Fostered by Fear: Affect and Environment in Romantic Nature Writing

Ashton Nichols
Dickinson College

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CHAPTER SIX

Fostered by Fear

AFFECT AND ENVIRONMENT IN
ROMANTIC NATURE WRITING

Ashton Nichols

William Wordsworth’s famous claim that his emotional development in the Lakeland of England was “fostered alike” by “beauty” and by “fear” leads directly into reflections on the recent “affective turn” in literary studies, especially toward the “fear” half of Wordsworth’s formulation. Why were so many Romantic writers so interested in fear as one of the most direct and powerful affects resulting from our experience of the nonhuman world? What was there to be afraid of in the external realm they called “nature”? Or was the true fear always internal, on the inside, always the product of mental activity that turned otherwise “normal” experiences into something to be feared? Along with fear in Wordsworth, other figures worthy of consideration here will include Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Mary Shelley, and Henry David Thoreau. In theoretical terms, from Edmund Burke on the sublime through Charles Darwin on emotional expression in higher primates, to Ludwig Wittgenstein on emotions as linguistic events, numerous thinkers shed light on a dark presence in nature that is often connected to responses of the human being (“self” or “other”) in similar nonhuman settings. Even the “sorrow” aspect of Romantic affect is often an acknowledged corollary of fear; humans experience sorrow as an emotion once the sources of fear have been realized: the lightning strikes, the avalanche descends, or the loved one dies. The emotion of fear then leads affectively to the emotion of sorrow. Finally, of course, fear can perhaps best be described in terms of its biological and physical manifestations in bodies.

Rowan Boyson provides a useful overview of recent work on one set of Romantic emotions in “Pleasure, Happiness and Romanticism: A Critical Survey” (2010), but we need more work like Mark Canuel’s “Romantic Fear” in Secularism, Cosmopolitanism, and Romanticism (2008). In recent studies of affect, as Mary Favret points out, some scholars are “striving for a technical, almost clinical” definition of the term, while the more general ten-
dency has been to bundle affect and its cognates together with “a cluster of related terms: feeling, mood, sense or sensation, emotion, and—[especially by] acknowledging an intellectual debt to 18th-century moral philosophy—passion” (1159). In this essay, I will rely on my own Wittgensteinian impulse to tend toward the latter mode, striving to ally affect with a wide range of emotion-related terms and familial verbal relations that point to close links between elusive “inner” feelings and their more determinate “outer” biological expressions: facial features, blood pressure, perspiration, chills, sweats, and the like. For Wittgenstein, words—or even preverbal sounds—often are the emotions we describe them as expressing. In this way, language is the “material” manifestation of mind itself (words have to be written with pens or keys or spoken with tongues and lungs). Likewise, literary form becomes a physical manifestation of emotional states: my happiness is, in this sense, the words I chose to express it; my fear is, in this way, the poem I craft to record its occurrence. As Pieter Vermeulen points out in his useful study “Geoffrey Hartman and the Affective Ecology of Romantic Form” (2011), poetic form is important to Hartman precisely because it becomes “a medium that regulates the multifarious interactions between mind and world” (759); in Hartman’s own words, aesthetic form has a crucial role in the “ecology or interanimation of mind and world” (166). Hartman’s 1973 word choice here is especially significant, pointing as it does toward the sense of “ecology” as that “branch of biology that deals with the relationships between living organisms and their environment” (OED).

