Visions of Landscape in Romantic and Victorian Poetry

by

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Introduction:

From Esotericism to Scientific Materialism

The original inspiration for my project stems from a very simple observation: there is no single way of looking at a landscape. The driving arguments of this article proceed under the assumption that the observer of nature, or participant in nature, operates within a certain epistemological framework that invariably determines, to an important extent, his artistic representation of landscape. In this way, the representation reveals as much about the beholder as it does about the landscape itself. (And in some extreme cases, the representation concerns itself almost exclusively with the beholder and his orientation to the world and very little about the landscape in question.) This project is primarily interested in the ontological stance that the poet takes up in relation to landscape. For example, does the poet approach the natural world as something profoundly “other” than himself, so that his interaction with landscape necessarily constitutes, as Raymond Williams argues, a process of “separation and observation”? Or does the beholder, as he actively contemplates the landscape, arrive at a deeper understanding of his inner nature, so that the landscape ultimately formulates an expression of his soul? I examine the specific ways in which these different positionalities manifest themselves through the artists’ representations of landscape. In doing so, I address, among others, the following questions: does the artist attempt to create a strictly factual representation of landscape, so that he provides a random accumulation of botanical descriptions that cannot be subordinated to a unified aesthetic or moral vision? Or does the artist

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depict natural details in order to enhance the greater gestalt and to highlight the epistemological processes that facilitate an interaction with landscape—processes such as apprehension, assimilation, memory, and recreation?

The chronological scope of this project is extensive. I examine the primary materials of two generations of British artists, critics, and poets, beginning with William Blake’s “Marriage of Heaven and Hell” (1790-1793) and concluding with Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” (1859). A close consideration of these wide-ranging texts can illuminate the evolution of the poetic orientation to nature—from the Romantics’ more spiritual conception of landscape as an important instrument of self-knowledge to the Victorians’ more scientific interest in landscape as a material composition of disparate particulars that could be systematically examined.

The French Enlightenment had left behind an important intellectual legacy in the dualist framework of its Cartesian categories, which identified material phenomena as discrete, self-contained entities and established a strict separation between mind and matter, subject and object, and self and other.² The Romantics, however, entirely sidestepped a materialistic and fragmented investigation into nature, which required that the inquirer establish an ontological separation between himself and the phenomenon at hand, in order to observe, describe, and measure it with scientific empiricism. The Romantics firmly believed that the beholder cannot extract himself from the phenomenon that holds his attention: an examination of nature necessarily includes an examination of the self that examines. In this sense, their approach to nature, which assigned a primary importance to the experiential

aspects of their encounters with landscape, anticipated the phenomenological studies of twentieth-century philosopher Edmund Husserl. As Martin Buber explains in his meditations on the primary words, the individual I eventually incorporates within himself the phenomenon Thou that he examines. The Romantic poets practiced a conscious and feeling participation in the natural world, which involved on the part of the beholder an outward movement toward the material phenomenon and an inward identification with its qualities. For the Romantic poets, nature stood as the material medium through which the divine secrets of the spiritual world formulated themselves to human intelligence.

In the first chapter, I examine various poems, journals, and treatises of the major Romantic poets within the larger framework of the esoteric tradition, in order to illuminate their metaphysical insights into the reciprocal relationship between nature and the human mind. I argue that British Romanticism is deeply allied to, and indeed springs from, the spiritual impulses that have informed many of the mystical and religious traditions of the world. As an integrated movement that prized the active imagination as the primary means of accessing moral truths and uncovering the hidden secrets of the poet’s inner nature, Romanticism directly draws on esoteric insights into human spirituality and perfectibility, in its careful attention to the expansion and deepening of consciousness. The research for this chapter is largely based on Paul Davies’s examination of the relationship between Romanticism and the esoteric tradition. (I also draw on selected writings from the twentieth-century anthroposophist Rudolph Steiner, in which he recommends to the esoteric student in search of higher knowledge several concentration exercises that require

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contemplative practice in relation to a natural object.) In this chapter, my discussion of landscape is subsumed under a broader investigation into what these poets considered to be reliable forms of knowledge.

While the Romantics arrived at knowledge in broad, intuitive leaps, the Victorians advanced toward knowledge in steady and methodical steps, each planted firmly on empirical verification. The emergence of important scientific discoveries and the development of Utilitarian theories of social organization in many ways prevented the lettered societies from taking the esoteric heart of Romantic poetry in complete seriousness. Charles Lyell’s studies in evolitional geology, which explained the formation of the universe according to rational and mechanistic principles, presented an aggressive challenge to the creationist models of the earth’s formation. In addition, these geological discoveries severely damaged the Romantic conviction that a sympathetic connection existed between the human mind and the natural world. Furthermore, Utilitarian theories of social organization were slowly replacing a divinely inspired morality with one that could be systematically measured and implemented. The principle of utility, as put forward by Jeremy Bentham, sought to secure the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people and also encouraged the individual to pursue his personal forms of pleasure. Thus Utilitarianism, in addition to promoting a strong individualist impulse, also generated a spirit of social alienation, which created a society composed of “separate, atomized, competing, individual members.”

In this time of rapid industrial, scientific, and social change, the modern intellect could no longer acknowledge the active

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imagination as the primary instrument of knowledge. If the esoteric teachings of Romantic poetry were not being outwardly denounced in the discourse on morality, they were nonetheless becoming increasingly irrelevant to the modern way of thinking.

The second chapter examines the changing aesthetics that emerged from this transitional period, in which the Victorian poets grappled in their representations of landscape with this movement toward scientific materialism and individualism. In general, the artists and writers of the period demonstrated a newfound attention to the incidental particulars of nature. They pursued a gathering of knowledge piecemeal and launched an investigation into landscape at the microscopic level. In this way, the Victorian poets engaged what Carol Christ has termed an “aesthetic of particularity,” that is, an aesthetic that moves away from ideal categories—such as the beautiful, the picturesque, the sublime, under which the infinite particulars of the natural world are organized and subsumed—and toward the particular and the incidental. While the Romantics also demonstrated a keen aesthetic interest in natural particulars, they believed that a sublime presence infused the smallest details of nature. William Blake, for example, urged humanity to cultivate a spiritual sensitivity to the minute components of landscape, in order “to see a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wildflower.” In this sense, the Romantics celebrated the incidental precisely because it brings into existence the absolute. The Victorians, however, found themselves profoundly uninterested in subordinating the particulars of the natural world to ideal categories. Instead, they considered the minute details of
nature endlessly interesting in themselves and boldly claimed that these particulars merited artistic representation in their own right.

Robert Browning, for example, believed that each element of nature, no matter how miniscule or repugnant, represented an important source of artistic interest. His microscopic attention to the individual components of landscape established the particular as a new universal order. Browning objectively examined the natural world from a removed distance—that is, as an observer of landscape, he was ontologically removed from nature, not intellectually disengaged from or unfeeling toward it. Indeed, he approached landscape with the Cartesian mentality that enforces strict separations between “self” and “other,” “subject” and “object,” “observer” and “observed.” Other Victorian poets who approached the natural world according to these dualist categories sometimes developed a more pathological relation to landscape: either their epistemological interests were firmly entrenched on the side of extreme materialism, or else they collapsed entirely on the side of extreme subjectivity. It seemed that once the beholder could no longer sustain a reciprocal relationship between nature and the human mind, he severely upset the balance between a healthy outward interest in the natural world and an inward contemplation. For example, the Pre-Raphaelite painters and poets, such as William Hunt and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, looked at the natural world as a multitude of disparate particulars, each of which competed for the beholder’s attention and his artistic representation. These artists documented the countless details of their natural and domestic environments with remarkable scientific accuracy—each item crisply outlined, sharply focused, and carefully rendered in exquisite verisimilitude. However, the
Pre-Raphaelites remained exclusively interested in the pure materiality of nature, which offered the beholder nothing in the way of philosophical insight or moral guidance. Tennyson, on the other hand, demonstrated a keen interest in exploring psychological states of isolation, hallucination, and madness through representations of landscape. The natural particulars that compose the landscape in “Mariana,” for example,” exude a dreamy and otherworldly quality that reflects the private grief of the heroine. In this way, the reader understands that the landscape exists solely through the distorted perception of the subject, who remains severely estranged from the reality of the natural world. Other poets, such as Christina Rossetti, expressed their deep anxieties that such an aesthetic of particularity, which celebrated the diversity and multiplicity of the natural world, threatened to cast the beholder into a spiritual state of anomie. “Goblin Market” urges the beholder to discern signs of the divine presence in the natural world. The poem documents her religious efforts to reconcile this materialistic interest in landscape with a spiritual recognition of its divine origins.

Some final words on the terms and methodology of this project. First, I use the term “landscape” loosely, not exclusively to denote a composition of organic matter, as I examine poetic representations of both natural and domestic landscapes. Second, a great portion of this article is contained in the form of close readings of primary materials. Because I examine the works of a wide range of artists, critics, poets, and thinkers, close analysis becomes a valuable method with which to explore the differences and interconnections that emerge throughout the these texts. Furthermore, I believe that the poet’s ontological stance toward landscape is deeply
embedded in his language. Therefore, close attention to the elemental components of a textual passage, such as word choice, sounds, rhyme and rhythm, and syntactical arrangement, enable the reader to make an accurate assessment of the poet’s orientation to the world.
Chapter One

A Romantic Imagination of Landscape:

Active Imagination and the Metaphysical Conversation

In the summer of 1805, Samuel Taylor Coleridge observed in his private journal that as he contemplated the changing landscape from the interior of his country home, he found himself confronting something familiar and forgotten about his own inner nature:

In looking at objects of nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering through the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were asking for, a symbolic language for something within me that already and forever exists, rather than observing anything new. Even when the latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if the new phenomena were the dim awakening of a forgotten or hidden truth of my inner nature.5

Coleridge’s informal reflections on the nocturnal landscape neatly summarize the Romantic relationship with nature, which unfolds as a dialogical process toward self-realization. For the Romantics, landscape functions as an important medium that draws the contemplative poet closer to a state of self-knowledge. Coleridge entirely sidesteps the dualistic categories that determine a more superficial interaction with landscape, in which the beholder directs his visual attention outward toward the external regions, in order to gain new information about his surrounding environment. Instead, he discovers that the landscape illuminates something profoundly within himself, not distinct and separate from himself. In this way, the “symbolic language” of landscape constitutes an unusual system of semiotics: landscape, as the signifier,

points *away* from itself and *toward* another signified—an eternal and unchanging truth about the poet’s inner nature. At this point, landscape has pointed *back* to the original beholder and therefore formulates an *expression* of his soul. Thus, in one sense, the natural world stands as a material script that can be “read,” studied, and meditated on for its hidden spiritual significance. In another sense, landscape becomes the language spoken—not only by the poet’s inner nature, but more importantly by the divine source from which this inner nature is derived. Indeed, this presence “within [the poet] that already and forever exists” issues from the original source of all metaphysical knowledge and physical phenomena—“the great I AM, whose choral echo is the universe.”

