

English

Minds, Manifestations, and Mysteries: An Afterlife Exploration in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Literature

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In the centuries leading up to the Enlightenment era, there was little question as to whether or not human personality survives the death of the body. The literature of pre-Industrial England and colonial America reflected a common idea that human souls—separate from the physical body—were destined for either eternal reward or eternal damnation, dependent on one’s conduct during earthly life. Enlightenment scholar Thomas Munck estimates that “systematic critical reasoning and the espousal of humanist ethical values” were common among eighteenth-century intellectuals, which made their writings “deeply suspect in the eyes of conventional religious minds” (139). This Enlightenment spirit would hugely impact afterlife thought in the following centuries, beginning an ongoing era of religious skepticism and unorthodox reinterpretations of the Christian afterlife.

The immediate expression of such unorthodox viewpoints soon sparked a moral revolution spanning the first half of the nineteenth century. This fast-spreading shift in attitude resulted in the questioning of divine judgment, embracement of liberal lifestyles, and perception of genius reputation as the key to immortality. The middle decades of the nineteenth century then saw a renewed literary interest in the supernatural and the concept of ghosts as expressions of legacies; in the latter half of the century, however, religious skepticism evolved dramatically into spiritually conflicted, often atheistic thinking. At the dawn of the twentieth century, this conflict ultimately culminated in further exploration of unconventional afterlife concepts, with inventive narrative styles being employed to blur the barrier separating the living from the dead.

This pattern of progression within literature, while seeming to indicate continual evolution of the idea of the afterlife, actually points to a standstill in the development of new ideas on the topic, with writers at the beginning of the twentieth century transforming (but not replacing) motifs that appeared in the century prior. Further, British literature of the nineteenth century shows a high level of interdependence when addressing this subject, ultimately leaving life

after death as an open question and influencing American authors at the century's close. In challenging orthodoxy, British Enlightenment-era authors ushered in a century-long period of vibrant afterlife curiosity and skepticism (an "afterlife Renaissance"), which expressed itself in different forms in subsequent British literature, culminating in American works which manipulated narrative to build upon these forms.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790) by William Blake is paradigmatic of the unorthodox reinterpretations of Christian morality and the afterlife that accompanied the post-Enlightenment English Romantic period. Challenging the centuries-old concepts of an absolutely paradisiacal heaven and agonizing hell, Blake reconciles passion (called "energy") and piety (called "reason"). In the process, he radically redefines the idea of the soul, and, by extension, its final judgment. In asserting that the "Contraries" of good and evil are "necessary to human existence," Blake questions the very nature of morality and argues that "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul," meaning that secular passions comprise a part of the self, and since the self is inseparable from the soul, it is unfair to condemn a soul to hell based on its inherent contents (150).

Blake's idea suggests that the passions an individual carries out through his bodily senses—which may be regarded by the religious as "evil"—cannot, in fact, *actually* be evil, because they originate in the immortal soul, which is widely understood to be pure in religious and philosophical traditions. Blake further reinterprets Christian morality by suggesting the "comforter" (or, Holy Spirit) can send "Desire" (one's innate disposition for secular passions) to build upon "Reason" (piety, or obedience to orthodoxy), essentially encouraging others to find the full potential of their souls through free thinking (151). He warns, "Always be ready to speak your mind, and a base man will avoid you," meaning there is sadly no room for differing opinions on doctrine among base orthodox Christians in the church. In the section "Proverbs of Hell," he laments that the "eagle" (a recurrent symbol for the unbridled soul) "never lost so much time as when he submitted to learn of the crow," or blindly accept as facts the teachings of the church (17-19).

Blake's view of the soul and the damaging effects of orthodoxy on its earthly potential are clear, but his idea of the soul's eternal destiny is vague. To Blake, the soul itself was a greater concern than its final destination, though that is not to say there is no intimation of an afterlife in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. For instance, also in "Proverbs of Hell," Blake alludes to "portions of eternity too great for the eye of man," consisting of "the roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword." The "eye of man" cannot see this eternity because man prefers an absolute heaven and an

absolute hell, whereas these violent, yet majestic images fall between those two extremes (7-9).

Blake, then, expresses that heaven and hell have the same intermingled relationship as the body and soul. He then argues that whether the soul has accessed a heaven and not a hell depends on one's perspective. In the section "A Memorable Fancy," Blake contrasts his personal "eternal lot" with the "eternal lot" of an Angel (contrasting Blake's "Devil"), who believes Blake's renegade attitude is preparing him for the "hot burning dungeon" that is the traditional idea of hell. The Angel takes Blake into a watery "infinite Abyss" which reminds strongly of the primordial state of the world at the beginning of Genesis; this suggests that heaven and hell, like earth, must be created. Though God is unequivocally the creator of heaven in Genesis, Blake instead suggests that human souls create their own heavens, or, perhaps more accurately, reveal them. This is supported by Blake's "eternal lot"—his personal afterlife—transforming from a dark, Leviathan-dominated sea to a "pleasant bank beside a river" once the Angel departs; a harper sings that "the man who never alters his opinion"—the Angel—"is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind." The Angel was not creating a hell for Blake, but rather interrupting his heaven, as the vast, empty void and reptilian Leviathan would appear to reflect the Angel's own mind, and not Blake's (156-57).