This idea that “ecology” links the natural world to the human mind, and thus the material world to an imaginative construct like literary form, animates a great deal of Romantic poetry from the 1790s to the 1830s. In his sonnet “When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be” (1818), Keats is afraid not so much of physically dying into some terrible nonhuman realm as he is of losing those activities inherent in his own continuing human life. He does not want to lose his physical life before his pen has “gleaned” his “teeming brain,” before he has had a chance to read the “high-piled books” in front of him, or before he can “trace . . . with the magic hand of chance” the words he wants to write; and most of all, he fears he shall “never look upon” his “fair creature of an hour” ever “more” (ll. 2, 3, 7–8, 9–10, in Complete Poems). Whether “fear” is to be found in the recalled human child, as is so often the case in Wordsworth, or directly in various forms of death and dying, as in Coleridge, or in the terrifying “other,” as in Mary Shelley, fear is often externalized so that the affective element of the experience is
necessarily fear of something. From these English Romantics, this essay will move chronologically and geographically across the Atlantic to Thoreau, a Romantic American environmentalist who was so filled with fear on Mount Katahdin in Maine that he reversed many of his earlier claims about the beneficent affects (and effects) of the nonhuman realm. In all the cases I examine, attempts to externalize fear as something outside of the self will resolve into an awareness that such “affects” come ultimately from within and reside not in the externality of any mysterious realm but in the human mind (and the body). Like the “ecophobia” of our own times (see Estok), Wordsworth and Thoreau finally see their fear as an internal state linked to an external stimulus. Thus, both Romantic naturalists leave us, once again, questioning the extent to which we create the very conditions of emotional affects that we so much want to ascribe to otherness.

Wordsworth recounts the way that various emotions—we might just as easily say “affects”—are the sources of discordant details that come together to form a self, a sense of his own personal identity:

How strange that all
The terrors, pains, and early miseries,
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes interfused
Within my mind, should e’er have borne a part,
And that a needful part, in making up
The calm existence that is mine when I
Am worthy of myself! (Prelude [1850], 1.344-50)

As a child, it is fear—as much as any emotion—that produces the experiential emotions that lead to this sense of selfhood. The young boy, on the border between childhood and adolescence, steals a boat and rows away from a dark Lake District shoreline. Suddenly, a vast mountain—probably the 2,232-foot-high Black Crag—not far from the lapping shores of Ullswater, seems to pursue the boy as it begins to fill his field of vision. This “huge peak,”

black and huge,
As if with voluntary power instinct
Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,
And growing still in stature the grim shape
Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
Fostered by Fear

And measured motion like a living thing,
Strode after me. (1.378-85)

But then, as the young boy seeks to escape from the pursuit imagery of this primal scene, making his way back toward safety, he

homeward went, in grave
And serious mood; but after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days, my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being; o’er my thoughts
There hung a darkness, call it solitude
Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes
Remained, no pleasant images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;
But huge and mighty forms, that do not live
Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
By day, and were a trouble to my dreams. (1.389-400)

The immediate fear of physical pursuit is transferred over time into mysterious archetypes of emotional response, mighty mythic forms that remain in the mind to shape his later moods and pursue the child’s thoughts—not his physical self—by day and by night. Charles Darwin expresses precisely this emotional transference from an immediate physical fear (of the pursuing mountain in Wordsworth) to what the poet calls long-term “darkness,” “solitude,” and “desertion.” Describing this process Darwin writes, “No suffering is greater than that from extreme fear or horror, but here a distinct emotion comes into play, and will be elsewhere considered. Prolonged suffering, especially of the mind, passes into low spirits, grief, dejection, and despair”; the biological scientist of emotions notes that this tendency is especially true “in children” (Expression of the Emotions, 147).

The same Wordsworthian boy is also the earlier thief of a wild-captured bird that was the result of another trapper’s efforts. In such a well-remembered case of guilt-producing theft,

a strong desire
O’erpowred my better reason, and the bird
Which was the captive of another’s toil
Became my prey; and when the deed was done
I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
Of undistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod. (*Prelude*, 1.318–25)

