Suicidal Romanticism: Race, Gender, and the End(s) of Individualism

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2015
ABSTRACT

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Moving beyond traditional conceptions of suicide in Romantic literature as indices of Romanticism’s fascination with tragic or mad genius, this dissertation traces how Romantic-era writers also employed the trope of suicide as a political tool to argue for the rationality of individuals without rights, or with limited rights, such as slaves, women, and the poor. In both scholarly and post-Romantic artistic engagements with so-called Romantic suicide, suicide is typically interpreted as neither a critique of an unlivable society, nor even a mark of mental illness, but instead operates as a meta-critique of art itself, suggesting that the artist, by virtue of his creativity, is somehow beyond this world. But by showing how suicide also emerged, in the Romantic period, as a metaphor for challenging social structures associated with liberal individualism, *Suicidal Romanticism* posits that the emphasis on the link between creative and suicidal proclivities associated with Romanticism, which persists even in our contemporary imagination in spite of social scientific arguments to the contrary, troubles our capacity to talk either about the problem of mental illness or about the social injustices that would drive somebody to want not to live. The Romantic writers examined here—including Thomas Day and John Bicknell, Mary and Percy Shelley, and William Wordsworth—proposed an alternative conception of suicide, positing the need to open the social field to recognize all those who are considered “non-subjects.” By
using suicide as a metaphor to interrogate the roots of inequality within a social structure based on exclusive individualism, these writers suggest that acts of suicide represent responses not only to private phenomena, but also to social conditions, and that the two are not mutually exclusive. By thus reading Romantic-era discourses of suicide as radical interrogations of liberalism, *Suicidal Romanticism* also positions Romanticism itself as a response to political questions that first emerged in abolitionist and women’s rights discourses of the long eighteenth century.
Dedication

For Emma Pearl Whitman,
old graybeard, my courage-teacher.
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Finally, I am grateful to my family for believing in me even when they didn’t believe in my choices, and to my friends – especially those also in graduate school, at Duke and elsewhere, who understand this experience, and who helped to make a difficult process enjoyable and rewarding.
Introduction

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme
~John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale”

Chaque suicide est un poème sublime de mélancolie.
(Each suicide is a poem sublime in its melancholy.)
~Honoré de Balzac, Le Peau de Chagrin

The difference between poetry and rhetoric
is being ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children.
~Audre Lorde, “Power”

Savage Beauty, a retrospective of the work of fashion designer Alexander McQueen, which opened in 2011 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, begins with a display of waistcoats reminiscent of those typically worn by Romantic figures such as the subject of Caspar David Friedrich’s well-known painting, “Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer” (“The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog,” ca. 1817).¹ Savage Beauty also features pieces self-consciously inspired by the Flemish masters, the Tudors, and Plato’s Atlantis, among others.² Yet in spite of the fact that McQueen’s aesthetic was informed by a range of historical periods

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² Bolton, 92, 112, 184.
and subjects, the exhibition is organized into sections entitled “The Romantic Mind,” “Romantic Gothic and Cabinet of Curiosities,” “Romantic Nationalism,” “Romantic Exoticism,” “Romantic Primitivism,” and “Romantic Naturalism,” thereby rendering the entire show—and, effectively, McQueen’s entire corpus—in terms of the Romantic aesthetic arguably most prevalent in the display of waistcoats. One wonders how much the curators’ emphasis on the association between McQueen and Romanticism represents a reflection on McQueen’s widely publicized 2010 suicide.

Although the association between suicide and art goes back at least to Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, it is at its most pronounced at the turn of the nineteenth century, during the period known as Romanticism. Romantic literature, in particular, can’t stop talking about suicide. In the ubiquity of sentiments such as those expressed in the first two epigraphs above, we are constantly reminded that Romanticism was characterized by repressed sensuality, ineluctable destiny, and irremediable malaise, and that these strong emotions often were understood

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3 See Bolton’s exhibition catalogue and the accompanying website.
4 “Sit ius liceatque perire poesis; / inuitum qui seruat, idem facit occidenti. / Nec semel hoc fecit nec, si retractus erit, iam / fiet homo et ponet famosae mortis amorem,” or, “Let poets have the privilege and license to die [as they please]. He who saves a man against his will, does the same with him who kills him [against his will],” in *The Works of Horace*, eds. C. Smart and Theodore Alois Buckley (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1863), ll. 466-8. Leon Goldstein’s translation reads, “Let the right be given, let permission be granted, for poets to die. Whoever saves someone against his will does exactly the same thing as the person who murders him” (22) in *Horace for Students of Literature: The Ars Poetica and its Tradition*, ed. O.B. Hardison and Leon Goldstein (Gainsville: U P of Florida, 1995). More recently, an open source edition of the *Ars Poetica* offers a more succinct translation: “Grant poets the power and the right to kill / Themselves: who saves one, against his will, murders him.” See *Horace: The Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*, ed. A. S. Klein, www.poetryintranslation.com, 2005, accessed 2 February 2014, ll. 466-7.
to result in suicide. Nor was Romantic-era interest in suicide limited to high literature: in the late eighteenth century, newspapers began publishing suicide notes, both fictional and actual; suicide formed the subject of several key legal and political disputes (the 1822 suicide of the statesman Lord Castlereagh led directly to the eradication of suicidal burial laws); and suicide even dictated fashion (the blue and gold suit that Werther wears when he kills himself in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s 1774 *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was one of the most sought-after styles of the day, and there was even a perfume called Eau de Werther, named for Goethe’s tragic hero).  

Yet despite the period’s interest in suicide, very little scholarship exists on the role that suicide plays in Romantic-era literature and culture. Historians of suicide, as I discuss in further detail in the next section, hold to the general thesis that the Enlightenment opened suicide to critical inquiry because loosening religious strictures gave way to thinking about suicide as due, either, to madness or to individual choice, and that the Romantic-era fascination with suicide is a further development of that Enlightenment tradition. This dissertation, however, argues something different.

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The Enlightenment understanding of the importance of property for the liberal subject opens up, despite itself, the idea of suicide as a legitimate and necessary political response to social oppression; however, this conclusion is never explicitly acknowledged in Enlightenment discourse. In this dissertation, I will argue, first of all, that “Romanticism” starts with recognizing this relationship, but that there are several “Romantic” ways of articulating this: in chapter 1, I trace an explicitly political version through Thomas Day and John Bicknell’s abolitionist poem *The Dying Negro* (1773), which emerged co-terminously with the more traditionally Romantic narratives of Werther and Chatterton; in chapter 2, I read a mediated version of this narrative in Wordsworth’s poetry of 1798-1805, whose early interests in a poetics of relationality draws on the social dimension of suicide developed by eighteenth-century political writers; and in chapter 3, I posit, in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), an attempt to determine a more general logic of alterity at work in Enlightenment political discourses by way of the trope of suicide. However, as I note in the second half of chapter 2, all of these variants of Romantic suicide were subsequently obscured by the Victorian rewriting of Romantic suicide, a rewriting that in effect bequeathed to us the apolitical vision of Romantic suicide that I outlined at the start of this introduction.
Histories of Suicide

Though there are book-length histories of suicide about many periods, including the eighteenth century and the Victorian era, there is no such history of the Romantic period. Most histories of suicide take the Enlightenment, and particularly David Hume's text On Suicide (written in 1756 and circulated after Hume's death in 1776), as a key turning point in cultural attitudes toward suicide; however, as I will show below, this only works if we ignore how Hume's text was framed in its eighteenth-century editions. Another key turning point sometimes posited by critics is Durkheim's late-nineteenth-century sociological account On Suicide (1897); but even while Durkheim himself suggests that the earlier part of the nineteenth century was historically pivotal for the history of suicide, neither Durkheim nor scholars who follow his approach adequately account for the significance of the Romantic era to the history of suicide.

Scholars who posit David Hume's On Suicide as the beginning of “modern” suicide do so by mapping the “modernization” of suicide onto a shift in moral

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thought in the eighteenth century. The majority of these critics hail the Enlightenment as an intellectually liberating moment that opened the topic of suicide to critical inquiry, holding to the general thesis that loosening religious strictures gave way to more fluid thinking about suicide. It is here, they tell us, that suicide became “modern” and entered, fully fledged, into cultural discourse.

In the introduction to their well-known book *Sleepless Souls*, Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy offer the following overview of this history of suicide:

> Ancient philosophies that condoned and in some circumstances celebrated suicide gave way in the Middle Ages to theological condemnations and folkloric abhorrence. The Reformation intensified religious hostility to self-murder in England and some other European countries. Finally, in the eighteenth century, Enlightenment philosophy and the secularization of the world-view of European elites prompted writers to depict suicide as the consequence of mental illness or of rational choice, and these concepts still dominate discussions of self-destruction today.\(^7\)

More recently, Jeffrey R. Watt tells the same story slightly differently, but concludes with basically the same outcome:

> While ancient and medieval writers were most concerned with the ethics of taking one’s life…virtually all intellectual leaders of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe viewed suicide as utterly abominable. By contrast, many of their counterparts of the eighteenth century, the era commonly known as the Enlightenment, took issue with the traditional abhorrence of suicide. The so-called philosophes, the intellectual leaders of the Enlightenment, celebrated reason and rejected as superstitions many Christian traditions, often embracing deism or even atheism. Earlier studies have shown that many of these thinkers – including Montesquieu, Voltaire, and most emphatically David Hume – defended voluntary death.\(^8\)

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The conclusions of these, and other histories of suicide, are the same: modern suicide—“secularized, decriminalized, medicalized”—was a product of the Enlightenment.

For these accounts, not only is “modern” suicide historically tied to the Enlightenment, it is also ideologically and even etymologically tied to England’s national character. By the seventeenth century, suicide became known across Europe as a particularly English malady, and the 1733 publication of George Cheyne’s *The English Malady* reinforced this stereotype. Cheyne, a physician, explained that “the suicidal tendencies of the English were tied, on the one hand, to the progress of atheism and the philosophic spirit among the English, and on the other, to the melancholy temperament of an island people living in unfavorable geographical and climactic conditions.”

Adding to Cheyne’s assessment of the “particular Englishness” of suicide was the fact that the word “suicide” originates in the writings of an Englishman, appearing for the first time in the 1643 edition of Sir Thomas Browne’s *Religio Medici*. In their etymological study of “suicide,” Brian Barraclough and Daphne

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9 Ibid., 8.
10 Quoted in Minois, 181.
11 In the third printing of the text, but the first to be authorized and corrected by Browne himself. The word “suicide” does not appear in the manuscript versions. It appears once in the Religio Medici, as quoted below, and Browne does not use it again in subsequent works, nor in any translations of the Religio Medici: 
There be many excellent straines in that poet, wherewith his Stoicall Genius hath liberally supplied him; and truly there are singular pieces in the Philosophy of Zeno, and doctrine of the Stoickes, which I perceive, delivered in a pulpit, Passe for
Shepherd posit that in the ensuing centuries, the word tended to be used by philosophical apologists favoring its relative neutrality, while those opposed to the act of suicide used compound phrases that would imply its criminality, such as “self-murder” or “self-homicide.” This association with criminality comes from the English Medieval Latin term for suicide, *felonia de se* (“felon of himself”, shortened to *felo de se* in English common law). The term was broadly defined in the nominal, referring to “one who deliberately puts an end to his own existence or commits any unlawful act which results in his own death;” this remained the legal definition of suicide in England until 1938. The first English dictionary to include “suicide” was Blount’s *Glossographia* (1656), defining it as “The slaying or murdering of himself.” The “upmarket” competitor *Glossographi*, on the other hand – Phillips’ *The New World of Words* (1658) – deliberately chose not to define “suicide,” stating that some words are

currant Divinity: yet herein are they in extreames, that can allow a man to be his own Assassin and so highly extol the end and suicide of Cato; this is indeed not to feare death, but yet to bee afraid of life.


12 Barraclough and Shepherd locate uses of the word and its close alternates in works of the preeminent English writers of the 17th and 18th centuries, including Donne, Burton, Spenser, Sidney, Kyd, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, Pope, Johnson, and Pepys. None actually use suicide, opting instead for terms like “self-homicide,” “self-murder,” or, as in the King James Bible, descriptions of the action such as “Saul took a sword and fell upon it” or “[Judas Iscariot] went away and hanged himself.” Notably, not even Addison’s 1713 play *Cato*, which popularized the idea of suicide in eighteenth-century literary culture, uses the term. See Brian Barraclough and Daphne Shepherd, “A Necessary Neologism: The Origin and Uses of Suicide,” *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 116.

13 Ibid., 115.

14 Quoted in ibid., 117.
so monstrously barbarous, and insufferable, that they are not worthy to be mentioned, nor once thought on…one of them I shall produce, which is Suicide, a word which I had rather should be derived from Sus, a Sow, than from the Pronoun Sui, unless there be some mystery in it; as if there were a Swinish part for a man to kill himself.  

Barraclough and Shepherd speculate that Phillips here refers to the French Medieval Latin suicidium, meaning abattage des porcs or slaughter of pigs. Many scholars take for granted that the modern English “suicide” derives from suicidium; however, Barraclough and Shepherd maintain that “suicide” is, in fact, an English invention, and that Romance languages adopted “suicide” from English in the eighteenth century, precisely when philosophical considerations of the topics were becoming more prevalent across Europe.  

As the authors and ideas now associated with the Enlightenment gained in popularity, earlier debates about the religious dimensions of suicide thus gave way to secularized debates over suicide. For example, John Donne’s defense of

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15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 120. Minois’ highly regarded History of Suicide offers a different account of the term’s origin, making no mention of Barraclough and Shepherd’s study. Minois agrees, however, that the term – regardless of its origin – becomes popular across Europe in the eighteenth century.  

17 By this point, all Christian denominations considered suicide to be a sin, but Methodism, which, perhaps not coincidentally, emerged in England toward the end of the eighteenth century, stressed compassion toward those who commit suicide. Further, according to Minois, Christianity has varied drastically in its stance toward suicide because “Christianity’s founding event was a suicide,” 26. Indeed, for early Christians, there was a very fine line between martyrdom and suicide – one that could easily be crossed. Historians offer the 313 A.D. Edict of Milan (which established Christianity as a legitimate religion within the Roman Empire) as the point when the Church’s official stance against suicide began to crystallize, but it wasn’t until the next century, with Augustine’s City of God, that the Church’s attitude became explicitly reproachful: This we declare and affirm and emphatically accept as true: No man inflict death upon himself at will merely to escape from temporal difficulties – for this is but to plunge into those which are everlasting; no man may do so even on account of another’s sins, fearing they may lead to a sin of one’s own – for we are not sullied by others’ sins; no man may do so on account of past sins – for to expiate them by
suicide, *Biathanatos* (1644), and Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1628) both posit that God is merciful enough to forgive the sin, and Burton even goes so far as to urge the Church to accept some types of suicide. Further, Burton traces some cases of suicide to melancholia, a physiological disorder, thereby suggesting that such cases of suicide are an inevitable part of human existence:

Those hard censures of such as offer violence to their own persons, or in some desperate fit to others, which sometimes they doe...are to be mitigated, as in such as are mad, beside themselves for the time, or founde to have beene long melancholy, and that in extremity, they knowe not what they doe, deprived of reason, judgment, all, as a ship that is void of a Pilot, must needs impinge upon the next rocke or sands, and suffer shipwreck.\(^18\)

Georges Minois remarks that Burton’s attempt to explain suicide medically “was a first step in the direction of removing suicide from the realms of religion and...
criminality,” providing a “precedent for later partisans of tolerance.” Indeed, Minois, Watt, and other historians of suicide hold that the efforts of both Burton and Donne paved the way for assertions of the individual’s right to commit suicide based upon the Enlightenment truisms of reason and free will.

Thus, the first texts to herald this new age of “secularized suicide” were, themselves, arguably uninterested in secularization per se, but rather sought to carve a place for understanding suicide within the terms of Christianity. Nevertheless, they opened suicide to debate in areas besides religion, and paved the way for what is often read as the first truly secular account, Hume’s On Suicide. Yet following Donne and Burton, Hume’s Enlightenment argument that the choice to die belongs to the individual likewise turns on the individual’s relationship to God: Hume argues that it is precisely because his body is given to him as part of a divinely ordained universe that the individual may choose to die. In the first section of On Suicide, Hume asserts that in creating the world, God established a set of governing principles that “continually encroach upon each other, and mutually retard or forward each other’s operation.” It is through the interactions of these laws that God asserts his governance over the world, and humans, along with all forms of life, depend on the operations and interactions of these laws. It is within this providentially ordained state that every man possesses “the free

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19 Minois, 101-2.
21 Ibid., 4.
disposal of his own life” and may “lawfully employ that power with which nature has endowed him.” In effect, the first part of Hume’s essay posits suicide as an act sanctioned by God: if “nothing happens in the universe without [God’s] consent...then neither does my death.” Further, to assume that any action on the part of man can interfere with what God has created is, for Hume, its own “kind of blasphemy.” Moving away from the relationship between suicide and religion, Hume then considers suicide’s impact on society. Hume posits that suicide does nothing to impair the social order, as “a man who retires from life does no harm to society: he only ceases to do good.” Hume then poses a scenario in which a person has become an outright drain on society: “in such cases, my resignation of life must not only be innocent, but laudable.” Most people who consider or commit suicide, he argues, are probably in such a state, as “those who have health, or power, or authority, have commonly better reason to be in humor with the world.” And finally, in the most famous line of the treatise, Hume dispels objections to suicide on the grounds of man’s duty to himself: “I believe that no man ever threw away life while it was worth keeping.” What keeps people from committing suicide, Hume concludes, is a pervasive fear not of God—for it is God

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 8.
25 Ibid., 8-9.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 10.
who allows us the possibility of suicide—but a fear of death itself. Thus, it is the
prohibition against suicide, rather than the act itself, that becomes un-Godly in
Hume’s account.

This final assertion has influenced many historians’ to champion On Suicide
as a watershed text of Enlightenment individualism. But while many of Hume’s
assertions are radical indeed, the context in which Hume’s essay circulated in late-
eighteenth-century England suggests that the narrative offered by historians,
namely, that Hume’s essay somehow inaugurated a new sense of freedom to speak
of suicide outside of a religious context—or to speak of it at all—has
overestimated, or plainly disregarded, the public reception of Hume’s text. On
Suicide circulated in London in 1783 as Essays on suicide, and the immortality of the
soul, ascribed to the late David Hume, Esq. Never before published. With remarks,
intended as an antidote to the poison contained in these performances, by the editor.
To which is added, two letters on suicide, from Rosseau’s [sic] Eloisa. The same
volume was reprinted in 1799 as Essays on suicide and the immortality of the soul.
By the late David Hume, Esq. With remarks by the editor. To which are added, two
letters on suicide, from Rousseau’s Eloisa. As the editor’s preface, which appeared
in both editions, explains, “the well-known contempt of this eminent philosopher
for the common convictions of mankind, raised an apprehension of the contents
from the very title of these pieces. But the celebrity of the author’s name renders
them, notwithstanding, in some degree, objects of great curiosity.”

That is, Hume’s essay was framed by a title and preface that reminded readers that Hume’s positions were not widely accepted. Even more strongly, a 1798 essay by Johann Georg Zimmerman declares that “Hume’s infidelity [to Christian doctrine] was the rock upon which his reputation was wrecked.”

Although Hume’s essay does register some wildly progressive views on suicide for its time, the essay was not well received, and Hume himself was, for this and other writings, reviled.

A truly secular approach to suicide does not appear in the Enlightenment, but rather at the end of the nineteenth century, in the work of the sociologist Emile Durkheim. Durkheim’s 1897 On Suicide analyzes statistics from the second

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rGroupName=duke_perkins&tabID=T001&docId=CW121342066&type=multipage&contentSet=ECC OArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE

31 Hume’s orientation against religion was well known in the eighteenth century. J.B. Schneewind emphasizes Hume’s “belief that religion is morally and politically detrimental to society and human happiness. He did not urge the establishment of a civil religion for the masses. He hoped, rather, that the light of advancing knowledge would cause religious belief to disappear,” in The Invention of Autonomy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 354. Because of these views, one of Hume’s contemporaries, the critic John Brown, accuses Hume of being a threat to “all of the Foundations of religion, revealed and natural,” a writer who, “with a Pen truly Epicurean, dissolves at once all the Fears of the Guilty, the Comforts of the Afflicted, and the Hopes of the Virtuous,” quoted in James E. Crimmins, “John Brown and the Theological Tradition of Utilitarian Ethics,” History of Political Thought 4 (1983): 540. For more on the reception history of Hume’s thought, see Laurence L. Bongie, David Hume: Prophet of the Counter-Revolution (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000).
half of the nineteenth century to posit the first comprehensive theory of how suicide functions as a social phenomenon. David Lester, a contemporary suicidologist, offers the following précis of Durkheim’s thesis:

The basic concepts in Durkheim’s analysis of suicidal behavior lead to four etiological types of suicidal behavior. These four types form two groups. The first group, which includes egoistic suicide and altruistic suicide, is based on the concept of social integration. A society is integrated insofar as its members possess shared beliefs and sentiments, interest in one another, and a common sense of devotion to common goals. Suicidal behavior is common in societies where there is a high degree of social integration (altruistic suicide) and in societies where there is a low degree of social integration (egoistic suicide). The second social variable that Durkheim used was social regulation. A society is regulated insofar as the society has control over the emotions and motivations of the individual members. Suicidal behavior is common in societies with a high degree of social regulation (fatalistic suicide) and in societies with a low degree of social regulation (anomic suicide).

Durkheim used statistical records from late-nineteenth-century Europe to advance the theory that suicide rates are contingent upon the interplay of social forces, and that if we can control those forces, we can prevent at least some incidences of suicide. Durkheim’s work has been influential in the development of conceptual and empirical studies in sociology and public policy. But where literary scholars have attempted to incorporate Durkheim’s paradigm to support historical studies of suicide, they have overlooked the fact that the date range upon which Durkheim relied was, itself, a consequence of limited data. In fact, Durkheim hypothesizes that the first half of the century represented the culmination of some significant shift in the European cultural understanding of suicide. But the lack of data from

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that period forced Durkheim, and in effect, some of his followers, to begin historical analysis of suicide from the century’s latter half.\textsuperscript{33}

Barbara Gates’ 1988 \textit{Victorian Suicide}, the foundational work on suicide in literary studies, revises Durkheim’s timeline to point to the Romantic, rather than the Victorian period, as a moment of significant development in the history of suicide. In her preface, Gates admits that she set out to follow a Durkheimian timeline by reading literary depictions of suicide during the Victorian period, but she quickly found that her own findings told a story slightly different from Durkheim’s: “I had set out to use traditional chronology...[but] my materials dictated a different narrative, even as to beginning and ending. Suicide law was significantly revised in 1823, where I now open my account, and suicide remained illegal in England until 1961.”\textsuperscript{34} The 1823 event to which Gates refers is the scandal that followed the suicide of Lord Londonderry, Viscount Castlereagh. The publicity that Castlereagh’s suicide received led to an overhaul of centuries-old laws. Since the 13\textsuperscript{th} century, persons who committed suicide were legally considered to be either mad or criminal (the legal term was \textit{felo-de-se}). If found to be \textit{felo-de-se}, a person’s property would be forfeited to the Crown and her body buried at a public crossroad with a stake driven through the heart. Even while the practice of forfeiture associated with \textit{felo-de-se} had long been recognized as a

\textsuperscript{34} Gates, xiv.
punishment “developed by medieval judges to enrich the royal treasury,” to be deemed felo-de-se was considered far more ignominious than insanity. Those who committed suicide while insane were allowed to be buried in churchyards (albeit along the edges), while the felonia-de-se were not. But when it came to judging Castlereagh’s suicide, neither judgment would do: for, “to dub such an eminent man insane was to help label British power at its highest level as mad, and to pronounce Castlereagh felo-de-se was still worse,” because of the dishonorable burial he would receive. Eventually, the label of insanity was judged to be the lesser evil, and Castlereagh, deemed insane at the time of his death, was allowed burial at Westminster Abbey. This judgment led to public protests so intense that his burial pageant had to be cut short and his funeral procession closed off except to a few friends and family. Less than a year later, in June of 1823, the law known as 4 George IV c 52 outlawed the burial of felo-de-se in public highways, and from this point, though still subject to the terms of forfeiture, all suicides, including felonia-de-se, could be buried in churchyards or public burial places, albeit without Christian rites and only between the hours of nine and midnight. As Gates frames it, the Castlereagh scandal and the legal amendment that resulted from it marked a new era of thinking about suicide that persisted for the remainder of the

\[35\] Ibid., 7.
\[36\] Ibid., 4.
nineteenth century and into the twentieth—this was “the end of Old Europe,” as far as suicide was concerned.

But even as Gates’ focus on the events of 1823 helps to fill in the gap in what occurred in the history of suicide between Hume and Durkheim, to date, there has not been a sustained examination of suicide in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century. Rather, accounts of this period’s attitudes toward suicide are contextualized, in passing, within broader commonplaces about the role of the emotions in literary Romanticism, and the meaning of “Romantic suicide” is thus treated as self-evident. Minois, for instance, accounts for Romanticism’s interest in suicide as part of “all the age’s vague malaise and turbid emotions concerning love, death, and the irremediable human inability to communicate,” while for Gates, “in romantic suicide, the individual hopes that consciousness will be absorbed by the infinite.”

While such generalized accounts that touch on themes of excessive emotionality and spiritual transcendence speak to some of the artistic sensibilities that were present during the Romantic period (as in, for example, the two epigraphs from Keats and Balzac with which I opened this dissertation), there is, I will show in this project, a more complicated narrative that emerges around suicide at the turn of the nineteenth century, which is neither reducible to

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37 Ibid., xv.
38 Minois, 267.
commonplaces about Romantic literary sensibility, nor is it limited to the Romantic period. In order to emphasize the persisting power and influence of the “Romantic” approach to suicide that I detail in this dissertation—the narrative that underwrites, for example, the framing of the McQueen retrospective in terms of Romanticism—I now turn to my third epigraph, the opening lines of Audre Lorde’s 1978 poem “Power,” as illustrative of my reassessment, in the chapters of this dissertation, of a different historical narrative of suicide. This narrative, I will argue, originates in, but is my no means reducible to, the Romantic period.

**Suicide, Romanticism, and Social Death**

On its face, Lorde’s “Power” has little, if anything, to do with Romanticism. Lorde wrote “Power” in response to the release from prison of a white policeman who was caught on video fatally shooting a ten-year-old boy and later admitting that he “didn’t notice the size nor nothing else/ only the color [of his skin].” As Lorde stages it, the particular relationship between poetry and suicide turns not on a poet’s individual predilection toward suicide—the typically “Romantic” reading of suicide—but on the cultural impact of poetry itself, namely the difference between poetic and everyday language, or “rhetoric.” Through multiple stories of racial subjection and violence, Lorde suggests that poetic language achieves

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something quite different from rhetoric: rhetoric, being predicated upon an implicit address to a reading subject, holds within it all the attendant complications of the reducibility of that subject to one predetermined definition—the middle class white male. We see this, for example, in the lines describing the officer’s acquittal:

    by 11 white men who said they were satisfied
    justice had been done
    and one black woman who said “They convinced me”
    meaning
    they had dragged her 4’1” black woman’s frame
    over the hot coals of four centuries of white male approval
    until she let go of the first real power she ever had\footnote{Ibid., ll. 32-40.}

Even as power is ostensibly transferred by the hegemonic group (the white men) to the black woman, it reveals itself to be essentially non-transferable. That is, even as it is ostensibly bestowed upon the woman, she emphasizes that the men “convinced” her to cede to them the decision to acquit; and in ceding to their rhetoric, she becomes complicit in perpetuating systematized oppression, “lin[ing] her own womb with cement / to make a graveyard for our children” (ll. 41-2). For Lorde, rhetoric is tantamount to the social instruments, signified most obviously by the police, but also implicit in the logic that “convinced” the woman to vote with the men, which perpetuate the continued degradation of subsequent generations. In “Power,” the murder of a child by an officer of the state thus becomes not only justifiable, but justice itself, and Lorde’s answer to the social
forces that will indefinitely perpetuate this system is to cut it off at the source: suicide, poetry. As I shall demonstrate in the chapters that follow, Lorde’s turn to self-annihilation as a metaphorical antidote to the Enlightenment’s emphasis on the transparent power of the liberal individual was first articulated in Romantic critiques of Enlightenment individualism.

Over the course of the three chapters that follow, I will show how a Romantic-era vision of suicide emerges out of a growing frustration with the Enlightenment’s failures to deliver on its promises of justice for all people—the same frustrations that inform not only Lorde’s “Power,” but any number of contemporary discussions about civil rights. I will begin by examining a historically significant literary work that was contemporaneous with the two figures most deeply associated with the birth of Romantic suicide, Goethe’s 1774 Werther and the 1770 death of Thomas Chatterton, but which has since been all but forgotten, Thomas Day and John Bicknell’s 1773 poem The Dying Negro. This poem popularized the trope of the suicidal slave, and in so doing, the poem left the topic of suicide with a definitively political charge. Contextualizing the poem within late eighteenth-century legal discussions of the philosophical legacy of John Locke, I show that The Dying Negro addresses controversies surrounding the tension between, on one hand, Lockean principles of self-ownership and private property that create rights-bearing subjects, and on the other, the economic logic that made it possible for certain kinds of people to be owned as property in the
system of Atlantic world slavery. Situating the poem against the 1772 case *Somerset v. Stewart*, which many regard as a crucial step toward abolition, Day and Bicknell’s poem reveals that the secular rhetoric of suicide is inextricable from the rhetoric of self-possession associated with liberal individualism. By depicting the conditions that enable some people to assert themselves as “individuals” as also creating the conditions that make suicide attractive to those excluded from that category, *The Dying Negro* thus frames suicide within larger questions about the limits of the legal category of personhood that continue to underwrite liberal society.

If the Romantic period did not simply forget the political questions that emerged from abolitionist literary depictions of suicide, then, I propose in Chapter 2, this calls on us to revise our accepted narratives of Romantic suicide as solipsistic and, implicitly, apolitical. I begin to do this in my second chapter by reading the most famous articulation of so-called Romantic suicide in English literature, Wordsworth’s description of Chatterton as the “marvellous boy” in his 1802 “Resolution and Independence,” against a lesser-known work in which Wordsworth also considers the topic of suicide, “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman.” The 1798 “Complaint” establishes Wordsworth’s awareness of and interest in the relationship between suicide and emerging discourses of alterity, and as such, it also enables us to reframe the monolithic Romantic mythos associated with the “marvellous boy.” Re-reading “Resolution and Independence”
as ambivalent about, rather than laudatory of, Chatterton’s suicide, my second chapter argues that the Romantic period is not unilaterally “in love” (to borrow Keats’ phrase) with self-destruction. Rather, the emphasis of this latter narrative over the earlier, political narrative about suicide, is a Victorian-era construction, one that continues to influence readings of Romanticism even today.42

Yet even while Victorian definitions contribute to ongoing perceptions of the tragic Romantic artist, the Romantic period reveals itself to be much more varied in its representations of suicide. In my third chapter, I show how Mary Shelley returns to the abolitionist project associated with suicide, in order to interrogate additional categories of social exclusion. Contextualizing Frankenstein within eighteenth-century theories about the processes of sympathy, I read the relationship between Victor and his creature as one that allegorizes the process of textual exchange, and that turns on their shared suicidal drive. In thus figuring literary exchange in terms associated with suicide, Mary Shelley demonstrates that texts are at their most dangerous when their authors write in genres that implicitly claim to cover the entirety of the social field, because in so doing they leave no

42 I draw here on what Denise Ferreira da Silva and others refer to as the “transparency thesis,” which precisely seeks to obliterare our awareness of difference under the liberal rubric of sameness by way of the fantasy that individualism, as a category of belonging, is accessible to all human beings. For more on this, see da Silva, Toward a Global Idea of Race (Minneapolis: The University of Minneapolis Press, 2007). In applying this argument to contemporary thinking about suicide, I mean to suggest that the aestheticization of suicide, that we see not only in the McQueen exhibit, but also in popular responses to the suicides of public figures like Kurt Cobain in 1994 and Robin Williams in 2014, impedes our ability to deal either with the problem of mental illness, or with the social conditions that stem either from the stigmas associated with mental illness, or from other social inequities, might drive a person to want not to live.
space for an outsider, signaled by the creature. *Frankenstein* stages the difficulty of constructing subjectivity through experiences of sympathy by revealing the sympathetic subject of the Enlightenment as one intrinsically closed to alterity. By finally suggesting the destruction of the Enlightenment category of “the self,” *Frankenstein* posits the need to open the social field to recognize all those who are considered “non-subjects.” Mary Shelley, I argue, uses the trope of suicide to critique a rigid understanding of social relations in order to interrogate the roots of inequality within a social structure based on selective individualism, finally suggesting that it is the very idea of the liberal subject that needs to be revised.

In reading Romantic writers’ interests in the social conditions that create inequality by way of the metaphor of suicide through a combination of postcolonial, feminist, and critical race theory and history, *Suicidal Romanticism* brings the field of Romantic studies into conversation with the chronologically parallel field of Black Atlantic studies. In so doing, the project implicitly engages the sociological discourse on “social death,” which is now commonly associated with critical histories of slavery, though it emerged from discourses on mental illness.

The term “social death” is attributed to the sociologist Erving Goffman, who initially developed it in a treatise on the treatment of mental patients in asylums. Goffman observes that patients newly admitted start with “relationships and rights,” but end up, over the course of their treatment, with “hardly any of
either.\textsuperscript{43} Since Goffman’s 1961 study, the term “social death” has been used to draw attention to the way in which the social existence of not only mental patients, but also of prisoners, the elderly, and the dying is often reduced, and sometimes eliminated, by way of other parties’ physical and emotional withdrawal. The central contention of the concept of social death is that people can cease to exist socially before they have been defined as clinically and/or biologically dead. “Social death” thus emerged, in the 1960s, as an index of how not only death and dying, but also life itself, is defined and managed by modern institutions like prisons and hospitals.

Orlando Patterson turned this medical discourse into one explicitly engaged with civil rights. In \textit{Slavery and Social Death}, Patterson’s expansive survey of slave cultures from across history, Patterson uses “social death” to describe those people who have no social existence beyond that which he has with his master. Since Patterson’s study, social death has also been widely engaged to discuss the precondition of ascribing and denying human value through relationality that underscores the perpetration of social violences from everyday sexism and racism to genocide.\textsuperscript{44}

Beyond demonstrating that British Romanticism is already interested in representing the lives and deaths of those individuals described by this phenomenon, I argue that some Romantic writers posited a solution to the political preconditions that create social death. What begins, in The Dying Negro as a call to recognize the social death of enslaved persons by stirring the reading public, through the sentimental depiction of a slave’s suicide, to resurrect the eponymous slave from this condition becomes, in Mary Shelley’s hands, an invitation for British society to reform itself. Romanticism’s various engagements with suicide thus represent a shift, between 1773 and 1818, from sympathizing with the perceived victims of social inequity, to challenging the society that has produced those inequities by first creating the preconditions for victimization, and then coming to the rescue of, those “victims” in the first place. What the period’s emphasis on suicide finally reveals, then, is a gradual awakening, through the trope of self-destruction, to a prophetic self-realization: that the system of liberalism within which Romantic writers lived—which both gave them social life and enabled their political and moral outrage against social death—is ultimately untenable in bringing to fruition modernity’s promises of universal equality.

