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“Islanded in the World”: Cultural Memory and Human Mobility in *The Last Man*

CHARLOTTE SUSSMAN

ALTHOUGH *THE LAST MAN* IS NAMED FOR THE ULTIMATE solitary individual, Mary Shelley’s novel devotes much of its energy to representing human aggregates, to imagining populations. Set in the late twenty-first century, the narrative recounts the extinction of humanity by a virulent global plague that leaves only one man alive. Although it has sometimes been cited for inventing a new category of utopian fiction, science fiction, *The Last Man* describes few technological innovations; the main sociopolitical difference between its dystopian future and the early nineteenth century is the peaceful replacement of Britain’s monarchy by a republic. Before the plague arrives, the novel is primarily concerned with the differing political beliefs of the republican Adrian, the earl of Windsor (often thought to be based on Percy Shelley), and the autocratic Lord Raymond (often thought to be based on Byron, especially since the character leaves England to fight in Greece and the Near East). Because of its resemblance to Mary Shelley’s world and because it was written after the deaths of Percy Shelley, Byron, and others in her circle, *The Last Man* has often been read as a personal memoir written in the key of apocalypse.¹

Yet the novel was also part of a vogue for last-man narratives in the first decades of the nineteenth century, which included a novel translated from French called *The Last Man; or, Omergarus and Syderia, a Romance in Futurity* (Grainville; 1806) and Byron’s poem “Darkness” (1816). Shelley’s work is unlike many of these, however, in that her title is something of a misnomer. The loneliness of the last man takes up a bare twenty pages of the almost five-hundred-page narrative; the rest are concerned with what Shelley calls “the silver net of love and civilization” (262). As it recounts the extinction of humanity, the novel necessarily

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describes the gradual unraveling of that net. The plague exerts extreme pressure on the idea of national community in particular, by forcing a reevaluation of the number of people needed to continue a nation as a living community. Furthermore, it increases human mobility, severing all local attachments as its survivors seek safety. By considering these issues, *The Last Man* engages with contemporary sociopolitical debates and reflects on the consequences of those debates for literary production and readership.

To illustrate this engagement and reflection, I introduce a piece of neglected historical context for the novel: the fierce debates over emigration, especially state-aided emigration, that took place during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Although emigration was seen to be a promising cure for the ills of overpopulation, its supporters, as well as its opponents, worried about the strain it would put on cultural and national community, two categories that did not necessarily overlap. The debates examined the extent to which communities were constituted by the territory they inhabited and the degree to which they were based on customs and traditions. This led to arguments over the difference between emigrants and exiles: between people still linked to the society they left and those cut off irrevocably from it. How far could someone travel from his or her native environment, it was asked, and still retain a connection to it? Shelley's novel aligns itself, albeit in a strikingly pessimistic way, with those who opposed any encouragement of emigration. *The Last Man* takes up the issues raised by the emigration debates in terms of national and cultural community, using plague as a way to trigger and consider the movement of vast numbers of people. What is at stake is the relation between the abstractions of nation and culture and empirical measurements of population.

Published in 1826, the novel appeared in the midst of widespread speculation about the value of such measurements in ascertaining the state of a society. As Mary Poovey has demon-

strated, before 1800 "Britons . . . manifested a pervasive indifference to numerical information, which seemed irrelevant to what many people considered 'truth' or 'value'" (282). By the second or third decade of the nineteenth century, however, this indifference was challenged by what Ian Hacking calls an "avalanche of printed numbers." Between 1800 and 1830, Thomas Malthus's theories of population, in particular, aroused great controversy over the value of numbers in revealing truths about human society (Poovey 278–95; see also Foucault). The question of emigration, on which Malthus also weighed in, is an important instance of the way politicians and commentators tried to reach concrete solutions to social problems that were evidenced by empirical measurements. Shelley's novel engages with this issue by interrogating the extent to which absolute numbers of persons undergird the possibility of culture: Can there be a nation without citizens? Can cultural history be sustained in a single memory? Finally, bringing these questions about population back to its own status as a novel, *The Last Man* asks, Can books exist without readers?

Nation

From its first paragraph, *The Last Man* declares its interest in the fate of national communities in a world where population is reckoned globally. Its protagonist, Lionel Verney, introduces himself by saying:

I am the native of a sea-surrounded nook, a cloud-enshadowed land, which, when the surface of the globe, with its shoreless ocean and trackless continents, presents itself to my mind, appears only as an inconsiderable speck in the immense whole; and yet, when balanced in the scale of mental power, far outweighed countries of larger extent and more numerous population. (9)

At the outset, then, Verney imagines the world in its entirety as an "immense" and mostly

“trackless” expanse, in which national boundaries all but disappear. At the same time, he recognizes that sheer numbers of persons, as well as territory, can determine the visibility and power of a country. Yet he concludes that a nation like England is constituted in “man’s mind alone” (9), what Benedict Anderson would call an “imagined community.” This first paragraph, then, provides two ways of registering the existence of nations: in terms of empirical measurements, such as territory and population, and in terms of “mental power,” the individual or collective capacity to imagine a nation. Already in some tension with each other, these two modes of representation are forced further apart by the plague.