Paul Davies describes the Romantic encounter with nature as “a metaphysical conversation,” that is, a meeting of oneself with oneself. The reciprocal relationship between the poet and landscape does not constitute a closed circuit of reflection, in which the landscape directly mirrors the thoughts and feelings of the beholder. Instead, the poet finds himself thoroughly transformed through his participation in landscape, so that the final beholder is precisely *not* the original beholder. As he contemplates the various “objects of nature” that compose the landscape, Coleridge becomes intimately (re)connected to a more meaningful truth about his inner nature, which transcends the surface characteristics and biographical determinants that make up his finite personality.

The central aim of the esoteric tradition is to develop a correct relationship with reality (Davies 11). This process necessarily involves confronting the ultimate metaphysical question, which concerns the origin of the human spirit and also the

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sense and purpose of human existence. In rare moments of meditative tranquility, or perhaps in moments of unanticipated existential crisis, the mental constraints of habitual thinking fall away, and the individual finds himself free, or forced, to seriously consider the essence of his human nature. The sincere and earnest seeker begins to grasp an answer that springs from his inner yearning for knowledge—an answer that does not confine itself to the experiences of his private biography, but instead unfolds and changes with his expanding awareness. For this reason, the spiritual realities that the esoteric sciences strive to uncover have also been called “mysteries,” not because they are fundamentally unknown or unknowable, but because they carry infinite meaning and are constantly revealing themselves to human intelligence.

Human existence, which constitutes a constant state of becoming, presents in itself an intricate question, one that cannot be satisfied with a single determinate answer, but instead demands ongoing consideration and research. The question that surrounds human existence considers the ways in which we can guide the evolution of our lives, so that it becomes meaningful and directed, rather than a habituated product of custom. While standard historicism and psychology insist that the individual look to his past experiences in order to purposefully construct a new future, the esoteric sciences maintain that the seeker actually receives in the present moment his creative impulses from the future (Davies 11). That is, esotericism invites the seeker to adopt a spirit of receptivity to that which is potential, but not yet manifest, and to actualize this potential through his active imagination (Davies 88). In this way, the sought is found not in some distant, external region, as the Cartesian
mentality would have it, but rather in ourselves, as seekers, *in potentia* (Davies 16). David Bohm, the twentieth-century quantum physicist, explains that the seeker finds at the very heart of his question an attraction to what is, as yet, unknown to him—an attraction that, in turn, draws him into a state of creativity and moves him closer to the sought:

> We may feel there is something in us, and we may ask questions to bring it out…The new idea was already in the question. You can ask, where does this facility to be aware of the questions come from, and perhaps that’s the nature of awareness.7

The answer, it turns out, is already nascent in the question. The formulation of any new concept originates from this paradoxical sense of familiarity with the unknown. Thus, in order to draw out a working response that addresses his inner yearning for knowledge, the seeker must pose questions about his own presentiments of the unknown. For example, Coleridge *seeks* and *asks for* a symbolic language that can articulate his “obscure feeling” about the “hidden truth of my inner nature.” Indeed, the poet describes his encounter with landscape in terms of intuitive grasping rather than firm conviction: he characterizes his metaphysical insights into the mysteries of his inner nature as “a dim awakening”—that is, a partial knowledge that gradually becomes more complete as he contemplates the landscape. Through this meditative practice, which involves active questioning, contemplation, and moments of quiet waiting, the seeker prepares himself to receive an emergent answer.

Davies considers this “question of questions” to be the best kind of prayer and meditation, precisely because it necessitates a direct invocation of the active imagination. A strange yet wonderful fact emerges from a sustained meditation on

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this ultimate question, and that is, one can never arrive at a definitive answer that resolves the search, once and for all. Because the question surrounding human existence is undergoing a constant state of becoming, the answer must necessarily evolve with the evolving question. The search, then, becomes a meditative exercise that calls upon the seeker’s constant contemplation of the unknown, which slowly reveals itself to his inquiring appeal, but never fully. It is this constant attraction to the unknown that acts as a mover of time, drawing the Romantic seeker throughout his biographical journey (Davies 30).

“Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey”8 (1798) describes William Wordsworth's return to the banks of Wye and to the natural sights he used to roam about as a young man. The poem is a meditation on the moral influence of nature on the soul, an evaluation of the poet's intellectual and spiritual maturation from youth to age, and a formal revision of his view on the relationship between nature and the human mind. The "few miles above Tintern Abbey" serves as a vantage point from which the poet contemplates the evolution of his attitude toward nature: from a passionate, sensuous exhilaration to a more substantial and intellectual pleasure; from an aesthetic appreciation of nature to a spiritual participation in it. Wordsworth conceives of landscape not as a projection, or even a reflection of his soul, but as a direct expression of his soul. Wordsworth's nature is a model of the perfectly ordered and mature mind in which harmony, spontaneity, creativity, variation, and stability all

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exist in balance and in tandem. Thus nature contains the eternal forms of goodness and stands as a representation of humanity's best potential.

The opening stanza contains twenty-three lines of rapturous description of a sublime landscape that the waterfalls, the mountain crags, the skies, the orchards, the trees, and the farms. Wordsworth opens the poem with the direct, simple sentence “Five years have past.” Immediately he alerts the reader to the great length of time that has elapsed since he has last encountered his beloved Wye: “five” appears three times in the space of two lines, and those five winters are unquestionably “long.” These five years are crucial for the spiritual maturation that Wordsworth develops during this absence. The poet is at last reunited with the natural terrain of his youth, but this time he brings to it a new vision and a new heart. Wordsworth conceives of these natural elements not as entities strictly external from and independent of himself, but rather as inseparable from his consciousness. His new understanding and experience of the natural world necessarily involve a quiet participation in it: “I hear” (2), “I behold” (5), “I…repose…and view” (9-10), “I see” (15). These verbs denote a calmness and a still observation that characterize the poet’s relationship to landscape. He participates in the natural phenomena with such openness and intensity that he absorbs their physical characteristics into his own consciousness:

I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
Which on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky (5-8).

A feeling of harmony and variance pervades these lines—a harmony between natural element and natural element, between the natural world and the poet’s soul. The verb “impress” joins together the “cliffs” and the “thoughts” of the poet’s mind, while
“connect” ties those “cliffs” with the “quiet…sky.” Nothing in the Romantic conception exists in self-contained, self-sufficient isolation and autonomy; rather, everything is intimately connected. However, an experience of wholeness and unity such as Wordsworth describes does not threaten his ability to discern the diversity and variety of the objects in question. A comparison of the adjectives in the “landscape” clause yields a compelling tension among the qualities of the natural elements: “steep,” “lofty,” “wild,” “secluded,” and “quiet.” Freedom, elevation, unrestraint, calm, and stillness all exist in balance and in tandem. Wordsworth recognizes that “unity” does not mean “uniformity.” Oneness does not reduce everything to a muddied blur. Instead, approaching phenomena holistically enables him to experience the multiplicity and variety of the world with greater fullness and appreciation.

Wordsworth proceeds in the following stanza to discuss the moral realm of landscape. The Wye holds a regenerative power that saves the poet from the disconnection and dejection that he experiences in the urban environment. For too long a time has the poet resided in an “unintelligible world” (41) in which “the fretful stir / Unprofitable…Have hung upon the beatings of my heart” (53-55). The long, heavy, Latinate qualities of “unintelligible” and “unprofitable,” together with their negated prefix “un-,” express the spiritual weariness that the city induces in the poet—so much of the urban world seems incomprehensible and meaningless. But he finds in nature an expression of his best self—organic and orderly, creative and receptive. So carefully lodged in his heart are the lessons of the natural world that they bring forth an inexhaustible flow of spontaneous joy and goodness that tides him
over the strains of urbanity: “feelings too / Of unremembered pleasure” (31-32) and “little, nameless, unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love” (35-36). Nature is a boundless resource of spiritual energy that transforms the poet into a more loving, more joyful, more true person. Acts of kindness spring from him without any conscious effort on his part—they are natural and spontaneous. Wordsworth insists that the moral reformation brought about his interaction with landscape is not an instantaneous, transitory incident, but rather a permanent change of heart, as it contains enough “life and food / For future years” (65-66).

The poet’s mature conception of nature, one that involves an understanding of its lessons on wholeness and a gratitude for its moral guidance, is above all imaginative. Mere feeling for nature, passionate and ecstatic though such feeling may be, ultimately proves unproductive and inadequate when unaccompanied by a more actively imaginative faculty. He describes the solace that nature provides him as

[f]elt in the blood, and felt along the heart;  
And passing even into my purer mind  
With tranquil restoration (28-30).

