians quickly spread themselves over the deserted English fields, gleaning what they could find” (The Seventh Remove). The merging of the Indian and American vectors intensifies the broadening of the worldview picture that is being shaped during the captivity experience, which involves an extensive traveling. I suggest, the pronoun “we,” which is used in the cited paragraph, signals a shift in Rowlandson’s traveling experience. It creates an interactive zone for Indian and “English” consciousness, enabling Rowlandson to overcome her fear, pain, despair, anxiety, horror and to become adjusted to the environment that requires tolerance and openness to Others in order to survive.

In her narrative, Rowlandson gives an extensive description of the Indians’ life, contributing to mapping out the Others’ world. When introduced alongside the geographical exploration, the cultural domain can be presented in terms of designing the interior of the house. This insight expands
Rowlandson’s experience that goes far beyond mere captivity and geographical displacement. The Indian cultural picture is seemingly contrasted with the Christian picture; nevertheless, the fact that the difference is being registered delivers a subtle message about the potential to establish dialogue. This dialogue, however, is at the early stage of development as the Indians are depicted as being rather reluctant to participate in it. In Rowlandson’s story, beating, aggression, lying, and cruelty outnumber those few episodes of Indians’ goodness and kindness which she is lucky to experience. One of the most poignant episodes is when an Indian lies about the death of Rowlandson’s son: “He answered me that such a time his master roasted him, and that himself did eat a piece of him, as big as his two fingers, and that he was very good meat” (The Thirteenth Remove). These dramatic and traumatic cultural encounterings are accompanied by a spiritual experience that solidifies Rowlandson’s faith and hope which are so easy to lose: “So easy a thing it is with God to dry up the streams of Scripture comfort from us” (The Thirteenth Remove). Geographical traveling is accompanied by spiritual traveling from “darkness to the light,” “from no hope to new hope”: “I asked them to let me go out and pick up some sticks, that I might get alone, and pour out my heart unto the Lord. Then also I took my Bible to read, but I found no comfort here neither, which many times I was wont to find” (The Thirteenth Remove). Rowlandson needs to go through this stage before she creates her map of spiritual strength.

Although Rowlandson’s ordeal is not marked by a complete loss of faith and trust in God, she comes very close to a dark abyss of despondency: “I thought of being sold to my husband, as my master spake, but instead of that, my master himself was gone, and I left behind, so that my spirit was now quite ready to sink” (The Thirteenth Remove). Also, it is quite peculiar that Rowlandson receives the Bible when she finds herself at one of the weakest points of her spiritual strength: “I cannot but take notice of the wonderful mercy of God to me in those afflictions, in sending me a Bible” (The Third Remove). In
this context, the Bible provides a material link to God, to the Christian community, when the Indians’ practices seem to be absolutely alien to Rowlandson’s consciousness. The Bible as physical evidence of God’s presence maintains and nourishes spiritual strength and growth. From the Puritan perspective, it illustrates a connection between physical and spiritual worlds, and thereby the earthly life is a reflection of the heavenly, supernatural. This aspect introduces the motif of mirroring—Rowlandson’s ordeal becomes a replica of the martyrs’ sufferings. The mirror motif is also supported by the survival and redemption stories of the Bible. As Henwood suggests, “Mary Rowlandson uses her Bible to protect and project her vulnerable self” (182) in the wilderness. The Bible, according to Henwood, is employed as Rowlandson’s spiritual mirror and she “uses this mirror of the inner self as an aid to self-realization” (182). In this context, the mirror implies doubleness and duality, reflecting a wandering and developing consciousness.

After receiving the Book, Rowlandson provides an emotional description of her condition that signals a road back to God:

But the Lord helped me still to go on reading till I came to Chap. 30, the seven first verses, where I found, there was mercy promised again, if we would return to Him by repentance; and though we were scattered from one end of the earth to the other, yet the Lord would gather us together, and turn all those curses upon our enemies. I do not desire to live to forget this Scripture, and what comfort it was to me. (The Third Remove)

Rowlandson launches a journey to restore her faith shattered by the Indians’ attack. Relying on her own self, on the one hand, and being guided by the Word, on the other, she shapes her belief system, which receives its contours and its concretion over the traveling. Without abandoning Puritan beliefs, Rowlandson organizes her “spiritual map” to include her captivity experience. When discussing Rowlandson’s spiritual journey, it is worth mentioning that a strong and solid Puritan edifice seems to have “an orifice” activating inner transformations and modifications. Exercising self-reliance and practicality, Rowlandson resorts to the Bible to discover God’s presence in her life.
In the end of her journey—spiritual and geographic—Rowlandson confesses: “I have learned to look beyond present and smaller troubles, and to be quieted under them. As Moses said, ‘Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord’ (Exodus 14.13)” (The Twentieth Remove). The captivity is perceived in terms of a horrible and traumatic ordeal as well as in terms of a “great lesson.” In the sixteenth remove, Rowlandson, guided by the Book and her imagination, transforms her capture into Providence: “The Indians stood laughing to see me staggering along; but in my distress the Lord gave me experience of the truth, and goodness of that promise, ‘When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee’ (Isaiah 43.2)” (The Sixteenth Remove). It is rather significant that throughout the traveling a personal/individual element is always vividly emphasized. It reveals an intimate inner dialogue with God and, while helping to sustain an active position, resisting a passive status of a victim and subject. This contributes to the spiritual quest, involving the exploration of the spiritual wilderness and the structuring of a new spiritual map. Being rather naïve about her faith and somewhat impatient about her portion of trials and afflictions before the capture, Rowlandson seems to arrive to a complete acceptance of God’s power. Life is unpredictable and this is something she has witnessed and experienced: “I have seen the extreme vanity of this world: One hour I have been in health, and wealthy, wanting nothing. But the next hour in sickness and wounds, and death, having nothing but sorrow and affliction” (The Twentieth Remove). The awareness of instability can cause much fear and anxiety. Although Rowlandson speaks for “whole dependence” on God, she does not eliminate her personal/individual impetus: “If trouble from smaller matters begin to arise in me, I have something at hand to check myself with, and say, why am I troubled? It was but the other day that if I had had the world, I would have given it for my freedom, or to have been a servant to a Christian” (The Twentieth Remove). The God–Individual interaction maintains “hope” for the
continuous journey—either physical or spiritual—which is inherent in Puritan ambiguous existential maps.

Through her captivity story Rowlandson deals with her trauma, and through her traveling experience she works out the map of the self, which is responsive to the inner and outer environment. While concluding her geographical displacement and summarizing the Indian culture, Rowlandson crowns her traveling with the spiritual discoveries that turn into her personal guidance, amidst the chaos, and into “a great lesson” to the community. Rowlandson’s voice, through narrating her trial and sufferings, articulates the individual’s journey to God and to the self. By moving through physical wilderness, waging the spiritual battle that involves counteraction with Others, Rowlandson undergoes a spiritual quest manifested through her engagement with the Biblical motifs, which are extrapolated on the individual act of life-structuring and self-creation. Through mirroring inner and outer exertions, Rowlandson’s narrative reveals the versatile nature of the travel writing genre, providing multiple replenishments in literary and cultural continuum.

When making her voice heard through the emotional record of her traveling with the Indians in the wilderness, Rowlandson connects with the audience that was originally limited to “her dear children and relations” and later expanded to the public community. Like her narrative, which travels from a smaller community to a larger one, Rowlandson’s experience reflects traveling through the personal–universal dimension that contributes to the delineation of an individual map via physical and spiritual ordeals. Movement acquires vital importance, securing changeability and flexibility that open up multiple routs and roads, which contribute to the assembling and re-assembling of a diversity of existential maps.
Works Cited


Charles Wright is a spiritual poet. The work of this celebrated American poet, the United States’ most recent Poet Laureate, grapples with a numinous sense of something meaningful beyond the visible world. This is something to which his critics have been almost unanimously alert: 3 Bonnie Costello, for example,

3 For example, Debra Allbery recognizes that a “spiritual questing . . . suffuses Wright’s work.” Lee Upton describes a sense of ultimate realities in Wright’s poetry that remains half-begrudgingly reliant on religious terms (25), while Phyllis Franzek’s insightfully defines this non-doctrinal ‘spirituality’ as a “persistent longing for connection with an always-absent, austere Other” (138). Such longing reflects a common desire for wholeness, a transcendental urge not to be fulfilled by “proof of any
identifies an “ultimate unity of ‘something infinite behind everything’ [as] Wright’s only subject” (326). Wright himself has acknowledged that a central theme of his work is what he calls “the idea of God” ("New Poet Laureate") or the “metaphysics of the quotidian” ("Prize-Winning Poetry"), terms that designate spiritual mystery and the otherworldly quality of worldly things. His work expresses longing for an ultimate foundation or truth, which is associated with full knowledge and transcendent selfhood but is felt to be unattainable. Gestures towards this impossible transcendental ideal constitute the essential movement in his contemplative poems.