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That Romanticism had its roots in concerns over rights has been well established, from seemingly incalculable volumes examining, for example, the period’s relationship to the French Revolution or early feminism qua Wollstonecraft, to Peter Kitson’s recent claim that “the forms of expression developed in abolitionist discourse were vital to the discourses we have come to term ‘Romantic’.”45 But in recognizing not only Romanticism’s interrogation of the intended subject of those rights (the liberal individual) through suicide, but also the ways in which that interrogation has been obscured by critics of Romanticism beginning with the Victorians, Suicidal Romanticism suggests that we may begin to use Romanticism’s dual interests in suicide to read British Romanticism in the context, also, of more recent discourses associated with civil rights. That aspects of the Romantic period are still relevant today is evident in the persistence of the mythos of the suicidal creative genius. Learning to read the political narrative of suicide that also emerged during the Romantic period will call on us to ask whether, and how, the trope of suicide may also inform contemporary discourses that continue to challenge that hallmark of modernity, the liberal self.

Chapter 1: The Abolitionist Prehistory of Romantic Suicide

“The Enlightenment looks different from the perspective of the living death sentence of slavery.”

- Paul Youngquist and Fran Botkin, “Black Romanticism”

“Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.”

-Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract

Before Werther’s melodramatic suicide made him Europe’s most fashionable ideal, and before Chatterton was immortalized by Wordsworth as the Romantic suicide par excellence, English society was moved by the poetic narrative of a nameless “black who shot himself on board a vessel in the river Thames,” the protagonist and speaker of Thomas Day and John Bicknell’s abolitionist poem The Dying Negro. First published in 1773, and revised five times over the course of two decades, The Dying Negro was “occasioned by an article of news that appeared last week in the London papers, intimating that a Black, who a few days before, ran away from his master, and got himself christened, with intent to marry his fellow-servant, a white woman, being taken, and sent on board the Captain’s ship, in the

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Thames; took an opportunity of shooting himself through the head."² But the
poem’s narrative, I will argue here, also recalls a rather more well known event, the
1772 trial that freed the slave James Somerset and led to what many believed was
the beginning of the end of the British slave trade.

In this chapter, I recast Day and Bicknell’s critically maligned poem from a
quintessential exemplar of abolitionist literature’s tendency to whitewash and
misrepresent the actual experiences of slaves, to a critical reassessment of the legal
grounds on which the Somerset trial was decided—namely, Somerset’s successful
appeal for a writ of habeas corpus—and their larger implications not only for the
future of the slave trade, but also for British liberal society.³ By replacing
Somerset’s legal victory, which declared him a person in the eyes of the law
through habeas corpus, with an act of suicide that is meant to establish the poem’s
narrator as a person in the eyes of readers, Day and Bicknell present suicide as a
slave’s only reasonable option, and in so doing, they highlight just how
extraordinary Somerset’s victory was. They hence draw attention not only to the
Enlightenment’s failure to deliver on its promises of universal liberty, but also to
key paradoxes in the very idea of liberty on which those promises were built—
paradoxes that I will trace here to vexed notions of property and personhood in

² This explanation is cited from the Advertisement to the first edition. According to the
English periodical The Bibliographer, “This story was told to Day by his friend John Bicknell, and the
result was a poem entitled The Dying Negro” (31). See: “The Author of Sanford and Merton,” The
Bibliographer V (January 1884): 30-4.
³ Habeas corpus is a formal written order to produce a prisoner before a judge in order to
review the legality of her arrest, imprisonment, or detainment.
Lockean political theory, which Day and Bicknell’s poetical suicide note precisely helps to reveal.

*The Dying Negro* accomplishes its critique of liberal individualism when read within the particular context of the Somerset case, which, as I discuss in further detail later in this chapter, helped to highlight and spark debate about the reach, and the limits, of habeas corpus, a legal concept as significant in the eighteenth century as it is today. That is, though different in many ways, both English and American legal systems hold as fundamental certain ontological assumptions about “the body,” of which habeas corpus is an important cipher.⁴ But as countless critics of Atlantic world slavery have noted, the effect of slavery was precisely to de-personalize, or to take away the ontological significance associated with bodies in legal discourse, producing abject, commoditized “flesh” where there might otherwise be “bodies” – that is, to take from the enslaved body its ontological significance as a body that could communicate one’s legal status as a person.⁵ Day and Bicknell, two British barristers, challenge the relationship between “body” and “self” by replacing habeas corpus with suicide, an act of self-

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⁴ Recently, Alexander Weheliye has challenged this notion, noting that habeas corpus fails to adequately account for those bodies not represented by the law under the system of liberalism. Drawing on Black Feminist notions of “flesh” as a historically significant counterpoint to the white, liberal “body,” Weheliye posits the term *habeas viscus* to account for those bodies not represented by habeas corpus. See: *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

assertion through a different kind of ownership of one’s body, it’s self-imposed
destruction.

The implications of Day and Bicknell’s poem are twofold. In a basic sense,
*The Dying Negro* aims toward the sentimental stance of bestowing upon the
disenfranchised slave ontological recognition as “human” by eliciting sympathy
from its (implicitly) white readers, which many critics have rightly read as creating
more problems than it solved. But beyond its unfortunate polemical strategy, it is
also important to recognize the association that the poem creates between the
legal drama of 1772 and the subject of suicide. I will argue that the poem succeeds,
if not quite in its intended goal as a work of anti-slavery literature, then more
broadly as a work that challenges liberal Enlightenment thinking. By recalling a
familiar narrative but changing the ending, Day and Bicknell vastly expand the
reach of the abolitionist project, to encompass not only a critique of the institution
of slavery, but also of British society more broadly. By linking slavery, suicide, and
habeas corpus, Day and Bicknell illuminate a central paradox of liberalism,
namely, its inability to justify the limits it places on individual freedom. What *The
Dying Negro* finally articulates is the dialectical nature of the Enlightenment
project of freedom as one that aims to challenge, even as it relies on, the
constitution of personhood through property in liberal society.⁶

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⁶ My approach here reads across several critical traditions, all of which variously draw from
eighteenth-century political philosophy. For my readings of the notion of the rights-bearing
Further, I will argue that the poem accomplishes this critique by means of a new literary form. The poem, as most critics hold, is one of the earliest examples of engaging sentimental conventions to link imaginatively references to lived forms of this paradox from the margins of government; but this is not the extent of its literary innovation. *The Dying Negro* is also a suicide note in verse, a unique form with a particular history in the eighteenth century. It is the specificity of this individual as created, at least in part, through a relationship to property, I am indebted to a long tradition of scholarship that reads literary culture and literary form as not merely reflective, but also constitutive, of political formations. Isaac Kramnick’s work on the importance of John Locke, Edmund Burke, and other political philosophers on the literary milieu of the late eighteenth-century in *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) is central here, as is C. B. MacPherson’s reading, in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) of Locke’s theory of selfhood as predicated on an economic logic of the infinite accumulation of property rather than, as other critics (including Kramnick, one of MacPherson’s chief opponents) would have it, in a conceptual understanding of the primacy of natural law. The vast field of novel studies, grounded in reading the formative influence of the novel on the co-terminous development of liberal politics, and especially Nancy Armstrong’s readings of the construction of the master-category of ‘individualism’ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in *How Novels Think* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), also heavily inform this study, though implicitly, I maintain, as Mutlu Blasing argued in *Lyric Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), that poetry participates in political argumentation and formation in ways similar to the novel. Equally significant is the economic and legal critique of structures of inequality, as they operate within the logic of liberalism. This approach belongs to a more recent history of critical race theory and Atlantic world history. What began as historical inquiries by David Brion Davis in *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), and Seymour Drescher in *Economide* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), to name a few, has, more recently, burgeoned into a wide-reaching field that recognizes the Black Atlantic not as secondary to Europe and America, but as fundamental not only to building more nuanced understanding of Euro-American culture, but also as a space that requires its own unique critical apparatuses and criteria. Much of this field is, in turn, underwritten by theoretical and historical work in postcolonial studies, pioneered by, among others, Gayatri Spivak, whose early work in Romanticism influenced her path-breaking inquiries into the complex interplay of cultures at the turn of the nineteenth century, a critical juncture in the history of modernity.
form that allows the relationship between the political, the legal, and the literary to emerge in *The Dying Negro*.

The reading I develop in this chapter enables us to view *The Dying Negro* as central to the eighteenth century’s ongoing reassessment not only of slavery, but also of the cultural meaning of suicide, which takes on a political tenor largely by way of Day and Bicknell’s poem. If, as historians of suicide have posited, thinking about suicide “opened” in the eighteenth century, it did so, at least in part, because the subject of suicide was recuperated from the mainstream view, which held that suicide was a mortal sin, or, in some cases, a kind of sport in which the upper classes could indulge. With Day and Bicknell’s poem, suicide became, instead, one of the master tropes of political movements occurring on the fringes of society, such as abolitionist projects that sought to open Enlightenment categories of personhood to include a wider spectrum of people. By the end of the eighteenth century, in association with discourses committed to expanding individual rights based on contractarian principles of personhood and property, suicide emerged as a key cipher of some of the period’s the most pressing political concerns. And this political narrative, in turn, underwrites the development of Romantic notions of suicide at the turn of the nineteenth century.

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The Problem of the Sentimental Slave Suicide

Though I offer more detailed readings of parts of *The Dying Negro* throughout this chapter, let me begin with an overview of the poem’s narrative arc. *The Dying Negro* is written in heroic couplets sustained over 19 pages (in its original 1773 printing). As a suicide note in verse, the poem is styled to represent the final words of a slave aboard a ship who, having been captured and about to be returned to the Americas, has decided to jump into the ocean. The poem primarily addresses the slave’s lover, left behind in England, and in places also speaks to the slavers holding him captive. *The Dying Negro* is, at bottom, a defense of the slave’s decision to commit suicide. As I discuss in closer detail later in this chapter, the poem opens with a series of assertions about why suicide is the slave’s only recourse against the injustices of the world. The poem then proceeds to alternate between pitiable addresses to his lover, his only source of happiness since he became enslaved, and outrage over his experiences of enslavement. A significant part of the poem also recalls the narrator’s life in Africa, which, the authors’ footnotes tell us, are based on Michel Adanson’s 1759 travelogue *A Voyage to Senegal*. This section describes the duplicitous means by which Europeans befriended West Africans only to trick them onto the ships that sealed their fates. The poem then shifts back to the slave’s lamentation, first returning to the slave’s sorrowful address to his lover, and finally, concluding with the slave’s imagination of the guilt and shame that the slavers who witness his suicide will feel. The
implication, then, is that once his narrative is completed, the slave shoots himself in the head.

Although there had been poems depicting Atlantic world slaves and slavery prior to 1773, Day and Bicknell’s *The Dying Negro* is considered the first explicitly abolitionist English poem. Yet despite its historical significance, the poem is not given much interpretive attention in literary criticism. Literary critics instead tend to malign the poem as the prototypical example of the dangers of sentimentalizing suicide among slaves. As Lynn Festa explains, the intention of sentimental anti-slavery writing was to

> make a plea for the humanity of the slave by conferring a voice upon the slave...articulat[ing] the sufferings of the slave in the first person in order to stir the reader-interlocutor into action. [In such works], the metropolitan reader veers between a first-person identification with the slave (the “I” of the poem) and his or her “real world” identification with the British audience (the “you” or “thee” addressed in the poem). This oscillation between the position of speaker and interlocutor executes the political agenda of the poem; it enables the reader to sympathize with the suffering slave and asks him or her to recognize, if not to alter, the oppressive structures in which the slave is enmeshed.

What emerges as problematic about this technique, however, is that it assumes that slaves’ sufferings can be “known” by means of the imaginations of free men and women, thereby implicitly rendering dispensable the lives, experiences and voices of slaves, themselves.

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10 The notion that sentimentalism can be politically and socially unsettling has been enumerated by more scholars than I can list here. Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* (New York: Oxford U P, 1997) offers one of the definitive explications of how sentimental strategies in
In the case of *The Dying Negro*, one need only glance at recent historical work on slave suicides to recognize how little the poem takes into account the actual lives and deaths of slaves. Work by Marcus Rediker and Eric Robert Taylor has underscored the frequency of suicide among the enslaved, and Terri L. Snyder has offered ethnographic interpretations of the range of meanings of self-destruction among imported slaves. Further, as Daniel Walker shows, the abolitionist writing subsume the subjectivity and agency of the person or group positioned as the object of the sentimental stance, rendering the display of sympathy a performance of the cultural values of the sympathizers while perpetuating even more, albeit usually unintentional, violence to the sympathized-with. In the same vein, Nina Baym points out sentimentalism’s implicit ethos of victimization and subjection of women in “Women’s novels, women’s minds: An unsentimental view of nineteenth-century women’s fiction,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 31, no. 3 (Summer 1998): 335-350. Even those critics who do not explicitly account for how sentimental texts deal with dynamics of social inequality are critical of the genre. Though sentimentalism is meant, as Paul Goring writes in *The Rhetoric of Sensibility of Eighteenth-Century Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 143, “to encourage emotional responses in readers and to prescribe the manner in which such responses should be made manifest,” insofar as sentimental fiction is, as Janet Todd puts it in *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986), 4, “a kind of pedagogy” that operates by “teaching its consumers to produce a response equivalent to the one presented in its episodes,” it is a pedagogy of social and ideological prescriptivism. Goring, for example, finds the genre problematic because it produces inauthentic responses: “sentimental fiction provided the eighteenth century’s growing number of readers…with opportunities to perform polite literary responses (and/or to report and advertise such responses),” asserting polite identities as moral individuals without actually effecting any real ethic of care toward others (143). Thus, Goring suggests that sentimentalism produces, if not necessarily a culture of unexamined bigotry (as critics working in the vein of Hartman and Baym would hold), then at least a self-involved myopia that becomes difficult to overcome because it masquerades as outward-looking concern for others. It is important to read sentimental fiction’s discernible cultural effects beyond its intentions. When we do so, we find that even while sentimentalist strategies were deployed, usually, with the aim of creating a more compassionate and egalitarian society, the underlying politics of sentimentalism’s strategies point up the vast difficulty of attaining these goals.

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realities of slaves’ suicides were very different from how suicide came to be depicted in abolitionist writing. According to Walker, in many West African traditions, suicide was associated with a belief in transmigration, the idea that the soul or spirit of the suicide would be returned to the community into which the person had been born. Crucially, by the end of the eighteenth century, Anglo-American society knew that transmigration was a motivating factor for suicide among slaves. In 1791 a British House of Commons report notes that West Africans felt “such an aversion to leaving their native places that they threw themselves overboard, on an idea that they should go back to their own country.” It is unclear, from my own research, whether in 1773, when The Dying Negro was first printed, this motivation for suicide among slaves was known in England; nevertheless, the poem continued to be reprinted through the end of the century and into the next, and it is therefore significant that by 1791, even as the poem

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12 Quoted in Walker, 11.
continued to circulate, it was known that the suicidality of slaves was not, as the abolitionist tradition depicted it, an individual pursuit, but a communal one: the suicides of many slaves were motivated by hope for a future life in the communities they were forced to leave behind. This is not to suggest, of course, that all slaves’ suicides must be read in terms of transmigration. One can imagine that the dehumanizations and degradations suffered by slaves would be motivation enough for many to end their lives; and further, the possibility of transmigration through suicide can only be read as a motivation for first-generation slaves, as transmigration was only believed to reincarnate a soul within the community in which s/he was born, and thus would not serve as an escape from slavery for those born on plantations. Still, on slave ships, suicide could, and often did, signify something very different from what it would come to mean within the popular eighteenth-century English imagination.

This tension between the meanings that European society constructed around the inner lives of slaves and the available evidence about the actual experiences of those who were enslaved is well encapsulated in the period’s visual culture, which was enamored of the sentimental spectacle of slave suffering. Consider, for instance, Josiah Wedgwood’s 1787 abolitionist seal (Figure 1), which remains the most abiding image of the abolitionist era, used everywhere from the cover of the scholarly journal *Slavery and Abolition*, to national monuments such as Thomas Ball’s Emancipation Statue in Washington, D.C. (Figure 2). Regard the
slave's pose in Wedgewood's image: kneeling, he gazes up, presumably at a white master, with his hands clasped in a pose suggesting prayer or supplication. The stance is submissive, despairing, sentimental.

Figure 1: "Am I Not a Man and a Brother?" The abolitionist medallion, designed by Josiah Wedgwood in 1787, © British Museum, London.
Though Ball’s statue, above, changes the position of the slave’s hands, his presence at the feet of Lincoln – ostensibly, his liberator, though he might just as easily be read as his master – has caused considerable controversy since the nineteenth century.13 As Celeste-Marie Bernier and Judie Newman have shown, Wedgewood’s image has been understood as, alternately, “humanizing” the slave through its spectacle of emotion, aligning him with a position of power “as the sacred intercessor addressing God on behalf of weaker mortals,” or casting him as

“subservient to an implicitly white patriarch” by calling on the everlasting power of
the master class to recognize his humanity and set him free.\textsuperscript{14}

The evocation of pathos for the slave in the visual iconography of the
“kneeling slave” is precisely the tactic at work in the sentimentalizing rhetoric that
underwrites \textit{The Dying Negro}. But how different is the image of the kneeling slave
above from the following passage, taken from a slaver’s description of the postures
of slaves who committed suicide aboard slave ships:

\begin{quote}
In the barracoons, it was known that if a Negro was not amused and kept in
motion, he would mope, squat down with his chin on his knees and arms clasped
about his legs and in a very short time, die. Among the civilized races it is thought
impossible to hold one’s breath until death follows. It is thought that the African
can do so.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Regardless of whether the kneeling slave image is understood to be poised in
supplication or in submission, unlike the description above, the slave looks
outward: in kneeling slave imagery, the slave is presented in relation to his
oppressors, and thus the effect of the image becomes less about the slave himself,
and more about some aspect of the culture of oppression that keeps him kneeling
at somebody else’s feet. The quoted description of the suicidal slave, on the other
hand, is entirely inwardly facing and contained, giving no consideration at all to
his oppressors. In the passage quoted above, the author notes the ability of
Africans to commit suicide through a method that seems impossible or

\textsuperscript{14} Celeste-Marie Bernier and Judie Newman, “Public Art, Artefacts, and Atlantic Slavery:
\textsuperscript{15} Quoted in Walker, 11.
inaccessible to Europeans. This distinction emphasizes the vast cultural and conceptual distance that exists between the act of suicide by the slave and the interpretation of that act by the European observer. This difference speaks precisely to the perspective of many critics of Atlantic world slavery, who note that turning the realities of slave suffering into the sentimental conventions of abolitionist art creates a problematic paradigm. For Philip Gould, for example, sentimentalism “often implies the lack of difference; it tends to subsume racial or gendered differences [within] the trope of ‘humanity’ that itself registers Enlightenment tendencies to seek out universal categories of analysis.” For this reason, Gould and others have been right to accuse texts like The Dying Negro of “reduc[ing] Black suffering to simplistic formulas” that lead “to the narrative erasure of Africans themselves.”

By assuming as interchangeable imagined and actual scenarios of slave suffering, abolitionist texts and images paradoxically rely on the very logic of white universality (if not also white supremacy) that underwrites the institution of slavery, even as these texts are meant to abolish that institution.

Because it is considered paradigmatic of precisely this troubled legacy of abolitionism, The Dying Negro is frequently recalled by critics but, with only a few

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exceptions, it is rarely read with any sustained attention. Yet in its day, the poem garnered five editions in England between 1773 and 1793, and circulated widely in the United States well into the nineteenth century. Following the first printing of The Dying Negro, abolitionist writing began to feature with increasing prominence the contemplation or completion of suicide by slaves. As Richard Bell observes, “concerted efforts to leverage the spectacle of slave suicide for activist purposes began in the early 1780s...Focusing on the subject of suicide proved to be a timely tactic, a means to render slaves’ torments in forms that catered to readers captivated by both mortality and sentimentalism.” Elsewhere, Bell notes that that this trend was influenced directly by “Day and Bicknell’s sorrowful masterpiece.” Thus, even while critics are absolutely right to note ways in which The Dying Negro whitewashes the racial and class politics of slavery by ventriloquizing slaves’ voices, the poem also asserts a singular place in ongoing


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17 Festa, 160-162 and Carey, 75-84.
19 Bell, “Slave Suicide,” 525.
20 Bell, We Shall Be No More, 206.
ideological critiques of liberalism by introducing into the political conversation the ostensibly apolitical trope of suicide, and for this reason, it merits reconsideration.

Having now laid out the existing arguments about the shortcomings of Day and Bicknell’s poem, in the remainder of this chapter, I wish to consider whether there might be another, more productive way to understand this poem. What if, even as we note the shortcomings of sentimental abolitionism, we recast The Dying Negro as a poem about the limitations, inconsistencies, and paradoxes of a society that would call itself liberal? In other words, what if we suspend, without forgetting, the abolitionist intentions of The Dying Negro, and recast the poem as one that uses suicide to consider the more general enterprise of freedom, which, in liberal society, is predicated on the legal recognition of one’s personhood qua property?

**The Suicide Note and the Poetics of Personhood**

The problem of personhood pervades not only the explicit political agenda of The Dying Negro, it is also implicitly registered by the poem’s formal structure. Brycchan Carey has called The Dying Negro as “a suicide note in verse.”21 This descriptor is deceptively simple. It is significant, first of all, to recognize the rhetorical specificity of the suicide note – a uniquely reflexive and, simultaneously, anticipatory account of one’s own death that exists at the intersection of, at least, ____________________________

21 Carey, 76.
autobiography, epistle, confession, and apologia. The “suicide note in verse,” then, is an equally complex genre. To my knowledge, there has been no scholarly inquiry into the poetical suicide note, though a handful of essays have explored the literary qualities of actual suicide notes that appeared in the eighteenth century popular press. However, *The Dying Negro*—a fictional suicide note in verse that holds as its explicit goal to change political institutions through poetry—constitutes a distinctive and wholly unexplored formal category.

Michael MacDonald first brought the eighteenth-century fashion of printing suicide notes to our attention in 1988. For MacDonald, this trend was part of the larger cultural shift toward what he and Terence R. Murphy described as the secularization of suicide in their landmark book *Sleepless Souls.*

According to MacDonald,

> The rapid growth of the newspaper and periodical industry after 1700 transformed the social context within which suicide was understood. The press made suicide a much more public event than it had been before. Newspapers and magazines became the principal means of learning about such deaths. Stories describing suicides appeared very often in eighteenth-century newspapers and periodicals. Their frequency naturally varied from time to time, but it was not unusual by the 1720s and 1730s for several such stories to appear in the London papers each week.

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22 The overarchingly claim of *Sleepless Souls* is that in the eighteenth century, public dialogues about suicide saw a marked decline in concern with religion, and suicide became more a question of criminality, ethics, and insanity. This work began with MacDonald’s single-authored essay “Suicide and the Rise of the Popular Press in England,” *Representations* 22 (Spring 1988): 36-55, and continued in a chapter devoted to the hermeneutics of the suicide note in MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy’s *Sleepless Souls* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

23 MacDonald, 41.
MacDonald identifies three types of stories about suicide that appeared in English newspapers: “First, suicides were listed among the various ‘casualties’ that had occurred in London or (more rarely) a provincial cities. Second, brief stories recounting suicides appeared among the news of routine crimes and violent accidents. Third, longer pieces were occasionally printed that made an attempt to reconstruct in detail the circumstances, motive, and meaning of a death.”

MacDonald emphasizes the aesthetic qualities of these accounts, through which, he argues, “writers attempted to place their readers at the scene of the death, and invited them to reconstruct what had happened from the evidence before them.”

Mass interest in reading about scenes of suicide in as much detail as possible gave rise to a related phenomenon, the printing and literary consumption of suicide notes, particularly real ones:

Suicide notes were naturally prized, for they provided an opportunity to recreate the thoughts of the dead without resorting to patent speculation. (They were so prized, in fact, that they were sometimes faked by writers anxious to improve their tales.) Editors frequently printed suicide notes with a minimum of framing narrative, letting them stand as epistolary short stories, so that the suicide in effect spoke directly to the reader.

For MacDonald, this trend is significant because it showcases the eighteenth-century’s increasingly tolerant views on suicide.

Although well regarded when it was published, MacDonald’s work did not yield much further interest in suicide notes until 2014, when Eric Parisot returned

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24 Ibid., 43.
25 Ibid., 46.
26 Ibid., 47.
our attention to suicide notes in the eighteenth century British press. Focusing on
suicide notes printed after the middle of the century, Parisot’s central claim is that
that suicide notes “emerge as public markers of the incongruity of sensibility as
both moral and pathological discourses...[and] expose the slippery connections
between the two.”27 In other words, for Parisot, suicide notes offer an “alternative
textual history of sensibility.”28 Focusing on the complex interplay of literary
conventions with the realities of suicide, death and suffering, Parisot suggests that
even while the “performative strategy” of the suicide note is culled directly from
the pages of sentimental literature, it is equally “a strategy that brings into stark
relief the fictive origins of affective response, despite the reality of the suicidal
experience.”29 Parisot makes his point by identifying some features of the cultural
effects of suicide notes in the late eighteenth century, emphasizing the multiplicity
of styles and the range of emotions that the notes he surveys represented. That
the qualities exhibited by suicide notes cannot be reduced to a single set of
categorical markers “speaks more to the suicide note as a precarious and deeply
conflicted performance, one that attempts to reconcile the surrender and
reclamation of personal agency, the rejection and reformation of social ties, and
ultimately, the competing desires for self-destruction and self-construction.”30

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27 Eric Parisot, “Suicide Notes and Popular Sensibility in the Eighteenth-Century British
28 Ibid., 277.
29 Ibid., 284.
30 Ibid., 278.
Parisot corroborates Janet Todd’s notion that if suicide notes appear to participate in discernible literary conventions, “it may be because huge emotions often express themselves in clichés. A suicide note cannot...be emotions recollected in tranquility; it has to be emotion enacted and expressed in the nearest words.”

Thus, rather than attempting to understand suicide notes in terms of literary styles and tropes, Parisot focuses on the cultural impact of printing and reading suicide notes.

Suggesting that suicide notes are about more than “merely gratifying the reader’s morbid fascination,” Parisot argues that the “isolated scenes of suffering” depicted, or at least suggested, by printed suicide notes, gave readers the occasion to “test their own capacity to feel and...to provoke substantive moral response.”

But in so doing, suicide notes effectively “reinforce[d] patterns of social dysfunction.” Thomas Keymer has argued that the culture of sensibility was not interested in alleviating the suffering of others so much as it was interested in exploiting sensibility to “congratulate itself on its compassionate posture towards evil of its own creation.” Parisot offers an equally skeptical perspective on the social function of suicide notes:

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32 Parisot, 279.
33 Ibid., 285.
As sentimental vignettes, polite suicide notes of the period operate to conceal the physical and psychological torture of self-destruction, the social origins of this extreme unsocial behavior, and the utter irrevocability of the deed. Without the disguising aids of fiction, published suicide notes remain uncomfortably public notices where the failures of society are writ large.35

For Parisot, the brief popularly of the suicide note in print – a trend that reached its peak in the 1770s, the same decade as the Somerset trial (1772) and the first three printings of The Dying Negro (1773-1775), and declined sharply after 1779 – signals “the moment sensibility as dignified virtue descends into a maelstrom of resentment.”36

If the suicide note does, indeed, signal a breakdown in the efficacy of sensibility as a political tool, then the question becomes, might there be something else at stake in Day and Bicknell’s poetic suicide note? What, beyond a superficial imagination of slaves’ emotions, does the suicide note offer these poets’ political agenda? In part, of course, it is important to recognize that to print anything about suicide in the eighteenth century was, at bottom, a political act. Through the array of responses to suicide in the eighteenth century – regardless of whether it is seen as anti-social, anti-providential, anti-humanitarian, or as the ultimate assertion of individuality – suicide is fundamentally inseparable from the day’s political concerns. But, I would add that the suicide note ought to be recognized

35 Parisot, 285.
36 Ibid., 287.
as a development of the aesthetic and political work of another kind of death note popular in the eighteenth century, the epitaph.\(^{37}\)

While a full consideration of the similarities and differences between epitaphs and suicide notes is beyond the scope of this chapter, I call up the association here with an eye toward Barbara Johnson’s work on the constitution of personhood in poetry and the law through the rhetorical conventions of the epitaph. In two landmark essays,\(^{38}\) Johnson considers how the rhetorical categories of anthropomorphism/personification (the act of conferring human attributes onto a nonhuman entity) and prosopopoeia/apostrophe (an address to an absent or dead person), which are prominent features of poetic epitaphs, also inform the legal concept of the person. In “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” Johnson brings what she considers a fundamental relationship between

\(^{37}\) The epitaph is a highly reflexive genre, which has long been held as instructive of a culture’s understanding of its own ideological assumptions, interests, and transformations. As Joshua Scodel explains in *The English Poetic Epitaph* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 1-2: Since the existence of a social order presupposes its survival despite the death of its individual members, a society must treat the dead in such a way that they undergird rather than undermine the reproduction of social life and its fundamental values and practices. Changes in the treatment of the dead are thus closely and dialectically linked to changes in social relations among the living…[Further,] as a literary genre the poetic epitaph exploits both the distinctive features of verse and its own specific conventions in order to define the dead in ways that not only reinforce but also extend, challenge, and reshape prevailing cultural assumptions. The development of the poetic epitaph is thus a continuous process of assimilation and modification of cultural norms.

\(^{38}\) Both essays have been multiply published. “Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law” first appeared in the *Yale Journal of Law and Humanities* 10, no. 2 (1998): 549-574 and was later reprinted in *Persons and Things* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion” first appeared in *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986): 29 - 47, and has been reprinted in *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) and several anthologies of literary and cultural criticism. My references to the essays above refer to their first printings in the *Yale Journal of Law and Humanities* and *Diacritics*, respectively.
apostrophe, animation, and death in Western poetry to bear on late twentieth
century discourses about abortion, in order to grapple with assumptions about the
limits of human life implied through the uses of apostrophe in both poetic and
legal language about abortion. In “Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law,” Johnson
considers, more broadly, the possibility that “lyric and law might be seen as two
very different ways of instantiating what a ‘person’ is.” Reading the difference
between a lyric person – “emotive, subjective, individual” – and a legal person –
“rational, rights-bearing, institutional,” Johnson proposes that the two illuminate
each other, such that these seemingly unrelated axes are, in fact, complementary
structures through which personhood is negotiated and understood.\textsuperscript{39}

If we take Johnson’s claim that “lyric and law are the fault lines along which
‘personhood’ is structured”\textsuperscript{40} then the suicide note in verse emerges as a suggestive
innovation for Day and Bicknell to interrogate their culture’s understanding of
“the person.” Like Johnson, Day and Bicknell were implicitly asking “whether
there is a relation between the ‘first person’ (the grammatical ‘I’) and the
‘constitutional person’ (the subject of rights).”\textsuperscript{41} But unlike the epitaph, through
which Johnson draws the terms of her analysis, the “suicide note in verse” reverses
the ideology or stance toward being implied by a poetics wherein personhood – if

\textsuperscript{39} Johnson, “Anthropomorphism,” 549. All citations of this essay refer its first printing in
the \textit{Yale Journal of Law and Humanities}.  
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 574.  
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 556.
not also life itself – is negotiated on the related sites of anthropomorphism and apostrophe. That is, both anthropomorphism and apostrophe – and by extension, the epitaph – rely on a positive reckoning with personhood: anthropomorphism calls up, or imposes, “humanness” onto something non-human, while apostrophe animates, or makes live (and therefore, implicitly present) something or someone that is absent or dead. Both techniques shift absence into presence, death into life, non-personhood into personhood, bestowing life unto that which is, in every realm other than the space of poetry, absent, dead, or simply “not.” The act of suicide in the Western imaginary has precisely the opposite effect: suicide, understood in its most basic definition as self-murder or self-inflicted death, renders dead that which lives. The poetic suicide note, then, poses a special kind of interpretive challenge: as a discursive form that belongs to a poetics that is legible only when predicated on presence and the positive assertion of being, what does it mean to pronounce, in verse, one’s intention to kill oneself? How do we read the subjectivity and temporality of a lyric subject, whose very purpose in coming into being as a lyric subject – in composing the suicide note in verse – is to announce his self-effacement?

Contrary to how critics have read The Dying Negro – contrary, indeed, to its own stated intentions – I would argue that the poem’s significance lies not only in its constitution of the slave as a person by sentimentalizing his intention to kill himself, but paradoxically also in the fact that the poem creates that person
precisely in order to undo him. To attend only to that process of constitution is to attend only to part of the story. When understood within the context of the Somerset trial, I will argue that the poem’s emphasis on suicide functions not only to sway readers into believing that slaves could be viewed as socially legible persons, but simultaneously to interrogate the precarious grounds on which the category of personhood had been built in the first place.

**James Somerset and The Dying Negro**

The first paragraph of Day and Bicknell’s Advertisement, dated 5 June 1773 (not even a full year after the explosive trial of James Somerset), situates the poem squarely within the day’s contemporary events by claiming that the poem was based on a real news item. The story, which was printed in some, but not all, London newspapers, was just a paragraph long, and appeared as follows:

Tuesday a Black, Servant to Capt. Ordington, who a few days before ran away from his Master and got himself christened, with the intent to marry from fellow-servant, a White woman, being taken and sent on board the Captain’s ship in the Thames, took an opportunity of shooting himself through the head.\(^{42}\)

A handful of critics have noted the resonances of this narrative with the well-known circumstances of Somerset’s case, which, only a year earlier, had declared illegal precisely the detention of a black man on a ship set to sail for the Americas, and thus held the wider implication that slaves could not be returned to

\(^{42}\) Quoted in Carey, 75.
slavery once in England. The news report on which the poem is based, then, demonstrates that the Somerset ruling, although widely considered a monumental step toward abolition, was in fact less effective than many believed. As such, Brycchan Carey argues that for Day and Bicknell, two London lawyers, to write a sentimental poem about the extent to which “the law could be flouted” suggests that the poem itself “must therefore be seen first as a commentary on the ineffectiveness of the law.” I agree with Carey that the poem engages with the legacy of the Somerset case, but I would argue that it does not simply criticize the law’s ineffectiveness, but, by replacing the legal outcome of the trial with the slave’s suicide, the poem offers a prescient critique of the foundations of the laws in question.