Here Wordsworth presents his hierarchy of the different activities of human consciousness: at the bottom lies the physiological/visceral reaction, in the middle the emotional response, and above everything else the unaffected and “pure” imaginative mind. As a young man, Wordsworth approaches the natural world physiologically and emotionally. His feelings for the natural world include a mixture of ecstasy and danger: he roams about the Wye

…more like a man  
Flying from something that he dreads, than one  
Who sought the thing he loved (71-73).
He has not yet reached the point at which he can recognize the unity and wholeness of things. He regards nature with fear because he regards it as “other”: only something unknowably foreign can conceivably threaten to harm him. While at the beginning of the poem the mature Wordsworth describes the waterfalls of the Wye as “rolling…a sweet inland murmur” (3-4), here he perceives those same waterfalls as “the sounding cataract / [that] Haunted me like a passion” (87-88). His mature realization of a beautiful, harmonious landscape that is representative of humanity’s best potential is necessarily preceded by his youthful conception of a sensational and predatory nature. The landscape of Wye contains for the young Wordsworth all the fascination of a foreign entity, and it stimulates in him sensations characterized by extremity—the “aching joys” (85), “dizzy raptures” (86), and “wild ecstasies” (139).

Echoing the principle of universal harmony that Coleridge espouses in “The Aeolian Harp,” in which he marvels at the “one Life within us and abroad,”9 Wordsworth puts forth his own thesis of unity and wholeness as expressed through nature. In the penultimate stanza, he speaks of

...[a] motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought
And rolls through all things” (101-103).

This “spirit” is the universal consciousness that resides in all things, in both physical and metaphysical phenomena. The interior soul and the exterior world are, if not indistinguishable, then profoundly inter-related. Wordsworth the Romantic poet takes this theory of participation one step further: he acknowledges that we are indeed

represented by nature. We are expressed by what we perceive, as much as we perceive anything.

For the Romantics, the active imagination provides a direct pathway to higher stages of awareness. They believed that the imagination transforms the inner life of the individual by infusing his moods with calm purpose, cleansing his perceptions of the world, and influencing his attitudes toward life. In this way, the imagination can be understood as “active” because it facilitates deeper and more expansive stages of awareness, not because it involves busy or toiling mental activity (Davies 64). The Romantics saw the imagination as fundamentally opposed to discursive reasoning.

Coleridge explained that the imagination, which he referred to as “reason,” is “fixed”—that is, absolute, fundamental, and immediate. The imagination alone can access authentic knowledge, because it “appeals…in all its decisions…directly to the ground and substance of their Truth.” Intellectual reasoning, or “understanding,” on the other hand, is “discursive”—that is, intrinsically dependent on some other premise for its own validity. It must “refer to some other faculty as its ultimate authority…in all its judgments.” Coleridge felt deeply that as his consciousness progressed from an intellectual mindset to a more creative one, his spirit became more alive, intimate, and grounded in nature and reality (Davies 79). He often bemoaned the fact that through intellectual activity alone he could find so few “abiding places” for his reason (Biographia Literaria, 93). Once he consciously engaged his creative spirit,

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10 Coleridge, Aids to Reflection (Burlington: C. Goodrich, 1829), 40. Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically.
however, he found himself able to firmly situate his consciousness in the great present moment and to open his spiritual eyes to its infinite richness and possibility.

This revelation about the transformative power of imaginative thinking contains an important esoteric message—that only through a focused attention on the present moment can we hope to secure a brighter future and to heal past wrongs (Davies 103). Percy Bysshe Shelley arrived at the same conclusion through his contemplation of the subtle, but vital, changes that occur in the inner life of the individual, when he shifts from one mode of thinking to another. In his metaphysical poem \textit{To a Skylark} (1820), Shelley laments the frequent spells of spiritual dryness that characterize ordinary consciousness, in which the individual’s thoughts are occupied by the tedious cares of daily life.

\begin{center}
\textit{We look before and after,}
\textit{And pine for what is not.}
\textit{Our sincerest laughter}
\textit{With some pain is fraught (86-90).}\textsuperscript{11}
\end{center}

The Romantic poets constantly expressed their deep anxieties over this hurried and habitual state of mind that unfortunately constitutes the default mode of thinking. Ordinary consciousness, they feared, has become dominated by the demands of misplaced priorities, which prevents the individual from cultivating a rich and authentic inner life, in which his thoughts, feelings, and actions are unified by honest sincerity and singleness of purpose.

For this reason, the Romantics were determined to lay bare the fact that, through occupying our mental and physical activities exclusively with the matters of the immediate, material world, we develop an uncreative relationship with the world

around us and with the passage of time. That is, we cling to the past and chase after the future, while in the meantime, we remain utterly asleep to the “flood of rapture so divine”—the spiritual sustenance that, as the esoteric tradition constantly maintains, is infinitely available to the seeker in the present moment. Although we actively pursue a high level of material productivity and struggle to piece together some semblance of spiritual fullness, we are often left with a profound sense of emptiness, despite our toiling efforts. And while we spend our material and psychic energy striving to accumulate resources and to accomplish ambitious goals, we can never have or do enough to appease our insecurities and find ourselves crying out for more. William Wordsworth had this ache-and-toil lifestyle in mind when he observed that through “getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.”

William Blake, too, spoke sadly of the “mind-forged manacles,” whose presence he discerned in the desperate cries of humanity.

The Romantics maintained that the active imagination, which they constantly engaged in their contemplation of the natural world, provided the single effective antidote against spiritual dullness and dissatisfaction. They insisted that the outward problems of daily life cannot be addressed at their own level; instead, engagement with them must be infused from a higher wisdom. However, the Romantics never suggested that this metaphysical wisdom should be entirely divorced from the realities of the material world. In fact, they recognized that knowledge of the absolute could only be gained through contemplation of the relative—that is,

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knowledge of the material world. Rudolph Steiner, the leading twentieth-century anthroposophist, emphasized in his numerous esoteric writings that any knowledge of higher worlds must be firmly established in a meditative study of the natural world. He recommends to the esoteric student several initiation exercises that require contemplative practice in relation to a seed, plant, or flower. Such fundamental contemplation directly summons the active imagination, which enables the esoteric student to conduct, with a clear mind and an open heart, a rigorous examination of both the specific qualities of a natural object and his inner responses to the phenomenon that holds his attention. As he practices these initiation exercises, the esoteric student begins to experience what can be summarized as a going out of his immediate self toward the seed, plant, or flower that is positioned before him. This soul experience involves a direct participation in, and not merely with, the matter at hand. Steiner insisted that without this basic contact with the concrete phenomena of the natural world, the esoteric student can only manage to arrive at a higher knowledge that is, at best, partially or poorly understood and therefore useless or, at worst, entirely fabricated and therefore dangerous.

In this way, the esoteric tradition constantly cautions the seeker of higher worlds against indulging in extreme fantasy and establishing his metaphysical insights on a superficial or non-existent basis in reality. At the same time, it also warns him against approaching the world with an attitude of extreme materialism, in which the seeker regards the world of matter as the ultimate and final reality and thereby denies the presence and influence of the higher, super-sensible worlds. Owen

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Barfield explains that when we experience physical phenomena as separate and independent from our conscious participation, we assign the material world a false and immoderate status.\textsuperscript{15} This type of thinking, which establishes limiting categories such as “mind” and “matter,” “subject” and “object,” “self” and “other,” presents itself as a danger to our spiritual lives: for we remain self-satisfied and isolated in our private spheres when we could integrate our consciousness into a greater spiritual reality. The esoteric tradition urges the esoteric seeker to adhere to a straight spiritual path that shuns the polar spiritual dangers of extreme fantasy and extreme materialism—in short, to develop a right relationship with reality.

The Romantics contemplated the landscape with what can be called “spiritual vision,” with which they looked beyond the material reality of the natural world, in order to access higher, metaphysical truths about their inner nature. The theme of discerning, looking, perceiving, and seeing, and its related theme of listening and hearing, run throughout the whole of Romantic poetry. The Romantic poets constantly referred in their poems, letters, and treatises to the act of clearing the vision, in order to see the world anew, as it really is, unmasked in all its glorious splendor. “Seeing” is often thought of as a passive and uncomplicated act that consists of visually absorbing whatever happens to be placed in front of the gaze. The Romantics insisted, however, that the act of perception involves a conscious, concentrated effort to eliminate what Shelley described as “the film of familiarity”—that is, the mental habits, moral prejudices, and extreme materialism that obscure the spiritual vision. Blake proclaimed that “if the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to

\textsuperscript{15} See Owen Barfield, \textit{Saving the Appearances: a Study in Idolatry} (London: Faber and Faber, 1957).
man as it is, infinite.” The “doors” refer, of course, not exclusively to the visual sense organs, but more directly to the spiritual organs that enable the seeker to discern the infinite nature of the universe, which is also contained within his human consciousness. In *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793), Blake explains that he makes use of his sense perceptions in order to facilitate, by means of his active imagination, a more spiritual and inward vision: “I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning sight. *I look thro’ it & not with it.*” Blake acknowledges that his sense perceptions function as a window that reveals the final vision but *does not stand in itself* as the final vision.

Similarly, in his *Defense of Poetry*, Shelley argues that poetry functions as a necessary good for the moral evolution of humanity, precisely because it possesses a unique ability to “purge from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being.” When Shelley speaks of this “wonder of our being,” he is not motivated by selfish egoism or an inordinate sense of grandeur. Instead, he is pointing to the infinite nature of the human mind, which constitutes one of the eternal mysteries that constantly reveals itself to the esoteric poet in his contemplation of landscape. These meditations on sight and seeing bring to light an important esoteric truth—that the active imagination does not create dreamy and insubstantial fantasies. On the contrary, it functions as a direct *reveler* of truth, uncovering hidden, higher realities. Blake’s insistence that, with purposeful direction of the soul faculties, we can experience reality “as it is” demonstrates his conviction that the imagination accesses already existent truths and does not indulge in make-believe. Again, the higher knowledge gained by the active imagination does not
stand as a figment of fancy that is divorced from reality, but instead exists in profound accordance with it.