So, emotional desire in the child (one repository of affect) overcomes the power of rational intellect and produces such long-lasting effects in the mind. Wordsworth eventually titles Book Eighth of his autobiographical poem *Retrospect—Love of Nature Leading to Love of Man*. In the extended versions of the verse autobiography (the earlier first version—1799—only contains two parts and a total of twenty-seven text pages), we find that the love of natural things, which precedes but leads to human love, is a new version of those childhood emotions that were built up out of beauty and fear. We love nonhuman nature’s contents (birds, flowers, and clouds), the poet says, because of the power of the immediate emotions they generate in us. This love is then transferred to human persons (sisters, friends, and even the self) as the maturing identity begins to realize that other selves—unlike the rest of nature—share in our emotional power to be generative of affects. Book Eighth is necessarily a *Retrospect* because it requires a literal return to those passions of childhood by which the soul was “built up,” a mental example of time travel, back to those early experiences that shaped the “soul” and made it into the feeling self it became.

Keats explains his own version of this process by saying that we are not born with a soul; rather, we “make” our emotional self as a function of certain experiences—especially powerful emotional experiences—that form the basis of the sort of “soul” (we would now say “self”) that we become. Keats lays out his theory in a long letter he writes to his brother and sister from February to May 1819. The crucial passage was written on April 21: “Call the world if you Please ‘The vale of Soul-making.’ . . . Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!” (*Selected Poems*, 288–89). We are born, as many modern psychologists now tell us, as pure potential, waiting to be acted upon by the particular circumstances of our environment: “The mind/body divide is disappearing, too, as we discover that mental phenomena have physical correlates. . . . The false dichotomy of nature vs. nurture is quickly erod-
Fostered by Fear

ing, and the modern era of stress research makes a compelling case for the study of the dynamic interplay between our genomes and our experiences” (Francis and Kaufer). The mind is made out of this complex combination of inherited potential and circumstantial development, but we do not need a soul; take away the idea of a soul, and consider what human beings have accomplished without it. Percy Shelley makes the same claim that Keats does about the fact we have “no soul,” but he does so from a negative perspective: “All that we see or know perishes and is changed. . . . It is said that it is possible that we should continue to exist in some mode totally inconceivable to us at present. This is a most unreasonable assumption. . . . Such assertions . . . persuade, indeed, only those who desire to be persuaded” (“Essay on a Future State,” 1.193–95). The soul is nothing more than a ghost, and there are—after all—no ghosts.

Keats provides one of the most concrete and specific references to the immediate fear of personal death in “When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be.” This fear of an end to consciousness, which for Keats was surely the end of everything, this fear of demise—especially youthful demise—was particularly relevant for nineteenth-century writers, given the frequency of early deaths among themselves and their families. Life expectancy in England and Wales from 1780 to 1820 hovered between thirty-five and forty years of age, averaging approximately thirty-eight (Caselli, Vallin, and Wunsch, 48). Lord Byron died at thirty-six, Percy Shelley at twenty-nine, and Keats at twenty-five. Keats and Wordsworth lost both of their parents before they were fifteen years old, and they were both sent away to school at an early age. Coleridge was sent to Christ’s Hospital school at the age of eight upon the death of his father. Mary Shelley’s young mother—Mary Wollstonecraft—died in childbirth with Mary at the age of thirty-eight, and the daughter made the death of a youthful mother the fictional trigger for Victor Frankenstein’s need—at the age of seventeen himself—to become “capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter” (M. Shelley, 30); we all know the results of that desire. For Coleridge, the emotion of fear also constitutes a central trope in emotional development, from the fears of nature made manifest in “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” (1798) to the fear of personal identity in “Limbo” (1834) and “Ne Plus Ultra” (1834). The Wedding Guest is afraid of the Ancient Mariner himself, but that is because the Guest thinks he may be confronting a supernatural spirit: a ghost. This is the antithesis of the young Victor Frankenstein, whose father “had taken the greatest precautions that
my mind should be impressed with no supernatural horrors. I do not ever remember . . . to have feared the apparition of a spirit” (30).