Thus, Blake concludes that human souls have control over their own destiny, and that God does not punish; instead, in ignorance and restraint of passions, souls unwittingly condemn themselves to a "deep pit" in an open Bible where they are as restrained "monkeys" withheld by "the shortness of their chains" (157). To Blake, "Poetic Genius"—as he terms it—is what gives the ability to create a heaven of passions and shun the hell of constraining ignorance. Blake's portrayal of the prophet Ezekiel, for example, expresses a wish to "raise other men into a perception of the infinite" while never resisting "genius or conscience only for the sake of present ease or gratification" (i.e. the gratification of following orthodox rules in a bid to enter heaven) (154).

A later Romantic, William Wordsworth, shared this admiration for "Poetic Genius" (though he does not use that term) and also presents the human soul as being intertwined with the body—knowing of otherworldly realms and perhaps in control of its own destiny. In the 1815 poem "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," Wordsworth expresses a Neo-Platonist view of the immortal soul, regarding it as pre-existing in a realm suggestive of a Christian heaven. In Wordsworth's view, children, being most recently departed from this realm, have the ability to see the physical world "appareled in celestial light" (4). Like Blake, Wordsworth suggests that the soul

and body are one, but also argues that bodily experience fosters a sense of mundanity, obscuring the soul's divine insight and burdening it with "earthly freight" (126). In other words, the soul—which, according to Wordsworth, "rises with us"—cannot be independent of the body, for its abilities are compromised when people are born and age, as birth is "but a sleep and a forgetting" (58). While Blake saw "Poetic Genius" as the product of unrestrained passion, Wordsworth saw the same genius inherent in innocence.

Wordsworth also shares the anti-church sentiments of Blake. In describing a youth as "Nature's Priest," he implies dually that the youth has a special understanding of nature and that all other priests are artificial for lacking such knowledge: the youth is not merely a priest of nature, but a priest appointed by nature as well (72). The child is said to be an "Eye among the blind" (as opposed to Blake's "eye of man") who can read the "eternal deep," the Biblical image familiar from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (111-12). Like Blake, the child can accurately separate a false, hellish illusion from the heavenly reality. The child, though his "exterior semblance doth belie [his] Soul's immensity," is able to reveal a heaven out of the "eternal deep" which brought forth the world around him (108-9). His soul has "sight on the immortal sea," or pre-existent realm, which imbues him with this skill (163). In the same way, Blake, though seemingly devilish compared to the Angel, is able to reveal a heaven from the black abyss of an ambiguous afterlife realm.

Also like Blake, Wordsworth was more invested in his study of the soul, rather than a comprehensive definition of the afterlife. He does, however, offer a hopeful outlook on a life to come, declaring that humans "will grieve not" and will "find strength in what remains behind," referring to lost divine knowledge and the effort to reclaim it. He speaks of a "faith that looks through death" that all humans share from knowing they are missing the answer to a person's destiny when he dies. Late in the poem, Wordsworth presents a key to immortality that is very similar to Blake's: a "philosophic mind" (a "Poetic genius") that can create "thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears" from the sight of even just "the meanest flower" (202-03). Though both Blake and Wordsworth regarded genius as the means to unlocking the truth behind morality, the natural world, and even the afterlife, the late Romantics would come to greatly admire genius itself and regard it as that which could make the poet or philosopher immortal in a figurative as well as a literal sense.

The second generation of Romantic poets glorified intellectual (and, to a lesser extent, physical) prowess as the very elevator of a person's essence to higher planes of existence. This philosophy of immortality was most readily expressed in the works of Pisan Circle intellectual colleagues Lord Byron and Percy Shel-

ley. Shelley's praise for Byron's *Don Juan*, calling it "pregnant with immortality," speaks volumes to these two poets' faith in the genius of themselves and poets like them as the pathway to eternity (Greenblatt 615). Whether they regarded the higher existence of "immortality" as merely an everlasting legacy on earth or a transition of a soul to an unseen metaphysical place is ambiguous. Ultimately, their work hints at both, suggesting that an afterworld, for the late Romantics, remained a possibility. It would not, however, resemble exactly a Christian heaven in its function, nor would it ever suggest a hell.

Byron's autobiographical details reveal him to be the very embodiment of Blake's picture of the human soul: one that is married to its bodily passions and supposed vices. Byron himself noted the peculiar dichotomy of his being, describing himself as a "strange mélange of good and evil" (Greenblatt 616). Byron's liberal lifestyle and affinity for the pursuit of glory in both his intellectual and physical giftedness shines throughout his poetry. In 1810's "Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos," for instance, Byron gloats about the ease of his intercontinental swim, boasting to only "faintly stretch" his "dripping limbs" (11). He alludes to the legendary Leander, who swam the same distance to see his lover, Hero. Byron, mercilessly mocking Leander for "[swimming] for Love" instead of "Glory," is "doubtful" Leander ever completed the swim in the first place, and belittles him for drowning (14-16). Byron, in the end, denigrates Leander and others like him as "sad mortals," implying Byron thought attaining glory through physical prowess made him on par with "Gods" who only "plague" the weak (18).