Blake insisted that when the individual closely examines his human essence and distinguishes what is transitory from what is eternal, he finds that the imaginative thinking constitutes the kernel of his most fundamental self: “Judge then of thy Own Self: thy eternal lineaments explore, What is Eternal and what Changeable, and what annihilable. The Imagination is not a state: it is the Human Existence itself (my italics).” According to Blake, the imagination, which cannot be experienced by removed observation but only by direct participation, marks us as decidedly human. Here Coleridge explains that the human spirit, which he understood as free, creative, authentic, and enduring, resides in the active imagination. Once again, he refers to the active imagination as “reason”:

Reason is the faculty of contemplation. Reason indeed is much nearer to sense than to understanding, for reason...is a direct aspect of Truth, an inward beholding having a similar relation to the intelligible or spiritual as sense has to the material or phenomenal (Aids to Reflection, 40).

Coleridge returns to the theme of sight and seeing. This “inward beholding” represents an immediate, direct, and unsurpassed knowledge. It can also be described as a meeting with ones truer, higher, and forgotten self in the act of contemplation. Coleridge makes a powerful claim about the infinite capacities of the individualized human mind, when he describes the primary imagination as the “repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” The active imagination connects the seeker, or perhaps more accurately, marks him a part of, the pure,
unadulterated consciousness of the divine source—the original and unbroken unity that informs all things, seen and unseen.
Chapter Two:

Victorian Representation of Landscape

and the Aesthetic of Particularity

As demonstrated in Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” the Romantic relationship with nature unfolded as a dialogical process toward self-realization. The poet began his journey into nature with a set of unresolved and pressing questions about the capacities of the human mind, the influence of nature on human action, and the evolution of his own youthful emotiveness to his present, thought-centered understanding. As he allowed the natural world to quietly reveal its answers, the poet discovered in nature a boundless resource of moral guidance, spiritual sustenance, and psychic restoration. What he asked for, he received, and what he sought, he found. Nature guided him toward a moral and spontaneous action that existed in accordance with his best self. Most importantly, the poet succeeded in locating a precise analogue for the self in the natural world. Wordsworth proclaimed in his revelatory state that the waterfalls, the mountain crags, the sky, and the trees formulated an expression of his soul. For the Romantics, the imagination possessed an unlimited capacity to apprehend the inseparable oneness between the human mind and the material world and to rejoice in the “one Life within us and abroad.”

While the Romantics arrived at knowledge in broad, intuitive leaps, the Victorians advanced toward knowledge in steady and methodical steps, each planted firmly on empirical verification. The modern era had ushered in significant industrial advancements and scientific discoveries that had drastically changed the collective
orientation to the world. A scientific discourse was emerging that described nature as an indifferent system of pure mechanics. In his *Principles of Geology*, published in three volumes from 1830-1833, Charles Lyell proposed a uniformitarian theory of geological evolution, which hypothesized that the formation of the earth’s crust resulted from a continuous course of chemical processes that spanned the duration of millions of years. For many devout geologists and creationists, Lyell’s text presented a heretical challenge to the Mosaic account of the formation of the earth, which insisted that God divinely created the universe approximately six thousand years ago. As new knowledge of scientific discoveries became widely disseminated through public lectures and literature, the lettered societies grew increasingly skeptical that an intellectual connection existed between nature and the human mind. For poets such as Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Matthew Arnold, the Romantic conviction that nature provided a sympathetic and important moral force for humankind could no longer survive unchallenged and undamaged in this critical era. Literary theory, too, called for an intellectually rigorous representation of human emotion that functioned without recourse to natural fallacy. In his essay “Of the Pathetic Fallacy,” John Ruskin denounces the poetic conflation of psychological states and natural conditions as false and fantastical anthropomorphism. He advocates instead a factual representation of nature that remains uncontaminated by excessive human emotion or passion.

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The mechanistic and rational principles that guided the development of science also played a crucial role in shaping theories of social organization. In 1825, Jeremy Bentham explained his principle of utility in *The Rationale of Reward*, which urged the private citizen to pursue activities and courses of action that not only produced useful outcomes but, more importantly, contributed to the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Bentham equated happiness with the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain, and he insisted that the specific manifestations of pleasure and pain must be personally determined by each individual for himself. Utilitarianism thus exemplified an important change in the discourse on morality: a consequentialist system that prized pleasure as its ultimate moral objective presented an aggressive challenge to a divinely inspired and humanly accessed morality. In fact, Bentham maintained that pleasure represented the highest ethical good and that all systems of morality could be “reduced to the principle of sympathy and antipathy.” Bentham and the later Utilitarians, such as John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer, argued that social policies should be directed toward achieving the highest moral imperative of pleasure, in order to secure the greatest sum of societal happiness. In this way, the Utilitarians demonstrated an eager willingness to apply the methodologies of quantitative science to their ethical objectives and expressed confidence that their visions of social organization could be calculated and implemented systematically. Furthermore, the movement embodied the burgeoning individualist impulse of the modern period. Because no single, esoteric moral code

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21 See Harrison.
existed to govern human conduct, the most sensible course of action was to ensure that each individual pursue his private interests and secure his personal forms of pleasure.

Utilitarianism formally stripped poetry of its honored status as an instrument of divine knowledge and moral guidance and, in the meantime, relegated the art form to the category of pleasurable pastime. The scientific materialism that informed both the contemporary scientific discourse and the social sciences served to discredit many of the esoteric principles that had made up the ethical heart of poetry. Utilitarianism further solidified the modern disbelief that the natural world was expressly fitted to the human mind and that the individual possessed the imaginative capacity to apprehend a divinely inspired morality (Richards 5). Because these intuitive forms of knowledge could not be empirically confirmed or systematically described, they were pushed to the margins of rational discourse, or else entirely rejected as unreliable and impractical theories. This spirit of modern skepticism, which has doggedly persisted up until the present day, has prevented the common reader from taking poetry in complete seriousness.

In his chapter on “Art and Science,” Bentham infamously compares poetry to “[a] game of push-pin”:

The value which [the arts and sciences] possess is *exactly in proportion* to the pleasure they yield….Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin is of *equal value* with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. If the game of push-pin furnish more pleasure, it is more valuable than either (my italics).  

Bentham makes no apology for his grossly reductive evaluation of the arts and sciences, whose intrinsic worth he reduces to the exact degree of pleasure that they

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provide. He casually dismisses the aesthetic, intellectual, and moral benefits of the humanities as “fanciful…species of preeminence” that hold value insofar as they provide pleasure. For this reason, Bentham makes no distinction between the pleasure that accompanies the improvement of the mind and the pleasure that is derived from distractive amusements. Aesthetic, intellectual, and religious pleasures are not, in his mind, intrinsically superior to recreational pleasure. Utilitarianism rejected the hierarchization of values that had structured the more traditional moral systems and evenly leveled all forms of pleasure on a horizontal plane. Bentham clearly believed that the pleasure that a particular activity, discipline, or pursuit affords, and hence the value that it contains, can be determined with mathematical precision. This Utilitarian passion for empirical quantification is acutely embedded in Bentham’s language, in which he employs commercial diction in such words and phrases as “exactly in proportion,” “yield,” “equal value,” and “more valuable.”

It is entirely possible for the cultural historians of this transitional period to overestimate the importance of Utilitarianism (Richards 5). While Utilitarianism had managed to cast poetry into the margins of the collective consideration, it succeeded in doing so not because Bentham made an argument for the case, but because its visions of social organization, moral systems, and scholarly education cut off the esoteric “life-stream” of poetry at its very source (Richards 5). To an important extent, Utilitarianism contributed in significant ways to a period of change that was not entirely of its own making: the movement was inevitably shaped by the growing industrial advancements and scientific discoveries that exerted their own inexorable force.
The materialistic attitude toward nature and the individualist impulse in theories of social organization presented important implications for literature and painting. Scientists, writers, and artists alike pursued a gathering of knowledge piecemeal and launched an investigation into nature at the microscopic level. The important poets of the period expressed a sensuous enthusiasm for examining the specific colors, contours, odors, textures, and movements of a multitude of natural phenomena. This fascination with the heterogeneous particulars of nature informed such poetic moments as the rapt meditation on the physical properties of a farmhouse in Tennyson’s “Mariana” (1830); the purely descriptive account of street rubbish in Browning’s “Fra Lippo Lippi” (1855); and the extensive inventory of market produce in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” (1859). For these poets, the world was filled with a thousand points of interest, each of which merited the closest attention and the most faithful—that is, scientifically accurate—representation. This “aesthetic of particularity,” to borrow Carol Christ’s phrase, explored how each incidental particular fulfilled the celebratory promise of a pluralistic universe.  

Thus, in directing their poetic attention to the infinite minutiae of a pluralistic universe, the Victorian poets made a bold claim for the primacy of the particular and the incidental over the ideal classification. The neo-Platonic principle of art, which insisted that each manifestation of a common term (for instance, a tulip) closely echo its eternal and transcendent form, was being rapidly replaced by a new aesthetic that assigned primary importance to the particular and that located the essence of each

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phenomenon in its individual identity. In his preface to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), Walter Pater turns this neoclassical hierarchy that emphasized abstraction over particulars neatly on its head, as he urges the true student of aesthetics to define beauty by its concrete examples and special manifestations, rather than by abstract ideas and universal formulas. Pater explains that the quality of beauty that graces an excellent work of music, poetry, or painting is composed of an aggregate of specific features that can be thoroughly identified and described. For this reason, any discussion of beauty that proceeds along abstract and relativistic terms compromises the productivity of an aesthetic analysis. “The definition of [beauty],” Pater asserts unapologetically, “becomes unmeaning and useless in proportion to its abstractness.”

The task of the aesthetic critic thus remains to analyze, distinguish, and dissect the work of art in question, in order to extract with a surgical precision that specific feature of beauty that illuminates the entire work: “His end is reached when he has disengaged that virtue…by which a picture [or] a landscape produces this special impression of beauty and pleasure…, and noted it, as a chemist notes some natural element, for himself and others” (Pater 1508). Pater expresses the scientific materialism of the age when he dismisses the possibility of an absolute standard of “truth” and “beauty” as probably indeterminable and, in any case, irrelevant to contemporary aesthetic criticism. The aesthetic critic who exercises his discriminatory and analytical faculties

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has no need to trouble himself with the abstract question what beauty is in itself, or what its exact relation to truth or experience—metaphysical questions, as *unprofitable* as metaphysics elsewhere. He may pass them all as being, answerable or not, of *no interest* to him (Pater 1507).

