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Limited Analogies: Reading Relations in Wordsworth's *The Borderers*

All our reasonings concerning matter of fact are founded on a species of analogy.

—David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

The other knows me merely by analogy—and that just is not knowing another mind! But I've already seen that nothing could be *better* than, could go beyond, analogy here!

—Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*

IN THE PREFACE TO *LYRICAL BALLADS*, WORDSWORTH CONSIDERS “THE pleasure received from metrical language” and ends up offering what is perhaps his most comprehensive but least original statement on aesthetic theory:

I mean the pleasure which the mind derives from the perception of similitude in dissimilitude. This principle is the great spring of the activity of our minds, and their chief feeder. From this principle the direction of the sexual appetite, and all the passions connected with it, take their origin: it is the life of our ordinary conversation; and upon the accuracy with which similitude in dissimilitude, and dissimilitude in similitude are perceived, depend our taste and our moral feelings.¹

“A commonplace of eighteenth-century aesthetics,” as editors Jane Worthington Smyser and W. J. B. Owen note, Wordsworth's principle of “similitude in dissimilitude, and dissimilitude in similitude,” reflects a basic

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1. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Michael Mason, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2007), 82.

concern with the workings of analogical thought.² If analogy was understood broadly in the eighteenth century as a “resemblance between things with regard to some circumstances,”³ Wordsworth is interested here in how analogical resemblances are determined in the first place, and in how they determine many facets of life: aesthetic experience, of course, but also mental activity, the passions, morality, judgment, and intercourse in all senses. Approaching this passage with the concerns of queer theory and poststructuralist ethics in mind, recent readers have argued that Wordsworth privileges certain notions of sameness and difference: the first half of his chiasmic formulation (“similitude in dissimilitude”) has been criticized as a heteronormative principle that puts forth sexual difference as a necessary condition for attraction, while the latter half (“dissimilitude in similitude”) has been valorized for emphasizing the importance of difference in the context of ethical relations.⁴ And yet the crux of Wordsworth’s formulation does not so much involve sameness and/or difference as “the *accuracy* with which similitude in dissimilitude, and dissimilitude in similitude are perceived.” At least when it comes to “taste” and “moral feelings,” everything, for Wordsworth, would seem to “depend,” not upon whether one privileges sameness or difference, but upon one’s ability to discern the difference between a similitude and a dissimilitude. Everything would seem to depend, in other words, upon the possibility of even knowing the difference between difference and sameness.

Of course, by most accounts, the epistemological limits of analogy are supposed to be old news at the beginning of the nineteenth century. “At the beginning of the seventeenth century,” writes Michel Foucault, “thought ceases to move in the element of resemblance. Similitude is no longer the form of knowledge but rather the occasion for error.”⁵ Students of Romanticism will likely understand the break Foucault identifies in terms of a more gradual shift, whereby a system of analogical correspondences that structured Renaissance ontology breaks down across the Enlightenment as analogy comes to be seen as a merely rhetorical device,

2. *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, Smyser and Owen, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 1:211.

3. Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 1 (London: Printed by W. Strahan, 1755).

4. For examples of the former, see Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 87–88, and Christopher C. Nagle, *Sexuality and the Culture of Sensibility in the British Romantic Era* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 84–85. For examples of the latter, see Simon Jarvis, *Wordsworth’s Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 14, and Robert Hale, “Wordsworth’s ‘The Mad Mother’: The Poetics and Politics of Identification,” *Wordsworth Circle* 39, no. 3 (2008): 108.

5. Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 51.

rather than an organizing principle that unifies the physical, moral, and spiritual realms. According to both Earl Wasserman and M. H. Abrams, for example, “the last significant vestige of the myth of an analogically ordered universe” is found in the eighteenth century, albeit in a “greatly weakened” form, after the “literal belief in a universe of divine types and correspondences, which had originally supported this structural trope, faded.”⁶ Indeed, in the influential literary history that Wasserman and Abrams helped establish, Romantic poetry is said to get off the ground precisely by moving beyond the “outworn creed” of analogical thought, as well as the crisis posed by its collapse.⁷ Romanticism, in other words, has traditionally been positioned as beginning where the eighteenth-century “problem of analogy” ends,⁸ a problem that David Hume is thought to have raised most definitively, particularly in his critique of the argument from design in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

In what follows I want to reconsider this supposedly obsolete problem and show how it not only persists but mutates in Romantic writing. Critics who have discussed how analogy did or did not function in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have largely treated it as a barometer for measuring the religious atmosphere. Colin Jager, for example, has recently complicated the secularization thesis that underwrites Wasserman and Abrams’s literary history by tracking how the analogical argument from design did not, in fact, disappear once Hume’s *Dialogues* was published, but rather became a “lived practice” that endured throughout the Romantic period.⁹ If, as Jager notes, the “romantic rejection of analogy” that Wasserman and Abrams posit is, “by proxy, an argument for construing romanticism as that which overcomes or secularizes an entrenched religious tradition,” the persistence of analogy that Jager tracks is, by contrast, an argument for construing Romanticism as still enmeshed in this tradition; in his account, “analogy itself becomes a figure for secularization as differentiation rather than secularization as transformation.”¹⁰ But the use

6. Wasserman, “Nature Moralized: The Divine Analogy in the Eighteenth Century,” *ELH* 20, no. 1 (1953): 67; Abrams, “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric,” in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Norton), 210.

7. Wasserman, “Nature Moralized,” 59.

8. Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 199.

9. Jager, *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 57.

10. Jager, *The Book of God*, 51, 31. The concept of “differentiation,” which Jager derives from José Casanova, is used to designate a process of secularization that does not entail the decline of religion (29).

of analogy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was not, of course, limited to the sphere of religion. Nor was the eighteenth-century critique of analogy. If Hume demolishes the argument from design in his *Dialogues* while nevertheless acknowledging the entrenched cultural tendency to find patterns and parallels between phenomena, he also concludes in his writings on human understanding that “*All* our reasonings concerning matter of fact are founded on a species of Analogy”—all the while demonstrating that analogy can never provide an entirely stable epistemic, much less ontological, ground.¹¹ He thereby established what Gilles Deleuze calls “the first great logic of *relations*, showing in it that all relations (not only ‘matters of fact’ but also relations among ideas) are external to their terms,” which is why Wasserman perceptively claims that “Hume threw a dark shadow of doubt over the entire subject” of analogy.¹² My first thesis is that such generalized doubt cannot be without consequence for how Romantic-era writers thought about relations in contexts other than natural religion and design theory.