Though Byron evidently was fond of combating mortality with arrogance, he also had more substantial contributions to afterlife thought, including a glimmer of an idea about the possibility of afterlife realms. In the seventh stanza of the second canto of "Child Harold's Pilgrimage," Byron introduces the idea of "a land of souls," but, like his early Romantic predecessors, excludes both the orthodox heaven and hell as the identity of this theoretical place (65). He admits, in the same canto, that "holiest men" have been the ones to uphold the idea of afterworlds, but dismisses their versions as "dubious lore" (64-67). The Sadducee, believer in the neutral Sheol, was wrong about eternal destiny. His pagan counterpart was the sophist—characterized by historian Peter Adamson as concerned more with "the value of persuasion" than with truth-seeking (80). Both figures are symbols of fraud. In the second canto's eighth stanza, Byron shuns these so-called "holy" men, embracing instead "all who taught the right," in his view, including the "Samian sage" (72). This is a reference to Pythagoras, who believed in reincarnation, which implies that the soul is "immaterial and probably indestructible" (Adamson 29). The freedom of the soul to migrate influenced Plato, and, by extension, the Romantic era's Neo-Platonists. Byron

himself, of course, knew, admired, and affirmed one such poet: Percy Shelley, whose thoughts on afterlife realms closely resemble those of the Neo-Platonist Wordsworth.

Though Shelley had a reputation for atheism, he came to explore concepts of the afterlife thoroughly while grieving over the unfairly early death of John Keats. In his 1821 elegy to Keats, *Adonais*, Shelley first contemplates the link between genius and legacy, then considers the transportation of the essence of Adonais (a glorified depiction of Keats) back to the unseen realm from whence it came; it is a realm inherent in the natural world, though made invisible by the shroud of death. Shelley essentially builds upon ideas of the secret sublimity of nature and origin of souls established by Wordsworth, all without compromising the unorthodox reinterpretations of “heaven” that pervaded the century.

Shelley begins *Adonais* imploring the title character’s mother to weep for him and to “dream not that the amorous Deep”—i.e. an abyss similar to Blake’s that is the image of the pre-creation void—could be able to “restore him to the vital air,” or that Adonais cannot be reborn into his body from that mysterious “Deep” of passions from which he emerged (25-26). From here, the poem evolves into a more optimistic outlook: first, Shelley puts much faith into the eternal survival of genius, noting that Milton’s “clear Sprite” (spirit, specifically in regards to genius) continues to “reign o’er earth,” implying Keats’s shall too (35). Shelley regards Milton and the other greats as dwelling in a figurative “serene abode” of “Fame” (45), and he names these poets “the eternal” (58).

Shelley continues his elegy with the presentation of Keats’s mourners, who include his dreams and even the elements of nature itself. For instance, Shelley describes “wild winds” that “flew around, sobbing in their dismay” (126), and a “Pale Ocean” in “unquiet slumber” (125). Wind was a common motif in the Romantic era, and was often used as a symbol of creative inspiration. This wind is explicitly natural and not Keats’s genius itself, but mourns because it is one in spirit with that genius, and cries out at its apparent loss. The “Pale Ocean,” another reminder of the void before creation, is in unrest knowing the body and soul it birthed is now missing; it anticipates Keats’s return, as is portrayed at the elegy’s conclusion. These natural images suggest supernatural origins for souls, bodies, and the genius they are imbued with, but also have integrity as natural images in their own right: following Wordsworth’s idea of nature’s power to enlighten, Shelley portrays nature as the source of genius itself, and mournful when its creation is seemingly lost.

In the next few stanzas, Shelley hints at the meaning behind his imagery, mentioning a specific “Ocean” that brings “quickenning life from Earth’s heart” ever

since “the great morning of the world when first God dawned on Chaos” (163-66). So, for the first time, Shelley equates Chaos with the realm of pre-existence first suggested by the Neo-Platonist Wordsworth. “Baser things,” Shelley states, “diffuse themselves” from this Ocean-realm and receive “renewed might” as they are brought from a world of formlessness into the world of the living (169-71). Shelley compares the creation of new life to resurrection, leading him to a Blakean discussion of the body-soul dynamic. Shelley ultimately declares “grief itself to be mortal” (183) when he realizes the truth in his analogy that a sword cannot be “consumed before the sheath” (178). Even though the sword and sheath fit together perfectly as body and soul, the sword—the soul, here an image of victory and might—is not weakened, but unleashed and revealed in all its glory when its sheath (the body) is destroyed. The body is to Shelley what it was to Blake: merely a vehicle for earthly perception. It is needless to grieve because Keats’s personality has not been destroyed nor altered with the demise of his body. He is hidden, not gone.

Shelley continues the motif of “unveiling” through to the elegy’s conclusion. He employs the recurring analogy of immortal stars to describe Keats’s condition: the “veil” of death, like nightfall to stars, covers him from view, yet he and stars are ever-present. Shelley finally connects all of his elements when he accepts the death of Keats’s body, crying, “Dust to dust! But the pure spirit shall flow back to the burning fountain whence it came,” the “burning fountain” being the first explicit reference to an afterlife realm—the “Eternal”—where life itself originated, exactly like the realm proposed by Wordsworth (338-40). This realm cannot resurrect, but it does reabsorb, which makes Keats “one with Nature” (370). The natural and supernatural are now effectively unified, with the dead permeating the whole universe unseen. Adonais transcends all things, being “beyond all worlds” (419). In the unorthodox manner of writers of his time, Shelley never bothers with concepts of salvation as a means to this higher state, but reaffirms his position that a “lofty thought lifts a young heart above its mortal lair,” not adherence to strict rules of morality (392-93). To Shelley, earthly life and the afterlife combine to form eternity; eternal “white radiance” is “stain[ed]” by life, a “dome of many-colored glass” that obscures, but does not separate (462-63). Shelley revolutionizes afterlife discussion by shattering the border between the living and the dead, allowing for the next generation’s interest in the implications of hidden spirits revealing themselves as ghosts.