For Pater, the most valuable aesthetic criticism involves a reasoned break-down of a beautiful work of art into its distinct, irreducible features, which can then be discussed with more or less empirical exactitude.

Browning’s poems represent an important example of this movement of Victorian aesthetics away from abstract ideals and universal formulas and toward the particular and the incidental. His microscopic and indiscriminate examination of nature established the particular as the basis for a new universal order (Christ 66).

Browning believed that each element of nature, no matter how miniscule or repugnant, represented an important source of vitality and exuberance. J. Hillis Miller points out that Browning’s poetic language enacts the sensuous drama that continuously unfolds in a heterogeneous world of objects: the stuttering alliteration and syncopated rhythm of his verse embody the friction of active entities pursuing their individual movements.25 Browning expressed a sensuous fascination with objects of nature that are dense in substance and rough in texture: the objects that inhabit his landscape often appear ready to burst forth from their skin and release their life-force (Miller 510). He describes the exquisite and the disgusting specimens of nature with an equal degree of detail and scientific exactitude, as he seeks to break down the boundaries between the beautiful and the ugly.

Browning often provoked criticism from those critics and poets who held serious reservations about throwing over ideal categories and overarching concepts in favor of celebrating the infinite particulars of the natural world. For example, in an informal review of Browning’s poetry, Matthew Arnold insisted that poets “must begin with an Idea of the world in order not be prevailed over by the world’s multitudinousness.” Whereas Browning approached this multitudinousness in a spirit of joyful celebration, many of his contemporaries worried that this enthusiastic embrace of material particulars confirmed a troublesome loss of an organizing moral center, without which the individual risks entering a state of spiritual distractedness and purposelessness. Christina Rossetti, whose poem “Goblin Market” I will discuss further on in greater depth, believed that the infinite particulars of the natural world, each of which seems endlessly interesting in itself, threatens to overwhelm the physical sense and to absorb the beholder into its pure materiality. For this reason, Arnold and Rossetti insisted that the poet must maintain overarching concepts in his interactions with the natural world, so that he can differentiate, hierarchize, organize, and subsume the countless pieces of information that he gathers under ideal categories.

This central debate concerning the movement of Victorian aesthetics away from ideal categories and toward the particular gave way to a secondary argument that addressed the following question: which specimens of nature merits artistic representation? In general, Browning overlooked for poetic representation those objects that were informed by a generic ideal of beauty and directed his artistic

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attention instead to those individual objects that stood out by virtue of their idiosyncrasies. Walter Bagehot, a contemporary literary critic, was the first to characterize Browning’s as purposefully “grotesque.”27 Bagehot correctly pegged Browning as “an artist working by incongruity [who operates] by showing you the distorted and imperfect image” (465). Indeed, the grotesque captured and stimulated Browning’s imagination, whereas standard beautiful objects often failed to arouse his artistic interest. Browning recognized that while normally “beautiful” objects share a similar structure, each abnormal specimen is clearly differentiated from the others and, for this reason, deserves to be celebrated for its individuality. Bagehot worried that an indiscriminate observer of nature, who develops an excessive and unhealthy attraction to repugnant forms, necessarily surrenders his ability to find a more wholesome pleasure in beautiful things.

In “Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis,” Browning salvages a pedantic book that he had tossed into a crevice a month earlier and finds it covered with spotted, streaked, and multi-colored mold. The title of the poem presents a facetious tongue-twister that mocks the stuffy Latinate names of plants and, more importantly, mimics the diversity and multiplicity of nature. Browning extracts an immense delight in accentuating the unexpected intricacies of language: the reader trips over the multiple syllables and jarring consonants of the poem’s title, just as the observer of nature becomes spontaneously absorbed in the minute and individual particulars of the natural world.

Here you have it, dry in the sun,
   With all the binding all of a blister,
And great blue spots where the ink has run,
   And reddish streaks that wink and glister
O'er the page so beautifully yellow:
   Oh, well have the droppings played their tricks!
Did he guess how toadstools grow, this fellow?
   Here's one stuck in his chapter six!

How did he like it when the live creatures
   Tickled and toused and browsed him all over,
And worm, slug, eft, with serious features,
   Came in, each one, for his right of trover?
—When the water-beetle with great blind deaf face
   Made of her eggs the stately deposit,
And the newt borrowed just so much of the preface
   As tiled in the top of his black wife's closet?28

The scholarly, lifeless text has been transformed into a proliferate breeding ground for organic matter and a wide assortment of busy insects. Each of these parallel existences embodies a unique physicality and pursues its essential activities. The different species of fungi, for example, arrange themselves organically into their individualized patterns and flaunt bright colors that distinguish them from their backgrounds. In a moment of striking scientific realism, Browning zooms in with microscopic focus on the face of an egg-laying beetle and accurately documents its large, sightless, and unhearing qualities. He presents the natural world as a composition of competing energies that “wink,” “glimmer,” “tickle,” “touse,” and “browse” in their self-seeking efforts to convert the book into their own especial habitat (Christ 68). These active verbs, all of which contain hard consonants and terse, single or double syllables, evoke the robust motion that propels a dynamic and heterogeneous universe. The disparate particulars of the natural world fail to organize themselves into a uniform and harmonious landscape. Instead, they

forcefully assert their individual identities and often collide discordantly with their surrounding environment. The poem, which is heavily saturated with such visual and tactile impressions, presents natural phenomenon as a self-contained and sharply-defined object. Even normally passive characteristics, such as color and texture, take on an assertive and almost aggressive comportment (Christ 67).

The overwhelming particularity and materialism of the Victorian aesthetic was also symptomatic of darker concerns that troubled many contemporary thinkers: namely, the loss of a determinate, eternal, and universal order and the individual’s disconnectedness from nature. What remained in the absence of this single, unifying theory was a multitude of disparate particulars that each seemed to vie for the beholder’s artistic focus and representation and that, although endlessly interesting in themselves, failed to provide him any moral guidance, philosophical insight into the workings of the universe, or confirmation of a sympathetic connection between nature and the human mind. In his discussion on W. Holman Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience* (1851-1853), Ruskin describes how the incidental details of nature impress themselves violently on the mind of the beholder and threaten to overpower human intelligence with their pure materiality: “The most trivial objects force themselves upon the attention of [the] mind….They thrust themselves forward with a ghastly and unendurable distinctness, as if they would compel the sufferer to count, or measure, or learn them by heart.”29 The Pre-Raphaelite artists relished a surfeit of natural and domestic objects in their paintings and ensured that each featured item

was precisely outlined, sharply focused, and executed with a high degree of detail and finish.

Hunt’s painting (see image reproduced on the following page), which features a young bourgeois couple lounging in an overstuffed parlor, faithfully replicates the specific colors, textures, and surface decorations of a varied assortment of Victorian bric-a-brac. The verisimilitude of each detail—the delicate perforations in the linen dress, the elaborate patterns on the shawl and the tapestries, and the intricate surface carvings on the piano forte—remains intact even under microscopic inspection. But the accumulation of objects offers the beholder no aesthetic or intellectual gratification beyond its pure and thoughtless materiality. The discarded glove, the unread newspaper, the flat cigar tray, and the glass-encased clock each stand forth in striking detail and scientific exactitude, but they communicate no discernible unity or intelligible order. Because the beholder cannot approach these distinct objects with his sympathetic and imaginative powers, he is forced to deal with them systematically and to register their material properties with empirical precision. The Awakening Conscience demonstrates that the aesthetic of particularity not only produced extraordinary mimetic results but also fulfilled an important taxonomical function. As part of a resolute effort to control an over-determined world of objects that proved increasingly resistant to the organizing faculties of the human mind, the Victorian poets and painters resorted to zealously recording, describing, and categorizing the innumerable phenomena of nature.

This obsession with compiling extensive and descriptive lists of objects was primarily driven by a relentless search for an objective standard of truth. Many Victorian poets distrusted the distortive powers of subjectivity and were thus compelled to reject intuitive forms of knowledge. While the Romantics located truth and reality in the reciprocal relationship between nature and the human mind, the Victorians often pursued a materialistic knowledge of nature that was founded on empirical observation and that remained uncontaminated by human feeling. The scientific materialism of the age could no longer sustain the individual's interdependent relationship with nature, in which the natural world formulated an expression of his mind and guided him toward correct moral action. The Romantic poets recognized the necessary role that the epistemological processes, such as apprehension, assimilation, memory, and recreation, played in shaping their understanding of the world. Consequently, they did not fear that a conscious and feeling participation in the material world threatened to imprison the individual in a solipsistic frame of mind or to eclipse the identity of the object at hand. For Victorians, however, any knowledge gained of the outer world or judgment formulated about its various components, no matter how objectively anchored in empirical verification, contained value and meaning for the subject and the subject only. Pater insists in his conclusion to *The Renaissance* that the individual’s consciousness consists of an indeterminate and contingent stream of sensuous experiences, which remain circumscribed within the subject’s “thick wall of personality through which no voice has ever pierced” (1511).
Thus the new aesthetic process of locating, investigating, and documenting the material properties of natural phenomena became a profoundly separating, rather than unifying, act. The Victorian artists earnestly followed Ruskin’s instructions to approach nature in a spirit of humility and to “select nothing [and] reject nothing”\(^{31}\) in their study and representation of nature. However, this aesthetic ethos that encouraged an indiscriminate embrace of “the world’s multitudinousness,” to borrow Arnold’s phrase, failed to inspire within the artist an outward expansiveness toward and an inward identification with the natural phenomenon represented. The overwhelming multiplicity of nature only informed the individual of his existential separateness and compelled him to retreat further into his private and insular sphere. Although the Victorian poets and painters sought to represent nature with empirical precision, they could not avoid psychologizing their physical environment and thus risked slipping into the domain of solipsism. Christ points out that the Victorian treatment of nature corresponds to a curious detachment from any authentic interest in nature itself. The materialistic culture of the age prevented the artist from interacting with nature in the spirit of true openness, receptivity, and reverence required for the natural world to reveal its divine secrets. The more empirical knowledge the Victorian poets gathered about the outer world, the more keenly aware they became of the emptiness and indeterminacy within. Nature, it seemed, had become the great distancer of humankind from the divine.

