"SAVE WHERE . . .": THE TROPE OF EXCEPTIONALITY

BY ERIK GRAY

Near the beginning of his "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," Thomas Gray introduces a poetic formulation so simple yet so effective that it became a standard trope, both of loco-descriptive poetry and, later, of high-Romantic subjective poetry. In Gray's poem it appears twice in quick succession.

> Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
> And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
> Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
> And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;
>
> Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower
> The moping owl does to the moon complain
> Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,
> Molest her ancient solitary reign.[1]

The poet makes a blanket statement (All is dark and still), followed by a specific, vivid exception: "Save where . . ." The formula is so straightforward that it may seem strange to offer to trace its popularity to a single source, but the evidence is undeniable. A search of English poetry in the two and a half centuries before the elegy (written c.1746, published 1751) yields a half-dozen instances of the phrase "save where"; between 1751 and 1830, there were over two hundred.

Gray certainly did not invent the trope: it had appeared already in the previous century. Several of Gray's contemporaries, moreover, used the same formula in their own descriptions of evening, which may well have contributed to the trope's subsequent dissemination.[2] But it was almost certainly Gray's elegy, which became famous immediately upon its publication and quickly achieved the status of a classic, that gave the device its remarkable popularity. For the rest of the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth, it formed an almost universal feature of poetic scene painting.

No blithe birds-ditties thro' the still-wood ring,
Save where the Nightingale with solemn notes,
Charms the late eve from her nigh willow bough.
(Moses Browne [1773])

'Twas silence all—save, where along the road
The slow wain grating bore its cumbrous load;
Save, where broad rivers roll'd their waves away,
And screaming herons sought their watry prey.
(John Scott [1778])

Sad, silent, all, save where the wild winds urge
The sullen fury of the heaving surge.
(Henry James Pye [1798])

Night on the Ocean settles, dark and mute,
Save where is heard the repercussive roar
Of drowsy billows.
(Charlotte Smith [1798])

No voice, no sound his silent course arrests,
Save where the screech-owls hover round their nests.
(M. G. Lewis [1808])[3]

The formula varies of course: "save where" is the most prominent form, but numerous other instances read "save that" (as at line 9 of Gray's elegy) or "save when." More often than not, the trope occurs at or near the beginning of the poem.

The attraction of the formulation for the loco-descriptive poet is clear. It is in a sense the ideal empiricist device: rather than beginning with an observation, the poet begins one step further back, wiping the scene clear of all sense impressions to establish a *tabula rasa*; into this blankness physical details are then admitted one at a time. The trope thus displays almost scientific efficiency in isolating physical observations in order to set a scene and establish an atmosphere. But the same sense of isolation also carries with it overtones both of exaltation and of possible guilt, and these help explain the trope's continued currency in Romantic poetry. In what follows, I first consider Gray's predecessors, particularly John Milton, to understand the connotations of sublimity and mental daring that the phrase carried when it was first introduced into English poetry. I then turn to Gray, examining how his elegy helped to popularize the trope, so that exceptionality eventually became a loco-descriptive commonplace. In the third part of the essay, I show that the trope, despite its ubiquity, never lost its potency but continued to appeal to several of the major Romantic poets. Samuel

Taylor Coleridge used the device to indicate both the temptation and the danger of solitary contemplation; for William Wordsworth, meanwhile, the trope was attractive for its ability to combine detailed natural observation with the highest reaches of imagination.

The history of the trope of exceptionality thus exhibits a distinctive pattern: in its first, isolated appearances, it indicates daring divergence; it then becomes a commonplace in the later eighteenth century, but regains its original connotations of sublime difference in Romantic poetry. This history is significant for several reasons. In the first place, it reveals the inherently dialectical nature of exceptionality—when the exception, or exceptionality itself, becomes the rule, what was formerly the rule becomes the exception—and this cycle provides the basic pattern of literary history. What is most exceptional in one writer or group of writers becomes standard in the next generation, and vice versa; more generally, literary periods tend to alternate between those that prize difference (like Romanticism) and those that value decorum.[4] (The pattern applies, incidentally, not just to literary history but to history more generally: the same dialectic for instance is characteristic of political exceptionalism.)[5] The "save where" trope both exhibits this literary-historical pattern over the course of its own development and also describes the principle of exceptionality that underlies it.

The same trope, moreover, can be taken to describe the workings not only of literary history but of literature itself. It may come as no surprise that the device became so prominent among the Romantics, since it seems particularly suited to the Romantic exaltation of private experience and individual genius. Yet it is not only Romantic poetry that depends upon exceptionality: all poetry, and to some extent all literature, creates meaning by setting up normative patterns and breaking them. In that sense, exceptionality could be seen as the poetic trope *par excellence*. If its use in English poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has not attracted much attention, that may be due not to its exceptionality, but to its very centrality.

I.