In the works of Victorian-era contemporaries Emily Brontë and Charles Dickens, the “essence” of a person—previously regarded by Shelley as intellectual genius—is imagined to consist of other mental components: love and greed, respectively. These “energies” that drove a dead person’s personality in life are projected in the real world as the ghosts of Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering*

Heights (1847) and Jacob Marley in *A Christmas Carol* (1843).

Wuthering Heights critiques the merit of strict orthodoxy in both religion and culture: Catherine's bedroom at the eponymous estate is haunted by her brokenhearted ghost as the result of her disastrous social obligation to marry Edgar Linton over her true love, Heathcliff. Thus, Brontë presents the phenomenon of ghosts as the result of unresolved conflict during life. Brontë shows that Catherine's essence is her love for Heathcliff: Catherine declares that Heathcliff is "more [herself] than [she] is," establishing that Catherine's and Heathcliff's souls are twisted together (63). Their one soul cannot pass on until their bodies are physically joined in burial at the novel's end; so Brontë, in this respect, continues Blake's unorthodox interpretation of the soul as being one with the earthly body and personality. The ultimate point of the novel, then, is that Nelly Dean must relate the full story of the tragedy of Catherine and Heathcliff's love, allowing time for Heathcliff to reflect and finally realize that pleading "Cathy, do come" is futile, and that he must go to her instead of her to him (23).

Catherine's eternal destination, naturally, is neither a heaven nor a hell, with Catherine herself confessing how "extremely miserable" she would be in heaven (63). In the view of Martha Nussbaum, the novel is "structured around an opposition between Christian piety and authentic love," the "authentic love" being between Catherine and Heathcliff and the "Christian ascent" of Nelly Dean, Linton, and the residents of Thrushcross Grange producing only "inauthentic human relations" (397). *Wuthering Heights*, which is, as Susan Gubar describes, "anti-hierarchical and egalitarian," stands in stark contrast to the "hierarchical chain" of Thrushcross Grange, which "Western culture traditionally proposes as heaven's decree" (389). However, to authentic lovers Catherine and Heathcliff, *Wuthering Heights* is figuratively the true heaven, so it is expected that Catherine's ghost should appear there, waiting to be reconciled with Heathcliff at that place. The inclusion of Catherine's ghost in and of itself plainly indicates Catherine and Heathcliff are more than mere corpses at *Wuthering Heights*, their one personality being upheld by true romantic love rather than the inauthentic "love" of orthodox Christianity.

Dickens follows many of Brontë's examples, continuing the century's trend of defiance against orthodoxy: he, too, considers mental elements aside from genius which could manifest as a ghostly projection of a person—namely, the negative trait of greed. Dickens upholds Shelley's idea of the nature of eternal fate, reminding the reader that he is "standing in spirit at [the reader's] elbow," a possible prediction of his post-mortem future as an invisible being among future generations (23). Further, the ghost of Jacob Marley tells Scrooge that he had "sat invisible beside him many and many a day" up until the moment of

his visit. The reason Marley becomes visible is because of an unresolved earthly conflict, similar to the situation of Brontë's Catherine (18). Marley confirms that if a "spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death," and confides in Scrooge that he is doomed to a "weary journey" and "incessant labor" because of his greed in life (15-16). Marley's ghost manifests itself by the energy of his greed, and for the occasion of Scrooge's redemptive journey, just as Catherine is manifest by the energy of her love and on the occasion of Heathcliff's resolution to die. Both Heathcliff and Scrooge, then, are redeemed by the intervention of a ghostly visitor who leads them to resolve unfulfilled love and unbridled avarice, respectively. Because he is writing a morality tale and not a romance, however, Dickens outlines the progression of Scrooge's redemption step-by-step, in contrast to Heathcliff's redemption, which occurs suddenly when his plots for revenge prove meaningless.

In portraying Scrooge's gradual change of heart, Dickens uses personification to analyze experience and deeds as they relate to eternal fate. The Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come are unique in that they are not spirits of former living people, but rather symbols for the three perspectives of human experience relative to the passage of time. The three non-human ghosts serve as framers who provide insight, echoing the narrative style of *Wuthering Heights*. Like Brontë's Nelly Dean, the Christmas ghosts narrate the story of why spirits of the departed have leaked into the mortal world. Just as Nelly served to tell Lockwood Catherine's history with Heathcliff and, incidentally, why Lockwood encountered her as a ghost, Scrooge's three visitors serve to show Scrooge how Marley came to suffer his eternal fate, and ultimately warn Scrooge that he himself is on Marley's same path.

In addition to having narrative similarities with contemporaneous *Wuthering Heights*, *A Christmas Carol* also echoes its Romantic predecessors through symbolic reference. For instance, the three spirits account for Scrooge's otherwise unrealistic reformation by guiding him to a "rediscovery of his own innocence," as scholar Elliot Gilbert proposes (24). This reclamation of lost innocence is a major concern of immortality for Romantics such as Wordsworth. Further, the Ghost of Christmas Past is a bearer of a brilliantly white light that closely resembles Shelley's image of eternity: like Shelley's vision, the ghost's figure is "light one instant" and dark "at another time," reminiscent of the dome of life covering eternity's glory (23). Scrooge's attempt to extinguish the light in anger at the visions the ghost brings ultimately represents his unwillingness to face eternity: he does not want to consider how his fate after death may be impacted by his shameful legacy. The ghost has "a child's proportions," though its age and gender are ambiguous (23). These features, as well as its apparent capacity for shapeshifting, suggests a soul not yet assigned a body—a Neo-Platonist,

Wordsworthian concept of a being who originates from a pre-existent realm, or a separate world characterized completely by the concept of "Past." So, the ghost's features are unsurprising in this context.