Various forms of fear become a central trope in much Romantic prose fiction, from at least the time of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). The eighteen-year-old Shelley’s college-aged character Victor produces a monstrous self-projection, a doppelgänger created to appease his creator’s own fear of death. The early death of Victor’s own mother produces a fear of death in him that is fulfilled when what he describes as his “vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me” (49), ends up killing his younger brother, his father, his best friend, his fiancée, and ultimately, Victor himself. Early on, *Frankenstein* describes the fear of his own “hideous progeny” by quoting Coleridge on a specific kind of terror: “My heart palpitated in the sickness of fear; and I hurried on with irregular steps, not daring to look about me” (35), Victor says not long after his creation escapes. He then quotes “The Ancyent Marinere”:

> Like one who, on a lonely road,
>  Doth walk in fear and dread,
>  And, having once turn’d round, walks on,
>  And turns no more his head;
>  Because he knows a frightful fiend
>  Doth close behind him tread. (Coleridge, ll. 446–51)

Edmund Burke’s version of sublime terror has long been of particular interest to Romanticists because its signature appears on so many examples of the Romantic sublime: the bird-theft and boat-stealing episodes in *The Prelude*; the Ancient Mariner’s terror and transcendence on a “wide, wide sea” and the Wedding Guest’s experience of the fearful Mariner himself; Keats’s fear of ceasing “to be”; and Mary Shelley’s terrified medical student (neither a doctor nor a mad scientist) — afraid of his own creation and also afraid of his own powers as a creator (“Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil . . . My limbs now tremble and my eyes swim with the remembrance . . . my eyeballs were starting from their sockets” [32]). As Burke originally says, “Terror is in all cases whatsoever . . . the ruling principle of the sublime. . . . The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature . . . is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (58). So, if fear is at the heart of all of our experiences of the sublime, then fear as *affect* in-
Fostered by Fear

eludes the emotion and the emotion’s expression as facial features, gesture, and utterances, whether verbal (“I am afraid!”) or purely sonic (“Oh, oh!”).

Fear in Coleridge moves from natural fear of external entities in the Ancient Mariner and the Wedding Guest to fear of something located solely within the self of the poem’s speaker. The Mariner’s external fear of shining water snakes and “a dead man’s eye” (252), and the Wedding Guest’s fear of the Mariner himself—(the Guest fears that the Mariner may be a ghost, but the Mariner responds, “Fear not, fear not, thou wedding guest! / This body dropt not down” [ll. 222–23]), from the text of 1798, has been replaced by 1803 with completely internal fears in “The Pains of Sleep”:

Fantastic passions! mad’ning brawl!
And shame and terror over all!
Deeds to be hid which were not hid,
Which all confused I could not know,
Whether I suffered, or I did:
For all seemed guilt, remorse or woe,
My own or others still the same
Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame! (Coleridge, ll. 25–32)

Eight years later, in 1811, Coleridge’s Notebook Fragments include lines that are among the most powerful utterances of Romantic affective fear produced by any poet of the period:

Tis a strange Place, this Limbo! not a Place,
   . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Wall’d round, and made a Spirit-jail secure
By the mere Horror of blank Nought at all—
Whose circumambience doth these Ghosts enthrall.
A lurid Thought is growthless dull Privation,
   . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Yet that is but a Purgatory curse
Hell knows a fear far worse,
A fear, a future fate. Tis positive Negation! (ll. 34, 56–59, 92–94)

I quote the lines that would become the poem “Limbo” from the Notebook version of the poem, where the draft version of lines that would eventually become the poem “Ne Plus Ultra” also appeared as scattered fragments:
The Substance, that still casts the Shadow, Death!
The Dragon foul and fell!
The unrevealable
And hidden one, whose Breath
Gives Wind and Fuel to the fires of Hell!
A sole despair. (ll. 71–76)

Here, Coleridge goes as far as any Romantic poet, or any Romantic naturalist, away from fear of nonhuman nature into fear of the speaker's self.

