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Unsuspected Romantic Legacies: Modern Reimagining of Romanticism in Williams, Levertov, & Nabokov

Alejandra P. Vargas



FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

UNSUSPECTED ROMANTIC LEGACIES:
MODERN RE-IMAGINING OF ROMANTICISM IN
WILLIAMS, LEVERTOV, & NABOKOV

By

ALEJANDRA P. VARGAS

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The members of the committee approve the dissertation of Alejandra P. Vargas defended on May 14, 2009.

James O'Rourke
Professor Directing Dissertation

Lauren Weingarden
Outside Committee Member

Eric Walker
Committee Member

Helen Burke
Committee Member

Approved:

Ralph Berry, Chair, English Department

Joseph Travis, Dean, Arts and Sciences

The Graduate School has verified and approved the above-named committee members.

*para mis padres – un soñador y una buena mujer,
y para Angela – sobrina, alma infinita*

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ABSTRACT

In exploring the degree to which Romantic legacies persist, this study concerns a particular type of poet and novelist. Typical Romantic themes – such as those of nature, solitude, or the sublime – surface in numerous nineteenth and twentieth century writers, such as the poetry of usual suspects like Emerson or Thoreau, but also in the poetry of less usual but notable poets like Elizabeth Bishop, Wallace Stevens, or Wendell Berry. Although they would be worthy poetic subjects, this study *does not* concern those poets. I am more interested in the less obvious examples of poets who derive their poetics partially from Romantic elements in ways that one might not suspect, and in ways that the poet herself might not suspect. This study concerns those less obviously Romantic writers who yet show signs that Romanticism has infiltrated their thought processes – their poetics – even despite their inclination to veer away from Romantic traditions. Such writers – in this case, Denise Levertov, William Carlos Williams, and Vladimir Nabokov – are studied primarily against the context of Wordsworthian and Keatsian poetics or against European Romanticism through Rousseau’s *The Confessions*. Thus, the nuance in Levertov and Williams’ poetics emerges more keenly when explored through the lens of Wordsworthian poetics; and, Nabokov’s *Lolita* provides ample territory for exploring Romantic “autobiography” in the context of claims that both Nabokov’s protagonist and Rousseau make – that they will tell nothing but the “truth.” In some ways, Romanticism has infiltrated poetic thinking long after its time, and continues to persist in poetic language, philosophy, and practices; it persists even in the poetic thinking of writers who strive to create entirely new literary movements, or who define themselves against past Romantic poetics. In understanding and gaining awareness of how and why these legacies persist, we gain an understanding of how our own writing works and the effects it can have. We also appreciate what it is that impels a literary period to persist sometimes against our own will, or our own expectations.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous modernist authors have been studied in relationship to Romantic texts. Of course, modernism, with its emphasis on irony, un-sentimentality, and the ideal of the impersonal author (epitomized by the image of James Joyce's godlike artist, "paring his fingernails" in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), may seem far removed from Romantic literature. Nevertheless, there are enough deep connections between the concepts and style of Romantic authors and their modern descendants to make this relationship a promising field for scholarship. According to David Perkins, "The interplay in twentieth-century poetry of the Modernist mode with the romantic tradition is a subject for many books" (171). More recently, French writer Joanny Moulin has observed in her study "Remnant Romanticism in Modern Poetry," that "it is possible to view the Romantic moment as the climax – or merely the *peripeteia*, the instant of reversal – in a huge tragic plot that would have its exposition in the days of the Renaissance and the Reformation, and reach its dénouement in the Modernist and Postmodernist age" (3). And the essays in an entire section of Nicholas Roe's book, *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*, called "Romantic Afterlives," examine aspects of Romanticism that persist into the modern era. Among the authors in this section of the book, Timothy Morton, for example, interprets the Romantic movement as a precursor of ecological criticism and of modern environmentalism in general; Charles Rzepka discusses the influence of specific Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth, on modern poets like Robert Frost and Elizabeth Bishop; and Edward Larrissy considers modernism's and even postmodernism's debts to Romanticism. Although, as Larrissy notes, some modernist poets explicitly reject Romanticism, such as Kingsley Amis in his poem, "Against Romanticism," there are strong links between the Romantics and writers like Dylan Thomas in England and Allen Ginsberg in the United States.

This dissertation seeks to follow in the tradition of linking the work of Romantic and modern authors – in uncovering the legacies of Romanticism that one may find in the work of

distinctly modern literature. But while doing this, I wish to avoid dealing with the usual suspects – modern authors whose links to the Romantic age are well-known or expected. I am more interested in poets who are less obviously Romantic, and who yet show signs that Romanticism has infiltrated their thought processes and their poetics, despite perhaps their inclination to veer away from Romantic traditions. Thus I am interested less in the definite or conscious influence of Romantic authors on modern ones, than in the *infiltration* of Romanticism into literary thinking long after its time – into the thinking of writers who strive to create entirely new literary movements, or who even define themselves against the attitudes and poetics of Romanticism. Surely typical Romantic themes – such as those of nature, solitude, individualism, the imagination, or the sublime – surface in numerous poets of the 20th century, such as the poetry of Dylan Thomas, Elizabeth Bishop, Wallace Stevens, e. e. cummings, or Wendell Berry. In some cases, a modern writer connects so deeply to Romanticism that more than one book can examine that poet in relation to Romanticism, as is the case with Hazard Adams’ book, *Blake and Yeats*, and Harold Bloom’s *Yeats*, which includes chapters on the influence of Shelley and Blake on Yeats. This connection is, of course, not that surprising for a poet who, as Yeats did, declared of himself and his generation, “we were the last romantics” (in “Coole Park and Ballylee”). In this dissertation, however, I am more interested in the less obvious examples of modern writers who derive their themes partially from Romantic elements in ways that one might not suspect, and in ways that perhaps even the writer himself might not suspect. In gaining awareness of how and why these legacies of Romanticism persist, we gain an understanding of both Romanticism and of the intricate and diverse nature of modernism itself. My argument is, then, that certain modern writers can be understood more fully through a comparison of their work to Romantic predecessors, and that this kind of comparison sheds light on the way that Romantic literature persists despite our own expectations. Thus this is a study in the unsuspected legacies of the Romantic movement in the work of three writers associated with modernism: the American experimental poet William Carlos Williams; the Anglo-American poet Denise Levertov, who was in some ways a disciple of Williams; and Vladimir Nabokov. Two of these writers, Levertov and Williams, are actually mentioned in the essay cited above by Larrissy, but they appear only tangentially. In fact, although Larrissy refers to Williams as an influence, *along with Romanticism*, on the school of writers known as the Black Mountain poets,

Larrissy does not consider Williams as a Romantic himself. Briefly, Larrissy mentions Levertov as the author of an essay on organicism, thus linking her to the Romantic interest in the organic (as in that of Coleridge). But as this dissertation shows, the poetry and poetics of Williams reveal deep connections to the Romantics, and Levertov's relationship to the Romantics is extensive and multi-faceted, appearing both in her prose essays as well as in much of her poetry. Though some critics have noted the presence of Romantic elements in the work of both Williams and Levertov, their reputations in general are strongly modernist; neither is an expected example of a modern writer with deep Romantic roots, and neither is as obvious a choice for comparisons to Romanticism as were some of their fellow poets.

Before elaborating on my approach to Williams, Levertov, and to the one modern novelist that I discuss, Vladimir Nabokov, some discussion of the tradition of the study of Romantic and Modernist affinities is in order; such a discussion will place this project in the context of earlier works of criticism in this area. My study, moreover, focuses on the relations between Romantic and modernist texts of literature – it is, thus, a study primarily of *literary* relations, rather than critical relations. Thus it should be distinguished from the approach to Romantic connections to the modern period found in a study such as Jerome McGann's *Romantic Ideology*. McGann's book looks at the ways that modern critics of Romanticism have perpetuated certain Romantic biases or ideologies, and therefore have not been able, according to McGann, to develop a truly critical study of Romanticism. While the insights of such an approach may inform parts of my discussion, it is important to note that this dissertation is concerned with the specific affinities and actual influences found between the work of the three modern authors I have chosen and the work of key figures from the Romantic era; through this approach, the dissertation seeks to demonstrate how works that we usually think of as being quintessentially modernist and non-Romantic actually reveal the persistence of certain Romantic themes and concerns. This study is not intended in any way to diminish the modernist claims of innovation, or to undercut the writers I examine. It does, however, attempt to do the following: to show how superficially different literary approaches are related on a deeper level; to clarify how certain modernist writers, usually thought of as literary revolutionaries, are actually more complex, as they created work that not only departs from but also extends notions of literary creation from the past; and to illustrate Romanticism not as a vestige or, in Joanny Moulin's

term, a “remnant” in the modern period, but as a powerful, ongoing, and ever-developing force in literary history.

As the references to critical works above indicate, there have already been attempts to do the kind of critical work on Romanticism and modernism that David Perkins saw as having so much potential for scholarly study. There have been individual essays on this topic, such as those mentioned above, or those collected in the online volume, “Romanticism & Contemporary Poetry & Poetics,” part of the *Romantic Praxis Series* on the internet site, Romantic Circles. And, in addition to the books already mentioned by Adams and Bloom on Yeats, there have been other studies, such as Anthony Whiting’s book, *The Never-Resting Mind: Wallace Stevens’ Romantic Irony*, which focuses on Stevens’ use of one aspect of Romantic literature, as noted in the book’s subtitle. However, probably the most wide-ranging examination of Romanticism in relation to modernism is Carlos Baker’s *The Echoing Green: Romanticism, Modernism, and the Phenomena of Transference in Poetry*. The title phrase, of course, comes from one of Blake’s Songs of Innocence and Experience, “The Echoing Green,” which implies that the book will deal with modern “echoes” of Romanticism. To a great extent, the book does this, but it also looks at writers, such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, who reveal little sympathy for, or influence from, Romanticism. The book takes six major modern poets, Frost, Stevens, Yeats, Auden, Pound, and Eliot, and reads them against the background of six romantic poets: Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats. The book begins with chapters on each romantic author, briefly summarizing their accomplishments and associating each poet with a key concept, such as a democratization of poetry in Wordsworth, and ethical and natural concerns in Keats, whom Baker sees as, after Wordsworth, the Romantic poet most deeply interested in nature.

Following this introductory groundwork, Baker moves to a discussion of the modern “echoes” of the Romantic period. While he refers to some of Yeats’ poems, mainly he discusses the ideas of admiration expressed for the Romantics in various of Yeats’ essays, especially dealing with Shelley and Blake. With Frost, Baker notes the ways that Frost echoes Wordsworth’s simplicity of language and love of nature that plays so large a role in Frost’s poetry. Unlike Whiting, who focuses on Romantic irony, Baker sees Stevens’ connection to Romanticism as lying mainly in his shared interest with the Romantic view of imagination and the mind’s relation to nature. Noting the ways that W. H. Auden differs from the Romantic

sensibility, Baker nonetheless notes the importance to Auden of two Romantic poets who, though major figures, are somewhat idiosyncratic in terms of many of the mainstream associations that we have with literary Romanticism – Blake and Byron. Baker points out that the depth of Auden’s interest in the Romantics, even if his own poetry does not often bear a resemblance to Romantic poems, is found in his study, *The Enchaféd Flood: The Romantic Iconography of the Sea*, which deals with Melville, Coleridge, and other Romantic depictions of the sea. Baker’s book is useful in identifying various points of similarity and difference between certain Romantic and modern poets, but as Perkins suggests, the topic of Romantic-modern interplay is so vast that much work could still be done, both on individual writers and on the two periods in general.

Also pursuing Romantic legacies that are present in the poetics of our time, R.J. Reilly studies the religious affinities between four twentieth-century British writers: Owen Barfield, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and J. R. R. Tolkien. In a similar vein, Gavin Hopps and Jean Stabler have edited an anthology of critical essays entitled *Romanticism and Religion from William Cowper to Wallace Stevens*, though the individual essays tend to focus on single authors rather than on interconnections between them. Still, the book’s premise is that Romanticism’s relation to religion can be seen extending beyond the chronological boundaries of what we think of as the Romantic movement, on into the twentieth century, and into the work of such typically modernist authors as Wallace Stevens.

Other authors have written critically about the legacies of Romanticism even as they have admitted to, or at least been described as, revealing Romantic influence in their own poetry and prose. Thus Ezra Pound, whom Baker accurately described as being generally critical of Romanticism, reveals some profoundly interesting points of comparison to certain of the Romantics, particularly Wordsworth, as shown by David N. Wright. According to Wright, despite “Pound’s anxiety about falling into Romantic sensibilities,” or perhaps even because of this, we find that “Wordsworth’s material and the sensibility of Wordsworth – that of journeying backward to discover some cohesive and repetitive methodology – is very much a part of Pound’s poetic project” (51).

One of the most celebrated modernist poets outside the English tradition, Octavio Paz, himself addressed the links he saw between the avant-garde and Romanticism; when Paz spoke

at the University of Utah, he titled a section of his talk “Modernity and Romanticism” and there defined Anglo-American perceptions of the avant garde in relationship to Romanticism versus the rest of the world’s perceptions. His own work, as in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, bears significant links to British and German Romanticism (in exploring national identity and self), and his Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University, published as *Children of the Mire*, examine the subtle relations between Romanticism, beginning with German Romanticism, and Latin American modernity; in fact, the avant-garde for Paz cannot be fully understood without seeing it as a reaction against as well as a reflection of Romantic tendencies – though Paz’s work is an abstract discussion, and more concerned with broad issues of attitude or mindset, rather than with specific literary features or the interplay of individual texts, as is found in, for example, Hazard Adams’ study of Yeats’ relationship to William Blake. Joining Paz in his concern with Romanticism is another Latin American author, Jorge Luis Borges, who leans on a Romantic tradition in his blend of mysticism and a tendency toward defamiliarization that recalls some of the key tenets of Romantic theory. In fact, the entire project of Latin American magical realism, which is one of the most notable features of literary modernism, reveals strong affinities with Romanticism. Famous magical realist stories such as García Marquez’s “A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings,” or Borges’ “The Aleph,” rely in part on taking very ordinary events or physical details and transforming them into something strange and otherworldly. This tendency parallels Wordsworth’s wish, in the Preface to the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, “to choose incidents and situations from common life, and . . . to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way,” (597) and Coleridge’s emphasis, in *Biographia Literaria*, on being able “to combine the child’s sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar.”([1817] 55). Borges, in fact, explicitly acknowledges the impact on his work of English Romanticism: “I’m a good reader in many languages, especially in English, since poetry came to me through the English language, initially through my father’s love of Swinburne, of Tennyson, and also of Keats, Shelley, and so on – not through my native tongue, not through Spanish. It came to me as a kind of spell. I didn’t understand it, but I felt it” (Artful Dodge Interview, April 25, 1980). Borges’ great love of the English Romantics finds expression

also in short pieces on Coleridge and in a modern revisiting of Blake's famous poem, "The Tyger."

In twentieth-century poetry, the influence of the Romantics seems especially strong in America. I have already mentioned Carlos Baker's discussion of Romantic aspects of Wallace Stevens and Frost, but two other American poets are unmistakably Romantic in their sensibility: e. e. cummings and Edna St. Vincent Millay. A few words about them will further help to contextualize my own approach, and to show the distinctiveness of the writers whom I do study here.

In Millay, the parallels to Romanticism are obvious, in part because Millay often uses rhyme and rather traditional language and forms that could place her almost as a nineteenth-century poet. Despite her occasional "saucy pokes at bourgeois convention," as David Perkins calls it (Vol. 1, p. 372), her work frequently shows an intensely emotional expressiveness and a focus on the inner world of the individual that are reminiscent of Romanticism, as in the following poem:

God's World

O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!

Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!

Thy mists that roll and rise!

Thy woods this autumn day, that ache and sag

And all but cry with colour! That gaunt crag

To crush! To lift the lean of that black bluff!

World, World, I cannot get thee close enough!

Long have I known a glory in it all,

But never knew I this;

Here such a passion is

As stretcheth me apart, -- Lord, I do fear

Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year;

My soul is all but out of me, -- let fall
 No burning leaf; prithee, let no bird call.

Although his work is far more experimental than Millay's in form, e. e. cummings shares with her an emotional intensity of tone, celebration of nature and individualism, and the vaguely "romantic" sounding archaic language, such as "thou" and "thee," exemplified in the following poem:

O Thou to whom the musical white spring

 offers her lily inextinguishable,
 taught by thy tremulous grace bravely to fling

 Implacable death's mysteriously sable
 robe from her redolent shoulders,
Thou from whose
 feet reincarnate song suddenly leaping
 flameflung, mounts, inimitably to lose
 herself where the wet stars softly are keeping

 their exquisite dreams – O Love! upon thy dim
 shrine of intangible commemoration,
 (from whose faint close as from some languorous hymn

 pledged to illimitable dissipation
 unhurried clouds of incense fleetly roll)

 i spill my bright incalculable soul. (53)

That these two poems share a Romantic sensibility is clear, and testifies to the presence of Romantic imagery, tone, and concerns on into the work of twentieth-century poets, even those who, like cummings, experiment with unusual juxtapositions of language, or the arrangement of lines on the page. In the most superficial sense, these poems typify what would seem to be “Romantic” elements, but as the subsequent discussion of Levertov, Williams, and Nabokov will show, Romanticism’s links to modernism can be far deeper and more complex, appearing in subtler and more surprising, interesting ways.

Of course, the presence of Romanticism in modern literature is not limited to work that is so unmistakably lyrical and effusive as the examples from cummings and Millay; thus, in the grittier, more deliberately shocking work of some writers of the Beat Generation of the 1950s, Romantic tendencies also make themselves felt, and show themselves to have a greater range than a concern with the rapture that nature can produce, or with emotional self-expression in a poem. Not all of the Beats, of course, are followers of Romanticism, but among the poets associated with this movement, “romantic nihilism” and a feeling of descending from “the whole tradition of American, British, and French romanticism” were prevalent (Preminger 73). The Beat poet most explicitly associated with the Romantics is also the best-known of all the Beat poets – Allen Ginsberg. In fact, a key incident in Ginsberg’s development as a poet involved one of the major British Romantics – William Blake. While a student at Columbia University,

Ginsberg . . . had what he referred to as his “Blake vision,” an auditory hallucination of William Blake reading his poems “Ah Sunflower,” “The Sick Rose,” and “Little Girl Lost.” Ginsberg noted the occurrence several times as a pivotal moment for him in his comprehension of the universe, affecting fundamental beliefs about his life and his work. While Ginsberg claimed that no drugs were involved, he later stated that he used various drugs in an attempt to recapture the feelings inspired by the vision.

<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/8>)

In his poetry as well, Ginsberg revels in a spontaneity of utterance – or seeming spontaneity of utterance – and in the use of “the language really used by men,” to use Wordsworth’s phrase, to the extent of actually including slang and obscenities that would have been unthinkable for writers of the Romanic period. Similarly, Ginsberg shares with the

Romantics a strong interest in mystical or visionary states of being – not only in the Blake vision he had at Columbia, but in his poetry, which emphasizes states of altered consciousness, whether by drugs or more natural and spiritual sources. While Shelley appears in the important position of the epigraph to Ginsberg’s poem *Kaddish* (“Die, if thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!” from Shelley’s “Adonais”), Blake, along with the American poet Walt Whitman, remains undoubtedly the most profound influence on Ginsberg: “Ginsberg’s long-lined urban prophecies recall Blake who is an oft-mentioned point of reference in his poems. When Ginsberg asserts in *Howl* (1956) that ‘Everything is holy!’, he is nearly quoting Blake from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*” (Larrissy 672).

While poets have been among the writers most visibly influenced by Romanticism, it is important to realize that modern fiction also shows the persistence of Romantic styles, themes, and ideas. This area has not received as much attention as has poetry – probably because of the huge role that poetry played in British Romanticism; after all the “big six” of British Romanticism are all poets. But some scholarly attention has been paid to prose as well as poetry, a tendency that seems to be increasing. In 1993, Allan Chavkin edited a book entitled *English Romanticism and Modern Fiction* (1993), which examines both prominent English and American novelists (e.g., James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Saul Bellow) in relation to the Romantics. More recently has appeared *The New Romanticism: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Eberhard Alsen (2000), which focuses specifically on the American fictional debt to Romanticism. Some of the connections made here, for example between Hawthorne’s classic American novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, and later American fiction, such as that of John Updike, or even Toni Morrison, are not that surprising. But the book also contains less obvious comparisons, such as discussions of writers like Vladimir Nabokov in relation to Edgar Allan Poe and of Ralph Ellison in relation to Ralph Waldo Emerson, as well as broader discussions of the persistence of Romanticism in the twentieth century. More recent still is a book focused on a single American prose writer’s links to the Romantic movement – Susan J. Rosowski’s *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather’s Romanticism* (2001).

The writers and texts discussed above are only a few instances of the diversity of Romanticism’s continued influence in modern literature. The purpose of reviewing these instances was not to summarize the entire topic of Romantic-Modernist relations, but to indicate

the potential richness of those relations for literary study, and some of the varied forms in which these relations appear. In selecting a workable topic from the vast array of possibilities for studying Modernism's links to Romanticism, I have chosen three writers who are not, as I have already mentioned, among the most obvious choices for such a study: William Carlos Williams, Denise Levertov, and Vladimir Nabokov. But the process of reading each of these writers on their own, and being struck by the ways in which their works seemed to echo and, at times, deliberately, even if subtly, to engage with aspects of Romantic literature, suggested them to me as fruitful subjects for examining the "ties that bind" modernist innovations to the Romantic past – or, perhaps more accurately, to show how the concerns of the Romantics continue to be vital and significant long beyond the specific historical confines of the Romantic era.

As mentioned earlier, none of these three authors is an obvious choice for study in relation to Romanticism. A brief discussion of each of them will help to remind readers of their basic literary reputation and authorial identity, and also to explain just what it is that impelled this study to include them as a main point of focus.

William Carlos Williams

Certainly for general readers, and for most academics or even professional poets, Williams is best known for his highly innovative, avant-garde poems. And his single most famous literary production, "The Red Wheelbarrow," hardly seems to evoke notions of Romanticism. Similarly, other well-known poems, such as "At the Ballgame" or "The Young Housewife," are notable mainly for technical innovations, unusual or even bizarre juxtapositions of imagery, or for the deliberately non-poetic or even anti-poetic flatness of style, as Williams seeks to break down the barrier between conversation and poetry, as in "This is Just to Say":

I have eaten

the plums

that were in

the icebox

and which

you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

The contrast between the unadorned, unemotional style of this poem and, for example, Edna St. Vincent Millay's impassioned, traditional form and wording in "God's World," which was examined earlier in this section, could not be more clear – and it is the Millay poem that would, most likely, strike most readers as more typically Romantic. But on a deeper, subtler level, Williams reveals himself to be very much exploring areas similar to the Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth. Like Wordsworth and most other great poets, Williams sought to define his own relation as a poet to the art of poetry and to society, and to craft a poetic identity in contrast to the dominant notions he found around him – as has often been noted, especially the notions propounded by T.S. Eliot, whose influence in modern poetry Williams deplored; however, where Williams' defining as an artist most parallels Wordsworth is in how he seeks to do this. Thus, more specifically, in examining the work of Wordsworth and Williams, I will concentrate on poetical use of objects versus feelings, showing how Williams' slogan, "no ideas but in things," both connects to, and departs from, Wordsworth's mentality in which the *idea is the thing*; my discussion will also show how Williams, while giving his poetry a very different mode of expression from the Wordsworthian "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" ("Preface" 598) strikingly resembles the earlier poet's concerns. Like Wordsworth, but in his own distinctive manner, Williams reveals a deep concern with the mind's interaction with the world of physical objects, and attempts, in terms highly reminiscent of Wordsworth, to create a poetics and a poetry that would involve simpler, more everyday language. Central to this concern is Williams' concept of the free imagination – something which, like Wordsworth, Williams locates at the very center of his role as a writer and of his relation to the world that he perceives and describes.

Denise Levertov

Although not among the best known of modern poets, Denise Levertov has garnered serious critical attention in a number of books and articles, noted later in this study. While some scholars have noted her affinities with Romanticism (calling her at times “the new romantic” after her first book of poems), she is most often described in terms of her skill in free verse, her connections to the Black Mountain poets, especially Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley, and for her passionate anti-war poems, written during the Vietnam War. Reading her work, one can easily interpret her poetic identity as completely modern – not in the same, powerfully avant-garde manner as Williams (who was a great influence on her writing, and an author with whom she corresponded about poetry) – but modern in its syntax and in the way her work joins dissonant ideas that one would never find in the Romantics. The more one spends time exploring her work, the more connections emerge to the Romantics, in such things as a love of the natural world which is as deep, even if expressed in somewhat more subdued ways, as is the love of nature in the poems of Millay and Cummings.

Moreover, her poetry occasionally surprises the reader with direct lines from the Romantics that almost force us to return to the Romantic texts she quotes from, and to read her work in the context of the earlier poets, while also reading *their* work in the context of her own. Thus, in the poem, “Everything that Acts is Actual,” a conversational, but somewhat abstract tone dominates, with challenging, typically modernistic images that do not immediately open up to understanding, e.g., “The flawed moon/acts on the truth, and makes/an autumn of tentative/silences” (6). Within these overall dissonant images as in *the flawed moon* versus *truth*, or the image of *autumn* formed through *silence* – images which seem completely twentieth century – we suddenly encounter none other than John Keats (in the form of a direct quotation, in italics, from one of his famous letters):

The black moon
turns away, its work done. A tenderness,
unspoken autumn.

We are faithful

only to the imagination. *What the
imagination
seizes
as beauty must be truth.*” (Italics in original; 6)

In this poem, as in certain others, to be studied below, Levertov herself evokes the Romantics in ways that seem less a mere quotation or a sign of their influence on her, than as a way of helping her, and her readers, re-imagine the issues that the Romantics addressed, and to re-imagine them in the process of reading Levertov. In this way, then, reading Levertov at the deepest level entails a reading or re-reading of the Romantics, and then a re-imagining of the Romantics’ images and concerns, whether implicitly, as in much of Levertov’s work, or explicitly, as when she quotes or otherwise specifically mentions a Romantic author or text. At times Levertov, as we will see, approaches the Romantics with the same reverence that is suggested in her echo of Keats, above. But she also occasionally stands Romantic notions on their head, but in such a way as actually to seem to be trying not to condemn or criticize or reject Romanticism, but to get closer to what Romanticism was putatively about – to achieve a genuine closeness to nature, to the reality of the physical world and thereby to the spiritual qualities or experiences that such closeness to that world’s reality could, for the Romantic imagination, engender. It could be said that in a sense, at times Levertov is actually trying to out-romanticize the Romantics – to pick up where they left off, and use their insights and imagery as stepping stones to deeper insight.