I propose that the consistency of style, tone, and perspective in Wright’s poems allows us to read his body of work as a cumulative whole, recording the obsessions of one, distinct subjectivity. When read as a whole, the spiritual attitude of his work provides it with an implicit narrative that is reminiscent, as Henry Hart has noted, of the modernist “sequence epic” (325). In other words, Wright’s body of work can be read as narrating an episodic spiritual quest or pilgrimage—indeed, the poems’ “I”-figure is referred to as “Pilgrim” on a number of occasions throughout Wright’s oeuvre. The workings of narrative in his poems can be demonstrated with reference to his “memory poems,” or those of his poems that center on remembrances of the past. This style of poem, which is usually wistful and often ostensibly autobiographical, is one that Wright has revisited many times throughout his career. His memory poems iterate the same movement of pilgrimage as the rest of his works, with the past embodying the hidden, persistent influence and foundational
truth that his pilgrim seeks. As I will show, memorializing and pilgrimage share the same goal in Wright’s poetry: to escape death by being reborn into conclusive selfhood and salvation, a state associated with return to the pilgrim’s lost “home.” The memory poems thus provide a key to the pilgrimage narrative of Wright’s whole body of poetry and provide insight into the knowing futility of this pilgrim’s quest.

The archetypical memory poem of Wright’s oeuvre is “The Southern Cross,” a long poem from his 1981 book of the same name. It is also a typical example of Wright’s poetry in general, featuring his distinctive broken line, disconnected sections and wistful tone, as well as his career-long preoccupation with landscapes, aging, deficiency and mortality. In what follows, I will explore the defining narrative of pilgrimage in Wright’s poetry with reference to this poem, focusing in particular on its motivating dream of homecoming and rebirth and on the conditions of reality that make these things unattainable.

“The Southern Cross” records the “I”-figure’s attempts to recall his birthplace, Pickwick, Tennessee, by way of Venice, Italy. Wright was born in Pickwick in 1935 but lived there for only a few months; he ultimately had a transient Southern childhood, living in “ten different places from birth until the age of ten” (“Interview by Clark” 51). As a young man, Wright spent a number of years working for the U.S. Army Intelligence Corps in Italy, and it was there that he “discovered” poetry and his vocation after reading Ezra Pound’s poem “Blandula, Tenulla, Vagula” (“The Art of Poetry" 7-8). Places in the American South and Italy appear regularly in his poetry: significant locations in the South constitute the landscape of childhood and family history, while Italy is emblematic of carefree youth and newly-realized, un tarnished selfhood. It is thus Venice, a city associated with the poet’s awakening, on which his imaginings of his literal birthplace are modeled in “The Southern Cross.”

Throughout the poem, the rememberer struggles to see himself narrated—that is, to locate his present-day self within a scheme of connected events that defines the significance of his current state in relation to a whole. This struggle is exemplified by his inability to remember Pickwick and Venice clearly or directly. The poem’s twenty-five semi-disconnected sections are
of varying lengths and seemingly haphazard. Present-day ruminations mingle with formative memories of the past, which appear non-chronologically as though emerging from and retreating back into the physical landscape; this creates a sense of the past in conversation with the present rather than a clear narrative. Even the poem’s division into sections and spacing on the page suggests spatial organization rather than temporal or causal connection. What narrative exists is not a linear history but an exploration of history’s disintegration and the absence of certainties: there is “[n]o trace of a storyline” (Southern 49). The poem presents a kind of unfinished journey through the fragmentary landscapes of the past in an attempt to reconstruct history from the perspective of the present and to understand the present in relation to the past.

The first and earliest memory in the poem is of Wright as a small child: “[i]t’s 1936, in Tennessee. I’m one / And spraying the dead grass with a hose” (Southern 49). The words “I’m one” are lent emphasis by the line break that follows, setting the remembered self apart as exemplary, singular, whole, and primary. Certainly, this “I” is young and singular in comparison with the increasingly diffuse and aging present-day “I”-figure. However, this memory is not the sought-after origin. Rather, this is an arbitrary snapshot interchangeable with other memories or times: “[o]r it’s 1941 in a brown suit,” the poem goes on, “or ‘53 in its white shoes” (Southern 49). Like every memory in the poem, this vision is just another “overlay tumbled and brought back, / As meaningless as the sea would be, ~ if the sea could remember its waves” (Southern 49). Memory stirs up, disperses and submerges the past, causing past events to emerge at random as though disturbed by moving waters; thus “[p]laces swim up and sink back, and days do” (Southern 59).

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5 This line describes an actual photograph of Charles Wright as a child (held in the University of Virginia Library).

6 I have followed the trend established by Calvin Bedient of using a tilde (~) to indicate occurrences of Wright’s ‘broken’ line in quotations.
In Wright’s poems, the past is omnipresent, making itself known in the present day through the perceived abidance of the dead, traces of past events and reminders of other landscapes. The strong bearing of history on the present and future means that a continual exploration of one’s origins is necessary in order to understand one’s present and future self. In this context, recalling one’s origin amounts to uncovering the crucial reference point from which to chart one’s progress in order to “know” oneself, allowing a conclusive selfhood to be reclaimed from the disordering influence of time and change. According to Bonnie Costello, “[by] mining his origins, [Wright] seeks a transcendental identity” (326): i.e. full (self)-knowledge. Recreation of the past through memory thus enables self-understanding, even self-recreation, and is tantamount to the realization of a kind of transcendent wholeness. This state is frequently represented as a rebirth in Wright’s poems, amounting to a return-to-self and reclamation of an ideal, complete identity.

Unlike the “I”-figure’s fluid or “windblown” memories in “The Southern Cross,” we are told that “Pickwick was never the wind” (Southern 65). Rather, it “stays unchanged” and “stays in the same place” (Southern 65), representing an unwavering, concrete, original truth. The moment of origin that the “I”-figure seeks is definitive, associated with a hidden cause or influence, and precisely that which cannot be recalled. This is made clear by the poem’s opening declaration: “[t]hings that divine us we never touch” (Southern 49). “Divine” means to predict or detect supernaturally, or perhaps “consecrate;” it suggests the assonant “define”—to give meaning or set limits—and “the Divine.” The first line of the poem thus alludes to unknowability of the ultimate realities that determine us. These untouchable “[t]hings that divine us” include “[t]he black sounds of the night music” (Southern 49)—the camouflaged, harmonious order of the universe that recalls the music of the spheres—and “the Southern Cross,” which, “like a kite at the end of its string,” marks an uppermost boundary (Southern 49). As James McCorkle recognizes, “what is lost or past converges with what is mysterious, primitive, and unseen” in Wright’s works (202); accordingly, the past that eludes the speaker is a crucial aspect of the “[t]hings that divine us [that] we never touch” (Southern 49). Indeed, in the fourteenth section of the poem the thing we “never
touch, ~ no matter how far down our hands reach” (*Southern* 57) is identified as the past. Seeking to recall one’s own beginnings, in Wright’s poetry, is thus tantamount to seeking access to the hidden influence behind all things.

At the end of the “The Southern Cross,” the speaker imagines returning to Pickwick:

> A city I’ll never remember,
> its walls the color of pure light,
> Lies in the August heat of 1935,
> In Tennessee, the bottomland slowly becoming a lake.
> It lies in the landscape that keeps my imprint
> Forever, and stays unchanged, and waits to be filled back in.