The Ghost of Christmas Present also bears the image of children, who, in Wordsworth's view, hold divine knowledge of the immortal soul; however, Dickens corrupts this image by using personification again to portray the evils of "Ignorance" and "Want" as wretched children who accompany the middle ghost. After avoiding the light of eternity emitted by the first ghost, Scrooge is forced to confront his fate in the form of children who embody the very opposites of wisdom and contentment, qualities previously associated with the innocent children of Wordsworth's poetry. Ignorance and Want are children not born of the perfect pre-existent realm, but rather Scrooge's selfish past. So, while the first ghost revealed to Scrooge the wrongness of his greed, the middle ghost dramatically illustrates the repercussions of Scrooge's actions, which become ever-apparent to Scrooge through to the novella's conclusion.

Dickens continues this pattern of symbolic visitors and shocking revelations to the moment of Scrooge's redemption. Rather than employ imagery suggestive of Romantic views of immortality (namely, light and children), Dickens opts for the more universal image of the personification of Death for the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Though this ghost possesses no symbols independent of itself, its grave presence (which does not even necessitate a voice) communicates clearly enough that it is a symbol of eternal death: the vision it provides of Scrooge's covered corpse fills Scrooge himself with despair, apparently convincing him of death's permanence. Still, he is instilled with the thought that a "heart, brave, warm, and tender" could lessen death's sting, for a legacy of "good deeds" can "sow the world with life immortal," a power that Shelley had attributed to genius reputation when considering the bleak possibility that people, at death, truly ceased to be (71).

Consistent with the final ghost's vision of eternal death, Scrooge's final revelation is not hell, but rather a lonely grave. The ghost suggests that death is an everlasting state, which is disturbing considering that the appearance of Marley had seemingly guaranteed post-mortem existence. It appears an impossible concept in the narrative of the novella, but is consistent with the recurring nineteenth-century idea of the oneness of body and soul: the soul, being attached to the vulnerable body, may have potential for destruction. Also, like the other two ghosts, the final ghost brings forth an image of a child: the dead, innocent Tiny Tim. Tim's death serves to shatter former Romantic notions of the divine quality of children, and the dark shroud of the Death-like final ghost, in contrast to the light of the Ghost of Christmas Past, seems to obscure eter-

nity forever. These last, bleak images before Scrooge's character transformation point to a despairing attitude of afterlife doubt which would pervade the end of the nineteenth century and spark the creativity of the twentieth.

British literature of the nineteenth century would culminate in a period of religious skepticism which would greatly affect afterlife discussion in the literature of the century following. The beginning of this characteristically intense skepticism—which would eventually cross into American literary territory—began with Brontë and Dickens's contemporary, Alfred Tennyson. The poet's 1850 elegy to friend Arthur Hallam—*In Memoriam, A.H.H.*—continues previously established tropes while desperately searching for an afterlife amid the consuming doubt which would inform later works.

Like Dickens, Tennyson also uses the occasion of Christmas to frame his thoughts. In section twenty-nine of the elegy, for example, Tennyson mourns Hallam at Christmas Eve and, also like Dickens, employs personification. The figures of "Use and Wont," though they try to "guard" the household of Somersby from grief with the "wreath" of Christmas pastimes and obligatory cheer, are ultimately "old sisters" who "will die" despite being relied upon as a coping mechanism: as Ignorance and Want were birthed by Scrooge's greed, Use and Wont are killed by Tennyson's grief (11-16). So, Tennyson's inability to handle the loss of Hallam—even on joyful occasions—will only serve to exacerbate his doubt as to where Hallam has gone, if anywhere.

Throughout the elegy, Tennyson attempts to make sense of Hallam's transformation from living to dead, and where Hallam's personality may have been transported. He includes a song in section thirty which notes that the dead "do not die nor lose their mortal sympathy, nor change to us, although they change," contrasting the familiar memory of Hallam—similar to Hallam in person—with his unknowable post-mortem state. Tennyson grapples with the possibility that this state is nothing more than absolute death, saying in section thirty-four that "earth is darkness at the core," should everlasting life be false (3). This intimation of eternal darkness is countered by Hallam's earlier mention in section thirty of "the light that shone when Hope was born" (32). "Hope" refers to Christ's incarnation, a "revelation of God's love" that was, to the doubtful Tennyson, a "secure ground for a belief in a future life," and this is reflected in the thematic significance of the poem's Christmas sections (Wheeler 231). Hope's "light" evokes a familiar image of eternity common to the century's authors. In his inner turmoil, Tennyson looks to the birth of Christ and the event of Christianity as not only the source of eternity, but the source of hope. He does not know for certain the details of the afterlife, but the possibility of Christianity being true convinces him that *something* may very well exist beyond the grave.

As the elegy continues to unfold, however, Tennyson's hope in Christianity dwindles, and he reaches for unorthodox possibilities regarding the afterlife, as his predecessors and contemporaries did. In section forty-seven, most notably, he mentions the "the skirts of self" (i.e., that which remains when the physical body is destroyed) "reemerging in the general Soul," suggesting a return to a pre-existent world exactly as the one described by Wordsworth (3-4). He imagines rejoining Hallam in that place, which is a "vaster dream" unmatched by even "Love on earth," and concludes he and Hallam will "lose [themselves] in light" implying a metaphysical transformation beyond compare and surpassing all earthly delights (11-16).

So, again, light is associated with eternity, in both Christian and Neo-Platonist contexts. Further, Tennyson also explores the possibility of ghosts; in section ninety-three, he exasperatedly admits Hallam has apparently undergone "tenfold-complicated change" and implies Hallam's ghost may be "near," though Tennyson's own ghost cannot sense its presence in the "blindness of the frame" (12-16). This reflects exactly Shelley's concept of the dead existing parallel to the living unseen, and matches also the notion of Tennyson's contemporaries that ghosts can make themselves known.

Finally, Tennyson makes his doubt explicit, calling it "Devil-born" in section ninety-six upon realizing how it torments him (4). After declaring he "fought with Death" in section one-hundred-twenty, he asks, "What matters Science unto men, at least to me?" expressing disinterest in science's answers, for they are not the answers he wants to hear (4-8). Finally, Tennyson concludes in section one-hundred-thirty-one that certain "truths" pertaining to the afterlife can "never be proved" until death and the relinquishment of "all we loved, and all we flow from" (10-12).

Robert Browning, in his 1868 work of dramatic monologues, *The Ring and the Book*, seemed to concur with Tennyson. Though Browning does not explore the metaphysical afterlife in this work, he uses the character of Pompilia—a Renaissance-era woman faced with a death sentence for adultery—to voice not mere doubt, but explicit criticism of religious institutions. Pompilia declares that "downright love atones for everything" when speaking of her affair with priest Caponsacchi, so questions why she would be guilty (365). She is disillusioned with the church, saying it has "harmed [her] most" while "hav[ing] meant to do most good" (380).

The core of Pompilia's testimony is that she began to ask "God for counsel, not mankind" indicating the ultimate unorthodox reinterpretation God which severs completely deity from clergy and church (379). Further, she vows to "lay

her [babe] away with God," referring to her son, Gaetano—her legacy and only clear "afterlife." Like Brontë's Heathcliff, she is resolved to die and leave the fate of her son and herself up to that which sustains them—not humans whose "plans and projects come to nought," and not love, at least not the love of Catherine and Heathcliff, but rather some idea of God independent entirely of priests (380-81). Whoever this God is, he is a hope brighter than the Christianity Tennyson initially experienced. The questions these Victorians raise concerning God's identity, the nature of love as it relates to life, the mystery of post-death transformation, and the ultimate existence of literal immortality regardless of all these things, would come to inform a range of innovative American literature at the twentieth century's dawn.

Emily Dickinson, American poet of the latter half of the nineteenth century, was a prolific writer whose works would initiate a wave of American afterlife curiosity and doubt which would follow both contemporary and past British examples. Known for her morbidity, Dickinson, circa the 1850s and 1860s, takes a close look at death in "Because I could not stop for Death," but never explicitly evokes the supernatural, in either religious or unorthodox terms. Rather, the poem—published in 1890—is a symbolic one, and Dickinson—much like Dickens and Tennyson—is dependent on personification especially to make sense of the event of death. The afterlife is conceived as a journey in the poem, with "Death" being a gentlemen in a "Carriage"—a carriage that can approach the living, but that the living cannot themselves "stop for" (1-3)

The reason the speaker can "accede to the trip in death's carriage," in the view of critic Carol Frost, is because of the presence of "Immortality"—personified here as well (68). Dickinson, whose faith in the Christian afterlife was "in flux" throughout her life, ponders how curious such an old and blind assumption is, for she believes in death's "sudden and impersonal power" (Frost 67). She observes that Death "pass[es] Us" at all stages of life: during the "Recess" of childhood, the "Fields of Gazing Grain" that are the fruitful years of adulthood, and to "the Setting Sun," which is old age and the fading of life (9-12). Death surrounds people from the time of birth, yet people scarcely notice it as it passes, convinced, by religion, that it is no threat.

Further, the speaker realizes the ephemeral nature of being at her death—her "labor and leisure," are "put away" as now totally irrelevant (6-7), her "Gown," it dawns on her, was nothing but "Gossamer" and her "Tippet" only "Tulle" (15-16). So, everything worldly about her—routines and possessions—fly away as webs and tissues during the ride into "Eternity" (24). Dickinson questions whether or not "Eternity" is where the "Horses' Heads" truly point (23); the horses pause at a "House" with a "scarcely visible" roof and its "Cornice – in the Ground," suggest-

ing a grave site with a sunken tombstone “roof” and edging (17-20). The fact that the horses only pause suggests this grave may not be their final destination, though this has been debated for “Centuries” (21). By having her speaker consider the destination of Eternity in a timeframe that “Feels shorter than the day,” Dickinson asserts that the afterlife is but a common conjecture: unknowable, despite religious and unorthodox theories (22).

This attitude that “no one knows” regarding the afterlife would tease another American author, Ambrose Bierce, whose 1890 short story “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” examines closely the moment of death. Unlike Dickinson, he offers not a journey to eternity, but a journey of transformation from living to dead. The only “afterlife” Bierce suggests through the “occurrence” of Peyton Farquhar’s execution is a dream that leads a dying person from one state of existence to the next. Farquhar, Bierce reveals at the story’s end, was unequivocally dead, though his odd experience crossing into the realm of death presents an unsettling new possibility that post-mortem existence is a fantasy perpetuated not only by culture, but by the brain itself. Bierce enhances the “death journey” narrative employed by Dickinson by first seeming to follow, in critic Clifford Ames’s word, “the logically consistent, cause-and-effect pattern of conventional nineteenth century narration” before abandoning it for “an ambiguous viewpoint that confuses the imaginary with the factual” and follows, instead of regular time, “psychological time” (54).

Farquhar’s observations—which flow in a stream of consciousness that anticipates William Faulkner’s own “psychological fiction”—lead his journey to its end (Ames 54). As the narrator notes, the “thoughts” that “flashed into [Farquhar’s] brain” are “to be set down in [the] words” of the story (12). Like Dickinson, Bierce personifies death, calling him a “dignitary” who is to be respected when he “comes announced” (11). This subtly implies that Farquhar’s unwillingness to accept his fate is what causes Death to turn on him at the end when Farquhar’s apparent survival and possible afterlife are suddenly sucked away into darkness.

With this in mind, it is possible that Bierce is leaving eternal existence as an open possibility, but delivers at the end the cosmic irony that a full afterlife was not ultimately dealt to a determined yet unfortunate Civil War-era Southern sympathizer. Throughout Farquhar’s descent, Bierce keeps his audience guessing as to how the hanging has played out. It would seem immediately that Farquhar fell from the noose into the river below, though the details from thereon repeatedly suggest delirium. Farquhar first loses “the intellectual part of his nature,” but then it is mysteriously “restored,” and gradually, his senses become “preternaturally keen and alert,” which enables him to perceive the natu-

ral world around him as hyper-realistic, as if he were a Wordsworthian child seeing things “appareled in celestial light” (14-15). Whether Farquhar is in a new world, or seeing the world differently by hallucination or divinely enhanced vision, is disturbingly ambiguous, though it is almost certain he is not exactly in the same river he stood high above just a moment before.

The river itself serves as a symbol for the stream of thoughts issuing from Farquhar’s brain. Apparently falling into a raging stream, he falls into his own consciousness; the “gleam of light” seemingly signals eternity, especially when, apparently against his will, it “grow[s] and brighten[s]” and raises him to the surface, bringing him into a new world (14). The world begins to degrade, however, as Farquhar’s mind itself degrades: all images become “commingled and blurred,” and as he escapes on foot through a forest, everything becomes jarringly unfamiliar, including even the stars, which are “golden” and “grouped in strange constellations” (17-18). The image of stars points back to Shelley: the odd stars, when combined with the “whispers in an unknown tongue” suggest unseen spirits of the dead who are perhaps hiding behind this path to the afterlife, the path Farquhar instinctively knows to be “the right direction” to his home and wife, or his “heaven” (18).

The initial light seen from the bottom of the river was apparently meant to carry Farquhar to a metaphysical, “heavenly” version of his home, which, like previous depictions of eternity, had been brilliant in appearance, “bright and beautiful in the morning sunshine” (18-19). It appears, however, that Farquhar, being a criminal and keeper of slaves, did not have the Poetic Genius of the Romantics, nor the love of the heartsick Heathcliff, nor the generosity of the redeemed Scrooge, nor the hope of Tennyson, to gain access. The fate of Farquhar’s body is certain, but his soul, be it damned as religion would presuppose, blotted out, nonexistent, or left to some other fate, never speaks about how it had been twisted and doomed by the hypocrisy and immorality of Southern customs. Decades later, in *As I Lay Dying* (1930), William Faulkner gives Addie Bundren this chance.

Faulkner’s innovative novel is notable as a product of every afterlife motif developed and explored in the nineteenth century. Faulkner transforms the images and themes established before him further than even his immediate predecessors, fellow Americans Bierce and Dickinson. Like those authors, Faulkner expressed in his work all but complete disbelief in definitive life after death. In giving the tragic Bundren matriarch a voice beyond her grave, however, he effectively condemns the hypocritical cultural and religious belief systems in the American South which would engender distrust in orthodoxy. Through Addie’s mysterious monologue, Faulkner both fully represents and systematically cor-

rupts every aforementioned nineteenth century afterlife theme. In the end, he says that the random echoing of the “voices” of those who suffered and caused suffering on earth constitutes their only certain “afterlife.”

The presence of Addie’s voice in the novel implies that she still exists, in some way. Like Shelley, Faulkner believes immediately that a dead person’s legacy (be it great or shameful) can continue their “presence” in the world: the farcical, dangerous funeral journey is the consequence of Addie’s implicitly vengeful request to her family. In addition, Faulkner uses Addie’s supernatural presence and speech to reveal the injustice of a Southern patriarchal culture. Unlike the vision Shelley had for Keats, Addie is not absorbed in a bright Eternity parallel to her former world, but rather stuck in some ambiguous, random void where the memory of injustice plagues her still, apparently forever—a neo-Jacob Marley, as Bierce’s eternally dead Peyton Farquhar is an Ebenezer Scrooge.

To illustrate Addie’s ambiguous location, Faulkner mercilessly exchanges the symbol of stars for symbols of, for instance, Vardaman’s fish and Cash’s coffin. Addie’s vitality—her “swimming”—is interrupted when she is “caught” and essentially killed; she is concealed to never again be seen, for “enclosing her,” in the words of scholar Doreen Fowler, “dispose[s] of the threat to conscious patriarchal authority and identity posed by the mother’s body” (321). Addie’s death-transformation involved not being hidden away as a spirit, but rather mangled into a bitter voice doomed to repeat the details of her pain to any random listener.

Addie herself, despite her voice indicating apparent survival of death, believes that death is her eternal destiny. In her monologue, she expresses a strong need to feel remembered, evident in her urge to beat her young students as a means of leaving an impression and making social connection. This show of physicality and dominance to gain a legacy is reminiscent of the philosophy of Byron, though Faulkner uses subversion to have Addie’s physicality leave behind not genius reputation, but scars. Addie’s longing for connection is actually very understandable considering that her family, back in the physical world, cannot make sense of her death-transformation, resorting always to analogy in their grief.