For Alfred Tennyson, this inexorable movement toward extreme subjectivity presented troubling implications for the moral sensibilities and social commitments of humanity. Tennyson understood that the scientific materialism and individualist impulse of the modern period had destroyed much of the sympathetic force that connected the individual to the outer world and that enabled him to apprehend a universal order. He took with complete seriousness his role as a social poet who dedicated himself to the education of his public audience; naturally, he was anxious about the solipsistic consequences that resulted from the subject’s withdrawal into his self-enclosed consciousness (Christ 36). In many of his early poems, such as “Mariana,” “The Lady of Shalott” (1832), and “The Lotos-Eaters” (1832), Tennyson launched an epistemological investigation into what he considered to be the pathological powers of subjectivity, which distorted human perception and damaged the possibility of a universally accessible meaning. Tennyson’s *dramatis personae* devote an almost obsessive attention to a random selection of particulars that, when combined with the dreamlike reality of their representation, produces an intensely psychological landscape. These poems explore the various ways in which a sustained and emotionally charged contemplation of the natural world and its mundane particulars gives way to a state of complete solipsism. In addition, these poems often depict static images of objects and places that appear to exist outside of time and space and that lack any indication of a concrete and phenomenal existence (Christ 38). The timeless, changeless, and even bodiless quality that emanates from these representations of nature suggests, of course, that the landscape exists primarily
through the subject’s distortive perception, providing further indication of his imprisonment within the “thick walls of personality.”

In “Mariana,” Tennyson articulates his deep anxieties about the self-enclosed beholder who forcibly projects his private emotions onto his physical environment and thereby imposes a severe separation between himself and the reality of the natural world. The poem creates a haunting presentation of landscape that explores the solitary fears, obsessive thoughts, and hallucinatory perceptions of the eponymous heroine. Having been abandoned by her lover in a deserted farmhouse, Mariana mourns her severe isolation from the human world and retreats further into her private and insular sphere. She absorbs the various particulars of her environment through an emotional filter of isolation and melancholy, until eventually the entire landscape conveys a gloomy homogeneity in its emotional tone. The poem evokes a nostalgic longing for the Romantic ethos of universal connectedness, which inspired the individual to approach nature in a spirit of openness and receptivity, in order to transcend the narrow confines of his personality and to apprehend the divine source that sustained all things material and spiritual. Tennyson recognized that whenever the beholder approaches the natural world in a spirit of self-absorption, he necessarily eclipses the identity of the object at hand and prevents the object from revealing its divine secrets. In her despondent examination of nature, Mariana gains no substantive knowledge of its material phenomena and cannot acknowledge the reality of their independent existences. She discerns in the natural world only a narrow reflection of her inner melancholy and thus remains trapped within an inescapable circuit of private emotion. Just as Narcissus becomes single-mindedly obsessed with
his physical beauty and eventually drowns in a shallow pool that reflects his image, so Mariana develops a pathological addiction to her own brooding sorrow that anticipates her psychic collapse and disintegration.

Landscape functions as the poem’s primary conveyor of mood. Tennyson does not attempt to provide a lifelike depiction of a country farmhouse but aims instead to explore the various ways in which the psyche shapes landscape and lends it a distinctly dreamlike reality. Although Mariana does not describe the grange in the first-person lyric voice, the poem presents the landscape in such uniform intensity that the reader comes to understand the environment through the heroine’s eyes (Christ 19). Here in the opening stanza, Tennyson introduces the “dreamy house” (61) through a series of sharply focused and disjointed sense impressions:

With blackest moss the flower-plots
   Were thickly crusted, one and all;
The rusted nails fell from the knots
   That held the pear to the gable wall.
The broken sheds looked sad and strange:
   Unlifted was the clinking latch;
   Weeded and worn the ancient thatch
   Upon the lonely moated grange.
   She only said, “My life is dreary,
   He cometh not,” she said;
   She said, “I am aweary, aweary,
   I would that I were dead!” (1-12)  

What is most striking about this passage is the way in which each image—moss, flower-plots, nails, knots, pear, wall, sheds, latch, thatch, grange—stands forth in crystal clearness and distinct precision. For all their startling prominence, however, these pieces of botanical and domestic clutter seem utterly devoid of any indication of

a concrete and phenomenal existence. Throughout the poem, Tennyson makes
heavily gestural references to the various creatures, furniture, plants, and tools that
compose the landscape. These gestural references consist mostly of noun-adjective
pairs that lack substantial descriptions of their material characteristics, such as “the
flower-plots,” “the rusted nails,” “the gable wall,” “the broken sheds,” and “the
clinking latch.” Furthermore, the sweetly assonant and almost precious sound quality
that these references convey draws further attention to the hollowness of their
representation: although bold and clear in outline, these images become strangely
ephemeral in substance.

In the first line, for example, the poet provides the odd but evocative image of
“blackest moss.” Several puzzling questions come to mind when the reader attempts
to form a mental picture of “blackest moss”: how has this characteristically green-
colored plant become black? How does the dramatis persona know that the moss is
black as black can be? The answer, of course, to these seemingly pointless questions
is that the “blackest moss” does not signify any familiar or even existent plant but
stands instead as a morbid and otherworldly image of grass that results from the
beholder’s distorted perception. Indeed, Mariana’s psychic pain has brought about a
severe imbalance between her awareness of abundance and her awareness of
deterioration (Christ 25). Her sense impressions uniformly reflect her obsession with
the processes of decay, so that the outer world appears “sad and strange” to her eyes:
the rusty nails loosen themselves from the wall, while the pathetic sheds are falling to
pieces. The image of “the clinking latch [that]…was unlifted” becomes especially
sinister as the poem dwells on the unfulfilled potential of the apparatus.
The poem is marked by an almost complete absence of dynamic movement that signals Mariana's imprisonment in a world “without hope of change” (29). Her feelings of entrapment extend beyond her solitary isolation in the “lonely moated grange” to include a captivity of consciousness. Each object mentioned in the fourth stanza, reproduced below, remains tightly sequestered within its prescribed space and engages in little to no interaction with the neighboring items.

About a stonecast from the wall
A sluice with blackened waters slept,
And o’er it many, round and small,
The clustered marish-mosses crept.
Hard by a poplar shook alway,
All silver-green with gnarled bar:
For leagues no other tree did mark
The level waste, the rounded gray.
She only said, “My life is dreary,
He cometh not,” she said;
She said, “I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!” (37-48)

The only words that connect each self-contained image to another are relational prepositions that denote the spatial arrangement, such as “a stonecast from,” “o’er it,” “hard by,” and “for leagues.” A short analysis of the active verbs uncovers, not surprisingly, a notable lack of action: the “sluice,” or embankment, “sle[eps]” with blackened waters” to suggest a filthy and unwholesome stagnation; the “clustered marish-mosses cre[ep]” above the motionless water with insidious intent; and the “silver-green poplar [that] sh[akes] alway” provides a rare instance of dynamic, albeit isolated, movement. As in the poem’s opening stanza, a timeless, changeless, and even bodiless quality emanates from these gestural images (Christ 23), which express a certain homogeneity in their representation of disintegration and decay. The gloomy observation that “no other tree did mark / The level waste” belabors the
unfulfilled potential of the wide expanse of empty land and emphasizes not what is present, but instead what is absent. The studied stillness of the landscape is further reinforced by the poem’s monotonous and trance-like rhythm, which mostly consists of mono- and duo-syllabic words that fall neatly into a strict iambic meter. The slightest movement produces a startling effect, so that the reader can almost hear in the first stanza the “rusted nails” fall to the ground with a ring of finality, breaking the meditative silence of the uninhabited grange. Mariana is driven into a state of irreversible despair by the uniform stasis of her unchanging world. In the poem’s morbid refrain, reproduced above in lines 9-12 and 45-48, Mariana repeatedly articulates her existential fatigue and desire for death. The “she only said…she said” that brackets her lament for her lover and the repetition of “dreary” and alternatively “aweary” mimic the closed and static quality of her existence.

Mariana’s sense impressions reveal an acute sensitivity to sight, sound, and movement that far exceeds normal human perception. Her manic attentiveness to the mundane particulars of the natural world is symptomatic of a pathologically strained state of mind. Mariana’s overwrought senses cannot support the normal epistemological processes that contribute to a wholesome contemplation of landscape. An individual who possesses healthy faculties of perception, for example, can distill, organize, and hierarchize a multitude of impressions that he gathers from the landscape—highlighting, for example, central elements that stand in the forefront while leaving minor background matter appropriately blurred. Mariana, however, surveys her entire natural surroundings with a microscopic and indiscriminate eye and documents each phenomenon with the same degree of extreme detail. In a desperate
endeavor to locate some point of emotional release, her mind seizes upon any object
that lies within her range of perception, until the landscape lacks any discernable
unity or intelligible order.

Faced with the unbroken sameness of her environment, Mariana monitors the
changes of the day with an almost obsessive attention, scanning the skies in a futile
effort to discern a glimmer of future hope and peace. She despises the intrusive
morning sunbeams (77-79) and cannot stand to stare into the heavens “at morn or
eventide” (15-16). Mariana’s spiritual insomnia denies her any form of precious
respite, as she prowls the grange at all hours of the night to track the movements of
the moon:

Upon the middle of the night,
    Waking she heard the nightfowl crow;
The cock sung out an hour ere light;
    From the dark fen the oxen’s low
Came to her; without hope of change,
    In sleep she seemed to walk forlorn,
Till cold winds woke the gray-eyed morn
Upon the lonely moated grange.