> Someday I’ll find it out
> And enter my old outline as though for the first time,

> And lie down, and tell no one. (*Southern* 65)

This imaginary return to his forgotten birthplace sees the “I”-figure take up what is apparently his rightful place in the wider landscape, a womb- and grave-like space that marks out both his point of origin and his destination and so is indicative of a double belonging. By returning to this unchanging landscape the pilgrim ostensibly leaves behind time and change and becomes his original and final self.

Just as Pickwick is imagined in “The Southern Cross” as having “walls the color of pure light” (*Southern* 65), Venice, too, appears saturated with light and promise, being described as “[f]lawless and Byzantine, / [ . . . ] like glass” (*Southern* 54). In his early poetry, Wright often depicts influential places of the past as jewel-like cities that recall Yeats’ Byzantium or the Biblical New Jerusalem. For example, San Miniato is an “Unnatural city, monastic transparency” in “Oscar Wilde at San Miniato” (*Hard Freight* 40), and Florence is described as an “abyss of enfolding
light” in “Nocturne” (Hard Freight 41). Such cities, glowing with unnatural light, are real cities, once seen and known and now remembered with a golden hue. However, they also embody a mythic state of unearthly perfection, infinite priority and newness. They emblematize the paradiisical, lost home associated with the past, selfhood and full knowledge the “I”-figure hopes to regain. Sometimes American, often Italian, but inevitably aglow on a river, the bright cities of the past in Wright’s poetry represent the moment of origin preserved whole and immaculate on the edge of memory and time, promising eternal completion and fulfillment.

The paradiisical impression of the past in Wright’s poetry means that return to the past is indistinguishable from a heavenly afterlife. Hart aptly characterizes the “rituals of remembrance” in Wright’s poems as attempts to “return to ‘proto’ or ‘crypto’ dream homes” modeled on the “transcendent Eden” espoused by mystics; the “I”-figure is thus styled as a “‘homeless’ pilgrim, always looking over his shoulder longingly at an illusory paradise as he moves through the world” (331). Moreover, the past is what the pilgrim hopes for when he looks forward to his ultimate destiny. His concept of ideal fulfillment, such as one might associate with salvation, amounts to a reunion with loved ones and the reattainment of the idealized past and home. For example, in Wright’s poem “Little Apokatastasis,” the eschatological reunion of all souls—even sinners’—with God, in accordance with the Christian doctrine of apokatastasis, is foreshadowed by the evening peak-hour traffic: “hundreds of headlights, ~ everyone coming home” (Buffalo Yoga 73).

A revealing variation on the theme of the afterlife as a homecoming takes place in “Virgo Descending,” the subterranean journey that begins Wright’s 1975 volume Bloodlines. This poem re-imagines a passage from John’s gospel, “In my Father’s house are many rooms. . . . I am going there to prepare a place for you” (John 14. 2). In Wright’s poem, the house of the afterlife lies deep below ground, “down / Where the worm and the mole will not go” (Bloodlines 10). The speaker finds the home half finished, “[t]he open beams and bare studs of the hall / Pink as an infant’s skin” (Bloodlines 10). Meanwhile, the speaker’s “father / Is planning rooms” (Bloodlines 10), just as parents-to-be might plan a nursery. It is implied that these
rooms are completed in time for the death and arrival of each loved one, as the brother and sister’s rooms are unfinished but the medicated aunt’s is “almost complete” (Bloodlines 10). This homecoming in death represents a return to family roots and family wholeness as well as a return to place, with the “I”-figure physically taking up his place in the landscape via his burial. He reflects, “[h]ome is what you lie in, or hang above, the house / Your father made, or keeps on making, / The dirt you moisten, the sap you push up and nourish” (Bloodlines 11). Nonetheless, the underground house opens onto “a radiance / I can’t begin to imagine,” apparently frustrating the father’s plans for a cozy, contained home: “[t]hat light, he mutters, that damned light. / We can’t keep it out. It keeps on filling your room” (Bloodlines 11). This light indicates that the “I”-figure’s room is not finished, acting as a reminder that this is apparently a dream and he is not dead yet. Additionally, the blinding light manifests a divinity that hijacks the speaker’s more modest ideal of heaven, which is simply a family reunion and the reinstatement of “home.”

The return home in the form of a return to the past that Wright’s “I”-figure seeks can be understood as a rebirth in two ways. First, in the sense that home is associated with one’s original identity and potential, the return home restores the pilgrim to himself, prior to all subsequent diminutions, ostensibly enabling him to “begin again.” The “I”-figure’s desire to “enter [his] old outline as though for the first time” (Southern 65) in “The Southern Cross” is a desire to be reborn as himself. In the second sense, insofar as the lost home is synonymous with the afterlife, the pilgrim’s longing to return home to the past is a longing for salvation. Wright’s poetry reflects a particular sense of home influenced by Southern gospel songs, which perpetuate “the nostalgic evocation of home as a bastion of virtue and security in a world of ceaseless change” (Malone 13). For the embattled Christian hero of such songs, likened to “a pilgrim in an unfriendly world,” the ultimate home is in heaven (Malone 12-13). Thus, Wright’s pilgrim’s longing for heavenly transcendence and his longing to return home are one and the
same desire, and both are linked to the restoration of the past. To reclaim one’s past is to be born again into eternal life. Accordingly, in Wright’s poems the past looks like paradise and, inversely, the heavenly city on “the other side of the river” that he often imagines awaiting his pilgrim after death resembles his places of origin, Pickwick or the cities of Italy.

This conflation of origin and afterlife means that Wright frequently depicts life as having an unusual two-way direction, simultaneously forwards and backwards, with the past apparently set to return in the future as time conveys us back to our graves. This is evident in the final lines of “The Southern Cross,” quoted earlier, which suggest that the birthplace is also the place of burial. It is as though the “I”-figure’s grave is the body-shaped impression he left when he first emerged from the earth in an autochthonous birth, and that he will reassume in death. The speaker’s “tell[ing] no one” (Southern 65) is a glad silence that indicates an end to poetic searching and memorializing once the forgotten origin is finally reclaimed. Burial is thus, apparently, a kind of reverse birth, or a birth inwards, back into wholeness. As Julian Gitzen suggests, Wright’s “I”-figure “looks forward to death in part because he imagines that it will unite him with his unknown or forgotten past, making him complete or allowing him full knowledge of himself” (176). However, if full knowledge is only attained in death, then full knowledge is shown to be impossible. The origin that lies outside of memory is apparently restored only when the knowing, speaking self ceases.

In “The Southern Cross” “[i]t’s what we forget that defines us, and stays in the same place, / And waits to be rediscovered” (Southern 65). Pickwick, representing the moment of birth, is the ultimate forgotten thing, something that can never be directly remembered. It exists on the cusp of what can be known because the moment of birth both begins the “I”-figure’s story and precedes it. It represents a foundation for his identity but it also takes place before his selfhood and outside of his recallable past. The origin cannot be arrived at purely from within one’s own history (because it exceeds that history); therefore, it cannot provide a ground of meaning. Furthermore, to return to the origin means to go beyond selfhood and knowing. It seems, therefore, that full self-knowledge in fact exceeds the
self. Without a knowable beginning, the self and the world as a whole must remain unknowable. The unrecallable origin thus introduces an openness and groundlessness at the foundation of the structure of understanding that belies any desire for solid ground beneath one’s feet or true understanding, including the dream of home and rebirth.

According to Mark C. Taylor, it is common for the “time outside of time” that is the origin to be “imagined in terms of fullness, plenitude, and perfection,” in contrast with the present day, in which an insurmountable break with the past has brought about “the loss of original perfection and [. . .] a period of exile” (64). In “The Southern Cross,” “the past, ~ with its good looks and Anytime, Anywhere . . .” (Southern 57), is attractive and imbued with infinite possibility, unlike the realized present. This disparity is profound and inexplicable: “[n]othing had told me that my days were marked for a doom,” the speaker laments, “[n]othing had told me that woe would buzz at my side like a fly” (Southern 50). The Venice of the poet’s dreams from a year he has difficulty recalling has the quality of something eternally pristine. In direct contrast with the noisy, never-still canal, we are told that “Venice will lie like silk ~ at the edge of the sea and the night sky, / Albescent under the moon” where “silence will have the last word” (Southern 56). The past is imagined as perfectly preserved elsewhere, but its “otherness” (Southern 57) in comparison with the present day bespeaks its irrevocable disconnection from the now.