Like the poem’s unnamed slave, Somerset’s fate was sealed when he ran away from his master only to be captured and held on board a ship. In 1769, James Somerset was brought to England by his master, Charles Stewart. Although slavery was illegal in England, Somerset remained Stewart’s servant for two years until, in 1771, he attempted to leave his master’s service. At Stewart’s request, Somerset was captured and held on board the docked Jamaica-bound ship Ann and Mary by the ship’s captain, John Knowles, with the goal of returning Somerset to slavery in North America. Like the slave in the poem, Somerset was a converted Christian, having been baptized in England. Three citizens claiming to be

43 Carey, 76.
Somerset’s godparents from his baptism, John Marlow, Thomas Walkin and Elizabeth Cade, as well as the ecumenical abolitionist Granville Sharp, learned of Somerset’s detention and brought the case to the courts, appealing for a writ of habeas corpus. Captain Knowles was ordered to produce Somerset before the Court, which would determine whether his imprisonment aboard the ship had been legal. After six months of proceedings, on 22 June 1772, William Murray, Lord Mansfield, Chief Justice of the Court of King’s Bench, declared that the air in England was “too pure” to suffer the “odious” institution of slavery.44 With these strong words, Mansfield declared Somerset a free man.45

There are two key differences between Somerset’s story and that of Day and Bicknell’s speaker: the love story between the poem’s eponymous slave and a white servant girl (which is, of course, part of the news report cited in the Advertisement), and the substitution of suicide in the poem for the triumph of habeas corpus in Somerset’s case. Critics have accounted for the former, but they have wholly overlooked the latter. Lynn Festa reads the love story as the chief rhetorical vehicle of the poem’s intended sentimental effect on its readers. For Festa, “pity rehumanizes the slave both from his interlocutor’s perspective, and,

44 Although there is no exact transcription of the proceedings and several contemporary accounts of the case survive, including one by Granville Sharp, per scholarly precedent, my references to the case rely on the Lofft report, generally considered the most complete report of the proceedings. See: Somerset v. Stewart, 1 Lofft King’s Bench 1772, 510.
significantly, from his own vantage point; it is because his beloved sees him as human that he regains his will to become so.”

Festa’s point is supported by passages like the following, in which the speaker imagines the impact of his suicide on his beloved, and regrets the pain he knows it will cause her:

How shall I soothe thy grief, my destin’d bride!
One sad farewell, one last embrace denied?
For oh! Thy tender breast my pangs will share,
Bleed for my wounds, and feel my deep despair.
Thy tears alone will grace a wretch’s grave,
A wretch, whom only thou would’st wish to have.
Take these last sighs – to thee my soul I breathe –
Fond love in dying groans, is all I can bequeathe.

For Festa, the compassion the speaker receives from his lover is meant to “reanimate the speaker from the social death of slavery” in the minds of readers,

46 Festa, 161.
47 Day and Bicknell, 3. Unless otherwise noted, my readings refer to the 1773 edition of the poem, owing both to its historical proximity to the Somerset case, and to its more sustained focus on the issue of suicide than subsequent editions. As Carey has observed, in subsequent editions, Day and Bicknell shift the poem’s focus from the slave’s personal suffering (and therefore from his motivations to commit suicide) to the politics of slavery more generally:

The 1775 edition has a completeness missing from the earlier edition. It also projects a more public vision than the earlier version, which dwelt on the Dying Negro’s personal feelings and the domestic situation that prompted his suicide. In the third edition, the domestic and the personal – often couched in sentiment terms – are still present, but the ending dramatically expands the scope of the poem. The first edition had ended with private prayers, private sorrow, and private acts of revenge. The second and third conclude with an apocalyptic vision of war between Africa and Europe, a war from which no one can escape, and in which natural justice, so long perverted by Europeans, is finally asserted. By translating the slaves’ ‘impious expostulation’ from the realm of personal prayer to that of intercontinental warfare, it demands that the reader respond in a manner which is less private and more public. In short, the poem ends by asking the reader to do something: to take action to end slavery and the slave trade. (84).

In the absence of line numbers, my citations refer to the page numbers of the 1773 edition.
who will issue him a kind of “afterlife” from their reception of his dying words. In this way, “pity and love become recompense for the injustice done to the slave.”

Ultimately, of course, the slave, unlike Somerset, chooses to die. Festa’s reading focuses on the cultural politics of slavery, but overlooks the cultural and religious politics of suicide. In fact, Festa’s reading implicitly undermines the slave’s suicide by positing that the speaker is given an “afterlife” in readers’ minds. In this way, too, Festa’s reading circumvents the religious problem of suicide that the poem brings up. The speaker, a converted Christian, claims that the horrors of slavery are so anti-Christian that suicide is more forgivable a sin than that perpetrated by the white masters. And, by aligning the reader with the position of the speaker, the poem argues the same thing.

Noting the poem’s structure, Carey argues that *The Dying Negro* manipulates the reader’s emotional state by purposely oscillating between incendiary political issues like interracial love and the suicide of a self-professed Christian, and highly emotional scenes of suffering. By setting the possibility of rational argumentation about, for example, race, the economics of slavery, and the

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48 Festa, 161.
49 This was not lost on the poem’s contemporary readers. In 1775, Day and Bicknell revised the poem to make the suicide a function of a decidedly un-Christian ideology. Carey reads this version of the poem as “a rejection of his recent conversion to Christianity. In these later editions, *The Dying Negro* offers himself as a sacrifice to unspecified, but clearly unchristian deities...Perhaps mindful of the accusations of impiety the first edition received, Day [adds a pun on ‘falling’ into the third edition]. But, if the Dying Negro is indeed falling towards damnation, it is a voluntary and calculated fall. No longer desiring the favours of a Christian God, the slave asks for ‘no long eternity of happiness’. Instead, he wants freedom.” See Carey, 84.
practical possibilities for reform, immediately before or after moving scenes of suffering, the poem “establishes and promotes the idea of a suffering sentimental hero, while also aiming to emotionally subvert the reader’s intellect.”50 This intellectual subversion is achieved by emotionally evocative transitions, which Carey suggests are “calculated to rouse indignation and guide the reader into the final scene of the poem, where the slave’s despair moves him inexorably towards the madness of suicide.”51

Yet if we read the love story in the way that Festa and Carey have posited – that is, as exemplary of the authors’ rhetorical maneuvering – then, the crucial distinction between Somerset and the titular subject becomes the exchange of habeas corpus for suicide. For Carey, the slave in the poem “gives vent to his feelings at being torn from the woman with whom he has fallen in love, as well as being torn from the country in which he now wishes to stay.”52 Such a reading asks us to imagine suicide as the slave’s alternative to deportation. We might be tempted to imagine that Somerset, too, went through similar suicidal contemplation when threatened with deportation.

But, I will argue in the next section, the poem’s turn to suicide is a response not to the injustices perpetrated on slaves by their owners, but also offers an imagined alternative to Somerset’s legal triumph. Habeas corpus, I show in what

50 Ibid., 76.
51 Ibid., 78.
52 Ibid., 76.
follows, gained traction in the public imagination as an important marker of individual liberty at this moment in history, precisely because the roots of liberal political theory were already coming into question by mid-eighteenth century political radicals—an inquiry that was spearheaded, in no small way, by abolitionists. Habeas corpus, as a legal concept and as a cipher of the key ideals of liberalism, is closely tied to the history of slavery, both because it was the basis on which Somerset was freed, and also because of the symbolic weight that came to be associated with debates about slavery in the late eighteenth century. And importantly, the trope of suicide is what allowed writers in the eighteenth century to bring this association to light. In what follows, I will posit that if we recast our understanding of the role of suicide in The Dying Negro from the ultimate result of the poem’s emotional manipulation, to a cipher of the slave’s natural right to freedom, then the role of suicide in this poem – and indeed, the increasing interest in poetic representations of suicide from the late eighteenth century through Romanticism, more generally – emerges as fundamentally tied not only to the histories of secularism and sensibility, but also to the period’s burgeoning political radicalism.

**Habeas Corpus, and the (Im)possibility of Self-Possession**

For almost two centuries, the decision by Lord Mansfield to free James Somerset has been considered directly precedential to the 1807 abolition of the
English slave trade and the 1834 emancipation of slaves in English colonial holdings, and has been read as paradigmatic for the American struggle for emancipation. Some historians have even claimed that at the time, English and American society viewed the decision itself to be the end of slavery in England and English territories.\textsuperscript{53} Today, the Somerset case remains canonical in Anglo-American constitutional thought, and has been read as foundational for everything from the genesis of modern human rights law to attempts to establish rights of non-human animals.\textsuperscript{54} Yet \textit{Somerset v. Stewart} was not only about slavery, but also about habeas corpus, the writ that protects against illegal detention; and moreover, it is precisely because the case was not about slavery, over which Mansfield’s court would have had no authority, but about the unlawful detention of a single person on English territory, that Somerset was freed at all. Although Mansfield himself held abolitionist convictions, the ruling, as Mansfield reminds us no fewer than four times during his pronouncement of the decision, was not finally about the legality, nor even the morality, of slavery. Nevertheless, scholars continue to extol the case as everything from “a major weapon in the arsenal of

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abolitionism”\textsuperscript{55} to “co-equal with the Declaration of Independence”\textsuperscript{56} in its influence on establishing and maintaining individual freedoms.

In addition to marking the shifting tide against slavery in Europe and America, at least part of the significance of Somerset \textit{v. Stewart} is that it opened the door for an important reassessment of habeas corpus. Today, habeas corpus, perhaps more than any other single concept, is understood as the link between key concepts of modern constitutional theory, including the association among personhood, property and liberty. Arguably, this view of habeas corpus as a fundamental safeguard of personal liberty is an eighteenth-century invention that emerges, in part, from the public's interest in the Somerset trial, and then gains traction during the British panic over Pitt's suspension of habeas corpus during the Treason Trials in 1794, and re-emerges again during the American uproar over Lincoln’s suspension of habeas corpus in 1861.\textsuperscript{57} In this way, one could read the Mansfield Decision as inaugurating what we might call the Habeas Corpus Century, wherein the relationship between the person and the state became increasingly embattled, even as that relationship grew more and more central to

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\textsuperscript{57} Indeed, zealous responses to and discussions of habeas corpus extend through the twentieth century and well into the present day: consider, for instance, petitions for “world habeas corpus” that became prominent in the 1950s and 1960s, or, more recently, the controversy over violations of habeas corpus, among other transgressions, in Guantanamo. On these points, see: Luis Kutner, \textit{The Human Right to Individual Freedom: A Symposium on World Habeas Corpus} (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970) and Anthony Gregory, \textit{The Power of Habeas Corpus in America} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
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both state policies and to emergent theories of the liberal self.

Scholars have traced the practice, if not the institutionalization, of habeas corpus at least as far back as the Norman Conquest, though some go all the way back to ancient Greece, but all agree that it was codified in its modern form on the eve of the Enlightenment in England: in 1679, Parliament passed 31 Cha. 2 c. 2, better known as the Habeas Corpus Act. Although there had been an earlier Habeas Corpus Act of 1641, and further Habeas Corpus Acts were passed in 1803, 1804, 1816 and 1862, the Act of 1679 remains one of the most important statutes in constitutional history because of how severely it limited the powers of the Crown over the individual. Specifically, the 1679 Act laid out, for the first time, specific procedures and timelines associated with the writ: it mandated near-immediate issue and return within three days, and it enabled prisoners to appeal for the writ even when courts were on vacation. The Act also laid forth penalties for delaying trials, and introduced fines for judges who refused to grant the writ, thereby enabling stricter enforcement. This was significant because prior to 1679, habeas


59 These later acts were largely clarifications of the 1679 Act. For example, the Acts of 1803 and 1804 clarify the extension of the Judges of the King’s Courts of Records and the Court of King’s Bench, respectively, to award writs of habeas corpus; the Act of 1816 expedites the timeframe within which appeals of habeas corpus are to be heard; and the Act of 1862 limits issuances of writs of habeas corpus to England only, excluding the colonies from its reach. Full texts of these Acts may be accessed at legislation.gov.uk.
corpus had been used predominantly in the service of the Crown, rather than the citizens it was supposed to protect. As Anthony Gregory has explained, by the middle of the seventeenth century, the Privy Council, at the behest of the king, regularly condemned prisoners to secret prisons outside of England without due process; and while a number of Parliamentary acts had been passed attempting to limit the unchecked rights of the crown over issues from forced loans, to violations of property rights, to martial law, most of these went unenforced. The 1641 Habeas Corpus Act – the first Parliamentary act to name the writ explicitly – stripped the Privy Council of its jurisdiction over civil matters and abolished Star Chambers, a tribunal used by the Crown to circumvent scrutiny over its detentions. But in the years following the 1641 Act, Charles I was stripped of his power during the First English Civil War, and Parliament itself suspended habeas corpus for those who supported him. This act of hypocrisy fueled Charles II’s attacks on Parliament when he restored the monarchy in the 1660s. Just why Charles II agreed to the 1679 Habeas Corpus Act remains unclear due to a lack of documentation. However, when the Act was passed, it limited significantly the powers of the Crown. So monumental was the Act that the 1679 session of Parliament came to be known as the Habeas Corpus Parliament, and the Act itself has come to be celebrated as the most efficient safeguard of the liberty of the

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60 Gregory, 32.
61 Ibid., 35.
subject. Per the nineteenth-century constitutional theorist A. V. Dicey, the 1679 Act and the revisions that followed “declare no principle and define no rights, but they are for practical purposes worth a hundred constitutional articles guaranteeing individual liberty,” and the legal scholar Kevin Gutzman stated, in 2013, that it is “the chief reason that Anglophones have long been free.” For at least two centuries, then, habeas corpus has been touted as the apex of individual freedom; and while there have been several studies of the history of the writ, few have put it into explicit conversation with the development of that other Enlightenment discourse of property and the self, Lockean liberalism.

John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government* was published a decade after the 1679 Habeas Corpus Act. In the oft-discussed section “Of Property” (Chapter V of the *Second Treatise*), Locke declares, “every man has a property in his own person.” This claim is advanced as part of Locke’s argument about how man moves from the state of nature to establishing civilized society, or the modern liberal state. For Locke, asserting ownership over parts of the “common” given by God to man begins with an individual exerting physical labor over an entity, and thereby claiming the right to call it one’s own: “The labour that was mine, removing them [objects in nature, e.g. acorns and berries] out of that common

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state they were in, hath fixed my property in them.” In other words, when one picks up acorns or berries, they belong to the person who picked them up; and one can only own as much property as he can reasonably use. As the argument continues, Locke moves from the advent of private property in a hunting and gathering society to one based on agriculture and land ownership. Here, again, the labor that one imposes on the land delineates what land can be enclosed. The next stage in the evolution of the state of nature involves the introduction of money. Locke remarks that before the introduction of money, there was a degree of economic equality, imposed both by reason and the barter system, because economic exchange was largely confined to the satisfaction of needs and conveniences. This was because most of the necessities of life are perishable – berries, meat, and so forth. However, the introduction of money led to differential increases in property, resulting in economic inequality, which in turn caused quarrels, contentions and increased violations of the law of nature. This, then, led to the decision to form a civil government. At this point in Locke’s argument, any limits on property ownership are set aside, and the system allows for unlimited acquisition of private property. This articulation of the relationship between the self and property in civil society constitutes one of the central tenets of liberal

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65 Ibid., par. 28.  
66 Ibid., par. 37.
individualism. But crucially, both the notion that property rights may be established by means of the body, and that personhood may be asserted through the possession of property, are not only assumed in the logic of modern habeas corpus, they are written in its etymology.

From the Latin habeas (2nd person singular present subjunctive active of habere, “to have,” “to hold”) and corpus (accusative singular of corpus, “body”), habeas corpus literally means “may you have the body.” In delineating the terms by which an individual person may challenge the state's claim to possess his body, the Habeas Corpus Act of 1679 asserts, at least in some measure, a notion of property not only in but of one's own person – a notion strikingly similar to the one that would become the cornerstone of Locke's 1689 Treatise. But my aim here is not to claim Locke's own indebtedness to the 1679 Act; rather, I would like to turn to the political culture of the mid-eighteenth century, which saw this connection as fundamental to its critique of Enlightenment ideologies. Paul Halliday has noted that the particular resonance that habeas corpus took on

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67 And this view remains largely held today. One of the preeminent legal scholars of the last century, Margaret Jane Radin writes in “Property and Personhood” Stanford Law Review 34, no. 5 (May 1982), 957-958, that “almost any theory of private property rights can be referred to some notion of personhood...The premise underlying the personhood perspective is that to achieve proper self-development – to be a person – an individual needs some control over resources in the external environment.” Summarizing the modern-day implications of this basic premise of liberal political theory, Radin notes the extent to which it runs through the political spectrum: “Conservatives rely on an absolute conception of property as sacred to personal autonomy. Communitarians believe that changing conceptions of property reflect and shape the changing nature of persons and communities. Welfare right liberals find entitlement to a minimal level of resources necessary to the dignity of persons even when the entitlement must curtail the property rights of others.”
within the culture of the eighteenth century may not be directly in line with its seventeenth-century foundations, which, as I have noted above, are not entirely understood. Rather, it is what the Act came to represent that established the modern notion of habeas corpus as an ideal marker of liberalism: “Ideas about liberties running through the writ of habeas corpus marked out an astonishingly vast subjecthood [such that] liberties came from subject status and thus from those parts of law that defined who were subjects.”

This interrelationship between subjecthood, liberty and the law was the very cornerstone of radical political culture at the end of the eighteenth century. Isaac Kramnick has demonstrated the extensive influence, in particular, of Locke’s philosophy on the reform movements of that epoch, even going so far as to call England at this moment in history “Locke’s country.” According to Kramnick, late eighteenth-century reformers “made a clear link from Locke to British reform and socioeconomic change” by emphasizing natural rights over historical entitlements. At the end of the eighteenth century, Lockean liberalism was predominantly read as an ideology through which individuals could define themselves as active subjects through their work, as opposed to the prevailing aristocratic ideology of republicanism, which was predicated on leisure and entitlement. Pointing to the wide circulation of pamphlets and treatises defending

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68 Halliday, 179.
69 Kramnick, 36.
70 Ibid., 187.
or otherwise extolling Lockean ideas, Kramnick notes that “chapter 5 of the *Second Treatise*, ‘Of Property,’ became the received wisdom in advanced radical circles in the late eighteenth century.” Considerations of habeas corpus, in particular, offered commentators an apt field within which to consider these Lockean principles.

One such consideration, *The Rise and Practice of Imprisonment in Personal Actions, Examined*, a pamphlet published in 1772, just as the Somerset case went to trial, by the barrister Thomas Hallie Delamayne, makes explicit the link between habeas corpus and Lockean principles of property. Mainly a history of the prison, Delamayne organizes his inquiry according to key shifts in English legal history. For Delamayne, the English courts have always been organized around three objects of property, “body, land, and goods,” and it is the changing definitions of and relationships among these three kinds of property, he argues, that have most forcibly determined the course of English legal history. Within his contemporary moment, Delamayne notes that this relationship has been most strongly influenced by the 1679 Habeas Corpus Act: “Here indeed the people rejoiced – they had much reason for so doing – and seemed satisfied in the acquisition of so great

\[\text{\cite{Ibid., 193.}}\]

a second charter of their liberty [the first being the Magna Carta].”

Delamayne’s treatise posits that through most of England’s history, the laws of England had been determined by “the prerogative of the crown over the body.” But the Habeas Corpus Act’s limitation of the crown’s claims of ownership over individual bodies set the course for a new epoch, wherein the individual person was constituted, in one way or another, through some relation to property.

Responses to Somerset v. Stewart offer a prime example of how strongly habeas corpus spoke to liberal notions of the relationship between property and personhood. In a 1773 pamphlet that protested the Mansfield decision, Samuel Estwick argues that the outcome of the case created an illogical shift in the relationship of property to personhood. Stewart’s side of the case, as Estwick summarizes it, had rested on a delineation of Somerset as an object of property that was legally obtained. As such, for Estwick, it seemed preposterous “by what new law or magic...[slaves like Somerset] are now become the subjects of the Crown of England, and intitled [sic] to the benefit of Habeas Corpus.” In other words, the issue animating the defense, as well as Estwick’s own objection to the decision, was that Somerset was, legally, property, and that to assert otherwise

73 Ibid., 81.
74 Ibid., 20.
would be to instantiate an illogical precedent that effectively entitles property to property. Estwick argues that the Mansfield decision did not adequately address the legal principles by which Somerset had been constituted property, and thus, the protection by habeas corpus that rendered him a “person” in the eyes of the law represented an exception to the laws governing property, rather than their full exercise. Yet to make this argument, Estwick has to blur the distinction between the constitution of an individual through property in Lockean theory, from the notion of human beings as objects of property under the laws of slavery. That is, for Estwick, the notion of slave-as-property differs categorically from the notion that liberal subjects are also constituted through a relationship to property. However, Lockean liberalism is predicated precisely on preventing the enslavement not of Africans, but of Europeans—that is, of the very people who would be subjects in Estwick’s view.

Locke’s Second Treatise begins by articulating the necessity of a social structure based on the constitution of personhood through property precisely in order to curtail the possibility of British society becoming enslaved. Locke’s Two Treatises of Government were written to challenge Sir Robert Filmer’s 1680 veneration of the divine right of kings in Patriarcha. Locke’s theory, in contradistinction to the Patriarcha, emphasizes the significance of citizens’ rights, which he grounds in the assertion that a theory of government grounded in the

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76 Ibid., 91.
original sovereignty of one man over another is, in fact, an attempt to justify a system of slavery, and that the alternative to government as a form of slavery is government as a form of contract. To be sure, Locke’s rhetoric of slavery is most likely not referring to the actual practices of Atlantic world slavery, as some critics have suggested. Rather, Locke frames his Two Treatises of Government as a system that will ensure that British society not become enslaved by developing a political structure that will protect the primary value of liberalism, individual freedom. 

Drawing on the basic Lockean principles of natural rights, contracts and property, social reform movements in the eighteenth century became interested in building recognition of the disenfranchised as rights-bearing individuals in order to effect a more inclusive notion of Lockean individualism. As Kramnick has shown, the culture of this radical moment imagined freedom through a symbology

77 Jennifer Rae Greason argues that slavery was implicit in the logic of possessive individualism from the beginning. According to Greason in “The Prehistory of Possessive Individualism,” PMLA 127, no. 4 (2012), 918, the logic that human beings could be possessed at all “was generated, before and alongside liberal political theory, in the practice of Atlantic slave capitalism.” In other words, for Greason, the logic of possessive individualism is predicated on an economic history in which individuals were already being possessed. There is much that is compelling about the argument, and while I would not dispute the spirit of Greason’s notion that possessive individualism is historically inextricable from practices of social oppression, it is equally worth pausing to review Locke’s stance on slavery. Locke himself was vehemently opposed to Atlantic world slavery, which has created critical confusion regarding his invocation of slavery in the Second Treatise, particularly when, in Chapter 4, he attempts to justify slavery in certain cases. The critical field on this question is vast and there remains no consensus. One of the most persuasive attempts to reconcile Locke’s writings with his stated political views is James Farr’s explication of Locke’s theory of slavery as having been intended to apply only to English absolutism and not to Afro-American slavery in “Locke, Natural Law, and New World Slavery,” Political Theory 36, no. 4 (2008): 495-522. Still, Farr, Greason, and a host of others note that Locke’s economic involvement with the slave trade nevertheless calls into doubt his position as champion of liberty.
of chains that may, or may not, have held in its purview the realities of Atlantic world slavery: when Jean-Jacques Rousseau made the famous pronouncement quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, for example, he was likely not thinking about Atlantic-world slavery. The “chains” Rousseau describes are the mental enslavements – what William Blake would famously call “mind forg’d manacles” – that keep society tied to wide-scale systems of oppression that impede equality. Thus, the imagery of chains that enslaved actual human beings could just as easily have been drawn upon to negotiate social freedom during this period, and in fact, I would argue that the figure of the suicidal slave was just that.

Indeed, returning once more to this strategy of using the imagery of slavery to discuss British social structures in Locke, it is crucial to note that Locke’s articulation of individual freedom as the cornerstone of civil government has severe difficulties in dealing with two seemingly unrelated kinds of actions: owning another individual (i.e., actual practices of slavery) and killing oneself (suicide). In order to explain why suicide – which might otherwise appear to be the ultimate assertion of individual liberty – is forbidden, Locke reverts to the schema of sovereignty against which he had argued, claiming that individuals stand in a relationship of dependence to a more powerful entity, God, and thus “though man...have an uncontrollable liberty to dispose of his person or

possessions, yet he has not liberty to destroy himself.” Elsewhere in the Second Treatise, he also claims that the self-imposed death of a slave isn’t actually suicide, for when one has been divested of his freedom and his status as a person (and presumably, given the above, also his status as God’s property), he may kill himself because he is, effectively, already dead.

For Locke, slavery is acceptable as a form of punishment, such that when a man has committed an act for which he would deserve to have his liberty taken away, he may justly lose his legal standing as a person and become enslaved. And thus, for Locke, such a man, “having, by his fault [effectively] forfeited his own life, by some act that deserves death...whenever he finds the hardship of his slavery outweigh the value of his life, ‘tis in his power, by resisting the will of his master, to draw on himself the death he desires.” That is, because the slave no longer belongs to himself, the suicide of a slave does not constitute a suicide at all, but the logical extension of the master’s deed in effecting the condition of enslavement. Self-murder in slaves, then, is not quite tantamount to suicide for Locke, because to lack freedom is to be, in some sense, already dead. Thus, it follows that, to commit suicide, one must first be free. It is the choice to give up that freedom over one’s self that seems to be at stake in Locke’s thinking about suicide, and it is because the slave already lacks that choice that he is the

79 Locke, Chapter 2, Par. 6.
80 Locke, Chapter 4, Par. 23.
exception to Locke’s prohibition against self-murder. ⁸¹

But these stipulations about suicide and slavery are irreconcilable with one another, as well as with Locke’s larger schema for a society governed by self-determining individuals: for, even as Locke is opposed in general to the condition of slavery, as well as to the actual practice of enslaving Africans, his theory is troubled from within both by its inability to distance itself from that theory of sovereignty that he claims makes slaves of individuals, and by its difficulty in allowing for what most readers would consider as obvious, namely, that a self-imposed death of a slave is indeed a suicide. It is this tension between sovereignty and individualism, which exists, in Locke, in both the question of suicide and that of slavery, that comes to the fore in the middle of the eighteenth century, as both the issue of suicide and the problem of slavery become engaged by a culture interested in furthering the social condition of freedom by, first, rethinking the limits of individualism.

Thus, though they originate the trope of the suicidal slave in English poetry, Day and Bicknell do not invent the relationship between suicide and slavery: it is, as we have seen, already present, albeit implicitly, in one of the foundational texts of modernity, Locke’s Second Treatise. Instead, Day and Bicknell bring to light the

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association by situating the vexed idea of a hypothetical slave’s suicide against the vexed discourses surrounding the application of habeas corpus to James Somerset. Through the figure of the suicidal slave—an object of property who, by virtue of his decision to die, asserts himself as his own property, and thus a free individual—The Dying Negro uses suicide to push the period’s ideas about selfhood and property to their logical limits, to finally consider that freedom, in liberal society, can hardly be understood apart from some concept of ownership. Thus, at least part of how The Dying Negro achieves its injunction against the institution of slavery is by calling into question the grounding principle of the modern liberal state, which is liberty itself. At stake in abolitionist depictions of slave suicides, then, is a weighing of this conception of freedom based on individualism; and, where abolitionism may fail, from a contemporary critical perspective, in adequately expressing the inner lives of slaves, it may, in fact, succeed in helping us to recognize some of the tensions that underlie the very practices of self-determination that continue to govern us even today.

Property, Felony, and the Poetics of Law: How Habeas Corpus Becomes Suicide in The Dying Negro

Day and Bicknell’s substitution of suicide for habeas corpus reveals the extent to which, even while we ascribe to a society based in property, we will never truly be free. Day and Bicknell achieve this by drawing—in addition to the
discourses already noted—on the period’s rapidly changing laws on suicide and property. The slave in the poem is quite aware that in choosing to kill himself, he renders himself an even greater social outcast. “No pageant wreaths [will] deck an outcast’s tomb,” he laments, and no epitaph will “mark the friendless victim of despair” for several reasons: first of all, he is a slave and therefore not considered a person worthy of burial; secondly, he is a suicide, and therefore would not receive an honorable burial even if he were not a slave; and finally, he is about to jump into the ocean, rendering the his final resting place literally un-markable. In the same way, even while both Somerset and the ‘dying negro’ are, in one way or another, released from their chains, the poem’s emphasis on the slave’s indeterminate status after his death begs the question, to what extent will Somerset truly be ‘free’ after the verdict? Unfortunately, that is a question at this point without an answer, as there is, to my knowledge, no evidence of what became of Somerset after his trial.

One imagines that, if he remained in England, Somerset endured many hardships in spite of the social standing that the habeas corpus verdict implicitly granted. Day and Bicknell imagine an equally uneasy reconciliation between the struggle for freedom and the implications of achieving it. Though in life, the slave has been forbidden “the rights of man to claim, / Or share with [his beloved] a

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82 Day and Bicknell, 4.
Christian’s hallow’d name,”\(^83\) as he sees it, one right remains inalienable from him: “The gloomy privilege to die,” for “Not beyond the grave, / Thy [European] power extends.”\(^84\) Thus, as he looks down at the waters into which he is about to plunge, the slave reverses the terms commonly associated with the Middle Passage as a dreadful barrier between freedom and bondage to, instead, a “vast watry barrier, ‘twixt thy world and me”\(^85\): the ocean becomes his sole recourse to freedom because it allows him to remove himself – that singular “me,” whose subtle assonance rings out into the white space at the end of the line – from the harsh enclosure of “thy world,” in which he exists only as “a thing without a name.”\(^86\)

In this section devoted to imagining the suicide’s final resting place, *The Dying Negro* draws on yet another political discourse of its day, namely debates over burial laws and, particularly, the problem of what happens to the property of those who die by suicide. Since the thirteenth century, suicide was penalized, in part, by the forfeiture of the deceased’s property to the crown. This practice is part of a longer history of forfeiture that, as K. J. Kesselring notes, constitutes the original, defining feature of felony in English Common law: “Despite its ubiquity in legal discourse, the term ‘felony’ defies easy definition...we can only define felony

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 6.
\(^{84}\) Ibid.
\(^{85}\) Ibid.
\(^{86}\) Ibid., 9.
by its legal effects....And forfeiture was the defining legal concept of felony."\(^{87}\)

Kesselring holds that “as long as forfeiture remained, the criminal law did not just protect property but also shaped by conflicts and concerns the nature of property itself.”\(^{88}\) In other words, the criminal laws of England were shaped by the nature of property, even while property also came to define, with increasing prominence, the very people these laws were meant to govern.

Sir William Blackstone, the preeminent legal commentator of the eighteenth century, highlights this problem in his mid-century discussion of suicide. Emphasizing the increasing prominence of suicide within legal discourses of property, Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* greatly expands his remarks on suicide in his earlier treatise, *Analysis of the Laws of England*. The only mention of suicide in the entirety of the 1758 *Analysis* consists of the following: “Killing one’s self, or Self-Murder, is where one deliberately, or by any unlawful malicious Act, puts an End to his own Life. This is Felony; punished by ignominious Burial, and Forfeiture of Goods and Chattels.”\(^{89}\) In the 1769 *Commentaries*, Blackstone expands his consideration of suicide to two full pages.

Though it is considered a crime, Blackstone is unclear about what sort of crime it


\(^{88}\) Ibid., 203.

is, calling it a “peculiar species of felony.” According to Blackstone, suicide is peculiar because it is a crime against both God and against the king. With no clear category, Blackstone finally labels it “a felony committed to oneself,” and moves to consider what sort of punishment “human laws inflict on one who has withdrawn himself from their reach.”

Laws, Blackstone finds, can only act upon what the deceased has left behind him, his reputation and fortune: on the former, by dishonorable burial beneath a highway, with a stake driven through the body; on the latter, by a forfeiture of all goods to the king, in the hope that “his care for either his own reputation or the welfare of his family, would be some motive to restrain him from so desperate and wicked an act.” Blackstone’s reasoning is complicated by the fact that he calls suicide “a felony committed to oneself” without accounting for what that means. He lands on this definition only by default, because he cannot decide whether suicide constitutes a crime against God, the king, or both. Perhaps Blackstone means that to remove oneself from the kingdoms of God and the king is to do oneself a crime; but the lack of clarity in this passage bespeaks a larger cultural

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91 Ibid.
92 Ibid., 190.
93 Ibid.
skepticism regarding extant laws surrounding suicide and property, and a burgeoning push to reform them.

One such articulation of the need to reform suicide laws came in 1771, by the barrister William Eden, 1st Baron Auckland, whose *Principles of Penal Law* saw its second printing in the same year. Lord Auckland’s treatise includes a brief consideration of the same penal laws regarding suicide that Blackstone outlined, but Auckland’s chief interest is in reforming the law of forfeiture and, consequently, to decriminalize suicide. Auckland calls the practice of forfeiture “ineffectual and absurd,” and moreover, “cruel” and “unjust...to heap sufferings on the head of innocence,”94 which is to say, the surviving family. Auckland’s interest in reforming the law highlights the extent to which the concept of suicide was associated with the question of property at the time that Day and Bicknell wrote *The Dying Negro*.

It is, in part, with these legal debates about suicide and property in the background that Day and Bicknell’s substitution of suicide for habeas corpus is significant: by juxtaposing the logic of habeas corpus with that of suicide, Day and Bicknell put into conversation the period’s various, and variously interrelated, discourses of property and bodies – the extent of one’s ownership of his own body

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(a legacy of Lockean individualism), whether anyone has the right to own and sell other people’s bodies (a key issue in slavery debates), and whether ownership of a “self” constitutes a right to do what one pleases with one’s body (the principle behind defenses of suicide) – in order, finally, to examine the principle of freedom toward which all of these philosophies are ultimately oriented.

**Conclusion: Slavery, Suicide, and the Politics of Freedom**

*The Dying Negro* begins with an assertion that complicates a seemingly straightforward category: the language of secular freedoms that we might expect from a late-eighteenth-century poem about suicide. In its opening lines, the poem sets the language of individual rights against the language of providence:

> Blest with thy last sad gift – the power to dye,  
> At length, thy shafts, stern fortune, I defy;  
> Welcome, kind pass-port to an unknown shore! –  
> The world and I are enemies no more.  
> This weapon ev’n in chains the brave can wield,  
> And vanquish’d, quit triumphantly the field.\(^95\)

By opening with the word “blest,” the poem suggests that the decision of the slave to commit suicide is not only, as the rest of the stanza contends, his natural right, a “weapon” he will “wield” against the structures of social oppression that keep him enslaved, but also providential, a divine “gift” – and it is worth noting here that natural rights are, indeed, those “gifts” with which each person enters life.

However, it is unclear from whom or what this “gift” of the right to suicide is

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\(^95\) Day and Bicknell, 3.
bestowed – whether “the power to dye” is given by nature, by the abolitionists who oppose the institution of slavery, or by God (and therefore a gift as such – a bestowal of freedom from a force greater than him).

