Unquiet Things
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PART III

After the Secular
And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

—Genesis 1:2

Create the opposite dream. Know how to create a becoming-minor.
—Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “What Is a Minor Literature?”

Walter Scott’s post-chaise of history and his hippogriff-drawn chariot of romance share one important quality: they move. Images of literary activity in a world ordered by post-messianic historical time, post-chaise and chariot point to a particular kind of literary effect. We sometimes say that literature moves or inspires us, or we speak of being “carried away” by a story. Let us for a moment be literal about these moving pictures: does it matter that images of how writing moves us are themselves vehicles for transportation?

This is not an idle question. Consider another image of literary activity that we encountered in Scott’s novels: the alembic. There, too, the question is how a spirit causes change in the material world. As the novel makes clear (and the background context of Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution underlines), there are other uncertainties as well. How does spirit interact with body? Can a spirit move a vehicle? Can a spirit move us? These are questions raised by the gothic mode, and they are philosophical questions with an important origin in Descartes’s mind-body dualism.

Long before Descartes, though, the writer of Ezekiel saw four fantastic creature-vehicles that ran on pure spirit: “Whithersoever the spirit was to go, they went, . . . ; and the wheels were lifted up over against them: for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels” (Ezekiel 1:20). These four living creatures, each with four wings and four sides, flashing lightning, are also the wheels wherewith they move. For them, spirit interacts seamlessly with matter.

When I. A. Richards turned his attention to metaphor in The Philosophy of Rhetoric (1936), he distinguished between its tenor (the object referred to) and its vehicle (the object whose qualities are being borrowed). A metaphor moves: it moves itself, it moves language, and perhaps a good one moves us. The word means “to carry over” or “to transfer.” Yet its motions remain at
the same time elusive, spiritual, ethereal. How does it interact with the physical world? What does it mean to be moved by a word? And what does it mean to be moved at a distance—not by the touch or push that Hume took as a model of causation but by subtler pressures and changes in the air, in the surrounding environment, in the mood of a place or of an age? These questions confront the speaker in “Frost at Midnight,” gazing at the film, the “sole unquiet thing” in his midnight world, whose flickering motions alert him to the air currents moving about the room. The pun may be accidental, yet questions of the soul are clearly in the air whenever we confront such action at a distance. It is probably not accidental that the speaker compares such action to his memory of church bells, sounds that “stirred and haunted [him] / With a wild pleasure” (lines 31–32). Though they may be silent now, the bells continue to haunt indirectly, just as the unquiet film allows the speaker to register how much the silence of his environment disturbs and stirs his thought.

Metaphors are not only vehicles; they are tethered by their tenor, by the thing that does not move but is rather augmented, as it were, in place, by the vehicle. In the previous section I explored several examples of this kind of metaphorical movement—movement, that is to say, wherein distant forces so change the surrounding atmosphere that they force a movement not so much because of direct contact but because of distributed and often invisible influence. My examples in the previous section were largely negative: Scott’s interleaved discussions of horses and chariots, frivolity and alembics; the encircled poet of “Kubla Khan”; government troops traversing the Scottish countryside, whose presence forces a Covenanting movement that signifies as guilt. These, I argued, are images of life in a secular age. To be moved by worldly rather than otherworldly forces is part of the metaphysics of the secular age—and as we have seen, such movements can be painful. The word that I used for that process was *minoritization*: the process of being rendered minor, unimportant. In the case of someone like Robert, that rendering is traumatic.

Such spectral histories, with their gothic overtones, tend to construe the secular as a form of loss, and that indeed has been my primary though not exclusive emphasis so far—loss, however, not of religion nor enchantment per se but rather of varied possibilities for living, a loss visited most dramatically upon the already vulnerable. Still, the kind of motion figured by a creative spirit moving on the waters, by metaphor, or by Coleridge’s church bells, can also be a pleasure of a distinctly human and worldly kind. The church bells, after all, are silent now, their wild pleasure transposed into
other, more immanent kinds of human flourishing. In her recent book *The Future of Illusion*, Victoria Kahn reads such developments as positive and creative steps away from religion, enabled by what she calls *poiesis*, namely humanity’s own self-recognition as creator in its own right. Criticizing the fascination with political theology in the recent work of Agamben, Žižek, and Badiou, Kahn argues that it was only by *breaking* from the theological legitimation of the state that Renaissance writers from Shakespeare to Hobbes to Spinoza cleared room for a purely immanent theory of creativity and made it possible for art and fiction to step into the space once occupied by religion. Against Taylor and Asad, she claims that the advances of the early modern period, from science to philosophy to governance to art, cannot be understood as developments from within Christianity but must rather be seen as examples of the human ability to “artfully construct the world of human interaction and political order.” We only know what we can make ourselves—that may be a limitation, but it is also an invitation.