Regardless of critical persuasion, scholars of Romantic literature tend to construe the consequences of Enlightenment skepticisms in terms of crisis and privation; Hume’s skepticism in particular is customarily figured as a dark shadow or “threat” that most Romantic writers avoid, repress, or attempt to overcome.¹³ Analogy, for its part, is often maligned as epistemologically deficient and is routinely figured as something to get “beyond,” not only in literary-historical narratives but also in literary-critical practices (one thinks, for example, of the rather cryptic rhetorical gesture of proclaiming that some privileged analogy is “not just an analogy”). Against such critical tendencies, I want to argue that the skeptical understanding of analogy the Romantics inherit enables a logic of relationality that might be valued precisely because of its failure to establish clear-cut identities and differences—precisely, that is, because of its epistemic instability and “merely” rhetorical nature.

11. Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed., rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 104 (my emphasis). Hereafter cited in the text as E.

12. Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume’s Theory of Human Nature*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), x; Wasserman, “Nature Moralized,” 57.

13. See, for example, Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). For discussions of the impact that Humean skepticism in particular has upon Romantic writing, see, also, Tim Milnes, *Knowledge and Indifference in English Romantic Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and Cairns Craig, “Coleridge, Hume, and the Chains of the Romantic Imagination,” in *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism*, eds. Leith Davis, Ian Duncan, and Janet Sorenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

This essay charts such a logic and develops its implications. First, I'll revisit the well-known debate between Earl Wasserman, M. H. Abrams, and Paul de Man over whether the mind-nature relation in Romantic literature is most authentically symbolic or allegorical, and show how the stakes of this debate turn on a tension intrinsic to analogical relations that is not so much overcome as refigured through the symbol-allegory opposition. I'll then trace how this tension runs like a fault line through Hume's own philosophical project. On the one hand, Hume makes conspicuous the limits of analogy in his skeptical writings on human knowledge, rendering uncertain the relations that make all inference possible; on the other hand, he develops the first robust account of sympathetic identification in his writings on morals and the passions, treating as unproblematic the analogies that structure interpersonal relations. The second half of the essay then reads Wordsworth's early and only drama *The Borderers* as a work that brings Hume's two hands together, so to speak, mapping his skepticism onto his sentimentalism in order to test the limits of relationality in the absence of positive law. More than just troubling the concept of sympathy, I'll argue, the drama's exploration of interpersonal relations challenges the critical tendency to privilege concepts of both sameness and difference—from repetition compulsion to radical alterity—and to posit such concepts as ontic and ontological properties that exist beyond the rhetorical or figurative dimension of language. It complicates, in other words, the desire to move beyond the limits of analogy.

The Problem of Analogy

When Earl Wasserman and M. H. Abrams situated Romanticism beyond analogy, they did so because they believed the breakdown of the Renaissance system of correspondences ushered in a skeptical crisis that demanded what Stanley Cavell would term “efforts at recovery.”¹⁴ As Wasserman writes:

The analogical universe had become an outworn creed; it lingered because it had behind it the force of tradition, but man's faith in it, and the spiritual security it had once provided had been evaporating. . . . Once the pattern had given the comforting sense of a total divine system; this skeptical age was asking: Right or wrong, how much comfort will the hypothesis provide us?¹⁵

As a result of “[n]o longer thinking analogically, but consciously thinking about thinking analogically,” eighteenth-century skeptics like Hume had

14. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 80.

15. Wasserman, “Nature Moralized,” 59.

separated mind from nature, matter from spirit, surface from depth, subject from object—effecting, in Abrams’s words, an “Absolute separation” that the “Romantic sensibility” could not endure.¹⁶ Hence, for these critics, the “central enterprise” of the Romantic poets “was to join together the ‘subject’ and ‘object’ that modern intellection had put asunder” so as to bring about “the reintegration of the divided self (of ‘head and heart’) and the simultaneous healing of the breach between the ego and the alien other (of ‘subject’ and ‘object’).”¹⁷

The key word here is “enterprise.” If the limits and limitations of analogy were thrown into sharp relief in the eighteenth century, it is not clear that they were ever actually overcome. As Paul de Man notes in “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” Abrams “makes it seem, at times, as if the romantic theory of imagination did away with analogy altogether and that Coleridge in particular replaced it by a genuine and working monism. . . . But he does not really claim that this degree of fusion is ever achieved and sustained—at most that it corresponds to Coleridge’s desire for a unity toward which his thought and poetic strategy strive.”¹⁸ While de Man takes issue with Wasserman’s and Abrams’s own desire for unity and the prominence they therefore accord to the Romantic symbol, he nevertheless agrees that the eighteenth-century problem of analogy gives way to Romanticism. As a counter, however, he unearths “an allegorical tradition beyond the sensualistic analogism of the eighteenth century,” one that recognizes time, rather than space, as the constitutive category of language.¹⁹ Thus, in de Man’s revision of the Wasserman/Abrams narrative, the problem of analogy produces a crisis to which Romantic-era writers—as well as their twentieth-century readers—respond in one of two ways: either with a deluded desire to unify, by way of the symbol, that which cannot be unified (which de Man aligns with Coleridge as well as with Wasserman and Abrams), or with an ethos of renunciation in which the subject, acknowledging that it “bears no resemblance” to the natural world, accepts its alienation and finitude, an acceptance that is marked by the language of allegory (which he aligns with Rousseau and Wordsworth as well as with his own critical position).²⁰

16. Wasserman, “Nature Moralized,” 71; Abrams, “Structure and Style,” 218.

17. Abrams, “Structure and Style,” 220.

18. De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” 195.

19. De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” 205.

20. De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” 206. It is worth noting that Coleridge’s understanding of rhetoric is certainly more complex than either de Man or Abrams suggests. As Susan Wolfson says in the context of a discussion concerning simile, Coleridge is “as much a precursor of deconstructive as of organicist methods of reading.” See *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 71.