The sounds of the nightfowl, crow, and oxen punctuate the stillness of the night and
mark the progress of time. Mariana observes as the entire grange and its natural
inhabitants make their inexorable movements through time, while she alone remains
ever the same: alone, desolate, and desirous of death. “Mariana” demonstrates the
important ways in which Victorian aesthetic had deviated from the Romantic
principle of universal identification. Tennyson obviously shared with the Romantic
poets an epistemological concern in the central role that human psychology played in
formulating the natural world. However, while the Romantics placed a primary
emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between the human mind and the natural
world, Tennyson’s interests tended to collapse entirely on the side of subjectivity and the psychological states of extreme emotion, sensation, obsession, and hallucination (Christ 25). In “Mariana,” Tennyson condemns the extreme subjectivity of the self-enclosed subject, but he never explicitly advocates a conscious and feeling participation in the natural world.

Throughout Tennyson’s investigations into the phenomenological processes of the self-enclosed subject, a fascinating tension constantly unfolds between the firmness of his ethical reservations and the aesthetic curiosity of his poetic ambition. On the one hand, Tennyson believed that the solipsistic frame of mind presented serious threats to the moral sensibilities and social commitments of humanity. His poems that depict moments of madness, confinement, and hallucination mourn the loss of a universal order and warn against the spiritual dangers that emerge from subject’s retreat into his private and insular sphere. On the other hand, Tennyson was keenly aware that an investigation into extreme subjectivity offered certain aesthetic advantages so rich and unexplored that he felt compelled to pursue them in his poetic experimentation. Many of his early poems explore the emotional intensities and sensual richness that become possible when the self-enclosed subject examines the outer world with an indiscriminate and microscopic eye. In the case of “Mariana,” the beholder fastens her attention to a multitude of particulars with an almost obsessive concentration, until each phenomenal perception becomes charged with an emotion of unparalleled intensity. Thus, unlike Browning and Gerard Manley Hopkins, who were able to describe the natural world with a considerable measure of dispassionate objectivity, Tennyson plunged directly into morbid states of extreme
subjectivity in order to explore these aesthetic and emotional possibilities. In doing so, Tennyson also convincingly presented the morbid temptations of solipsism that proved difficult to overcome in the modern period.

Tennyson’s poetic experiments in extreme subjectivity provided an important source of thematic and aesthetic inspiration for the Pre-Raphaelite poets and painters. These artists found themselves immediately drawn to Tennyson’s treatment of medieval subject matter, the rich sensuousness of his descriptive passages, and his preoccupation with the subjective powers of the human mind (Christ 37). However, while Tennyson sought to expose the spiritual dangers that accompanied the solipsistic frame of mind, the Pre-Raphaelites embraced extreme subjectivity with an almost sensationalist enthusiasm. In this way, the Pre-Raphaelites engaged a similar aesthetic of particularity that examined the natural world with Tennysonian focus, but their pursuits were motivated by an entirely different philosophical agenda. As they strove single-mindedly to perfect their super-realistic and highly stylized presentation of nature, they neglected to cultivate the proper degree of self-reflection that had enabled Tennyson to assess the moral problematics of his aesthetic choices.

As a leading member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti shared Tennyson’s enthusiasm for expressing states of extreme emotion through a concentrated presentation of landscape. Rossetti clearly possessed a sharp visual perception and a heightened sensitivity to natural forms, which served to enrich his meticulous depictions of a wide assortment of natural and domestic phenomena, such as birds, flowers, furniture, trees, weather, and sounds.
The strikingly realistic images that populate his nature poems provide a stark contrast against the gestural references that compose Tennyson’s psychological landscapes. Tennyson uses an emotionally charged topography to indicate the subject’s feelings of isolation, madness, and hallucination. His dreamlike images, which convey a significant degree of symbolic depth and emotional effect, seem to lack any indication of a phenomenal existence. Rossetti’s poems, on the other hand, are filled with concrete images of nature that suggest a decidedly more definite location in time and space: he packs each composition with an abundance naturalistic details, each rendered in remarkable scientific accuracy. These natural images often develop into a random accumulation of surface descriptions and botanical facts. For this reason, they carry minimal symbolic and emotional import and fail to communicate any meaningful order (Christ 39).

This important distinction between the poets’ descriptive techniques points to larger differences in their respective epistemological frameworks. Tennyson’s presentation of landscape, which exists primarily through the subject’s distortive perception, collapses entirely on the side of extreme subjectivity. Rossetti’s aesthetic interests remain exclusively concerned with a factual representation of the natural world and thus collapses on the side of extreme materialism. His poems operate within a strict dualist framework that establishes an ontological separation between “subject” and “object,” so that any amount of information that the beholder gathers about the outer world can provide no valuable insight into the inner workings of his psychic life. Rossetti’s poetic speakers encounter in nature only the presence of pure and unthinking materiality and remain entirely oblivious to the spiritual sustenance
that their Romantic predecessors found so abundantly in the natural world. Because the beholder cannot approach these distinct objects with his sympathetic and imaginative powers, he must deal with them systematically and register their surface characteristics with empirical precision. In this way, the aesthetic of particularity reveals a severe upset in the balance between introspection and outward interest: either the extreme subjectivist becomes so absorbed in his solipsistic frame of mind that he loses all contact with the reality of the outer world, or else the extreme materialist becomes exclusively preoccupied with the natural world, to the detriment of his spiritual life.

In “The Day Dream,” Rossetti displays the same studied realism that characterizes Hunt’s painting. The speaker describes with factual dexterity a tightly packed summer garden that contains, among other things, “[a] shadowy sycamore,” “young leaflets,” and “the leaves’…spiral tongues”:

The embowered throstles’ urgent clangours gore  
The summer silence. Still the leaves come new  
Yet never rose-sheathed as those which drew  
Their spiral tongues from spring-buds heretofore (5-8).³³

The richness and precision of Rossetti’s natural descriptions might compel the reader to consult an encyclopedia in an effort to determine whether or not “spring-buds” indeed display “spiral tongues.” However, the poem ultimately remains a glorified collection of botanical facts that conveys only a minimal degree of symbolic effect. Rossetti succeeds in evoking a particular mood that infuses much of Pre-Raphaelite art—an atmosphere of lush sumptuousness that results from a beautiful and careful representation of the particulars of an over-determined world. But his poems resist

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any attempt on the part of the reader to apply a symbolic interpretation or to extract any intellectual gratification beyond an appreciation for its extraordinary surface realism.

Occasionally Rossetti displayed a keen awareness of the spiritual emptiness that results from this materialistic approach to the natural world. In “The Woodspurge,” the best solace that the grieving speaker can extract from his concentrated examination of nature is a piece of scientifically accurate and existentially meaningless information: “the woodspurge has a cup of three.”

My eyes, wide open, had the run
Of some ten weeds to fix upon;
Among those few, out of the sun,
The woodspurge flower'd, three cups in one.

From perfect grief there need not
Wisdom or even memory:
One thing then learnt remains to me,—
The woodspurge has a cup of three (9-16).\(^3\)

The speaker’s microscopic eye, which demonstrates a powerful capacity for optical magnification, zooms rapidly from a gathering of ten weeds, to a single woodspurge, and finally to the flower’s individual cups. His precise count of the plants and their individual components further uncovers the hyper-sensitivity of his visual attention and reveals his compulsive tendency to consider each particular as a distinct entity that stands in complete separation from its neighboring particulars. Richards observes that these disparate particulars of the natural world offer the speaker no spiritual consolation, insights into the workings of nature, or even salutary distraction (157). Like Tennyson’s grief-obsessed Mariana, the speaker “fixes” his attention

obsessively “upon…some ten weeds,” in a futile effort to extract some measure of spiritual solace. While “The Woodspurge” communicates the existential despair of the extreme materialist, the speaker nonetheless manages to locate a moment of hollow satisfaction: he realizes that the spiritual emptiness that he encounters in nature relieves him of the burden of the search for meaning, in a world in which the possibility of a universal order remains unclear.

Christina Georgina Rossetti, the younger sister and artistic contemporary of Dante Gabriel, positioned herself firmly against this form of extreme materialism. She believed that the aesthetic of particularity compelled the beholder to indulge his senses in the remarkable variety of the natural world and to deny, in the meantime, the divine presence in nature. Her most famous poem, “Goblin Market,” presents an implicit rejection of the shallow yearning for natural realism that had inspired much of the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic. The poem opens with a prolonged and remarkable list of delicious, forbidden market produce: a sinister gang of goblin merchants shout forth the names of countless varieties of apples, berries, citrus, and other fruits that are available for the beholder’s consumption. The list communicates Rossetti’s deep anxieties that nature—in its infinite colors, flavors, forms, movements, and scents—threatens to absorb the beholder into its pure materiality and to dampen his spiritual awareness of a higher, divine presence. The poem sustains her religious conviction that the beholder who immerses himself exclusively in the sensuous richness of nature eventually becomes lost in a spiritual state of anomie. Only an unshakable
moral center, Rossetti maintained, can guide him toward making sense of the multiplicity of the natural world.

Christina Rossetti was by no means an reclusive ascetic who isolated herself from the outside world, untouched by the sensuous pleasures of nature. In fact, Rossetti considered herself an avid participant in and passionate lover of nature. She often spent her family holidays exploring the English countryside with her siblings, and her early letters reveal that she frequently visited the Regent’s Park Zoological Gardens in her adolescence and young adulthood. After one such visit in August 1858, she wrote enthusiastically to her older brother, William Michael, about the lizards, tortoises, alligators, armadillos, wombats, and porcupines that she observed. However, Rossetti was convinced that when the beholder approaches the natural world for the sole purpose of indulging its sensuous pleasures, he necessarily risks assigning the natural world a false and immoderate status. The Tractarian writings of John Keble and John Newman profoundly influenced her sacramental attitude toward nature. These prominent theologians declared that the material elements of the natural world stand as symbols the invisible divinity (Grass 360), and that the devout Christian must make a concentrated effort to locate in nature “the signs of the Creator.” For this reason, Rossetti tempered her instinctive desire to celebrate the sensuous splendors of the natural world and faithfully examined nature for its moral and sacred meanings (Grass 360).