My focus on the language of “the gift” here recalls Marcus Wood’s important argument in The Horrible Gift of Freedom. At issue for Wood is the idea that freedom can be “given” or “gifted” to one who is not free, because of course, freedom, in this sense, must first have been taken away:

Gift is a key word – but a very slippery word...Gift might not seem to be a very hard word to define; in Chambers Dictionary it has two primary meanings as a noun, and they are short and sharp: ‘A thing given; a quality bestowed by nature.’ But certain things, freedom being one of them, cannot be given, and freedom in the context of slavery and emancipation consequently has a difficult, maybe impossible relation to these two definitions of gift. The impossibility is exposed in the following question: How can freedom be given, either individually or collectively, if it already exists as nature’s gift to all?96

For Wood, the very possibility of this theoretical problem bespeaks a long history of oppression and repression, written through “a series of justificatory, indeed self-serving, rhetorics that take liberty and dress it up as a gift.”97 Wood continues,

If freedom as nature’s gift has been violently removed from certain people, it can only be returned to those who have been robbed of it. Such a process of restoring stolen property is not the same as the process of bestowing a gift. And yet, again and again across the Atlantic slave diaspora the ex-slave powers, turned liberators, decided to fictionalize freedom as a pristine gift that was in their power, or the power of their allegorical figures, to bestow upon the victims of their abuse...When the slave powers or their apologists put this cultural mechanism in place, they established a paradox of perfect perversity.98

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97 Ibid., 2.
98 Ibid., 3.
This “perfect perversity” has taken the form, since the era of abolition, of a “liberation fantasy” that is predicated on a logic wherein “humans may function as gifts when they are themselves turned into commodities,” and thus “freedom may be perverted into a gift when the slave commodities are turned back into humans through the legal transmutation of an act of abolition.” Freedom, in this sense, is a fiction, a mythology created by European and American liberators in order to obscure the crimes that made liberation necessary in the first place.

Thus, the opening of The Dying Negro obscures – perhaps intentionally, or perhaps simply because it has never been clear within a European Enlightenment framework – the question of whether freedom is an entitlement of nature, a blessing bestowed from on high, or a social condition that can be fought for and won. Written on the heels of the Somerset trial, one might argue that it is entirely unclear what end the final act of suicide is meant to evoke or suggest, because the condition toward which it is aimed—freedom—is, itself, the condition in question.

Wood’s grounding assertion that freedom cannot be given because it pre-exists economic exchange aligns him with the classical liberal tradition, which likewise holds freedom to be a natural right. For Locke, too, freedom can only be taken away. As we have already seen, his controversial discussion of slavery in his Second Treatise posits that slavery is justifiable precisely when one deserves to

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99 Ibid., 2.
100 Ibid., 3.
have his freedom taken away. Locke does not suggest whether or how it can ever be attained again; rather, slavery as a form of retributive punishment suggests that the removal of one’s of freedom, which everyone implicitly has in the state of nature, creates a permanent condition of living death.

And it is here, too, as we have seen, that Locke condones a sort of suicide. Although the free individual hasn’t the right to take his own life, the enslaved may choose to kill himself because his life has, effectively, already been taken from him. But if enslavement suggests that the lack of freedom is, itself, tantamount to a kind of social death, then how to we categorize the physical death of the body of one who is already dead? Arguably, in The Dying Negro, to physically die is to assert one’s power, if not over one’s ontological condition of freedom or the lack thereof, then at least over the physical condition of one’s freedom. By replacing Somerset’s release from physical bondage with the slave’s release from life, the poem emphasizes the question of what defines the condition of freedom in a liberal state.

Although the poem opens on an ostensibly Christian note, by immediately turning to the paradoxical condition of freedom, the poem divorces from the issue of suicide its Christian prohibition, and turns suicide, instead, into a tool that may be used even by Christians to combat social evils far greater than the evil of self-murder. Later in the poem, this becomes the explicit argument: in the poem’s conclusion, the narrator accuses Europeans of being un-Christian in perpetrating
the horrors of slavery, and thus, he claims that suicide is a far less grievous sin than those sins committed by Christians who support, in any capacity, the institution of slavery. The poem concludes with an extensive indictment of the hypocrisy of Christian morality in perpetuating the institution of slavery. The long final stanza begins,

Thou Christian God, to whom so late I bow’d,
To whom my soul its fond allegiance vow’d,
When crimes like these thy injur’d pow’r prophane,
O God of Nature! Art thou sall’d in vain?²⁰¹

The speaker then continues by appealing directly to Christ, asking, “Did’st thou for this sustain a mortal wound?”²⁰²

There is, in the background here, perhaps a hint of parallel between the slave and Christ, who, in early Christianity, was sometimes considered a suicide until Augustine proclaimed suicide a sin in the fifth century.²⁰³ But Day and Bicknell do not quite equate the slave’s suicide with that of Jesus, though it is important to note that this poem does participate in creating a convention of black martyrdom that would become characteristic of much of the discourse surrounding abolition in the eighteenth century.²⁰⁴ Still, even while The Dying

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²⁰¹ Day and Bicknell, 18.
²⁰² Ibid.
²⁰³ For more on this see Georges Minois, History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 23-31.
²⁰⁴ In Characters of Blood: Black Heroism in the Transatlantic Imagination (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), Celeste-Marie Bernier has elucidated the prevailing caricatures of black heroism that have persisted in the Anglo-American imaginary from the era of abolition through the present. According to Bernier, “black men and women have been conceptualized solely as either barbaric fiends in an array of pro-slavery atrocity literatures or as sacrificial martyrs...
Negro does not draw explicit parallels between the slave and Christ, *The Dying Negro* is nevertheless framed by a challenge to Christianity, calling up the Christian ideal in order to reveal its ethical incoherence because, the poem argues, the very existence of slavery has already done so. The slave reminds us, as he moves into his final utterance before he carries out his implied suicide, that he, too, is a Christian:

> On thee I call’d with reverential awe,  
> Ador’d thy wisdom, and embrac’d thy law;  
> Yet mark thy destin’d convert as he lies,  
> His groans of anguish, and his livid eyes,  
> These galling chains, polluted with his blood,  
> Then bid his tongue proclaim thee just and good!105

But God’s power, he argues, is either “too weak” to spare him the sufferings of

in didactic, seemingly redemptive antislavery tracts,” 21. In several key ways, *The Dying Negro* functions as both of these stereotypes. By perpetuating a racist ideology even from within an ostensibly equalizing stance, the poem assumes the didactic position of “redeeming” the slave’s humanity; and even as the poem moves to “humanize” the slave, in scenes that show him in his native homeland, the poem cannot help but reduce him, if not quite to a “barbaric fiend,” then certainly to a less civilized counterpart to European men. Much of the middle of the poem depicts the original enslavement of West Africans, based, as Day and Bicknell acknowledge in their footnotes to the poem, on contemporary travelogues. The slave recalls how his people bestowed “gifts” onto white colonizers, rendering the “last, sad gift” of the opening especially poignant, as we are returned to the paradox of the “gift of freedom” in the last place in which he was, in any recognizable sense, free. He then tells of how the colonizers tricked his people onto the slave ships. The idea of detainment here hearkens somewhat to the legal language of the Somerset trial, and suggests, perhaps, that the institution at large is a fundamental breach of natural law. And in much the same manner as he will refuse Christian divinity later in the poem, here, in an anticlimactic narrative of becoming, the narrator challenges the power of African gods, who did not come to save him from his fate: “No power descended to assist the brave, / No lightning flashed, and I became a slave,” 14. Referring, shortly thereafter, to himself as a “wretched carcass,” 14, the slave is aware that as a slave, his existence can only be understood as tantamount to something like living death.  

105 Day and Bicknell, 18-19.
slavery, or God simply doesn’t care.¹⁰⁶ Relinquishing the possibility of salvation through Christianity, the poem turns instead to revenge: revenge, if not against Christianity itself, then at least against its subjects, the perpetrators of the sufferings endured by so many on the Middle Passage and in the Americas. The speaker’s revenge will come through his assumptions about the power of sympathy to affect Christian readers, in whom he expects suicide will elicit a particular kind of moral outrage:

> And may these fiends, who now exulting view  
> The horrors of my fortune, feel them too!  
> Be theirs the torment of a ling’ring fate,  
> Slow as thy justice, dreadful as my hate,  
> Condemn’d to grasp the riven plank in vain,  
> And chaced by all the monsters of the main,  
> And while they spread their sinking arms to thee,  
> Then let their fainting souls remember me.¹⁰⁷

As he rages toward his vengeful conclusion, it becomes clear that this poem is neither about sympathy nor commemoration, but about guilt and shame – those emotions commonly associated with suicide now become associated with slavery, so that in its final stance toward remembering the dead slave, readers are made to focus not on his suicide, but on the conditions that drove him to it, and to find those conditions, rather than the act of suicide, deplorable and outrageous.

The moral strategy here is convoluted at best: having rejected Christianity for its inability to recognize the sufferings of slaves, the narrator nevertheless imagines that his captors and, implicitly, his readers, will be moved to sympathy

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 19.  
¹⁰⁷ Ibid.
by seeing him throw himself overboard, and that the negative emotions that his suicide will elicit will be his revenge. But why should the slave believe that his captors will care about his suicide? If Christian virtues are an illusion, then why should witnessing the suicide of a slave make these Christians care, either about his suffering in life, or about his decision to end it?

Here, I would argue, the poem reveals itself as, primarily interested in the social conditions that define its intended readership, rather than about the abolitionist cause as such. By beginning and ending with the Christian prohibition against suicide, Day and Bicknell emphasize that in this poem, the status quo is not as it seems: this is a poem precisely about subverting the rhetorical and conceptual norms on which its readers assume society is built. That is, where Christianity is assumed to be fundamentally opposed to suicide, within the space of the poem, and against the backdrop of slavery, suicide emerges as the only possible course of action. And in the same way, as the poem progresses away from the theological restrictions against suicide, so, too, it makes apparent deeper paradoxes in European culture that the act of suicide, as a response to the institution of slavery, reveals to be incoherent. Thus, beyond circumventing Christian stigma, by drawing a parallel between suicide and habeas corpus, or liberal political ideology more broadly, The Dying Negro makes an important intervention in the “modernization” of suicide. By alternately referring to the decision to commit suicide as a blessing, a gift, a power, and a weapon, the poem
hints at an inherent tension concerning Western conceptions of freedom: as Wood has asked, once freedom has been taken away, who gets to restore it? Or, who “owns” freedom, anyway?

Thus, *The Dying Negro* is not only about a struggle for freedom against the oppression of slavery, but also about the ideal of everyday freedoms of all forms: spiritual, legal, social. Day and Bicknell situate atemporal philosophical arguments around freedom against the historical backdrop of the Atlantic slave trade, but even while this poem is oriented toward freeing slaves and moving England abolition and emancipation, *The Dying Negro* encounters, and cannot get past, paradoxes laden within the liberal principles it was ostensibly using to bolster its cause. In Day and Bicknell’s 1773 poem, the image of the suicidal slave ultimately functions to interrogate the grounding assertions of modern political and legal institutions. In this way, suicide animates the question of freedom, while the idea—if not the fact—of Atlantic world slavery opens a discursive field within which English society is able to work out questions that trouble the heart of liberalism. It is for this reason that reading *Somerset v. Stewart* in the background of *The Dying Negro* is important: for it is the Somerset trial’s emphasis on habeas corpus that not only helped to shape English thinking about the slave trade, but also animated essential questions about the social structures that, in many ways, continue to govern Anglo-American life.
Day and Bicknell bring to light the association between slavery and suicide by situating the idea of a hypothetical slave’s suicide against the vexed discourses surrounding the application of habeas corpus to James Somerset. Through the figure of the suicidal slave—an object of property who, by virtue of his decision to die, asserts himself as his own property, and thus a free individual—The Dying Negro uses suicide to push the period’s ideas about selfhood and property to their logical limits, to consider finally that freedom in liberal society can hardly be understood apart from some concept of ownership. In this sense, suicide functions in the poem not only as a sentimental tool for establishing the slave’s rational personhood, but also as a means for revealing, to its British audience, the limitations of the Enlightenment’s promises of universal rights and freedoms.

Recognizing this eighteenth-century backdrop, which unfolded at the same time as the popularization of so-called “Romantic suicide” via Chatterton, Werther, and their admirers, calls on us to ask whether subsequent Romantic-era engagements with suicide can be divorced from Day and Bicknell’s notion of suicide as part of larger social critiques. By recasting The Dying Negro as a poem about the paradoxes inherent in the political structures of English society, Day and Bicknell present a poetical narrative of a slave’s suicide in order to consider the more general enterprise of freedom, which, in liberal political theory, is predicated on the legal recognition of personhood. If the Romantic period did not simply forget the political questions associated with suicide and liberal self-assertion,
then what are we to make of the period’s emphasis on Werther and Chatterton rather than their explicitly political counterparts, such as the protagonist of *The Dying Negro*? One possibility might be to read the aestheticization of suicide, from Werther and Chatterton to Alexander McQueen, as a means of obscuring social realities that suicide actually helps to reveal. In the following chapter, though, I explore how this obfuscation occurred not in the Romantic period, but in Victorian accounts about the Romantics; Romanticism itself, on the other hand, continues to explore suicide as a means of imagining the social inequities that can drive entire groups of people to lose the desire to live.
Chapter 2: Marvelous Boys; or, What We Talk About When We Talk about Romantic Suicide

Often did I think many of the inhabitants of the deep much more happy than myself. I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and as often wished I could change my condition for theirs.
~Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African*

I shall not dwell on the death-bed scene, lively as is the remembrance, or on the emotion produced by the last grasp of my mother’s cold hand; when blessing me, she added, ‘A little patience, and all will be over!’ Ah! My child, how often have those words rung mournful in my ears—and I have exclaimed—‘A little more patience, and I too shall be at rest!’
~Mary Wollstonecraft, *Maria, or, The Wrongs of Women*

Now more than ever seems it rich to die.
~John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale”

In the third epigraph above, John Keats encapsulates what Michelle Faubert has called Romanticism’s fascination with “fashionable suicide,” or what I will call here, simply, “Romantic” suicide (with the proviso, to be explained later, that this “Romantic” view is in fact a Victorian invention). This is the view that suffering to the point of self-destruction signals extreme sensibility and, that correlated with it is, perhaps, a high degree of artistic aptitude. Faubert attributes the emergence of this view of suicide to Goethe’s 1774 novella *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and she traces English Romanticism’s interests in fashionable suicide – from the Romantics’ poetic resurrections of Thomas Chatterton, to Godwin’s figuring of Wollstonecraft as a “female Werther” in his *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication*
of the Rights of Woman, to a widespread desire to produce a British figure as fashionable as Goethe, an “English Werther.” Yet even as she traces the beginnings of British Romantic interests in suicide to the “Wertherism” that swept Germany shortly after the publication of Goethe’s novella, Faubert complicates this narrative by suggesting that “Goethe did not celebrate sentimentality and suicide in the novel, but...warned against it. Thus the concept of Romantic-era suicide is based on a great, enduring misreading; or alternatively, it is even more fictional than its literary origins suggest.”¹ In the preceding chapter, I traced a somewhat different narrative of the pre-history of Romantic suicide from the one on which Faubert relies—one that begins in British abolitionist sentimentalism rather than in the German novel of sensibility—yet I am fully in agreement with Faubert that what has long passed as a tacit understanding of both the emergence of and the cultural meanings associated with representations of suicide in the Romantic period needs to be reconsidered and revised.

Certainly, the sheer amount of interest in suicide expressed in British Romanticism is nothing short of remarkable as, per Keats, “now” – which is to say, during the Romantic period – “more than ever seems it rich to die.” Yet what was precisely so rich about the ideas that surrounded suicide during this period is that

they were far more diverse than any critical variations on the themes of morbidity or excessive sensibility have thus far registered. Suicide, at the turn of the nineteenth century, drew on the period’s various interests in interiority, but it did so, at least in part, in the service of raising awareness of issues of social inequality based on identity. For example, in the first and second epigraphs from Equiano and Wollstonecraft, we clearly see how cultural programs of oppression contributed directly to black and female subjects coming to regard suicide not as an expression of tragic genius, but as a logical, necessary, and even welcome, response to the social ills of slavery and patriarchy, respectively. What I will argue in this chapter is that these two dimensions of suicide in the Romantic period – the Romantic sense of suicide as linked with overwhelming creativity, and the political narrative of suicide as a metaphor for the need to change society by revising existing definitions of personhood – are not merely two distinct meditations on the same theme (i.e., the topic of suicide). By focusing on the existence of both of these narratives in the work of William Wordsworth, I will argue that what has been called “Romantic suicide” develops, as an organizing trope for figuring Romanticism more broadly, in response to the political narrative that used suicide as way of thinking about questions of identity and cultural difference. Romantic suicide, I will finally argue, is a critical construct that has functioned historically to occlude the other notion of suicide that was present in the Romantic period, which I have been tracing. In so doing, I will argue,
alongside recent readings that aim to reorient the scholarly field of Romanticism through the lens of Critical Race Theory, that our continued emphasis on narratives about Romantic suicide have contributed to an incomplete understanding not only of the cultural history of suicide in and around the Romantic period, but also of Romanticism itself.

**Romantic Suicide and the “Marvellous Boy”**

It is one of the best known sentiments of the Romantic period, though it spans only two lines of Wordsworth’s 20-stanza, 140-line “Resolution and Independence”: “I thought of Chatterton, the marvellous Boy, / The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride.”² Considering the depths of human sadness, the poet thinks of Chatterton,

> who walked in glory and in joy  
> Following his plough, along the mountain-side:  
> By our own spirits are we deified:  
> We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;  
> But thereof come in the end despondency and madness.³

With his emphasis on the immortalizing powers of the poetic imagination (“by our own spirits are we deified”), Wordsworth paints a picture of the work of poetry as originating in “glory,” “joy” and “gladness,” but leading the poet into the “despondency and madness” implicitly signified, in part, by Chatterton’s suicide.

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³ Ibid., ll. 45-9.
This passage may read as the Romantic articulation of Chatterton’s martyrdom for the cause of poetry. Chatterton, here, is depicted as an ur-Romantic figure, because he lives in such close proximity to his art that he ultimately succumbs to its darkest impulses.

Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, across Europe and in the United States, writers would pay homage to this ideal of Chatterton as a tragic ingénue, a dreamer-turned-martyr who lost a fatal struggle for acceptance by a materialistic society incapable of fully comprehending his genius. Beyond Chatterton’s popularity in England, he appears, also, in the French playwright Alfred de Vigny’s drama *Chatterton* (1825), widely heralded alongside Victor Hugo’s *Hernani* (1830) as one of the crowning achievements of the *drame romantique*, catapulting to international recognition the name of Chatterton as symbol of shattered hope and tragic illusion. Attention to Chatterton’s life continued through the twentieth century, spurring numerous biographies, a novel by Peter Ackroyd (1987), plays by Francis William Grattan (1918), Charles Reznikoff (1927) and Victoria Sackville West (2002), a hybrid prose piece by Barry MacSweeney combining elements of an academic lecture with the poetic structure of an elegy (*Elegy for January*, 1970); and musical compositions by Serge Gainsbourg (1997), Matthias Pinscher (1998), and Matthew Dewey (2005). Invariably, all of these works focus on the narrative of spurned dreams and tragic failure, earning Chatterton such descriptors as “the most enduring image of
Romanticism,” “a symbol of a fearless spirit that triumphed over death,” and a “glorious martyrdom to Europe’s artists.”

It is worth noting, however, that although Chatterton is now primarily remembered for his suicide, in his own day Chatterton was known as a literary forger, and not a very good one. Attempting to capitalize on the success of James MacPherson’s Ossian poems, Chatterton was notorious for forging a series of manuscripts he attributed to a fifteenth-century priest named Thomas Rowley, claiming to have found them in his father’s attic. Chatterton sent his “transcriptions” to Horace Walpole, who recognized them as fake and rebuked the poet and his work, famously urging him to give up his literary pursuits and return to his job as an attorney’s assistant. Somewhat unfairly, history would castigate Walpole for disheartening Chatterton and driving him to his early death, when arguably, the circumstances surrounding Chatterton’s death call the assumption of suicide into question. Chatterton died from an overdose of arsenic, but arsenic was widely used for medicinal purposes. Further, just four months prior to his death, Chatterton left a fake suicide note for his employer in order to finagle his way out of debt, yet no suicide note was found with his body. It is entirely plausible, then, that Chatterton died by accident. Nevertheless, from the end of

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the Romantic period and well into the present day, suicide would become

Chatterton's greatest legacy: as William Hazlitt remarked in 1818,

I never heard any one speak of any one of [Chatterton's] works as if it were an old well-known favourite...It is his name, his youth, and what he might have lived to have done, that excite our wonder and admiration. He has the same sort of posthumous fame that an actor of the last age has — an abstracted reputation which is independent of anything we know of his works.⁵

For Faubert, the critical rejection of evidence that Chatterton was not a suicide is telling because “it suggests that commentators on the poet prefer to perpetuate the myth of his suicide that has been handed down to us since the Romantic period...if Chatterton was not a suicide, then he ceases to be a mascot for Romanticism, in which the notion of fashionable suicide is so deeply entrenched.”⁶ And indeed, during the Romantic period, Chatterton’s suicide figures in such well-known poems as Keats’ *Endymion* (1818) and Shelley’s *Adonais* (1821), and Coleridge spent his career finessing his now little-studied tribute to Chatterton’s doomed genius, “Monody on the Death of Thomas Chatterton,” which he first composed in 1790, and revised and reprinted no fewer than seven times before 1834. Chatterton, according to Faubert, was the “poster boy” for what came to be regarded as a quintessentially Romantic identity in England, the persona of “the disenfranchised,

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⁶ Faubert, “Fashionable Suicide.”
sensitive, pitiable poet,” for whom suicide functioned “an expression of frustrated poetic talent.”

Though other poems dealt more expansively with Chatterton, as well as with Goethe’s Werther – one recalls here, for example, Charlotte Smith’s engagement with Werther as a sympathetic figure throughout her 1784 Elegiac Sonnets – Wordsworth’s poem lives on most explicitly in critical recollections of Romantic suicide, and it is for this reason that I am focusing on it here. In “Resolution and Independence,” which was composed in 1802 and first appeared in the 1807 Poems in Two Volumes, the speaker confronts his melancholic impulses as a poet, and grapples with the fact that what makes him a poet may also, one day, cause him to follow in Chatterton’s footsteps and become suicidal. At the beginning of the poem, Wordsworth casts nature as a cure for melancholia: the poem opens with a shift from “a roaring in the wind all night” and a rain that “came heavily and fell in floods” to the sun “rising calm and bright” and giving way to the singing of birds. The depiction of nature in the opening stanza mirrors the speaker’s emotional condition at the start of the poem, which he expresses in the third stanza: “My old remembrances went from me wholly; / And all the ways of

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7 Ibid.
8 For example, Michael MacDonald and Terrence R. Murphy’s book, Sleepless Souls, takes its title from “Resolution and Independence.” Likewise, Barbara Gates’ Victorian Suicide defines “romantic suicide” against Wordsworth’s Chatterton in the same poem.
men, so vain and melancholy.”

In his 1828 “On the Power of Sound,” Wordsworth would explicitly attribute to poetry the power to “stay / The uplifted arm of Suicide.”

James Chandler has referred to this late-Romantic ode as “a kind of echo-chamber of [Wordsworth’s] own early lyric subjects, especially those of the period from *Lyrical Ballads* to the 1807 *Poems, in Two Volumes.*” By 1828, then, poetry was, for Wordsworth, an antithesis to the impulse to commit suicide; but in “Resolution and Independence,” suicide represents the threat that looms behind the impulse to compose poetry, though it is one with which Wordsworth does not want to align himself. Thus, I will argue that if suicide is, at this point, Romantic, it is, for Wordsworth, a source of deep anxiety, rather than fashionable interest.

“Resolution and Independence” recalls a time when the poet found himself dejected, melancholic and, perhaps, suicidal, and the various processes of thought and emotion that both contribute to, and, ultimately, pull him out of his despairing state. Though Chatterton is referenced in the seventh stanza, the specter of Chatterton appears as early as the first. The poem opens with a

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10 Ibid., l. 21.

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commonplace metaphor for hope, as “roaring” winds and heavy rainfalls give way
to the sun “rising calm and bright” and birds “singing in the distant woods”:\n\begin{quote}
Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods;
The Jay makes answer as the Magpie chatters;
And all the air is filled with pleasant noise of waters.
\end{quote}

Within this imagery of birds is embedded the image of poetic voices in
conversation with one another: the brooding Stock-dove corresponds to the
brooding mood that will strike the poet-speaker later in the poem, and the
answering Jay and chattering Magpie represent the other voices that the poet will
encounter – namely, the leech-gatherer, whom the speaker describes as answering
or “responding” to the Poet’s questions, and the image of Chatterton, whose
presence first appears in the lyrical “chatters” of line 6. The stanza concludes with
a “pleasant noise of waters,” rather than the voices of the bird-poets, calling up the
Wordsworthian picturesque as a preferable antidote to the difficult associations
between authorship and suicide that the remainder of the poem will go on to
explore.

“All things that love the sun are out of doors,” the Poet continues; and as he
describes the “mirth” of the outdoor scene, he remembers seeing a similar sight in
his youth. Here, by way of one of Wordsworth’s classic tropes, that of the
recollected of the past in the perpetual present of lyric form, the poet becomes
fully entangled in the scene he describes in line 21, forgetting, because of nature,

\footnotesize{13} Wordsworth, “Resolution and Independence,” ll. 1-4.
\footnotesize{14} Ibid., ll. 5-7.
“all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy.” Though this line is not necessarily a reference to Chatterton, it can easily allude to the melancholy associated with the young poet. So, when despair overcomes the speaker in the fourth stanza – “fears and fancies thick upon me came; / Dim sadness, and blind thoughts I knew not nor could name”¹⁵ – his dejection occurs, perhaps, on the heels of the poem’s second allusion to Chatterton, or at least to a Chatterton-esque state of despair. Wordsworth attributes such a state to involuntary functions in the mind: “as it sometimes chanceth, from the might / Of joy in minds that can no further go, / As high as we have mounted in delight / In our dejection do we sink as low.”¹⁶

Thus, when in the next stanza, he begins to shuttle between the happiness he felt in childhood and “Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty,”¹⁷ the poem begins a progression that culminates in the Poet’s panic over the threat of suicidal madness lurking in his poetry, where he recalls the “marvellous boy,” his kindred spirit.¹⁸

It is on the heels of Wordsworth’s realization that poetry is likely to lead the poet to suicide that the speaker encounters the leech gatherer. Not insignificantly,

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¹⁵ Ibid., ll. 26-7.
¹⁶ Ibid., ll. 22-5.
¹⁷ Ibid., l. 35.
¹⁸ And indeed, this close association extends beyond the page, into Wordsworth’s biography. We know from his sister Dorothy’s Grasmere Journals that the character of the leech gatherer is based on a real person the two encountered on 26 September 1800, though Wordsworth did not begin to compose the poem until two years later. Further, Wordsworth himself associates himself with the speaker of the poem when he notes, in a letter about the poem written 14 June 1802 to Mary and Sara Hutchinson, “I describe myself.” Quoted in Leon Waldoff, Wordsworth in His Major Lyrics (Columbia: University of Missouri Press), 77.
throughout the poem, the speaker has trouble figuring the leech gatherer in poetic language. His first description of the old man attempts to couch him in the heavily symbolic language of falling, where it “befell” the poet to see him, “whether it were by peculiar grace, / A leading from above, a something given.”19 Later, he forces the old man into such inexplicable metaphors as a “huge stone [that] is sometimes seen to lie / Couched on the bald top of an eminence; / Wonder to all who do the same espy” later still, he is “a sea-beast crawled forth, that on a shelf / Of rock or sand reposeth, there to sun itself.”20 These metaphors are thin because the leech gatherer is exactly the opposite of any great wonder: he is a frail old man who cannot even stand up straight: “His body was bent double, feet and head / Coming together in life's pilgrimage.”21 Indeed, the speaker even admits that he does this in order to give the old man's presence meaning – “So that it seems a thing endued with sense.”22 The metaphors, then, have nothing to do with the man’s physical presence, but rather with what the Poet wants to imagine this old man will represent to him: “not all alive nor dead, / Nor all asleep--in his extreme old age.”23 The old man here represents another kind of death: natural death, and its symbolic implications of cyclicality and inevitability, represented here by the

19 Wordsworth, “Resolution and Independence,” ll. 50-52.
20 Ibid., ll. 57-63
21 Ibid., ll. 66-67.
22 Ibid., l. 61.
23 Ibid., ll. 64-65.
old man’s rounded figure “Coming together in life’s pilgrimage.”24 In one sense, we might read the old man as a foil to the theme of suicide – despite the increasing difficulties of his physical existence he perseveres, letting things unfold (or fold over, as it were), rather than undercutting the cycle of life, as Chatterton had done.

But the old man is not a poet like Chatterton; if anything, he is patently the opposite, a reader of the poetry of nature. In Stanza XII, stirring the muddy waters for leeches, the old man looks “as if he had been reading in a book”25 as he tries to make sense of the obscured surface of the waters by looking for a purpose – his leeches. The speaker wants to understand this near-futile search for meaning as a message of hope; he goes so far as to tell the leech gatherer that “This morning gives us promise of a glorious duty.”26 But this, like his previous metaphors, is forced. The speaker is despondent when he meets the old man; why should he be suddenly uplifted by this obviously forlorn figure? Arguably, the speaker only wants to identify with the old man, but it is unclear whether he actually can. His desire to relate to the leech gatherer is signaled by the fact that each time the speaker recounts their conversations, he gives his own questions directly, marked by quotation marks, where the old man never answers in his own voice; instead, his responses to the speaker’s questions are filtered through the speaker’s voice, such as in stanza XIV, when the speaker has the old man answer like a poet would,

24 Ibid., l. 67.
25 Ibid., l. 81.
26 Ibid., l. 84.
in “Choice word and measured phrase.” But this man is precisely not a poet, so why does Wordsworth’s poet-speaker insist on forcing the comparison?

When the speaker sees the old man, he is at the height of his communion with the poem’s other poet, Chatterton. Afraid that he will descend into the kind of madness that claimed Chatterton, he thus clings, instead, to the leech gatherer. Contrary to Chatterton’s refusal to tend to his own physical well-being, the leech gatherer is shown to pursue an “honest maintenance,” despite its “hazardous and wearisome” nature. This is quite unlike Chatterton, who could not make a living with his literary endeavors and (perhaps) killed himself because of it; indeed, the leech gatherer’s staunch resolution to live might suggest a challenge to the lofty aims of the imagination, itself, bringing to the fore the problem of living within one’s mind when one also has to maintain one’s body. Yet Wordsworth’s speaker is not ready to confront this problem, and in the next stanza, he begins to imagine the old man’s body disintegrating into the river or, again, reducing the leech-gatherer to a figment of his own mind:

The old Man still stood talking by my side;
But now his voice to me was like a stream
Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;
And the whole body of the Man did seem
Like one whom I had met with in a dream;
Or like a man from some far region sent,
To give me human strength, by apt admonishment.29

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27 Ibid., l. 95.
28 Ibid., l. 105, 101.
29 Ibid., ll. 106-112.
And so, the speaker momentarily reverts to the solipsistic reverie with which he began, entertaining a “hope that is unwilling to be fed” and an unspecified “fear that kills.” But he soon finds that this is precisely what will leave “mighty Poets in their misery dead.” And so, the speaker turns back to the leech gatherer.

Concluding the stanza, he asks, again, about the old man’s physical being: “How is it that you live, and what is it you do?” (119). What follows is the first and only instance in which the leech gatherer speaks:

He with a smile did then his words repeat;
And said, that, gathering leeches, far and wide
He travelled; stirring thus about his feet
The waters of the pools where they abide.
“Once I could meet with them on every side;
But they have dwindled long by slow decay;
Yet still I persevere, and find them where I may.”

But no sooner does the leech gatherer speak for himself that the speaker, again, pulls the poem into his own mind:

While he was talking thus, the lonely place,
The old Man’s shape, and speech--all troubled me:
In my mind’s eye I seemed to see him pace
About the weary moors continually,
Wandering about alone and silently.
While I these thoughts within myself pursued,
He, having made a pause, the same discourse renewed.

The old man continues to talk, but his words are relegated to the background, perhaps somewhat audible to the poet but entirely unheard by the readers, as the poem again gives way to the workings of the speaker’s mind. This slippage is

30 Ibid., ll. 113-14.
31 Ibid., l. 116.
32 Ibid., ll. 120-126.
33 Ibid., ll. 127-33.
reinforced by the pun in the final stanza that the man “blended” other matters into his speech, as he himself becomes blended in the Poet’s mind. As the leech gatherer continues to address the speaker with “demeanour kind,” the speaker concludes his poem with his own shock “to find / In that decrepit Man so firm a mind.” Finally, the poem ends squarely in the speaker’s mind (though the old man continues to speak in the background): “God...be my help and stay secure; / I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!”

Wordsworth’s encounter with the leech gatherer is generally interpreted as part of his ongoing interest in reconciling his poetic, as well as his autobiographical, persona, with what he moving describes, in “Tintern Abbey,” as “the still, sad music of humanity.” This is the project that he names, in the 1800 Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, as “mak[ing] the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement.” F. M. Todd describes this poetic manifesto within the terms that punctuated many Romantics’ early revolutionary interests: “As Paine and

34 Ibid., l. 134.
35 Ibid., l. 135.
36 Ibid., ll. 137-38.
37 Ibid., ll. 139-40.
Godwin had planned to do with kings and princes, so Wordsworth wished to remove the poet from the unnatural, the superhuman eminence of his imagined superiority, in order to elevate him to the truer dignity of common humanity.”

As Richard Gravil further explains, Wordsworth’s early poetry was “his defense of the common people...in the light of a Jacobinical sense of Nature as synonymous with Liberty. As a poet of nature and the poet of human suffering, Wordsworth in the 1790s discovers these two themes simultaneously, in part because natural religion and natural rights are ineluctably combined in the culture [of the period].” Wordsworth thus announces his endeavor, in the Lyrical Ballads, to “imitate and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men.”

Putting aside, for the moment, the question of Wordsworth’s effectiveness at speaking the “language of men” in his highly symbolic and rigidly structured verses, his 1802 letter on “Resolution and Independence” to Sara and Mary Hutchinson suggests that Wordsworth’s leech gatherer is a politically-charged figure: the old man, Wordsworth tells Hutchinson, “carr[ies] with him his fortitude, and the necessities which an unjust state of society has entailed upon him.” Yet even as Wordsworth’s emphasis on the social conditions that force the old man to go about the tiring and dangerous work of gathering leeches in

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42 Wordsworth, Preface, 177.
43 Quoted in Todd, Politics and the Poet, 111-112.
“Resolution and Independence” links, perhaps, to the social project that Wordsworth began in representing rustic characters in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, I will argue in the next section that Wordsworth’s emphasis on the relationship between himself and the subjects of his poems—as well as the intentional and unintentional social commentary that it produces—is not solely signaled by the leech gatherer’s poverty and old age; it is also underscored by the specter of Chatterton that runs throughout the poem. That is, part of the significance of “Resolution and Independence” is that its reference to suicide is not, as narratives associated with Romantic suicide would have it, a vehicle for a self-reflexive or solipsistic daze, but rather as a vehicle for thinking about the social struggles of other people—a perspective that, I will demonstrate in the following section, Wordsworth first begins to develop in the *Lyrical Ballads*, in his engagement of the subject of suicide as a way into imagining the experience of a Native American woman in “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman.”