Other scholars have of course elaborated and nuanced the specifics of the symbol-allegory debate that Wasserman, Abrams, and de Man chart collectively. Anne Mellor, for example, proposes that “Friedrich Schlegel’s concept of irony, properly understood, offers both historically and theoretically a way to embrace both Abrams’s ‘constructive’ and de Man’s ‘deconstructive’ approaches”;²¹ Tilottama Rajan resituates the “debate between organicist and deconstructionist critics over the nature of Romanticism” by contending that this debate “was originally waged by the Romantics themselves and was not resolved in favor of either side”;²² and Nicholas Halmi reexamines the “organicist side” of this debate to offer a more critical and historically informed account of how “the theorization of the symbol in the Romantic period may be understood as an attempt, however illogical and methodologically dubious in itself, to foster a sense of the harmony of the human mind and nature.”²³ And yet, despite such interventions, the problem of analogy remains critically relegated to the pre-Romantic past. What is particularly striking is that this relegation occurs for two seemingly contradictory reasons: From the de Manian perspective of allegory, analogy appears to be a device of mystification that hides difference under an illusion of ontological identity; hence de Man’s turn to a supposedly more demystified linguistic device, like allegory, which “prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self.”²⁴ From the Wassermanian and Abramsian perspective of the Romantic symbol, however, analogy appears *too demystified*, too obviously rhetorical, and not at all ontologically secure; hence Wasserman’s and Abrams’s turn to a concept “more intimate than analogy,” like the symbol, for any “resort to analogy only dodges the problem, since it both pretends to a relation between subject and object and yet keeps them categorically apart.”²⁵

What, then, are we to make of a linguistic structure that is disparaged for being both too mystifying and too demystifying, too unifying and too separating, too full of sameness and too full of difference? Is analogy, in pretending to a relation between subject and object, a rhetorical device that effaces difference as well as its own rhetoricity? Or, in keeping its terms categorically apart, is it instead a device that shows up the limits of tropo-

21. Mellor, “On Romantic Irony, Symbolism and Allegory,” *Criticism* 21 no. 3 (1979): 217.

22. Rajan, *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 19.

23. Halmi, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24.

24. De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” 207.

25. Wasserman, “The English Romantics: The Grounds of Knowledge,” *SiR* 4, no. 1 (1964): 20–21.

logical exchange and the fictive nature of the relations that tropes establish? What such contradictory positions help clarify is that the story de Man crystallizes in the first half of “The Rhetoric of Temporality” is not exactly historical in nature. While de Man may locate his conception of allegory “beyond” the analogism of the eighteenth century, he also notes that “[a]nalogy as such is certainly never abandoned as an epistemological pattern.”²⁶ To stay within the register of de Man’s thought, we might say that the epistemological pattern of analogy is not so much abandoned in his own essay as allegorized through a narrative that splits the difference between difference and sameness by way of two oppositional figures, one of which stands for identity, intimacy, unity, and mystification (the symbol), the other of which stands for difference, distance, separation, and demystification (allegory). De Man, that is, construes the relation between analogy, symbol, and allegory through a narrative that, in his words, “give[s] duration to what is, in fact, simultaneous,” but in so doing, he also suggests that the historical opposition between symbol and allegory itself refigured a more general problem involving the instability of analogy as an epistemological pattern.²⁷ Rather than understand the eighteenth-century problem of analogy as having been historically displaced by symbol and allegory, then, we might do better to understand their historical opposition as a displaced symptom of a tension intrinsic to analogical thought.

As Wordsworth’s interest in the “accuracy” with which one perceives “similitude in dissimilitude” and “dissimilitude in similitude” indicates as well, this tension involves the way in which analogy formally encompasses both sameness and difference without, however, providing the means with which one could formalize the difference between them. Rather than establishing an identity between terms, analogy suggests a relation of both identity and alterity without establishing either; it constructs connections that it suspends as tenuous hypotheses. Analogy, in other words, both opens and leaves open the question of relation. Wasserman’s claim that analogy “both pretends to a relation between subject and object and yet keeps them categorically apart” captures this dynamic in all its ambiguity, since the reverse could also be said: analogy pretends to keep its terms apart and yet suggests a more intimate relation between them. Analogy, in short, is fundamentally *duplicitous*, in that it acts in a double manner and can therefore be seen as deceitful, as pretending to discover the very relations it makes possible. Hence Wasserman’s own obvious disdain for analogy, as well as his claim that “Coleridge could justifiably complain” about the “dim analogies” of eighteenth-century poetry, for, as Coleridge writes,

26. De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” 195.

27. De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” 225.

“A Poet’s *Heart* and *Intellect* should be *combined, intimately combined and unified*, with the great appearances of Nature—& not merely held in solution & loose mixture with them, in the shape of formal Similes.”²⁸ Hence, too, de Man’s suspicion of “analogical tropes” and their ability to effect an illusory movement “from analogy to identity, from simile to symbol and to a higher order of truth.”²⁹ Whether one believes analogical relations tend toward difference or toward identity, the belief is that these relations are only pretend.

Analogy’s Analogues

While the aforementioned critics were all ostensibly working to situate Romanticism beyond what Wordsworth terms the “analogy betwixt / The mind of man and nature,”³⁰ their use of a conspicuously interpersonal rhetoric—involving intimacy and separation, self and non-self, ego and other—suggests that the problem of analogy is not limited to this particular relation. As is commonly noted, Hume was the eighteenth-century thinker who demonstrates most definitively that the analogical relation between the mind of man and the author of nature is “liable to error and uncertainty.”³¹ Less commonly noted, however, is that he generalizes such uncertainty to even the most basic and fundamental of analogical relations. For Hume, an inference is an analogy interpreted as an identity: “All our reasonings concerning matter of fact are founded on a species of Analogy, which leads us to expect from any cause the *same* events, which we have observed to result from *similar* causes” (E 104; my emphases). But since such reasonings are not themselves founded on reason, he emphasizes, they are always also potential misinterpretations: “As to past *Experience*, it can be allowed to give *direct* and *certain* information of those precise objects only, and that precise period of time, which fell under its cognizance: But why this experience should be extended to future times, and to other objects, which for aught we know, may be only in appearance similar; this is the main question on which I would insist” (E 21).