The disparity between past and present is palpable in the seventh section of the poem, where the past is imagined as a time when human action had fabulous outcomes: “[w]hen my father went soldiering, apes dropped from the trees,” the speaker remarks; “When my mother wrote home from bed, the stars asked for a pardon” (Southern 52). These “parents” are in fact Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, Wright’s self-identified forebears in the American literary tradition (Wright, "Language, Landscape" 137). The imagined exoticism of their lives and peculiar consequences of their actions contrast with their
ineffectual, ghostly presences in death. They are reduced to insubstantial “voices . . . like smoke,” “[h]aunting the chairs and the sugar chest” (Southern 52). This contrast also attests to a loss of poetic potency in the present day compared with the genius of the past. In the previous section, the speaker describes his Italian poetic forebears haunting the banks of the river Adige with their absence: “Dante and Can Grande once stood here,” we are told; “[b]efore that, in his marble tier, / Catullus once sat through the afternoons. / Before that, God spoke in the rocks . . .” (Southern 52). The “I”-figure depicts himself as the latest and least spectacular member in a line of poets that leads right back to divine utterance in Biblical prehistory. In Wright’s poetry, the dreamlike quality of the ideal past distinguishes it from the unexceptional present but also indicates that such prelapsarian and defining things exist half in myth. Although the apparent solidity of a city evokes a stable foundation and stronghold, the bright city imagery in Wright’s poetry is equally mythic and apparently conjured by imagination rather than memory.

The elements of fluidity, randomness, and restlessness that permeate “The Southern Cross” emphasize the absence of a linear storyline that sees the truth realized. The motion of the ever-present ocean and wind contribute to a persistent motif of rising and falling all the way through the poem, reinforced by the recurrence of phrases such as “ebb and flow” (Southern 51), “in and out” and “fall, and then not to fall” (Southern 49). Phyllis Franzek points to these as signs of “a sensibility that takes no sequences for granted” and undermines “assumptions of causality,” testifying to a world of change and juxtaposition rather than underlying order (148). Tellingly, undulating movement links to reminiscence in the poem; “[g]auze curtains blowing in and out of open windows all over the South” (Southern 49) are representative of memory as it sweeps indiscriminately through the rooms of the “I”-figure’s past. The

“Their complexity exemplifies the uncertainty, unpredictability and apparent randomness that characterize the world of Wright’s poems despite the divining/defining influence of the past.”
volatility of wind and waterscapes in the poem is emblematic of the limitations of memory and all ways of knowing a final truth.

This link is evident in the eleventh section of the poem—the first of several sections to address specifically what cannot be remembered—which focuses entirely on the unceasing movement of a Venetian canal:

After twelve years it’s hard to recall
That defining sound the canal made at sundown, slap
Of tide swill on the church steps,
Little runnels of boat wash slipping back from the granite slabs
In front of Toio’s, undulant ripples

What’s hard to remember is how the electric lights
Were played back, and rose and fell on the black canal
Like swamp flowers,
shrinkign and stretching,
Yellow and pale and iron-blue from the oil.

(Southern 54, 56)

The dynamic waters are hard to recall accurately. They are also emblematic of the variability of memory itself as it offers multiple, fragmentary and distorted reflections of the past. Earlier in the poem, the river is described as a “[r]iver of sighs and forgetfulness [. . .] of slivers and broken blades from the moon / In an always-going-away of glints” (Southern 51). The speaker presents himself as trying to piece together a coherent picture from such “glints” of insight. Later, we find him staring out into the night, lighting “match after match in the black air” (Southern 58).

As topographies that thwart the speaker’s efforts to locate himself in relation to, and to return to, a stable starting point, the waters and wind in “The Southern Cross” destabilize identity. They are complex systems that are difficult to predict despite their being determined by the laws of physics acting on their initial conditions. Their complexity exemplifies the uncertainty,
unpredictability and apparent randomness that characterize the world of Wright’s poems despite the divining/defining influence of the past. In the ninth section of the poem, these systems parody divination and mock the ideal of predictability: “[h]ere is the truth. The wind rose, the sea / Shuffled its blue deck and dealt you a hand: / Blank, blank, blank, blank, blank” (Southern 53). The movements of the wind and water here reveal nothing of the past or future while at the same time suggesting that the future holds nothing for the speaker. In the tenth section, even the seemingly constant stars, arbiters of fate, are inscrutable and waterborne. “The Big Dipper has followed me all the days of my life,” the speaker tells us; “[u]nder its tin stars my past has come and gone” (Southern 53). The echo of Psalm 23 verse 6 lends the constellation a benevolent air, but its waterborne “tin stars” seem a flimsy counterweight to the overruling uncertainty.

The penultimate section of the poem is a clear statement of unpredictability:

The life of this world is wind.
Windblown we come, and windblown we go away.
All that we look on is windfall.
All we remember is wind. (Southern 65)

The repetition in this passage hovers somewhere between incantatory wisdom and self-parody. Robert Denham reads the passage as evidence of a pervasive godly influence at work in the world (14). However, given the recurrence of the troublesome wind in Wright’s poetry as something elusive and unpredictable, the passage surely undoes any notion of benevolent divine influence and reveals not a fundamental but “a decentered force” at work (Franzek 150). The word “windfall” encapsulates this ambiguity. Meaning good fortune and unexpectedness, it also promises a “Fall”. Evocatively, the term applies to ripe fruit blown down by the wind.

The implication is that the world in Wright’s poetry is determined but invisibly and inexplicably so: divined, but not, it seems, by anything recognizably divine. This impression is reinforced by insects’ movements, which contribute to a motif of apparently haphazard determination throughout his works. In “The Southern Cross,” the speaker describes the impression that the small creatures he watches from his cabin porch act according
to some unseen, unpredictable order into which he has no insight. In the twenty-second section, an industrious bumblebee, inhabiting a garden that seems to be enacting its own obscure liturgy, contributes to the impression that “[e]verything has its work, ~ everything written down” (Southern 63), while, one page earlier, a spider and a dragonfly have a similar effect:

Behind my back, the spider has got her instructions
And carries them out.
Flies drone, wind back-combs the marsh grass, swallows bank and climb.
Everything I can see knows just what to do,

Even the dragonfly, hanging like lapis lazuli in the sun. (Southern 62)

In this poem and elsewhere in Wright’s works, bugs reveal the influence of an unfathomable force or order that defies narrativization. The remembered self who is swept by floodwaters “[t]hrough the front doors and down to the back half / Of da Montin”7 (Southern 55) is not so different from the “Leaves and insects drifting by” on reality’s choppy surface (Southern 59). His experience of being “windblown” (Southern 65) is a magnified version of the insects’ apparently haphazard determination by unreadable forces, and indicates that he, too, is subject to the influence of his initial state and the whims of an invisible law, both of which are impossible to deduce. Wright’s likening memory and remembered things to water implies the impossibility of ever truly plotting one’s origins or centering one’s self. Origins appear as cities on the riverbank, solid “places” cut off from us by uncertainty and unmappable forces that prevent them from becoming the definitive ground of identity that we might like them to be.

While his past cannot be recovered from his disordered present, the “I”-figure perceives in the chaos of his present the

7 A Venetian hotel, the Antica Locanda Montin, or its restaurant (Denham 112).
promise of further inescapable decline in the future. The third and fourth sections of “The Southern Cross,” coming directly after the bewildered lament, “[n]othing had told me” (Southern 50), portend death and toothless infirmity: “early blooms on the honeysuckle shine like maggots after the rain. / The purple mouths of the passion blossoms open their white gums to the wind” (Southern 50). Shortly afterwards, the “wisteria tendrils” seem to extend their necks beneath the sword of the hunter Orion, portending death (Southern 50). In the nineteenth section, we are told that “[t]ime is the villain in most tales, ~ and here too. / Lowering its stiff body into the water,” the speaker perceiving “the petals of wreckage in everything” (Southern 61). While time creates ripples that represent unpredictability, its “stiff body” is evocative of the inescapable fate of old age and death (Southern 61). The moving waters are threatening. Like the ocean in Walt Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” which whispers the “low and delicious word DEATH” (l. 68), the “voice of the waters” in “The Southern Cross” speak a “ghostly litany” (Southern 51), and “[t]he huge page of the sea” contains the “one word despair” (Southern 57). This suggests that the pilgrim’s obsession with regaining his past is a futile attempt to circumvent mortality. His looking backward toward an imagined moment of eternal wholeness points to his inability to face his inevitable end.