These are difficult poems to read, and even more difficult poems to reflect upon, if we consider their full emotional implications or try to decipher their tones and tonal variations. These poems say that the greatest of all human fears actually resides deep in the (subconscious?) inner self of the speaking voice of such lyrics. Writing to his editor, Alaric Watts of The Literary Souvenir, Coleridge described the draft of "Limbo" as "containing some of the most forcible Lines & with the most original imagery that my niggard Muse ever made me a present of" (233n). At the end of both jottings, Coleridge wrote in his notebook that these lines were just "a specimen of the Sublime dashed to pieces by cutting too close with her fiery Four in Hand round the corner of Non-sense" (236). The Norton editors add that these Notebook Fragments exemplify "the complexity of C[oleridge's] mind, the velocity with which it begins in satire and moves to serious philosophical and theological musings" (233n). We could say that the affect recounted in these lines is the inner realization of personal identity as the true location of a "fear far worse" than any other, a fear that leads only to "despair" and "positive Negation!"

In a similar way, the American naturalist Henry David Thoreau, in a winter storm on Mount Katahdin in Maine, offers a remarkable example of the Romantic writer suddenly forced to counter his long-held belief in an optimistic view of the nonhuman world and accept a nature that does not care about human beings or human life at all. Near a beautiful—if desolate—spot, still known as "Thoreau Springs" on this jagged mountain peak, the author of Walden (1854) suddenly confronts a new version of nature that is alien, detached, and purely materialistic in what it has to offer. Here is no spiritual consolation, no divinity located in the natural world: just rocks, and stones, and trees rolling on and on through endless space and time. In recent years, Stephen Hawking has added credence to this perspective, noting that the greatest of all human errors may be the belief in
any beginning of things (or time) at all. The evidence from modern physics now suggests that the universe never began; rather, matter and energy have always existed and will both exist forever as well. There is no beginning and no end, just eternal space aligned with eternal time on a planet in a universe that has nothing to offer by way of consolation for human fears, only a robust table of 112 to 118 material elements (depending on whose recent science we accept) and their existence in a time-space continuum that stretches infinitely in all directions (Giorbran).

Here is the language Thoreau uses to present this existential fear of a natural world that has no positive connection to human life or human feelings. Like Wordsworth, whose own epiphany occurs during his descent of the Alps (having earlier crossed the summit at Simplon Pass), Thoreau is now descending Katahdin, having almost achieved the highest summit in Maine (5,267 feet) on the previous day. Suddenly he sees a new version of earth, a world he has not known before:

This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhandselled [untouched] globe. . . . Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific,—not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or be buried in,—no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there,—the home, this, of Necessity and Fate. There was there felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place for heathenism and superstitious rites,— . . . I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one,—that my body might, but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries!—Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we? ("Ktaadn," in Week on the Concord, 645-46)

I quote Thoreau at length here because he so well describes the "Nature"—that is to say the essence—of human fear as an affect in nature and of nature. This sensation related to the fear Wordsworth felt when he stole the bird and the boat during his early wanderings around the English Lake-land. Thoreau's "presence of a force" no less perfectly describes those "huge and mighty forms, that do not live / Like living men," which chase the boat-stealing boy in The Prelude through his daydreams and night dreams.
For Wordsworth, by the time he composes “Tintern Abbey” (1798) as a young man of twenty-eight, the childhood manifestation of terror has been moderated into a joy that is nevertheless still disturbing:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused. (ll. 94–97)

Frederick Turner notes of Thoreau a point that is equally true of Wordsworth when he says that the “mechanistic account gives a fair idea . . . of what Thoreau and Emerson meant by ‘nature,’ if we may add that the human self was for them part of the ‘new wiring’ that the universe must add to itself” (82); this is especially true in a modern world that has secularized “God” and described the “spiritual” completely in terms of the “material.”