28. Wasserman, “The English Romantics,” 21.

29. De Man, “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 248. For de Man’s most explicit denunciation of analogy, see “Heaven and Earth in Wordsworth and Hölderlin,” in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers*, eds. E. S. Burt, Kevin Newmark, and Andrzej Warminski (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 137–46.

30. These lines are from the excised “Analogy Passage” that was originally intended to follow the Ascent of Snowdon in Book 13 of Wordsworth’s 1805 *Prelude*. See Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979), 496–99.

31. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1998), 16.

And yet Hume does not insist on this skeptical line of questioning when he discusses our relations with those “other objects” known as persons. This discrepancy is most stark in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in which Hume keeps his skepticism regarding analogical inference (Book One) separate from the realm of sociality and his influential articulation of the fundamentally analogical concept of sympathy (Books Two and Three). Whereas in Hume’s analysis of human understanding “resemblance is the most fertile source of error,” in his writings on the passions and morals the “great resemblance among all human creatures” is just what allows us “to enter into the sentiments of others.”³² Whereas apparent similitudes between objects can always dissemble more important dissimilitudes, apparent dissimilitudes between persons can always be overcome by similitudes that lead to sympathy, thereby rendering the sentiments of others “intimately present to us” (T 320). Of course, in order to “enter so deep into the opinions and affections of others” (T 319) we must first read “external signs in the countenance and conversation” (T 317) and “find a parallel in ourselves” (T 318). But according to Hume, these signs do not provoke interpretive or inferential difficulties: “From *these* we infer the passion: And consequently *these* give rise to our sympathy” (T 576). Hence, the ease with which one can analogically infer another’s passion allows Hume to claim, famously, “that the minds of men are mirrors to one another” (T 365).³³

When one contrasts Hume’s uncompromising skepticism toward relationality as such with what Nancy Yousef refers to as his “improbable confidence about our intimacy with other persons,” the concept of sympathy, much like the Romantic symbol, begins to look like a somewhat paradoxical attempt to overcome the limits of analogical relations through an analogical concept.³⁴ Indeed, insofar as the *telos* of Hume’s conception of sympathy entails the fantasy of total intimacy and identification between self and other, one might say that sympathy is to interpersonal relations what the symbol is to the relation between mind and nature. As with the symbol, the eighteenth-century development of the concept of sympathy runs counter to the increasingly apparent limits of analogy as an epistemological pattern, while also registering dissatisfaction with these limits. And as with critiques of the symbol, critiques of sympathy register dissatisfaction with analogy, too, either because of its constitutive limits or because it

32. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 61, 318. Hereafter cited in the text as T.

33. See Wordsworth’s adaptation of this formulation in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, where the poet “considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature” (606).

34. Yousef, *Romantic Intimacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 7.

seems—though inevitably fails—to erase these limits by establishing an illusory form of sameness between persons. However one posits and construes the relation between the mind–nature problem and the problem of the other, both would seem to boil down to the problem of analogy and its discontents.³⁵

In recent years, such discontent has quietly informed the turn toward ethics in Wordsworth scholarship, a turn that takes its cue from Emmanuel Levinas’s influential critique of the “primacy of the same” in Western philosophy.³⁶ Bringing renewed attention to the ways in which Wordsworth explores the contours of relational experience, particularly in his “poetry of encounter,”³⁷ critics such as Yousef, Adam Potkay, and David Simpson have compellingly situated poems like “The Discharged Soldier,” “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” and the “hunger-bitten girl” passage of *The Prelude* in the context of the eighteenth-century moral philosophies of Hume and Adam Smith.³⁸ In each case, Wordsworth is portrayed as inheriting the concept of sympathy, showing up its limitations, and offering a more complex account of relationality that emphasizes difference and prioritizes an ethical relation over a relation of knowledge or comprehension. If twentieth-century critics distinguished Romanticism from the eighteenth century by positioning the former beyond analogy, many recent readers have done so by placing Romanticism beyond the concept of sympathy.

In the rest of this essay I want to argue that Wordsworth’s early and only drama *The Borderers* similarly engages tensions intrinsic to sympathetic identification and eighteenth-century British philosophy, but that this engagement emphasizes the importance of the epistemic to the ethical, rather than prioritizing the ethical over the epistemic. Or, to put it somewhat differently, I want to argue that Wordsworth’s drama further scrutinizes how “external signs in the countenance and conversation” condition relational

35. See Cavell’s *In Quest of the Ordinary*, where he ruminates on whether material-object skepticism or other-minds skepticism is more fundamental, only to conclude that “we do not know what constitutes living our skepticism” (55).

36. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 45.

37. This term was first used by Frederick Garber in *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Encounter* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971) to describe the poet’s reflections on his encounters with objects of all sorts, though it has since come to refer more specifically to those poems in which Wordsworth’s speakers encounter vagrants, laborers, and children.

38. See Chapters 2 (“Close Encounters 1”) and 3 (“Close Encounters 2”) in Potkay’s *Wordsworth’s Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); Chapter 1 (“At the Limits of Sympathy”) in Simpson’s *Wordsworth, Commodification, and Social Concern: The Poetics of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Chapter 3 (“Sentimental Justice: Hume, Wordsworth, and the Ends of Sympathy”) in Yousef’s *Romantic Intimacy*.

experience so as to expose the shortcomings of both sympathy- and alterity-based ethical models, rather than invoking ethics to expose the shortcomings of analogy.

The Countenance

Set on the anarchic border of Scotland and England during the Baronial revolts of the thirteenth century, *The Borderers* focuses “almost exclusively” on “the passions and the characters, and the position in which the persons in the drama st[and] relatively to each other.”³⁹ The plot is driven by Mortimer’s desire to discern the nature of the relationship between Matilda, his apparent love interest, and Herbert, a blind and dispossessed baron who claims Matilda is his daughter—it is driven, that is, by the question of whether Matilda is bound to Herbert by a relation of blood. While the Iago-esque Rivers manufactures this question through a series of fictive tales that effectively convince Mortimer that Herbert is an impostor, Rivers would then seem to settle the matter upon revealing his act of deception in Act 4 and proclaiming Herbert’s innocence.