Poignantly, the chaos of the present that promises death in the future also serves to further obscure the past. In the eighteenth section of the poem we are told that the “I”-figure’s memories of the past are “[l]arger and less distinct each year, / As we are, ~ and lolling about in the same redress” (Southern 59). The implication is that as the present unravels into chaos and decay, so, too, does one’s memory of the past fade with old age and forgetfulness. In the fourteenth section, the speaker laments of the past, “[o]ur prayers go out to it, our arms go out to it / Year after year / But who can ever remember enough?” (Southern 57). The twenty-first section is framed with the declarations “I can’t remember enough” and “I’ll never be able to” (Southern 63).

If the “real” past cannot be known, as “The Southern Cross” seems to suggest, then all versions of the past must be fantasies. Imagination supplements incomplete memory, which is increasingly detached from “real” history. This is evident in
the seventeenth section of the poem, where the speaker distinguishes between what he recalls and “what really happened,” which “we’ll never remember / No matter how hard we stare back at the past” (Southern 59). The eighteenth section emphasizes this distinction again: memory undulates but the real “Rome was never like that, ~ and the Tiber was never like that” (Southern 60). The speaker states ironically, “I can’t remember the colors I said I’d never forget,” before vividly describing the “ochers and glazes and bright hennas of each house” (Southern 60). The implication is that the real colors were different, maybe not as vibrant, but now unknowable. The tendency to exaggerate and romanticize is as unavoidable as the tendency to forget.

Wright’s memory poems convey the modernist desire for the true past that represents an unquestionable, foundational reality, as well as an abiding skepticism that such a thing exists. The “I”-figure imagines the “real” past as something quite distinct from his imperfect memories and in contrast with the fragmentation and mutability of the present-day. Yet, as “The Southern Cross” demonstrates, he finds it impossible to recover a point of origin or create a reliable map of the past because the “truth” is elusive, re-invented and severed from the present. Moreover, the pilgrim cannot penetrate the rift between his past and his “now” precisely because no original, unbroken moment was ever present. Rather, the break is original. Nonetheless, belief is sustained throughout the pilgrimage, which seeks a definitive origin through acts of remembering, desiring and projecting a home to be returned to even as the dream founders with the recognition that it is only an unlikely dream.

In one sense, arriving in Pickwick or the moment of his own appearance would complete the pilgrim’s journey, allowing him to lay claim both to his origin and pre-origin. On the other hand, this would complete a loop, delivering the pilgrim back to his starting place and condemning him to repeat the pattern of virtual rise-and-fall that prevents him from ever making any progress towards transcendence. This kind of endless repetitive movement, at odds with any finite sequence of approach and
arrival, is evident everywhere throughout Wright’s oeuvre, not only in the flux of land- and seascapes but in the random insights and shortfalls of memory and his works’ signature movement of spiritual “ebb and flow.” As Lee Upton recognizes, images of ascent in Wright’s poems are almost always met with “images of falls, dissipations and dissolves” (31-2). This pattern exists on every scale in the fabric of Wright’s works, which depict a world in which inescapable rise-and-fall, both natural and spiritual, makes headway towards any transcendent ideal an impossible but ongoing task. As Daniel Cross Turner observes, the pilgrim’s perception that his present is determined by a past that cannot be known “creates an eschatological desire without end,” because “[a]s much as he wants his remembered moments to cohere into a redemptive narrative, his past lives to progress toward some apocalyptic moment of wholeness, this cohesiveness, personal and cultural, never arrives” (118).

The vicissitudes of memory portrayed in “The Southern Cross” are representative of the thwarted spiritual pilgrimage implicit in Wright’s poetry as a whole. In the memory poems, Wright’s pilgrim attempts to achieve transcendence over the human condition of limited knowledge and mortality by recovering a source of wholeness and absolute truth. In his other poems, he attempts the same transcendence through metaphysical contemplation. Just as memory’s ebb and flow betrays him, the “I”-figure’s spiritual attitude fluctuates, sometimes rapidly, between rising anticipation of transcendence and short-lived epiphany on one hand, and the downward movement of forgetfulness, loss and resignation on the other. This movement is mirrored in the rise-and-fall and come-and-go patterns of real and remembered landscapes, in such things as waves and the intermittent wind and, elsewhere, the passing of days and the circling seasons. This ubiquitous pattern testifies to the absence of a ground of final meaning. Yet such mutability and uncertainty also stokes the pilgrim’s desire for “home;” the same natural cycles that illustrate his restless searching inspire his belief in the possibility of return and rebirth.

Throughout “The Southern Cross,” the ideal state of transcendence represented by the past is shown to be unattainable, memory to be unreliable and the past’s influence on the present day to be inscrutable: in short, the “[t]hings that
divine us we never touch” (Southern 57). The shifting landscapes of memory and of the present day and the inability to remember one’s origins contrast with intimations of an untouchable, influential past, which is held up as an article of ultimate but elusive truth. This contrast is evidence of the “I”-figure’s fragmentation and bereavement, and also of his decline and looming mortality. The pilgrim’s failed attempts to remember the past in Wright’s poetry typify the impossibility of any kind of transcendence of the human condition and reveal the dubiousness, as well as the inescapability, of yearnings for an ultimate truth. The foundation the pilgrim seeks continues to elude him but remains an object of desire associated with narrative wholeness nonetheless, while efforts to reclaim it are never conclusively ended but instead repeat with the same limitations, frustrations and longing in poem after poem in Wright’s body of work.


‘The by-path of inquiry as to her virtue or vice’: The Journey of Mary Stuart’s Casket Sonnets

On 10 February 1567, Mary Stuart’s husband Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, was murdered under mysterious circumstances. Plenty of people had reason to want to be rid of him, including the Queen of Scots herself, which is why the case still beguiles so many. For centuries, historians have debated the authenticity of the so-called Casket Letters and sonnets, allegedly penned by the ill-fated Queen, and if proven authentic, contain damning evidence that Mary had an extramarital affair with Lord Bothwell and conspired with him to murder Darnley. If they are conclusively attributed to Queen Mary, the love sonnets would not only contribute more conclusive evidence to one of Europe’s most fascinating murder cases, but would also provide a rare glimpse at the work of a sixteenth-century woman writer. The question of whether or not the Queen was accessory to the
murder of Lord Darnley, her second husband, remains “the most celebrated mystery in Scottish history” (Weir 3), but the love sonnets as literary texts—whether authored by the Queen or not—provide insight into the literary culture of that era as well as others that followed. With the notable exception of Rosalind Smith, little scholarly attention appears to have been paid to the sonnets in terms of their import as poems. In her 2003 book about Darnley’s murder, British historian Alison Weir asserts that “[the Casket Letters’] importance has been somewhat overstated” in terms of the factual evidence they contribute to the murder case (5), so their usefulness to us cannot be limited to their role as pieces of evidence in a 450-year-old court case. Most prior scholarship on the materials has focused on the letters, while other writings have endeavored to evaluate the sonnets. Conclusions on the sonnets’ quality range from “rather unpleasant” to “beautiful and poetical” (“Reading Casket Sonnets” 170; Campbell 70). I argue that, due to their technical accomplishments and importance in Western European political and literary history, the sonnets ought to establish Mary Stuart as an early literary figure on par with contemporary women writers such as Mary Sidney.

The reputation of Scotland’s most famous monarch has undergone many changes over the centuries, and there are as many different versions of Mary’s story as there are reasons to write about her. Countless books have been written on Mary Stuart over the centuries, many with the intended project of pinpointing those responsible for the murder of Lord Darnley while exonerating those who are believed to have been wrongly implicated. Such a project is far beyond the scope of this paper, but I will explore certain views of Stuart that may affect how the writer then responds to the poetry that has been attributed to her. Thus, it is necessary to explore certain questions of authorship in order to contextualize the sonnets and the environments in which they have been received.