In this regard, Thoreau goes on to say, “‘So soul,’ continues the Hindu philosopher, ‘from the circumstances in which it is placed, mistakes its own character until the truth is revealed to it’” (Walden, 69), here reversing Keats’s quote that our soul is not something we are born with but rather something that we make—or can “mistake” along the way—formed out of our own experiences in a world of emotions, especially “a place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!” (Keats, Selected Poems, 289). Insofar as fear is part of this feeling and suffering, then “experience, for Thoreau and the pragmatists,” says Turner, “is truth” (89). In this recognition lies the corollary that affect is itself a form of meaning, and if our perceptions and expressions of beauty can create the self, then so can our experiences of fear, both emotional and physical. The biological evolution of experience is an acknowledgment that sensory perceptions, and the resulting emotional expressions of humans, taken together, create the only “meaning” that exists in the universe. Take away human cognition, and the resulting affecting emotions, and you have the same “meaningless” universe that existed for countless small scurrying mammals, untold thundering dinosaurs, endless swimming trilobites, and for all of those other living creatures and plants that inhabited the planet earth for hundreds of millions of year before the evolution of hominids and—eventually—the evolutionary emergence of human consciousness and emotions sometime within the last few million years.

What makes Thoreau so important to this narrative is the extent to
which the "intensity of perception" in his work is sometimes "almost hypnотic" (Turner, 90). For Turner, the same William Blake who sees "minute particulars" in the universal, and the Samuel Taylor Coleridge who sees icicles as a perfect image of pure creativity, are united in Thoreau’s image of human versus "natural" creativity: "You may melt your metals and cast them into the most beautiful moulds you can; they will never excite me like the forms which this molten earth flows out into" (Walden, 207). Nature contains within itself the precise set of "formal," or we might just as easily say "organizing," principles that are required to make the world we inhabit. Just as our Newtonian and Darwinian universe needs no God, so the human individual needs no soul beyond the Keatsian version of the self, a modern form of personal identity crafted out of the particulars of sensory experience and the emotional affects they produce in organic molecules. These experiences and affects unite to form the psyche—within the human brain—as well as the biological manifestations of mental activity: smiles, frowns, contorted faces, sweating hands. Turner concludes, "When we are truly experiencing we are growing by a reflexive process in which we are only separated by our consciousness from nature in order to share in nature's own creative process" (93). I have cut the final hyphenated phrase of Turner’s quote—"self-transcendence"—because it is not important what nature is creating but only that nature is involved in a creative process in which we, as consciously self-aware beings, also participate. Our specific participation includes our self-conscious acts of awareness and their subsequent or simultaneous feelings and attendant actions: affect.

For Wittgenstein, the emotion of fear is not separate from the words we use to express that fear. Of course, this 1940s idea of Wittgenstein is at least as old as Wordsworth, who says in an often-quoted note to his poem "The Thorn" (1800) that poetry is "the history or science of feelings," and, even more importantly, that our "words" are "not only symbols of the passions," but are "things, active and efficient, which are themselves part of the passion" (1.213). So, saying "I am afraid of that mountain coming after me" is, in this philosophical (and perhaps physiological) sense, the fear itself, since the emotion and the utterance are not magically distinct. As Michael F. Mascolo notes, for Wittgenstein "expressions of emotion (e.g., facial, vocal, motor action) are manifestations of the emotion itself. There is not an internal state and also a set of contingent expressions; instead, what we call an emotional expression is part and parcel of the emotion process itself. This applies to both natural and linguistic expressions of emotion"
(262). As Darwin notes in his study of emotion in primates, and as modern research confirms, an ape grimacing in pain or wide-eyed with fear is having just as real an emotion as any human being expressing similar feelings; the affect is the same (Buttelmann, Call, and Tomasello). Since the expression of the pain is the pain, and the rules for the language game of “fear” are absolute ways of being in pain, then as Wittgenstein says, “if there were for instance no characteristic expression of pain, of fear, of joy; if rule became exception and exception rule; or if both became phenomena of roughly equal frequency—this would make our normal language-games lose their point” (142). Even though it is possible to imitate emotional responses or to fake our feelings—consider actors on stage or in film—the understanding of emotions is based on the normal repeated responses, on the regular affective reactions to external stimuli.