Vladimir Nabokov

As a Russian-born writer who was later transplanted to America, Nabokov obviously invites comparisons to Russian literature. At the same time, his reputation is, of course, that of one of the major authors of modernism, on a par with such other examples of modernism in prose as Virginia Woolf or James Joyce. Mention Nabokov’s name, either to the general reader or to an academic specialist, and what comes to mind is usually his great verbal artistry, his mastery of prose style, full of clever turns of phrase and subtle wit, irony, and playful manipulation of the reader. And, along with these things, one cannot help but think of the sexually scandalous subject-matter of his most famous novel, *Lolita* – a book that caused shock

waves when it was published, and that seems to typify the ways that modern literature has pushed the envelope of what can be described in literature, especially with regard to sex. None of these things mark Nabokov as someone with a strong affinity for Romanticism. But a close reading of *Lolita* reveals the novel to be engaged, in part, with one of European Romanticism's most influential texts – Rousseau's *Confessions*. In fact, Nabokov himself invites us to read his novel in relation to Rousseau, as when he depicts his narrator calling himself “Jean-Jacques Humbert.” Autobiography, especially confessional autobiography, that reveals the inner being of the author, is of course a very prominent part of the Romantic sensibility – one thinks of Rousseau's *Confessions*, of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, or of Thoreau's *Walden*. Nabokov's *Lolita* partakes of this confessional, autobiographical mode, at the same time that it seems to parody it, something that, of course, Nabokov was fond of doing, as in his parody of academic scholarship in the novel, *Pale Fire*. By reading *Lolita* as a re-imagining of the possibilities and limits of a key Romantic text – Rousseau's *Confessions* – we can come to a fuller appreciation of Nabokov's text, while also looking at the *Confessions* with a fresh perspective, provided by the lens of Nabokov's satirical manipulations of features found in Rousseau. Thus Nabokov's book becomes richer for us not only because we see Rousseau's *Confessions* in it, but because through it, we also begin to re-read and re-evaluate parts of the *Confessions* – and thus re-evaluate a major part of Romantic literature.

I hope that the points raised above make it clear that this is not an influence study; for this reason, an argument such as Harold Bloom's, as found in *The Anxiety of Influence*, while occasionally pertinent to my approach, is not directly related to my study's central concern. This is not to say that the three modernist writers selected for study were *not* influenced by the Romantics, or that they felt no anxiety about their literary precursors (though Williams seemed more anxious about his contemporaries Pound and Eliot than about earlier authors). Rather, the point of comparing these moderns to the Romantics is to see how in many instances these writers seem to take a Romantic concept or concern and adapt it to their own, more contemporary situations and interests. Thus we find in Williams, Levertov, and Nabokov not so much a reflection of Romanticism, or, conversely, a rejection of Romanticism, but a re-imagining of certain Romantic issues in more modern terms. Hence, the dissertation's title emphasizes the idea of re-imagining Romanticism. In no way can any of these three writers be said to be trying

to duplicate or to emulate what the Romantics did; and in asserting their own independence of the Romantics, or challenging, as they occasionally do, certain features of Romanticism – such as, in the case of Williams, as we will see, the conventional, even hackneyed associations of certain images, such as that of roses – they are nevertheless not concerned with rejecting or denouncing Romanticism. Rather, each writer offers readers a highly individualized, very contemporary re-vision of some aspect of the work of major Romantic writers – in Williams’ case mainly with Wordsworth; in Levertov’s, mainly with Wordsworth and Keats; and with Nabokov, mainly with Rousseau. As a result, in studying these writers in relation to one another, we are rewarded with deeper insight into, and understanding of, two of literary history’s most intriguing, and as it turns out, inter-related chapters – Romanticism and Modernism.

CHAPTER 1

AT THE SHIP'S PROW: WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

“A poet should be forever at the ship’s prow” (28). With these words, from “Kora in Hell,” William Carlos Williams proudly described the innovative, forward-looking qualities that he associated with the poet’s role, and that many have associated with Williams himself. In the words of Webster Schott, in an introduction to Williams’ book *Imaginations*,

[Williams] behaved like a prophet. Reading these early works now, we know he was. In the last half of the twentieth century we’ve learned we can be free only through the senses, and we’ve been struck with a sensual revolution . . . Williams was our forbear and if our time had any saintly men he was among them. (xvii)

Schott is right to note Williams’ revolutionary tendencies; indeed, more than a century after his birth, Williams’ work continues to push the envelope of poetic reading and interpretation.

However, as discussed in my first chapter, a close look at Williams’ theories of poetry reveals a surprising affinity with an earlier “prophetic” and “revolutionary” writer – William Wordsworth, whose theoretical pronouncements strikingly anticipate key points in Williams’ contributions to avant-garde theories of poetry. Williams’ links to Romanticism, are, of course, well known, with particular scholarly attention going to Williams’ interest in Whitman and Keats. One finds, for example, thorough discussions of Williams’ relationship to Keats in Stephen Hahn’s and Stuart Peterfreund’s articles. Peterfreund notes that “numerous writers, Wallace Stevens and Yvor Winters among them, have called Williams a Romantic” (8) and that Williams is not only “a quintessentially American poet, but a quintessentially Romantic one as well” (12). And for reference to the extensive work done on Williams’ relationship to Whitman, we need only to see

the critical work of numerous scholars: E.P. Bollier, James Breslin, Howard Chapnick, Robert Davis, Rosemary Gates, Albert Gelpi, Chanita Goodblatt, Daniel Morris, and Stephen Tapscott.

Similar to such studies, the relations of Wordsworth to modernity have also received plenty of discussion; Charles Altieri, for instance, examines Wordsworth's continuing presence as a point of reference or comparison in contemporary poetry while Brian Wilkie depicts Wordsworth as a harbinger of modernist developments which, at first glance, seem very far removed from the imagination that produced texts like "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" and *The Prelude*. These essays by Altieri and Wilkie further the discussion of Wordsworth's relationship to modernity as Wilkie, for instance, links Wordsworth's emphasis on the importance of pleasure as an aim of poetry to the avant garde, mentioning such figures as Isadora Duncan, Apollinaire, John Cage [the composer], and Allen Ginsberg, though he does not mention Williams (209).

Scholars such as Carl Rapp and Peter Schmidt, who establish direct links between Williams and Wordsworth, provide detailed analyses of parallels in the poetry of Wordsworth and Williams. Rapp, for example, states that in explaining his sonnet "To Lady Beaumont," Wordsworth "gives a remarkably prophetic synopsis of the rationale that lies behind the procedures of imagism" (157-158). Here Rapp shows how Wordsworth anticipates imagism, a key modern movement in poetry, which, in turn, was very important for Williams and other avant garde poets. And Schmidt, when linking Wordsworth's *Prelude* to Williams' *Paterson*, goes as far as calling Williams' *Paterson* a "Modernist son," albeit a rebellious one, that "shows itself to have been sired by Romanticism" (205).

Expanding on these numerous earlier discussions, I wish to show how Williams' poetic theories, especially as they appear in *Spring and All*, (1923), emerge in clearer perspective when situated in their relation to Wordsworth's writings on poetry. Some of the most familiar principles of Williams' poetics, such as innovative poetic diction, an emphasis on the imagination, and an immersion in the details of physical nature, recall Wordsworth's theoretical statements in the Advertisement to the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, in the famous Preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, and in his letters on poetry to John Wilson and Lady Beaumont. If, as Schott declares, "Williams was our forbear," then Wordsworth was very much Williams' forbear.

This chapter consequently will illustrate how William Carlos Williams applies his poetic

theory in his own writings, specifically in *Spring and All*, and how the integration of his theory and poems reveals Williams' simultaneous connection to and departure from the past, especially in regard to such British Romantics as Wordsworth. As Linda Wagner has said, in reference to *Spring and All*: "like halves of any book, any painting, the poems cannot be separated from the prose without reducing the whole to fragments" (46). Similarly, Webster Schott points out that Williams "enunciates his literary principles in the prose. He demonstrates them in the poetry" (introduction to *Spring and All* 86). In keeping with these principles, the focus on Williams' combination of poetic practice and theory will highlight, in both the prose and poetry of *Spring and All*, relevant themes that are linked to past poetic theory. While these various themes emerge and overlap throughout *Spring and All*, occasionally, for purposes of clarification, I will also draw on aspects of Williams' other writings.

In relationship to Williams' links to past poetic theory in *Spring and All*, several themes emerge: 1) Williams reveals surprising links to the past, including an affinity with certain principles found in an earlier group of sometimes rebellious poets – the English Romantics; 2) A major difference between Williams and the Romantic innovators is his avoidance of the Romantic emphasis on transcendence – thus in his emphasis on the present, Williams has none of the Romantic interest in transcending the present moment; Williams avoids the kind of mystical, spiritually transcending moments favored by Wordsworth in poems like "Tintern Abbey" and *The Prelude*. Williams himself wishes to escape from, to revolt against, to "transcend," in a sense, earlier poetic strictures, but this is a very different kind of transcendence from the visionary experiences of nature – what, in M.H. Abrams' words, could be termed natural supernaturalism – found in Wordsworth, as well as in other Romantic writers such as Blake, Coleridge, and Shelley. 3) In departure from traditions of lyric form, prosody, or conventional tones, Williams' theory and poetry reveal whimsical elements combined with wild, violent qualities in *Spring and All*, and finally; 4) Williams displays a distinctly American spirit in his theories, in the subject matter, and even in the tone in much of the poetry of *Spring and All*. His complex relationship with European centered poetic traditions thus surfaces as he accepts, recreates, or defies them.

Williams' connections to the English Romantics (and, of course, to such American Romantic innovators as Walt Whitman) lie in his work's spirit of revolution, his focus on the

imagination, innovation, and freedom, and, in his deliberate attempt to escape existing poetic standards in order to create new ones. His spirit of poetic revolution and artistic freedom is far more extreme than that of the Romantics, as he pursues radical experimentation in language and form. Wordsworth, for example, wants to liberate poetry from the artificial diction of earlier poets like Thomas Gray (i.e. “Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,”) – he seeks to use the “language really used by men” as he says in the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (597). For Wordsworth, words are tools, or mimetic “acts” to express feelings and ideas:

For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length . . . we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves . . . must necessarily be in some way enlightened, and his affections ameliorated (*Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* 598).

Going much farther than Wordsworth, Williams is not interested in using words as vehicles for a mimetic representation of reality. Rather, Williams believes that words in and of themselves are a kind of reality, and in fact can bring us closer to reality. In this way, Williams’ thoughts about language echo this principle even when he says, “no ideas but in things” – which includes the things that we call “words.” Words, as new creations, cannot be mimetic. Poetry, then, for Williams consists of words, not feelings and ideas – just as a work of sculpture is made up of stone or marble, or a painting is made up of canvas and oil paints. Williams shows the importance of the non-mimetic relation of words of poetry to reality as he comments:

. . . poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it—It affirms reality most powerfully and therefore, since reality needs no personal support but exists free from human action, as proven by science in the indestructibility of matter out of force, it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but—

As birds' wings beat the solid air without which none could fly so words freed by the imagination affirm reality by their flight (*Spring and All* 149-150).

As these comments suggest, Williams goes much further than Wordsworth in challenging literary convention in his contrasting sense of the purpose of poetry; Williams' focus is not feelings and ideas, but rather action – the affirming of reality through words which break from poetic conventions. Williams' often irreverent tone, his rejection of traditional meter and rhyme, his fascination with such “unpoetic” natural details as the color of a rotting apple (in the poem “Perfection”) are all far removed from the familiar and reassuringly picturesque, or transcendently sublime features of Wordsworth's verse. And Williams' language includes phrasing that would be considered vulgar or inappropriate for poetry even in his own time, and that would be unthinkable for a writer desiring respectable publication in Wordsworth's day – i.e., the lines “swinging their butts” from “The Dance,” (229) or “I kissed her as she pissed” from “Turkey in the Straw,” (231) a poem that Williams' widow actually objected to including in his collected poems. One could say, indeed, that Williams takes Wordsworth's notion of the language really used by men far more literally and liberally than did the great but highly proper Romantic poet. But for all of these distinctions, clearly on the level of theory, the two poets parallel each other in their concern with extending the range of poetic discourse and subject matter, in freeing poetry from what each saw as constricting convention and literary elitism, and in transforming the seemingly mundane into poetic art through the shaping and revealing powers of the imagination.

On the most obvious level, Williams' connection to Wordsworth appears in their shared desire to liberate poetic diction from artificial, archaic forms. After all, one of the most distinctive aspects of Williams' work is the use of everyday language, including slang, colloquial speech, and words with distinctly un-poetic associations. If Wordsworth wanted to use “the language really used by men,” it would seem that Williams wanted to use the language really used by Americans – and the cultivation of American idioms was a key element in Williams' poetry after he moved away from the ornate language and conventional poeticisms (i.e. the use of “thee” and “thou”) that appeared in his earliest work. One recalls “At the Faucet of June” with J.P.M. the American millionaire or “At the Ball Game” with its quintessential snapshots of an American pastime:

The crowd at the ball game
is moved uniformly

by a spirit of uselessness
which delights them—

all the exciting detail
of the chase

and the escape, the error
the flash of genius—

all to no end save beauty
the eternal—

(Spring and All 147-148)

And, in the other poem, “At the Faucet of June,” Williams’ allusions to Persephone (Kora) and J.P.M. are striking as they show not only the presence of distinct American contemporary qualities in his poetry, but also Williams’ tension with and linkage to the past:

pulling at the
anemones in
Persephone’s cow pasture —

When from among
the steel rocks leaps
J.P.M.

who enjoyed
extraordinary privileges

As one critic, James E. Breslin, has noted, J.P.M. is a modern version of Pluto raping Persephone (67). Like Pluto, J. Pierpont Morgan is someone with great power – an American millionaire who made his fortune in a very American industry (steel), and, not surprisingly, profited from the automobile industry. Thus, Williams blends ancient myth with contemporary references, making his poem, as he would call it, a “field of action” where both past and present interact in a refreshing use of language.

Such aspects of Williams’ connection to the past have already been amply studied by Donald Markos, who observes that

Williams’ attempt to incorporate American speech rhythms and antipoetic diction into his poetry was part of the general movement – influenced by realism in fiction and by the modernist mistrust of abstractions – to bring poetry closer to the physical and emotional realities of modern life. The modernist revolution in poetic diction may be viewed as an extension of Wordsworth’s 1798 revolution against the euphemistic and artificial aspects of eighteenth-century poetry (81).

But a more subtle and less studied aspect of Williams’ relation to Wordsworth – what we could even call Williams’ re-imagining of the Wordsworthian poetic project – emerges in the interplay of three key issues for both poets: poetic subject matter, the imagination, and the reader’s relation to the poet.

In terms of subject matter, Williams actually refers to Wordsworth in the poem, “The Mind’s Games” (1948), where he disparagingly quotes one of Wordsworth’s most celebrated short lyrics (from “The World Is Too Much With Us”). In a maneuver that Denise Levertov will later duplicate¹, toward the end of the poem Williams writes, “The world too much with us? Rot! the world is not half enough with us” (160). Williams’ exclamation here ties in with his general and well known wish to extend the subject matter of poetry, making it more inclusive of the mundane, and basing it on the sheer physicality of the world around us rather than on fantasy or preconceived notions – in other words, “no ideas but in things,”² (*Imaginations xvi*) to quote one of Williams’ most famous formulations about poetic theory and practice alike. But Williams

¹ as will be discussed in the Levertov section (chapter 2)

² First stated in *Paterson*, first page.

is rewriting Wordsworth here. In fact, in the very poem Williams so indignantly quotes, the sonnet, “The World Is Too Much With Us,” Wordsworth laments the ‘world’ not in the physical, natural aspects that Williams celebrates, but in a rather different sense of that word –

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The Winds that will be howling at all hours
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not . . . (Abrams 220)

By “world” here, Wordsworth clearly has in mind the world as society, as the world of “getting and spending,” the world of materialistic, non-artistic, unimaginative petty concerns that block us from a direct, responsive interaction with the facts of nature – with the sea, the winds, the flowers.³ If anything, Wordsworth’s point here is actually closer to Williams’ own view than Williams makes it appear. Wordsworth implies that because one kind of world – the world of getting and spending – is too much with us, another world – the world of natural fact, is indeed not with us *enough*.

Williams wants the world in all its material ordinariness to be very much both with us and with poetry – hence his emphasis in *Spring and All* on including the most common details of life (furniture, implements such as a red wheelbarrow, and automobiles) as part of the subject matter of poetry. Many of Williams’ poems ostentatiously demonstrate his belief that “A poem can be made of anything” (“Kora in Hell” 70). But here again, his call for extending the subject matter of poetry actually echoes an essential element of Wordsworth’s poetic agenda.

Wordsworth writes, for instance, that the materials of poetry “are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind” (“Advertisement to the *Lyrical Ballads*” 591).⁴ And in the

³ Wordsworth’s negative sense of “world” in the poem, far from being the natural world that Williams, in an instance of rather willful misprision, assumes it to be, actually resembles more the “world” as used by Yeats in “Adam’s Curse” (1903): “. . .the noisy set/ Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen/ The martyrs call the world” (p.1941).

⁴ 1st edition, 1798.

preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), Wordsworth describes his desire to “choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men.” He goes on to explain his choice of “low and rustic life” as the most common subject area for the poems (Abrams 159). Further, in anticipation of the way that future poets would turn to science and technology, Wordsworth asserts that “the remotest discoveries of the chemist, the botanist, or mineralogist will be as proper objects of the poet’s art as any upon which it can be employed. . . ,” (167).⁵ In a letter to his friend John Wilson, Wordsworth defends further the subject matter of his poems, specifically in “The Idiot Boy,” to which Wilson had objected on the grounds that the poem’s subject – indicated by its title – could not be pleasing to readers. Thus, for all of Williams’ emphasis on modern experience, on avoiding the traditionally pleasant or poetic subject, and on cultivating the imagery of science, technology (Williams was one of the first modern writers to make poetic use of the automobile), and of life’s mundane details, Williams in many ways continues a revolution in subject matter rendered prominent more than a century earlier by Wordsworth. From Wordsworth’s idiot boy and leech-gatherer to Williams’ red wheelbarrow and crowd at the ball game, the difference is more of degree than of kind.

Nevertheless, Williams, in some ways, goes much farther than Wordsworth in the expansion of his poetic subject matter. As Williams stresses the new, he is not afraid of exploring unusual, atypical subjects – connecting himself not just to a British Romantic such as Wordsworth, but as far back as Shakespeare and even Homer. It is, in fact, from Homer and Shakespeare and other past figures that Williams delineates the nature of the imagination that helps him expand his poetic subject matter: Homer, because his work describes actual life and not an imitation; Shakespeare, because, although Hamlet professes the purpose of playing (i.e., of drama) is to “hold a mirror up to nature,” Shakespeare is able to identify with life, to make, in a sense, his plays as new and separate realities rather than mere plagiarized versions or copies of reality. He borrows from life not as a plagiarist but as one who identifies with every character so much that every character is a part of him. According to Williams,

Shakespeare had that mean ability to fuse himself with everyone which nobodies

⁵ An idea that also lies behind Wordsworth’s recognition of the poetic potential of technology in the sonnet, “Steamboats, Viaducts, Railways” written in the 1833, found in Abrams 222.

have, to be anything at any time, fluid, a nameless fellow whom nobody noticed much, and *that* is what made him the great dramatist. Because he was nobody and was fluid and accessible. He took the print and reversed the film, as it went in so it came out. Certainly, he never repeated himself since he did nothing but repeat what he heard and nobody ever hears the same words twice the same (*The Descent of Winter* 253).

Interestingly, Williams notes Shakespeare's accessibility and fluidity as part of what makes him a great dramatist because it enables him to be any one at any time. That ability helps the dramatist then, to be a "nobody" – yet ever more a character in every play. Shakespeare uses his imagination to the fullest potential, spurs life and energy in the drama of life – no inventor, yet no plagiarist, since he becomes the reality of the play. He becomes what he tells so that his plays no longer merely mimic life exactly how another would tell it, but instead become life itself – they become what always was.

When he speaks of fools, he is one; when of kings he is one, doubly so in misfortune. . .

He is a woman, a pimp, a prince Hal –

Such a man is a prime borrower and standardizer – No inventor. He lives because he sinks back, does not go forward, sinks back into the mass –

He is Hamlet plainer than a theory – and in everything.

(*The Descent of Winter* 258)

For Williams, Shakespeare "escapes" the world and activates another world through writing (258). Dante, he mentions, also "escapes" and thus adds vividness to his writing (258). It is perhaps this ability to "escape," to free oneself in the natural world of the imagination that Williams sees and admires in writers and even fictional characters of the past. His affinity to the past is such that he writes in reference to Shakespeare, Marlow, Chaucer, Cervantes, or the character of el Cid,

The good poetry is where the vividness comes up 'true' like in prose but better. That's poetry. Dante was wrestling with Italian, his vividness comes from his escape from Latin. Don Quixote. I don't know about the Russians or the French.

(*The Descent of Winter* 247)

Wagner postulates that this connection to the past is what brings Williams an appreciation for the local:

It is not that Williams disliked rhymes, sonnets, inversion, but that he felt them to be worn out devices, no longer capable of reaching most readers. . . .

No poet is more reverent of tradition, of the past, than Williams. . . It is through Williams' intense appreciation of Homer, Sappho, Theocritus, that he came to his equally intense belief in the local as the source of all viable art (6).

This may help explain Williams' predilection for topics such as a faucet, a ball game, a farmer, a hospital, or a painting about a once local occurrence. One could, in fact, see these mundane images as Williams going one step – or several steps – beyond Wordsworth's emphasis, in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, on "low and rustic life."

Williams shows his connection to the past in other writings as well, but Williams, true to his principles, does not merely copy the past, instead, he uses literary allusions to recreate the past in a new form and new, modernistic idiom. Unlike the grandeur of most of Eliot's allusions (ex. Dante, Spenser, Chaucer)⁶ or the stateliness of Pound's use of the courtly provençal troubadours, Williams often evokes mundane sources or topics from the past, such as Pieter Breughel's paintings of lower class people; Williams uses a painter whose work draws compassion for what were sometimes underrepresented subjects. Such pattern of evoking the past through allusion is evident in "The Dance," one of his poems based on a painting by Breughel, *The Kermess*. Breughel lived from 1525-1569, and Williams, displaying an admiration for elements of past culture, describes the peasants depicted in *The Kermess* in a later book of his, *Pictures from Breughel*:

The Dance

In Breughel's great picture, The Kermess,
The dancers go round, they go round and
around, the squeal and the blare and the
tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles

⁶ *The Wasteland* alone, according to one scholar, L.S. Limanta, includes allusions to the works of Dante, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Andrew Marvell ("To His Coy Mistress"), Oliver Goldsmith, or to the Psalms. Even the very first lines in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" allude to Dante's inferno in *The Divine Comedy*.

tipping their bellies (round as the thick-
 sided glasses whose wash they impound)
 their hips and their bellies off balance
 to turn them. Kicking and rolling about
 the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those
 shanks must be sound to bear up under such
 rollicking measures, prance as they dance
 in Breughel's great picture, the Kermess 1944 (229)

Here, Williams shows his affinity for history while at the same time challenging its conventions. Williams reveals the whimsical nature of the Kermess, a day set aside to celebrate a Saint's day or a holiday with an outdoor festival, as he gives us images of round bellies tipping, swinging butts, and hips off balance. But traditional poetry – and even the innovative elements of Romantic poetry – would not have described the bodies of dancing people in this manner. The words “swinging their butts” are in a slightly vulgar, slangy tone, especially for a poem in Williams' time, and give this poem about a European painting an Americanized modernized tone. Thus, Williams makes moments of sixteenth century culture alive in our minds, while he simultaneously shuns the conventions of traditional poetry.⁷

Such is Williams' whimsical subversive nature with language in his own century. In writing about his own times and culture, Williams writes in free verse and shirks literary conventions of rhyme, meter, or linear logic in poetry that have become burdensome for him; in so doing, he highlights moments in American culture and creates new associations with words while keeping elements of the past. Additional portions from *Spring and All's* eighth poem, “At the faucet of June” (from which I've previously quoted), help further illustrate this situation. It begins,

VIII
 The sunlight in a
 yellow plaque upon the

⁷ An exception to this are Byron and John Claire, figures who would require a separate study and are not the focus of this one. One thing to note is that when Byron used slang or an unconventional approach to his expressions, Byron himself sometimes referred to his bawdy language or perceived poetic improprieties as “doggerel,” (not poetry) something that an avant garde writer such as Williams, felt no need to do. Williams' own version of “doggerel” would be considered by him poetry in its own right and need no apologies or qualifying statements.

varnished floor

is full of a song
inflated to
fifty pounds pressure

at the faucet of
June that rings
the triangle in the air

pulling at the
anemones in
Persephone's cow pasture –

When from among
the steel rocks leaps
J.P.M. (109)

Williams disarms us of conventional associations with sunlight which are usually positive, cheerful and bright. Instead, Williams gives us a sunlight that is “plaque upon the varnished floor.” Although a plaque is usually hung on the wall, here it is on the floor, made of sunlight – a rectangle – a reflection perhaps of the modernist interest in technology and geometric shapes. Still, the poem is ambiguous. Williams leaves ambiguities in the poem as if they are the effect of writing with words that are liberated from their usual attached meanings. Having verbal ambiguity helps Williams propel his idea that poetry must have vividness that “comes up ‘true’ like in prose but better” (*Descent of Winter* 247) or that local subjects can be as intriguing and poetic as other sources. Prompting readers to wonder and discover helps produce newness and Williams recreates the local by selecting random images that do not transcend their capacities as simple objects. Unlike former poets such as Wordsworth, who imbues daffodils

with an ability to transcend the ordinary and the present, Williams makes the ordinary a fit subject for poetry while keeping it in the present.

Furthermore, the sunlight in “At the Faucet of June” is full of the song made by a car tire moving along, “inflated to fifty pounds pressure,” and does not shine on a fountain of June, but on a faucet with its more mundane implications; Williams, in fact, seems to revel in the mundane for its own sake and deliberately strips words of any Romantic associations the reader might have. The mundane is a good subject for the imagination because it has not been overused by past poetic traditions. It has the potential for newness that other subjects may not have. Through the mundane, Williams can also focus on objects rather than abstract subjects such as feelings, for it is through objects that Williams writes poetry.