Because grief and the conception of death requires, as Eric Sundquist puts it, “the intimate participation of other minds,” the novel’s web of monologues becomes a necessity, though it puts everything about Addie’s fate into question: Faulkner manipulates his narrators in a similar way to Brontë by blurring information through lenses of perception (291). While the story of Heathcliff and the reason and nature of his death are clarified by the observations of out-

siders, details concerning Addie's are clouded by people's various views of her. Faulkner's message is that no one can be certain of the fate of the dead, though he makes a point to let Addie—the victim of their ignorance—exasperatedly declare the truth of how worthless their words are.

Addie's complaint about the meaninglessness of words reflects her view of earthly life in general. She imagines people who "use one another by words" as "spiders dangling by their mouths from a beam, swinging and twisting and never touching," which is reminiscent of the spider web images in Dickinson: life is a web built without sincere communication, that breaks and unravels to the wind during the carriage ride with Death (99). Addie also mourns for Anse despite him being physically alive, in a subversion of Tennyson's elegy for Hallam. She says Anse "did not know that he was dead" in that he lacked the love she was craving (100). "Anse or love; love or Anse," bemoans Addie, who knows the "love" Anse is culturally believed to give her is a lie, and that merely being married to Anse is not true love (99). Though Anse remains alive, Addie mourns because she loses a friend she never really had to begin with.

Faulkner also corrupts Blakean body-soul unity in the "correlation" Addie makes "between words and bodies," which suggests "words are for something we are not" (Sundquist 297-98). She describes Anse as a "significant shape profoundly without life"—Anse's body is his name, and his soul is the patriarchal culture which "flow[s] out of darkness into the vessel [of the name]" (100). The only soul Anse has is his backward, selfish thinking, which fits perfectly into the empty shell of "husband" or "father" that culture dictates his name to afford him. In further subversion of the Romantics, Anse's essence originates from "darkness," rather than light, and the image of the "dark" is evoked again in the "dark land talking the voiceless speech," the "land" referring to Addie's situation and its "speech" being the stipulations of patriarchal marriage, which are meant to be understood, but go unsaid in favor of a meaningless use the word "love" (101).

Under her circumstances, Addie would, in a way, be dead even before being put in a coffin, badly desecrated, and ultimately forgotten over the course of the ill-fated funeral journey. She is dying throughout the novel, as the title suggests—she dies in marriage, dies physically, dies further when her body's integrity is violated, and dies as a memory until all that is left is the echo of her voice. It's an idea supported by her father's motto that the reason to live is "to get ready to stay dead a long time," for Addie was dead even while living, as Anse is also dead, without even knowing it (98). Addie had been getting ready to die ever since finishing giving Anse children, giving herself up for "love," like Heathcliff, though this "love," is false, being based on detestable Southern constructs of family, marriage, and love, which are, Addie realizes, mere words.

Faulkner's dismantling of nineteenth century afterlife concepts is most recognizable in the parallels between Addie and Browning's Pompilia. Like Pompilia, Addie commits adultery with a clergyman (Whitfield), delivers a monologue which explains the unfair cultural marital obligations which would lead to the affair, and expresses a distrust in humanity. Browning's narrative style of several conflicting and unreliable monologues is even replicated exactly by Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying's* structure. So both Addie and Pompilia are voices among voices who do not understand them, and both, when faced with death, put their faith in a place beyond these voices. Pompilia may have turned to God for her afterlife, but Addie was so desperate, she longed for escape from it all, and embraced eternal death.

To Addie, "salvation is just words" and God, who would allow the injustice of patriarchal culture (and, according to that culture, ordain it), "created the sin," and "sanctif[ies] that sin" (101-02). She declares that sin is nothing but a "dead word" in her supposedly sacred marriage to Anse, which, like her own dead self, has a "forlorn echo" (her voice) which is "in the air" (the mysterious place from which her dead self speaks). Faulkner makes Addie further the "anti-Pompilia" by giving her no afterlife faith in even her children, whose "names would die and solidify into a shape and then fade away" (100-01). Her children are a deplorable legacy, born out of the darkness of Southern patriarchal culture rather than the radiance of eternity. They are born not of Wordsworth's pre-existent realm, for though Darl would seem as intelligent and as divinely insightful as a Wordsworthian child, the culture he was born into stifles his genius.

The darkness, then, snuffs out the light, and Faulkner's view of the afterlife is very bleak. Informed by the ideas of his predecessors, yet influenced by his own distrust of religious culture and hypocrisy, Faulkner exemplifies perfectly the twentieth-century writer torn between atheism and afterlife possibility. Reflecting this, he allows Addie to speak, somehow without resurrecting her, and he depends always on the poetic geniuses before him for clues to eternity's nature. In expressing his overwhelming doubt, however, he corrupts their ideas one-by-one.

It is revealed, ultimately, that each author is informed by his or her own cultural and personal understanding of the afterlife, though they all incorporate previously established ideas into their interpretations and depictions. Therefore, postulations on the afterlife remain where they had been since the Enlightenment era in Europe—brightened by the Romantics, darkened since the Victorians, and then questioned ceaselessly by the writers after them. The minds, manifestations, and mysteries intensely explored during the nineteenth-century "afterlife Renaissance" would come to gain eternal lives themselves, never disappearing as they crossed overseas and into a new century—sometimes displaced, but never destroyed.

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