**Another Model of Suicide in Wordsworth: The Native American Death Song**

Though rarely commented upon by critics, “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman” was a significant work not only in Wordsworth’s early poetic development, but also in the development of poetic engagements with suicide as these moved from the context of eighteenth-century abolitionist and feminist
efforts, into the configuration that would eventually come to be understood as the “Romantic” view of suicide. The “Complaint” was originally conceived as part of an expansive, and never completed, study of rural life, *The Recluse*, which Wordsworth began to conceptualize in 1798.\(^{44}\) As Wordsworth tells us in his headnote to “The Complaint” as it appears in the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, the poem was inspired by a Native American practice of leaving behind individuals who are unable to follow on a long journey, which Wordsworth learned about in Samuel Hearne’s travelogue *Journey from Hudson’s Bay to the Northern Ocean* (1798):

> When a Northern Indian, from sickness, is unable to continue his journey with his companions, he is left behind, covered over with deer-skins, and is supplied with water, food, and fuel if the situation of the place will afford it. He is informed of the track which his companions intend to pursue, and if he is unable to follow or overtake them, he perishes alone in the desert; unless he should have the good fortune to fall in with some other tribes of Indians.\(^{45}\)

Though the genre of the death song was, by 1798, already popular among British writers, with “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman,” as well as another poem in the *Lyrical Ballads* about a Native American, “The Mad Mother,” Wordsworth helped to initiate a new sub-genre, one that concerned the lives and deaths of Native American women.

It is worth pausing my discussion of Wordsworth here to point out that early nineteenth-century English interest in Native American cultures is, in


\(^{45}\) Wordsworth, “Complaint,” 105.
general, one of the most underdeveloped areas of Romantic studies. Tim Fulford’s 2006 monograph on this subject is the only sustained study in recent memory, and Fulford’s subsequent collection of essays on the so-called “Indian Atlantic,” co-edited with Kevin Hutchings, helps to expound on what remains an underexplored area of literary criticism. This oversight is problematic, in part, because it severely limits not only our understanding of the political backdrop against which British Romanticism developed, but also perpetuates what Fulford calls the “cultural amnesia that continues to haunt our views of the relationship between Europe and the Americas,” the effects of which extend well beyond British Romantic studies:

This paradigm presumes the existence of separate British, American, and Canadian national literatures [and] forgets the transatlantic identity of much pre-1850 writing. At best it ignores the complex identities of eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century writing; as worst it perpetuates the petty racism of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which a supposedly distinct national character was carved out of a common culture and intermingled identity by creating false oppositions. This paradigm also consigns Indigenous peoples to the disciplines of ethnic/Native American studies programmes, which, though ground-breaking and important in their own right, must avoid becoming disciplinary ghettos within the larger world of academia.

To begin to correct this oversight, Fulford traces several different trends of representing Native Americans popular in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century


47 Fulford, Romantic Indians, 18.
British writing, all of which, he warns, must first of all be read as fundamentally fictional: “they were cultural types—constructed figures conjured up in the pages of authors or played out as roles on stage...at their crudest, they were clichéd examples of noble or ignoble savagery but at their most complex they were ambiguous, uncanny, disturbing.”

The reasons underlying British writers’ interests in Native American cultures were quite real. From 1756 to 1763, the Seven Years’ War—also known as the French and Indian War—brought increased numbers of Britons to North America. While British settlers had lived beside Native Americans before, it was not until the Seven Years’ War that any European power actually employed Native Americans to assist in their battles. As a result, more Britons engaged with indigenous peoples in North America than ever before.

Thus, where earlier settlers’ accounts featured clumsy depictions of Native Americans as stock figures of, mainly, savagery and brutishness, beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century,

Indians became complex mixtures, in British eyes, of courage and ferocity, heroism and primitivism, honour and savagery, oratory and superstition, stoicism and violence, nature and bestiality, orality and simplicity, dignity and drunkenness. They appeared with a new, ethnographic level of detail: text after text told Britons how Indians lived, what they wore, what they believed, how they made war—and love, how they died. This occurred because of the particular history of America in the second half of the eighteenth century.

And in particular, it was during the Romantic period that literary depictions of Native Americans became politically significant in Britain.

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48 Ibid., 12-13.
49 Ibid., 17-18. For more on this history, see Chapter 1: “Romantic Indians and their Inventors.”
Fulford notes that “from the 1770s onwards,” literary depictions of Native Americans, and indigenous peoples more generally (for example, the rural Welsh and Cumbrians, whom many prominent Romantic authors, including Southey and Coleridge, regularly likened to Native Americans\(^{50}\), began increasingly representative of “anxiety about the state of the British ruling classes.”\(^{51}\) In Native Americans, many Romantic-era writers “identified exemplars of the manly virtues that Britons should be relearning,” as a kind of foil to the gentlemanly manner endangered by the eighteenth-century culture of domesticity.\(^{52}\) Yet even as the “Romantic Indian” became an imagined alternative to domestic British values and mores, British writers were ultimately unwilling to “sacrific[e] their civilized manners for savage ones.”\(^{53}\) As such, representations of Native Americans in fin de siècle British writing became a vexed site for challenging and negotiating British cultural values, as well as, more precisely, Romantic writers’ own visions for social transformation:

Indians became fascinating and Romantic because they offered a tantalizing glimpse of the kind of heroic warrior, full of courage, passion, coolness under fire, and physical power, that Britons might again become. But they simultaneously became dangerous since it seemed that what naturally accompanied Indians’ martial virtues were cruelty, bloodthirstiness, and savagery. Britons risked uncovering such characteristics in themselves (and in their own code of martial behavior) if they came too close and if they admitted their fascination for Indians too openly.\(^{54}\)

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 130-135.  
\(^{51}\) Ibid., 23.  
\(^{52}\) Ibid. 24.  
\(^{53}\) Ibid., 24.  
\(^{54}\) Ibid., 24.
Later in the Romantic period, in response to the Napoleonic Wars, writers altered their portrayals of native peoples from conceptual negotiations of “alternatives to commercial culture and gentlemanly manners” to endorsements of “a reformed version of that culture and those manners as the means by which Britons could and should civilize the rest of the world.” Fulford’s study thus traces several iterations, all taking place roughly within the period typically associated with British Romanticism, in which representations of Native Americans in British writing shift from corresponding to a politically radical imagination of a new world order, to an increasingly conservative return to the superiority of traditional European values. Fulford and Hutchings further argue that early nineteenth-century British culture was not only informed by, but “could not have been sustained” without Native Americans: “Britons wanted not only land and fur, but also alliances with Indian military power. And so the colonists, the Crown and the Indians made deals with each other, entering a political and economic relationship that altered society...on both sides of the ocean”\textsuperscript{55} – a dynamic that Joel Pace calls the “Indian Atlantic,” defined as the “transoceanic literary and cultural exchange that created the construct of the American Indian as an idealized subject in the Atlantic-rim imaginary.”\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{55} Fulford and Hutchings, “Introduction,” 2.
Importantly, the increasing prominence of British-Native American relations, as well as the corresponding shifts in depictions of Native American life by British writers, from caricatures to vehicles for social commentary, also corresponds with the rise of Romantic suicide, which, as I have demonstrated in the preceding chapter, likewise emerges during the decade of the 1770s. One of the most prominent poetic genres of the period was the Native American death song; and while most death songs typically represent either natural or wartime deaths, a handful also touch on the theme of suicide, including Wordsworth’s “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman,” which initially appears toward the end of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, and is later moved toward the beginning of the first volume of the two-volume 1800 edition.57

“The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman” gives a first-person account of the titular speaker’s attempt to will herself to death. Having been left behind for reasons undisclosed by the poem, the speaker ruminates on the relative merits of fighting for survival, but ultimately wishes for, and attempts to will, her own death. Twice in the first stanza, the speaker declares, “Before I see another day, / Oh let my body die away!”58 In the second stanza, she compares herself with a recently-extinguished fire, as well as with the iciness of her surroundings: “My fire

57 William Wordsworth, “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman,” in *Lyrical Ballads*, 138-140. Though it was not substantively changed between editions, my readings here refer to the 1798 printing.
is dead: it knew no pain; / Yet is it dead, and I remain: / All stiff with ice the ashes lie; / And they are dead, and I will die." Yet though the stanza begins by figuring death and, by extension, the forsaken woman herself, as a logical counterpart to natural forces like fire and ice, it then quickly shifts to the role that natural forces, including fire and warmth (as opposed to the iciness of her present surroundings) play not vis-à-vis death, but in making life worth living:

When I was well, I wished to live,
For clothes, for warmth, for food, and fire;
But they to me no joy can give,
No pleasure now, and no desire.
Then here contented will I lie
Alone, I cannot fear to die.60

Moving from the clarity of intention of the first stanza, Wordsworth begins to unsettle the speaker’s resolve to die; for even as death and her desire for it is, initially, figured as natural, by the end of the stanza, the speaker feels less in communion with the dead elements, and her resolve turns to worry, as she admits, “I cannot fear to die” in the stanza’s final line. And further, in the next stanza, worry becomes regret, and rather than wishing to die, she wishes that there was some way she could continue to live. From first blaming her tribe for not “drag[ing] her on / Another day”61 to “grievously” regretting that “I did not follow [the tribe],”62 the third stanza gives way to poem’s core, in which we learn what the speaker would want to live for, if she had the choice: the child she was forced to

59 Ibid., ll. 11-14.
60 Ibid., ll. 15-20.
61 Ibid., ll. 21-22.
62 Ibid., l. 28.
leave behind. At the thought of her child, the speaker then again communes with nature, but rather than seeing her own death in it, she sees an opportunity to send a final message with the wind:

O wind, that o’er my head art flying
The way my friends their course did bend,
I should not feel the pain of dying,
Could I with thee a message end;
Too soon, my friend, ye went away;
For I had many thing to say.63

The next stanza continues her imagined journey back to her tribe, where she envisions that she will “look upon your tent again.”64 Then, signaled by unusual punctuation, a hyphen at the beginning of a line, Wordsworth brings her, and the reader, back to the speaker’s painful reality: that she has been left to die, and thus may choose not whether she will live, but only whether she will make her peace with death; and finally, returning once more to the imagery of the dead fire, she returns to the resolve with which she opened the poem: “Young as I am, my course is run, / I shall not see another sun.”65

For Fulford, the speaker’s resignation to death—not exactly equivalent to an act of suicide, but close to it—is a form of subversion, precisely because of her cultural difference from the poem’s intended readers: “her repeated insistence on the shear fact of her coming demise ultimately resists our vicarious emotional succor...Although he assimilates her to the natural sublime, he does so without

63 Ibid., ll. 45-50.
64 Ibid., l. 54.
65 Ibid., ll. 61-62.
occluding her cultural difference."⁶⁶ Within Fulford’s reading, Wordsworth manages to avoid repeating the problems associated with reading and writing suicide as a sentimental tool for humanizing “the other,” as I have summarized these in Chapter 1. Fulford insists that British depictions of Native Americans, though obviously racialized, avoid the kind of racism inherent in abolitionists’ depictions of Africans, for while “scientific racism and manifest destiny were not entirely absent from the British/Indian relationship,” no British authorities “argued that Indians were a separate species and few viewed their disappearance from the earth as right or even inevitable.”⁶⁷ Yet even if the woman in Wordsworth’s poem is, as Fulford puts it, “allowed her cultural difference,”⁶⁸ her gender complicates the poem’s engagement with “difference,” more broadly construed.

Like the sentimental abolitionist tradition exemplified by Day and Bicknell’s The Dying Negro, the Native American death song was a popular genre at the turn of the nineteenth century, and it, likewise, often turned on representations of acts of self-assertion in which a person’s humanity is demonstrated even as her life ends. And yet, because the stakes of the death song genre were not expressly political—which is to say, not engaged, in any direct way, with questions of British national policy—it is not quite comparable to Day and Bicknell’s use of suicide as a

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⁶⁶ Fulford, Romantic Indians, 174-175.
⁶⁷ Ibid., 29.
⁶⁸ Ibid., 175.
trope for bringing about direct social change. Nevertheless, Native American
dehit songs often functioned as literary vehicles for cultural critique:

[As] a poetry that was closer to the body than any other kind...it appeared to
occupy the opposite pole to polite, urbane and urban writing—the decorous,
schooled literature of gentlemen. And, as such, it established Indians as ideal
representatives of the unity and authenticity the gentlemen, weary of the
sophisticated culture they had learnt, imagined they wanted but could not admit
to wanting in their own persons, lest they appear savage. The Indian of the death
song, it follows, was not simply the other but the secret twin of the British male
reader—the embodiment of his taboo desire.69

In the mid-eighteenth century, Native American death songs were primarily
read and written as ecstatic pronouncements of the deaths of male warriors. These
songs, depicting the deaths of men who could not be more different from the
gentile men of letters writing and consuming this genre, functioned as a way to
reflect on British codes of masculinity and manners:

Britons' interest in the genre thus revealed both homoerotic and macabre
fixations, as if the cultural repression of gentlemen drove their desire to
extremes...Taking aesthetic pleasure in Indians' pain, readers could vicariously
satisfy a wish for knowledge of the flesh that gentlemen could not be seen to enjoy
in their own persons. And so the dying Indian became a dangerously attractive
hero who took familiar ideals to unfamiliar extremes, an uncanny figure for a
strange part of the British gentleman that could not be acknowledged in itself.70

Wordsworth's poem, however, shifts the focus to the figure of the dying woman.
In focusing on the death of a Native American woman, the critique shifts from one
concerned with the shortcomings of British masculinity, to a reinstatement of the
merits of not only masculinity, but of patriarchy. Many death songs were
concerned with imagining heroic Native American men as representatives of

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69 Ibid., 145.
70 Ibid., 146.
traditional communities centered on patriarchal authority but, as Fulford points out, in so valorizing patriarchal authority they patently ignored the complex matriarchal structures that governed many Native American tribes and traditions. In this way, Native American songs were, in effect, “the first progeny of the Burkeanism that [the first generation Romantics] were increasingly to develop...the Romantics sang Indian songs in order to give as much sublimity to ‘natural’ patriarchs as Burke had found in the titled noblemen who, since time immemorial, had inherited power in Britain.” They did so, in part, by depicting women as ascribing to the violence and degradation they were instructed to endure by their male leaders.

71 Prominent Native American death songs include those that circulated through Joseph Ritson’s Historical Essay on the Origin and Progress of National Song (1783) and Henry Timberlake’s Memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake (1765), which is credited with introducing the genre into British writing, though the most popular cycle of Native American death songs is Robert Southey’s cycle, “Songs of the American Indians” (1799). For more on the development of this genre, see Fulford, Chapter 7.

72 Ibid., 152, italics original.

73 Felicia Hemans’ late-Romantic “Indian Woman’s Death Song” (1828) helps to clarify the extent to which the Romantic-era depiction of the willful deaths of Native American women bespeak the enduring power of patriarchal values. Like Wordsworth’s poem, Hemans’ is told in the first person. In it, the speaker chooses not only death, but also to commit infanticide, when she discovers her lover has strayed. Talking to her infant daughter, Hemans’ narrator reasons that she is saving them both from a life of inevitable heartache at the hands of men:

And thou, my babe! tho’ born, like me, for woman’s weary lot,
Smile!—to that wasting of the heart, my own! I leave thee not;
Too bright a thing art thou to pine in aching love away,
Thy mother bears thee far, young Fawn! from sorrow and decay.
She bears thee to the glorious bowers where none are heard to weep,
And where th’ unkind one hath no power again to trouble sleep;
And where the soul shall find its youth, as waking from a dream,—
One moment, and that realm is ours.—On, on, dark rolling stream!

The poem is filled with imagery that signals female subjugation, including, very pointedly, its setting on the Mississippi River: according to Hemans’ note to the poem, the Native American name for Mississippi is “Father of waters.” That she is an “Indian Woman” here is, arguably, less
But in shifting the narrating voice of the death song to that of a woman, Wordsworth’s poem perpetuates another form of violence. Beyond the gross misinterpretations and misappropriations of North American tribal customs that belie Wordsworth’s “Complaint,” as a poem about the desire for death, the poem also participates in a larger conversation about suicide and its relationship to English interests in questions of identity and difference. This is not, in other words, a revolutionary cry for recognizing the subjectivity of marginalized people, as *The Dying Negro* had been. Yet in the following section, I would like to argue that the “Complaint” nevertheless registers some of the cultural associations that already existed between suicide and alterity, and thus, coupled with “Resolution and Independence,” helps us to see how Wordsworth, too, uses the subject of suicide to think about social exclusion.

**Suicide, Community, and Exclusion**

The “Complaint” is part of Wordsworth’s agenda, in the *Lyrical Ballads*, to represent the perspectives of those people whose lives had previously been considered inappropriate for representation by British poetry. But for Alan Bewell, significant than the fact that she is a woman. Thus, death songs like Wordsworth’s and Hemans’ are less concerned with accurately figuring Native American life, but rather appropriate the figure of the Native American in order to articulate British anxieties about, in this case, gender. See: Felicia Hemans “Indian Woman’s Death Song,” in *Records of Woman, with Other Poems*, ed. Paula R. Feldman (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1999), ll. 36-43.
the “Complaint” represents an even broader agenda, through which Wordsworth tries to reimagine the cultural practices surrounding not just the production of poetry in England, but also the organization of death. Though the poem has generally been read as “simply an exercise in primitive sentimentalism,” Bewell contends that Wordsworth preempts and sidesteps such a characterization because, in his 1800 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, he “did not emphasize the poem’s sentimentalism, but instead its experimentalism.”

As Wordsworth writes,

> Each of these poems has a purpose...[to] follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature. This object I have endeavored in these short essays to attain by various means...[such as] by accompanying the last struggles of a human being at the approach of death, cleaving in solitude to life and society, as in the Poem of the Forsaken Indian.

Thus, the *Lyrical Ballads* are written as experiments, through which Wordsworth tests and expands the affective powers of the minds of his readers by asking them to imagine, through his verse, the lives and deaths of other people, including Native Americans and the rustic poor, about whom readers might never otherwise have thought. The *Lyrical Ballads* are, in this way, an exploration and an experiment in the social effects of literature, itself.

For Bewell, “The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman,” in particular, is uniquely tied to this social experiment because of its connection to Wordsworth’s anthropological interests in burial practices:

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75 Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 175-176.
Why Wordsworth chose to write about an isolated and abandoned Copper Indian dying in the northern wilderness of Canada requires little conjecture. What must have struck him as he read Hearne’s account…was that here was a society that neither buried its dead nor engaged in any ceremonies relating to their final disposition…For a poet familiar with the anthropological link between burial and metaphysics, Hearne’s observations provided an extraordinary opportunity to explore, with empirical support, the idea of death in a pre-burial society.\textsuperscript{76}

Wordsworth’s interests in burial practices and their relations to British social life would become more explicitly pronounced in his 1810 Essays upon Epitaphs. And while these essays concern what is, at best, a sub-genre of poetic form (the epitaph), the Essays upon Epitaphs, Wordsworth’s longest works of criticism, are fundamental for helping us to understand the role that not only death, but also suicide, plays within Wordsworth’s larger poetic theory.

The first Essay upon Epitaphs takes up the question of how these monuments came to exist, and what cultural function they serve. Wordsworth conjectures that epitaphs “proceeded obviously from a twofold desire: first, to guard the remains of the deceased from irreverent approach or from savage violation; and secondly, to preserve their memory.”\textsuperscript{77} A monument that will exist even after those who knew the deceased die themselves, the epitaph thus represents for Wordsworth a physical cipher of the durability of human community, despite the impermanence of its particular members.

For Bewell, this interest in symbolizing “humanity,” writ large, in spite of the vulnerability and fragility of individual “humans,” is first signaled in the

\textsuperscript{76} Bewell, 198.
“Complaint” is 1798. Wordsworth’s interest in the Native American woman as a subject for his poetry is reflected in his representation of her as “an amalgam of societal status and parental duties” rather than a “private, psychological...self.”

Thus, for Wordsworth’s speaker, death is primarily a social, rather than a personal, loss:

‘Alone, I cannot fear to die,’ she asserts, for being isolate and forgotten is a far greater death than the termination of life: ‘Methinks ’tis strange I did not perish / The moment I was left behind.’ Yet her society has no place for the dead; instead, it cuts them off from the living and forgets them. The woman’s desire to be part of her tribe even in death and her feeling that she could die ‘with happy heart’ if she could die with her child ‘close to me,’ indicated how important it is for humans to transform death into a social and familial institution...The “Complaint” shows us that the development of customs relating to the dead are closely linked to the development of society and a nature shaped by human hands...The ‘pain of dying,’ for this woman, is the pain of being forgotten.

Linking Wordsworth’s depiction of the Native American woman’s loss of her child and community, to Wordsworth’s later interests in epitaphs, Bewell points to Wordsworth’s larger interests in the socializing power of both death and poetry:

“Communities are built in the face of death, which links otherwise solitary individuals to one another and binds them to place...Wordsworth links the progress of the idea of death to the progress of language and the institution of burial.”

The Boy of Winander episode of the 1805 Prelude stands out as particularly illustrative of how Wordsworth would come to understand the association

78 Bewell, 201.
79 Bewell, 201.
80 Bewell, 213.
between his work as a poet and larger cultural attitudes toward death: here, he makes it clear that the dead receive a dual burial, in the earth and in narratives. In the passage in Book V that begins “There was a boy,” Wordsworth recalls being nine years old, looking at the spot where another young boy was buried, and ruminating on the earth’s forgetting the young boy who, in the previous stanza, had boisterously sung to all its lakes and wildlife. Recalling his experience of standing in the “silent neighborhood of graves,” Wordsworth hopes that nature will “long / Behold a race of young ones like to those with whom I herded”; and then, using parentheses to signify the shift in perspective, the adult Wordsworth interjects: “(easily, indeed, / We might have fed upon a fatter soil / Of arts and letters--but be that forgiven).” For Bewell, this episode dramatizes the interchangeability of physical and literary burial places in Wordsworth’s poetics of community: “Graves idealize the dead by...placing them together, so that they are no longer alone, but can be conceived as a community. The dead are also buried in narratives. No longer able to speak for themselves, to be active agents in the world and in language, they depend upon others for their continued existence.” Bewell links Wordsworth’s psychic internalizations that equate the mind with the

82 Ibid., ll. 406-410.
83 Bewell, 212-213.
places and practices of burial to the “Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman,” which, he argues, likewise explores this connection:

The forsaken Indian woman’s repeated assertion that her friends will remember the ‘spot’ where she died is closely linked to the genesis of a series of short autobiographical sketches, which have come to be known as the ‘spots of time’ passages [of which The Boy of Winander is one]. All of these poems return us to a world...where memories of the dead are still linked to “spots” marked out in the landscape...Each shows us how the human mind is born out of its confrontation with death and how the same symbolic activities that create graves...also create minds that can serve as burial sites for the past.84

But, in keeping with Bewell’s observation that Wordsworth’s “Complaint” represents an early foray into his later interests in burial practices and communities of the dead, then “The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman” also signals an anxiety about the forgetting of individuals who die certain types of death. That is, the speaker of the poem has been left to die by her tribe and forgotten; and while not exactly a suicide, her repeatedly willing herself to death nevertheless links the poem to contemporary debates about the burials of suicides.

As I have noted in my introduction, since the middle ages, the bodies of suicides were not legally allowed to receive Christian burials, but were instead buried in unmarked graves on unhallowed ground. Further, as I discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, this practice would be overturned in 1826, owing to ongoing debates at the turn of the century about the cruelty of this practice. The association that already existed, in late eighteenth-century radical writing, between suicide and liberal subjectivity, underscores suicide as a relevant topic for

84 Ibid., 208
Wordsworth’s poetic experiments in the *Lyrical Ballads*. That is, because it had been used as part of the social agendas of abolitionists and early feminists to critique the very structures of British liberal society that do not allow certain types of people legibility within society, suicide was part and parcel of the same discourses of the disenfranchised and the marginalized that Wordsworth sought to make legible in his *Lyrical Ballads*. In this way, “The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman” represents a way by which Wordsworth holds onto, even as he alters, the late eighteenth-century political arguments wherein suicide became a cipher of a kind of marginality.

To be sure, this argument does not extend as far as Day and Bicknell’s use of suicide to argue for the rights of non-Europeans. As Fulford and Hutchings repeatedly maintain, depictions of Native Americans in Romantic-era British writing were never really about developing a nuanced understand of Native Americans, but were rather “mixtures of British writer and reader and indigenous people” and “projections of Britons’ fears, desires, and observations, with more to say to Britons than to the indigenous people themselves.”85 Thus, in terms of its engagement with Native Americans and women, Wordsworth’s “Complaint” is a troubling portrayal of cultural stereotypes and female subjugation. However, within the larger context of Wordsworth’s poetics, “The Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman” functions as an allegory for the postmortem dehumanization that

85 Fulford and Hutchings, “Introduction,” 32.
also takes place when one commits suicide, which, in turn, informs the most famous of Wordsworth’s suicides, Chatterton.

If “Resolution and Independence” represents Wordsworth’s personal anxieties that he might commit suicide, then suicide here comes to operate as a kind of disenfranchisement, in that it is an unprivileged death, which affords no remembrances. Thus, when Wordsworth invokes Chatterton in “Resolution and Independence,” it is not only because he worries that poetic impulses will lead him to suicide, but also because if he commits suicide, he will be treated as marginalized and forgotten; but unlike his resurrection of Chatterton in the space of the poem, there will be no one to remember Wordsworth.

Of course, this moment of solipsistic crisis is only temporary in “Resolution and Independence.” Ultimately, the poem dramatizes the necessity of community, and Wordsworth’s own self-conscious defense against suicide arrives by way of his imagination. As Leon Waldoff puts it, “the speaker represents the encounter with the old man as a reversal of loss—in effect, as a rescue,” for the speaker encounters the old man at precisely the moment that his thoughts turn to Chatterton and the fates of poets. Indeed, even in his letter to Sara and Mary Hutchinson, Wordsworth phrases the encounter in terms of exuberant salvation rather than solipsism: “I was rescued from my dejection and despair almost as an

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interposition of Providence. But in “rescuing” himself by inventing a figure of, in this case, poverty and physical disability, to console himself, Wordsworth reveals a cultural insensitivity that troubles his poetics: namely, that Wordsworth uses narratives of alterity—including not only the Native American woman of the “Complaint,” but the many figures who represent poverty and mental or physical disability who people his works—to reflect back to himself his own subjectivity. Indeed, that this, rather than the investigation of the actual experiences of these people, is his explicit goal as early as the *Lyrical Ballads* calls into question the ethics of Wordsworth’s privileged role as a key figure in Romantic studies.

Before I turn to how critics have recently gone about reorienting Romanticism from celebrations of these kinds of narratives—narratives that, in fact, are not emblematic of the entire age, but are rather called into question even by other Romantic-era writers, as the next chapter will show—I want to turn to how these self-reflexive narratives came to be viewed as emblematic not of some of the worst aspects of Romantic-era writing, but of Romanticism at its best. Above, I have shown that a secondary narrative about willful death, popular during the Romantic period, linked suicide to Wordsworthian anxieties about being forgotten by way of already existing anxieties about gender, ethnic, and class differences. In the next section I will trace how, in particular, the narrative associated with Romantic suicide, which is predominantly concerned with white European men

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87 Ibid., 94.
(and only very occasionally, their white European female admirers), become the central narrative about suicide in the Romantic era. What I will show below is that it was the Victorian reception of Romanticism that whitewashed these social dimensions of the Romantic-era conversation about suicide, and placed Chatterton, the tragic ingénue poet, definitively at the center of the period’s interest in suicide.

The Victorian Life of Romantic Suicide

Suicide is precisely not romanticized by Wordsworth but, in “Resolution and Independence,” is rather feared, in part, because of its potential to make the poet an outcast not only in life, but also in death. Why, then, has the association between Chatterton and Romantic suicide become such a commonplace, and why, in particular, has it taken such a powerful hold through Wordsworth’s 1802 poem? Although the association between great poetic potential and early death are rife throughout the Romantic period, the particular narrative around Chatterton that gave way to the cultural trope of the Romantic suicide emerges not from Romanticism per se, but rather in Victorian-era associations between Chatterton

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88 For example, Percy Shelley’s 1821 elegy on Keats, Adonais, also links the themes of young death, poetry, and literary dejection, a constellation that then also bleeds into the theme of suicide in speculations over, for example, whether Shelley’s fatal boating accident in 1822 was intentional, or possible links between Lord Byron’s fascination with morbid themes and the fear of aging he regularly expressed in his poetry, and his death, in 1824, at age thirty-six, while fighting for Greek independence from Turkey at Messolonghi.
and the Romantic poets. Even more than Wordsworth and his contemporaries, Victorian interpreters of Romanticism inscribed the mythos of Chatterton as the Romantic suicide *par excellence* into the critical and popular consciousness, alike.

As Andrew Radford and Mark Sandy put it,

> Romantic myths of the artist as a solitary genius, sage, and mystical shaman were bequeathed to the Victorians as much as they were reinforced, even initiated, by Victorian editors and biographers who, influenced by their own age of economic and political individualism, contributed significantly to the mythology and hagiography of Romantic authors. Victorian writers developed during a period in which Romantic poetry...[was] being fashioned and widely distributed. This dissemination of a revitalized world of romance propagated a fresh Romantic sense of the author as a hero, an inspired magician, or even divine seer. The literary artist was invariably seen as a human deity, able to summon a new world into existence through the power of imagination. George Henry Lewes’ conception of the ‘true artist’ draws upon what he believed was a ‘Romantic’ notion of the creative genius-magician who trusts the impulses from within, rather than the demands from without. ‘This world was never meant for genius!’ contended Edward Bulwer Lytton. ‘To exist, it must create another.’

While Victorian characterizations of Chatterton, and of Romanticism more generally, are too numerous to fully recapitulate here, I will illustrate, through the related and well-known examples of Henry Wallis and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, how Chatterton’s suicide became representative of what critics now regularly term ‘Romantic suicide’ not during the Romantic period per se, but in recollections and characterizations of Romanticism by Victorian writers.

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The role that later nineteenth-century thinkers played in inscribing Chatterton’s suicide as a Romantic trope is perhaps most obvious in the century’s visual culture. Easily the best-known illustration of Chatterton’s death is Henry Wallis’s 1856 oil painting, in which George Meredith poses dramatically as the titular subject (Figure 3). According to Radford and Sandy, this painting “achieved iconic status for the poet and set the seal on the image which, in some sense, had been struggling to manifest itself since the poet’s suicide in 1770.”

For Julie Crane,

When Chatterton appears to the Victorians... his appearance is often more sinuous...less easy to locate....To the outward, conscious Victorian writer’s mind he was a warning figure – a spectre of ruin...But he is also more obliquely available – a presence engendered by his art rather than his life – because of the makings of his gift, the peculiar haunted quality of his art....[Thus, in the Victorian period], the pre-Romantic Chatterton became a Romantic figure of disturbing possibilities: both endlessly fecund and self-dividing into different ways and suggestiveness; and a silenced being.

Though Chatterton’s legacy was certainly of widespread interest during the Romantic period, it was arguably the Victorians who created from Chatterton’s suicide an eternal afterlife of Romantic (im)possibility. Compare, for example, the differences between Wallis’s painting, and earlier engravings of Chatterton’s death from 1794 and 1801 (Figures 4 and 5).

In the Wallis painting, though his eyes are closed, Chatterton faces the viewer, whereas in both Romantic-era etchings, his eyes are open and he gazes

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away from the viewer, rendering unclear whether he is already dead or in the process of dying. In the Wallis painting, Chatterton is clearly dead, but his orientation toward the viewer, compounded by the painting’s vivid colors and heavy brush strokes, render his suicide as, in some sense, very much alive – that is, it is evident here that not Chatterton himself, but his final act of resignation, achieves an eternal, lyrical presence in the space of the painting.

Figure 3: "Chatterton" by Henry Wallis, ca. 1855-56, © Tate Britain, London.
Figure 4: “Death of Chatterton” by Edward Orme, after Henry Singleton, 1794, © National Portrait Gallery, London.

Figure 5: “The Death of Chatterton” by Francesco Bartolozzi, after Raphael Lamar West, 1801, © National Portrait Gallery, London.
The etchings, on the other hand, are much more diffusely focused. In the first etching, by Edward Orne, based on a drawing by Henry Singleton, it is unclear whether Chatterton himself is the focal point, or whether it is the woman and child who enter the room to find Chatterton near death. The presence of these other characters suggests a drama to the scene beyond that of the young poet’s death. Likewise, though Chatterton is the only figure depicted in Francesco Bartolozzi’s drawing, it is the light shining through the window and falling on Chatterton, rather than Chatterton himself, that emerges most prominently out of the otherwise heavily shaded illustration. The heavy-handed symbolism of that light, which is pointed at Chatterton’s heart, functions similarly to the woman and child in Orne’s drawing, in that it invites the viewer to consider more than the simple fact of Chatterton’s death. Further, because in both etchings, Chatterton faces away from the viewer, the etchings leave it to the viewer to take in the scene as a whole, rather than just the supine figure. However, by 1855, it is only the tragic fact of the young poet’s suicide that faces, literally, Wallis’s viewer; every other detail is secondary to the titular subject, whose limp body sprawls across the entire canvas.

This shift in focus from the scene of Chatterton’s death in the early nineteenth-century drawings, to the actual death of Chatterton in Wallis’s mid-century painting, is a significant one. During the Romantic period, the interest in Chatterton’s suicide, though often sentimental in tone, was varied, and might have
held many possible meanings. Like the speaker in “Resolution and Independence,” Orme and Bartolozzi attempt to grapple with, but they do not surrender to, the allure of the beautiful young poet’s tragic undoing. This thoroughly “Romantic” position is articulated, rather, by the Victorian artist Wallis, and Wallis’s “Chatterton” would come to be praised by such Victorian luminaries as John Ruskin, Robert Browning, and Matthew Arnold, among others.  

One of Wallis’s greatest admirers, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, further inscribes Chatterton’s position as a Romantic figure in his sonnet sequence “Five English Poets,” which appears in the 1881 volume Ballads and Sonnets. In “Five English Poets,” Rossetti places Chatterton among the ranks of Blake, Coleridge, Keats, and Percy Shelley. Rossetti’s poem on Chatterton is the first in the sequence, and offers a meditation on tragedy, youth, and poetry:

With Shakspeare’s manhood at a boy’s wild heart,—  
Through Hamlet’s doubt to Shakspeare near allied,  
And kin to Milton through his Satan’s pride,—  
At Death’s sole door he stooped, and craved a dart;  
And to the dear new bower of England’s art,—  
Even to that shrine Time else had deified,  
The unuttered heart that soared against his side,—  
Drove the fell point, and smote life’s seals apart.  
Thy nested home-loves, noble Chatterton;  
The angel-trodden stair thy soul could trace  
Up Redcliffe’s spire; and in the world’s armed space  
Thy gallant sword-play:—these to many an one  
Are sweet for ever; as thy grave unknown

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94 Beyond the “Five English Poets” sequence, Chatterton returns, alongside several other Romantics, in a later poem in Ballads and Sonnets, “Tiber, Niles, and Thames.” Here, Chatterton, Keats and Coleridge make up the volta to a poem that considers the relationship of poetry to imperial power, with Chatterton’s suicide serving, in the final line, as a powerful analog to the silencing of historically significant rulers.
And love-dream of thine unrecorded face.\textsuperscript{95}

Here, I would argue, is a much more pointed articulation of the Romantic allure of what Daniel Cook has called Chatterton’s “neglected genius”\textsuperscript{96} than is present in Wordsworth’s oft-quoted 1802 poem, or in either of the Romantic-era images of Chatterton’s death.

I would like, then, to suggest that there is more to Romantic-era narratives about suicide than the commonplace narrative of tragic, misspent youth that follows from depictions of Chatterton as the prototypical Romantic suicide. This critical commonplace, in fact, emerges from the end of the nineteenth century, rather than from its beginning. What I have shown above is that one of the texts most frequently associated with the Romantic reading of Chatterton, Wordsworth’s “Resolution and Independence,” is, itself, ambivalent about the meanings of both Chatterton and suicide. But in Wallis, Rossetti, and their contemporaries, Chatterton’s suicide becomes inscribed as a transcendental act, associated with not with cultural critique, but with poetic genius. Such a reading, as I have been arguing, forecloses the historical significance of well-known political discourses associated with identity that arose in narratives about suicide during the Romantic period. What I will illustrate, in my final chapter, is that


some Romantic-era writers maintained and developed the eighteenth-century discourses that aimed to link suicide back to the radical critiques characteristic of abolitionist and women’s rights agendas. And as such, what we inherit, by way of the Victorians, as “Romantic suicide,” is only a partial illustration of the cultural meaning of suicide during the Romantic era.

**Conclusion: What We Talk About When We Talk About Romantic Suicide**

In his essay “Notes Toward a Critical Race Theory: The Race in/of Romanticism,” Marlon Ross writes that in critical considerations of social and cultural difference during the Romantic era, Romanticists have tended toward critiques of imperialism, but have generally stayed away from talking about race, because to do so would require confronting an essentially racist logic that runs through the majority of Romantic-era British writing – and, per Ross, “No one wants to seem so vulgar as to call romantic writers racists.” Allow me to be so vulgar—which is to say, to take seriously Ross’s challenge to embrace, rather than to avoid, the possibilities that are opened by acknowledging Romantic writers’ attempts to understand difference, even if it means facing the uncomfortable fact that nineteenth-century representations of race differ wildly from our own, still

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evolving, understanding of race and its histories. In the preceding chapter, I have asked what happens to some of our commonly-held conceptions of Romanticism – the “Romantic Ideology” that Jerome McGann long ago named and deconstructed, but which nevertheless persists in structuring our field, even if, increasingly, in the negative\(^\text{98}\) – when we bring issues of not only racial but also gender and class difference to the foreground of our conversations about Romantic-era British representations of suicide. The period’s varied engagements of the trope of suicide allows us to inch closer toward an understanding of Romanticism as a cultural formation not only interested in, but fundamentally built on, vexed notions of identity and alterity. Following McGann and, more recently, Paul Youngquist, I hold that the potential for this understanding has been dwarfed by critical conceptions of the field that whitewash the difficulty that Romantic writers met when attempting to ask and answer questions about difference, variously construed.

Youngquist has similarly taken Romanticists to task for the field’s apparent indifference to race. In the introduction to the *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* volume *Black Romanticism: Circulations*, Youngquist and Fran Botkin call this

\(^{98}\) McGann’s *Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) was enormously influential in diversifying the objects of our study to include women, journalists, lower class poets, and, most recently, black voices. Yet even as the field has identified the need to move away from critiques centered on the so-called “Big Six” poets – Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Shelley, Byron, Keats – arguably, we nevertheless persist in organizing our critiques in terms that relate the increasingly non-canonical objects of our study to those six looming figures of Romantic Genius.
oversight “a massive act of forgetting on the part of contemporary scholarship, an institutional disavowal of the economic conditions that help make cultural production during the Romantic Era possible: the maritime economy of the Atlantic.”

Elsewhere, Youngquist contends that in light of the slave trade, the Napoleonic wars, colonial uprisings, the Peterloo massacre, and vast numbers of other domestic and international engagements, “histories of Romanticism should be written in blood”; and yet,

British Romanticism is white. Or [more to the point], British Romanticism is transparent, the cultural production of a majority culture whose whiteness becomes visible only in relation to its raced Other. I know it isn’t fashionable to speak abstractly of Romanticism right now, and I’m not waxing nostalgic for the bad old days when the sacred six set their ideological terms for what it meant to be Romantic. Jerome McGann blocks the road back with the flaming sword of ideology critique. And the road forward takes a hard left turn. Culture now largely sets the terms for studies in Romanticism, broadly conceived in the tradition of E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams as a whole way of life, the myriad discourses and practices typical of British society during the years that run roughly from 1780 to 1830. But however broadly this culture gets conceived, it remains all but oblivious to its whiteness. It occludes the blackness at its core, a confrontation with its racial Other that drives Romantic cultural production....But what if Romanticism, or more congenially, cultural production during the Romantic era, arises out of an encounter with blackness that it then occludes to maintain this transparency? In that case, Romanticists wouldn’t be the dupes of ideology so much as of culture itself, willing participants in the production and perpetuation of its blank authority.

In this chapter, I have suggested that if the Romantic period’s interests in difference gave way to the “blank authority” of Eurocentricism, then it was

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institutionalized not by the Romantics themselves, but by later cultural and critical narratives that elevate traditional notions of Romantic suicide. But the Romantics themselves did not simply forget the questions of social identity and liberal self-assertion that became associated with suicide in the eighteenth century, as I have shown in this chapter, and as I will continue to show in the next. Thus, the association between Romanticism and the aestheticization of suicide, coupled with the place that Romantic writers have been made to inhabit in literary criticism about Romanticism (to say nothing of the place these writers inhabit in the cultural consciousness more generally, inscribed as such by way of their continued centrality in contemporary English literature curricula in university and K-12 education\textsuperscript{102}), obscures the very troubling social realities that Romantic-era engagements with the trope of suicide were meant to reveal.

By thus contextualizing one of the most abiding images of Romantic suicide, William Wordsworth’s famous description of Thomas Chatterton’s suicide in his 1802 “Resolution and Independence” and its afterlives in the Victorian period, within an earlier depiction by Wordsworth of a fictional Native American woman’s suicide, I have shown here how the familiar narrative of the beautiful, doomed Romantic poet is precisely built up from a less familiar narrative that turns on obfuscating racialized and gendered categories of belonging, even as it

\textsuperscript{102} For more on this, see Ted Underwood, Why Literary Periods Mattered: Historical Contrast and the Prestige of English Studies (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).
attempts, perhaps, to give them voice. Such an approach to the study of Romanticism reveals how Romanticism itself is fraught, from within, by its own difficulties in grappling with alterity, and this anxiety around the question of “the other” is, in fact, a constitutive component of traditional narratives of Romanticism’s interest in poetic self-assertion. Moving beyond recent work on Romanticism and race by critics like Ross, Youngquist, Botkin, and others, and with an eye, also, on the longer history of feminist critiques of Romanticism, I contend that beyond recuperating Romantic-era narratives of alterity, we need to apply the methodologies of feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theory to grapple, explicitly, with the question of Romanticism’s own difficulties in working through questions of difference.

Such critiques of Romanticism will reveal not only British Romantic-era anxieties about socially-inscribed differences, but also our own. Articulating the ways in which Wordsworth, for example, represents and mis-represents Native American women holds significant implications for achieving a broader understanding of the genealogy of ethnic and gender studies, which leads us back not only to problematic categories of political ontology developed out of the Enlightenment, but also to Romantic-era efforts to critique, if not quite to correct, those Enlightenment limitations. Moreover, the critical tradition by which these lines of inquiry have been shut down and replaced by more palatable narratives of, for example, Romantic suicide, reveals a larger cultural unconscious at work, one
that inscribes a Eurocentric, patriarchal authority as transparent by eliding all other forms of subjectivity—and it is for this reason, above all others, that even the “vulgar” fact of Romanticism’s difficulties in dealing with otherness is, finally, worth articulating.
Chapter 3: Unhallowed Arts: Mary Shelley’s Suicidal Romanticism

Thus spoke my prophetic soul, as, torn by remorse, horror, and despair, I beheld those I loved spend vain sorrow upon the graves of William and Justine, the first hapless victims to my unhallowed arts.
~Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

It is impossible to read the productions of our most celebrated writers, whatever may be their system relating to thought and expression, without being startled by the electric life which there is in their words. They measure the circumference or sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit...They are the priests of an unapprehended aspiration, the mirrors of gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they conceive not; the trumpet which sings to battle and feels not what it inspires; the influence which is moved not but moves. Poets and philosophers are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.
~Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform*

Even while historians of suicide have long read Romantic-era interest in suicide as part of the eighteenth century’s philosophical interests in individualism, as I have been arguing in the preceding chapters, the discourse of individualism was also the object of critique of much late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writing about suicide. What I will illustrate here is another way that some Romantic writers, following in the tradition of British abolitionism, also engaged suicide as part of their rebellion against the Enlightenment fantasy of the individual. The widespread cultural obsession with suicide, especially by the second half of the Romantic period, reveals not only the limits of the fantasy of individualism, but reflects late Romanticism’s commitment to radical liberatory politics. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that late-Romantic authors who took
this view understood the individual as constructed through social means, and thus, the emphasis on suicide in Romantic literature—far from fitting into the now commonplace notion of a preemptive, solipsistic act of mourning for the inevitable failure of one's own poetic vocation—continues to pose social questions across the Romantic period.¹

In such Romantic texts, tropes of suicide function to signal a necessary break with the rules, assumptions, and mores that governed mainstream European society. Romantic writers engaged tropes of suicide to reveal that the Enlightenment logic of the ‘construction’ of a particular kind of subjectivity must give way to the limitations of that fantasy. What late Romanticism knew well was that the Enlightenment ideal of a discernible, self-governing subject would have to be eradicated, and that such change would require a certain amount of self-effacement and violence. Recalling Harold Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence, wherein Western poetry is always implicitly engaged in an Oedipal-esque rivalry with key voices from the past, I am arguing that for the Romantics, it is not enough that the father be killed in order that the son come into his own; here, both writers and readers are incited to kill themselves, or, more precisely, the expectation of certain notions of “the self.” Nowhere is the confrontation between

¹ Implicitly, this claim poses a challenge to the notion that lyric poetry – especially Romantic poetry – is a solipsistic or individualistic practice. Mutlu Blasing challenges this critical commonplace by suggesting that poetry be read within the same epistemological tradition through which critics have read processes of subject production in the European novel. For Blasing, the lyric “I” stands to inform us of the “communal personality of a people” just as well as the novel. See Blasing, Lyric Poetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 12.
suicide, literature, and the limits of the modern subject more clearly articulated than in Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein*.

Recognizing the emphasis on suicide in that most famous text of the Romantic era allows us to reassess Mary Shelley’s interest in the construction, through literary means, of the individual in society. Moreover, it allows us to examine how questions of the individual intersect with questions of the social, not only in the problem of reading as laid forth by Mary Shelley, but also, as I have been suggesting, in the problem of suicide, itself. Insofar as *Frankenstein* takes seriously the notion that literature can shape subjects, Shelley’s novel emerges as a descendent of the Enlightenment tradition of *Bildung* – with *Bildung* understood here as the formation of “proper” subjectivity by means of texts. But Shelley also takes issue with the particular kind of subject that the *Bildung* script aims to construct. For Shelley, the novel needs to accomplish something closer to what

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3 McLane has also problematized Mary Shelley’s engagement with the *Bildung* script. For McLane, the novel posits a challenge to the anthropomorphic epistemology that gave rise to the *Bildung* tradition in the first place. McLane highlights the tension that emerges in the novel between human and non-human access to the texts and intentions of *Bildung*. While McLane’s is a useful distinction to note, my reading of the novel does not call into question the creature’s ‘humanity,’ but rather aligns with Anne Mellor’s claim in *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 63 that while Mary Shelley “saw the creature as potentially monstrous...she never suggested that he was other than fully human.” McLane’s reading poses a useful challenge to the anthropo-logic that, in Shelley’s day, governed – and perhaps still governs – the “human sciences” of literature and education. However, I am arguing from the perspective that the creature’s “otherness” is more fruitfully read not in terms of exclusions in constructions of species variation, but as an allegory for the social exclusionary violence that takes place within the category of the human.
her soon-to-be husband, Percy Shelley’s, poetry aspired to do: to liberate minds, to instruct for the purpose of dismantling antiquated notions and building up society anew.

To that end, *Frankenstein* places contemporary debates about suicide into conversation with Percy Shelley’s theoretical works on poetry, the individual, and society. Percy Shelley’s writings from the period surrounding the composition of *Frankenstein* drew heavily from the Enlightenment debate about how subjects are formed and maintain cohesion. According to Enlightenment theorists such as David Hume and Adam Smith, subjects come into being and cohere into strong selves through processes of sympathy. *Frankenstein* reveals that these theories of sympathy suggest that individuals relate to one another in reader-like relationships (i.e., sympathy requires that each person “read” the other), and, moreover, that this entire theory of subject-formation is threatened by entities that cannot be “read.” *Frankenstein* depicts the fate of one of these entities who cannot be read – the creature – and in this way suggests that suicide is the other side of Enlightenment theories of sympathy and subjectivity, in that suicide is the obligatory fate of all those who cannot be read.

In order to make my case that Shelley’s novel uses suicide to reveal how texts can either create or destroy Enlightenment subjectivity, I will first establish that it is at least plausible that the creature is constructed from the body parts of suicides. Attending to the precise “materials” from which the creature is
composed reveals the extent to which the novel engages debates surrounding suicide at the turn of the nineteenth century. But even more vital is the extent to which cultural anxieties about suicide permeate the main plot. It is deeply significant, for example, that Frankenstein concludes with the creature’s ecstatic announcement of his impending suicide:

“But soon,” [the creature] cried, with sad and solemn enthusiasm, “I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in peace; or if it thinks, it will not surely think thus. Farewell.”

In a text written from within an intellectual milieu so centrally concerned with the development of the human subject, and participating in the genre most explicitly engaged therewith, one has to wonder why the novel’s final act should be one of self-murder – the intentional undoing of that development.

The implications of the creature’s final act have already been read as a challenge to the interests and goals of Enlightenment ideologies associated with subject formation. For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the “darkness and distance” into which the creature is only too eager to hurl himself in the novel’s final line signals an “existential temporality that is coherent with neither the territorializing individual imagination...nor the authoritative scenario of Christian


autobiography,” two principles that underwrite the logic of British imperialism. Spivak’s now canonical reading of Frankenstein opens with the bold (for its time) claim that “It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored.” Since its 1985 publication, Spivak’s reading has spawned a staggering amount of scholarly work attending to and problematizing the Euro-normative dynamics of social subject-production in Frankenstein. Within the logic of such criticism, the novel all but necessitates the creature’s expulsion from the social order. Whether the creature’s development is understood in terms of the

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6 Ibid., 267.
7 Ibid., 262.
pedagogical theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau,⁹ nascent discourses of liberal feminism drawn through Mary Shelley’s mother, Mary Wollstonecraft,¹⁰ or Immanuel Kant’s tripartite theory of the subject,¹¹ critics generally agree that the text necessitates the creature’s expulsion because he does not fit the criteria – however they are conceived – of Enlightenment subjectivity. For the purposes of the present discussion, the particular kind of subjectivity that the novel wants to grapple with is not wholly relevant; rather, what is significant is that for readers who understand the text to be about the limits of that Enlightenment fantasy of a unified and coherent self, it comes as given that the creature can find no place within the social order, and must be done away with. But does the creature’s expulsion have to be suicide? Why couldn’t death happen to the creature, either

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⁹ According to Richardson, “the monster is often compared to the ‘natural man’ of Rousseau’s Second Discourse, although...more plausible (and more far-reaching in their implications) are the associations made between the creature and Rousseau [in The Confessions] as self-styled victims who dwell upon their persecution by an unjust society; and between the often remarked relation of Victor and his creature as two halves of a divided self and the literal self-division of Rousseau in the Dialogues or Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques.” See Richardson, 205.

¹⁰ See, for example, Mellor, Mary Shelley, Chapter 10, wherein Mellor argues that the creature’s education preemptively troubles the “cult of domesticity” that would come to inform Shelley’s later novels, wherein heroines hold more closely to the lines laid out by Rousseau in Emile. In Frankenstein, however, Mellor posits that the creature’s education recalls the unhappy choices facing women between a haphazard self-education and the sanctioned “sexual education” of passivity and self-containment. See also Mary Poovey, The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), Burton Hatlen, “Milton, Mary Shelley, and Patriarchy,” Bucknell Review 28, no. 2 (1983): 19-47, and Kate Ellis, “Monsters in the Garden: Mary Shelley and the Bourgeois Family” in The Endurance of Frankenstein, eds. George Levine and U. C. Knoepflmacher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 123-142.

¹¹ As in Spivak’s reading, wherein Victor, Clerval, and Elizabeth are, respectively, the cognitive/pure reason, the ethical/practical reason, and the aesthetic, collectively serving as foils to the creature’s status as non-subject
by accident or murder? In a novel that posits the creature as a non-subject, what does it mean that the creature is able to will and assert his own death?

The above questions are complicated by the fact that the creature is not the only suicidal character in the novel. Victor Frankenstein spends most of the third volume baiting the creature, effectively setting up his own death. As I have shown in my Introduction, the question of an individual’s right to die was the question _du jour_ of the eighteenth century. What I would like to posit in this chapter is that it was also the question at the heart of Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel about what _makes_ an individual in the first place.

In what follows, I link the issue of suicide in _Frankenstein_ to three kinds of extra-textual discourses: first, to Mary Shelley’s attempt to come to terms with the role of suicide in her biography, as well as in the larger cultural debate on legal and medical aspects of suicide at the turn of the nineteenth century; second, to the novel’s engagement of Percy Shelley’s account of the relationship between reading, sympathy, and love as it concerns the possibility of subject production; and third, to a larger Enlightenment debate about how subjects are formed and maintain cohesion. Through the intersection of these three discourses in Mary Shelley’s novel, I posit that the novel uses suicide to stage Romanticism’s interest in the political efficacy not of subjects, but of the materials that create subjects: texts. Mary Shelley’s novel considers how Romanticism, emerging out of the “age of
suicide,” as the eighteenth-century is sometimes dubbed, came to consider the social and political dimension of suicide by engaging it, first, as a literary problem.

**Hiding Places: Frankenstein and the Suicide Debate**

What if Frankenstein’s creature were composed of the body parts of suicides? To what extent, and in what ways, would this affect our reading of arguably the most famous text of British Romanticism? Could it, for example, absolve Victor of some of the vileness attendant of grave robbing, to know that he had taken bodies from unconsecrated graves? Or would it, perhaps, make the creature an even more sympathetic being if we saw him as a living amalgam of the most desperate extremes of human despair and misery?

To a certain extent, we have already seen a distant variant of this possibility played out in our cultural consciousness by way of James Whale’s 1931 film version of *Frankenstein*. Whale’s interpretation has the good Doctor animate his creature using the brain of a criminal, thereby rendering the creature indisputably errant, if not altogether monstrous. In Whale’s film, the creature’s component parts directly influence his interiority. But Mary Shelley’s novel, which is likewise interested in the relationship between materiality and interiority, takes a much lighter touch to the question, leaving the details of creation vague. In part, the narrative necessitates this vagueness, as Victor tells Walton that he will not divulge this most dangerous secret of mankind. But it is also, as Susan Wolfson has pointed
out, a function of Mary Shelley’s inability to divulge knowledge that she, herself, does not possess:

This overwhelming achievement [the animation of the creature with the spark of life] comes to us at the end of a series of paragraphs in which our author, with considerable dexterity, has avoided giving us any details. The evasion is not surprising, since Victor has here surpassed the achievement of the ‘wisest men since the creation of the world.’ Under the circumstances, the eighteen-year-old Mary Shelley may be excused from the responsibility of telling us how it was that Victor arrived at success.¹²

In what follows, I submit a third possibility: perhaps the materials of corporeal creation are left unspoken because they are, in some fundamental way, unspeakable.

_Frankenstein_ teases its readers with the possibility that the creature is constructed, at least in part, from the body parts of suicides. Within the space of a few pages, Victor suggests no fewer than five possibilities of where he might have gathered the materials to make his creature: churchyards, charnel houses, slaughterhouses, anatomy labs, and an unspecified fifth option. And further, Victor’s reasoning during the scenes of creation oscillates between scientific objectivity and superstition, so that it is not always clear where his true motives lie: perhaps it is this ambivalence that won’t allow him to say where the bodies actually came from.

As he divulges the process by which he came to gather his necessary parts, his narrative betray a sense of uneasiness toward certain hallowed spaces of

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burial, even as he attempts to claim total objectivity. Throughout his descriptions of the creation process, Victor tries to paint himself as a man of science who is unfazed by the supernatural. However, the history of his time at Ingolstadt betrays that while the supernatural may not frighten him, he is hardly as dispassionate toward it as he would have us believe:

In my education my father had taken the greatest precautions that my mind should be impressed with no supernatural horrors. I do not ever remember having trembled at a tale of superstition, or to have feared the apparition of a spirit. Darkness had no effect upon my fancy; and a church-yard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life, which, from being the seat of beauty and strength, had become food for the worm. Now I was led to examine the cause and progress of this decay, and forced to spend days and nights in vaults and charnel houses.¹³

Painting himself a scholar of unflappable rationality, Victor cites the education he received from his father, as if to have us forget that just a few pages earlier, in the context of his formal schooling at Ingolstadt, he had fought M. Krempe in defense of the supernatural logic of Albertus Magnus, Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus. Of Krempe’s rejection of Victor’s interests, Victor complains, “I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth,”¹⁴ suggesting that he both recognizes and endorses the fanciful nature of these ancient knowledge systems. Indeed, his eventual mentor, M. Waldman, inspires Victor’s interest in the modern sciences by engaging and affirming his interest in the supernatural.

¹³ Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, 30.
¹⁴ Ibid., 27.
Waldman wants to take the old knowledge seriously as grounds for thinking about the goals of the new knowledge; but Victor misses this nuance, and instead understands Waldman to be endorsing the old against the new, and follows suit. In his introductory oration, Waldman distinguishes between ancient and modern scientists based on the scope of their ambition:

The teachers of this [ancient] science...promised impossibilities and performed nothing. The modern masters promise very little; they know that metals cannot be transmuted, and that the elixir of life is a chimera. But these philosophers, whose hands seem only made to dabble in dirt, and their eyes to pour over the microscope or crucible, have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew how she works in her hiding places.15

For Waldman, the secrets of nature’s “hiding places” may be discerned through minute and specific discoveries about human existence. It is not a totalizing, but a partial knowledge which, when combined with other discoveries of likewise narrow scope, may build toward a grander knowledge of life. But Victor misses this point. He takes Waldman’s advice to become an expert in the principles of chemistry and mathematics, but he never fully gives himself over to the modern way of thinking. Rather, Victor lets slip that it was “the amiable character of this man that inclined me more to that branch of natural philosophy which he professed, than an intrinsic love of the science itself.”16 And thus, even as he becomes an expert in modern methods, he never quite lets go of his earlier intellectual affinities. Indeed, the very pursuit of the “spark of life” is, in terms of

15 Ibid., 28.
16 Ibid., 29.
the dichotomy of knowledge drawn by Waldman, more in line with the grandiose and fantastical scope of that ancient method of analysis, which does yield to the supernatural. Thus, even while Victor may not be frightened of the supernatural, he is hardly unruffled by it.

Victor’s interests in the supernatural are what motivate his early foray into science. It is out of the possibility that he can confirm the validity of magic as a legitimate mode of inquiry that he becomes interested in science. And even after he is re-educated in modern scientific methodologies, he never leaves his predilection for the supernatural behind: it underpins the spirit, is not the practice, of his experiments. Thus, the churchyard, laden with spiritualism and superstition but also containing the necessary raw materials for his experiments, becomes a crucial site of tension for Victor and his competing intellectual passions.

Although Victor initially dismisses the “church-yard” as “merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life,” with each subsequent reference to his process of gathering materials, he moves further away from this space of mythic and religious significance, and increasingly to more neutral locales. As early as the end of the long paragraph quoted above, he alters his narrative to state that he was “forced to spend days and nights in vaults and charnel houses.” Not only is the

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17 Ibid., 30, italics mine.  
18 Ibid., 30.
removal of bones from either a vault or a charnel house something of a departure from the implication of Victor’s physically digging up bones from the consecrated ground of church-yards, the statement is notably the only grammatically passive construction in the passage, giving the impression that he set out to collect these bones in spite of himself. Then, the next time he mentions his source, it is markedly no longer a space of supernatural significance, and notably, his language becomes active again: “I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave, or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay.” 19 Several lines later, when he mentions the charnel houses a second time, he states that he disturbed them with “profane fingers,” 20 further betraying his inability to remain unruffled by the hallowed spaces of human burial. And finally, the passive trepidation with which he reflects on his transgression in the church-yard meets the more active recapitulation of his work with animal parts, as the final description of his sources are locales that are, in and of themselves, free from the weight of superstitious engagement: “The dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of my materials; and often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation, whilst, still urged on by an eagerness which perpetually increased, I brought my work near to a conclusion.” 21 Key in this pronouncement are two things: firstly, that Victor is not as unaffected as he would have us believe. And secondly, that

19 Ibid., 32.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
the sources of his materials are ambiguous. It is plausible that the creature is comprised of a combination of animal and human parts, and indeed, given his gigantic stature, this seems likely. But if Victor is remotely “impressed” with the mythic weight of the churchyard, then even as he visits consecrated graves, it seems unlikely that he would actually pilfer from them. More likely, as he finally divulges, his human materials came from a combination of laboratories and unhallowed graves: both common repositories for the bodies of suicides.

In thus differentiating between “hiding places,” the novel both engages and interprets recent developments in how local and state governments dealt with suicide. Since at least the thirteenth-century in England, bodies of people who committed suicide in a rational state of mind (charged as felo-de-se, literally “felon against himself”) were buried at crossroads with stakes driven through their hearts. The combination of heavy traffic and the stakes were thought to keep ghosts from rising. On 4 July 1823, responding to the Castlereagh scandal discussed in my introduction, 4 George IV C 52 outlawed coroners from issuing warrants to bury suicides in public highways and banned the practice of staking. Still, as Bryan Rivers reads it, “old attitudes die hard,” and even after the legislation passed, many people held fast to whatever superstitions they could, burying

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suicides without Christian rites and at night, between the hours of nine and midnight.  

Yet even before Castlereagh’s suicide, these burial practices constituted a deeply contentious public issue. Many believed that the practice of staking, tinged as it was with superstition, was no longer relevant in the modern world, and moreover, that it was demeaning to both the memory of the deceased and to the surviving family. In Barbara Gates’ reading of Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights*, a novel published in 1847 but set in 1771-1803, Gates claims that Bronte’s text “alludes...to pre-1823 burial customs.” Gates argues that early nineteenth century readers were not only “aware of suicide law and lore,” but that “the legal and moral implications of suicide and the folklore they generated took deep hold” over the British cultural imagination at the turn of the century. By 1816, readers would be well familiar with this history, including the burial of bodies in unhallowed graves, and the inquests regularly held for suicides, owing to which the bodies of suicides were frequently to be found in laboratories. Certainly, Mary Shelley was well aware of the cultural discourses surrounding suicide, not least because at least four members of her family and extended social circle either attempted or committed

25 Gates, 8.
26 Gates, 12.
suicide – two in the fall of 1816, the period during which Mary wrote most of *Frankenstein*.

**Hushed Up: Mary Shelley and the Suicide Debate**

That suicide was a topic of interest to Mary Shelley in the years leading up to her writing *Frankenstein* is evident from her journal. Her first mention of suicide appears on 25 August 1814. On that date, Mary notes that she and Percy: “hear of Patricksons killing himself...this is another of those cold blooded murders that like Maria Schooning (sic) we may put down to the world ... S is much shocked at hearing of P P.’s death.”²⁷ Proctor Patrickson was a protégé of Godwin’s and an acquaintance of Mary’s and Percy’s. He committed suicide on 10 August 1814.²⁸ As Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert explain in their editorial note on this entry in Mary’s journal, “Maria Schooning” is a reference to Maria Eleonora Schöning, the protagonist of a short story published in *The Friend* in 1810, which tells a “particularly harrowing story of female misfortune”:

> Maria is first raped as she sits weeping over her father’s grave, and then befriended by a poor woman, Harlin. Maria persuades Harlin to join with her in a false confession of infanticide, so that she and Harlin can be executed, thus avoiding the sin of suicide, and Harlin’s children can then be cared for by charity and not die of starvation. Overcome by remorse, Maria confesses the truth before her execution, but the magistrates do not believe her; Harlin is executed and Maria expires on the scaffold.”²⁹

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²⁸ Ibid., 40, n. 133.
²⁹ Ibid., 40, n. 134.
One possibility for why Mary includes a reference to this fictional narrative in the middle of her journal entry on Patrickson’s death is that it recalls her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft’s, view of suicide as a mode of feminist defiance. As Michelle Faubert has written, Wollstonecraft employed the theme of suicide in her fiction “to express a feminist sentiment about the worthlessness of the unfulfilled female life, and to protest women’s lack of control over their own destinies.

Wollstonecraft suggests that, for women of her day, life is a cruel prison from which death (not feminism, alas) will release them.”\(^{30}\) In thus including a passing reference to Maria Schöning, a heroine not unlike Wollstonecraft’s suicidal women, perhaps Mary Shelley sought to validate Patrickson’s decision to end his life.\(^{31}\) Such an interpretation seems plausible in light of Faubert’s recent essay “A Family Affair: Ennobling Suicide in Mary Shelley’s *Matilda*,” wherein Faubert posits that Mary Shelley’s 1819 novella *Matilda* not only proffers her position that suicide


\(^{31}\) According to William D. Brewer has written, had been ridiculed by “snobbish fellow students [at Cambridge] as a ‘Barber’s Clerk.’” See Brewer, “Male Rivalry and Friendship in the Novels of William Godwin” in *Mapping Male Sexuality: Nineteenth Century England*, eds. Jay B. Losey, William Dean Brewer (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2000), 58. In an effort to console him, Godwin suggested that he read Seneca, but as Peter H. Marshall writes, “the call to stoicism was to no avail. On his return to Cambridge the next day, he wrote to Godwin: ‘life has been a thing of no value to me, and I have been accustomed in times of sorrow to envy even the ground I trod on’. The next day, 10 August, he shot himself in his rooms.” See Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven: Yale U P, 1984), 308.
is a valid, even agreeable, option under certain conditions, but also “encourages the reader to consider [suicide] in this regard.”

Shelley’s discussion of the Maria Schöning tale emphasizes her interest in the socioeconomic dimension of the suicide debate. When Maria convinces Harlin to set herself up for execution in lieu of committing suicide, she does so in order that her children continue to be cared for by the state. If one was deemed felo-de-se, in addition to facing ignominious burial, the deceased’s property was also forfeited to the Crown. This practice of forfeiture had long been recognized as little more than a punishment “developed by medieval judges to enrich the royal treasury.” And yet, even following the Castlereagh scandal, after the felonia-de-se were allowed interment in churchyards, the terms of forfeiture still held; these were not lifted until 1939. As Georges Minois has shown, for almost as long as the forfeiture laws were on the books, it was widely known and detested that aristocratic families regularly influenced coroners away from issuing verdicts of felo de se in order to preserve the family fortune, if not also the family name.

One suspects that Mary’s existing interest in the socioeconomic dimension of suicide could only have been deepened by the cover-up, in December of 1816, that followed the discovery of the drowned body of Harriet Westbrook Shelley, Percy’s first wife. Subjected to the standard coroner’s inquest, the verdict returned

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33 Gates, 7.
34 Minois, 210-248.
on Harriet’s body was significantly influenced by the weighty reputations of both families, but most particularly by pressure from Percy’s father, Sir Timothy Shelley. Sir Timothy had ample reason to worry about the Shelley name, as it was, by then, public knowledge that Percy had abandoned Harriet to live with Mary Godwin on the Continent, and that Harriet, meanwhile, was pregnant outside of wedlock. Thus, when Harriet’s body was discovered on 10 December 1816 in the Serpentine River, Sir Timothy and the Westbrook family rallied to keep the details of the death as quiet as possible. As Henry George Davis, a local historian, recalls in his 1859 *Memorials of Hamlet of Knightsbridge*, the entire affair “bears the marks of outside influence.”35 When the mandatory inquest was held – itself a “hushed up procedure” – “a verdict [was] returned, which saved her the revolting burial then awarded to the suicide.”36 The official verdict noted only that Harriet was “found dead in the Serpentine River”; the coroner’s report makes no mention of her pregnancy, and no account of the inquest was given to the local newspapers, though it was then common to report that an inquest had taken place, regardless of its outcome.37 Still, English society quickly ascertained the truth of Harriet’s demise. Percy Shelley’s explanation to Mary just five days after the inquest confirms that it was a suicide: “It seems that this poor woman – the most innocent

36 Ibid., 113.
of her abhorred and unnatural family – was driven from her father's house, &
descended the steps of prostitution until she lived with a groom of the name of
Smith, who deserting her, she killed herself.” 38 So deeply did this cover-up offend
English society, that as late as 1859, Davis still derides the actions of the
Westbrook and Shelley families toward Harriet, citing Thomas Hood's popular
poem “The Bridge of Sighs,” about the suicide of a prostitute, to suggest that
British society was hardly fooled by the attempted concealment of the unfortunate
fate of Harriet Shelley. 39

The immediate fate of Harriet's body brought Mary Shelley back to the
topic of suicide in yet another way, for the body was taken to the Fox and Bull Inn,
then a receiving house of the Royal Humane Society. By 1816, the Royal Humane
Society was known for its commitment to, among other things, combating
England's “suicide problem.” 40 Founded in 1774, the Humane Society (it became
“Royal” in 1784) was formed to enable the rescue of people from drowning by
disseminating information about resuscitative techniques to the public, providing
free medical care to drowning victims, and offering rewards to anyone who

38 Before her body was discovered, Harriet Shelley had been missing for a week, and it was
later discovered that she had rented a room under the name Harriet Smith.
39 Bryan Rivers, “‘Tenderly’ and ‘With Care’: Thomas Hood’s ‘The Bridge of Sighs’ and the
40 Kelly McGuire has done a thorough reading of the associations between the
Enlightenment's discourses on suicide and the increasing public opinion, during the eighteenth
century, that suicide was an expressly English problem. See McGuire, Dying to be English: Suicide
Narratives and National Identity (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), particularly her chapter on
Eliza Haywood, one of the earliest social critics to comment on the so-called “English malady.”
attempted to save lives by applying resuscitation methods. By the turn of the nineteenth century, the London Royal Humane Society had become a respected part of British public life, with sister societies all over the country, as well as in America and throughout the British Empire.