Wittgenstein’s linguistic turn has a perhaps unexpected corollary in Darwinian observations about fear and environmental adaptability. For Wittgenstein, when we see the face of a person who is scared, “fear is there, alive, in the features” (537); in such a description, the fear is the face, not something behind the face or hiding in the mind of the person who displays this face. In biological terms, we may not be surprised to learn, fear appears on faces in the ways it does for very specific and practical reasons. For Darwin, apes widen their eyes—just as we do—when in fear, and this physiological response improves the width of their field of vision, while also allowing their eyes to move faster in their sockets in order to follow potential or actual threats, thereby increasing the likelihood of a successful response to the physical source of the fear: “Terror acts in the same manner on them as on us, causing the muscles to tremble, the heart to palpitate, the sphincters to be relaxed, and the hair to stand on end. Suspicion, the offspring of fear, is eminently characteristic of most wild animals” (Descent, i.39). Darwin even comes close to suggesting the Wittgensteinian identification of the utterance with the emotion itself when he says, “Our cries of pain, fear, surprise, anger, together with their appropriate actions, and the murmur of a mother to her beloved child are more expressive than any words” (Descent, 54). We do not need words or grammar, since we have groans, faces, sweat glands, blood vessels, and even hands to express these affects for us.

Percy Shelley and Darwin—perhaps not so surprisingly, given the close links I have traced between nineteenth-century poetry and science in Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism (2011) and elsewhere—produce almost identical descriptions of the biological and physical effects of fear. Here is
Shelley’s description of undersea plants (biologically mistaken but poetically powerful), with their water-surrounded foliage reacting to the powerful force of the West Wind on the surface of the Mediterranean:

The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know

Thy voice, and suddenly grow grey with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves: O hear! (“West Wind,” ll. 39–42, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*)

And here is Darwin’s remarkably similar description of a single powerful emotion on the human face; in certain cases, the face “is liable to grow pale from cold and fear” (*Expression of the Emotions*, 315). Darwin goes on to admit that “few points are more interesting in our present subject than the extraordinarily complex chain of events which lead to certain expressive movements” and, in addition, “that the chief expressive actions, exhibited by man and by the lower animals, are now innate or inherited,—that is, have not been learnt by the individual,—is admitted by every one. So little has learning or imitation to do with several of them that they are from the earliest days and throughout life quite beyond our control” (351). We inherit many of our fear responses, both physical and emotional, directly from our ancestors, human and nonhuman. It will not now be surprising that even Keats, a half century earlier (1819), could express a proto-evolutionary view about a “purposeful” element of humans, one that is directly linked to lower animals. He says, “I go among the Feilds [sic] and catch a glimpse of a stoat or a fieldmouse peeping out of the withered grass—the creature hath a purpose and his eyes are bright with it—I go amongst the buildings of a city and I see a Man hurrying along—to what? The Creature hath a purpose and his eyes are bright with it” (*Selected Poems*, 285). The purposefulness that Keats finds in creatures large and small indicates precisely the reason that William Wimsatt’s and Monroe C. Beardsley’s “affective fallacy” turns out not to be a fallacy at all. Like our animal ancestors, we do manifest the affects that most powerfully influence us. We do so when we are reading; we do so when we are living.