As the epidemic comes to England, *The Last Man* uses the imaginative force of mental power and empirical measurements to convey the state of the nation. Searching for appropriate figures, Verney moves between two kinds of metaphor: personifying England as a human body and comparing it to the inanimate spaces of a tomb or a grave. As the plague eradicates the need for trade, for example, he notes that “the great heart of mighty Britain was pulseless” (261). As he leaves, however, he addresses Britain as the “tomb of Idris [his wife]. . . . Grave in which my heart lies sepulchred” (378). The two figures come head to head in lines from *Macbeth*—“Alas, poor country; / Almost afraid to know itself! It cannot / Be called our mother, but our grave”—which make a London audience feel “a shudder like the swift passing of an electric shock” (282). This opposition between two types of metaphor reveals the difficulty in deciding the relative importance of persons and places in constituting a nation. On the one hand, the term *England* is so powerful, and names so many indefinable elements, that it is best represented as a person. This figuration works by imagining England as a single entity that stands for a human aggregate; when that population dips below a certain level, the nation becomes a corpse. On the other hand, the novel holds out the possibility that *England* merely names the

space that a nation inhabits. Once the number of living persons there decreases, the space becomes a grave. The doubled figurative potential of the nation’s name, as personification and location, is underlined when Verney surveys its deserted landscape and remarks, “England remained, though England was dead” (363).

In both uses of the word, however, the rhetoric that describes a nation seems closely tied to the population of that nation. The figure of the corpse or the grave manages the relation between nation and population by abstracting the multiplicity of people into a singularity: one body, one place. Yet Verney also tries to represent the condition of England in language more sensitive to the behavior of human aggregates under the onslaught of the plague. Realizing that the nation lives as long as it is inhabited by a certain number of people, he enthusiastically joins in his friend and leader Adrian’s plans “to congregate in masses what remained of the population: for he possessed the conviction that it was only through the benevolent and social virtues that any safety was to be hoped for the remnant of mankind” (307). This safety proves illusory; the plague soon decreases the number of Britons below the level at which they can maintain a coherent society (Bewell 305). Using a different metaphor, this time an analogy for multiplicity, to describe that national death, Verney asks:

Have any of you, my readers, observed the ruins of an anthill immediately after its destruction? At first it appears entirely deserted of its former inhabitants; in a little time you see an ant struggling through the upturned mould; they reappear by twos and threes, running hither and thither in search of their lost companions. Such were we upon earth, wondering aghast at the effects of pestilence. (316–17)

Soon he makes even clearer the importance of numbers not only to national coherence but also to human identity itself: “Man existed by twos and threes; man, the individual who might sleep, and wake, and perform the animal func-

tions; but man, in himself weak, yet more powerful in congregated numbers than wind or ocean: man the queller of elements, the lord of created nature, the peer of demi-gods, existed no longer" (320). The plague underlines the difference between two meanings of the word *man*, as it has with the word *England*. "[M]an, the individual" is simply another animal; man "the lord of created nature" can only exist in numbers larger than three. It turns out that the ability to congregate, to form a unified whole of belief and purpose, is what has long characterized humanity; depopulation has turned the remnant of humanity into an aggregate, numbers without purpose or direction.²

In this section of the novel, then, nation and population are mutually defined. Without sufficient numbers, the nation becomes a dead body or space; without the governing idea of a nation, human interaction is reduced to the "animal functions" of doomed ants. Verney bemoans this interdependence in an elegiac apostrophe: "England, late birth-place of excellence and school of the wise, thy children are gone, thy glory faded!" Other nations, he explains, are known for their natural resources—American sugar, or the spices of the East—but England was famous for "thy children, their unwearied industry and lofty inspiration. They are gone, and thou goest with them the oft trodden path that leads to oblivion" (324). In this address, the idea of England is detached from its territory and environment and linked firmly to its inhabitants, its population. Yet, when the last survivors decide to leave England, Verney revises the figure, decouples population from nation, and allows the survivors to retain their sense of being a living community by jettisoning their ties to the nation. "Let us go!" he says, "England is in her shroud,—we may not enchain ourselves to a corpse. Let us go—the world is our country now. . . . The world is vast, and England, though her many fields and wide spread woods seem interminable, is but a small part of her" (326). England now becomes a grave for England's

corpse. By locating England's mortality in her own territory, Verney raises the possibility that human community can survive the death of the nation, that it might be remade on a different principle in a different place. Strikingly, at this point in the narrative, he uses a number rather than a metaphor to designate this group. Adrian "lead[s] forth from their native country, the numbered remnant of the English nation. . . . Our numbers amounted to not quite two thousand persons" (330). The empirical and figurative descriptions of the nation disengage; the "numbers" move on, while England becomes a "depopulate" "corpse" (377).

Mobility

The plague makes population, as a concept separable from nation or culture, a visible issue. As the nemesis of population, the plague reveals numbers themselves to be something worth conserving. The departure of the last two thousand people from England is only the most poignant instance of the way the plague increases human mobility. Long before this exodus, the novel is haunted by the inefficacy of political and corporeal boundaries and by the tenuousness of local attachments. The disease is the novel's most compelling device for imagining a world in which no culture or community can remain isolated from others. Indeed, Shelley's novel has most interested scholars recently for the way its concerns about the global spread of disease adumbrate our own.³ When the disease assumes global proportions, however, it produces another kind of international circulation, as "the spirit of emigration [creeps] in among the few survivors" (325). "The English, whether travelers or residents, came pouring in one great revulsive stream, back on their own country" (235). This immigration into England takes a sinister turn as the inhabitants of Britain's former colonies return to England in search of safety from the plague. Reversing the trail of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century emigration, North Americans

come to Ireland, then to Scotland, and finally begin to encroach on England.

Their lawless spirit instigated them to violence . . . the ruin complete in one place, they removed their locust visitation to another. When unopposed they spread their ravages wide; in cases of danger they clustered, and by dint of numbers overthrew their weak and despairing foes. They came from the east and the north, and directed their course without apparent motive, but unanimously towards our unhappy metropolis. . . . They swept the country like a conquering army, burning—laying waste—murdering. The lower and vagabond English joined with them. . . . They talked of taking London, conquering England—calling to mind the long detail of injuries which had for many years been forgotten. (298)

The invaders are stopped well before they achieve this goal, but the incident illustrates the novel's sense that the plague exacerbates the conflicts between classes and ethnic groups and renders the geographic boundaries between them permeable. As we have already seen, the depopulating attack of the plague forces the novel to explore the discourse of populations, to search for a vocabulary for the sounds and movements of human aggregates. Again the narrative describes the social ruin wrought by the plague with a metaphor of multiplicity drawn from the insect world; these emigrants from plague are a "locust visitation."

This highly charged rhetoric enters a hyperbolic, and racist, register as it singles out the Irish, whose "disorganized multitudes" are "collected in unnatural numbers" (298)—the English dread "their disorderly clamour, the barbarian shouts, the untimed step of thousands coming in disarray" (300). As the plague makes the barriers between nations hypersensitive and vulnerable, societies lose their order, their rhythms, their civilization—their numbers become "unnatural." Thus, this exaggerated mobility of what Shelley calls "emigrants" (296) puts as much pressure on the idea of the nation as does depopulation, by throwing a harsh light

on the criteria by which persons are allowed entrance into a community. Significantly, this conflict is halted when a lone invader dies in the English leader Adrian's arms. Echoing the narrative's search for a unitary figure to represent the nation, "the fate of the world seem[s] bound up in the death of this single man" (303). Once the unruly aggregate can be understood in terms of a singularity, an ideal of human community is restored; "on either side the band threw down their arms . . . while a gush of love and deepest amity filled every heart" (303).

Many critics note that this episode registers the novel's defensive consciousness of England's place in an expanding colonial economy (e.g., Bewell 306–07). I would point to a more specific context as well. This vision of a superabundant, desperate, and destructive population entering and destroying English culture could have been drawn directly from the schemes for state-sponsored emigration that began to appear near 1800 and continued to appear until about 1830. This period marks out a specific phase in British emigration policy; as one historian says, "[A]t an earlier time [such projects] would have been considered harmful; subsequently they were believed to have been ineffective" (Johnston 1). From the beginning of the nineteenth century, public consciousness of "surplus population" increased, focused on the same groups that Shelley pinpoints: the Irish, the Scottish, and the English poor. Here were laborers without jobs, "superfluous" multitudes produced by the return of war veterans, by the clearing of land in Scotland, by the development of potato farming in Ireland, and by the advent of new industrial methods everywhere—a "problem" given a theoretical framework in Malthus's writings.

At first, private schemes appeared for transforming this "useless" population into a force that could contribute to national productivity. These plans invariably tied emigration to the project of English colonial expansion. For example, the Scottish landowner Thomas Douglas, earl of Selkirk, funded the emigration of

small groups of Highlanders to Nova Scotia in 1804 and to Manitoba in 1812. He claimed that this project “show[ed] the utility that may be derived from a class of people who have hitherto been lost to their native country. . . . Though of little service as manufacturers, it proves that they may be made excellent colonists” (222).⁴ Enthusiasm for emigration increased in the next decades (Chandler 459–63). In 1814 Patrick Colquhoun celebrated English colonization, since it meant that “the means exist whereby ample provisions can be made for all classes of her redundant population, and that too in a manner which may be rendered not only profitable, but perfectly satisfactory to the individuals themselves” (*Treatise* 421).⁵ After Waterloo, deteriorating economic conditions gave such schemes a greater urgency, and pilot programs of government-subsidized emigration from Ireland to Canada and South Africa were put into practice in 1823 and 1824. The debates such schemes provoked culminated in a series of reports in 1827 and 1828 from a parliamentary committee under the directorship of Byron’s cousin Wilmot Horton (Johnston 56).

Emigration was generally considered an individual right. Shelley’s father, William Godwin, for example, characterizes it as voluntary and beneficial in his final retort to Malthus, *On Population* (1820): “One of the blessings indispensable to the welfare of man in society, is the prerogative he shall possess of removing himself from the yoke of a government that, for whatever reason, has become unbearable to him” (378). While Godwin argues for man’s right to renounce his nation, other writers on the issue sought to harness this kind of discontented “industry” for the state. The earl of Selkirk, for example, represented emigration as a “salutary drain” of Highlanders “infected with deep and permanent seeds of every angry passion,” who would be given productive labor elsewhere (Douglas 124). The parliamentary committees explored the possibility that unemployed laborers, with their families, might be helped by the

government to settle “empty” colonial land for Britain in South Africa and Canada.

The committee’s opinions, and those of earlier commentators on the issue, drew on a labor theory of value. The utility of persons and their value to the nation are based on their ability to find productive labor and use the wages from that labor to pay their rent and other expenses. If they cannot, they are understood to be useless, and their connection to the nation is rendered tenuous, if it is not severed. Surplus population, thus, is population that can produce no surplus value for the state. By offering employment to such persons, emigration promises to resuture them to that entity; it is the “means by which this surplus population can be rendered useful to themselves and their country, by giving their industry a new and beneficent direction” (Colquhoun, *Considerations* 3). Paradoxically, then, the distance emigrants travel ties them more firmly to the nation they left. As Colquhoun optimistically explains:

The great national family of the United Kingdom is not confined to the British Isles.—It extends to all His Majesty’s subjects in every colony and dependency of the British Crown—and the productive labor of this extensive family is all more or less beneficial to the Empire at large, and particularly to the parent state, who possesses the monopoly of supplies of her produce and manufactures, and also of the whole exportable produce of the colonies received in turn. (31)

This vocabulary of organized flow and monopoly, channeled through the embodying metaphor of a family, articulates a mercantilist ideal of population as a resource to be managed by the state. The conviction that persons should be valued in terms of their labor power therefore combines with an interest in the portability of their labor to produce a particular idea of national community. Membership in the nation is ensured by both industry and mobility.

The parliamentary committees of 1827 and 1828 continued this concern for the rational distribution of labor over the British Empire. Their

anxiety about the problem of surplus population was driven by the theories of Malthus, particularly his conviction that, unless checked, population would continue to grow exponentially, eventually outstripping food supplies. Malthus, an important witness for the 1827 committee, declared redundant laborers “a tax upon the community” (Great Britain, House of Commons 38).⁶ The committee took these views to support the project of subsidized emigration as a handy way of removing such laborers and so increasing national wealth. Indeed, the worst consequence of the surplus population crisis, the committee predicted, would be an uncontrolled flow of labor across territorial boundaries. *The Third Report from the Select Committee on Emigration from the United Kingdom* stated in 1827:

Unless an early diversion be provided by Emigration to check the increasing irruption of the pauper population of Ireland, which now pours itself into Scotland and England with alarming rapidity, no other result can be contemplated, than the permanent deterioration of the English and Scottish labourer. . . . The question, whether an extensive plan of Emigration shall or shall not be adopted, appears to your committee to resolve itself into a single point, Whether the wheat-fed population of Great Britain shall or shall not be supplanted by the potato-fed population of Ireland; Whether Great Britain, in reference to the conditions of her lower orders, shall or shall not progressively become what Ireland is at the present moment.

(Great Britain, House of Commons 5–7)

The figuration of population as a stream of persons susceptible to direction recurs here. The Irish are imaged as a liquid force that “pours itself” into spaces where it is not wanted, erupting inappropriately. Through such language, the committee drives home its point that population mobility without state direction threatens to destroy cultural boundaries, blurring the socioeconomic distinctions between England and Ireland.

This is one of the anxieties played out in *The Last Man*, most explicitly in its description of the

unwanted Irish and Scottish immigrants discussed above. Yet if the plague-driven invasion foregrounds the destructive effect of “unnatural numbers” on national integrity, most of the novel takes up the issue from the opposite perspective. That is, while the early-nineteenth-century debates about the benefits of emigration for the problems of surplus population asked whether having *too many* people might destroy national identity, Shelley’s novel asks whether the nation can sustain itself with *too few* people or even none at all. It takes to a terrifying conclusion the latent suggestion of pro-emigration literature that England might be better off purified of all disruptive elements. Both approaches to the problem of the relation between nation and population, however, converge on the issue of mobility. While proponents of emigration hope that a properly directed population stream (toward the colonies) will strengthen the nation, *The Last Man* provides a more radical and more pessimistic account of human mobility. The novel takes a paradigmatic problem of its time to an abstract and apocalyptic extreme. While Malthus theorized that disease was one of the natural checks on population growth, Shelley transforms disease into an “ocean of death” that absorbs the flood of human population (412).

The initial invasion results from enforced and desperate mobility in the barbarians of the New World, in the Celtic fringe, and in the poor, but subsequent developments in the novel show that European nations are equally mobile. The most striking example of such generalized, involuntary mobility occurs when the last English survivors of the plague rather surprisingly renounce any attachment to the memories embedded in the depopulated landscape of England and make a “plan of emigration” (325). This departure shatters the novel’s most sustained and settled community, one based on collective memory, love of place, and shared cultural ideals. Early in the narrative, Lionel; his wife, Idris; her brother, Adrian; Lionel’s sister, Perdita; her husband, Raymond, the Lord Protector

of England; and their children all gather to devote their lives to intellectual and familial pursuits in Windsor Forest and Windsor Castle: “Years passed thus,—even years. Each month brought forth its successor, each year like to that gone by” (92). Founded on domestic and cultural pleasures rather than on ancient traditions or collective industry, this tiny community nonetheless represents a national idyll. If Londoners are distraught ants after the onslaught of the plague, Windsor’s inhabitants before its appearance are as “gay as summer insects” (90). The community’s capacity to persist for years without alteration allows it to build a sense of collective, rooted, memory. Furthermore, its location recalls Alexander Pope’s invocation of the site in his great patriotic poem of 1713: “Thy Forests, Windsor! And thy green Retreats, / At once the Monarch’s and the Muse’s Seats, / Invite my Lays” (lines 1–3).⁷ Even in the postmonarchical world of *The Last Man*, the “green retreats” of the forest nurture both government and culture.

This community is first disrupted by the departure and deaths of Raymond and Perdita. Then the triumph of the plague completely uproots it. The motives for the group’s departure are mixed. In part, the group leaves to seek safety from the plague; in part, they go to assuage their hopelessness, seeking to “amuse for a time [their] despair” (325). Verney explains their sad difference from previous emigrants:

To leave the country of our fathers, made holy by their graves!—We could not feel even as a voluntary exile of old, who might for pleasure or convenience forsake his native soil; though thousands of miles might divide him, England was still part of him, as he of her. He heard of the passing events of the day; he knew that if he returned, and resumed his place in society, the entrance was still open, and it required but the will, to surround himself once more with the associations and habits of boyhood. Not so with us, the remnant. We left none to represent us, none to repeople the desert land, and the name of England died when we left her. . . . (325–26)

Figuring this departure as involuntary, Verney reiterates the importance of community and communication to national identity. For England to remain part of the voluntary exile, not only must he be able to learn of events in his homeland, but he must also be remembered, “represented,” by those he left behind. These things cannot happen for the departing plague survivors; without continuous habitation of the place they left, the emigrants cannot carry the idea of the nation with them. The human body may be portable, but the nation is not.

In this assertion, *The Last Man* seems to align itself with opponents to emigration. Much of this imagery, including the poignancy of leaving ancestral graves and nostalgia for the associations of childhood, might have been taken from the rhetoric denouncing government support for emigration. As one opponent of the parliamentary committee writes, “[T]hose who can talk lightly” of emigration “but little consider . . . the horrible misery which must be induced before such families are seriously to entertain thoughts of leaving, for ever, the land of their forefathers, the society of all their living friends, and the graves of all those whom they once knew and loved” (*No Emigration* 15).⁸ To illustrate this misery, he uses the poignant couplets of Oliver Goldsmith’s “The Deserted Village” as an epigraph, revealing the poem’s power as an antiemigration work:

Good Heaven! What sorrows gloomed
that parting day,
That called them from their native walks away;
When the poor exiles, every pleasure past,
Hung round their bowers, and fondly looked
their last,
And took a long farewell, and wished in vain
For seats like these beyond the western main. . . .
(lines 363–68)

Another commentator rejects the promise that emigrants will be more firmly attached to the “national family” by their departure and asserts, “By those who support the system it has been assented that the appalling number of two millions

of our fellow creatures should be exiled forever” (Hillary 85). One writer takes this figuration of the emigrant as an involuntary exile even further, comparing the immigrant in North America with William Cowper’s vision of Alexander Selkirk, a model for Robinson Crusoe:

Oh, Solitude! Where are the charms
Which sages have found in thy face,
Better to dwell in the midst of alarms
Than reign in this horrible place.
(qtd. in Head 38)

In these views, emigrants do not become a productive part of a larger, imperial community through their departure. Instead, they are forced into a profound solitude, cut off from the past and future of their original community.

Like F. B. Head’s pamphlet, *The Last Man* furthers its critique of the consequences of global mobility through reference to one of the most important Enlightenment figures for the success and value of English expansion across the globe: Robinson Crusoe, who unlike Cowper’s Selkirk turns his solitude into productive labor and eventually into a kind of community. After he becomes the last man, Verney parses out an explicit meditation on the differences between himself and Defoe’s hero.⁹ It begins, “We had both been thrown companionless—he on the shore of a desolate island: I on that of a desolate world” (448). In this comparison, the novel uses the triumph of the plague to undermine the promise of productive labor to remake places and persons as emigrants journey out from England. Verney is “rich in the so-called goods of life”; Crusoe is “forced to toil in the acquirement of every necessary.” At first, freedom from labor seems the only good thing about Verney’s condition. But it hardly compensates for what Crusoe has. Verney continues, “Yet he was far happier than I: for he could hope, nor hope in vain—the destined vessel at last arrived, to bear him to countrymen and kindred, where the events of his solitude became a fireside tale. To none could I ever relate the story of my adversity; no hope had I” (448). By

their contiguity in Verney’s thought process, Crusoe’s labor seems connected to Crusoe’s ultimate reunion with a larger community—his work, his survival, has a purpose. Verney’s idleness becomes an important element of his more drastic isolation: no amount of productive labor will ever change his condition. Here again we see the importance of communication and community to the value and legibility of human experience. Crusoe’s narrative will become a “fireside tale” for his “countrymen and kindred,” while Verney’s story will never be heard. So strong is his need for human contact that Verney declares, “[T]he wild and cruel Caribbee, the merciless Cannibal . . . would have been to me a beloved companion.” As it is, he fears, “Shall I wake, and speak to none, pass the interminable hours, my soul islanded in the world, a solitary point, surrounded by a vacuum?” (449). Verney’s physical and psychic islanding sharply contrasts with two geographic islands: the “barren island” of England, whose name died when he left her (412), and Crusoe’s island, which reiterates the productive fiction that an isolated and distant individual can remain bound to a nation through fruitful labor and successful narration. As if in refutation of contemporary schemes to move people about for the betterment of empire, Shelley describes a peripatetic world in which no amount of productive labor will alter the fate of humanity.

The Last Man’s exploration of the futility of human labor is characteristic of the last-man narratives of the early nineteenth century. Such narratives either show humanity’s destructive exhaustion of the world’s resources or posit that no amount of human labor and ingenuity can change the downward trajectory of the environment. One of *The Last Man*’s antecedents, a French novel by Jean-Baptiste Grainville, describes a future in which humanity has almost completely died out through infertility (35).¹⁰ Although the novel eventually transforms this predicament into a contest between secular and divine forces, it initially ascribes the death of humanity to the overtaxing of the earth’s resources:

The earth's duration has exceeded the period marked by Nature, and those whom she has nourished, her own children, loaded with her rich gifts, have proved her parricides. They have hastily drawn from her bowels the very principles of life. Men, in reaping too much, have lavished away their strength and lost it. (74)

Thus, human labor, instead of transforming the world for the better, has contributed to its destruction. Byron's "Darkness" gives another grim account of the inefficacy of labor, this time in a universe subjected to a natural apocalypse. The poem describes a world in which "the bright sun was extinguished" (line 2). Faced with such conditions, humanity must expend its energy destroying everything it has produced:

And they did live by watchfires—and the thrones,
The palaces of crowned kings—the huts,
The habitations of all things which dwell,
Were burnt for beacons. . . . (10–13)

This enormous deconstructive labor is useless, however; darkness prevails.¹¹ In Thomas Campbell's poem "The Last Man" (1823), the sun also dies, even though

beneath [it] man put forth
His pomp, his pride, his skill;
And arts that made fire, flood, and earth,
The vassals of his will. (lines 31–34)

In contrast to these apocalyptic narratives, Shelley describes a future in which nature flourishes while humanity is destroyed. The very abundance of resources in *The Last Man* likewise demonstrates the futility of human labor in forestalling extinction.

By bringing material on contemporary debates about emigration to bear on my discussion of Shelley's novel and other last-man narratives, I suggest that these questions about the efficacy of labor are related to a growing consciousness of increased human mobility and its cultural consequences. The texts play out a historically specific anxiety about the consequences of in-

dustry's failure to keep the "silver net" of society tightly woven over vast distances. Whereas Robinson Crusoe travels to America and returns to a Europe in which his labor has meaning and economic value, Grainville's Omegarus journeys to Brazil to find Syderia (the last fertile woman), only to return to Europe and discover that any children from their union will contradict God's plan for the apocalypse. Although Shelley's *The Last Man* seems to side with those who opposed government encouragement for emigration, the novel depicts a world where mobility is inevitable and cannot be delimited to the superfluous and unproductive few. Even after he becomes the last man, Verney dedicates himself to perpetual travel. "A desire of wandering came upon me," he says. "[A] solitary being is by instinct a wanderer" (453, 468).

Memory

Verney's statement that "the name of England died when we left her" casts his departure as a tragedy of signification. Verney becomes a kind of anti-Adam: not a powerful namer but a passive witness to global unnamings. Silencing an already fractured word, he asserts that *England* will no longer designate a nation once the plague survivors have left. The concept captures his imagination, and he repeats it: "we had quitted England—England no more; for without her children what name could that barren island claim?" (412). This formulation posits the nation as a linguistic construction; the nation makes a claim on human voices to name it—without those voices it reverts to being a piece of barren ground. The diminishing power of any single human voice as humanity disappears haunts the novel and emphasizes the importance of communication to human identity. As the survivors leave England, Verney imagines them dying "one by one, till the LAST MAN should remain in a voiceless, empty world." The lament is poignant but odd; while he explicitly describes the absence of other voices in the world,

he implicitly discounts his own voice: the last man will be voiceless, because he has no interlocutors. This prediction comes to pass; once alone, Verney bemoans “the vast annihilation that has swallowed all things—the voiceless solitude of the once busy earth” (267). When he tries to speak, he finds that “my voice, unused now to utter sound, comes strangely on my ears” (467). The diminishing number of human voices first erases the identity of the nation and finally threatens to render the last individual unrecognizable to himself.¹²

The novel’s persistent interest not simply in voice but in community and audience underlines the way that most narratives about human extinction concern cultural memory—in the peculiar sense that they are written in the face of the extinction of memory. As many readers of the novel have noted, a story by the last man by definition has no audience: the events of Verney’s solitude will never become a fireside tale (e.g., Johnson). When he writes that story, he can only address it to a community that has already disappeared, “the illustrious dead” (466). Tales of the last man must therefore produce elaborate narrative schemes to explain how the story is being transmitted to the reader. Many, like “Darkness,” are presented as “a dream, which was not at all a dream” (1). Shelley’s novel, in contrast, begins with an account of the narrator’s discovery, in Naples, of sybilline leaves bearing the history of the last man. Grainville’s *The Last Man* puts the problem more directly. As it begins, its narrator is waylaid by the “spirit of futurity,” who justifies his need to transmit the story by saying, “The last man will not have any posterity to know and admire him. I wish before his birth that he may live in memory” (7). These openings present the problem of the last man as the transmission of memory through time—a circuit that in this case must run backward.

Placed in relation to the emigration debates and to the focus on human movement in Shelley’s novel, such narratives can be understood as being about the persistence of memory across

space as well. Another moment from Grainville, in which a minor character, Ormus, decides to leave his home to accompany some of the other survivors, illustrates this issue:

Before I quit this place [he says], suffer me to engrave on these walls, “Here dwelt Ormus, contented! But no,” replied he, much affected, “that care is useless: no one will ever visit this spot, to read these characters. O cherished abode! Thou wilt no longer behold the face of man, nor hear his voice!” As he said these words, he shed tears, and began his journey. (194)

Once people remove themselves permanently from a place, writing on monuments becomes a useless form of cultural memory. Other literature of Shelley’s day is full of images of memorials that can transmit their meaning over vast expanses of time. Godwin, in his *Essay on Sepulchres* (1809), argues for the creation of a map of the “monuments of eminent men”: then “though cities were demolished, and empires overthrown . . . by means of [this map], at the greatest distance of time, everything that was most sacred might be restored, and the calamity which had swallowed up whole generations of men, might be obliterated as it had never been” (112). The kind of radical and universal human mobility posited by Grainville’s and Shelley’s novels precludes this method of reconstituting community. Monuments, even ancestral graves, cease to have meaning if no human eye will look on them again.

Shelley’s *The Last Man* suggests that the hypermobility provoked by the plague destroys not only the future of a community but also its past, that it undermines cultural memory. This is adumbrated early in the novel, when Verney realizes that in a plague-ridden world, “one living beggar had become worth more than a national peerage of dead lords—alas the day!—than of dead heroes, patriots or men of genius” (293). The exaggerated value that the epidemic places on life in the present produces an unexpected equality among humankind. It also has the unexpected side effect of devaluing the past. Thus,

depopulation undermines the importance of history, particularly national history: “We saw depart all hope of retrieving our ancient state—all expectation, except the feeble one of saving our individual lives from the wreck of the past” (412). In their struggle to survive, people disassociate themselves from a continuous culture, from the memory of its “ancient state.” They must journey forth into the world without nation and without history. This kind of cultural dissolution echoes the fears of nineteenth-century proponents of emigration. The emigration projects of the earl of Selkirk were inspired, for example, by his finding “that the Highlanders were dispersing to a variety of situations, in a foreign land, where they were lost not only to their native country, but to themselves as a separate people” (Douglas 2). His strategy of encouraging families and villages to emigrate together is fueled by the hope “that a portion of their antient spirit might be preserved among the Highlanders in the New World” (3). The kind of dispersal Shelley imagines, however, since it leaves only one man alive, obviates this possibility for preserving culture.

At times it seems as if books will take the place of a living, continuous community as the repository of cultural memory for the last man. For a while Verney is able to understand and legitimate his experience of solitude amid the ruined splendor of Rome by reference to his memories of novels: not only *Robinson Crusoe* but also Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* and Madame de Staël’s *Corinne* (462).¹³ Indeed, Rome, with its massive buildings, galleries, and libraries, represents his last refuge from cultural oblivion, a place where “not . . . everything [is] forgetful of man; trampling on his memory” (460). Here Verney composes his own narrative, “a monument to the existence of Verney, the Last Man” (466), to stand among the other monuments of the decaying city. Yet as soon as he stops reading his writing, the futility of this monument too asserts itself (467).¹⁴ Still, the powerful consolation of books ensures that Ver-

ney continues to be a reader even after he has ceased to be a writer. He sets off on his final voyage out from Rome accompanied not only by the last dog, but also by volumes of Homer and Shakespeare, and he imagines “the libraries of the world . . . thrown open” to him (469). In this tableau of the smallest possible reading public, Shelley holds out the possibility of continuing cultural memory, of books as a kind of portable monument, at least as long as the last man lives.

Yet even if Verney can maintain his connection to the literary past, Shelley’s plague threatens to limit narratives of the present. When he first sees a victim of the disease, Verney explains that the spectacle exceeds the paradigms of past literature:

The pictures drawn in these books [*A Journal of the Plague Year* and *Arthur Mervyn*] were so vivid, that we seemed to have experienced the results depicted in them. But cold were the sensations excited by words, burning though they were, and describing the death and misery of thousands, compared with what I felt in looking on the corpse of this unhappy stranger. This indeed was the plague. (259)

Significantly, Verney devalues the cold sensations of literary identification even as he places the plague in a generic context. He hoped to understand the plague through novels about “the death and misery of thousands” but now realizes that experience trumps what he thought he gained from books. In this allusion, *The Last Man* self-consciously signals both its participation in a literary tradition and its departure from that tradition. In the novels Verney mentions, the failure of language in the face of the multiplicity of suffering is a recurrent trope. Defoe’s famous description of a plague pit concludes with this apology: “This may serve a little to describe the dreadful Condition of that Day, tho’ it is impossible to say any Thing that is able to give a true Idea of it to those who did not see it, other than this; that it was indeed *very, very, very* dreadful, and such as no Tongue can

express" (53–54). Similarly, Charles Brockden Brown's Arthur Mervyn, confined to a hospital during Philadelphia's yellow fever epidemic of 1793, exclaims, "O! how poor are the conceptions which are formed, by the fortunate few, of the sufferings to which millions of their fellow creatures are condemned" (166). In both novels, narrative finds its limit in the face of aggregates of suffering. Shelley's novel tries in a different way to solve the problem of representing suffering: it distills the misery into a single figure—an unhappy stranger of whose individual body Verney can say, "This indeed was the plague." This attempt to find a singularity to stand in for an aggregate echoes Verney's search for an adequate singular rhetorical figure for the nation and his search for the resolution of the invasion crisis in the death of one man. Indeed, the rhetorical strategy of using one to represent many is *The Last Man's* crucial, experimental departure from the genre of plague novels, one that it literalizes by imagining that the tradition of Western humanism might be maintained in the memory of a solitary individual.

Yet this representational strategy produces its own problems. As we have already seen, in a mobile world populations resist representation by any single figure for a nation, and, at the opposite extreme, a solitary man is a voiceless man. When he becomes the last man, that ultimate example of singularity, Verney recognizes his illegibility: "My person, with its human powers and features, seems to me a monstrous excrescence of nature. How express in human language a woe human being until this hour never knew! How give intelligible expression to a pang none but I could ever understand!" (467). His solitude brings him to the edge of narrative's capacity to preserve and communicate experience. These passages press the point that language in the novel is predicated on communication—with none to listen to him, the last man is voiceless. The images of Rome in *Corinne* and Radcliffe's *Udolfo* provided an important structure for travelers' experience in the

early nineteenth century (Buzard 69, 110–13), and Verney takes comfort in their accounts while he still sees what they describe. Once his story moves beyond the reach of such mutual understanding, it loses its intelligibility. The creature in *Frankenstein* is monstrous because society deems him so; Verney is monstrous because society has disappeared around him.

Although the device of the sybil's prophecy brings Verney's story from the future into Shelley's present, his account is "unintelligible" and must be given "form and sustenance" by the narrator (7). Thus, a tale written by an emigrant from a vanished culture is found and "translated" by a tourist, who finds it while "wander[ing] through various ruined temples, baths, and classical spots" (3). This narrator enjoys the grim task of piecing together the apocalyptic story, since this task too becomes a kind of tourism, taking her "out of a world, which has averted its once benignant face" (7). Indeed, the desire for escape is an initial point of sympathy between the frame narrator and Verney, who also invokes a theory of real and imaginary travel as consolation to explain the wanderings of the plague survivors. "This scheme of migration," he says, "would draw us from the immediate scene of our woe, and leading us through pleasant and picturesque countries, amuse for a time our despair" (325). Yet Verney's narrative ends as he leaves Italy. He imagines sailing first into the classical literary past—"forgotten Carthage" and the "pillars of Hercules"—but then on to scenes supposedly inhabited by illiterate peoples, "the tawny shores of Africa" and the "spicy groves of the odorous islands of the far Indian ocean" (469). Revealing that this story eventually exceeds not just the chronological but also the geographic limits of its frame narrative, *The Last Man* investigates the limits of the existing genres of the Romantic novel.¹⁵ By introducing a third term, the emigrant, into the more conventional opposition between the traveler and the tourist, it questions narrative's capacity to accommodate all kinds of mobility.

Verney's fate ultimately exceeds the function of travel as consolation. He is not a tourist, since he will never return home refreshed by foreign scenes. Nor does he match the image of the Romantic, Byronic traveler, concerned with self-discovery and personal change.¹⁶ Although Verney ends up a solitary voyager, sailing east, his journey has more in common with the mass movements of emigration westward than with the categories of travel and tourism. Of course, the comparison between his fate and that of an emigrant holds true in only the most pessimistic and attenuated sense: he is an emigrant who, in contrast to early-nineteenth-century optimism, is not industrious, does not serve a faraway nation, and cannot regain his culture's "antient state." The roots of his mobility lie in the cataclysmic shifts of population precipitated by the plague. This difference in etiology from the more conventional travels of Romantic literature has significant implications for the viability of Verney's narrative. That he ceases to write as he leaves Europe suggests that his narrative's intelligibility for the nineteenth-century tourist who transcribes it lasts only as long as their geographic positions are congruent—that is, as long as both are in Italy. Once the path of the last man diverges from the ultimately circular path of the tourist, the narrative ceases. Thus, the frame of the novel reminds us of its preoccupation with communication, with a speaker's need for an interlocutor. Without an audience, the last man has no voice; an audience can only hear him as long as his travels remain in the context of European cultural history.

Ironically, Verney's experience as a reader outlasts ours. This final, singular representative of humanity cannot write, but he can read. Although we run up against the end of his documentation of the literary future, he continues to preserve the literary past, reading Homer and Shakespeare on his perpetual voyage. The nineteenth-century debates about the fate of excess population and the merits of emigration find their most resonant echo in Shelley's novel in this

suggestion of the limits of the reading public. Insofar as it engages with broader debates about the value to the state of emigration, the novel seems to side with those who argued that emigration painfully stripped its participants of communal and individual identity. Furthermore, it posits that the emigrant's departure may ultimately silence the name of the nation left behind. The novel's most powerful image, however, is of a future in which radical human mobility is inevitable and universal and in which such pain is unavoidable and permanent. As it considers the consequences of this future for literary production, *The Last Man* intimates that the capacity for texts to bear cultural memory is as limited as the human communities that produce them. Proponents of emigration held that literature, particularly the novel, would reinforce the bond forged by productive labor between emigrants and the nation they had left. As Katie Trumpener has documented, many colonial administrators felt that when emigrants read their national literature, "the nostalgic homesickness this induce[d would] make 'England's Exiles' better, more loyal subjects of the British Crown" (257). But Shelley's novel of the future posits that literature is doomed not just by time but also by space. Shelley suggests that not all travels can be communicated, and she questions whether cultures can be remembered over the vast distances of the new globe.

NOTES

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¹ Almost all readings mention Mary Shelley's lines in her journal in May 1824: "The last man! Yes, I may well describe that solitary being's feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me" (*Journals* 476–77).

² Compare Rousseau on the state as a free aggregation of people (53; bk. 1, ch. 6) and on the calculus of population and territory in measuring the state (73; bk. 2, ch. 10).

³ See Fisch. Critics have tended to read the plague either allegorically (e.g., Jacobus) or in terms of Shelley's historical context (e.g., Bewell). While both approaches have yielded illuminating readings of the novel, I am more interested in the plague as a narrative device that helps isolate and foreground the problems of population.

⁴ Neither project was very successful (Richards 36–43; Carrothers 16–20).

⁵ See also *Memoir* 1. For the emigration projects of the early 1820s, see Johnston. Shelley was aware of the massive emigration of Scots to the Americas. In her later novel *Lodore* (1835), *Lodore* settles for a time in Illinois, among “emigrants from Scotland, a peaceable, hard-working population” (64). *Lodore* himself is described as an exile (53, 63) and an emigrant (59, 79).

⁶ Malthus ultimately believed that emigration was a temporary remedy for the problem, which could only be solved by moral restraint (Johnston 106–07). Both generations of Romantic poets were familiar with the Malthusian controversy. Mary Shelley followed her father's debate with Malthus and in 1818 wrote, “Malthus is the work from which all the rich have . . . borrowed excuses and palliations for their luxury and hard-heartedness” (qtd. in Sunstein 155). For the early Romantics' engagement with Malthus, see Winch; for Malthus and the later Romantics, including both Shelleys, see McLane.

⁷ Percy and Mary Shelley also lived happily for a time near Windsor. Like the characters in *The Last Man*, however, they along with many of their family members and associates soon left England for Europe.

⁸ For a different reading of the departure from England, see Clemit 198–99.

⁹ Shelley read *Robinson Crusoe* in April 1820.

¹⁰ For the work's French contexts, see Majewski.

¹¹ On the ecological implications of *The Last Man* and “Darkness,” see Morton 186–87.

¹² One of the novel's early reviews recognizes this emphasis on voice and puts it in the misogynist framework of a woman's need for chatter. The *Literary Gazette* wrote, “Why not the last Woman? She would have known better how to paint her distress at having nobody left to talk to” (Rev. of *The Last Man* 105).

¹³ On the importance of literary identification to the novel, see Jacobus 116.

¹⁴ In her discussion of the monuments of Rome, Shelley may have been thinking of her husband's grave and the lost grave of her child, William (Sunstein 359).

¹⁵ Steven Goldsmith also discusses the pressure the novel puts on narrative form. Johnson emphasizes the generic and cultural significance of Verney's departure from Rome.

¹⁶ On early-nineteenth-century concern with the difference between travelers and tourists, see Buzard; Chard.

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