Or perhaps not. After all, Rivers’s confession only proves that Rivers was lying, not that Herbert was telling the truth about being Matilda’s father. In fact, when the play ends, both Matilda’s parentage and Herbert’s honesty remain questionable.⁴⁰ As though to underscore such uncertainty, Wordsworth stages a short scene in which Herbert has a chance for his paternal claim to be corroborated by an unbiased outsider of sorts, an unnamed pilgrim who plays no other role in the drama than to do just that. Informing Matilda that he knew Herbert long ago when Herbert was a “wandering outcast” (2.ii.14), this pilgrim then proceeds to tell her a story about an afternoon he once spent with Herbert in a cave, avoiding a storm. “No doubt you’ve heard the tale a thousand times,” he begins, “It was a dreary afternoon . . .” (2.ii.25–26). But it soon becomes clear that Matilda has not heard the story, as she interjects to ask, “And I was with you?”⁴¹

39. Wordsworth, “The Fenwick Note (1843),” in *The Borderers*, ed. Robert Osborn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 814. All quotations from *The Borderers*, hereafter cited in the text, are from this edition and refer to the Early Version of the drama unless otherwise noted.

40. Reeve Parker brilliantly argues that there is an untoward truth in Rivers’s tales insofar as Herbert indeed attempts to bind Matilda in tyrannical ways. See *Romantic Tragedies: The Dark Employments of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 13–32. Marjean Purinton, however, seems to be the only critic who has noticed that Rivers’s confession does not prove Herbert’s filial connection to Matilda. See *Romantic Ideology Unmasked: The Mentally Constructed Tyrannies in Dramas of William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and Joanna Baillie* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994), 39. For a reading that historicizes the significance of the illegitimacy thematic, see Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 225–310.

41. Here I cite from the 1842 version (line 701). This line is identical in both versions

The pilgrim, however, does not immediately confirm Matilda's relation to Herbert, as she desires, but responds, "If indeed 'twas you—" (2.ii.31), appropriately suspending the filial relation on a dash, a mark that severs while still eliciting articulation. Wordsworth thus composes a scene that serves no other purpose than to prove or disprove the filial relation and yet chooses not to do so, instead leaving open the question of the relation between Herbert and Matilda.

More interesting than this question itself, however, is the method through which the *dramatis personae* attempt to find an answer. After the pilgrim admits to Matilda that he does not know if she was the "tottering little one" (2.ii.32) whom he saw long ago, he then recalls Herbert's "countenance" in an effort to confirm that it was indeed her:

His countenance, methinks I see it now,
When after a broad flash that filled the cave
He said to me that he had seen his child
—A face—and a confused gleam of human flesh,
And it was you, dear Lady.

(2.ii.43–48)

The pilgrim thus eventually establishes a relation between Herbert and Matilda by first attempting to imagine Herbert's face and then attempting to imagine—hers? "A face" that gives way to "a confused gleam of human flesh" hardly establishes a filial connection, and hardly seems intended to do so. On the contrary, by juxtaposing the figural (face) with the material (flesh), this scene underscores how the face, as figure, can work to produce a "confused" mode of imagined identification. "Deceptive appearances cloud characters' perceptions in *The Borderers*," as Marjean Purinton notes, yet Wordsworth does not locate truth or knowledge in some realm beyond appearance.⁴² Instead, he deliberately foregrounds "that romantic notion of judging people by their faces," so central to eighteenth-century sentimentalism, in order to test how the countenance functions and founders as a bridge between epistemology and ethics.⁴³

Throughout the drama, faces and countenances are commented upon as though they might offer some form of knowledge that cannot otherwise be understood or conveyed. For Matilda, the face would seem to contain a sympathetic and persuasive power. When she attempts to convince Herbert that Mortimer is worthy of her love, for example, she stresses that the

with the exception that it does not end with a question mark in the earlier version. In both, the pilgrim's response to Matilda is the same.

42. Purinton, *Romantic Ideology Unmasked*, 39.

43. Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, ed. Chloe Chard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 256.

latter's "face bespeaks / A deep and simple meekness" (1.1.136–37); when, on the other hand, she attempts to convince both Herbert and herself that Mortimer is not Herbert's rival, she "behold[s] the ruins of [Herbert's] face" and "The name of Mortimer is blown away" (1.1.106, 109). When she then later tries to make Mortimer appreciate the hold that Herbert has exerted over her, she figures his face as a site of obligation:

Could I behold his face, could I behold
The terrible pleading of that face of his
And could I feel his arms and hear him pray
That I would not forsake him nor permit
My heart to abandon him in his old age—.

(3.v.131–135)

And when she is in disbelief that Herbert could have been murdered, such disbelief is generated by her belief in the protective power of his visage: "Oh! had you seen him living!—he had a face— / There's not a soul—" (5.iii.49–50). For Mortimer, meanwhile, the appearance of Herbert's face leads him to doubt—or want to doubt—Rivers's tales. The first time he sees Herbert he states: "I would fain hope that we deceive ourselves: / When I beheld him sitting there, alone, / It struck upon my heart—I know not how" (1.iii.1–3). And when he tries but fails to murder Herbert it is because "There was something in his face the very counterpart of Matilda" (2.iii.272), because her features "Lurked in his face" (1842 version, 968), "Her very looks smiling in sleep" (2.iii.276). As he then relates to Rivers: "I tell thee I saw him, his / face towards me—the very looks of Matilda sent there by some fiend to baffle me" (in the 1842 version: "Idonea's filial countenance was there / To baffle me") (2.iii.287–89; 986–87).