Though I believe Kahn underestimates the messiness of the break from political theology, her account nevertheless reminds us that the *poiesis* of minoritization can sometimes be turned around, its line of flight not only a passive motion but a process of being pulled or pushed toward a conversion, toward the making of a new space, or at any rate toward a change from the status quo, from things as they are or were. Scott’s frivolity, and the strange “delights” of addiction in Purchas and Coleridge, would be cases of this—examples not so much of minoritization as of what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call “becoming-minor.” This implies a creative agency missing from the passive construction of minoritization, an artful construction dedicated less to an end product than to the process of getting there.

A minor literature, according to Deleuze and Guattari, has three components. First, it “doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language.” Second, a minor literature is intrinsically political, since “a whole other story is vibrating within it.” And third, a minor literature is charged with the “role and function of collective, even revolutionary, activity.” Kafka, their main example, could have engaged in a symbolic “re-territorialization” by composing in either Czech or Yiddish rather than German, or indeed by writing in a German swelled up “through all the resources of symbolism.” He does none of these, however, choosing instead to proceed by a “willed poverty, pushing deterritorialization to . . . an extreme.” He “deliberately kills all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification.”
At certain moments in *Prometheus Unbound*, Percy Shelley may approach such decomposition—but Deleuze and Guattari are really extrapolating from a modernist aesthetic too quick to disparage figurative language as a form of bad faith. The writers in this final section are rightly cautious of such a gesture of negation. Attracted to the politics of a becoming-minor, they remain all too aware of the costs associated with absolute separations, and mistrustful too of the unforeseen consequences of human creativity. Shelley, for example, will make grand claims for the power of figure to change the world, but he does so by means of what his heroine Cythna in *The Revolt of Islam* (1817) calls a “subtler language”:

> Clear, elemental shapes, whose smallest change
> A subtler language within language wrought.

Such “language within language” shares a great deal with a minor literature, created “within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature” (18). But it realizes that impulse not by abandoning figurative resources but through what Shelley in his 1821 *Defense of Poetry* calls the “vitaly metaphori-cal” quality of language, “which marks the before unapprehended relations of things.” Poetry creates relations where there were none before. Rather than a purely immanent innovation, a decisive and modern step away from the old enchantments, such poiesis serves as a reminder that modernity has not yet delivered on its promises. Metaphor, the crossing-over or traversing of a space, encapsulates a desire for change—but it also keeps one nearby, within range of the place where one has begun. One may long to fly farther, to become mere vehicle, but the tenor is still there, like Coleridge’s church bells, holding one’s feet to the ground through flights of memory or of imagination. It is in this sense what Shelley calls the “smallest change,” though its effects may be magnified under the right conditions. This, too, is a way of becoming minor, to “be a sort of stranger within [one’s] own language,” as Deleuze and Guattari put it (26). Like Cythna in her cave, weaving a language open to unexpected arrivals, or like Coleridge’s speaker, anticipating a surprising visit: “and still my heart leaped up, / For still I hoped to see the stranger’s face,” a stranger who seems already almost present in the “strange . . . silentness” that is the “sound” of the secular (lines 40–41, 10–11, emphasis added).

Thus the texts in this final section are poised between the metaphorical and the becoming-minor. There is here a developing argument that literature
does not only register the governmental aspects of secularity but also mobilizes the secular for a constructive project. The writers in this section are attracted to the creative possibilities of a minor literature, to the way that such a literature can open up new pleasures, possibilities, and capacities. Yet it is in their characteristic hesitation or pause along this line of flight that they “express another possible community”—not through a willed linguistic poverty nor a decisive break, but rather through a small change or an arrested movement: the strange, atemporal pause of the Byronic hero, the metaphorical constellations theorized by Robert Lowth and Friedrich Schleiermacher, or the odd “vacancy” of Shelley’s *Mont Blanc*. In such spaces we encounter the potential for another, or for many others, to emerge. The arrival of such strangers alters the terrain. And that would be, not a becoming-poor, but a becoming-plentiful.
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