William’s allusions in “At the Faucet of June” to Persephone (Kora) and J.P.M. are also striking as they show not only Williams’ tension with and linkage to the past, but also the presence of distinctly American contemporary qualities in his poetry. One stanza after J.P.M. is described, the poem continues with an American theme, reminding one of “the market” – of capitalism in general:

whose cars are about
the finest on
the market today –

And so it comes
to motor cars –
which is the son

It thus is with reason that Breslin remarks, “ ‘At the Faucet of June’ creates a modern June morning in which we hear the sound of the motor car as well as the more delicate music of nature” (66). The delicate music of nature we’ve heard when in the sunlight’s “song,” which in this poem could very well be the hum of tires. What is important about this observation is that the description of cars gives the poem an even more modern quality that further deepens the poem’s tension with and difference from past literary subjects and tones.

But to truly see the poetic potential in such subjects, for Williams, requires an active, powerful imagination. In *Spring and All*, Williams maintains that the expansion of poetry’s

subject matter is impossible without a complex interplay of the imagination with reality, on the part of both the writer and the reader. “There is a constant barrier,” writes Williams, “between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world” (88). How does one break down this barrier? Through the imagination. “To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force— the imagination” (89). Williams continues: “In the imagination, we are from henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader” (*Spring and All* 89). Imagination thus is crucial for the reader as well as the author. But for Williams, the imagination is not a vehicle of transcendence as it sometimes is for Wordsworth (or any of the Romantics); instead, it is a tool that aids in understanding “the greatness of life’s inanity, the formality of its boredom” (91). Moreover, rather than divorcing imagination from reality, Williams asserts that “It is the imagination on which reality rides” (139).

Nevertheless, at the same time that Williams’ poetics lacks Romantic transcendence, his affirmation of the imagination links him deeply to his Romantic ancestors – and in a striking way to Wordsworth. The role of the imagination in the perception of reality and the expansion of subject matter is central to both Williams and Wordsworth. For instance, in a letter addressing Lady Beaumont about his own poems and theories Wordsworth writes that his poems will seem insignificant, probably even to “respectable persons,” and goes on to say “I hope that these Volumes are not without some recommendations, even for Readers of this class, but their imagination has slept; and the voice which is the voice of my Poetry without Imagination cannot be heard” (317). With a few changes in tone and some modernizing of the language, this point could very well have been made by Williams. The same could be said of part of Wordsworth’s description of the “principal object” of the poems in the *Lyrical Ballads*, namely, his wish to “choose incidents and situations from common life,” and “to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way” (Abrams 159). Both Williams’ poetry and poetic theory seem to exemplify this very idea, as when Williams declares his interest in “familiar, simple things” which he wishes to “detach . . . from ordinary experience to the imagination” (*Spring and All* 110). As he “detaches,” Williams creates another tension between what is “familiar” and what is not. He adds a tension between modern images – snapshots – and the familiar images of the past juxtaposed with the modern.

This tension with the past Williams experiences together with his own literary contemporaries. While there are those who wish to adhere to tradition and conventions, such as that of pathetic fallacy that Williams disdains, Williams notes that at the time he is writing *Spring and All*, writers contest the “return to the proven truths of tradition”; those writers state that “design is a function of the IMAGINATION” and cannot therefore be guided by mere convention or tradition (*Spring and All* 98). Williams shows us this very theory at work in his poetry when he allows the imagination seemingly random freedom to structure and design the poem; concurrently, that freedom reveals the power of the imagination in the mind of a character in the poem –

III.

The farmer in deep thought

is pacing through the rain
among his blank fields, with
hands in pockets,

in his head

the harvest already planted.

A cold wind ruffles the water
among the browned weeds.

On all sides

the world rolls coldly away:

black orchards darkened by March clouds --

leaving room for thought.

Down past the brushwood

bristling by

the rainsluced wagonroad

looms the artist figure of

the farmer – composing

– antagonist

(my italics; *Spring and All* 98-99)

Through the imagination, the farmer’s deep thoughts shape the design of poem III. The planting of the harvest is already planted *in his head*, the word “already” suggesting the completeness and

reality of the imagination – the harvest **does** exist, in his imagination. In a way, the harvest can exist in reality only after it exists in the farmer’s imagination. Amid black orchards, rain, blank fields, a cold wind and browned weeds, the farmer composes his thoughts about the farm just as the artist, the poet, has composed a life in the midst of the principles of tradition. But it is an artist, and not tradition, that has composed, structured, and designed a poem through the imagination.

Williams’ attention to the imagination as a powerful force in poetry echoes the English Romantics who frequently stressed imaginative force and were guided by it – imagination allowed the Romantics to effectively guide readers in transcending the present moment (recall Wordsworth’s dancing daffodils, magnum opus *The Prelude*, or Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale”). But Williams’ similarity to the Romantics in this particular poem stops there; Williams’ use of the imagination is far more extensive and radical as he allows the imagination complete freedom to structure content and poetic form. While Wordsworth’s *Prelude* shows the growth of a poet’s mind as the poet transcends his everyday experience, Williams’ poetry compels one to live an “eternal moment” through language – a moment that, in Williams’ art, may very well comprise of concrete objects rather than abstract ideas. Wordsworth’s poetry, on the other hand, is written upon the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (“Preface” 598) and is allowed free expression when feelings erupt. In fact, Wordsworth would argue, it is in that state of mind that a poet is most apt to create good poetry.⁸

A more representative case in point, the poem “The Rose is Obsolete,” from *Spring and All*, shows us how Williams’ imagery and tones differ from Wordsworth’s while similarly breaking linguistic and poetic convention. Wordsworth, for instance, wanted to recreate what had always, in his opinion existed – the true “language of men” – and to avoid the artificial diction of poets like Thomas Gray. Likewise, in “The Rose is Obsolete,” both the concept of imagination as designer and Williams’ (conscious or unconscious) affinity with Romantic poetic rebellion are at work. Although Williams’ verse relies on common, everyday diction, for him, even a word as simple as “rose” can be encumbered by old, or, as he puts it, “stale” poetic

⁸ For, as he famously states, “. . . all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects, but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply” (*Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* Gill 598).

associations. Williams regards a rose as obsolete in a way that past generations – including the Romantics – had not done; he disentangles the reader unceremoniously from conventional images, ideas, and expectations about a rose, such as those in, say, that most famous of all romantic treatments of rose imagery, Robert Burns’ “A Red, Red Rose.” In opposition to such poems Williams writes,

the rose is obsolete

But each petal ends in

An edge, the double facet

Cementing the grooved

columns of air—the edge

Cuts without cutting

Meets—nothing—renews

Itself in metal or porcelain—

Wither? It ends. . .

(*Spring and All* 107)

Here, the conventional associations of the rose with softness, passion, and femininity – such as those found in Burns and a long line of poems before him – become “obsolete” for Williams, while the rose itself is made new. It becomes unconventional in Williams’ text – a new rose resembling a physician’s surgical tool, an almost hard, sharp mechanical object. Williams mentions ends, edges, double facets, cementing, (with connotations of the hardness of concrete), columns, cuts, metal, porcelain. Williams further defamiliarizes traditional associations of the rose with the double entendre, “the rose carried weight of love/ but love is at an end—of roses.” Here, the word “end” implies that love is finished, done – or that love is “at an end,” found on the delicate (or sharp, as it cuts the air) end or edge of a rose; this is not, of course, a place a reader initially associates with love – but a reader may do so after being challenged by the novelty and complexity of associations of the rose that Williams provides.⁹

Williams would not have liked to be called a Romantic, but the new associations he

⁹ Another avant-garde defamiliarizing of the rose occurs in the famous, deliberately repetitive, unadorned phrase of Gertrude Stein, “a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” (originally from *Sacred Emily*, 1913, found in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein* ix).

creates for the rose, like the work Wordsworth wished to do, transport the reader to a new imaginative space; for Williams, however, the imagination is a place where roses can be sharp, metallic, or hard, in vivid contrast to the familiar, understandable associations of imagery like that of Burns' more conventional imagery: "O My Luve's like a red, red rose, / That's newly sprung in June" (Burns 107). Burns' love is passionate, enduring, beautiful as the sea, as a sweetly played melody, as a rose. But readers have become numb to language that is so familiar or that reflects, in Williams' view, "crude symbolism" and "strained associations" (*Spring and All* 102). Wishing, as he says, to "escape" such associations, Williams transforms the traditional poetic image through his "sharp" rose and his love that is ambiguous, "at an end – of roses"; Williams endows the rose with new associations even as he names it obsolete, thus paradoxically making it not obsolete at all, but fresh and ever present.

In "The Rose is Obsolete," as throughout his work, Williams focuses far more than Wordsworth and the other Romantics on objects rather than on feelings and abstract ideas. Admittedly, Wordsworth decries conventional artifice in his desire to, as Coleridge puts it, "awaken. . . the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom," (qtd. in *Natural SuperNaturalism* 378)¹⁰ – but Wordsworth believes in transporting the mind and in transcending the moment by connecting, in the end, to elementary feelings and states of spiritual illumination – not to a world of objects. It is not the things in and of themselves, be they daffodils or railways, that Wordsworth seeks and celebrates, but rather the ways that such things, perceived by the imagination and recollected in tranquility, lead to joy and insight: In recollection, the poet reaches not only daffodils, but all that memory represents: a mood, a transcendence to another place and time, one where the poet's feeling and thought is exalted – the realm of the imagination:

For oft when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

¹⁰ Originally stated in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*

Even the movement, the dance of the daffodils, is transported to that of the poet's thought and feeling as his heart "dances with the daffodils," but the focus, in the end, is the thought process of the poet rather than the daffodils themselves.

For Williams, by contrast, the focus is primarily on the objectivity of the physical world, rendered in language that strips that world of the encrustations of convention and overly familiar images and poetic associations – including those of the Romantics themselves. Williams wants words to be borne by an imagination that is unencumbered by contemporary overused words.

In the same way, a wheelbarrow becomes forever ingrained in American poetic history. In Williams' most famous poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow," we see that the imagination again structures the poem, this time in a series of small lines that, step by step, make the reader use his own imagination to understand how the words belong together:

so much depends

upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white

chickens

(bold added; *Spring and All* 138)

"Upon," set by itself, modifies the red wheel; "barrow" is modified by "glazed with rain," and water is modified by "beside the white" – but just as we are led to focus on those statements we are pleasantly surprised: a red wheel? – no, a red wheel *barrow*, glazed with rain *water*, beside the white *chickens*. Interestingly, the top line depends on the reading and structure of the rest of the poem as much as ordinary life can depend on a red wheelbarrow. Thus, content and form blend as only the imagination could have structured it.

It is through this use of the imagination that *Spring and All* defies traditional poetic principles of rhyme, meter, and technique as it creates a new poetics: Williams teaches the reader how to write without using words and their old associations; he teaches a poem whose "form" stems from the imagination and not preconceived traditional poetic technique. In essence, this is one way Williams brings innovation in both form and subject matter. A black sky, for instance,

in poem IV of *Spring and All*, suddenly becomes majestic and able to be encircled by a coronal of lights. We are used to a sky that is limitless, unable to be enhanced by human adornment; in Williams' poem, however, we can crown the black sky in a way that Easter stars cannot. The Easter stars shine, but they are above the flashing lights that are a coronal to the black. Pinholes also acquire new associations. Is it the flashing lights that are like pinholes in the blackness, is it the Easter stars, or is it both? And why call stars pinholes? It is a common word used in an uncommon way. The verbal ambiguity allows the imagination to roam free, to experiment, to create so that there is a renewal of the potential of words for meaning after there has been destruction of the old meanings or associations, just as we saw earlier in "The Rose is Obsolete."

IV

The Easter stars are shining
above lights that are flashing –
coronal of the black –

Nobody

to say it –

Nobody to say: pinholes

Thither I would carry her
among the lights –
Burst it asunder
break through to the fifty words
necessary—

a crown for her head with
castles upon it, skyscrapers
filled with nut-chocolates –

dovetame winds –
stars of tinsel
from the great end of a cornucopia
of glass

(*Spring and All* 99)

The poem continues in its ambiguity as the poet imagines he would carry a woman through the lights. He talks of "burst[ing] it asunder" but doesn't tell us what "it" is. We are left

to imagine that he would break the coronal, the blackness, or the silence (“break through to the fifty words”). Is it perhaps, that it’s not the blackness that deserves the crown, but it is she – and who is she? It is someone who also deserves castles, skyscrapers, and nut-chocolates on that crown.

The puzzling nature of the above passages requires the reader to speculate and interpret the poetic language beyond the norms of traditional poetic interpretation. As is typical of the avant-garde, the reader is drawn into a relation with the artist, but in a different way from the personal sense of a “poet speaking to men” in Wordsworth’s work. Even for readers today, many years after Williams’ poems were published, he is not using words the way we are accustomed to seeing them, but in so doing, he revitalizes those words, defamiliarizes them, and makes a new creation of them. According to his theory, “The value of the imagination to the writer consists in its ability to make words. Its unique power is to give created forms reality, actual existence . . .” (*Spring and All* 120). Williams’ words of poetry, then, live in our minds through the power of Williams’ liberated imagination.

Another dimension of Williams’ often surprising or shocking effect on his reader – far more than what we have in Wordsworth’s more “reader-friendly” relationship to his reader (as he seeks, among other things, to use the “language of men”) – is the discordant violence of Williams’ imagery. This violence is not really typical of most lyric poetry, and certainly not of Romantic poetry, with the exception of a few poems here and there, such as Wordsworth’s “Nutting” – but even this poem, with its ripe sexual undertones and the violence of “merciless ravage” witnessed by the “spirit in the woods” metaphorically (rather than overtly) implies rape or a moment involving pleasure followed by violence.¹¹ Williams’ poetry, on the other hand, evokes violent sexual imagery overtly, unexpectedly, and sometimes literally. Throughout poem IV, for example, one sees the undercurrent of violence that pervades so much of *Spring and All*. In poem IV we have images of “burst it asunder” and “break through” combined with Williams’ creation of new and separate realities. As he says in one of the prose passages of *Spring and All*:

¹¹ Arguably, violence in John Claire’s treatment of nature or Wordsworth’s work on the French Revolution is similar to the violence in Williams’ work, but this is the subject of a future study that would require a discussion about the difference between Williams’ *discordant* and jarring juxtaposition of violent images and poetic themes versus the more traditional forms of violence (or implied violence) found in Claire and Wordsworth.

I speak for the integrity of the soul and the greatness of life's inanity; the formality of its boredom; the orthodoxy of its stupidity. Kill! Kill! let there be fresh meat. . .

The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world. Let it rage, let it kill. The imagination is supreme (91).

In relation to this, throughout *Spring and All*, Williams does not just want a new world, he wants first annihilation of literary associations from the old world that have become stale to him. He wants words to be borne by an imagination that is unencumbered by contemporary overused words. And in this liberation of words, he creates a new, sometimes uncomfortable, challenging relationship of the poet to his reader.

Since Williams is trying to show that the mundane is indeed a great source for art, he offers words that sometimes have jarring new associations for the reader, creating scenes that have no endings, snapshots of life that we are left free to interpret:

. . . Once
anything might have happened
You lay relaxed on my knees –
the starry night
spread out warm and blind
above the hospital – (Poem IX, *Spring and All* 113)

Nothing out of the ordinary here, it is perhaps a snapshot of Williams' life. A nurse relaxes on his knees. A starry night hangs above the hospital. But in the midst of these ordinary, easily understandable aspects of the poem, we see the surprising statement that the night is "blind." In this way, the ordinary gives way to more extraordinary writing – in calling the night blind Williams reinforces his belief that words must be freed of conventional associations, even if this disrupts the conventional expectations of the reader. As the poem continues, it is not simply men, women, and animals that can be blind, but the night also cannot see – cannot observe the scenes and emotions displayed that night; it cannot see what seems out of the ordinary.

. . . In my life the furniture eats me

the chairs the floor
the walls
which heard your sobs
drank up my emotion –
they which alone know everything

and snitched on us in the morning –

What to want?

Drunk we go forward surely

Not I

(*Spring and All* 113-114)

Furniture, in Williams' imagination suddenly becomes capable of eating him. The reader is forced to ask why – the poet, again, disrupts or disturbs the reader's experience by creating the seemingly nonsensical statement that the furniture may eat him, but the poet also offers clues to the reader's imagination – so that the reader exercises the imagination in much the same way that the poet does as the reader interprets his work. In this way, we can see that Williams' subject matter and his emphasis on the imagination actually overlap with the poet's relation to the reader. Imagination tells the reader that the furniture eats him because the furniture "hears" what the night is shielded from by walls; the furniture would "snitch" on the speaker and the nurse who is presumably his lover. We are used to the personification of some things – walls that hear for instance – but Williams expands the idiomatic expression, "the walls have ears," by including furniture that also "hears" and "snitches." In this way, he kills old associations of words and recreates meaning in a common idiom, but one that is rendered unfamiliar as a result of the poet's experimental use of language, his re-imagining of conventional images and subjects, which in turn makes him a kind of prod to the reader's own use of the imagination.

The limitless imagination of the author – and therefore of the actively engaged reader of his work – can find life even in walls and furniture, strange and whimsical as this may be. Williams, in a maneuver characteristic of *Spring and All's* whimsical tone, becomes playfully ambiguous not just in the idea of animated furniture but in his words, "Drunk we go forward

surely / Not I.” Yes **she** may go forward, but not “surely,” or, he, not at all – the word “surely” having more than one meaning – *confidently* or *undoubtedly*.

Williams continues a train of thought that includes ordinary routine hospital images or duties, but he intersperses those thoughts with sexual images – thoughts, perhaps, of the speaker himself before he enters a love scene:

beds, beds, beds
elevators, fruit, night-tables
breasts to see, white and blue –
to hold in the hand, to nozzle (*Spring and All* 114)

Initially, the image of the naked body may have been the most natural thing to intersperse with beds, elevators, fruit, and night-tables. After all, this is a hospital where bodies of patients are constantly viewed. These everyday images, however, do not remain ordinary when accompanied by the words “white and blue – / to hold in the hand, *to nozzle*” Thus, the imagination once again succeeds in creating a new experience for the reader, but doing it through the ordinary, even the “inane.” Since it is not typical of poetic subject matter to deal with the inane, Williams shows how for him the poet’s role may include creating unusual or disorienting reading experiences and therefore new perceptions for readers – perceptions that force them into a more active use of the imagination to meet the challenge of the poet’s imagination.

The poem continues in its contrasting images (of the ordinary vs. the new) and succeeds in relating a love scene that is incongruent, imaginative, and real in its own creative way (as a “separate existence”):

It is not onion soup
Your sobs soaked through the wall
breaking the hospital to pieces

Everything
windows, chairs
obscenely drunk, spinning –
white, blue, orange
hot with our passion

wild tears, desperate rejoinders
my legs, turning slowly
end over end in the air!

But what would you have?

All I said was:
there, you see, it is broken

stockings, shoes, hairpins
your bed, I wrapped myself round you –

I watched

You sobbed, you beat your pillow
you tore your hair
you dug your nails into your sides

I was your nightgown

I watched!

(Spring and All 114-115)

Williams' undercurrent of violence additionally helps make this poem more real for the reader, existing as a snapshot with contrasting images – violent and calm; present and past; ordinary and new. The pieces of the city are broken while a curious caress changes the tone to a calmer one. This poem is about what happened or might have happened fifteen years ago, but it is also about what is happening now in two different places. He is thinking while she lives somewhere in the city, helping, "patching up sick school children." Like the Romantics, Williams describes more than one realm of thought (the imagined past or the memory of the past), but his purposes are different, his writing more violent:

Clean is he alone

after whom stream
the broken pieces of the city –
flying apart at his approaches

but I merely
caress you curiously

fifteen years ago and you still
go about the city, they say
patching up sick schoolchildren

(*Spring and All* 115)

Williams strives for a ‘field of action’ while the Romantics used states of thought to show how speakers of their poems transcended their moment, or their state of being, into a different or better state. One critic has noted that Williams introduces the last five lines with “but” to imply that the love scene was only supposition (Wagner 44). Curiously, Wagner has quoted from a version of *Spring and All* that reads in past tense: “but I merely caressed you curiously.” If, however, Williams’ original intent was to leave the words in the present tense, the poet may be living that very moment in his imagination as if it had not been a daydream. Thus the reader is transported into the poet’s imagination and therefore shares it in an immediate way – even more immediate than is the case with Wordsworth.

Probably what most distinguishes Williams as an American poet and what separates him from past poetics is his whimsical tone combined with newness, destruction, and renewal in American subject matter. “At the Faucet of June” with J.P.M. the American millionaire or “At the Ball Game” with its quintessential snapshots of an American past time clearly demonstrate Williams’ whimsical tone and use of American subject matter. “At the Ball Game” began with a happy crowd delighted by the “spirit of uselessness,” (*Spring and All* 147) but this same crowd, the speaker warns us, is also venomous, smiling grimly. In this same poem, beauty follows revolution, and the image of the crowd is restored, renewed to one that is happy, cheering, and laughing.

Williams, in a sense, serves as a translator for America. He depicts for readers an American culture that can be understood through images or objects (a crowd, a rose, a

wheelbarrow.) At the same time, Williams seems to be purposeful in allowing ambiguity in a poem in order that the imagination roam free.

While older Romantic tradition (particularly the one associated with Wordsworth and Coleridge) is purposeful in making its moral or transcendent messages understood (as one finds in “The Ancient Mariner”), Williams’ practices contain much more poetic ambiguity. Such practices at times reflect the experience of some of his American contemporaries, expatriates who thrived in Europe through their ambivalence about American culture and language. The speakers in Williams’ poem don’t necessarily care if the reader is “delighted” as Wordsworth would prefer.¹² Thus Williams’ rose is hard, his characters sometimes violent, or his poetic content and form radical and ambiguous.

But these ambiguities, among Williams’ other qualities of revolution, violence, newness, freedom, and the living local moment, seduce the reader into experiencing words that are ever present and vivid in a forceful, poetic field of action. In this way, *Spring and All* establishes the birth of a new art. Similar to how the English Romantics changed ideas about forms and styles of art, Williams calls for America to recognize its own intrinsic qualities that separate its art from other art forms. Williams’ attempt to establish this new art is violent and jarring in its poetic agenda. While Wordsworth in 18th and 19th century England was trying to develop a new way of writing and reading poetry, his call for change was not violent; he desired, instead, to delight the reader, to be understood. In “Advertisement to Lyrical Ballads” he states,

The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purpose of poetic pleasure . . . (591)

Williams’ theme of violence and the often jarring contrasts and images reflect his departure from the poetics of past writers such as the Romantics. For all of his affinity with Wordsworth’s notions of poetic diction, subject matter, and the imagination, in practice, Williams is imagistically and tonally distant from Romantic poetry. Williams prefers to use

¹² Wordsworth: “The first volume of these poems. . . was published, as an experiment, which, I hoped, might be of some use to ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted . . .” (*Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* Gill 595).

images drawn from ordinary objects of everyday life, producing, at times, words stripped of their usual associations, jarring language found even in the most mundane subject matter that Williams believes is indeed a great source of art.

For both Williams and Wordsworth, current language is not sufficient. While Wordsworth renews what has, in his opinion, always existed, (the “language of men”), Williams desires to recreate what may or may not have existed – *Nuevo Mundo!* – an idea he exclaims in his work, *The Great American Novel* that appropriates the cry of the Spanish explorers who called what they found “a new world” when in fact that world had always been there.

While Wordsworth had frequently written amid raw and unvisited surroundings in Cumbria, Williams in America could dwell on creating freshness from the mundane in his city surroundings. Wordsworth, in contrast to Williams, did not live in a land that, only in very recent history, had been conquered, infiltrated with different cultures and named the “New World.” His was the “Old World” – one that was conquered much earlier – a world perceived, at times, through the lens of its imperialist history rather than for what it offered that was raw and wild; this world did not, as America, entice foreigners with its New World blend of newness and its fresh dreams, or an “American dream.” In Williams’ understanding, Wordsworth’s poetic concerns could thus never be those of a wholly American public. As the son of an American Puerto Rican mother and an English man who loved the classics, he intuitively senses that in traditional European models of poetry, America cannot be fully represented. Still, he cannot discard some models of the Old World; Shakespeare and Homer prevent him; writers like them, Williams believes, employ vividness of language, use the local as a source of art, and believe in the freedom of the imagination. Nevertheless, America, for him, is not a country of harmony and symmetry that Europe had established in its poetics; rather, it is a new country: discordant, indigenous, mixed. Thus, he reacts with shock and anger when confronted with “The Wasteland” that T.S. Eliot, intentionally or unintentionally, threw in the face of all for which Williams had labored:

I felt he had rejected America I knew he would influence all subsequent American poets and take them out of my sphere. I had envisaged a new form of poetic composition, a form for the future. It was a shock to me that he was so

tremendously successful; my contemporaries flocked to him – away from what I wanted (qtd. in Wagner 33).

Williams believed T.S. Eliot delayed the acceptance of his new poetics and dispersed his former followers. T.S. Eliot's poetry, albeit modernist, differed vastly from his own in form and structure. Williams does not want or believe in an imagination that has similes or "pretty thoughts and images" (*Spring and All* 120) because he firmly believes in fresh, renewed language unobstructed by poetic fanfare and convention. Each poem for him must be a new creation rather than a copy of what has been done before.

Paradoxically, for Williams, new creations or renewal in language cannot occur until there is destruction. The integrity of the soul is linked to the imagination and its freedom to destroy and create. (" . . . poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it—It affirms reality most powerfully and therefore . . . it creates a new object, a play, a dance" [*Spring and All* 149-150]). Through freedom of the imagination Williams can show us, time and time again, how simple, inane, or day to day activities can have vast significance. Like Wordsworth in his observation to poets to mold the taste by which poetry is judged, to use ordinary, humble events, Williams calls for America to recognize its own intrinsic qualities that impel a new art form.

Despite Wordsworth's Romantic practice and Williams' avant-garde modernist poetics, these two poets clearly intersect in their emphasis on the power and necessity of the imagination. In his autobiographical poem "Asphodel that Greeny Flower" Williams tells his wife, "I bring you / a last flower. Don't think / that because I say this / in a poem / it can be treated lightly / or that the facts will not uphold it. / Are facts not flowers / and flowers facts / or poems flowers / or all works of the imagination, / interchangeable?" (37). Indeed, Williams' fundamental poetic belief, as noted before, is explicit: "to refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force—the imagination" (*Spring and All* 89). Through this process of refinement, clarification, and intensification, Williams' message endures in a non-obsolete, un-sentimental, hard-edged rose, in a red wheelbarrow, in tipping bellies and swinging butts of peasant dancers seen in a painting by Breughel. His poetry percolates in both the present and past – in the beauty or violence of the eternal present moment and local incident.