Readers who have noted the prominence of the countenance in *The Borderers* have somewhat predictably argued that Wordsworth is interested in an ethics based in—or on—the face of the other. In part, this ethics would seem implicated in Wordsworth's choice of genre. For Melynda Nuss, "performance offers its own sort of knowledge to compensate for the lack of a narrative voice," and "[r]eading the physical," particularly the countenance, is just this compensation: "Seeing the face brings into focus the nature of vision that *The Borderers* presents. As the traditional reading suggests, the play is about knowledge, but the knowledge Wordsworth seeks is . . . the knowledge that can be gained from seeing the face, and realizing, as Mortimer does too late, that 'We are all of one blood.'"⁴⁴ For

44. Nuss, "Look in My Face: The Dramatic Ethics of *The Borderers*," *SiR* 43, no. 4 (2004): 602, 607.

Adam Potkay, on the other hand, Wordsworth's "hyperconscious meditation on *seeing faces*" is more proto-Levinasian and thus more invested in the otherness of the other than in the other as a relation of blood.⁴⁵ Both Wordsworth and Levinas, he argues, "ground ethics in a face-to-face encounter with an other that cannot be fully comprehended," and this ethics is exemplified in *The Borderers* when "Mortimer freely undertakes to kill Herbert, and, seeing his face, finds that he cannot."⁴⁶ Although Nuss suggests Mortimer tragically learns to see the face as a source of knowledge only after it is too late, she too claims that "[s]eeing the face prevents Mortimer from killing Herbert."⁴⁷ For both Nuss and Potkay, then, the countenance, particularly Herbert's, functions in *The Borderers* as a site of either ethical knowledge or an ethical demand.

There are, however, fundamental problems with this line of reading. For one, Potkay's claim that Mortimer's inability to kill Herbert exemplifies a Levinasian ethics, wherein one responds to the "sheer *otherness* of each living face we encounter," is certainly an odd one to make, given that Mortimer only spares Herbert's life because he sees "the very looks of Matilda" in Herbert's face. Far from being something "one cannot assimilate" or "appropriate for one's own enjoyment," Herbert's face is something of a transferential canvas.⁴⁸ After all, Mortimer chooses not to slit Herbert's throat, not because he encounters the irreducible alterity of Herbert, but because he sees Herbert *as*, or *like*, Matilda—an explicitly assimilative act of analogical perception that also allows him to derive his own enjoyment: "I must see / That face of his again," he tells Rivers after failing to kill Herbert, "I must behold it—'Twere joy enough to end me" (2.iii.308–10). The face of the other is not a given that is then effaced by analogy, but a figure given by an analogical structure that is itself effaced by the privileging of alterity. Rather than registering a disruptive recognition of the other as absolute Other, Mortimer's act of looking at Herbert's face is openly transferential—which, it turns out, may well make for a more ethical outcome. For it seems quite likely that Mortimer would have killed Herbert had he perceived Herbert's "sheer *otherness*."

Still, however ethical, Mortimer's reading of Herbert's countenance would seem to support Nuss's argument that "[s]eeing brings knowledge."⁴⁹ With no other way to know whether Herbert is truly Matilda's father, Mortimer would seem to see his way to the truth of their relation by simply recognizing that Herbert resembles Matilda. The resemblance be-

45. Potkay, *Wordsworth's Ethics*, 40.

46. Potkay, *Wordsworth's Ethics*, 43, 44.

47. Nuss, "Look in My Face," 607.

48. Potkay, *Wordsworth's Ethics*, 43, 44.

49. Nuss, "Look in My Face," 616.

tween their respective countenances would thus seem to confirm their relation of blood—unless, of course, Herbert “hath got a face / Which doth play tricks with them that look upon it” (2.iii.227–28). Certainly, such trickery figures in the rest of the countenances that Mortimer encounters. When Rivers has a beggar lie and claim she is Matilda’s mother, Mortimer similarly seems to believe he can see Matilda’s “filial countenance” in her visage: “(*Looking at her stedfastly in the face*) / You are Matilda’s mother? / Nay, be not terrified—it does me good / To look upon you” (1.iii.163–65). And when Mortimer then observes a peasant whom Rivers has claimed Lord Clifford drove insane, Mortimer once again glimpses the counterpart of Matilda: “Oh Rivers! when I looked upon that woman / I thought I saw a skeleton of Matilda” (2.i.32–33). How reliable, then, is the knowledge that Mortimer derives from seeing Matilda in Herbert’s face? In any case, it is not lasting and does not stop Mortimer from leaving Herbert to die. Moreover, Herbert’s face can just as easily signify the exact opposite. After Rivers confesses to his act of deception and proclaims Herbert’s innocence, Mortimer contradicts him by citing Herbert’s face as undeniable proof of Herbert’s *guilt*: “’Twas in his face—I saw it in his face— / I’ve crushed the foulest crime” (4.ii.194–95). As an epistemic site in *The Borderers*, the face is much more a locus of uncertainty than of certainty. If, as Nuss argues, the act of seeing the face of another establishes a “relationship of psychic knowledge,” then it also demonstrates that such knowledge is constitutively deceptive.⁵⁰ The countenance thus functions throughout the drama as an “external sign” that draws together the tenets of Hume’s skepticism and his moral sentimentalism, signaling their tension without offering any resolution. The broader stakes of this tension, however, are played out in the relation between Rivers and Mortimer.

Conversation

Though readers usually characterize Rivers as a “man of reason” who embodies the worst aspects of Godwinian rationalism, his character more intriguingly figures the theoretical proximity between expected sympathy and potential antipathy that Hume’s philosophy leaves in its wake. Rivers’s seemingly motiveless malignity is, after all, explained as stemming from a deep, compulsive desire for sympathetic identification. Or at least such is the explanation Rivers himself offers to Mortimer when, after confessing to his own past crime, he dramatically unveils his act of deception:

The mask
Which for a season I have stooped to wear,
Must be cast off.—Know then that I was urged,

50. Nuss, “Look in My Face,” 604.

(For other impulse let it pass) was driven,
 To seek for sympathy, because I saw
 In you a mirror of my youthful self.

(1842 version, 1860–1864)

Rivers thus reveals himself to be, deep down, a “man of feeling,” as he takes the desire for interpersonal sympathy to its logical endpoint, namely, a narcissistic “impulse” toward sameness and seamless self-reflection.⁵¹ “I’ll have him / A shadow of myself, made by myself” (5.i.32–33), he declares elsewhere, the enjambment between the two lines underscoring the appropriative desire that underwrites his sympathetic relation with Mortimer, while also hinting at its possibly erotic dimension.⁵² Having perceived a resemblance between Mortimer and his “youthful self,” Rivers does not look for some “puling sympathy” (3.v.80) or fellow feeling; instead, he seeks to perfect their analogy to the point of total identification—which, by most accounts, he succeeds in doing. By manipulating Mortimer into repeating his own past crime, Rivers not only figuratively enslaves his leader “by a chain of adamant” (4.ii.187); as critics have it, he also effaces any meaningful difference between their persons, thereby rendering them “doubles” of each other.

Seeking to undermine Rivers’s delusions of mastery and autonomy, readers from Geoffrey Hartman to David Collings have construed such doubling through the Freudian concept of repetition compulsion. After all, as Hartman writes, “[o]ne needs little psychology to see how deeply compulsive [Rivers] is: the crime he instigates is practically identical to his own.”⁵³ Thus, as much as Rivers may live by the belief that “There is no law but what each man makes for himself” (2.i.53), critics have seen to it that he ultimately submit to the law of the death drive, which is routinely cited as the key to unlocking what William Jewett refers to as the drama’s “master plot of ‘strange repetition.’”⁵⁴ What would seem to be truly antisocial about Rivers, then, is not just that he tricks Mortimer into killing an old man, but that his desire for sympathy points up the existence of a dark

51. Rivers’s “sympathy” is what Wordsworth would seem to have in mind when he writes in his prefatory “Essay on the Character of Rivers” of “moral sentiments to which we attach a sacred importance applied to vicious purposes” (*The Borderers* 67).

52. For a discussion of the largely understudied “homosexual, or at least violently homosocial,” relation between Rivers and Mortimer, see David Collings, *Wordsworthian Errancies: The Poetics of Cultural Dismemberment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 59.

53. Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787–1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 130.

54. Jewett, *Fatal Autonomy: Romantic Drama and the Rhetoric of Agency* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 82.

and disorderly force of repetition that takes on an almost cosmological significance in the world of *The Borderers*.⁵⁵ Indeed, the “uncanny power” of repetition compulsion is seen as so omnipotent in Wordsworth’s drama that it would even seem to take hold of those who read the work. According to Jewett, it is “affectively impossible to read *The Borderers* without feeling the power of the *idea* of compulsion—without, that is, taking compulsion seriously.”⁵⁶

But how seriously does Rivers take the idea of repetition compulsion? And how seriously should we take Rivers? It has become customary for critics to point to Wordsworth’s rather obscure prefatory “Essay on the Character of Rivers” as evidence that the action of the drama “obeys the logic of repetition compulsion,” particularly to the following lines in which Wordsworth offers general—albeit almost unreadable—reflections on moral psychology:⁵⁷

in a course of criminal conduct every fresh step that we make appears a justification of the one that preceded it; it seems to bring back again the moment of liberty and choice; it banishes the idea of repentance and seems to set remorse at defiance. Every time we plan a fresh accumulation of our guilt we have restored to us something like that original state of mind, that perturbed pleasure, which first made the crime attractive. (Wordsworth, *The Borderers*, 67)

But however much Rivers’s deception of Mortimer might bring on a pleasure “like” that which first attracted him to the crime, the play’s entire theme of repetition compulsion hangs, not on a likeness between Rivers’s psychological states of liberty, guilt, and/or perturbed pleasure, nor even on a likeness between Mortimer’s actions and Rivers’s purported past actions, but on Rivers’s own autobiographical account of these past actions, a confession wherein he purports to cast off his mask and lay bare how he, too, was once tricked into leaving an innocent man to die. Now, critics have noted how *The Borderers* foregrounds the persuasive, binding power of narrative; they have also noted that Rivers is “the arch-storyteller” of the drama, “a master at weaving a fiction.”⁵⁸ And yet no one, to my

55. For Purinton, Rivers’s confession “serves as a microcosmic version of the rebellion cycle depicted throughout the play. It is an analogue, on the personal level, of the revolutionary process depicted in *The Borderers* on a collective social/political level” (*Romantic Ideology Unmasked*, 46).

56. Jewett, *Fatal Autonomy*, 86, 81.

57. David Bromwich, *Disowned by Memory: Wordsworth’s Poetry of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 57.

58. Parker, *Romantic Tragedies*, 25; Purinton, *Romantic Ideology Unmasked*, 43.

knowledge, has brought these two observations together to ask what would really seem to be an obvious question—namely, why should we take Rivers's autobiographical narrative at face value, as though it were a truthful and transparently literal account of his personal history? Is it not possible—indeed more than possible—that the arch-storyteller's confession is simply another of what he calls his “daring fictions” (1842 version, 368)? Just about everything in the drama suggests that Rivers's supposed confession should probably be met with a good dose of skepticism. The fact that it is not—the fact that readers consistently refer to Rivers as a lying sociopath and yet unquestioningly accept the literality of his final story—demonstrates that the concepts of repetition and repetition compulsion, much like the affinities and correspondences of Renaissance neo-Platonism, can function to impose a sense of order on an otherwise anarchic world. To be sure, it may well be the case that Rivers desires to manipulate Mortimer into becoming his sympathetic double. Yet such doubling is only effected in and through Rivers's life story, a story that may well be not only Rivers's but also the drama's ultimate trick of manipulation.

Indeed, Wordsworth seems to suggest that this story is merely a fictive parable. As Rivers's narrative unfolds it becomes more and more abstract; it quickly turns into a general tale about the road to self-consciousness and the act of throwing off the “feeble props” (4.ii.162) of superstition. It also functions as a literary device that Rivers uses to deliver his lesson with dramatic flair. As his tale concludes, and Mortimer still struggles to understand its greater significance, Rivers climactically states: “Think of my story— / Herbert is innocent” (4.ii.211–12). He thereby reveals that the purpose of his parable just was to reveal to Mortimer that he had tricked him into killing Herbert. And, really, Mortimer should have caught on much earlier, perhaps when Rivers embellished the repetition to the point of farce, claiming, almost tauntingly, that his supposed victim also “had a daughter . . . a lovely maid” (4.ii.80, 82). Since Mortimer is not a very good reader of narrative, however, he refers to this daughter as though she were someone other than Matilda—only to have Rivers reproach him: “You do not listen to me” (4.ii.92). Rivers's tale is didactic: it may well be a narrative crafted to allow Mortimer to understand his new-found “liberty” (4.ii.106), or it may simply be the ultimate fiction in Rivers's efforts to bind Mortimer as his double. In any case, the all-too-strange pattern of repetition this tale would seem to establish should really lead us to ask the question Mortimer puts to Rivers slightly earlier in the play: “Wherefore this repetition?” (3.v.43).

The point I am trying to drive home, however, is not that Rivers is definitely lying to Mortimer, but that his analogical tale does not defin-

itively establish a relation of sameness or difference between them.⁵⁹ On the one hand, the drama stages a movement toward sympathetic identification that culminates in Rivers's autobiographical confession, thereby taking the desire for sympathy to the endpoint of utter sameness. Rivers's compulsion to sympathy—his desire to make and to possess Mortimer as an image of himself—thus seems to stand as both the central threat to and the ruling principle of the tenuous social order found in *The Borderers*; it figures the “impersonal mechanism of repetition that appears to govern the replication of action.”⁶⁰ And yet, on the other hand, this movement toward sameness that finds its end in repetition is staged as a process of *deception*. The reduction of difference to the point of identity, to the point where Rivers renders Mortimer's person identical to his own, is the *telos*, not of some ontological or cosmological force of negativity, but of a prolonged and elaborate act of manipulation. Rivers's confession is his most cunning fiction precisely because it cements the fatal illusion that he and Mortimer are the same.⁶¹

The final deception enacted in and through *The Borderers* thus depends not so much upon the veracity or falsity of Rivers's uncanny tale as upon how this tale effectively disguises the very rhetorical structure that makes it seem uncanny. As the play draws to a close, Mortimer describes his own fate in terms of compulsion and is convinced he will forever be bound to Rivers by “links of sympathy” (1842 version, 2276); “they remain joined in a silent partnership,” writes Alan Richardson, “still doubles and still linked in a reflexive struggle . . . without [Mortimer] so much as attempting to

59. That Wordsworth intended for Rivers's confession to be met with skepticism is further suggested by his inclusion of a short scene in which the band of borderers put Rivers's past on trial, only to prove nothing. In Act 3, the borderer Norwood mentions he has “often heard / Dark rumours of some strange and heinous crime / Which [Rivers] committed in his youth” (3.iv.15–17), and the others then call forth the borderer Lennox, who sailed with Rivers near Syria, to act as witness to Rivers's rumored but unnamed crime. Lennox, however, who plays a role roughly analogous to that of the unnamed pilgrim in the Herbert-Matilda connection, does not confirm the “Dark rumours” but instead tells the others that, in Syria, Rivers “did despise alike / Mohammedon and Christian”—and hence the band sets off to kill Rivers, not because of any crime he committed, but because of his inferred atheism, because “when the name of God is spoken of / A most strange blankness overspreads his face” (3.iv.19–22).

60. Jewett, *Fatal Autonomy*, 82.

61. It is worth noting that Freud himself describes as superstitious “the idea of something fateful and inescapable” that follows from the apparent repetition of events. For Freud, it is not that what we perceive as uncanny instantiates the compulsion to repeat, but rather that “whatever reminds us of the inner ‘compulsion to repeat’ is perceived as uncanny.” See “The Uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 237, 238.

break the chain itself.”⁶² In the end, Mortimer’s tragic error, or *hamartia*, is not that he reads Rivers’s tales as though they were transparently literal, nor even that he perceives a relation of sympathy or similitude between their persons. The tragedy is that he treats this relation as though it were founded on something more intimate than analogy.

Analogy, Limited

“I have always been hostile to analogical forms of thought and art,” states Roland Barthes in a 1975 interview, explaining that his “denunciation of analogy is in fact a denunciation of the ‘natural,’ of pseudo-nature. The social, conformist world always bases its idea of nature on the fact that things resemble each other,” he continues, “and the resulting idea of nature is both artificial and repressive: the ‘natural.’”⁶³ And yet, as Barthes’s language of artificiality indicates, analogy de-naturalizes just as much as it naturalizes; the relations it establishes are of a pseudo-nature, or “nature,” that resists as much as abets the naturalization it is charged with performing. The problem with analogy, then, is not so much that it does or does not naturalize, but that it suggests there really is no nature without scare quotes, no nature that is not also somewhat artificial—and no artificiality that is not also somewhat natural. Analogy only ever pretends to a relation because it shows how relations are always tenuous and somewhat pretend.

This is not bad news. One of this essay’s basic claims is that analogy might be valued precisely because of its obstinate rhetoricity and its inability to establish clear-cut distinctions between sameness and difference. On the whole, criticism has construed this inability as a threat or a deficiency, taking its cue from an intellectual history in which analogical reasoning is said to have “little real value” after Hume.⁶⁴ But if “humanity seems doomed to Analogy,” as Barthes laments elsewhere, then dwelling with its ambiguities makes more sense than searching for ways to overcome them.⁶⁵ Symbol and allegory, sympathy and alterity, repetition and singularity—critical practice is rife with concepts that often depend upon an analogical structure they seem designed to surpass, as though a thinking of relationality necessitated “access to the Other outside of rhetoric, which is ruse,

62. Richardson, *A Mental Theater: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1988), 37.

63. Barthes, “Twenty Key Words for Roland Barthes,” in *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 208.

64. Wasserman, “Nature Moralized,” 57.

65. Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 44.

emprise, and exploitation.”⁶⁶ But what *The Borderers* demonstrates is that all the problems *with* analogy—its so-called dangers, ruses, seductions, and shortcomings—are not so much the result *of* analogy as the result of reading analogies as though they were situated beyond the rhetorical. In place of the ethics and politics of identity and alterity, a reexamination of the various species of analogy and their terms of resemblance, likeness, similitude, and dissimilitude might renew a thinking of relationality in the Romantic period and beyond. After all, such rhetorical qualities better capture the way we relate than conceptual schemas of sameness and difference, which, however destabilized, understate the complexity not only of the relations that structure critical practice, but also those that structure thought as we know it.

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66. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 72.

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