In the end, fear turns out to be a central formative affect on the developing human consciousness, especially self-consciousness. The emerging psyche of the child becomes the crucible in which identity, or selfhood, is
realized through beauty and fear. We find the beautiful as that which we are drawn to, that which we want to imitate, to copy, and to unite with in the end. We sense our experience of fear not only as that which we dread and seek to avoid but also as experiences that can have a uniquely powerful effect on us through their affects. Fear is almost always strangely and incessantly compelling, as Coleridge’s Wedding Guest proves with his repeated expressions of fear of the Mariner during the long tale-telling by a most strange man: “I fear thee, ancient Mariner! / I fear thy skinny hand! . . . I fear thee and thy glittering eye, / And thy skinny hand, so brown” (ll. 224–25, 228–29); this is fear that draws us toward its fearfulness in ways that are at once tempting and terrifying. Thoreau is terrified of the alien nature he feels on Katahdin, but he is drawn to it at the same time: “I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them . . . . Talk of mysteries—Think of our life in nature, daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it” (Week on the Concord, 646). At times, there is nothing that scares us so much as daily life, our ordinary world, a world we are drawn to at the same moment that we are terrified of the existential threat of its bare material reality.

This phenomenon is related to what the Romantics and their critics often call, echoing Burke, “the sublime.” I stand on the edge of the precipice or the ship’s railing, and I long, at one and the same instant, to be pulled back from the edge and, at the same moment, to be pulled forward over the edge, into the abyss. I do not literally want to fall over the edge, in the sense of falling to my physical death. I only want to know the feeling of entering into the completeness of infinite and empty space. This is the fulfillment of the same “oceanic” (and Freudian) oneness that Ishmael feels in the crow’s nest near the top of the mast on the whaling ship Pequod: “There you stand, lost in the infinite series of the sea, with nothing ruffled but the waves. The tranced ship indolently rolls; the drowsy trade winds blow; everything resolves you into languor . . . lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature . . . while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror” (Melville, 133, 136). This famous “Mast-Head” chapter of Moby-Dick (1851) ends with a final physical image of death by drowning: “And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea,
no more to rise for ever” (136). There is not a death wish here so much as there is a love of fear.

Of course, the horror of that return to the undifferentiated infinity that surrounds our physical bodies and emotional selves is closely related to a much earlier primitive “ego-feeling” that we all experienced, before we were differentiated into separate selves, before our unity with the mother—and the breast—and everything material that we perceived around ourselves gave way to that Keatsian (and Freudian and Lacanian) sense of personal identity and our concomitant sense of discreet objects, inanimate things, and animate persons all around us. As Brian Massumi notes, perceptively linking fear even to the sorts of political threats that surround us in our current, modern, and terrorist-obsessed world, “Fear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future. It is the felt reality of the nonexistent, loomingly present as the affective fact of the matter. ... A threat that does not materialize is not false. It has the affective reality of a past future, truly felt. The future of the threat is not falsified. It is deferred. The case remains forever open” (54). This forever openness is important to my critique of affect because it links to that most serious of our deferred fears—the fear of death and the related sense of death as the one fear that may not be deferrable—the one fear that cannot remain forever open. In our postmodern and secular world, with death as our absolute end, there can be no fear that surpasses the fear of our own death. To die is to realize not only the greatest but also the final fear. The fear of dying is simply the greatest of all affective fears. Like Wordsworth’s childhood fears—low breathings coming after him or tall mountains in pursuit—our childhood and adult fears are ultimately threats to our physical person, fears of an end to our own consciousness—of an end to all we know. In order to survive psychologically, we must resolve these fears of death—our physical and psychological end—into fears that we can live with, at least as long as we survive physically to possess such fears.

When we realize that we are going to lose this life we have—a realization that occurs sometime near that preadolescent age when the young Wordsworth feared material nature (in pursuit) so completely—then we come to another equally important realization. Shakespeare, as is so often the case, says it best: “This thou perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong,/ To love that well, which thou must leave ere long” (sonnet 73, ll. 13-14). We must love everything (objects and people) all the more, because we are going to lose all of those things (and all of those persons) to the passing
of time. Since, as Shakespeare so rightly claims, everything becomes more valuable precisely because we are going to lose it, then the ultimate fear—our fear of our own death—is linked directly to the acceptance of death. Death is the one reality that ensures the full power of our love for ourselves, and especially our love for the other human beings around us.

WORKS CITED


Fostered by Fear