The first important instance of the phrase "save where" in English poetry occurs in book 5 of *Paradise Lost*.[6] Book 5 begins with an exception: day dawns, and all creatures awake—except Eve, who (to Adam's surprise, since it has never happened before) continues to slumber uneasily, because Satan has whispered into her ear the previous night and disturbed her rest. When Adam now wakens her, Eve recounts

the troubling dream she has had, which turns out to be an inverse of the opening scene where she is the only one asleep. In her dream, while all the world is darkened and asleep, Eve alone awakes, roused by a voice that calls to her:

> Why sleepst thou Eve? Now is the pleasant time,
> The cool, the silent, *save where* silence yields
> To the night-warbling bird, that now awake
> Tunes sweetest his love-laboured song; now reigns
> Full orbed the moon, and with more pleasing light
> Shadowy sets off the face of things; in vain,
> If none regard; heaven wakes with all his eyes,
> Whom to behold but thee, nature's desire,
> In whose sight all things joy, with ravishment
> Attracted by thy beauty still to gaze.[7]

Eve alone of mortal creatures, the Satanic voice suggests, is awake to gaze upon the universe and be gazed at in return.

Or almost alone. All is silent and asleep, "save where silence yields / To the night-warbling bird." The nightingale's wakefulness serves to reassure Eve that her own is perfectly natural and innocent. At the same time, this one exception to the rest of the world does nothing to diminish the sense of Eve's solitude—the sense that she alone is counterpoised against the whole created universe, at once its cynosure and sole observer. The brilliance of Satan's "save" clause is that it provides Eve with a precedent without in the least diminishing her precedence. By naming the sole exception, yet naming something as relatively insignificant as the nightingale (so insignificant that Satan can immediately go on to say that "none regard" the moon if Eve does not), Satan both naturalizes and reinforces Eve's exceptionality.

There is clearly something dangerously tempting about being thus singled out—as demonstrated by the fact that the voice immediately leads Eve in her dream to the Tree of Knowledge, sole exception to humankind's dominion over the earth. The rest of book 5 confirms the troubling nature of exceptionality. The latter half of the book consists of Raphael's telling Adam and Eve the story of Satan's rebellion, which begins with a scene that closely recalls Eve's dream. Raphael recounts how on a certain day God anointed his Son and proclaimed him ruler over the angels, to their general jubilation. But he notes a single exception: "So spake the omnipotent, and with his words / All seemed well pleased, all seemed, but were not all" (*PL*, 5.616–17). This solitary malcontent is identified by the fact of his remaining awake, while all the rest of the "angelic throng"

slept
Fanned with cool winds, save those who in their course
Melodious hymns about the sovereign throne
Alternate all night long: but not so waked
Satan, so call him now, his former name
Is heard no more in heaven.

(*PL*, 5.650–59)

If Eve is not already impressed by the similarity between Satan's wakefulness and her own in her dream, she should be struck by the fact that Satan then rouses Beelzebub with the same phrases he used to her: "Sleepst thou companion dear, what sleep can close / Thy eyelids?" (*PL*, 5.673–74).[8]

And yet even here there is no simple, direct equation between exceptionality and evil. The "save" clause in the passage above applies not to Satan but to those angels whose duty it is to sing "melodious hymns" around the throne of God. Satan too, in other words, has a precedent, the equivalent of Eve's nightingale. There is nothing inherently wrong about being alone and conscious in a world where all else is still. Nor are more daring forms of exceptionality necessarily condemned. When Satan takes exception to the divine decree and exalts himself in solitary opposition to God, he is eternally damned and his name rased out from heaven. But book 5 concludes with the parallel story of Abdiel, who sets himself all alone against Satan and his rebel horde—"Among the faithless, faithful only he" (*PL*, 5.897). The same exceptionality constitutes Satan's fault and Abdiel's glory. Milton himself, moreover, seems to relish the very position of exceptionality with which Satan tempts Eve: in his invocation to book 3, Milton associates himself with the nightingale. Just "as the wakeful bird / Sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid / Tunes her nocturnal note," so Milton continues to sing despite the isolation of his blindness (*PL*, 3.38–40); indeed, the surrounding darkness sets off his song.

In short, as is true of so many things in Milton, exceptionality is neither inherently good nor inherently bad.[9] "All save only me" is the boast of Satan, but likewise of Abdiel, of Milton, even of God himself. Two aspects of the exceptionality trope, however, emerge clearly from Milton's use of it in book 5. The first is that the exception proves the rule. If a single nightingale is awake with Eve, or even a choir of angels awake with Satan, that does not diminish the isolation of Eve or Satan. The very fact that the exceptions can be enumerated reinforces the sense of their solitary opposition to the whole world. Second, the exceptionality trope provides a sense of expansion. Although the gram-

matical subject of the clause is usually something small or incidental, the trope really applies by extension to the solitary poet or observer of the sleeping scene, who swells to become the equivalent of all that s/he opposes or surveys.

