At the end of March 1828, Sir Humphry Davy, the most famous chemist of his day, left England, never to return. He was seeking to recover his health by traveling on the European continent, where he hoped the climate would be more congenial and the distractions of society less demanding. The previous year, a debilitating stroke had caused him to resign as president of the Royal Society and to curtail his social activities in London. His great scientific discoveries (including sodium, potassium, and other elements, produced by analysis using an electrical battery), and his inventions (such as the miners’ safety lamp), were all behind him. At the age of forty-nine, it seemed that his brilliant career was now over. In the following months, his travels took him to the Austrian provinces of Styria and Carniola, and to Italy, where he settled for the winter season in Rome. There, he experienced a further devastating stroke in February 1829. Fearing that his death was imminent, he summoned his wife Jane from London, and his brother John, who was then serving as a surgeon with the British army in Malta. After they joined him in Rome, he began the slow journey home, but only reached as far as Geneva, where he died on 29 May 1829. Two days later, his mortal remains were buried in a cemetery just outside the Swiss city.

The following year, his last book was published. Consolations in Travel: Or the Last Days of a Philosopher was edited by Davy’s brother from a manuscript completed by the author shortly before his death. Readers who eagerly seized upon this posthumous work of a distinguished man of science found themselves puzzled by the diversity of its contents and confounded by its peculiar form. The six chapters are mostly in the form of dialogues, in which a group of fictional characters with elaborate Greek names discuss chemistry, geology, and other sciences. But the first chapter immediately establishes that this is not a typical scientific text. In it, the narrator, “Philalethes,” recounts a
vision he has experienced in the Coliseum in Rome. Resting there in the moonlight, he is visited by a mysterious voice, which announces itself as a superior intelligence from another world. The spirit or “Genius” then unveils to the narrator scenes of previous eras in the world’s history and of life on other planets. In the next chapter, the narrator and his companions discuss the meaning of this vision, while contemplating the view from the summit of Mount Vesuvius. [SLIDE 5] Each of the subsequent chapters is set in a different exotic locale: the third at the temple of Paestum in Campania, the fourth and fifth in the Austrian Alps including the cavern at Adelsberg (now Postojna in Slovenia), and the sixth in the harbor at Pola (now Pula in Croatia). The conversations range across the history of life on earth and the prospects for the future of humanity, touching also on questions of religious doctrine, such as the persistence of life after death. The dialogues wander among these metaphysical issues, alongside more recognizably scientific topics, with frequent digressions and sometimes abrupt transitions of subject-matter.

As he was finishing the book, Davy wrote to his wife that Consolations (as I shall call it) was a piece of “philosophical poetry though not in metre.”¹ This paradoxical description was reflected in the puzzlement of the reviewers, most of whom found the whole thing rather indigestible.² A critic in the Athenaeum, one of the leading literary journals of the day, remarked on Davy’s “very ingenious, if somewhat visionary, hypotheses and speculations.”³ A writer in the Dublin Literary Gazette declared that some of the contents were “extravagant, and almost bordering on the absurd.”⁴ The critic of the Monthly Review noted the “fantastic design” of the work, and he didn’t mean that as a compliment.⁵ Some of the obituary notices for Davy ignored the book altogether, reflecting the sense that it was an anomaly among his publications and a bit of an embarrassment.⁶ What commentary there was mostly restricted itself to summarizing the heterogeneous contents and quoting extracts from the text. But, whatever its peculiarities, the book proved popular, and that popularity was sustained for the remainder of the nineteenth century. There were at least nine individual editions published in London before 1900, and two more in which Consolations was combined with other works by Davy. (The fifth edition contained
the illustrations, which I am showing today. [SLIDE 6]) An American edition, published in Philadelphia, followed hard on the heels of the first London one, and another appeared in Boston forty years later. There was a German translation and a Dutch one within a few years of the book’s first appearance, and other languages followed. A literary monster it might have been, but there is no doubt that it drew significant numbers of readers, and continued to draw them in subsequent decades.

Academic criticism of the work has tended to follow in the tracks of the early reviewers. Most scholars have agreed that Consolations saw Davy indulging the poetic imagination he had expressed in his youth, when he associated with the poets Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Southey; though the volume in fact contains none of Davy’s poetry and is written entirely in prose. It has also been identified as a “philosophical” work, reflecting the author’s knowledge of the classical philosophical tradition and his second-hand acquaintance with contemporary trends in German philosophy. The literary scholar Richard Holmes has called it “one of the most extraordinary prose books of the late Romantic period.” These characterizations are fine as far as they go, but they leave many questions unanswered about the book’s specific themes and form. One can situate it in relation to literary and philosophical traditions, and within the prevailing climate of Romanticism, but that does not explain why contemporaries found it both appealing and puzzling. I am going to argue for a closer attention to specific features of the text, and the contexts in which it was both produced and read. Some of its features were shared with other works of the era, but I don’t think they can be explained by reference to the broader movement of Romanticism. Rather, I will suggest that the text needs to be read in conjunction with the particular circumstances of Davy’s life and career, and the specific approach to studying the natural world that he fostered.

There are two particular aspects of the book that I want to focus on. First, there is the relationship between the book and its author. Because of the circumstances of its publication, the text was immediately and inseparably associated with the recently deceased writer. But, within the book, at least two different characters are used to stand in for Davy, a technique that distances the author from his
fictional personae. This was a source of confusion for many of his readers, but I believe it can be understood in relation to Davy’s lifelong project of experimenting with his own identity. Second, *Consolations* represents a particular kind of aesthetic approach to the natural world. It shows how an appreciation of landscape can open out into an understanding of its history. This also was an innovative feature of the text and ambiguous in its implications. Davy identified the contemplation of the lengthy history of the earth with the aesthetic experience of the sublime. Such an experience was appealing to many readers, even to those who disagreed with him quite profoundly as to what it implied for questions of religious doctrine.

First, then, the relation of the book to its author. We know, from Davy’s last letters to his wife and his brother, that he saw the book as his most precious legacy. He began the composition in June 1828, at Ischl in the Austrian Alps. [SLIDE 7] John James Tobin, who was accompanying him on his journey as a companion and amanuensis, recorded at that time that Davy was dictating what he called his “Vision” for an hour or two each morning.¹⁰ A couple of months later, Davy wrote to his wife Jane that he felt like a mother ushering a beloved child into the world—an intriguing simile, given that their marriage was childless and neither of them had natural offspring.¹¹ At the beginning of December, he wrote again to Jane: “It may be imagination, but I seem to see the novel scheme of the Universe more clearly than formerly.”¹² After his stroke the following February, he was convinced he had only a few more days to live. At this point he claimed the privilege of a dying prophet, one whose special insight into matters of life and death derived from his position on the boundary between the two states. He decided on the book’s subtitle: “the last days of a philosopher.”¹³ And he charged his brother with the solemn duty of ensuring its publication at all costs. In a letter dictated to his wife a few days after he suffered his stroke, he wrote: “I should not take so much interest in these works did I not believe that they contained truths which cannot be recovered if they are lost & which I am convinced will be extremely useful both to the moral and intellectual world. I may be mistaken in this point, yet it is the conviction of
a man perfectly sane in all the intellectual faculties & looking into futurity with the prophetic aspirations belonging to the last moments of existence.”

For anyone who picked up the book after publication, it was impossible to detach it from its author’s circumstances at the end of his life. Davy initially planned to be identified on the title-page as “the author of Salmonia” (his previous book, on salmon fishing). This was not a serious attempt at anonymity, since it was widely known who that author was, but it would have kept the work at a slight distance from his more mainstream scientific publications. In the event, however, when Consolations appeared, Davy’s name was prominently displayed below the title. [SLIDE 8] Also, the very first thing that readers were told, in an introductory note contributed by his brother, was that the book “was concluded at the very moment of the invasion of the Author’s last illness.” This was followed by a short Preface, which Davy himself had somehow managed to dictate the day after he suffered his debilitating stroke in Rome. In these ways, the book was presented as inseparable from the individual who had produced it and the circumstances in which he had done so. It owed a large part of its authority to its association with a poet and philosopher on the threshold of his own death, or, as the Dublin Literary Gazette put it, “when the soul was quivering on the beam between the two states of existence.” Had Davy survived to see the book published, it is not clear that it would have attracted so much attention or respect.

The identification of the book with its author was strengthened by its failure to cite any sources. The Platonic dialogues were obvious precedents for the philosophical conversations Davy composed, and Georges Cuvier was later to call Consolations “the last words of a dying Plato.” At one stage, Davy intended to call the book “The Modern Socrates.” The title he finally chose alludes to The Consolation of Philosophy, by the sixth-century Christian Neo-Platonist, Boethius. Closer to Davy’s own time were the writers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, whose influence can be felt from the opening of the first chapter. The narrator is accompanied by two interlocutors, who represent each side of the
eighteenth-century dispute over Christianity. “Onuphrio” reflects the skepticism about religious doctrine that emerged in the Scottish Enlightenment, while “Ambrosio” speaks from a moderate position within traditional Catholicism. As they view the scene in the Coliseum, these two along with Philalethes recapitulate much of the Enlightenment debate about the legacy of Christianity and classical antiquity. Ambrosio points to the triumph of Christian faith over ancient Roman superstition and its associated barbarities. For him, the most important lesson to be learned from the ruins of Rome concerns the victory of Christianity over its pagan persecutors. Onuphrio, on the other hand, introduces the melancholy reflection that Christian civilization itself is destined to pass away, as that of ancient Rome did, in the long sweep of human history. In the background here are such figures as Edward Gibbon, who was inspired to write his account of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire by his own meditations in the Forum in Rome, and the Comte de Volney, whose *Ruins ... of Empires* achieved great popularity in the 1790s. [SLIDE 9] Volney’s work has several points of similarity to Davy’s. It also begins in the ruins of an ancient city (in this case, Palmyra), and features a ghostly apparition who takes the narrator on a journey into space to view the earth and its history as a whole. [SLIDE 10, SLIDE 11] Other writers of the Enlightenment also seem to have inspired Davy’s creative imagination. Voltaire’s fantasy of extraterrestrial travel, *Micromégas*, is one likely source for Philalethes’ visit to other planets. And the Marquis de Condorcet had long been a favorite author of Davy’s for his vision of progress as the central theme of human history.

It is not hard to spot these literary influences, which must have been evident to many readers. And yet Davy gave no citations and mentioned no names of his literary precursors. The impression he wanted to give was that the book had originated entirely in his own imagination. Its central theme—the history of the earth and human progress—was conveyed through the fictional devices of dreams and visions. Readers naturally wanted to know whose experiences these were, and they tended to assume that individual was the author. This, presumably, was why John Davy made sure his brother’s identity was firmly stamped on the book from the beginning. And yet, the book flouted the normal conventions of
written dialogues or conversations, in which the author was identified with one particular position. Davy didn’t appear in his own person and he seemed to have more than one representative among the fictional participants. This led to difficulties for readers who wanted to work out what he actually believed and wanted to communicate.

John Davy addressed the puzzlement felt by many readers of the book, when he wrote his brother’s biography in the late 1830s. He claimed that the Coliseum vision was based on a dream Humphry Davy had had in Rome in 1819.20 Another incident mentioned in the text was dated to earlier in Davy’s life, to 1807, when he had experienced a vivid and apparently prophetic dream during a bout of serious illness.21 On the other hand, John explained that his brother had never fallen down a waterfall or traveled to Palestine, although these things happened to characters in the book.22 The confusion was understandable, given how much the characters did share the experiences of their author. The initial vision in the Coliseum is assigned to Philalethes, though a few pages later he admits it was a composite of dreams he had had on various occasions.23 The effect here is the rather dizzying one of the author dropping his character’s mask or jumping the frame of the narrative. Although still speaking in the voice of Philalethes, Davy seems to be peeping out from behind him to say: “Yes, I gave my character a fictional vision, but it was based on dreams I have really had.” The conversation moves on to a dream of special significance: the one Davy had while suffering a severe bout of typhus fever in 1807. Philalethes tells the story of how, in his delirious state at that time, he saw a vision of a beautiful woman then unknown to him. Ten years later, he was reminded of the vision when he encountered the attractive young daughter of an innkeeper in Illyria. “Now,” says Philalethes, “comes the extraordinary part of the narrative: ten years after, twenty years after my first illness, at a time when I was exceedingly weak from a severe and dangerous malady, … I again met the person who was the representative of my visionary female; and to her kindness and care I believe I owe what remains to me of existence.”24 It may be Philalethes who is speaking in the text, but the dream was Davy’s own, as was the insistence that it had truly been prophetic. The young woman who was his muse and later his nurse really existed; her name
was Josephine Dettela, she lived in the city of Laybach (now Ljubljana in Slovenia), and Davy left her money in his will. Throughout this part of the text, there is a strange oscillation between author and character, a motion of masking and unmasking on Davy’s behalf. He assigned this particular dream to his character Philalethes. And yet, to guarantee its validity as a prophecy, he had to drop the mask and repossess the dream for himself, insisting that it was no fiction but a real event.

The confusions are compounded by the introduction of a new character in the third dialogue. [SLIDE 12] Visiting the temple of Paestum in southern Italy, Philalethes and his companions meet a mysterious stranger called simply “the Unknown.” He is found sitting in the ancient ruins, making notes in a memorandum book. He is said to present a remarkable appearance, with a handsome countenance and a dress described as “very peculiar, almost like that of an ecclesiastic.”25 As the Unknown begins to give his opinions—about the possible virtues of chlorine as a preventive against malaria, about the geology of the region, and eventually about the evolution of the planet and living things—readers seem again to hear Davy’s own voice. In the fourth dialogue, the Unknown is encountered once more in the Austrian Alps, where he rescues Philalethes from nearly drowning in a boating accident. The near-fatal experience is followed by a discussion on personal immortality and whether life continues after death. In the next dialogue, the Unknown assumes the role of the chemical philosopher, voicing what is clearly Davy’s own claim to that title. [SLIDE 13] The character explains that advances in the technical fields of chemistry depend upon the elevated intellectual perspective of the philosopher. Such a perspective requires an individual to be noble in spirit and outlook, not seeking personal gain or profit. Only by being independent of material needs can one engage in the “sublime speculations” that encompass universal truth while also serving earthly needs. The Unknown was clearly intended by Davy to personify this unworldly figure, who by virtue of his abstraction from mundane desires could attain true wisdom and realize the true utility of science.
Readers were nonetheless puzzled by Davy’s having introduced another character to represent himself when Philalethes already seemed to be playing that role. Accustomed to the conventions whereby an author spoke unequivocally through one character, they were confused by Davy’s adoption of more than one persona. The *Monthly Review* thought that the Unknown was a more authentic mask for Davy to assume, “notwithstanding that the author appears to have disposed of his own identity already in the character of Philalethes.”

John Davy suggested that his brother took several roles in the book because he was himself a man of many parts: poet, metaphysician, geologist, chemist, and Christian. Underlying all of these was the figure of the philosopher, “in the original, modest, and humble meaning of the word.” The Unknown was therefore the most fundamental of Davy’s identities. John recorded that he had discussed this matter with his brother and had evidently encountered some resistance to the suggestion that the Unknown was another self-portrait. He ventured, nonetheless, to contradict his brother and insisted that the identification was correct. John wrote: “independent of his dress and some of the incidents of his life, he was essentially the prototype, in sentiments, feelings, opinions, doctrines,—in brief, in mind; … The religious sentiments *The Unknown* expresses, and his metaphysical doctrines, were, I believe, entirely my brother’s own.”

The matter of religious sentiments posed a further conundrum for Davy’s readers. He was publicly identified as a member of the Church of England, and yet *Consolations* seemed unexpectedly pro-Catholic in its sympathies. Ambrosio, who upheld the side of religious orthodoxy in the jousts with Onuphrio, was explicitly identified as a Catholic, and was widely assumed to be based on a papal nuncio, Monsignor Spada, who had befriended Davy in Italy. When the Unknown comes on the scene, there is a curious incident in which Ambrosio identifies him also as a Catholic, since he is wearing a rosary. The Unknown explains that he is actually an Anglican, but that he wears the rosary in tribute to pope Pius VII, whom he met in exile at Fontainebleau. Again, readers assumed that the episode had happened to Davy himself. The reviewer in the *Athenaeum* wrote that the anecdote was “so pleasing, that we would be sorry to think it is not a literal account of a real occurrence; and it has more value also in our eyes when we
persuade ourselves that we may consider the narrator of the story as Sir Humphry Davy himself.”31 It was
again left to John Davy to try to sort the matter out in his biography. He noted that the story has the
Unknown receiving the rosary at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, but Davy never actually
visited the Holy Land. He was in Rome in 1814, when Pius VII returned to the city from captivity under
Napoleon, but there is no evidence that he actually met the pontiff. It seems that Davy did have a degree
of respect for Catholicism and for at least some of its devotees, but readers who thought he was endorsing
Catholic doctrine were misled by the slippage between the author and his characters. Given the constant
masking and unmasking in which Davy indulged in Consolations, the confusion is understandable.

Why, then, did Davy adopt this stylistic device? Why did he introduce more than one figure to
represent different aspects of himself? One answer is that it was consistent with a lifelong tendency to
adopt masks of one kind or another, to experiment with his own identity. Davy was constantly assuming
new personae, in his public performances as a scientific lecturer, in the course of his rapid rise up the
social ladder, and in his writings. Consolations could be seen as his last virtuoso performance, his last
experiment with his own identity. He also seems to have believed that a fictional character, not too
closely identified with himself, possessed the kind of charismatic authority needed to convey his message.
In one of his notebooks in 1827, he had made some jottings intended to introduce some sort of
autobiography. It would, he remarked, focus not on himself but on “a very extraordinary Person … a
mind far superior to my own.” Of this individual, he wrote: “His opinions are wont to be so singular[,] his
lessons so instructive & his history so mysterious that they are worthy of being recorded.”32 By the
end of these notes, Davy had dubbed this individual “the Unknown”; he had discovered the character who
was later to assume such a prominent role in Consolations. Davy noted that the character would seem
forever youthful, like one who had discovered the elixir of the alchemists or the secret of eternal life.33
With these attributes, he would compel readers to attend to the message he had to impart.
So the Unknown was conceived as an unworldly, even otherworldly, being, not so much a flesh-and-blood person as a spirit or angel temporarily assuming human form. This allowed the character to speak with authority on a pivotal theme of the book: the prospect of intellectual or spiritual life continuing beyond the death of the material body. This was of urgent concern for a man confronting his own mortality, as Davy was at this time. He sought comfort in the view that mind and body were not inseparably connected to one another, that the former could survive independently of the latter. He repeatedly reassured others (and himself) that his ailments were affecting only his body, that his mental capacities remained unimpaired. The play with multiple masks and roles was a way to reinforce the point that the intellect or spirit is not to be identified with an individual’s physical manifestation. Bodily features change in the course of someone’s life, but intellectual identity remains. This is what gives grounds for the hope that it may continue in some form after death.

The point is made in a rather unexpected way in the fourth dialogue, entitled “The Proteus, or Immortality.” After Philalethes is rescued from nearly drowning after his fall down the cataract, he and a companion called “Eubathes” go with the Unknown into the cavern at Adelsberg. These organisms had drawn Davy’s attention in the last months of his life, and the conversation touches on the peculiar features revealed by his inquiry. The creatures are able to live below or above water, because they possess both gills and lungs; their origins are obscure, as are their feeding habits and mode of reproduction. The discussion then passes to the chemistry of respiration, and to whether the air could be the source of a material principle that constitutes vitality. The Unknown is adamant that the mystery of life cannot be explained in this materialistic manner. “I can never believe … that intelligence can result from combinations of insensate or brute atoms,” he insists. Mental processes cannot be identified with the material organs of the senses. On the contrary, the mind is an immaterial entity that exists continuously
throughout the changes in a person’s body during their lifetime. And at the end, as the Unknown puts it, “the mind, as it were, falls asleep, to awake to a new existence.”

Although Eubathes resists this conclusion, Philalethes professes himself satisfied with the Unknown’s deduction. Speaking again for Davy himself, Philalethes denounces materialism, as “a cold, heavy, dull and insupportable doctrine … necessarily tending to atheism.” He neglects to say that he had in fact flirted with it in his youth, when he associated with the materialist physician Thomas Beddoes and other radical thinkers. The flirtation was short-lived, and Davy was soon vigorously crossing out the materialistic comments in his old notebooks. By the 1820s, he had openly allied himself with the anti-materialist side of a bitterly fought controversy that was dividing the scientific—and especially the medical—community. The reviewers had no difficulty discerning which side Davy was taking in this dispute. The Monthly Review welcomed his attack on the “sophisms” of materialist physiologists, the British Magazine expressed its appreciation for his support of the orthodox Christian doctrine, and the Anti-Infidel hailed his demolition of a theory “which some half-informed venders of blasphemy are so anxious to diffuse.” On this issue, it seems, Davy had managed to speak without equivocation, having aligned the positions of both of his spokesmen on the anti-materialist side of the debate.

This is not, however, the final note struck in Consolations. Nor does Christian orthodoxy quite have the last word. [SLIDE 15] The final dialogue, “Pola, or Time,” has the characters discussing long-term changes in the material world. They consider the operations of gravity, heat, and chemical forces, the wearing down of mountains by erosion, and the destruction of human monuments by corruption and decay. Faced with the melancholy prospect of the mutability of all things, Philalethes and the Unknown agree that comfort must be sought from faith in God’s design. Christianity provides the reassurance that all these transformations are ultimately serving the divine plan. The theme is one that Davy might have taken from his classical precursor Boethius. In Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy, human anxieties and uncertainties are allayed by an awareness of the providential design underpinning the cosmos.
Everything must, ultimately, be for the best, since providence rules over the universe as a whole. But the final sentence of Davy’s book offers a rather more materialistic solace, one that seems closer to the Roman atheist poet Lucretius than to Boethius. Speaking at the end, Philalethes suggests that, even if human monuments decay to dust, they can sustain the growth of vegetation to nourish new life: “nature asserts her empire over [the ruins] …, and the vegetable world rises in constant youth, and in a period of annual successions, by the labours of man, providing food, vitality, and beauty upon the wrecks of monuments which were once raised for purposes of glory, but which are now applied to objects of utility.”

At the end, then, the “consolations” Davy was offering in this book go beyond those of traditional Christianity. The reassurance of traditional faith was ultimately not quite sufficient. Also needed was a sense of cosmic change over very long periods of time, the cyclical succession of destruction and restoration, death and rebirth. It was this latter kind of consolation that Davy derived from his travels, and which he identified with a sense of the sublime. Repeatedly in the book, he opened his readers’ eyes to how the landscape around them had been shaped by the prolonged operation of natural forces. He drew upon the writings of contemporary geologists and his own observations in the field to describe the effects of volcanoes and earthquakes, sedimentation and erosion. He invoked rivers carving valleys out of rocks, while new mountains were thrust up from beneath the earth. And he extended this sense of deep time into the cosmos at large, mentioning on the last pages of the book William Herschel’s idea that stars and planets could be formed from the nebulae glimpsed through telescopes. He even suggested that such planetary systems could be inhabited by “genii or seraphic intelligences,” presumably akin to the spirit who had spoken to the meditating Philalethes in the Coliseum. This was the philosophical vision of the cosmos into which Davy sought to escape from his earthly troubles. It is not surprising that readers such as his brother worried that it was not exactly compatible with Christian orthodoxy. Davy was not seeking scriptural salvation, and he was not awaiting bodily resurrection. Rather, he was hoping that his spirit
might flee from the trammels of his afflicted body into what J. J. Tobin called “the oft self-imagined planetary world.”

The uncertainties and ambivalences of *Consolations* contributed to its longstanding popularity, as the nineteenth century remained preoccupied with the questions of science and faith it had raised. Charles Lyell made several comments on the book in his *Principles of Geology*, the first volume of which was published in the same year, 1830. Lyell was particularly impressed by Davy’s ability to discern the effects of long-acting natural forces in shaping the landscape. He quoted Davy’s description of the deposition of travertine marble by sedimentation in springs and lakes in Campania. On the other hand, Lyell resisted Davy’s supposition that evolution manifested a progression of forms of life. At this point in his career, Lyell regarded such theories as unproven and speculative. He rather condescendingly referred to Davy as, “a philosopher … pleased to indulge in conjectures on this subject.” A few years later, Charles Darwin tackled *Consolations*, just as he was beginning to formulate his own ideas about evolution. He noted a simile in which Davy had compared philosophers’ ignorance of the causes of life to that of a so-called “savage” contemplating a steam engine. In a telling remark, Darwin recorded that such a person might be more impressed by a piece of colored glass than by a steam engine. The comment seems to reflect not only Darwin’s actual experience of the people he called “savages” in the course of his voyage on the *Beagle*, but also his increasing sympathy for materialism. His point was that imputations of design are relative to human capacities: if we don’t have the relevant experience, we cannot even recognize the steam engine as something that was designed. The implication is that we should hesitate before identifying divine design in the universe at large or in individual creatures.

The responses of Lyell and Darwin testify to the openness of Davy’s *Consolations*, its availability for interpretation by readers who did not share its author’s outlook. The dialogical form had something to do with this, and Davy’s use of multiple characters to express his own views made the text more than usually ambiguous. One reason for the book’s popularity was precisely that the author could not control
the meanings his readers drew out of it. Lyell disputed the notion of the progressive evolution of living things, but he valued Davy’s insight into the long-term effects of continuous forces in geology. Darwin read the book and tested his own emerging materialism against Davy’s opposing perspective. Both men were captivated and inspired by *Consolations*, notwithstanding their differences with its author. The way Davy invested travel with deep philosophical significance resonated with other scientific travelers too. Davy had shown them how one could draw from an experience of landscape a profound sense of the history of the earth. And, for those inclined to read the book this way, he had suggested that this kind of cosmic vision could provide a complement or alternative to traditional Christian faith. One can even catch an echo of Davy’s closing sentence in the last passage of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, published nearly thirty years later. In that passage, Darwin famously evoked a similar sense of change and eternal renewal, with the “planet … cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity,” while evolution slowly took its course.

I have tried to suggest how we can recapture some of this sense of Davy’s *Consolations* as an inspirational work. Blandly categorizing the book as an example of Romanticism does not seem to me to reveal quite why it was so influential and yet so ambiguous, so widely read and yet so generally regarded as an enigma. I have been arguing that these qualities reflect the relationship of the book to its author, both the circumstances in which it was composed during Davy’s last illness, and the way it distributes his experiences and opinions among the characters in the text itself. In one respect, as its readers knew, this is a deeply personal book, mirroring Davy’s most intimate hopes and trepidations as he approached his own demise. As the early reviews admitted, the book probably would not have gained so much attention, had it not been promoted as the last words of a great man of science. *Consolations* was presented to be read in just that way, with the appropriate title-page, prefatory notice, and accompanying publicity. But, when readers picked it up, they found it less straightforward than they expected to disentangle Davy’s message. They were confused by the dialectical back-and-forth of the argument, and by the attribution of Davy’s characteristics and ideas to more than one participant in the dialogues. They wanted to know
which of the events depicted had really happened to him, and which of the points of view was really his. But, by allowing uncertainty to remain about these matters, Davy had in a sense opened his work to a greater range of interpretations than it might otherwise have gathered. As it turned out, that was to secure the book a readership well beyond the lifetimes of those who remembered Davy or even knew who he was.

In this paradoxical way, Davy’s ambitions for the book were fulfilled, at least for several decades. Writing to his brother and his wife in the days after he suffered his catastrophic stroke in Rome, Davy said that he expected his bones to rest in the eternal city. That was not to be. He also declared that *Consolations in Travel* would be his spiritual legacy, to live on long after he was gone. Until the end of the nineteenth century, that prophecy came true. As far as I can tell, however, no new edition of the book has appeared since the beginning of the twentieth century, though it is now available from Google Books and as print-on-demand. Perhaps it is time for it to be read again.
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10 Tobin, *Journal*, 96 (June 1828).

11 Humphry Davy to Jane Davy, 21 August 1828 (Fullmer 1828:20).

12 Humphry Davy to Jane Davy, 3 December 1828 (Fullmer 1828:31).


14 Humphry Davy to John Davy, 23 February 1829 (Fullmer 1829:12); Humphry Davy to Jane Davy, 1 March 1829 (Fullmer 1829:15).

15 RI, Davy MSS, HD/14/i, 55-56.

16 Davy, *Consolations*, [v].

17 *Dublin Literary Gazette*, 197.

19 RI, Davy MSS, HD/21/d, 231.


30 Davy, *Consolations*, 160-162.


32 RI, Davy MSS, HD/13/b, 12, 14.

33 RI, Davy MSS, HD/13/b, 22-23, 31.

34 Davy, *Consolations*, 206-207.


42 Charles Darwin, Notebook N (1838-39), 36 (also from www.darwin-online.org.uk); Cf. Davy, *Consolations*, 211.