Nor was The Royal Humane Society singular in its interests. Tim Marshall has described European society at the end of the eighteenth century a “resurrectionist culture,” obsessed with the limits of biological life as evidenced by widespread interest in scientific methods of resuscitation and reanimation.⁴¹ Among many groups that formed around these interests was a Dutch assembly of “public-spirited citizens” who came together in 1767 to form “a charitable society for the recovery of the drowned, raising money to cover the expenses of distributing information on resuscitation techniques, recompensing innkeepers for the accommodation of victims, and paying the laborious poor for the lavish expenditure of man-hours required by their treatment.”⁴² Of its ten directors for 1768 was one Johann Goll van Frankenstein, succeeded by his son in 1785. In a suggestive aside, Carolyn Williams posits that the “partnership of Frankenstein and son, united in philanthropic endeavor, displays all the closeness and harmony

so sadly absent from the relationship between Victor Frankenstein and his creature.”

Still, what makes the Royal Humane Society principally pertinent for Mary Shelley’s novel is twofold: firstly, much of the science employed by Victor Frankenstein is similar to that used by the Royal Humane Society. Among their methods of resuscitation, the Society engaged turn of the century interests in the animating potentiality of electricity as elucidated in, for example, the work of Luigi Galvani, John Hunter, and Ben Franklin (whose famous kite experiment Frankenstein cites in the first chapter of his narrative as an early inspiration of his interest in science). Moreover, by the turn of the nineteenth century, the Royal Humane Society was not only resuscitating victims of accidental drowning, but actively seeking out suicides who had died by drowning in order to restore them to life and send them around England to lecture on consequences that await suicides in the afterlife. In 1805, the physician Samuel Jackson Pratt reported that “more than five hundred suicides have been providentially restored by the medical

\[43\] Williams, 214.

assistants of the Humane Society.”45 Mary Wollstonecraft was one among this number.

Wollstonecraft was famously displeased with what she viewed as the Society’s interference with her freedom of choice to die – a fact that haunted Mary Shelley all her life. As Carolyn Williams first brought to scholarly attention, Wollstonecraft’s second suicide attempt (her first was in May of the same year, by an overdose of laudanum) was tinged, both in its preparation and in her response to its failure, by what Wollstonecraft deemed the intrusive work of the Royal Humane Society:

When she set out to commit suicide, she expressed fears lest attempts be made to restore her to life. In October 1795, she wrote to Gilbert Imlay, “I go to find comfort, and my only fear is, that my poor body will be insulted by an endeavour to recall my hated existence. But I shall plunge into the Thames where there is the least chance of my being snatched from the death I seek” [Letter LXIX]. She jumped into the Thames off Putney Bridge, and lost consciousness before she was pulled out of the water. Her next letter expresses a coolly defiant refusal to endorse conventional responses to her situation: “I have only to lament, that, when the bitterness of death was past, I was inhumanly brought back to life and misery... If I am condemned to live longer, it is a living death” [Letter LXX].46

Indeed, the longing for death figures prominently even in unexpected places in Wollstonecraft’s writing, such as her Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark (1796). In Letter XV, for example, she describes how “death, under every form, appears to me like something getting free to expand in I know not what element ... I asked myself why I was chained to life and its

46 Williams, “Inhumanly,” 222-223.
Moreover, as Cora Kaplan reminds us, Godwin's descriptions of Wollstonecraft's suicidal tendencies were among the principle reasons that his 1798 Memoirs “undid her influence and reputation for almost a century.”48 Thus, the specter of Wollstonecraft's suicidality everywhere surrounded Mary Shelley. Williams posits that Mary Shelley may have seen herself as a kind of Frankensteinian being, produced from – or in spite of – her mother’s suicide attempts. Williams notes that “the impact on Frankenstein of Mary Shelley’s lifelong distress at the role she played in bringing about her mother’s death in childbirth has been thoroughly canvassed by other critics,” but what is missing from this approach, for Williams, is a reading of the novel as a text in which Mary Shelley understands herself as “a child of the dead...conceived after her mother’s second suicide attempt.”49

Building on the possibilities suggested by Williams’ reading, I would add that Mary Shelley also held in her purview the suicide of her half-sister, Wollstonecraft’s other daughter, Fanny Imlay (sometimes referred to as Fanny Wollstonecraft or Fanny Godwin), who, like Harriet Shelley, committed suicide in the fall of 1816, while Mary Shelley was writing Frankenstein. Fanny Imlay died of an intentional overdose of laudanum on 9 October 1816. Critics have long, and

49 Ibid., 213.
unsuccessfully, speculated on the reasons for Fanny’s suicide. Among the proposed list of possibilities include consternation at the fact of her illegitimate birth; the cruelty of Godwin’s second wife, Fanny’s step-mother, Mary Jane Godwin; her recently having been denied a teaching post in Dublin; a life-long tendency toward melancholy; and, perhaps the most far-fetched, a love affair with Percy Shelley gone wrong.\textsuperscript{50} One of the few historically verifiable details surrounding Fanny’s death was the publication of her suicide note. On 12 October 1816, \textit{The Cambrian}, a Welsh newspaper, printed an anonymous note found near the body of a deceased woman. This was not the typical female suicide, a destitute young woman in the family way, but apparently a respectable young lady; and thus, it was especially intriguing that the signature had been torn from her suicide note:

\begin{quote}
I have long determined that the best thing I could do was to put an end to the existence of a being whose birth was unfortunate, and whose life has only been a series of pain to those persons who have hurt their health in endeavoring to promote her welfare. Perhaps to hear of my death will give you pain, but you will soon have the blessing of forgetting that such a creature ever existed.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

Although she was eventually identified from a label sewn into her clothing, Godwin never claimed the body, and Imlay was buried in a mass grave. Many have speculated about who tore off the signature, and why.\textsuperscript{52} But somewhat

\textsuperscript{51} Quoted in Todd, \textit{Maidens}, 3.
\textsuperscript{52} Among the possibilities suggested by critics are: that the maid did it, instructed by the innkeeper to avoid the taint of suicide on the premises; that Fanny tore it off, either as a last
surprisingly, few have acknowledged how closely Fanny’s description of herself as a being of “unfortunate” birth, whose life brings “a series of pain” is echoed throughout Frankenstein.

It seems plausible, as I suggest above, that Victor’s creature is composed of body parts from suicides, and it is more or less certain that Mary Shelley herself had above average knowledge about the topic. But critics have had little to say on the role of suicide in the novel. While suicide in Frankenstein is sometimes mentioned within the context of larger discussions about the novel, only Richard K. Sanderson has endeavored a reading devoted explicitly to the relevance of suicide to Shelley’s first novel. Sanderson reads the theme of suicide through the novel’s allusion to Eve’s suggestion, in Book 10 of Paradise Lost, that she and Adam

acknowledgement of her long-felt lack of identity, or to spare the Godwins the embarrassment; a third possibility is that Godwin did it; or, in perhaps the most sensational theory, Janet Todd suggests that Percy was the one to tear the letter, either on behalf of Godwin and Mary, or, perhaps, in keeping with some critics’ conjecture of a secret love affair between Fanny and Percy. For further explication of these and other possibilities, see Pollin’s essay and Todd’s book, especially Chapter 1.

53 Ana M. Acosta has argued that the novel’s invocation of Genesis via Milton is, itself, part of Mary Shelley’s secularism, which reveals itself, especially, in the creature’s decision to commit suicide. Acosta suggests that the creature’s decision to commit suicide comes from a fundamental misunderstanding of how to read literary texts. Acosta argues that the creature reads texts theologically, as true histories, and that this mode of reading ironically produces in him a fundamental inability to believe in anything beyond his own reason. Thus, Acosta posits that the creature’s suicide function as part of his accidental invention of something like a theology of disbelief, based in Enlightenment principles of individual will. Acosta’s reading clarifies that though Frankenstein may invoke the language of Christianity through Paradise Lost, it stages a negative relationship to Christian doctrine, and thus the subject of suicide is part of Mary Shelley’s engagement of Enlightenment secularism, even as the novel may read as couched in religious rhetoric. See Acosta, Reading Genesis in the Long Eighteenth Century: From Milton to Mary Shelley (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 163-169.
not procreate, proposing instead either abstinence or mutual destruction. Reading echoes of this scene in *Frankenstein*, Sanderson thus posits that suicide is an essential part of the novel’s interest in procreation. Sanderson then argues that suicide is also an essential part of the literary conceit of the doppelganger, because doubling forces a literary character to overcome a version of himself. Where Sanderson’s scope is confined to the text and the presence of suicide in Mary Shelley’s life, beyond merely extending Sanderson’s reading of textual references to suicide, my argument proposes that suicide is part of the novel’s larger political critique. While Mary Shelley’s personal encounters with suicide are important to recognizing her familiarity with the subject, I argue that Mary Shelley engages suicide not only to work through her personal feelings about her mother and others who committed suicide, but also to interrogate British social life at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Thus, suicide is tied to broader social questions in Shelley’s novel. The presence of suicide in *Frankenstein* extends well beyond the level of literary conceit. In light of the cultural milieu during which the novel was written, as well as its author’s personal circumstances, *Frankenstein* posits suicide as a social phenomenon that operates on a more complicated logic of relationality than that suggested by Sanderson’s reading of doubling. In other words, while there is, perhaps, a suicidal dimension operative in the literary play of doubling, Mary Shelley’s text moves beyond Sanderson’s claim that a character may assert a
unified notion of “self” by eliminating his “other self” qua the double or doppelganger. Instead, I will propose that Mary Shelley is interested in exploring the possibility of reading the other in oneself, and vice versa. To do this, Mary Shelley engages Enlightenment-era interests in relationality qua sympathy, which she codes through the novel in terms closely akin to those articulated by Percy Shelley in writings on love from his 1815-1816 period. Through moments of textual and conceptual similarity, I will show that Percy Shelley’s texts from this period offer a useful backdrop against which to read Mary Shelley’s novel, as well as a point of contact between the Enlightenment-era debates on sympathy that Percy’s writings explicitly consider, and which Mary also read. But far from simply recapitulating Percy’s views on the Enlightenment question of sympathy, Mary utilizes Percy’s ideas in tandem with her own interest in suicide. Building from Faubert’s assessment of Mary Shelley’s positive stance toward suicide, I will suggest that Mary Shelley engages the theme of suicide not merely to support a mode by which one could escape a problematic world, but to signal the need to rebuild it. To this end, Frankenstein calls on Percy Shelley’s theories of sympathy to signal not only the viability of suicide as a personal choice, but also the ideological necessity of a certain kind of social suicide in order to lay the groundwork for a better collective future.
Romantic Exchange: The Shelleys and the Composition of Frankenstein

Before I explain how Mary Shelley uses the theme of suicide to critique Enlightenment ideology qua Percy Shelley, it is useful to consider more closely both the nature of Mary and Percy’s intellectual relationship, and the significance of Frankenstein in the Romantic literary canon. Inasmuch as Frankenstein belongs to the Romantic period, Mary Shelley’s novel also stages a meta-assessment of many key interests of Romanticism. Written in the company of Percy Shelley and other important writers of the day – Lord Byron, John Polidori, Madame de Stael – the 1818 novel offers an interpretive window into the Romantic intellectual milieu. As Anne Mellor has suggested, Mary Shelley’s novels offer “a sweeping critique of the Romantic poetic ideology.” Still, despite several different attempts by literary critics to explain the precise dimensions of that critique, there is no consensus on how Frankenstein relates to Romanticism in general, or to Percy Shelley’s Romanticism in particular.

54 Madame de Stael’s involvement with the Shelley-Byron circle at Diodati is typically overlooked by scholars, but her presence at Lake Geneva during the summer of 1816, and her close friendship with Byron, is indicated in Byron’s journals from the period. See especially the entries dated 22 July 1816, 29 July 1816, 25 August 1816, 2 November 1816, 5 December 1816, and 12 August 1817 in Byron’s Letters and Journals, vol. 5, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (London: John Murray, 1976). Byron appears to have first been introduced to the works of de Stael through her 1813 essay “On Suicide,” after which he became interested in the woman, significantly older than he, with whom he eventually struck up a close friendship. Byron writes about his early impressions of de Stael in journal entries dated 27 June 1813, 8 July 1813, and 10 November 1813 in Byron’s Letters and Journals, vol. 3, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (London: John Murray, 1974).

55 Anne Mellor, Introduction to The Last Man, by Mary Shelley (University of Nebraska Press, 1993), xviii.
Although, as Charles Robinson has shown in The Original Frankenstein, the novel was indeed composed with significant input from Percy,\textsuperscript{56} we would be remiss to accept something like John Lauritsen’s brash (and fundamentally untrue) allegation that Percy was responsible for the novel’s true genius.\textsuperscript{57} In grappling with the complicated intellectual relationship between these two literary titans, it may be more useful to consider Mary Poovey’s articulation of not only the extent, but the \textit{kind}, of influence that Percy exerted over Mary as she wrote and rewrote \textit{Frankenstein}. Much of Poovey’s well-known argument posits the novel as, simultaneously, a display of self-assertion against not only Percy’s, but also Godwin’s and Wollstonecraft’s weighty reputations, while at the same time indicative of the author’s attempts to maintain some of the quiet decorum that was then expected of women writers. Poovey is quite right that “Mary did not uncritically or wholeheartedly accept...Percy’s version of the Romantic aesthetic.”\textsuperscript{58} Instead, Poovey calls \textit{Frankenstein} “less a wholehearted celebration of the

\textsuperscript{56} Robinson’s edition of Shelley’s novel, titled \textit{The Original Frankenstein} (New York: Vintage Classics, 2009) brings forward, for the first time, the earliest available draft of the novel, composed between autumn 1816 and March-April 1817 (which is not the original draft, now lost, written at Diodati during the famed ghost story competition between the Shelleys, Polidori and Byron). Robinson’s edition reprints two versions of \textit{Frankenstein}: the draft written solely by Mary Shelley, as well as the commonly-known edition of the text based on the 1818 publication, in which Robinson italicizes the areas of Percy’s interpolations. Robinson estimates that Percy “contributed at least 4,000 to 5,000 words” to the novel, which totals approximately 72,000 words.


\textsuperscript{58} Poovey, 130.
imaginative enterprise...than a troubled, veiled exploration of the price she had already begun to fear such egotistical self-assertion might exact.”

While I tend to agree with Poovey that Mary’s novel demonstrates her aptitude for originality of thought, the picture that Poovey ultimately paints is one of a still-tentative Mary, seeking middle ground between her society’s restrictive expectations and her family’s daunting reputation. As I read it, the astonishing depth and complexity of *Frankenstein* reveals its author as far more assured in her wits than Poovey allows. To that end, I want to point out that Poovey’s claims about the anxiety of authorship attendant in *Frankenstein* have an historical context that Poovey overlooks.

In calling attention to the conceptual differences between Mary and Percy’s notions about the role of the author, Poovey focuses exclusively on the poet’s 1821 *Defence of Poetry*. The *Defence* is rightly remembered as the culminating articulation of Percy’s most emblematic, and certainly most celebrated, views on the social and political import of literature and the role of the poet in society. However, these convictions did not always go unquestioned by their author. Between 1815 and 1816 – even as he had already begun to do the political work he would later defend as inseparable from the work of poetry, publishing one of his most incendiary poems, *Queen Mab*, in 1813 – Percy Shelley was still tentative about the relationship between poetry and politics. It was not until 1819, as he was

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59 Ibid., 121.
writing, among other things, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, that his now-renowned conviction that “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (articulated both in the *Philosophical View*, quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, and, later, in the 1821 *Defence*) became overt.

In what follows, I turn my focus to Percy’s well-known poem *Alastor* (1816) and two unpublished essays, *Treatise on Morals* (also known as the *Speculations on Morals*, ca. 1815) and *On Love* (1815), all of which are variously concerned with the relationship between solitude, creativity, and the development of one’s individuality. The poem, I will show, anticipates one of the most enduring images of Mary’s novel, while the essays draw heavily on the Enlightenment discourse on sympathy, echoes of which are likewise omnipresent in *Frankenstein*. Mary Shelley, then, picks up and reworks *Alastor’s* anxiety about authorial egotism as part of her own consideration not simply, as Poovey would have it, of her role as an individual author, but of the question of what constitutes an individual. What Mary Shelley ultimately posits is that neither of these questions is far removed from the issue of sympathy; and through the novel’s understanding of a version of Enlightenment sympathy, qualified by Percy’s early notion of love, Mary Shelley arrives at a reading of suicide as the implicit and necessary counterpoint to the question of Enlightenment subjectivity.
On “Love”: Percy Shelley and the Social Function of Sympathy

Most of the action of Frankenstein is motivated by a thwarted desire for love. But before I can show this to be the case, “love,” in the sense that the Shelleys employ this term in 1815-16, requires some contextualization. “Love,” in the early years of Percy Shelley’s career, is not yet the philosophical doctrine of eternal human goodness that Shelley would come to be remembered for.\(^6\)

Shelley’s early writings are rarely included in critical accounts of his interest in the subject of love; those critical conversations tend to engage the 1821 Defence and the poems associated with its political vision, including Queen Mab (1813), The Revolt of Islam (1817), “Ode to the West Wind” (1821) and Prometheus Unbound (1821). These texts variously posit love as a transcendental force that unifies the world. As Floyd Stovall has summarized it, “Love [in the majority of Shelley’s works] is the principle which actuates the life of the universe, and determines its inevitable progress towards perfection.”\(^6\)

But in 1815-16, when Percy Shelley first begins to write on love, he does so within the terms developed by the eighteenth-century

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philosophers interested in “sympathy.” In the years just preceding the composition of *Frankenstein*, Percy Shelley was thinking about love rather differently.\(^6^2\)

In 1815-16, Shelley uses the word “love” to rethink “sympathy” as it was deployed by the moral philosophers of the Enlightenment. Interest in sympathy swept the Enlightenment\(^6^3\) following the publication of Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651): according to Roy E. Cain, “many thinkers of the eighteenth century expended a great deal of energy in seeking to rebut first Hobbes and later Bernard Mandeville, whose *Fable of the Bees* was as frightful to some as Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. Among the most effective of these opponents of the self-love philosophy were three Scots – Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith.”\(^6^4\) In *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), Hutcheson posits that man’s moral impulses derive from inborn benevolence. This theory, according to Cain, held wide appeal for “many prosperous Britons”; however, “as the new prosperity came to emphasize man’s acquisitive nature and to call for some justification of

\(^{62}\) Insofar as Shelley wants to attach to humanity an essential quality of goodness, which, he believes, governs both subjectivity and social life, both his early and his later articulations of love fall into the Enlightenment schema. Most eighteenth-century moral philosophers likewise believed in essential human goodness. But while Shelley maintains throughout his career that love is both the cipher of and the tool by which we may unlock that essential goodness, his earlier considerations of love are decidedly less metaphysical than the works for which he is better remembered. I am not suggesting that these notions of love are irreconcilable. However, to trace how they are connected would be beyond the scope of this chapter.

\(^{63}\) Michael L. Frazer’s *The Enlightenment of Sympathy* (New York: Oxford U P, 2010) gives an excellent account of the (mostly dichotomous) relationship between the development of interests in sympathy through the Enlightenment and the more widely acknowledged understanding of this period as the “Age of Reason.”

\(^{64}\) Roy E. Cain, “David Hume and Adam Smith as Sources of the Concept of Sympathy in Hazlitt,” *Papers in Language and Literature* 1 (1965): 134.
the exercise of self-interest, self-denial and benevolence no longer sufficed as the bases of a universal system of morality.”

Thus, the second half of the eighteenth century turned toward developing an understanding that could account for both man’s self-interested, and his benevolent, impulses. Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) quickly became, and continues to be, one of the most widely read articulations of such an ethic.

Although “Hume’s works were known...to few of Smith’s readers and were understood by even fewer,” the Shelleys appear to have read more Hume than Smith. Percy Shelley cites Hume through much of his prose, including *A Fragment on Miracles* (ca. 1813-15), *A Refutation of Deism* (1814), *Treatise on Morals* (1815), *On the Devil, and Devils* (ca. 1819) and *A Defence of Poetry* (1821). Further, the reading lists that Mary Shelley kept in her journals suggest that both Shelleys read Hume extensively in the years 1814 through 1817.

Smith, on the other hand, is not listed at all in Mary Shelley’s journal, nor does Percy Shelley cite Smith in any of his prose from this period. Still, in his introductory essay on the development of Shelley’s thought in *Shelley’s Prose*, David Lee Clark notes similarities between Shelley and Smith as early as 1812. Moreover, many of Shelley’s contemporaries and friends read and commented extensively on Smith, including his mentor,

65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 135.
father-in-law, and intellectual idol, William Godwin, as well as the prominent literary critic and friend to the Shellesys, William Hazlitt. So suggestive, indeed, are the affinities between Shelley’s and Smith’s thinking, that it is more than likely that Shelley had read Smith. Thus, although I could not verify this through historical sources, I nevertheless take Shelley’s early views on love as engaging the legacies of both Hume and Smith.

For Hume, sympathy is a source of moral distinction: “the sentiment of others can never affect us, but by becoming, in some measure, our own.”69 In other words, in making the other present in the self through sympathy – knowing, and being moved by, someone else – one could learn to act morally. Smith recasts sympathy from a purely moral to, also, an epistemological problem in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith’s theory emphasizes that sympathy, in addition to sharpening our moral attunement, is also a reflexive apparatus. This reflexivity comes from the fact that, inasmuch as the impetus toward sympathy may derive from a benevolent drive in mankind, the actual experience of sympathy is nevertheless highly subjective, because it can only operate through one’s imagination – which is to say, not necessarily the actual truth – of how someone else experiences the world: “our senses will never inform us of what [the other] suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is

by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations.”

Smith also maintains Hume’s social dimension of the theory of sympathy, ceding that the fact that pity and compassion, as motivated by sympathy, indicate an inherently moral drive in man to know his fellow human beings. However, as Smith states above, that endeavor is finally, and necessarily, a selfish one – selfish, not necessarily in the sense of self-interest, but insofar as sympathy can only, finally, be instructive of one’s own subjectivity, and not that of the person with whom one sympathizes. What ultimately emerges from Smith’s emphasis on the limits of our capability to know the other, is that sympathy is a mode of thinking about others, but that it can only be achieved through oneself: inasmuch as sympathy is a mode of moderating one’s own passions and ensuring that one conducts himself morally – and inasmuch as the drive to do so is a socially conscious one – sympathy must be recognized as finally limited in its social dimension, because its operation is filtered, always, through the individual.

David Marshall has written extensively on the implications and contradictions of the eighteenth century notion of sympathy. Of especial interest for Marshall is the aesthetic dimension inherent in the recognition that “selves” are constituted through expressly imaginative acts of sympathy. For Smith, especially, according to Marshall,

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Sympathy depends upon a theatrical relation between a spectator and a spectacle, a relation that is reversed and mirrored as both persons try to represent the other’s feelings. We need this sympathy, we thrive upon it, and even when we are alone we double and divide ourselves in order to play the part of our own spectators. Thus the theatrical structure of sympathy is both acted out between people and internalized; the self as Smith represents it has a dramatic character.71

Above, Marshall is interested in the problem of the limits of relationality with the other: within the structure he describes above, Marshall calls our attention to the fact that in imagining the position of an “other,” we create a fiction, for it is not the “other” whom we engage, but our own imagination of that person. Elsewhere, Marshall also points out that the very process by which people experience sympathy may, itself, be turned into a fiction, such that people may unwittingly find themselves

Deceived by hypocrites, masters of a semiotics of the passions who either on or off the stage known how to imitate the exterior signs and symptoms of feelings and thus trick beholders into taking their presentations of self at face values. [Further,] the spectacles of sincere people might be subject to misinterpretation by beholders who misread or misconstrue appearances. The tableau of someone innocent or sincere might appear the same as the tableau of someone guilty or deceptive…In reading or beholding the characters of others, one risks not only being misled but also being placed in the position of distance, difference, and isolation that sympathy is supposed to deny.72

Similarly to the claim I will make shortly, Marshall finds that Frankenstein takes up the aesthetic dimension of sympathy to posit its limits. Marshall’s analysis of Mary Shelley’s interest in sympathy proceeds mainly via the novel’s interest in Rousseau. Establishing Rousseau as a central influence on Mary Shelley’s parents, Marshall

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71 David Marshall, The Figure of Theatre: Shaftesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith and George Eliot (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 190.
thus posits the French philosopher as a key source for Mary. But so, I would add, is Percy.

Percy Shelley takes up the tension between the desire to step outside of one’s subjective experience of the world and the recognition that it may not be possible, to develop “love” as a corollary to Enlightenment theories of sympathy. As Hume and Smith view sympathy, so Shelley also believes that sympathy, as well as love, prove humanity’s inborn goodness. However, in *Treatise on Morals*, Shelley begins to explore a tension between the mediated process by which a person becomes accustomed to the experience of sympathy, and aspects of goodness, as signaled through sympathy, that are inborn:

> The inhabitant of a highly civilized community will more acutely sympathize with the sufferings and enjoyments of others, than the inhabitant of a society of a less degree of civilization. He who shall have cultivated his intellectual powers by familiarity with the highest specimens of poetry and philosophy, will usually sympathize more than one engaged in the less refined functions of manual labour.73

A very great deal of the *Treatise on Morals* recapitulates David Hume’s discussions of sympathy in both the *Treatise on Human Nature* and the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, wherein Hume likewise concentrates on the mediation of sympathy: for Hume, that mediation occurs through the imagination. Hume’s notion of “imagination” refers to a broad faculty of the mind that can reproduce

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“faint, languid” copies of impressions,”\textsuperscript{74} and that also, within the experience of sympathy, makes possible “the sentiments of others [to become] our own...by opposing and encreasing our passions.”\textsuperscript{75} For Shelley, too, “Imagination or mind employed in prophetically imaging forth its objects, is that faculty of human nature on which every gradation of its progress, nay, every, the minutest, change, depends.”\textsuperscript{76} Sympathy, then, is developed, or “cultivated,” as part of a larger program of socialization that is inextricable from the process of reading “the highest specimens of poetry and philosophy.”\textsuperscript{77} Shelley begins, in the above passage, to make explicit a link between the broad notion of “imagination,” the role of that imaginative faculty in social subject production, and the experience of reading and mentally engaging with texts.

For Shelley, the process by which one is constituted a sympathetic – and therefore not only moral but \textit{highly civilized} being – is tied directly to reading poetry and philosophy. And just as poetry and philosophy are contrived, in the sense that they are written by someone, so too, Shelley finds virtue to be, in a certain sense, a human construct:

The only distinction between the selfish man and the virtuous man is, that the imagination of the former is confined within a narrow limit, whilst that of the latter embraces a comprehensive circumference...Virtue is thus intirely [sic] a refinement of civilized life; a creation of the human mind or, rather, a combination

\textsuperscript{74} Hume, \textit{Treatise}, 8-9.
\textsuperscript{75} Hume, \textit{Treatise}, 593. See also: M. Jamie Ferreira, "Hume and Imagination: Sympathy and ‘the Other’," \textit{International Philosophical Quarterly} 34, no. 133 (March 1994): 39-57.
\textsuperscript{76} Percy Shelley, “Treatise,” 189.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
which it has made, according to elementary rules contained within itself, of the feelings suggested by the relations established between man and man.\textsuperscript{78}

To be clear, like Hume and Smith before him, Shelley maintains throughout the \textit{Treatise on Morals} that humanity is inherently benevolent. In the passage above, Shelley merely posits that our inborn benevolence is given particular form and context socially. In light of Shelley’s emphasis on the relationship of texts to the shaping of morality in individual subjects, we might call this a grammar of virtue or morality; or further, the grammar by which we become “civilized” subjects – a topic that, as we will see shortly, is also of primary concern in \textit{Frankenstein}. But in a suggestive passage in the \textit{Treatise on Morals}, Shelley shifts from the Enlightenment’s concern in how the subject (the “reader”) is shaped through sympathy, to the emphatically Romantic interest in the writer as the entity that governs that developmental process: “The benevolent propensities are thus inherent in the human mind. We are impelled to seek the happiness of others. We experience a satisfaction in being the authors of that happiness.”\textsuperscript{79} Shelley’s \textit{Treatise on Morals} thus concludes by considering the social nature not only of subject production through sympathy, which Shelley inherits from the Enlightenment, but also of the deeply social implications of recognizing the effects of sympathy produced in others by the author.

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\textsuperscript{78} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
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But for Shelley, this understanding also calls forth more questions than the
*Treatise on Morals* can answer between the logic of subject formation and the fact
that subjects are shaped by authors: What is an author? What gives him the
authority to affect the moral and social development of other men? And, perhaps
most troublingly for Shelley, what happens if he is misunderstood? These are the
questions that drive Shelley’s 1816 poem *Alastor* and his essay *On Love*, drafted in
1815. In *On Love*, Shelley attempts to think beyond how sympathy enlarges one’s
understanding and develops a man into a subject. Here, it is the writer, not the
reader, who is in need of sympathy; but the writer’s attempt to find sympathy only
indicates to him how little one is able to understand another person, and, even
more troublingly, how little the writer – the moral force of the universe – is, in fact,
understood:

> I know not the internal constitution of other men, nor even thine, whom I now
address. I see that in some external attributes they resemble me, but when, misled
by that appearance, I have thought to appeal to something in common, and
unburthen my inmost soul to them, I have found my language misunderstood, like
one in a distant and savage land. The more opportunities they have afforded me
for experience, the wider has appeared the interval between us, and to a greater
distance have the points of sympathy been withdrawn. With a spirit ill fitted to
sustain such proof, trembling and feeble through its tenderness, I have everywhere
sought sympathy, and have found only repulse and disappointment.⁸⁰

One can almost hear Frankenstein’s creature here. But it is not just the creature in
*Frankenstein* who wishes to have someone understand his “inmost soul.” The
novel is framed by a wish for precisely such reciprocal relationality. Arguably, the

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main narrative would not have been written had Walton not been lonely and desperate for a friend. Indeed – and this is what separates Shelley’s articulation of love from the “sympathy” of either Smith or Hume – *On Love* shifts the terms of Shelley’s discussion decidedly away from the overarching question of society at large, and more toward the “society” that is formed between readers and writers. Thus, even while *On Love* may well be a lament over the limits of sympathy,\(^8\) it is even more precisely an expression of anxiety over the limits of the grammar of sympathy suggested by the *Treatise on Morals*, as well as those responsible for disseminating that grammar, the authors.

As with many of his early compositions on the role of the author, Shelley draws from the preeminent poet of his day, William Wordsworth. In concluding the *Treatise on Morals*, Shelley quotes two lines from Wordsworth’s 1798 “Tintern Abbey” – “Those little, nameless, unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love”\(^9\) – to bring to an end the essay’s final proposal that it is in the differences of manifestation, rather than in the mere fact of what Hume calls the habit, or what I

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\(^8\) The marginal note in the fair copy suggests that the essay was written less out of conviction than from a moment of dejection. At the bottom of the manuscript page is scribbled, in Percy’s handwriting, “These words are ineffectual and metaphorical. Most words are so – No help!” See: Percy Shelley, “Essay On Love” in *The Bodleian Manuscripts, vol. XX*, ed. Michael O’Neil, (London: Routledge, 1994), 454. This suggests that the author was frustrated with the efficacy and impact of words, and that the essay, which likewise laments the possibility of its own legibility, is reflective of this moment of misgiving. Still, even if “On Love” is not finally representative of Percy Shelley’s philosophical convictions, it nevertheless deserves recognition as a background text for *Frankenstein*.

have called the grammar, of sympathy, that the fact of our inborn morality is confirmed:

Each individual, who composes the vast multitude which we have been contemplating, has a peculiar frame of mind, which, whilst the features of the great mass of his actions remain uniform, impresses the minuter lineaments with its peculiar hues...these flow from a profounder source than the series of our habitual conduct, which, it has been already said, derives its origin from without. These are the actions, and such as these, which make human life what it is, and are the fountains of all the good and evil with which its entire surface is widely and impartially overspread; and though they are called minute, they are called so in compliance with the blindness of those who cannot estimate their importance.83

In the essay’s final lines, Shelley proclaims that the search for confirmation of morality in ourselves has led us astray from actually finding it: “We consider our own nature too superficially. We look on all that in ourselves with which we can discover a resemblance in others; and consider those resemblances as the materials of moral knowledge. It is in the differences that it actually consists.”84

But just as the speaker of On Love seeks and does not find sympathy from his reader, the 1816 poem Alastor similarly ruminates not on the positive effects of sympathy – identification with others, social subject production – but on the danger of seeking it in the wrong places. That Alastor is a poem about of authorial dejection and anxiety about the egotism associated with the Romantic poetic model has been observed by a number of critics. Without rehearsing the many, many well-conceived and variously nuanced interpretations of just how the poem

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84 Ibid., 193.
functions in this regard, I will note here simply that *Alastor* represents Shelley’s refusal of the Wordsworthian model of the solitary genius.\(^85\)

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\(^85\) Because the *Alastor* volume includes Shelley’s derisive sonnet “To Wordsworth,” its titular poem is typically read as an engagement with the elder poet. However, with exactly which version of Wordsworth – that is, with which poetic model the poem argues – has been debated by critics. As L. H. Allen notes in “Plagiarism, Sources, and Influences in Shelley’s *Alastor*,” *MLR* 18 (1923): 133-151, as early as 1899, the German critic Richard Ackermann suggested that echoes of Wordsworth’s *The Excursion* in *Alastor* were evidence of plagiarism, though Allen refutes this accusation in his 1923 essay. Beginning in the 1930s and extending into the present day, critics have tended to view Shelley’s engagement of Wordsworth as a vital part of the content of the poem, though little consensus exists regarding which version of Wordsworth Shelley engages in *Alastor*, or to what end. In “Wordsworth and the Prototype of the Poet in Shelley’s *Alastor*,” *PMLA* 49 (1934): 229-245, Paul Meenschke and Earl L. Griggs argued that Wordsworth was used as a “prototype” for the Poet of *Alastor*; by 1981, Yvonne Carothers, William Keach, and other critics had convincingly made the case that *Alastor* was not emulating Wordsworth so much as censuring him, though the question remains unsettled to date: which Wordsworth had offended Shelley so? Critical accounts have variably found Shelley to be rebelling against the Wordsworth of the early *Lyrical Ballads* for his naïve convergence with nature, the aging Wordsworth of the “Intimations of Immortality” ode for his perceived loss of faith in nature and poetry, and the Wordsworth of *The Excursion* for his newfound religious orthodoxy and political apostasy. While the latter two readings are viable, Shelley could not possibly have been rebelling against the early Wordsworth of the *Lyrical Ballads*, for as the sonnet “To Wordsworth” makes clear, it is precisely this Wordsworth whose voice, like Shelley’s own, “did weave / Songs consecrate to truth and liberty” (ll. 11-12), and for whose poetic mourning for “Childhood and youth, friendship, and love’s first glow” (l. 3) Shelley himself now mourns. Indeed, Shelley’s figuration of the early Wordsworth as mourning a more innocent past is the first indication of the *Alastor* volume’s final affiliation with this version of the poet, underscored by comparable figurations of the relationship between poetry and time. For more on these and other perspectives of Shelley’s indebtedness to Wordsworth in the *Alastor* volume, see: Marcel Kessel, “The Poet in Shelley’s *Alastor*: A Criticism and a Reply,” *PMLA* 51, no. 1 (1936): 302-310; Albert S. Gerard, *English Romantic Poetry* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1968); Yvonne M. Carothers, “*Alastor*: Shelley Corrects Wordsworth,” *MLQ* 42 (1981): 21-47; William Keach, “Obstinate Questionings: The Immortality Ode and *Alastor*,” *Wordsworth Circle* 12 (1981): 36-44; Neil Fraistat, “Poetic Quests and Questioning in Shelley’s *Alastor* Collection,” *Keats-Shelley Journal* 33 (1984): 161-181; Stuart Peterfreund, “Between Desire and Nostalgia: Intertextuality in Shelley’s *Alastor* and Two Shorter Poems from the *Alastor* Volume,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 9.1 (1985): 47-66; Christopher Heppner, “*Alastor*: The Poet and the Narrator Reconsidered,” *Keats-Shelley Journal* 37 (1988): 91-109; Francesca Cauchi, “A Rereading of Wordsworth’s Presence in Shelley’s *Alastor*,” *Studies in English Literature* 50, no. 4 (Autumn 2010): 759-774. A minor critical tradition also traces Coleridge’s influence on *Alastor*. Representative works include: Joseph Raben, “Coleridge as the Prototype of the Poet in Shelley’s *Alastor*,” *The Review of English Studies* 17 (1966): 278-292; Timothy Webb, “Coleridge and Shelley’s *Alastor*: A Reply,” *The Review of English Studies* 18 (1967): 402-411; Sally West, *Coleridge and Shelley: Textual Engagement* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007).
But *Alastor* also constitutes an important link between Percy Shelley’s philosophical interests of 1815-16 and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. That is, *Alastor* preempts – potentially, it even invents – *Frankenstein’s* most enduring image of grave-robbing: as the frame-poet readies himself to tell the Poet’s tale, he describes his own poetic process in strikingly Frankensteinian terms: “I have made my bed / In charnels and on coffins, where black death / Keeps record of the trophies won from thee.”