He looks at Homer, Sappho, or Theocritus and learns from them the principles of finding art within the local, the present. In Shakespeare he finds a moving pulsing imagination whose

power he further tests in Dante, Marlow, Chaucer, Cervantes, or the character of el Cid. And like Wordsworth, Williams highlights objects of the present in order to make the present live, breathe, or end. He presents the world through words and objects that live in their newness, freed from conventional constraints of rhyme, meter, sonnets, inversion, or logic. Similar to Wordsworth, Williams integrates his theory and poetry by invigorating moments in life and following the lead of the imagination – the imagination that he calls the one force that can “intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live” (*Spring and All* 89). This is why at times, Williams is not too different from Wordsworth, whose choice of subject matter for his poetry enabled him to dwell on single moments in the lives of a leech gatherer, waves of daffodils, an old man in the city, or of a boy and his nutting crane in virgin forest land. In the letter to John Wilson (cited earlier), Wordsworth wrote that the poet “ought to travel before men occasionally as well as at their sides” (Wilkie 203). For Wordsworth, the poet leads others forward – he is before his readers – but he is also on equal footing with them as he is at their side. Williams, more solitary, and less accommodating of his audience, not only challenges his readers but shocks them, or goes off on his own, as he interprets objects and the world by presenting them through poems that live in their newness, freed from conventional constraints of rhyme, meter, traditional forms, poetic inversion, or logic. His is a whimsical, wholly incongruent muse disciplined only in its consistent appearance, exploding after long periods of repression – but William Carlos Williams ultimately controls his muse as he dictates when those explosions of the imagination are allowed. His is the control of a disciplined physician, one who salvages the life of words by reinventing them. Hence, as the risk-taking, experimental poet of the hard-edged rose, the red wheelbarrow, the drunken peasant dancer, Williams travels at the ship’s prow, much as Wordsworth did in his own time, going before his readers (if not quite at their side), creating the taste by which he would be judged, exploring new territory for poetry. Unlike Wordsworth, Williams does not aim to transcend reality in search of some higher truth or pleasure or virtue; instead, Williams’ truth and reality coexist in words and objects as only the imagination understands – as only a new poetics would illustrate.

CHAPTER 2

DENISE LEVERTOV: IMAGINATION, LYRICISM, AND NATURE

Unmistakably modernist as Denise Levertov's poetry and essays are in tone and topic, they reveal explicit engagements with the poetry and poetics of her Romantic predecessors; in a sense, much of Levertov's work entails the attempt to transmute Romantic concerns into her own poetry, and even to her own personal, lived experience.¹³ Wordsworth's presence emerges in her work through a shared emotional, imaginative engagement with nature, as well as through explicit references to his writings. Her capacity for Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" ("Preface" 598) becomes apparent as she writes to her long time mentor William Carlos Williams: "You say one must know what one is doing . . . I depend so much on feeling (instinct?), on my ear, almost on luck. And you expect an intelligence of me that I either don't have or else haven't learnt how to use" (MacGowan 13). Notwithstanding Levertov's reliance on "feeling," Levertov also recognizes the value of joining feeling and long and deep thought. Soon afterwards in her very next letter she tells her mentor, "I've been saying for a long time, 'I damn well won't write unless I have something to say' and months go by without my having anything to say. . . so I stayed stuck in ditches of my own making. . ." (14). To get out of these ditches Levertov realizes she must do what Williams says as he teaches her how to escape them, "Your only chance of doing some arresting writing, something that the world is really waiting for with open arms, is to be ready" (MacGowan 16).

¹³ "I've always, since I was a young girl, felt some kind of affinity for Keats' feeling that he wanted to be great, he wanted to be numbered among the English poets. . . He really wanted to be a poet; not to 'have a career.' And of course he was hurt when he got those horrible reviews; . . . referring to the Cockney accent and things like that. But it wasn't immediate recognition but posthumous fame that he really sought" (qtd. in Block 1).

This chapter will examine the ways that the work of Denise Levertov recuperates Romantic notions of lyricism, imagination, and nature, with particular attention to Wordsworth and Keats. While a re-envisioning of Romanticism emerges in Levertov, a re-imagining or re-envisioning of Romanticism also surfaces, albeit with some resistance, in her long-time mentor William Carlos Williams. Because of Williams' long-time mentorship of Levertov, and because she and Williams both fashioned a poetics distinctly focusing on more tangible objects (as in Williams' "no ideas but in things" (*Imaginations xvi*)¹⁴, my chapter on Levertov must include some exploration of Williams' own relationship to Romantic poetics – a relationship which has, however, received more detailed treatment in the previous chapter on Williams and Wordsworth. Here, with a focus on Denise Levertov and William Carlos Williams, I will examine how both authors compare in their affinities and antagonisms towards Wordsworthian and Keatsian poetics, illustrating exactly how a re-imagining or re-envisioning of Romanticism developed, and how the lens of an avant-garde writer and a Black mountain poet searching for their own distinct poetics, affected the legacy of Romanticism.

First, we must examine Wordsworth's claim, in the "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*," that poetry should exude powerful feelings *after* the poet has thought "long and deeply":

For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply (598).

We can easily see that both Levertov and Williams hark back to Romantic tendencies even as they mold a distinctly modernist and American poetics. For all of the emphasis on direct expression of emotion, both Levertov and Williams, like Wordsworth, emphasize the importance to poetry of both intellectual labor (thinking long and deeply) and of spontaneity – but even this spontaneity is one for which one must prepare and be ready: "Practice, practice, practice," Williams tells Levertov, "is what makes the artist – and intelligence to perceive the opportunity when it arrives. Then, perfectly composed, we go to work" (MacGowan 4). This view is similar to Wordsworth also waiting for an opportunity, waiting until what he calls the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" ("Preface" 598) arrives, but for that opportunity to arrive, he

¹⁴ from poem "A Sort of Song" (1944).

believed he must first engage in long and deep thought.

In another example of a return to Romantic poetics, Levertov revitalizes certain key notions of Keats with regard to poetics and the writing of poetry. Keats's influence on Levertov can be traced in explicit references, as well as more broadly in Levertov's lyrical style, her use of negative capability, and her focus on sensory perception.

As these comments indicate, Levertov's work draws deeply on the Romantic tradition, especially as found in the work of Wordsworth and Keats. At the same time, however, it is important to understand that Levertov's appropriation and application of distinctly Romantic concerns reveals her to be neither an example of the Bloomian anxiety of influence, nor a mere imitator of the earlier writers. Rather, Levertov's work seems bent on actively extending and revivifying certain Romantic images, poems, and specific texts in terms of her own modernist idiom and her own individual perspective as a poet.

Levertov, more prone than William Carlos Williams to use Keatsian poetics, refashions Romanticism in her modernist use of lyricism and negative capability, and in her more inclusive vision of nature than Wordsworth. In comparison to Wordsworth, much of Levertov's poetry can be seen in some ways as an outgrowth of and response to Book 2 of *The Prelude*, as when, quoting from Wordsworth's *Prelude* in her poem "The Almost Island" she refers admiringly to Wordsworth's and Thoreau's own famous relations to nature:

...Nature: metonymy of the spirit's understanding
knows them to be a concentrate
of all that Thoreau or Wordsworth knew by that word,
Nature: 'a never-failing principle
of joy And purest passion.' ¹⁵ (101)

Levertov affirms the Wordsworthian emphasis on feeling, but adds her own modernist perspective. Her idea of "nature," for instance, refashions Romantic pastoral or idyllic definitions of nature. "Nature" in Levertov's poetry does not require Wordsworth's idyllic pastoralism, and thus extends and redefines the traditional, typical Romantic emphasis on nature.

¹⁵ Wordsworth's original quote (1850): ". . . and in thee
For this uneasy heart of ours, I find
A never-failing principle of joy,
And purest passion" (*The Prelude* 2:449-452).

For Levertov, nature can be found in the middle of a city park “contained in the two-mile circumference of an almost island” (101) surrounded by the weekend “pleasure boats crowd” (101). Nature can be found on this almost-island both in the sight of “the vast mountain in the horizon” and the “downtown skyline” (101). Even in Thoreau’s time, her poem states, “Thoreau’s pond / was bounded by the railroad, punctuated / by the ‘telegraph trees’ and their Aeolian wires” (101). The “nature” of which Levertov writes is consequently no longer our wilderness; our new wilderness, her poem asserts, we now call “Space” (101).

Further complicating or revising Romantic ideas about “nature,” Levertov’s use of the phrase “Aeolian wires” vividly modernizes a common Romantic image, the Aeolian harp – an image found, for instance, in Wordsworth’s passage on “Aeolian visitations” in Book I of *The Prelude* (line 96 Abrams 231)¹⁶ or in Coleridge’s poem, “The Eolian Harp,”¹⁷ and years later in Shelley’s “Mont Blanc.”¹⁸ M.H. Abrams’ discussion of the Aeolian harp in his essay, “The Correspondent Breeze” also indicates the importance of the Aeolian image to the Romantics:

. . . — the lyre of Apollo was often replaced . . . by the Aeolian lyre, whose music is evoked not by art, human or divine, but by a force of nature. Poetic man, in a statement by Shelley which has close parallels in Coleridge and Wordsworth, is an instrument subject to outer impressions “like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody.” The wind-harp has become a persistent Romantic analogue of mind, the figurative mediator between outer motion and inner emotion. It is possible to speculate that, without this plaything of the 18th Century, the

¹⁶ Among Wordsworth’s other multiple references in *The Prelude* (1850) to the Aeolian harp you find: in Book I – “harp in hand” line 172, “orphan lyre” line 233 (Abrams 233-234); and, in Book III – “. . . obedient as a lute / That waits upon the touches of the wind” lines 141-142 (Abrams 258).

¹⁷ In “The Aeolian Harp” Coleridge imagines his mind influenced in like fashion to the Aeolian harp:

Full many a thought uncalled and undetained,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
As wild and various as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject lute! (332)

¹⁸ According to one critic, in “Mont Blanc” Shelley applies the symbolism of the harp “to the reflective mind itself” (Ecker 1).

My own, my human mind, which passively
Now renders and receives fast influencings
Holding an unremitting interchange
With the clear universe of things around. (qtd. in Ecker 1).

Romantic poets would have lacked a conceptual model for the way the mind and imagination responds to the wind, so that some of their most characteristic passages might have been, in a literal sense, inconceivable (114).

Levertov refashions this Romantic image of the Aeolian harp as she merges the technological and the organic in the phrases “Aeolian wires” and “telegraph trees,” suggesting a parallel between telegraph wires and the strings of an Aeolian harp, and implying telegraph wires exist as a part of nature, as “telegraph trees.”

In contrast to Levertov, Williams’ resistance to Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” as he strives to “practice, practice, practice” and “be ready,” actually leads him to employ components of Romantic poetics, albeit through objects rather than ideas, and with an engagement to the natural world as object rather than as a transport to the transcendent or sublime states that the Romantics prized. For Williams, “nature” consisted of the objects surrounding him, while for Wordsworth, “nature” involved not only physical surroundings, but a place where one could transcend physical reality and journey towards the sublime. Williams’ famous poem about a red wheelbarrow displays his focus on objects in and of themselves, and shows how such a poem can be significant without the poet having to ascribe transcendental qualities to poetic subject matter.

When compared to the Romantics, not only does Williams have a greater emphasis on non-transcendental objects, he also refashions Romantic thought when he emphasizes skill rather than thinking “long and deeply.” Wordsworth’s method of “practicing” was described, interestingly in the abstract: Wordsworth tells us to think “long and deeply” while modernists like Levertov and Williams extend that idea to include descriptions of “practice, practice, practice” and a poetic focus on concrete rather than abstract images (“no ideas but in things”). Williams’ avant garde influence shows in his value for looking at the writing craft itself, the way that words merge and diverge from standard meanings ascribed to them, or the way that syntax can be used far more purposefully and idiosyncratically in a poem than the usage of it in Romantic writings. So Williams’ advice to Levertov to “practice, practice, practice” is not too different from Wordsworth’s call to think “long and deeply”; yet Williams’ advice addresses the pragmatic need of a poet to exercise his skill rather than Wordsworth’s more abstract notion on intellect.

In Williams' desire not just for a modernist but for a distinctly American poetics, he also resembles Wordsworth's Romantic notion that he must create the literary taste by which his readers will judge him, a literary taste for the "language of men." Both Wordsworth and Williams set about refashioning literary taste – one through his belief that language must be disarmed of affectations that kept poetry relegated to a select few – and the other poet, Williams, through his will to create a poetry that was not only different from past literary traditions, but that could be recognized as a distinctly *American* poetry.

Williams' Romantic threads appear again as he affirms the seer-like or prophetic and "deep feeling" qualities of a poet. These Romantic strains emerge in his desire to create the taste by which his poetry would be judged and the language by which his audience would read him. Williams called this, writing through an *American* poetics; Wordsworth called it, writing in the "language of men." Wordsworth consequently attempts to train his readers in cultivating poetic taste in his "Advertisement to the Lyrical Ballads" and later in the "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*." He explains, "An accurate taste in poetry. . . Sir Joshua Reynolds has observed, is an acquired talent, which can only be produced by severe thought, and a long and continued discourse with the best models of composition" ("Advertisement" 591). In his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), Wordsworth is even more direct about the necessity of preparing the taste by which he would be judged: ". . . I am sensible, that there would be some impropriety in abruptly obtruding upon the Public, without a few words of introduction, Poems so materially different from those, upon which general approbation is at present bestowed" (596).

Principally, Wordsworth molds poetic taste in his desire to make his audience understand several things:

The principal object. . . which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and at the same time, to throw over them a certain coloring of the imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way (597).

In essence, as his preface later reveals, Wordsworth needs his audience to understand why he was choosing "low and rustic life" as poetic subject matter, why his poetry included the rhythms of prose as opposed to conventional, neoclassic poetic diction, and why he believed that the

primordial objective of poetry, or poetry as the “science of feelings,” (“Note to the Thorn” 594) is truth. Wordsworth believes that “low and rustic life” more easily captures natural language (“language of men”) without the ornate decorations of more conventional poetic diction (“Preface” 597).

Williams, on the other hand, was not invested as Wordsworth in a “language of men” whereby men understood him, but he was invested in an “American poetics” whereby poetic taste would be altered – altered in a way that equipped the public to legitimate, accept as poetry, words that broke from their usual associations. Thus, like Wordsworth, Williams attempts to mold the taste by which he would be judged.

Notably, both Williams and Levertov’s professionalism surfaces in their poetic practice as they require non-poets to bend towards their type of poetic language. When Levertov quotes Keats in her poems she is making Keats accessible to the average reader even though she does not entirely accommodate the reader – making the reader come to her: even if readers do not understand the allusions to Keats’ letters, they can understand and experience the poem through the imagery of Keats, his words, and through their own experiences that might shape their perceptions. Likewise, the use of American idiom helps Williams create poetry not just for the elite, but for American readers that would be familiar with Williams’ native idiomatic expressions. Wordsworth, as well, in his Advertisement for his *Lyrical Ballads* celebrates the use of the vernacular in poetic subjects – challenging language that is class-based as he hopes to create new practices in his poetic profession.

As Williams wrote through an *American* language, he rebelled against past traditions or against those of contemporaries like T.S. Eliot, who, in Williams’ opinion, were not advancing an American poetics.¹⁹ Williams also rebelled against the ornate qualities of conventional poetic diction. His resistance to past traditions thus refashioned Romanticism while creating a distinctly American poetics that focused on the here and now, on the tangible object, or on the

¹⁹ Williams shows his disdain for Polonius-type critics who, as he believed, incorrectly judged T.S. Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”: “. . . there is always some everlasting Polonius of Kensington forever to rate highly his eternal Eliot. It is because Eliot is a subtle conformist. It tickles the palate of this archbishop of procurers to a lecherous antiquity to hold up Prufrock as a New World type. Prufrock, the nibbler at sophistication, endemic in every capital, the not quite (because he refuses to turn his back), is the ‘soul of the modern land,’ the United States! . . . Prufrock is a masterly portrait of the man just below the summit, but the type is universal. . . No. The New World is Montezuma or, since he was stoned to death in a parley, Guatemozin who had the city of Mexico leveled over him before he was taken.” (*Kora in Hell* 24).

practical and mundane details of physical reality.

Not content to be a poet in exile like Pound, T.S. Eliot, or Henry James²⁰, Williams tried to form this American poetics, and in doing so, he reinvigorated, through a refashioning of it, Wordsworth's idea that poetry should be written in the "language of men." As Williams' poetics obliquely revisit Wordsworth's ideas (as in the idea that poetic taste and language must be taught), Williams fights against them, and in his own way, he creates a new modernist version of "the language of men." Indeed, one might even say that what Williams creates is not so much a sense of the language really used by men, but the language really used by *Americans*. Williams' known antagonism towards T.S. Eliot after "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" may very well be explained by his resentment that T.S. Eliot, while fashioning his poetry as modernist, yet fostered poetic language still attached, in some ways, to Wordsworth's "language of men" ideas. T.S. Eliot's popularity and influence frustrated Williams' attempts at creating a distinctly modern American poetics that broke free from long accepted Romantic and Victorian poetics, or from a largely British style of poetic language.

Levertov at times noticed Williams' impatience with poets who did not advance the use of American idiom: "[In 1948] having married American literature, it seemed, as well as an American husband I had read Eliot; but like most English readers at that time, I thought of him as an *English* poet (and of course, the fact that it was possible to do so was precisely what made Williams so angry with him, as I later understood)" (*Light up the Cave* 196). Later, however, upon facing Williams' suggestions for more of American idiom in her own poetry, Levertov wrote back,

Now, about 'The American Idiom' I agree that there is a marvelous poetry in common speech, painful heartbreaking human poetry only to be heard and cherished if the poet hears and frees it – your life's work evidences that.

But – for me personally, I cannot put the idea of "American idiom" first. For you it has always been a focus, almost a mission. But each person must know his own needs. My need and desire is in each poem to find the tone and measure

²⁰ "For Williams, Levertov was an example of what he came to see in the last years of his life as a vindication of his career-long claims for a distinctive American poetry, and an endorsement of the value of the culture itself: no longer one that produced such exiles as James, Pound, Eliot – the whole stream of expatriates who left for Europe in the 1920's, and against whom to some extent Williams had defined his claims for "the local" and "the American idiom" in his own critical statements." (intro., MacGowan vii).

of what I feel, whether the language, word by word or measure by measure, strikes the reader as ‘American’ or not. That poem you were distressed by, “The Jacob’s Ladder,” has to be the way it is because it sounds the way I think and feel about it, just as close as I can make it. My shakings up of its structure into something else would be a betrayal of what I know I must do. (Sept 21st letter, no recorded year; 1960, presumably; MacGowan 99-100).

In “Jacob’s Ladder,” Levertov’s first few lines illustrate such conforming of a poem’s make-up to how she “think[s] and feel[s] about it”:

The stairway is not
a thing of gleaming strands
a radiant evanescence
for angels’ feet that only glance in their tread, and need not
touch the stone.

It is of stone.

(37)

Levertov does not concern herself with American idioms as Williams had suggested. Instead, her lines reflect a sense of hard physical nature, in this case the stone that makes up the stairway, versus how we might idealize physical things – sometimes giving them an ethereal quality – and yet in the last line of her poem, the speaker depicts a belief that some things can indeed be ethereal as the speaker claims: “The poem ascends” (37). For the speaker, the stairway is only stone, but a poem is like the angels’ flight she imagines.

Williams, upon meeting Levertov a couple of months later, made her read her poem (“Jacob’s Ladder”) four times, since he had grown to like it so much. He concluded it was actually the best poem she had ever written after realizing what he had missed the first time he read it – how in that poem, he told Levertov, she focused on what he was “most eager to see in a poet – ... [her] relationship with the art itself rather than any topical matter which curses even our most promising artist” (MacGowan 105).

Williams’ engagement with past Romantic principles differs from Levertov’s as he offers a unique “American idiom” form of poetics, but he shares with her a high value for the poet’s

relationship to his art. Nevertheless, Williams' desire to see true American idiom in emerging poets was as Levertov aptly describes it – “a focus, almost a mission” (99) – and while Levertov embraces past poetic traditions that have fused with her European, multi-cultural upbringing, Williams does not.

For a distinctly American poetics to form, breaking free while yet engaging with the past was necessary, but Williams' focus was more on the future of poetry, not its past. Levertov, on the other hand, more than Williams, engaged with the literary past even as she created a clearly modernist, at times avant-garde body of poetry. Key parts of this engagement with the past include the Romantic notion of imagination and the Romantic emphasis on human interaction with the natural world.

It is thus not surprising that Levertov and Williams, while refashioning and re-imagining elements from Romantic, and especially Wordsworthian poetics, starkly differ in how strongly antagonistic or welcoming they are of Romantic poetic principles. Christopher MacGowan, introducing a book of letters between Williams and Levertov, notes that Williams tries to win Levertov over to American idiom while Levertov asserts her multi-cultural roots and English traditions and poetics (viii). At other times, on the other hand, Williams' comments about poetry could have been taken straight from a notebook of Wordsworth, Shelley, or Keats. In several statements, Williams underscores what many times plagued the Romantics in both their works and personal lives – the sensibility, “deep feeling,” and underlying tension surrounding poetic thought.

At the same time that Williams emphasized the above qualities, he suggests the Romantic notion of seer-like or prophetic qualities of a poet: “A poem is made up not of the things of which it speaks directly but of the things / which it cannot identify and yet yearns to know” (MacGowan 8). Williams' notion that a poem can contain “things which it cannot identify and yet yearns to know” (8) reminds one, for instance, of Keats' nightingale that brings the speaker to a revelation, however enigmatic that revelation may seem to readers (“Ode to a Nightingale”). Williams, like Keats in his poem, speaks to a poet's ability to perceive, yearning first for knowledge and later revealing what the poet had not intended. And, as he speaks to Levertov, Williams reiterates the importance of the poetic tension found in that which is purposely written, that yet inadvertently reveals what the poet may not have intended. Like the Romantics,

especially Wordsworth, Williams points to a poet's need for thoughtfulness, "deep feeling," and an almost seer-like quality that helps the poet's revelatory spirit: "[said to Levertov] You may not be old enough yet to know your own mind for it would have to be a thoughtful, an adult book of deep feeling that would reveal you in what may not want to be revealed" (MacGowan 10). Echoing Wordsworth's "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*" where Wordsworth describes the poet to be "endued with more lively sensibility" (Gill 603), Williams once again suggests the poetic tension and sensitive nature found in the poet: "Things that cannot from the necessary reticenses [sic] of a sensitive person cannot be expressed but in a poem. It is the tension within ourselves that drive [sic] us to confess what is wrung from us" (MacGowan 10).

Williams' words have inherited ideas found in Percy Bysshe Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry," where Shelley notes the lonesome yet powerfully affecting quality of the poet:

A Poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why (784).

To see another illustration of Williams' ties to Romantic tensions surrounding poetic thought, one has only to read another work concerning a nightingale – Keats' nightingale poem, written under a plum tree, a poem portraying the songbird that inspires an observer to long for, to yearn for, to search for another world, for a nightingale flight, or for a "draught of vintage" ("Ode to a Nightingale" 820).

At other times, Williams' sentiment of the poet as lone prophet or of how "The poet is the only one who has not lost his way. . ." (MacGowan 95) connects to Wordsworth's lone poetic journey in *The Prelude*, where, arguably, a poet sometimes finds his way and his most basic poetic principles, as he engages with nature and the growth of his own mind²¹. Williams may be more antagonistic towards Romantic poetics than Levertov, but his relationship with past traditions is not always a simple detachment. Williams builds on this past tradition, even as his avant garde tendencies revolted against Romantic notions and poetics. Williams was a Romantic in spite of himself.

²¹ I realize that the common trope in *The Prelude* of the poet's frequent state of being "lost" throughout his journey makes this point an arguable point.

Memories of John Keats

The influence of Romantic poetics is most evident in Levertov's use of imagery in connection to the senses and in her use of lyricism in poetic diction. In this regard, Paul de Man's discussion of the Romantic use of the image is helpful. De Man sees continuity between Romanticism and twentieth century writing, but in contrast to New Critics like Wimsatt and Beardsley, with their attack on "intentional fallacy," de Man sees authorial intention in Romanticism as vital; only through a study of the author's intent can we more fully explore the role of consciousness and transcendentalism and go beyond or deeper than a study of typical Romantic themes. For de Man,

An abundant imagery coinciding with an equally abundant quantity of natural objects, the theme of imagination linked closely to the theme of nature, such is the fundamental ambiguity that characterizes the poetics of romanticism. The tension between the two polarities never ceases to be problematic (66).

Coinciding with de Man's sense of the role of the image in Romanticism, Levertov continues the Romantic blending of imagery with nature or with natural objects, and creates, like the Romantics, similar tensions between imagination and natural objects, although the tension is lessened since Levertov does not link the imagination as much to nature or natural objects alone, and her poetry redefines "nature" to be more inclusive of non-pastoral, and even urban settings. Yet Levertov's poetry does not markedly show a line between the present moment and the transcendent moment, the imagination and reality. Similar to Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," where we cannot always clearly tell where imagination and memory begin and end, Levertov blurs moments of imagination with reality and depicts how memory can be one's reality in "Memories of John Keats." In this poem, she provides words in italics that are original words from Keats' letters, but the narrative of the poem makes it seem as if Keats himself is speaking to her in that moment.