Both characteristics are evident in the poems of Henry Needler. Needler (c.1690–1718) was a minor poet whose works were published posthumously in 1724. It is difficult to tell how widely Needler's volume would have been read by his contemporaries, although two further editions were published (1728 and 1735). But whatever his subsequent influence may have been, Needler deserves to be recognized for having singled out and developed Milton's trope, which he uses twice. The first occasion, in "A Description of a Summer-Night in the Country," imitates its Miltonic source quite closely.

> Stretch'd on his homely Bed, the weary'd Hind
> Now sleeps secure; no Cares disturb his Mind:
> No Use of Down or Opiate Drugs he knows;
> His wholesom Labour gives a sweet Repose.
> The Beasts and Birds are now retir'd to Rest,
> Those to their grassy Couch, These to their Nest.
> The Winds too are asleep, and scarcely move
> Thro' the still Horrour of the gloomy Grove.
> Now pearly Dews refresh the gelid Air,
> And kindly Nature's vital Juice repair.
> All's hush'd; and universal Silence reigns,
> Save where the mournful Nightingale complains,
> Or where the wakeful Dog affrighted howls
> At the shrill Screeking of foreboding Owls.[10]

Like Milton, Needler begins with humans and animals asleep and all of nature hushed, then draws attention to the solitary nightingale. More strikingly, the trope raises the possibility of a power struggle: "Silence reigns" in Needler's scene, "Save where" her reign is threatened by birdsong. Needler thus develops the hint of power relations that exists already in Satan's speech to Eve, where "reigns" appears in a similar position: "now reigns / Full orbed the moon" (*PL,* 5.41–42). Needler too goes on to describe the moon, then concludes his poem by suggesting a contest between heaven and earth. He describes how earth, like heaven, has lights (fireflies or glow-worms), and he imagines a solitary wakeful observer to whom their light would seem to rival that of the stars themselves.

> Nor Heav'n alone those radiant Beauties knows;
> Each Bush with num'rous living Spangles glows,

> Diffusing all around a Lustre far,
> Such as might guide the wand'ring Traveller.
> As if a Show'r of Stars from yonder Sky
> Had fall'n, and Earth design'd with Heav'n to vie.[11]

With this speculative image of earth hubristically vying with heaven, the poem abruptly ends.

In Needler's second use of the trope, the exception is visual rather than aural. "A Sea-Piece" begins, like the other poem, with calm: "When stormy Winds in Northern Caverns sleep."[12] But the description soon turns dark and turbulent, and it is here that the trope occurs.

> By Tempests vext the raging Billows roar,
> And dash their foamy Heads against the Shore;
> Night all around her sable Wings extends,
> Save where more horrid Day the Lightning lends.[13]

Needler once again makes plain what in Milton was implicit: the exception intensifies the sublimity of the situation rather than relieving it; lightning does not dispel darkness but renders it more visible and "more horrid." In both poems, then, Needler not only imitates Milton's phrase but draws upon the context of the phrase in *Paradise Lost*, developing its associations and connotations. And all the instances from Milton and Needler present the same paradox: namely, that the trope of exceptionality implies universality. It sets the solitary self in counterbalance, and often in opposition, to the universe—which at the same time constitutes a whole all the more sublime for the exceptions that throw it into relief.

II.

In the decades that followed the appearance of Needler's poems, and beginning especially with Gray's elegy, exceptionality became more popular, in every sense. In 1730 James Thomson made use of the trope in *The Seasons*. Like Needler's lightning, Thomson's exception is visual, but it has the distinction of for once highlighting dark against bright.

> The cherish'd Fields
> Put on their Winter-Robe, of purest white.
> 'Tis Brightness all; save where the new Snow melts
> Along the mazy Current.[14]

Thomson's exception is deliberately unsublime: his dark stream in the midst of "Brightness" shows like the reverse of Needler's flash of lightning. In the same manner, the description of the solitary bird that immediately (and inevitably) follows singles out, not the lorn nightingale or mournful owl, but the robin, exceptional for its sociability.

> The Fowls of Heaven,
> Tam'd by the cruel Season, croud around
> The winnowing Store, and claim the little Boon
> Which Providence assigns them. One alone,
> The Red-Breast, sacred to the household Gods,
> . . . .
> leaves
> His shivering Mates, and pays to trusted Man
> His annual Visit.[15]

In Thomson's hands the trope thus begins to shed much of the tension and paradox that had previously characterized it and becomes more entirely descriptive.

The device next appears, as mentioned above, in several other poems about evening roughly contemporary with Gray's elegy. But it was clearly the latter that launched the fashion, by highlighting the trope so forcefully.

> Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
> And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
> Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
> And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;
>
> Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower ("Elegy," 5–9)

Gray's "Save where" is more striking than any of the previous examples. In the first place, unlike Milton and Thomson (though like Needler), Gray places the phrase after a line break, allowing the sense of total silence to linger for a moment before it is interrupted. Gray then reinforces this effect by repeating it two lines later, even more dramatically, after a stanza break. Above all, Gray's "Save where" counters what appears to be the total closure of a perfectly hermetic line: "And all the air a solemn stillness holds." "Air" and "stillness" are each both subject and object; the air holds the stillness and stillness the air.[16] The double alliteration ("all . . . air," "solemn stillness") binds the line even more tightly together. "Save where" chimes with the previous line aurally—"save" alliterates with "solemn stillness," and "where" rhymes with "air"—yet contradicts it semantically. The phrase is thus

brought into unusual prominence: it introduces an exception where exception was least expected.

When the trope is repeated in the next stanza, it is associated once again with a struggle for primacy.

> Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower
> The moping owl does to the moon complain
> Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,
> Molest her ancient solitary reign. (“Elegy,” 9–12)

This is very close to Needler: the conjunction of owl, moon, and wanderer, and the rhyme of “complain” with “reign,” so nearly resemble the end of Needler’s “A Description of a Summer-Night” as to suggest direct influence. But the similarity may just as likely be attributable to a shared source: Eve’s dream in *Paradise Lost*, where the combination of moon, “reign,” and solitary birdsong leads directly to a temptation to challenge that reign—and, in the rest of book 5, to a narrative about another solitary waker who does molest heaven’s monarchy. Gray thus retains many of the sublime implications of Milton’s use of the trope. Yet he also, crucially, renders it more homely and accessible; and this, together with Gray’s prominent placement of the phrase, helps explain why Gray’s elegy launched the poetic fashion for the trope of exceptionality.

In Milton too the trope combines the humble and the exalted: as described above, the nightingale provides Eve with a simple natural precedent at the same time that it serves as an encouragement to her flight of imaginative daring. But in Gray the former function is much more strongly emphasized. The speaker of the elegy begins in solitude, but scarcely a sublime or even unusual solitude. The world is not yet silent or asleep, but only just beginning to retire.

> The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
> The lowing herd wind slowly o’er the lea,
> The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
> And leaves the world to darkness and to me. (“Elegy,” 1–4)

Nevertheless, Gray invokes the trope in order to find parallels for his own increasing isolation: the beetle, the sheep, the owl. The result is a sense that exception is really the norm: Gray creates, as it were, a community or fellowship of solitude. The way is thus prepared for the revelation of the fourth stanza, where the reader learns that the speaker is situated in a graveyard—a true community of isolation, where “Each in his narrow cell for ever laid, / The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep” (“Elegy,” 15–16).

So successfully has Gray deployed the trope of exceptionality that this image—a conscious figure encircled by the dead—does not seem jarring. Belying his title, Gray has exactly reversed the usual situation of elegy: in place of one body surrounded by a community of mourners, we have a single living elegist surrounded by corpses. But at the same time that the solitude in Gray's poem is obviously more extreme than it is in Needler, or Milton, or any of the classical precedents where one wakeful person is surrounded, not by death, but merely by repose, Gray also makes it seem more natural.[17] Whereas in Milton solitary consciousness in an insentient world is the province of a special few—the blind bard, the mournful nightingale, Satan, and Eve in her dream—in Gray it is part of the natural order, vouchsafed alike to the beetle, the owl, the poet, and even by implication the forefathers themselves. (The graves are of course senseless and silent, yet each is also said to retain just enough awareness to recognize its own solitude: "Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries, / Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires" ["Elegy," 91–92].) Gray thus foreshadows a Romantic notion that consciousness itself necessarily implies isolation. In doing so he democratizes the trope of exceptionality. Even while it maintains a hint of the imaginative sublimity that it carries in Milton (Gray's speaker momentarily seems to encompass half the world: "And leaves the world to darkness and to me"), it also becomes a universal predicament—a commonplace.

III.

The history of the trope outlined so far helps to clarify not only why it became so popular with loco-descriptive poets, as it immediately did, but also why it continued to appeal to Coleridge, Wordsworth, and other poets of Romantic reflection. The trope very neatly combines two great Romantic preoccupations: detailed observation of nature and sympathy with natural phenomena (since the solitary poet is implicitly equated with the exceptional bird or beetle or breeze); and imaginative expansion—the mind's ability, in the absence of sensory information, to figure forth an alternate world. My point is not that the trope of exceptionality introduced these concepts into English poetry. Rather, the point is that for English-language poets after Gray, a single two-word phrase had the power pithily to suggest both of these ideas and to combine them.

Coleridge made use of the trope throughout his poetic career. He deploys it already in what may be his first complete poem, "Dura Navis"

(c.1786), where it takes a familiar form, similar to that in Needler's "A Sea-Piece." Like Needler, Coleridge describes a storm at sea and notes how the lightning furnishes an exception that serves only to intensify the general darkness:

> total darkness overspreads the Skies;
> Save when the lightnings darting winged Fate
> . . . .
> Shall shew with double gloom the horrid Scene.[18]

More notably, the trope recurs consistently in the poems of 1798, Coleridge's *annus mirabilis*. "Fears in Solitude" and "France: An Ode," for instance, each of which considers the relation between the individual, peaceful citizen and the nation united in war, both begin with an exception. In "Fears in Solitude" the speaker finds himself in a typical pastoral landscape, where one hill nevertheless seems to distinguish itself from all the rest: "The hills are heathy, save that swelling slope, / Which hath a gay and gorgeous covering on, / All golden with the never-bloomless furze."[19] The use of the trope in "France: An Ode" is far more unusual, and the speaker's identification with the exceptional feature more complex. Here we find the usual wakeful nightingale; but the "save" clause applies to a collective body—the woods that drown the nightingale's song.

> Ye woods! that listen to the night bird's singing
> Midway the smooth and perilous steep reclin'd,
> Save when your own imperious branches swinging
> Have made a solemn music of the wind![20]

The meaning of this surprising reversal becomes clear as the poem progresses and the speaker's own sympathies shift. In the second strophe the speaker recalls how, at the outbreak of the French revolution, he acted as a solitary nightingale, an Abdiel speaking out against the popular opposition to France: "Unaw'd I sang amid a slavish band."[21] Even after Britain declares war, the speaker maintains his dissent: "Yet still my voice unalter'd sang."[22] By the end of the poem, however, the speaker has changed his tune and joined his voice to that of the majority. Yet by reversing the trope at the beginning, the speaker manages to maintain his own exceptionality and his sense of independence, even as he becomes part of the chorus. The exceptional sound in this case belongs not to the nightingale but to the woods, which on rare occasions produce their own, more subtle and more "solemn music." Coleridge takes advantage of the fact that exceptionality itself has be-

come a convention in order to tweak the trope and make conformity seem exceptional.

Coleridge's most characteristic use of the trope, however, comes in "Frost at Midnight," where it appears twice. As in Coleridge's other conversation poems, the speaker of "Frost at Midnight" insists both upon his solitude and upon his need for community.[23] The trope of exceptionality thus regains the sense of conflict or uneasiness, even guilt, that had accompanied it in Milton but largely disappeared with Thomson and Gray. Coleridge's poem begins once again with darkness, sleep, and an owl.

> The Frost performs its secret ministry,
> Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
> Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.
> The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
> Have left me to that solitude, which suits
> Abstruser musings: save that at my side
> My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.[24]

The use of the trope here is entirely misleading. Under the guise of an exception the speaker merely repeats himself: his family is all asleep, "save that" at his side his baby . . . is also asleep. Rather than using an exception to emphasize the quiet, Coleridge uses quiet to emphasize quiet, and the tautology contributes to the feeling, so typical of Coleridge, that such solitude is unnatural: "'Tis calm indeed! so calm that it disturbs / And vexes meditation with its strange / And extreme silentness."[25]

The true exception, the one that provides a parallel to the speaker's isolated consciousness, appears some ten lines later in the form of the film upon the fire—besides the speaker the "sole unquiet thing," whose "motion in this hush of nature / Gives it dim sympathies with me who live, / Making it a companionable form."[26] The fluttering film leads the speaker to dream of his school days, and of earlier instances of dreamy self-isolation; and within this double isolation, this reverie-within-a-reverie, the trope appears again.

> And so I brooded all the following morn,
> Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye
> Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:
> Save if the door half opened, and I snatched
> A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
> For still I hoped to see the stranger's face,
> Townsman, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
> My play-mate when we both were clothed alike![27]

The context for the trope here differs from all earlier examples. The schoolboy is surrounded not by sleep but by an intellectual community, from which he has voluntarily exiled himself into a fearful, brooding, furtive state of exclusion. (The use of the trope that most nearly parallels this one comes in *Paradise Lost*, when Satan first conceives rebellion.) "Save if" in this case signals almost the opposite of what it usually does: not the presence of a fellow exception, a natural precedent that justifies the speaker's isolation, but rather the possibility of rescue from isolation. The speaker desires to be saved from solitude, to enter into as perfect a communion as possible with another person (even to the point of total identification with his sister, "My play-mate when we both were clothed alike").

This second "save" clause draws the speaker out of his redoubled reverie and restores him to the present, and the poem then concludes with the speaker's forswearing exceptionality altogether. He promises that his infant son will enjoy a childhood free from schoolboy alienation. He even promises to rear the boy in a landscape where no natural feature stands out from the others but each has its counterpart: the "lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags / Of ancient mountain" are echoed by the "clouds, / Which image in their bulk both lakes and shore / And mountain crags."[28] In "Frost at Midnight" Coleridge thus reveals a fundamental ambivalence about the trope of exceptionality. He invokes it almost gratuitously at the beginning of the poem to ensure "that solitude, which suits / Abstruser musings." Yet he also uses it to suggest a guilty and precarious isolation that he would willingly spare his child.

The latter sense is emphasized at the end of "The Eolian Harp" (1795), where the speaker similarly emerges from remembering an earlier reverie and recoils from the dangerous exceptionalism it implies. As in "Frost at Midnight," the trope signals the rejection of such self-indulgence: "For never guiltless may I speak of him, / The Incomprehensible! save when with awe / I praise him, and with Faith that inly feels."[29] The association between the "save" clause and the need of being saved is then made explicit in the following lines: "Who with his saving mercies healed me, / A sinful and most miserable Man."[30] Throughout his poetry Coleridge both rejoices in the imaginative expansion that comes with exceptionality and also fears it. (Coleridge's most isolated creation, the ancient mariner, is also his most guilt-ridden. The mariner finds himself in a very similar position to the speaker of Gray's elegy: as a single living consciousness surrounded by hundreds of corpses. But where Gray had made this situation seem natural, Coleridge renders

it phantasmagorically grotesque.)[31] The trope of exceptionality thus offers a singularly powerful temptation to Coleridge, who employs it often but "never guiltless," and never lightly.

Wordsworth, like Coleridge, recognizes the trope's ability to suggest an isolated or self-alienated consciousness. But Wordsworth also takes the trope more literally than Coleridge; he concentrates, that is, on the actual physical subject of the "save" clause—the bird, the beetle, the breeze. For Wordsworth "the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears," and the attraction of the trope of exceptionality lies precisely in its ability to link the sight of nature to insights into the human mind.[32] This explains why the trope appears prominently placed at the very beginning and end of Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1850), a poem that explicitly sets out to trace the "Growth of a Poet's Mind" by starting from his early love of natural forms.[33] Near the beginning of book 1 the speaker, feeling assured that he is about to begin a great poetic work, sits pondering alone in a silent grove. The stillness is interrupted by the familiar trope, which here makes its first appearance in the poem.

> Thus long I mused,
> Nor e'er lost sight of what I mused upon,
> Save when, amid the stately grove of oaks,
> Now here, now there, an acorn, from its cup
> Dislodged, through sere leaves rustled, or at once
> To the bare earth dropped with a startling sound.[34]

Despite the repeated "mused," however, and the good omen promised by the acorn (small seed of mighty things), inspiration fails the speaker. He experiences no spiritual expansion but instead is conquered by the silence: his "Æolian visitations" are "soon defrauded, and the banded host / Of harmony dispersed in straggling sounds, / And lastly utter silence!" (*P*, 1.96–99). The acorn, in other words, remains defiantly an acorn, rather than a spur to emulous exceptionality like Eve's nightingale. The trope holds out its promise from the start, but the speaker, to his chagrin, cannot take advantage of it.

But the hope that the speaker invests in the trope, and in the power of small exceptions to provide universal revelations, is redeemed in the poem's final great visionary moment, the ascent of Snowdon in book 14. The time is now midnight, and the speaker, though accompanied by a friend and a guide, has retreated into "his private thoughts" as he trudges uphill (*P*, 14.18). Once more his "musings" are interrupted.

> Thus did we breast the ascent, and by myself
> Was nothing either seen or heard that checked
> Those musings or diverted, save that once
> The shepherd's lurcher, who, among the crags,
> Had to his joy unearthed a hedgehog, teased
> His coiled-up prey with barkings turbulent. (*P*, 14.19–24)

A dog discovers a hedgehog: once again, this seems a bathetic interruption, not a revelation. But all the "spots of time" in the poem, with their sudden focus on specific, often trifling physical details, seem bathetic at first, yet possess the power to reveal the mind's enormous reach (*P*, 12.208). Here the episode with the hedgehog, and the "save that" clause that introduces it, presage the great breakthrough that immediately follows. The speaker becomes conscious of a sudden illumination and looks up to discover that he has emerged from the fog and now stands on the shore of a sea of mist—

> All meek and silent, save that through a rift
> . . . .
> Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams
> Innumerable, roaring with one voice! (*P*, 14.56–60)

Awed by the sudden vision, the speaker finds in it "the type / Of a majestic intellect," "the emblem of a mind / That feeds upon infinity" (*P*, 14.66–71).

The speaker's discovery is introduced by the same formula as the dog's, and for good reason. What he has discovered is not some great and unknown natural phenomenon, but rather the mind's ability to find greatness in isolated details—to turn any hedgehog into an epiphany. The great in spirit, Wordsworth says, are those who can "build up greatest things / From least suggestions" (*P*, 14.101–2), those to whom anything that is rightly perceived—perceived in all its exceptionality—contains sublime possibilities. Wordsworth achieves this revelation through his vision of a universal blank marked by exceptions: a sea of mist, silent and featureless, "save that through a rift" the evidence of the senses is admitted in bursts. The use of the trope of exceptionality in *The Prelude* fully brings out its inherent, paradoxical force: an inconspicuous phrase, which draws attention to small details, is able to exalt the poet or observer to an apprehension that borders on the divine.

The trope did not disappear from English poetry after the Romantic period; to the contrary, examples only multiply in the later nineteenth century.[35] But Wordsworth represents a fitting point at which to con-

clude, for several reasons. First, the trope of exceptionality seems to be especially characteristic of Romantic poetry. Wordsworth and Coleridge in particular consistently use "save where" (or some near equivalent) in major poems and at crucial moments, since it manages to encapsulate so many of their chief preoccupations. Second, Wordsworth's use of the trope at the end of *The Prelude* marks the completion of one full cycle of its history. Wordsworth seems to acknowledge how commonplace the device has become when he uses it in book 1 in an unsuccessful attempt to spur his own creativity, and again in book 14 to describe the dog. Yet this background of common usage is precisely what makes the final occurrence feel so extraordinary, as Wordsworth reinvests the trope with its original, Miltonic connotations of sublime exaltation. Finally, and most significantly, Wordsworth's use of the trope of exceptionality in a metapoetic passage about the workings of the imagination underscores the trope's self-reflective nature. The pleasure of poetry, Wordsworth says in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, derives from our perception of underlying patterns ("similitude in dissimilitude") and of exceptions to the pattern ("dissimilitude in similitude").[36] In highlighting both the general rule and the exception, the trope of exceptionality at once describes that pleasure and provides it.

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NOTES

[1] Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," in *The Poems of Gray, Collins, and Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London: Longman, 1969), lines 5–12. Hereafter abbreviated "Elegy" and cited parenthetically by line number.

[2] Lonsdale (119n) notes parallels in poems by Mark Akenside, Thomas Warton (both Senior and Junior), and William Collins. It is not clear whether or not these instances predate Gray's elegy, the composition of which may have begun by 1742. None of the poems he cites, in any case, was nearly as influential as Gray's. The only other one to achieve real fame was Collins's "Ode to Evening" (1746), where the device appears in the third stanza: "Now air is hushed, save where the weak-eyed bat / With short shrill shriek flits by on leathern wing, / Or where the beetle winds / His small but sullen horn" ("Ode to Evening," in *The Poems of Gray, Collins, and Goldsmith*, lines 9–12).

[3] Already by 1765 William Stevenson could parody the trope in "The Progress of Evening," where it appears four times in the first three quatrains (and twice more at the end):

> A solemn stillness lull'd the silent world,
> The fleecy flocks within their folds retir'd;
> Save where the pebble-ruffled streamlet purl'd,
> Save where the grove with whisp'ring plaints inspir'd.

Save where the thrush, perch'd on a thorny spray,
Makes ev'ry echo vocal with his song,
. . . .
Save where the turtle, in soft cooing strains
(5–13)

All these quotations (Browne, "Eclogue V: Renock's Despair"; Scott, "Eclogue IV: Lycoron"; Pye, "On the Wreck of the Halsewell"; Smith, "Sonnet LXXXVI: Written Near a Port on a Dark Evening"; and Lewis, "The House upon the Heath"), as well as the figures cited above, come from Literature Online (http://lion.chadwyck.com).

[4] A similar dialectic is apparent in literary criticism. Max Cavitch notes, for instance, that Emily Dickinson has recently undergone a process of "de-exceptionalization," as historical contextualization and an expanded canon of newly appreciated contemporary writers (especially other women) have combined to de-emphasize the apparent anomalies of Dickinson's poetry that earlier critics had singled out. "Against the exceptionalizing grain, however, growing numbers of her readers argue not just for the contingency but even for the familiarity of an erstwhile estranged poetics" ("Dickinson and the Exception," in *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*, ed. Martha Nell Smith and Mary Loeffelholz [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008] 222).

[5] Although a self-contradictory dialectic affects all forms of political exceptionalism—which tends implicitly to impose a standard identity on the very populations for which it claims exceptional status—it is most blatant in the case of the so-called "state of exception." This concept, which was named by the philosopher Carl Schmitt in the early 1920s and is the subject of a recent study by Giorgio Agamben, describes a situation (also called the "state of emergency") in which a sovereign power claims the right temporarily to suspend the normal operation of the law. Ironically the state of exception is characterized by the refusal to recognize exceptions—it denies individual liberties and distinctions. Furthermore, it tends to perpetuate itself into a new status quo: as Agamben says of the situation in Europe in the mid-twentieth century, "the state of exception has by now become the rule" (*State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005], 9). Throughout this essay I use the term "exceptionality," since the trope I describe singles out individuals, whereas "exceptionalism" has come to describe an ideology concerning groups or populations, but the two concepts are of course closely linked.

[6] The only earlier instance I have found occurs in George Wither's *The Tired Petitioner* (1648). But although Wither uses the phrase (line 75), he does not use the trope: the context in Wither's poem has nothing to do with the absence of other sensory information, as it does in the other cases I discuss. William Shakespeare, however, uses "Save that" in a comparable manner in sonnet 27 (1609).

[7] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1998) book 5, lines 38–47; emphasis added. Hereafter abbreviated *PL* and cited parenthetically by book and line number.

[8] Compare "Why sleepst thou Eve?" (*PL*, 5.38).

[9] On this point see Stanley Fish, *How Milton Works* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001), 1–15.

[10] Henry Needler, "A Description of a Summer-Night in the Country," in *The Works of Mr. Henry Needler* (London, 1724), lines 1–14. All quotations from Needler's poems refer to this edition, which is partially reproduced in facsimile by the Augustan Reprint Society, edited by Marcia Allentuck (Los Angeles: Clark Memorial Library, 1961).

[11] Needler, "A Description," 21–26.

[12] Needler, "A Sea-Piece: Sent in a Letter from Portsmouth, in October, 1711," in *Works*, 1.

[13] Needler, "A Sea-Piece," 31–34.

[14] James Thompson, "Winter," in *The Seasons*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), lines 232–35. "Winter" was published in 1726, but these lines first appeared in the 1730 edition of the completed *Seasons*.

[15] Thompson, 242–50.

[16] Later in the poem Gray uses both subject-object-verb constructions—for example, "Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke" ("Elegy," 26)—and object-subject-verb: "Some pious drops the closing eye requires" ("Elegy," 90).

[17] The best-known classical example of such solitary sleeplessness is Dido, who in book 4 of the *Aeneid* remains restlessly awake while the whole world slumbers. The passage has many parallels, beginning with the opening of book 2 of the *Iliad*, where a wakeful Zeus disturbs Agamemnon with an evil dream. But I have not found, in either classical poetry or classical rhetoric, an exact equivalent to the trope of exceptionality. (If one does exist, it appears to have had little influence on English poetry before the mid-eighteenth century.) The closest parallel seems to come in Statius' *Silvae*, book 4, poem 5, lines 17–20: "No bleat of a thousand woolly flocks, no lowing of cow for her sweet paramour; the fields are mute save when they echo to their owner should he sing" (*Silvae*, trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, Loeb edition [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003], 277).

[18] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Dura Navis," in *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), lines 12–16.

[19] Coleridge, "Fears in Solitude," in *Poetical Works*, 4–6.

[20] Coleridge, "France: An Ode," in *Poetical Works*, 5–8.

[21] Coleridge, "France: An Ode," 27.

[22] Coleridge, "France: An Ode," 36.

[23] This represents another version of Coleridge's constant preoccupation with the One and the Many, as explored at length in Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

[24] Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight," in *Poetical Works*, 1–7.

[25] Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight," 8–10.

[26] Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight," 16–19.

[27] Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight," 36–43.

[28] Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight," 55–58.

[29] Coleridge, "The Eolian Harp," in *Poetical Works*, 58–60.

[30] Coleridge, "The Eolian Harp," 61–62.

[31] The trope appears again near the end of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), after the mariner's ship has sunk and he has been drawn into the pilot's boat: "Upon the whirl, where sank the Ship, / The boat spun round and round: / And all was still, save that the hill / Was telling of the sound" (in *Poetical Works*, 556–59). As in "The Eolian Harp," therefore, the trope signals not isolation but salvation from isolation; it is followed by the mariner's plea for atonement.

[32] "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," in William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) lines 203–4.

[33] "Growth of a Poet's Mind" is the poem's subtitle; the title of book 8 explains its subject to be "Love of Nature Leading to Love of Man."

[34] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979), book 1, lines 80–85; all quotations are from the first edition (1850). Hereafter abbreviated *P*, and cited parenthetically by book and line number.

[35] Perhaps the most revealing later instance comes in Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, 2nd ed. [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987]). In "Pelleas and Ettarre" (first published 1870), the climactic scene features Pelleas alone and awake at night in a castle garden, where he stumbles across his beloved Ettarre sleeping in the arms of the sleeping Gawain. The phrase occurs just before, in the description of the garden, where Pelleas

found
Here too, all hushed below the mellow moon,
Save that one rivulet from a tiny cave
Came lightening downward, and so spilt itself
Among the roses, and was lost again.
(lines 414–18)

The reason this passage is so revealing is that Tennyson—unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge—here deliberately recalls the Miltonic origin of the trope. The language he uses to describe Pelleas's reaction ("he drew / Back, as a coward slinks from what he fears" [428–29]) echoes Milton's description of Satan after he has tempted Eve ("Back to the thicket slunk / The guilty serpent" [*PL,* 9.784–85]). Even more tellingly, Tennyson directly imitates the scene in book 5 of *Paradise Lost*, described above, when Satan awakes and declares his exceptionality: Tennyson's "pavilions reared" for "sweet sleep" (419–424) recall Satan's "pavilions . . . reared, / Celestial tabernacles where they slept / Fanned with cool winds, save those who in their course" (*PL,* 5.653–55). On these echoes, see Erik Gray, *Milton and the Victorians* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2009), 125–26.

[36] Wordsworth, "Preface," in *Lyrical Ballads*, by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Michael Mason, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2007), 82.