“Goblin Market” explores the intimate relationship that evolves between two young sisters: the beautiful and carefree Laura, who finds herself overcome by the infinite particulars of the natural world, and the morally steadfast Lizzie, who redeems the transgression of her wayward sister through the strength of her sisterly love. The narrative traces the initial temptations, painful consequences, and eventual redemption of Laura’s moral transgression, which centers around her consumption of the delicious, forbidden fruit peddled by a sinister gang of goblin merchants, who function in the poem as agents of temptation and spiritual destruction. During a covert visit to the goblin market, Laura offers the goblin merchants coveted parts of her body—a “precious golden lock” (126) and “a tear more rare than pearl” (127)—in exchange for fruits that bring her unfathomable pleasure, “sweeter than honey from the rock” (129) and “stronger than man-rejoicing wine” (130). Laura soon suffers from the deleterious effects of the addictive fruit and, trapped in a state of unendurable withdrawal, rapidly wastes away in body and spirit. Through her sisterly love and devotion, however, Lizzie manages to recover the disintegrating Laura and to redeem her sister’s moment of moral weakness. Lizzie approaches the goblin merchants and offers them a silver penny in exchange for pieces of fruit, which she intends to feed to her sister, but refuses to hand over what they truly desire—her company and her body. The enraged goblin merchants attack the intractable Lizzie, who “stood / Like a lily in a flood / […] Lashed by tides obstreperously” (408-409, 411). Having resisted their attempts to force-feed her pieces of fruit, Lizzie returns home to feed her sister the leftover fruit juice that has stained her body. This selfless
act of sisterly sacrifice results in Laura’s salvation and brings about her physical and spiritual renewal—a “life out of death” (524).

For the analytic purposes of an investigation into the poetic representation of landscape, perhaps the most fascinating passage of the poem can be found in its opening stanza, which consists mostly of the extensive list of market produce. Indeed, this list stands out from the countless descriptions of landscape that permeate Victorian nature poems, by virtue of its sheer length, colorful descriptive power, rapid rhythm, and the rapt attention it pays to identifying the different types of a wide assortment of fruit. The reader might expect to find such a thirty-line compilation of the names of twenty-six different types of fruits technical and monotonous. But instead, she finds herself increasingly drawn into the market scene by the irresistible appeal of the poem’s descriptive power. I have provided the entire first stanza in full, in order to present an example of the aesthetic of particularity at its most detailed, elaborate, and exhaustive:

Morning and evening
Maids heard the Goblins cry:
“Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy:
Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpecked cherries,
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,
Swart-headed mulberries,
Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries;
All ripe together
In summer weather,—
Morns that pass by,
Fair eves that fly;
Come buy, come buy:
Our grapes fresh from the vine,
Pomegranates full and fine,
Dates and sharp bullaces,
Rare pears and greengages,
Damsons and bilberries,
Taste them and try:
Currants and gooseberries,
Bright-fire-like barberries,
Figs to fill your mouth,
Citrons from the South,
Sweet to tongue and sound to eye;
Come buy, come buy.”39

The poet’s moral objection to a materialistic approach to nature can hardly be detected in this celebration of natural specimens that prove “sweet to tongue and sound to eye.” One of the poem’s greatest achievements lies in the brightness and vitality of its descriptive language, which convincingly enacts the extreme temptation that nature presents to the fascinated beholder. Laura becomes quickly absorbed in this parade of beautiful and delicious fruit, each of which she finds endlessly interesting in itself. The stanza’s melodic sounds, rapid rhythms, and proliferation of similes exemplify the feelings of excitement and joyousness that the beholder extracts from the natural world. The market scene captivates passers-by not only because it features an extraordinary array of fruit, or because the fruits promise a delicious sensory experience, but most importantly because each fruit is distinctly different from the others: the softness of the “bloom-down cheeked peaches” stands in sharp contrast against the rough texture of the “swart-headed mulberries,” which in turn distinguishes itself from full volume of the “plump unpecked cherries” and the vivid color of the “bright-fire-like barberries.” While the goblin merchants first shout the

names of more commonplace fruits, such as “apples,” “lemons,” and “oranges,” they soon advertise the names of more exotic fruits, such as “quinces” and “rare pears.” The market-goer rapidly learns that any species fruit might yield a number of subspecies: for example, the poem individually identifies three different varieties of plums—“bullaces,” “greengages,” and “damsons”—and nine different varieties of berries, including the lesser-known “mulberries,” “bilberries” and “barberries.”

Again, such an elongated enumeration of fruit names does not fatigue the reader with its repetition and sameness, but instead forces the beholder to marvel, as Laura so eagerly does, at the incredible diversity of the natural world.

Grass notes that these multifarious fruits have assembled together in order to form what he describes as “nature’s perilous variety” (361). The format of the list, which Rossetti uses to introduce the names of the fruits, serves to enact the sensuous temptations that the natural world presents to the undiscerning beholder. The goblin merchants advertise each fruit “horizontally”: that is, while each fruit is distinctly different from the others, no one fruit is characterized as more important or more appealing than another. This sheer variety of fruits intoxicates Laura’s physical senses and confuses her moral discernment (Grass 362). Consequently, her indiscriminate consumption of market fruits contributes directly to her bodily and psychic collapse. As Laura succumbs to the harmful effects of the addictive fruit, the narrative finds her entirely drained of her youthful energy and prematurely aged: “Her hair grew thin and grey; / She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn / To swift decay and burn / Her fire away” (277-280). What had once served as her primary
source of bliss has now become a wearisome burden for the fallen heroine (Grass 371).

“Goblin Market” actively addresses several important concerns that engaged an entire generation of painters, poets, and critics, many of whom felt compelled to claim an artistic and moral position vis-à-vis the aesthetic of particularity. On the most superficial level, the poem acknowledges the wondrous pleasures that the natural world offers to the sensory perceptions of the beholder. Rossetti shared with Browning and her brother Dante Gabriel a fascination with the diverse and infinite particulars of the natural world and demonstrated an eager readiness to capture the specific characteristics of material phenomena with microscopic accuracy. On a more moral level, the poem warns against the spiritual dangers of idolatry that arise when the beholder regards the material world as the ultimate reality. “Goblin Market” communicates Rossetti’s anxieties that the multiplicity of the natural world threatens to cast the beholder into a state of spiritual distractedness, when he finds each particular to be endlessly interesting in itself. Like Tennyson, Rossetti exploited the aesthetic of particularity for the purposes of her own artistic experimentation but remained, at the same time, aware of the troublesome moral implications that surrounded such an aesthetic.

Obviously, Rossetti did not mean to suggest that the individual who derives a sensuous enjoyment from nature necessarily lacks a firm spiritual grounding, or that the dedicated and reverent beholder must close himself off to the pleasures of the natural world. Instead, she advocated what she considered to be the proper manner in which to approach nature and to appreciate the diversity of its infinite particulars: the
beholder must discern signs of the creator in nature’s smallest details. Mary Arseneau, as she discusses “Goblin Market” in the context of Rossetti’s involvement with the Oxford Movement, explains that according to Tractarian belief, the devout Christian, in an effort to secure his spiritual salvation, must make a concentrated and sustained effort to consider the natural world as a material indication of Christ’s enduring presence and incarnation on earth.\(^{40}\) In a similar observation, Sean Grass points out that “Goblin Market” emphasizes the necessity of cultivating a singleness of mind and purpose, in order to overcome the sensory overload of the natural world (363). In this way, Rossetti’s religious message reinforces Arnold’s statement that poets “must have an Idea of the world in order not to be prevailed over by the world’s multitudinousness.” While Arnold may not have been referring specifically to a Christian “Idea of the world,” he nonetheless insisted on the necessity of sustaining overarching concepts, under which the poet can organize, and indeed subordinate, the infinite pieces of information that he gathers about the natural world.

\(^{40}\) See Mary Arseneau, “Incarnation and Interpretation: Christina Rossetti, the Oxford Movement, and *Goblin Market,*” *Victorian Poetry* 31 (1993), 81.
Conclusion:

Toward a Reconciliation?

As the modern era entered a transitional period of rapid industrial, scientific, and intellectual change, the epistemological terms surrounding a poetic investigation into nature changed accordingly. Because the Victorian thinkers firmly established their pursuit of knowledge on empirical verification, they could not easily accept Wordsworth’s insistence that the natural world was expressly fitted to the human mind. In general, the Victorian poets who concerned themselves with landscape no longer approached the natural world in an effort to arrive at metaphysical truths about human nature. Instead, they launched an investigation into landscape at the microscopic level, in order to systematically categorize, describe, and organize its infinite particulars. While poets such as Matthew Arnold and Christina Rossetti condemned this absence of a universal order, which characterized most poetic representations of landscape, they found themselves unable to fully support the Romantic conviction that landscape functions as a direct expression of the poet’s inner nature. Rossetti might have implored the beholder of nature to discern signs of the divine presence in the natural world, but she could not conclude that the human mind is directly derived from the divine source, as a “repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” Tennyson also attempted to preserve a spiritual faith that cannot be sustained by the intellectual reason alone:

We have but faith: we cannot know,

For knowledge is of things we see;
And yet we trust it comes from thee,
A beam in darkness: let it grow (21-24).  

Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* examines, among other themes, the hopeless despair of the poet’s private grief, the failure of his poetic language, and the possibility of preserving a spiritual conviction in the age of scientific skepticism. These lines show the desperate efforts of a modern poet to convince himself of the correctness and necessity of faith, despite that he regards faith as fundamentally incompatible with knowledge, as light is incompatible with darkness. Because he cannot intellectually “know” that which he believes, his faith essentially amounts to an act of blind trust.

While the Victorian poet must “see” with his intellectual reason, the Romantic’s spiritual vision was facilitated by the active imagination. The Romantics, who prized the active imagination as “a direct aspect of Truth,” found no disconnect between faith and knowledge. Tennyson’s comments summarize the modern poet’s continuous struggle to reconcile his spiritual impulses with the increasing skepticism of modernity.

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**LIST OF WORKS CITED**

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Secondary materials:


