**Writing Romanticism at the End of the World:**

**Love and Loneliness in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* and *Matilda***

If I am destined to be happy with you here, how short is the longest life.

John Keats to Fanny Brawne

Deh, vienti ti aspetto.

Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*

Stranger Things

It is a truth universally acknowledged that being a scholar is a lonely, solitary pursuit and profession, full of long days reading in silent communion (one hopes) with oneself, perhaps with the companionship of some books in want of a critical analysis, or perhaps secluded in library rare books rooms, or chasing down some half-forgotten (or is it half-remembered) quote—or, just as often, sequestered in a room of one’s own at home chasing that flighty, fluttering, friable, flying thing we call writing. Of course, while this, shall we say, romanticized description glints with truth, scholars also know this “self-evident” truth to be largely self-evident rubbish as even the briefest of glances at, say, any monograph’s acknowledgements movingly testifies to the it-takes-a-village ethos of all scholarly writing endeavors. In fact, my first book, *Romantic Revelations*, about the post-apocalyptic visions Romanticism conjures up in reaction to fears about the changing climate writers of the period witnessed as a result of 1816’s year without a summer, found a dense colloquy of fellows in its converse with not only the voices long past of the period but with scholars writing in what we might with some honesty call the dread despair of the here and now.

For what once was in 1816, in terms of climate change disasters and global pandemics, seems to now be again (if it ever were not) and Romantic writing, creative and critical, from then to now, continues to tarry with horrific visions and realities about both the end of the world and the end of the human species. In some ways, Mary Shelley’s pandemic novel, *The Last Man* (1826), prefigures, or, if you like, prophecies, the moment we are living through with the COVID-19 virus and the disaster of climate change evidenced in, to choose but one example, the mass wild fires in California, Oregon, and Washington in the summer of 2020 that made the sun appear dim red, like in John Martin’s *Last Man* (1849) painting, surrounded by a burnt orange coronal sky. Isolated in our homes for months, we might all even begin to sympathize with Lionel at novel’s end who, alone and at the species’ amort, with vague prospects of finding a companion, takes it upon himself to write down the events of the plague that wiped out, mostly, the human species with the exception, of course, of Lionel himself who sets sail at novel’s end into the ocean’s vast unknown. He sets sail all alone aside from some books, a dog, and a companionate loneliness that compels him to seek out others, to fly forth into a world seemingly well lost to the pandemic’s decimating destruction.

It is in this theorization of lastness that, I want to argue, Romantic writing of the sort we see in the novel indexes this ontological, singular, accompanying loneliness as life itself.[[1]](#footnote-1) The dilemma of last-person-ness is the dilemma of both epistemological and ontological uncertainty, an uncertainty that stems from what it would mean to know you are the last person. How could one be sure? One would need to be omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, which would mean one were not terrestrial at all, but a god of some variation.[[2]](#footnote-2) Concurrently, since a condition of being alive is that one may become the last person, then being human contains within it the condition that we are all already extinct. If this were not so, then we would be sempiternal. In other words, lastness, the condition of lastness, means we are all already the last man, the last woman, the last genderfluid, or last non-binary person.[[3]](#footnote-3) This sorities would also mean that if lastness is a condition of life then so is loneliness in the sense of the specific loneliness lastness is. But the nature of this loneliness, unlike the scholarly imaginary spun out above, is far from self-evident.

Lionel’s loneliness, and arguably the loneliness of Romanticism, is best understood as the realization that the hope for any companionship has already long been extinguished by, paradoxically, strangely, companionship’s own ontological nature as loneliness. We might turn to Percy Shelley’s state of nature imaginary in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) to see how loneliness as sketched out in the novel scrambles the definition of companionship Shelley famously articulates. Shelley writes that “the social sympathies, or those laws from which as from its elements society results, begin to develope [sic] themselves from the moment that two human beings coexist.”[[4]](#footnote-4) When two persons meet in the state of nature, this meeting founds the social sympathies, the laws that we call norms that then engender society itself. Shelley’s vision of the social’s origin unfolds in chronologically temporal fashion—“the future is contained within the present as the plant within the seed”—and something akin to this notion surfaces at the site of the Sybil’s Cave that opens *The Last Man* (511).

Only, in this scene, Shelley’s *Defence*-dictum is dizzied by companionship’s essential, internal, lonely yearning for a futurity whose horizon dims under the shade of the sun that would illuminate it. In 1818, when the two anonymous travelers enter the Cave, they find the scattered, multilingual, fragmentary jottings, the scholium, as it were, on the Sybilline apograph:

What appeared to us more astonishing, was that these writings were expressed

in various languages: some unknown to my companion, ancient Chaldee, and Egyptian hieroglyphics, old as the Pyramids. Stranger still, some were in modern dialects, English and Italian. (5)

The linguistic virtuosity on display in the writing sunders companionate understanding—we might even risk saying social sympathies—entire; the companion, in not knowing the vast array of global languages on display, essentially estranges him or her or theirself from our unnamed, un-gendered narrator and, what’s more, slices and dices the globe into regions of the known and unknown thus constricting, reducing, and compartmentalizing the world as, from the look of it, thoroughly Western in its orientation—a clear colonialist thought process.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Stranger still, estrangement is “stranger still.” For at the moment the narrator, on behalf of the companion, is returned to the Western world from the alienating unknown of Chaldea and Egypt, the revelation unfolds that “modern dialects,” English and Italian, which, presumably, a narrator writing in English in Italy would be aware of, are pronounced “stranger still.” But not because these dialects are unknown: they are strange precisely because they are *known*. The known, for some reason, is stranger than the unknown, the *heimlich* more *unheimlich* than the *unheimlich*. What is homely becomes unhomely and the one who inhabits a home becomes an alien or foreigner in their own home, estranged from others—lonely near those they know, their companions, just like our narrator who, unable to speak with their companion in the foreign languages the companion does not know, Chaldean and Egyptian, or, apparently, the languages the companion does know, English and Italian, no *longer does* speak with the companion. The nature, the being, of companionship, in effect, creates loneliness from the cosmopolitanism the narrative covets but dispossesses in its xenophobic colonialist logic that estranges areas of the globe from each other. After all, the companion disappears because of his or her or their inability to help read the texts, his or her or their inability to learn about others through their language, and the narrator is left alone. In other words, in circumscribing the world, the companion compartmentalizes the narrator into that smallest of units, the solitary self. The consequent effect is that the self of the narrator is not just a solitary self, then, but *the world itself*, the whole world as and in the self.[[6]](#footnote-6)

What is more, the uncanny alienation of the self that makes stranger things of the demotic known, is, it turns out, not grounded in anthropocentric, heliocentric time. For the prophecies themselves are not preterist, prophesying not just events of the future, since we know the narrative of the novel is dated 2073, but also events of the present, “relations of events but lately passed,” and, it follows then, of the past as well since this present is already passed according to our unnamed narrator. It is perhaps something like what Barbara Johnson calls the “interminable death of the penultimate,” where the question is not “how to begin speaking of the end, but how to *finish* speaking of it.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Or, we might say, when does this novel, indeed, end, if its beginning takes place after its end all while ostensibly taking place *in the narrator’s own present*? If prophecy tells the future here it tells the future not just, as Percy Shelley would have it, as seeded from the present, but the future as both the past and present *and* future *at once*; more, then, the future is taking place simultaneously in the past, present, and a future that have all *already occurred*. The future is taking place in the narrator’s present, because the narrator is writing it, even as that future is already passed, the past. The temporal effect is, thus, stranger still as well since it erases the distinctiveness of heliocentric human time that underwrites human history. What is written on the leaves, then, if we follow this uncanny temporal logic, in this very “moment” of the narrator’s narration, is the story the narrator is telling us and the story of past events *and* the story of *The Last Man*, which is a future the narrator cannot know but is writing, nonetheless, as she, he, or they is simultaneously reading it, *right now*.[[8]](#footnote-8) The narrator writes what the narrator cannot, as yet, know and, what’s more, they know they do not know it, and in not-knowing it, not-knowingly writing it, know it, know the story they do not know. Therefore, we can say that the very thing they write on the leaves *is* weird, non-anthropocentric, non-heliocentric time because it is non-epistemological and non-ontological time. It is a timeless time, timeless because unbound by time, by human time, a different time that we might properly recognize as not *contingent* on human beings (and in this sense, we can follow Peter Melville who says it is an ethical story about “hospitality to come” in the “unpredictable future.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

This type of fortuity is akin to how Quentin Meillassoux describes contingency, which he argues is the only turtles-all-the-way-down foundational natural law that exists, in that the paradoxical problem of what he calls “correlationism”—our anthropocentric idea that we are necessary *for* the world to be—also demonstrates that we may not be necessary for the world. But the novel goes further, stranger, still, than Meillassoux. Contingency in the novel transforms the “dim light” of the sun—that is, anthropocentric time—that casts the shadows in the cave in this Platonic moment and thereby reorients notions of the world by displacing humans from the world, from even being a part of the world. Like the companionable logic that proves un-hospitable to the very notion of companionability, the loneliness inherent in the enclosed human world makes humans exorbitant to the world. A human is an enclosed world but not of the world, not indubitably connected to the world but rather contingent, just a hanger-on, riding out onto the sea, an indifferent sea, like Lionel. No longer oriented to the world, humans shall have to wander all alone looking for others, other human beings, to anchor themselves, as if they are lost vessels at sea bidding their sails search and search (to crib a phrase from Nietzsche), for some island’s shore, some other person. Humans, it turns out, accustomed to those social sympathies, think, believe, feel, that they need them. We might even say this is why I am writing this, this essay, this Romanticism in, at, of the end of the world.

In this sense, what I am calling “writing Romanticism” in this essay—which is also this essay, perhaps—as it confronts fortuity and futurity in our “moment,” realizes that if amity contains within it its own loneliness, then this realization concurrently negates the possibility of any human progress or achievement and, even, we see, negates any human history at all. Samantha Webb argues that “with his departure from Rome, Lionel Verney writes himself out of human history, only to be reinscribed into it by the voice of the Cumaean Sibyl and recuperated as history by the editor.”[[10]](#footnote-10) I want to suggest, divergently but not unrelatedly, that *The Last Man* is estranged *completely* in regard to and from human history. *The Last Man* is about writing at the end of the world as it is for humans (and, really, European, white humans, although the novel also indicates that the *hortus conclusus* of its paradise is post-anthropo tout court). Therefore *The Last Man* is the un-writing of the history of the last human, which is to say, the un-writing of human history from outside of human history.

What the novel shows us, then, strangely, or stranger still, in illustrating this contingent non-anthropocentric, non-heliocentric time, is that the self is a stranger thing too. Always interested in the solitary and the lonely, the creature in *Frankenstein*, the leper and Beatrice in *Valperga*, the mortal immortal in “The Mortal Immortal,” to name an exiguous few, Shelley’s point is not, finally, that companionship only leads to loneliness but that each person is always already riven with loneliness, a condition of selfhood, and the self’s only companionship is loneliness. Loneliness becomes a case not of *noli me tangere* but *non est potis contingere*: it is not possible to make contact, to connect; there is no complimentary or complementary togetherness possible. The search for the other that plays out in all of her work stages the disorientation of the human, to show us how each person is an isolated world, a last person. Moreover, since every human is a world they are, or, more accurately, have been, perforce, *lonely and alone at the end of the world for their whole lives and always will be*. And this is ontologically true, at least as Shelley sees it, for a last man, a last woman, a last non-binary person. It is in this regard that we can say that *The Last Man* is not some futuristic allegory but an ontological explanation of how a self is always alone in the world, the world of the both the self and the world outside the self that is not the self, the world.

The consequences of Shelley’s a-temporal futurity, this loneliness whose only companion is ontological loneliness, this loneliness that disorients the world of the self from the world, are severe and sadness-making in their totality and infinity. Shelley makes writing, writing Romanticism, a form of autobiography (although not, I think, in the sense commonly meant, whether biographical or pyschobiographical).[[11]](#footnote-11) Alone with loneliness, life, for any individual, means that, as we see in the novel’s primal scene of writing in the Sybil’s Cave, every life, like the narrator’s and Lionel’s, is autobiographical but in the sense of autobiography in the literal sense of self-life-writing. But it is an autobiographical writing that is, yes, stranger still. Like the narrator, like Lionel (who are, who are we kidding, if we follow the novel’s logic, the same person, us), we are all worlds, all alone, and just as the pandemic does in the novel, the coronavirus confronts us with the terrifying truth of contingency, that all writing is therefore autobiographical since it cannot be otherwise than lonely and that all writing is therefore a writing of the self, that is to say, the end of the world. It is the writing of the self that is already not there and whose writing continues to make the self disappear within each moment of that writing since each moment is lastness, the end, death, even as that lastness is interminable in life. Romanticism is always writing at and about the end of the world.

...still…

We can see something of how Shelley’s phenomenology—this loneliness that lastness is—presents in Derrida’s late lectures. The following is “one of the thousand directions” in which he would be “tempted to interpret the last line of a short and great poem by Celan”:

Between my world, the ‘my world,’ what I call ‘my world’—and there is no

other for me, as any other world is part of it—between my world and any other

world there is first the space and the time of an infinite difference, an interruption

that is incommensurable with all attempts to make a passage, a bridge…There is no world, only islands.[[12]](#footnote-12)

J. Hillis Miller finds this passage to be axiomatic in Derrida’s work, at odds with most of continental philosophy (Heidegger, Levinas, Blanchot, etc.) in that it severs *Dasein* and *Mitsein*. In the continental tradition, to be in the world necessarily places people in relation to other subjects, “to be there” is to “be with,” existentially and phenomenologically speaking. For Miller, though, Derrida’s Celan-passage provides concrete evidence that when Derrida writes, elsewhere, “*tout autre est tout autre*,” “every other is wholly other,” *he means it absolutely*. On Miller’s reading, for Derrida, unlike John Donne (“no man is an island”) and Jon Bon Jovi (“they say that no man is an island”), every person is an island, their own personal version of Robinson Crusoe’s enisled-ness (Defoe’s novel is one of two texts under discussion in Derrida’s late seminar), separated from all the other islands. And yet, Derrida’s thoughts on *Dasein* tread well beyond Miller’s reading (Derrida says this is but one way he would interpret Celan after all).

For Derrida, each individual is a world, an island in the world, but also its own world, hence, the “individual death I’ve often said was each time *the* end of *the* world, *the* end, the whole end of *the* world…the end of the world in general, the absolute end of the world” (*BS* II, 260). It is the death of an enclosed world of that person, the world they alone know and we can never fully know, but the death of a world we witness and know only through the fact that we cannot phenomenologically know it: “no one will ever be able to demonstrate…that two human beings, you and I for example, inhabit the same world, that the world is one and the same thing for both of us” (265). If each person is a world, forever unconnected from other worlds in existential solitude, then death, for each person, is the death of not only their world but the death of a whole world for others as well. Lionel’s allusion is an apt one in this regard: “for a moment I compared myself to that monarch of the waste—Robinson Crusoe. We had been both thrown companionless—he on the shore of a desolate island: I on that of a desolate world” (448). Robinson Crusoe, as Lionel distinguishes him, theorizes each life as an island that one may yet escape from (as Crusoe, arguably, does) and find another shore, another person, who one can connect with whereas Lionel theorizes each life as a world, one for whom no destinational shore is possible—he sails off at the end, as he says, in search of a person, a world.

We can see in Derrida two possible consequences of this a-straitened, a- phenomenological worlding. The first, as Derrida puts it in *A Taste for the Secret*, is that we understand that

somehow, this secret that we speak of but are unable to say is, paradoxically…

the best-shared thing in the world; but it is the sharing of what is not shared:

we know in common that we have nothing in common. There may be an

unlimited consensus on the subject, but the consensus is of no use, since it

is a consensus on the fact that the singular is singular, that the other is other,

that *tout autre est tout autre* . . . everything that exist shares the unshareable.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The shared, unshareable secret that is us, that is to say, you, an individual, means only that, again, every other is wholly other and a consensus to a shared secret is mere pretension since that secret, what is inside the self, can never be shared *absolutely* without obliterating the self. It follows, then, that the “I” is defined by the other, *oriented* by the other, we might say:

that is what the self is, that is what I am, what the I is, whether I am there

or not. The other, the others, that is the very thing that survives me, that is

called to survive me and that I call the other inasmuch as it is called, in advance,

to survive me, structurally my survivor. Not my survivor, the survivor of me,

the *there* beyond my life (*BS* II, 131).

The survival that comes after our death is both the living other now and the survival that pre-exists our death in that other who survives us in the sense of the “there beyond my life” in that the prolepsis of my life is already taking place in my life in the other before the there is there…and after the there (before and after *Dasein* and *Mitsein*, that is to say).

This then is how Shelley—(but, what would it mean to say, to say so secretly, bashfully, as if this is my secret, I)—would interpret Derrida. What can, does, occur between two people, in love, say, who claim to share intimate and extimate feelings and experiences, is, therefore, fictional:

. . . where there is no world . . . what I must do, with you and carrying you,

is make it that there be precisely a world, just a world, if not a just world…

to make as if…I made the world come in the world, as though there ought

to be a world where presently there is none, to make the gift or present of this

as if come up poetically, which is the only thing that…can make it possible that

I can live or had let you live, enjoy or have or let you enjoy, to carry you for a

few moments without anything happening and leaving a trace in the world,

that belongs to the world, without a trace left or retained in the world that is

going away…leaving no trace, a world that has forever been going to leave and

has just left, going away with no trace, the trace becoming trace only by being

able to erase itself (*BS* II, 268).

The presence of your absence that is in me, and the presence of my absent present in you, in you, the presence of my presence that is not there, is the trace. This is the poem or fiction of a shared life that embraces the other across the shores even as the poem notes in its lines the death of the other who holds it in this life, the survivor of the “I,” of me, who will survive me with there being a trace of me in them. For only without the trace of me remaining, in you, always already in you, will there have been a *possibility* of a world, of an “I,” that is not enclosed. Counter-intuitively, paradoxically, the trace, the survivance of me in the other, means that I am a wholly separated world; therefore only the annihilation of that trace, of me, after my death—that is, only if that trace, my memory in you did not exist—*would it mean that I was not a wholly enclosed world*, any more than you are. But the erasure of that trace, that trace of me in you, would also mean the death of you, would only happen on your death, and thus mean the death of the survivance of me.

The paradox is that the trace of me that survives, my name or memory in your memory, is proof that I existed, as you did, do, wholly apart, since the trace is the other come from without, me in you and you in me, but never the experience, a shared experience, in you of me, of me in you, of my absolute being in you, or you in me. If it were otherwise, the “I” that is me, and the “I” that is you, would be shattered, un-enclosed, not an “I.” It would belong to, be, in another. It is in that sense, that the sense in which that trace of me only exists, a ghost of me and not me, the I that is me in you, would have to not exist in order for there not to be separate worlds. But if that were so, if neither of us existed as separate worlds, if we were to touch (*contingere* and not *tangere*), be in the other, experience the other in the other, experience the other’s secret, we would not be an “I” but some smoorged together island nation: we would not exist as two people who love each other but as one world inseparable and hence not in love because not “in” at all but rather within without the without within needs to be truly without within. *Only by being apart can we be together.* Only by being lonely can one be together even if that loneliness never becomes togetherness (*non est potis contingere*) in terms of a shared experience of a common world, of each other. There are only worlds.

That lonely companionship is a poem is why Derrida says that “the book lives its beautiful death” (*BS* II, 130). In autobiographical writing, which is to say writing, the “I” encloses the secret, the secret of us, or tries to and in so doing, leaves that trace behind in the book. “Like every trace,” then, Derrida writes, “a book, the survivance of a book, from its first moment on, is a living-dead machine, surviving, the body of a thing buried in a library, a bookstore, in cellars, urns, drowned in the worldwide waves of a Web, etc., but a dead thing that resuscitates each time…the breath of the other…makes it live again by animating it” (*BS* II, 131). Lionel’s book is *The Last Man*, given new life by the narrator who imparts it with a new breath, gives this death, this trace of life, a life. Late in the novel, he finds writing materials and declares, “I also will write a book, I cried” (466). His questions that follow this decision, though, have an explicitly Derridean ring to them: “for whom to read?—to whom dedicated?” (466).

Who indeed? His imagined addressee demonstrates the loneliness that inheres in the self of autobiographical writing as its trace plays out in the writing that would, if it could, speak to the other: “DEDICATION / TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD. / SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL! / BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE / LAST MAN” (466). The inscription does not address some theoretical remnants who will bestir a new population, even as he questions the possibility of that shortly thereafter—“yet, will not this world be re-peopled, and the children of a saved pair of lovers, in some to me unknown and unattainable seclusion…?”—but to the dead, to those already gone of whom he, and his writing, his book, are the survivance (466). Lionel, the last man, is the trace of the other he writes to, for, in, this inscription to a dead that cannot ever read this trace. His history erases itself in the very writing of it since he theorizes writing as reading. *The Last Man*’s frame narrator also writes the narrative as they read it, which means, then, the very book they are reading, *we are reading*, is being erased, a palimpsest, under the writing of the narrator and that also announces our death, the end of the world that is—us, the reader, in the narrative’s logic. There is no lastness, only a lonely firstness contingent and absolute on the teeter of lastness of which we were and are.

*The Last Man* is the autobiography of Lionel who does not write it but whose survivance as a trace is blown into life as the dying embers of a fire by the narrator. This would mean, could we say, can we say, that writing to anyone, that writing this essay, reminds of the loneliness of lastness that is the self whose writing will always be autobiographical and always read by another? And then, and then, any autobiography would be, perforce, written by the other, our world, us, permanently enclosed in the self that even writing erases in the reading that is writing by the other? To whom do we write? To whom dedicated? To the trace of the self, that still that remains, in the other who will never know, feel, experience, you as anything other than a trace evanescing under its own, their, writing?

…stranger…

Shelley’s next writing, the novella *Matilda* (1820), opens with the claim that the narrator, Matilda, is the last woman, experiencing a similar, though stranger, a-heliocentric, a-temporal, estranged, eschatological loneliness than that of Lionel. In fact, things begin strange and get stranger still:

I am in a strange state of mind. I am alone—quite alone—in the world—

the blight of misfortune has passed over me and withered me; I know that

I am about to die and I feel happy—joyous.

…I do believe that I shall never again feel the vivifying warmth of another

sun; and it is in this persuasion that I begin to write my tragic history. Perhaps

a history such as mine had better die with me, but a feeling that I cannot define

leads me on and I am too weak both in body and mind to resist the slightest

impulse.

What am I writing? –I must collect my thoughts. I do not know that any will

peruse these pages except you, my friend, who will receive them at my death.

I do not address them to you alone because it will give me pleasure to dwell

upon our friendship in a way that would be needless if you alone read what I

shall write. I shall address my tale therefore as if I wrote strangers.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Here the friend, Woodville, gets configured as inherently estranged, a stranger who is actually many “strangers.” That multiplicative effect inflating the one to the many indicates how Matilda sees herself as a world alone and lonely by nature, alone by herself by her self. If Lionel is ambiguously gendered as Lisa Hopkins and Anne Mellor point out (and if the novel plays with gender in other ways as Fuson Wang notes) because in the *roman-a-clef* logic of the novel he stands for Mary Shelley, then *Matilda* reframes this gendered loneliness yet again as feminine and at the mercy of a surrounding world thoroughly cisheteropatriarchal and insidious (and makes Lionel something of a Tiresis figure!).[[15]](#footnote-15) The autobiographical history Matilda produces at the end of her life, her world, unlike Lionel’s, takes a different written form then. While Lionel’s process of writing the self is the erasure of the self in the act of writing, Matilda’s pen-to-paper does the reverse and writes her death to both produce and efface her life and to kill her self outside of a cisheteropatriachcal system that would kill her love. The “history…had better die with me” even as, in this writing that will be read by strangers, that erasure of life gives life to her life in the other, the companion, in Woodville. Matilda produces the very trace she must produce in order to die even though she had rather annul that life, that trace, altogether.

Further complicating this last-woman-ness is the novel’s incestuous family romance between Matilda and her father that traffics in gender fluidity. As scholar Julia Ftacek argues in her reading of Byron’s *Manfred*, the poem relies thoroughly on trans tropes for its being and meaning. According to Ftacek, Manfred sees in his sister, Astarte, himself and she in him; that is, Manfred sees in Astarte the female ideal of himself and his love for her is actually an expression of his transgender desire to be a woman, that woman that he sees in this feminine version, this—please forgive me Ftacek—Womanfred. *Matilda* stages a similar logic.[[16]](#footnote-16) Their first physical meeting is colored in Shelley’s familiar, familiarizing litoral language: “I jumped into the boat, and well accustomed to such feats, I pushed it from the shore, and exerted all my strength to row swiftly across” (160). Unlike the lover islands of Matthew Arnold’s “To Marguerite” who remain enisled (“Yes! On the sea of life enisled” [1]), here one island appears to cross the shores and merge with the other, the daughter to the father. Her father, similarly, has written earlier that he must leave England, “that unhappy island, where every thing breathes *her* spirit,” after the death of her mother (155). His return locates that mother’s spirit in Matilda (“my father has often told me I looked more like a spirit than a human maid” [159]), though, and he falls in love with her, his secret to which he cannot give expression until pushed to do so by Matilda. He sees in her, in other words, the trace of the mother but also, the trace of himself as a woman. Desire can sometimes be to possess and to be that which one wants to possess—to be that person that one desires. His face is also in his child. Because as Matilda reveals later after his death, this is no simple familial resemblance: “I was surrounded by my female relations, but they were all of them nearly strangers to me” (184). Instead, in her relation with her father, a different type of strangeness persists. As Matilda describes it, “in all this there was a strangeness that attracted and enchanted me” because “I was all that he had to love on earth” (162). The strangeness, of course, is, on one hand, the unspoken incestuous secret of that love that cannot be spoken on earth (*Manfred*’s *Hamlet* epigraph is coincidentally quite apt: “There are more things on heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy”). It is narcissistic and reveals itself as Matilda desiring both her father and to be her father and he her. On the other hand, it is the secret of the other in the other that neither of them know because if it were known to them *it would not be a secret*.[[17]](#footnote-17) The secret hides itself in Matilda from the one who bears it; and that secret is the father in the daughter and the daughter in the father, a secret so obvious yet so forbidden that to speak it annihilates them both.[[18]](#footnote-18) But it is also, early in the novel, the secret of their love that Matilda *does not know*, either that he feels that way or that she feels that way, that either he or she contains that secret.[[19]](#footnote-19) After all, to speak the trace, to annihilate the trace, annihilates the world of the other and the world of the self.

In that the secret is and maintains (maintains in its is-ing and is-ing in its maintenance) their love for to speak it would also annihilate their love, it must remain secret, or else it exposes the fact that they are two worlds destined to never be otherwise than lonely in their experience of the other in their own self. Shelly uses the incest narrative to encrypt the secret of love itself in that by saying incest she does not have to say “I love you.” “You have a secret grief that destroys us both,” Matilda tells her father, and “you must permit me to win this secret from you” (171). Giving voice to it, as she does shortly after this exhortation, forcefully announces the nature of their lonely en-worldling: “I was left on a barren rock; a wide ocean of despair rolled around me…” (163). As she writes, “who can be more solitary in a crowd than one whose own history is known to no living soul. There was too deep a horror in my take for confidence; I was on earth the sole depositary of my own secret” (185). With her father’s death, the secret that defined his existence, his being—his love for him in her—transfers to her and she can give no voice to it or she will be obliterated. At the same time, she now knows the secret—that he loved him in her and she in him—so it is no longer a secret to her but a revelation as long as she keeps it hidden in her—she does not give voice to it, to her self. Her history, his history, is known “to no living soul” but it is also in this moment of writing it, this moment that is also after she is on earth as it is being read, that she makes it known to Woodville who will read (is reading) this history and, unlike the narrator in *The Last Man*, not take part in writing it but through his reading it preserves the secret in his self. The secret, the absolute secret, the secret of the self that Lionel can never impart, moves between worlds in *Matilda*, and it is told again and again.

This transference of the secret, of the trace, through writing, heralds how *Matilda* thinks of lastness’s loneliness as what begets and is life precisely because it is beyond life (a life beyond life, a death in life, your life as death in the other). She describes their initial shore-crossing encounter “as if I were recreated and had about me all the freshness and life of a new being” (162). When they embrace in union at the lakefront, they engender the secret that they do not know in this new fiction of new being. After his death, she writes, “a strange idea seized me; a person must have felt all the agonies of doubt concerning the life and death of one who is the whole world to them before they can enter into my feelings” (182). This strange idea, a much stranger idea than the strangeness of loneliness Lionel’s Romanticism is, signifies the secret no one else can know since the world that is her father exists now only in her even though it is not him or his own experience of him as himself or him self; thus, it continues as a secret so strange it estranges her from it. *She never explicitly gives voice to this secret in the rest of the novel*: she loves him too. Instead, she can only say “in truth I am in love with death…” and “alone it will unite me to my father when in an eternal mental union we shall never part” (208). And this *is* the truth because the death she is in love with is her own death that takes with her trace that is him inside her, the secret that she loves him, and the trace, because she is also in him, that is her, her self. As she puts it, “My life has been before as a pleasing country rill, never destined to leave its native fields, but when its task was fulfilled quietly to be absorbed, and leave no trace” (162). For Matilda to die, she must pass the secret on to Woodville, the trace of her father in her that keeps them both alive in survivance. For Matilda to die, she must live in the writing of her writing of her life, her autobiography.

The revenant of Matilda’s and her father’s love thus takes on disembodied life in their death, in a writing whose survivance pulses with a life that could never be in order to contain the love that would. “Love never woke again,” she reflects, but “its ghost, ever hovering over my father’s grave, alone survived” (184). As an ephemeral being and nothingness at once, love exists as this ghostly imprint of life in the world within the closed pages of the book Woodville opens to read.

Love is a ghost

As does the creature in *Frankenstein*, Matilda longs for an apocalypse, a return to Paradise. “Is it not strange that grief should quickly follow so divine a happiness?” Matilda asks, a lament whose paradox plays out on the very nature of the self that misunderstands itself as defined through this supposedly grounding division of nature and culture (162). Matilda finds herself, that is, her world, disorientated: “I had no idea that misery could arise from love and this lesson that all at last must learn was taught me in a manner few are obliged to receive it” (162). Misery arises, it orients, her to this new realization of how love works in and through the other. She refers to “those few short months of Paradisiacal bliss” in which she “disobeyed no command…ate no apple, and yet…was ruthlessly driven from it” (162). The rewriting of the myth here places the firstness of their lastness on her father: “Alas! My companion did, and I was precipitated in his fall. But I wander from my relation” (162). For her father, in this riverrun past Eve and Adam, had a taste for the secret, the forbidden secret, the secret of Matilda, which is to say, a taste for the knowledge of Matilda’s self (it might be well here to recall that in Latin “sapere” means both “to taste” and “to know).

The incestuous logic of the novel suggests that this taste for the secret of the other is also always a misrecognized taste for the self in the other. Driven by the riven river-run loneliness of the self whose companion is always the trace of the self in the other, love is the temptation to narcissism (make me one like myself the creature says in *Frankenstein*) to finding the other within the self, one’s self. To taste of it, then, destroys it because it shares what absolutely must not be shared to remain what it is. The self is always already defined by the need, the necessity, the demand to be lonely, to keep the secret of the self sacred and safe from any paradise whether it is envisioned as a return to an embowering nature or as a fast forward to a utopian society. The novel dramatizes this ontological argument through incest since the father literally sees the trace of himself in Matilda. That he seeks to partake of it, to partake of the self he sees in that other, is the process that the novel suggests is what love is precisely because, conversely, you also find the other in you. The secret that is your self is also the love for that other as borne out through your narcissism. In the lonely world of the self one finds a companion who is the other who is you, but not like the narcissus palely gleaming, forever loitering on the Styx.

At this point in the novel, early in the novel, her father has already died although we have not, yet, as readers, arrived at that knowledge and so we miss, by Matilda’s autobiographical design, that she tells us her secret, tells us her self, gives us her secret, gives us her self, and so dies right in front of us on the page. “But I wander from my relation,” she writes, a cunning pun, a kind of *hapax legomenon*, that disguises the very thing that it articulates (162).[[20]](#footnote-20) Her relation is, of course, the relation of her tale in this digression into reflections on the mootness of yearning for a paradise lost. It is also her divulging that she wanders now from her relation, from her father, and from her romantic love for him—and her self. As a reference to the writing, making this statement indicates as well that this writing, this autobiography, divulges the secret of the self. But that Matilda cannot actually say “I love him” other than through a pun, paradoxically evidences the fact that she loves him because to say it would betray it and betray the self. To say what is forbidden tastes of it. Nonetheless, the secret must be told since as long as she holds it, does not voice it, she remains alive and the trace of her father in her remains alive as well. She has to say what she cannot say or betray in order to betray it and say it, in order to die. But she can’t say it.

Without her speaking it on her own behalf, Matilda discloses her love for her father in a paranomasia that allows her to say in writing, after her death, what she could not say in life. The life-writing allows her to do the very thing that causes her death: voice her self. In that sense, then, since what she also gives voice to is her self, her secret that is the self, is her romantic love for her father, this means that her self is that love. The secret of the self, and the secret of the love, are the same. “Love never woke again” and “its ghost, ever hovering over my father’s grave” that “alone survived” is the survivance of that love, which also means that the ghost is the trace of the other in the other. Which, in turn, means that the self is only ever the trace of the other for whom that other can only ever be the other despite that the other’s very self is the love the self has for that other that the self finds when they find that other within their own self. If the other did not remain the other absolutely, then there would be only the self who never finds that trace of the other in their self. There would not be love, not even a ghost. (And if I can’t bring myself to say it, then you already know my secret. If I die, I’ll live it th(r)ough. There is that ghost of a chance, a contingency, that a hauntology, a love, revives to become a li(f)e).

“Yet is it true that we do not believe in ghosts?” Shelley asks in her short reflection, “On Ghosts” (1824). There she speculates that the modern world has lost all the wonders and glories of the former:

The antediluvian world, strode over by mammoths, preyed upon by the megatherion,

and peopled by the offspring of the Sons of God, is a better type of the earth of Homer, Herodotus, and Plato, than the hedged-in cornfields and measured hills

of the present day. The globe was then encircled by a wall which paled in the bodies of men, whilst their feathered thoughts soared over the boundary; it had a brink, and in the deep profound which it overhung, men's imaginations, eagle-winged, dived and flew, and brought home strange tales to their believing auditors. Deep caverns harboured giants; cloud-like birds cast their shadows upon the plains; while far out

at sea lay islands of bliss, the fair paradise of Atlantis or El Dorado sparkling with

untold jewels.[[21]](#footnote-21)

While we might be tempted to take this metaphorically, as comment on the lackluster fiction of her own time, or the familiar rhythms of the Romantic imagination crumbling as a tower to dust against the backdrop of a modernity that assails it with the slings of dullness, we find, rather, that Shelley believes in the mythologies of the Golden Age as reality. Nor, for that matter, is this a willed belief parlayed in a skepticism that announces doubt about the very belief it purports to disbelieve in in the moment it states its belief, as in *The X-Files*’s “I want to believe.” Instead, the watery palaces of Atlantis in the pages of Plato’s *Timaeus*, the El Dorado sub-aurum, and the enchanting perils that lullaby Odysseus finally to a pleasurable sleep after his very long flight delay, have all been swept away, kept alive now only in the poems that believe in them (books dying their beautiful death). The “islands of bliss” that “lay” “far out at sea” recall the straitened water worlds of all of her works. Yet, here, those islands have already been destroyed—because we do not believe in ghosts!

If this logic sounds odder, stranger, still, we might say, then, that the reason for this oddity lies in the fact that Shelley means that the Golden Age is Percy Shelley, and those worlds, those real worlds, of creative plenitude and possibility, have died with him. Or, to put it differently, she thinks love has died out from the world because we have stopped believing in it, stopped believing in ghosts! Shelley’s logic, which is the logic of dream work, basks in tautology as an exorbitant antidote to the logical poison of a reality denuded of the spectral hauntology of ghosts. We have stopped believing in love because we have stopped believing in ghosts, which is to say we have stopped believing in love! She exploits this figure as neither dream nor reality but both *both* to illustrate the inexplicable, con-fusing (*non est potis contingere*), lonely nature of dreaming and of ghosts, which move in, and move in the world, through the logic of unhomely knowingness:

For my own part, I never saw a ghost except once in a dream. I feared it in my sleep; I awoke trembling, and lights and the speech of others could hardly dissipate my fear. Some years ago I lost a friend, and a few months afterwards visited the house where I had last seen him. It was deserted, and though in the midst of a city, its vast halls and spacious apartments occasioned the same sense of loneliness as if it had been situated on an uninhabited heath. I walked through the vacant chambers by twilight, and none save I awakened the echoes of their pavement. …He had been there; his living frame had been caged by those walls, his breath had mingled with that atmosphere, his step had been on those stones, I thought:—the earth is a tomb, the gaudy sky a vault, we but walking corpses. The wind rising in the east rushed through the open casements, making them shake;—methought, I heard, I felt—I know not what—but I trembled. To have seen him but for a moment, I would have knelt until the stones had been worn by the impress, so I told myself, and so I knew a moment after, but then I trembled, awe-struck and fearful. Wherefore? (142-143)

In this passage, which haunts itself on the being of loneliness, Shelley refuses to say the secret, to identify the lost friend—an unspoken but very pronounced, even unspoken, spooky, clue—to say how to know what she means when she claims not to know what she knows. She elides the experience entirely, in fact, stating at first that this is a dream she awoke from before (dis)associating the experience with a former visit to a house where she had last seen the lost friend, which suggests it is not a dream but the recounting of a life memory. Dreams and reality are fused here, which also makes the nature of the hauntology circumspect if not suspect. Did she see the ghost in her dream? Or at the house? Quite the opposite, she writes, “to have seen him” as if to say she has not. But to see a ghost would be to have seen and not seen “him” as he is an apparition, the phantom that appears as the real, like the dream that recalls imperfectly the life memory. Yet, simultaneously, she writes “I would have knelt until the stones had been worn by the impress,” which gives the impression that she *did not see him* because she would have knelt in order to make him appear.

In the tautological, impossible terms of her hauntology, then, Shelley affirms that *she did see him*—as a ghost. That she sees the ghost, and cannot, will not, say, who it is, likewise affirms the identity of his secret identity: Percy Shelley. She will not speak his name because to do so is to abolish their love—to say the secret. This ghostly visitation—skewing the borders of fantasy and reality—“bestows on the feeling heart”—that heart that loves, that is—“a belief.” The belief in ghosts. That society can no longer see the gleaming, golden fields of Hesperides’s apples means it no longer has a taste for the secret, for love of the other. For love. Because it does not, cannot, know, it if it were ever to be (spoken).

Like the plots of Shelley’s novels the liter(or)al loneliness of the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the reality of the lyric loneliness of life for Shelley. “I want to see you—and soon—I have a world to say to you,” Shelley’s mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, writes to her lover, William Godwin.[[22]](#footnote-22) I have a world to say to you? For whom to read? To whom dedicated? Indeed, as Shelley well knows, the self is a world with much to say, the secret it cannot say, even to the other. Forced to write, at home, to write alone, to write as writing always is, as writing is not, the COVID-19 crisis reminds us, in this writing of Romanticism that is always writing at the end of the world for that is what writing is, that we have always been radically contingent on loneliness because that is what the self is. To write the self in language is to expose the self’s secret. To write autobiographically, to write, to write this, erases the self in the very trace of its imprint on the page. I have a world to say to you? To whom dedicated? If every other is wholly other, and every other is a world forever unreachable from this shore to theirs, then with what purpose do you, I, write to them? To write to them, to write to them of the secret, is to expose it, to destroy it, to destroy the self in the life writing of the self. The self can only, only does, live in them, as the trace of you in survivance, not even a ghost while the ghost of love wanders all alone waiting to be not seen (to be seen) what a self is.

Referencing Isaiah 11:7, Matilda asks on the last page of her self-less autobiography, “why does my heart heave with the vain endeavor to cast aside the bitter anguish that covers it ‘as the water covers the sea’” (210)? If one were to pose that question, about waters that are islands, that know the names of shores, that ask you to be, but be how who you are, over there, what is that to say about the heart oh covered by the selfless sea? And what would Shelley, to this, say, and would it be waving or drowning? Would she be able to say, yes, yes, I will, a contingent loneliness of the self that it identifies, exposes, explores, a sea for being, a Lionel and Matilda and creature Halloween party adrift finally finding home? If Shelley were to answer, even in her ghostly books dying a beautiful death I think, I think, perhaps, she might say the heart as the world, her world as her heart, and the heart of Percy I kept, the water that covered that heart, that heart you broke, that heart I kept, that heart that is yours, the ghost that now lives as the love of that heart in a writing too knowing in its unknowingness of its secret to speak it, to kill that love, to drown it. I believe in ghosts. I think. I think then, that if we were to ask Shelley what she meant, what this, her strange autobiography on autobiography means, she wouldn’t say, at all, of all her wanderers, Lionel, Matilda, the creature, Beatrice, Perkin, me, you, that they are not set sail on the sea, like one of Percy’s forlornly hopeful paper boats shoved off from the shore, capable of finding that other world, but rather that they are the sea, what keeps the worlds apart because there are only worlds, and thus there is the possibility of love, and that is the gift she gives us, the possibility to find the companion of loneliness in the self and to begin to write against the history of *non est potis contingere*, to begin to write the self and togetherness for the first time. She is showing us how to write Romanticism at the end of the world. She wants us to believe in ghosts.