I have already demonstrated how Mary Shelley employs the same imagery of burial places to hearken to contemporary debates about suicide. What I would like to finally posit is that *Frankenstein* takes up Percy Shelley’s interest in the limits of sympathy by, similarly, turning his questions about the limits of authorship over to the terms of the suicide debate.

What I have done above is to outline some key terms on Percy’s and, I would argue, on Mary’s mind around the time of the novel’s production: the social function of sympathy, the textual deployment thereof, and the open question of the role of the author in creating and affecting the “right” kind of reader – that is, the proper Enlightenment subject. These questions find articulation in *Frankenstein* with significant recourse to the ongoing cultural conversation around suicide. I have brought up *Alastor* not to offer a reading of that poem, but to use it as a bridge between Percy Shelley’s interests in the above-named topics, which are

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echoes in *Alastor*’s deep-seeded anxieties about authorship, and the fact that at the same time as the poem continues Percy’s 1815 strain of interest in the writer, it also preempt one of the most enduring images of Mary’s novel. It is through this double function of the poem, rather than merely through the fact that Mary and Percy were lovers, that I wish to reiterate my point that Percy’s writings from 1815-16 serve as a fundamental backdrop for many of the ideas Mary would consider in *Frankenstein*.

**Sympathy, Suicide, and the “Self”**

In the opening pages of *Frankenstein*, Walton betray to his implicit reader, his sister Margaret, the same anxiety Percy Shelley betrays in *On Love* about having one’s feelings (mis)understood in the medium of writing:

> I have no friend, Margaret…I shall commit my thoughts to paper, it is true; but that is a poor medium for the communication of feeling. I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me; whose eyes would reply to mine.  

What Walton describes above, and what will come to the fore even more forcefully when he meets Victor, is the desire for what Percy Shelley calls “a miniature of our entire self...a soul within our own soul that describes a circle around its proper Paradise, which pain and sorrow and evil dare not overleap.”  

For Percy Shelley, such a state of connection is not one in which one can expect to be able to read the Other, but of having the Other properly read you:

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[Love] is that powerful attraction towards all we conceive, or fear, or hope beyond ourselves, when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void, and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience within ourselves. If we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would that the airy children of our brain were born anew within another’s; if we feel, we would that another’s nerves should vibrate to our own, that the beams of their eyes should kindle at once and mix and melt into our own; that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart’s best blood. This is Love.\textsuperscript{89}

For Percy Shelley, as for Walton, love (or in Walton’s case, friendship) is tantamount not to understanding, but to being understood. Not coincidentally, then, in divulging his intense loneliness to his sister, Walton recalls his history as a would-be poet: in his second letter to Margaret, he recalls that in his youth, before he was interested in exploration, “I also became a poet, and for one year lived in a Paradise of my own creation; I imagined that I also might obtain a niche in the temple where the names of Homer and Shakespeare are consecrated. You are well acquainted with my failure, and how heavily I bore the disappointment.”\textsuperscript{90}

Dejected by his inability to write himself properly, Walton turns to desiring a friend, hoping to actualize the experience of being read in life, if not in verse. And thus, when he meets Frankenstein, somewhat inexplicably, he comes to consider him the very friend he has sought.

Walton first finds Frankenstein on the brink of death and, in a preemptive echo of the novel’s famed creation scene, describes how he and his crew “restored

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 503-4.
\textsuperscript{90} Mary Shelley, \textit{Frankenstein}, 8.
him to animation.” 91 When he is able to talk, Frankenstein likewise notes, in an expression of apparent gratitude, that Walton has “benevolently restored me to life.” 92 As Walton tells it, what attracts him to Frankenstein is his gratitude, which, for Walton, indicates deeper qualities of “benevolence and sweetness”:

I never saw a more interesting creature: his eyes have generally an expression of wildness, and even madness; but there are moments when, if any one performs an act of kindness towards him, or does him any the most trifling service, is whole countenance is lighted up, as it were, with a beam of benevolence and sweetness that I never saw equaled. But he is generally melancholy and despairing; and sometimes he gnashes his teeth, as if impatient of the weight of woes that oppress him. 93

But what most emerges about Frankenstein’s character over the course of the novel is his “melancholy and despairing” nature and his extreme self-involvement. This is perhaps most evident in his continuous and, I would argue, baseless rejection of the creature. For instance, the “breathless horror and disgust” 94 that Frankenstein feels in the moment of the creature’s animation derives from his shock of the implications of what he has wrought – and while that shock may be warranted, it overpowers completely any sense of responsibility that Frankenstein ought to have had for the creature he had just brought into existence. Instead of staying to face the consequences of his toils, Frankenstein runs away and avoids dealing with the creature for two years – a creature who, when we hear his story,
we realize was not acting from malevolence when he “held up the curtain”\textsuperscript{95} of Frankenstein’s bed, trying to detain him that first night, but from disorientation and confusion. And yet, at no point in the novel does Frankenstein demonstrate “benevolence and sweetness”\textsuperscript{96} to anyone, least of all to the creature, whose perspective he never attempts to consider. Even Frankenstein’s apparent gratitude to Walton at having been saved from certain death is a fundamental misreading on Walton’s part: by this point in the novel, Frankenstein’s only desire is to kill the creature and to die. He even admits to Walton that the only reason he made himself visible to the crew was the chance that the ship was headed south, so that he could continue his chase; but, he was dismayed to learn, they were headed north. If Frankenstein is grateful to Walton for anything, it is for prolonging his life so that he might complete his mission of killing the creature: “You took me on board when my vigour was exhausted, and I should have sunk under my multiplied hardships into a death, which I still dread, -- for my task is unfulfilled.”\textsuperscript{97} And when he is well enough, he explains that he cannot be the friend Walton seeks because of this mission:

\begin{quote}
I enjoyed friends, dear not only through habit and association, but from their own merits; and wherever I am, the soothing voice of my Elizabeth, and the conversation of Clerval, will be ever whispered in my ear. They are dead; and but one feeling in such a solitude can persuade me to preserve my life. If I were engaged in any high undertaking or design, fraught with extensive utility to my fellow-creatures, then could I live to fulfill it. But such is not my destiny; I must
\end{quote}

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 145.
pursue and destroy the being to whom I gave existence; then my lot on earth will be fulfilled, and I may die.  

It is curious that Frankenstein should invoke his friendships with Elizabeth and Clerval as justification for his obsession with killing the creature. For, while their deaths may ostensibly serve him as sources of guilt that perpetuate his revenge narrative — and indeed, while Elizabeth and Clerval may well have been good friends to Victor — the novel has carefully shown that Victor was never a good friend to them.

From the beginning, Frankenstein’s friendships and relations are motivated by a mix of self-interest and denial of his need for other people. For example, he admits to ignoring his duties to Clerval and his family while in the throes of his research:

The same feelings which made me neglect the scenes around me caused me also to forget those friends who were so many miles absent, and whom I had not seen for so long a time. I knew my silence disquieted them….but I could not tear my thoughts from my employment, loathsome in itself, but which had taken an irresistible hold of my imagination. I wished, as it were, to procrastinate all that related to my feelings of affection until the great object, which swallowed up every habit of my nature, should be completed.

\[98\text{ Ibid., 147-148.} \]

\[99\text{ I use the term “friend” here more loosely than I had in my discussion of Walton above — i.e., as akin to Percy Shelley’s definition of love, or being understood perfectly by another. Here, I mean simply that the novel has established that Victor only cares for these people when it suits him. Still, it is worth noting that in the terms associated with friendship, as laid out by the novel viz. Walton, Victor once again does not meet the criteria of a good friend to either Elizabeth or Clerval because, as I will show in what follows, his actions toward them are neither guided by a desire to understand them, nor to be understood by them, as friendship qua Percy Shelley’s definition of love would have it.}\]

\[100\text{ Mary Shelley, } \textit{Frankenstein}, 33.\]
In thus ignoring or “procrastinating” his social affections, Victor posits feelings – at least those feelings relating to friendship – as a mechanism or switch that can be turned off or ignored. And yet, when he is all but petrified by the consequences of his success, it is his friendship with Clerval that helps him regain himself:

Study had before secluded me from the intercourse of my fellow-creatures, and rendered me unsocial; but Clerval called forth the better feelings of my heart; he again taught me to love the aspect of nature, and the cheerful faces of children. Excellent friend! How sincerely did you love me, and endeavor to elevate my mind, until it was on a level with your own. A selfish pursuit had cramped and narrowed me, until your gentleness and affection warmed and opened by senses; I became the same happy creature who, a few years ago, loving and beloved by all, had no sorrow or care.\footnote{Ibid., 43-44.}

Although couched in the presumption that he does not want his family and friends to know about his “loathsome” employment, in relating this part of his story to Walton, Victor lets slip what really motivated his self-imposed isolation from his loved ones: “If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind.”\footnote{Ibid., 33.} In other words, by this later point in the story, Victor himself realizes that his motivations were not only reprehensible but, in his own words, “unlawful,” because they “weaken[ed]” his affections for others.

Through this declaration, Mary Shelley reemphasizes the novel’s interest in the line between selves and other people: by this point, it is clear that for Mary Shelley, selves cannot exist without others, for Victor’s myopic self-involvement is,
by his own admission, his downfall. Leading directly into the first self-conscious break in his narrative, Victor continues to ruminate on whether the kind of isolation into which he had thrown himself is necessary for progress: “if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved; Caesar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed.”\textsuperscript{103} Crucially, the narrative breaks here: “But I forget that I am moralizing in the most interesting part of my tale; and your looks remind me to proceed.”\textsuperscript{104} Even as he attempts to relay a narrative of progress and necessity, Victor cannot help but become aware of this story as a story, and of Walton as his audience – in other words, of the presence of other people, his literal and implied audience. This break, then, offers an ample moment for reflection: would it have been so bad if fellow-feeling were better remembered throughout history and Greece were not, for example, enslaved under Caesar, or the empires of Mexico and Peru not destroyed? How might it have altered the course of history if Europeans had emigrated to America more gradually, or not at all? Here, Mary Shelley seems to return to the political tenor of sympathy to imagine, however briefly, the possibility of a world based on a less self-interested mode of relationality.

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
But as the novel will remind us, this is not how human relations work. For Victor, sympathy, or friendship, is entirely self-centered: when he needs friends, he has them, and when he becomes too busy, he rejects them. Even his engagement to Elizabeth is marked by self-interest. When he finally decides to marry her, it is not for love, but in order to hasten his desire to die. The creature, having been denied a mate, promises to be with Victor on his wedding night. Assuming that this threat was leveled at him, Victor reasons that to marry Elizabeth would be to lure the creature to finally kill him, to put him out of his misery:

> The remembrance of the threat returned: nor can you wonder, that, omnipotent as the fiend had yet been in his deeds of blood, I should almost regard him as invincible; and that when he had pronounced the words, “I shall be with you in your wedding-night,” I should regard the threatened fate as unavoidable. But death was no evil to me...and I therefore, with a contented and even cheerful countenance, agreed with my father, that if my cousin would consent, the ceremony should take place in ten days, and thus put, as I imagined, the seal to my fate.\(^{105}\)

In agreeing to marry Elizabeth, Victor admits that he expected to be killed: “when I thought that I prepared only my own death, I hastened that of a far dearer victim.”\(^{106}\) Thus, Victor’s decision to marry Elizabeth is guided by a suicide wish, even if it is, at this point, an altruistic motivation (i.e., to save his loved ones from being killed by the creature).

But when Elizabeth and the rest of his family and friends are gone, that self-sacrificial urge turns inward, and Victor’s life comes to revolve around a death wish motivated by self-loathing, guilt, and despair – a suicidal motivation that is

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\(^{105}\) Ibid., 132, italics original.

\(^{106}\) Ibid., 133.
likewise shared by the creature. By the point in the novel when he kills Elizabeth, the creature has vowed to make Victor’s life difficult and painful by removing any affective ties he has left in the world: thus, the creature slowly does away with Victor’s family and friends. And yet, the creature, it seems to me, puts more weight than Victor does on the power of those friendships. For, while I would not deny that Victor feels strongly for his relations when he does feel for them, that he can so casually forget them in pursuit of his studies suggests that friendship, sympathy and love do not motivate Victor’s life in the way that they do the creature’s.

The creature’s process of development, as he tells it to Victor, is guided almost entirely by a desire for companionship. In his early development, he is crestfallen by the unlikelihood of his ever finding a friend. First the villagers, and then the De Laceys, teach him that humans will never love him. But what is fascinating in the novel’s interrogation of the search for love is that the creature is the only character who demonstrates any earnest attempt to get to know other people as well as wanting other people to get to know him.

His initial interest in people is honest and naïve; unlike Victor, the creature is focused on who people are in themselves, and on how his presence in their lives might benefit them, rather than on what he can get out of the relationship: “I longed to discover the motives and feelings of these lovely creatures...I thought (foolish wretch!) that it might be in my power to restore happiness to these
deserving people." In observing the De Lacey family, for example, the creature exhibits what we might call true, or disinterested, sympathy – feeling what they feel without any attention paid to himself, a notion already absent from either Hume or Smith, and implicated by Percy Shelley in his marginal note to “On Love” as unfeasible: “When they were unhappy, I felt depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathized with their joys.” Such “pure” sympathy is outside the scope of social theories of sympathy. For Hume and Smith, sympathy is limited to the experiences of the self; for Shelley, the wish for a transcendent connection, a “soul within my soul,” is acknowledged, however reluctantly, as a fantasy. For all three theorists, sympathy is a tool and an aspiration toward an ideal humanity, but it necessitates the recognition of its limitations. The creature lacks this recognition, and thinks that he is able to sympathize with others without regard for himself. But if he is able to sympathize selflessly, it is only because he does not yet possess understanding as a “self.”

Crucially, it is from the creature’s curiosity about the feelings he experiences for others that he decides to share, as it were, in Safie’s education: “I found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds. I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and

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107 Ibid., 77.
108 Ibid., 75.
countenances of the hearers.” And yet, in learning the “god-like science” of language, the creature is initiated into a world of subjecthood to which he cannot reconcile himself, and from which his only escape becomes death. Consider, for example, the creature’s explication of how he comes to view himself as monstrous:

The words [of Felix’s explanation of Volney’s Les Ruines, ou Meditations sur les Revolutions des Empires] induced me to turn towards myself. I learned that the possessions most esteemed by your fellow-creatures were, high and unsullied descent united by riches. A man might be respected with only one of these acquisitions; but without either he was considered, except in rare instances, as a vagabond and a slave, doomed to waste his powers for the profit of the chosen few. And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was, besides, endowed with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they, and could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded their’s. When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?

By all indications, the creature is, at least physically, superior to human beings: he is larger, faster, stronger, and more physically resilient. But he learns, in this moment, to hate himself because he is taught that identity is constituted through relations with others, and that those relations are, themselves, constituted and measured through social institutions that are only available discriminately. Arguably, the most important lesson the creature gleans from his education is that he does not fit into the structures that govern human life, and that because of this, he has no choice but to die: “I learned that there was but one means to overcome

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\(^{110}\text{Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, 74-75.}\)

\(^{111}\text{Ibid., 80-81.}\)
the sensation of pain, and that was death – a state which I feared yet did not understand.” In other words, the creature learns to be suicidal.

It is here, I would argue, that the novel is most explicit in its suggestion that the relationship between suicide and subjectivity is mediated by textual relationality. At least one of the three texts that most profoundly influence the creature's development, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and Plutarch’s *Lives*, is explicitly about suicide. But more importantly, what the creature gleans from each of these texts is not, as the Enlightenment tradition would have it, self-understanding or self-creation, but rather an understanding of “the self” as something that can, and, in this case, should, be killed. Prior to his “education,” the creature had not considered the possibility of his own death. Out in the woods, and even in town, he lived by pure survival instinct, proclaiming that “life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it.” But once his understanding is cultivated, he begins to ascertain the possibility and the necessity of his own end. This becomes especially apparent in his reading of Goethe’s *Werther*, which incites

112 Ibid., 81.
113 Sanderson has tried to extend the relationship to suicide to all three texts. Most obviously, Goethe’s *Werther* is a principle text of Romantic suicide, and launches the creature into his own brief consideration of the virtues of self-destruction. According to Sanderson, Milton’s Eve also briefly expresses a suicidal wish in her proposal, in Book 10, that she and Adam forego procreation to end human existence; a wish that, Sanderson argues, is echoed in the monster’s very first speech, and which likewise offers a parallel to Victor’s decision not to create a female companion. Moreover, Sanderson notes that Plutarch’s *Lives* centers on a structure of doubling, and that stories that feature doubles or dopplegangers operate on a suicidal logic.
114 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 66.
in him a sense of “wonder” at the novel’s “disquisitions upon death and suicide,” as well as awareness that he is not the intended audience for the text:

As I read, however, I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike the beings concerning whom I read, and to whose conversation I was a listener. I sympathized with, and partly understood them, but I was uninformed in mind; I was dependent on none, and related to none. The path of my departure was free; and there was none to lament my annihilation. My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: what did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them.

What the creature’s experience of reading points up here is that in order that this text be understood, it requires a subject to understand it; but in order for a subject to understand it, the text needs to teach one how to be a subject. That the texts the creature reads are actually about suicide is less significant than the fact that, in pointing up the fact that he does not belong to the category of “subject”, they lead him to want to kill himself. They have, in a sense, the opposite of their intended effect: rather than educating and cultivating the subject of Enlightenment, they put into sharp focus the fact that the creature cannot be one; and thus, they impel him to seek a way out of the world which, as he discovers, was never meant for him to inhabit.

Anxiety over the capacity of texts to affect minds in dangerous and subversive ways was at the forefront of the European cultural consciousness in the eighteenth century, especially following the 1774 publication of The Sorrows of

115 Ibid.
116 Ibid.
Young Werther. English society was especially concerned, almost to the point of hysteria, about the effects on young people of reading about suicide. What Frankenstein gets at so presciently is the limits of the didactic tradition of Bildung in the European novel, of which none other than Goethe is the ur-master. Mary Shelley depicts the creature’s education in subjecthood only to dismantle it by taking him through the motions of a European education, so that, to anyone who cannot see him, he might pass as something very near to the proper Enlightenment subject. This is implied in De Lacey’s assumption that the creature is not only European, but French like him, “my countryman.” And yet, by this point, the creature is unable to recognize how close he is to being, if not human, at least properly European. He has been so inculcated with what a subject is not through its physical determinants—for example, the social standing that Enlightenment subjects possess through landedness, which is determined, first and foremost, by being male and white—that he fails to realize how close he has actually come to becoming a subject internally.

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117 In The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture (London: Verso, 1987), 3, Franco Moretti posits Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship as not only the first novel in the genre, but as the “decisive thrust” of the Bildung tradition that it made possible “the Golden Century of Western narrative,” marked by the hero of youth and development. Even while Goethe’s Bildungsroman is not Werther, but his second, novel Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship (1775-6), it is at least plausible that some of the panic over Werther was owing to the fact that the “subject” that the proper novel is supposed to shape is presented, by its very own master, as so imperfect and so deeply fallible that he would choose to kill himself rather than, as is the implication in tales of Bildung, to cultivate and manage himself. 118 Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, 90.
I have been suggesting that what is so precisely attractive about suicide for Mary Shelley is that “the self” as a stable and coherent concept in European culture could be eradicated. What Frankenstein explores, in the same vein as The Dying Negro, is that at the turn of the nineteenth century, suicide was a viable, and sometimes necessary, option for those people not “legible” within existing European social structures.

**Conclusion: Re-marking Legibility**

Saidiya Hartman has drawn our attention to the potentially damaging effects of reading the textual interplay between subjects and non-subjects. Recalling the white abolitionist John Rankin’s attempts to communicate the evils of slavery by imaginatively describing himself and his family in the position of slaves being whipped, Hartman worries that insofar as sympathy “is a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other,” Rankin does more to reveal his own imagined reactions to torture than to allow us to understand those “whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to reach.”\(^{119}\) For Hartman, “in the fantasy of being beaten...Rankin becomes a proxy and the other’s pain is acknowledged to the degree that it can be imagined, yet by virtue of this substitution the object of identification threatens to disappear” (18-19). According

to Hartman, “if this violence can become palpable and indignation can be fully aroused only through the masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other’s suffering one’s own, this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration” (19). This is precisely the problem at the heart of Percy Shelley’s anxiety about the limits of texts to generate understanding. That process of imagining the other through the self, “fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead,”120 effectively creating, in both subject and object, an isolated being, confined in his loneliness, “misunderstood like one in a distant and savage land,”121 and, crucially, without hope of ever being understood.

Frankenstein’s creature thinks that he is such a being. But in fact, I would suggest that he is not. When he asks for a mate, he does so out of a sense of his difference, but in explaining that all he really wants is to “excite the sympathy of some existing thing,”122 he reveals his essential participation in what the novel holds to be a most human characteristic, the need to be understood by another like oneself. Victor’s egregious destruction of the mate is, in turn, indicative of his inability to recognize this need for sympathetic engagement with others in the subject formation. Victor’s act of destruction has been read as motivated by a vaguely Malthusian worry that the two creatures would begin a new species, but I

120 Hartman, 20.
122 Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, 99.
would argue that such a reading is limited on two counts: firstly, as Maureen McLane, one of the chief proponents of the Malthusian reading, herself points out, it is not clear that the creature and his mate can reproduce\textsuperscript{123}; indeed, it is reasonable to assume that if this were a real fear for Victor, he would simply engineer the female so that she could not reproduce. The problem, then, runs deeper than the fear of reproduction and speciation. For, even more strongly than he fears the creatures will get along, Victor worries that the female will reject the original creature:

\begin{quote}
The creature who already lived loathed his own deformity, and might he not conceive a greater abhorrence for it when it came before his eyes in the female form? She also might turn with disgust from him to the superior beauty of man; she might quit him, and he be again alone, exasperated by the fresh provocation of being deserted by one of his own species.\textsuperscript{124}
\end{quote}

What the creature desires in his imagined mate is a complementary status as outsider; it is precisely not for her physical shape that he wants her, but for the community that he imagines they might form in their shared exclusion from human society. But what Victor imagines, instead, is that the female creature – for no reason other than the fact that she is female – would see the creature as Victor sees him, and would attempt, instead, to join mankind (never mind the fact that mankind would surely reject her as they had the original creature). The myopia here is almost unimaginable, betraying Victor’s inability to register anything from a perspective that is not squarely his own. And crucially, as evidenced by the

\textsuperscript{123} McLane, 103.
\textsuperscript{124} Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, 114.
novel’s early emphasis on Victor’s schooling, Victor’s perspective had been cultivated according to the right and proper European model of education. The real issue, then, is not with the principle of population but with that of patriarchy and the civilization that it had wrought. The problem is, ultimately, what McLane calls the “ruse of the humanities” – the notion that subjectivity may be crafted and perfected through, in this case, a carefully constructed European literary education.

Victor’s inability to step outside of himself, his failure to understand either of his creatures for what they are or could become, nor even to accept the task of shaping them, register Victor as, in a certain sense, a failed reader; but he is also, quite explicitly, a creator, a writer. Like Walton, Victor’s first education was in literature, only later followed by training in the sciences: “The raising of ghosts and devils was a promise liberally accorded by my favourite authors, the fulfillment of which I most eagerly sought.” Thus, Mary Shelley positions Victor, alongside Walton, as someone whose early intellectual interests were in the imagined realms of art – interests that were undone and overturned once he had access to proper schooling. Indeed, the creature is likewise implicated in this kind of early poetical education, which is later, in some rudimentary and unintended sense,

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125 McLane, 84.
126 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 22.
127 Interestingly, in the 1831 version, Victor is stripped of this early interest in poetry, and this role is given to Clerval, who is fleshed out much more fully as the humanistic foil to Victor’s stark scientism.
cultivated according to the Enlightenment’s systematic schemas: before he is initiated into language in the De Lacey cottage, the creature describes how he “tried to imitate the pleasant songs of the birds, but was unable. Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again.”\footnote{128} Walton, Victor, and the creature are, in some sense, all thwarted poets.

But what neither Victor nor the creature seems to grasp is that in their mutual oath to carry out each other’s destruction, they enter into exactly the kind of mutually sympathetic relationship that Percy Shelley longs for in “On Love,” and that Walton seeks in Victor. Several times throughout the third volume, Victor declares his desire to end his own existence. “The cup of life was poisoned for ever,” he laments, before admitting that he “often endeavored to put an end to the existence I loathed and it required unceasing attendance and vigilance to restrain me from committing some dreadful act of violence.”\footnote{129} And thus, while Victor does not commit the act by his own hand, he is only too eager to pursue the creature so that they may kill each other. Paradoxically, their mutual pursuit of each other, and Victor’s resignation to suicide at the creature’s hand, becomes Victor’s very reason for staying alive:

\begin{quote}
I had formed in my own heart a resolution to pursue my destroyer to death; and this purpose quieted my agony, and provisionally reconciled me to life....I confess that is it the devouring and only passion of my soul...I devote myself, either in my
\end{quote}

\footnote{128}{Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, 69.}
\footnote{129}{Ibid., 126-127.}
life or death, to his destruction....How I have lived I hardly know; many times have I stretched my failing limbs upon the sandy plain, and prayed for death. But revenge kept me alive; I dared not die.\textsuperscript{130}

And so, even on the brink of death, Victor wills himself to stay alive. To the same end, the creature, fearing that “if [Victor] lost all trace [he] should despair and die, often left some mark” to allow Victor to find him.\textsuperscript{131} The literary overtones are not to be overlooked here: as the novel crescendos toward its dramatic conclusion, Victor's narrative depicts the creature as authoring the story's end. The creature, Victor admits, is leaving him textual traces so that Victor will continue to follow him: “Sometimes, indeed, he left marks in writing on the barks of trees, or cut in stone, that guided me, and instigated by fury.”\textsuperscript{132} The creature is both literally inscribing messages for Victor to read and also drawing on Victor's affective response to his texts. Thus, the creature becomes, in a larger sense, the final author of both their destinies; and Victor is only too fervent to read on, to pursue the creature despite all manner of physical difficulties.

It is deeply significantly, then, that when Victor dies, the creature, who had always sought sympathy from anyone who would offer it, announces to Walton, “I seek not a fellow-feeling in my misery. No sympathy may I ever find.”\textsuperscript{133} For, as the creature recalls it, “whilst I destroyed his hopes...I still desired love and

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 138-140.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 142.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 154.
fellowship.” But in his rejection of Walton’s offer to join his crew, the creature reveals that the love that he desired was, in fact, the fellow-feeling that he had with Victor: their mutual hatred, their commitment to pursue each other’s destruction, was precisely the image of “a soul within my soul” described in Percy Shelley’s “On Love.” And so, before he hurls himself into the darkness, the creature says one final farewell to his creator: “Farewell, Frankenstein! If thou wert yet alive, and yet cherished a desire of revenge against me, it would be better satiated in my life than in my destruction. But it was not so. Thou didst seek my extinction.” With this utterance, the creature suggests that his death – his suicide – is not of his own choosing, but rather, his final gift, given of necessity, to his creator.

What I would like to suggest here, is that if the twisted relationship between Victor and his creature may be understood within the context of the textual exchange imagined by Percy Shelley as part of the work of poetry, then what Mary Shelley draws our attention to is that sometimes, readers and texts interact in ways we cannot predict. Writing from within the context in which novels were used didactically, Mary Shelley paints a picture of reading and writing gone awry. But where texts are at their most dangerous, Mary Shelley seems to indicate, is when their authors write in genres—e.g., the Bildungsroman—that

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134 Ibid.
135 Ibid., 155-156.
implicitly claim to cover the entirety of the social field (and which thus leave no space for someone like the creature). Just before he kills himself, the creature inquires of Walton,

Why do you not hate Felix, who drove his friend though his door with contumely? Why do you not execrate the rustic who sought to destroy the saviour of his child? Nay, they are virtuous and immaculate beings! I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on.\footnote{Ibid., 154-155.}

Frankenstein’s creature is hated, Mary Shelley finally declares, not because of his actions, but because of his appearance: he does not look like a subject in any traditional sense, even as his actions frequently mirror those of the other, supposedly “proper” subjects in the text – most obviously Frankenstein, himself\footnote{Making a similar point, David Marshall writes, “Without the ability to compare himself to others and recognize them as fellow creatures, as beings like himself, the primitive man cannot look on anyone outside of his immediate family with sympathy. Where he should see a semblable, he sees an other who appears to him as a stranger, a beast, a monster,” in \textit{Surprising Effects}, 204. Marshall is exactly right here. Victor relies on a social grammar to tell him who is his friend, or who loves him; he does not see it when it is given to him in the form of the creature, because the creature does not look like him.}

Moreover, although he may not “count” in the world, his relationship or “friendship” with Victor – their mutual mission of destruction (of self and each other) – constitutes them both as subjects of sorts within each other’s imagined relational spheres. Their mutual suicidal drives and actions, then, reveal the novel’s critique of the assumptions of subject formation held by Enlightenment culture. Mary Shelley offers this cautionary tale of the trouble with teaching subjectivity through texts in order to suggest that Romanticism may begin to rethink what the Enlightenment had wrought.
But Mary Shelley does not undermine the efficacy of texts to shape people; instead, she also validates it. For Mary Shelley, texts may possess pedagogical capacity, but that capacity is quite divorced from authors’ intentions. This is evidenced in the fact that the creature learns from texts never intended for him, but it is equally underscored in the fact of the creature, himself – the creature is a text created by an author with expectations that he (the creature) defies. For Mary Shelley, the expectation of sympathetic engagement that underscores such didactic constructs was based on assumptions about what would happen to a person when she reads a certain kind of text. *Frankenstein* stages the difficulty of constructing subjectivity through the experience of sympathy by revealing that, within the didactic logic of Enlightenment, to sympathize (either with another person or with a text) is to take for granted that the sympathized-with is a subject. Thus, the novel asks, what happens to sympathy when its object is precisely not a subject?

The results, in *Frankenstein*, are disastrous, revealing the sympathetic subject of the Enlightenment as one intrinsically closed to alterity. Through the novel’s suggestion of the creature's suicide, Mary Shelley finally submits the possibility that European culture needs to rethink its prevailing, and discriminatory, notions of who counts as a “self.” And while *Frankenstein* styles its provocation to kill “the self” through the fantastical tale of a Gothic monster, Mary Shelley’s critique is grounded in tangible social realities. For, to suggest the
destruction of “the self” is to open the social field to recognize all “non-subjects.” Mary Shelley’s use of the trope of suicide to critique a rigid understanding of social relations interrogates the roots of inequality within a social structure based on selective individualism. What remains at the end of Frankenstein, which leaves almost every character dead, is a call to engage each other without prejudice, and the implicit question of what kind of world will make this possible.
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Biography

Deanna Koretsky was born on 3 June 1985 in Sumy, Ukraine. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and Russian, with a minor in Theatre, from Bucknell University in 2007, where she also completed a Master of Arts in English in 2009. Her publications include “Sarah Wesley, British Methodism, and the Feminist Question, Again” in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (2013), “Unhallowed arts: *Frankenstein* and the Poetics of Suicide” in *European Romantic Review* (2015), “Habeas corpus and the Politics of Freedom: Slavery and Romantic Suicide” in *Essays in Romanticism* (2015), and short essays in the *Encyclopedia of Literary Romanticism* (2010). At Duke, Deanna received research fellowships from the Graduate School and the Duke Talent Identification Program (TIP), where she taught from 2012-2015; she was a Preparing Future Faculty Fellow (2012-2013) and a Ph.D. Lab in Digital Knowledge Scholar (2013-2015); she earned certificates in Feminist Studies and College Teaching; and she received the Dean’s Award for Excellence in Teaching (2015). Beyond Duke, Deanna’s research has been recognized with awards from the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism (Outstanding Graduate Student Paper, 2014) and the International Conference on Romanticism (Lore Metzger Prize for the Best Graduate Student Paper, 2014). Deanna will join the English faculty at Spelman College in Fall 2015.