The mythology surrounding this fascinating queen is as interesting as the events that prompted that interest in the first place, for the writings of any given period serve as a microcosm for their time. For example, the sixteenth and seventeenth-century accounts of Mary’s conduct and tragic end are, unsurprisingly, primarily informed by the political, national,
and/or religious affiliations of the people writing them. Catholics saw Mary Stuart as a brave martyr for their cause; conversely, Protestant writers feared a repeat performance of Mary’s zealous Catholic Cousin, Mary Tudor, and tried their best to defame both queens. In a *Notes and Queries* article, Rosalind Smith includes examples of sixteenth-century responses to the case that show ways in which Catholics and Protestants responded. In order to control how the public viewed the crime, both camps printed and disseminated ballads about the murder. The first redaction Smith mentions is this excerpt of ‘Ane declaration of the Lordis just quarrel’:

Than sen that bowdin bludy beist Bothwell,
[H]es trayterously in myrk put downe our King:
His wife the Quene syne cauysit to him sell,
In filthie lust throw cullour of wedding. (qtd. in “The Case of Mary Queen of Scots” 499)

This ballad represents the propaganda of the Protestant faction, who believed that Mary’s “filthie lust” for Bothwell inspired her to murder Darnley so she could marry Bothwell. However, the Catholics would have their say as well, in ‘A rhime in defence of the queen of Scots against the Earl of Murray’8 representing their heroine “as both ‘simple’ and ‘good and vertuous’, beguiled by the powerful Protestant lords in a complex plot of ‘craft and subtile train…’” (qtd. in “The Case of Mary Queen of Scots” 499). It hardly seems remarkable that the factions involved would immediately work to distribute propaganda about the murder, but what is striking is the “number and diversity” of ballads that appear “in such a short period of time.” These ballads highlight the role that literature took in shaping this case from its early days (499).

Clearly, public interest in this crime is not a new phenomenon, nor is the role of literature in its public reception.1 While earlier historians wrote their own detailed textual analyses of the sonnets and letters, they did so with the express purpose of determining whether those letters are authentic. Rosalind Smith

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8 i.e., another prime suspect for Darnley’s murder.
has taken a different approach, and appears to be the first writer to examine the Casket Letters, as well as the story of Darnley’s murder, specifically in terms of their impact on genre and literature itself. In “The Case of Mary Queen of Scots, Lord Darnley and Lord Bothwell: Initiating the Literature of Husband-Murder in Sixteenth-Century England,” Smith argues that the case of Mary Stuart serves as an early modern example of the true crime genre.

Even though the writings published by Mary Stuart’s contemporaries tell us a great deal about the marriage of literature and political propaganda in public discourse, those same sources are nonetheless unable to shed light on the initial reception of the Casket materials, because few people had access to them at the time, and only copies have remained since. Instead, public opinion of Mary’s writing relied upon second-hand interpretations from biased commentators. Further, both Mary Stuart’s advocates and detractors sought to control rather than observe the contents’ reception, so they are hardly reliable sources on public opinion. Given the early partisans’ inability to see past their own prejudices (and, in some cases, to access the Casket Letters at all), we must look to later sources for insight into how the poems were viewed as literary texts.

By the eighteenth century, historians were able to access the Casket materials, and were also far enough removed from the events to have some chance of examining them objectively. This is not to say they always succeed, for religious and political biases remain present, not to mention a sizable amount of anti-female, anti-Continental, and/or anti-Scottish prejudice. Still, the later writers try to handle their subject with a level of objectivity their forebears did not bother to cultivate. William Tytler’s introduction to *An Inquiry, Historical and Critical, into the Evidence against Mary, Queen of Scots* provides an example of how these eighteenth century writers attempt to define themselves in opposition to previous writers:

It is perhaps none of the least advantages which we now enjoy, that bigotry and party-rage have at length

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9 Mary Stuart’s first husband was the French king, to whom she had been betrothed since she was young. She spent her formative years at the French court.
subsided...Every person now expects to be convinced by proof only, such as from the nature of things may be expected...It may seem strange...that the truth of the facts relating to the above era, may with more certainty be judged of at this day, than could have been done at the time when they happened...The partisans of those times were too much inflamed to have really, with deliberation, the certain evidence of facts. Heated with passion, declamation often supplied the place of reason and proof. (2-3)

Tytler’s somewhat self-congratulatory introduction succinctly defines the ethos of his age, and further asserts that he believes himself and his contemporaries to have successfully distanced themselves from their impassioned Renaissance predecessors. As a group, the eighteenth-century writers seem to pride themselves on their objectivity and superior capacity for reason. It is during this century that Mary shifts from the strict Catholic figurehead/homicidal adulteress dichotomy, and instead is examined as an individual with some control over her own destiny.

Part of Tytler’s project to present the unadorned facts of the Darnley murder includes an explication of the sonnets. Here, the sonnets are taken into account as relevant pieces of evidence that might lead to one conclusion or the other, rather than presented as incontrovertible proof that Mary had conducted an affair with Bothwell. Unlike other contemporaries,10 Tytler is of the opinion that the Casket Letters and sonnets are forgeries, and cites the quality of the poetry (or, really, lack thereof) as his primary argument for why Mary could not possibly have written them. In the absence of original copies, which would allow for an analysis of the handwriting, rhetoric is truly the only indicator of authorship on the page.

Here is the first Casket Sonnet:
O you High Gods, have pity, and let me find
Somehow some incontestable way to prove
(So that he must believe in it) my love

10 Tytler was certainly not the first or only writer to assert that the contents of the Casket were forgeries, as Walter Goodall had also done so in the 1750s (Tytler 6).
And this unwavering constancy of mind!
Alas, he rules already with no let
A body and a heart which must endure
Pain and dishonor in a life unsure,
The obloquy of friends and worse things yet.

For him I would account as nothing those
Whom I named friends, and put my faith in foes:
For him I’d let the round world perish, I
Who have hazarded both conscience and good fame,
And, to advance him, happily would die. . . .
What’s left to prove my love always the same? (48)

Tytler asks, “Are [there] only imperfect hints or obscure expressions of the Queen’s criminal love? Could...[she] have expressed herself in plainer terms, or in coarser expression, than the author of these low verses has done?” (254). Put more simply, Tytler marvels that anyone could believe that writing this terrible belonged to the Queen. Referring to earlier writers who appeared to believe the letters to be genuine, Tytler says, “I cannot forbear expressing my amazement that two such elegant writers, and judges of writing, as Dr. [William] Robertson and Mr. [David] Hume, should ever have been imposed upon by so coarse and palpable an imposter” (256-7). For Tytler, answering the question of authorship seems to be informed by one’s taste in poetry, a rather surprising turn for an Enlightenment-age writer trafficking in fact-based arguments. Tytler appears astonished that otherwise erudite historians and writers are unable to identify poor quality poetry, as if such a skill is necessary for historical inquiry. This text shows that literature found its place even in the writings of men who prided themselves on total objectivity. Further, Tytler is clearly of the opinion that Mary’s intellect and abilities exceed those of whatever forger penned the sonnets —likely Murray, Morton, or Lethnington (6). As will be demonstrated, Mary was considered very bright in spite of some of her more questionable behavior, so Tytler’s equation of intelligence with poetic ability demonstrates the hold that poetry still had on intellectual life in the 1760s.

This tendency to engage in a close reading of the sonnets continued into the nineteenth century. In the preface of his
edition of the reprinted letters Hugh Campbell writes: “I am not fully prepared to vouch for [the letters’] authenticity, only because I did not see the Queen write them; but history and concurring details induce me to feel almost confident that they are the compositions of the unfortunate Queen of Scots” (vi). Continuing the tradition of objective inquiry and adherence to factual information, Campbell reinforces the importance of textual analysis in the larger project of understanding the Queen. In fact, as a point of comparison, Campbell analyses another poem, “Si je suis en repos,” written for Francis II after his death. When explicating the text, Campbell writes, “In my humble opinion, the poem altogether is a fine composition…The thoughts are natural, and simple, well conducted, and elegantly expressed. The fourth stanza appears to me, particularly, to be beautiful and poetical” (70). Campbell disagrees other writers, who have “a mean opinion of Queen Mary’s poetry,” including both the possibly forged sonnets and Mary’s other work (70). While the writers of this period contradict each other in terms of Mary’s skill as a writer, their interest (as well as references to other writers) illustrates the relatively high number of people who viewed the sonnets as historically significant.