Additionally, while Levertov differs in her understanding of how sound and poetic diction must work in her poem, she resembles Keats in her value for a lyrical style and for a keen use of the visual and the sensory. Thus she affirms in "Memories of John Keats" the importance of *watchfulness* and *sensation*:

Watchfulness and sensation as John Keats

said to me

for it was to me

he said it

(and to you)

Side by side we lay full-length

upon a spummy rock, envisioning

Alisa Craig

(100)

As Levertov describes *watchfulness* and *sensation* here, she lends a delicate sensuality to the words and quotes Keats from a letter he wrote to a friend (Oct. 1818) where he highlights *sensation* and *watchfulness* as key components of mature, genius poetry.²² Levertov's poem echoes Wordsworth's definition of the poet as "a man speaking to men" ("Preface" 603) when the speaker in her poem reiterates that it was to her that Keats said this. She declares herself a poet as she includes herself in the group of "man speaking to men." In Levertov's poem, we first see the focus on sensation when the speaker and Keats himself lie "side by side . . . full-length / upon a spummy rock" (100). Levertov evokes frothy images of the sea with "spummy rock" as she uses the soft sound of the Latin root, *spuma* – evoking the smoothness of foam or froth that forms as waves crash against the rocks. Soft and hard surfaces blend easily and effortlessly. And yet, this effortless blending, or the languid impression of two lying side by side is countered by the unrest of the remaining sea – a sea as restless as the creative process can be:

The sea tumult

bore away

a word

and a word

(100)

The double sense of "bore" as the sea "bore away / a word" recalls that words can be tolerated (as in when one "bears" the brunt of a joke), but words can also be abided – as when one "bears"

²² Levertov in her poem "Memories of John Keats" quotes from the following of Keats' letters (written to James Augustus Hessay Oct. 9, 1818): "The Genius of Poetry must work its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself — That which is creative must create itself — In Endymion, I leaped headlong into the sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice. I was never afraid of failure; for I would sooner fail than not be among the greatest. . ." (Scudder 328)

a responsibility. Implicitly, the speaker connects such tumult of the sea to diverging elements in the creative process – the element of a poet’s responsibility to words, and the poet’s tumultuous power to wear away the power of words. More clearly, using Keats’ ideas and quoting Keatsian phrasing in the very next lines (i.e. “Vale of Health” etc.), the speaker links the metaphorical tumult of the sea to the creative process as she remembers what Keats, who lay beside her, said:

And again *that which is creative*²³
must create itself he said
We skirted
the murmurous green hollow
Vale of Health²⁴
strolling the spiral road, the
Vale of Soulmaking²⁵ (100)

Levertov, like the Romantics before her, here displays a poetics that values the physicality of the senses, both in their tumult and in their murmurs. Thus, she observes contrasting forces in the creative process through the sensory images of sound: with every line, for instance, that possesses its distinct break and pauses, Levertov highlights sound as she poetically mimics the varied rhythms and patterns of the creative process. In fact, her ideas about line breaks and pauses can attest to her intentional lyricism found in “Memories of John Keats”; we see her summarize her lyrical intentions for poetry most precisely in *The Poet in the World*, “At their best sound and words are song, not speech. The written poem is then a record of that inner song” (24). Such a poem does not ultimately try to depict the natural or material world, but the inner world of the poet. Levertov connects to Keats through her use of lyricism as she recreates the

²³ from Oct. 9, 1818 letter written to James Augustus Hessay. (See footnote 21).

²⁴ place in Hampstead where Keats lived in the summer of 1816, “happy in the association of [Leigh] Hunt and kindred spirits, and trembling with the consciousness of his own poetic power” (Scudder 14)

²⁵ cf Keats’ letter to George and Georgiana Keats, April 28, 1819 “. . . I say ‘Soul-making – Soul as distinguished from an intelligence. There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions – but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each on is personally itself. . .’” (Scudder 369).

rhythms of murmurs and tumult of the creative process in “Memories of John Keats.”²⁶ “For there are poems” she states, “—good poems—which simply are not initially acceptable to the intellect. One does not auscultate with a telephone receiver, one does not catch fish with a hammer. We must learn the use of our faculties as we learn the use of tools” (*Light up the Cave* 49).

Levertov’s “Memories of John Keats” highlights not only the auditory senses, but also the creative process itself, and in doing so, the poem’s focus shifts to the imagination and by extension, themes of transcendence. In this poetry that shifts to the creative process, as well as in separate discussions on the imagination, Levertov’s affinity with Romantic poetics becomes highly apparent. Tangentially as well, her references to the transcendent, the life of the spirit, the need for “salvation” from the constraints of the temporal, mortal world, recall the very strivings of celebrated Romantic literary figures such as Byron’s Childe Harold,

My mind may lose its force, my blood its fire,
And my frame perish even in conquering pain;
But there is that within me which shall tire, . . .
Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire;
Something unearthly which they deem not of . . .

(*Childe Harold* 534. 4.137.1226-1230)

Lord Byron, who poured much of his own biographical experience into his cantos, lived through some of the very strivings that his fictional characters celebrated. Like past Romantic authors and their characters, in Levertov’s “Memories of John Keats” the speaker and Keats value the imaginative journey of the poet – the “Vale of Health” or “Vale of Soulmaking;” here it is the journey of two creative persons who “skirt” and “stroll” through “Health” and “Soulmaking,” as

²⁶ Levertov’s work, *Light Up the Cave* provides a more comprehensive discussion about Levertov’s use of lyricism and sound in her poetry. There she states, for instance, “Educated readers today. . . typically concentrate their attention on what they can quickly verify with the reason, including the poem’s sentiments, with which they can “identify”; or if they listen to the sounds as to music, it is as a separate activity. The degree to which sounds, the actual physical existence of the poem as waves in the air, can carry content, and *must* carry it in a well-written poem, is something they seem not to realize. This is self-deprivation. Not only are they missing much of what the poem could release to them, but they are quite cut off from some kinds of poems

The poetry I have in mind is rather that in which the sounds—the vowels and consonants, the tone patterns, the currents of rhythm . . . —are the chief carriers of content. It is this poetry which is most inaccessible to readers trained to bring, not the whole of themselves, but their wits, or alternatively their emotional opinions, to a reading” (49).

if Keats and the speaker of the poem are creators of souls, or, more likely, as if the spiral road itself through which Keats and the speaker of the poem stroll helps test and try their souls; and, in so doing, it helps *create* them. In a letter to his sister and brother-in-law dated April 28, 1819, Keats wrote,

. . . I will put you in the place where I began in this series of thoughts—I mean I began by seeing how man was formed by circumstances—and what are circumstances but touchstones of his heart? and what are touchstones but provings of his heart, but fortifiers or alterers of his nature? and what is his altered nature but his Soul?— and what was his soul before it came into the world and had these provings and alterations and perfectionings?—an intelligence without Identity—and how is this Identity to be made? Through the medium of the Heart? and how is the heart to become this medium but in a world of Circumstances?

Since Keats has explained his belief about how circumstances can test and try and ultimately create an identity, what he calls the soul, the appearance of Keats’ specific phrase, the “vale of Soulmaking” in Levertov’s poem suggests the journey a poet must take in gaining her poetic identity. In “Memories of John Keats,” the poet, in this case found in the figure of Keats himself, can stop for simple pleasures as he thinks about the creative process. He can leap “headlong into the sea” and experience the *watchfulness* and *sensation* of the moment.

Nevertheless, Keats reminds the poet-speaker, watchfulness and sensation are not enough. The poet needs to work, for his poetry requires “salvation” not in the abstract, but worked out “in a man”:

He would stop to pluck
a leaf, finger
a stone

watchfulness was his word
sensation

and watchfulness in itself

the Genius

*of Poetry must work out
its own salvation in a man*

*I leapt he said
headlong into the sea. . .*²⁷ (Levertov's italics, 100)

Echoing Wordsworth's call to radically change poetry using the "language of men," Levertov similarly values a poetics that appeals to men and women rather than gods or a select few – a poetics that can "work out / its own salvation in a man" (100). Unlike Wordsworth, however, Levertov implies that the poet needs more than the "language of men" for true poetic genius to occur. This is why, in "Memories of John Keats," the speaker recalls how Keats' pronouncements on the "Genius of Poetry" connect poetic genius to "salvation in a man." It is as if for poetic genius to occur, words must take on a life of their own; words must "work" through and with the poet. Thus, for Levertov, the *relationship* between the poet and the poem, or the "man" and the poem, whereby poetic genius can be "saved," may be just as important, or even more so, than the poet's focus on the language of the poem. Like Wordsworth, Levertov shows that such "salvation" cannot happen without the poet's sensory and imaginative journey (as Wordsworth shows in *The Prelude*), but for Levertov, this includes a relationship between the poet and his words – involving not just the way words work for readers and the poet, but how words reflect the poet's inner voice, even when the poet is yet unaware of it.

Fittingly, the dual speakers of narrator and Keats in "Memories of John Keats" stress the importance of the creative process even as they appeal to their immediate and sensory, physical surroundings. And, just like Keats' imaginative use of negative capability in "Ode to a Nightingale," ("Do I wake or sleep?" [Abrams 822]) so Levertov's poem ends on a final, enigmatic note incorporating Keats himself as the speaker: "*I leapt he said / headlong into the sea...*" (100). Here, Levertov reveals, in part, the spirit of Romanticism as noted by Paul de Man, in the sense that a tension exists between what Levertov portrays as nature or natural objects, and the imagination. Since nature is linked to the imagination, the last phrase with Keats quoting himself, "I leapt headlong into the sea" becomes more enigmatic. On the one hand,

²⁷ cf Oct 9, 1818 letter to James Augustus Hessay. See footnote 21 for excerpt.

Keats in real life first used the phrase when describing to a friend how he plunged into the work of his epic poem “Endymion”: “In Endymion,” he states, “I leaped headlong into the sea”²⁸ (Scudder 328); on the other hand, the phrase in Levertov’s poem also signals the poetic narrative or scene involving an actual physical leap into the sea. Levertov sets up this scene with images one would find on a beach, with the figure of Keats lying next to the speaker of the poem “Side by side. . . full-length / upon a spumy rock” – a rock covered by the frothy “spume” created by waves of the sea crashing against it; and later, the scene shows how he “stop[s] to pluck / a leaf, finger / a stone.”

Such imagery complicates, at times, the figurative significance of the poem, even as the words are from actual figurative language from Keats’ letters. In Keats’ original letter where he uses such a phrase, it is clear that he is referring to the process of writing “Endymion” and the reasons for facing critics with no fear of failure, but, as is the nature of figurative writing, Keats also uses language that refers to physical events or natural objects even as he is being figurative – as he refers to leaping headlong or mentions “the Soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks,” or “the green shore,” and the action of “pip[ing]” a silly pipe,” and having “tea and comfortable advice.” Although it is clear the passage is figurative, it is unclear how natural objects in this passage play into a reader’s interpretation of it:

The Genius of Poetry must work its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself — That which is creative must create itself — In Endymion, I leaped headlong into the sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice. I was never afraid of failure; for I would sooner fail than not be among the greatest. . .” (Oct. 9, 1818, Scudder 328).

To fully understand Keats’ statement as figurative, one must be aware first that “Endymion” is a work of art, and that the “sensation” and “watchfulness” that Keats mentions applies to his life, but also applies to the process of writing. Here, the sea is a metaphor for words. Levertov, like the Romantics, uses the phrase of leaping “headlong into the sea” to denote both the poetic process of plunging deeply into words – what, in other writings, she calls, using *cante hondo*, but

²⁸ cf letter written to James Augustus Hessay Oct. 9, 1818. See footnote 21 for excerpt.

she is also narrating a scene – one with physical imagery describing the moment at hand, with *sensation* and with *watchfulness*. In contrast to de Man’s idea that the Romantics “levitate” or live in a kind of lofty world of their own, Levertov shows John Keats, the main character of her poem, engaging with the physical natural world as he “[leaps] headlong into the sea”(100). Nevertheless, in “Memories of John Keats” Levertov also establishes the materiality of words – she treats them as objects and props in her poem as she quotes from Keats’ letters. Words are both part of what make the poetic imagery and part of the objects or materiality portrayed in the poem. Because we know that Keats never literally jumped “headlong into the sea,” (at the time that he used the expression), the metaphor supports de Man’s idea about the Romantics not quite being able to merge the natural with their poetic language. However, blending ideas about the imaginative process with real-life incidents from Keats’ life and letters in a poetic recreation of his statements, Levertov seems to find a bridge between natural objects and the imagination, at different times both lessening and increasing the very tension de Man has noted in the Romantics.

De Man has stressed the importance of considering authorial intention in order to fully explore Romantic consciousness. Perhaps Levertov’s intention here is to show that the high world of the imagination is as real as the natural world we live in. In some ways, Levertov’s poetry effortlessly unites physical images with the imagination and erodes the tension between them. Her poem “Memories of John Keats” identifies her as a Romantic who accepts that tradition, yet the tension de Man describes surfaces nevertheless when one thinks about the blurring between past and present or between the images of Keats and the memories of Keats’ words that Levertov presents both figuratively and as the physical material reality of the poem’s narrative. By treating Keats’ words as linguistic materiality and by imagining Keats actually examining such concrete things (in the narrative scenery), Levertov sets the stage for having the quotation about leaping headlong into the sea take on a more ambiguous, potentially literal quality in addition to the clearly metaphorical meaning that the image had in Keats’s letter. In essence, the sea is a metaphor for words in this poem (as in Keats’ original letter), but it is also a real part of the narrative scenery in the poem. When Levertov portrays Keats in her poem, he comes across as someone who inhabits several separate states, that of the imagination, memory, and physical reality as depicted in a poetic narrative – one state contains Keats’ words from the

nineteenth century, another contains an entire ocean, a beach, a leaf, or a stone. Keats, in Levertov's poem, says he plunges into the sea – representing the joining of a poetic imaginative memory of Keats, a mentor to Levertov, with the physical world of tangible objects and real-time sensations. "Memories of John Keats," thus shows the part of this poet which wholly engaged with the here and now – the physical grounding of the present (in Levertov's portrayed scene). At the same time, his portrayal seems ethereal or unearthly in that physical world portrayed in the poem, as if he is from a different loftier world, a world of imagination where one can leap headlong, or "levitate," as de Man fittingly might observe.²⁹

Consequently, in one way, Levertov's affinity with Romantic poetics, most apparent in her discussions on the imagination, surfaces in "Memories of John Keats" as it unites the Romantic value for the physicality of the senses with a value for the watchfulness and work needed in the creative process. Levertov ascribes this watchfulness to the work of the imagination, and, as it did for Keats and other Romantics, discussion of the imagination fuels Levertov's poetics. Levertov elevates the imagination as a faculty that can transport one to divine experiences. She herself states in an interview about her 1984 essay, "A Poet's View":

Because it is a matter of which I am conscious, it is possible, however imprecisely, to call it an intellectual position; but it is one which emphasizes the incapacity of reason alone (much though I delight in elegant logic) to comprehend experience, and considers Imagination the chief of human faculties. It must therefore be by the exercise of that faculty that one moves toward faith, and possibly by its failure that one rejects it as delusion. Poems present their testimony as circumstantial evidences, not as closing argument. Where Wallace Stevens says, "God and the imagination are one," I would say that the imagination, which synergizes intellect, emotion and instinct, is the perceptive organ through which it is possible, though not inevitable, to experience God (qtd. in Norris 1).

The imagination is given ample attention again in "Everything that Acts is Actual" where

²⁹ This "levitating" or lofty quality of Levertov's poetry sometimes clashed with poets like William Carlos Williams, as when she writes to him, "I believe fervently that the poet's first obligation is to his own voice – to find it and use it. And one's 'voice' does not speak only in the often slipshod imprecise vocabulary with which one buys the groceries but with all the resources of one's life, whatever they may be, no matter whether they are 'American' or of other cultures, so long as they are truly one's own & not faked." (MacGowan 100).

Levertov quotes from one of Keats's most famous letters on the imagination (“What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth,” Nov.22, 1817, Abrams 860), and where she examines throughout the poem, the interplay of imagination and reality, with an act of the imagination (its “grasp”) being the reality that is perceived in this case. The last stanza in her poem pays particular attention to this blend of imagination and natural reality:

We are faithful
only to the imagination. *What the
imagination
seizes
as beauty must be truth.* What holds you
to what you see of me is
that grasp alone. (6)

In “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Keats imagines the context behind the figures sculpted on an urn, and in that imagined context, the speaker of the poem finds that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” Likewise for Levertov, the imagination must be aided by the poet’s use of her observational powers that can establish a connection to something deeper – as in “Memories of John Keats,” where Levertov links the poet’s spirit, her “salvation” to the writing process and implies that “salvation” can be attained through the journey itself, or through what, in other writings, she calls “the long swim through waters of unknown depth” (qtd. in Norris 1). One writer recalls how Levertov herself has felt she attains a kind of poetic and spiritual awakening as she composes a lyrical poetic piece:

In the 1980s she began composing a lengthy poem, a “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus” (doubting Thomas), as an aesthetic exercise, reasoning that if so many musical composers had mined the structure of the mass for their art, she could do so in a poem. Several months into the process, “when I had arrived at the Agnus Dei, I discovered myself to be in a different relationship to the material and to the liturgical form. . . . The experience of writing the poem – the long swim through waters of unknown depth – had been also a conversion process” (qtd. in Norris 1).

Referring the “long swim” Levertov alludes to Keats’ idea promoting the sea as a metaphor for

words. In so doing, she evokes again the tension between figurative imagery and words or images that are part of the physical objects or materiality of the poem.

Lyricism and Nature

To understand this spiritual dimension in Levertov that links her to the Romantics, it is necessary to further discuss how her use of lyricism intertwines with her spiritual poetic components. I will be using the term lyricism in its reference to what is musical, in the sense that John Minahan has used in his book, *Word like a Bell: John Keats, Music, and the Romantic Poet*:

In some respects, the sound of Romantic poetry is the dress of its thought; in others, it is not. Romantic prosody can reinforce a particular point. But what makes it musical is the degree and purpose of its meaning. We can call this dimension of poetry "melos": "the quality of sound and rhythm in a poem created by . . . the conscious or intuitive arrangement of various consonant and vowel groupings . . . and degrees of stressed syllables." In Romantic poetry, melos achieves greater priority. Sound becomes a thoroughgoing intensification of the overall poetic experience. This it does by striving to forge a link between language and time in ways similar to what happens in music (92).

The *melos* to which Minahan refers, is also a term Levertov writes about in her own work, and a term that is featured most prominently in *Light up the Cave*, where Levertov describes the music or "voice" in a poem to be intrinsically linked to content and meaning as much as to sound and diction. Levertov sought to find melos in all of her poems, but for now, my focus will be on how she describes the use of sound (or melos) in her prose, and how this ties her to the Romantics.

Throughout her many statements regarding lyricism in *The Poet in the World*, we find words as such: "At their best sound and words are song, not speech. The written poem is then a record of that inner song" (24). "Memories of John Keats" displays these ideas about speech as one notes Levertov's use of italics and line spacing to create all the right pauses. Her poem is almost like a conversation between a poet and a mentor (Keats) and reads more like song than structured phrases. The poem allows readers to use their imagination aided by the breaks,

pauses, and musicality of its words. Her words are sensual, light sounding, or imitative of the sounds of nature such as when, in recreating the tumult of the sea, the speaker states:

The sea tumult
bore away
a word
and a word (100)

Written without significant breaks or spaces, Levertov here could not have imitated the back and forth motion of sea waves. Her relation to Keats becomes lyrically connected as she recreates the rhythms of murmurs and tumult in the sea. Like Keats, she displays a value for lyricism with the use of soft sounds, recalling, at times, the soft rush of ocean waves. “All words,” she states, “are to some extent onomatopoeic” (*Light up the Cave* 60). But Levertov connects these sounds to the meaning of the poem, and in so doing, she attains the lyricism, or *melos* that we find notable in Romantics like Keats or Wordsworth.

Her poetry retains musical cohesiveness despite varied pauses and line breaks. This emphasis on cohesiveness is apparent in Levertov’s *The Poet in the World*:

I long for poems of an inner harmony in utter contrast to the chaos in which they exist. In so far as poetry has a social function it is to awaken sleepers by other means than shock (3).

In this sentiment, Levertov both parallels and differs from Wordsworth’s longing to rid poetry of what he believed to be stifling and conventional poetic diction. His desire for the “language of men” in his poetry includes making a case for the value of prose in relationship to poetic diction.

. . . not only the language of a large portion of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to metre, in no respect differ from that of good prose, but likewise... some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose, when prose is well written (“Preface” 602).

As we see in the “Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*,” Wordsworth believed in fostering delight and pleasure in the reader through meter or diction, but most essential was the feeling of the poem; Wordsworth refused to let diction compromise the sense of the poem and did not heed strict

neoclassic models emphasizing balance and symmetry. Levertov believes, like Wordsworth, that the highest form of poetry *incarnates* thoughts and is closer to song. She laments that contemporary poetry is “far from song” and thus not always of this highest form:

Wordsworth announced (who was it reported this? Hazlitt? De Quincey? I first wrote it down so long ago, twenty-five years ago. . .) that: “Language is not the *dress* but the *incarnation* of thoughts.” This is true of the highest poetry (as of the best prose, the best speech)—that is, the most impassioned, charged, and precise; but there is much poetry, much highly praised poetry of today, that is discursive, conversational, explanatory, far from song (16).

Nevertheless, regarding lyricism or poetic musicality, Levertov shares more in common with Keats, as in, for instance, the following typical comment: “What I call listening to experience (a function of Negative Capability) can lead to discovery of the music inherent in the material. Few poems we feel are musical become so, grew so, out of direct intention of the poet toward musicality” (*The Poet in the World* 16).

As with Levertov, Keats’ lyricism displays itself in both his poetry and discussions about poetry. Levertov incorporates sound especially in her religious poems, and extends Keats’ idea of negative capability to include a dependence on the poet’s “voice” and the literal sound of the poem. Levertov’s regard for the “sound” of the poem leads her to write in the tradition of Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* while incorporating Keats’ idea of negative capability, a technique which Levertov believes prompts readers to find the “voice” of the poem. For this reason, she urges readers,

. . . Put aside your resistance, your alertness, go off alone somewhere and read the poem aloud to yourself. . . Let the sounds of the poem surround you. . .

Let that lead you into the winding dance of such patterns as the poem continues. Feel the almost hypnotic recurrence of certain words, sounds that knit the undulating lines into a fabric. Musically the poem coheres. Hearing the poem as a sound-structure is the way into its world (*Light up the Cave* 51).

Readers may be able to hear the poem’s “voice” with this kind of active reading, but in order for the poet to be truly successful in the music of poetry, Levertov believes the poet must come to a place where “thought and feeling” become “Word, become Flesh” (*The Poet in the World* 17).

Invoking the Christian image where word becomes flesh in the book of John (“In the beginning was the word. . .” Jn 1:1) or alluding to the context of metaphorical prophecies and covenants existing throughout Judeo and Christian scripture (“The Word of the Lord”), Levertov creates a subtext whereby the poet must be patient and listen for the gift of words to “arrive,” as if the poet herself must derive words from divine inspiration. She describes the poet not only as someone who must listen, but also as someone who “transmits” and “transposes.” Like the Romantics, Levertov believes even contemporary poets can engage in the highest form of poetry when they understand Wordsworth’s ideas about the incarnation of thought, or Keats’ use of lyricism.

Resembling the Romantics, Levertov values insight or an epiphany, but she is more direct in defining these things; she links such epiphanies to *Cante Hondo* – or Deep Song – that arises when thought and feeling have crystallized and need has summoned such song.

The poet feels, thinks, and then searches for words in which to *clothe* his thoughts. That is language used as a dress. Such poems are not deeply musical, though they may sometimes be superficially so. The *music* of poetry comes into being when thought and feeling remain unexpressed until they become Word, become Flesh (i.e., there is no *prior paraphrase*). The awareness of them remains vague – perhaps oppressive – perhaps very oppressive – yet the poet does not give way to “irritable searches” but waits in passionate passivity (Negative Capability) until thought and feeling *crystallize* (remember to reread Stendhal on this word) in words that haven’t been hunted down but which *arrive*, magically summoned by the need for them. *Cante Hondo*. It arises from depths, takes us with it into them (17).

“Cante Hondo” depicts Levertov’s linguistic blending of two cultures that celebrate passion, deep song, and revelation – the culture of Flamenco dance and that of Mexico, the country she lived in at the time of her writings about cante hondo. In Spanish, the words for “deep song” are *canto hondo* (not *cante*), but in Flamenco dance, the same term derived from Andalusian Spanish, is *cante jondo*. Perhaps inadvertently, Levertov has joined the Flamenco term with the Spanish one, providing noteworthy connotations. For a Flamenco dancer,

The essence of flamenco is *cante*, or **song**. Flamenco songs fall into three categories: *cante jondo* (“profound song,” or “deep song”), *cante intermedio*

(“intermediate song,” also called *cante flamenco*), and *cante chico* (“light song”). The *cante jondo*, whose structure usually is based on a complex 12-beat rhythm, is thought to be the oldest form. It is characterized by profound emotion and deals with themes of death, anguish, despair, or religious doubt.

(Encyclopedia Britannica online)

While *cante intermedio* and *cante chico* are simpler in rhythm and work with lighter topics or dance styles (such as fandango), *cante jondo* replicates what Levertov calls the poet to do in her art – to give that poem a voice, even if the voice requires the poet to dwell in places of deep anguish while insight crystallizes and becomes, finally, song. This may require a more complicated rhythm, such as *cante jondo* requires, but it is the way to reach deep into the poet’s use of language, and into a revelatory spirit; true *Cante Hondo*.

For Levertov, the use of Cante Hondo in relationship to poetic lyricism complements Wordsworth’s “Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*” in that, in Levertov’s idea of Cante Hondo, content is more important than diction, and meaning helps determine syntax. However, Levertov diverges in her writing from the Romantics when she focuses on physical reality alone – on objects rather than abstract thoughts; reflecting at times, Williams’ influence with his emphasis on physical and concrete imagery (“no ideas but in things”). Levertov is sometimes more concerned with the physical “being” of things, while Wordsworth would be concerned with the “spirit” of things and the poet’s ability to embody, or incarnate – become flesh – such spirit. Thus, for Wordsworth, “dancing with the daffodils” is not as important as the *recollection* of “dancing with the daffodils” – and the transport in thought or transcendence of spirit created by that recollection.

Levertov, in contrast, with her focus on “being,” is more about the here and now that the poet can potentially embody and thus release in song. She quotes Gerard Manley Hopkins’ idea of *inscape*:

The *being* of things has inscape, has melody, which the poet picks up as one voice picks up, and sings, a song from another, and transmits, transposes it, into tones others can hear. And *in his doing so* lies the inscape and the melody of the poet’s *own being*” (qtd in *The Poet in the World* 17).

As a transmitter and transposer, “being,” observing, and “listening” become a poet’s highest

tasks. Likewise, for Levertov, the poet needs to be open to new sounds, and do away with preconceptions about what a poem should sound like.

Levertov's understanding of lyricism differs in another way from the Romantics. While spacing or syntax is an important component to the lyricism of the piece – the here and now related to the actual physical reading of the poem is quite important. Regarding spacing in a poem Levertov's poetry shows how the poet's personal voice choices may reflect his "inner voice" rather than his speaking voice; but not every poet can "express his inner voice in actual speech" (23). Reading poetry is the closest we have to it.

But I don't think they really are breath-spaced. There are a lot of poems where you actually have to draw a big breath to read the phrase as it's written. But so what? Why shouldn't one, if one is capable of drawing a deep breath? It's too easy to take this breath idea to mean literally that a poet's poems *ought* by some moral law to sound very much like what he sounds like when he's talking. But I think this is unfair and untrue, because in fact they may reflect his *inner* voice, and he may just not be a person able to express his inner voice in actual speech (23).

For Keats and Wordsworth, meter of course, and diction, play a larger role, even though Wordsworth welcomes prose poetry. Yet while syntax is important to creating sound for Levertov, the high concern with unconventional syntax usage that emerged with Gertrude Stein and the avant garde period, is not present in the Romantics, with the exception of someone like Byron in his purposeful use of dashes or ellipses for instance.

Related to Levertov's use of sound in her poetry, a comparison between Levertov's poem "Breathing" and Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and "Nutting" can illustrate how Levertov refashions Romantic (especially Wordsworthian) tradition that shows the importance of listening to nature, or the importance of the solitude that can lead to such listening. The idea of being quiet and observant and receptive to nature is fundamental to Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey,"³⁰

³⁰ "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey"

where the speaker³¹ finds “tranquil restoration” as he returns, for instance, to a wandering river, “O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer through the woods. / How often has my spirit turned to thee!” (133). Repeatedly, the speaker highlights his welcome solitude in nature and the quiet sounds accompanying nature in this solitude. He describes how the “steep and lofty cliffs, / . . . on a wild secluded scene impress / Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect / The landscape with the quiet of the sky” (131). He treasures his solitude and the quiet found in such sylvan landscapes; in “lonely rooms” through urban noise he realizes he owes to such landscapes since they have helped him keep tranquil:

But oft, in lonely rooms, and mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration . . . (Gill 132)

The speaker believes it’s not until “with an eye made quiet by the power / of harmony, and the deep power of joy,” that we “see into the life of things” (133). Quiet is important here, and at other times as well, when he remembers “The still, sad music of humanity,” (134) or when he tells his sister how nature can so impress “The mind that is within us . . . / “with quietness and beauty” (135).

In yet another poem, “Nutting,” Wordsworth again highlights the importance of listening when he shows in the poem how he experiences the sounds of thorns or brambles that he passes by with his “nutting crook in hand” or later, as he enters a virgin scene where he hears only murmurs from the “fairy water-breaks” of a stream (Gill 153). Such solitude and silence allow him to fully exult in the beauty of nature:

A virgin scene!—A little while I stood,
Breathing with such suppression of the heart
As joy delights in; and with wise restraint

³¹ or, for Wordsworth, since the poem is autobiographical. “No poem of mine was composed under circumstances more pleasant for me to remember than this. I began it upon leaving Tintern, after crossing the Wye, and concluded it just as I was entering Bristol in the evening, after a ramble of 4 or 5 days, with my sister. Not a line of it was altered, and not any part written down till I reached Bristol.” (qtd. in Gill 692).

Voluptuous, fearless of a rival, eyed
The banquet . . . (153)

The speaker in “Nutting” fears that a “rival” might take away from his visual banquet and from the harmonious experience of hearing only the sounds of nature. The poem ends with a tinge of sadness, when the poet discovers he himself has sullied the virgin scene with the simple act of rising from the ground (as he prompts a crash of “branch and bough” creating “merciless ravage”).

I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees and the intruding sky.—

. . . dearest Maiden! move along these shades
In gentleness of heart; with a gentle hand
Touch—for there is a Spirit in the woods. (154)

Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” and “Nutting” (among other nature poetry) thus resemble Levertov in such poems as “The Breathing,” where Levertov’s speaker highlights the importance of listening and observing in a sylvan setting. The quiet, tranquil quality of nature in “The Breathing” echoes those same qualities at the end of Wordsworth’s “Nutting” where the speaker recognizes a “spirit in the woods” and the importance of treating nature gently – not disturbing the silence or solitude one can find in nature. However, where Levertov’s poem differs, is in how she does not connect nature necessarily to the sublime, to “a spirit in the woods” (Nutting”) or to the “purer mind” that forms when, according to the speaker in “Tintern Abbey,” he “become[s] a living soul” (132) as he experiences “beauteous forms” of nature:

To them [‘beauteous forms’ of nature] I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame

And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul

Levertov's poem, in contrast, shows that nature exists as it is, organically real yet beautiful even in its breathing that is "too quiet to hear." There is no sublime transcendence in the way

Wordsworth's speaker experiences:

An absolute
patience.
Trees stand
up to their knees in
fog. The fog
slowly flows
uphill.

White
cobwebs, the grass
leaning where deer
have looked for apples.
The woods
from brook to where
the top of the hill looks
over the fog, send up
not one bird.
So absolute, it is
no other than
happiness itself, a breathing

too quiet to hear.

(8)

In this poem, Levertov pays attention to “an absolute patience” of nature and to its living qualities. She also exhibits, in other nature poetry, a preference for the Romantic belief that nature is a guide from whom one must learn. In “The Victors,” Levertov presents nature as a teacher about life – where the bushes that had been cut survive, victorious, blooming with berries, likely providing sustenance for the birds. Levertov’s poem resonates with Wordsworth’s ideas in “Tintern Abbey” and “Nutting” where nature is also a guide and teacher – one that provides restoration and quiet solitude. Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” presents nature as a place from which one can learn how to restore one’s self even if living through the “din of towns and cities” (132). And, Wordsworth’s “Nutting” shows nature as teacher and guide when the speaker learns we must treat nature gently or risk losing both its physical beauty and the beauty of what it offers.

Levertov also stresses the spirit of exploration when portraying nature. Her poem “Stepping Westward” takes its title from Wordsworth’s poem of the same title. The first line of Wordsworth’s poem, “What, are you stepping westward?” leads the main figure to imagine a kind of “heavenly destiny” in stepping westward “without place or bound” (Gill 314) towards an area he does not know. He is roaming far from home, and stepping westward filled him with a human sweetness. We see this in the poem when the speaker interprets a woman asking him if he is stepping westward as having a kind of “human sweetness” that guided him to explore her land. But the woman’s voice is not relevant – what is relevant is how the speaker interprets the woman’s voice and beautifully connects her pleasant sweetness to his love for travel and exploration – for “stepping westward.” Levertov’s “Stepping Westward” includes the figure of a

woman speaking and the woman's relation to nature that shows a woman judged both inconstant and steadfast – a woman who steps westward in her life:

If woman is inconstant

good, I am faithful to

ebb and flow, I fall

in season and now

is a time of ripening.

If her part

is to be true,

a north star,

good, I hold steady

in the black sky

and vanish by day,

yet burn there

in blue or above

quilts of cloud. [. . .]

(15)

Levertov's poem, "Stepping Westward" also celebrates the spirit of exploration, but her portrayal

of nature is in relationship to a woman's exploration of self, rather than to a man exploring nature. For the female speaker of the poem, her constancy or steadfastness are as the seasons in nature, the "ebb and flow," the time of ripening or the time of holding "steady in the black sky" while burning "in blue or above quilts of cloud."

Nature Revisited

Notably, despite Levertov's ideas about the importance of listening, or about the *sound* of a poem, or despite her varied thematic use of nature, she never fails to return to the Romantic issue de Man has examined, such as the tension between what is natural and what is not, what is nature and what distracts from it, or between what is nature and the imagination. Wordsworth in "The World Is Too Much With Us," (Abrams 220) establishes the distractions of the "world" as what is not natural or as something that deters us from being in tune with the essence of that world. Wordsworth would have us stay away from the world as he states that "the world is too much with us" and that "we are out of tune." It is as if nature contains a melody unknown to those distracted by worldly pursuits and desires. His poem illustrates such distractions:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The Winds that will be howling at all hours
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;

It moves us not . . .

(Abrams 220)

Levertov, in contrast, begins her poem "Taste and See" by saying that "The world is / not with us enough" (53). The title, "Taste and See," alludes to the bible, but Levertov's first line changes the allusion by reversing meaning in Wordsworth's phrase "The world is too much with us." What Levertov means by "the world" is not what Wordsworth meant, since he indeed meant the

world of “getting and spending,” whereas Levertov means the natural physical and tangible world that can be enjoyed and that can also include what one finds in nature:

The world is
not with us enough.

O taste and see

the subway poster said,
meaning **The Lord**, meaning
if anything all that lives
to the imagination's tongue

grief, mercy, language,
tangerine, weather, to
breathe them, bite,
savor, chew, swallow, transform

into our flesh our
deaths, crossing the street, plum, quince,
living in the orchard and being

hungry, and plucking
the fruit.

(Levertov's bold, 53)

For the speaker in this poem, the natural world includes what Wordsworth in his own poem would deem distractions of the world – distractions by which “we are out of tune” (Abrams 220). Wordsworth shows how nature is not valued, how we see little in it. We’ve sold ourselves, in Wordsworth’s time, for the railroad, for the steamboat, for man-made machines. We have sold ourselves to the needs of materialism. We’re wasting our natural reserves and laying waste our resources – laying waste nature without much attention to the future. The speaker in Wordsworth’s poem believes we are unmoved, out of tune, even in the face of the “Sea that bares her bosom to the moon” or the winds “howling at all hours” that are yet “up-gathered now

like sleeping flowers” (Abrams 220).

Levertov’s narrator, in contrast to Wordsworth’s narrator, contends the natural physical world can contain elements found in Wordsworth’s sublime nature: “The world is not with us enough” (“*O Taste and See*” 53). Levertov’s words that tell us to “taste and see” this world, stand against a creation story – against the image of the God in Genesis who restricted a man and a woman from “tasting,” from plucking a fruit (Gen 2:16-17). And yet this is not a poem that coheres, necessarily, with the image of the Psalmist God who called for his creation to “taste and see” his goodness (Ps 34:8). What the speaker urges one to taste is different. Levertov subverts the declarations of both the Psalmist and Genesis God by suggesting an appreciation for the fulfillment of physical or material desires, while Wordsworth’s “The World Is Too Much With Us” laments those same desires that could lead us to “lay waste our powers” or to be “out of tune” (Abrams 220).

On a biographical note, Levertov has stated that she wrote “Taste and See” during an agnostic period of her life; but when not seen necessarily from a biographical angle, the subtext of these lines in relationship to Levertov’s ideas on the imagination provide further examples of how Levertov both connects and clashes with Romantic poetics. For the speaker in “Taste and See,” living in an orchard, figuratively hungering for what lies in “the imagination’s tongue,” she must pluck the fruit, she must follow those desires she associates with the imagination. Levertov implies that the imagination includes hunger, and the satisfaction of that hunger.

In this light, Levertov has carried into her modernist experience that tension that Paul de Man ascribes to the Romantics: a tension between imagination and nature. The phrase alone “all that lives / to the imagination's tongue” contains within it an opposition: that of physical living, a literal tongue versus what is abstract and non-living physically: the imagination. In the yoking of concrete organic metaphor, tongue, with the abstract imagination, Levertov seems both to exemplify and to attempt to resolve what de Man sees as the tension between the imagination and nature in Romanticism. This is one of the ways in which her work reveals a reworking of Romanticism into her own modernist mode. She has re-imagined Romanticism, re-envisioned it, drawn from it and fused with it, her *Cante Hondo*.

CHAPTER 3

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN OF THE JURY! AUDIENCES IN *LOLITA* AND ROUSSEAU'S CONFESSIONS

Thus far in this comparative study of Romantic literature and the work of poets William Carlos Williams and Denise Levertov, Romantic poetics and themes of imagination, nature, and lyricism, surface in the work of these modernists despite their desire, at times, to veer away from past Romantic practices. This is one reason that propelled their study. However, another Romantic theme and element of Romantic poetics, that of a focus on the self or core of identity – as we see for instance in Wordsworth's *Prelude* or Byron's *Don Juan* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* – finds ample illustration in the practice of autobiography, both fictional and not, through the work of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau is quite unlike the other Romantics of his time and of this study – especially since he is a novelist and essayist, not a poet – but his importance to Romanticism in his introspective focus on identity and sentiment through autobiography makes him a prime candidate for a discussion of Romantic legacies found in the work of another modern novelist, Vladimir Nabokov.

In *Lolita*, Nabokov controls a multi-faceted relationship between fictional narrator Humbert and his audience with the delicacy and art of a *torero*. My analogy stems from Michel Leiris' analogy where he compares the technical mastery and art of the *torero* to that of the autobiographer. I extend his analogy to include the paradox of evasive autobiography: Leiris' image implies that the autobiographer must have artful technical skill to save his life, figuratively, or at least, to control the perception of his life (academic, professional, even sometimes physical). In such an analogy, the autobiographer emerges most successfully when he dodges a hit by his own figurative bull – a bull that takes the form of denials, lies,

rationalizations, self-justifications – and a bull that also appears as something far more real, far more dangerous and made of flesh; the bull is you – the reader. Thus, the classical understanding of autobiography is that the writer of it seeks to be recognized, but Leiris’ analogy depicts the autobiographer as one who is more interested in concealing. The autobiographer must dodge your judgment, your condemnation, your threat to his life of letters and to the perception and future representation of that life. To be successful, he must evade you. At the very point when he is most revealing, he must also dodge you, conceal from you, and never be hit by your misperceptions or your judgment against him. Or, he must evade your realization that at times, his words may not entirely be the most representative of the truth of his life. He must build his relationship with the bull – with you, the reader, and the reader must want to come to him. He must be like the *torero* when first engaging the bull – guiding him, tempting him to come closer, waving his magnificent cape, beckoning as he glides the cloak over the bull – only to retreat when such closeness risks his life – until he will beckon again, ready one more time for the dance of *torero* and bull.

Of course, the metaphor of torero and bull has its limitations when used in describing the relationship between author or protagonist with readers. A protagonist’s antagonism towards his audience, for instance, is not necessarily that of the author’s. A bullfighter always taunts the bull in order to continue the performance, but whether or not the author or protagonist taunts his readers is not always as easy to discern.

In *Lolita*, such a multi-faceted relationship between reader, author, and the persona of the autobiography, one that includes qualities that question the very genre of confessional autobiography, descends from that of Rousseau’s relationship to readers of *The Confessions*. In fact, the origins of such authorial or “autobiographical” narrator-manuevered relationships to readers can even be said to share common threads with the libertine literature that preceded Rousseau’s and Nabokov’s texts. Libertine literature’s influential effects on Romanticism surface in Byron, for instance, who growing up contemporaneously with the libertine tradition, would have been aware of pre-French Revolution notions that regarded sex as free, or that attributed sometimes, at least superficially in the midst of tawdry details, more egalitarian sexual rights to men and women than the status quo. Censorship laws in much of eighteenth century

Europe would have banned libertine literature, but such was the demand for it that, disguised with the code name “philosophical works,” it was published and quickly sold (Darnton *xix*, 3-21). According to Robert Darnton, author of *The Forbidden Best-sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*,

To French readers in the eighteenth century, illegal literature was virtually the same as modern literature. The official in charge of suppressing it, C.G. de Lamoignon de Malesherbes, found the task impossible. Indeed he refused to do it: ‘A man who read only books that originally appeared with the formal approval of the government,’ he wrote, ‘would be behind his contemporaries by nearly a century’ (xix).

Rousseau grew up with this tradition of pseudo-censorship (that included selective scapegoat book burnings) and would have been familiar with libertine ideas claiming various forms of sexual freedom despite his claim in *The Confessions* that he hardly knew, until his thirties, of “inconvenient” books that ladies could only read “with one hand” (from the French, pg. 48 in the English version). What Rousseau and other Romantics added to this tradition, as critics assert, was the idea of Romantic love³² and the legitimization of displaying feeling over reason in trying to “convey a man’s apprehension of truth” (Cohen 10). Yet the effect of libertine literature could certainly be felt, for instance, when Rousseau affirms Mme. de Warens’ sexual philosophy. What connects Rousseau to her philosophy and to libertine philosophy is that he believes love and sex are inextricably linked. The emotional range with which Romanticism shows the link between love and sex can be seen in just how seriously Rousseau treats this subject versus how playfully Byron treats it. Byron, as well, affirms that love depends on sex and sex depends on love, at the same time that he simultaneously undercuts and strengthens this notion when he playfully jokes about it. In this way, the effect of libertine literature surfaces in *Don Juan* when Byron, at the same time that he celebrates romantic love and elicits our sympathy for women in

³² Rousseau on love: a) “If the fire in my blood demands women, the emotion in my heart cries more loudly for love” (44); b) “I found in her a metaphysical and thoughtful mind, sometimes a little prone to sophistry. Her conversation, which was far from being that of a young woman who has just left the convent, was most attractive to me; and yet she was still under twenty. Her skin was dazzlingly fair; her figure would have been tall and fine if she had held herself better; her hair, which was ash blonde and of uncommon beauty, reminded me of Mamma’s in her prime, and sent a tremor to my heart. But the strict principles which I had just adopted and which I was resolved to adhere to at all costs, secured me from her and her charms. . . . Five or six years later I should neither have been so wise nor so foolish; but it was decreed that I should only be in love once in my life, and that another than she should receive the first and last sighs of my heart” (335-336).

bondage (thereby decrying sexual bondage), he also shows a sultan who treats sex and love as a casual commodity in a harem where women also took their turns with young Juan. “Love” is possible there too, Byron implies, even while women go about their usual duties in sexual bondage. Byron thus underscores a libertine sex message: Whether emotion is present or not, even in bondage, sex is about bodies; sex is a chemical transaction; sex is not sacred.

Such traditions distinguishing between sexual and Romantic love (that is treated as a commodity) highlight sexual issues in Nabokov’s text that sometimes correspond to the libertine tradition or to those of the Romantics, especially to Rousseau’s open characterization of sexual themes; however, Nabokov ascribes a difference to his modern novel, because at its core, the novel’s driving force is not sex, after all – not the transactions between bodies, but the “local palliative of articulate art” – one that does all that libertine literature could not, as it compels attention to the ethics of love and passion and Humbert’s longing for the one he calls “my sin, my soul” (9). In other words, without Nabokov’s artistry, the novel would simply fall into the category of almost-pornography. Nabokov dispels his connections to pornography on the very first page, with assonance and alliteration – a kind of song for Lolita (“Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. . .”). Because this novel is not porn, the crime of its protagonist lends itself to discussion and serious reflection. As Humbert veils his crime in the art of his autobiography, Nabokov problematizes our ethical condemnation of Humbert and the rules by which we discuss these ethics. So begins Nabokov’s indirect revision of the autobiographical genre’s compositional practices – such as the practice of art in both veiling and unmasking the protagonist’s states of denial or defensiveness. So begins for Nabokov, the re-imagining of Romanticism – through a re-imagining of autobiography, sex, and the dance between author, reader, and protagonist.

In addition to Nabokov’s links to libertine notions about sex, a look back at the later period of Romanticism in France can also help us understand how Nabokov follows in confessional writing practices particular to Romanticism. While Rousseau’s Romantic contemporaries in England treated what were at times unorthodox representations of subjects in areas ranging from child abuse (chimney sweepers) to race, sex, politics, or religion (i.e. Blake’s “The Little Black Boy,” Byron’s *Don Juan*, Shelley’s “Men of England,” Blake’s “The Tyger”), my focus will be on autobiography of the Romantic period with Rousseau, since Nabokov

revises and re-imagines the genre through the art of his fictional protagonist Humbert, as Humbert relates, autobiographically, the story of Lolita.

Like Nabokov, Rousseau develops multi-faceted interactions between the narrator and his audience in *The Confessions*. Such relationship-building interactions occur as Rousseau uses gender to his advantage when addressing his readers, particularly female readers. The narrator's revelations to his female audience attempt to teach us how we are to evaluate such a character's values and actions. The perceived accuracy of Rousseau's self-revelation depends on such nuanced handling of this complex reader-narrator-author relationship. The protagonist we come to know in *The Confessions* may not be the Rousseau that everyone knew.

Exploring such reader-narrator-author relationships shows us, ultimately, that what both Rousseau and Nabokov do with ideas about sex defamiliarizes autobiography and libertine rhetorical and compositional practices, as these authors add the idea of romantic love, for instance, or as they test readers time and again, seeking their approval or understanding while they manipulate reader sympathies. In the area of autobiography for instance, at the same time that Rousseau emphatically and constantly reminds us, "My duty is to tell the truth; my readers to be just" (335), his confessions contain an unacknowledged use of art that affect the depiction and perception of the "truth" of his autobiography. On the other hand, writers in the 20th century display more awareness of the degree to which compositional tactics can affect a text; they do not presume they will speak "truth" without first qualifying such statements and discussing the process they believe got them to it. Thus, by 1939 in France, Michel Leiris completely acknowledges and affirms that aesthetic technique and compositional ploys can affect factual representation in the writing of his autobiography, *Manhood: A Journey from Childhood into the Fierce Order of Virility*, as he compares the art of the autobiographer to the art of the *torero* dangerously handling the run of the bull in his *toreo* – his *corrida de toros*:

. . . the order of the *corrida* (a rigid framework imposed on an action in which, theatrically, chance must appear to be dominated) is a technique of combat and at the same time a ritual. It was therefore necessary that this method I had imposed on myself – dictated by the desire to see myself as clearly as possible – function simultaneously and effectively as a rule of composition (Leiris 162-163).

In the *torero's corrida* and in the autobiographer's aesthetic and metaphorical run with his own "bull," the risks can be life threatening, either to one's physical life or one's academic and personal reputation. Rousseau certainly feared for his life when, after writing politically explosive works, he had to secretly flee France and later Geneva in order to save his life, but Leiris' analogy of the *torero* does not always concern such physically dangerous moments for a writer; rather, it focuses on an autobiographer's choice as to how much he can risk by being as truthful as possible. Therefore, technique – art or compositional skill – readily acknowledged in the twentieth century as having an effect on factual representation – can help present the truth of autobiography, or, in the case of Rousseau and the "autobiography" in *Lolita*, such skill must also evade the reader, when necessary, to succeed at presenting the persona the author has cultivated – the persona he does not want unmasked. Both narrators (Nabokov's protagonist Humbert and Rousseau) were not entirely *toreros* in the Leiris sense, since underneath aesthetic strictures, they sometimes adorned the truth rather than risk complete honesty either with themselves or with readers. For Leiris, the author who acts like a *torero* uses art to get closer to the truth, but will also courageously break from art at times in order to more fearlessly accomplish his act – which is, for the author, to tell nothing but the truth.

I have already spoken of the fundamental rule (to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth) to which the writer of confessions is bound, and I have also alluded to the precise ceremony to which, in his combat, the *torero* must conform. For the latter, it is evident that the code, far from being a protection, contributes to his danger: to deliver a thrust under the requisite conditions demands, for instance, that he put his body, during an appreciable length of time, within reach of the horns; hence there is an immediate connection between obedience to the rule and the danger incurred. Now, all things considered, is it not to a danger directly proportional to the rigor of the rule he has imposed on himself that the confessional writer is exposed? For to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth is not at all: he must also confront it directly and tell it without artifice, without those great arias intended to make it acceptable, tremolos or catches in the voice, grace notes or glidings. . . (Leiris 160).

As Leiris had in 1939, Nabokov's *Lolita* in 1955 also affirms and openly acknowledges that aesthetic technique affects representation of facts as he treats the confessional narrative aspect of autobiography through his fictional protagonist Humbert – reveling in the art of the novel – defamiliarizing the genre of autobiography through fiction that included parody, humor, irony, and the “aesthetic bliss” Nabokov claims his work must have: “For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm.” (“Vladimir Nabokov on a Book Entitled *Lolita*” 315). Nabokov's embracement of “aesthetic bliss” fuels the defamiliarization of the “autobiography” that occurs in *Lolita*. Nabokov creates a novel that defamiliarizes autobiography through the very use of art and the open acknowledgment that the protagonist's autobiography, after all, is fiction. Humbert, as a fictional character, can use parody in his story, in ways Rousseau could not when he wrote his autobiography. In this defamiliarization of confessional narrative practices (a defamiliarization that fully affirms aesthetic confessional technique) lies Nabokov's re-imagining of Rousseau's Romantic era themes and autobiographical practices. This re-imagining, while yet retaining essential nineteenth century Romantic themes such as romantic love, or the nature of passion or versus the law, nevertheless modernizes and re-imagines the “confession,” the treatment of the confessor's audience, and the ways we talk about sex.

This essay will illustrate Nabokov's ways of re-imagining both French and Russian elements of Romanticism by exploring the liaisons between readers, narrators, and authors in both Nabokov's and Rousseau's respective works, *Lolita* and *The Confessions*. In exploring *Lolita*, the focus will be on how a modern re-imagining of Romanticism is occurring in his text and on the following questions pertaining to this modern Romantic re-imagining: Does the writer address a male, female, or mixed audience? How does the gendering of the audience change the “truth” of the autobiography? We, the readers of *Lolita*, are reading a book that takes the form of a confession supposedly written by Humbert Humbert to a prospective jury. What, consequently, is the relationship of Humbert Humbert to that jury-audience? How do his comments to that audience reveal things about his own character and how do they ultimately shape our own moral evaluation of this morally troubling character? And to what extent does the

“confessor” change his facts? While analyzing *Lolita*’s narrative strategies in comparison to Rousseau’s *Confessions*, this chapter will also concern itself with the same questions as those posed by *Lolita* for Rousseau’s text – questions of gender, truth versus perception of the truth, and the narrator-audience relationship.

Finally, a few last questions to be explored in Nabokov’s links to Romanticism concern one of Nabokov’s comments about *Lolita* when he was in the midst of creation: “I am engaged in the composition of a novel, which deals with the problems of a very moral middle-aged gentleman who falls very immorally in love with his stepdaughter, a girl of thirteen” (*Selected Letters* 128). The very distinguishing of Humbert as a “moral” man from his “immoral” action inserts issues of “morality” into *Lolita*’s creation and connects *Lolita* to similar issues of morality found in Romantic texts. Byron, incidentally, tiptoed around the issue of incestuous relations with his half-sister in his writings and in his personal life, while Rousseau’s *Confessions*, in its title alone, implies issues of morality. Likewise, questions of morality surface as both Rousseau and Nabokov treat taboo subjects that range from love triangle sexual issues (sharing the same woman, jealousy, suicide) to issues of incest and blatant promiscuity. Nabokov does not raise the question, but his novel and Humbert’s relationship to the reader do: should a seemingly moral man with a very immoral passion be forgiven or redeemed? When Humbert offers an analysis of what led him to his attraction for Lolita, what does he hide? And for Rousseau, to what degree do his autobiographical confessions attempt to exculpate him from his actions and to what degree is the truth of his autobiography represented? Most importantly, how does art affect reader perception of reality? For the readers of both Rousseau’s autobiographical work and Nabokov’s *Lolita*, perception of what is right and wrong in the lives of their protagonists seems extraordinarily affected by the art of the “confessions” and the art of the novel; such an effect changes the truth of the protagonists’ autobiography or confessions.

Rousseau: Techniques of Autobiography vs. Reader Perception: Gendering the Audience and Gaining Intimacy

Rousseau’s autobiography, like the confessional autobiography depicted by Nabokov’s fictional character Humbert, employs artistic tactics that affect the ways readers perceive the

protagonist's veracity. Thus, one of the first notable artistic decisions affecting reader perception occurs in Rousseau's autobiography as he genders his audience. Although aware of both male and female readers, Rousseau addresses female readers more than male readers, and tries to seek female condolence and understanding for his actions. To note a few of Rousseau's addresses to the female audience, below, Rousseau explains how he treats one of the first Catholics who winned and dined him then talked to him about Catholic theology:

All I wanted was not to upset people who were being kind to me with that end in view. I wanted to cultivate their benevolence, and leave them some hopes of success, by appearing to be less well armed than I really was. My crime, in that respect, was like an honest woman's coquetry. For sometimes, to gain her ends she will, without permitting any liberties or making any promises, raise more hopes than she intends to fulfill (53).

Interestingly, at this mid-eighteenth century time in France, when women primarily had only three venues of climbing up the social ladder, that of marriage, prostitution, or of becoming a mistress, Rousseau identifies with the coquetry involved for an honest women in such a society, one who raises "more hopes than she intends to fulfill" (53). In fact, he imitates such women when a fine noble entertains him with talks about Catholicism. By comparing himself to an honest woman, he appeals to their sympathy; such addresses to women are frequent in Rousseau's text, and they work to elicit more sympathetic responses from Rousseau's female audience.

Rousseau, at other times, praises women for providing him consolation at a time when his musical tutoring performance was found disastrous:

In the midst of all these humiliations, I found the sweetest consolation in the news I had from time to time of my two delightful girlfriends. I have always found great powers of consolation in the sex; and nothing so lightens my afflictions in misfortune as to feel that some charming creature is concerned for me (147).

At the same time, speaking of Mme. de Warens, Rousseau attributes perhaps far too much to women he loves, so much so that he lives in denial about how a love triangle affected at least one

party, who eventually died most likely because of a suicide prompted by despair in sharing Mme. de Warens with Rousseau.³³ Rousseau can see no wrong sometimes in a woman he loves and thus fuels his own denial or prompts a veiled representation of himself in his autobiography:

So we lived in an alliance which brought us all happiness, and which only death was strong enough to dissolve [i.e. death of Claude Anet through suicide]. One of the proofs of that delightful woman's excellent character is that all who loved her loved one another. Jealousy, and even rivalry, gave place to the dominant feeling which she inspired, and I have never known any one of those around her ill-disposed towards any other (173).

It was only after she had been unfaithful to him that I really knew what an affection she had for him. Since she knew that I did not think, feel, or breathe except through her, she showed me the extent of her love for him so that I might love him equally; and she laid less stress upon the friendship than on the respect that she felt for him, since that was the feeling that I could most fully share. How many times did she melt our hearts and cause us to embrace in tears, by telling us that we were both necessary for her life's happiness! And let no woman who reads this give a malicious smile! With a temperament such as hers, there was nothing dubious about this need; it was simply that of her heart (194).

Such sentiments reveal a curious situation where Rousseau, at times, pretends to reveal himself when he is actually concealing something about himself. Rousseau ends up defending Mme. de Warens in this passage by presenting an idealized picture of her in the same way that Rousseau bolsters an idealized picture of himself. He presents this information under his premise that it is an "honest woman" who might understand best; after all, he has told us from the very beginning that his own "crime" of sometimes appearing as someone he was not, was "like an honest women's coquetry" (54) and he admonishes women here against giving "a malicious smile"

³³ Joseph McMahan has accurately described it thus: "Anet, who left Vevey with Madame de Warens, was also converted to Roman Catholicism. He served her faithfully as a fairly bright business manager and was rumored to have died as a result of chagrin over the favours she showered upon Rousseau. Jean-Jacques gives a quite different presentation of the situation in the *Confessions* where he speaks of the joyful intimacy of their particular ménage à trois and the sorrow (not altogether disinterested on his part) which descended upon the house when Anet passed on, a victim of over-exposure during one of his herb-gathering expeditions. Anet probably died in March 1734, two years later than the date given in the *Confessions*. He appears, sharply revised, in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* as the young man who indentures himself to help his fiancée out of financial difficulties and who is bought out of his servitude by Saint-Preux" (98).

(194). In his reference yet again to women, he is asking for them to relate to him as he “reveals” Mme. de Warens’ character, all the while concealing the more flawed aspects of this amorous arrangement.

And of course, when love was easier (as with his one-time travel romance Mme. de Larnage), Rousseau usually found complete understanding for such a woman, even though she wasn’t the type to make him stay: “She had her reasons for being so easy; it allowed her to display all her charms. One could see her without loving her, but to possess her was to adore her” (240).

Primarily, Rousseau relies on female readers to have understanding and compassion for him, especially when trying to exculpate himself of remorseful or seemingly questionable actions. But Rousseau finds more than consolation in woman. As he states, they stimulate his mind as well, in a way different from men: “For there is no doubt that interesting and sensible conversation with a good woman is more capable of forming a young man’s mind than all the pedantic philosophy in books” (166). And, quoting a friend (Father Castel), Rousseau shows awareness for the power women can have: “Nothing is achieved in Paris except by help of the ladies. They are, so to speak, the circumference to which learned men, like so many asymptotes, draw ever nearer, yet which they never touch” (272). Thus, in this one of many instances, Rousseau’s rhetoric implies that women can be actually significantly wiser or more skilled than men. This praise of women’s intelligence and influence, stemming from Rousseau’s gendering of the audience, seems to be part of his attempt to have his readers – at least his female audience – excuse his questionable behavior towards women.

And yet despite his praise for women, Rousseau’s own words describe how throughout his life, he took advantage of several women who were not as talented as he was, and in fact were less educated than him. One example is a young peasant girl whom he blamed for his own crime of stealing. Another is his own seamstress common law wife Thérèse. When he steals, he steals out of wounded pride, not out of great necessity; after all, he decides he “needs” some of the same comforts of the upper class at a time when he felt he was serving beneath his station. The young girl whom he blames for his crime, an honest peasant bystander, didn’t stand a chance. Nevertheless, Rousseau blames not himself, but the fact that he is a *man*; “. . . there are moments of a kind of delirium, in which men cannot be judged by what they do. I did not

exactly steal that money. What I stole was the use of it. But it was theft and, what is more, it was a disgraceful one” (46). In connecting his theft with what “men” do in “a kind of delirium,” Rousseau continues his appeasing of his female readers, downplaying at least with that audience, the negative degree to which they might perceive his petty but inhumane theft (for which an honest servant receives irrevocable punishment).

Perhaps his worst treatment of women, however, emerges in his treatment of his live-in girlfriend Thérèse,³⁴ a woman he eventually married after *The Confessions*, someone he claimed he loved dearly but with whom he was not “in love.” Immediately after each of Thérèse’s and Rousseau’s five children were born, he convinced her, with some trouble at first, but not as much trouble as time passed, to give up each child to the care of the State. It didn’t help that Rousseau’s mother-in-law, in view of her own self-interested social climbing ends, helped convince Thérèse to do what Rousseau wanted. Rousseau never liked his mother-in-law, but he was perfectly comfortable in having her as an ally in such respects.

Rousseau praises Thérèse for her “goodness of heart” (331), and describes her as having “simple mindedness” – perhaps the very qualities that aided her in her obedience and understanding of him despite all the times her true wishes were overcome – as in the very first time Rousseau revealed his habits:

. . . and the man who best helped to stock the Foundling Hospital was always the most applauded. I caught the habit, and modelled [sic] my way of thinking upon that which I saw prevalent among these very pleasant and fundamentally very decent people. ‘Since it is the custom of the country,’ I told myself, ‘if one lives there one must adopt it.’ That was the way out I was looking for. I cheerfully resolved to take it without the least scruple; indeed the only scruples that I had to overcome were Thérèse’s, and I had the greatest difficulty in the world in persuading her to accept this sole means of saving her honour. . . . In the following year the same inconvenience was removed by the same expedient, except for the initials, which were forgotten. No more serious reflections on my part, and no greater willingness on the mother’s; she obeyed with a sigh (322).

³⁴ This is not counting the time he and his friend bought a young child they intended to have sex with in a few years – a girl Rousseau luckily grew too fond of to exploit.

Incidentally, Rousseau argues he has no money to provide for his children even when the third child came at a time when he receives a literary prize. He persuades Thérèse to give up their third child with arguments full of rationalizations and self-pity, and does not acknowledge that ultimately, his ambitions, his career, were more important than Thérèse's protestations. He declares he does not want to impose his fate on his children, at the very moment he is entering a period of success. But by putting them in the Foundling Hospital, he gave them one of the more difficult elements of Rousseau's childhood, a life without a mother.

Never for a moment in his life could Jean-Jacques have been a man without feelings or compassion, an unnatural. I may have been mistaken, but I could never be callous. . . in handing my children over for the State to educate, for lack of means to bring them up myself, by destining them to become workers and peasants instead of adventurers and fortune-hunters, I thought I was acting as a citizen and a father, and looked upon myself as a member of Plato's Republic. More than once since then the regret in my heart has told me that I was wrong. But far from my reason having told me the same story, I have often blessed Heaven for having thus safeguarded them from their father's fate. . . .

My third child, therefore was taken to the Foundling Hospital like the others, and the next two were disposed of in the same way, for I had five in all. This arrangement seemed so good and sensible and right to me that if I did not boast of it openly it was solely out of regard for their mother (333).

Such rationalizations regarding Rousseau's treatment of Thérèse are perhaps forgotten by female readers through Rousseau's constant appeasing addresses to women. However, it is notable that Rousseau genders his audience, especially since it can have the effect of mollifying female reactions and molding female opinion. Ultimately, what Rousseau is always asking from his readers is that they *not* focus on the immorality of the action but instead look at their sympathy for his character. This very strategy is one we will soon see in Nabokov.

Rousseau's ploys to manipulate readers also emerge in his depiction of women who ultimately hurt him in some way; in Rousseau's mind, women who reject him get "punished." Mme d'Épinay, who tries to take advantage of her patronage of Rousseau (as she seems to have ulterior motives and feelings towards him), ultimately fails and later is unsuccessful in what

Rousseau believes is her revenge, negatively influencing people against him; greater fame comes to Rousseau despite this. And Rousseau's beloved "Maman" (Mme. de Warens) emerges as a figure who later in life seems punished by fate or her own weaknesses; after all, she mismanaged her finances and rejected Rousseau's proposed arrangement, i.e. *I'll provide for you if you live with me and Thérèse and give up your pension*. Rousseau's representation of Maman highlights Rousseau's offer as one of generosity and Maman's refusal as a wrong and unwise choice. Yet it was a similar proposal Mme. de Warens had made to *him* in the past, and Rousseau had ultimately refused, stating he did not wish to consciously disrespect her:

I love you too much to degrade you. Possession of you is too dear to be shared. The regrets I felt when you first gave yourself to me have grown with my love. I cannot retain your favours at such a price. You will always have my adoration. Always be worthy of it! It is more necessary for me to respect you than to possess you. I will give you up to yourself alone, Mamma. It is to our hearts' union that I sacrifice my pleasures. May I die a thousand times before I take any [pleasures] that degrade the woman I love! (250).

Even though he was prompted by compassion for her plight, now much later in life since that effusive proclamation, Rousseau offers Mme. de Warens in her ill fortune what he would have once deemed disrespectful. Although he is offering a place to live (with him and Thérèse) and is not necessarily offering sex, the threesome aspect of the offer touched Mme. de Warens' sense of dignity or pride, perhaps, given that she knew Rousseau's feelings from the past. However, Rousseau presents to readers an analysis of Mme. de Warens that may not be complete, albeit his tenderness for her remains. When her life ceases, he laments it, but yet makes devious allusions as he writes, "Go, gentle and kindly soul, to join Fénélon, Bernex, Catinat, and all those like them who, in a humbler walk in life, have opened their hearts to true charity" (572). Rousseau likens Madame de Warens to a saint, a charitable benefactor, and one of Louis XIV's marshals who worked his way up in the military from very humble beginnings. All three represent qualities Mme. de Warens possessed, even down to Rousseau's allusion to her sexual liberties if one considers the French meaning of *catin* from Catinat: whore.

This punishing representation of certain women and his rationalizations in the giving away of his children with Thérèse point to Rousseau's method of psychoanalyzing events in a

way that can elicit sympathy from readers and further a feeling of intimacy with them. Other compositional ploys in Rousseau's text include focusing on his childhood innocence and his abundant generosity, never mind that he took advantage of a woman who was less talented or smart than he while playing up his sexual virility or his claims that despite his virility he could never quite find love.

Rousseau's next artistic ploy reflects the romance of the Petrarchan sonnet. His implicit play on the Petrarchan sonnet ideal of a man who suffers through unattainable love implies Rousseau is a kind of literary hero and even, at times, one connected to the gods. Rousseau sets himself up apart from the typical lover; he ascribes virtues to himself that aren't necessarily there. In his mind he is the most honest of men, the most compassionate and generous. Except, he doesn't quite recall, at such times, that when people or his own children might interfere with his ambition, his lofty sentiments and virtues end. Never mind that when he intermingled with lower classes, his wounded pride (at being classed with them) causes him to steal and blame the servant girl. Yet he persists in depicting the notion that he is a noble long-suffering virtuous lover, enduring unrequited love and not falling for the temptation of consummating an emotional affair with an unavailable woman. Although he desires love and believes he finds it in Mme. de Houedetot, she cannot return it in the way he wanted: "There was equal love on both sides, though it was never mutual. We were both intoxicated with love – hers for her lover, and mine for her; our sighs and our delicious tears mingled together" (413).

In addition to representing an ideal Petrarchan lover, such depiction of himself as a lover who cannot truly find love evokes the confessional nature of his autobiography, and in this way, Rousseau's relationship to his readers becomes even more intimate – in a way readers may not have experienced before. Similarly, Rousseau complicates his relationship with readers as he uses gender to appeal to women even when he exploits his own live-in girlfriend, or as he gains intimacy and reaches them through his confessional style, something readers can appreciate despite any ethical qualms they may have about Rousseau. Inevitably, Rousseau's complicated intimate relationship with his readers challenges perception of the veracity of his autobiography. While Rousseau's feelings seem genuine, his own perception of events, and the perception his readers gain, may not always be so close to factual truth. His text thus becomes a harbinger of Nabokov's *Lolita* as he genders his audience, elicits reader sympathies, and innovates the genre

of autobiography through a confessional style and manipulative treatment (at times) of the reader.

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury!

Nabokov's own comic, playful, occasionally condescending fictional treatment of his readers in *Lolita* provides the means for Humbert's autobiography, for this character's own relationship to his readers, and for Humbert's appeals for forgiveness, for redemption, for art. The narrator's relationship to his audience emerges as a key element throughout this tale of love, lust, fear, guilt, and loss. While critic Alfred Appel has noted that Humbert addresses the reader "no less than twenty-nine times, drawing him into one trap after another" (lvii), the actual number is indeed more if one counts the readers who exist within the story – i.e., the jury that Humbert repeatedly refers to, as the fictional Humbert's initial intention was to write to a jury. Humbert addresses these other readers, (the literal jury at his trial), on several occasions. Nabokov's use of a double audience and a writer within the text is as much his charm as it is his challenge – a challenge that raises valuable questions while rendering greater insight into the character of Humbert, his "sin," his "soul," and his "parody of incest."

Thus, although Nabokov is mostly celebrated as a great verbal artist, moral issues are an important element in *Lolita*, as pointed out by Nabokov critic Michael Wood. In addition to the aesthetic pleasures of Nabokov's work, morality plays an important role in determining the aesthetic quality of the text. As Wood says,

. . . crucial in Nabokov but very hard to discuss, is the ethical. This is the realm of the unspeakable for Nabokov, but it is nonetheless (or for that very reason) everywhere implicit in his work. He is neither the aesthete that he himself and his early readers kept making out he was, nor the plodding moralist that recent criticism, with an audible sigh of relief, has wheeled on to the stage. Moral questions . . . are put to work in his fiction (7).

Not surprisingly, when Wood concerns himself with the question of whether or not Humbert should be forgiven, he is less than sympathetic:

I can't believe in his repentance because the language of his renunciation is the language of gloating, as indeed his language throughout, however guilty he feels, or says he felt, is full of relished remembrance, like that of Dante's lovers Paolo and Francesca enjoying the rerun of what took them to hell (Wood 139).

However, Humbert's multi-layered relationship with his readers suggests that his "language of gloating" is actually part of a complicated personality that seeks to entertain, as any writer would who enjoys parody, and that within that language are many direct, even tender, pleas to the reader for forgiveness – pleas that are treated as serious and real for the entirety of the novel, albeit within the context of parody at various times. Given that *Lolita's* ending stuns many readers as they realize Lolita is dead, we have an indication as to how real these characters' stories can become to them. Not all readers necessarily see the "gloating" that Michael Wood sees. But without the language that immortalizes Lolita in art, without Humbert's language of repentance preceding her death – without all of this, the troubling yet immortalizing ending intermingled with Humbert's "repentance" would not only be less effective, but in some ways, less affirming of the readers' relationship to each character. Humbert's pleas stand a chance only in so far the art of his confessions can affirm or relate to its readers.

As in the discussion of Rousseau's audience in *The Confessions*, looking at Humbert's relation to his audience can help us understand more fully Nabokov's own artistic strategies, and how these artistic strategies sometimes lead readers to feel they understand Humbert's moral situation better. Madame de Stael said that to understand everything is to forgive everything. While we may not go that far, we may come closer to forgiving Humbert if we do understand him, and our moral understanding of him can become clearer as a result of looking at the ways he specifically addresses his double jury – the jury within the novel and the jury of his readers. This is not to say Nabokov wants us to "forgive" a pedophile, but it does speak to the qualities of art that can powerfully imply that one should even consider the unthinkable as the protagonist pleads his case. Like Rousseau, Humbert, who at one point refers to himself as "Jean Jacques Humbert" (124), also pleads or indirectly seeks understanding from his readers. To examine Humbert's audience addresses and the unthinkable – the forgiveness of such a man – we can only be enabled by art, where we must first heed Humbert's plea; "Imagine me, I shall not exist

if you do not imagine me” (129). With this plea and his ambiguous choice of word, “imagine,” Humbert hints to readers that he will reveal himself at the same time that he will conceal himself behind the aid of reader imagination; he will be, in a sense, a kind of “imaginary” narrator if readers heed his plea. He will give readers his confessions, and yet hide behind these confessions as they foster a more nuanced relationship with the very readers to whom he “reveals” himself.

Through Humbert’s confessions, several forms of banter, smugness, and notions of Old World superiority emerge in his relationship with readers – qualities that either amuse or strain their patience. Humbert’s prospective jury is made up of twelve “ladies and gentlemen” but *Lolita* addresses an even wider audience – literary readers that may at times, according to one critic, rely on theories of psychoanalysis, expectations of libertine literature, or the author’s use of literary conventions. (Appel introduction) But Nabokov uses Humbert to defy reader reliance on clichéd conventions, as when Humbert parodies Russian duels or courtship practices. The relationship, consequently, is marked by a playful, humorous, and assertive attitude that adds credibility to the narrator’s story. Readers who refuse, or do not enter Humbert’s games, may neither like his defiance of their expectations nor see the humor, and thus discredit any pleas the narrator later makes. Readers who do share in his game-playing, however, may find themselves closer to understanding this strange, complex character, and thus may come closer to judging him less harshly. Not unlike Rousseau, Nabokov here shows an “author” who re-imagines the role of autobiography as one that handles readers not only with Romantic sentiment, but with the addition of the high stylistics of parody and games.

Alfred Appel provides ample examples of this playful attitude as he discusses Nabokovian games and ploys in the text:

Although [fictional] editor John Ray, Jr., serves fair enough warning to those “old-fashioned readers who wish to follow the destinies of ‘real’ people beyond the ‘true story,’ ” virtually every “move” in the “true” story of *Lolita* seems to be structured with their predictable responses in mind; and the game element depends on such reflexive action, for it tests the reader in so many ways. By calling out “Reader! Bruder!” (p.262), Humbert echoes *Au Lecteur*, the prefatory poem in *Les Fleurs du mal* (“Hypocrite reader! – My fellow man – My brother!”);

and, indeed, the entire novel constitutes an ironic upending of Baudelaire and a good many other writers who would enlist the reader's full participation in the work. "I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay," says Humbert (p.57), but such illicit participation will find the reader in constant danger of check, or even rougher treatment: "As greater authors than I have put it: 'Let readers imagine' etc. On second thought, I may as well give those imaginations a kick in the pants" (p.65). Humbert addresses the reader no less than twenty-nine times, drawing him into one trap after another. In Nabokov's hands the novel thus becomes a gameboard on which, through parody, he assaults his readers' worst assumptions, pretensions, and intellectual conventions . . . (lvii-lviii).

What's important about Humbert's playful, game-like disposition, is that the mastery of his game may start to appeal to a reader's sense of play, and, likewise, fallible though he is, Humbert may appear to the reader as an intelligent, witty, at least somewhat sensible character. Thus, play may actually enter into the moral evaluation of Humbert. Humbert frequently uses playful and self-deprecating humor to appeal to the audience, as when he alludes to a death penalty consequence for himself or to his previous urges (never executed) to kill his ex-wife:

Incidentally: if I ever commit a serious murder . . . mark the "if." The urge should be something more than the kind of thing that happened to me with Valeria. Carefully mark that *then* I was rather inept. If and when you decide to sizzle me to death, remember that only a spell of insanity could ever give me the simple energy to be a brute (all this amended perhaps) (47).

Instances where Humbert does not take himself too seriously ("if and when you decide to sizzle me" [47]), in addition to the artful games Nabokov directs, are perhaps what prompted one critic to exclaim, ". . . [*Lolita* is] narrated not only with exquisite artistry but with meticulous intensity and a high, arching, piercing humor as well" (Ianone 52). This kind of narration and the humorous language employed in it is a way for Humbert to maintain a certain cockiness, a playful defiance – indeed the very playfulness becomes a form of defiance of his reader-judges, although he is also seeking exoneration from those judges.

One of the most obvious ways Nabokov uses artistic maneuvers to play with his readers is in how his protagonist openly speaks to his readers, gendering his audience at times like Rousseau, while he seeks their sympathy. In seeking exoneration, Humbert sometimes addresses his audience by gender, especially since sex with a female is so much a part of his situation. Unlike Wordsworth, for whom gender is not a direct concern in his autobiographical *Prelude*,³⁵ although he does direct himself to a male audience, and more like Rousseau, who depicts keen awareness of a mixed gender audience in *The Confessions*, even as he favors a female audience, *Lolita* also directs itself to both sexes. Humbert, a man about to be on trial for child molestation and murder, wants to save himself and appeals to both sexes with such urgent exclamations as “Reader!”, “Learned reader,” or hyperbolic references to the feelings of celestial beings, “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied” (9).

Although the story is clearly told from a male perspective and shows awareness for both male and female readers, occasionally, Humbert does focus his attention on one gender over another for the very reason that his crime is both sexual and gendered – it is, after all, not only a story about a murder, but about a crime against a female child. Thus, in one striking instance, Humbert makes a point of seeking female understanding – and, presumably, female forgiveness – when he says “sensitive gentlewomen of the jury, I was not even her first lover” (135). It is as if Humbert hopes here that the women of the jury, who share the same gender as Humbert’s victim, Lolita, will understand what is involved in Lolita’s loss of virginity, and thus will sympathize with Humbert because the girl he seduced was not as innocent as she might have seemed. In fact, in their first hotel scene, Lolita seduces him, if we accept Humbert’s notion that a thirteen year old’s advances can be called seduction. Humbert’s hope here, he intimates, is that the women in the jury, or as he puts it in an attempt to ingratiate himself with them, “Sensitive gentlewomen,” would know better than male jurors what Lolita’s non-virginal condition meant about her own morals, and thus would be more kindly disposed to Humbert. Such appeals may

³⁵ For Wordsworth, gender is not a direct concern in the sense that he does not ostensibly have an emotional investment in whether his audience is male or female. Meanwhile, Rousseau almost always seeks condolence or other sympathies from women; and Nabokov’s protagonist Humbert usually favors forming a connection with his male readers as he mocks the female reader.

not necessarily win him support from the female part of the jury (and by extension, his female readers), but he is, at least on the surface, certainly trying.

In another instance of addressing and gendering the reader, Humbert may further win literary readers to his side with the comical “Frigid gentlewomen of the jury!” (132) In some ways, Humbert is really addressing men by suggesting the classic male analysis of a joke that insults women for being frigid. Humbert is playing on an assumption that it is the “frigid” women that need to be appealed to at this point and that any normal full blooded woman would see his point and thus not even require that he plead with them (at least on this occasion). This plea is made at a moment when Humbert is describing the first night in a hotel with Lolita where he initially endured agonizing hours of restraint in order to preserve her still in some way: “Frigid gentlewomen of the jury! I had thought that months, perhaps years, would elapse before I dared to reveal myself to Dolores Haze; but by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers” (132). Presumably, a “frigid gentlewoman” might have more understanding for a man who had planned to wait as long as necessary rather than reveal himself too soon. On the other hand, the plea is actually a parody of a plea because, realistically, if the jury were directly in front of him, attributing frigidity to them would be ineffective. Nevertheless, the parody of the plea works to create amusement in the reader, to let the male reader “in” on the joke, and, by extension, it works to soften readers towards Humbert, momentarily disarming them from the seriousness of Humbert’s crime. Thus, gendering and addressing the reader with familiar and direct expressions, are parts of Nabokov’s aesthetic technique that affect reader perception of Humbert’s trial – a technique that recalls Rousseau’s Romantic use of gender as he also appeals to his audience, especially to the women in it.

Humbert’s pleas may be even more effective for the male reader, who, while he may not be a willing participant to the pedophile voyeuristic and implied self-arousal scenes in Humbert, he is nevertheless included in the voyeurism by default (thereby making him an accomplice), and he is directly addressed as Humbert refers to the male libido in trying to analyze his own libido, albeit a misdirected one:

I am ready to believe that the sensations I derived from natural fornication were much the same as those known to normal big males consorting with their normal big mates in that routine rhythm which shakes the world. The trouble was that

those gentlemen had not, and I *had*, caught glimpses of an incomparably more poignant bliss. The dimmest of my pollutive dreams was a thousand times more dazzling than all the adultery the most virile writer of genius or the most talented impotent might imagine. My world was split. I was aware of not one but two sexes, neither of which was mine; both would be termed female by the anatomist. But to me, through the prism of my senses, “they were as different as mist and mast.” All this I rationalize now. In my twenties and early thirties, I did not understand my throes so clearly. While my body knew what it craved for, my mind rejected my body’s every plea. One moment I was ashamed and frightened, another recklessly optimistic. Taboos strangled me. Psychoanalysts wooed me with pseudoliberations of pseudolibidoes (18).

Such thoughts by Humbert point to Nabokov’s use of artistic maneuvers that gender the audience, allowing male readers to feel as if they are directly involved or appealed to and as if they are “in” on the truth of Humbert’s “confession.” Maneuvers like this connect Nabokov’s text significantly to *The Confessions* of Rousseau, where Rousseau, as we will later see, commends his female readers while at times seeming to forget the male reader exists. Where Nabokov re-imagines Rousseau’s artistic maneuvers is in how much further he attains a voyeuristic experience for the reader while he dwells on one of the most taboo of subjects at the same time that his protagonist faults Lolita for her “nymphet” charms and for what Humbert relates as willing sexual participation (at least at first).

More prominently, seduction of readers comes to a highpoint as the artistry of the author conflates with the character of Humbert; this artistry emerges as Humbert genders the audience when needed and as he provides a voyeuristic experience at times, aimed at heterosexual men. He gives great detail, both flattering and not, about the physical and sexual appearance of women and girls – from Valeria and Charlotte to Lolita and other “nymphets.” He makes fun of Charlotte’s porcine appearance – indicating the unflattering nature of her full body fitted too tightly perhaps into a full piece bathing suit befitting a seal. He describes Valeria’s transformation from a bride that attracted him (primped and childlike as she seemed), to a simple-minded stocky overweight thick legged short woman. He goes far into his sexual fantasies and romps, but only as far as it helps him plead his case and as far as it provides readers

an excuse to be voyeurs, making them somewhat complicit, figuratively, in his imagined and literal crimes.

He offers additionally a plea to female readers as he argues through his defense of Lolita's memory and through other actions, that he is just an average guy – a victim of certain circumstances – a victim who reminds readers he was once a young child whose efforts at love were thwarted and whose first love replicated his thwarted desires with Annabel, "his" Lolita. Humbert provides readers all types of arguments for forgiving him: the psychoanalytic argument, the true love argument, the repentance and reformation argument, and even the aesthetic argument – one where he might say, "Look I am defending a woman's honor even through parody," conflating the author's artistry with Humbert's as he delivers that artistry. And even though he gives us the blaming or seduction argument at times, i.e. an attitude of "Lolita had her part in it too, victim though she is," Humbert ultimately finishes with the memorial argument, "I must not be so bad if my words immortalize Lolita in art and I've reformed." Such arguments can gain ground with readers as Nabokov orchestrates Humbert's gendering of the audience and the aesthetic pleasures of the text that ameliorate discontent with Humbert's crime. Humbert's autobiographical confessions in *Lolita*, although enclosed in a work of fiction, depict autobiographical techniques that both recall and repel Romantic autobiography.

Notwithstanding Nabokov's departure, at times, from past examples of the autobiographical genre, Humbert, in seeking exoneration and understanding from the reader, fits in with such earlier traditions of confessional autobiography. One example of this – something that we also see in Rousseau's work, and that Humbert himself seems to realize as he calls himself "Jean Jacques Humbert" (124), is, of course, his direct appeal to readers throughout the novel as he tries to seek forgiveness. In seeking forgiveness or redemption, one of Humbert's most notable pleas acknowledges the magnitude of damage he's caused Lolita. He remembers how she used to cry at night, and how he, guiltily, would ignore it. He remembers a young school girl friend whose father held her on his lap in a casual, familial tenderness while Lolita looked on from the kitchen, accidentally cutting herself in the process; Avis, of course, had a real father – Lolita did not. Lolita's own experience sitting on the lap of her stepfather Humbert was quite different. She may not have known, that first time, what Humbert sexually experienced as she half-stood half-sat on his knee, but she knew by the time she observes Avis receive fatherly

tenderness; she observes what had been missing that first time on Humbert's lap and knew what it turned into instead. As she "looked on from the kitchen" at Avis and her father, we infer her longing, not for sex, but for a father. Humbert finally understands this himself and cements this understanding with one concluding observation in a children's playground:

What I heard was but the melody of children at play, nothing but that, and so limpid was the air that within this vapor of blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic – one could hear now and then, as if released, an almost articulate spurt of vivid laughter, or the crack of a bat, or the clatter of a toy wagon, but it was all really too far for the eye to distinguish any movement in the lightly etched streets. I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord (308).

Humbert observes what he could not have noticed before, and what bothers him finally, is that Lolita has lost her childhood – irrevocably to him. He had prevented her from fully participating in the games of the distant concord and the "majestic . . . minute, remote and magically near, frank and divinely enigmatic 'melody of children at play' " (308). Nabokov here has re-imagined how the tradition of confession could be used when depicting a fictional protagonist who shows signs of a change of heart, such as in Humbert's realization conclusively, that he had in fact, ruined a child's life.

In contrast, in real life confessional autobiography, Rousseau never analyzes the kind of effect his actions might have had on the inner life of Thérèse, the seamstress he eventually married; in fact, even though he gave away his five children born from her to the terrible conditions of the state orphanage, Rousseau hardly gives Thérèse a three dimensional role in his autobiography. She appears to be more of a servant than a partner or wife – a go-between even, for Rousseau's affairs, a dependent living on the sidelines. Thérèse is bossed around by her mother, her siblings, Rousseau's patrons (Mme d'Épinay especially) and by Rousseau himself. We hear more information about the inner lives of the women with whom Rousseau had affairs, even purely emotional sexually-unrequited affairs, because he is, to echo Foucault, a sexual

equal only to people with as much power as him – namely, people from a higher and more educated class than Thérèse (such as Countess d’Houdetot). Foucault’s argument about sex applies here: for Foucault, sex is, after all, at the core of identity; symbolic or romantic qualities given to sex serve to shift power relationships between people. In the case of Rousseau and Thérèse, an unequal balance of power exists from the very beginning (through difference in class, talent, education, etc.), so that any voice Thérèse might have had in the relationship was muted or inaudible from the start. Power usually shifted in Rousseau’s favor rather than for Thérèse, regardless of Rousseau’s financial support for her. Thus, in the self-pitying or self-justifying diatribes of Rousseau’s autobiography, it is not surprising that Rousseau does not acknowledge power shifts between him and Thérèse (or any other woman), since such acknowledgement would affect Rousseau’s self-revelation and his reader’s perceptions.

While Nabokov re-imagines the Romantic elements of gendering the readers and of directly appealing to an audience, he does not always modernize Rousseau’s self-justification tactics used so often in the confessional genre. Yet, a re-imagining or re-envisioning of such elements does occur: by including parody, Nabokov’s text revises reader perception of a character’s supposed beginning moral reformation, and in fact, the text can be said to provide, ironically, more accuracy in the depiction of self-revelation. Humbert’s poem at the end – although it is yet another parody, or travesty on T.S. Eliot’s modernist style of poetry, asserts Humbert’s redeeming qualities while parody undercuts them. In his poem, Humbert explains to Quilty how he stole his chance at redemption and why he must kill him:

. . . Because you took advantage of a sin
when I was helpless moulting moist and tender
hoping for the best
dreaming of a marriage in a mountain state
aye a litter of Lolitas. . .

The very fact that such a poem is included in Humbert’s parodic dueling and drunken bout with drugged up Quilty undercuts the strength of Humbert’s claim to repentance. This excerpt suggests Humbert’s redemptive qualities as he expresses a hope “for the best” – for the romance of a marriage, children, a future with Lolita, but it does not acknowledge what Lolita has chosen

– a miserable life with anyone other than Humbert. It does not acknowledge the shifts of power (between him and a child) that could never truly favor Lolita’s genuine desire for freedom, for a father, for a childhood where girlhood crushes didn’t turn into what she couldn’t handle. Such claims Humbert makes about his redemptive qualities are consequently not the most persuasive points, especially since he is aiming, at the moment, a gun at someone’s head.

On the other hand, the text simultaneously shows glimpses of Humbert’s better qualities. The gun is, after all, directed at another sex offender, presumably a more promiscuous, less “moral,” sex offender, and one to whom Lolita has nothing of the kind of significance that she has for Humbert. Quilty’s casual attitude to Lolita, as far as he is able to remember her, comes through, for example, when he says he did not kidnap her, but

‘saved her from a beastly pervert. Show me your badge instead of shooting at my foot, you ape, you. Where is that badge? I’m not responsible for the rapes of others. Absurd! That joy ride, I grant you, was a silly stunt but you got her back didn’t you? Come, let’s have a drink’ (298).

And then later, his casualness emerges as Quilty states, “I had no fun with your Dolly. I am practically impotent, to tell the melancholy truth. And I gave her a splendid vacation. She met some remarkable people” (298). Quilty’s casual attitude here is very far removed from the intense emotion, obsessive though it may be, of Humbert’s parting scene with Lolita, which we have just read prior to coming with Humbert to Quilty’s house.

Somewhere beyond Bill’s shack an afterwork radio had begun singing of folly and fate, and there she was with her ruined looks and her adult, rope-veined narrow hands and her goose-flesh white arms, and her shallow ears, and her unkempt arm-pits, there she was (my Lolita!), hopelessly worn at seventeen, with that baby, dreaming already in her of becoming a big shot and retiring around 2020 A.D. – and I looked and looked at her, and knew as clearly as I know I am to die, that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth, or hoped for anywhere else. (277)

Such a parting scene may increase Humbert’s favor in readers’ eyes as Humbert realizes the full extent of his damage to a child and learns that he loves her not only because of a sexual obsession with her youth, but despite it. The love for Lolita that Humbert demonstrates here is

not sexual or based on her appearance. In fact, her looks are ruined, but Humbert's inner understanding and perception of her have changed. It is why he could see children in a playground and regret that Lolita is not there with them. It is why he understands why Lolita accidentally dropped a knife in the kitchen, cutting herself, after she noticed a tender moment between Avis and *her* father. Lolita had no father, and the stepfather she did have, was not the father she needed.

Quite different from Rousseau's confessional lamentations as Nabokov includes parody, Nabokov's rhetorical range is greater than Rousseau's range; he is both flamboyantly parodic and more invested in the rhetoric of genuine love than Rousseau as he depicts Humbert idealizing Lolita, likening her to the goddess Venus for instance, or ultimately, killing for love. Humbert's parting scene with Lolita in Nabokov's re-imagined Romantic confession text, depicts a protagonist who discovers what he claims to be genuine love, albeit an unrequited one sought through unethical means. In Rousseau's autobiography, Rousseau claims he never finds true love even given what he claims are many opportunities, particularly with Mme d'Houdetot: "Ah, if I had waited so long before knowing true love, now my heart and my senses paid the arrears in full! What must be the raptures one feels with a loved one who returns one's love, if an unrequited love can inspire so much as it does!" (413). Notably, Nabokov's modern confessional practices of his protagonist readjust the narrative techniques that Rousseau uses in his own confessional autobiography. Like Rousseau, Humbert alludes to the ideal of a Petrarchan lover, but in Nabokov's text, the language of reformation can be simultaneously strong and genuine in one scene and parodic in the next.

Thus, we see Humbert understand that when Lolita refuses to return to him, her unspoken statement about Quilty is "He merely broke my heart, you broke my life" (279). That Humbert imagines this is indicative of his true guilt and pain over what he has done to Lolita, just as we see a sign of his pain when he tells how she cried night after night after he was pretending to sleep. He did not do anything about that, he let her cry – but his letting her do so, and his admission of this, conveys an honesty at least at that point about his own brutal behavior toward her. Although his testimony seems more concerned with his own suffering than with Lolita's, numerous comments and images in the text suggest that a lot of Humbert's pain or concern with himself stems from his remorse over the pain that he caused Lolita, or at least, this is what he

leads readers to believe. Thus, Humbert's love for Lolita gains glimpses of tenderness, in the midst of a sordid somber scene, as Humbert assesses his impressions upon finally finding her:

She was frankly and hugely pregnant. Her head looked smaller (only two seconds had passed really, but let me give them as much wooden duration as life can stand), and her pale freckled cheeks were hollowed, and her bare shins and arms had lost all their tan, so that the little hairs showed. She wore a brown, sleeveless cotton dress and sloppy felt slippers.

“We—e—ell!” she exhaled after a pause with all the emphasis of wonder and welcome.

“Husband at home?” I croaked, fist in pocket.

I couldn't kill *her*, of course, as some have thought. You see, I loved her. It was love at first sight, at last sight, at ever and ever sight. (269-270)

In this last scene with Lolita, when she is married to Dick, Humbert does not want to take her to a motel for casual sex, as she thinks he does, but he wants her to come away with him forever. This shows again a semblance of love for her – a love of sentiment, not just of the body. He is still obsessed with her, and he still lusts for her, but what he wants is something more significant than casual sex. He does not want to molest her.

Nevertheless, Nabokov also follows in Rousseau's tradition as he echoes a Petrarchan style to appeal to his readers in a more intimate way. Nabokov depicts the notion of the unattainable love of a goddess-like woman. Like Petrarch's sonnets alluding to the real-life married, unattainable Laura, Humbert also idealizes Lolita even at the point when he last sees her,

Curious: although actually her looks had faded, I definitely realized, so hopelessly late in the day, how much she looked – had always looked – like Botticelli's russet Venus – the same soft nose, the same blurred beauty. In my pocket my fingers gently let go and repacked a little at the tip, within the handkerchief it was nested in, my unused weapon (270).

And at an earlier period, he has idealized her just as he relegates Lolita to the mythological goddess status of Botticelli's Venus surrounded by pink roses:

‘I simply love that tinge of Botticellian pink, that raw rose about the lips, those wet, matted eyelashes’ (64).

‘. . . for there is nothing more conservative than a child, especially a girl-child, be she the most auburn and russet, the most mythopoeic nymphet in October's orchard-haze...’ (186).

‘A poem, a poem, forsooth! So strange and sweet was it to discover this "Haze, Dolores" (she!) in its special bower of names, with its bodyguard of roses – a fairy princess between her two maids of honor’ (52).

Artfully, Nabokov has re-imagined other Romantic elements of Rousseau’s self-revelatory practices and aesthetic techniques – as his confessional and fictional character Humbert effectively courts readers through art, gendering the readers and appealing directly to his audience: “Reader! Bruder!” (262), “Frigid ladies,” (132) “Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury,” (9) “my learned reader” (48) “Oh winged gentlemen of the jury (125) “Sensitive gentlewoman of the jury” (135) “my patient reader” (139) “Oh, do not scowl at me, reader,” (166), etc. Even though Nabokov does not always modernize Rousseau’s tactics of self-justification, he in effect alludes to them and undercuts them, presenting Humbert’s tactics (or poem, in one instance) as parodies of the real thing; readers know from the beginning that while genuine remorse may exist in such a pedophile’s case, genuine ploys are also present.

Humbert, additionally, returning to the practice of Romantic narrators and protagonists who ennoble their story through art, appeals to the reader’s appreciation for art more persistently than the self-promoted protagonist Rousseau presents as himself. Nabokov’s text immortalizes Lolita’s story while the explicitness, lyricism, and humor used to describe Humbert’s love for her emphasizes art’s eternal value (“I couldn’t kill *her*, of course, as some have thought. You see, I loved her. It was love at first sight, at last sight, at ever and ever sight” [269-270]). This emphasis continues throughout the novel, especially in *Lolita*’s concluding paragraph. Once readers have been led to feel this kinship in a common value for what Nabokov calls “aesthetic bliss” they are at a more vulnerable place to accept and understand Humbert even while not justifying his actions. Humbert himself never really feels justified in his actions against Lolita although he has pleaded with readers to understand him. What might “save” him, ironically, is art, and by stating so he may sooner reach his readers:

Alas, I was unable to transcend the simple human fact that whatever spiritual solace I might find, whatever lithophanic eternities might be provided for me, nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted on her. Unless it can be proven to me – to me as I am now, today, with my heart and my beard, and my putrefaction – that in the infinite run it does not matter a jot that a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac, unless this can be proven (and if it can, then life is a joke), I see nothing for the treatment of my misery, but the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art (283).

Thus, because it does matter that Dolores Haze has been deprived of her childhood, and because it does matter that Humbert breaks not her heart but her life, Humbert must treat his misery with “the melancholy and very local palliative of articulate art” (283). And later, in the remarkable ending where Humbert’s voice changes to that of a different, more broken man, art is undeniably upheld as paramount to Lolita’s immortality. Lolita considered that the worst part about dying was that in dying, one is completely on one’s own – the ending however, defies her death as Humbert speaks to her (and to humanity), rendering Lolita to be never alone, but alive for readers forever (*at first sight...at ever and ever sight*):

And do not pity C.Q. One had to choose between him and H.H., and one wanted H.H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations. I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita. (309)

Humbert himself does not justify his past actions, but instead, seems to transcend his obsession by giving Lolita money she is legally entitled to and allowing her for the first time to choose between a life with him and someone else. Humbert offers this choice under no conditions, and he seems, in that brief moment, an ethical man.

Similar to what we see in Rousseau’s text, Nabokov’s protagonist continues to play with his readers, transfixing them with the art of the novel, and in so doing, he again disarms them while trying to promote his ex-culpability. If Nabokov, commenting that his novel “. . . deals with the problems of a very moral middle-aged gentleman who falls very immorally in love with

his stepdaughter” designates Humbert as a moral man, and, given Humbert’s perhaps volatile and manipulative relationship to readers – should a seemingly moral man with a very immoral passion be forgiven or redeemed? Lolita, his immoral passion, dies in childbirth after Humbert, in an act of ethical responsibility, has chosen to give her a sizable amount of money. Humbert kills Quilty, not only out of revenge, but, arguably, under a moral responsibility to both his and her honor. With Humbert’s act, Nabokov again begins to control the relationship between audience and narrator through artful technique. He is different from Rousseau in this authorial control in that Nabokov can be more open about his artistic technique (through parody for instance) since Nabokov engages, after all, in a *fictional* autobiography of his protagonist. By definition, fiction allows compositional ploys and wider artistic freedom.

We see this artistic freedom and authorial control in Humbert’s murder of Quilty, a murder that actually constitutes a modernized, parodic revision of a major Russian Romantic theme: that of the duel. To some extent, Nabokov’s echo of the duel motif promotes Humbert’s action toward Quilty as possessing some sense of honor. Despite the parodic elements in Nabokov’s description of Humbert’s quest for revenge, the murder of Quilty symbolically echoes and embodies some of the standard expectations and “honorable” qualities of a duel.

Note that Humbert is enacting, albeit in a grotesque and comical way, the role of the defender of his lady’s honor – except that here she has no similar sense of such honor, and does not even want to be with Humbert, who also, rather than some knight in shining armor, is a child molesting pervert, by his own description. To a reader familiar with the dueling tradition in Russian literature, the murder is a defense for and “salvation” of honor and love, and revenge becomes sanctified under “honorable” death. Nabokov, of course, undercuts the symbolism of the duel by providing only a parody of it. Still, it is worthwhile to observe both the duel tradition and examples of murder in Russian literature if only to gain more insight into Nabokov’s characterization of it and to further understand the “duel’s” subsequent implications on Humbert’s case.

In the traditions of such writers as Tolstoy, Turgenev, Pushkin, and Lermontov, murder and duels exonerate, redeem, and “save” the life of different characters. Most significant for Nabokov would be the famous, almost legendary duels from Pushkin’s novel in verse, *Eugene Onegin*, and from Lermontov’s somewhat later novel, *A Hero of Our Time*. Interestingly,

Nabokov translated both of these works, and provided copious notes for Pushkin's novel, including numerous detailed discussions of the traditions of dueling in nineteenth century Russia. Not only literary duels, but the actual final duel fought by Pushkin, resulting in his death, receives extensive treatment in Nabokov's notes – thus illustrating the importance of the duel as a theme not just in Russian literary works but in Russian culture, given the greatness of Pushkin's status in that culture.

Nabokov's extensive notes to *Eugene Onegin* speak to the elaborate rituals involved in the dueling tradition – careful selection of seconds, the detailed arrangements for the location and procedures of the duel, the final preparations that duelists would make as they would get ready to participate in this very formal ritual (40-56). In *Lolita*, Nabokov clearly echoes, but also undercuts, the elaborate, honorable qualities of the Russian literary duel depicted in Russian Romantic literary works such as the novels of Pushkin and Lermontov and in such famous stories of the time as Pushkin's "The Shot." And so, when Humbert finally finds out the whereabouts of Lolita, and before the beginning of his journey to her downtrodden home, he dresses himself up, "with the stern and romantic care of a gentleman about to fight a duel," (268) to kill his opponent. While Humbert does not find his rival Quilty at her house, to the eyes of Dolly's husband, Humbert appears to be "maybe a viscount" with his "velvet coat and beige vest" (273). Thus, Nabokov does foreshadow a murder, but paints that foreshadowing with the "redemptive" qualities of a duel even as he undercuts the duel tradition by his parody of it.

To a certain extent, the image of the somewhat bumbling, middle-aged émigré Professor Humbert preparing to exact revenge like some Romantic duelist is ludicrous – a parodic inversion of the honor-obsessed literary characters and historical figures familiar to Nabokov, as we know from his descriptions of duels in his commentary to *Eugene Onegin*. And when Humbert actually encounters Quilty, his revenge becomes farcical, characterized by semi-drunken incompetence on Humbert's part and Quilty's un-honorable scrambling for safety after being shocked out of his drug-induced hallucinated reverie.

We fell to wrestling again. We rolled all over the floor, in each other's arms, like two huge helpless children. He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us.

In its published form, this book is being read, I assume, in the first years of 2000 A.D. (1935 plus eighty or ninety, live long, my love); and elderly readers will surely recall at this point the obligatory scene in the Westerns of their childhood. Our tussle, however, lacked the ox-stunning fisticuffs, the flying furniture. He and I were two large dummies, stuffed with dirty cotton and rags. It was a silent, soft, formless tussle on the part of two literati, one of whom was utterly disorganized by a drug while the other was handicapped by a heart condition and too much gin. When at last I had possessed myself of my precious weapon, and the scenario writer had been reinstalled in his low chair, both of us were panting as the cowman and the sheepman never do after their battle (298-299).

Notwithstanding this very parody of the duel, such a scene can actually work to enhance Humbert's relationship to readers as he likens himself, through parody, to a defender of Lolita's honor. Throughout the novel he pleads for understanding, but it is not until the end, after Nabokov's artistic games and ploys – after the poetic justice of Humbert's death, that the reader is truly prepared, perhaps, to “forgive” his actions despite not justifying them. Humbert himself, as mentioned before, does not feel he is justified in his actions.

Like Nabokov's parody of the traditional duel scene from a Russian novel, the rest of *Lolita* reveals a combination of parody, sincerity, humor, and seriousness. As we have seen, these qualities come through not only in Humbert's descriptions and narration, but also in his many direct comments to readers whom he has placed in the position of judges of his own character and actions. Just as his tone with those readers is mixed, so too his own character is composed of morally mixed qualities. Despite his despicable treatment of Lolita, Humbert is not the kind of simple, easy-to-hate character that we can dismiss as a black-hatted villain. His confession of guilt and pain, self-serving as it is, reveals the layers of complexity in his own character and in his relationship with Lolita, and perhaps suggests parallel complexities in any relationship of desire. As individual readers consider these complexities, they will come up with their own verdict of guilt, innocence, or something in between as far as Humbert Humbert is concerned. But in any case, that verdict must acknowledge a writer's seductive and artful treatment of his audience – one who so skillfully blended art, morality, and confessional "autobiography" into a delicately woven fabric called *Lolita*.

Two centuries earlier, the fabric of Rousseau's *The Confessions* also displayed a re-imagined version of the autobiographical confessional genre. Rousseau's text, like Nabokov's, prompts questions about art and morality, and about how the seduction of readers through art – its games and ploys – affects their perception. If mostly through Rousseau's paranoia and self-defensive diatribes, Rousseau's text delves into questions about his own personal and professional ethics. At the same time, the text points to questions about the man behind the bravado, through his highlighted displays of a heightened sexual potency in his desires, as opposed to a type of impotence theme found figuratively in *Lolita*, for instance, in the faint, almost failed gunshots between Humbert and Quilty. Rousseau himself comically engages in his own slightly parodic "duel" scene as he faces Sophie's lover Saint-Lambert, not with a gun, but with the act of *reading* to him. Lambert, in what is an ultimate insult to Rousseau, falls asleep – snoring throughout Rousseau's reading, in effect causing Rousseau to feel unduly punished for his love for Sophie. This comparable "duel" scene or interaction between the two lovers becomes even more pathetic as we notice Rousseau's opinion regarding Saint-Lambert: ". . . I, who was once so proud and now looked so stupid, dared not break off but continued to read as he continued to snore. Such were my humiliations, and such was his vengeance" (430). In contrast, Nabokov is more deliberate than Rousseau in his parody of a duel. Notwithstanding the sexual imagery and impotence theme surrounding the Humbert-Quilty-shooting scene, such a parodic duel scene echoes, at the same time, the Pushkin protagonist Silvio who redeems his honor by *not* making the shot, a character who is not in the least depicted as impotent by Pushkin but quite the contrary. Humbert, engaging in a parodic duel scene that he figuratively depicts as both impotent and sexually virile (the act is accomplished), veils the truth behind his fight with Quilty – that he is, after all, fighting himself – fighting that part of Quilty who did what he himself did – take advantage of a minor. Rousseau likewise manages to obscure the reality behind his confessions as he for instance, fights against his "enemies" who provoke misunderstanding of his life choices and who, apparently to him, are out to get him. Exploring such questions and themes that both obscure and create the autobiographical persona in Rousseau and Nabokov's texts, enables understanding for Nabokov's re-imagined version of Romantic autobiography.

Notably other themes emerge in the comparison between the confessional narrative practices of Nabokov and Rousseau (albeit in Nabokov's text, his fictional character Humbert is the one confessing). Such themes, including gendering of the audience and delving into unorthodox

subjects, connect these two authors considerably as they promote an interplay between readers and the protagonists of their respective texts. This interplay between readers and protagonist, and indirectly, the author, illustrates for us the dance between the author and the reader – the art behind the *torero*'s enticing of the bull – one that is re-envisioned each time an author looks for the eternal quality of “aurochs and angels” or perhaps the solace of his confessions.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in Port Hueneme, CA, Alejandra “Alex” Vargas attended Claremont McKenna College, studied literature, and continued this study in her masters and doctoral pursuits at Florida State University. Alex chose the eighteenth and nineteenth century in British literature as her area of interest, with a special focus on the British Romantics. Active in both her graduate pursuits and in her teaching, Alex has served as a liaison between graduate students and faculty as an elected member of ACES, a graduate student group to which only five are elected. In addition to teaching first-year writing courses and leading Writing Center activities, Alex taught Shakespeare discussion sections for five years at FSU. Her teaching experience, strengthened by a vast array of courses at FSU, includes a semester teaching an essay course and a Shakespeare course in London for FSU’s International Studies Program. Appointed as a First-Year Writing Mentor for incoming instructors and as a CARE Mentor by FSU, Alex has also had the pleasure of serving her peers in the English Department and of guiding undergraduates in the FSU CARE program – a group that supports first generation college students.