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## Romantic Ideals in Contemporary Folk Music

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ROMANTIC IDEALS IN  
CONTEMPORARY FOLK MUSIC

by

BRETT MICHAEL SCHWARTZ  
B.S. University of Central Florida, 2011

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines contemporary folk music from no earlier than 2006, specifically music of the bands The Decemberists, Fleet Foxes, and Bon Iver. Providing a close reading of select songs, I prove that modern music is seeing a revival in the Romantic Era and Transcendentalist ideals and philosophy. The works and philosophy of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), William Wordsworth (1770-1850), John Keats (1795-1821), as well as Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), among others and their critics are all considered for points of comparison to the modern lyrics. The reason for this revival is considered in the conclusion chapter in terms of why there is a reaction against the technology driven culture in favor of one that romanticizes the thoughts and ideas of the Romantic era writers, their emphasis on nature, emotion, and the imagination which opposed the logic, reason, and technology of the industrial revolution, just as today there is a reaction to the alienation caused by technology.

I dedicate this thesis to my loving wife whose encouragement and constant motivation pushed me to do my best in not only my thesis work, but in life and all of my goals as well. I also dedicate this thesis to my family who have provided me with the love and strength to make me who I am today.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

Folk music has a vast history that spans not only decades and centuries, but nationalities, ethnicities, regions, and subcultures as well. Currently in the United States there is a resurgence in the tradition and it is selling well. However, this is not the first time folk has been revived and each new generation that takes the reigns of the tradition adds something new to it. From its inception, folk has sung the praise and woes of the working class, the immigrants, the farmers, the slaves. It even spans multiple genres, from gospel and blues to country and bluegrass to Cajun and Native American music. Then, folk became a political statement, almost defined by its use of the protest song, during the American folk revival. Now, with folk's return to the mainstream it seems to have taken yet another turn. Contemporary folk of the last two decades has been full of the disenchanting youth who write of fleeing the urban landscape and returning to more simple spaces.

As I will show throughout my thesis, the lyrics of contemporary folk music return to the ideals of the Romantic Movement and are a direct reaction to the urbanization of Western culture. I will show how the themes of anti-urbanization, a return to nature and emotion, as well as the themes of alienation and isolation appear in contemporary folk music and how these themes are tied to folk's reaction to modern culture. Furthermore, I will follow the Romantics' revolutionary ideas and the effects they had on our worldview. I will look primarily at themes of nature and the Romanticists' attempts to place nature out of the logical and reasoned worldview of the Enlightenment thinkers; explore the views of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Keats on the role of the mind in art, its creation and its meaning; the role of emotion in poetry; the reaction against the damage done to nature and culture by the Industrial Revolution; as well as

Transcendentalists ideas of nature, solitude, isolation, and alienation. All of which will be compared to the lyrics and music of folk music produced in the last ten years.

Along with Romanticism, contemporary folk music is also drawing much of its influence from that of the 1960s folk revival. The American folk revival drew much of its own influence from Woody Guthrie who, during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression, attempted to collect folk songs by travelling with displaced farm workers. Guthrie's motives, like the Romantics, were largely cultural, but also political. However, it wasn't until Guthrie's move to Greenwich Village that he would be able to build the legacy he had today and influence those who eventually came to idealize him, such as Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan. It was also this move to the city that would allow the folk movement to gain political and popular ground,

[F]olk music became an established part of the left-wing functions, and folk performers enjoyed quite a vogue among white radicals and intellectuals who sustained the [Communist Party]. Lead Belly, from Louisiana; Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan, and Jim Garland, from Kentucky; and (after 1940s) Woody Guthrie, from Oklahoma, all became folk celebrities among the Left in a vibrant New York City—based scene. The singers were in demand for the political meetings, parties, and benefits that the Left sponsored. (Filene 70)

Pete Seeger would pick up largely on the political front after Guthrie having come from the labor movement. Dylan and Joan Baez would pick up after Seeger as well as other,

In the summer of 1963, Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan stood onstage at the Newport Folk Festival and sang “We Shall Overcome,” joined hand in hand with such luminaries of the folk revival as Joan Baez, Theodore Bikel, the Freedom Singers, and Peter, Paul, and Mary. For Seeger the moment was the sweet fruit of a quarter

century career[...] The focal point of Seeger's pride and hopes was Dylan. The twenty-two-year-old sensation seemed to meld a political conscience with a performance style, persona, and repertoire firmly rooted in American folk traditions, and he was demonstrating conclusively that this combination could be commercially powerful. (182)

Decades later, folk artist Conor Oberst would begin performing his popular "When the President Talks to God" in protest of George W. Bush's presidency and policies, following the political influence of his folk forefathers. Folk will forever attempt to spread a message, either politically or culturally. Contemporary folk bands even take much of their influence from the musical style of their predecessors as well, blending folk elements with that of rock.

The folk revival would see a decrease in popular and essentially an end by the 1980s. Despite this, contemporary folk music still their influences from the 1960s to cling to. Many folk acts today, like the revivalists, are based out of the city. Fleet Foxes, for example, are based out of Seattle and The Decembersists from Portland, Oregon. Yet, while contemporary folk still contains many of the musical themes and instruments of the past folk movements, the current production of folk sees a much higher aesthetic in the rock and roll music that came before it. That is, much of folk music today isn't as simple as a capella performances or only a couple of instruments such as a guitar, bass, or fiddle. Much of contemporary folk is not afraid to use the many recording processes that have only come about in the past few decades in order to create a more complex sound. However, at the same time there are folk artists such as Iron and Wine (a one man act despite the name) who started by using a simple 8-track recorder and a microphone to create simple but effective songs often only using a guitar and vocals. Interestingly, and in stark comparison to traditional folk, contemporary folk has many modern influences to pull from

and it refuses to ignore them. Many folk bands now are not afraid to use modern recording rooms to their advantages when creating their music.

Yet, despite the modern influences on the music, the lyrics of contemporary folk are deeply rooted in the American romantic traditions of transcendentalism as well as the Romantic Movement as a whole. Both contemporary folk and Romanticism share similar themes, such as an emphasis on the importance of nature, creativity, and emotions. Platinum selling albums such as *Fleet Foxes* by the Seattle based band of the same name visits these themes. The emphasis on escape, solitude, the nature imagery, and the simplicity of the verses harkens back to the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The lyrics of Band of Horses asks us to return to the simple living style and natural surroundings much like Thoreau's *Walden*, "Deep in the heart of the country / Was a house I built from logs" (Band of Horses, "Compliments"). Almost all of the works included in this thesis express in some way an escape from urban landscapes as well.

While there seems to be less use of classical form and allusion, it can just as well be argued that Dr. Dog's use of a piano jingle version of the vocals of The Waitresses' 1982 "I Know What Boys Like" towards the end of their song "Hang On" is an allusion to what a more contemporary movement sees as classic. Singer-songwriter Andrew Bird uses the classic English folk song of "Sovay" as the basis of his anti-war song "Sovay." The Fleet Foxes lyrics above even end in the classic couplet. Allusion, thus, is not ignored, but reconstructed and those works which are referenced are simply just not as old or as the classical as those used by the romantic writers.

It's hard to place what folk music is today. It's not quite a solid genre anymore, if it ever was, and has a tendency to become an umbrella term for anything with a banjo, fiddle, or other "traditional" instrument. Folk even has varied names, such as roots music and traditional music,

that have sprouted up over time as scholars and ethnomusicologists have attempted to define what folk is and what it is not. Then, of course, the Folk Revival 1960s happened and made everything even more confusing and new genres appeared such as folk-rock and having to define these new terms under the old umbrella. Today there is even folk-metal music, predominantly coming from Scandinavia. Before examining what ties all of these genres of music together and allows them to share the common term folk, first, we will have to look at how folk is and was defined.

### Defining Folk Music

Folk music is a tradition that gets carried from generation to generation. Often unattributed to any one writer or creator, traditional folk music is present in just about every culture. At the 1954 International Folk Music Council conference, folk music was defined as:

[T]he product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission. The factors that shape the tradition are: (i) continuity which links the present with the past; (ii) variation which springs from the creative impulse of the individual or the group; and (iii) selection by the community, which determines the form or forms in which the music survives.

The term can be applied to music that has been evolved from rudimentary beginnings by a community uninfluenced by popular and art music and it can likewise be applied to music which originated with an individual composer and has subsequently been absorbed into the unwritten living tradition or a community.

The term does not cover composed popular music that has been taken over ready-made by a community and remains unchanged, for it is the re-fashioning and re-creation of the music by the community that gives it its folk character. (qtd. in Karpeles 312)

This came during the time of the revival of folk music and was an immediate reaction to the growing popularity of folk bands and musicians popping up and claiming to be writing new folk music. The IFMC was quick to point out this growing popularity claiming that these new popular forms of folk were not actually folk music. The IFMC, however, has since changed its name to The International Council for Traditional Music. A change which Philip V. Bohlman comments on in his book *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World*:

In 1981, the International Folk Music Council (IFMC) adopted a new name, the International Council of Traditional Music (ICTM). Professional societies do such things, of course, usually to signal that they are about to redefine their fields of study with greater precision. (xiii)

No editorial in the yearbook of the council mentions the change, justifies it, or even issues an apologia; outsiders note the change only because of the yearbook's new title. Few members have objected strenuously in subsequent years, and the ambiguous nature of traditional music seems not the least bit contentious. One might think that folk music has quietly slipped into the past and peacefully become a relic of a less complicated age. One might imagine that folk music has confronted and been confronted by the modern world, but that the resulting impasse meted out no terrain appropriate for survival. This book argues

otherwise and proposes an alternative interpretation of folk music in the modern world. (xv)

Just as Bohlman proposes we must look at folk differently in the modern world, it seems true to that the now ICTM felt this way when they changed their organizations name. Their long and rather conservative definition of folk music now means nothing considering their new focus is “traditional music.”

In truth, there was a rather large fissure in the study of folk music as the Folk Music Revival arrived sometime in the 1920s and gained massive popularity in the following decades, specifically the 1960s, a popularity that has, quite frankly, not ceased very much. The conservative view of folk music presented by the IFMC had to eventually give way to the new folk artists such as Bob Dylan that would never seem to fit. As people have taken on Dylan’s works and reworked them and covered them and made them their own, however, we can certainly see how he fits into IFCM’s clause: “The term does not cover composed popular music that has been taken over ready-made by a community and remains unchanged, for it is the re-fashioning and re-creation of the music by the community that gives it its folk character” (qtd. in Karpeles 312). Jimi Hendrix certainly “refashioned” “All Along the Watchtower.” Yet, there is still a conflict between it being commercially popular as opposed to the orally transmitted works such as “Oh! Susanna” or “Man of Constant Sorrow.”

### How Music Critics Define Folk Now

Looking at the history of folk may make one think that folk music today is more akin to rock music in general or even just falls under the nebulous label of “indie.” One thing, however, that helps determine how we categorize such genres, especially in the modern age, is to look at

how critics speak about these subjects. How reviews and critics define this music often times determines how we will talk about it until it is possibly forgotten altogether (if that were to ever even happen). We may then look at reviews for more popular folk bands such as Fleet Foxes and see that indeed people are actively defining the music they make as folk.

Borrowing from ageless folk and classic rock (and nicking some of the best bits from prog and soft rock along the way), on their self-titled debut album Fleet Foxes don't just master the art of taking familiar influences and making them sound fresh again, they give a striking sense of who they are and what their world is like. Their song titles reference the Blue Ridge Mountains -- never mind that they're actually from Seattle -- but it's the ease and skill with which they mix and match British and American folk and rock from the far and not too distant past that makes the band's music so refreshing. (Phares)

In this review we can see how contemporary folk is able to borrow from music that came before it in order to create a new idea of folk. Yet, at the same time, it still is definable as folk. Heather Phares of AllMusic is able to acknowledge and define the music as folk through its influences, even if some of them are not folk at all. A review of the band's second album shares a similar sentiment:

The area in which rock music meets poetry is seldom a happy place, so it's with a mild sense of panic, five minutes into *Helplessness Blues*, that the listener realises they're in the presence of a song loosely based on the work of WB Yeats. In fairness, you can see why his poetry might appeal to the Seattle sextet. It's as thick with references to folk tales as their music is with allusions to folk music; a bit mystical – befitting a band who write songs named after the magician's cry of Sim

Sala Bim then swathe them in so much reverb it sounds as if they're performing in a church – and old enough to sound archaic. (Petridis)

While not outright describing the album of folk the influence is at the very least obvious here as well. We may also look at the reviews of bands such as the Decemberists as a comparison.

Recorded in a converted barn on Oregon's Pendarvis Farm, *The King Is Dead* eschews the high, mystical wailing of British folk for its North American counterpart. Rustic and roomy, the record nods to Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris, early Wilco, the Band, Neil Young, and especially R.E.M. (Hogan)

Here one can see not only more influences of the current folk scene, but also a reference to both British and American folk styles that have influenced the band. Specifically, Hogan is talking about the change in style that The Decemberists went through between the two albums *The Hazards of Love*, which is strongly influenced by British folk, and the album being reviewed *The King is Dead* in which the band went back to their Americana roots.

The *Rolling Stone's* snippet of Bon Iver's *For Emma, Forever Ago* when they named the album number 92 of 100 best albums of the 2000s also mentions what influences that folk has had on today's popular music.

One of the all-time great breakup albums, not to mention one of the era's surprise success stories, Justin Vernon, recovering from the end of a relationship and the collapse of his band, retreated to a cabin in rural Wisconsin with his acoustic guitar. He spent the winter chopping wood, growing his beard, and writing these songs, lamenting, "Can't you find a clue/ When your eyes are painted Sinatra blue?" Despite the stark folkie sound, it's warm and caressing, with Vernon's

falsetto the kind of voice that can keep you welcome company on a bad-whiskey night. (“100 Best Albums of the 2000s”)

The conversation about modern folk music is definitely prevalent and it’s unmistakable that the bands covered in this thesis fall under the category, at least in the eyes of popular sources for reviews. It is these popular sources, however, that often define how we see and define the music that we listen to. If the *Rolling Stone* magazine consistently calls a certain sound folk, then that is more than likely how it will be referenced.

Reviews are one thing, but an actual comparison to the folk artists of the first revival, the 1920s to about the 1970s, such as Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, or later with Bob Dylan and Paul Simon shows that perhaps we have a very different genre at hand. Terms like “electronic folk” were tied to Dylan’s later career, along with more modern terms such as “indie-folk” and “folk-rock” pop up along with “contemporary folk,” “Americana,” “roots music,” and even “alt-country” (short for alternative country) in rare and specific situations. It is through evolution, however, that folk has changed and not through any change in definition. That is, folk of today, while influenced by many genres, is predominantly influenced by the folk music that came before it, as we see in the reviews of above which constantly reference older folk.

Therefore the genre’s definition evolves along with the movements themselves, from traditional folk music to the folk revival, and then even further to the contemporary folk of today. New sub-genres of folk even began to appear in the 1960s. One of the most famous cases of this was, in the wake of Bob Dylan’s electric years, Simon and Garfunkel’s “Sound of Silence” which, before becoming famous, underwent a massive change in style. Larry Star and Christopher Waterman share the story:

In early 1965 Paul Simon and Arthur Garfunkel were an urban folk duo with a fine acoustic album to their credit, *Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M.*, that was causing no excitement whatsoever in the marketplace. When folk rock hit the scene in midyear and Bob Dylan went electric, Simon and Garfunkel's producer, Tom Wilson—who was also the producer of Bob Dylan's records at the time—had a “bright idea.” He took one of Simon's original compositions from the *Wednesday Morning* album, a highly poetic song about urban alienation called “The Sound of Silence,” overdubbed a rock band accompaniment of electric guitar, bass, and drums onto the original recording, speeding it up very slightly, changed the title for some reason to “The Sounds of Silence,” and released it as a single—all without Simon and Garfunkel's prior knowledge or permission! (294)

“The Sounds of Silence” became one of the most famous songs of the Folk Revival movement and, like Dylan, a key piece that helped start the folk-rock subgenre.

A more modern example of the folk revival and its evolution as a genre is the song “I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow,” a traditional folk song with no writer attributed to it, but made famous by the 2000 movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, a new version of a traditional song which is often attributed to be the reason of folk's re-revival. The movie rendition of the song is fictionally attributed to the Soggy Bottom Boys, but was actually arranged and recorded by Dan Tyminski of the highly popular bluegrass group Alison Krauss and Union Station.

### Why the Artists I Have Chosen

So far, I have mentioned quite a few artists and bands, but have not explained what it is that could possibly make them relevant. Seeing as I will be arguing for a reemergence of the

Romantic Movement through the lyrics of contemporary folk, I think it is important that the bands discussed within this thesis are relevant not only lyrically in content, but also bands creating music that is actually being heard by a large audience. The reason being that any avant-garde musical act could attempt to revive a movement and without ignoring the relevance or importance of avant-garde movements, it is still important that any movement gain an audience and appears in more than one band.

All of the music chosen for this research has received not only critical acclaim but has also seen financial success. Below is the list of albums that songs were pulled from and their accolades.

*The Hazards of Love* by The Decemberists

Peaked at #14 on Billboard's Top 200 ("*The Hazards of Love* - The Decemberists Awards")

*Fleet Foxes* by Fleet Foxes

Peaked at #2 on Billboard's Top Independent Albums

Peaked at #36 on Billboard's Top 200 ("*Fleet Foxes* - Fleet Foxes Awards")

Numerous top album of 2008 awards<sup>1</sup>

*Helplessness Blues* by Fleet Foxes

Peaked at #1 on Billboard's Top Independent Albums

Peaked at #4 on Billboard's Top 200

Grammy nomination for Best Folk Album ("*Helplessness Blues* – Fleet Foxes Awards")

Numerous top Album of 2011 awards<sup>2</sup>

*For Emma, Forever Ago* by Bon Iver

Peaked at #4 on Billboard's Top Independent Albums

Peaked at #64 on Billboard's Top 200

Peaked at #1 on Billboard's Top Heatseekers ("For Emma, Forever Ago - Bon Iver Awards")

Numerous top album of 2008 awards<sup>3</sup>

While other songs may be referenced throughout the course of this thesis, these are the core albums of the close readings that I use. The only album that I will look at in its entirety is *The Hazards of Love* as it is a concept album in which all of the songs are related to one another and tell a complete story. From the rest of the albums I only chose one or two songs each to allow for closer readings.

### Romanticism in Context

It could be argued that the English Romantic Movement began with an anonymously published and strongly criticized collection of poetry titled *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The collection focused heavily on the vernacular of the English middle and lower class people and looked to praise the innocence of the English countryside farmers, laborers, and population. *Lyrical Ballads*, and thus the Romantic Movement, was a paradigm shift in thinking not only from the Enlightenment Age's emphasis on logic, reason, and metropolitanism but also in the political and literary worlds. In fact, we still feel the effects of the Romantic Movement to this day because of the way it shifted cultural focus on to the marginalized and lower class workers as well as the "common people" and rural workers just as the revival of folk music had done in the 1960s. Seeing how the Romantic

Movement begin to gain ground during the French Revolution and borrowed many ideologies from it, this is not surprising.

Yet, the Romantic Movement helped to change more than just political views. Literature itself began to see a considerable change as well. M. H. Abrams captures this change in literary views in his book *The Mirror and the Lamp* in which he describes the history of literary criticism as moving from mimetic theories, to pragmatic theories, and then in the Romantic era to expressive theories. Mimetic theories come from the ancient Greek studies of art which claimed that art was an imitation on the universe. Pragmatic theories were those that came out of Sir Philip Sidney's *An Apology of Poetry* (circa 1580) and argued that art "has a purpose—to achieve certain effects in the audience" (Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* 14) and thus poetry was seen as a higher form of philosophy. The expressive theories of the Romantic era, and more specifically of the 1800 "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, argued that poetry was an "overflow, utterance, or projection of the thought and feelings of the poet" (*The Mirror and the Lamp* 21-22). Thus, the ideas of literature went from two external views to an internal one with more emphasis on the artist than on the art itself. Abrams further explains in his book that this internal view of poetry changed more than just that of literature,

The change from imitation to expression [...] was not an isolated phenomenon. It was an integral part of a corresponding change in popular epistemology—that is, in the concept of the role played by the mind in perception which was current among romantic poets and critics. And the movement from eighteenth- to nineteenth-century schemes of the mind and its place in nature is indicated by a mutation of metaphors almost exactly parallel to that in contemporary discussions of the nature of art. (*The Mirror and the Lamp* 57)

In other words, our understanding of how the mind perceives the world, transforms these perceptions, and then creates art was vastly affected by how the Romantics changed our ideas of art and its creation. This further changed our views of nature because of how the mind was viewed as a part of nature, which became a major theme of Romantic poetry. Therefore, the Romantic Movement was not merely a political revolution or a movement that followed the French Revolution, but a revolution of our own understanding of the world and art.

### Moving Forward

The current trend of folk is not only an evolution in style, but is also a reaction to current trends in popular culture, just as Romanticism was a reaction not only to industrialization, but also to the rationalization of culture and in particular that of nature in the hands of the Enlightenment thinkers. Contemporary folk is seeing a similar revolt to culture. To explore these ideas, chapter two, three, and four will be close readings of lyrics and, if needed, the music accompanying them. The lyrics will be treated in these close reading as poetry and will be compared to the Romantic writers where necessary.

Chapter two will look at The Decemberists *The Hazards of Love* in its entirety (as it is a concept album with a constant story and characters throughout). I will break down the various characters and their allegorical meanings as well as the various Romantic elements of the text. While not *strictly* a folk album in terms of music, the story itself is in the style of a folktale and many of the songs have strong folk elements as well as songs like “Annan Water” which is a folk song in its own right. Specifically, the album will be related to the British Romantic Movement and Romantic Nationalism in terms of the collecting of folktales to preserve the culture of the past as well as exploring a needed reverence of nature, and our inability to control or understand

nature. Chapter three will look primarily at two songs by Fleet Foxes, and how their lyrics treat the themes of solitude, alienation, and isolation and the role of nature as a place of spiritual healing. The ideas of the Transcendentalist writers will be explored and implemented in this reading in that Fleet Foxes songs often explore anti-urbanization sentiments and nature writing. Chapter four will look at the Romantic ideas of art, its creation, and the achievement of beauty in art through the works of Bon Iver. Lyrics will be compared to Keats's idea of Negative Capability as well as Coleridge's secondary imagination. The importance of emotion and expressive theories of literature will be explored as well. The final chapter will lead to the conclusion that the lyrics and ideas of contemporary folk music are in fact a reaction to modern culture in the various ways which show themselves through each chapter.

#### Chapter Notes

1. Compiled here: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fleet\\_Foxes\\_\(album\)#Accolades](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fleet_Foxes_(album)#Accolades)
2. Compiled here: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helplessness\\_Blues#Accolades\\_and\\_awards](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helplessness_Blues#Accolades_and_awards)
3. Compiled here: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/For\\_Emma,\\_Forever\\_Ago#Reception](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/For_Emma,_Forever_Ago#Reception)

## CHAPTER TWO: ROMANTIC TROPES AND THEMES IN *THE HAZARDS OF LOVE*

By the very end of the eighteenth-century, Romanticism did not yet have a singular work or masterpiece to help define or shape it. However, throughout the eighteenth-century, influences were being formed and the French Revolution would end with Bonaparte's coup in November of 1799. In 1800, Wordsworth would rerelease his, and Coleridge's, *Lyrical Ballads* with a preface that would finally define what the original, anonymously published 1798 edition sought to do and thus help begin a new era and artistic movement. In this chapter, I will look at The Decemberists album *The Hazards of Love* in comparison to Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Wordsworth's "The Female Vagrant" to explore how modern folk artists are using both music and lyrics to revisit many of the themes to be found in English Romantic poetry. To do so, I will look at the few characters individually and explore how they are used symbolically to form a greater allegorical narrative, much like that of the Ancient Mariner in "Rime." I will also draw comparison to the characters Margaret and The Forest Queen to "The Female Vagrant" to show the emphasis on the effects that urbanization and civilization has on both the ordinary man and nature. Just as Wordsworth sought to emphasize the "common man" in an attempt to become closer to nature, so to do The Decemberists explore a revolution against society in favor of nature and nature's power.

To begin, Wordsworth's "Preface" was important to the Romantics for a few reasons. The original *Lyrical Ballads* opened with an "Advertisement" which claimed "[t]he majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments" which may have been off-putting to anyone one who initially picked up the volume (Wordsworth and Coleridge 3). The preface of

the second edition finally explained what these “experiments” were and how they affected the poetry. In doing so, *Lyrical Ballads* became a seminal text to the Romantic Movement and its ideals. In the preface, Wordsworth lays out the “principle object” of the poems and the collection:

The principle object, then, which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughought, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and at the same time to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way [...]  
(Wordsworth and Coleridge 97)

*Lyrical Ballads*, thus, sought to overthrow the cultural emphasis on the noble, the rich, and the metropolitan and instead focus on the common man and the rural population. This shift in focus from poetry as a “high art” of the nobles to Wordsworth’s use of “the real language of men” (95) was also important for creating an emphasis on the natural world which would become a vital theme of the Romantic Movement. As Wordsworth explains it, “[h]umble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language [...] in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature” (97). Living in the rural areas of England and working the land made the ordinary man, as Wordsworth calls them, closer to nature and thus closer to human nature. Their language emphasizes this as well and so Wordsworth argues that he must borrow this language in order for his poetry to also express matters of nature and human nature.

Wordsworth also considers the role of the poet in “Preface.” If a new language must be adopted, specifically one of the ordinary man, then clearly a new type of poetry must be formed. When Wordsworth asks “what is a Poet” he answers by claiming that the poet “is a man speaking to men” (103). One poem in which Wordsworth attempts to speak to the ordinary man is “The Female Vagrant.” This poem looks at the hardships put on the rural workers by the constant and threatening urbanization of England caused by the Industrial Revolution. The poem was radical for its time, claiming the Industrial Revolution and other urban tendencies all but destroyed the life of the protagonist. “The Female Vagrant” presented the dangers of urbanization to its audience and is an emotionally driven argument to leave the countryside alone.

*Lyrical Ballads* was not without its flaws, however. At the release of *Lyrical Ballads* and its first poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” “Rime” was criticized in various ways. Coleridge even wrote to a friend “it seems that The Ancyent Mariner has upon the whole been an injury to the volume [...] If the volume should come to a Second Edition I would put in its place some little things which would more likely to suit the common taste” (qtd. in McFarland 101). Wordsworth also criticized it in his own commentary of *Lyrical Ballads* and Coleridge rewrote it for the second addition to use much fewer archaic words and removed some lines entirely for the 1800 edition and then once again reworked the poem for, the now definitive, 1817 edition. The poem now is lauded for its use of allegory and its plea to find beauty in the natural world.

Similar to “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” The Decemberists’ album *The Hazards of Love* too was met with mixed reviews. Both poem and album seemed to share the same problem. Neither share many of the aspects that made their genres (music and poetry) popular during the time. The original version of “Rime” had many archaic words and terms and was said to be

alienating to the public. Another issue of course was that the tenets and ideas of Romanticism were not yet established and neither were its writers, especially in England. *Lyrical Ballads* is often considered the beginning of English Romantic literature. Similarly, *The Hazards of Love*, while not necessarily panned completely, was not considered the best album by the group. *Entertainment Weekly* only dedicated two sentences about the album before giving a rating of D+: “Frontman Colin Meloy has many unique gifts as a songwriter — gifts that have all but deserted him on this regrettable attempt at a prog opera.<sup>1</sup> *Hazards of Love* drowns in convoluted plots, blustery guest vocalists, and comically out-of-place guitar shredding” (“*The Hazards of Love* – EW.com”). Pitchfork panned the album as well giving it a 5.7 out of 10 and claiming, among other things, that “*The Hazards of Love*, inspired by UK folkie Anne Briggs' 1966 EP of the same name, has thick stoner-metal sludge and peat-bogged prog-folk arpeggios” is “Too much work, not enough payoff” and “largely missing the catchy choruses and verisimilar emotions that previously served as ballast for the Decemberists' gaudy eccentricities” (Hogan). Even positive reviews point out the pretentiousness of the album, “The Decemberists approach this kind of pretentiousness somewhat ironically” (Hermes). To say *The Hazards of Love* does not fit into the average top 40 radio station is an understatement. But yet, the early Romantic works of Wordsworth and Coleridge did not fit their time period either, at first.

### Margaret and The Rake: Symbolism and Rebellion in Romanticism

*The Hazards of Love*, true to Romantic fashion, uses symbolism throughout to represent different aspects of the points it attempts to make. These symbols exist in their strongest forms in the characters, what they represent, and the music that represents each character. Some characters, such as the Forest Queen, have their own theme that is repeated throughout while

others are represented as permutations of the folk genre. It should be noted here that not all of *The Hazards of Love* is a true folk album, but instead uses folk music and folklore as a base from which to spring for each of the styles that represent the characters and often times emotions or atmosphere for the accompanying poetry and narrative. As stated in the both the *Entertainment Weekly* review and the *Rolling Stone* review, there are elements of prog rock as well as metal and other influences. All of these influences and styles have a purpose and are always tied to the band's folk roots.

One of the best uses of these changes in styles is seen in the music that follows Margaret through the narrative. Early songs that feature Margaret are almost all plagued with the heavier theme of the Forest Queen. "A Bower Scene" as well as the following "Won't Want for Love (Margaret in the Taiga)" feature either the Queen's theme or a more electric sound than most of the album with a folk-style acoustic guitar and piano underneath the weight of the distorted electric guitar. In contrast, the songs she shares with William are much more in the range of country or traditional style of folk depending on the particular theme. Some examples are "The Hazards of Love 1 (The Prettiest Whistles Won't Wrestle the Thistles Undone)," "The Hazards of Love 2 (Wager All)" and "Isn't it a Lovely Night." There are two main reasons for Margaret sharing her themes outside of the initial feminist reading that Margaret has no agency or character throughout: 1) Margaret is vastly out of her element throughout the text as she has run away from home into a magical realm and 2) Margaret's own existence within the text is typically dependent on the characters around her. In fact, Margaret is more of an object used in the text to drive much of the conflicts.

Margaret does have a little agency, however, and that is her decision to travel to the woods. At the beginning of the album we get a small glimpse into her home life and her motives:

Fifteen lithesome maidens lay

Along in their bower.

Fourteen occupations paid

To pass the idle hour.

Margaret heaves a sigh

Her hands clasped to her thigh. (The Decembersists, “The Hazards of Love 1”)

There is some language here that perhaps mentions Margaret is a part of a brothel as the “maidens” are in a bedroom and are described as lithesome, or in other words supple and graceful, as well as Margaret’s clasping of her thighs implying, perhaps, some sexuality. However, there is evidence against this as well and we are uncertain as to what the occupations are and why one maiden does not have one. The most important element here, though, is that Margaret, clearly bored spending her “idle hours” either being served or serving, leaves the home.

My true love went riding out

In white and green and gray.

Past the pale of Offa’s wall

Where she was want to stray. (“The Hazards of Love 1”)

The above stanza is the first line we hear in the album and thus begins the text with an act of agency. As I will cover in Chapter 3, colors are an important symbol in Romantic writing as a form of symbolism and *The Hazards of Love* is not without its symbolic phrases and stanzas. A great example in this early stanza is that of Offa’s Wall, or Offa’s Dyke, which to this day remains as a border between England and Wales. In the story, the passing between England into Wales, “Past the pale of Offa’s Wall” as the song puts it, is also a passing from the social life of

Margaret into the wild of the woods. While Wales was not without its own industrial revolution, Wales has always been seen as a more pastoral land than that of England, especially from the Industrial Revolution on. Margaret's passing the wall "in white and green and gray" gives a vague, but symbolic foreshadowing of the following narrative. White leaves us to believe that Margaret is virginal or pure; green, a color that commonly represents nature, tells us that she will be on the side of nature, which we see when she heals the faun that becomes William; gray is just as one would imagine, a color that draws a line, often of morality, but here more accurately represented by Margaret's crossing between society and the forest most of the story takes place in. Margaret, then, is clearly a Romantic figure. She values nature over society as she consistently passes the wall in favor of the more natural surroundings there and as we see in the narrative her love and passion for William takes over any reasoning when she runs away to see him when he sister berates her for being pregnant.

So then, Margaret is a rebel in the eyes of society at the beginning of the album. This sort of cultural rebellion is a staple of the romantic era and was very much a part of the romantic ideal. The romantics rebelled against the logical thinking of the enlightenment era and the societal norms of the times in favor of an emphasis on emotion and a return to nature and natural ways. Margaret from the very first song with lyrics, "The Hazards of Love 1 (The Prettiest Whistles Won't Wrestle the Thistles Undone)," is depicted as an outsider who often leaves cultural confines in favor of more natural surroundings. Let's revisit the first two stanzas of the album. The first, cited above, is followed by:

And there she came upon

A white and wounded fawn,

Singing: "Oh, the hazards of love." (The Decemberists)

Without even knowing the fawn would become the shape-shifting William the reoccurring line “oh, the hazards of love” paints Margaret as a lover of nature, along with her common wanderings into the forest and away from her home. This first narrative driven track also shows Margaret’s disdain for life at home, “Fifteen lithesome maidens lay / Along in their bower / Fourteen occupations paid / To pass the idle hour” (The Decemberists). Margaret is the one maiden counted out of the fifteen who we can assume is bored of the womanly chores of the house and decides instead to stray from home life in favor of nature. “A Bower Scene” strengthens these notions:

“Thou inconsolable daughter,” said the sister,  
“When wilt thou trouble the water in the cistern?  
And what irascible blackguard is the father?”

And when young Margaret’s waistline grew wider  
The fruit of her amorous entwine inside her  
And so our heroine withdraws to the taiga. (The Decemberists)

Faced with societal norms and the judgments of her own sister, Margaret rebels by returning to the forest, or taiga.

After these initial acts of rebellion and agency, Margaret loses any ability to act. The last time we hear her voice before the final song is “Isn’t it a Lovely Night,” which is the seventh song in a seventeen track album. Margaret’s lack of voice should be noted. The singer who plays Margaret is actually only credited in four tracks out of the seventeen track album. Two of those tracks are duets and the final duet is largely only William’s voice with Margaret’s drowned out and only heard in certain stanzas. In fact, it is William’s decision that the two be ceremoniously

married by drowning themselves. He sings, in the folk ballad “The Hazards of Love 4 (The Drowned),” without Margaret’s voice, “Our ghosts will wander all of the water” and we do not hear her voice until the following stanza, “So let’s be married here today these rushing waves to bare our witness, / And we will lye like river stones rolling only where it takes us” (The Decemberists). Margaret makes the decision to follow him, but it is William’s idea that they should die together since he had earlier promised the river his life for safe passing. Arguably, nature itself is given much more agency than Margaret, especially when compared to the other female character, the mystical Forest Queen, and the river’s ability to take bribes, but of course so do the two male characters, William and the Rake.

Margaret’s lack of agency can be compared to that of the protagonist in “The Female Vagrant” poem by Wordsworth. The poem tells the story of a woman whose family’s land is built on by a nobleman who refuses to acknowledge who truly owns the land, “Then rose a stately Hall our woods among, / And cottage after cottage owned its sway [...] Through pastures not his own, the master took” (Wordsworth, “The Female Vagrant 143). However, this is only the beginning of her troubles. After the death of her father, the woman is forced to move to the city with her husband to get work as even their own pastures were ruined by the industrialization of the area and they “breath’d a pestilential air” (144). In her travels she finds herself on a boat to America in an attempt to find a home away from where she is being subjugated, but she experiences “disease and famine, agony and fear” (145) and the violence of the American war for independence. After more wandering, she finds herself in a hospital where she has very little sympathy for those around her because they were not oppressed and forced from their homes like she was. Just as the vagrant woman loses all of her agency due to the industrialization and urbanization of England, so too does Margaret lose all of her agency due to the larger forces

surrounding her. At home she is made to work and is bored and thus subjugated by the nobleman who owns the house. Likewise, in nature she is subjugated by The Forest Queen who is corrupted by man, much like the industrialization of the vagrant woman's home pastures.

Agency or no agency, however, Margaret, like all of the characters in the story, is an allegorical figure, even if she has no single musical theme or really any true, fleshed out characteristics throughout the narrative. It is worth mentioning that none of the characters are all that fleshed out. The narrative itself only gives us about five characters in all, though really only four worth speaking of as Margaret's sister is only quoted briefly in "A Bower Scene," so each one must have a stronger meaning behind each to give them a further purpose. Here we can draw a strong comparison to "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." The Ancient Mariner is a mysterious figure whom we never really learn anything about. His motives and his history are unknown outside of the woeful story he is seemingly forced to tell to any passersby. Coleridge's poem draws all of its meaning through allegory and not character development. *The Hazards of Love* does just the same thing creating not only a narrative based on allegory, like "Rime," but also using each character as an extended metaphor to fuel the allegory. When we look at what little Margaret actually does in the story, each event shows that Margaret's role is to depict societal norms, or, actually in her case, a rebellion against them. By straying away from what is expected of her, we get the entire narrative of the story

Individualism was a strong theme of the Romantic period and nobody is more of a solitary individual than the character called only "the Rake." The Rake is more of a tool to the narrative and the Forest Queen than represents any singular strong symbol like the other three main characters. Yet, as violent and immoral, or amoral, as the Rake is, his story is presented as a sort of personal revolution that freed him from the confines of a life he feels he never liked. His

introduction, “The Rake’s Song,” is very much like the French Revolution that many scholars tie to the motives of the Romantic Movement. Stephen Greenblatt writes in his introduction to the Romantic Period in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, that

This was a turbulent period, during which England experienced the ordeal of change from a primarily agricultural society, where wealth and power had been concentrated in the landholding aristocracy, to a modern industrial nation. And this change occurred in a context of revolution—first the American and then the more radical French—and of war, of economic cycles of inflation and depression, and of the constant threat to the social structure from imported revolutionary ideologies to which the ruling classes responded by the repression of traditional liberties. (2)

It is true the Rake is a constant threat to the social structure in the narrative on his own. Yet, it is important to see him as a person who seeks a pure individualism. We may consider him a sort of extremist Romantic in that he takes matters into his own hand when he is unhappy and escapes to the woods on his own. Furthermore, his rebellion is very violent like that of the French Revolution. “The Rake Song” is the documentation of the Rake’s attempt to free himself from what he feels is a burden he did not ask for:

I had entered into a marriage  
In the summer of my twenty-first year  
And the bells rang for our wedding  
Only now do I remember it clear.  
Alright, alright, alright.

No more a rake and no more a bachelor,  
I was wedded and it whetted my thirst.  
Until her womb started spilling out babies,  
Only then did I reckon my curse. (The Decemberists)

What follows next is the detailed description of familicide in which he kills his children and becomes his own individual. The French Revolution was itself a familicide, in its own way, of the French nation full of the violent murders and overthrow of the governing body. The Rake wishes only to govern himself and experience an intense version of individualism where others, such as Margaret, are only tools to achieve his happiness, as shown in the only other song to feature his actual voice, "Margaret in Captivity." Even more similar to the French Revolution is that he becomes an emperor of his own life, like Napoleon of France, and only lives by his own rules. Greenblatt continues: "Napoleon, the brilliant tactician whose rise through the ranks of the army had seemed to epitomize the egalitarian principles of the Revolution, had become an arch-aggressor, a despot, and would-be founder of a new imperial dynasty" (3). As we follow the Rake in the story, he is eventually haunted by his wrong doings and avenged by the ghosts of his murdered children. William uses this opportunity to free Margaret from the Rake's captivity and they are able to escape together.

All three characters are rebellious in their own terms: Margaret against society, the Rake violently against society, and William against his oppressive mother. However, Margaret is more symbolic of the Romantic revolution against the culture that followed the Industrial revolution. She leaves peacefully to the forest to explore her emotions and perhaps become closer to nature by healing the wounded faun. The Rake, on the other hand, is more like the French Revolution, violent and eventually a failure to the empiricism of Napoleon.<sup>2</sup> Both of these events would

strongly influence Wordsworth and Coleridge. *The Hazards of Love* too, as folk music, is comparable to these revolutions. The folk revivalists had strong political messages about society and are perhaps themselves comparable to Margaret. They sought to rebel against culture, hence the name counter-culture, especially issues such as war and consumerism. Woody Guthrie would influence many folk writers with his anti-fascist slogans and songs. Guthrie's political ideas would later lead to songs such as Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower," which explores the directions in which culture was seen to be losing the value of its possessions, "Businessman, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth / None of them along the line know what any of it is worth" (Dylan, "All Along the Watch Tower"). The Romantics could possibly be considered a counter-culture of their own time, much like the folk revivalists and thus contemporary folk.

#### William: Hybridity, Nature, and the Wanderer

William is a steady allegory throughout the narrative, unlike Margaret who is a vessel that takes on the various roles of other character allegories. Even if Margaret does seem to stand out the most as an outsider to the magical realm of the forest, it is in fact William who should stand out the most. Margaret, at the very least, has the Rake to compare to as a fully human character. Similarly, the Forest Queen is an entity of the forest or maybe even the forest itself. William, however, is a hybrid. William was taken in by the Forest Queen as a baby and given the power of shape-shifting and presumably he was once a part of the societal world of England as we know it. He says to the Forest Queen, "And you delivered me from danger, then / Pulled my cradle from the reedy glen / Swore to save me from the world of men ("The Wanting Comes in Waves / Repaid"). William, like the Mariner is separated from the "world of men" by nature's wrath. After the Mariner shoots down the albatross is when he is made to suffer on the ship full

of dead sailors with nothing to eat or drink. It is at this point that the Mariner begins his life as a wanderer.

The trope of the wanderer that arises so much in Romantic fiction and art, classic examples being both the Ancient Mariner and Casper David Friedrich's "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog," can be attributed to William as well. It may seem as though he is not a wanderer because of various interactions and ties he has to characters such as Margaret, his lover, and the Forest Queen, his "mother," but William is alone. He is neither completely one with the forest, nor is he a part of society. Instead, William is a hybrid of the two worlds which he creates a bridge between. A bridge that allows characters like Margaret and the Rake to enter into the mythical world through and where characters like Margaret and the Rake both separate themselves knowingly from society, William is instead stuck between the mystical world of the woods and the society he came from.

William also is arguably the main protagonist. For the most part we get all four characters in relatively equal ratio, but it is William's voice we hear the most. The narrator, designated in the lyrics as "First Voice" is very arguably William especially when the narrator says lines like "My true love went riding." Perhaps there is some other man who loves Margaret that is narrating the story of her demise and death, but we are not given that information at all and it seems very likely that William is this narrator because of lines like this one. Similarly, the Ancient Mariner, is the protagonist of his own story as well and the wonderer in both of these texts is given the spotlight. Those who are greatly individual from society or culture are often praised by the Romantic ideals. The Ancient Mariner is not without his flaws and is thus maybe not "praised," but the lesson that the Ancient Mariner learns and William's ability to take control

of his love and his life are both commendable at the very least. Furthermore, they learn similar lessons as well.

William and the Mariner both incur the wrath of nature in some way. They must also both redeem themselves. The Mariner does so by finally seeing the beauty in nature and his error in killing the albatross. After the death of all the sailors, the Mariner, left alone, looks deeply into the water:

Beyond the shadow of the ship,  
I watched the water-snakes:  
[...]  
O happy living things! no tongue  
Their beauty might declare:  
A spring of love gushed from my heart,  
And I blessed them unaware:  
Sure my kind saint took pity on me  
And I blessed them unaware.

The self-same moment I could pray;  
And from my neck so free  
The Albatross fell off, and sank  
Like lead into the sea. (Coleridge 40)

The Mariner is only set free when he realizes the importance and beauty of nature. William is aware of nature's beauty and power already because he was raised by the Forest Queen. This is

made evident when, in an attempt to free Margaret from the bonds of the Rake, he promises his body and his life to a rushing river.

Like most of William's songs, "Annan Water" is a true folk song mostly devoid of the electric-based music that follows the queen. The song could be read as prayer to nature in which William begs for safe crossing. In doing so, he promises:

But if you calm  
And let me pass,  
You may render me a wreck  
When I come back.  
So calm your waves  
And slow the churn.

And you may have my precious bones on my return. (The Decemberists)

The river gives him safe passage, but the consequences of what will happen to Margaret are not expressed. After the defeat of the Rake, the two return to the river in "The Hazards of Love 4 (The Drowned)" and decide to be married in the river as William fulfills his promise to the river. Margaret's rebellion here is complete. She has given herself so fully to that of natural world that she would even die for it. William's death is the end of his wandering and his hybridity, as he has finally become one with nature and left his human ties behind.

If we are to interpret this ending as such, we then can see how nature and emotion wins over society and logic. William did not have to return to the river, but could have possibly never went back towards it having run away from his mother with Margaret. He may have even been able to return to "the world of men" he came from. But, in this story, the only way for the two to finally be happy together is to give themselves to nature. It could be argued the story is not "for"

nature in anyway because of the Forest Queen's anger and jealousy and how she led to the tragic end of these two lovers. Also, and unfortunately, we are given no closure for the story of the Forest Queen. Her reign in the forest surely goes unimpeded, but we do not have any reaction from her because our narrator is killed in the river. Nonetheless, we have to remember, that the queen does not truly represent nature, she is instead nature corrupt by man.

### The Forest Queen and Mythology

If the Forest Queen is Meloy's symbol for the natural world then it is not a pretty one. The Forest Queen is petty and jealous, she goes back on her word when she promises William he may have one night with Margaret before the Queen has possession over him again. Her vast character flaws lead to the demise of both William and Margaret. Her character theme, a heavily distorted guitar riff filled with crashing cymbals, often haunts the backgrounds of those such as Margaret until we are finally introduced to the Queen in "The Wanting Comes in Wave / Repaid." While the Queen's theme sees many variations throughout it culminates in the heavy metal song "The Queen's Rebuke / The Crossing" in which the Queen's emotions have clearly gotten the better of her. The Romantic importance of emotion over logic once again shows its face here, even if for the worse. Despite the queen's emotions turning for the worst, nature is still shown as an emotion driven entity and not one that can be made logical as the enlightenment thinkers wished to do.

As I have noted, it is particularly important to point out the musical themes of the characters in this narrative because of what they say about the characters and the Queen's musical transformation tells the most about her character. The first hint of the Queen's character is the very short instrumental tune "The Queen's Approach" which is a nothing but a slow, even

somber, banjo accompanied by a high pitched and harsh violin. The Queen's musical transformation from this emotional folk sound to that of the metal we hear later in the album tells almost her whole story. Folk here is seen as the more "natural" sound as it is undistorted. Later, her music becomes increasingly filled with the sounds of distorted guitars, electric guitar solos, and heavier drums. This new sound is eventually overall less natural and more constructed by electronics.

What this transition tells us is that the Queen is a natural being who is corrupted by machines and the presence of man to become a much less natural being who is wrought with emotions that make her act and do the things she does. Once again we can look at "The Female Vagrant" as an example of the corruption of nature by man. At the beginning of the poem, the woman is described as innocent and pious as she was taught to be by her father. It is not until the "master" moves on to there and land and begins to build everywhere that their troubles really begin. Their pastures are ruined by pestilence and they are eventually forced to move due to the nobleman's greed. While we may only work in the framework of the story given, I think it is fair to say that the presence of the human Margaret has reminded the Queen that her son, William, is truly a human no matter what the Queen has done to or for him. In *The Hazards of Love*, unlike "The Female Vagrant," nature is given a chance to fight back against this corruption. William yearns to be with Margaret and thus his kind, but the Queen refuses. In "The Queen's Rebuke" she introduces herself to the Rake:

I'm made of bones of the branches,  
The boughs, and the brow-beating light,  
While my feet are the trunks,  
And my head is the canopy high,

And my fingers extend to the leaves,

And the eyes, and the bright. (The Decemberists)

The queen relates herself directly to the natural world, but it is also clear that she is a supernatural being when she explains William to the Rake,

And he

Was a baby abandoned,

Entombed in a cradle of clay.

And I was the soul who took pity and stole him away.

And gave him the form of a faun to inhabit by day. (The Decemberists)

This blend of supernatural and natural is a common feature of folklore which Romanticism often borrowed from and it also reminds us of mythical creatures such as fairies. Even more specifically the Forest Queen is based on the mythological fairy queen.

To further understand the Forest Queen, I believe it is important that we trace the lineage, so to speak, of the fairy queen archetype in Irish and English folklore. There are a couple of characters from Celtic folklore specifically that we could possibly trace to this archetype, but I think the most likely candidate is Medb (also anglicized as Maeve, Meadhbh, and Meave, among a few less common ways). Medb is the legendary queen of the Connacht (or Connaught), one of the Irish provinces. There are multiple stories and tales that involve Medb and the most famous is the ancient Irish epic the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Going into detail about the text is unimportant, but it should be known that Medb's role begins as Queen of Connaught, married to the king Ailill. The main action and conflict of the epic begins when Medb, while comparing riches with her husband, becomes angry that Ailill owns one more bull than she does and because of this she

decides to go to war with Ulster to steal another bull for herself. This section of the story is succinctly captured in *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore, and Symbols*:

In Brythonic mythology queen of Connaught. Originally the wife of Conchobar, who she left for Ailill. Findabair was her daughter. She coveted the Brown Bull of Ulster owned by Daire. When Daire refused to lend her the bull she appointed Fergus, an Ulsterman who had quarreled with Conchobar, to lead her forces in an attack against Ulster. Her army was defeated, but with the aid of Lugaid, Ailill, and others, she attacked a second time, planning her campaign to coincide with the season when the men of Ulster were under the magic of a weak spell (winter). By the sorcery of the daughters of Catalin she enticed Cuchulainn (sun) into single combat against her whole army (darkness). In this second battle Cuchulainn was killed and the Brown Bull (fertility) became the property of Medb, who usually is interpreted to be a moon goddess or queen of darkness. (Jobes 1082)

A jealous rage drives both Medb and the Forest Queen to commit violent acts for what they consider important possessions. We also get more background information from this text on what the different characters stand for in Irish folklore, as well as a hint into the idea that Medb is in fact tied to the archetype of fairy queen, “Probably the original of the fairy queen Mab” (1082).

It is undoubtable that Colin Meloy knew about *The Táin*. One of the Decemberists’s earlier concept albums is titled *The Tain* and borrows very loosely some ideas from the Irish Folklore of the same name. There is also an accompanying video for the album that, while not following the narrative of the album, does follow closely the narrative of the epic. Thus, it is very possible that he drew from the text in some way as inspiration for *The Hazards of Love* with which *The Tain* shares many characteristics. For instance, both albums play with a mixture of

heavy guitar riffs inspired by metal and classic rock music and more traditional folk sounds. Though, of course, like Yeats and other Irish and British writers, Meloy takes the archetypes and ideas of fairy tales and mythology and shapes them to fit his own purpose. We see this as well when we look up the name Mab, “Mab (Madb, Maeve) In English folklore queen of the fairies [...] Probably derived from Medb” (1031). Mab is a Welsh and occasionally English figure who also shows up in folklore as well as in Shakespeare.<sup>3</sup> Another explanation of Medb reads:

In Ireland the great goddess MEDB was diminished over time into a quasi-historical queen of the same name. In Wales the same process resulted in this FAIRY QUEEN who offers only a hint of earlier divinity. Queen Mab is best known from the reference in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, where she appears as the “fairies’ midwife,” a role traditionally played by a human victim of FAIRY KIDNAPPING. (Monaghan 318)

Once again we see similarities to *The Hazards of Love* character the Forest Queen. As far as we know she has not effectively kidnapped William, but it is a common occurrence in Irish folklore that creatures such as fairies as well as changelings may kidnap humans for their own gain.

Another comparison arises with the Queen’s line “Brightest shine / It is my shine,” which implies that the queen may have some control over the light in her forest, and the earlier entry’s explanation that Medb “is interpreted to be a moon goddess or queen of darkness” (Jobes 1082). We can see an altered version of this idea in the Queen’s lines “Brighter shine / It’s my shine” and “Brightest day / It’s my day.” Both lines imply that the queen some control over the light in the forest.

This borrowing from old mythology and folklore is a common characteristic of Romantic poetry. We can track these themes and ideas back to the German Romantic nationalists who

focused on preserving folk values, religions, customs, traditions, and folklores. But, as I said before, these uses of old mythology are often used to some new gain. The Forest Queen in *The Hazards of Love* show us a corrupted nature incurring its wrath, much like that in “The Ancient Mariner.” The shooting of the Albatross is the corruption of nature and the Mariner’s punishment is the basis of the entire poem thereafter. William’s hybridity is the corruption of nature in *The Hazards of Love*. He was left like waste by men in the forest at which point the queen took it upon herself to raise him. It is his want to return to or express his humanity that drives her into a jealous rage.

Nature remains an important theme through the Romantic period as well as in contemporary folk. In both *The Hazards of Love* and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” nature is used to teach us about its own importance and punish those who corrupt it. This is a particularly English version of Romantic ideals and it is interesting that an American band, The Decemberists, would be so influenced by it. Meloy draws from various folklore, both Irish and English, to create his symbolism, whereas Coleridge is more interested in creating his own. Both, however, give a raw and intimidating power to nature that can strand us out at sea, or take away our one true love. Neither end happily.

In the next chapter, we will look at a more American look at nature and natural images in the lyrics of the Seattle based band, Fleet Foxes. Transcendentalism has a widely different view of nature, but the importance of it is still prevalent. Those like Thoreau and Emerson see nature as more of a spiritual place, not a mystical one. Of course, finding nature as spiritual was important to the English as well, but the Transcendentalist movement felt as though man should be one with nature, not in awe or fearful of it. Meloy definitely gives us a sense of fear for nature. The Forest Queen is angry and powerful and Coleridge’s vision of nature gets its revenge

on the mariner. The Fleet Foxes, on the other hand, see nature as a place of spiritual healing and important to the wellbeing of man.

### Chapter Notes

1. Here, the reviewer is referencing a style of rock music formally called progressive rock, not mostly called prog or prog rock. For reference, the most famous prog rock bands are probably Rush, Yes, and Genesis with some later Pink Floyd albums falling under the category as well. Prog opera, here, refers to the genre or prog rock as well as the concept of a rock opera. Entertainment Weekly was probably referencing the heavy sections of the album as prog rock, which may be true, but the basis of the album is clearly folk even if the album also borrows from many other rock genres.
2. Further study could possibly be sought here in terms of the French Revolution versus the Romantic revolution against the Enlightenment era's thinking. An interesting poem that would help in this research would be Wordsworth "I Grieved for Bonaparte" in which Wordsworth grieves for Bonaparte's revolution in vain as Napoleon became essentially what the initial revolution was against. The poem asks "What knowledge could [Bonaparte] gain?" from the violence that followed his gaining power.
3. Shakespeare later changes her name to Titania, borrowed from Ovid's The Metamorphoses, in A Midsummer's Night Dream. Titania can be seen as a name change because her and Mab share very similar characteristics and play similar roles within their respective stories. Like Medb, Tatinia is a proud Fairy Queen who argues with her husband over the ownership of a changeling (instead of a bull like in The Tain). Later, other author, such as Goethe and Tennyson, would barrow the name for similar use.

## CHAPTER THREE: NATURE AS HEALING IN TRANSCENDENTALISM AND FLEET FOXES LYRICS

Even after the release of *Lyrical Ballads* and the subsequent stream of Romantic poetry and criticism of culture and art that followed, it still took a few decades for the ideas of the Romantics to find ground in America. The most read authors who espoused Romantic ideals were all born in the 1800s: Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in 1803, Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1804, Edgar Allen Poe in 1809, Henry David Thoreau in 1817, and Walt Whitman in 1819. It took just about a generation for the American writers to finally share their ideas and changes to Romantic ideals. To call those such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman Romantics, however, is perhaps a bit of a stretch. Certainly they were influenced by the Romantics and shared similar themes with them in their writing, but they still had other influences as well. This new generation of American Romantics would go by the name of Transcendentalism.

Transcendentalism, as I stated, owes much to the Romantics before them. Their reverence of nature, emphasis on the individual, and privileging emotion over the logical are all present just like the English Romantics. There are some key differences, however. For one, The English Romantics had a healthy fear of nature. They saw it as something mystical, unexplainable, and, as I showed in the last chapter, uncontrollable. Transcendentalists such as Emerson saw nature as a place of spiritual healing, a place that brought one closer to God. Thoreau, Emerson's protégé, too sought healing in nature, though he had a slightly different approach. Whereas Emerson saw nature as religiously spiritual, Thoreau was more concerned with seeking "self-knowledge." Thoreau argues in the "Higher Laws" chapter within *Walden* that by living in nature we can reach the primitive self and learn more about our own natural state as humans, which society has

taken away from us. To Thoreau, learning about the simple and primitive-self heals us by teaching us who we really are without the societal pressures of the city. In other words, to Emerson, the healing of the spirit is being closer to God by being in and admiring the nature that God created. However, to Thoreau, the healing of the spirit is removing the influences of society and experiencing a more primitive self.

These new views of nature lead the Transcendentalists to have a focus on the ideas of solitude, alienation, and isolation which would help to explain how one could be closer to nature and thus closer to God and cleansing one's spirit. Alienation was not the goal, nor really was isolation. Solitude, however, was a very important concept to Emerson and Thoreau. Still, these concepts are all connected. If Solitude was the goal, then isolation was the vehicle to that goal. Yet, isolation by outside forces such as the city and industry could lead to alienation. There is a fine balance to be had between the three and finding a place of healing. The folk revivalists were also concerned with alienation, even drawing directly from Marxist and communist ideas. Specifically, the political folk figures such as Woody Guthrie, Seeger, and Dylan were concerned with the alienation of working class by the upper-class much like the Romantics.

Like the Transcendentalists, contemporary folk music clearly has an emphasis on nature as I have shown in the last chapter and continue to show throughout my thesis. Isolation and solitude are also clearly present. Furthermore, just as the folk revivalists were concerned with Alienation, so too does the concept play a large role in the Fleet Foxes songs and, I would argue, that of Margaret's role in *The Hazards of Love*. In this chapter, I will explore the concepts of solitude, alienation, and isolation to explain how folk music, specifically the work of Fleet Foxes, seeks to leave the city to find the same healing in nature as Thoreau and Emerson as well as avoid the alienation which concerned the folk revivalists.

### Solitude, Alienation, and Isolation

Thoreau has often been criticized for his own return to nature in his book *Walden* in which he traveled only a few miles out of the city in an attempt to seek solitude and a simple life. Don Scheese explains, however, that “[t]o devalue the work and experience because Thoreau did not live in a bona fide wilderness is to miss the point. *Walden* is justly famous and seminal because it resolves a central conflict in American culture: the tension between wilderness and civilization” (41). He continues with a deep analysis of many of the chapters of *Walden*, yet one stands out in particular for this study: the chapter “Visitors.” Scheese points out that when Thoreau at first meets the woodchopper, Therien, he believes the woodsman to be an ideal to hold himself up to. Therien seems to lead the simple life that Thoreau is attempting to discover for himself and more importantly one that separates himself “from the market economy that Thoreau sees as corrupting entangling, and encumbering” (43), only to find that Therien does not really uphold to these ideals that Thoreau is seeking (43).

The major problem here, and one that Scheese does not deeply explore, is the difference between solitude, alienation, and isolation. Therien may be isolated from culture by choosing to work in the woods and to never exchange opinions with men (Thoreau 139), but Thoreau does not believe that Therien has found solitude as Thoreau himself was seeking. Thoreau says of Therien “the intellectual and what is called spiritual man in him were slumbering as in an infant” (138). Solitude, to Thoreau, seems to come as a choice, the ability to make the decision to seek out Emerson’s ideas of nature as spiritually cleansing and bringing one closer to God. Isolation, then, is a bit more literal and unnecessary for that of solitude. Thoreau himself is quick to admit that he was not truly far from town and he kept “three chairs in [his] house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society” (132). He does not separate the ideas of solitude and society and

even creates a space where both may exist, perhaps not simultaneously, but it is distinct that he does not make them separate.

Solitude, instead, is more of a mental or spiritual state; the ability to take nature into yourself and learn from it as Emerson defines it at the beginning of *Nature*,

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. Seen in the streets of cities, how great they are! If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

(Emerson 5)

Emerson here notes that nature is persistent and thus man tends to ignore or forget about it because it does not seem special, but instead, he later notes, becomes a commodity. Emerson argues we need to treat nature, in this passage represented by the stars, as if it only showed itself “one night in a thousand years.” Emerson explores how man has an effect on nature and the earth by using it to his own gain.

The useful arts are reproductions or new combinations by the wit of man, of the same natural benefactors. He no longer waits for favoring gales, but by means of steam, he realizes the fable of Aeolus's bag, and carries the two and thirty winds

in the boiler of his boat. To diminish friction, he paves the road with iron bars, and, mounting a coach with a ship-load of men, animals, and merchandise behind him, he darts through the country, from town to town, like an eagle or a swallow through the air. By the aggregate of these aids, how is the face of the world changed, from the era of Noah to that of Napoleon! The private poor man hath cities, ships, canals, bridges, built for him. He goes to the post-office, and the human race run on his errands; to the book-shop, and the human race read and write of all that happens, for him; to the court-house, and nations repair his wrongs. He sets his house upon the road, and the human race go forth every morning, and shovel out the snow, and cut a path for him. (Emerson 8)

Karl Marx also writes on similar ideas of how man commodifies his resources creating the ideas of use-value and exchange-value. The passage above shows the problem with the use of nature as exchange value. We exchange nature and its natural existence for an artificial form that we may then use. Emerson may argue that nature should purely have a use-value in which nature is never exchanged, but used to cleanse ourselves spiritually and learn more about ourselves and the world created by God to become closer to Him.

Marxist ideas thus help us to define Alienation. As I have stated, solitude, isolation, and alienation are all three different ideas. If isolation is a chosen ideal, one which a person seeks in nature, then alienation is that which is not chosen by man but created by society. Marx believed that the drastic rise in labor during the industrial revolution, and thus the rise in capitalism, was alienating the workers within their very own society. He argues, “[l]abor does not only produce commodities, it produces itself and the laborer as a *commodity*” (Marx 401) and thus alienates workers as not a part of society, but as an object used by it. Marx, in a way, is an Enlightenment

writer, using logic to argue his points, but also a hero to the Romantic ideals. He saw the industrial revolution, just like the Romantics, as a very harmful movement to the human and human nature. “The Alienation of Labor” shows that Marx too believed in the importance of nature to man: “Humanity lives on nature, which means that nature is humanity’s *body* with which it must remain in objective dialogue with or else perish. That the physical and active life of human beings depends on nature has another sense: nature depends on itself since human beings are part of nature” (403). This idea of human as natural and the Industrial revolution removing that naturalness from man by commodification, aligns directly with that of the Romantics.

However, we have to remember that Marx largely wrote at the end of and after the Romantic period. Whereas, Marx was influenced by the Romantics, the folk revivalists were influenced by Marx. Pete Seeger had even joined the Young Communist League as a teenage and later, as an adult, the Communist Party USA. While Seeger would later leave the Communist party, it was still an influence on the rest of his life and his work the labor movement as well as his focus on the American working class. Seeger himself often argued that his purpose as a folk singer was “to create a ‘singing labor movement’” (Lieberman 91). Seeger and The Almanac Singers, which would later include Woody Guthrie, were concerned with the alienation of the working class. This reaction to alienation in folk has evolved quite a bit to include issues of technology and internet. Still, we can see the revivalists influence on contemporary folk music.

One example we can visit to show this alienation in the work of the Fleet Foxes is “Tiger Mountain Peasant Song.” The song is a lamentful, traditional style song, lacking much of the recording studio’s tricks and technology for a simple echoing vocal track and two guitars. The lyrics are a reflection on the death of somebody very close to the narrator and the effects this

death has had on him emotionally. More Romantic tropes arise from lines such as “Wanderers this morning came by” (Fleet Foxes, “Tiger Mountain Peasant Song”) which uses both the idea of the wanderer as well as lyrical structuring which emphasizes the sound and rhythm of the lyrics over the grammatical form and has an almost archaic sound to it. The narrator, as a “peasant,” lives in the mountains and is for the most part alone, especially after the lamented death.

Through the forest, down to your grave

Where the birds wait and the tall grasses wave

They do not know you anymore. (“Tiger Mountain Peasant Song”)

The dead, possibly named Jessie as hinted at by the last stanza, are alienated from the living world which no longer “knows” them. The narrator too is alienated from society as a rural living peasant.

Into town, one morning I went

Staggering through premonitions of my death

I don’t see

Anybody that dear to me. (“Tiger Mountain Peasant Song”)

The city is shown as a negative place, much like other Fleet Foxes lyrics, and the people of the town are alien to the narrator. He sees nobody he may know and is out of his element. Finally, Pecknold cries, “Jessie, I don’t know what I have done / I’m turning myself into a demon” (“Tiger Mountain Peasant Song”), showing the anger and intense emotion of alienation left by Jessie’s death,<sup>1</sup> who was maybe his only companion up in the mountains. Alienation, thus, is not only a Marxist idea, but was important to the Romantics as well. M. H. Abrams also notes the fact that Wordsworth and Coleridge were attempting to “help redeem man by fostering a

reconciliation with nature, which, because man has severed himself from his earlier unity with it, has become alien and inimical to him” (*Natural Supernaturalism* 145). This aligns with Emerson’s transcendental philosophy as using the land and its resources have separated man too much from nature itself. Instead of returning to the woods, we pave roads through it in order to travel faster and instead of traveling to a friend to tell them something, we simply hand our letters to the postman. Abrams continues, “this concern was an element in a set of interrelated concept which had wide currency in the age of Wordsworth and Coleridge—concepts which have evolved into the reigning diagnosis of our own age of anxiety: the claim that man, who was once well, is now ill, and that at the core of the modern malaise lies his fragmentation, dissociation, estrangement, or [...] ‘alienation’” (145). I will return to this idea further in the conclusion, but it is still clear in this chapter that malaise, fragmentation, and alienation are present in all three of the songs presented within this chapter.

Solitude and Isolation still play a role here as well. Alienation is almost always the negative of the three and “Tiger Mountain Peasant Song” is not a song of healing like “Blue Ridge Mountains,” as I will show later. However, the narrator is still able to use the countryside and nature imagery to find some solitude in his thoughts. The first stanza quoted above uses the nature imagery of the path to the grave to allow the narrator a moment of solitude from his depression and he is able to appreciate the birds, the grass, and the natural beauty of the grave. It is not until the narrator goes to town that he is struck with the idea of “turning [himself] into a demon” (“Tiger Mountain Peasant Song”). The first stanza, too, is focused on the natural surroundings of the mountain countryside.

Wanderers this morning came by

Where did they go, graceful in the morning light?

To banner fair

To follow you softly in the cold mountain air. (“Tiger Mountain Peasant Song”)

Once again the narrator is able to be alone with his thoughts outside of death as he focuses on the wanderers and the light and feel of the day. Yet, it is possibly his isolation allows him to fall into the depression caused by his alienation as a peasant. Still, finding isolation can be important to achieving solitude, thus many Fleet Foxes songs look towards leaving the city in an attempt to find solitude.

### Leaving the City, Returning to the Nature

Even though early in their career the Fleet Foxes sounded more like a 1960’s rock or pop band than a folk group, there were elements of Romantic ideals in their lyrics. Pecknold sings, “So long to the headstrong / I wasn’t qualified to lead that city life” (Fleet Foxes) in their pop song “So Long to the Headstrong.” The idea that people should return to a simpler, more natural life and a disdain for the city and its industrialization is prevalent in Pecknold’s lyrics and reminds us of works such as William Blake’s “London.” Pecknold calls city dwellers “headstrong” and, of course, Blake is not quite as nice. He claims during a walk through London that “mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe” (368). Much of Blake’s poetry embodies a rebellion against the Industrial Revolution and what it was doing to major cities and its people. As we see in the lines from “London,” Blake saw an adverse effect that the city had on the people.

Here we can draw even more comparison to Fleet Foxes and Blake. William Blake had actually published his collection of poems *Songs of Innocence and Experience* almost ten years before *Lyrical Ballads*. Blake, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, focused on the impoverished and

marginalized in England. However, he was also very focused on the city and for the most part spent his life in London. It may be argued that perhaps Blake was a pre-Romantic at first, but was later adopted into the movement by literary critics who recognized the similarities of his work to that of others'. The Fleet Foxes too were at first picked up by their label, Sub Pop, for their initial 1960s pop sound, but later evolved into the folk music that they are known for today. Furthermore, they are based out of Seattle, not some small town in the south or elsewhere as one might imagine a folk band to be from. As I will show the Fleet Foxes even share a similar disdain for the city that Wordsworth would express in "London."

Thus, Pecknold's lyrics and even his appearance perhaps lines up a bit more with the Romantic Movement and thoughts and more specifically with the branch of Transcendentalist thinkers than those who might be pro-urbanization. Fleet Foxes focus more on the spiritual, philosophical, and even the healing powers that can come from being one with nature as opposed to the mystical power and reverence of nature that comes from the English, as shown in the last chapter. As Fleet Foxes began to find that their sound was leaning more into the folk range than the pop they started from, their songs began to have more political and philosophical meaning than the story of the long lost love told in "So Long to the Headstrong" or the nostalgic and pun titled "Textbook Love." Their two full lengths albums vastly explore themes and imagery of nature, isolation and alienation, existentialism,<sup>2</sup> rebellion against city life, individualism, and just about any Romantic trope you may come across, even their take on exoticism in songs such as "Sim Sala Bim"<sup>3</sup> are reminiscent of the 1800's movement.

If we look at the sea as part of nature, Melville's first paragraph in *Moby-Dick*, then, strongly captures the tone for the American Romantics. "Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particularly to interest me on

shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation” (3). To Ishmael, leaving the city is an important means of keeping himself healthy, or as he says it regulates his circulation. Just as importantly, it also helps him fight off his depression, i.e. the spleen.

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off—then, I account it high time to get to the sea as soon as I can [...] There is nothing surprising about this. If they knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me. (Melville 3)

Ishmael not only claims that all men are inclined to return to nature, but that also he would rather kill himself than not return to the sea and a life much closer to nature, “This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship” (Melville 3). Melville’s sentiment at the start of his grand novel mirrors that of Emerson’s and the necessity for man to return to nature. It also reminds us of Thoreau and the somewhat disdain for society expressed in *Walden*’s “The Village,”

One afternoon, near the end of the first summer, when I went to the village to get a shoe from the cobbler’s, I was seized and put into jail, because, as I have elsewhere related, I did not pay tax to, or recognize the authority of, the State which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle, at the door of its

senate-house. I had gone down to the woods for other purposes. But, wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong their desperate odd-fellow society. (162)

I noted earlier in the chapter the lines from “So Long to the Headstrong” which resonates strongly with Thoreau’s experience here. Thoreau is not completely anti-city, but the headstrong ideals and pressure of the institutions that are largely enforced only when he returns to the city.

As Fleet Foxes music began to mature and find a sound closer to that of folk, Pecknold’s lyrics began to expand from not only leaving the city, as expressed in “So Long to the Headstrong,” but to also explaining that the much more preferred setting is that of the rural countryside. “Blue Ridge Mountain” of Fleet Foxes’ first full length album, *Fleet Foxes*, expresses this theme, “Let’s drive to the countryside, leave behind some green-eyed look-alikes” (Fleet Foxes, “Blue Ridge Mountains”), along with a multitude of other songs. However, this theme is best explored in the song “Helplessness Blues” from their second full length album which is named after the song.

“Helplessness Blues” explores some of the more existential ideas from Pecknold, yet at first seems to begin by moving away from the individualism of both Existentialism and Romanticism.

I was raised up believing I was somehow unique  
Like a snowflake distinct among snowflakes, unique in each way you can see.  
And now after some thinking, I’d Say I’d rather be  
A functioning cog in some great machinery serving something beyond me. (Fleet Foxes, “Helplessness Blues”)

He even evokes the imagery of wanting to be a part of the industrialization that Romanticism was a direct rebellion against with the imagery of the machinery. However, there is some resignation about these lines throughout the song when Pecknold sings, “But I don’t, I don’t know what that will be / I’ll get back to you someday soon you will see” (Fleet Foxes), This resignation is continued throughout the first movement of the song until it is finally resolved in the second movement as the narrator attempts to figure out his place in life he repeats the mantra “I’ll get back to you someday soon you will see” (Fleet Foxes) after the first three stanzas.

As the song continues, the narrator slowly falls away from the first few anti-Romantic lines. In the next verse, a more individualistic ideal begins to emerge.

What’s my name, what’s my station, oh, just tell me what I should do.

I don’t need to be kind to the armies of night that would do such injustice to you,

Or bow down and be grateful and say “sure take all that you see,”

To the men who move only in dimly-lit halls and determine my future for me.

(Fleet Foxes)

This second verse shows a much more rebellious nature than that of the conformist lines in the first. The narrator certainly does not want to be “a functioning cog in some great machinery” if he will not “bow down.” It is also important to note that the end of the first verse and the end of the second verse are juxtaposed here. “Serving something beyond me” evokes the idea of a spiritual higher being. Similarly, “men who [...] determine my future for me” could suggest corporation who maybe control the livelihood of its musicians or a similar idea, but it also suggests predestination which creates a parallel between this line and the other verse.

Whether it is a spiritual predestination or a rip on the corporate holdings of artists, either way it gives the narrator an intense anxiety. The final stanza before the change in movement puts

the first two stanzas in perspective and shows just how confused the narrator really is. Should he be a cog in the machine or his own entity?

If I know only one thing, it's that everything that I see  
Of the world outside is so inconceivable often I barely can speak  
Yeah I'm tongue-tied and dizzy and I can't keep it to myself  
What good is it to sing helplessness blues, why should I wait for anyone else?  
(Fleet Foxes)

This anxiety over how the narrator should live his life is resolved in the second movement, but in this stanza is where it culminates into its worst manifestation. At this point, the narrator's anxiety and confusion has affected his life as this stanza is followed by "And I know, I know you will keep me on the shelf. / I'll come back to you someday soon myself" (Fleet Foxes). Yet, we begin to see some of the determination and confidence of finding a place in the world that is established in the second movement. We are also reminded in this couplets that follow each stanza that the narrator is explaining to somebody in particular his issue. This listener is referenced more directly in the second movement.

After the third chorus, the song's tone changes and begins a new musical movement. The music drops the frenetic and constant strumming to a mellower melody and slower beat. We can hear the anxiety has been calmed some and even gives off an almost dream-like atmosphere. Furthermore, the narrator's ideas of his life change from uncertain to more determined. More importantly though, the narrator takes his decisions and thought process from the first movement and begins to dream of moving to the countryside. The lyrics of the second movement express a daydream of a more simple life which matches the change in the music:

If I had an orchard, I'd work till I'm raw

If I had an orchard, I'd work till I'm sore  
And you would wait tables and soon run the store

Gold hair in the sunlight, my light in the dawn

If I had an orchard, I'd work till I'm sore

If I had an orchard, I'd work till I'm sore

Someday I'll be like the man on the screen. (Fleet Foxes)

The final line ends the song cryptically, but we can view this line as ending the song with an ideal image of a man; an image that Hollywood has created for us, thus “on the screen.” To the narrator that means working the land and starting from waiting tables to running a store. It is very much an American dream image. We also see here where the narrator fits in the intended audience of the lyrics. In this daydream, the narrator fulfills his intention to return and goes even further to the point of hoping to create a life for himself and his lover or partner. Finally, we can also see that a strong sense of individualism has emerged from the narrator's change in ideas and he has lost the idea of a cog in the machine.

All things considered we can still see the importance of the narrator moving to the countryside. The daydream's focus on the rural setting calms the music, and thus the narrator's mind, about the anxieties of city life and having to fit in. The genre of folk in itself is a rural art with ties to the agricultural and isolated lifestyles. Benjamin Filene explains further in his book *Romancing the Folk*, “rural whites and African Americans had been playing their traditional music since long before the 1900s, but they had done so, for the most part, out of the view of the middle and upper classes: outsiders had showed little interest in the their culture, and correspondingly, the rural musicians had had no reason yet to think “the folk” or of their music

as “folk” music” (9). The Fleet Foxes, ironically, are based out of Seattle, a major city, but the ideal of the country is very important to them in both their musical sound and their lyrics.

Returning to the Melville quote, in which Ishmael expresses his need to return to nature or else kill himself, we see a parallel with the protagonist of “Helplessness Blues,” and even the title of the song is a key that allows us to unlock these ideas. In the city the narrator is confused of his place in life and as he slowly changes his ideas of what he wants and where he wants to be, he is helpless. Yet in nature, or at least the prospect of nature (key words being “*if* I had an orchard), the narrator knows exactly what he wants. He wants to work the land until he is sore, or, that is, feel accomplished. Furthermore, his lover or partner will serve tables until they are able to live a more comfortable life off of the orchard. It is clear that in this hypothetical life the narrator knows exactly how to live and it is a much more simple plan like the simple living ideas of Thoreau.

### Solitude in Nature as Healing

The importance of the rural setting and nature in many Fleet Foxes songs may seem to be that of an urban writer romanticizing something they do not understand, the countryside. However, there are many nature images throughout the Fleet Foxes catalogue of songs and none of them are simply just following some trend of lyrical conventions. They all have a very distinct purpose which aligns fully with that of the Transcendentalist philosophy: that of the spiritual healing of nature. Thus, moving to the countryside has a much stronger importance than just escaping the “headstrong” of the city. One song we can look at in particular to explore this idea is “Blue Ridge Mountains.” Once again the song is broken up into, arguably, three parts, in true

Fleet Foxes fashion, which all create a build up to the realization of nature as a place that can change us, particularly for the better.

“Blue Ridge Mountains” opens with an almost inaudible prelude. A stringed instrument, either guitar or maybe mandolin plays very light strum of simple chords as a voice, echoing as if in an empty cathedral, sings:

Lie down with me, my dear

Lie down

Under stormy night, tell nobody. (Fleet Foxes, “Blue Ridge Mountains”)

The quiet music and the phrase “tell nobody” leads the listener to believe that there is an affair happening, of course, also implied by the lines before it. It is important to note that it is in this prelude that we begin to understand the actions and ideas expressed in the rest of song. We are later lead to believe that the narrator of the prelude is the second narrator’s brother. There is clearly plenty of opportunity for emotional hurt in this text, even if we are just judging it by the first few lines.

After the prelude, the song’s music changes drastically. The music is clearer and a constant strumming guitar is accompanied by a piano that mimics that of echoing prelude in timbre. Like many Fleet Foxes songs, a change in musical movements often means a passing of time as we saw in the song “Helplessness Blues.” The two brothers, the narrator and the cuckold, meet up after a missed flight and they decide to leave the city behind.

My brother, where do you intend to go tonight?

I heard you missed your connecting flight

To the Blue Ridge Mountains, over near Tennessee

You're ever welcome with me anytime you like

Let's drive to the countryside,

Leave behind some green-eyed look-alikes

So no one gets worried, no (Fleet Foxes)

Here is another instance of protagonists leaving the city in favor of nature. An interesting point to note here is that the traveling brother was perhaps intending to go to the countryside anyway. He is travelling to the Blue Ridge Mountains, not a city in Georgia, Tennessee, or the Carolinas where that particular range of mountains is. Sean, as we soon learn is the cuckolded brother's name, is perhaps already attempting to get away from things. However, we are never told what happened to the lover from the prelude. Yet, as the song implies that nature is a place of healing, it could be implied that Sean was attempting to get away from things for a while.

The final stanza before the song changes again, shows a reluctance of the narrator's brother to travel with him.

But Sean, don't get careless

I'm sure it'll be fine

I love you, I love you

Oh, brother of mine. (Fleet Foxes)

The reassurance of "I'm sure it'll be fine" and the almost begging "I love you, I love you" finally lets the listener know that this story is connected to the prelude. Sean is clearly reluctant to travel with his brother after his affair. It is also important to notice here that in this stanza the music mellows out to slower guitar strumming more reminiscent of the prelude, though not the same, to show the importance of these lines and allow them to be heard easier as well as adding to the tone of sincerity and attempting to reason with Sean.

Yet, after this stanza, the music once again changes, though not as drastically this time as it does from the prelude to the main part of the song. The melody of the second movement remains, but we now hear a much fuller sound from the band, more drums, the piano plays louder and more constantly and Pecknold's voice even picks up a little more to be heard over the full band. The melody overall is much more complex as well with two guitars playing at some points and the piano playing an accompanying arpeggio to back up the tune when it isn't playing its own melody. The lyrics of this section consist of three stanzas that are repeated twice with one minor change at the very end of the song. These lyrics take place after having traveled to the countryside (another example of music changing to show time passed) and express both nature imagery as well as a sense of nostalgia for a better time between the two brothers. The three stanzas are as follows:

In the quivering forest

Where the shivering dog rests

Our good grandfather

Built a wooden nest

And the river got frozen

And the home got snowed in

And a yellow moon glowed bright

Till the morning light

Terrible, am I, child?

Even if you don't mind. (Fleet Foxes)

The second time through the three stanzas, the song ends with simply the word “No” as an answer to the question in the third stanza.

The two brothers travel to a cabin from their childhood and due to the snow and the cold night are forced to spend the night snowed in. The third stanza gives us a quick glimpse into conversation they spend the night with, that of the guilt of the narrating brother for his actions in the prelude. The narrator asks if his brother thinks he is terrible and admits that even if the answer is “I don’t mind” it is still true that what he did was wrong. For the most part though, we are treated to simplistic nature imagery which sets the tone for the two brothers and their time together. The snow is both a narrative tool which forces the brother to stay in, but also the freezing cold could be a symbol for the animosity between the two.

Nature as a place of healing is not a new concept and in fact can be traced directly to Transcendentalism. Emerson saw nature as a place for man to become spiritually closer to God who created it and thus be able to heal their soul. Emerson says that “Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece” (Emerson 6) and in “Blue Ridge Mountains” we see a scene of mourning turned to good. Similarly, that sense of nostalgia we get from Pecknold’s line “Our good grandfather / Built a wooden nest” is expressed by Emerson as well, “In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth” (6) as well as the healing that nature can bring to us:

Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival  
is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years.

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me  
in life, — no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot

repair. Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. (6)

The brothers' return to the "wooden nest" is not only a nostalgic release for the two which allows them to re-find that child in them as Emerson points out. Furthermore, we can see how Emerson believed that nature was spiritually healing in the quote above. The ego vanishes from those who find solitude in nature because there is nothing which "nature cannot repair." Emerson's view of nature as a place to return to faith and be closer to God creates a place of deep spiritual cleansing, which is what we see in "Blue Ridge Mountains," the narrator becomes closer to nature with his brother and the lyrics explore the nature surrounding the cabin and the brother is able to finally confront what he did and make amends.

Modern writers of Romanticism have covered this idea as nature as a place of healing as well. Frank Trentmann writes in "Civilization and its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism in Twentieth-Century Western Culture" about a group of "tens of thousands of urban workers and office clerks" (584) turned countryside hikers, in the 1920s, who are "fired by an urge for spiritual regeneration [...] the revival and popularization of folk" (583-84) and anti-modernist ideals. These "urban workers" of the 1920's sought solitude from the city and they are still able to do so in large groups. Solitude and finding healing in nature is not necessarily about being alone, but understanding the larger workings of the natural world and becoming closer to it in some way. Thoreau does exactly this in *Walden*.

In all three songs discussed within this chapter, nature and rural settings play a large role. We may be reminded, then, of the pastoral genre of literature which Herbert Lindenberger calls an "idyllic" and "isolated moment [...] which gains its meaning and intensity through the tensions it creates with the historical world" (338). This definition is a bit too specific for what

we find in the Fleet Foxes lyrics, but it still holds true to a large extent. The three songs explored in this chapter all contain idyllic moments in nature which maintain intense emotion through the tensions of the narrators: in “Helplessness Blues” the confusion of the narrator’s existence and place is fulfilled by the dream of owning an orchard, in “Blue Ridge Mountain” the narrator’s tension with his wronged brother is healed in the woods; and in “Tiger Mountain Peasant Song” the lament of the narrator is given reprieve from his own depression in the nature imagery. The power of nature, then is clearly expressed in its healing powers, just as Emerson and Thoreau explained.

#### Chapter Notes

1. Perhaps it is not Jessie’s death, but a person who the narrator is lamenting directly to.
2. Not specifically a Romantic theme, but still enforces the ideas of individualism and finding meaning in life that does not necessarily include a logical outlook (as from the Enlightenment area Romanticism rebels against).
3. Lyrics such as, “Are you off somewhere reciting incantations? / Sim sala bim on your tongue. / Carving off the hair of someone’s young,” conjure up images of a savage or mystical Eastern religion. Exoticism does not often in appear in contemporary folk music, but it does appear occasionally and this song is good example. Perhaps this is a topic for further research though.

## CHAPTER FOUR: NEGATIVE CAPABILITY AND BON IVER

One aspect of the nineteenth-century that plagued England was opium. Opium was an often used medicine of the time and Coleridge was known to use the substance for his rheumatism, possibly even as young as eight years old (Hayter 191). It is not unlikely then that many of the Romantic writers would use the substance recreationally and for creative reasons. Thomas De Quincey was by far the most open with his opium uses which lead him to publish *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* in 1821. Keats too has been documented for possible use of the drug (Hayter 306).

The wide use of opium in nineteenth-century England could be considered a proto-drug culture and would thus draw comparison to the wide use of drugs and the drug culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Dick Weissman writes of the folk drug culture in his book *Which Side are You On?*

By the end of the folk boom, marijuana had become a popular drug among folksingers. By the time folk-rock reared its head, marijuana was superseded by LSD. Marijuana had been seen as a recreational drug, but LSD was viewed as a source of personal enlightenment[...] Much of the drug movement was connected to the explosion of folk-rock in San Francisco. (162)

Both LSD and marijuana are both comparable to the use of opium within the circles of Romantic writers. Opium, like Weissman explains of LSD, was used as a means of opening the mind to creativity. This is still the case of use of drugs today in music. In an interview with Josh Tillman (aka Father John Misty), the former drummer of Fleet Foxes, titled “Father John Misty Just Quit Fleet Foxes: We Get High in His Van,” there are several references to drugs other than the title itself. Interviewer Aaron Frank writes,

Tillman soon tells me he'd prefer to leave the bar and smoke weed in his van during our interview. This only serves to further the mystique I've already derived from his Tumblr page, which features photos of the singer on stage at a strip club sandwiched between heady quotes from existential philosophers [...] The name Father John Misty is partly a reference to cocaine, as in "Misty Mountain Hop."<sup>1</sup> (Frank)

Of course, Father John Misty is not the only instance of drug use in modern folk music. Bon Iver, the focus of this chapter has also openly admitted to using marijuana recreationally: "The last verse fast-forwards to two Christmases ago, spending time with [brother/co-manager] Nate during an ice storm, smoking weed" (Vernon, "Bon Iver"). Drugs as a recreational and creative substance has been influencing writing for centuries. Neither folk nor Romanticism are an exception to this part of history.

This recreational use of drugs may heighten the creativity of artists and thus we could conjecture that it is because of opium that we get some of the interesting critical and philosophical ideas that arose from the Romantic writers. Two concepts of particular interest to this thesis are that of Keats's Negative Capability and Coleridge's secondary imagination. Both of these concepts explore the mind's capacity to create art as well as how the mind creates art at all. To explore these concepts I will look at the lyrics of Bon Iver, how these lyrics explore Romantic themes, the creation of the lyrics through secondary imagination, and how Bon Iver is able to achieve Negative Capability. In doing so, I will also show how these three, Keats, Coleridge, and Bon Iver, all strive to be more than just writers, but writers whose art achieves a higher beauty.

### Criticism in Romanticism and Folk Music

As discussed in the Introduction, the Romantic period was a turning point for literature in which the literary world became much more self-aware. The Romantics were perhaps the greatest critics of their own movement and literary criticism was a staple of many of the Romantic writers. Wordsworth writes about his and Coleridge's own poetry in the preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in a defense of their new style of writing poetry and critique of eighteenth-century's typical style of poetry. Friedrich von Schiller, the early German Romantic, discussed his own and Goethe's writing while attempting to define the types of poets who have written thus far. He categorizes poets as those who "either [are] nature or *seek* her. The former is the naive, the latter the sentimental poet" (300). This is a notion that others like Keats would attempt to expand on. Following the Romantic tradition of poetry criticism, Emerson would later write his essay "The Poet" and Thomas Love Peacock "The Four Ages of Poetry" to which Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote his response in "A Defence of Poetry." Certainly, the Romantics were not the first literary critics. In fact, they often draw from those as early as the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle; however, their change in focus from philosophy centric literary criticism to literature centric philosophy marks a new beginning for criticism which would pave the way for the New Critics later. This, as M. H. Abrams explains it, is the switch from mimetic and rhetorical theories, to that of expressive theories of literature (*The Mirror and the Lamp*).

Romanticism can thus be seen as a such a sudden shift in thought and shock to the culture of the late 1700s and 1800s that it seems as if the Romantics felt they needed to defend themselves. David H. Richter even calls Wordsworth's "Preface" to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* "the first and one of the most lasting apologies for the Romantic Movement in poetry and for the expressive theory of literature that underpinned its other beliefs" (305). Such an

apology was necessary to help explain the movement's radical change in thought, especially from that of the Enlightenment era. For example, Whitman, though perhaps not purely a Romantic or Transcendentalist writer, changed how we view verse to such an extent that, in my personal experience within the American school system, he is claimed to have invented free verse.<sup>2</sup> While it is perhaps true that Whitman perfected the style or made it famous, the importance here is that he, along with the Romantic writers, were changing poetry and writing to such an extent that perhaps their defense, their "apologies," were necessary. Yet, no one Romantic writer was quite as critical as Keats, who almost seemed upset with some of his peers for their attempts of creating beautiful art and not achieving it.

Keats's criticisms appear, for the most part, in letters in which we find radical ideas such as that of Negative Capability. In a letter to his brothers, Keats writes:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, upon various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason - Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration. ("Letter to George and Thomas Keats" 333)

This famous passage gave us a definition of Negative Capability which is still discussed at length to this day. Brazilian politician and philosopher, Roberto Mangabeira Unger, uses the term in a modern context to explain how people can break free of social institutions and these institutions' ability to construct society members' identities. He explains his use of Keats's idea in his book *False Necessity*: "I call these varieties of empowerment 'negative capability' when considering them in relation to the context change that makes them possible. Thus, we may use the poet's turn of phrase to label contexts delivers us over to a fixed scheme or division and hierarchy to an enforced choice between routine and rebellion" (Unger 279). Unger's description perhaps gives us a better look into the definition of Negative Capability than Keats's short letter. Thus, Negative Capability is a person's ability to escape from the norms surrounding them and see things in a wholly individualistic way. To make decisions and observations about one's surroundings while choosing which norms to follow and which norms to rebel against as opposed to being influenced by societal norms without question. When Keats says "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties" (Keats 333) he is allowing for these types of choices to be made and it is the ability to step out of social norms and scientific facts to be able to make choices about presenting and creating art that makes the art truly beautiful or authentic.

Keats, in his letter, strongly criticizes Coleridge for attempting to obtain knowledge of the natural world as opposed to seeking pure beauty. Keats wanted the Romantic poets to seek and achieve true art like that of Shakespeare's works. Keats's criticism of Coleridge also seems to take Coleridge soundly out of the Romantic Movement. If Coleridge were truly attempting to bring logic to nature or art, then he would be a man of the Enlightenment era that the Romantics rebelled against.<sup>3</sup> However, Coleridge is clearly a Romantic and it was likewise that Keats himself was often criticized by his peers: "1818 was cast as the year in which this rising genius,

already frail and sensitive, was mortally crushed by vicious reviews. Percy Shelley helped initiate this myth in *Adonais*, which describes Keats as ‘a pale flower.’ Byron, who did not like Keats's verse, put it unsentimentally: Keats, he wrote, was ‘snuffed out by an article’” (Greenblatt 879).

Criticisms and Keats's rough start as a poet aside, his ideas were still greatly influential to the Romantic writers. Negative Capability was an idea that had been expressed and discussed by various writers, but never one that was given a name or really solidified in meaning. Coleridge had written about the imagination and its importance in art and poetry. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge describes a primary and secondary imagination. The primary is the human perception, the secondary is

An echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (*Biographia Literaria* 325)

The secondary imagination is different per individual in terms of its ability and likewise it is not as predominant as the primary. The secondary imagination, though, is responsible for taking the perceptions of the first imagination and turning it into artistic expression, or as Richter interprets it as “minimally reshaping the perceptual world and creating another idealized and unified picture” (321). To the Romantic writer, this secondary imagination is manifested in the poem. Furthermore, the secondary imagination is responsible for taking the primary imagination's perception and dissolving, diffusing, and dissipating it and then finally recreating it. In doing so,

the secondary creates a new world in its place. This world, or at least the process, is comparable to that of Negative Capability in which the poet may take empirical perceptions of the world and reacting to them without searching for the reasons of these reactions. We then see how Keats is able to criticize Coleridge for such similar ideas. Where Coleridge was attempting to find a reason for why the poet may take their own perceptions and create an idealized image of it in art, Keats was more concerned with letting this act happen without asking why.

Needless to say, the Romantic writers all sought a very particular ideal, but at the same time none of them shared that ideal in the exact same form. Yet, these criticisms and debates on the ideals of Romanticism are important to note for this argument because the music industry of today is often under the same attack by those who attempt to produce their work independently.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Justin Vernon, a music producer and most famous for his folk music project Bon Iver as well as his work with popular rap artist Kanye West, is a critic of his own art as well. Though not quite as philosophical as Keats or the Romantics, Vernon still has very strong feelings about the music industry. In an interview with Pitchfork Media about his new band Volcano Choir, Vernon speaks about labels in the industry and making music about money instead of about the art. When asked by the Pitchfork Media in this interview<sup>5</sup> about his influences and what he is bringing to genres of music, Vernon replies:

[I]ndie rock is just as susceptible-- if not more susceptible-- to all the gross things about people becoming total ass clowns in music, and only worrying about money and image. I'm not interested in being a part of that [...] it's dangerous when music gets cornered by anything [...] I think it's so funny that when you look at the business and the way that people make decisions in their lives, whether they're in art or music or they're in industry, they forget that being unique is the

answer. Becoming yourself and finding an idea. Like Steve Jobs: “Think different.” Apple is not thinking different anymore, they are getting worse by the day. They’ve become bottom-dollar and you can see that transition easily. It’s the same with music and people who make a good first record then a shitty second record because they’re scared and they want to have money and security. All the people I look up to are the ones who don’t give a shit about any of that. They just care about the people around them and about searching. (Vernon, “Volcano Choir”)

While Keats’s Negative Capability is not making a statement about the commoditification of art and literature, I think he would agree with Vernon’s statement that attempting to get the next album out as fast as possible would deprive artists of being able to create and obtain the sort of mental state in which art is created. Creating albums both too fast to meet demand as well as to please a specific and defined audience, i.e. demographics, takes music creation into the realm of reasoning in which artists are consciously attempting to recreate what worked before. Thus, art and music becomes a science in which bands or songwriters are fixed to a formula instead of creating content through emotion and the secondary imagination. Vernon also sees being stuck with a label, or genre in this instance, “indie rock,” as stifling and does not allow one to create the music they want, but instead forces the artist to attempt to fit their music into the label that is given or chosen.

Justin Vernon, according to the interview discussed, is definitely an artist who tries to do different things with each of his projects and stray away from the formulas and genre designations that create these formulas. One project that sticks out in particular to this study is

Vernon's folk project whose debut album features Vernon as the sole artist, aside from two songs which only add on or two members each, operating under the name Bon Iver.<sup>6</sup>

### Negative Capability and the Creation of Art

I believe it is important to discuss and analyze the creation of the album *For Emma, Forever Ago* before moving on to a close reading of the lyrics of Bon Iver. The circumstances that led to *For Emma*'s creation are just as moody and angst ridden as the album has a tendency of sounding. After a bad break up with longtime girlfriend as well as a band, Vernon contracted mononucleosis and decided it would be best for him to spend some time alone. He moved out to a cabin in Wisconsin. His actions are very Thoreau-esque as his website's bio describes it:

Vernon moved to a remote cabin in the woods of Northwestern Wisconsin at the onset of winter. He lived there alone for three months, filling his days with wood splitting and other chores around the land. This solitary time slowly began feeding a bold, uninhibited new musical focus. The days slowly evolved into nights filled with twelve-hour recording blocks, breaking only for trips on the tractor into the pines to saw and haul firewood, or for frozen sunrises high up a deer stand. All of his personal trouble, lack of perspective, heartache, longing, love, loss and guilt that had been stock piled over the course of the past six years, was suddenly purged into the form of song. ("Albums – *For Emma, Forever Ago*")

Perhaps described in a much more grandiose fashion than the album itself, but the importance of the situation remains. Vernon did not intend to create any music during this time. However, eventually he had a friend bring out some simple recording equipment and Vernon was able to "purge" his feelings.

Through this story we can draw comparison to Keats's emotionally charged and tragically short life. Both dealt with lost love and illness, though let us not confuse tuberculosis with mononucleosis or the intense emotions within the letter writing of Keats's to Fanny Brawne, a love that went unfulfilled due his early death and her tuberculosis induced move out of London, to a bad breakup. Still, both become very emotionally driven writers because of their own personal experiences and tragedies. Additionally, Vernon's original intent was never to write or create the album. It was a flurry of emotion that perhaps drove him to it. His solitude and isolation, like that of Thoreau, may have become his inspiration and the importance of nature as a place of healing arises again as well. The nature imagery throughout the album is, thus, almost expected given the story and environment surrounding its inception.

Negative Capability and Vernon's own critiques of the music industry are also important concepts in exploring the album's creations. Vernon said that albums and music should not fall victim to the popularity and demand of the artist. A good song or a good album should come when it is ready. The artist must allow their secondary imagination to work and change the perceived world into the artist's manifestation and only then can Negative Capability be achieved. *For Emma*, thus, was created "without any irrational reaching after fact & reason" (Keats, "Letter to George and Thomas Keats" 333) just as Keats describes. The album is simple musically, just as any traditional folk album might be, yet dense and often tiring to listen to because of its intense emotional content, tone, and its cerebral and symbolic lyrics. Though *Bon Iver* was a huge success after its debut, Vernon certainly was not intending it to be, having originally released it independently before allowing it to be printed by a studio.

There is definitely more in common with Keats and Vernon than lies on the surface, then. Vernon criticizes the music industry for lacking the emotion it takes to create beautiful art, and Keats says to his brothers of some of the greatest thinkers of his time:

These men<sup>7</sup> say things which make one start, without making one feel, they are all alike; their manners are alike; they all know fashionables; they have a mannerism in their very eating and drinking, in their mere handling a Decanter – They talk of Kean & his low company – Would I were with that company instead of yours said I to myself! I know such like acquaintances will never do for me [...] (333)

Both Keats and Vernon separate themselves from the artists of their times. They both seek something more, something driven by a personal ambition outside of logical creation of art, something poetic.

#### Achieving Negative Capability: Imagery and Metaphor

While folk has been a changing genre for the past decade now, Bon Iver's attempt at the genre is unique. Vernon uses both traditional folk elements, a simple guitar and vocals only, occasionally accompanied by drums and other instruments, with simple chord progressions and no fancy flourishes in the music, but also adds a bit of modern folk sound, such as the buzzing of guitar strings in "Flume" or the reverb slathered vocals that prelude "Lump Sum." The overall effect of the album's sound is that of traditional folk with clear experimentations that add to the slightly eerie, haunting, and moody tone of the music. Vernon's lyrics too are slightly unconventional, sometimes bordering on the surreal, and almost always minimalist and impressionistic. With these experimentations, Vernon is able to obtain Keats's idea of beauty through that of Negative Capability. Vernon's unhindered do-it-yourself recording process and

lack of input from others or producers allowed him to create something unique that lacks any attempts at logic and reaches solely for an emotional experience.

Vernon's lyrics are deeply personal and their minimalist verses often makes them hard to interpret. It is clear they are full of symbolism and intense emotion like much of the Romantic era's lyrical poetry, which are characteristically short and very dense. "Flume," for instance, is a deep reflection on love.

I am my mother's only one

It's enough.

I wear my garments so it shows,

Now you know. (Bon Iver, "Flume")

The first stanza (above) begins the song with simple reflection that the narrator's mother only needs one child to love, "it's enough" for her. There is perhaps a hint to the idea that she could not conceive another child as well and she is content to raise and love only one child. The next line, I believe, is another way to say he wears his heart on his sleeve and he expresses his love and admiration for his mother openly. In the second stanza is where we begin to run into the denser symbolism:

Only love is all maroon

Gluey feathers on a flume

Sky is womb and she's the moon. (Bon Iver)

In true Romantic fashion, Vernon turns immediately to nature images to create his symbolism. This stanza serves as the chorus of the song, though it is only repeated one more time at the end of the song (though, the penultimate stanza begins with "Only love is all maroon" as well). Just the color maroon itself could possibly take a thesis to explain. We can look at it a couple of

ways. Literally speaking, maroon is a deep, saturated red that is not mixed with either of the other two prime colors (blue and green). Red is typically a color of passion and thus a deeper red like maroon may symbolize a deeper passion. Finally, I think Maroon can also have a meaning of the earth. Being a deep red may remind one of red clay or its slight brown color could be dirt. This final interpretation would fit well with the next two lines and indeed the rest of the song.

Colors often find an important place in the Romantics' repertoire. Shelley's lyrical poem "The Cloud" stands out as an example of using color as symbolism with a little over 10 references in 84 lines to various colors or the concept of colors itself. Some of these colors are just as you would expect, such as the cloud being described as a "pillow of white" and "the green plains" (Shelley, "The Cloud" 404-5) but others clearly take a more symbolic turn. "In the depths of the purple sea" (405) brings up much stronger feelings of the royalty of nature and its importance than a simple mentioning of a blue ocean, similarly, Heaven is compared to the sky with "Heaven's blue smile" (405) I think, perhaps, the most powerful though is "and the crimson pall of eve may fall / From the depths of Heaven above" (405). Crimson is such a strong term for that of night time and imagery of the pall being laid over the earth as if the day has died and is placed in a casket. Crimson of course being the color of blood, in many instances, as well. The importance of the day's death here is what allows the rebirth of the new day and allows the cycle to continue, much like that of the life cycle of the cloud itself,

For after the rain when with never a strain

The pavilion of Heaven is bare,

And the winds and the sunbeams with their convex gleams

Build up the blue dome of air,

I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,<sup>8</sup>

And out of the caverns of rain,  
Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,  
I arise and unbuild it again. (406)

The “crimson pall” from previous lines sets up the metaphor of cyclical life so that by the time the reader reaches the final stanza they are not surprised that the cloud rebuilds itself in a cycle and leaves its own tomb empty. The cloud is unlike the day however, as the day ends and is placed in a coffin with a crimson pall on it, the cloud is able to come and go.

Both Shelley and Vernon create their color metaphors on top of natural imagery. The second variation of the chorus in “Flume” also explores color metaphors as juxtaposed with nature:

Only love is all maroon.  
Lapping lakes like leery loons.  
Leaving rope burn—  
Reddish ruse. (Bon Iver, “Flume”)

These uses of metaphorical colors and natural images return us back to the concept of Negative Capability. These images do not “reach for fact or reason,” but instead conjure up emotions that differ from listener to listener, or in the case of Shelley reader to reader. Reddish ruse is a strange phrase as there are archaic definitions for the word ruse,<sup>9</sup> but “a trick, stratagem, or wile” (“Ruse, n.1”) hardly seems like it can be expressed in terms of colors. In lyrics as personal and minimalist as in “Flume” it would be impossible to determine what he means by this even if it is tied to the idea of rope burn. The beauty, imagination, and emotion of these lines are what is important and in Vernon’s case even creates a very impressionistic imagery; an image we cannot very much linger on but instead actually feel the hurt that lost love has left on Vernon as if it

were a rope burn. Love then, is reddish in that it has left an injury on him, and also in that love is a trick, or false. Emotions are conflicted strongly in the two chorus variations as opposed to the rest of the song. As we saw in the first stanza, the love between a mother and her child, and *vis versa*, is strong enough, but in the choruses, love passes as if a feather floating on a flume, or hurts like a rope burn.

Though Shelley was purportedly a deep admirer of Keats,<sup>10</sup> and indeed one of the greatest Romantic lyrical writers, his “A Defence of Poetry” does not seem to match that of Keats’s Negative Capability. Instead, Shelley argues that Plato, who refuses poets from his “Republic,” is himself a poet because of the way he is able to use words to create imagery and melody (Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry” 349). Thus, to Shelley, poetry is in the form and use of language, where to Keats, poetry is in the artist’s ability to let go of the logic and reasoning and allow the imagination to transform the perceived without question. In other words, to write purely through emotion.

#### Comparing Bon Iver’s and Keats’s Lyrics<sup>11</sup>

The use of metaphor and symbolism in poetry is important to accessing Keats’s ideas of poetic beauty and thus comparing Vernon’s work to Shelley’s, a master of metaphorical and symbolic meaning, is still an important practice. As I said, however, Shelley is not Keats and their writings styles do have their differences. Shelley was largely politically driven, though still able to write the beautiful lyrics of poems such as “The Cloud,” whereas Keats was much more concerned with “the disciplining of sensation into symbolic meaning,” especially in his odes (Daiches 920). “Ode to a Grecian Urn” is a deep reflection on the titular urn which Keats speaks through in order to express how there is beauty in the silence and art of the urn itself and

culminates in the urn finally speaking the enigmatic lines: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (Keats, “Ode to a Grecian Urn” 344). These lines express a sentiment which aligns strongly with that of Negative Capability and perhaps even seems to be a poem which wishes to express the term in verse.

Cleanth Brooks famously spends time with this poem in his seminal work *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in Structure of Poetry*. Brooks uses the poem, along with others to prove the importance of paradox in poetry and how it is used to bring out some truth about the world and is thus an important element to the form of poetry. In order to understand the final lines quoted above, Brooks argues, one must also understand the paradox that is formed throughout the poem, which he shows other critics of the poem did not do. Brooks breaks the poem down through each stanza, metaphor, and paradox presented in order to finally find the meaning of the statement at the end of the poem:

One can summarize the answer already implied thus: throughout the poem the poet has stressed the paradox of the speaking urn. First, the urn itself can tell a story, can give a history. Then, the various figures depicted upon the urn play music or speak or sing. If we have been alive to these items, we shall not, perhaps, be too much surprised to have the urn speak once more, not in the sense in which it tells a story—a metaphor which is rather easy to accept—but, to have it speak on a higher level, to have it make a commentary on its own nature. If the urn has been properly dramatized, if we have followed the development of the metaphors, if we have been alive to the paradoxes which work throughout the poem, perhaps then, we shall be prepared for the enigmatic, final paradox which the “silent form” utters. But in that case, we shall not feel that the generalization, unqualified and to

be taken literally, is meant to march out of its context to compete with the scientific and philosophical generalizations which dominate our world. (134)

The paradox of the speaking urn is built upon the metaphors which foreshadow the urn's dramatic moment, in terms of both relating to drama as theatre as well as the drama of the moment.

Bon Iver's "re: Stacks," similarly, sets up its final moments through metaphor and paradox. The beginning of the lyrics express the idea that the narrator is changing or at least coming to the realization that there is an issue,

This my excavation and today is Qumran.<sup>12</sup>

Everything that happens is from now on,

This is pouring rain,

This is paralyzed. (Bon Iver, "re: Stacks")

The first line especially hints at the catharsis that came with the creation of the album in that excavating the hidden, ancient settlement in which the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. The next three lines point out the reality of this realization and uses the metaphors of pouring rain and paralysis to show it is not a change that can be ignored as well as the idea that the change will last "from now on."

The paradox comes, however, when we get to the end of the lyrics and in the last stanza we are told that the narrator has not changed, "This is not the sound of a new man or crispy realization / It's the sound of the unlocking and the lift away" (Bon Iver). The "new man" that has been excavated has been there all along and is why the imagery of the excavation is used. The "new man" was always there, but it had to be "unlocked" and then lifted out. Just as Brooks argues, one cannot focus on a single line and attempt to derive meaning from it. Instead, both

Vernon and Keats, are able to play with the meaning of their lyrics by structuring them to change the meaning as the reader gets from beginning to end. The paradoxes built within the stanzas and created and changed by that of the last stanza in both poems.

The use of paradoxes in a poem is not how a poet reaches or achieves something like Negative Capability, but instead it is a result of Negative Capability. The paradoxes of the texts both come from “being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats, “Letter to George and Thomas Keats” 333). An urn cannot speak; however, metaphorically it speaks to Keats as a statement to art and its potential for beauty. Brooks explains “[t]here is much in the poetry of Keats which suggests he would have approved of Archibald MacLeish's dictum, ‘A poem should not mean/ But be.’ There is some warrant for thinking that the Grecian urn (real or imagined) which inspired the famous ode was, for Keats, just such a poem, ‘palpable and mute,’ a poem in stone” (124). Likewise, a man cannot be excavated, or in other words learn of his own true feelings, without that new knowledge not having changed him into a new man. Yet, the two writers both allow their emotions to control the metaphors and their meaning. They do not seek logical explanations to construct their writing. Instead, they let out their emotions into uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts and allow their secondary imaginations manifest in their lyrics.

#### Chapter Notes

1. “Misty Mountain Hop” is a Led Zeppelin song which chronicles a drug purchase and then being arrested by the cops.

2. Free verse poetry can be traced back to the vers libre poetry in France and *The Origins of Free Verse Poetry* by H.T. Kirby-Smith traces the style to that of John Milton and other 16th century poets.
3. Perhaps Keats is a little harsh as Coleridge himself had expressed ideas that align with Negative Capability to an extent. Earl R. Wasserman writes in *The English Romantics: The Grounds of Knowledge*: “To the complaint of Wordsworth, expectedly unsympathetic on epistemological grounds, that this is the ‘Mock Sublime,’ Coleridge replied: ‘from my childhood I have been accustomed to abstract and as it were unrealized whatever of more than common interest my eye dwelt on; and then by a sort of transference and transmission of my consciousness to identify with the object’” (343). Here we see Coleridge not reaching for fact or reason, but instead dealing in the abstract, which would align well with Keats’s definition.
4. The music industry of today makes it nearly impossible to produce any work independently and those who are picked up by the few giant labels are often the only ones heard on mainstream radio. For independent studios, it is often impossible to get funding or recognition without the backing of these giant studios such as EMI, Sony, and Universal. For instance, Sub Pop, a major label in the “indie” music movement is actually owned by the Warner Music Group. The labels which distribute and produced Bon Iver’s albums, Jagjaguwar and 4AD, are truly independent of the massive labels. Though, For Emma, Forever Ago, was initially self-released by Vernon himself.
5. This interview discusses Indie Rock genres and Vernon’s side project Volcano Choir, not Bon Iver, so the fact that they are not talking about folk is irrelevant here. Instead, the importance of the criticism should be emphasized.

6. Bon Iver's second and final album would drop the solo act in favor of a full band and a large production staff.
7. Benjamin Haydon, Horace Smith, "Hill & Kingston & one Du Bois" (333) are some of the mentioned names within the letter.
8. Empty tomb.
9. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, both obsolete terms for ruse involve hunting: "A detour or turn made by a hunted animal in order to elude capture" and "A departure by a hunter from the path in order to close in on the quarry" ("Ruse, n.1") While the first perhaps lines up well with the nature imagery, it more or less is a very specific form of the noun we know today.
10. It is said that upon his death he was found to have a book of Keats's poetry on him. Shelley's elegy "Adonais" was also written at Keats's death.
11. I cover in this section Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn" though I title the section to imply I will be reviewing lyrical poetry. It should thus be noted that Odes are in fact a specific form of lyrical poetry (Baldick 238).
12. Misspelled on the official lyrics website, BonIver.org, as Kumran.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Thus far we have discussed and proven the connections between contemporary folk music and the Romantic period. However, the issue of why such a revival would occur still remains. The Romantic Movement was a reaction to both the Enlightenment thinking of the century leading up to it as well as the Industrial Revolution. Similarly, the Folk Revival of the 1940s up until about the 1970s was itself a political reaction to the deemphasized cultural significance of the “common folk” as well as the capitalism of America. The two movements can actually be linked to certain extent as Filene explains,

The roots of [the folk revival] phenomenon stretched back to Europe. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, European intellectuals turned their attention as never before to the vernacular culture of their countries’ peasants, farmers, and craftspeople, launching what historian Peter Burke has called ‘the discovery of the people.’ Once scorned as ignorant and illiterate, ordinary people began to be glorified as the creators of cultural expression which a richness and depth lacking in elite creations. (9)

These intellectuals came, for one, from the tradition of the German Romantic Nationalists who attempted to gather the folktales and songs of the common people, but also the English Romantics fit into this category as well. The Romantic poets idealized the countryside and showcased their practiced pastoralism in poems like Blake’s “The Shepherd” and Robert Burns’s “To a Mouse, on Turning Her Up in Her Nest with the Plough, November 1785.” Centuries later Woody Guthrie would begin learning and singing traditional folk songs he learned from workers while traveling during the great depression. The Folk Revival was clearly politically driven and directly attempted to prove the worth of the working class. Guthrie’s uncountable followers and

those influenced by him such as Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan, would carry on Guthrie's message after his death and almost all of them were just as politically driven with a major focus on civil rights and anti-war songs.

While folk remained a major influence on some artists, by the 1980s the genre had largely lost its fame and glory to that of the pop artists that were taking advantage of the new forms of media, the technology allowed in the recording rooms, and electronic instruments. Hip hop as well took over in the 1990s as the strongly political vehicle for civil rights messages and the anger and alienation of the black community in America. Folk had a hard time returning to the spotlight until the release of the Coen brothers' 2000 film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* which not only received critical acclaim, but so did its folk driven soundtrack:

The *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* juggernaut shows no sign of slowing down. The Mercury/Lost Highway soundtrack to the Coen brothers' film has gone quadruple-platinum (more than four million sales) and swept the Country Music Association Awards earning nods for both best album and best single (for "I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow"). It earned six Grammy nominations, including album of the year, best compilation soundtrack, and best producer (for T Bone Burnett). (Harris, Stiff, Black, and Loveless 193).

However, this initial rise to fame did not really seem to follow any clear political movement like that of Guthrie's followers. In fact, the album's monetary success could simply only be tied to that of the movie. Furthermore, while this one album had achieved such success and the country music scene was beginning to reenter the mainstream radio station, folk and folk rock music was still not the focus of major radio stations or selling quite like it did during the Folk Revival. Groups like the Decemeberists has cult followings by the mid-2000s and were finally seeing

chart positions by 2006. The Fleet Foxes too saw their fame begin to take off in 2007. Bon Iver's first release was not until 2008, but by this time the genre seemingly had once again found its footing and *For Emma, Forever Ago* began winning nominations and awards (including two Grammys) almost instantly.

Still, there seems to lack some political or cultural motive that would bring the folk genre back to prominence as it was initially brought to culture's attention or why folk would return with such a focus on Romantic ideals. There are two reasons, I propose, as to why we are seeing a return to Romanticism within in the folk genre: 1) a renewed importance on the environment and 2) modern over-consumerism of technology and the alienation this technology has imposed on our culture.

#### Environmentalism and its Effect on Society

I will admit that, to some extent, it is conjecture that the political sphere has affected our outlook on the environment and thus shaped modern folk. I have been hard-pressed to find much strong evidence that the folk artists discussed in this thesis have directly spoken on the issue. However, there certainly are hints of the role nature has in the creation of folk music the last ten years. Bon Iver speaks about his album taking shape due to his natural surroundings, and even expresses a slight interest in Thoreau's *Walden*, in an interview with About Entertainment, "the way Thoreau put words together rung true to me [...] By being at my dad's cabin, by myself, surrounded by woods, with no outside influence, that really helped me to shake loose a lot of things that'd always been there, and allowed me to access a lot. In that way, it really was a result of its environment" (Vernon, "Interview: Justin Vernon of Bon Iver"). Furthermore, in response

to the question, “How do you feel about being portrayed as some rugged, back-to-the-land poet of the snowy interior?” Vernon responds:

Anytime a person makes something and puts it out into the world, then that thing they've made becomes global, or shared. And when that happens, the original person who actually made that thing is, in a way, removed from it. When those people think something of me, rather than just the record, that doesn't make me feel good or feel bad. I don't think it makes me feel anything. However people want to paint me, as a person, after hearing my record, almost says more about them than me. (Vernon)

While he does not directly admit his feelings towards a Romantic persona, his statement does show that the fans who are interested in the music are themselves interested in such a “back-to-the-land” ideology that helps define the Romantic Movement.

I have also shown that nature plays a large role in the music and lyrics of folk artists and I think this is largely affected by our own political atmosphere. In a study done by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication, 10% of Americans in 2008 believed in global warming (Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, Feinberg, Rosenthal, and Marlon 8). As the debate arose in the political sphere in America the issue likely became a “Litmus Test for would-be GOP Presidential Candidates” and the political right took the anti-climate change debate as a buzz word against their opponents (Yale Climate Connections). Likewise, on the liberal side, “The 1990s may be witnessing a trend toward ecojustice activism building bridges with traditional environmentalist causes” (Buell 643). Buell, writing in 1998, notices the cultural trends in environmentalism. By 2013, 23% of Americans now believed that climate change was not an issue or real (Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, Feinberg, Rosenthal, and Marlon 8). The

debate had turned people against each other as a new buzz word for political campaigns and thus entering into the American conscious.

The emphasis on nature and the various Romantic tropes and themes I argue for in the previous chapters all point to a reemergence of the idea that perhaps nature is something worth saving. The more politically minded and forthright country and folk band, Band of Horses, write in their 2007 song “The General Specific”:

What the writers say, it means shit to me now,  
Plants and animals.

We’re on a bender when it’s 80 degrees

The end of December, what’s going on? (“The General Specific”)

“The General Specific” shows a more direct outrage as the line “what’s going on?” is expressed as an almost incredulous shout in the song. The lyrics express that the philosophical ideas of writers are not what is important to him, instead it is the plants and animals who we have harmed in the destroying of Earth’s atmosphere and ecosystems which he is worried about. In another genre completely, The Postal Service would tackle the issue in a similar way,

Again last night I had that strange dream,  
Where everything was exactly how it seemed,  
No concerns about the world getting warmer.  
People thought that they were just being rewarded,  
For treating others as they'd like to be treated,  
For obeying stop signs and curing diseases,  
For mailing letters with the address of the sender.  
Now we can swim any day in November. (“Sleeping In”)

Both songs take on the political issue in their own way and both are concerned about the issue to some extent. In “Sleeping In” the lyrics describe an idealized world where global warming has happened, but it is a reward for the goodness of humanity as opposed to a natural reaction to the greenhouse gasses introduced by humanity, yet the song still does not deny the issue at all. In fact, it almost seems to take on the issue with a sense of irony or sarcasm, as if to say that the planet’s climate change is not a reward, but a punishment. This is especially true when you realize how each stanza depicts complex ideas such as climate change and the Kennedy assassination within a dream “where everything is exactly how it seems” (The Postal Service). Climate change is a complicated issue and to simplify such an issue to something like a reward for “mailing letters with the address of the sender” is much too rudimentary to be anything but sarcastic.

Folk’s emphasis on nature thus aligns with Lawrence Buell’s “Toxic Discourse” which argues for a new way of discussing environmentalism that would no longer talk about the environment “as social construct and thus as a symptomatic register of political or economic power, or as a site of cultural contestation” (641). Toxic discourse instead is not one controlled by government, but one that enters the realm of the underprivileged. He argues that to an extent it has, “an awakened toxic consciousness and green activism have increased dramatically among the nonprivileged. In the United States, the antitoxics campaign has changed the face of environmentalism since its inception as a large-scale movement” (642) an argument which he continues with the example of

When Richard Hatcher, the first African American mayor of Gary, Indiana, an adroit politician with a keen sense of social justice, managed to rally African Americans, middle-class suburbanites, and working-class whites behind a

campaign for better air quality, it is not clear whether he or they were consciously influenced by Carson, much less by antecedent traditions of toxic discourse. But the success of Gary's environmental coalition-until rust-belt recession hit the city so hard in the 1970s that unemployment overwhelmed other civic concerns-depended upon pollution's power as a social unifier. (650-51)

When the discourse of toxicity enters into the realm of the common people, that is when they are threatened by the environment, their city turned toxic, the political power is much stronger than that of the federal red tape that slows the process of fixing the environment or even discussing it in terms of its decay.

Folk is a possible open door for this issue to enter the realm of the common people. Folk began as the voice of the common people, then became a cry for the common people, thus with the reemergence of folk today and its rising popularity, it is possible to enter that realm once again. Folk artists attempt to do so by following in the footsteps of those Romantic writers before them and decide to take on the issue through symbolism and internalizing the problem into their secondary imagination and manifesting it as poetry (as discussed in the previous chapter). Thus, we get the similar ideals of the Romantics and the Transcendentalist who felt “that greater knowledge of the natural world brought by science was making humanity presumptuous and arrogant” (Doherty). In other words, the Romantics believed that it was arrogant to attempt to understand nature through means of science as nature is something uncontrollable that should be revered. Both chapter two and chapter three focus on this very point and it is clear that contemporary folk artists today are aligning themselves with Romantic ideals, even if they are unaware of them. In doing so, they are attempting, like Buell, to bring the discourse of nature into the home and out of the hands of politicians.

## Technology and Alienation

The other issue I have covered to some degree already. Isolation, solitude, and alienation are all important concepts to both the Transcendentalist as well as the past ten years of folk music. Alienation, I have established, is, for the most part, the negative concept of the three. The idea coming mostly from Marx's writing, at least in my argument, still holds true to today and we see how it affects our culture through the lyrics of contemporary folk music. There are some slight differences between the Romantic reaction to the Industrial Revolution and the new folk artists, but that has more to say about the change in technology and culture over time than it does about whether or not the folk artists of today agree with the Romantic ideals. Whereas the Industrial Revolution created the problem of mass production at the expense of the environment and the alienation of the workers from the culture, today's culture harbors that mass production and uses the technology that comes from it to foster this alienation.

A personal observation is that technology today creates the illusion of community in websites like Facebook and other social media sites, but in reality is creating a new form of alienation. Instead of the workers being alienated from society, our newfound ability to talk and discuss matters via the internet has alienated us from each other, but more importantly those methods of communication are actually a vehicle for advertising and consumerism. This view is backed up by those like P. J. Rey, whose article, "Alienation, Exploitation, and Social Media," reviews Marxist ideas of Alienation and Exploitation within the realm of social media. To Rey, social media is a particularly interesting means of communication and exploitation because of its "voluntary nature" (Rey 401). Rey argues that while social media is in fact entirely voluntary it is still comparable to that of the alienation that occurs within factory life during the industrial revolution. He claims that

the separation of intellectual life and physical activity—and the consequent alienation—was at the heart of life in the factory. By increasing specialization—making tasks more efficient, more repetitive—to the extent that virtually no thought was required to complete them, humans themselves were reduced to machinery. The exercise of imagination was left solely to the capitalist (and other elites, such as engineers) who orchestrated the means of production, whereas the worker was simply exploited as a source of raw, physical labor power. (406)

The average social media user is exploited as a means of both data-mining, that is getting information on demographics to sell to advertising agencies, as well as creating a pseudo-intellectual life for those who use social media which directly separates the user from physical activity. In other words, the act of physical and direct interaction with others is replaced by digital interaction. The folk music examined in this thesis does not necessarily claim that we should spend more time together, though there could be an argument for “Blue Ridge Mountains,” but it does suggest a return to nature and the rural instead of any emphasis on technology. This, in turn, is an emphasis on seeking solitude in nature as opposed to any consumerist gains on the internet or in metropolitan areas.

Furthermore, articles such as “DIY Noise and Compositional Horizons: Indie Musicians and Promoters in the Age of Digital Reproduction” by Billy Geoghegan and Kevin Meehan outline how technology and music distribution has had a tendency to harm the artists more than they help. Streaming services such as Spotify, which are attempting to replace the buying of music with a subscription and advertising model, pay a pittance to unheard artists and it can be near impossible to be successful without the help of a major label. The Decemberists and Fleet Foxes are both on labels which have the money and visibility to allow the success of their artists.

Smaller folk acts, however, must find their own way to make money and promote. While some of these artists may prefer this independent status, they are still alienated by the massive industry of music which chooses to ignore such artists (Geoghegan and Meehan 61-64).

While the lyrics only have an absence of technology, many folk artists speak about the trouble technology can cause outside of their music. Jonathan Zwickel asks Robin Pecknold of Fleet Foxes, “Despite the angst it seems to cause you, your love/hate relationship with technology is inspiring—at least as it plays out on Twitter. You articulate the depersonalization wrought by the Internet very well, as well as its semi-miraculousness. Does that conflict play into ‘Helplessness Blues?’” To which he replies,

I haven't really thought about in that way, the record or lyrics referencing technology. I guess in some way it must. I think there's a lot of isolation and some yearning for community on the album, and maybe those feelings were exacerbated by engaging with technology, or looking at screens too much. There are so many places to look now it's hard to know if you're looking at what you should be looking at, if you know what I mean. But maybe it's really good. Twitter is kind of therapeutic for me, or was when I started using it, I just felt really isolated while finishing the record and needed somebody to talk to kind of. So that's the flipside of it -- it works both ways. I think "Get Off the Internet" by Mt. Eerie is the best song I've heard recently. (Pecknold)

The question sets up Pecknold’s own personal hang ups about technology, but Pecknold also rounds off his answer by saying that a folk song with lyrics like “why not wake the fuck up and smell the air outside” (The Microphones<sup>1</sup>) was one of his recent favorite songs. Additionally, while Pecknold claims Twitter was therapeutic for him for a time, he also states his uncertainty

about whether or not Twitter or the internet was a good place to go for companionship. There is a general distrust of the technology Pecknold attempts to use to quell his isolation, but he still feels alienated by the technology which we see in his hesitation to embrace it.

Let's not mistake the issue for arguing that technology is a negative thing. There is no doubt that new technological advances can have a strongly positive impact on both the environment and culture. Solar power is one great example. The use of technology to exploit its users, however, is also a strong concern. Too many times I have seen kids in restaurants with their face buried in tablet computers or phones with headphones on. This is clearly a choice of the parents' and not my own, but it is still an appropriate observation and that sort of alienation from culture could have a profound effect on the future of our culture. The internet and social media already has, without question, changed our day to day routines and understanding of each other. Folk music decries these practices and finds solitude in that which is natural and in the countryside, not the isolation and alienation of consumerism and technology, much like Romanticism was opposed to the industrialization of civilization.

### The Future of Folk

We cannot deny that folk has been a largely political genre. When discussing the massive growth of the music industry, Bob Dylan says “The *truth* of it all was covered up, buried, under the onslaught of money and that wolfish attitude – exploitation. Now it seems like the thing to do is exploit everything” (Dylan). That was in 1987. In January of 2015, after feeding his chickens in his back woods farm home, Colin Meloy of the Decemberists speaks critically of institutionalized racism to *The Guardian*:

It's a totally wrongheaded idea that doesn't recognize the decades and centuries of systemic, institutional racism at all levels of the government. I'm a pro-government liberal. I think it's important to have those institutions. But some branches of those institutions, such as law enforcement, are fairly corrupt and support that institutional racism in certain parts of the country. And there's this idea that we have a black president, so we're post-racism and no longer need to have accommodation for minorities. But we do. We need them more than ever.

(Meloy)

Of course, much of Woody Guthrie's music, with his trademark "This Machine Kill Fascists" sticker, were political as well.

Yet, if folk is a reaction to the issues of environmentalism, consumerism, and technology, then where does folk have to go from here to further these causes? The bands I have discussed up to this point are all massive successes, but folk often exists in small communities, bars, or music festivals. The majority of folk is probably massively unheard. Even relatively popular bands in folk circles do not receive much, if any, recognition on radio stations or by those who are not already familiar with the genre and follow its artists. Of course, not all "folk" artists fall neatly into the folk genre or even into the Romantic ideals. However, many of them are either politically driven (see later Bright Eyes albums), emotionally driven (Damien Rice), writers of the common people (Iron & Wine), or bands that capture the disenchanted youth of the south (Or, The Whale). There are even some bands that take on a folk-punk persona, such as The Avett Brothers and The Microphones, to explore other political realms and punk's trademark "do-it-yourself" philosophy.

With the popularity of bands like Fleet Foxes, The Decemberists, and Bon Iver, I think that upcoming folk artists will look up to them and explore more the dynamic of Romantic writing especially that of nature and solitude. The very idea of folk music is steeped in the countryside and as new artists begin to explore these themes it will enter into the American discourse more and possibly change our culture back towards believing in the existence of climate change or appreciating the rural workers of America. One of the most striking things I read in my research came from Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling of America*. He writes:

In 1973, 1000 Kentucky dairies went out of business. They were victims of policies by which we imported dairy products to compete with our own and exported so much grain as to cause the rise in price of feed. And, typically, an agricultural expert at the University of Kentucky, Dr. John Nicolai, was optimistic about this failure of 1000 dairymen, whose cause he is supposedly being paid—partly with *their* tax money—to serve. There were inefficient producers, he said, and they needed to be eliminated. (42)

This complete negligence in policy making is what made the Kentucky dairymen “inefficient” and thus caused their failure. Furthermore, these dairymen were unable to gain the money needed to buy larger and better equipment that was necessary to produce the milk and dairy products at a more efficient rate and cheaper cost. Technology and metropolitan centered laws caused the downfall of these rural workers. Hopefully, the future of folk is bright, so that mistakes of this caliber will not be made and the common man will reenter the American discourse. Folk music is the genre that can open the door to our understanding of these issues and it does so through the revival of Romantic ideals, an emphasis on nature, the countryside and its population, and exposing our alienation from each other.

## Chapter Notes

1. Mount Eerie also records under the name The Microphones.

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