Another historian, Agnes Strickland, holds writing ability in high estimation and believes the Queen of Scots to be an exemplar of such talents:

What evidence, indeed, can afford so fair a test of the moral qualities and intellectual powers of persons, who have played a conspicuous part in the arena of public life, as that which has been furnished by their own pens? The epistolary talents of Mary, Queen of Scots…have scarcely been, as yet, rated at their full value. No one, however, who is capable of appreciating the beautiful simplicity of her style and the eloquence of her language, can deny that her letters very far surpass those of her most accomplished contemporaries, not even excepting those of [Sir Francis] Bacon and Sir Philip Sidney. (xvii)
The bold opinion that the Queen’s writing ability is superior to Bacon and Sidney may not be shared by all, but Strickland’s comments demonstrate that, by 1848, Mary’s authorial talents are still part of the conversation about the Casket Letters. The value of a good poet, and by extension the contempt earned by a poor one, becomes even more apparent when Strickland contrasts Mary Stuart with her cousin, Elizabeth I.

Writing in 1903, Martin Hume adds yet another textual analysis, albeit a shallow one, to the canon of secondary literature on the poems:

The objections justly urged against much of the text of the Casket letters cannot with equal force be opposed to the sonnets that accompanied them. They appear, to me at least, to bear upon them undoubted signs of authenticity, and if they present a true picture of her feelings towards Bothwell when she wrote them, the favours crowded upon the earl by his sovereign are more than explained. She appears to have been self-tortured with jealousy, and reveals herself in one hundred and sixty lines of passionate verse as a woman fiercely and insatiably pursuing the lukewarm object of her desire…No forger, especially if he were a man, would have put so much gall in his pen when referring to her as is contained in several of Mary’s sonnets. (373)

Although Hume’s claim that a forger—specifically, a male one—could not have possibly written with such passion is somewhat dubious, this treatment of the poems as important literary texts shows that historians maintained an interest in the poetry until the early twentieth century. The more believable the passion on the page, the likelier it was that Mary had willingly submitted to Bothwell and confirmed the accusation that she was willfully unfaithful to Darnley. Later, Hume quotes from the ninth sonnet in order to address whether Mary’s relationship with Bothwell was consensual:

My Heart, my Blood, my Soul, my chiefest Care,
You promised that we two should taste the pleasure
Of planning the fair future at our leisure;

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11 Mary would later claim that Bothwell raped her.
Yet all night long I lie and languish here
Because my heart is sore beset with fear,
  Seeing that it beats so far off from its treasure.
  At times I am afraid beyond all measure
That you forget me utterly, Most Dear:
Sometimes I dread lest gossip, all-untrue,
  May harden your kind thoughts from love to hate,
Or am I chilled with terror lest some new
And troublous throw of chance or shaft of fate
May swerve away from me my Dearest Love. . . .
O God, drive Thou all evil omens off! (57)

Readers of Hume’s volume looking for a deep analysis of the text will come away from the experience sorely disappointed, for Hume’s analysis amounts to this:

In this poem, it will be noticed, Mary asserts that, until Bothwell had possessed himself of her by violence, she had not been in love with him; but that from that time she had, for his sake, disregarded honour, the sole source of happiness…and had cast aside all considerations but her love. It is perfectly true that she had done so, and with her eyes open to the sacrifice she was making…during the spring of 1567 she disregarded all things and considerations for the overpowering passion that dominated her. (375)

This is a rather superficial reading of the poems, and does not sufficiently address the question of whether they could have plausibly been written by the Queen. Is there sufficient evidence to indicate that “inimical forgers certainly would not have” alluded to an initially violent encounter between Mary and Bothwell? Perhaps not, as the forgers may have been willing to risk damning Bothwell as a means to an end. While Hume’s analysis is not nearly as technically-based or flattering as that of the other writers, Hume’s analysis demonstrates the poems’ continuing import.
In spite of all the glowing reviews of her writing, the Queen’s personal reputation continued to suffer centuries after her death. Writing of the bafflement with which historians treated Mary’s personal choices, British historian Alison Weir writes:

Mary was seen as a woman who allowed her emotions to rule her acts and was therefore responsible to a degree for her own destruction…This view gave rise to a trend, which continued into the nineteenth century, for portraying Mary as the frivolous victim of a licentious upbringing at the French court, whose unrestrained sexual intrigues brought about her downfall. (Weir 4)

Weir’s summary is corroborated by the writings of many historians working in different time periods. Even when writers assert that they believe Mary to be innocent in the case against Darnley, they often add a few caveats that she is still, at least, guilty of poor judgment in her personal life.

It is certainly true that Mary was not prepared for statesmanship, as she left Scotland for France while still a child and came of age in the French court as the French dauphin’s betrothed. Although Mary was the daughter of James V of Scotland and heir to the Scottish throne in her own right, her presumed role was future consort of the future French king, rather than the Scottish queen regnant she would unexpectedly become upon the untimely death of Henry. This is important to note, for Mary’s lack of experience in government—and, consequently, her future failures as a ruler—can be attributed to the expectation that she would always defer to her husband and those who would rule Scotland in her stead. As Weir explains,

There is little evidence that [Mary] received any formal training in political skills, for everyone, herself included, expected her to remain in France. Scotland would be governed by others on her behalf, so there was no necessity for her to be trained specifically for the duties of queen regnant. (14)
Had she been given a chance to learn statesmanship and diplomacy, or even intellectual pursuits beyond those typical of a royal woman of her time, Mary might have had the skills necessary to rule her land competently and keep control of her subjects. More importantly, Mary’s success would have been much more likely had she been equipped to deal with the idiosyncratic factional politics of the unruly Scottish lords. In his sympathetic biography of Mary, John Guy challenges the traditional view that Mary was an incompetent ruler, arguing that Mary deftly handled the nobles of her native country for several years, and that only a few mistakes at crucial moments caused her downfall.

Prepared or not, Mary Stuart was to be compared with monarchs of her day, not consorts. Weir writes that while Mary did not quite demonstrate the wit and intellect of Elizabeth I, the English royal cousin who would eventually order her execution, Mary nonetheless read for pleasure, knew several languages, and enjoyed a variety of intellectual pursuits appropriate for her station. Comparisons of the two women’s cleverness are common, with Elizabeth often winning due to her political shrewdness and enduring reputation. Strickland disagrees: “It is a positive refreshment to turn from the laborious, pedantic, and mystified compositions of Queen Elizabeth, to the easy, unaffected, perspicuous letters of Mary Stuart” (xvii-xviii). Pierre de Bourdeille Brantôme wrote that “there was hardly any branch of human knowledge of which [Mary] could not talk well” (qtd. in Weir 14). It is important to remember that Mary Stuart had no reason to believe that she, a woman, could or would rule a country on her own. The glittering and notorious Tudor female personalities that would rule Britain as queens in their own right in the sixteenth century—namely, Mary I and

“Alison Weir shows how Elizabeth epitomized the ideal Renaissance consort, a role completely distinctive from queen regnant.”
Elizabeth I—did not come into power until Mary Stuart was coming of age on the other side of the English Channel. Mary Stuart’s cousin “Bloody” Mary Tudor would demonstrate ways in which a Catholic woman could rule a Protestant country in the 1550s, but her unpopular zealotry cannot have served as the best model for effective statesmanship. In short, Mary Stuart had no female role models to guide her.