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1. See also Khalip’s *Last Things*, where he characterizes Romanticism as “already extinct,” which, for him, generates its productive fecundity and generativity (12). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I develop this point at greater length here: Washington, 69-76. See also Peter Melville, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Emily Steinlight writes of Verney that “as soon as he is last, he is no longer man” because to be a human man requires a fellow species (71). While I agree with this estimation, at the same time, to be human always previously contains the possibility of lastness so, in a sense, we have all already “become” last. Nonetheless, Steinlight’s argument comports with the idea that Lionel may, in fact, not be a man, but rather, as Johnson’s and Fisch’s work variously suggests, that Lionel is the last woman. On the other hand, Lionel says that as soon as he begins writing his narrative, he becomes an Adam: “suddenly I became as it were the father of all mankind” ( PG#). Or, as Melville put its still differently, the question for Lionel is “how to announce the end of man, when he himself is still a man” (144). Andrew Sargent, meanwhile, trends somewhere else entirely, that a sort of human life will remain, however unrecognizable: “and though the no futures of this ‘now’ may still include something akin to ‘us,’ it might only be as fossils or ghosts” (323). Sargent’s powerful sense of ghosts here registers a bit differently than my reading of Shelley’s ghosts below. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry” *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 509-38. New York: W. W. Norton, 2002, 511. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a reading that argues that Shelley, in the novel, relies on “the insistence on the primacy of human sympathy and sociality, which had always grounded her critique of romantic politics,” see Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, 754. For readings on the colonialism and imperialism at work on the novel, see Bewell and Raza Kolb. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Elizabeth Effinger argues that Verney becomes like an animal in not having a world (26). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Barbara Johnson. *A Life with Mary Shelley.* Stanford UP, 2014, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Fuson Wang makes a related though, I think, different observation about time in the novel as it relates to the novel’s narratology (I don’t see it as dialectical): “her narrative strategy is both cautiously dialectical and consistently open-ended; firstness, middleness, and lastness are all constantly being shuffled into different permutations of the Sibylline leaves” (238). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Peter Melville. *Romantic Hospitality and the Resistance to Accommodation*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2007, 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Samantha Webb. “Reading the End of the World: *The Last Man*, History, and the Agency of Romantic Authorship.” *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, edited by Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran, Johns Hopkins UP, 2000, pp. 119-33, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I am not reading this psychobiographically in the sense that Shelley is after Godwin as Mellor does (*Mary Shelley*, 194-195). Nor do I mean autobiographical in the sense of it in Mellor’s, Harpold’s, or Nichie’s reading of the novel. Rather, I mean in the sense that all writing is, fundamentally, autobiographical. My sense of autobiographical here is much closer to Gillingham and Johnson. Of course, there are clear autobiographical resonances in all of her novels, particularly *Mathilda*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Derrida, Jacques. *The Beast and the Sovereign*. Vol. 2. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Derrida, Jacques and Maurizio Ferraris. *A Taste for the Secret*. Edited by Giacomo Donis and David Webb. Translated by Giacomo Donis. London: Polity, 2001, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Mary Shelley. *Matilda*. Edited by Janet Todd. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Mellor, 13; Wang, 238-241; Hopkins, n.p. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Kathleen Miller also reads the secret in the text, but as fundamental to Mathilda’s identity whereas I am taking it as fundamental to her existence: it “exists either as unconscious knowledge or as fear that comes from an intense personal secret, the revelation of which would disrupt the entire construction of her identity” (295). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For psychoanalytic readings, see: Edelman-Young, Gillingham, Faflak, and Rajan. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. In this sense, I diverge from Harpold (54-55) and McKeever (197) who see it as the father’s passion for the mother in the daughter. Meanwhile, Clemet sees her as casting herself as Oedipus and not his daughter, “as both guilt-ridden and innocent, both sexual transgressor and sexually pure” (70-71). Diana Edelman-Young agrees that “she wants him as a lover, not a father…” and that “she must destroy the very thing she desires in order to succeed in creating her self” (141). Similarly, Tilottama Rajan writes that “it is also far from clear whose incestuous desire the text is about and also whether it protects or abjects that desire. The narrative is ostensibly about the father's passion for Mathilda and yet, just as powerfully about her desire for him” (n.p.). Gillingham, too, finds it ambiguous: “While the text declines finally to blame Matilda for her father's desire, neither does it position her solely as a passive, subjugated victim of it. Indeed, the nature of her own affection for her father is left persistently ambiguous” (267). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. We might see a similar idea at work in where Faflak nudges us in relation to the unconscious in the novel: “Here I am thinking of an encounter with the unconscious in Romantic literature’s various scenes of psychoanalysis, such as Shelley’s encounter with Rousseau in *The Triumph of Life*, which he describes as ‘thoughts which must remain untold’” (722). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For a reading of the differences between Aliferi’s *Myrrha*’s incest plot and *Mathilda*, see Davenport Garrett. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Mary Shelley, “On Ghosts.” In *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*. Edited by Pamela Clemit, 2: 140-147. London:Pickering and Chatto, 1996, 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Wollstonecraft, Mary. *Godwin & Mary: Letters of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft*. Edited by Ralph M. Wardle. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)