It is possible that Mary would have left a different impression on history if Francis II had lived and Mary had been relegated to the role of French queen consort. Mary’s female forebears had proved themselves to be popular and capable royal wives, which might allow us a glimpse at the successes that Mary Stuart might have enjoyed under different circumstances. For example, Mary’s Plantagenet great-grandmother, Elizabeth of York, overcame nightmarish circumstances and eventually married Henry Tudor, the future Henry VII, founding the Tudor dynasty and winning the affection of the English people. In *Elizabeth of York: A Tudor Queen and Her World*, Alison Weir shows how Elizabeth epitomized the ideal Renaissance consort, a role completely distinctive from queen regnant. Elizabeth evidently embodied all the best traits of her Plantagenet relatives, yet part of the Yorkist queen’s success can be attributed to her ability to contain her erudition within the parameters of her role; she appeared neither overqualified (i.e., threatening) nor under-qualified (i.e., incompetent) for the position. Although it is impossible to say for sure whether Mary Stuart would have earned the same respect under different circumstances, Elizabeth of York’s example allows us insight into the alternative ways in which historians have treated female monarchs who behaved.

Still, Mary Stuart’s capriciousness and lack of judgment is a frequent topic in conversations that involve her life, which has caused some historians to appear reluctant to praise her. Further, despite Mary’s enormous popularity, historians also seem to struggle with explaining why they are inclined to write about her at all.\(^\text{12}\) As one example of this particular anxiety,

\(^{12}\) A type of explanation which, it must be said, never appears to be necessary when yet another book is published on Henry VIII, or any of the other illustrious Tudor monarchs.
consider this passage from the preface of Martin Hume’s 1903
*Love Affairs of Mary, Queen of Scots*:

The only excuse that can be advanced for the production of a new book on Mary Stuart is that her supremely interesting personality has so frequently led her historians into the by-path of inquiry as to her virtue or vice, as to have obscured, to some extent, the reasons for her disastrous political failure; which, as it seems to me, did not spring from her goodness or badness as a woman, but from certain human weaknesses of character, quite compatible with general goodness and wisdom or with the reverse, but which fatally handicapped her as against antagonists who were less subject to such weakness. (vii)

Hume’s choice to use the word “excuse” betrays his opinion that perhaps Mary’s legacy ought not to have enjoyed the historical import it already had begun to by that point—i.e., much attention had been paid to the Scottish queen, but not necessarily for good reason or with useful results. Hume allows Mary’s memory the generous view that she did not fail as a ruler because she was a weak woman, as so many had claimed, but instead because she was a weak person. In his view, Mary’s abject failure as a ruler was an inevitability regardless of her breeding, experience, or upbringing.13

Hume was one of many to go out of his way to justify his inclination to write about Mary. In *The Tragedy of Fotheringay*, published in 1905, Mrs. Maxwell Scott also recognizes the overwhelming amount of information already written on the subject, and addresses the matter thus:

Writers of every opinion—friends and foes—have taken as their theme the life and death of Mary Stuart, and it would now seem as if nothing further could be written on the subject, fascinating though it has proved. Fresh historical matter bringing new evidence, however, comes

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13 As opposed to Jenny Wormald who, according to Weir, believes that Mary “was an abject failure as both a queen and a woman, and that she was an accomplice in Darnley’s murder” (Weir 5).
to light now and then, and the publication in France, some years ago, of such testimony is our excuse for adding a short chapter to the history of Queen Mary. (11)

Once again, a writer sees the need to “excuse” another book about Mary. It seems that nearly every writer publishing on Mary Stuart feels the need to explain the inclination away, or at least senses an obligation to demonstrate the writer’s qualifications to speak on the subject. Nearly all will concede that the matter is fascinating, but few will recognize a need for anyone to publish material on the matter in the absence of new information. Writing about Mary simply because she is an interesting personality is apparently not justification enough. The scholarly self-consciousness is unsurprising, seeing as the biography genre was still not considered a part of legitimate historical study by the turn of the twentieth century. Agnes Strickland seems to be one of the pioneers of the form in the nineteenth century, intending her volume of Mary’s letters to include an “almost autobiographical history of [the Queen’s] latter years” (xiii).

Thankfully, the number of writers who apologize for publishing additional writing on Mary, Queen of Scots seems to have gone down. Where writers once had a difficult time explaining any new material that didn’t support conclusive findings in the murder mystery, the popularity of character studies has given this mystery a new life. To show a current example of how writers delve into the murder and Mary’s possible involvement, I return to Alison Weir. Weir demonstrates far less concern than Hume, Scott, or even Strickland about illustrating the impetus behind her project. Nonetheless, Weir appears very aware of the vast length of her book, and by extension the possibility that some readers may be put off by it. She states in the introduction that she “make[s] no apologies for the long build-up to Darnley’s murder” or for “the length of the text” (5), which indicates the anticipation of criticism. However, no mention of Weir’s reasoning for writing the book appears anywhere. In the twenty-first century, a time of unprecedented literacy in the Western world, the enduring demand for books on Mary is reason enough.

With all these new publications on the Queen, however, there exists at least a need to present the information in a fresh light. Exigency and politics prompted the propaganda of the
sixteenth century, while widely available copies of the letters prompted factual examinations of the eighteenth century. The following century saw a renewed emphasis on moral character, which prompted writers to reach conclusions based on the morality of the key players. In recent years, the emphasis has shifted yet again toward a genre-based approach. Writers treat the Darnley incident as a murder mystery and sixteenth-century whodunit replete with a cast of distinctive and fully-formed characters. This shift has seen a de-emphasis on the letters and poems, with an increased emphasis on the players’ motives and circumstantial evidence based on psychological character studies. In spite of the fact that her book explores the mystery from every possible angle and contains extensive analysis of the Casket Letters, for example, Weir spends remarkably little time discussing the poems. Relying primarily on secondary sources, the following is the extent of what Weir has to say on the poetry:

The 158-line love poem in French from the Casket Documents, often erroneously described as a collection of twelve sonnets, was also alleged by some to have been written by Mary for Bothwell while she was at Stirling. Robin Bell, who edited Mary’s collected verse, believes that this poem is consistent with her authenticated style, and that any forger would have attempted to copy her youthful, better known poems, rather than guess how she would write in her maturity. He suggests, however, that the ‘sonnets’ may have been tampered with in order to incriminate Mary: [George] Buchanan claimed that they were composed ‘(as it is said) while her husband lived, but certainly from before [Bothwell’s] divorce from his wife.’ He also says they were written with tolerable elegance, but Brantôme and Ronsard declared that they were in such bad French, and in such an unpolished, fragmented style, that it was ludicrous to attribute them to Mary. It has been suggested that Buchanan himself wrote—or altered—them, since he was one of the few
people in Scotland who knew how to compose courtly French verse; furthermore, he knew Mary’s style. (407) Although she extensively examines the prose in the Casket Letters with, at times, sentence-level precision, Weir does not bother to re-print, explicate, or evaluate the poetry. Indeed, she does not even use this summary of sources that address the poetry to arrive at any particular conclusion about it. Six chapters later, Weir concludes that “[i]n the light of all the evidence, it is impossible to resist the conclusion that the Casket Letters were fabrications” (535). Apparently, the poetry belongs under the same umbrella as the letters, and contains no useful meaning on its own. This choice seems odd, considering Weir has spent considerable time exploring the historical significance accuracy of poems in her other books.¹⁴

Now that historians have untangled the rhetoric in the works credited to Mary Stuart and exhausted the extant resources on the “unfortunate” queen,¹⁵ the conversation about these texts has necessarily shifted toward a view of Mary as a poet. Rosalind Smith explains that “[b]y the mid-twentieth century…Mary Stuart’s identity as a writer began to exist alongside her status as a historical character” (“Reading Casket Sonnets” 169), but even today, the Queen is more often handled as an historical curiosity than a poet in her own right. Compared to the amount of attention Elizabeth I’s writing receives, and given the widespread impact of her written work, additional academic treatments of Mary Stuart’s letters and poetry through a variety of critical lenses are overdue.

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¹⁴ In Mary Boleyn: The Mistress of Kings, Weir explores the possibility that a poem by John Skelton corroborates accounts of Elizabeth Howard’s questionable virtue. Elizabeth Howard was the mother of Mary and Anne Boleyn. The latter married Henry VIII, Mary Stuart’s great-uncle, and gave birth to Elizabeth I.

¹⁵ It is interesting to note that no fewer than three writers refer to Mary Stuart as “unfortunate,” even when they take an unfavorable view of her conduct.
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